QUEERING CLASS: LESLIE FEINBERG’S STONE BUTCH BLUES

CAT MOSES

At the violet hour when the eyes and back
Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits
Like a taxi throbbing waiting
I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see

—T. S. Eliot
The Waste Land

In presenting the daily struggles of a working-class transgendered person, a person who fits into neither prescribed gender category, Leslie Feinberg’s first novel, Stone Butch Blues (1993), exposes the quotidian practices through which fixed gendered and sexual identities are culturally constructed and systematically imposed. Stone Butch Blues chronicles pre-Stonewall working-class transgendered and gay and lesbian life and struggles in the urban Northeast and the conflicts between those struggles and the women’s liberation movement. Feinberg employs narrative fiction to foreground the interrelationship of class structures and gender constraints. This essay examines the interrelationship of gendered identity development, socioeconomic structures, and resistance to oppression in Stone Butch Blues.

The achievement of Feinberg’s award-winning novel is not that it is the first novel to tell the story of a transgendered person, but that it is the first to embrace “transgendered” as an identity. Stone Butch Blues addresses a transgendered experience that is just beginning to see the light of day in both the medical and the popular literature on the subject: that of the female-to-male (FTM) transgendered subject. Stone Butch Blues makes it clear that FTM expression is a complex identity in its own right. The very terms FTM and MTF are inadequate—Feinberg might argue—in their suggestion that

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anyone whose gender expression falls outside of either “F” or “M” is moving towards the expression of the “opposite” gender.

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. The novel implicitly interrogates the American Psychiatric Association’s official construction of “gender identity disorder” (g. i. d.), a construction that has recently been challenged by transgender activists.4 Stone Butch Blues implies that the “disease” of gender dysphoria (upon which the g. i. d. “diagnosis” is based) infects the dominant culture, and that it is a dis-ease with difference.5

The concept of transgender has been seized upon by gender theorists because it deconstructs the naturalness of gender and challenges the biological “sex” categories upon which gender identity has been constructed as dependent. Transgendered subjects exist not in a space outside of gender, but in a space in which gender does not necessarily follow naturally from “sex,” in which biological sex is often a mutable construct.6 It is important to note, however, that definitions are contested in this realm. Neither transgendered communities nor those who theorize gender speak with a monolithic voice. Not all transgendered subjects, activists, and scholars, for example, endorse Marjorie Garber’s concept of a “third space” outside of gender binaries.7 Nor do all agree that the concept of transgender brings biological “sex” categories into question. For many transgendered persons, the notion of gender identity is the locus of transgender subjectivity. Feinberg portrays the relationship between the body, gender, and desire as not contingent on any “natural” factors, and as subject to change. “The transgenderist,” argues Anne Bolin, “disput[es] the entire concept of consistency between sexual orientation and gender,” a concept that Stone Butch Blues undermines.8 The categories that define/confine desire—gay, straight, lesbian, bisexual—are dependent on notions of gendered identity and biological sex. “Same-sex” desire, for example, takes on a new and paradoxical meaning if the very notion of sex is problematized.

Stone Butch Blues portrays gender as a field of identity positions. Feinberg’s position echoes Sandy Stone’s thinking on transsexual subjectivity. Stone “constitute[s] transsexuals not as a class or problematic ‘third gender,’ but rather as a genre—a set of embodied texts whose potential for productive disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored” (italics Stone’s).9 Although Feinberg does not portray transgendered subjects as a class, her project, and, in this essay, mine, is to investigate the interrelationship of class and transgender experience. In addition to the productive disruption of sex and sexuality categories Stone addresses, Stone Butch Blues employs a transgendered narrative to produc-
tively disrupt class divisions. Feinberg’s novel interrogates the relationship between racism, sexism, and exclusive class structures. Since the novel is relatively new and issued by a small press, much of the critical discourse addressing it to date has taken place at conferences and on the internet. In these venues, I have found that her focus on class is generally dismissed as old-fashioned, simplistic, and naïve. These claims are not entirely without merit; Feinberg is more Marxist than neo-Marxist. However, a critical discipline that has been as slow to address class as has gender theory cannot afford to dismiss the class concerns of an author as uniquely positioned to explore them as Feinberg, who is a transgender activist, a longtime labor organizer and chronicler of labor struggles, a novelist, and an independent scholar of transgender history.10

Feinberg uses the image of a continuum to describe the possibilities for gender identity. She equates “gender [with] self-expression, not anatomy.”11 The claim that gender is self-expression would seem to place Feinberg’s text in the tradition of transsexual autobiography (as Jay Prosser has argued),12 and at odds with social constructionist gender theory. I argue, however, that although Feinberg constructs an essential self whose expression often falls within the confines of “gender,” Stone Butch Blues clearly demonstrates that gender is a performatively constituted social construct, as is evident in the series of brutal and humiliating punishments to which protagonist Jess Goldberg and other transgendered characters in the novel are subjected for failing to perform gender properly. Feinberg grounds performatory theories of gender in the context of class struggle. Gender performance emerges in Stone Butch Blues as a guerilla theater in which the players’ survival is at stake.

In its epistolary opening segment, addressed to Jess’s former lover Theresa, Jess speculates on Theresa’s whereabouts and imagines her “married in another blue-collar town, lying with an unemployed auto worker who is much more like me than [university educated feminists are].”13 Here, Jess identifies with the men she works alongside in the factories and warehouses, rather than with the middle-class feminists who exclude butch and femme lesbians from their organizations.14 From the novel’s opening pages, then, Feinberg focuses on class and its interrelationship with gender and sexuality. Elsewhere in the novel, Jess identifies with butches, with members of other oppressed groups—drag queens, the Native American women who work in the factories, the African-American students in her high school—and with individuals who are set apart by their difference: a deaf mime, for example, and a homeless man who dresses in flowing garments that de-emphasize his gender. What all of these characters have in common, in addition to their being classified by a dominant order as Other, is membership in the proletariat. Stone Butch Blues is informed by an underlying yearning for the development of a revolutionary class consciousness among the proletariat,
across gender and racial divisions. This is precisely the yearning that some critics of the novel have found reductive and naïve. I would like to suggest, however, that while the novel yearns for the development of class consciousness and blue-collar unity, it does not unproblematically depict their manifestation, although at times it veers precariously in that direction, particularly in the segments featuring Jess’s interaction with Native American characters. Indian characters like the Dineh who take the infant Jess under their care and the factory workers who invite Jess to a pow wow are imbued with an instinctive sympathy toward Jess’s otherness. Native cultural beliefs and traditions are reductively portrayed. Jess benefits from stereotypical Native beliefs and practices involving nature and community without working to understand them or interrogating the privilege that her whiteness bestows.

At several other points, however, Feinberg problematizes and complicates the notion of working class unity across racial divisions. Jess undergoes an extended period of separation from her comrade Ed, for example, because Jess does not adequately respond to Ed’s assertions that black Americans are disproportionately serving as cannon fodder in the Vietnam War, and because Jess makes little effort to understand Ed’s grappling with Du Boisian double consciousness. Ed commits suicide while Jess yearns for but does not act to bring about reconciliation. In another segment, Jess’s friend and confidante, Duffy, the straight white male union organizer, causes Jess to lose her job when he inadvertently publicly identifies her as female when she has been passing as a man in the workplace. A long period of estrangement follows. In both of these situations there is an elemental yearning for class unity across race or gender and sexuality boundaries, but in neither situation is this unity easily achieved, and in Jess’s relationship with Ed, it is never fully achieved. Class unity, then, is presented as a limited and problematic possibility in *Stone Butch Blues*, but as a possibility worth working toward. The exploration of this possibility is one of the two primary components of the cultural work the novel performs in its focus on class issues. The second component is the limning of an oppressive pre-Stonewall past in unsparingly bold brushstrokes.

Feinberg portrays in vivid detail what Jeffrey Escoffier has termed “the political economy of the closet.” Referring to the pre-Stonewall period in lesbian and gay economic history as “the Closet Economy,” Escoffier notes that “its primary economic institutions were bars, baths, adult bookstores and heavily coded mail-order services, most of which operated on the margins of legality.” Escoffier calls for research into the costs to gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of operating within this marginal economy while contributing to but not fully benefiting from the dominant capitalist economy, even while he notes that the actual costs will be difficult to determine and catalogue precisely because of the marginalized, encoded nature of the closet economic system. Escoffier notes that the closet economy, like the larger, dominant
economic system, “has always catered more to men than to women, for reasons having to do with men’s greater opportunities for employment, income, and mobility.” Stone Butch Blues, informed by its author’s personal experience and extensive research, portrays the economic (and the emotional and physical) hardships imposed on a group that existed on the margins of the already-marginalized closet economy: the transgendered.

Feinberg’s purpose in writing Stone Butch Blues was to explore the nature of power relations and the limited possibilities for resistance outside of a supportive community, and to suggest the necessity of building an inclusive resistance. The sheer force of the brutality that Jess faces on a daily basis at times overwhelms the reader. She is the grade school outcast; the junior high “lezzie” who is raped by half the football team, with the approval of the coach; and a victim of both a chilling medico-psychiatric “cure” and a well-orchestrated campaign of police terror against gender traitors—all before she is seventeen. Jess struggles alone to construct a self amid a social milieu dominated by alienation, fragmentation and loneliness. She discovers that resistance to oppression—and the refashioning of a resisting self—are lonely and losing battles outside of a resistance community. But just as the novel yearns for yet problematizes working-class unity, it longs for a unified resistance among transgendered subjects even while it explores the substantial obstacles to that unity. Feinberg limns the relationship between class status and the dominant culture’s tolerance for transgendered self-expression. Stone Butch Blues reiterates the danger Jess and other working-class transgendered subjects court simply by appearing together in public. The character Ruth has a “geometric theory: two people like us in public are more than double the trouble” (p. 255). One butch or drag queen on the street is likely to be perceived as a freak and subjected to harassment; two or more together are a freak show, a traffic-stopping phenomenon, an invitation to violence. The novel introduces the questions of how, when, and whether transgendered resistance is possible, and it provides an array of answers.

The proscriptions and the violence to which Jess is constantly subjected illustrate not only the nature of daily life for those who are differently gendered, but also the variety of practices through which gender and biological sex binaries are systematically imposed upon working-class bodies. When the mechanisms of gender construction are invisible—when subjects stay within the bounds of their assigned genders—gender appears to follow naturally from sex. 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. As Judith Butler puts it, “we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right.” In the sixties and seventies, the period in which most of the novel is set, when a butch and a femme strolled down the street holding hands they suffered not only for the butch’s gender
treachery, but also for embodying a desire that directly challenged normative heterosexuality. Joan Nestle, a femme veteran of pre-Stonewall vice squad raids, writes that “the sight of us was enraging [to] straight spectators . . . we were a symbol of women’s erotic autonomy, a sexual accomplishment that did not include them. The physical attacks were a direct attempt to break into this self-sufficient erotic partnership.”

Upper-class cross-dressing women have always been more tolerated than working-class butch women. Nestle points out that upper-class butches like Vita Sackville-West and Radclyffe Hall have been tolerated as trendy and, I might add, reified in fashion industry imagery and constructed as icons of independence and inaccessibility in the few Hollywood films in which they appear (the defining Hollywood bourgeois butch icon is the seductive Marlene Deitrich, in the cabaret scene in *Morocco* [1930]), but working-class butches have long been objects of hate, scorn, and ridicule, and they have been denigrated by feminists who have misread them as mimicking and privileging heterosexual hypermasculinity. Middle-class feminists appear in *Stone Butch Blues* only to deny butches and femmes the opportunity to participate in the (1960s) women’s liberation movement. The butches do, however, find a few allies among the men they work with. The mostly male unions are portrayed as ignorant about transgender issues but sympathetic and inclusive of the butches. The novel yearns for class solidarity while it problematizes the gender solidarity across class divisions that existed in the rhetoric more than in the practice of Second Wave (60s and 70s) feminism.

*Stone Butch Blues* portrays an era in which the police systematically used sexual torture against working-class gender traitors. Butches and drag queens have historically fared the worst in vice squad raids on gay and lesbian blue-collar bars. They are the most visible gender transgressors, and in singling them out for punishment, the police attempt to inscribe both compulsory heterosexuality (since they believe that all cross-dressers are homosexual) and binary gender categories. *Stone Butch Blues* provides a detailed portrait of this process of punishment and inscription. When Jess and Ed are attacked by two policemen outside a bar, the policemen’s speech reveals their thinking about gender and sexuality.

“Eyes straight ahead,” the cop behind me had his mouth close to my ear.

The other cop began shouting at Ed. “You think you’re a guy, huh? You think you can take it like a guy? We’ll see. What’s these?” he said. He yanked up her shirt and pulled her binder down around her waist. He grabbed her breasts so hard she gasped.

“Leave her alone,” I yelled.

“Shut up, you fuckin’ pervert,” the cop behind me shouted and bashed my face against the wall. (P. 56)
The police maintain the fiction that their victims are the predatory ones, the “perverts.” After each arrest and torture session, the butches feel alienated even from the femmes who love them. Jess dissociates from her body to dissociate from the pain and humiliation, and she loses a bit more of her voice with each arrest, each beating. In a singularly sickening scene a cop forces her head under water in a toilet bowl with feces floating in it. She remains passive and silent, imagining Theresa waiting with the bail money at the booking desk upstairs. Years later she writes to Theresa, “You prayed you wouldn’t hear me scream. I didn’t” (p. 10). Elaine Scarry, writing on the relationship between the body and discourse in state torture of prisoners, notes that torture takes the sufferer back to “a state anterior to language.”

Torture translates the prisoner’s pain into “a regime’s fiction of power.” In *Stone Butch Blues*, the police translate Jess’s pain and silence into the juridical fictions of innate gender and normative heterosexuality, the very norms she is charged with violating. Through the act of torture and the words that they speak while it is in progress, the police construct themselves as universal subjects and Jess as the excluded abject body that validates and makes possible a universal white male heterosexual subjectivity. They also construct and reinforce class enclosures. Upper-class lesbians in this era tended to congregate in private homes rather than in lesbian bars, as Maxine Wolf points out in “Invisible Women in Invisible Places: The Production of Social Space in Lesbian Bars”; thus, working-class women were more likely to be subjected to the ritual of violence, brutality, and humiliation that was the police raid. The police torture literally forces Jess into a state anterior to language, but it is an awareness of her class status that keeps Jess and the other butches silent about the repeated acts of police brutality. They have neither the means nor the social status (these two are of course intimately related: one implies the other) to pursue justice or freedom from brutality. In a reiterated cycle of oppression, the butches’ gender expression limits their employment opportunities, thus placing them in economic peril and on the margins of the working class, and their working-class status makes their gender expression doubly dangerous.

The violent acts of oppression in *Stone Butch Blues* remain etched in the reader’s mind; the quotidian acts and proscriptions to which Jess is subjected complete Feinberg’s detailed portrait of the mechanisms of gender and class construction. Jess is harassed in and driven out of both women’s and men’s public restrooms, the victim of what Marjorie Garber, after Lacan, calls “urinary segregation” (pp. 13-17). Her test of passing, after the barbershop, is the public toilet. And then, of course, there is clothing. Jess chooses hers very carefully because she is more aware than are most of us of its cultural meaning. She consciously violates laws that require the wearing of three pieces of gender-specific clothing that “reflect” one’s “biological” sex, preferring BVDs and an elastic binder to traditional women’s underclothing,
which would, to her, represent drag attire.26 The way that Jess walks, her voice, the way she holds her body, all attract attention because they are perceived as violating gender norms. Her dress and demeanor signify class as much as they do gender; hence, she is subject to harassment due to her gender expression and the possibilities for resistance are decreased by her membership in the working class and the imposed lack of unified resistance among transgendered subjects. Jess’s gender expression further complicates her position in gendered workplace relations. Passing as a man in the workplace, Jess finds that she is expected to exert male privilege and join her male co-workers in the degradation of women. When she is not passing as a man, she and other butches are not accepted as women; they are placed in a category by themselves, subjected to special taunts and humiliations, and assigned to the most dangerous and physically taxing jobs. Feinberg foregrounds the economic consequences of failing to perform gender right. In Jess’s internal monologues and in her conversations with confidantes, her questioning of her gender identity is always linked to the most basic concerns about economic survival and restrictive class structures.

Feinberg provides no substantive clue as to how, when, or why Jess became differently gendered. Perhaps because Feinberg does not view Jess’s gender status as an aberration she does not feel compelled to explain its origins. Gender, for Feinberg, is an expression of something that is both “always already there,” and fluid. Jess says several times that she “didn’t have a choice” about gender expression, that she “didn’t want to be different” (p. 13). Very early in life, Jess realizes that the problem of gender is rooted not in her body but in her culture. At age ten she thinks, “When I was really small, I thought I’d do anything to change whatever was wrong with me. Now I didn’t want to change. I just wanted people to stop being mad at me all the time” (p. 19). She moves, then, from thinking that there is something “wrong with” her to thinking that there is something wrong with the dominant order. Although Stone Butch Blues shares certain generic elements with transsexual autobiography, this passage makes it clear that Jess does not feel that she is trapped in the wrong body. It is not until Jess reaches working age, however, that Stone Butch Blues makes clear connections between Jess’s relationship with her body and her position within socioeconomic structures. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it is not until Jess reaches working age that she begins to question the relationship between her body, her gender, and her position within socioeconomic structures. The reader is made aware of the interrelatedness of these constructions almost from the start of the novel. As she comes of age, Jess comes to see her body as a battleground—a site of oppression, resistance, and contestation.

Very early in life Jess is fashioned by the dominant heterosexual culture as an abject body—an aberration against which sexual dimorphism is constructed. This construction is facilitated by her class status. Feinberg continu-
ally makes it clear that if Jess were a member of the middle or upper class her gender expression would doubtless have been interpreted differently and responded to, on a daily basis, less violently. Which is not to say that the working classes are more violent than the middle class. As a working class child, and later as an adult, Jess is more at risk of violence than are middle-class gender transgressors. Few urban working-class gender traitors are afforded the comparative luxury of being viewed as simply odd or eccentric. The fact that working-class butches are seen as usurpers of scarce “male” jobs, for example, compounds Jess’s daily survival struggles in the workplace.

Even as a child, Jess views the social construct of gender—not her body—as a place of confinement, and confining spaces are associated in Stone Butch Blues with danger. Feinberg inverts the traditional symbolic association of private enclosed spaces with the feminine, warmth, receptivity, and safety. Even as a little girl, Jess gravitates toward open, public spaces. When she is about eight or nine, after a rare happy moment lying in a field and feeling as though “nature held me close and seemed to find no fault with me,” Jess is attacked by a gang of boys who taunt “what are you?” (p. 18). In a grotesque foreshadowing of her encounters with police in the years to come, the boys tie her hands behind her back, pull off her trousers, and lock her in a coal bin. She is terrified that she will never escape from the dark enclosure. Hours later, she is discovered, “covered with coal soot and blood, tied up and half-naked” (p. 18). Jess’s subsequent encounters with enclosed spaces signal danger. There are the public restrooms; the police vans with snarling dogs, pulled up to the bar door during raids, leaving no escape; the police station basement interrogation/torture rooms, and the jail cells. Like the coal bin, all of these spaces (with the exception of public bathrooms) are class enclosures, spaces rarely experienced by the rich and too-frequently experienced by Jess and other working class gender outlaws as oppressive and violent geographical manifestations of the intersection of class and gender.

The first time Jess cross-dresses in her father’s suit and stands before a mirror, she is eleven years old. The suit represents not just the gendered self-expression that Feinberg claims for it, but also Jess’s unconscious yearning for a class status that might afford her more breathing room as a transgendered person. Jess’s moment of archetypal self-recognition is interrupted by her parents, who say nothing, but abandon her in a mental ward a few days later. This scene strikes me as out of character with the details of Jess’s class identity that inform every other scene in the novel. In short, the scene’s dissonance may be characterized as follows: working class transgendered people tend to be punished for failing to properly perform gender; genderqueers of more privileged classes are more likely to be subjected to cure than punishment. It seems unlikely that a child of the working class like Jess, living in a company-town ghetto, would be deposited in a mental ward.
Among other questions this segment raises is the question of who pays for her hospitalization. I suspect that Feinberg may have been attempting to portray the breadth of strategies of oppression, punishment, and cure to which transgendered youth are subjected; in so doing she violates the geography of class she has so painstakingly constructed. Jess is subjected to the “cure” generally reserved for the social classes symbolized by the tailored suit rather than to the punishment that more often befalls genderqueers of the working class to which she belongs.

In the mental ward, Jess is entirely at the mercy of what Anne Bolin calls “the privileged controllers of individual bodies, the medical professions” (p. 447). In the ward, Jess learns “a lot in three weeks. I realized the world could do more than judge me, it wielded tremendous power over me” (p. 22). As oppressive as this knowledge is, she uses it to her advantage, and pretends to go along with the psychiatric establishment’s cure, which involves mandatory dress-wearing, weekly visits to a psychiatrist, and enrollment in charm school. In the ward, she learns, in essence, the necessity of deception. As Kate Bornstein has noted, transgendered and transsexual people are probably the only people encouraged by mental health practitioners to lie about their identity.27 Bornstein was referring to the fact that the medical/psychiatric establishment counsels sex-change patients, pre- and post-operative, not to identify as transgendered or transsexual, but to pass as the gender they are encouraged to think of themselves as in the process of “becoming.” In charm school, Jess learns that she “[isn’t] pretty, [isn’t] feminine, and w[ill] never be graceful” (p. 23). What she doesn’t learn, until years later, is that her masculine gender expression is just as attractive to some women as prettiness and femininity are to some men.

Feinberg skillfully inverts notions of the naturalness of gender divisions in the novel’s most macabre drag sequence and one of its most pathetic and harrowing normative class-inscribing rituals: Butch Ro’s funeral. Ro’s biological family allows the butches to attend the funeral only if they wear dresses. When Jess arrives at the funeral home,

[t]here, around the open casket, were Butch Ro’s lifelong friends. All of them were wearing dresses. That’s how much they loved her.

These were burly, big-shouldered he-shes who carried their womanhood in work-roughened hands. They could playfully slap you on the back and send you halfway across the room. Their forearms and biceps were covered with tattoos. These powerful butch women were comfortable in work chinos. Their spirit roared to life when they wore double-breasted suits.

Wearing dresses was an excruciating humiliation for them. Many of their dresses were old, from another era when occasional retreats were still necessary. The dresses were outdated, white, frilly, lace, low-cut, plain. The shoes were old or borrowed: patent leather, loafers, sandals. The clothing degraded their spirit, ridiculed who they were. Yet it was
in this painful drag they were forced to say their last good-bye to the
friend they loved so much.

... [Butch Ro] lay in the casket... in a pink dress... holding a
bunch of pink-and-white flowers. (Pp. 116-17)

Judith Butler, Marjorie Garber, and others have noted that drag has
subversive possibilities; that it foregrounds the constructedness of gender
and the extent to which clothes make the man (or woman). Esther Newton
sees drag as doubly subversive, as an illusion of an illusion. In her analysis,
the drag queen presents a feminine outside (dress and appearance) that cloaks
a masculine inside (body), while simultaneously claiming a feminine inside
(“essence”) that is expressed on the blank slate of the masculine outside
(body).28 The reverse drag ritual at Ro’s funeral doubles this doubling and
challenges the naturalness of gender binaries. When butches dressed as
butches pass as men, the restricted categories of “men” and “women” are
challenged. When butches dressed as women cannot pass as women, the
binary categories break down altogether.

In the scene around Ro’s casket, as in the opening epistolary segment and
the scenes of butch solidarity in the factories and on the loading docks,
Feinberg emphasizes class. The butches’ hands are “work-roughened,” their
clothes of choice are those that they wear to work in the factories, their
mannerisms and gestures signify working-class identification, and their
tattoos—in the era in which this novel is set—are signifiers of membership in
the working classes. The dresses and shoes they wear to the funeral are those
of working-class women from another era. The age and style of the butches’
clothes at the funeral, garments that are supposed to conceal gender transgres?
sion, signify class. The women’s class status makes them more vulnerable to
the authority imposed by the funeral home director who enforces the gender
edict of Ro’s family, but it also functions to queer the space of the funeral
parlor. The funeral proceeds according to Ro’s family’s edict until Jess and
Ed, representatives of a rebellious new generation of butches, arrive wearing
suits, in deliberate violation of the dresses-only injunction. The moment the
funeral home director catches a glimpse of Jess and Ed, he brings the viewing
of Ro’s body to an abrupt halt and closes the funeral home to the butches and
femmes. Jess’s and Ed’s transgression is two-fold; not only are they wearing
“men’s” clothing, they are wearing suits, which, like the suit Jess wore before
the mirror as a child, signify gendered power and upper-class status. The
butches, quite aware of this double signifying, buy their suits in the best
men’s wear stores, sparing no expense, and have them professionally tailored
to fit.

The macabre drag ritual that functions to foreground class is repeated
when the unemployed butches try on wigs and make-up in a desperate attempt
to obtain “women’s” jobs “in the department stores,” since the factory jobs
they had during the Vietnam war are now classified as men’s work (p. 143). “Four stone butches trying on fashion wigs,” observes Jess. “It was like Halloween, only it was creepy and painful” (p. 143). In a reversal of the moment of self-recognition before the mirror that Jess experienced when she first tried on her father’s suit, she looks in the mirror at her wigged self and realizes that she “look[s] more like a he-she with a wig on than with a goddamn DA” (p. 143). The butches abandon the wig and make-up scheme when each looks in the mirror and realizes that clothes do not make the woman. Their failed attempt at passing as made-up coifed women leads to a discussion of who they are. They recall a friend, Ginny, who began a sex-change program and is passing as Jimmy:

Jan put her beer bottle down on the table. “Yeah, but I’m not like Jimmy. Jimmy told me he knew he was a guy even when he was little. I’m not a guy.”

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

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

I leaned over and put my arm around her shoulder. “You’re my friend.”

Ed laughed sardonically. “Like I can really pay my rent with that.” (P. 144)

The butches demonstrate in this scene that they have internalized some of the dominant culture’s gender anxiety (“We aren’t real women, are we?”). They come to the uneasy conclusion that they are “he-shes,” a term used derogatorily by bashers that Jess co-opts and claims as her own. For Jess, he-she means not quite a woman and not “just [a] . . . lesbian” (p. 146). Both “he-she” and “lesbian” are laden with class value. “He-she,” the term Jess becomes comfortable with, and one that is rarely heard today, was used almost exclusively by the working class, hence it is the term that Jess co-opts. Her discomfort with the word “lesbian” is reiterated throughout the novel. “Lesbian,” especially during the time period in which Jess’s friends struggle with identity issues (the sixties), was a middle- or upper-class term, when it was uttered at all. Its association with the middle and upper classes and its use by sixties and seventies feminists who denigrated butch/femme, rather than its connotations of homosexuality, account for much of Jess’s distaste with the label.

Jan, Grant, Ed, and Jess question whether their problem resides in their culture’s oppressive gender binaries or in their bodies. The tension between these two conflated and contested sites of oppression is a central tension in *Stone Butch Blues*. Whether the site of the problem is the body or the binary, however, all of the butches experience gender trouble most acutely (and chronically) as a problem rooted in class and economics. If their class status
were other than working class, the parameters of their gender trouble would be distinctly different. I have already alluded to the fact that lesbian bars in this era often presented the sole opportunity for working-class lesbians to socialize in a “safe” environment that paradoxically left customers open to the ritual abuse of the police raid. Just as they were often able to create safe social spaces in private, upper- and middle-class genderqueer women were more likely to be able to avoid abusive workplaces. Almost every episode in *Stone Butch Blues* in which a tormented butch questions her gender identity is preceded by an episode of workplace violence or humiliation, a police raid on a bar, or a violent street bashing in a working-class neighborhood. Gender dysphoria in this novel, then, is more a result of the constraints of class than it is of gender binaries or individuals’ feelings that they are in the “wrong” body.

All of the butches but Jan either have begun or are about to begin availing themselves of medically regulated technologies (hormones and surgeries, primarily) that will allow them to remake their bodies’ sexed characteristics. Feinberg stresses, however, that unlike Jimmy, whose life has been an unambiguous female-to-male continuum, Jan, Grant, Ed, and Jess’s “problem” with their bodies is primarily an economic problem, and thus a class problem. They do not question “what the hell am I” until the answer is “unemployed.” Their inability to find work as he-shes—not an innate discomfort with their bodies—prompts their self-questioning and gender refashioning. Feinberg provides ample evidence that Jess’s primary—indeed, sole—motivation for passing as a man is economic. Jess seeks stable employment and safety from violent attacks on the street and by the police. These are clearly class-based concerns that are greatly exacerbated by her gender status; they are not rooted in her feelings about her gender or her body. I reiterate, however, that this is not to say that Feinberg—or this writer—confers a moral judgment upon those who choose to alter their bodies’ sexed characteristics for reasons other than Jess’s. *Stone Butch Blues* features several characters, Jimmy and Rocco, for example, who undergo FTM transition for reasons primarily related to their discomfort with their bodies’ sexed characteristics, and the text supports their choices.

The butches are acutely aware of the extent to which gender functions as a class category. As Kate Bornstein notes, “the gender binary is the one most firmly entrenched in our culture because it’s the one that capitalism trades on the most, other than class.” The butches’ desperation at their inability to find work underscores their double oppression: they have been assigned to the inferior biological gender category of “women,” and hence denied the economic advantages to which working-class white men are privy, and they are denied “women’s work” because their gender expression is outside of the boundaries of the “women” category. *Stone Butch Blues* speaks directly to the reality of working-class butch survival and challenges the notion that butch
and femme identities are mimetic of heterosexual gender roles. Feinberg also challenges the notion (here I am thinking specifically of Judith Butler) that drag is parodic. Although Jess’s gender presentation contains parodic elements, Feinberg, like Joan Nestle, describes it as primarily expressive of something that is “always already there”—in distinct opposition to artificially constructed social class.

Jess, Grant, and the other butches repeatedly frame their identity issues in the language of geography. With this language of place, Feinberg employs a class-based conceit. One’s place, one’s sense of belonging, is inextricably bound to one’s class status. The bars, the workplaces, and the community in which Jess moves are distinctly working class, and class constraints prevent Jess from seeking community elsewhere. Conversely, while Jess feels shut out of everything and everywhere, she also feels trapped: “I don’t feel like a man trapped in a woman’s body, I just feel trapped” (pp. 158-59). The butches are trapped in an endless cycle of temporary jobs and economic dependence on their femmes, who enjoy relative job stability in traditionally female occupations such as clerical work and prostitution. The butches feel that they’ve got “no place to hide” (p. 159). Socioeconomic currents and constant punishment for gender transgression drives Jess to a resistance strategy that, for her, ultimately proves unworkable: she makes the difficult decision to begin hormone treatments and pass as a man.

As a man, Jess lives in fear of discovery and finds that she has to invent a new history and identity to match her new hormonally-altered body. With her breasts in a binder and beard stubble on her face, Jess cannot even engage in a social activity as simple as going to the gym for a steambath and a swim with the guys from work. To complete her identity change, Jess has breast reduction surgery. Even while the medical establishment is in the process of shaping her body to fit into an accepted gender category, it reminds Jess that she is a transgressor, a monster. She is thrown out of the hospital before she has even recovered from the effects of the anesthesia, let alone those of the surgery, because “this hospital is for sick people,” not freaks (p. 177). Compared with the reinforcement that the medical establishment gives women who opt for breast “augmentation” surgery—the after-effects of which are now known to be ruinous to women’s health—the treatment that Jess receives is particularly illuminative of the nature of the medical processes of “biological” gender construction.

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: “A feeling of claustrophobia choked me. Even as my world was expanding, it was shrinking” (p. 175). She is forced to concede that, for her, the psychological and
social disadvantages of passing as a man outweigh the economic advantages—the primary one being the availability of steady work.

Jess simultaneously begins to experience a measure of comfort in her new body and an isolation unlike any that she has known. Here the tension between the body as the site of oppression and as the locus of resistance reaches its zenith. Jess has altered her body as a strategy of resistance, and the strategy at first appears to have worked: she finds stable employment and she finds herself free from gender oppression for the first time in her life. But her new body is not the locus of resistance she envisioned. Rather, she experiences it as a symbol of victory for the forces that punished her for failing to properly perform gender. The binary vision of the outside world constructed Jess as a “man trapped in a woman’s body,” and she has now altered her body to conform to this diagnosis. Although passing has its pluses, Jess still feels that there is “no place outside of me where I [belong]” (p. 209). She has modified her body as a way of dealing with economic hardship (unemployment) and harassment, but it remains clear that the external surface of her body does not dictate who she is. She is comfortable in the space outside of gender binaries, but the world continually tries to roust her from that space and keep her firmly constrained by class divisions.

In her new body, Jess assumes that no lesbian femme would accept her as a lover, and even if one would, there is no longer a community or a meeting place to facilitate such a connection. She is both attracted to and terrified by straight women. Finally, the attraction and loneliness get the better of her terror, and she ends up in bed with Annie, a working-class straight homophobic woman who thinks Jess is a man. In this scene, Feinberg weaves a complex symbolic narrative in which class is as cogently signified as gender. Through sleight of hand and skillful manipulation of a dildo, Jess lives up to—and exceeds—Annie’s expectations. Annie is clearly impressed by Jess’s skill as a lover and by the fact that their lovemaking focuses on Annie’s, not Jess’s, pleasure. “‘You don’t fuck like other guys,’” she says, “‘It’s like you got a brain in your dick instead of a dick for a brain’” (p. 193). When my students read Stone Butch Blues last year, they found Jess to be a very likable character and they were angered at the injustices to which she was subjected, but they found the scene with Annie to be utterly unbelievable. I found it to be unlikely, but certainly not unbelievable. Marjorie Garber observes—and documents—that the sort of performance enacted by Jess and Annie has been enacted “dozens, probably hundreds” of times in recent history, for time periods often spanning the participants’ entire lives (p. 67). Brandon Teena, a young transgendered person (FTM) who was murdered for his gender transgressions in Falls City, Nebraska in 1993, was described by five of his former lovers, all of whom identified as heterosexual women, as “the best boyfriend they had ever dated, the most alluring suitor and certainly the best lover.” None of them thought of themselves as lesbians or of Teena as a
woman. What my students found difficult to believe is precisely what Annie, and Brandon Teena’s partners, found so satisfying about the encounter: the notion of “heterosexual” sex that is not penis-centered, that is focused on the woman’s body. The scene’s irony, of course, is derived from the fact that both of the participants are women (Jess never ceases to think of herself as a woman, even when she is passing). Feinberg effectively deconstructs, in this scene, both the naturalness of maleness, and hence its claims to universal subjectivity, and the authenticity of the penis, which is precisely, I think, why some of my students found the scene challenging. Where there is a penis present, male privilege asserts that it will be the center of attention, and Feinberg decenters that expectation. David Henry Hwang, in an interview focusing on his play *M. Butterfly*, addresses—and supports—the expectation of the centrality of the penis. In a discussion of “male frontal nudity” in the play, and his decision to downplay it, to have the nude actor stand downstage and at an angle to the audience, he asserts, with authority, that “if you have a penis here and Sir Laurence Olivier there, everybody looks at the penis.” In the scene with Annie and Jess, the “penis” is there, and the reader’s—and Annie’s—attention is riveted on Sir Laurence Olivier.

But the phallus here is not simply representative of masculine power; it is an object with a long history and, more recently, a signifier of class. Colleen Lamos writes that “the dildo has circulated within popular culture, satiric tales, and subliterary, pornographic genres in the West since at least the seventeenth century. The use of dildos has been proscribed in various ecclesiastical codes, while commercial possession of dildos is illegal in some states,” including Texas. Performance artist Jim Rose was recently arrested for appearing on stage in Lubbock, Texas, (where this writer currently resides) fully clothed, sporting a strap-on dildo. Possession of six or more dildos in Texas makes one liable to prosecution for “intent to promote” their use. Lamos argues that cultural anxiety about the dildo arises from an unconscious understanding that “the dildo both imitates and undercuts the phallicism of the penis, discrediting phallic power while simultaneously, and paradoxically, assuming such power for itself,” and that as “[a] detachable part, the dildo humorously implies that the penis can be detached from its phallic burden—or that the phallus has spawned another symbol. Like simulacra in general, it is threatening and alluring in different contexts as a substitutive displacement of that which it represents.” Lamos’s analysis of the dildo is born out in the scene with Annie. The power of the phallus is undercut by the focus on Annie’s pleasure, and by the reader’s understanding that the “penis” in this scene lacks both sensation and naturalness. The humorous implications of the dildo are multilayered: Annie thinks the joke is on “other” men who have not been as skilled at the art of lovemaking as Jess; the joke is on Annie, who thinks Jess is a man and believes that homosexuals are child-molesting perverts; and the phallus is indeed detach-
able. But the dildo also functions as a reviled class signifier. Again, I cite Lamos:

the dildo was decried by many lesbian feminists in the 1970s and 1980s as a straight male fantasy, a myth contrived by jealous men who could not imagine two women sexually satisfying each other, or else disavowed as a retrograde, male-identified practice stemming from false consciousness or penis envy. Like the butch lesbian, it was relegated to the benighted, prefeminist past, the product of outdated notions of sexual inversion.36

The charge of “false consciousness” to which Lamos refers was most often leveled at working class women, and at working class lesbians in particular, and, to middle-class lesbian feminists, the dildo was a primary signifier of that “false” consciousness. Dorothy Allison writes that although “[i]n 1979, the idea of using dildos was still anathema to most feminist lesbians,” lesbians were furtively using them, and feminist lesbians were being schooled in their use by their working-class lovers, where such liaisons across class boundaries existed.37 Stone Butch Blues vividly sketches the treatment of working-class butch and femme lesbians by middle-class feminists active in the Second Wave women’s movement. In foregrounding the dildo in the Annie segment, and elsewhere in the novel—Jess’s first symbolic point of transition from “baby butch” to adult occurs when an older butch presents her with a dildo; a later significant moment in her development involves a femme telling her what it signifies to femmes and how she is to use it—Feinberg implicitly foregrounds class and the class divisions the Second Wave women’s movement attempted to efface.

Although the bedroom scene with Annie appears to invite a reading of Jess’s body as a site of resistance—to universal white masculine subjectivity and the “naturalness” of gendered and sexed bodies—the narrative encourages another reading. Shortly after the one-night stand with Annie, Jess reaches a crisis point of isolation and alienation. She reconnects with Edna, an old femme friend, and, again employing a negative spatial trope, confesses that she feels “‘[l]ike [she has] been buried alive’” in her own body (p. 213). Rather than confirming her identity, passing as a man has fragmented it. Before passing, she claims, she knew who she was: a he-she. Now she is not sure. “I don’t know what I am,” she tells Edna. In using “what” and not “who,” Jess questions her humanity. She adopts the language of her enemies, of those who used to call her “it” before she passed. She now sees herself as a negative, as “neither” a man nor a woman, and she “‘[doesn’t] like being neither’” (p. 218). Edna responds that Jess is “‘more than just neither. There’s other ways to be’” (p. 218). Again, Jess squares off against her fragmented self in the mirror, the syringe of hormones poised above her thigh. This time she realizes,
As much as I loved my beard as part of my body, I felt trapped behind it. What I saw reflected in the mirror was not a man, but I couldn’t recognize the he-she... I could see my passing self, but even I could no longer see the more complicated me beneath my surface... I hadn’t just believed that passing would hide me. I hoped that it would allow me to express the part of myself that didn’t seem to be a woman. I didn’t get to explore being a he-she, though. I simply became a he–a man without a past. (P. 222)

The only time Jess feels trapped in the wrong body, then, is when she is passing as a man. This scene foregrounds Feinberg’s expressive hypothesis. Motivated by economic necessity, Jess’s performance as a man is parodic and unfulfilling. Feinberg privileges the expression of a self outside of gender, not the subversive performance of gender. 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. If Jess did not have to worry constantly about getting or keeping a job and about living hand to mouth, the cusp of gender and self would be more accessible to her; she could be the eccentric, the dandy in a suit, the maiden aunt. None of these identities are accessible to the working class butches in Stone Butch Blues.

The half-formed yearning for a past, a history, that has crept into Jess’s consciousness throughout the narrative comes to the fore in the scene before the mirror with the syringe, and it stays Jess’s hand from injecting the hormones. The postmodern Jess, the man without a history, is erased, and the he-she resurfaces. Jess begins to see her body as a possible site of resistance, and this time the thought does not isolate or exhaust as much as it empowers. In the final pages of the novel Feinberg suggests that the gendered body may productively be seen as a site of oppression and resistance only when the inseparability of class, gender, and sexuality issues is acknowledged.

A growing consciousness of the historical and socioeconomic context of her struggles enables Jess to envision her body as a locus of resistance and facilitates her understanding of the relationship of social class to gender expression. Even before history becomes important to Jess, Stone Butch Blues is infused with it. The novel interweaves narratives from labor history, the Civil Rights struggle, anti-Vietnam War activism, Wounded Knee, and the women’s movement. All of these historic struggles are situated within the context of class struggle. Each of these historic movements is seen in terms of the deep fractures it brings about in Jess’s high school, in the butch-femme community, and among assembly-line workers. Each is evaluated in terms of its support or subversion of class hierarchies. Feinberg suggests that the labor and gay liberation movements of the nineties possess the potential to subvert class structures. The novel closes with Jess applying what she has learned in organized labor struggles to gay liberation struggle. Given the nature of the
novel’s unrelenting portrayal of the quotidian brutalities that function to construct gender and to keep gender transgressors in their place, the ending seems almost utopian. But it is an ending that reflects the novel’s time and its timeliness. The United States on the eve of the twenty-first century does not appear to be witnessing a revival of popular support for organized labor; however, both the gay civil rights struggle of the nineties and queer studies at the fin de millénaire are beginning to address class and transgender issues.

Jess finds her voice and a language in which to express herself when she happens upon a gay liberation rally in the street. It is not the first such rally she has seen, but in the past she has “always walked away feeling outside of that movement and alone,” no doubt because she associates it with her rejection by white middle-class feminists in the women’s movement (p. 296). This time, however, she hears a young woman testifying before a large crowd about having been raped by a gang of young men from her neighborhood. She was raped because she was singled out as a lesbian. “I never told my lover what happened,” the woman concludes, “I felt like we’d have both been raped if I told her” (p. 296). The story strikes a familiar chord for Jess. Another woman’s testimony to silence makes Jess feel “so sick to death of my own silence that I needed to speak too,” and moves Jess to public speech (p. 296). Dizzy with fear, Jess mounts the stage.

“I’m not a gay man. I’m a butch, a he-she. I don’t know if the people who hate our guts call us that anymore. But that single epithet shaped my teenage years . . . I watch protests and rallies from across the street . . . There’s lots of us who are on the outside, and we don’t want to be. We’re getting busted and beaten up. We’re dying out here. We need you—but you need us too.” (p. 296)

In claiming a voice and a history, Jess inserts the transgendered body into resistance strategy. The tension between the body as the site of oppression and as the locus of resistance appears to be almost too easily resolved. Jess acknowledges that her body has been a site of oppression, and she simultaneously claims it as a site of resistance. Her first two sentences respond to the misreading of her body she anticipates receiving from the crowd. She asserts what Leslie Adelson asserts in making a claim for the importance of real bodies to resistance history: that the body “is both within and outside the reach of dominant orders [and] resistance to oppression is a matter not of missing heroes beyond the invisible walls of culture but of everyday mortals: you and me.” Feinberg would stress the “and” in Adelson’s “you and me.” In asserting “There’s lots of us who are on the outside, and we don’t want to be,” it is clear that Jess is not speaking about sexuality—she is, after all, addressing an audience at a gay liberation rally. The “us” on the outside, “getting busted and beaten up,” are transgendered people, who will not get a foot in the door of the gay liberation movement for another decade or so past
the point at which Jess makes her speech—despite the fact that butches and drag queens initiated the resistance at Stonewall that sparked the movement. “Us” also refers to the working class that gay liberation movement of the seventies, eighties, and most of the nineties has effaced. Feinberg’s project, then, is not just about delineating the effect of class constraints on gender expression and construction; it is about suggesting the necessity of opening up gay civil rights struggle to class analysis and transgender issues. Stone Butch Blues, published on the eve of an era in which “gay marriage” has, for better or worse, become synonymous with gay civil rights, anticipates the significance of gender issues (such as the far-reaching implications of defining marriage as a legal tie “between one man and one woman”) to gay civil rights struggle.

In the purview of this novel, transgender issues are working-class issues. Speaking to her labor organizer friend Duffy in the novel’s final pages, Jess confirms

“Something incredible happened to me today, Duffy. I got up in front of a rally and talked over a microphone. I wanted to tell them how it was in the plants, how when a contract’s almost up management works overtime trying to divide everybody. I didn’t know if they’d get what I meant if I said it takes the whole membership to win a strike.” (P. 299)

In Feinberg’s assessment, meaningful resistance can only take place when there is a revolutionary working class consciousness, and the yearning for this consciousness that has marked every page of the novel becomes more pronounced at its close. Jess has progressed from enacting a modernist individual agency that brought isolation, exclusion, and alienation, to working as a resisting subject within existing structures—labor unions and the nascent gay and lesbian liberation movement. The final pages leave us with the promise of Jess working with others to create a space for the transgendered subject and for the address of class and gender issues within both of these organized resistance structures. Her presence in the labor movement necessitates an examination of the movement’s treatment of gender and of women, and her presence as a working-class butch in the gay liberation movement underscores the class issues the movement has been slow to address. 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 collective action and coalition-building as tactics of resistance. It examines the relationship between gender and class structures, and it suggests means by which such an examination might advance a praxis of resistance.

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NOTES

1 The Stonewall rebellion is generally thought of as the birth of the Gay Civil Rights movement. Stonewall was the name of a bar on Christopher Street in New York. In June 1969, police raided the bar and patrons fought back, with butches and drag queens at the forefront—a three-day “riot” ensued.

2 *Stone Butch Blues* won the American Library Association’s 1993 award for best gay or lesbian novel.

3 Leslie Martin Lothstein’s *Female-to-Male Transsexualism* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983) was the only book-length study, prior to 1996, to address the female-to-male subject, and Lothstein’s perspective is clinical. He regards transsexualism as “a disorder of the self.” Marjorie Garber laments the invisibility and critical misunderstanding of the female-to-male (FTM) transgendered subject. She goes a long way toward exposing and correcting this misunderstanding, in *Vested Interests*, and argues that FTM cross-dressers and transsexuals have been ignored because MTF expression is seen—especially by the medical establishment—as a curable psychosis (the cure being sex-reassignment surgery), and FTM expression is seen as a simple desire to be a man, a desire that the medical-psychiatric establishment has long believed that all women develop and, in “normal” development, repress and subjugate (p. x). FTMs are now beginning to speak for themselves on the internet, through small presses, and through organizations like Transexual [sic] Menace. Loren Cameron’s critically acclaimed photo/text narrative *Body Alchemy* has opened the door for a flood of textual attention to the FTM subject.

4 *Gender Identity Disorder* appears in the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Gender dysphoria is defined by the medico-psychiatric system in terms of the “patient” being “trapped in the wrong body,” a man trapped in a woman’s body or vice versa. Sandy Stone points out that the medico-psychiatric system that invented Gender Identity Disorder denies sex reassignment surgery to individuals who do not state that they feel “trapped in the wrong body,” and that persons desiring surgery are therefore compelled to state that they feel trapped in the wrong body, whether they do or not; that the medico-psychiatric system quite literally creates the pre-operative transsexual subject who feels trapped in the wrong body (Sandy Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto.” In *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, edited by Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub [New York: Routledge, 1991]). Recently, there has been considerable debate in transgender communities about the wisdom of demanding a removal of Gender Identity Disorder from the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Some community members feel that its removal would expedite transgender liberation; others fear that the removal of the classification would make it more difficult or impossible to secure health insurance coverage of sex reassignment procedures.

5 I do not mean to imply that Feinberg argues—or that I argue—that no individual is gender dysphoric or that individuals should not have access to medical technologies for altering the body’s sexed characteristics—technologies currently accessible primarily to those who have been diagnosed with gender identity disorder. Feinberg argues that these options should be readily accessible to those who desire them. I argue that her protagonist, although she does employ some sex reassignment technologies, is driven to do so primarily by socioeconomic concerns and class constraints, not by gender dysphoria.

6 Butler, Garber, Kate Bornstein, Martine Rothblatt, and others argue that biological sex is as problematic a category as gender. They point out that traditional biological markers of sex self-deconstruct under scrutiny, as does the “science” that invented them. Rothblatt, for example, observes that “it is not true that all legally defined women are XX and all
legally defined men are XY [chromosomally]. Hundreds of thousands of people are born with all manner of chromosomal variations, including XXY and X, among others. The Olympics has ceased using chromosomal tests for a second X as a means of disqualifying women, after certain athletes—namely persons with a vagina, a lifelong ‘female’ gender identity, and but one X chromosome—were cruelly disqualified right at the quadrennial event.” (The Apartheid of Sex: A Manifesto on the Freedom of Gender [New York: Crown, 1995], p. 6.) I address Bornstein’s work below.

7 Marjorie Garber, Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 11. Garber envisions a “‘third’ . . . space of possibility . . . which questions binary thinking.” She emphasizes that this “third” is “not . . . a sex, certainly not an instantiated ‘blurred’ sex as signified by a term like ‘androgyne’ or ‘hermaphrodite’ . . . The ‘third’ is a mode of articulation, a way of describing” (italics in original).


9 Stone, p. 296.

10 It is nearly impossible, for example, to work in gender theory today and not address the work of Judith Butler; yet Butler, and most of her contemporaries, are all but silent on issues of social class. Butler’s crucial concepts of performativity and abject bodies tend to reduce complex social milieux to insider/outsider dichotomies such as hetero/homo, empowered/disempowered, and, occasionally, universal white male subjectivity/women of color. Butler’s work is clearly groundbreaking and has been deservedly influential, but, like much contemporary work that theorizes gender, it invites a closer examination of the complex interrelationship of gender, transgender, and class issues; the issues this essay sets out to explore. See Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990) and Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex” (New York: Routledge, 1993). See also Butler’s treatment, in Bodies that Matter of Jennie Livingston’s Paris is Burning (“Gender is Burning”), pp. 121-40. Butler acknowledges the significance of class and race in the film but then proceeds to discuss it in terms that illustrate her ideas about performativity and abject bodies but do not interrogate its treatment of class and race.


14 Gendered pronouns become problematic here. The English language has not yet caught up with the transgender revolution. To avoid confusion, I will use gender-specific pronouns—and the noun “woman”—as Feinberg uses them. Feinberg refers to her protagonist as both a woman and a “he-she.” I refer to Jess throughout as “she” because, although she chooses to pass as a man for a time, she never refers to herself as a man, and she presents herself to those with whom she is intimate as a woman or a “he-she.” Her confidantes and allies use the pronoun “she” to refer to Jess.

15 Ed loans Jess a copy of W. E. B. Du Bois’s 1903 The Souls of Black Folk, with the following passage from the essay “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” marked (Stone Butch Blues, p. 178): “It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that
looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”


17 Ibid., p. 123.

18 Ibid., p. 124.

19 Feinberg outlined this rhetorical purpose in the question and answer session following a speech on 11 April, 1994, closing Penn State University’s (University Park, PA) Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Pride Week.

20 Butler, Gender Trouble, p. 140.


22 Ibid., p. 107.


24 Ibid., p. 18.


26 In an autobiographical segment of Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul ([Boston: Beacon, 1996], p. 8), Feinberg writes that three-pieces-of-gender-specific-clothing laws were on the books and were regularly and brutally enforced in Buffalo in the early 1960s.

27 Bornstein made this observation during a discussion with the audience after a 1994 performance of The Opposite Sex is Neither at Penn State.

28 Esther Newton, Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 103. The majority of discourse on drag to date has focused on the male-to-female (MTF) cross-dresser and transsexual. Marjorie Garber addresses (FTM) cross-dressing in Vested Interests.


30 I wish to reiterate that Jess’s interpretation of her hormonally and surgically altered body as a symbol of victory for the forces of gender oppression reflects her understanding of her body and her culture. Neither Jess, Feinberg, nor I argue that transgendered persons’ use of medical technologies to alter their bodies is always the wrong choice or a victory for gender conservatism. Feinberg has stated, and I concur, that access to medical technologies for re-embodiment should be a right and a choice, not an imposition or, as is the case with Jess, an economic necessity.


34 Ibid., p. 102.

35 Ibid., p. 120.

36 Ibid., p. 104.


38 Leslie Adelson, Making Bodies, Making History: Feminism and German Identity (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1993), pp. 34-35.