



MA in Construction and Representation of Cultural Identities

The Queer Homes and Communities of *Stone Butch Blues*: On Violence, Intimacy, and Queer Possibilities

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Abstract

Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) follows the life of Jess, a Jewish, working-class, and butch protagonist. Through first-person narration, the novel explores issues of intersectional community-building, negotiation of difference and sameness, and the possibility of queer alternatives to home and domesticity. Amidst constant and unbearable police brutality, social punishment and verbal threats, the characters of the novel struggle to survive both on a physical level—keeping their bodies alive—and on a psychological one—developing a sense of self and self-worth. This Master's thesis analyzes both the novel's depiction of police violence, framed as torture, and the survival strategies that develop around it, which involve community-building and intimacy between traumatized characters. The analysis is structured in two parts: the first part explores what makes community necessary and how it works through close readings of the text alongside theoretical works on community, such as Zigmunt Bauman's, and on torture, such as Elaine Scarry's. The second part of the analysis focuses on the limitations of community, the delineation of its boundaries, and the consequences of being without community through works on queer and bisexual theory, such as Jack Halberstam's and Claire Hemmings'. Lastly, this thesis turns to the utopic drive of the novel, focusing on hope and the celebration of difference as essential to queer, class-conscious politics.

Key words: community, queer domesticities, torture, bisexual theory

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Introduction

Stone Butch Blues follows the life of Jess, a Jewish, working-class, and butch protagonist. Through first person narration, Jess provides an account of the first forty years of her life, from 1949 to the late eighties. In these years, Jess works at different factories, has several femme romantic partners, and befriends a number of butches and femmes. Violence and survival drive the narrative as core elements of her lived experience in a world that, as the novel portrays, wants her dead. Amidst constant and unbearable police brutality, social punishment and verbal threats, the characters of the novel struggle to survive both on a physical level—literally keeping their bodies alive—and on a psychological one—developing a sense of self and self-worth.

Stone Butch Blues is a novel about home: about the experience of being un-homed in one's body and world, and the search for livable alternatives. By making readers painfully and graphically aware of the violence that surrounds the protagonist, the text frames "homes" as an unarguably indispensable necessity. In the novel's 20-year-anniversary edition, the author makes a point of justifying the depiction of violence in a direct address to the reader:

"Dear Reader:

I want to let you know that *Stone Butch Blues* is an anti-oppression/s novel. As a result, it contains scenes of rape and other violence. None of this violence is gratuitous or salacious.

Leslie." (Feinberg)

The conclusions I draw from this concise and deliberate statement frame my reading of the novel and shape the analysis that follows: that *Stone Butch Blues* is an explicitly political novel, and so its formal and stylistic choices are informed by the author's politics, and that the author is aware of and concerned with the political implications of what can and cannot be

contained in the text. Consequently, my analysis revolves around the political and cultural statements that emerge from the novel, which I intend to read closely through literary criticism and queer, feminist, and bisexual theory. In fact, the novel is so rich with theoretical potential and implications, that narrowing down the scope of analysis has proved challenging. In an interview,¹ Leslie Feinberg described her frustration with 1990's gender theory:

“it was mostly so abstracted from [human] experience that it lacked meaning for me. I wanted to write about trans characters, and how their lives were intersected by race, class, and desire. I wanted to write the kind of gender theory that we all live” (Feinberg, qtd. in Rand 40).

The author's theoretical intent shines through the character's dialogues, their conflicts, and the violence they constantly encounter, which are in turn informed by Feinberg's own experience as a self-defined working-class transgender butch, making the text a form of fictionalized theory. As a consequence, the novel works to create a bridge between theory and lived experiences.

While it is unarguable that Feinberg's portraits of gruesome acts of violence perpetrated mostly by policemen are politically motivated and bring to light the violence perpetuated by systems of law enforcement especially towards queer working-class people, my analysis is more concerned with what comes *after* the violence and around the constant threat of it, as well as the role said violence plays in community-building. That is, I shall be taking a close look at the communities and homes that are formed in the novel, at their potential and limitations as places of refuge, and at the rituals of intimacy and care that they make possible in the aftermaths of violence. The first part of this Master's Thesis is concerned with how these homes and communities are built and the relationships of care and intimacy that are made possible within

¹ I have been unable to find the full interview, and therefore only make reference to the fragment quoted by Erica Rand in her article (2011).

them. Through a selection of fragments and key moments in the novel, I attempt to answer the question: What makes community necessary and what does belonging to it mean? I devote special attention to an analysis of police brutality as torture in order to frame the specific forms of intimacy that develop in its aftermath and set the characters' need for community within the context of routinely brutal violence. The second part includes the close reading of several chosen fragments of the novel through which I attempt to problematize these communities, looking at their margins, their rules, and their dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Focusing on those who are excluded and why, and on instances of expulsion and exile from community, serves to reveal both the structures around which community articulates and the limitations of said communities. As Feinberg's, my intent in this is political—because I believe in the radical necessity of homes and communities and in their role in building new, different realities, I turn to her work as an exemplary case study of what makes community necessary.

Home and Community

Queer communities and homes are central to *Stone Butch Blues*, and are the core axes of my analysis. The text approaches its communities with empathy and portrays them as fluid, diverse, and ever-changing. Because different theoretical frameworks apply at different points in the narrative, rather than constraining the analysis to a single definition of “community” I use the term with certain freedom. In the novel, communities are formed around certain identity markers and shared spaces, such as butch or femme identities in the bars, or unionized workers in the factories. Homes, particularly queer homes, are smaller spaces of domesticity that orbit the community and have a porous relationship with it. This Master's Thesis makes use of two key texts on community. *Repensar la Comunidad en el género y la literatura* is a compilation of essays edited by Marta Segarra, whose introduction to the book offers a useful overview of different philosophical and literary approaches to community. In particular, Fina Birulés's chapter “La distancia como figura de la comunidad, Hannah Arendt” provides insights on the

role of communication and vulnerability in making community possible that resonate with the core themes of *Stone Butch Blues*. On the other hand, Zigmunt Bauman's *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* foregrounds my analysis of the text's approach to difference and sameness, and his thoughts on ghetto-like communities are relevant to the novel's problematization of queer spaces.

Bisexual epistemologies

I would like to introduce bisexual theory as one of the queer tools at my disposal, drawing primarily from Clare Hemmings' *Bisexual Spaces: A Geography of Sexuality and Gender* and Maria San Filippo's *The B Word*. In her work, Hemmings makes use of feminist and queer geographies in order to examine bisexual meaning "without relying on the presence of bisexual subjects to validate that inquiry" (42). San Filippo, on the other hand, takes a bisexual approach to film criticism, searching for what she refers to as "missed moments": "the questions and meanings left unexplored when a monosexual perspective is imposed upon a text rich with bisexual potential" (15). My study of *Stone Butch Blues* is partly grounded in my personal interest in bisexual theory and meaning, which is one of my chosen axes of analysis. As such, it shares Hemmings' desire to analyze the implications of bisexual meaning rather than bisexual identity, as well as San Filippo's interest in shifting away from instances of bisexual "(in)visibility" and turning instead "toward an acknowledgement of their readability as bisexual" (32). While the primary work at hand is not a novel about bisexuality, certain characters are potentially readable as bisexual, and reading them as such can expand our understanding of the queer spaces and homes of *Stone Butch Blues*. More specifically, bisexual theory's problematization of the homosexual/heterosexual dyad, which destabilizes gender and sexual identities, will be useful in my approach to the novel's communities' own rigid categories of gender and sexuality, which become most evident when confronted with

deviations. Although these deviations are not bisexual *per se*, and certainly not in name, they are charged with bisexual meaning and show the theoretical potential of queer bisexual theory.

Leslie Feinberg and *Stone Butch Blues* in context

In spite of being first published in the United States in 1993 and its quickly acquired cult-like status, *Stone Butch Blues* did not become accessible in Spain until very recently. In 2021, less than two years before the writing of this thesis, the novel was translated into Spanish by Judit del Río and Layla Martínez and published by Levanta Fuego as part of their Antipersona collection. What was a groundbreaking text in 1993, passed around in self-edited formats mainly within underground transgender and queer communities in the United States, was largely unknown to Spanish readers until over 28 years later. These 28 years have seen a lot of changes in terms of the political climate and the feminist movement's role within said climate, of the linguistic and material tools that are now at our disposal to engage with queer lives, and of the development of queer and feminist theory. This has not, however, lessened the relevance of the novel for a contemporary readership or its impact on queer studies: *Stone Butch Blues* has proved to be an extremely versatile work, allowing for multiple readings and identifications across time. Historian Tatiana Romero, for example, writes in her review of the novel for *Pikara Magazine* about her experience reading the Spanish translation in 2021: “puso en marcha una serie de engranajes en mi cuerpo y mi cabeza que, a día de hoy han logrado reconciliarme con esa parte *femme* que todavía vive en mí y reconectarme más si cabe con la *butch* en la que me he convertido”. Her review, which describes the impact that the text had on her nearly three decades after its initial publication, serves as an example of the novel's continued significance to its queer readership across time.

The circumstances of the novel's Spanish publication are tied to my motives for and questions of analysis. I am reading the novel in 2022, using the tools and theory available to me in my context of reception. Although I am working with an English version (the 20th anniversary edition in particular), the Spanish reception of the novel has profoundly informed my initial interest in the work. On the book's 10th anniversary, Feinberg referred to the novel

as “a bridge of memory” (397);² this is how I received it and how I read it. The questions I have chosen to pose to the text intend to be a part of that bridge: I am not as much concerned with what the text *did* in its time, as I am with what it can *do* for us now.

The reasons for the novel’s late arrival to Spanish bookshelves were not related to the quality of or potential public for the work itself. Rather, it was mostly economic reasons related to Feinberg’s decisions regarding the rights of her work that made it extremely difficult to re-publish and translate the book. After struggling for years to recover the rights to the novel, Feinberg decided to “[take] *Stone Butch Blues* off the capitalist market” (412). An exception is made for translations of the book, as long as they follow the author’s requirements. The requirements include, among others, that no alterations are made to the original text, that the 20th anniversary edition is used, and that no introduction is written. The most significant condition, however, is economic: “the translation must be non-commercial, that is, be a print edition that is priced to meet only production cost” (420). This criterion explains the long 28 years that it has taken for her work to reach Spain, and highlights Levanta Fuego’s unique social commitment: the publishing house had to be willing to take on the project relinquishing financial gain. Feinberg’s reason for this requirement is stated clearly in the 20th anniversary edition: “I give this novel back to the workers and oppressed of the world” (413); that is, to the movements within which she fought all her life and the people for whom she actually wrote the novel. In her editorial statements, Feinberg firmly describes herself as a communist and states the political reasons behind this ideological choice. She also takes responsibility, to an admirable extent, for the novel both as literary text and as intellectual property (and therefore marketable): “As a white communist, I am responsible for the book’s strengths and weaknesses. *Stone Butch Blues* is not merely a ‘working-class’ novel—it is a novel that embodies class struggle” (416). Feinberg’s commitment has inspired me to approach the novel with care and

² This and the following statements are all compiled in, and quoted from, the 20th anniversary edition.

respect and to take into serious consideration the political intent and nature of her work. I, too, am responsible for the analysis that follows and, as a white bisexual activist and student would like to acknowledge the personal dimension that drives it. This discussion arises from a deep respect for Feinberg's work and a desire to put certain theoretical frameworks in service of her text, hoping to shed some light on its potential meanings and limitations.

PART 1 - HOMEMAKING

1. Community-building: ground rules, shared struggles, and difference

“It is not the words in and of themselves that are important to me—it’s our lives. The struggle of trans people over the centuries is not *his*-story or *her*-story. It is *our*-story.” (x)

Transgender Warriors (1996), Leslie Feinberg

Stone Butch Blues is, I contend, a novel about community as much as it is a novel about its protagonist’s individual gendered journey. The community and the individual coexist in Feinberg’s work, not essentially in conflict or opposition but in dialogue and mutual need. This dialectical relationship, which is fluid in some points of the narrative and tense in others, has its faults and does fail plenty of times, but the text never abandons its faith in it. Community does not pre-exist individuals; rather, characters are born into a hostile world and by seeking out shelter, they come together in communities, which are constantly changing and adapting to circumstances as well as requiring individuals to change and adapt with them. The porosity, boundaries, multiplicity, and precarity embedded in the novel’s portrayal of its communities make *Stone Butch Blues* a deeply rich piece of work that challenges us to reconsider and examine issues of mutual respect and responsibility in queer community-building. This is especially, but not only, due to the author’s commitment to nuance, demonstrated by her willingness to explore within the same work the celebratory and euphoric aspects of belonging, the brutality of the world that makes community necessary for survival, and the violence that takes place within the community itself and at its margins. The following section explores the first of these elements, examining what it means for the novel’s characters to be in community, the rules that make it possible, and how they negotiate overlapping identities, difference, and their role within wider social movements.

1.1. Finding community, coming home

Of the many analyses of *Stone Butch Blues* written in the nearly three decades since its publication, Jay Prosser's "No Place Like Home: The Transgendered Narrative of Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*" is, to me, the most striking misreading of both the primary source and the theory it utilizes. Prosser grounds his analysis on an understanding of queer theory as committed to mobility and non-places, and draws from this commitment a rejection of specificity, home, and the materiality of gendered lived experiences. This logical conclusion is flawed: mobility, fluidity, and non-spaces are not necessarily at odds with specificity, material conditions, or the desire to belong, and portraying them as oppositional limits the possibilities for a queer analysis. However, Prosser uses this portrayal of queer theory to make the argument that Feinberg's novel is "unqueer": "there threads through *Stone Butch Blues* a distinctly unqueer yearning for home both in the body and in community" (Prosser 490). That this yearning, unarguably and painfully present in the novel, might be construed as "unqueer" seems only possible through a misinterpretation of queer theory. Home and community are extremely relevant to queer theory, and an interest in their deconstruction does not necessarily entail a rejection of them altogether, or mean that they are somehow "unqueer". Contrary to Prosser's analysis, I argue that the novel's portrayal of different homes and communities actually allows us to examine what makes their queer reimaginings necessary, possible, and desirable.

Jess is born into a community that makes her life unliveable throughout her childhood and early teenage years. She grows up with her family in the projects, where she absorbs working-class consciousness at a very young age. Her father and the other men are "military-contracted aircraft workers" (12), while her mother and the other women are housewives. It is soon made clear, however, that while there is a sense of class belonging across the community, it is not extended to all of its members. As a child, Jess and all the other children knew that they were not allowed to enter the McKensie family home: "Although it was 1955, the neighbourhood

still had some invisible war zones from a fierce strike that had been settled in 1949, the year I was born. ‘Mac’ McKensie had been a scab” (13). Class struggle informs her childhood through its solidarity and exclusions, which make clear to her that belonging is conditional. This brief early portrayal of Jess’s home town also hints at the intersectional problems that will continue to exist throughout the novel: Jess is Jewish and experiences antisemitism; the school, and by extension the town, are racially segregated. That class solidarity does not cross racial lines is one of the rules that structures this community—in fact, Jess is punished with suspension from school for daring to challenge it by sitting with her black friend in the cafeteria. There are also gendered rules and, like racial rules they are not made explicit until there is a transgression. These rules do not come naturally to Jess, instead having to learn them through punishment, highlighting their unnaturalness and Jess’s own moral compass. As Jess grows older and her gender expression begins to trouble the adults in her life, she discovers that these other, somewhat unspoken rules must be followed if one desires to belong—and that she is unable to do so. While she attempts to “follow all their rules”, it is made clear to her that there is something wrong with her she is unable to fix (9). This wrongness takes the form of a question rather than a mandate: “Is that a boy or a girl?” (9). Her inability to successfully answer the question does have, however, very concrete and material consequences. Jess is bullied and abused throughout her childhood; a violence that culminates in a psychiatric institutionalization, which teaches her the power that medical institutions could hold over her. Her reaction to these attempts to either fix her or exclude her from community is to seek out others like her, to search for safety and recognition outside of her given community. The search leads her to Butch Al and Jacqueline, who welcome her into their home, introduce her to the butch-femme community they are part of, and provide an alternative frame of reference for Jess to see herself in.

This moment is the first coming home for Jess: she finds a place where she is recognized and accepted for who she is, where she is given a role to fulfil, and where her presence is desired. Al and Jacqueline's home is set in direct contrast to Jess's parents' house, which is built around reproductive heterosexual marriage and extremely hostile to Jess's difference. Her "yearning", in Prosser's words, for this refuge is anything but "unqueer". The queerness of the newfound domestic space resonates significantly with Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place*: "The queer 'way of life' will encompass subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and those forms of representation dedicated to capturing these wilfully eccentric modes of being" (1). Their welcoming of Jess is arguably the first indication of these "eccentric modes of being": she is a perfect stranger to them, and yet they bring her into their home on the very same day they meet. The encounter is significantly made possible by the community generated around the bar; where they meet. Heteronormative rules regarding the exclusionary limits of the traditional home are shattered from the start: Jacqueline is an ex-sex worker, while butch Al cross-dresses and takes on a masculine role. They have made a home together, but, contrary to what is expected from normative homes, its boundaries are porous as it becomes an extension of the community, taking Jess in (practically a child at this point) and providing her with the adult understanding, care, and teachings that her original community could or would not supply. A queer genealogy and alternative line of inheritance thus begins to flourish, although it will be sharply interrupted by the trauma of police brutality, as I explore in section 2. Its short existence in time, however, does not diminish the deep effect Jacqueline and Butch Al have on Jess, the latter becoming a parental figure whose masculinity Jess can mirror herself on, unlike her father's.³ From them Jess learns the

³ Jess has, as a child, attempted to mirror herself in her father's masculinity, most significantly by trying on one of his suits and admiring herself in the mirror, wondering about the gendered possibilities of her future self. The consequence for this transgression, however, is radically different from the encouragement and understanding she finds in Al and Jacqueline: upon discovering her, her parents react by sending her to a psychiatric institution.

basic rules of the butch-femme community, receives a vague sexual talk, and is gifted a dildo, among other coming of age moments. Most significantly, however, meeting the couple and being welcomed into their home provides hope for Jess that, unlike what she has always been taught, her life might have value because, and not in spite of, her inability and unwillingness to belong in heteronormative society. She learns that people like her exist, and they might do so continually through time, however precariously: she learns that a queer future for her is possible, that a queer home is possible, and that there are people out there who share and understand her need for home and refuge from a hostile world. As we will see, she also learns that such refuge is precarious but that, while no home or community can offer full protection, it is these temporary spaces of relative refuge and belonging that make life a little more liveable, and violence a little more bearable.

1.2. Rules and genealogy

The queer communities of *Stone Butch Blues* are organized by a considerable number of rules, some more explicit than others. A certain code of conduct must be followed, and belonging is not granted unconditionally. The rules, however, are grounded in mutual understanding and take the shape of a mutual contract. Paraphrasing Hannah Arendt, Fina Birulés describes the mutual contract in contrast with the social contract, in which individuals are subjected to their government: “El contrato mutuo, mediante el cual los individuos se vinculan para formar una comunidad, se basa en la reciprocidad y presupone igualdad.” (37) The individuals that form the community are broadly butches, femmes, and drag queens, the latter two often bundled together. There are established courtship rituals with their own rules of appropriateness: romantic relationships take place between femmes and butches in ways that sometimes resonate with and sometimes subvert heteronormative relationship standards. Butches take on traditionally masculine roles such as asking the femmes to dance, initiating

flirting, and becoming jealous and possessive of other butches, which is one of the most recurrent sources of conflict among them.

It would be simplistic, of course, to read these behavioural codes as mere replicas of heterosexist romantic behaviour. Rather, Feinberg's depictions of these relationships echo Judith Butler's theory on performativity by denaturalizing heterosexuality: "The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original" (*Gender Trouble* 43). The butch-femme rituals, which mimic the only framework available to them, that of heterosexuality, reveal "the original to be nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original" (43). That is, the replication and performance of a supposed original by othered bodies, as well as their reformulation of masculinity and femininity within queer relationships, signals the artificiality of heterosexuality. The text stretches this to the extent of parody when the police come to raid the bars: "we switched dance partners. Us in our suits and ties paired off with our drag queen sisters in their dresses and pumps" (3). This strategy circumvents the law that forbid two women and two men to dance together, while simultaneously performing a subversion of the sex-based legality: presenting appropriately sexed dance partners who are inversely gendered, the construction of sex and gender and the law's attempts at regulating it are here exposed for their contradictions and artificiality.

However, other less parodic and more dangerous elements are also appropriated from heteronormative relationships, as the butches are sometimes abusive to their femmes and often objectify them. Their strict monogamy easily turns violent: most butches treat their femmes as property and take on the role of a jealous husband when other butches fail to respect their boundaries. This is, in fact, the first rule expressed to Jess by a bartender when she is but fourteen, establishing certain limitations to the freedom this queer space can offer: "I told you it was OK to ask a woman to dance. But the first thing you should know is - don't ask Butch

Al's woman!" (29). This grammatic possessive becomes a recurrent pattern; the text often refers to femmes as someone else's to the extent that they are at times introduced not by their own name but by their partner's. This sense of ownership, evident on a linguistic level, has violent implications. For example, Jess lives for some time in the garage of Toni and Betty's house, a butch-femme couple. One day, when Jess is recuperating from her first brutal rape at the hands of the police, Toni becomes drunk, angry, and violent, accusing Jess of breaking the code and flirting with "her" femme. In spite of Jess's pleas and her attempts to reassure Toni that she "would never do anything to disrespect [Toni]" (81), the butch refuses to listen to reason and kicks Jess out of her house, leaving her homeless at her most vulnerable. The code being broken at this point is an agreement between butches to stay away from each other's femmes, highlighting their possessiveness over their partners and reproducing sexism within their relationships. The text problematizes this too, showcasing its willingness to both celebrate its communities and approach them critically, by having Jess stand in for an alternative butch masculinity, more caring and respectful of femmes, aware of her own limitations and invested in growth and change.

While gender roles are central to the community's rules and structure, age and experience are also important factors. There are hierarchies between elder and younger butches which, although they could potentially replicate normative power structures, suggest instead queer alternatives to what Halberstam calls time of inheritance "within which values, wealth, goods, and morals are passed through family ties from one generation to the next" (*Queer Time* 5). In contrast with inheritance within the reproductive heteronormative family, which serves to accumulate wealth and reproduce the system, in the queer spaces of *Stone Butch Blues* generational inheritance works to pass down survival mechanisms and strategies of resistance to the system. Elders are highly respected for having survived to a mature age, and they educate the younger butches on their place in the world and the community. They are also invested in

protecting their young to the limited extent they are able to, as shown by their attempts to hide Jess from the police raids when she is only a teenager. Although their strategies and attempts at protection are painfully limited, and they are constantly reminded that the world's hostility cannot be kept out of their spaces, they provide moments of care and connection that suggest to Jess that life might actually be worth living, that she might be worth loving, and that she too might survive long enough to reach maturity. Thus, the presence of older butches and their relationships with the younger ones serves to provide them with frameworks of futurity onto which Jess can project herself.

1.3. Difference and allyship

The potential strength of the community is determined by its willingness to acknowledge and respect differences within it. In her desire for unity, it is tempting for Jess to homogenize her community, placing the focus on their similarities and brushing over their differences. This places her in a reconciliatory position, which will prove useful when it comes to union organizing. It eventually becomes clear, however, that differences exist and that dismissing them in favour of sameness can, in itself, be a violent act, and has the potential to drive people away and weaken the community as a whole. In *Repensar la Comunidad desde la Literatura y el Género*, Marta Segarra reflects on the role of difference within community, drawing from Gloria Anzaldúa's work to claim the following: "Gloria Anzaldúa no propugna la desaparición de las comunidades sino que nos invita a vivir en múltiples comunidades basadas en la diferencia, negociando entre todas ellas" (23). The idea of multiple communities based on difference resonates with Feinberg's depictions of otherness in her work. The negotiation of difference is central to community-formation in the novel, and takes place at two major levels: within the community itself, and between different communities. The latter involves the role of the butches within the union and is easier to negotiate for Jess because it does not significantly fragment her home community. Duffy, a white union man, asks Jess to turn down

a promotion that is being offered to her with the only intention of keeping Leroy, a Black man, from the job. Jess would have been the first butch to be given such position and the other butches treat her promotion as a victory for their community, which would have made visible their role at the factory floor and served as recognition. However, Jess accepts the compromise. This incident introduces the intersectional intricacies of the labour struggle, problematizing class as a homogenising category: gender and race are also significant categories that generate conflict within the union, primarily concerned with its white, male members. While Duffy is fighting to have the union protect its black members, Jess explains to him the particularities of the butches' precarious position within it—namely, they are not even allowed to participate in union meetings. Aware of the union's limitations, Duffy is asking Jess to prioritize racial equality over gender equality, with the promise of future recognition. A strike follows, in which Jess convinces the other butches to back the union, leading to an outstanding victory for the workers. However, the butches eventually leave the bindery when the steel factory “has to hire fifty women” (124)—unhappy with their role at the bindery, the steel factory offers better pay and the proximity to a different kind of working-class masculinity. This decision is fatal for everyone involved: the butches soon discover they will have no union protection at their new jobs and they will be treated with increased hostility, whereas the union is weakened by the loss of workers committed to its cause. In retrospect, Duffy acknowledges that the situation could have been handled differently: “If I could do it again, I'd bring Leroy and all of the butches to that next meeting and say to the guys, ‘Here we all are, we're the union!’” (127). His regret and the phrase “we're the union” are a recognition of differences among the community's members, and a desire to acknowledge the intersections of their oppressions as core to the labour movement. In spite of its unfortunate resolution, the fight led by Duffy and Jess to give butches proper roles in the union and to have the struggle account for their needs

as part of the working class, highlights the need for intersectional accounts of class, focusing on those at the margins.

When difference manifests itself within the community, however, Jess is confronted with her own ignorance and limited point of view. The most significant example of this results from a fight between Grant, a white butch, and Edwin (Ed), a Black butch. The fight takes place on Grant's birthday and has two tragedies as its backdrop: Martin Luther King had been murdered a few days back, leading to riots across the country, and Grant has just received notice that her brother was killed in Vietnam. Jess has been busy with work and learns about the quarrel from Theresa, who explains that Grant was drunk and angry and "said we ought to drop an A-bomb on Vietnam. She said no one would miss them" (156). Ed, who in the novel represents the civil rights movement⁴ and is the only Black butch in Jess's community, pointed out Grant's racism, aligning herself with Muhammad Ali instead and stating that "she didn't have any beef with the people over there" (156). Grant calls her a communist and the situation soon escalates: "Grant said some terrible things about King being killed, about the riots. She wouldn't stop. So Ed hit her ... Grant got Ed up against the bar, choking her" (157). Theresa ends by laying out the consequences of the fight: "Meg [the bar owner] is saying no Blacks will be allowed back at Abba's for a while" (157). Theresa has also been banned because she broke a bottle over Grant's head to stop her from harming another femme. Jess is devastated by this news, as her idealized version of community has been shattered. Her first instinct is to go talk to Ed: "I want to know if she's ok. I just think we all shouldn't be fighting each other. We need to stick together" (157). Theresa, who has anticipated Jess's instinct to prioritize "sticking together"

⁴ Throughout the novel Ed becomes increasingly involved in the movement, attending rallies and voicing concerns to her friends. Because Jess's world is mostly White, Ed is the one who exposes her to Buffalo's segregated world, gifting her a WEB Du Bois book and taking her to a Black bar.

when it comes to conflict resolution, stops her and encourages her to think the situation through before she talks to anyone.

This incident and the conversations that follow force Jess to look at her community anew, paying attention to difference rather than sameness. Theresa, who works at the University and has been in close contact with feminist and civil rights movements, gently encourages Jess to reconsider her position and the implications of her desire to bring about togetherness at all costs. She also encourages Jess to think deeply about politics and the world around her, to examine what she believes and to stand behind it once she has determined what her core convictions are. Theresa insists that politics, the things that happen in the world, do not exist in an abstract reality separated from their life: they affect Jess's life and the lives of the people she loves, including Theresa⁵ and Ed. Ignoring these political issues, or attempting to stay neutral, can therefore be violent in and of itself, signalling a lack of care and understanding of her friends' lived realities. As Theresa tells Jess, "Sticking together is really important sometimes. But not always ... Sometimes you have to take sides" (159). The "sides" in question refer to Ed's experience as a Black butch and Grant's racism, which are personalized representations of broader issues: the civil rights movement and the American war in Vietnam. The fact the community cannot (and should not) isolate itself from these issues, resonates with Zigmunt Bauman's ideas expressed in *Community*:

"The sameness finds itself in trouble the moment its conditions begin to crumble: when the balance between 'inside' and 'outside' communication, once skewed sharply towards the interior, gets more even, thereby blurring the distinction between 'us' and 'them'. The sameness evaporates once the communication between [the community's] insiders and the

⁵ Theresa also takes the opportunity to point out the reproduction of gender roles within the community and the sexual objectification that her and other femmes are subjected to.

world outside becomes more intense and carries more weight than the mutual exchanges of the insiders.” (13)

Jess is, in Bauman’s terms, being confronted with a blurring of sameness and difference brought about by the heavy weight of the world “outside”. The conflict between Grant and Ed complicates Jess’s desire for a clearly distinct “us” based on shared butchness by revealing the community’s porosity and its limitations as a refuge from the world. In contrast with Jess’s ideal community,⁶ individuals exist *in* the world and are therefore crossed by different axes of oppression and privilege, the consequences of which are in turn brought into the community. For the community to actually offer some safety to its members, these differences must be accounted for and negotiated because doing otherwise, as Theresa suggests, makes the community unsafe by default to its more marginalized individuals. Ed’s Blackness and Grant’s racism cannot be simply ignored or be reconciled for the sake of “sticking together” without that being what enables Grant’s behaviour, leaving the community’s racism untouched, and making the bar an unsafe place for Ed.

Ed’s presence in the community is somewhat liminal: she is actively involved in a separate community, that of the Black bars of segregated Buffalo, and goes to Abba’s only occasionally. And, I argue, the novel is invested in the value of her liminality, which in turn blurs the community’s boundaries, making it lean towards porosity rather than strict, opaque walls. She brings with her parts of the world that are unknown to or unseen by the white butches, and her participation in the community has the potential to broaden their perspectives on gender and race. This is only possible, however, if the community is willing to accept and respect her difference: she must be welcomed not only as a butch but as a Black butch, which necessarily brings about the dissolution of an ideal, non-conflictive sameness. Her friendship

⁶ Her ideal of community appears through the text in the form of dreams, and I examine it in section 6.

with Jess serves to highlight her value within the community, framing her possible unbelonging in terms of loss and encouraging Jess to confront her own view of the world out of her love for Ed. This moment in the novel is particularly rich in that it allows Jess space for reflection without judgement, drawing attention to the conflict between her need to seek refuge in a solid, stable, ideal community, and the increased precariousness such a rigid definition of community creates for those who, like Ed, already lead more precarious lives and for whom the community can be a site of further violence and hostility rather than a place of refuge.

2. Intimacy and care in the aftermath of torture

In order to look at what makes community necessary in *Stone Butch Blues*, I borrow some thoughts from scholars Cat Moses and Karen Hammer on the novel's relationship to class and disability theory. Their works "Queering Class: Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*" (Moses) and "A Scar is More than a Wound: Rethinking Community and Intimacy through Queer and Disability Theory" (Hammer) provide valuable insight that, I contend, benefit from being read together and within the framework of torture as theorized by Elaine Scarry.

Cat Moses, writing in 1999, laments the previous lack of class analysis of *Stone Butch Blues* and offers a critical reading of the novel's intersections of class and gender, pointing to the protagonist's working-class-status as constitutive of her gendered experience. There is a clear class divide between Jess's experience as a working-class butch and that of middle-class feminists, associated with the university space and the feminist movement of the time. Moses focuses on the class dimension of the violence Jess and her fellow butches are subjected to, establishing a direct correlation between a lack of economic resources and increased vulnerability to the police, who are the main representatives and enforcers of such violence. This violence, which takes the form of beatings, rapes, and verbal and physical humiliation in general, is framed as torture in Moses' reading, and it is this framing that will inform my analysis of community and intimacy in the novel.⁷ Karen Hammer, on the other hand, uses crip theory to examine how pain and injury can shape and create possibilities for connection, emphasizing the role they play in establishing bonds between characters in the novel's world. The following section takes on both Moses' framing of police brutality as torture, theorized through Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*, and Hammer's thoughts on intimacy and love to

⁷ I will only be discussing as torture the acts of violence perpetrated by the police (who are not the only rapists in the novel) because they most significantly fit my understanding of torture as inflicted by state power and related to confined spaces (jails) over extended periods of time.

consider how and why communities become essential to survival for the characters in Feinberg's novel.

2.1. Police brutality, torture, and the body

In *The Body in Pain* (1985), Elaine Scarry developed a theory of torture, pain, and the politics of their representation. Her work closely examines the relationships torture generates between body, language, and agents of pain (be it the actual people enacting it or the objects used for that purpose). Through the lenses of Scarry's work, police brutality in *Stone Butch Blues* can be read as torture due to several factors: its role in enforcing and securing authority and power structures while simultaneously demonstrating power's instability; the constrained spaces it takes place in; the use of not only physical but also verbal violence as further humiliation; and the threats of future pain which ensure that, to the police's likely victims, torture becomes a constant possibility that perpetually looms in the horizon. While the novel's portrayal of torture and its effects is briefly established in Cat Moses' article, I will be taking a more in-depth approach, analyzing the meaning of torture within the novel and its consequences and effects on the characters' ability to communicate with and relate to one another.

The novel first introduces the reader to the beatings and rapes that will become constant and expected not through explicit descriptions of violence, but by showing its effects on the body and mind of the protagonist's friends, Mona and Butch Al. Jess is "spared" from torture the first time she is taken into police custody. She is not, however, left unscathed: she is forced to see her main authority figure at this point, the one adult she has been able to see herself in, destroyed by sexual violence—and is sent home with an explicit warning, as I examine below. For both Jess and the reader, torture becomes hereinafter a looming threat that is repeatedly foreshadowed; it becomes not a question of *if* it will happen, but of *when*. Because Jess is both

our narrator and our focalizer, we do not see what exactly happens to Butch Al or to Mona, and the specifics are left to the reader's—and Jess's—imagination.

Descriptions, however, begin to flow when her friends are brought back into their cells after being taken away by the policemen. Both the butch (Al) and the drag queen (Mona) show clear signs of brutality both on their bodies and in their state of mind. Mona is described as having wet hair and smeared make up, with “blood running down the back of her seamless stockings” and looking “dazed, unwilling to move” (39). Butch Al is brought back some time later in a similar state:

“She was in pretty bad shape. Her shirt was partly open and her pants zipper was down. Her binder was gone, leaving her large breasts free. Her hair was wet. There was blood running from her mouth and nose. She looked dazed, like Mona” (40).

These descriptions suggest that the violence enacted against them has been both sexual and gendered, directly related to their respective gender transgressions in the form of cross-dressing. The insistence on fluids, water and blood, evokes sexual violence which is, in turn, tied to gendered clothing: Mona's stockings and Butch Al's unzipped pants and missing binder. The police act as representatives of the state's punitive structures and the violence they enforce is therefore acted out in the name of the state, affirming through rapes and beatings the overwhelming and unquestionable nature of power. Elaine Scarry claims that the incontestable reality of physical pain is used in torture to “confer its quality of ‘incontestable reality’ on that power that has brought it into being” (27). In this moment of the novel, readers are introduced to the powerlessness of butches and drag queens while in police custody through Jess's witnessing of their battered, brutalized bodies; physical markers of pain that objectify and make real the power of the police and of the state structures and hegemonic ideology they represent. The gendered and sexual specifics of these markers and the broken and missing clothes, lead

us to Scarry once more in that “it is, of course, precisely because the reality of that power is so highly contestable, the regime so unstable, that torture is being used” (27): following Scarry’s logic, the very fact that torture is being used, that extreme punishment is required for those who wear “incorrect” clothes, suggests that these norms are not, in fact, incontestable or stable. In the case of Mona and Al, as well as Jess’s later in the novel, torture is being used in service of heteronormativity, objectifying onto their bodies the “incontestable reality” of gender and sexual norms.

Jess is deeply traumatized by this first experience in police custody. As a witness not of the torture itself but of the direct effects of torture on the body of her friends, Jess’s fear serves to show how police brutality amplifies pain beyond the tortured person “in the sense that it is objectified, made visible to those outside the person’s body” (Scarry 28). The policemen walk drag queens and butches in and out of cells, taking them to rooms out of view in different directions, making each time the cell door opens, whether it be to bring someone back or to take someone away, a threat. They also make every effort to display the effects of their violence, exposing the other prisoners to the tortured body. The mental anguish of expecting violence and pain, never knowing when it will take place, is extensively documented by Scarry as a core element of the purpose and effects of torture, making her work highly relevant to the novel’s portrayal of police violence. For Jess, the dreadful impact of seeing the brutalized bodies of her friends as she helplessly wonders whether she might be next is further amplified by a policeman’s verbal and explicit threat of future violence. As he physically lifts Jess up in the air, he “pressed his thumbs deep into [her] breasts and jammed his knee between [her] legs” (40). Jess is lifted from the ground; shown she cannot physically resist if the policeman decides to sexually brutalize her. He threatens her verbally as well: “You should be this tall soon, tall enough your feet would reach the ground. That’s when we’ll take care of you like we did your pussy friend Allison” (40). Only a child, about fourteen years old in this moment, Jess does not

fully understand—and will not be told by her friends—what exactly has happened to Butch Al and almost certainly awaits her in the future. However, witnessing Al’s body and state of mind is enough for this act of torture to be amplified, its effects spreading beyond the physical pain itself.

2.2. Torture and the undoing of language

While the physical effects of violence are impossible to hide and traumatizing to witness, the most shattering consequences are related to language and psyche. On the relationship between language and torture, Elaine Scarry writes: “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language” (4). This idea is persistent in *Stone Butch Blues* and it takes different forms, from the victims’ inability to speak or even hear when spoken to until a period of time has passed after the traumatic events, to the community’s shared refusal to speak about what exactly the police is doing to them. Jess sees both Mona and Butch Al stripped of language: while Mona takes some time to return to the world of language—“she didn’t seem to hear me for a long time” (40)—Butch Al, the strong, powerful butch, will never speak again for Jess to hear. When Jess is eventually raped by the policemen, she too becomes silent for a time as the people around her try to provide whatever care they can. Through these passages, by showing its characters be returned to a state prior to language, the novel illustrates the dehumanization process inflicted through the sexual, physical, and verbal violence of torture instrumentalized by policemen with the purpose of enacting power and forcing their victims into pre-existing normative gendered identities.

This loss of language persists beyond the immediate trauma: while the body and mind slowly heal, torture remains unspoken of in spite of its pervasiveness in their experiences. After witnessing the pain of her friends for the first time, Jess wishes someone could explain to her

“exactly what they were going to do to [her] next time and how to live through it” (42). This is, however, one piece of information that cannot be shared, knowledge that cannot be taught: torture is unspeakable, and “whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language” (Scarry 4). Throughout the novel, the physical and psychic pain derived from torture remains unsharable through language or, at least, through verbal language (in the next section, I will examine alternative forms of communication). Jess is denied the knowledge she desires because the people who care about her, the people who *know*, are familiar enough with pain to understand that language cannot communicate it, and fear traumatizing her ahead of time. This denial of knowledge or of its transmission is, however, traumatizing in its own way, as it hints at an unspeakable threat beyond apprehension. Moreover, the impossibility of communicating the trauma of pain revictimizes the sufferer by distancing them from other people. Therefore, in “[inflicting] physical pain that is itself language-destroying” (Scarry 19), torture extends beyond its physical space and its effects permeate the lives and relationships of its victims.

2.3.Survival, intimacy, and community

All is not lost, however. While brutal violence and post-traumatic stress inform some of the novel’s most painful moments, its portrayal of the aftermath of torture, which implies a return to community or home and involves elaborate routines of care and both physical and mental recovery, touchingly refuses to surrender its characters’ subjectivities to trauma, to surrender their personhoods to the victimizers. Instead, Feinberg depicts numerous instances of care and intimacy that are only possible in the context of shared trauma and which, while carrying the horrifying implication that *every one* of these characters has undergone similar experiences, place mutual care at the center of survival. I now turn to Karen Hammer’s thoughts on queer and disability theory, which look at how “routinely othered” bodies tend to form relationships differently, claiming that works such as *Stone Butch Blues* can “lead us instead to imagine new

forms of community and intimacy that include fragmentation, suffering, and loss.” (Hammer 159). The episodes that follow violent moments tend to show the most intimate versions of the characters’ relationships, enacted through an “accumulation of ordinary gestures that for many othered bodies becomes extraordinary” (Hammer 160). These include, among others, offering a cigarette to a cellmate, bringing food to a friend in recovery, or making curtains for their home.

This last example deserves particular attention because it centers homemaking and the act of unspoken recognition, both of which inform what makes life liveable for Jess. After her first experience with police torture, Jess becomes faded and makes every effort to withdraw into herself. Not desiring company, she is also unable to *be* in her body: food disgusts her, and she has a panic attack when she attempts to have a bath. Torture has at once dissociated her from her body and feelings—“I didn’t feel much of anything at all” (Feinberg 78)—and highly aware of her bodily functions and any kind of physical contact. Her basic needs have become entangled with the trauma; the bath water becomes flooded with blood and reminds her of her head being forced into the toilet, the thought of meat (flesh) disgusts her and makes her unable to feed herself. This is the state she is in when Betty, a femme from her community, visits her bringing gifts: an apple pie and some “bright yellow calico” with which she intends to make curtains for Jess’s window (Feinberg 79). Jess accepts the gifts with a nod, still unable to speak, and Betty proceeds to sit down and sew, providing silent company. Betty’s behavior implies an immediate recognition of the nature of Jess’s need that, as she will make explicit, is born out of shared experience. Her gifts turn ordinary objects of sustenance and domesticity into acts of recognition and care. The apple pie suggests a desire to care for Jess’s physical well-being, anticipating that she has not been eating and that she might be unable to eat meat. It is also not mere survival food—it is a desert, not merely a source of sustenance but of pleasure as well. The theme of sustenance versus pleasure takes on a larger role later in the novel and is

framed as central to the difference between merely surviving and actually living. Through her gift, therefore, Betty is communicating to Jess not only that her body deserves to be kept alive, but that it is deserving of pleasure as well. The curtains, on the other hand, serve multiple purposes related to her emotional and psychological wellbeing: they act as filters between Jess and the outside gaze and as a gesture that this space, her home, *can* be made into a place of refuge. The fact that Betty sews them herself in front of Jess turns what might otherwise be a decorative object into a personal act of love and care. Lastly, her sewing serves as an excuse to simply be there, in silence, requiring nothing from Jess while assuring her with her time and calm presence that she is deserving of company and care.

Finally, once the curtains are finished, Betty speaks:

“I know,” she said. “You don’t think anyone knows. You can’t believe anyone would understand. But I do know.” I shook my head slowly—she didn’t know.

Betty knelt down in front of me. As we made eye contact I felt a sudden jolt of emotional electricity. I saw everything I was feeling in Betty’s eyes, as though I were looking at my own reflection. I looked away in horror. Betty nodded and squeezed my knee. “I do know,” she said, getting up to leave. “I do understand.” (79)

The words “I know” and the gaze and recognition that follow them are first introduced into the narrative in this fragment but appear repeatedly throughout the novel in similar contexts. It is here that, I argue, Moses and Hammer’s analysis come together. Torture returns the characters to a state anterior to language, making them unable to verbally communicate with others and stripping them of their sense of self. However, it is also in this state that a new form of communication emerges, “not despite but *within* adverse conditions” (Hammer 167). While Jess is unable to speak, what makes it possible for Betty to get through to her is her own awareness that the trauma cannot be put into words. Instead, it requires eye contact, to have

one's gaze interact with the other's and to let one's own pain surface, making oneself vulnerable as well.

In Hammer's words regarding this fragment, "their sense of mutual understanding overcomes Jess's defense mechanisms" (166), which resonates with Georges Bataille's understanding of true communication: "La 'comunicación' no puede realizarse de un ser pleno e intacto a otro: necesita seres que tengan el ser en ellos mismos *puesto en juego*, situado en el límite de la muerte, de la nada" (qtd. Birulés). Betty manages to communicate with Jess by exposing her own hurt, which shocks her out of numbness in a "jolt of emotional electricity" (79). Although this moment is painful for Jess and fills her with horror, it nonetheless serves to bring her back in contact with reality and feeling, back into cohabitation and coexistence beyond the boundaries of her body. In exposing her own pain to be able to connect with Jess, retrieving her from her withdrawal into herself, Betty shows how "precarity exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency" (Butler, "Precarious Life" 148). In other words, the shared recognition of each other's precarity highlights the necessity of community and interdependency, making both a matter of survival. While this is a very small moment within the novel, it lays out the key themes of care and domesticity that become central to its characters and their survival. Life is enriched and made possible by queer domesticities, by the always frustrated desire to shield each other from the world, and by the mundane acts of care and recognition that prevail in spite of the world's increasing hostility and brutality.

PART 2 – BOUNDARIES AND BINARIES

3. The Cost of Isolation

Community in *Stone Butch Blues* is shaped by its ability to provide shelter and comfort, to take in complete strangers and offer them a home, and by its internal conflicts and willingness to remove people when deemed necessary. There are more than a few instances in which a character or characters take a step back from the community, more or less willingly depending on the situation. In some cases, individual butches and femmes remove themselves from the shared space of the bar because they need to grieve a romantic relationship, sometimes because they figure that removing their relationships from the bars will help preserve them from the desire of strangers, sometimes because they simply need space from the community's inability to fully comprehend their difference, as is the case of Ed. In the latter case, there is often an alternative community they can turn to, whether it be the union and their coworkers or the Black bars in segregated Buffalo. It is rarely the case that anyone embraces a removal from community if there is not an alternative space for them—when it happens, the time away from community is experienced with pain, loneliness, and homesickness. Because community is framed as integral to their survival in a hostile world, and provides care for the daily trauma of police brutality, being removed from it is usually seen as a threat to one's life. While this isolation from community is sometimes permanent, it is more commonly temporary, and individuals are required to grow and change before being allowed to re-enter.

This section explores the consequences of isolation from community as experienced by Jess and other characters, whereas the following sections address the rigidity of the community's boundaries and the processes of growth and reparations that take place towards the end of the novel.

3.1. Dissolution of community

The precarious context of the novel's communities makes them very fragile and leads to their dissolution at several points throughout the text. The most significant and extended over time takes place when life is at its harshest, after the end of the American war in Vietnam. The war drafts made it so there were less men around, which made it easier for butches to be employed in factories, doing traditionally masculine jobs around which they built their own gendered selves based on working-class masculinity. As men reclaim public spaces after the war, the persecution and threats of violence become inescapable on a daily basis. The return of this working force along with an economic recession result in most butches becoming unemployed and unable to find work. As hopelessness spreads among them, each desperate to find survival strategies, the community begins to dissolve and communication between them becomes more and more difficult.

The butches appear to bear the most of this violence, both in terms of employment and of physical and verbal violence. It is in this context that the text begins to introduce the possibilities of gender transition through conversations about hormones, surgery, and tales of butches who live as men. Their increased precarity alienates them from the rest of the community, the femmes, even more so as gender transition begins to appear as a possibility. The "knowing" that previously created the basis for intimacy across the community, at this point in the narrative turns to frustration with the difficulties they find in communicating to each other their gendered experiences. The relief of encountering someone who "knows" thus becomes less and less available and this disconnection turns into loneliness. Jess sees Ed for the last time when the butches are considering their survival options: after experimenting with wigs and "feminine" clothes to get jobs as women, Jess goes for a drink with Ed, Jan, and Grant. They have a conversation about the possibilities of transition, and we learn that Ed has already begun taking hormones. Jess shares a dream with them, and in so doing finds an understanding she has been unable to find in Theresa. Whereas she attempted to explain her

dreams to her femme girlfriend, an inability or unwillingness to understand made it impossible for her to do so. This time, however, no explanation is necessary: when asked about the meaning of her dream, Jess simply tells her fellow butches that they “know”, which they immediately admit. They share their anxieties and doubts around the possibility of transition, and the increased difficulty they find in communicating with their femme partners. This disconnection from the femmes of the community, however, soon extends to the butches themselves. An aura of shame surrounds their desperate attempts at survival, the parts of themselves they are being forced to give up in order to survive. As a result, they become isolated from each other and from their communities, and most of them, including Jess, undergo an extremely difficult time all alone.

3.2.Isolation

We, as readers, experience the isolation derived from the dissolution of community through Jess, whose survival is highly at risk. Her decision to hormonally transition leads to her breakup with Theresa. Sinking into her grief, she also becomes disconnected from her fellow butches, who are undergoing similarly hard times. This is an extremely painful time for Jess, as she becomes more and more disconnected from her own sense of self through transition and isolation from her community, highlighting the novel’s portrayal of identity as both individual and introspective, and relational.

In order to survive, Jess attempts to remove herself from the world as much as possible and withdraw into herself, a process which begins right after the breakup: “I didn’t want to be there when Theresa and the rest of the world began their day” (195). Theresa and the world become one in her mind, whereas Jess expresses a desire to remove herself from the daily time of the world. A long process emerges through heartbreak, and she begins to hormonally transition, and eventually undergoes a mastectomy. Initially, Jess has given up on love and community,

and instead turns to her own body, desiring to feel at home in it (216). The breast surgery is a gift to herself, and it does make her feel better in her body—however, it is at this peak in her transition that the loneliness and disconnection from her community becomes painfully evident. Right as she comes to the realization that she finally has the home she wanted in her body—“There it was – the body I’d wanted.” (225)—she learns that Ed has committed suicide. The news devastates Jess: she is at this point recuperating from her surgery, with no one to take care of her or to accompany her in the traumatic hospital space; Ed’s suicide is a mirror of her own desperation. Ed’s death also widens the reader’s perspective, de-centering Jess’s loneliness and pain and highlighting that her suffering is far from unique, that her friends are isolated as well. That some, like Ed, might even have a more difficult time than Jess, who has not bothered to read the Du Bois book Ed gifted her in an attempt to get Jess to understand her experience. Ultimately, Ed’s suicide serves to show Jess’s own limitations, highlighting her inability to be there for her friend, and to raise the stakes: survival really is not to be taken for granted.

Slowly, Jess becomes aware that: a) passing as a man does not truly make her feel at home in her body, and b) she needs a home beyond herself, outside of herself. She wakes up one day feeling displaced:

“I awoke feeling small and terrified. I couldn’t find myself in my own life—there was no memory of me that I could grasp. There was no place outside of me where I belonged. So every morning I willed myself back into existence” (266).

Jess struggles to exist because her gender identity and sense of self were previously facilitated by her being in community, by her seeing herself in other butches and loving herself in them, and by the experience of desiring and being desired by femmes. Identity in *Stone Butch Blues* is beautifully made up of interwoven spaces, bodies, and affects, and the narrative refuses

to choose a singular catalyst for it. Survival requires refuge, within and outside of oneself—and refuge can be found in the body, in the home, and in the community. Because the relationship between the three elements is dialectical and porous, the disappearance of one or more of them automatically destabilizes the others, and leaves Jess refuge-less. She survives by withdrawing into herself, accepting the disassociation that passing creates between her sense of self and the way others perceive her, and rejecting emotional involvement with others in order to avoid heartbreak and loss. She abandons part of herself in the process and it is not until the last part of the novel when, through her friendship with Ruth, she is able to begin a process of healing, allowing herself to feel again and daring to build a home once more.

4. “They don’t have a place to go like we do”: the community-less

Through changes in the community structure, in the culture at large, and in Jess’s own sense of self, work remains permanently present in Jess’s life. Early in the narrative, as Jess becomes integrated into factory life, settling down in a working-class environment shared with fellow butches and men, the labor struggle is introduced back into her life. Unions were present in her childhood, most remarkably through the community prohibition of entering the McKensies’ house in her neighborhood because Mac McKensie had been a scab back in 1949. The text communicates this family’s place in the neighborhood so matter-of-factly that the reader is, from the start, made aware of the importance that unions and strikes will carry through the narrative. In fact, the need for their existence is never questioned; rather, the text interrogates their limitations and their failures due to an inability or lack of disposition to embrace the most marginalized among their workers, such as butches and racialized men. In spite of the unions’ hostility towards them, whether a factory is unionized or not is always a main concern whenever Jess or her fellow butches are seeking employment. One of Jess’s early unionized factory jobs is at a bindery in Buffalo, where butches are able to join the union (as Jess does) but are excluded from union meetings. It is at this point in the narrative that Duffy is introduced, a well-intentioned and determined union leader who becomes an intermediary between the white men, the Black men, and the butches in the factory. Jess and Duffy soon become relatively close, which is made possible by Jess’s commitment to the union and willingness to be understanding of its shortcomings in the defense of her and her people’s rights and make compromises for its sake. Chapter 8 of *Stone Butch Blues* narrates several exchanges between Jess and Duffy that serve to provide nuance and understanding of how these compromises and limitations work. After asking Jess to reject a promotion offered to her with the only intention of keeping Leroy, a Black man, from the job, Duffy begins to see in her an ally and to understand (or at the very least, desire to understand) what the butches need, who

they are, and the exclusionary violence they receive from the union men. Moreover, because these two characters are in the process of learning from each other, their exchanges often allow Jess to verbalize to both Duffy and the reader the unspoken rules that shape her community.

4.1. The desire to understand and recognition of the other's knowledge

Jess and Duffy's relationship is remarkable in that it serves to dialectically introduce problems of comradeship and difference, complicating class unity and making room for new possibilities for class solidarity in its intersections with gender and race. Because their conversations are so rich in number and meaning, this section focuses only on one brief exchange between the two, which takes place at a company softball game. I have chosen this fragment because, on the one hand, it serves as a starting point to situate Duffy and the union he represents and, on the other, it leads to discussions of gender, sexuality, and the butch-femme community that I would like to dive into. The conversation begins as follows:

Duffy sat down next to me. "Hey, Jess, you're the only one who I could ask this question." I felt flattered.

"I wanted to ask you about Ethel and Laverne," Duffy said.

I looked around. "Are they here?" Duffy shook his head. "Too bad," I told him, "I always wanted to meet their husbands."

Duffy spoke carefully. "What's the story with Ethel and Laverne? Are they lovers?"

"Naw, they're both married. You know that."

Duffy fumbled for words. "Yeah, but aren't they butches?"

I understand what he was driving at. "Well, they're he-shes, but they're not butches."

Duffy laughed and shook his head. "I don't get it."

I shrugged. “There’s not much to get, really. I mean they look like Spencer Tracy and Montgomery Cliff, but they really seem to love the guys they married.” (106)

Duffy’s standpoint as an outsider to Jess’s community who looks at it from ignorance but with empathy allows him to become a surrogate for the reader who might be unfamiliar with the context-specific butch-femme communities portrayed in the novel. Whilst most interactions with heterosexual men are extremely violent, Duffy embodies an alternative masculinity informed by class consciousness and the union struggle. He recognizes the oppression of others, he recognizes his own ignorance about their experience, and he struggles to build bridges of understanding for the sake of the fight against their shared class oppression. Unlike other men such as the ones that insult Jess at the unemployment office and accuse her of stealing their jobs, Duffy does not see enemies in the butches but potential comrades in the labor struggle. He does not expect this comradeship to come naturally or easily, nor does he attempt to bring it to life by erasing difference. He makes mistakes, but he is eventually willing to recognize those moments of failure and determined to learn from them and do better in the future. As a consequence, Duffy’s character invites identification from readers like him, and makes room in the novel for those who might want to grow with him, to recognize themselves in his desire for solidarity as well as in his unavoidable limitations. This is made possible by the fact that he finds in Jess a potential ally, someone willing to meet him where he is at and help him understand. This scene is an example of their interactions, at once extremely sweet and rich with radical potential in terms of alliance building.

Duffy’s desire to know “flatters” Jess because of its meaningful implications. In his assertion that “you’re the only one I know who I could ask this question” (106), Duffy recognizes both his condition as an outsider, signaled by his not having close enough relations with any butch other than Jess, and Jess as a worthy interlocutor. Their friendship is built partly on their willingness to share knowledge about their communities to each other—Duffy explains

union rules, Jess advises him on the butches' needs. Although these knowledge exchanges are not always successful, and in fact fail painfully a number of times, they are what makes their relationship possible. This is because the desire to know and the recognition of the other as an interlocutor or representative, and therefore a subject in possession of important knowledge, serve to establish a foundation of respect.

Duffy's question concerns Ethel and Laverne, two characters who do not make any appearance in the novel beyond being mentioned in this brief conversation. Significantly, they are not part of the butch scene Jess is familiar with, as she explains, and they do not seem to participate in union activities either, since they are absent from the softball match and we never hear of them again after the match. Although the novel paints Jess as the expert in gender and sexuality as compared to Duffy in this scene, the multiple potential meanings of this exchange grow when we consider that she does not actually *know* Ethel and Laverne or about their lives. Duffy's misconceptions have led him to ask Jess about two people who are not actually in her community—and Jess's understanding of her community and the violence inflicted on those who look like her, lead her to making some assumptions about Ethel and Laverne. While Jess's role as the authority in the matter may encourage the reader to take her assumptions at face value, I intend to challenge their implications through a critical queer bisexual reading. I would therefore like to expand the possibilities of this exchange in the light of bisexual theory, seeking to shed light on what is said, what is assumed, and what (or who) is left out from the text, from this particular conversation and from the queer communities of the novel.

It is always important to take extra careful approaches to characters who are only spoken about but never speak for themselves. Their silence can lead us, as readers, to stick to what the text does make explicit, and thus fail to consider the tensions between what is said and what is not said, who says it, and the interpretations and assumptions being imposed on these characters. Although Feinberg's text does not refer to Ethel and Laverne beyond the

conversation at hand, it does take the time to hint at different existing realities outside of Jess's world, and to do so with empathy. Therefore, I will be examining the excerpt's implications to broader issues of community and belonging in the novel. To begin with, Ethel and Laverne are introduced as a question Duffy is seeking answers to. Due to their masculine presentation and, yet, their marriages to men, he is unable to situate them within heterosexuality and associates them with the only alternative he knows—Jess and the other factory butches. Because they share similar gender presentation, Duffy makes an assumption of sameness and inclusion: that they must be part of the butch community. His mistake allows for Jess to establish some of the defining rules of her community as she attempts to explain why Ethel and Lavern are not, in fact, “butches”. It is of interest to this reading that Jess does not consider that one could be married to a man and be anything other than heterosexual, as her first response to Duffy's “Are they lovers?” shows. Jess is quick to solve this question: “Naw, they're married” (106). Because the fact that many people remain closeted under the protection of heterosexual marriage is not presented as a possibility within the text, this moment stands out to me within the novel's otherwise mostly nuanced portrayals⁸ of different survival mechanisms. Evidently, the text does not provide any information to suggest this is the case for Ethel and Laverne either, but given that Jess has very little information about them, it is at the very least deserving of attention that she would not consider this possibility and instead shuts down Duffy's question with conviction.

This moment does serve, however, to disrupt the sexuality and gender dichotomies Duffy is appealing to in his attempt to *make sense* of Ethel and Laverne. His confusion—“But aren't they butches?” (106)—is caused by Jess's affirmation of the fact that their marriages are real. Jess attempts to make Duffy understand that Ethel and Laverne's gender presentation does

⁸ This could, in fact, be read as one of the moments when the text reveals Jess's limitations, such as her difficulties to understand Ed's Black butch experience or Frankie and Johnny's relationship, which I examine in the following section. This fragment stands out, however, in that unlike these other examples it is never revisited in the text.

not exclude the possibility of heterosexuality: “They’re he-shes, but they’re not butches” (106). While Jess and other characters identify as both he-she and butch throughout the novel, this is the first and only moment when we are introduced to the possibility that these two categories may not exactly overlap, that one can be a he-she without being a butch. “He-she” is therefore established as a gender category, while “butch” remains associated to sexuality—specifically, to a form of lesbian sexuality within the butch-femme community. Duffy’s question thus makes room for a brief, effective, and empathetic moment of exposition in which Jess explains to him and to readers how gender and sexuality are perceived in her community and the role they play in establishing and defining its boundaries.

This categorization is imperfect, however, given that femme and butch are clearly gendered categories as well. The line that Jess seems to be drawing is that “he-shes” are masculine presenting women, whereas butches are masculine presenting women who have relationships with femmes (in section 5 I will look at the conceptualization of butch desire as exclusively directed towards femmes rather than the broader category of women, which will allow us to revisit this scene and provide some extra nuance). Nonetheless, Jess acknowledges a shared gendered experience that connects her to Ethel and Laverne and which, like most identifiable individual characteristics in the novel, is depicted through the violence and social punishments it arouses.

The question of Ethel and Laverne’s gendered sexualities is framed through a comparison to Montgomery Clift and Spencer Tracy, two staples of Hollywood masculinity who lived controversial lives that challenged normative prescriptions. Both Clift’s homosexuality and Tracy’s affair with Katharine Hepburn were treated as open secrets, known in their circles but supposedly unknown to the public. Ethel and Laverne’s gender presentations seem to similarly generate a split between their intimate lives and their perceived performance to the world: because they do not match, Duffy assumes an open secret regarding their sexuality

must be the answer to the question they pose, and that Jess might be “in the know”. Her insights, however, dismiss the possibility of an open secret and instead fix them as heterosexual, and because there is no further description of their married lives, we can only take Jess at her word when she claims that “they really seem to love the guys they married” (106).

4.2. “He-shes”, butches, and bisexual possibilities

The conversation goes on as Duffy, here portrayed as misguided, continues to question the pair’s relationship to each other and Jess offers a nuanced and empathetic (although limited) explanation of what their realities must be like:

Duffy shook his head. “But they’re inseparable. Don’t you think maybe they’re lovers and they’re afraid to let people know?”

I thought about it for a moment. “Jeez, Duffy, it’s not like they’re getting off much easier by being married—they’re still he-shes. They’ve gotta deal with the same shit butches do. Imagine Laverne going into the ladies room at the movies. Or Ethel at a bridal shower. I don’t think people who give them a rough time give a fuck who they sleep with. It’s probably harder for them, too,” I added. “They don’t have a place to go like we do—I mean like the bars. All they got is their husbands and each other.”

Duffy smiled and shook his head. “The way Ethel and Laverne are with each other, I was sure they were lovers.”

“Oh, they love each other alright. You can see that. But it doesn’t necessarily mean they’re hot and bothered for each other. They really understand each other. Maybe each of them just likes looking in the other’s mirror and seeing a reflection that smiles back.” (106-107)

Firstly, Jess describes the violence that Ethel and Laverne undoubtedly endure due to being “he-shes”, emphasizing that heterosexual relational behavior is unlikely to sufficiently shield them from it. In fact, Jess goes as far as to suggest that their heterosexual marriages have the potential of exposing them to further violence. While they will encounter the same hostility as any butch in public spaces such as women’s bathrooms, Jess hints at the violence of heterosexual spaces that she and her fellow butches would be unlikely to experience through the example of a bridal shower, an exclusively feminine and heterosexual space in the historical context of the novel. In inviting Duffy and the reader to imagine “Ethel at a bridal shower” (107), she calls our attention to the fact that heterosexual marriage is likely to also place them in proximity to the culture that surrounds it and, by extension, to its rejection and punishment of nonnormative femininity. The novel has shown us that violence is to be feared and that it is to be expected not only from men but also from heterosexual women, who weaponize their own femininity and are inclined to punish those who deviate from it⁹. The text’s portrayal of female heterosexuality thus encourages us to imagine the violence a “he-she” might encounter when surrounded by heterosexual women at an event dedicated to the celebration of femininity and marriage.

This initial exposition, leading to “I don’t think people who give them a rough time give a fuck who they sleep with” (107), highlights that the nature of social and physical punishment directed at butches is mainly caused by their gender presentation rather than their sexuality. Rather than assuming that their marriages place them in privileged positions, Jess takes a more nuanced approach, concluding that “It’s probably harder for them, too. They don’t have a place to go like we do” (107). This statement is striking due to the contrast of its syntactic

⁹ The most vicious example of this violence takes place in a public bathroom. After seeing Jess come in, two women joke about not knowing whether she might actually be a man, and that they “should call security and make sure” (Feinberg 71). Their tone shows cruel entertainment rather than fear, and their allusion to security shows that their appropriate femininities could be weaponized to call for police violence on those who deviate.

simplicity and the depth of its meaning. As I have explored in the previous sections, *Stone Butch Blues* frames community as necessary for survival in a hostile world, placing those who lack it in extremely vulnerable positions. The absence of “a place to go” can potentially make life more painful for Ethel and Laverne, alienating them from the acts of care and mutual recognition that allow Jess and other butches to survive the trauma of police brutality and the roughness of everyday life.

Seeing Jess’s empathetic portrayal of their realities, I cannot help but wonder why it is that they are not in the community, why Jess is so quick to dismiss the possibility of their belonging, and what that tells us about the way the community is structured. Ethel and Laverne seem to have more in common with the butches than their femme partners do, who do not face the same type of danger in public spaces. Although the violence directed at femmes is also significant, its sources are different, and it takes the form of sexual abuse and violence by their employers or clients within the context of sex work, or is caused by their proximity to butches when at the bars or in public. Their belonging, however, is not questioned, and the violence they experience is acknowledged within the community. Neither is the belonging of drag queens, who are present in Jess’s environments throughout the novel and are welcomed and acknowledged as part of the community, as well as important partners in their struggles due to their shared gender deviance.

As to Ethel and Laverne’s sexualities, the possibility that they are, in fact, together, *is* present in the text, albeit introduced by Duffy, who is conflating sexuality and gender presentation. However, we might also consider that Duffy’s lack of knowledge and understanding of the butch community and its dynamics is likely to make him innocent of certain prejudices that Jess carries, as we see later on in her hostile reaction to two butches being in a relationship. Taking this into consideration can widen our understanding of what is taking place in this fragment by introducing the possibility that Jess’s rejection of their

butchness and of the suggestion that they might be romantically involved go hand in hand. Being together would make them not only “he-shes” but butches, and more specifically, two butches in a romantic relationship. This is not a possibility Jess can contemplate at this point in the narrative: her idea of their sexuality is limited by the strict grounding of butch identity as dependent on desire for femmes, which is both displayed at length throughout the novel and problematized towards the end, as we will see in the next section. A bisexual reading of this scene highlights the monosexual and binary logic that foregrounds Jess’s thinking at this point of the novel as well as that of her community, and allows us to critically engage with the assumptions being made.

I have centered the discussion of this fragment so far around the words “he-she” and “butch” because those are the only terms employed. With the use of the word “bisexual” I do not mean to identify Ethel and Laverne as such or to imply that the text is trying to represent them as bisexual. Rather, my intent is to introduce the possibility of bisexuality as a space of desire that is disregarded by Jess because I believe it can bring nuance and depth to our understanding of this particular scene and its implications. Similarly, the text never uses the term “torture”, but that does not make it less of a useful tool to understand and signify the processes of violence and care that take place in the novel. The same could be said of “non-binary”, a category which is not part of the author’s or the character’s vocabulary but is nonetheless relevant to any contemporary analysis of the text. The use of these words introduces theoretical spaces that expand and re-signify aspects of the novel. By introducing bisexuality as a category of analysis I follow Claire Hemming’s work *Bisexual Spaces*, in which she prioritizes bisexual meaning over bisexual identity in order to “examine bisexual meaning without relying on the presence of bisexual subjects to validate that inquiry” (42). Hemmings illustrates how bisexuality is rendered impossible in some of queer theory’s most psychoanalytically informed criticism: if lesbian and gay subjectivities are the result of

repudiating “opposite-sex object choice” (Hemmings 10), bisexuality becomes troublesome. This is because it is not taken into consideration that one might make a “same-sex object choice without having ‘first’ made and repudiated the all-important opposite-sex object choice” (Hemmings 10). Therefore, Hemmings continues, “since the bisexual does not repudiate opposite-sex object choice, she must therefore *be* heterosexual” (10). We see this at work in Jess’s assumptions about Ethel and Laverne, drawn from their perceived happy marriages. Because Jess assumes they are not repudiating their opposite-sex object choice, their husbands, whom they seem to “really love” (106), there is no room for even considering that that they may also be interested in a same-sex object choice—that is, in each other. By reading this fragment bisexually, opening up the space for desire without repudiation, we might also consider the hierarchization of affect that Jess is displaying in her interpretation of Ethel and Laverne’s relationship. The love that *is* acknowledged between them (“They love each other alright”) is superseded by their marriages to men, and considered less integral to their identities. In the process, Jess is conceding to heteronormativity the supremacy of heterosexual marriage, taking at face value the heterosexual/homosexual dyad and leaning towards the first as default.

Jess’s journey is one of overcoming binaries, and we might read these earlier moments as the result of her attachment to a strict, binary understanding of identity, love, and community. Through a bisexual gaze, the conclusion of this conversation invites us to imagine alternatives for survival grounded in mutual recognition and companionship for those who are left out. Jess has sympathy for the fact that “they don’t have a place to go like we do” (107), which contextualizes the intimacy that Duffy is pointing out between them as a survival mechanism. Lack of community does not eliminate the need for it, and their relationship to each other seems to reproduce, in Jess’s view, the recognition of sameness she feels with her fellow butches.

It is interesting, on the one hand, to read Jess's explanation as a rejection of Duffy's attempt to erotize the relationship between the two women by highlighting the value of female friendships themselves. However, the opposite reading can be made as well: that Jess is erasing the possible erotism of their relationship, repeating and perpetuating the historical erasure of sexual relationships between women. As I explore in the following section, her motives for this erasure could be grounded in her desire to fix attraction towards femmes (and only femmes) as the cornerstone of butch identity. Bisexual historical figures have suffered this erasure doubly: because they might have had heterosexual relationships, it has been even easier to situate them within heterosexuality; but when their same-sex attraction and relationships are deemed proven, they tend to be automatically categorized as gay or lesbian in contemporary historical accounts. That is, desire tends to be made sense of through monosexual lenses. We may see an example of the latter case in Jess's reading of Ethel and Laverne, not so much as an erasure of a desire existing in the text; but as an outright denial of the possibility of such desire. In monosexualizing Ethel and Laverne, Jess is closing any possible space to make inquiries as to why it is that they do not have a place to go, why their worlds are so far apart if their forms of inhabiting the world are so similar.

Nonetheless, Jess acknowledges Ethel and Laverne's relationship to each other as a shared need for recognition that Jess herself has felt and searched for in community: "Maybe each of them just likes looking in the other's mirror and seeing a reflection that smiles back." (107). I return to Fina Birulés and Hannah Arendt, and read this fragment alongside the claim that "nada ni nadie puede 'ser' sin que alguien mire, sin aparecer ante los demás" (Birulés 32). Ethel and Laverne come into being in each other's gaze, in the other's recognition of sameness. Jess certainly does not see them, and the world around them seems confused by the difficulty of reconciling their gender expression and their sexuality. They are, according to Jess's reading of them, each other's "mirrors", because they are the only ones that *see* each other. In *Female*

Masculinity, Halberstam makes a case for an approach to historical masculine women as separate from the modern category of lesbian, and claims that “there is probably a lively history of the masculine heterosexual woman to be told, a history, moreover, that must be buried by the bundling of all female masculinities into lesbian identity” (57). We might consider not only masculine heterosexual women, but masculine bisexual women as well, whose particular experience also tends to be “bundled” into lesbianism. This passage of *Stone Butch Blues* provides a glimpse of the non-lesbian masculine woman by having Jess reject Duffy’s attempt to associate masculine presentation with lesbianism. However, no other alternative to heterosexuality is suggested, and their inclusion in the community is considered out of the question. Jess might have responded to the situation differently, were she to encounter the same scenario later in life, once her ideas on butchness and identity have expanded and become less strict. Significantly, although other tensions related to identity and belonging are addressed towards the end of the novel, revisiting Jess’s previous prejudices and celebrating her growth, there is no Ethel nor Laverne, nor anyone like them, to be seen again in the text. However, I argue, the bisexual readability of this fragment provides us with tools to examine how Jess’s limitations work and what they have to say about her evolving thoughts on identity.

5. Butch for butch

Ethel and Laverne are not the only couple that Jess struggles to find a place for in her worldview: one of the major confrontations in the novel takes place when she discovers that Frankie, a fellow butch, is dating Johnny, who is a butch as well. Frankie and her girlfriend only get together when the community is dissolved—like Ethel and Laverne, their relationship exists outside of the community and it is unclear whether it would be welcomed inside. While Jess's reaction to Ethel and Laverne, whose intimacy she can explain as a survival mechanism devoid of romantic or sexual involvement, is an empathetic one, the same courtesy is not given to Frankie and Johnny. Jess's hostile reaction does not come from a place of understanding; rather, it seems to spur from fear and insecurity. Significantly, Jess's conflictive encounter with Frankie takes place when their community has disappeared and life is becoming increasingly tough for butches: men have returned from the war and are reclaiming the factory jobs, there is an economic recession, and the queer bars have been shut down by the police. These circumstances have increased the precariousness of the lives of many butches, now unable to work and make money, and left with no refuge from the world's hostility. At the same time, hormones are becoming more available, and some of the butches turn to gender transition for different reasons: out of dysphoria, in order to work in the factories passing as men, to protect themselves from daily violence, or all of the above. Through Jess's experience, the text portrays isolation as the main consequence of her transition: from her partner, from her community, from herself; all that is left is her job. Her sense of her butch self gradually crumbles as she is continually seen as something other than herself, emphasizing the role of the other's gaze and recognition in securing or destabilizing one's identity. This section examines Jess's reaction to Frankie and Johnny's relationship and the destabilization of butch identity that becomes apparent through their conflict.

5.1.Deviant desire

Some time after beginning her transition, once she is fully passing as a man and working at a factory, Jess encounters Frankie, one of her old butch friends. Jess's job security depends, at this point in the narrative, on her passing—discovery of her gender history would result in dismissal and, perhaps, physical or verbal violence. Her initial fear is that Frankie might have talked to someone and exposed her; however, as she panics and tries to explain the situation, Frankie is quick to interrupt her: "It's OK, I know ... I understand, Jess. Don't you think I understand?" (257). She does not require Jess to explain herself, and she seems to have instinctually understood the situation without being told, and chosen to protect Jess's secret. Jess's follow up question, "How did you survive this long?" (257), frames this understanding within the context of survival. Frankie has had to survive without community as well, and although she has not transitioned, she is understanding of the need to do so. Although Jess's appearance has changed, Frankie is willing to accept and respect that change, and is just happy to see that her old friend has figured out a way to survive as well. When Jess learns that Frankie is dating Johnny, a fellow butch, she is unable to feel the same for her, and reacts with rejection instead, walking away from her friend:

She put her hands on her hips. "She's my lover, Jess. Do I look like I'm kidding?"

My mouth hung open. I shook my head from side to side. "Honest, Frankie, I just don't get it. I don't understand."

Frankie smoldered. "You don't have to understand it, Jess. But you gotta accept it. If you can't, then just keep walking."

That's exactly what I did. I couldn't deal with it, so I just walked away. (258)

Jess's reaction suggests that her understanding of butchness is tied to femme attraction, that for her, butchness as a gender category also requires a desire towards femmes. The fact that Jess would react to Frankie the same way that other people react to her reflects the text's desire

to problematize rigid notions of identity within queer community. Its use of irony is exacerbated in Jess's inner monologue as she tries to come to terms with the visceral rejection Frankie's choice arises in her:

“The more I thought about the two of them being lovers, the more it upset me. I couldn't stop thinking about them kissing each other. It was like two guys. Well, two gay guys would be alright. But two butches? How could they be attracted to each other? Who was the femme in bed?” (258)

Her rationalization is a parody of heteronormative reactions to queerness, and shows the limitations of butch-femme couples as “a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original” (Butler 43). Although freeing for some, and certainly potentially troubling to heteronormative ideals, an unexamined replication of heterosexual roles in queer communities can also reproduce heteronormative prejudices and standards. In this case, this can result in rejection and alienation from the community, once again leaving its potential members without refuge.

When Frankie points out the absurdity of their conflict, that Jess would “cut another butch loose” because of who she desires at a time when loneliness and isolation are making life nearly unlivable, Jess's reaction is to attack Frankie's right to belong: “What makes you think you're still a butch?” (265). Frankie wittingly responds by mirroring the question back to Jess: “What makes you think *you're* still a butch?” (Italics mine, 265). This last exchange cements their conflict—they will not see each other for many years—by abandoning the previous parodic tone and approaching the core issue. Her transition has made Jess doubt her own sense of self and butchness: the discovery that gender and presentation are not fixed, that hormones and surgery are available and that the world can perceive her as a man, leads her to hold on to butch-femme desire as the cornerstone of butch identity. Their conflict ultimately reflects the shifting nature of both gender and desire, the instability of queer identities, and the ways that

transgressive and deviant desire can be punished as a way of self-preservation in the face of such instability. Although critical of Jess's behavior, the novel also approaches the issue with empathy and understanding by contextualizing the conflict at her most vulnerable moment. As a result, the text portrays how precariousness can lead people to be more rigid with their understandings of identity and belonging, while also showing the sad consequences of gatekeeping by ending the chapter with Jess sitting in her car, hoping that Frankie "wouldn't let [her] go" (265). This final failure to communicate to Frankie the desire that she would stay is a moment where having "el ser en ellos mismos *puesto en juego*" (Bataille, qtd. Birulés) impedes communication rather than facilitating it. Jess's perceived risk to her sense of self and her extreme vulnerability at this point in the narrative make her unable to communicate with Frankie in their shared precarity, and she instead withdraws into her own walls seeking to protect her fragile and unstable sense of identity. As I explore in the following section, Jess's journey ultimately leads her to a shift in perspective which, alongside a growing sense of material and psychological security, allows her to apologize to and reconnect with Frankie.

6. Reparations and reconciliation

6.1. Transgression and forgiveness

Jess is, at one point, expelled from the community for transgressing its rules. This takes place when Jess and Ed do not listen to the older butches, who have instructed them to wear “women’s clothes” to Butch Ro’s funeral. While the elders have accepted the incredibly painful task of wearing feminine clothes in order to be able to say goodbye to their friend, Jess and Ed show up wearing their usual clothes. As a consequence, Ro’s family had the funeral home close and asked them all to leave. Ed and Jess’s transgression, although fairly motivated by their desire to dress like themselves, disrespects the elders’ willingness to compromise on their wellbeing in order to grieve their friend. Alice, Ro’s femme partner, explains to the young butches: “See, they figured if they could make such a sacrifice to say goodbye to Ro, you young ones could too. It’s not your fault, really. But you two better keep a low profile for a while, if you know what I mean” (146). Alice’s assurance that “it’s not really [their] fault” hints at the basis for an eventual reconciliation; that is, the realization that Jess and Ed are ultimately not the enemies here, Ro’s family and heterosexism at large are.

That does not, however, absolve them of personal responsibility towards their elders, who need time before they are ready to forgive. Weeks go by, which Jess experiences as “exile” (146), until finally Butch Jan extends a peace offer to Jess with a question: “Do you get it yet?” (146). The question suggests that the time required before re-entering community is not just for the older butches to overcome their anger—time and space are required for Jess to reflect and *understand* what she did wrong. And, as she explains, she has: “Yes, I think I understood right away. I just didn’t know what to do. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry I messed it up for all of you to say goodbye to Ro” (146-7). Jess’s heart-felt apology, which includes an admission of wrong-doing and genuine grief for the pain she has caused, provides the grounds for reconciliation. The fact that Jess has understood and is willing to humble herself, recognizing

their pain, leads Jan to admit that there were larger forces at work: “Ah, it wasn’t your fault ... The next day at the burial the family made us stay one hundred yards away from the grave. That wasn’t your fault either” (147). This brief exchange, which ends with Jan welcoming her back, is a powerful demonstration of the rituals of expulsion and welcoming that govern their community. It shows that reconciliation is possible but certain requirements have to be met: the wrong-doer takes some time away to reflect and grow, harm is properly acknowledged and apologized for, and the wronged is able to take a step back from personal anger and redirect it towards the larger systems at work.

6.2. Frankie

Although most of the theory on community I have referenced so far explores how showing one’s vulnerability to the other has the potential of opening up a space for true communication and where alternative languages and rituals of care emerge, we have also seen that, at times, increased precarity makes closeness impossible. Such is the case, I have argued, in Jess’s confrontation with Frankie. Now turning to the analysis of the resolution of their conflict, I return to Bauman’s work, this time to his writing on ghettos: “Ghetto life does not sediment community. Sharing stigma and public humiliation does not make the sufferers into brothers; it feeds mutual derision, contempt and hatred” (121). This idea is useful to understand what makes the reconciliation possible because of its emphasis on the context of the ghetto as a space where solidarity and community fail. Although the characters do not inhabit an actual ghetto, not in the sense Bauman means, their social existence *is* ghettoized. At times, they internalize the shared stigma of butchness and project it onto one another; Frankie, however, symbolizes a refusal to accept and internalize the stigma. At a time when Jess is at her most vulnerable, Frankie’s refusal, embodied by her romantic relationship with Johnny—that is, her love for someone like her, her love for butchness—Jess responds with the derision Bauman describes.

For Jess to approach Frankie differently, material circumstances need to change first, reflecting the novel's empathy for and understanding of its characters' limitations as they do their best to survive in a world that wants them dead. After years of isolation and bare survival, Jess develops an intimate relationship with her neighbor Ruth. They come to love one another deeply, to offer each other whatever safety and care they can. In order to establish relationships and love again, Jess needs to come out of her shell and accept the possibility of loss, a process which the text firmly upholds as worth its risks. At this point in the narrative, Jess has stopped taking hormones and begun to embrace a version of her body that refuses to resolve the gender problem in binary terms—man or woman; looking instead for a home somewhere in between or outside of the binary entirely. Her relationship with Ruth is a healing one, in which preconceived notions of right ways to be butch or femme are left at the door. They develop a language of care and domesticity that slowly brings about in Jess the desire to live again, to expose herself to vulnerability and loss, to take care of her body and the space she inhabits, to dare and seek out pleasure.

It is only when this new environment settles, when Jess has developed a new sense of self-worth grounded in love and understanding, that she begins to revisit previous episodes, to mourn for lost relationships and seek out reparations where possible. Just like Theresa allowed Jess the space to think through her tendency to force togetherness by avoiding conflict, Ruth becomes a new interlocutor with whom Jess can come to terms with new realizations regarding her past attachment to binary notions of identity and her growing willingness to embrace the parts of herself and others that simply cannot be contained in them. Ruth gifts her a book, *Gay American History*, that allows Jess to see herself in the past: “just finding out that it was ever different, even if it was long ago, made me feel things could change again” (349). Jess's approach to history allows her to denaturalize the stigma of butchness that the world imposes on her, therefore giving way to a de-internalization of the stigma. It is this change that allows

her to think of Frankie again, as she tells Ruth: “I always wanted all of us who were different to be the same. I can’t believe I rejected a butch friend because she took a butch lover” (350). She proceeds to reach out to Frankie, but she is only able to do so because of certain changes: her relationship with Ruth has provided for her a new home and new-founded sense of self-worth and security, which have in turn facilitated a desire to look back at history in search of alternative ways to perceive and value herself and others like her.

Her apology to Frankie is heartfelt and shows personal growth and self-awareness: “Frankie, I’m sorry. I always thought I was so open-minded. But when I came up against my own fears, I tried to separate myself from you. I’ve done some growing up since then. I can’t take it back, but I’m real sorry” (352). Her words recognize fear as the source of her reaction and acknowledge the desire to separate herself from shared stigma without absolving herself of responsibility. This moment, integral to Jess’s journey towards a sense of self-worth, shows a form of catharsis through the act of looking at Frankie: “I’d forgotten how much I love butches until I looked at her standing there—the defensive defiance of her stance, one hand jammed in her trouser pocket, her head cocked to the side” (351). The admiration in Jess’s gaze suggests a renewed appreciation of both Frankie’s butchness and her own butch self, made possible by her willingness to step back into the world, face past fears and mistakes, and make herself vulnerable to rejection and love. Frankie proceeds to express her own hurt and insecurities around her butchness:

“What hurt the most is I respected you. I wanted you to respect me ... how do you think I felt when you told me I wasn’t a real butch because I sleep with other butches? You were taking away who I am. Jesus, Jess, when I walk down the streets guys fuck with me. I don’t have to prove I’m a butch to them. How come I got to prove it to you?” (352).

Frankie's hurt is framed within her desire for mutual recognition, or "respect", born out of her love and appreciation of Jess, whereas her reference to everyday violence, which persists independently of where Jess and the community at large draw the line for belonging, returns to the need for community as refuge. The resolution of Frankie and Jess's conflict thus focuses once again on belonging and identity, emphasizing the negative consequences of rigid, binary, and prescriptive forms of community formation without abandoning the text's empathy for the characters' investment in them nor its commitment to portraying the hurt they can cause.

7. Conclusion: Towards Jess's queer utopia

Stone Butch Blues is a text concerned with violence and the relationships that form around it. This Master's Thesis has examined how violence works and is represented in the novel in order to take a close look at its characters' relationships and survival strategies. Through Jess's journey, in spite of the near insurmountable odds stacked against her, the text returns again and again to the possibility of love and life, celebrating growth and change. Feinberg's writing centers empathy and understanding as the core requirement for both community and coalition building, and is invested in utopic thinking. In spite of the novel's vivid depiction of violence and despair—or, perhaps, because of it—the narrative is driven by hope: it is because hope of a different future is possible that healing from trauma and living with others is worth its cost. An alternative, utopic version of community manifests itself through Jess's dreams, which foreground the novel's ultimately hopeful tone and can be best read through José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*. Muñoz's contribution to queer theory reflects on queer utopias and the necessity of utopic thinking, emphasizing a need to look both to the past and to a utopic future in order to rethink and change the present. I turn to this approach to utopias and its significance for *Stone Butch Blues* as the conclusion of this thesis because, I contend, the longing for utopic alternatives drives the novel's core themes and underlies its portrayal of intimacy, community, identity, domesticity, and activism.

In the novel, the function of dreams is threefold: they serve as escapism, they provide insights into Jess's internal conflicts and gender experience, and they portray a wishful alternative to reality that showcases what life could be like. These dreams are not fully removed from reality; rather, real communities and imagined or dreamed communities exist in dialogue: dreams provide a mirror to the community's limitations and offer an imaginable future for them to strive for, whereas the actual realities of community-organizing highlight the compromises that must be made for the sake of survival and the limitations of achievable victories. This

relationship is at its most powerful in the last chapter of the novel, which depicts Jess speaking at an LGBT+ rally for the first time, a conversation with Duffy about organizing and the labor movement, and a final dream.

Jess dreams of a world in which she and others like her are not hated, nor merely tolerated, but loved and celebrated. Although there are people around her smiling at her, she walks to a small hut, where others “who were different like [her]” (388) sit in a circle and welcome her in. That is, even in this utopic version of reality she seeks shelter and desires to be where “we could all see our reflections in the faces of those who sat in this circle” (388). She feels her life “coming full circle ... and then back to the same question that had shaped [her] life: woman or man?” 389. The dream ends with this thought, and Jess bemoans being forced back into reality. Her utopia consists of a world where that question—woman or man—does not require an answer. The real world, however, does not cease to ask it of her, and it will not stop. Nonetheless, she can still find those who do not expect an answer from her, like Ruth and Duffy, people among whom she might rest and be at ease, and perhaps find the courage and strength to work with where reality is at. Earlier in the chapter, she has spoken in public, at a queer rally, about her experience, and has let her voice be heard for the first time; she has made peace with Duffy and been offered a job as a union organizer. Because organizing is grassroots, everyday effort which involves constant compromise, it requires a utopian drive, as Duffy implies: “Try imagining a world worth living, and then ask yourself if that isn’t worth fighting for” (387). Jess’s dream addresses Duffy’s question and provides an answer to it through a queer utopia that, although painfully far from grasp, might give her the strength to fight, and beautifully resonates with Esteban Muñoz’s claim that “queer politics ... needs a real dose of utopianism” (35). Her imagined future is also connected to her longing for a queer history of herself and people like her, an interest that gradually builds throughout the novel and shows that queerness is “intensely relational with the past” (Muñoz 27). In knowing others existed

before her, that they were once respected in certain communities, she is able to project a future where that might be the case again. That is, because “the present is not enough ... [it] must be known in relation to the alternative temporal and spatial maps provided by a perception of past and future affective worlds” (Muñoz 27).

Significantly, Jess’s interior life and journey towards a realized sense of self, is not framed individualistically. Rather, her dreams involve communities and the faces of others in which she can see who she would like to be, how she would like to be seen and see others, and how life could be. The presence of these other people in her dreams and the fact that her internal journey leads her to finding her place among them highlights the author’s commitment to community above all else. Even in the idealized world of dreams, Jess finds community not in the dream-world at large but inside the hut, among others like her. Because this final chapter also has her take on a role within the larger LGBT+ movement as well as the labor movement, it frames the dreamed hut as coexisting with her role as a spokesperson for queer rights and syndicalism, bringing us back to Marta Segarra’s assertion that Gloria Anzaldúa “nos invita a vivir en múltiples comunidades basadas en la diferencia, negociando entre todas ellas” (23). That is, the novel concludes by emphasizing its core theme, which has driven my analysis of the text: the importance of both finding places of refuge and queer homes to live in, and of stepping outside of them to fight for a better world and a queer future.

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