

Passing in Plain Sight: Visibility, Activism, and Identity in Leslie Feinberg's

Stone Butch Blues

Introduction:

The act of existing as a queer person is in and of itself an act of resistance. Butch and femme lesbian pairings, although they may be perceived as the fulfillment of traditional gender roles and the upholding of heterosexual norms, are in fact an act of resistance to prescribed gender roles. I focus on Leslie Feinberg's groundbreaking trans novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and the feelings of anxiety and dissatisfaction that the protagonist, Jess, feels in her varied attempts to pass as male. Feinberg's novel illuminates the ways that the danger and mobility of passing create an important sense of resilience and solidarity among marginalized communities. The duality of change of outer physical appearance and justification of internal understandings of identity illustrates the limitations of binary gender constructs and the necessity for language and concepts that capture the fluidity of gender. Jess' transition help to "...illustrate how "gender," "race," and "sex" found reiterative arrangement in an imbricated field wherein the designations between human and person, black and white, and sex and gender were not easily mappable as distinctly biological or social terrains." (Anna Marie Smith, 97). Jess' discomfort with her passing self highlights the ongoing struggle for recognition and understanding in a world that often fails to accommodate non-binary identities.

The Act of Passing

Before Jess began actively trying to pass and she was still acting as an activist. She and many of her friends were engaging in Resistance and/or activism is any form of dissent or opposition towards a social phenomenon or practice by an individual or group. Therefore, the

action taken becomes resistance and non-resistance. Both passive and active activism involve a struggle between the collective and one's personal culture. Passive activism refers to non-acceptance through means of noncooperation. Active activism refers to "the practice of taking action to effect social, political, economic, or environmental change. It encompasses a wide range of activities, from grassroots organizing and protests to lobbying, advocacy, and community outreach" (The Oxford Review). This language also reveals the way "passing" sounds "passive" next to activism. Jess is an activist in a variety of ways, and passing for her; and for most people, is never passive. There have been countless examples of this through the novel with Jess saying, "I've been fighting to defend who I am all my life," (Feinberg, 159). The very nature of masculine women is subverting gender roles, according to Halberstam "a thorough examination of the construction of the stone butch reveals the ways in which some sexual roles are irrevocably linked to inauthenticity while others are entwined so thoroughly with the real that we cannot conceive of them as "roles."" (112-113). Not only is the butch gender expression linked to gender but also their very personal identity and existence, butch lesbians therefore specifically pushes this activism in the subversion of gender roles further. These are a collection of women who so drastically subvert gender roles that both parties in a relationship are women.

However, none of these women set out the first time with the intention of challenging the system specifically, they simply existed as a group of women participating in gender expression, which so happened to be masculine. The further examination of the politics surrounding the identities of butch and femme reveals that according to "Lesbian-feminists ... butch/femme lesbians [were] "apolitical and...criticized..." (Elizabeth A. Smith, 412) for this supposed apolitical stance, especially while lesbian-feminists of the time were fighting heavily for gay rights. *Stone Butch Blues* explores many different identities both in its main character and inside

characters, who all exist on differing points on the gender spectrum. Snorton suggests that one must view “identity not only in terms of real vs artificial but also, and perhaps always, as proximal and performative,” (Snorton, 70). The deconstruction and understanding of oneself happens naturally through every person's life, but are often more obvious in the case of gender-nonconforming individuals, or those who more outwardly experiment with aspects of visibility, expression, and identity. Jess’ sense of identity is not only herself, but is heavily tied to her community or communities, she always evaluates herself in combination with those who would be ‘her people’ searching for likeness, to find understanding. Throughout the journey that she goes on through the gender spectrum she is able to better understand herself allowing her, “... to be able to explain my life, how the world looked from behind my eyes,” (Feinberg, 243). Her ability to explore and experiment is another aspect of her unintentional activism, her aim was never to cause disruption or ‘stick it to the man,’ she passively engages in forms of activism and resistance, whether she realizes this or not. She thinks of this plan of action as a solution to her safety and an opportunity, “[b]ut the hormones are like the looking glass for me. If I pass through it, my world could open up, too.” (163), she can imagine all that her life could be and the happiness she could have if the hormones have the desired effect.

When Jess makes the decision to begin hormones and receive an elective double mastectomy (top surgery) she engages in the first actions taken to make herself appear to the world as a man. In previous instances of masculine dress or mannerisms were an extension of her intertwined sexuality and gender expressions. She was not attempting to be seen as a man, but to be seen as a masculine woman— constantly maintaining her identity as a lesbian, “Theresa shook her head. “I don’t want to be with a man, Jess. I won’t do it.” “I’d still be a butch,” I protested. “Even on hormones.” (Feinberg, 163). Her butch identity is essential to who she is, making clear

that becoming a trans man in a heterosexual relationship with Theresa is not the goal of the hormones. Jess after experiencing life as a butch lesbian has endured many abuses and discrimination. She specifies “I’ve worked hard to be discriminated against as a lesbian.”” (164). Theresa has worked to be an active part of the lesbian community as a bar lesbian and femme. In the queer community femme’s take on a unique role in using their appearance of adherence to gender roles and heteronormativity in order to protect their butch and other non-conforming lesbian and queer counterparts. As she appears to adhere to her prescribed gender role she must fight harder to be recognized as a member of the lesbian community.

Eventually Jess grows tired of this negativity and has some hope after a friend mentions hormones and transition surgery she elects to attempt passing as a cis man although she internally maintains her identity of a butch/masculine woman. However after intentionally passing for some time in this new identity she begins to feel uncomfortable in a body which does not adhere to her gender identity. She speaks of the situation saying, “I didn’t regret the decision to take hormones. I wouldn’t have survived much longer without passing.” Every time she took a shot of hormones...Jess knew the implications and active resistance she was taking part in, she recognized how she changed some peoples opinions on women even if they did not realize it , and was able to pass her station –while staying as a woman. Despite acknowledging she made the best choice for herself at the time, she had not been living as her true self and felt disconnected to the life that she had in a stranger's body, “a stranger always trying not to get involved. Whoever I was, I wanted to deal with it, I wanted to live it again,” (Feinberg, 243). In this way we notice a similarity to the trans* experience of uncomfortability in one's own body due to the lack of alignment with one's gender identity. I believe that Jess has more of a disconnect after beginning gender affirming care as she is missing many of the features she

previously associated and appreciated about her body, she notes that while on hormones and after surgery, “[She] was no longer [her] on the outside,” (Feinberg, 186). Rather than continue in a manner that meant safety but uncomfortability, she would pursue comfort in her identity and the way in which she presents this identity to the world despite the active danger she will be in. She

The Juxtaposition of passing as a form of resistance and activism while actively disguising one's true self. It has already been established that existence is resistance, and this concept extends to include various methods of survival – even if those methods seem counterintuitive to the ultimate goal of visibility and acceptance. Jess has faced resistance and discrimination for her entire life, both for her masculine gender expression and her lesbian sexuality, this has caused pain and difficulty both physical and psychological to the point that she says, “I’m not gonna make it.” when conversing with her girlfriend at the time, Theresa. Jess is referring to not being able to physically stay alive anymore, she is being constantly beaten and sexually assaulted by the police and is under constant threat of being beaten in the street for her gender presentation, she is also worried about finding and maintaining a job as a woman, and specifically as a butch woman.

Jess’ positionality has found her in a more strictly understood category of ‘butch,’ “...the stone butch has been characterized as more blocked, more lacking, and more rigid than all other sexual identities.” (Halberstam, 112). Jess has no intention of changing her sexuality or gender identity, she is not seeking hormones or surgery as an attempt to “pass out of” her community. Halberstam addresses this directly in their book *Female Masculinity* naming “a subject position that we might usefully call trans gender butch to signify the transition that the identity requires from female identity to masculine embodiment...But the shifts and accommodations made in most cross-gender identifications, whether aided by surgery or hormones or not, involve a great

deal of instability and transitivity. Trans gender butch conveys some of this movement.” (146). This act of attaining gender-affirming care highlights Jess’s ability for resilience because of her community. She does not give-up and go back to traditional gender roles and heterosexuality, she is finding a way to continue.

Negative Results of Passing

Jess, after having received top surgery and utilized hormones for a decent amount of time has experienced a major difference in her appearance, including but not limited to: a flat chest, facial hair, deeper voice, and a more angular body. This causes Jess major discomfort in herself, she despite her transition care has always maintained a gender identity of womanhood. Jess has maintained this identity most obviously through her identity as a lesbian which strictly refers to non-males. She however has faced the questioning of her gender since childhood with the question, “Are you a boy or girl?” littering her memories, a count of eight times throughout the novel mostly in the early chapters. This continues through into and after her use of gender affirming care saying, “I fought long and hard to be included as a woman among women...” (241). After taking hormones and having her physical body resemble a man to too great an extent Jess remarks, “I felt trapped behind it. I couldn’t recognize the he-she,”

Jess is struggling to find language for an identity that breaks out of the he/she binary. The only language available was that of ‘he-she’ which although used and intended to be an insult or slur against “a transgender or non-binary person (later esp. one whose birth sex was male); (occasionally) a woman (esp. a lesbian) who adopts a traditionally masculine identity or appearance”” according to the Oxford English Dictionary. In the case of Jess and many of the other butch characters presented in the novel have reclaimed the term to be less disparaging and

simply a descriptor of the intricate balance of feminine and masculine. “My face no longer revealed the contrasts of my gender,” the further complication of Jess’ gender identity used to be apparent in the contrast between a more feminine body type and gender identity and a more masculine method of gender presentation lending itself to a complex identity being represented. In her own words Jess, “ I could see my passing self, but even I could no longer see the more complicated me beneath my surface,” (Feinberg, 240). This resulted in mainly negative reactions but still managed to subvert treatment according to traditional gender roles. Jess, although most who saw her pre-hormone/surgery were confused of her gender identity, indicating how effective her ‘passing’ could be, resulting in a lack of ability to treat her according to her gender, is now, once transitioned, treated according to a perceived gender – man. She is similar to Theresa in that they value accurate treatment and understanding from the outside world rather than better treatment for some who they are not.

These examples display the paths such as active resistance in the taking of hormones or receiving surgery also applies to existence as resistance, as they are actively/scientifically altering themselves from the “natural” state of being. She does not give up on the category "woman" as we see in her frustration about feminists who suggest as much. In the late 1980’s and early 1990’s “There [was] a growing consensus in transgender studies that trans embodiment is not exclusively, or even primarily, a matter of the materiality of the body.” (Anna Marie Smith, 175) Feinberg, through Jess, is trying to transform that category of woman in ways that would include transmasculine identities. The term transmasculine does not appear in the novel but its use is supported by the identity and actions of Jess in her physical transition to a more masculine body while maintaining a female gender identity. Jess tells Theresa, “I can’t keep taking the system head-on this way.” (Feinberg, 158) not that she will concede to the system. In this

instance Jess does not stay in this male-passing presentation, as it begins to make her feel uncomfortable and as if she is not herself. Anna Marie Smith comments on the notion of “impermanent gender identifications, providing a more precise alternative to passing’s narration to suppose how a figure may inhabit various gender positions with a sense of sincerity and intransience until otherwise moved.” (172) in her book *Lesbian Erotics*. We can see this concept readily applied to Jess’ evolving understanding of her gender identity through her changes in gender presentation.

Gender is understood both through social construction of mannerisms and outer presentation and the way in which one perceives themselves. Firstly, gender expression which refers to the way one presents themselves to the world consists of clothing, voice, mannerisms (behavior and body language), gate, hair, makeup, and other aspects of one's external characteristics. Gender expression is independent of one's sexual orientation and gender identity and can both adhere to or reject traditional gender roles and expression. Theresa, a longtime girlfriend of Jess, breaks up with her when Jess decides to begin taking hormones which will alter her body to a more masculine one. Theresa has a more narrow definition of being lesbian than allows for the existence of Jess and her transmasculine identity, “...gender reassignment for FTMS does have social and political consequences.” (Halberstam, 143). Although her transition does nothing in erasing her lesbian identity it is inescapable that Jess’ relationship with her girlfriend and community change along with her relationship with herself. Theresa categorizes Jess as a trans-man due to her desire to transition physically and proposes that Jess is not a butch but “... to be [a] FTMS who [is] too afraid to make the “transition” from female to male.” (Halberstam, 144).

Although Theresa can understand the desire for comfort and safety and recognize the ways that this transition will help Jess in terms of retaining work and avoiding arrest, she also is very aware of the social implications of the change. If Jess begins taking hormones it will not only affect how people treat her but also the way Theresa will be seen. In their current circumstances both women are not “passing;” however, Theresa states when speaking to Jess that “If [she’s] not with a butch everyone just assumes [she’s] straight.” Theresa is a proud lesbian and wants to be treated as such despite or perhaps because of the discrimination that comes with owning her identity. She has no desire to pass and this change in Jess would result in, “[Theresa] passing too, against [her] will.” Theresa occupies an interesting position in both the queer and non-queer society. She, as a femme, appears to adhere to traditional gender roles, dressing in more feminine clothing, wearing makeup, and using graceful mannerisms, all of which are associated typically with cis-het women. However, as a lesbian she is also actively going against traditional gender roles in terms of her sexuality. Theresa not being with a man is very much opposite to traditional gender roles which prescribe that she should date a man, because of this “[She’s] sick of the world thinking [She’s] straight,” (Feinberg, 164). There is no societal prescribed notion of the power dynamics between the pairs, one is not expected to be meek or give in to the others demands. As a lesbian she is “free” from these prescriptions as seen by society allowing her more agency –or at least perceived agency– as she has already been marked as other.

Critical Examinations

The mobility or what C. Riley Snorton refers to as transitivity in their book *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, fosters an important sense of resilience and solidarity

among varied queer communities. By, in many ways, reducing her body as moldable and changeable she becomes fungible, having more potential to be something else. This fungibility allows for the movement – or transitivity between different presentations of outward expression. Jess does this throughout the novel, from when she first imagines herself in her fathers suit, to the initial change of her haircut and development of masculine dress, to her time passing as male, then again into a ‘new’ Jess who has a new perspective of the meaning of self. Elizabeth A. Smith notes that in reference to “the first two general-interest lesbian-feminist books charged that butch/femme was an “unnatural” and harmful effect of living in a sexist society.” that “To them, butch was an identity both false and unreconcilable with the identity “woman.”” and “...a result of the development of a powerful critique of gender roles and the equation of any sexual roles with culturally mandated gender identities.” (411). Halberstm notes the same misunderstanding in *Female Masculinity*, “[t]he real problem with this notion of lesbian and transgender masculinities lies in the way it suggests a masculine continuum that looks something like this:

Androgyny - Soft Butch - Butch - Stone Butch - Transgender Butch - FTM
Not Masculine -----Very Masculine

Conclusions:

The exploration of gender identity and presentation through the experiences of Jess and Theresa in Leslie Fienberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* reveals the complicated dynamics between gender expression, identity, and social perception. Jess's journey highlights the tension between adhering and resisting societal expectations and displaying personal authenticity. Her medical transition, initially motivated by a need for safety, resulted in a deeper understanding of her true self. Theresa's resistance to Jess's transition underscores the complexities of identity within

lesbian and queer relationships, where society's perceptions can impact personal connections profoundly. Additionally, investigating the impact of community support and societal attitudes on the well-being of gender non-conforming individuals could offer valuable perspectives on fostering inclusivity and acceptance. By continuing to deconstruct and reconstruct gender, society can move towards a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of identity.

Furthermore, I think this quote from Anna Mari Smith sums up the purpose of this novel and how *Stone Butch Blues*, “...ways to be trans, in which gender becomes a terrain to make space for living...” (Anna Marie Smith, 175).

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