

Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro
Instituto de Letras

Carla Alves da Silva

**“Are you a Boy or a Girl?” :
The Awareness of a Transgender Identity**

Rio de Janeiro
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Dissertação apresentada como requisito parcial para obtenção do grau de mestre no curso de Mestrado em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa do Programa de Pós-graduação *Strictu Sensu* da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro.

Orientadora: Profa. Dra. Eliane Borges Berutti

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Carla Alves da Silva

Dissertação de Mestrado em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa. Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Área de concentração: Literatura em Língua Inglesa. 2006.

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Conceito:

☯☯☯☯

*For all Transgenders I have had the privilege
to know.
Thank you for sharing your own
awareness with me.*

☯☯☯☯

☞ Acknowledgments ☞

My deepest appreciation for my professor (in five courses!) and advisor Eliane Borges Berutti. I was both surprised and amazed at my first lesson with you in the *Curso de Especialização*. Yes!! There was such a thing as queer theory and literature! Both the insightful texts you introduced to us and the always lively discussions in class have quenched a special thirst for knowledge I had. You have helped to queer my view of the world – and I am proud of that!

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So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.

Genesis 1:27-28, *The Bible*, King James Version

All human beings carry within themselves an ever-unfolding idea of who they are and what they are capable of achieving. The individual's sense of self is not determined by chromosomal sex, genitalia, assigned birth sex, or initial gender role. Thus, the individual's identity and capabilities cannot be circumscribed by what society deems to be masculine or feminine behavior. It is fundamental that individuals have the right to define, and to redefine as their lives unfold, their own gender identities, without regard to chromosomal sex, genitalia, assigned birth sex, or initial gender role.

[...] and further, no individual shall be denied Human or Civil Rights by virtue of a self-defined gender identity which is not in accord with chromosomal sex, genitalia, assigned birth sex, or initial gender role.

International Bill of Gender Rights, 1995.

☞ Resumo ☜

O objetivo dessa dissertação é discutir a jornada em direção à consciência de identidade empreendida pelas protagonistas dos romances *Stone Butch Blues*, de Leslie Feinberg, e *Middlesex*, de Jeffrey Eugenides. Na superfície, os dois romances muito compartilham do ponto de vista de estudos de gênero: ambos descrevem personagens denominadas mulheres ao nascer, cuja construção de identidade é narrada em primeira pessoa e que nos contam sobre seu (re)posicionamento no mundo e sua consciência de terem nascido “diferentes”, em uma emocionante busca do entendimento de seus próprios corpos, sexo e gênero. A minha intenção é testar essa aparente similaridade em face de teorias proeminentes sobre sexo e gênero, tentando tecer a minha leitura dos romances sob o olhar da teorias *queer* e *transgender*.

Palavras-chave: literatura norte-americana; gênero; transgênero.

☞ Abstract ☞

The purpose of this thesis is to discuss the journey towards identity awareness undertaken by the protagonists of the novels *Stone Butch Blues*, by Leslie Feinberg, and *Middlesex*, by Jeffrey Eugenides. On the surface, these two novels share a great deal from the point of view of gender studies: both depict female-born fiction characters whose identity construction is narrated in the first person and who tell us about their (re)position in the world, their awareness of being born "different", and most compellingly, their search to understand their own bodies, sex and gender. My intention is to test this apparent similarity against the preeminent theories about sex and gender, trying to establish my reflection from the viewpoint of queer and transgender theories.

Key words: American literature; gender; transgender.

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☞ Chapter I ☞

Stone Butch Blues and Middlesex: Two Journeys towards Awareness

After my reading of *Stone Butch Blues*, by Leslie Feinberg and *Middlesex*, by Jeffrey Eugenides, I have decided to initiate research on transgender characters and their identity search. Gender-challenging individuals, the transgenders have received a number of denominations and descriptions throughout the years, in the mythology, science, history, religion, and literature of many different cultures. In this thesis, I use the definition of "transgender" as described by Leslie Feinberg in *Transgender Warriors*: "an umbrella term to include everyone who challenges the boundaries of sex and gender [...] Transgender people traverse, bridge, or blur the boundary of the gender expression they were assigned at birth"¹. If God created man and woman, Nature nevertheless created beings who are neither, simply because they transgress the limitations of two-gender, two-sex categories.

The transgender problematizes and questions the traditional borders of identity and otherness as far as gender/sex is concerned. They reveal a great deal about how society sees and treats those who cannot perfectly match their sex and gender expression to a two-gender/sex classification. The patriarchal/sexist system has pushed into the status of "aberration" anyone who would differ from the dominant heterosexual male, including homosexuals, androgynes, intersexuals, and transsexuals, attaching to their status a negative value judgment. The "other" must be placed off-borders where it is safe and not threatening to what society traditionally considers being "normal" and "natural". Interestingly, those "excluded" have always brought about feelings of terror and fascination, disgust and curiosity, because they dare to transgress. Presumably, the

¹ FEINBERG, L.(1996) p.x

fascination/horror that they inspire is not merely a question of transgression per se, i.e., just because one transgresses, one does not necessarily inspire the horror/fascination response. The depth of this issue, I dare to say, lies in the fact that these individuals transgress sex/gender categories, which reside at the core of the formation of one's identity. Furthermore, this transgression is intrinsically intertwined with sexuality. The vehemence of emotions drawn by sex issues goes beyond any reasoning or politics – it is certainly part of our instincts and passions, thus transgression on that level inevitably makes a very strong impression.

Simone de Beauvoir once wrote that "one is not born a woman, but rather one becomes a woman" ². And what if one is biologically classified as a female but simply cannot perceive oneself as a woman? Or, what if one experiences both sides of the border that separates male and female, and realizes this line is fluid or maybe nonexistent? Science has been struggling to understand those individuals; History has similarly documented a variety of cases of transgenderism; the Arts have famously portrayed the image of the Androgyne. My aim in this thesis is to focus on how the theme is treated in literature. More specifically, I analyze, compare and contrast how the expression of transgenderism is experienced in these two narratives of contemporary American literature, *Stone Butch Blues* and *Middlesex*. As far as methodology is concerned, my research has included the reading of theoretical and critical studies on contemporary literature, identity, sex/gender issues, the body and queer/transgender issues, followed by an analysis of the transgender expression in the two novels. The main theorists included in the bibliography are Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Toril Moi, Judith Halberstam, Jay Prosser and Leslie Feinberg.

² BEAUVOIR, S. (1989). p.267

In this opening chapter, I not only introduce the definition of transgender that underlies the reflections in this thesis, but also the issues of transgender identity which pervade the novels. Moreover, I offer a summary of each novel and the protagonists' profiles as well as proceed to present both authors, Leslie Feinberg and Jeffrey Eugenides. In chapter two, I present how the concepts of sex, gender and transgender have been treated by major gender theorists, which seems fundamental for the reflections that will be carried out in the following chapters. I also make an attempt to compare and contrast contemporary theories on gender and sex, by trying to understand where these theories converge and diverge. In chapter three, I discuss *Stone Butch Blues*, focusing my analysis on the protagonist's journey towards the awareness of her own transgender identity. In chapter four, I discuss transgender issues in *Middlesex*; in addition, I compare and contrast its protagonist's life journey to Jess Goldberg's in *Stone Butch Blues*. The final chapter presents my final reflections and conclusions concerning the treatment of transgender issues in the two novels.

Regarding the use of pronouns to refer to transgender individuals in this thesis, I chose to repeat the pronouns used by the authors in their books to refer to their characters and themselves. In *TransLiberation – Beyond Pink and Blue*, Leslie Feinberg states her preference for gender-neutral pronouns³. In respect to that, I use the subject pronoun “s/he” (in place of “she” or “he”) and the possessive/object pronoun “hir” (in place of “her”, “him” or “his”) to refer to this author. However, I use feminine pronouns to refer to Jess Goldberg and the other masculine women in *Stone Butch Blues* since this is the choice of the author in the novel. When discussing the intersexual protagonist in *Middlesex*, I use different pronouns as the author did: masculine, when the protagonist is referred to as Cal, and feminine, when referred to as Calliope.

³ FEINBERG, L. (1998), p.1

Both the protagonist of *Stone Butch Blues*, Jess, and the protagonist of *Middlesex*, Cal, are assumed to be female at birth. Therefore, they are expected to perform as such. Nevertheless, both Jess and Cal grow to experience ambiguity in their gender expression, early realizing that they do not quite "fit" in with society's traditional patterns. Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* unfolds the story of Jess, a biological woman who from her childhood in the 1950s cannot see herself portrayed in any "Sears catalogue" or TV shows; she cannot identify with any image of what a woman is, or more precisely, what she is supposed to be. Very early on she starts suffering violence from a world unable to accept or understand gender ambiguity and masculinity in women. The story proceeds to her adolescence when she drops out of school and runs away from home, trying to escape from exclusion, prejudice and physical/psychological abuse. Finally, Jess reaches adulthood, when she struggles to survive despite poverty, extreme physical and sexual violence, isolation, and loneliness. Jess is unable to find a sense of home and self until she discovers a community of gender/sexual minorities, feeling prompted to become politically engaged. In capturing her experience both internally and externally, Jess's story is not only a search for identity, but also a discovery of the power of belonging to a community.

A number of readers have recognized aspects of Leslie Feinberg's own life in the story of his character Jess Goldberg. Goldberg is a "he-she", a masculine woman, born in the 1950s and raised in Buffalo, NY, who early in life suffers the consequences of being differently gendered. Like his character, Feinberg was also born in a working class Jewish family in Buffalo, New York, in 1949, where s/he grew up. Similar to Jess Goldberg, Feinberg struggled to find his identity in a culture that seemingly had no place for his as a "he-she" – a transgendered individual. In response to the common assumption that the novel is semi-autobiographical, Feinberg has claimed, however, that the novel is purely

fictional and that s/he chose to write it from a first-person point of view in light of the limitations that using third-person pronouns would have imposed upon the narrative. Somehow contradictorily, in the first edition of *Stone Butch Blues* from 1993, Feinberg ends hir acknowledgments by saying, “There were times, surrounded by bashers, when I thought I would not live long enough to explain my own life. There were moments when I feared I would not be allowed to live long enough to finish the writing of this book. But I have”⁴. Moreover, in the afterword of the 10th anniversary edition of *Stone Butch Blues*, Feinberg tells us about hir own re-reading of the novel:

I wrote this narrative from the inside, awash in its depths, towed by its currents. By the time I held the blues in my hands the inked words seemed like faint animal tracks on a smooth landscape, a cold trail I couldn’t follow.

Now a decade later, I am surprised. Astonished to be reintroduced to characters I birthed, who like anyone’s grown children developed fictional lives of their own, independent from mine. I discover a journey not identical to my life’s path and yet blazed by with the intimated familiarity of my own lived experience. I locate theory – the way it is lived in motion and in interconnection. Not hard to understand; hard to live [...] “Is it fiction?” I am frequently asked. Is it true? Is it real? Oh, it’s real all right. So real it bleeds. And yet it is a remembrance: Never underestimate the power of fiction to tell the truth.⁵

Whether the novel has little or a great deal of Feinberg’s biography is not the main point; what has made the novel so appealing as well as a classic in transgender literature is the fact that it illustrates the lives of so many gender deviants. Like Feinberg, the protagonist of *Stone Butch Blues*, Jess Goldberg, identified as a butch lesbian before fully coming to terms with her gender identity, which falls outside the norm. As both non-fiction biographies and fiction showed, both Feinberg and Goldberg were unable to find a sense of home and self until they discovered a community and political activism. Leslie Feinberg has been a leader in the transgender rights movement as long as such a

⁴ FEINBERG, L. (1993) p.4

⁵ FEINBERG, L. (2003). p.196

movement has existed. Hir books reveal hir life and activism: a political organizer and author, s/he is also an activist journalist and grassroots historian, being a pioneer of transgender activism and culture. *Stone Butch Blues* won both an American Library Association Award for Gay and Lesbian Literature and a 1994 Lambda Literary Award, besides having been translated to German, Dutch and Chinese. Feinberg has also published two nonfiction books: *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (1996), which won a Firecracker Alternative Book Award for Nonfiction in 1996, and *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue* (1998). Hir writing also includes political pamphlets and essays. Being a longtime participant in the fight for the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered individuals, s/he has stated that hir written work is often an attempt to answer hir own questions about why some people feel that they need to punish those who are different. S/he has been especially vigilant in hir writings about documenting the otherwise ignored contributions to history various oppressed groups have made. Hir nonfiction works explore not only transgender issues, but the crucial relationships and parallels among the women's, people of color, and queer rights movements. Most compelling are hir arguments on the importance of a broad-based multi-issue coalition among gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people – an alliance that could easily extend to other progressive groups. Hir political activism includes being the leader of the Workers World Party, an independent Marxist organization, and a managing editor of its newspaper. S/he lectures widely at colleges and universities, speaks at Pride marches, and often participates in various transgender events and political organizations.

Whereas *Stone Butch Blues* first person narrative reveals realistic testimonial features, Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex* is an epic novel that alternates both social and magic realism. The story is narrated by Cal Stephanides, a hermaphrodite living in Berlin

at the beginning of the 21st century. Cal traces his heredity back several generations through different geographic and political landscapes in order to tell us the story of his family, Greek immigrants living in Detroit, USA. Cal is their grandchild (named Calliope at birth), the omniscient first-person narrator who traces his family history back and forth in time, in order to explain who he/she is: a pseudo-hermaphrodite (or intersexual) raised as a girl, with internal testicles that went unnoticed until puberty. Taken to a gender specialist at the age of sixteen, the doctor decides (after a number of tests) that since he was raised as a girl, his body must be surgically "corrected" to female. Cal decides to run away and starts to dress as a man, living an underground life while trying to figure out his own identity and gender.

Like his protagonist Cal, Jeffrey Eugenides was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1960, the third son of an American-born father whose Greek parents immigrated from Asia Minor and an American mother of Anglo-Irish descent. Eugenides was educated at public and private schools, graduated *magna cum laude* from Brown University, and received an MA in English and Creative Writing from Stanford University in 1986. Two years later, in 1988, he published his first short story. His fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *The Yale Review*, *Best American Short Stories*, *The Gettysburg Review* and *Granta's "Best of Young American Novelists"*. His first novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, was published in 1993 and translated into fifteen languages, besides being made into a successful motion picture.

Middlesex has earned the writer Jeffrey Eugenides the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. He is the recipient of many other awards, including fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and The National Foundation for the Arts, a Whiting Writers' Award, and the Harold D. Vursell Award from The American Academy of Arts and

Letters. In the past few years he has been a Fellow of the Berliner Künstlerprogramm of the DAAD (Der Deutsche Akademische Austauschdienst – The German Academic Exchange Service) and of the American Academy in Berlin.

People often wonder about Eugenides's choice of a hermaphrodite narrator. More than a few times he has been asked whether the character is auto-biographical, to what Eugenides diplomatically – and not lacking in sense of humor – replies that it reflects the gender confusion adolescents may go through⁶. When inquired about the gender issues raised by the protagonist, the author explains that Cal is reared as a girl but, due to her virilization at puberty, adopts a male gender identity. For him, Cal "operates in society" as a man, but that does not mean that he is really a man. In his words:

Nor is any man exactly like any other man. Between the alternatives of nurture and nature, I argue for a middle place. That's one of the meanings of the title, obviously. But the Middlesex I'm talking about is not only a third gender category. It also represents a certain flexibility in the notion of gender itself. It's a very American concept really. It's a belief in individuality, in freedom. I think we are freer than we realize, less genetically encumbered. Researchers expected to find 200,000 genes in the human genome. Instead they found about 30,000. Not much more than a mouse has. There literally are not enough genes to account for our human capacities. How did we become the way we are? The mystery is still unsolved. *Middlesex* is Cal's account of his own formation, his journey of self-discovery.⁷

When asked why a hermaphrodite protagonist appealed to him, Eugenides informs that the hermaphrodite has a long-standing and distinguished place in literary history⁸. First he cites Tiresias, who stumbled on two copulating snakes and threw his staff at them, at which point he was instantly turned into a woman. Secondly, he cites Plato who described the original condition of human beings as hermaphroditic: once upon a time

⁶ In interview published by *Powells.com*

⁷ In interview published by *Bomb Magazine*

⁸ In interview published by *Read Magazine*

we were all both male and female, but then these two halves were separated. For the author, the notion of a person who possesses both male and female characteristics has exerted fascination for a long time. He refers to the mutual curiosity of beings when women wonder what it would be like to be a man, while men wonder what it would be like to be a woman. He explains, however, that his protagonist is not a mythical creature like Tiresias. He is a real live person, and that he wanted to update the hermaphrodite as a literary character to bring it into harmony with current medical, political and philosophical thinking.

In this thesis, I work towards establishing a dialogue between *Stone Butch Blues* and *Middlesex*. On the surface, these two novels share a great deal from the point of view of gender studies: both depict female-born fictional characters whose identity construction is narrated in the first person and who tell us about their (re)position in the world, their awareness of being born "different", and most compellingly, their search to understand their own bodies, sex and gender. My objective is to test this apparent similarity against the preeminent theories about sex and gender.

☞ Chapter II ☞

“Boy, Girl or...?": a Queer Eye on the Gender Binary

“I’ve been searching all my life for a rock-bottom definition of a woman, an unquestionable sense of what is a man.”

Kate Bornstein

“Boy or girl?” is usually the first question asked about one’s identity. My interest in the novels *Stone Butch Blues* and *Middlesex* originated from my reflecting upon the gender binary. My discovery of the existence of queer and transgender studies as an academic discipline which both rethinks and challenges what seems monolithic regarding gender and sexuality was, to say the least, powerful.

As part of my methodology for starting a research on transgender characters, I decided that I would 1) read about queer/ transgender theory (and related theory), 2) work with novels whose protagonists could be defined as transgenders, 3) try to establish a dialogue between theory and the novels. Also, I decided I wanted to work with characters who were pronounced female at birth, but whose life journeys would problematize the gender binary. I wanted to investigate how fiction would treat the complexity of a transgender’s identity as well as their struggle to understand who they were, once they realized they were “different”. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to discuss relevant points regarding queer and transgender theory, in order to make clear some of the concepts and terms that will be used throughout this thesis.

Although many still believe that queer and transgender studies concern only those whose gender expression and sexuality cannot neatly fit in binary, heterosexual categories, it was intriguing to realize the far-reaching nature of those studies. For we are all affected by gender stereotypes: at the moment we are born and our gender is

pronounced by the doctor, we have an enormous part of our life pre-defined for us: from the games we are allowed to play (or not) as a child, to the clothes and colors we should (not) wear, the adequate body language we should (not) express, the sports we should play (or not), the careers we should (not) pursue, how assertive we can (or cannot) be, and whom we must (not) love.

All the pre-defined rules seem often so natural that most of the time we do not think about the gender binary dictating from rather ordinary to extremely relevant details of our lives. Most of us are so used to the straightjacket imposed by the gender binary that we barely feel it – let alone think about it. What is implied in the gender binary is the assumption that all human beings are divided into either male or female, each naturally having either masculine or feminine features inscribed in their bodies, which will mark their identities and interactions with the world.

My own intellectual journey of learning and reflecting about the gender binary has led me to be curious about those beings who claim to be both or maybe neither, those who go beyond or across gender: the transgenders. Transgender people prompt me to posit that they expose instabilities in the binary, deconstructing much of what we are told is natural. Since the fact we are either male or female lies in the core of our identity from an early age, this seems to be very revolutionary.

The title of this thesis “*Are you a Boy or Girl? – The Awareness of a Transgender Identity*”, obviously aims at referring to the gender binary as natural. For “awareness”, I mean “having or showing realization, perception, or knowledge⁹”. My choice of two novels by two different authors was aimed at exploring the life choices made by the protagonists, once they are aware of the fact that their identities do not match gender stereotypes.

⁹ www.m-w.com/dictionary/awareness

As for “transgender identity”, it refers first to the idea of a “gender identity”. In the words of the Executive Director of the Gender Public Advocacy Coalition (GenderPAC) and transgender author Riki Wilchins:

The inner sense the most of us have of being either male or female. The term has its origins in psychiatry (Gender Identity Disorder). It is most commonly used to refer to transsexual and transgender individuals, who are those most at risk for feeling some discordance between their bodies and that inner sense.¹⁰

It is often said that over the course of the past decade, transgender politics has become the cutting edge of sexual liberation. While the sexual and political freedom of homosexuals has yet to be fully secured, homosexual issues may pale in the face of the battle waged by transgender activists to dismantle the idea of what it means to be a man or a woman. The discussion of the transgender identity changed from a medical issue into a political issue in the 1990’s. Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble (1990)*, a milestone to start what is now named queer theory. The queer writer Ruth Goldman explains that, although lesbian and gay studies are often referred to as queer studies, the former are “primarily concerned with documenting the past and current manifestations and implications of same-sex attractions”, while queer theory operates from the perspective that “heterosexuality, or ‘normative’ sexuality, could not exist without queer, or ‘anti-normative’ sexualities”¹¹. She also explains that as much as the word “queer” itself allows different and, sometimes, contradictory meanings, queer theory may also contain a “variety of definitions”. For my work, I have chosen to apply the definition of queer theory as being a “theoretical perspective from which to challenge the normative”. In other words, it is a theory that both creates and maintains “a theoretical space for

¹⁰ WILCHINS, R. (2004). p.8

¹¹ GOLDMAN, R. (1996). p.169

polyphonic and diverse discourses that challenge heteronormativity”¹², as one of its inherent goals is to “undermine heteronormative hegemonic discourses – to reconceptualize the ways that we think about the relationships between power and the heteropatriarcal norm.”¹³

In reference to transgender theory, I mean the theoretical work that deals with the lives and issues of transgender people. Fundamental are the writings by scholars such as Judith Halberstam and Jay Prosser as well as by the activists Kate Bornstein and Leslie Feinberg. Moreover, I would also like to highlight the names of literature professors Eliane Borges Berutti and Maria Consuelo Cunha Campos, from the State University of Rio de Janeiro, as pioneer figures in the study of transgenders and literature in Brazil.

Transgenders, mainly in the United States, began to fight for social and civil rights in the 1990s. A number of organizations were created and hundreds of fiction and non-fiction books have been written on the matter since then. Gender studies (which often encompass women’s, gay/lesbian as well as queer studies) are now part of several interdisciplinary classes in many countries. Not only have queer/transgender scholars – Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Halberstam, Jay Prosser, etc – begun to have a voice in the academia, but also activists have been invited to tell their stories: Sylvia Rivera, Kate Bornstein, Leslie Feinberg, Cheryl Chase, Riki Wilchins, among many others. As far as mass media is concerned, millions of people have attended successful moving pictures in which transgender characters and their issues were exposed: *The Crying Game* (1992), *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), *M. Butterfly* (1993), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), to name just a few. In 2006, *Breakfast on Pluto* (about a transvestite cabaret singer in the 1960s and 1970s), directed by

¹² Ibid, p.170

¹³ Ibid, p.179

Neil Jordan, and *Transamerica* (the story of a pre-operative male-to-female transsexual), directed by Duncan Tucker, promise to win many awards for leading actors, respectively, Cillian Murphy and Felicity Huffman.

The current debate around gender and the fight for transgender rights obviously evolved from the fight for women's rights, and later, the fight for gay rights. Simone de Beauvoir in her groundbreaking work *The Second Sex* (1949) made it clear that inequality lay in gender: "One is not a woman, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society."¹⁴ The gay rights movement triggered by the Stonewall Riots in 1969, whose heroes included several transgenders, soon subdivided into different groups of activists which not rarely clash, but which also often work in coalition represented under acronyms such as G.L.B.T.Q.A. – gay, lesbians, bisexuals, transgenders, queer or questioning and allies.

While women and gay rights advocates made phenomenal mainstream progress in the 1970s and 1980s, it was in the 1990s that gender advocacy was infused with energy. According to Riki Wilchins, that energy came from two sources: first, the conquest of academia by postmodernism inspired by the ideas of the French philosophers Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, which subsequently gave origin to queer theory; secondly, the rise of an energetic transgender rights movement, begun by transsexuals and cross-dressers. Despite the fact that transcending gender stereotypes had always been a subtext of feminist and gay rights, individuals who transcended gender norms were not always well-served by movements that wanted to focus only on one gender or sexual orientation¹⁵. As Wilchins notes:

¹⁴ BEAUVOIR, S. (1989). p.267

¹⁵ WILCHINS, R. (2004). p.21

Surrounded by scores of transsexuals and hundreds of cross-dressers at conventions, it was impossible for differently gendered people to feel the same shame. And it was impossible for them not to want to take this strange feeling of being open and unafraid and make it a daily thing. Transsexuals and cross-dressers began to see themselves less as social problems and more as the next oppressed minority. It was a powerful moment of political recognition.¹⁶

As Wilchins continues to explain, the emergence of the internet and e-mail enabled transgender people to communicate privately and cheaply, building elaborate social networks¹⁷. In this beginning of the 21st century, the networking seems to be striving: on January 16, 2006, a Google search of the term “transgender” produced 7,790,000 results¹⁸; a Yahoo search, 10,700,000 results¹⁹.

As we have seen so far, in the 20th century, theories claiming that gender relations are socially constructed categories of meaning have opened up a number of new areas in feminist, gay, lesbian, queer and transgender studies as well as in activism. The traditional division of human beings into two genders, based on the biological differences between males and females, has been taken for granted and viewed as one of the most natural, common-sense categories of identity. In this binary model, "sex," "gender," and "sexual orientation" constitute a unified whole. It seems fundamental then, in order to discuss queer and transgender theory, to reflect upon the words sex, gender and sexual orientation. I do not fail to acknowledge that this discussion is “difficult terrain” – “quicksand”, some would say. I obviously do not aim at coming to definite, ultimate conclusions on the matter. My goal is merely to present an overview of the main points concerning the treatment of this subject by contemporary theorists.

In her essay “What is a Woman?” (1999), Toril Moi presents not only quite different views of gender, sex and sexuality, but also important historical data. She

¹⁶ Ibid. p.23

¹⁷ Ibid. p.23

¹⁸ www.google.com

¹⁹ www.yahoo.com

exposes the theoretical turning points in the debate sex versus gender as well as presents a very pragmatic analysis on the matter. She also rethinks the contribution of Simone de Beauvoir to feminist theory and her premise that sexual identity is socially and culturally constructed. Moi defends the idea that *The Second Sex*, properly read, offers inspiring solutions to urgent contemporary problems. The theorist praises the ingenuity of Beauvoir's ideas and suggests that we still think of the body as a situation, bearing in mind the idea of one's lived experience as fundamental to the formation of one's identity. The fact that one is born with a vagina, a penis, or atypical genitalia (like in the case of Intersex individuals) will certainly be relevant to one's subjectivity, being part of one's lived experience. However, this does not imply that biology should determine one's destiny in society, whether it is intellectual, social, professional, sexual, affective, etc. Obviously, this is not a new idea, nevertheless, Moi reminds us that it is still a rather revolutionary idea, especially if we extend it not only to women, but to all human beings.

The belief in biological determinism which grounded the pervasive picture of sex challenged by Beauvoir, determined that biological facts justify social norms. Therefore, there should be no distinction between male and masculine, or between female and feminine. In short, there would be no distinction between sex and gender. This essentialist and heterosexist view has been fiercely opposed by feminists and G.L.B.T.Q.A. activists, not without some confusion and contradictions. Moi examines three different ways of responding to the biological determinists' pervasive picture of sex and explains how feminists brought up the subject in the 1960s and 1970s. She starts by quoting feminist Gayle Rubin: "[I dream of] an androgynous and genderless (though not sexless) society, in which one's sexual anatomy is irrelevant to who one is, what one does, and with whom one makes love" and proceeds to explain that the distinction between the words "sex" and "gender" originated among psychiatrists and other medical

personnel working with intersexed and other transsexual patients²⁰. For these doctors, the distinction meant that “sex” would correspond to biology/genitals whereas “gender” would describe how the patient would perceive his/her true self, male or female, psychologically speaking. Once this distinction between the terms “sex” and “gender” was established, doctors could claim that transsexuals suffered from a “mismatch” between their sex and gender (which would explain their feeling of being “trapped in the wrong body”). As Moi highlights, the distinction between sex and gender emerged from “a concern with individual identity”²¹. Gender identity is then a term related only to a person’s psychological experience of belonging to one “sex” or another, in a bi-gender categorization (male vs. female, man vs. woman). However, the term was expanded by the American psychoanalyst Robert Stoller in 1968 when he developed four different concepts:

I prefer to restrict the term *sex* to a biological connotation. Thus, with few exceptions, there are two sexes, male and female. [...] *Gender* is a term that has psychological and cultural rather than biological connotations. If the proper terms for sex are ‘male’ and ‘female’ the corresponding terms for gender are ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’; these latter may be quite independent of (biological) sex [...] *Gender Identity* starts with the knowledge and awareness, whether conscious or unconscious, that one belongs to one sex and not to the other, though as one develops, gender identity becomes much more complicated, so that, for example, one may sense himself as not only a male but a masculine man or an effeminate man or even a man who fantasizes being a woman. *Gender Role* is the overt behavior one displays in society, the role which he plays, especially with other people, to establish his position with them insofar as his and their evaluation of his gender is concerned.²²

According to Moi, feminist theory incorporated Stoller’s idea that “sex” belongs to the realm of science, to biology and medicine. The commonly understood view of

²⁰ MOI, T. (1999). p.21

²¹ Ibid. p.22

²² Apud MOI, T. (1999). p.22

human identity came under increasingly sophisticated analyses as feminists began distinguishing between "sex" (which refers to an individual's biological – chromosomal – classification as male or female) and "gender" (the social and psychic meanings cultures assign to these biological differences).

As far as sexual orientation is concerned (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, etc), it has been proved that it does not necessarily have to match any label under the categories of sex or gender. The distinction between anatomical sex-based male-female differences and the gendered, socially determined meanings ascribed to these biological categories (sex vs. gender vs. sexual orientation) provided both feminists and G.L.B.T.Q.A. activists with an important tool in their theoretical and political analyses of the relations between women and men as well as of the foundations of a heterosexual/binary categorization of gender.

According to Gayle Rubin and other 20th century theorists, masculinity and femininity are not innate, essential categories of human existence; they are, rather, social inventions, constructed categories with specific meanings that vary across cultures and historical periods. For Rubin, sex concerns biological, sexual differences, whereas gender is related to the oppressive social norms brought to bear on these differences²³ – a classic example of a feminist rejection of biological determinism. Moi notes that, according to Rubin's definition, gender is always oppressive; in human society there cannot be such a thing as non-oppressive gender differences.

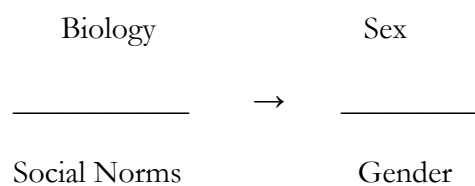
It is assumed that a man must be "masculine" and a woman must be "feminine", i.e., to conform to the social norms of what a man or a woman should be/act (body language, social behavior, grooming, clothes, etc) because they are biologically male or female. Thus, it is socially condemned to behave in a gender opposite to one's genitalia

²³ Ibid . p.27

(or biological sex). Hence, stereotyping man/masculine/male and women/feminine/female based on the genitalia would be oppressive to any human being. Moi also points out that in Rubin's dream of an androgynous and genderless society, there would be no social norms for correct, sexual behavior, no sexual stereotypes; for Rubin, gender would be a negative term referring to arbitrary and oppressive social norms imposed upon sex and sexuality:

Rubin dreams of an utopian world: instead of describing a specific behavior as masculine or feminine, we would have to consider whether we think of the behavior as wise, kind, selfish, expressive, or destructive *without* thinking of any these terms as sex-specific.²⁴

As Moi also points out, Rubin inherits Simone de Beauvoir's dream of a society where women will no longer be cast as "other" as well as Beauvoir's critique of patriarchal femininity; for both Beauvoir and Rubin, gender is ideological in the sense that it tries to pass off social arrangements as natural. Moreover, any attempt to invoke sex (= biological or anatomical differences) as pretext for imposing any specific social arrangements (= gender) would be ideological and ultimately oppressive. In this theory, therefore, a firm line would be drawn between biology and social norms:



In the relation pictured above, on a general social level, "sex" would mean "man" and "woman", or male and female bodies, and gender would refer to general social

²⁴ Ibid. p.28

norms²⁵. According to Moi, theorists following Rubin's footsteps would think of sex as an ungraspable entity outside history and culture (emigrating to the far reaches of hormones and chromosomes), whereas gender would mean the only relevant term for sexual difference²⁶. However, that would leave a gap where the historical and socialized body should be, and a theoretical problem would arise if one assumed that the sex/gender distinction must be the axiomatic starting point for any theory of subjectivity²⁷.

The 1980s poststructuralist revision of the sex/gender paradigm, mainly represented by Judith Butler's ideas in *Gender Trouble*, attempted to fill this gap and expand even more the reflection on the ratio of gender-to-sex. Moi explains that poststructuralist theorists were not satisfied with 1960s theorists' accounts of personal identity and the body. Under the review of poststructuralism, the 1960s understanding of sex would easily turn sex into an ahistorical and curiously disembodied entity divorced from concrete historical and social meanings. Judith Butler's poststructuralist theory of gender performativity presented a new approach to the male-female gender categories by blurring the boundaries between them. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler maintains that, because male-female gender categories inevitably reinforce Western cultures' heterosexual social contract, theorists should attempt to go beyond this binary meaning system. By positing "woman" and "man" as stable categories of identity, gender representations would naturalize heterosexuality and support conservative constructions of normative masculinity and femininity.

²⁵ Ibid p.29

²⁶ Ibid. p.30

²⁷ Toril Moi also discusses terminology in her essay "What's a Woman?". She highlights the fact that the distinction between "Gender" and "Sex" is not possible in certain languages, like in Norwegian or French, since there is only one term for both concepts; still, according to Moi, French and Norwegian women are completely able to understand sex/gender distinction and oppression. Early feminists, likewise, could perfectly make a case against biological determinism even before they had two words for "sex" to choose from. Ibid. p.5

Butler also argues that feminism makes a mistake by trying to assert that “women” were a group with common characteristics and interests. That approach would reinforce a binary view of gender relations in which human beings are divided into two clear-cut groups, women and men. Rather than opening up possibilities for a person to form and choose his/her own individual identity, therefore, feminism had closed the options down. Butler notes that feminists rejected the idea that biology is destiny, but then developed an account of patriarchal culture which assumed that masculine and feminine genders would inevitably be built, by culture, upon “male” and “female” bodies, making the same destiny just as inescapable.

The main argument from *Gender Trouble* (later reviewed in *Bodies that Matter, 1999*) is that both sex and gender are normative, i.e., discursive and constructed, insofar as it becomes central or definitive. When interviewed by Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal, Butler stated that she did not deny the physical difference, nevertheless, she argued, “why does it have to matter?”. Butler prefers “those historical and anthropological positions that understand gender as a relation among socially constituted subjects in specifiable contexts”²⁸. In other words, rather than being a fixed attribute in a person, gender should be seen as a fluid variable which shifts and changes in different contexts and at different times.

For Butler, there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results; gender is a performance; it is what you do at particular times, rather than a universal “who” you are²⁹. Butler suggests that certain cultural configurations of gender have seized a hegemonic hold (i.e., they have come to seem natural in our culture as it presently is) –

²⁸ “Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler”. Interview by Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal, London, 1993, at www.theory.org.uk/but-int1.htm

²⁹ BUTLER, J. (1989). p.25

but, she suggests, it does not have to be that way. By choosing to be different about the matter, we might work to change gender norms and the binary understanding of masculinity and femininity. In conclusion, Butler's theory of gender performativity destabilizes the heterosexist binary by redefining gender as a process, a series of discontinuous acts that must be repeatedly performed.

Departing from the idea that "gender performativity" opposes "gender essentialism", Butler says that one performs one's gender and that gender is an act, not a thing. To Moi, Butler acknowledges that this idea has close affinities to the French existentialist thought³⁰. For Beauvoir and Sartre, our acts do indeed define us and we are what we do. Therefore Butler's idea of "gender performativity" would be a 1990s way of speaking about how one fashions oneself through our acts and choices. Additionally, the fact that most behave according to certain gender norms would ensure that the norms were maintained and reinforced. Through this interpretation, Butler would have inherited Beauvoir's idea of how sexual difference was produced³¹.

Nevertheless, in Toril Moi's analysis, Beauvoir's ideas resist the dichotomy proposed by Butler insofar as for the French existentialist the "lived experience" meant an open-ended, ongoing interaction between the subject and the world. From this viewpoint, each term continuously constructed each other. About "lived experience", Moi explains:

[...] this is a central existentialist concept [...] In many ways the "lived experience" designates the whole of a person's subjectivity. More particularly the term describes the way an individual makes sense of her situation and actions. Because the concept also comprises my freedom, my lived experience is not wholly determined by the various situations I may be part of. Rather lived experience is, as it were, sedimented over time through my interactions with the world, and thus itself becomes part of my situatedness.³²

³⁰ MOI, T. (1999). p.55

³¹ Ibid. pp.46-47

³² Ibid. p.63

For the theorist, Beauvoir's claim that "the body is a situation" is still a complete and original contribution to feminist theory as well as a powerful and sophisticated alternative to contemporary and gender theories. For Beauvoir, the body matters: considered as a situation, the body encompasses both the objective and subjective aspects of experience; moreover, the human body is fundamentally ambiguous: it is subject at once to natural laws and to the human production of meaning, and can never be reduced to either one of these elements. The female body is a necessary part of the definition of "woman", but it is not *the only element to define the meaning of the word*. For Beauvoir, a woman (and maybe we could say today, a "person") defines herself through the way she lives her embodied situation in the world, i.e., through the way in which she makes something of what the world makes of her³³. Finally, Moi explains that Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* does not ask us to choose between a society with or without sexual difference, but between one with or without sex-based oppression.

Beauvoir's ideas seem to be reflected in the words of current queer and transgender theorists like Judith Halberstam. In Gabriel Baur's documentary film on drag kings (biological women who perform as male) *Venus Boyz* (2002), Halberstam comments on the issues of masculinity and femininity:

It's a big question what the differences might be between male masculinity and female masculinity, and some places there are no discernable differences. For example, a transgender man, somebody who was born female but lives now in a social role as a man, may not look on the surface any different from a man. But the fact that this person has a history in a female body makes all the difference in the world. [...] There are also very, very deep differences like the fact that female masculinity is a sort of peripheral gender, a minority gender and doesn't have the weight of political power and social power behind it. Thus male

³³ Ibid. p.69

masculinity is what we call a dominant gender, female masculinity is a minority gender.³⁴

In my viewpoint, the theorist realizes the importance of lived experience, as far as she understands that one's subjectivity is shaped by their social interaction. She sees the importance of lived experience, as far as she understands that one's subjectivity is shaped by their social interaction. Moreover, she acknowledges the body as a situation, by not denying the fact that the transgender body is oppressed when compared to a non-transgender body. Very important for my reflections on *Stone Butch Blues* and *Middlesex*, I believe, is her comment on power: the fact that a woman takes over a masculine persona does not necessarily make her as powerful as a biological man. On the contrary: by being part of a oppressed minority of gender deviants, her alternative gender expression may make her even less empowered – a “gender outlaw”, as Kate Bornstein describes in *Gender Outlaw – On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*, or an “abjected body”, as explained in Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror, an Essay on Abjection*. Various examples of the abjection and lack of power of transgender individuals can be found in *Stone Butch Blues*, which will be discussed in the next chapter. One may wonder whether Cal Stephanides's choice of the male gender in *Middlesex* was also based on power issues, which will be discussed in chapter IV.

Leslie Feinberg's book *Transgender Warriors* (1996) also discusses transgenders in relation to power. S/he shows discontent both with the post-structuralist paradigm and the lack of certainty about possible alternatives. The activist and writer moves the discussion on gender/sex further, in order to focus on the history and socio-political situation of transgender people. The term “transgender” dates from the 1980s, with its coinage usually attributed to Virginia Prince, the Southern Californian advocate for

³⁴ ONIX Filmproduktion, Germany, 2002.

heterosexual male transvestites, who in the 1960s wrote such pioneering self-help books as *The Transvestite and His Wife* and *How to Be a Woman though Male*. The term initially referred to individuals who lived full-time in a social role not typically associated with their birth sex, but who did not resort to genital surgery as a means of supporting their gender presentation. The logic of the term is that, while transvestites episodically change their clothes and transsexuals permanently change their genitals, transgenders make a sustained change of their social gender through non-surgical means.

However, the term took on a different set of meanings following the publication of Leslie Feinberg's pamphlet, "Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come" (1992). Feinberg's ideas were later expanded into the books *Transgender Warriors* (1996) and *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue* (1999).

In Feinberg's usage, transgender became an umbrella term used to represent a political alliance between all gender-variant people who do not conform to social norms for typical men and women, and who suffer political oppression as a result. As such, the term encompasses also transvestites and transsexuals (who may be either female-to-male or male-to-female), androgynes, butch lesbians, effeminate gay men, drag queens, people who would prefer to answer to new pronouns or to none at all, non-stereotypical heterosexual men and women, intersex individuals, and members of non-Western European indigenous cultures who claim such identities as the Native American *berdache* or two-spirit status, Brazilian "travestis", Indian hijras, Polynesian mahu, Omani xanith, African "female husbands," and Balkan "sworn virgins. [...] Feinberg, a Marxist, asserts the historical thesis that gender variance is an intrinsic part of human culture that was often honored and revered in pre-capitalist societies, but which has been suppressed within capitalism. Transgender liberation requires the overthrow of capitalism, just as any truly revolutionary social change must address the question of transgender liberation.³⁵

Feinberg starts *Transgender Warriors* by saying that his intention is to tell us about the battles of transgender people, hero/ines. Nevertheless, s/he wonders how, insofar as the

³⁵ GLBTQ- on-line encyclopedia of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer culture.

words woman and man, feminine and masculine are almost the only words that exist in the English language³⁶ to describe “all the vicissitudes and styles of expression”³⁷. S/he acknowledges two colloquial meanings for the word *transgender*: 1) an umbrella term to include everyone who challenges the boundaries of sex and gender; 2) a term that draws a distinction between those who reassign the sex they were labeled at birth, and those whose gender expression is considered inappropriate for their sex. S/he proceeds to explain that as the transgender movement has evolved, more people have been exploring the distinction between a person’s sex – and lists three: female, intersexual and male – and their gender expressions, which could go beyond three: feminine, androgynous, masculine and other variations.

And in dominant Western cultures, the gender expression of babies is assumed at birth: pink girls, blue for boys; girls are expected to grow up feminine, boys masculine. Transgender people traverse, bridge, or blur the boundary of the gender expression they were assigned at birth [...] Because it is our entire spirit – the essence of who we are – that doesn’t conform to narrow gender stereotypes, many people who in the past have been referred as cross-dressers, transvestites, drag queens, and drag kings today define themselves as *transgender*.

All together, our many communities challenge *all* sex and gender borders and restrictions. The glue that cements these diverse communities together is the defense of the right to each individual to define themselves.³⁸

When commenting on the images that s/he will present in the book, Feinberg says that s/he does so in order to challenge not only the currently accepted Western dominant view of a woman and man, but also the idea that there is only a way to be a man or a woman. Feinberg also claims that s/he does not share the view that an individual’s gender expression is exclusively a product of either biology or culture. The

³⁶ Feinberg defends the use of “politically correct” language as far as that means using language that respects other people’s “oppressions and wounds” (1996: ix) .

³⁷ FEINBERG, L. (1996). p.ix

³⁸ FEINBERG, L. (1996). p.x

writer makes a clear reference to Beauvoir's ideas in *The Second Sex* and other theory on gender/sex when s/he asks:

If two sexes are an immutable biological fact, why have so many societies recognized more than two? Yet while biology is not destiny, there *are* some biological markers on the human anatomical spectrum. So sex is a social construct, or is the rigid categorization of sexes the cultural component? Clearly there must be a complex interaction between individuals and their societies [...] Today a great deal of "gender theory" is abstracted from human experience. But if theory is not the crystallized resin of experience, it ceases to be a guide to action.³⁹

Later, Feinberg narrates an interview in which the reporter asked hir three times: "You were born a female, right?", then finally asking: "so do you identify as female now, or male?", to which s/he replied:

I am transgendered. I was born female, but my masculine gender expression is seen as male. It's not my sex that defines me, and it's not my gender expression. It's the fact that my gender expression appear to be at odds with my sex. Do you understand? It's the social contradiction that defines me.

S/he laments that all the complexity of hir gender expression can be reduced to "looking like a man", as people like hir are often defined⁴⁰. Feinberg states that when trying to discuss sex and gender, people can usually only imagine woman or man, feminine and masculine, since they have been taught that nothing else exists in nature. As s/he argues and tries to prove in hir book, this has not been true in all cultures or in all historical periods, by claiming that Western law took centuries to neatly partition the sexes into two categories and mandate two corresponding gender expressions. Quoting historian Randolph Trumbach, s/he explains that the paradigm of the gender binary began to predominate in western culture only in the early 18th century in northwestern

³⁹ Ibid. p.xi

⁴⁰ Ibid. pp.101-102

Europe, when feminine men and masculine women were thought of as third and fourth genders.

“But how many sexes and genders do exist?” – I once more quote Feinberg, since this is probably one of the questions that emerges the more we read about gender/sex issues. For hir, the answer to this question has to be understood within the context of oppression. S/he once again criticizes gender theorists by saying that they cannot just function as “census takers”, who count how much sex and gender diversity exists; rather, “they must be part of the struggle to defend our right to exist”⁴¹. Feinberg, a fierce activist, repeatedly reinforces that hir interest in the subject is not merely theoretical, but that s/he is in a fight

for human rights. For hir, the discussion about how much sex and gender diversity actually exists in society makes no sense when all the mechanisms of legal and extralegal repression render some people’s lives invisible. After this call for action, s/he tells us that the gradations of sex and gender self-definitions are limitless; therefore, people should have the right to control their own bodies and express their gender in any way they choose. As s/he explains:

I’ve been taught that feminine and masculine are two polar opposites, but when I ride the subways or walk the streets of New York City, I see women who range from feminine to androgynous to masculine and men who range from masculine to androgynous to feminine. That forms a circle – a much more liberating concept than two poles with a raging void between. A circle that has room on it for each person to explore and it offers the freedom for people to move on that circle throughout their lives if they choose.

Even today, when sex and gender choices have been so narrowed, when there are such degrading and murderous social penalties for crossing the boundaries of sex and gender, many of us can’t – and don’t want to – fit. We have to fight for the right of each person to express their gender in any way they choose. Who says our gender expression has to match our genitals? Who has the right to tell anyone else how to define their identities? And who has the right to

⁴¹ Ibid. p.102

decide what happens to each of our bodies? We cannot let these fundamental freedoms be taken away from us.⁴²

In this chapter I have made an attempt to present an overview of some of the main contemporary theories concerning sex and gender as well as to provide comments regarding different approaches and terminology. The distinction between the concepts of “sex” and “gender” and the recognition that gender relations are socially constructed categories of meaning have originated new terminology and opened up a number of new areas in feminist, lesbian, gay, queer and transgender studies.

Twentieth century feminists are responsible for the beginning of the debate around sex vs. gender. Beauvoir’s statement that “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”, has triggered the discussions against biological determinism and the pervasive picture of sex. For the French existentialist, when one says “I *am* a woman”, she is not saying that she is somebody that in every respect conforms to the dominant gender norms of her society, the verb in that sentence signifying existence and therefore a becoming, that is, a process that only comes to an end in death. For her, being a woman should not imply any stereotyping, and one could very reasonably use this way of thinking for any human being. Identity is not the fundamental value in Beauvoir’s ideas, but freedom. As Toril Moi says, “[...] for Beauvoir, freedom is a universal value: if it is good for women and feminists, it is because it is good for everyone”⁴³. I believe very few of us would disagree with that. The fight for freedom, for the defense of human rights and against any kind of oppression should always be a part of our life agendas.

The debate around gender was once again brought up in the 1960s by Gayle Rubin, who dreamed of a genderless (thought not sexless) society, where individuals would not be oppressed in terms of their gender or sexual orientation. Both Beauvoir and Rubin

⁴² Ibid. p.107

⁴³ MOI, T. (1999).p.118

believed that gender is ideological in the sense it tries to pass social arrangements off as natural; whatever biological differences that exist between the sexes, they do not ground in any particular social norms or structures. In the 1990s, Judith's Butler powerful poststructuralist theories about sex, gender and the body approached questions of materiality and tried to deconstruct the distinction between sex and gender, claiming that *sex* was also a construct.

I firmly agree with Toril Moi when she says the theorists cited above seem compatible in the sense that they challenge both the gender-normative and heterosexist/patriarchal ideology that supports oppression, as I have exemplified. I can also see the relevance of Toril Moi's and Leslie Feinberg's criticism over the excess of theoreticism and the lack of certainty about other possible alternatives in the debate around sex and gender. Nevertheless, I believe that this is a natural process in a time when "deconstructing" was part of the intellectual agenda. Moreover, few will deny that poststructuralists' ideas have been fundamental for the blooming of L.G.B.T.Q.A. activism.

For both Moi and Feinberg, however, it is about time we moved on to raise new questions that "really matter". Feinberg, for instance, points out that the new terminology introduced to refer to L.G.B.T.Q.A. communities still suffers from limitations (Moi might say it will always do), since the new words still reinforce the idea that there are only two distinct ways to be – you are either one *or* the other. For Feinberg that is not always true: the complexity of the transgender identity, for example, would not fit such simplification.

New words, new "straight-jackets", one could say. The task of having people re-thinking categories of sex and gender is not a easy one, since the binary distinction of man vs. woman is one of the most elementary certainties they have always had: most

people think of their gender as a core part of their identity; an integral part of “who” they are. Yet, it is unlikely that this is the most difficult task in the fight against both gender/sex oppression and abjection. Naturally, literature reflects the concerns of its time: *Stone Butch Blues* and *Middlesex* are fine examples of this debate.

It is from the viewpoint of queer/transgender theory that I discuss the life journeys of the transgender protagonists in *Stone Butch Blues* and *Middlesex*. In the following chapters, I will reflect upon the two novels and discuss whether the protagonists’ awareness of a transgender identity (respectively, Jess Goldberg’s and Cal Stephanides’s) represents a challenge to the oppression imposed by heteronormativity.

To end this chapter, I chose to quote the 1995’s restatement of the *International Bill of Gender Rights*, since I believe it truly underlies the fight for basic human rights and against *gender* or *sex* oppression (whichever word one chooses to use):

The Right to Free Expression of Gender Identity

Given the right to define one’s own gender identity, all human beings have the corresponding right to free expression of their self-defined gender identity.

*Therefore, all human beings have the right to free expression of their self-defined gender identity; and further, no individual shall be denied Human or Civil Rights by virtue of the expression of a self-defined gender identity.*⁴⁴

⁴⁴ FEINBERG, L. (1996). p.172

☞ Chapter III ☞

Jess: From Isolation towards a Queer Community

"No, my heart is turned to stone: I strike it, and
it hurts my hand."
Othello, Act 4, Scene 1

In this chapter, I discuss the novel *Stone Butch Blues*, trying to establish a dialogue between the work of fiction and the theory presented previously. My focus is on the protagonist's journey in her awareness of a transgender identity as well as her movement from isolation towards community. From my point of view, three aspects were highly influential in her life journey: shame, violence and community.

I would like to point out that historical facts served as background to the narrative, contributing to the nearly-testimonial features of the novel. By reading Leslie Feinberg's two other non-fiction books which preceded the first publication of *Stone Butch Blues* (1993), namely, *Transgender Warriors* (1996) and *Transliberation – Beyond Pink or Blue* (1998), one can say, with a reasonable amount of confidence, that several facts narrated in *Stone Butch Blues* meaningfully reflect the life of its author and the people s/he met throughout hir life. The writer and political activist Leslie Feinberg is a transgender person, biologically female, born in 1949 and raised in a Jewish and working class family.

The nearly-testimonial/confessional tone of *Stone Butch Blues*⁴⁵ is set at the very beginning: Feinberg starts by explaining hir reasons to write the novel; hir acknowledgments will very much foreshadow and intertwine with the fiction we are about to read. The author's acknowledgments are also filled with intensity and emotions; s/he

⁴⁵ From now on, I will be using the acronym SBB standing for the novel *Stone Butch Blues*.

very clearly tells us that those experiences and characters have made who/what s/he is now. Whether s/he has lived those experiences or just witnessed, whether s/he has really met those people or just got inspired by some real individuals, there is no doubt that fiction and lived experience are interwoven. The steps Jess Goldberg had to walk in her journey towards the awareness of a transgender identity were certainly the same walked by Leslie Feinberg and peers. In the acknowledgments of *SBB*, s/he wrote:

A special thanks to the butches, passing women, drag kings and drag queens, FTM brothers and MTF sisters – transsexual and transvestite - who urged me to keep writing, even if one sketch can't illustrate every life. In loving memory of you, Marsha "Pay It No Mind" Johnson – found floating in the Hudson River on July 4, 1992 – and the other Stonewall combatants who gave birth to the modern and lesbian and gay movement, and to the many other transgendered human beings whose lives ended in violence. Butch Anne, you will find the flavor of our shared past in these pages [...] History take note: I did not stand alone! ⁴⁶

Similarly to Feinberg's acknowledgments, chapter one begins with an intense and emotional letter that Jess Goldberg, the protagonist of *Stone Butch Blues*, writes to her ex-lover Theresa. Jess's words to Theresa summarize four decades of Jess's life, depicting her dramatic encounters with dominant society that led her to become a stone butch. In the letter, the protagonist recalls meaningful moments and events, thus anticipating the myriad of experiences and characters we are going to find throughout the book. In my viewpoint, both Jess Goldberg's letter and Feinberg's acknowledgments introduce the rest of the narrative and its themes: transgender identities, the butch-femme dynamics, the empowerment through political education and engagement, the transformations in the pre-Stonewall and post-Stonewall gay-lesbian lives, the gender outlaws and their

⁴⁶ Feinberg, L. (1993), p.4. Subsequent quotations from this novel refer to the same edition and will appear in the text by page number.

everyday struggle to survive in a world despite imminent violence, exclusion, abjection and oppression. As a fundamental part of the novel, the letter frames the narrative, summarizing the protagonist's journey towards the awareness of her gender identity.

Jess Goldberg is a biological woman; therefore, expected to perform according to society's traditional definition of what means to be a woman. For mainstream society, being born a woman means having to be "feminine": displaying feminine mannerisms, being groomed in a way that leaves no room for gender ambiguity, working in stereotypical gender occupations, besides, of course, being sexually oriented towards the opposite gender.

It seems valid to discuss here the title of the novel: *Stone Butch Blues*. The term "butch" is used to refer to masculine, mannish women, hence being included under the umbrella term "transgender". While the term "butch" describes a female of masculine gender expression who commonly pairs up sexually with "femmes", the term "stone butch" is used to refer to a butch who can give sex but cannot receive it, not allowing to be touched. Stone butches are described as not feeling comfortable at showing vulnerability, having shut emotionally and sexually for protection for they cannot meet mainstream society's expectation of womanhood. Their transgressive gender expression transforms them into frequent targets of violence and abuse. At a certain point, Jess realizes she has become a "stone butch". As Judith Halberstam explains in "Lesbian Masculinity: Even Stone Butches Get the Blues", the stone butch represents a functional inconsistency or a productive contradiction between biological sex and social gender. The stone butch manages the discordance between being a woman and experiencing herself as masculine by creating a sexual identity and a set of sexual practices that correspond to and accommodate the disjunctions. In SBB, Halberstam explains, becoming a stone butch is a response to continual sexual abuse or challenges: the butch

closes down because she has to, because the world has charged her already with perversion and insupportable sexual ambiguity⁴⁷.

The word “blues” is used in the English language to refer to a song, often of lamentation, in highly personal interpretations, reflecting a psychological mindset of melancholy and low spirits. The novel, which describes Jess Goldberg’s journey from the post-war 1950s through the outburst of the gay-lesbian political movements of the 1980s, has its chronology and mood marked by songs of each decade. However, it will be Tammy Wynette’s torch song “Stand by your Man” – a blues song – that will point out Jess’s adult life and solitude from the time she begins to take part in the gay-lesbian bar scene in Buffalo and Niagara Falls. The melancholy of the blues which is cited several times in the narrative highlights the painful, yet beautiful and transforming journey of the protagonist, which so much represents the lives of transgender beings like Jess Goldberg.

Violence and hatred make Jess close down emotionally, leading her towards becoming a “stone butch” – the one who toughens up in order to protect her body and soul from abuse. The early events in her childhood and adolescence will also contribute to reinforce the protagonist’s difficulty to understand her own identity. In a natural process of self-protection against serious suffering, she will start to toughen up, letting the stone build around her self like an armor. The clash between normative versus non-normative/transgressive forces will be part of her everyday hardships and will condition her struggle for survival. That will nevertheless hamper the understanding of her identity and her self-acceptance, insofar as the world keeps pushing her, as well as her gender-bender peers, into exclusion and otherness. Her life journey will also be the one of

⁴⁷ Halberstam, J. (1988), p.123

visualizing the apparent few options left for people like her: loneliness, death, poverty, prison, madness, erasure, silence, abjection⁴⁸.

In my viewpoint, the concept of “abjection” introduced by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror, an Essay on Abjection* (1982) can very well describe the lives of gender deviants like Jess Goldberg: “There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.”⁴⁹ Kristeva proceeds to explain that the abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I can name or imagine; what is an object is not my correlative and has only one quality of the object, that of being opposed to “I”. In other words, one could say that the abject is what goes against my view of the world, being closely related to the most repressed aspects of my being. Each of us has something that we must repress; insofar as it comes out, it is a transgression, it goes against the prescribed “I”. Abjection is part of the self, it is the part of me that is not socialized and I need it since it reminds me of what I am, “abject and abjection are my safe-guards. The primers of my culture.”⁵⁰ For not fitting in the cultural intelligibility of the gender binary, transgenders are often forced into becoming “abjected bodies”, that is to say, ‘neither subject or object’, therefore seen as individuals and bodies that “do not matter” for society. As gender theorist Judith Butler explains:

How, then, can one think through the matter of bodies as a kind of materialization governed by regulatory norms in order to ascertain the workings of heterosexual hegemony in the formation of what qualifies as a viable body? How does the materialization of the norm in bodily formation produce a domain of abjected bodies, a field of deformation, which, in failing to qualify as the fully human, fortifies those regulatory norms? What challenge does that excluded and abjected realm produce to a symbolic hegemony that might force a radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as ‘life’, lives that worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving?⁵¹

⁴⁸ A few moving-pictures have also featured the violence suffered by gender-benders and homosexuals and their forced abjection/silence, for example: *Boys don't Cry* (1999) portraying the rape and eventual murder of the transgender Brandon Teena; *If these Walls Could Talk 2* (2000) which portrays pre-Stonewall and post-Stonewall couples in three different decades; the Brazilian film *Vera* (1987), based on the distressing autobiographical book *A Queda para o Alto*, by FTM Herzer.

⁴⁹ KRISTEVA, J. (1982). p.1

⁵⁰ Ibid p. 2

⁵¹ BUTLER, J. (1999). p. 243

The abjected body cannot operate in society (be operative) and therefore must be excluded. It is a threat for it disturbs the norm, and being a threat to ideology as well as to the institutions it must be destroyed or segregated. Regarding abjection and discourse, Butler explains that there are discourse means by which the heterosexual imperative enables certain sexed identifications and forecloses and disavows others. For her, this exclusionary heterosexual matrix requires, along with the formation of its subjects, the simultaneous production of a domain of abjected beings. These, who are not yet subjects, are fundamental as “negative mirrors” since they form the constitutive outside of the domain of the subject:

The abject designates [...] those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but those whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject’s domain; it will constitute the site of the dreaded identification against which – and by virtue of which – the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claims to autonomy and to life. In this sense, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, and objected outside, which is, after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding and repudiation.⁵²

For gender outlaws and homosexuals living in the extremely conservative pre-Stonewall times, invisibility was the most desired state, being both a challenge and a strategy for survival⁵³. As the novel develops, the readers follow her process of having her emotions and body turned into “stone”, both as a reaction to physical and emotional harassment and as a strategy of self-protection. Extreme fear and lack of self-understanding will prompt in her self the feelings of loneliness, shame and paranoia that will lead to her urge to “shut down”. But the “stone armor” which protects also isolates – a cruel paradox. The permanent fear and shame that accompany Jess not only create a chronic state of paranoia, dysphoria and non-acceptance, but also the feeling of living in

⁵² Ibid p.237

⁵³ What does not seem to have changed much in many places in the world where young gender-benders and homosexuals are forced to quit school and are often expelled from their homes; as a consequence, they are pushed into a life of under-paid jobs, homelessness, prostitution and/or crime.

the razor's edge – on the thin line that divides sanity and madness. The world frequently highlights her otherness, telling her that she is a “freak” – or mentally unhealthy. Chapter two begins with Jess saying:

I didn't want to be different. I longed to be everything grownups wanted, so they would love me. I followed all their rules, tried my best to please. But there was something else about me that made them knit their eyebrows and frown. No one ever offered me a name for what was wrong with me. That's what made me afraid it was really bad. I only came to recognize its melody through its constant refrain: “Is that a boy or a girl?” (p.13)

As Jay Prosser points out in his essay “No Place Like Home: Transgender and Trans-Genre in Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*”, “Jess's childhood and early life is steeped in an almost insufferable shame: the character repeatedly claims to be out of touch with her feelings, unable to express them, yet she frequently articulates feeling shame. Shame, as a consequence of physical and emotional abuse, will certainly shape one's identity, forever marking one's relationship with the world.⁵⁴

Despised from childhood, Jess's life journey becomes one of a constant search for identity, home, family (in whatever form it could be) and community. Jess's feelings of non-acceptance and shame have been built from early childhood. Her first memories are about her mother refusing to take care of her; yet, allowing Native-American neighbors to take care of the baby. Jess becomes rather attached to those “surrogate mothers”, but suffers the traumatic experience of being pulled away from a warm and nurturing environment when her parents feel uncomfortable as they realize their daughter is starting to pronounce words they cannot understand. Communication problems will not lie only in language anymore; lack of understanding will move much further when the girl grows to be a contrast to her feminine little sister. While Jess's sister

⁵⁴ PROSSER, J. (1998), p.179-180

will dream about flowered skirts and cute girly shoes, Jess will feel rather at home in her jeans. She will also dream about a

Roy Roger's cowboy outfit. As she describes, she could never see a girl "like her" among the people she knew, at school, on TV nor in any Sears catalogue. Not only Jess's personal expression of gender will mark the difference in her childhood: the Goldbergs are the only Jewish family in the working class neighborhood they live in, often being object of curiosity, biased attitudes, and mockery. At school, non-Jewish children refuse to play with the Jewish. Shame for being non-Christian involves the whole family, whose Shabbat candles must be hidden behind curtains, in an attempt to avoid mockery and other attacks. "Everyone in my family knew about shame" (p.19), Jess acknowledges. As Prosser observes:

While gendered contradiction has played a key role in making visible queer pride, Feinberg's stone butch filters this contradiction through shame, conveying it as acute discomfort, an affect to be resolved. Shame is a profound grappling with the self's location in the world – the feeling of being out of a place, of not being at home in a given situation, combined with the desire to be at home. "No other affect", writes psychologist of shame Gershen Kaufman, "is more central to identity formation [...] Answers to the questions, 'Who am I?' and 'Where do I belong?' are forged in the crucible of shame". At the root in gender identity disorder is a shame that has rightly been described as "existencial": gender dysphoric shame develops not from what one does but from what one is.⁵⁵

Besides religion, Jess's gender expression will add up to the family's shame. As Jess becomes older, her "tomboy" posture will not pass unnoticed to her parents' embarrassment; they will often hear the question, "boy or girl?" when other people cannot "understand" the child's gender expression. The girl seems to prefer to spend her time alone or with animals, which will not judge *who* she is or feel urged to classify *what* she is. Nature seems to be in good terms with diversity. In a common reaction to shame,

⁵⁵ Ibid, p.179.

the little girl seeks isolation: “Nature held me close and seemed to find no fault with me” (p.17).

An event in her childhood will foreshadow the extreme violence she will have to go through in her childhood and adolescence: a group of boys feeling puzzled by that girl with boyish attitudes trap her one day in a basement and strip her from her clothes. She is later discovered naked. Despite her deep humiliation and fear, the girl receives no support from her parents who actually feel ashamed. Shame, therefore, is the feeling that will start to encompass the construction of Jess’s personality: shame for being poor, non-Christian and not feminine. Shame will thus overlap with her feelings of otherness and loneliness. Besides, very early the protagonist will understand that shame and violence (both physical and emotional) will equate in her life journey. Jess repeatedly claims to be out of touch with her feelings, being unable to express them. Yet, she frequently articulates feeling shame.

Children and adult single her out for her early different gender-expression and that will lead her parents to eventually having her committed to a mental institution at the age of eleven, followed by years of psychological therapy. Her admittance is triggered by a young Jess’s attempt to understand her gendered identity. Not recognizing herself in the image of the females around her or in the media, Jess takes advantage of being home alone to dress up in one of her father’s shirts and tie. The image she sees in the mirror, a girl cross-dressing in her father’s suit, is not of a man but of an “uncatalogued” woman⁵⁶. What Jess sees reflected is the image of the transgendered woman she feels she would become: neither a man, nor a feminine woman, but someone else on the border or, rather, crossing and transgressing any traditional gender classification:

⁵⁶ Ibid, p.185.

I put on the suit coat and looked in the mirror. A sound came from my throat, sort of a gasp. I liked the girl looking back at me. [...] I stared in the big mirror over my mother's dresser, trying to see far in the future when the clothing would fit. To catch a glimpse of the woman I would become. (p.20)

The sensation of being “right” is suddenly interrupted by the unexpected arrival of her parents, while Jess was crossdressing. Next day they quietly drive their daughter to a mental home. The experience of being abandoned by her parents will be one of the most dramatic and painful experiences in the protagonist's life journey. In the hospital, among mentally sick adults, Jess feels afraid and overwhelmed by a situation she cannot quite understand. At eleven years old, Jess realizes that life will not be easy for her and that protection is not an item she can count on in her life. As an outcome of the traumatic experience in the mental institution, she understands she is alone. Later, Jess's parents will also enroll her at a “charm school”, what rather than making her more “feminine” (and therefore more “appropriate”), will enhance in her the sentiment of not fitting. She seems to be unique – what is both isolating and frightening.

As Jess becomes an adolescent, she will have to overcome more physical and emotional abuse. She once again suffers in consequence of expressing her gender in a way that challenges the norm, which often provokes uneasiness, not rarely attracting hostility. As certainly foreshadowed from her childhood, Jess is gang-raped by members of the high-school football team, learning the consequences of those who fail to fulfill society's norms. The mocking group of young men takes pride in showing their power by violating the school “lesbo” in the football field. They start by mocking Jess, calling her by the derogatory words “Jezzie” and “Lezzie”, in reference both to her name, Jess, and her sexual orientation. In a shocking passage of the novel, Jess describes what she hears and feels while she is being raped:

Another boy was huffing and puffing on top of me. I recognized him – Jeffrey Darling, an arrogant bully. Jeffrey grabbed my hair and yanked it back so hard I gasped. He wanted me to pay attention to the rape. He fucked me harder. “You dirty Kike, bitch, you fucking bulldagger.” All my crimes were listed. I was guilty as charged.

Is this how men and women have sex? I knew this wasn’t love; this was more like making hate. (p.41)

For Jess, different levels of prejudice overlap. During the rape, much of her oppressed identity comes forward: lesbian, Jewish, female, masculine, when her “shameful” features are called aloud: “lezzie”, “dirty kike”, “bitch”, “bulldagger”. She is guilty of having transgressed the normative as far as heterosexism, religion, sex and gender expressions are concerned. The sexual violence against Jess also serves to reinscribe her shame for containing in her self so many levels of otherness.

Jess’s rape is above all a display of the power of men. The boy’s words clearly trace a limit to what males can do and female cannot, for Jess’s masculine gender expression is what triggers the abuse. It reveals that males are often threatened by masculinity not exercised by biological men. The pervading idea is that masculinity is a feature which only males can possess. In the novel, sexual violence and other forms of physical violence are clearly exercised by men. First, it is exercised by the neighborhood kids, then by the high school bullies, and eventually by policemen who will often abuse Jess and her friends in the bars and in the streets. Through humiliation, they set clear borders between those who hold the power – male, white, Christian and heterosexual – and those who cannot fit in one or more of these categories – female, non-white, non-Christian, gays, lesbians, transgenders, etc. Found out by the football coach, Jess is scolded for what happened, despite the visible violence she has just suffered (“Get out of here, you little whore!!”, p.41). Jess foresees that there is not much left for her at school than more shame and violence. Moreover, she knows that neither support nor protection

can be expected from her family. Thus, she decides to quit school and run away from home. Her main issues will be both to figure out why she causes so much hostility and how she can survive. Isolation, however, does not seem to be the answer. Maybe finding a community of equals is.

As far as the idea of community is concerned, I believe that it is important to discuss the ones Jess participates in. We can see Jess's journey as one of search for identity and home. The metaphor of "home" can be easily interpreted as the mythical space of "acceptance", "identification", "protection", "stability" and "community". Jess's journey can be read as a search for home, both in a physical and metaphorical sense. She needs a physical home as much as she needs a subjective/identity home. As a child, Jess finds it difficult to identify with the other children in the neighborhood, having her gender ambiguity constantly pointed out. Her parents cannot understand the masculine traits in their daughter (especially when contrasted to their other feminine daughter), feeling embarrassed by Jess's "inadequacy". In the school corridors, her masculinity will provoke mockery from classmates: " 'Is that animal, mineral, or vegetable?' I didn't fit in any of the categories" (p.24). Therefore, the protagonist's first communities – family, neighborhood and school – become merely locations where she seems to be part of; nonetheless, they are hardly spaces of either acceptance or identification. Displaced from her original communities, she struggles to settle down, to have a regular ceiling above her and a steady job. Day after day she fights against the lack of future prospects; the forced abjection has transformed her in a wandering being, constantly moving from job to job and place to place.

Even her own body cannot be her home – in the sense that the world frequently defines her as dysphoric and "wrong", provoking in her a profound feeling of shame and social displacement. Unlike the transsexuals who often need to surgically re-assign their

bodies since they feel they were born in the wrong sex/body, Jess does not share these feelings, “I don’t feel like a man trapped in a woman’s body. I just feel trapped” (p.158-159). According to Prosser, “the stone butch experiences her female body as that which is most *unheimlich* in herself”⁵⁷. Also in his words, those incidents “will centralize and subjugate Jess’s body, exacerbating her shame over its abjection and her identificatory distance from it”⁵⁸.

When Jess learns about the existence of bars where people like her can go, she feels both eager and anxious – she might finally meet her own kind. Her introduction to the bar scene in Buffalo and Niagara Falls will be the milestone to mark the first steps towards the understanding of her identity – defined as a “he-she”, “masculine woman”, “butch”, “stone butch”. There she will feel relieved at discovering that there are other females and males who do not conform to the traditional definitions of what a boy or a girl must be. The bar scene will also become the place for forming the bonds with other gender-benders (drag queens, transsexuals, cross-dressers) as well as acquiring education from the older bar-goers. Older butches will somehow not only substitute for biological parents and family, but also contribute to her sexual education and acquisition of strategies for survival. Instead of blood relatives, a chosen “family” of friends starts to form. Those gay and lesbian bars become the territory for both homoerotic encounters and identification for homosexuals and gender deviants. The bars and goers become Jess’s new community; nevertheless, this is a marginalized community, therefore its members are an easy target for violence.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p.178

⁵⁸ Ibid, p.180.

Bruno Souza Leal points out that the idea of “community” implies in a space for sociability, for participation in the world, and for the creation of networks of affective and erotic relationships⁵⁹. In his opinion, gay and lesbian bars are somehow marked geographically and thus made visible through graphic, sound or even body signs. Hence, even if one can recognize those places as a kind of refuge, or as “home” in the tapestry of the city, the bars are marked by the transgression of the identities and practices of the goers. As a result, belonging to this community becomes provisory, limited and unstable⁶⁰. For Leal, the expression “community” may contradictorily condense not only the promise of encounters, home, but also the experience of isolation, fragmentation and otherness of homoerotic subjects⁶¹. He cites Julia Kristeva when she observes that the term “community” implies in a feeling of belonging, being one among “us”. However, she notes the possibility of a “paradoxical community”, made of strangers in themselves, of unstable and fragile identities. Despite being paradoxical, this community would be a reality in a world marked by transitory and cosmopolitan features⁶².

The marginalized community of those gay and lesbian bars can be easily defined as a “ghetto”. According to the *Merrian-Webster* dictionary, the word “ghetto” is defined as “a quarter of a city in which members of a minority group live especially because of social, legal, or economic pressure”; “an isolated group”; a situation that resembles a ghetto especially conveys the idea of “inferior status or limiting opportunity”⁶³. For sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, the ghetto phenomenon can be at the same time territorial and social, blending the *physical* proximity/distance with the *moral* proximity/distance⁶⁴. Bauman explains there are two kinds of ghettos: the voluntary and the real. The fundamental

⁵⁹ LEAL, B. S. (1996), p.127.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p.126.

⁶¹ Ibid, p.127.

⁶² Ibid, p.122.

⁶³ *Merrian-Webster on line* at www.m-w.com

⁶⁴ BAUMAN, Z. (2003), p.106.

difference between the two is that the former allows the freely coming and going of its individuals and aims at preventing the entrance of strangers. Voluntary ghettos serve the cause of freedom. On the other hand, it is not safe to leave the real ghettos – leaving means hostilization. Real ghettos imply in the negation of freedom. People confined in ghettos live in prison, often surrounded by invisible walls. Those people help each other to bear the difficulties of a precarious life. However, the life in the ghetto does not quite constitute a community. The idea of “belonging to community” is associated with feelings of comfort, protection, security. Belonging to a ghetto, nevertheless, means sharing stigmas and humiliation. For Bauman, the ghetto is not the location for communitarian feelings, but rather a laboratory of social disintegration, atomization and anomia. In short, a ghetto means the impossibility of a community and reveals a society of exclusion.

Being part of the gay/lesbian bar scene is the closer Jess can get, then, to some sense of acceptance, protection, family, home, and apparent community. The pre-Stonewall bar scene of the early 1960s meant “ghetto”: homosexuals and gender-benders were restricted to a very delimited area of certain bars, which were usually run by the Mafia and had their business conditioned by bribes offered to the police in order to continue open. Women and men were supposed to be wearing, at least, three pieces of “right” clothing – what meant that cross-dressing would entitle them to be arrested⁶⁵. The violent encounters with one more powerful institution, the police, will serve to accelerate Jess’s process of toughening up – or stoning – just as it will do to many of her peers. The recurrent bullying and bashing by this fierce representative of the power of male hetero-

⁶⁵ There are explicit references to the Stonewall event in SBB and to its recurrent effects in the lives of gays, lesbians and transgenders. More historical information regarding the scenario before and after the Stonewall riots in the United States can be found in Martin Duberman, *Stonewall* (1994), and in Eliane Borges Berutti, *The Stonewall Legacy* (1999) and “Voz, Olhar e Experiência Gay: Resistência à Opressão” (2002).

normative power – the police – will be transforming the lives of those in the “ghetto”. That will only add more force to their moving towards abjection, along with the force of previous and parallel excluding forces of other institutions: family, school, religion, mental/medical organizations. The abjection forced by the power of these mainstream institutions will shape the life possibilities of those who “dare” to deviate from their norms. What will be left for those? Silence, powerlessness, isolation, abjection, suicide/death, madness. Throughout Jess’s journey in the novel, she will be faced with all these “possibilities” and will often see the prospects of her future mirrored in the lives of her peers. There is not much hope for acceptance then. The first and only apparent choice is to toughen up. Her future seems to lead her towards abjection. What Jess foresees is bashing leading to death, depression leading to either suicide or madness, prostitution, poverty, isolation from the family – possibilities which are portrayed by the lives of different characters Jess runs into during the narrative.

The bars will also be the location where she will feel freer to exercise her sexual orientation, learning about the “butch” and “femme” dynamics. She realizes she is a “butch”, a (usually) lesbian female whose gender expression is masculine, feeling more comfortable with masculine gender codes, styles, or identities. Jess feels sexually attracted to the “femmes”, that is, lesbians of feminine gender expression. Femmes will not only help Jess define her sexual desire, but will also be fundamental to add one more piece to the understanding of Jess’s identity. In *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam provides a thorough historical and theoretical view on the expression of masculinity in females, discussing common beliefs and language. Halberstam explains that many social histories of lesbianism have shown that the butch-femme dynamics was often and fiercely rejected among lesbian circles after the rise of feminism in the 1970s. At that time, that dynamics

was seen as a “gross mimicry of heterosexuality”, the butch image rejected as a “repulsive stereotype” of the male image/power they fought against. The feminists of the time “took aim at butch-femme as a particularly form of cultural imitation“, seeing this dynamics, “like slavish copy of heterossexual roles”⁶⁶. Halberstam also argues that the boundaries white feminists confine themselves to in describing sexuality “are based in white-rooted interpretations of dominance, submission and, power-exchange etc”⁶⁷. She urges to the acknowledgement of the important role of female masculinity in the history of lesbianism for the masculine woman has made lesbianism “visible and legible as some of confluence of gender disturbance and sexual orientation”⁶⁸. Halberstam challenges the view of the

butch and femme dynamics as hetero-normative, for this interpretation would actually be a paradox in face of the theories that supported gender as a social construct. If gender is socially constructed, it cannot be conditioned to biological sex and to the traditional, hetero-normative binary division. She quotes Rita Laporte on the matter:

The qualities of femininity and masculinity are distributed in varying proportions in all Lesbians [...] A butch is simply a lesbian who finds herself attracted to and complemented by a lesbian more feminine than she, whether this butch be very or only slightly more masculine than feminine. Fortunately, for all of us, there are all kinds of us. [...] Decades before Judith Butler’s refusal of the notion that lesbian genders imitate heterosexual originals, Laporte wittily rejects the imitation hypothesis as simply too easy: “It would indeed simplify matters if butch/femme were no more than an imitation of male and female. Then we could dispense those two traits as nothing more than cultural convention, the scientific principle of parsimony, that the simplest theory is the best, will seldom work where human nature is concerned”.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Halberstam, J. (1998).p.121

⁶⁷ Ibid, p.122

⁶⁸ Ibid, p.119

⁶⁹ Ibid, p.122

For Halbertstam and Laporte, to believe in the dynamics butch-femme as a mere emulation of heteronormativity is to oversimplify the matter; it implies in an essentialist view of gender, in which certain characteristics, attitudes and behaviour have been traditionally and exclusively attributed to biological males while others are expected from biological females. Comparatively, what was once considered essentially and exclusively for either males or females has changed over the centuries – clothes, hair style, jobs, assertiveness, school education, etc. That can prove that those “essential” attributes are clearly in transformation and, therefore, constructed. The common statements that butches are imitations of men and that a butch-femme couple is a tentative to reproduce the heterosexual couple can be undermined when we challenge the notion that certain characteristics, attitudes, behavior are actually essential to either one gender or the other.

In reference to the butch identity in SBB, a femme called Edna explains to Jess how she sees butches:

I don't think femmes ever see butches as one big group. After a while you see how many different ways there are for butches to be. You see them defiant, you see them change, you watch them harden up or be destroyed. Soft ones and bitter ones and troubled ones. You and Rocco were granite butches who couldn't soften your edges. It wasn't in your nature. (p.213-214)

Although Edna mentions nature, her point of view is very much related to Simone de Beauvoir's vision on the importance of lived experience, as it describes the “butchness” as a category that alters across time and bodies. For Beauvoir, “every concrete human being is always in a specific situation”⁷⁰, or in another version of the same statement in English, “the fact is that every human being is always a singular, separate individual”⁷¹. I believe it is reasonable to assume that Edna understands that

⁷⁰ Apud MOI, T. (1999). p.8

⁷¹ Apud MOI, T. (1999). p.8. See footnote.

generalizations will not translate the complexity of the subjectivity of those people she has come across. Edna's words humanize the often abjected masculine women.

As far as the stone butch is concerned, Halberstam points out that in SBB (and in other books and films) the degrees of butchness are measured either in terms of hardness and softness or in terms of permeability:

The hard butch or stone butch [...] has a masculine 'nature' as opposed, one presumes, to a masculine style or exterior. The soft butch is a dyke with butch tendencies who has not completely masculinized her sexuality; then there are the 'granite' butches, the stones who will not melt and are impenetrable. The stone butch [...] seems to provoke unwarranted outrage not only from a gender-conformist society that cannot comprehend stone butch gender or stone butch desire but also within the dyke subculture, where the stone butch tends to be as frigid, dysphoric, misogynist, repressed, or simply pretranssexual. [...] The stone butch complicates immensely the imitation hypothesis – or the idea that butches are bad copies of men [...] one difference between butches and men: butches, even though they took the active or aggressive role sexually, aimed solely – unlike men – to please their partners sexually rather than please themselves. This emphasis on the pleasure of the femme was embodied within the stone butch, the partner "who does all the doin' and does not ever allow her partner to reciprocate in kind".⁷²

The "stone" armor may be seen as a form of disassociation with one's self/body, since it causes the butch so much trouble. In SBB, Jess's hardening up and consequent shutting up to being touched by partners is narrated in various parts, although she suffers and dreams of the right femme whom she will be able to trust, giving herself the possibility of softening a little. Her sexual interactions are not described as unpleasant; nonetheless, Jess craves for achieving some level of trust that will make her stone melt. More than simply a sexual desire, we can see that as revealing a much more complex necessity to melt her whole emotional stone and, thus, feel less defensive and more accepted.

⁷² Halberstam, J. (1998), pp.124-125.

For Halberstam, stone butches cannot simply switch into having a “vagina”, therefore engaging into sexual passive surrender while in the rest of their time they are performing as male. She questions: “why should we necessarily expect butches suddenly to access some perfect and pleasurable femaleness when everywhere else in their social existence they are denied access to an unproblematic feminine subjectivity?”⁷³ Halberstam also comments on the fact that in SBB, as well as in other narratives alike, the stone butch is infused in melancholy⁷⁴. Their sexual attitude is shown as a response to social, emotional and physical abuse rather than as a re-writing of sexuality. Interestingly enough, against all the assumptions raised by the 1970s feminism, which foresaw that the empowerment of women in society would discontinue the existence of the butches and the femme-butich dynamics, what we can see now is that the butch-femme model is still strongly present in lesbian culture. They often emphasize the transgressive and “queer” nature of their anti-normative nature cross-identifications. Butches and femmes, of either biological sex, now seem to highlight theories that support the idea that gender expression does not match sex or sexual orientation. In other words, there is masculinity and femininity that can be expressed in infinite hues and degrees, in any sex/body. Differently from the painful position of pariahs, butches started to be seen as an attempt to create direct access to masculinity from within a female embodiment. Now there are communities and transgender legitimacy, as long one acknowledges this too, both to facilitate and validate their gender expression as well as sexual practices. In short, butch masculinity and butch-

⁷³ Ibid, p.125.

⁷⁴ Probably the most classical example is Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, also mentioned by Halberstam.

femme dynamics are more and more visible as seen as queerly disruptive, managing to thrive within a queer lesbian community⁷⁵.

The community represented by the gay-lesbian bar scene, however, does not represent protection for neither Jess's deviant gender expression nor sexual orientation, her life being often at stake. Furthermore, the violence suffered will only feed her feeling of shame. The police constantly raids the bars; in one of these occasions, Jess is arrested and again violently raped by the policemen. In a sad irony, the event occurs at a special night when the transgender bar-goers celebrate their identities in a musical performance. Jess is the M.C., dressed in her first suit, specially bought for the occasion. Once again, her shame is reinforced through mockery, emotional and physical violence. Quoting Prosser:

Similarly, on both subsequent occasions when she is raped, first by schoolboys and then by the police, and when men urinate on her bed in the psychiatric ward, the sexual violence against Jess is both caused by and reinforces her difference, her "unnaturalness". These incidents centralize and subjugate Jess's body, exacerbating her shame over its abjection and her identificatory distance from it.⁷⁶

Jess's body is the main cause for her feeling of social unbelonging. Jess craves for invisibility – the invisibility possessed by those who can easily fit in a binary gender category. She struggles to understand her own identity since she can neither fit within the traditional borders of what a female is supposed to be nor feels she is a man, despite her masculinity. As a high-school drop-out and "he-she" (term commonly used then to refer to masculine women), only blue-collar jobs are left for her. Becoming an adult as a blue-collar lesbian masculine woman will prove to be more than a fair challenge to Jess for adulthood only highlights her differences in a society not prepared to tolerate, respect

⁷⁵ It is easy to find queer representatives, books, magazines and websites that glamourize and celebrate both the butch and the femme personae, as well as their sexual dynamics. Some examples are the queer performers and writers Susie Bright, Tristan Taormino and Kate Bornstein.

⁷⁶ PROSSER, J. (1998), p. 180.

nor appreciate diversity. In the factories, her non-normative gender expression would not stand out so much, since they are locations where masculinity prevails and butches are commonly accepted as employees. This young Jess wishes to fit in normativity; she feels urged to choose between the two genders offered. In her experience until then, living in ambiguity will eventually lead her to death. In an attempt to survive, Jess chooses locations where she believes her gender expression can be less visible, like the factories and the ghetto.

The possibility of engagement in a political gay-lesbian community also shows to be inadequate for Jess in those early 1970s. The lesbian political activism of that time does not seem to be the location of either identification or acceptance for a masculine woman like Jess. While the transgendered texture of gay-lesbian bars housed and valued the gendered contradiction and bodily shame in the figure of the stone butch, the new lesbian-feminist ideology seems to have no place for the “non-woman-identified-woman”⁷⁷. For the lesbian feminists, the masculinized features of a butch dislocated her from the category “woman”. She does not identify with the women’s lib poster that her politically engaged girlfriend Theresa sticks to the wall and which portrays two naked feminine women embracing. The poster bears the legend “Sisterhood – Make it Real” (p. 183). Jess looks at the poster and feels embarrassed, not being able to see herself in the image of two feminine women, with all their femininity enhanced by their nudity and long hair. It is important to point out here how Jess’s transgressive gender expression as a butch becomes a reason for prejudice even among her supposed peers – other lesbians. Butch and femmes are looked down in the political organizations in Theresa’s circles and not welcome in their meetings. Thus, it seems interesting to point out that the one who transgresses the borders of gender and biological sex can be doomed to even more

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 182.

oppression and abjection than those who express same-sex desire but still express their gender normatively. Jess claims she cannot feel she can be part of the women's movement because she is a butch. On the other hand, Theresa insists that, as a butch, Jess is a woman; therefore, Jess would also benefit from women's liberation. Jess reacts by insisting on her transgendered difference: "No, I'm not, I yelled back at her. I'm a he-she. That's different" (p.147).

The feeling of social entrapment reinforced by serious economical crises in the country will lead Jess to decide to pass as a man. "Passing" is a term used to describe the attempt to look like the gender opposite to the biological sex. It is an attempt to disrupt gender ambiguity and look normative. For Jess, passing as a man includes going through a radical mastectomy, testosterone shots and heavy physical workout. The Vietnam War brings about great unemployment, what makes even more difficult for Jess to get a job. By transforming her body, she hopes both to get a job and to get rid of the physical abuse caused by her masculine expression. Jess feels at that moment this is her only chance of survival, what will radically crash with the new feminist Theresa. Passing as a man will eventually lead to their separation and contribute once more to Jess's feeling of isolation. Factory work also enhances her paranoia to be discovered as a "fake" due to the fragile features of her invisibility, since she has a past as a woman. But, mainly and foremost, trying to fit in the male gender will only stress her identity confusion and her feeling of isolation.

Her passing as a man is so successful that Jess no longer sees "me looking back at me" in the mirror. What Jess sees is the image of a man, which hardly reflects the complexity of her transgender identity. Not finding her identity in an all-male figure, she ceases taking testosterone injections. Both her confusion and eagerness to understand her identity is shown when Jess narrates one more mirror scene:

I drew one cc of hormones into a syringe, lifted it above my naked thigh – and then paused. My arm felt restrained by an unseen hand. No matter how I tried I could not sink that needle into my quadriceps as I'd done hundreds of times before. I stood up and looked in the bathroom mirror. The depth of sadness in my eyes frightened me. I lathered my morning beard stubble, scraped it clean with a razor, and splashed cold water on my face. The stubble still felt rough. As much as I loved my beard as part of my body, I felt trapped behind it. What I saw reflected in the mirror was not a man, but I couldn't recognize the he-she. My face no longer revealed the contrasts of my gender. I could see my passing self, but even I could no longer see the more complicated me beneath my surface [...] I hadn't just believed that passing would hide me. I hoped that it would allow me to express part of myself that didn't seem to be a woman. I didn't get to explore being a he-she though. I simply became a he – a man without a past.

Who was I now – woman or man? [...] What if the real me could emerge, changed by the journey? Who would I be? (pp.221-222)

This moment in the narrative brings up important issues concerning Jess's identity. In a retrospect, we can see that Jess, on one hand, cannot identify with feminine women; on the other hand, she does not feel she is a man. However, she can see herself reflected in the image of the masculine women she finds in the bars and factories. Prosser discusses the choices posed before Jess: looking normative versus looking transgressive. From his point of view, Jess is not a transsexual, i.e., somebody who feels his/her biological sex in disagreement with his/her psychological gender. Despite being gender deviants, transsexuals do not aim at challenging the gender binary; rather, they hope to fit in the gender category opposite to which they were born⁷⁸. According to Prosser, Jess's subjectivity is still identified as transgender. Hence her next decision to make it visible, holding off from the transsexual identity, which would locate her on the other side of the

⁷⁸ Ibid, pp.178-179

gender binary (male). She feels her “real me” can only emerge in the transition: “Jess ends up passing neither as man nor woman *and* being read as both. She makes the fantastic transformation, the intermediate space of crossing, her lived reality.”⁷⁹

Passing might bring her the feeling of being at home in her body, but assimilating as man also means the loss of a community Jess can really feel not foreign to. Yet, her transgender embodiment can hardly provide her with a heaven. It is time to move on once again and search for some stability. Jess moves to New York City, gets a job, and meets Ruth. This character will be fundamental in Jess’s self-acceptance, empowerment and awareness of her transgender identity, even if this is not named as such yet. Ruth is her drag-queen neighbor and can be interpreted as mirror image to Jess. Ruth, contrastively, does not choose silence, isolation or invisibility, her tall figure becoming even more noticeable by long red hair: “The color of my hair is my declaration to the world that I’m not hiding. It’s a hard to color to stand behind, but I do it to celebrate my life and my decisions “ (p.254). Her house is a constant coming and going of other drag queens who cheerfully talk, sew together and cook, sharing their day-by-day victories and defeats in communion. Ruth’s open, bold attitude as well as her apparent easiness to live in an ambiguous body intrigues Jess, who urges Ruth to help herself understand her own identity. This understanding will prove to be a process of mutual learning. In a moving dialogue, Jess asks Ruth:

“Do you know if I’m man or a woman?”

“No”, Ruth said. That’s why I know so much about you. “

I sighed. “Did you think I was a man when you first met me? “

She nodded. “Yes, I first thought you were a straight man. Then I thought you were gay. It’s been a shock for me to realize that even I make assumptions about sex and gender that aren’t true. I thought I was liberated from all of that.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p.187

I smiled. “I didn’t want you to think I was a man. I wanted you to see how much more complicated I am. I wanted you to like what you saw.” (p.254)

The dialogue meaningfully reveals Jess’s confusion about her own identity. Jess hopes Ruth can define her ambiguity by finally labeling her in one of the two genders, male or female. Ruth, however, shares the same ambiguity; that is why she can understand so much about Jess’s internal debate. Ruth’s assumptions on Jess’s identity reveal her own difficulty to be free from heteronormativity. Yet, the acknowledgment of her own internalized transphobia, added to her own transgressive expression bring some comfort to Jess, who craves for understanding and acceptance. Ruth shows Jess that the answer to their troublesome identity can lie beyond the norms of the binary. Later Jess confesses to Ruth:

I sighed. When I was growing up, I believed I was gonna do something really important with my life, like explore the universe or cure diseases. I never thought I’d spend so much time of my life fighting over which bathroom I could use. (p.254-255)

Jess’s words reveal the cruelty of the process of dehumanization and abjection she has gone through. Her transgressive gender expression has reduced her choices in life to a minimum and even her most basic biological needs and human rights are jeopardized for even public bathrooms are designed according to the gender binary. The realization of this injustice and unfair battle starts to build up inside her like a ticking bomb.

Three important events will profoundly mark Jess’s journey from abjection, silence, and identity confusion towards visibility, voicing and self-awareness. First, Jess is violently bashed by a gang of young men in the subway, having her jaw broken. She has her jaw clamped at the hospital, what prevents her from speaking for days. The image

can be metaphorically interpreted as the epitome of her voiceless life so far. Likewise, this image may foreshadow what her powerlessness might bring – her beating up by a new generation of men and her forced silence. Second, Jess and Ruth agree on a trip together. Ruth will visit the family she left and she insists that Jess visits Buffalo, where she grew up and started her life as a young butch. Another common allegory, their actual journey by car back home will denote the coming to terms with their own past and the revision of life possibilities, represented by people from the past. Some have died, others have simply disappeared, some chose to hide anonymously and silenced in the countryside; Butch Al, Jess's first role model, is committed to a mental institution.

The third event I want to focus on lies in the last chapter of SBB. It begins with Jess climbing up the stairs of the subway and having her attention drawn by the noise of a gay-lesbian demonstration. From the underground, in her usual lonely walk, Jess moves upwards, in direction of those voices that cried out crude life testimonials of suffering and abuse. Different from Jess, their voices and emotions are not silenced. They stand on a public stage, speak on a microphone to a crowd of attentive listeners, urging others to participate. Deeply moved and shaken by those explicit and loud testimonials, Jess feels compelled to try finally and courageously to voice her painful journey as well as to give a name to her identity as a moving realization of a now empowered community:

And suddenly I felt so sick to death of my own silence that I needed to speak too [...] my legs could hardly get me up on stage. I looked at the hundreds of faces staring at me. "I'm not a gay man". My own amplified voice startled me. "I'm a butch, a he-she. I don't know if the people who hate our guts call us that anymore. But that single epithet shaped my teenage years". (p.296)

The unexpected encounter between Jess and the more organized and politicized gay-lesbian community of the 1980s brings her hope. Differently from the lesbian feminists of the 1970s, the renovated community now seems to have political space for

transgender individuals. For Jess, life seems to be offering a future that points at brand-new directions and possibilities. Finally voicing her own life story, Jess acknowledges: “I know about getting hurt”, I said. “But I don’t have much experience talking about it. And I know about fighting back, but I mostly know how to do it alone. That’s a tough way to fight, cause I’m usually outnumbered and I usually lose” (p.296) Jess realizes, at last, that she is not alone, or rather, that she does not have to continue her struggle alone. She understands that a strong, organized community can be an alternative to abjected identities like her own:

“I don’t know what it would take to really change the world. But couldn’t we get together and try to figure that out? Couldn’t we be bigger? Isn’t there a way we could help fight each other’s battles so that we are not always alone?” (p.297)

The ending of *Stone Butch Blues* represents Jess’s return to the lesbian and gay community. As Prosser sees the scene: “Insofar as the figure of home stands for the concept community, *Stone Butch Blues* in its final pages suggests the importance of holding out for a community based on the specific differences of the transgender”⁸⁰. This renovated community does not resemble the ghetto represented by the gay-lesbian bars of years before, whose members, although supportive of each other were impregnated by shame and became easy targets of violence.

This new, political engaged, queer space where this more empowered community is located in liberal West Village, New York City, in the 1980s. Her taking the microphone at the lesbian rally clearly represents the end of years of silence. Jess’s realization of the power of belonging to a community makes her feel safe to come out in her transgendered identity. In place of trying to fit in normativity, Jess understands the

⁸⁰ Ibid p. 189.

power of assuming her queer identity. The narrative suggests that political engagement is the answer to defeat abjection.

Jess Goldberg's journey retells the life trajectory of her author, Leslie Feinberg. Both character and author evolved from feelings of shame and unbelonging that kept them in isolation to a now visible, empowered community. Feinberg's non-fictional books report the journeys of those individuals who bravely chose outing a transgender identity and fighting for acceptance. Other transgender individuals, on the other hand, will make different life choices. This is the case of the transgender protagonist in the novel *Middlesex*, Cal. His rather different life journey will be discussed in the next chapter.

☞ Chapter IV ☞

Cal – The Choice of Normativity

“I have to speak of things that, for a number of people, will be nothing but incredible nonsense because, in fact, they go beyond the limits of what is possible.”

Herculine Barbin

“Do we *truly* need a *true* sex?”, asks Michel Foucault in his introduction to *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memories of a Nineteenth Century French Hermaphrodite*. One would hardly disagree with the French philosopher when he stated that modern Western societies have answered affirmatively to this question. The reality of the body aligned with a clear definition of one’s sex/gender lies at the core of one’s identity. In the previous chapter I discussed Jess Goldberg’s transgender identity and her subsequent struggle to survive in a world that demands a clear definition between the borders of female and male. In this chapter, I examine Calliope/Cal Stephanides’s life choices in the novel *Middlesex* once the character realizes she/he cannot perfectly fit in the sex/gender binary. Moreover, I attempt to establish a dialogue between *Stone Butch Blues* and *Middlesex* by trying to observe where the journeys of their protagonists converge and diverge.

In the 21st century, Jeffrey Eugenides creates in *Middlesex* the story of a contemporary and realistic hermaphrodite, notwithstanding, in a story filled with fantastical imagination and mythology. Eugenides succeeds in narrating the story of a pseudo-hermaphrodite – or, in more politically correct language, an intersex – a XY person, raised as a girl. In the novel, the author manages to harmonically intertwine mythology, common belief, political activism and science regarding hermaphrodites.

The term “hermaphrodite” derives from “Hermaphroditus”, the son of Hermes and Aphrodite in Greek mythology. According to the myth, he was fused with a nymph so dazzled by his beauty that she joined with him, creating a being that possessed the physical traits of both sexes. Thus Hermaphroditus was, by modern terminology, a simultaneous hermaphrodite. In another version of the same myth, Hermes and Aphrodite’s child is such a perfect mix of both parents that they cannot agree on its sex, therefore naming it Hermaphroditos⁸¹. At least two other Greek hermaphrodite myths are referred to in Eugenides’ postmodern epic. One is Tiresias, who figures in the Oedipus cycle as well as in the *Odyssey*. Tiresias is a sequential hermaphrodite, having being changed from a man to a woman and back by the Gods. The other is described by Plato as having a perfect wholeness, triggering the jealousy of the Gods who split it apart in two beings. The two separate parts are doomed to spend their existence searching for their “other half”; the image has become a common romantic allegory used when we want to describe people’s search for a soul mate.

As novelist and psychologist Amy Bloom wrote, “monsters, freaks, prophets, border-crossers, portents of disaster – hermaphrodites have been disturbing people for a long time”⁸². Different terms such as “ambiguous genitals”, “doubtful sex”, “intersexed babies”, “male and female pseudohermaphroditism”, “true hermaphroditism” have been used to describe people whose genitalia does not match either their gene code or society’s often inflexible two-gendered categorization. As Bloom says, the question “what a beautiful baby! Boy or girl?” demands a clear answer; there are two possible answers, since “we do not know yet” is not acceptable. As she proceeds to say, in a culture that is still becoming used to children who are biracial and adults who are bisexual, the idea of

⁸¹ BLOOM, A. (2003), pp.108-109

⁸² Ibid. p.108

an undefined gender can be unbearable⁸³. The finding of “non-standard” genitalia (too large clitoris, too small penises, no apparent testes, etc) in a newborn has been treated as a medical and social emergency. In *Middlesex*, Calliope is found to have 5-alpha reductase deficiency, which seems to be not uncommon in the little village in Asia Minor where her grandparents came from. This deficiency causes female-appearing children to develop masculine features during puberty.

In *Mefistófeles e o Andrógino*, Mircea Eliade discusses the hermaphrodite both as the sacred image of the perfect being and as an aberration that should be either eliminated from society or corrected by science. He also explains that androgines and hermaphrodites have been portrayed in a few literary works, from ancient Greek mythology to Honoré de Balzac’s *Serafita*, Péladan’s *L’Androgyne* and other 19th century minor works⁸⁴. In the 20th century, one could find Michel Foucault’s presentation of the true story of a hermaphrodite of the 19th century in *Herculine Barbin – Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century French Hermaphrodite* (1980). Alexina Barbin, called Herculine by her family, is cited by Cal when referring to famous hermaphrodites⁸⁵. Barbin wrote her memoirs once her new identity was discovered and established. Alexina, like many other gender deviants, committed suicide. In the same testimonial tone, the characters Jess Goldberg in *Stone Butch Blues* and Cal Stephanides, in *Middlesex*, tell us their memoirs. Despite being works of fiction, they may be compared to Barbin’s report for they also narrate their protagonists’ life journeys as well as how their choices were deeply marked by their non-normative gender.

⁸³ Ibid. p.104

⁸⁴ ELIADE, M. (1999). pp.103-104

⁸⁵ EUGENIDES, J. (2003). p.19. Subsequent quotations from this novel refer to the same edition and will appear in the text by page number.

Eugenides believes that some people who hear that *Middlesex* is told by a hermaphrodite may reject the book. However, the author explains he used a hermaphrodite not to tell the story of a freak or someone unlike the rest of us but as a correlative for sexual confusion and the confusion of identity that everyone goes through in adolescence⁸⁶. In opposition to the way hermaphrodites have existed in literature previously – as mythical

creatures, mainly, like Tiresias – Eugenides explains he wanted to write about a real hermaphrodite and be accurate in regard to the medical facts. In his acknowledgements, in which he cites a few books and articles on gender and intersexuality, the author informs the readers about the medical research that was carried out (p.iv). The genetic condition found in Calliope happened to be a recessive mutation that only occurs in isolated communities where there has been a certain amount of inbreeding.

In *Middlesex*, the hermaphrodite also becomes a rich literary image. The dual nature of that androgynous being symbolically represents the novel itself in its various levels of hybridism – the gender blurring of its protagonist/narrator, the postmodern genre blurring of the narrative, the characteristic melting-pot of the United States with its “hyphenated” citizens (e.g. Greek-Americans), and finally, the portrayal of the essential hybridism of all societies – just now enhanced by globalization.

Being that the protagonist Calliope/Cal is born in America in a Greek family, one can affirm that a relevant level of hybridism in the novel concerns culture and nationality. As an adult in the beginning of the 21st century, Cal chooses to live as an expatriate in Germany. The author often makes clear the overlapping, mixing and clashing of the American way of life with the ancient heritage, habits, religiosity and idiosyncrasies of the immigrant family. Being a land of immigrants, America is absolutely hybrid. Moreover, as

⁸⁶ www.powells.com/authors/eugenides.com/.htmlm/authors/eugenides.html

an adult, Cal becomes a diplomat and lives in contemporary Berlin (a city once divided in two parts: “this once-divided city reminds me of myself. My struggle for unification, for *Einbeit*” (p.106). His perceptions of the environment and people surrounding him bring about images of the globalized and highly hybrid world we live in:

You used to be able to tell a person’s nationality by the face. Immigration ended that. Next you discerned nationality via footwear. Globalization ended that. Those Finnish seal puppies, those German flounders – you don’t see them much anymore. Only Nikes, on Basque, on Dutch, on Siberian feet. (p.40)

Cal’s description of the 21st century Europe reminds us of Stuart Hall, in *A Identidade Cultural na Pós-Modernidade*, where he claims that all modern nations are cultural hybrids. Hall explains that it is, therefore, very difficult to unify the national identity in one race only⁸⁷. That will reinforce even more the new, fragmented identity of the contemporary individual. According to Hall, this postmodern subject does possess neither a fixed nor a permanent identity; the identity is continuously transformed in relation to the forms through which we are represented in the cultural systems which surround us. For him, there are contradictory identities in all of us⁸⁸. From my point of view, Eugenides chose to represent this subject in the image of a postmodern hermaphrodite.

One could reasonably classify *Middlesex* as a typical postmodern work of fiction. In contrast to the realistic features of *Stone Butch Blues*, different literary genres overlap and mix in *Middlesex*: epic novel, family saga, coming of age tale, historiographic-metafiction, social realism, magical-realism and even scientific writing. Besides the blurring of literary genres, other postmodern characteristics can be observed in the novel: irony, parody, references to pop culture, the unreliable narrator, re-writing and intertextuality. It is

⁸⁷ HALL, S. (2003).p.62

⁸⁸ Ibid, pp.12-13

interesting to note here the differences between the two authors, Leslie Feinberg and Jeffrey Eugenides. While Feinberg, a working class transgender activist, wrote his novel as a way to fictionalize life experiences lived by himself and friends⁸⁹, Eugenides, an educated, middle-class author, had no clear autobiographical intentions, despite his Greek-American origin⁹⁰.

One important issue that should be discussed here is whether or not the literary "voice" is gendered in *Middlesex*, for it seems there is no dramatic shift in voice when intersex Cal moves into manhood. On this matter, Eugenides claims in his interview published in *Bomb Magazine*⁹¹ that he tends to believe there is not an innate difference between the way women and men write. He declares that differences between individuals are more significant than differences between genders. For the author, Cal's voice should not change. Eugenides explains that Cal is an adult when he writes his story and if innate language abilities exist between males and females, this would result from brain chemistry and the formation of the brain *in utero*, in response to different levels of hormones. Cal's brain would be that of a male and, as it happens, a heterosexual male, since he is attracted to girls. However, for the author, Cal's voice is his own, as Eugenides thinks everyone's is, in his/her own individual selves and lived experiences, in spite of gender. Still, Cal was raised as a girl in a society that legitimates the gender binary. Hence, the character had to render female experience credibly, according to the author.

In another interview found in *Powells Magazine*, Eugenides explains that he came up with a narrative point-of-view that could do anything and that he wanted to use a hermaphrodite as the narrator. It seemed to him that a novelist has to have a "hermaphroditic imagination", since he/she should be able to enter the heads of men

⁸⁹ "Afterword". In: FEINBERG, L. (2003)

⁹⁰ Interview with the author: "Mighty Hermaphrodite" at www.randomhouse.ca/readmag

⁹¹ Interview with the author at www.bombsite.com/eugenides/eugenides7.html

and women when intending to write books. “What better vehicle for that than a hermaphrodite narrator? It's sort of like the dream novelist himself, or herself, or itself – already we're into the pronoun problem”. Eugenides says he wanted the book to be first-person. The author notes that we are all an “I” before we are a “he” or a “she”; therefore, his need for a first-person narrator. Eugenides also explains that he wanted the “I” for practical reasons. He preferred to avoid the situation in which the character is “she”, then when one turns the page and “she” becomes “he” – or even the more “dreaded s/he” (his words). In the author’s remarks, he wanted to be very close to her metamorphosis, “to describe it from the inside”⁹². Here I would like to point out Eugenides’s position regarding the use of pronouns, when compared to Feinberg’s. It is common belief that many languages often cannot cater for gender diversity. On one hand, Feinberg, a transgender writer, feels comfortable at being addressed in gender-neutral pronouns (as reported in chapter I of this thesis). Eugenides, a declared heterosexual male author, on the other hand, “dreads” the use of gender-neutral pronouns like “s/he” . Although I believe it is unfair and superficial to declare Eugenides’s position as biased (or not) without further information, I wanted to note both authors’ words on the matter.

In his classification of the novel, Eugenides claims that *Middlesex* is at the same time a family story and an epic; thus, he also needed the third-person. According to him, it was necessary to give a sense that Cal, in writing his story, is perhaps inventing his past as much as recalling it. He needed to tell the whole story to explain his incredible life to himself, and here I observe, to describe his own process of awareness. The result is that Cal plays the role of the omniscient first person narrator in most of the narrative, the only shift being when Calliope learns about her physical condition. Regarding the use of

⁹² www.powells.com/authors/eugenides.htm

pronouns in this chapter, I have chosen feminine pronouns to refer to the protagonist while still living as Calliope, and masculine pronouns when the protagonist adopts the name of Cal, deciding to live as a male.

The title of the novel, *Middlesex*, refers first to the name of the house Cal's family moves to in his adolescence. The house, located on Middlesex Boulevard, in an upper-middle class suburb of Detroit, is described as the following:

Middlesex! Did anybody live in a house as strange? As sci-fi? As futuristic and outdated at the same time? A house that was more like communism, better in theory than in practice? [...] Hudson Clark [...] had designed Middlesex to harmonize with the natural surroundings. [...] Forgetting where he was (a conservative suburb) and what was on the other side of those trees (the Turnbulls and the Picketts), Clark followed the principles of Frank Lloyd Wright, banishing the Victorian Vertical in favor of Midwestern horizontal, opening up the interior spaces, and bringing in a Japanese influence. (p.258)

In a metaphorical sense, the house can be seen as referring to the several levels of hybridism present in the novel. Added to that, "Middlesex" symbolically (one could also say, paradoxically) represents the gender hybridism of the protagonist as a hermaphrodite. The constant realization of being in between – both or neither – in several aspects, will certainly mark Cal's life journey. Also, the house illustrates the hybridism and queerness of that family of non-W.A.S.P.s who struggle to be assimilated. The house may also stand for being non-normative, and still being surrounded by what had been established as "normal". The house is difficult to grasp by most people, queer as it is, standing out among the other conventional suburban houses. Yet, it harmonizes very well with the diversity and hybridism common in nature.

On the very first lines of "Book One", the first chapter of *Middlesex*, the narrator summarizes, in a humorous tone, the story that will be told in the following 526 pages: his hermaphroditic/intersex condition discovered at puberty, scientific data, his Greek-

American background, his involvement in historical facts, Greek Mythology representing events and people in his personal life, humor, irony and parody, as well as his adult life:

I was born twice: first as a baby girl [...] and then again as a teenage boy [...] Specialized readers may have come across me in Dr. Peter Luce's study, "Gender Identity in 5-Alpha Reductase Pseudohermaphrodites", published in the *Journal of Pediatric Endocrinology* in 1975. [...] My birth certificate lists my name as Calliope Helen Stephanides. My recent driver's license (from the federal Republic of Germany) records my name simply as Cal. I'm a former field hockey goalie, long-standing member of the Save-the-Manatee Foundation, rare attendant at the Greek Orthodox liturgy, and, for most of my adult life, an employee of the U.S. State Department. Like Tiresias, I was first a thing, then the other. I've been ridiculed by classmates, guinea-pigged by doctors, palpated by specialists, and researched by the March of Dimes. A redheaded girl from Grosse Pointe fell in love with me, not knowing what I was. (Her brother liked me, too.) An army tank led me into urban battle once; a swimming pool turned me into a myth; I've left my body in order to occupy others – and all this happened before I turned sixteen. [...]

Sing now, O Muse, of the recessive mutation on my fifth chromosome! Sing how it passed down through nine generations, gathering invisibly within the polluted pool of the Stephanides family. And sing how Providence, in the guise of a massacre, sent the gene flying again; how it blew like a seed across the sea to America, where it drifted through our industrial rains until it fell to earth in the fertile soil of my mother's own Midwestern womb.

Sorry if I get a little Homeric at times. That's genetic too. (pp. 3-4)

Even before Calliope is born, her gender is a topic for debate. Her parents, Milton and Tessie Stephanides, want a girl. Milton's brother, after reading an article in *Scientific American Magazine*, tries to convince the couple to have "sexual congress" twenty-four hours prior to ovulation: "the swift male sperm would rush and die off. The female sperm, sluggish but more reliable, would arrive just as an egg dropped" (p.8). The couple agrees, despite Tessie's fear that "to tamper with something as mysterious and miraculous as the birth of a child was an act of *hubris*". The fact that the character mentions *hubris* (from the Greek *hybris*, meaning "wanton violence, insolence, outrage,

originally presumption toward the gods"⁹³) foreshadows the atypical life of the child to be born. Once Tess is pregnant, her mother-in-law dangles a silver spoon tied to a string over the belly of her daughter-in-law in an ancient Greek custom, before pronouncing the child a boy. Milton's brother protests the divination; the baby is a girl, he insists: "It's science, Ma" (p.6).

Both science and divination could be correct for Calliope's gender. The aging family doctor overlooks the baby's unusual anatomy, declaring her a girl. Calliope will spend the 1960s and early 1970s as the daughter of a middle-class Greek-American family, only to discover at fourteen that she is a hermaphrodite. More precisely, as her physician and gender specialist explains, a pseudo-hermaphrodite. That is to say a child born XY (thus genetically male), but a sufferer of 5-alpha-reductase deficiency syndrome, what causes a child to be born with internal testes, with an apparent vagina and an enlarged clitoris (in fact, a small penis). "To the extent that fetal hormones affect brain chemistry and histology, I've got a male brain. But I was raised as girl" (p.19), explains Cal, the man Calliope decides to become after she learns the truth. Cal eventually runs away to avoid undergoing surgery and hormone treatments prescribed by the doctor, who thinks that the fourteen years of living as a girl will prevail.

In my opinion, *Middlesex* can certainly be seen as a rather intriguing piece of writing for gender studies. It depicts a fictional character considered female at birth but who is later found out to be genetically male. As her/his identity construction is narrated, the author tells us about their (re)position in the world, her/his "awareness" of being born "different", and most compellingly, her/his search to understand her/his own body, sex and gender. As far as the issue of gender is concerned, Eugenides brings back the discussion on nurture versus nature started by feminists and doctors in the 1960s:

⁹³ *Etymology online* at www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=hybrid

When this story goes out in the world, I may become the most famous hermaphrodite in history [...] To the extent that fetal hormones affect brain chemistry and histology, I've got a male brain. But I was raised as a girl. If you were going to devise an experiment to measure the relative influences of nature versus nurture, you couldn't come up with anything better than my life. (p.19)

In another part, Cal, already operating in society as an adult male, once again addresses the reader to explain his condition:

Something you should understand: I'm not androgynous in the least. 5-alpha-reductase deficiency syndrome allows for normal biosynthesis and peripheral action of testosterone, *in utero*, neonatally, and at puberty. In other words, I operate in society as a man. I use the man's room. Never the urinals, always in the stalls [...] I've lived more than half of my life as a male, and by now everything comes naturally. When Calliope surfaces, she does so like a childhood speech impediment. Suddenly there she is again, doing a hair flip, or checking her nails. It's a little like being possessed. (p. 41)

It is also important to observe that Cal does not choose to live openly as an intersex, rejecting his androgyny: "I operate in society as a man". In the binary, the character makes clear which side he is. The marks of his sixteen years as a girl in the adult Cal are reported as like "being possessed", or rather, not as a part of the identity that he had to build until it "comes naturally", after discovering about his XY condition. The quote reveals Cal's effort to conform his body language to what is expected from a heterosexual male. Cal's gender identity greatly contrasts to Jess's androgynous identity in SBB. While the former has never intended any gender ambiguity either as Calliope or Cal, Jess soon feels the gender binary cannot accurately translate her transgenderism.

As Riki Wilchins affirms, identity politics is "permanently troubled"⁹⁴, insofar as classifications can be often problematic and controversial. Hence, some would disagree with the classification of intersex people as transgenders. The term "intersex" is currently

⁹⁴ WILCHINS, R. (2004). p.82

used to refer to persons who are born with atypical genitalia⁹⁵, being the term “hermaphrodite” now considered both inaccurate (for being biologically impossible in human beings) and historically derogatory by activists. “According to Brown University medical university researcher Dr. Anne Fausto-Sterling, one in every 2,000 births is intersex”, informs Riki Wilchins⁹⁶. In the website of the Intersex Society of North America – ISNA – we learn that:

“Intersex” is a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn’t seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male. For example, a person might be born appearing to be female on the outside, but having mostly male-typical anatomy on the inside. Or a person may be born with genitals that seem to be in-between the usual male and female types – for example, a girl may be born with a noticeably large clitoris, or lacking a vaginal opening, or a boy may be born with a notably small penis, or with a scrotum that is divided so that it has formed more like labia. Or a person may be born with mosaic genetics, so that some of her cells have XX chromosomes and some of them have XY.⁹⁷

While some activists like Leslie Feinberg urge for the coalition among the different gay, lesbian, and gender bender groups (i.e., transsexuals, transvestites, cross-dressers, drag queens/kings, intersexuals), a trend among intersexuals has been to fight separately. Some activists defend the idea that intersex people differ from transgenders since they were not born with a defined genitalia of either sexes. For them, the biological/genetical component deserves a different approach.

Riki Wilchins calls intersex bodies as “bodies at the margins” in “All Together Now: Intersex Infants and IGM⁹⁸”. She co-founded with Cheryl Chase (a rare case of a true hermaphrodite) the intersex protest group “Hermaphrodites With Attitude”. Chase is the most notorious name among intersex activists in the USA nowadays, having founded

⁹⁵ www.isna.org

⁹⁶ WILCHINS, R. (2004). p.72

⁹⁷ www.isna.org

⁹⁸ IGM stands for “Intersex Genital Mutilation”.

ISNA, a pioneer intersex advocacy group. Wilchins reports that when she addressed transgender groups in search for support, she pointed out that, since Chase had changed from one sex to another, she was a transgender⁹⁹. However, Wilchins acknowledges that they may not always be embraced by the transgender cause, or any other group fighting arbitrary acts against gender:

[...] if national feminist groups even suspected that doctors performed clitoridectomies on thousands of baby girls each year, they would try to shut down hospitals across the country. If gay right activists suspected that doctors were using hormones and surgery to erase thousands of potential lesbians each year, queer activists would be demonstrating in the halls of hospitals and lobbying in the halls of Congress.

But none of these scenarios have happened, all because an arbitrary definition means that these infants aren't female or possibly lesbian or even transgender. They're this other thing called intersex, which is not an issue for women or gays or transgender people; it's a medical issue. Presented with an enormously damaging and barbaric practice that harms thousands of kids, no group was able to embrace IGM as an issue. The rules of identity meant that intersex infants – the noise in the system – didn't fit.¹⁰⁰

One could argue whether Calliope/Cal is really a transgender character in a transgenre novel. Some could question the classification of intersex people as transgenders. Others could claim that Cal does not see himself as a transgender, having chosen to live as a male. On one hand, I acknowledge that there will be no easy agreement between parts which defend different points of view, being each of them legitimate in their positions.

For this thesis, on the other hand, I chose to agree with Leslie Feinberg, who includes intersex/hermaphrodites under the transgender designation. As I have quoted in chapter I, Feinberg describes “transgender” as “an umbrella term to include everyone who challenges the boundaries of sex and gender [...] Transgender people traverse,

⁹⁹ WILCHINS, R. (2004). p.81

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p.82

bridge, or blur the boundary of the gender expression they were assigned at birth¹⁰¹”.

The reasons for my choice of the term were two: 1) In his two non-fiction books on transgenders, Feinberg included the testimonials of intersex people, including Cheryl Chase¹⁰²; 2) Having lived in two genders, Cal’s character seems to be unable to perfectly fit in society’s traditional boundaries of sex and gender, despite his total acceptance of the gender binary.

As far as the political aspect of identity is concerned, I would like to quote Cheryl Chase’s words:

Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are stigmatized and oppressed because they violate social standards for acceptable sex behavior; transsexuals because they violate standards for gender identity. Intersexuals are punished for violating social standards for acceptable sex anatomy. But our oppressions stem from the same source: rigid cultural definitions of sex categories, whether in terms of behavior, identity, or anatomy. I plan to be part of a movement where we work together against that common source of oppression.¹⁰³

Chase, born Charlie, differently from Eugenides’s character, was one year and a half old when doctors decided that “he” was actually “she”¹⁰⁴. Their examinations resulted in proving that Charlie’s small penis was an abnormally large clitoris. The medical decision was to cut it off. Following treatment protocols, all evidence of the boy’s existence was hidden. The family were warned to lie if Charlie/Cheryl ever asked about his/her history, because the truth – intersexuality and surgery – could traumatize the child: “doctors feared that acknowledging a history of intersexuality would

¹⁰¹ FEINBERG, L. (1996). p.x

¹⁰² Ibid (1996). p.104 and 139; (1998), p.88-93.

¹⁰³ Ibid (1998). p. 93

¹⁰⁴ In the beautiful and sensitive film *Both* (2004, USA/Peru), directed by Lisset Barcellos, we are told the fictional story of an intersex person, Rebeca Duarte. Duarte’s story is obviously inspired by the narratives of real intersex individuals, like Cheryl Chase.

undermine the sense of gender identity they had created in the child through secrecy and surgery”, reports Wilchins¹⁰⁵. The activist also points out:

Medical theories of Sex, like so much of theory, are concerned with the resolution and management of difference. Intersex infants represent one of society’s most anxious fears – the multiplicity of Sex, the pinging under the binary hood, a noise in the engine of reproduction that must be located and silenced.

This kind of Science is not limited to bodies. Its psychiatric counterpart is called Gender Identity Disorder or GID. GID does for insubordinate genders what IGM does for insubordinate genitals.

In GID, noncomplaining children as young as 3 and as old as 18 are made to undergo treatment that includes behavioral modification, confinement to psychiatric wards, and psychotropic medication, all because they transcend binary gender norms and/or cross-gender identity. These treatment measures are intended to help the child fit back into a defined gender role.¹⁰⁶

In *Middlesex*, once Calliope's condition is discovered, her atypical genitalia also becomes a medical issue. She ends up at a gender identity clinic. The sexologist, Dr. Luce, puts her through a barrage of tests to determine her "true" gender identity. Dr. Luce’s character is clearly inspired in the psychologist Dr. John Money, whose work in Johns Hopkins hospital in the 1970s inspired those who defended nurture over nature regarding gender expression. Dr. Money was considered at the time one of the greatest specialists in gender in the world, and families would travel long distances to consult with him. He fiercely defended the idea that a child would not live happily if he/she did not have a clearly defined sex thus being capable of “healthily” function in our society. As Dr. Money believed that gender was entirely constructed by rearing, he advocated that children with “abnormal” genitalia were surgically reassigned as girls – a much easier surgical procedure, and were raised as such.

¹⁰⁵ WILCHINS, R. (2004). p.73

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p.78.

Journalist John Colapinto's *As Nature Made Him* thoroughly narrates the treatment received by David Reimer, Dr. John Money's most notorious patient, known academically as the "John/Joan" case. David Reimer was born an identical twin boy in 1965. At the age of eight months, both David and his brother had a minor medical problem involving their penises, therefore, a doctor decided to treat the problem with circumcision. An inappropriate method of circumcision caused the doctor to accidentally burn off David's entire penis. At the advice of psychologist Dr. John Money at Johns Hopkins University, David's parents agreed to have him "sex reassigned" and made into a girl via surgical, hormonal, and psychological treatments. For many years, Dr. John Money claimed that David turned out to be a "real" girl with a female gender identity. Dr. Money used this case to bolster his approach to intersex, one that relies on the assumption that gender identity is all about nurture, i.e. upbringing and not nature, i.e. inborn traits. For those who adopt this approach, gender assignment is the key to treating all children with atypical sex anatomies. According to ISNA, this is the approach still applied to those cases throughout much of the U.S. and developed world. The case of David Reimer has been used by the proponents of the "gender is inborn" theory as proof that they are right. In the midst of the feminist movement and the constant debates involving sex and gender, many were convinced that personality, and especially gender-specific behavior, was determined by rearing. Sexologists and feminists insisted that each child was a blank slate and that rearing determined gender roles.

Throughout the novel, the narrator makes use of different images of hybridism and is thorough when explaining his life as an XY individual raised as a girl until the age of 14. In an autobiographical mode, readers learn about his choice of a heteronormative life, in which he decides to operate as male (despite the fact he has not undergone sex reassignment surgery) and closeted intersexual (only his family and very close friends

know about his condition) versus facing the prejudice and otherness of living openly as an intersexual. The gender hybridism will also assume a mythological tone in the second chapter of “Book Two” (the second section) in the novel, entitled “Minotaurs”. Once again the author makes use of another hybrid Greek myth – the Minotaur (called in the novel as “hybrid monster”, p.109), a creature half man, half bull – as allegory of his own condition. The monster image, an abjected being, also highlights his feelings of otherness.

In one of the most compelling parts of the novel, Dr. Luce explains to Calliope’s parents about her hermaphroditism. He advises them to keep their child’s identity as a girl since medical and psychological tests have “proved” that Calliope identifies as female. In Dr. Luce’s words, “Callie is a girl who has a little too much male hormone. We want to correct that”. (p.428) The tests applied by the doctor included a number of questionnaires about the child’s behavior, her habits, likes and dislikes, sexual preferences, attitude observations, physical exams. The tests also required the writing of a journal by the patient (which Calliope decides to transform into a work of fiction) and her watching of pornographic films (what, according to the doctor, would show one’s sexual preference). During the crucial meeting between her parents and Dr. Luce, Calliope kills time in a public library. Having previously overheard the word “hypospadias” to describe her physiological condition in one of her several visits to Dr. Luce’s office, she decides to look up the word in the dictionary:

I have never seen such a big dictionary before. The *Webster’s* at the New York Public Library stood in the same relation to other dictionaries of my acquaintance as the Empire State Building did to other buildings. It was ancient, medieval-looking thing, bound in brown leather [...] the pages were gilded like the Bible’s. (p. 430)

Calliope's words convey the feeling of formality and reverence she has at being at that place, opening that book (which she even compares to the Bible), both the building and the book carrying the weight of Western Culture and its norms. Flipping through the pages of the dictionary, she finds the word "hypospadias" which is basically defined as a synonym for "eunuch", a castrated man. Looking up the entry for "eunuch", Calliope is led to the reference to "hermaphrodite": "1. one having the sex organs and many of the second characteristics of both male and female. 2. Anything comprised of a combination of diverse and contradictory elements. See synonyms at MONSTER." (p. 430) The shock of having herself defined as a "monster" provokes in Calliope confusion and fear. At this point of the narrative, there is an interesting shift in the narrator's voice, which suddenly changes from first person to third person, as if Calliope felt, at that moment, distanced from her own self:

And that is where I stopped [...] my hair falling and onto the pages, covering up the definition of myself [...] Fear was stabbing me.

[...] There it was, *monster*, in black and white, in a battered dictionary in a great city library. A venerable, old book, the shape and size of a headstone, with yellowing pages that bore marks of the multitudes that had consulted them before me. [...] Here was a book that contained the collected knowledge of the past while giving evidence of the present social conditions [...] The dictionary contained every word in the English language but the chain knew only a few. It knew *thief* and *steal*, and maybe, *purloined*. The chain spoke of *poverty* and *mistrust* and *inequality* and *decadence*. Callie herself was holding on to this chain right now. [...] The synonym was official, authoritative; it was the verdict that the culture gave on a person like her. *Monster*. That what she was. (pp. 430-431)

The protagonist's confusion and fear as the teenage Calliope will remain in the adult Cal. His own expectations of "normality" both exclude and isolate him: Cal sees himself like a creature that his community would regard as a monstrosity. In other words,

as he sees it, to be other than ordinary is to be “freakish”. As David Punter argues in his essay “Monster”:

Monsters, as the displaced embodiment of tendencies that are repressed or, in Julia Kristeva’s sense of the term, “abjected” within a specific culture not only establish the boundaries of the human, but may also challenge them. Hybrid forms that exceed and disrupt those systems of classification through which cultures organize experience, monsters problematize binary thinking and demand rethinking of the boundaries and concepts of normality.¹⁰⁷

Fearing abjection and otherness, Calliope chooses to avoid as much as possible confronting heteronormativity. Still, Cal decides to live what seems to be true to his genes, performing from that moment on as a man. Instead of facing one more appointment with Dr. Luce, Calliope/Cal runs away, starts to wear masculine clothes and short hair as well as to use the men’s room: “I become male-identified” (p.450). On his way to San Francisco, the new male Cal describes his “adjustments” to fit in the “newly” gendered body:

[...] I began to use the men’s room. [...] I understood at those times what I was leaving behind: the solidarity of a shared biology. Women know what it means to have a body. They understand its difficulties and frailties, its glories and pleasures. Men think their bodies are theirs alone. They tend them in private, even in public.

A word on penises. What was Cal’s official position on penises? Among them, surrounded by them, his feelings had been as a girl: by equal measures fascinated and horrified. [...] And I was scared to death of being caught looking. [...] everytime I went into the men’s room a shout hang out in my head: “you’re in the men’s!” But the men’s was where I was supposed to be. Nobody said a word. Nobody objected to my presence. And so I searched for a stall that looked half clean. I had to sit to urinate. Still do. (pp.451-452)

This passage reveals that Cal’s appearance left little doubt about his new gender expression. Differently from what happens to a number of transgenders, to whom the

¹⁰⁷ PUNTER, D. (2004). p.264

bathroom is a space where they are often rejected and not uncommonly, suffer violence, Cal's androgyny is private, easily hidden behind the stall door. Also in private, he constructs his new body, recalling his previous frustrations in Calliope's body. As an intersex, Calliope's body could not develop the feminine features of the girls her age:

At night, on the fungal carpets of the motel room, I did exercises, push-ups and sit-ups. Wearing nothing but my new boxers, I examined my psyche in the mirror. Not long ago I'd fretted over my failure to develop. That worry was gone now. I didn't have to live up to that standard anymore. The impossible demands had been removed and I felt a vast relief. But there were also moments of dislocations, staring at my changing body. Sometimes it didn't feel like my own. It was hard, white, bony. Beautiful in its own way. (p.452)

Being in a male body brings more comfort to Cal, relieved from the awkwardness of being in a too androgynous female one. His atypical genitalia makes him run away though, both driven by feelings of abjection and by an instinct that made him fear the results of the surgery: "If sometimes I thought about turning back, running back to my parents and the Clinic and giving in, what stopped me was this private ecstasy between my legs. I knew it would be taken away from me." (p.453)

The chapters "Gender Dysphoria in San Francisco" and "Hermaphroditus" describe Cal's stay in California, where he lives in the streets until he accepts to work in a strip-tease club as a special attraction. While in the streets, he is almost gang raped. The gang gives up raping Cal when they see his genitalia, beating him instead. Cal then accepts the job in the club in search of some protection. Those days in San Francisco can be seen as the character's moment of self-understanding as well as education. That is when the character confronts the possible choices for his life by facing the way the world apparently sees him: a "freak". In the club, other sex/gender deviants like him –

transsexuals, transvestites, androgynes and intersex – are presented in special booths for the enjoyment of a male clientele.

In his process of awareness, Cal decides he must hide his condition if he wants to survive in a world not prepared to accept either gender differences or atypical bodies. On the other hand, Cal's roommate Zora, who also has a special form of hermaphroditism, educates him on their condition and points to him the way towards self-acceptance and activism. Having Androgen Insensitivity, Zora becomes a highly politicized activist, serving a counterpart to whom Cal chooses to be:

“I've got one question”, I asked Zora one day. “Why did you ever tell anybody?”

“What do you mean?”

“Look at you. No one would ever know.”

“I want people to know, Cal.”

“How come?”

Zora folded her long legs under herself. With her fairy's eyes, paisley-shaped, blue and glacial looking into mine, she said,

“Because we're what's next.” (p.490)

Nonetheless, Cal chooses to go back home and conform to norms. As an adult, his participation in activism is restricted to financial contributions to the Intersex movement. Yet, the character lets the reader know he has a great knowledge concerning his condition, which includes his understanding of scientific and political data – not to mention his knowledge of hybrid myths. Born in a large and united family, Cal chooses to live a rather solitary life far from his hometown and country so that he can better enforce the secrecy of his “difference”. From my point of view, Cal's choice of a non-transgressive life is the choice of somebody not prepared to face the unbalance of internalized social structures of power. Cal rationalizes about his conflicting feelings when he tells us about the current struggle of intersexual activists and his non-involvement in political activism:

A word on my shame. I don't condone it. I'm trying my best to go over it. The intersex movement aims to put end to infant genital reconfiguration surgery. The first step in that struggle is to convince the world – and endocrinologists in particular – that hermaphroditic genitals are not diseased. One out of every two thousand babies is born with ambiguous genitalia. In the United States, with a population of two hundred and seventy-five million, that comes to one hundred and thirty-seven thousand intersexuals alive today.

But we hermaphrodites are people like everybody else. And I happen not to be a political person. I don't like groups. Though I'm a member of the Intersex Society of North America, I have never taken part in demonstrations. I live my own life and nurse my own wounds. But it's the way I am [...] No reason to mention my peculiarities, my wandering in the maze these many years, shut away from sight [...] (pp.106-107)

Although Cal demonstrates both rational and informed understanding of his condition, his words also make clear that he still feels like a “freak”. By comparing himself to a solitary hybrid monster, the Minotaur, he reveals his feelings of self-contempt and otherness.

In another remarkable passage, Cal recalls how he felt about his intersexuality, after he knows Dr. Luce had published a paper on his case. In the paper, the doctor defended nurture over nature, versus the trend of evolutionary biology that started to prevail in those mid-1970s:

[...] it's not as simple as that. I don't fit any of these theories. Not the evolutionary biologists' and not Dr. Luce's either. My psychological makeup doesn't accord with the essentialism present in the intersex movement, either. Unlike other so-called male pseudo-hermaphrodites [...] I never felt out of place as a girl. I still don't feel entirely at home among men. Desire made me cross over to the other side, desire and the facticity of my body. In the twentieth century, genetics brought the Ancient Greek notion of fate into our very cells. This new century we've just begun has found something different. Contrary to all expectations, the code underlying our being is woefully inadequate. Instead of the expected 200,000 genes, we have only 30,000. Not many more than a mouse.

And so strange new possibility is arising. Compromised, indefinite, sketchy, but not entirely obliterated: free will is making a comeback. Biology gives you a brain. Life turns it into a mind. (p.479)

The character's words may remind us of Beauvoir's ideas of the body as a situation as well as the importance of the lived experience. Cal understands that his identity is the result of having an atypical body and of his experiences. By observing the lives of people who cannot fit into gender/sex traditional standards, he traces his identity and future. Despite having chosen the chance of sexual pleasure by keeping his atypical genitalia as well as believing in his body as truly male, Cal's most intimate parts will be carefully hidden from the few lovers, whom he reveals to touch but refrains from being touched. Differently from the process of "stoning" discussed in the novel *Stone Butch Blues*, the fear of being touched mainly express Cal's panic of having his intersexed body outed, of being rejected as a "freak".

It is my belief that *Middlesex* succeeds in discussing the not uncommon inconsistency of the scientific discourse, frequently used to classify perversions and adapt/correct the "non-fit" to what society considers normal and adjusted, so that the cultural and moral values that sustain the structures of patriarchal power can be maintained. According to Michel Foucault in "Scientia Sexualis"¹⁰⁸, the rising of the science of sex and the development of psychiatry in the 19th century have been fundamental to the reinforcement of the power relations as seen in Western society. It was from the 19th century that all the questions of gender were supposed to be answered by anatomy, becoming strictly biological. Currently, the distinction between male and female sexual identities seems to be so natural and obvious to us that we find it difficult to believe it was a recent cultural invention and not the result of an inherent knowledge of divine law. It is not uncommon to watch TV programs showing gender differences between boys' and girls' physical and cognitive development, or how the male brain

¹⁰⁸ FOUCAULT, M. (1990), pp.53-131

responds differently to different tasks when in contrast to the female brain, etc. Since the 19th century, science has been concerned to both explain and reassure the binary.

By discussing the *Scientia Sexualis*, Foucault wanted us to understand how much knowledge and science are politicized: “This new science was not interested in knowledge *about* sex but rather power *over* it. It generated an entire taxonomy of latencies, perversions, deviance, and disorders.”¹⁰⁹ It was the institutionalization of sexuality managing private behaviors. What allowed the normative institutions – the church, the state, the medicine – to have new and invasive powers on people. Those who suffered the most under this science – the different and marginalized – were those with the most to lose. All those unable to fit the binary were deemed deviants in need of treatment. It is a science motivated by “a stubborn will to non-knowledge” whose aim is “not to state the truth, but prevent its emergence.”¹¹⁰

If we contrast the journeys towards awareness of the two protagonists discussed in this thesis, Jess Goldberg and Cal Stephanides, we can realize the different effects of the norms imposed by the gender binary. Sharing characteristics with characters of a *Bildungsroman* and road movies, both protagonists also decide to travel, in a process that intertwines with an internal transformation. Nevertheless, Jess and Cal are, differently from the subjects of the humanistic tradition, divided and fragmented. Unable to completely fit in the fundamental norms of gender, they are far from achieving a stable identity. Both Cal and Jess decide to leave home fearing the consequences of having an anti-normative gender. For some time, only the movement can give them some sense of balance or

¹⁰⁹ WILCHINS, R. (2004) p. 53

¹¹⁰ Ibid. p.53

protection. The basic idea of a trip implies in moving from one place to another, which requires geographical distance. In the end, Cal also chooses a cultural distance, choosing to live isolated in a foreign country, away from any trace of his background. His government job highlights his acceptance of the norms of the Establishment.

As Guacira Lopes Louro notes in *Um Corpo Estranho: Ensaio sobre Sexualidade e Teoria Queer*, the statements “It’s a boy!” or “It’s a girl!” also mark the beginning of a kind of journey. In other words, they initiate a process that, supposedly, must aim at a certain direction. Those statements, more than being a description, can be understood as a decision or definition over a body. She cites Judith Butler when arguing that those statements trigger a whole process of “construction” of a body as either masculine or feminine. Based on the physical differences, to those bodies are attributed cultural meanings, thus reinforcing the sequence sex-gender-sexuality. The act of naming a body happens inside logic which supposes sex as a “datum” previous to culture, what gives it an immutable, a-historical and binary character. This logic implies in the “datum” both determining the gender and inducing a unique form of desire.

As Louro highlights, the statements “it’s a boy” or “it’s a girl” initiate a process of either masculinization or femininization through which the subjects are committed for the rest their lives. In order to qualify as “bodies that matter”, in Butler’s words, the subjects must obey rules that regulate their culture. However, the sequence sex-gender-sexuality is sometimes subverted; despite rules, there will always be those who break rules and transgress social arrangements, like the character of Jess Goldberg. Like in any journey, it may be intriguing to try new routes and the unexpected. Nevertheless, as expected, it will be those daring subjects who will become the targets of actions of

exclusion, correction, reform and punishment¹¹¹. In a heteronormative society, each gendered identity must maintain a strict coherence among sex, gender identity, gender expression, and desire. As Wilchins observes, female is to woman as woman is to feminine as feminine is attracted to male: “Breaking any link causes a gender to fall right off the grid of cultural intelligibility”¹¹².

Yet, it is intriguing to note how both characters could “construct” the gender in their bodies in both narratives: Jess can very well pass as a man by taking hormones, having her breasts removed, working out muscles, and by dressing and acting as a man; Cal had been raised and lived, dressed and performed as a girl for fourteen years until he learned about his intersexual condition. Although he chooses to keep the fullness of his body after that, he switches his gender expression to live as a man, the gender that he believes suits him better, despite his atypical sexual organ. He also works towards making his androgynous body look more male, just like Jess did: physical workout, hormone shots, male grooming and mannerisms. Knowing that stories like those sound similar to real testimonials of transgenders, the character transformations make us reflect upon how much of gender can be actually built. It makes us wonder to what extent we are even biologically programmed to adhere to the rules of our particular group and respond with shame and guilt when we break these rules.

While Jess’s journey represents a search for community, Cal’s journey represents exile. However he refuses to cross the border of gender normativity, refusing to stay “in between”, in the zone of transgression. Cal becomes an observer, perfectly operating within the prevailing logic of the binary. Cal, a “docile body” (using Foucault’s term), is the perfect, uniform citizen who has internalized a sense of personal visibility, self-

¹¹¹ LOURO, G.L. (2004) p.15-16

¹¹² WILCHINS, R. (2004). p.130

consciousness, and social norms. This process produces an individual for whom the greatest fear – even in his most private moments and particularly in his sexual activity – is to be thought as abnormal. As far as gender stereotypes are concerned, Cal looks gender-normal. His running away as confused teenager gives him the opportunity to witness both the possibility of living in abjection and engaging into activism once he chose outing his intersexuality. While Jess does not quite realize the dialectic “I’m not a girl therefore I am a boy”, Calliope, just like Tiresias, moves from female to male, never desiring to challenge any stereotypes. It is in the comfort of the norms that Cal finds home.

Jess’s life journey, on the other hand, is the one of a wandering character, in search of an identity, and a home that equates with a social place and family. She has no roots, always about to abandon everything, always trying to defend herself from eminent violence. Jess does live the abjection for being unable to live a gender expression that fits the binary. First, social norms demand her to perform feminine, what she cannot. Later, in an attempt for invisibility and survival, her passing as a man just ensures her that she cannot fit in any descriptions of what a woman or a man should be. However, her final envisionment of the political engagement as way to be part of a community and, therefore, to survive, makes Jess realize she can inhabit the space “in between” – she can feel at home at the space of transgression for she is not alone there. She achieves empowerment by outing her transgenderism, thus choosing to assume her queer identity. By recalling the fights for civil rights which marked the 20th century (blacks, women, gays and lesbians), we can acknowledge the impact of choices of individuals like Jess in society – what they dare to be affects not only their own lives, but the life of their contemporaries. These individuals generate an enlargement of the possibilities of being and living. Of course the choice of invisibility in the mainstream society is also political;

nonetheless, some may argue whether the option to fight for mainstream acceptance (for instance, by looking gender-normal, or by comparing gay people to heterosexual as far as they can also be monogamous, raise families, etc), can be politically effective to a certain point. However, it may back-fire as it may keep a fidelity to social norms that will continue to exclude the deviants.

I wish to finish this chapter by quoting native-American gay theorist Jmake Highwater on his account of deviants. In *The Mythology of Transgression*, he gives us a sensible account on being an outsider – condition held by those who carry the mark of “queerness”, therefore, deviance, in their identities (the non-white, non-Christian, not heteronormative). He creates the intriguing metaphor of those who live inside the walls and those who live outside the walls. It is a most enlightening thought for it advocates a new meaning for “alienation” and “transgression”:

We often take for granted the notion that some people are insiders, while others are outsiders. [...] The wall the separates insiders from outsiders is not born of human nature but methodically built, brick by brick, by tribal convention.[...] a barrier meticulously constructed by erratic community decrees as a means of identifying those who are part of the group and marking those who are not. It is not difficult to understand the chauvinism that requires a community to mark its territory and distinguish its members from its enemies. It is far more difficult to understand the kind of “outsiders” [...] who are part of the group and yet are rejected by their peers and cast into a terrible, internal exile. It is an exile called “alienation”.¹¹³

Highwater’s words makes us reflect upon how much of internalized self-contempt is the result of the community disdain for difference, for regarding difference and marginality as a burden, rather than as a gift, what is part of Jess’s journey and finally, of Cal’s. Those who break the norms of a heteronormative society are led to see themselves as the *cause* and not as the *object* of hatred, believing that they deserve to be hated. In short, Highwater’s thought is that outsiders may discover the courage to

¹¹³ HIGHWATER, J. (1997). p.5

repudiate self-contempt, recognizing their “alienation” as a “precious gift of freedom from arbitrary norms that they did not make and did not sanction.”¹¹⁴

Highwater argues that once one understands that “alienation” can be a gift, one’s voice can be heard “through the walls”. However, he continues to explain the consequences of daring to have a voice that trespasses the walls, that is, transgresses the rules:

[...] The people within the walled city are often offended by the sounds of outsiders that penetrate the sturdy barriers of conformity. They attempt to silence the voices, but occasionally the valiant utterances of outsiders manage to loosen a bit of mortar, perhaps even dislodge a few bricks, opening the wall to a strong, new light that has never before been seen by those who are safely walled up.¹¹⁵

Obviously not everyone can have a voice, or having it, manages to use it, thus becoming forever mute and invisible, like Cal Stephanides. “Some give up their voices willingly”¹¹⁶. Others try to destroy the walls with rage and bombs, however nothing changes. Nonetheless, as Highwater continues to explain, some, like Jess Goldberg, will walk a different path:

There are, however, those who will not be silenced or driven into self-destructive violence. There are always those who must speak or die. It was the African-American author James Baldwin who said: “The victim who is able to articulate the situation of the victim has ceased to be a victim – he or she has become a threat.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Ibid. p.21.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. p.6

¹¹⁶ Ibidem

¹¹⁷ Ibidem

☞ Chapter V ☞

The Awareness We Can all Share

“I believe that the ways in which we are fundamentally the same are far fewer and less interesting than the great multiplicity of ways in which we have invented and reinvented whatever it is we mean when we speak of ‘human nature’.” **Jamake Highwater**

It was my intention in this thesis to discuss the journey towards identity awareness undertaken by the protagonists of the novels *Stone Butch Blues* and *Middlesex*. Fictionally, the two novels belong to a tradition of transgendered narratives, in which we are told about the characters’ old and new selves. Influenced by a line of cultural studies, my aim was to go beyond the usual metaphorical literary analysis in order to show that the lives of the characters in those novels could be seen as representative of some of the stories of transgenders in the history of the United States of America – and I dare to say – in other parts of the world. Transgender/queer fiction and theory pose the question: if sex /gender is natural, why do we spend so long learning to be a man or a woman? I believe the two novels discuss fundamental issues to all of us, for we all have been denied things due to the straight-jacket of the gender binary.

In transgender and queer studies, understanding gender oppression and gender privilege is an important step in the direction of making change. As all political struggle for civil rights have acknowledged, change is a matter of justice. In her article “Focalizando a ‘outra América’, Questões de Identidade e Fobia”, professor Eliane Borges Berutti discusses the slogan that appeared after September 11, in an attempt to

bring together American people against terrorism: “United We Stand”. However, based on the lectures she attended with queer representatives of American society, she questions whether Afro-Americans, homosexuals, non-Christians and gender benders have ever felt part of the “we” in the USA, for safety was certainly a fact they could never take for granted among their fellow “mainstream” citizens.

The gay, lesbian and transgender movements are currently putting into action what seems to be one the most important fight for civil rights and respect since the outburst of the black and feminist movements, having, actually, originated from those. The literature after World War II was infused with voices from the margins of society. The civil rights movements, the protest against the Vietnam War and women’s lib inspired and opened doors to individuals who were raised to be in silence: non-white persons, women, homosexuals, and more recently, the transgenders. As one of the consequences of those changes, people started to look for answers on identity in literature, in search of the voices of the margin. The work of non-canonic writers began to be taken seriously as they had never been before. Writers felt new freedom to define themselves, exploring identity in new ways, feeling urged to reveal new perspectives and include issues related to their communities. Departing from their own personal experience, they aimed at challenging patriarchal society’s definition of normativity regarding social roles, gender expression and sexual orientation. Authors also started experimenting with different literary forms to show characters never seen before in the mainstream, in order to reveal how complex and diverse identity can be.

For many marginalized communities, action was a form of telling their stories. On the other hand, some authors felt extremely linked to those groups and wanted to

write about the damage caused by the oppression of patriarchy. For them, the writer would have the responsibility to speak for those who cannot, thus becoming a story teller committed to social issues. This is certainly the case of the writer and activist Leslie Feinberg, whose fictional novel *Stone Butch Blues* is filled with the stories of those who were oppressed for transgressing the norms of social class, religion, race, gender and sexual orientation. Jess Goldberg, the fictional character, struggled with many issues also faced by the author himself.

For Feinberg, identity is not something we can “grab on”, but rather a process, a “coming out”¹¹⁸. The new literature of the margins revealed this process by making a collage of personal and collected experiences, mixing memories, biography and history. For this literature, what is fiction and what is factual is not the most important; the lived experiences which will form one’s identity, however, are fundamental. In order to discuss this meaningful literature, I have chosen to work with Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* and Jeffrey Eugenides’s *Middlesex*. By choosing an enlarged definition of transgenders (as presented in chapter I of this thesis) and juxtaposing Jess, a masculine woman, and Cal, an intersexed individual, I did not aim at representing all transgenders or the multiplicity of their experiences. Rather, I wanted to investigate how fiction treated two possible narratives regarding the awareness of an identity that challenged the gender binary. Whether we are gay or straight, transgender or gender normative, we should all see the larger gender paradigm that includes us all.

Medicine and psychology have developed a tradition of dealing with differences by branding them as pathology. In academia, there are those who are not concerned in showing how the gender system makes difference illegitimate and silent, but rather on revealing what transgender people “really” are underneath. Inevitably, the gender binary

¹¹⁸ In the documentary film *American Passages – A Literary Survey: In Search of Identity*

remains intact. There is an emphasis on realness, imitation, and the ownership of meaning (mannerisms, clothes) that recenters and restores the “truth” of the gender binary. In hir non-fiction book *Transliberation: Beyond Pink or Blue*, Feinberg explains: “I am not at the odds with the fact I was born female-bodied. Nor do I identify as an intermediate sex. I simply do not fit the prevalent Western concepts of what a woman or a man “should” look like.¹¹⁹” For hir, the term “masculine female”, s/he defines hirself, is still limiting, however, these two words put together are “incendiary”¹²⁰. To despise a transgender individual is common. We frequently hear that transgender individuals are caricatures of the sex opposed to what they were born, a mere emulation. Nonetheless, we could ask ourselves how much of this thought implies in putting in a straight jacket the freedom of individual self-expression. For many transpeople, referring to anyone’s gender expression as exaggerated is insulting and restricts gender freedom. I can only share this view, and propose that we all rethink our attitudes towards human behavior and self-expression. One way to do that is to hear the voices of transgenders, learning to question the rigid cultural definitions of sex categories, whether in terms of behavior, anatomy or identity. As Feinberg claims, the lives of transgenders are proof that sex and gender are much more complex than a delivery room doctor’s glance at genitals can determine. The transgender fight, as a movement of masculine females, feminine males, cross-dressers, transsexual men and women, intersexuals, gender blenders and benders – in short, of any gender/sex variant people – is giving us the opportunity to expand our understanding of how many ways there are to be a human being. Their fight exposes some of the harmful myths about what means to be a woman or a man. How much have those myths compartmentalized and distorted our lives. Our own choices as man or

¹¹⁹ FEINBERG, L. (1998). p.1

¹²⁰ Ibid p.8

woman are sharply curtailed by the gender binary, we are all involved in its mechanisms. We are continuously subject, in daily life, to the norms of gender. Our every move is weighed with gendered meaning: vocal inflection, clothes and accessories, hair, overall musculature, body language. We monitor the way we are, especially in public, conscious of being watched. We also do that in private, by policing and regulating our own behavior just as avidly as if they were on display. Therefore, the defense of each individual's right to control her/his own body, to explore the path of self-expression, enhances our own freedom to discover more about ourselves and our potentialities. "To discover, on a deeper level, what means to be ourselves", as Leslie Feinberg vehemently claims.

Stone Butch Blues is a poignant story involving class, race, religion, politics, and gender. By weaving the story of Jess Goldberg, a working class gender warrior, through the narratives of 1960s and 1970s social movements, Feinberg reminds us that our individual struggles are always part of a larger fabric of resistance. Through Jess Goldberg's transformations towards self-love and identity awareness, the author examines the straight-jacket of the gender binary as well as the norms imposed by mainstream society. Moreover, s/he enhances the massive vitalities of friendship and political community.

Like the author, Jess identified as a butch lesbian before fully coming to terms with hir gender identity, which falls outside the norm. Jess is unable to find a sense of home and self until s/he discovers a community of gender/sexual minorities, the ending of the novel strongly suggesting that she will become politically active. In my choice of the term "queer identity" as defiant of the restrictive rules of heteronormativity, I have argued that Jess Goldberg has queered her identity in her journey of awareness. By becoming part of an organized and politicized community, Jess makes her final move

from abjection, invisibility and silence towards a brave and challenging social representation. Being queer is about being visible and voiced. It is about questioning society on their bias against the transgender image as well as struggling for everybody's awareness that prejudice comes from the fear of the unknown, from ignorance.

In several occasions, Feinberg has reported that all hir life s/he has been asked, "Are you a guy or a girl?" For hir, the answer is not so simple and s/he does not wish to simplify hirself in order to neatly fit in either gender. Like Feinberg, there are millions of individuals who defy binary categorizations. S/he clearly states, however, that hir work is not aimed at defining but rather defending diversity.¹²¹ Feinberg has been especially vigilant in hir writings about documenting the otherwise ignored contributions to history various oppressed groups have made. Hir works explore not only gender issues, but the crucial relationships between marginalized communities, often drawing parallels among the women's, people of color's and queer's rights movements. For Feinberg, the key word is coalition. *Stone Butch Blues* is a powerful novel written by a founder of contemporary transgender movement. It is also an important historical text documenting the profound shift in how we all came to think about gender at the end of the last century.

Ten years after the first publishing of Feinberg's novel, Jeffrey Eugenides gives voice to a postmodern hermaphrodite in *Middlesex*, being awarded the Pulitzer Prize of 2003. The author blends mythology, history, philosophy and medicine to present to us the complexity of the protagonist, Cal Stephanides, born Calliope. On one hand, we can appreciate both the rich and beautiful metaphorical image represented by an androgyne. On the other hand, we are also given the opportunity to reflect upon intersexed individuals, whose stories are usually reported to us from the limited and structured

¹²¹ Feinberg, L. (1996), p.ix

settings of clinics and hospitals. Dominated by the power that medicine has acquired since the 19th century, society easily regards those born with atypical genitalia as pathological cases. Once it has been decided what a “normal” vagina and an “acceptable” penis should look like; from that time on, the body not fitting the measures of “normality” was doomed to be “corrected” by science, the earlier the better. The practice is still current in this beginning of the 21st century.

As far as gender expression and biological sex are concerned, what society seems to demand from us is “choose a side and stay there”. This demand, nevertheless, was not always so fundamental in Western history. According to Foucault, that can be proved by the status which medicine and law have once granted to hermaphrodites. Actually, it was a long time before the formulation of the postulate that hermaphrodites had to have a single, true sex. For centuries, it was simply accepted that hermaphrodites had two. This is a rather intriguing idea, if we think that some of the current discussions on gender wish to problematize the idea that one “must” always have one sex/gender, preferably matching his/her genitalia. We could even dare to affirm that Western society has gone through a retrocess, which both gender theorists and transgender activists challenge nowadays. As Foucault illustrates:

In the middle Ages, the rules of both the canon and civil law were very clear: the designation “hermaphrodite” was given to those in whom the two sexes were juxtaposed, in proportions that might be variable. In these cases, it was the role of the father or the godfather [...] to determine at the time of the baptism which sex was going to be retained. If necessary, one was advised to choose the sex that seemed to have the better of the other, being the “most vigorous” or “the warmest”. But later, on the threshold of adulthood, when the time came to for them to marry, hermaphrodites were free to decide themselves if they wished to go on being of the sex which had been assigned to them, or if they preferred the other.¹²²

¹²² FOUCAULT, M. (1980). pp.vii-viii

While reading Foucault's excerpt above, I tried a mental exercise: I reread it as "In the beginning of the 21st century, the rules *are* very clear..." and then changed all the verbs to the present sentence. It sounded rather revolutionary in contrast to the current scenario. Although it was imperative that those individuals should keep the sex they declared as adults until the end of their lives in the Middle Ages, thus following the rigid binary norm, individuals were granted free choice. In other words, it was believed that maturity would bring one's awareness of his/her true self, hence, he/she would have the right of deciding. A rather queer concept, when compared to today's reality in which a child born with apparently "abnormal" genitalia becomes an emergency case to doctors as well as case of desperation to the family.

The disappearance of both free choice and the idea of a mixture of two sexes in a single body originated in the 18th century¹²³, achieving more solid argumentation with the importance obtained by *Scientia Sexualis* in the 19th century. "The investigation on sexual identity was carried out with more intensity in order to establish not only the true sex of hermaphrodites but also to identify, classify and characterize the different types of perversions", explains Foucault¹²⁴. Doctors, from that time on, have been given the power to "decipher" one's true sex:

Henceforth, everybody was to have one his or her primary, profound, determined and determining sexual identity; as for the elements of the other sex that might appear, they could only be accidental, superficial, or even quite illusory.¹²⁵

For science, one's sex is single, despite being hidden at times. It is the doctors' job to help certain individuals to "correct" any kind of ambiguity, in order to reveal his "true" self, therefore becoming both perfectly and healthily adjusted to society. Again

¹²³ Ibid, p.viii

¹²⁴ p.xi-xii

¹²⁵ p.viii

quoting Foucault, “at the bottom of sex, there is truth [...] our harbors of what is most true in ourselves”¹²⁶.

Alexina Barbin, the notorious example of a hermaphrodite born in the 19th century (whom I mentioned in chapter IV), was called Herculine by her family. She wrote her memoirs once her “true” identity was discovered and established by doctors. Alexina, like many intersexed individuals who had their identity decided by the power of medicine, committed suicide. Cal Stephanides, a fictional character, also reports his history, telling us of a different journey. Although Cal decides for heteronormativity (by hiding his intersexuality and choosing to live as a man), he is able to escape from the authoritarianism of medicine, thus rescuing his free-choice of his own identity.

Besides death, nothing seems more definitive and certain than our sex, the gender binary being an essential norm to define what is in the core of our identity. When a baby is born, it is immediately stated, “It’s a boy!” or “It’s a girl!”; that human being is, then, expected to start his/her life journey towards either one of the genders: masculine or feminine. The gender binary then becomes the first requirement to qualify an individual as legitimate, as a “body that matters”¹²⁷. From that moment on, that individual inherits a social, cultural and moral baggage that he/she is expected to carry along his/her life journey. That baggage contains indications on what to wear, how to move, how to think, what to speak, whom to love. To different physical characteristics are attributed cultural meanings and the sequence sex-gender-sexuality is reaffirmed. Challenging this binary norm, crossing gender borders or choosing non-traditional journeys have often become the ultimate transgressions against what is acceptable in a legitimate human being. Therefore those who dare to cross the borders of normative gender expression have

¹²⁶ p.xi

¹²⁷ BUTTLER, J. (1999).

often seemed to deserve correction, abjection, punishment, and destruction. As Riki Wilchins observes:

[...] for transpeople, having issues with gender is the basis for common identity. Transpeople have no choice but to attack gender norms, because their very existence is in itself a challenge to gender norms, no matter how well they might visually conform to them.¹²⁸

A number of transgender people have their formative years marked by violence against their bodies and souls in the name of a normative notion of the human and of what the body of a human must be. Their life is a daily struggle to prove their own humanity, when denied safe access to school, work, and even public bathrooms. Not uncommonly, they are either refused medical treatment or neglected as social pariah. What makes us think of Judith Butler when questioning on whom counts as human, whose lives count as lives: “What makes for a grievable life?”¹²⁹

In conservative times like we live in this beginning of century, we frequently see the word of religion used to qualify (or not) somebody in the category of whom deserves both respect and grieving. As Jamake Highwater argues, to question the divine law is the ultimate transgression, because it attempts to cross the boundaries laid down by a religious cosmology. It is, so to speak, an argument with God: “Of all forbidden acts, there is none as strongly prohibited as transcending a society’s mythology and thereby calling into question its most tenaciously held attitudes about divinity, morality, normality, and the ultimate nature of reality.”¹³⁰ It is assumed that God does not make mistakes and does not create freaks, unless he intended to punish. That thought makes us often mistake variation for deviation, what seems to assume a sinister connotation when

¹²⁸ WILCHINS, R. (2004). p.142

¹²⁹ BUTLER, J. (2003). p.199

¹³⁰ HIGHWATER, J.(1997). p.54

applied to gender, sex and sexual orientation. In “Power, Bodies and Difference”, Moira Gatens explains that:

Difference is not concerned with privileging an essentially biological difference between sexes. Rather it is concerned with the mechanisms by which bodies are recognized as different only in so far as they are constructed as possessing or lacking some privileged quality or qualities. What is crucial in the [...] current context is the thorough interrogation of the means by which bodies become invested by differences which are taken to be fundamental ontological differences. Differences as well as commonality must be respected among those who have historically been excluded from speech/writing and are now struggling for expression. Beauvoir assumed that specificity of the reproductive body must be overcome if sexual equality is to be realized.¹³¹

Therefore I believe in the relevance of transgender/queer studies and art to raise a fundamental reflection upon the relations of asymmetry in our society. Queer represents clearly the difference that does not want to be assimilated or tolerated, being therefore much more transgressive and disturbing. Its main target is the heteronormativity, but also includes a critique to the police of “normalization” of part the gay and lesbian groups, which still keep heteronormativity as a reference. It is necessary to challenge and contest the knowledge and dominant hierarchies which have built what is now classified as normal. To think queer means to problematize and contest traditional forms of knowledge and identity.

Finally, it is my desire that literature can continue to make us rethink our notions of reality. Moreover, I hope all arts can continue diligent in the effort to expand everyone’s awareness, so it can better encompass the diversity of what to be human is.

¹³¹ GATENS, M. (1999). pp.232-233

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