

**The Disruptive Third:
Textual Strategies for Androgynous Bodies**

By Elyssa Warkentin
University of Manitoba
2002

A thesis
submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
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**THE DISRUPTIVE THIRD: TEXTUAL STRATEGIES
FOR ANDROGYNOUS BODIES**

BY

Elyssa Warkentin

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree
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MASTER OF ARTS

ELYSSA WARKENTIN ©2002

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The Disruptive Third: Textual Strategies for Androgynous Bodies

By Elyssa Warkentin

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the ways in which the androgynous characters in three late twentieth-century novels enact disruptions of sex and gender binaries. Working with a definition of androgyny that includes both sex and gender outlaws, I adopt Marjorie Garber's notion of a third gender as a means of examining the binary disruptions that result in these novels. After situating androgyny within a critical and theoretical history, I look more specifically at the function of the androgyne within each novel. In Jeanette Winterson's historical fantasy The Passion, androgyny is presented as a source of great personal satisfaction for the androgynous Villanelle, and the binary disruptions that she embodies bring with them increased life-choices and freedoms. Will Self's Cock & Bull, however, is a satire on the very possibility of gender transgression, and the androgynous characters are presented as either victims or victimizers. Leslie Feinberg's Stone Butch Blues situates the androgynous body in a realist and autobiographical framework that clearly shows the dangers (but also the rewards) of living in a state of ambiguous gender. The thesis concludes by observing the current lack of adequate theorizing on the complexities of sex and gender transgression that occur at the site of the androgynous body – and by calling for change.

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The Disruptive Third: Textual Strategies for Androgynous Bodies

By Elyssa Warkentin

Chapter One

Theorizing Androgyny

"There is no differentiation between man or woman; there is no 'man,' there is no 'woman,' just a shared organism responding to touch, smell, taste, sound."

– Betty Roszak ("The Human Continuum" 305)

"To oppose something is to maintain it ... To learn which questions are unanswerable, and not to answer them: this skill is most needful in times of stress and darkness."

– Ursula K. Le Guin (The Left Hand of Darkness 153)

"Who was I now – woman or man? That question could never be answered as long as those were the only choices; it could never be answered if it had to be asked."

– Leslie Feinberg (Stone Butch Blues 222)

The concept of androgyny faded from fashion somewhat with the decline of high modernism, as Lisa Rado documents in her book The Modern Androgyne Imagination: A Failed Sublime, which was published in 2000. But it has enjoyed something of a renaissance in recent years, certainly in pop culture with the

continuing mainstream appeal of drag queens and, for example, the stage and screen success of John Cameron Mitchell's Hedwig and the Angry Inch, but also in literature and critical theory. Androgyny is a complex site of intersection between sex, gender and sexuality; it blurs the already obscure boundaries between the three, and tends to break down any totalizing sex or gender category it comes into contact with. As queer theorist Marilyn Farwell argues, "once gender definitions are unclear, sexual definitions also become unclear" (165). For this reason, androgyny is a rich site for investigations into the nature of sex, gender and sexuality, and the interplay between them. Significantly, the 'problem' of androgyny (often formulated as the question, "is that a man or a woman?") cannot be solved; the union of two already problematic categories in a single being necessarily raises more questions than it answers. As Le Guin's epigraph reminds us, some questions are unanswerable; sometimes the search for answers is not appropriate. Androgyny, then, is a site that must be theorized, but can never be finally 'solved.' It remains, as it must, open-ended and alive.

Androgyny does, however, have the tendency to act as a disruptive influence on the gender and sex categories it comes into contact with – particularly binaries such as male / female and homosexual / heterosexual. This chapter will situate androgyny in a theoretical history, and examine the ways in which contemporary critical theory, particularly postmodern gender theory, tends to

ignore the materiality of androgynous bodies. Through an understanding of androgyny as a third gender position, I will examine the ways in which it functions as a disruptive and potentially (though not necessarily) progressive influence on conceptions of gender itself. The following chapters will investigate the deployment of androgyny in three recent novels – Jeanette Winterson’s The Passion, Will Self’s Cock & Bull, and Leslie Feinberg’s Stone Butch Blues – and the very different ways in which the androgynous bodies found in each novel act as disruptive forces within the binary sex and gender categories that exist in these works of fiction. Each novel is of a very different genre; thus I will also examine the contrasting ways androgyny is deployed across several genres. The historical fantasy of The Passion offers an idealized and romanticized version of androgyny; Cock & Bull is a vicious satire on the very idea of the possibility of gender transgression; Stone Butch Blues situates the androgynous body in a realist and autobiographical framework that clearly shows the dangers and difficulties of living in a state of ambiguous gender – dangers that postmodern gender and queer theorists tend to overlook. In each novel, androgyny is a disruptive force, but that disruption occurs in vastly different ways.

Questions of identity – particularly questions of gender identity – are often fraught with highly-charged emotional debate and fundamental disagreement simply because there is so much at stake, both personally and politically.¹ But they

are also questions that will not *not* be addressed. Kate Bornstein observes, “I know too many male men with vaginas and too many female women with penises to any longer buy into some wishful thinking on the part of old-guard scientists who’d like to have things all nice and orderly in some predictable binary” (26).

Bornstein’s apparent confusion about the distinction between sex and gender expression is not unproblematic; still, the apparent contradiction of men with vaginas and women with penises brings into crisis questions about how women and men are defined, what, exactly, it means to be either (or neither) sex or gender, and how stable these categories are.

The question of meaning is always problematic in any discussion of androgyny. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, androgyny is simply the “union of sexes in one individual.” While this seems to suggest that androgyny can denote any blending of male and female in a sole individual – and while this thesis interprets that blending to include all manner of sex and gender outlaws – some critics argue that androgyny itself perpetuates the gender binary it would seem to question. Joanne Blum notes, “While proponents of androgyny posit a transcendence of overly masculine or feminine behavior through a blend, or a combination, of gender-related characteristics, the bipolar construct on which this androgynous blend is based remains firmly intact” (2).² Certainly in the satiric Cock & Bull, examined in Chapter Three of this thesis, androgyny momentarily

disrupts the idea of binary gender, only to reinforce essentialist notions of masculinity and femininity. Blum argues for a more “multidimensional” vision of gender which, “rather than effecting an androgynous blend of masculine and feminine, defies and transcends these gender constructs” (2). Though Blum herself does not use the word, her argument points to transgender as a transgressive gender category that destroys the binary gender opposition³ that androgyny, in her view, leaves intact. As a pioneer of the modern transgender rights movement, Feinberg defines the concept of transgender in the following way: “transgender people traverse, bridge, or blur the boundary of the gender expression they were assigned at birth” (Transgender Warriors x). However, this brings up an important terminological point – although ‘androgyny’ and ‘transgender’ are intimately connected, they are terms that cannot be easily conflated. While some transgendered people (some butch lesbians, for example) may consider themselves androgynous, others (transsexuals, perhaps) may embrace a masculine or feminine gender expression entirely, and be offended by the label ‘androgynous.’ Transgender and androgyny inhabit similar spaces, but the connection between the two terms (both of which inform and challenge contemporary gender theory), has not yet been adequately theorized.

This thesis takes androgyny as an umbrella term that includes gender outlaws of all description – from transsexuals (while acknowledging that not all

transsexuals would employ the label themselves) to butch women and femme men. My formulation of androgyny is not intended to be absolute, but is meant simply to open a provisional space in which discussion can take place. There are, of course, further problems of terminology. Bornstein uses the pronouns “ze” and “hir,” for example, to escape the duality of gender-specific language, but these new pronouns are rarely used elsewhere. As Feinberg explains, “Language can’t be ordered individually, as if from a Sears catalogue. It is forged collectively, in the fiery heat of struggle ... It’s not the words themselves that are important to me – it’s our lives” (TW ix). Bornstein also writes:

I think that the most valuable label or name would be paradoxical. It would be a name that defines the unique essence of who we are, without constructing a definition that would exclude anyone else. It would be a name that would give us unlimited options while at the same time giving us some common ground. (184)

Finally, though, Bornstein agrees with Feinberg that the label ‘transgender’ is the most appropriate label currently in use, and adds, “I want to see ‘transgender’ mean ‘transgressively gendered’” (250) – something that can often be argued of androgyny, as well.

Contemporary notions of androgyny can be traced back to the speech of Aristophanes in Plato’s Symposium. In this originating myth, humans are divided

into three sexes – men, women, and a third which “partook of the nature of both the others” (59). But Zeus, fearing the strength of humans, cut them all in half. Aristophanes explains: “Man’s original body having been thus cut in two, each half yearned for the half from which it had been severed. When they met they threw their arms round one another and embraced, in their longing to grow together again” (61). Androgyny is thus figured as a utopian return to an original state of wholeness – a joining of the severed halves.⁴ And humans are always engaged in a “pursuit of the whole” (64). “The way to happiness,” Aristophanes suggests, is “returning to our original condition” (65), as one of the three original sexes.

Following Plato, androgyny is quite often referred to as a third sex – something that is perhaps theoretically felicitous, but whose promise is not generally borne out by the experience of those living it. Male-to-female transsexual Claudine Griggs observes,

My experience says that gender neutrality does not precipitate an attribution of ‘neither male nor female;’ it triggers an attribution of ‘man’ from some people and ‘woman’ from others. Ambiguity results in unpredictable attribution, but not specifically non-attribution. Where an observer genuinely cannot determine gender, there will usually be other attempts to decipher bodily presentation

through conversational or interactional scrutiny – perhaps direct inquiry – until attribution is made. (20-21)

Attribution must be made so that the apparently essential characteristics of the individual in question can be read – as Judith Butler notes, for “those abjected beings who do not appear properly gendered, it is their very humanness that comes into question” (Bodies That Matter 8).

How can an individual be considered human while existing outside of the male / female binary? What other existence is possible? One starting point for talking about gender is essentialism, defined by Diana Fuss in Essentially Speaking, her study of the essentialist / constructivist binary, as “a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the ‘whatness’ of a given entity” (xi). Gender essentialism, baldly stated, is the belief that there is an essential masculinity or femininity – something that transcends historical and cultural differences to assert that men are like this, women like that. And, obviously, claims to gender essentialism are politically expedient – even necessary (though admittedly problematic) to movements such as feminism, which bases its politics on the integrity of the presumably unified subject it represents. However, as Butler writes, “The mobilization of identity categories for the purposes of politicization always remain [sic] threatened by the prospect of identity becoming an instrument of the power one opposes.” She adds, though, that

this danger is “no reason not to use, and be used, by identity. There is no political position purified of power, and perhaps that impurity is what produces agency as the potential interruption and reversal of regulatory regimes” (GT xxvi). Identity politics rests on the assumption that it is representative of a certain constituency, and because of that, essentialism is highly attractive: women, as a group unified by their very nature, can together resist the repression of patriarchy. However, the gender blurring enacted by androgyny tends to lead theorists (particularly queer postmodernists) towards a constructionist formulation of gender in which, as Fuss explains, “the body is never simply there, rather it is composed of a network of effects continually subject to sociopolitical determination” (5). If men can have vaginas and women penises, as Bornstein suggests and as Winterson, Self and Feinberg assume in their respective narratives of gender transgressions, obviously the relationship between biology and gender expression is more complex than a reductive version of gender essentialism can explain – a challenge to identity politics that has been received by some as a threat. Gender theorist Sandra Lee Bartkey contends: “Any political project which aims to dismantle the machinery that turns a female body into a feminine one may well be apprehended by a woman as something that threatens her with desexualization, if not outright annihilation” (77). This may well account for some of the fear and hostility with which people of androgynous appearance are often met – if androgyny proves gender a construct,

does that strip gender identification from everyone? And how can social equality movements based in identity politics (feminist, queer, etc.) respond to that apparent threat? Fuss, however, argues that the essentialist / constructionist binary is illusory, and that in fact, “the possibility of any radical constructivism can only be built on the foundations of a hidden essentialism” (12-13) – that is, social forces do their constitutive work on already-existing bodies. Understanding the interconnectedness of essentialism and constructivism, then, helps to make the political danger or ‘threat’ of androgyny ring hollow – the mingling of masculine and feminine does not threaten anyone’s gender expression – rather, it opens up more options for those who chose to take them.

Gender essentialism is obviously problematic, both politically and theoretically. Fuss explains the dilemma: to argue that “the natural provides the raw material and determinative starting point for the practices and laws of the social” (3), is dangerously close to arguing in favour of biological determinism, which is one of the forces against which feminism struggles. For this reason, essentialist thinking has been abandoned by many theorists, particularly postmodernists – despite Fuss’s attempt to reevaluate it as a useful and potentially sophisticated theoretical tool. For these people, as Fuss explains, “essentialism is nothing more than the philosophical enforcer of a liberal humanist idealism which seeks to locate and to contain the subject within a fixed set of differences” (xii).

This essentialist desire to contain the human subject within a “fixed set of differences” – identity politics’ paradigmatic “race, class, ethnicity, etc....” (Butler 143) – has been problematized by theorists like Butler, who argue that the idea of an essential subject is in itself repressive. Susan Bordo observes that many critics are starting to articulate “a new scepticism about the use of gender as an analytic category” (135).

Michel Foucault offers a fundamental and compelling challenge to essentialism in The History of Sexuality (particularly in the first volume), and in his work on discourse theory and power. He asserts that far from being essential human characteristics, gender and sexuality are formed discursively through regulatory institutions that have been evolving since the seventeenth century. He argues, “Through the various discourses ... a norm of sexual development was defined and all the possible deviations were carefully described” (HS 36). Chris Weedon, in her book Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory explains:

Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning.

They constitute the ‘nature’ of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects which they seek to govern.

Neither the body nor thoughts and feelings have meaning outside of their discursive articulation, but the ways in which discourses constitute the minds and bodies of individuals is always part of a

wider network of power relations, often with institutional bases.

(105)

Gender – in fact, the body itself – is a discursive construction. Butler observes, “For Foucault, the body is not ‘sexed’ in any significant sense prior to its determination within a discourse through which it becomes invested with an ‘idea’ of natural or essential sex” (GT 117). Foucault identifies discursive methods of power (medicalization, for example), “whose operation is not ensured by right but by technique, not by law but by normalization, not by punishment but by control, methods that are employed on all levels and in forms that go beyond the state and its apparatus” (HS 89). This power is omnipresent and all-encompassing, and is itself constitutive of sex and sexuality. He concludes:

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries to gradually uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power. (HS 105-6)

Sexuality is constructed through the very discourses that seek to study and regulate it – it is a circular relationship, and for that reason, difficult to interrupt and examine.

However, Foucault does leave room for individual opposition to the regulatory power of sexual discourse. Power, he argues, is not necessarily negative and “needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body” (“Truth and Power” 61). He claims that “where there is power, there is resistance” (HS 95), and adds that resistance, in the form of a “‘reverse’ discourse” (HS 101), is possible. Finally, Foucault ends his argument with the assertion that “the rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures” (HS 157). In other words, Foucault advocates a breaking away from the regulatory nature of sex-as-discourse (which constitutes essentialist beliefs in body and sex roles), and an embracing of the “claims of bodies” (HS 157) – regardless of gender or sex – as a mode of resistance. The idea of pleasure as resistance is precisely Winterson’s project in The Passion, where Villanelle’s ambiguously-sexed body is the site of the novel’s most intense pleasures and transgressions. Foucault opens up a theoretical space in which androgynous bodies can be considered key to our understanding of the regulatory nature of sexual discourse. The androgyne, here, is not a ‘failed’ man or woman, but rather a discursively-produced being that

highlights the limitations of binary notions of gender.

Several writers have criticized Foucault for universalizing male experience. Bartkey argues, “to overlook the forms of subjection that engender the feminine body is to perpetuate the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom these disciplines have been imposed. Hence ... [Foucault’s] analysis as a whole reproduces that sexism which is endemic throughout Western political theory” (65). Nancy Hartsock refers to Foucault pointedly as “the colonizer who resists” (166). Still, his work has provided a crucial framework for postmodern gender theorists, and has in fact been reinvigorated by these new uses of his theories.

Foucault’s work on discursive sexuality and his linkage of sexuality, truth and power are an important predecessor to the work of Judith Butler,⁵ whose theory of gender performativity (formulated in Gender Trouble and revised in later work) has radically altered the field of gender studies since its publication in 1990. Gender Trouble takes Foucault’s formulation of the discursive construction of identity for granted, but extends it to the corporeal realm. Butler writes, “‘The body’ is itself a construction, as are the myriad ‘bodies’ that constitute the domain of gendered subjects” (GT 13). She continues:

Regulatory practices of gender formation and division constitute identity, the internal coherence of the subject, indeed, the self-identical status of the person ... The ‘coherence’ and ‘continuity’ of

‘the person’ are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility.

(GT 23)

Gender, thus, is the means through which individuals become intelligible to each other – which is a credible explanation for the hostility and incomprehension individuals with ambiguous gender traits often experience. Claudine Griggs relates an episode of mixed attribution while she was in a bar – a patron recognized her first as a man, then as a woman. She writes, “Though his perception of me changed from ‘man’ to ‘woman’ in not more than 15 minutes, the attribution was unambiguous at each given moment” (22). Butler argues:

‘Intelligible’ genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations or coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire ... The specters of discontinuity and incoherence, themselves thinkable only in relations to existing norms of continuity and coherence, are constantly prohibited and produced by the very laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted genders, and the ‘expression’ or ‘effect’ of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice. (GT 23)

Androgynous people, as defined in this thesis, are exactly these “specters of

discontinuity and incoherence” who are theoretically valuable precisely because they disrupt and expose, by their very existence, the regulatory fiction of heteronormativity. Butler explains, “Gender as substance, the viability of man and woman as nouns, is called into question by the dissonant play of attributes that fail to conform to sequential or causal models of intelligibility” (GT 32). Feinberg’s narrator in Stone Butch Blues, Jess Goldberg, is illustrative of Butler’s point. Her shifting between male and female gender roles, and even between male and female anatomy, makes her unintelligible even to people who love her – her girlfriend Theresa breaks up with her when she begins passing as a man, at least in part because she can’t identify Jess as either woman or man.

Gender Trouble is perhaps infamous for its assertion that “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (GT 33). Gender, then, is defined as “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (GT 43-44). Gender has no ontological status – it is comprised solely of the performances it in turn demands. This seeming contradiction, Butler argues, is the key to the resistance that she claims is strikingly absent from Foucault’s work. She writes that “If the regulatory fictions of sex and gender are themselves multiply contested sites of meaning, then

the very multiplicity of their construction holds out the possibility of a disruption of their univocal posturing” (GT 43). Butler argues that “subversive repetition” (GT 176) – in forms such as drag, where “the parody is of the very notion of an original” (GT 175) – is the key to exposing and resisting heteronormative regulatory fictions of gender. The problem of agency is reformulated into an examination of how signification works, and how its power is exercised. Opposition is thus reiterative, and comes from within the power discourse.

Butler has refined and re-thought the premise of Gender Trouble continually in the years since its publication. The book seems to suggest that gender is a garment that can be slipped on and off at will; Butler herself acknowledges, in the tenth anniversary edition’s new preface, “Gender Trouble sometimes reads as if gender is simply self-invention” (GT xxv). It also lacks consideration of transsexual and transgender bodies (which she acknowledges in the new preface) – if gender is simply performative, how can we account for the surgical intervention of sex-change operations, without resorting to patronizing charges of ‘false consciousness’? If gender is a deliberate performance, why would people of androgynous appearance choose to face harassment and violence on the street, instead of choosing to perform their required gender? In a sense, Butler dodges the question. In the new preface, she observes: “it is difficult to say precisely what performativity is not only because my own views on what

‘performativity’ might mean have changed over time ... but because so many others have taken it up and given it their own formulations” (GT xiv).

In Bodies That Matter, Butler’s examination of the materiality of the body (which, she argues, is discursively produced), she offers an important clarification – most relevantly as follows:

Gender performance cannot be theorized apart from the forcible and reiterative practice of regulatory sexual regimes ... The account of agency conditioned by those very regimes of discourse / power cannot be conflated with voluntarism or individualism ... The materialization of norms requires those identificatory processes by which norms are assumed or appropriated, and these identifications precede and enable the formation of a subject, but are not, strictly speaking, performed by a subject; and ... the limits of constructivism are exposed at those boundaries of bodily life where abjected or delegitimated bodies fail to count as ‘bodies.’ (BM 15)

She adds that her use of drag as an example of gender performativity in Gender Trouble should not be considered representative of the nature of gender performance – it is simply one possibility among many for the subversive repetition she calls for. However, the fallacy of Butler’s drag analogy has been observed by queer theorist Judith Halberstam in Female Masculinity, who argues

that the stone butch – androgynous in her combination of female biology and masculine gender presentation – defies Butler’s theory:

The stone butch again challenges even [Butler’s] complicated theory of performativity because her performance is embedded within a nonperformance: stone butchness, in other words, performs both female masculinity and a rejection of enforced anatomical femininity. Nonperformance, in this formulation, signifies as heavily as performance and reveals the ways in which performativity itself is as much a record of what a body will not do as what it might do. (126).

Halberstam’s understanding of Butler’s concept of performativity might be lacking (is nonperformance not itself a type of performance?), but her reading of butch into Butler’s theory again brings to mind Fuss’s assertion that: “the possibility of any radical constructivism can only be built on the foundations of a hidden essentialism” (12-13) – that is, what bodies will and will not do. If gender is indeed entirely performance, why can the butches in Feinberg’s novel not perform feminine – even for a day? Their attempt to wear dresses and wigs to find work in department stores fails miserably; their bodies simply will not perform convincingly. This breaking down of the essentialist / constructivist binary offers an important way of interpreting androgynous characters, who fit comfortably into

no binary system.

Bornstein agrees that the two-gender system is overly simplistic; she replaces the notion of binary gender with a theory that there are as many distinct genders as there are people, and that these genders relate to each other in a pyramid-like power hierarchy that places “perfectly gendered” (41) individuals – white, male, American, upper-middle-class, heterosexual, etc. – at the top, and gender outlaws on the bottom. Following both Foucault and Butler, she argues:

We’re starting to define ‘gender’ as a hierarchical dynamic masquerading behind and playing itself out through each of only two socially privileged monogendered identities. The power of this kind of gender perfection would be in direct proportion to the power granted those who can stake legitimate claims to those identities. The power is derived from the very invisibility of the gender / identity hierarchy. This makes gender, identity, and power each functions of each other, inextricably woven into the web of our culture beneath an attractive tapestry called the bipolar gender system. (42)

Thus, Bornstein argues that a Jewish teenaged male and a baby-boomer businessman in fact represent different genders – she claims that “different kinds of men might as well be tagged as different genders” (41). If each person then represents a separate gender, Bornstein is merely restating liberal individualism in

the guise of gender radicalism, which in the end does little to advance her political cause. Bornstein, too, exhibits a reliance on essentialism that seems at odds with her radical constructivist politics. She argues for an intense examination of the category of gender on the basis that, “Until we’ve fully explored our identities, until we’ve explored our genders and made some choices about them based on informed consent, we’re presenting consciously or unconsciously a more or less false picture of ourselves to the world” (22). This implies that there is a true self – perhaps temporarily obscured – that needs to find expression, which appears to contradict Bornstein’s assertion that “I think it’s identity itself I want to quit now” (252). Her desire to “live without gender” (280) in a space of “measured, personal anarchy” (270) – despite the fact that many of the testimonials she quotes in her own text suggest the impossibility of living outside of gender – illustrates one of the major political difficulties with her theory: if all individuals have distinct genders, how can political organizing for social equality take place? How can transgendered people – or women, or queers, for that matter – form coalitions? Bornstein leaves the question unanswered.

Halberstam’s Female Masculinity takes as its subject biological females who present masculine gender expressions. She cautions, “It is important when thinking about gender variations such as male femininity and female masculinity not simply to create another binary in which masculinity always signifies power”

(28-29) – a vital issue in thinking about all forms of androgyny, particularly transsexuality. (Of course, the theoretical power to avoid creating new binaries is conditioned by social forces such as sexism, which are not necessarily affected by theory at all.) Bornstein contends that “transsexual people, no matter the direction in which they’re heading, prove the existence of male privilege over and over” (152). She cites an example from her own life – she was forced to accept a 30 per cent pay cut when she began to pass as a woman. Similarly, but more extremely, in Cock & Bull Carol’s penis gives her immediate access to ‘male’ aggression and sexual power while Bull’s vagina casts him as a vulnerable victim. However, while FTM transsexuals sometimes are able to “access male privilege within their reassigned genders” (Halberstam 143), as Halberstam suggests, they are also often subject to harassment and violence upon discovery. So, when Jess Goldberg begins passing as a man in Stone Butch Blues, she is able, finally, to find steady employment. But she also lives in isolation and fear – the economic privilege she experiences comes at a high personal cost.

Halberstam’s formulation of gender, which blends aspects of performativity theory with a theory of multiple genders that echoes Bornstein’s, is significant for its “refusal of the dialectic of home and border” (170). If the gender binary is shown to be a fiction – as, Halberstam argues, the existence of female masculinity makes clear – then there is no home gender, and no gender borders to speak of.

She writes, “I want to argue for a sexual discourse that pays particular attention to the constellations of acts that make up increasingly queer gender identities” (118). Identity, then, flows from behavior. Like Bornstein, Halberstam identifies different types of female masculinities (such as stone butch, drag kings, trans butch, etc.) as different genders – but attempts to create a non-hierarchical taxonomy instead of abandoning gender entirely, as Bornstein does.

Marjorie Garber, like Plato, describes the androgynous body as neither male nor female; therefore constitutive of a “third,” which functions differently from the other sexes – in fact, it doesn’t follow the patterns of the other sexes at all. She writes, “The ‘third’ is a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility” (11), and argues that the transvestite is exemplary of the third, well versed in the “disruptive act of putting in question” (13). I would argue that androgynous bodies, which for the purpose of this thesis include the transvestite, are constitutive of Garber’s ‘third’ gender, formulated as a space of possibility.⁶ Casting androgyny as a ‘third’ allows for the necessary political mobilizing that Bornstein’s theory lacks, and avoids the confusion of Halberstam’s non-heirarchical taxonomy of genders, which fails to explain what can be considered a gender appropriate for inclusion. Further, to define the ‘third’ as an open space, a site of possibility engaged in the act of the disruption of binary gender, allows it to remain as inclusive as possible – though it is by no means perfect. Thus, a

provisional return to Plato's original formulation of androgyny as the third sex is appropriate, while remembering Claudine Griggs' statement that public gender attribution is still almost always male or female – if androgyny represents a third gender, it has yet to gain widespread public acceptance. Androgyny, then, is not always recognized, and is therefore not always disruptive of binary notions of gender in the social world (indeed, as Griggs observes, the public will often go far to avoid acknowledging it). But in each of the following novels, androgynous characters are definitely disruptive – though each in a different way, and to a different degree.

Halberstam takes issue with the idea of a third gender. She argues, “‘Thirdness’ merely balances the binary system and, furthermore, tends to homogenize many different gender variations under the banner of ‘other’” (28). Her second point is more compelling than her first – whether androgyny balances or disrupts the binary gender system (indeed, it is questionable whether or not any binary *can* be ‘balanced’ by a third), is largely a question of perspective. However, the problem of homogenization within the third category is critical. For example, although Villanelle and Jess Goldberg both inhabit the space of the third, they are radically different creations. Because it is defined as a space of possibility, the realm of expression within the third category is incalculable – and it is here that gender theory reaches its limit. How can the vast realm of gender possibility – the

endless mutations and modifications apparent in the fictions that follow – be adequately theorized? Perhaps, as Viviane K. Namaste argues, the theory is beside the point. She writes:

In recent years, the field known as queer theory has witnessed a veritable explosion of essays, presentations, and books on the subject of drag, gender, performance, and transsexuality. Yet these works have shown very little concern for the individuals who live, work, and identify themselves as drag queens, transsexuals, or transgenderists. (9)

Indeed, the use of theory against androgynous bodies can be problematic, particularly because these bodies do not tend to fit into any single theory of gender. My use of Garber's theory of the third gender to explain androgyny should be understood as provisional. In the chapters that follow, I will examine how the androgynous characters in each novel function as disruptive entities, using the concept of the third as a makeshift guiding principle. Despite the difficulties the concept of the third shares with other theories of gender, it provides the most useful way of approaching the transgressive genders at work in the novels that follow, and allows the binary-smashing, disruptive potential of androgynous bodies to be explored.

Peter Stallybrass and Allon White remind us in The Politics and Poetics of

Transgression, that “It would be wrong to associate the exhilarating sense of freedom which transgression affords with any necessary or automatic political progressiveness” (201). Political progressiveness of course varies in the novels that follow. While the androgynous position of the third is invariably disruptive of gender and sexual binaries throughout each of the novels, the effects of those disruptions differ. As we will see, androgynous and transgendered bodies find very different means of expression in the genres represented by The Passion, Cock & Bull and Stone Butch Blues, and the disruptions they enact have vastly different results.

Notes

1. There are also high psychological stakes, identified notably by Freud in his essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” and developed by Butler in Gender Trouble as “the melancholia of gender identification” (81).
2. This is indeed the case in many examples of androgynous literature; Ursula K. Le Guin’s The Left Hand of Darkness posits a race of alien androgynes, all of whom are almost entirely masculine in their gender expression – a fact the author now regrets. And perhaps more famously, Simone de Beauvoir describes her utopian androgynous world as a “brotherhood” (157). On the other side of the binary, Helene Cixous’ conception of bisexuality suggests a doing away with gender binaries through a mingling of the sexes, but her definition of ‘woman’ remains essentialist: “When I say ‘woman,’” Cixous writes, “I’m speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history” (“Laugh of the Medusa” 245).
3. Here it is important to note the distinction between transgender and transsexual: while a transsexual individual often crosses sex and gender boundaries with the goal of transition into the ‘opposite’ (which does not necessarily challenge the gender binary), transgendered individuals – like Feinberg – may not be interested

in inhabiting solely a masculine or feminine space. This explains the theoretical opposition between transgender (or queer) theory and transsexual subjectivity, as identified by Namaste.

4. This notion has gained widespread attention recently, for example, with the success of the off-Broadway musical and subsequent film Hedwig and the Angry Inch. The faux glam rock band, with John Cameron Mitchell as the ambiguously-sexed Hedwig on vocals, performed their song “The Origin of Love” – an account of the Platonic myth – on the Rosie O’Donnell Show on January 15, 1999, thereby introducing middle America to both theoretical and embodied androgyny.

5. Butler, of course, disagrees with Foucault on many points, particularly his notion of the all-encompassing nature of power, which “implicitly refutes the postulation of a subversive or emancipatory sexuality which could be free of the law” (GT 29).

6. Garber does not automatically place the androgyne within the category of the third; however, our definitions of androgyny differ greatly – she conflates androgyny with hermaphroditism; my definition, like Feinberg’s, is much broader than this.

Chapter Two

Passions and Pleasures: Fantastic Androgyny in The Passion

"What we ... need is to accept in ourselves, with pleasure, the subtle and various emotions that are the infinity of a human being. More, not less, is the capacity of the heart. More not less is the capacity of art."

– Jeanette Winterson (Art Objects 108)

Jeanette Winterson's 1987 novel The Passion has been described on its cover by Edmund White as a "fairy tale about passion, gambling, madness, and androgynous ecstasy" (Vintage International edition).¹ Interestingly, as Christy Burns notes, this "fairy tale" was reviewed upon its publication with "a certain gender-encoded chastisement ... strengthened by the occasional antifeminist, or even antilesbian, sideswipe" (279). Burns cites several critics whose negative reception of the novel betrayed strong anxieties about its treatment of gender. William Pritchard, for example, saw in the novel "a general contempt for hearth and home, for the family, for 'our broken society' and especially for men" (279). Another critic, Peter Kemp, accused Winterson of "scrawling the graffiti of gender-spite across her pages" (279). The vitriolic sense of moral outrage embedded in these criticisms suggests that Winterson hit a nerve with her portrayal

of demonstrably androgynous narrators and ambiguous sexualities. Pritchard and Kemp sound defensive – as if they are somehow under attack. This can only be understood in light of Jeffrey Weeks’ observation that “[Identity] is an absolutely fundamental concept, offering a sense of personal unity, social location, and even at times a political commitment” (31). The utopian formulation of androgyny in Winterson’s text, which questions the fixity of gender and sexual categories – and even the stability of the self – can indeed be read as a disruption of, and threat to the types of immutable gender roles Pritchard and Kemp presumably endorse.

But how tenable is the ‘threat’ presented by The Passion? Does the novel really threaten binary gender identity, as Winterson’s critics seem to think? Does its presentation of a utopian strain of androgyny call binary notions of gender into question? Or are questions of gender oppression romanticized and therefore depoliticized through Winterson’s fantastic, magic-realist genre?² Postmodern queer theorist Laura Doan argues that Winterson’s writing effects “a politicization of the postmodern cultural domain by collapsing binaries and boundaries, demanding the reconfiguration of gender constructions and deregulating heteronormativity through the genesis of pluralistic sexual identities” (141). She adds that The Passion demonstrates that “the search for clear-cut distinctions where gender is concerned is futile” (149). Certainly, as we shall see, Winterson holds up the androgynous body as an epitome of the human – in Villanelle, female

and male characteristics are blended into an idealized whole. Henri, who exhibits some of Villanelle's gender fluidity (without exhibiting a physical mingling of the sexes) but in fact actively works against it, is literally and metaphorically imprisoned by his rigidity at the end of the novel. Each, at times, occupies the gender position of the third, defined by Garber as a potentially disruptive space of possibility; but while Villanelle embraces the uncertainties this gender position entails, Henri cannot. The Passion, then, is a utopian illustration of androgyny, and offers up the expression of the pleasures and excesses of the body (echoing the writing Michel Foucault, as we shall see), as a replacement for gender binarism. The disruptive potential of the third gender position is presented throughout as empowering and advantageous.

The Passion is both historical and fantastic; both factual and magical. It is the narrative of two travelers – Villanelle, the daughter of a Venetian boatman who plies her trade and gambles with her heart in the casinos of Venice, and Henri, a soldier and cook, loyal to Napoleon. The novel bases many events around Henri's experiences in Napoleon's army – to that extent, its genre appears to be historical fiction. But it also includes impossible elements like an icicle that will not melt, and a disembodied, stolen heart that continues to beat – elements that suggest the fantastic realm of magic realism. Burns identifies this juxtaposition of genres as a statement of "the necessity that fantasy will run up against reality

often” (291); that is, although the genres seem to oppose each other, in fact they function together – thus a binary genre scheme (historical fact / fantasy) is circumvented, and the genres fuse into a third. The narrative structure of the novel thus echoes Winterson’s deployment of gender – androgyny, the disruptive and transgressive third gender, exists here in a third genre space that appropriately mirrors the disruptive capacity of the androgynous body. Doan identifies the blending of genres as politically-charged, arguing that “Winterson constructs her narrative ... in order to challenge and subvert patriarchal and heterosexist discourses and, ultimately, to facilitate a forceful and positive radical oppositional critique” (138). Doan, in short, argues that a postmodern melding of genres and styles allows Winterson to pursue a political project – the fantastic elements of the novel do not preclude its disruptive potential.

Very soon after Villanelle begins her narration, Winterson marks her as a gender outlaw. Villanelle acknowledges, “[I] have taken my pleasure with both men and women” (Passion 59-60). She thus exists outside of the heterosexual / homosexual binary which, as we have seen, simultaneously disrupts the gender binary, as well. Her sexual relationship with her female lover is described, significantly, with great candor. She says of her lover, “when she touched me I knew I was loved and with a passion I had not felt before. Not with another, and not in myself” (Passion 95). She further describes the physical nature of their

relationship, saying “I smell her skin [and] find the mute curves of her nakedness” (Passion 146). She also has sexual relationships with men, including Henri. He narrates:

I touched her when I was sure she was asleep. Ran my hand up her spine and wondered if all women felt so soft and firm. One night she turned over suddenly and told me to make love to her.

‘I don’t know how.’

‘Then I’ll make love to you.’ (Passion 102-3)

As Doan argues, Winterson’s claim is “on behalf of the transcendence of love – rendering whichever way one is born [ie. male or female] inconsequential” (144).

This is an echo of Michel Foucault’s notion of bodily pleasure as a form of resistance to regulatory (heteronormative) sexual discourses. In the first volume of The History of Sexuality he writes, “Where sex and pleasure are concerned, power can ‘do’ nothing but say no to them” (83). Yet, “Pleasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another” (HS 48). Foucault concludes:

We must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power; on the contrary, one tracks along the course laid out by the general deployment of sexuality. It is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim – through a tactical reversal of the various

mechanisms of sexuality – to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance. The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures. (HS 157)

Villanelle says, “I have learnt to take pleasure without always questioning the source” (Passion 148) – that is, in the Foucauldian sense, she finds “pleasure in the truth of pleasure” (HS 71). Her rejection of labeling, in a sense, allows her to transcend sexual categorization; more importantly, her embracing of bodily pleasure (and Winterson’s candidly physical descriptions) functions as a mode of resistance. Villanelle’s body and the pleasure she takes in it fundamentally challenge the essentialist notions of binary gender that regulatory heteronormative sexual discourses attempt to enforce. By existing outside of the male / female binary (and even, with her webbed feet, outside of the animal / human binary), and by rejecting identification within the homosexual / heterosexual binary in favor of attending solely to bodily pleasure, Villanelle – by her very existence – disrupts binary thinking and essentialist formulations of gender.

Villanelle, the gender outlaw, continually engages in gender play (or, what postmodern gender writers like Kate Bornstein refer to as ‘gender fuck’). “I like to dress as a boy now and then,” she says (Passion 96). And at the casino: “I dressed

as a boy because that's what the visitors liked to see. It was part of the game, trying to decide which sex was hidden behind tight breeches and extravagant face-paste" (Passion 54). Gender, for her, is a disguise to be slipped in and out of as convenient. It is a performance, with all the Butler-related implications of that word fully realized. Butler argues that it is through the practice of drag that the performative nature of gender is most clearly exposed.³ She argues,

The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed.

But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance ... As much as [male⁴] drag creates a unified picture of 'woman' (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency.

(GT 175)

In The Passion, Villanelle's physiology (which contains, with her webbed feet, an overtly masculine trait) means that even the first category of anatomical sex is questionable, which certainly exposes, as Butler argues, the constructed nature of

gender.

Throughout The Passion, gender is shown to be contingent upon circumstances. When she meets her female lover, Villanelle is dressed as a man. This causes her some confusion – is her lover solely attracted to her masculine characteristics?

Should I go to see her as myself and joke about the mistake and leave gracefully? My heart shriveled at this thought. To lose her again so soon. And what was myself? Was this breeches and boots self any less real than my garters? (Passion 65-66)

As Doan argues, cross-dressing is “a cultural performance that illustrates how perceptions of external ‘appearance’ and internal ‘essence’ interrelate in a problematic state of flux” (148). When Villanelle asks, “What was myself?” she comes to the crux of the issue: in The Passion, the self is multiple, fragmented and mutable. Doan continues, “Cross-dressing maneuvers the dresser into a position of power, not only the power of knowledge and the ability to control perception but also, and more important, the power and freedom to choose and to play with choice” (148). In this novel, unlike Cock & Bull and Stone Butch Blues, gender play and androgyny are often equated with choice and empowerment. In Winterson’s fantastic world, gender performance is formulated as a choice, and the character who best understands this, Villanelle, ends the novel happily. And

although she eventually tells her lover, “I’m a woman” (Passion 71), her refusal to remove her boots and expose her feet – which mark her as something not entirely female or male – indicates her desire to maintain the integrity of the performance she has chosen, for the moment, at least.

Doan argues that “cross-dressing – cultural perversion as cultural subversion – is only a temporary strategy to facilitate a break from imposed restrictions; it cannot enact permanent social change” (151). But Winterson moves beyond androgynous clothing and inscribes Villanelle’s very body with an androgyny that makes the impossibility of binary gender categories very clear – she has webbed feet, which are considered a masculine trait in Venice. Villanelle states: “there never was a girl whose feet were webbed in the entire history of the boatmen” (Passion 51). Significantly, at Villanelle’s birth the horrified midwife attempts to force Villanelle’s infant body into a purely feminine state:

The midwife took out her knife with the thick blade and proposed to cut off the offending parts straight away. My mother weakly nodded, imagining I would feel no pain or that pain for a moment would be better than embarrassment for a lifetime. The midwife tried to make an incision in the translucent triangle between my first two toes but her knife sprang from the skin leaving no mark. She tried again and again in between all the toes on each foot. She bent the point of the

knife, but that was all. (Passion 51-52)

The impossibility of cutting through Villanelle's webbing is analogous to the presumed impossibility of forcing bodies into binary gender roles.⁵ Villanelle is born with male and female traits, though it is important to note that her most obvious masculine characteristic – her webbed feet – are not an absolute marker of masculinity, like a penis would be. In Winterson's fantasy, meanings shift and masculinity comes to be associated with an arbitrary physical attribute, once again emphasizing the contingent nature of gender. Judith Seaboyer argues, "Villanelle's amphibious, sexually ambiguous body ... refuse[s] the neat binary oppositions of true and false, good and evil, masculine and feminine, and against such paradoxical grounds, Winterson begins to trace disruptive, transformative possibility" (506). Villanelle may identify as a woman, but that category is itself problematized by her physical nature and sexual behavior. In short, she functions within Garber's category of the third: her body is disruptive of gender binarism, and her behavior carves out new spaces of gendered possibility.

Henri, too, is characterized by questionable gender traits that place him in the category of the third, though he fights against his androgynous tendencies, unlike Villanelle. The first indication Winterson gives that Henri's masculinity is in any way ambiguous comes early in the novel. Henri relates: "I take off my socks once a week to cut my toe-nails and the others call me a dandy" (Winterson

4-5). The term “dandy,” of course, has often been used in the past to imply homosexuality, or at least dubious masculinity. Henri’s concern with his physical appearance is considered by the other soldiers to be a feminine trait, and his masculinity is therefore called into question right from the start of his narration. In addition, his belief in the Virgin Mary as humanity’s mediator is mocked by Patrick, another member of Napoleon’s army, who jeers, “The Blessed Virgin’s a woman too, for all that she’s Holy, and there’s no man I know can get his own way with her. You can pray all day and all night and she won’t hear you. If you’re a man, you’d much better stick with Jesus himself” (40). There is much riding on that “if.” Also, Henri learns his sexual gender role from a woman. Villanelle says, “He had no notion of what men do, he had no notion of what his own body did until I showed him” (*Passion* 148). In a neat reversal, Villanelle explicates the male body to a man, illustrating once again the fragile and questionable correspondence between biology and gender roles.

Slightly later in the novel there is another, perhaps more subtle, signal of Henri’s questionable gender status. Henri remembers how, as a child, he polished his mother’s cooking pot for her: “at home we used a copper pot that I polished, loving to polish anything that would keep a shine” (*Passion* 25). He continues:

I see a little boy watching his reflection in a copper pot he’s
polished. His father comes in and laughs and offers him his shaving

mirror instead. But in the shaving mirror the boy can only see one face. In the pot he can see all the distortions of his face. He sees many possible faces and so he sees what he might become. (Passion 26)

This passage calls to mind the Lacanian theory of mirror construction – that process that enacts “the formation of the *I* as we experience it in psychoanalysis ... The transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image” (Lacan 71-72). As Seaboyer observes, “it may be suitably prophetic that a child who will become a cook should admire his face in a cooking pot, but it is more telling that he should construct his mirror self out of an image associated with domesticity and the feminine, with heart and hearth” (501). And it is perhaps even more telling that Henri’s father attempts to replace the reflective surface of the pot with a (masculine) shaving mirror – he wants his son to identify unambiguously as male, despite Henri’s apparent willingness to incorporate some aspects of femininity into his character. Henri’s early recognition of “many possible faces” is also significant, suggesting that binary identity is not natural to his character – and indeed that his body houses a variety of possible selves, which are performed contingently. Villanelle undergoes a similar moment of Lacan-like mirror construction when she catches sight of her reflection in the Venice lagoon, and sees “in the distortions of my face what I might become” (Passion 62). The Venice

waterways in which she sees herself are, as we have already seen, coded as a male space. And again, her use of the plural “distortions” indicates a pluralistic sense of self.

Henri is thus something of a reluctant gender outlaw; his sexuality, too, marks him as a transgressor. First, his relationship with Napoleon is coded as romantic: Henri makes numerous statements such as “[Napoleon] was in love with himself and France joined in. It was a romance. Perhaps all romance is like that; not a contract between equal parties but an explosion of dreams and desires that can find no outlet in everyday life” (Passion 13), and even “[Napoleon] became the focus of our lives” (Passion 19). Later in the novel, the evidence becomes slightly less subtle. In one passage, Joséphine offers Henri the opportunity to work for her instead of Bonaparte. Henri’s reaction is swift: “I was horrified. Had I come all this way just to lose him?” (Passion 36). The strength of his reaction suggests that his passion is more than purely platonic. Henri adds, “I wrote about [Joséphine] or tried to. She eluded me the way the tarts in Boulogne had eluded me. I decided to write about Napoleon instead” (Passion 36). This statement seems to elide Joséphine and the tarts (both of whom function as embodiments of female sexuality), with Bonaparte. Thus Bonaparte becomes identified indirectly as a sexual figure in Henri’s life. Even more conclusively, when Bonaparte orders Henri back to Boulogne, he responds by wondering, “perhaps he saw how I

blushed, perhaps he knew my feelings, he knew those of most people” (Passion 37). Seaboyer has identified several other passages in which Winterson offers, in a masked way, additional indications of Henri’s ambiguous sexuality. Seaboyer argues that in The Passion, “armed conflict is exposed as a form of erotic displacement” (487). She adds, “such repressed desire is available to be channeled into blind patriotism” (487). Napoleon, as the head of the army, represents the ultimate expression of this displaced eroticism. In the army, where militarism replaces conventional sexuality, conventional sexuality is turned into an ugly, joyless travesty. Henri’s experience with the cook in the brothel bears this out. Henri watches the cook: “his woman knelt in front of him, her arms folded. Suddenly he slapped her across the face and the snap killed the talk for a moment. ‘Help me, you bitch, put your hand in, can’t you, or are you afraid of eels?’” (Passion 14). There is nothing appealing to Henri about this expression of sexuality at all; thus Henri, immersed in the military world, takes Bonaparte as an erotic ideal. Seaboyer also observes that Henri’s later killing of the cook contains homoerotic undertones. Henri describes the event: “I had the knife in my hand and I thrust it at his side. As he rolled I thrust it in his belly. I heard it suckle his guts. I pulled it out, angry knife at being so torn away, and I let it go in again” (Passion 128). Seaboyer notes, “the sexual connotations of this bodily penetration are obvious enough” (503). Henri, then, like Villanelle, is cast in the gender role of the

third. "You're my brother," she tells him (Passion 122) – and, significantly, he is the only person to whom she exposes her feet.

Each character, however, reacts to this positioning differently. At the end of the novel, Henri finds himself, conventionally, in love with the woman carrying his child. His love and desire for Bonaparte is transformed into an obsessive hatred (which can be read as a rejection of his earlier experimentation with and blurring of binary identity), and his passion for Villanelle remains. "Though I know it's nonsense," he says, "I really believe we would always be happy and that our children would change the world" (Passion 123). Indeed, Henri ultimately appears to be completely unable to transcend the traditional notions of essential masculinity that he has flirted with throughout the novel. When he learns of Villanelle's plans for his escape, and of her pregnancy, his first response is, "Then we can get married" (Passion 148). When she refuses, he becomes threatening. Villanelle narrates, "When we made love he put his hands to my throat and slowly pushed his tongue out of his mouth like a pink worm. 'I'm your husband,' he said" (Passion 148) – an identification with the violent masculinity of the cook. After that, Henri refuses to escape with Villanelle, and refuses to see her again – refuses to partake in a relationship that involves risking his position in the binary gender scheme. If she will not marry him, he cannot see her. Henri ends his narration trapped in a prison he refuses to leave – preoccupied with freedom, but imprisoned

by choice – surely analogous to the prison of gender essentialism he is finally unable to reject.

Villanelle, on the other hand, ends the novel having completely abandoned the notion of binary identity. Fully androgynous, she will not marry Henri, nor will she return to her all-consuming lover. She plans to have her child, and someday “gamble” (Passion 151) her heart again – an activity she identifies not as a vice, but as an “expression of our humanness” (Passion 73). She concludes, “What you are one day will not constrain you on the next. You may explore yourself freely and, if you have wit or wealth, no one will stand in your way” (Passion 150).⁶ Thus androgyny is a utopian ideal that provides choice and power to those strong enough to exploit it. Villanelle, whose transgressive nature is inscribed in her own flesh, ends the novel enjoying the freedom that Henri, still mired in gender binarism, lacks. Imprisoned on his island, he isolates himself. “Perhaps he has lost himself” (Passion 150), Villanelle speculates. As Doan notes, the novel is more than narrative – it is a “coming to terms with larger ideological struggles ... wrestling with epistemological questions, and the deconstruction of patriarchal and heterosexual hegemony” (141). Villanelle as a character enacts the deconstruction of gender itself; Henri exhibits a fear of the same eventuality. The novel, Doan argues, results in “a sexual politics of heterogeneity and a vision of hybridized gender constructions outside an either / or proposition, at once political and

postmodern” (154).

While character is a key element in Winterson’s construction of an androgynous utopia, place also plays a pivotal role in this construction. Seaboyer identifies the setting of Venice as a space of “shifting meanings and border crossings” (484), which reflects Winterson’s ideal fluidity of gender:

The waters that define the ... city penetrate its porous body, which, in its unmappable illegibility, recalls the ancient myth of the labyrinth, a fluid space of transformation and danger that has traditionally stood for the psychic inward journey, and increasingly for textuality itself. (485)

Winterson creates a space in which the androgynous body is reflected in the very landscape surrounding it: illegible and fluid. Further, her text, with all its postmodern accoutrements, exists in a similar space.

Interestingly, if not unexpectedly, Villanelle and Henri react very differently to the Venetian setting. As their boat approaches the city, Henri narrates: “I watched Villanelle’s face; the face of someone coming home, seeing nothing but the homecoming. Her eyes flickered from the domes to the cats, embracing what she saw and passing a silent message that she was back. I envied her that. I was still an exile” (Passion 110). Villanelle is at home in Venice because she is like Venice: “Like Venice, she inhabits a phantasmagorical space in which she is now

an 'ordinary woman,' now a fantastical creature. Like her city, she is amphibious, a thing of land and water" (Seaboyer 506). Villanelle the androgyne finds her home in a place "not built along any lines [Henri] can fathom" (Passion 110) – while Henri remains an outsider. Seaboyer concludes:

Villanelle, a Venetian gambler sold to Napoleon's army as a whore, is reborn in that she returns to her family and her old life and slips easily back and forth between the surface city and the changeful space of the labyrinth that both mirror her own beautiful, amphibious body ... Henri, a French deserter from Napoleon's army, has a very different experience of the city ... He remains an exile unable to navigate the labyrinth and is swallowed up into madness and despair.

(485)

Seaboyer extends the metaphor of the labyrinth to encompass a Minotaur – the "symbol of perversion that the labyrinth conceals" (502) – in the person of Villanelle's husband, the cook. Henri's violent confrontation with him is an attack on his "enemy Other" (Seaboyer 503), and the recognition of the violent Other within himself when he carves out the cook's heart is what drives Henri mad. For Henri, Venice is "the place of abjection where meaning collapses, and he is lost, physically and metaphorically" (Seaboyer 499). At one point, Henri is lost in the city for five days. He asks Villanelle for a map. "It won't help," she answers. "This

is a living city. Things change” (Passion 113). Significantly, Henri compares Venice unfavourably to the France of Napoleon:

Where Bonaparte goes, straight roads follow, buildings are rationalised, street signs may change to celebrate a battle but they are always clearly marked. Here, if they bother with street signs at all, they are happy to use the same ones over again. Not even Bonaparte could rationalise Venice. This is a city of madmen. (Passion 112)

As Seaboyer argues, “Napoleon’s indiscriminate greed becomes a nice analogy for a death-driven desire to engulf national difference into the oneness of empire” (498) – here, Bonaparte’s homogenizing, rationalising impulse has transferred to Henri, and distances him (fatally, as it turns out) from the heterogeneity of Venice.

Within Venice, Villanelle’s casino is another key setting – “the heart of Winterson’s textual labyrinth ... a liminal place” (Seaboyer 499). It is here where Villanelle most habitually plays with gender, and here that the stakes are highest. Villanelle’s tale of the gambler who bets and loses his life (death by dismemberment) illustrates the thrill of the game: “what [the gamblers] risk is the second death, the shattering of the self that plunges them into the feared and desired chaos of the Real” (Seaboyer 500), which is strikingly reminiscent of Kate Bornstein’s statement that “I think it’s identity itself I want to quit now” (252). Each comment conjures a collapse of stable identity categories – most obviously

gender, but more encompassing than just that. It is identity itself that is lost in Venice, in the casino, and identity itself that Bornstein rejects. In the casino, punters bet; winning and losing themselves nightly – seduced by the specter of the shattered self. “What you risk reveals what you value” (Passion 91), Villanelle says. It is somewhat ironic that in a novel so obsessed with questioning and debunking the concept of (gender) identities, that which is valued most highly seems to be the self.

Of course, Villanelle is already comfortable in an androgynous, multiply-gendered world. She is a gambler, but her stakes are different: “It was a game of chance I entered into and my heart was the wager” (Passion 94). Villanelle loses herself not in Venice’s transformative fluidity, like Henri, but in her lover. Her passion leads her into confusion: “we who were fluent find life is a foreign language” (Passion 68); “I spent the weeks that followed in a hectic stupor ... I found myself staring into space, forgetting where I was going ... I lost weight” (Passion 62). Most tellingly, she asks:

How is it that one day life is orderly and you are content, a little cynical perhaps but on the whole just so, and then without warning you find the solid floor is a trapdoor and you are now in another place whose geography is uncertain and whose customs are strange?
(Passion 68)

Henri is shattered by the fluid geography of Venice; Villanelle by the trapdoor of passionate love. The difference is, Villanelle continues on in spite of her shattered self, regaining her heart but saying she will gamble it again (Passion 151), while Henri's life turns to stasis in his imprisonment, and he refuses to see even the woman he loves: "I have to send her away because she hurts me too much" (Passion 151). Again, Henri becomes trapped in his own rigidity while Villanelle discovers a form of freedom. Burns argues that the novel is fundamentally about "controlling desire and one's relation to the world" (288). Henri's desire for control ironically traps him; Villanelle is freed by relinquishing control of her heart – a metaphor too for the gender politics at play in the novel.

Winterson's novel is thus overwhelmingly focused on issues of gender identity. Villanelle's androgyny is idealized as utopian; her body is the site of freedom in the novel; androgyny, here, is self-contained and does not function in relation to another – indeed, this is the case for Cock & Bull and Stone Butch Blues, as well.⁷ Seaboyer argues, "[Villanelle's] ability to walk on water ... is distinctly masculine ... Villanelle's amphibious, sexually ambiguous body and the paradoxical, amphibious body of Venice both refuse the neat binary oppositions of true and false, good and evil, masculine and feminine, and against such paradoxical grounds, Winterson begins to trace disruptive, transformative possibility" (506). Again, as Marilyn Farwell argues, "the narrative system, not

simply the character images, must be the site of transgression” (167). And as Bonnie Zimmerman contends, “Just as the character crosses the borders of religious belief and sexuality, the author effectively crosses the boundaries of genre and style” (230).⁸ As we have seen, Winterson employs both historical and fantasy genres, and her postmodern style blends shifting narrators and chronology with romantic lyricism and fragmented metafictional vignettes. When Henri speaks as narrator, he says “I’m telling you stories. Trust me” (Passion 5); slightly later we realize that he has appropriated the phrase from one of Patrick’s tall tales – and Henri doesn’t know whether or not to believe Patrick when he says, “I’m telling you stories. Trust me” (Passion 40). The narrative voice, and the system in which it is based, is thus destabilized.

The transgressive narrative system provides a home for the transgressive bodies in the novel. Farwell writes:

When writers confront instead of ignore the cultural construction of the female ... body, when they seize and use these symbols for their own purposes, the narrative in which they place transgressive bodies is changed.

The gender boundaries are rearranged; the narrative positioning of gendered subjects and objects is altered. (167)

Farwell argues that both Jeanette Winterson and Virginia Woolf “work within the

cultural construction of the female ... body but also develop this same construction into 'a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy,' to use Michel Foucault's terms about the double nature of discourse" (158). The two novels are often, and aptly, compared; for both Orlando and Villanelle, "the narrative structures used to house these defiant bodies is built on divisions, differences and boundaries" (Farwell 158). Farwell adds, "we can define the traditional narrative as a story that seeks to control female sexuality and the female body. The narrative space coded female is, in bodily terms, that which the male-defined narrative movement intends to control and eventually to transform into non-threatening ... closure" (161). Henri's offer of marriage offers just such a closure – Villanelle rejects him in favour of a more complicated conclusion, thus eluding a "male-defined" narrative impulse and confirming the transgressive narrative thrust.

Winterson's deployment of androgyny in The Passion, then, is both transgressive and idealistic. As we have seen, both Villanelle and Henri occupy the gender position of the third, which is coded throughout as a positive and generative space of potential. Doan maintains, "What the reader discovers in the natural upset Winterson inscribes on Villanelle ... is not a quest for a unified and coherent essentialized self but a consistent willingness to explore multiple and fragmented fictions of identity, that is, to engage in endless speculation" (149).

This is precisely the project of the androgynous third as deployed in The Passion. However, while androgyny is presented throughout as a utopian ideal, Villanelle's body is a fantastic, paradoxical impossibility. Her androgyny is empowering, and only increases the life choices available to her. Winterson hints only briefly at the more dangerous side of androgyny: when donning her drag one evening, Villanelle admits, "the moustache I added for my own protection. There are too many dark alleys and too many drunken hands on festival nights" (Passion 55). In the following chapters, the dangers associated with occupying the position of the third will become more apparent. In Cock & Bull, the sudden discovery of androgyny turns individuals into either predators or victims; in Stone Butch Blues, Jess Goldberg's androgyny results in horrific violence against her person. While all three novels deploy androgyny as a disruptive third gender position, Winterson's idealistic treatment of it, and Villanelle's unequivocal happiness and satisfaction with her androgynous nature are unique among the novels.

Notes

1. White's use of the word "ecstasy" presents a clear parallel between Orlando (which equates androgyny with ecstasy) as an ancestor text and Winterson's own novel.
2. Again, this is similar to the romanticization and perhaps the resultant sense of the depoliticization of androgyny that occurs in Orlando.
3. Although Butler also mentions other cultural practices (cross-dressing and butch/femme identification, for example), her main emphasis in Gender Trouble is drag performance.
4. It is worth noting that Butler continually refers to male drag, and apparently ignores the existence of the very healthy and thriving drag king community.
5. The scene can also be read as an attempted (and failed) castration on the body of a woman. Winterson's take on female castration is significant. Freud writes, "The fear of castration being thus excluded in the little girl [by her lack of a penis], a powerful motive also drops out for the setting-up of a super-ego" ("The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" 178). He concludes,

Character-traits which critics of every epoch have brought up against women – that they show less sense of justice than men, that they are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life, that they are more often influenced in their judgements by feelings of affection or

hostility – all these would be accounted for by the modification in the formulation of their super-ego which we have inferred above.

(“Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes” 257-258)

The fear of castration is thus vital to the healthy (male) development of a super-ego; the failure of Villanelle’s castration and Winterson’s idealization of her indicate a rejection of Freud’s blatantly sexist theory. The failure of the castration, from a Freudian perspective, also licences Villanelle’s desire – free from the regulation of castration anxiety, Villanelle is also free from the resultant coercion to surrender her primary (female) love object.

6. This sort of heady idealism matches well with an equally idealistic passage from Orlando: “[Orlando’s] sex changed far more frequently than those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive; nor can there be any doubt that she reaped a twofold harvest by this device; the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied”(Woolf 108). In each text, androgyny is held up as the path to freedom – offering possibilities for both exploration and pleasure.

7. This is not the case, however, in all postmodern enactments of androgyny. Hedwig’s androgyny, for example, is presented as a search to find her other half.

8. Zimmerman is referring to the character Jeanette in Winterson’s autobiographical first novel, Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit; however, the comparison is equally apt in the case of The Passion, where Villanelle (and, to a

lesser extent, Henri) crosses borders of sex, gender and sexuality, and Winterson crosses boundaries of genre and style, as we have seen.

Chapter Three

Less Than a Woman, Less Than a Man: Cock & Bull's Horrific Androgyny

"Push button A and B will happen."

– Will Self (Cock & Bull 54)

Will Self's 1992 novel Cock & Bull (comprised of "Cock: A Novelette" and "Bull: A Farce") offers a radically different deployment of androgyny from the utopian rendition of the Platonic tradition found in Orlando and The Passion. The gender transformations that occur in Self's text are less miraculous, constructive metamorphoses than atrocious horrors. Carol's slide into androgyny with the sudden growth of a penis is a Freudian nightmare; Bull's Kafkaesque early morning discovery of a vagina growing on the back of his leg is a scene-by-scene replay of Gregor Samsa's own nightmarish awakening. In Cock & Bull, the space of possibility opened up by the third gender position is repeatedly cast as a negative, and the disruptive capacity of the third can only be considered a danger. Further, the androgyny presented in the novel tends to confirm, rather than debunk, gender essentialism. Joanne Blum assumes this to be one of the "limitations of the concept of androgyny, primarily based on its subtle reinforcement of gender polarity" (2). However, this view of androgyny requires complication; while the idea of the existence of essential gender characteristics is strongly confirmed by

the text, the fact remains that the male / female gender binary is disrupted by Bull and Carol's physical androgyny. An uneasy inverse relationship exists between gender binarism and gender essentialism in the novel. Carol's penis transforms her into an aggressor; Bull's vagina turns him into a vulnerable victim – but neither character exists as male or female, rather, each occupies the space of the third, whose role appears to be the confirmation of the existence of male and female essences. Again, as Stallybrass and White maintain, "It would be wrong to associate the exhilarating sense of freedom which transgression affords with any necessary or automatic political progressiveness" (201). Carol and Bull disrupt and transgress gender, but their very transgression confirms gender essentialism in its basest, most unsophisticated and problematic form. Butler's theory of gender performativity is continually trumped by essentialism. Fuss argues that essentialism is a slippery term that can be put to either radical or conservative use (20); here, Self's gender conservatism is evident.

However, this reading of the androgyny found in Cock & Bull is complicated further by the genre of the novel. Like The Passion, it contains elements of fantasy – not least, the sudden eruption of sexual organs in unlikely places, but it functions most clearly as a satire, as well as a metafictional investigation into the nature of narrative. The darkly funny tone of the novel is at odds with the earnestness of The Passion, and raises the crucial question – if the

novel is satiric, what is being satirized? Abrams identifies satire as “the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn or indignation” (187), but it can also be a surprisingly idealistic genre, as Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom argue in Satire’s Persuasive Voice, their study of the genre. The satiric writer poses a challenge to the status quo in hopes of altering it – in this framework, Bloom and Bloom argue, “What passes for order is the lie, what the satirist fabricates is the truth” (107). Just as Fuss argues that essentialism can be put to either radical or conservative ends, satire can be deployed in their radical or conservative ways. The question is, what is the satiric subject of Cock & Bull? Is it Carol and Bull, in all their grotesqueries? Is it the concept of gender constructivism, satirically refuted through the emotional and behavioral transformations that accompany the characters’ physical transformations? Or is it perhaps an elliptical satire on essentialism itself, with the transformations the characters undergo so over-the-top that they evoke laughter, and negate the possibility of serious consideration? As Bloom and Bloom note, “satire is elusive and variable, wearing many disguises and satisfying many expectations” (15). Self’s text offers multiple readings; any reading of it is necessarily inconclusive – an appropriately open-ended genre choice, perhaps, for a subject as multifarious as androgyny. However, while all these readings (and many more) are possible, Self’s continual portrayal of the

androgynous as alternately dangerous and ineffective, his repeated privileging of the male side of the gender binary, and his insistence on the causal relationship between physical attributes and behavior combine to suggest that it is not the concept of gender itself that he is satirizing, but rather the idea that it can be transcended at all.

“Cock: A Novelette”

The narrator begins by describing the (anti)hero Carol as feeling like “less of a woman when [her husband] Dan was around” (3). Although thus far she occupies a female gender position, she’s cast as something of a gender outlaw from the start, with her “Sapphic nights at Llanstephan under the influence of a rotund lesbian called Beverly” (3), and her apparent alienation from Dan and her role as his wife. But whereas characters like Orlando and Villanelle give the impression that as gender outlaws they have more to offer,¹ the narrator significantly describes Carol as not more than a woman, but less. Of course, this description becomes even more important when we realize, later in the text, that the narrator (or, at least, *this* narrator – Carol narrates her own story to yet another narrator, who listens to her story on a train ride, and only occasionally interjects), is in fact Carol herself, in the guise of a don. There are thus at least three layers of

narration – for purposes of clarity, I shall refer to the character within the artistic frame of the novelette as Carol, and the narrator as the don. This description of Carol, then, is the judgement of the androgyne on her formerly female self – and it is harsh indeed. Additionally, her relationship with Beverly is described as a grotesque deviation: they “fiddled sweatily” (3) during their first encounters. Later Self writes, “If it wasn’t for Beverly’s horrible face, the schoolgirl myopia and cartoon curls (and that sour cream smell: was it sweat, or worse?), Carol could perhaps have unslipped the surly bonds of her meager restraint and flown off into orgasmic orbit” (15). Of course, Self himself admits in his collection of essays Junk Mail, that he is “not really interested in character at all,” and does not “really believe in the whole idea of psychological realism” (Junk Mail 381). This is, after all, a satiric novel, not intended to be read for realism. Self writes, “Carol and Dan’s life was thus exactly like a work of literature: thin and pulped into existence” (C&B 40). And there is consequently no distinction between Dan’s friends, Gary, Barry, Gerry, Derry and Dave 1 (Dave 2, of course, is more prominent), which has a strangely universalizing effect – quite the opposite of the fragmentation of identity that occurs in The Passion. Instead, Self’s characters function as empty ideas (a hallmark of satire). Carol is marked as the transgressor. By transgressing binary gender distinctions, she becomes, by the end of the text, one of the unintelligible “spectres of discontinuity and incoherence” (Butler, GT

23) identified by Butler – but Carol is far more monstrous than anything found in Butler’s work.

As Martin Amis has observed, Self is “a very cruel writer – thrillingly heartless” (qtd. in Finney 1), and the description of Carol goes on to characterize her as “insipid” (3), and “lazy and with no profound convictions” (6). Most tellingly, however, she’s not intelligent enough to “shape her critique” of the “male phallic hegemony” (3), and has a “tendency always, always to take the line of least resistance” (4). Thus while Carol is never portrayed as a “real woman,” or what Kate Bornstein might call “perfectly gendered” (46), she is nonetheless afforded several of the negative stereotypes associated with femininity: lack of intelligence, passivity, timidity. At least, this is the androgynous don’s judgement on the female Carol – or on the version of femininity that she performs. All this changes, of course, as her anatomy does, suggesting that in Cock & Bull gender performance stems directly from anatomical sex. This counters Butler’s theory that performativity “reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin” (GT 175). Carol remains passive and timid until she sprouts her penis – in Cock & Bull, gender performance has a clear, biological origin. Dan’s performance of masculinity is imperfect; the child of a “synthetic, plasticized” (18) woman, he is described as “slight, sour, effete, unsure of himself” (7), in his “denim blouson and leather trousers” (7). This early feminization that

casts Dan as weak and ineffectual prefigures the role-reversed victimization at the end of the novelette. His gender performance is flawed, and he ends up as roadkill on Carol's path of destruction.

Carol's transformation begins slowly, but right from the start, physical and behavioural characteristics are linked. Early on Self writes, "nuzzling up against Dan had already, mysteriously, shrunk her womb. Whittled away at her capacity for selfless mothering" (9) – a conflation of the physical organ with Carol's emotional behavior that is blamed, strangely, on Dan's ineffectual sexuality rather than the unhappiness of her quotidian existence:

Like her foremothers, she would clean and categorize the wedding chattels from Heal's and the more recent acquisitions from Habitat and the Reject Shop. She would straighten up the maisonette. And then, perhaps, she would take a walk in the park, or a trip to the library to exchange books. (8)

Carol's life is essentially empty – regardless of Dan – and her attempts to fill it with language classes and pets fail. Essentially, as the don relates, her existence as a woman leaves her disappointed and unfulfilled. The text suggests that Carol would remain this way perpetually, unable to access any other gender performance – except for her sudden change of anatomy. Again, this dispels Butler's theory of performative gender.

Carol's physical transformation significantly begins at almost the exact same time that she learns to masturbate. As Dan slips further and further into alcoholism, Carol takes sex into her own hands, literally. She peruses a "technically illuminating" (20) Jilly Cooper novel, then:

She put the book aside. Her hand crawled down the covers to the crackling hem of her nightie, and lifted it. Her fingers flowed up the smooth runnel between her thighs. She cupped her vulva and then kneaded it a little. One finger slipped inside the puckered lips and sought out the damp pit of her vagina. The access of power thrilled Carol to the tips of her carmined toenails. (20)

Carol, with her shrunken womb, begins to equate sex with power instead of with maternity, as a "perfectly gendered" woman presumably would. As soon as she appropriates this power for herself, her body itself changes: "*en route* to her vagina, in that place where there should have been nothing but slippery anticipation ... she found instead a tiny nodule, a little gristly frond of flesh ... Somehow her vestibular bulb was being grossly flexed from within, pushing forth a miniature volcanic column of tissue, sinew, blood and vessel" (23). Carol's emerging penis is described immediately in terms of power – it is "volcanic," whereas her female genitalia have in the past been a source of embarrassment. She, for example, like her mother, was "mortified" (25) when she began to menstruate.

Here and throughout, the don privileges the power of the male over the “bloody horror of gynaecological fact” (22) – an expression of phallogocentrism that simultaneously naturalizes it, by basing the concept in biological fact. Androgyny offers Carol an access to male power – inhabiting the third gender position is thus potentially empowering. But Self’s insistence on essentialism – the behavioral changes that accompany the growth of Carol’s penis – are taken to a violent extreme, thereby emphasizing the danger of inhabiting the third gender position.

After Carol’s initially petrified response to her growing member, her next reaction is disgust at the newly-sober Dan. “Never before, not even in his cups, had Dan disgusted her as he disgusted her now. And now he was giving in to his mother, accepting her estimation of him and seeking her help. This was weakness run rampant” (29). She begins to define her newly masculine, powerful self in relation to weak, effeminate Dan. And her behaviour takes on some substantial changes. The don explains, “the matter-of-fact, pragmatic, practical qualities – qualities one primary-school teacher had once reported that she possessed, but which, to my knowledge at least, she had never before exhibited – began to come to the fore” (43). She buys tools, and takes driving lessons, developing an “unreasonable interest in everything to do with the road” (48) – both potentially empowering, and traditionally male-identified activities that were apparently unavailable to her, pre-penis. Most importantly, though, “Carol was also getting

more aggressive” (45) – yelling back at cat-calling plasterers, for example.

But when she and Dan have sex for the first time after the appearance of the penis, Carol’s initial fear transforms completely and permanently into something else. When Dan approaches her, “some access of *jouissance* made Carol not turn aside” (51). The don continues,

More than that – she exulted. Yes, exulted, although she was unable fully to acknowledge the source, or even the content of her feelings. For Carol it was enough that she had escaped detection ... But really ... absolutely *entre nous* I think it was because when *it* stiffened and Dan made his febrile stab at her, Carol thrust back. (53)

Carol’s exultation is based in the fact that she has assumed the ostensibly masculine role in sexual intercourse. No longer is she an object to be “climbed aboard” (8) by Dan – Carol’s new physiology allows her to do some climbing aboard herself. She achieves similar exultation when she receives her driver’s license, thus again assuming more of a powerful role. The events are textually linked by the sense of power Carol begins to discover in each activity she pursues: “she felt her status as a potentially effective agent being pushed and moulded into shape by everything she did” (54). Simply put, the don credits her penis with turning Carol from object to agent.

Carol’s enjoyment of her changing body is thus entirely based in the

newfound sense of power it affords her. Like Villanelle, she finds great satisfaction in her position as an androgyne, but there is an important distinction to be made between the two characters. The sense of play Villanelle exhibits, which echoes the constructivist, postmodern formulation of gender as performative – Butler expresses it as “the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance” (GT 175) – is strikingly absent from Carol’s gender expression, which is much more sinister than it is playful. While Villanelle takes pleasure in her body, and thereby enacts a Foucauldian form of resistance to regulatory sexual discourses, as we have seen, Carol’s experience of her changing body is one of power, not pleasure. Foucault’s desire to “counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies” (HS 157) in order to acquire a form of resistance is reversed by Carol, who uses the claims of her body to uncritically appropriate those very “grips of power.”

It is at this point that Carol begins to revel in her new-found power and masculinity: “It felt so good to acknowledge *it*, to see *it* now that *its* purpose was starting to be revealed” (54). Carol is at a strange crossroads – not man, not woman, but an androgyne somewhere in the middle. “Carol knew that her penis didn’t make her a man but it did free her a little but more from being anything else, it did unslip those surly bonds and surly girly locks” (56). This passage suggests that Carol is freed, emancipated from the cage of gender by her newly intersexed body. It is not, as Butler would have it, a subversive performance of gender that

frees Carol, but rather the physiological changes she undergoes. Here, the subject position of the third is posited almost as a lacuna – an absence of definitiveness or femaleness. Carol thus falls into Butler's category of "those 'incoherent' or 'discontinuous' gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined" (GT 23). She is monstrous in her illegibility. The sense of empowerment afforded by assuming the third gender position is almost immediately tinged with the violence that engulfs the rest of the narrative. Carol's penis spurs her on to aggression and violence – again, anatomy trumps performativity. Cocks, in Self's formulation (or, at least, in the don's), result in aggression and sexual violence – no matter who they are attached to. And Carol's androgyny confirms, rather than debunks, that conservative, essentialist notion of sex.

Carol visits her local off-license with chilling premeditation to purchase the beer that will be Dan's eventual downfall. The shopkeeper, who has lusted after her for years, takes this unfortunate opportunity to grope her:

From behind Ted Wiggins gently inserted his hand between the warm denim tubes that sheathed Carol's upper thighs ... But what happened next was determined entirely by Carol and her quickening reflexes. Sensing her penis under threat, Carol grabbed a bottle of

Emva Cream that one of the fuddled pac-a-mac brigade had left on the counter, and, whirling around, she dealt Ted Wiggins a glancing blow on the side of the head. (65)

Carol's newly-emerging agency results in ever-escalating violence – as her penis grows, so does the violence that accompanies it. In addition, this passage seems to peripherally suggest that male violence is a result of a perceived threat to the penis, another biologically-driven explanation for behavior that complements the novel's formulation of gender.

As Carol begins to exult in her male physiology, the text's privileging of the male side of the gender binary over the female becomes more and more overt.

Some people say that the penis is an ugly thing, one of God's creative afterthoughts. They draw comparisons between its dangling extraneousness and the neat, fitted design of the female snatch. A pox on such pundits with their envious carpings. We know all about their pendulous labia, their cetacean clitorises and Moby Dick odours! Oh, Carol's penis, I could write an ode to it. (73)

The don's disgust with her female genitalia is obvious. And although Dan and Carol have very different relationships with their respective penises, each indicates the forceful superiority of that organ. Dan fears his penis as a "hard tool, a bludgeon, a corrector" (82). As a weak man, Dan distrusts the power ostensibly

inherent in his genitalia. Carol, on the other hand, revels in the power to which she has never before had access. She can tuck her penis away “between her clenched thighs ... rendered 100% womanly once again. But this made her shiver, and she happily let it spring back out again” (79). Her power, self-sufficiency and agency are all dependent on her penis – the gender performance Carol has embraced would not, in the world of Cock & Bull, be possible without its physical correlative. She cannot now seriously contemplate herself without a penis. We have seen Halberstam’s warning that “it is important when thinking about gender variations ... not simply to create another binary in which masculinity always signifies power” (28-29), but that is precisely what Self’s text seems to do.

Once all of Carol’s preparations are made and she begins her boozy seduction (strangely reminiscent of a date rape) of Dan, Self makes the following claim: “Carol had never consciously thought about what was going to happen, she was just blithely following an instinct” (87), as if the events of the last few pages of the novelette are instinctively, inevitably the result of her burgeoning masculinity. Carol, for the first time, takes the lead in the bedroom. She makes Dan touch her “the way she wanted to be touched” (87). She positions him as she pleases, throws him around, and finally rapes him.

She pushed into him and rent his sphincter, tore a crack in one of its muscular segments. But hold up! *Tolle!* How was it for *her*? Surely

that's the important thing. Fuck him, he's a passive thing, an empty vessel, a field upon which the majestic battle may rage, but Carol?

Well ... Isn't she beautiful? (88)

Here the role reversal is complete – Dan is the passive object of Carol's active lust.

The pleasure she attains is based entirely in power. Butler argues, "Which pleasures shall live and which shall die is often a matter of which serve the legitimating practices of identity formation that take place within the matrix of gender norms" (GT 90). Again, Carol's newfound masculinity is presumably what allows her to find pleasure in the power of sexual violence. Her pursuit of bodily pleasure by no means resists the regulatory discourse of sex, as Foucault would have it. Rather, it reinscribes and reinforces that regulatory system.

Finally, as Carol rapes and murders Dan with the force of her attack, she reaches the culmination of her transformation:

She felt the tight rejection of Dan's restraining ring but pushed in despite and because of it. This was her moment, she sensed. Her confirmation of what she truly was ... The idea that being able to fuck Dan, actually penetrate him somehow made Carol aggressive, made her a rapist ... Crass, but true. (89)

Thus, the crowning conclusion of "Cock" is explicit: her violence is a result of her penis. The relationship between body and behavior is uncomplicated – crass

indeed, except that the simplicity of Self's formulation in what is a structurally complex and exceedingly clever text invites speculation that he intends the scene to be read satirically. Then again, it could be that the don is attempting to duck responsibility for her behavior by blaming it on her newfound masculinity. There is no overt suggestion of this in the text, however, and an essentialist notion of gender prevails.

Thus far I have ignored the increasingly numerous breaks into the text by the mysterious don as (s)he relates the tale of Carol and Dan to the narrator, who is held captive by the plot twists – and by the sinister insistence of the don. The don / Carol narrator adds a new dimension to the text, bringing up questions about the nature of narrative itself. The novelette is thus multi-layered: On one level, it is calculatedly shocking and very funny. On another, it appears to be deeply sexually conservative. On yet another, it's about the limits and failures of narration – the power of language to classify and falsify. And so when the don / Carol screeches, “My reality shouldn't be tipped into a plastic laundry basket and sold off in this manner. I reserve my right to centrality – to be the pro- as well as the antagonist” (71), she can be read as commenting on how these levels interact in a way that is illustrative of the logocentric, anti-feminist binary basis of language described by Hélène Cixous and the French feminists. As critic Brian Finney observes, “Self seems instinctually to adopt the poststructuralist conception of the linguistic

construction of the human subject” (7). The don appropriates the narrative to her own violent ends (the text ends with another rape – this time of the narrator), and turns her story into a weapon in the same way she uses her penis as a weapon.² As Self himself admits, Cock & Bull “is, of course, an elaborate joke about the failure of narrative” (Junk Mail 381).

Finney argues, “Self’s primary interest lies in transgressing the limits of homogeneity, whether they are social, psychological, sexual or linguistic. Yet he is simultaneously revealing the presence of a limit in the very act of transgressing it” (3). Finney concludes, “He is celebrating both the act of transgression and the reinscription of limits at the same time” (10). Certainly, Self disrupts and transgresses the limits of binary gender in the novelette – Carol exists outside of the binary altogether. And he seems to reinscribe those limits, satirically or not, by casting the androgyne as a barren (97), sexually violent predator, and positing gender in a simple cause-and-effect relationship with behavior. Here, the third gender position functions to expose the essentialism presumed to be at the heart of gender – not to problematize that relationship. “Cock” (and, in fact, the whole of Cock & Bull), illustrates that gender transgression is not equivalent to political progressivism, and thus offer up a challenge to much of postmodern gender theory.

“Bull: A Farce”

Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" famously begins, "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a giant insect" (733). The first chapter of "Bull," also titled "Metamorphosis," begins, "Bull, a large and heavy-set young man, awoke one morning to find that while he had slept he had acquired another primary sexual characteristic: to wit, a vagina" (103). The obvious parallel continues – each man tries to hold panic at bay with rationalizations about working too hard, and unusual illnesses. And although the dream-like sense of surreal horror that pervades Kafka's text is much more concrete and workaday in "Bull," Self's intertextual referencing lends his text, which echoes and inverts "Cock," a sense of impending doom from the start.

Bull, like Carol, is initially horrified by his changing body. Carol's early discovery of her penis leaves her "petrified" (24) and "retching" (42) – if only briefly. Bull's discovery moves him similarly:

Bull, still naked, staggered to the full-length mirror that was shinily affixed to the rose-patterned wallpaper. He placed his back towards it and sighted over his shoulder and down. His eyes met the Cyclopean squint of the vagina, but before he could examine it closely Bull vomited copiously. (105)

But Bull is not simply a male version of Carol – he is her mirror image. While she grows in power and aggressiveness as her penis grows, Bull's changing body

affects him in the opposite way. Before he has even discovered the nature of the growth on the back of his leg, Self writes, "He knew only this: that there was something in the vulnerable pit behind his knee. Something that might be a wound" (104). The vagina is cast as both vulnerable and wound-like before it is even identified. And his changing physiology quickly begins to effect his emotional outlook, thus establishing Self's habitual link between physiology and behavior that debunks gender performativity in favor of an anatomically-based theory of gendered behavior. As he sets off to see his doctor about the mysterious wound, "he felt an odd vulnerability this morning which he attributed to his wound or burn. But Bull didn't let this govern him. After all, he was a man with an appointment to keep" (107). Bull is still "a man," not yet "governed" by the "vulnerability" ostensibly inherent in his vagina – his gender performance, in other words, is still comfortably masculine. But the longer his vagina exists, the less he is able to maintain that masculine performance.

When Bull is finally examined by Dr. Alan Margoulies, the womanizing, faux-conscientious practitioner, his new vulnerability becomes more specifically gendered. As Alan begins to examine him, Bull – the "essentially hearty, uncomplicated, rugby-playing type of fellow" (122) – reacts with an acute anxiety that he is experiencing "for the first time in his thirty-something years" (123):

Bull's secret horror was that his penis would be primed, limbered

and rolled out for target practice. Bull could conceive of nothing more embarrassing than an involuntary erection – especially if a man, such as Margoulies, was touching him.

But this dread was something different. It was a fear of intrusion *into* himself, rather than of expansion into the world's gaze. Bull felt his leg as a soft, shrinking and vulnerable thing. He longed to cry out to Margoulies and warn him to examine his leg in a particular way, with specific firm, yet calm, movements. But his tongue was dried out and glued to the floor of his mouth. (123)

This is the basis of Self's biologically-based gender model. The penis, with its "expansion into the world's gaze," results in men who are aggressive, outward-thinking, and bold. The vagina is vulnerable, and results in fearful, anxious women who, like Bull, are rendered speechless by the presence of authority. The dictates of anatomy thus trump any notion of gender performativity. The third gender position offers a space between male and female, but it still seems to demand engagement with either one side of the binary or the other. Bull is neither woman nor man, but his vagina demands specifically 'feminine' behavior.

Whatever the cause of Bull's sudden transformation – and Self's suggestion is that he is "cursed" (118) by Razza Rob's obscene stand-up comedy show (all puns, presumably, intended) – Alan decides that it would be best to withhold the

truth about the vagina from his patient. "Until he could divine the aetiology of Bull's vagina, Margoulies knew intuitively that the awareness of it would severely disturb his patient. To act otherwise would have been less than conscientious" (125). Alan begins to treat Bull with the same patronizing condescension with which the medical system has traditionally treated women (even going so far as to prescribe Valium in lieu of what Bull assumes are antibiotics) – and Bull accepts this loss of power over his own body blindly. Furthermore, Alan is immediately attracted to Bull's leg: "Margoulies had abandoned his professional perspectives, he had allowed his own likes and dislikes to affect his judgement. He was no longer acting in the best interests of his patient" (127). He finds Bull appealing because he is "so vulnerable, so trusting" (134). Most tellingly, however, the report he writes in Bull's medical file – "Cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt, cunt...." (128) – is a deliberate and overtly misogynist reduction of Bull to his new genitalia, as if the whole of his existence boils down to that word. (This provides an interesting echo of Self's own reduction of Bull's full set of female genitalia and reproductive organs to a "vagina," as he refers to it throughout the text.) It is also important to note that while Carol is portrayed as a monstrous "[spectre] of discontinuity and incoherence" (Butler, GT 23), horrible and dangerous, Bull is never portrayed as fearful. Instead, he is pitied, both by Alan and by the reader. This suggests that it is Carol's access of male power that makes her monstrous –

the female access of male power is horrific because it threatens the privilege of the male side of the gender binary. Halberstam observes, "gender transition from female to male allows biological women to access male privilege within their assigned genders" (143). But Carol's transition into the third gender position through physical and resultant behavioral changes has the same effect. Carol is punished with barrenness and life-long, desperate unhappiness. Bull, however, in gaining a vagina, loses his access to male power, and thus, threatening nothing, is to be pitied instead of feared. The gender binary, with privilege firmly on the masculine side, remains intact despite the disruption of androgyny.

In "Cock," as we have seen, Self (or, in a purely satiric reading, Carol) privileges the powerful male side of the gender binary over the weak and female side in his description of the increasingly powerful and autonomous Carol. In "Bull" there is a reversal of the female-to-male transition of the first narrative, and Self attempts, briefly, to reverse the privilege of the binary to reflect Bull's transformation. However, even this attempt is of dubious success: "The male physiology is a static and lifeless thing, a metabolic Empty Quarter, unaffected by the tremendous lunar pulls and washes of hormonal gunk that stream through its sister form" (137). Even here his description of the female body is less than glowing. While the male body is "static and lifeless," the female is rendered irrational with "hormonal gunk." Clearly, though a female-to-male transition

involves expanded power (no matter how disturbingly that power is put into practice), a male-to-female transition is an unfortunate loss – a defeat, of sorts, for the sports-minded Bull.

This becomes even more apparent when Juniper makes her pronouncement on the ontology of the vagina, which echoes Jill Dolan's postmodernist definition of woman as "the site of conflicting discourses in which there is no immutable truth" (96). The "*archetypal* cunt," Juniper explains, is "just a cipher – an empty category on to which people project their own distorted attitudes. After all, what's a hole once one removes it from the ground?" (147). And this binary definition of male as presence and female as absence is, of course, precisely the basis of the logocentric system of thought that works through binary opposition and consistently privileges the male side of the binary over the female – and is resisted by writers such as Cixous. Cixous argues that logocentrism can be debunked through conceptual bisexuality, which she describes as "the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes, evident and insistent in different ways according to the individual, the nonexclusion of difference or of a sex, and with this 'permission' one gives oneself, the multiplication of the effects of desire's inscription on every part of the body and the other body" ("Sorties" 148). It is by accepting the existence of both sexes within each person – that is, embracing the subject position of the third, androgynous gender – and by allowing the full range

of ungendered desire to reach its full expression that the repressiveness of logocentrism can be left behind. This, however, is not borne out in the fictional realm of Cock & Bull. Here, even the location of two sexes physically within one body is not enough to shatter the binary gender system completely, though it may temporarily disrupt it: Carol's penis turns her into a rapist and a murderer and Bull's vagina leaves him vulnerable and victimized, leaving the third a space of danger.

Eventually Alan's fear that Bull will discover the nature of his "wound" on his own drives him to tell Bull the truth. Feeling "powerful and protective" of Bull, who sits with his knees hunched together "as if trying to hide his treasure still further from view" (153), Alan explains about the vagina. Bull's horrified reaction is far stronger than anything Carol experiences: "The big, ginger man knelt moaning on the carpet. A bubbling, keening sound came unbidden from the corners of his not unsensual mouth" (155). His hysteria grows, kicking and shouting and smashing, until he jams himself in the space under the stairs and finally sits still.

Bull saw it all. Bull understood it all. Understood the feelings of vulnerability that had been troubling him all day ... But worse, far worse, Bull understood certain deep and painful things about himself that had always shamed him ... [He] saw the sketchy picture of his

latent femininity emerge from a myriad of locker-room blushes and missed emotional connections ... Bull's wheezing intellect, like the little engine that couldn't, struggled to make sense of its own identity. (157)

Whether Bull's latent femininity is the source of his vagina or vice versa, the connection remains the same – only when the vagina appears does Bull become vulnerable, meek, and “the picture of powerlessness” (158). Although this passage suggests that gender in Cock & Bull is, at least partly, a question of performance (Bull's performance of masculinity, it seems, has always been slightly flawed), that performance is always inextricably linked to biology. Bull's latent femininity cannot emerge until his vagina does.

Alan is aroused by the manifestation of “Bull-as-woman; Bull as inside, rather than outside” (158). He quickly seduces him, and as they proceed, “Alan was transported. Bull *was* all woman to him. Bull's hysteria and now this tremulous capitulation. What could be more feminine?” (159). Even sexually, Bull's behavior becomes entirely (and stereotypically) feminine. Echoing (but reversing) the sex passage in “Cock” in which Carol's enjoyment is paramount: “How was it for *her*? Surely that's the important thing” (88), “Bull” asks, “What did Bull feel throughout this? How was it for him? Shame on you for even daring to ask. Some things must, after all, be sacred” (161). Feminine sexuality must not

be spoken, must retain its purity. However, Self does write, “[Bull] felt, for the first time in his life, that his sense of himself as a purposeful automaton, striding on the world’s stage, had been completely vitiated by a warm wash of transcendence” (161). The possession of a vagina, and sex with Alan combine to destroy Bull as an independent agent – Bull’s transcendence of gender is a complete reversal from Carol’s, but in both cases the transcendence that initiates their membership in the third gender position is posited as a negative. The laughing playfulness of writers like Bornstein and the satiric performance endorsed by Butler are subsumed in Self’s dark and nihilistic gendering of his characters.

A later bout of masturbation admittedly brings Bull a sense of “self-determination” (171), and he begins to see the heretofore phallic architecture of London as patently “vagocentric” (173), but Bull’s newly-emerging identity cannot escape the vulnerability that his vagina inevitably brings with it in Self’s fictional world. He remains “passive and yielding” (174) when he is fired from his job, and becomes teary over his relationship with Alan. Standing in front of Boots, he’s torn between the displays for rugby equipment and women’s stockings and tights, before eventually making a purchase from each – apparently acknowledging his androgynous nature. “But despite this decisive and seemingly mature acknowledgment of his dual nature, in the bleak mid-afternoon Bull found himself crying once more” (181). He is completely ineffective and unable to take action.

His dispiriting evening with Ramona, who, as “a chimera, or a representative of some new, third sex” (190) – like Bull himself – he wrongly expects to be sympathetic to him, only serves to further isolate him. In addition, his life-long enjoyment of rugby ends at approximately the same time he starts his first period: he begins to dislike his mates, feeling “oppressed by their self-assurance, their seemingly unquestioning masculinity” (195). Bull is completely isolated, and completely vulnerable. His vagina has alienated him from the world he knows, and allied him with women insofar as he now shares their experience of oppression – though he remains outside of any real community, as his encounter with Ramona shows.

The foundation of the relationship between Alan and Bull – the only relationship in Bull’s life that has any real substance – is from the start the relationship of exploiter to exploited, structured by Alan’s lust for Bull’s vagina. But in the last pages of the narrative, the language of exploitation becomes increasingly overt, and increasingly disturbing. Bull becomes a self-blaming victim of the curious eyes of his rugby team, and Alan becomes bored with Bull and decides to leave him, thinking to himself “‘It’s my word against his’” (206), should Bull decide to go public. Bull is “used and abandoned” (206), but at least escapes Alan’s temporary fantasy of killing him. “Shamed and ashamed” (212), he contemplates suicide. It is one of the master narratives of melodrama – though, of

course, “Bull” has many unusual twists.

The final twist of the narrative, and one of the most surprising, is Bull’s pregnancy. While Carol (post penis) manages only to have “miscarriage after miscarriage” (97) in the grotesque barrenness that apparently stems from her condition, Bull and Alan unwittingly manage to conceive a child. Again, the difference between FTM and MTF transgendering is vast. Carol forfeits her maternal potential when she accesses male power; Bull gains reproductive power while he loses many of the privileges he enjoyed as a male. Bull delivers his baby in the Epilogue, after fleeing to San Francisco. In a final irony, his son grows up to be dark and handsome – popular, and “very much one of the boys” (213). Bull is left a single parent, his character defined by his body’s fertility. His vagina has completely shaped his existence and molded his character.

Self writes, “The abnormal becomes normal through its inclusion in the worlds of others. Exclude it and it begins to take on a penumbra of sinister otherness” (134). As Finney argues, Self transgresses sex and gender boundaries by writing about Carol and Bull as androgynes – he pushes these categories to their limits. But as a satirist, can Self really be said to be normalizing these gender outlaws by bringing them into the world of others? Surely the distancing effect of satire does more to construct his characters as others than it does to normalize them, and the subject of the satire is not gender, but rather the idea that gender can

be transgressed at all. Carol is nothing if not sinister and grotesque, and Bull ends up in exile, hardly included in the “world of others.” Finney argues that Self’s objective is to illustrate that “there is no objective limit. Each of us can only discover his or her limits by performing, narrating or reading acts of transgression” (12) – which would seem to prescribe Butler’s theory of gender performativity as a means of disrupting regulatory gender limits or norms. But the sex and gender transgressions in Cock & Bull serve only to reinforce biologically-based, stereotyped notions of gender: vaginas make women weak; penises are powerful – and performance is always subordinate to anatomy. Androgyny, in the world of Cock & Bull, marks and fortifies inequality; further, it portrays the sex or gender outlaw as either ineffective or as a violent aggressor. Leslie Feinberg’s Stone Butch Blues offers another perspective, this time from a realist / autobiographical perspective. As we shall see in the next chapter, a switch of genres makes a vast difference to the deployment of androgyny in fiction.

Notes

1. The case is strikingly similar in Hedwig and the Angry Inch; Tommy Gnosis sings to Hedwig, "I was just a boy. You were so much more than any god could ever plan – more than a woman or a man" in the song "Wicked Little Town."
2. At this point it is important to note the strange strain of anti-Semitism that continually mars the don's speech. While this may function in line with the don's obvious sexism, homophobia, somatophobia and general racism, its virulence and violence is disturbing and unexplained, except that it perhaps serves to further demonize the character of the don. Still, it remains a problem for the text.

Chapter Four

“No place like home”: theory meets pragmatism in Stone Butch Blues

I think it's identity itself I want to quit now.

– Kate Bornstein (My Gender Workbook 252)

Strange to be exiled from your own sex to borders that will never be home.

– Leslie Feinberg (Stone Butch Blues 11)

Leslie Feinberg's 1993 novel Stone Butch Blues is positioned, like The Passion and Cock & Bull, at the site of all sorts of intersections – not least, the narrator Jess Goldberg exists at the intersection of transgender and androgyny in the overarching realm of the disruptive third gender position. Jess's body refuses categorization as either butch woman or transsexual man, thus disrupting various forms of categorization, as well as the theoretical essentialist / constructivist binary. Her body is the most realistic, and therefore, it could be argued, the most transgressive of all the fictional androgynous bodies we have seen. Interestingly, Jess's body is contained in the most conventional narrative structure – that of the (realist) fictional autobiography. The content of Stone Butch Blues, though, does frustrate expectations by refusing to fulfill itself as the transsexual “coming home” story it appears to be (as critic Jay Prosser argues). Jess's body – the most overt

site of her transgression – is a very real physical possibility. Stone Butch Blues thus deploys the androgynous body in a new way – from the body that has never existed (Villanelle) and the body that could never exist (Bull and Carol), we move to a body that very certainly can and does exist. And Feinberg's choice of genre places her androgynous character within a very different framework from Self's and Winterson's. The stakes are different and the transgressions that occur in Stone Butch Blues have consequences that are all the more frightening for the novel's realism.

Stone Butch Blues is a realist novel, "written so as to give the effect that it represents life and the social world as it seems to the common reader, evoking the sense that its characters might in fact exist, and that such things might well happen" (Abrams 174). Indeed, the genre seems very conventional and stable in relation to the body that inhabits it. Feinberg's choice of genre affords a sense of verisimilitude that imbues the text with an intimacy and immediacy that stands in direct opposition to the distancing satire of Cock & Bull. Realism is thus a politically inflected choice of genre. It makes the harassment Jess suffers credible, and avoids the constant 'othering' of difference that texts like Self's enact. It also avoids the unabashed optimism of The Passion and takes, instead, a more measured approach. Thus, Stone Butch Blues realistically illustrates the interlocking oppressions that keep Jess and her friends on the margins of society

(something neither The Passion, which idealizes the position of the androgyne, nor Cock & Bull, which demonizes it, is concerned with) – and, as individuals already straddling gender and sexual categories, they are perfectly placed to depict this intersection. Feinberg is able to tackle classism, racism, capitalism and the transphobia that exists within the burgeoning gay rights movement, and although she does so in a way that is perhaps overly idealistic, she does at least bring the interconnectedness of the issues to light, which Bornstein describes as “groundbreaking” (149). In addition, the novel is written in the first person, which only adds to the novel’s immediacy.

Stone Butch Blues is suggestively autobiographical. Several critics have noted the similarity between Leslie Feinberg and Jess Goldberg’s names. And even more overtly, Feinberg writes in her acknowledgments, which precede the novel itself, that “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 writing this book. But I have” (4). The fact that this passage precedes the novel proper in the text grants it substantial textual importance. Stone Butch Blues is thus Feinberg’s attempt to explain her own life, and to advance her political message (which will be received by many, but not all readers). Her use of realism is strategic; it imbues the novel with a sense of political urgency that is absent from the other novels.

Although the novel's genre is highly conventional, its content frustrates expectation. Prosser identifies in the text elements of the transsexual autobiography, or "coming home" narrative in which a problematically-gendered individual comes to embrace his or her true sex as the narrative concludes. And these "narratives with plots centered on embodied becoming" (Prosser 487) offer a challenge to queer theory's standard argument of gender performativity:

Transsexual subjects themselves have traditionally figured their transition as a final going home, a trajectory that is only worth its risks, complications, and intense pain (somatic and psychic) because it will allow one to finally arrive at where one should have always been: the destination, the *telos* of this narrative (being able to live in one's "true gender identity") is all. Gender is not so much *undone* as queerness would have it as *redone*, that is, done up differently.

(Prosser 487)

This passage highlights the potentially divisive opposition between queer and transsexual political / theoretical interests; the implication is that gender positions like Garber's third term, which 'undo' the concept of binary gender – and further, that represent "an undertheorized recognition of the necessary critique of binary thinking, whether particularized as male and female, black and white, yes and no, Republican and Democrat, self and other, or in any other way" (Garber 10-11) –

are at odds with transsexual subjectivity, which 'redoes' gender instead of 'undoing' it. Stone Butch Blues is rife with what Prosser calls a "yearning for home both in the body and in community" (490) that is common to transsexual coming-home narratives. Early on, Jess explains that it is "strange to be exiled from your own sex to borders that will never be home" (11). She is a "lonely exile" (5), and her subsequent experiences with hormones and surgical alterations – not to mention her search for community in the bars, the labor movement and amongst Aboriginal women – are all attempts to find a home for herself in a hostile world. But, as Prosser notes, Jess eventually refuses her transsexual identity: "Jess turns back in her transition, thus refusing the refuge of fully becoming the other sex and the closure promised by the transsexual plot. She chooses, instead, an incoherently sexed body, ending up in an uneasy borderland between man and woman, in which she fails to pass as either" (488). Jess accepts, finally, the gender position of the third. The text refuses to consummate the transsexual autobiographical master narrative, and Jess, like the text, is left seemingly without a home – that is, without the sense of home afforded by uncomplicated male or female identity. As we will see, Jess's home is necessarily more complex than that; indeed, it is in the evolving *nature* of the home that Stone Butch Blues evades categorization as a conventional transsexual coming-home narrative. Feinberg's project is not, as Halberstam would have it, the "refusal of the dialectic of home and border" (170), but rather the

interrogation and perhaps rehabilitation of these concepts. Prosser argues,

... [T]he journey – simply the act of leaving home or the familiar – brings with it the recognition that home (the body/identity) is made up, a construct, and thus, along with the narrative of gendering, to be relinquished. Yet in spite of its resistance to taking up a recognizable textual and sexual place, there threads through Stone Butch Blues a distinctly unqueer yearning for home both in the body and in community; while the trajectory is the same ... its meaning is radically different, its narrative point of view an insider's, its grounds not a theoretical premise but subjective experience. (489-490)

The tendency to read Jess as a flawless example of postmodern gender theory (Butler, Halberstam, et al) is repudiated by her incessant desire for home, and by the horrific violence she faces in her day to day life as a result of her failure to pass as either sex.

Jess is cast as a gender outlaw from early childhood on – one of her earliest memories is the “constant refrain: ‘Is that a boy or a girl?’” (13). Although she “didn’t want to be different,” and says she “followed all their rules, tried my best to please” (13), she is unable to pass as female, even as a young child, which again repudiates the notion that gender performance invariably constitutes gender reality.

Argues Prosser,

Stone Butch Blues cannot be read without our accounting for the subjective experience of being transgendered, without our 'risking essentialism.' We need to take this risk even if, or perhaps especially when, the task involves drawing on categories that we have come to believe require deconstructing *a priori*: experience, the body, sex, feeling. (490)

Prosser's argument calls to mind Fuss's assertion, in Essentially Speaking, of the falsity of the essentialist / constructivist binary. She writes, "It is difficult to see how constructionism can *be* constructionism without a fundamental dependency upon essentialism" (4) – that is, social forces cannot exist unto themselves without a point of origin and without already-existing bodies to work on. In Fuss's scheme, and in Feinberg's, the two go hand in hand. Jess presents herself as transgendered from the start, despite her own best efforts to perform as female (and later, as male). The consequences are immediate: as a child she is taunted and stripped by a gang of neighborhood boys. As a teenager coming out in the gay bars of Niagara Falls, she's harassed by the police, escaping the beatings and rapes she will later suffer at their hands only because of her young age. And at school she is gang-raped by six members of the football team – all this in the first forty pages of the novel, and all of it is written with a stomach-turning intensity that withers the

memory of the cartoonish violence of Cock & Bull. The character of Jess, and the novel as a whole, can thus be read as something of a lived critique of postmodern gender theory. The challenges Jess faces in inhabiting her own body counter the unabashed joy Villanelle takes in hers; the postmodern playfulness of Winterson's deployment of androgyny seems unavailable to Jess.

However, Jess's problem is not merely one of performance – ironically, she learns to perform the male gender well enough to pass successfully as a man, though she was unable to pass as a girl in her childhood days. Still, she finds herself isolated and unhappy. Her decision to physically alter herself is telling. Jess wakes from a dream in the middle of the night: “In the dream I had a beard and my chest was flat. It made me so happy. It was like a part of me that I can't explain ... I didn't feel like a woman or a man, and I liked how I was different” (143). Later, Jess and several other butches – desperate for jobs – try on ‘feminine’ wigs in the hopes of landing jobs in department stores. But they are unsuccessful: “The wigs made us look like we were making fun of ourselves” (143). As subversive repetition in the Butlerian sense, this gender play is more humiliating for the butches than it is empowering. Instead, Jess and Ed decide to begin taking hormones and attempt to pass as men. Their reasons are external: the economic necessity of keeping a job, and the desire for safety; they are thus excluded from the female-to-male transsexual label, which assumes an internally-located desire

for a 'true' gender. In this as in all gender categories, Jess is on the outside. In any case, as Cat Moses argues, "The very terms FTM and MTF are inadequate – Feinberg might argue – in their suggestion that anyone whose gender expression falls outside of either 'F' or 'M' is moving towards the expression of the 'opposite' gender" (74-75). "I keep thinking maybe I'd be safe, you know?" (144) Jess explains. Her lover Theresa leaves her when she begins to pass as a man, but even she admits that Jess would "probably be killed on the street or take [her] own life out of madness" (153) if she did not take the hormones.

Androgyny, for Jess, might be a difference that she likes, but it brings with it an immense lack of choice in her life. This, of course, is a reversal of Winterson's optimistic deployment of androgyny, which is representative of postmodern gender theory, and which culminates in Villanelle's assertion that "What you are one day will not constrain you on the next. You may explore yourself freely and, if you have wit or wealth, no one will stand in your way" (Passion 150). Unable to live as a woman, unable to pass as a man without physically altering her body, and unable to survive in the androgynous body she finds most comfortable, Jess is not freed by androgyny, but trapped – just as Carol and Bull are in Cock & Bull. "What the fuck am I going to do, Theresa? Tell me, what can I do?" (151). Prosser argues,

Stone Butch Blues requires that we reconstitute the transgendered

narrative, that we re-learn how to read narratives of gender in their specificity and break from our tendency to trace them over and over again onto the same master (anti-) narrative of Queer Theory. For Stone Butch Blues represents transgender as embodied and deeply painful, features pivotal in differentiating it from the queer anti-narrative of gender-crossing. Whereas queerness has written of transgender in terms of homosexual gender masquerade and performativity – tropes which are intended precisely to denaturalize the sexed body – Feinberg's transgender foregrounds the suffering of gender-crossing, its costs, its limits, and, above all, its embodiment. And whereas the transgender of queerness loosens the narrative structure of gender through sexuality, Feinberg's transgender affirms the materiality of gender, its essential place in the narrative of this identity. (490)

Again, we are reminded of the theoretical tension between transgender and queer. And, as Prosser reminds us, the playfulness of postmodern gender theory has grave consequences for the bodies living it – consequences Butler and similar theorists do not address in any material or embodied way. Certainly for Jess, gender crossing is only partly voluntary. Although her physical transformation is self-enacted, her gender expression leads to problems of attribution over which she has

no control. For her, gender crossing is not empowering, nor does it offer her choice. In fact, it isolates her from the community she so desperately seeks.

After Theresa and Jess break up, Jess stays with Gloria and her two children. But the deep relationship she develops with Kim and Scotty is ended by her hormone treatments. "I'd have to say goodbye to Kim and Scotty soon. Gloria would never let me see the kids once I started to change" (164), she realizes.

Although she finds a job and enjoys relative safety in places like public bathrooms that have previously been sites of danger and harassment, Jess is more alone than she ever has been. She no longer fears for her physical safety, but she comes to realize that passing as a man cannot solve all her problems: "I still lived in fear, only now it was the constant terror of discovery" (173). And although she is able to hold down a job as a mechanic's apprentice, she finds that "having a job was the good news. But there wasn't much else to do or anyone to do it with. That was the bad news" (174). Jess has several deceptive relationships, and still feels alone:

"The loneliness became more and more unbearable. I ached to be touched. I feared I was disappearing and I'd cease to exist if someone didn't touch me" (185). She says to Edna during their brief relationship that "I feel like a ghost ... Like I've been buried alive. As far as the world's concerned, I was born the day I began to pass. I have no past, no loved ones, no memories, no me. No one really sees me or speaks to me or touches me" (213). Jess's choice of words is strikingly similar to

Butler's – Jess, who feels like a "ghost," has become one of Butler's "spectres of discontinuity and incoherence" (GT 23). Significantly, it is only when Jess is passing as a man that she feels her identity is threatened – that she is disappearing. As Cat Moses argues in an essay on the novel, "Jess struggles alone to construct a self amid a social milieu dominated by alienation, fragmentation and loneliness. She discovers that resistance to oppression – and the refashioning of a resisting self – are lonely and losing battles outside of a resistance community" (78).

Finally, Jess decides to stop the hormone treatment, although she continues to appreciate the effects of her breast reduction surgery: "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 the surface" (222). Jess relinquishes the safety of passing to return to her original androgynous state – the complicated self that exists somewhere in the third gender space between male and female. She concludes, "Who was I now – man or woman? That question could never be answered as long as those were the only choices; it could never be answered if it had to be asked" (222). And her decision to return to a state of ambiguous gender is presented as a creative opportunity – the "space of possibility" (Garber 11) afforded by assuming the third gender position is the source of her

excitement: “I wanted to find out who I was, to define myself. Whoever I was, I wanted to deal with it, I wanted to live it again ... Fear and excitement gnawed at me” (224-225). Significantly, Jess’s attempt to discover herself is accompanied by a move to New York. And although Jess’s fear is well-founded – she begins again to experience the harassment and violence that passing allowed her to avoid – she is able to build her own home, and her own life in New York. She says, “one day I looked around at my apartment and realized I’d made a home” (236).

Jess develops a close friendship with her neighbor, gets a job, and begins to reconnect with old friends. Most significantly, however, she works to assemble for herself a history of transgendered people and their liberation movement, much like Feinberg’s own work in Transgender Warriors. And the novel ends optimistically, with Jess becoming active in a (somewhat idealistically) pluralist queer rights demonstration. She ultimately finds her fulfillment as a self-identified he-she – a ‘home’ identity that, by its very existence, disrupts binary gender. As Prosser argues, Stone Butch Blues is about:

the complex struggle for sexual embodiment, for gendered becoming, not for their playful denaturalization. At an angle to queerness, which has inscribed gendered unbelonging and mobility as subversive and celebratory, Stone Butch Blues ultimately recognizes the power of the lure of an albeit illusory home, corporeal

and communal, even though home is not realized as it is in transsexual autobiographies. (490).

Jess finds her home in a complex web of gender, class, race and sexual identifications – but that home is as contingent as it is real. Judith Halberstam criticizes Prosser's article for the ways in which it "pits queer theory against transgender identity in a polemic: queer theory represents gender within some notion of postmodern fluidity and fragmentation, but transgender theory eschews such theoretical free fall" (147). She argues that instead, the androgyny found in Stone Butch Blues "represents both essential and constructed genders, both performative gender and genetic embodiment" (148). And Jess only finds a home for herself when she exists between genders, both in her essential and constructed selves – as Fuss has shown, this is not a contradiction. Cat Moses agrees: "Gender, for Feinberg, is an expression of something that is both 'always already there,' and fluid" (81). This is the central theoretical intersection of the novel.

Physically, Jess's 'home' emerges when she begins taking hormone treatments, and her androgyny becomes a physical reality as well as a part of her gender expression. "Beard stubble roughened my cheeks. My face looked slimmer and more angular. I stripped off my T-shirt and BVD's. My body was lean and hard. My hips had melted away ... I took a hot, soapy shower, enjoying the feel of my hands on my skin. It had been so long since I'd been at home in my body"

(171). Similarly, she considers her breast surgery “a gift to myself, a coming home to my body” (224). Remaining physiologically female is impossible for Jess, and existing as a man is equally problematic. It is only when the two combine in her body that she finds her home – a condition that confirms her position in the third gender category. Significantly, Jess’s home is a new creation of her own. She does not return to her original physical state, nor does she embrace a wholly masculine home – an important frustration of the conventional transsexual coming-home narrative. Instead, she (re)creates herself and, in effect, comes home¹ to an uncanny body. Freud explains, “The uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar ... [It is] frightening precisely because it is *not* known and [yet] familiar” (“The Uncanny” 220). He concludes that “this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (“Uncanny” 241). Jess, then, has been frightened of the prospect of life as an androgyne – indeed, the fear of it (and the physical and emotional violence such a life entails) drove her to alter her body with surgery and hormones to pass as a man. But when she is able to face her fear and ‘return’ to her androgynous self, she has a coming home, of sorts, to her uncanny body. She has always, from childhood, apprehended herself as androgynous. In Freud’s schema, the repression of that original self resulted in the fear of the

uncanny, which Jess overcomes as she makes peace with, and finds her home in an uncanny body.

Stone Butch Blues makes very clear the dangers and pitfalls of any kind of labels, while simultaneously displaying a desperate longing for labels and language of its own. Jess knows that she is different from other children at a very young age, and she quickly discovers the power of naming. She says, “No one ever offered a name for what was wrong with me. That’s what made me afraid it was really bad” (13). Her fear is based in the experiences her family has already had with derogatory naming. Two teenagers shout “Kikes!” (19) at them through their window as they light the Shabbas candles.² Their neighbor Mac is labeled a “scab” by the community: “Just the word itself was enough to make me shy away from their house. You could still see traces of that word on the front of their coal bin, even though it had been painted over in a slightly different shade of green” (16). Language is both powerful and indelible – and Jess internalizes the desire to name, asking the crows and dogs she plays with, “are you a boy or a girl?” (17). Later, at high school, her classmates taunt her: “is it animal, mineral or vegetable?” (24). Eventually, she comes across one of the labels she will use to describe herself most often throughout the text: he-she. “Suddenly a wave of foreboding swept over me. I felt nauseous and dizzy” (20). The only word she has for herself is synonymous, her father says, with “weirdo” (20).

With a (provisional) name for herself and a burgeoning self-awareness as a he-she, Jess visits her first gay bar and is told she can ask any woman to dance – “but only the femmes” (28). The women in the bar are divided by the butch/femme labeling system, with all the behavioral conventions that go along with it. In this imperfect system, Jess identifies as a woman, a he-she and a butch, and the communities that arise around these labels are the only things that keep Jess alive long enough to mature. But the validity of all of these labels are quickly called into question. First, Frankie confides to Jess that she is sleeping with Johnny, another butch. Jess reacts with disgust and silence. “The more I thought about the two of them being lovers, the more it upset me. I couldn’t stop thinking about them kissing each other. It was like two guys. Well, two gay guys would be alright. But two butches? How could they be attracted to each other? Who was the femme in bed?” (202). Although Jess eventually reconciles with Frankie, her horror at the breakdown of the language and labels she uses to construct her own identity is telling. “What makes you think you’re still a butch?” (207) she asks Frankie sarcastically. Frankie replies to the already-passing Jess with the same question. If a butch who loves other butches and a woman passing as a man can both lay claim to the term “butch,” and both exclude the other from it, the meaning of the word itself is in doubt. And as Cat Moses argues, the subsequent police torture that she endures “literally forces Jess into a state anterior to language” (80). Silence

becomes her only mode of communication.

Jess's argument with Frankie also illustrates one of the potential pitfalls in theorizing androgyny as the third gender. Judith Halberstam argues that the idea of the third "tends to homogenize many different gender variations under the banner of 'other'" (28), and in Stone Butch Blues effects of this homogenization are made manifest. Jess initially cannot accept the idea of two butches being attracted to each other, and her rejection of Frankie leaves the former friends estranged for years. In Jess's estimation, she and Frankie are completely different, and she feels threatened by any sense of their similarity. The differences between Frankie and Jess must not, at this stage, be overlooked by homogenizing them into a single subject position. There are many other examples of the dangers of overlooking the diversity of the gender expressions that exist outside of the male / female binary, notably Grant, who is wracked by a silent misery. Frankie speculates, "I think she's horrified by something inside of her she thinks is twisted, like maybe she fantasizes about being with strong old bulls, or men or something" (274). The problem, perhaps, is that Grant cannot reconcile her butch identity with a desire for men or other butches. Is there room in the third gender position for a woman who desires men?

Jess's decision to pass as a man and her subsequent breakup with Theresa bring similar questions to light. As the butches in the bar discuss their friend

Jimmy's recent sex change, there is the following exchange:

[Jan said] "I'm not like Jimmy. Jimmy told me he knew he was a guy even when he was little. I'm not a guy."

Grant leaned forward. "How do you know that? How do you know we aren't? We aren't real women, are we?"

Edwin shook her head. "I don't know what the hell I am."

(144)

The group wrestles with the question of defining the term "woman," and deciding what kind of language to use to describe themselves, grasping, it seems, for a third option. Their entire conversation is marked with uncertainty.

When Jess tells Theresa about her decision to pass as a man, their discussion is similarly confused. Theresa says, "I'm a woman, Jess. I love you because you're a woman, too. I made up my mind when I was growing up that I was not going to betray my desire ... I just don't want to be some man's wife, even if that man's a woman" (148). Here, the label "man" is expanded to include even women. It is a complete breakdown of the binary gender system; nonetheless Theresa makes her decision by trusting its integrity. She adds, "if I'm not with a butch everyone just assumes I'm straight. It's like I'm passing too, against my will. I'm sick of the world thinking I'm straight. I've worked hard to be discriminated

against as a lesbian” (151). This is a joke, but a rather macabre one in light of Jess’s many beatings and rapes. It is as if Theresa’s lesbian label is contingent upon her surroundings, and to maintain her identity she must leave Jess. Theresa’s dilemma – is she still a lesbian if Jess becomes a man? – illustrates exactly how empty this terminology can become.

Feinberg also clearly illustrates the ways in which labels can be used to divide a community against itself. Frankie questions the ways in which the standard definition of butch seems to cast femme women as ineffectual: “I’m sick of hearing butch used to mean sexual aggression or courage. If that’s what butch means, what does it mean in reverse for femmes?” (274). This passage alludes to the concurrent trend within segments of the feminist community in the 1970s and early 1980s to disdain butch/femme roles and labels as inherently sexist – a condemnation that is presented as naive, harmful and divisive in Stone Butch Blues. Jess meets a pseudo-progressive woman who claims that butches “hate themselves so much they have to look and act like men” (5-6), and it is true that when she passes as a man, Jess is expected to join in the subjugation of women – though Jess, of course, resists this. Jess vehemently denies the woman’s claim with stories of transgendered people (who, in this instance, she appears to equate with butches), who have existed as respected and even revered members of different societies throughout history. As Jess’s pseudo-progressive acquaintance proves,

the liberating rhetoric of the gay and women's rights movements marginalize many. Jess says,

We thought we'd won the war of liberation when we embraced the word gay. Then suddenly there were professors and doctors and lawyers coming out of the woodwork telling us that meetings should be run with Robert's Rules of Order ... They drove us out, made us feel ashamed of how we looked. They said we were male chauvinist pigs, the enemy. It was women's hearts they broke. (11)

Obviously, the word "gay" solved no problems for the community of which Jess is a part. This, combined with the breakdown of terminology that occurs throughout the text, encourages a degree of scepticism about the efficacy of words as labels.

However, Stone Butch Blues is rife with a counter-current of desire for a language – clearly, many of the emotional wounds Jess and her friends endure are rooted in the fact that they don't have the language to simply accurately describe themselves. Jess is searching for some kind of certainty; a language, a history and a home. She tells Ruth, "I wish we had our own words to describe ourselves, to connect us" (254). And slightly later, when she's reminiscing with Frankie, Jess explains:

Sometimes I feel like I'm choking to death on what I'm feeling. I need to talk and I don't even know how. Femmes always tried to

teach me to talk about my feelings, but it was their words they used for their feelings. I needed my own words ... I feel like I'm clogged up with all this toxic goo, Frankie. But I can't hear my own voice say the words out loud. I've got no language ... I've got no words for feelings that are tearing me apart. What would our words sound like? ... Like thunder, maybe. (275)

Feinberg's project, in many ways, is to capture that thunder. In Transgender Warriors, Feinberg embraces the term "transgender,"³ and uses it to define herself: "I am transgendered. I was born female, but my masculine gender expression is seen as male ... It's the social contradiction between the two that defines me" (TW 101). Even though transgender is a better label than any other Feinberg has considered, linguistic boundaries still exist: "there are no pronouns in the English language as complex as I am" (TW ix). Transgender Warriors offers a cross-cultural history of transgendered people, and a material analysis of their oppression.⁴ Like Jess, the book is suffused with a melancholic (in both the vernacular and Freudian senses) longing for home. Butler formulates a gender application of Freud's theory of melancholia from his article "Mourning and Melancholia," and explains,

The melancholic refuses the loss of the object, and internalization becomes a strategy of magically resuscitating the lost object, not only

because the loss is painful, but because the ambivalence felt toward the object requires that the object be retained until differences are settled. (GT 78-79)

Clearly, the loss of binary gender is both painful and disorienting; Jess's desire for home can perhaps be read as an internalized longing for the 'home' she has lost (or has never had), but the pain that accompanies that loss is obvious.

The word transgender, in any case, is presumably chronologically unavailable to Jess. She identifies, finally, as a he-she. In an argument about Jess's passing, Theresa shouts, "You're a woman!" Jess responds:

"No, I'm not ... I'm a he-she. That's different."

Theresa slapped the table in anger. "That's a terrible word. They call you that to hurt you."

I leaned forward. "But I've listened. They don't call the Saturday-night butches he-shes. It means something. It's a way we're different. It doesn't just mean we're ... lesbians." (147-148)

Jess, like Feinberg, defines herself in the space between male and female; in the third gender position, though, as this passage makes clear, there are still complex questions to be answered about who can be included in that category. Again, when Jess finds her voice at the end of the novel and makes a speech at the rally, she

explains, "I'm not a gay man ... I'm a butch, a he-she" (296). In this final acceptance of androgyny, Jess says, "I felt my whole life coming full circle" (301). She is returning to a time when "nature held me close and seemed to find no fault with me" (17), but she is returning in a different, perhaps uncanny, form – surgically altered and still affected by hormonal treatments. Moses argues, "In claiming a voice and a history, Jess inserts the transgendered body into resistance strategy" (92). As a he-she, Jess finds her voice and a home of her own making. Moses contends, "Feinberg privileges the expression of a self outside of gender, not the subversive performance of gender," which recalls Bornstein's individualistic definition of gender, but ignores how marked all of Feinberg's characters are by gender – whatever relation they may have to it. But echoing Fuss's thesis in Essentially Speaking, Moses adds, "It is implied that Jess will achieve fulfillment only when the performance of gender and the expression of self coincide" (91) – as they do at the end of the novel. In this way, Butler's theory of gender as performance is combined with a form of essentialism that allows Jess to finally find fulfillment. Jess cannot be said to exist outside of gender; her entire life is marked by her difficult relation to that concept. But she does exist outside of the male / female gender binary. In the space of the third gender position, she is androgynous and transgendered – a transgressive (and progressive) presence.

Feinberg's deployment of androgyny in Stone Butch Blues is a challenge to

gender theory in the ways that it destabilizes the very terminology theory depends upon. Unlike The Passion, which wholeheartedly embraces postmodern gender theory, and Cock & Bull, which provides a simple satire of gender transgression (and therefore postmodern gender theory in general), Stone Butch Blues is also a political challenge – the realism of its characters and situations demands that the violence and harassment Jess and her friends face not be lost in the technical discussion of the novel's various qualities. (In fact, the power of the novel is such that the preceding examination of its theoretical components almost feels like a betrayal of its voice.) Feinberg writes in Transgender Warriors, "Gender theorists can't just function as census takers who count how much sex and gender diversity exists; they must be part of the struggle to defend our right to exist, or most of us will be forced to remain underground" (102). Stone Butch Blues is thus a call to arms in the battle for social and political change. Its project is not, as Bornstein would have it, to "quit identity" (252), but rather to create a safe space in which identity (and the necessary home of gender, whatever form it may take) can be created and explored.

Notes

1. Significantly, the German word Freud uses to describe the uncanny is “*unheimlich*,” which translates as “unhomely.” Freud writes, “*Heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*” (“Uncanny” 226). The linguistic distinction, in German, at least, between homely and unhomely is therefore nonexistent – an interesting precedent to the term’s application in postmodern gender theory, with its continual deconstruction of binaries of all sorts.
2. The difference between the portrayals of anti-Semitism in Stone Butch Blues and Cock & Bull offers another example of the generic and political incongruity of the two novels. Jess’s experience with racism is deeply-felt, and wounding. In Cock & Bull, racial epithets are used almost as throw-away lines. The don’s vitriolic racism is unexplained, and seems to have little point.
3. According to Feinberg, transgender activist Virginia Prince coined the term in its active form, “transgenderist” in 1987 or 1988 (TW x). The active use of the word is, rather unfortunately, now rarely used.
4. Feinberg is no historian and her analysis is sometimes unsophisticated, but then, that is not precisely the project of the book, which is best read as a survival tool and as a call for political and social change.

Conclusion

Gender Theory Without a Theory of Gender: Surrendering to Yearning?

"The yearning is more important than the possibility."

– John Cameron Mitchell (Pop Matters interview)

As we have seen, androgynous and transgendered bodies are often used as an elucidating trope for the constructed nature of binary gender; however, gender theorist Viviane K. Namaste roundly criticizes queer theorists who ignore the materiality of the bodies they appropriate for theoretical purposes:

Critics in queer theory write page after page on the inherent liberation of transgressing normative sex/gender codes, but they have nothing to say about the precarious position of the transsexual woman who is battered and who is unable to access a woman's shelter because she was not born a biological woman. (9-10)

Namaste contends, in Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People, that theories of gender that appropriate androgynous and transsexual bodies for theoretical ends but fail to closely examine the realities and dangers of actually living in these bodies risk perpetuating both the dehumanization of these people, and their alienation from the academy. Of course,

this thesis addresses literature and not social theory, and Namaste's categorical anti-theoretical stance is untenable. Still, although her conclusion is problematic, her point is understandable. Butler, for example, refers to transgendered people as a "critical resource" (BM 3), which is a statement problematic in its disregard for lived experience. This is what Halberstam refers to as the "symbolic burden" forced on the transgendered body within postmodernism (145).

Even the third gender position – perhaps the most inclusive theory of gender to still employ gender as a means of categorization – is problematic in its inability to differentiate between different types of androgynous bodies and experiences. The differences between, for example, Villanelle, Carol and Jess are vast. A comparison of The Passion, Cock & Bull and Stone Butch Blues is instructive in that each text contains bodies that, in their androgyny, disrupt binary notions of gender categorization, and in none of these novels is androgyny presented as a choice. Villanelle is born with her webbed feet, Carol and Bull sprout appendages without even realizing it, and Jess is trapped from an early age in a body that is rarely read as female.¹ However, each text deploys androgyny to very different effect. The Passion portrays the only androgynous character who is truly happy. Villanelle (if not Henri) thrives on the playful performance of gender and thus idealizes the position of the third as a space of endless possibility. In Cock & Bull, the androgynes momentarily disrupt, but then immediately reinforce

essential gender characteristics, and Self's satiric pen casts the third as malevolent and dangerous. In Stone Butch Blues, the limits of the third term are most apparent, as Jess and her friends struggle with questions of homogenization and division. Clearly, there is much diversity in the realm of the third. Beyond the ability to disrupt binary gender, there are few points of comparison between the deployments of androgyny found in these three novels.

Butler, Garber, Bornstein, and many others have attempted to formulate explanatory theories of gender, which often function well when considering male / female and homosexual / heterosexual binaries. But the binary breakdown enacted by androgyny tends to show the cracks in many of these theories. Namaste argues that it is often a problem of context. Butler's theory of gender performativity illustrated by drag is compelling, except that "it fails to account for the context in which these gender performances occur" (10). Drag shows almost always take place in gay bars, which, Namaste observes, contain and regulate this gender transgression by segregating it to the stage, thus creating an implicit opposition between the overt gender performance on stage and the supposed naturalness of the gender expression of the audience: "Drag is contained as a performance in itself. Gay male identity, in contrast, establishes itself as something prior to performance" (13). Namaste also comments on the troubling tendency of Butler's theory to privilege drag over transsexuality in terms of subversive potential – "drag

queens expose compulsory sex / gender relations, while transsexuals can only offer 'an uncritical miming of the hegemonic [sex / gender system]'" (14). Certainly, individuals who choose to physically alter their bodies in hopes of conforming to a "true" sexual identity express a type of essentialism (a potentially sophisticated concept that need not be used derogatorily, as Fuss has shown) not accounted for by Butler's influential theory. What can postmodern theorists make of this desire for the embodiment of a "true" gender expression, without turning to patronizing charges of false consciousness, and how can we account for the mixture of essentialism and constructivism that seems to exist at the site of the transsexual body? Butler's framework, Namaste argues, is overwhelmingly damaging because:

- (1) it can be deployed in a violently anti-transsexual manner; (2) it forces a separation of drag queens from transsexuals (a division that is already quite strong within transgendered communities); and (3) it prevents the elaboration of a broad-based transgendered politics.

(14)

Performativity, then, is a problematic theory. Its fictional deployment is equally problematic.

The Passion, as we have seen, wholeheartedly embraces the doctrine of postmodern gender theory, including Butler's theory of performativity. Androgyny is idealized throughout as generative of choice and freedom, which conforms to

Butler's idea of the emancipatory potential of the "subversive repetition" (GT 188) of gender. It is only by refusing the promise of androgyny that characters, like Henri, are lost. However, it is not in the repetition of gender, but by finding "pleasure in the truth of pleasure" (Foucault, HS 71), that the novel finds its most potent transgressions. Villanelle's declaration, "I have learnt to take pleasure without always questioning the source" (Passion 148), is, as Foucault might argue, the key to the novel's resistance of regulatory sexual discourses, rather than her propensity for drag or the webbing between her toes. Performativity, then, cannot account for all the gender transgressions of the text. In the radically different novel Cock & Bull, gender performance is fused entirely with genital reality. There can be no subversive repetition of gender, and Self's deployment of androgyny confirms, rather than debunks, gender essentialism. Here, the very notion that gender can be transgressed in any meaningful way is the target of satire. In Stone Butch Blues, the concepts of performativity and essentialism are inextricably linked. Jess finds some sense of comfort and contentment only when her gender performance and, for lack of better terms, her gendered essence are in harmony. Thus, the character of Jess offers something of a (fictional) lived critique of any gender theory that operates within the essentialist / constructivist binary, which includes most postmodern gender theory. Performativity is thus insufficient to explain the androgyny that exists in these fictions.

Garber's theory of the third, too, has its problems. Namaste argues that Garber's formulation "ignores the intertextual relations in which meaning is situated. This framework also enacts familiar oppositions between academics and 'our' objects of inquiry" (15) – an excellent point, but one that is difficult to remedy. Namaste contends that Garber's theorizing of transvestitism, which this thesis has applied similarly to androgyny, is equally flawed. "Insofar as [Garber] reduces the transvestite to a mere tropological figure, a textual and rhetorical device that points to the crisis of category and the category of crisis, she has effectively undermined the possibility of 'transvestite' as a viable identity in and of itself" (14-15). It could similarly be argued that by using the concept of the third as an explanation for the gender disruptions that occur in The Passion, Cock & Bull and Stone Butch Blues, I have obscured the distinct identities of the androgynous characters within them (though, of course, I have tried to avoid this). The common thread running through all of Namaste's criticisms of theory is that

The presentation of transgendered issues within queer theory does not account for the quotidian living conditions of transgendered people. The political objections to this field are clear: queer theory begins its analysis with little thought of the individuals designated as the objects of study. At best, this perspective is an unfortunate and unacceptable oversight; at worst, it belies a kind of academic inquiry

that is contemptuous and dismissive of the social world. (16)

Namaste argues that these objections to queer theory are compelling enough to demand a resultant rejection of the entire field as it is currently practiced; she has nothing to say about the successes of queer theory. Further, her argument can be extended to anti-intellectual and anti-academic ends – if only transgendered people can write about transgendered issues, we are back to a form of basic essentialism that excludes theoretical inquiry. While Namaste's exploration and explanation of the erasure of transgendered and transsexual people within queer theory is worthwhile, and addresses a wrong that requires immediate redress, she does not advance a counter-theory of her own, except to claim that "transsexual and transgendered people are produced through erasure" (53). Surely, instead of shutting down the possibilities for queer theory to grow, change and expand to become more inclusive, it would be more valuable to encourage theoretical work and debate.

If, then, queer theory and all the sub-theories within it (Butler, Garber, etc.) are at least incomplete, and at most complicit in the erasure of transgendered people, what are the alternatives? Clearly, the subject position of the transgenderist or androgyne has not yet been adequately theorized, and further work must be done. In The Passion, Cock & Bull and Stone Butch Blues, the disruptive capacity of the androgyne is the sole constant. A single theory of gender thus far seems

insufficient to account for the many variations of androgynous bodies that exist – both in fiction, and in the world at large. It is therefore crucial to acknowledge the necessarily provisional nature of the flawed theories we use. Overarching theories, like Garber's and Butler's, are problematic in their tendency to overlook difference; individual, specific theories, like Bornstein's, cannot theorize political agency. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reminds us that on an axiomatic level, "People are different from each other" (22) – important for any theory to remember, but difficult to politicize. What all these theorists have in common, though, is a vision of the world in which social justice is available to all people, regardless of their gender positioning. Winterson and Feinberg, though writing in fictional mode, clearly share that vision – as, perhaps, does Self (though his is a very different political framework that would presumably seek to ensure gender parity through essential gender conformity). Perhaps, then, as John Mitchell Cameron would have it, "the yearning is more important than the possibility" (Pop Matters); that is, the vision behind the desire for a unified gender theory in which variation can be recognized and accounted for is more important, at this stage, than the actualization of that desire. Theorist Iris Young calls for a "concept of social relations that embody openness to unassimilated otherness with justice and appreciation" (320). We don't yet know what such a concept would look like, but working to move towards is absolutely necessary, and can only be a worthwhile

project.

Notes

1. This thesis considers only the ways in which androgyny disrupts male / female gender categorization – that is, the ways the third gender position invalidates the concept of binary gender. However, further research into the possibilities of androgynous gender essentialism is warranted. If androgyny can indeed be considered a third gender along the lines of male / female / androgynous, how can the concept of gender essentialism be extended and applied to the third term, if at all? This, perhaps, is part of Feinberg's project in Stone Butch Blues.

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