A Scar is More than a Wound: Rethinking Community and Intimacy through Queer and Disability Theory

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> Without the scars there is no me; with them, I am in a negotiation with your hands.
> —Riva Lehrer, "Golem Girl Gets Lucky"

In Riva Lehrer's creative non-fiction essay, "Golem Girl Gets Lucky," she expresses how the coming together of queer and disability theory creates new frames for thinking about sexuality, community, and intimacy. As a common point of departure, these theoretical fields' joint project entails the decentering of the Western subject as well as the questioning of rationality and self-sufficiency as central to the human experience. Together, queer and crip theory precipitate a shift away from a modernist conception of a stable and coherent identity and body (Shildrick 2). In the following reading of Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and Lehrer's "Golem Girl Gets Lucky," I explore complex embodiment and complex relationality, i.e., why our scars are more than just the body's method of remembering a wound.[1]

A reconsideration of *Stone Butch Blues* alongside Lehrer's "Golem Girl Gets Lucky" places ongoing systemic violence against all in the foreground, with what Magrit Shildrick calls "anomalous embodiment," a term that creates common ground between queer and crip. Lehrer and Feinberg poignantly convey the complexity of forming relationship in queer and crip communities, which are comprised of anomalous bodies routinely othered by "a tangle of eyes": "eyes raise, eyes meet, eyes slide away, eyes widen, eyes lock, and eyes are cast down" (Lehrer 234). I here consider how relationships form and adhere differently, often without the usual end goals or luxuries of life-long partnership, reproduction, and private property. Both works lead us instead to imagine new forms of community and intimacy that include fragmentation, suffering, and loss.

In addition to systemic violence, the butch and the crip have in common a lack of mainstream representation. However, for both Feinberg's Jess and Lehrer, this relegation to the margins of culture can allow a certain freedom to form relationship differently. Common vulnerability creates an opportunity to embrace a sense of interdependence through mutual precarity. As Lehrer explains, "Disability can

act as a radical alchemist's laboratory of relationship possibility. A place where love might be invented beyond the roles of gender, and leave behind inherited, failed mimicries of intimacy" (246). Through close readings of the texts, I explore this space within and beyond normativity and initiate a specific consideration of how community and intimacy form differently because of this erasure from mainstream culture.

Because of this history of systemic violence and the simultaneous absence of representation, queer and disability theory often take as their object of study the trauma of identity disintegration and moments of *un*becoming, which ironically form the ground for the constantly shifting relationships in *Stone Butch Blues* and "Golem Girl Gets Lucky." In *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Ann Cvetkovich writes on the historically "traumatic texture" of daily life in many lesbian queer contexts. For her, the body becomes "a ground for negotiating social relationships" and "address[ing] experiences of homophobia, shame, and abjection in the public world" (56). Specifically, I locate how this traumatic texture informs the creation of alternative patterns of community and relationship within the prison cell, the medical complex, and the domestic space. In these real and imagined sites, queer and crip desire is often expressed in small acts of solidarity, in the accumulation of ordinary gestures that for many othered bodies becomes extraordinary. Desire and love are expressed in the offering of a cigarette through the bars of a prison cell, in the hanging of hand-sewn curtains, or in simple non-verbal gestures that speak to a mutual recognition of shared oppression. Both works depict an improvisatory system of connection that adheres, solidifies, or falls apart, only to be reformed again across a bodily and/or psychic scar. Thus, scars become not only evidence of wounding, but also a new surface on which to form community and intimacy.

Synopses

Questions about the gender of Feinberg's protagonist, Jess Goldberg, who is born female, arise early in the novel, which is set in a small conservative town in upstate New York in the late 1950s. Her parents suffer acute shame and disappointment to the point that, when she is ten years old, they attempt to feminize her by temporarily having her committed. This attempt fails and, as Jess matures, she maintains her masculine appearance and style, thus suffering repeated abuses from her parents and peers. A gang of high school boys, a painful foreshadowing of future events, even mercilessly rapes her. At sixteen, Jess runs away to become a part of the underground butch-femme bar scene in the Buffalo/Niagara Falls area; she eventually finds acceptance and mentorship from other butch women who have suffered similar isolation and abuse: "What I saw there released tears I'd held

back for years: strong, burly women, wearing ties and suit coats. . . . Some of them were wrapped in slow motion dances with women in tight dresses and high heels. Just watching them made me ache with need. This was everything I could have hoped for in life" (Feinberg 28). In these initial moments, she enjoys for the first time a sense of social location, community, self-respect, and sexual love.

Jess meets her most significant lover, Theresa, in 1968. The Civil Rights Movement, the escalating war in Vietnam and the beginnings of the second wave of the Women's Movement form a backdrop to their affair; Feinberg even notes that Martin Luther King, Jr. is killed shortly after they meet. There is increasing turbulence and fragmentation in the butch-femme bar culture as well, resulting in part from a growing feminist consciousness that insists on gender neutrality as the only release from patriarchal constraints. Theresa joins a woman's group that criticizes butch/femme sexual styles for their reactionary and patriarchal nature, ensuring her eventual separation from Jess. Moreover, returning Vietnam veterans begin to occupy the factory jobs once held by "he-shes," and Jess and her friends feel forced to pass as men in order to compete for secure employment in Buffalo. Jess tries to medically transition, but she does not feel quite comfortable with becoming a biological man and, instead, relocates to New York City to begin a new life.

However, in this in-between state of partial gender transition, she feels very separate from the mainstream gay movement in New York City, and her friendships emerge instead with those who share the experience of sustained oppression and violence. A significant relationship develops not with another butch, but with Ruth, her transgender neighbor who focuses her efforts on turning her rundown apartment into a nurturing home. The friendship evolves slowly, painstakingly, through occasional, disjointed conversations and small gestures of caring. After Jess gets her jaw broken by a group of teenagers on a subway platform as she is returning to her apartment building with a box of elderberries for Ruth, Jess refuses to stay in the hospital for fear of being assaulted by the police. Because Ruth is one of the few people in Jess's life who understands what she suffers, she allows Ruth to take care of her. Afterward the two resolve to establish a sense of purpose that has been lost in their lives because of their gender and sexual orientation. Ruth admits to Jess that "when I was growing up, I believed I was gonna do something really important with my life, like explore the universe or cure diseases. I never thought I'd spend so much of my life fighting over which bathroom I could use" (255). Though it is unclear what form this desire will take, by caring for one another's scars, they form the foundation for a sustaining friendship.

Similarities between Jess's and Lehrer's early lives present crucial parallels

between queer and crip, particularly in terms of the immense pressure to conform. In "Golem Girl Gets Lucky," Lehrer too must recover a positive self-image within the violent conditions of her early family life. Lehrer's family also fears, for different reasons, that the "unbalanced shapes" of her body "hint at unsanctioned desires" (Lehrer 234), meaning that her disabilities automatically connote a deviant sexuality that must be neutralized within the context of proper feminine presentation. In response, her family tries to turn her into a docile woman to ensure a somewhat normal, albeit asexual, adulthood. Nonetheless, the neutralization of her desire fails, and as a teenager, Lehrer responds by dressing "like a hooker in a storm cellar" just to prove that she is in control of her desire (239). Lehrer, like Jess, receives the message that she must show her conventional femininity if she is to be accepted by her family and peers.

Lehrer's interactions with space, namely the street and the home, indicate how she must navigate intimacy and relationship differently than normate subjects. She names her adult home "The Castle," and describes how she must defend herself against possible invasion. For Lehrer, home can be both a refuge and a painful reminder of the dangers outside her door, as the crossing of the threshold into her "castle" leads to a sense of safety. Yet, because her home is also a kind of protective "fortress," she never truly forgets the trauma of daily life, and the space always feels vulnerable to "monsters." "The street" also has multiple meanings, and while it may serve as a humiliating catwalk or a battleground, the street may also be reclaimed as a space of agency and positive self-definition. Initially, because of her small stature, her orthopedic shoes, her "z" shape that leads her to walk in a kind of zigzag pattern as if she were on a "slalom course," the street is clearly a place of vulnerability. As though she were not enough of a spectacle, she must continually change sides of the street to maintain even stress on her ankles. While the street is for many women a kind of "catwalk," she is aware that her body is clearly not "built for the performance of Womanhood" with a capital "W" (234). In the section titled "closet," she writes that her sexual desire must be completely hidden, or experienced as so partial that most of her body must be publicly disowned. She is acutely aware of which parts of her can be sexualized, which parts can pass as able and functioning, and the remainder that must be disowned: "We [crip girls] use magic spells and incantations to make the rest of us disappear" (242). To ensure this erasure, crip children are kept largely uninformed about their sexuality.

It is only after Lehrer's mother passes away that she begins to "hear [her] body speaking" (242). Much to her dead mother's imagined chagrin, Lehrer discovers that she is bisexual. At art school, as creativity and queerness come together, she is able to explore her sexuality and experience new models of relationship that

are neither whole, long-lived, nor completely coherent. Her sexual coming-of-age makes her realize the lack of role models for queer/crip girls, because they are generally either fetishized, absent or, in the case of politically correct lesbian porn, used to make a "feminist theory point" (244). However, as already suggested, Lehrer also sees in this lack of mainstream cultural representation a certain freedom to form relationship differently.

The Prison

> I lay on a precinct floor, alone in a strange city, my mouth pressed against the cold concrete. I wondered if I was close to death because I seemed to be drifting away from the world. Only two things tethered me to life—one was the feel of cold stone against my lips, the other was the faint strains of a Beatles tune coming from a radio somewhere in the jail. *She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah.* (Feinberg 136)

As suggested by Lehrer's relationship to home as a kind of space that is both confining and liberating, and Feinberg's above description of Jess's arrest, the prison cell becomes for crip and queer subjects a real and metaphorical site of violation and intimacy. When we begin to work on what McRuer calls "imagining desires and bodies otherwise" (36), we can look to situations and locations of discipline as also sites of interconnection. In the graphic prison scenes found in *Stone Butch Blues*, the butch body is othered and criminalized because of both a perceived lack of able-bodiedness—i.e., normative embodiment—and unacceptable gender performance and sexual orientation.[2] As Shildrick asks, "What strategies . . . must be in place in order to ensure an illusory security, and how may they be contested?" (20). The conditions of othering for Feinberg's Jess and Lehrer might be different, but a similar self/other confrontation in confined spaces exists in both works through which community and intimacy take shape and normalizing strategies are contested.

When queer and crip subjects become victims of horrific violence, the oppressor reveals his pervasive anxiety about his own vulnerability and contingency. As Lehrer suggests, in order to neatly categorize the bodies we encounter, we create a system of "flashcards" that allows us to quickly and seamlessly identify a particular race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability. When unable to easily match a body with a category, we may experience a dual sensation of revulsion and attraction. There is a sexual component to this classification; as Lehrer writes, they are like "flash cards strobing a route between head, heart, and pelvis" (234). Nonetheless, when this revulsion/attraction dialectic becomes overwhelming, violence may ensue. Through this drama of otherness enacted on the level of the everyday, "it becomes clear that it is the encounter with an anomalously embodied other *positioned within the arena of sexuality* that is the most threatening and disruptive" (Shildrick

94). Sexuality can be described as already self-shattering and, therefore, the queer and/or crip body can be seen as doubly threatening because of these "flashcards." A good example is a sexual encounter that abruptly ends for Lehrer when her date becomes overwhelmed with her otherness: "I guess, after all, you were spooked by me" (232). Yet, the devastation of rejection within the confines of her own apartment does not eliminate the possibility of kinship and intimacy. In queer/crip communities, relationships form *within* the effects of systemic violence, as though this trauma and othering subjects may be more likely to realize their own existence as messy and acutely contingent.

At its core, the reaction of the cops to the butch body must be viewed as a result of this fear of interdependence, and the fear of what the Other represents culturally and symbolically. In *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, George Yancy approaches the body as a "site of contestation," as well as "a shifting and changing historical meaning that is subject to cultural configuration and reconfiguration" (xxii). His analogy of the body as "battlefield," though tied here to the construction of race, is particularly relevant for Jess as the war over gender and normative embodiment is fought on a physical level, particularly in the prison cell. Clearly, what the lesbian queer and crip body represents is the potential for a "breakdown in a well-ordered society" (62). Rape, in *Stone Butch Blues*, is a common "method" of preventing such a perceived social unraveling. Cvetkovich describes how for those who become victims of unequal distributions of power and resources, penetration automatically signifies their subjugation. Moreover, penetration becomes an apt metaphor to grasp not only "gendered and sexualized forms of power," but also "hierarchies of race and nation" (51). By raping Jess, the cops, as representatives of the nation-state, insist that she conform to a national ideal of what it means to be a properly feminized, white citizen of the United States. In addition, the pathologized lesbian queer body becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy; the cops brutalize and disable a body they already perceive as pathological, and thus Jess's corporeality condemns her to the losing side of this symbolic battle.

The fear of rape haunts butch-femme culture and becomes for Jess and her friends a part of what Cvetkovich calls the historically "traumatic texture" of lesbian communities. When Jess finally begins to feel accepted after she discovers the bar scene, she quickly realizes that it is only a limited zone of safety and sexual expression. Early on, Butch Al becomes a role model and protector: "I had really met Butch Al. I was so excited. And scared. I needn't have been: no one was ever kinder to me. She was gruff with me alright. But she peppered it with scruffing my hair, hugging my shoulders, and giving my face something more than a pat and less than a slap. It felt good" (Feinberg 29). Butch Al's "gruff" affection suggests

paternal behavior in a biologically female body, and a remarkable departure from the brutal masculinity observed in the police. Jess, a runaway without resources for survival, naturally responds positively to this kind of tenderness: "I liked the affection in her voice when she called me kid, which she did frequently. She took me under her wing and taught me all the things she thought were most important for a baby butch like me to know before embarking on such a dangerous and painful journey" (29). These scenes poignantly convey the closeness of the relationships formed within the constant threat of violent police reprisals. Through Butch Al, Jess learns both the joy of expressing desire within the cultural codes of the community and the unavoidable reality of rape.

While Jess is aware of the trauma that awaits her, nothing can quite prepare her for what she witnesses: "the cops dragged Al in . . . she was in pretty bad shape. Her shirt was partly open and her pants zipper down. Her binder was gone, leaving her large breasts free. Her hair was wet. There was blood running from her mouth and nose. She looked dazed. . . . The cops pushed her into the cell" (35). This image of blood, torn clothing, and bodily violation is the first of many that Jess must somehow absorb into her consciousness. After the arrest, Jess feels abandoned and confused: "Butch Al and Jacqueline weren't at the bar after that. Their phone was disconnected. I heard some stories about what happened to Al. I didn't choose to believe any of them" (37). But she continues to idolize Butch Al and believes in her survival throughout the narrative, just as a child might hold on to the image of an estranged parent. In fact, Jess's admiration for Butch Al and a belief in her survival helps Jess sustain the horrendous abuse she later suffers. As Halberstam writes, "'queer' [also] refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" (*Queer Time* 6). The relationship between Butch Al and Jess becomes an expression of queer as a nonnormative logic that includes, and exceeds, sexual orientation; the closeness that survives indefinite separation conveys how alternative kinship patterns take the place of normative familial ones within queer and crip cultures.

It is not surprising that Jess receives the same treatment as Butch Al soon after Al disappears from the narrative. The following depicts one of Jess's most vicious arrests:

> Mulroney was fingering his crotch. "Suck my cock, bulldagger." Someone hit the side of my knee with a nightstick. My knees buckled more from fear than pain. Mulroney grabbed me by the collar and dragged me several feet away to a steel toilet. There was a piece of unflushed shit floating in the water. "Either eat me or eat my shit, bulldagger. It's up to you." I was too frightened to think or move. (Feinberg 62)

They force her head into the toilet, and she nearly swallows the feces, before they decide to gang rape her on top of a desk. After this horrific event, she descends into a trance state, an imagined space of snow, ice, and silence that prevents any entry (i.e., penetration) from the outside: "I moved in numbness for several weeks, unable to feel the sensation of temperature, hot or cold. The world seemed distant" (Feinberg 67). Considering that the choice to "eat shit" or be gang raped is obviously a false one as she is subjected to both, and physical flight is virtually impossible, this mental escape becomes her only option.

The intimate relationships that form in the novel appear even more remarkable against the backdrop of this traumatic scene. After the rape, Jess returns to her apartment desperately wishing to be alone. However, when her friend Betty arrives with a plate of fried chicken, which she will not eat because it looks like "human limbs," their sense of mutual understanding overcomes Jess's defense mechanisms. Betty stays and sews curtains while Jess rests until, finally, Betty approaches her, "'I know,' she said, getting up to leave. 'You don't think anyone understands. But I do know" (66). Betty "kneels" in front of Jess, and her protective shell receives a shock, "As we made eye contact I felt a sudden jolt of emotional electricity. I saw everything I was feeling in Betty's eyes, as though I were looking at my own reflection" (66). This mutual recognition, often occurring in small, intimate gestures, becomes central to the formation of community and intimacy within systemic violence.

Penetration has a particular meaning for butch lesbians who often experience at some point in their sexual histories a lack of desire for this sexual act. In Halberstam's chapter in *Female Masculinity*, "Lesbian Masculinity: Even Stone Butches Get the Blues," he expresses concern for how the butch's refusal to be penetrated is often pathologized (*Female Masculinity* 114).[3] While the pathologization should be argued against, we can also consider through disability theory the relational aspect of all sexual expression, and the ways that refusing penetration can be a form of solidarity and shared resistance between partners. Furthermore, disability allows us to see that the cops are not only committing violence against a specific Other, but also against a relationship and community. As Abby L. Wilkerson argues in "Normate Sex and Its Discontents," "many [intersex, transgender, transsexual] people experience eroticisms in distinct contrast to medicalized notions of sex—a key element of normate sex—and the creation of these erotic possibilities constitutes an important form of resistance" (200). Wilkerson continues this train of thought by suggesting that gender, similar to ability, is always relational and is often only made intelligible by the erotic charge between partners.

Mutual enjoyment also occurs alongside the anxiety of public acknowledgement.

Similarly, what Cvetkovich finds powerful about the pre-1970s working class, butch-femme feminist writings on trauma, or post-Stonewall accounts of the era, such as *Stone Butch Blues*, is the "raw, confrontational, and even sexy" attitude of these trauma stories: "when Leslie Feinberg and Cherríe Moraga write about not wanting to be touched, they celebrate the hard-won experience of sexual pleasure without denying its roots in pain and difficulty" (4). In many ways, enjoyment of public acknowledgment signals the desire to be a part of something larger than oneself, a desire that is often denied to those with anomalous embodiment. Similarly, in addition to feeling sexual charge when with her (also disabled) partner, Lehrer feels the need to overcome the shame, "because you quickly see that being my companion means becoming one-half of a two-headed freak in a sideshow" (Lehrer 246). Her companion, however, allows her to feel "ok," and this changes the actual tenor of the street for both partners. Likewise, some of the more tender moments of intimacy in *Stone Butch Blues* occur when Jess and her lovers are able to proudly display their affections at the bar and on the dance floor.

As f-t-m disability activist Eli Clare argues in his essay, "Stones in My Pockets, Stones in My Heart," the connection between rape, disability, and queerness is often under-theorized. Yet, as Jess's story makes clear, lesbian queer/crip subjects often learn through rape what it means to be embodied, to be female, and how these are bound to "the larger power structure and hierarchy" (567). Recovering desire and forming relationship and community within systemic conditions of oppression thus requires incredible emotional flexibility and fortitude. The survival of intimacy attests to the strength of the body, mind, and spirit to thrive, not despite but *within* adverse conditions. As Clare recognizes, this is a strength that can be developed in the individual queer and crip subject, and within queer, feminist, and crip communities (570). He writes, "I came to terms with the sexual abuse and physical torture done to me. And somewhere along the line, I pulled desire to the surface, gave it room to breathe" (570). The prison cell, as both actual and metaphoric site of violation, compels an analysis of the remarkable ways that the queer and the crip continually "[pull] desire" out of the most degrading circumstances and use the surface of the scar to build community and intimacy.

The Medicalization of the Queer/Crip (Desiring) Body

> Desire plants me inescapably in my body. The shields are falling against mutual lust. The truth under my clothes is whispering loudly, *urgently*, asking how will I explain myself to you. I am most comfortable with the language of medical records. With convoluted, opaque terms that let me speak as if I were on display in the next room. Terms meant for an examining table, not a bed. (Lehrer 247)

Lehrer and Jess both experience their bodies as medicalized anomalies—they

constantly have the sense that their bodies and minds are inadequate and in need of intervention. However, it is within, not despite, these medical narratives that relationship is formed, broken, and sutured in a pattern that deviates from the normative, reflecting the contingency and interdependence at the heart of relationality. In current disability theory, medicalization is even reconceived as potentially sexy. When Lehrer has an encounter with a lover in her/his apartment, an obstacle course of furniture and other spatial barriers, there is a healing acceptance that ironically recalls a medical intervention: Lehrer admits, "you're radiating something that is imploding my fears" (248). Similarly, later in this passage, she speaks in a language of biology and science that is not isolating and abusive, but freeing, "During nights alone in the darkness, I've wrestled my sheets into chains. I think that touching you could break the Mobius strip that binds me only to myself" (248). Medicalization, as an often unavoidable and oppressive part of life for queer and crip subjects, can also become the site of alternative community and intimacy.

As shown by the historic confinement of the queer and disabled to basements, attics, nursing homes, and mental hospitals, concerted efforts have historically been made to block non-normate subjects from society and from reproduction. These attempts to isolate, control, and reform queerness and disability have prevented community and intimacy from occurring, but this does not mean that desire has not always lingered at the margins of these spaces. The character of Butch Al (*Stone Butch Blues*) again illustrates abuse and confinement, and the endurance of surrogate family bonds. As already explored, Butch Al is a type of father figure for Jess, and this relationship culminates in a painful and disturbing reunion after Al is institutionalized years later. But these scenes reveal that even within the medical/disciplinary site of the mental hospital, her feelings for Butch Al are sustaining and enduring, even as Al is crudely tied down with strips of bed sheet. The medicalization of Butch Al's body and psyche does not block Jess from recovering the connection. This scene then becomes reminiscent of a reunion in which the idealized father figure fails, because of violent othering, to live up to the son's image: "She sat in front of the windows. She was slumped in a chair, staring either through the windows, or at them. . . . As I got closer I saw that she was tied to the chair with a strip of bed sheet" (Feinberg 286). In *Stone Butch Blues*, it becomes clear that alternative kinship patterns endure—including and exceeding the medical narrative of their own experience—despite the historic isolation of the queer and crip body.

After Jess experiences a partial medical transition through the voluntary taking of testosterone, her body also becomes medical anomaly. As Wilkerson argues,

medical intervention often demanded by the transgendered cannot always be viewed as agency, considering the profound "cultural demands for conformity to the sex/gender binary [that produces] felt needs for one's body to accord to one's gender as dictates by heteropatriarchal convention" (194). While this is certainly not always so for trans subjects, it proves true for Jess, as changing economic and social conditions post-Vietnam force the temporary transition. Due in part to the historical context of the novel, the transitions yield in their wake an even more profound lack of social location: "Loneliness had become an environment—the air I breathed, the spatial dimension in which I was trapped" (Feinberg 221). The reason for her loneliness after transition is complex because there was no transgender support system then to aid in her transition had she desired to continue the process; the lesbian feminist community disowned butch-femme identified subjects because of their perceived collusion with patriarchy.

Another reason is that, like in Lehrer's case, Jess's body after her partial transition is never truly seen or accepted on its own terms—her body becomes perpetually distorted; it is either acutely visible or entirely absent. In her transition state in Buffalo, Jess remarks on the discomfort of her anomalous embodiment: "My body was blending gender characteristics, and I wasn't the only one who noticed. . . . I remembered what it was like to walk a gauntlet of strangers who stare- their eyes angry, confused, intrigued. Woman or man: they are outraged that I confuse them. The punishment will follow. . . . I am different. I will always be different" (Feinberg 267). For the contemporary moment, we need to take Wilkerson's suggestion that the desire for gender reassignment should also be viewed as an outcry for social change, one that becomes expressed toward the end of the novel through her friendship with Ruth and her former boss, Duffy. Her relationships with Ruth and Duffy help ease the painful reality that through self-directed medical intervention, she becomes a spectacle, a freak, ironically because of an imposed need to become clearly gendered, a "tangle of eyes" that continues to plague queer and crip subjects in the twenty-first century.

Both texts demonstrate how queer and crip subjects support and aid each other in regaining a positive self-image within the medical complex, and refuse the tendency to self-blame when their minds and bodies do not conform to standard notions of health (Nicki 82). Lehrer considers herself sexual, powerful, and viable in her lover's bed through, not despite, the medicalization of her body: "Your hands trace the palimpsest of forty-three surgeons' signatures and the imprint of three hundred hospital bracelets" (Lehrer 250). Through relationships of various kinds, the queer and crip receive validation of their existence that does not occur elsewhere, and we can see this validation as also a reflection of "the folly of relying

on atomistic visions of self-determination, which are based on autonomy at the expense of interconnection" (Wilkerson 205). It is through, not despite, the medicalization that was often forced that relationships are forged and sustained.

The Queer/Crip Domestic

> We got real furniture. I mean, it was Salvation Army, but it was real. Our names were printed inside a heart on the dishtowel that hung on the refrigerator door handle. . . . It was a brave thing to do . . . and there were marigolds in amber glasses on the windowsill, daisies in a green cut-glass vase on the kitchen table . . It was a home. (Feinberg 123)

> The keys are already in my hand as I come home again. The sight of the long iron fence in front of my building makes my spine prickly with metamorphosis…This iron threshold marks the line between the hard-shell body I wear in the street and the soft-stitched-up skin of my animal self. (Lehrer 231)

Both Lehrer and Jess try to make home in a hostile urban environment, expressing their desire to establish a life worth living against the threat of violent othering. For them, the domestic space and the objects within it become vital to their survival. As the above quotations powerfully demonstrate, home is at times the only refuge against the possibility of attack. The objects within the home also take on elevated importance, as both anchoring points and obstacles within a hostile world—for Jess, these are sentimental objects like the "dish towel" the "amber glasses" and the "green cut-class." As in Cvetkovich's idea that objects become for immigrants remedies for cultural dislocation, Jess's possession provides a profound sense of stability and security (199). Furthermore, while the home is a place to forget the daily confrontation with the world—for Lehrer, her size, shape, and way of walking (234)—, the street also carries a possibility of safety and relationship, prompting a reconsideration of the meaning of "inside" and "outside," as suggested by Lehrer's elaborate system of gates and locks that "keeps in" and also "keeps out."

After Jess moves to New York City, she must invent alternative kinship and home outside of the imagined community of the post-Stonewall gay movement. Her situation is common; the changing economy and the influence of the cultural feminist movement at SUNY-Buffalo provide the conditions for what Cvetkovich, describes as "queer diasporas" (2003, 122). These diasporas move beyond Benedict Anderson's model of "imagined community" because of their tendency to forge "transnational [I would add translocal] circuits of cultural reception and production" (122). This translocal connection can be found in Jess's friendship with Ruth and in their mutual attempt to create a home for themselves. However,

the symbolic importance of Jess's home is most evident when her apartment building, after its owner's failure to sell it, burns to the ground—the likely result of arson. The scene shows the ephemeral nature of material objects in Jess's life, and their importance as symbols of resistance:

> I heard the fire before I saw it. The hellfire roared from the windows of my building straight up into the sky. Sparks shot up like a volcanic eruption and floated down on nearby roofs. My yellow calico curtains blew between broken shards of glass as though a storm was raging inside my apartment. A small spot of flame appeared on each curtains, and they dissolved in a poof, the way cotton candy melted on my tongue. (Feinberg 244)

Not only does she have to watch her handmade "yellow calico curtains" literally "dissolve" before her eyes but, as the fire rages, she remembers the wedding band Theresa gave her and the only picture she has of her, Milli's ceramic kitten, and Edwin's gift, a W.E.B Du Bois book. By comparing the fire to a sweet childhood memory of cotton candy melting on her tongue, she makes a provocative connection between the pleasure and the abuse she has suffered throughout her life. Trauma and intimacy become intertwined in this passage and, therefore, the joys and labors involved in the creation of home co-exist with the bitter disappointment of loss: "Every time I got a paycheck I used part of it on my apartment. I spent one whole weekend spackling the cracks in my walls and ceiling. As I applied paint to each room with broad strokes my spirits lifted" (236). She sands and polyurethanes the floors until they are "dazzling." This appears to add a new dimension underfoot, as though the ceilings have been raised, or the apartment has grown in size: "and then one day I looked around my apartment and realized I'd made a home" (237). This laborious and transformative work in the home is an example of how a life is often constructed on the surface of physical and psychic scarring.

Clare also expresses this connection to material objects as salvation in a hostile world as he writes on the traumatic effects of growing up in a small, rural town with a brutally abusive family life—like Jess, as a child Clare knew "in [his] bones" that he was neither a boy nor girl (567). Consequently, he suffered sustained rape and torture by his father and his father's friends who were often invited to partake in the abuse. To keep his psyche intact, he held stones in his pocket, stones that reminded him of a steadiness lacking in his home environment. These stones are similar to the domestic objects that Jess holds dear in her mind, such that even when they are lost, they become symbolic of the possibility of desire and connection within a hostile world. While the stones to which Clare refers in his essay should not be conflated with stone butch identity, he reveals the power of stone as metaphor—the stones remind Clare of the "inviolate parts" (564) of

himself, just as Jess's domesticity expresses her desire for love and intimacy within the violence she experiences. Clare's metaphoric keeping of stones in his pocket in order to fortify himself against abuse also suggests a paradox, i.e., while stones may recall hardness and immobility they too may be warmed and softened by the body's heat or, in this case, by the creation of alternative kinship patterns within the traditionally heterosexual and able-bodied domestic.

For Lehrer, the reality of her space as tailor-made becomes painfully evident when she tries to navigate a new lover's apartment. However, her tangle with spatial obstacles in an unfamiliar space becomes not a cause for separation, but for connection between herself and her lover. Even bodily awkwardness becomes an opportunity for intimacy and eroticism. The section "Four Rooms: A Travelogue" speaks to this unanticipated potential for desire: "I've been expecting you to flinch at all my flailing around. I suddenly realize that you've been very calm all night. Incredible" (Lehrer 247). The domestic becomes beautifully imperfect, contingent, and full of erotic moments of unbecoming, questioning the idea that only independence and self-sufficiency can signify sexiness.

In both works, the domestic ultimately results in a destabilization of the inside/outside binary, the dichotomy that provides us with a rationale for the false conception of coherent and stabile identities and bodies. For Lehrer, inside and outside come together after a sexual encounter that causes the street environment to be experienced as less hostile: "This morning I swung open the black gate onto Balmoral. Stepped out onto the sidewalk behind two slender blondes. Per usual, I felt like a Troglodyte lurking behind their thoughtless, easy gait. But then for a moment, I remembered your lips against my forehead" (Lehrer 252). Even though the relationship does not have the normative quality of permanence, the memory of desire makes her move with less hesitancy through the crowd. In fact, she tackles her internalized able-ism and even begins to take pride in her body as spectacle. This blurring of inside and outside becomes evident for Jess while Ruth is painting a twilight sky on Jess's bedroom ceiling:

> "It's just incredible. I can't believe you've given me the sky to sleep under. But I can't tell if it's dawn or dusk you've painted." [Ruth] smiled up at the ceiling. "It's neither. It's both. Does that unnerve you?" "Yeah, in a funny way it does." "I figured that," she said. "It's the place inside of me I have to accept. I thought it might be what you need to deal with, too." I sighed. "I really do have trouble not being able to figure out if what you've painted is about to be day or about to be night." Ruth rolled toward me and rested her hand on my chest. "It's not going to be day or night, Jess. It's always going to be that moment of infinite possibility that connects them." (Feinberg 270)

Just as a kiss on the forehead compels Lehrer to consider her own internalized oppression, the twilight sky allows Jess to revise the pathological ways that she still perceives her own "in-betweenness." Through the blurring of internal and external, inside and outside, the home becomes not a place of bliss and escape, but one that is entwined with the very public reality of abuse and violence. Home becomes an opportunity to welcome disability and queerness as containing "infinite possibility," where relationships and bonds form against all odds.

Conclusion

Later in the novel, Jess realizes that in order to make her trauma visible to herself and perhaps to a larger public, she has to locate her own traumatic memories: "I put them away somewhere because they hurt. Now I have to remember where I put them" (271). An essential part of theorizing on pain, trauma, and disjuncture in queer and crip experience is allowing the memories to surface, and using this archive to understand how bonds are constituted. In the process, analyzing the silences and lapses in memory also becomes foundational. The queer and crip body represents a kind of buried trail of "affective life" that must be brought forward from the margins of cultural representation, recovered and used to upend normative models of community and intimacy (Cvetkovich 12). That both texts accomplish this goal in often overlooked ways is significant.

As aptly established by Feinberg and Lehrer, when the very stability of both identity and body—including the conceit of control and autonomy—is put into question through queer and crip theory, we recognize our pervasive anxiety about all types of difference. The acknowledgment of our interdependence and contingency may be, for some, physically and emotionally intolerable. As McRuer's asserts, we must be willing to collectively break both the heterosexual/ homosexual and able/ disabled binaries if we are to "imagin[e] bodies and desires otherwise" (389). It is crucial to focus on the bonds created through violence, and to actively engage with stories of systemic violence while simultaneously eschewing clichéd narratives of victimization and individualized psychological recovery. McRuer, Clare, and Cvetkovich agree that it is important to avoid a response to trauma that over-values the sharing of such stories. They resist at once the difference between what Cvetkovich calls "witness," which requires active participation, and "confession/ voyeurism," which sometimes overlaps with the narrative of a victim. As readers of these texts, we become witnesses to both the trauma experienced by queer and crip subjects and the relationships that develop as a result.

Further, while it is crucial that we not dilute the specificity of queer and crip subjectivity, systemic violence and the relationships created within hostile conditions for the more widely considered anomalous body allows an

interrogation of the presumption of the able-bodied queer, and the heterosexual crip. Both theoretical fields contain omissions that have been corrected through more nuanced analysis of their relationship. While it remains important to retain specificity, the intersectional work of scholars like McRuer, Wilkerson, Shildrick, and others remedies some omissions found in the separate theoretical frames. For example, queer theory often neglects disability, and yet, as Shildrick observes, "disability affects every one of us whatever our corporeal form, because our mode of embodiment is one—if not the major—organizing principle by which we make sense of the world" (148). Conversely, academic and activist Robert McRuer, working between the fields of queer theory and disability theory argues that recognition of queer theory compels disability studies to reconsider the image of "proud and positive disabled identities" and acknowledge the queer/crip subject who has commonly been blamed for her own suffering (27).

The many tender moments of desire in *Stone Butch Blues* and "Golem Girl Gets Lucky" occur within remembered and ongoing oppression, and for this reason relationship becomes as difficult and tenuous as it is rewarding. On recognizing the contingency of life more generally and the complex reasons of binding to each other, we appreciate what Jess's friend Ed terms, "love with no illusions" (Feinberg 113). Ed's character also suggests that the privileged normative model is "love with illusions," what Lauren Berlant terms our "cruel optimism," or constant drive toward objects, people, and places that promise fulfillment, but consistently fail to deliver. Lehrer's poem, "Prayer of the Golem," which serves also as the conclusion to her essay, points to a similar loss of illusion: "We will only move forward / Our dance clears the room / Shadow crossing the moon / Without me, love would be a / small / pink / candy / heart" (252). Making connections between queer and disability theory may lead toward an understanding of how non-normative community and intimacy can be models for all.[4] Because of our anomalous embodiment, many of us cannot afford the illusion of autonomy or love in the form of a pink candy heart. Through engagement with queer and disability theory, we can make more visible the reality of our collective contingency, in that messy terrain across the identity categories of queer and crip.

Notes

[1] Queer and disability theory have benefitted greatly from increasing overlap. Academic and activist Robert McRuer, working between the fields of queer theory and disability theory, questions the queer glorification of the "romantic outlaw sort"—the addict, the HIV-positive sex worker—that often takes place without serious engagement with disability studies (McRuer 27). While these "outlaws" frequently appear in works like Halberstam's *Queer Time*, as part of the recovery of the socially illegitimate subject, there is hardly ever a rigorous consideration of

the assumption of an able body (27).

[2] Both Jess and Lehrer experience their bodies as monstrous, and this connects to the fact that one of the central notions about the body in Western cultures proposed by Aristotle in his work *Generation of Animals* is that the female is a type of deformed male. As Garland Thomson argues in *Extraordinary Bodies*, Aristotle's explication of the normal body as one that necessarily takes after its parents genetically, and remains male rather than female, has given us the concept of all non-normate bodies—female, queer, and crip—as "monstrosities."

[3] J. Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* argues for more analysis of alternative masculinities outside of the biologically male body (9). In many ways, I try here to bridge his work on female masculinity with his study of alternative patterns of relationship in *A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. However, I extend his analysis by suggesting that through disability and trauma theory, we can more powerfully critique the "organic nature of 'community'" *and* push against queer theory's presumption that the body is always-already able (*A Queer Time* 153). Through this extension, I make more central Shildrick's claim that "disability affects every one of us whatever our corporeal form, because our mode of embodiment is one—if not the major—organizing principle by which we make sense of the world" (148).

[4] The importance of sexuality in public life cannot be underestimated. As Wilkerson argues, it is crucial that we conceive of our "sexual-political interdependence; a politics that is, that emphasizes our interdependence as allies and that values the potential of the sexual to enable this interdependence to flourish" (204). The solution clearly does not lie only in the political legitimation of the queer and the crip subject; yet, the benefits of some specific varieties of inclusion cannot be denied. The disability rights movement compels us to consider that when seeking inclusion and rights, we must not lose sight of the costs versus the benefits. We must ask, does acceptance have the unintended effect of displacing difference and othering on to another minoritized and oppressed group? To be very specific and selective about legal legitimation may minimize the risks of such negative consequences, a point that many strains of queer and disability theory have become acutely aware of.

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