

THE TRANSGENDERED INDIVIDUAL AS EXILIC TRAVELLING SUBJECT

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In this article I consider the relationship between transgender, travel and exile as it emerges in a particular example of 1990s American literature, *Stone Butch Blues* by Leslie Feinberg. Generically, the work in question has been categorised variously as transgender fiction, fictionalised autobiography, and lesbian literature. It has not, to my knowledge, been classified as travel literature. However, throughout the text, the narrator specifically defines her collective experiences as constitutive of exile and a journey, so I have been interested in pursuing her interpretation of exile and travel as they relate to the circumstances she narrates, with a view to considering the implications for travel literature and travel theory. Exile will be considered symptomatically, in terms of contingent feelings of alienation; it will be considered conceptually in terms of separation from a notional 'home', and it will be considered from a causal point of view, in terms of its origin as coercive or non-coercive.

I am interested in possible conceptual overlap between travel variants and transsexuality. Some attention has already been given to this by critics working in various fields. Jan Morris's 1974 autobiography, *Conundrum: An Extraordinary Narrative of Transsexualism* is paradigmatic, being the autobiography of a transsexual travel writer. *Le Saut de L'Ange*, the 1987 autobiography of male-to-female transsexual Maud

Marin, does not focus on issues of geographical displacement, but Jean-Didier Urbain considers it in his theorisation of travel in *Secrets de Voyage* alongside accounts of travellers who have manipulated their physical appearance for the sake of travel. According to Urbain, such changes of appearance radically alter the nature of the traveller's interaction with other people, so that vertical travelling is achievable, in which the travel experience is not dependent upon actual displacement in geographical space. Urbain's treatment of this subject is problematic, however, as he overstates the case that boredom and curiosity are chief amongst the motivations of such travellers, some of whom have taken measures as drastic as amputation of body parts. There is no attempt to consider the role of gender dysphoria or physical danger incurred by contemporary subjects who already diverge from heterosocial norms of appearance or lifestyle.

Stone Butch Blues is announced as a work of fiction but, according to the preface, is intended to be an accurate illustration of actual lived experiences of gay and transgendered people. It was published in 1993 and covers the narrator's life from the 1950s to the 1980s. The section corresponding to the 1980s gives a very different account to that given by Jean Baudrillard in *Amérique*, published in 1986. In Baudrillard's account, 1980s North America is a zone of sexual permissiveness as a result of which everybody is in a state of indecision as regards their gender, and the levelling of sexual difference has become the norm, heralding a society of sexually autonomous, unisex individuals. In *Stone Butch Blues*, the same society is shown to be brutally intolerant of people whose appearance raises the question 'Is it a man or a woman?', and such people are shown to be living in constant fear for their lives. The presence of this danger is unexplored by Baudrillard and will serve as the primary context for considering vertical travel in *Stone Butch Blues* as exilic in origin.

In *Stone Butch Blues*, the narrator Jess Goldberg, a butch lesbian in pre-Stonewall Buffalo, New York, takes male hormones and has her breasts surgically removed in order to pass as a man. In this article I retain the author's terminology and refer to Goldberg as 'passing-male' as opposed to male or transsexual. This is to indicate that although she undergoes physical sex change, she does not consider herself to be a man. There is some ambivalence about her motives, to which I shall return, but the primary explanation she gives is as follows: she has been raped twice and subjected to so many severe beatings on

account of her sexuality that she is physically and psychologically incapable of withstanding further attacks. She therefore tries to pass as a man to escape from the relentless gaybashing directed towards butch lesbians.

Stone Butch Blues opens with a retrospective letter, in which the transgendered narrator looks back on the events narrated in the main body of the novel from a distance of many years. In the very first paragraph of this letter, she defines her existence as exilic: 'Tonight I walked down streets looking for you in every woman's face, as I have each night of *this lonely exile*' (Feinberg 1993: 5). A few pages later, she is more specific. She says, 'Strange to be *exiled from your own sex* to borders that will never be home' (11). This is our first indication that the term exile refers to the condition of passing as a man. In this phrase, her 'own sex', that is, the one preceding hormone therapy, is posited as home and the subsequent one, the passing-male body, is posited as not-home. The autobiographical narrative goes some way to support the idea that the transition from the one to the other is consistent with notions of exile.

Firstly, Goldberg claims that for her, gender-realignment measures would ideally be used as a temporary subterfuge, not the actualisation of a desire to change sex. She distinguishes herself from female-to-male transsexuals, saying: 'I don't feel like a man trapped in a woman's body. I just feel trapped' (158–59). She asks whether it will be possible to 'go back to being a butch later, when it's safe to come out' (145). This model of escape is very much in line with Mary McCarthy's description of exilic status in 'A Guide to Exiles, Expatriates and Internal Emigrés': 'The exile waits for a change of government or the tyrant's death, which will allow him to come home. If he stops waiting and adapts to the new circumstances, then he is not an exile any more' (McCarthy 1994: 49).

Edward Saïd's essay *Reflections on Exile* includes rootlessness as a significant component of exilic experience: 'exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past' (Saïd 2001: 177). These are very much the terms in which experiences of passing as a man are described in *Stone Butch Blues*: '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). Goldberg's first reaction to her condition as a passing-male is: 'I awoke feeling small and

terrified. I couldn't find myself in my own life – there was no memory of me that I could grasp. There was no place outside of me where I belonged' (209). From these descriptions, Goldberg's life as a passing-male seems to be characterised by feelings of loneliness and a lack of belonging that are symptoms familiarly associated with exile.

If we are to accept Goldberg's experiences as constitutive of exile, then this is a departure from conceptions of exile as dependent on geographical displacement. In *Reflections on Exile*, one of the perspectives Saïd examines is that 'Exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and bond with one's native place' (185). Within this alternative model being explored in *Stone Butch Blues*, 'native place' equals the human body. One of the ways in which I see *Stone Butch Blues* as potentially contributing to the redefinition of literatures of travel is in its integration of discourses of displacement into phenomena occurring initially on a physiological and psychological level within the human subject herself. That is, Goldberg's body exists as a site of travel, to the extent that her body is experienced as a vessel containing her mind and, as such, constitutes her mind's primary physical environment. Any change to that environment is liable to be experienced as a change of location.

As I am about to demonstrate, Goldberg hints at a new cartography which includes the bodies of the human beings that reside within geographical space. This expansion of understandings of what is properly constitutive of physical environment, and therefore amenable to non-metaphorical employment of discourses of displacement, is mirrored by recent innovations in the field of Cultural Geography. Contemporary cultural geographers are calling into question dualistic thinking that sees the body as necessarily separate from its surroundings and re-theorising relationships between internal and external space.

In a study entitled *Bodies: exploring fluid boundaries*, feminist geographer Robyn Longhurst makes a case for the full integration of the human body into considerations of what constitutes physical space (Longhurst 2001). She argues that the insides and outsides of bodies have a material reality and exist as actual physical locations. Similarly, bodily fluids and excreta exist as shifting boundaries and mobile features of the environment. Therefore, on account of its physical reality, any displacement inside or on the surface of the body and its fluids and solids should be considered as actual geographical

displacement instead of being marginalised within geography or dismissed as theoretical.

These arguments, Longhurst says, are to be situated within the context of other attempts to give consideration to the body in geography, apparent in the work of certain geographers from the 1970s onwards. Longhurst acknowledges that 'over the last few years, geographers have begun to pay more attention to bodies' (1), but she criticises the theorised, abstract notion of the body that emerges from such work: 'The bodies articulated in geographers' texts have tended to be theoretical, fleshless bodies. A distinction has been drawn between discursive bodies and material bodies' (1–2). Longhurst claims that her work is innovative because, unlike earlier geographers, she gives attention to the biological reality of the body – 'the leaky, messy, awkward zones of the inside/outside of bodies and their resulting spatial relationships [which] remain largely unexamined in geography' (2). She theorises geographers' neglect of such bodily realities as being deliberate and political in intention and effect, as it seems to her that such neglect perpetuates masculinist conceptions of knowledge which create antithetical associations between fluidity and irrationality, and solidity and rationality. Further, as we may infer from Longhurst's analysis, an appreciation of the body's spatiality would appear to be crucial to a feminist geography, to the extent that it would enable consideration of the boundary violence constituted by rape and sexual assault.

I now propose to explore some forms of body-centred departures featuring in Goldberg's narrative in the context of aggression towards lesbian subjects. Firstly, Goldberg's strategy for surviving rape is to be noted. While she is being raped, she uses increasingly sophisticated visualisation methods in order to imagine that she is somewhere else. On the first occasion, she successfully detaches her consciousness from the situation and focuses on her physical environment, then mentally reconfigures it as follows: 'I couldn't escape it, and so I pretended it wasn't happening. I looked at the sky, at how pale and placid it was. I imagined it was the ocean and the clouds were white-capped waves' (41). On a subsequent occasion, she focuses on a lightbulb and mentally transports herself to an elaborately-visualised desert. However, the pain and degradation which prompt these imagined journeys are simultaneously impeding freedom of visualisation: when the pain increases, she has to struggle for psychological mobility. In her words, 'I tried to return to the desert but I couldn't find that

floating opening between the dimensions I'd passed through before. An explosion of pain in my body catapulted me back' (63).

In *Stone Butch Blues*, then, Goldberg's body is construed as a zone within which there can occur various forms of micro-displacement. It is, moreover, a zone with its own boundaries to be negotiated by other travelling bodies. Accordingly, *Stone Butch* sexuality, that is, the state of sexual unresponsiveness and guardedness supposedly resulting from long-term exposure to mental and physical harm, is presented as a walled landscape. Goldberg reflects on her sexuality in the following terms, to a prospective lover:

There's a place inside of me where I've never been touched before. I'm afraid you'll touch me there. And I'm afraid you won't. My femme lovers knew me well, but they never *crossed those boundaries inside of me*. They tried to coax me *across the borders* into their arms (270).

The immobilised body is elsewhere also presented as traveller of fluids: during the first rape, she is fused to the ground; she cannot run but she notes 'blood and slimy stuff *running* down her legs' (41), and describes how 'pain *travelled* up to [her] belly' (41). Male aggressors subject her to additional boundary violence across their own fluids and solids as she is urinated on and forced to eat excrement.

Earlier, I quoted Goldberg's comment, 'Strange to be exiled from your own sex to borders that will never be home' (11), which suggested that her diagnosis of her condition as exilic was strongly linked to the phenomenon of not feeling at 'home' in the passing-male body. Goldberg's usage of the word 'home' in the text as a whole both affirms the interpretation that the body is being experienced as location, and problematises any claim that the exile she designates is reducible to an enforced transition from one sex to another. The passing-male body is considered as 'borders that will never be home', but elsewhere Goldberg makes it explicit that in many ways the passing-male body *is* home. She describes the surgical removal of her breasts as a 'gift to [herself], a coming home to [her] body' (224). When testosterone has made her body lean and muscular, she claims to 'feel at home in [her] body' (171). There is also evidence that there had been an expectation that this would be the case. Before embarking on hormonal realignment processes, she has been idealising another passing-male whom she would like to regard, conceptually, as

'a home to come to when [she] wasn't safe' (96). This had been followed by a dream in which she was in a hormonally-altered body and 'felt happy in [this] body, comfortable among friends' (142).

There seems to be a degree of inconsistency and vagueness with regard to perceptions of home and their implications for Goldberg's conception of exile: I return to this later on. What does seem to be consistent is Goldberg's dualistic self-perception: she apparently considers herself in terms of consciousness dwelling inside a separate, alterable physical exterior. This dualistic self-perception is particularly conducive to intra-body travel – that is, types of travel in which the body itself is experienced as a changing location. Reflecting on her life as a passing-man, she describes this as a 'long road travelled', and says: 'I had never stopped looking at the world through my own eyes. I'd never stopped feeling like me on the inside. What if the real me could emerge, changed by the journey?' (222).

Although Goldberg paradoxically feels *more* at home in the altered body to which she has purportedly been exiled, her interpretation of her condition as being exilic is sustainable because of this novel's refusal to adhere to a unified notion of 'home'. One of the consequences of Goldberg's exile from a butch body into a passing-male body is that she is rejected by her femme lover, who refuses to be with somebody perceived to be male. This turn of events follows the pattern of traditional models of exile as based on banishment, as Goldberg is told to leave the house where they have been cohabiting, never to return. Without being designated as such, this appears in the light of a second exile contingent upon the first. At one point in the narrative, it is implied that this ex-lover represents home, as Goldberg states that 'the moments she pulled [her] head onto [her] lap and stroked [her] face were all [she] knew of refuge and acceptance' (223), and that there was nowhere else she could have gone 'for safety in an unsafe world' (223). However, she makes similar claims about other lesbian friends, gay bars and even her motorcycle, so attempts to privilege one or another seem provisional.

The body does not supersede external space as geography, it just adds another dimension: the transgendered subject's spatial body is simultaneously travelling in external space. It is of note that in *Stone Butch Blues*, external travel is presented as a strategy for living with the exilic condition. This disrupts the more familiar notion that external travel is a direct and regrettable consequence of exile. In her phase as passing-male,

Goldberg underlines the increased value she places on her Harley Davidson motorcycle. She says: 'I lived to cruise on that bike. It was my joy and my freedom' (209). Cruising can be seen as a motorised equivalent of *flânerie*, which serves in this case as an antidote to feelings of loneliness and isolation.

In the context of motorised recreational travel, transexuality is aligned with exile in terms of the motorcycle-owning transgendered subject's equivalent status as political alien. Goldberg loses the right to mobility because she cannot obtain identification reflecting her current gender as male. As a result, she cannot cross the border and she cannot even gain a valid motorcycle licence. The narrative focuses on a frustrated desire to travel, as the following example demonstrates:

I still couldn't get across the border. I had no valid ID...I felt like a nonperson. I stared across the Niagara River, longing to open up my Harley on those roads I knew so well. A feeling of claustrophobia choked me. Even as my world was expanding, it was shrinking (175).

Goldberg continues to ride illegally within state boundaries rather than forgo the pleasure of motorised cruising. She refers to the motorcycle as a love object, saying, 'I love that bike. I mean, I actually love it' (52). Goldberg's attachment to the means of high speed motorised transport provides a valuable new context for the critical re-evaluation of the certain aspects of the work of French social theorist Paul Virilio. Arguably, Virilio's work is crucial to a critical appraisal of twentieth century travel literature as it addresses the social, political and personal implications of the technological advances that have brought about ever-increasing acceleration of displacements, communications and pace of living, including the advent of virtual reality and the Internet, as well as cars, motorcycles, aeroplanes and ballistic missiles.

Paul Virilio's work *Esthétique de la disparition* (1989) is of particular interest here as it features parallel discussions of the motorcycles and renegotiated sexual identities. Paul Virilio theorises the levelling of gender differences in the context of the rise of high-speed mechanised transport in the twentieth century. Virilio specifically links motorcycles, the disappearance of physical gender, and the demise of sexual relationships between men and women. He presents these as being related features of a society of ever-increasing speed. In Virilio's thought, Goldberg's transition from being attached to a woman to being attached to a motorcycle would be a logical

progression in her given sociohistorical context. It is Virilio's contention that, in the context of love, people, specifically women, are being replaced by motors. 'L'engin remplace absolument la bien-aimée' (108). He illustrates this point with examples of people forming amorous attachments to cars and motorcycles. He claims that interrelationships are now modelled on a set 'trilogie' in which a *genderless* human subject accesses the world directly through motorised transport, bypassing any need for a human, sexual intermediary. This is said to have supplanted an earlier, biblical model consisting of Man being seduced by Woman and thereby attaining the World. 'La trilogie initiale est complètement modifiée et le rapport s'établit entre *un unisexe* (dissimulation définitive des identités physiologiques) et un vecteur technique, les contacts avec le corps de la bien-aimée [...] disparaissent' (104–05). Since men are removed from this equation in *Stone Butch Blues*, Goldberg's case problematises Virilio's masculinist conception in which the sexuality and travel practices of women are presented as always derivative and always based on an attempt to regain or replace the interest of men who now prefer motors to women.

Further, in *Stone Butch Blues* there seems to be a reversal of Virilio's premise that the motorbike represents the attraction of danger and accidents in a world that gives the illusion of being safe. Virilio describes how science has apparently created a society of sleepwalkers 'naturellement très à l'aise dans une situation de paix totale, de dissuasion nucléaire' (105). Goldberg, by contrast, expresses concerns about how to be safe in an unsafe world and, interestingly, the motorcycle is defined as a *place of safety*, as she says: 'Now this was the place I found my mobility and my safety – on this bike, under this helmet' (155). She finds comfort in high-speed cruising – similarly, on a train journey she observes: 'I began to feel the pleasure of the weightless state between here and there' (226).

On one level, certainly, Goldberg seems to be compensating for the lack of a fixed external 'home' by enacting Virilio's idea of dwelling in travel – 'installer dans le déplacement la fixité de la vie' (105). However, travel in physical space is also conceived of as a process of going home, where home is an unknown quantity yet to be encountered. She rationalises her will to travel as follows: 'The time had come to accept that my home might be waiting for me somewhere else. Or maybe I had to travel in order to find that home inside myself' (225).

Ultimately, 'home' appears to be a chaotic conception in this novel: vagueness and ambivalence with regard to where, what or who constitutes 'home' seems to be a defining feature of this text with significant implications for notions of travel and exile. Competing notions of home as body, home as acceptance, and home as mobility prove to be provisional.

Stone Butch Blues does, however, give us a clearer conception of what 'home' is not. That is, 'home' appears to be disassociated from cartography and chronology: it lacks topographical specificity, and is not the point of origin. Goldberg's place of birth and parental home are presented as a place of rejection, from which she migrates at the first opportunity towards the nearest gay community, in the hope of finding 'her people' for the first time.

Issues relating to differing sexual identities and the construction of notions of home and belonging are currently receiving attention in the field of Gay and Lesbian Studies, and affiliated branches of human geography. It is suggested that traditional conceptions of home are so firmly grounded in assumptions of heterosexual, patriarchal family structures that there is a need to renegotiate conceptions of home to reflect diversity of 'family' relationships and associated living arrangements. Of particular relevance to the problematisation of notions of home in *Stone Butch Blues* is an essay entitled 'Wherever I Lay My Girlfriend, That's My Home' by Lynda Johnston and Gill Valentine. This essay forms part of *Mapping Desire: geographies of sexualities*, a collection of studies addressing issues of sexual orientation and how it reconfigures human relationships to geographical space (Bell and Valentine 1995).

In 'Wherever I Lay My Girlfriend, That's My Home', Johnston and Valentine specifically explore the theoretical implications of lesbian sexualities for the concept of 'home'. It is argued that the parental home has 'no meaning as a source of identity or "roots"' because it is a site 'where heterosexual family relations act on and restrict the performance of a lesbian identity' (102–103). By contrast, it is argued, any locations permitting free performance of sexual identity may represent 'home' ipso facto. This creates the possibility of plural, interchangeable sites that may simultaneously be perceived as home.

The negative definition of home, applied to *Stone Butch Blues*, would suggest, by inference, a complementary negative definition of exile: the account of Goldberg's life from birth to

running away from her parent's house at age sixteen is characterised by frequent, serious examples of exclusion and banishment, including care in foster homes, internment in a psychiatric hospital on account of her cross-dressing, exclusion from the school playground on account of being Jewish and then suspension from school. The narrator records these events but leaves them unanalysed and makes no attempt to interpret her conditions as exilic, apparently because throughout this stage of her life, it has been her primary, normative experience to feel like an outsider distanced by sexual orientation and gender dysphoria.

In conclusion, the premising of exile upon separation from a single, chronologically prior, location designated as home, or what Edward Saïd calls 'native place', is problematised by non-heteronormative conceptions of home, which may be plural and variable, and very often do not coincide with those communities to which one is affiliated by birth. Additionally, in the novel studied, gender dysphoria has been shown to reconfigure the subject's conception of physical space to include her body, which is posited as an alterable location. This creates the possibility of previously neglected, body-focused versions of both exile and other forms of displacement. These versions open up our understanding of travel as they constitute multilayered trajectories comprised of movement in both internal and external 'geographical' space.

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