

“The Queering Subject”
Challenging the Binary Understanding of the World
in *Passing*, *Stone Butch Blues* and *Funny Boy*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Chapter 1 Queering the Color Line in Nella Larsen's <i>Passing</i>	24
Chapter 2 Is that a Boy or a Girl? Leslie Feinberg: <i>Stone Butch Blues</i>	44
Chapter 3 It Isn't Really Funny: Shyam Selvadurai's <i>Funny Boy</i>	62
Conclusion	79
Works Cited	85

INTRODUCTION

The work on this thesis has been driven by the following question, posed by Judith Butler in the introduction to her book *Gender Trouble*: “How must we rethink the ideal morphological constraints upon the human such that those who fail to approximate the norm are not condemned to a death within life?” (xx). Butler addresses the fact that in Western society each individual is expected to accept her place within the system of different identity categories. Underlying this system is the presumption that individuals have a “natural” or “true” identity, which corresponds with their race, gender and sexual desire. For example, social norms in Western culture maintain a solid connection between an individual’s sexual identity and her/his gender. In other words, “man,” a male individual (i.e. born with male reproductive organs) is expected to be masculine and have a sexual preference for women and “woman,” a female individual (i.e. born with female reproductive organs) is expected to be feminine with sexual preference for men. Historically, the transgression of category boundaries and/or refusal or inability to conform to the norms of behavior expected from the members of an identity group has typically been punished either by social ostracism or by legal means, creating different levels of unjustified anxiety for the individual. However, embracing a postmodern/poststructuralist approach of deconstruction and considering the possibility that these identity categories are nothing more than discursive, social, political and cultural constructions opens for a viable exploration of mechanisms governing their creation and maintenance and discloses their “unnatural” and constructed character.

My choice of the primary texts to be discussed in this thesis is based primarily on my wish to explore and analyze depictions of literary characters who challenge and subvert the heterosexual norm and the traditional binary concepts of femininity/masculinity and

whiteness/blackness. In other words, the focus of this thesis are protagonists who I have chosen to call “queering subjects,” protagonists who through boundary transgressions and the destabilizing character of their subjectivity challenge the fixity and finality of the socially constructed categories of race, gender and sexual desire and expose the personal costs of (not) succumbing to social pressure and (not) compromising one’s individual identity to one’s identity as a member of a group. Disclosing the mechanisms governing the creation and imposition of identity and identity categories reveals the constructed character of these categories and questions the believed necessity and inevitability of the social norm. I believe that through an analysis of literary characters who through their “queering subjectivity” challenge this norm, we can achieve a better understanding of the challenges posed by the system of identity categories.

In the process of selection of my primary texts, I was striving for diversity with respect to period and cultural context. Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing* (1929) was published at the height of the Harlem Renaissance and conveys a story of a mulatto heroine passing for white. At the time of its publication, *Passing* was considered a well written yet not very original piece of work, since it seemed to follow the popular tradition of the tragic mulatto story. A genre in its own right, the tragic mulatto tale was especially popular both among readers and writers of this period. The mulatto is usually portrayed as “a victim of uncontrollable urges of mixed blood,” who tries to escape the miseries of the black life by passing for white and lives a life of self-loathing and fear of being revealed in the act of trespassing (McLendon 14). Clare Kendry, the protagonist of Larsen’s novel, does to some extent embody the stereotype of the mulatto in that she abandons her race and, after becoming dissatisfied with her “white” life, dies trying reestablishing her racial ties. While it cannot be disputed that Larsen, in creating her protagonist, drew on the tragic mulatto stereotype, it would be a mistake to leave unnoticed the fact that she, at the same time, manages to subvert this stereotype by undermining the victim role of the mulatto. I will argue

that Clare Kendry is a subversive character and “queering subject” who challenges the existence of the color line, questions the privileged position of “whiteness” and exposes the constructed character of race.

Leslie Feinberg’s novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) has been celebrated by the transgender community as a groundbreaking and seminal work due to its deployment of gender and sexual desire non-conformity. In most cultures, the distinction between “man” and “woman” is considered to be clearly readable from the body and is furthermore inextricably related to the binary set of male/female. This opens up for the false expectations of society that individuals with female bodies will automatically subscribe to the mantra of womanhood and femininity, while individuals with male bodies undergo the same process in relation to manhood and masculinity. Jess Goldberg, the protagonist of *Stone Butch Blues*, fits neither prescribed gender category. She is a masculine woman, who desires other women and as such is doomed to social persecution and violence exercised in the name of morality and normality. I will explore the ways in which Jess’s position of a “queering subject” challenges the heterosexual norm and the binary concept of gender and exposes the means used by the dominant power to silence and punish individuals who fail to approximate the norm.

Finally, Shyam Selvadurai’s novel *Funny Boy* (1994) is a story of the protagonist’s growing up in the midst of the ethno-cultural tension between the Tamil and Sinhala groups in Sri Lanka and his coming to terms with his homosexual desire. Arjie is confused when the adults seem to be alarmed by his preference for playing with girls rather than with boys. He overhears his parents discussing that he is in danger of turning out “funny.” While he is not sure what it actually means, he understands that being “funny” is something he should, for his own good, try to avoid. Growing up, Arjie needs to deal not only with the pressure of fitting into the image of the prescribed heteronormative masculinity, but also with the pressure of occupying the

marginalized position of a Sri-Lankan Tamil. I will argue that Arjie's innocent perspective of a child observer and his position as a "queering subject" represent a valuable standpoint from which to question and challenge the patriarchal status quo.

My reading of the protagonists' position of racial, gender and sexual marginality has been informed by knowledge summoned under the umbrella term of "Queer Theory." Originally, the term "queer" was a pejorative term meaning homosexual or abnormal. Currently, "queer" is frequently used both as "a coverall term for categories of non-normative sexual desire and behavior – for example, as a quicker way of saying LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual/transgender, intersexual)" and as a term denoting a field of theoretical knowledge informed by postmodern critique of metanarratives of identity (Beasley 163). Throughout this thesis, I use the upper case "Queer" to distinguish Queer Theory, from broader uses of "queer."

Within the field of Queer Theory, gender and sexual identity are seen as social constructions, which are internally unstable and incoherent. In the spirit of postmodern thought, Queer Theory deconstructs identity binaries inherent in the Western thought and further "focuses on what is excluded and devalued within these identity binaries, to illustrate their socially prescriptive and fabricated character" (Beasley 163). In other words, Queer Theory "describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability—which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect – queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire" (Jagose 3). Even though Queer Theory is typically associated with the field of gender/sexuality studies, its use is not restricted to this field only, as "it has a potential to be annexed profitably to any number of discussions" (Jagose 2). I will be employing the Queer approach not only in discussion of gender and sexuality, but also in discussion of race.

Furthermore, taking into account the diversity within and the recent criticisms of “Queer theory,” I feel that some additional clarification regarding my understanding of “Queer” is necessary. The concept of “Queer” has been used in particular by theorists within the fields of gender and sexuality studies to create a space for the non-heterosexual and the non-conformist. Chris Beasley points out the fact that the proclaimed “queer” intention to deconstruct identity categories has materialized particularly in the new accounts of gender, whereas non-heterosexual sexualities, on the other hand, seem to have gained a more central and solid position. In other words, “Queer Theory invokes a rebellious sexual identity, but not a rebellious gender identity. Gender is ‘fucked’ it would seem, while ironically sexuality is not” (167). Queer theory’s inclination to prioritize sexuality has been criticized because it “invokes the same kinds of exclusions as the analyses it seeks to replace” (Beasley 171). Further criticisms of “Queer theory” are concerned with the fact that its focus on sexuality diminishes and silences other differences such as race, class or gender and is subsequently responsible for the production of “a prototypical figure unmarked by these social distinctions. White male gay thus become the prototype of queer” (Beasley 172). Furthermore, one needs to keep in mind that “under the rubric of transgression are placed subjects with very different access to and complicity in the rewards of the normative: some are more vulnerable and have more at stake than others” (Beasley 172). My main concern regarding “Queer theory” is that the revolutionary potential of “Queer’s rejection of the fixity and self-evident clarity of the identity definitions” might be profoundly limited if “Queer” was to become yet another identity “albeit fluid, provisional one that sets itself in opposition to categorisation and normalization” (Beasley 172). My understanding of “Queer,” as employed in this thesis is not that of an identity, but an action. Consequently, I am discussing “queering subjects” rather than “queer” subjects. I have chosen the particular novels based on

their protagonists' potential *to queer* the existing boundaries between identity categories, not because of their sharing of some sort of queer identity.

As Queer Theory owes much of its knowledge to the tradition of postmodern/poststructuralist thought, I find it relevant for my further discussion of “queering subjects” to introduce some of the basic postmodern criticisms and poststructuralist accounts of the individual, as represented by the French philosophers Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Before going on in my discussion of the principles characteristic of postmodern/poststructuralist thought, a terminology clarification is in order. Chris Beasley discusses the difference in the meaning of the two terms, suggesting that “Postmodernism is typically used as a portmanteau and inclusive term, while Poststructuralism is perhaps more likely to be linked to more specific intellectual field” (26). She further acknowledges the fact that “some commentators have been inclined to distinguish between Postmodern and Poststructuralist thinking and tend to view them as separate lines of analysis” (27). Even though I am aware of the existing differences between the two terms, for the purpose of this thesis, I choose to play down this difference and use the terms interchangeably.

The postmodern and Queer critique of the modernist conception of identity and identity politics, as introduced in this thesis, calls for a brief summary of the modernist perception of the world and the individual. The modernist view of Western society as “culture defined by truth and guided by knowledge and science” was deeply challenged when atrocities, committed in the name of rationality and technical progress during World War II, became publicly known (Wilchins 33). Modernist optimism about never-ending social progress seemed suddenly unjustified. This disillusion with the modernist account of the world triggered an era of fundamental critique of traditional Western thought called postmodernism.

Some of the basic modernist concepts postmodernism revises are the Cartesian assumption that “the rational, independent subject is the ground of both ontology (being) and epistemology (theories of knowledge)” and the foundationalist assumption that “individuals as free-thinking subjects are the basis on which one conceives political and moral action” (Namaste 195). On the contrary, postmodern thought focuses on the subject’s position amidst the complex network of social relations and asserts that “the subject is not something prior to politics or social structures, but is precisely constituted in and through specific socio-political arrangements” (Namaste 195). Furthermore, poststructuralism aims to trouble and deconstruct the perception of individual’s position as an autonomous subject and show that meaning is tied to a particular cultural and social context.

The writings of Michel Foucault and certain aspects of Jacques Derrida’s thought are relevant for this thesis. In her book *Queer Theory, Gender Theory*, Riki Wilchins discusses Derrida’s critique of language. Derrida pointed out that the general assumption that language is a transparent and reliable means of *describing* the pre-existing world is false. Derrida points out that language tends to favor that which is common, while leaving to one side that which is unique and unnamed. Western thought has always privileged language to the point of mistaking it for reality. What is named is real, and what is not is non-existing and unreal (Wilchins 33-45). For example, the fact that English and other Western languages operate with two genders – masculine and feminine – results in our inability to perceive other genders, e.g. butches, drag queens or cross-dressers as equally real. They are considered to be copies, imperfect imitations of the perfect original – the masculine and the feminine. In her ground-breaking essay “Imitation and Gender Subordination,” Queer theorist Judith Butler offers a different view of the dynamics governing the relation between the original and copy. Butler refuses the notion of a “proper” gender, “a gender proper to one sex rather than another, which is in some sense that sex’s cultural

property.” Butler famously claims that “*gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*” and that the apparent position of originality is produced through the imitation itself (313).

In Western culture, difference is typically organized in opposing binaries. Some common pairs of oppositions are for example:

Man/Woman
White/Black
West/East
Culture/Nature
Reason/Emotion
Heterosexual/Homosexual

Looking at these pairs it is important to realize that they are not merely two halves of a whole, but that the split is charged with meaning and the pairs are organized as a center and its periphery. The center is typically considered as deserving of privilege and of power to exercise control over the periphery, the “other.”

In his concept of supplementarity, Derrida comments on the fact that meaning is created through difference and in dynamic play of presence and absence. He points out that “a focus on this play is useful because it reveals that what appears to be outside a given system is always already fully inside it; that which seems to be natural is historical” (Namaste 196). In other words, the center defines itself in opposition to the periphery, without the periphery the center loses its meaning. Furthermore, since the center is assumed to be naturally there, the attention focuses on the periphery. This explains why social science has been for decades discussing women, femininity, homosexuality and blackness while at the same time, unconsciously perhaps, reaffirming the central position of men, masculinity, heterosexuality and whiteness. Derrida argues that it is necessary to critically interrogate the binary pairs and attempt to understand the logic underpinning their construction, in other words, to deconstruct them (Wilchins 33-45).

“Deconstruction seeks to make sense of how these relations are at once the condition and effect of all interpretation” (Namaste 198).

While Derrida focused on the deconstruction of thought, Foucault addressed the essentialist account of human Self, the presumption that identity is created on the basis of a “natural” core, which exists independently of time and environment. In his influential book *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (1976), Foucault claims that modern science is not only a source of knowledge about human behavior, but also of power over the individual. He discusses the so called “repressive hypothesis,” the assumption that in the past three centuries (reaching peak during the Victorian Age), attitude of modern Western society toward non-marital sex was negative and sexuality was a taboo. Foucault does not deny this fact of sexual repression, but he suggests that sexual repression is not the primary source of modern power over human sexuality. According to Foucault, modern power stems from new discourses created by modern science. By inventing new discourses about human sexuality, modern science not only gained control over human sexuality, but in fact invented new forms of sexuality which now serve as basis of sexual identity.

There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and “psychic hermaphroditism” made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of “perversity”; but it also made possible the formation of a “reverse” discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or “naturalness” be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified. (Foucault 101)

Furthermore, Annamarie Jagose discusses Foucault’s famous argument that discourse gave rise to the homosexual as a “species” and the same discourse provided in return the means for resistance. Jagose asserts that according to Foucault, sexual identities are the “discursive effects of available cultural categories” rather than a “natural” disposition (82).

Foucault's account of homosexuality as a social construction challenges the notion of homosexual identity. Identity is a political concept and both the lesbian and gay movements and Civil Rights movement used effectively the notion of identity in their struggle for social rights and recognition. This partly explains why the Queer approach, which advocates the deconstruction of gender, sex and race, is often met with fierce resistance and criticism. The idea of identity deconstruction is often criticized for being unproductive and for being a means of further disempowerment of those who already have little or no power. While the political usefulness of the concept of identity cannot be disputed, the idea of identity as something given, as an origin, leads one's attention away from the diversity within a particular group. Furthermore, failing to see the individual behind the identity markers opens up for the creation of stereotypical images, which can be easily used and misused as an ideological justification for oppression. I would argue that the aim of the deconstruction project is not to force everybody out of their identity positions, but rather to provide the tools and space which would enable us "to ask how such identities are created, what effects they have on us, and whose ends they serve" (Wilchins 43).

While most works on the emergence of homosexuality in the nineteenth century have traditionally drawn on theories of gender as an explanatory model, Siobhan B. Sommerville observes in her book *Queering the Color Line* that these ideologies of gender "shaped and were shaped by dominant constructions of race" (16). She points out the fact that the notion of homosexuality in the United States emerged approximately "at the same time that boundaries between 'black' and 'white' were being policed and enforced in unprecedented ways, particularly through institutionalized racial segregation" and further argues that "the structures and methodologies that drove dominant ideologies of race also fueled the pursuit of knowledge about

the homosexual body: both sympathetic and hostile accounts of homosexuality were steeped in assumptions that had driven previous scientific studies of race” (16-17).

Unsurprisingly, the intersectionality of oppressive ideologies leads to intersectionality of actual oppression. Elaine Ginsberg asserts that

in American history, race, sex, and gender have been inextricably linked, first through the system of slavery that placed white men in control of the productive and reproductive labor of black men and the productive and reproductive labor of both black and white women, and then nationally through an economic and political system and a cultural ideology that established a fundamentally racist and sexist hierarchy of privilege and oppression. (5)

Economic and political oppression is necessarily accompanied by an ideology which can provide a justification for actions which clearly disadvantage and suppress a particular group within a population. Many times in the past, we have witnessed that a change in a legal system is not necessarily followed by a change in attitude of the general population. Prejudice and stereotypical images are deeply rooted and resistant to any immediate change. It is only through the exposure of the structure and mechanisms underlying the use and creation of stereotypes that one can hope to achieve the desired change.

All three novels address, in different ways, the issue of ideology and stereotypical images. Nella Larsen is writing during the period of Harlem Renaissance. At this time, Harlem represented a free zone in a climate of prohibition and strict sexual norms. However, the liberal approach to sexuality reflected negatively on the black woman, as it affirmed the oppressive image of her as the sexually aggressive Jezebel. The only “positive” image of black womanhood in white imagination available at this time was that of “mammy.” Stripped of her sexuality, she is the surrogate mother devoted to her white family (society), who knows her proper place. I will suggest that in creation of her characters, Nella Larsen is well aware of the limitations of these stereotypical images of black womanhood and works consciously to avoid them in order to

explore the costs of marginality, sexism and racism on the psyche of individual women. Even though she in her novel uses the image of a tragic mulatto, which “was the most accessible convention for the portrayal of middle-class black women in fiction” (Wall 89), I will argue that Larsen’s protagonist consistently subverts this convention.

Leslie Feinberg is an outspoken transgender activist and her novel explores the personal costs of not conforming to the Western ideology of heteronormativity and gender binarism. Feinberg tells a story of those living in gender and sexual borderlands. Gay men, lesbians, transgender people, transsexuals, and others who live in gender borderlands are on daily basis met with rejection, ostracism and persecution, because their existence challenges and subverts the heterosexual norm and the traditional concepts of maleness, femaleness, masculinity and femininity. Each and every day Jess, the novel’s protagonist, has to face the world which thinks very little of people like her. It has been suggested that the novel is an implicit interrogation of the American Psychiatric Association’s official construction of Gender Identity Disorder (Moses 75). Homosexuality had also figured on the list and its removal has been one of the achievements of the struggle for gay and lesbian rights. However, Jess herself challenges the concept of a transgenderist created by the medico-psychiatric system, which defines gender dysphoria as the patient’s feeling of being trapped in the wrong body. At one point in the novel, Jess admits that she doesn’t really feel trapped in the wrong body, but that she simply feels trapped. She comments on the impossibility of existence out of the gender binary. In her essay “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” Sandy Stone addresses the problem of language and theory insufficiency to capture the diversity of gender experience. She claims that both medical and feminist discourses have consistently refused to acknowledge and validate as relevant the experience of people who feel to be “differently gendered.” She suggests that in order to accurately describe and understand the multiple contradictions of individual lived gender and

sexual experience we “must begin to rearticulate the foundational language by which both sexuality and transsexuality are described . . . one which allows for the sorts of ambiguities and polyvocalities which have already so productively informed and enriched feminist theory” (231).

Ideology and prejudice play an important role in the post-colonial context of the modern Sri Lanka of Shyam Selvadurai’s novel *Funny Boy*. The ethnic conflict portrayed in the novel has its roots in a misconception of the Sinhalese as (fair) Aryans and the Tamils as (dark) Dravidians. In her study of Aryan racial theory, Marisa Angell has shown that the difference discourse governing the relationship between the two ethnic groups was in fact a product of British orientalism. The different languages spoken by the two groups have been used to “substantiate the discrete ethnic markers of ‘Sinhalese’ and ‘Tamil’” (12). This conception of the two groups as profoundly different was then embraced by the Sinhalese, as they were to gain from it due to their favorable position in the binary. The consequences of the construction of the Sinhala and Tamil ethnicities as binary opposition, where one group is empowered, while the other is gradually marginalized, are an important theme in Selvadurai’s novel.

The discussion of deconstruction of gender and race calls for a review of the concepts’ construction. “‘Gender’ typically refers to the social process of dividing up people and social practices along the lines of *sexed identities*” (Beasley 11). In Western society, gender is organized in a binary hierarchical opposition, where the masculine has traditionally been cast as positive and the feminine as negative. The concept of gender has been used by the women’s movement to create a division between the social and the bodily. This concept made it possible to forward a critique of biological sex determinism and biological sex difference. Indicating that body does not necessarily tell you much about the social organization of sexed identities and practices has been the primary role of the concept of gender. However in the past decade this concept has been subjected to extensive critique and it has even been argued that gender has

outlived its potential as an analytical tool. It is, in particular, the sharp division between the social/cultural and biological/natural that has raised concern, since this division seems to reinforce the binary oppositionality of Western thought.

The claim that gender is an analytical tool which has outlived its potential has been famously asserted by Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble*. In Queer spirit, Butler not only disregards gender as a possible ordering tool for the creation of identity politics, but she goes further, claiming that “the body too is a thoroughly cultural product, such that bodily sex and anatomy itself can be seen in terms of cultural interpretations of gender difference” (Beasley 101). In other words, the importance we ascribe to the bodily/sexual difference is a result of our cultural interpretation, as the significance of such difference need not be higher than that of the difference in the color of one’s eyes (Beasley 101). Denying the existence of any essence inherent to the “self,” Butler views gender and sexuality as performative, which means that they come into existence as “the product of endless citation and reiteration of certain normative categories (such as man or heterosexual), rather than as formed out of an already biological basis” (Beasley 254).

As I have mentioned earlier, Queer Theory does not only open for rethinking of gender and sexuality, but of other social constructions as well. As early as his 1985 essay “Writing ‘Race,’” Henry Louis Gates denaturalizes the concept of “race” and defines race as merely a metaphor, “the ultimate trope of difference” (5). Siobhan B. Sommerville discusses the fact that in Anglo-American context, race has been used as a tool to scientifically “justify the economic and political disenfranchisement of various racial groups within systems of slavery and colonialism” (23). She further comments on the fact that the notion of race (similarly to gender) is tied tightly to the body, which is believed to be “a legible text,” always readily available to give away one’s “true” identity. “In the logic of biological determinism, the surface and interior

of the individual body rather than its social characteristics, such as language, behavior, or clothing, became the primary sites of meaning” (23).

However, the conception of body as a site of reliable identity intelligibility is challenged by the act of “passing,” the act of crossing socially, politically and culturally constructed color, gender and sexuality lines. The process of “passing” interrogates the ontology of identity categories and their construction and “questions the categories’ position as inherent and unalterable essences” (Ginsberg 3). In the context of U.S. society, where the assumption of white identity has been accompanied by an access to a number of privileges and a higher social status, while being black had made one a second class citizen, it is not surprising that keeping the racial boundaries intact is central to the white majority’s interest in maintaining its dominant position. “Had emancipation brought full social and legal equality, the story of race passing might have ended in the 1860s. But in the aftermath of the Civil War, numerous legal as well as cultural barriers were erected to full citizenship for persons defined as ‘Negro’” (Ginsberg 7). In its 1896 *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision, the Supreme Court ruled that “a person with one-eighth Negro ancestry could be legally defined as Negro under Louisiana law, even though, as in the case of Plessy, that ancestry was not physically visible” (Ginsberg 7). This asymmetrical definition of race which came to be known as the one-drop rule, had clearly been implemented in order to help to maintain white dominance in the face of rising African American power during Reconstruction. However, the ideologically constructed privileged position of “whiteness” was undermined by generations of miscegenation, which challenged the assumption of racial visibility. For those who were light enough to pass, this represented an opportunity to escape oppression and subordination and gain access to social and economic opportunities normally reserved for whites.

Even though “passing” has been primarily associated with race, it can also be “applied discursively to disguises of other elements of an individual’s presumed ‘natural’ or ‘essential’ identity, including class, ethnicity and sexuality as well as gender” (Ginsberg 3). Jess, the protagonist of Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues*, fits neither prescribed gender category. As a masculine woman, she challenges the presumed consistency between the body, gender and sexuality and is exposed to actions of coercion both in the private and public sphere. In order to satisfy the binary vision of the world and to ease the everyday pressure she is exposed to, Jess decides to pass as a man. This however doesn’t lead to confirming her identity, but rather to its further fragmentation. Jess does not desire to go all the way and actually become a man, she enjoys the queer combination of female body with masculine traces. The either/or choice Jess is presented with by society is simply not sufficient. In other words, the system of fixed gender and sexual identities is incapable of reflecting the reality of multitude and diversity representative of the relationship between human body, gender and desire.

Arjie, the protagonist of Selvadurai’s novel *Funny Boy* is denied the play of his choice because it is deemed too effeminate by his father and could lead to turning him “funny” (read homosexual). In a way, then, Arjie is also passing, first for a boy who likes sports and enjoys playing and competing with other boys and later for a heterosexual, when he tries to hide his love for another man, because of the potential harm this would cause his family.

The protagonists of all three novels find it necessary to break away from their families in order to be able to live their lives the way they themselves choose. They make a journey, both physical and psychological, from a place assigned to them by social categories, norms and expectations, to a place which they have chosen as more in keeping with their needs and desires as individuals. Clare Kendry decides to leave her “racial home” and pass for white in order to be able to live an economically secure life and be simply a person, not a black person. Jess leaves

her family before she even finishes her education. She soon becomes aware of the fact that her parents would never accept her “otherness” and she is afraid they might commit her to a mental institution. Arjie, too, understands that in order to share his life with a partner of his own choice, he will have to leave not only his family, but also his country.

Describing the experience of the African American man, W.E.B. Du Bois famously stated:

One ever feels this two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled stirrings: two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder... it is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (4)

Du Bois addresses the issue of construction of the African American as “the other.” The binary oppositional thinking inherent in the Western intellectual tradition is based on a categorization of “people, things and ideas in terms of their difference from one another” (Keller in Collins 70). Through the process of objectification one creates a group of subjects and a group of objects. “As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one’s reality is defined by others, one’s identity created by others, one’s history name only in ways that define one’s relationship to those who are subject” (Hooks in Collins 71). It is the subject position of the African American man Du Bois is describing. He addresses the impossibility of self-definition and the internal conflict between being African and American simultaneously. However, as I will show in the discussion of the “queering subjects,” the concept of “double consciousness” can be productively applied also out of the realm of debate on African American identity.

I have chosen to investigate and discuss the role of “queering subjects,” protagonists who through boundary transgressions and the destabilizing character of their subjectivity challenge the

fixity and finality of the socially constructed categories of race, gender and sexual desire in the works of three authors from different time and cultural contexts. Because of the nature of my inquiry, it is not possible to name one particular methodology, but rather a plethora of inspiration. Poststructuralism and Queer theory have been an obvious influence. Since I also see the texts as reflective of the particular knowledge of the period and believe that introducing the historical and cultural context of their production will provide for a better understanding, I should mention the influence of new historicism. Louis Montrose, a representative of the school, writes that “The new orientation to history . . . may be succinctly characterized, on the one hand, by its acknowledgment of the historicity of texts . . . and, on the other hand, by its acknowledgment of the textuality of history” (8). Regarding the protagonists themselves, I seek a compromise between the opposing accounts of characters as either real people or textual constructions. Rimmon-Kenan asserts that choosing either of the two standpoints leads to erasure of the specificity of fictional characters. As this proves to be counter-productive for any literary analysis, she suggests reconciliation between the two accounts:

In the text characters are nodes in the verbal design; in the story they are – by definition – non (or pre-) verbal abstractions, constructs. Although these constructs are by no means human beings in the literal sense of the word, they are partly modeled on the reader’s conception of people and in this they are person-like. (33)

I do not approach the characters discussed in this thesis as real people and I do not try to fabricate for them “a past and future beyond what is specified in the text” (Rimmon-Kenan 32). Instead, I focus on the characters’ role in the text and the way they challenge and question basic assumptions about “human nature” both in their fictional reality and beyond it.

In Chapter 1, I discuss Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing*. I have chosen this particular novel for several reasons. Firstly, I will argue that Clare Kendry is a “queering subject” in that she through the act of racial passing exposes the unreal character of race. Secondly, I will discuss the

specificity of the period as a time of the rise of African American consciousness and the restrictions the creation of not only negative, but also positive stereotypes place on the individual. I will argue that in her exploration of the costs of marginality, sexism and racism on the psyche of individual women, Larsen uses “passing” as a subversion strategy.

Chapter 2 focuses on Leslie Feinberg’s fiction *Stone Butch Blues*. As the book follows the trajectory of Jess Goldberg’s life and the reader from its start witnesses Jess’ struggle to fit into society despite her gender queerness, I start the chapter reflecting on the ways gender conformity is reproduced and maintained, introducing Michel Foucault’s concept of “normalizing judgment.” Since Jess is coming out as young butch lesbian in Buffalo of the pre-Stonewall era, I provide a historical and cultural account of the butch-femme form of lesbian relationship in this period, on which I then base a discussion of the possible meanings and forms of butchness in the novel. In this context, Judith Halberstam’s concept of female masculinity is especially relevant. My further debate turns around Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity and the way this is exemplified in the novel. Finally, I consider the role of *Stone Butch Blues* in the canon of trans-literature.

Chapter 3 explores the circumstances and consequences of political, racial and sexual boundary crossing in the Sri Lankan context deployed in Shyam Selvadurai’s novel *Funny Boy*. I will argue that similarly to Claire Kendry and Jess Goldberg, Arjie is a “queering subject,” who through boundary transgression and the destabilizing character of his subjectivity challenges the fixity and finality of the socially constructed categories of race, sexuality and gender. Secondly, drawing on Mita Manjeree’s essay “Queer Laughter: Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy* and the Normative as Comic,” I will analyze the moments in the novel when Arjie is exposed to the mocking of the normative gaze and turned into a queer spectacle and the way he, through subversive appropriation of the mocking gaze, turns the situation into a moment of

empowerment. Finally, I will discuss to what extent Selvadurai opens up for the possibility of a reform of a nation in dissolution through alliances among the marginalized groups created across the race, gender and sexuality boundaries.

CHAPTER 1

Queering the Color Line in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

When explaining why she had chosen to pass, Clare Kendry, the protagonist of Nella Larsen's novel, makes the following statement: "I was determined to get away, to be a *person* and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscrete HAM" (159, italics mine). Clare comments on the fact that, if she was to acknowledge her African American heritage, she could never move beyond the constrictions the category of race poses onto an individual's life and identity. Clare's physical features allow her to cross the assumingly impermeable border between races, but she learns that being a "queering subject" in the world of fixed social categories does not lead to an individual freedom, but rather, to entrapment.

Even though the issue of race is a theme obviously present in the novel, I will argue that Larsen chose not to subscribe to the calls of her time for art as a means of racial propaganda. Rather, she uses the concept of race to explore and expose the absurdity and irrationality of the governing system of social identity categories and social norms, as well as the psychological costs paid by the individual as a result of this system. However, in line with Aram H. Veesser's statement that "every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes" (Veesser xi), Larsen also encountered some difficulties in her interrogation of the present social order through the passing female character. Cheryl Wall points out that "for Larsen, the tragic mulatto was the only formulation historically available to portray educated middle-class black woman in fiction" (97). Even though Larsen's novels achieved a fair amount of recognition at the time of their publishing and Larsen herself

became the first African American woman to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Writing in 1930, Larsen's adherence to the convention of the tragic mulatto tale meant that earlier critical accounts of the novel focused on the question of racial conflict and the tragic fate of the beautiful heroine and did not reflect the full scale of Larsen's achievement. I will, in line with Claudia Tate, argue that by changing focus from the "tragic" elements in the story to the psychological ambiguity and intrigue "*Passing* is transformed from an anachronistic, melodramatic novel into a skillfully executed and enduring work of art" (142). Furthermore, drawing on Martha J. Cutter's essay "Sliding Significations: Passing as a Narrative and Textual Strategy in Nella Larsen's Fiction," I will suggest that what appears to be a conventional choice of form on Larsen's part is in fact an act of subversion. Clare Kendry's "queering subjectivity" has a destabilizing effect on her surroundings and functions as a means of interrogation of the logic of the system of social identity categories.

A change in the self-conception of the African American could be sensed already by the end of the war in 1919. Through their participation and undeniable record of excellence in a war which was "a moral crusade to make political justice and democracy a reality to men throughout the world," the African American man gained self-confidence and a determination to no longer be the modest and unassuming second-class citizen of the pre-war era (Huggins 54). The call for the self-defined "New Negro" and for a positive racial awareness was to be answered by the participants of the Harlem Renaissance. Urbanization, emigration and employment trends of the 1910s participated profoundly in making of Harlem into the cultural and intellectual center of the African American community (Watson 11).

Alaine Locke's famous essay "The New Negro" (1925) marked a break with the past, saying farewell to the days of "aunties," "uncles" and "mammies" (23). The "Old Negro," Locke says, "has been more of a formula than a human being – something to be argued about,

condemned and defended, to be ‘kept down’, or ‘in his place’, or ‘helped up’, to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden” (21). Consequently, the New Negro needs to free himself from the fiction of the past and rediscover himself. For Locke, art was the perfect means of carrying this task through. However, all African American artists of the Harlem Renaissance period were faced with a dual agenda. On one hand, in the spirit of Locke, they were to create “pure” art and rely on its transforming power, while at the same time, they could not avoid the demands of their time for racial propaganda. Addressing this question of art vs. propaganda, W.E.B. Du Bois makes his standpoint clear in an essay published in *The Crisis*, a publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, in which he asserts that “all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists” (1000). For Du Bois, literature created by African American artists was to serve primarily as “a didactic and propagandistic tool for advancing African American culture” (Watson 93).

In this atmosphere of “race above all,” those works which did not hold “the problem of the color line” as their primary focus, often failed to be recognized in their full complexity. Until recently, women writers of the Harlem Renaissance period have been seen as “hung up on parlor room manners and mores, too blinkered by their middle-class location to identify the ‘real’ issues of African American life” (Balshaw 127). Even though Larsen’s first novel *Quicksand* (1928) was acclaimed by W.E.B. Du Bois to be “the best piece of fiction that Negro America has produced since the heyday of Chesnut” (Shockley 432), the criticism of both of her novels has until recently been focused on either finding fault with Larsen’s so called stylistic difficulties, or confining her work to the category of female literature and ignoring the possibility of Larsen’s conscious choice of stylistic means “as sites of resistance to dominant discourses” (McMillan 134).

Since its beginnings, African American literature has reacted to white society's image of blacks. The negative stereotypes of black people that had developed during slavery were given a more positive spin in abolitionist writing. "In the struggle against slavery, the novel as a means of exposing its evils was an effective medium, since, as a genre, it could be used as a source of both moral instruction and entertainment" (Christian 19). The social realities of the antebellum South gave rise to the image of black woman either as mammy or sex-crazed Jezebel. Both stereotypes corresponded to the equally stereotypical image of the white woman as a southern lady. However, it is the stereotype of the mulatto which is most relevant to my discussion of Larsen's novel *Passing*. American writing has given rise to several versions of the mulatto. In southern writing of the antebellum period "she is shown as caught between two worlds, and since she is obviously the result of an illicit relationship, she suffers from a melancholy of the blood that inevitably leads to tragedy" (Christian 16). In abolitionist writing and the novels of the early twentieth century, she is the Angel of Mercy, beautiful, pure and Christian (Christian 23).

The 1920s brought a new stereotype: the African American as an exotic icon. Many previously derogatory qualities attributed to blacks were converted into virtues and one of the new modern perceptions of the African American was that of the noble and vital primitive whose actions are completely uninhibited and driven by passion. Steven Watson states that "the Negro perfectly satisfied progressive America's psychological and intellectual needs of the moment – he represented pagan spirituality in a period of declining religion, native American expressiveness at the time the nation was forging its own aesthetic, and the polymorphous sensuality that exemplified the 1920s' loosening of behavior" (Watson 105). The view of the Negro as primitive and passionate was explored more deeply by the male writers of the period. "The garb of uninhibited passion wears better on a male, who after all, does not have to carry the burden of the race's morality or lack of it" (Christian 40). The depiction of an uninhibited, primitive female

character was risky in that it would fuel the stereotype of the black woman as loose and overtly sexualized. This explains why so many women writers of the Harlem Renaissance period, including Nella Larsen, chose “to make their heroines light-complexioned, upper-middle class black women with taste and refinement” (Christian 40). The price most female writers paid for avoiding the dangers of harmful stereotypes of black womanhood was their assumed marginality to the Harlem Renaissance and the labeling of their writing as “prissy, genteel and apolitical” (Balshaw 128).

Passing is essentially a story of two childhood acquaintances who renew their friendship after a chance meeting in the restaurant of an exclusive hotel on an occasion when they are both passing. However, while both are attractive, affluent and able to pass, Irene Redfield does so only for occasional convenience, while Clare Kendry goes all the way and lives her life as a white woman, married to a white man who is unaware of his wife’s African American heritage. After the chance encounter Clare wants to renew her friendship with Irene and through Irene her connection to the African American community. In an unconventional twist on the traditional form of the tragic mulatto tale, the story ends with Clare’s death. However, the reader is left in the dark about what exactly happened.

While *Passing* formally subscribes to the convention of the tragic mulatto tale, it also introduces a number of novelties into this genre. Firstly, Larsen’s protagonist Clare Kendry shows no sign of remorse or suffering resulting from turning her back on her black identity. Secondly, Clare’s attempts to renew her ties to the black community are by no means driven by her desire for a sense of racial pride and solidarity, but rather by her longing for amusement and excitement. One could argue that Clare Kendry passes as the literary convention of the tragic mulatto, when she in fact subverts it. Finally, the protagonist’s queer subjectivity, i.e. her ability

to move across the racial line and act authentically within the domain of a particular race, opens up for interrogation concerning the “realness” of race.

Cheryl Wall suggests that “Larsen’s deviations from the traditional strategies signal that her concerns lie elsewhere” (98). Wall sees Larsen’s main concern as the exploration of the psychological costs of racism and sexism, which confront the black woman in her quest for a wholly integrated identity. She further comments that

Larsen’s protagonists attempt to fashion a sense of self free of both suffocating restrictions of ladyhood and fantasies of the exotic female Other. They fail. The tragedy of these mulattoes is the impossibility of self-definition. Larsen’s protagonists assume false identities that ensure social survival but result in psychological suicide. (98)

The tragedy in the search for self-definition among Larsen’s protagonists originates in the dualism and essentialism of traditional Western thinking. The logic of binary opposition positions white and black as opposites, ordered in hierarchy. But the mulatto subverts this logic. America’s racial system recognizes only the dichotomy of black and white, and mixed blood is classified as black regardless of the color of one’s skin. However, the discrepancy between the double racial identity of the mulatto and the either/or logic of the social system causes a situation in which it is simply impossible for an individual to wholly belong to either category. Still, as I find it rather problematic to operate with concepts of true and false identity, I would amend Wall’s argument by Martha J. Cutter’s suggestion that it is not the assumption of false identity, but rather the assumption of single unitary identity that causes Larsen’s protagonist to fail. “To assume a single identity in a world in which identity itself is often a performance – a mask, a public persona – is to ensure psychological suicide” (79).

Larsen’s characters live in a world of set norms which clearly define an individual’s place in society and supply one with a role to play. Irene Redfield is a light skinned, middle-class African American woman, who lives an economically secure life. She is a mother of two sons,

married to a doctor, devoted to “uplifting the brother” – in every way the perfect representative of the middle-class fantasy of “idealized domesticity” (Hering 2001). To Irene, safety and security are of prime importance: “she was aware that, to her, security was the most important and desired thing in life” (235). She believes in the fixity of social and racial roles and expects others to play by the same rules.

This belief in social categories as based on an identity which is essentialist, fixed and unitary is also shared by Clare’s white husband Jack Bellew. For Jack Bellew one is either black or white. He believes that he himself can draw the color line by determining with certainty who is “the black scrimy devil,” “always robbing and killing people” (172) and who is a white, dutiful citizen. Ironically, despite claiming that there are “no niggers in my family,” he is married to one. On one occasion he is sitting in a room surrounded by “three black devils, drinking tea” (172), yet completely unaware of this fact. Through the character of Jack Bellew, Nella Larsen exposes the naivety and falsity of the general assumption of race as written on the body - an essentialist understanding of race. For Jack Bellew, the visual difference between races is a sign of a difference which goes deeper, under the skin. When he in the end realizes that his wife (and for that matter his daughter as well) are both “black,” his understanding of the world as divided along the color line is shattered.

Brian Redfield, Irene’s husband, adheres like his wife, to his own class and kind, yet with far more reluctance. Even though he is living his existence as a member of the black middle class, he shows signs of severe discontent, saying: “Uplifting the brother’s no easy job. . . . Lord! How I hate sick people, and their stupid, meddling families, and smelly, dirty rooms, and climbing filthy steps in dark hallways” (186). He refuses to ignore racism and hatred of white America and has been dreaming about going to Brazil, which, at the beginning of the twentieth century, was considered a place where racial lines were much less rigid than in America. Brian Redfield

detests the social system of identity categories, because they diminish his possibility of living the life he might choose as a free individual.

Unlike all the above mentioned characters, through Clare Kendry Larsen creates a character who chooses not to be confined by any particular social category. Clare uses her “queering subjectivity” “to multiply the roles available to her” (Cutter 84). She refuses to stay confined to one particular social category. Clare was not born into a secure middle-class household as Irene Redfield was. Clare’s father was a janitor and when he was killed in a bar fight and Clare had to move in with her white aunts, to whom she was little more than cheap domestic help and an object for Christian charity, Clare simply refuses to accept her fate and starts fully to exploit the possibilities opened to her through the queering character of her subjectivity. Clare starts passing not only for white, rather, “‘passing’ becomes a mechanism to get what she wants – which is not a singular identity, an identity that corresponds to a theoretical inner self, but an identity that can escape the enclosures of race, class, and sexuality, that would limit her ‘having’ ways” (Cutter 84).

Critics of Larsen’s work have been divided on the issue of the novel’s main concern. While some would read the text as the classical tragic story of a mulatto and focus on the issue of race in the social and historical context of the Harlem Renaissance, others, such as Claudia Tate, would argue that the issue of race “is more a device to sustain the suspense than merely a compelling social issue” and rather focus on the psychological complexity of the characters (142-43). It has also been suggested that the story should be read as an allegory of the difficulty of representing black women’s sexuality in relation to its appropriation by mainstream discourse as an icon of primitivism and exoticism (McDowell). The plethora of possible interpretations of the novel’s concerns, confirm the novel’s ambiguous character. In order to illustrate this assertion of

ambiguity as a profound feature of the novel, I will now focus on the ways through which Larsen has managed to create a carefully ambiguous interplay between Irene and Clare.

In the traditional tragic mulatto tale, the plot commonly follows a protagonist, typically a female of mixed blood, through her encounters with the world. However, Jacquelyn Y. McLendon points out that in *Passing*, Larsen revised this traditional narrative form by presenting not one but two passing characters (95-97). Clare Kendry is passing in the traditional meaning of the word. She has physically passed into the white world to satisfy her desire for a more comfortable life and it is only after her encounter with Irene that she starts to long back for the company of other African Americans. Irene Redfield passes only on occasions, when it is convenient for her, “but resorts to other kinds of disguise and erasure to escape the difficulties of being black and female” (McLendon 96). By juxtaposing the two characters, Larsen broadens the traditional meaning of passing as a physical act to also include emotional and psychological passing.

The story is mediated by Irene’s point of view. She is the focalizer, the character through which we see and perceive the story. However, throughout the text it becomes clear that she is an unreliable focalizer, who often jumps to conclusions without sufficient hard evidence. She feels sure that her husband is having an affair with Clare, yet throughout the text there is little information to support her suspicion. The subjectivity of Irene’s perceptions is confirmed by an omniscient narrator who supplies the reader with extra information, unavailable to Irene.

Consider the following passage:

It was only that she wanted him to be happy, resenting, however, his inability to be so with things as they were, *and never acknowledging* that though she did want him to be happy, it was only in her own way and by some plan of hers for him that she truly desired him to be so. *Nor did she admit* that all other plans, all other ways, she regarded as menaces, more or less indirect, to that security of place and substance which she insisted upon for her sons and in a lesser degree for herself. (190, emphasis mine)

Agreeing that there is “no single, ultimately authoritative voice,” Jacquelyn McLendon contends that Irene’s point of view is the dominant one in the text. In order to prove this, she uses Roland Barthes’ method of establishing a text’s point of view as outlined in *Image-Music-Text*. According to Barthes, narrative “knows only two systems of signs: personal and apersonal” and these “do not necessarily present the linguistic marks attached to person (I) and non-person (he)” (112; Barthes qtd. in McLendon 99). Replacing third person pronouns in the text with first person pronouns and failing to achieve any change other than the change of grammatical pronouns, leads us to the identification of a “personal system.” McLendon maintains that such a substitution of grammatical pronouns may be made easily for most of Irene’s discourse and concludes the centrality of Irene’s point of view.

This centrality of Irene’s point of view may explain the reader’s tendency to understand and interpret Clare as an unsympathetic character. Irene is a snob, who judges everything and everybody according to her middle-class values and likes to think herself morally superior to Clare, “a woman whose life had so definitely and deliberately diverged from hers” (162). For example, after spontaneously having invited Clare for a week-end in the country, she immediately regrets it, assuring herself, that it wasn’t “that she was a snob that cared greatly for the petty restrictions and distinctions . . . but that she had a natural and deeply rooted aversion to the kind of front-page notoriety that Clare Kendry’s presence in Idlewild, as her guest, would expose her to” (157). Since childhood “Clare had never been exactly one of the group” for Irene, and that has not really changed (154). Right from the beginning of the story, Clare is made susceptible to Irene’s judging eye. For example, on the day of their first encounter in a restaurant, Clare flashes a smile that Irene finds “just a shade too provocative for a waiter” (149) and Clare’s letter is “a bit too lavish in its wordiness, a shade too unreserved in the manner of its expression” (182).

Not only is Irene biased in relation to Clare, but her own self-image as morally superior does not correspond to her actual behavior. She likes to think herself an opposite to egoistic and unpredictable Clare, whose trouble was, “not only that she wanted to have her cake and eat it too, but that she wanted to nibble at the cakes of other people too” (182). Irene, on the other hand, claims that “she had never considered herself” (186), just her husband’s and sons’ best, in all her strivings. Yet she shows the same kind of determination as Clare, when the “life she had so admirably arranged for them all” (187) is threatened by another explosion of Brian’s discontent, insisting that this “*would die*. . . . She had only to direct and guide her man, to keep him going in the right direction” (188).

At one point in the text, Irene enraged by Clare insists that “actually they were strangers. Strangers in their ways and means of living. Strangers in their desires and ambitions. Strangers even in their racial consciousness” (192). Still, the text reveals many parallels between Irene’s and Clare’s thoughts and desires. The difference is that Clare is living hers out, whereas Irene represses all those feelings which do not correspond to the values and social expectations of her class. Passing is considered an “unhealthy business” (185), “a dangerous . . . abhorrent thing” (161), and yet to Irene it is strangely appealing. Irene is offended (as she should be according to what is expected from her) when asked by Clare whether she had ever considered passing herself, but she cannot hide her fascination with this “hazardous business of passing” (157). To Irene, passing into the white world would be disloyal to her race, yet she does not seem to mind passing “a bit” on occasions, when this can secure her extra comfort. Irene, like Clare, likes to have her cake and eat it too, but she is not willing to risk the disapproval of her actions by the public.

Many critics have noted the interdependence existing between Clare and Irene (Little, Tate, Sullivan). It is through Irene’s reflections and perceptions that we learn about Clare. Irene is obsessed with Clare’s beauty, thinking, that Clare is “really almost too good looking” (156),

“exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting . . . slim golden feet; her glistening hair . . . eyes sparkling like dark jewels (203). Gradually we get a very detailed picture of Clare’s appearance and her many exquisite gowns, yet due to the stylistic devices Larsen uses (i.e. Irene’s point of view as central to the story), Clare remains an enigmatic figure, an opaque character. We learn about her thoughts and ideas only from her direct conversations with Irene, yet somehow even then the focus remains on Irene’s reflections of Clare’s ideas and the impact these have on Irene. On the other hand, the description of Irene’s appearance is rather sketchy, the reader learns only that she has “warm olive skin” and black curly hair (183). Irene functions on the behalf of others; she talks about children, clothes, charity, “her discourse never strays from the proper, the banal, the bourgeois” (McMillan 143). However, Irene’s encounters with Clare subtly and indirectly provide an insight into Irene’s psychological character and reveal information otherwise inaccessible to the reader. Jonathan Little has noted: “Clare is Irene’s projected psychological double. It is through Irene’s descriptions of Clare that readers learn about Irene’s deepest and unacknowledged impulses and desires. In other words, we learn about Clare through Irene and about Irene through her encounters with Clare. Claudia Tate asserts that “the two portraits are polarized and mutually complementary – one is purely external, while the other is intensely internal” (144).

An unreliable focalizer, psychological doubling of the protagonist and antagonist and ostensible adherence to the tradition of the tragic mulatto tale are not the only stylistic means through which Larsen manages to achieve a high level of ambiguity in her novel. Unfinished sentences, irony and double meanings are all at work in the creation of a “writerly text,” one that according to Roland Barthes makes “the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (Barthes qtd. in Cutter 76). On several occasions Irene’s sentences and thoughts remain unfinished, forcing the reader to create her own version of the situation. In this way, Larsen

manages to avoid saying outright the socially unacceptable or provoking. During Irene and Clare's first encounter, Irene thinks to herself while looking at Clare: "She's really almost too good-looking. It's hardly any wonder that she --" (156). That she what? That she passed for white severing all her ties to her black heritage, that she has used her looks profitably in her encounters with men, that she was a whore? Whatever the thought might be, it is abhorrent enough for Irene to make her unwilling to put it in words.

Later on, when Clare is trying to persuade Irene to take her to the Negro Welfare League dance, Irene tries to discourage Clare in her determination to come by saying: "All sorts of people go, anybody who can pay a dollar, even ladies of easy virtue looking for trade. If you were to go there alone, you might be mistaken for one of them, and that wouldn't be pleasant." Clare laughs saying: "Thanks. I never have been. It might be amusing" (199). The reader may only guess, whether Clare is at this moment mocking Irene, being well aware of the rumors which have spread about her after she left her father's house, or whether she sincerely means it.

It is however the ambiguous ending of the novel which has provoked the most conflicted reactions. There are several possible explanations of Clare's death. Irene's version of the incident is that Clare has accidentally fallen out of the window in the conflict after Jack Bellew's arrival. "It was an accident, a terrible accident," she muttered fiercely. "It *was*" (239). Claudia Tate suggests that suicide may also be a plausible alternative, a choice Clare might make to avoid the consequences of her double life and identity. I would however argue that the most likely option, that to which Larsen is gradually building up her story, is that Irene, blinded by her jealousy and fear of losing the life she had striven so hard to build, pushed Clare out of the window. Even though Larsen is deliberately avoiding any final answer to the cause of Clare's death by counterbalancing all three options against each other, the reader is dared to think that it was murder. Jacquelyn Y. McLendon suggests that Clare's murder "is foreshadowed by a number of

subtle destructive acts performed by Irene” (107). It is primarily the moment when Irene, enraged by the idea of Brian leaving her for Clare, drops a cup: “There was a slight crash. On the floor at her feet lay the shattered cup. Dark stains dotted the bright rug. Spread. The chatter stopped.” Trying to make the situation look insignificant, Irene comes up with a “confession,” saying that: “It [the cup] was the ugliest thing . . . ever owned. . . . I’ve never figured out a way of getting rid of it until about five minutes ago. I had an inspiration. I had only to break it, and I was rid of it for ever” (222). The juxtaposition of Irene’s thoughts about Clare with the shattering of the cup is not accidental. One may at this moment suspect that Irene has just figured out her solution to “problem Clare.” The stream of thoughts going through Irene’s head right before and right after Clare’s death also seem to point in the direction of murder. When furious Jack Bellew storms into the Freeland’s apartment and everybody is confused as to what this is supposed to mean, Clare and Irene seem to be the only two people who, at this moment, are aware of the consequences of Clare’s disclosure. Clare, enigmatic as usual “seemed unaware of any danger or uncaring.” Irene on the other hand “ran across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and laid a hand on Clare’s bare arm. One thought possessed her. She couldn’t have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn’t have her free” (239). It is not just Irene’s physical presence and determination to get rid of Clare which makes her likely to be responsible for Clare’s death. As thoughts are racing through her head, unreflected, uncensored, she realizes that “there would be questions. She hadn’t thought of them, of afterwards, of this. She had thought of nothing at the sudden moment of action” (240). It is tempting to assume that the sudden moment of action refers to Irene’s action of pushing Clare out of the window. Even though the version of the ending which makes Irene responsible for Clare’s death may be the most reasonable, the reader has to keep in mind that “all evidence is circumstantial, and we cannot determine Irene’s guilt beyond a reasonable doubt” (Tate 145).

Critics of Larsen's work disagree on whether her abrupt ending is a sign of stylistic difficulties and an inability to move beyond the constrictions of the mulatto stereotype or whether, on the contrary, it is proof of her stylistic genius. Larsen's biographer, Thadious Davis, asserts that Larsen is unable to "envision conclusions according to the organic, internal logic of her narrative" and that her "narratives, like her public life, would stop abruptly, present no viable solutions, and remain dominated by dissatisfaction" (191). On the other hand, Martha J. Cutter argues that "Clare's death at the end of *Passing* is a stroke of genius that maintains her problematic 'passing' presence" (97). Clare's role as a destabilizing element in the novel is brought to an end by her death before her identity can become enclosed by one meaning. Clare leaves as she came. Everybody's eyes are turned to her, with questions sizzling in the air, yet there are no answers to be found. Clare is a passing and enigmatic character till the end. The reader's need to know what exactly happened remains unsatisfied. The central focalizer, Irene, refuses to remember: "What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly" (239) and the omniscient narrator who "serves the function of exposing more than Irene herself can risk" also suddenly remains silent (Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 169).

Passing invites to discussion of the role the socially constructed categories of race, gender and sexuality play in the creation of black female subjectivity. Clare and Irene's bodies challenge the assumption of race as written upon an individual's body and the either/or thinking inherent in western thought. Irene's way of life and adherence to (white) middle-class values question the generally accepted idea that race goes "deeper than the skin," showing that it is not necessarily race but rather class which is the division line of greatest importance. T.S. McMillan has pointed out that "although the mulatto elite of the Harlem Renaissance sought racial uplift, it did so within the system of oppositions and hierarchies, maintaining the bourgeois order of things"

(139). Irene, who has grown up in a comfortable middle class home, gone to high school and college and been on several Y.W.C.A. committees, is not a representative of the majority of the black population. Her light skin is an asset which helps to maintain her privileged status in society, since despite the political appreciation of dark skin, mulattoes and lighter skinned African Americans enjoyed more favorable treatment in a society which took the standards of white beauty for its own. The contrast between Irene and her servants is not built just on class difference, but also on the difference in their appearance. Zulena, Irene's maid, is characterized as "a small mahogany-colored creature" and her name is also far more exotic sounding than Irene's. Irene secretly disapproves of Clare's little trips on which she would "*descend*" to the kitchen and "with – to Irene – an exasperating childlike lack of perception, spend her visit in talk and merriment with Zulena and Sadie" (208). Irene believes in the fixity of social positioning and demands that people adhere to their place. Clare's mingling with the working class seems inappropriate to Irene.

Larsen's novel has been criticized for its "bourgeois ethos" (Wall 97). However, her portrayal of the middle class's life and values can be considered a comment on the hypocrisy and superficiality of such a way of life. Irene is busy following all her social appointments and charity work, always surrounded by people who, like herself, are playing their little part in the social game, yet they are unable to stop even when the game is no longer amusing. Losing face, not just in public but in front of your closest friends, is a series social faux pas. At the Freeland's party towards the end of the book, Irene, sure that her husband is having an affair with Clare Kendry, feels extremely anxious and upset. "Only Irene wasn't merry. She sat almost silently, smiling now and then, that she might appear amused" (237). Irene's state of mind doesn't go unnoticed, yet the whole situation is turned into a joke, into a brisk exchange of witty repartee. Maintaining

a comfortable, easygoing atmosphere seems to be more important to everyone than finding out the reason for Irene's displeasure.

The black middle class's attitude towards passing is rather ambivalent. It seems to be acceptable to pass on rare occasions when this is convenient, yet passing over, as did Clare Kendry is considered to be an act disloyal to the race. In a conversation with a friend, Irene admits to passing on occasion. "I do [pass], but not for the reason you think. I don't believe I've ever gone native in my life except for the sake of convenience, restaurants, theatre tickets, and things like that. Never socially I mean, except once" (227). Staying loyal to one's race is a political choice and deserting one's race is considered a betrayal. It is this internalized social responsibility for members of one's own kind which presents Irene with a problematic dilemma. Irene feels that she should be loyal to Clare Kendry because of the racial tie between them, so when this comes in conflict with her own desires, she feels trapped:

She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. . . . Sitting alone in the quiet living-room in the pleasant fire-light, Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. It was brutality, and undeserved. (225)

Irene and Clare have the unusual opportunity of choosing their racial allegiance. They challenge the central premise of racial ideology – the assumption that race is a biological fact. Deborah R. Grayson points out that "because those of us who have black and/or female bodies have been legally defined as visible in our culture, we usually do not have the option of bodilessness" (30). An individual with a body marked through the inscription of race and/or gender is placed in the position of "the other" and exposed to the gaze. Grayson explains: "Observation, or the gaze, is used as a tool by those in power to keep those not in power subordinant. The gaze is so powerful

because the gazers do not have to be present for their power to be felt. The gaze works by making 'the other' always visible as opposed to invisible" (31). However, the key condition for the gaze to be functional in relation to black bodies is that these bodies are marked, i.e. visibly black.

In *Passing*, Larsen stages several situations where the power of the gaze is indicated. At the beginning of the novel when Irene meets Clare, they are both passing at a restaurant in Chicago. Irene grows significantly nervous when she realizes that she is being observed. She starts wondering what could make a stranger stare at her so unscrupulously and after checking that her hat and make up are in order, she questions the possibility whether the woman might discern her African American origin. Irene's own answer to this question is no. "Absurd! Impossible! White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, finger nails, palms, of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot" (150). Yet Irene is at this moment unaware that she herself has just made a mistake assuming that the gaze belongs to a white person. Irene's failure to recognize Clare as a woman of color gives Clare's gaze the power it could not otherwise have. On the other hand, when Irene meets Clare's racist husband the situation is reversed. This time it is Jack Bellew's whiteness which is visible, since he fails to read the (black/white) bodies of the women in front of him. The mulatto body thus challenges the rigidity of race ideology, which relies on the race's inscription on the body.

It has been argued, that Larsen's characters are not passing only with regards to race and class, but also with regards to sexuality. For example, the above described encounter between Irene and Clare in the restaurant could also be read in terms of subtle sexual attraction. Before Irene starts to fear that her origin might be revealed, the reader senses a growing tension between the protagonists as they are watching each other. "Very slowly she looked around, and into the dark eyes of the woman in the green frock at the next table. But she evidently failed to realized

[sic] that such intense interest as she was showing might be embarrassing, and continued to stare” (149). Similarly, David L. Blackmore and Deborah McDowell both argue that “a close reading of the novel will show that Larsen hints at the idea of homosexual desire both between Irene and Clare and in the case of Brian” (Blackmore 475). The subtlety of these hints is responsible for the fact that the sexual passing of the characters has long stayed unnoticed. Both Irene and Clare are married, yet it is established early on in the novel that their marriages are sexless and passionless. Irene’s is a marriage of convenience, an alliance through which she has secured herself social and economic status. At one point she admits to herself: “Strange, that she couldn’t now be sure that she had ever truly known love. Not even for Brian. He was her husband and the father of her sons. But was he anything more? Had she ever tried for more? In that hour she thought not” (235). The affection which is lacking in Irene’s marriage is present however in her relationship to Clare. The reader gradually becomes aware of Irene’s infatuation with Clare, which is present from the start. Irene is not only fascinated by Clare’s appearance, but has uncontrollable rushes of affection whenever she is in Clare’s presence. “Looking at the woman in front of her, Irene Redfield had a sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling” (194). These feelings are however never recognized by Irene. Just as Irene refuses to name her feelings for Clare, she refuses to name the source of Brian’s “unreasonable restless feeling” (201). However, Irene’s remarks that “Brian doesn’t care for ladies” (173) and Brian’s attitude to sex, which he is calling “a grand joke, the greatest in the world” (189), only reinforce the impression that shared sexual intimacy in their marriage is non-existent. It is certainly tempting to assume, as David L. Blackmore does, that the fact that Brian does not care for ladies indicates his desire for other men. However, I would argue that unlike in the case of Irene and Clare, Larsen does not provide any substantial indication that would support this interpretation. The polarization and consequent

categorization of human sexuality as either homo- or heterosexuality is a rather reductive understanding of sexual desire.

Deborah McDowell points out that “the idea of bringing a sexual attraction between two women to full narrative expression is, likewise, too dangerous a move” (xxx). That is why Larsen has chosen to follow the “technique found commonly in narratives by Afro-American and women novelists with a ‘dangerous’ story to tell: ‘safe’ themes, plots, and conventions are used as the protective cover underneath which lie more dangerous subplots” (xxx). It is certainly not too radical an interpretation to suggest that Larsen desires to explore human sexuality beyond the constrictions posed by bourgeois morality, yet directly questioning the hegemony of heterosexuality through an open exploration of same-sex desire may have been a step too radical even for the liberal atmosphere of the Harlem Renaissance.

McDowell suggests that Clare’s death at the end of the novel terminates the narratives radical potential: “it punish[es] the very values the novel implicitly affirms, to honor the very system the text implicitly satirizes” (xxxi). However, based on my reading of Clare Kendry as a “queering subject” I would suggest that Clare’s death may as well be a comment on the impossibility of maintenance of “queer subjectivity” within a social system of polarized, unitary identities.

CHAPTER 2

Is that a Boy or a Girl? Leslie Feinberg: *Stone Butch Blues*

In modern, Western society, socially prescribed standards of femininity and masculinity, derived from female and male bodies respectively, have governed and determined the possibility of self-expression for each individual in both the public and private sphere. Femininity and masculinity are organized in an opposing binary, which renders the combination of male/feminine and female/masculine “unnatural” and socially unacceptable. Individuals who fail to perform their gender “correctly” have to face reactions of animosity, rejection and persecution, because their “queering subjectivity” challenges and subverts the presumed natural character of the relationship between male/masculine and female/feminine. *Stone Butch Blues* introduces the reader to the world of gender and sexual borderlands and its inhabitants who “queer” the gendered heterosexual norm and expose not only its constructed character, but also the system’s means of disciplining and coercing its subjects into gender and sexual conformity.

Jess Goldberg, the protagonist of *Stone Butch Blues*, learns about the consequences of not conforming to the governing social order from early on in her childhood. “No one ever offered a name for what was wrong with me. That’s what made me afraid it was really bad. I only came to recognize its melody through this constant refrain: ‘Is that a boy or a girl?’” (13). Jess has every reason to be afraid, because her “queering subjectivity,” which is manifested through her gender ambiguity, is a severe offence against the directive of normalization, which maintains that individuals should be judged “not by the intrinsic rightness or wrongness of their acts but by where their actions place them on a ranked scale that compares them to everyone else” (Gutting

84). In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Michael Foucault claims that this “normalizing judgment” is a part of modern disciplinary control and that there is practically no way of escaping it. Social norms define what is acceptable behavior and what is not. Being judged abnormal exposes one to acts of coercion at all social levels (182-84). Jess fails to perform her gender in a socially acceptable way, which renders her visible to the “normalizing gaze” and susceptible to punishment.

Unlike her little sister whose “dream was a felt skirt with an appliqué poodle and rhinestone-studded plastic shoes” (19), Jess is a tomboy, who prefers wearing boy outfits. Suddenly, one day, Jess is no longer allowed to wear pants and has to start wearing dresses, like all other girls her age. This situation illustrates Judith Halberstam’s argument that while a mild form of tomboyism is tolerated and even encouraged with prepubescent girls, it is punished “when it appears to be the sign of extreme male identification (taking a boy’s name or refusing girl clothing of any type) and when it threatens to extend beyond childhood into adolescence” (6). When Jess is surprised by her parents while standing in front of the mirror wearing her father’s suit, that which was until now considered an innocent, if disagreeable, boyishness of their daughter, turns into a problem which needs to be treated. In the cultural context of the 1950s United States, the transgression of gender and heterosexual norms was commonly seen as a sign of mental disorder. Accordingly, Jess is hospitalized in a mental institution where she learns “that the world could do more than just judge me, it wielded enormous power over me” (22). After her release from the institution, Jess has to continue seeing a psychologist and attend a charm school to ensure that she does not walk astray from her gender path and that she learns to perform her gender appropriately. However, the juxtaposition of Jess’s female masculinity and the charm school’s demand for a perfect performance of femininity makes it only more obvious that Jess “wasn’t pretty, wasn’t feminine, and would never be graceful” (23). Long before Jess becomes an

adult, she learns about the shame and humiliation of “being different, being other and therefore lesser, therefore sub-human, in-human, non-human” (Anzaldúa 18).

Throughout her adolescence, Jess is eagerly, yet unsuccessfully, searching for an image of a woman that she could identify with. “I didn’t look like any of the girls or women I’d seen in the Sears catalog. . . . All the girls and women looked pretty much the same, so did all the boys and men. I couldn’t find myself among the girls. I had never seen any adult woman who looked like I thought I would when I grew up” (20-21). Furthermore, she discovers an even more alarming thing about herself when she sneaks into a showing of an adult movie. “I melted as Sophia Loren moved her body against her leading man. Her hand cupped the back of his neck as they kissed, her long nails trailed against his skin. I shivered with pleasure” (24). Subconsciously, Jess knows that she is bound for some more trouble. Not only does she fail to match her female body with an appropriate performance of femininity, but also her desire seems to be going in the “wrong” direction. It is not the place of Sophia Loren she is yearning for; instead, it is the place of the man who gets to feel the physical presence of a woman in his arms. As Jess has nobody with whom she could discuss her new discoveries about herself, she struggles with an unsettling feeling of guilt and anxiety that there must be something wrong with her.

In order to spend as little time as possible at home, Jess finds an after-school job, where her coworkers let her “otherness” go for the most part unnoticed and are nice to her. One day a colleague mentions her brother, “how he’s a pansy and wears women’s dresses” (26). Jess then learns that there is a bar where people like him go and she immediately makes up her mind to find it. On her first visit to the bar, Jess finally meets the kind of women she never saw in the Sears catalog. “What I saw there released tears I’d held back for years: strong, burly women, wearing ties and suit coats. Their hair was slicked back in perfect DA’s. They were the handsomest women I’d ever seen” (27-28). Jess has finally discovered a space where she can stay

free of the normalizing gaze that exposes and renders her gender and sexual queerness as abnormal and undesired. While still a teenager, Jess enters the world of butches, femmes and drag queens and starts learning about the life in the gender and sexual borderlands, about what kind of woman she wants to be and the price she will have to pay for it.

In her essay “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” Gayle S. Rubin discusses the occurrence of periods of sex panic in both American and British societies. These were periods “in which the state, the institutions of medicine, and the popular media have mobilized to attack and oppress all whose sexual tastes differ from those allowed by the currently dominative model of sexual correctness” (3). She asserts that in the post-war period of 1950s and early 1960s, all those who did not adhere to the gendered heterosexual norms regulating human sexual behavior were labeled as “sex offenders” and consequently exposed to forceful persecution. Systematical police harassment becomes an unavoidable part of Jess’s life as a “queering subject” and one of Jess’s greatest fears after she, for the first time, experiences the horrors of a police raid in the bar. “I peeked outside the bathroom. All the stone butches and drag queens were lined up facing the wall, hands cuffed behind their backs. Several of the femmes who the cops knew were prostitutes were getting roughed up and separated from the rest. I knew by now it would take at least a blow job to get them out of jail tonight” (34). The drag queens and butches are taken to the police station where they are one by one “investigated” for their breach of the laws on morality. Jess watches in horror the signs of severe sexual and physical violence inflicted upon her friends as they return back to the cell. “About an hour later the cops brought Mona back. My heart broke when I saw her. Two cops were dragging her; she could barely stand. Her hair was wet and stuck to her face. Her makeup was smeared. There was blood running down the back of her seamless stockings” (35). Jess tries to comfort Mona who warns her about the consequences of one’s decision to live a life in the gender borderlands. ““It

changes you,' she said. 'What they do to you in here, the shit you take every day on the streets - it changes you, you know?'" (35). Due to Jess's low age, she escapes the sexual violence, but she leaves with a threat: "You should be this tall soon, tall enough your feet would reach the ground. That's when we'll take care of you like we did your pussy friend Allison" (36).

Youth may protect Jess from legal punishment for her transgressions, it however cannot and does not safeguard her from attacks conducted on an individual level. Jess loses her virginity during a gang rape at her school. The severe sexual assault is a retribution for her crime of not conforming to the norms of femininity and heterosexuality. "He wanted me to pay attention to the rape. He fucked me harder. 'You dirty Kike bitch, you fucking bulldagger.' All my crimes were listed. I was guilty as charged" (41). While still a teenager attending high school, Jess starts to understand the urgency of the message to toughen up carried by the stone butches from the bar and realizes that the process has already started spontaneously. "I was mortaring a brick wall inside myself. The wall didn't protect me, and yet I watched as though it wasn't my hands placing each brick" (37).

Finally, Jess decides to quit school and leave home. She gets suspended from classes for challenging the rules of the "color line" when she sits down next to her black friend during a lunch break. The "separate but equal" rule is not to be questioned and the transgressor needs to be punished. Jess leaves a note for her parents explaining what has happened and asks them not to come after her. She is well aware of the fact that her family would never accept her "otherness" and is afraid that she might be again committed to a mental institution. Gayle S. Rubin comments on the role of family in enforcing sexual conformity upon its members. "Much social pressure is brought to bear to deny erotic dissidents the comforts and resources that families provide. Popular ideology holds that families are not supposed to produce or harbor erotic non-conformity. Many families respond by trying to reform, punish, or exile sexually offending

members” (Thinking Sex, 22). Jess understands that in order to be able to explore the (im)possibility of a life as a “queering subject,” she needs to leave her family behind. “When I was blocks away I leaned up against a lamppost and caught my breath. I felt free. Free to explore what freedom meant” (47).

Leslie Feinberg sets Jess’s coming out as a young, butch lesbian in Buffalo of the pre-Stonewall era. In their book *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis assert that in the period before gay and lesbian liberation, the public lesbian community followed the social imperative of butch-femme roles. The different roles were characteristically expressed through appearance and sexual behavior. While butches adopted a masculine style in appearance and an active sexual role of the doer and the giver, femmes were in style typically feminine and their “receptive passion was the butch’s fulfillment” (152). When Jess first enters the butch and femme community, she has to learn the butch-femme code. She gets initiated by Al and Jackie who not only help Jess to buy her first tie and sports coat, but also enlighten her on the issue of butch-femme sex. Al has a rather straightforward way of showing Jess what is sexually expected of her as a butch. “One night at the kitchen table Al pulled out a cardboard box and handed it over to me to open. Inside was a rubber dildo. I was shocked” (30). When Jackie sees Jess’s confusion she tries to be more concrete in explaining what makes a butch a good lover. She takes the dildo and says: “‘You know, you could make a woman feel real good with this thing. Maybe better than she ever felt in her life.’ She stopped stroking the dildo. ‘Or you could really hurt her, and remind her of all the ways she’s been hurt in her life. You got to think about that every time you strap this on. Then you will be a good lover’” (31).

Anchored in the social and cultural realities of the 1950s and early 1960s Jess and her butch friends follow the imperative of the indissolubility of the butch-femme union. Kennedy and Davis discuss the fact that the butch-femme roles functioned “as both a powerful personal code of

behavior and as an organizing principle for community life” (152). The butch-femme roles governed also the rules of sexual desire. “Two butches could be friends but never lovers; the same was true for two femmes” (152). The pervasiveness of this “rule of attraction” in the 1950s and 1960s catches up with Jess as well. Upon learning that her friend Frankie is with another butch and not a femme Jess is confused and disgusted. “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). Jess’s reaction is illustrative of the stereotypical understanding of butch as identified in relation to femmes. This concept of butchness, prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s, promoted the image of butch as a sexual aggressor who “tops” (runs the sex) and whose sexual desire is directed exclusively towards femmes. However, such an understanding of butch identity has since been discarded as ignorant of the variations in butch experience.

In her essay “Of Catamites and Kings,” Gayle S. Rubin discusses the butch stereotype as it appears in the popular culture. “The Iconography in many contemporary lesbian periodicals leaves a strong impression that a butch always has very short hair, wears a leather jacket, rides a Harley, and works construction” (473). However, Rubin draws attention to the diversity within the butch identity category and introduces a less restrictive definition of the butch: “Butch is the lesbian vernacular term for women who are more comfortable with masculine gender codes, styles and identities than with feminine ones” (472). The degree of butch’s investments into masculinity varies greatly. Some butches follow the masculine dress code and hairstyle and “enjoy combining expressions of masculinity with a female body” (473), while others may be gender disphoric, transvestites or choose to pass as men. Sherrie A. Inness and Michele E. Lloyd share Rubin’s objective of broadening and redefining the meanings of butch in their essay “G.I.

Joes in Barbie Land: Recontextualizing Butch in Twentieth-Century Lesbian Culture.” They find the understanding of butch as “characterized by the object of her desire” (10) to be insufficient and restrictive. By discussing the “vast realm of attitudes, behaviors, appearances, and actions” (11) employed in the construction of butchness and by stressing the historic specificity of the meaning of butch, Inness and Lloyd try to explode the butch-femme binary.

The most prominent trait of butchness is masculinity. In our culture, masculinity has been traditionally associated with maleness, and the existence of alternative (i.e. female) masculinities has been largely ignored. Judith Halberstam argues that “this widespread indifference to female masculinity . . . has clearly ideological motivations and has sustained the complex social structures that wed masculinity to maleness and to power and domination” (2). Reducing masculinity to a male body and its effects deprives us, according to Halberstam, of the opportunity to uncover the mechanisms securing the hegemony of gender conformity, since it is first at the moment when masculinity leaves the white male middle class body that it becomes legible (2). A female body performing masculinity directly challenges the meanings of femaleness, femininity and masculinity.

Masculinity, however, is not a unitary and universal concept. Rubin states: “Forms of masculinity are molded by the experiences and expectations of class, race, ethnicity, religion, occupation, age, subculture, and individual personality” (Of Catamites and Kings, 474). Jess’s butch masculinity represents the white working-class masculinity, which has been historically linked to “images of young, rebellious, sexy, white, working-class masculinity that stretches from Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* (1954) to the character of James Hurley on ‘Twin Peaks’” (Of Catamites and Kings, 473). Butch masculinity is commonly (mis)understood as a copy of male masculinity and as an expression of a desire to be a man. This is not necessarily so. Such an understanding of butch masculinity is rooted in the oppositional gender system, which conflates

femaleness with femininity and maleness with masculinity, while maintaining an oppositional relation between woman and man. A butch is perceived as a non-woman, because she lacks femininity, yet she cannot really be a man because she does not possess the correct anatomy. The misconception of butch as a fake man is well illustrated by the situation when Jess's lover Theresa says: "When a woman tells me, 'If I wanted a man I'd be with a *real* one,' I tell her, 'I'm not with a *fake* man, I'm with a real butch.'" (139, italics mine). Due to its rigidity, the gender system fails to accommodate alternative expressions of gender, which would function independently of physical anatomy. In other words: "While heterosexual society sees the butch as 'play-acting' the role of man, and considers her lack of physical maleness to be a failure, in actuality the butch's transgressive behavior exposes the artificiality of social constructs about sex and gender" (Innes and Lloyd 19).

In her discussion of female masculinity, Judith Halberstam points out that "female masculinity is generally received by hetero- and homo-normative cultures as a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment, as a longing to be and to have a power that is always just out of reach" (9). In the mid-1970s when feminist ideology became dominant within the middle-class lesbian community, the butch-femme roles were swiftly discarded as a replication of the heterosexual order. The butch was criticized for her performance of masculinity, and femme for her selling out to the patriarchal images of femininity. At this time, lesbian experience was redefined in terms of equality and androgyny. Consequently, Jess has to deal with the challenge the lesbian feminist movement posed to butches and femmes. "One day I came home from work and found Theresa stewing in anger at the kitchen table. Some of the lesbians from a newly formed group on campus had mocked her for being a femme. They told her she was brainwashed. . . . 'They told me that butches were chauvinist pigs!'" (135). Jess demands to know what exactly chauvinism has to do with butches and Theresa tries to explain: "I think it's because they draw a

line – women on one side and men on the other. So women they think look like men are the enemy. And women who look like me are sleeping with the enemy” (136).

Though the perception of the butch-femme binary as a copy of the heterosexual real has been widespread in both the heterosexual and lesbian community, it is problematic since it uncritically accepts the assumed “naturalness” of heterosexuality and its positioning as an original. Judith Butler has claimed that the construction of heterosexuality as an original is done through its repeated imitation of itself, which basically means that the butch-femme binary cannot be an imitation of the heterosexual order. It will always be “only an imitation of an imitation, a copy of a copy, for which there is no original” (Imitation, 314). Butler is not denying the appearance of heterosexual norms in gay and lesbian identities, but argues that “to be constituted or structured in part by the very heterosexual norms by which gay people are oppressed is not, I repeat, to be claimed or determined by those structures” (Imitation, 314).

After yet another beating on the street, Jess finds herself exhausted from the adversity of living on the brink of society. “It was so hard to be different. The pressure never let up for a minute. I felt all messed up inside and bone weary” (140). When everyday hardship is joined by the impossibility of finding a job, Jess realizes that she can no longer live as a he-she and that she has to choose a side. This is however not an easy decision, because Jess’s gender-queer subjectivity means that she does not have what it takes to satisfy the demands for gender conformity, no matter which side she chooses. Her masculine appearance and female body are an anomaly, a violation of the gender order. Neither the category of man nor woman can accommodate her gender variation. In order to adapt to the governing gender order, she will have to choose between *passing* as a feminine woman and *passing* as a man. At first, some of Jess’s butch friends consider dressing up as women, but this option is fast rejected. “Four stone butches trying on fashion wigs. It was like a Halloween, only it was creepy and painful. The wigs made

us look like we were making fun of ourselves” (143). For Jess, there is no way she can combine her femaleness with a believable performance of femininity.

One night Jess has a dream. She is at a place she doesn't recognize, but it feels strangely familiar. She is with several of her drag queen friends and experiences a deep feeling of belonging. Telling Theresa about the dream, Jess says: “In the dream I had a beard and my chest was flat. It made me so happy. . . . It wasn't about being gay. It was about being a man or a woman. . . . I always feel like I have to prove I'm like other women, but in the dream I didn't feel like that. I'm not even sure I felt like a woman.” When asked whether she felt like a man, Jess answers that she didn't. “I didn't feel like a woman or a man, and I liked how I was different” (143). Unfortunately, modern Western culture does not accommodate other options than female femininity and male masculinity, which means that Jess does not have the freedom to live out her dream. Finally, for the first time, Jess starts to consider the option of passing for a man.

The choice of passing for a man is Jess's survival strategy; it is a way to make her otherness invisible to the scrutiny of the “normalizing gaze.” However, within the lesbian community, such a choice is perceived as a transgression. Jess gradually becomes aware of the fine but definite line between being a butch and a FTM (female to male) transgressor. Jess confides in Theresa her plan to start on male hormones so that she can pass for a man and realizes the grave consequences of her decision and the problematic position such a decision will put Theresa into. Theresa argues: “I'm a woman, Jess. I love you because you're a woman too” (148); and later adds: “I want to be with a butch. . . . If I'm not with a butch everyone just assumes I'm straight. It's like I'm passing too, against my will” (151). Theresa's arguments are illustrative of the conception of the femme-butch binary as mutually complementary and of the importance of butch-femme roles in making the existence of lesbian desire visible in public. Furthermore, “the coexistence of masculine traits with female anatomy is a fundamental

characteristic of 'butch' and is a highly charged, eroticized, and consequential lesbian signal" (Rubin, *Of Katamites and Kings*, 473). The effects of male hormones on a female body destroy this eroticized balance between the female and the masculine. Altering her body towards maleness will strip Jess of her butch identity and will consequently lead to her exclusion from the butch-femme lesbian community.

When Jess sets in the first dose of male hormones, she is full of conflicting emotions. She hopes that this is her ticket from the discomforts of being different and that something is "going to change, that an enormous weight might be lifted from me" (164). While Jess may hope that her life in the public sphere will get more bearable as a consequence of her decision to approximate her body to her performance of gender and that she will finally gain freedom to "just live" (164), she realizes it may be a lonely life. She has to say goodbye to all that she has been so far, to her friends, and to the possibility of a relationship with a femme. "Warm memories flooded over me: butch friends, drag queen confidants, femme lovers. I couldn't see them now. I was alone at this crossroads" (164). For the second time in her life, she has to break away from the familiar in order to explore the meager possibilities of a decent life in a gender- and heteronormative society.

To Jess's disappointment, the transition does not happen over night and it takes several months before her body starts to change. Finally, one morning, she wakes up with stubble on her cheeks and notices that her hips have melted away and that her body is lean and hard. "This was almost the body I'd expected before puberty confounded me. Almost" (171). Even before completing her bodily transition with a breast reduction, Jess starts to enjoy the freedom of newly gained public mobility. After a successful visit to a barbershop, it is time for the final test of her ability to pass for a man: a visit to the public bathroom. The public bathroom is the ultimate illustration of the persistence of gender binarism. Judith Halberstam points out that public bathrooms represent a battle zone for individuals who fail to satisfy the cardinal rule of gender

that “one must be readable at a glance” (23). The punishment for the violation of the rule of gender readability ranges from disapproving looks to physical violence. This exclusion of gender-queer subjects from the space of public bathrooms severely restricts their public mobility, so when Jess finds out that she can successfully pass, she is really excited: “I could go to the bathroom whenever and wherever I needed to without pressure or shame. What an enormous relief” (173).

At first, Jess really enjoys that “the world stopped feeling like a gauntlet I had to run through” (173), but after the initial excitement wears off she realizes that passing for a man does not bring her any closer to being herself. Jess’s freedom of movement in the public space rests on her successful performance of maleness. Out of fear that her passing might be revealed, she avoids any personal relationships and consequently feels lonely. A random body-check upon arrest or a request for her ID card would at once uncover her trespassing. Furthermore, she also feels uncomfortable with any compliments on her maleness. “Why was I so angry? This was what I wanted, wasn’t it? To be able to be myself and yet live without fear? It just didn’t seem fair. All my life I’d been told everything about me was really twisted and sick. But if I was a man, I was ‘cute.’ Acceptance of me as a he felt like an ongoing indictment of me as a he-she” (178). The feeling of suffocation provoked by her ostensible maleness keeps growing. Upon a random meeting of a femme friend from the old days, Jess finally finds somebody to speak to about her confusion and dissatisfaction with her life as a passing subject. “I feel like a ghost, Edna. 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). Even though Edna understands Jess’s frustrations and reassures her that she is not the only one left with the feeling of being neither man nor woman, she is unable to help

her as there is no real option for Jess to accommodate her specific gender and bodily variation within the governing gender system.

Finally, one morning Jess realizes that passing for a man is not the way to get where she wants to go. Jess decides to stop her hormone treatment and let her body return to its “natural” state of gender ambiguity. As much as she enjoyed the secondary markers of her masculinity, the beard and the firmness of her body, she feels trapped behind them. All she was hoping to gain through passing was the possibility to freely explore who she was, but this proved to be impossible. “I didn’t get to explore being a he-she, though. I simply became a he – a man without past” (222). Within a year Jess’s body and facial features change and stares in the street announce that she is back under the scrutiny of the “normalizing gaze.”

The publication of Feinberg’s autobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues* was welcomed with considerable relish by both the transsexual community and scholars working within the field of Queer studies. However, while the reading of the novel as a fictional transsexual autobiography focused on the protagonist’s “yearning for home both in the body and in community,” the queer reading emphasized the novel’s role in the denaturalization of the gender/sex identity categories (Prosser 490). The different interpretations are illustrative of the differences in theorizing gender identity within the fields of transsexual and Queer studies. The understanding of gender prevalent within the transsexual framework is that of a “home.” The motivation for transsexual’s decision to undergo a change of his/her bodily sex is the desire “to maintain and enhance *gender continuity*,” a deeply-felt sense of either masculinity or femininity (Beasley 153). The view of gender identity as an essence is in a direct opposition to Queer theory’s refusal of stable identity categories. “Queer theory sees identity as thoroughly socially constructed and internally unstable and incoherent” (Beasley 162). Within the Queer frameworks, the conception of gender is radically anti-narrative. Gender is understood as a “process of

becoming: repetitious, recursive, disordered, and, most importantly, without ending” (Prosser 485).

In his essay “No Place like Home: The Transgender Narrative of Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues*,” Jay Prosser argues that the novel needs “to be read in the context of transsexual rather than queer texts” (490). He claims that Feinberg’s fictional autobiography “shares with transsexual autobiography a narrative trajectory that centers on the sexed body, driven by the subject’s sense of not being at home in his/her body, promising to reach closure once the body is hormonally and surgically reconstructed” (491). I find this assertion problematic. Even though Jess undergoes a hormonal treatment and opts for a mastectomy, she says several times that her desire for bodily change is not driven by a desire for male embodiment. “I don’t feel like a man trapped in a woman’s body. I just feel trapped” (158-59). The transsexual subject has typically a view of her/himself as of other gender, as being failed by her/his body. Even though Jess has the need to alter her body so that it can carry more easily her performance of masculinity, she does not have a definite conception of herself as either male or female.

Prosser’s claim of continuity between *Stone Butch Blues* and transsexual autobiography is further weakened by the fact that Jess stops taking male hormones and prefers to live a life as a gender ambivalent he-she. Jess’s decision turns her in the opposite direction from the one suggested by the transsexual narrative of homecoming. Jess never wanted to become a man. Her perception of herself as a he-she never changed. The changes she undergoes are attempts to create a place for herself in a world where gender ambiguity is an offence. Framing Jess as a transsexual subject means turning away from the complex reality of life as a “queering subject.”

Queer accounts of gender as fiction provoked a lot of criticism from the transsexual community and were often blamed for ignoring and obliterating the urgency of real-life experiences of transsexuals. However, I find highly appealing Judith Halberstam’s answer to

such criticism, in which she states that it is the monolithic model of transsexuality rather than the lived experience of transsexuals which is under Queer scrutiny. Halberstam stresses the importance of awareness of “the wild variability of masculinities and identifications across butch and transsexual bodies” (149) illustrating her statement by the following passage from an essay of an FTM performance artist Jordy Jones:

Not everyone who experiences gender dysphoria experiences it in the same way, and not everyone deals with it the same way. Not all transgendered individuals take hormones, and not everyone who takes hormones is transgendered. I have (a genetically female) friend who identifies as male and passes perfectly. He’s never had a shot. I certainly know dykes who are butcher than I could ever be, but who wouldn’t consider identifying as anything other than women. (Jordy Jones qtd. in Halberstam 149)

Halberstam asserts that in order to understand and maintain the subjectivity of a transgender butch, it is necessary to acknowledge the diversity of experiences for gender-queer individuals and refrain from organizing this experience along a definite continuum model of masculinity as this tends to construct stone butchness as “a compromise category between lesbian and FTM” and leads to its being defined by “sexual dysfunction rather than sexual practice” (151).

After getting off hormones, Jess notices that things got worse. “Before, strangers had raged at me for being a woman who crossed a forbidden boundary. Now they really didn’t know what my sex was, and that was unimaginable, terrifying to them” (225). Finally, Jess decides to move to New York City and make a fresh start. At first, little is different from her life in Buffalo. Jess is still subject to random acts of violence and has to work hard to make a living. Everything changes when she meets her neighbor Ruth. Ruth was born as Robbie and has an insiders’ understanding of Jess’s predicament. However, even Ruth gets confused by Jess’s gender ambiguity. “At first I thought you were a straight man. Then I thought you were gay. It’s been shock for me to realize that even I make assumptions about sex and gender that aren’t true. I thought I was liberated from all that” (254). Jess enjoys spending time with Ruth, but they never

dare to walk together in public. Ruth has a geometric theory: “two people like us in public are more than double the trouble” (255). Neither Jess nor Ruth can deal with more trouble than they already have. Even though her platonic relationship with Ruth makes Jess feel happy and “normal,” Jess is still on occasion reminded of her position as a social outlaw. When she gets beaten up and is taken to hospital, the mention of the police coming to take her testimony makes Jess panic. She immediately leaves the hospital, despite her serious injuries and her need for medical care.

For Christmas, Ruth gives Jess a very important present. It is a book called *Gay American History*. For the first time, Jess can read about women like herself. The knowledge that she is not alone, that people like her have a place in history, that she is not a mere abnormality but just one of many variations of humankind gives Jess a previously unknown feeling of strength and belonging. Jess starts to research the history of transgender people and tells Ruth: “We haven’t always been hated. Why didn’t we grow up knowing that?” (271). Gradually, as Jess gains a sense of belonging and having a place in the history of the human kind, she gains confidence and strength to deal with some of the things she has been too afraid to face. She calls her butch friend Frankie and apologizes for cutting her off after she had learned about her attraction to other butches. Jess admits that she got scared, because Frankie shattered the few securities of Jess’s life. “You know, Frankie, when we were younger, I thought I had it figured out: I’m a butch because I love femmes. That was something beautiful. Nobody ever honored our love. You scared me. I felt like you were taking that away from me” (273). But Frankie admits that she was scared too. Scared of her own desire. Only after being honest with herself, could Frankie accept who she was. Throughout their lives, Jess and Frankie learned about the hardship of living in a society which reserves for itself the right to write and rewrite the narratives of history and desire.

In her life, Jess learned a lot about exclusion and loneliness. As a child, she felt to be “just one more bad card life had dealt my parents” (13). As an adult she became a gender outlaw. She had to leave the butch-femme community, when she decided to explore the territory of passing. She did not feel welcomed in the new lesbian feminist movement. As a he-she, Jess has been excluded from the social discourse and denied the right to speak up for herself. Finally, one day Jess finds herself in the middle of a gay demonstration and feels an urge to speak up for the first time and claim her place in the world. Jess climbs up on the stage without knowing what exactly she is going to say, but as she stands there looking at the hundreds of people who are ready to hear what she has to say, Jess starts speaking:

“I’m not a gay man.” My own amplified voice startled me. “I’m butch, a he-she. . . . I know about getting hurt,” I said. “But I don’t have much experience talking about it. And I know about fighting back, but I mostly know how to do it alone. That’s a tough way to fight, cause I’m usually outnumbered and I usually lose. . . . I watch protests and rallies from across the street. And a part of me feels so connected to you all, but I don’t know if I’m welcome to join. There’s lot of us who are on the outside and we don’t want to be. We’re getting busted and beaten up. We’re dying out here. We need you – but you need us too. I don’t know what it would take to change the world. But couldn’t we get together and try to figure it out? Couldn’t the *we* be bigger? Isn’t there a way we could help fight each other’s battles so that we’re not always alone?” (296)

Jess is no longer confused and frustrated by being different. She understands now that it is not her there is something wrong with. It is the place and time she lives in that fails to accommodate the diversity of the humankind. “I felt my whole life coming full circle. Growing up so different, coming out as a butch, passing as a man, and then back to the same question that had shaped my life: woman or man?” (301).

CHAPTER 3

It Isn't Really Funny: Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*

The present chapter will explore the circumstances and consequences of political, racial, sexual and gender boundary crossing in Sri Lankan context deployed in Shyam Selvadurai's novel *Funny Boy*. I will argue that similarly to Claire Kendry and Jess Goldberg, Arjie, the protagonist of Shyam Selvadurai's novel, is a "queering subject" and I will look at the ways his "queering subjectivity" is manifested throughout the novel and the impact it has on the established patriarchal status quo.

The novel is structured as a collection of six independent stories in chronological order, tied together through the Tamil narrator Arjie. Set in the late 1970s, the reader follows Arjie's growth from childhood to adolescence amidst the ethno-cultural tensions between the Tamil and Sinhala groups of Sri Lanka, which led up to the eruption of the July 1983 riots and his family's subsequent decision to flee the country and emigrate to Canada. In her essay "Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora," Gyatri Gopinath, observes that "this experience of migration forms the ground on which the narrative unfolds" (165). The mode of remembrance is set early on in the novel when Arjie recollects: "Those spent-the-days, the remembered innocence of childhood, are now coloured in the hues of the twilight sky. It is a picture made even more sentimental by the loss of all that was associated with them. By all of us having to leave Sri Lanka years later because of communal violence and forge a new home for ourselves in Canada" (5). Such a framing of the story gives a clear signal that even though the young Arjie is the focalizer (it is through his perception of the world the story is mediated to the reader), the actual narrator is the adult Arjie

living in exile in Canada. I would argue that choosing a child's perspective to convey a story set in a landscape of sharp-edged ethnic/racial, gender, sexual and spatial boundaries is a strategy that enables to avoid entrapment in the complexity of Sri Lanka's political situation. Arjie's innocent perspective of a child observer and his position as a "queering subject" represent a valuable standpoint from which to question and challenge the patriarchal status quo.

Arjie's experience of forced migration mirrors that of the author himself. Selvadurai, who is of mixed Tamil and Sinhala background fled with his family to Canada after the 1983 Colombo riots. It seems reasonable to argue that this experience provided the personal and historical background for the novel. At the same time, it is important to remember that Selvadurai is writing in English and from exile. Minoly Salgado discusses in her essay "Writing Sri Lanka, Reading Resistance: Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* and A. Sivanandan's *When Memory Dies*" the precarious position of the diasporic writer: "Their residence in metropolitan centers and access to Western publishers gives them an international readership and the potential for publicity that is the envy of their counterparts in Sri Lanka but, simultaneously, places upon them a burden of representation which some of them may not wish to have" (6). While spatial and temporal distance from their native country may provide a certain degree of freedom of creation, their work remains embedded in the complex web of ethnic and cultural realities of Sri Lanka. Consequently, the author does not stand free of the difficulties associated with setting his novel in context of an ongoing and presently escalating ethnic conflict. Selvadurai portrays the ethnic conflict entirely from the point of view of the Tamils as seen through the eyes of a child growing into an adolescent. He had been accused of "reinforcing the prevailing tendency to read Sri Lankan political violence through a historically-transcendent, binary logic of Sinhalese-Tamil discord" (Salgado 12). I would argue that he in fact manages to transcend the issue of "burden of

representation” of the complexity of the ethnic conflict by focusing on maintaining the constructed character of ethnic identity and the irrationality of violence as such.

The consequences of the construction of the Sinhala and Tamil ethnicities as binary opposition where one group is empowered while the other is gradually marginalized are an important theme in Selvadurai’s novel. However, before setting about discussing the issue of racial/ethnic boundaries presented in the novel, a terminology clarification is in order. While many scholars reject the term “race” as inaccurately affirming the non-existent biological basis of “races,” others stick to the term but use it sociologically. Accordingly, in the following discussion I treat the term “race” as interchangeable with the term “ethnicity,” in agreement with Ana Maria Alonso’s argument that both somatic indexes of status distinctions such as skin color, hair quality, shape of features, or height privileged by “race” and style-of-life indexes of status distinctions such as dress, language, religion, food, music or occupation privileged by “ethnicity” are used simultaneously as signifiers of hierarchized categorical identities. Thus there is no sharp distinction between these two (391).

Formerly a British colony, Ceylon became independent in 1947 and free elections were held the same year. This however led to little change and the government continued to rule with the interest of the English-educated, Westernized elite groups in mind, rather than those of the Sinhala- and Tamil- educated masses. In the 1956 elections a new Sri Lanka Freedom Party was elected to office. This time it was the Sinhala Buddhist majority whose interests were promoted by the government and it voted to make Sinhalese the official language of the country. This and the assassination of the Prime minister in 1959 led to a wave of unrest in which a number of people were killed. This moment of Sri Lankan history is also reproduced in the novel. Arjie’s Tamil great-grandfather was killed in the riots of the 1950s and in this way the Tamil-Sinhala conflict is personalized through one generation of Arjie’s family. This leads to an

intergenerational conflict in which Arjie's grandmother, who witnessed the moment when her father was brought home massacred from the riots, is still caught up in the prejudice dividing the Tamils from the Sinhala. To her, a Sinhalese surname is enough to assure her of the person's poor character and dishonest intentions.

Her children and grandchildren on the other hand, yet unaffected by the direct experience of violence, seem not to ascribe too great importance to the ethnic boundary. It is only when Arjie's aunt Radha befriends a Sinhalese man Anil and Arjie is a witness to a bitter argument between his grandmother and Radha Aunty, that he becomes aware of the existing division line and tensions existing between Tamil and Sinhala. It is, however, not easy for him to understand why this is so. "I wondered why Anil's being Sinhalese upset her so? I was in a Sinhala class at school and my friends were Sinhalese. My parents' best friends were, too. Even our servant was Sinhalese, and, in fact, we spoke with her only in Sinhalese. So what did it matter whether Anil was Sinhalese or not?" (59). The difficulty in comprehending ethnic intolerance is a mark of Arjie's childhood innocence, "something that will inevitably have to be shed as he grows into adulthood, and develops an awareness of political contingency and the inflexibility of social perspectives" (Salgado 9).

Even though Radha Aunty has agreed to marry a Tamil boy from a good family, the opposition of her family to her friendship with Anil makes her see him differently. In the end, she develops warm feelings for him and they decide to get married, despite their families' disapproval. A threat of racial boundary transgression and miscegenation provokes Radha's family into action. Radha is sent to relatives in Jaffna with no possibility of contacting Anil. On her way back, her train is attacked by Sinhalese agitators and even though she is lucky and gets away, she is injured. This experience of violence and the persistent opposition of her family makes her understand the impossibility of a union across the ethnic boundary in an atmosphere of

aggression and hatred and consequently Radha takes back her promise to Anil. Radha Aunty's experience marks the beginning of Arjie's awareness of the existing tension between the two ethnic groups. "From then on I began to listen carefully to the conversation of the adults to discover more about the quarrels between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. What I learned made me very uneasy, because I realized these problems were not a thing of the past" (61).

The Tamil-Sinhalese ethnic identities are not the only ethnic identities creating a power imbalance in the structure of relationships in the Sri Lankan context. Several stories in the book bear references to the Burghers, who were the white descendants of the Dutch, spoke only English, and were looked up to or down at by the Tamils and Sinhalese at different times in Sri Lankan history. As the story unravels, the reader learns that Arjie's mother was in love with a Sri Lankan Burgher, Daryl Uncle, but their love remained unfulfilled because of their different ethnic identities. Daryl explains this problem to Arjie: "Some Sri Lankan people thought Burgher people were too white to marry their children and some Burgher people thought Sri Lankan people were too brown to marry theirs" (116). Doris Aunty, a Burgher woman Arjie meets during drama rehearsals, who tries to open Radha Aunty's eyes to what there is to come if she marries someone "not of her own kind," admits that despite the fact it worked out well with her Tamil husband, she wonders what life might be like had she not insisted on her choice. She would not have had to give up her family and she would not probably have been left alone now that her husband has died. Finally, Arjie himself discovers the limitations ethnic identity places on the individual, when he falls in love with a Sinhalese boy named Shehan. "Shehan was Sinhalese and I was not. This awareness did not change my feelings for him, it was simply there, like a thin translucent screen through which I watched him" (302).

Throughout the novel, Selvadurai presents a wide range of love affairs established across the ethnic, racial and cultural boundaries; Burgher-Tamil, Tamil-English, Tamil- Sinhala. With

one exception all the relationships fail “as a result of the collective investment in maintaining ethnic difference” (Salgado 8). The trespassing, queering subject experiences animosity not only in the society in general, but also in the family whose task remains to discipline the disobedient subject. The story of Radha Aunty and Anil is illustrative of the ways the ethnic boundary is maintained in the private sphere. Family takes on the role of the patriarchal oppressor and threatens to excommunicate members who are not willing to follow the rule of keeping to one’s own race.

While historical, linguistic and religious cleavages between the Sinhala majority and the Tamil minority together with the racial aspect of the tensions all complicate any attempts to create national unity and identity and problematize the relationship between the two groups, Selvadurai shows that the relationship between one’s ethnic identity and political affinity is not always predictable. In other words, not all Tamils support the separatist tendencies of the Tamil Tigers and not all Sinhalese agree with the government’s differential treatment of the Tamil minority. In the novel, Arjie’s mother is at first strongly opposed to the Tamil separatist efforts. She believes in the new government and is sure that things in Sri Lanka are getting better. “Amma, even though she was a Tamil, thought the Tigers were wrong, that they were nothing but terrorists and that they were giving other Tamils a bad name” (110). Amma has several heated discussions with Daryl Uncle, who realizes that things are getting worse for the Tamils in Sri Lanka. He comes to write an article for an Australian newspaper he works for, hoping to uncover and document the atrocities committed by the government against the Tamils. It is only after Daryl is killed during his investigations in Jaffna that Amma is pressed into facing the harsh reality that the government, in cooperation with the press, is deliberately withholding information from the public. “How could I have thought this government was any better than the last?” asks Amma in despair, having realized that she has nowhere to turn to for help in finding out what

actually happened with Daryl. “Where does one turn when the police and the government are the offenders?” (138).

It is at a moment when violence is personalized to her through the murder of Daryl Uncle, that Amma radicalizes her political affinity and changes her view of the Tamil Tigers.

“Maybe these Tigers and their separate state are not such a stupid idea after all” (190).

Interestingly, even though Amma had been aware of the ongoing tension and violence, she chose to look away from it and pursue the bliss and security of the middle-class life style. I see this as an example of a situation where the existing social boundaries intersect and allegiances are formed along some lines, while animosity is maintained along other lines. In this case, class affinity is stronger than ethnic affinity, but that changes with the escalation of violence. In other words, in time of peace, the ethnic boundary is of lesser importance than for example class boundary. Arjie’s parents find it unproblematic to have Sinhalese friends and society in general seems to be unalarmed by social exchange across the ethnic boundary. This however changes immediately with the onset of violence, when ethnicity turns into the most prominent social boundary determining social interaction in all spheres and on all level of both public and private life.

Appa chooses to completely ignore the escalating situation and the animosity growing between the two ethnic groups. His attitude stands in sharp contrast to that of Jegan, a son of his recently deceased childhood friend. After some hesitation Appa decides to help Jegan, gives him a job and invites him to live with the family. Early on in the story the reader learns that Jegan was involved in the Gandhiyam movement “an organization to assist Tamil refugees who were affected by the 1977 or ’81 riots” (160) and admits that many people in the movement are sympathetic with the Tigers. Proud and unwilling to live “under constant threat from the Sinhalese, always second class citizen” (176), Jegan’s rebelliousness contrasts with Appa’s faith

that “as a Tamil you have to learn how to play the game. Play it right and you can do very well for yourself” (173). Jegan and Appa both represent different ways of dealing with systematic oppression. Appa believes in invisibility as a remedy for the disadvantaged position of the members of a minority group. “The trick is not to make yourself conspicuous. Go around quietly, make your money, and don’t step on anybody’s toes” (173). For Jegan, visibility is the only solution. You need to shout, be heard and make the rest of the world aware of the conditions you live in.

Even though the question of ethnic identity and problems created by sharp ethnic boundaries are important themes in Selvadurai’s story, *Funny Boy* is also a coming out novel, a gay-rite-of passage tale in which the reader witnesses Arjie’s coming to terms with his awakening sexuality and attraction to boys and his gradual understanding that love on its own is not enough if you love the “wrong” kind of person. Selvadurai uses the destabilizing effect of Arjie’s “queering subjectivity” to expose the homophobia of patriarchal Sri Lankan society and the rigidity of gender roles which leave little space for individual choices. He uncovers the mechanisms at work in the imposition and maintenance of gender boundaries in both the public and private spheres and focuses on the role of family and school as a site of patriarchal authority and power.

The fixity of gender boundaries is in the novel materialized through spatial configurations. Arjie, his siblings and all his cousins are dropped off every Sunday at their grandparents’ house, where they spend the whole day playing. During this play the space and activities one can join are dependent on one’s gender. If one is male, one joins the boys playing cricket in the front yard. “The front garden, the road, and the field that lay in front of the house belonged to the boys” (3). As a girl, one is confined to the territory of the back garden and kitchen porch. However, Arjie prefers the girls’ “sphere,” as he admits “the pleasure the boys had

standing for hours on a cricket field under the sweltering sun, watching the batsmen run from crease to crease was incomprehensible to me” (3). Arjie enjoys a privileged position of a leader among the girls, which was given to him “because of the force of my imagination” (3).

Selvadurai gives a detailed account of one of Arjie’s transitions during a game of bride-ride:

The dressing of the bride would now begin, and then, by the transfiguration I saw taking place in Janaki’s cracked full-length mirror – by the sari being wrapped around my body, the veil being pinned to my head, the rouge put on my cheeks, lipstick on my lips, kohl around my eyes – I was able to leave the constraints of myself and ascend into another, more brilliant, more beautiful self.” (4)

The above description of Arjie’s transformation becomes especially interesting when read in the light of Judith Butler’s notion of gender as drag. Butler points out the fact that drag “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*” (Gender Trouble, 175). With the help of clothes and make-up, Arjie becomes an icon, “a graceful, benevolent, perfect being upon whom the adoring eyes of the world rested” (5).

Arjie and his female cousins truly enjoy their fantasy play, free of notions of gender appropriateness, until the arrival of a new cousin who refuses to go along with the blurring of the gender lines and insists that boys cannot play like girls because they cannot be girls. She is envious of Arjie’s exclusive position in the game of bride-ride and calls him a pansy, faggot and sissy. Even though Arjie understands that those words must be insults, he is not aware of the consequences of such labeling. His “queering subjectivity” is unproblematic until it is recognized and confirmed as an anomaly by the words of his uncle: “Ey Chelva, looks like you have a funny one here” (14). The words addressed to Arjie’s father are not a mere statement, they are an appeal for corrective action. Appa refuses to look at Arjie and later blames Amma for being responsible

for the lack of their son's masculinity. "If he turns out funny like that Rankotwera boy, if he turns out to be the laughing-stock of Colombo, it will be your fault. . . You always spoil him and encourage all his nonsense" (14).

In her essay "Queer Laughter: Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* and the Normative as Comic," Mita Banerjee discusses the role of laughter in the interplay between the "queering subject" and his/her audience:

Queerness is understood as an epithet of derision wielded by a heteronormative mainstream distancing itself from the spectacle of Otherness/sexual difference by the very act of laughter; and as the subversive appropriation of the term by the gay community itself. It is in this latter sense that the spectacle returns both the question and the laughter accompanying it to the sender. (149)

It is the normative gaze of Arjie's family which transforms him from a cinema goddess into a laughing-stock, "yet at this point in the narrative Arjie is still unable to turn tables and turn the audience itself into the spectacle of weirdness: a jettisoning of normative signification in which the audience is looked – and laughed – at in the very act of gazing at difference" (Banerjee 154).

Arjie's family views his engagement in the game of bride-ride as a threat to his masculinity. This conception of one's masculinity as endangered by improper influences is based on the presumption of single and unitary "proper masculinity," which is a "natural" manifestation of biological predispositions. However, as the concept of masculinity (as well as of femininity) is continuously subject to reinterpretation in relation to historical and cultural contexts, it would be misleading and restrictive to accept this essentialist view. In other words, there is not just one universal masculinity common to all men, but rather diverse masculinities, defined as "behaviors, languages, and practices, which are commonly associated with male and thus culturally defined as not feminine" (Whitehead and Barrett 15-16). For the purpose of further discussion of masculinity in the context of the novel, I find very useful Arthur Brittan's concept of

masculinism. In his essay “Masculinities and Masculinism,” Brittan makes a distinction between masculinity which “refers to those aspects of men’s behavior that fluctuate over time” and masculinism:

Masculinism is the ideology that justifies and naturalizes male domination. As such, it is the ideology of patriarchy. Masculinism takes it for granted that there is a fundamental difference between men and women, it assumes that heterosexuality is normal, it accepts without question the sexual division of labor, and it sanctions the political and dominant role of men in the public and private spheres. (53)

Society’s adherence to masculinism provides for a “masculine norm,” which is defined by the rejection of femininity and homosexuality (Gutterman 61). In his novel, Selvadurai exposes and challenges the prevalence of masculinist ideology in Sri Lankan society through the queering subject Arjie.

Arjie’s queer performance challenges not only the “masculine norm,” but due to the close association of gender with sexuality also the “heterosexual matrix.” Judith Butler uses the term “to characterize a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality” (Gender Trouble, 194 n. 6). Arjie’s performance of gender-queering signals to the adults in the room the possibility of an even more serious “offence” – homosexuality.

Interestingly, Arjie’s female cousin Meena is also trespassing the gender boundary, yet nobody seems to be bothered. Meena is in fact a leader of one of the fractions in the boy territory. One may wonder why nobody ever seems alarmed when a girl acts more like a boy, why it is acceptable to be a tomboy, while there is no positive image or role for a boy in the reversed situation. While this is undoubtedly tied to age, being a tomboy is generally unproblematic only

for prepubescent girls, I would also suggest that this reflects the power imbalance between the sexes in a patriarchal society and the unequal value ascribed to the genders. By subverting the masculine and heterosexual norm one shakes the core of the patriarchal system.

After the incident when Arjie's queerness is exposed, he is banned from all female territories. What hurts him most profoundly is being denied access to his mother's bedroom, which means that he can no longer be present at his mother's dressing ritual. Every time Amma was dressing up to go out, she would let Arjie sneak into her room. "Entering that room was, for me, a greater boon than that granted by any god to a mortal" (15). Being excluded from female territory, the world of free fantasy, saris, make up and dresses and failing to fit into the world of cricket games and boy fights, leaves Arjie feeling homeless and lonely. "I would be caught between the boys' and the girls' worlds, not belonging or wanted in either" (39).

Appa decides that Arjie's "funny" tendencies need to be "corrected" and that family supervision on its own is insufficient for this task. If Arjie is to become a man, he needs to be educated in an institution which subscribes to the appropriate form of manhood and masculinity. The spatial separation of the male and female world is accompanied by the necessary ideology, which gives clear definitions of gender roles and creates an idealized version of manhood and womanhood that individuals are expected to aspire to. Arjie is transferred from St. Gabriel to the Queen Victoria Academy. "The Academy will force you to become a man" (210), says Appa, explaining his reasons for arranging the transfer.

The first thing Arjie notices upon entering the compound of Queen Victoria Academy is the brutality of the games played by the older boys. His brother Diggy explains the rules governing relationships at Victoria Academy. "Once you come to the Queen Victoria Academy you are a man. Either you take it like a man or other boys will look down on you" (211). The ethnic boundary is also present to a greater extent than at his previous school. When Arjie wants

to enter his class he is stopped by a boy demanding to know his name. Learning that Arjie is Tamil, he refuses to let him in, claiming that this class is only for Sinhalese. Arjie is confused, because he in fact does not even speak Tamil. The politics of the ethnic conflict is also personalized through the leadership of the school. Black Tie, the headmaster, believes that the school should stay open to all races and religions, while Mr. Lokubandara represents the government's pro-Sinhalese politics and would like to turn Victoria Academy into a Buddhist school. This would in reality mean that the school would no longer be open to Tamils, as they are primarily Hindu. Despite Black Tie's Tamil-friendly attitude, Arjie has no sympathy for the headmaster, because he despises his policy of discipline maintained through intimidation and physical punishment.

In attempt to secure his position of power, Black Tie decides to arrange for one student to recite two favorite poems of a minister who is to attend a recital arranged by the school. Arjie is given the honor of performing this task. He works hard on learning the poems, but when he is taken to Black Tie's office to perform them, the sight of a cane on the table and the thought of an awaiting painful punishment freeze his mind and he is unable to remember a single word. The humiliation and pain he is exposed to as a subject in subordinate position inspire him to strike back. Arjie decides to deliberately mix up the poems and expose Black Tie to a public ridicule. "Instead of trying to get out of reciting the poems, I would do them. But I would do them wrong. Confuse them, jumble the lines, take entire stanzas from one poem and place them in the other until the poems were rendered senseless (277).

The school recital is the moment for Arjie's queer revenge. He finally "appropriates the laughter, which has hitherto been perpetrated at his own expense" (156). Through manipulating the lines of the poems, he manipulates the audience into laughing. In this case, however, the audience will not laugh only at his recital but also at Black Tie's speech based on this recital.

“The very man who polices and severely punishes the licking of lips is turned into the laughing stock of the entire school by a queer subject” (Banjeree 156-57).

It is at Victoria Academy that Arjie meets Shehan, who guides him into the world of homoerotic love. Ever since being publicly humiliated in front of the whole family while playing bride-ride, Arjie had been confused about his identity. He had not been quite sure what adults meant by calling him funny. “The word ‘funny’ as I understood it meant either humorous or strange, as in the expression, ‘that’s funny’. Neither of these fitted the sense in which my father had used the word, for there had been a hint of disgust in his tone” (17). In his early teenage years, Arjie becomes gradually more and more aware of his admiration for men and male bodies. Upon his meeting with Jegan, he is struck by the strength of his body. “Now I admired how well built he was, the way his thighs pressed against his trousers” (160-61). Arjie, himself still rather unconcerned with the recent development of his appreciation of male bodies, becomes devoted to Jegan after he defends him against Appa’s allusions to Arjie’s possible homosexuality. “For as long as I could remember, my father had alluded to this ‘tendency’ in me without ever giving it a name. Jegan was the first one ever to defend me and for this I grew even more devoted to him” (166). However it is only after Arjie is transferred to the Victoria Academy and meets Shehan that he becomes fully aware of the reasons for his father’s concerns and learns about the consequences of loving the “wrong” kind of person.

Arjie is fascinated by Shehan and disregards any warnings from Diggy to stay away from Shehan, since he “could easily lead you down the wrong path” (256). On the contrary, Arjie realizes that “the difference within me that I sometimes had felt I had, that had brought me so much confusion, whatever this difference, it was shared by Shehan” (256). With this bond between them, their friendship becomes a fact despite Appa’s and Diggy’s disapproval. When Arjie’s and Shehan’s friendship develops into an erotic one, Arjie suffers from sudden throws of

guilt towards his family. "I looked around at my family and saw I had committed a terrible crime against them, against the trust and love they had given me" (262). He suddenly becomes painfully aware of his position as "the other." "Now I understood my father's concern, why there had been such worry in his voice whenever he talked about me. He had been right to try to protect me from what he feared was inside me, but he had failed. What I had done in the garage had moved me beyond his hand" (262). Arjie starts to question the order of things, realizing that "right and wrong, fair and unfair had nothing to do with how things really were. . . . For how could loving Shehan be bad?" (273-74). At this point he has yet to find answers as to whether his "otherness" is forever going to confine him to invisibility, marginality and powerlessness, but he is well aware of the unequal distribution of advantages to those subscribing to the heterosexual norm at the expense of those who choose to live their lives otherwise. "If you were powerful like Black Tie or my father you got to decide what was right or wrong. If you were like Shehan or me you had no choice but to follow what they said" (274).

Black Tie and Arjie's father are representatives of traditional heteronormative masculinity formed by the patriarchal assumption of male supremacy. Both Black Tie and Appa talk to Arjie from the position of power and authority and do not hesitate to punish him on every occasion he does not live up to the expectations set up for him as a male. In his novel, Selvadurai however addresses other forms of masculinities which queer the linearity of the male-masculine domination-hetero thinking. Arjie and Shehan are the most obvious examples; their queer subjectivities subvert the notion of the empowered male, as they both experience oppression by males at the hands of patriarchy through the constructed norms of masculinity. Jegan shows a friendly interest in Arjie, not sharing his father's homophobic worries about Arjie's funny tendencies. Daryl Uncle seems equally uninterested in reinstating heterosexual masculinity in Arjie on occasions when it would have been deemed necessary by Appa. One day Daryl Uncle

approaches Arjie, who is reading a book called *Little Women*. Arjie was told by his father that this was “a book for girls, a book that boys shouldn’t be reading, especially a boy of twelve” (104). Arjie is then surprised to hear that *Little Women* used to be Daryl Uncle’s favorite book. The deployment of alternative masculinities challenges the dominant position of patriarchal heteronormative masculinity in that it exposes its insufficiency to contain existing diversity.

Finally, it remains to explore to what degree Selvadurai opens up for, or even suggests the possibility of reform in a nation in dissolution through alliances among marginalized groups created across the race, gender and sexuality boundaries. In his reading of the novel, R. Raj Rao suggests that “subaltern identification exists between minorities in the three groups, who constitute the ‘other’ of the male fanatical self” (117). Rao analyzes for example the friendship of Arjie and Radha Aunty in terms of alliance between marginalized homosexuality and female gender. Rao suggests that when Arjie refuses to watch Radha Aunty’s wedding ceremony, it is due to his identification with Radha as the marginalized subject. “I couldn’t bear to watch the ceremony. I turned away” (99). In other words, seeing that Radha in the end had to give in to the social pressure and marry the man her family had chosen for her, Arjie realizes that he, too, will never be able to live according to his personal choices. I find this interpretation problematic since at the point of Radha’s wedding, Arjie is not yet aware of his queer nature.

The idea of subaltern alliances proves to be problematic also on other occasions. Appa’s order that Arjie should be banned from all female spaces and encouraged to play with boys and like a boy is adhered to without any discussion. Even though Amma witnesses Arjie’s pain caused by his separation from the feminine, she takes no action. She chooses not to challenge the status quo, even though she admits that it does not necessarily make sense. “Why can’t I play with the girls?” – “You’re a big boy now. And big boys must play with other boys. – That’s

stupid. – It doesn't matter, she said. Life is full of stupid things and sometimes we just have to do them" (20).

The position of marginality does not automatically create a bond of alliance across the race, sexuality and gender boundaries. Furthermore, the novel shows the fragile nature of possible alliances within the categories themselves. The marginalized position of women in Sri Lankan society does not necessarily result in female loyalty. Radha's relationship to Anil is exposed, monitored and brought to an end through the cooperation of women in the family, who rather than listening to Radha's wishes follow the social demand for maintaining family relations within the individual racial boundaries.

I have argued that Arjie's queer subjectivity and empowerment attack the core of the normative heterosexual middle-class system and demystify the patriarchal notion of masculinity and that his perspective of a child, unburdened by perception of other ethnic groups as "the other," reveals how ethnic difference is maintained and imposed within both the private and public sphere. Furthermore, I have focused on moments of queer revenge, when the "queering subject" through subversive appropriation of the normative mocking gaze experiences a situation of empowerment. Finally, I have argued that even though *Selvadurai* exposes and challenges the patriarchal status quo, by choosing exile as the final solution he confirms the impossibility of any reform in the present Sri Lankan context.

CONCLUSION

I started this thesis by introducing the concept of the queering subject, which I have defined as a protagonist who through boundary transgressions and the destabilizing character of her/his subjectivity challenges the fixity and finality of the socially constructed categories of race, gender and sexual desire and exposes the personal costs of (not) succumbing to social pressure and (not) compromising one's individual identity to one's identity as a member of a group. Through the subsequent discussion of queering subjects in three different novels, I aimed to explore the various circumstances and consequences of social transgression and its potential as a subversive strategy enabling rethinking of identity, identity categories and identity politics. Inspired by Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble*, I have argued that the concept of identity based on gender, race or sexuality is a flawed one, as it sets up common standards and expectations to individual members of an identity group and often ignores or downplays existing diversity and renders that which is different invisible. Furthermore, the creation of identity groups is inadvertently accompanied by creation of rules, which define who can be included and who cannot. Such prescriptive norms open up for the creation of ideal versions of an identity group's member and are complicit in justifying hierarchies existing within a particular group.

The theme of the constrictive effect identity categories have on the lives of individuals whose queering subjectivity excludes them from finding a welcoming home within a particular identity category is common to all three novels. As all three protagonists have the need and desire to find *their* place in society, a place where they would feel safe and accepted without being under constant surveillance of the normalizing gaze, the notion of home proves to be a productive way of relating the novels to each other. The protagonists of the novels all experience that at the

home of their origin (both family and their identity home), their difference provokes reactions of animosity and they are pressured into compromising their queering subjectivity. They all choose to leave their family homes in hope that this will partly free them from the pressure of conforming to the socially accepted norm, yet are further challenged by the expectations society has of them as members of particular identity categories. Contextualizing identity categories of race, gender and sexuality in terms of the notion of home opens up for an interesting discussion regarding the direction of the journey the protagonists undergo. As I will show, whether one conceives of the trajectory as leaving home, heading home or returning home changes depending on the identity category in question.

Racial passing, represented in Larsen's novel, is typically conceived of as *leaving home*, the known and familiar, to exploit the material and social advantages of living as a white person. As *Passing* is set in the cultural context of the 1920s New York, when the racial boundary was maintained in all spheres of life, upon deciding to pass into the white society, Clare Kendry has to cut off all connection to the African American world of her childhood, as this could reveal her origin and compromise her in the white society. By her own choice, Clare becomes a woman without past. In contrast to the literary customs of her time, Larsen did not portray her passing heroine as suffering as a result of her decision to pass. Rather, I would suggest, Clare Kendry stands as a true queering subject in that she does not subscribe to the notion of unitary identity and insists on being both black and white at the same time. To Clare, racial identity does not seem to be a question of essence, she feels neither black nor white. Similarly, Martha J. Cutter asserts that "Clare is interested not in a fixed and stable identity; rather she wants one that is most 'having'" (92). Considering the historical and cultural context of the novel, I find Larsen's way of dealing with the passing subject rather postmodern, as she opens for interpreting identity as a strategy enabling the queering subject to move in the world of fixed identities. Furthermore,

Martha J. Cutter discusses how “Larsen’s characterization shows a brilliant nexus between Clare’s racial and class concerns: Clare initially passes from the black to the white race to transcend her class position, but to flaunt this new class position, she must pass back from white racial identity to black one” (92). Clare’s death at the end of the novel has been often interpreted as a punishment for her transgression. However, I would agree with Elaine K. Ginsberg’s interpretation suggesting that “*Passing* leaves its characters and its readers in a destabilized universe in which identities and texts, refuse suffocating closure” (11).

While racial passing is presented as *leaving the home*, the transgender trajectory is conceived of as *heading home*. Jess is dreaming about finding her home, yet her queering subjectivity makes it a difficult task. As identity categories are based on a unitary notion of identity, Jess fails to fit in. In her search for home, she leaves her family and finds herself welcomed to the butch and femme community, where she for the first time experiences a sense of belonging. However, when Jess decides to start a hormonal treatment and surgically modify her body, she is excluded and looked upon as a traitor to the butch identity. Similarly the growing lesbian feminist movement refuses to accept Jess as one of their own, because her gender performance is *too* masculine. Importantly, then, one realizes that even identity categories established to promote the interests of queer individuals fail to accommodate the diversity of queer experience.

I have previously discussed the different conceptions of gender and the transgender subject within the field of transsexual studies and Queer Studies, pointing out that the understanding of gender prevalent within the transsexual framework is that of a “home,” while within the Queer framework, gender is radically anti-narrative and typically understood as a “process of becoming: repetitious, recursive, disordered, and, most importantly, without ending” (Prosser 485). The transsexual and queer frameworks open up for two different readings of Jess.

Within the transgender framework, Jess is a transsexual subject on a journey towards a gender home. Her stone butchness is seen as a compromise between lesbian and FTM identity. In a queer reading “the stone butch becomes a nonsurgical and nonhormonal version of transgender identification and does away with the necessity of sex reassignment surgery for some people” (Halberstam 148). I agree with Judith Halberstam in that the transsexual understanding of stone butchness as a transitory state is limiting and problematic. She argues that within the transsexual understanding “cartography of gender relies on a belief in the two territories of male and female, divided by a flesh border and crossed by surgery and endocrinology” (164). Furthermore, the linearity of the transsexual narrative of gender homecoming is problematic owing to its exclusion of those who (like Jess), for different reasons, never make it all the way to the other side. “Some bodies are never at home, some bodies cannot simply cross from A to B, some bodies recognize and live with the inherent instability of identity” (Halberstam 164).

The end of the novel *Funny Boy* leaves the protagonist Arjie literally homeless. Due to the evolving ethnic violence, Arjie and his family have to flee their home and hide at their neighbors. When they return, they find their house burnt down. Selvadurai shows the destabilizing effects of violence on the individual’s sense of reality. In the heated atmosphere of the riots, the everyday and familiar suddenly seems strange and foreign. Upon fleeing from their house, Arjie notices that “the back of the garden looked menacing, and the trees and bushes seemed strange and unfamiliar. Even the verandah seemed alien” (295). The destruction of the family home symbolizes the change in the social position of Arjie’s family. Within a short period of time, the security of their middle-class life vanished and they now find themselves exposed to systematic violence with no authority to turn to for help. Finally, Apa decides that the only solution is emigration to Canada. Arjie is relieved: “I am glad he said that, because I long to be out of this country. I don’t feel at home in Sri Lanka any longer, will never feel safe again” (304). Curiously

enough, the fact that Arjie is a Tamil is not the only reason why he would never actually feel safe in Sri Lanka. His queering subjectivity makes him attracted to social spaces where he cannot gain a “residence permit.” As the boundary between male and female in Sri Lanka seems to be clearly defined and not negotiable, Arjie’s transgressions within the realms of gender and desire would put him into an exposed and unsafe position.

The sight of the remains of the burnt down house leaves Arjie empty of emotion. “I observed all this with not a trace of remorse, not a touch of sorrow for the loss and destruction around me” (298). I am inclined to view Arjie’s lack of grief over the loss of the familiar as a consequence of a process which has started already before the destruction of the physical home. As Arjie comprehends that his love for Shehan is irreconcilable with the expectations of him held by his family, he realizes that in the future, he cannot rely on their unconditional support. “My eyes came to rest on my parents. As I gazed at Amma, I felt a sudden sadness. What had happened between Shehan and me over the last few days had changed my relationship with her forever. I was no longer a part of my family in the same way. I now inhabited a world they didn’t understand and into which they couldn’t follow me (284-5).

The loss of family home and the subsequent difficulties in finding a safe, welcoming place where one could relax without fearing the consequences of being caught off guard are caused by the queering subjects’ difference from the norm and society’s reluctance to accommodate their difference. While some differences get little or no reaction, other such as racial or sexual difference provoke the most outrageous acts of violence and persecution. I cannot but wonder why this is so. Clare Kendry’s transgression of the racial boundary is by the black community perceived as a betrayal of the race and by the white community as a serious crime. Even though throughout the novel Clare does not encounter any acts of direct violence, she is being judged by Irene as lacking racial pride and denied a full membership in the African

American community. Furthermore, as I have discussed earlier, Clare's death at the end of the novel has often been interpreted in terms of a punishment for her act of trespassing. Jess's gender ambiguity makes her an exposed target of violence, both random and systemic. She is gang raped at school, attacked on the street, raped and abused by the police and denied access to a number of public spaces, such as the public bathroom. Finally, Arjie experiences the violence and insanity of an ethnic conflict when literally overnight, ethnic boundaries gain an unprecedented importance and make existence and relationships across the ethnic boundary impossible. I would like to conclude by pointing out that despite the fact that my discussion of the queering subjects in different historical and cultural contexts has conceived of race, gender and desire as non-essentialist and "unreal" basis of identity and identity categories, the acts of violence faced by the protagonists show that the consequences of thinking based on these discursive, cultural, social and political constructions may be very real to the individual who is under the surveillance of the normalizing gaze.

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