Will I Make a Man Out of You?
Coming-of-Age and Subversions of Masculinity in *America Is in the Heart* and *Stone Butch Blues*

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Though Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* (1946) can both be categorized as coming-of-age narratives, both forego the conventional individualism of the Bildungsroman structure. The beginnings of these novels follow the typical path of the young hero and their journey, and both protagonists are inherently concerned with what it means to come into one's masculinity in the society that surrounds them. The role of masculinity in the European Bildungsroman is central to the protagonist's pursuit of a fully realized self, particularly as the privilege of being a white, male adult offers the freedom to do what one wants without needing to depend on others in order to succeed in the eyes of society. However, when applied not to white, male characters but to protagonists whose *masculinity* is in fact marginalized, the narrative of individual advancement and success built into the Bildungsroman structure simply does not and cannot work. In their respective novels, Jess, a butch lesbian and gender non-conforming person; and Carlos, a Filipino immigrant worker in 1930s America, establish a new form of the masculine coming-of-age story that is characterized by endless cycles of violence and resistance, while emphasizing alliances between marginalized peoples. Jess and Carlos's distance from white, heterosexual masculinity prevents them from pursuing a path of total personal advancement at the expense of others. Instead, the marginalized masculine identities of Feinberg and Bulosan's protagonists reveal a modern form of the Bildungsroman which builds not up to individual success, but to collective liberation.

It is first important to establish the structure and plot points of the typical Bildungsroman, particularly in its application to a male coming-of-age narrative. According to Frow, Hardie and Smith, "the defining elements of the Bildungsroman, conventionally understood, are these: a young man from the provinces seeks his fortune in the city, and undergoes a process of education in the ways of the world such that he eventually becomes reconciled with it" (1905). The narrative of the Bildungsroman involves a pattern of loss or hardship, followed by a journey of self-discovery, followed by the resolution of personal conflicts and self-actualization. This definition is derived from Mikhail Bakhtin's, wherein he further distinguishes between multiple types of Bildungsroman. Notably, in one form, the male protagonist emerges "against the immobile background of the world", which, "existing and stable in this existence, require[s] that the man adapt to it" (Bakhtin 23). On the other hand, in a different sort of Bildungsroman, the man "emerges *along with the world* and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself" (23). In the latter case, the man changes with and upon the turn of an epoch. This form is the closest version of the bildungsroman that the reader may apply to *America Is in the Heart* and *Stone Butch Blues*—closest, but not yet exact. One notable difference is that in these novels, the protagonists actively

work to change the world as they move and grow through it, meeting with significant and continuous resistance.

Jess's story, for instance, does not end when she finds her place within the lesbian community, nor when she begins to successfully pass as a man. In fact, the protagonist instead moves away from rigid and exclusive masculinity as she radically deconstructs the harmful power structures that the gender binary has created in service of future generations, to create "a world worth living in" (328). Similarly, Carlos is unable to truly fit into the community of Filipino-American migrant workers until he dispels the toxic masculinity imposed upon them by the oppressive nature of their lifestyle, thus creating a new future for himself and his people. In Bulosan and Feinberg's works, the characters must not become reconciled with the world at the expense of their identities; instead, the world must become reconciled with them, and it is only through their collective actions that this becomes possible.

Notions of citizenship pervade both novels, with Carlos and Jess both representing a version of American belonging that poses a threat to historical associations of citizenship with racial and gendered hierarchies. Carlos Bulosan's identity as a Filipino immigrant occupies a strange, liminal place in American society from the very beginning. Of course, we must first contend with the problematic notion of the Filipino "immigrant" to the United States. Between 1898 and 1946, the Philippines were officially a United States colony, meaning that Filipinos, though not American, were not completely foreigners either. Prior to 1934, according to Joseph Keith, Filipinos were officially "U.S. nationals" due to their status as "colonial wards" (Keith 33), but after the passing of the Tydings-McDuffie Act, and due to the Philippines' change in status to an American commonwealth, Filipinos retained their forced allegiance to the United States but were "considered as if they were aliens" (Keith 34). Keith, who writes about the immigrant Bildungsroman as applied to *America is in the Heart*, further notes that "the narrator's journey…does not hold out the promise of integration or 'failure,' as in the classic bildungsroman; instead it is ultimately *criminalized*" (Keith 34). To relate this to theories of race, in "My Dungeon Shook" (1962), James Baldwin notes that white Americans "have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men", and that any disturbance of this hierarchy implies "the loss of their identity" (9). Because "the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar", thus "as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations" (9). Though Baldwin writes about race relations between black and white Americans in his work, this notion that an outgroup is *necessary* for the ingroup to function can also be applied to Asian immigration and views toward Filipino-Americans. The integration of Filipinos into American society would imply an equalizing of white Americans and those whom they have colonized, a power dynamic which threatens the absolutism of white superiority. Carlos's transition to fully realized adulthood is therefore constantly pushed back—both too masculine and not enough like a white man, he is unable to achieve the sort of power offered to a white male citizen of the United States.

Carlos's constant movement across the United States, from Seattle to Alaska to California, but always within the same impoverished, violent, and oppressed communities of Filipino men, further emphasizes the way that America prevents him from growing and succeeding in one place. Each migration forces him to start over, and his movement follows a lateral trend in which he is unable to escape a collective fate of police violence and involvement with gambling and prostitution. Ironically, his social immobility is tied to his constant physical mobility, where he must enter and re-enter endless cycles of violence that drive him and other Filipinos "inward, hating everyone and despising all positive urgencies toward freedom" (Bulosan 123). It is only when he is physically unable to move upon his hospitalization that he takes the time to expand his view of the world, build interracial and interclass alliances, and begin writing and organizing. As Keith notes, Carlos traces the narrative of his own growth through his move "from a personal to an impersonal voice—from an individual to a collective experience" (48). Through these actions, he creates his own space for belonging within the immigrant community.

For Jess, the experience of identifying as a butch lesbian and passing as a man, yet feeling neither like a man nor a woman, also places her in a complex spot within her community, which views gender expression as a strict and mutually exclusive binary. Just as the Filipino immigrants in Bulosan's work are both colonial wards and non-citizen aliens, both oversexed and emasculated, Jess's in-between status forces her to operate within a restrictive binary where neither side is truly representative of her identity. A "he-she" who does not fit into this system is at best a "weirdo" according to characters such as Jess's father (15), at worst a "whore" (40), a "bulldagger" (40), or a "pervert" (65) for those who associate the subversion of gender with sexual depravity. However, this transgression of both femininity and masculinity also represents a subversion of existing power structures. To understand the effects of this, we can return to Baldwin's claim that an oppressed group must remain inferior for the oppressor's supremacy to survive, and that any shift in this dynamic becomes frightening to the group in power because it feels "out of the order of nature" (9). In this vein, because of the exclusive nature of gender categories, as well as the inherent hierarchy of masculinity over femininity, Jess's move from a position of supposed feminine submissiveness toward the stereotypical dominance of masculinity is threatening to those who base their ideas of societal order upon a gender-based power imbalance.

Indeed, this power imbalance of heteronormativity pervades even the mind of the protagonist, revealing the way that rhetoric spread by the culture of power does not halt at the border surrounding marginalized communities. For instance, Jess cannot wrap her head around the idea that "two butches" (Feinberg 219), Frankie and Johnny, "could be attracted to each other" because in her mind, one of them must be "the femme in bed" (219). To Jess and those around her, being butch, being masculine, *necessarily* means that one is attracted to femininity. Even more relevant to Jess, however, is the idea that if she takes male hormones, she can no longer be considered a woman or a butch despite not feeling like a man. Heteronormativity and the unfathomable nature of gender non-conformity thus threaten Jess's own life—she recognizes that she "wouldn't have survived much longer without passing" (243), and yet once she does, she feels

"like a nonperson" (188), without a history and with "no valid ID" to illustrate it (188). This returns to the idea of citizenship—Jess is literally unable to identify herself as a citizen because her ID does not match her gender expression. She thus becomes essentially undocumented as she enters the liminal space between gender boundaries, further emphasizing the way that the society she lives in prevents her from becoming "reconciled" with it as in the typical Bildungsroman.

Before deconstructing the harmful ideas of masculinity (and femininity) imposed upon them by the white community, however, Jess and Carlos both begin by succumbing to them. In *America Is in the Heart*, violence becomes one of the essential traits of masculinity for Filipinos in the United States, particularly in response to the police brutality that they must endure. Early in Carlos's life in America, a gambler comments that cops "often shoot Pinoys…without provocation" (131). The normalization of police violence in Filipino communities leads to a culture of violence where "once in a while a Pinoy shoots a detective", and Carlos himself is compelled to assert, "If they beat me, I will kill them" (131). This interaction occurs after two detectives shoot a young Filipino boy, effectively robbing the boy of his potential to grow into a man. Carlos responds to the figurative emasculation of his community by threatening further bloodshed: his and other Filipinos' desire for control as connected to their desire to become men and retain power becomes inextricably tied to violence, mirroring the tools used by white men to maintain superiority. […]

Just as violence is associated with masculine strength in *America Is in the Heart*, it becomes closely tied to butchness in *Stone Butch Blues*, especially within heteronormative relationships and identities. Though not expected to perpetuate violence themselves, butch lesbians are often expected by other members of their community, including femmes, to have endured violence at the hands of men and other figures of authority. Like Carlos, Jess's journey toward masculinity is continuously criminalized: Feinberg begins her novel with a reminder of the legal ramifications of dressing in a way that is not aligned with one's sex assigned at birth: "the law said we had to be wearing three pieces of women's clothing" (3). There exists an assumption that butches, or "he-she[s]" (15), will necessarily face more violence because of their gender expression. Jacqueline notes that "we [femmes] want you to be strong enough to survive the shit you take. We love how strong you are. But butches get the shit kicked out of their hearts too" (36). In Jacqueline's words are an insinuation that butchness is defined, at least in part, by how much abuse they are able to take. […]

To focus particularly on Jess's experience and that of other butch lesbians, the violence that they endure is especially evident in the scenes of police brutality and rape in Feinberg's novel. Like in *America Is in the Heart*, the violence that butch lesbians undergo is designed to emasculate them, to make them aware of the consequences of not looking the way that women are expected to, and to reduce them to nothing but a "pretty girl" (65). Because Jess's identity is so steeped in a form of masculinity that rejects and *excludes* femininity, being taunted as a "pretty girl" both denies her who she is and, to the cops, thrusts her violently into a categorization that men can more easily assert dominance over. Sexual assault further strips masculine-

presenting lesbians of their identities, forcing them into a position of submission and the exact lack of power they fight against. Critic Karen Hammer (2013) states that "when queer…subjects become victims of horrific violence, the oppressor reveals his pervasive anxiety about his own vulnerability and contingency" (163). In other words, rape occurs in these situations as a reaction to the oppressor's fear of otherness, a fear of the "dual sensation of revulsion and attraction" derived from being "unable to easily match a body to a category" (Hammer 163) and thus being unable to determine the victim's positionality in relation to conventional power structures. Sexual assault thus becomes "a common method of preventing such a perceived social unraveling" (Hammer 164). Indeed, when Jess is raped by the police officers, they do so while "exposing [her] breasts" (Feinberg 65) and repeatedly using misogynistic insults to make it clear to *themselves* that despite her masculinity, they are facing a woman. The rape thus makes evident the precarious position of patriarchal masculinity in response to the perceived threat of gender nonconformity.

This scene also mirrors an earlier assault that Jess experiences at the hands of football players Bobby and Jeffrey at her high school, thus associating her first sexual experience with trauma and violence. The football players, representing an idealized, all-American form of masculinity, may be read as younger figures of authority within the arena of the school, paralleling the role of the cops in the society-at-large. One final point Hammer makes is that "by raping Jess, the cops [and by extension, the football players], as representatives of the nation state, insist that she conform to a national ideal of what it means to be a properly feminized, white citizen of the United States" (164). This "national ideal" of womanhood thus depends upon an oppressive masculinity denoted by hyper-dominance and wanton violence. The failed attempts of Jess's rapists to feminize her continue to reflect the way that Jess is unable to conform to the conventions of the Bildungsroman—her butch identity makes it impossible for her to be reconciled with problematic societal ideals. In addition, Jess is not given the privilege of growing up gradually, learning more about the structures of the world as she mature; instead, she is made "old before [her] time" (Feinberg 71) through repeated sexual assault. Her journey to self-actualization thus occurs over a much longer time span than the typical Bildungsroman protagonist, as she must work throughout her entire life toward rejecting the violent, gendered expectations that American society has imposed upon her during her formative years.

Carlos's own masculine growth and sexuality are also tied deeply to questions of citizenship and assimilation, with Bulosan drawing particular attention to the racist rhetoric against interracial relationships and the male-dominated Filipino-American labor class. Wong and Santa Ana (1999) remark that "policies restricting Asian immigration to male laborers have been responsible for many of the stereotypes that distort the gender and sexuality of Asian American men" (178). Because these immigrant groups were prevented from forming nuclear family structures, "disfiguring images of them as sexual predators, 'emasculated Fu Manchus,' 'asexual Charlie Chans,' and moral degenerates" were placed in contrast with the white nuclear family "model for citizenship" (Wong 178). By perpetuating stereotypes that Filipinos are "sex-starved"

(Bulosan 143) and "go crazy when they see a white woman" (143), white Americans further rationalize their treatment of Filipino immigrants through a rhetoric of dehumanization and sexual deviancy. Consequently, while Filipinos become emasculated through the violence that they undergo at the hands of white men, they are also oversexualized and portrayed as dangerous to ensure that white Americans can maintain a hierarchy between themselves and immigrant communities.

However, it is important to note the role that the Filipino community plays in perpetuating those stereotypes in *America Is in the Heart*. When Carlos arrives in America and attends a wedding, the brief pleasure he had once associated with sexual desire in the Philippines morphs into a "sickening" (137) feeling, as he voyeuristically watches his fellow Filipino workers sleep in succession with the same woman. Carlos states that in those moments, "man was indistinguishable from beast" (137), reflecting the dehumanizing rhetoric used by white Americans against Filipinos. However, Carlos notes that "our decadence was imposed by a society alien to our character and inclination, alien to our heritage and history" (137). This demonstrates his awareness of the way that a combination of American consumption culture and immigration law has prevented his community from creating healthy romantic relationships. According to Bulosan, this imposed culture of sexual violence is not the fault of the Filipinos themselves, but a by-product of discriminatory racial and class dynamics in male-dominated immigrant societies, which have little exposure to healthy relationships and little choice in the matter.

Reading *AIH* as a typical masculine Bildungsroman, Carlos's loss of virginity with a Mexican prostitute would mark an important moment in his transition from boyhood to adulthood. However, this loss of virginity is an assault, violent and traumatizing. His sexual pleasure, which he describes as "spring in an unknown land…the gentle fall of rain among palm leaves" quickly becomes connected to the "nameless shame" that he experiences afterward (Bulosan 161). The question the nameless prostitute poses, "Did you like it?" (161), is irrelevant—at this moment, Carlos loses the control he had possessed over his sexuality. This instance is not one that he has chosen for himself, but one that the other men force upon him: they "grabbed" him, "carried [him] toward the wall of sheets", "pinned [him] down on the cot" (161). Carlos himself, objectified and powerless, must submit completely to the "naked Mexican woman waiting to receive [him]" (161). His forced loss of virginity is thus the culmination of a sexual coming-of-age denoted by trauma and obscenity, rather than pleasure and fulfillment. […]

After deciding no longer to take hormones, Jess must move to New York City to find "that home inside [her]self" (244), a state of belonging within her own body. The initial setting of the novel, Buffalo, represents the insularity of the lesbian community and the pervasive masculine and feminine stereotypes that all must abide by. New York, however, gives Jess the opportunity to learn about herself outside of that restrictive context. This portion of the narrative is much in line with the classic Bildungsroman, wherein the big city setting serves to enable the protagonist to meet a wider range of people and figure out who he is in relation to the world around him. Where previously Jess had always been living with femme partners or staying with

butch-femme couples, she now lives on her own, enabling her to create an identity that is based on intrinsic rather than extrinsic factors, separate entirely from romantic relationships. In New York, Jess meets Ruth, a trans woman who is "different like [her]" (270), and who introduces her to a larger community of gender non-conforming identities. Jess's relationship with Ruth, which remains platonic, emphasizes the importance of finding support and protection in the construction of intersectional alliances. Jess notes that Ruth and herself "never left [their] apartment building together" because "two people like [them] in public are more than double the trouble" (278)—they would most likely face violence if going out on their own. However, Jess's speech at the LGBT demonstration at the end of the novel shows her commitment to finding "a way [to] help fight each other's battles so that we're not always alone" (324). It takes Jess years to fully realize the extent to which problematic ideals of gender have prevented her and her community from achieving the goal of societal acceptance, and not just of survival. By creating impassable boundaries between butch lesbians and gender non-conforming people or trans men; by maintaining the exclusivity of the gender binary, the queer community prevents itself from becoming an interdependent, supportive, and inclusive force to combat their collective oppression. Her growing awareness that differences within marginalized groups are to be celebrated and not ostracized permits her to become a voice for her community, and to prioritize a culture of intergenerational support.

Like Jess, Carlos comes to define masculinity through a lens of family and community support, rather than one of exclusivity, sexual attraction and violence. Bulosan's references to his own coming-of-age occur in the context of his relationships with his mother and father in their home village. His mother's name is a "talisman, a charm that lights [him and his brother] to manhood and decency" (125), emphasizing a respect toward women that is reflected in his maternalistic relationships with white women later on. Earlier in the text, when Carlos returns to Mangusmana after attending school, he writes about how he has "come back to manhood…to myself and my roots…back to my soil and to my father's faith" (78). In particular, he connects his journey into adulthood with the way his father would go "from house to house…asking the farmers if they could lend him a piece of land to cultivate or could hire him" (78). Despite the way he pities his father for his decisions, he respects and admires his dedication to supporting his children through school, and his lasting faith in his community. The pain that his father and ancestors had gone through, with his father "limping through Mangusmana on his sore feet" (78) and his great-grandparents having "lacerated their lives digging away the stones and trees to make the forest land of our village a fragrant and livable place" (78) emphasizes the importance that Bulosan sees in sacrificing one's comfort for the sake of future generations. Thus, as Carlos risks his life to organize the migrant worker community, he directly parallels the work of his forefathers in his life in the United States. He announces that "we must not demand from America, because she is still our unfinished dream. Instead we must sacrifice for her: let her grow into bright maturity through our labors" (312).

Like his ancestors making Mangusmana into a home and building a strong foundation for their community, Carlos's journey to manhood culminates with his commitment to making America a better place for and *with* his fellow immigrants. As Bulosan establishes and reinforces his own values, he discovers that manhood is not a stagnant state of satisfaction and passive acceptance, but one of strong reliance upon one's community for continued change, and to enable future generations to thrive. This is directly paralleled in *Stone Butch Blues*: just as butch Al and other lesbians had served as parental, guiding figures to help Jess find her place within the butch community, Jess's involvement in the gay rights movement allows her to give back, to demonstrate a commitment to fighting for "a world worth living in" for future generations (328). Like Carlos, Jess's ability to *be* masculine in her own unique way relies entirely on community support. Neither narrative is one of learning to fit in within oppressive spaces, but of retaining one's unique identity in worlds which must change to accept it.

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