Critical Response II
Diamonds and Rust

David Kurnick

"Stone" in Leslie Feinberg's 1993 novel *Stone Butch Blues* is sometimes a name for a specific sexual disposition, a refusal to be sexually touched.[1] Feinberg's narrator Jess Goldberg, a blue-collar butch growing up in 1950s Buffalo, calls herself stone in part to explain to herself what she does in bed, the way in other sexual economies someone might self-describe as a bottom or a dom. But *stone* also names an emotional and physical habitus in the novel, a toughness highly functional for subjects whose gender nonconformity makes them targets of a violence at once transphobic, misogynist, and homophobic. This *stone* is not information for intimates but armor visible even to the antagonists against whom it is built to defend: in the novel's first use of the word, Jess remembers a terrifying bar raid in which "the cops picked out the most stone butch of them all to destroy" (*S*, p. 8). Both forms of stone develop over time, the result of trauma or training, or training by trauma: "'I don't want to see you after you've hardened up,'" a transfeminine mentor tells a young Jess early in the book, referring to *stone* as a corporeal and affective bearing; "'you're stone already,'" says a lover a bit later, now explicitly designating a sexual closed offness (*S*, p. 35). Both types of stone can feel durable enough to constitute something like an identity—but both are also open to alteration over the temporal arc of a relationship, a job, or a night of the right kind of sex. "'You don't have to get stuck in being stone,'" that same lover assures Jess, as if becoming stone were like sinking into a tar pit, a fate from which one could with effort be extracted, perhaps

1. Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (New York, 2003); hereafter abbreviated *S*.

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for good (*S*, p. 73). Another girlfriend, Jess tells us later, "could always melt my stone"—this time as if under the right conditions stoneness might obey a diurnal rhythm, like a pond that freezes and melts every twelve hours (*S*, p. 124). *Stone* in the novel is, in other words, a strikingly fluid metaphor. *Fluid* is of course also a metaphor. (As is *striking*. As is *metaphor*.)[2]

S. Pearl Brilmyer's essay turns on the metaphors that she argues have undergirded and limited queer theory, and this searching article put me in mind of *Stone Butch Blues* not just for the mineralogical imagination it shares with Feinberg's novel but for its muted but crucial engagement with the question of figuration and literalism (see S. Pearl Brilmyer, "Queer Rigidity: Habit and the Limits of the Performativity Thesis," *Critical Inquiry* 50 [Summer 2024]: 610–39). Brilmyer sometimes appears to be proposing that queer theorists switch up their metaphors—dropping their investment in fluidity as dynamic, resistant, and politically good, and reevaluating the figure of rigidity that she argues has served as a bugbear in queer analysis. But at other moments she implies that we might reconsider our commitment to figure *tout court* and invest in a literalism that would offer not only a more realistic vision of how sexuality is lived but the hope of connecting sexuality more clearly to the stuff and substance of the world.

Stone Butch Blues suggests how difficult that second project will turn out to be—and, I think, how undesirable: the figural nature of Feinberg's titular adjective is after all the source of its emotional power, its intersubjective utility, and its political sensitivity. Even in the truncated survey of the novel's semantic nuances offered above, it's clear that the metaphoricity of *stone*—a metaphoricity avowed and worked by everyone who speaks the term—is what makes it a supple gauge of emotional and historical situations. Note the quasi-geological imagination that allows one character to speak of seeing stone forming (as if she were watching a *National Geographic* program on the earth's cooling four billion years ago) or the science-fiction-tinged apocalypticism that allows another to imagine good sex as hot enough to *melt rocks*. Such imagistic warping is mind-bending when you stop to

2. "*Stone* butch is a strikingly 'rigid' gender identity," remarks Jay Prosser, "yet this rigidity is 'softened' and the stone butch's female sex made livable by her sexual practice" (Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* [New York, 1998], p. 178). The metaphors shift over the course of the novel, as Jess first begins and then abandons transition and moves from Buffalo's butch-femme community to New York City. Once removed from the milieu that makes communal sense of the term, *stone* becomes a more overtly literary (and personal) metaphor.

David Kurnick is professor of English at Rutgers University. He is the author, most recently, of "*The Savage Detectives*" *Reread* (2022).

consider it, but it's important that it is also mundane: equipment for living, a form of self-explanation that sometimes feels right and sometimes feels awful (sometimes characters want to vindicate or eroticize stone, sometimes they want to leave it behind). In its political, emotional, and philosophical multivalence—impossible to say whether stone is a tool one uses or a condition one suffers, a quality of mind or body, let alone whether it is good or bad—the novel couldn't be further from what Brilmyer justly decries as the relentlessly "positivizing" drive of some recent queer theoretical inquiry, in which queerness is reliably the site of agency and good politics (p. 638).

It's not clear, though, that queer theory's sometimes-wearying positivity derives from the metaphorical habits Brilmyer targets, nor whether that positivity would be remedied by a turn to figures of rigidity or to the history of minerology. Feinberg's stone, for example, answers to many of the ambitions Brilmyer has for queer theory in offering a nonredemptive picture of sexual being not as an autonomous domain of liberal self-expression but as the often haphazard "result of [the subject's] encounter . . . with its environment" (p. 636). But the complexity of Feinberg's figure bears an attenuated relation to the properties of literal stone: as we've seen, the novelistic figure is available for imagistic remaking—deliberately unfaithful to how real stone behaves in the real world—and in that respect is very much unlike, say, the crystals that Brilmyer extracts from Félix Ravaisson as a potentially productive counterimage for queer thinking about sexuality. I'll return to Brilmyer's (and Ravaisson's) crystal, but for now I'll acknowledge that in praising the suppleness of Feinberg's metaphor, I could be accused, like the theorists Brilmyer critiques, of privileging fluidity and downplaying the conceptual advantages of rigidity—and it's true that my terms of praise valorize motion and changeability. Brilmyer's essay has clarified for me that I do indeed think that these terms can be theoretical goods as well as, quite often, psychological ones—that a theory of history or of subject formation may have excellent reason to think through images of flux, ductility, or alternation and that, at the more intimate scale of sexual self-conception, many people are invested in sexuality as a domain of vitality or aliveness or at minimum (to choose a set of less value-laden terms) as a zone of atmospheric shift, an area apart from or an interval in whatever is usually happening.

Queer theory has accounted for sexuality's will to changefulness in various lexicons—probably most famously in Leo Bersani's notion of "self-shattering," sometimes critiqued for offering an implausible vision of sex as sublimely intense and philosophically meaningful.[3] Lauren Berlant's likening of sex to "spacing out" is designedly less dramatic, but it shares with Bersani

3. See Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 197–222.

a basic understanding of sex as an interruption in the fabric of the ordinary.[4] When one agrees to have sex, Berlant writes elsewhere, "one is assenting to be overwhelmed or disorganized or aroused from touch that happens in the right way, whatever one means by that."[5] If Bersani and Berlant converge on a vision of sex as that which loosens or undoes something normally experienced as fixed, it's clearly possible also to imagine a subject for whom an inverted version of this metaphorical structure would sometimes feel true, someone for whom disorganization or shatteredness constituted the stuff of daily experience—a backdrop against which sex might then feel like an intensification of self-delineation, an excited accentuation of one's outline, coherence, containedness. The conception of sexuality as changefulness would in that case remain, even if sex itself swapped sides in the resulting opposition. This is emphatically not to say that there is some ethico-political good in movement as over against fixity—but it is to say that the association of sexuality with volatility or change may answer some durable need, worth investigating, in many people's self-conception. For still other subjects or cultures, certainly, the image of sex as movement into another phase or area of existence might not feel appropriate or accurate. But a liberal logic of self-possession and intentional self-expression does not follow necessarily from either conception.

By insisting on the inescapability of metaphor I mean to ask about when and to what argumentative effect we suture figures to our conceptual claims. Brilmyer's defense of habit is illuminating and timely in a moment when, as her essay cannily diagnoses, a covert voluntarism has snuck into many conceptualizations of queer sexuality. But need habit be imaged as rigidity? The couch potato might figure his routine to himself as a comfy squishiness, a languid and loose surrender to the flow of the habitual—just as someone else (a high school principal, say, or a different variety of couch potato) might not understand their habitual behavior along a hard-soft axis at all but instead as a form of fidelity to a god or spouse or moral code or circle of colleagues. My point is just the obvious one that *rigidity* is a powerfully metaphorical, and far from inevitable, term under which to conduct an analysis of habit.

In Brilmyer's essay, habit as rigidity is tightly connected to the crystal that appears in a sentence of Ravaisson's *Of Habit* (1838). The passage is worth

4. Lauren Berlant, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)," *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Summer 2007): 780. The essay concludes by claiming that "the overwhelming present . . . is expressed in regimes of exhausted practical sovereignty, lateral agency, and, sometimes, counter-absorption in episodic refreshment, for example, in sex, or spacing out, or food that is not for thought" (p. 780).

5. Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (Durham, N.C., 2022), p. 39.

revisiting, if only because doing so shows how creatively figural Brilmyer's own writing is, the extent to which she is engaged in an act of theoretical poesis. *Of Habit* mentions crystals in the context of Ravaisson's claim that habits can be "transformed into instincts"—that habit testifies to the "fading of the will and consciousness." He continues:

> The most elementary mode of existence, with the most perfect organization, is like the final moment of habit, realized and substantiated in space in a physical form. . . . All the way down to the confused and multiple life of the zoophyte, down to plants, even down to crystals, it is thus possible to trace, in this light, the last rays of thought and activity as they are dispersed and dissolved without yet being extinguished.[6]

In this analogy between crystal and habit, it seems to me, what matters about the crystal is not its hardness but its inorganic quality, the apparent absence from it of "thought and activity." For Ravaisson, that is, the crystal figures habit as *unconscious process*. Brilmyer, by contrast, sets this crystal in her argumentative structure by emphasizing first its "rigidity" and then the irregularities that allow crystals to be affected by "environmentally contingent, but not entirely disorganized, patterns" (p. 635). This permits Brilmyer's pivot to scientific accounts of real crystals offered by minerology: an excursus that issues in her powerful critique of the voluntaristic implications of some recent queer theory but that doesn't reckon with its own metaphorical investments. The crystal for Brilmyer becomes, if I can put it this way, a figure for literalness.[7]

That Ravaisson, conversely, is more concerned with the metaphorical affordances of crystals is clearest in his writing's figurative play. His sentence makes marked use of crystal's optical qualities in claiming that "in this light" we can "trace . . . the last rays of thought and activity": the glints that make us think we see animation in a crystal's depths, that is, are analogies for the way we can perceive in habit the remnants of intentional action. In thus isolating for our attention a crystal's manner of refracting light, Ravaisson's language recalled to me another nineteenth-century French discussion of crystallization, this one explicitly concerned with the workings of desire. Stendhal's *On Love* (1822) made "crystallization" famous as a figure for erotic idealization.

6. Félix Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, trans. Clare Carlisle and Mark Sinclair (New York, 2008), p. 67.

7. Brilmyer's valuation of the literal is most visible in her contrast of Judith Butler, for whom "'congealment' is a metaphor" for the process of gender formation, to William James, whom Brilmyer commends for arguing that "a person's character *literally* congeals as the matter of the body loses plasticity with age" (p. 612).

Stendhal takes the concept from what he presents as a Salzburg courtship tradition of placing a dead branch into the salt mines: retrieved several months later, the ordinary bough—now "covered in sparkling crystals . . . an infinity of diamonds"—has become a dazzling love token. "What I am calling crystallization," Stendhal clarifies, "is the working of the mind, as it draws out from all around it new discoveries of the loved object's perfection."[8] Crystallization here is avowedly a metaphor for perceptual, cognitive, and emotional processes, one that proves over the course of *On Love* remarkably volatile, as Stendhal's various fictional personae consider whether first or second crystallizations are more powerful, disagree over how gender inflects the formation of crystals, and insert the concept into anecdotes to test how it illuminates specific stories, or fails to.

Stendhal's crystallization, in other words, is as figurally stretchy as Feinberg's tonally divergent treatment of stone. This may account for the fact that both writers' works seem better suited to the imagination of sexual being than the gorgeous plate from a German 1849 science encyclopedia reproduced in Brilmyer's essay (see p. 635). As a heuristic for thinking sexuality, this image left me mildly dispirited, probably because it seemed to offer little conceptual purchase for the fantasies and projections and phenomenological turbulence (not, to repeat, the agential self-expressiveness) endemic to human sexuality. This is not to claim the absolute priority of the literary over the scientific in the study of sexuality, but it is to say that the relative prominence of literary theorists in the early years of what became known as queer theory might have to do with those writers' alertness to sexuality's special relation both to the literal and to its phantasmatic transfiguration.

To the extent that Brilmyer's argument is conducted through a series of metaphors (of habit as rigidity, of rigidity as crystalline) that she inhabits, extends, and imaginatively distorts, I am tempted to say that she is despite herself of the devil's party, a partisan of conceptual motion even as her argument explicitly takes up arms against the trope of fluidity. While I wished for a more determined consideration of sexuality's inevitable metaphoricity in her essay, the figures she does use are turned to the important purpose of questioning the pious promotion of queerness to an ethico-political standard. Theresa de Lauretis, in one of the essays Brilmyer rightly offers for our renewed attention, disparaged the very idea of "queer theory" in 1993 (as Brilmyer notes, shortly after she had coined the term) (quoted on p. 638). But de Lauretis did so less because that body of speculative work had deprecated habit than because, as she put it, queer theory had become—thirty

8. Stendhal, *On Love*, trans. Sophie Lewis (London, 2009), p. 6.

years ago!—"a conceptually vacuous creature of the publishing industry."[9] The most far-reaching implication of Brilmyer's essay lies for me in its closing hint that queer theory might be hampered not by the wrong metaphors but by the felt need to adjudicate what is *really queer*. What if the study of sexuality abandoned that essentially scholastic exercise?

9. Theresa de Lauretis, "Habit Changes," *differences* 6, nos. 2–3 (1994): 297. Brilmyer usefully stresses the emphasis on negativity in de Lauretis's important essay. But de Lauretis's argument is equally notable in dissenting from Butler's stress on materiality at the expense of "agents or subjects" (p. 302). De Lauretis clarifies: "For the purposes of my study of sexuality, it is not only bodies that matter; the subjects, each of them constructed and constrained through a bodily boundary, must also matter; for me they are indispensable in a theory of sexuality, queer theory, or any other" (p. 303). De Lauretis's interest in environmental constraint, habit, and unconsciousness, that is, does not here lead her beyond the human.