Butch Ability

By Lee Cicuta

Butches hold open doors. Butches arm ourselves and patrol around the local queer bars in order to protect other queer folks from bashers. Butches use power tools, build sheds, haul the heaviest furniture when our friends are moving. Butches step in and beat down predatory men. Butches protect. Butches build. Butches act. Butches serve.

This butch, writing to you now, rests. I endure. Once a butch who defined her butchness in so many terms laden with capacity, ability, productivity, and service: now I have to ask for help with projects I would have considered simple 6 years ago or I cannot do them at all. Nearly every muscle in my body is in agony, and can be further injured easily under relatively minor strain. Activity of any sort—even the mental activity of writing this piece to you now—drains me quickly, and too much can trigger an avalanche of pain that I must spend weeks to months gingerly excavating myself from underneath.

I adored being a butch who could do *so many* things, who could build, protect, and provide an abundance of care and acts of service for others. I remember an ease of choices that I envy now. Being able to so easefully say "Yes" to people, and to, for a time at least, be socially rewarded for doing so. Yes, I'll come over and put your furniture together for you. Yes, I'd be happy to drive you there. Yes, I'll be there. Yes, I'll do that for you. Yes, I can carry that for you easily! It is such a pleasure to participate. Even more of a pleasure to know that your acts of service play a key role in the activities of life. It's beautiful and satisfying to see how the actions of your own body, your own laboring hands, can help facilitate loving space and connection. So, too, is it soothing to make oneself "useful," and therefore to provide a disincentive to something that seems to tag along with butchness as fiercely as ideas of strength and chivalry do: disposability.

Sometimes the idea of butch usefulness feels to me like it acts as a companion to notions of our disposability more so than it works to challenge it. Especially as it interacts with ableism more broadly. If what makes us valuable, desirable, and worthwhile are the things we can do, what does that mean of us when we can no longer do them? What kind of butch am I when opening a door is a struggle? If my knowledge of power tools and my ability to use them in a productive way makes me sexy, what do people think of me now when I have to lay surrounded by ice packs while my partner does much of the domestic heavy lifting? Where does my value go? Where does my butchness go when I have to be cared *for*?

Butch Ability, like all ability, declines. For some of us this happens faster than others—for reasons biological, environmental, and systemic—but it *does* happen to everyone. Able-bodied is a temporary condition, and would be in any plausible social utopia you can imagine. This statement is not to be confused or misaligned with the eugenic politics of coercive mass infection that we see in COVID-denialist rhetoric today (ex: "We'll all get sick eventually, so there's no point in avoiding it") but is a simple recognition that where there is life, there is also disability. However, this does not mean that who becomes disabled, how they become disabled, and how their disability is treated is something entirely random and left to the winds of fortune. Nor is it, as many more would have it, reducible to personal health choices or the strength of individual willpower. Health and illness alike are irrevocably collective and thus political in nature. This is demonstrated in the reality that health is a stratified resource in our society. Across the board, social and economic marginalization increase vulnerability to disability, and disability further compounds social and economic marginalization. Transgender and queer people, for example, are more likely to be disabled than the general population: 39% of transgender people and 36% of lesbians and bisexual women report having a disability, compared to the 27% of the general population. Our ability is temporary, yes, but it is also being politically undermined in an explicitly, and yet undeclared, war.

Casualty of an Undeclared War is the title Leslie Feinberg—a revolutionary transgender butch communist and theorist—gave to the collection of research on Lyme Disease ze gathered in the time before Lyme took the last of hir capacity to write and eventually, on November 15th of 2014, hir life. Feinberg was initially infected in the early 1970s and spent *four decades* navigating the hostile and transphobic medical industrial complex until ze was finally diagnosed in 2008 with Lyme and multiple tick-borne co-infections. The very idea that Lyme disease can be chronic was and remains controversial within the medical establishment, and to this day treatment beyond two to four weeks of antibiotics is not covered by insurance, even if patients can find doctors willing to treat it. Two to four weeks of antibiotics were not enough to cure Feinberg of hir illness at such a progressed stage, and ze could not afford to attempt other treatments. Before Feinberg died, ze named the medical industrial complex hir killer, attributing hir health crisis to "bigotry, prejudice, and lack of science."

For the entirety of hir writing career, in every political project ze engaged in and supported, Leslie Feinberg was disabled by chronic illness and pain. Ze spoke of and considered hir disability in connection to broader political struggles. In hir research collection *Casualty of an Undeclared War*, Feinberg sought to demonstrate the connection between the medical neglect ze (and many others) experienced to the ways that capitalist interests in the medical industrial complex function and express themselves in the relationships between patients, doctors, medical boards, pharmaceutical companies, and the State. In ze's notes Feinberg made connections between hir medical struggles and various U.S. projects of biowarfare and even drew a direct line of complicity between the gaslighting of sufferers of chronic Lyme to the way the details of George Bush's Lyme treatment was withheld from the public in 2007. During the trip to Cuba that informed hir work on hir book *Rainbow Solidarity in Defense of Cuba*, Feinberg had hundreds of discussions with Cubans while walking the streets of Havana at night while ze was too sick to sleep. Towards the end of hir life, Feinberg could no longer consistently read or write and thus was forced to leave hir notes (originally gathered with the intention of writing a full piece on the subject hirself) in the hopes that others would pick up the strands. Unwilling to stop sharing hir perspective on the world, Feinberg turned to photography for hir creative work. Hir *'screened-in' series* is a collection of pieces depicting hir life at home, too ill to leave. Feinberg's politics shine through this series: ze used a palm-sized digital camera and used various techniques to protect the anonymity of neighbors and passing strangers. Hir love of people, community, and the beauty of nature—already clear in hir previous writing—is tenderly visible in hir approach to the medium. Hir grief and frustration at being separated from so much that ze adored is palpable.

Feinberg's theorizing on trans identity as well as hir life's work of agitating for communism and revolutionary action are invoked with relative frequency, especially in queer and trans radical circles. Ze is one of the most well-known transgender theorists of the 1990s. Rarely, however, have I seen hir experience as a chronically ill disabled person mentioned except for, perhaps, a passing reference to hir cause of death. An isolated tragedy that took another radical too soon. As if Lyme was something that became real for the instant that it took someone whose political work we valued away from us, rather than being a condition that informed every aspect of Feinberg's life—including and especially hir politics—for the last 40 years ze was among us.

Leslie Feinberg is not the first nor the only writer whose disability is treated as a sidenote to their creative work—far from it—but just as ze wrote of how misogyny and transphobia informed the ways the medical industrial complex treated hir as a disabled transgender butch, so too, have similar dynamics informed how hir life and political work are related to and spoken of after hir death. Where Feinberg can be found in the record as a Butch In Action, A Butch Doing, A Butch Fixing, are held up (not unjustifiably) as signifiers of Butch Value. Butches aspire to be (and many others expect us to be) like the Leslie Feinberg who put regularly hir body on the line at protests, like the Leslie Feinberg with hir fist raised in rage, like the Leslie Feinberg who could sit for long interviews and deliver clear and valuable insights when ze did. And, truly, there are many of hir actions we should work to emulate! However, what is not captured—in fact *missing*—in these moments of Butch Action is the increased cost of such action when the one performing it is chronically ill. When a day of glorious or important activity is paid for in increased pain and illness for days, weeks, even months afterwards. I love seeing a photo of Leslie Feinberg delivering a fierce speech to a crowd of gathered protestors. I love looking back at hir political activity and seeing how relentless ze was in fighting against capitalism and imperialism. These actions should be celebrated and encouraged, they are excellent ones to aspire to. But so, too, do I love seeing the tender care that comes bleeding through a photograph ze took from the window of hir home when capacity for all other creative and political work had left hir. I wonder at what it must have taken for Feinberg, so sick that it would be only two years until the medical industrial complex succeeded in murdering hir, to travel from New York to Minnesota in 2012 to support the political efforts to free CeCe McDonald, a Black trans woman who was imprisoned for defending herself against a violent transmisogynistic attack. I wonder at Butch Strength as so many of us strive to express it in the public sphere and how often so many of us must pay the cost of that expression behind closed doors.

I write of Leslie Feinberg not because hir disability or experience of medical neglect is an especially unique story, but because it isn't, as ze recognized in hir own writing. What is unique about Feinberg's struggle is that ze was an internationally known and valued theorist and activist who had, from outside appearances at least, a reliable support system at home to attend to hir care, things relatively few disabled people—especially trans disabled people—can count on. I write about Feinberg because how hir image as a butch and how hir work is approached, being so widely known and acclaimed, makes the dynamics that other disabled butches must contend with more visible. If people are so eager to push mention of Feinberg's nearly life-long struggle with chronic illness to the last sentence of hir biography, so determined to make Lyme a tragic footnote instead of something that intensely informed hir theorizing and set the conditions for hir political work, where does that put the rest of us? What does it suggest about butchness and what aspects of butch experience are kept hidden because we are afraid of what will become of our value when we cannot always, or maybe never, perform Butch Strength, Ability, and Action?

I write this because I want to bring disability, pain, and illness into the image of butchness and I want to show that it has always been there. Being the target of misogynistic, homophobic, and transphobic violence is disabling. Being unable to access regular and non-transphobic healthcare is disabling. Being pushed into low-wage, high-impact, heavy labor is disabling. Being gender marginalized is disabling. Queer and trans people are more likely to be disabled than straight and cis people. Many of us have been disabled by systems later in our lives, others have been disabled from birth and systematically marginalized on that basis for our whole lives. There are more of us—more disabled queer people—than common depictions of our identities ever allow. Our disabilities inform everything about our lives, from how we communicate, travel, eat, sleep to how we fuck, fight, and agitate. A fist raised in the street, a window broken, a building barricaded, and the hours, days, months of care required to make that militant expression possible are together the same action.

It took me two weeks of almost nothing but rest and putting every part of my body on ice for me to harness the capacity necessary to write this to you now. I can only wait to find out how much time my body will take to recover once it is finished. It's hard for me to feel the truth of it in my heart—to dislodge the internalized ableism that still has its tendrils wrapped around my mind—but I know my disabled comrades and those who care for me have it right: if it takes you two weeks of rest to have the capacity for a project, that rest is part of the project. And so it *does* seem to me, in a body so constantly wracked with pain that seeing the rest it demands as "leisure" or "downtime" feels trivializing of the real and intensive labor that simple endurance requires. The truth of my life and work is that no one gets to experience *this* Lee Shevek without the hard work of the Lee who, last week, couldn't do much of anything but move herself from the bed to the couch and back each day. My Butch Ability is conditioned by my butch disability. My Butch Capacity undermined by years of medical neglect. My Butch Strength… fleeting, changing form, and constantly having to accommodate to new constraints.

I feel anxious. I feel more unstable, keenly aware of the ways my systemic vulnerability increases the more my physical capacity decreases. I have a support system I deeply trust (something *many* disabled people do not have), but the material resources within that support system are still meager in the face of thousands of dollars of medical bills, no end yet in sight, and a body that can labor less and less as time goes on. Objectively, there is a lot of material things to be fearful of in this position, and there's no shortage of other disabled theorists who have expanded upon this. What I wish to dig into here is a component of that fear I have found entangled in my sense of butchness, patriarchy, and long-standing anxieties that I believe I have developed in-part due to the intracommunal messages I have received about what makes a butch valuable, and thus, less disposable.

The gender marginalized in a patriarchal society are deemed, at large, only as valuable as their ability to be desirable to cis men and productive for them to control. What is constructed as desirable in women is that which most closely approaches a feminine ideal invented by and for cisgender men. It is an ideal informed by white supremacy, colonialism, patriarchy, transmisogyny, and ableism. Womanhood is both the cage that one is forced into and also a strict social category that failure to conform to gets one demoted to the category of UnWoman, pushed from subhuman (woman) to nonhuman (trans Other). Still to be extracted from, but the extraction of value from those deemed UnWoman can be done by even harsher means. Any woman can be demoted to UnWoman in a moment's notice but, like all social mechanisms, who tends to be targeted with higher frequency and deadlier means is informed by who tends to be constructed as disposable Other. Racialization, and anti-Blackness in particular, is one common mechanism by which this demotion occurs. The very perception of what is considered "gender-nonconforming" is highly informed by other marginalizations; for example, Black women are frequently categorized as "gender nonconforming" even when they are feminine and thus experience more pressure to perform hyper-femininity in order to avoid this kind of degendering. Transmisogyny is another vector by which women have their status as women revoked: transmisogyny does not push trans women into "manhood" as some very mistakenly claim—as this would come with all the power and allowances granted to cis men through patriarchy—but into UnWoman. Forced into an underclass of women made hyper-vulnerable to the extremes of patriarchal violence who have even fewer options for recourse than the women still "allowed" to occupy the cage. Being in the cage of womanhood is a deadly place to be for countless women, there is no need to romanticize that location or to claim that it is a space of intrinsic privilege. That said, there is a real material difference between being categorized as an object-possession that can perhaps at least anticipate being fed and given shelter and experiencing the social equivalent of being trash in a ditch.

Being considered trash, easily disposable, is not a simple social experience to survive. Many simply do not, are murdered either directly or over time via the extremes of social neglect. Those of us who survive on the margins, us UnWomen, do so by various means with whatever tools we have at hand. Before disability I thought of the popular intracommunal conceptualizations of butchness as connected to and expressed through Action, Capability, and Physicality as being a kind of resistance to patriarchal ideas about the abilities of women and an irreverence towards what actions and forms of expression are broadly considered the domain of men. I still believe that to a point and continue to delight in that aspect. However, having now tread the path from a physically strong, capable, service-driven young butch to a butch who sometimes has trouble just standing up for long, I have begun to suspect—for myself at the very least—that there is more to it than simple and pure political subversion. Is there not at least a little bit of fear there, for what happens to us when we can't hold open doors?

When I serve, I make myself valuable. When I can do as much or more for other people than they do for me, I can outpace the anxiety that the people around me are calculating my cost. If I can engage in an act of service it helps me (or, more accurately, feels like it can help me) work out of the deficit I often start with as a butch woman; gives me material with which I can pull myself out of other people's frequent early reads of me as cold, aggressive, intimidating, and unapproachable (I've found a butch girl really cannot smile enough to avoid this read). I make myself useful and people are at least a little more hesitant to toss out trash they think could be of some use to them later. It is soothing, in a way, to feel like you can make a strong case for your continued participation. And it really does feel good to engage in acts of service, to make the way for others easier, to be the shade on a sunny day. Caring labor for others is wonderful, vital, it's what keeps us all alive. However, it *is labor*, and like all labor it is contingent on ability and capacity, two things that unavoidably decrease as life is lived, faster and more intensely for some than others. It is for this reason that it is eminently unstable ground on which to erect a sense of self and identity upon. It is for this reason that locating the desirability and value of butchness solely or primarily in our physicality, ability, capacity, or usefulness will only include a fraction of butches (only temporarily) at the neglect a vast multiplicity of butchness, the value of which extends far beyond the physical capacities of our mortal bodies.

Butches open doors. Butches have to use the disabled entrance and need doors held open for us. Butches arm ourselves and patrol around the local queer bars in order to protect other queer folks from bashers. Butches are unable to leave home and instead coordinate safety plans for our friends from our beds. Butches use power tools, build sheds, haul the heaviest furniture when our friends are moving. Butches call to ask for a ride because we can't drive ourselves to our own medical appointments. Butches step in and beat down predatory men. Butches try medication after medication because the physical, sexual, and structural violence we've experienced has written itself into our blood and tissues and manifested as chronic pain and illness. Butches protect. Butches need protecting. Butches build. Butches need housing. Butches act. Butches need solidarity. Butches serve. Butches need mutual aid.

Our abilities, like all people's abilities, are more fleeting than we can anticipate. Our capacity shifts, changes, and decreases throughout our lives. Some of us have *never* been able to engage in the feats of physical prowess so frequently tied to butchness. Our value, however, maintains regardless. This is not a call to utterly shut down praise and celebration of Butch Ability, but instead a demand to bring Butch Disability into the light of day to be recognized in tandem with all the impressive things we produce and all the generous ways we serve others. Truly, it is my hope through this piece to make clear that Butch Ability and Disability are irrevocably connected. Leslie Feinberg lived with chronic illness for four decades of hir life, nearly the totality of hir politically active years. Just like all disabled butches, ze wasn't just chronically ill at home, but at all times, in every photograph or interview we see hir in, in every political struggle ze showed up for. There is an unknowable quantity of caring labor—done by Feinberg for hirself and by others in hir support system—that made all of hir work and action we did see possible. There is Butch Strength in throwing down on the picket line, yes! And so, too, is there Butch Strength to be celebrated in the rest taken by a butch too sick to leave home. It is fundamentally the same Strength, worthy of equal recognition and celebration as any act of service we can offer.

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