

Butch Noir

This is a story about time. About coming from the darkness to the light. I always thought time started when I was born and ended when I died. Didn't you? But it all started a long time ago in black and

white. And now it's a fact of life. There's no logic in here. No beginning, middle or end.
—Shaw

*I*n *Memories of the Revolution*, a collaborative account of the first ten years of the wow Café Theater, a New York feminist performance space, Holly Hughes writes that, on meeting Peggy Shaw there for the first time in the early 1980s, Shaw “ordered” her to make a show.¹ “You have to understand,” Hughes explains, “that I didn’t know it was Peggy Shaw who was telling me; I thought it was a woman who looked like James Dean, who was, maybe, really James Dean, and so I should do what I was told” (2). The James Dean description captures something of the stylized retro masculinity of Shaw’s butch persona both on and off stage (see fig. 1). With an enduring reputation as a charismatic lesbian Lothario, Shaw’s resemblance to mid-century Hollywood film stars has continued throughout her long career. Frequently described as a “butch icon,” Shaw speaks her vulnerability from the security of the established history of her own roguish appeal (Prior 69) (see fig. 2). Alisa Solomon refers to her as “the big butch Split Britches actor who is every feminist critic’s favourite example” (175). The performance of masculinities with cinematic resonance has long been a signature element in Shaw’s solo shows, as well as in her work with Lois Weaver in the lesbian

Figure 1
Peggy Shaw, Lex-
ington, New York
(c. 1985)

Photo by and cour-
tesy of Debra Elise
Miller



theater company Split Britches, which they cofounded in New York in 1980 with Deb Margolin.

One such dimension of Shaw's persona has been her embodiment of what I shall call *butch noir*. This generic category cites and reworks *dyke noir*, a term originally coined by a *Village Voice* journalist in her 1988 review of *Dress Suits to Hire*, a piece written by Hughes for Shaw and Weaver. *Dyke noir* not only confirmed something previously critically unrecognized about the ambition of this early lesbian performance work but it also opened up an aesthetic language that literally, Hughes recalls in the aforementioned memoir, changed her life: "Carr [the journalist] took what might have been a failure in the eyes of other critics," Hughes writes, "and turned it into proof of innovation [. . .]. [S]he was untroubled by a crime story without a crime because she realised that the characters are the crime" (99). For Hughes, "[D]yke noir [. . .] didn't just apply to one show or any one artist but described what many of us knew ourselves to be, at least in terms of our artistic aspirations" (99). This concept ingeniously combines the reclamation of a term of homophobic abuse (dyke) with a postwar generic category that linked a particular stylized heterosexual dynamic (sexually manipulative women and naïve, susceptible men) and violent crimes (noir). These absurd aesthetic

Figure 2
Peggy Shaw and
Clod Ensemble, *Must*
(2007)

Photo: Manuel Vason.
Courtesy of Peggy
Shaw and Clod
Ensemble



mixtures and audacious cultural appropriations offered feminist audiences in the late 1980s the pleasures of mockery through imitative derision.

If dyke noir captured the irreverence of the “bad girls” of 1980s lesbian performance pastiche, then butch noir extends this practice into the present through a rather different set of temporal and sexual coordinates. Dyke noir, coined by Carr and embraced by Hughes, is not a category that has traveled in the queer critical debates of the last thirty years. Unlike its queer counterpart, *dyke* has retained a historical and gendered location, anchored in the 1980s—the decade when it had the widest currency. It is impossible to imagine that *dyke* rather than *queer* could have become such a widely adopted theoretical and generative referent from the 1990s onward. In typically gendered ways, *dyke* has retained its specificity and, for many, now reads as rather dated, while *queer* has achieved a conceptual mobility, crossing generational and national boundaries to signify the opposite of its original derision. Nonetheless, elements of dyke noir have continued to inform the work of many lesbian performers, including Hughes, Shaw, and Weaver. *Butch noir* is deployed here to extend elements of dyke noir into a different time span, speaking back to the film noir of the postwar period and to the prefeminist signs of masculinity in 1950s butch lesbians, as well as to the 1980s feminism that largely rejected them, yet continuing into the present in the aesthetics of both everyday generic styles and the artistic practices of performed and mediated cultures.²

Butch noir works through a relay of what I shall call *having-already-been-read-ness*: a relational dynamic by which queer subjects are generated through their anticipation of other people’s readings of them. These are played back through self-narrations structured by a knowing contestation of the legibility and authorship of desire. As Esther Newton puts it in her recent memoir, when writing of the importance of her femme lovers to her own sense of desirability: “[I]n their loving gaze I saw who I could become” (7). We might understand the erotic dynamic of having-already-been-read-ness as an anticipatory temporality—a dialogic mode in which the expected response to an utterance is constitutive of its form. As Newton’s memoir details, the sense of recognition of one’s desirability in the other’s eyes provided a much needed contradiction to the abjections of particular homophobic cultures in the late 1960s. The embodiment of this anticipatory temporality has continued to have a distinctive resonance in lesbian aesthetic forms ever since.

A particular historical mode of having-already-been-read-ness has manifested itself in the performative reclamation of queerness from its

homophobic associations. But the queer and feminist readings can never be fully detached from the homophobic and misogynistic ones; they remain mutually constitutive. The former interrupts the discursive power of the latter by demonstrating its own skillful readings of homophobia—a discourse known most intimately by those whom it condemns. In this context, the homophobic designation of butch undesirability, whether as physical abjection, social derision, or phallic theft, operates through the discursive foreclosures of the having-already-been-read-ness that is punishable by misogynistic verbal abuse and physical violence for gender failure.³ If, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has put it emphatically, “*There must be no bad surprises*” (150), then there is no endpoint for the “paranoid reading” relations that constitute butch noir, but rather, only an infinitely expanding horizon of queer future perfects, of knowing one will have been read.⁴ The having-already-been-read-ness of this anticipatory dynamic might be characterized in the first- and second-person form in the following way: my vulnerability arises in your capacity to wound me, but my queerness defies this wounding power, since it has already embraced and incorporated your derision; thus, you read me, I show you that I have read your reading by reclaiming it, and, in reading myself—by refusing your reading of me—I try to get ahead of the game; but, just when I think I have done so, I find this rereading has already been reread, if and when I arrive in your future.

It would be mistaken, however, to conceptualize butch noir only through this mode of puncturing the discursive power of homophobia and misogyny by getting there first. For butch noir exists through another, quite opposite, structure of having-already-been-read-ness: its inscription as a genre of lesbian desirability that confirms the shifting historical circulation and legibility of queer erotic codes. What Sue-Ellen Case has defined as the “butch-femme aesthetic [. . .] playfully inhabiting the camp space of irony and wit” provides the ground for the retro sensibilities of a noirish masculinity that has already been read as generically desirable (*Feminist* 47). Making its match with its femme counterpart through seduction scenarios whose clichéd potency retains a visceral charge despite its endless repetitions, butch noir sits confidently in the spaces of erotic play where having-already-been-read-ness forms the heart of the pleasurable dynamic for its lesbian audience.

Yet butch noir does not wield an exclusive propriety over the condition of having-already-been-read-ness: its temporal textures stretch well beyond lesbian cultures. As I go on to suggest, the anticipatory mode of butch noir legibility draws upon a more generalized temporal dynamic

that inaugurates subjectivity itself. If, as psychoanalytic theory has suggested, the subject is brought into existence as the “I” of language that has already been read by an other, then butch noir brings its own particular generic and historical structures of self–other intelligibility to bear on the deeply layered sense of the strangeness of temporality at the heart of subject formation. What is distinctive about the butch noir of lesbian performance cultures, however, is the disturbance this figure brings to the normalizing repressions of such formations.⁵ Unsettling the conventional chronologies and sequences of self-narration, butch noir brings an affective interference into the room that embeds more generalized temporal discordance in lesbian aesthetic forms.

Peggy Shaw’s Butch Noir

Peggy Shaw is the figure who most vividly embodies butch noir in lesbian performance cultures (see fig. 3). Shaw’s work provides the focus here for my discussions of how “temporal dissonance” connects to “sexual dissidents,” as Elizabeth Freeman has put it (7), and of how we might think about “queers as denizens of time out of joint” (19). Taken less as a case study for a critical reading of butch noir and more as one of its authors, and perhaps even theorists, Shaw’s work conceptualizes and enacts the affective dynamics of having-already-been-read-ness.

Famous as the butch to Weaver’s femme in *Split Britches* (see fig. 4), Shaw embodies a stylized retro masculinity with noirish resonance.⁶ A writer, producer, and teacher, as well as a performer, Shaw has collaborated and performed with Weaver for nearly forty years. Mixing styles of cabaret and vaudeville with fragments of family history and lyrical vignettes about relationships (including their own), Shaw and Weaver pastiche scenarios that loosen (but then often tighten again) the structuring temporal dynamics of desire. Case, who edited the 1996 collection of their scripts titled *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance*, has famously argued that “butch-femme seduction is always located in semiosis.” Taking Shaw and Weaver’s capacity to “move masquerade to the base of the performance” (*Feminist* 45), Case claims that “the butch-femme couple” inhabits a “subject position together—‘you can’t have one without the other,’ as the song goes.” She writes: “[T]he two roles never appear as discrete” though they “constantly seduce the sign system, through flirtation and inconstancy” (32). Shaw and Weaver have each also made solo work. When they began to perform *without* each other, their shows often evoked the other in their

Figure 3
Peggy Shaw and
Clod Ensemble, *Must*
(2007)

Photo: Manuel Vason.
Courtesy of Peggy
Shaw and Clod
Ensemble



Figure 4
 Peggy Shaw and
 Lois Weaver, *Butch/
 Femme, The Kiss*
 (1984)

Photo by and cour-
 tesy of Eva Weiss

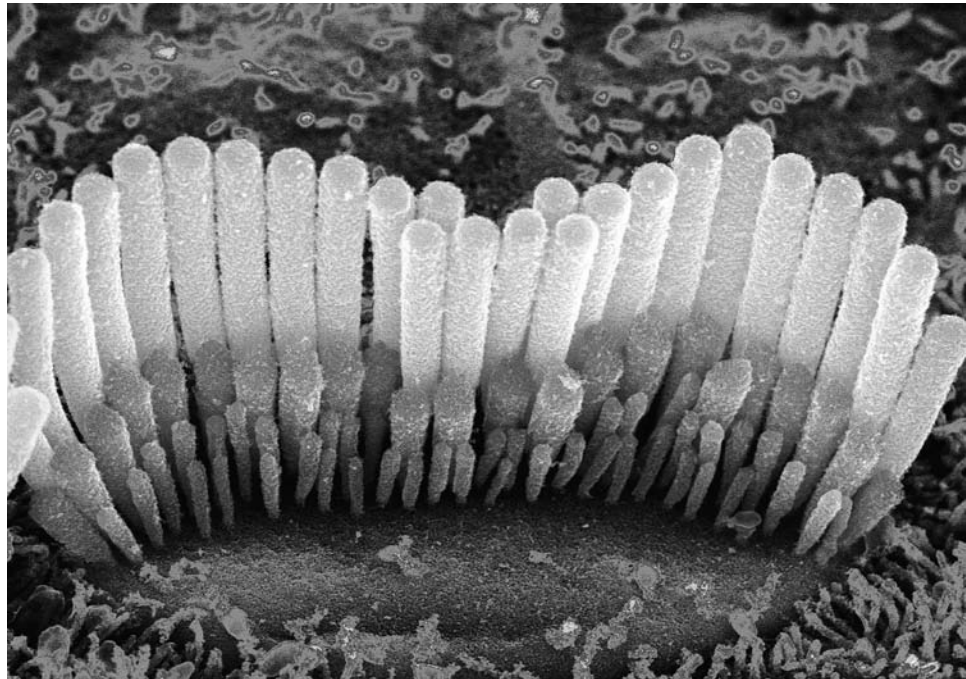


absence. As Jaclyn Prior has suggested, Shaw's use of the second person in her solo work conjures the lost femme subject, be it the beloved who left her or the object of her desire, as we, the audience, sometimes become the new femme addressees of her monologues (73).

Situated in relation to ongoing debates in queer theory, as well as in the history and context of Shaw's collaborative and solo performances, the following focuses on Shaw's embodiment of butch noir in *Must—The Inside Story*. Chosen for its pastiche of the aesthetics of the noir genre and for its desire to queer the conventional temporalities of self-narration, *Must* combines the investigative structures of detection with the curiosity of the medical gaze. As the epigraph above indicates, Shaw plays with our attachments to temporal norms and with our investments in their opposites. One

Figure 5
Nerves and hair cells
in the vestibular
(organ of balance in
the inner ear)

Photo: Dr. David
Fumess. Courtesy of
Wellcome Library,
London



critic has described *Must* as “an exquisite lesson in anatomy [. . .], open-heart surgery of the artistic kind, performed without anaesthetic” (Gardner). Structured around eleven monologues about Shaw’s own body, the show presents stories of desire and loss, of illness and lucky escapes. Blending noirish iconographies and scenarios, Shaw turns the stage into an anatomy theater and the audience into her students. Narrating her medical history through shifting generic registers, she moves us in and out of personal family sagas, sexual histories, scientific discourses, Hollywood cinema, and poetic remembrance.

A collaborative performance with the experimental performance company Clod Ensemble, the eleven monologues that comprise *Must* are coauthored with Clod’s director, Suzy Willson.⁷ Shaw is accompanied by live piano, violin, and double bass (music composed by Paul Clark), played to one side of the stage, and by a large screen at the rear onto which are intermittently back-projected microscopic enlargements of color slides of the inside of the body from the Wellcome Library (such as fig. 5). These slides are interspersed with moving images, such as endoscopy footage, and an extract from *The Skeleton Dance* (1929, see fig. 6). Becoming the noir detective, Shaw redirects the revelatory impulses of science to read the medical history of her body as the source of possible clues to narrating her own “inside story.”

Figure 6
 Peggy Shaw performing “These Rattling Bones” in front of *The Skeleton Dance* (1929). *Must* (2007)



Reiterating and reconfiguring familiar genres of masculinity from her previous work, Shaw’s butch noir in *Must* plays back a cinematic masculinity intent on solving the mysteries of femininity (yet generically destined to fail) to an audience curious to see and to know more. Shaw’s performance invokes the mood and structures of noirish retrospection and the generic problem of reading the enigma of the femme fatale—and by implication of femininity more generally: “The minute I laid eyes on you, I knew you weren’t going to make my life easier [. . .]. ‘Aren’t you lonely sometimes?’ you said. I was wondering exactly what you meant. Did you really care if I was lonely? [. . .] Women like you say things, but mean something else a lot. It wasn’t out of concern for me that you said it” (Shaw and Willson 152). *Must* transports us back to a place of shadowy secrets, illicit desires, and the mysteries of noir: a world in which following the clues may lead you into deeper trouble; a world in which the edgy and unsettling mise-en-scène should have made us realize earlier that desirable women are never what they seem.

But Shaw restructures the gendered relations of noir to make her own body the object of investigation, shifting the focus from the enigmatic surface beauty of the femme fatale of 1940s and 1950s cinema to the imagined

depths of a protagonist who has incongruent stories to tell: of roguish butch desire, of mammalian identification with the Elephant Man, of the voyeurism of the scientific gaze, and of disturbing experiences of medical procedures in illness and childbirth. The object of fascination on stage, Shaw narrates her butch body through its inscription in the histories of medical and cinematic voyeurism, as she flirts with feminist and queer readings of its desirability within the history of lesbian experimental performance and subcultures since the early 1980s.

Shaw's embodiment of butch noir anticipates and extends the broader theoretical arguments about queer temporalities and about the relational nature of subjectivity itself. My primary purpose in what follows is to conceptualize the stylized performance genre of butch noir as a particular embodiment of queer temporality and to demonstrate the significance of having-already-been-read-ness to both queer theories of time and our understanding of the inauguration of subjectivity more generally.

Queering Temporality

In a roundtable discussion on queer temporality, Annamarie Jagose expressed concern about the “ease with which we reify” this concept by placing queerness at the heart of time's strangeness (186). For Jagose, our eager moves toward queering temporality have been in danger of reinforcing the power of the normative by giving it a coherence and unity it necessarily lacks. If time is somehow beyond our grasp, because its inevitable passage disturbs us in ways that cannot ever be fully calmed by the modern structural organization of clocks and calendars, then what grounds are there to appropriate its uncanny passing as specifically queer?

Jagose's challenge targets those theorizations of queer temporality that have sought to elaborate a sexual specificity to its forms. This influential work has expanded queer theory in temporal directions to explore cultural and historical formations of queer desire and subjectivity. These debates have been widely rehearsed elsewhere, but key interventions have included, *inter alia*: Lee Edelman's challenge that queers embrace the imaginary place homophobic culture has assigned to “the homosexual” as a way to defy the imperatives of reproductive futurism's privileging of the figure of the Child that anchors it; Elizabeth Freeman's reconsideration of the continuing pull of the past on queerness through binding concepts, such as temporal drag, that might slow time down; Jack Halberstam's model of compressed time in opposition to the norms governing the organization of

domestic time; Heather Love's move toward a certain backwardness in our thinking about the affective temporal relations of queer desires; José Esteban Muñoz's emphasis on the future as a unique space of queer utopian possibility. Responding to a discussion with these and other writers, however, Jagose argues that if we characterize straight time as the linear narrative of heterosexual romance leading to reproductive familial generational continuity and set this in opposition to queer time as compressed, backward looking, slowed down, discordant, and utopian, we are in danger of giving false coherence to a norm against which queer temporalities are then measured and often celebrated or championed.

Challenging what she refers to as the annexing of "the queerness of time for ourselves," Jagose urges us to situate these claims within much wider histories and theories of modernity. To quote her caution more fully:

I wonder about the ease with which we reify queer temporality, that adjectival "queer" throwing a proprietary loop around properties or characteristics that have long been theorized as at the heart of "time" or, for that matter, "history" [. . .]. Acknowledging these [Derridean, Lacanian] and other intellectual traditions might make us hesitate to annex the queerness of time for ourselves. Rather than invoke as our straight guy a version of time that is always linear, teleological, reproductive, future oriented, what difference might it make to acknowledge the intellectual traditions in which time has also been influentially thought and experienced as cyclical, interrupted, multi-layered, reversible, stalled—and not always in contexts easily recuperated as queer? (186–87)

For Jagose, it is vital for queer theorists to acknowledge the paradoxes of the organization of time in modern culture rather than setting up alternative conceptualizations by reifying normativity. Put simply, an overreaching conceptualization of queer temporality is in danger of ignoring the ways in which "modern time" is already such a strange beast.

For Jagose, its organization into linear models of past, present, and future needs to be theorized as evidence of the underlying dimensions of modernity more broadly. As many have argued, modern time is something very historically particular, governed by clocks and calendars, schedules and sequences, as well as by a focus on maximizing productivity to saturation point to increase profits (see Sherman). But this is also, importantly, a temporality at odds with itself, characterized by a kind of temporal doubling,

haunted by times past, and necessarily already penetrated by the projected external temporalities against which it defines itself, as the demands of reproductive, as well as productive, labor pull in competing directions.⁸ In many ways, it is this historicity of the subject of modern time that feminist and queer performance work (and its implicit theorizations) have staged for us. Sometimes generic to particular erotic cultural practices and sometimes speaking to the more general strangeness of modernity's temporal imperatives, this work has offered historical specificity to the generalizing claims of the queerness of stepping to one side of the conventional organization of time.

The risk of claiming temporal alterity *as queer* for Jagose and other critics is that this only confirms the fictionality of the cohesion and linearity of the normative inside of so-called modern time. Rita Felski, for example, has shown how postmodernism has been seen as “synonymous with the demise of historical time”; where “time loses its arrow [its linear logic] it no longer has a coherent goal or direction” (2). In this context, claims to queer temporality may appear to ignore theories that locate our understanding of this concept historically as well as philosophically. But as Freeman has also made clear, queer time “emerged within, alongside and beyond [the] [. . .] heterosexually gendered double-time of stasis and progress, intimacy and genealogy” (23). Jagose's intervention raises the question of whether it is possible to locate specificity while avoiding the problem of “annexing.” Taking Jagose seriously but following a rather different logic, I argue that the anticipatory temporality of butch noir exposes the earlier constitutive temporal dynamics of subject formation that largely remain unconscious. It is not that having-already-been-read-ness belongs exclusively to butch noir, but rather that this queer genre embodies the affective sense of the more generalized temporal structure of modern subjectivity.

The subject's entry into culture via language, according to psychoanalytic theory, depends upon becoming an “I” that has already been read by another. Or, put the other way around, since the subject is read into being in order to become the “I” of language, its existence depends upon having already been read. These foundational dynamics have been theorized variously as processes of misrecognition and splitting, encounters with enigmatic signifiers, and division and repression. Jacques Lacan's “mirror stage” has famously offered the visual metaphor for this having-already-been-read-ness in the pleasing yet illusory coherent and unified image that is reflected back to the infant in the mirror/mother's face (see Lacan). This early misrecognition, as Laura Mulvey has argued, constitutes the “birth of a long love affair/despair between image and self-image,” and it is this, she

suggests, that finds “such joyous recognition in the cinema audience” (10). The infant’s entry into language, where it begins to speak an “I” already constituted by a more powerful other, leaves affective traces that emerge through different scenarios in culture via signification. For Jean Laplanche, since the helpless infant is born into an extreme dependency on the nurturing adult, our first relationality is structured around a temporal discrepancy: the infant has already been subjected to having been read by an other before it becomes an “I” in language (Fletcher 107).⁹ For Laplanche, reading relations are central to the constitution of subjectivity, which he theorizes as the infant’s primal encounter with enigmatic signification: the nurturing adult bathes the helpless baby in the enigmatic signifiers that, for the most part, remain unconscious (Laplanche). That sense of having already been read by an other in the creation of the “I” through a relational inequality then resonates throughout our encounters with, and ongoing formations through, unequal social dynamics. In later encounters with having-already-been-read-ness, this inaugurating structure charges our affective interactions, reiterating this repressed psychic residue of our earlier temporal discrepancies (Fletcher and Ray). If our original desires are generated through an enigmatic saturation, we are destined to be overactive readers in later life, reading into and reading out of the signs of sexuality as they circulate in culture and in our personal intimacies. For those habituated to anticipating negative readings of their sexuality in a homophobic and misogynist context, a reading apparatus in overdrive quickly becomes normalized.

When butch noir cites its own having-already-been-read-ness, it draws attention to the ontological problem of claiming an inaugurating authorship of oneself (of the “I”). This problem of apprehending the limits of the subject’s own self-grounding authority is a temporal one that structures our having-already-been-read-ness. In Lacan’s mirror stage, the projected fantasies of unity and coherence that hold the promise of recognition are founded on a fundamental temporal misrecognition that the subject is doomed to repeat. If the infant’s projections are *anticipatory*, insofar as “he” imagines himself as more fully formed than his floppy dependent body of the present tense allows ontologically, then this experience of temporal dissonance is one that continues to structure the psychic dynamics of “his” later life. The queerly temporal reading relations of butch noir thus necessarily rework the *having been read into being* that precedes any social interpellation. Butch noir registers both the specificity of this affectively queer temporality and reconfigures its more generalized form in the having-already-been-read-ness of the mirror stage and the subsequent entry of the

infant into language. In generating a repetition of the affective dynamics of having-already-been-read-ness, butch noir loosens the hold of such generalized processes while anchoring this temporal dynamic in a historically specific erotic genre.

To imply a teleology here, though, is misleading, since the potential unavailability of those early inaugurating experiences continues to structure the subject's unconscious sense of her own self-narrations.¹⁰ There is no single, continuous account of living a life here. The power of Shaw's butch noir lies in her capacity to make affectively present a sense of this never fully available temporal self-other dynamic. The trace of this inaugurating relationality deepens the affect of butch noir's temporality. The having-already-been-read-ness of butch noir reiterates the subject's temporal relation to the "I" in language: the undertow of the former derives from both confirming and unsettling the latter.

The having-already-been-read-ness generated through homophobic interpellation is one such instance. In the homophobic imaginary governed by a visceral repugnance at lesbian sexuality as the abject other to femininity's heterosexual imperative, the butch body becomes the focus of a potentially nauseating threat. In a culture where heterosexuality is organized around masculine fears of femininity's capacities to lay bare its dependence on that which it disavows, butch noir threatens to uncover what Judith Butler has argued is the imitative structure of heterosexuality itself. If the normative dynamic organizing gender's supposed mutual compatibility—both biologically and socially—requires femininity to appear to confirm the masculine position that "postures as an autonomous and self-grounding subject," then repudiation and disavowal are necessary and inevitable outcomes (*Gender* 44). The butch noir figure carries the threat of being punished for impersonating masculinity and for stealing its "phallic trophies" (L. Kaplan 351). In these impostures, the lesbian embodiment of a queer retro pastiche of the "subject-supposed-to-know-better" (the noir hero) lays bare the mutual impossibility of the gendered idealizations upon which heterosexuality is premised (see *Gender* 44-45; and Case 32).

In butch noir, anxiety and vulnerability translate into a queer temporality whose having-already-been-read-ness exposes the necessarily illusory nature of masculinity's more general claims to self-grounding autonomy. The anticipatory time of future-perfect legibility (the paranoid sense that one *will have* already been read) belongs to a queer history of embodying temporality through particular stylized genres of desire. The queer temporality of butch noir that interests me here is that anticipatory

sense of having already been read by others while trying to get there first in order to play back the reading and deflect the conventionalized codes organizing assumptions about lesbian desires. These are the particular queer temporal compressions that are condensed in the butch noir figure, who promises to decode the enigmas not only of the femme fatale but also of life itself.

In the sections that follow, I explore the having-already-been-read-ness of butch noir as it has been articulated through particular modes of embodying queerness at a specific historical conjuncture. If Jagose is right to caution that the strangeness of modern time is in danger of being eclipsed by the proprietary loop of queer claiming, then we need to anchor our claims in the specificities of the particular “corporeal sensations” that Freeman argues are the “hallmark of queer affect,” including those of a “certain counterpoint between the then and the now” (8).¹¹ While I argue that this queer temporality echoes the more general issue of pinning time down in the relay of having already read-ness through which the subject comes into being (Laplanche), my reading of Shaw’s butch noir seeks to demonstrate its simultaneous instantiation of the conceptual problem of finding queer particularity in time’s binding elusiveness (Freeman).

Noir Masculinities

Noir is a cinema of retrospection. As such, it invokes a sense of history being brought into the present (Freeman 137). In classic film noir, the having-already-been-read-ness of the protagonist sits at the heart of his susceptibility to the femme fatale’s irresistible sexual seductiveness: he has always been read and chosen as her prey in advance because she knows how easily he will succumb to her manipulations.¹² Much has been written in feminist scholarship about the power of the femme fatale but less perhaps about what makes her prey’s masculinity so vulnerable to this particular enigmatic femininity.¹³ The noir hero, or antihero, is easily drawn into the erotic opportunities of triangulated intrigues; he is morally ambiguous, often misogynistic, and susceptible to sexual temptation and thereby to being framed (Krutnik). Driven by the past, he is a loser with little left to lose, a moody loner in a hostile world governed by paranoia. And yet, the point of view of the narrative always belongs to him: his is the first-person retrospection that governs the flashbacks in film noir. This is his compensation for a wounded masculinity, and for being brought down by a deceitful woman.

Witty and acerbic, the noir protagonist's reflections typically deliver a cynical take on life in response to the general existential angst that marks the genre. Be it Fred MacMurray as Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity* (1944) or Glenn Ford as Johnny in *Gilda* (1946), the voiceover retrospection confirms to the audience that what the noir hero badly needed was more insight much earlier in the game. It is his response to the femme fatale's physical attractiveness that exposes the limits of his own reading apparatus; his desires cloud his judgments, and he fails to see below her surface appeal to recognize she is rotten to the core.

Film noir is a retrospective structure driven by the problem of deciphering enigmatic erotic codes. The noir world is one governed by anxiety about duplicity, where nothing is to be taken at face value. For the protagonists, it is the failure of timing that is of the essence: these men have, quite simply, *not been paranoid enough*. Their reading skills let them down and their insights come too late. Reading and misreading amid the gendered power play of heterosexual misrecognitions, the femme fatale and the noir hero are caught in a struggle over the *transparency of intention* and the *legibility of desire*. In the narrative closure of *Double Indemnity*, to cite a famous example, Neff records a dying confession to his boss, Keyes (Edward G. Robinson): "Yes, I killed him [. . .]. I killed him for the money and for a woman. I didn't get the money and I didn't get the woman" (see fig. 7). Just as noir masculinity has "already been read" by the femme fatale, so, too, the protagonist offers his reading of her through a retrospective narrative structure that favors his point of view. But whereas she saw him coming, he truly sees her only as he is going. In Neff's case, his ruination is necessary for his hindsight, which, by definition, comes too late. If the femme fatale is punished for her enigmatic treachery, the noir protagonist pays the price for his compromised reading skills.

The queer appropriation of noir masculinity from a genre marked by eroticized power play echoes its focus on the problem of gendered and sexual decodings.¹⁴ Read through the definition of pastiche as "a form with imitative intent which seeks to be appreciated as imitation" (Dyer, *Pastiche* 7), butch noir doubles the having-already-been-read-ness at the heart of the genre from which it borrows. In pairing mastery with vulnerability, noir masculinity articulates an anxiety about being undone by a susceptibility to deceptive femininity, whose success depends on his failure to read her. In butch noir, this combination of mastery and vulnerability is translated into a queer pairing that redirects the relational dynamics of legibility. In so doing, this form of imitation anticipates a having-been-read-ness that brings

Figure 7
 Fred MacMurray as
 Walter Neff in *Double*
Indemnity (1944)



the future into the present, both as the mastery of the paranoid reader who has retrospection on her or his side and as the vulnerability of having been subject to homophobic derision nevertheless. The wounded masculinity of noir is thus transformed into butch vulnerability. And yet both (noir protagonist and butch counterpart) hold their sense of agency by appearing to stay in charge of the direction of the scripting of the story.

Butch noir turns anticipatory dialogics into an “unconcealed aesthetic imitation” that responds to a specific history of queer sexualities (Dyer, *Pastiche* 1–2). If butch noir’s self-reflexive stylizations resemble the more general citationality of postmodern cultures, this cannot be reduced to a mere iteration of this cultural aesthetic. Instead, butch noir specifically queers masculine knowingness as a response to living a lesbian life in a homophobic culture, where usurping the privileged gender can become a punishable crime. But the having-already-been-read-ness of butch noir speaks simultaneously not only to the vulnerability of such bodies in the continuing climate of antagonism, but also to their desirability in the history of lesbian artistic and performance practices since the 1980s. Read back across this period from our current context nearly forty years later,

butch noir works across a timespan that has afforded considerable cultural visibility to multiple modes of embodying queerness, while never failing to look back over its shoulder in case hostility is approaching. Butch noir has straddled both a vulnerability to derision and a pleasurable sense of its own desirability. Herein lies the specifically queer temporality of butch noir's having-already-been-read-ness, which provides the grounds for claiming it *as and for* queerness (to respond to Jagose), as it also draws on a dynamic foundational to the inauguration of subjectivity, in which the subject has always been read prior to becoming an "I" in language.

Butch Noir / Dyke Noir

Butch noir is a historical as well as an aesthetic category. Read through the history of dyke noir in early lesbian performance work, Shaw's butch noir in *Must* belongs to a longer genealogy, documented in the aforementioned collection (Hughes et al.). Hughes is coeditor and one of the authors of this memoir of the first ten years of the wow Café Theater, where she devised and performed work together with Shaw and Weaver and numerous others in New York in the 1980s. As she details, being read as "doing dyke noir" transformed Hughes's sense of her collaborations with Split Britches and of the more general genres of experimental work at this time. This category captured something of the queer temporalities of these early lesbian aesthetic practices. Reworking rather than sidestepping the homophobic clichés of both popular film genres and canonized literary traditions, these performers were queering culture long before the term gained such widespread associations. As Hughes writes: "We looked at the movie stereotypes of dykes as ruthless, unruly women with murder in their hearts and we refused to get on board with any movement that would offer up sanitized versions of ourselves. We were done being nice girls. We were armed and dangerous and didn't care who knew it" ("Dyke" 100). For Hughes, *dyke noir* registers a generic combination that melds together two historically specific configurations: the feisty prequeer 1980s that reclaimed a category previously used to shame lesbians and a postwar B-movie, low-life genre with a compelling eroticized dynamic of masculine vulnerability and feminine duplicity in a world where everything is off-kilter and not what it seems. This combination spoke to the defiant appropriations of early lesbian experimental work that played generically within and against the histories of homophobic and misogynist cultural forms while refusing to be defined and constrained by their aesthetic and narrative structures. Works such as *The Well of Horniness* (1984), *The Lady Dick* (1985), *Snow White Unadorned*

(1986), and *Paradykes Lost* (1987–88) produced stylized pastiche that spoke to an emergent lesbian sense of the comic absurd from the margins. This history is glossed here, in a necessarily condensed way, to offer some sense of the textured temporal layers of shifting sexual signifiers and citations through which butch noir can be read today.

All Shaw's solo performances involve a knowing play with the having-already-been-read-ness of butch noir. What has been described by Dolan as Shaw's "working-class Belmont, Massachusetts, accent" and her "open-vowel style" of speech echoes the stylized retrospective tones of hard-boiled noir antiheroes ("Introduction" 3). Like the voiceovers of the noir protagonists before her, Shaw's retrospective is spoken in the first person but undercut conventional expectations of autobiographical confession, since the "I" here is unreliable, making only loose claims on the events narrated. Indifferent to being "convincing," she tells her audience in *You're Just Like My Father*: "It doesn't matter if you believe anything I say or not" (Shaw 53). And yet, in her own accounts of her practice, she also claims *not* to be acting: "This is how I was born. I was born like this . . . this is how I walk. I never make it up. I didn't construct this person for your pleasure. I'm performing as myself" (Shaw qtd. in Dolan, "Introduction" 1). Shaw's butch noir captures the artifice of a stylized masculinity no sooner installed than dismantled, yet no less affective for its self-conscious grandiosity that has already been punctured. *Gay Community News* describes her in *You're Just Like My Father* thus: "With classic butch finesse—that handsome combination of vulnerability and toughness—Peggy Shaw pieces together the challenges of growing up butch in the 1950s."¹⁵ In her solo pieces, Shaw glamorizes masculinity even as she dismantles its phallic claims, "charming the ladies" with clichéd lines and discarded gestures that nevertheless continue to spark seductive interactions (see fig. 8). "So many women, so little time," she laments in *Menopausal Gentleman*:

*I have nice breasts for a boy.
You'd describe me as a 54-year-old woman
who passes as a 35-year-old man
who likes the ladies.
A woman passing as a man who looks like a younger man,
a man passing as a woman
looks like an older woman.
That's just the way it goes.
I keep young by passing, you see.
I sacrifice being a woman for youth. It's a trade-off. (76)*

Figure 8
Peggy Shaw and
Clod Ensemble, *Must*
(2007)

Photo: Robin Hol-
land. Courtesy of
Peggy Shaw and Clod
Ensemble



Speaking back to a feminism that rejected her butchness in the infamous “sex wars” of the 1980s, Shaw plays with anti-essentialisms: “I was born this way. / I was born butch / I didn’t learn it in Theater School! / I’m so queer I don’t even have to talk about it, it speaks for itself” (84) (see fig. 9). Lowering her voice to match her appearance—“I gotta concentrate to keep my voice low/ to match my suit” (78)—Shaw undoes and rewrites the codes of butch noir that she lives and performs. As Case puts it, “Somehow the actor overcomes any text, yet the actor herself is a fiction and her social self is one too” (*Feminist* 44). Such play with and on “the fictions we live by” forms the basis of Shaw’s butch self-narrations, installing and dismantling the grounds of her identifications and enacting the illusory fixtures of identity categories while fleetingly offering us a taste of some of their erotic pleasures.

Figure 9
Peggy Shaw in *Menopausal Gentleman*
(1998)

Photo by and courtesy of Eva Weiss



Shaw has had a creative and pedagogical influence on lesbian culture, as Dolan has documented: her “performances of masculinity have brought her a certain renown and committed fan following”; those who have seen her work, writes Dolan, “attest to the vitality and seductiveness of her stage presence” (“Introduction” 1). In her solo show, *To My Chagrin* (2001), Shaw explores her role in relation to her grandson as his

“grand-butch-mother,” which, Prior claims, she has extended from her immediate familial group to whole new generations of feminists, lesbians, butches, gender-queers, and transmen. For more than four decades, Prior argues, Shaw has provided an aesthetics of touching audiences and students that has extended kinship in new queer directions (70).

The having-already-been-read-ness of Shaw’s butch noir shows a knowingness about the many readings of her body and her “inside stories,” and about the different temporal touchstones that have informed audiences’ responses to her performances. Shaw turns her refusals of gender normativities into a queer matter through the shifting timeframes of butch noir’s temporal drag, “thought less in terms of the psychic time of the individual than in the movement time of collective political fantasy” (Freeman 65). Both queering temporality through the lesbian pastiche of 1980s “dyke noir” and stretching the question of her legibility back across the contested historical terrain of second-wave feminism and its relationship to gendered forms of embodying lesbian desire, Shaw’s butch noir performs a reflexivity about being an object of desire across that very history (see Munt).

Aware of the desirability of her presence for many, Shaw seduces the audience of *Must* with the promise of intimate revelation that is never straightforwardly delivered. Anticipating future readings that *will already have been made* of her by the live audience, Shaw’s “inside story” maps her vulnerability onto her desirability, as she embodies the apparent mastery of articulating past narratives alongside stories of the future that others might have in mind for her. In these monologues, Shaw reverses and extends this anticipatory mode of address by moving the audience in and out of a sense of having already been read *by her* prior to the live show itself. Being included in the imagined audience of these monologues is sometimes exhilarating and sometimes anxiety provoking; but above all, it is flattering and gratifying to imagine one has been thought of by Shaw in advance. The banter back and forth with the second-person address, a “you” that is both generic and personalized, hails us into the very moment of the live performance and has the effect of making people sit on the edge of their seats, feeling highly attuned to *being present in the present tense* of Shaw’s presence.

There is another reason for the heightened affect around reading relations in the audience in the later performances of *Must*. In 2011, Shaw suffered a massive, life-threatening stroke. Following a break from the schedule, she continued performing, having suffered memory loss that she managed to build into the piece. Nevertheless, there were moments when it was not predictable whether Shaw would recall all her lines. If Shaw’s

performances up until this time had been characterized by the thrill of her unexpected shifts in pace and swerves in genre, this heightened affect was intensified by the effects of her stroke. The audience, like Shaw herself, had to face her vulnerability and her mortality in the light of this knowledge. Prior offers an account of a performance of *Must* at the University of Massachusetts only three months after the stroke: “Already a performance about memory and loss, mourning and dying, Shaw’s palpable frailty the night of this performance filled me with an eerie feeling that this could be the last time I would watch her perform” (71). A show about the queering of time and the question of how it is made present in and through the body, the sense of the passing of time in *Must* took on a new significance after the stroke, which might have meant Shaw could no longer perform at all. Yet her continued presence on stage ever since has testified to her exceptional will and energy even as it also brought her own mortality into the exploration of medical science in this show.¹⁶

Must—The Inside Story

Must is a word that both makes a forceful demand and signals futurity. Whether an obligation, a compulsion, or a command, *must* is an auxiliary verb of immediate necessity that requires a subject: she must speak, we must listen. On the cover of the miniature artist’s book of the monologues published to accompany the live performances, a close-up photograph shows the word *MUST* tattooed on Shaw’s naked shoulder (see fig. 10). The placement of this ornate font blends the futurity of the imperative with an invitation to speculate about intimate stories from the past that are written on Shaw’s body. The show’s subtitle, *The Inside Story*, suggests an investigative structure that ties together the genres of crime, medicine, and romance. The forensics of science meets the forensics of the theater in *Must*. As James Frieze puts it: Shaw uses “metaphor to perform an autopsy on her living body,” offering “a journey underneath the skin, a mapping of the human body in which sites of love and loss are placed under the microscope and analysed with a forensic gaze” (159). But, he argues, she jams “theatre’s forensic machinery” (148) and refuses its “diagnostic imperative (160). *The Inside Story* promises the intimacy of personal revelation, confession, and physical exposure while never confirming whether the scenarios referred to belong to Shaw’s own personal history.

In *Must*, Shaw generates and then refuses to satisfy the generic expectations of the confessional forms she parodies. *The Inside Story* cites

Figure 10
Peggy Shaw and
Clod Ensemble, *Must*
(2008), artist book-
cover

Photo by and cour-
tesy of Eva Weiss



the self-narrations of her previous work. In *You're Just Like My Father*, for example, she begins wearing only her boxers and an Ace bandage draped round her neck, which she then uses to bind her chest. Echoing the reverse-strip of some of Weaver's Split Britches performances, Shaw slowly dresses and binds herself on stage, as she tells stories about the history of her butch body (see fig. 11). *Menopausal Gentleman* opens with Shaw describing how she is "trying to pass as a person when there is a beast inside me, a beast on fire who waits in the shadows of the night." "Let me try and describe it to you," she says, "what it all looks like, and how it all takes place inside my body" (71). In *Must*, Shaw reads her body's "signs of life" through retrospective narrations and examines the desires behind the audience's voyeuristic curiosity. The queerness of having-already-been-read-ness is repeatedly extended outward into the discursive spaces that have anticipated our affective responses before we feel them.

Shaw's performance in *Must* moves us through shifts in register, mood, and genre, repeatedly undoing our expectations and transforming them into their opposites or holding them in surreal relation to each other. As James Frieze suggests, by "saturating the body with words and emotions," the more "she continues to script," the more Shaw tries to "outrun the process of being scripted" (158). "Underscored by piano, violin and bass," he writes, she "tries to reach conclusions while pouring out confessions

Figure 11
 Peggy Shaw,
You're Just Like My
Father (1994)

Photo by and courtesy of Eva Weiss

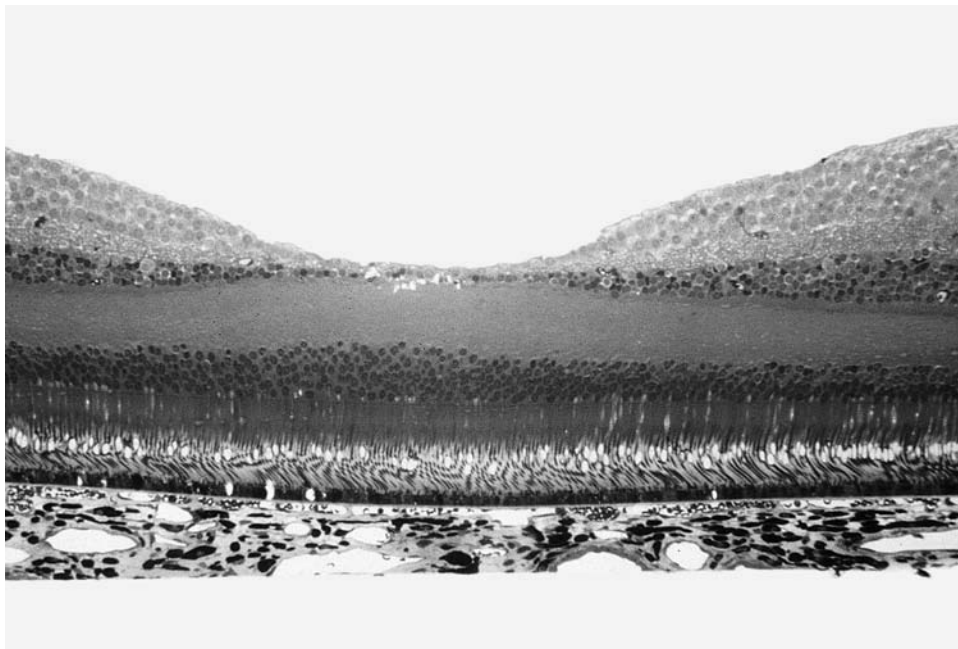


and fantasies, all the while reporting, illustrating, dancing, *as if answering a demand*" (158; emphasis added). The having-already-been-read-ness of butch noir structures these proliferating associations. The audience's reading apparatus goes into overdrive, trying to keep abreast while digesting an excess of competing signifiers that collide with each other across incompatible scales and time frames.

The Inside Story of *Must* is about feeling the disturbance of the queerness of time in your body. It is about deceptive appearances and unsettling sensations, about not knowing whom to trust, about knowing when intimacy might lead to knowledge, and about what counts as evidence and whom to believe. As Shaw tells us in monologue 2:

Figure 12
Section through the
fovea (center of the
retina)

Photo: Chris Guerin.
Courtesy of Well-
come Library,
London



*There are different ways of seeing inside me:
You could guess what's in here.
You could x-ray me.
You could touch me.
Or you could just believe what I tell you.
(Shaw and Willson 142)*

Shaw narrates her “inside story” while magnified, microscopic images of the inside of the body from the Wellcome Library—“section through the tongue,” “hair cell of the inner ear,” “newly fertilised human egg”—are back-projected onto a large-scale screen, becoming exquisite abstract forms that resemble mountainous landscapes, repeating textured patterns, and visual networks (see fig. 12). These visual magnifications resonate with a poetics of scale in Shaw’s monologues, as she ranges from the details of everyday life to sweeping generalizations and back again. The medical slides transform the microscopic into the macroscopic: the inside view of the human body becomes a vision of abstract geological patterns and contours. The energetic movement of Shaw’s live body contrasts with the stillness of the enduring landscapes of formal beauty projected on the screen. These detailed images of cells and hair follicles, of nerve tissue, muscle, and skull are scaled up to turn time into an abstraction of universal proportions. Combining with

Shaw's physical liveliness, the magnified images shift the signified body of this onstage presence to connect to the nonspecified abstract forms reproduced on the screen. Suggesting a transcendence of human frailty and mortality, these magnified images become the scaled-up signs of the enduring nonhuman temporalities of other forms of material life.

Shaw pastiches the all-knowing narrator of film noir through a masquerade of his mastery, as she simultaneously anticipates her place as the queer object both of curiosity and desire for the audience. By "standing outside herself," Frieze suggests, Shaw breaks "the diagnostic chain of symptom-reading → identification of condition → prescription" (158), instead anticipating how she has already been read through the logic of diagnosis and the structures of detection. Performing her body's multiple histories through both "paranoid" and "reparative" readings (Sedgwick), she generates a tension between the "will have" in the having-already-been-read-ness of butch noir and the present-tense pleasure for the audience of being "on side" with her stage presence.

Through this play with the time of live performance, Shaw mobilizes the mastery and vulnerability of having-already-been-read-ness alongside its opposite: the transient presence of performance embodying these temporalities. Peggy Phelan has famously claimed: "Performance's only life is in the present [. . .]. Performance's being [. . .] becomes itself through disappearance" (146). It is this quality that Shaw puts into dialogue with the images projected behind her and with the history of noir cinema that she invokes, blending the liveness of the time performance with the artifice of narration and of the image. The "aura" of Shaw's presence on stage (the performance is only temporary and cannot be captured) is in dialogue with technologically reproduced images from medical archives and silent cinema, which promise to outlive us.

These biomedical and cinematic histories of visual representation are folded back into Shaw's stories of her own live body on stage (haunted by the dead body of the anatomy lesson), as *Must* combines the ontologies of live performance, recorded film, and medical photography. Imitating cinema's animating capacities, Shaw breathes new life into the stylized bodies of the screen. Her onstage relationship to both the live music and to these back-projections shifts from synchrony and dialogue to belatedness and irony: sometimes she becomes the human screen onto which the images are also literally projected; at other moments, her presence battles for the audience's attention as she sings or shouts her monologues to be heard above the other sounds or as she moves intensely around on

and off the stage to hold our attention despite the competition from the projected images.

The tension between vulnerability and mastery is held in the spaces between the body's affective presence in the theater and its performance of tropes from the history of cinema and medicine. The liveness and the transience belong to Shaw and the musicians, in contrast to the still and moving images on the screen. Frieze argues: "While Shaw projects onto us, her body is projected onto by images she sometimes tries to evade [. . .] [and] increasingly contends with, obstructs and flirts with"; then, at certain moments, he suggests, "she allows herself and us to stop and study them. The microscopic images [. . .] seen so closely [. . .] appear to be something entirely different. The closer the inspection gets [. . .] the more 'foreign' the body appears to be" (159). This play with scale generates a tension between liveness and liveliness and between the physical presence of the body and representations of its interiors. There is a sense of temporal overload as we yield to the circuitous directions of this poetic journey.¹⁷ The endlessly shifting modes of address—from the particularities of the homophobic imaginary and the voyeuristic genres of cinematic and scientific gazes to the universalizing abstractions—hail the audience through both the queer temporalities of butch noir and the familiar temporal strangeness of the having-already-been-read-ness of human subjectivity. Throughout *Must*, Shaw's dialogic address reads her own body by anticipating and articulating discursive positions through which it will have already been inscribed.

Shaw's work has been a major source of the continued circulation of the figure of the butch in lesbian cultures. But if butch noir captures something distinctive to Shaw, its significance reaches beyond her into modes of retro self-fashioning that embody a queer sense of having-already-been-read-ness in a culture that, despite recent legal liberalizations, has continued to require paranoid readings as a mode of survival for many. While this temporality resonates in particularly intense ways in queer cultures, it also returns us to the disjunctive time of our inauguration as subjects in language; and, more than this, *Must's* preoccupation with both the queerness of time and the queering of time ultimately transforms this strangeness into rescaled material landscapes, stretching beyond the human form and Shaw's own immediate context and particularity. The ellipses and traces of memory and history are held in the contours of these planetary forms with microscopic origins. In the final sections of this article, I look more closely at three examples of the textures of Shaw's monologues to explore how they

blend butch noir temporalities with the having-already-been-read-ness of subject formation in language, and I consider the embodied affects of being hailed into the present tense of live performance in this work.

Rogue Butch

Being *in must* or *musth* refers to that annual period of heightened sexual excitement in male elephants (bulls) during which violent frenzies can occur.¹⁸ Shaw's "pachydermal" identifications and entangled affiliations with the figure of the Elephant Man connect with what Elin Diamond has called the "rogue" behavior of the butch lesbian (see fig. 8). Running across the monologues of *Must* are Shaw's roguish confessions: "I spend too much time looking at beautiful ladies" she tells us in monologue 2 (Shaw and Willson 142). And later, in monologue 8:

Sshh.

I hear voices in the background. Very low. I think they're talking about my body. They're looking at my insides, on a machine. They will never guess I am a rogue by the shadow of my insides. (150)

Like the Elephant Man before her, Shaw's medical history is turned into a show, extending her body into the classificatory world of natural history. But unlike—or perhaps on behalf of—the Elephant Man, Shaw speaks back to the discourses of deviant desires and abnormal bodies in the history of both cinema and medicine. Shaw makes herself into the object of fascination and then refuses the terms of voyeurism that have structured the visual pleasures of each respective field. The script outruns the discourse that has already assigned her to ridicule by making an identification with one of the most famously abjected bodies in the history of science.

This association is established in the prelude, when Shaw stands among the audience in full house lighting and addresses us directly:

*I've been waiting for you
and now you're here.*

*I am descended
from a long line of pachyderms.
I'm a non-ruminant undulate,
Thick-skinned Elephas Maximus.
I am not sensitive to criticism or ridicule.*

*I know one thing.
 (It's always good to know one thing).
 I'm a Lover.
 Mama was. Papa was too.
 Come with me. (Shaw and Willson 139)*

Shaw's butch noir brings an anticipatory temporality into the audience through her investigative address: "What do you think happened? Who turned on the lights?" she asks, as we move into darkness and the music begins. The expectation of having already been read by others, of criticism or ridicule, alongside Shaw's efforts to get ahead of potential derision, heightens our sense of being present in the present through the unpredictability of how she might be about to implicate us in her story or even speak to us directly.

Invoking these associative registers only to disarm them, the proximity of the "pachydermal descentance" to the "Lover" brings incongruent cross-species kin in proximity with erotic identifications. In making this genealogical connection to the Elephant Man, whose overgrown body parts Victorians paid to see in curiosity shops and freak shows, Shaw takes the homophobically abjected butch lesbian body—as oversized, as monstrous, as masquerade, as phallic theft—and twists its logics to refuse its shame:

*I am leaving these bones to science.
 These big bones that get misidentified.
 I wish I'da gave birth like an elephant walking around.
 (Shaw and Willson 156)*

Recasting these bull elephants *in musth* through the pain of heartbreak, Shaw's monologue is full of lament, of longing for the return of lost love, as if fluids were leaking out of her own body on stage (Prior 73). The secretion from the temporal glands when bull elephants are *in musth*, she tells us, creates the impression that they weep—that "tears flow freely from their eyes. I am crying for you" (Shaw and Willson 155). Here, animal drives become the human pain of lost love and rejection. By identifying with their most abjected forms, Shaw's combination of the *Elephas Maximus*, the Elephant Man, and the rogue butch trump the discourses through which lesbians have been constituted as undesirable, pathological, monstrous, and in need of conversion.

First Person, Second Person

Shaw's work is a live collaboration with the audience, constructed between the "you" and the "I." As she puts it, "I am a solo artist and, by virtue of that, a collaborator—/ 'I would be nothing without you.'" (Shaw "On Being" 39). Blending intimacy and abstraction in her temporal compressions in *Must*, Shaw shifts between second-person direct address and the generic "you" of narrative scenarios that resemble part-memory, part-fantasy, and part-everyday story: "The tips of my fingers trace you on a foggy window. They trace your outline and they make a heart with an arrow through it. Such a simple map showing the pain of an arrow through the heart, explaining that feeling you have when something outside yourself draws you to it" (Shaw and Willson 140). Like fragments of a dream that condense and displace, this scenario combines a sense of the familiar and the unfamiliar. Both centering the audience as addressee and allowing us to move out of the spotlight into a more impersonal genre, the shifts and swerves in and out of direct address are part of the pleasures and dangers of the unpredictability of Shaw's script: the "you" might suddenly be directed at one person, or she might lose herself in retrospection, seeming to leave behind the live audience altogether for a moment. "It's funny talking to you this way now, as if, in a way, you're a stranger. There was a time when I felt aligned with you, complicit in what we both knew. Now I'm not sure. I'm not sure of anything. I'm just gonna tell you a story, the inside story" (Shaw and Willson 142). Throughout *Must*, Shaw uses the first person to read and narrate her own body, anticipating and articulating discursive positions through which it will have already been inscribed. And yet the "I" is always provisional. There is no neat match between the spoken first-person, the body on the stage, and the persona beyond the performance. Shaw's stories seem to be autobiographical, as she shifts and compresses temporal registers through personal and impersonal modes of address, but we can never be sure, and she tells us not to believe her.

Telling stories about personal histories, Shaw cites and subverts the vulnerability of woman's body as the classic object of the medical gaze: "I can't lie down to be examined; it makes me feel like I will die. It scares me to expose the front of my chest without my arms covering it. I am feeling foolish in your room—like in the ladies room—a bull in a china shop" (Shaw and Willson 146). The exposure of the woman's body to the male gaze of the medical establishment is transposed as masculinity shifts to carry feminine vulnerability in the normative spaces of shaming gender incongruence.

Shaw evokes a wounded masculinity but never becomes the object of pity, consistently retaining her voice as “the Lover.” The seriousness of exposure is undercut by her confident flirtatiousness:

If you look at me from the front you will notice there is a part of my body you can't put your finger on.

I'm not afraid of you and I'm not afraid of being alone.

How do I know I can trust you? How do I know you haven't got a gun in your pocket, or a stethoscope?

I feel your fingerprints all over me.

(Shaw and Willson 142–43)

Reading her own body as if from the audience's point of view, Shaw pastiches the connections between criminality and sexuality in classic noir—the evidence of transgression of the law and of normative desires leaves “prints” that could count against her in the future. Her having-already-been-readness stages the interplay between her anticipation of how she is being read in live time and the stories she narrates about previous readings of it in the past.

If there is a noirish grounding to the wounded masculinity on stage, then it is never far from Shaw's reputation for butch seductiveness that has a long history in Split Britches. When, lit only by a spotlight, Shaw asks, “Would you like to see my body?” (Shaw and Willson 145), the laughter in response is as knowing as her question. Taking off her tie, she halts the laughter with a shift in register:

I'm sixty-four and I'm lucky:

*I have both my breasts still,
safe, inside my suit.*

My upper arms are big, 'cause my dad said life is hard, so he made us lift our weight every day before we went to school. My wing on the right side is lower than the one on the left; you will notice that right away. It kinda droops. I have been told that my clavicles are the sexiest part of my body. There's a photo of them recorded on a cell phone somewhere. (145)

Pushing her jacket and shirt back over her naked shoulders and holding her clothes tightly at the front, her hands cover her upper chest as she asks: “Can you smell the years of sun on my skin making it rough like elephant's hide, or are you too busy thinking I look like Marilyn Monroe?” (146). The “you” of direct address (might we be close enough to smell her skin?) shifts again to the generic “you” of generalized recognition and misrecognition.

Pastiche her own having-already-been-read-ness, she plays butch noir back to an audience increasingly willing to submit to her readings of their readings of her: “The reason I get mistaken for a man is my neck. It’s my Adam’s apple that’s throwing you off. My Adam’s apple combined with my suit and tie is what’s confusing you. My thyroid cartilage and my cricoid cartilage combine to challenge you” (146). Shaw’s descriptions of her flesh, bones, muscles, organs, and skin transform the voyeurism of the anatomy theater into a seductive refusal of gender’s self-evident transparency.

Holding authority and vulnerability in the balance, Shaw’s readings try to get ahead of the game only to undermine their own certainties with new doubts. But her having-already-been-read-ness is not reducible to the singularity of the will-have-been-read-ness of the future perfect. Shaw’s performance of her body’s medical history invokes two contrasting temporal registers: future-oriented vulnerability (how might I have been read by you?) and the mastery of reading the having-already-been-read-ness of your having already read me, claimed through a noirish retrospection (I have already incorporated that reading and reworked it for my purposes).

Embodying what Edelman has called “the queerness of time’s refusal to submit to a temporal logic” (188), Shaw’s stories about her own body crush together temporal scales, as chronology is abandoned in favor of the discontinuous temporality of “the body multiple”¹⁹:

I have been thirteen bodies in my life

This is only one of them

[. . .] I fell off the porch and got a stick in my eye [. . .] I was born with broken clavicles [. . .] I got pneumococcal meningitis when I slept with a woman for the first time [. . .] I had a lump removed from my breast. [. . .] I had a baby. (Shaw and Willson 146)

This condensation turns the body into the history of its injuries, illnesses, and physical events, inviting us to take a close look at its scars, its folds, its wrinkles, its skin. Is the body that endured childhood injury the same as the one that had cancer? Is the body that yearned for sex with women the same as the one that gave birth? What gets lost when we think about the time of our bodies in the singular?

Must performs the artifice of temporality itself. Shaw combines voiceover retrospection with shifts in time that intensify her live presence, moving us into an affective poetic narration of the history of her body in the present time of her performance: its desires and its diseases, its abnormal growths and its injuries, its treatments and its surgeries, its birthing and

its aging. These are the genres of physical semiotics through which Shaw replays the roguish dimensions of butch noir. Shaw's body becomes the anatomical anchor for these dispersed poetic registers as they speak personally and generically, undermining their own foundations and compressing temporal and spatial scales to signify the universal through the particular.

Rescaling Time

A couple of hundred million years ago,
before you were born, my body was
joined together to form one land mass.
Slowly my twelve plates started moving
away from each other. My continents
were dancing to the music of deep time.
A dance of incredible slowness. Powerful
enough to throw up the mountains and
pour away the oceans.

My tectonic plates have always rubbed
and exploded next to each other. Their
edges are sites of intense geologic activ-
ity. The doctors gave me beta-blockers
so I wouldn't cause a volcano or an
earthquake. [. . .]

Sshh. You can hear the plates of my skull
moving as I talk and the plates in my
hips moving as I walk. Can you hear
all my bones fitting together as I keep
living?
—Shaw and Willson

No less than the history of the planet is narrated through the rescaling of the materiality of Shaw's physiology. As its sub-subtitle—*a Journey through the Shadows of a City, a Pound of Flesh, a Book of Love*—suggests, *Must* is “a mapping of the body in which the environmental, anatomical and emotional are bound together” (Frieze 159). Evoking her inside story through the time of abstracted landscapes, Shaw sustains a sense of the entanglements of the particular physicality of the live body on the stage and a sense of the strata of its accreted natural histories.²⁰

Discordant and fractured, these scales simultaneously stretch cinematic time, erotic time, social time, biological time, and geological time together. It is Shaw's command of these multiple referents that holds the particular and the general so powerfully within the same frame, blending and mixing them, as she throws them out into a visual landscape that makes time feel material: “I keep finding the future inside of me. I can hear it really loud, coming like a field of windmills, or a hive of bees” (Shaw and Willson 140). Echoing the visual scaling up of the back-projected slides, the stories connecting Shaw to the history of the universe itself seem to materialize time in the history of a particular body. The problem of capturing time or pinning it down, which Freeman explores in *Time Binds*, is condensed in

Shaw's body in her moves between historically specific stylized postwar noir masculinity and *Must*'s simultaneously expansive and compressive temporal gestures.

The foundation for the affective appeal of the apparent omnipotence of the butch noir narrator is the deeper pull on the subject who has already been read before coming into being. These discordant scales push time's strangeness into proximity with our own physicality and mortality. Through the performance of its material histories, *Must* pushes toward returning the body to time. But if the body performed on stage has a history that cannot be captured in time or by narration, it has a materiality that is also hard to grasp: that uncanny sense of the embodiment of time—being *of* rather than *in* time.

Guiding us through imaginary landscapes, Shaw rescales geological and biological time to share the queer frames of intimate histories and stories of lost loves. *Must* makes present the strangeness of folding these incommensurable temporalities into the linear narrative or into the logic of a tightly bound time frame of a singular embodied subject. The live music and the liveliness of Shaw's commanding presence work with and against the still and moving images from medical and cinema archives. Time is stretched out to planetary proportions and compacted into the intensity of the present moment, as forms of representation collide across their mortal and reproducible incarnations. The converging experimental, popular, and medical sources crowd in to claim a place in a story about being out of synch when timing is of the essence.



The figure of the butch is one whose significance has become increasingly urgent to evaluate in light of its potential disappearance among the plethora of newly articulated identity categories that are increasingly characterizing and reconfiguring current feminist, queer, and trans cultures. It is in this environment that Newton has recently published her memoir *My Butch Career*. This memoir tracks the personal and professional stakes for her generation in living a life as a lesbian whose butchness made her desires legible on her body for all to read. Reflecting back on the pain, as well as the pleasures, of times when explicit homophobia and misogyny were encountered as everyday expressions of acceptable prejudice and aversion, Newton returns to decisions taken and paths chosen in her life—ones that might well have been lived differently in today's trans cultures. With the experienced eye of the anthropologist, Newton's account is deeply and

subtly embedded in the social and historical formations of what made her butchness livable at that time and what has now changed that might make such a category redundant in the future.

The memoir is a retrospective form of narration that brings the past into the present, whether of the wow theater café, like Hughes's, or of the career of a lesbian academic, such as Newton's, written about a time when homophobia made her butchness so threatening to the academy that at times it looked like she might find no place there at all. The vulnerability that exists alongside the desirability, articulated by the butch noir figure and elaborated in this article thus has a physical and emotional historicity. Looking back, we may find that the cultures of the butch belonged to a particular period in the history of sexuality. If there is value to paying close attention to this figure as she becomes something of an endangered species, there is much to draw upon from the butch noir's own retrospective reading practices in understanding the shifting temporalities of her queer presence.

Shaw's butch noir takes retrospection and turns it inside out and back again. *Must* is a performance evoking the specificity of the having-already-been-read-ness of butch noir, while simultaneously bringing to light the very strange temporal origins of becoming a modern subject. As a generic erotic form, butch noir engages the subject on a psychic and social level, disrupting any linear teleological account of which layer of already-been-read-ness came first. Butch noir has the potency to expose the multi-layered intricacies of the politics and ontologies of what it means to try and get there first in relation to the already-been-read-ness that produces us all over and over again. Shaw's butch noir connects the queer temporalities of designated bodies and histories to the inauguration of the "I" in language; it generates temporal and spatial scales that unearth a sense of the universal in the particular. Queerness cannot be neatly isolated here but rather saturates the whole affective disturbance of the temporal field. Combining the pastiche of noirish hindsight with the charismatic pleasures of her stage presence, Shaw's capacity to shift and compress time frames defies the imperative to choose between lesbian particulars and human universals.

Butch noir enacts a series of structural moves that expose the illusions of our psychic investments in the ordering and sequencing of time. If there is a haunting strangeness in being called into existence by the "I" we subsequently use to name ourselves, then the enactment of the having-already-been-readness of butch noir makes affectively present something that more usually remains repressed and unavailable. The anticipatory push and pull of having-already-been-read-ness is the constitutive art of butch

noir performance genres. The thrill of being read by one so proficient in getting ahead of the game lies in that sense of being undone by she who keeps refusing to be. And it is this blend of retrospective mastery and present-tense exposure that this figure offers up to the sometimes overreaching theoretical debates about queer temporality, as she scripts and rescripts the future she has in mind for us. Whatever we find to say about her, the chances are she will have got there before us.

I would like to thank the following people for their helpful responses to earlier work that formed the basis for this article: David Alderson, Daniela Caselli, Ann Cvetkovich, Laura Doan, Hilary Hinds, Anu Koivunen, Monica Pearl, and Patricia White. I am especially grateful to Amber Jacobs for insightful conversations about psychoanalysis and queer theory in response to earlier drafts of this article. I would also like to thank Janelle Hixon for her assistance in preparing the final draft of this article. I am grateful to Debra Miller, Eva Weiss, Split Britches, and Clod Ensemble for permission to reproduce the images and to Holly Hughes for support with this project.

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Notes

- 1 The acronym wow stands for Women's One World. For a history of this performance space, see Davy.
- 2 The term dialogic is associated with the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, who conceptualizes "dialogic speech" as acknowledging sets of social relations between and among speakers constituted by historical and cultural formations. For further discussion of dialogics in relation to feminist theory, see Pearce.
- 3 For a theoretical discussion of the "lesbian phallus," see ch. 2 of Butler's *Bodies That Matter*.
- 4 For the inaugurating essay on paranoid and reparative readings, see Sedgwick. For a discussion of the future perfect in the context of queer experimental video work, see Cho.
- 5 On recent discussions of the limits of antinormativity for queer theory, see the special issue of *differences* edited by Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth Wilson.
- 6 The lesbian theater company, Split Britches, was originally formed in 1980 by three writers/performers, Deb Margolin, Peggy Shaw, and Lois Weaver. Each has also done solo work, but only the latter two continue to perform together and to use the name of the company (see Harris). See Case (*Split*) for a full history. For a recent collection

- on Weaver's work, see Harvie and Weaver.
- 7 Clod Ensemble is a performance company based in London and founded in 1996 by director Suzy Willson and composer Paul Clark. The script for *Must* was coauthored by Shaw and Willson.
 - 8 See Sherman for a detailed account of the historical emergence of modern time.
 - 9 See Laplanche. See also Fletcher, "The Unconscious, the Id, and the Other." For a critical evaluation of Laplanche's work to psychoanalytic theory, see Fletcher and Ray; and Fletcher.
 - 10 For a critical assessment of the problems with how and why teleology has been deemed heteronormative in queer theory, see Traub.
 - 11 See Dinshaw's introduction for an excellent account of the conceptual tensions of elaborating the queerness of time; and see Wiegman, "The Times We're In" for a discussion about the relationship between time and affect in queer feminist theorizing.
 - 12 The classic noir period in cinema is usually located roughly between 1945 and 1953, with a particular focus on the films of 1946 (on contexts, in particular, see Copjec; and Naremore). The debates about women in film noir were inaugurated by E. Ann Kaplan's edited collection on the subject.
 - 13 See E. Ann Kaplan's edited collection, *Women in Film Noir*.
 - 14 Richard Dyer has written about the history of queer figures in film noir in "Postscript: Queers and Women in Film Noir."
 - 15 This quotation is taken from the back cover of Dolan's book.
 - 16 Shaw's most recent solo performance is *RUFF*, in which she reflects on life before and after a stroke; her memory loss is built into the structure and form of the show, and she is accompanied by Weaver, who sits near the front row as her regular prompter.
 - 17 On the forms of liveliness, see the introduction to the special issue of *Body and Society* on animation and automation, edited by Stacey and Suchman.
 - 18 This term is spelled both ways: *must* and *musth*. For further discussion of Shaw's identifications, see Prior.
 - 19 This phrase is borrowed from Anmarie Mol's book of the same title.
 - 20 As well as Frieze's eloquent account of these convergences, see Barad on what she calls material entanglements between human and nonhuman actors.

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