

Haverford College

## Haverford Scholarship

---

Faculty Publications

English

---

2014

### "When Elephants Are in Must": Peggy Shaw, Acts of Trans/fer, and the Present Future of Queer Desire

Jaclyn Pryor

*Haverford College*, [jpryor@haverford.edu](mailto:jpryor@haverford.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarship.haverford.edu/english\\_facpubs](https://scholarship.haverford.edu/english_facpubs)

---

#### Repository Citation

Pryor, J. "When Elephants Are in Must": Peggy Shaw, Acts of Trans/fer, and the Present Future of Queer Desire" TDR 58 (4): 68-79

This Journal Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Haverford Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Haverford Scholarship. For more information, please contact [nmedeiro@haverford.edu](mailto:nmedeiro@haverford.edu).

# “When Elephants Are in Must”

Peggy Shaw, *Acts of Trans/fer*,  
and the Present Future of Queer Desire

Jaclyn Pryor



*“I love that part, when Frankenstein splits his stitches and he dies, fertilizing the earth where that little girl grows tomatoes.” [...] Though he seems to inseminate the little girl (for his body fluids will indirectly enter the orifice of her mouth when she eats the tomatoes), he transcends both the supposedly natural pain of childbirth and the cyclical time of reproduction. Like Walt Whitman, he disseminates himself. Together, his body and the act he performs with it suggest a historiographical practice wherein the past takes the form of something already fragmented, “split,” and decaying, and the present and future appear equally porous. Indeed, they seem to answer Roland Barthes’s call [...] for a model of dispersed but insistently carnal continuity, which I call binding. In this sense, the monster’s body is not a “body” at all but a figure for relations between bodies past and present, for the insistent return of a corporealized historiography and future making of the sort to which queers might lay claim.*

—Elizabeth Freeman (2005:84–85)

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

—Peggy Shaw (2011a:139)

It is early April in Amherst, Massachusetts, which means that the air is wet, and crisp, and the dogwood trees are just about to burst with pink. It is almost 8:00 p.m. and the Bartlett Hall Auditorium at the University of Massachusetts is packed. Butches, dykes, femmes, faggots, dandies, tranzies, queens, queers. And that is just my row. We've come to see Peggy Shaw and Clod Ensemble's production of *Must: The Inside Story*, directed by Suzy Willson, which had been touring for three years prior to this 2011 production.<sup>1</sup>

The majority of spectators are college students—including a large number of queer, genderqueer,<sup>2</sup> and trans masculine-identified people, many already familiar with Peggy Shaw as a performer, teacher, and butch icon.<sup>3</sup> While her collaborative work with the Hot Peaches, Spiderwoman, and the original Split Britches preceded them by decades, the young queers in Shaw's audience know her work because she has recently visited the Five College area to teach and perform, as she has been doing with regularity for three decades.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, Peggy Shaw has been trans/mittng lesbian feminist cultural history through live "acts of [trans/fer]" to young, local queers for quite some time.<sup>5</sup> Such embodied forms of pedagogy are vital in a United States where "straight" history is archived in public institutions of memory (museums, libraries, film, popular media), but the always already marginalized lives of queer and trans people slip from history because there are few institutions devoted to collecting, protecting, and trans/mittng their history and collective memory.<sup>6</sup> Acts of trans/fer are particularly crucial at

- 
- 1 I learned the term "tranzie" from trans male activist and educator Tones Smith, who used the term as a trans-positive colloquial alternative to the derogatory term, "trannie." In the first sentence of the opening epigraph, Freeman is quoting Hillary Brougher's *The Sticky Fingers of Time* (1997).
  2. The meaning of genderqueer is varied, but generally refers to people who identify as doing their gender in non-normative, queer ways.
  3. For the purposes of this essay, I focus on the relationship between butch lesbian and trans masculine histories and identities. For a more inclusive analysis of trans femininity and cultural politics, see, for instance, Gabeba Baderoon, "Gender Within Gender" (2011); Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, *Nobody Passes* (2006); Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw* (1994); Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl* (2007); Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (2008); as well as the special issue of *GLQ* edited by Susan Stryker (1998).
  4. The Five College area in and around Amherst includes Amherst College, Hampshire College, Mount Holyoke College, Smith College, and the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Hampshire College commissioned Shaw's first solo show, *You're Just Like My Father* (1994), for their Friends and Family Weekend, and Shaw has been a frequent artist-in-residence in Hampshire's theatre program since the 1980s.
  5. In this essay, I am building upon Diana Taylor's notion of performance as an act of cultural transmission, or transfer, with my use of the neologism, "trans/fer," to invoke the particular ways in which butch and trans cultural histories are being transmitted through the live enactment of this performance (see Taylor 2003).
  6. For more on the politics of queer historiography see Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, *Hidden From History* (1990).

Figure 1. (facing page) Cover art for the published performance text of *Must* by Clod Ensemble and Peggy Shaw (2008). (Photo by Eva Weiss)

*Jaclyn Pryor is Visiting Assistant Professor of English and Peace, Justice, and Human Rights at Haverford College. She received her PhD from the University of Texas-Austin. Her writing has been published in Theatre Topics, Theatre Journal, Ollantay Theater Magazine, Liminalities, and in the anthology, Experiments in a Jazz Aesthetic: Art, Activism, Academia, and The Austin Project (University of Texas Press, 2010). Her first book, Time Slips: Queer Temporalities in Performance after 2001, is under contract with Northwestern. She has received artist residencies and/or awards from Stillwater Foundation, City of Austin, Austin Art Alliance, Austin Critics Table, First Night, Creative Research Lab, Land Arts of the American West, Playa, and Wassaic Project.*

this historical moment in queer politics, when emergent trans masculinities need a queer past and clear future to which they might (and deserve to) lay claim. In this sense, Shaw emerges as living history, opening the archive that is her aging, butch body for her young audiences to research.

The aging, fragile, virtuosic, self-proclaimed “grand-butch-mother” (Shaw 2011a:49) that is Peggy Shaw is the kind of skin-splitting, seed-spreading Frankenstein that Elizabeth Freeman describes in the opening epigraph. Like the monster that splits his body open to fertilize the earth and inseminate the little girl who eats the tomatoes that grow in its fertile soil, Shaw, I argue, ever so queerly slips inside her young, “porous,” and desirous audience, fertilizing the “present future” of queer with historiographical knowledge.<sup>7</sup> Here, I am particularly interested in the process through which Shaw, an icon of butch lesbianism, effectively “seeds” her trans-masculine spectators and fans. I am interested, too, in what can be gained from reading this act of trans/fer through an erotics of intergenerational “touch.” In touching (us) without even physically touching us, Shaw trans/mits her butch past onto the next generation of queer, genderqueer, and trans spectators and fans. Like Frankenstein, like Whitman, Shaw disseminates herself so that she and we may live in perpetuity.

### Acts of Trans/fer

Diana Taylor writes, “Performances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated, or what Richard Schechner has called ‘twice-behaved behavior’” (2003:2). To touch, transmit, and inseminate without making contact is not only ontologically performative, as Taylor asserts, it is quintessentially queer. As non-biological reproduction, it subverts the heterocapitalist mandate that situates the production of surplus capital and nuclear families as *the* nationalist project. Contrary to dominant culture, Shaw uses performance as a technology for producing affect rather than capital, and queer kinship ties, rather than bio/logical family.

For instance, when Shaw refers to herself as a “grand-butch-mother,” she is at once invoking her literal role as a butch grandmother to her grandson, Ian—a relationship bond that forms the core narrative in *To My Chagrin* (2001)—but also her symbolic role as the “grand” butch elder to and for many butches, genderqueers, and trans men. As Dolan explains in her editor’s introduction to Shaw’s recent performance anthology:

In a generation in which lesbians and trans men take pleasure in stretching the envelope of conventional masculinity, and queer communities engage politically in transgender identity and style, Shaw’s performances of a complex combination of femininity and masculinity preceded contemporary transgender political activism and theorizing, making her in some ways the “butch hero” who came to model, for many trans folk, the potential of refusing biological gender assignments. (in Shaw 2011a:15–16)

Shaw is esteemed by trans male, genderqueer, and gender nonconforming youth in spite of the fact that she unequivocally maintains her status as “butch” “lesbian,” and “woman”—labels that are sometimes pitted against (rather than seen as part of) the trans liberation movement.<sup>8</sup> Shaw’s status as “butch hero” to trans-masculine youth can be traced in part to those various practices such as breast binding and suit wearing which she performs in *You’re Just Like My Father* (1994) and *Menopausal Gentleman* (1998), and that today are associated with trans masculinity as much as (if not more than) lesbianism per se.

---

7. I borrow the term “the present future” of queer from Traub (2007).

8. Again, I am referring specifically to the relationship between Shaw’s butch identity and trans masculinities, in particular.

The trans male boom that characterizes the past decade of queer public culture has been made possible, in part, by increased access to various legal and medical technologies that support gender reassignment. It has also been made possible by a more general move in queer politics to finally reckon with the category of “man”—like it did with the category of “woman” 65 years prior (see De Beauvoir 1949)—and to re-imagine “man” as a viably feminist identity position—in spite of the fact that certain feminisms have historically critiqued the appropriation of seemingly “male” aesthetics and desires (see Nestle 1987). As Shaw herself succinctly put it, “Feminists made me hate dolphins, I mean dildos” (Shaw 2011a:59).

While a “paranoid reading” of trans masculinity might lament the “disappearance of butches,” a “reparative reading”<sup>9</sup>—one that I prefer to rehearse—acknowledges the ways in which trans masculinity productively “mutilates” the notion of gender altogether (to borrow legal theorist Dean Spade’s evocative phrasing [2006]). In this sense, trans is akin, rather than opposed, to butch lesbian gender formations. Both butch and trans masculinities undo the neatly binary sex/gender system of dominant culture, while continuing to provoke in many people—lesbians and feminists among them—extreme feelings of fear, loathing, and moral panic.

For the current generation of gender outlaws<sup>10</sup> that sit in Shaw’s audience, she “re-becomes” the queer ancestor that we never knew we had (or that we never had at all). As Schechner explains, “Restored behavior offers to individuals and to groups the chance to rebecome what they once were—or even, and most often, to rebecome what they never were or wish to have been or wish to become” (1985:36). Shaw was never trans, but through our desire her body becomes that of a *trans/cestor*—something that this particular community desires and hasn’t had, because so many of our trans/cestors have been “disappeared” from history (see Taylor 1997 and 2003:161–89).

By no means is everyone in Shaw’s audience trans-masculine, genderqueer, or even queer, for that matter. But because many of my friends, colleagues, and the students with whom I watch and later discuss the performance are, and because I, too, identify as queer, genderqueer, and trans in addition but not opposed to lesbian, dyke, and woman as identities and practices, my reception and analysis also reflect *my* desires to make whole the ideological gap that separates lesbian from trans, and past from present and future. Simply put, this desire is for butch and trans histories to touch, and together (be)come (a)live, livable, grievable, and bound.

## When Elephants Are in Must

The Amherst production of *Must* came on the heels of a stroke that nearly killed Shaw only three months prior. 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.

I had seen Shaw only a few days before the stroke, in New York City, where she lives. She and Split Britches collaborator Lois Weaver were performing their equally elegiac *Lost Lounge* at Dixon Place. When I received the publicity photo for *Lost Lounge* in my inbox a few weeks before their performance, I was already alerted to the ways in which time had slipped without my knowing it. Shaw’s face looked older than I remembered it: wrinkles around her eyes,

---

9. Butch elder Cherríe Moraga, for instance, used the phrase “the disappearance of butches” in her 2010 lecture at the University of Massachusetts Stonewall Center. Moraga was challenged by several members of the audience and promised to revise her manuscript before publication, which she did. See *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness* (2011), especially “On Keeping Queer Queer.” On “paranoid readings,” see Sedgwick, “Paranoid Readings and Reparative Readings, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You” in *Touching Feeling* (2003).

10. Performer-author Kate Bornstein (1994) most famously uses this expression.



Figure 2. Photo used for the publicity poster for *Lost Lounge* (2010), Dixon Place, New York City. Created and performed by Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver. (Photo by Lori E. Seid)

forehead, and mouth; grey sideburns; a tiny lump below her left eye. Weaver, too, seemed aged: her blonde hair bleached platinum and black; her skin heavy with foundation. In the photo, Weaver’s face refracted outward and onto Shaw (and vice versa); *the* butch and femme after which the aesthetic was named—at least in our field—had, quite simply, grown old (see Case 1993).

This is not how I remembered Shaw, nor Weaver, for that matter. In my memory, Shaw’s hair is full, and brown, falling in a curl above her Roman nose. Her skin is smooth—like Weaver’s—whose blonde curls gather at her bare shoulder, the place that Shaw would clutch when they would kiss. *And they would kiss.* They have not only grown old, it seemed they have also grown apart.<sup>11</sup>

In the weeks leading up to Shaw’s *Must* performance—scheduled prior to her stroke—it was not even clear whether she would be able to perform. Her London tour was canceled. She was no longer living with her “grand-companion-

son,”<sup>12</sup> Ian, in their rent-controlled East Village apartment but down the road with her former lover and current collaborator, Weaver, who was serving as round-the-clock caretaker. Emails circulated, dates changed, auxiliary events like classroom visits and house parties—typical for Shaw’s visits to Western Massachusetts—were suspended. She would perform *Must* and give one artist talk. No more. Shaw’s stroke and its aftermath made me aware that Shaw and the history she carries through performance won’t be around forever. And so: I knew I must see *Must* and, more to the point, that I must bring my students.

## The Inside Story

A solo performance, *Must* examines how traumatic histories live in the body, on the body, and between bodies, and how, too, “when something is real, it leaves a trace” (Shaw 2011a:156). Shaw makes a very Benjaminian move with *Must*, attempting to re/member—“make

11. Shaw and Weaver are no longer lovers, though Shaw maintains that they are still “partners” both in life and art (Shaw 2011b).

12. See Shaw’s performance *To My Chagrin* (2001).



whole”—multiple things that have “been smashed.” These include her broken heart, broken bones, the broken plates her mother hurled against the wall, as well as the symbolic breaking/splitting open of her skin with eleven “stories” about her “insides.”

The performance uses second person address: the “you” to whom Shaw speaks is both the spectator whom she asks to serve as witness, as well as the “you” that was the loved one who left her and ostensibly catalyzed this need—this *must*—to speak.<sup>13</sup> “When elephants are in must,” Shaw explains towards the end of *Must*, “tears flow freely from their eyes. I’m crying for you [...] Stuff is leaking out, draining from my eyes, dripping from my holes everywhere, tipping my head over like a tea pot, emptying my brain, pouring all the residue out onto the floor in a pile” (2011a:155). Shaw, like the elephant she cites, is in must.

“Must” (or musth) is a periodic condition experienced by male elephants indicated by increased levels of testosterone, aggressive behavior, and, most notably, the swelling of the temporal glands on the side of the head, which causes the discharge of a thick, tar-like secretion from the elephants’ temporal ducts (Moss 2000). As Shaw notes, this secretion creates the impression that when elephants are in must, they weep—“tears flow[ing] freely from their eyes.” In this sense, Shaw is in must because her love has left: “The tips of my fingers trace you on a foggy window,” she laments:

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 when you have something outside yourself that draws you to it—like a crash at the front of the bus, or a commotion outside the square, like blood cells rushing to an injured place where they desert the rest of your body and leave you exhausted. (2011a:140)

Shaw is in must not only because her love has left her but because the other “you” to whom she speaks, the audience, has *not*. We are her new femme, receptive to her butch need to touch gently, penetrate deeply, and (not so artificially) inseminate with words. This desire to speak, to split, to seed, draws her “like blood cells rushing to an injured place” close to her audience—leaving her exhausted and us, full.

Shaw begins, “I’ve been waiting for you / and now you’re here” (2011a:139). In signature style, Shaw emerges from the audience towards the stage: making eye contact, saying hello,



Figure 3. Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw in *The Kiss*, a photo by Eva Weiss (1995).

13. According to Shaw, the fictive “you” that she has lost was inspired by the loss of her mother as well as the mother of Suzy Willson, Shaw’s lover and *Must* collaborator (Shaw 2011b). When I saw the performance, I read the “you” as a lover, and my analysis here reflects my reception experience.



Figure 4. Publicity poster for *Must: The Inside Story*. (Photo by Manuel Vason)

touching a shoulder, shaking or kissing a hand. As always, this conceit feels genuine coming from Shaw, not theatrical *per se*, as if the gesture is as much for her as it is for us. “By pressing the flesh, [Shaw] humanizes herself down to size, and refuses the awe her own charisma inspires” (Dolan 2005:54). In touching us, Shaw is also literally and symbolically inviting us into the process of “corporealized historiography” by which she will become not only “‘a body’ but a figure for relations between bodies past and present” (Freeman 2005:60), and by which we, to her, will agree to bind.

The fact that she has “been waiting for [us]” and “now [we] are here” immediately establishes her as our “elder,” signaling her prior existence in time and space, as well as her desire

that we join her, which we’ve fulfilled. Because Shaw is already in the house, more or less, from the moment we arrive; because she is wearing the same suit, more or less, that we’ve seen her wear countless times before; because we are, more or less, young enough to be her grandchildren; because students and professors and local queers have been revolving in and out of these same seats, more or less, in this same town, for three decades to watch her perform, it is as if Shaw has been waiting, and wading through, all of time for the “you” that is “us” to arrive. In this sense, the *Must* stage is what theatre semiotician Marvin Carlson would call a “haunted” one, and *Must* a “memory machine.” Shaw continues, “And now you’re here.” She could finally say whatever it was that she had waited all this while to say. We are not passersby, random spectators, accidental or incidental audiences. She chose us as witnesses who she has *long* been waiting—*longing*—for.

Shaw moves slowly from the house to the proscenium stage to begin her “inside” story. This 40-minute performance is less physical than many of Shaw’s prior shows. It is delivered as a monologue: poetic, fragmented, and stream-of-consciousness spoken text broken into 11 parts with only one musical number.<sup>14</sup> Shaw only occasionally moves—descending and ascending the stairs between the apron of the proscenium stage and the pit. In this sense, *Must* feels less like a play or performance art and more like an elegy. But perhaps because, as Shaw herself once put it, “every word you speak is forever in the air, it will never go away” (2011a:54), I am perfectly content to simply listen to her words. At one point, I even close my eyes; I want to hear her voice *inside* my head.

Inside herself, Shaw is broken. The lost love that she mourns, for instance, seems to have spurred this melancholic tale, and her desire to split herself open is a search for answers, an

14. When Shaw usually performs *Must*, she has a live band accompaniment that plays music throughout the show, with original music arranged by Paul Clark. The band was not able to travel with Shaw for the Amherst production.



attempt to make sense of this great loss: “I count the hours since you left, / but the numbers never add up. I have to admit / they never add up” (2011a:152). And instead of finding the “truth” about this past loss inside her body, what Shaw finds are more lost and broken things: broken bones, sunken slave ships, ziplock bags, dead pigeons, garbage, MacBooks, melting icebergs, drowning polar bears, oil spills, New York City—all swirling inside her inner eco-system. She calls these things “the future” and pulls them out to show and tell:

I keep finding the future inside of me. I can hear it really loud, coming from a field of windmills, or a hive of bees. / I know, I know, I know. / I am digging. Deep past the topsoil. There’s no cutting involved. Just turning over the soil. I am afraid of finding something I didn’t know about—like a bear shitting in my woods, or a field of Irish potatoes in my uterus, or a huge, garbage-swirling, plastic toxic mass in my pituitary gland that is close to the size of Texas. Fish and turtles and things are growing in it and eating it and fossils are traveling on it to foreign dangerous places where they are not meant to be. (2011a:140–41)

While perhaps Shaw is initially “digging” through her personal past, she seems to have dug so deep—“deep past the topsoil”—that she has found the global future of this planet. In this sense, *Must* presents time not as linear but as a postmodern palimpsest, a serializing swirl of public culture. “The plastic toxic mass [...] the size of Texas,” for instance, refers to the Great Pacific Garbage Patch—layers upon layers of accumulated, discarded plastic from the second half of the 20th century, which swirls and stagnates in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Plastic, the new parchment, is growing thick—deep in the ocean and other places where consumers don’t have to look. Shaw’s invocation connects her private loss of love to ecological disaster. “My desire is melting my icebergs so fast, they’re drifting further and further apart and polar bears are dying from exhaustion [...] Underneath my thighs is where all the oil is being stolen from, leaving empty pockets inside” (141). Through her desire, her loss, and her longing, Shaw becomes Gaia herself (Malloy 2011).

In framing herself as old as the planet, Shaw also reinforces her role as primordial trans/censor and casts us as her contemporary heirs. At the same time, in making herself the world, Shaw re/presents an otherwise marginal identity—butch, lesbian, working-class, Irish, grandmother—as literally, *universally* human. As Dolan has similarly argued, with such a rhetorical move “Shaw’s body comes to stand in for all bodies, revising what lesbian theorist Monique Wittig once called ‘the axis of categorization’ by putting a butch lesbian body at the center of an illustration of life” (in Shaw 2011a:33; see Wittig 1992). What’s more, because her *Must* spectators occupy similarly marginal identity positions, *our* bodies are also, uncharacteristically, placed at the center of the univers(al).

Throughout the performance, various parts of Shaw’s body are illuminated by large, colorful, photos of elemental details of the human body that are being projected on the screen behind her: cells of the upper respiratory tract, a striated muscle, a hair cell of the inner ear, a newly fertilized human egg, a sectional image of the human tongue. These “scientific,” archival



Figure 5. Newly fertilized human egg. Transparent image from *Must*. (Photo courtesy of the Wellcome Library, London)

images expose the inner—usually invisible—workings of the human body as neither gross nor grotesque but as beautiful mythomorphic landscapes, spectacular action paintings. Projected onto Shaw’s body, this theatrical device at once acknowledges and subverts the stereotype of the butch as “exterior”—that is, the notion that butch bodies are merely surfaces: contained, composed, impenetrable. Though the images rest on the surface of her skin, they suggest an enflashed interiority that we otherwise cannot see.

Shaw continues, “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 believe what I tell you” (2011a:142). Because we want—we’ve come—to see inside of her and, in so doing, see inside ourselves, we choose to believe what she tells us:

I have been thirteen bodies in my life.  
This is only one of them.

I cracked my pelvis. I broke my heels. I smashed my knuckles on my right hand. I smashed my knees in the woods. I fell off the porch and got a stick in my eye. The wind was knocked out of me when I smashed into a tree. I cut open my hand when my grandma died. I was on crutches for six months when I jumped off a fence. I had fourteen spinal taps curled in a ball like a fetus. I was born with broken clavicles. I got pneumococcal meningitis when I slept with a woman for the first time. I died for three minutes. I was in a coma for two weeks. I had mononucleosis and couldn’t kiss a boy for a year. I had cancer on my face and got twenty-eight stitches. I had a lump removed from my breast. I have lumps on my forearms and the front of my thighs where I store my original thoughts. I smashed my two front teeth on the ice fighting over a girl. I had a baby. (146)

Like the transparent images projected onto her body, this litany of cuts and incursions reveals an inside—and a vulnerability—to her ostensibly inviolate (butch) flesh. The fact, for instance, that she has had a baby exposes the literal penetrability of her butch body that we only otherwise suspect, but cannot see.

During the performance, she keeps track of this litany by “counting” each traumatic event on her fingers. It doesn’t seem like she is pretending to remember the past as much as actually trying to remember her lines. Shaw speaks slowly and deliberately, occasionally looking up and to the left as some people do when they are fishing for a word or a memory just beyond their grasp. I listen intently to her list, wanting/waiting to see if she will include her stroke in this first performance of *Must* in its wake. Perhaps I want to hear her stroke named because it reflects my reception experience, as I am acutely aware throughout that Shaw subtly but palpably struggles to speak and remember the performance while she’s executing it. Perhaps I want to hear it because I feel protective of Shaw—I want the youngest of the young people in the audience, who may be seeing her perform for the first of what they imagine will be many times, to know that Shaw doesn’t usually fumble for lines, or seem weak, or fragile, or exhausted.

Here, I am reminded of other iconic artists in the field, such as Joseph Chaikin, Robbie McCauley, and Deb Margolin, to name a few prominent examples—who have similarly had to navigate the impact of illness, aging, and/or debility on their work. Unlike Shaw’s *Must*, however, Joseph Chaikin’s *Struck Dumb* (1988, directed by Robert Woodruff)—a solo performance about “the relationship between speech and mind”—was created in the *wake* of the artist’s own post-stroke aphasia.<sup>15</sup> Similarly created after the artists’ onset of illness are Deb Margolin’s *3 Seconds in the Key* (2001), a performance about Hodgkin’s disease, motherhood, and basketball; and Robbie McCauley’s *Sugar* (2012), about diabetes, health inequities, and the transatlantic slave trade. While Shaw’s solo show, *Ruff* (2011, directed by Lois Weaver) was conceived in the

---

15. *Struck Dumb* was coauthored by Jean-Claude van Itallie, who has archived the production history on his website (see van Itallie 2013).

aftermath of Shaw's stroke (and for which Shaw/Weaver would brilliantly incorporate video monitors as script prompts reminiscent of the hanging text, rope and pulley systems, and TV monitors that Chaikin similarly relied upon in *Struck Dumb*), *Must* was written three years prior to Shaw's stroke. As such, Shaw's physical and mental frailty the night of the 2011 Amherst production of *Must* is neither rehearsed nor theatricalized. Rather, it is laid entirely bare—functioning as an unintentional yet uncanny overlay onto a performance originally created for medical students and healthcare practitioners—people who, that is, devote their lives to thinking through questions of illness and loss.<sup>16</sup>

Because Shaw is not only a woman but a butch lesbian, the particular ways in which her vulnerability is exposed in this production work to complicate essentialized notions of (butch and trans) masculinities. Perhaps the fact that Shaw is particularly vulnerable the night of this performance provides a necessary role modeling for butch and trans masculine people in the audience—myself included—who don't always know how to navigate our feelings of fragility and powerlessness.<sup>17</sup> As poet Bonnie Barringer explains, "When butches cry / they weep, they wail / they gnash their teeth / and moan / Strong women's pain / it's just the same / except it's mostly done / alone" (in Nestle 1992:109). It's "mostly done alone" because to be witnessed in a state of vulnerability exposes what Moraga has called the pink "underside" of the butch turtle shell. Shaw's palpable frailty shows us how even (or perhaps especially) "butch heroes" experience so-called "failures" of memory, masculinity, vitality, and strength.

While this particular performance may reveal her body as vulnerable in new ways, Shaw's large, commanding presence—and the erotic longings that this presence notoriously incites in her audiences—is palpable nonetheless. Writing about Shaw's 2000 production of *A Menopausal Gentleman* in Austin, Dolan writes, "Her presence moved through the house like a current; she electrified us, bound her to us, and brought us close to the complexities of her longing and our own" (2005:54). With *Must*, the complexities of her longing and our own include the desire to be bound across generations, to feel the erotics of intergenerational, trans/temporal touch.

For instance, making eye contact with a young queer person in her audience during *Must*, Shaw asks, "Would you like to see my body?" We vicariously understand the generosity of such an offer, and it draws us close. She continues, "I'm 64 and I'm lucky: I have both my breasts still, / safe, inside my suit" (2011a:145). Shaw's words penetrate *our* suits, which may or may not still have had both breasts, safe inside. "I can't lie down to be examined," Shaw confesses. "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" (154). The medical gaze, that is, has alienated and violated her butch body. Being on an examination table, like being in a ladies' room, has made her feel "foolish," "scared," and even like she "will die." "How do I know you haven't got a gun in your pocket, or a *stethoscope*?" (154). While the medical gaze may be violent, our gaze is not, and she knows it. We pull her close, like a lover, allowing her to expose her butch beauty and flaws alike:

My upper arms are big, 'cause my dad said life is hard, so he made us lift weights 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. (154)

16. *Must* was created under the auspices of Clod Ensemble's Performing Medicine project, "a programme of courses, workshops and events which use the arts to provide training to medical students and practicing health professionals" (Clod Ensemble 2013).

17. For more on butch feelings, see Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings* (2003); Cherríe Moraga, *Loving in the War Years* (1983); Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1999); Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country* ([1988] 2003); and Esther Newton, "My Butch Career" (2003).

Shaw unbuttons the top of her shirt and carefully lets her big arms, droopy wing, and sexy clavicles hang out (while covering her chest with her elbows and forearms).

In the final moments of the performance, Shaw removes her shirt completely, and stands—topless—near the projection screen with her back facing the audience. Her shirt gathered loosely around her waist, she allows a flood of images to be superimposed—one after the next—onto the soft, bare skin of her back. For some of us, this filmic dance across her back is reminiscent of that moment in *To My Chagrin* when Shaw bares her breasts so that images of her “grand-companion-son,” Ian, could be projected onto her chest. “She replaces cultural presumption [about racial difference] with what she truly carries in heart,” says Dolan of *Chagrin* (in Shaw 2011a:37). In *Must*, it was not her mixed-race “blood” grandchild she reveals as carrying in her heart, though, but us—her mixed-gendered grand-butch-children. Shaw explains, “Elephants teach their young to slide their trunks over dead bones. They hold their baby elephants’ trunks in theirs, listening as they smooth out the memories” (139). At once the living grand-butch elephant and the elephants’ bones, Peggy Shaw held our baby butch trunks in hers—and taught us, brought us, in and out.

### References

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1999. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Baderon, Gabeba. 2011. “Gender Within Gender: Zanele Muholi’s Images of Trans Being and Becoming.” In “Race and Transgender Studies,” special issue, *Feminist Studies* 37, 2:390–416.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1968. *Illuminations*. 1st ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World.
- Bernstein Sycamore, Mattilda. 2006. *Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity*. Berkeley: Seal Press.
- Bornstein, Kate. 1994. *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. New York: Vintage.
- Brougher, Hilary. 1997. *Sticky Fingers of Time*. 35mm. 81 min. Dist. Strand Releasing.
- Carlson, Marvin. 2001. *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Case, Sue-Ellen. 1993. “Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic.” In *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, edited by Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin. London: Routledge.
- Clod Ensemble. 2013. “Performing Medicine.” Clod Ensemble. Accessed 22 June 2014. [www.clodensemble.com/medicine.htm](http://www.clodensemble.com/medicine.htm).
- Clod Ensemble, and Peggy Shaw. 2008. *Must*. London: Self-published by Peggy Shaw and Clod Ensemble.
- Cvetkovich, Ann. 2003. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. (1949) 1993. *The Second Sex*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Dolan, Jill. 2005. *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Duberman, Martin Bauml, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey. 1990. *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*. New York: Plume.
- Freeman, Elizabeth. 2005. “Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography.” *Social Text* 23, 3–4:84–85.
- Freeman, Elizabeth. 2010. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Malloy, Ryan. 2011. Class discussion in “Introduction to Queer Studies,” Hampshire College, 7 April.
- Moraga, Cherríe. 2011. *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Moraga, Cherríe. 1983. *Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Pasó Por Sus Labios*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Moraga, Cherríe. 2010. “Still Loving in the Still War Years: On Keeping Queer Queer.” Lecture. The University of Massachusetts–Amherst Stonewall Center, 5 October.

- Moss, Cynthia J. 2000. *Elephant Memories: Thirteen Years in the Life of an Elephant Family*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Nestle, Joan. (1988) 2003. *A Restricted Country*. San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press.
- Newton, Esther. 2003. "My Butch Career: A Memoir." In *Queer Ideas: The Kessler Lectures in Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 81–98. New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY.
- Schechner, Richard. 1985. *Between Theater and Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 2003. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Serano, Julia. 2007. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Berkeley: Seal Press.
- Shaw, Peggy. 2011a. *A Menopausal Gentleman: The Solo Performances of Peggy Shaw*, edited by Jill Dolan. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.
- Shaw, Peggy. 2011b. Personal correspondence with author, 25 August.
- Spade, Dean. 2006. "Mutilating Gender." In *The Transgender Studies Reader*, 315–22. London: Routledge.
- Stryker, Susan. 2008. *Transgender History*. Berkeley: Seal Press.
- Stryker, Susan, ed. 1998. "The Transgender Issue," special issue, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4, no. 2.
- Taylor, Diana. 1997. *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Taylor, Diana. 2003. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Traub, Valerie. 2007. "The Present Future of Lesbian Historiography." In *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, edited by George Haggerty and Molly McGarry, 124–45. New York: Wiley-Blackwell.
- van Itallie, Jean-Claude. 2013. Jean-Claude van Itallie. "Plays." Accessed 22 June 2014. [www.vanitalie.com/plays/dumb.html](http://www.vanitalie.com/plays/dumb.html).
- Wittig, Monique. 1992. *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press.