Butch Between the Wars: A Pre-History of Butch Style in Twentieth-Century Literature, Music, and Film

Karen Allison Hammer

The Graduate Center, City University of New York
BUTCH BETWEEN THE WARS:
A PRE-HISTORY OF BUTCH STYLE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERATURE, MUSIC AND FILM

by

Karen Allison Hammer

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in the Department of English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The City University of New York

2017
Butch Between the Wars:  
A Pre-History of Butch Style in Twentieth-Century Literature, Music, and Film

By

Karen Allison Hammer

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in the Department of English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

________________________________________
Date
Wayne Koestenbaum
Chair of the Examining Committee

________________________________________
Date
Mario DiGangi
Executive Officer

Supervisory Committee

Nancy K. Miller
Steven Kruger

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

Butch Between the Wars:
A Pre-History of Butch Style in Twentieth-Century Literature, Music, and Film

By

Karen Allison Hammer

Advisor: Wayne Koestenbaum

*Butch Between the Wars* is a pre-history of “butch,” a twentieth-century masculine style that became an identity category for lesbians in the 1940s and ’50s. Between the two world wars and in the early postwar period, women used the energy of butch to create literature, music, and character on film. Butch-styled artists expressed a muscular orientation to the world, one with close associations to lower and working class black and white masculinities. Those who were recognizably lesbian and those with less clearly defined sexualities challenged the idea that strength, authority, and independence are qualities “naturally” bound to the male body. Historical events provided the conditions for these earlier butch styles.

The nine artists in this dissertation discovered their artistic exuberance in what I call “butch exceptionalism,” a grandiosity based in masculine monumentality. Because butch-styled women broke with feminine propriety in times and places where this was considered blasphemous, they naturally considered themselves to be exceptions. Further, the butch-styled artist often required what I call a “femme witness,” a person of either biological gender who functioned as stage manager, typist, travel coordinator, publicist, and emotional support for the butch in her rise to success. Butch artists held a treasure chest of private feelings that can only be shared safely with carefully chosen intimates.

In Chapter One, “Epic, Amiable, Minuscule: Writing Stone Butch After the Great War,” I explore how Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, and Marianne Moore developed a stone butch style of writing
in response to the First World War. These writers used blockage and absence of emotion to convey the loss and tragedy of the War; simultaneously, they rejected the nineteenth-century Cult of True Womanhood that bound women to the domestic sphere. In Chapter Two, “B.D. Women Sing the Blues (and Dance the Charleston): Rage and Defiance in the Era of the ‘Greats,’” I correct a pervasive tendency to minimize or erase entirely questions of racial difference in discussions on butch. Butch style is a multi-layered response to sexism, racism, and homophobia. I consider how Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Josephine Baker used butch defiance and rage to confront the legacy of slavery and the present reality of Jim Crow. Through butch style, black female musicians and performers found the audacity to “tell it like it is,” and discover through performance a sense of body continuity, what Hortense Spillers calls “being-for-self.” However, all three died in poverty, Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith in relative obscurity, which suggests that the very contours of butch style were determined by life-or-death racial, economic, and social factors.

In Chapter Three, “‘Just Put Your Lips Together and Blow’: Butch Pluck and Gumption in the Films of Clara Bow, Lauren Bacall and Hope Emerson,” I observe how representations of butch style gradually shifted as butch become an identity category. All three performers honed an uncanny ability to hijack the plot of the film by throwing a punch, lighting a match, or eating a giant stack of pancakes. However, silent film star and “It” girl Clara Bow had more license to bend gender and sexuality in the pre-code era, and she received little punishment in the narrative arc of the film for her tomboy behaviors. By the ’40s and ’50’s, butch women were maligned, often used as minor characters and foils for the heterosexual love plot. Lauren Bacall expresses butch toughness through clipped language, precise physical movements (such as catching a matchbook in midair), and stone butch impenetrability. Through her representation of what I call the butch body out of control, Emerson used her size to create an imposing butch presence.
CONTENTS

Introduction / 1

Epic, Amiable, Minuscule: Writing Stone Butch After the Great War / 19

B.D. Women Sing the Blues (and Dance the Charleston): Rage and Defiance
   in the Era of the “Greats” / 83

“Just Put Your Lips Together and Blow”: Butch Pluck and Gumption in the Films of Clara Bow,
   Lauren Bacall and Hope Emerson / 140

Epilogue: Melting Hannah Arendt’s Stone: Butch as a Way of Being in the World / 198
ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Studio portrait of Willa Cather in embroidered jacket / 33
Figure 2: Willa Cather and Léon Bakst in his studio / 44
Figure 3: Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas with their Ford truck, “Auntie” / 53
Figure 4: Gertrude Stein in the Church Yard. Lucey Church. Photograph by Carl Van Vechten / 54
Figure 5: Marianne Moore and Mary Warner Moore in their Brooklyn apartment / 70
Figure 6: Marianne Moore and Mary Warner Moore holding hands / 70
Figure 7: Ma Rainey and her band / 102
Figure 8: Bessie Smith. Photograph by Carl Van Vechten / 111
Figure 9: Bessie Smith Advertisement / 118
Figure 10: Josephine Baker in Copenhagen / 130
Figure 11: Josephine Baker in the later incarnation of the banana belt / 131
Figure 12: Clara Bow (age 21) with knapsack and gun on the set of Mantrap (1926) / 163
Figure 13: Lauren Bacall, as Rose Cullen, in Confidential Agent (1945) / 171
Figure 14: Hope Emerson, as Rose Givens, in Cry of the City (1948) / 186
Figure 15: Hope Emerson, as Rose Givens, in Cry of the City (1948) / 187
Figure 16: Hope Emerson, as Rose Givens, in Cry of the City (1948) / 188
Introduction

“Culture on all fours to greet/ A butch and criminal elite”—W.H. Auden, *New Year Letter* (1941)

“Let me recite what history teaches. History teaches.”—(Gertrude Stein, “If I Told Him, A Completed Portrait of Picasso” (1923)

*Butch Between the Wars* is a pre-history of “butch,” a twentieth-century masculine style that became an identity category for lesbians in the 1940s and ’50s. Studies of early butch performance tend to focus on familiar figures like the writer Radclyffe Hall, or the lesbian film star Marlene Dietrich, who famously crooned to a woman while wearing a tux in the 1930 film *Morocco*. However, beyond these usual suspects, butch has a resonant historical and aesthetic presence, one that has yet to be fully appreciated. Between the two world wars and in the early postwar period, women used the stylistic energy of butch to create literature, music, and character on film. Through butch, artists expressed a muscular orientation to the world, one with close associations to lower and working class black and white masculinities. However, while the women in this study might have had lesbian lovers or proclivities, the lines of desire remained unpredictable in this period, in part because “homosexual” or “lesbian” was not yet a cohesive identity. Through butch, black and white artists, those who were recognizably lesbian and those with less clearly defined sexualities, challenged the idea that strength, authority, and independence are qualities “naturally” bound to the male body.

Butch offered a self-authorizing power, an artistic license not granted but rather stolen and seized. As part of a stylistic toolkit for gay men and women, transgendered individuals, and people of color, butch disrupts gender/sex alignments, and notions of cisnormativity in the present.1

---

1 Here I refer to the definition for “cisgender” provided by Erica Lennon and Brian J. Mistler (2014); “cisgender” refers to the “cultural and systemic ideology that denies, denigrates, or pathologizes self-
economy of pleasure between butch-styled performers and their audience therefore tampers with any sense of continuity between the masculine body and masculine gender orientation. Butch style is characterized by emotional reserve in the public sphere, an aggressive stance, and an enormousness that confronts rather than merely protests.

My use of style rather than identity allows for a deeper appreciation of butch pleasures in earlier periods. Susan Sontag writes in the title essay “Where the Stress Falls” that style is the manner in which things appear to us as designed for pleasure (72). First and foremost, writers, musicians and performers found pleasure in butch behaviors and in their ability to aggravate the gender/sex alignment. In *All We Know: Three Lives*, a study of idiosyncratic artistic women of the 1920s, Lisa Cohen defines style:

> a form of pleasure, for oneself and for an audience, and as an expression of the wish to exceed and confound expectations, to be exceptional…style is a response to the terror of invisibility and isolation—a wish for inclusion. Above all, it is a productive act that, although it concerns itself with the creation and experience of brilliant surfaces, is powerful because it unsettles what we think we know about the superficial and the profound. (6)

Butch-as-style offers meanings that stray from the more predictable stereotypes; while the term “butch” might evoke for earlier generations the image of a James Dean or Marlon Brando-esque lesbian wearing a leather jacket, pursuing a Donna Reed-looking femme, there are a greater variety of butch expressions that pull from the past in unanticipated ways.

---

2 Butch can also be defined as a “sensibility,” though I use “style” to remain consistent in my use of terms. As Susan Sontag proposes in “Notes on ‘Camp,’” sensibility underlies and catalyzes “taste,” a concept that has its own internal logic. She writes that “a sensibility is almost, but not quite, ineffable. Any sensibility which can be crammed into the mold of a system, or handled with the rough tools of proof, is no longer a sensibility at all. It has hardened into an idea” (“Notes on ‘Camp’” 276). I am curious about butch before this process of hardening, which occurs in tandem with increasing visibility in the ’40s and ’50s, followed by much literature and thinking on the subject.
From a queer perspective, butch is an example of Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, which identifies the ways subjects perform gender outside of a biological imperative. In Butler’s view, performativity describes how a signifier not only names but also generates existing phenomena (Gender Trouble 20). As a gender orientation with traces in the deep past as well as in the present, butch also demonstrates the temporal dimension of performativity. As queer and feminist theorist Sara Ahmed writes, the performative anticipates the future generation of effects, effects that depend upon meanings already accumulated in the past (93). The power and authority of a given citation exists in how it recalls this past (93). For example, twenty-first-century butch “behaviors” cited by queer butch anthropologist S. Lochlann Jain —“jocularity, physical strength, confidence, straight talking, space taking”—bear an important similarity to the qualities of “masculinity” enumerated by Sontag in her essay, “The Third World of Women” (Jain 501). Sontag argues that the qualities of “competence, autonomy, self-control, ambition, risk-taking, independence, rationality” define “masculinity,” while “incompetence, helplessness, irrationality, passivity, noncompetitiveness, being nice” define femininity (“The Third World” 181). My subjects in this pre-history break with these typically feminine behaviors, which Sontag characterizes overall as “childish, servile, weak, and immature.”

---

3 Sontag claimed that the “‘femininity’ of women and the ‘masculinity’ of men are morally defective and historically obsolete conceptions” (“The Third World” 182). I agree with Sontag and would add that the “femininity” of women and the “masculinity” of men are never perfectly cited. Many individuals broke with gender conventions in the past, perhaps not through dress (often because cross-dressing was illegal), but they broke with the behaviors listed above. Sontag’s called for a gender revolution, which she envisioned as conservative in its stance against consumer-based society, and radical in its desire to challenge “authoritarian moral habits” found in both capitalist and communist societies (183). The most radical aspect of any revolution, in Sontag’s view, is the liberation of women. However, in order for a revolution to succeed, women need to relinquish the “prerogatives of the fool, the child, and the servant,” a project that can be accomplished through butch style (188).

4 In this dissertation, I am attentive to the differences and overlaps between queer theory and feminist theory. As Deborah Cameron explains in her essay “Language” included in the 2014
Historical events provided the conditions for this departure. These events include the First World War, the closing of the North American frontier, the rise of American exceptionalism, the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and the film industry (as part of a larger cultural shift toward technology: advertising, publicity and the star system). Between the wars, and in the early postwar period, I look for what lesbian historian Valerie Traub calls “cycles of salience,” the recurrence of certain “meta-logics” across time, though always repeated with a difference (125). One of my initial findings early on in this project was that many butch-styled writers, musicians, and performers invented a boyhood, often insisting on being called “he” well before any kind of transgender movement or consciousness. I use “cycles of salience” as a conceptual tool for describing the similarity between artists, always remaining conscious of the fact that racial and class differences structure the appearance and content of butch style. Through this tool, I also account for the tensions between continuity and change within these butch emotional patterns.

I chose nine individual lives as the subject of this butch study—Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, Josephine Baker, Clara Bow, Lauren Bacall, and Hope Emerson. Their stories suggest how masculine energies circulate and touch one another, some of which are patriarchal, or non-progressive, in nature. As Lauren Berlant explains, masculinity is tied to the symbolic and to both the privilege and burden of identifying with/as the Law. Masculinity, particularly white masculinity, offers a “mirage of identity,” the stability of which gives
the feeling of a “fixed and monumental presence” (Berlant 88-89). These nine figures flirted with masculine monumentality, the excess and anxiety of which can be projected onto women, resulting in a kind of butch misogyny. In fact, both black and white butch artists found their artistic exuberance in what I call “butch exceptionalism,” a grandiosity based in this masculine monumentality. My butch subjects ground their exceptionalism in the belief that they are too talented or too rare for this world. For writers, butch exceptionalism corresponded to the concept of the artistic genius already present in literary modernism. Their talents were often misunderstood and undervalued, which added to their feeling of being exceptional. Historically the concept overlaps with American exceptionalism, a term connoting excessive hubris, colonial and postcolonial greed and avarice. In the 1920s, the era of big projects and big plans, butch artists sought to redraw the boundaries of their respective artistic fields. Cather, Stein, and Moore even felt a kinship with great male figures like Alexander the Great, Ulysses, Napoleon, Buddha, and Christ, making them exceptional not just within the category women, but within humanity itself.

Early references to butch in literature and film of the 1920s and ’30s suggest not only masculine toughness, but criminality, violence, even the threat of fascism and dictatorship so acutely present during this time. Cruising the dictionary offers some initial inspiration for thinking about this darker side of butch performance. Butch could be a name that connoted these unsavory significations; the first known reference to “butch” in popular print culture occurs in newspaper articles on the legendary “Butch Cassidy,” alias George Cassidy, companion to the Sundance Kid, who led the gang “the Wild Bunch” on a string of bank and train robberies across the American Old West (“Butch”). Their infamous crimes inspired the 1967 Oscar-winning film Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, starring Paul Newman and Robert Redford, two examples par excellence of white American butch masculinity performed in the cisgendered male body. In the 1937 Little Rascals episode “Framing Youth,” “Butch” is the name of little boy who threatens to give Spanky two black
eyes if he doesn’t stop Alfalfa from competing in the talent show and ruining his own chances.

Aloysius “Butch” Grogan is a character in the Prohibition-era work *Guys and Dolls* by Damon Runyon; in this story, Butch is the retired safecracker recruited by a gang of hoodlums for one last robbery. However, he’s babysitting that night and can’t find a substitute, so he takes the baby with him on the job. The character inspired plays and movies by the same name, as well as a Three Stooges episode. “Butch” Grogan was typical of Runyon’s characters, who were usually gamblers, hustlers, actors, and gangsters.

Perhaps the most striking example of the sinister pleasure of butch is the 1941 poem “New Year Letter,” in which W.H. Auden uses the word “butch” to invoke his ambivalence toward arriving at any clear-cut moralistic solution to the social and political problems of the era.

Culture on all fours to greet
A butch and criminal elite.

In this reference, “culture” passively awaits penetration by the “butch,” the apotheosis of masculine violence, the sadist with imperialist aspirations. Butch connotes the intertwining of pleasure with dishonesty, violence, corruption, suggesting the difficulties of condemnation.

In the postwar period, butch took on a specifically German, Nazi-identified meaning. In the novel *Asphalt Jungle* (1950) by W.R. Burnett, a contemporary of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, the police Commissioner’s secretaries are described as like three “harness bulls,” or German storm troopers—“tall, heavily made, and with his white-blond hair disfigured by a butch haircut.” Here, the word “butch” appears in close proximity to the word “harness,” foreshadowing the later definition of a butch as always a sexual top with a physically imposing, sadistic appearance. The mention of butch in *Asphalt Jungle* appears shortly after the September 10, 1954 issue of *News* out of San Francisco, which describes how “some of the girls” began “wearing mannish clothing” and calling themselves ‘Butches’” (“Butch”). On March 26, 1965, *New Statesman* applied the term butch to a lesbian: “This rejection of the female role is very common among the ‘butch’ type of
lesbian” (“Butch”). This marks a turning point in the use of butch to specifically label a lesbian, indicating they were synonymous in this time.

Butch self-authorizing power enabled these artists to perform as butch with a complicated assertiveness usually owned exclusively by men. Josephine Baker coined the phrase “doing Josephine,” which described a way of being in world that demanded that others bend to her whims. Bessie Smith’s business manager and husband purchased for her a railroad car with her name painted in large letters on the side, which could be seen from miles away. Butch character actor Hope Emerson rejected standards of beauty in her postwar films, using her height and weight to overwhelm male and female characters on screen. She came to represent what I call the butch body out of control. The subjects in this dissertation claimed personal heroic genius for themselves despite their historical position as women.

The butch ego could also be large and fragile, such that the butch-styled artist required what I call a “femme witness,” a person of either biological gender who functioned as stage manager, typist, travel coordinator, publicist, and emotional support for the butch in her rise to success. In the case of Gertrude Stein, Willa Cather, and Bessie Smith, the femme witness could be a female lover. By contrast, Marianne Moore’s femme witness was her mother. After her mother’s lesbian lover abandoned her in 1910, Moore returned home and would hardly leave her mother’s side for the next 37 years. She was Moore’s most revered reader and critic. The butch-styled artist must have a constant witness to their masculine performance, or the performance becomes invisible. As Chicana feminist Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano explains, butches express both masculine bravado and “the fear, pain, and difficulty involved in making oneself physically and emotionally vulnerable or receptive” (4). Butch writers held a treasure chest of private feelings that could only be shared safely with carefully chosen intimates. However, this internalization of emotion became a source of melancholy for the butch, which could lead to a constricted emotional life.
The Chapters

In Chapter One, “Epic, Amiable, Minuscule: Writing Stone Butch After the Great War,” I explore how Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, and Marianne Moore developed a stone butch style of writing through identification with the white male body and psyche wounded in the First World War. The gender binary received a shock as a result of the War; around the world, an unprecedented archive of war photographs presented the reality of wounded men, black and white, arriving home physically and psychologically broken. Masculinity itself suffered a crisis; the male body was no longer viewed as impenetrable, but rather broken and feminized. Soldiers with severely deformed faces were given masks produced through a sculptor’s rendering of the pre-war soldier. Yet the mask could not conceal this loss of an ideal masculinity that Cather, Stein, and Moore held close. Stein’s kinship with the doughboys, the American soldiers in World War I, suggests that the War struck a deep personal chord. Her “novel” Lucy Church Amiably (1930) suggests that she may have suffered from PTSD alongside these doughboys, so strong was her connection to masculine style.

Meanwhile, both the War and the closing of the American frontier shaped Cather’s butch style; crossing the continent early in life helped her to create a transgender aesthetic that included the adoption of masculine and feminine qualities by bodies of the opposite gender.5

---

5 White masculinity came to be viewed as precarious and contingent, unable to fulfill the ideals formed during what Joane Nagel calls the “nineteenth-century Renaissance of Manliness,” promoted through male social clubs and the first Olympics (244). In the 1920s, women petitioned aggressively for the right to vote, to retain their jobs after the men came home from the War, and to be sexually expressive. Men’s fashions for women became popular during the 1920’s, particularly in Europe, as explored by Laura Doan in “Passing Fashions: Reading Female Masculinities in the 1920’s.” Women used masculine props, such as canes, monocles, and cigarettes, which dangled out of the mouths of the most famous women. White women experienced a new freedom and autonomy. However, men’s fashions for women disappeared after the obscenity trials over Radclyffe Hall’s Well of Loneliness, and the subsequent banning of the novel under the Obscene Publication Act of 1857. After the trial, a connection formed in popular culture between men’s clothing and lesbian sexuality; from this point forward, any woman who chose to wear men’s fashions was condemned as a sexual deviant.
These writers use stone butch impenetrability—the qualities of absence, blockage, and irregular expression of emotion—to convey the loss and tragedy of the War. Through emotional reserve, Cather, Stein, and Moore rejected the nineteenth-century Cult of True Womanhood and the idea that women were obligated to express excessive pathos in their writing. They cultivated butch restraint in their work and public lives in order to, in Stein’s parlance, “kill the nineteenth century.”

Because of women’s “naturally excessive” emotions, serious writing could only be done by men; Nathaniel Hawthorne even condemned women writers as “that damned mob of scribbling women” (304). Cather, Stein, and Moore drained their work of sentiment, creating bare, formalist frameworks for their ideas. Because of this emotional restraint, Cather was accused of sterility, Moore of intellectualism, and Stein of dilettantism and insincerity.

Cather, Stein, and Moore were also inspired by a masculine fervor pre-war, expressed in the proliferation of artistic movements, such as Futurism, Orphism, Vorticism, and Dadaism. As Stein scholar Lucy Daniel argues, these –isms allowed Stein to make “her own grand, self-mythologizing artistic statement” (64). As a butch writer, Stein felt comfortable within this male-driven age of movements and manifestos, a time that would abruptly end with the arrival of the War. Moore and Stein in particular came of age through cubism, a time when “all facts and fictions [were] cast into doubt,” which made it easier to assume a position of authority within a male world, to adopt and make their own variety of male postures and styles (Visual Arts 63). All three carried the blessing and liability of a formidable ego; in their minds, they were peerless geniuses without models or masters, heroes plagued by the melancholy of great men.

---

6 As Lisa Ruddick reports in Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis, when Stein wrote The Making of Americans, she began to recognize herself as the “murderer of the nineteenth century” (125). Stein revealed in her personal writings of 1943 that “between babyhood and fourteen, I was there to begin to kill what was not dead, the nineteenth century which was so sure of evolution and prayers, and esperanto and their ideas” (125).
In this chapter, I reclaim butch as an important historical style for women, and therefore as a subject for feminism, even though Stein, Cather, and Moore did not identify as feminists in the 1920s and ’30s. As Nancy K. Miller writes in her foreword to the essay collection *The Poetics of Gender*, feminist scholarship is particularly attuned to “inscriptions of culture” specific to women; early twentieth-century butch-styled subjects identified as women, even though the category may not have held a great deal of personal significance for them. In fact, they were conservative in their views on gender, and might have agreed with Henry Miller’s lamentation over the loss of gender categories after the War, which he viewed as “part and parcel of the larger disintegration, the reflex of the soul’s death, and coincident with the disappearance of great men, great causes, great wars” (qtd. in Millett 24). It was precisely the “great men, great causes, great wars,” that these women longed for and admired.  

Cather, Stein, and Moore were rewarded for their masculine performance, for while many women writers in the 1920s were pushed back to the margins of society, virtually eliminated from history, Cather, Stein, and Moore saw more success than some male writers (Ammons 17). In *Conflicting Stories*, Elizabeth Ammons writes on the opportunities and costs of masculine performance for women writers from the turn of the century onward. Being a successful artist was equated with being a privileged, white, and erudite male, and disclaiming femininity was an important mark of success for women (11). Cather won the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours* in 1923, Stein prepared for her major literary success, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in 1933, and from 1925-1929, Moore became editor of *The Dial*, essentially controlling what would and would not be

---

7 Cather experienced profound disillusionment after the War and felt the world had literally “broken in two” (O’Brien 359). Cather detested the Roosevelts, and like both Stein and Moore, was skeptical of Freud’s theories of psychoanalysis. According to Cather’s friend Elizabeth Sargent, she became “rigid, opinionated, and domineering over the years,” and this tendency began in the post-war period (359).
read by the literary and artistic establishment in New York City. For the most part, Cather, Stein, and Moore lacked a connection to women’s concerns. However, all three still wrote as women in the world, and therefore feminist criticism is useful for discovering what Catharine Stimpson calls the “variations and fluctuations, blurrings, coded signals, and lapses into mimicry or a void,” that occur in women’s writing (“Zero Degree” 250). Despite their indifference to feminist causes, butch-styled writers like Stein, Cather, and Moore employed a double-voiced discourse in which the marginalized use the tools of the dominant to construct their own language.

Butch offers a gendered “home,” but one that remains mythical and out of reach in a deeply patriarchal society. The butch-styled writer of the early twentieth century is the wanderer looking for a homeland, the Byronic figure, the modern-day Odysseus. I find this to be particularly true of Cather, Stein, and Moore; for example, in Cather’s first collection of poems, April Twilights (1903), she drew from male myths and legends—Apollo, Orpheus the Grail, and the father-son bond—as the primary structures for her poems (O’Brien 258). At Bryn Mawr where Moore received her undergraduate degree, a classmate remarked that she had the appearance of a sister in a convent, but Moore saw herself instead as “Byronesque” (Holding On 75).

For B.D. (bulldyke) blues artists like Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith, the homeland may be imagined as the street corner in the South where they first heard the plaintive notes of the

---

8 This feeling of loss of an authentic butchness that some may be experiencing today further suggests the nostalgic aspects of butch style and identity. As transgender theorist Gayle Salamon observes, butch has always been in the process of disappearing, and “handwringing about the death of ‘real’ butchness has been a constant accompaniment to butchness itself” (109). In the 1990s, Sue-Ellen Case also lamented the loss of butch “integrity” after the sex wars of the 1980s, which suggests how a sense of authenticity is integral to butch. Because of this perpetual feeling of loss, butch evokes an uncanny quality, which can be felt even in the most contemporary transmasculinities. Freud experienced the uncanny as the return of the repressed in the language of the familiar. In the words of literary scholar Deborah Lutz, the uncanny describes how “at the heart of the strange, there is a sense of home, of a deep interiority, of a place already visited” (33). Regardless of the time period, butch style tends to be infused with this kind of uncanniness and nostalgia.
wandering bluesmen, or the African continent before the brutal destruction of life wrought by the European slave trade. In Chapter Two, “B.D. Women Sing the Blues (and Dance the Charleston): Rage and Defiance in the Era of the ‘Greats,’” I argue that race plays a central role in the structuring of butch style and identity. In the process, I correct a pervasiveness tendency to write out questions of racial difference in discussions on butch styles in history. The term’s association to white lower-class masculinity means that black butch artists are “stealing” both masculinity and whiteness to accumulate power and cultural capital. Butchness is therefore in these instances a multi-layered response to sexism, racism, and homophobia, as demonstrated in the writings of Chicana feminists Cherríe Moraga, Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, and Emma Pérez, and women-of-color feminists Hortense Spillers, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, and Sylvia Wynter. Butchness does not occur outside of the histories of racism and colonization. Though outside the scope of this dissertation, stone butch feelings, for example, are not limited to white butch women, but can also appear in communities of color for men, as in Marlon Rigg’s seminal film, Black Is, Black Ain’t (1995). In the 1920s and ’30s, black musicians and performers used butch defiance and rage to confront the legacy of slavery and the present reality of Jim Crow.

Rage is an extreme expression of anger, an emotion that only white men can freely express in a racist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic cultural environment. As Sontag writes in “The Third World of Women,” while “ambitious,” “tough,” or “intellectual” women are threatening to white male hegemony, angry women are viewed as “castrating” when they engage in behaviors that are “normal” or even “commendable” in men (193). Through butch style, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Josephine Baker found the audacity to “tell it like it is,” to discover through performance a sense of body continuity and what Hortense Spillers calls “being-for-self.” Through lyrics, musical technique, and performance, these performers resisted psychic and physical capture by white and black men. Simultaneously, they questioned New Negro ideology, and the bourgeois values of blacks in France,
which demanded that urban women uphold middle-class respectability and chastity. Coeval with the development of the “City Negro” between 1915-1925, New Negro ideology determined which styles of art, writing, and music were “acceptable,” and which were not.

As Angela Davis explains in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, the blues artist was traditionally a black man who wandered from town to town, refusing to settle down, and whose main musical theme was the love relationship. Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith transformed themselves into masculine wanderers and philanderers, claiming the musical styles of the black bluesmen; by performing for large audiences both in the North and the South, they also stole the white male privilege of being seen and heard. Josephine Baker spread this rage and defiance across the Atlantic; when she arrived in Paris, she taught the French the Charleston, and danced topless in a belt made of rubber bananas, a symbol of her own phallic rebellion. Their rage and defense also recalls the myth of Sapphire and the fear that angry black women inspire. However, Rainey, Smith, and Baker often concealed their anger and rage with comedic gestures. Josephine Baker strikes me as rage-filled, defiant, and butch-styled, despite or perhaps in light of her campy, hyper-feminine costuming. Rainey, Smith, and Baker were also outrageous in their choice of dress and lifestyle, even by today’s standards, and I theorize this outrageousness as an expression of outrage. Their butch-styled rage and defiance also connects them to the rich history of black feminist theory on the subject, as well as the history of the earliest butch identity, the bulldagger, or “B.D. woman.”

However, racial difference made these artists particularly vulnerable to exploitation and economic disparity, which caused these artists to guard their private lives and to hide many of their tender emotions from the public eye. All three died in poverty, Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith in relative obscurity. The fate of these women, particularly the premature death of Bessie Smith, often called a “death by Jim Crow,” recalls the definition of racism articulated by Ruth Wilson Gilmore in *The Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*: “state-sanctioned or
extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (28). The very contours of butch style were thus determined by life-or-death racial, economic, and social factors. In many ways, after 1929, these artists became the victims of the same capitalist marketplace over which they claimed power, suggesting both the possibilities and the historical limitations of butch, particularly for artists of color.

In Chapter Three, “Just Put Your Lips Together and Blow”: Butch Pluck and Gumption in the Films of Clara Bow, Lauren Bacall and Hope Emerson,” I observe how representations of butch style gradually shifted as butch become an identity category for lesbians in the 1940s. After 1945, films demonized butch masculinity, to the point where there developed a close association between the figure of the Nazi and the masculine woman. While silent film star and “It” girl Clara Bow had more license to bend gender and sexuality in the pre-code era, in films of the ’40s and ’50’s, butch women were often used as minor characters and foils for the heterosexual love plot. Film became an important vehicle for propaganda against gays and lesbians and for a reconsolidation of white male power. As Emerson’s films make clear, butch minor characters often appear in the films of the ’40’s and ’50’s as villains, as butch came to closely resemble the “criminal elite” of Auden’s poem. Mercedes McCambridge’s striking cameo appearance as a member of Chicano motorcycle gang in Orson Welles’s Touch of Evil (1958), or Emerson as accessory to the crime in City of the City (1948), are prime examples.

Despite the differences between pre-code and post-code film, Bow, Emerson, and Bacall commanded enormous visual power on screen. They honed an uncanny ability to hijack a plot by throwing a punch, lighting a match, or eating a stack of pancakes. In the 1920s and early ’30s, Bow used tomboy pluck to command this power, behaviors for which she received minimal if any punishment in the plot of the film. These films are also examples of the industry’s complicity with racist norms, as Bow’s “savagery” was often compared to that of the Native American, who appears
not as a human being but either as the Noble Savage or uncivilized heathen. This demonstrates Critical Race theorist Siobhan Somerville's thesis that sex and gender destabilization often occurred in early cinema through the reifying of racial stereotypes. In Bacall's first two noir films, she expresses butch toughness through clipped language, precise physical movements (such as catching a matchbook in midair), and stone butch impenetrability. These films differ radically from her later, more well-known films in which she plays stereotypically feminine types. Emerson represents the turning point in public perception of butch style as butch became synonymous with lesbian. Through her representation of the butch body out of control, Emerson used her weight and height to add to her imposing demeanor. In Cry of the City and in the women's prison film Caged! (1950), Emerson is both a hardcore criminal and a compulsive eater who disrupts the narrative arc of the film, despite that in Cry of the City, her screen time amounts to no more than thirty minutes.

During and after World War II, the U.S. military used butch to label and uproot lesbian “predators” from the service, to issue them dishonorable “blue” discharges, and to “rehabilitate” the femme victims who fell prey to butch advances. The blue discharges, which became increasingly prevalent for servicewomen after the war, helped to form gay enclaves in the cities. These more organized gay and lesbian communities began using butch to describe masculine lesbians who desired feminine partners. Many writers have since chronicled in great depth the butch/femme communities of the ’50s and ’60s. In her trans-genre “biomythography” Zami (1982), Audre Lorde explains that the butch/femme distinctions were so important, that black and white lesbians who did not fit into this social structure were labeled Ky-Ky or AC/DC, the name used for “girl-girl” prostitutes (178). Butches and femmes in the 1950’s and ’60’s faced brutal discrimination by the police and by straight men. Leslie Feinberg’s Stone Butch Blues (1993) offers an historically accurate picture of this discrimination, as well as a stunning portrait of how the butch/femme bar culture blossomed and later collapsed due to the Vietnam War and the Second Wave Feminist movement.
Bow, Bacall, and Emerson suggest the power of popular film to disseminate both productive and pathologizing sex and gender epistemologies and ontologies.

In the twenty-first century, butch has been displaced and/or augmented by an explosion of new categories of female masculinity, including “transbitch,” “transman,” “ag” (aggressive girl), “genderqueer,” “masculine-of-center,” “gender fluid,” and many more. This pre-history of butch style on film provides current transgender identities with an historical context. Since this project began, transgender studies has become an important home for this butch-pre-history, particularly as the field has come to address historically constructed transgender behaviors and styles that don’t necessarily indicate a transgender identity in the contemporary sense. However, I stress the importance of collaboration between feminist and transgender studies scholars. As Gayle Salamon argues in *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*, despite antagonism between the two fields, eerily reminiscent of the early 1980’s exclusion of butch/femme styles, transgender studies and women’s studies need one another. On the one hand, women’s studies needs to avoid transphobia and become more responsive to emergent genders (95). As Salamon asserts, transphobia in women’s and gender studies departments indicates that scholars have forgotten that the main purpose of feminism is to provide systemic understanding of the structures of gender and the relations of power upon which these structures depend (96). Therefore, perhaps butch-styled subjects who fall just outside of the binary gender system may provide feminism with an ideal subject, one that remains in exile from gender, unable to be assimilated (96). This exile makes plain the ways that gender is both enacted and secured (98). However, transgender studies will become ineffective without a systemic and historical understanding of gender, the decades-long domain of

---

9 I define norms and normalization using the entry on “Norms and Normalization” provided by Dean Spade and Craig Willse (2016) in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, based on the work of Michel Foucault: “both disciplinary subjection of individuals and their bodies and minds as well biopolitical regulation of population dynamics” (p. 1).
women’s studies. Butch can help further disciplinary diplomacy, for while butch may represent for some a passage toward the masculine, or as a third gender of its own, butch remains historically tied to the category “woman” through its relationship to lesbian masculinity. Some within these categories may distance themselves from earlier butch identities, but remnants of butch style tend to remain.  

In a brief epilogue, I offer Hannah Arendt as a butch thinker who utilizes all of these aspects of butch style addressed in the three chapters. I read Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil (1963) through the lens of butch. I also consider how in her public appearances, she hijacks the interview, bearing resemblance to Hope Emerson. Ironic and uninhibited, Arendt offers the ways that butch can be useful for thinking about the role of the public intellectual in the current resistance movement against Donald Trump and his executors.

For lesbians of earlier generations who may lament the loss of butch, I offer this genealogy as an homage, and as testimony to the historical roots of an identity and style that has been critically important for many people. For their respective time periods, these butch-styled writers, musicians, performers, and actors possess an agency that in Butler’s words “exceeds the power by which it is enabled” (The Psychic Life 15). They became artists working against the grain, necessary subjects for study in the contemporary moment. They are anomalies, exceptions, agitators, whose artistic products are results of what Arendt calls the unpredictable outcome of acting in the world.

---

10 Some theorists, like butch writer S. Bear Bergman and anthropologist S. Lochlann Jain, argue for butch as a contemporary third gender category. Jain describes a twenty-first century butch identity that finds “comfort in the performance of gender-neutral and/or masculine affect or behaviors reflected in fashion as well as the appearance of physical, emotional, and social confidence and/or strength” (501). However, “transmasculinity” has become the preferred term to butch and to Jack Halberstam’s 1998 invention, “female masculinity.” Transmasculine refers to transgender people who were assigned to the female gender at birth but identify with masculinity more than with femininity. “Transbutch” describes a butch who opposes traditional gender, while retaining her lesbian-specific confrontation to both heteronormativity and cisnormativity.
Complicated, messy, and at times complicit with conservative agendas and white male hegemony, they smash our staid notions of what gender has meant in the past. They are “role models” not for a new explication of sex and gender but rather for conceiving what it means to be human, a messy project in the best of times. Butch style is characterized by persistent spirit in the face of unfavorable historical conditions, what we consider to be the masculine drive to express and create without models, and to show the world, eventually.
Chapter One

Epic, Amiable, Minuscule: Writing Stone Butch After the Great War

Men jostle and climb to, meet the bristling fire.
Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,
They leave their trenches, going over the top,
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,
And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,
Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop!
—Siegfried Sassoon, “Attack,” 1918

Baby love.
A great many people are in the war.
I will go there and back again.
—Gertrude Stein, “Lifting Belly,” 1915-1917

Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, and Marianne Moore pondered deeply the material and psychic effects of World War I, a war that changed not just arts and letters but humanity itself. The War as subject matter encouraged these writers to adopt a stone butch style, through which a hardened exterior protects the tender emotion within.\(^\text{11}\) The term “stone butch” usually describes a lesbian who refuses penetration by a lover, though stone butch can also refer to an emotional and artistic style. As Ann Cvetkovich writes in her 1998 essay “Untouchability and Vulnerability: Stone Butchness as Emotional Style,” stone butch involves an interiorizing of emotion where feelings are shown through absence (159). Stone butch is often seen as a reactive posture meant for a coterie of queers. However, as Jack Halberstam explains in her typological study, Female Masculinity, stone

\(^{11}\) Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and Joan Nestle’s collection *The Persistent Desire* (1992), as well as oral histories of butch/femme communities in the 1940’s and 50’s most clearly establish stone butch as an identity. These works contain the kinds of revelations that were made possible by second wave feminism, the Vietnam War, and by the cultural climate post 1960’s. Here I consider earlier periods when butch appeared as a historically constructed, creative style.
butch actually holds the power to challenge the stability and accuracy of binary sex-gender systems (139). In this chapter, I extend the theories of Halberstam and Cvetkovich to consider the stone butch dance of the penetrator and penetrated occurring in literature, which creates circuits of pleasure between characters and textual elements, as well as between writers and readers.

Cather, Stein, and Moore used stone butch style in their work to address the material and psychic effects of the War; Siegfried Sassoon’s soldier “floundering in the mud” therefore becomes the specter that haunts these works. The War revealed without question humankind’s potential for brutality. As Sassoon’s poem suggests, the real difference between this war and previous wars was an attitude toward the human being as a dispensable quantity, symbolized by the trench, a site of living death. The War thus offered a preview of how technological advances may lead to human extinction. This generation of writers observed the advent of many firsts: the first use of chemical weapons, the first mass civilian bombings, and the first official genocide of the modern era. During and after the War, on the streets of European and American cities, the amputee became a regular site, and for the first time, an extensive archive of war photographs documented the wounded returning from the Front, many of whom suffered from a new disease: shell shock. The wounded white male body and psyche was acutely present in the popular consciousness.

Stone butch writers reveal their inner tenderness in their own work, and to what I call the “femme witness.” The femme witness offered protection in a hostile world, and more than this, he or she provided a host of other supportive qualities that enabled the success of the work. Willa Cather’s novels abound with stone characters placed within epic architectures, many of whom have some relationship to a femme witness who acknowledges their pain and encourages their artistic progress. In their own lives, the femme witness became indispensable to the work itself. It’s hard to imagine Stein without Alice B. Toklas, Cather without her companion, Edith Lewis, or Moore without her mother, Mary Warner Moore. Further, it’s impossible to imagine any of the three writers
existing apart from their creations. “To melt her stone,” is an expression Leslie Feinberg popularized in her novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) to describe how a femme might access the exquisite tenderness of the stone butch within the sexual scene. Jess Goldberg in *Stone Butch Blues* remembers the femmes who “held” her “in their gaze” (Feinberg 108). To be held in the gaze of another suggests acceptance that cannot be found elsewhere in the culture, a holding that is both maternal and potentially sexual, though not necessarily. The stone butch artist enlists the support of the femme witness, who then acknowledges her greatness, allowing her to experience a reprieve from her often severely limited emotional life.

In the second section of this chapter, I offer an overview of the historical situation that provided the conditions for stone butch writing. In the third section, I discuss Willa Cather’s stone butch style as a reaction to the War and as a result of her experience crossing the continent with her family as a young girl to resettle in the vast plains of Nebraska. In the fourth section, I consider how Stein’s stone butch aesthetic developed out of her years volunteering at the Front with Toklas, at which time she developed a close identification with returning American soldiers, or doughboys, the informal name for members of the U.S. Army or Marine Corps in World War I. In the fifth section, I explore the life and poems of Marianne Moore, a writer not normally considered “butch” but whose steely exterior, particularly when she served as editor of *the Dial*, set a precedent for later tough female poets who refused to emote in expectedly feminine ways. Using stone butch style, all three writers departed from nineteenth-century literary norms for women as well as the gospel of high modernism, which determined that only men possessed the ingredients for genius.

I have found that stone butch is perhaps the most widely visible of the butch attributes analyzed in *Butch Between the Wars*. For example, the work of Dorothy Allison contains echoes of Willa Cather’s stone butch characters; the war-like conditions in poverty-stricken North Carolina in the 1950’s and ’60’s, especially as Allison describes these conditions in her short story collection,
Trash (1988), produced as many casualties proportionally speaking as any officially declared war. The ability to withhold emotion—to feel exceptional, and to limit emotional expression to a femme witness—become methods of survival for Allison’s characters. Stein’s stone butch poetics echo in the work of contemporary poets Eileen Myles, Harryette Mullen, as well as in the art, writing and philosophy of Mina Pam Dick (a.k.a. Hildebrand Pam Dick, Nico Pam Dick, et al.). These artists create their work in the mode of the author-as-penetrator, and yet their penchant for Steinian perversities, their desire to penetrate with language, reveals simultaneously the stone butch fear of emotional openness and love.

Stone butch as metaphor also provides an opportunity to talk about the contemporary struggle over closed versus open borders, for while a “soft” national body is a feminized one that can be “penetrated” or “invaded” by others, a hyper masculine one refuses “entry” of foreign bodies (Ahmed 2). As Sara Ahmed explains in The Cultural Politics of Emotion, like the penetrable/impenetrable dichotomy found in stone butch, the metaphors of “softness” and “hardness” are not always individual attributes but attributes of collectives. With nativist xenophobia proliferating across the globe, questions of open vs. closed, soft vs. hard, become high stakes conversations with material effects. Far from a special interest topic, then, stone butch becomes a way into discussions about contemporary politics of representation, as well as concepts of nationhood, citizenship, and notions of belonging to a human community.

Historical Context: Exceeding the Capacity of Words

Pat Barker’s trilogy of historical fiction on World War I expresses the true horror of being a soldier and spending months at a time in the trenches. In these novels, the trench becomes a larger metaphor for the inauguration of a new modern century. W.H.R. Rivers, poet Siegfried Sassoon’s psychiatrist who helps him recover from shell shock, explains that the breakdowns suffered by so
many men were not a result of some unique horror, but rather the less heroic conditions of “immobility, passivity and helplessness” created by the trenches (The Ghost Road 172). Soldiers passively waited in holes in the ground for the next shell to come and kill them, or maim them beyond recognition. The physical and emotional conditions created by the trench become one reason why language felt insufficient for writing about the War. As Susan Sontag conveys in Regarding the Pain of Others, after the start of the Great War, “much that had been taken for granted came to seem fragile, even undefendable”; the conditions of the War “exceeded the capacity of words to describe” (25). Stone butch—a display of feeling that takes the form of absence—became a way for Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, and Marianne Moore to express this failure.

As writers, they felt a privileged kinship with the great male figures in history. During and after the War, Cather, Stein, and Moore grieved for what they felt to be the death of greatness. “Great” civilizations, concepts and constructs were deeply important to these writers, and they were not alone in their grief. In 1916, Freud wrote on the War in a lesser-known essay entitled “On Transience.” He describes in poetic detail the atmosphere of loss at this time, the impossibility of hope:

[The war] destroyed not only the beauty of the countrysides through which it passed and the works of art which it met on its path but it also shattered our pride in achievements of our civilization, our admiration of many philosophers and artists and our hopes of a final triumph over the differences between nations and races. It tarnished the lofty imperially of our science, it revealed our instincts in all their nakedness and let loose the evil spirits within us which we thought had been tamed forever by centuries of continuous education by the noblest minds. It made our country small again and made the rest of the world far remote. It robbed us of very much that we had loved, and showed us how ephemeral were many things that we had regarded as changeless. (171)

Though Cather, Stein, and Moore were not followers of Freud, they echoed his anguish, though often behind a coldly intellectual, glittery, or melodramatic surface. The War equally “shattered” their own pride in the “achievements” of white men as well as their sense of continuity, and in many
ways, they were dealt a double blow because of their at times exaggerated identification with the masculine.

In literature as well as in personal letters and speeches, Cather, Stein, and Moore displayed what I call butch exceptionalism, a sense of their own greatness which aligned them with the noble male poets and heroes of past centuries as well as with the wounded soldier returning from the War. As Stein advises her readers in *The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*, “Think of the Bible and Homer think of Shakespeare and think of me.” Stein cherished her portrait of General Grant, whose memoirs she also loved to read (R. Cohen 130). For Stein, the great generals were American, and when she became “general of the avant-garde,” she emulated “heroes” like Grant (130). Even after her tenure as general of the avant-garde ended, she became a kind of heroic masculine figure (though she called herself godmother) to the doughboys. Willa Cather also worshipped the great male heroes of the past; on a visit to Paris in the summer of 1902, she wrote to her father that the “tomb of Napoleon is the only thing I have ever found in the world which did not at all disappoint” (*Letters* 66). As editors Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout write in *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, Cather also took a strong interest in the American soldiers returning home from the war (*Letters* 266). Edith Lewis told how Cather visited wounded soldiers at the Polyclinic Hospital (*Letters* 266). On December 27, 1918, Cather described in a letter to a friend her holiday dinner with an amputee from the War: “Street-boys, farmer boys, any old boys—they have a kind of gracious grace. A one armed lad who was here on Xmas eve could eat, and seat his hostess at the table, so deftly with one strong, warm, brown hand” (*Letters* 267). The War became Marianne Moore’s first true poetic subject, and her brother’s enlistment in the U.S. navy precipitated a lifelong interest in heroism. Antiquated weaponry, armor, and war implements were nothing short of obsessions for Moore throughout her career. Even a cursory examination of the personal histories
of Cather, Stein, and Moore before and after the War reveals their profound identification and pride in white masculinity.

The stone butch characters in Cather’s novels also confirm the tendency in literature to portray the butch character as wounded, or butch itself as wound. Sally Munt explains in “The Well of Shame,” an essay in the collection Palatable Poison, for “literary butches” like Stephen Gordon in The Well of Loneliness (1928), the “war wound” “is the visible transmutation of shame into pride (208).

Susan Kingsley Kent offers a similar theory in “The Well of Loneliness as War Novel,” that Gordon was actually modeled after the “wounded male subject of the postwar world” (224). According to Kent, the wounded male subject even became a source of pleasure for lesbians during this period (224). The butch exceptionalism found in stone butch style is a similar “transmutation,” through which writers like Cather, Stein, and Moore took up wounded masculinity as subject and converted the shame of being different into a source of pride. The wounded male body and psyche became a source of creative inspiration for these writers.

Stein’s belief in her own exceptionalism came in part through the theories of Otto Weininger, an Austrian philosopher with unconventional views on gender and sexuality. From 1903-1910, she frequently consulted Weininger’s work Sex and Character (1903), which is regarded today as partly progressive, partly reductive and inaccurate (Ruddick 23). Despite the fact that Weininger was anti-Semitic, Stein was compelled by his thoughts on the “specialness” of masculine women as the only women capable of creativity. Weininger provided Stein with an historical rationale for her masculine identification and butch exceptionalism. However, despite this outer confidence and bravado, Stein confesses in The Making of Americans (1925) that she fears her own failure as a writer: “I have been a miserable one because I have been always a little pretty nearly certain that I would be ending failing and every one enthusiastic or passionate or sensitive or excited in attacking would
then make me a jealous one, a miserable one” (609). This is the essence of stone butch—to display an outward bravado that veils the tenderness, anxiety, and insecurity within.

Neither Cather, Stein, nor Moore referred to themselves as women writers, nor did they admit to any “shame” in being different, for they guarded their private lives, and found personal confession to be distasteful and unliterary. The blurring of gender categories during and after the War helped created the conditions of possibility for these writers to experience a high degree of success, particularly in their later careers. However, with the exception of Moore’s early work with the Suffragettes, these writers felt no particular alignment to a feminist cause, or sense of community with women authors per se. Cather condescended to her fellow women authors as frequently and as viciously as any male critic. They did not share Virginia Woolf’s belief in the power of androgyny for women writers, for example, or the mystical faith in women’s artistic powers, as in the work of Mina Loy, or the poetry of H.D. Stone butch writing style aligns more closely with the heroism of the American Revolution, and therefore Cather, Stein, and Moore would likely have agreed with Henry Miller’s view that after World War I, “‘the loss of sex polarity [became] part and parcel of the larger disintegration, the reflex of the soul’s death, and coincident with the disappearance of great men, great causes, great wars’” (qtd. in Kate Millett’s Sexual Politics). Political and social conservatism is part of what must be confronted and wrestled with when dealing with the butch lineage and legacy.

As Stein scholar Ulla Dydo reminds us in The Language That Rises, readers of Stein (and to my thinking, Cather and Moore), must imagine the scorn that these women endured because of their anomalous sexuality and gender, which may have further exaggerated their stone butch styles. According to Dydo, despite Stein’s buoyant public presentation, she was subjected to “incessant, condescending assaults upon herself as a writer, a person, and a woman’”(13). Combined with the war-related trauma experienced by an entire generation of writers and artists, these “incessant, condescending assaults” helped shape stone butch writing between the wars. For Cather, Stein, and
Moore, stone butch became a matter of survival; the armor that protects against emotional penetration conceals an abundance of emotion, and carefully wrought linguistic surfaces alternately conceal and reveal their vulnerabilities.

Stone butch style depends upon this armor to protect the tender emotions within, but this armor remains impermanent and variable, and ultimately phantasmatic, corresponding to what Jacques Lacan describes in “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function” as the “armor of an alienating identity.” This armor of finely honed ego defenses begin to develop after the infant views herself in a mirror, and conceives of the fantasized imago of the idealized self. The “Ideal-I” exists before language creates of the infant a subject, and before she becomes identified with the other, situating the ego before socialization and setting in motion a fiction of wholeness, a gestalt, that remains forever unrealizable (76). The imago exists in eternal tension with the fragmented and vulnerable self, which compels the subject to develop fantasies of integrity, moving toward “the finally donned armor of an alienating identity” (italics mine, 78). Stone butch writing describes the defense of this unrealizable wholeness, and the movement back and forth between the fragmented state and the rigid armored state. This need for armor becomes accentuated during this historical moment, when the fragmented white male body begins to appear regularly on the streets and in the newspapers—fragmentation and dissolution become realizable threats.

For Cather, Stein, and Moore, literature itself became part of this attempt to defend the inner castle of the ego described by Lacan, as expressed through characters and scenes in the writing, as well as poetic styles and aesthetic choices. Cather, Stein, and Moore as modernist writers employed the trope of the fragmented subject, which means that the works move back and forth from an armored state of protection to a state of dissolution. The armored state, or fantasy of impenetrability, became the desired return. As Stein writes in The Geographical History of America, to become split is to lose oneself, a fate she herself experienced when she wrote to and for an audience
in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (1933). As she wrote rather enigmatically, “The minute you are two it is not philosophy that is through it is you.” Moore defended the state of wholeness through what she termed “relentless accuracy.” Cather narrativized the drama, and impossibility, of the armored state through her characters. The ability to hold in suffering is a mark of white manliness, both during this era and today—an ability that begins to break down as a result of the War. In Regeneration, Barker describes the suffering white man bearing the burdens of what was falsely believed to be a “white man’s war.” Bearing one’s suffering in silence became requisite to the performance of conventional masculinity. As W.H.R. Rivers notes, the men had been “trained to identify emotional repression, as the essence of manliness. Men who broke down, or cried, or admitted to feeling fear, were sissies, weaklings, failures” (Regeneration 48). Yet at the hospital, men learn the secret art of tenderness toward one another, as well the ability to acknowledge trauma, the depth of which no soldier had encountered before World War I.

With the help of an often iron-clad butch exceptionalism, and within the protective pockets of their respective femme witnesses, Cather, Stein, and Moore responded through stone butch style to wounded white masculinity, and to the War that marked the end of masculine heroism. I establish a common lineage for these writers through stone butch style and a shared connection to the masculine, in the process correcting views in literary history that place Stein and Moore in particular in separate categories; while critics consider Stein to be the forerunner of American experimental poetry, Moore is associated with the lyric tradition of Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop. In The Professor’s House (1925) and in One of Ours (1922), through a complex series of gender crossings,

---

12 For more information on Moore’s pervasive use of this term “relentless accuracy,” and the ways in which she used the term to ensure her protection from the outside world, see Linda Leavell’s article, “Marianne Moore Instructs Her Biographer: ‘Relentless Accuracy’ versus ‘The Haggish, Uncompanionable Drawl of Certitude.’”
Cather creates male stone butch-styled protagonists whose emotional expressions are structured by the historical situation. In *Lucy Church Amiably* (1930), *Useful Knowledge*, and “Pink Melon Joy,” Stein performs in the mode of author-as-penetrator, allowing the reader to access the more visceral traumas of the War. In her poems and prose, particularly works that convey her closeness to armored animals, Moore captures the essence of stone butch as an elaborate, and at times troubled (and troubling) style of expression. The emotional refusals and allowances present in these writings suggest a finely tuned artistic economy of blockage and loss, one that continues to be used by contemporary artists and writers.

**Epic Stone Butch in the Novels of Willa Cather**

In Cather criticism, interpretative claims have led to fierce rivalries. This contentious response testifies to the difficulty of Cather’s narrative structures, to the twisting and extending of sex and gender in her work, as well as to the more general butch girth of her literary production. Beginning in the 1970’s, feminist and queer theorists have tended to approach Cather’s masculine characters and affective structures as choices made under historical duress, as though the only way she could express her latent homosexuality was through a masculine veneer. According to this body of criticism, underneath this veneer lay Cather’s dormant, woman-identified nature. Biographer Sharon O’Brien even bends Cather’s story to create an affinity for the feminine; she argues that Cather finally abandoned her love of the masculine to embrace her repressed affections for her mother, and to emulate her mentor, Sara Orne Jewett. At this point, according to O’Brien, Cather became the woman writer she was meant to be.

In the 1990’s, queer theorists sought to rescue Cather from lesbian feminist criticism, and yet these readings tend to reify some of the more reductive aspects. In “Across Gender, Across Sexuality: Willa Cather and Others,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick theorizes that Cather’s male fictional
“alliances” were not signs of pathological identification with masculinity, but rather an attempt to express her identity as a masculine lesbian. Sedgwick’s concept of “alliance” is a powerful and accurate one for describing Cather’s fictional characters, one that closely follows Cather’s own words on her writing process found in The Selected Letters. Claude, the protagonist in One of Ours, indeed became like a friend, brother, son, and confidante; numerous letters suggest that Cather’s fate and fortune allied with those of her characters, but in ways that cannot be limited to her sexuality or her “repressions.” There were likely multiple reasons why Cather decided to write male characters, one of which may have been an artistic decision to take a point of view. As Hermione Lee argues succinctly, we can call Cather a lesbian if we wish, for there is significant evidence to make that case, but we must be careful not to reduce her imaginative impulses to her sexuality, as though the only reason she wrote was to express covertly her lesbian orientation (12). This view can be stigmatizing, for it assumes that Cather succumbed to cowardice in her writing, and that sexual openness in the style of a 21st century author would have made for better fiction, which is not necessarily the case (12). As Butler also argues in Bodies That Matter, Sedgwick’s idea of an original, ahistorical lesbian truth, which awaits historical representation, assumes a sexuality that is intact prior to discourse (145).

While Sedgwick names Cather as Oscar Wilde’s “effeminophobic bully” repulsed by feminine artifice, I argue instead that Cather’s gender variance appears exuberantly in some works, not as a sign of her sexuality necessarily, or as an effect of her rejection of the feminine, but rather as part of her authorial pleasure, in stone butch in particular. Within this blocked, irregular emotional expression, she found a perverse jouissance, which she experienced as a kind of integrity, an integrity that may or may not have always aligned with her lived identity. Sedgwick also underestimates the deep ambivalence Cather felt toward gender and sex, expressed through the notion of displacement, which as Butler argues may be the foundation of Cather’s literary structures (149). As Lee concurs,
Cather was at her best when she worked through “indirection, suppression, and suggestion, and through a refusal to be enlisted” (12). Stone butch becomes a powerful way to analyze these displacements and blockages; through stone butch, she communicates a vision in motion, a shutting down in order to turn on. At the same time, Cather expressed the gaps and absences in language that occurred as a direct result of the War, which brought the need for new ways of speaking, and of reading that reflect the change in humanity itself.\footnote{As Billy Prior explains in Barker’s third novel The Ghost Road, “if the war went on for a hundred years another language would evolve, one that was capable of describing the sound of a bombardment or the buzzing of flies on a hot August day on the Somme. There are no words” (198). Cather’s fiction often represents the inability of words to capture the War’s consequences.}

The novels and stories of Willa Cather express how stone butch can be a citation of a wartime masculinity that both travels and refuses to travel—across continents, across genres, and across gender. However, Cather’s cross-gender aesthetic also developed from her experience crossing the United States by train from Virginia to Nebraska to relocate with her family. I suggest that this relocation contributed to the creation of stone butch characters in her work. As a result of this drastic geographical shift, her fiction is epic in scale, but also sparse—critical of modernity, conservative and often contradictory. As a nine-year-old on the train ride from East to West, Cather gazed upon the last vestiges of the open prairie. As she remembered in a 1913 interview in the Philadelphia Record: “‘As we drove further and further out into the country, I felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything…It was a kind of an erasure of personality’” (Selected Letters xi). The fact that she experienced the move West as an “erasure of personality” suggests an evacuation or disintegration of the self, similar to the kind described by war veterans. This kind of erasure also precipitates the stone butch response; she even remarks in the same interview that on that journey, songbirds reminded her that her purpose in life from that moment forward was “not to cry” (xi).
However, while Cather remained suspicious all her life of public displays of emotion, or feminine-styled confession, she showed tremendous tenderness toward friends and family. After the death of her ex-lover, Isabella McClung, she even wrote to her brother that her problem had not been carelessness, but caring too much and “too hard” (561). While this approach made her as a writer, she feared that in the end, it would break her personally (561). In her emotional armor, Cather modeled herself after the men in her family rather than the women, a conscious choice that appears in her characters.

In femme witness Edith Lewis, Cather found artistic support and emotional reprieve; Lewis understood Cather’s artistic process and knew when to leave her alone (O’Brien 353). She created for Cather an “emotional and psychological sanctuary” where she could retreat without worry for practical concerns (353). Lewis believed strongly in Cather’s genius, and she admired Cather’s eyes in the same way that Toklas admired Stein’s voice (353). Their Bank Street apartment, like 27 rue de Fleurus, was the “walled stronghold of her very self” (353). After her death, Lewis dedicated herself completely to preserving both their Park Avenue apartment and Cather’s legacy. She became Cather’s voice on all literary matters, destroying many potentially incriminating letters, especially the ones written to her first lover, Louise Pound, which show in a most dazzling manner Cather’s butch gallantry. In one letter written to Pound in the summer of 1892, she remarks on Pound’s “handsome” appearance at a party, and Cather’s ability as her suitor to generate the “greenest envy” among the men in attendance (Selected Letters 16). She lamented on how unfair it was that “feminine friendships” were considered “unnatural” (17).

The autobiographical impulse is a persistent topic in Cather criticism, and while I argue that her life experiences do not structure ahistorically her stone butch style, the similarities between Cather and her characters indicate that her own life was a primary influence. Cather maintained an imaginary connection to an uncle who died in the Civil War, which perhaps led her to adopt a male
Figure 1: Studio portrait of Willa Cather in embroidered jacket, fall 1921, inscribed, “For an old and dear friend, who first encouraged and directed me in the work which has become the purpose and pleasure of my life, Willa Cather.” Philip L. and Helen Cather Southwick Collection, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries.
persona as a child, a persona she continued to enjoy throughout her early years at the University of Nebraska. From 1888-1892, she took on the name and identity of William Cather, Jr., complete with a crew cut and soldier costume from the Civil War. Her college classmates remembered her for her unorthodox dress and for her masculine personality, which they described as “assertive, energetic, outspoken, individualistic, superior, independent, forceful, strong, self-confident, brilliant, and egotistical, as well as mannish, and boy-like” (O’Brien 121). While Cather eventually gave up her male style of dress, she never relinquished the masculine emotional orientation observed by her classmates. The attempt to recover a dead masculinity from the past became the subject of her short story, “The Namesake,” in which she imagines herself to be her uncle’s double and heir:

Under the roof where my father and grandfather were born, I remained utterly detached. The somber rooms never spoke to me, the old furniture never seemed tinctured with race. The portrait of my boy uncle was the only thing to which I could draw near, the only link with anything I had ever known before. (“Namesake”)

Far from a display of false consciousness, her ebullient embrace of masculinity—including her campy love of football and Rudyard Kipling—expressed a jouissance in the materiality of masculinity, one that persisted throughout her career.

Cather experienced tremendous success writing a male character in *My Ántonia* (1918), and this gave her the confidence to create the character of Claude in *One of Ours*, which she based on her cousin, Grovsenor P. Cather, who sailed to France with the American Expeditionary Forces in September 1917. On June 8, 1918, Cather found her cousin’s name among the list of Americans killed in battle in France. She spent time with her cousin in Nebraska on the farm before the War, and he became the source of a melodramatic pride in the returning soldier, which became the center of her novel. As she writes to her Aunt, on June 12, 1918:

I can see him sitting on his wagon as plainly as if it were yesterday, in the middle of a peaceful country, with thousands of miles of land and sea between him and those far-away armies we were talking about. What would have seemed more improbable than that he should fall, an officer, in France, in one of the greatest battles the world has ever seen. He
was restless on a farm; perhaps he was born to throw all his energy into this crisis, and to die among the first and bravest of his country.” (Selected Letters 256)

Cather expresses in this letter her glorification of the War at this time and her feeling that the common American soldier was the true hero.\(^{14}\)

However, despite her enthusiasm for the American soldier, by the time she wrote the novel, she detested the War and the development of the West, which she perceived to be linked processes and events. She expressed her new views to Ferris Greenslet on January 12, 1921: “You’ve always groaned a little at the War—as do I!—and a great deal about the West, and this novel is so wholly West and War that maybe you will feel a little relief as well as, I hope, some decent regret, at not having to be responsible for it” (297). Cather shows through Claude the fundamental truth that the War was not a worthy heroes’ mission, but a demoralizing one. Similarly, Claude at first believes that the War is a part of the poet-hero’s journey; he even compares himself to “the hero of the Odyssey upon his homeward journey” (One of Ours 244). However, because he is being sent off to war at this point in the novel, this is in fact a reversal of The Odyssey’s narrative arc. This reversal suggests that his poetic sensibility is at odds with the mission of this war, and that the poet-hero cannot survive modern warfare or the brutality that has taken hold in Europe. Cather tethers Claude to the deeds of past heroes, even though she recognizes that heroism is quickly becoming outmoded. As Hermione Lee explains, through Cather’s varied references to myth, legend and ancient history, she tries to promote this modern war as dignified, and the simple Nebraskan soldier as part of a long line of heroes, views that she abandons several years later (179).

\(^{14}\) She expressed similar feelings in other letters at this time; she writes to Irene Miner Weisz on October 26, 1918, “I like to feel that G.P. and the brave boys who fell with him, who went so far to fight for an ideal and for that only, became and are God’s soldiers. Whatever the after life may be, I know they have a glorious part in it” (Selected Letters 261).
Although the novel won a Pulitzer Prize, *One of Ours* was widely denounced by the major critics and writers of the day. The book has two distinct halves, and while the first half was generally praised as conveying successfully the quiet passions of the Plains, the second half was denounced as a romantic glorification of the War, blindly patriotic and naïve. While the idealized version of the War should make contemporary readers uneasy, the ferocious critical response, launched by prominent male critics, was partly a defense of territory, for they considered Cather to be intruding upon masculine terrain: the pioneering West and the battlefields of the Great War. The most brutal assessment of Cather’s work came from Ernest Hemingway, who wrote privately to Edmund Wilson: “‘You weren’t in the war weren’t you? Wasn’t that last scene in the lines wonderful? Do you know where it came from? The battle scene in *Birth of a Nation*. I identified episode after episode. Catherized. Poor woman she had to get her war experience somewhere’” (O’Brien 114). H. L. Mencken thought the battle scenes were taken straight from a Hollywood movie lot, while Sinclair Lewis wrote that the novel “disastrously loses [the truth] in a romance of violinists gallantly turned soldiers, of self-sacrificing sergeants, sallies at midnight, and all the commonplaces of ordinary war novels” (114). However, damning critical response also came from Cather’s personal associates, whom she ceased to count as friends after their comments about the book. This dispels a common misconception that only the most famous critics remote from Cather’s true inner circle publicly criticized *One of Ours*; Cather felt betrayed by trusted confidantes, but she was not afraid to break old attachments in order to pursue what she felt was a new style of writing.

Despite the intense criticism, Cather defended her choices, privately in her letters; in 1923, she wrote to her artist friends, Earl and Achsah Barlow Brewster:

This book has been a new experience for me. The people who don’t like it detest it, most of the critics find it maudlin sentimentality and rage about it in print. But the ex-service men like it and actually buy it. It has sold over forty thousand now and is still selling. I’ve had to take on a secretary to answer the hundreds of letter I get about it. The truth is, this sort of
success does not mean much but bother and fatigue to me—I’m glad I never had it before.”
(Selected Letters 336-7)

The novel launched Cather as a literary celebrity, but she lamented rather than celebrated this
development, for Cather preferred the company of a few treasured friends, some of whom had
rejected what she felt was her best, and truest, writing.

Cather may have had a premonition of these losses when she chose to express through
Claude the difficulty of becoming emotionally open to anyone but the femme witness, in Claude’s
case his mother. Cather felt that with Claude she was telling the truth not about France or the War
but the emotional truth about a boy. Her identification with her character reached a critical intensity
during the writing of the novel; she wrote in a letter to a friend in 1922 how “some of him still lives
in me, and some of me is buried in France with him” (309-310). In many letters written in 1922,
Cather at the same time appears adamant that she had no intention of glorifying the War, or of
depicting the War with historical accuracy. She wrote to Elizabeth Moorhead Vermorcke:

It’s disconcerting to have Claude regarded as a sentimental glorification of War, when he’s so
clearly a farmer boy, neither very old nor very wise. I tried to treat the War without any
attempt at literalness—as if it were some way away back in history, and I was only concerned
with its effect on one boy. Very few people seem able to regard it as a story—it’s friends as
well as its foes will have it a presentation of “the American soldier,” whereas it’s only the
story of one. (325)

This letter also suggests Cather’s long view of history, which she communicated by depicting Claude
as a hero in the mold of the ancients rather than as just another soldier who died in the Great
War.”15

15 By writing in a realist mode, Cather was in many ways out of step with her contemporaries, which
became another source for her exceptionalism. As Jean Noble writes in Masculinities Without Men?,
while her themes corresponded to the modernist obsession with identity, voice, subjectivity, and
splitting and fracturing of consciousness, her realist mode went against the anti-representational,
anti-realist, formal poetics of the “New” (xvii).
Cather’s attention to the emotional texture of this character suggests that her male alliances were not simply alter egos but masculine prototypes with whom she felt a deep blood bond. Cather found in Claude a “brother” who knew the difficulty of expressing emotion, the pleasure and pain of the Lacanian “armor of an alienating identity.” In Claude’s emotional impenetrability, intensified by his critical stance toward modernity and progress, he refuses domestic life, and frames this refusal as one with a political basis: “There was no chance for the kind of life he wanted at home, where people were always buying and selling, building and pulling down. He had begun to believe that the Americans were a people of shallow emotion” (One of Ours 406). As a butch exception, Claude believes that he is the only one who possesses emotional depth, which causes him to condemn the world around him as shallow and unfeeling. Emotional armor becomes the response to what is perceived to be a hostile world.

The wounded male body becomes a strong symbol of the need to protect oneself from this hostility. When Claude first arrives in France, the sight of the wounded male bodies quickly dampens his enthusiasm for war:

Their skin was yellow or purple, their eyes were sunken, their lips sore. Everything that belonged to health had left them, every attribute of youth was gone. One poor fellow, whose face and trunk were wrapped in cotton, never stopped moaning, and as he was carried up the corridor he smelled horribly…These were the first wounded men Claude had seen. To shed bright blood, to wear the red badge of courage,—what was one thing; but to be reduced to this was quite another. Surely, the sooner these boys died, the better. (335)

Claude’s viscerally powerful description of these men tells us more about Cather’s themes than even about the War itself; not only does Claude observe the fact of their condition (the “face and trunk” wrapped in cotton, the condition of the skin, lips, and eyes), but he also bears witness to their pain, expressed through the ceaseless moaning. While Hemingway hated One of Ours, as Jean Noble explains, Cather and Hemingway had a lot in common in terms of how they staged the turn-of-the-century crisis in white masculinity, which occurred at the turn of the century. Particularly in the early novels, The Sun Also Rises (1926) and A Farewell to Arms (1929), Hemingway presents masculinity as
wounded, much the same as Cather. Through Claude, Cather asks fundamental historical questions about the status of manhood after the War, and the degree to which one’s sensitivities needed refuge. She questions the difference between war and murder, or between an act of power and an act of authority.

While the cleaving of the novel into two parts became cause for the most vicious criticisms, the split itself also forms part of the stone butch structure of this novel; in the first half, Cather represents the rarefied world of emotion and reflection on the plains, Claude’s interior life as he attempts to navigate his own emotional landscape while working the family farm, while in the second half, she represents the masculine world of public action. Cather establishes that stone butch style is misunderstood in both worlds, for Claude finds comfort neither on the farm nor on the Western Front. Cather also suggests a characteristic restlessness of a generation. As Lee offers, Cather wanted to portray a broken world through the irony of Claude as a young American hero in a world where heroism is losing its meaning (173).

However, Claude’s relationship with his mother transcends material circumstances, transcends even death. The masculinities that Cather revered clearly needed protection from brutishness, as seen through the characters of Claude’s father and his brother, Bayliss, the capitalist, whom Claude’s mother learns to tolerate as “rugged.” The artist and the intellectual—Winston Churchill’s Great Man—became for Cather both what was being fought for and the primary casualty of the War. Claude exaggerates his dilemma and imagines that the world has turned against him: “Was there nothing in the world outside to answer to his own feelings, and was every turn to be fresh disappointment?” (One of Ours 154). In characteristic stone style, Claude bears his suffering in silence, and his connections to others outside of his mother (and later his wartime friend, Gerhardt) prove tenuous and disappointing.
While Claude eventually takes some comfort in the daily life of the farm, he mainly achieves this comfort through a mental escape so profound that he loses touch with the war looming in Europe. The newspapers pile up outside his front door while he sleeps “like the heroes of old” (158). When he finally does read the papers, he lacks the basic knowledge to understand the world situation: “The German army was entering Luxembourg; he didn’t know where Luxembourg was, whether it was a city or a country; he seemed to have some vague idea that it was a palace!” (167). This ignorance doesn’t seem to bother Claude, in part because he feels the world has disappointed him, and in part because he feels he belongs to a separate class of men who don’t need to bother with common knowledge. Claude convinces himself that he is doing the more important work of the stone butch poet-hero, and this work necessitates a separation from the world. The stone butch possesses the singular privilege of the universal perspective, a lunar view of history and time that only the self-appointed exile can fully appreciate. Claude remarks how he alone understands the moon looking “down upon the follies and disappointments of men; into the slaves’ quarters of old time, into prison windows, and into fortresses where captives languished” (207). By taking the point of view of the moon, and possessing “her” perspective, he gains a privileged knowledge of the passage of time, a view that is only possible because the world rejects him.

Stone butch style is therefore, like the structure of One of Ours, ultimately heroic and split. The butch artist or character feels she has a particular mission and role to play in the future of literature and history. Claude’s mission is similar to Cather’s, which explains their kinship; as Lee offers, “One of Ours acts out her search for a new mythology to replace the loss of the old” (177). In many ways, returning to the beginning point of this section, Cather’s history of geographical displacement plays a role in her own—and her characters’—exceptionalism. As O’Brien observes, unlike other writers of her generation, Cather moved West at a crucial age: old enough to remember,
yet young enough to savor the adventures ahead (74). The creative transformation of loss became a cornerstone in Cather’s work.

In the second half of the novel, by describing in painstaking detail Claude’s last moments, Cather makes her own peace with the death of heroism, and the passing of the man of integrity modeled after her father. Cather eroticizes this wounded male body, which is also a way of describing the degree of identification, for when we eroticize we also form a connection to another through a shared human experience of pleasure and/or pain. We bear witness to another’s human experience. 16 Claude represents the emotional wound that must be armored and protected:

Hicks and Bert Fuller and Oscar carried Claude forward toward the Snout, out of the way of the supports that were pouring in. He was not bleeding very much. He smiled at them as if he were going to speak, but there was a weak blankness in his eyes. Bert tore his shirt open; three clean bullet holes. By the time they looked at him again, the smile had gone….the look that was Claude had faded. Hicks wiped the sweat and smoke from his officer’s face. (One of Ours 453)

The fact that he was not even bleeding suggests how the stone butch character has become god-like in his untouchability. There is also an erotic quality to the way his friend tears his shirt, only to find that bullet holes are “clean.” He dies without experiencing any of the bodily ugliness of death—without pain and without mess.

Cather closes the novel with the feeling that somewhere Claude carries on his self-bestowed celestial mission, which suggests that stone butch style allows one to become immortal. However, the ending also contains a pessimistic view for the future. As Lee argues, Claude’s celestial departure

---

16 From the time she spent talking with the wounded soldier returned from War, Cather felt she understood the dilemma of the emotional wound. In another letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher on April 7, 1922, she explained what she had accomplished, to get “across to you what the roughneck, the sensitive roughneck, really does feel when he’s plunged into the midst of—everything. It’s not only his vanity that suffers—though that very much--; he feels as if he has been cheated out of everything, the whole treasure of ages…I found so many of the sick men I got to know had suffered that chagrin, and had brought back with them another wound than the one on their leg or breast—a wound that would ache at odd times all their lives, and that wound made them wiser, always” (Selected Letters 318).
is in part what makes this novel “painful and unsatisfactory” (180). The enduring emotional wound, which Cather experienced firsthand, offers a negative reading of the future of civilization, a pessimism that resists restoration (180). Stone butch style between the wars therefore becomes an elegy to heroism, a sign of the impossibility of historical redemption given the slaughter of the War, and the intensification of materialism and greed in the U.S.

Cather’s blood bond to the character Claude was in many respects unparalleled in her writing career. By contrast, her subsequent novel, The Professor’s House, failed to inspire Cather’s creative enthusiasm to the same degree. Around March 21, 1922, she confided to her friend Dorothy Canfield Fisher that, unlike Claude, the new male alliance, Professor Godfrey St. Peter, was “an external affair” (Selected Letters 315). However, while The Professor’s House may have been “an external affair,” she continues to search in this novel for a writing style that does not contain the “usual emotional signs,” the reason behind the unfair critical response to One of Ours (327). The Professor’s House is a continuation of stone butch style through a protagonist that refuses to emote, or emotes irregularly, stymying rather than opening communication of feeling, halting narrative progression in the conventional sense. In fact, Godfrey St. Peter is stone butch par excellence; he feels he has an historical duty to shut off from the world, mainly because of the capitalist greed of his son-in-law, Marsellus, who steals not just the patent of St. Peter’s student Tom Outland who has died in the war, but also his sense of a masculine ideal. Like a victim of shell shock, St. Peter has no language for his grief, and this leads to an interior and solitary life. St. Peter relies on the seamstress, Augusta, to be his femme witness and the container for his feelings, and in fact, it is Augusta who eventually melts St. Peter’s stone, saving him from certain death by his own hand.

Despite Cather’s professed lack of emotional connection to this novel, St. Peter’s loss reflects Cather’s personal losses at this time. Cather once told another friend that all of her books were written for her ex-lover, Isabelle McClung, a wealthy Bostonian who cared for Cather both
materially and emotionally but who eventually married a man. The initial loss of McClung formed the emotional structure of both *My Ántonia* and *A Lost Lady* (1923), and later *The Professor’s House*, which Cather began after her final visit to the couple’s new home in France, a visit that forced her to accept the marriage. As O’Brien reports, Cather was devastated by the visit, a fact on display in the grim portrait of Cather painted that summer by Léon Bakst. Throughout her life, she often commented that “the ‘world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts’” (240). The world broke in two in part because she lost McClung, and because her criticisms of the War (and American greed) were crystalizing in her novels. *The Professor’s House* makes clear the relationship between the War and losing McClung to “another man,” circumstances that may also have led to a certain prickliness and irritability present in the writings as well as in the letters. After the War, Cather came to be known as a disagreeable person who detested the Roosevelts and was skeptical of the theories of psychoanalysis proposed by Freud (thus separating from other lesbian writers of her generation, namely H.D. and Bryher). According to Cather’s friend Elizabeth Sargent, Cather became “‘rigid, opinionated, and domineering over the years,’” beginning in the post-war period (*Selected Letters* 359). In her memoir, Sargent paints a rather unbecoming portrait of Cather, as Cather began “intimidating customs officials…dismissing Amy Lowell…defining the correct salad dressing: ‘light French olive oil…the richest wine vinegar, with a dash of tarragon. She insisted on tarragon’” (359). This insistence on tarragon suggests her stone butch defenses during a difficult historical and personal moment, displayed also in her absolute certainty of the correctness of her own point of view, a temperament not unlike that of St. Peter. However, beneath this impenetrable surface lies a reserve of feeling, and Cather was thrilled that some of her friends, including Irene Miner Weisz, understood this fact: “It was such a satisfaction to me to have you read the story [*The Professor’s House*], dear Irene, and to see that you got at once the really fierce feelings that lie behind the rather dry and impersonal manner of the telling” (*Selected Letters* 366). St. Peter’s “dry and impersonal manner”
Figure 2: Willa Cather and Léon Bakst in his studio. Photograph by Henri Manuel, October 1, 1923. Philip L. and Helen Cather Southwick Collection, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries.
therefore cannot be mistaken for indifference, but rather must be taken as a sign of an abundance of often emotion.

Other biographical similarities between St. Peter and Cather should be noted, for while Cather did not seem to experience the same level of emotional connection to this character, he seems to be created out of the clay of her personal life. As Lee points out, St. Peter is fifty-two, Cather’s age at the time the novel was published. Both Cather and St. Peter are transplants who maintain a nostalgia for the lost homeland, observed in the strip of the lake visible from St. Peter’s attic studio, which reminds him of his childhood. Like Cather, St. Peter is a teacher who maintains passionate connections with his students. There is a wider connection, too, with her whole writing life. St. Peter’s early work only reached a small audience, but now he is rewarded both financially and professionally, just as Cather was similarly rewarded with the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours*. St. Peter continually vacillates between the desire to communicate, and the refusal to do so, also mirroring the dynamic between association/dissociation in PTSD, or shell shock.

As a result of this underlying weariness and alienation, St. Peter refuses to move from the old house (painted the color of ashes, signifying death), to the newly purchased one, earned as a result of his material success and scholarly accomplishments. St. Peter cannot experience any feelings of pride in his growing daughters, or in his relationship with his wife, and instead comforts himself in memories of his dead student, Tom Outland, and in the pleasures of his “walled-in” French garden (*The Professor’s House* 5). The walled-in garden symbolizes how St. Peter has walled himself off from the world, augmenting his butch exceptionalism and confirming his status as “a spiritual snob” (Lee 238). The busts that Augusta uses to make clothes for his wife and daughters also communicate to the reader St. Peter’s psychological paralysis, a growing stone butch reticence to speak openly to others. When Augusta attempts to take the sewing things away from St. Peter’s attic studio, one that is remarkably similar to the converted sewing room studio Cather had at
McClung’s family home, St. Peter cries out, “I can’t have the room changed if I’m going to work here. He [the mover] can take the sewing-machine—yes. But put her back on the chest where she belongs” (Selected Letters 58; The Professor’s House 4). As he immerses himself more and more deeply in memory, the busts become his closest companions.

In the beginning of the novel, St. Peter attempts to follow his wife’s mandate to be “agreeable,” but eventually he becomes more insulated and less able to connect, culminating in a scene at an opera that reminds St. Peter of his youth, yet another idealization that removes him from his present discomfort. While he and his wife experience a brief moment of intimacy, which amounts to series of extended gazes and whispers, St. Peter realizes that he is indeed alone, and that the “heart of another is a dark forest, always, no matter how close it has been to one’s own” (78). He makes the decision to shut himself off from the world even more completely:

That night, after he was in bed, among unaccustomed surroundings and a little wakeful, St. Peter still played with his idea of a picturesque shipwreck, and he cast about for the particular occasion he would have chosen for such a finale. Before he went to sleep he found the very day, but his wife was not in it. Indeed, nobody was in it but himself, and a weather-dried little sea captain from the Hautes-Pyrenees, half a dozen spry seamen, agonizingly high and sharp, along the southern coast of Spain. (78-9)

The “picturesque shipwreck” becomes an idealization of impenetrability, a fantasy steeped in masculine emotional withholding, as his chosen intimates are men like himself: also in exile, far from home. This fantasy of masculine isolation can lead to a shell-shock-like radical dissociation. In St. Peter’s invented battle, he sides with death through Outland, which leads him to transcribe Outland’s journal. Cather’s nesting strategy, the placing of a narrative within a narrative, not only suspends or delays time, but also creates a literal insulation from the world; for St. Peter, the “desk was a shelter one could hide behind, it was a hole one could creep into” (141). Outland becomes a secondary femme witness—albeit a dead one—which demonstrates the extent to which St. Peter refuses to process his losses.
St. Peter also displays butch exceptionalism, for St. Peter fantasizes himself “christened Napoleon Godfrey St. Peter” (143). He limits his emotional life to his femme witnesses, both Tom Outland and the seamstress, Augusta, which causes his stone to harden and become in its final state the “rigid structure” of the Lacanian ego-as-armor. St. Peter displays what Lacan calls the “mechanisms of obsessive neurosis,” which occur when the guarding of the inner castle of the ego becomes so extreme that it leads to “inversion, isolation, reduplication, undoing what has been done, and displacement” (79). St. Peter ultimately saves himself through the realization that “there was still Augusta, however; a world full of Augustas, with whom one was outward bound” (The Professor’s House 257). This final reflection suggests the invaluable quality of the femme witness for the very survival of the stone butch-styled character. Ultimately, even St. Peter’s passive suicide attempt suggests how his entire life is a “negation,” for he is defined by what he doesn’t do—go back to France with Tom, develop the patent of Tom’s invention, move house, go to Europe with his family, read his family’s letters, finish editing the journals, etc. (Lee 252).

As Heather Alumbaugh writes in “Transcending Gender: Androgyny, Artistry, and Modernist Subjectivity in Willa Cather’s O, Pioneers!,” Cather understood her characters’ subjectivity as “incomplete, ongoing, evolving, and multiply defined” (41). Cather’s characters don’t necessarily will this stone sensibility through some kind of agency, nor is this sensibility a result of a psychological failing, but rather the character is often placed in a situation—through a relationship to history, time, geography, modernity—where negation and absence, refusal and blockage are the most apt responses. These responses also seem to suggest Cather’s own pessimism toward the world situation; Cather invokes a heroic historical past to alert the reader to the irredeemable failures of the present. Cather therefore offers death rather than the re-birth of civilization, the end of moral harmony and the beginning of brokenness as the new norm. Just as the men who return from the war in One of Ours “were not the same men who went away” (240), St. Peter expresses a similar
feeling about his own change, further demonstrating the fundamental and pervasive shifts in human perception caused by the War. Her stone butch writing style expresses the fundamental metamorphosis that Cather and many of her generation experienced, one that required a shutting off from old intimacies and the development of a hardened exterior. For Cather, this shutting off, this hardening, occurred on an epic scale.

**Stone Stein Amiably**

Twentieth and twenty-first century critics liberally claim Stein as butch, but I want to be more specific and suggest that Stein’s writing style itself is butch—not just butch, but stone butch. As a writer, Stein desired the position of penetrator; subtly and not so subtly, she used her characteristic “plain” language to enter the minds of her readers. The books became acts of love making, revealing Stein’s “tender feelings,” which she would not show outside of her circle of intimates.

Some critics argue that Stein’s work became more emotionally opaque after the War; for example, Lisa Ruddick claims that *GMP* (Gertrude Matisse Picasso), which Stein finished shortly after *The Making of Americans*, was the last work to explore recently uncovered, archaic memories. *GMP* therefore represented a particular moment of pre-war emotional equilibrium:

The equilibrium was precarious. It was shattered, in my view, by the First World War. The war that represented such a creative stimulus for many of Stein’s male colleagues in the literary arts seem in her case to have temporarily dampened her inspiration; even after the war her writings, however fine in new ways, would never again have the same introspective daring. (Ruddick 189)

I support Ruddick’s view that the war profoundly altered Stein’s literary trajectory, but I disagree that Stein’s writing changed in ways that were emotionally negating, or that indicate a lack of introspection or psychological evolution. I propose instead that her interwar writings utilize a more complicated style of abstraction, a stone quality that is at times porous. This quality allowed Stein to
continue her pursuit of the “core” of experience, as she writes to her friend Bravig Imbs: “I have destroyed sentences and rhythms and literary overtones and all the rest of that nonsense to get to the very core of this problem of the communication of intuition” (Souhami 203).

To pursue a core can also mean to penetrate, but in this case, Stein penetrates with plainness, a stealthy literary maneuver that Stein explains through the voice of Alice in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (1933): “My sentences do get under their [the critics’] skin, only they do not know that they do, she [Stein] has often said” (66). Even Stein’s insistence on her own readability becomes in itself an act of penetration, an insistence against which no one can effectively argue. In an excerpt of a radio interview with William Lundell, recorded during her U.S. lecture tour, Stein responds to Lundell’s accusations that her works are too difficult by stating, “if you enjoy it you understand it” (Lectures 10). The more penetrating her language became and the more trust she required of her readers, the more stubbornly she defended the work as transparent and easy to comprehend (Daniel 68). Lucy Church Amiably was fittingly the first work published under Plain Edition, Stein and Toklas’ response to the fact that they could find no interested publishing houses.

This straightforward approach, this plain language, in many ways turns the novel into an objet d’art, which even more radically reframes the question of literary “expression.” In a 1965 journal entry, Sontag conveys how hard it can be for readers to accept the novel as object, which suggests a prejudice against the literary arts: “people who’ll take Larry Poons or Frank Stella are mystified by G Stein saying ‘One + two + three + four…”’ (As Consciousness is Harnessed 66). The misogyny in this lack of acceptance appears obvious, for what separates Stein from Poons or Stella is not only history or medium but gender. And yet, while the plain “objectness” of Stein’s works should make the meaning more available, both readers and critics lament Stein’s difficulty. In Two Lives, Janet Malcolm even quotes a male critic who claimed that Stanzas in Meditation (1994; 2012) is “perhaps the dreariest long poem in the world” (58-59). I want to propose the more perverse point
of view that readers who experience Stein as “drearily difficult” may be confronting their own reluctance to allow Stein to penetrate; such readers may struggle with their own readerly vulnerability, the lack of literary lubricant. Readers and critics who are not open to Stein’s literary penetration become tempted to intellectually parse Stein’s words, “to make sense of” rather than to allow her words to be at once fierce, sensual, and edible. However, when readers allow this seemingly difficult novel to “penetrate,” a deeper understanding of the War also becomes available.

Feminist scholars like Shari Benstock view this plain language, and Stein’s defense of her style, as part of her attempt to code her lesbian desire, a desire that was lived as an “imitation” of the heterosexual norm. While offering invaluable insights on Stein and the Left Bank more generally, Benstock’s criticism can be read in the context of post-1970’s feminist readings of Stein’s work that insist on a lesbian feminist underpinning (Daniel 24). However, Stein refused to be enlisted in any cause, feminist or otherwise, and the term “lesbian” did not emerge for Stein as particularly relevant or necessary. The view of Stein’s language as “coded” also suggests a cowardice, an inability to follow the lead of Djuna Barnes, Natalie Barney, Colette, etc., all of whom preferred feminine expression of emotion. In a stone butch reading of Stein, the lack of overt reference to lesbian love demonstrates a lack of identification with the term “woman” or “lesbian.”

Stein expressed through stone butch style her comfort in the position of penetrator. As Chicana feminist Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano writes in “I Long to Enter You Like a Temple,” butches

17 Some scholars believe that Stein asserted a feminist claim in Lucy Church Amiably when she proposed that “If men have not changed women and children have.” In her essay “Gertrude Stein and the Transposition of Gender,” in the collection The Poetics of Gender edited by Nancy K. Miller, Catharine Stimpson argues that through this statement, Stein might have been making a claim that women were more modern than men (177). This possibility doesn’t contradict Stein’s refusal to be enlisted in feminist causes, but rather points to the complicated politics of Stein’s writing, and her ability to admit contradictory, even diametrically opposed, points of view in one work. This statement also doesn’t exclude her sympathy with men, particularly with men who suffered after the War, for she doesn’t take a personal position but rather reiterates a common view at the time.
are by definition women who might prefer the sexual position of “the fucker,” but who also fear love (89). Butch writers express the “fear, pain, and difficulty involved in making oneself physically and emotionally vulnerable or receptive” (90). Stein expresses this “fear, pain, and difficulty” through a prickly public persona, counterbalanced by tenderness in her writing. In *Tender Buttons* (1914), for example, an object like the pencil becomes a giving phallus: “PEELED PENCIL/CHOKE. Rub her coke” (29). The writing of the book becomes an act of love, for Toklas and her family of femme witnesses; both Alice B. Toklas and the American photographer and writer Carl Van Vechten nicknamed Stein “Baby Woojums,” used with the pronoun “he.” As Edward Burns writes in the introduction to *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten, 1913-1946*, in regard to the name “Baby Woojums,” it was used for both Stein and Toklas as well as other friends, and it may also be the name of cocktail described in Van Vechten’s novel *Parties* (1977). When Stein came to America for her lecture tour, the term came to be used to express how the three were a family; Alice Toklas was Mama Woojums, and Carl Van Vechten was Papa Woojums (4). The infantilization of Stein in this queer family scene suggests how Stein’s stone surface became malleable and tender in the presence of Toklas and Van Vechten, while in the company of others she could be rigid and uncompromising.

As Stein muses in *Lucy Church Amiably*, the purpose of the novel is “To put into a book what is to be read in a book, bits of information and tender feeling” (171).18 Her role as writer is both to

---

18 Additionally, for Stein at this point in her career, the novel was also about the need to make money. As Noel Sloboda explains in *The Making of Americans in Paris*, when the stock market crashed in the fall of 1929, the dollar fell sharply against the franc, straining Stein’s limited resources. It became much more expensive for Stein and other expatriates to live in France, and as a result, Stein began to feel that “nobody unless they are really rich can live on an income that is fixed” (Sloboda 36-37). Stein could not in good conscience go into debt, nor could she part with her paintings, so she began to look to her writing as a source of income. Sloboda points out that a recurring interest in profit appears in *Lucy Church Amiably*, as Stein repeats phrases like “By her pay her pay her pay her for the paper” (38).
inform and to incite feeling, both plain intentions that do not indicate what Benstock observes as a desire to encode or conceal her lesbian feminism. In *Lucy Church Amiably*, Stein penetrates the consciousness of her readers through the repetition of a militaristic marching pattern—“left to right, right to left”—which penetrates not with excitement, but with the monotony of the War. As Stein writes in *Lucy Church Amiably*, “There may be war but there can be no climaxes there” (58). If we take Stein at her word, then she means very clearly that there is no important point, no orgasm, no final equilibrium reached, through war. Instead the War gives rise to questions like the ones found in her work *Useful Knowledge* (1928):

Can we stand ditches.  
Can we mean well.  
Do we talk together.  
Have we red cross.  
A great many people speak feet.  
And socks. (166-7)

In this passage, Stein encourages her readers to reflect on the War by asking the question, “Can we stand ditches [trenches],” and also by presenting the fact that “people speak feet.” During the War, feet could be lost easily, forming part of the trench wall, submerged in mud, or less dramatically, feet could be cold, numb, in need of socks. This speaks to the material reality of this war and the inability to meet basic needs. Stein and Toklas volunteered as ambulance drivers and caretakers, and observed the horror of the trenches firsthand. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein writes on their experiences: “Soon we came to battle-fields and the lines of trenches on both sides. To anyone who did not see it as it was then it is impossible to imagine it. It was not terrifying it was strange. We were used to ruined houses and even ruined towns but this was different. It was a landscape. And it
Figure 3: Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas with their Ford truck, “Auntie,” 1918. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
Figure 4: *Gertrude Stein in the Church Yard. Lucey Church*. Photograph by Carl Van Vechten, June 13, 1934. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
belonged to no country” (Autobiography 203). Stein’s restrained tone penetrates differently, as she speaks to the impossibility of language in such conditions; the best one could do was to map the contours of this “strangeness” and to suggest its disconnection from common experience. And perhaps given this impossibility, this is indeed enough.

Stone butch is the result of excess emotion, an effect of too much rather than too little feeling, and in Lucy Church Amiably, the overflowing quality of the waterfall suggests this excess. Stein wrote Lucy Church Amiably sitting in front of this waterfall, with Toklas embroidering by her side. Stein’s reflections on the hat-like steeple, thoughts of Napoleon, and memories of the War wove in and out of her consciousness. She compares the sound of the waterfall to a piece of music: “Select your song she said and it was done and then she said and it was done with a nod and then she bent her head in the direction of the falling water. Amiably” (Lucy Church Amiably, “Advertisement”). Stein was an expert at the regulation and refusal of emotion. While the use of what she called the continuous present in Lucy Church Amiably feels in some ways like a Buddhist relinquishment of attachments, the continuous present also staves off full digestion of the traumas of the early twentieth century. Her complex outer armor also allowed her to weather many decades of rejection, as well as to register in her own way the effects of the War. As Joan Retallack explains, in Stein’s unconventional time meter, she was in tune with the sentiments of her generation. She was deeply affected by the war, and also by the rate of change in urban societies (Retallack 6). While her goal was to refuse the literary styles of the nineteenth century, she also regulated and refused the emotional conditions of the present. Her use of continuous present meant that like St. Peter, a part of her lived in the old house and a part lived in the new—however, unlike St. Peter, for Stein the past, present, and future existed in “dynamic equilibrium” (13).

In Lucy Church Amiably, Stein also explored her ecstatic, erotic relationship to food; the rituals surrounding food and eating were one way for Stein to transgress the boundary between the inner
and the outer, sometimes to excess. In *Gertrude and Alice*, Diana Souhami includes many of these food scenes that tell us more about this aspect of Stein's life: “Gertrude and Alice went off in Godiva [the car] for frequent picnics…For these outings Alice prepared two basic picnic lunches. One was of chicken cooked in white wine and paprika, with hard-boiled eggs stuffed with mushrooms, and a dessert of cream puff shells filled with strawberries and sugar” (Souhami 146). This keen interest in food even led to Stein getting “fat” and needing to go on a diet (146).

Nevertheless, through her mouth, and perhaps through her mouth as speaking device (Stein’s works are often much more easily appreciated when read aloud), she could find cohesion and unity, and intense pleasure, a pleasure the two women shared. However, during the wars, Stein’s sources of food became unsteady, which gave her a deeply insecure feeling. Many passages in *Lucy Church Amiably* reveal these disruptions in her daily living, and eating, brought on by war. When Stein “asks” without a question mark, “What is the colour of butter and peculiar violence of nuts if nuts are made into oil and oil is ineradicable,” she expresses how food can become arsenal, and how nature also contains the ingredients for violence and violation (*Lucy Church Amiably* 33). Stein points to both the technological advancements that made World War I possible, and her need to protect her daily living from these so-called advancements.

The many references to war and battle are too numerous in *Lucy Church Amiably* to mention here, but suffice to say one of the novel’s main subjects is the trauma of the War and the stone butch response to the War, which Stein reveals through the stutter step of the shell-shock victim, contrasted against sublime nature. For example, a “pine tree with a little flag on top” and “greet regiments,” combine with Lucy’s penchant for cleaning knives: “Actions and actions. How many knives can Lucy clean with a machine” (42). The work includes recurring references to colonels, conscriptions, propaganda, marshes (a less obvious reference to the marshes that often plagued soldiers in World War I military campaigns), regiments (and the numbers of men of different
countries who enlist in these regiments). Metaphorical burial occurs frequently; for example, Stein creates variations of the line, “should their heads buried in clover…Lucy Church their heads buried in clover,” a “clover” that repeats in relation to the death of love in Stanzas in Meditation ([1933] 2012) (Lucy Church 101). Stein uses animals metonymically to stand in for the battle between great and weaker nations: “what is a crow a magpie a hawk to do if five little birds attack one big one. What are they a magpie a hawk a crow to do. What is it that they do what is it that they are to do” (102). Stein also depicts the bludgeoning effect of propaganda, aided by the development of new technologies (for example, the dropping of flyers and leaflets from airplanes). Stein repeats over the course of four lines: “Lucy Church propaganda Lucy propaganda Lucy Church propaganda…” (106).

Despite the fact that Stein commented in Autobiography—rather tongue-in-cheek—that World War I was a “nice war,” in Lucy Church Amiably, Stein suggests that the War brought no substantive improvement in human conditions. As Freud’s essay “On Transience” suggests, the War failed to bring civilization to greater heights. Instead, shell shock produced new varieties of mental illness, leading to the first diagnoses of PTSD. Stein writes about shell shock through the character of John Mary—a character whose name is significantly bi-gendered, suggesting the ways that shell shock feminized men, afflicting them with the same kinds of neuroses that middle and upper class women experienced in the home during peacetime. In Lucy Church Amiably, these war neuroses create a door in the self that can both open and close: “John Mary having shut the door opened it again but not always sometimes it had to be done for him. The difference between the present and the past. Pastime” (64). In the passage, we see the collapsing of time, specifically for those who have experienced war, a collapse that John Mary negotiates through engaging in “pastimes,” including gardening. John Mary is so debilitated that at times someone close to him must open the
door, which loosely points to Stein’s need for a femme witness to “open her door” emotionally and to melt her stone.

John Mary is divided—by war and by gender—like Stein and many others who witnessed the war first hand, and this division occurs literally in Lucy Church Amiably as a division “between the two statues one to a dead defender and the other to a dead provider” (118). The choice between death, and death, paints a grim picture of this war’s aftermath. While John Mary can always choose (perhaps) to “not be divided,” the fact remains that he is also divided between the desire for expression and inability to express, the two impulses of stone butch. Lucy Church symbolizes a lost romantic sublime, and through repetition, Stein makes clear that one cannot forget about the war, even through the pure and divine image of Lucy who “made it seem that Grenoble was far away. Listen to Lucy. Lucy Church made a church made a church Lucy Church” (89). Maybe Lucy can put Grenoble at a distance, a city that harbored many of the industries of war, but like a violent waterfall, we meet an overwhelming force of feeling on the other side of this forgetting—the choice between death, and death, therefore repeats throughout the novel.

At times, Stein’s prose in Lucy Church Amiably reads like period footage of men with shell shock, men who could not control their muscles, their speech, men who lost their hearing, their limbs, and often their will to live. Clearly John Mary suffers from some form of post-traumatic stress, and the remedy is simple work: “John Mary spoke of military service. He said he had seen Sunday and was no difficult it was not difficult to be able every day to work in a field and plant plant it with what had been at other times whatever they had seen” (119). Mary is trying to forget about what happened to him during the war through working in the fields, but he can never quite forget, as Stein makes clear later in this passage: “Association and disassociation as if it were used one two threes as if it were used four six eight as if it were used one two three as if it were used” (119). This association, which is an act of remembrance and connection, and disassociation, the quick
repression of the remembered emotion and the object to which the emotion connects, clearly reminds the reader of modern-day PTSD. In the kinds of war-related traumas made available in Stein’s “plain” prose, association leads to dissociation in a kind of stone-styled back and forth movement. The counting reminiscent of marching or the count-off to firing a cannon, and the movement back and forth between “association and disassociation” corresponds to the extremes of stone butch in Cather’s The Professor’s House, like St. Peter who withdraws more and more deeply into his own mind, John Mary protects himself from his own memories by never actually sharing anything recognizable about his “military service.”

Stein may have suffered from her own PTSD as a result of what she witnessed as a volunteer at the Front, and from what theorists have suspected as Stein’s childhood sexual abuse at the hands of her father, Daniel Stein. Her mother’s death and the subsequent disintegration of her family life made adolescence very painful for Stein, which is apparent in the fact that she described this time as “medieval” in comparison to the Eden of childhood: “Fifteen is really medieval and pioneer and nothing is clear and nothing is sure, and nothing is safe and nothing is come and nothing is gone. But all might be” (32). The pain—and possibility—of adolescence might have strengthened her butch resolve to resignify the masculine, which culminated in The Making of Americans (1925), a 925-page effort to remove her father’s shadow from over her life.

Linda Wagner-Martin, in her work Favored Strangers: Gertrude Stein and Her Family, offers readings of Stein’s adolescent diary entries to gain a better understanding of her possible sexual trauma. There was, according to Wagner-Martin, a “sexual dimension” to Daniel’s relationship to his daughters (25). While Stein never directly implicates her father in any sexual advance toward her, Stein noted in her diary that her father “approached Bertha [her sister] sexually” and that their Uncle Sol, her father’s brother, had done the same to Gertrude. As Wagner-Martin notes, Stein saw her father and brother as similar in their desire for young girls, as Stein expresses in the following entry:
“Fathers loving children young girls. Uncle Sol, Amy [one of Sol’s daughters] uncle to them to them?” (25). Stein feared the male relatives in her family, and this may have tainted her concept of love with sexual danger (25).

Stein expressed ambivalence about fathers in other personal writings: “‘father Mussolini and father Hitler and father Roosevelt and father Stalin and father Lewis and father Blum and father France…There is too much fathering going on just now and there is no doubt about it fathers are depressing’” (Souhami 25). However, Stein expressed admiration elsewhere, which shows that her father may have inspired in her a split feeling about the paternal. Her description of her father’s eyes suggests the co-existence of the playful and the tyrannical: “‘sharp and piercing and sometimes dancing with laughing and often angry with irritation’” (18). Her father was in Stein’s words “‘in some ways a splendid kind of person…big in the size of him and in his way of thinking,’” and yet he mostly either ignored or criticized young Stein (24). Stein is commonly perceived as content, self-assured, and even arrogant, but she suffered from a great deal of insecurity and fear, what she would call in her diaries “queer feeling.”

Stein’s early works, specifically GMP and The Making of Americans, reveal Stein’s early stone butch style, her preoccupation with what exists inside and outside of a person, as well as her attempt to process her childhood with her tyrannical father, Daniel Stein. In Gertrude and Alice, Diana Souhami describes Daniel Stein as a man who suffered from severe mood swings, pounded his fists on the dinner table and ignored his children when walking with them in the street: “he swept the air with his cane and held forth about the weather or the fruit and made his children unhappy, uncomfortable, and embarrassed” (23). While Cather wrote admiringly of her father through the character of Tom Outland in The Professor’s House, Stein wrote about fathers from a more cynical perspective. In both her diaries and fiction, fathers appear as figures from which one desired
emancipation. Even still, Stein retains her stone remoteness around the topic, evident in the following sketch in *GMP*:

Fathers are dead. What are fathers, they are different. The casual silence and the joke, the sad supper and the boiling tree, why are bells mightily and stopped because food is not refused because not any food is refused, because when the moment and the rejoicing and the elevation and the relief do not make a surface sober, when all that is exchanged and any intermediary is a sacrificed surfeit, when elaboration has no towel and the season to sow consists in the dark and no titular remembrance, does being weather beaten mean more weather and does it not show a sudden result of not enduring, does it not bestow a resolution to abstain in silence and move South and almost certainly have a ticket. Perhaps it does nightly, certainly it does daily and raw much raw sampling is not succored by the sun. A wonder in a break, a whole wonder and more rascality in a slight waste. (*GMP* 171)

Curiously, despite Stein’s intimate knowledge of the “difference” of fathers, this passage lacks any personal content. By asking if it is possible to buy the ticket and “move South,” to reject the “sad supper,” and “to sow” in the darkness, she seems to be asking if it is possible to extract from her father’s masculinity the more creative, earthy one she desired.

Trauma studies of the last few decades make clear the connection between the PTSD of the war veteran and the trauma of sexually abused women, a connection to which Stein eludes in *Lucy Church Amiably*: “She said that a pagoda and chains a church and places and window and extra ruins and a name makes it be comfortably what is it when they are very frank. No one is interested in a neglected child” (58). While the relationship between Stein’s life and her fiction remains unpredictable, her mention of a neglected child, together with “extra ruins” and “chains,” suggests the associations she made between the war and her own childhood experiences. At the same time, within these references to vulnerability, Stein creates language surfaces that distract from the traumatic content: “Lucy Church means fuchsias because fuchsias grow in pots and have very pretty baskets very pretty paper and sewing very pretty rose and purple very pretty leaves and heights very pretty here to Lucy very pretty” (105). The repetition of “pretty” creates a kind of wall, a wall of flowers and fuchsia perhaps, but nonetheless the “extra ruins” are only papered over with a saccharine prettiness, for this reference to prettiness occurs directly before the word “propaganda.”
Readers who are penetrated by Stein’s prose experience a kind of disorientation through these juxtapositions, such that the difference between inside and outside dissolves, causing a feeling of simultaneity that Stein called a continuous present.

Stein’s short piece “Pink Melon Joy” also deals with the War, particularly the very beginning when so little about the conflict could be understood, and so little had been processed. Basic necessities again became of prime importance. Stein began “Pink Melon Joy” in the first part of the summer of 1914 when the War had just broken out (A Stein Reader 280). In A Stein Reader, Ulla Dydo writes in the introduction to this piece how it expresses Stein’s “lighthearted, humorous, and erotic” style (280). While she was enjoying the company of her friends Alfred North and Evelyn Whitehead in England, the reality was that she and Alice were unable to return home to Paris for eleven weeks (Stein and Van Vechten 29). On September 10, 1914, Stein writes to Carl Van Vechten, in the usual affectionate but brief and disaffected tone of her letters: “We were caught by the war in England and have been with friends in the country” (28). Surrounding what Dydo calls the “domestic joys” of the piece, I also see Stein’s humor as an attempt to hold the tensions and fears of the war within, and to maintain her position as penetrator. When she and Toklas are in Spain later in the war, Stein writes to Van Vechten and alludes to how much the war has preoccupied her: “We have just been to Valencia for a week and saw what there is to see of bull-fighting, Gallo, Gallito, and Belmonte. Those names don’t mean anything to you but we saw five of the best fights. It’s the only thing that can make you forget the war that is it’s the only things that made me forget the war” (Stein and Van Vechten 46-7). Stein feels relief only in the presence of fighting, which testifies to the impossibility of both remembering and forgetting the War.

If the reader allows Stein’s words in the piece to penetrate, then the more visceral traumas of the War become available. She includes in “Pink Melon Joy” several passages containing the word “war,” alongside a plea for peace, a kind of prayer-like request that she and friends can “bear” the
situation, that they will “let us be,” and ultimately for things to be “Mended” (288). As well, successive references to fighting occur alongside the first mention of the title of the piece:

Pink Melon Joy.
It pleases me very much.
Little swimming on the water.
I mean to mention pugilism. Pugilism leaning. Leaning and thinking.
Thinking. (288-289)

Stein’s frequent use of juxtaposition becomes important, particularly her simultaneous reference to the pleasant and the unpleasant. Within these folds of language, Stein reveals those bits of tender feeling, both the pleasure of Whitehead’s friendship and hospitality, the “Pink Melon Joy” of being with Alice and with good friends, but also the reality of the war, the nature of violence and of fighting (pugilism), boundaries (national boundaries, personal boundaries, the difference between far and near, home and away, etc.), as well the penetration of those boundaries, which she refers to early in the piece through the word “drilling.” The joy of stone butch style is also the joy of juxtaposition, of inside and outside sometimes expressed in the same sentence, which makes it possible for “Not pink melon joy” and “pink melon joy” to coexist in the same line. In this poem, the word “pins” is placed next to the phrase “esquimaux babies.” This reference to babies of the extreme north of the world, belonging to the “esquimaux,” emphasizes the potential for coldness in Stein’s stone butch style: “I know you don’t know what the pins are. I know you suspect much more. I know that anything is a great pleasure. I know esquimaux babies, that is to say tender” (292). “Esquimaux babies,” also leads back to an understanding of Stein’s penetrative style as infantile, as infantile as projecting a finger into a baby’s mouth, an act that would be part of her “Baby Woojums” alter ego. This reference removes stone butch from its exclusive association to the sexual, revealing the complexity of stone as a style with multiple points of exit and entry, existing in a range of temperatures, shaped by exposure to the elements, to weather.
Under the title “Pink Melon Joy III,” Stein brings all of these qualities together in one passage:

War.
I wish I was in the time when all the blame was feelingly added to mercies.
I wish I could ask what’s the matter now.
By believing in forms by believing in shed by more stationing by really swimming as usual, no shell or fish. Pray. (297)

Stein’s mention of the word “Pray.” after “no shell or fish,” as well as the repetition of “believing,” suggests prayer as an attitude of guarded surrender. In Pink Melon Joy, Stein prays by creating a nest for the war, for her fear and terror. She needs Pink Melon Joy, just as we need Pink Melon Joy, as a container for both our fears and joys, facts of life that co-exist even during times of war.

In these as well as in various other works—Geography and Plays (1922), the murder mystery, Blood on the Dining Room Floor (1948), as just two examples—Stein redefines how “things happen.” Her constant back and forth movement between association (remembering) and disassociation (forgetting) inspires a questioning of time, of narrative progression, and of stable notions of gender and sex. Lucy Church Amiably, like almost all of Stein’s novels, contains no central plot, and while time seems to pass, the prose also refuses time through an underlying stasis, an eternal quality that can be experienced as a kind of humming sound. As Wayne Koestenbaum explains, Stein enters or infuses our reading bodies, as if our bodies’ sympathetic vibrations were her prose’s destination. Through texts with multiple levels of penetrating force, Stein gives readers an opportunity to experience their own jouissance, their own pleasure in the materiality of language, and in the interplay of war, gender, and time. My analysis works toward a kind of thinking on and with Stein that does not suppress the fact of the desiring body. With the body in mind, we may even experience Stein’s as well as our own release: as critic Elizabeth Ammons writes, “Stein drenches us in words: thick, dense, piled repetitively on top of each other; or stark, isolated, standing alone yet positioned provocatively next to each other. But in any case, words” (97). By submitting to Stein’s
prose, readers can more fully experience the trauma of the war, as well as the pleasures and perils of association/disassociation, an unsettling proposal, but one with tremendous emotional and visceral rewards.

**The Stone Butch Miniatures of Marianne Moore**

Moore’s poems are miniature and muscular—dense, full of bravado, and yet defensive in nature. In contrast to Cather’s epic novels, or Stein’s penetrating prose, the poems present tough exteriors that contain pearls of vulnerability and grace. Moore used the terms modesty and “gusto” to describe this duality in her style. In letters, Moore reveals the importance of gusto, which she explains is a kind of relentless attention to one’s work regardless of reception; gusto also seems to have been the driving impulse behind what her peers perceived as an impenetrable and uncompromising professional persona. Despite her fragile appearance, her persistence in her poems and her uncompromising toughness as editor of *The Dial* suggest an affinity for the masculine that endured throughout her long career.

While Moore maintained that her poems and editorial style were driven by this gusto, her stone butch style was expressed through her love of small and often seemingly trivial things. She did not travel widely; she preferred familiar surroundings and people; and the world was often mediated through museum exhibitions, pamphlets, objects, and photographs. She wasn’t uprooted to another part of the country in early childhood like Cather, and she wasn’t an expatriate like Stein, but rather as the simulacrum of her New York City living room in the Rosenbach Archive suggests, her world existed principally within the boundaries of her own home. This does not make her less butch, but rather indicates the variety and range found within this style; butch does not have to be large in scale but must be large in presence. The critical reception of Moore’s poems, however, was not minuscule.
Unlike Stein and Cather, Moore lived to see the confrontation of the old poetic guard and the new. The radical shift from the modernist sensibility toward the more openly confessional feminist style for women poets meant that Moore’s rich legacy and acclaim were largely forgotten until the 1990s. The poetry of Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, and Anne Sexton eventually eclipsed Moore’s severe, guarded, and arguably more intellectual poems. Both her work and her persona (she is often described in her later years as the little old lady with the tricorne cap and cape) were out of step with the newer generation of poets arriving on the scene, despite the fact that her early poems fiercely critiqued marriage and gender norms. Moore’s most pointed criticisms of gender inequality occur most frequently from 1915-1925, at the beginning of her career, immediately before and after the War (Miller 104-5). The War offered Moore an opportunity to reflect on her own views and to consider, as Christanne Miller writes, “the ways in which power relationship and various constructions of value are affected by and oppose or reinforce widespread gender constructions” (104-5).

In her time, Marianne Moore won every single major American poetry prize available in the twentieth century; in 1935, Selected Poems put her at the center of American letters, and yet despite these accolades, later generations failed to include her in the canon of modernist poets. As a result, as biographer Linda Leavell argues, despite her notable successes, her position as one of the greatest poets of her era is far from secured (373). Despite growing pressure to do so toward the end of her career, she refused to “confess” her sexuality or her anger in what she believed to be the emotionally turbid style of Plath and Rich. In fact, Moore’s dislike of this new style of poetry was so intense, Moore denied Plath’s request for a letter of recommendation for a Guggenheim fellowship, writing to her friend Henry Allen Moe who ran the Foundation that Plath’s poems were “specializing lately in gruesome detail, worms and germs and spiritual flatness” (Holding On 375). She preferred the work of her husband Ted Hughes, who she claimed had “moral force” and “twice the talent” (375).
In the 1990’s, feminist critics rediscovered Moore’s prescient gender consciousness. Her most famous critique of masculine hegemony appears in her 1923 poem, “Marriage,” in which she writes that “men have power/ and sometimes one is made to feel it” (Complete Poems 62). However, these feminist critics tended to disavow or misread Moore’s masculine orientation. While Miller cites an “overwhelming” use of male characters in the poems, she dismisses the idea that Moore desired masculinity, or that her poems expressed a masculine aesthetic: “Moore does not dress, act, or present herself as masculine (as did her contemporaries Gertrude Stein and Willa Cather), and I see no sign that she thinks of herself as being more like a man than a woman” (225). Miller attempts to use Moore’s feminine appearance to distance her from the “obvious” butch writers, and yet to accomplish this task, she exaggerates Stein and Cather’s masculine sartorial style. Cather is the only one of the three who went through a distinct period of crossdressing, and apart from Stein’s occasional masculine hat (and her Roman emperor haircut), Stein never dressed as a man. Indeed, despite the lack of sartorial markers, Moore’s contemporaries were struck by the masculine strength of Moore’s poems. Mary Carolyn Davies of the Others group in New York remarked: “Your things are so—they make you afraid. They’re so reserved. They’re strong like a man’s” (qtd. in Costello 148). William Carlos Williams also marveled at “how slight a woman can so roar, like a secret Niagara” (148).

In 1914, Moore’s masculine emotional orientation even excluded her from the “special” women’s number of Others edited by Helen Hoyt, who found Moore’s poems to be lacking in “comfort” (Holding On 140). Criticism of Moore’s poems by men tended to be even more directly (and bitterly) gendered. On November 10, 1921, Moore writes to Bryher and H.D about a review of Edna St. Vincent Millay, Anna Wickham, and herself entitled ‘Women of Wit’ that appeared in the October 26th issue of The Nation. She quotes from the review:

“For better or for worse these women have contracted marriages with wit…Marianne Moore, one admits right away, must be taken for worse. She wedded wit, but after divorces
from beauty and sense. Her manners are those of the absurder coteries, her fastidiousness is that of the insufferable highbrows. She wrote some pieces for Alfred Kreybourg’s *Others* which made that anthology difficult to take seriously, and in the present volume she quite smothers out an occasional passage of distinction.” *(Letters 182)*

Regardless of whether one thought of oneself as a woman or not, women writers were barraged with these kinds of assaults. The review attacks Moore for her excessive intellect, her lack of feminine beauty, and her fussiness, all qualities that would be highly regarded in a male poet. However, Marianne’s stone butch style, expressed through a combination of gusto and reserve, allowed her to weather these rejections with grace. Moore developed a characteristic butch prickliness in response to her historical circumstances. She remained unmoved when confronted by these kinds of male critics, particularly when she was attacked for her prudishness and conservatism. As Moore wrote in the last line of an early poem, “Roses Only” (1924), “your thorns are the best part of you.” This line states her outright rejection of the mandate that women be tearful and vulnerable in their writing and in their worlds.

While Moore often ruffled her peacock feathers in the offices of the literary journal, *The Dial*, where she served as editor from 1925-1929, at home she was deeply dependent on her mother and brother, both femme witnesses in Moore’s artistic journey. Her poems contain references that only her close associates would recognize, which means that uninitiated readers miss important cues *(Costello 6)*.19 Her mother was her primary femme witness; she served as audience, editor, and supportive partner. Her relationship with her mother was also sexually charged, an uncomfortable fact that is not discussed in detail in Moore scholarship.

A range of critics have written that Moore was either a repressed lesbian or asexual, but Moore actually held very unconventional queer attitudes toward sex and marriage, which are often

---

19 As the introduction to the section in *The Selected Letters* 1930-1934, “The Poet in Brooklyn,” suggests, “Warner continued to be one of Moore’s most faithful witnesses as she went on to publish her work in the decades to come” *(italics mine, 255)*.
misunderstood as prudishness. In a letter to her friend, Bryher, in 1921, Moore expresses very directly her liberal views, which appear to be anti-monogamy, and both anti-marriage and anti-psychoanalysis. She writes to Bryher on August 31, 1921:

In beating the drum of sex continually, the psychoanalytic wing of modern thoughts surely misses the mark; it is as if someone were to say to one of us, in accepting an invitation to tea, ‘I haven’t any illusions about your intellect; my stomach is in good working order and I am here to prove it’…I don’t like divorce and marriage is difficult but marriage is our attempt to solve a problem and I can’t think of anything better….An intentional matrimonial grand right and left has no point whatever so far as I can see; in Turkey, monogamy is gaining as it is everywhere else and there is confusion of thought I think in advocating anything different in a plan where there is to be any kind of civil contract. If we do away with the marriage contract, the case is different but nobody seems to wish to do that since if we do, we get back to cave life.” (Letters 177)

Here Moore begrudgingly admits that marriage is the best solution to the regulation of sex, but she seems to doubt the desirability of this regulation in the first place. Her comment about monogamy “gaining” in Turkey “as it is everywhere else” suggests that monogamy is like a disease that spreads. Her attitude toward marriage as a trap for women may also explain why she remained with her mother until her mother’s death in 1947.

Moore’s 1921 poem “The Radical” suggests that her sexuality was actually phallic, regardless of whether or not she pursued a sexual relationship. In the poem, Moore creates a self-portrait in which she is a red-headed phallic object that is “predestined to be thick,” “with ambition,/ imagination, outgrowth,/ nutriment,/ with everything crammed belligerent- /ly inside itself” (The Poems of Marianne Moore 134). This wedge-shaped root contains everything it needs to fulfill its creative ambitions, but at the same time Moore understands the cost of this phallic auto-eroticism, particularly for a woman in her time. The fact that she keeps her “radical” status private speaks to her stone butch style; as a poet, she knew that like the radical, she was both impossible to “force” and therefore impossible to “hinder.” This poem perhaps more than any other announces Moore as a penetrating force like Stein, but similar to the root vegetable buried in the ground, she kept her penetrating prowess largely hidden from view.
Figure 5: Marianne Moore and Mary Warner Moore in their Brooklyn apartment, 1938.
The Rosenbach Archive.

Figure 6: Marianne Moore and Mary Warner Moore holding hands, Cummington, Massachusetts; Ward Identified and Date on Back., 1942.
The Rosenbach Archive.
Moore was reticent to make friends outside of her family, and appears to have suffered from debilitating social anxieties. On November 2, 1919, she wrote to her brother about a luncheon she attended at the Bryn Mawr Club, complaining “there were so many half-acquaintances there that I felt as if I were escaping from a barbed wire entanglement and didn’t know which way to turn. Some sort of handy mask ought to be invented or hindoo veil for the city social event” (Letters 125). Her reference to “barbed wire” recalls the War and the use of such wire around the trenches and through the territory between enemies lines infamously known as “no-man’s land.” Such social interactions seemed to make Moore feels as though she were trapped on a battlefield without allegiances or safety. Similarly, she expressed near terror at celebrity gatherings in Greenwich Village, which she began attending in the early 1920’s. On January 16, 1920, she wrote to her brother about a “jammed unsorted mammoth gathering of celebrities,” which included a veritable A-list of the time: Art Young, Max Eastman, Gaston Lachaise, Scofield Thayer, Lola Ridge, Piggy [Robert] McAlmon. She felt the dim, “smoke crowded” atmosphere to be oppressive, and returned home to her mother at 11:30 pm (Letters 128). Marianne’s mother, nicknamed “Mole” by Moore and her brother, is like a lover who waits up for her in order to soften her anxieties, and Moore seems to find this party to be a kind of intrusion on her intimate life with her mother. While she could be prickly and demanding at The Dial and in individual interactions with men and women with whom she disagreed, Moore experienced the larger social world as dangerous, a fact that limited her emotional life, creating the conditions for her small, armored poems. At times, Moore demanded complete isolation from the world.

One notable exception was her relationship with Annie Winifred Ellerman, known simply as Bryher, with whom Moore shared a spirited correspondence. Bryher was butch, in both appearance and manner, though her butch style took on a specifically British flavor. Bryher, the devoted lover of the poet H.D, also wrote novels and was central to the avant-garde art scene in Europe. Even
though Bryher and Moore were very different butch varieties, Bryher was drawn to Moore’s “austere boyish head” and “flushed face…vivid with excitement” (180). Her friendship with Bryher was a butch bond, as Bryher also gave Moore the opportunity to reflect on her unconventional gender and sexuality. She wrote to Bryher on November 29, 1920: “my experience of childhood playmates—of girls at least—corroborates yours and dolls have always seemed to me, the dreariest, tawdiest things in the world” (Letters 137). Moore wrote a poem for Bryher called “Smooth Gnarled Crape Myrtle,” “a defense of ‘blameless bachelors’” such as Bryher and herself, which seems to confirm their unapologetic butch style (291).

Moore also confided in Bryher her fear of exposure. After Bryher pleaded with Moore to visit her and H.D. in Europe, Moore declined, blaming what she called her “ice-bound state,” a position which the facts of her life situation could not explain (128). In this letter, Moore described herself as literally frozen, like ice, a substance which bears a structural similarity to stone in that both are hard and yet capable of breaking open. While in letters to Pound or Eliot she was unapologetically cold and dismissive, she respected Bryher’s opinion, and therefore regretted if she seemed “cool.” In 1921, Bryher and H.D., finally frustrated by Moore’s reclusivity in her work, took it upon themselves to put together a bound volume of Moore’s poems, without her permission. This decision devastated Moore for decades. On July 7, 1921, in a heartbreaking display of stone butch vulnerability, she invoked Bryher’s nickname for her, “pterodactyl”:

Dear Bryher:
I received a copy of my poems this morning from Miss Weaver. Now that I am a pterodactyl, it is perhaps well that you even with your hardened gaze, cannot see what it is to be a pterodactyl with no rock in which to hide. In Variations of Animals and Plants under Domestication, Darwin speaks of a variety of pigeon that is born naked without any down whatever. I feel like that Darwinian gosling. You say I am stubborn [!!]. I agree and if you knew how much more than stubborn I am, you would blame yourself more than you do, on having put a thing through, over my head. I had considered the matter from every point and was sure of my decision—that to publish anything now would not be to my literary advantage. (164)
Moore tried to appeal to Bryher’s stone butch qualities by remembering her friend’s “hardened gaze”; she expressed the extent of her exposure by comparing herself to a naked “Darwinian gosling.” Later in the letter, she praised the book for its beauty, but remained upset by the decision, remarking that if it weren’t her friends who undertook this project, she would have thought it done by enemies; about the copies of the book that were sent to her, she laments, “I don’t know what to do with these and don’t know what to do next” (167).

Early rejections gave Moore another impetus to develop stone butch style, which is revealed in the first line of an early letter to Ezra Pound, written on January 9, 1919: “I do not appear. Originally, my work was refused by *The Atlantic Monthly* and other magazines and recently I have not offered it” (*Letters* 123). The extremely suggestive line, “I do not appear,” reveals how Moore’s artistry at this time, only several months after the end of the War, relied on absence and withdrawal. This absence, this refusal, represents a crossing toward the masculine, a conscious decision reflected in her calculated effort to be absent from public life. Moore does not admit to cowering, but rather, the rhetorical move in this letter, “I do not appear,” suggests the agency in Moore’s temporary withdrawal.

Within this dance of gusto and modesty, interspersed with times of extreme social isolation, armor became a central theme as well as an aesthetic quality in many of Moore’s poems. Armor even became a persistent subject in Moore criticism, dating back to Randall Jarrell’s 1952 essay “Her Shield” in which he misreads Moore’s armor as the mark of an overly feminine sensibility. He complains that the earlier poems suffer “a contained, removed tone...like the ladies who learned a little before birth not to mention money, who neither point nor touch and who scrupulously abstain from the mixed, live vulgarity of life” (134-5). He speaks about armor as a childish fantasy that she would eventually outgrow in her more “mature” poems. However, Moore’s life-long interest in armor and war implements suggests that this was not an instance of false consciousness, but rather
an abiding attachment to masculine material culture and ways of knowing. During her tenure as editor of *The Dial*, one of the first books she wanted to review was *Helmets and Body Armor in Modern Warfare* (*Holding On* 172-3). Moore critic Bonnie Costello notes Moore’s extensive collection of books, articles, and brochures on the history of arms and armor, and her attendance at lectures and exhibitions on the subject (108). In a 1922 letter to Robert McAlmon in which she describes a visit to see her brother in Seattle, Moore expressed her fascination for the “perfection” of the battleship on which her brother served his military duty, which she found “thrilling” (*Letters* 188). Many letters convey the pleasure she experienced when interacting with armor and weapons, a pleasure she would extend in the poems.

The War was Moore’s earliest poetic subject, even though many of the first war poems were never published. She was initially a pacifist, and felt ambivalence over the U.S. entry into the war, but her opinion changed after 1917 when her brother enlisted as a navy chaplain (“What is War for” 56). The War even seems to have given rise to Moore’s idiosyncratic stanza, a short stanza based on syllable count rather than feet, a significant deviation from traditional verse in English (*Holding On* 129). Moore used a war poem to enter a contest to make money for the family, and this poem was the first to use this stanza (129). As Linda Leavell explains, in the poem, Moore departed from the accentual meter she used in previous poems, instead employing a 3-1-5-5 syllabic pattern (129). Most poetry written in English relies on the number of feet rather than the number of syllables, as in Haiku and certain kinds of Hebrew poetry. Instead of writing in lines, Moore wrote in stanzas. While Moore did not invent syllabic verse, as Leavell writes, she was the first known poet to use this kind of structure in English, for this convention is more common in Haiku and Hebrew poetry (130). She also experimented with the typewriter’s tab feature, and used a rhyme scheme that relied on abrupt transition rather than smooth or melodic sound. While her early poems are commonly referred to as “syllabic”, she refused this idea, because she felt this disregarded the deeply internalized rhyme
scheme of the stanzas, as well as the importance of her pattern of indentation (130). In terms of 
content, later poems leave behind the “vitriol” of the early war poems, but her work continued to 
pose these initial ethical concerns, gaining in complexity and scale (“What is War For” 70).

Critics often describe her poems as having an effect of density created through these stanza 
structures, heavy use of line-end and internal rhyme, extremely varied line-lengths, unusually 
frequent quotation, and explanatory notes to poems, strategies that, through “piling,” achieve an 
armor-like quality. However, despite this density, she forms an intimate connection with her 
audience, inviting readers to empathize with the armored animal. Moore felt very close to the animal 
kingdom; she loved going to the circus and to the zoo, and developed a particular fondness for 
animals with thick coverings and skins, as well as venomous animals. It is fitting that Bryher chose 
the pterodactyl as Moore’s nickname, a flying dinosaur that is externally structured by hard ridges. 
Moore delighted in taking on the persona of the pterodactyl, an animal that is by turns tough and 
vulnerable. Sometime in the 1930s, she even began signing letters to her brother using the 
nickname “Basilisk,” the name for the legendary king of serpents who has the power to cause death 
with a single glance. She wrote to her brother on July 24, 1932, “I am now a basilisk—(harmless 
however). And my hat was 5 dollars & had been 15. not 12.95” (275).

“The Pangolin,” written in 1934, is perhaps the strongest example of her armored animal 
poems. The poem captures Marianne Moore’s love of small things that are resistant but not 
aggressive, awaiting their predators like the soldier in the trench who withstands mud, cold, and 
threat of certain death. However, the pangolin’s “Armor seems extra,” and his “eye apertures” are

---

20 Bryher describes Moore in her novel *West* (1924) as a pterodactyl, a description to which Moore 
refers in a letter to Bryher on May 9, 1921: “Sitting here like a pterodactyl on a rock afraid to move. I 
suppose you feel if you fell off it into the sea you’d enjoy swimming among the anemones” (*Letters* 
159). The description clearly illustrates Moore’s fear of exposure, though her friends feel she might 
find enjoyment in company.
“impenetrably closable,” which suggests that his defenses exceed the need brought about by his circumstances (Complete Poems 117). Through the poem’s slow revelation of the animal (often the main action of these poems), and the multiple meaning of the animal’s covering, Moore welcomes the reader to join her in the art of acute observation.

The polysyndeton in “The Pangolin” creates a piling that both armors and reveals, and as language accumulates, the meaning of the poem simultaneously unfolds. The poem offers Moore’s belief in plurality, optimism, and human possibility, qualities that even humankind’s “vileness” cannot extinguish:

```
Sun and moon and day and night and man and beast
each with a splendor
which man in all his vileness cannot
set aside; each with an excellence! (Complete Poems 118)
```

As Rachel Trousdale observes in “Humor Saves Steps: Laughter and Humanity in Marianne Moore,” the artichoke, the pangolin, and the tank all appear together in this poem, suggesting the inextricability of life and death. The juxtaposition of human annihilation (symbolized by the tank) and human sustenance (artichoke) reveals the extent of the peril in World War I. There remains a soft and tender inner core to all of these things; the tender body inside the pangolin’s armor, the man within the armored vehicle, the heart of the artichoke become the things worth saving. Moore, like the pangolin, thrives on contradictions.

The pangolin is “stone-swallowing” and “uninjurable,” qualities that attest to the indefatigability of this animal’s armor. The density of description, the zooming in and zooming out from close observation to the larger questions of life, particularly through the line “Sun and moon and day and night and man and beast” shows how a reader gets to have intimacy with this animal, but only if the reader maintains her own courage and concentration. Moore makes demands on the reader, but provides places to rest:
To explain grace requires
a curious hand. If that which is at all were not forever,
why would those who grace the spires
with animals and gathered there to rest, on cold luxurious
low stone seats—a monk and monk and monk (118-119)

Here stone signifies humility, something low from which to contemplate, while the multiplying
image of a monk offers a meditation. If the reader presses on in this meditative way, she experiences
the grace that lies within the animal’s protective skin.

Moore’s gaze rests not on earth but rather on the celestial bodies, as she reaches toward a
privileged communion with the heavens, a reaching that communicates Moore’s own butch
exceptionalism. In the final lines of the poem, the speaker admits her shortcoming, and seeks
answers above the human fray:

    says to the alternating blaze,
    “Again the sun!
    anew each day; and new and new and new,
    that comes into and steadies my soul.” (120)

At the poem’s close, Moore maintains stone confidence, a confidence that does not come from
human beings, but from the sun—the apogee of masculine assertion. The polysyndeton here
expresses the exhaustion of continuing on—“Again the sun!”—but also the possibility of renewal
through diligence and precision.

Moore refined interest in weaponry contrasted against the “mechanization” of the War; like
Cather, she compares unfavorably the present slaughter to the art of war in times past. Over the
course of Moore’s career, armor became a central metaphor, one that also challenged materialism,
modernity, and conquest. While the tightly constructed surfaces sometimes give the poems a
machine-like intensity, Moore was highly critical of mechanized intelligence, particularly in the early
to middle years of the war, 1915-1917, though she continued with this theme in later years. The
1935 poem “To a Steam Roller” is an excellent example of her enduring criticism:
The illustration
is nothing to you without the application.
You lack half wit. You crush all the particles down
into close conformity, and then walk back and forth on them.

Sparkling chips of rock
are crushed down to the level of the parent block.
Were not “impersonal judgment in aesthetic
matters, a metaphysical impossibility,” you
might fairly achieve
it. As for butterflies, I can hardly conceive
of one’s attending upon you, but to question
the congruence of the complement is vain, if it exists.

(Complete Poems 84)

Unlike the closely conforming surfaces of the man-made environment, Moore’s stone is not
impersonal or unyielding, but rather porous, containing within its crevices the potential for grace.
Distinct from the steam roller that crushes “all the particles down/ into close conformity” then
mercilessly walks “back and forth on them,” she composes her stone loosely, out of “Sparkling
chips of rock,” which she refuses to level; her surface becomes one that invites butterflies.

Similarly, in an early poem “Those Various Sculpels” written in 1917 as an homage to Mina
Loy, Moore criticizes modern warfare through images of more dignified historical battles. She
compares Loy’s hair to “the tails of two fighting-cocks head to head in stone—/ like sculptured
scimitars repeating the curve of your ears in/ reverse order” (Complete Poems 51). The intellectual and
artistic weapons that Loy wields have an elegance that the steamroller can never achieve. While not
uncritical of Loy’s more directly feminist style, here Moore champions Loy’s use of dignified
weaponry. This poem also subtly communicates Moore’s sexually charged appreciation of women
who unlike Moore, possess a rarefied armor made of “emeralds from Persia/ and the fractional
magnificence of Florentine/ goldwork” (51).

In the 1917 poem “To be Liked by You Would Be a Calamity,” she uses the title of the
poem to reveal the meaning, a convention Moore frequently employed. In the poem, “You” is the
hegemonic masculinity that drives the steamroller. Words carefully selected through restraint form
the armor against the war of attrition she viewed as taking place in everyday life. She writes, “‘Attack
is more piquant than concord,’ but when/ You tell me frankly that you would like to feel/ My flesh
beneath your feet, I’m all abroad; I can but put my weapon up, and/ Bow you out” (Becoming
Marianne Moore 220). Moore felt that her carefully executed refusals of speech could defeat any foe.
As she writes in the prefatory note to Complete Poems, originally published in 1935, “Omissions are
not accidents.” With this aphorism, she suggests that silence and restraint can be the ultimate
weapons. Moore Like Stein and Cather, she modeled herself after the ancient poet-hero who fights
on behalf of the highest ideals, often using the masculine metaphor of armor to describe the artistic
process. In the later poem “Armor’s Undermining Modesty,” published in 1951, Moore uses the
instance of a moth “alighted” on her wrist to meditate on armor and heroism:

sheen. Once, self-determination
made an ax of stone
and hacked things out with hairy paws. The consequence—

our mis-set

alphabet

(Complete Poems 151)

Moore strongly believes in self-determination to the point where language itself is the direct result of
“an ax of stone.” The poem considers armor to be an asset for the poet, the politician, and the
scholar. In Moore’s view, “the knights who sought the Grail” understood “armor’s undermining
modesty” and knew that it was not necessary to enumerate the shortcomings of the opponent to win
the war, for one could win by using the stone butch art of refusal. In a Moore poem, old-fashioned
masculine traits of chivalry, gallantry, and gusto somehow survive the contemporary slaughter.

In both the 1943 poem “In Distrust of Merits” and “Armor’s Undermining Modesty,” a
stone exterior conceals the subtle human qualities, like modesty, and allows for the restraint that is
needed for the human race to transcend conflict. Moore performs restraint in these poems, drawing
us in through a characteristic formality, a stone surface that displays unity and technical prowess.
The poems often read like cerebral machines, but within these carved lines, Moore creates nests for baby birds or dinosaur eggs. As Costello writes, “Art becomes a symbolic shield against, and model for, the unwieldy flux of internal and external forces” (115).

Moore’s use of quotations is often cited as one of the qualities that set Moore’s poems apart from those of T.S. Eliot, and these quotations also became part of her literary armor. As Jarrell writes in “Her Shield,” “quotations were a subject of endless interest to her—her collection was vast and her use of it legendary. If her own writing had not been so fiercely wrought, many of her essays and her poems might have seemed like collages of references…They did allow her to go out into the world, like her favorite armadillo, protected by the knowledge of other people’s achievements—a humility that she said was necessary” (Jarrell 52). The quotation-as armor suggests how Moore constructed her poems in an adversarial mood.

Even though Moore liked T.S. Eliot and had a strong connection to him as a person, Moore was critical of *The Waste Land* (1922), which also employed a quotation technique. She wrote in a letter to Yvor Winters on December 20, 1922 that she felt the poem to be “macabre,” lacking in “rhythmic cohesiveness,” compressing imagination at the expense of experience (*Letters* 191). Her style of quotation differed from Eliot as it stemmed more from experience than from knowledge. Her quotations taken from the ephemera of modern life—*Vogue* and *Scientific American*, random advertising, and overheard remarks—bear a remarkable similarity to cubist collages. While she proceeds in the letter to describe *The Waste Land* as a “creative achievement,” her acerbic criticism of one of the most famous poems of her day reveals how Moore believed herself to be a revolutionary—an exception.

In her 1941 poem “The Student,” Moore reveals a sense of her inner life, and her remarkable similarity to Stein, a poet who also suffered from too much rather than too little feeling: “he renders his service where there is/ no reward, and is too reclusive for/ some things to seem to
touch/ him, not because he/ has no feeling but because he has so much” (The Poems of Marianne Moore 185). Ultimately, stone butch style demands a redefinition of masculine power and restraint, and an understanding of power as the ability to be tough but not unyielding, stone but strategically impenetrable. As Costello writes, Moore redefined power as a way of apprehending the world rather than a type of conquest. The images of combat in Moore’s poems convert anxiety to gusto, and utilize combat toward a positive end.

Moore’s poetic career also demonstrates the difficulty and in some ways untenability of stone butch armor, for herself more than for the armored animals she adored. In the 1930s, Moore experienced an unmanageable degree of internal and external pressure as the crisis in Europe edged the continent toward war once again. As Costello explains, “Moore’s youthful conviction that one may live unconflictedly within one’s own thick or thin skin markedly diminishes with the repeated global crises of the century” (277). Moore also became more politically conservative, and this conservatism made her nearly obsolete in the world of serious writers of the socialist 30’s. She was a staunch Republican, a Hoover supporter like Cather, who found Hoover’s speech in October of 1932 stirring. Her growing pessimism caused her to write in a letter to Monroe Wheeler on July 11, 1932, that she was “not satisfied with the world,” and felt “constantly in despair—on the verge of embitterment almost—as a result of world abuses and my own errors” (266). Rather than expressing the fighting spirit of a finely honed ethical consciousness, her later war poems, like the conclusions to Cather’s most famous novels, mourn what she sees as humanity’s impending doom.

Late in her career, Moore also began to write commercially successful poems (many for women’s magazines), achieving literary celebrity that depended in some ways upon her abandonment of the earlier, more difficult stone butch style. As Miller writes, perhaps ironically, writing on women’s subjects for a more conventional audience put Moore in the position of supporting “a regressive image of womanhood” that directly contradicted the unconventional
gender role and domestic life she had created with her mother (170). While these later poems may offer a warmer, simpler, and more vibrant joy, there is a sadness in the fact that Moore lost contact with her stone butch identification, with creatures who by nature are built to conceal as much as they reveal: the jerboa, the plumet basilisk, the pangolin, the arctic ox. She abandoned the stone that grounded her earlier style—“the camouflage, metamorphosis, veils”—which both protects and lures within an intricately choreographed dance of penetrator and penetrated. Despite her departure from these butch miniatures, what Wallace Stevens once called her small-scale world of “shimmering minutiae,” the poems still testify to the importance of stone butch between the wars, not only for Moore, but for many writers who used an aesthetic of internal preservation and restraint, combined with swagger and bravado, to launch an often-misread critique of masculine hegemony. This critique, born out of an affinity for masculine greatness, would prove to be unsustainable, particularly in the postwar era when gender and sex expressions were more strictly curated, normalized and restricted.
Chapter Two

B.D. Women Sing the Blues (and Dance the Charleston): Defiance and Rage in the Age of the “Greats”

The subject is certainly seen, but she also sees. It is this return of the gaze that negotiates at every point a space for living, and it is the latter that we must willingly name the counter-power, the counter-mythology.
—Hortense Spillers, “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words”

B. D. Women, they all done learnt their plan
B. D. Women, they all done learnt their plan
They can lay their jive just like a natural man
—Lucille Bogan, “B.D. Woman”

The period between the two world wars is known as the era of the “greats”—the Great War, the Great Migration, and the Great Depression established the horizon of possibility for writers, musicians, and performers. These historical events disproportionately limited butch artists of color who for the first time in American history gained wide recognition for their work. Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Josephine Baker are three prime examples of “great,” highly praised, butch performers during this period, and yet they were forced to negotiate throughout their careers the effects of institutional racism. Josephine Baker left the U.S. to find freedom from racial oppression, but encountered a different set of limitations in Europe during the rise of fascist regimes. Using artistic strategies of resistance often coded as humor, Rainey, Smith and Baker infused their performances with rage and defiance against racist ideologies. In the 1920s and ’30s, despite racial violence, desperate poverty, and the burdens placed upon black women within the new postbellum family systems, B.D. women negotiated what Hortense Spillers calls a “space for living.” These strategies, which belong to the “B.D.” (bulldyke) woman of the early twentieth century, demonstrate how agency can be discovered despite unfavorable historical situations.
The term “B.D. woman” pre-dates the use of the term “butch,” and is a style that would later echo in butch/femme communities in the second half of the twentieth century, communities explored by lesbian writers like Audre Lorde in her trans-genre biomythography, Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982). Through the B.D. woman, a term that all but disappeared after the 1930s, I continue to theorize butch as a set of masculine emotional styles used to create literature, music, and character on film in the decades before butch became a lesbian identity category. Rainey, Smith, and Baker articulate early butch style despite a lack of fashion choices (such as clothing and hairstyle) that would indicate a transgender or genderqueer identity in the contemporary sense.

Transgender expressions depend upon their historical, political, and material contexts, and though all three did cross-dress at some point in their performances to achieve a desired effect, “dressing like a man” was de facto forbidden in the U.S. and illegal in Paris. I continue the early work of Ann Cvetcovich, who argued in the 1990s that claiming “butchness as emotional style” allows for an expansion of the kinds of subject positions and bodies that can be considered butch, beyond the “limit points or borders where masculinity is at its most heightened” (italics mine, 168). In contemporary politics of representation, cultural critics often focus on these “limit points or borders” of masculine performance, and overlook a larger historical variety of butch styles.

In this chapter, I approach butch as a racial construction, which can help correct the singular focus in cultural theory on white butch stereotypes. When the issue of class is raised, the white, working class butch often becomes the primary representative. However, the black butch performer bears little resemblance to James Dean, or to Gertrude Stein for that matter, but rather discovers her roots in the blues and jazz era of the 1920s and ’30s. In her song “B.D. Woman,” the “dirty blues” singer and composer Louise Bogan describes the B.D. qualities that Rainey, Smith, and Baker shared:

Comin' a time, B. D. Women ain't gonna need no men  
Comin' a time, B. D. Women ain't gonna do need no men
Oh the way they treat us is a lowdown and dirty sin

B. D. Women, you sure can't understand
B. D. Women, you sure can't understand
They got a head like a sweet angel and they walk just like a natural man

B. D. Women, they all done learnt their plan
B. D. Women, they all done learnt their plan
They can lay their jive just like a natural man

B. D. Women, B. D. Women, you know they sure is rough
B. D. Women, B. D. Women, you know they sure is rough
They all drink up plenty whiskey and they sure will strut their stuff

B. D. Women, you know they work and make their dough
B. D. Women, you know they work and make their dough
And when they get ready to spend it, they know they have to go. (Bogan)

The gender style represented in the song “B.D. Woman” developed out of the styles of the travelling bluesmen of the South who played for handouts on street corners, as well as vaudeville performers, and the music, literature and art of the Harlem Renaissance. The music of slavery produced in captivity also greatly influenced these later musical styles. B.D. offers an entirely different butch flavor from the ones developed by Cather, Stein, and Moore, or those presented by the Hollywood film actors Clara Bow, Lauren Bacall, and Hope Emerson. While there is significant overlap between white and black butch styles, the B.D. woman has her own specific history rooted in oppression and violence.

Due to their confrontational stance, biographers often describe Rainey, Smith, and Baker as prickly and forbidding. When black women express rage and defiance, they run the risk of becoming “unlikeable” and “unsympathetic.” In her recent collection of essays, Bad Feminist, Roxane Gay critiques this double-standard in film and fiction through which unlikeable men become “inscrutably interesting,” while unlikeable women become outcasts (88). When women are depicted as unlikeable, it prompts questions like, “Why are these women daring to flaunt convention? Why aren’t they
making themselves likeable (and therefore acceptable) to polite society?” (88). Self-effacement is the norm for women, and “mis-directed” anger can lead to ridicule and scorn.

Rage is the most extreme form of anger, an emotion only permitted for white men in a racist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic cultural environment, particularly within the shadow of slavery, or what Hortense Spillers calls the “marketplace of the flesh.” Rage mirrors the intensity of the sun, and can point directly, with searing precision, to the causes of suffering and pain. The defiance that follows rage describes a masculine-identified position, an orientation to the world that necessitates “a renunciation of faith” and/or “a declaration of hostilities” (“Defiance”). When a woman renounces faith or allegiance, and declares hostilities, she often relies on her own judgment rather than those of others; she makes a decision, launches her protest, and stands against that person or idea. Defiance and rage invite rather than avoid disruption, the kind of disruption that can lead to a new blues phrase or dance move.

Defiance and rage join Rainey, Smith, and Baker to the history of black feminist work on the subject. In her foundational study *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, Angela Davis explains how the blues absorbed the musical styles developed in slavery “in which protest was secretly expressed and understood only by those who held the key to the code” (111). The covert defiance and rage articulated by nineteenth-century slaves, and re-encoded by Rainey, Smith, and Baker, becomes more fully exposed during the Second Wave Feminist Movement. Audre Lorde opens her essay “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger” with the following provocation: “EVERY BLACK WOMAN in America lives her life somewhere along a wide curve of ancient and unexpressed angers” (“Eye to Eye” 145). In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks shares how she developed consciousness of her own anger in childhood: “Growing up in a Southern, black, father-dominated, working class household, I experienced (as did my mother, my sister, and my brother) varying degrees of patriarchal tyranny and it made me
angry—it made us all angry. Anger led me to question the politics of male dominance and enabled me to resist sexist socialization” (39). In part because of economic pressures, and the “patriarchal tyranny” common in black southern families, anger developed for hooks like a flashpoint of awareness. The defiance and rage of the black butch artist emanates from the realization of this shared pain. The black butch poet Harryette Mullen working in the 1990’s employs some of Gertrude Stein’s rhetorical strategies, but infuses her lines with the rage particular to the black woman living in the U.S. She expresses to her audience how she is a “reflection” of her mother’s “secret poetry,” “as well as of her hidden angers” (151). Davis, Lorde, hooks, and Mullen propose the ways that defiance and rage are handed down through generations of black women writers, artists, and performers.

Expressing defiance and rage allowed Rainey, Smith, and Baker to attain a sense of body continuity denied to them as black women, a feeling of self-possession that Spillers describes as “being-for self.” At the root of this defiance and rage is pain, reverberating through the early decades of the twentieth century as black people were subjected to both outright slaughter (through lynching and other forms of actual murder), and to “quieter” biopolitical slaughter in the form of Jim Crow laws, which led to all forms of public and private humiliation, as well as to the neglect and decay of black neighborhoods and black lives. Defiance and rage become primers for a musical canvas, one that takes up pain as its main subject. In her blues songs, Smith used what historian Ann Douglas calls “grief-rage,” a combination of anger and sorrow that conveys the depth and complexity of this particular pain. According to Douglas, Smith shared with her fellow urban moderns, black and white, the desire for brutal honesty, as well as hostility towards all forms of moralizing (8). In reaction to the violence inflicted upon black and brown women’s bodies between the wars, B.D. women created a language of rage interwoven with more tender feelings, a type of expression that bears similarity to the stone butch sensibility explored in Chapter One, but with an
entirely different pitch and range. The artistic act becomes a form of non-violence predating the
protests of the Civil Rights Movement, which only Baker lived long enough to see and experience.
Using humor and charisma, these women sought to disarm their audiences, many of whom were
white tourists who frequented the small blues and jazz clubs in the U.S. and abroad. Even the most
perceptive of white tourists could fail to detect the rage and defiance hidden within the aesthetic
layers of these performances.

In this first section of the chapter, I offer an overview of the historical circumstances that
allowed the B.D. woman to gain popularity in the urban centers of the North and abroad. In the
second section, I discuss Gertrude “Ma” Rainey’s launch to fame as “Assassinator of the Blues”; she
provided a prototype for Bessie Smith, and possibly for Josephine Baker. In the third section, I
explore the ways that Smith embodies Louise Bogan’s description of the female “bad boy” who
takes her cues from the wandering philanderer. However, Smith also gained popularity with elite
whites like Carl Van Vechten, whose famous photographs provide a view of the complex aesthetic
layers of her performance. In the fourth section, I offer my own extension of B.D. style and argue
for the inclusion of Josephine Baker, who achieved legendary status by breaking with feminine
propriety. Through an idiosyncratic B.D. style, Baker challenged both New Negro ideology in the
U.S. and black bourgeoisie values in Europe.

These artists gave rise to many waves of performance styles, though their influence often
goes unacknowledged. The vocal qualities of Rainey and Smith echo in the American Punk Scene, in
the swing toward gender bending and androgyny found in Patti Smith, “The New York Dolls,” and
David Bowie (“Music and Gender”). Smith’s biographer Buzzy Jackson explains how Janis Joplin
learned to sing by imitating Smith, which suggests that even thirty years after her death, Smith
retained her status as an icon of female bravado (82). Baker’s influence can be found in perhaps the
widest range of work, as artists like Lady Gaga often cite Baker as a forefigure of postmodern
pastiche. According to Baker biographer Bennetta Jules-Rosette, Madonna took cues from Baker, in part because of Baker’s use of double identities and manipulation of patriarchal feminine signs as sources of empowerment (263). In other words, Baker butchified the feminine symbol, and others followed her lead; using butch as an analytical tool, an iconographic costume like the banana belt can be theorized as a kind of multiple dildo harness. All three B.D. women were anomalies, artistic forces who repeatedly announced in highly public ways their phallic orientation to the world.

**Singing and Dancing One’s Way Out of (and into) History**

The historical memory of what Hortense Spillers calls “the marketplace of the flesh” played a central role in shaping the B.D. styles developed by Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Josephine Baker. In captivity, black women were denied entry into the realm of the feminine, such that feminine self-effacement, an aspect of the 19th century “Cult of True Womanhood,” begins to look more like a dubious privilege. Slavery rendered the black woman a non-entity, a biological unit that lacked the privilege of being. As Spillers so famously argues, this “paradox of non-being” was a fact of life that destroyed any sense of femininity for the captive woman who lacked ownership even of her own children. As she explains, “because African-American women experienced uncertainty regarding their infants’ lives in the historic situation, gendering, in its coeval reference to African-American women, insinuates an implicit and unresolved puzzle both within current feminist discourse and within those discursive communities that investigate the entire problematics of culture” (“Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” 224). Given the specific gender problem created by black woman’s history in

---

**21** Hortense Spillers explains this problematic in her essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” For black women, the legacy of slavery creates a radically different relationship to gender. In Spiller’s explication of the black woman as a “different cultural text,” she names the following interconnected problems: “(1) motherhood as female bloodrite is outraged, is denied, at the very same time that it becomes the founding term of a human and social enactment; (2) a dual fatherhood is set in motion comprised of the African father’s banished name and body and the captor father’s mocking
the U.S., any attempt to draw parallels between, say, Gertrude Stein and Ma Rainey, or to include both within a butch canon, requires that the historical situation of these artists receive careful consideration.

Through rage and defiance, B.D. women expressed a desire for body continuity, something that was and is denied black women, beginning with what Spillers calls the “crisis of reproductive violence in slavery” (“Peter’s Pans” 20). Taking command of the body, even for one moment on stage, became a radical gesture. To have body continuity means to possess a feeling of wholeness and integrity, to feel ownership over one’s life and a sense of purpose in the world. Theater initially became a key medium for the black artist in the struggle for human recognition. As Barbara Lewis explains in her essay “Making the Word Flesh: Three at the Threshold of Tomorrow,” by the 1890s, black performers essentially sang and danced their way out of racist stereotypes, using the stage to engage in a covert protest against lynching and the minstrel characterization (192). However, it wasn’t until the arrival of female playwrights Angelina Weld Grimke, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and Mary Burrill that black writers began to take up the subject of lynching without the aspect of black guilt. Drama developed into the most effective genre for challenging a world view that denies body continuity for black people (195).

In “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,” Spillers offers the term “being-for-self” as another way of speaking about self-possession achieved through performance (165). Using Kenneth Burke’s “pentad of fiction”— the agent, agency, act, scene, and purpose involved in the human drama—Spillers describes how the blues singer achieves being-for-self. This pentad becomes presence. In this play of paradox, only the female stands in the flesh, both mother and mother-dispossessed” (“Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” 228-229). Butch becomes one way of theorizing black women’s defiance against these forms of subjugation.

---

22 Between 1882 and 1930, lynching claimed the lives of 2,400 black men, women, and children (law.jrank.org).
compressed in the singer into a living body, insinuating itself through a material scene, and in that dance of motives, in which the motor behavior, the changes in countenance, the vocal dynamics, the calibration of gesture and nuance in relationship to a formal object—the song itself—is a precise demonstration of the subject turning in fully conscious knowledge of her own resources toward her object. In this instance of being-for-self, it does not matter that the vocalist is ‘entertaining’ under American skies because the woman, in particular and vivid thereness, is an unalterably and discrete moment of self-knowledge. The singer is a good example of “double consciousness” in action. (italics mine, 165)

Spillers uses the black female blues singer as the specific example of an individual who becomes “fully conscious” through a dynamic relationship to her art. The singer “compresses” all of Kenneth Burke’s aspects of a fictional work into her body, and achieves in the process a sense of her own presence in the world. Through movement, facial expression, and voice, the singer assumes a privileged position that exceeds the oppressive power of any nation-state, including the U.S.

These acts of repossessing appear particularly radical considering the increasingly popular and nefarious “race science,” which gained prominence during the first three decades of the 20th century. Basing their ideas on Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species: On the Preservation of the Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859), studies in comparative anatomy, and anthropometry (the scientific study of the measurements and proportions of the human body), scientists “confirmed” the supremacy of the white man, establishing once and for all the “truth” about race, sex, and gender. Siobhan Somerville explains how in this new expert science, white women and black men existed on the same developmental plane as a white male child, thus representing an ancestral stage in the evolution of adult white males (24). Race scientists paid close attention to the taxonomy of the black female body and its “abnormalities,” which they believed hearkened back to a primitive time of undifferentiated sexes. As Cedric J. Robinson explains in *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and The Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film Before World War II*, through the legitimizing effects of this kind of quasi-scientific inquiry, race came to appear as a stable and natural category. However in reality, these theories demonstrate how facts can be manipulated to manufacture a rationale for oppression and violence. As Robinson argues, “race is mercurial—deadly and slick. And since race is
presumably natural, the intrusion of convention shatters race’s relationship to the natural world. This is true for the contemptible Black, at one and the same time the most natural of beings and the most intensively manufactured subject” (4). “Race science” was thus conducted, in Robinson’s words, between the registers of “burlesque” and “horror” (3).

The explosion of mass industry in the 1930s, particularly the development of race records and venues for black performers, became another important factor that allowed B.D. women to launch their careers. As the popular culture critic Joshua Gamson explains, the 1930’s saw the coeval development of publicity, advertising, public relations, and the film industry (Will 152). As American consumer culture industrialized, there developed “‘an engine of publicity such as the world [had] never known before’”(152). The record industry of the 1920’s created the first black divas of the blues catalog, performers who took to the small stages and bars, often establishing their popularity well before the 1920’s.

The formation of what Chapman calls the “sex/race marketplace” largely influenced what black women could produce, torn as they were between two poles: New Negro ideology on one side and the sex/race marketplace on the other. B.D. defiance therefore depended on the market, and the fact that sex and race sold records. Advertisements for blues records also convey the public discomfort with the tough masculine sexuality of some of the blues singers. Many of these ads mocked the resistance of the B.D. woman in order dispel the real threat she posed to the social order. However, while Chapman argues that black women could only be “spectacles and objects” who maintained the racial and sexual imbalance of power, Angela Davis, Hortense Spillers, George Yancy, Daphne Harrison, and others believe these performers transcended their subjugated status, creating a call-and-response effect throughout the black community. The protests of the B.D. woman paved the way for later black feminist thinkers as well as the Civil Rights Era more broadly defined. Further, as Harrison contends in Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920’s, blacks were not
passive consumers of the record industry, but rather active participants who petitioned the record producers to promote the work of certain singers over others (57).

The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural watershed caused by a combination of factors: the advent of mass industry, the Great Migration from the rural south to urban north, the end of World War I in 1918, and the return of African American soldiers who were committed to making the U.S. live up to its promise of inclusivity (Jones 51). The rise of black creative expression post-World War I and consumerism challenged the supremacy of the church, which heavily influenced the blues.

Black urbanism post-World War I and the development of the city negro between 1915-1925 meant more opportunities for black artists, but black middle class values, including propriety for black women, determined the contours of these opportunities. New Negro ideology proposed that black women would be automatically emancipated through the alleviation of black men’s oppression, but artists working in a B.D. style rejected this kind of sexist trickle-down theory. Rainey, Smith, and Baker thus found themselves in conflict with the black middle class on both sides of the Atlantic, particularly the black elite who considered their performance styles unworthy of serious recognition (Pittman 148). Because of the term’s association to race, sex, and gender difference, and to the “grit” and “roughness” of lower or working class attitudes, B.D. style offers important insight on the multiple strands of black culture that developed in the early twentieth century.

B.D. blues between the wars transgressed binaries of all kinds—male/female, straight/gay, rural/urban—further demonstrating how blues more generally speaking escapes definition (Jackson 8). Sexuality and defiance against feminine propriety became a main theme for the women blues singers, in ways that challenged feminine proscriptions and proprieties within their communities. At this time, the main cultural discourse on black women’s sexuality was the blues.23 The defiance and

23 Other than a “handful” of lesbian/feminist texts, the blues remained for decades the only sign that black women had a sexuality to discuss. As Spillers famously argues, “black women are the beached
rage expressed in the following butch blues performances stems from the desire to take back the
sexual body. In “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues,” Hazel
Carby describes how black women came to use what is called the Classic Blues as a vehicle for their
empowerment. The women’s blues of the 1920s and ’30’s “is a discourse that articulates a cultural
and political struggle over sexual relations: a struggle that is directed against the objectification of
female sexuality within a patriarchal order but which also tries to reclaim women’s bodies as sexual
and sensuous” (Carby 474). Rainey and Smith portrayed themselves as so sexually liberated, they
didn’t need to bother with gender distinctions (Jackson 158). The B.D. woman used defiance and
rage to defend her right to choose a mate who treats her well and satisfies her sexually, directly
countering the legacy of slavery, which is a legacy of rape by definition.24

Embrace of independence and freedom of movement also became key themes in the blues
of the B.D. woman. Staking their claim to the masculine-gendered ability to pack up and move on,
Rainey and Smith excluded in their music any reference to children, domestic life, husbands, or
marriage (Davis 13). Even if they cried and wailed in their music, they eventually lifted their heads
and defied their pre-ordained roles as appendages or victims of men without sexual desires of their
own (20-1). These assertions led them to leave their home towns and participate in the Great
Migration, though their departures are often expressed in their songs as reactions to romantic
disappointment. W.C. Handy’s “St. Louis Blues,” popularized by Smith, propose that depression
and ennui can be combatted by movement. As Yancy offers, the line “I’ll pack mah trunk, an’ make

whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting their verb. Their sexual
experiences are depicted, but not often by them, and if and when by the subject herself often in the
guise of vocal music often in the self-contained accent and sheer romance of the blues” (Spillers
153).

24 Cedric J. Robinson writes on George Bourne’s description of the antebellum South as a “vast
harem where menstealers may prowl, corrupt, and destroy”; Wendell Phillips also proposed that the
South was “One great brothel, where half a million women [were] flogged to prostitution” (54).
mah getaway,” suggests how making a getaway symbolizes the B.D. woman’s “metastability,” her readiness to take control and redirect her life (212). The blues singer became an interstitial medium in this migratory drama, a transgender bridge that linked the two communities of women: the rural and the urban (Carby 477). By speaking to both rural women who desired to migrate and to urban nostalgic for home, the blues singer utilized what linguists call code-switching, the fluent use of two or more languages within one polysemic conversation.

Braggadoccio, or exaggerated talk used to show toughness and pride, is another prominent element in B.D. blues. The women characters in the blues were at times volatile and lude, qualities which were often perceived as mimicries of stereotypical male aggression. However, as Davis argues, the “rowdy and hardened” qualities of these characters express the larger goal of affirming black women’s “absolute and irreducible humanity” (Davis 36). For Harrison, violent behaviors portrayed in the blues are defense mechanisms used to develop self-respect in hostile cultural environments (6). When a male character in a blues song is publicly shamed for his philandering ways, the use of violence is a positive assertion of black women’s power (89). B.D. style offers a way to theorize this toughness as an historically constructed gender crossing.

In addition to themes of travel, sexuality, and violence, B.D. blues singers refuted New Negro doctrines of racial uplift by telling the truth about the lives of black people. As Davis conveys, the blues idiom demanded “absolute honesty” and a dismissal of the notion of taboo subjects (107). Thus, “whatever figures into the larger picture of working-class African-American realities—however morally repugnant it may be to the dominant culture or to the black bourgeoisie—is an appropriate subject of blues discourse” (107). The blues told of natural disasters and their effects on black communities, including the Mississippi flood of 1927, events that would otherwise have gone unseen. B.D. rage and defiance present in the blues suggest the awesome power of putting collective experience into words and music, particularly during catastrophic events.
Beyond the use of specific themes is the attitude of the B.D. blues performer to her craft. In concert with the reactions of the audience, rage and defiance allowed the singer to attain a sense of being-for-self during her performance and to a lesser extent when recording albums. One of the distinguishing qualities of the early blues singers like Rainey was their extraordinary ability to outperform their records, keeping the stage vibrant after the advent of the phonograph. “Ma” Rainey made ninety-two records in five years under the Paramount label, but the poor sound quality of the Paramount sides, recorded on wax, means that we inevitably miss some of the richness of Rainey’s sound (Harrison 38). In the absence of film recording it can be difficult, though not impossible, for the contemporary listener to envision what Harrison calls “that toughness of spirit which fuels the will to overcome despair and to wait for the better day that is on the horizon” (101). The performance presented an opportunity for women in the audience to discover their body continuity and being-for-self; B.D. women used the power of the stage to transfix their audiences, and to communicate defiance and rage as a shared experience.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Baker became one of many young black women to arrive in Paris in the 1920’s to teach the American styles of dance and music. Years later, Baker remembered the day she set sail for Paris, September 15, 1925: “When the Statue of Liberty disappeared over the horizon, I knew I was free” (Wood 72). Baker’s traumatic childhood memories of the St. Louis race riots of 1917 likely determined her view of race relations in the U.S. When Dotson Radar of Esquire magazine interviewed her when she was in her 50’s, she recalled her birth city as “a horrible place, yes, worse than the Deep South. I was a little girl, and all I remember is people. They ran across the bridge from East St. Louis to escape the rednecks, the whites killing and beating them. I never forgot my people screaming, a friend of my father’s face shot off, a pregnant woman cut open. I see them running to get to the bridge. I have been running ever since” (Wood 30-31). By contrast, Paris opened a world of opportunity; Baker’s dynamism, comic sensibility, and
overwhelming artistic prowess collided with the city of Paris at the city’s most potent and chaotic moment. As critic Bennetta Jules-Rosette observes, “She entered France at the height of the colonial period and at a point of rapid social and economic change between two world wars. Paris was a metropolis transformed by war, industrialization, migration, overcrowding, and urban redesign” (151-152). American girls stayed for the long-term or for only a few weeks, making a home in Paris as they taught the popular songs and the Charleston; black men worked as instrumentalists, bandleaders, or exotic characters in music hall revues (Gillett 116).

B.D. style required an audacity for which there was no precedent, and at the center of butch consciousness is this kind of derrin-do. B.D. style accomplishes Spillers’s recommendation: to make of the black woman a “different social subject” existing outside of the “ranks of gendered femaleness” (228-229). In the process, in part by claiming their own names (often writ large), Rainey, Smith, and Baker discovered the “insurgent ground” that Spillers describes, which allowed women to become social subjects in their own right (228-229). Naming was indeed very important for all three of these women; Bessie Smith had a railroad car designed with her name in bold letters on the outside, while Ma Rainey insisted on being called, along with her husband, Pa Rainey, an “assassinator” of the blues. Josephine Baker coined the term “Doing Josephine” to describe her bold approach to living. All three claimed their own names, utilizing defiance and rage to move away from the paradox of non-being toward being-for-self.

The direct confrontation with pain becomes the touchstone for these B.D. performances. As Yancy writes in Black Bodies, White Gazes, the blues singers used music to articulate pain and to never become a prisoner of it (212). In a world where the “spectatorial gaze” turns people into commodities and prevents them from having agency, the return of the gaze held a powerful hope for staking out a cultural location (Johnson 32). This is in part how Rainey, Smith, and Baker achieved body continuity and being-for-self, even if only in specific moments during their
performances, even if only for a relatively brief period in history. Over the course of the twenty-century and into the twenty-first century, whites and some blacks have attempted to use the Sapphire Caricature to make a mockery of black women’s anger; this dominance and strength has come to be viewed as pathological, the result of the absence and/or impotence of black men in the new family structure. The strength of African-American women, noted by historians like E. Franklin Frazier in *Negro Family in the United States* (1939), is perceived by later generations “as an instrument of castration” (“Mama’s Baby” 218).

Ma Rainey serves as the beginning point of the B.D. lineage established in this chapter. The bulk of Rainey’s performances occurred in tent shows across the South, her gritty vocal style connecting nostalgic northern urban dwellers to their roots. By presenting herself as “in motion,” Rainey became a formidable figure in the music world, a force to be reckoned with for men and women. Rainey’s protégé, Bessie Smith, became one of the wealthiest and most famous musicians of her day. As Jackson writes, “Unlike Billie Holiday, whose violent private life clearly informed her wounded, fragile public image, Smith consistently projected the persona of an invincible woman” (65). In her professional life, Smith insisted on doing everything her own way, including integrating her stage and audio crew before this was acceptable. Despite commercial pressures, Smith stayed true to her roots and her purpose: to expose boldly the struggles of black women in relationship to black men. By contrast, Josephine Baker, particularly in the banana belt dance, presented the sexual act as absurd and comical, which worked at times to undermine the sexual objectification of black women. All three performers paid a high price for B.D. style, which demonstrates how butch styles were often unsustainable for both black and white women between the wars.
Gertrude “Ma” Rainey Jumps Out of the Victrola!

Crowned mother of the blues by her fans, Rainey embraced the live performance as her domain. The blues evolved out of the country towns of the South, where the blues singer was a solitary, wandering man singing *a capella*, accompanying himself with a guitar or a harmonica, using falsetto, hollers, whoops and shouts, to complement these instruments (Lieb 58). The subject matter was generally rural, as most of these early singers were farmers or travelling laborers (58). They often formed the center of the entertainment for Saturday night parties and dances, while the audience caroused, talked loudly, or fought with each other (58). However, it wasn't until the 1910’s that the blues were “discovered” by major white entertainers, which gave blues a central role in the entertainment industry of the following two decades (Harrison 44).

In the outdoor venues, Rainey “responded to the demands of the tent show masses with raw, heavy-handed lyrics that were cleaned up for recordings” (100). The singer’s voice had to be strong because there were no microphones in the tents; this limitation self-selected the gruffest, toughest, most carrying voices (Lieb 7). These tents were often the only entertainment in these backwoods places, so these were big affairs. As biographer Sandra Lieb describes, when Rainey’s troupe “The Rabbit Foot Minstrels” rolled into town, “a brass band would march around to advertise and drum up business for the show. Wooden boards on a folding frame served as the stage; the footlights were Coleman lanterns” (7). These tents lacked dressing rooms, a backstage, proper lighting, sound equipment, and yet townsfolk flocked to hear Rainey sing, so much that she became a sensational star in the South before anyone in the North had ever heard of her. Though Paramount records announced in 1923 that Rainey was “Discovered at Last,” she had already been performing in the South for a quarter of a century (Harrison 35).

Themes present in her music may have derived from the bluesmen, but Rainey adopted her outrageous costuming, dazzling showmanship, and flair for the comedic from the vaudeville
tradition. After World War I, only very slender women were considered beautiful, but Ma Rainey was a self-proclaimed “big mama” who transformed herself into “a comic and literal sex symbol” (10). Lieb depicts Rainey as “Bewigged and elegantly gowned, masked by greasepaint and glittering jewelry” as she performed professionally on the footlit stage of a traveling show (Lieb 77). Rainey used exaggerated stereotypes to mock the sexual objectification of black women, directing her affront to both white men, former slave masters, and black men who would take advantage of black women.

Ma Rainey’s gruff vocality and her appeal to the large numbers of lower and working-class people in the South defined her B.D. style; her purposefully unrefined vocal texture made her a tour de force (Harrison 220). As Jackson articulates, “Her gruff, earthy voice was full of the weather, the food, the feelings of the South they once knew” (35). Rainey used a heavy contralto that lacked melodic sweetness, to the point where her lyrics often feels forced (Lieb 66). Her voice cracks often, and she refuses bright or smooth tones (66). Her heavy Georgia accent and lisp make it difficult to understand her diction; her recording partner, Lucien Brown, revealed that when she sang, she kept a dime under her tongue to stop herself from stuttering (66). However, these rough qualities were aesthetic choices that Rainey refused to edit out because doing so would dilute the country feeling so important to her audiences. Cleaning up the vocals would also neutralize the masculine energies in her music which allowed for such conviction. As Lieb contends, her moaning was full of life, and her music was never depressing or maudlin. She borrowed liberally from the travelling bluesmen,

25 The defiant stance Rainey took toward standards of beauty for black women can best be described through a typical ad in The Chicago Defender showing “two little girls, one with light skin, refined features and wavy ringlets, carrying a white doll; the other, a dark-skinned pickaninny in tattered clothes. Ringlets: ‘My mother uses Arrowway on my hair’; Pickaninny: ‘I wish my mother did’” (Chapman 162). This is the kind of ad that Rainey indirectly spoke against in her performances; as a “big mama,” becoming both a comic and literal sex symbol can be seen as a kind of butch harnessing of power that uses language and symbols that only her audiences could truly understand.
both in terms of content, form, and worldview; in songs like “Trust No Man,” she defied the idea that white masculinity is the master signifier for all musical expression. Her appeal to black southerners, as well as her base in Chicago, a city with more down-home, southern influences than New York, meant she was overlooked by white promoters like Carl Van Vechten (Lieb 23).

Through close examination of the musical qualities, I analyze the ways that Rainey constructs these songs in B.D. style. Through tempo and volume changes often occurring within a single word, Rainey communicates the intensity of her rage and defiance. The call-and-response she achieves with her accompanists helps to reiterate her character’s volatile emotions. Rainey commands the space of the song through forceful vocals that consciously disregard the importance of training or precision; in fact, the cracks in her voice are integral to the communication of rage and defiance and to the achievement of body continuity and being-for-self. The cracks show that Rainey is not afraid to lose control, and to express the full extent of her butch rage and defiance. Listeners, particularly in the outdoor venues, must have been overwhelmed by Rainey’s monumental presence.

Unlike the blues singers Ethel Waters and Clara Smith, Rainey wrote many of her own songs, and further, she challenged the music industry’s standards by recording twelve-bar blues instead of more popular and non-blues songs. In “Farewell Daddy Blues,” an early tune from 1924, Rainey’s contralto—as well the energy and force of her vocal presence forms a bright contrast to the sadness of the lyrics. In the line “I don’t want you, daddy, if I can’t call you mine,” the singer announces her defiance, using direct address to the “daddy” character. Rainey elongates the word “daddy,” using an equal and forceful emphasis on both syllables, while maintaining a high volume and a stylized quality. The hailing of the male subject communicates her self-respect, her unflagging conviction that she has been done wrong. Toward the end of the song, Rainey offers through vocal quality and lyrics an even greater sense of rage, defiance, and determination to leave the situation for
Figure 7: Ma Rainey and her band, 1923. Courtesy of Jade Salazar, Tagg Magazine.
good, highlighting her disregard for traditional sexual roles. In the final lines, Rainey achieves a forward momentum, nearly screaming “daddy” in the first two lines of the last stanza:

So fare you well, daddy. Someday you'll hear bad news.
So farewell, daddy. Someday you'll hear bad news.
When you look for your mama, she's gone with the farewell blues. (Herdt)

These lines represent another remarkable aspect of this travelling theme—leaving often represented a turning away from masculine power and a refusal to engage, a strategy that Jack Halberstam argues is key to an affirming female masculine subjectivity (*Female Masculinity* 9). Instead of returning the gaze, the singer diverts her attention toward other objects and futures.

There are two contemporary renditions of this song, one by Kim Basile, the lead singer of the Little Brothers, and one by Margot Bingham, who plays jazz singer Daughter Maitland in the HBO series *Boardwalk Empire*. Both versions differ from Rainey’s in terms of pitch, delivery of key lyrics, and in the case of Bingham, visual presentation. Both Basile and Bingham have much higher voices, which gives the song a more feminine feeling. The delivery of key lines also departs from Rainey’s B.D. style; for example, Basile pronounces the word “daddy” using a more depressed timbre, almost one of exhaustion. She allows her volume to drop in the last syllable, which drains the line of force and conviction. Margot Bingham brings a grace note and a kind of classic blues flourish to the word “daddy,” which further adds an element of feminine sexual seduction to an already sweet and melodic version of this song. In footage of a *Boardwalk Empire* episode, Bingham appears only in the last stanza of the song, looking dejected and terrified rather than defiant. These renditions suggest how a single song can have radically different meanings depending on the historical situation and the individual performer.

In the 1930 song “Leaving This Morning,” Rainey’s character declares her departure even more definitively (Herdt). She finds herself walking without purpose down a Kansas City street, missing her hat, trying to find her man and/or his new woman. Ultimately the character decides that
the best course of action is to leave (Herdt). The singer may be drunk, but this doesn’t stop her from maintaining a declarative and purposeful tone. In one set of lyrics, the character appears ready to attack the philanderer, which suggests how the theme of travel entwines with the theme of revenge:

See me reelin’ and rockin’, drunk as I can be
Man I love tryin’ to make a fool of me
I’m leavin’ this mornin’, I’m leavin’ this mornin’
I’m leavin’, tryin’ to find a man of my own

When I get through drinkin’, gon’ buy a Gatlin gun
Find my man, he better hitch up and run
‘Cause I’m leavin’ this mornin’, I’m leavin’ this mornin’
I’m going to Kansas City to bring Jim Jackson home. (Davis 226)

The poor recording quality and Rainey’s accent make it difficult to discern whether she is saying “buy a Gatlin gun” or “from a five-gallon drum,” as both make narrative sense in this context. However, whether she intends to kill him or not, she doesn’t plan to keep the man when she finds him, for this woman is averting her gaze to other possibilities, ultimately vowing that she will find a man of her own. The song expresses a low-level depression, and yet the dogged determination in Rainey’s voice suggests a B.D. defiance and rage just below the surface.

In the 1925 “Rough and Tumble Blues,” Rainey demonstrates how the grief-rage in the above example can quickly turn lethal.26 The character in the song tears off on a murderous rampage when she discovers “Miss Shorty Toad” and her man “shimmying down to the floor” (Lieb 114). In this song, the character resorts to a violence that not only avenges the wrongdoings of the black male philanderer, but indulges in gratuitous destruction. Despite an ominous piano introduction

---

26 The following songs also show how the blues women could play a character that differed from their own natures, further demonstrating the disconnection between the music and the personal histories of these performers. While Bessie Smith had a reputation for physical violence throughout her life, Rainey was known to be easy to get along with, generous to her company, and more cooperative with the TOBA, the Theater Owner’s Book Agency, or as the black musicians called it, Tough on Black Asses. The difference between Rainey’s personality and the characters she performed shows the impossibility of reading these songs as testimonials.
foreshadowing the arrival of a menace, the trumpet intrudes, taunting like a murderess, with a New Orleans, ragtime-inspired frolicking tempo. From the very first lines, Rainey’s voice penetrates in terms of both volume and force, as she mirrors the trumpet’s abrupt entry. By emphasizing the first syllable of “going,” she highlights the singer’s determination to flee any situation in order protect herself. The volume nearly reaches the level of a scream, which shows Rainey’s unrelenting ability to project as though she were still singing in the poor acoustical environment of the tent. Rainey overwhelms her accompaniment, except for the trumpet, which echoes her emotional fortitude. The lyrics reveal that her first attack against her cheating man will be to destroy his reputation by spreading the news of his misconduct:

I’m going to the Western Union, type the news all down the line
I’m going to the Western Union, type the news all down the line
‘Cause Mama’s on the warpath this mornin’ and don’t mind dyin’ (Davis 239)

Through repetition of key phrases, enunciated clearly and forcefully, Rainey articulates her desire for revenge. The taunting quality of the second line is again mirrored in the trumpet. The unrelenting delivery, the slightly higher pitch, and the use of the present tense (Mama’s on the warpath) in the last stanza suggest further transgressions in the near-future.

I got rough and killed three women ‘fore police got the news
‘Cause Mama’s on the warpath with those rough and tumble blues (239)

For Rainey’s butch character, the warpath may have just begun. While she’s stricken with the “rough and tumble blues,” this doesn’t prevent her from taking action on her own behalf. The character doesn’t care if the listener judges her behavior as criminal and vengeful; she will do what she has to in order to establish her dominion over the man, for whom she went out of her way to purchase a “struttin’ suit,” the cause of all of the attraction from women—short and tall.

While in “Rough and Tumble Blues” the man seems to have escaped the woman’s murderous rampage, in Rainey’s 1924 “See See Rider Blues,” the man becomes the direct target. In contrast to the frolicking tempo of “Rough and Tumble Blues,” this song moves more slowly; the
accompaniment drags from one passage to the next before Rainey’s voice enters. Whereas in the previous song the trumpet taunted the audience, here the muted trumpet cries with grief. Like the flooding Mississippi River in 1927, Rainey’s voice surges through the first line, and when she sings “I’m so unhappy,” she exaggerates the last syllable of “unhappy,” emphasizing her depression and anguish. Her voice emanates from a deep place, as though she were excavating this grief from the archaeological layers of past hurts. The first two stanzas are comprised of short, clipped lines, which she elongates to allow God, to whom she addresses her tale, to experience full appreciation of her slow river of pain.

Despite the dirge-like tempo, and the singer’s deep, painfully slow and purposeful enunciation, the lyrics speak of the character’s defiance and rage, and her determination to take revenge. This song again demonstrates Rainey’s use of grief-rage to attain a sense of body continuity and being-for-self. The character promises that neither of them will be happy if he doesn’t return:

    I’m gonna buy me a pistol, just as long as I am tall, Lord, Lord, Lord
    Gonna kill my man catch the Cannonball
    If he don’t have me, he won’t have no gal at all (241)

The character remains boastful that she is the best lover this man will ever get, which conveys her butch exceptionalism. This kind of braggadocio is a prominent theme through which B.D. blues singers communicated their rage and defiance.

As “See See Rider Blues” suggests, Rainey’s B.D. blues could feel dark and menacing—bone-quaking and threatening to body and soul, but she also used humor, particularly in a two-part song called “The Blues the World Forgot.” This comedic style would get passed down to later B.D.-styled artists, like Moms Mabley. The humor in “Blues the World Forgot, Part I” takes root in the conflict between the “irrepressible ‘Ma’” and her more timid companion (Lieb 139). The juxtaposition presents a butch-femme witness dynamic in which Rainey becomes more drunk and belligerent, while the femme witness (in this case, a man) attempts to soften her outbursts (139). As
explained in Chapter One, the butch ego could be large and fragile, such that the butch requires
what I call a “femme witness,” a person of either biological gender who could function as stage
manager, typist, travel coordinator, publicist, and emotional support for the butch in her rise to
success. In this skit, the B.D. character requires someone who can take charge of damage control,
someone who can prevent her from taking her outbursts too far. However, in this skit, the more
insistent the femme witness becomes, the more recalcitrant Rainey behaves, to the point where she
invites everybody up for a drink/brawl, including the police (139). By offering bystanders the choice
between “a drink or a brawl,” Rainey confirms the defiance and rage embedded within B.D. style:

X: Woman, I believe you is drunk.
Ma: Drunk? Don’t gimme no hambone. Mm, mm, mm, mm, mm, Lord have mercy! The way
I feel this morning, I don’t mind going to jail!
X: Ma, don’t talk so loud—don’t you see the sergeant standing out there on the corner?
Ma: Tell the sergeant I said come on in, and bring all the corn munch he have with him!
Lord have mercy! Now, that does it! (138)

The femme witness attempts to reason with “Ma,” but she ignores his warnings, a refusal she may
regret the next day.

The 1928 song “Prove It On Me,” the most well-known of Rainey’s songs, bears thematic
similarity to Bogan’s “B.D. Women.” With a husky voice full of masculine defiance, the character
unapologetically admits her sexual orientation, announcing that she doesn’t even like men to begin
with. In this song, Rainey openly rejected the cultural norms of New Negro ideology, becoming one
of the first women musicians to public present a lesbian theme.27 Ma Rainey also had a reputation

27 Other female singers in the Harlem Renaissance openly displayed lesbian or bisexual tendencies. For example, at Harry Handsberry’s Clam House on 133rd Street in Manhattan, Gladys Bentley
cross-dressed in a white tux for all black audiences (T’ Ain’t Nobody’s Bizness). In the early 1930’s,
Bentley also performed at Harlem’s Ubangi Club, backed by a chorus line of drag queens. (T’Ain’t
Nobody’s Bizness). However, according to Robert Philipson, director of the documentary film T’ Ain’t
Nobody’s Bizness: Queer Blues Divas of the 1920s, until recently Bentley was erased from the dominant
histories of the blues women.
for being sexually liberated and a bit wild. Rainey was arrested during an all-female orgy in Chicago; she was discovered flat on her back with three naked women laying on top of her. Her protégée, Bessie Smith, bailed her out (*T'Ain't Nobody's Bizness*). Scholars assume that Smith was also Rainey’s lover, because Rainey was always “cuttin’ up like a man” in front of her, not wanting any man to talk to her (Jackson 18).

In “Prove It On Me,” Rainey presents in a humorous manner a man’s cavalier attitude toward sexuality. The accompaniment, a belching tub jug washboard band, brings an unusual comical flair to a lesbian theme. Her suit and tie, mentioned in the lyrics and also worn during the performance, are not part of any fixed butch identity, but rather part of the act—one of many outrageous costume changes:

> It’s true I wear a collar and tie,  
> Make the wind blow all the while;  
> They say I do it, ain’t nobody caught me,  
> They sure got to prove it on me. (Lieb 124)

Lesbian sex was punishable by law in the early decades of the 20th century, but this character broadcasts her ability to “make the wind blow” for the women she meets. Capitalizing on Rainey’s sexual prowess, Paramount even used the criminal aspect to advertise the record in *The Chicago Defender*. In the ad, Rainey wears her jacket and tie, while flirting with two feminine women, all in plain view of a police officer (125).  

---

28 Chapman uses the song as a title for his book, not to applaud Rainey’s courage, but rather to suggest the ways Rainey’s butch bravado may have become untenable as the audiences in the North developed more urban tastes, and as racial solidarity began to take precedence over deviant artistic expression. He argues that while in this song Rainey might have taken an assertive stance against conventional gender styles, the majority of black consumers in the North disavowed Rainey for her “immorality and deviance,” more associated with the denigrating image of the “primitive” that many urban blacks sought to disavow (12). However, Davis would view Chapman’s assessment of the song’s failure as short-sighted, as she argues that this song served as the singular anchor point for the lesbian-affirming music later created and performed by women in the 1970’s.
As the U.S. entered the 1930s, market forces ended the careers of many B.D. blues artists, including Bogan, Bentley, and Rainey. Around 1927, vaudeville, the T.O.B.A., and the Classic Blues style declined simultaneously. Live vaudeville could not compete with radio and records, and black audiences in the cities came to see T.O.B.A. as part of an outdated and crude southern history (Lieb 37-9). As Lieb reports, entertainment became more centralized in the ’30s as radio, film, and records consolidated under larger corporations that catered to the conservative, white mainstream (39-40). However, despite her declining popularity, Rainey refused to modernize her sound, eventually directing her defiance and rage against the music industry itself. While she retained her popularity in the rural South, she chose not to adapt to the new swing style. Rainey disappeared from the historical record until feminist scholars like Angela Davis rediscovered her immense discography. Even with this renewed interest, her legacy remains obscured, which shows how market forces control for future generations the visibility of many different types of female masculinity. As a sign of Rainey’s erasure, when she died of heart disease in 1939 at the age of 53, her death certificate claimed her occupation to be “housekeeping” (48).

**Bessie Smith’s Bellowing Butch Blues**

Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand. —Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”

Bessie Smith did not just sing out her rage and defiance, but discovered the place where these emotions “bellow” from deep within. This bellowing quality that Langston Hughes remarked upon in 1926, however, tends to be overshadowed by Smith’s dark and tumultuous personal history. In the 2015 HBO docudrama *Bessie*, Queen Latifah conveys the body continuity and being-for-self
that Smith achieved during her performances, but the film exaggerates Smith’s dark side. By depicting Smith as deranged by alcoholism, indiscriminate in her affairs with women and men, and gratuitously violent—a *butch body out of control*—HBO capitalized on the Sapphire Caricature, the stereotype of the angry black woman with personal failings. The film thus repeats the narrative of racial uplift in which a tragic-romantic black woman eventually outgrows her rage, and becomes a star. Aspects of this depiction echo in Chris Albertson’s biography of the same title. However, while Smith’s emotional extremes often drained her of vitality, they need to be historically situated.

At a party in 1925 hosted by Carl Van Vechten and his wife in his Manhattan apartment, Smith gave an impromptu performance that conveys the quality of her B.D. style as well as the racial dynamics of the time. In her biographical study *A Chance Meeting*, Rachel Cohen recounts the story from Hughes’ perspective: “Bessie arrived dead drunk and had a FULL pint glass of straight gin when she got there. She sang with a cigarette in the corner of her mouth and she didn’t hold it there with her fingers. Nor did she drop it. But she was in magnificent form and sang the Blues like a low-down Black Angel. I LOVED Bessie” (172). Smith completely disregarded feminine propriety and arrived not only drunk but *dead* drunk. As she sang, she expertly controlled the cigarette in her mouth as though it were a phallic extension of her own body. In Smith’s able hands, B.D. style—like the blues—emanates from a low and deep place, perhaps from some inverted heaven.

At Van Vechten’s party, Smith “tells it like it is,” barely disguising the hostility she felt toward her rich, white supporters. In a composite story from multiple sources, biographer Chris Albertson recounts Bessie’s niece Ruby Walker’s impression of Van Vechten “[radiating] the sort of glee a celebrity hunter might exhibit upon having at last captured his prey” (127). He suggested a

---

29 In *Female Masculinity*, Jack Halberstam notes Queen Latifah’s portrayal of the butch lesbian character, Cleopatra Sims, in the film *Set It Off* (1996), which suggests that HBO indeed cast a recognizably butch actor as the lead for *Bessie* (227).
Figure 8: Bessie Smith. Photograph by Carl Van Vechten, 1936.
The Smithsonian American Art Museum, Renwick Gallery.
There were those who sought to modernize and professionalize established ideologies of racial advancement, solidarity, and uplift through a New Negro progressivism articulated by “lovely, lovely dry martini?,” to which Smith “bellowed” in response: “I don’t know about no dry martinis, nor wet ones either” (127). Like Hughes, Walker uses the word “bellowing” to describe Smith’s voice, which underscores the overwhelming rage that Smith used to evade “capture” by white men. Further, through her choice of song, “Work House Blues,” she rejected the class politics of the party, sending to an all-white audience a message of solidarity with black people. Clearly, for Smith, the joke was on Van Vechten; later, with friends at a local bar, Smith mocked his studied elegance, pushing back against his attempt to place her in artistic captivity: “Sheeeiiiiit,” she joked to her friends, “you should have seen them ofays lookin’ at me like I was some kind of singin’ monkey!” (176). White tourists in Harlem and elsewhere often completely misread the cues of black performers, which is evident here in Van Vechten’s misperception of Smith’s gracious goodwill.

Smith may have privately criticized her white benefactor, but she derived part of her butch exceptionalism from the attention she received from whites. In fact, Smith’s belief in the radical individualism of the artist places her in closer alignment with the very white modernists she seemed to mock. As Chapman explains, New Negros were divided into two camps:

- committed would-be racial leaders like Charles S. Johnson, E. Franklin Frazier, Elise Johnson McDougald, James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Fauset, and Oscar Micheaux. Others including Langston Hughes, Ethel Waters, Nella Larsen, Claude McKay, and Bessie Smith questioned, if not the very idea of racial solidarity itself, then at least the obligation of racial allegiance and respectability, and instead touted a radical individualism and independence from all but the most personal allegiances to art or self or some other self-generated ideal.

While Smith’s songs often spoke to the brutal poverty in black communities, Smith’s “radical individualism” allowed her to amass unprecedented wealth and fame. Her “low down” bravado—her specific ego confrontation with the world—often bears a greater similarity to the practices and gestures of white artists. Smith, like Baker, capitalized on her own singularity, expertly combining the qualities northern blacks wanted—a voice “rich with Southern history, weathered by Southern air,”
yet also in tune with the hardness of urban life (Jackson 43). Smith’s career suggests how the radical individualism of B.D. style can overlap with the masculine egotism, pride, and showmanship. When Smith worked with the 1925 Harlem Frolics tent tour, her husband Jack Gee (a femme witness, at least in terms of Smith’s career), purchased for her a personal railroad car, custom-made in Atlanta by the Southern Iron and Equipment Company. Painted in a bright yellow with her name in green lettering, the car could be seen from miles away.

Despite Smith’s reticence to enlist in any racial cause, she used her B.D.-styled defiance and rage to defend black people, for example, when she singlehandedly confronted the Ku Klux Klan while performing in a tent show in rural North Carolina. As Harrison observes, this was the realization of many performers’ darkest nightmare: “Traveling from one Jim Crow town to another, the performers were haunted with fears of being dragged from a train or theater at the whim of some racist white person who wanted to have some fun or demonstrate his superiority” (25).

Smith’s physical confrontation with the Klan, told through the eyes of Ruby Walker, deserves to be recounted in full. Walker first described the context for the incident:

It had been a hot and humid day, and the relief that usually accompanied nightfall was nowhere to be felt. Further aggravating the situation, the show’s electric generator and lights heightened the temperature inside the packed tent, making it particularly unbearable for the cast, which had to wear costumes and makeup while performing energetic movements. Bessie and the dancers held up remarkably well, but when one of the musicians came close to passing out halfway through the show, he put down his instrument and stepped outside. There was sufficient moonlight for him to take a little walk around the tent without tripping over the ropes, and he had not gone far when he heard soft voices and grunts nearby. Walking in the direction of the sound, he came upon a frightening sight: a half-dozen hooded figures, their white robes eerily bathed in the moonlight, were busy doing something to the tent. (Albertson 156)

The musician noticed that the Klansmen were pulling up the stakes to collapse the tent and trap black performers and audience members inside. Smith was leaving the tent just as the musician tried to alert the other performers. She confronted the Klansmen from only ten feet away, characteristically placing one hand on her hip, shaking her fist in the air: “What the fuck you think
you’re doin? I’ll get the whole damn tent out here if I have to. You just pick up them sheets and run!” (156). According to an eyewitness, the Klansmen were initially too stunned to move, but after a string of insults from Smith, they finally fled the scene (156-7).

While Smith usually demanded to be the center of attention during her performances, in the short film *St. Louis Blues* (1929), it is only through the community that Smith’s character is able to transform her pain into defiance. The film also shows the ongoing influence of church music; the call-and-response—the polysemic layering of musical voices—creates an historical as well as an aesthetic reverberation, harkening back to early blues and to the music created in captivity. As Buzzy Jackson observes, Smith often appeared invincible when she sang. The *OED* defines the word “invincible” as a quality that makes a person “insurmountable” (“Invincible”). Like the writers of the previous chapter, Smith approached life and love as a series of battles to be won or lost, which often made her appear as a warrior, even when heartbreak threatened to shatter her. In the film, Smith plays the romantic lead in a familiar story of jilted love: a “high yaller” woman with coveted light skin that takes on a yellow hue steals her man, leaving Smith devastated and singing the blues. The overall feeling of the tune is doleful, and the image of Smith singing alone on a barstool reads as tragic. However, in the final moments of the film, the black patrons in the crowded bar begin singing with her, rising up and around Smith, creating a womb-like enclosure around the character’s loss. The community carries Smith’s voice until the very end of the film when she is able to find her own, scream-like sound to express her defiance and rage. The film suggests that while the B.D. performer revels in her singularity, the individual voice cannot exist apart from the larger social context.

Smith was also a master collaborator capable of working expertly with band members to achieve tragic or comic effect. Smith borrowed from vaudeville the “humorous aside,” though as with Rainey and Baker, humor often coded her defiance and rage. As in “The Blues the World
Forgot,” humor can expose audiences to deep truths that are almost too daunting to confront without a joke or a riff. Smith often used what’s called a “patter section,” which involves a series of complex musical maneuvers that required flawless execution. As Albertson explains, “the performer had to possess a strong voice, a forceful personality, and—above all—good timing. Bessie had all three” (82). The tempo in a patter section can be either moderately fast or very fast, with rapid succession of rhythmic patterns, while each syllable of a word must receive a corresponding note. The “patter” often features tongue-twisting lyrics, alliteration, or consonant/vowel sounds, devices that allowed Smith to control the pacing.

Many of her individual songs feature female characters in control of their own destinies, which reflects Smith’s own presence in the world. In her first recording with Columbia in 1923, “Downhearted Blues” (composed by Alberta Hunter and Lovie Austin), Smith’s character controls the men rather than the other way around. The song obviously appealed to a wide audience, and by the end of that year, the record sold three-quarters of a million copies, more than Ma Rainey or any blues artist could have imagined selling at the time (Jackson 52). After this initially explosive success, Smith dominated the blues and jazz scene throughout the 1920s (52). The first lines of this song aptly express the sense of control attained by the B.D. woman:

I got the world in a jug, the stopper’s in my hand
I’m gonna hold it until you men come under my command (51)

The B.D. woman ultimately “holds,” or owns, the stopper, a phallic object that can be inserted or pulled out at her command. Her ability to “hold it,” or “withhold,” the phallic instrument until the partner submits also suggests a masculine-styled sexual prowess. Through these lines and others, the song performs the kind of being-for-self that makes the blues so crucial to black women’s empowerment. Here Smith recasts and reverses the relationship between ego and object for black women.
In contrast to the raw, countrified B.D. blues of Ma Rainey, the clean, orchestrated quality of this song and Smith’s careful enunciation gives her resistance a polished presence that appealed to white and black urban audiences. The song also utilizes a slow tempo and a steadiness, which Smith interrupts when she raises the volume and pitch intensely at key moments; for example, she emphasizes the words “love” and “someone” in the opening line, and “don’t” in the second line: “Gee, it’s hard to love someone/ When that someone don’t love you” (italics mine, Davis 273). These lines underscore her grief, whereas the last stanza suggests rage and defiance just below the surface. At the end of the song, she raises the volume and pitch in the words “world,” “jug,” and “stopper”; while the singer is “disgusted, heartbroken,” her departed lover will “get his,” and will one day come under her “command.”

Another prominent example in the “controlling men” category is the song “Aggravatin’ Papa,” which like “Downhearted Blues,” breaks with the traditional blues forms, and the piano accompaniment even has shades of chord sequences that would later be appropriated into country music and pop (Herdt). This further suggests the ways that Smith accommodated to the tastes of white, middle-class consumers while retaining B.D. rage and defiance. Powerful and declarative, the song insists the man will not get away with his two-timing and cheating ways. She tells it as a story of someone else’s situation, a narrative device that builds community among her listeners, for this could be anyone’s tale (Herdt). The character in “Aggravatin Papa” is not afraid to bring physical harm to her partner, evidenced by the lyric, “I’ll smack you down, and I don’t mean maybe!” (Davis 259). The instruments fade away during this line, creating empty space around Smith’s voice, which makes the lyric particularly prominent. She enunciates this line slowly, to further accentuate her threat. Like one of Rainey’s rabid murderesses, the singer’s got “a darn forty-four that don’t repeat,” which means that she is a good shot, and will only require one or two bullets to take him down. Through the image of the character that will get it right the first, or at most the second time, she
again alludes to a phallic sexuality that disarms with stunning accuracy. Smith also uses repetition in the lines “don’t two-time me,” and “let me be.” The musical instruments, including piano, banjo, and clarinet, shine toward the end of the piece, especially the clarinet, which creates a call-and-response pattern (Herdt).

The final and most extreme example of the “controlling men” thematic is the song “Hateful Blues.” In Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s, Harrison includes an ad for this song, which features a female character in black face brandishing a butcher knife. A top hat flies into the air, and in the far-left margin is a drawing of a bit of man’s shoe with dust clouds behind it, revealing that that man has fled from her wrath (and with haste). The ad reads, “WOW~but BESSIE SMITH spills fire and fury in HATEFUL BLUES on Columbia Record 14023D…Having a phonograph without these records is like having pork chops without gravy—Yes, indeed” (Harrison 84). Through referencing home cooking, the ad appeals to the nostalgic longings of northern transplants who yearned for the South. However, despite these appeals to “comfort food,” the song opens with a grinding, toothaching fiddle—a dissonant gnawing sound that could cause the listener to want to run away like the owner of the top hat. To introduce the first line—“my daddy treated me wrong”—the fiddle mimics the sharpening of a knife, then repeats in unison with the lyric that follows, “Yes, I’m low down, nothin’ ever worries me long, I said long” (Davis 286). To emphasize her pain, she repeats certain phrases throughout the song. As the knife-sharpening fiddle and her voice come together, the song gains momentum, in proportion to the singer’s resolve. In the line “I cried last night and I cried all night before,” the fiddle and the singer achieve a kind of back and forth movement that even mimics the physical action of knife sharpening. Smith, in alignment with the fiddle, separates each word, slowing the line down to leave space for this back and forth motion to occur. The volume of Smith’s voice also increases, becoming thunderous. However, as the musical scene
Figure 9: Bessie Smith Advertisement. Image from *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920's*, by Daphne Harrison.
reaches a climax, the instruments recede and the empty space around Smith returns, with the exception of the fiddle, which now sounds like a knife that penetrates the body of this cheating man:

If I see him I'm gon’ beat him, gon’ kick and bite him, too  
Gonna take my weddin’ butcher, gonna cut him in two  

The ambulance is waitin’, the undertaker, too  
A suit in doctor’s office, all kind of money for you  

Ain’t gonna sell him, gon’ keep him for myself  
Gonna cut on him until a piece this big is left  
‘Cause my love has been abused  
Now I got the hateful blues. (287)

These lyrics express physical violence—beating, kicking, and biting—with murderous intent (“gonna cut on him until a piece this big is left”). The fiddle-as-knife that serves as a constant companion to Smith’s rage and grief expresses in a graphic and visceral way the potential symbolic and literal effects of B.D. defiance and rage. While most of Smith’s songs don’t reach this kind of critical edge, some do, and these represent the extreme threat to masculine hegemony that B.D. women can pose.

The last thematic category within Smith’s oeuvre that I’d like to briefly mention is “telling it like it is,” in which the B.D. singer reveals in uncensored detail the truth about the black experience. In these songs, Smith identified with the battered woman and broadcast widely the reality of black women’s lives (Herdt). The song “Black Mountain Blues” opens with a kind of bright tone reminiscent of the musical “Porgy and Bess,” but the dark opening lyrics establish a marked contrast to this brightness. While Smith exposes the grim reality of life in this fictionalized town “Black Mountain,” she’s also talking about the grim conditions in the northern cities during and after the Great Migration. As Harrison writes, whether urban or rural, “Poverty was the omnipresent force which lurked in the black community…licking at the heels of those who were trying desperately to elude its stranglehold on their dreams” (70). Smith’s own life was filled with violence, and therefore
her conviction in these songs derives from experience. What makes this song B.D. is not necessarily
the lyrical content but the attitude that the singer brings to the music.

Back in Black Mountain, a child will smack your face
Back in Black Mountain, a child will smack your face
Babies cryin’ for liquor, and all the birds sing bass (Davis 264)

In this song, everything is inverted—children are physically violent and crying for alcohol, essentially
taking the role of the dysfunctional adult, and birds sing from the bottom octave. These upside-down
circumstances create the context for a woman’s violence against the man who has betrayed her
(though here we can see how the “man” is also a stand-in for all the other situations and people that
have caused her pain). The character determines that she won’t come back to Black Mountain unless
she is armed and ready to retaliate:

I’m bound for Black Mountain, me and my razor and my gun
Lord, I’m bound for Black Mountain, me and my razor and my gun
I’m gonna shoot him if he stands still, and cut him if he run (Davis 265)

In the final stanza, Smith expresses the inevitability of violence in this situation. Unlike the song in
the other categories, the ones in the “tell it like it is” category often do not end with a sense that the
character can overcome her circumstances. In fact, in the final lines of “Black Mountain Blues,” she’s
drunk and looking for trouble, in cahoots with the devil. The bleak ending reveals how the cycles of
poverty and abuse seem to repeat endlessly, without closure.

Throughout her oeuvre, on the stage and in select personal interactions, Smith grounded her
experience in what George Yancy calls a “blues ontology.” Smith claimed the power to transform
sorrow and pain, “making a way out of no way” (Yancy 213). Similarly, for scholar Houston A.
Baker, the blues becomes a “matrix,” “a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting,
crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit” (3). The work of Bessie Smith demonstrates how
a B.D. aesthetic functioned in the production of the blues-as-matrix; butch and blues became
connected ways in which disempowered subjects located agency, and summoned a life from the
scraps of a culture that did not want them. Smith and Rainey penetrated the male tradition, and penetrated the space with their presence.

**Baker's Bananas**

The American darky is the performing fool of the world today
—Claude McKay, *Banjo*

In many respects, the work of Josephine Baker can be used to substantiate McKay’s dire prognostication. Baker—topless, wearing a belt of semi-erect bananas made of rubber—appears to be the prototype for the “American darky” as “performing fool.” Indeed, for many critics throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Baker serves as yet another example of the Europhilic aesthete’s complete dominance over the black female body. For Chapman, Baker confirms the difference between an assertive stance and the illusion of one, the hegemony of European primitivism and the exploitation of black female bodies (106). In this assessment, Baker’s being-for-self is merely “a trick of the light,” a collaborative heist accomplished by performer and photographer (106). Though Baker’s story and artistic oeuvre present difficult questions in regard to the position of the black woman artist in the early twentieth century, in select performances, Baker expertly crafts a B.D.-styled double-consciousness. Part of Baker’s B.D. style was to engage and exploit the artifice and discover her body continuity and being-for-self. Through the invention of multiple stylistic surfaces, Baker reversed the white (and black) male gaze and engaged in strategies of resistance that could easily be mistaken for submission, for capitulation rather than expression of agency.

After crossing the Atlantic, Baker utilized her literal “rear end,” her ass, to launch herself as an unprecedented international star, in turn exploding the sexual norms of the early twentieth century. Certainly, as Jules-Rosette explains, critical sociological questions arise from Baker’s use of the “rear end,” in regard to the complicity of the performer in perpetuating the primal stereotype
Jules-Rosette proposes that Baker “both benefited and suffered from this complicity” (249). While this may be true, her performances present critical examples of the kind of penetrating force that inspired new butch performances later in the century. The essay “The Rear End Exists,” by Suzan-Lori Parks, becomes one example of a renewal of Baker’s work, an oeuvre that compels butch responses in return. Parks’s essay is startlingly candid (and butch) in its analysis of Baker’s rear-end. As Parks argues, the dominant cultures in the U.S., including black proponents of racial solidarity, viewed Baker as the “bottom,” and yet paradoxically, Baker used her own “bottom” to raise herself up:

Check it: Baker was from America and left it; African-Americans are on the bottom of the heap in America; we are at the bottom on the bottom, practically the bottom itself, and Baker rose to the top by shaking her bottom. Josephine Baker, bottom-shaker, does not merely “uncover…a new region of desire,” is not simply a “Jazz Cleopatra,” as her biographers have called her. Baker was American. Baker came from America. (11)

In this vernacular improvisation, Parks strips Baker criticism of pretension, positioning Baker’s ass-centered performance as an obvious affront to American racism. Parks contends that hers was a “smart ass”; as Baker herself once casually remarked, “The rear end exists. I see no reason to be ashamed of it. It’s truth that there are rear ends so stupid, so pretentious, so insignificant that they’re only good for sitting on” (13). For Parks, Americanness is made of an interwoven set of ideologies that seek to avoid the historical past, a past evoked by the backward direction of the “ledge-butt.” America thus forces black women to dissolve their histories by tucking their asses, which would compel them to move forward rather than backward. In dancing ass-first to an audience of Parisians, Baker forced America to deal with its own past tense. Further, Baker’s use of the ass as penetrative, rather than penetrated, reverses her sexual objectification and her role as passive object of the male gaze. Through further analysis of Baker’s ass-first strategies, it becomes clear that, especially during highly sexual performances like the “Banana Dance,” Baker becomes the B.D. aggressor and a butch body out of control.
Baker also reversed the gaze by turning sex into a kind of absurdity, depicting the European desire for the primitive as ridiculous. Her form of comedic reversal relied upon an exaggeration of stereotypes, which in effect so stretched and distorted the image that she could reveal its true two-dimensional nature. Her strategy, and those of performers like her, in part derives from a dance called the “cakewalk,” popular in southern black communities in the late nineteenth century. The dance, which was also a kind of competitive game, mocked white people without them noticing the joke. Baker used the same strategy found in the cakewalk to gain power and control over her audience. George Yancy writes, in regard to subjects like the Hottentot Venus, whom Baker often visually recalls, the “very act of gazing (even if sitting in the dark watching a film) is itself a form of visual penetration by the phallocentric hegemony of the colonizing gaze” (94). However, logically speaking, it cannot always be the case that every instance of gazing penetrates the performer’s consciousness, for this requires that the gaze be always accepted passively. Using defiance and rage, often in the guise of the comedic, Baker butched the terms of this gazing and reversed the relationship between observer and observed, refusing the very process that solidifies one’s race and gender identity. As B.D. performer, Baker took command of the gaze and the patriarchal fantasy that enables its reproduction. In this way, Baker challenged Audre Lorde’s later assertion that a black woman cannot emancipate herself by using the master’s tools; indeed, Baker dismantled—crushed—the master’s house using her own black rear end.

A different Lorde essay, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” does help to clarify how Baker asserted her sexual power as a black woman, regaining a sense of body continuity through the very methods that would seem to signal her subjugation. Lorde established the difference between the “erotic,” as something that exceeds the senses, and “pornography,” which defers only to the senses, and usually involves the manipulation and promotion of sexual images for individual gain and/or profit. In contrast to pornography, the erotic provides the intrepid participant a sensory
provocation (54). The erotic can be expressed in art, while the pornographic cannot. In Lorde’s view, the word “erotic,” derived from the Greek *eros*, does not signal the degradation of the black body, but rather can be a sign of women’s vitality (55). In the case of Baker, the erotic is often masculine-styled, evidenced by the semi-erect rubber banana, which becomes simultaneously dildo or vibrator, an autoerotic instrument of pleasure, or, as the ultimate reversal of the gaze, an instrument to be used on others, male or female.

Numerous stories about Baker seem to confirm her masculine attitude toward sex. As Wood explains, Baker grew up in an environment in which the brothel, as shaper of sexual attitudes within East St. Louis, provided Baker with no context for sexual guilt, or inversely, any kind of reverent attitude toward the sexual act: “this made it easy for her to mock her own sexy dancing, and her audiences for finding it sexy, by clowning. The clowning also helped her to keep men at a distance. Even in bed, as a later lover recalled, there was still a quality of remoteness in her” (58). Baker even once remarked on how she approached sex as a form of exercise. As one lover reported, “she didn’t need conversation. Sex was like champagne to her. It would last 20 minutes, perhaps one hour, but it was body to body the whole time. She was a free spirit ‘way back. Just because a man spent an hour with Josephine, he could never feel that he owned her”’ (97). Frederic Ray, one of her many sexual partners in the mid-late 30’s, even revealed that sex with Baker was like “‘making love to a boy… She was not soft and cuddly. She was in charge, in the driver’s seat. She decided what to do and how to do it”’ (206). Both on and off stage, Baker set the terms for her own sexual expression, exploding the prevailing notions of women’s sexual passivity.

In her sex life and in her art, Baker utilized what Jules-Rosette calls a strategy of “self-writing,” or the use of nested narratives that build upon another, and change or reroute her image in quick succession. Baker was a kind of B.D. shape-shifter, so much in control of her own self-presentation that even the most vehement criticisms were redeployed through “humor, irony, and
pathos” (Jules-Rosette 183). Using myriad costume and image changes, Baker retained her position as “ultimate signifier and source of narrative coherence,” which further suggests Baker’s butch exceptionalism (177). Baker demanded her own way, sometimes using exaggerated gestures of entitlement. In eerie resemblance to Gertrude Stein, Baker envisioned herself as a kind of Napoleon figure; she even purchased a set of antique portable steps, which she placed at the foot of her bed, like those Napoleon purportedly used (92). But perhaps the biggest sign of her butch exceptionalism can be found in her coining of the phrase “Doing Josephine,” a sort of basket term that allowed her exemption from the worst of her tantrums and assaults. Luis Buñuel, the director of Baker’s first film, *Siren of the Tropics* (1927), testified in his autobiography to the “whims of the star,” which at the time appalled and disgusted him (Wood 132). While the cast and crew expected Baker to begin shooting at nine in the morning, she often wouldn’t arrive until five that evening, at which point she would destroy her dressing room, slamming doors and objects, and throwing makeup bottles at the wall (132). When asked if there was something wrong, she would explain that her dog was ill (132).

In the spirit of “Doing Josephine,” Baker broke many of the established rules of decorum for dance and performance in the 1920s when she appeared semi-nude in the 1925 *La Revue Nègre* at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées. The performance made Baker an icon, and yet at the same time Baker encoded butch rage and defiance through mimicry and exaggeration of primitive stereotypes. Jules-Rosette crafts an eloquent description of the dance:

The curtain rose at 9:30 pm on October 2, 1925, revealing a dimly lit stage with a bold cartoon-like sketch of a New York skyscraper as a backdrop. Magical clarinet music resembling the melodies of a snake charmer wafted through the air…The revue’s cast of twenty-five artists and musicians performed seven vaudeville-style tableaux: ‘New York Skyscraper,’ ‘Mississippi Steamboat Race,’ ‘Louisiana Camp Meeting,’ ‘Les Strutting Babies,’ ‘Darkey Impressions,’ ‘Les Pieds qui parlent,’ and ‘Charleston Cabaret.’ The highlight of the show was a wildly erotic dance, referred to in the press as a Dionysian spectacle, performed by Josephine Baker…The atmosphere was tense. Clad only in beads and a belt of feathers, with glaring spotlights focused on her, Baker began to gyrate. No one knew what to expect. (47)
The fact that the audience was expectant, anxiously so, speaks the degree to which Baker maintained control over the crowd. While her nude body invited a potentially objectifying gaze from both male and female audience members, Baker later described how she achieved a sense of body continuity during the performance. There is an auto-erotic quality to Baker’s own description of the dance, which conveys her embrace of a masculine-styled, penetrating presence: “Driven by dark forces I didn’t recognize, I improvised, crazed by the music, the overheated theater filled to the bursting point, the scorching eye of the spotlights. Even my teeth and eyes burned with fever. Each time I leaped I seemed to touch the sky and when I regained earth it seemed to be mine alone. I felt…intoxicated” (47-8). In this account, Baker registers the heat in the performance space before any feeling of being watched by the audience. The idea that the earth became “[hers] alone” further suggests her exceptionalism. Rather than allow the “image of the frenetic savage dancer” to determine her existence, she used it as a challenge (47-8).

Baker also used the empty space around her movements to amplify her sense of being-for-self, and to defy the audience’s objectification. Janet Flanner, writing for *The New Yorker* under the pen name Genêt, described the power of Baker’s silence, which placed the audience in a kind of trance. Flanner recalled how Baker wore only a pink flamingo feather between her legs. Her dance partner carried her upside down while she performed the splits:

Midstage he paused and, with his long fingers holding her basket-wise around the waist, swung her in a slow cartwheel to the stage floor, where she stood, in a moment of complete silence. A scream of salutation spread through the theatre. (qtd. in Finkelman and Wintz 1045)

In the concentrated moment of the gesture, Baker locates her B.D. pleasure by withholding action, demonstrating to her audience that she is in control of this erotic display. It was only after this “moment of complete silence,” that, according to Flanner, the audience was allowed to “let down,” and find their response—their “scream”—which erupted throughout the theater. Some booed and hissed, while others rushed the stage. Critics described the dance as both deeply erotic and slightly
comic, which confirms how Baker incorporated the elements of the “cakewalk” to exaggerate the stereotypes that would “fix” her in the audience’s imagination. Baker’s use of sexuality also demonstrates Lorde’s notion that the erotic can be a source of creative empowerment for women.

The banana belt, first worn by Baker in 1926, constituted another way that Baker challenged race and gender stereotypes of the time. As Gillett reports, European newspapers in the 1920s announced that Baker had “introduced the Charleston to Paris”; the dance had been renamed the Banana Dance “on account of the banana garment worn by the Colored dancer at the Folies Bergère” (117). Jules-Rosette argues that Baker’s image has been over-determined by what she calls the “banana skirt syndrome,” because the skirt (or belt, as Baker called it) established Baker as an ingénue in the collective imagination, causing the belt to become a consumer fetish, similar to Marilyn Monroe’s white dress. However, the banana belt also gave Baker the power to create her own image. While the first belt was thought to be the invention of Jean Cocteau and Paul Colin, inspired by Covarubbias’ caricatures, Baker played a crucial role in the garment’s design and its later incarnations. Baker recalled: “It is Cocteau who gave me the idea for the banana belt. He said, ‘On you, it will look very dressy’” (Baker and Chase 135). From this quote, it seems that Baker conceived of the garment as a belt, not a skirt, which is significant in terms of its transgender potential. In fact, the costume bore no resemblance to a typically feminine skirt. Further, she suggests that while Cocteau may have given her the idea for the “dressy” belt, his role ends there, and after the initial suggested, she assumed creative control over its production and use. The belt becomes not necessarily the “legendary” example of “European primitivism and exploitation of black female bodies in the service of cultural imperialism,” as Chapman insists, but rather another example of “self-writing” (106). At the very least, Chapman’s monolithic pronouncement loses its certainty, and the easy gratification that often comes with these kinds of sweeping historical generalities.
Theorists have developed over the years an adolescent glee when describing this belt. Wood offers the following composite depiction of the first skirt: “around her waist is an extraordinary girdle of golden bananas, each hinged loosely at one end to her waistband and otherwise swinging free” (Wood 8). Wood’s description of the belt as a more feminine-identified “girdle” also points to the continuing confusion over what to call this piece of clothing, and to which gender it actually belongs. Jean-Claude Baker, Baker’s adopted son, described how the surviving footage of the dance, lost for sixty years and recovered in a box found in Rochester, New York, is taken from the version performed in the United States, evident in the fact that she is not topless but wears a bra (Baker and Chase 135). Jean-Claude’s description of the dance highlights the absurd and comic elements as well as the relationship of the dance to the country styles popular in black communities in the South.

Josephine enters the jungle setting at twilight and moves barefooted along the trunk of a fallen tree, her arms stretched back like the wings of a giant bird. And there on the riverbank, beside the sleeping body of a young white explorer, while his bearers beat drums, she dances. It’s a Charleston, a belly dance, Mama Dink’s chicken, bumps, grinds, all in one number, with bananas flying. (Taylor Gordon, a black American singer who caught the show, remembered that ‘the vivacious Josephine Baker was flopping her bananas like cowtails in fly time.’) (135)

Jean-Claude reinscribes the casual, the countrified, and the comic into this dance, in turn rejecting the suggestion that his mother was being objectified by remarking that “it was not so easy to exploit Josephine; you couldn’t make her do anything unless she was convinced the public wanted it. Besides, there was nothing prurient about all those swinging bananas, they were funny” (135). Artist Marcel Sauvage agreed with Jean-Claude in terms of the comic element, only he saw an even more complex pallet of emotion in Baker’s dance: “a comic nudity of bronze…in tune with the sax, the banjo…A little hate is mixed with it…quickly masked behind a grimace” (italics mine, 135). Sauvage communicates the strategy of the black butch performer engaged in a complex act of double consciousness, compressing behind the comic, cross-eyed expression the rage and defiance that she must hide from view for the resistance to succeed.
What is also crucial in the above passage is Jean-Claude’s reporting of Taylor Gordon’s response. Gordon’s description of Baker “flopping her bananas like cowtails in fly time” conveys Baker’s sense of ownership as well as the sense of ease with which she embodies the phallic. The bananas weren’t just moving on their own, or moving as an unintended effect of the dancer’s motion, but rather, as Brenda Dixon-Gottschild notes, these were “like phalluses stimulated by female agency” (Joséphine: First Black Superstar). Rather than becoming a passive recipient of the gaze, she transforms into a “female personality that is in possession of the male” (Joséphine: First Black Superstar). Baker seems to have found the verb for her sexual agency, the doing word that Spillers claims black women perpetually “await” in terms of their sexuality (“Interstices”). Importantly, in this instance, the object of the doing is not a vagina or breast, but a bunch of semi-erect rubber phalluses. The semi-erect quality offers a masculine arousal in transition, an in-between state that allows Baker to grasp a sense of her own potentiality.

Other critics took a more poetic approach to the banana belt, offering its spiritual and transcendent qualities. The poet e.e. cummings wrote in the September 1926 issue Vanity Fair: “she enters through a dense electric twilight, walking backwards on hands and feet, legs and arms stiff, down a huge jungle tree—as a creature neither infra human nor superhuman but somehow both: a mysterious unkillable something, equally nonprimitive and uncivilized, or beyond time in the sense that emotion is beyond arithmetic” (qtd. in Wood 107). However, while cummings’s description is on the whole more erudite and Europhiliac than Gordon’s, his use of the word “unkillable” offers another possible butch reference; “the mysterious unkillable something” may allude to the defiance and rage that constitute part of the essence of Baker’s performance, qualities that must be maintained if the B.D. performer is to survive in the 1920’s. The fact that she is not “timebound”
Figure 10: Josephine Baker in Copenhagen, “flopping her bananas like cowtails in fly time.”
Figure 11: Josephine Baker in the later incarnation of the banana belt, with sequins and rhinestones.
could indicate how she is not frozen in her historical moment, but leaps from the temporal frame, into an anti-racist, transgender “not yet.”

Like Baker herself, the belt evolved over time, and later versions contained pointed spikes that looked less realistic. However, this does not mean that the bananas lost their phallic power. In a caption accompanying a photograph of Baker wearing the spiked Ziegfeld Follies version of the belt, Jean-Claude asserts: “Many will claim to have invented it [the banana costume], but only Josephine would dare to strategically fashion herself a substitute phallus” (Baker and Chase 155). In this version of the belt, the spikes adorn her pelvic region, appearing more like erect phallic objects that accentuate Baker’s virility. In the finale to the Ziegfeld Follies, the belt appeared “studded with rhinestones and with bananas curved cheekily upward at the ends instead of hanging like a bunch…she led the entire company in dancing the Charleston” (Wood 108). The comedic element of these now-erect phalluses increases, as even the idea of dancing the Charleston is such gear sounds as ridiculous as it does potentially sexy. Baker simultaneously announces her not-so-subtle seduction of the audience, rather than the other way around. While Jules-Rosette finds the belt “unsettling,” she summarizes how “through the skirt’s evolution and its place in Baker’s narratives and performances, the changing character and extent of her agency are revealed” (52).

Baker’s films of the 1930s offer another critical view of the ways she found agency through performance, and disarmed and seduced her audiences. She starred in three films produced in rapid succession: Siren of the Tropics, Zouzou (1934) and Princess Tam-Tam (1935). In Siren of the Tropics, Baker accomplishes these reversals of power despite a racist and imperialist storyline, and a strange medley of stereotypes; for example, while the name of the fictional colony, Monte Puebla, suggests Spanish rule, the clothing worn by the colonized convey the styles of Pacific Islanders. The lack of attention to these kinds of “details” conveys the quick, unconsidered nature of these early silent comedies. As we shall see with the films of Clara Bow in Chapter Three, early film paid little consideration to
things like camera angle, lighting, costume, or storyline. As Vito Russo reports in *The Celluloid Closet*, because they weren’t to be taken seriously, these “schlock” comedies could unsettle gender, sexuality, and race without posing a significant threat to the culture.

In the story, a young engineer, André Berval, falls in love with a native girl, Papitou, played by Baker, but their relationship is cut short when his fiancée comes to rescue him from Monte Puebla. Papitou becomes a stowaway on the ship back to Paris, and after a series of mishaps, meets a wealthy patron who offers her employment as a nanny. Papitou is later discovered by a dance hall manager (played by her real-life husband, stage manager, and femme witness, Pepito), and she becomes a famous music hall performer. As the charming “noble savage” Papitou, Baker uses tomboyish humor and physical agility to evade the white rapist/landlord figure, Alvarez, who is described as “greedy and brutal…hated even more than he is feared.” In the first shot of Papitou, she is shown laughing uproariously at Alvarez after she has thrown flour in his face. Her loose physical posture shows she is relaxed and confident rather than fearful. She hops on top of his desk and begins to eats the cherries he has offered her as a “gift,” but she defiantly spits the pits in his face. Alvarez chases her around his office, attempting to rape her, but she climbs on top of a bookcase and taunts him with her feet. Enabling the audience to take Papitou’s point-of-view, the camera positions above Papitou as she sits on the bookcase. This shot demonstrates her command of the scene and her ability to take on the universal, (male) third person perspective; she becomes the actor rather than the acted upon. Alvarez locks the door, disabling her escape, but Papitou calls to her German Shepherd who scares Alvarez, enabling her to jump out the window. Even after Alvarez tries to shoot at her with his rifle, she continues to taunt him from afar. This scene demonstrates the ability of Baker’s characters to take on the most vicious white men, and to disarm them with humor and mockery.
Certain scenes in this film also clearly show Baker’s “ass-first” assault on American racism. Papitou decides to chase André Berval back to America. She “costumes” herself in proper Western women’s attire, inciting a riot after she attempts to cut in the line of passengers waiting to buy tickets for the boat to Paris. She climbs over a railing, and then uses her rear end to literally push back a crowd of white people. In this scene, her rear end becomes a penetrating force that can literally “push away” racist oppression. She also uses her trademark wild-eyed expression to infuse this scene with comedic lightness. When she is denied passage because she doesn’t have enough money, she swims to the boat, and is rescued by one of the shipmates. Papitou escapes the shipmate’s grasp and falls into a coal bin, scaring a white passenger who is suffering from seasickness. When a crowd of passengers begins hunting for this “black-faced” specter, the seasick passenger claims she is “easy to recognize—she’s all black,” a line that makes important commentary on the ship’s all-white clientele. Next, Papitou hides inside a flour bin, essentially becoming white. When the same seasick passenger discovers her, she hollers, “she’s white now—a ghost!” Papitou escapes again, this time finding a stateroom where she can take a bath and cleanse herself of both racial constructions—white and black.

This rags-to-riches plotline, with a colonial twist, mirrors Baker’s own life, suggesting that the characters Baker played resembled herself. She also brought to the performance the essential ingredients of her pre-filming tantrum cited by Buñuel, but she veiled this aggression with comedic gestures. In the final scene, she performs in a large dance hall wearing boyish overalls, once again using her rear end to taunt Western culture. Her performance in the film announces Baker’s break with the staid chorus girl tradition and the beginning of the jazz age. The screen text announces, “Suddenly, dominating the crazy rhythm of the jazz, a cry…the latest cry of modern civilization, Here’s Papitou!”
In the French film *Zouzou*, by Marc Allégret, Baker became the first black female lead in a major motion picture. In *Zouzou*, Baker uses many of the same strategies to upend racial and gender hierarchies. As children, Zouzou and her adopted brother Jean are part of travelling circus, and while they are introduced as twins from a dubious origin, Zouzou is black while Jean is white. Their adopted father, the circus performer Papa Mele, describes the two children to the circus-going audience as “miracles of nature,” adding that the twins were born on an unnamed “Polynesian island,” to Chinese and Indian parents, “but of the same color.” Papa Mele explains to young Zouzou that the stork accidentally dropped her down the chimney, which resulted in her blackness. When they are grown and Jean returns from military duty in the navy, he treats Zouzou as if she were his sister, but she quickly realizes she’s in love with him. In Paris, Jean works as a music hall electrician, while Zouzou, initially a laundress, becomes a star of the music hall through a series of serendipitous events involving in part Jean’s good will toward his “sister.” When Jean is accused of murder and Zouzou needs money to mount his defense, she pleads to go on stage. However, even though Zouzou is now famous, Jean falls in love with Claire, Zouzou’s friend from the days when Zouzou had to support the family by working at a laundry. Similar to her fate in *Siren of the Tropics*, Zouzou can engage in the disruptive antics of a B.D. woman, but due to racist ideologies in both the French and American film industries, she can’t become the love interest of the white lead.

In *Zouzou*, Baker uses many of the comedic gestures that made her famous, including crossed-eyes, chicken-like sounds, and the use of her fingers as puppets. As a laundress, she uses this mockery to question the legitimacy of the white star, Barbara. She sings and dances in the center of a circle of laundry girls, who cheer her on and participate in the antics. Zouzou’s mockery is interwoven with Barbara’s practice session at the music hall, which reveals the white star’s anemic quality, and her inability to remember her lines because she hasn’t bothered to rehearse. In a scene that perfectly exemplifies Bakers’s double consciousness, she puts on a dancer’s leotard stolen from
the laundry and “practices” behind the curtain at the dance hall. However, Jean lifts the curtain so that the dance hall managers can observe her talent. Zouzou is so mesmerized by the play of her own shadow, larger than life and dancing with her on the wall behind her, she doesn't even notice that the curtain has been raised. She then performs her signature “ledge-butt” chicken dance. A series of dance moves follow where Baker asserts the position of a hunter/marksman with her hands in the pose of two guns. The fact that she is performing for herself matters in this case, as it suggests Baker's achievement of being-for-self; her lack of selfconsciousness, her indifference toward her audience means that Baker's dances were often auto-erotic, more for the pleasure of being in her own skin than for satisfying another's erotic curiosities. Like the blues singer in Spillers' descriptions, she achieves selfhood through performance. This choice to place a scantily clad (fuzzy white nipped) character on a swing inside of a birdcage references earlier performances in La Revue Nègre in 1925 and Les Folies Bergère in 1926. The cage offers a critique of the subjugation of black women. Eroticized and objectified, her plaintive bird-like song symbolizes the use of creativity to express pain and suffering. In the bird-cage dance, the most cited scene from this film, she expresses a longing for Haiti, the first nation in the world to achieve independence through a slave rebellion. The fact that she opens the bird cage on her own, and escapes without assistance, suggests the possibility of freedom within the performative gesture, if not in the world around her.

Baker's last film, Princess Tam-Tam, can also be viewed as a critique of Western “civilization,” which depends upon the labor and “creative energies” of people of color. The majority of the film takes place in Tunisia, where novelist Max de Mirecourt meets Alwina, played by Baker, a charming native who steals goats in order to set them free. Max tries to escape his philandering wife, and believes that Tunisia will offer him the right kind of artistic inspiration, particularly when he decides that Alwina and her “westernization” will become the subject of his next novel. Max educates and dresses Alwina, and teaches her about the delicate emotions involved in the western conception of
“love.” The novel that Max writes then gets played out as if it is happening in real life; Alwina sails with Max to Europe where she passes as Princess Tam-Tam from Africa— that is, until Max’s jealous wife launches a scheme to expose her true identity. The novel becomes a bestseller, and in “real life,” Alwina marries and has children with a local man. In the last scene of the film, Alwina’s donkey eats the title page of Max’s new novel, which he glibly titles Civilization.

The movie begs the question: who are the savages and who are the civilized? When Max announces that Alwina would make a great “character” if they were to “scrub her off, educate her, and see how she reacts,” the story becomes an interracial prequel to My Fair Lady, but one that more candidly exposes the ill-well at the heart of Max’s altruism. Max and his assistant make the very revealing statement that “to become civilized is to learn how to lie,” something that despite her stealing, mimicry and joke playing, Alwina cannot do with serious subjects. This statement echoes Caliban from Shakespeare’s The Tempest, in which the “savage” Caliban laments, “You taught me language; and my profit on’t. Is, I know how to curse: the red plague rid you, For learning me your language!” (35; 1.2.363-65). The film makes fun of the white male novelist who must conjure the image of an uneducated “savage” muse in order to write. The final dance in the film powerfully suggests the sense of being-for-self that Baker achieves through performance. As the film depicts the more conservative and tame styles of the white line dancers, a friend of Max’s wife gives Alwina copious amounts of champagne and convinces her to dance. Alwina bounds toward the stage, throwing one shoe into an ice bucket (the film offers a close-up of the shoe on ice), while the other shoe hits a bald white man in the head. She strips off her metallic evening gown while Max and his assistant look on in despair. Dancing barefoot in African style, Alwina gyrates with her hand on her lower belly, her top barely covering her breasts. She lies on the floor on her belly and picks up a white handkerchief with her mouth. The editing in this scene contributes to the orgasmic quality; as the speed of the dance increases, close-ups of Baker’s face and torso are interspersed with the
instruments in the band and the black musicians. The crowd goes wild, and the men carry her out on their shoulders. The film simultaneously upholds and questions white Western values, for while Alwina appears as the innocent “savage” who loves animals and who steals only because she is hungry, white women and men are portrayed as conniving, selfish, and dishonest.30

Often considered the forerunner of a postmodern performance aesthetics, Baker continued to reveal the extent of her agency throughout her long life. Unlike Smith and Rainey, she experienced the Civil Rights Movement, in particular the March on Washington, still the largest civil rights demonstration ever to occur in the U.S. Despite Baker’s refusal to be enlisted in any cause (she disagreed with the Black Power movement for their constant need to bring up the issue of “race”), the speech that Baker made at the demonstration conveys the rage she could not openly express in the 1920s and ’30s. At the demonstration, Baker testified to the pervasiveness of racial injustice, for until the 1960s, even rich and famous black women like Baker were denied hotel rooms and restaurant service. She told a piece of her story to the crowd of 90,000 people:

“You know, friends, I do not lie to you when I tell you I have walked into the palaces of kings and queens and into the houses of presidents. And much more. But I could not walk into a hotel in America and get a cup of coffee, and that made me mad. And when I get mad, you know that I open my big mouth. And then look out, ‘cause when Josephine opens her mouth, they hear it all over the world.” (qtd. in Jules-Rosette 236)

30 Baker uses similar strategies of mockery and comedic relief to question the “civilized” French, whose success in society is based on the ability to lie. In one scene during an afternoon picnic, Alwina takes offense when a white gentleman tells her that she is “wild,” animal-like, but too clever to be an animal. Alwina retaliates by putting sand in the salt shaker. When a young white Frenchwoman asks where the salt is, Alwina graciously presents her the shaker and runs away through the Roman ruins where they have been picnicking, to Max’s delight. A scene in the Roman ruins reveals her sophisticated ability to mock the origins of Western civilization. First the camera pans the height of a Roman column, suggesting the grandeur and mystery of the ruins. She sits on the ground, takes up a doll from one of the children who surround her, and sits the doll on a rock, pretending it is a venerable Roman emperor. Bounding back up the steps, she performs an African and American jazz age-inspired dance that has the children going wild.
While Baker enjoyed Martin Luther King’s speech, she apparently commented to her nephew, “‘He wasn’t strong enough. He should have put his foot down and demanded rights for black people. I could have done it better’” (italics mine, Wood 288).

The B.D. performance is stentorian and invincible in terms of both voice and presence, and these qualities become the threads that ultimately unite these three performers. Whether in a homemade tent in North Carolina or on the Washington Mall, these women carried their own voices and bodies, performing a kind of masculine-styled emotional and physical labor that reached the farthest margin of the attending audience. Often considered unlikeable in their personal lives, these B.D. artists announced in no uncertain terms their entitlement. Through concentrating their emotions in the moment of the performance, Rainey, Smith, and Baker rediscovered, again and again, a body continuity and being-for-self denied to them in the larger social and political arenas. They invented not only their own unique B.D. styles, but also a sense of their own humanity, a right not bestowed upon all bodies, both between the wars and today.
Chapter Three

“Just Put Your Lips Together and Blow”: Butch Pluck and Gumption in the Films of Clara Bow, Lauren Bacall, and Hope Emerson

the film audience is not an audience that is awake it is an audience that is dreaming, it is not asleep but it is always dreaming.
—Gertrude Stein, *Everybody’s Autobiography*

As Josephine Baker’s films suggest, Western popular film has played a central role in determining when and how certain expressions of gender and sexuality become perceivable to a mass audience. Within a given set of what Judith Butler calls “embedded evaluative structures,” films contribute to the misperception of some expressions, and serve as vehicles for the dissemination of pathologizing sex and gender epistemologies and ontologies (*Frames* 51). As Laura Horak offers in her recent work *Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Women, Lesbians, and American Cinema*, popular films unveil the “assumptions and values” of a specific historical time period in a more transparent way than other art forms, in part because they are produced quickly and by committee rather than exclusively by individuals (19). Films spread their influence widely, alerting communities of viewers to what is “normal, ideal, and erotic” (19). One prominent example is the construction of butch on screen after the practice of cross-dressing became associated with lesbianism in the 1920s and ’30s. The number of film representations of butch declined in the U.S., and those that escaped the censors’ scissors were pathologizing. In 1953, the original American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) listed homosexuality as a “sociopathic personality disturbance,” which meant that as lesbians, butch subjects were stigmatized.

Film is central to any discussion of twentieth-century disruptions to gender norms, considering the ways that film has come to replace dreaming as a way of talking about events that feel impossible—too extreme or too painful to believe. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag
observed how many who experienced 9/11 firsthand chose to describe the scene as “like a movie,” rather than using the earlier analogy, “like a dream.” The description of 9/11 as “like a movie” anticipates the current collapse of entertainment and reality, foreshadowing the election of a reality television show host as the President of the United States in 2016. The reign of the digitally manipulated image and “the alternative fact” adds urgency to the task of understanding how film replaced the intimacy of the dream world, becoming the principal way in which “reality” is mediated, understood, and processed.

However, while film may anticipate and reflect our worst fears and nightmares, film also offers opportunities for imagining other realities. From the 1920s to the 1950s, butch-styled actors Clara Bow, Lauren Bacall, and Hope Emerson temporarily reversed the gendered script, allowing viewers to enjoy vicariously a brief reprieve from feminine effacement and passivity. While Hollywood film may have offered to white women this dream of masculine power, the dream usually ends with a realignment of the social order and a re-entrenchment of American norms and processes of normalization. This realignment occurs through what disability theorist Lennard Davis call the “curative closure.” Films could explore societal fragmentation through butch, but like the nineteenth-century novels theorized by Davis, the curative closure restores white, straight hegemony (97). Norms deployed from the 1950s onward condemn butch subjects as “defective,” “sick” and in need of what I term the heteronormative “cure.” This “cure” can only be achieved through a “recommitment” to heterosexuality and model gender conformity.

Butch moments on screen invited all kinds of aberrant desire, desire that may have been neutralized by the narrative arc, but not necessarily forgotten by the viewer. While butch often served as a warning for middle-class white women to conform to cultural expectations, queer-minded viewers could hold alternative interpretations. Feminist film theorists of the 1970s coined the term resistant viewer to describe one who refuses the Oedipal polarization of active/male and
passive/female in mainstream popular film. Other reception theories discuss how communities of viewers form alternative interpretations. As Patricia White argues, film favorites can constitute the basis for community identification (xiv). In the process, viewers adopt what White terms a private subject position in public; by reading against the staple tenet of feminist film theory that “the gaze is male,” she suggests that lesbians and queer viewers of the past experienced visual pleasure in unconventional ways. Similarly, Vito Russo suggests the use of Claude Lèvi-Strauss’s term *bricolage* to describe how historical audiences would play with and “bend” film content to their own queer purposes (65). Throughout this chapter, I consider how this rogue viewer might have misperceived or refused to hear the pathologizing messages that these films disseminated.

Discussions on butch subjectivity in film have evolved over the last several decades, but the topic needs more nuanced historical and aesthetic explication. In this chapter, I assemble, augment, and in some cases revise the work of White, Russo, Halberstam, Kristen Hatch, Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin. In my discussion of the tomboy performances of Clara Bow, I expand on Russo’s research on early film, in particular his discussion of the pairing of butch and sissy characters. In *The Celluloid Closet*, Russo discusses how screwball comedies of the teens and ‘20s allowed for gender misalignments only because they were not to be taken seriously. However, while this may be true, the era’s less restrictive approach to tomboy masculinity must be considered in contrast to the later butchphobia of the postwar period. This escalation in butchphobia needs to be accounted for and explained in the context of the film industry’s consolidation and commercial trajectory.

In the chapter “A Rough Guide to Butches on Film” in *Female Masculinity*, Jack Halberstam places twentieth-century butch representations into discrete categories. By pursuing the silent era through Clara Bow, I extend Halberstam’s “tomboy era” category (in which he includes the character of Frankie in *The Member of the Wedding*). I also consider Bow’s performance through Kristen Hatch’s recent work on tomboy characters of the twentieth century. According to Hatch, in
these postwar films, it isn’t so much a change to female clothing but rather the character’s “willingness to submit to male authority” that determines the tomboy’s transformation (78). As an early twentieth-century tomboy, Clara Bow displayed a remarkable unwillingness to submit, and unlike characters in later films, she received minimal punishment through the plot’s denouement.

I extend the research of twenty-first century, queer film theorists Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, who make passing reference to the “butch flapper” in America on Film but never explain the term or its historical importance. Through close readings of select Bow films, I offer a more thorough examination of the circumstances that allowed for such a thing as a “butch flapper” to exist, and to blossom, in the 1920s, in conjunction with these so-called frivolous tomboy performances. Using the work of Siobhan Somerville and Cedric J. Robinson, I also consider how Bow’s gender disruptions occurred within a re-entrenchment of racist stereotypes, which suggests how sex and race categories formed simultaneously in the early twentieth century.

Through Lauren Bacall and Hope Emerson, I expand on Halberstam’s “predatory butches” category. In addition to Emerson’s performance in the film Caged! (1950), the category features strong frontier women Vienna (Joan Crawford) and Emma (Mercedes McCambridge) in Johnny Guitar (1954), and Mercedes McCambridge’s uncredited role as a Chicana/o gang member in Touch of Evil (1958).31 Halberstam argues that while these representations of butches on film (occurring without cross-dressing) may have been pathologizing at the time, they inform the contemporary development of a transgressive, queer dyke identity. While this insight has been immensely valuable to many scholars and activists, I take a more historical view in order to understand exactly how these representations participated in the enforcement of mutually imbricated postwar norms that continue

---

31 The “fantasy butch” category contains girl bikers in c (1953), and in the “tranvestite butch” category Halberstam references Calamity Jane, played by Doris Day, in the 1953 film of the same title.
in the present. While neither Halberstam nor White includes Lauren Bacall in their butch analysis, both Russo, and Benshoff and Griffin, argue that this character is a strong example of the homosexual coding found in 1940s film noir, a prominent genre for the expression of lesbian “tendencies.” Her toughness, clipped lines, and emasculating demeanor recommend her as a type of predatory butch, even though the romantic endings dilute her force.

Supporting butch characters like Emerson (and Bacall in Young Man with a Horn (1950)) buttress what White calls the “imbricated ideologies of heterosexual romance and white American hegemony permeating Hollywood cinema” (142). Other examples of White’s butch minor characters in the first half of the twentieth century include Thelma Ritter, who often starred opposite sissy characters in the 1930s; Agnes Moorehead, both a prolific Hollywood supporting actress and known Hollywood dyke who plays the benevolent phallic woman opposite Emerson in Caged!, in addition to many other roles on television and film; and Ethel Waters, whose career as a singer helped to bring a sexual swagger to the stock “mammy” character (139-40). I add to White’s discussion my term butch body out of control, which helps viewers to understand the central role that Emerson’s weight and height played in her multi-layered butch resistance.

All the above film theorists emphasize the importance of the Production Code Administration (PCA) or Hays Code, established by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributers of America (MPPDA), which controlled film content in this period, albeit with a great deal of inconsistency and contradiction. The code insisted that “no picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence, the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil, or sin” (Female Masculinity 177). Butch characters were portrayed as evil criminals, but also as “sick” individuals who could make the decision to “rehabilitate” themselves through the heterosexual “cure.” Because the code mandated against the open representation of sex and gender difference, butch subjectivity was not revealed through
masculine clothing or embodiment but rather through a character’s overt aggression, masculine
mannerisms and demeanor, tomboyism, and irreverent attitude toward heterosexuality.

In the first section of this chapter, I offer a history of film from the advent of the literal and
metaphorical “white screen,” through the silent era and the postwar years when McCarthy-era
repression causes U.S. films to become more propagandistic. Films in the postwar era engaged in a
backlash against upwardly mobile black and white women who found employment and a new sense
of identity during World War II. In the second section, I discuss how by becoming both a butch
flapper and tomboy, Clara Bow reflected and shaped the loose morals and masculine-styling of the
New Woman. In the third section, I analyze the early noir films of Lauren Bacall and the challenge
she poses to hegemonic masculinity, particularly in comparison to her later films in which she plays
more stereotypically feminine types. In the fourth section, I explore Hope Emerson, a prime
example of the butch character actor of the postwar period. Emerson’s minor roles unsettle sex and
gender to the point where she must be removed from the narrative through death or mysterious
disappearance. Emerson is a powerful example of Halberstam’s butch actor who in this period
“prowls the film set as an emblem of social upheaval and as a marker of sexual disorder” (Female
Masculinity 186).

The golden age of butch pluck and gumption provides a clearer perception of our current
prejudices against female masculinity. As Horak argues, new categories of female masculinity,
including butches, dykes, studs, transmen, FTMs, ags [aggressive girls], genderqueers, individuals
masculine-of-center, and many more, have been erased from contemporary mainstream film (224).
While non-binary transgender men and masculine women have a range of new media available to
them—from feature films to YouTube videos—mainstream film has much less space for play with
gender and sex than it did in the early decades of the twentieth century (224). This chapter provides
historical background for the current pathologization of butch and transmasculine subjects, and for
how film continues to determine the perceivability of some subjects over others. Contemporary viewers and critics need to be aware of the violence of invisibility perpetuated by the mainstream media, particularly during this current collapse of entertainment and reality. The problem of “butchphobia” cannot be solved simply by creating more “positive” representations in mainstream films, but rather films, and all media, must disrupt the very fabric of the text by reintroducing in full force the kinds of energies that Bow, Bacall, and Emerson unleashed in their respective periods.

**History of the “White” Screen: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in American Film**

The white middle-class fantasy that has dominated popular film from the very beginning was paradoxically produced and shaped by the “lavender and gold invasion” that hit Hollywood at the turn of the century, in which gays and lesbians, Jews, and cowboys competed for control over what film historian William Mann describes as the “illusion that would transform a nation” (4). This migration of outsiders laid the foundations for the enormously powerful American film industry of today. At the turn of the twentieth century in Southern California. World War I decimated the European market, which created new opportunities for the U.S. The industry was initially self-regulating, a business enterprise rather than an artistic one, a distinction made clear by the 1915 Supreme Court decision not to cover motion pictures under the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of speech. However, “freedom of speech” was not an initial concern of the early Hollywood crowd of the teens and twenties; the new medium nurtured a wild, anything-goes atmosphere for those white, sometimes privileged actors willing to take the risk and leave behind the world of theater. In early silent films, vestiges of the raunchier vaudeville tradition remained, even after the switch from short to long format and to the novel as a basis for storytelling. As Mann recounts, Alla Nazimova, a silent film star of the teens known for sensuous lesbian films like *Camille* (1921), built the 8080 Club, a virtual sex palace in Hollywood frequented by young butch-styled
women who occupied many of the backstage jobs. Early Hollywood offered a range of opportunities for women in general; they were found both barking orders through megaphones and fetching coffee for the stars. The industry lacked a strict hierarchy between jobs that were “appropriate” for queers or for straights, which allowed newcomers to fulfill their potential in the Hollywood game. The butch-styled director Dorothy Arzner was one such newcomer, who began as script girl for Nazimova during the 1920 production of *Stronger Than Death*, and went on to become the most famous lesbian director of the Golden Age. However, many gays and lesbians who found success in the teens and twenties lost their jobs during the Depression, and in 1932, Arzner’s contract with Warner Brothers wasn’t renewed.

These depression-era cutbacks reveal the racist and sexist biases of the industry present from the very beginning. U.S. popular film has never been a politically neutral medium, however much it may masquerade as such. The “white screen” of the first motion picture houses provided a rationale for Jim Crow segregation and for the white-washed “picturing” of American national identity, in the middle of rapidly changing demographic and economic patterns (Robinson xv). Butch style permeated the medium of film from the very first silent pictures. However, despite the sexually libertine atmosphere of the early silent era, filmmakers capitalized on stereotypical images of racial minorities—blacks and Native Americans in particular—already circulating in the culture. In fact, as Cedric Robinson argues in *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film Before World War II*, moving pictures exploited the racist conceptualizations that trickled down from the very top of American commerce, science, and government (80). Film extended the power of new cultural institutions and media outlets that ensured the reproduction of racist ideologies: “museums, scientific journals, newspapers, magazines, amusement parks (see present-day Disneyland), circuses, films, popular cartoons, children’s toys (puzzles, toy banks, etc.),
curios, postcards, and advertisements for cereal, fruit companies, shoe polish, toothpaste, and so on” (80).

As Siobhan Somerville discusses in Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture, the mutually imbricated technologies of “race science” and sexology present at the turn of the century offered quasi-scientific theories that justified racist, homophobic and misogynistic stereotypes. In the ’20s and ’30s, film began a more aggressive naturalization of these myths of proper gender and race. The early butch styling of Clara Bow suggests an increased interest in sex and gender, incited by the first articles on sexual inversion, which appeared in U.S. medical journals at the beginning of the film industry (Somerville 37). By the ‘30s, popular film pandered more aggressively to the white middle class by both assuaging their anxieties and playing on their fantasies. The industry aligned with bourgeois “standards of respectability,” as it moved further away from the popular cultural forms of burlesque, minstrelsy, the dime museum, the P.T. Barnum-derived freak shows, etc. (58). Butch played a part in this process by allowing white women to indulge momentarily in the idea of masculine power within the safe zone of the darkened, and segregated, theater.

However, queer Hollywood took an even deeper turn toward the conservative after the consolidation of the motion picture studios and the development of the star system. The middle-class values of stars—their marriages, children and fairy tale lifestyles—became important publicity. Women formed 83% of movie audiences in 1927, indicating the success of marketing strategies aimed at shaping and reflecting the interests of white female viewers (White 3). Stars helped to maximize film profits and to maintain white women’s roles as consumers, sex objects, homemakers, and domestic subjects within a patriarchal, white-dominant, culturally imperialist nation (3). Major changes in the ’30s, including rapid industrialization, and the combined forces of film technology, advertising, and public relations, fueled the star system, as American consumer culture intensified.
As feminist critic Barbara Will writes on the period, “The Hollywood film industry and its stable ‘stars’ were at the white-hot center of this engine, not only generating enormous domestic revenues but also creating one of the most important ‘industries of desire’ in the twentieth century” (152).

Hollywood of the ’20s and ’30s censored even the possibility of miscegenation and open homosexuality, and yet used fashion, glamour, sexual fantasy, and homosexual innuendo, including veiled female homoeroticism, to entice audiences. The creation of the female star and the invention of the “Woman’s Picture” helped to bring in large audiences. The popularization of scientific discourses on female sexuality, psychoanalysis, the suffrage movement, and urbanization inspired a move away from Victorian homosociality among women under the sign of the “New Woman.” As feminist scholar Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argues, New Women “wished to free themselves completely from the considerations of gender, to be autonomous and powerful individuals, to enter the world as if they were men. Hence they spoke with male metaphors and images” (197). Stars could be ambiguously gendered with fluid sexualities, and they could embrace white masculine style and privilege, but there were limits on how these styles could be represented on film. By the mid-1930s, cross dressing came to be identified with lesbianism, which led to a ban on the practice in mainstream Hollywood.

This ban on female-to-male cross-dressing occurred through increased enforcement of the Motion Picture Code. The Production Code Administration (PCA) or Hays Code, established by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributers of America (MPPDA), was initially named after Will H. Hays, the president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) from 1922 to 1945. In late 1920, Will Hays, former postmaster general of the United States and a Hoosier Presbyterian elder, was drafted to head the Motion Picture Producers and Distributers of America to improve the public image of the film industry and to protect from outside censorship. The Code followed a series of anti-vice laws promoted by the Catholic Church and temperance groups aimed
at cracking down on urban gay nightlife. Bans on cross-dressing and homosexual content in
nightclubs, vaudeville theaters, and “legitimate” theaters effectively ended what was known as the
“pansy trade” (Bérubé 111). In a recent homage to cultural critic and gay smut enthusiast Boyd
McDonald, William E. Jones cites aspects of the code that specifically censored sexual and racial
difference: “the sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld; pictures shall
not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted and common thing…; miscegenation
(sex relationships between the white and black races) is forbidden…; certain places are so closely
and thoroughly associated with sexual life or with sexual sin that their use must be carefully limited”
(22).

Horak offers insight on the specific restrictions placed on cross-dressing for women in the
1930s, in conjunction with the Code, after cross-dressing came to be associated with lesbianism. As
she observes, there were three waves of female cross-dressing in Hollywood, the longest and most
saturated period occurring between 1908-1921 when the practice was not linked to sexual
perversion. From 1922-1928 during the pre-code era, actors like Greta Garbo and Marlene

---

32 The first openly lesbian film, The Children’s Hour (1961) starring Shirley MacLaine and Audrey
Hepburn, led to the demise of the Hays Code. The Hays office threatened to censor the film, but
Arthur Krim, the president of United Artists, supported the director, and threatened to continue
with the film without Hays’ approval. Krim forcefully argued that the Code, not the film, should be
changed. On October 3, 1961, the Code was revised so that it permitted “tasteful” treatments of
homosexual themes (Russo 70). As Benshoff and Griffin explain in Queer Images, the overturning of
the Code did not change the fact that throughout the 1960s, Hollywood representations of queers
would continue to align with previously established stereotypes; homosexuality was silly and
comedic, villainous and scary, or shameful and tragic. The only major difference was that now
filmmakers could name the condition forthrightly instead of only hinting at it.

33 However, Siobhan Somerville offers a somewhat different story; while not tied to lesbianism,
during the time of the suffragettes, cross-dressing was stigmatized as part of abnormal sexual
practices. Somerville argues through historian Sharon Ullman that the stigma was evident as early as
1906 and widespread by 1913 (55). For male impersonators as well, the issue of cross-dressing was
also political and tied to suffrage (55).
Dietrich still experimented with taboo subjects (11). However, the period of sexual freedom and
gender play on film, what American film director George Cukor called the “La Belle Epoque,”
effectively ended in the 1930s (Mann 84). The practice of cross-dressing virtually disappeared after
1934 when the PCA was more rigorously enforced (Horak 17). Those who did cross-dress only
appeared in a limited number of genres, mainly musical comedies and biopics, and these characters
usually displayed more feminine sensibilities (17). Between 1934-1968, actors expressed butch style
through masculine emotional orientation: stone butch impenetrability, pluck and gumption.

Crucial changes in the depiction of white women more generally speaking also occurred
between the 1930s and '40s. In her essay “The Woman’s Film,” feminist film theorist Molly Haskell
explains how female characters in the '40s often displayed excessive emotion and tended toward the
neurotic, the prime example being the figure of the passive war wife. By contrast, Haskell uses the
word “spunky” and “stoical” to characterize the heroines of the '30s. As Andrea Weiss concurs,
stars like Katharine Hepburn, Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo “often asserted gestures and
movements in their films that were inconsistent with the narrative and even posed an ideological
threat within it” (33). Garbo kissed her lady-in-waiting in Queen Christina (1933), Dietrich flirted with
women in Morocco (1930) and Blonde Venus (1932), and Katherine Hepburn cross-dressed in Sylvia
Scarlett (1935). Lesbian film stars inspired writers like H.D. who gravitated to Garbo in Queen
Christina, perhaps because she reminded H.D. of her own lover, Bryher, a butch-styled writer and
artist active in the avant-garde movement in Europe. In July 1927 after seeing the film, H.D. made
this comment in Close-Up, I: “Greta Garbo, as I first saw her, gave me a clue, a new angle, and a new
sensation of elation. This is beauty...Let us be thankful that she, momentarily at least, touched the
screen with her purity and glamour” (qtd. in Weiss 35).

However, Hollywood could never truly threaten what Faderman and Timmons call “butch
America,” the so-called “authentic” butch masculinity performed by actors like John Wayne, and
later the future president Ronald Reagan (59). White, middle-class audiences were taught to enjoy a kind of subversion that could be erased through the heterosexual, curative closure. Changes in women’s employment and social standing in the ’40s created an ambivalence in female heroines, what I would call a stone butch sensibility, found in Joan Crawford’s portrayal of Vienna in the film Johnny Guitar (1954), and Bacall’s early noir films, To Have and Have Not (1944), and Confidential Agent (1945). As Haskell explains, women had to “pay for” ascending the employment ladder with a fall from “the pedestal,” expressed in characters that were both “hard and squishy, scathing and sentimental” (28-29). Haskell sees these characters as evidence of a backsliding from the feminism of the ’20s and ’30s; these women could only possess a “pseudo-toughness, a façade of steel wool that at a man’s touch would turn into cotton candy” (29). As I explain in the close readings of her first two films, Bacall epitomizes the steel wool/cotton candy dichotomy common in the more conventionally attractive butch characters. However, Hope Emerson’s weight and physical appearance made her a different kind of butch actor who was only allowed to take on minor roles. Because of their relegation to character actor status, butch-styled performers like Emerson expose even more explicitly the American postwar investment in the maintenance of pure, white femininity and the reproduction of heterosexuality. Butch, now synonymous with “lesbian,” was considered a communicable disease, like tuberculosis or polio, and there was no vaccine.

The films may have used the curative closure to eventually deny and repress all kinds of racial and sexual difference, but in specific moments and scenes, Bow, Bacall and Emerson use

---

34 In her mixed genre work of the period, We Walk Alone ([1955] 2006) Ann Aldrich (a.k.a Marijane Meaker) compares lesbianism to tuberculosis, the symptoms of which “might well be treated as symptoms of any other serious illness—by consultation with an authority who is better able to suggest treatment” (148). According to historian John D’Emilio, doctors in the early-mid twentieth century employed a range of experimental procedures in order to “cure” gays and lesbians, including psychotherapy and hypnosis, but also “castration, hysterectomy, lobotomy, electroshock, aversion therapy, and the administration of untested drugs” (D’Emilio 18).
butch pluck and gumption to captivate and seduce audiences. Butch actors called attention to themselves by offering an alternative vision of gender and sexuality that challenged white male hegemony. Butch exceptionalism was also an onscreen quality that permitted these actors to take non-conforming roles and to have non-conforming moments. Haskell cites similar qualities in Dietrich, Hepburn, Rosalind Russell, Bette Davis, and characters like Scarlett O’Hara and Jezebel who were “aristocrats of their sex” and held a singular point of view, a quality of independence that often made them unpopular with men and women (23).

In the fourth section on Hope Emerson, I examine more closely how film changed in the McCarthy era, and how butch became maligned, in stark contrast to the less restrictive days of Clara Bow and Dorothy Arzner. In the postwar period, the military, in conjunction with the psychiatric complex and the media, played an integral role in the dissemination of new epistemologies of gender and sex, including the new category of “butch predator” who “stalked” femme enliees in the armed services. The U.S. used the term “butch” to uproot lesbians (who were assumed to be butch “predators”), and to issue what were known as dishonorable “blue” discharges, which forced these newly enlisted soldiers back to their hometowns in shame and disgrace. These humiliating discharges were widely publicized in newspapers; a clipping from the period housed at the Lesbian Herstory Archive (LHA) offers the following headline: “Navy weighs old heave-ho for eight ‘lesbian’ sailors” (“Navy”). The placement of lesbian in quotation remarks, as well as the casual employment of the phrase “heave-ho,” suggests the total lack of empathy in this particular newspaper for the large number of lives affected by these abuses of power. Another article in a lesbian newspaper entitled “military witchhunt,” under the section heading “struggle,” describes the process by which the military rooted out and accused women of lesbianism: “[male] authorities select a woman they suspect...of being a lesbian and threatened her with a less than honorable discharge. They then offer to let her out on a better discharge, or even not to throw her out at all, if she will furnish the names
of other lesbians” (“Struggle”). The article then explains how they repeatedly used “threats, innuendos, and outright lies to provoke a confession or scare women into accepting less than honorable discharges” (“Struggle”). Educational films informed recruits in the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) and Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service (WAVES) about the dangers of homosexuality.

After World War II, the U.S. entered a new era in which the control of sex, sexual identity, and pleasure became top priorities. As transgender scholar Beatriz Preciado argues in her work on the postwar period, the political management of body technologies visible today in global media represents a “new governmentality of the living” emerging from the “corporal, physical, and ecological urban ruins of the Second World War” (267). World War II was the turning point in the use of sex, sexuality, sexual identity, and pleasure as tools for the political management of life, a management administered in part through popular film (267). Preciado explains the two main areas of change that occurred in the mid-twentieth century that allowed for the more “efficient” regulation of gender and sex, a regulation that continues to accelerate and “perfect” itself in the present. “Pharmaco-pornographic” means the combination of “the processes of bio-molecular (pharmaco) and semiotic-technical (pornographic) government of sexual subjectivity—of which ‘the Pill’ and Playboy are two paradigmatic offspring” (269).

During this period, the U.S. invested more money in the scientific research of sex and sexuality than any other country had ever invested before (267). This included research on “gender reassignment surgery”; in 1954, Harry Benjamin developed the first hormonal molecules for the

---

35 Pearl Harbor played an under-estimated role in the what historians have called “The Age of Anxiety,” an era of paranoia that can be traced back to the late ’30s (in radio broadcasts like Orson Welles’ 1938 War of the Worlds) and that found justification in Pearl Harbor (Wilson 86). Pearl Harbor might have inadvertently added fuel to the fear and paranoia that shaped cultural interests in gender, sex, and sexuality at the time.
“treatment” of “transsexualism,” a word that first achieves common usage in 1954 (267). Joanne Meyerowitz writes in her work How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States that Benjamin’s work on transsexuality emerges from a hostile mid-twentieth century environment that encouraged the pathologization of transgender subjectivities, including butch, on the theoretical, political, and social level. In tandem with the medical profession and the media industries, the government gained an unprecedented ability to manage biopolitically the dissemination of gender and sex epistemologies and ontologies, as well as to harness the physical properties of sex, reproduction and pleasure. Within these new biopolitical methods of control, popular film dominated mass cultural discourses, particularly in the years before the rise of television. As White reports, “at the height of Hollywood’s cultural hegemony in 1946, ninety million Americans attended the movies weekly” (3).

However, despite McCarthy-era crackdowns on transgender subjectivity, homosexuality, and other forms of deviance, the United States experienced an outpouring of cultural production on sexuality, including popular psychology, such as the Kinsey Report (1948), films, and pulp novels, some of which indulged in the salacious details of the lives of homosexuals and other deviants, while at the same time expressing fear and anxiety over their increasing visibility. The rise of television compelled Hollywood to include more adult material designed to lure viewers to the theater, which led to an increase in images of homosexuality as villainy. As Russo explains, “Pop psychoanalysis was rampant in the Forties and Fifties, and gays were increasingly being defined in psychiatric jargon both onscreen and off. Suddenly people began talking about dominant mothers and weak, passive fathers” (99). This produces the characteristic “weirdness” of the postwar film era, as an alien onscreen represented a more generalized fear of difference, a dystopic vision of what could happen if difference were allowed to circulate unhindered (99).
As the 1950s progressed, women continued to be punished on screen for the male roles they played in society during World War II. Women who didn’t learn to become passive had to be disciplined, which led to what Russo calls the neurotic and cold “steely gorgon” character who “hinted at a perverse sexuality that was never quite made specific” (100). Like Emerson these characters were sadistic and mean, and presented the paradox of the woman who was trying to be masculine, but who also desperately needed a man (100). Twenty-first century filmgoers are for the most part accustomed to the hidden evaluative structures born out of this postwar anxiety, a fear-based view of the world that sought to neutralize butch as well as all forms of race, sex, and gender difference.

The Tomboy Pluck of Clara Bow

In contrast to the “grownup tomboys” of the postwar era who appeared pathetic and incomplete in their quest for status, the tomboy spirit in Clara Bow films playfully expressed the desires of the New Woman and her affection for masculinity (Russo 100). Clara Bow portrayed scrappy street kids and butch flappers, sexually liberated characters who were often allowed to remain unrepentantly butch at the end of the film. As Faderman and Timmons write of many of the early silent stars, “they were fluid both in sexuality and in gender presentation, and their daring was encouraged” (40). Bow expressed this daring throughout the 1920s, until the Great Depression, combined with Bow’s personal instability, ended her career. But until that time, Bow’s wildness

---

36 As Bow biographer David Stenn writes on the flapper, the concept originated from film star Colleen Moore in Flaming Youth (1923): “Discarding her mother’s cotton underwear, ankle-length skirts, tight corsets, black cotton stockings, and high-button shoes, the flapper bobbed her hair, rouged her face, rolled her silk stockings, and raised her hemlines.” She took a libertine attitude toward sex, read Freud, smoked cigarettes (an important symbol of New Womanhood), and drank with abandon despite Prohibition (39).
infused the industry, in films like *Black Oxen* (1923). In this typical Bow film, the character playing Bow’s grandmother scolds the father for failing to control his child: “A fine father you are, with your daughter out every night going to hell as fast as she can fox-trot—the wretched little flapper.” In one scene, Bow has just returned from an all-night party, but still craves more mischief. With one hand on her hip and the other holding a lit cigarette, Bow’s character teases the camera with boyish flirtation. She holds the cigarette between her thumb and forefinger, the way a man would do at the time. Eyeing the family and her love interest from the corner of her eye, with no jewelry or frilly adornment, she looks particularly boyish in her pursuit of further excitement. The camera also captures this frame against a blank background, which helps to highlight Bow as the main event rather than as a feminine decoration. Both black and white artists and performers used this kind of butch pluck in their work, including Nella Larsen, who was also known as a cigarette-smoking, butch flapper.

The tomboy and the butch flapper roles reflect Bow’s own experiences and history growing up on the streets of Brooklyn. Even when she plays a more feminine character, her butch style emanates through the feminine artifice. As feminist film theorists Joan Rivière and Mary Ann Doane argue, there exists very little difference between so-called “genuine womanliness” and the mask of femininity (Citron, Lesage, Mayne, Rich, Taylor, and the editors of *New German Critique* 113). This psychoanalytic concept of feminine masquerade theorized by Rivière in 1929 predates Butler’s theory on gender performativity and yet offers a similar proposal. The “successful ‘intellectual woman’” was another type in films of this period who dealt with the threatening masculinity of her position by adopting an excessive feminine flirtatiousness (113). Bow inflected her tomboy pluck with a highly stylized femininity perfectly suited to the comedic styles of the period.

As a child, Bow developed a tough exterior, and in early screen tests, the film studios quickly identified Bow as “the redheaded tomboy type” (29). Her mother suffered from mental illness and
often complained that Bow behaved more like a boy than a girl (Epstein and Morella 18). When Bow was a teenager just beginning her film career, her mother woke in the middle of the night and tried to kill her with a butcher knife, because she believed her daughter was selling her soul to the devil. As Bow once boasted of her tomboy pluck, “I could lick any boy my size…My right was famous” (Stenn 12). She spent a lot of time on the streets with gangs of boys who wielded knives, bricks, or stones hauled in onion sacks, though Clara preferred to fight with her hands. Even after she became famous, she was a tomboy both onscreen and off, never forgetting her love of rough sports. As Zierold reports, “To her house in Hollywood she invited the entire University of Southern California football team for a midnight practice session on the lawn” (170). She loved the working-class film crews because they reminded her of her now grown childhood playmates in the street gangs of Brooklyn. As Stenn explains, while they may have wanted to pursue her romantically, they also treated her “like one of the boys” (50).

Despite her tomboy pluck, Hollywood took advantage of Clara’s lack of financial backing and family support. The movie industry functioned very differently in the 1920s; a number of small, independent production companies competed with one another, and often shot, edited, and released films within two weeks. From Thanksgiving of 1923 to Christmas of 1924, Bow shot twelve films, all of which were hastily assembled with no care for Clara’s make-up or costuming. Silent films were also never truly “silent,” as theaters provided musical accompaniment, and sets were noisy, loud, and confusing, with directors screaming instructions while film crews, technicians, and personnel engaged in their own loud activities (Epstein and Morella 37). Crews barely considered lighting and photography, and writers crammed scripts together at the last minute. The films lacked direction, and as a result, Bow had to teach herself to develop character and to “act” using only her instincts (60). In many of these unrefined films, her character fights physically with both men and women, which expressed Bow’s own butch pluck.
Bow’s butch style helped give her a start in the industry. In director Elmer Clifton’s words, it was Bow’s “gumption and unadorned appeal” that led him to cast her as a cross-dressed tomboy in her first big break, *Down to the Sea in Ships* (1922). *Variety* praised Bow’s performance in the film, noting that “[Clara] lingers in the eye after the picture has gone” (Epstein and Morella 44). Another example of Bow’s early tomboy presence is the lost 1924 film *Grit* in which she plays Orchid McGonigle, a street kid trying to live a clean life despite extreme economic and social pressures. The plot of many Bow films revolves around a central boyish character, played by Bow, trying, and failing, to make good. While tomboy films of the postwar era (and beyond) tend to discipline the boyish character, Bow’s plucky heroines escape such punishment. As Kristen Hatch writes on tomboy films of the twentieth century, it isn’t so much a change to female clothing but rather the character’s “willingness to submit to male authority” that determines her transformation (78). One postwar example is the character of Frankie Addams in the 1952 adaptation of Carson McCuller’s novel, *The Member of the Wedding* (1946). However in contrast to Bow’s unrepentant characters, by the end of the film, Frankie succumbs to social pressures and adopts properly girlish aspirations.37

The concept of “It” also gained popularity during the era of the New Woman, particularly because of the term’s association to masculine sexuality. British novelist-actress writer Elinor Glynn invented the sexual category of “It” in 1920 specifically for the Hollywood film industry. Glynn became a self-ordained authority on “It,” to a point where when she was asked to cast the leading man for the 1921 Paramount film *The Great Moment*, she refused to approve any of the potential actors because they did not have “It.” She succinctly explained that “They either have ‘It’ or they

---

37 Bow’s lack of proper alignment in some of these films may in part result from remnants of the antebellum philosophy on child-rearing that believed to raise little girls as tomboys was “healthy” because this insured they would be robust enough to handle the demands of motherhood (Hatch 352). This philosophy of raising little girls combined with the daring image of the New Woman allowing white women to strip themselves of the corsets of the past, both sartorially and emotionally.
don’t”—at that point, she only found “It” among the working-class men of Hollywood: cabdrivers, bartenders, and carpenters (Epstein and Morella 82). However, upon first sight, she determined that Clara Bow had “It,” and she became the first woman on the short list. Paramount used Glyn’s assessment as a publicity stunt. When reporters contacted Glyn, she explained that “there are few people in the world who possess ‘It.’ The only ones in Hollywood are Rex, the wild stallion [a horse], actor Tony Moreno, the Ambassador Hotel doorman, and Clara Bow” (84). Later, Glyn appeared as herself in the film version of It, in which Moreno played the male lead. In a scene in the Plaza Hotel dining room, Glyn offers a clearer definition, one that bears a remarkable similarity to my sense of butch style: “Self-confidence and indifference as to whether you are pleasing or not—and something in you that gives the impression that you are not all cold. That’s ‘IT’!” (It). Just a moment later in the film, she also makes a clear statement on what is not “It,” by calling a couple of minor characters “Itless Its” (168).

A prime example of a film that foregrounds both Bow’s tomboy pluck and “It girl” status is the campy comedy, Mantrap (1926), directed by Victor Fleming (also the director of Wizard of Oz (1939)). Bow plays Alverna, a flirtatious manicurist who finds herself marrying a backwoods dweller named Joe. Alverna takes on the Canadian wilderness, wields a gun, and eventually steals a canoe to escape back to the city. Through silly antics and the trope of mistaken identity, early silent comedies displayed a combination of titillation and uneasiness with the masculine styles of the New Woman. As Russo explains, these types of films guaranteed that if a “real” homosexual or transgender identity were encountered, it would not appear as a realistic option (17). Despite the loosening of gender and sex norms, early American film helped create the illusion that “true” butch masculinity can only belong to cisgendered white men. Both the sissy character and the tomboy functioned in Vito Russo’s words as “yardsticks” for what was considered normal behavior (63). These early comedies introduced this “yardstick” concept through vaudeville and older theatrical traditions of transvestite
farce. Clara Bow’s rough and tumble attitude, particularly in the backwoods scenes, is complemented by hints of Joe’s “sissy” ways before he meets Alverna, most evident in Joe’s affection for women’s Parisian-style hats. However, some scenes hint at the serious anxiety provoked by the New Woman. When Joe travels to Minneapolis after deciding he’s had enough of the “he-man” wilderness, he stops in for a haircut, and mistakes a female client for a man because she is getting the popular men’s haircut, the “Eton Crop.” This scene suggests how some feared in the 1920s that gender categories were losing all meaning, and that American cities would soon be plagued by a virtual mass of indistinguishable androgynous individuals.

The light style of Bow’s comedies also provided an opportunity to revel in the wild ways of the New Woman of the 1920s. One particular frame shows Alverna sitting on a log, wearing a men’s hat and handkerchief, and gazing down the barrel of a gun. Similar to Hope Emerson’s ravenous presence in the postwar era, Alverna eats profusely, sits on table tops like a man, and even starts a fist fight with a woman twice her age, the only other white woman in the town of Mantrap. This fight reflects the intergenerational conflict between the New Woman and her mother who still wore the corset, long skirt, and high button shoes. Alverna’s appetites reveal her “unnatural” desire for masculine power, which caught the attention of the film magazines. A review in Variety confirms the enthusiastic reception for her performance: “Clara Bow! And how! What a ‘mantrap’ she is! And how this picture is going to make her!...Bow just walks away with the picture from the moment she steps into camera range. Every minute that she is in it, she steals it from troupers Ernest Torrence and Percy Marmont. Any time a girl can do that, she is going some” (qtd. in Stenn 70).

While these comedies may have temporarily provided white women with a fantasy of emancipation from gender norms, they did so through heavy-handed racial stereotyping. In Mantrap, Hula (1927), and Call Her Savage (1932), Native Americans as docile Noble Savages become scapegoats for Bow’s gender performances. As Somerville argues, gender and sex were often
destabilized in silent film through the entrenchment of racial categories, a strategy that also guarded against the threat of miscegenation. Michael Rogin’s concept of “political amnesia” also helps to explain the appeal of Bow’s films as instruments for cultural forgetting designed to absolve white guilt. As props for Bow’s gender play, Native Americans appear not as victims of violence but rather as innocuous and compliant extras (*America on Film* 71). Bow is often savage “like them,” and yet her whiteness and “Itness” turn this similarity into a playful version of “going native.” The Native Americans in Bow’s films also loosely reference the Western genre, which gained popularity in the ’20s and ’30s (108). The film also takes place in Canada, which allowed for an even greater denial of the annihilation of Native American populations in the U.S. In one important scene, Alverna verbally abuses the Native American guide, accusing him of eating too much of their food: “Ease up a little, Hiawatha [even though the guide is a man]. We’ve got barely enough food left to see us through.” Alverna’s abuse causes the guide to abandon her and Prescott, which shifts the stereotype from the docile and obedient Native American to the shifty and untrustworthy heathen. This scene displaces whatever anxiety the audience may have felt about Alverna’s butch masculinity on to the Native American who usually never appears as human but rather as part of an undifferentiated mass. While butch characters in postwar film were usually eliminated by the end of the film through death or mysterious disappearance, in silent comedies like *Mantrap*, butch characters got away with their misdeeds with minimal consequences. In fact, Alverna’s love interest, Ralph, seems increasingly aroused by Alverna’s aggressive display of courage, and her boyish appearance after several days in the woods. Ralph praises Alverna for her bravery when she declares that they will hike out without the canoe. However, it must be remembered that women like Alverna who take the role of the promiscuous “rake” are also responsible for emasculating the men and provoking their escape to the woods in the first place. At the end of the film, as Ralph and Joe try to decide “what to do with” dishonest Alverna, she snidely interrupts and informs them that “I’m my own boss—from now
Figure 12: Clara Bow (age 21) with knapsack and gun on the set of Mantrap (1926).
on.” Joe calls after Alverna as she speeds away in the stolen canoe, “Remember—you still bear my name!”, to which she replies, “So does your old man!” In the final minute and a half of the film, Alverna does return to Joe and to Mantrap, but she immediately finds another man to flirt with, which suggests that her philandering will never end.

In the 1927 comedy *Hula*, also directed by Fleming, Bow plays another tomboy character who destabilizes gender and sex against the stereotype of the Noble Savage. The story features Hula Calhoun (Clara Bow), the daughter of a Hawaiian planter, Bill Calhoun (Albert Gran), a nouveau riche American with a strong yet unspecified Eastern European accent. He encourages Hula to be unconventional, commenting while drunk that he “Can’t get Hula off her horse—’cept to eat an’ shleep!” The arrival of her eighteenth birthday means she has “come of age,” but she remains in control of her own destiny. This film is most known for two erotic scenes, one featuring Hula bathing nude in a natural spring, and the other the seductive hula dance that seals her future marriage. However, even in the nude bathing scene that opens the films, she appears boyish and unselconscious; when it’s time to get out of the water, she trucks off across the dirt path with her clothes in her arm, quite unaware and unconcerned about her naked body (see clip, “Hula). She performs the hula dance as a highly stylized feminine masquerade that barely compensates for her tomboy hijinks. Similar to *Mantrap*, Hula’s tomboyism occurs within and alongside the feminization of a male character, this time her “nanny,” the native Hawaiian Kahana who makes for her birthday a horse whip with her name carved into the handle. This gift suggests a sadomasochistic flavor to Hula’s masculine aggression, similar to the much later film, *Call Her Savage* (1932), in which Bow’s character playfully whips the male lead when he fails to comply with her “requests.”

Kahana’s character continues the pattern of using Native American stereotypes to neutralize the threat of miscegenation and to deflect any serious challenge to gender and sex norms. When Hula finds out that her love interest, Anthony, is married but doesn’t love his wife, she sighs, “Even
a native knows marriage means nothing without love,” to which Anthony replies, “A native isn’t tied to conventions! Gad, I wish we were natives!” In this film, Kahana is a feminized, noble savage who replaces Hula’s dead mother. In tomboy films, the mother of the tomboy is often absent or dead, which suggests that tomboyism develops as compensation for a lack of proper mothering. In this case, Kahana fulfills both the sissy and the Noble Savage stereotype, essentially neutralizing the threat of both.

Even after Hula decides to seduce Anthony, she never gives up her tomboy ways, except perhaps the habit of allowing her dog to sit on her lap during formal dinners. When the Calhoun cowboys who live on her father’s property throw Hula a “coming-of-age” birthday party, she challenges them to an eating race, continuing the trope of ravenous eating as an aspect of butch irreverence. One of the cowboys strokes her arm and croons “You a woman now, Hula—ready to love!”, but Hula pushes him away, declaring, “Hula will know when she is ready for love!” Even in her quest to gain Anthony’s affections, she disregards feminine propriety, and wins Anthony through a series of pranks. First, Hula lets her dog out of the house on purpose so that Anthony will try to rescue the animal, though in the end it is Hula who rescues both man and dog from drowning in a raging river. Last, Hula tricks his ex-wife by pretending to have blown up the mine. Hula’s dishonest maneuverings are again rewarded, and her butch pluck and gumption swing the outcome of the story in her favor.

38 These films provide a contrast to the postwar period and beyond. Medical developments in the 1950s directly affected the representation of tomboyism. The psychiatric model of homosexuality that emerged postwar affected children differently, as the goal was to avert a transgender or homosexual crisis through early diagnosis and implementation of the heterosexual “cure.” This focus on childhood “gender dysphoria” continued through the remainder of the twentieth century; in 1980, six years after homosexuality was depathologized and removed from the DSM, gender identity disorder (GID) entered the third edition (DSM-III) along with diagnostic criteria (Preciado 268). GID focused on childhood behavior, and was largely understood to be compensating for the removal of homosexuality. Prevailing psychiatric discourses felt that GID would instate surveillance
Bow’s portrayal of the unrepentant tomboy and butch flapper continued into the late 1920s with her first sound film *The Wild Party* (1929), directed by Dorothy Arzner. The film takes place in an all-female college where the girls are more interested in partying than studying. Because of Bow’s physical energy and her tendency to bounce from place to place during filming, she struggled with the stationary needs of the sound studio. As Zierold explains, unlike some silent stars, she had a decent voice for talkies, but she couldn’t deal well with the restrictions the microphone placed on her movements. Arzner would shout, “‘Cut, we’re not picking you up, Clara,’” and Bow would try to physically attack the microphone (174-5). The film is also known for its overt lesbian content, which Arzner created by actually removing an overtly lesbian character from the story that demonized women’s romantic friendships. Instead, Arzner infused the film with a more casual eroticism, occurring for example in the playful opening scene that shows the girls “exercising” in their dorm room in very short shorts and tight tops. The scene is reminiscent of the first overtly lesbian motion picture, the 1931 German film *Mädchen in Uniform*, produced during the Weimar Republic and later suppressed by the Nazis. In the presence of patriarchal symbols (such as the iron staircase, the bugle, the school principle as phallic woman, the ambient repressed lesbian sexuality), the phallic woman becomes the paternal container for the girls’ lust since they can’t have sex with each other. In a similar vein, Stella as butch flapper encourages the girls to be wild, demonstrating the kind of hijinks that become possible in the absence of a bitter, driving Fraulein.

Lesbian sexuality in the boarding school and college environments responds to the work of sexologist Havelock Ellis, who at the turn of the century believed that all-female environments bred lesbianism. Overt references to lesbian sexuality, and to masculine sexual aggression, were therefore mechanisms to prevent the kind of childhood gender crisis that Hula experiences, which ultimately led to homosexuality within this pathologizing logic (Puar 79).
not lost on 1920s audiences familiar with Ellis’s warnings, which he launched just as women’s colleges began to proliferate in the United States. American film wasn’t only reacting to the fact of lesbian sexuality but also expressed the fear that educated women would act like men and compete on both the sexual and intellectual levels. Novels like Ivy Compton-Burnett’s *More Women Than Men* (1933) and films like *The Wild Party* played with the idea of lesbian sexuality, while steering away from any serious consideration of a possible lesbian culture, which means that butch added a flavor to the film rather than a discrete identity. As Weiss writes, “Ellis’ preoccupation with all-female environments was taken up, popularized, and significantly refocused in several European and American films in the late 1920's and 30's,” for the pleasure of audiences still familiar with campy (and transgender) vaudevillian romps (55). While the film technically centers around Bow’s character, Stella’s, initially antagonistic relationship to the new anthropology professor, Gil, the erotic energy of the film mainly circulates between women. During the “exercising” session in the dorm room, the girls playfully comment on anthropology as the study of man, but they agree: “we know all about him, but there’s a lot he can learn about us!” By loosely referencing the field of “anthropology,” the film questions the divide between nature and culture, and the supposedly concrete boundaries between gender and sex categories. In one of the most cited lesbian scenes of early cinema, Stella finds her best friend Helen on the beach with a man, which provokes her to embrace Helen and admit her affections— “I love Helen, too!”—proving that her loyalty lies more with Helen than with Gil.

This style of zany comedy didn’t survive the arrival of the Great Depression and the subsequent need for darker, more complex characters that mirrored the country’s dire struggles. Bow’s decline in the 1930s was also due to a breakdown in her personal affairs, including the news that her longtime secretary, femme witness, and companion had been embezzling money. Bow also couldn’t adapt to the shift in the cultural climate. The 1920s was a notoriously hedonistic decade in
which audiences lived vicariously through Bow’s onscreen and offscreen performances—her tomboy pluck, the sexual ambiguity of her butch flapper persona, her “It Girl” outrageousness. 1929 marked the end of this libertine spirit, and what once seemed entertaining and carefree began to appear irresponsible and selfish (189). As the industry left the last remnants of vaudeville behind, filmmakers found new butch idols and heroines in Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, women whose gravitas signaled the ultimate end of Bow’s campy, decadent and scandalous career.

“Just Put Your Lips Together and Blow”: Inventing Lauren Bacall

Films of the 1920s and 1930s continued to present a feminist consciousness for white women through the trope of the New Woman and through the new butch lesbian star power found in Garbo and Dietrich. However, in a clear backlash, films of the 1940s used female characters that were in conflict with themselves, and were at once “hard and squishy, scathing and sentimental” (Haskell 28-29). As Haskell explains, during and after World War II, “The Woman’s Film” created female characters who “paid for” women’s ascendance of the employment ladder with a fall from “the pedestal.” Lauren Bacall is an excellent example of an actor who played these types of phallic women with outer toughness and a soft center (29). Haskell sees these characterizations as a backsliding from the feminism of the ’20s and ’30s. However, this steel wool/cotton candy dichotomy also bears a remarkable similarity to the stone butch duality explored in Chapter One, suggesting a continuation rather than a break from the Dietrich/Garbo lineage. In her early films, Lauren Bacall uses stone butch toughness to disarm the male lead, a toughness that only partially dissolves in the (somewhat) curative closure.

Bacall came to Hollywood from New York a shy and awkward teenager, determined but unsure of herself. Despite the fact that she was a lower middle-class Jew from New York raised by a single mother, her unfailing pursuit of an acting career eventually led her to be discovered by
director Howard Hawks, who saw something in her that not everyone was able to see. By hiding her nerves and shyness behind a tough girl façade, Hawks molded her into the character she would play in her first film, *To Have and Have Not*. In fact, it was Bacall’s nervous tremor that led her to develop “The Look,” for which she became famous. During screen tests for the film, she pressed her chin against her chest so that she could face the camera without shaking. In the process, she tilted her eyes upward, which led to her trademark seductive gaze. With Hawks’ coaching, Lauren (formerly known as Betty) acquired a deep voice and sultriness, what biographer Joe Hyams describes as an “almost masculine quality,” and for a short while, she became the new Marlene Dietrich (67). Hawks also envisioned her as a female version of Humphrey Bogart, an actor who would break the mold of the repetitive hollow heroine of the 1940s and add a new butch spirit to wartime cinema (92). Bacall serves as a good example of life imitating art, rather than the other way around. Her rise also demonstrates how film not only reflects but also creates gender and sex norms. Bacall’s early film persona fit perfectly with the film noir style, which allowed for greater gender and sex ambiguity. Whereas Bow films played with a vaudevillian tomboy butch and transgender aesthetic, Bacall’s earliest noir films, *To Have and Have Not* and *Confidential Agent*, are dark and menacing. Faderman and Timmon explain that the film noir mirrored the actual shadows in the cultural environment in L.A. in the early 1940s:

As the 1940s began, Los Angeles literally darkened. Following the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, cities on the West Coast instituted blackouts, fearing they would be the next target. City dwellers were instructed to blacken windows and to cover with dark paint their skylights and the top halves of automobile headlights. Wartime cast shadows everywhere. This period that was so dominated by darkness and dark suspicions introduced a long era in which the unfamiliar was despised and persecuted, even by public officials whose job it was to protect. The literary and film style of “noir,” marked by shadowy lighting and a theme of urban corruption, reflected a new L.A. Reality. (71)

Stone butch toughness in these early Bacall performances also suggests how gender difference, particularly female masculinity, came to be associated with the sinister and the shadowy. This association intensified throughout the postwar period, as butch lesbians came to represent more
directly the most evil figures in circulation—namely, the Nazi, the gang member, and the sadistic phallic woman haunting the prison and the factory.

Weiss, White, Halberstam, and Russo theorize film noir as a prominent medium that both explored and constrained lesbian “tendencies.” In addition, feminist theorist Teresa de Lauretis argues that film noir represents a departure from “The Woman’s Film” of this era, and from the monotonous trope of the “love interest” awaiting the return of the heroine, like Darling Clementine in “countless Westerns, war, and adventure movies” (87). In line with the emerging medical model that officially labeled homosexuality a “pathological personality disturbance,” film noir often used psychological perversity to portray lesbianism. The Hays Code only permitted these tendencies if the “disturbed” character received punishment for her transgressions, as in the classic film, *Rebecca* (1940), in which the sexually perverse Mrs. Danvers (Judith Anderson) is consumed in the fire she sets. Miss Danvers, referred to in the film as “Danny,” secretly orchestrates the demise of the patriarch. In a separate wing of the house, she coddles her pathetic romantic interest in the patriarch’s dead wife, signaling the beginning of the portrayal of diabolical masculine women on screen. Her death by burning also suggests how all film witches, particularly the lesbian ones, succumb in the end to the elements of “nature,” as in the watery demise of the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz*. As Weiss explains, lesbian tendencies are only vaguely expressed in these films, as in Mrs. Danvers’ “faraway, unfocused look in her eyes when she talks about Rebecca” (53). The severe look and harsh voice are the qualities that call attention to her deviance and to her lesbianism (53). Bacall’s “severe look” and “harsh voice” similarly code her as butch, a threat to both cisnormativity and heteronormativity, but a threat that is tempered by her eventual attraction to the male lead.

Her first film, *To Have and Have Not*, was loosely based on Ernest Hemingway’s novel of the same name, though screenwriters Jules Furthman and the young William Faulkner took many
Figure 13: Lauren Bacall as Rose Cullen in *Confidential Agent* (1945).
liberties with both plot points and character development. The film takes place in 1940 in Nazi-occupied Martinique shortly after the fall of France. Harry Morgan (Humphrey Bogart) is a skipper who hires his cabin cruiser out to wealthy customers. His boat piques the interest of the hotel owner, Gerard, a Gaullist fighting to free France from Vichy rule. He asks Morgan to smuggle underground leaders into Martinique, a request that Morgan eventually fulfills despite his professed lack of interest in politics. Lauren Bacall plays Marie Browning, a tough 22-year-old American who stops in Martinique because she runs out of money. Upon meeting Browning, Morgan nicknames her “Slim,” and she in turn nicknames him “Steve,” in anticipation of both a practical and romantic partnership. Critical reviews confirm the steel wool impression that Bacall made on audiences at the time. According to Hyams, when Marlene Dietrich saw the film, she called Hawks and chided him, “You SOB, that’s me twenty years ago” (106). Her most favorable critic early on in her career, James Agee, claimed that Bacall had a “cinema personality to burn, and she burns both ends against an unusually little middle” (10/23/44 for Time, qtd. in Royce 37). He characterized her personality as a compound of Bette Davis, Greta Garbo, Mae West, Marlene Dietrich, Jean Harlow and Glenda Farrell, but with a new “javelin-like vitality, a born dancer’s eloquence in movement, a fierce female shrewdness and a special sweet-sourness” (37). Agee perceived a “stone-crushing self-confidence and a trombone voice” that formed the persona of “the toughest girl a piously regenerate Hollywood has dreamed of in a long, long while” (37). Bosley Crowther of The New York Times claimed she was “plainly a girl with whom to cope” (10/12/44 for NYT—qtd. in Royce 37). Biographer Joe Hyams reports that Walter Winchell, a very influential columnist at the time, coined a new phrase, “The Bacall of the Wild,” which suggests a close relationship to Clara Bow’s “savagery,” as well as the slightly condescending edge that journalists used to dismiss any real threat Bacall may have posed to gender and sex norms.
Her very first line of the film—“anybody got a match”—is delivered in a restrained, understated manner (likely due to her nerves), which makes Bacall’s butch qualities excquisitely apparent from the start. She leans against the doorway of Steve’s room, and he throws her the matchbook (from quite a distance), which she catches successfully. In one frame, Bacall shows her stone butch duality visually through a combination of open and closed qualities. As she holds the lit match, about to bring it to the end of her cigarette, she stares out of the corner of her eye, communicating both her challenge to Steve and her desire. However, the other arm closes around her waist, encircling her body protectively. Despite Slim’s struggle with her vulnerabilities, every time Steve throws something from across the room, which happens several times, be it keys or matchbooks, she catches them expertly. The “catch” underscores the double entendre that occurs in these scenes, for when she uses lines like, “I can use a match,” “a match” means both the literal object and her desire for someone who can “match” her stone cold drive and aggression. The two are the only ones who can melt each other’s stone, something that proved to be true in real life as well.

In both butch music and film between the wars, cigarettes become a central phallic prop that demonstrate masculine style and mastery. For Clara Bow in the 1920s, Dietrich and Garbo in the 1930s and Bacall and Bette Davis in the 1940s, cigarettes represented masculine privilege, on screen and off. The movements of the camera, in particular the tendency to record a scene from Bacall’s point of view, signal that she is not only a love interest but a central figure in her own right—as Crowther observed, “a girl with whom to cope.” In the same opening scene, she throws the matchbook back to Steve, and abruptly walks off camera, cutting the viewer’s gaze short and foreshadowing her control over her own comings and goings in the film. Unlike many of her later films in which she portrays a stereotypically feminine manipulator, for example opposite Gregory Peck in the 1957 comedy about fashion, *Designing Woman*, in her early noir films she directly
challenges masculine control, particularly as she prowls the barroom scenes so typical of this genre. As Agee also wrote, “Besides good lines, there are good situations and songs for newcomer Bacall. She does a wickedly good job of sizing up male prospects in a low bar” (qtd. in Hyams 106).

However, racial stereotyping, particularly the use of “good-natured” black characters native to Martinique, as well as black jazz musicians in Hoagy Carmichael’s barroom band, indicate a similar strategy of racial containment that appeared in the 1920s. When sex and gender became unmoored, filmmakers reinforced racial stereotypes to guard against the threat of miscegenation, which would signal the total unravelling of social norms. Examples in this film include the docile black islander who Steve hires to help out on the boat. Like the Noble Savage in *Mantrap* and *Hula*, “good-natured” black Caribbeans living in poverty reduce racial violence to a static noise in the background. The main action of the film unfolds between white characters, further naturalizing the centrality of white characters and white problems, a formula that continues in contemporary Hollywood film. The casual inclusion of a racist song about “a very unfortunate colored man,” played by Hoagy Carmichael’s band, suggests how black characters were clowns and dupes, compliant barkeeps and porters, but never actors with substantive roles.

While Bow’s films were hastily produced and unconsidered in terms of camera placement and scene construction, noir films used more sophisticated camera angles, lighting, and scenic detail. In the bar, the camera again switches points of view to observe the scene from Slim’s perspective, suggesting her active rather than passive role in the story. In fact, Hawks’s creation of Bacall’s character as both Bogart’s competitor and love interest becomes clear in this scene as the camera continually changes position to register both Slim’s and Steve’s points of view. Later in the scene, she takes over the vocals for Carmichael’s band without bothering to ask permission; as Agee observes, Bacall “growls a *louche* song more suggestively than anyone has dared since Mae West in
While she’s singing, the camera is positioned behind Slim, from what is commonly understood as the third-person singular, universal male point-of-view. Her stone qualities clearly emerge when she steals a man’s wallet without his awareness, a move Steve notices and admires. Slim’s criminality establishes the two as co-conspirators, reversing the damsel-in-distress and knight-in-shining-armor motif so familiar to audiences of the period.

There are other notable aspects that recommend Bacall as butch. Because she was only nineteen when she starred in this film, her character also has the quality of a tomboy who has run away from home. In these menacing noir scenes, Bacall proves herself to be a genius of the one-liner, something she continued to master in her next film, *Confidential Agent*. After the Vichy authorities seize Slim and Steve and apprehend them for questioning, they ask why she stopped in Martinique from Trinidad, Port of Spain, a question she answers with scalpel precision—“to buy a new hat.” Part of Hawk’s strategy for dealing with Bacall’s nerves was to give her lines that were clipped and sparse, which ironically added to the butch bravado in her performance.

Steve’s ability to melt Slim’s stone also demonstrates Haskell’s premise that the leading women in the ’40’s were often steel on the outside and cotton candy on the inside. However, unlike later Bacall films, she never melts entirely. She begins to confide more in Steve and to speak about her life, but since both characters are primarily concerned for themselves, Steve never completely trusts Slim, nor vice versa. After a particularly tender moment, Slim delivers the famous lines that kick-started her career. Her ego refuses to accept Steve’s refusal of her sexual advances, and while she claims that she is trustworthy, the steely quality of her dialogue suggests otherwise: “You know you don’t have to act with me Steve. You don’t have to say anything and you don’t have to do anything. Not a thing. Oh maybe just whistle. You know how to whistle, don’t you Steve? You just

---

39 Hyams reminds the reader that she lip-synced the song, and the true vocals were by Andy Williams (106).
put your lips together and blow.” This line establishes her control over her own sexuality (she also tells Steve that both her money and her lips belong to her, and she doesn’t see any difference), but also suggests that Bacall possesses the requisite phallus that would allow Steve to perform a sexual act in this way. If Steve indeed needs to perform a whistling gesture in order to please Bacall sexually, this by necessity insinuates a transgender reversal, the possibility of a male homosexual encounter. This innuendo further establishes Hawks’ intention to create Bacall in Bogie’s image, a sexy butch with some of the qualities of a femme fatale, mixed together seductively to compete with Bogey’s swagger. The noir lighting accentuates the stone butch extremes of the characters, playing a major role in molding their dark, menacing, and aggressive aspects. In the scene where she is being questioned by the Vichy authorities, the lighting creates a chiaroscuro effect that heightens the sense of drama and danger. When Slim tries to make Steve jealous by flirting with another man, she begins to soften, admitting that she “never felt that way before” about a man, but the lighting in the hotel room also suggests the temporary nature of her softened stance.

The romance between Slim and Steve occurs alongside the more typically gendered marriage of the underground leaders, the De Bursacs. The demure wife worries over the fate of her wounded revolutionary husband, though she claims none of her own political views. When DeBursac’s wife gets irate with Steve out of her own frustration with their precarious situation, he warns her, “Don’t get tough with Slim—she’s apt to slap you back.” By contrast Slim’s decision to join Steve in the underground movement suggests she has come to her own views about Vichy, views for which is prepared to die. The ending of the film is therefore only a somewhat curative romantic ending, with a political twist that gives the relationship an added depth. When Steve proposes that they leave Martinique together, she delivers another stone butch one-liner: “I’m hard to get Steve—all you have to do is ask me.” Her nonchalance in the face of danger proves her difference from the damsel,
as well as her undeniable butch gumption. The two saunter off, with Carmichael’s band playing a “happy” song, but a song that doesn’t foreclose complication and further dark times for the couple.

In her next film, Confidential Agent, produced shortly after To Have and Have Not, Bacall plays an even more butch heroine in an ill-received performance that nearly ended her career. Another film to make use of her Bacall’s noir qualities, Confidential Agent describes a shadow world in which the men are soft and the women are hard. The film played on wartime fears ignited by the specter of the newly enlisted women soldiers in the U.S. army and Rosie the Riveter, both of whom threatened to claim men’s jobs and identities at home. The film is set in the middle of the Spanish Civil War. The leading man, Luis Denard (Charles Boyer), a former concert pianist and composer, travels to England as a confidential agent of the Spanish Republican government. He plans to buy coal for the Loyalists in order to deny it to Fascist rebels back home. On the ship, he meets Rose Cullen (Lauren Bacall) whose father, Lord Benditch (Holmes Herbert), heads the firm that Denard hopes to enlist in his cause.

The reviews of this film demonstrate how Bacall’s accentuated butch qualities in this film may have been unpopular with audiences. Crowther abruptly changed his mind about Bacall’s potential, calling her performance an “unmitigated bore,” complaining that her appearance was “far from attractive” and that her voice was “monotonous and dull” (11/3/45 NYT; qtd. in Royce 11). The New Yorker even compared her “sultry stare” to Medusa, which proposes an important potential overlap between contemporary butch style and this classical archetype (11/10/45; p. 59). The article went on to claim that she kept her face “obstinately immobile” and that it was only through an occasional nostril flair that you could tell how she was feeling (qtd. in Royce 40). These devastating reviews may help to explain why she played more gender-conforming characters in future films. As her former director Howard Hawks later chided her in 1947, “For Chrissakes, Betty, why don’t you
do scenes the way I taught you? You’re losing your attitude in films. You’re no actress, you’re a personality” (qtd. in Hyams 140).

Rose’s hard stone butch characteristics are again quite visible from her first moments on screen. The initial shots of Rose in the ship’s bar clearly depict the threat she poses to hegemonic masculinity. The camera gradually zooms in on Rose sitting at a small corner table surrounded by a throng of men in black coats and hats. Her coat is too big for her, which leads to the impression that she is wearing a man’s coat. A British man sits down at her table uninvited, and the dialogue between them reveals Rose as a force to be reckoned with, a sign that the war is causing women to become “unnaturally” bold:

Brit: I beg your pardon, but may I sit here?
Rose: Why?
Brit: You look a bit lonely—it’s not right, ya know, a pretty girl like you.
Rose: It’s a public place [she says it with attitude].
Brit: Well thank you, how about a fresh drink?
Rose: No.
Brit: Having fun?
Rose: Yes, in a quiet way.
Brit: You can’t have fun alone, especially on a boat.
Rose: It takes practice, but it isn’t too difficult.

The camera tracks her progress as she abruptly leaves the table and walks toward the bar, where she complains to the bartender about the lack of any decent scotch, a sign of how Rose’s butch attitude disguises her elite pedigree.

In her initial interactions with Denard, she appears dominant—unwilling or unable to expose her romantic feelings. After a delay at customs prevents them from making the train to London, she forcefully suggests that they hire a car. Denard presents a feminine softness, which highlights Rose’s ability to “castrate” the men who come into her sphere, similar to the ways Bow also emasculated the men in her films of the 1920s. Both actors suggest that women can’t display butch pluck or gumption without stealing these qualities from the men to whom they “rightly”
belong. Rose degrades Denard and seems to have a vendetta against him, particularly in her continued use of one-liners: “You lay on the mystery with a trowel—do you want to impress me?” Noir lighting adds to the darkness, power, and mystery of butch masculinity in this film.

Rose stresses repeatedly her similarity to her father and their mutual dislike of feminine sentiment, which serves as a warning to Denard that she will withdraw her help and affections if he starts being “melodramatic.” Tender moments between the two are often followed by Rose’s condescension and display of a hard exterior. Like her father, she doesn’t trust anyone, except a select few people. In a scene in her apartment that threatens to become romantic, she throws him out, saying that she detests “self-made martyrs.” She slaps him and calls him a liar, then wipes the blood tenderly from the corner of his mouth. The camera executes a tight close-up of Rose’s face, articulating the tears that run down her face as she slaps him. With a bad boy persona usually reserved for the male rake, she tells him straight: “I’m no good of course, but I have my points, if a man can stand the strain.” When the police question Denard for the murder of a young Irish housekeeper, one officer tries to protect Rose, but she dismisses his paternalism (“You’d better go. This isn’t a case for ladies’ ears,” to which Rose replies unflinchingly, “Oh, don’t be an ass”).

In contrast to Rose and her father, Melenday, a spy for the Spanish underground, calls Denard a “soft man,” in part because he was a music composer before the war. Meanwhile, Mrs. Melenday is a butch character in her own right, a murderer who pushes her own servant, Else, out the window, and who describes herself as cold, hard, and cruel. Mrs. Melenday further demonstrates how war perverts gender, creating effeminate men like Denard and Contreras, played by Peter Lorre, and hard women like Rose and Melenday, all part of the upside-down world of the noir. According to Vito Russo, in films of the period, Peter Lorre often plays a sissy or a stooge, and similarly in this case, he has “a weak heart,” which could be read as a sign of feminine weakness. When Melenday pushes Else out the window, Contreras covers his eyes with his hands.
Melenday has a strong Spanish accent, suggesting how ethnic background comes to signify butch evil in postwar film, continuing the stereotype of the Spanish and Italians as dirty and corrupt in comparison to the more refined Anglo characters. Mrs. Melenday becomes the diabolical traitor to the anti-fascist cause. A shot of Mrs. Melenday in her sitting room shows the consequences of butch masculinity in the postwar era if taken too far. The shot occurs at a distance, outside the door frame, which allows the audience a critical view of the predator. She’s sitting alone in a dimly lit room that has a particularly old world flair, which shows both her ethnic pride and her isolation. The outside wall of the room is on camera and completely black, as the use of extreme noir lightning confirms butch malignancy. The painterly quality dramatizes the life and death struggle in this film, as well as the evils of fascism channeled through an evil masculine woman. She laughs sinisterly and then looks morose as she contemplates her plan to poison herself, just so she can deny Denard the satisfaction of killing her.

The last scene of the film also deviates from the typical romantic and curative closure found in films of the period in which the hard-boiled woman eventually falls for the male lead. Rose joins Denard on the boat back to Spain, but makes clear that her devotion is both romantic and political, which gives her actions a larger and more independent purpose. She is a political and romantic equal who demands to drive the car, get drunk, and make the first move. As they face the future together as equal partners, Denard delivers the final line: “One day, I know, we must win.”

As Hyams explains, while Bacall may have realized that her roles after Confidential Agent were stereotypical and flat, Warner Brothers had taken complete control over which roles she could take, so there wasn’t much she could do. Instead of investing in her potential and providing her with training, studio heads decided to cast her in stereotypical, slinky roles opposite leading men with established careers (Hyams 140). One exception is the film Bright Leaf (1950), in which she plays a whorehouse madam opposite Gary Cooper in a period picture about the booming tobacco industry.
in the late nineteenth-century South. As Horak explains, butchness was allowed after the mid-thirties in period pictures, and this may be one example of that phenomenon. In the film, tobacco tycoon Brant Royle (Gary Cooper) tells Bacall’s character, Sonia, to “stop acting like a woman” when she displays uncharacteristic emotional softness. She rolls her own cigarettes, plays poker like one of the boys, proving the adage in the film that “only fast women smoke.” She’s quick to anger, in contrast to Miss Margaret, who becomes Cooper’s demure (and manipulative) wife. Bacall’s character is a truth teller, and she possesses the plunk, spunk, and gumption to take on any man. Sonia rejects Royce in the end, which leads to Royce’s expulsion from town; no happy love ending or curative closure results for either character, which is unusual. *To Have and Have Not*, *Confidential Agent*, and *Bright Leaf* are a far cry from later films like *Women’s World* (1954), in which Bacall’s character declares to her girlfriends that women are in charge, not because of their independence and drive, but rather because they’re the ones to have the babies. This change demonstrates the power the studios had in the postwar period to determine expressions of gender and sex, as postwar phobias increased the need to show conformity at any cost.

**Hope Emerson and the Emergence of the Butch Sadist**

While Bacall’s later more conventional film roles forced her to tame her butch, Hope Emerson’s character actor status allowed her to portray a variety of butch types throughout her career. Very little biographical information exists on Emerson; in fact, one of the only works to even consider Emerson is Boyd McDonald’s gay film lover’s guide and critical manifesto, *Cruising the Movies*. In the 1980s, McDonald appreciated Emerson’s presence, and felt that “to see her is not to see an actor acting but a person being, manipulating the audience by her mere existence rather than by technical effort” (24). While McDonald doesn’t directly refer to Emerson as butch, the essence of butch on screen is the manipulation of audiences through one’s very existence rather than through
technical expertise. While Halberstam, White, and Russo do refer to Emerson as “butch,” it is McDonald who perceives the visceral quality that makes this so.

McDonald also saw the contrast between the more misogynistic women’s roles in the 1980s, and the roles that the minor character status allowed Emerson to play in the 1950s: “Were she alive today, she would provide a valuable antidote to the poisonous treatment of women on film; in recent years, ‘straight’ men have increasingly made it official that they hate women, and by now even such nasty little creatures as Prince (Nelson) are abusing women on screen (his Purple Rain, to judge from reviews, is a real slapathon). Nobody would slap Hope Nelson around” (28). Emerson also provides a “valuable antidote” to the recent swell of unapologetic misogyny that has recently been on display in the highest levels of American politics. Recent normalization of violence against women should lead us to question the assumption that our culture has outgrown such hatred. Today as in the 1980s, we need Hope Emerson’s unforgiving butch defiance and fortitude.

From the perspective of a queer or otherwise progressive viewer, Emerson’s girth represents a challenge to hatred against women (and against fat women specifically). However, Emerson’s characters were all in their own way a product of postwar butchphobia, intended to frighten audiences through blatant homophobia and misogyny. In the film Adam’s Rib (1949), in which misogyny itself is “on trial,” Emerson plays a circus performer who can lift a man up in the air with one arm; House of Strangers (1949) cast her as the overbearing Italian mother figure who bears “unnatural affections” for her daughter; Thieves Highway (1949) features Emerson as the relentless and demanding restaurateur who “knows her food,” perhaps too well; Cry of the City (1948) highlights Emerson as a jewel thief and a compulsive eater, which were not mutually exclusive categories; and in Caged! (1950), she took on her most iconic role as the diabolical, Nazi-like prison matron who revels in both her love of food and sex.
In all her films, her size and weight are major aspects of her characters, as she came to represent a *butch body out of control*. In fact, a mini-biography currently posted by an Emerson enthusiast on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) notes her size and butch style as her most distinguishing aspects:

Although there may have been “bigger” actresses in Hollywood's history, there were few ‘larger’ than Hope Emerson. At 6’ 2” and 230 pounds, she towered over many of her male co-stars, and her size, brusque voice and stern demeanor typed her for a career in villainous roles, such as her star turn as the sadistic prison matron in *Caged!* (1950), which garnered her an Oscar nomination. (frankfob2@yahoo.com).

The decision to remark first on her size rather than her acting abilities confirms her status as not only a butch, but a *fat* butch.

The fat butch category contains Hope Emerson, and also Gertrude Stein. Both possessed butch girth, and refused to apologize, even though both were victims of fat phobia throughout their lives. Writers described Stein as massively overweight (which was an exaggeration) and commented in a condescending and disparaging manner on her love of food. Her rejection of the corset early in life, before it was fashionable to do so, also became a subject for negative commentary. Mabel Dodge’s description of Stein, written in 1913, shows how fat phobia played a part in some people’s perceptions:

Gertrude Stein was prodigious. Pounds and pounds and pounds piled up on her skeleton—not the billowing kind, but massive, heavy fat...She would arrive just sweating, her face parboiled. And when she sat down, fanning herself with her broad-brimmed hat with its wilted, dark-brown ribbon, she exhaled a vivid steam all around her. When she got up she frankly used to pull her clothes off from where they stuck to her great legs. Yet with all this she was not at all repulsive. On the contrary, she was positively, richly attractive in her grand ampleur. (qtd. in Souhami 155)

While Dodge seems compelled to add that this billowing, massive, heavy fat was part of what made her attractive, the image of sweaty clothing sticking to “great legs” paints a repulsive picture. Her acerbic comments suggest how thinness signified proper feminine decorum in the early decades of
the twentieth century. After World War I, few women in the public eye dared to be unapologetically fat.

Scholars in the emerging field of fat studies illuminate the ways that fat women have been the objects of scorn and ridicule for at least the last one hundred years. In “The White Man’s Burden,” Female Sexuality, Tourist Postcards, and the place of the Fat Woman in Early 20th Century U.S. Culture,” Amy Farrell reports how by the beginning of the 20th century, fatness in women became tied to lower prosperity, illness, fertility problems, and lower sexual attractiveness (256). Nativist critics and health professionals in the U.S. were looking for ways to separate the superior stock from the inferior, and race and fatness became convenient categories to accomplish this objective. Fatness signaled one’s uncivilized status, especially when connected to one’s ethnic and racial identity (260). According to Elena Levy-Navarro, the term “obese” helped differentiate properly disciplined white Americans from their nonwhite and ethnic counterparts (15). In the United States, widespread fear of “obesity” coincided with a cultural anxiety over the influx of immigrant groups, especially Italians and Jews (16). Emerson’s portrayal of the overbearing and fat Italian mother in House of Strangers suggests how film expressed this anxiety. While in the nineteenth century fatness conferred privilege, fatness came to symbolize lower class status, which helps explain Emerson’s portrayal of characters that were both fat and working or lower-class. Particularly in Caged, Emerson’s fatness hinted at a variety of unhealthy appetites, including desire for the young women in her “care,” and “unnatural” desire for masculine power and status.

The noir genre provided Emerson with the opportunity to use her fat butch qualities to depict the shady side of life. In Cry of the City, directed by Robert Siodmak, Emerson plays a jewel thief masquerading as a “masseuse” (in the parlance of the times). As Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton write in A Panorama of American Film Noir 1941-1953, Siodmak produced better noir effects in other films, but Hope Emerson’s presence makes the film worth watching. While they
claim that overall *Cry of the City* appears rushed and uneven, Emerson made the picture a success through her portrayal of a famished, quintessentially phallic woman. She easily forces the supposed tough guy, Martin Rome (Richard Conte), to submit to her whims.

The film begins with Rome recuperating in a prison hospital after a shootout that leaves one police officer dead. He is visited by a tearful, young fiancée, Teena Ricante (Debra Paget). A shady lawyer representing another crook, Niles, claims that Rome participated in a jewel robbery with Ricante in which a woman was killed. Rome is innocent of that crime, but he worries that the no-good lawyer will frame him and Ricante. He escapes the hospital and kills the lawyer, at the same time retrieving the name of the true female accomplice in the jewel robbery, Rose Givens (Hope Emerson). Suffering from bullet wounds and on the verge of collapse, Rome locates Givens in her home/“massage parlor.” She recognizes him and calmly lets him in, after which they agree on a romantic and criminal partnership, at least from Rose’s perspective. However, Rome tricks Givens, and as she attempts to retrieve the jewels from a subway locker, she is apprehended by the police. In the struggle, she shoots at Rome, but wounds Candella instead. However, despite Candella’s failing condition, he manages to kill Rome at the end of the film.

Despite Rose Givens’s delayed entry and her short screen time, her character is unforgettable. The viewer is not so much introduced to Givens as confronted by her. The scene takes place in the middle of the night and utilizes noir lighting to convey Givens’s evil nature. The camera is positioned behind Rome as he waits outside the door for Givens to answer. The fact that Givens is a “masseuse” further demonstrates how her character is defined through the fat butch body. The sign reads “Mm. Rose Swedish Massage” with the word “Reducing” below, and as the scene with Martin Rome reveals, Givens indeed offers massage to fat, old women with “too many jewels.” Givens’s main objective is to steal the jewels for herself to punish these women for wanting to become thin and to stave off old age. Rome rings the bell, and a door positioned far down a long
Figure 14: Hope Emerson, as Rose Givens, in *Cry of the City* (1948), as she confronts Martin and the audience with her *butch body out of control.*
Figure 15: Hope Emerson as Rose Givens in *Cry of the City* (1948). “That’s Right, Martin. Relax…it’s good, isn’t it? I have a touch.”
Figure 16: Hope Emerson, as Rose Givens, in *Cry of the City* (1948), offering Marty a stack of pancakes.
corridor opens, revealing only Givens’s silhouette. She moves slowly down the corridor, backlit from the room she has just left. The outside door has a glass window, which means that we can see Givens approaching; the silhouette allows viewers to perceive Givens’s physical enormity as her principal quality, and yet, she walks with confidence and pride. Her figure remains in the dark until she turns on the lights in the foyer, which reveals her middle-aged, witch-like presence: diabolical, menacing, and distrusting. In one frame of this scene, the collar of her uniform creates an imposing “V” shape, symbolizing her dangerous, engulfing female anatomy. The camera is positioned low so that Givens looks down on Rome and the viewer. As in the still of Bow in Black Oxen, Givens wears no jewelry or feminine adornment, which adds to her mannish appearance in this moment. The low camera angle also accentuates the wrinkles in Givens’s face, adding to the impression of an old, fat butch sorceress intent on murder and mayhem.

In the scenes that feature Givens, the director positions the camera at a low angle, which accentuates her size, making Rome seem defenseless and childlike. There are many shots of her from behind, which allows for a long meditation on her rear end as it sways beneath her “masseuse” uniform. When Rome tells her that he knows about her involvement in the jewel theft, she sits down opposite Rome, allowing her full weight to fall on the chair. She coolly and calmly refutes Rome’s claim: “that’s ridiculous…you know better than to walk in here and try to bluff me like that.” When Rome shows Givens the newspaper announcing the death of the lawyer, her accomplice, she rolls the newspaper into a phallic wand and begins to caress Rome’s face. In one frame, she holds a fist on one hip while leaning with her opposite forearm on Rome’s chair. She smiles down at him, revealing the pleasure she takes in teasing Rome with the wand. Givens then gives Rome a massage: “That’s right, Martin. Relax…it’s good, isn’t it? I have a touch. It’s only given to a few. It’s a matter of knowing the currents of the body.” Her special knowledge of the body’s currents, her claim to having “a touch,” suggests how Emerson’s size was used to depict malice. By
making her sexual drive and hungers part of her criminality, the film creates a direct association between butch and evil. After this chilling seduction scene, Givens threatens to kill Rome if he doesn’t give her the key to the subway locker where the stolen jewels are hidden. Seated behind and above him on the arm of the couch (the position of a butch sadist and top), she closes both hands around his neck. Her heavy arm takes up much of the foreground of the shot, and her face betrays the pleasure she takes in making the threat. Her eyes are cast downward at Martin while Martin looks up at Givens with a terrified expression.

The next morning, Givens prepares a large breakfast, including a giant stack of pancakes, which she consumes with abandon. She tries to get Martin to eat while she stuffs her own face with food. Mid-chew, she feigns concern over Martin’s welfare: “Eat, Martin—you need your strength.” Again with her mouth full of food, she discusses her plans to hawk the jewels and start a bed and breakfast in the country, because she “loves to cook.” Her overeating makes her later capture by the police seem well deserved. Her overbearing nature and insatiable appetites mean that the audience doesn’t need to be sympathetic toward her when Rome betrays her. Through Emerson’s character, the film depicts butch as a desire for too much of everything, a desire that must be tamed through the narrative arc of the film and the curative closure.

In Caged!, directed by John Cromwell and based on the story, “Women Without Men,” by Virginia Kellogg and Bernard C. Schoenfield, Emerson plays the sadistic prison warden, Evelyn Harper, who subjects her charges to a variety of abuses. The story revolves around 19-year-old Marie Allen (Eleanor Parker), who is sent to a woman’s state prison as an accomplice to her husband’s botched armed robbery, in which he is killed. Marie becomes just another helpless victim of a man’s misdeeds, a common scenario for most of the women in the prison. Many of the women are “regulars,” “bad girls” doomed to recidivism because they can’t choose a good man. The film was intended to be a serious portrayal of the horrific conditions in women’s prisons. In fact, the
film was nominated for three Academy Awards, including best leading actress (Eleanor Parker), best supporting actress (Hope Emerson), and Virginia Kellogg and Bernard C. Schoenfield for best writing, story, and screenplay. Today the film is a queer camp classic. As Boyd McDonald notes, the exclamation point in the title may have added extra gravitas to the film at the time, but today it is a kind of eye winking to queer audiences, something, he contends, a “complacent” heterosexual might not notice.

While Harper actively punishes her charges if they don't comply with her demands, Superintendent Benton (Agnes Moorehead) represents the benevolent phallic woman, a figure analogous to the school marm in Ivy Compton Burnett’s 1933 novel More Women Than Men. Benton tries to convince the prisoner to desire the white, middle-class life, including a good husband, a family, and a house in the suburbs. Benton values conformity and believes that the prisoners can use their time in prison to make themselves ready to receive this “heterosexual cure.” The constant presence of women’s magazines, like Happy Homes, reminds the prisoners of what should be their ultimate goal: heterosexual (thin) rehabilitation. In their first conversation together, Benton reminds Marie that “no prison is a normal place,” while the camera registers a photograph of Benton’s husband, suggesting what is, in fact, “normal.” Benton tries to give Marie hope that she can lead a happy life:

Benton: We want to help you so that when you go home you can start a new life.
Marie: I want to do the right thing.
Benton: You’re an intelligent girl. You know good from bad.

Because Marie is also skinny and attractive, Benton sees her as an ideal candidate for rehabilitation, while girls like Kitty, a fellow inmate, have already crossed over permanently to the “butch” side. Marie’s submissiveness—her shaking and trembling—appear to be “healthy” signs of femininity. When an exhausted and jaded intake nurse initially interviews Marie, she lets her skip the “mental test,” since she looks “normal enough.” Marie gradually becomes butch throughout the film,
demonstrating how the women may arrive able-minded and straight only to become sick through repeated exposure to butch masculinity.

Harper has a gruff voice, and a rough, violent manner, which she uses to threaten the girls into accepting her seductions. Harper offers candy, cigarettes, and other unspecified “treats” to those who comply with her demands. Harper shows excessive appetites for both sex and food, but she is unapologetic and even claims to be happy with her body and the life she has created for herself in the prison. We first meet Harper in her room, after the camera focuses on a framed piece of embroidery that reads, “For Our Dear Matron,” a gift from one of the inmates in Harper’s “care.” The camera pans to Harper’s bed, which is decorated with a souvenir pillow from Niagara Falls, suggesting Harper’s lower class, tacky search for love. She eats chocolates out of a box and reads a magazine, *Midnight Romance*, while reclining on the bed. As in *Cry of the City*, the director places the camera at a low angle so that her torso appears larger than life. Another inmate brings Marie into Harper’s room, and Harper croons, “Let’s you and me get acquainted, honey. You may be a number to the others, but not to me.” Harper points out the presents around the room that inmates have given her for her “care and concern.” She eats the chocolates compulsively, at one point even eating half of a chocolate and throwing the rest back in the box. Harper assures Marie that if she plays along, and gets Harper money from the outside, she’ll make it much easier on herself. The camera uses shot-reverse-shot to register the helpless expression on Marie’s face as Harper discusses Marie’s “future” in the prison. However, when Harper finds out Marie’s people have no money, she forces her to scrub the floors with lye, just one of many sadistic punishments. As Harper walks out of the “pen,” we get another long shot of Emerson’s rear end.

In fact, Harper likes the ways she looks, and even has a lover, a man who lives above a bar in a room that’s “real comfortable, if you know what I mean.” In a scene that occurs after a prisoner gets denied parole, and she’s being consoled by her bunkmates, Harper walks in slowly, which again
makes her *approach* the focus. When the prisoners make fun of her outfit, a loud flowered dress with gaudy accessories that accentuate her size, Harper defends herself: “the guy outside likes the way I look.” Once again, the camera is close and low, exaggerating her enormous presence. The camera moves slowly from one prisoner to the next, registering each horrified expression as Harper discusses her seedy sex life on the outside.

The film also contains many overt lesbian references, which serve as warnings to potential lesbians of the fate that awaits them if they refuse to change their ways. In the postwar period, prejudice against lesbians escalated in proportion to their increased visibility in mainstream culture. This film thus foreshadows the inclusion of homosexuality as a “sociopathic personality disturbance” in the original 1953 American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM). The scene with the strongest lesbian content occurs when Kitty tries to seduce Marie while lying on Marie’s top bunk. This becomes a classic case of the butch “infecting” the more feminine woman with her lesbian disease, a common reason why lesbians received dishonorable discharges in the military during and after World War II. While Marie arrives as the feminine victim, vulnerable to the predatory whims of Harper and Marie, she leaves a tougher version of herself, immune to Benton’s reformist rhetoric. After Marie suffers repeated abuses from Harper, and watches prisoner after prisoner get “flopped back” after failed parole hearings, Kitty’s persuasions begin to work. Marie’s turn toward butch occurs after she gives birth and her own mother refuses to care for the child, which means that the baby will be put up for adoption. Kitty uses this moment as an opportunity to recruit Marie to her side at last. Kitty urges Marie to flop out.

---

40 The film can be compared to the contemporary series, *Orange is the New Black*, a show that also makes the connection between lesbianism and criminality. Though lesbians are not necessarily demonized in the series, being a lesbian means turning away from cisnormativity and heteronormativity, including home and family. However, home and family are still often depicted as the only desired—and desirable—objects after prison.
quick and let her contact her “boys” on the outside who will get her set up boosting. Marie lies on her back, while Kitty croons softly, “think it over sweetie, but get this through your head if you stay in here too long, you don’t think of guys at all. You just get out of the habit.” The loss of her baby seals Marie’s fate, suggesting that a thwarted maternal sensibility can cause butch pathology. Marie’s physical confrontation with Harper during the prison brawl also has lesbian undertones, as Marie rips Harper’s uniform, exposing her bra and breast.

The extremes of Harper’s behavior necessitate her complete removal from the film, in this case through a violent death that the audience witnesses in the curative closure. In *Cry of the City*, her role in the film ends with her capture by the police, which may have seemed punishment enough. However, Harper isn’t just a criminal, but a fat, butch criminal with sadistic, demonic intent. Early in the film, a debutante, another victim of a bad man, loses her mind in the middle of the night and punches through a glass window with her bare hand, while calling out, “father!” Harper commands one of her minion guards to “grab her,” and then suggests that a “cold hose will quiet her down,” a torture eerily reminiscent of today’s water-boarding. While Benton punishes Marie with solitary confinement, Harper takes the punishment a step further by shaving Marie’s head, ignoring Benton’s repeated warnings that the practice is “criminal.” When Harper turns on the clippers, Marie screams, causing Harper to stuff a towel in her mouth. The camera takes a position above Marie’s head so the viewer can register the progress of the clippers as they remove the last sign of Marie’s femininity. This act bears chilling similarity to the punishment given to French girls who fraternized with German soldiers during World War II, but also to the head shaving that Jewish women were subjected to in concentration camps. The camera then moves below Harper’s chin so the viewer can witness her diabolical glee, also reminiscent of a Nazi guard who might take pleasure in sadistic abuse. This head shaving solidifies Marie’s transition from helpless femme to butch aggressor. When Kitty (who is still catatonic from a month in solitary confinement) kills Harper with a fork, she also
kills off everything that Harper represents: fatness, seedy sexuality, unquenchable appetites for power, food, and sex. However, Marie’s indoctrination into Harper’s ways suggests that butch can never be truly disavowed or eliminated. Marie delivers an epitaph to Harper’s tragic existence when she gazes on the body and simply instructs: “Kindly omit flowers.” Marie thanks Benton “for the haircut” as she leaves the prison, out on parole, though Benton’s last words in the film—“she’ll be back”—suggest that any character who becomes butch is doomed to recidivism. In a last gesture of butch defiance, Marie throws her wedding ring in the trash on her way to meet her new keepers—a car full of men with whom she keeps pace, lighting a cigarette with a butch-like sneer as they drive away.

In the postwar period, queer content that survived the censors’ scissors needed to serve the national obsession with norms and normalization. This meant that gay, lesbian, and transgender characters were often portrayed as villains, Nazis, “crazies,” and pathological criminals. Other examples of outrageously evil butches include the chief Nazi agent, Mr. Christopher, in The House on 92nd Street (1945), a cross-dressed character who is really agent Elsa Gephardt in drag. American sexism, homophobia and xenophobia are given voice all at once in this character. At the end of the film, Gephardt perishes in a fire, shortly after her gender identity is revealed—thus her death becomes a direct result of her gender dysphoria. An example of heavy-handed war propaganda, this film reveals how a transman could signify the greatest terror—the possibility of Nazi agents operating in New York City’s Upper East Side. The film also shows the more general postwar tendency to code homosexuality through villainy, a tendency found in films like Alfred Hitchcock’s adaptation of Patricia Highsmith’s novel, Strangers on a Train (1951).

In Orson Welles’s Touch of Evil, butch-styled character actor Mercedes McCambridge gives an uncredited performance as a member of a Chicana motorcycle gang. As the gang prepares to rape the white, female lead (Janet Leigh), McCambridge refuses to leave the hotel room and delivers this
bone-chilling line: “I wanna stay—I wanna watch.” Her character is also a symbol of the paranoia over gender, sex, and race in the post-Pearl Harbor “age of anxiety.” With her slicked-back hair and leather jacket, she resembles James Dean or Marlon Brando, demonstrating how throughout American history, butch borrows from existing male styles. As Benshoff and Griffin report, “Dean’s rumored bisexuality and his combination of both ‘tough’ and ‘soft’ masculine characteristics made him a role model for ‘baby butch’ lesbians” (*Queer Images* 101). The line “I wanna stay—I wanna to watch,” creates a link between lesbianism, voyeurism, and sexual violence, and makes lesbians into perpetrators instead of victims. Leslie Feinberg’s novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) as well as first-hand accounts of early butch/femme communities in the 1940s and ’50s, show how butch lesbians were brutally attacked in this period. McCambridge’s character serves as a good example of how mainstream Hollywood film creates distortions that masquerade as truths about gender, sex, and race (White 180).

Today Hope Emerson gives viewers an appreciation for the enormous potential of the fat butch, a potential that can be explored in contemporary film. We can see her evil as a kind of revolt against the discrimination and oppression that fat butch-styled individuals have faced for over a century. Butch-style characters from the silent era to the postwar era can provide context for a contemporary assault on the symbolic order through the medium of Hollywood film. Clara Bow, Lauren Bacall, and Hope Emerson leave an indelible impression; they are enormous in their own ways, for their own periods. We need similar enormousness to appear in mainstream cinema today. Considering the economic and cultural dominance of the Hollywood film industry, I want to conclude by proposing ways that filmmakers can engage in a contemporary assault on normalization from within the texts themselves. In the feminist film theory classic, “Women’s Cinema as Counter Cinema,” Claire Johnston argues that myths governing the production of Hollywood film operate under the same logic as other aspects of society, in which cultural myths are played out through
icons. Using Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies*, she suggests that a sign can be emptied of its original denotative meaning and replaced with a new connotative one (32). Through Barthes, Johnston questions the idea that realism or naturalism are the only means for disrupting normalizing discourses, for these modes only cement the myth to the icon, preventing any subversive entry into the text. Revolutionary strategies through film must instead challenge “reality” and manufacture new meanings within the medium itself (33). In many ways, each example discussed in this chapter accomplishes this task. While none of these actors’ “discuss” misogyny and homophobia onscreen, Johnston questions the effectiveness of “discussion” of oppression in the first place. This strategy has yet to disrupt sufficiently the interlocking processes of cisnormativity, heteronormativity, or ableism, any more than it was able to disrupt significantly sexist ideology in the ’70s.

Much of the change must come from the visions of butch directors who insert their views into their projects. Johnston returns me to the example of Dorothy Arzner, who used parody and extreme stereotyping to create intertextual resistance in the 1933 film *Dance, Girl, Dance*, made with RKO Radio Pictures. As in many of the above examples, primitive stereotyping make heteronormative and cisnormative logic appear absurd; in one scene, a bubbly female character suddenly stops dancing, turns to the audience, and begins to reveal how *she* sees *them* (italics mine, 38). This scene disrupts object/subject relations and destroys the logic of gazing at its very core. Bow, Bacall, and Emerson can also serve as historical examples of how filmmakers can invert the relationship between “seer” and “seen,” a dynamic that has been firmly entrenched in the Hollywood film industry since at least the postwar era.
Epilogue

Melting Hannah Arendt’s Stone:
Butch as a Way of Being in the World

In *Butch Between the Wars*, I offer the stories of nine women who worked in a butch style during the interwar and early postwar periods, expressing in their craft an affinity for masculine flavors and tones. The first half of the twentieth century has received comparatively little attention in conversations on butch, and even when this period is addressed, the more common butch lesbian figures tend to emerge. I also move toward an analysis of the texture of butch, with an eye for what I call butch moments in which these styles appear. In this respect, *Butch Between the Wars* is concerned with the local, the historically constructed aesthetic exchanges that occurred between artist and audience in literature, music, and film. This research provides historical context for the current proliferation of transmasculine and female masculine styles and subjectivities. I search for how writers, musicians, performers and actors navigated and circumvented gendered demands, strategies that can be useful in the present. I consider as well the price that those with anomalous gender performance continue to pay for their transgressions—for insisting on their own artistic pleasures. Between the wars, this desire for masculine pleasure sometimes led to a close cooptation of hegemonic masculinity, an aspect that must be acknowledged as part of the whole. Any discussion on transmasculinity and/or female masculinity must include these darker notes, for it is impossible, and perhaps undesirable, to separate so-called productive or transgressive masculinity from the more progressive or revised versions.

In Chapter One, I explore how butch writers—Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, and Marianne Moore—empathized with soldiers who fought in World War I, and how this identification with masculine greatness (and masculine failure) led these writers to develop a stone butch style. Stone butch is one of the most widely visible aspects of butch style in the interwar period, and in the
present. From Susan Sontag, whose work appears frequently in this dissertation, to the presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, many public figures use stone butch, a way of being that simultaneously acknowledges and denies emotion. No matter how many popular articles appeared in 2016 attempting to penetrate Clinton’s stone and portray her as a soft, grandmotherly woman, she was still guilty of not displaying appropriate levels of emotion in public. She was even accused of not knowing the names of her children, which suggests her total disconnection from the domestic sphere, which still amounts to heresy. Stone butch is a quality that can make a woman highly unlikeable, but this unlikeability may be part of the guilty pleasure that public figures find in stone butch. Perhaps there is a particular creative arousal to be found in turning others off. Stone butch challenges the expectation that women will be emotionally expressive and nurturing in any given situation, while men will be logical and restrained. Though beyond the scope of this dissertation, there is strong potential for the exploration of stone butch in gay male cultures in which penetration, both sexual and emotional, takes on a potent, often over-determined set of meanings. People of color also use stone butch as a kind of armor that deflects discrimination and violence. Stone butch emotional postures can circulate equally among straight, white men who simultaneously—and secretly—enjoy (and disavow) various forms of emotional and sexual penetration.

In Chapter Two, I explore how B.D. (bulldyke) women in the interwar period “tell it like it is,” suggesting the ways that butch style confronts audiences with uncomfortable truths. B.D. women—Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Josephine Baker expressed anger and defiance at a time when the white middle class, and black proponents of New Negro ideology, demanded feminine effacement and silence. B.D. women challenged the idea that the suffering of black people in the Jim Crow South or in the cities of the North needed to be hidden to induce an attractive picture of racial uplift. Using a variety of artistic devices, including humor, they subverted the Sapphire Caricature that confines black women to cartoonish, knife-brandishing, highly reproducible
images. In the contemporary moment, black female anger is dismissed through the Sapphire Caricature as an irrational part of a genetic make-up rather than as a justified response to violence and abuse. This caricature often determines what others expect from a black woman. Only the anger of white men is ever truly heard in patriarchal cultures, but this didn’t stop black female performers in the interwar period from confronting their perpetrators.

In Chapter Three, I investigate the ways that the film industry both shaped and reflected white butch performance for women at a critical point in the medium’s history. While in the screwball comedies of the 1920s the figure of the tomboy was a prominent way to express butch style, in the 1930s and ’40s, the film noir genre became a vehicle for the more open expression of lesbian “tendencies.” In the postwar period, the butch minor character deflected anxiety over the proliferation of gay identities in urban communities. When butch began appearing more widely in the culture, a semiotic slide occurred between the butch, the Nazi, and the criminal. World War II deepened the turn away from the representation of female masculinity, a turn that began in the 1930s; benign, comical representations of boyish or mannish women gradually disappeared and cross-dressing was banned, which led to the erasure of butch on screen. This meant the loss of a certain kind of film heroine. Even today, Bette Davis, Barbara Stanwyck, Joan Crawford, Marlene Dietrich, Lauren Bacall, and Hope Emerson remain the quintessential tough butches of the big screen.

Melting Hannah Arendt’s Stone: Toward Butch as a Way of Being in the World

The U.S. is experiencing both a time of renewed attention and interest in female masculinity and transmasculinity through the transgender movement, and a time of political and social crisis. In light of the recent turn of events (or turns of the screw) in American politics, I want to end by offering butch as a style of political response, as a way of being in the world that demands the
exposure of difficult truths. Figures like Hannah Arendt, Judith Butler, and Roxane Gay came to mind when I imagined women who perform a kind of butch political swagger, but I chose to focus on Hannah Arendt, a political theorist who looks back at the Second World War, the Holocaust, and the nature of evil with an exterior coldness, and an inner tenderness. While such a view has not yet been proposed, to my thinking, Arendt’s gender performance was butch, with all of the stone (and stone-crushing), rage, defiance, pluck, and gumption that butch is capable of evoking. This epilogue will therefore show how all of these butch qualities can be theorized together, forming a kind of butch toolkit. Butch is a style that moves both discretely and overtly, weaving its way through diverse identity categories, continuing on as style even after the advent of butch as lesbian moniker. Arendt shows these butch qualities in her writings, interviews, personal letters (particularly to her close friend, Mary McCarthy), and in her teaching (it was not uncommon for her to invite members of the community to hear her lectures, a testimony to her Steinian butch sense of plurality and radical democracy). She may differ from the other subjects in this dissertation by trade, but not in style.

Anecdotally speaking, the election of Donald Trump and the rise of nationalist movements across the world have caused a spike in Arendt readership in certain circles, particularly of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which has begun to appear in bookstore windows across New York City. However, because of the struggles that Arendt faced over her “tone,” her follow-up to *Origins, Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, becomes equally urgent reading. Her concept of the “banality of evil,” which she invented after observing the trial of Nazi officer, Adolf Eichmann, has become one of the most maligned (and misunderstood) phrases in political theory. However, the resistance to this phrase, and to Arendt’s proposals more broadly speaking, continues to occur in part because of ongoing discrimination against butch-styled individuals.
Consider this epilogue as a paean to the primacy of truth, a strenuous and unremitting demand for fact. In the age of the “alternative fact” (previously known as “lie”), we can learn from Arendt’s struggle to present what she believed to be the most accurate retelling of the Holocaust. In the process, Arendt presented to a wider public the incongruous and upsetting image of a masculine woman thinking. While being a Jew—and being a woman—belonged to certain “indubitable facts” about her life, she never felt any affiliation within a specific group of people, an aspect of her person that enflamed Arendt critics. Her lack of belonging to either the category “man” or “woman” became evident in Eichmann, a book that also indicted hegemonic masculinity as a source of what she called the Nazi’s “ruthless toughness.” In a 1964 interview for the German television program “Zur Person,” Günter Gaus asks Arendt about the “problem of women’s emancipation,” and if the problem had been present for her (“What Remains?” 5). Arendt acknowledged that “there is always the problem as such”—but by using the passive voice, she suggested a lack of personal connection to the problem (5). Arendt felt qualified to give advice to other women to refrain from “giving orders” (to men) if she wishes to remain feminine, but she insisted that the “advice” problem played no role in her life (5). As Arendt claimed, “I have always done what I liked to do” (italics mine, 5).

Scholars often have difficulty placing Arendt’s work within any one field, though she argued strongly that she was a political theorist and not a philosopher. She was trained in philosophy and studied with Martin Heidegger, who became her lover, though she finished her dissertation under the guidance of Karl Jaspers, the existentialist philosopher-psychologist. Heidegger’s turn toward the Nazi party devastated Arendt and caused their painful separation. In her dissertation, she focused on the concept of love in the work of Saint Augustine, ideas that influenced her entire oeuvre as she explored her own love of the world through political theory. Arendt claims that she was given the tools for thinking from Heidegger, as she adopted his mixing of passion and reason, though she believed in the separation of emotion from public life. In 1933, she emigrated from Germany.
illegally, eventually crossing the border into France. In 1940, she married Heinrich Blücher, a German poet, Marxist philosopher, and prominent activist. Shortly after, she was briefly imprisoned in a French concentration camp, Camp Gurs, but was released after only a few weeks. She then emigrated to the United States with Blücher and her mother, and during the War began working with the Zionist movement to provide training and support to Jewish youth. Over the course of her prolific career, she taught at many prestigious universities, eventually at the New School for Social Research, where she remained until her death in 1975.

Her work on the Eichmann trial first appeared as a series of five articles in The New Yorker, on February 16 and 23, and March 2, 9, and 16, 1963. The 2013 film Hannah Arendt by Margarethe von Trotta depicts how much The New Yorker risked by allowing Arendt to expose the role that the Jewish Councils played in the Final Solution, as well as by permitting the phrase the “banality of evil” to appear in print at all. Part of the problem was, as Arendt suspected, that she had the audacity to expose in the first place these unsettling hypocrisies within the Jewish community in Europe during the War and in Israel during the time of the trial. For example, she pointed out that according to Rabbinical law, current at the time of the trial, no Jew in Israel could marry a non-Jew; children of mixed marriages were considered bastards, and if you had a non-Jewish mother you could not be married or buried. She used these facts to condemn the “breathtaking naïveté” of those who denounced the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, which prohibited intermarriage and sexual relations between Jews and Germans. Arendt proposed that the German Jewish community negotiated with Nazi authorities, an idea that appalled American Jews and Jews in Israel, as well as across the diaspora. As Arendt writes in the post-script to Eichmann, it was the ubiquitous nature of anti-Semitism, the feeling of inevitability of anti-Semitism that allowed this negotiation to take place, that is, in the early stages before the Final Solution. Early negotiations made it easier to implement the
Final Solution, when helping Jews to escape quickly turned for certain council members into helping the Nazis deport them.

In the chapter “The Wannsee Conference, or Pontius Pilate,” she lists painstakingly (and perhaps unnecessarily) the many ways the Councils abetted the deportation process: compiling lists of persons and property, securing money from deportees to defray costs of deportation and extermination, keeping track of vacant apartments, supplying police forces with the means to seize Jews and get them on trains, and handing over assets for “final confiscation.” Fellow Jews distributed yellow badges, even made a business out of it by making washable ones out of fancy plastic. She notoriously claimed that in the Nazi-inspired but importantly not dictated manifestos issued by the Jewish organizations, “we still can sense how they enjoyed their new power” (118).

However, the lines for which she was most hated were the following: “The whole truth was that if the Jewish people had really been unorganized and leaderless, there would have been chaos and plenty of misery but the total number of victims would hardly have been between four and a half and six million people” (The Portable, 354).

Ironically, male scholars came to similar conclusions, but Arendt was attacked more fiercely, having already been a subject of derision in the world of political theory. Two accounts appeared at around the same time, one a study of prominent figures of the Third Reich, Robert Pendorf’s Morder und Ermordete. Eichmann und die Judenpolitik des Dritten Reiches, which also takes into account the role of the Jewish councils in the Final Solution; and Strafsache 40/61 by the Dutch correspondent Harry Mulisch, the only writer on the subject to put the defendant, Eichmann, at the center, and whose evaluation of Eichmann coincides with Arendt’s on essential points. The cooperation of Jewish leaders and organizations was already known through Raul Hilberg’s The Destruction of the European Jews, published in 1961, on which Arendt relied heavily. Today, her conclusions on the factors contributing to the Final Solution have become scholarly consensus, but her book doesn’t often get
the credit that an early seminal work should receive. While the phrase “banality of evil” with which she ends the book seemed to exonerate Eichmann (or at the very least lessen the magnitude of his crimes), in reality she created a turn of phrase for what many were already beginning to understand—that total bureaucracy leads to a total devaluation of human life qua human, but not in ways that appear radical or spectacular on the surface.

The ideas she presented were therefore deeply upsetting, but not new; in my view, it was her butch presentation, her “tone” that most upset her friends and detractors, in the past and present. Her tone placed her not only on the wrong side of a political divide among Jews, but on the wrong side of the gender divide, a fact that continues to color (darkly) the perception of Arendt’s work, much to our own peril. She was not criticized because she was a woman, but rather because she was not enough of a woman. Her perceived lack of warmth, her arrogance, presented a contradiction: a woman in a traditionally masculine field, a woman who refused to soften the facts to appease others, cannot be human. Arendt was a butch-styled intellectual performer who challenged the aesthetic and political constraints of her time.

Arendt was “old-fashioned” in that she believed we had lost our taste for facts unless they are elevated to the formulation of ideas. Arendt caressed facts the way Stein caressed nouns, and for a female public intellectual, this also amounted to heresy. Shortly after the trial, she suffered a horrible car accident, and Blücher endured a stroke, but she continued, with joy, to sort through the “facts” contained with the Eichmann files. She revealed her physical and emotional pains at this time to McCarthy, and also her pleasure in the handling the material. She writes on May 20, 1962:

I am in the midst of Eichmann and rather desperate because I cannot make it as brief as I wanted to. I am swimming in an enormous amount of material, always trying to find the most telling quotation and shall have to write a second draft (something I ordinarily hate but it can’t be helped because of too many documents). I probably will take all summer to really finish, but au fond I don’t mind. On the contrary, [I] somehow enjoy the handling of facts and concrete things. (italics mine, Between Friends 131).
Not only does she read, digest, and analyze the facts, but she handles them with a lover’s care, perceiving the book to be a simple report, with a few conclusions at the ends of chapter, and an epilogue in which arrives at her infamous phrase “the banality of evil.” Regarding the controversy the book incited, she writes to McCarthy: “my point would be that what the whole furor is about are facts, and neither theories nor ideas. The hostility against me is a hostility against someone who tells the truth on a factual level, and not against someone who has ideas which are in conflict with those commonly held.” (italics mine, 148). The hostility is not against just “someone” who tells the truth on a factual level, but a butch-styled woman—an already maligned individual who dared to steal masculine power in a field that was dominated exclusively by men.

By insisting on the integrity of her facts, she angered friends and strangers, alienated her closest allies, and jeopardized her teaching career. In the film Hannah Arendt, von Trotta poignantly depicts Arendt’s friend Kurt Blumenfeld’s words to her on his death bed: “Your quest for truth is admirable, but this time you’ve gone too far.” She was accused of ruthlessness and cruelty—perhaps the same kind of “ruthless toughness” that Arendt claimed of the Nazis. In a letter to McCarthy dated Sept. 16, 1963, she tells how the Anti-Defamation League sent out a circular letter, called Arendt Nonsense, to all rabbis recommending they preach against her on Rosh Hashanah, a request with which the rabbis did not in the end comply. She admits to McCarthy some of her feelings of vulnerability at the time (as was acceptable in their exchanges), “What a risky business to tell the truth on a factual level without theoretical and scholarly embroidery” (Between Friends 146). And yet she still finds enjoyment in this process, “This side of it, I admit, I do enjoy; it taught me a few lessons about truth and politics” (146). It appears at times that Hannah Arendt took pleasure in her own butch unlikeability. In the “Zur Person” interview, she states that she understands the prickliness of her nature, but refuses to apologize: “I’m not very agreeable or polite. I say what I think” (“What Remains” 8)
In true butch fashion, Arendt responded directly and pointedly to the criticism of her tone, arguing against the idea that the only way you could talk about these things was in a manner “full of pathos.” In the same “Zur Person” interview, she boldly revealed how she laughed when she read the testimony:

I’ll tell you this: I read the transcript of his police investigation, thirty-six hundred pages, read it, and read it very carefully, and I do not know how many times I laughed—laughed out loud! People took this reaction in a bad way. I cannot do anything about that. But I know one thing: three minutes before certain death, I probably still would laugh. And that, they say, is the tone of voice. That the tone of voice is predominantly ironic is completely true. The tone of voice in this case is really the person. When people reproach me with accusing the Jewish people, that is a malignant lie and propaganda and nothing else. The tone of voice, however, is an objection against me personally. And I cannot do anything about that. (italics mine, “’What Remains’” 27).

She reiterated the humorous aspect of Eichmann’s testimony numerous times, both publically and privately. On May 31, 1961, Arendt wrote to McCarthy, confessing that she was “half-way recovered from the Eichmann-torture which was not without a rather macabre humor” (Between Friends 119). She wrote her political theory in an ironical tone, what became a personal signature, which forms part of what I would call her butch intellectual style. As for the B.D. women of the 1920s, humor is a strategy of resistance that deviates from expected “pathos” and brings the truth forward along with complicated pleasures—pleasures that it seems were more complicated for her audience than for Arendt herself.

Butch can help to articulate Arendt’s irregular flow of emotion, this so-called lack of pathos, which concealed an abundance of feeling, while butchphobia can help explain, at least in part, the extreme reaction to her supposed “heartlessness.” Stone butch can also help us understand the personal assaults on Arendt, for as evidenced by the many exposés on the “softer side” of presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, revelations of a hidden tenderness only seem to increase public anxiety over a butch presence. While in Hannah Arendt, von Trotta tried a more sentimental portrait of Arendt, contemporary critics used the opportunity to renew their attack on “the banality
of evil,” and on Arendt’s ambiguous gender performance. Von Trotta depicts a private Arendt that many could not comfortably reconcile with her brash public persona. In “‘Hannah Arendt’ and the Glorification of Thinking,” which appeared (perhaps also ironically) in *The New Yorker* on May 30, 2013, Richard Brody lambasts the film, continuing the tirade against her “careless” turns of phrase. Yet, he seems most offended by von Trotta’s glorification of Arendt’s thinking to the level of an art. He links this snobbishness to *Eichmann*, which for Brody is a book marred by solipsism, emotional blankness, and anti-literary conventions; in short, the work is a heretical treatise filled with “monstrous abstractions.” For different reasons, the film is both “sanctimonious” and “sentimental.” By claiming that von Trotta’s film was like “soft-core philosophical porn,” he suggests, without realizing it, our society’s difficulty with images of a “butch thinking,” further suggesting the incongruity in the term itself.

Stone butch questions the insistence that women either emote in public over certain subjects or not appear at all. Stone butch style casts a woman like Arendt into a gendered no-man’s land where she can be neither a powerful masculine thinker nor a compelling female character in a film. Similarly, Mark Lilla’s “Arendt and Eichmann: The New Truth,” appearing in *The New York Times Review of Books* on November 21, 2013, critiques the film as just another of von Trotta’s “didactic feminist buddy movies.” He describes *Hannah Arendt* as the result of a tiresome formula in which a strong woman befriends and mentors a weaker one—a “jeune admirer”; the friendship evolves (predictably) within the political unfoldings of its historical setting. Though I agree that Janet

---

41 Brody critiques the von Trotta film in comparison to the 2013 film by Claude Lanzmann, *The Last of the Unjust*, which is based on Lanzmann’s 1975 interviews with Benjamin Murmelstein, the last head of the Jewish Council in Theresienstadt, who worked under Eichmann and put into practice the policies dictated for the camp, including the deportation of inmates to Auschwitz. After the war, he was harshly criticized by some Jewish leaders, who considered him a Nazi collaborator. Lanzmann dismisses the idea that the Jewish Council members were collaborators, but rather paints them as victims of the “Real killers.” Lanzmann directly discounts Arendt’s thesis.
McTeer’s portrayal of Mary McCarthy lacks gravity—the kind of substance needed to play such a formidable thinker and writer as McCarthy—the film at least attempts to create a human portrait that can take into account the texture of Arendt’s gender, her sexuality, her life with Heinrich and her friends. Once again, butchphobia—the fear of masculine-styled individuals who inhabit the no-man’s land—explains at least some of this resentment.

Two years before the film, another butch scholar, Judith Butler, came to Arendt’s intellectual aid post-mortem, defending the “banality of evil,” and at the same time, refusing to even engage with the question of her tone. Butler has also been accused of emotional blankness, pretention, the use of prohibitive language, and intellectual snobbery, and thus the intellectual seems to become the personal in this article as she defends Arendt on philosophical grounds. Despite pressure to do so, Butler has not disregarded Arendt’s thesis, even as “new evidence” of the force of Eichmann’s anti-Semitism has come forward as “motive.” Butler still claims the phrase has been misunderstood, that it did not mean ordinary, but rather that the new nature of the crime demanded a fresh approach to legal judgment. Butler tries to explain for those who still consider it blasphemous in what sense Arendt meant to use the word “banal.” If a crime against humanity had become banal, it was because of the daily, systemic way in which it occurred, “without being adequately named or opposed” (“Hannah Arendt’s Challenge”). Arendt professed that national socialism had invented a new kind of historical subject, one through which policy was “implemented” but without intentionality.

“The banality of evil” seemed to trivialize the Holocaust as the supreme example of evil, de-emphasizing Eichmann’s anti-Semitism as the prime motivation for his actions. For many, her concept of the “banality of evil” confirmed their perception that Arendt was an anti-Semite, and her relationship with Heidegger didn’t help her case. However, she doesn’t introduce the phrase until the very end of the book, which means that she “handled” with love all facts at her disposal before
proposing the concept. Arendt believed that to have intentions meant to live reflectively, to think not only about oneself but about others. To lack intentions indicates the lack of the kind of internal life that makes plurality possible; for Arendt, Nazism was a degradation of thinking itself (“Hannah Arendt's Challenge”). Thus, she called for a new way of reflecting on political and legal matters, which would provide some security against the future (and total) destruction of humanity: “for Arendt the consequence of non-thinking is genocidal, or certainly can be” (“Hannah Arendt’s Challenge”). Butler defends thinking on behalf of a butch thinker, one who broke boundaries not only between passion and reason, but between male and female, trespassing too often and too forcefully on masculine terrain.42

Not only do we need the concept of butch and the phrase “the banality of evil” to describe our own political crisis, but as well other ideas in Eichmann that tend to get overshadowed by accusations of coldness, accusations that appear at times as guises for insidious forms of gender discrimination. We are entering a new era of global insecurity: we can no longer afford to indulge these gender biases that blind us from hearing the full and complete story, the uncensored and unabridged truth. According to Arendt, evil can result from thoughtlessness, not a lack of moral rectitude, but the kind of thoughtlessness that “perfect” bureaucracy requires. She argued quite forcefully in the epilogue to Eichmann that the Holocaust was only a beginning, that similar crimes were likely to recur in the future, for the simple reason that once something like this has appeared, the possibility of recurrence remains even after the particular conditions seem to disappear. She saw that modernity had spawned a potentially devastating possibility:

42 Butler cites a similarity to legal philosopher Yosal Rogat who also didn’t believe that you could put on trial anti-Semitism or its history (“Hannah Arendt’s Challenge”).
The frightening coincidence of the modern population explosion with the discovery of technical devices that, through automation, will make large sections of the population ‘superfluous’ even in terms of labor, and that, through nuclear energy, make it possible to deal with this twofold threat by use of instruments beside which Hitler’s gassing installations look like an evil child’s fumbling toys, should be enough to make us tremble. (Eichmann 273)

These insightful gems tend to get bypassed when we look back at Arendt’s work on Eichmann; we would do well to pay attention—like Butler—to her insights, for the future of humanity on earth depends on taking these kinds of provocations seriously.

After Eichmann, Arendt dedicated her teaching and scholarship to understanding another element of Eichmann’s world views, based on a gross manipulation of Kant’s moral philosophy. Eichmann declared that he lived his life according to Kantian principles—including his Nazi beliefs. However, as Arendt protests, “This was outrageous, on the face of it, and also incomprehensible, since Kant’s moral philosophy is so closely bound up with man’s faculty of judgment, which rules out blind obedience” (Eichmann 113). In the book, she tries to make the distinction between practical reason and obedience, something she would continue to press throughout the rest of her career, through her lectures on Kant’s political philosophy at the New School. For Butler, what came after Eichmann is as important as the work on Eichmann itself, work which she claims was “an avid effort to reclaim Kant from its Nazi interpretation and to mobilise the resources of his text precisely against the conceptions of obedience that uncritically supported a criminal legal code and fascist regime” (“Hannah Arendt’s Challenge”).

Being butch in the world can help to avoid blind obedience that can be mistaken for sound judgment. Butch thinking constantly tests the limits of what should be known, what it is decent to know, flouting respectability and conventions, and questioning unwavering allegiance to any one group, which can congeal our perceptions. Butch can become a way of being in the world in which individuals maintain a fierce demand for truth. Further, in the present, women performing butch continue to refute the idea that a woman cannot be both sympathetic and intellectual.
Despite a hardened exterior, the inner tenderness of butch can be used to empathize from deep within, a quality Arendt feels can save the world; she demanded this of herself and of her readers—she requires us to leave our comfortable categories, to broaden our minds to consider the concept of the human, to consider the necessity of speaking out as requisite to the project of being:

Speaking is also a form of action. That is one venture. The other is: We start something. We weave our strand into a network of relations. What comes of it we never know. We’ve all been taught to say: Lord forgive them, for they know not what they do. That is true of all action. Quite simply and concretely true, because one cannot know. That is what is meant by a venture. And now I would say that this venture is only possible when there is trust in people. A trust—which is difficult to formulate but fundamental—in what is human in all people. Otherwise such a venture could not be made. (“What Remains?” 38)

Her words provide us with the impetus for action, compel us to move as butch toward a conception of the human that accounts for both the specificity and universality of suffering. She believed that one must act and have a trust in humankind, a trust in what is human in all people. This is the true curative closure. By releasing our expectations of how gender should signify both historically and in the present, we can cultivate this kind of trust, which will allow us to listen more attentively, more astutely, to new vocabularies, furthering our aesthetic education as a kind of political act. We can cross-pollinate, acknowledge both our categories and their complications, and use our energies to dismiss, under any circumstance (and with a butch throw of the hip)—the “alternative fact,” no matter how seductive it may appear.
Works Cited


---. Hannah Arendt: The Last Interview and Other Conversations, Melville House, 2013.


*Bessie*. Directed by Dee Rees, performance by Queen Latifah, HBO, 2015. Film.


*Call Her Savage.* Directed by John Francis Dillon, performance by Clara Bow, Fox Film Corporation, 1932.


----. *One of Ours.* Knopf, 1926.


*The Children’s Hour.* Performances by Audrey Hepburn and Shirley MacLaine, United Artists, 1961.


Clara Bow Archive. *tumblr*,
https://clarabowarchive.tumblr.com/post/18022947387/emancipated-flapper-clara-bow-


*Confidential Agent.* Directed by Herman Shumlin, performance by Lauren Bacall, Warner Bros., 1945.


*Cry of the City.* Performance by Hope Emerson, Twentieth Century Fox, 1948.


*Dance, Girl, Dance.* Directed by Dorothy Arzner, RKO Radio Pictures, 1933.


*Down to the Sea in Ships*. Directed by Elmer Clifton, performance by Clara Bow, W.W. Hodkinson, 1922.


*Flaming Youth*. Directed by John Francis Dillon, performance by Clara Bow, Associated First National Pictures, 1923.


*Grit*. Directed by Frank Tuttle, performance by Clara Bow, Pyramid Picture Studios, 1924.


Herdt, Jascha. Personal Interview. 16 June 2015.


*The House on 92nd Street*. Directed by Henry Hathaway, Twentieth-Century Fox, 1945.


*It.* Performance by Elinor Glyn and Clara Bow, Paramount, 1927.


*Johnny Guitar.* Performance by Joan Crawford and Mercedes McCambridge, Republic Pictures, 1953.


Jones, Sharon L. *Rereading the Harlem Renaissance: Race, Class, and Gender in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, and Dorothy West.* Greenwood, 2002.


*Joséphine: First Black Superstar.* Directed by Suzanne Phillips, Forget About It Film and TV, for BBC Wales, 2006. Film.


*Mädchen in Uniform.* Directed by Leontine Sagan, Deutsche Film-Gemeinschaft, 1931.


*Mantrap.* Directed by Victor Fleming, performance by Clara Bow, Paramount, 1926.


*The Member of the Wedding*. Directed by Fred Zinnemann, performance by Julie Harris, Columbia Pictures, 1952.


---. *[Marianne Moore and Mary Warner Moore in Brooklyn apartment, New York City]*. The Rosenbach, Moore XII:02:37a.

---. *[Marianne Moore and Mary Warner Moore Holding Hands, Cummington, Massachusetts; Ward Identified and Date on Back]*. The Rosenbach, Moore XII:03:01c.


Orange is the New Black. Lionsgate Television, July 11 2013-present.


Queen Christina. Performance by Greta Garbo, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1933.


---.“Downhearted Blues.” *YouTube,* 3 June 2009.  

---.“Hateful Blues.” *YouTube,* 3 May 2011.  


---. [Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas with their Ford truck, ‘Auntie’]. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.


*Strangers on a Train.* Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, Transatlantic Pictures, 1951.


*To Have and Have Not.* Directed by Howard Hawks, performance by Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart, Warner Bros., 1944.


----. *[Gertrude Stein in the Church Yard. Lucey Church]*. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.


