A Terrible Beauty is Born

The Affective Politics of the Butch Memoir in Performance

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In keeping with the theme of *30 Years of Stone Butch Blues*, this article directs attention towards the unique possibilities that the spatiotemporal coordinates of performance poetry offer to the butch memoirist. Scholarship focused on the lesbian memoir's strategic political significance indubitably agrees upon the genre's role in reaffirming "the centrality of identity to lesbian-feminist politics" (Zimmerman 1984: 664). However, looking back at a lineage of Anglophone butch life-writing, we notice its complicated history. The butch memoir, which has simultaneously stood at odds with the tyranny of cisheteropatriarchy and lesbian feminism, possesses a peculiar generic identity of its own. While a majority of butch memoirists have gravitated towards book-length prose narratives, the genre continues to expand and adapt in response to the Midas-touch of its authors. Here, I examine Joelle Taylor's short poetic sketch titled *CUNTO* (first performed in 2018) as a proponent of experimental butch poetics that revels in affective embodiment.

Taylor (and Choudhuri 2023) calls herself a "question," a "witness" and a "disruptive force", to emphasise her marginalised status as a working-class, butch lesbian, performance poet:

> As butch women, as non-conforming women, women who're coloured outside the lines […] we're taught to doubt ourselves as women – that everything, our version of reality is not quite right. I think it's vitally important that we stand firm and strong and say: *No, this is my memory. It is.* (ibid.)

CUNTO was commissioned by Apples and Snakes for *Rallying Cry* (2018), a series of poetry performances curated around the theme of protest (Apples and Snakes 2018). Following the poem's first performance, Taylor was invited to expand her fifteen-minute poetic sequence into a play. This plan, though temporarily thwarted by the COVID-19 pandemic, produced the print collection *C+nto and Othered Poems* (2021) which was awarded the T. S. Eliot Prize for Poetry. As we look upon this fiery collection's titular poem, we witness a conjuring of ghosts. *CUNTO* is a litany and cenotaph; it is a call to action in a time of renewed violence against the LGBTQ+ com-

munity. The poem foregrounds the butch body as a "library" (UEA Archives 2022) haunted by ghosts that require exorcising. Most importantly, *CUNTO* is Taylor's first foray into writing what she terms a "creative memoir" (Tender Buttons 2022).

To fully grasp the extent of Taylor's formal experimentation, it is necessary to delineate the socio-cultural forces that have shaped the butch memoir as a genre and have determined the forms that it has taken. As stated earlier, butch memoirists, and most lesbian memoirists for that matter, have privileged print media as an apposite container for autobiographical material. This is in keeping with the fact that lesbian writers have had to struggle to find a voice and a language of their own within a dominantly phallogocentric literary culture that deems print publication as a marker of credibility, legitimacy, and quality. The solidity and permanence of print publication is also advantageous in the face of exclusionary historiography. In terms of form, lesbian authors have chosen to frame their narratives not only as purely non-fictional memoirs but also as semi-autobiographical novels. The latter, which negotiates between the reality of lesbian existence and novelistic parameters, is of particular interest to us as we deal with the 'creative' aspect of Taylor's memoir-writing.

The novel's formal characteristics naturally lend itself to narratives of growth. As Ian Watt (1957) explains, the form typifies the zeitgeist of Enlightenment thought dominated by Cartesian, capitalist, and Calvinist conceptions of the individual. Specifically, the Bildungsroman throws into relief the deep structure of the novel as a "myth of origins" (Andermahr 2009: 50) focused on the hero's identity-formation. Lesbian authors who have treated autobiographical material with a tinge of imagination continually revise, subvert and destabilise such staunchly androcentric and heterosexual literary discourses. However, as a subcategory of the semi-autobiographical lesbian novel, the butch memoir has borne the brunt of a double marginalisation. Besides heteronormative historiography, exclusionary lesbian feminist politics has pushed butch voices and experiences to the periphery in favour of a homogenous woman-identified lesbian identity (Nestle 2003). Thus, butch life-writing highlights the exclusivity of butch experience, while opposing both heteronormative erasure and mainstream lesbian-feminist life-writing projects. Commenting upon Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*, Sally Munt writes that the novel is "littered with rites of passage in the style of Bildungsroman" (1998: 17) but additionally functions as an "instructional" and "pedagogic" text, that can "sensitise the reader to the complexity and contemporaneity of lesbian identity, and the plasticity of gender and the body" (ibid.).

Against this backdrop, we can begin to appreciate the advantages that embodied theatrical performance can afford the butch artist. Postfeminist approaches towards theatre emphasise the performative nature of gendered identity. The narrativized butch body on stage can posit new, multiple texts rooted in real experiences and sexuality in opposition to heteropatriarchal texts (Forte 1988). Elements of embodied expression such as the inflection of voice, costume, blocking (i.e., the posi-

tioning of actors on stage), and movement (Severin 2004; Laird 2019) allow the queer artist to perform gender on stage through a repetitive "stylization" (Butler 1988: 519) of the body in time. Butch bodies, which conflate lesbian desire with queer masculinity, "shape and are shaped by how bodies extend into worlds" (Ahmed 2006: 94). Thus, performance matches the spatial and corporeal dimensions of Taylor's memoir-writing. At the same time, Ann Cvetkovich's conception of the "archive of feelings" provides a useful framework for evaluating *CUNTO*. Cvetkovich (2003) deems usually neglected ephemeral cultural texts (including performance arts) as legitimate modes of historicizing queer subcultures. She defines them as "repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception" (2003: 7). By directing attention towards individuals' felt relationship to "public" culture and experiences that seem to "leave behind no records at all" (ibid.), Cvetkovich further suggests that ephemeral performance contains the potential to "explore public articulations of trauma" (ibid.: 16) and create new cultures or collectives of resistance bound by a shared feeling.

Yet, there remains one final question: why poetry? We may turn to Taylor's own words for the answer:

> [T]he 'creative memoir' is a way of approaching the past. It's a way of going back into a room you're scared to go into but with a torch. And the torch for me was poetry. Poetry allowed me to spotlight certain objects in the room, to see them literally in a different light, and to retrieve them, take them back out of the room. (Taylor and Choudhuri 2023)

Much of Taylor's narrative is fraught with violence and grief. It is an honouring of the dead, of the queer spaces and community lost to neoliberal hegemony. It is a cenotaph for friends lost to homophobic hate. Yet, there is intense joy contained in the very act of remembering. Poetry enables the memoirist to enter the backroom of memory and represent it subjectively, to condense and intensify moments of both anguish and euphoria. The rubrics of embodied poetry formalise and give shape to otherwise chaotic experiences. Moreover, in his study of performance poetry, affect and protest, Peter Bearder explains how the corporeal medium of performative, choreographed poetry replaces the "typography of the page" (2019: 191): the vascular and neurological pathways that animate "the topography of flesh" (ibid.) transmit affect through voice, gesture and rhythm. Live performance truly converts poetry into an equanimous exchange between poet and audience; it is the "petri dish of human solidarity" (ibid.: 297).

CUNTO foregrounds the female body as a political act, to address the ontological and epistemological conundrums of living as a working-class butch lesbian within an arena of heteropatriarchal discourses. Moreover, through the poem,

Taylor (2018b) celebrates the protests led by women from the 1980s through to the mid-2000s, and her debt to them as a woman and as a writer. Taylor (and Choudhuri 2023) observes that before receiving a commission to expand *CUNTO* into a play and a poetry collection, she had envisioned this poem to be her memoir. This yoking of raw, lived experience with the stringency of poetic form is inextricably tied to her refashioning of the traditional butch memoir. She contests the butch memoir's usual correspondences with the teleological hero's journey, or the univalent Bildungsroman, by structuring the raw material of lived experience in a series of cantos. While Taylor's choice of form does link the poem to an existing literary tradition exemplified by figures such as Dante, Byron, and Ezra Pound, she hardly invests herself in slavish imitation. As a quintessentially vocative form, the canto presupposes the utterance of a bardic poet figure aimed at narrating and eulogising a heroic journey. This formal association epitomises Taylor's poem as a heroic narrative. Yet, she repudiates the canto's ideological underpinnings through what she terms a "feminine morphology" (Taylor 1998: 129) which upends gendered assumptions surrounding the poet's voice and chosen subject. In a performance of her opening poem from *Songs My Enemy Taught Me* (Taylor 2017) titled *Canto*, Taylor depicts her experience of sexual abuse in seventeen cantos. Interestingly, she likens the canto sequence to a 'film', where each part functions as a scene (Samuels 2017). By dialoguing with several traditionally androcentric media and subjecting them to various forms of lyric openness, her poetry issues a challenge towards heteropatriarchal codes of heroism and the lacerating effects of the "scopophilic" (Mulvey 1999: 836) male gaze.

Although *CUNTO* was composed as a spoken-word piece for a proscenium stage, to be performed without props in the style of a slam poem, Taylor's collaboration with director Rob Watt and his production team modified and enhanced the poem's performative significance. Watt's stage, for the first performance of *CUNTO* at the Battersea Arts Centre in 2018, resembled a boxing ring roped off by barbed wires, with the audience seated on all four sides (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: stage design for CUNTO directed by Rob Watt. Battersea Arts Centre, London, 5 October 2018. © Rob Watt, source: www.robwatt.co.uk.

This extra-literary choreography consciously superimposes the spatial significations generated by the boxing ring and the military 'no man's land' upon the performance space. In the context of butch lesbian identity, both these conceits generate several ideological implications. The boxing ring, conventionally understood as the arena for "public contests" staged to assert the "meaning of masculinity and its relation to male embodiment" (Halberstam 1984: 272), when associated with the spectacle of the fighting butch, allows her to steadily transmute the mechanisms of normative hypermasculinity into "new constellations of embodiment, power, and desire" (ibid.). One might be reminded of Peggy Shaw's solo show *You're Just Like My Father* (1994) which exposes the struggles of growing up butch in an America of the 1950s through the figure of the boxer. Shaw's performance toys with stereotypes of hypermasculinity, among which the boxer exists as a figure in transliteration. Her body, exposed to view, straddles the boundaries between masculine and feminine, as though suspended in a free play of meanings that dissolve the binarism of sex and gender. Just as Shaw shadowboxes onstage to highlight her struggles as a masculine woman, so does Taylor at the beginning of her performance.

In addition, the metaphor of the liminal "no man's land" (Taylor 2021: 35) appearing in Taylor's first canto "the body as battleground", connotes a space constantly subject to violence. It is an "enemy territory" (ibid.), a waste land riven by gunfire, where men explode suddenly, and the corpses of transgressive women pile up in the trenches. Social scientists Genny Beemyn and Mickey Eliason posit that "[t]he discourses around cis lesbian and trans identities and communities have been represented almost exclusively in negative terms – framed as border crossings, trespassing, battlegrounds, and conquests" (2016: 2). Yet, despite these negative significations this blank space holds the promise of regeneration for Taylor. It is no accident that she has often altered the adjectives used to describe the "no man's land", as:

this **filthy** quiet this no man's land (Taylor 2018a)
this **sticky** quiet this no man's land (Taylor 2021: 35)
this **muscular** quiet this no man's land (The Leeds Library 2021)

Here, the dynamic evolution of the text in performance allows the autobiographical subject to leave behind the filthiness (of how heteropatriarchy labels butch masculinity) and traverse the sticky path towards reclaiming its muscularity. Indeed, within this no man's land, butch masculinity constantly dissolves essentialist sex/gender norms, turning it into a "stretch of contestatory and discursively productive ground" (Noble 2004: x). Barrenness problematises this space's ontology to imply the possibility of proliferating configurations of gender – of a lifetime's search for body.

The associations generated by the two spatial metaphors of the boxing ring and the "no man's land" are augmented by the re-signification of the butch body as "battleground," "protest," "trespass," "cemetery," "backroom," "haunted house," and "uprising," in the seven successive 'rounds' of the poem (Taylor 2018). Taylor's early working title for the piece, "Butterfly Fist", symbolises this process as both battle and metamorphosis. The performance space, thus, externalises the conflict between the butch woman's desire to forge a stable subjectivity against the oppressive maws of disciplinary power that attempt to thwart her. Rob Watt's direction formalises what Taylor (and Choudhuri 2023) describes as a "constant battle with [her] body" by literally replicating the butch lesbian's ruptured subjectivity through stage blocking. At the beginning of the performance, at two corners of the stage stand two contenders – Taylor, the butch lesbian in a vest and boxer shorts, and a three-piece navy suit (Fig. 2).

Through the course of the performance, Taylor gradually dons the suit while addressing her audience to represent a dynamic process of becoming. The primary battle, she states, is "getting the damn suit as I'm saying the lines," for the body in motion constantly militates against the constricted space of the stage (Taylor and Choudhuri 2023).

Fig. 2: stage blocking at the beginning of CUNTO directed by Rob Watt. Battersea Arts Centre, London, 5 October 2018. © Rob Watt, source: www.robwatt.co.uk.

In addition, the quest to find stable subjectivity is dramatized through an alternation between the second person "you" with the first person "we"/"our"/"us" used only when the lesbian bar is evoked: "On the dance floor, we are tidal" (Taylor 2021: 37), or "we fall into each other's mouths this is love furious love" (ibid.: 43).

Additionally, the sequence's identification of butch identity with a costume draws attention to the paradox of butch hyper(in)visibility. The butch lesbian is violently stereotyped by mainstream narratives, singled out for their gender non-conforming lesbian sexuality, and often the target of homophobic violence perpetrated by the state and other structures of power. Taylor's poem exposes this predicament of hyper(in)visibility. Her aim, however, is to reconfigure the butch's non-conformity as a weapon and a means of self-definition. In opposition to what Sedgwick terms the "epistemology of the closet" or homosexuality as an open secret, here, the butch individual's epistemological terrain is aligned with the "wardrobe" (Halberstam 1984: 98). Despite marking her out for violence, her clothing reaffirms her subjectivity. Taylor develops this idea in the intensely autobiographical second

canto, where she juxtaposes her experience of sexual abuse as a child with the act of stylising the self in cuffed "Levi's," "white t-shirt," "tsunami quiff" like a shadow rising above, and "black boots whose roots spread tangle through the centre of the earth" (Taylor 2021: 36). The tension between depersonalisation and the affirming performance of gender is encapsulated in a list of pejorative terms hurled at the butch lesbian:

> boi bwah dyke diesel female sodomite lady faggot bull-dyke
> bull-dagger queer pervert gold star silver back stud invert
> kiki she-male drag-drone baby butch tomboy stone (ibid.: 37)

Taylor utters these manifestations of "injurious speech" (Butler 1997: 2) in a raspy voice, while circling the stage as though to intimidate. She concludes the list by aiming a punch at the hanging suit, at which point, the poem turns. Taylor subverts such injurious speech by tracing the origin of the term "butch" to Butch Cassidy's outlawry, and by metonymically associating the "stone" butch with an "avalanche of wrong-walking women" (Taylor 2021: 37). Such subversions separate language from its injurious power to talk back to oppressive power structures, a linguistic act that is accentuated by the inflections of the voice and Taylor's careful modulation of tone and volume.

Round three, "the body as trespass," evokes the space of the city as it traces a journey through space and time. It is the most filmic of the poem's seven sequences, acting like a series of jump cuts from the poet-narrator's childhood in Accrington city to her migration to London, where she is subjected to abuse as a young homeless butch woman. The section's keynote reflects how the butch is "a trespasser in [her] own body", where "the landowners are men who pass/[her] in the street" (ibid.: 39). Rounds four, five, and six – presenting the body as "cemetery," "backroom," and "haunted house" – reinstate the conception of the body as an archive of trauma, wounded by suicide attempts, systemic homophobic assault, poverty, and sexual abuse. However, every foray into the space of the dyke dive bars and the gay clubs resuscitates the visceral energy of "modern primitives." In these spaces, they dance like they "are stamping out fires", with their "boots hammering the last nails into the coffin of the old gods" (ibid.: 40). Taylor supplements these lines by stamping her own boots on the stage to interfuse the rhythmicality of voice and body in an energetic resistance against oppression.

This feeling of ecstasy mingled with grief percolates into the poem's cathartic final section "the body as uprising." Here, Taylor brings the past into contact with the present, declaring that the steady rise of neoliberal ideology will ensure that no one remembers "the love" that created bonds of solidarity among the queer community in the past, and "how alike it is to rage" (Taylor ibid.: 45). She laments that a history of united resistance and sacrifice will be erased under the rainbow-washed shop win-

dows and through the act of "unpicking acronyms by candlelight" (ibid.: 54). Yet, in the face of oblivion, her act of remembering revives the past, and her "dead friends" within the space of performance. In a stage performance of *C+nto* at the Loud Poets' Dumfries Slam, Taylor chants the names of the real people who are memorialised in the poetry of *C+nto*: "Cass Johnson… Avi Cummins, Sam Silvern, Tony Macaroni" (I Am Loud Productions 2023). Though invisible and silent, their presence is rendered palpable via the queer artist-archivist's act of remembrance. It is at this point that Taylor completes the process of dressing herself. The conjunction between these spatiotemporal trajectories culminates in the fusion of the split self with which the poem had begun. No longer confined to the periphery of the stage and in conflict with her identity, the butch narrator occupies the centre of the contested no man's land (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Taylor takes centre stage at in the last 'round' of CUNTO directed by Rob Watt. Battersea Arts Centre, London, 5 October 2018. © Rob Watt, source: unpublished recording of CUNTO, received upon request from Apples and Snakes.

This cathartic and triumphant moment is marked by the music of the bars. As Taylor dances to the music, the audience breaks into a standing ovation, as though sharing in the journey delineated by the poem. *CUNTO*, indeed, resembles what Taylor (and Choudhuri 2023) terms as a "victory poem", a type of performance poem that gets increasingly visceral as it approaches its end and elicits within its audience a corresponding bodily response to it. In foregrounding the butch body's negotiation with several structures of power, the performing body produces a "contagion" (Foster

2008: 57) that impels the audience to mimic its movement, and consequently, share in its feelings.

Taylor's intrinsically hybrid and intermedial butch memoir tempers the frisson of embodied narration with lyric form, and concurrently exploits elements such as stage design, costume, voice, and delivery to establish affective dialogues with the audience and create resistant archives of feeling. My analysis of *CUNTO* reveals how the butch memoir in performance enhances the impact of the author's narration by externalising the 'archive of feeling' contained within them to generate new bonds of solidarity among their audience. This in turn supplements the genre's political significance and allows for the creation of resistant counterpublics against hegemonic oppressive powers. The butch memoir in performance, thus, not only resists heteronormative historiography by redefining the theoretical bases for understanding memory and archives, but also transforms the conventionally passive process of 'reading' the memoir into an active one by encouraging our direct participation in the process.

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Figures

Fig. 1: *CUNTO* (2018) directed by Rob Watt. Battersea Arts Centre, London. © Rob Watt, www.robwatt.co.uk.
Fig. 2: *CUNTO* (2018) directed by Rob Watt. Battersea Arts Centre, London. © Rob Watt, www.robwatt.co.uk.
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