



# Remaking Masculinity: Split Britches, Killer Lesbians, and the Cultural Disruption of Masculine Violence

By Scott Knowles

Violence offers a mode of masculinity often positively associated with men and, as I will demonstrate, negatively associated with women. Violence is what a man does when all other avenues to a masculine identity are blocked, or to reach the fullest sense of one's "masculine potential." It can be simultaneously regenerative of a masculine identity and destructive to the masculine body and the victim's identity and body. Importantly, Stephen M. Whitehead's *Men and Masculinities* announces the statistical significance of men's violence by noting that "90 percent of violence [is] perpetrated by men" (35). Throughout history masculinity has been identified with violence. For example, Christopher Forth's *Masculinity and The Modern West* adeptly isolates Hegel's identification of the importance of violence to what Hegel calls "self-consciousness": "unless a male has risked his life struggling on equal terms with another male, he has not really actualized his masculine potential" (115).<sup>1</sup> Or, more recently the #metoo movement has pointed to the impact of toxic masculinity's violence on women and society as a whole. Men are violent, and this violence is tied up with the masculine identity in a way that if/when women become violent they are pathologized and criminalized to protect the masculine identity. Split Britches' *Lesbians Who Kill* (1992) offers a critique of masculinity and its violence through early 1990s feminism and gender theory that points to what Jill Dolan might term a "cultural disruption" for the traditional masculine subject, men ("Practicing Cultural Disruptions" 334-354). The play critiques masculine

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<sup>1</sup> Importantly for Forth, "Hegel only saw males as being truly capable of "self-consciousness" (115).

violence and offers a pathway towards new non-violent forms of masculinity.

Women's violence is understood mostly through two different conceptions: 1) resistance, and 2) pathology. The two are not mutually exclusive. As Lizzie Seal's *Women, Murder and Femininity* points out, "women who kill abusive partners and mothers who commit filicide are likely to receive greater understanding if they are thought to be mentally unbalanced" (2). Killing or hurting an abusive partner is certainly an act of resistance that can be thought of as pathological. Lesbianism (traditionally, and unfortunately, viewed as pathological along with homosexuality in general) provides an interesting location and combination of culturally assigned pathology and resistance. According to Lynda Hart, inversion theory—developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—allowed for a pathological model to be applied to homosexuality. Inversion theory also creates a paradox whereby the female invert maintains "the heterosexual imperative" by becoming "man's double." This double goes on to threaten men's masculinity. Thus, the female invert both reaffirms and threatens the traditional gender binary of masculine/feminine (*Fatal Women* 8-9). The performative nature of gender, as suggested by Judith Butler, describes gender not as a result of being, but rather as a result of doing ("Performative Acts" 519). The performance of aggression and violence by a woman's body represents a particularly threatening act of doing masculinity—or rather, a powerful "cultural disruption" targeted at standardized equivocations of male, masculine, and violence. The portrayal of lesbian violence in *Lesbians Who Kill*, produces a "cultural disruption" allowing space for a feminist spectator to critique masculine dominance and violence. I argue that through variable gender performance and mimicry of masculine violence it also critiques and points towards alternatives to traditional masculinity.

Split Britches, *Lesbians Who Kill*, and the WOW Cafe have been held up by feminist critics such as Jill Dolan, Sue-Ellen Case, Lynda Hart, Alisa Solomon, and Kate Davy as examples of radical feminist interventions that subvert heteronormative gender conceptions and help to construct what they variously term the “feminist spectator,” the “collective subject,” or a “lesbian performative context” (Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator*; Davy, “Constructing the Spectator”; Case, “From Split Subject to Split Britches” 143; Hart, “Identity and Seduction” 127). In each case the goal of the scholar was, at least partially, to construct a space for feminism generally and the lesbian feminist specifically. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, when these scholars were working on Split Britches, this project was paramount to the continued success of the feminist movement, the inclusion of lesbian women in feminism, and to the construction of new forms of theatre and representation that could, as Davy notes, “undercut the heterosexual model by implying a spectator that is not the generic, universal male, not the cultural construction ‘woman,’—a subject defined in terms of sexual similarity” (47). How might a lesbian performative context inform the construction of masculinity for both men and women today? How can a woman’s construction of masculinity challenge and alter men? *Lesbians Who Kill* offers the ideal site to locate this study because of its direct address to one of the most problematic and generative definitions of the masculine: violence.

The play takes place in a car outside of a house in the middle of a thunderstorm. May and June, a butch-femme lesbian couple, sit in their car during storms to avoid lightning, which hits their house consistently. June is a butch lesbian. May is a femme lesbian. To pass the time, they talk about their lives, play games, sing songs, have sex, and fantasize about killing men. In fact, the play recalls the actions of Estragon and Vladimir in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*—a canonized piece of all male

theatre. Instead of the endless “nothing” that repeats and comes back in the dramatic action of *Godot*, May and June continuously come back to the fantasy of killing men. Whereas the horrors of Vladimir and Estragon’s existence are answered with silence and possibly suicide, May and June find their solution in destroying the cause of their oppressed existence: violent masculinity. Intermittently dispersed through May and June’s singing, sex, and general mockery of heteronormative behavior, the radio reports on the progression of the supposedly first woman serial killer in Florida: Aileen Wuornos. The play ends with May and June each holding two guns pointed towards the audience and a question:

JUNE. (*to audience*) I’d love to watch her really kill somebody. Kill somebody by the railroad tracks in the wind while the trains went by, somebody with a beard of thorns and crotch as hard and bitter as an unripe raspberry. Y’all know anybody like that?” (Margolin, Shaw, and Weaver 223)

The question reminds us that May and June are not actually killers. It suggests through the description of an erect penis that the cause of the violence is men’s desire and sexuality, which might be argued is always already violent through the act of penetration. Ultimately, it calls for the audience to recognize this root of violence in the world outside of the play—specifically with regards to the case of Aileen Wuornos.<sup>2</sup>

Within an interview written between May and June by Peggy Shaw (June) and Lois Weaver (May), *Split Britches* reveals the genesis of *Lesbians Who Kill*. After receiving an openly misogynistic review of their latest show—*Belle Reprieve*, which they collaborated on with the

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<sup>2</sup> *Lesbians Who Kill*, Permanent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/dv41ns8n>. I am basing my analysis of this play on both the text located in *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance* edited by Sue-Ellen Case and a video recording of a performance of *Lesbians Who Kill* that occurred on October 28, 1994 in Santa Fe, New Mexico and linked above. The performance was presented with the original cast members, Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver.

performance group, Boolips—Shaw, Weaver, and a group of others left a bar to find all of their cars towed by a local towing scam. Shaw/June describes the confrontation: “When we protested that \$200 towing charge was too much for parking five minutes in a shopping center parking lot, we were reprimanded for not behaving in a ‘lady-like manner.’ It was at this moment that I announced to every man within ear-shot that the title of our next piece was going to be *Lesbians Who Kill*” (“May Interviews June” 4-5). As Case points out, while this might have been the moment when Shaw and Weaver decided to do *Lesbians Who Kill*, Margolin—the writer—had been avidly following the case of Aileen Wuornos and had already suggested a play about “lesbian serial killers” (“Introduction” 29). The play became about the complex issues surrounding women’s masculine violence and gender anger inspired by the demands that women behave in a feminine manner. It took on the pathologization of women’s violence and the criminalization of women’s masculinity and lesbian identity that was embodied in the representation of Aileen Wuornos’s story.

Aileen Wuornos killed seven white men who picked her up on the Florida interstate to buy sex. According to Hart, Wuornos “claimed that she was a hitchhiking prostitute, who killed these men because they were raping her and/or threatening to kill her” (*Fatal Women* 137). Years later, as Lizzie Seal points out, Wuornos “retracted this assertion, arguing that it was made up and that she deserved to receive the death penalty” (32). Wuornos was raised by her grandparents, sexually abused by her grandfather, gave birth to a child at the age of 15, and was continuously mistreated and neglected throughout her adolescence (Seal 33). Seal contends that representations of Wuornos attempted (and succeeded) to portray her as a masculine woman: “As a violent woman who was also involved in a sexual relationship with a woman, Aileen’s aggression was attributed to her status as a ‘mannish lesbian.’” Wuornos was also

referred to as a “Lethal Lesbian Hooker,” and a “Bull-Dyke Man-Eater” (Seal 33). Like Hart, Seal identifies the cultural construction of masculine women with theories of inversion that depict masculine women as not only gender deviant but as aggressive or criminal (*Fatal Women* 9-10; Seal 24-27). Clearly the operation of such opinions of women’s masculine behavior—particularly violent behavior—affected the manner in which Wuornos’s case was handled.

When *Lesbians Who Kill* and Lynda Hart’s chapter on Aileen Wuornos were written there was no degree of certainty that Wuornos had not acted in self-defense. At the time, Wuornos had not conceded that “she deserved to receive the death penalty,” if, in fact, her retraction was truthful. Lynda Hart and Split Britches were trying to question the way in which Wuornos was being portrayed in order to break down the stereotype of the masculine lesbian as criminal, pathological, and dangerous. Wuornos may very well have committed murders in cold blood, but the way she was depicted as a hyper-masculine, aggressive lesbian only fed the negative stereotypes of lesbian masculinity and solidified ideals of the masculine man (violent or not).

The very name Split Britches reiterates the context and desire of the group to create a feminist spectator or collective subject. Vivian M. Patra’s analysis of the name is particularly salient: “the words *split britches* draw attention to the mentioned ‘unmentionables’: women’s otherwise invisible physicality, their urinary and sexual organs. And it’s not *split petticoats* but *britches*, the *split* suggesting female genitalia, and the *britches*, the traditional male garb, denoting the power that these performers don” (223, original emphasis). The name, then, can be read as a literal combination of the masculine and the feminine; a feminist spirit with the power of traditional masculinity; the construction of a female gaze, spectator, collective, or performative space. Split Britches might also

be literally translated as a dress or skirt—quite literally britches that have been split along the inside. It brings to mind the female genitalia, certainly, but could also be read as a splitting or attack on the male genitalia that traditionally resides within britches. Whichever way one decides to interpret the meaning of Split Britches, it seems clear the group aims to conflate, challenge, and produce modes of feminist and lesbian gender through performative acts that allow women and men to confront one of the most harmful aspects of traditional masculinity, violence.

*Lesbians Who Kill* not only produces gender through performative acts but it does so through the use of violence. The play contains no less than six different murder fantasies variously acted out by both June and May. More specifically, Shaw and Weaver perform the characters of June and May who perform different lesbians—or themselves in fantastical situations—committing murder. In other words, we have at least three levels of gender performance that take place within each of the six murder fantasies. Judith Butler’s “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” offers a definition of gender as performative:

Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity, instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (519)

Gender is not a place of agency. An individual cannot simply take on and off different genders. Rather, gender can be seen and understood as a repetition or iteration of something that came before. Theatre offers a particular agency that allows for the manipulation and control of these



representations. On stage, an actor can perform a different gender act. To do so in real life would not be nearly as successful because of the matrix of power surrounding gender performance. Theatre provides a location for challenging a more restrictive and exclusionary masculine performance.

For example, Peggy Shaw, a butch lesbian, performatively embodies masculinity. Presumably, she re-presents a masculinity that she has seen performed by other men, butch women, women, effeminate men, etc. When Shaw takes on the character of June (also a butch lesbian), she cites both her own personal masculinity and other masculinities she has seen or experienced and decides to incorporate into her performance. Finally, June takes on the performance of a violent lesbian identity in fantasies about killing men—and in some cases takes on the masculine performance of the men who are to be the victims. The masculinity of Shaw can be read as an explosion of different iterations of masculinities anchored in various contexts that bring them life. Shaw can take, manipulate, and re-anchor masculine gender identity to demonstrate the reality of lesbian masculinity through an understanding of new and old contexts.

In fact, part of the purpose of *Split Britches* was to incorporate everyday problems, events, and gender issues into stage performances to produce knowledge about what it was to be a lesbian. Lois Weaver describes this position in an interview with *Theatre Week's* Gerard Raymond:

Lois Weaver: I think what we are doing is exploding images of power. Someone may interpret this as us wanting to be men, but I think we crawl inside those images and sort of take them on. [ . . . ] We don't have to become men, but right now we have to wear the male images in a certain way in order to . . .

[Gerard Raymond:] . . . **frighten the shit out of them?**

Weaver: Yes! (23)

The concept of performative gender is obvious within such a discussion of theatre, but it also neatly illustrates the purpose of Split Britches' performance. Taking this further, Peggy Shaw notes in the same interview, "we do shows about what we know. A lot of women thank us for putting our relationship on stage. [ . . . ] The whole thing about May having an affair in this piece, for instance" (Raymond 24). What it is to be a lesbian (masculine, feminine, or neither) is presented through the performance of multiple and diverse gender identities anchored in the context of real-life experience, national events—like Aileen Wuornos's killings—and imagined concepts of other gender identities. To demonstrate this and its effects specifically within the play *Lesbians Who Kill*, take for example the fantastical murder of Ed McMahan.

May/Weaver, the femme lesbian, takes her turn at fantasizing about murdering a man by unzipping her nurse's dress and drawing the face of McMahan on her belly. Once the face is complete she squeezes her belly to make it seem as though McMahan is talking and laughing:

(M) Laugh again! (EM) Henh Henh Henh! (M) Music! Music to my ears! You are a specimen! You really are! I'm glad you're here! I'm glad you're sitting next to me! You add so much to my life! (EM) Aw! Henh Henh Henh! [ . . . ] (M) You make me win! You make me a winner! (EM) That's nice! Henh Henh Henh! (M) I can't believe it! I won! I won seven thousand and fifty million dollars! [ . . . ] (EM) Henh Henh Henh! (M) I think I'm getting my period. [ . . . ] Golf? Golf? Would you like to play some golf? Bend over you bastard! Bend over and line your putter up with your balls! (EM) Aw, Henh Henh Henh! (M) Do you need help? Do you need my help? C'mom!

We'll put them in permanent alignment! We'll go to that great  
 Publisher's Clearing House in God's green heaven. (207-08)<sup>3</sup>

Before May/Weaver can finish killing McMahan another radio broadcast updates the audience on Aileen Wuornos. The text hardly does justice to this particular murder fantasy in performance, but does give a sense of the possible comedy and multiple gender performances that are engaged in the bit. Weaver presents no fewer than three additional layers of gender identity on top of her own femme lesbian identity. Weaver portrays May (a femme lesbian) engaged in an act of killing a famous white man who she is also portraying with a different portion of her body. The masculine performance of McMahan is literally drawn onto the body of May/Weaver. Not only does the violence of May/Weaver towards McMahan create what society might label a "Bull dyke man-eater" (as is the case for Aileen Wuornos), but it also suggests that the masculinity of McMahan—importantly also realized in/on the body of May/Weaver—is the victim of violent women's masculine behavior. Jack Halberstam<sup>4</sup> notes that "there is no word for the opposite of 'emasculatation'?" (*Female Masculinity* 269). Culture views masculine and feminine gender performance as mutually exclusive. When a man enacts a feminine performance, we describe them as emasculated—evacuated or void of masculine characteristics. Conversely, when a woman performs violent acts or is attributed with masculine qualities, she becomes (historically speaking) pathological or criminal—neither masculine nor feminine (Hart, *Fatal Women* 9-10; Seal 24-27). It is quite literally too disruptive for a woman to embody the masculine. In the case of May/Weaver killing McMahan, the violence needed to affirm May/Weaver's dominance is only given hesitantly and at the provocation of June/Shaw: "you didn't

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<sup>3</sup> For clarity, note that (M) stands for lines read by the character of May and (EM) represents the voice of Ed McMahan.

<sup>4</sup> The piece was originally published under the name Judith Halberstam.

even kill him yet,” “Kill him!” “Put him out of his misery” (208). The moment is described by May/Weaver as “play” and in many ways caricatures the common trope of men goading other men to behave violently to prove their masculinity. May/Weaver’s multiple identities allow her to assume a liminal position between the masculine and the feminine that prevents her feminine character from being fully evacuated of masculinity or femininity. The comic sendup of men seeking their masculinity through violence, men fearing women’s violence will have an emasculating effect, and the masculine ideal of regeneration of identity through violence allows May/Weaver to regenerate her own feminine identity (by attacking patriarchy embodied by McMahan) while mocking and critiquing the very process of regeneration through violence.

May/Weaver resists gender categorizations and stereotypes of the feminine in the killing of McMahan. The resistance can be read in the constant combination and simultaneous enactment of masculine and feminine gender identities. The presence of May’s bra directly above McMahan’s painted face, the fact that making McMahan laugh by squeezing May/Weaver’s stomach brings up questions about May’s period, and the concurrent performance of Weaver, May, McMahan, and a lesbian killer within one body all illustrate the complex interactions between different gender identities and the impossibility of fully evacuating one for the other. This hodgepodge of gender performance enacts a complex citation of multiple contexts that all exist in the same performer, moment, and space. By taking on multiple gender performances, May/Weaver refuses the notion of violent women as pathological, and suggests that the degradation of women’s masculinity as always already violent assaults the masculinity enacted by her own body.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Here, I am suggesting that Lesbian violence is not allowed to “just be” in the same way that heterosexual male violence is. As May/Weaver suggests in her song Boogey Man near the end of the play, men just “get” killing. She is suggesting that men own violence somehow, so when it is

The specific gender performatives cited provide a critique of traditional assertions that masculine women are necessarily pathological by embracing the stereotypic citation and combining it with a critique of the masculine gender's use of violence.

*Lesbians Who Kill* clearly offers a diverse range of gender performance based on a multitude of contexts that open up critiques of the male-gaze, heteronormativity, and rigid definitions of gender binaries. But it is through its constant utilization of what Elin Diamond calls mimicry where the viewer might become a feminist spectator, where alternative masculinities become possible for both men and women.

Throughout *Lesbians Who Kill* May/Weaver and June/Shaw play a simple game called "looks like/is like" that constructs a model from which we can view the multiple performances of gender identities as what Diamond terms mimesis-mimicry. "Looks like/is like" is played simply by making associations between words. One person starts with a word and each player must come up with a word that either looks like or is like the starting word. If the other player does not understand the association being made s/he asks for an explanation. The player who understands the explanation loses. As Lynda Hart points out in her review of the play in *Theatre Journal* and her description of this particular game, "winning means accepting failure, so the game can be renewed" ("Untitled Review" 515). As an example, take this short sequence:

MAY. Hummingbird.

JUNE. Needle and thread.

[ . . . ]

MAY. Free will.

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performed by a traditionally oppressed group it is seen as overly criminal, aggressive, and pathological, i.e.- women should not perform in this way. So, the notion that lesbians (especially masculine lesbians) are always already violent precludes and covers up any other possibility of women's masculinity.

JUNE. Peeing.

MAY. Peeing?

JUNE. Explanation

[ . . . ]

MAY. Yes. Looks like?

JUNE. Is like. The flash that lets you know you have to pee

MAY. That's bogus.

JUNE. How do you know you have to pee?

MAY. I feel the urge to pee!

JUNE. In a flash of speed like a hummingbird at the blossom!

MAY. Not in a flash of speed like a hummingbird at the blossom!

Just an urge!

JUNE. Like a flash.

MAY. An urge.

JUNE. In a flash.

*Thunder.*

MAY. Sure. You win. Start another one. (190-91)

The game, as Hart notes in her review, recalls what Elin Diamond defines as mimesis: "a truthful relation between world and word, model and copy, nature and image, or, in semiotic terms, referent and sign, in which potential difference is subsumed by sameness" (363). Similarly, "looks like/is like" attempts to acknowledge and discover the similarities between words, images, or objects as opposed to their differences. According to Diamond, traditional mimesis and its "truthful" relation has primarily been phallogocentric. The necessary element of "truth" within the relationship between the model and the copy, however, can be coopted for diverse subject positions. Importantly, these different notions of "truth" operate under the commitment to "the truth value of one's own position, however complex and nuanced one's account of that position might be" (Diamond

364). Diamond recognizes that forming a different “truth value of one’s own position” can be resistant, but that it relies on the establishment of “truth values” that ultimately might be in danger of creating an oppressive effect similar to the phallogocentric “truths” of traditional mimesis. Despite this, representing a multiplicity of gender identities in one performer, body, or being can be read as a form of resistance to heteronormative gender constructions. But *Lesbians Who Kill* and the game “looks like/is like” seem to go further. The multiplicity of performance in the play also aligns with the postmodern subject that “no longer lay[s] claim to a stable system of reference” (Diamond 364). “Looks like/is like” plays with the instability of various references within the communication between two people. For June/Shaw, “peeing” somehow associates with “Free will,” and ultimately May/Weaver agrees to the association. “Truth” becomes a moving target in the destabilized system of references within the play, and yet, like June and May, agreement can be reached, if only on a small group basis. One of the most dynamic shifts within feminism during the 1980s and 90s was a movement towards inclusivity and multifaceted, divergent, unique, ways to be a feminist, explore one’s femininity, or be a woman. This is seen in Hart, Dolan, Case, Solomon, and Davy’s desire to create and include lesbian feminism within feminist discourse. It is a shift, I argue, that has yet to occur for men or masculinity and absolutely essential to move [mM](#)asculinity past its reliance on violence and dominance towards something better for everyone. As a solution that might be particularly useful to unlocking multi-faceted and divergent types of masculinity, Diamond builds on a theory of mimesis-mimicry initially theorized by Luce Irigaray.

Diamond variously describes mimesis-mimicry as an overflowing of mimesis into mimicry, a form of challenge or questioning, and a recovery of the place of exploitation (368-373). In other words, mimicry might be

considered a hyper-mimesis, where mimetic forms of representation become over-performed to the point that they lose their mimetic qualities and pass into the realm of mimicry. "Looks like/is like" pushes the concept of mimesis to the forefront of the performance of *Lesbians Who Kill*, but does so in a way that relies on no set system of associations or references. In fact, the only rule to the game seems to be that "symbols don't count" (192). Based on Diamond's assertion that mimesis is primarily phallogocentric it seems rather important that "looks like/is like" denies the symbolic and permits a discussion of masculinity and femininity without the male body. As Dolan suggests in her discussion of lesbian performance, "Rather than gazing through the representational window at their commodification as women, lesbians are generating and buying their own desire on a different representational economy. Perhaps the lesbian subject can offer a model for women spectators that will appropriate the male gaze" ("Desire Cloaked" 64). But this appropriation of "the male gaze," this "form of challenge," I argue does not just offer a model for women spectators. The game, "looks like/is like," also frees the masculine from the control of the symbolic. It suggests that the spectator examine the multiple gender performances through the "looks like/is like" model, through a mimicry of the phallogocentric symbolic. The play asks whether or not Shaw's/June's masculinity looks like or is like men's masculinity. The question not only appropriates the masculine identity for a lesbian feminist spectator, but also points out the ways that masculinity can operate outside the strictures of violent masculinity, critiquing masculinity created through violence and offering alternatives.

The musical numbers performed throughout *Lesbians Who Kill* provide a site of mimicry. It is within these numbers that Shaw/June and Weaver/May over-perform their butch-femme roles. The performance exceeds the parameters of mimesis and moves into a mimicry that



challenges heteronormative gender identities, and uncovers a site of exploitation—a site where women are told to behave in a feminine manner and men own violence. Take for example the first musical number of the play described in the text as “*the theme from a stereotypically romantic movie, like A Man and a Woman comes on the radio. May and June light cigarettes, pour champagne, and begin to sing romantically along with the music as if they were the French lovers in the film*” (196). Weaver/May and Shaw/June take on the most stereotypical heterosexual love scene imaginable. It is not performed in a realistic manner, but rather as if the two characters/performers have never been so bored. The lines are spoken or sung in either a monotone or an overly dramatic voice. The song changes from sappy romance to heated anger halfway through:

MAY and JUNE. (*singing*) When hearts are passing in the night, in the rushing night;  
 I see two lovers in the night, in the lonely night;  
 They take a chance that in the light, in the morning light  
 They’ll be together . . . so much in love. [ . . . ]  
 JUNE. (*singing*) I saw you kissing in the night, in the rushing night  
 With someone else it wasn’t right wasn’t really right  
 You touched her cheek and held her tight and held her really tight,  
 You were together . . . so much in love. (196)

The song and interaction between the two lovers require the audience to reconcile what they know about heterosexual lovers with the lesbian lovers presented in the performance. The song asks the audience, in a manner of speaking, “looks like/is like?” Are these lovers like heteronormative couples, or do they look like a heteronormative couple? The play necessarily avoids prescribing an answer to this question. What is interesting, important, or resistant in this situation is not that the question be answered, but that the question be asked, and that it be asked with the

“looks like/is like” model in mind. It is not abundantly useful to suggest that the butch-femme couple merely looks like—but is not—a re-inscription of heteronormative gender, nor is it useful to suggest that they are essentially a heteronormative couple. These two statements are quite literally the most obvious associations to the term “butch-femme” when it is played in the game of “Looks like/is like”; however, the game that Shaw/June and Weaver/May are playing relies on an unstable system of references and the constant recitation of different gender performances. “Butch-femme” could have a multitude of different terms associated with it, different identities and ways of being, and different forms of masculinity. Through mimicry, the over-performance of traditional heteronormative masculinity calls into question assumptions about masculinity. Mimicry allows for the simultaneous questioning of the similarity and difference of women’s masculinity and men’s masculinity. It creates a space that represents masculinity as a both/and instead of reinforcing a binary between feminine and masculine. The question asked by the musical number’s heteronormative performance—“looks like/is like?”—is reflected in assumptions about the butch-femme relationship discussed by feminist scholars and assumed in culture generally.

Historically, inversion theory has attempted to maintain the heterosexual model by arguing that “the ‘true’ invert [read, butch lesbian] was not really a woman at all,” and that “the woman [read, femme lesbian] seduced by the congenital invert retained her feminine gender identification” (Hart, *Fatal Women* 7). It is not difficult to see or assume a butch-femme relationship in this sort of construction. Case’s “Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic” points out the homophobia inherent in the relationship between feminism and lesbianism in the 1970s and 1980s—an example of a “truth value of one’s own position” having an oppressive effect—by examining Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon’s book *Lesbian/Woman*

(1972) (Diamond 364; Case, “Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic” 284). According to Case, “If the butches are savages in this book, [and she argues they are] the femmes are lost heterosexuals who damage birthright lesbians by forcing them to play the butch roles” (“Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic” 285). Case goes on to explain *Lesbian/Woman’s* premise that butch-femme relationships are merely reinstitutions of the traditional heteronormative gender order that has oppressed women. In other words, butch-femme lesbians reinstall patriarchy. Jill Dolan reasserts the continued prevalence of this belief by pointing out the criticism that the WOW cafe received for its positive portrayals of the butch-femme relationship (“The Dynamics of Desire” 170). The negative view of butch-femme lesbians that I have traced briefly above provides a way to understand the representation and punishment of Aileen Wuornos and helps the play to establish the focus of its mimesis-mimicry.

Aileen Wuornos was a lesbian who acted aggressively in self-defense, or otherwise, to kill seven men. Hart summarizes the view of lesbian philosopher Jeffner Allen, “women do not kill [ . . . ] their passivity is a heterosexist/patriarchal imperative” (*Fatal Women* 142). In other words, as Hart goes on to explain, a violent woman in the context of a heterosexist/patriarchal imperative ceases to be thought of as a woman (*Fatal Women* 143). Hart suggests that the reason Wuornos failed to receive any support for her assertion that she murdered in self-defense has to do with the unrepentant nature of Wuornos’s behavior (*Fatal Women* 140-44). To have been repentant in some form might have reattached Wuornos to a feminine identity, and perhaps garnered her some support. Interestingly, despite the construction of Wuornos as a masculine butch lesbian, appearances of Wuornos and her former partner Tyria Moore might have suggested the opposite association—Moore appears more butch than Wuornos (Basilio 58). Miriam Basilio goes

further, asserting that after Moore cooperated with police to obtain a confession from Wuornos, she proceeded to be constructed as feminine (58). In the case of Aileen Wuornos, a clear attempt to construct the identity of women killers as butch lesbian, not women, and certainly not feminine seems obvious. But women killers are also not men. They simultaneously represent in popular culture, some feminist theory, and inversion theory an iteration of traditional masculine positions while threatening to destroy the very thing they reiterate. The problem of masculine violence embodied by women—which is always already negative—is the problem that *Lesbians Who Kill* seeks, in part, to undermine and repurpose. The insertion within the play of updates on Wuornos's murders makes clear the mimesis of men's violence being suggested by media and the play's mimicry of that violence to establish a wider swathe of masculinity and femininity within lesbian culture. This is absolutely valuable to both the construction of a feminist spectator and the opening up of alternate masculinities to both men and women.

Through the simultaneous performance of multiple gender identities and the mimicry of heteronormative behavior, *Lesbians Who Kill* contests the assumptions of lesbian masculinity as pathological while continuing to claim a masculine self-identification. The play resists early feminist assertions that butch-femme relationships reiterate patriarchy, and instead constructs a subject position that Case might describe as unmasking the "masquerade" of heteronormativity with the fun-filled question of "penis, penis, who's got the penis?" ("Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic" 291). In other words, a subject position that denies the power of the phallus. This interaction can be seen in a murder fantasy enacted by June/Shaw where she presents herself as feminine. June/Shaw removes her masculine clothing and for the first time in the performance dons a dress:

JUNE. C'mere . . . I won't hurt you, I promise . . . I'm not going to hurt you, I'm going to kill you . . . I've read that dying doesn't hurt, it feels good. [ . . . ] It's strange, isn't it, that I'm going to kill you . . . I'm so much softer than you . . . so much prettier . . . I'm going to take you dancing . . . and I'm going to kill you . . . I'm going to kill you in self-defense. [ . . . ] so you see where the self-defense comes in, don't you, love . . . I'm defending myself against your voice on my radio, your voice on my answering machine, your saxophone sounds on my phonograph. [ . . . ] Did I hear you ask me why? Did you actually *say* that? O, sweetie, that's kitsch . . . *Why?* Okay . . . your underpants are too tight . . . keep dancing . . . your shoes are ugly, your speech writer stinks, your mind is slow, your speech is slurred, your breath is bad, and you're NOT FUNNY! You're just NOT FUNNY! (205-06)

Shaw, a masculine lesbian, performs a masculine lesbian performing a feminine killer. Importantly, the feminine killer wants to claim self-defense for her actions, suggesting that the victim's very voice, music, words, and presence form an abusive environment. In fact, the way that the abusive voice surrounds the feminine killer through all aspects of her life hints at the ubiquity of normative gender and its restrictions. June/Shaw portrays a seemingly acceptable form of women's violence—self-defense from abuse—while redefining the abuse as the restrictive domination of men in general. The performers of *Lesbians Who Kill* aren't necessarily killing men, but killing the phallogocentric system of mimesis that leads to women's masculinity's pathologization and criminalization. A presentation of multiple gender identities both feminine and masculine are deployed in the fantasy, and the heteronormative trope of the woman killer as defender of feminine passivity is situated through what I argue is Diamond's notion of mimesis-mimicry. The result is an understanding of

violent resistance that is similar to and different from the feminine self-defense mode of violence. It is mimicry of the regenerative form of masculine violence in that it takes back the site of “exploitation” while blowing up the dichotomy of masculine oppressor and feminine victim—the site of exploitation transforms from patriarchy’s abuse of women to patriarchy’s abuse and regulation of gender. In this way, the play doesn’t just speak to the feminist spectator but also opens up possibilities for men’s view of the masculine. The over-performance of gender (mimicry) and reiteration of multiple gender identities by June/Shaw make it impossible for a spectator, masculine or feminine, to fall back on tired and stereotypical definitions of gender and examine the situation for what it really is: the power and dominance of patriarchal definitions of gender. Taken in total, all the murder fantasies performed by June/Shaw and May/Weaver—which resituate different gender identities in the various positions of victim, killer, masculine, feminine, etc.—critique the assumption of the masculine lesbian as violent, aggressive, and criminal and attack the entire system of patriarchy. *Lesbians Who Kill* enacts a “cultural disruption” of normative gender restrictions that have prevented butch masculinity from being looked at as something other than the most negative pieces of traditional masculinity and allowed masculinity to perhaps begin to acknowledge its own diversity and potential.

In this play, *Split Britches* challenges heteronormative proscriptions of masculine identity. The construction of butch masculinity is particularly problematic because of the normative view of the butch lesbian as pathological, criminal, and aggressive. Because of this view, butch lesbians are not considered women, but are also denied access to masculinity. In other words, lesbian masculinity is negatively situated as looking like a man, but certainly not being like a man. Fortunately, butch lesbians don’t

want to be men. Lois Weaver notes, “Does being butch mean you want to be a man? No. It is about being able to take on the images of dominance, power, and strength, and play with them without having to live the reality of what they are” (Raymond 23). This is a form of play, call it mimicry if you like, which all forms of masculine identity can and should begin to engage with and allow to transform our rigid self-definitions of the masculine into something more diverse and inclusive. As Dolan suggests, “The aim is not to look like men, but to look at all” (“Desire Cloaked” 65). For the feminist spectator gaining the ability to “look at all” was and is absolutely necessary for the progression of feminism. For men, it offers the chance to look at themselves, differently. To look differently means both viewing diverse genders with an open mind and beginning to play openly with masculinity. Split Britches’ playful use of performance, mimesis, mimicry, the butch-femme relationship, women’s violence, and non-normative genders is an excellent place to begin. It allows for both a critique of the normative and a space to explore various gender identities that are positive, desired, feminine, and masculine.

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