2012

"The Infinity and Clarity of Desire:" Identity, Piracy, and Pleasure in the Work of Kathy Acker

Clare Donofrio
Bard College

"The Infinity and Clarity of Desire:"
Identity, Piracy, and Pleasure in the Work of Kathy Acker

A Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

By Clare Donofrio

Annandale-On-Hudson, NY
May 2012

For my dad, who read me poetry before I could read it myself.

Many thanks….

To Cole Heinowitz, my brilliant adviser, for her unflinching commitment to this project, for her encouraging wisdom, and for her love and appreciation of Kathy Acker's work.

To the members of my board, Geoff Sanborn and Deirdre d'Albertis, whose teaching inspired me to pursue a degree in Literature, and whose feedback has proven invaluable.

To my mom, for her strength, support, and for always reminding me "life's too short."

To Lucy and Ellen, my beautiful sisters, without whom I would be lost.

To Maddy and Max, for their unconditional love and friendship.

To my housemates, Nicola and Laura, for countless good laughs and cries at the end of the day.

And, of course, to Kathy herself, who is the voice in my head reminding me to "live forever in wonder."

Contents:

“get rid of meaning.
your mind is a nightmare
that has been eating you;
now eat your mind.”

Introduction:

"Ugh Ugh Ugh"

"You wanted me to begin by reading the red 'ugh,' at once asignificatory and polysemic, but in the first place barely linguistic: a heave, a groan, a punctuation, a way of marking your beautiful, unmystifiable cunt. Ugh!"

Avital Ronell, "Kathy Goes to Hell," from *Lust For Life*

Kathy Acker's name is frequently followed by one of a series of epithets: "punk," "punk poet," "feminist," "sex positive feminist," "postmodern feminist," "postmodern," "experimental novelist," "avant-garde novelist," "cult figure," all of which strive to describe her and her writing.[1] When peers ask the subject of my senior thesis, I become uncomfortable, and tell them to go read Kathy Acker for themselves, at a loss for words to describe her writing and refusing to rely on one of the broad generalizations listed above. This, of course, is what Acker herself would have wanted. Mistrusting academia and the field of literary criticism, Acker believed that truly good writing would speak for itself: "I've never been sure about the need for literary criticism. If a work is immediate enough, alive enough, the proper response isn't to be academic, to write about it, but to use it, to go on" (*Bodies Of Work* 7). This is, of course, impossible, as students and scholars of Acker's work react strongly either in favor or in opposition to her excessively startling language and scandalizing disregard for literary convention. We cannot resist the overwhelming desire to try and make sense of her writing, to classify it, to categorize it, to talk about it. This becomes problematic in academia, as numerous scholars attempt to claim Acker's writing as a contribution to their individual fields of study. This is even

[1] These epithets appear on the back covers of her books published by Grove Press, in encyclopedia entries about her, in blogs featuring her work, in her obituaries, etc.

further complicated by the fact that Acker is no longer alive to speak for herself, to disregard these scholarly claims.

Acker's work is primarily written about in terms of feminism, postmodernism, queer studies, and poststructuralist theory.[2] Journal articles about Acker's writing feature titles such as "Kathy Acker and the Postmodern Subject of Feminism," "Postmodern Fiction as Poststructuralist Theory" and "Kathy Acker and Punk Aesthetics."[3] While these titles, born out of each author's academic discipline and personal field of study, shed light on discreet works or aspects of Acker's oeuvre, they fail to capture the experience of *reading* Acker's work. Alternately, approaching Acker herself rather than her work is popular. Her public persona is inseparable from her work, prompting those who read Acker to critique or commend her "on personal rather than literary grounds" (*Bodies Of Work* 7). In the documentary film, *Who's Afraid of Kathy Acker?*, several female undergraduate students are interviewed about why they are Acker fans. One responds, "she uses real words, and words that make people go 'oh my god!' so I like that about her."[4] In a 1993 review published in *Trivia,* Penelope Engelbrecht performs a lesbian reading of Acker's texts: however, the bulk of the critique shifts from Acker's writing itself to details of Acker's personal life. After speculating whether Acker is "really bisexual," Engelbrecht writes, "Does Kathy Acker represent what many lesbians

[2] See "Works Consulted" for a full list of scholarly articles on Kathy Acker. Almost every entry fits into one of the categories above.
[3] Sciolino, Martina. "Kathy Acker and the Postmodern Subject of Feminism;" Muth, Katie R. "Postmodern Fiction as Poststructuralist Theory: Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*;" Larry McCaffery, "The Artists of Hell: Kathy Acker and 'Punk' Aesthetics," in *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*.

wish they could be: a tough, sexy, genderfucking, postmodern icon? Is Kathy Acker selling a reproduction of herself with/in these books?" (39). The emphasis continually shifts to Acker, the punk/feminist/postmodern icon, rather than to her writing or her body of work.

Before we can open the book to her words, we are first greeted by Kathy's face on the cover. Hence, the only way to approach Acker's writing is through Acker's life, tracing her development as an artist alongside the development of her writing. One cannot detach the aspects of Acker's work from each other; her language and prose style, the violent and sexual content of her writing, her public persona and commitment to autobiographical detail—these things together dictate the reader's encounter with an Acker novel or essay. This kind of holistic reading is best accomplished in essays written by those who knew Acker personally and understood her creative project on an emotional level. I am specifically referring to the volume of essays, *Lust For Life*, edited by Carla Harryman, Avital Ronell, and Amy Scholder. These writers and artists, when addressing Acker's work, desire proximity to Acker herself, an intimacy with both the writing and the illusive figure behind it, their friend who called herself Kathy Acker.

This is first evident in these scholars' delicate and careful approach to the subject of "Kathy Acker." Avital Ronell writes, "Kathy Acker and I are not the same; yet, as her friend, I found myself tempted to reduce her to sameness, to love her as a part of me. This reduction implicates me in unjust acts, eliciting as it does a sense of violation: is it possible to remember and engage a friend without the calculation of sameness, without this reserve of narcissistic appropriation?" (*Lust for Life* 13). By reading Acker's works through Acker herself, a portrait of Kathy Acker can emerge, an intimate combination of

both the writer and the writing. This reading of Acker's work is most successful as it confronts the tensions inherent in a *reading*, the ability of the reader/friend to violate that which is read, to separate its bits and pieces out from the whole, the textual reality, the body of work to which it belongs. Hence, in this study, I attempt to treat Acker's work with a similar intimacy. Although this is impossible given that I never knew Kathy Acker personally, I attempt to know Acker through her writing, her interviews, her readings, cultivating an intimacy with her voice.

In my efforts to make sense of Kathy Acker, to identify what she did in her writing and why she did it, I am drawn to these primary texts, the voice of Acker herself. However, throughout my research, the more I hear or read Acker, the more I become aware of the ways in which she mediates her "self" for the public to which she speaks. She will often contradict herself in a single interview, or make overwhelmingly general proclamations about herself and her work. For example, in a 1995 reading at SUNY Buffalo, Acker makes the audience laugh with her cynical comments, responding to their laughter with, "I'm sorry, I have a very black sense of humor." In response to the question, "where do you locate yourself within feminism?" Acker responds, "I'm not brilliant at locating myself."[5] A tension arises between who Acker is publicly, who she is in her work, and who her friends identify her to be. Mark Amerika, friend and interviewer, cites moments where Acker dismissed questions in interviews: when he asked her about the voice in her writing, Acker replied, "What voice? I just steal shit." He

[5] S Kathy Acker. "On Different Feminisms." Rec. 12 Apr. 1995. *Penn Sound*. Web. 27 Apr. 2012. <http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Acker/04-12-1995/Acker-Kathy_02_on-different-kinds-of-feminism_Interview-and-Discussion-at-UB_04-12-95.mp3>.

continues, “Once, during an especially heated phone call (Acker always said what was on her mind), she said, ‘What do all these people want from me? I’m powerless, can’t they see I’m powerless?’” (Amerika 4).

Essentially, Acker negotiated a tension between her public persona and her private self. Part of this stemmed from her discomfort in the public eye: she says at a reading, “Anyone who’s in the public has an image, and anyone who’s in the public, or has to deal publicly, is in a *use* situation.”[6] Acker’s way out of this “use” was to make sure she was always an enigmatic performer. Jonathan Webster writes on the experience of interviewing her:

> The most enjoyable thing about having a conversation with the gorgeous, post-punk, post-feminist, pierced and tattooed American novelist Kathy Acker, is that her answers to interview questions take on an elliptical quality. Just as in her novels, you are simultaneously thrown off balance and yet riveted, never quite knowing whether she is going to give you a straight answer or about to go off at a bizarre, but somehow connected, tangent. (Bohemian Ink 1)

Friends cite her as simultaneously narcissistic and generous, as both combative and understanding (*Lust for Life* 25, 106). The more I read, the more friends of Acker’s I encounter, the harder it is to pin down “Kathy Acker.” Her birth date is ambiguous, listed variously as 1944, 1947, and 1948 (Robinson 152). Even obituaries list the date of her death differently. Her birth name was Karen Lehmann; Kathy was a nickname and Acker was the name of her first husband, Robert Acker.

In an attempt to elucidate the “Essential Acker,” I will trace Acker’s oeuvre chronologically, breaking down her work into the three predominant phases of early work

---

[6] Kathy Acker. "On Fitting In and Punk Culture." Rec. 12 Apr. 1995. *Penn Sound*. Web. 27 Apr. 2012. <http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Acker/04-12-1995/Acker-Kathy_02_on-fitting-in-and-punk-culture_Interview-and-Discussion-at-UB_04-12-95.mp3>.

with identity, a middle section of novels concerned with piracy and plagiarism, and her final works' concerns with myth and narrative.[7] In Chapter One, I discuss Acker's early texts, written during the 1970s. Studying with poets and performance artists such as David Antin in California, Acker began to cultivate the idea of writing with a uniform "process" of composition, engaging in a process of experimentation from which the outcome was ultimately unknown. In these early years, Acker began to articulate an authorial identity, navigating the link between poetry and prose, between author and narrator, whilst experimenting with the location of the "I" in the text. In her first three novels, *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, *I Dreamt I Was Nymphomaniac*, and *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec*, published together in a volume *Portrait of an Eye,* Acker experiments with form and content, breaking down conventional grammar and syntax while juxtaposing real and fake "autobiography." This performative act becomes political, resisting consumption by the reader whilst employing Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's model of schizophrenia. The outcome of these experimental texts is the creation of a new reality inherent in the text itself.

In Chapter Two, I explore Acker's increasing interest in plagiarism and piracy via her novels *Great Expectations* (1983) and *Don Quixote* (1986). Given the movement toward "appropriation" in the 1980s New York art scene, I discuss the contemporary artistic climate by which Acker was influenced. In pirating sources from popular culture alongside canonical literature, Acker is forced to navigate a duality of complicity versus

[7] This "tripartite" exploration of the three phases of Acker's work seems to be popular among critics. As Caren Irr articulates, it begins with "an initial autobiographical confrontation with identity, the plagiarizing middle years, and a final more affirmative quest for a new myth of community" (Hardin 221). Yet, as I explain, this is a vast oversimplification.

critique. I argue that while this impulse is inherently political, it is foremost motivated by pleasure and the desire for textual "wildness." By using the Marquis de Sade, Luce Irigaray, Georges Bataille and Roland Barthes' respective models of the relationship between language and pleasure, I attempt to articulate Acker's own quest for the endless orgasm through/in language.

In Chapter Three, I discuss Acker's shift from performance to communication, and the changes in her methods of composition and growing concerns with myth and narrative. Here I deal with the work written from the mid 1980s up until her death in 1997, with a focus on *Empire of the Senseless*, *In Memoriam to Identity*, and *My Mother: Demonology*. In these final novels, the reading experience changes, as Acker herself nuances her use of piracy and collage in favor of increasing images and dream material. These Acker texts strive to explain themselves, oscillating between intensely individual experience and a desire to communicate with the outside world. Using Jacques Lacan's conception of "the linguistic structure of dreams," I attempt to articulate Acker's differing means of signification and communication in these later works.

These "phases" of Acker's career, however, are not cleanly delineated. Never leaving anything behind, Acker's creative process is additive, each phase building on that which came before it. While Acker's artistic concerns, influenced by her own life's experiences, the contemporary climate in the art worlds of New York, San Francisco, and London, change shape throughout her career, they never wholly abandon that which came before them. This contributes to the consistency of voice and tone throughout Acker's works, and the distinctively disorienting yet thrilling experience of reading a Kathy Acker novel.

While a comprehensive approach to Acker's work is impossible given her enormous breadth of published material, I, like Acker, have followed my instincts with this project, lingering in the spaces I find most interesting, forever in search of freedom and wonder through language. This is certainly a daunting task, as Acker's texts require an overcoming, a risk-taking, a challenging commitment. Penelope Engelbrecht articulates this as follows: "Suddenly, a gaping chasm appears at my feet: I stand at the brink… Every fiber of my body strives to resist momentum… In a provocative letter my editor urges, "go ahead and jump: but I'm afraid to (take a) stand. I can't stand it, can I? I peer behind me, ahead, to the sides. I jump." (33) This fear, this challenge, is what Acker herself would have wanted. She desired her readers to take the journey of the text with her, always exploiting the disorienting potential of language, and its ability to drag the reader into the text, "because that's the only way you can take the journey" (*Hannibal Lecter* 15).

Chapter One:

Acker Learns to Write (Kathy is Born)

"There is just rubble and smoke. Out of the rubble rises…."

Kathy Acker, *The Birth of the Poet: An Opera*

Kathy Acker identifies the beginning of her writing career to be when she "escaped New York" for California around 1970. Upon her relocation to the West Coast, Acker studied under poet David Antin, who, she recalls, "introduced me to the early conceptual artists" (*Hannibal Lecter* 2). Acker's early emphasis on conceptualism and her "apprenticeship" with David Antin identifies an important starting point for understanding Acker as a writer: Antin marries performance and language, valorizing artistic intention and concept over product. As he described at a conference on Kathy Acker in 2002, Antin taught by giving precise instructions for his pupils' writing process:

> I had never taught poetry in my life… There were a number of people in the class including Kathy Acker… I said look, I'm not good at psychology but let's do the work this way, you can write about anything in the world you want, but if somebody else knows more about it than you and it's already in a book in the library, go to the library and steal it… We'll consider the work of putting the pieces together like making a film. Then I could deal with it as a working procedure, somebody would be doing something and we could look at it. There was a sense of free construction that this allowed them: the freedom where their soul was not being judged. ("Talking on Kathy Acker")

The way in which Antin assigned his students a specific "working procedure" resonates throughout Acker's work. As conceptual artists, both Acker and Antin engage in experiments of process: they want to see what will and could happen. Therefore, their texts are composed as a kind of performance, a performed procedure from which an unknown outcome is born.

The emphasis Antin, as well as Acker, places on the inclination to write and perform inspires consideration of larger political frameworks within which their work

functions. In the 1970's, Acker says, "Most poets didn't think why did they write the way they wrote. There was still, and still is, the lingering idea of good poetry as the perfect word in the perfect line. And what David taught me is, to hell with that. Just think what you want to do and do it. Form is determined not by arbitrary rules, but by intention" (*Hannibal Lecter* 3). This disposal of previously dominant poetic values like "the perfect word in the perfect line" is a starting point for thinking about Acker's work. Rather than beginning with a specific desired outcome, Acker intends to ignore "arbitrary rules" in favor of experimental form.

Having escaped the "dead world" of her parents and her childhood in New York, and being exposed to various artistic communities, Acker would begin to have the necessary desire to conceptualize her place in the proto-punk art world of first San Francisco and later New York City (*Bodies Of Work* 159). Acker's early confrontation with intention, the *why* and *how* of her early work, is what I wish to address in this chapter. How does Acker begin to conceptualize not only her writing, but also herself as a writer? What is she trying to accomplish in her early work? How do Acker's intentions determine her texts' formal elements?

"**It's a construct, and her name's Kathy"**

Acker's first work, *Politics*, written when she was "either twenty or twenty one," is a series of prose poems (*Bodies* 9). A selection of *Politics* appears in *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*: it is ten pages long, nearly devoid of punctuation and dotted with proper nouns that stick out with their obtrusive capital letters. Essentially, the work reads as an elongated typically Ackerian stream of consciousness in its diaristic circling around events, people, and places in her life:

> last night with Mary was a complete failure I couldn't understand what she was saying I've never seen any Warhol films I felt she was deaf was I supposed to fuck her Harriet's work was gorgeous eccentric Beardsley one interpretation could be that I was maniacal and Mary was uptight babbling I could be far from reality I don't know no one is willing to come close enough to tell me why the fuck should they. (*Hannibal Lecter* 27)

While this passage has the hints of self-loathing, sex, schizophrenia, and masochism that become tropes throughout all of Acker's texts, *Politics* exists as raw diary and Burroughsian cut-up material, radically unformed in relation to Acker's subsequent novels. It is unmediated by plagiarism or "fake" biography. In fact, it is her only published literary work that she does not call a novel: there is nothing narrative about it besides the consistent use of the first person "I." By translating her own daily and diaristic experiences into linguistically experimental prose poems, Acker allows herself to concentrate entirely on the act of writing as mediation and manipulation of form and textual identity. The emphasis on content is minimal, but the names are familiar: Mary, Warhol, Johnny Carson, Tina Turner, Mark. We know that this world is Kathy's own, but we are exposed to it through the formal nuances that manipulate the way in which we can read and understand it. We see it as she intends us to: unpunctuated, swirling, confusing, inquisitive, vulgar, but *real*. It is resoundingly clear that *Politics* is some kind of reality, if not Acker's own.

But it is useless to sift through pages of her texts in order to parse out the factual and the fictitious. Acker herself never takes ownership of the events in her life: they remain ambiguous. This sets her apart from her contemporaries who also used real-life experiences as inspiration for their artwork. Nan Goldin, for example, with whom Acker worked on the 1983 film *Variety*, photographs in the tradition of diarism. Like Acker's, her work includes themes of sex, violence, and subculture (Goldin, 1986). The difference,

however, is Goldin's willingness to identify the subjects in her photographs and her methods of composition. Goldin takes ownership of the events in her photographs as aspects of her own life: it is important to understanding her photography that the people she photographs are her friends (Goldin 1996). Acker, however, suspends the reader and the text from giving us information about the details of her own quotidian reality. Rather than emphasize the world that inspires the text, Acker emphasizes the text and the world it creates in itself.

Politics is still distinctively "experimental:" this is evident in its refusal to become a part of Acker's widely accepted oeuvre. But something is beginning here; by using Burroughs' cut-up technique, Acker is beginning to scratch at the surface of the problem that she claims is at the center of her next works: the formation of identity and the problematic "I." The "I" is problematic for Acker because it is not accurate: in its falsely empowering stability, it feigns a voice that Acker claims to lack. She repeatedly declares her absence of voice: "I wanted to be a writer; I didn't want to do anything else; but I couldn't find my own voice" (*Bodies* 9). *Politics* ends with a declaration of frustration: "I'm sick of fucking not knowing who I am." This suggests that from here on, the question of "who/what is "I"?" will be addressed. In "experimenting" with identity in the text, Acker attempts to destabilize and deconstruct notions of cohesive subjectivity, exposing her readers to the truth of its fragmented nature while simultaneously searching for an alternative in the creation of a new, more accurate representation of her own authorial identity. At this point in her literary career, Acker's only *intention* is to deconstruct conventional notions of subjectivity and creativity on both a personal and societal level. Acker finds her "own voice' by exploring every possibility of her own

identity, and by consequently articulating her authorial vocal instability through the creation of Kathy. Kathy, however, at this point in Acker's career, is not a solution to this problem, but rather a new possibility for circumventing the answer.

And so begins Acker's experiment with this *I*, and its use in her own quasi-auto-biographical writing. This exploration of identity is glaringly apparent in her next three published works: *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, *I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac,* and *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec. Tarantula* was originally published under the pseudonym "the Black Tarantula," which, Acker claims, came out of her community in 1970s San Francisco and its culture of experimentation with identity: "Everybody changed their name, everybody dressed up all the time, everybody wore make-up" (*Devoured* 3). This "everybody" that represents Acker's artistic community also describes her personal interest in bodily appearance: her manipulation of the body foregrounds her control over her own body, just as her manipulation of a text allows her the ability to control it, or, in her terms, to "fuck with it."

This experimentation with performance, role-playing and identity spawned Acker's creative interest "in the model of schizophrenia." She claims that she began with a very clear and Antin-esque conceptualism, inherent in her chosen form:

> I wanted to explore the use of the word I, that's the only thing I wanted to do. So I placed very direct autobiographical, just diary material, right next to fake diary material. I tried to figure out who I wasn't and I went to the texts of murderesses. I just changed them into first person, really not caring if the writing was good or bad…and then continued to see what would happen. (*Hannibal Lecter* 7)

Hence, in setting up deceptively autobiographical narratives, placing description of Acker's "real-life events," next to that which she "isn't," Acker performs a series of word

experiments on her own writer-identity. This conceptualist writing is inherently experimental, and hence playful, given the unknown outcome of the act of writing. Yet the I itself is not dismantled by Acker's "conceptualism:" by conducting these experiments in the form of a narrative, the reader unifies these two disparate forms of source material (true and false) into one new character. This new "I"-dentity, however, is certainly not Acker herself, "it's a construct, and her name's Kathy" (*Blood and Guts* 34).

Hence, throughout Acker's writing she cultivates a persona; Acker *performs* identity in her texts through the existence of "Kathy." In her interview with Sylvère Lotringer, Acker relates an anecdote in which she finds a letter to David Antin from a publisher to whom she had sent her work: "I see my name, so of course I read the letter, and it's from Carol Berger's saying, this woman is a total nutcase, lock her up in the loony-bin, thinking that these stories were about me…I remember being fascinated that the work had had that kind of power" (*Hannibal Lecter* 6). It is therefore the authorial identity, "writer-I", in which Acker is interested, and the power that authorial identity possesses. Acker, writing out of the obscure locus of authorship, has the power and the potential to write herself into the "world" however she chooses. Rather than obliterate the role of authorship entirely, Acker performs and plays her role as "Kathy," as author: she is able to write her "Kathy" self into the world alongside her other characters/ alter egos. Her texts then, work to articulate her own authorial identity as "Kathy" by exploring the shifting and schizophrenic "I" of her protagonists.

Many have deemed Kathy Acker a "performance artist," along with an "avant-garde writer and cultural outlaw" (King 334). Along with the tendency to appropriate her work into a variety of academic disciplines, Acker's name is frequently followed by a

series of epithets, which attempt to classify her multiplicities of character and variety of alter egos. This is further complicated by the fact that friends and colleagues of Acker express surprise at the extreme diversity between her public persona and herself in the private sphere.

The boundaries between Acker's own biographical material and her literary work are blurred and intentionally confused. But rather than leave Acker herself out of it, focusing solely on her language and the texts themselves, we are forced to analyze Acker's own life as we would one of her novels. Even after thorough research, the details of her biography overlap and contradict each other. I, for example, have yet to discover an undisputed account of her birth year. This confusion is essential to the careful cultivation of her public persona, which also contributes to the ways in which readers have interacted with and understood her texts. Yet by allowing her authorial identity to become an object of speculation and interpretation, Acker allows the critical discourse on her work to diverge from the texts themselves, and into merely the intentionality behind them, or the *process* of their creation: "Most of all, I remember being taught that it's not an artwork's content, surface content, that matters, but the process of making art. That only process matters" (*Bodies* 83). Essentially, Acker valorizes process over product; she says she didn't "care if the writing was good or bad." So, is there anything to gain from a close reading of these early works, as they are merely experimental in nature? I believe there is. These texts begin to establish not only the persona and alter egos of Kathy and identify issues with which, although still inarticulate in her contemporary understanding, become the foundation of her later works. They allow Acker a necessary "working

through" of the problem of identity, a crucial step in her personal development as a writer.

Portrait of an I

The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula was originally published under the pseudonym "The Black Tarantula." The novel was then followed by two similar works: *I Dreamt I was a Nymphomaniac*, and *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec*. This trilogy, later published together under the title *Portrait of an Eye* after George Bataille's novel *Portrait of the Eye,* deals with, in Acker's words, "the issue of identity" (*Breaking the Sequence* 23). Identity is certainly a *concern* here, as the reader begins to discern Acker's characters' schizophrenic tendencies. On the second page of *Tarantula*: "I hallucinate that the Virgin Mary wears black leather pants and a black leather motorcycle jacket, she climbs trees, she doesn't give a fuck for anyone." This is what Acker would call fake biography. The "who I wasn't," Acker's "I," functions in complete opposition to the protagonists in this first section, "some lives of murderesses." We see this further down the page when a sample from Acker's diary is inserted: "Do you want me to call you yes. I call Friday call Saturday Sunday this is Kathy O uh do you want to spend a night with me again are you too busy uh goodbye have a good time in New York uh goodbye" (4). Acker *does* "give a fuck" unlike Charlotte Wood, the murderess, protagonist, alter ego. So the question becomes, why murderesses? Why does Acker insist on writing from the perspective of the deranged? By articulating the extreme *opposite* of Acker's own identity in society, going into the extremes of human experience, Acker begins to articulate the repeated and subtly varied personae of her novels. This person, articulated from the anger, pain, ecstasy, intensity and insanity of

Kathy/Acker's wildest imaginings, when read, reflects back on Acker herself, classifying what is to become of her "*real*-world identity." By "*dis*-integrating" the "I," Acker can find "a more comfortable way of being" (*Sequence* 23).

This disintegration and vacillation of identity creates the schizophrenia typical of Acker's narration. "I feel angry. I've forgotten how to feel. I feel like I've done what I wanted. I feel elated" (9). How can one interpret this series of contradictory statements? This moment is unable to be classified into the dichotomy of biography vs. non-biography: it is part of the text itself and therefore it is real. It belongs to Kathy, the writer who dares to be nonsensical. In fact, the pages of all three narratives within *Portrait of an Eye* are dotted with I's. Hence, the weaving I's create a portrait of Acker's own vocal and subjective instability, and her desire to articulate the authorial position as a "cultural outlaw." Kathy does not possess a clearly delineated intention: she is confused, unable to reason, and espouses these irrational confusions as a means with which to unravel the reader's own perceptions of identity, and the self in relation to society.

By denying and suspending the role of revered authorship, "taking the postmodern axiom of death of the author to its logical (and absurd) extreme" (Lewis 5) Acker, via Kathy, is able to perform irrationalities and schizophrenia convincingly to her audience. Her words are born from the desire to dismantle societal notions of selfhood and desire in favor of something more powerful and more immediate. Her performances are productive foremost in the experience they create for both the performer and the audience. This is specifically evident in the three parts of *Portrait of an Eye*; it is in these works that Acker is more foretelling in her use of other texts and her intention behind the writing. *Tarantula* begins with the epigraph: "Intention: I become a murderess by

repeating in words the lives of other murderesses" (2). It then ends with a kind of credits to those from whom Acker has pirated her texts: "All the above events taken from *The Marquis de Sade The Complete Justine Philosophy in the Bedroom and Other Writings* by Count Donatien Alphonse Francois de Sade, *Portrait of de Sade* by W. Lenning, and myself" (90).

While these statements work to bookend the "artwork" that lies between them, the authorial consciousness still seems absent. The brief "statement of intention" does not appear as a dignified and distinguished foreword, while the "end credits" end with a credit to "myself." The slight and brief inclusion of this word suggests wonder at who this self could possibly be. Is it the same as the "myself" that appears a few pages prior in a fit of "I" confusion and childlike self-annihilation?

> Redo myself
> I slobber down the right side fat white mouth goo goo goo goo 'yes my dear that's right' I'm a pudgy ball stick a knife in me and I bleed. I scream and I scream and I scream. I don't scream; I keep that wrapped up inside of me and I smile. (87)

In this sense, Acker seems to be performing these bodily acts and denial of the self/the "I" through her writing. As Acker herself has admitted, her early works are not "novels" in the sense that they tell a story, but rather highlight the act of writing, the artistic gesture itself. One may enter the text/performance and exit it at any time. Bearing witness to Acker's performing is what remains significant: it is an experience of the irrational product that allows the creative process to materialize.

Acker's texts are called "theories-in-performance[8]" due to the feminist and postmodern theories that provide subtext to Acker's performance texts. Yet the performance comes *before* the theory: at this point in Acker's career she hadn't yet read Deleuze and Guattari, two French theorists who, I argue, are vital to understanding her work. Acker, in her early work, is performing out of need to exist (and name herself in the art world) rather than from desire for creativity or self-expression. Just as the writing precedes the theory that later explains it, necessity to write precedes the pleasure of selfhood that Acker then experiences as a result of writing. Acker articulates this in *Tarantula*:

> I was interested in "fame" as one end: (1) people whose work I want to find out about would talk to me, (2) I would somehow be able to pay for food rent etc. doing something connected, (3) artists I fall in love with would fuck me: these desires are fucking over my work (and me). So I say the desires out loud. I'm trying to get away from self-expression but not from personal life. I hate creativity. I'm simply exploring other ways of dealing with events than ways my lousy habits—mainly installed by parents and institutions—have forced me to act. (86)

Kathy/Acker proclaims that she is interested in fame as means to an end, the end of communication and community: she needs to pay rent, fuck, eat, all of which are desires that interfere with her work, and thus must be incorporated, or appropriated, by that work. Acker's writing is born out of her personal life, out of her desires and "lousy habits," and thus it allows her to come into dialogue with these desires and habits. By placing what she *is* (the reality of her quotidian existence) next to what she *isn't* (her wildest

---

[8] In her essay, "Kathy Acker and the Postmodern Subject of Feminism," Martina Sciolino uses this term to describe Acker's work. Of course it is important that Acker is a woman, that her desire is necessarily female, and that her writing is comparable to other writers (all male) who make up the "postmodernist canon." But the performance precedes the theory: Acker does not use performance to demonstrate a given theory, but rather she "pirates" the theory and applies it to her writing.

imaginings of violence, ecstasy, death), Acker is able to invent the coping mechanism of performing, re-appropriating, and articulating her self. Further, by articulating and making public this process of becoming, Acker distances her "self" from the texts. Kathy doesn't "give a fuck" whether her writing is good, as long as she gets to fuck famous men.

Martina Sciolino discusses this "becoming" nature of Acker's writing, and specifically of her early works. By performing a self, constructing "Kathy" through writing, Acker's re-writing of her own experience is "full of gaps, folds, and disappearances. A narrative becoming requires strategic decomposition, in reading and writing" (438). As a female writer, Acker performs, writes, and re-reads her gender, just as she writes, re-reads, and performs de Sade. It is Acker's re-constituting of her desires and her self that allows the narrative to move forward. *Portrait* is not a collection of prose poems, but rather a collection of three discreet experiments in language that begin in one place and end in another. Sciolino describes this: "A narrative moves because a character is a work-in-progress: engaged in a ceaseless process of negotiating selfhood through relations to the world, to time… the difference that constitutes identity is contingent—interrelational and contextual" (443). Thus, Kathy is not antithetical to her murderesses, but rather someone who can fantasize about murder, about sex, someone who is closely related to the "oppressed, repressed, horny women" who populate her texts (Foster Wallace 1). Acker is not writing about herself and about her fictional characters, but rather using the text and the reader as springboards against which to bounce her desires, her fantasies, against which to negotiate her selfhood. Her texts are unstable because they are fluctuating and positional negotiations.

Schizo-resistance

Because identity is explored as a negotiation, a process, and a becoming, Acker's texts are forced to take on aspects of schizophrenia. The I is an unstable subject, at once here and there, at once reading and writing itself. By stretching the I out in every possible direction, by placing it on a plane and letting it slip and slide across the surface, Acker is experimenting with "self-potentiality." Laurie Weeks articulates this concept, first described by Foucault, when she cites Acker as "[providing] me with a sort of map toward a territory where the unexpected, the forbidden, the contradictory, frolic about in ecstatic states of possibility" (Boaz 45). This practice of slipping through a portal into unknown compartments of self-writing is intrinsically political, as new linguistic identities take place and re-form what Acker calls her "lousy habits—mainly installed by parents and institutions." *Portrait of an Eye* is a reaction to the imposition, the repression and oppression, that Acker (alter egos included) experiences in society.

In this sense it is useful to look at Acker's self-writing from a Foucauldian perspective. Although Acker had not yet thought of her work in terms of poststructuralist theory, she identifies Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari, and Butler to have shaped the ways in which she can talk about "why I'm doing what I'm doing" (*Hannibal Lecter* 9). In a recent essay, Alex Houen reads Acker in terms of Foucault: "fiction is intended to suspend individuals from biopower networks and give them breathing space to explore potentiality" (24). Society's political networks have forced Acker to define *who she is*, and as she so angrily declares at the end of *Politics*: "I'm sick of fucking not knowing who I am." So the "self-writing" that takes place in *Portrait* is not a means to discover and express oneself through the autotelic process, but rather to use the text as a means of

creating spaces in which new and foreign experiences of being can occur, challenging the ways in which society forces Acker to answer the question of *who am I.*

What results is a schizophrenic voice that incorporates Acker's own desires with her wildest imaginings, her friends' experiences, her own dreams, and the work of those whom she has read and admired. This process of appropriation of her own biography alongside others' biographical information uncovers her own understandings of selfhood and the fictional subject that allow her to define herself as an artist:

> I learned two things. First, in fiction, there is no 'true' or 'false' in social-realist terms. Fiction is 'true' or 'real' when it makes. Second, if there is a self, it isn't Hegel's subject or the centralized phallic I/eye. If there is a self, it's probably the world. All is real. When I placed 'true' autobiography next to 'fake' autobiography, everything was real. Phallic identity's another scam that probably had to do with capitalistic ownership (*Bodies Of Work* 10).

Essentially, Acker concludes that the concept of identity, like the concept of reality, is relative. "All is real" because reality is something with which the reader can interact, "probably" something more "comfortable" than "phallic identity."

The fluidity of Acker's writing, its inability to stay still, to describe, delineate, or name, can be understood as a tactical reaction against the phallic I. If Acker is "barely born, I was dead," a voiceless female deranged from familial connection and mechanisms of naming her self, her body, and her experiences, these experiences must inherently occur in opposition to the mainstream, the phallic, the masculine and mainstream notions of reality. Hence, schizophrenic identity and persistent vocalization of desire are tactics of rebellion against the capitalist social order.

Acker viewed art in general as a rebellious and oppositional force, as artists oppose the omnipotence of logos: "Art and artist have always been marginal to this polis, the political body. Right now, our government is increasingly attacking acts of the mouth,

written and oral speech, which pertain to those parts of the body not ruled by the logos, and acts of speech occurring in other media, visual, theatrical, etc" (*Bodies* 82). Acker's understanding of "art," however, highlights those artists belonging to what she calls the "other tradition, the non-acceptable literary tradition," the "immediate" tradition: "because our society, through the voice of its literary society, cannot bear immediacy, the truth, especially the political truth" (*Bodies* 7). The art of which Acker speaks is the art that works to create this an internal political effect, a call to attention, "immediacy," in its form and content: it is the tradition of work from which Acker herself draws, and to which she now belongs. This lineage is specifically relevant in understanding her early work in which Acker relied heavily on Burroughs' cut-up technique as the process through which to enact her political deconstruction:

> The language of our media who dictate our political and social actualities is that of (false) continuity and (always partially false) fact: simple declarative sentences, as little use of ambiguity as possible, no dwelling within verbal sensuousness. Burroughs fights this post-bourgeois language with poetry: images, dangling clauses, all that lingers at the edges of the unsaid, and that leads to and through dreams. As Burroughs said: without dreams, our desires, especially sexual desires, we will die. (*Bodies Of Work* 3).

Acker is not concerned with the real in terms of the factual but rather with what has the potential for *textual* reality. Writing, or "processing," becomes a means with which to create a new and empowering reality: fiction is a tool with which the false or imaginative can be created. In this sense, Acker's creative process gestures (like Burroughs' texts and unlike the media) toward verbal sensuousness, toward the unsaid, toward dreams and desires. In this sense, Acker wishes to create a text that cannot be consumed by said "media," a text that works against dominant political powers, a text that cannot be understood. This leads us to the model of capitalism and schizophrenia as articulated by

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, a model that became useful for Acker in explaining her work's intention and process.

"If there is a Self, it's probably the world"

Deleuze and Guattari's psychoanalytic and philosophical study *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* was published in 1977, when Kathy Acker was in her late twenties and had already written and published her first four novels. Acker did not encounter their work until the mid-eighties: "When I had first read Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari and met Felix Guattari, I knew that those philosophes were working as they were working for cultural and political reasons and purposes" (*Bodies* 85). Acker identified with these theorists because she understood them to be working towards a dismantling, a post-structural/post-modern/post-punk destruction of conventional means of understanding and explaining sex, desire, and power in favor of new methods. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari relate desire to capitalist society: it is their model of schizophrenia and "desiring machines" that most adequately illuminate Acker's use of the schizophrenic "I" as a political tactic in opposition to the "phallic I."

Capitalism and Schizophrenia defines *bodies*, physical, societal, political and historical, in terms of desire and production. When put into these terms, the "body" becomes a series of organs, or desiring machines. Each organ produces and desires. Each body belongs to the capitalist system of production and consumption. The schizophrenic body, however, exists outside of this system because it is the "universal producer": "The body without organs is nonproductive; nonetheless it is produced, at a certain place and a certain time in the connective synthesis, as the identity of producing and the product: the schizophrenic is a body without organs" (8). The schizophrenic, by universally producing

and refusing to be consumed, abjects itself from the capitalist system of consumption. It resists the desiring-machines, rendering itself universally productive and uncontrollably spewing desire. Acker's writing, like the schizophrenic "body without organs," resists consumption at all costs. Acker's "I's" are essentially *always* schizophrenic, because they converge, change names, genders, races, time period, and place. Acker's work relentlessly produces while resisting consumption at all costs: it disgusts, revolts, annoys, and frustrates.

The schizophrenic narrator is nearly oxymoronic, because fiction is written with the intention of consumption. But is Kathy Acker's? Deleuze and Guattari classify the schizophrenic/ body without organ's relationship to language and speech: "In order to resist organ-machines, the body without organs presents its smooth, slippery, opaque, taut surface as a barrier. In order to resist words composed of articulated phonetic units, it utters only gasps and cries that are sheer unarticulated blocks of sound" (9). This description is specifically resonant with Acker's early works. *Politics* for example, is certainly slippery: by omitting punctuation, the first-time reader dives in and is forced to come up for air after only a few lines. Pages are "inarticulate blocks" in the sense that there are no paragraphs or line breaks. Unstable signifiers and relentless explosions of desire and perception halt the reader's predisposed desire for a rational and logical narrative. *Politics* exercises a kind of brutality upon the reader who attempts to consume its meaning. A few lines start to finish read:

> Tonight the new couple fucked maybe tomorrow night he doesn't know he's sooo busy maybe I won't be able to train another couple in time hah ten easy steps to Hollywood bare the vagina destroy yourself he couldn't be bother a couple of nights' work he makes me puke I can't work in such hell I call up Mark at his house he'll do the show whenever I want nights (he works days). (*Hannibal* 28)

By refusing the conventions of grammar and syntax that allow a text to be understood, read narratively, and thus consumed, Acker interrupts the reader's desire for comprehension. Rather than guiding us through a sentence or paragraph with singular narration and directive punctuation, "The 'either…or…or' of the schizophrenic takes over from the 'and then'" of rational texts (Deleuze and Guattari 12). The consumer/reader does not know where to turn. We may momentarily put the book down, or reread a sentence several times, but the schizophrenic I continues to direct us to several different places simultaneously: "Whereas the 'either/or' claims to mark decisive choices between immutable terms (the alternative: either this or that), the schizophrenic 'either…or…or' refers to a system of possible permutations between differences that always amount to the same as they shift and slide about" (12). This explains the ways in which Acker's texts become recursive, shifting back and forth and repeating words and nearly identical pornographic scenarios:

> (Pure pornography) I scarcely feel his fingers edging through the layers of my musk into the sex of the body… I only feel relief as his fingers penetrate, moving freely inside me…my tensed muscles the muscles around my clit shooting outward disintegrate I lose my sex by coming (*Tarantula* 45)

> Lowered his hardened manhood into me so that I thought he was tearing my skin, thrusting an iron-hot cleaver into the most secret part of my body. He kept forcing himself into me until he began to shudder…I felt no relief (*Toulouse Lautrec* 236)

While these instances of pornographic material occur rather frequently, they reiterate and repeat the same shifts in language and experience. How are we supposed to read such passages? Rather than contributing to some kind of forward narrative progression or an increased reader comprehension, the repeated physical experiences of pain and pleasure overlap and confuse the meanings of words like "disintegrate," "relief," and "sex," refusing linguistic specificity and echoing bodice-rippers and romance novels.

Ultimately, these passages paired with poetic expressions of pain and suffering confuse the consciousness of the narrator herself. Deleuze and Guattari explain this "disjunction" of meaning: "The disjunctive synthesis of recording therefore comes to overlap the connective syntheses of production." (13) Therefore, Acker's schizophrenic writing is *recording* more so than producing. Because there is no "self," self-expression becomes impossible: instead, Acker's texts become catalogues: of her own dreams, of personal experiences, of others' texts.

It is useful, then, to return to David Antin's description of his work with Acker. By supplying Acker, in her early experiences as a writer, with a specific "working procedure… a sense of free construction that this allowed: the freedom where [her] soul was not being judged," Acker was able to find a tactic for experiencing pleasure in writing while simultaneously articulating politically oppositional texts. Acker's "soul" or " personal voice" is never judged because she cultivates a new persona within the new world of her writing. This paradoxically, however, keeps her personality at bay in service of the political message her writing performs. Acker approaches writing as a task that must be completed: as a process that necessarily *frees* her from her self and her known reality by establishing a new, liberating, and "comfortable" textual reality.

The schizophrenic "either…or…or" described by Deleuze and Guattari produces a multitude of possibilities for Acker's writing: every "or" allows a new potential for being, a new scenario of uninhibited desire, and a new opportunity to dismantle the phallic "I." writing is a task that provides her with a profound experience of pleasure. By writing, Acker is working to articulate her artistic project: the result of her task-like process is a space in which Kathy emerges in a joyful schizophrenia. David Antin

articulates Acker's specific desire for experience. He discusses it in terms very similar to Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of desire as "fluid" and "flowing:"

> Kathy had a desire for life. Desire as I see it doesn't refer to an absence it refers to a superfluidity and an abundance of energy… Her engagement was with so many things, but she had to restrain herself so not to be all over the place all at once. The rule system was essentially a convenience to have her have a way of working that was procedural enough to make sense. ("Talking on Kathy Acker")

Essentially, Antin suggests that writing allowed Acker's own overabundance of the "desire flow" to be mediated by language: a specific process of performance that allows not only a rearticulation of her own experiences and notions of selfhood, but also a tangible proof of performance with which the reader can interact. By "cutting up" pieces of her own life, her favorite fiction, dreams and fantasies, Acker mutilates a phallocentric reality in order to create something *more* powerful: a personal, immediate, an inconsumable record of experiences.

Chapter Two:

Kathy, King of the Pirates

"Imagine someone who abolishes within himself all barriers, all classes, all exclusions, not by syncretism but by simple discard of that old specter: logical contradiction, who mixes every language, even those said to be incompatible; who silently accepts every charge of illogicality, of incongruity…Such a man would be the mockery of our society: court school, asylum, polite conversation would cast him out: who endures contradiction without shame? Now this anti-hero exists:"

Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

After completing her first three short novels, Kathy Acker claims that the problem of identity "became a dead issue because I realized that you make the I and what makes the I are texts" (*Hannibal Lecter* 11). "So," she says, "I became interested in just text. Other people's texts. If there's no problem with the I, then in terms of text there was no self and other, I could use everyone else's writing. And then it's like a kid; suddenly a toy shop opens up and the toy shop is called culture." After addressing her own authorial identity and its place in relationship to her texts, Acker concludes that these questions are essentially irrelevant: the *reality* of a text is of utmost importance. Hence, Acker is left with delight in the "worlds" or realities of the texts themselves, and their inherent malleability. Acker adopts a new creative process that allows her the freedom to make a "world" with both her own language and others' texts. This process is rooted in pleasure: as Acker deconstructs the texts of others, she is simultaneously relishing her creative license to slice up and put back together. Acker is no longer "fucking with" the concept of identity, but rather the materiality of the text itself: and for Acker, "fucking" is always ecstatic**.**

The variety of content Acker "pirates," "steals," "plagiarizes," or "appropriates," is endless. Her sources are diverse in content, age, and form. The "toy shop," for Acker, is all-inclusive: she refuses to refine her samplings to any form of literature, i.e. culture. It is, in fact, the opposite: by pairing high culture and canonical literature (like Cervantes' *Don Quixote*) with popular "trash" such as soft-core pornography Acker "dissolves herself into a torrent of textuality" (Wollen 2). This "torrent" overrides both the reader and the content of the text itself, refusing to abide by narrative form or the reader's desire for consumption.

"Terrorism in Literature!"[9]

In his 1991 essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Fredric Jameson discusses the postmodern in terms of what he calls its two main characteristics: pastiche and schizophrenia. Jameson argues that postmodernism both resists and reacts against a "unique self and private identity" in favor of *pastiche*, "the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language" (114). Jameson writes, "in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum" (115). This ventriloquism of "dead styles," or other texts, results in an "effacement of some key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion between the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture" (112). By using both canonical voices and pop culture voices seamlessly, a "postmodern" writer like Acker refuses to draw the line between *kinds* of culture or literature, instead using each stylistic mask as a new tool or toy. The result of this "playing," "mushing," or "mashing," (as Acker calls it) is a new

[9] Lotringer, *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*, page 13

text, a pastiche (Dead Doll 4). By juxtaposing these stylistically nuanced texts, Acker uses the writing of others as building blocks to create her own textual torrent, a new reality.

During the late 1970's and early 1980's, the time during which Acker was writing two of her better known novels, *Great Expectations* and *Don Quixote*, pastiche via appropriation was becoming a widely used artistic technique in the downtown New York art scene. Artists were manipulating and pirating existing images and texts to create new works and new representations, and to react against increasingly conservative American society. Appropriation became a valuable artistic practice for its inherent critique of authorship and authority, as well as its deconstruction of the conception of the "artwork" as a direct expression of the "artist" and his/her unique individuality. By manipulating both "high art" and artifacts of popular culture, artists could use "dead languages" in order to both draw attention to their failure and create new representations of the world. In his 1993 *Artforum* article "The Lightness of Theory," John Rajchman articulates this "world" in which art was changing. He writes:

> We are only made-up things, we told ourselves, and live in a make-believe world: all is only "simulation," "hyperreality," "appropriation." Two great assurances arose. There was the notion that nothing new can happen, and that we must content ourselves with more or less "ironical" recombinations juxtapositions, quotations of what has been. And so we were at the End--the end of Modernity, reality, truth, "the subject," and, of course, art, or, at least, the fine arts. (Rajchman 2)

In the recessed, Reaganesque 1980's, the artist as subject was declared dead, and that subject was a "very particular one, not to be mourned by all: white, bourgeois, humanist, male, heterosexual" (Foster 11). With this subject dead, postmodern artists were free to feed on his corpse, and redefine the standards of what "art" could be.

Visual artists began to employ appropriation techniques in the service of their own politics and aesthetics: artists like Barbara Kruger and Richard Prince used popular images lifted from magazines and pornography, and manipulated them with their own text and images to create shocking collages, or pastiche. Sherrie Levine, after whose work Acker claims *Don Quixote* is modeled, took photographs of canonical art pieces, from Edward Weston's nudes to Marcel Duchamp's sculptures, and called them her own (Friedman 2). Levine ripped high art from the pristine museum and repossessed it, while Kruger and Prince critiqued popular culture by manipulating images from mass media.

Yet, pastiche and appropriation, while vital to the production of postmodern art, was not a novel concept. Acker was first introduced to the power of using others' texts through the cut-up technique of William S. Burroughs. Burroughs used cut-ups to manipulate his own writing, but also to include popular culture items such as newspaper headlines. Burroughsian cut-ups, like appropriation art in the 1980's, works to interrogate "the notion of (un)fixed history which lay at the core of the preceding cut-up texts by highlighting the questionability of the document," or art object (Robinson 128). Burroughs desired to question the authority of historical documentation: "The past only exists in some record of it… there are no facts. We don't know how much of history is completely fiction" (Burroughs 303). By pairing "facts" with "fiction," Burroughs, like Acker, calls into question the nature of the text's reality, destabilizing notions of authorship and authority.

Many appropriation artists suffered lawsuits for their use of others' materials: their work was attacked "on personal rather than literary grounds" as copyright owners and publishers frequently failed to acknowledge the legitimacy of appropriation

techniques (*Bodies Of Work* 7). All appropriation artists, however, would refute the conflation of pastiche with "plagiarism:" while "appropriation" is more frequently self-referential to the act of "borrowing," plagiarism is a legal term implying secrecy and illegitimacy. In 1990, Acker was sued for "plagiarizing" best-selling author Harold Robbins' novel, ironically titled *The Pirate*, in her novel *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec*. Acker used a scene in which a woman, modeled after Jackie Onassis, picks up a black man in a bar. Acker was eventually forced to sign a letter of apology to Robbins, after resisting this, claiming, "to sign would be to apologize for twenty years of work… I haven't certainly hidden anything" (*Hannibal Lecter* 13). Acker addresses this issue further in her essay "Dead Doll Humility." She discusses her use of appropriation and others' language. In Acker's opinion, she is *not* guilty of plagiarism:

> To be guilty of plagiarism, according to the law, is to represent someone else's material as your material. I haven't done that. […] What a writer does, in 19th century terms, is that he takes a certain amount of experience and he "represents" that material. What I'm doing is simply taking the text to be equal to the world to be equal to non-text, in fact to be more real than non-text, and start *representing* text. (*Hannibal Lecter* 13)

By representing text in a new context, with new language, Acker is doing something similar to re-writing her own quotidian experiences. In treating the text as the "world," her manipulation of it is simply another representation of her experience. Rather than merely plagiarizing a text, recreating it with false claims of ownership, Acker represents a text in terms of her own experience with said text. Like photographers Richard Prince and Barbara Kruger, Acker does not "appropriate" or "steal" others' work, she produces unprecedented juxtapositions, putting high art in an unfamiliar context and conflating texts from different cultural registers.

Although many appropriation artists claim that this artistic act is based in political significance, Kathy Acker claims that her piracy of others' texts comes from an impulse for pleasure.[10] Yet politics cannot be excluded from this artistic practice: a question inherent in appropriation is one of complicity as opposed to critique. By invoking materials as diverse as Dickens, Cervantes, Marquis de Sade, John Keats, best-selling author Harold Robbins, Hammer Horror films and erotica, Acker employs language of other texts, i.e. culture, while critiquing this language from the inside. Yet while Acker's work does not contribute to what Jameson calls the "healthy linguistic normality" of patriarchal language, it relies on that language to exist. Acker uses pastiche, calls on the voices of high culture in order to play with them, to bring them into dialogue with her beloved "schlock:" "science fiction and horror novels, pornography" (Dead Doll 5). Rather than create language, Acker would like to be *given* language, and manipulate that language: "Since this language-world is rich and always changing, flowing, when I write, I enter a world which has complex relations and is, perhaps, illimitable… I can play and be played" (2). Acker speaks of a power dynamic between herself and language: they penetrate each other and play together, neither taking absolute control. Rather than "create a prison" by attempting to force language into "uni-directional meaning," Acker chooses to remain subservient to her own artistic process (3).

Acker has no precise method of selection, but rather chooses from a grab bag of culture and follows her instincts of textual manipulation. She takes a text hostage and does what she pleases. As a writer, Acker is "the subject of her own desires and discourse:" an "unstable textual territory" allows for new possibilities, for ultimate

[10] Yet, as we will see later, in Acker's case politics and pleasure are inextricably bound. At this point, however, it remains unclear what exactly Acker's politics are.

exploration (Brennan 247). By using appropriation and pastiche, Acker abandons the "uni-directional meaning" that she associates with the self-identification of "writer as God" (Dead Doll 3). This abandonment of unique authorial identity allows Acker a "freedom" and "wildness." By using others' texts alongside her own language, Acker is able to experience ultimate artistic freedom because there are no limits to her textual reality. For Acker, "wildness was writing and writing was wildness," and wildness, like play, is the freedom to experience pleasure in "mushing," "mashing," and deconstruction without boundaries (Dead Doll 4). In her essay "Dead Doll Humility," Acker articulates her fear of confinement, of losing the ability for wildness and freedom, in terms of a linguistic prison. She writes:

> Want to play. Be left alone to play. Want to be a sailor who journeys at every edge and even into the unknown. See strange sights, see. If I can't keep on seeing wonders, I'm in prison. Claustrophobia's sister to my worst nightmare: lobotomy, the total loss of perceptual power, of seeing new. If [I] had to force language to be uni-directional, I'd be helping my own prison to be constructed. (Dead Doll 5)

Pastiche and appropriation allow Acker the ability to perceive, to see, to travel through the words of others, and to journey into the unknown. This passage recalls Jameson's contribution to poststructuralist linguistic theory, *The Prison-House of Language.* Jameson frequently refers to the signifier as a "free-floating" object, "soaking up new types of value" (130)**.** The signifier is autonomous, mobile, and polysemous. Like the signifier, the letter or word, Acker's text is able to refer to something that it is not without maintaining permanent attachment to said object of identification. The dynamic ability of Acker's textual torrent allows its significance to be forever changing, refusing to embody a stable and "uni-directional" meaning.

Acker further offends the integrity of the sources that she pirates by altering their

language in favor of her own. Acker claims to eschew "cleverness" in favor of "stupidity:" "That cleverness, as a convention of "good literature," can be a method of social and political manipulation. [I] decided to use language stupidly. In order to use and be other voices as stupidly as possible, [I] decided to copy down *simply* other texts" (5). Acker's simplification of other texts produces an a-literary tone in her work: her novels frequently read as the ranting of a self-loathing teenage girl or diary entries of a madwoman. In *Great Expectations*, for example, Acker's narrator summarizes her conclusions about the outside world and her own body in an oversimplified series of maxims:

> Everyone hates me. My mother may have been murdered. Men want to rape me. My body's always sick. The world is paradise. Pain doesn't exist. Pain comes from askew human perceptions. A person's happy who doesn't give attention to her own desires but always thinks of others. (67)

Here, Acker's narrator recites contradicting assessments of value that come from the words and texts of others, via society. The logic of the narrator's conclusion is deeply skewed: each sentence presents a relationship between the narrator and an opposed and abstract external being, such as "everyone," "men" or "a person." Further, the subject of each sentence is displaced: "me" is the object, rather than the subject. When the narrator does appear as the subject of the sentence, it is only as "my body" and "my mother," which are possibly dead and obscurely ill. The narrator's mounting self-denial culminates in the last sentence, as the narrator identifies "a person's happy who doesn't give attention to her own desires but always thinks of others." "Others" dictate Acker's sentence constructions, like they dictate the way in which the narrator may define herself. The narrator relates to these external bodies only in terms of fear and uncertainty: her mother may or may not be dead, while men want to rape her and hence endanger her.

Yet, by ventriloquizing the voices of repressive society or of repressive texts that oppose the female subject, does Acker reify the power of said texts? By portraying her narrators as powerless victims to the values of a patriarchal society, speaking through the texts of said society, does Acker reinscribe its sexism? Or is the mere ability to manipulate and re-present these representations empowering?

In the early 1980's, Acker gained attention for the publication of *Blood and Guts in High School*, as well as for Great *Expectations* and *Don Quixote*'s blatant piracy of canonized novels. Both of these novels, published in 1982 and 1986 respectively, borrow names and ideas from Charles Dickens and Miguel de Cervantes' texts of the same name. Yet in these exemplary instances of pastiche, Acker does not by any means limit herself to Dickens and Cervantes. Some allusions are obvious, such as directly quoted passages, while others occur on the micro-level of the sentence or character name. *Great Expectations*, although first masked by the title and plot of Dickens' own novel, also includes references to the work of Madame de La Fayette (a seventeenth century French *comtesse* and novelist), John Keats, Herman Melville, Marquis de Sade and painter Clyfford Still. *Great Expectations* begins:

> My father's name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Peter. So I called myself Peter, and came to be called Peter. I give Pirrip as my father's family name on the authority of his tombstone and my sister—Mrs. Joe Gargery, who married the blacksmith. (5)

Dickens' novel bearing the same name begins almost identically. The only variation in Acker's text is that she has replaced "Pip" with "Peter." This substitution inspires the novel's ironic tone from the start: while "Pip" is, in fact, short and not "explicit," Peter is nearly of the same length and phonetic diversity as Phillip. The substitution itself,

however, is not surprising: "Peter" is a name that reappears in nearly all of Acker's novels; it alludes to her first husband and friend, Peter Gordon.[11] This opening passage is as close as Acker ever comes to straightforward copying of Dickens' original text. The act of "copying" or re-transcribing, however, frequently offers Acker a useful starting point for entering her textual world. Acker claims that she began *Don Quixote* while in the waiting room of an abortion clinic, as she mindlessly started transcribing Cervantes' text: "I wanted to see what pure plagiarism would look like, mainly because I didn't understand my fascination with it. I picked *Don Quixote* as a subject really by chance. I think it was a bit incidental, perhaps consciously incidental, that it was a male text" (Friedman 1). In conversation with Sylvère Lotringer, Acker says, "It's very boring, copying, your mind goes. What's fun is what happens when you start playing with a text, it's just like jazz riffs, you go back and forth and down and around. You've got the text in front of you and you go everywhere" (Hannibal Lecter 11). But before "going everywhere" and experiencing the pleasurable freedom of "mushing," Acker must orient herself within that text through the mindless act of copying: this allows Acker to forego the beginning of her novel, the "I am" of her narrative, the otherwise necessary authorship of introduction.

While Acker pirates elements of Dickens' original novel for her own, she does not include any kind of traceable plot, nor does she map her narrator's personal transformation through trials and tribulations. Rather, there is no one narrator, location, time period. Further, Acker repeatedly veers as far as possible from a Dickensonian

---

[11] Acker names several of her characters after Peter Gordon; his name appears in almost every one of her novels, as anything from a major character to "Janey's stuffed lamb" (*Blood and Guts* 9). Acker details their relationship and brief marriage in her interview with Sylvère Lotringer (*Hannibal Lecter, My Father* 4).

voice, in favor of other styles of writing. Soon after one has begun to read *Great Expectations*, seduced by Dickens' own opening lines, Acker begins to recount the details of her own mother's suicide, exaggerated by a typically grotesque and vivid inclusion of rape. Chapter Two begins the same way: Acker begins with an allusion to Dickens' lawyer character, again replacing a Dickens character with Peter Gordon's name: "Mr. Jaggers" becomes "Mr. Gordon" (*Great Expectations* 17). But soon, we are simultaneously in New York City and Egypt, vultures and dogs are "tearing at a donkey's leftovers" and "this old woman's begging me to fuck her" (17-18). By obviously pirating narrative details from well-known texts, Acker is invoking the instability of authorial ownership while denigrating said texts by polluting them with her "schlock." While a title like "I Journey to Receive My Fortune" may suggest a bildungsroman or quest narrative, Acker's "wildness" refuses to allow a narrative progression: the unknowing reader's "great expectations" for this novel have been quickly obliterated.

A Political Reality, A-political Reality

Written in screenplay-esque style, as her scenes of family drama frequently are, Acker begins to ventriloquize a scene from a soap opera or romance novel, with hints of erotica:

> HUBBIE: Stop it, dear. (Doesn't know what to do when he sees a woman crying. It makes him feel so helpless.) The children'll see and think something's the matter.
> WIFE: We don't have any children. It's all your fault. […] Don't you love me? Bobby? Do you love me and be nice to me and don't desert me because I love you so much?
> HUBBIE (completely bewildered): Of course I love you. (His big strong arms pick her up. He carries her into the bedroom. He puts his cock into her pink rayon panties. He comes. He wants to do what he wants to do.)
> WIFE: You promised and you cant break your promise you'd stay here.
> HUBBIE: Shit.
> (21)

Acker represents this scene in fast-paced dialogue that becomes comical due to her variations on what would be the original text. The screen directions include insights into the archetype of "Hubbie:" strong-armed, bewildered in the face of emotion, and driven by sexual desire alone. There is a mandatory reference to the children's well being before the correction "we don't have any children." The "helplessness" of the "Wife" continues into the bedroom, down to her "pink rayon panties." This passage closely resembles one from a 1980's romance novel titled *Promise at Midnight*, published by the popular romance novel press, Harlequin Romance. A scene between the protagonists plays out as follows:

> "'I know what you deserve,' he said, and his hand reached out to close her lips which were opened in a gasp of protest. 'Marriage to me, and that's what you're going to get.' 'Are you proposing?' she asked, her body trembling now for a different reason. Not proposing, informing, demanding, stating. And you're agreeing. Right?' Her brown eyes melted as they gazed into his. 'You're dictatorial and you're a tyrant, Marsh Faraday, but-' she curled into him, 'I love you so much and I've loved you from the moment--' He kisses her greedily." (Peake 261)

Like Acker's "Wife," the female protagonist of *Promise at Midnight* is a victim to her lover's whims and pressures, while all happiness is in search of marriage. Like Acker's account, the hundreds of romance novels published from the 1970's onward include a domineering male presence and a submissive female who only wants to be loved. This continues in its contemporary format, the thousands of erotica stories published on Internet websites like "Literotica.com." Like visual pornography, romance novels and online erotica reproduce archetypical gender roles within plot scenarios altered to cater to specific sexual fetishes or erotic categories.

By representing this text, an endlessly re-produced and re-consumed formula for

the fight between lovers (the domineering male and passive, love-starved female, both seemingly normal, eventually engaging in starkly described sex acts), Acker is drawing attention to the ridiculousness of the characters' communication and the bourgeois concept of "Hubbie and Wife" in general. Terms of endearment are flipped on their bellies: Acker exposes, within the institution of marriage, manipulation, inequality, and sexual domination. On the following pages, the saga of fighting and fucking continues, while Hubbie's name changes from Bobby to Frank. This passage reproduces popular gender roles that Acker represents while critiquing. Female desire is absent from much of both *Great Expectations* and *Don Quixote*: women are frequently raped and beaten and fucked but are rarely beating or fucking. Yet they are not necessarily experiencing pain: frequently the scene of abuse is paired with descriptions of orgasm and ecstasy. Acker frequently depicts women who are imprisoned and tortured, an aspect of her writing that has earned her feminist critiques (Sciolino 438). One does not have to look far beyond Acker's writing, however, to find texts in which the same gender politics are present. By creating a representation of reality, Acker dedicates her text to demonstrating reality and exposing social dynamics as they are in her world. As she reaches into the enormous grab bag of culture, she more frequently than not will find a representation of women as imprisoned, abused, and passive.

While some critique Acker for her representations of oppressed women, others claim feminist motivations where even Acker herself denies them. *Don Quixote* is frequently deemed feminist for its concern with gender and the limitations of feminine power. Cervantes' novel is a natural choice for critiquing gendered norms: Don Quixote is a character obsessed with chivalry, storytelling, and the myth of romance. Like

Acker's protagonists, Don Quixote is driven to madness and delusion by the myths represented in these texts, or the culture that they reproduce:

> When she was finally crazy because she was about to have an abortion, she conceived of the most insane idea that any woman can think of. Which is to love. How can a woman love? By loving someone other than herself. She would love another person. By loving another person, she would right every manner of political, social, and individual wrong: she would put herself in those situations so perilous the glory of her name would resound. (9)

Like chivalrous Cervantes' Quixote, who "hit upon the strangest notion that ever madman in this world hit upon," Acker's protagonist is driven to quest for adventure and danger (Cervantes 27). While the most obvious difference is Acker's shift of Don Quixote's gender, Acker has displaced Don Quixote's influence by chivalrous stories to her experience of real-world pain and trauma, localized in the abortion clinic. Acker's Quixote is driven not by dreams of chivalry, but by the desire for love and sex. Both Acker's Quixote and her sidekick, Saint Simeon (sometimes male, sometimes female) have been degraded and beaten about by society: the beginning of the section "Saint Simeon's Story" begins with tales of abuse by the father and gang-bangs by schoolmates at Catholic boarding school (13).

Through their quest or journey, both Acker's characters and her readers must learn that romantic paradigms of love and sex are not represented in the material world. Acker uses pastiche to accomplish this: when her protagonist submits to marriage, which for Acker is equivalent to death, she must resort to "other texts" in order to continue with her narrative. By creating a section of self-referential pastiche, Acker calls attention to the fact that coherent narrative is impossible, as women are refused the power of narration, or *voice*, in society. "Other Texts" begins, "BEING DEAD, DON QUIXOTE COULD NO LONGER SPEAK. BEING BORN INTO AND PART OF A MALE

WORLD, SHE HAD NO SPEECH OF HER OWN. ALL SHE COULD DO WAS READ MALE TEXTS WHICH WEREN'T HERS" (39). Acker draws a parallel between her protagonist's search for love and her own search for language: neither can exist without patriarchal texts.

While Acker relies largely on Cervantes' narrative framework for *Don Quixote*, she simultaneously cites Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom*. Acker uses Sade's texts in many of her novels, yet, unlike her use of Dickens' or Cervantes' canonical "high-art" novels, Sade's texts go uncited. They are seamlessly woven into Acker's own writing. Acker identifies herself as working in Sade's lineage: rather than pirate Sade with the goal of critique, Acker pays homage to his writing through the appropriation of his language. Acker views her writing in allegiance with Sade's: they both belong to "'that tradition,' 'the other tradition,' 'the non-acceptable literary tradition'" (*Bodies Of Work* 6). "De Sade," Acker says, "would head this list." Acker views Sade, with Jean Genet and William S. Burroughs, as her allies, like-minded in their use of language to "explode [the human heart] into flames" (6). All three, like Acker, used vivid accounts of a marginalized reality, painting portraits of degenerate society. Hence, in pirating pieces of language and content from writers like Sade, Acker reifies her complicity in their representation. Further, by failing to distinguish or make obvious text borrowed from Sade, Genet, or Burroughs, Acker is using pastiche to ally her writing with that from which she is born.

Sade recurs most frequently throughout Acker's novels, as his writing of excessively pornographic material and disregard for character or plot development lends itself easily to Acker's work. Sade's novels portray both the male and female bodies as

something to be penetrated, while representing female pleasure and desire in a manner very useful to Acker. Sade's novels present sex without societal restriction, and pornographic material that necessarily eschews the construct of romantic love. Further, like Acker, Sade portrays female sexuality in terms of masochism, uniting experiences of pleasure and pain, while binding both experiences to language. Sade's male and female characters vocalize their ecstasy in the midst of sex acts, and talk excessively about the sex in which they are engaged. In *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, Sade's protagonists engage in a series of orgies that are simultaneously highly eroticized and humorous in their excess:

> MADAME DE SAINT-ANGE—This scepter of Venus you have before your eyes, Eugénie, is the primary agent of love's pleasure: it is called the *member*: there is not a single part of the human body into which it cannot introduce itself […] And finally whatever be the place among all these he most prefers, after a few instants of agitation the member may be seen to vent a white and viscous liquor, whose flowing forth plunges the man into a delirium intense enough to procure for him the sweetest pleasures he can hope to have in life.
> EUGENIE—How much I should like to se this liquor flow! (200-201)

Madame de Saint-Ange dictates the sequence of events involved in Eugénie's "lesson," carefully naming each body part and action involved in each sex act. Without a narrator, we witness every sex act described at length. Each character gives language to their own actions and the pleasure that results from said actions. In Sade's world of sex, characters must articulately describe their experiences of pleasure, maintaining control over the language of sex. An orgasm reads as follows, "I cannot bear it any more! Oh, I'm dying! Don't abandon me, dear friends, I am about to swoon" (206). Acker, however, further explores Sade's link between language and sex, but oscillates between the articulate and inarticulate in rapid alteration. While Sade's excessive talkativeness in the midst of pleasure does exist in Acker's text, it is paired with an inarticulate moaning and groaning,

with syntactical decomposition and rapid repetition.

Further, Acker adopts Sade's use of masochism as integral to pleasure. Like Sade, Acker frequently describes her characters' masochism and the fine line between the articulation of extreme pleasure and extreme pain. In *Great Expectations*, Acker:

> He has the keys to her place. She's naked. She's just finished meditating. She realizes he's carrying what looks like a golf club bag. He tells her to open his bag. The whips are pink silk and pale black fur and one plaster and leather with tiny double and triple knots so there're no expectations and dolls and a long light brown whip that looks like the tail of an animal. The minute he touches her she begins to come. For the first time he asks her what her taste is. She can't answer. He tells her she's going to help him destroy her. (43)

While Acker's protagonist "begins to come" "the minute he touches her" (most likely with his whip) she plays no active part in the unfolding of this sexual encounter. She is torn from "meditation" into a masochistic scenario in which she literally cannot speak. It is unclear whether Acker's character here is experiencing pleasure or pain. In Sade's *Justine*, the narrator's dialogue is only a "howling," "scream," or "murmur:" articulation is only prompted by extreme sensations of either pleasure or pain (or both simultaneously). Whether through silence or through "excessive talkativeness," the link between language and sex becomes an important locus of tension in both Acker and Sade's work.

"To be forever in wonder:" The Poetics of Eroticism

Acker continues de Sade's project of articulating pleasure, yet her contemporary position changes the political context in which she writes. Acker's texts are inherently political for their reclaiming of male texts and her use of strictly female subjectivity. Yet Acker denies a political persuasion; she refuses to subscribe to any kind of logical justification or political movement, including feminism. Beyond her technique of

pastiche and appropriation lies something more significant than a political gesture or subscription to postmodernity: this analysis of Acker's novels leaves an important part of her language unaccounted for. While Acker claims that the texts she finds in the "grab bag" of culture function as play-things, tools, or masks with which to play dress up, there is a point where her own distinct use of language, her poetics, peeks through the cracks of her broken narrative. This occurs as an incoherent voice, a scream or a stutter, an interruption in an already chaotic stream of narrative consciousness. Although Acker would never call herself a poet, ("I never wrote poetry, I always wanted to write prose") her prose is entirely language-driven (*Hannibal Lecter* 5). The significance in her texts comes not from the narrative structure, but rather from emphasis on specific words and minute repetitions.

Not surprisingly, then, Acker credits the Black Mountain School of poets with her early training as a writer. She cites her early introduction to the work of Robert Kelly, Jackson MacLow, and Charles Olson to be important in her understanding of language[12]. Acker especially emphasizes her identification with Olson's theories of the musicality in language: she compares her use of other texts to the freedom inherent in musical sampling or jazz. Just as Acker is said to have read her work several times, one of which was only for the sound and rhythm, her work invests meaning and emphasis in syllables

[12] While Acker cites her exposure to the Black Mountain poets as key to her development as a writer, she later forcefully revokes them in her essay "Dead Doll Humility," writing, "to hell with the Black Mountain poets even though they had taught [me] a lot" (8). Acker conflates these male poetic voices with her conception of "her fathers" in her interview with Sylvère Lotringer. She says, "feminists made me realize then why one would want to decentralize a father, take the father and tear him apart… It made me realize what my relation to these old authoritarian male poets was. I must have been influenced by them, but certainly in a perverse way" (18). Is Acker, here, repudiating her admiration for Olson et. al's work in order to have an ideal father against which to rebel? Why is her denial of these "authoritarian male poets" so resolute?

and repetition. In the middle of *Great Expectations*, Acker's paragraphs separate into discreet sentences, broken up by empty space. Acker varies only slightly her syntactical constructions, beginning with subject-verb-object descriptions, and then moving into the capitalized "scream:"

> She's laying out her clothes and wondering which one's the softest.
>
> She's wondering if she's going to die.
>
> She is waiting for this man who says he's not her lover by trying to guess what he wants.
>
> He is telling her iron becomes her.
>
> He is seizing her by the throat and hair.
>
> She is thinking that it is not a question of giving her consent and it is never a question of choice.
>
> So what use is emotion? What use is anything? Oh, oh, she isn't understanding.
>
> NOT ONLY IS THERE NO ESCAPE FROM PERCEIVING BUT THE ONLY WAY TO DEAL WITH PAIN IS TO KILL ONESELF TOTALLY BY ONESELF. SUICIDE HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE MOST DIFFICULT OF HUMANITY'S PROBLEMS. (41)

Acker is clearly concerned with the visual and aural aspects of her language: the spaces between lines force her reader to focus on each short sentence, while the repetition of "he" and "she" with the "-ing" present participles conducts a kind of rhythm throughout this segment of text. She ends these statements with "oh, oh, she isn't understanding:" the repetition of "oh" creates a musical refrain that allows a momentary pause before the final exhale of textual energy and emotional investment.

By concerning herself with the sensual experience of reading, as well as the content of sexual encounters, Acker ensures that her readers consume her text as a sensual experience. Like Olson's poetics, Acker's are deeply involved with the body and

a kind of transaction of energy and experience. In his essay "Projective Verse," Olson articulates the concept of the poem as a "high energy-construct" and "energy discharge." This implies that the poem is essentially comprised of the energy that the poet consumes, with which the poet writes, the energy peculiar to the verse itself, and the energy that the reader will take away. At every point in the poem, there is a linear flow of energy from the writer to the reader: all occurs simultaneously. Olson emphasizes the process of composition to be a navigation of these energies through perception and bodily experience. Like Acker, Olson stresses the process of writing over its product, refusing to point to a closed system of meaning inherent in the poem's language itself (Olson 240). Acker writes for pleasure rather than to communicate: the energies vested in the poem are a result of her artistic process. Acker adopts both Olson's understanding of rhythm as linked to the bodily cadence of breath and his notion of using others' texts as incantations. Essentially, Acker views her practice of piracy and pastiche as a means to access this kind of poetic, language-driven writing. In *Great Expectations* she writes, "That's why one text must subvert (the meaning of) another text until there's only background music like reggae: the inextricability of relation textures the organic (not meaning) recovered…" (15). Like Olson, Acker subverts textual meaning in favor of language, while talking about writing in terms of the physical. What is left, after Acker's performance of mashing and dismembering source material, are sensual textures: energy over meaning.

Acker frequently discusses her writing in terms of "accessing" language. Society has rendered women unable to express desire, and in order to represent that which has been omitted or silenced, Acker must "access" it rather than create it. In her essay

"Seeing Gender," Acker articulates a search for her body, "which exists outside its patriarchal definitions" (*Bodies Of Work* 166). Acker argues for the connection between the body and language, the body as the site of language, both inseparable from acts of perception. Acker writes:

> I have become interested in language which I cannot make up, which I cannot *create* or even *create in*: I have become interested in languages which I can only come upon (as I disappear), *a pirate upon buried treasure,* The dreamer, the dreaming, the dream. I call these languages, *languages of the body*. There are, I suspect, a plurality of such languages. (*Bodies Of Work* 166-167, emphasis mine)

By reproducing the "languages of the body," Acker draws from Olson's idea of breath and breathing, yet applies this to the experience of female orgasm. Acker also implies that writing is generative, and transporting: like sex, it allows an experience of ecstatic torrent. But unlike sex, the ecstasy does not stop until the writing stops.

Frequently, Acker's characters narrate their experience of orgasm, whether masturbatory or with a partner. In *Don Quixote*, a section titled "Russian Constructivism" includes a section with the heading, "4. The Mystery." It begins with the question, "How exactly does my body feel pleasure?" This is answered by a remembered sexual encounter: "I reach over Peter so my mouth is on his nipple. Or my wet tongue is flicking his nipple tip. This makes me excited more subtly than when I'm being touched: I don't come as much as violently, but I'm sort of coming all the time. I'm sort of coming all the time" (55). Acker explains the sensations she feels as a result of certain sex acts, the result of which is ultimately "coming." We begin to understand the arbitrariness of this classification when she repeats the phrase, "I'm sort of coming all the time." The "sort of" alludes to the inability of language to describe the experience of continual orgasm or multiple orgasms. Yet the repetition of the phrase allows a kind of rhythmic emphasis on

the act of "coming." In repeating the sentence, Acker's narrator is prolonging her orgasm, or its written representation. Other times, punctuation is omitted, creating a kind surge-like frisson: "I'm thinking about you right now and I've been thinking about you for days when I jerk off I see your face and I'm not going to stop writing this cause then I'll be away from this directness this happiness this isness which is" (*Great Expectations* 103). Writing produces a flow of language, of bodily language, that not only mirrors physical experience of pleasure, but amplifies it.

In her text, *This Sex Which is Not One*, Luce Irigaray performs a critique of the male subject, and an analysis of female sexuality from within a masculinist world. Irigaray argues that the female orgasm is not a pure form of feminine pleasure, but rather a means to reinforce masculine domination: "That a woman has one, two, ten or twenty orgasms, to the point of complete exhaustion, does not mean that she takes pleasure in her own pleasure. Those orgasms are necessary as a demonstration of masculine power" (199). Insofar as female orgasm and sexual pleasure exists within the pornographic scenario of the male gaze or as a result of penetration by the male, the woman cannot take ownership of her own ecstasy: this can only happen when she understands and/or attempts to articulate her own pleasure apart from the male who may induce it. Under the guise of masculinist power, female pleasure is something supplementary to male orgasm, and thus cannot be independently articulated or understood in patriarchically derivative language: women can only express and hence take ownership of their own pleasures in language apart from reason and logic, unmediated by traditional linguistic paradigms. Irigaray articulates, "Feminine pleasure has to remain inarticulate in language, in its own language, if it is not to threaten the underpinnings of its own logical operations. And so

what is most strictly forbidden to women today is that they should attempt to express their own pleasure[13]" (77).

By articulating pleasure, women destabilize the definition of the female orgasm as passive, and inexplicable without the male who allows it. When writing the feminine experience of sex, logic and narrative necessarily fail, and Acker is left with only textures and words. Acker's "isness which is" and her "sort of coming all the time" are the closest she can come to articulating her experience of orgasm: instead, she relies on poetics and the sensuality of reading to articulate instances of orgasmic pleasure and the larger and more profound pleasure she experiences through the act of writing itself. The result is a text that navigates both experiences of pleasure and frustration inherent in the attempt at its articulation. While Acker is highly influenced by Irigaray's notion of the historical inexpressibility of female desire, she contradicts this idea, arguing that sex roles are malleable regardless of gender: men can be penetrated, as we see in Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, and women can dictate the terms of their own orgasm. Acker ameliorates this issue in Irigaray's description of female pleasure by using Bataille's theories of eroticism as the meeting point of two discontinuous entities.

In his book, *Erotism*, Georges Bataille articulates eroticism in terms of this illogical breakdown: "Eroticism always entails a breaking down of established patterns, the patterns, I repeat, of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals" (18). Acker breaks the "discontinuous

[13] While Acker was highly influenced by Irigaray's articulation of female pleasure and its relationship to language, she believes that women's orgasms are not inherently supplementary to men's because we do have the power to articulate it. Essentially, Acker pairs Irigaray's notion of the difficult necessity of articulating pleasure and accessing the language of female sexuality with de Sade's conception that language and sex are inextricably bound.

mode of existence as defined and separate individuals" by replacing authorial identity with ambiguities, and narrative progression with collaged pastiche. This "breaking down" is erotic due to the excitement and freedom inherent in the anticipation of "the farthest bounds of possibility" that exist when the two discontinuous forces meet (24). Bataille continues, connecting his theory of eroticism to the linguistic. The poetic text, he argues, is inherently erotic: "Poetry leads us to the same place as all forms of eroticism--to the blending and fusion of separate objects. It leads us to eternity, it leads us to death, and through death to continuity. Poetry is eternity; the sun matched with the sea" (25). By piecing together "other" texts, cracking their foundations to reveal an intrinsic fallibility, Acker's text becomes erotic because it pulls back the curtain of what Irigaray calls "patriarchially derivative language" to reveal incoherent textures and the loci of ecstasy.

If Acker is experiencing a pleasure more vast and intense than the physical orgasm, how does this enter into the text's reality? What exactly does this textual pleasure entail? Is it inherently erotic, found by making canonical literature perverse? Is it merely rooted in Acker's freedom to pirate what she wishes and the artistic gratification therein? Is it similar to the reader's experience of simultaneous narrative disorientation and sensual titillation through the text? In his book, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes articulates that which makes a text erotic as a kind of tension created by kinds of representation:

> Two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge (the language is to be copied in its canonical state, as it has been established by schooling, good usage, literature, culture), and *another edge*, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours), which is never anything but the site of its effect: the place where the death of language is glimpsed. These two edges, *the compromise they bring about*, are necessary. Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so. (7)

It is both the familiar, canonical culture re-presented, aligned with that which lives at the verge of the inarticulate, the death of language, that creates a kind of textual eroticism. Both the masked role of authorship and the unmasked pre-lingual being are crucial to Acker's own experience of textual bliss, as well as the reader's ability to experience her text delightfully.

Barthes continues to make a distinction between what Richard Miller translates as "pleasure" and "bliss." Pleasure comes directly from the French *plaisir* while "bliss" is a translation of the French *jouissance*. Jouissance, articulated most memorably by Jacques Lacan and later by Julia Kristeva, is something beyond linguistic expression, the combination of physical pleasure and a more extreme, intellectual kind of pleasure. Barthes articulates the difference, "Pleasure can be expressed in words, bliss cannot. Bliss is unspeakable, inter-dicted" (21). Like Irigaray's explanation of female pleasure, Barthes' concept of bliss cannot be expressed in language, likening it to a specifically feminine mode of pleasure: it defies the logic of language. Yet, although one cannot describe bliss or *jouissance*, one may experience it textually: "Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language" (Barthes 14). This crisis of language occurs through the oscillation between text of the

unknown, the inarticulate death of language and its simultaneous excitement and frustration, and familiar cultural forms. Acker's texts are neither wholly destructive nor entirely coherent: they exist "where the garment gapes," in the space between concrete meaning and the place where language fails to express said meaning: "I feel I feel I feel I have no language" (*Great Expectations* 24).

Acker's pastiche frequently breaks down into individual instances of Jamesonian "signifiers," able to be filled with meaning. Acker's "unformed-ness" is a deconstruction of logic, dismantling systems of identification within narrative structures in favor of that "formless, sprawling matter" of the real world (Jameson 119). Most commonly, these breakdowns of language occur with repetition and recursive rhythm. Rules of grammar, syntax, and logic fail in the face of articulating Acker's *jouissance*. Carla Harryman discusses this affinity for "un-formed-ness" in terms of Acker's own affinity for *wonder* (*Lust for Life* 43). The capacity for wonder occurs in the moments when Acker breaks from her pastiche. As she oscillates between ventriloquizing, reciting and repeating popular narratives, and "excessive talkativeness," Acker ultimately returns to an un-formed, pre-linguistic, infantile cry of simultaneous pleasure and pain, of orgasm and death (*Lust for Life* 40). Here, Acker is free and wild to wonder at language's possibilities and its shortcomings: "I adore everything: I adore the sky. I adore the trees I see. I adore rhythms. I… I…I…I…I'm I'm mine mine my. I can't I can't. I hate being responsible oh" (*Great Expectations* 66). Even when the logic of pastiche and political ventriloquism ceases, Acker is able to communicate via the rhythmic repetition of language and its relationship to her own bodily experiences. By repeating words and phrases, Acker experiences *jouissance* as the union of intellectual pleasure and bodily

pleasure. Acker is left feeling, amazed, mouth open, wondering at the world she has created. And this is the ultimate goal of her texts:

> I am no longer a child and I still want to be, to live with the pirates. Because I want to live forever in wonder. The difference between me as a child and me as an adult is only this: when I was a child, I longed to travel into, to live in wonder. Now I know, as much as I can know anything, that to travel into wonder is to be wonder. So it matters little if I travel by plane, by rowboat, or by book. (*Bodies Of Work* 159)

Chapter Three:

The Adult Life of a Mythmaker

"All of us come from stories, out of myths, out of shared beliefs. Artists, we take these myths, these histories, these bodies and remake them according to the words we hear the gods say." (177)

Kathy Acker, *Bodies Of Work*

Acker distinguishes her late work, written in the decade before her death, for its uncharacteristic attention to narrative and myth. While *Empire of the Senseless* (1988), *In Memoriam to Identity* (1990) and *My Mother: Demonology* (1994) are novels more focused on *story*, with recognizable narrators and plot events, the difference lies primarily in the experience of reading. Acker identifies this shift as her abandonment of an ironic attitude toward the sources she pirates in favor of a respect for others' materials. She says, in her 1991 interview with Sylvère Lotringer:

> I have to use other texts when I write, that's just how I am, but now I don't have irony towards them. The irony is gone. I'm not so interested in pulling them apart, I don't have that suspicion toward them any more, because I respect them. I want to learn from them about myth because they're myth-dealers. (24)

Rather than manipulating text and language, deriving pleasure from the critique of dominant cultural narratives and the rough textures of pairing texts from varying cultural registers, Acker begins, at this point in her career, to foster an interest in stories themselves, and specifically the underlying myths that govern these representations. More than just representing the stories that dictate societal behaviors and norms, Acker takes an interest in the underlying foundations of storytelling and patterns of narrative thinking.

Many have identified this "shift" as an abrupt turn from deconstruction towards construction, identifying an abandonment of Acker's apparent nihilism.[14] Acker herself delegitimizes this claim. She says, "Construction sounds very positive. People say, Oh, you're not so negative anymore. (Groans). No, I'm not a New Ager. Deconstruction is always a reactive thing and as long as you're dwelling in the reactive you're really reinforcing the society that you hate. So I got very interested with narrative. I'm a Westerner with Greek myths and that's where *Empire of the Senseless* begins" (*Hannibal Lecter* 17). Acker's reflection on her current artistic preoccupations implies a burgeoning interest in the repository of Western storytelling, that which constitutes the Western imaginary. But does Acker's interest in narrative and myth truly differentiate her later works from that which came before them? Is she abandoning her violent interrogation of Western culture in favor of a new positivism? In order to understand the evolution of Acker's concerns with myth and narrative, we must address the obvious trends and disparities between her later work and that which comes before it.

"You should go away and not read any of it"[15]

The experience of reading an early Acker novel is frequently uncomfortable. Acker refuses to commit to a single narrator or setting, juxtaposing pirated passages of family drama and travel narrative with scenes of excessive sex and violence. Her reluctance to stay in one place, shifting the "I" wildly and spontaneously, spawns uneasiness in the reader's search for consistency. The "I" never has a chance to reflect or become self-aware, forbidding the reader to do the same. The reader's "great expectations" are, at the hands of Acker herself, slowly demolished. In *Blood and Guts in*

---

[14] See Spencer Dew's book-length study, *Learning for a Revolution*
[15] From the back cover of *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*

High School (1984), Acker digresses from her appropriation of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*:

> The roads are getting so super-paved and big and light and loaded with BIG MACS and HOWARD JOHNSONS that the only time people are forced into danger or reality is when they die. Death is the only reality we've got left in our nicey-nicey-clean-ice-cream-TV society so we'd better worship it. S&M sex. Punk rock. Don't you know, you can step into the snow, the raging ocean and the freezing snow, you can step into danger…
> anytime you please…
> step into me…
> The government, the big multi-national businessmen, the scholars and teachers, and the cops are the people who maintain the roads. The scientists, philosophers, and artists are the people who build the roads. Everyone's a slave. (94)

This indictment of society is common throughout Acker's earlier work. Acker alludes to the contemporary American landscape, urging her reader to worship death, sex, and punk rock. If not, she says, we are all slaves. The reader, as a member of society in the twentieth century, like the "businessmen, the scholars and teachers, and the cops…. the scientists philosophers and artists," is accosted. As outside of Acker herself and thus a part of the culture she rebukes, the reader is not exempt from this criticism of contemporary American society.

Acker's narrator, now Hester Prynne, continues:

> I've been alone for a very long time. I'm locked up in a room and I can't get out. Because I've been locked up in this room so long whatever desires are arising in me are rampaging around everywhere as wild and fierce and monstrous as gigantic starving jungle beasts. I don't know how to talk to people, I especially have difficulty talking to you; and I'm ashamed and scared 'cause I want you so badly, Dimwit. I know you no longer want to see me 'cause I'm so antisocial and awkward. How can I learn to talk better? How can I learn to love you more so I can give you what you want? (95)

Here, Acker's narrator is typically alienated from that which is outside herself, literally "locked up" and fostering desires like "gigantic starving jungle beasts." She laments an inability to communicate with the outside world, especially with "you," "Dimwit." While

Acker here plays off of Hawthorne's character "Dimmesdale," changing his name to "dimwit," she also conflates the "you" of her readership with a "dimwit." This passage's narrator professes a lack of control over language and an inability to articulate herself. She is self-loathing and narcissistic, unable to be reasoned with, assaulting the reader with questions like "How can I learn to talk better? How can I learn to love you more?" The reader must be a passive audience, addressed inadequately, a mere observer of Acker's characters' madness.

Like her use of Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, Acker similarly addresses representations of female sexuality in canonical literature with her use of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* in her novel *In Memoriam to Identity*. Still refusing to remain loyal to a single narrator throughout an entire novel, *In Memoriam to Identity* features four sections, the first three narrated each by a different character, Rimbaud, Capitol, and Airplane respectively, and the fourth narrated by a third person narrator. This fourth section features the longest segment of text in all of Acker's writing without switching into first person, never employing the "I" outside of dialogue. The format of the novel's point of view resembles that of *The Sound and the Fury*, the William Faulkner novel from which much of its material is pirated.

Section two, titled "CAPITOL," begins thus:

> Quentin came back from Harvard with all these ridiculous *theories*. He told me Freud had said that all women are naturally masochists, though he didn't say that that simply. I understood what Quentin meant and I got angry at him. 'They teach you stupid things in universities and universities are no good for anybody.' I was angry, though I didn't know why. I had never known Quentin. Or anyone. It's impossible to know a person who's always fantasizing about you and about whom you're obsessing. I saw Quentin as someone who desperately wanted to touch me but never could because he was mean. All these men wanted me; well, maybe they did and maybe they didn't. (153)

While the narcissism and pessimistic tone of this passage is similar to the passages above, the narrative voice demonstrates an uncharacteristic degree of control. Rather than the ranting of an insane adolescent nymphomaniac turned canonical adulteress protagonist, this narrator possesses a self-aware ability to reflect. She is able to identify her emotional state as "angry," and admit, "I did not know why." Further, while Acker indulges her tendency to simplify and "dumb down" theory with "Freud had said that all women are naturally masochists," she admits, "he didn't say that that simply." The presence of a narrator's distinctly controlled consciousness, while not developed as a wholly separate character from many of Acker's other narrators, further mediates the emotional torrent of her perceptions. Capitol is angry with Quentin, angry with Freud, rather than angry with us, the slaves of society who make up "everybody."

In *My Mother: Demonology* (1993) Acker continues to use "you," ambiguously addressing something outside of herself, but without hostility. Chapter Two begins:

> (The days of begging, the days of theft. No nation that began for the sake of escape and by fire can be all bad. Even if democracy is a myth. Myths make actuality, that's what myths do. Me, I've always been on fire for the sake of fire.
>
> (Listen. They thought they could have their freedom through something called democracy, but they forgot about knowledge, and no one's ever had freedom, anyways. So now it's all falling apart, this economy, a so-called culture and society, so-called, and anyway, there's never been anything except loneliness, the days of begging, the days of theft. (19)

While continuing to communicate universal enslavement by American society with "no one's ever had freedom anyways," Acker directs her antagonism towards "they" who seek the myth of democracy. While acknowledging the failure of "so-called culture and society," Acker addresses her reader in a whisper rather than a scream, beginning with "Listen." Acker does address the oppressor outside of herself, but her targets of critique

are specified and clear. The cynicism and violence remain integral, but are no longer directed at everything outside of the individual, indicting the reader along with "society" as a whole. Our narrator is no longer a desperate lunatic with desires like wild beasts, but rather a disgruntled critic of American society who desires to communicate her opinions about mainstream hypocrisy.

Robert Glück articulates the reader's experience of Acker's early work in his essay, "The Greatness of Kathy Acker." He writes, "It is a strange loneliness to be abandoned, emotions disavowed, choking on the equipment of narrative projection […] I slip back and forth between embrace and distance" (*Bodies Of Work* 46). As we read early Acker, we are embraced and attempt to embrace via our "equipment of narrative projection," each narrator's story, however insane or delusional he or she may be. This proves difficult and essentially inadequate. In the end we are frequently face-to-face with "Kathy Acker," the writer/persona herself: "My name is Kathy Acker. The story begins by me being totally bored" (*I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac* 96). In these early experiments with identity, Acker refuses to maintain the fallacies necessary in order to suspend her reader's disbelief, and brings us right up against her own writing, asking us to empty ourselves and "continually renew [our] trust in the process of reading while [our] assumptions are demolished" (*Bodies Of Work* 56).

Although Acker's schizophrenic identity-refusing texts complicate a reading for plot, they do consistently feature enticing formal experiments that assist the reader's engagement with the text by suspending half-hearted storytelling in favor of raw and unmediated textual torrents. In all of her work, however, Acker employs formal tropes to help propel her novels forward, breaking the text into readable pieces that appear visually

appealing on the page. For example, she often divides the text into chapters and segments with indicative titles, and uses the epistolary format in place of dialogue between characters. In *Great Expectations*, Acker includes several pages of letters written to figures from her own life, signed by a "Rosa." The following letter is written to Susan Sontag:

> Dear Susan Sontag,
> Would you please read my books and make me famous? I actually don't want to be famous because then all these people who are very boring will stop me on the street and bother me already I hate the people who call me on the phone because I'm always having delusions. […] Poverty is one of the most repulsive aspects of human reality: more disgusting than all the artists who're claiming they're total scum are the half-artists the hypocrites the ACADEMICS who think it's in to be poor, WHO WANT TO BE POOR, who despise the white silk napkins I got off my dead grandmother—she finally did something for me once in her life (death)—because those CRITICS don't know what it's like to have to tell men they're wonderful for money, cause you've got to have money, for ten years. I hope this society goes to hell. I understand you're very literate, Susan Sontag,
> Yours,
> Rosa
>
> (28)

Here, Acker writes as "Rosa," addressing Susan Sontag on the state of the art world, academia, and her own poverty. The letter to Susan Sontag, a respected intellectual, becomes a forum for Acker's own rant about her artistic struggles and economic hardships. "Rosa" appears only in the context of these letters; she is not an established character. The sentences are long and winding, void of most punctuation: it is as if Acker's emotions are dictating her desire to get the words onto the page in a fervor. Acker capitalizes "ACADEMICS" and "CRITICS," expressing her frustration formally, with loud capital letters. She ends with two statements, humorous in their juxtaposition: "I hope this society goes to hell. I understand you're very literate, Susan Sontag." Acker is not, in fact, addressing Susan Sontag, and Sontag is not truly her audience. It is unclear, then, to whom Acker is speaking. She frames her rant as an address to someone

"very literate," in order to further ridicule the hypocrisy of academia, perhaps accusing her "literate" audience of such crimes. Again, Acker's use of irony and humor, while masterfully commenting on oppressive aspects of her society, disregards the reader, pushing us into a space of abjection. Although many of Acker's readers have likely experienced Acker's own frustrations with "CRITICS" and poverty, Acker does not attempt to articulate her frustration clearly and explicitly in order to inspire sympathy. Acker does not need her reader to understand her frustrations, just as she does not want "people who are very boring" to call her on the phone. She is performing out of an individual impulse towards this kind of linguistic violence.

Acker uses similar formal tropes in *My Mother: Demonology*. The protagonist, Laure, writes a series of letters to her lover, B. In one of many unsigned letters to B, Laure writes:

> Dear B,
> The more I try to tell you everything, the more I have to find myself. The more I try to describe myself, the more I find a hole. So the more I keep saying, the less I say, and the more there is to say. I'm confusing everything between us.
> I'm not being clear here.
> I don't want to tell you anything.
> The only thing that's possible between us is a car accident. A car accident's now the only thing that can deliver me from the anguish that's you.
> I'm dumb, wild, and I don't want anyone coming too near me. But the more emotion comes out, the more I want you.
> I've been writing down every type of fatal accident I can imagine. Whenever I do this I feel calm, and as if I'm orgasming. I know I have to follow death until its end. That road passes through putrefaction and disintegration.
> Whenever I'm traveling that road, I'm calm. (22)

This letter, unlike the previous passage, is written to a specific character, in order to communicate a series of emotions and frustrations. Again, Acker's language is self-referential, circling around the inability to communicate clearly. Laure is "trying" to "tell you everything," acknowledging the inadequacy of language to communicate that which

"there is to say." While Acker's protagonist typically claims a desire for self-inflicted isolation, she is forever desiring to communicate, to speak clearly, to write down the ideas in her head in order to "feel calm, and as if I'm orgasming."

This kind of continuation of Acker's most frequently used formal experiments in service of a cohesion and communication rather than chaos and performance continues throughout *My Mother: Demonology.* Acker maintains a balance of mediated and processed narrative voice with unmediated, unsynthesized raw material. The first few pages feature the narrator's retelling of her childhood interwoven with present-tense diary accounts of childhood that are italicized (8). Acker continues with her characteristic blocks of capitalized text. She begins, digressing from her narrative, "STORYTELLING METHOD: THE ACT OF BODYBUILDING PRESUPPOSES THE ACT OF MOVING TOWARD THE BODY OR THAT WHICH IS SO MATERIAL THAT IT BECOMES IMMATERIAL" (110). Here, in the midst of storytelling, Acker writes about her own desire to tell stories, and the relationship between that desire and her fascination with bodybuilding, both being means of "moving toward the body." Two pages later, Acker returns to this trajectory, elaborating on her previous point:

> METHOD: A MUSCLE'S BUILT WHEN AND ONLY WHEN ITS EXISTING FORM IS SLOWLY AND RADICALLY DESTROYED. IT CAN BE BROKEN DOWN BY SLOWLY FORCING IT TO ACCOMPLISH MORE THAN IT'S ABLE. THEN, IF AND ONLY IF THE MUSCLE IS PROPERLY FED WITH NUTRIENTS AND SLEEP, IT'LL GROW BACK MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN BEFORE (112)

Then again a few pages later, "TOWARD A LITERATURE OF THE BODY" (112). While Acker here is speaking literally about bodybuilding, she also sheds light on the formal movements she employs in her writing, breaking down and destroying existing

forms of narrative, manipulating them, so that they can grow back stronger and more capable, more supple and shapely, able to do more.

Although these blocks of capitalized texts are not unusual in Acker's work, her repetition of them within several pages, as a continuation of her own theoretical explanation, is new. Within the novel's narrative of the love story of Laure and B, Acker maintains the freedom to digress from narrative in favor of the non-communicative and unexplained, that which is not semantically meaningful. The difference is that these things are not happening simultaneously and interchangeably: while still informing the narrative with theory, Acker's own voice is separated from the content of the novel's story. Conversely, in *Blood and Guts In High School*, a series of capitalized passages occurs alongside similar unexplained instances of formal experimentation:

> No No No No No No NO NO NO
> No No No No No No No
> No No No No No No No No No No No No
> No No No No No No No No No No No No
>
> SUCK ME SUCK ME SUCK ME
> SUCK ME SUCK ME SUCK ME
> SUCK ME SUCK ME SUCK ME
>
> PUKE MUSHY MUSHY I GO MUSHY I AM REPULSIVE
>
> (108-109, 123)

Here, Acker performs a disavowal of conventional grammar rules and syntactical logic via repetition. Rather than elucidating her syntactical unraveling, Acker merely performs it as an uncontrollable digression from narrative for the sake of performance alone. There is a theory behind this gesture, and an explanation for its inclusion, but the reader is not privy to this explanation, only to the artistic act itself. In *My Mother*, however, the gesture is explained in its performance. In this sense, Acker's intentions have clearly

changed: where once the experimental process of writing was valued definitively over the ability to communicate, her works in the last decade of her life strive to explain themselves. With a burgeoning interest in narrative, Acker experiments with its limits, "forcing it to accomplish more than it's able" "until its existing form is slowly and radically destroyed," feeding it with her own ideas and theories, and letting it "grow back more beautiful than before."

Leaving Home: Beginning and Beginning Again

While Acker's later novels clearly demonstrate a change in her artistic preoccupations, they continue the same line of questioning she has established throughout her earlier work, attacking the hypocrisy of twentieth century culture while destabilizing notions of identity. The later work is still distinctively Ackerian, featuring alienated, confused, disillusioned, self-loathing narrators illustrating extreme accounts of sex and violence. Further, Acker remains true to the format of the *bildungsroman* up through her final novel. Whether the narrator remains the same or changes thrice in one paragraph, each routinely recounts their childhood and then exodus from the nuclear family. Hence, Acker's consistent fascination with the myth of "quest," and transformation of her "characters" suggests an unchanging interest in, if not employment of, narrative structures throughout all of her works, rather than merely in her later novels.

Almost every Acker novel begins by recalling childhood. *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* opens:

> I'm born in the late autumn or winter of 1827. Troy, New York. My childhood is happy, and my parents allow me to do whatever I please as long as I, by my actions, don't infringe on their high social standing. My father is a great and wealthy man, a tall man, whom I look up to. As a child, among my dolls, I feel safe. I will never die. No one can hurt me. My mother, my father, my two older sisters, my younger sister, and my brother often ignore me, or promise to love

> me, give me a present, then don't; and I cry. My name at this time is Charlotte Wood. I don't remember any of my childhood before I was six years old when I started learning to read. My eldest sister marries a baronet and lives in England; my second eldest sister marries a doctor and moves to Scotland. (3)

Black Tarantula begins typically: our narrator expresses neglect and isolation within her nuclear family. This occurs through recognition of the capitalistic culture around her: her sisters are married and thus "bought,[16]" and her parents are concerned with superficial appearances and their "high social standing." Because the only other viable option for escaping the nuclear family is through marriage, which further reinforces and perpetuates imprisonment by the nuclear family, the protagonist must journey outward, alone, into an external reality filled with sensations of pleasure and pain.

My Mother: Demonology begins similarly, with childhood alienation and fear: "I was six years old. Every night immediately after supper, which I was usually allowed to take with my parents, I would say, 'Good night.' To reach my room, I'd have to walk down a long dark corridor that was lined with doors on either side. I was terrified. Each door half-opened to unexpected violence" (7). By beginning each novel with memories of age six, the age at which Acker learned to read and thus think independently, Acker's narrators demand control over their own story's telling. Acker uses and reuses this formula because she is interested in childhood, but more so in the point of departure between oneself and his/her nuclear family and the myth of the "nuclear family" itself. In her essay "Seeing Gender," Acker recounts the alienation she experienced in her own childhood. She begins the essay with a section titled "Childhood:" "When I was a child,

---

16 For Acker's writings on the link between marriage and capitalism or "slavery," see *Empire of the Senseless*, page 15, or *In Memoriam to Identity,* page 73.

the only thing I wanted was to be a pirate. Because I wasn't a stupid child, I knew that I couldn't" (*Bodies Of Work* 158). She continues:

> Barely born, I was dead. In the world of my parents, my bossy mother and my weak father, the world in which I had to wear white gloves and panty girdles even though I was skinny, was a dead world. Whereas pirates lived in the *living* world because pirates had fun. Since pirates lived in my books, I ran into the world of books, the only living world I, a girl, could find. I never left that world. (*Bodies Of Work* 159)

For Acker, age six is significant because it is the age she learns to read, and hence acquires the ability to travel outside of her family and into the magnificent solitude of the text. Age six represents the point at which one can begin to learn new information, visualize a different reality, and mentally free oneself from the confines of the immediate family. By repeating and rewriting this point of departure, Acker creates a community of protagonists who, like herself, begin a lifelong quest for freedom and meaning at age six.

It is clear, then, that Acker's later writing does not entail a complete departure from her early work: while Acker claims an increased focus on narrative, the use of myth and others' stories has been an integral part of her work since her earliest novels. Rather than displaying a defined "shift," Acker's work from 1973-1996 creates a kind of gradient, demonstrating a gradual change from the impulse to merely perform to the desire to communicate. The important distinction, however, is that this process is additive: Acker never leaves anything behind, but rather continues to include and supplement earlier concerns with her present preoccupations. This new preoccupation happens to be a decisive interest in the narrative structures that underlie the Western imagination, the myths that make the texts she loves to read. In conversation with Sylvère Lotringer, Acker claims that while always looking backward at the Oedipal myth and the myth of romantic love, exposing their unrelenting societal influence via ironic

ventriloquism, she is now attempting to create a *new* myth: "What I tried to do in *Empire of the Senseless* was to start to make a kind of myth that would be applicable to me and my friends" (*Hannibal Lecter* 18). Thus, while Acker attempts to create something, going "one step further," she must confront the demands of communication (Juno 184). This results in the appearance of a new tension in her work: Acker no longer polarizes the individual as fearful and anxious victim and the society that attempts to control and thus lobotomize her. Acker recognizes the points of convergence between the internal and the external, the desire to both acknowledge the internalization of that which is outside and communicate that which is inside. In her later novels, Acker dwells in these sites.

"The path of life is but a dream" [17]

Kathy Acker consistently includes dream material in her work. She is cited saying that she was sleep-deprived for much of her writing career because she would frequently wake herself up throughout the night to record her dreams (*Lust for Life* 55). Acker's novels themselves are mapped dream worlds that lead simultaneously to nowhere and to everywhere: their significance is in the journey itself and its labyrinthine nature, rather than the point of departure or the final destination. Like Acker's novels, dreams are disjointed narratives, in which one is both herself and other, material and immaterial. They resist the logic of waking life: time and identity are collapsed and conflated. While narrative is essential to the myth of the quest, the narrative cannot have a delineated beginning or ending because Acker's quest does not occur in measurable or linear time. Like in dreams, in Acker's novels, linear narrative structure is present yet inadequate and broken.

---

[17] Kathy Acker, *In Memoriam to Identity*

Jacques Lacan discusses the "linguistic structure" of the dream in his *Écrits*. He explains the "signifying chain" of dreams as based in combination and substitution, which creates a never-ending chain of signification: "there is no signification that does not refer to another signification; the most common denominator of those significations is produced in it—namely, the scant meaning (commonly confused with what is meaningless)" (520). Because dreams are created from that which the individual experiences in the external world and then internalizes, recontextualizes within a usually nonsensical dream narrative, and rearticulates through language, each dreamt image proposes a series of possible associations, each narrative a series of points of discontinuity. One must interpret all associations together, adding each to the cumulative signified. This occurs in Acker's dream narratives. In *My Mother: Demonology*, a section titled "My Dream of Returning to Cathy" begins as follows:

> I am traveling, the same as flying, through rooms that were connected to each other so that their insides were both outside and inside. The name: *the crags of Penistone*. The room through which I was passing was either an expensive Eastern clothing store, a window that displays two fur and silk robes, or a Hindu temple. All the walls were the same yellow-white as the ground below them. Sand lay everywhere. (143)

The narrator/dreamer flies through rooms that are both inside *and* outside, either a Hindu Temple *or* an Eastern clothing store. Sigmund Freud conveys the idea of the "and" versus the "or" in dreams. He argues that in dream interpretation, we must always replace the option that something is one *or* another with the copulative "and." He writes, in *On Dreams*, "In analyzing a dream, if an uncertainty can be resolved into an "either—or," we must replace it for purposes of interpretation with an "and," and take each of the apparent alternatives as an independent starting point for a series of associations" (44).

Hence, by forcing the "either...or...or"[18] into an "and" structure, the dreamer or writer, in Acker's case, creates layers of narrative signification. The method of synthesis is entirely additive. No possible association is left behind: the dream is communicated in its entirety by including every simultaneous signification via "and."

For example, in the passage above, Acker herself combines two possible associations by using "and:" "I am traveling, the same as flying, through rooms that were connected to each other so that their insides were both outside and inside." Acker is unable to deduce the true signification of her dream images, and is hence forced to conflate the two possible definitions. In the next sentence, Acker employs the "or:" The room through which I was passing was either an expensive Eastern clothing store, a window that displays two fur and silk robes, or a Hindu temple." Because Acker's narrative logic informs her that this room cannot be both an Eastern clothing store and a Hindu temple, she presents the two possible significations with "or," forcing the reader to replace "or" with "and" in our own interpretation of Acker's dream. Acker does not choose the "correct" classification for the room through which she travels, so how can we? In each case, all possible associations converge to produce a multiplicity of signification.

Acker claims that her work beginning in the late 1980's with *Empire* saw an influx of dream narrative as a means of composing. Acker speaks of this practice in a 1993 interview with R.U. Sirius. She responds to the question, "so do you just empty your mind to see what comes up?":

---

[18] This is Deleuze and Guattari's linguistic structure of the schizophrenic text, as explained in my first chapter. Similarly, it is how Freud argues we are *tempted* to interpret dreams, forcing them into a decisive narrative format, while we must instead add every possibility given to us by the "or," substituting "either…or" for "and."

> Lately I've been working on narrative, so I don't do it that way now. But I'm starting to worry about self-censorship -- that I might be internalizing some shit. I might be writing what people expect me to write, writing from that place where I might be ruled by economic considerations. To overcome that, I started working with my dreams, because I'm not so censored when I use dream material. (Sirius 2)

Acker expresses concern that a shift toward narrative could be interpreted as "selling out," or relinquishing her anti-capitalist, anti-conformist principles in favor of something more "mainstream." To combat this, then, Acker actively returns to one of her favorite means of composition, that which intrinsically defies the linear structure of conventional narratives, by turning inward to the complexly layered signification of dreams. Acker confronts the "shit" that she claims to be "internalizing" by confronting it via her subconscious dream life. By continuing to relinquish authorial control by using dream material as a new source for appropriation, Acker can explore her interest in narrative (and its shortcomings) while continuing relinquish control over her text, using content derived directly from her subconscious.

For Acker, the idea of "self-censorship" is among her worst fears, like claustrophobia, akin to lobotomy. The means to combat the fear of control by society, of lobotomy, is to desire, and forever traveling and searching for the object of that desire: "what really gets me off is the idea that you can just travel, and traveling is just like having an endless orgasm. You just go and go and go" (Sirius). As long as one is desiring, and hence searching, one will live "forever in wonder" of new possibilities found around every corner of the network of desire. Like Acker's protagonists, who must leave behind their families in favor of ultimate freedom and wildness, Acker too is searching for a better reality, a territory ruled by desire, a never-ending space of absolute

freedom. Acker uses her dreams to help illuminate these desires, the "miraculous and forbidden objects" (Lacan 524). In conversation with Karl Schmieder, Acker says:

> I began looking for the source of dreams, what makes a dream. I realized a dream is a pure movement of desire. And in a dream, you're just watching, without stoppage, which is what you do when you're not dreaming. Lacan says the object of desire is never there. It's an absence and to look for the real meaning of the dream, you have to look for the one point where the dream doesn't make sense, where there is something missing. That will tell you what the dream means. And that fascinated me. (Schmieder 2)

Dreams are the locus of that which is unknowable, unexplainable, the unmediated truths of the mind, a "pure movement of desire." Like Acker's early texts, dreams are an unstoppable torrent that is entirely dislocated from reason or sense, resulting from pure impulses, anxieties and desires. Further, Acker uses the Lacanian explanation of desire, which asserts that the object of desire *is never there*, and hence the quest for this object is never-ending. Lacan articulates the "structure of desire" as follows: "Desire is what manifests itself in the interval demand excavates just shy of itself, insofar as the subject, articulating the signifying chain, brings to light the lack of being [*manque à être*]" (524). The point of lack, *manque à être*, the void, the "something missing" is the locus of indestructible potential, because it is the filling of which that we eternally desire. As long as Acker, and hence her characters, are *desiring*, they are creating a narrative of search and quest, but a quest that has neither beginning nor end. They are searching for the sake of the search itself.

The search for the object of desire resembles the quest Acker's characters undertake as they depart from their family structures in favor of something they are without, and the journey her readers undertake as they enter into her text. In her interview with Andrea Juno, Acker speaks extensively about the importance of this search:

> This second class of women [women who are tattooed, who have not internalized norms] are actively searching for who to be, and it has to do with their own *pleasure*, their *own* feeling of identity—they're not *obeying*—they're not obeying the normal society. They're looking—it's very different. And when you look, you know you're "failing," you know you're "inferior." There's always something *missing* […] We're looking for a society that allows us *the fullness of what it is to be human*, I would think—it's hard to know because I've never been there! But I read about societies in which ecstasy and joy and certain areas of sexuality are venerated. (183-4)

Because Acker is forever desiring and searching, she wishes to create a myth of this search for a world where desire can be ultimately fulfilled, "the world in our own image" (*Blood and Guts* 164). Acker imagines a space where ecstasy, joy, and desire are prioritized above the trappings of material society, above the necessity of identity. Because "normal society" requires obedience, which is impossible for Acker, she must search for a space in which mind, body, and spirit can meld in the face of pleasure and ecstasy.

Yet Acker does not wish to undergo this quest alone. In conversation with Andrea Juno, she expresses the misfortune of Western society's projection that we must, or "should," search in solitude, unable to access language, unable to communicate our search. She says:

> We don't have anything in our society that allows us to do a rite of passage *communally*; we do everything individually. Our own search is all done individually; now and then we might tell each other about it, but we always have the feeling we're being a bit "outside" the society when we tell each other. I mean, ecstasy—be it sexual (or some other kind of orgy) should be taking place somehow in our "community"—and it's not. *Our society gives us nothing.* […] We don't have any language with which to talk about these things. (Juno 184)

Acker desires a kind of communal bodily experience, a physical rite of passage, something done to the material body that causes an experience of shared ecstasy. These alternative communities, however, must not present a threat to individualism, as Acker

sees the nuclear family or romantic relationship. In Acker's ideal community, the self and the group can exist symbiotically. One way this can occur is by demolishing the hostility between the internal and the external, allowing continuity between the self and the other.

Acker is able to navigate her tensions with a personal narrative, the responsibility to communicate, and the struggle of the journey to be both free and always desiring through tattooing. Rather than maintain a life *against* or *outside* society, forever reacting, Acker is able to transpose the tension between herself and that which is outside herself onto her body, creating new myth rather than reacting against the myths already present and powerful. Sylvère Lotringer says, in conversation with Acker, "That's what happens to dealers of myths. They become myth. Now you don't even need to be a real poète maudit, all you need is what? Tattoos on your body." Acker responds, "that's what tattooing is for me, it's myth" (*Hannibal Lecter* 21). Lotringer elaborates on this transference of one's tension with society onto the body, emphasizing the importance of transforming the immaterial into the material: "you must literally inscribe your debt to society on your body" (Lotringer 2012). Like the dream, tattoos take that which originates in the outside world, and internalize it, in the case of tattooing, literally injecting an image into one's skin. The tension between outside and inside manifests on the surface of the body as an image that is both underneath and on top of the skin. Tattoos, like dreams, like Acker's texts, take tensions present in society and force them inward, writing them on the mind and body. Rather than take place *out there*, the tension takes place on the boundary between the outside and the inside, on the skin, causing simultaneous pain and pleasure, anxiety and desire. Through tattooing, Acker makes and remakes herself:

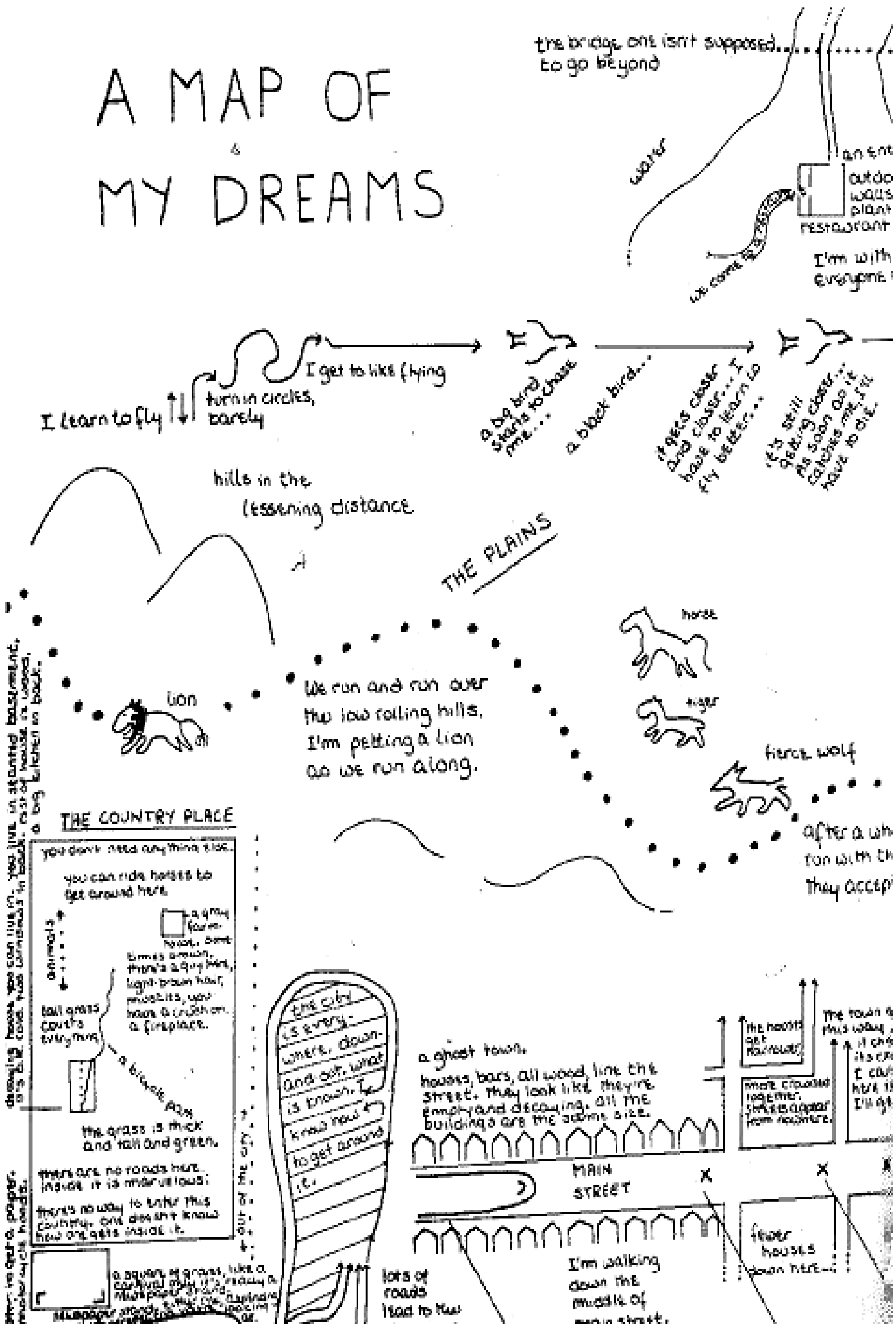
> ACKER: Well, I have the body. I am very much primitive if you scratch me.
> LOTRINGER: But it's all on the surface. It's like myth-making, the body takes place of the I.
> ACKER: Yeah, because the body's more text. […] Someone wrote on me, which is incredible. It's all in the process of making. I invented someone to help me make my body. And I had to trust that person. (21)

Acker invents herself by inventing someone to write on her body. Tattooing allows a reciprocity of making, an invention of self that requires participatory experience, a communal search. Dreams and tattoos are, like freedom, only a "prelude to further ambiguities," not means of finding the object of desire, the thing for which one searches, but rather a means of prolonging the search (*Bodies Of Work* 103). Acker uses her unconscious and her body as "a public commons, the location of image-making that belongs to a community" while also the means by which she experiences her individual search (*Bodies Of Work* 55). "So," she says, "how can we institute a society where the search is both individual and communal at the same time?"

In her book *Tattooed Bodies: Subjectivity, Textuality, Ethics and Pleasure*, Nikki Sullivan cites Fakir Musafar's concept of "primal energy" and bodily communication. She writes, "For Musafar the body functions as a vehicle for the expression of primal energy, or as Ostermann puts it, 'communication without words.' For the most part, body modification in its various forms involves an element of sensuous experience or pain, and surrendering to this experience inaugurates a 'transcendental spiritual event'" (Sullivan 38). Acker repeatedly gestures toward a kind paradoxically extra-lingual communication. Acker takes Roland Barthes' advice, as Sullivan articulates it, recognizing "the duplicity of language—the idea that *significance* simultaneously structures meaning and decomposes it—rather than attempting to privilege one meaning over another" (Sullivan

120). Barthes writes, “it is not polysemy which is praised and sought out; it is quite precisely amphibology, duplicity” (1977: 73).

This recognition of the duplicity of language and the amphibology of syntactical constructions manifests in her work through her increasing use of images alongside her text. Acker began to experiment extensively with images in *Blood and Guts In High School* (1984). As we flip through *Blood and Guts*, we see hand drawn pictures of massive genitals with small captions excerpted from Acker’s text. In the middle of the novel, we find a six-page spread of “A Map of My Dreams” (46). The map is drawn by Acker, with her signature at the bottom, featuring small bits of writing and images of streets, animals, architectural drawings of buildings, next to huge penises and tribal designs. One could spend hours trying to decipher each small sentence, attempting to follow this “map.” The first page appears as follows:


A MAP OF
MY DREAMS
the bridge one isn't supposed to go beyond
water
restaurant
I learn to fly
turn in circles, barely
I get to like flying
a big bird starts to chase me...
a black bird...
it gets closer and closer... I have to learn to fly better...
it's still getting closer... As soon as it catches me, I'll have to die.
hills in the lessening distance
THE PLAINS
lion
horse
tiger
fierce wolf
We run and run over the low rolling hills, I'm petting a lion as we run along.
THE COUNTRY PLACE
you can ride horses to get around here.
animals
tall grass covers everything
the grass is thick and tall and green.
there are no roads here.
the city is everywhere, down and out, what is known. I know how to get around it.
out of the city
a ghost town.
houses, bars, all wood, line the street. They look like they're empty and decaying. all the buildings are the same size.
MAIN STREET
I'm walking down the middle of main street.
fewer houses down here
lots of roads lead to the

Acker's dream map is entirely unnavigable, with arrows in the top left corner captioned by "I learn to fly," "turn in circles, barely." Rather than delineate a beginning and end to her dream map, each small event or scene within the dream is happening simultaneously on the page. We cannot read from left to right, but rather in circles, retracing our interpretive steps. While words appear on the page, they exist within a visually mapped series of images and lines, creating an interaction between the text and the image. There is no correct or incorrect way to read or interpret Acker's map: we must read the page differently, interact with the physical book differently, turning it and examining its small details.

Next, Acker includes a twenty-page hand drawn section titled "Persian Poems by Janey Smith." The poems, or words listed in English on the right side with their Persian translations on the left, are apparently the result of the protagonist, Janey Smith's, preoccupation with a Persian grammar book while held captive by a Persian slave-owner. The translations create a symmetrical image on the page, with legible English and beautiful Arabic characters. These are apparently translations, two linguistic images that directly relate, but neither Acker nor the majority of her readers would understand or decipher the relationship here. By using both maps and another language's characters, Acker experiments with signification that is beyond that of the word or sentence. Acker pushes the signification of English words to their limits with italics, capital letters, and repetition: the image of words on the page allows the words to doubly signify, first in the literal meaning of the words themselves, and then through their visual manipulation on the page.

Empire of the Senseless includes tattoos drawn by Acker's own tattooist, to whom the book is dedicated. These drawings feature skulls, roses, daggers, and coy fish, with words swirling around or within them. Several resemble tattoos Acker had on her body such as the enormous coy fish she had across her upper back. Acker tattoos her text, like she tattoos her body, repositioning and texturing its surface. Where words fall short or are pushed to their limits, images are inserted as another path through which the reader must take the journey of Acker's text. Rather than further "scramble the codes" with visuals or a navigable map, forcing the reader to "choose" the correct path of interpretation, Acker includes images alongside her language to further complicate her own code, and add to the richness of the significance which it unlocks. The following image appears on the first page of *Empire of the Senseless*:

By using a caption alongside this image, including words in the visual, we associate "my family fortune" with a skull and a rose. Further, it is unclear whose family fortune we have seen depicted: is it the narrator's? Kathy's own? The larger mythical structure of the

nuclear family's? While the images are embedded in the text, directly correlating to its content, they enrich the mythic element of the text, transposing images from bodies onto the text, allowing us to interact with the text as we would with an individual. Both the body and the text exist in relationship to myth, to the history from which it is born. Essentially, the text, like the body itself is Acker's "family fortune," that which she has inherited, re-written and re-formed. Tattoos, dreams, and myths essentially use narrative to invent and re-make Acker herself and her text.

By addressing myth, tattooing, and dreams, Acker focuses on the point of synthesis between the inside and outside, the internal and external. Acker moves away from erratic juxtaposition, instead composing more slowly and thoughtfully, articulating spaces where the individual meets community, where the immaterial becomes material, and lingering in these spaces longer than usual. Instead of reacting against the society she hates, Acker begins to relate to it, exploring the ways in which she cannot help but be complicit, acknowledging her internalization of the myths and narratives that surround her. Rather than positivism or nihilism, construction or deconstruction, external or internal, Acker performs a consistently additive process in which these apparent binary oppositions are revealed as inextricably bound up with each other.

Afterword:
A Body with Organs

"To begin (writing, living) we must have death."

Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*

Kathy Acker died on November 30, 1997. After receiving a double mastectomy to combat the cancer in her breast, "because it was cheaper," Acker learned that her cancer had spread to her lymph nodes, and the only method of treatment would be chemotherapy. Without any health insurance or any remaining faith in Western medicine, Acker continued to live her life as usual, following a lover to London and touring with British punk band "The Mekons" (Carr 2). Videos of Acker performing with The Mekons can be found on You Tube:[19] she sits perched on a stool, reading animatedly from *Pussy, King of the Pirates*. After the musical performance is underway, Acker, dressed in a flowing white dress that matches her short bleached hair, dances wildly around the stage, flinging her arms in the air and smiling. It is hard to believe that this woman is, in fact, terminally ill. Upon returning to San Francisco months later, Acker learned that she had cancer all over her body, and went to Tijuana to receive some last alternative treatments, where she died.

Acker's death, like her life, required a kind of break with the dominant rationale of society, the norms of Western medicine. Acker approached her illness with a simultaneous pessimism and curiosity: like the romance novels she would pirate, Acker's breast cancer seemed surreally trite and clichéd. For someone so wedded to the sensations

[19] *The Mekons and Kathy Acker Live: Pussy, King of the Pirates*. Kathy Acker and The Mekons. *You Tube.* The Super Channel, 10 Nov. 2009. Web. 19 Apr. 2012. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Azh5grNxqIg>.

of her body, it was hard for Acker to understand she had cancer when she didn't *feel* like she had cancer. But with the help of her "healers," Acker relentlessly sought her cancer's cause. She writes, "I had been confused why I had gotten cancer. Three weeks later, I saw the network of causation so clearly I wondered why I wasn't more disease-riddled. [sic] My healer reminded me that health is based on forgiveness, and that I had to forgive." Hence, in an attempt to save her life, Acker returned to the details of her own biography that haunt her work, her early abandonment by her father and her mother's suicide, by re-writing them once again.

Her impending death allowed a new lens through which Acker could write her reality. She began her final works of fiction, *Eurydice in the Underworld*, an appropriation of the myth of Eurydice that discusses mortality at length, and *Requiem*. In the third act of *Requiem,* Acker articulates her struggle with the meaning versus meaninglessness of her life and her death. Acker speaks as both a first person narrator who discusses her breast cancer, and then again through a character named Electra. She writes, "If this world is meaningful, I continued, then so must be each of its parts, no matter how minute. If this world is meaningful, then I need to concern myself, not with cancer, but with its cause. Whatever caused it must change. I knew one thing. That writing is a way to change reality" (Requiem, Act III 3). Deciding, in the end, that this world has meaning after all, Acker seeks forgiveness of her mother in order to eradicate her cancer. Through writing, Acker attempts to cure her disease, to re-form her own reality. "Requiem" ends:

> You were the terrorized child,
> Mother,
> Be no more.
> Requiat in pacem.

Requiem.
For it was you I loved.

Acker uses the text to address her dead mother and to address her disease-ridden body. Always believing that the text shapes identity and reality, Acker continues, more than ever, to "explore the relationship between text and flesh" (Wynne-Jones 12). At this point, Acker's writing is her *only* means of combating the disease. She writes, in "The Gift of Disease," "When I walked out of the surgeon's office and didn't know where to go, I asked myself what I could know. Did I have anything in myself, in my life, that could help me know, and so, deal with cancer? […] My work, my writing…Imagination and will."

By writing through her death as a means of therapy, and publishing this writing, Acker publicized her own illness and physical demise. Acker gained increasing notoriety after her untimely death, which, as Claire MacDonald argues, made her writing "safer," given the context of her personal suffering. MacDonald writes, "She made her journey towards death, in life, as a writer, with no clear boundary between "real" and "fictional" experience. Writing was her world. Past lives, possible lives, future lives, cutting, shaping, and re-making her body were her tools. In death, as she finally says, she gave birth to herself as a writer" (114). By writing her death, facing the underworld via the myth of Eurydice, Acker is able to understand, "know" her death as she knew her life: by making it textual, manipulating it, cutting it up, and exercising control over its reality in the text.

Yet, to this day, Acker's death seems wrong, unjust, and untimely. Given that her writing itself defies a terminus, readers, fans, and friends of Acker cannot help but return

to “the irresolvable stupidity of Kathy Acker’s death” (Ronell 12). Acker’s writing is always beginning again, circling pleasure, pain, sensations, and always returning to birth and to childhood. Acker’s writing itself is not concerned with an end, with finality, nor with a linear temporality. It is difficult, as we take Acker’s writing from her life, to accept that while Acker’s writing defies death or ending, Acker herself could not. In the end, fifteen years after Acker’s death, we are left with Acker’s texts, her recorded voice, her prolific body of work, and its ubiquitous liveliness. In her death, Acker’s work, like the bodybuilding muscle, has been damaged and grown back more beautiful than ever, reframed in the context of her life as a whole.

Works Cited

Acker, Kathy. *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*. New York: Grove Press, 1973.

-------*I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac.* New York: Grove Press, 1974.

-------The *Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec.* New York: Grove Press, 1975.

-------*Great Expectations*. New York: Grove Press, 1983.

-------*Blood and Guts in High School.* New York: Grove Press, 1984.

-------*Don Quixote*. New York: Grove Press, 1986.

-------*Empire of the Senseless*. New York: Grove Press, 1988.

-------*In Memoriam to Identity.* New York: Grove Weidenfield, 1990.

-------"Dead Doll Humility." *Postmodern Culture* 1.1 (1990).

-------*Hannibal Lecter, My Father*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1992.

-------*My Mother: Demonology*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1993.

-------"On Fitting In and Punk Culture." Rec. 12 Apr. 1995. *Interview and Reading at SUNY-Buffalo as Part of the Wednesdays @ 4 Plus Series*. *Penn Sound*. Web. 27 Apr. 2012. <http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Acker/04-12-1995/Acker-Kathy_02_on-fitting-in-and-punk-culture_Interview-and-Discussion-at-UB_04-12-95.mp3>.

-------"On Different Feminisms Rec. 12 Apr. 1995. *Interview and Reading at SUNY-Buffalo as Part of the Wednesdays @ 4 Plus Series*. *Penn Sound*. Web. 27 Apr. 2012. <http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Acker/04-12-1995/Acker-Kathy_02_on-different-feminisms_Interview-and-Discussion-at-UB_04-12-95.mp3>.

-------*Bodies Of Work: Essays*. London: Serpent's Tail, 1997.

--------*Eurydice in the Underworld.* London: Arcadia Books, 1997.

Acker, Kathy, James Strahs, James Lapine, Stephen Sondheim, Des McAnuff, and John Jesurun. *Wordplays: An Anthology of New American Drama.* New York: PAJ Publications, 1986. Print.

Amerika, Mark. "Tribute: Kathy Acker." *The American Book Review* 19.2 (1998): 4. Web.

Antin, David. "David Antin Talking on Kathy Acker (NYU, 2002) on Vimeo." *George Quasha's Vimeo Stream*. Vimeo, 02 May 2009. Web. 06 Dec. 2011. <http://vimeo.com/4446934>.

Barthes, Roland, Richard Miller, and Richard Howard. *The Pleasure of the Text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1975. Print.

Barthes, Roland. *Roland Barthes*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. Print.

Bataille, Georges. *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*. San Francisco: City Lights, 1986. Print.

Boaz, Amy, and Laurie Weeks. "Deranging Language." *Publisher's Weekly* (2011): 45.

"Bohemian Ink: Kathy Acker." *Levity.com*. Web. 25 Apr. 2012. <http://www.levity.com/corduroy/acker.htm>.

Brennan, Karen. "The Geography of Enunciation: Hysterical Pastiche in Kathy Acker's Fiction." *boundary 2* 21.2 (1994): 243-68. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Oct. 2011.

Burroughs, William S., and Sylvère Lotringer. *Burroughs Live: The Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs, 1960-1997*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2001. Print.

Carr, C. "Kathy Acker 1944-1997." The Village Voice, 09 Dec. 1997. Web. 29 Apr. 2012. <http://www.villagevoice.com/1997-12-09/news/kathy-acker-1944-1997/>.

Cervantes, Saavedra Miguel De, and Edith Grossman. *Don Quixote*. New York: Ecco, 2003. Print.

Cixous, Hélène. *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*. New York: Columbia UP, 1993. Print.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1983. Print.

De Sade, Marquis, Richard Seaver, and Austryn Wainhouse. *The Marquis De Sade: The Complete Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, and Other Writings*. New York: Grove, 1965. Print.

Dew, Spencer. *Learning for a Revolution: The Work of Kathy Acker*. San Diego: Hyperbole Books, 2011.

Englbrecht, Penelope J. "Re/Viewing Kathy Acker." *Trivia* 21 (1993): 30-41. Print.

Foster, Hal. "Postmodernism in Parallax." *October* 63.Winter (1993): 3-20. Print.

Foster Wallace, David. "Review: Portrait of an Eye: Three Novels by Kathy Acker." *Harvard Review* 1 (1992): 154-56. *JSTOR*. Web. 6 Dec. 2011. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27559426>.

Freud, Sigmund, and James Strachey. *On Dreams*. New York: Norton, 1952. Print.

Friedman, Ellen G. "Conversation with Kathy Acker by Ellen G. Friedman by Kathy Acker on Myspace." *Kathy Acker's Blog*. Web. 12 Nov. 2011. <http://www.myspace.com/kathy_acker/blog/297139390>.

Glück, Robert. "The Greatness of Kathy Acker." *Lust for Life: On the Writings of Kathy Acker*. London: Verso, 2006. 45-57. Print.

Goldin, Nan. *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. New York: Aperture, 1986.

Goldin, Nan. "The Other Side." *Illuminations: Women writing on photography from the 1850s to the present*. Ed. Heron, Liz and Williams, Val. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.

Hardin, Michael, ed. *Devouring Institutions: The Life Work of Kathy Acker*. San Diego: Hyperbole Press, 2004.

Houen, Alex. "Sovereignty, Biopolitics, and the Use of Literature" Michel Foucault and Kathy Acker. *Theory and Event* 9.1 (2006). *Project Muse.* Web. 16 Sept 2011.

Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1985.

Jameson, Fredric. *The Prison-house of Language; a Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1972. Print.

Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." *Postmodern Culture*. London: Pluto, 1985. 111-25. Print.

Juno, Andrea. *Angry Women*. San Francisco: Re/Search Press, 1991.

King, Noel. "Kathy Acker on the Loose." *Meanjin* 55.2 (1996): 334-39. Web.

Lacan, Jacques, and Bruce Fink. *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. New York: W.W. Norton &, 2006. Print.

Lewis Peters, Greg. "Dominance and Subversion: The Horizontal Sublime and Erotic Empowerment in the Works of Kathy Acker." *State of the Fantastic: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Fantastic Literature and Film : Selected Essays from the Eleventh International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, 1990*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1992. Print.

Lotringer, Sylvère. "Theory in Art." CCS Speaker Series: Sylvère Lotringer. New York, Annandale-On-Hudson. 28 Mar. 2012. Lecture.

MacDonald, Claire. "Requiem for the Self: Kathy Acker's Final Work." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 10.1-2 (1999): 105-16. *Taylor & Francis Online*. Web. 19 Apr. 2012. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/07407709908571295>.

McCaffery, Larry. "The Artists of Hell: Kathy Acker and 'Punk' Aesthetics," in *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, eds. Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989), 220.

The Mekons and Kathy Acker Live: Pussy, King of the Pirates. Perf. Kathy Acker and The Mekons. *YouTube.com*. Electracloud via The Super Channel, 10 Nov. 2009. Web. 19 Apr. 2012. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Azh5grNxqIg>.

Moran, Joe. *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America*. London: Pluto, 2000. Print.

Muth, Katie R. "Postmodern Fiction as Poststructuralist Theory: Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*." *Narrative* 19.1 (2011). *Project Muse.* Web. 16 Sept. 2011.

Olson, Charles, Donald Allen, Benjamin Friedlander, and Robert Creeley. *Collected Prose*. Berkeley: University of California, 1997. Print.

Peake, Lilian. *Promise at Midnight*. Hampton, NH: Chivers North America, 1983. Print.

Rajchman, John. "The Lightness of Theory." *Artforum* Sept. (1993). *CBS Interactive Business Network Resource Library*. Web. 19 Mar. 2012. <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_n1_v32/ai_14580141/>.

Robinson, Edward S. *Shift Linguals: Cut-up Narratives from William S. Burroughs to the Present*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011. Print.

Ronell, Avital. "Kathy Goes to Hell: On the Irresolvable Stupidity of Acker's Death." *Lust for Life: On the Writings of Kathy Acker*. New York: Verso, 2006. 12-34. Print.

Schmieder, Karl. “Kathy Acker Interview.” Naropa Poetry Institute, 25 July 1991. Web. 21 April 2012. <www.ilato.org/kathy1.html>

Scholder, Amy, Carla Harryman, and Avital Ronell. *Lust for Life: on the Writings of Kathy Acker*. London: Verso, 2006. Print.

Sciolino, Martina. "Kathy Acker and the Postmodern Subject of Feminism." *JSTOR*. Web. 14 Sept. 2011. <www.jstor.org/stable/377661>.

Sirius, R.U. "Kathy Acker: Where Does She Get Off?" *Kathy Acker Interview*. ALTX Online Network, 1993. Web. 13 Apr. 2012. <http://www.altx.com/io/acker.html>.

Sullivan, Nikki. *Tattooed Bodies: Subjectivity, Textuality, Ethics, and Pleasure*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001. Print.

Who's Afraid of Kathy Acker? Dir. Barbara Caspar. Women Make Movies, 2008. DVD.

Wollen, Peter. "Kathy Acker." *Lust for Life: On the Writings of Kathy Acker*. London: Verso, 2006. 1-11. Print.

Wynne-Jones, Ros. "Mission over for Woman Who Sought Meaning in Death." *The Independent* [London] 07 Dec. 1997. Web. 19 Apr. 2012. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/mission-over-for-woman-who-sought-meaning-in-death-1287382.html>.

Works Consulted

Acker, Kathy. *Literal Madness: Three Novels.* New York: Grove Press, 1994.

------*Pussy, King of the Pirates*. New York: Grove Press, 1996.

Antin, David. *Radical Coherency*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Brande, David. "Making Yourself a Body Without Organs: The Cartography of Pain in Kathy Acker's Don Quixote." *Genre* XXVI (1991): 191-209. Web.

Chisholm, Dianne. "Kathy Acker's Grave Songs and Visceral Insights." *Parallax* 11.3 (2005): 40-54. Print.

Clune, Michael. “Blood Money: Sovereignty and Exchange in Kathy Acker.” *Contemporary Literature* 45.3 (2004): 468-515. *JSTOR.* Web. 14 Sept. 2011.

Dainotto, Roberto Maria. "The Excremental Sublime: The Postmodern Literature of Blockage and Release." *Postmodern Culture* 3.3 (1993). Print.

Dane, Gabrielle. "Hysteria as Feminist Protest: Dora, Cixous, Acker." *Women's Studies* 23 (1994): 231-56. Print.

Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations.* New York: Dodd, Mead, 1942. Print.

Fare, Diane. "A Spectacle of Pain: Confronting Horror in Kathy Acker's My Mother: Demonology." *EJAC* 21.2 (2002): 98-111. Print.

Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury: The Corrected Text*. New York: Vintage, 1990. Print.

“Friedman, Ellen G., and Miriam Fuchs. *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1989. Print.

Halberstam, Judith. *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. Print.

Hawkins, Susan E. “All in the Family: Kathy Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School*” *Contemporary Literature* 45.4 (2004): 637-658. *JSTOR.* Web. 14 Sept. 2011.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter.* New York: WW Norton, 2004. Print.

Hinton, Laura, and Cynthia Hogue. *We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics*. Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama, 2002. Print.

House, Richard. “Informational Inheritance in Kathy Acker’s *Empire of the Senseless*.” *Contemporary Literature* 46.3 (2005): 450-482. *Project Muse.* Web. 16 Sept. 2011

Hume, Kathryn. "Voice In Kathy Acker's Fiction." *Contemporary Literature* 42.3 (2001): 485-513. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 Sept. 2011. <www.jstor.org/stable/12089993.

Hume, Kathryn. "Books of the Dead: Postmortem Politics in Novels by Mailer, Burroughs, Acker, and Pynchon." *Modern Philology* (2000): 417-44.

Jardine, Alice A. *Gynesis*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.

Kauffman, Linda S. *Bad Girls and Sick Boys: Fantasies in Contemporary Art and Culture*. Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1998. Print.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia UP, 1982. Print.

Mackay, Polina, and Kathryn Nicol. *Kathy Acker and Transnationalism*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2009. Print.

Martin, Robert K. *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative*. Iowa City: Univ of Iowa, 2009. Print.

Moran, Joe. *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America*. London: Pluto, 2000.

McCaffery, Larry. "Kathy Acker: Always Missing—A Plagiarized Tribute." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 51.2 (2010): 104-11. Print.

McCaffery, Larry, and Kathy Acker. "An Interview with Kathy Acker." *Mississippi Review* 1/2 20 (1991): 83-97. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 Sept. 2011. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20134512>.

Perloff, Marjorie. *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996. Print.

Pitchford, Nicola. "Flogging a Dead Language: Identity Politics, Sex, and the Freak Reader in Kathy Acker." *Postmodern Culture* 11.1 (2000). *Project Muse*. Web. 16 Oct. 2011.

Pitchford, Nicola. *Tactical Readings: Feminist Postmodernism in the Novels of Kathy Acker and Angela Carter*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2002.

Punday, Daniel. "Theories of Materiality and Location: Moving Through Kathy Acker's Empire of the Senseless." *Genders* 27 (1998). *Genders*. Web. 2 Nov. 2011. <www.genders.org/g27/g27_theories.html>.

Redding, Arthur F. "Bruises, Roses: Masochism and the Writing of Kathy Acker."*Contemporary Literature* 35.2 (1994): 281304. <*www.jstor.org/stable/1208840*>. Web. 14 Sept. 2011.

Robbins, Harold. *The Pirate: A Novel*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974. Print.

"Resighting Gender Theory: Butler's Lesbian Phallus in Acker's *Pussy*." *Fetishism and Its Discontents in Post-1960 American Fiction*. Ed. Christopher Kocela. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Print.

Robinson, Christopher L. "In the Silence of the Knight: Kathy Acker's Don Quixote as a Work of Disenchantment." *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 2 Nov. 2011.

Rock, Catherine. "Poetics of the Periphery: Literary Experimentalism in Kathy Acker's In Memorium to Identity." *LIT* 12 (2001): 205-33. Print.

Russell, Jamie. *Queer Burroughs*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Saxton, Ruth. *The Girl: Constructions of the Girl in Contemporary Fiction by Women*. New York: St. Martin's, 1998. Print.

Schlichter, Annette. ""I Can't Get Sexual Genders Straight": Kathy Acker's Writing of Bodies and Pleasures." *Postmodern Culture* 17.2 (2007). Print.

Scholder, Amy, and Ira Silverberg. *High Risk: an Anthology of Forbidden Writings*. New York, NY: Dutton, 1991.

Siegle, Robert. *Suburban Ambush*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.

Stivale, Charles. "Acker/Rimbaud: 'I'-dentity Games." *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 3.3 (1998): 137-41. Print.

Wollen, Peter. "Death (And Life) of the Author." *London Review of Books* (1998): 8-10. Web.

Worthington, Marjorie. "“The Territory Named Women's Bodies”: The Public and Pirate Spaces of Kathy Acker." *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 15.4 (2004): 389-408. Print.