

Montclair State University

Montclair State University Digital Commons

Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects

1-2021

Salvaging the Utopia : Posthumanism, Feminism, and Anti-Patriarchal Language in Kathy Acker's In Memoriam to Identity

Fe Lorraine Agustin Reyes

Montclair State University, felorraine.reyes@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Reyes, Fe Lorraine Agustin, "Salvaging the Utopia : Posthumanism, Feminism, and Anti-Patriarchal Language in Kathy Acker's In Memoriam to Identity" (2021). *Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects*. 682.

<https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd/682>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Montclair State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects by an authorized administrator of Montclair State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@montclair.edu.

ABSTRACT

This thesis reads a posthuman feminist ethos, as theorized by Rosi Braidotti, within Kathy Acker's *In Memoriam to Identity*. By recognizing the posthuman undercurrent of the text, my argument cuts against the conventional postmodern arguments traditionally associated with Acker's work. I emphasize the novel's recuperation of the French feminist theory *écriture féminine*, a 20th century postmodern method of thinking that sought to embody and empower the "woman" in language. However, my position gives pause to simply recognizing the implications of the text's postmodern conventions. If left to a postmodern reading, Acker's text runs the risk of succumbing to language's patriarchal consciousness. Coherence, as I argue, is directly linked to a patriarchy itself. By coupling a postmodern deconstruction and a posthuman understanding—one that prioritizes the living being—I articulate an "actual way out" for the marginalized subject. As a result, Acker's nearly incoherent rhetoric, "non-identity" characters, and understanding of sexuality as beyond gender, all constitute a text that truly salvages the "woman" in language.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Salvaging the Utopia: Posthumanism, Feminism, and Anti-Patriarchal Language

in Kathy Acker's *In Memoriam to Identity*

by

Fe Lorraine Agustin Reyes

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

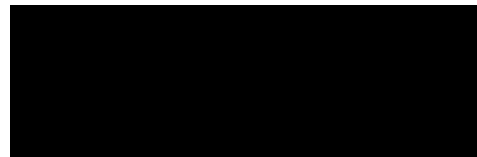
Master of Arts

January 2021

College/School: Humanities and Social Sciences

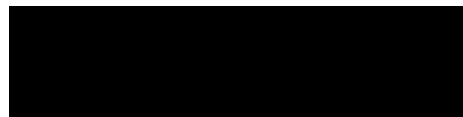
Thesis Committee:

Department: English



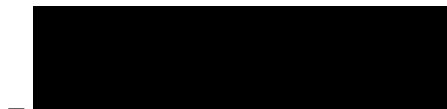
Jeffrey Gonzalez

Thesis Sponsor



Adam Rzepka

Committee Member



Emily Cheng

Committee Member

SALVAGING THE UTOPIA: POSTHUMANISM, FEMINISM, AND
ANTI-PATRIARCHAL LANGUAGE IN KATHY ACKER'S
IN MEMORIAM TO IDENTITY

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

by

FE LORRAINE AGUSTIN REYES

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

January 2021

Copyright © by Fe Lorraine Agustin Reyes. All rights reserved.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are people who put stock into this thesis, both consciously and unconsciously, and for that I am grateful:

- My mother, who will not read this, but that's okay.
- In no specific order: Matthew Berg, Kim Plaksin, Audrey Dingler, and Beck Silva. There is so much of myself in this project, and so they all, in their own ways, underlie the spirit of this text.
- Dr. Adam Rzepka, who helped foster my theoretical aptitude beginning all the way from my undergraduate thesis and culminating in my Master's thesis, and Dr. Emily Cheng, whose feminist considerations strengthened the work.
- Dr. Jeffrey Gonzalez, who has never disregarded my ambition. Who taught me the importance of saying something "interesting" and "smart." Whose consideration and empathy have never gone unnoticed, and who always took my work, the chaotic mind of Kathy Acker, and me very seriously.
- And what is any dedication of mine without including Joseph Glinbizzi, the quiet gem in every room, who I believe is owed a perpetual thank you for everything he does. The world is already a better place with him in it, but mine especially and eternally.

Fe Lorraine A. Reyes – January 2021

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1:	1-9
Chapter 2:	10-20
Chapter 3:	21-35
Conclusion.....	36-38
Bibliography.....	39-40

Chapter 1

A task that interested *écriture féminine* writers in the late twentieth century was finding the space to embody the female in language without relying on the male voice. They sought for a type of non-metaphorical language in hopes of empowering the woman—providing her with a mode of communication that was distinct from patriarchal logic. While these critics did not provide us with a specifically feminine language, they did give rise to a new way of thinking about dominant ideology, its oppressive implications and its relation to language. Writers such as Leslie W. Rabine, in “*Écriture Féminine* and Metaphor,” discuss language in this way. In her essay, she examines Hélène Cixous’ central contention that the basic structure of language, operating through a structure of dualist, hierarchal oppositions, is responsible for shaping thought, and “[is] that on which meaning depends” (Rabine 27). Here, she points out the problematic makeup of Western languages; how, at their core, they exclude women, and function only through the incessant silence and repression of them.¹ This very structure is inextricably patriarchal, and inevitably circumscribes the gender binary. So much so, that even if the woman tried to subvert language through metaphor for the purpose of escaping the “male voice” and patriarchal logic, she would end up in the same place as where she started.

Take for example, the conventional novel. What is required to produce a marketable, cohesive work of fiction is one in which its storyline is not only structurally

¹ While *écriture féminine* theory has indicated that oppression takes on multiple forms, my focus on language and linguistic coherence coincides with Kathy Acker’s own play with language. Obviously, subversive language alone will not undo centuries worth of systematic oppression that globally impacts the lives of women of color and transgender women. I acknowledge that marginalization is more than linguistic. But my choosing to underline language’s participation in their oppression connects to my overarching contention that language and consciousness is an inextricable human experience, and therefore is deserving of discursive elaboration.

sound and dramatically appealing, but also one in which its general way of communicating is clear. *Écriture féminine* writers sought to undermine the notion of clarity, for they found that at the root of coherence and order was a patriarchal consciousness. Hélène Cixous and other postmodern *écriture* writers saw the language within novel/narrative/text as a way to reveal the effects of subversion, and thus a useful tool for understanding the limitations of language and its inextricability from patriarchal logic. However, the problem underlying this way of thinking is that it still functions in the male/female binary by attempting to lend credence to the female, inevitably essentializing gender and reversing the hierarchical structure. Perhaps missing in *écriture féminine* criticism was a thorough destabilization of language followed up with an actualizable call for action, one that doesn't require patriarchal forms in order for it to be articulated. Indeed, *écriture féminine*'s own oversight reveals how deeply entrenched patriarchal logic is: when one acknowledges this logic, they are left with no sensible choice but to repurpose it.

A theoretical lens that lances this endless trap of repurposing is posthumanism, a critical analysis of modernity that favors new possibilities and indeterminate logic. Posthumanism shifts our current fidelities from an anthropocentric ideology to an uncentered reality, one that evades hierarchical language and thought. The lens offers “a new epistemology not centered in Cartesian dualism,”² and calls for a continuous renewal of power differentials to guide encounters among living beings. Deleuzian feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti, in her text “Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism,”

² Bolter, Jay. (2016). *Posthumanism*. 10.1002/9781118766804.wbiect220.

champions a “posthuman vitalist feminism” which proposes an application of language that decouples from reason, universality, and humanism. Her essay deconstructs the intersection between feminism and posthumanism, effectively drawing attention to problematic, structured thought that naturalizes patriarchal spaces, and offering an alternative to oppressive systems at play by validating a type of relational ontology between identities.

Kathy Acker’s novel *In Memoriam to Identity* offers its reader a material testament of posthuman ethics through its recuperation of écriture féminine theory. Although Acker had not known what posthumanism was at the point of writing, her book gives its reader a way of looking at posthumanism that situates a subversive consciousness that is rhizomatic, unstable, and uncomfortable, but nonetheless, a way out of a patriarchal consciousness. Acker’s work is traditionally understood as postmodern, for it tends to call for a deconstruction of the language at first glance. However, my reasons for not extending the postmodern argument on Acker’s text has to do with my discomfort in reducing Acker’s text to its material form. I can understand the inclination to do so. Acker’s language, after all, is not reader-friendly; postmodernism, which conventionally abides by the Derridean rule of thumb, “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte” or “There is no outside of the text,” provides the reader with a system of reading that sees only linguistic play in Acker’s work. However, to me, Acker’s novel engages in more than just language play – it prioritizes the human. Stefan Herbrechter reiterates this idea in his examinations of posthuman literature. In a keynote speech about posthuman literature’s seemingly contradictory position, he validates a deconstructive overlap between the postmodern and posthuman, but nonetheless distinguishes the outdatedness

of the former theory. He argues that postmodernism is “most urgent [with] the apocalypse of humanity” through its mixing of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, intermediality and science into the novel, all the gradual embracing of hypertext and the advent of electronic literature. (5) Indeed, if Acker’s text is deconstructed through these understandings, a postmodern deconstruction would certainly make it more palatable to the reader. However, the consequence of doing this is significant, in that the theory itself slides over the content and by extension, the human itself. In defense of posthumanism, Herbrechter notes that:

Posthumanism is [a] continuation of the poststructuralist critique of the prevalent humanism in literary criticism throughout most of the 20th century and the idea that literature and the study of it should be a defense of the human, or the nature and value of humanity, against the perceived scientific and economic onslaught. (6)

Here, Herbrechter recognizes posthumanism in its structuralist tendencies, but then saves the human by emphasizing the socio-historical boundaries of the human as it has been measured up against scientific and technological change. Simply put, Herbrechter formalizes our posthumanism as a type of post structuralism, one that is inherent within postmodernism, but nonetheless coupled with an understanding of technological advancements and the empathetic nature of humanity.

If posthumanism is understood in this manner, postmodernism limits a discussion of Acker’s text because of the theory’s inclination to simply deconstruct or diagnose the binary opposition that exists within the language. Therefore, I opt for posthumanism as a way for this analysis, which prioritizes the human both in the way the text is meant to be read (form) and, in the content, too. Haphazard and furiously rhizomatic, *In Memoriam*

employs three narratives that intersect with each other: a reimagination of teenage and young adult Rimbaud's ('R') life and relationship with Verlaine ('V'), a parallel story to R's and V's about a girl named Airplane and her relationship to her rapist; hypersexual Capitol, whose manic infatuations with her brother Quentin informs her desire to conquer men, and who practices the act of "forgetting" in order to destructively kill her multiple selves; and finally, "Wild Palms," which retrospectively alternates between the narratives of Airplane and Capitol. In this analysis, I argue that Acker presents a posthuman approach to identity and gender politics within this novel and embraces Rosi Braidotti's posthuman feminism in a way that actively prioritizes the human and undermines the male consciousness underlying linguistic coherence.

Moreover, the text reveals its posthumanism in the way it disregards preconceptions of logic – operating through the conceptual as opposed to the actual. In other words, posthuman ethics appear within this text through its consistent obliteration of rhetorical rules – even if only for a split second. Its success in doing so lies within its ability to both embody the essence of an "actual way out" and yet still undercut the kind of marginalized "space" that *écriture féminine* writers believed to be a solution to patriarchy. For example, the sentences in her novel, which I expand more on in the third section of this thesis, demonstrates a posthuman feminism – namely, in the tension between its grammatical sensibility and logical nonsense. The text is riddled in "sentences" that follow the basic rules of language: subject/predicate. But Acker's sentences rarely mean anything clear, nor connect to another part of the "narrative" that would otherwise give them rhetorical purpose:

Over his vodka and beer, V, though he was still an alcoholic and had to be in control of all situations because he was weak, decided that it was necessary for him to leave his family and have adventures with R because he was *imminently* about to be arrested by the cops for collaborating with the Communists... Being a good Frenchman V had to protect his only child by abandoning him. (Acker 57)

Is V's leaving of his family predicated on his weakness or his alcoholism? What about being a good Frenchman prompts the protection of his child? More frustratingly, *how does abandoning the child protect it?* This denial of a sensible link between parts of the sentence, i.e. a pushing aside of coherence, demonstrates the text's rhizomatic approach to language, and therefore its posthumanism. The conventional order of subject/verb, which sets the given action in the sentence to be dependent on the subject, inevitably circumscribes the subject itself. But by being ceaselessly hapless and wayward in organizing sentences, the novel prioritizes dismantling this logical structure. Acker's way of tackling this is by constructing her characters as a *non*-identity. In the third section, I elaborate on the implications of this – how the narrative's use of a characterlessness destabilizes subjectivity and breathes a posthuman agent into the novel. Inherently confusing, these methods deprivilege an equivocation of narrative as logical and organized to something that is only meaningful if we remember to salvage the marginalized subject that exists because of the incoherence.

Furthermore, *In Memoriam of Identity* toys with fixed identity by complicating the dichotomy of "I" and "Other," thus doing away with the existence of a binary in identity construction. In place of the subject, an idea that usually relies on the metaphorical body, is a restructured identity that at first glance is non-characterizable. The character of

Rimbaud, for example, is sutured to an anachronistic reimagining of the real-life Rimbaud. The point of this construction, where the reader is unable to track the character either through the allusion or through a developmental plot, is to reveal the very existence of the marginalized figure in language. The notion of *who* exactly Rimbaud *is* becomes questionable, for his so-called character arc is replaced by a disjointed narrative. The subjectivity inherent within asking “Who” Rimbaud “is” becomes dismantled as a result, thus revealing a critique on subjectivity. Moreover, the very title of this novel suggests that identity, as a once living subject, has died, and so the book itself will serve as a reflection of (perhaps meditation on) identity that once was. Acker complicates our conceptions of the “I”, and answers back to the Butlerian proposition that, “When the ‘I’ seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration” (Butler 8). Indeed, in Judith Butler’s reading, the “I” cannot actually give an account of itself. In the form of the narrative, Acker successfully and paradoxically positions the subject within a narrative that is inherently *anti-narrative*. Because we don’t understand what happens “characters” like R, Acker wishes for us to reimagine language as averse to conservation of the past as the basis for a straightforward, logical chronology. Ultimately, through Acker’s precursive posthumanism, she recognizes that “[This] struggle with the unchosen conditions of one’s life, a struggle—an agency—is also made possible, paradoxically, by the persistence of this primary condition of unfreedom” (Butler 19). This understanding of subjectivity can still reveal an agency that does not rely on a binary in language nor implicate the individuals back into hierarchical thought. Therefore, the “characters” in Acker’s text are liberated from an anthropocentric model in the way that

they don't really act like characters. They don't need to really on structured meaning, linearity nor comprehension in order to be felt or understood. This model thus paves a way for understanding how the posthuman can exist in language.

The notion of "becoming" in posthuman logic can be looked at as a type of new humanity that serves as a navigational tool that helps in understanding the complexities of the present. It suggests that the chronology of life is constantly mutating into a number of contemporary discursive events. The idea of becoming, then, focuses primarily on the action of doing something, with open potential, without thinking it is completable. It does not rely on a recapitulation of the self, and therefore does not allow for capitalization of that potential. In that way, the act of "becoming" is transversal, as are the characters in Kathy Acker's text. Although, yes, characters within stories are technically meant to parallel people and stand in for human subjectivity, Rimbaud, Verlaine and the like are meant to be metacognitively understood as an *abstract stand-in* for subjectivity. That is to say that because the characters are always depicted within an act of irrevocable suspension, of incompleteness, of nothing but a thing which does not require growth, they are opposing the conventions of selfhood as they often appear in literature. By doing this, Acker destabilizes character, and therefore destabilizes subjectivity.

Finally, sexuality in Braidotti's posthumanism recognizes itself as a living force beyond gender. In Braidotti's posthumanism, sexuality itself is not reduced to the gender binary, and because posthumanism is zoe-centered, the body serves as a conduit of that life force. Sexuality, after all, "provides a nonessentialist ontology structure for the organization of human affectivity and desire" (Braidotti 36) and is grounded by the body itself. This makes gender a system which continually disciplines and punishes the body.

Posthumanism, then, looks for intensities beyond binaries and functions by an “and-and” logic as opposed to an “either-or”. In order to do this, the body must be seen as an incorporeal complex assemblage of “virtualities” that both understands that one is always sexed and encompasses sexuality as a constitutive element (37). The becoming-woman in posthumanism involves the evacuation of gendered identities of women and opens them to a “virtual multiplicity of chaomic forces of becoming” (37).

Reading the novel through Braidotti’s claims, I argue that the novel attempts to capture the indeterminate by *becoming* the indeterminate. The only way for the “woman” to survive in language is by doing away with the gender binary that keeps her in an oppositional spot to her traditionally empowered, male counterpart. A way to do this is not just in subversive or postmodern methods of thinking that considers language alone, but in a posthuman way of thinking that prioritizes the living being. *In Memoriam* is profuse with language that never seeks to be wholly understood because conventional language, or even critical theory, defines proper comprehensibility as inherently male. Acker, in writing with a posthuman agency vis-a-vis a type of rhizomatic language, encourages us to imagine a world in which systems are beyond the current understanding of the human condition—for the humanist ideal of man has resulted in oppressive power differentials. In remaining simultaneously open and contrarian, Acker has us critiquing oppressive system at play. But in playing as a posthuman agent, she argues for a disembodying and reimagining of these systems that prioritizes the safekeeping of life yet opposes the practice of pigeonholing through categories. In other words, the posthuman recuperates an underlying utopianism to her text, and thus language and thought themselves.

Chapter 2

The following section examines Kathy Acker's subversion of "character" in her novel *In Memoriam to Identity*, and how Rosi Braidotti's arguments on posthuman feminism offer cause for an intervention into postmodern readings of Acker's language. Postmodern readings, which tend to focus their analysis of Acker's language play, suppress two key elements of Acker's texts: her mutilation of character and her antinarrative design. In response, this section examines the theoretical, utopian overlap between Braidotti's and Acker's texts by first explaining how Braidotti's posthumanism helps clarify Acker's indeterminate, rhizomatic language in the way it undermines Western subjectivity/identity and destabilization of the unified subject. As mentioned in the introduction, my stance differs from the postmodern view of her language in the sense that it considers both content and form within its analysis. But by conceptualizing a characterlessness, which takes on a "future ontological position whereby no other comes into existence" (Colby 61), Acker reveals how normative language is inherently gendered, oppressive, and contingent on hierarchy. Next, my argument dovetails Braidotti's examination of zoe-centrality with Acker's motifs of flesh and death, offering a vital neo-materialist approach to life. Lastly, my argument explores Braidotti's contention of seeing sexuality as *beyond* gender through Acker's own use of desire as an amorphous, uncategorizable force that begins with the body. When understood through Braidotti's theory, utopianism returns to Acker via the posthuman lens; Acker's mutilation of character and anti-narrative design within *In Memoriam to Identity* thereby reveals its aim to be staunch rebel against Western language.

Kathy Acker's mutilation of the character in her novel overlaps with Rosi Braidotti's posthumanism in that Acker's text treats her "characters" as totally detached from a unified, narratable subjectivity, which undoes anthropocentric thinking in language. In her novel, Acker subverts the convention of using the character as a stand-in for the normative subject, for to do so would mean to subject her characters to an oppressive dualistic identity. In *In Memoriam*, Acker will construct her own characters as fragmented identities. That reading alone would make for a great postmodern analysis. But I will take that a step further and say that they're not characters at all. Instead, they embody characterlessness that remains consistently indeterminate. Despite her characters being given names or other means of identification, Acker simply uses them as a navigational tool. We can understand this disconnect between character and subject through the way Acker approaches dialogue.³ Conventional fictional technique calls for a connection between character and their spoken dialogue. However, if we were to read that the posthuman consciousness runs through the novel, then I would argue an automatic disconnect between character and dialogue; character, as we know it, ceases to exist, thus rendering the possibility for the characters to stand mutually exclusive from a narrative milieu. What this allows for is a collapsing of character and diegesis and clarifies a destabilized consciousness that exists throughout.

Nonetheless, Acker works within the margins of the novel/narrative structure in order to "systematize" the instability of the subject. To Acker, rhetorical coherence equates with stability in language, which thereby promotes reliance on the patriarchal logic. In *Kathy Acker: Writing the Impossible*, Georgina Colby discusses *In Memoriam*'s

³ I elaborate on this further in the third section.

incessant undercutting of identity in her chapter concerning “non-identity,” or as she would call it, “constructive non-identity.” She specifically examines Airplane’s recollection of Rimbaud’s words: “I am an *other*.” (226). In this statement, she argues that “the ‘I’ is objectified and gestures to self-alienation, whereby the self is alienated into the position of other within the binary ‘I’ and ‘other’” (161). Here, Colby discusses how the “I” becomes isolated and objectified, thereby disrupting the reader’s conventional dependency on the “I” and subjectivity. This dependency aligns with Judith Butler’s proposition on the “I,” in that this normative structure of the subject teaches the individual that there is a solid, conceivable way of giving account of oneself. Yet, as discussed in the previous section, the contrary is highly misleading. Acker sees through this inability to perfectly concretize a subjective narrative, and instead attempts to momentarily reconcile the fundamental disjunction between subject and narrative. This tactic is Acker attempting to purport the very Butlerian inability of talking about characters at all. According to Butler:

... If the subject is opaque to itself, not fully translucent and knowable to itself, it is not thereby licensed to do what it wants or to ignore its obligations to others. The contrary is surely true. The opacity of the subject may be a consequence of its being conceived as a relational being, one whose early and primary relations are not always available to conscious knowledge. (19)

Here, Butler discusses the limitations of subject formation theory – more specifically, how the opacity inherent within subject formation is directly related to its being conceived as a relational being. This Butler acknowledges the inevitability of *a* subject – after all, the subject plays and has played a role in constructing conscious thought.

Although the subject itself is inextricably linked to patriarchal consciousness, society cannot completely do away with their attachment to the subject. Instead, Butler calls for an ethics that comes from this understanding of subjectivity. Again, my argument stands that subject is an extension of patriarchal consciousness. In this way, I err towards Butler's belief in the value of both the acknowledgement of how the subject still stands as a valuable and reliable platform for understanding social relations. Acker's reimagining of the "I" through the subversive, posthuman subject in her own text sees the value in presenting subjectivity within her opaque subjects by constructing them as fluid and relational through elements of a narrative.

Braidotti's contentions on flesh when seen through posthumanism, specifically in its zoe-centered sensibility which considers all forms of life at whatever organic biological stage it is in, is read through Acker's own relationship to flesh and death. A post human understanding of flesh relates to Acker's understanding of character in that both are destabilized and permeable. Conventionally, both have relied on a malecentered, patriarchal sensibility in order to give it structure and meaning. In *In Memoriam*, however, Acker debases the socially constructed understanding of both. Acker executes this posthuman read of death through her approach of abortion, a taboo practice, one in which maternal scripts are heavily weighted, and through which she is underscoring the natural process of life and death. She does this by eliminating any sentimentalized notions that are associated with this concept. The "The Wild Palms" section of *In Memoriam* features a chapter titled, "Abortions". Tangentially, though abortions are mentioned in the chapter, the concept itself does not thematically anchor the chapter, once again producing a destabilizing effect on the reader. Instead, abortions are

simply approached through their efficiency. The narration speaks of the character Capitol's attitude towards abortions, and analyzes the rules set up for the woman's body by society: "When a woman's body turns into a baby-wanting machine and if the woman doesn't want a body, she has to wage war against herself. Her best girlfriend the same. Both of them had three abortions in one year" (Acker 248). What's missing here is the sentimentalizing of abortions that one would see in a conventional text, and what's replaced it is the woman's tumultuous task of augmenting the socially and biologically imposed pressure of motherhood. The blunt, matter of factual end to Capitol and her friend's narrative of having three abortions, which followed powerful imagery of what the woman had to go through in order to outset societal judgement, underscores Acker's acknowledgement of abortion as simply an elimination of the flesh. Most significantly, this imagery emphasizes the need to instead, highlight how the societal judgement emotionally affects the woman. Although the pain of the subject is a humanist move, I argue that this understanding of pain, in conjunction with the postmodern treatment of the sentence itself – after all, it's bluntly tagged onto the end of the paragraph – helps us to understand how zoe-centered sensibility can be felt through narrative.

Braidotti again embraces this understanding of death in her argument for the activist recognition of zoe, i.e. nonhuman life. She contends that within posthuman feminism, "The postanthropocentric turn goes a step further: by challenging anthropocentric habits of thought, it foregrounds the politics of the 'naturalized' nonhuman other and thus requires a more radical break down the assumption of human uniqueness" (Braidotti 30). Through a posthuman understanding, the naturalized material nonhuman other does not get recognized on a hierarchy, but rather, as one *or* the other.

The concept of the human being gets challenged because it does not get recognized as distinct, and as a result, is also deprivileged in Acker's language. Annette-Carina van der Zaag discusses Braidotti's contentions in this vein:

In a postanthropocentric sense, in a deeply relational sense, our death is impersonal. Death is not a finite limit, but a porous threshold. For Braidotti, death is the inhuman inside all of us, and a fear of death is an all too human quality that binds us. Specifically, she argues that at the level of consciousness, death is that which we fear most, is already behind us. (334)

In stating that death is "inhuman," she condenses life down to its bios. The idea that death is "behind us" draws attention to its inevitability; thus, sentimentalizing death only assigns meaning to it that prevents us from prioritizing the life that precedes it and follows from it. Van der Zaag argues that this is a misstep in our considerations of life, for it privileges the human subject as opposed to bios itself. Similarly, the constraints placed within language, which opt for keeping the human privileged, gets relinquished by Acker and is used instead to find a sense of freedom that is extricable from the human. By using the practice of abortion, Acker subverts an idea that has been given unnecessary meaning, not only pointing to the finality of life and death, but the agency we have in how to construct it.

Furthermore, Acker's text mirrors Braidotti's posthuman contentions by expressing sexuality as a force beyond gender. Our author does this by distinguishing between the consciousness of adult and child. Instead of seeing sexuality through the conventional binary logic, which effectively subjects the individual, Acker's text understands pure sexuality as a geography rather than another type of category. The

distinction made between adult and child is Acker's way of reiterating the construction of the two, and the term adult itself as innately frivolous. This idea is demonstrated when Airplane discusses her grief upon being left by her boyfriend. She states:

I became two people: I was (still) a child who wanted caring parents and I was a human I had made. The human I was making had a will as a god's, like those gods in Norse mythology, cause the one I was making had to. The will isn't ferocious or uncontrollable; it's an adult. Whereas the child's freedom in geographical terms is sexuality. That got me mixed up for a long time: being two people or rather, being the same person as a child and as an adult. And I knew I was hurting and I clung to my hurt. (Acker 149)

A bifurcated split is administered within character in this narration: between the inherent child who still yearns for parental validation and the human, who is independent. Acker here replaces the child's opposite, an adult, with the human. Her connotative splice is an important reminder to her reader that human is made, rather than naturally appearing. The speaker then goes on to note that the type of human being constructed had to fit within the constraints of a pre-made visual of the human, i.e. godlike akin to Norse mythology. This would be done not out of will, but because that type of construction was mandated by society. The will, as noted by the narrator, is an "adult" – not a characteristic of an adult, but the adult itself. This type of language demonstrates Acker's belief that will and conscientiousness embody the adult in society, and everything else falls into the category of the child. Therefore, the adult in this context can read viewed as the Enlightenment subject. Acker even uses this splice between child and adult in the narrative within the "A Japanese Interlude". This section interrupts Rimbaud's chapter, and details the

destructive romance between the characters of Tomomori and Uneme. Tomomori says to his lover: “‘Half of you, Uneme, is a child who’s living in a world in which every person’s a monster.’ The child told him he was scared’ (47). In this dialogue, Acker shows that unfiltered emotion is derived from the “child” facet of one’s psyche, while the adult facet attempts to negate, repress, or intellectualize their emotions. Furthermore, the sexuality expressed in geographical terms, as exemplified by the quote, underscores the freedom of sexuality. To Acker, if the child represents the human in a pre-language state, and sexuality becomes the way in which one could locate the child proper, then sexuality here is meant to be understood as fundamentally raw and instinctual, as opposed to conditioned by language and sullied by social constructs.

Acker’s obscene visuals of the flesh pollinate with her notions of sexuality in *In Memoriam* and call forth a posthuman recognition of both. The Japanese interlude underlines society’s inclination to perceive sexuality as solely tied to sex itself, and how this connection centralizes heteronormative desire and romance. In other words, a sexual heteronormative dynamic clearly situates the relationship between Tomomori and Uneme, as Tomomori is conventionally masculine and thus exudes masculine desire, while Uneme is feminine and passive towards her lover. As a result, sexuality functions simply as another marker of hierarchy and power difference. Following the title of the section, the narrator reveals that the story was written by a woman named Murasaki Shikibu, in A.D. 1008. This disclaimer suggests that the following narrative is seen through the female consciousness, and thus might play a considerable role in how the reader should conceptualize the narrative of the Japanese couple. Although this move suggests essentializing behavior, and thus contradicts what Acker would want, I posit that

her use of the female as narrator still works in seeing a way out of the gender binary.

Female perspectives in *In Memoriam*, after all, are often spoken about in a position of submission to their masculine counterpart. But Shikibu's own female perspective seems almost metacognitively aware of the reader's likelihood to align the story with the female consciousness. As a result, Acker validates Shikibu's indication that her own story is a "mental attitude"; in other words, she aware that it's going to be read as female. Her story begins, "There is something vulgar, childish, and underdeveloped in the mental attitude revealed: a coarse greed for all experience, unlighted by the power to judge and reject or by any consciousness of the ranks and hierarchies" (43). What we should expect to see in the story that follows her claim is a relationship that understands sexual desire as liberated from logic and reason or a need to concede to a hierarchical structure. To the narrator, her story will illustrate characters who treat sexual passion as free of the nexus of political power, in addition to the difficult mental feat that one should experience. However, Acker's narration informs the reader that, "Such passion is simultaneously childish and destructive" (43), which ultimately stresses that while the sexual passion is emotionally freeing, and bodily pleasurable, it does not align with the liberal conceits of conceptual humanism, nor will the passion foster constructive relationships.

Finally, Acker internalizes the transversal facet of Braidotti's posthumanism in the way she conceptualizes a type of continuous transformation of the human within her text. Her language parallels with Braidotti's concept of "becoming-". Braidotti titles this sensibility "feminist becoming-woman," arguing that in a nomadic, or unpressured, evolving sense, "becoming-woman entails the evacuation or destitution of the socially constituted gendered identities (as molar formations), returning them to the virtual

multiplicity of chaotic forces of becoming” (Braidotti 37). Through this, Braidotti calls forth a process of becoming that relinquishes gendered identities and opts for, instead, a kinetic mode of being. Acker, too, fosters this type of understanding of “becomingwoman” in the evolution of Airplane. “The Wild Palms” is interspersed with vignettes of a Faulknerian stream of consciousness (“men who are patriarchs either kill or maim by subverting their daughters. Every daughter has a father; every daughter might need a father” [220]). This employment acts as a displaced, patriarchal undercurrent, which runs through the conventional narrative. Airplane, in recognizing her own narrative’s

Faulknerian undercurrent, comes to this abrupt realization about herself:

Airplane had decided, after considering the facts of herself, that women don’t have shifting identities today, but rather they roam. She was talking, not exactly about Faulkner, but about her own self-destructiveness and strength. We are not dead pilots, she would say, but we don’t roam for the purposes of dying. Motorcycle hoods. If a man doesn’t fuck me where and when I want, he can get out. Of everywhere. (220).

In understanding her gendered identity, Acker defines the liberation *within* Airplane’s identities as that *which roams*. This differentiates from the liberal belief that identities had to somehow overcome when met with adversity or conflict. Acker argues that to do so would mean to simply protect representation. Instead, Acker gives Airplane comfort in empowerment, achieved at Airplane’s “roaming” pace. Moreover, the action of roaming itself implies a slow negation of time as a relevant factor in the identity of the woman. In the woman understanding her means of self-destruction and strength through a sensibility

that seemingly counters strength, Airplane's internal consciousness suggests a subversion of the strong woman that does not need to submit nor assign excess meaning to the woman within her flesh and being.

Chapter 3

This final section will focus primarily on the spatial devices in Acker's text, specifically in its misuse of punctuation marks and the posthuman consciousness that I argue underlies that misuse. Instead of serving to clarify language, Acker's punctuation marks oftentimes complicate the reader's relationship to the words on the page and the message behind them. The following analysis defends using the critical framework of posthumanism as the primary way of digesting *In Memoriam*, as opposed to relying solely on the deconstructing methods of postmodern theory. First, I begin with a brief explanation about how some of these technical experiments seem postmodernist but are still emotionally divorced from this method of thinking. In other words, it might seem like Acker's techniques are thoroughly postmodern, but seeing them through that framework will yield at best only a partial understanding of their effects. I argue that a reading of Acker is fragmented when not coupled with posthumanism. The motivation behind mentioning both theories begin with my reading of critic Ellen E. Berry, whose postmodern take of Acker's bildungsroman, *Blood and Guts in High School* illustrates how leaving out the human is likely to happen when we think of Acker as strictly postmodern. In her essay, Berry first points out the conventions of postmodernism. She states that:

Postmodern systems...function through a logic of simulation, hyper mimicry, and sign exchange and work in the realm of the negative, the absent... From this process of simulation and self-reference merges a culture of pure images, codes, and spectacles—a hyperreality more real than real – which material reality as such is

fundamentally irrecoverable so radically has it been subordinated to processes to technological reproduction. (52)

Here, Berry informs her reader of the radical destabilization and meta-awareness inherent within postmodernism. Postmodern critique uses conventions such as repetition and self-referential tactics to reconstruct or represent hyperreality in the language of a given text. A type of re-creation operates as a way to undo and denaturalize the material signifier – i.e. the text itself – from understanding it as a mirror on the world. In accepting this postmodern approach to Acker’s most recognized work, *Blood and Guts in High School*, Berry reads Acker’s text like an assertive deconstructionist, reading this book specifically through a feminist negative critique that counteracts Enlightenment ideology.⁴ In a typical postmodern fashion, she looks to a system of symbolism patterned within the text as a way to understand Acker’s work. As Berry states herself, her motive for illustrating the value of this postmodern critique is to figure how Acker’s symbolic systems, “[turn] against themselves.... expose their limits, and [are] so made vulnerable” (Berry 60). In other words, the critic looks at the ways in which the novel includes symbolic systems that are exposed for being constructed and not natural, and thus allows us to recognize the problem with all symbolic systems. However, my primary reason for writing this section is not because I don’t take Ellen Berry’s argument into consideration; rather, my response is related to my confusion at her statement directly said before the sentence quoted above. In it, she states, “I want to continue reading *Blood and Guts in High School* not to uncover its futural gestures toward potentially positive social spaces and transformative

⁴ Through a feminist negative critique, Berry recognizes Acker’s goal as not to create a new system of language, per se, but rather, to mutilate the preexistent dominant structure that exists within language so as to accelerating its ruin within consciousness.

visions of the female subject” (60). This statement, I believe, wholly undercuts the gravitas of Kathy Acker’s life work. It does not consider the very human reason for Acker writing in the style she does – namely, to help us to empathize the marginalized subject and envision a world in which real empathy is possible. In isolating the postmodern approach, foregoing the human in language, and most egregiously, failing to prioritize the creation of these positive social spaces, Berry treats Acker’s work as though it was written for technical reasons only, without batting an eye towards real systematic change. In other words, by sidelining these ambitions that I see as essential to Acker’s work, Berry foregrounds the philosophical and technical aspects of her work at the cost of the human itself and its utopian potential. As reminded by Herbrechter in my opening section, relying on the material signifiers within Acker’s language fragments the human. Therefore, my own grievances against this move not only point to the limitations I see within Berry’s argument, and most postmodern readings for that matter, but justify the importance of prioritizing posthuman frameworks in reading of Acker’s work.

The biggest advantage in applying a posthuman lens to Acker’s work is that it allows us to fully grasp not only her particular style—specifically, the defamiliarizing of punctuation—but helps us to recognize this misuse in such a way that discerns and empathizes with the marginalized lifeforce within the narrative itself. Posthumanism lets us locate something essential about Acker’s work that the bulk of postmodern readings have not been able to identify. Indeed, through *Memoriam*’s unreliable narration, narrative pluralism, and de-systematized punctuation vis-à-vis its misuse of quotation marks, brackets, and unsound arguments within her sentences, an Ackerian posthumanism seeps through. Similar to Berry, this section looks to how the haphazard

language of the text seeks to de-systematize the absurd and destructive nature of patriarchal consciousness. Moreover, this section takes inspiration from the French feminist critique of *écriture féminine* by trying to find the space that woman “resides” in within language itself. What French feminist critique sought to do with its subversive style, the posthumanism method of thinking actualizes. Though Acker’s techniques, references, and the years of her career seem to scream ‘postmodern,’ my reading of *In Memoriam* recognizes a way of radical destabilization that doesn’t try to hit reset on one’s way of thinking. As a result, this section embodies the posthumanist thought itself – one that acknowledges and divorces from past systems and doesn’t ruin them to start anew but offers a way of looking at language that prioritizes the living being. In short, I am arguing against the dominant tendency to engage in postmodern readings of *In Memoriam* and emphasizing the inherent and timely posthuman consciousness necessary in reading Acker’s language.

To start, a convention within Acker’s language is the misuse of quotation marks, which serves to destabilize narration. Quotation marks, which are used within narratives to visually separate the prose and dialogue, get haphazardly used within the novel. As a result, the illustration of dialogue and narration confuse the reader insofar about who is talking or whether someone is talking at all. The quotations in *In Memoriam* do usually mark dialogue, but Acker also uses them as a means of conveying internal thought. For example, Airplane’s character, who is largely presented through dialogue and direct narration, is depicted in a scene where Airplane and her rapist are in his car, and in this scene, we see the play with punctuation. They are traveling to the urban outskirts, and Acker uses quotation marks to indicate Airplane’s thoughts: “I told my rapist I was

hungry. He started the car. Identity must be a house into which you can enter, lock the door, shut the windows forever against all storm. And so, we entered a city, its outskirts” (118). Here, the quotation marks lead the reader to believe that Airplane is saying this aloud. However, the text itself suggests that she is thinking these sentences, rather than externalizing them. The reader is not given a clear relation to this character – we don’t know her relation to the narrator or to whom she’s speaking, so we don’t know who is quoting her or what is part of her narration of her experience nor what is reflected, or philosophized, on that diegetic experience. As a result, Airplane stands in for the narrator, which would normally be implied in a text that consistently keeps a first-person narration. But by using quotation marks, this line automatically segregates the narration that precedes Airplane’s dialogue and the rest of the narration. Paradoxically, Acker here is creating no distance between the diegesis of Airplane’s experience depicted here (moving in the car with the rapist), and the one that exists internally (her reflections on identity). In other words, the use of quotation marks in this context suggests that the words that are spoken aloud carry the same weight and should be read in the same way her internal dialogue. By quoting what Airplane’s own narration of what she said to her rapist (‘I told my rapist I was hungry), what was physically happening around Airplane while in the car (‘He started the car’, ‘we entered the city’) and her own philosophy (‘Identity must be a house into which you can enter’), the text garners a deeper sense of empathy for the deeply traumatic stress that Airplane undergoes. In using quotation marks this way, Acker embodies both the psychological and physical pain that Airplane feels in its entirety through a collapse of inner and outer worlds. Indeed, in this displacement of punctuation mechanics, marked by the play with mechanics that conventionally

prioritizes separation, a linguistic displacement of anthropocentric logic gets displaced itself. Through this misuse of quotation marks, the posthuman consciousness arises, one in which the human-nonhuman (in this case bodily and external environment) come to the fore and become consolidated by pervasive technological mediation (Braidotti 26).

Indeed, this collision of technology (quotation marks as spatial devices) and the psychology of the Airplane during this moment, displace anthropocentric logic in the way that it underscores human pain felt not just by her, but *through* Acker's characterless construction of a human. Which, as mentioned before, is not really a character at all.

Furthermore, quotation marks get taken away in spots where there should be quotation marks. By stripping the typical markings of a quotation, Acker breathes a consciousness into the life of the prose. In a way, all narration should be considered dialogue. The narrator as storyteller is, quite obviously, telling a story. The convention of narratives dictates, however, that we don't put quotes around narration. The technique that gets employed in Acker is a conventional postmodern move: free indirect discourse, which uses a 3rd person narrator and collapses the distance between narrator and character usually present in that style, ultimately adapting the thoughts and language of the character. In the narrative of Tomomori and Uneme, the narration gets toyed with in that the quotation marks vacillate between dialogue being said aloud and dialogue that is internal as well as dialogue between narrator and reader. At the end of their narrative, which again, interrupts the narrative of "R" and "V", the character of Tomomori fantasizes about killing Uneme and the narrator relays to the reader his guilt for harboring this fantasy. While in his murderous fantasy, he is then catapulted to a phantasmic place that frightens him. However, the lack of quotations within this part of the text reverses

our conventional understanding of internal and external dialogue. Prior to Tomomori and Uneme's narrative, Acker had used quotation marks in a nearly excessive manner in order to underscore its oppositional motivation—but it still showed when R and V were conversing. This switch in use speaks to the text's unstable nature. As a result, the narration emerges as a dialogue both between narrator and audience and as well as the character with himself:

He had to get out of there. There was no one to rely on there. There was no protection.

Why had he murdered?

Why had he taken her away with him when he knew that he didn't care about her? It wasn't that he hadn't cared about her. He had never taken responsibility for his actions. Before this. After death. (54)

Here, the text displays a series of rhetorical questions about the event that may have happened or may have happened in Tomomori's fantasy. This place implied in the first sentence (“get out of *there*”) where Uneme feels trapped is a metaphor for him being riddled with the thoughts of confusion and guilt for having killed his lover in his fantasy. Upon reading this, the reader must note that this narration itself starts off conventionally; in an omniscient manner that presents the thoughts of the character in the narration itself. It works in conjunction with the character, but still maintains a space between itself and the space of the Tomomori. However, following this conventional narration is a series of rhetorical questions by this narrator, all of which imply that the narrator is representing Tomomori's consciousness as it occurs to Tomomori. This consciousness is marked by its own capacity to not only question, but to rhetorically question the events that had just

happened before them. Moreover, this narration suggests that the narrator can be confused by the relationship between Tomomori and Uneme, in addition to relaying questions that Tomomori asks himself, and thereby can speculate why Tomomori could have possibly murdered his lover or not. This is implied in the fact that the narrative prose seems to both ask and answer its own question – even ending on a hyperbolic note that confirms the idea that they alone have established a dialogue with itself. Either that, or that the narrator begins to have a dialogue with themselves in a way we cannot, nor shouldn't, follow. Braidotti's multiple potentialities of the body emerge in this space. Through the text's use of free indirect discourse, Acker collapses her own narration into Shikibu's, and then again to Tomomori and Uneme's. Even in playing with language and narration like methods of postmodernism would, she instills literary technique not specific to postmodernism. The lack of quotation marks in a place where there conventionally should be quotation marks – “someone”, after all, is talking – not only clarify Acker's subversive, inconsistent depiction of dialogue or thought but speak to the narrative plurality that exists within the text and the posthuman undercutting of a binary logic.

Indeed, the narrative plurality and free, indirect discourse mimic the conventions of postmodernism. Their destabilizing nature exploit the structure of language and narrative, which effectively reveals the transgressive nature to Acker's work. However, if the reader were to couple this narrative transgression with the content of Acker's work, therein lies the posthuman nature of text. Emilia Borowska, in her book *The Politics of Kathy Acker*, suggests a post-poststructuralist reading of Acker's characterless (or to Borowska, “subject-less”) characters that overlaps with a posthuman ethos. She states:

It becomes apparent that Acker is looking for an open notion of the subject which, while remaining faithful to the poststructuralist disposal of a closed Cartesian ego, is more committed, responsible, self-willed, collective and active than the other poststructuralist models would allow. Further, her questing heroes are deniably drive by the pursuit of eternal values such as love, community and political emancipation, which suggests that their becoming a subject exceeds Sartrean 'being for-itself. (Borowska 210)

Here, Borowska reads the Ackerian subject within *In Memoriam* as subversive, one that tosses away a patriarchal, Cartesian consciousness in hopes of exposing the marginalized figure. However, Borowska also points to the fact that there are human pursuits of these "characters" that establish a retentive call for our empathy, such as love and community. Because this pursuit is understood through the destabilized language, and not through centralizing a character, a renewed, posthuman method of thinking rises from our reading. In that way, a posthuman "deconstruction" is one that ensures our closing off of ego and opening up to collective understanding.

The vacillation between internal and external consciousnesses, again, demarcated by the misuse of quotation marks, is also illustrated in Airplane's participation in a sex show. In centering this segment on sex, these scenes speak to the posthuman recognition as sexuality as a force beyond gender. The scenes relay the idea that sexuality should not be understood as it normatively has been – as constructed and subsequently categorized identities. Instead, it should be understood as it "pertains to the vital chaos, which is not chaotic but the boundless space of virtual possibilities for pleasure-prone affirmative relations" (Braidotti 37). In stating this, Braidotti calls us to read these scenes as a

disruption of patterns in which we usually sexualize the body. In this segment of the novel, Airplane publicly performs in sex show as a means of catharsis, albeit destructively, after ending her obsessive and abusive relationship with her rapist. What destabilizes our understanding of character is the fact that the narration fails to imply a reason for why she performs a sex show to begin with. This move is evidentially posthuman, in that we can read through the rhetorical play, but we are unable to further our understanding of Airplane's individual psychology. Instead, we understand an event that would and should give rise our collective empathy for a person in her position. In this scene, the narration juxtaposes two sequential sex shows: one that could be read literally, in the way that it hyperbolizes the power dynamics of sex, and the other metaphorically, in the way that it reiterates the emotional aftermath of sex power dynamics and the consequences of them. The illustration of the sex shows first gets introduced as a performance, but one that plays into the heteronormative power differentials within sex (hence the identifiers of "Husband" and "Wife"), emphasizing an unequal power dynamic. Indeed, through this obscene, psychologically perturbing event and change of narrative register, the reader gains both an empathy and deeper understanding of the power-differential underpinnings of why woman is marginalized, in the addition to the intimacy needed in order to liberate her.

Regarding this first narrative, it is important to remember that directly before the sex show, the narration states, "Later, I learned that his mother had been a drug addict" (116). This implicates a connection between that idea and the sex scene that follows. By placing this line and the scene of the sex show next to each other, the text suggests a connection between her rapist's childhood and the sex show. The text uses a

psychological link between addiction in the household and the development of the child – in which case, turns them in violent and abusive adults – in order to disclaim a connection between that and the sex performance. This imagining, which uses a series of misused quotation marks and half opened parentheticals in its narration, sexualizes a woman’s troubling relationship with her husband:

‘(Sex show:

‘(Husband: Where are the rubbers?

‘(His newlywed, very young wife, turning over in bed: What do you need rubbers for darling? It’s not raining.

‘(Husband to himself: Dumb.

‘(Husband: All right. Turn over, and I’ll teach you something. (Acker 116) The reasons for headlining this scene with a sex show is a way for the narration to connect this scene with the sex show aftermath that follows. By using a colon in a conventional sense, in that it preemptively marks a defining or modifying qualify to the term or phrase prior to the colon, Acker is defining this as what *makes up* a sex show. She is saying here that her rapist’s childhood event foregrounds the psychological underpinnings of sex show itself. Therefore, the text here is using the colon to clarify its misuse, while still holding onto its conventional use, in addition to again missing quotation marks; this time as temporal separation, as opposed to a narrative separation. Additionally, the content here is important to remember. The sex depicted here underscores a power differential within a heterosexual relationship. Using the identities of “husband” and “wife”, which harkens back to the social, martial union, emphasizes the socially constructed difference between them. Indeed, the crude and vulgar nature of their performance, and thus the

attention towards the marginalized subject, gets read through both this first scene, and the connection to the next, which again, is understood through the language's spatial devices.

The demarcated sex show that "occurs" subsequent to this performance is no longer focused on an active sex show. Again, this scene misuses punctuation and quotation marks to both subversively distinguish the text as prose, and not dialogue, in addition to harken back to the previous, metaphorical sex show. In this scene, which is separated by a catapult back to real time between Airplane and her rapist, the text informs us that a sex show is occurring continuously. By leading in with the sentence "Sex show.", the narration informs the reader of an indirect relation to the sex show and precludes the collective empathy felt by Airplane and the other sex performers. The text reads:

"Sex show. The point is that the smell of sex is everywhere. Whether or not you do it. It lies on the skin and it's in the air in the mouth... Here, the women don't need feminism to allow them to curl around each other like cats, or to put their heads on each other's shoulders for consolation, or to hold hands.... They are women whose legs are automatically spread open and to whom men can do anything. Anything can go into any hole. But these women smell particularly, of sex." (55) Like mentioned in my second chapter, this scene exhibits the collective intimacy felt by these women who presumably participate in the sex show. However, its structural relation to a similar event in the narrative reiterates the posthuman ethos that underlies it. Instead of treating the text that follows the term "Sex show" as though the event itself is occurring at the given moment of narration, the text describes the emotional aftermath of the sex show on the individuals, particularly the women, who are participating in the event. The text here does not feature

the literal scenes from the sex show because Acker is interested on what the effects of the event are on the woman. In order to do so, Acker illustrates the empathy of the women that occupy this space and uses the provocative setting of a sex show as a place that necessitates such collective empathy. In describing the “smell of sex” as pervasive, Acker is bringing us into the physical setting of the scene and suggesting the way that sex exists as a social milieu of the space itself. The reader can distinguish “sex” as the backdrop of the scene in Acker’s reiteration that it, sex, still lingers “Whether or not [one does] it.” This once again draws attention to Acker’s subversion of the period as punctuation. We know that a sex show has happened, but we know that vicariously through its aftermath. Indeed, the internal dialogue that is quoted, either by the narrator or Airplane, is Acker’s way of displacing a narrative consciousness; the porousness of the registers of narration unifies both internal and external dialogue, in addition to morphing together the consciousness of the narrator and the character.

Furthermore, Acker still creates a distance between these two sex scenes through an in-between narration. The reason for providing narration between the sex scenes is to not only reiterate a separation between the events but to reinform the reader of multiple temporal realities that exist within the text. Again, the text shares an interdependence with multiple others (Braidotti 39). In this case, sexuality gets revealed through plural narrations. Normally, narratives call forth a type of transition between scenes, all the while implying that there is a temporal or causal relation between them. However, Acker subverts this notion. In this space between sex scenes, the narration conveys a switch in location, marked by a dialogue between Airplane and her rapist (115-6). Still in the car, the rapist stops the vehicle outside the urban centers, suggesting that they are now in an

urban district after a long journey. This is separated in the way the parentheses end, and the focus returns to Airplane and her rapist in the car for a few paragraphs, then back to the sex show in another parenthesis. We are thus not given a clear sense of when the sex show occurs in relation to the time in the car or in relation to the actual rape. In between the sex shows, the rapist says to Airplane, “Look at yourself. Look at yourself.”

Airplane responds, but internally: “I don’t want to look. He held the back of my neck in his fingers and turned it to the car mirror. My mouth was open. You only look when you care what you see.” (117). Compare this to the description of the scene a few pages prior: “After he had raped her, the tall thin man carried the girl out the barn, into some sort of car, that moved by an engine, and she didn’t fight him. She even seemed to cling to him” (114). This scene, which appears prior to the second sex show, confirms the fact that Airplane and rapist are driving at a separate time than the sex show or after the rape, thus spatially and temporally stabilizing the narrative. More notably, the scene justifies the reason for Airplane’s imagined justification of her rapist’s own trauma, in addition to contextualizing both the need for a setting in which women must congregate in order to empathize and heal from their collective traumas.

Finally, by looking to the improper causal relations within sentences, Acker’s language speaks back to the Braidotti posthuman feminist call to practice defamiliarization as a key methodological tool. In the way proper use of punctuation is set up to support logical relations in order to engender comprehension, posthumanism subversively demands that we first, evolve a new frame of reference and more significantly, become relational in a complex and multidirectional manner. As Braidotti argues, doing so would disengage the language from dominant models of subject

formation, and by extension, dominant and oppressive institutions (Braidotti 30). Acker does this through her language. Indeed, moments of logical but unsound narrative movement, which maintain their sense through causal relationality, are prevalent in *In Memoriam*, to which Braidotti would argue are relayed through its rhetorical nonsense. For example, this occurs when Rimbaud, whose own narration is haphazardly set against the backdrop of World War II, tells a bike gang about German men's ferocious means of killing. He says that, "All men, being men, are cruel and minimal; the Germans, being conscious of their cruelty, thus confident of their decisions and lack of decisions, were crueler" (17). Literally, the claim is split three ways. First, the text argues that all men, because they are men, are cruel and minimal. Second, the men's confidence in their decision-making is predicated on their awareness of that cruelty. Thirdly, the behavior of these men was crueler because the men were aware of their cruelty. There is a logical disjunction between the cause and effect of these claims. Sensibly speaking, men are not cruel and minimal just *because* of their gender. Awareness of one's cruel attributes does not automate confidence. There is no clear explanation as to why cruelty would beget cruelty in this instance. Nonetheless, a narrative still gets constructed through these series of sentences, even though it is told in a defamiliarizing manner. The "trajectory" of R, for example, draws a series of logical links but they're not actually logical, narrative, or coherent. The reader can still pick up a critique on men, and their penchant for cruelty once aware of their power to be cruel. Indeed, in recognizing the posthuman call to comprehend language through a new frame of reference, Acker's lack of proper causal relation gives rise to type of coherence that is dramatically separated from dominant structures.

Conclusion

My reason for a posthuman reading of Kathy Acker's *In Memoriam to Identity* is a personal one. Why shouldn't it be? After all, I identify, at least in part, as the marginalized subject whose identity diametrically opposes the conceptual Man, or the normative subject our society remains centered around. What that means is that I am categorized within the group of social individuals whose oppression Acker wishes to lend credence to, and therefore validate, within her subversive, destabilizing text. For this reason alone, the stakes of her writing involve me and other marginalized figures alike. Who else would Acker be writing for, if not the living individual themselves, and all the trauma that comes from existing on a lower tier of the individual hierarchical reality? Through my analysis, I wished to clarify that posthumanism, a method of thinking that argues for the consideration of all bios, makes the most sense if we are to undo the deeply embedded patriarchal logic that pervades our consciousness and language. Because the very concept of the human was constructed with the means of maintaining a standardized, binary way of thinking, then we must undo the Enlightenment associations with the human and all its implicative tendencies in order to see an actual way out of it. Undo, however, should not be mistaken with forget. The deconstructive methods in my readings still highlight the mechanics needed to patriarchal thought in language, but the maintenance of the human must be come to the fore of our reading. A reader of Acker's should ask themselves, "Where does empathy reside?" and not, "How can I understand this for the sake of understanding this?". Quite simply, we must see past our current

understanding and maintenance of the humanism, and the logical sensibilities that are coupled with it, if we are to ever liberate the marginalized subject.

By analyzing Acker's *In Memoriam*, a novel whose very essence aligns with the écriture féminine writer's way of subverting patriarchal language, I, too, am breathing life into the woman in language. However, I purport to do so in a way that does not concentrate on the woman as she's been conceptualized through language. I do not wish to reinscribe her into a binary existence, and I am really not interested in seeing the woman solely reimagined within fictional narrative and theoretical discourse. My opposition to this limitation is the reason why I find it significant to clarify the inappropriateness of using theories such as postmodernism in order to understand Acker's text. Simply put, the problem with using postmodernism is that despite its efforts to deconstruct the material form of language in order to clarify seemingly impenetrable texts, postmodernism ultimately prioritizes the male-centered consciousness. For instance, if Acker's approach to sex was seen only through a postmodern lens, the reading would sacrifice the isolated bodily pleasure that Acker wishes to maintain. One does not intellectualize sex within the act, so why one-dimensionalize it within language? The intellectualizing habit of postmodernism runs dialectical circles around a sensation that is impossible to fully explain. Because the posthuman considers a relational ontology that begins with the body, in addition to considering the historical underpinnings of sex, sexuality, and desire, the theory can simultaneously support Acker's narration and call attention to sex itself and the pleasure that underlies it.

Moreover, posthumanism emphasizes the need for optimal fulfillment of what it means to be a living being, whereas postmodern cynicism leaves the living individual

nothing but circular deconstruction. Understanding this, I argue that Acker's text lacks a complete or consistent understanding of its own language. This posthuman impossibility emphasizes that its primary focus is indeed, empathy. Her text is her iteration of empowering the living being, and all of those who suffer under the weight of the patriarchal consciousness because of structural categories and logic. Do the obscenities and vulgarity pushed to the forefront of Acker's narrative only exist in *theory*? Do sexual assault, male-inflicted abuse, and violence attached to sex only lie on a plain of theoretical discourse? The discomfort in recognizing that they, in fact, do not, and instead are real things that happen to real people, is the reason to consider the human outside of language and therefore oppose the theoretical drive of postmodernism and deconstruction. The marginalized subject is a life on the spectrum of bios who is actually at stake and at the mercy of patriarchy. By rejecting coherent narrative language, Acker is truly dislodging the anthropocentric mentality that presents comprehensibility as inherently male and salvages a utopianism of bios both inside and outside her narrative.

Bibliography

- Acker, Kathy. *In Memoriam to Identity*. Grove Press, 1990.
- . *Blood and Guts in High School*. Grove Press, 1984.
- Berry, Ellen E. "Kathy Acker's Fatal Strategies." *Women's Experimental Writing: Negative Aesthetics and Feminist Critique*, Bloomsbury, 2016, pp. 39-60. Bolter, Jay. "Posthumanism." *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*, Wiley & Sons, 2016.
- Borowska, Emilia. "Searching for the Subject: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune in *In Memoriam to Identity*." *The Politics of Kathy Acker*, Edinburgh University Press, 2019, pp. 202-245.
- Braidotti, Rosi. "Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism." *Anthropocene Feminism*, edited by Richard Grusin, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis; London, 2017, pp. 21-48.
- . *The posthuman*, Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Buter, Judith. "An Account of Oneself." *Given an Account of Oneself*, Fordham University Press, 2005, pp. 3-40.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of Medusa." *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875-893.
- Colby, Georgina. "Intertextuality and Constructive Non-identity: *In Memoriam to Identity*." *Kathy Acker: Writing the Impossible*, Edinburgh University Press, 2016, pp. 140-171.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Vintage Books, 1973.
- Herbrechter, Stefan. "Posthumanist Literature?" Approaching Posthumanism and the Posthuman Conference, June 2015, Geneva.

Iriguay, Luce. *Speculum of a Woman*. Cornell University Press, 1985.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minnesota University Press, 1984.

Rabine, Leslie W. "Écriture Féminine as Metaphor." *Cultural Critique*, no. 8, 1987, pp. 19-44.