

WHAT IS IT TO BE A WOMAN IN A POSTMODERN WORLD? OR KATHY ACKER'S *DON QUIXOTE*, LOST IN THE CITY OF NIGHTMARES

CRISTINA GARRIGÓS GONZÁLEZ
Universidad de Sevilla

De este modo podremos llegar a comprender que un hombre es la imagen de una ciudad y una ciudad las vísceras puestas al revés de un hombre, que un hombre encuentra en su ciudad no sólo su determinación como persona y su razón de ser, sino también los impedimentos múltiples y los obstáculos invencibles que le impiden llegar a ser.

(Martín Santos,
Tiempo de Silencio)

Women, as minority, have always been especially preoccupied with finding their own identity and with questioning the status that society has attached them to, as opposed to men who are supposed to have a centered and unquestionable identity. Turning back to the quote then, we will see that for a woman, the city would be, even to a greater extent than for a man, the place to be outside the familiar space, the place to get out of the unit usually associated with her and therefore, the place to become, to be. The city would provide the perfect metaphor for women's searching of the self. As Liz Heron says in *City Women*, «City fictions are often narrative of self-discovery» (2).

The city, as representation of the western world, is a place that presents men as unitary and centered figures and women as decentered and fragmented, two adjectives which, on the other hand are usually applied to postmodernism.

Fredric Jameson has often criticized postmodernism for not being political enough; he sees the absence of historical consciousness in postmodern culture as its main

problem.¹ Susan Suleiman in her book *Subversive Intent*, mentions Craig Owens's essay, «The Discourse of Others: Feminism and Postmodernism» to agree with him that feminism provided for postmodernism a concrete political edge (188). Suleiman, nevertheless, doesn't seem to see that this view is also shared by Jameson when he says:

In our own time, feminism has been virtually alone in attempting to envision the Utopian languages spoken in societies in which gender domination and inequality would have ceased to exist: the result was more than just a glorious moment in recent science fiction, and should continue to set the example for the political value of the Utopian imagination as a form of praxis. (107)

Jameson is referring here to the subversion of pronouns undertaken by Ursula K. LeGuin and others in their works. It would be hard to think of Jameson as a feminist, but the opinion quoted above shows how conscious he is of the necessity of subverting language for political targets.

Don Quixote which was a dream by Kathy Acker is a novel about love and violence, but it is also about the power of a city, New York, over a woman, Don Quixote. The way in which such a power relationship is structured, through the quest for love, is drawn from postmodern theories of relations of power and language². Moreover, the novel shares the postmodern interest in experimenting with narrative techniques such as collage of genres, fragmentation, quotes and re-creations of pre-existing literary works.

Rightly considered a controversial and provocative work, it is definitively true that there is nothing frivolous or naive in Acker's work. She herself makes clear her position in an interview with Ellen G. Friedman where she says,

The culture is there to uphold the postcapitalistic society, and the idea that art has nothing to do with politics is a wonderful construction in order to mask the deep political significance that art has—to uphold the empire in terms of its representations as well as its actual structure. (21)

For Acker, the writing that shows any true feeling is political; in «A Few Notes on Two of My Books» she affirms that «any appearance of the individual heart is a political occurrence.» In *Don Quixote*, her denounce of patriarchal and capitalistic society

1. See «Theories of the Postmodern» in Jameson's *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991.

2. Kathy Acker has acknowledged the influence of critics such as Guattari, Deleuze and Foucault on her work due to their common approach to language as the place for subversion against established discourses. See Ellen G. Friedman's «A Conversation with Kathy Acker» in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 9.3 (Fall 1989): 12-22.

is very solid and distinct, and this is evidenced in her use of language and conventions to make explicit her concern with the situation of women living in a world «gone inside out.»

Acker's treatment of the subject of love and violence is meant to present woman as the inhabitant of a decentered and chaotic world in which she feels alienated. The city is the supreme emblem of a male and capitalistic world. With Don Quixote, in her journey through the night, we will visit the dark side of a New York where her companions are dogs and nazis transvestites and where God is a dream. The night is the perfect setting for her quest for love and identity. For Heron, «It's the city's world of the unknown that intimates its infinite possibilities, and when is the city more unknowable than at night; and yet more promising of freedom and transformation» (1). It is this paradoxical aspect of the city that makes it attractive for Acker as the place where fantasy and reality come together to find a woman searching for an identity in a world deprived of love and a sense of equality. According to Thomas Carmichael, «to consider the city in postmodern fiction is to recognize that at the level of the significant trope of place the city is the uneasy and often simultaneous projection of both the vision and the experience of postmodernity» (242).

The novel begins with a woman who has just had an abortion and decides that she wants to be a knight and go in search of love. The first words of the novel tell us of the reasons of her unreasonable quest: «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.» (9) The protagonist's sense of loss is due to her double condition, since «she was both a woman therefore she couldn't feel love and a knight in search of Love. She had to become a knight, for she could only solve this problem only by becoming partly male» (29) Don Quixote's ambiguity is similar to that of a series of figures, like Villedbranche and De Franville in the third section of the novel, who are alternatively addressed to as «she» and «he». This is just one of the instances of what Naomi Jacobs calls Acker's «grammatical terrorism,» that is, the revaluation of the female experience by subverting the habitual referents of pronouns and nouns (53). Another form of playing with gender is the assignment of an originally male role to a woman is Acker's novel *Don Quixote*. For Owens,

A fin de hablar, de representarse a sí misma, una mujer asume una posición masculina; quizás sea ésta la razón de que suela asociarse la feminidad con la mascarada, la falsa representación, la simulación y la seducción (96-97).

In Borges's story, «Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*,» Pierre Menard wanted to re-write the story of the hero from la Mancha, word by word but with the richness that the reading of the text should have won with time. Acker, on the other hand, conscious of the impossibility of such a task, is not writing Cervantes' text, but reading it and writing her own re-creation of the story having a woman as protagonist. As Ellen G.

Friedman points out, Acker's recuperation of Cervantes's text is not nostalgic, it does not invoke master narratives, but rather uses them to face possible future representations (243). Acker's *Don Quixote* is not meant to be read as a rewriting of Cervantes's work, for little in common will we find, if we look at it that way; rather it should be looked at as a mode of reading not only that novel, but the other works she uses such as Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Catullus's poems or Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Acker's appropriation of these texts is highly political; it is meant to subvert the gender values. She takes a male text and adapts it to her own needs and, like her protagonist, does what she says in the epigraph to the second part of *Don Quixote*: «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.»

Cervantes's Don Quixote is a man who believes in an ideal. Acker's knight is also fighting for a chimeric quest: love («Do you know why I'm screaming? the mad knight told them. Because there's no possibility for human love in this world.» (17)). The fact that this quest takes place in a city and in the figure of a woman reinforces for Acker, the absurdity of such a mission in the materialistic, machist and sexist world in which we live. A city like New York represents all the western values carried to an extreme. As the novelist Alison Fell says in the essay called 'Penthesilea Perhaps':

To live in a city is to live with the decay of the city, with unemployment, overcrowding, homelessness, and run-down public transport system: an embattled zone in which degraded attitudes like sexism, racism and machismo flourish. (*City Women* 338)

Acker's city in *Don Quixote* is one where dichotomies like male/female, white/black, human/animal, master/slave do not exist as such but collide in a carnivalesque universe. The cohesion of these traditionally western differences is a characteristic of postmodernist fiction, as Brian McHale has pointed out when he asks «What is a world? ... What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?» (10) In Acker's novel, what happens is the questioning of the legitimacy of these cultural categories. This is also what Carmen Africa Vidal sees in this work when she says that «el espacio literario que Acker crea es «heterotópico» en el sentido de Foucault, está formado por zonas sin centro, como las de Apollinaire, las de *Gravity Rainbow*, las ciudades invisibles de Calvino, las de Cortázar o Alasdair Gray; territorios incongruentes, imposibles, llenos de fragmentos» (386). This is what Linda Hutcheon considers postmodernism is about, experimenting with the «limits of language, of subjectivity, of sexual identity, and we may also add: of systematization and uniformization (8).

Nevertheless, in *Don Quixote* the artificial and carnivalesque representation of such a confrontation of cultural categories focuses on the actual binary divisions that do really exist in the world in which we live. The fact that Don Quixote's sex is ambiguous

should be a sign of the equality of the sexes, but it is not so. It is not by accident that Acker has chosen Don Quixote to represent a woman in a city. Don Quixote is traditionally considered a pathetic figure, displaced, living in a world that is not his. In the same way, for Acker, women are displaced in a world ruled by males and the city is the place where isolation is made more explicit. If we agree with Heron in her opinion that,

The city is where women cross the threshold of domesticity, declining to stay put in the separate, 'natural' sphere allotted them; instead entering and shaping culture, in all transformative possibilities, to be in a possession of themselves. (341)

Then we could see the woman in the city as a striving figure looking for an identity. To step outside the constructed self that society has created for women means to step outside culture too. This is what Acker tries to communicate with her work: the necessity of breaking with absolutely all conventions, such as gender, sex and language in order to change the status quo. But this is an impossible mission for, and this Acker realizes, it is impossible to step outside culture.

New York is the place where she thinks she will find love and consequently a identity. Her first sight of the city describes her expectations:

One day St. Simeon went away. Don Quixote couldn't bear living without him. For St. Simeon had taught her how to slay giants, that is, to consider someone of more importance than herself. . . She sighted New York City. She was elated for she was anxious to see her friend. She decided to wait until the night which is when the city opens. Night orgasmed: it wasn't lightless: its neon and street lights gave out an artificial polluted light. Nothing was to be heard anywhere, but the barkings of junkies. Their whinings and mutterings deafened her ears and troubled her heart. Where was her heart? All the noises grew along with the silence. The knight took such a night to be an omen, but of what? (18)

Looking for the heart of the city is like searching for her own heart. The only thing she finds is a void, for the heart of the city is composed by multiple fragments which are scattered everywhere like the neon lights.

One of the stories in *Don Quixote* is about a girl that goes back home after deciding that the city, where she escapes to in search of freedom, is not the place that she had thought it would be.

New York is hell. You don't know how hellish capitalism really is. Daddy, I was wrong to leave here. I ran away to the city because I didn't feel normal in a normal household and, wanting to be me, I wanted to express me. In the city, in order to stay alive, I sucked cocks while their owners held guns to my head. At the same time, I was scared. All the time I was so frightened of men, I kept

running after men who might protect me, especially, cause I was so frightened of men, I didn't want anything to do with them, after men who didn't want me. Love was rape and rejection. If I wasn't loved, I couldn't fit into this market place of world of total devaluation. I fit in perfectly. I believed I was on Mars, I had no conceptions of how to live on Mars. Either my education had been inadequate or faulty or I wasn't who I was born to be. (115)

Women are presented as victims of society, but, Acker seems to say, they are also to blame for their own situation. Living according to the paradigms means adapting oneself to the rules that society, «the market place of world of total devaluation,» imposes upon us; because they are scared, women in Acker's fiction turn to men for protection, but this gives them even more power since they feel they are in control of women. In this way, women are partly responsible of their dependence. For Friedman, «Insofar as the culture constructs individual experience by interpreting experience, Acker presents women as accomplices in their own victimization» (41). Thus, men are presented as sadistic figures, and women have masochist and self-destructive traits.

Culture, for Acker is phallogentric, and so is language. Hence the need to subvert language in order to alter the social habits; but again, this is a vicious circle, because language is culture. The city as a cultural construct is phallogentric too, therefore, it is impossible for women to find their identities there. The city is Mars, a place where women feel out of their natural environment, but also a place where they go in search of their self. What women do not seem to see is that they do not have to look for this self in others, for to love means to recognize this other, but to see themselves not only as objects, but as subjects of love, able to give. In order to do this they have to break all the rules that society (culture) has tied them to and try to get to the city of art, a city where the rules of culture do not apply; as Acker's narrator says in *My Death My Life* by Pier Paolo Pasolini: «My stepfather, society is anything but the city of art» (LM 216), a city where the old ties of western culture do not mean anything. Nevertheless, this is just an utopic dream, as the ending of *Don Quixote* demonstrates, for one can never step outside culture.

Acker's view can be considered pessimistic, since she never shows a way out for the suffering heroines of her stories; instead, as Friedman suggests, «Acker's questers' searches for identity and a new healing myth lead to silence, death, nothingness, or reentry into the sadomasochism or patriarchal structure» («Now eat...» 44). I agree with those readers that say that Acker's novels are not precisely an example of good taste, I believe they do not try to be so, but rather the opposite. *Don Quixote* is an exercise of playing with limits, it is a constant questioning of everything that culture represents for women and that women represent in that culture.

In «On violence» a short story by Acker about the self-destructive relationship between Tomomi and Uneme, the protagonist thinks to herself: «If you wish to strive for peace of mind and pleasure, believe. If you wish to find out the truth, inquire. The

truth of human nature, or partial truths, could be abhorrent and ugly. (26) In the same way, Don Quixote, in her chimeric quest wants to believe that the truth of the human nature is love. Her trip into the night of the city will show her that the truth is uglier than that.

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