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Troubling Textualities: Insubordinate Politics and Conflicted Complicity in the Work of Kathy Acker (1978-1988)

Daniel Filipe Honório Lourenço

Orientadoras: Professora Doutora Susana Isabel Arsénio Nunes Costa Araújo
Professora Doutora Margarida Isabel de Oliveira Vale de Gato

Tese especialmente elaborada para obtenção do grau de Doutor no ramo de Estudos da Literatura e da Cultura, na especialidade de Estudos Comparatistas.

2022

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Abstract

Kathy Acker (1937-1997) was a celebrated experimental writer, who found a striking degree of commercial and critical success in the mid-1980s. Born and primarily based in the U.S., Acker managed to trace a creative and professional trajectory across the Atlantic, becoming an esteemed author - and often, a minor celebrity - both in the U.S. and in the U.K. Her book-length, novelistic experiments challenged the tenets of the contemporary novel, powerfully subverting encoded expectations and dominant definitions of narrative form, of authorial intent, and of literary creativity. Often grouped with post-modernist contemporaries, Acker's work both expresses something of that historical moment and surprises its convened temporality, producing imaginative pathways across various counter-traditions of innovative and oppositional literature. Variously described as pornographic, feminist, plagiaristic, violent, transformative, queer, punk, bad or derivative, her writing holds a compelling force of its own, and attests to a distinctive ethos of transgression. This project departs from extant understandings of Acker's work and the various ways it has been valued and rememorated across time - especially as the anniversary of both her birth and her death was celebrated in 2017. Recognizing these more recent processes of recollection and rememoration across various media and discursive contexts, this project unequivocally situates itself amidst an ongoing reassessment of the capacities and potentialities of Acker's body of work. However, unlike most contemporary discussions of Acker's writing, this project holds that her standing as a radically committed writer demands increased – rather than decreased – scrutiny into the more normative impulses of her work. While emphasizing the multiple ways her writing disrupted normalized structures of meaning and understanding, we must also probe into those moments where it reiterated, repeated, and reasserted the political fictions of hegemony and dominion. Three categories prove indispensable to this confrontation with the defining limits of Acker's work: race, gender, and sexuality. With a strong intersectional emphasis, the present project suggests readings of three of Acker's novels: *Kathy Goes to Haiti* (1978), *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984) and *Empire of the Senseless* (1988). Tracing a comparative critical trajectory across the three texts, it evinces the inevitable contradictions of Acker's writing, and attempts to widen the scope of present conversations about the politics and poetics of her work.

Keywords: Kathy Acker (1947-1997); Experimental literature; 20th century U.S. literature; Politics of representation; Politics of transgression; Queer Studies; Critical race studies; Feminist writing; Intersectional critique.

Resumo

Kathy Acker (1937-1997) foi uma autora experimental celebrada, que encontrou um surpreendente grau de sucesso comercial e crítico em meados dos anos 80. Nascida e primariamente baseada nos Estados Unidos, Acker conseguiu traçar uma trajectória criativa e profissional através do Atlântico, tornando-se uma autora estimada – e muitas vezes, uma celebridade menor – tanto nos Estados Unidos como no Reino Unido. As suas experiências com o formato do romance desafiaram os fundamentos do romance contemporâneo, poderosamente subvertendo expectativas codificadas e definições dominantes de forma narrativa, de intenção autoral, e de criatividade literária. Frequentemente agrupada com autores pós-modernistas seus contemporâneos, a obra de Acker simultaneamente expressa algo desse momento histórico e surpreende a sua temporalidade convencional, produzindo percursos imaginativos através de diversas contra-tradições de literatura inovadora e oposicional. Variavelmente descrita enquanto pornográfica, feminista, plagiária, violenta, transformativa, *queer*, *punk*, má ou derivativa, a sua escrita mantém uma força própria, e expressa uma distintiva ética da transgressão. Este projecto parte de leituras existentes do trabalho de Acker, e dos vários modos pelos quais este tem sido valorizado e rememorado ao longo do tempo – especialmente com as celebrações do aniversário do seu nascimento e da sua morte, em 2017. Reconhecendo processos mais recentes de memorialização através de diversos *media* e contextos discursivos, este projecto situa-se inequivocamente num debate em curso, pelo qual se reconsideram as capacidades e potencialidades da sua obra. No entanto, ao contrário da maioria das discussões contemporâneas sobre a escrita de Acker, mantemos que a localização da autora enquanto uma escritora radicalmente comprometida exige escrutínio acrescido – e não reduzido – sobre os impulsos mais normativos da sua obra. Conforme enfatizamos os múltiplos meios pelos quais a sua escrita perturbou estruturas normativas de sentido e interpretação, devemos prestar especial atenção àqueles momentos em que esta mesma repete, reitera e reafirma as ficções políticas da hegemonia e do domínio. Três categorias são cucais para este confronto com os limites constitutivos do trabalho de Acker: a raça, a o género, e a sexualidade. Com uma marcada ênfase interseccional, o presente projecto avança leituras de três romances da autora: *Kathy Goes to Haiti* (1978), *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984) e *Empire of the Senseless* (1988). Traçando criticamente uma trajectória comparativa através dos três textos, expomos as inevitáveis contradições próprias à escrita de Acker, e procuramos ampliar o escopo de discussões actuais sobre a sua agência política e poética.

Palavras-chave: Kathy Acker (1947-1997); Literatura experimental; Literatura estado-unidense do século XX; Políticas da representação; Políticas da transgressão; Estudos queer; Estudos críticos de raça; Escrita feminista; Crítica interseccional.

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I am especially thankful to my supervisor. Susana Araújo has always proven to be an attentive and incisive tutor, collaborator, and ally. None of this would have been possible without her exceptional capacity to hold space for error, experimentation, and improvement. Working with Susana has transformed my critical praxis, and I suspect it will continue to do so. I would also like to thank Margarida Vale de Gato, who generously agreed to co-supervise the project at a later date. I deeply appreciate her sensitive and adaptive approach to this project, and all of her insight, patience, and support.

"Troubling Textualities" was completed well into the COVID-19 pandemic. It bears witness to how that crisis has impacted conditions for intimacy, for dialogue, and for community. The ongoing transformation of public space and the constraints placed on the messy, unpredictable pleasures of proximity have placed the importance of friendship into sharp relief. Here, I thank various of my fellow PhD-Comp colleagues, but especially Elisa Scaraggi, for the chance to think collectively, to share space, and to make space for critical thinking.

Although they were and remain far from me, I know this project would not have been possible without the curiosity, complicity and tenderness of Alex Eisenthal and Nat Raha. In more ways that I can account for, this thesis is an ongoing, implausible conversation with, and a remembrance of our time together at the University of Sussex. Closer to home, Inês Pina has helped me pull together the threads of the quotidian, and find absurdity amidst hardship and ritual. Together, they have welcomed me into myself.

Finally, thanks to *mã* and thanks to Laura. For their patience, and for their endurance. For their strength to stay with the trouble, as well.

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Foreword: Kathy Acker, Then and Now

> Whenever writers are considered marginal to a society, something is deeply wrong in that society and wrong with the relations between writing and the society. For *to write* should be *to write the world* and simultaneously *to engage in the world*. […] The bestowing of meaning and thus, the making of the world, the word as world: this is what writing is about.
>
> - Kathy Acker, "Writing, Identity and Copyright in the Net Age," 96-97.

> Writing is one method of dealing with being human or wanting to suicide cause in order to write you kill yourself at the same time while remaining alive.
>
> - Kathy Acker**,** *In Memoriam to Identity*, 174

A relative revival.

The past decade has witnessed renewed interest in the life and work of Kathy Acker, and especially so in the U.S. and the U.K. A series of events unfolding from the 10th anniversary of the author's death (in 1997) and the 70th anniversary of her birth (in 1957) has resulted in new patterns of reception and rememoration, that have been variously described as a "comeback,"[1], a "rebirth," [2] or "a revival."[3] This commemorative cycle includes new publications, cultural events, and emerging critical narratives. Together, these have generated a distinct momentum surrounding Acker's location in multiple archives, including those of experimental literature, of the English-language avant-garde, and counter-cultural traditions of dissent. Collectively, they evince how different facets of Acker's literary praxis, public presentation and personal life remain subject to

[1] Little, Harriet Fitch. "Why post-punk pioneer Kathy Acker is making a comeback." *Financial Times*. 26 April 26 2019. https://www.ft.com/content/d5d7574c-65c7-11e9-b809-6f0d2f5705f6 Accessed on the 21st of March 2020.
[2] Clare, Ralph. "Why Kathy Acker Now?." *LA Review of Books*. 2 May 2018, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/why-kathy-acker-now/ Accessed on the 21st of March 2020.
[3] Karmelek, Mary. "Blood and Guts In High School: The Rebirth of Kathy Acker." *Please Kill Me.* 1 November 2017, https://pleasekillme.com/blood-guts-rebirth-kathy-acker/ Accessed on the 21st of March 2020. Wiegener, Matias. "The Life, Death and Afterlife of Kathy Acker: Matias Viegener interviews Chris Kraus." *LA Review of Books*. 11 September 2017. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-life-death-and-afterlife-of-kathy-acker/ Accessed on the 22nd of March 2020.

distinctive forms of critique and celebration. Three works in particular have catalyzed public interest and shaped the present debate: the epistolary anthology *I'm Very Into You* (2015); the critical biography *After Kathy Acker* (2017), and the solo exhibition *I, I, I, I, I, I, I, Kathy Acker* at the London Institute of Contemporary Arts (2019).

Approaching the afterlives of Acker's work with this chronological timeframe in mind, this introduction purposefully grounds the present project in direct relation to its historical and contextual determinants. This includes its own location within academic production about Acker's work. By narrativizing this over-arching process as a relative revival, I mean to emphasize the convergence of long-term forms of cultural continuity with more episodic instances of memorialization, which shape this project's own context and momentum. As a correlate, this project is bound to the analytic utility of the decade as a concrete cycle in time. The fact the readings presented here are organized according to a quite precise temporal trajectory (1978-1988) is both a methodical decision of its own, and a recognition of the scale of processes of reading and remembrance across time.

The cycle at stake is in a more immediate sense initiated by the publication of *I'm Very into You: Correspondence 1995–1996* in 2015, through Semiotext(e). Edited by Matias Viegener, *I'm Very Into You* compiles e-mails exchanged between Acker and Australian media theorist and cultural critic McKenzie Wark, some time before Acker's passing. In the volume's introduction, Viegener addresses the spontaneous, wavering narrativity proper to their correspondence, equating the collection to "the quaint form of the epistolary novel." (Acker and Wark, 13). Their exchange ranges from the intimate to the theoretical, and the various entanglements thereof. Topics of conversation include mutual readings (William Burroughs, Pier Paolo Pasolini, each other…), their respective work situations, or quotidian events.

Often, they discuss sex, gender, and identity. Both gauge the emerging discursivity of queer and express their shared discontent at extant vocabularies of sex/gender. Both negotiate the categories of "butch/femme" and "top/bottom," as positions which disrupt the dualistic constraints of patriarchal, heterosexist society. Wark would later come out as a trans woman, redefining the palimpsestic performativity of their meditations on these matters. And MIT Press, the book's distributor, explicitly markets the book towards trans and queer counter-publics, among others. Copy on their website reads:

> Their correspondence [sic] is a Plato's Symposium for the twenty-first century, but written for queers, transsexuals, nerds, and book geeks. *I'm Very Into You* is a text of incipience, a text of beginnings, and a set of notes on the short, shared passage of two iconic individuals of our time.[4]

The assimilation of Acker's work into sexually dissident and gender disobedient cultural archives has proved key to its ongoing celebration and dissemination. The same month *I'm Very Into You* came out, the first artistic fellowship in Acker's name was announced by Les Figues Press, a small-scale "nonprofit literary organization" based in Los Angeles, working to support experimental work by queer and/or feminist writers. The "Kathy Acker Fellowship" was established as a part-time appointment for emerging writers, artists, editors, or curators "in support of innovative, exceptional text-based practices."[5] When reporting on this opportunity, local newspaper the L.A. Times appositely titled its news article: "Kathy Acker returns."[6] In a review published four years later, Wark described the endurance of Acker's work in the public imagination in somewhat less drastic terms:

> Kathy Acker is a writer whose readership has never gone away, even after her death at age 50 in 1997. There's some strange margin of the literary world where queers, punks, riot girls and avant-gardists have found reasons to keep turning to her. (Wark, 2020)

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[4] From MIT Press's online catalogue: https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/im-very-you Accessed on the 10th of Abril 2020.

[5] From the Le Figues Press official website: https://www.lesfigues.com/kathy-acker-fellowship/ Accessed on the 10th of April 2020.

[6] Kellog, Carolyn. "Kathy Acker returns." 25 of February 2015. *Los Angeles Times*. Link: www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-et-jc-kathy-acker-returns-20150220-story.html. Accessed on the 10th of April 2020. The article antecedes the publication of *I'm Very Into You*; in fact, it mentions the book will come out that same month.

Wark calls attention to the afterlives of Acker's work amidst contemporary counter-publics, in ways that mainstream media will not or cannot. Across the decades, Acker's body of work has been enlivened by its assimilation into wider institutional economies, strong in cultural and intellectual capital, such as universities, major publishers, and museums. Yet concurrent forms of counter-cultural rememoration have proved just as important. Especially among readerships either uninvested in or disavowed by the mainstream – including those "queers, punks, riot girls and avant-gardists" Wark evokes. Acker's standing as an enduring icon of the radical imagination

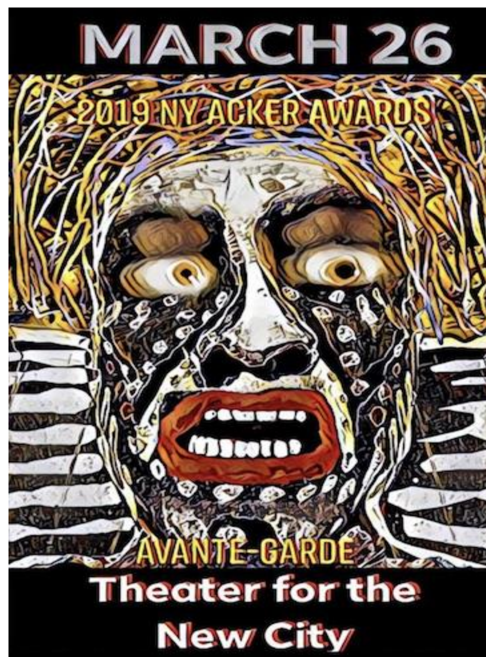

Figure 1 - Poster art for the 2019 New York Acker Awards.

is further evidenced by the independently organized Kathy Acker awards. Established in 2013 by Clayton Patterson (in New York) and Alan Kaufman (in San Francisco), the awards are held annually, in celebration of avant-garde writers, experimental artists, and other cultural agents.[7]

In 2017, a critical point was reached that has decisively reenergized conversations surrounding Acker and the legacy of her work. Chris Kraus's *After Kathy Acker: A Literary Biography*, also published through Semiotext(e), was instrumental in this. Kraus's book positioned

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[7] A 2019 article in *The Villager* describes the awards like so: "Produced by documentarian Clayton Patterson, the Acker Awards recognize avant-garde artists, writers, musicians and community organizers that enliven the Downtown arts scene. While the event's name pays homage to the late feminist writer Kathy Acker, it's also an archaic Dutch word that means "a visible current in a river." Adams, Rose. "Acker Awards to honor D'town's avant-garde." *The Villager*. March 19, 2019. https://www.thevillager.com/2019/03/acker-awards-to-honor-dtowns-avant-garde/ Accessed on the 21st of March 2020.

itself as the first legitimate biography of Acker. If it managed to do so, it was in large part thanks to its reconstructive relationship to memory, narrative, and truth. The project was intensely and extensively researched, through archival materials as well as conversations with many of Acker's friends and peers. Kraus's efforts were positively received by Viegener – Acker's literary executor– and her extensive acknowledgments mention "the dozens of people who spoke generously and candidly about the friendships and time they shared with Kathy Acker" (Kraus, 343). Not so much a regulatory portrait of the author as a writerly entanglement of its own, *After Kathy Acker* was a critical success in part because of its personalized approach to its subject matter. Introducing "what may or may not be a biography of Kathy Acker" (Kraus, 2017, 14), Kraus observes:

> Although she wrote first-person fiction and gave hundreds of interviews in which she was asked to recite the facts of her life over and over again, these facts are hard to pin down in any literal way. Because in a certain sense, Acker lied all the time. She was rich, she was poor, she was the mother of twins, she'd been a stripper for years, a guest editor of *Film Culture* magazine at the age of fourteen, a graduate student of Herbert Marcuse's. She lied when it was clearly beneficial to her, and she lied even when it was not. Perceptive readers of Acker's work have observed that the lies weren't literal lies, but much more a system of magical thought. (Kraus, 14)

Kraus does not weave these remarks in a denunciative capacity. Nor does she construe them as a corrective injunction over Acker's (many) texts. Her "literary biography" does not presume such fabrications are, by definition, subject to the burden of proof and in need of decisive verification or falsification. And it certainly does not measure literary merit by such epistemic standards. Instead, such fabrications are perceived as a facet of Acker's poetics, in the widest sense of the expression. The fact they work to complex – even contradictory – effects is not a constitutive controversy *per se*. Through Acker's poetics, the factual and fictional become enmeshed and entangled. "But then again, didn't she do what all writers must do? Create a position from which to write? (Kraus, 14)

Kraus is an established writer, artist, and editor herself. *A Financial Times* articles goes as far as describing *After Katy Acker* as a "celebrity-on-celebrity biography" (Little 2019), placing Kraus's respective achievements into relief. Kraus's debut novel, *I Love Dick* (Semiotext(e), 1997) intertwines academic gossip, confessional candor and creative fiction to dramatize the author's marriage with theorist and editor Sylvère Lotringer, and their shared fascination with media

theorist Dick Hebdige (best known for *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, published in 1979).[8] The novel became a cult success, eventually breaching the mainstream.[9] More to the point, as one of Semiotext(e)'s co-editors (along with Lotringer and Hedi El Kohlt), Kraus established the Native Agents editorial rubric, to divulge English-language and female-authored experimental writing. *I'm Very Into You, I Love Dick,* and *After Kathy Acker* were all under published through this same rubric.

Besides being Kraus's collaborator and partner, Lotringer was an influential figure in Acker's life: for a time, the two were lovers, and it was through their intellectual rapport that Acker confronted so-called "French theory" (i.e., post-structuralism, and to an extent, post-modernism). This confers a curious, subjectivist bend to *After Kathy Acker*. In its construction, intellectual or literary history and the casual archives of gossip do not figure as mutually exclusive. Quite on the contrary: they are constitutively intertwined, as distinct yet conversant forms of knowledge. In the end, one archive is not tenable without the other. Thus, it comes as little surprise when Kraus grounds her narrative of Acker's personal life by citing epistolary exchanges with various partners, which the latter directly incorporated into her literary texts. For that matter, one would do well to reopen the question of where and how to situate *I'm Not Very Into You* in a wider genealogy of texts by Acker *and* around Acker, which themselves trouble the definitional boundaries between life and literature. As Viegener writes in his introduction to *I'm Not Very Into You*:

> Sexual desire, seduction and romantic obsessions are at the core of many of Acker's texts, just as they formed a through-line in her life. She filtered her daily life throughout her manuscripts. This wasn't ancillary to her work; it was its very fiber. (Acker and Wark, 6-7)

Here, the strong claim is that intimacy and affectivity are not supplementary in relation to the work of literature, but rather at its definitional core. They are the very conceptual and creative animus of Acker's literary praxis, and they inscribe themselves in her texts at a compositional, methodological, and formal level. Nowhere is this more compelling a claim than where *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984) is concerned. Supple in autobiographical intertext and anti-realist

[8] Kraus refers quite explicitly to various academics and writers across the text, but "Dick" is only ever referred to through the sexually evocative mononym from which the book takes its title. His identity was only revealed extra-textually, and at a later date.

[9] The most visible expression of its break into the mainstream might well be its adaptation into a television series: *I Love Dick*, featuring popular Hollywood actor Kevin Bacon as the titular "Dick," was produced by Amazon Studios and distributed through Amazon's own online distribution services in 2017.

experimentation, it proved to be Acker's commercial and critical breakthrough. In November 2017, Grove Press published an anniversary edition of this key work, to mark the 20th anniversary of Acker's death (1997) and the 70th anniversary of her birth (1947).[10] It featured an important structural alteration: in all previous printings, the last two sections of the text had been switched around and excluded from its table of contents. Acker expressed her impression of this editorial mishap quite casually, in conversation with Lotringer: "The English [editors] got the end mixed up, and no one noticed, so I guess it's not the most tightly structured book after all." (Acker and Lotringer, 196).

Grove's anniversary edition corrects this error, and it resets the structural standard for further reprints. It also features an introduction by Kraus, re-contextualizing the novel within more recent discussions of Acker's work, on which Kraus herself has had an important individual impact.[11] As Acker's biographer, Kraus historicizes the book's composition (between 1973 and 1978, approximately) in relation to the coordinates of personal circumstance, as well as those of creative labor. In doing so, she suggests something of the crucial interlacing of the intimate and the aesthetic which motivates much of Acker's writing. Kraus writes:

> In one sense, *Blood and Guts* chronicles the years she spent with [long-term partner] Peter Gordon. She describes their East Fifth Street apartment – "usually no hot water or heat, costs two hundred dollars a month" – and their neighborhood – "All of the buildings are either burnt down, half-burnt down, or falling down." She writes about her first cancer scare – a mass that fortunately turned out to be benign, but prompted their brief legal marriage in February 1978. Most likely, the disturbance of their final separation prompted Acker to arrange this collection of outtakes and unpublished writings into a disjunctive but emotionally continuous work. But, more importantly, the novel chronicles and melds the writing process she'd begun with [*The*] *Childlike Life [of the Black Tarantula]*. During those five years, she'd written two more serial novels—*The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec* (1975) and *I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac: Imagining* (1975)—as well as two book-length experiments in genre-ridden narrative, *Rip-Off Red* (1973) and *Kathy Goes to Haiti* (1978). (Kraus, 2017)

[10] As listed on Grove Press's official website: https://groveatlantic.com/book/blood-and-guts-in-high-school/ Accessed on the 30th of May 2020.

[11] Kraus's introduction was additionally published as a single piece in *The Paris Review* that same month, just as the first chapter of *After Kathy Acker* had previously been. See: Kraus, Chris. "Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*." 9 November 2017. The Paris Review, https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/11/09/kathy-ackers-blood-guts-high-school/ Accessed on the 12th of April 2020.

Blood and Guts in High School played a pivotal role in Acker's career. On one hand, it represented Acker's breakthrough into the mainstream literary market, on both sides of the Atlantic: it's first printing in the U.K. sold out within three weeks, as Kraus notes in the introduction.[12] On the other, it powered Acker's breakthrough into the British public sphere as an unlikely celebrity of sorts, bestowed with an unusual degree of media attention: her obituary in *The Independent* remarks that by the time she was 40, "the punk writer had become a literary celebrity."[13] *Blood and Guts in High School* was additionally reprinted through Penguin UK's "Penguin Modern Classics" imprint, that same year. As were, the following year, the novel *Great Expectations* (1982), the short story "New York City in 1979" (1981), and finally, *After Kathy Acker*.[14]

Momentum surrounding Acker's work persisted across the following years. Matias Viegener co-curated the first solo exhibition on Acker, presented at the Badischer Kunstverein (Karlsruhe, Germany) between October and November 2018.[15] Emphasizing four different works, representative of different moments in Acker's career – including her first published novel, *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* (1973), and her very last, *Pussy, King of the Pirates* (1997) – the exhibition places Acker's work in interdisciplinary perspective. Along with materials authored by or belonging to the author, *Get Rid of Meaning* featured an array of interventions by other artists and critics. Markedly, it sought to foreground Acker's indebtedness to performance art, to conceptual art, and to the visual arts:

> Kathy Acker's proximity to the art context of the 1970s is reflected in the grounding of her writing in conceptual thought as well as her interest in procedural work. The artistic contributions of the exhibition are closely linked to Kathy Acker's literary and performative work. Some of the works share similar concerns in terms of performativity and the female body or refer directly to selected texts by Acker. They examine her method of appropriation and recombining in order to address subjects such as body politics, transgender

[12] "Picador's first print run of *Blood and Guts in High School* sold out within three weeks of its January 1984 publication." (Kraus, 2017)

[13] Guttridge, Peter. "Obituary: Kathy Acker." Wednesday 3rd of December 1997, *The Independent*. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/obituary-kathy-acker-1286572.html

[14] The year also saw the publication of a much less widely received biographical work on Acker: Douglas Martin's lyrical essay *Acker* (2017), which came out in October through Nightboat Books.

[15] *Get Rid of Meaning*. 5th of Oct. - the 2nd of Dec. 2018, Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsuhe. The exhibition's title is drawn from a central quote in *Empire of the Senseless* (1988): "GET RID OF MEANING. YOUR MIND IS A NIGHTMARE THAT HAS BEEN EATING YOU: NOW EAT YOUR MIND." (Acker, 1988, 38) This enunciate, provocatively posited as hermeneutic key of sorts, appears in the novel as a piece of code which protagonists Thivai and Abhor must use to find the construct they are searching for.

identity and strategies of empowerment. Other artists raise questions about plagiarism, writing methodology and copyright as well as the relationship between libraries and friendship.

A major hallmark came the following year, with the presentation of the first UK-based exhibition on Acker's work by the London Institute of Contemporary Art.[16] The ICA has its own historical relationship with Acker; in 1986, it hosted an interview of Acker by British cultural theorist and critic Angela McRobbie, the recording of which remains one of the most widely divulged audiovisual records of Acker in public access.[17] More recently, in January 2018, it held the event "Sex Positive: A Night of Film + Fiction," which it described as a "programme of short films that evoke and provoke in the spirit of Kathy Acker.[18] The ICA cycle is particularly interesting for its geographical and cultural situatedness: it strongly attests to the continued relevance of Acker's work for a British tradition of experimental arts and innovative literature, as a direct result of her commercial success and prolonged periods of residence in the U.K.

Held between the 1st of May and the 4th of August, *I, I, I, I, I, I, I, Kathy Acker* presented a comprehensive program, ranging from seminars and roundtables to concerts and tarot readings. As explained on the ICA's official website:

> This polyvocal and expansive project combines an exhibition with a programme of performances, screenings and talks. The exhibition is structured around fragments of Acker's writing, which serve as catalysts for a network of interconnected materials presented around them, including works by other artists and writers, video and audio documentation of Acker's performative appearances in various cultural and media contexts, and documents and books from her personal archive. [19]

This resurgence of interest in Acker's work is not a homogenous or unitary cultural phenomenon. It is both theoretically and contextually multifocal, just as it is diversified at the level

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[16] One would be remiss to ignore the publication of *Kathy Acker: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* in early 2019. Organized by Amy Scholder and Douglas Martin, this volume compiles all of Acker's interviews from early in her career to the very last, including a 19976 interview to the Spice Girls in *The Guardian*. For the sake of brevity, I have chosen not to engage this volume in detail at this point.

[17] Pritchard, Ralph. "Kathy Acker at the ICA, 1986." *YouTube*, 25th of August 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pxu85kiqkg0 Accessed on the 14th of April 2020. Note that although this digital copy of the video recording includes an explicit disclaimer regarding copyright law (summarily: "Film and Video Piracy Is a Crime"), it has not been removed since it was originally posted in 2017, and it has since amassed over 30 thousand views.

[18] A description of the event, including its full program, can be found on the ICA's official website: https://archive.ica.art/whats-on/sex-positive-night-film-fiction Accessed on the 22nd of July 2021.

[19] For this copy, and other useful materials – including a digital copy of Isabel Waidner's "Class, Queers and the Avant-Garde," see the ICA's official page for the *I, I, I, I, I, I, I, Kathy Acker* program: https://www.ica.art/exhibitions/i-i-i-i-i-i-i-kathy-acker Accessed on the 14th of April 2020.

of conditions of production. As mentioned earlier, the temporal arch traced so far encompasses means of publication and distribution that are not endowed with major editorial or institutional capital. A strong example of this would be the publication of *Kathy Acker 1971-1975* by Éditions Ismael, in 2019. Éditions Ismael is a non-profit organization based in Paris, the activities of which branch out to London and Lisbon occasionally. *Kathy Acker 1971-1975* compiles previously unpublished material, written before Acker's turn towards the novelistic across the early 1970s and the 1980s. Previously only accessible through archives, these texts antecede Acker's commercial breakthrough, both in the U.S. and in the U.K.

Compellingly, given this project's respective location in Portugal, the book's publication was accompanied by a launch event in Lisbon, held at Galeria Zé dos Bois in October 2019.[20] The event featured musical performances by Portuguese artists, along with the projection of Acker and Alan Sondheim's 1974 art film "Blue Tape."[21] The event itself is remarkable for its relative decontextualization: none of Acker's work has been translated to Portuguese if not for select passages, usually in Brazil and within the scope of copyleft or creative commons projects. Often, these entail illicit processes of reproduction and distribution. In its isolation, the event nonetheless attests to the processes by which Acker's work continues to branch out towards new territories and new publics, either through or despite institutional rationality and the reach of the law.

The processes of mediation and translation which have brought Acker's texts into new contexts are not exclusively linguistic or literary in kind. Whether convergent or concurrent, patterns of reading are differentiated at a political level, just as they are at a linguistic one. Gauging the discrepancies between mainstream literary publics and dissident counter-publics helps us ground current conversations about Acker's life and work in their contextual diversity. For one, trans and queer readings of Acker, strongly – albeit not exclusively – motivated by the work's sexual and gender politics, have fomented politically generative patterns of re-contextualization.

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[20] The evening's full program can be consulted on Zé dos Bois official website: https://zedosbois.org/en/programa/lancamento-do-livro-kathy-acker-1971-1975/ Accessed on the 20th of July 2021. Furthermore, the poster created to divulge the event can be accessed on Éditions Ismael's official website: https://editions-ismael.com/en/5160/ Accessed on the 20th of July 2021.

[21] A video-performance, "Blue Tape" concerns the end of a romantic relationship between the two artists. Viegener has characterized this early incursion into authorial performativity – into confessional cinematography, even – by placing it into the wider context of Acker's romantic life, and the libidinal motivations of her writing: "The Blue Tape is a counterpoint to the Acker/Work correspondence, a set of bittersweet monologues on each lover's disappointment in the other, his intellectual and hers erotic. While it appears 22 years before these letters, it is a kind of postscript to the failure of writing, as Acker and Sondheim both refer to the letters they wrote to each other to arrange their rendezvous in New York. It's a fugue of affliction." (Acker and Wark, 10)

The intermittent references to trans and/or queer readerships (some eventual, some actual) I have included so far point to the formation of these distinctive counter-publics, and their own history of reception and rememoration of Acker's work. Wark, herself a major trans and queer interlocutor of Acker's, wrote of *Empire of the Senseless* (1988):

> As the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard once said, it's a function of modernist literature to write not for an existing audience but for one that doesn't exist, and call it into being. *She wrote for the radical, queer, trans, precarious reader to come.* If books are dolls we put ourselves to bed with, this is the doll for those who want to cut and glue their Barbies into monsters. Books made by remaking other books. (Wark, 2019; my emphasis)

As a critical countercurrent, ongoing discussions of Acker's work by trans and/or queer readers give shape to their own kind of inquiries. To wit: in a text especially commissioned for the ICA exhibition, experimental writer Isabel Waidner broaches the absence of a substantial queer literary avant-garde in the U.K., using Acker's public success as an atypical point of counter-distinction. Waidner emphasizes Acker's self-acknowledged position as a tokenistic exception to the rule of the literary establishment: "the one post-modernist writer, the one writer connecting fiction with critical theory and subcultural contexts, the one transgressive writer in British literature at the time…" (Waidner, 1). But instead of engaging with Acker's work, Waidner uses her status to describe wider tendencies in literary practice and editorial politics in the U.K.

Waidner's argument is a historical one, concerning to the socio-economic structures which shape the conditions of literary possibility: "The conditions of possibility for queer and innovative writing simply were not in place" (Waidner, 1), they claim. They suggest the commercial success of *Blood and Guts in High School* (and of Acker's writing, more generally) "did nothing to help advance 'British' queer avant-garde writing more widely" (Waidner, p.1), as a result of regimented class relations and overdetermined processes of financial distribution which excluded (and continue to exclude) queer and working-class authors. Provocatively ignoring Acker's writing for the entire duration of their essay, Waidner raises a difficult but important question:

> Did Acker-tokenism in the '80s and '90s enable the publishing establishment to give the appearance of risk-taking and inclusivity, rather than make the structural changes required to address its elitism and normativity long-term? (Waidner, 1)

In a sense, Waidner writes *around* Acker's singular status in national literary history, while calling attention to authors – including themselves – within the emerging tradition of innovative

literature, whose work disputes the socio-economic and sexopolitical *status quo*. In the U.S., conversations about Acker's relative engagement with (and notional belonging to) a queer counter-tradition raise a different set of questions, both historically and politically speaking.

In *Queer Experimental Literature*: *The Affective Politics of Bad Reading* (Palgrave, 2017), Tyler Bradway reclaims "queer experimental literature" as a literary tradition of relative consistency, extant both within and alongside the historical avant-garde. However, Bradway does not define queer experimental literature as a continuum of texts that abide by similar formal principles, but instead as the collective praxis of a community bound together in time: "the concept of the avant-garde," he suggests, "should not be conflated with a style but reserved for signifying a community of writers and artists operating within specific historical circumstances." (xliv) In fact, Bradway is not concerned with the problem of form as much as he is with *attitudes* towards form, and how these in turn impact the reading experience:

> I resist the equation of experimental writing with a specific set of stylistic moves that can be identified transhistorically. Rather than define "experimental" in formalist terms, then, I use the term as a heuristic to construct a genealogy of writers that share a common conception of form—namely, that deformations of narrative prose can expose reading as a social construction and an affective discipline. (Bradway, xliv)

To approximate a disjunctive sense of literary community, Bradway suggests an unlikely grouping of authors, situated at diverse stylistic and disciplinary junctures: William S. Burroughs, Samuel R. Delany, Kathy Acker, Jeanette Winterson, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Alison Bechdel, and Chuck Palahniuk. In effect, he de-emphasizes relations of contiguity and focusses instead on relations of contingency; his point is not that these authors constitute a stable group-formation, but rather that they are interconnected by the ways in which they engage with the problem (and possibilities) of form. Notably, Bradway's intervention also touches on the difficulties present when ascertaining the historicity of a queer avant-garde:

> To be sure, some of the writers in *Queer Experimental Literature* are in conversation with one another, such as Burroughs and Acker, Acker and Winterson, and Delany and Acker. But taken together, queer experimental literature does not constitute an avant-garde in any traditional sense. In fact, we will see writers, particularly Acker, distressed at the absence of a queer avant-garde, which has been gentrified by the forces of commodification and homonormativity in the neoliberal era. (Bradway, xliv)

While Waidner cites Acker as exemplary of a kind of tokenistic exceptionalism which protects the literary establishment from socio-political change, Bradway points to her role as a

point of relay between disparate writers working within this discontinuous counter-tradition. He suggests something of Acker's agency not just as a queer writer, but as an active participant in wider circuits of communication and influence among queer writers. Ultimately, Bradway's point is that Acker's texts read queerly not because they present or represent queerness, but because they are queerly oriented towards the disruption of regulated standards of reading, as sanctioned by the academic and publishing markets.

The political agency of reading, as a practice that need not abide by socially normalized standards, and which can in fact contest the protocols which govern reading as practice, is all the more evident in trans reappraisals of Acker's work by trans writers and readers. One event in particular speaks strongly to such processes. In November 2019, Wark herself hosted "Trans | Acker: trans, queer and genderqueer readings of the work of Kathy Acker," at the New School of Social Research in New York. Attuned to the critical promise of "a community of trans readings of Acker that is lacking in current reception," the seminar was part of ongoing conversations about the queer potentialities of Acker's work, but also underlined that she remains an unacknowledged "point of reference for quite a few trans writers and critics." [22]

Wark's written statement on *Empire of the Senseless* emphasizes its socially incipient dimension; its readerly orientation towards publics – and counter-publics – yet to come. In turn, the event she hosted directly scoped such possibilities of reading, *and* incited them at a concrete social level, by gathering various artists and thinkers together to attend to the non-normative affects and politics of Acker's writing. Queer and trans readings of Acker are driven by latent textual possibility, promised or propitiated by her texts already. But they also consist in substantial forms of critical intervention, either communally or individually enacted, as they challenge standardized patterns of reading and reception.

[22] The description of the event here cited features on the New School's official website, on the page where the event is listed: www.newschool.localist.com/event/trans_acker_trans_queer_and_genderqueer_readings_of_the_work_of_kathy_acker#.Xp9SW8hKjIV Accessed on the 21st of April 2020.

Personality, performativity, and the present tense.

If I emphasize this last point in particular, it is because the present project is situated at the disciplinary and political interval between queer theory and trans studies, among other (un)disciplinary formations. Often, this work concerns how identity figures in Acker's work, even as it is unmade, or made to come undone. Both poetically and politically speaking, the problem of identity motivates much of Acker's writing – and likewise motivates our critical readings of it. This is not to say the present discussion retains the same political referents as Acker's own writing, nor that it acquiesces uncritically to the propositions and provocations expressed through it. Conversations about the aesthetic and ethical agency of Acker's work cannot avoid a necessary confrontation with those social, political, and discursive realities that it did not or could not figure. To grasp at the political complexity of Acker's writing, we must confront it with its respective, definitional limits. Even when – or *especially* when – her writing rejects the very premise of representational realism.

Acker's writing profoundly problematizes identity, rendering it as a fulcrum of crisis, disjunction, and transformation. But this recognition does not foreclose discussions of *how* it does so, and to what effect. The problem of identity remained a crucial nexus of interest and inventiveness across the decades, as Acker researched and revised her textual tactics and her theoretical standpoint. Moreover, this preoccupation with the making and unmaking of identity translated into specific forms of self-presentation and performativity, which in turn have proved decisive to the ways Acker's work is perceived and critiqued. Consider how the ICA exhibition frames the question of the self, within the larger context of Acker's life and work:

> *I, I, I, I, I, I, I, Kathy Acker* addresses 'Kathy Acker' as a still-unfolding cultural force, focusing on the uniquely diverse and disruptive character of the author's work and persona. In a 1996 text, Acker wrote: 'Language is the accumulation of connections where there were no such connections', and referred to a kind of language 'that makes webs'. In this spirit, *I, I, I, I, I, I, I, Kathy Acker* looks particularly to contemporary artists working across visual arts, literature and performance, illuminating points of connection and resistance to Acker's linguistic methodologies and lines of thought.

In this piece of curatorial text, ‘Kathy Acker’ discursively figures as construct, more than as an individual *per se*. Narrativizing Acker as “cultural force,” the exhibition emphasizes the intertextual and relational dimensions of her work. In fact, it decentralizes the individual work – and the individual signature – in favor of increased attention to those relational networks Acker integrated herself into, or into which she was integrated. The terminology is not of “influence,” pointing instead to “points of connection and resistance.” Such relational networks are not presumed to constitute a homogenous field of convergence and confluence, as bluntly demonstrated by Waidner’s intervention. Finally, the text does not antagonize personal identity and authorial identity. Rather, it seems well-aware of how the problem of the self is centrifugal to Acker’s work:

> For Acker, the use of the first-person singular was, in fact, plural, as she utilized the ‘I’ in her writing to inhabit different identities from her own life, fiction and history, acknowledging her complicated relationships with family, friends and lovers. From her first novels – which were episodically distributed by mail and written under the pseudonym ‘The Black Tarantula’– the performance of identity remained integral to Acker’s work. This performative relationship to the self was central to her creative strategies as she expanded her writing practice to include readings, performances, plays, screenplays, and collaborations with artists and musicians; fashioned a distinctive public image across different media contexts; and engaged ‘the language of the body’ through tattoos, piercings and bodybuilding.

Acker was an active participant in the construction of public perceptions of her work, and of herself. She deployed a varied set of tactics, both textual and extra-textual, to the effect of producing and positioning *herself* as spectacle. The result was not a continuous narrative, bound to causative coherence, but a frayed and multi-layered performance of the self, ridden with complexity and contradiction. This durational “performance of identity,” procedurally sustained across time, was achieved through various means and materials, as noted by the exhibition’s copy: from public readings to tattoos, from live performances to piercings, from individual stylistic decisions to collaborative creative engagements…

I describe this decisive aspect of Acker’s praxis through the conceptual heuristic of *authorial performativity*. I use it to describe Acker’s construction of a concerted yet discontinuous sense of persona, both through her writing and outside of it. The concept also proves useful when accounting for how that persona impacted the constitution of Acker’s (various) readerships. On this latter point, Wiegener writes:

> [The] mining of autobiographical information persisted throughout her life, and led many readers to irrepressible ideas about who she was or what she wanted. Early in her career, Acker not only didn't discourage this, but actively deployed both her life and her body in a sort of performative persona. This persona succeeded rather well in attracting readers, but also generated a set of problems in strangers who confused the persona with Kathy herself. (Acker and Wark, 8)

Wiegener signals Acker's willful, metatextual implication in her own writing, and how that implication imparted her writing with potentially conflicting truth-effects, which in turn affect the reading experience itself. The various avatars of the self that Acker constructed – and just as readily deconstructed – disobey the governing conventions of autobiography, whether as a literary genre or as a stylistic register. But they transform readerly engagements with Acker (or the idea thereof) regardless, setting off forms of cognitive and epistemic dissonance which confuse the boundaries between Acker-as-author and Acker-as-person. In a sense, authorial performativity *individuates* Acker, singling her out amidst her contemporaries. But it is not insular – nor is it detached from other representational histories.

In *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (2008), Paul B. Preciado emphasizes an important strand of sex-positive feminism, which contrasts with liberal mainstream versions of feminist politics in public discourse. Tracing a critical genealogy across activism, critical thinking and creative practice, Preciado identifies an important disjunction in the Sex Wars of the 1980s, through which sex-positive feminism emerged as an organized response against anti-porn feminism. Describing "pro-sex feminism" as a "sexopolitical movement," grounded on the contestation of those norms governing female sexuality, Preciado cites a distinctive cultural archive, which challenges normative standards of representation:

> This "post-porn" and self-reflective feminism was able to find a space for activism within audiovisual productions, literature, and performance. With the feminist postporn films of Annie Sprinkle; the documentaries and fictional films of Monika Treut; the literature of Virginie Despentes, Dorothy Allison, and Kathy Acker; the comic strips of Alison Bechdel; the photography of Del LaGrace Volcano and Axelle Ledauphin; the performances of Diana Pornoterrorista, Post-Op, and Lady Pain; the queer performances of Tim Stüttgen; the zines and ready-made politics of Dana Wise; the wild concerts of Tribe 8, Le Tigre, or Chicks on Speed; the neo-Goth sermons of Lydia Lunch; and the transgender science fiction porn of Shu Lea Cheang, an entire transnational postporn trans-feminist aesthetic was created that trafficked in signs and cultural artifacts and critically resignified normative codes considered by traditional feminism to be inappropriate for femininity. (Preciado, 341 – 342)

Reclaiming Acker as a post-porn feminist, Preciado repositions her within a wider range of creative practitioners across the latter half of the 20th century, whose projects converse at a political rather than disciplinary level. Collectively, they forged representational possibilities for female sexuality as a site of political dissent. The fact Preciado describes sex-positive feminism as "self-reflective" is key, given Acker's own ongoing work about and around the (female) self. Preciado's own work oscillates between the theoretical and the intimate, and it presents itself as "autofiction." His citation of Acker works both as an historical argument, and as a gesture towards the formal genesis of his own project.[23]

"Autofiction" aptly describes those autobiographical impulses that inform Acker's writing, but which do not translate into autobiography per se. As an experimental genre descriptor, it also helps inscribe Acker's work (even in its more individualistic incursions) within a wider discursive history. Kraus uses that same genre descriptor when introducing the anniversary edition of *Blood and Guts in High School*: "Thirty-three years after its first publication, *Blood and Guts* speaks powerfully to us as a literary work, and as a reminder that the genre known as 'autofiction' was not a post-Internet invention." (Kraus, 2017)

Acker's use of raw biographical materials was consistent across the decades. These include pieces of diary writing, excerpts from epistolary exchanges with lovers, visual diagrams of her dreams, or more oblique allusions to personal experiences and relations (such the absence of her father from her life, or the suicide of her mother late in her life). These materials were in turn interwoven with fictional materials, both original and plagiarized, to the point of relative indistinction. Acker's poetics are in fact powerfully bound to the obfuscation of the boundaries separating such disparate source-materials. This degree of citational cross-contamination deters her writing's capacity to ascertain truth-value: it is always uncertain, always unsteady. But it does not prevent important truth-effects from accruing.

The tremulous quality of those markers separating life and literature – which accordingly organize textual fiction – attests to Acker's ongoing commitment to deconstructive method and

[23] Acker's reputation as a sex-positive writer is not limited to theoretical discourse, or to Preciado's own argument. Mainstream media likewise assert Acker's standing as a sex-positive feminist, and especially so within the chronological interval under discussion. Zara, Janelle. See, for instance: "In Memory of a Radical, Sex-Positive Literary Icon". *New York Times Style Magazine*. 7 of March 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/07/t-magazine/art/bjarne-melgaard-kathy-acker.html Accessed on the 30th of June 2021.

anti-narrative composition. It results from a range of creative decisions and compositional techniques which radically trouble the conditions for narrative closure and epistemic certainty. But as both Kraus and Wiegener have suggested, these decisions and techniques do not anticipate or dissuade the eventual edification of Acker-the-person – presumably perceived as synonymous with Acker-the-author. If anything, the crystallization of an authorial mythos surrounding Acker imbues the affective relations her work engenders with a strong sense of personhood. Of personal *presence*, even. This is where the concept of authorial performativity proves indispensable, both when reading Acker's work and when historicizing its reception.

Acker's writing performs a radical critique of identity and pushes the self towards definitional crisis. But it does not – and cannot – dispel its integrity completely. Where identity does not figure an as overdetermined construct bound to material truth, it nonetheless survives as performative residue: an affective after-effect of sorts, that saturates the experience of reading her work. To address this, we must elaborate interpretative and critical templates responsive to the more personally vested facets of Acker's writing, while avoiding the imminent lapse into biographical reductivism. On their own terms, the discrepancies between Acker-the-author, Acker-the-person, and Acker-the persona proliferate to such a degree that they provide a procedural critique of realist epistemologies of representation. Fabulation matters here, and fundamentally so. Acker integrated scenes from her intimate life into her writing with a seemingly arbitrary musicality. But she also challenged the meanings of such incursions, through distortions, digressions and diffractions which suffuse the more informational or biographical moments of her writing with literary affect and imagination.

Hypothetically, we could aim towards a comprehensive exegesis of Acker's literary texts, public appearances, performances, interviews, essays, and other public interventions, as an open-ended system of partial fictions and performative refractions. If we did so, the constitutive power of contradiction across Acker's writing and other fictions would be even more salient. Where Acker's work is concerned, contradiction expresses the efficacy of a varied range of creative processes – rather than their failure. I present this hypothesis conditionally only, as the prospective pathway it insinuates is more suggestive than it is prescriptive. But the readings of Acker presented across this project are importantly informed by this hypothesis. While they centralize and focalize literary texts specifically, they do so with a keen sense of wider economies of imaginative labor,

which are not exclusively literary in kind. This allows for a more immersive engagement with the contexts and conditions of literary creation, which I suggest is lacking from current discussions of Acker's work. Especially as it motivates us to gauge how personhood, persona, and performativity are negotiated through both Acker's politics *and* her poetics.

To describe Acker's creative labor through the heuristic of authorial performativity is to insist on her capacity to imbue literary authorship with performative power and play, both affectively and effectively transforming readerly relations – as Bradway, in particular, has contended. It is a recognition that Acker performed authorship with pluralist proclivity, across various media and interdisciplinary intervals, and according to varying necessities and curiosities. But to claim as much does not amount to complementing or concluding a critical portrait of the author. Rather, this is a critique of the very regulatory ideal of authorship, as sustained by literary institutions and publics alike. It is a call towards admitting the porous untenability of that portrait with critical and epistemic humility, even as we gauge its dynamic imbrication in her writing. Acker's persona remains a determinant element in the perception and reception of her work to this day. Thus, this project departs from the contention that its enduring textual agency must be critiqued when contemplating the poetic and political legacy of her work.

Some notes on academic reception

When it comes to the academic reception of Acker's work, we are necessarily speaking of a distinctive chronology from the one charted above. Nonetheless, it overlaps in important ways with those non-academic patterns of reception and rememoration emphasized so far. Acker's writing was the object of academic attention as early as the late 1980s, while she worked an adjunct job at the University of San Diego. But we can trace a more concentrated trend of publications devoted to her work across the 2010s, to an extent parallel to the cycle of renewed public attention under discussion.

Three academic anthologies focused on Acker's work specifically had already been published between 2005 and 2009, each with a distinctive editorial identity. *Devouring Institutions: The Life Work of Kathy Acker*, edited by Michael Hardin, was published through Hyperbole Books (an imprint of San Diego University Press) in 2015. The collection positioned

itself as the first academic publication on Acker's work, deploying an array of disciplinary approaches to place her work in theoretical perspective. *Lust for Life: On the writings of Kathy Acker*, edited by Carla Harryman, Amy Scholder and Avital Ronell came out through Verso Books the following year, with quite a distinct editorial inflection. The essays it compiles, often speculative and free-form, focus on intimate rapports with Acker and Acker's work: most participating authors were part of the same artistic and institutional milieus as Acker, and the anthology often reads as eulogy. Where the first publication consists in a concerted effort to catalyze academic interest in Acker, the latter signals her more direct impact on a number of authors and scholars. *Kathy Acker and Transnationalism*, edited by Polina MacKay and Kathryn Nicol, was published through Cambridge Scholars Publishing in 2009. It was the first publication to adopt a cohesive disciplinary framework in its approach to Acker's work: the volume inquires primarily into questions of geopolitics, cultural politics, nationality and location, through the governing rubric of transnationalism, as drawn from Paul Giles's "Historicizing the Transnational: Robert Coover, Kathy Acker and the Rewriting of British Cultural History, 1970-1997" (Giles 2007).

Notably, it was only as recently as 2016 that the first major monograph on Acker's work emerged. Georgina Colby's *Kathy Acker: Writing the Impossible*, published through Edinburgh University Press, consists in an extensive study of Acker's compositional techniques – often sidestepped in analyses that prioritize the conceptual or thematic implications of her work. By analyzing individual works in terms of form and technique, Colby establishes a long-term timeline for Acker's deployment of diverse textual tactics across the decades, while contesting Acker's standard categorization as a post-modernism and reclaiming her as a late modernist. A second monograph on Acker's work followed soon after, in 2019: *The Politics of Kathy Acker: Revolution and the Avant-Garde* by Emilia Borowska, likewise published through Edinburgh University Press. Borowska's study politically recontextualizes Acker's work in relation to histories of resilience and revolution, thus challenging the recurring centralization of post-structuralism and/or post-modernism in critical discussions of her work. In fact, Borowska attributes the radical politics of Acker's writing to a cross-temporal attentiveness to key events in modern history, such as the Paris Commune of 1871 and the international political struggles of the 1970s.

At the time of writing, two further studies promise to expand the scope of conversations about Acker's work. Because they are contemporaneous with this project's conclusion, they do

not influence our theoretical narrative as much as the previously cited volumes – all of which proved fundamental to the arguments presented here. The first of these is Margaret Henderson's *Kathy Acker: Punk Writer*, which came out through Routledge in late 2020. *The Punk Writer* approaches Acker's work through the wider rubric of "punk," as an aesthetic and as a counter-tradition of insubordinate politics. Where Colby's project resituates Acker within the aesthetic temporality of late modernism, and Borowska retraces her standing as a socially committed writer, Henderson's study in turn situates Acker within one of the counter-cultural discourses she esteemed most. A more selective, nuanced emphasis on certain aspects of Acker's identity and writing is evinced by the upcoming *Philosophy for Spiders: On the Low Theory of Kathy Acker*, written by McKenzie Wark and to be published through Duke University Press in September 2021. *The Philosophy of Spiders* is immediately set apart from most of the academic publications cited so far, as Wark was an intimate acquaintance of Acker's. Moreover, Wark's study is presented as a reassessment of Acker's potential standing as a trans author, in continuity with other public interventions of Wark's across the past decade, which have reaffirmed the trans potentialities – affective as well aesthetic – of Acker's work.

If there is such a disciplinary tableau as Acker studies, then, it is one still in the making, both incipient and heterogenous. But this has not impeded certain regimes of reading to become codified and reified, even as the more disruptive, innovative, and even revolutionary energies of Acker's work are valued and celebrated. Disrupting these regimes will be a key concern of ours, as we suggest readings of three of Acker's novels: *Kathy Goes to Haiti* (1978), *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984), and *Empire of the Senseless* (1988). When tracing the critical chronology of what I have described as a process of relative revival, I have emphasized non-academic or para-academic objects and events, because Acker's work itself solicits such modes of intermedial and interdisciplinary perspective. It is no surprise, then, that critical narratives surrounding her work are as vividly enacted and effected outside the remits of academia as they are within. Besides the more recent proliferation of academic publications on Acker, there is a longer – albeit episodic – history of critical commentary and academic recognition. But this project is more immediately committed to its entrenchment within this wider cultural momentum, even as it remains sensitive to cross-connecting contexts and processes of re-contextualization which precipitate novel queries, demands, and possibilities.

A critical commitment.

The present project hopes to engage with extant – and expectable – understandings of Acker's work, and to retrace core characteristics of the author's writerly praxis. It both converses with and contests those understandings, challenging the scope of their critical attention and their concrete political intention. In the process, it retrieves key questions pertaining to the politics of Acker's work – ones these readings have either underestimated or omitted completely. Departing from standardized perceptions of Acker's writing, I hope to foster processes of critical interpretation and mediation, that might place textual meanings (or crises thereof) into relief. But I also seek to remain with the trouble of accepting that which *does not* mean, and which cannot be restored or recuperated through normative protocols of interpretation. To do so, I suggest the following structural trajectory, through which I hope to weave a compelling conceptual narrative, that might inform and interact with other readings of Acker.

Chapter 1, "On the literary war machine and certain worldly wounds" establishes this project's core ethical and political commitments, along with the conceptual vocabulary I believe they require. The chapter explains how these commitments translate methodologically, and accounts for a set of important decisions regarding how each text is subject to critical scrutiny. Emphasizing the contrarian ethos of Acker's writerly praxis, it dimensions the conflicts and contradictions proper to her work – especially as it is challenged from an intersectional perspective. The chapter evinces the baseline disputes this project reclaims in relation to habitual patterns of reception, and it specifies some of its fundamental claims. By experimenting with and repurposing extant theoretical terminology, it also hopes to foster more flexible and adaptable models of critical reading and readerly attention.

Chapter 2, "On the white signature: the canon, colonialism, and experimentation," follows on from that intervention into the conceptual vocabulary and critical frameworks which organize the ongoing reception of Acker's work. It consists in a reading of Acker's *Kathy Goes to Haiti* (1978), a work disregarded by most critics, and later disavowed by Acker herself. The chapter advances a detailed reading of the novel, while paying keen attention to its compositional and editorial history. By emphasizing the dynamic contexts of its composition and publication, the chapter raises key concerns about the racial politics of Acker's work. It points to a range of

recurrent tropes and themes within her writing, while suggesting the work's conceptual affinities to the avant-garde engender important exclusionary effects. Ultimately, it suggests that relations of critical distance impact the work's standing within contemporary reception, and shared perceptions of its representational ethos.

Chapter 3, "(Straight) Woman, Queer (Man): queer relations, textual and otherwise," probes further still into the representational politics of Acker's work. It consists in a reading of *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984), with a selective emphasis on the narrative (re)construction of French writer Jean Genet (1910-1986). By focusing on the latter sections of the narrative, and how its protagonist and Genet find idiosyncratic conditions and complicity, our reading foregrounds the queer affinities at stake in Acker's work. Through the conceptual framework of disidentification, it provides an account of the readerly and writerly investments inscribed within Acker's texts, and the affective politics of such intertextual connections. In part, it does so by retracing the textual constellations within which Acker situated herself. Finally, the chapter traces the increasing formal and technical complexity of her work in the 1980s, as she engaged with other forms of linguistic possibility, with a marked resistance to mimetic principles and the reasoning of narrative causality.

Chapter 4, "*Transitioning: Empire of the Senseless*, and dreamings surrounding" concerns an important turn in the politics and poetics of Acker's work. Through a discussion of *Empire of the Senseless* (1988), it describes the author's transition towards more narrative tendencies and reconstructive attitudes. Addressing Acker's own theoretical writing, it narrativizes her turn away from the denunciative and deconstructive functions of the literary work. The chapter attends to the novel's construction and content in detail, with a keen interest in its opposition to the political fictions of western dominion, heterosexual sociality, and patriarchal society. Detailing how these systems of oppression intersect – as, subsequently, do strategies of resistance to them – it completes a finer portrait of Acker's politically motivated writing, and the ethical possibilities engendered by. Re-marking and re-emphasizing the categories of heterosexuality and whiteness in particular, the chapter aims to integrate previous discussions of these same topics into a more comprehensive interpretation. Finally, our reading points to the degrees of indeterminacy that characterize Acker's writing even at its most narrative, raising the question of narrative finality.

Chapter 1: On the literary war machine, and certain worldly wounds

2.1. Introduction.

Every apparition of the individual heart is a political occurrence.

- Kathy Acker

It is quite possible for a work of literature to operate as a war machine upon its epoch.

- Monique Wittig

The present project is structured around careful and thorough readings of select literary texts (and some critical essays) by U.S. experimental writer Kathy Acker (1944-1997). They are moved by particular concerns regarding the representational politics of her work, especially where race, gender, and sexuality are concerned. These categories animate our critical encounter with Acker's writing, and our account of its respective contentions against standardized models of representation. However, as we re-emphasize the crucial problem of representation, we deliberately refrain from supporting the notion that political thought is somehow *other* or *exterior* to poetics, and the materiality of the written word. Instead, our understanding of Acker's poetics departs from a recognition of the constitutive force of the political in processes of literary creation and innovation. From this standpoint, writing – as praxis – is always imbricated in specific social dynamics, material histories, and epistemic ecologies.

I am especially invested in the epistemic ecologies actualized through Acker's writing, and how it reinstates and redistributes foundational forms of regulatory political violence – even as it confronts and disputes them. For our purposes, "epistemic ecologies" refer to complex, non-holistic systems of knowledge and knowledge-production. They take shape through a wide variety of discursive contexts, and material means of communication. Often, they are characterized by

heterogeneity, unpredictability, and indeterminacy.[24] The work of literature is one such means of conveying, contesting, or inventing knowledge. Literary discourse participates of the ongoing production and reproduction of normalized structures of meaning, and the power relations they represent. As such, it plays a potentially crucial role in the distribution – and redistribution – of political violence. At heart, this project aims to describe the ambivalent instrumentality of Acker's work within such political and representational disputes.[25]

This entails paying due attention to those processes by which Acker's writing is overdetermined by racism, sexism, heterosexism, and cissexism – even as it challenges the onto-epistemic reach of each of these systems of oppression. By confronting the more compacted dimensions of Acker's political imaginary, this project hopes to re-narrativize Acker's political agency as a radical writer, while dissuading the moralistic impulse to disqualify or exclude her work from extant archives of the oppositional imagination. It is an attempt to reconcile the reactive and the transformative capacities of her work, without presuming to produce an unequivocal or universal answer to this pivotal query. If anything, it emphasizes the definitional troubles her work engenders, and its capacity to resist hermeneutic reach. Concurrently, it refutes the ongoing idealization of Acker's life and work, as exemplary of contrarian creativity.

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[24] This formulation is inspired by Félix Guattari's appeal for a comprehensive (yet anti-totalitarian) "ecosophy," that would transform the whole of social relations. In *The Three Ecologies* (2000)*,* Guattari suggests a redescription of the socius as "social ecology," and of the psychic as "mental ecology." The two ecologies, in turn, remain in inter-systemic relay with what is most commonly perceived as "ecology" (i.e., environmental ecology). In the late essay "Remaking Social Practices," he argues:

> Without a change in mentalities, without entry into a post-media era, there can be no enduring hold over the environment. Yet, without modifications to the social and material environment, there can be no change in mentalities. Here, we are in the presence of a circle that leads me to postulate the necessity of founding an "ecosophy" that would link environmental ecology to social ecology and to mental ecology. (Guattari, 1996, 264)

[25] The concept of distribution/redistribution does not rapport exclusively to material resources or assets (including finance, infra-structures, of institutions), as it might in some versions of historical materialism and Marxist critical theory. Instead, violence is here contemplated as something that is likewise socially distributed and/or redistributed. Sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman, for one, has described the redistribution of violence proper to the so-called "civilizing process," and by extension, to the historical project of (western) modernity. Bauman claims that:

> Modernity legitimizes itself as a 'civilizing process' – as an ongoing process of making the coarse gentle, the cruel benign, the uncouth refined. Like most legitimations, however, this one is more an advertising copy than an account of reality. At any rate, it hides as much as it reveals and what it hides is that only through the coercion they perpetrate can the agencies of modernity keep out of bounds the coercion they swore to annihilate; that one person's civilizing process is another person's forceful 3 incapacitation. The civilizing process is not about the uprooting, but about the redistribution of violence. (Bauman, 141).

Acker's writing remains compelling and provocative because of the complex, even properly *contradictory*, forces and meanings it confronts the reader with. The complexities of her work inform the conceptual, affective, and political relations it engenders. Likewise, they inform the conditions of its reading and reception. Such tensions and conflicts stem directly from a dissenting ethos of contradiction, bound to Acker's own, individual perceptions of history, society, and subjectivity. This writerly ethos is important where the material identity of Acker writing is concerned, but it likewise affects the processes by which it is read and received: often, it calls for certain degrees of readerly implication. Borrowing from the theoretical vocabulary of Deleuze and Guattari, I provisionally describe this writerly ethos as "rhizomatic perspectivism." This is an important metaphor for method, insofar as it underlines the multifocal dynamics of the readings performed across this project. At the same time, it invokes something of the heterodox poetic and political logics of Acker's work – especially given its propensity for disruptive multiplicity and irreducible complexity.

Acker's efforts towards oppositional thinking, feeling, and imagining are characteristically contradictory, and bound to the very fact of contradiction. Moreover, a profound sense of impossibility and infeasibility persists throughout her textual imaginary. These degrees of indetermination give shape to a narrative epistemic profoundly indebted to post-structuralist understandings of subjectivation, de-subjectivation, and representation. Thus, the model of rhizomatic perspectivism also works to emphasize the influence of Deleuze and Guattari on Acker's critical approach to the politics of subjectivity and representation. Likewise, it emphasizes how the critical nexus at which subjectivity and representation undergirds the disorienting pathways and states of disarray Acker wrote of and wrote through.

Our own hermeneutic exigencies and curiosities take shape through adaptive readerly relations, which recognize and confront the overdetermined status of Acker's work, as emblematic of the radical literary will. Thus, our critical attitude is multifocal and multicausal. The conflicting and disjunctive dynamics of Acker's textual politics solicit due critical care and consideration, justifying this readerly standpoint. A vast range of factors impact our readerly attention, and by extension, our conditions for critical reading. Such factors include, but are not limited to: Acker's own life narrative, in its biographical and historical densities; the particularities of the representational logics and creative methods she favored; her authorial rapport with canonized and/or communalized structures of meaning; the disjunctive and deconstructive structural

architecture of her texts; the express stylistic corpulence of her poetics; the conceptual and political motivations of her writing; those versions of subjectivism she most valued, through authorial performativity and modulated fictions of personhood, or the historically indentured and context-specific political narratives her work both reclaimed and rejected – often in the same gesture.

This index cannot feign to be exhaustive. More to the point, it suggests something of the multifocal reading demanded by Acker's texts. These various factors, themselves constitutively multidimensional, entangle and entwine as we engage in a situated critique of Acker's work. Indeed, some must be rendered present – palpable, even problematic – if we are to break open distinctive trajectories for political and critical mediation. A grasp – even if partial – on the dynamic interaction between these factors, and their imbrication in the materiality of Acker's writing, is a pre-condition for reading her anew, and responsibly. That is to say, without relapsing into the reductivism of realist epistemologies of representation, or otherwise overdetermined and unitarian theologies of interpretation.

Finally, rhizomatic perspectivism describes how our critical investments diversify and ramify, with a keen sense of transversality. Ours is a trans-feminist, anti-colonialist, and queer critical reading. These various critical standpoints are interactively embedded into our hermeneutics, by necessity: both the contemporary moment and the complexity of the work under discussion demand as much. Our approach attends to intersectionality and multidimensionality when accounting for the gradual normalization of Acker's writing within the contemporary archive, even if this processual canonization is predicated *precisely* on Acker's oppositional claims and experimental achievements. One of our constitutive claims is that an intersectional and multidimensional critical perspective proves fundamental both when reading Acker's work, and when figuring the regimes of feeling and knowing that have historically organized its reception. Reading Acker from this standpoint engenders a more incisive and sensitive understanding of the ways in which her work bore witness to, struggled with, and even promulgated a number of normative political fictions: those of white supremacism, those of cis- and heteronormativity, those of Eurocentric colonialism, and those of liberal capitalism. Likewise, it places into relief that her work did so even through some if its most radically disruptive gestures.

One question in particular animates this project's processes of critical confrontation and reconstruction. Namely, Acker's own concrete standpoint as a writer. By this, we refer to the racial,

social, cultural, economic, professional, geopolitical, gender and sexual markers of Acker's concrete positionality, as an individual. We admit that these in turn inflect her investments, attachments, options, and preferences as a creative and social agent. This project departs from the premise that Acker's bodied conditions of living and making are constitutive – if not conclusive or determinant *per se* – of the conditions of possibility of her writerly praxis. By consequence, they shape the creative, conceptual, and political horizons of her writing – as would, for that matter, be the case with any given writer.

One implication of this finer point about Acker's authorial standpoint is that it has been (and continues to be) engrained into critical understandings of her work, and a critical reading of it cannot ignore this key point. Another is that for that standpoint to cohere as an object of critique, concerted efforts towards reworking critical vocabulary are necessary, so it may be named and narrativized accordingly. How this project theorizes Acker's writerly praxis through the heuristic of "authorial performativity" is one such effort. How it theorizes her body of work as a "literary war machine," is another.

There is one major tension which these introductory remarks will not resolve. If anything, it will continuously feed, as a centrifugal impetus of sorts, into much of the thinking, feeling, and writing produced across this project. It translates into a pivotal query: what happens when the heterodox orthographies of Acker's political imagination, in their combative relation to normalized power relations and structures of oppression, are confronted as a point of critical departure, rather than one of celebratory foreclosure? That is to say, how is our understanding of Acker's dissident politics transformed by the decision to address them as sources of trouble, rather than as hypothetical approximations to the political truth? Furthermore, what problems – and what possibilities – arise when the project of critical reading departs from a strong rejection of its own resolution, let alone one bound to the dualistic opposition between affirmation *or* negation?

To ask these questions is, in tandem, to raise the question of how a critical project like ours might move onwards, from that moment – both generative and afflictive – when we recognize Acker's work as a critique of contemporary economies of representation, which nonetheless reinstates and redistributes foundational forms of political violence, in compliance with normative structures of meaning and systems of oppression. How can we best describe how both reactive *and* transformative effects occur through the very same textual gestures and actions? And what kind of

critical narrative might we fashion, to follow through on these questions, while staying with the trouble that they engender?

Donna Haraway, whose theories of situated knowledge and partial perspective inform the present project, has written evocatively of the necessity of "staying with the trouble":

> In urgent times, many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe, of stopping something from happening that looms in the future, of clearing away the present and the past in order to make futures for coming generations. Staying with the trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future. In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing point between awful or edenic pasts or apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings. (Haraway, 2016, 1.)

This project stems from the decision to stay with the trouble of reading Acker in the contemporary moment. It privileges particularized pathways, profoundly committed to social, political, and affective justice. It expresses an ethos of readerly engagement, and critical immersion. The critical labor at stake does not focus on resolving or repairing a disjunction between dissonant elements or facets of Acker's work. We refuse to read constellations of textual contradiction as problems to be solved, by diving their constituent elements and reclaiming the distinction between *good* Acker (i.e., those imaginative or transformative elements, construed as positive attributes) and *bad* Acker (i.e., those political misrecognitions, epistemic cruelties, or regulatory fictions construed as negative attributes).

Holding these questions to heart in their perplexing proliferations and striated formations, and to do so while abiding by non-dualistic hermeneutic principles, is the most important and generative challenge this project presents. This decision neither allows for nor aims toward the absolute, univocal commensurability of literary values and signifying deeds, according to a hypothetical model of moralistic and analytic finitude. If *contradiction* as such haunts the very premises of Acker's writing, our methodologic commitment is not bound to the redemption or relativization of the troubled (and troublesome) effects it engenders. Quite on the contrary. To acknowledge the persistence of the affective and epistemic dissonances which ensue from this definitional trouble – to know of and struggle with it, ambivalent and painful and inconclusive as it may prove to be – is inextricable from this project's commitment to transformative critical justice.

2.2. The war machine: on the category of innovative literature.

How might we prepare for the complex injunctions and interpellations of Acker's work, without presuming to find a hermeneutic key immune to alteration or adaptation? How might we conceptually resist the reduction of Acker to an over-simplified caricature, for the purposes of rhetorical and methodological explication, and emphasize instead the literary and historical individuality of her signature? To do so, I suggest we figure Acker's work through a transitional conceptual metaphor. That metaphor is the war machine, here retrieved to describe the relations between history, literature, and subjectivity in the process of literary innovation. I suggest we depart from a particular definition of the war machine, as articulated within the wider context of western feminism and post-structuralism: the one advanced by writer and critic Monique Wittig.

In "The Trojan Horse" (1984), a brief essay later collected in the anthology *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (1992), Wittig probes into the problematic relation between older and newer literary forms in the process of literary innovation. Her argument begins by announcing the proper substance of literature as the materiality of the written word, thereby understood as performatively concrete on its own terms – rather than transparently referential, either to things or ideas. In this, her intervention corroborates conceptions of language and representation in currency in the context of post-1970s French post-structuralism.[26] Wittig retrieves this conceptual metaphor from ancient Greek mythology, to characterize the innovative (or experimental) work of literature as a persuasive apparatus, capable of unforeseen signification. She invokes the Trojans' first impression of the mythic structure, and how their increasing attraction and adaptation to it ensured the success of the Greek's invective.[27] Following this summary, Wittig writes:

> Any important literary work is like the Trojan Horse at the time it is produced. Any work with a new form operates as a war machine, because its design and its goal is to pulverize the old forms and formal conventions. It is always produced in hostile territory. And the stranger it appears, nonconforming,

[26] To an important degree, post-structuralism emerged in counter-distinction to the projects of structuralism and semiology, as dominant schools of thought with French academia (and continental academia more widely) in post-war French academia (and continental academia more widely). Post-structuralism consists both in a rupture with and away from structuralism, and in a continuation of various of its core inquiries. Structuralism, in turn, departed from the seminal work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1891), whose theory of signification was pivotal for its disciplinary formation.

[27] The event is retold in detail in Virgil's *Aeneid* (29-19 BC). In Virgil's narrative, a Greek soldier (Sinon) convinces the Trojans that the large structure is an offering to the goddess Athena, to make amends for previous attacks and acts of desecration.

> unassimilable, the longer it will take for the Trojan Horse to be accepted. (…) [Eventually, it] will sap and blast out the ground where it was planted. The old literary forms, which everybody was used to, will eventually appear to be outdated, inefficient, incapable of transformation. (Wittig, 1992, 68-69).

What calls our attention to this text, as we foreground the difficulties proper to critically approaching Acker's work, is not so much its dualistic opposition between established and novel literary forms. If anything, this account might prove overly schematic and developmental, reducing literary history to diachrony. In doing so, it risks underestimating the non-linear temporalities of literary form (its permanence and impermanence, across time) as well as its complexity under a synchronic axis of understanding, according to disparate geopolitical, material, and symbolic locations. Rather, I am drawn to the provocative power of this conceptual metaphor, as it figures an unequivocally *combative* conception of the innovative and/or transformative work of literature. The explicative powers of the war machine are both demonstrated *and* enlivened, as we confront Acker's body of work.

In this reading, the "important literary work" holds the same structure as the Trojan Horse. It does not forcefully break its way through accepted parameters of legibility and intelligibility. Instead, it deceitfully persuades readerships (i.e., the adversarial forces of that "hostile territory") of its sympathetic aesthetics and formal merit, only to reveal its combative capacities as a "war machine" over time. This confrontation with the war machine's true intent is inevitable, no matter how gradually it might come to expression, and according to how "unconforming" and "unassimilable" it first presents as. Then, and only then, it will destroy the territorial ground it draws from and stands on, and whereby it might signify unexpectedly. The moment when the war machine "saps out" and "blasts" the ground of its making – its intent fully expressed – is one of renovation and reconstruction. Those processes by which it attains a unique identity ultimately render extant "literary forms" redundant, insofar as it supersedes them.

From a feminist standpoint, the semiotic economy of the war machine might raise some definitional trouble. It strongly relies on precepts of deceitful intrusion, invasive penetration, and unconsented transformation – which chart more or less unequivocally onto gendered hierarchies of dualistic opposition. But one might also follow through on the tactical redeployment of these precepts and of this terminology. Especially because they so vividly enmesh with the dynamics of inimicality and antagonization at the core of so much of Acker's work, and which motivate us to read her texts as *invectives*. To follow through on this reading is to admit that feminist *and* bellic

poetics are already embattled, and entangled, in Acker's writing. At times, she was brutally candid about that warmongering standpoint. In 1990, she wrote: "In such a society as ours the only possible chance for change, for mobility, for political, economic, and moral flow lies in the tactics of guerilla warfare, in the use of fictions, of language." (Acker, 1990, 5).

For the purposes of her argument, Wittig then details her understanding of the materiality of literature's modes of signification, in relation to other systems of representation. As a Marxist lesbian feminist, Wittig was profoundly committed to a materialist critique of the long-standing and metaphysically grounded tradition of Western idealism. Especially in so far as that tradition has privileged form over matter, within its respective systems of representation. But she also subjects Marxist theory to scrutiny, emphasizing how it perpetuates that same divide through the distinction between "base" and "superstructure."[28] Wittig writes:

> Without a reexamination of the way language operates both in the domain of ideology and in art, we/it will remain in what the Marxists precisely call "idealism." Form and content correspond to the body/soul division, and it is applied to the words of language and also to ensembles, that is to say, to literary works. Linguists speak of signifier and signified, which comes to the same distinction. Through literature, though, words come back to us whole again. Through literature, then, we can learn something that should be useful in any other field: in words form and content cannot be dissociated, because they partake of the same form, the form of the word, a material form. (Wittig, 73)

Wittig's account of language – and subsequently, but not exclusively, of literature – departs from an anti-dualistic interrogation of the conventionally defined and hierarchically organized oppositions between form and content, between body and soul, and finally, between signifier and signified. Wittig produces an und-disciplinary critique of various disciplines, and their respective conceptions of language – including classically defined idealism, but also structuralism and formalism. These three dyadic oppositions are, in fact, recognized as causally and constitutively inter-dependent: they subtend and sustain one another, across a range of fields. In the process, Wittig re-equates the question of form/content, a discussion familiar to various strands of aesthetic inquiry within the western theoretical tradition.[29]

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[28] Wittig observes: "Even in the Marxist and post-Marxist traditions, there are, on the one hand, the economic order, the material one, and, on the other hand, ideology and politics, considered as the 'superstructure.' They do not examine language as a direct exercise of power. In this conception, language, along with art, is part of what they call the superstructure. Both are included in ideology, and as such express nothing but the 'ideas' of the ruling class." (73)

[29] Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation" (1966) stands as a strong example of this debate's importance within contemporary U.S. art theory and intellectual history. For reference, see: Sontag, 2001.

Markedly, she identifies its causal relation to the body/soul division, as inscribed into western culture by Christianity and actualized by the Cartesian body/mind split, which remains a foundational tenet of western thought. In this respect, Wittig's rapport converses with various feminist philosophical projects carried out in France across the 1970s and 1980s, which were key to Acker's conceptual understanding of her own praxis.[30] Finally, as she problematizes structuralism's operational split between signifier and signified – which would resolve the sign/referent duality, but in fact reinstates a form/content duality –, Wittig situates structuralist thought into a wider historical and cultural continuum, while disrupting its epistemic presumptions.

Wittig treats the materiality of the written word as self-evident – self-evidently *pedagogical*, even. By doing so, she alerts us not to underestimate the complexity of the war machine as she portrays it, on the grounds of a stronger focus on processes of formal innovation. Wittig's war machine encompasses a complex understanding of the materiality of literary signification, bound to Marxist semiotics, and by extension, to historical materialism. Hers is, emphatically, a materialist conception of language, and of the process of linguistic innovation. The war machine, as an assemble of material and semiotic phenomena, is not defined by a univocal passage from the material to the semiotic or from the semiotic to the material, in rapports of co-equivalence. Instead, embedded within the war machine, is a conception of the written word as a self-present implement of the two-as-one: form/content; content/form.

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[30] Acker mentioned her empathy with post-structuralist feminism in more than one instance. For one, in the more meditative piece "Paragraphs" (1995), she recognizes a gradual distancing from her initial investment in the work of Julia Kristeva. Placing Kristeva's theories in comparison with those of Luce Irigaray, Acker comments:

> I prefer Irigaray's position on the maternal to Kristeva's. According to Irigaray, we, being female in a patriarchal society, might have a double and ambiguous relation to our mothers: On the one hand, my mother was or is my lover. On the other hand, my mother was a victim in the male-defined society. So, if I identify with her, I'm forced to define myself as victim. So how do I deal with this double bind? Go mad? (Pun intended.) Irigaray says we, females, have to reinstate the mother as another person. I take that rather seriously. (90)

Acker was keenly aware of Kristeva's influential theory of abjection, and how it relates to cultural definitions of femininity. But she also engaged with the works of Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clément, and Wittig herself. These authors have often been collectively described under the unitarian rubric of "French feminism," despite their projects often being incompatible (in moments, outright contradicting one another). This categorical reduction has often been produced by U.S.-based cultural agents, ranging from writers (such as Acker herself) to theorists or academic editors. For an early inquiry into the disputable meaning of "French feminism," see: Moses (1998).

Wittig holds no interest in repurposing (and subsequently, reiterating) any given value from the aforementioned triad: form/content; mind/body; signifier/signified. Rather, she in intends to effectively dispense with these dualities, both at the level of theory and at the level of practice. This disavowal of dualistic thinking opens up our understanding of literary innovation, of the radical imagination, and of oppositional poetics when confronting Acker's work. This combative – *aggressive*, even – model of literary relationality inspires our epistemic and hermeneutic attitudes towards Acker's work, and it stands as an enduring heuristic and metaphor. Never is this truer than when it speaks of our own readerly embattlement in the assorted troubles proper to Acker's controversial poetics, and adjacent critical narratives.

Wittig concludes her essay with some remarks on Marcel Proust's *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu* (1913-1927). She cites it as an exemplary instance of the literary war machine, given its gradual unfolding across time. For Wittig, its crucial novelty lies in the constitution of "the subject as being homosexual for the first time in literary history" (74). In this analysis, literary praxis and subjective positionality become definitionally bound together, in what we might describe more simply as literary subjectivity:

> For in literature, history, I believe, intervenes at the individual and subjective level and manifests itself in the particular point of view of the writer. It is then one of the most vital and strategic parts of the writer's task to universalize this point of view. But to carry out a literary work one must be modest and know that being gay or anything else is not enough. For reality cannot be directly transferred from the consciousness of the book. The universalization of each point of view demands a particular attention to the formal elements that can be open to history, such as themes, subjects of narratives, as well as the global form of the work. It is the attempted universalization of the point of view that turns or does not turn a literary work into a war machine. (74-75).

Wittig's embodied positionality as a lesbian feminist critic and novelist informs her material understanding of literature, history, and politics on quite concrete terms. Her public presentation as a creator, thinker, and public figure produces that biographical bind within the critical moment: hers is an implicated standpoint. Here, as a writer writing on writing, she stands in playful, false symmetry with Acker – a performative approximation I would like to emphasize, as I invite their thoughts and discourses to meet. Wittig's strong claim is that history works at the very level of a writer's individual subjectivity, conditioning – or more exactly: *constituting* – their "particular point of view." History is instantiated, and comes to expression, through that point of

view.[31] But the ethical and pragmatic ramifications of Wittig's claim emerge when she points to the "vital and strategic" effort to render that point of view as *universal*. This transformation of standpoint is necessary for the war machine to function as such.

This claim does not, in and of itself, imply a claim towards the representational primacy of the subject's embodied positionality. Wittig explains that "being gay or anything else is not *enough*" (my emphasis), because there is no direct, mimetic relation of correspondence between consciousness, literature, and reality. What Wittig describes as "the universalization of each point of view" is not intrinsic to that point of view. Rather, it results from the practice of a deliberate attention to those generic *elements* or *units* within a work's making, which enable its eventual claim to universality. What makes the work "open to history" is the express result of a writer's decisions, and how they collectively interact.

When Wittig pivots universalization as the definitional requirement of the literary war machine, we begin to confront some of the more complicated political, epistemic, and representational ramifications of her conceptual narrative. The operative demand towards universalization confronts us with a wider array of questions pertaining to history, positionality, ethics, and innovation. These questions surround Wittig's intervention, as they do more generally the phenomenon of so-called innovative literature. As we confront these questions, within their respective complexities and subtleties, we broach some of the starker problems presented, performed, and even *affected* by Acker's work.

To begin: *which* and *whose* history does Wittig refer to? The very notion of being "open to history" implies a substantive, monolithic, and exclusionary idea of *History*, which substitutes for a plurality of concurrent, confluent, perhaps even conflicting histories. The injunction of being "open to history" seemingly takes expression as the text's legibility and intelligibility, through a minimal (yet determinant) capacity to exert persuasive action over the reading public's attention, achieved through the text's internal formal relations. If not readily legible and intelligible, the war machine certainly needs to *gradually* become so for it to function. To return to Wittig's opening argument, this amounts to saying that the Trojans must at the very least be aesthetically and/or

[31] That the gay male author is treated as a core referent – and as the protagonist of gay literature as such – is a significant aspect of the Wittig's analysis, given the much greater margin of access grated to gay male authors by western literary institutions. The centralization of gay male authorship and historical authority, and how it is entrenched in complex homo- and heterosocial relations of power, is discussed to some extent in Chapter 4, on Acker's 1984 novel *Blood and Guts in High School*. There, the exemplary gay male subject is French writer Jean Genet.

affectively drawn to the war machine's potential appeal in a first instance, to ensure its eventual efficacy. But what does it mean for a text – or a certain *kind* of text – to have its efficacy and efficiency defined in such terms? Plainly: what does the injunction towards universalization prefigure, and consequently, what poetic and political possibilities does it preclude?

In fact, to provocatively move onwards – and *outwards* – from this interrogation, what would it even mean for any text to be *closed* to history, insofar as texts are necessarily (and according to Wittig's own understanding) historical and historicized projects? The fact that a relation of attraction (i.e., affection as a condition for effect) is structurally doubled by an abstract demand towards universalization (i.e., those conditions which render the text legible and intelligible) calls our attention to the power of normalcy within literary relations, and those regulatory pressures which ensure normalization. The principle of universalization departs from a standardized perception of literary norms already in action. At stake is the historical contingency of definitions of literary relationality, given the values of legibility and intangibility are themselves historically transient and transitory, mediated by concrete protocols of power, knowledge, and discipline. Just as the very notions of attraction, affectation and adaptation are historically pliable, and contextually ductile.

These conceptual challenges do not aim to disarm Wittig's war machine, nor do they render it obsolete. Quite on the contrary: they attempt to retrieve this conceptual metaphor and imbue it with increased degrees of critical complexity and explicative subtlety. They evince the difficulties, the densities, and the tensions proper to the labor of confronting the regulatory ideals of legibility and intelligibility from within, through the practice of writing. These difficulties are not to be resolved, but rather, recognized as the epistemic trouble entrenched within any effort towards thinking "innovative literature" historically, and responsibly accounting for the historicity of dissident politics of representation. To be "open to history" may first read as a self-evident claim: a materialist assertion of the mediation of history as a writerly imperative, which places historical responsibility at the core of transformative literary practice. But history is a disputed epistemic construct itself: spatially/temporally permutable; definitionally bound to disciplinary ideals. The historical archive is a mode of epistemic narration shaped in accordance with the political strictures and constrictions of its disciplinary location of production, which presumes its own regulatory ideals of legibility and intelligibility.

From the recognition that conditions of legibility and intelligibility are historically produced, stems a need to challenge the presumably intrinsic structures and characteristics which would constitute the literary work as open to history. Even from a synchronic standpoint, we must recognize that they are bound to (and bound by) concrete social positions. Namely, those of majoritarian, dominant, and/or privileged subject-positions, which hold authority over knowledge and creativity, and whose authority works to deface or erase histories, bodies, and textualities other than their own. Hence, the recognizable novelty of *La Recherche*'s invective: the constitution of the gay literary subject, where there was none, is politically and epistemically transformative.

By recognizing the disciplinary production of history, we ground our confrontation with Acker's writerly ethos, her strong rejection of normative and normalizing impulses, and even her occasional favor for entropy or opacity. This confrontation identifies how the author's writerly ethos relates to complex histories of representation, oppression, and subjection. It asserts its imbrication within them, and its conflicted – or ambivalent – relationship to normative power relations and normalized structures of meaning. However, by historicizing Acker's work, we do not presume to explicate it fully, and exhaustively. Instead, we maintain that a historically sensitive account of Acker's politics and poetics must remain attuned to what remains beyond the ready reach of hermeneutics – that which is proper to inhabiting the world within contradiction and evades or eludes the project of interpretation.

A provisional thesis, then: Kathy Acker's body of work constitutes an important challenge to accepted literary standards, and to the norms governing literary creation. It is a war machine – and an especially impressive one at that. Acker's writing departs from avant-garde aesthetic and conceptual precepts, settling into their formal languages and representational logics to some extent. Yet it transforms them, through processes of both formal and conceptual innovation. Her praxis departs from a recognition of the subversive potentialities of counterculture and experimental literature, and the political counter-narratives they engender. But it also troubles them, as it upsets the grounds – epistemic as well as aesthetic – on which they stand. Her readerly and writerly relationship to the counter-tradition of experimental literature, in particular, is one of fierce commitment. It is also, by necessity, fiercely critical of it.

Ours is a struggling, yearning encounter with a deliberately unconforming and confrontational textual apparatus. Acker's programmatic assault to social and formal norms aims

to upset the definitional logics of legibility, intelligibility, and normativity as such. Still, ours is a methodologically mediated encounter. Through intersectional and multidimensional analysis, and with a fundamental concern with political accountability at its core, this project refuses to explain away – let alone romanticize – the failures, fault-lines and fissures which complicate the text of radical politics. Instead, the readings produced here confront Acker's war machine with its own constitutive limits. They emphasize its collusion in and complicity with a dominant epistemic ecology, and the various instances by which it reembodies, reinstates, and reiterates hegemony. To describe that war machine's frictions and altercations with hegemony, one must attend to its concrete textual tactics. To do so, and in continuity of our reading of Wittig, I suggest we breach its entrenchment within post-structuralist theory and post-structuralist discourse.

2.3. Deconstruction/decentralization: a post-structuralist vocabulary.

By the 1980s, Acker's literary discourse explicitly spoke to a programmatic model of post-structuralist theories. Across the 1980s and 1990s, her textual fictions openly incorporate post-structuralist understandings of language, signification, and representation. In a sense, post-structuralist discourse provided the conceptual infra-structure which supported the relative consistency of her texts' plain of composition. But this is also a question about the "material form" of words, in and as writing, to retrieve Wittig's appealing formula. Through diverse structural and formal mechanisms, Acker's work *performed* the promise of post-structuralism. Her writing does not simply abide by its conceptual scripts, as if verifying its precepts and premises: it embodies those precepts and premises, and practices post-structuralism as poetics. Ultimately, it inhabits post-structuralist theory as a structure of aesthetic feeling.

In "Paragraphs" (1995), Acker wrote:

> Some people ask me, "How can I make sense of your writing?" I then say, "Don't bother. Don't make sense. Eat your mind." As a novelist, I construct a world. I'm not concerned with what that world means, for to means is to be something other. There are sets of arguments about sexuality and identity in my texts, but no absolute meanings. There are tons of meanings and all of these meanings collide. Meaning shifts." (Acker, 1995, 92)

Here, Acker offers a hypothetical reader some leeway into the possibility of rendering her work meaningful. Or more importantly still, meaningless. The intrinsic instability of textual meaning is not construed as deceitful – a ruse on readerly expectations. In fact, Acker advises potential readers *not* to make sense of her work, and to forfeit on the possibility of fixed or finite meanings. To an extent, this is an argument about writerly intention. Rather than provide the means for interpretation, Acker disavows that project and obfuscates such efforts. By admitting she is not particularly preoccupied with the precept of comprehension, Acker produces an implicit critique of standardized models of reading and representation. This critical standpoint stems, to an extent, from Acker's direct engagement with post-structuralist thinking.

Acker first became invested in post-structuralism in the late 1970s, through an intimate rapport with theorist, publisher, and critic Sylvère Lotringer. Lotringer was a prominent proponent of "French theory" in the context of U.S. academia and leftist politics – and especially as the publisher of Semiotext(e). The rapport shared between the two enabled Acker to encounter a range of authors – and theoretical narratives – she had yet to confront. In interview with Larry McCaffery, Acker describes the transformative effect of that encounter:

> I guess what I wanted was to have a narrative that was a kind of "de-narrative." If there is such a word. You see, there was no way I had of talking about it, really, until the punk movement came along and I met Sylvère Lotringer. That was about 1976. Sylvère introduced me to the work of Félix Guattari, Gilles Deleuze, and (somewhat) Foucault. Those were the main ones for me. Derrida was never as important. And I never took to Baudrillard's work. But it was only then that I began to find a language for what I was doing. Especially the ideas of decentralization, and different notions of sexuality, and of the relation of sexuality to language and politics. And all that. […] So does all this have to do with postmodernism? I'm not sure. (McCaffery and Acker, 89).

The timeframe Acker implicitly refers to, before she encountered both punk *and* post-structuralism, is the early 1970s, when she composed and published projects such as *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* (1973) and *I Dreamt I was a Nymphomaniac: Imagining* (1974). Acker produces this account of her encounter with post-structuralism after McCaffery inquires into her work's relationship with post-modernism, suggesting such early works present post-modern characteristics *before* the fact of post-modernism – i.e., before its consolidation as a wider literary movement. Acker considers her categorization as a post-modernist "useful" (90). Otherwise, she seems keen on signaling a certain distance from that movement. Earlier in the interview, she tells McCaffery:

> I was appropriating this kind of materials prior to the use of this word "postmodernism," so I don't think that my interest in this sort of thing in anyway has to do with my awareness of what was happening in the "postmodern movement" as such. I can't trace exactly when the use of this started, but it was already there in the very beginning of my work, back in the late '60s and early '70s. (86)

This statement places Acker's disidentification from the "post-modern movement" into sharp relief. Conversely, she is quick to emphasize the conceptual influence of a few, key post-structuralist thinkers: Foucault, Guattari, Deleuze… Here as elsewhere, Acker describes a kind of anticipatory relationship with post-structuralism, which provides the metalanguage she had yet to attain. Sometimes, this encounter reads as revelatory: at one point in the interview, Acker refers to her "*discovery* of Deleuze and Guattari and the others" (my emphasis, 90).

What is particularly compelling about accounts of Acker's encounter with post-structuralism is that they often emphasize a process of *recognition*, by which the author found the conditions of expression of conceptual intuitions already at play in her creative praxis. Acker's encounter with post-structuralism transformed her literary and political understanding, and it engendered conceptual and poetic possibilities which surprised her previous epistemic standing. Yet this encounter has often been rendered as the means through which Acker reconciled an incipient critical vocabulary with what her poetics were already imaging, inquiring into, or intimating.

This project would rather describe Acker as a post-structuralist writer, rather than a post-modernist one. In this, it diverges from more recent readings, which have de-emphasized either category. In fact, it does so because it restitutes a distinction these readings seem to neglect. Namely, that post-structuralism and post-modernism constitute discrete, discontinuous theoretical and historical phenomena. Discussing recent patterns of reception, Emilia Borowska has compellingly argued that understanding Acker's textual politics in their relation to history requires "an interpretative framework that will supplant poststructural readings." (Borowska, 5) But Borowska's argument relies on the assumption that the two terms are nearly interchangeable. In contrast, this project retrieves and reasserts the distinction between them, precisely for historical reasons. [32]

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[32] Critical studies committed to contextualizing Acker's work within wider histories of contemporary literature often emphasize her relative standing as a post-modernist writer, thus situating her amidst her presumed peers. In fact, historical characterizations of Acker's work more often than not situate it within the specific, transient moment of English language, post-modernist literature. For two studies that attest to this tendency, see:

To begin, it pivots Acker's encounter with "French theory" (i.e., post-structuralism) as crucial to her creative and conceptual trajectory. Accordingly, is historicizes the concrete conditions of production of her work in relation to that discursive history. It de-emphasizes Acker's relative location within the post-modernist "movement" (to the extent one cohered as such), while accentuating her work's historical imbrication within transatlantic networks of influence, including intellectual exchanges between the U.S. and continental Europe. It relocates Acker's writerly standpoint, by evincing its constitutive fascination with an intellectual tradition much more specific in scope – both chronologically and geographically speaking – than the wider rubric of post-modernism. Finally, it suggests that reading Acker as a post-structuralist proves just as fruitful as post-structuralist readings of her work have proven to be. Perhaps more so, because is historicizes the assumptions entrenched within those same patterns of reception.

To elaborate on these claims, I suggest we consider Acker's deployment of the concepts of "deconstruction" and "decentralization." Acker's use of both, as theoretical devices which motivate narrative composition, entails some degree of creative and (mis)translative leeway. She retools these terms according to her own needs and curiosities, against the backdrop of cross-continental, interlinguistic transports of critical vocabulary. This adaptive attitude explains her occasional use of "French theory" as shorthand for post-structuralism, and adjacent critical traditions. How "deconstruction" itself was re-signified through its gradual recontextualization in U.S. academia stands as another strong example of such processes of adaptive (mis)translation. And Acker was well-aware of the concept's reconstructed definition. In an extensive interview with Lotringer, she describes her appropriation of Harold Robbin's writing as a "simplistic example of deconstruction." (13) Lotringer raises the point of that concept's definition: "I take it you use *deconstruction* in the American sense?" (14). She acquiesces:

> Yes, as opposed to construction or reconstruction. You just take other texts and you put them in different contexts to see how they work. You take texts apart and look at the language that's being used, the genre, the kind of sentence structure, there's a lot of contents here that most readers don't see. (Lotringer and Acker, 14)

Ebbeson, Jeffrey. *Postmodernism and Its Others. The Fiction of Ishmael Reed, Kathy Acker, and Don DeLillo*. Routledge, 2010; Pitchford, Nicola. *Tactical Readings: Feminist Postmodernism in the Novels of Kathy Acker and Angela Carter*. Bucknell University Press, 2001.

Noticeably, "deconstruction" is not presumed to refer to the theories of Jacques Derrida, nor to Derridean theories of textuality more generally (i.e., amidst his peers). In fact, Acker signals her relative disinterest in his work in the previously cited interview. Instead, "deconstruction" refers to recontextualized approaches to French post-structuralism within U.S. academia and intellectual counterculture. If anything, it might concretely refer to the Yale school of deconstruction – as advanced by theorists such as Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, or J. Hillis Miller – which was popular across Comparative Literature and English departments in the 1970s. Such approaches to deconstruction are syncretic and combinatory in kind: when Acker refers to sentence construction, she might well be describing a more formalist (or structuralist) impulse to attend to the formal minutiae of discourse. "Deconstruction" seemingly subsumes disparate strands of critical theory under an idiosyncratic, unifying rubric. Often, the discourse of "post-modernism" works to similar effect. But Acker's awareness of the distinction signals a situated understanding of the reconstructed program she was involved in, herself.

Acker uses the concept to explain an instance of plagiaristic infraction against another author's copyright – one, for that matter, which resulted in public controversy and impacted her status directly. She presents her appropriation of Robbins' writing as a hermeneutic exercise: an analytic experimentation with the materiality of his discourse, which evinces otherwise latent meanings or effects. Aptly, Lotringer figures this process as "some kind of active reading." (14) The strong implication being that the scene of reading and that of writing are not merely coterminous – they are in fact one and the same. Plagiaristic poetics enable the practice of reading and the practice of writing to intertwine, and they tacitly perform the deconstructive work of disrupting the definitional boundaries between the two. Expropriative textual actions function as forms of reading and rereading, surprising undiscerned "contents," through a concerted investment of readerly attention. In effect, they emphasize the creative and conceptual agency proper to the process of reading. Where Acker's work is concern, deconstruction describes a compositional method as much as a hermeneutic one: both as a critical and as a creative attitude, it is entrenched within her writerly sensibility.

In the same interview, Acker uses the concept of decentralization, while discussing feminist politics and a gradual realization of the need to disrupt patriarchal power:

> Feminists made me realize then why one would want to decentralize a father, take the father and tear him apart. I had some theory behind it. It also made me realize what my relation to these old authoritarian male poets was. (18)

The express desire to decentralize is akin to the desire to uproot or dislodge patriarchal authority from its affixed location. In a first instance, the concept functions through metaphors of spatiality. But the "father" is not only displaced, through that intervention of movement which would transform his location. He is subject to a transformative process *himself*, as an individuated figure, and undone by textual action. Acker's precise expression (to "tear him apart") indicates the disruption of that master-subject's bodily integrity, and the destruction of his body imago. Moreover, the expression also features in her provisional definition of deconstruction, expressing a degree of indeterminacy in the distinction between the two concepts: just as a text is "torn apart," so is the father (whether literary, or literal). Finally, decentralization affects more than the master-subject's place: it actualizes a latent knowledge of Acker's respective position – in this case, vis-à-vis the masculinist elite of contemporary poetry. Because it works in a self-reflexive capacity, decentralization reshapes perception, as construed from the margin. Insofar as the literary father is subject to critical transformation, so is the woman writer's minoritarian location.

Acker's context-sensitive definition of "deconstruction" places it in appositive proximity to those of construction and reconstruction. Construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction can be characterized as distinctive but interconnected projects the author engaged in across time, as she adapted her poetic and political curiosities to variable contexts. Roughly equated with plagiaristic praxis, "deconstruction" often describes Acker's appropriation of other texts, and their transformation by means of various compositional experiments. These include citation, collage, the cut-up technique, or (mis)translation.[33] Emilia Borowska provides a useful synthesis of how the four stages of Acker's career are habitually perceived, in part through the distinction between "deconstruction" and "(re)construction." She identifies each stage through key concepts or conceptual formulae, drawn without exception from Acker's own rapport:

[33] For a thorough account of the surprising range of compositional techniques Acker used across her career, see Georgina Colby's important study *Kathy Acker: Writing the Impossible* (Edinburgh University Press: 2016). Likewise disputing Acker's categorization as a post-modernist, Colby stresses the importance of recontextualizing Acker's body of work within late modernism, given her methodic approach to the problem of form and how strongly influenced she was by modernist English-language writing (ranging from Gertrude Stein to William Burroughs).

> Acker's work has often been received in the four phases she frequently demarcated in interviews. The first phase deals with her dissociation from the authorial 'I', the second with the 'deconstruction' of other people's writings, followed by a third stage of 'construction', motivated by 'a search for a myth to live by'. The fourth is concerned with the 'language of the body'. (Borowska, 42)

Markedly, Borowska attributes this chronological framework to Acker herself, while positioning her critics as receptive readers, who have followed through on the narrative produced by the author. Despite its descriptive language, this brief note speaks to Acker's active stance regarding the (re)presentation of her work and of herself across a range of discursive contexts. Moreover, it insinuates something of the author's strong hold over public perception – an effect of authorial power slightly at odds with her stated preoccupations with decentralization. Does this categorical understanding of the four stages of Acker's writing hold true? Yes, insofar as it describes concrete transformations in Acker's conceptual and poetic motivation that accordingly informed her compositional methods. These transformations have in turn been reiterated and reified by critics over time, as they reproduce the author's self-narrative within critical language. The same can be said, in many instances, of this same project.

But this template's truancy and applicability are not as important as the means by which it obtains and maintains them. First and foremost, this chronology is truthful for Acker, and part of the critical fictions she performed both textually and extra-textually. Its authorial design is what ensures its enduring efficacy over critical perception, and the continuity of its explicative power. And this despite Acker's own incessant confrontations with normalized definitions of authorship and authorial identity – as signaled by Borowska's description of the first of the four stages of Acker's career. Because we are especially concerned with the critical fictions Acker inhabited, and well aware of the degree of authorial performativity engrained into her praxis, we signal the artificiality of this self-narrative – among others. Concurrently, we scope out a speculative terminology which helps mediate the contradictions engendered by these fictions. To confront Acker's post-structuralist standing, we must play that same (constructionist) game.

2.4. The idea-thief: plagiarism and expropriation.

Acker's programmatic commitment to plagiarism is an inescapable facet of her writerly project. Her ongoing experimentations with intertextual appropriation, reappropriation, and expropriation are inextricable from the material and formal identity of her poetics. One might very

well ask whether Acker would have written at all, if not through plagiaristic inventiveness. In the aforementioned interview with McCaffery, she remarks:

> The truth is I have always used appropriation in my works because I literally can't write any other way. When I was in my teens I grew up with some of the Black Mountain poets who were always giving lectures to writers to the effect that, "when you find your own voice, then you're a poet." The problem was, I couldn't find my own voice. I didn't *have* a voice as far as I could tell. So I began to do what I *had to do* if I wanted to write, and that was appropriate, imitate, and find whatever ways I could work with and improvise off of other texts. When I was in high school I was imitating Shakespeare. It's been that way ever since. What it comes down to is that I don't like the idea of originality. (McCaffery and Acker, 90-91).

Appropriation figures as what stands in for poetics – and for style, more concretely – when it does not take shape of its own accord, and on its own terms. Reiterating the notion that she had "no voice," Acker recognizes appropriation as the only possible means of poetic agency, by which her readerly position can be transformed into a writerly position, while dispelling the authoritative demand for originality. In fact, this deferral of the demand for originality reads as an aesthetic attitude: a dislike, a disinterest in the concept. That aesthetic attitude dismisses its function as a pivotal value for a certain version of literary rationality.

Acker's approach to plagiarism was careful, thorough, and selective in many instances. In others, it was spontaneous, immediatist, and arbitrary. The resulting entanglement of disparate textual sources often reads as chaotic or unmotivated, to the extent it alienates the reader from a finer grasp on authorial intent, and on the limits of textual propriety. Yet Acker became studiously, rigorously methodic about the practice of plagiarism, and she was keenly sensitive to its conceptual underpinnings and performative efficacy. This does not mean we might recuperate a governing rationality, through which these intertextual entanglements are redeemed as the expression of a unitary design. Textual juxtapositions never render quite that rationally or instrumentally, even when the source-texts at stake are well known and widely discussed. In part, because they are sometimes unmotivated, or motivated by chance: in the same interview, Acker describes copying from Cervantes' *Don Quixote* because "[that] was the book I had taken with me to hospital when I was about to have an abortion." (91).

Because Acker was committed to disputing the rationality of textual conventions and disrupting the fiction of authorship, her creative method obfuscates hermeneutics which would demand for some ulterior signifier to subsist, and to justify the collective agency of her textual

actions. Moreover, because that method was constructed and reconstructed across a prolonged period of time, in interaction with various theoretical and aesthetic milieus (ranging from the Black Mountain Poets to post-structuralism), it merits a critical description of its own. Along with the concession of the presumed correlate that, eventually, it will *make sense*.

Another provisional thesis, then: to describe Acker as an idea-thief, and to allow space for the various connotative aftereffects this descriptor triggers. Some will help romanticize her work and intensify the exceptional charm of the outlaw creator. Others will operate in a more regulatory capacity, implicitly denouncing such acts of transgression as unlawful – and thus, unacceptable. Transgressive textual action is always context-sensitive. It is passible to edification, just as it is to penalization. The conditions of articulation of transgressive textual actions are what confer them with their relative location in the eyes of the law, both symbolic and actual. These include the writer's social standing, the motivation behind the insubordinate gesture, the public's general predisposition to assimilate or reject it… Because such readerly conflicts endure in the patterns of reception by which Acker's work has been both celebrated and vilified, and because no reading can presume to resolve them, this project affirms its imbrication within such conflicts. As we read Acker, we become entangled within them ourselves.

The conceptual metaphor of the "idea-thief" is incidental, and elusive. This figure of speech features only once in the eponymous text from which it is stems: an interview with Félix Guattari, published by French journal *Libération*, in June 1980. The interview begins with a recognition of those various acts of "borrowing" by which Guattari construed his idiosyncratic critical vocabulary, both individually and in ongoing collaborations with Gilles Deleuze. The interviewer points to "the extremely abstract nature of the language, the neologisms and the variety of vocabularies borrowed from very different disciplines" (Guattari, 2009, 21). Guattari does not refute this description of is critical language, but he does describe the reasoning underlying its construction. He foregrounds an important example of this controversial propensity towards neologism and abstraction, by citing the concept of "deterritorialization," and its interdisciplinary detournement in his collaborations with Deleuze:

> Borrowing is not a problem in itself, except on the level of the semantic foundation of a new word. For example, our term 'deterritorialization' was based on a concept of territory borrowed from American anthropology. This reference was quickly forgotten and the term integrated into very different disciplines,

> where it took on syntactic, rhetorical and even stylistic dimensions, which in turn guided us in certain ways. (Guattari, 2009, 23)

Because he "[does] not believe in universal literature or philosophy," Guattari turns to those "instrumental word tools" which enable concrete effects, in connection with "minor issues" and "particular results" (21). In this case, the etymological definition of "deterritorialization" – within a concrete academic discipline – is overwritten by those interdisciplinary transformations that increase its critical utility. In fact, Guattari suggests that where "the conceptual field" is concerned," "efficacy" is finally more important than "comprehension." In opposition to normalized structures of meaning, Guattari emphasizes the means by which context-sensitive implements for critical action might take shape. Including some necessary "borrowing." As a correlate, he is quick to reclaim an insinuated accusation of plagiarism and disciplinary indeterminacy. In fact, he outright declares: "I claim the term falsifier for myself, being an idea-thief, and a shuffler of second-hand concepts." (23)

As a programmatic plagiarist, Acker expressed a similar writerly sensibility. Her attitude towards authenticity or originality involved not just accepting, but actively *embracing* the disputable legitimacy of her texts, and the entropic efficacy of her expropriative gestures. Much like Guattari, Acker "borrowed" from other discursive contexts abundantly, and feigned no particular preoccupation with the commensurability of her transgressions under the rubric of a unifying value – such as that of comprehension. In her work, the base unit of textual expropriation might not be the idea *per se*, but a certain style, a narrative structure, or even the turn of a sentence. Even then, ideas sometimes seem to be what interests her most. Consider, for instance, the novels *Great Expectations* (1982) and *Don Quijote* (1986). Both projects heavily draw from and distort the structural architecture and narrative dynamics of Cervantes's and Dickens's classics, respectively. But they also admit their derivative poetics and confront them, through their eponymous designation after these canonical works.

The comparison between Guattari and Acker, through which the figure of the "idea-thief" takes shape, is supported by the latter's indebtedness to the theories of the first. As we have seen, Acker explicitly acknowledged Guattari as one of the post-structuralist theorists who influenced her most. The speculative relay intimated by our own "borrowing" of Guattari's casual expression becomes all the more compelling when is work it islet subject to reappropriation. As discussed in Chapter 3, Acker's B*lood and Guts in High School* (1984) cites Deleuze and Guattari's Anti-

Oedipus mid-narrative, with no attribution whatsoever of authorial identity. "Borrowing" seems to come full circle: from one-idea thief to another.

Yet it is one thing to borrow – or to outright steal – from the writings of Cervantes and Dickens. While both authors are authoritative figures in the western canon, an irreconcilable temporal distance separates Acker's writing from theirs. As a result, her textual transgressions are not subject to the exigency of copyright legislation, and adjacent forms of regulation over intellectual property and creative license. The same cannot be said of Acker's intertextual rapport with more recent authors, including her contemporaries. In these latter contexts, the practice of theft is juridically rather than poetically adjudicated. And thus, the practice of plagiarism is confronted with the conditionality of the law. The legal conflict surrounding Acker's appropriation of writing by Harold Robbins – along with its effect on Acker's professional standing – remains the strongest example of this confrontation.[34]

The romantic mythos of the unlawful contrarian, and its actual tenability as a political fiction, open up a certain critique of possession (and dispossession) which merits further attention. Here, I suggest we attend to another writer's perception of Acker's life and practice, and how it is organized by the political metaphor of criminality. Avital Ronell is a prominent figure within contemporary critical theory, and a disciple of Jacques Derrida. No less importantly, she was a close acquaintance of Acker's. [35] After Acker's death in 1997, Ronell co-organized the posthumous collection *Lust for Life: On the Writings of Kathy Acker* (2006), to which she contributed a meditative essay of her own. Ronell's eulogistic portrait of Acker admits to a tentative, hesitant relation to the collection's intended genre: that of testimonial writing. Still, and as a negotiation of that hesitation, Ronell's essay responds to the invective.

One of the more interesting claims Ronell advances is that Acker be re-positioned within an ongoing aesthetic-political history of "literary communism." Ronell argues that "[Acker] practiced the installations of community that were unfolded in the singular waves of [Georges]

[34] In her biography of Acker, Kraus successfully demonstrates how extant reports of this dispute conflict one another, sometimes to the point of contradiction. For instance, Acker has claimed she eventually signed an apology letter, sent out to significant publications of the time – yet there is no archival evidence of it. What does seem uncontroversial is that the matter was eventually settled between the two parties, and that Robbins expressed sympathy towards Acker's expropriative textual gestures.

[35] Ronell opens her essay with a prolonged meditation on friendship, and there she retells her attempts to produce a connection between the two, by introducing Acker's work to Derrida. "He wasn't greatly familiar with her works, though he knew what she represents for me." (Harryman et al, 12)

Bataille, [Maurice] Blanchot, and [Jean-Luc] Nancy" (Harryman et al, 23). The fact all three authors are French is no coincidence: Ronell herself invokes their shared curiosity about "the more subversive power surges of French and German texts" (13). Ronell attributes the concept of "literary communism" to Nancy's work, and more specifically, to his text *The Community at Loose Ends* (1991). As soon as she does so, however, she disputes the necessity of due attribution and of a respectful attitude towards literary propriety. Simply, she wonders "if property attribution makes a great deal of sense in this context" (23).

Ronell's characterization of Acker's praxis places a pronounced emphasis on the concept of *depropriation* (as distinct from appropriation, reappropriation, or expropriation). This concept is in turn enveloped in an incipient conceptual vocabulary, congruous with the conceptual metaphor of the idea-thief, as invoked here. In Ronell's words: "[Acker] practiced literary depropriation, in her exhibitionistic way renouncing property, the proper – any claim to her ownmost inventiveness, 'originality – propriety'." (23) On Acker's use of the titles of other texts for her own purposes, Ronell writes:

> [Acker] rearranged the logic of framing and defied the performative powers of a book's title. The title of a book is a legal institution: it institutes a text and no book can exist without a title. Sometimes Acker would snap up other titles, violently snatching their powers and pilfering histories. (23)

But Ronell's argument does not stop at Acker's rejection of the standardized protocols governing intertextual relations. Instead, she renders this rejection as concomitant with the rejection of those standardized protocols by which Acker's *own* authorial identity could be codified, regulated, and commodified. To do so, she underlines the intentionally ostentatious quality of the thefts Acker enacted, with performative acumen and combative energy. Such transgressions counter-act regulatory claims for legitimacy, and those processes of due attribution which bind authorial identity to the fact of property. She writes:

> [Acker] gave up the mystical foundations of authorship, the capital claims, looting and vandalizing legally protected stores of knowledge. […] Most authors conceal such evidence of a hijacked corpus or they transvaluate theft back into property, with proper holdings, sanctioned attributions and ideologies of 'influence'. Kathy stole everything in sight and pissed on property." (23)

Ronell's rhetoric vividly imbues Acker's textual transgressions with an unlawful character, as they disregard those norms which govern literary relations and which sanction authorial identity. Acker "loots," "vandalizes," "steals" – she even "pisses on." Importantly, Acker did not produce

a meta-language which sought to redeem such transgressions, therefore reconstructing them in accordance with the law. In fact, she renounced the possibility of that lawful resolution. Her plagiaristic praxis was not rationalized by an ulterior, instrumental intentionality, which would finally reconcile it with the plain integrity of intellectual property and authorial identity. In effect, her writing does not merely break the law. It *inhabits* that break; it decides to remain within it.

Of course, Ronell's account of Acker's plagiarism is premised on a presumed concession – on Acker's part – of those narratives and structures which constitute her own relative location as a writer. In Ronell's phrasing, Acker holds the capacity to *give up* (to let go; to release of) those historical, material, economic and juridic contracts which bind her writerly practice to a concrete standpoint, safeguarded by regulatory fictions of property, possession, and propriety. Describing Acker as a "punk criminal," Ronell continues:

> Ever dispossessed, she would take from the works of others and claim them momentarily as her own. The effect was to show the dispossession inherent in any text, no matter how familiar, intact, or confidently sealed by a prestigious signature. (23)

While Acker's unlawful poesis *does* perform such drastic degrees of disobedience, whether it in turn disobeys the conditions of possibility for her own authorial identity to crystallize – and to do so to authoritative effect – is another question entirely. The assumption that Acker's break with the law effectively fractures the lawful tenability of her own identity is one this project disputes, in its efforts to reconstruct a more comprehensive narrative of Acker's authorial identity and authorial performativity. To raise this question is to interrogate Acker's own signature, the narratives subtending its definition, and the infra-structures securing its material authority. This query demands that we characterize those processes if not of possession, then of re-possession, which enable her signature to accrue its respective degree of prestige – even if this prestige is bound to its own disputable legitimacy.

Furthermore, Ronell's commentary points to a less regional problematic: the contested definition of textuality. Through a discussion of Acker's plagiarism, Ronell shapes an argument about the onto-epistemic situation of texts. She invokes something of that constitutive indeterminacy proper to any text: the fact of its conditional dispossession. The implication of this argument is that Acker's plagiaristic actions not only *do* something to texts, but in fact *expose* a fundamental truth about textuality. Because this situated argument about Acker is co-extensive with a wider argument pertaining to the very truth of textuality, it prepares for a universalizing

gesture which I am especially concerned with disrupting. Namely, the claim that because such dispossessive dynamics are proper to the field of literary relations, Acker's textual transgressions finally approbate the importance of the western tradition, and express fidelity towards it:

> And yet, she stuck close to home. Kathy Acker scrambled the master codes without pretending that she could simply dispense with them. That's what made her, for some readers, radically effective. She wrote at the borders of a metaphysical tradition [i.e., state philosophy or western metaphysics], ever negotiating at the limits, without for a second thinking that she could bail. There was no outside or mystified Elsewhere to our literary inheritance. (23-24)

Ronell's finer point about Acker's revolutionary poetics is that her writing inhabited the outer limits of the western imaginary, and from there sought to perturb its representational and political primacy. She neither presumed to retrieve the constitutive outside of western metaphysics, nor did she seek to construct it in writing. Ronell's description of this project as "radically effective" (at least for some) calls to mind Guattari's rapport on the *efficacy* of textual thievery: such transgressions effect results because they *make do* with extant archives and materials. More striking, however, is Ronell's use of the loaded term "bail." It suggests Acker could not escape from within state philosophy and the long history of western metaphysics. This claim works both in a more informal sense (i.e., Acker could not ignore her commitment), but also in a punitive or penal sense (i.e., she could not evade imprisonment). If Acker was aware of the definitional limits of "our literary inheritance," and eager to place them into relief, she was nonetheless aware they were not to be transposed.

Ronell's reference to "our literary inheritance" is also important. Because it interpellates the essay's reader as a peer, or an otherwise equiparable inheritor to that literary tradition, her address prescriptively construes them as western. As Ronell describes the inescapability of the western tradition, she perpetuates its exclusionary limits at the level of discourse, thus consolidating their inescapability. This raises questions about tacit understandings of belonging at work in discussions of Acker's work, and its presumed publics.[36] Ronell continues:

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[36] It also points to a problem of *representation*: does Ronell's description actually hold true? I would suggest otherwise. Acker's later work is characterized by an increasingly immersive engagement with transnational, transhistorical archives – both literary and otherwise. Her frequent invocations of Voodoo cosmogony (starting in the 1970s) might be absorbed under the rubric of "our literary tradition" only through a stark degree of expropriative violence, which would reduce Voodoo to a subsidiary system of belief (in relation to western Christianity). But as Acker's attention turns to ancient Chinese folklore with the same daft inventiveness as it does to Persian cultural histories, Ronell's description faces its limits. This holds especially true of Acker's later constructive (or reconstructive) turn, and her

> In this sense, Acker was a loyal daughter of a great lineage – she did not turn her back on what was bequeathed to her; to the end, she honored and revered literature: she didn't turn her back on a very determined history of thought or on the literary tradition; she just turned them on their backs, that is, by reinscribing, regendering, profaning, desecrating, shattering the source and adjusting reference in a constant, loyal, determined manner. (23-24)

Ronell's turn of phrase holds a certain forceful agency. Her description asserts Acker's location within the western tradition with increasing certainty – and within a markedly universalist conception of that tradition. For one, this is a "great lineage," presumably elevated above others. Whereas Acker – the criminal, the plagiarist, the pilferer – now figures as the "lawful daughter," who "honors" and "reveres" that tradition. These language markers perform the re-inscription not only of propriety, but of property, and by extension of patrimony. They evince an underlying metaphoric bound to familial and institutional logics, which organize the causal relations between personhood, estate, and intergenerational social reproduction. As an inheritor, Acker's writerly standpoint is pivoted to the fact of her worldly position, and the reception of a tradition which she could not reject, regardless of intent.

This narrative reenforces the inextricable authority of the inter-generational transmission of property, propriety, and personhood. It mythologizes geopolitical belonging, and the adjacent privileges it entails. Finally, it recodifies literary belonging as a matter of rightful access to collective assets. Nowhere is this more evident than when Ronell deploys as loaded a term as "bequeathed," when her own text performs the work of remembrance, and thereby participates in the sustenance and maintenance of such economies of belonging. This set of claims proves difficult to reconcile with Ronell's previous appeal to literary communism. If anything, familial definitions of filament and descent seem to overwrite the imaginable commons. This unlikely synthesis of the criminal and the patrimonial is important precisely because it is unwilling to recognize and render itself as a problem. It raises important points about the historical conditions of Acker's writing, and the disparate archives within the western tradition which inform its making. Ronell's emphasis on Acker's transgressive poetics, and on the conditional determinants it confronts, is a partial recognition of the material and structural contradictions embedded within Acker's work.

"search for a myth to live by" (to retrieve Borowska's description). There and then, transcultural imaginings prove key to a confrontation with the world-as-is, as we will see in Chapter 5.

But her characterization of Acker as a "loyal daughter" is no less informative. In part, because it is a misrecognition of the ambitions at stake in Acker's writing: Acker *did* figure and yearn for other worlds, other options, and other possibilities for the political imagination. The fact she did not commit these ambitions to the pressure of political instrumentality makes them no less truthful, productive, or provocative as political fictions. Concurrently, it is a useful characterization, insofar as it exemplifies and amplifies a problem in critical perception. Acker's participation – and possible affirmation – of hegemonic representational histories and economies speaks to a foundational entanglement in ongoing systems of oppression and exploitation. These are the conditions of possibility of her writing. But this foundational entanglement must be subject to critical scrutiny, and to critical mediation. It does not provide us with a commendable conclusion on the political will of Acker's work. Its presents us with a *problem*, and it must be re-presented as such.

The imagined tension that Ronell's reading seems to sublimate – between literary communism and literary patrimony – is one worth reassessing, as we confront the geopolitical, historical, and economic locations of Acker's work. In fact, this conflict transports over onto receptions of Acker's work, and their respective willingness (or lack thereof) to address her work in terms of political collusion, conformation, and/or complicity. Ultimately, this is a conversation about how Acker's worldly situation informs her relation to the western tradition, and the kind of critique this relationship of ambivalent indebtedness demands of us as we read her.

2.5 Personhood, property, possession.

Ronell's mythologization of Acker, as someone "bequeathed" a great tradition which she cannot possibly escape, and which she inevitably reinstates with reverence and loyalty, confronts us with the question of Acker's historical entrenchment within the western tradition. This is a question of historical situatedness, pertaining to Acker's geopolitical belonging and the conditions of possibility of her work – be they material, symbolic or juridic in kind. But it is also a question of creative agency: it pertains to Acker's writerly intention, her conditional capacity to confront and disavow the limits of that tradition, and the scope of her political imagination. Ronell's essentialist portrayal of Acker's location within the western tradition relies on the facticity of

Acker's personhood: *who* she was, as a western writer and as a western reader. And her meditations ultimately sanction the celebration of Acker's writing as a confirmation of that position.

I suggest we cut through this overdetermination of Acker's relative location, in part by challenging the governing precepts which render her standpoint as *inevitable*. In fact, I suggest we cut *into* them, and recognize their historical contingency as correlates of the historical projects of capitalism and colonialism. In this, I am interested in re-marking that which Ronell's narrative allows to remain unmarked. Namely, the facticity of Acker's *whiteness*. Whereas Ronell encircles the reader within a presumed community, I suggest we dispute the interpellation by which that community becomes inescapable. Ronell's imaging of belonging performs a range of exclusionary effects on the essay's readership. I suggest we treat these fissures in the implicit pact of reading as important points of inquiry, and ask: who, indeed, belongs to this community? And to who does this community belong?

Naming the fact of Acker's whiteness – just as one might, and seemingly must, exhaustively name the fact of her femininity – is to evince something of her location which is otherwise taken to be self-evident, and thus, critically insignificant. The gesture of re-naming and re-marking whiteness does just the opposite: it prepares for a critique of whiteness, as an onto-epistemic construct, while relocating the object of critique from the margin (i.e., the non-white subject) to the center (i.e., the white subject). To produce a critical understanding of whiteness is, first and foremost, to historicize the material and symbolic mechanisms of its constitution and continuation across time. The linguistic labor of re-marking is what enables its objectivation as a problem, both politically and theoretically. In the essay "Towards a Gender Disobedient & Anti-Colonial Redistribution of Violence," Brazilian performer and artist Jota Mombaça describes the political and processual importance of *naming*, as key to the disruption of colonialist, cissexist, and heterosexist systems of power. They write:

> Naming the norm is the first step towards a gender disobedient and anti-colonial redistribution of violence, because the norm is that which is not named, and that is its privilege. Not being marked is what endows privileged (normative) positions with their principle of noninterrogation. That is to say: their ontological comfort, their ability to perceive themselves as the norm and the world as their mirror. As opposed to that, "the other" – as a diagram of images of alterity which shape the margins of the identity projects of "normal subjects" – is hyper-marked, incessantly translated by the analytics of power and of raciality, simultaneously invisible as a subject and exposed as an object. Naming the norm means returning that interpellation and

forcing the normal to confront itself, to expose the regimes that maintain it, to mess up the logic of its privilege, to intensify its crises and break down its dominant, controlling ontology. (Mombaça, 2021, 16).[37]

The historical project of whiteness is concomitant with those of capitalism and colonialism, through which the western subject constituted its zones of otherness and crafted the conditions of its onto-epistemic primacy. Universal reason and scientific reason alike, the philosophical projects which undergird our conceptions of personhood, are inalienably bound to the fact of whiteness, and the sustenance of white supremacy. Black feminists (such as Sylvia Wynter and Hortense Spillers) and Afro-Pessimist scholars alike (including Jared Sexton and Fred Moten) have compellingly argued that western rationality – and in fact, western modernity – is foundationally predicated on the constitution of blackness as its radical other.

Blackness is that radical *it*, both immanent and illegible, against which white subjectivity stakes its claims to self-identity and sovereignty. That *it* is, in a sense, *anterior* to the "I," in so far as it provides the latter's conditions of possibility and actualization. In this reading, the absolute location of blackness as *nothing* is the pivotal onto-epistemic moment by which whiteness renders itself as synonymous with the very idea of the human – and thus signifies as universal. Fundamentally, the modern episteme holds as intrinsic and intractable the predicate: the (*black*) object ≠ the (*human*) subject.

Sylvia Wynter, a black feminist scholar working within the social sciences, has produced some of the most radical examinations of accepted histories of the human, defying the epistemic and political instrumentality of those same disciplines. Following through on the radically anti-humanist potential of Foucault's work, Wynter contests the very idea of "humanity," and charts its complex scientific and political histories.[38] From this standpoint, to discuss categories such as

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[37]Author's translation. The original reads: "Nomear a norma é o primeiro passo rumo a uma redistribuição desobediente de gênero e anticolonial da violência, porque a norma é o que não se nomeia, e nisso consiste seu privilégio. A não marcação é o que garante às posições priveligiadas (normativas) seu princípio de não questionamento, isto é: seu conforto ontológico, sua habilidade de se perceber a si como norma e ao mundo como espelho. Em oposição a isso, 'o outro' – diagrama de imagens de alteridade que conformam as margens dos projectos identitários dos 'sujeitos normais' – é hipermarcado, incessantemente traduzido pelas analíticas do poider e da racialidade, simultaneamente invisível como sujeito e exposto enquanto objecto. Nomear a norma é devolver essa interpelação e obrigar o normal a confrontar-se consigo próprio, expor os regimes que o sustentam, bagunçar a lógica de seu privilégio, intensificar suas crises e demonstrar sua ontologia dominante e controladora." (Mombaça, 2021, 16).

[38] See, especially, Foucault's *The Order of Things* (2002). An important counterpoint to Foucault's claims, which pertain to the historical constitution of the material and intellectual possibility of the human (as a category of and for thought), would be Derrida's essay "The Ends of Man" (1969).

blackness or whiteness is impossible, if the category of humanity is not finally – and fundamentally – at stake. Hers is, in a first instance, a historical argument, pertaining to the constitution of "the human" as such:

> Our present arrangements of knowledge (and therefore their grounding analogic) were put in place in the nineteenth century as a function of the epistemic/discursive constitution of the "figure of Man." This represents, in our projected new terms, the first purely *secular criterion* of human being (or regulatory metaphysics) encoded in the "descriptive statement" of the human on the model of a natural organism and its related ontology. For our proposed new objects of knowledge to be receivable, we accordingly need to go beyond the ontology of the figure of man and the empowering *normalizing* discourses with which this "figure," as the projected model/criterion of being of the globally dominant Western European bourgeoisie, is still enchantedly constituted – now dangerously, in the context of our post-atomic environment. (Wynter, 1987, 208)

Wynter produces a critical genealogy of shifting definitions of the human, tracing the transition from monastic to secular humanist understandings of the world, and of "Man" himself. To push beyond this paradigm, Wynter suggests that the normative, regulatory fiction of humanity must give way – as must the discourses that surround and support it. From this critique of normalized categories of thought, Wynter advances the defiant thesis that:

> [The] unifying goal of *minority* discourse, if the term *minority* and its related discourse is to constitute itself as the "institutional" (and therefore ontological) fact that it is rather than the "brute" or empirical fact that it is strategically projected to be within the coercive analogic of our present onto-episteme, will necessarily be to accelerate the conceptual "erasing" of the figure of Man. (208-209)

Ultimately, Wynter holds that inquiries into the disputable definition of "humanity" hold as their inevitable horizon the abolition of humanity itself, as catalyzed through "the figure of Man." A number of more recent projects actualize the conceptual and political potential of Wynter's intervention, along with that of other black feminists and black radical critics. Alexander Weheliye, for one, retrieves Wynter's core contentions to produce an amplified definition of black studies. Perhaps inevitably, it is likewise anchored by a strong commitment to the abolition of "Man," and of humanism along with it:

> [Black studies] have developed a series of comprehensive analytical frameworks – both critical and utopian – in the service of better understanding and dismantling the political, economic, cultural, and social exploitation of visible human difference. In sum, black studies illuminates the essential role that racializing assemblages play in the construction of modern selfhood, works toward the abolition of Man, and advocates

> the radical reconstruction and decolonization of what it means to be human. In doing so, black studies pursues a politics of global liberation beyond the genocidal shackles of Man. (Weheliye, 4)

Black radical criticism entails distinctive critical genealogies of modern subjectivity and identity, and inquiries into the historically contingent construction of the projects (or phenomena) of whiteness and blackness. Within Afro-pessimism in particular, contemporary history is often perceived through the inaugural moment of chattel slavery, and the relationships between personhood, property and possession practiced and perpetuated thereafter. In these contexts, the transatlantic slave trade is interpreted as a turning point in the construction of the modern subject. And slavery itself is read as a template for contemporary life, rather than as a finite process in time:

> One of the central tenets of Afro-pessimism […] is a reoriented understanding of the composition of slavery: instead of being defined as a relation of (forced) labor, it is more accurately thought of as a relation of property. The slave is objectified in such a way that they are legally made an object (a commodity) to be used and exchanged. It is not just their labor-power that is commodified—as with the worker—but their very being. As such, they are not recognized as a social subject and are thus precluded from the category of "human"—inclusion in humanity being predicated on social recognition, volition, subjecthood, and the valuation of life. (Anonymous, 8)

This is not a claim about the sociology of race relations, or the ongoing social interactions which dynamically inscribe the political fictions of whiteness and blackness into the everyday. Nor, for that matter, is it a claim about minority subjectivity or minoritarian standpoints primarily. It is a radical claim about history, ontology, politics, and subjectivity. It describes a paradigm resulting from concrete historical action, yet so thoroughly embedded within normalized structures of knowing and feeling that, at the limit, to name it is to disrupt the very conditions of its comprehension. Because it demands a conversation about the conditions by which thought *itself* is made possible, it confronts hegemonic epistemic attitudes with their limit: the unthinkable.

Understandably, various critics within this counter-tradition have turned to poetics, and other modes of affective comprehension, divergent from scientific positivism. Saidiya Hartman has argued for the use of "critical fabulation," through which conventional critical method is interwoven with fictional narrative in the reconstruction of histories of blackness.[39] Fred Moten

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[39] Hartman uses the formula of "critical fabulation" to describe her writing method, as she retrieves and intervenes into the historical archives of colonialism. And even into the silences and absences instantiated by and sustained within them: "By advancing a series of speculative arguments and exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities), in fashioning a narrative, which is based upon archival research,

(himself a poet) incorporates musical cues into his queries into extant models for thinking, living, and being in the afterlives of slavery.[40] Denise Ferreira da Silva (a Brazilian contemporary) concludes a set of considerations on the extraction of value from enslaved bodies and occupied territories by turning to the reconstructive capacities of "black feminist poethics" – as exemplified by sci-fi novelist Octavia Butler.[41] To read Acker's work with these frameworks in mind is to reconstitute the epistemic architecture of her poetics. Where da Silva invokes the reconstructive capacities of black feminist "poethics", we return due deconstructive attention to white feminist poetics, and subject them to comparable scrutiny.

This project holds that Acker's whiteness must be re-marked once and again, and especially so whenever it seemingly becomes unimportant or self-evident. Moreover, it suggests one task of critical labor is to actively untangle the supposed self-evidence of Acker's whiteness, and to obviate it as a critical problem. Whiteness is inscribed into the very conditions of possibility of Acker's writing (as a conditional process in time), and into the tessiture of her poetics (as an epistemic standpoint). One possible follow-through of this re-cognition would be to saturate ongoing conversations about Acker's work with various markers of the materiality of whiteness, against the grain of objectivist critical discourse (which would render whiteness as self-present, self-identical, and self-evident). These markers include, but are not limited to, "white writing," white poetics," "white experimentalism"; "white prose"; "white power"; "white noise," "white literature" ...

The value of such rubrics is pragmatic, and not purely abstract. They work to redescribe writing, in its conditional bonds to a concrete ethico-existential situation, and an array of historical and social determinants (otherwise occluded from critical discourse). Moreover, they performatively confront standardized structures of meaning, which linguistically neutralize the objective fact of whiteness, in an effort to reconstruct our present categories of understanding.

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and by that I mean a critical reading of the archive that mimes the figurative dimensions of history, I intended both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling." (Hartman, 2008, 11)

[40] Moten, a key figure in contemporary black studies and in the ongoing reconstruction of historical narratives of the black radical tradition, often discusses music in his critical practice. His first major work was *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minnesota University Press, 2003).

[41] For da Silva, the eventual transformation of blackness's relative location within western thought would trigger a wider range of transformations, and thereby open up distinctive conditions of being and making: "From without the World as we know it, where the Category of Blackness exists in/as thought - always already a referent of commodity, an object, and the other, as fact beyond evidence – a Poethics of Blackness would announce a whole range of possibilities for knowing, doing, and existing." (da Silva, 81)

Finally, they work to impart whiteness with something of its unadmitted materiality and unthought contingency, in effect transforming its discursive integrity. Plainly: they *objectify* it. To treat whiteness with the linguistic discernment one might treat "blackness, "queerness," or "trans-ness" is to dispute the governing epistemic ecology that confers it with the reach of its referentiality and the finitude of its reality. To retrieve Acker's words: to name whiteness enables both its deconstruction *and* decentralization.

Within the scope of this project, I narrativize Acker as a white writer, and suggest a conceptual figure accordant with this critical action: that of the white signature. The signature is, in and of itself, an important concept, given Acker's commitment to plagiaristic poetics and how they de-realize commonly accepted notions of authorship. For our concerns, the white signature is a provisional critical implement, but also the pivot of a shift in hermeneutic attitude, which rewires protocols of critical reading to the fact of race, raciality, and/or racialization. It is an injunction to read with a keen sense of the racial politics proper to reading, to writing, and to their interaction in academic criticism. This category will prove especially important to our discussions of *Kathy Goes to Haiti* (in Chapter 3) and *Empire of the Senseless* (Chapter 5), as we interrogate how Acker inhabited (and expressed) that racial imbrication. Because it obviates an uninterrogated facet of Acker's writerly standpoint, the concept of the white signature enables us to recognize phenomena of representational violence that might otherwise remain unchecked, and even normalized.

This is an argument about Acker's representational politics – even at those moments where her writing turns away from (or against) representation, making the question of her *anti*-representational politics just as important. Acker's whiteness precedes representation, insofar as it describes the structural conditions of its articulation. It is concrete, carnally embedded into Acker's writerly standpoint: her position of locution, of critique, of invention… It does not explicate the textual construction of blackness and whiteness in Acker's work (nor, for that matter, their deconstruction and reconstruction). But it does contextualize these textual constructs not only historically and politically, but also biographically. Naming is, first and foremost, to refigure the actual and imagined grounds of her conditional capacity for literary innovation. This recognition is engrained into our reading of Acker's work, and it alters that reading by necessity. And it is one among many, as the signature can – and indeed, it must – be perceived as intersectional, and multidimensional.

2.6. Cis/White/Otherwise

The critical gesture by which the white signature is figured, in tacit counter-distinction to the non-white signature (and to the black signature, more specifically) might apply to other facets of an author's writerly standpoint and the conditionality of their project – albeit with quite different conceptual and analytic effects. For instance, consider how contemporary trans discourse has begun to rearticulate the category of cis literature, in tacit counter-distinction to so-called "trans literature." As a generic descriptor, the category of "cis literature" characterizes works authored by subjects who are *not* transgender – i.e., the vast majority of texts presently in circulation – and therefore, presumably exempt from an exegesis sensitive to the author's gender identity.[42] It relies on a baseline distinction between transgender and cisgender subject-positions; it then transposes that distinction onto generic definitions of literature. Reviewing a recently published novel, McKenzie Wark writes:

> We already insist that the antonym of trans women is cis women, that they don't get the whole category of 'woman' to themselves. So: if there it trans literature, its antonym is cis literature. Cis lit today is literary fiction, aimed mostly at a white, middle-class readership, of mostly cis women. It's probably not literature many trans women read. (Wark, 2021)

Wark's commentary is tinged with playful irony: she presents these statements matter-of-factly, as needing no particular elaboration. Pointedly, when she abbreviates "cis literature" (already abbreviated from "cisgender literature") to "cis lit," she places the novel she reviews firmly within the purview of genre fiction. Abbreviating the term, she invokes its phonemic proximity to "chick lit" and even "chick flick." These pejorative genre descriptors are negatively connoted because of their presumed audience: women. With "cis lit," gender and genre entangle in definitional interdependence. But here, the ironic distance expressed is the one separating the trans critic from cis publics, rather than the one separating the male critic from female publics. It

[42] We must be careful to distinguish between the categories of gender and of gender identity, and their differential usage in critical and political discourse. Following the work of John Money in the 1950s, "gender" most commonly describes the phenomenological expression of an individual's presumed biological sex, as achieved through a range of processes of socialization. It is made to coincide with that individual's belonging to one of two (mutually exclusive) categories: either man *or* woman. Whereas gender identity describes an individual's affective and psychic attitude towards the gender assigned to them, in accordance with normative conceptions of sex and personhood. That attitude may express either disidentification from or identification with that individual's presumed gender, as assigned at birth. While processes of disidentification are commonly described under the overarching rubric of "transgender," the concept of "cisgender" originates antonymically and describes processes of identification.

is directed from the minority towards the majority, and not the contrary. Finally, "Cis lit" is made to sound slightly rarified, beyond the scope of trans women's more immediate interests. Wark consciously admits to the entanglement between gender and genre, by mapping a disputable literary category onto ongoing disputes over the category of "women."

In a separate review of the same book, Wark revisits the question of cis authorship. In this case, she places the problem of authorship in direct relation to the problem of property – in a quite concrete economic sense, at that. With similar intimist candor, Wark writes:

> I don't know that a book can even make a claim to be political without facing up to what Marx called *the property question*. The bourgeois author pretends to have come across border lands in his imagination and plants his flag, when really there were other people living and telling their own stories there all along. One remedy is to extend ownership to more claimants to authorship. I'm all for this. Cis women writers have taken back their stories from those big swinging literary dicks; let's have more books by Black authors, disabled authors, trans authors. But this just extends the same bourgeois property logic into the margins – and, all too often, with less money involved. It's also a proposition that can get flipped around: sure, trans writers can write about trans pain, but then only that. Cis writers will continue to write as *unmarked subjects*, with ownership over the big universal stories, such as gender. Including your gender. (emphasis in the original, Wark, 2020)

Wark's informal rapport maintains much of the same sense of play as in the previous review. But it goes further, by suggesting a basic template for authorship (i.e., the bourgeois subject) and the self-fiction which governs the relative consistency of that position, along with the conditions for its literary imagination. Within this model, diverse subject-positions might be assimilated or acculturated to a paradigmatic model of literary ownership, attaining material and symbolic access to authorship. To the *right* of authorship, even. But even within this hypothetic model of inclusion and normalization, Wark is quick to point out that profit will remain unequally distributed amidst writers who inhabit disparate positions within capitalism. In this scenario, decentralization can only work as a confirmation of the economic rationality of sedimented power relations, and towards their social reproduction. As a result, generic segregation is bound to perpetuate the radical inequalities of capital, both within and outside the field of literary relations.

Wark likewise indicts the capacity of such processes of assimilation to reify an author's relative location, and to regionalize their work as exclusive to the one situation, identity, or identification: *the* trans writer; *the* trans narrative; *the* trans pain… The constitution of a minority standpoint coincides with its commodification, and thus, with its essentialization as unitary in

character and intent. Author, genre, and a range of generic elements are made to align in the interest of commercial instrumentality. But whereas that strict coincidence of terms between an author's identity and their writerly praxis works to delimit the conditions of possibility of minority subjects, it works to the opposite effect in the case of majority subjects. It is precisely the confinement of the regional to minority standpoints which enables the majority standpoint to avail itself of the categories of the universal, at will. To return to Wittig's argument, the universalization of that point of view is already built into its very conditions of being and articulation; in the abstract, *all* of its elements would be "open to history." It remains unmarked, implicitly synonymous with the human, presumably unbothered by the logics of identity.

Because the rubric of cis literature categorizes texts according to the majoritarian standpoint of its authors, it reverses normalized models of literary taxonomy, which place the onus of differentiation on minority authors entirely. The category dares re-describe what stands as normal, by identifying the subjective and social locations it re-presents as norm. As a process of naming the norm, "cis literature" re-marks the cis standpoint as a concrete social/subjective situation, with a subjacent narrative of identity. From the moment that standpoint is named, it can then be historicized, criticized, or analyzed. Therefore, its description dislodges its claim – whether explicit or implicit – to totality or universality.

Through the question of gender identity, Wark's line of thinking brings us back to the relationship between personhood, property, and possession – and demonstrates that their definitional co-relation is construed along the lines of gender, just as it is along the lines of race and class. When a certain regulatory ideal of personhood is achieved, that person may attain property. In fact, they must, because the intrinsic structures of capital demand as much: to be a legal person is to be the possessor of property. That concrete hold over property, by which personhood is sanctioned, in turn enables other modes of possession – including over abstract or immaterial objects, such as ideas. In so far as trans literature describes an important relationship of possession, so does cis literature. If we juxtapose the conceptual provocation previously suggested when discussing whiteness, this category might likewise unfold onto a number of others: "cis writing"; "cis aesthetics"; "cis poetics" … And perhaps, finally, the cis signature.

In this project, the signature figures in a juridic as well as symbolic capacity. It holds a historical function, as that which binds Acker's writing to her legal identity, and to her legal

personhood. It produces effects of possession or re-possession, even where the thought (and the practice) of dispossession is at work. It organizes Acker's relation to the law, particularly through the various liberties afforded to a white, middle-class, U.S. citizen – both nationally, and abroad. It signals the various privileges Acker benefitted from, even at those moments where she was the most textually transgressive, by outright disregarding the letter of the law. Such privileges include the right to circulate under the wide-ranging institutional authority of U.S. citizenship, and the use of a U.S. passport. Just as they include the hegemonic stature of the English language itself, as an unadmitted *lingua franca*.

The signature also pivots copyright relations which secure the value (financial as well as symbolic) of Acker's work, and the material conditions of its production and distribution across time. Plainly put: Acker's signature holds enduring authority over the material reproduction and intermedial representation of her work. And while the author powerfully subverted copyright regulations on numerous occasions, she did profit directly from intellectual property – an economic contradiction she was well aware of.[43] Today, that intellectual property is managed by her literary executor, Matias Viegener, who she was close to later in life. Thus, her signature remains as an artificial construct which, in the abstract, ensures the realization of her economic and poetic will. It survives her, with an instrumentality of its own.

Achieved in a first instance through textual and performative action, the signature describes a dynamic assemblage of interactive processes which exceed the scope of Acker's writerly agency and continue to be actualized to this day. It describes something of Acker's writerly standpoint, but also of that standpoint's translation into a range of juridical and extra-juridical effects, which govern the objective status of her work after the fact of her death – just as they did during her life. It flares up structural contradictions within U.S. society (on a macropolitical scale) which are

[43] In "Writing, Identity and Copyright in the Net Age" (1995), Acker interrogates the social standing of the contemporary writer, and their respective responsibilities towards the society they inhabit. Although her argument mostly concerns the motivations behind writing, it also addresses its material conditions of possibility within contemporary society. She writes: "Those who can and do support themselves writing do so, on the whole, by virtue of something called *copyright*. Copyright's existence, I believe, is based on the following assumptions or sentences: *An author is the only person who has written her or his own work; an author owns her or his own work."* (emphasis in the original, 95) Acker goes on to dispute the truth-value of either statement, contesting the implicit definitions of identity and ownership embedded within them. But ultimately, her point is to critique an over-determined economic situation: "In other words, as writers we depend economically on copyright, its existence, because we are living and working, whether we like it or not, in a bourgeois-industrialist, in a capitalist society, a society based on ownership. One needs to own in order to survive, in fact, in order to be." (Acker, 1995, 95).

embedded into Acker's writing (on a micropolitical scale). It entails a partial recognition of Ronell's argument, about Acker's compliance with or loyalty to the western tradition. But it refutes a romanticized perception of her entrenchment within that tradition, holding within the possibility of criticizing both that tradition *and* Acker's variable relation to it. If anything, the signature is a means to problematize that entrenchment – that historical bind –, while valuing Acker's confrontational attitude towards it.

Last but not least, the concept works to confront Acker's controversial approach to the western tradition with its respective limits – even as her stance becomes unequivocally anti-representational, and the concept of representation itself is placed into crisis. Understood in this capacity, it helps us name those undesired or unexpected degrees of conformity or complicity with a range of representational standards which her writing nonetheless combatively opposed. In a more immediate sense, it questions her writing's entrenchment within economies of representation founded on the political rationality of normalization – whether willingly or not. But it also questions her writing's entrenchment within normative conceptions of representation *itself*, even where that regulatory ideal would be impeded, thwarted, or negated. It is a tacit acknowledgement of Acker's own agency, which emphasizes her accountability as a radically committed writer – without defaulting to an attitude of either admonishment *or* admiration.

The arguments presented here describe Acker's entanglement in histories and economies of representation which her insurgent poetics could never erase, overwrite, or hope to resolve. But while they evince the definitional limits of Acker's project, they also interrogate their finality, or what Ronell might describe as their "inescapability." We mean to characterize a historical bind, not to promulgate the universalist authority of that history, or corroborate the seeming immutability of that bind. Each conceptual metaphor suggested across this chapter – ranging from "rhizomatic perspectivism" to "the signature" – aims to confront Acker's writerly standpoint, and to perform the necessary recognition of its entrenchment within a concrete historical, political, and poetic paradigm.

But these concepts are transformative or generative in kind, rather than purely reactive. They mean to emphasize Acker's political accountability as a radical writer. They open up a distinctive conversation about Acker's ethical and political responsibilities, and they re-mark the fault-lines, the fissures, even the failures of her writing. At the same time, they contest the reach

of the limits she confronted, and that ourselves confront, suggesting their contingency and their finitude.

This work stems from a strong desire for other ways of inhabiting the world, a recognition of the wounds enmeshed in its making, and an intuition of other worlds still in the making. It speaks to a political imagination that interacts and interferes with Acker's own, and with her work's critical relation to the world-as-is. And it is through this encounter – both a confrontation *and* a conversation with Acker's body of work – that the labor of critical mediation takes shape, as an effort to stay with the trouble of political contradiction. This is our experience of textual trouble: a range of encounters, envelopments, and collisions that finally transform the writerly and readerly standpoint alike.

Chapter 2: On the white signature: the canon, colonialism, and experimentation.

What's your latest hit, bro?

Fear of a black planet.

- "Fear of a Black Planet," Public Enemy

Word up!
Fear of a female planet?

- "Kool Thing," Sonic Youth

Both songs cited as epithets were released in the early 1990s. Both speak to the conflicted, intersectional entanglement of gender, sexual, and racial politics. This musical overlay may read as oddly decontextualized at first, but it flares up representational conflicts at the core of the present discussion. Public Enemy's song is a defiant proclamation against institutional racism, which teases at white male anxiety over interracial relationships.[44] Sonic Youth's, a parody of the masculinist values of the music scene, which interpolates a lyric from the first song with obfuscating – yet effective – results.[45] The first is rapped by a group of black men; the latter is sung by a white woman. The uncodified interval between both, that is to say, how their lyrical politics intersect through the formal mechanism of citation and the performance of disidentification, prepares for the ensuing discussion of the racial and sexual politics of Kathy Acker's *Kathy Goes to Haiti* (1978). While this work has often been excluded from conversations about Acker's work, I insist on reading it against the grain of extant expectations, to better confront

[44] The song addresses an abstract white male directly: "Man you need to calm down, don't get mad / I don't need your sista / But suppose she said she loved me? / Would you still love her or would you dismiss her? / What is pure? Who is pure? / Is it European? I ain't sure."

[45] The song's bridge, which features Chuck D of Public Enemy, includes the lyrics: ""Hey, kool thing, come here / Sit down beside me / There's something I got to ask you / I just wanna know, what are you gonna do for me? / I mean, are you gonna liberate us girls from male white corporate oppression?"

some of the more controversial facets of Acker's textual politics, across the 1970s and the 1980s. Finally, to historically ground this reading, I suggest we begin by contemplating the work's conditions of production, and Acker's (re)presentations of it.

2.1. "White niggers": position, composition, and publication in perspective

Acker proposed for a CAPS (Creative Arts Public Service) Grant for fiction in 1975, while living in New York city and experiencing a moderate degree of professional success.[46] Her proposal saw her travel to Haiti for an extended period of field research, to then create a new work. This would become the only novel of Acker's to be subsidized by a scholarship, an award, or a grant. The extent to which this may have shaped critical opinion is one I choose to leave open for now. In January 1976, Acker was awarded the grant, and a stipend of 7.000 U.S. dollars. She departed to Haiti in June, for an abbreviated stay, and began work on the manuscript for *Kathy Goes to Haiti* (henceforth referred to as *KGH*) upon returning to New York, later that year. There, she had begun to move away from self-publication, through the support of patrons, peers, and collaborators. *Kathy Goes to Haiti* was finally published in late 1978. By then, Acker had republished her first cycle of anti-novelistic experiments, through the TRVT editorial rubric. Still, she chose to publish *KGH* through Rumor Publications, a small-scale arts press based in Toronto.[47]

But Acker's interest in the work had already begun to wane, as she turned her attention towards a new project – a kind of delayed detachment she often expressed about her early prose experiments.[48] *Blood in Guts in High School* was published in 1984 – but first concluded and copyrighted in late 1978. It was Acker's critical and commercial breakthrough, as well as the first

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[46] Chris Kraus states as much, countering previous claims – by Acker, and critics – about the novel's conception and composition. The online catalogue for Duke University's collection of Acker's papers indexes this event as: *Creative Artists' Public Services Program New York State Grant For Fiction,* 1975-1976.

[47] Managed by Judith Doyle and Fred Gaysek, Rumour Publications was only active between 1978 – its first publication KGH itself, in the latter part of the year – and 1979, with an overall catalogue of just six works. Once dissolved, the press's catalogue became the intellectual property of Printed, Inc., a major agent in the distribution of artists' books, founded in 1976.

[48] Kraus writes: "She stayed in Toronto with Doyle for a couple of weeks for Rumour's *Haiti* book launch in February 1979. (…) *Haiti*, the book she'd come to promote, didn't interest her much. It was already part of her past." (Kraus, 143)

work of hers published simultaneously in the U.S. and in the U.K. By the mid-1980s, Acker was signed to Grove Press, an independent publisher reputable for its commitment to experimental writing and the avant-garde. Grove went on to publish most of Acker's original writing, along with reprints of earlier projects – including independent publications, and self-published projects.

A full decade after *KGH* was published, Grove released *Literal Madness: Three Novels* (1988). This collection of early works presents *KGH* along with *Florida* (also from 1978), and the previously unpublished *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini*. In effect, it provides the most accessible iteration of *KGH* for U.S.-based publics. But by the time it came out, the various pornographic illustrations Robert Kushner had crafted for the original edition) had been redacted, either for editorial or creative reasons (see Figure 1). This redefined the work's formal and material history; no longer an intermedial object, predicated on the expressive relay between Acker's text and Kushner's illustrations, it was standardized as *text* in subsequent reprints. The novel was also reprinted – again, without the visuals included in the first edition – in the *Young Lust* anthology, published by London-based Pandora Press in 1989.

Figure 1: Illustration by Robert Kushner, included in the first edition of "Kathy Goes to Haiti".

Unlike either the original Rumor edition or the Grove Press reedition, the *Young Lust* volume is preceded by an introduction by Acker, the title of which – "Introduction to My Early Lust to Write" – reads as a synthetic primer on the volume's editorial rationale. This is an easily

ignorable text, given its brevity and levity: only its first two pages concern *KGH* specifically, and they present no strong claims to historical authenticity. However, because of its expressive and performative capacities, I suggest we reread it against the grain. That is to say, that we take our time with this fiction of Acker's retrospective perception of the work, shaped as it is by creative, personal, and professional contingencies. The introduction works as a critical fiction of the fiction itself, which demands an exegetic attention aware – and weary – of the silences which govern both. What Acker has to say about *KGH* is just as important as *how* she says it – as is, for that matter, what remains unsaid. Probing into the author's conceptualist and formalist reasoning complements our reading of the work itself, and it allows for a finer understanding of Acker's textual politics. Especially so where race – and its representation – is concerned.

Acker begins by asserting she "came out of the poetry world of America" (Acker, 1989, vii). As she introduces the works collected in the volume, she cites her training by the "second generation" of Black Mountain Poets, and her training as a poet. From these few observations, she sparks quite a striking pedagogical dictate: [49]

> Among the many lessons I had learned by the time I was in my early twenties was a practical one: poets never make money and are, as both Rimbaud and Patti Smith said, *the white niggers of this earth.* (my emphasis, vii)

This polemic aphorism, explosive in racial meanings, can easily drift away from readerly attention: just another textual ready-made of perceptual shock, full of flippant punk-poetic performativity. But it is more important a refrain that critics – and perhaps Acker herself – would admit, and it demands further scrutiny. Not only because it informs our understanding of *KGH,* but because it speaks to the racial politics of the U.S. avant-garde more generally. Grounded within the avant-garde's language and imaginary, the phrase "the white niggers of this earth" forcefully folds the definitional limit separating class and race within U.S. society. As a metaphor for class, used to describe the collective poverty of poets, it reduces blackness to a categorial abstraction, itself used as an emblem for the (white) poet's predicament.

My concern, however, is not that race is subsumed under the category of class – as is the case in a range of discursive contexts. Nor, for that matter, that Acker's aphorism somehow

[49] Here, Acker seems to be referring to the experimental college's shift towards the pedagogy of literature in the 1950s, under rector Charles Olson. Olson was instrumental in the formation of the Black Mountain poetic school, which includes linguistically innovative poets such as Robert Duncan, Hilda Morley, John Wieners and Robert Creeley.

misrecognizes the materiality of class and race as discrete phenomena, given how intersectionally intertwined they are, at the level of concrete social relations. More so, my concern is that because of the perceived primacy of race, as a determinant of identity in U.S. society, what cannot be achieved through the vocabulary of class – because the category will not hold in public discourse – is achieved through the vocabulary of race instead. However, this produces another problem. Not just because race is conceptually and heuristically absorbed into class, but because its discursive detournement works to overwrite the political materiality of race relations in the U.S.

This characterization of the poet's standpoint through metaphors of race deters a necessary confrontation with the fact of white privilege. In fact, it deters a recognition of whiteness itself – whether racially or economically understood – as an overdetermined category of identity, both in U.S. society and on a global scale. The intimation of a certain sense of situatedness, stemming from Acker's turn to the autobiographical, actually forecloses the possibility of bringing race into the conversation – be that conversation about poetry, about poverty, or about the works included in the collection. And since Acker makes no further remarks on the matter, white middle-class sensibility is reified at the very moment when it is notionally redescribed or disputed. This invocation of economic deprivation, through adjacent forms of social exclusion, ultimately sanction's whiteness's standing as dominant and self-identical.

Patti Smith's song "Rock N Roll Nigger," likewise released in 1978, provides the direct citational linkage for Acker's provocative speech act.[50] Smith and Acker met in the 1970s, experimental arts scene – a fact which readjusts our notion of "the American poetry world," and adjacent forms of (white) sociality. "Rock N Roll Nigger" was swiftly banned from airplay upon release, due to its controversial racial content. Lyrically, Smith traces a fragmented narrative, construing the titular "nigger" as an exceptional figure of unbelonging. "Outside of society, they're waitin' for me. / Outside of society, that's where I want to be." Importantly, Smith suggests opportunity for community lies therein. The song's final stanza stands as a strong example of how

the word "nigger" is deracinated: both de-racialized and de-realized, at a remove from the material ontology of race relations in the U.S.

[50] The song was part of The Patti Smith Group's *Easter* album, and it was released just months before Lou Reed's "I Wanna Be Black," another striking lyrical performance of interracial citationality, from his *Street Hassle* album of the same year. Both albums were commercialized by Arista Records, a U.S. record company founded in 1974.

Jimi Hendrix was a nigger
Jesus Christ and grandma, too
Jackson Pollock was a nigger
Nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger
Nigger, nigger, nigger

Outside of society, they're waitin' for me
Outside of society, if you're looking
That's where you'll find me
Outside of society, they're waitin' for me
Outside of society

The song's deployment on the first-person is striking as is, considering Acker's own complexly layered relation to the narrative "I." In this context, reference to prominent black musician Jimmi Hendrix readily reads as brutal racist injury. But the song's appositive combinations and juxtapositions disrupt that interpretation, while disturbing the semantic integrity of "nigger" itself, as an element of anti-black vocabulary. The description of Jesus Christ as such might be construed as part of ongoing debates over his presumed ethnicity, and the historical reclamation of his blackness more specifically.[51] But when Jackson Pollock – a celebrated, white male, visual artist – figures the same way, it becomes obvious the categorical definition of "blackness" itself is at stake. Through Smith's pluralist exploration of perspective and position, ordinary language is reconfigured: "nigger" is rendered meaningful not so much for its denotation or connotation, as much as for its performative capacity. As a speech act, it is an active contestation of shared political grammars, and of normalized structures of meaning.

The detour of this racial signifier against the grain of dominant narratives of race is not exceptional; rather, it is ingrained into 20th century U.S. counterculture more generally.[52] The song's likely indebtedness to Norman Mailer's essay "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster" (1957), which itself reroutes the term "negro" to symbolically energize white

[51] Civil rights leader Jesse Jackson has claimed as much, in the context of a wider set of contentions on history and forms of ethnic/racial continuity in the U.S. Citing Jackson, Critic Ben L. Martin has described how "Black American elites have been drawn to similar themes [as those of the *négritude* movement], which incorporate resentment at colonialists' and slavers' despoilation as well as whites' distortion of the African heritage." (Martin, 1991, 88).
[52] In the 1997 video lecture "Race, The Floating Signifier," Stuart Hall discusses race as a signifier dependent on specific systems of representation, characterized by diversification and differentiation according to contextual variants. Analyzing the interfaces of power, signification and racialization, Hall plainly states: "Race is a discursive construct." In doing so, he emphasizes the semiotics of race as part of material culture. See: Hall, 1997.

middle class dissent, has been acknowledged by others. In *White Riot: Punk Rock and the Politics of Race* (2011), editors Stephen Duncombe and Maxwell Tremblay write:

> A long line runs from Shakespeare's Othello through Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* to Arthur Rimbaud's declaration 'Je suis une bête, un nègre' and Norman Mailer's "The White Negro"; from going native in the bush to enjoying urban minstrel shows. For centuries White folks have donned blackface to say and do what they felt their culture would not allow. The impulse, stems, in part, from a rejection of White culture; an understanding – be it social or political – of the oppression to which the White race has subjected the rest of the world, and the suppression to which they subjected themselves in the process. The flipside of this knowledge of oppression and suppression is the idealization of the freedom of the racial Other. They become everything White is not: rebellious, rhythmic, spontaneous and sexually free; in short, gloriously uncivilized. By identifying with the Other's culture you make yourself an Other, free of the weight and guilt of 'civilization'. (Duncombe and Tremblay, 18 – 19)

Duncombe and Tremblay refer us to a complex representational history: a larger tradition of processes of racial identification and disidentification, whereby white subjects expropriate and reappropriate the regulatory idea of blackness (as produced by white supremacy itself) for a range of purposes. Fundamentally, they point to the long-term cultural continuity of such processes of racial (dis)identification, which extends from the English Renaissance to the punk-poetic experimentalism of Acker's writing. While the authors remain critical of how such phenomena reaffirm racial hierarchies of subjection and objectification, they do sense latent political possibility within them:

> [T]he identification with people of color is a struggle to create a whiteness detached from the banality and brutality of White history. And while this impulse often results merely in vague notions of aesthetic transgression, it at least has the potential (…) to articulate itself politically. (Duncombe and Tremblay 19)

Smith's modernist, punk-rock trope of race-reversal, self-consciously deployed as a confrontational neologism, is in fact already in relay with the racialized foundations of (white) western modernity. Likewise, the interface between class and race in the attribution of position – and concretely: of an *excluded* position – is historically engrained in U.S. philology, both linguistically and materially speaking. The song's foray into this strain of nationally specific vernacular retrieves and reactivates subjacent, white colonialist understandings of class and race. But it does not challenge or inquire into them. Rather, Smith stood for an anti-doctrinaire yet individualistic understanding of the expression, claiming in the album's liner notes she had

"redefined the word nigger as being an artist-mutant that was going beyond gender." (Smith, 1974).

When Acker retrieves the expression, she positions herself within that same discursive tradition: that of modern and/or modernist authors who poetically instrumentalize race as metaphor, with the intent of challenging dominant – i.e., white – cultural and moral standards. Yet these disobedient representational gestures in fact attest to the monolingualism of the white avant-garde, and its indifference towards the material histories of colonialism, of U.S. imperialism, and of white supremacy as systems of exploitation, subjugation, and dominion. Colonialism, U.S. imperialism, and white supremacy as systems of exploitation, subjugation, and oppression. Performatively speaking, they signify *over* those histories.

If I insist on this point, it is because I believe it proves structural to our capacity to reencounter *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, and to reengage its political history. Both as a compositional process *and* as a published object, the work is imbricated in the economic and political grammars of white, imperialist, U.S. hegemony across the 20th century. Haiti was under U.S. military occupation from 1915 to 1934, and long-term tensions persisted between the U.S. government – especially under the Kennedy administration – and the Haitian Duvalier regime of 1957-1986. The Duvalier regime was a repressive, oligarchic and kleptocratic dictatorship established by former Minister of Health Roger Duvalier (popularly known as "Papa Doc") in 1957. By the time Acker travelled to Haiti, "Papa Doc" had passed, and his role had been handed down to his son, Jean-Claude Duvalier (popularly known as "Baby Doc").

This chapter suggests that Acker's relative position vis-à-vis this conjecture must be historicized and problematized, when reading or re-reading *Kathy Goes to Haiti* critically. As we do so, we render the ways in which position and perspective, in their material immanence, are bound to historically sedimented relations of power and privilege. And by raising the problem of authorship through an intersectional framework, we come to a better understanding of the constitutive conflicts inscribed within the text's conditions of production. In the process, we engage the complexities it textually performs and produces with a keener sense of their relative implication in – and eventual collusion with – U.S. imperialism and racial capitalism.

The question of finance explicitly figures in Acker's introduction to the *Young Lust* volume. Acker describes the work as an attempt at monetizing her praxis, suggesting an

intersection between economic opportunity and the creative challenge of composing a novel according to the expected norms of the U.S. publishing market. Acker asserts: "*Kathy Goes to Haiti* was my attempt to make money through writing, by writing a porn novel (vii). She goes on to claim a pornography publisher of the time, named Venice Books – which one cannot verify ever existed, and seems to be purely fictive – was paying poets of her generation for "quality porn" (vii).

Further emphasizing her training in poetry, Acker remarks: "I was, and still am, interested in verbal architecture, in language and how language works, rather than telling a story" (viii). This statement summates Acker's nearly programmatic detachment from plot, characterization, or narrative, along with her resistance to their definitional inter-dependence in the novelistic format. In fact, the creative restrictions dictated by editorial demands entice Acker's own desire to *defy* the novel, and to trouble its standing as the paradigmatic means of literary expression (against which the porn novel would stand as a mere subsidiary). Acker expresses this combative attitude towards the literary norms of her time through sexually charged imagery:

> A novel, I had been taught, was composed of a plot and believable or well-rounded characters. I decided to write a novel that, while seeming to have a story, had none and whose characters were so deprived of psychology as to almost not exist. I wanted to stick a knife, a little one, up the ass of the novel. (viii)

The upheaval of literary convention amounts to a weaponized act of sexual violence against the (imagined) body of the novel, with literary genre as its normative ideal. Taking this sexualized aside seriously, we might question its erotic, sexual, and gendered meanings The phallic economy of this figure of speech attests not just to Acker's idiosyncratic semiotics of violence, but also to her punctual (yet no less important) appropriation of those phallocentric economies her work sought to deconstruct and detour. By invoking the act of anally penetrating the novel – codified as male already, within the masculinist milieu of the literary establishment – with a tool of invasive incision, Acker draws as much from psychoanalytic imagery as she does from quotidian strands of homophobic slang and injury.[53] As an act of representational violence, it confirms (rather than

[53] Acker was acquainted with the work of Freud and, if antipathetic to the tenets of psychoanalysis, no less committed to countering them. Her description of later work *Empire of The Senseless* as an attempt to produce an "Anti-Oedipal" narrative attests to this, as does her acquaintance and dialogue with the works of French feminist theorists working through forms of psychoanalytic thinking ranging from Freudian orthodoxy to Lacan's paradigmatic shift, such as Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. See: Fornataro, 2004.

contradicts) phallocratic representational economies, and essentialist grammars of embodiment. The imagistic resource of the cut or incision is fiercely reenforced when Acker observes:

> *Kathy Goes to Haiti* was also my version both of a Nancy Drew book (an American girl's book) and of a travel journal. Using mathematical structure and genre parodies were my final two jokes – stabs on the form of the novel. Thus the rather black humor use of my own name. (viii)

Irony and parody are presented as part of the performance through which "stabs" are inflected on the novel, in a combative rapport with regulated genre conventions. These are to be derided and transgressed, with humorous detachment and aggressive imagination. When Acker explains the "black humor" use of her own name, she once again emphasizes the formalist reasoning underlying the novel's construction. This formalist bent results in forms of authorial performativity and political narrativity that complicate the objectivation of the work's respective conditions of possibility. At the limit, they also alter the text's internal relation to objecthood and/or objectivity – as will become apparent when we discuss its representation of Haiti.

KGH's situation, as a context-specific initiative largely propelled by economic circumstance, coincides with the irrelevance Acker finally ascribes to it:

> I never considered *Kathy Goes to Haiti* important. I just wanted to show – someone – I could write a 'real novel'. (viii)

Let this dismissive remark be our point of departure. Let us furthermore provisionally accept Acker's claim that *KGH* is her version of a "real novel" (between quite deliberate citation marks), to the extent it is a *derealized* one. That is to say, that its composition is motivated by a strong rejection of realist epistemologies of literature, and of the precepts governing the modern novel as genre. Although it is more narratively substantiated and structured than other works of Acker's, *KGH* is no less conceptually and formally motivated. It feigns no greater claim to self-coherence, let alone to a cohered commitment to codified genre norms – which the author would happily "stick a knife" into. Its poetic identity lies somewhere in this critical distance from the definitional remits of the novel, and how it gradually drifts away from genre expectations. This being the case, and given the "black humor" conferred to its premise, I suggest we depart from its (white) subject: Kathy, herself.

2.2. The white girl(s): the performance and parody of white femininity.

Kathy's situation on arrival at Port-au-Prince is quickly traced as one of displacement. She is "scared to death because she doesn't know anybody, she doesn't know where to go in Haiti, and she can't speak the language" (KGH, 5). Importantly, the actual grounds and means for Kathy's travel to Haiti are left unaddressed in the opening chapters. Opacity matters, and the question of Kathy's cultural literacy and situated understanding of Haiti is one that persists across the narrative. Perception, in turn, along with knowledge produced from the position of displacement, is bound from early on to visuality: there is a strong emphasis on sight and scenario, mediated through mostly third-person narration.

The emblematic performativity of the white gaze is evident from early on, as the text centers Kathy's (seeing) self as its narratorial standpoint. Certain statements, such as "Everywhere she sees the combinations of things she's never seen before" (6), or even as simple as "This is what Kathy sees." (8) establish the visual economy of Kathy's relation to Haiti, and by consequence, the narrative's own epistemic ecology. Normative conceptions of race, both visual and political in kind, are key to that ecology. When Acker writes that "so many men and women are walking in front of the walls, there's a closer wall of *black flesh*" (my emphasis, 9), black subjects are not discernibly individuated, but rather conglomerated or agglutinated. Collectively, they amount to carnal matter passive to the white regard, rather than remain distinctive as a group of individual persons and bodies.

On this point, I distinctly disagree with Riley's argument, that the text's descriptive emphasis on Kathy's whiteness – rather than on the blackness of her partners – produces a particular kind of anti-racist textuality. Riley claims, apropos of the excluded Kushner illustrations:

> For example, although many of the illustrations might be read as purely pornographic images of oral sex, the text problematizes such an erotic consumption. *Likewise, the interracial component of Kathy's sexploits is so embedded as to be nearly erased in the text: for example, Acker marks Kathy's whiteness in multiple episodes in the narrative, but never describes the race of the Haitian men during the pornographic scenes.*

> The images, by contrast, serve as a visual marker and persistent reminder of racial difference. (my emphasis, Riley, 32)

It is untrue that the novel is absent of markers of blackness accordant with hegemonic regimes of racialization, to the point of "erasing" the question of race and of interracial relations at a textual level. Furthermore, the structure of the gaze itself complicates such a reading. Racialization cannot be contained and accounted for as a question of *nomination* primarily. A range of processes of *visualization* are just as important – if not more so – where the textual construction of race is concerned. The visual cartography of Haiti engendered by the text is starkly summarized when we read: "Kathy hasn't seen any white people" (KGH, 10). Because this statement presents as a stand-alone paragraph, it is formally emphasized as an epistemic predicate. It signals how Kathy's own (racial) identity and her perception of Haiti intertwine across the text. As do, for that matter, her desire and her gaze. Later, she states: "I'd like to see it. I want to see as much of Haiti as possible." (55). Hers is an attitude of openness and enthusiasm towards an unknown field of possibility, presumably bountiful in opportunities for novelty and surprise.

This does not translate into a comfortable identification with the perceived position of the (white) tourist. At one point, Kathy indignantly claims: "I don't want to be a tourist. I just want to go somewhere where I can lie on a beach and not be hassled" (24). The blunt irony of this statement seems blatant, as solitary leisure and casual comfort are equated as contrary to tourism. Kathy often displays an important lack of self-awareness, and even a degree of non-situatedness. These affect the conditions of her travel across Haiti, her perception of her own class and national status, and her regard of Haiti itself as a country. In this case, the polarization of the terms *tourist* and *want* is part of a parodic recodification of white imperialist presumptions. It works to de-naturalize and de-value the protagonist's own acuity, and her awareness. In one of many moments where Kathy changes ideas on where to go next, she flippantly states: "I changed my mind (…) *I can do whatever I want*." (my emphasis, 30) Here, the character's individualistic self-perception is pinpointed with vociferous precision – as is Acker's acerbic attack on such stereotypes of white, middle-class sensibility.

Kathy's racialization as a "white girl" is achieved with swift and plain economy of expression, to the degree that this racialized moniker becomes interchangeable with the character's given name at various moments of narrative discourse – when that name is, as noted, a playful gesture of authorial performativity. Because Kathy's whiteness is objectivated as persistently and

as casually as it is, the text marks and remarks whiteness in a singular manner, as that which is (or ought to be) defined by counter-distinction. However, this does not preclude representational procedures which reify normative regimes of racialization, to violent effect. This becomes especially evident as we begin to understand that the foregrounding (i.e., the representational *affirmation*) of Kathy's whiteness does not interfere with the backgrounding (i.e., the representational *negation*) of Haiti, and its majority black population. Consider the following passage:

> The gray sky turns purples. Layers of roses and lavenders. Top layers of blues and dark purples. Everything in front of the sky has become forms of dark blues and black. The sky is dark blue. Now and then there are tiny lights. Carrefour, the town or stretch of land and swamp on the ocean between the hotel and Port-au-Prince. Paper walls are black. Black shapes pass each other in front of these black walls. (25)

Across the narrative, the semantics of blackness and/or whiteness often re-sediment dominant cartographies of vision and meaning – especially so where the narrative objectivation (or even: objectification) of the people of Haiti is concerned. The material presence of black bodies (racially speaking) is coextensive with the preponderant visual opacity of dark hues and shades of black (chromatically speaking). Passers-by figure as abstract silhouettes of a kind, indiscernible from their surroundings: "black shapes" juxtaposed over "black walls." They need not be specified or individuated as such; on the contrary, they are grouped, even amassed, as blackness. As before, with the figure of "black flesh," the (black) people of Haiti undergo a concrete form of representational erasure. The novel's schematization of the physiognomic marker of skin color, through the abstract signifier of blackness, works to expropriate bodies of their individual identity.

. In the very next page, we read: "The sky glows blacker and blacker. The black road between Port-au-Prince and the motel stretches out into the blackness. Trees, walls, huts are indistinct shapes." (26) And, in an earlier scene, "It's too dark outside to see the three Haitians and the white girl sitting on the patio under the thatched roof." (15) Relays between darkness and blackness abound, the first as a result of nighttime and quite often conflated with the latter – and the latter's racial signification quite often enmeshed with the first. As a result, grids of discretion and distinction cohere according to luminosity, legibility, and intelligibility. In these, the opposition between blackness and whiteness is mapped onto the opposition between background and foreground. And these oppositions are concretely bound to geographic conditions of visibility, which double as the conditional infra-structure for interracial interaction and intercourse. As a

result, the text is imparted with a second order mode of producing the physiognomic meanings of race.

Certain orders of indetermination fortify rather than dissipate this representational effect. For one, the core image of "the endless sun" (29) homogenizes daytime in terms of blaring light, illuminating "the white stucco walls" and other surroundings. Furthermore, it suggests an altered temporality, characterized by the deceleration of events – or even of time as such. As Kathy visits a new location, we read: "There are no signs on the road. As is true everywhere in Haiti, you have to know what you're doing. Or not care what you're doing." (29) This expresses a spatial order of indetermination, emphasizing the absence of those visual indexes which (ideally) organize cartography, and produce a sense of place accordingly. Concurrently, the conceptual and compositional temporality of the novel under the rubric of "slow time" is both experienced by Kathy diegetically, and materially effected by the novel's anti-novelistic construction, through processes of repetition, reiteration, and digression. When a male Haitian tells Kathy: "Time is slow here" (p 20), it reads as much as a comment on narrative temporality as one on colonial temporality: the two cannot be segmented apart. "Slow time" even impacts the alienated rhythm of the novel's first sex scene. As Kathy has sex with Sammy, a cab driver who nonsensically addresses her as his "girlfriend," the porn scene unfolds through desynchrony and detachment. She "can't stand this"; he "doesn't react." As they reach an impasse ("Nothing else matters no matter what she does"), sex itself is encased in the field of slow time, as a subjective sensation. Sammy says as much: "In Haiti time is very very slow." (16)

Kathy assimilates this shared perception of "slow time," later commenting with a local youth: "Yes. It's beautiful here. Everything is slow here. There's no tension." His reply is plain and redundant: "There's no tension" (19). Eventually, we come to understand how this presumed temporality converges with idealized notions of Haitian society and sociability. When Kathy asks a male character whether another man might rape her, he replies: "No. No. There's no violence in Haiti. Anybody can do anything they want" (52). His reply, and the sense of ease it may entail, do not rely on jurisdictive reasoning. Instead, it departs from the reification of Haiti, as a structurally non-violent society. The impossibility of sexual violence is treated as the correlate of the latter predicate, the strong suggestion being that full freedom precludes violence completely.

In this same conversation, one of the novel's key thematic refrains emerges, binding gender demographics and sexual politics together. As Kathy begins to probe into the situation of gender relations in Haiti, she is told that: "There are more women in Haiti than men. The women usually chase the men. But it's unusual for someone so young and beautiful to be alone." (19) This is one of various precepts surrounding marriage, sexuality, and affectivity in Haitian society. The claim that women take the sexual or romantic initiative is contradicted both by the flow of events and by Kathy's own perception of her situation. Still, it stands as a persistent presupposition, which singles out Kathy's status as a normatively attractive, relatively young woman, who is unmarried and traveling alone. In contrast, Haitian women are remitted to the background in a quite literal sense, intermittently figured as part of the scenery across which Kathy travels and meets various men:

> The sun's at its hottest. Against the stucco white wall by the highway a woman sits by a small black pig. Another woman peels a mango for a young boy. Across the highway everything's white. White motel walls. White cement underneath. The patio's crowded. Women with full short torn skirts and homemade bandanas, huge baskets filled with clean laundry, walk in the ruts. (25)

The connotative aftereffects of the statement that "everything's white" resound across the following two sentences. And although we are told of the demographic preeminence of women, male sociality remains dominant, both in description and in narrative action:

> There are men everywhere. Men talk to men. Ten-year-old men. Forty-year-old men. Most of all twenty-year old men. Men lounge around and do nothing. Men drink rum and coke. Men play the jukebox. (p25-26)

Both passages exemplify a key characteristic of *KGH*. This is a text in which description is not exhaustive, so much as it is *exhausted* by repetition. In this case, the deictic simplicity and synthetic sparseness of each sentence is both exacerbated and altered through repetition. The passage's repetitive cadence demonstrates the text's musicality, and its propensity for expressive processes that work through reiteration rather than accumulation: "Men… Men… Men…"

Later, Kathy's perception of Haitian sexual politics is expressed to more extreme effect. Upon learning of a 27-year-old woman who remains sexually inactive, Kathy exclaims: "Jesus Christ I didn't think there was a virgin in Haiti. Except for the zero to three year olds. *She must be a case*" (my emphasis, 67). Kathy's strident stigmatization of this woman – through the language of pathology, no less – coheres with an implicit sexualization of Haitian society at all ages and at all levels. The caustic image of the "the "zero to three year old virgins," in particular, encapsulates

an inflammatory derisions of child abuse as a cultural given, presumably resulting from the primacy of patriarchal authority.

Gradually, the propagation of such brutalist assumptions about Haitian society – and about Haitian sexuality, more specifically – becomes even more evident. Especially as these are articulated through the morally indeterminate lens of Kathy's gaze, and embedded into the text's aesthetics of detachment and displacement. Meanwhile, from early scenes to as corrosive an interjection as the one cited above, patriarchal authority figures as the force that compulsory instills sex (and sexuality) as the rule of Haitian sociality. This is the wider field of social relations the white girl enjoys and becomes entangled in.

If Kathy is unwaveringly marked as "the white girl," then Betty, the only other white woman in the narrative, is comparatively overmarked (humorously overdetermined, even) as whiter still. Betty is the wife of Roger Mystere, the Haitian businessman who becomes Kathy's main sexual and romantic partner as the narrative unfolds. At a point, Roger invites Kathy to the city of Cap Haiti to introduce her to Betty, expecting they might become friends or even lovers themselves. But before he does so, he warns Kathy: "[Betty] never leaves the house. Her skin's allergic to the sun down here so she can't go out of the house during the day unless she's totally covered up." (58).

Betty's very skin – her "epidermal-racial schema," to invoke Fanon's phenomenological terminology – prevents her from inhabiting the Haitian sensorium, and by extension, Haitian social relations.[54] Through this medicalized trope, pungent in acidic irony, she is empirically bound to isolation in domesticity. Her heightened whiteness reads as parodic. A figure of domestic American adequacy, Betty is physically and psychically vulnerable, and utterly maladjusted to both the social *and* the literal climate. Unable to abide the "burning white sun" (57) , she is so "very delicate" (58) the heat proves likewise unbearable. When Kathy and Betty do meet, a deterministic visual model of physiognomy seems apparent:

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[54] In *Black Skins, White Masks* (2008), Frantz Fanon describes the experience of being interpellated as a "negro" in the context of white society, as opposed to his life amidst national and racial peers, as something which makes the corporeal schema "crumble," leaving a "racial epidermal schema" in its place. We will return to this account of interpellation and racialization later in the chapter. Here, I anticipate the use of this expression to signal how Betty's whiteness is both somatically and semantically overdetermined in the physical and social context of Haiti, and how that overdetermination proves more important than her respective identity or agency.

> Betty's skinny and there's no blood in her face. She looks like she has no blood. She's not albino. Even though her hair is so blonde it's almost white, it's dingy. Straggly. She looks as if she's been totally permanently frightened. Otherwise she's pretty in a midwestern American way. Her eyes are pale pale blue. She's wearing an obviously new dark cotton dress which chokes her neck, droops at her waist and ruffles again and again around her nonexistent hips. (59)

So white the text goes as far as to negatively define her as *not* being albino, Betty's skin tone – even: the entire visible surface of her body, including her hair and eyes – is additionally connoted as the notional result of fear or of a specific fright, as if her body provides a prompt of her personality. Here, we might recall how Kathy was "scared to death" on arrival, the first token of an instilled sense of fear that disrupts the general discourse of peace and ease. The deictically improbable "dark cotton dress" protects Betty's body, evincing her slim, flat figure and her caricaturized guardedness. That guardedness is continuous with what we have by then learned of her sexuality (i.e., her favor for the "missionary position"; as Roger derisorily describes it). When left alone for a moment, Kathy and Betty's conversation is focused on Betty's lack of access to the objects of her desire and the commodities she yearns for, given governmentally dictated constraints on trade and commerce. Particularly fond of animals (including horses), she explains to Kathy:

> We couldn't bring the dog into Haiti. You can't bring anything into Haiti. It's like being in prison here. When I first moved here my mother sent me a carton of books, just some old books I had at home, and it cost me seventy-five dollars to take these books out of the post office. (61)

Haitian taxation on foreign goods is framed as punitive from the standpoint of white middle class comfort. When the American ex-patriate equates her situation to one of incarceration, it also calls back to how the motel where Kathy first stays is described. "Kathy locks the door of her cell after the man and starts to meditate" is one such instance. "She locks her cell and immediately goes to sleep" (24) is another. "Incarcerated," Betty's somatic and experiential position is wholly antithetical to the country Haiti. She is not only *morally* reactive towards its social and material conditions (primarily in matters such as health and security), but also *physically* reactive against its geographical and meteorological conditions. Alienated by every form of sensorial input, Betty is even "allergic to most Haitian foods" (75). Cultural specificity is herein enfolded with and encoded as *anatomy*, and it further emphasizes Kathy's exceptional capacity to adapt and adjust to Haiti. Cultural sensibility and somatic sensitivity figure as doubles, in the carnivalesque portrayal of Betty as a silhouette of incremental whiteness: akin to Kathy, yet alien to Haiti.

2.3. Living in (in)differentiation.

Kathy departs from Port au Prince on the suggestion of Marguerite, the only Haitian woman she talks to across the entire narrative. It is Marguerite who explains to her the compulsory cogency of the heterosexual contract, as materialized through the institution of marriage. She also provides insight into Haitian gender roles, early in the novel. Yet the near exclusivity of heterosexual rapport is reasserted soon after. On her first day alone in Cap Haiti, Kathy meets what she presumes must be an American man and who she wants to talk to, given "he's not even looking at me, much less chasing after me like all the Haitian men." (33). Moreover, he would afford her the chance to speak English, which at this point she has not for four days: for the duration of the first chapter ("First Days in Port-Au-Prince), she communicates in broken French only.

The prevailing sexual economy of male pursuit of women, regarded as recipients of active sexual attention, is set and sedimented in an unequivocally racialized manner. The would-be American, unlike "Haitian men" (stereotype in no need of qualification) participates of a distinctive visual economy: *he does not look at her*. Thus, he may be approached. "I'd be picking him up" (33), Kathy cautiously notes, with contextual savvy. His name is Gerard.-As they talk, a friend of his approaches, visually and linguistically ornamented in pop paraphernalia. This is Roger, who is first described as "A young Fidel Castro in a filthy Donald Duck T-shirt" (34). This sardonic epithet, referring to a key figure in Latin American politics and invoking Cold War tensions across the Americas, stands as a ready-made trope of political provocation. At the same time, Roger's use of attired branded after a famous U.S. cartoon character willfully tonally awkward, in the context of the novel's pornographic content. This citational cross-section juxtaposes an icon of anti-imperialist resistance and one of U.S. mass media and mass production, suggesting something of their interconnection. In fact, both Gerard and Roger "went to school in the states" (34), and although Gerard Speaks in a "thick Southern accent" (33), Kathy soon learns they are both Haitian men. As a result of their education, they are acclimatized and habituated to U.S. national culture, setting them apart from other Haitian men. And even from Betty, in a sense.

As the two discuss the penalty for drug possession in Haiti, Kathy learns that "The jails here are deathpits" (37). This isolated remark signals the latent violence of the national carceral system, without necessarily thematizing it. Effectively, this is an open secret – one of the many

afforded by Acker's daft deployment of gaps (or intervals) of intelligibility across the text. After the three drive around – a process with its own perceptual and narrative rhythm –, they come across "three huge bronze statues." Roger explains their meaning to Kathy: "Toussaint L'Ouverture. There are some others with him." He goes on:

> The French took him prisoner and brought him back to France. They imprisoned him in the Jura Mountains because they knew his body couldn't adjust to the cold. He spent a winter in an unheated cell – he had never before known the cold – without blankets, no doctor, so by the end of the winter he died. (40)

Suddenly, the text places incarceration as consequence of drug possession and consumption (as discussed by Kathy and Gerard) in proximity to the incarceration of Toussaint L'Ouverture by the French, and his ultimate demise in prison. This proximity indexes something of the work's consciously inconsequential narrative rationale. As a result, a radical discontinuity is placed into relief – and one which merits further attention. I refer here to the cleavage between the necropolitical dimensions of state power (including 20th century state power, but also Spanish and French colonial state power), and the recurrence of metaphors of incarceration, often used to describe either Kathy or Betty's situation. Such metaphors, used by both women to describe their perceived displacement and deprivation, seem derivative and extractive, given Haiti's history of occupation and colonization, and the contexts of political violence against which the story is told. The tension between their intimate descriptions of discomfort and distress and macro-political structures of oppression raises important questions about the text's political location – especially given its implicated standing in the political situation of the time, as well as the longer arches of Haitian national history.

L'Ouverture was the best-known leader of the slave insurgence of 1791-1804, in the country then known as Saint-Domingue. Having trained and fought alongside the French, L'Ouverture proved instrumental to anti-colonial resistance against Napoleon rule and the invasion of his armed forces[55]. As a military leader, he paved the way for the formation of the autonomous republic of Haiti, which he did not live to see. The trio's encounter with the monument speaks to the long history of the republic of Haiti, from its racialized national mythology to its structural conditions of deprivation across the 20th century. But the scene bears no acknowledgement – let

[55] A key document to contemporary descriptions of L'Ouverture's life (and his role in the Haitian revolution) is John R. Beard's *Toussaint L'Ouverture: A Biography and Autobiography*, first published in London in 1863. We will return to this text in Chapter 4, as we discuss Acker's *Empire of the Senseless* (1988).

alone any *engagement* – on Kathy's part, whether as an observant or as a speaking agent. Nor is the juxtaposition between these figures of the carceral rendered as explicitly conflicting, when compared to Kathy's description of her motel room as a "cell," earlier in the novel.

Rendered as a non-sequitur, this glimpse at wider anti-colonial and post-colonial histories defaults as background noise to interracial erotic. At most, it anticipates Betty's latter portrayal as a white U.S. ex-patriate, who feels imprisoned because of the rights and privileges she forfeits. This is also the moment at which Kathy and Roger begin to flirt. By counter-distinction, both Kathy and Betty's latter performance of white femininity are energized with mordant acidity. This formal decision does not render the history of Haiti (including U.S. occupation) inconsequential, as much as it shifts the question of representation: "Kathy" is as troubled a representational construct as "Haiti" itself is.

Soon, Roger and Kathy become sexually involved. "They start doing the same things at the same time without thinking about it" (44), we read. Their actions are reciprocal and mutually imbricated, and somewhat separate from mindful deliberation. Principles of repetition, patent at the level of composition itself, inform extended and schematized porn sequences like this one. This formal principle of repetition includes how these sequences are interposed and interpolated with incidental asides and dialogic drift, varying from the descriptive to the more stylistically ornate. The pornographic script itself is vested with Acker's recognizable poetics of sexuality, and a particular investment in experiential metaphors that bind genital arousal, sexual expanse, and sensorial multiplicity together. As Roger stimulates Kathy:

> she feels all her muscles relax, a force like a warm fire, an exploding bomb and all the wants in the world, these three together rise up her cunt muscles and then slowly into her whole body (45-46)

As often is the case in Acker's writing, and in no way exclusive to the pornographic rapport of *KGH*, the individual sex act conjures sensations of de-individuation, of multitude, even of totality. The concomitance of pleasure and hurt in their encounter – "The hurt increases the pleasure" (46) – has led Riley to claim that "the acts cannot function as pornography in the conventional sense because they occur at the level of a body susceptible to pain and illness" (Riley, 39). Riley refers to a scene featuring cunnilingus specifically, emphasizing that Kathy comments she might not take well, to which Riley in turn attributes a tacit critical value:

> This frames up the white tourist body as unhealthy and impure, directly voicing a dirty secret of tourism. It also indicates that on some level the black Haitian man still eats, or puts up with, white 'American' shit. (Riley, 39)

Riley's reading, however, is predicated on the assumption that the two characters are engaged in normative sex acts, ignoring Acker's frequent acknowledgement of BDSM sexual practices, along with the distinctive alignments (and misalignments) of pleasure and hurt these engender. Moreover, Riley defaults to a normatively over-codified understanding of cunnilingus as a form of debasement. Through metonymic displacement (*cunnilingus* = *anilingus*), it is made to coincide with the consumption of "American shit." (i.e., coprophagy). Coprophagy, in turn, is immediately connoted as a negative act of submission and subjection. [56]

I would hesitate to abridge genitality and anality so abruptly, in what reads as a functionalist reduction of the sex relation, reliant on normative conceptions of sexuality and sexual pleasure. In fact, I would add that the expression at stake actually *dispels* the presumed opposition between the two sensations. As do, for that matter, Kathy and Roger's excitement and satisfaction, rendering moot such an atavistic perception of cunnilingus.[57] My focus lies instead on the gendered metaphors of activity/passivity in use, and how they map onto the concrete figures of phallic implement/vaginal retainer. For instance:

> Kathy's cunt is silent, ready, nothing. Roger's tongue is the explosions, the fires, the desire. The explosions the fires the desire come faster and harder they become simultaneous and infinite. (KGH, 47)

This description conjures an intrinsic tactile understanding between the two characters, where Roger's tongue (i.e., *not* his person) figures as a concentration of intensity, while Kathy's cunt (again, not *her*) figures as neutral, muted, and objectual. The displacement of psychic personhood at the moment of orgasmic climax speaks to a distinctively phallic economy of sexual sensation and signification. On the same page, we read: "Roger's tongue draws Kathy out of herself, makes her quiver, and puts her back, slightly changed, into herself" (47). The stark difference here is that Roger's *tongue* operates on and within Kathy *herself*, who is drawn out of

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[56] This is not to say Acker herself does not participate in such discursive economies, by engaging in speech acts markedly bound to the sexual mores of patriarchal, heterosexist, cissexist society (and their wider symbolic and linguistic ramifications). A strong example of that participation in normative economies of sex and signification would be the aphoristically expressed intent to "stick a knife up the novel's ass," as discussed earlier this chapter.

[57] In fact, Riley's interpretation seems to depart from a fundamental misrecognition of who assents to the other's initiative, when Roger plainly insists on pleasuring Kathy genitally, despite her misgivings about how she might taste: "I love to suck women. Sometimes I come in my pants when I'm sucking a woman I like it so much." (46)

her body, and then placed back in. As Kathy comes repeatedly, orgasmic sensation is experienced as something other to hermeneutic capture or signification: “Kathy comes so much she no longer knows what coming means” (48) For moments, the dissipation of difference reads as the ontological horizon of sex. In Kathy’s words: “Everything’s everything else.” (50) At the limit, a sensorial zone of unconditional possibility opens up, its boundaries indefinite. After the two spend some time intermittently fucking and talking, the chapter draws to an end. Its closing sentence encapsulates their entanglement in specular synchrony of feeling and movement: “Kathy and Roger both come again.” (52)

Roger is the son of Mr. Mystere, who we learn “owns Cap Haitian” (49). The particularities of race and race relations in Haiti are belatedly foregrounded through the introduction of the Mysteres, Roger’s extended family, as “mulatto robber barons” (53), in the eponymously titled third chapter.[58] We must read this against the historical background of Duvalier (a.k.a., “Papa Doc”), and the racial politics of his dictatorial regime. His involvement within the *négritude* movement was bound to his project of galvanizing the black majority of Haiti against the minoritarian *mulatto* elite (i.e., the mixed-race segment of the population with the most power).[59] At this point, the novel recognizes the historical persistence of that elite (especially in terms of administrative and economic power), although more general references to blackness have yet to precipitate the question of blackness as such: its concrete definition in national history; the particular forms of racial hierarchization present in the country’s modern history, and a conception of blackness (in social life, and as a political narrative) that runs counter to mainstream U.S. national culture.

The Mysteres are the head of a large productive infra-structure. The head of the family owns “several lumber, cocoa, coffee, rum and bottling plantations and factories,” along with the

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[58] The novel features once single reference to (would-be) maroons. Betty tells Kathy of a couple, who “rode on horseback through the inland mountains and swamps” and “met tribes in the mountains who had never seen white men before.” (68). There is a peculiar cogency to the maroon fiction in the case of Haiti, given its foundation by a critical mass of Afro-descendants brought to the country by French slave-trafficking. Hypothetically, this could be a reference to the indigenous Taipo people, living in the territories when Columbus first found the territory he named “Hispaniola.”

[59] I have chosen to use the expression “mulatto” (from Portuguese “mula” and Spanish “mulo,” which translates as “mule” in English) when referring to this segment of the population, rather than substituting it for another term that would be less loaded in historical and political connotation. The reason is twofold: on the one hand, this is the term Acker uses herself, and thus the one which most directly rapports back to the text’s troubled racial politics. On the other hand, this was the term in currency at the time of the Duvalier regime, and it remains symptomatic of historically specific interpretations of race and racial identity.

Le Roi rum complex, which is "his baby." (53) They are enriched businessmen by patrimony: intergenerational property-holders, guarded within a closed system of industry and commerce, as sanctioned by state power. In a less than subtle citational overlay, their family name is an alternate designation for the Loa (from the French "les lois," meaning "the laws"), the spirits of Voodoo lore in Haiti and in the Haitian diaspora (including the federal state of Louisiana in the U.S., and its own tradition of Louisiana Voodoo). Also known as "the invisibles," they are individual entities to be served, who mediate between humanity and the Supreme Creator, Bondye (from the French "Bondieu," meaning "good god").

This token of the standardized authority of Voodoo as the official – and forcefully implemented – belief system under the Duvalier regime speaks to a latent awareness of the intimate implications between business, state, religion, and the cult of personality in Haitian society in the 1970s. The interrelation between racial and religious politics, capitalist commerce, and market monopoly are explicit, as are the economic constraints resulting from firm governmental hold over resources and infra-structures. "In Haiti it's hard to get decent machines, the government tries to get everything, so these tanks might explode at any second" (53), we learn of the Le Roi complex. The detailing of Roger's familial and economic belonging prepares for the complex set of asymmetries inscribed in his relationship with Kathy – although these are only rendered legible much later in the narrative.

2.3. Empire, hegemony, and class contradiction.

In her introduction to *Young Lust*, Acker explains that the rigidly defined formal and structural principles according to which she composed the text were in fact an expression of a long-term interest in Voodoo cosmology, as a system of representation. More so, perhaps, than as a regionalized system of spiritual belief. This conceptual and creative curiosity about Voodoo cosmology also shapes *Empire of the Senseless*, a novel published a full decade later. In her opening remarks to the *Young Lust* collection, Acker notes:

> *Kathy Goes to Haiti* was mathematically composed: every other chapter is a porn chapter; each chapter, except for the central one, mirrors its facing chapter. Mirrors are a significant part of the Voodoo cosmogony. (viii)

If we take Acker's account at face value (and we have plenty of reasons not to do so), a certain way of reading the novel insinuates itself. Namely, that rather than a narrative trajectory, from beginning through middle to end, *KGH* consists in a discontinuous field of variations and derivations, unfolding from the central chapter, as an excluded core of sorts. Not because that chapter is narratively indispensable, but because it cannot – by definition – obey the specular or mathematic principles governing the book's composition. Within this structural logic, "The Passions" stands, in a sense, as a sequence breaker. The narrative standpoint shifts; the textual flow becomes immersive and extensive; biographical and emotional detail are suddenly abundant.

The abrupt incurrence of second-person address, in particular, strikes a dissonant chord, both tonally and in terms of narrative perspective. R. J. Ellis has written on this pivot, whereby "the voice switches from the third-person/first-person to a second person address" (Ellis 81), and commented on its blunt effect on narrative structure:

> This disintegration of an otherwise strongly-centered narrative is strategic: the narrative in this chapter fragmentedly falls to bits as the unequal relationship between Roger and Kathy is laid as bare as Kathy lies beneath a sweating Roger. (83)

This narratorial shift coincides with the proliferation of the most nonsensical and entropic language-games in the book. Varied in compositional technique and style, "The Passions" interrupts the predicated of perception and presentation so far sedimented, without producing a new set of rules, prescriptively practiced across the following chapters. Neither quite revelatory nor reforming, the text stands on its own compositional terms, and merits further attention.

Suddenly, a subjective voice, dominated by self-demeaning and self-effacing affects, is introduced into the novel's emotional tessiture, and its relative efforts towards characterization. That voice is Kathy's own, and the chapter opens with a cluster of violent admonishments:

> Your past comes back and hooks you. Your insane search for affection because your mother didn't want you, disliked you, and she wouldn't tell you who your father was. You kept looking for someone to turn to. You kept looking for a home. Your need gathers. Passion collects. You're in now, baby… passions, just as they are...
>
> You're going to bang your head against that wall again. No affection. You. Where are you going to find love? How can you run away from yourself? (…) What a pleasure it'll be when your head breaks…
>
> You've got to get love. You've lost your sense of propriety. Your social so-called graces. You're running around a cunt without a head. (76)

A psychoanalytically motivated hermeneutic of the self emphasizes how female subjectivation is conditionally predicated on the constitutive dramas of the parental structure. What Deleuze and Guattari, in their critique of Freudian and Lacanian orthodoxy, described as the "Oedipal, neurotic" formula of "daddy-mommy-me." This foundational, tripart structure figures as a compelling mechanism of subject-formation, with the immediate correlate of devaluing the subject's situation: Kathy's "search for affection," whether motivated or not, is "insane." Importantly, the parental rapport also maps onto the spatial. The yearning for belonging is oriented not only towards someone, but towards "a home." Necessarily, this detail tinges our perception of the motivations underlying Kathy's travel to Haiti. Ultimately, subject-formation is defined vis-à-vis foundational negations: absence, detachment, miscommunication… Subsequently, the libido expresses itself as an impossible movement, away from the failure of the familial and towards the redemptive horizon of love.[60]

Importantly, the parental maps onto the spatial: the yearning for belonging is oriented not just towards "someone," but also "a home," which tilts one's sense of the protagonist's motivation when travelling. Subject-formation is defined vis-à-vis foundational negations (absence, disinterest, miscommunication) and subsequently the libido expresses itself as an impossible movement away from the failure of the familial and towards the redemptive horizon of love. The affective fault-lines that render Kathy as a subject-in-crisis hold determining power over the ideal of love. As the horizon of desire, it can only be a dead end: the litmus-test of the inevitable impossibility of any affective reciprocity. Displacement itself can only lead to further displacement, as lack perpetuates and intensifies Kathy's frustrations.

The vivid image of a head banged against a wall speaks to the drastic violence of these constraints and limitations. In fact, Kathy's subjectivity, untenable throughout the novel, becomes perceptible only to the extent it articulates through the violence of crisis. Her sexual agency very sexual agency is placed in perspective, as an excess inimical to self-control and self-possession, inevitably condiment through the other's (corrective) gaze. One line of flight cuts through this set

[60] The overdetermination of female libido as a function of the maternal figure's detachment and rejection strikes a particularly cogent meta-textual chord, in the context of the then-recent death of Acker's own mother. The indifferent mother/absent father dyad reoccurs throughout various texts of hers, with variable interpretations of its autobiographical entrenchment in her own experience. *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984) and *My Life My Death by Pier Pasolini* (1987), for instance, both pick up on this same pre-representational drama with further fervor and complexity.

of compactions, and it is contextually important, given its obvious relay with colonialist political fictions and visionary poetics. I refer to the fanciful utopia Kathy invokes, as the antithesis to her situation:

> Someday there'll have to be a new world. A new kind of woman. Or a new world for women because the world we perceive, what we perceive, causes our characteristics. In that future time a woman will be a strong warrior: free, stern, proud, able to control her own destiny, able to kick anyone in the guts, able to punch out any goddamn son-of-a-bitch who tells her he loves her she's the most beautiful thing on earth she's the greatest artist going fucks her beats her up a little then refuses to talk to her and able to fuck (love and get love) as much as she wants. In that future time, the woman will be beautiful and be the hottest number whose eyes breathe fire, who works hard, who's honest and blunt, who demands total honesty. Greta Garbo in Queen Christina. Meanwhile things stink, Kathy thinks to herself. (77)

The invocation of a "new world" is already embedded with fierce ironic energy, citing the "New World/Old World" partition produced by Christopher Columbus's accidental arrival in America, along with 16th century scientific discourse and cartographies (both spatial, and otherwise). Pivoted on the monad of the spectral "new woman," who is racially unmarked, culturally unspecific, and morphologically indistinctive, this fantasy teases at the contradictions proper to Kathy's predicament. At the same time, it complies with those structural exclusions perpetuated within the U.S. imperialist imaginary. The "New Woman" was a discursive construct – and adjacent rhetoric – reporting to ideals of femininity, in currency in late 19th century English-language literature and media. Sally Ledger has described how actual and imagined versions of the "New Woman" were of great importance in the "socio-sexual climate of the fin de siècle" (Ledger, 1), as social and economic factors reshaped the women's movement, as well as public perceptions of it. Ledger writes:

> The New Woman of the fin de siècle had a multiple identity. She was, variously, a feminist activist, a social reformer, a popular novelist, a suffragette playwright, a woman poet; she was also often a fictional construct, a discursive response to the activities of the late nineteenth-century women's movement. Textual representations of the New Woman (particularly unsympathetic representations) did not always coincide at all exactly with contemporary feminist beliefs and activities. (Ledger, 1)

Citing both critics and supporters of the nominal "New Woman," Ledger brings up that figure's own "social so-called graces" – or lack thereof:

> The New Woman as a category was by no means stable. Whilst medicoscientific discourse, for example, focused on reproductive issues, 91ourageous91 the New Woman's supposed refusal of maternity, antipathetic fictional discourses on the New Woman concentrated instead on her reputed sexual licence. (10)

The invocation of this personification of 19th century moral debates on what was then "The Woman Question" reads as a quite deliberate gesture towards the constitutive contradictions of ideals of femininity in adjacent literary and cultural histories across the Atlantic. Riffing off of a cultural mythos representationally *and* materially embedded in the English-speaking *fin de siècle* allows Acker to interpolate her uptake on regulated ideals of femininity with an unexpected degree of long-term historical continuity. In this regard, "Greta Garbo in Queen Christina" is no less resounding a refrain. Selecting Greta Garbo's filmic performance as a visionary token of future subjectivity, Acker refers us towards classic U.S. cinema and to the tropes of femininity encoded within it, themselves riddled with similar conflicts and contradictions. It is another self-referential nod towards the idioms of U.S. (popular) culture, in provocative friction with Kathy's immediate location in Haiti. Here, the invocation of the white European woman – as a figure of myth, mystery, and beauty – is particularly cogent as a racialized idiom. Consider Roland Barthes's mythographic description of Garbo:

> It is without a doubt an admirable face-as-object; in Queen Christina, a film shown again here [in Paris] in recent years, the star's makeup has the snowy density of a mask; it is not a painted face but a face in plaster, protected by the surface of its shadows and not by its lineaments; in all this fragile and compact snow, only the eyes, black as some strange pulp but not at all expressive, are two rather tremulous wounds. Even in its extreme beauty, this face not drawn but instead sculptured in something smooth and friable, which is to say both perfect and ephemeral, matches somehow Chaplin's flour-white complexion, those vegetally dark eyes, his totemic visage. (Barthes, 2012, 73)

Garbo's physical and visual performativity, and the expansive iconography surrounding it, are very much bound to the material fact of her whiteness – along with her North European ascent, the intelligible distinctiveness of her national identity, and ultimately, how all of these were rendered as assets within the visual economies of post-war U.S. culture. Barthes's panegyric, laced through with inter-locking semiotics of black/white (i.e., "snow"/ "shadows") and surface/depth (i.e., "mask"/"wounds"), ultimately devalues Garbo's concrete physicality, favoring instead the abstraction of the *human* as a totalizing referent:

> Garbo produced a sort of Platonic idea of the human creature, which accounts for her own face being virtually sexless without being at all 'dubious'. (74)

The somatic poetics of Garbo's filmic presence – of her body, of her skin, or of her hair – were propitiated by black-and-white celluloid film, itself engrained in a racialized history of technological and technical developments. The history of photography – including cinema – is

characterized by the modulation of technical precepts in accordance with the white body, treated as a template of physiognomic intelligibility. As a result, technologies of image capture are better equipped to portray the white body, and correctively adapt images of the non-white body accordingly. On these technical standards, and what she describes as "the inherited bias in camera and film technology," Sarah Lewis writes:

> Photography is not just a system of calibrating light, but a technology of subjective decisions. Light skin became the chemical baseline for film technology, fulfilling the needs of its target dominant market. For example, developing color-film technology initially required what was called a Shirley card. When you sent off your film to get developed, lab technicians would use the image of a white woman with brown hair named Shirley as the measuring stick against which they calibrated the colors. Quality control meant ensuring that Shirley's face looked good. It has translated into the color-balancing of digital technology. (Lewis, 2019).

Kathy's fiction of the future woman, emancipated within a world of reconstructed perception, culminates with – and is crystallized within – a version of idealized white femininity itself already embedded in the very means of production and reproduction of white supremacist national culture, as much as it is elevated within the visual economies these render possible. This seems to express a self-referential attitude, which seeks not (and needs not) address versions of femininity other than those already troubled within the text, through parodic performativity. Namely white, heterosexual, middle-class femininity. At the same time, it renders the absurdities and attritions proper to such representational conflicts quite explicitly. Because this anticipatory projection of the "new woman," drawn from the cultural archives of U.S. white supremacy and retooled as a mythographic trope of utopian possibility, is ultimately discarded. As an abstract ideal, it is neither pursued nor perused by Kathy, and simply drifts to the textual margins as detritus of possibility. "Meanwhile, things stink…" (77)

By opening up a conflicting portrayal of Kathy, the chapter also raises the question of her economic situation and class status. At this point, Kathy's economic precarity has been gestured towards on more than one occasion. Here, it is addressed directly, and not just as a characteristic of her travel conditions or as a transitory marker of her circumstances. Describing her life in New York, Kathy tells Roger:

> New York is hell you don't know how horrible it is. I hate living there. I just have to be there sometimes cause at this point that's the only place I can get money for my writing. I'm not rich: if I don't make money I'm going to die. (79)

Again, a loud silence resounds, surrounding the stark set of structural asymmetries between Kathy and Roger's conditions of possibility. That cleavage between their positions is not dramatized to recuperative or recuperative effect. Kathy's geopolitical position is that a white, female, middle-class U.S. citizen, experiencing precarity within the concrete economic circumstances of New York in the 1970s. Her position is further complicated by the choice of artistic practice as a favored form of labor, dependent on fluctuating opportunity. Her situation is synthetized through a context-specific definition of "richness," and of the necropolitical limit of death under late capitalism: "if I don't make money, I'm going to die." Acker's own government-sponsored opportunity to travel outside those conditional limits to write the text itself, which in turn thematizes the problem of economic precarity, generates its own form of non-representational friction. In fact, we might ask whether it does not constitute an act of representational violence of its own.

Roger's geopolitical position, in turn, is that of a Haitian, *mullato* man endowed with significant class privilege through oligarchic patrimony. He is bound to inherit his father's business in the context of a bankrupt economy, modulated by the political directives of the Duvalier regime and the interference of U.S. political hegemony. But he is so in a structurally disadvantage nation-state, founded on slave insurgence against French colonial power. A history of independence quite unlike the U.S.'s own, achieved as it was in opposition to the British empire, yet constitutively enriched and empowered by the economy of slave labor – rather than exploited and impoverished through it. Deliberate or not, Acker's decision *not* to render these distinctions discernible – inscribed as they are within the transatlantic slave-trade, the onto-epistemic paradigm for the foundation of either nation-state – is, of itself, an ethically contentious provocation. The overdetermining tensions that make up the relation of power (erotic and otherwise) between Kathy and Roger are neither analyzed nor alleviated. Rather, they are rendered in their opacity and unintelligibility, as unrecognized contradiction.

This contradiction is vividly portrayed when Kathy describes her own relationships in terms of possession, dispossession, and theft. In a moment of candid forthrightness, we read: "You don't want to steal, but you don't know how to get along if you don't steal" (80). At this point, Kathy's self-censoring monologue expounds on how she works an average of "two to three nights a week." Devaluing her own forms of (writerly) labor, Kathy notes she may at all times "borrow money from a guy you used to fuck who still loves you" (80), make a porn film (an apparent

reference to Acker's own experience with sex work), or even steal from her friends (which might be the text's most obvious nod towards plagiaristic poetics). Guilt likewise informs Kathy's description of a particular partner she has in New York city, someone "who tells you he loves you only when you decide to stop fucking him, and who beats you up when you have sex" (80).

The self-reprobative framework enfolds as inevitability the fact of violence and of conflict as the very substance of inter-subjective relations, sexual or otherwise. In a passage invocative of Betty's (slick, schematic) portrayal, physical vulnerability is moralistically encoded as due consequence of behavior not accordant with psychic integrity and societal conformation:

> Writing these things down doesn't alleviate your suffering. You don't want to steal. You steal. There's a sharp constant pain in you running from ovary to ovary. When this pain hits you, you think you're going to die. You're a stupid bitch. At least half of your thoughts are about the men you've fucked or want to fuck. You're desperate for affection, you don't want any affection because you're selfish and egotistical and insecure, so you get sick. For the past year you've had a lousy medical history: four abortions, four PID [Pelvic Inflammatory Disease] attacks, five flu cases, one breast cancer (now gone). Maybe you're in a bind. (81)

This medicalized confession is followed, with neutral simplicity, by Roger's announcement that he would like to buy Kathy a yacht. There is a stark irony to this announcement, which underlines the inarticulability of these forms of psychic and physical hurt within their relationship. In fact, this novelistic turn riffs off of the proclamation that writing does not alleviate, does not ameliorate suffering – as if seeding an intra-textual understanding of a metatextual architecture, in which writing is incapable of providing recuperation, resolution or remediation. The constraints of female subjectivity are not psychosomatically but rather *somatically* inscribed, in ways which writing – whether as a form of monetized labor or a technique of the self – cannot make amends for. Circular as the situation is, the narrative rapport defaults to the sexual relation itself, as an inevitable means of surviving or making "one's way."

When Kathy and Roger enter into economic agreement, situating themselves across their differences in terms of exchange and mutual aid, their effort both attests to Kathy's conditional agency, and confirms Acker's selective focus on histories of capitalism and colonialism. As they consider the conditions for prolonging her stay, Kathy outright states the cost of her trip: "Two hundred and forty dollars round trip" (81). Roger's response is unabashed and unimpressed: "That's not any money. I spend more than that amount of money on my bar drinking every month"

(81). Kathy insists that this is, indeed, a "lot of money for me" (91). But Roger's comparative economic power and Kathy's own financial circumstances cannot disassemble the foundational cleft between their respective positions within a capitalist global economy. Nor the ways in which race interacts and interferes with class, in the definition of the conditional contours of their relationship.

Race and class, as well as gender, become definitionally intertwined in contradiction, at the violent interface of U.S. racial capitalism and Haiti's post-colonial political economy. This is, of necessity, a critical location. This is notable when Kathy expresses the need to return to New York for sustenance, once again using the recurrent metaphor of the carceral, despite her voluntary travel to Haiti: "For me, the women here live in prison" (82). Kathy's preponderant preoccupation with the availability of her books evinces the conditions she finds unacceptable (i.e., carceral): "You've got to have some books for me. Otherwise I'll go crazy and I won't be able to stay there." (83)

2.5. Necropolitical horizons.

In the same chapter, Kathy's narrative of safe self-determination is indelibly altered. As is, for that matter Roger's propertarian sense of a possessive hold over her. Various friends of Roger feature across the narrative, such as the afore-mentioned Gerard. One of them is Duval, whose name is a sharp distortion of "Duvalier." As Kathy and Roger talk, she hesitantly tells him that Duval attempted to rape her:

> I don't know if I should tell you this. Yesterday afternoon, I was smoking with Duval and that nice Spanish sailor, I was totally stoned (…) Duval wanted to fuck me. I told him I couldn't because I was going to leave the room. (…) I was real stoned. Duval didn't listen to me: he grabbed me and almost raped me. When I got the chance, I pushed him away and ran out of the room. I think he's very angry. You know how close he and Ally are and how they talk. I hope there isn't any trouble. (85)

Kathy's articulation is both hesitant and defensive, aiming to ward off further risk or any social discomfort. Roger's dismissive reaction is to first suspect her account, and then to dismiss it: "Now that you've kissed Duval, you're fair game" (86). Imparting Kathy with guilt, Roger redefines her use-value and availability within a network of sexual exchanges in which male

authority is a given. Their exchange ends inconclusively, but the episode feeds into the accusatory monologue specific to this chapter, and its depiction of the constitutive violences of gendered subjectivity. The fact that Duval's name renders him as a metonymic displacement (or replacement) of Duvalier is no coincidence, and the tactical use of sexual violence by the Duvalier regime. After Roger's expectably indifferent reaction, Kathy's thoughts again flare up in distain, guilt, and dejection:

> Disgusting putrid horror-face no one wants to fuck you you make a fool of yourself you always make a fool of yourself everyone's always laughing at you everywhere you go you don't belong anywhere nowhere nowhere you're worse than a bum cause a bum can take care of himself he can stand sleeping on the streetcorner at night he can travel from place to place without worrying about his five thousand books how he's going to drag the right dress with him you can't do anything for yourself you're a demented abortion on God's earth you don't do anything useful you hate to work all of you is one mass of squirming and totally disgusting worms that squirm against each other hate each other. (86)

Kathy describes herself as inferior to "the bum" – i.e., the homeless, both socially abjected and materially dispossessed. This figure of speech is more than a descriptor of economic status; it signals exclusion form the economic organization of society, and remission to the site of social death. Presumed male already, he is accordingly gendered ("he"). Unlike Kathy, he can sustain himself, and has the capacity to sleep without shelter, without structure, and without care. His dislodgement from grits of habitation is portrayed as a form of unqualified, and unrestrained motility, free of inhibition. Quite unlike Kathy, whose motility remains tied up with her "five thousand books" and how to carry "the right dress."

Kathy's conception of need and desire is derisorily signaled by her preoccupation with attire, already gendered as a specific facet of self-presentation and self-perception, as well as her dependence on those abstract, absurdist "five thousand books" she cannot forfeit: individual possessions she would not know how to surrender. Thus, the passage parodies both class sensibility and economic privilege, as well as the gendered predicated and expectations surrounding middle-class femininity. To do so, Acker resorts to the figure of the "bum," which is treated as an emptied, non-referential category of class exclusion, which signifies social exclusion first and foremost. In

a sense, he too is rhetorically instrumentalized, within the circular reasoning of Kathy's monologue.[61] In the process, the fact of her sexual vulnerability disperses in the textual drift.

The bum is the metaphoric implement for the final negation of Kathy's use-value. It works to confirm her unworthiness within the relations of exchange she partakes of, be they sexual or professional in kind, and whether based in Haiti or in the U.S. There is a certain correspondence between the catastrophic failure of agency, and the subject's definition in terms of labor capacity: "you don't do anything useful you hate to work," Kathy insists in self-reproach. The interplay of gender, sex, and labor capacity culminates with Kathy's description as a "demented abortion on God's earth," an image that powerfully plays off of the gendered politics of social reproduction, and sites Kathy as the locus of their disjunction. Kathy's self-regard, as something beyond social being, calls to mind Julia Kristeva's work on abjection. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), which Acker later recognized as an important intertext, Kristeva produces the following definition:

> Abjection reserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another – maintaining that night in which the outline of the signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable affect is carried out. (Kristeva, 10).

Kristeva defines the crisis of meaning experienced when encountering the abject in relation to various structural separations that render the individual as such, after the fact of separation from the maternal body. However, this crisis is already indelibly inscribed into the organization of social and subjective being, as an immanent possibility. Kathy experiences disaggregation, as the result of deindividuation: the radical limit of debasement. Her bodily schema breaks down into a composite of partial objects; that "mass of squirming and totally disgusting worms." These parts are, in turn, mutually antagonistic, and associated with concrete processes of corrosion, and with the wider semantics of death. Consider Kristeva's following comment, on what is other to life or remains at its limit:

> A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in

[61] Here, we sense the same kind of expropriative displacement that the category "nigger" is subject to in Acker's introduction to *Young Lust* and the wider discursive tradition of which it partakes: the "bum" is likewise metaphorically instrumentalized for the purpose of illustrating, with polemic acuity, forms of precarity the white middle-class subject experiences which, in the abstract, exceed or surprise the privileges proper to that position.

> order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. (Kristeva, 3)

Kathy's passage through disintegration interrupts her overall characterization as a neutral or simplistic character, with little to no psychological content across the text. Suggestively, after this detailed description of self-negation, Acker confronts the reader with a paragraph – indeed, an unstructured cluster of predicates – bound to the fugitive, and the need to escape. These seem to be in partial relay with the codification of Haiti as a carceral space for women, and for white women more specifically:

> Gotta run. Gotta get out. Gotta get moving. Get out. Escape. Escape. Burst open. Stop. Get the fuck out of here anyway I can. Dig my way out. Break all these goddamn windows. Bust the world open. Beat up everyone until someone pounds me into a pulp. Stick more razor blades in my wrists. Fuck up my life. Destroy. (KGH, 87)

These short, sharp enunciates express intended forms of transformation, that ultimately lapse onto the self and its castigation. These are marked by violent trope reversal, and a volatile translatability between interiority and exteriority; between self and others; between the individual and the world. Together, they attest to the definitional bind Kathy finds herself in, in repetitive and cyclical processes that inescapably turn towards the self, as the ultimate object of violence. The outer limit of this explosive concatenation of chaotic thought and emotion is the maternal, which verbally pulsates to the point or relative nonsense, unchecked even by the grammatic mark of a period:

> I don't know what do any more, mommy. Mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy (87)

Kathy and Roger's relation itself affords neither catastrophe nor catharsis. As they reflect on Kathy's newfound predicament (including her sense of sexual vulnerability), they continue to have sex. "She puts her hands in his hard cock"; "Her hand rubs his cock through his pant material" (88). The cultivation of male bravado, along with the reciprocal sexual pleasure they find in each other, are used as a defense of immanent violence, including Roger's own indignant anger. Trying to ascertain the safety of her situation, Kathy asks: "What am I going to do?" (p 89). Roger bluntly replies: "Suck my cock. Lean down and put your mouth around my cock." (89) As she acquiesces, their discussion simply collapses, effaced from the textual surface by the reposition of the sex act.

In sudden scenic cut, the two are in a car, which pulls up to a brothel. There, the "girls" (i.e., the sex workers) "think Kathy's Roger's wife because she's white" (89). Kathy's race endows her with an exceptional social status, unlike that of a sex worker or a mistress. These, we are let to assume, would be black. As the two drive away from Cap Haiti, Kathy brings up the question of economic poverty:

> Do you realize that most of the people here are poor? (…) It's not just that they are poor. There are a lot of poor people in the world. These people don't have a chance to be anything else. Your father's business is going to come to you and you're going to have a chance to do something for these people. If nothing else, you're an example for these people. (89-90)

In fact, Kathy articulates a surprisingly optimistic, humanist framework, predicated on an ethos of empathy and solidarity:

> You've got to think about who you are. That's what I'm trying to say. These people follow you. If you have love in your heart and live for other people, these people will have love in their hearts. I know I'm sounding soppy, but it's what I believe. (90)

Kathy addresses Roger's responsibilities vis-à-vis Haitian economic and material precarity – the very necropolitical structures of social life (and death) in Haiti. She dimensions social transformation and political responsibility as matters of emotion, positing altruistic love as the lynchpin of social relations: the transformation of hearts is perceived as political transformation. This abstract ideal is immediately qualified as "soppy," regardless: it is sentimental, romantic, perhaps even tasteless. In a text unriddled by sentimentality, Acker constructs Kathy's political imagination in the language of emotion and connection, rather than the intervention onto material structures of power. To an extent, she exemplifies white western, subjectivist sensibilities regarding global capitalism – and the precepts of assistentialism, more concretely. The reification of the exceptional individual, distinguished by his social and economic status, becomes even more explicit as she continues:

> You have to show people who act like babies the way. In one way you're lucky cause you were born rich, you have every opportunity anyone could want, but in another way it's really hard for you: you can't be a private person. You have to think in terms of other people. (90).

Because of his class status and economic power, Roger is interpellated as a political agent who would stand as exemplary for other Haitians. These are reduced to complete inadequacy, through the ageist metaphor of "acting like babies." The responsibilities attributed to him

corroborate a meritocratic framework: he is lucky to be in a position of privilege amidst his peers, although that position is likewise marked as a burden. By default, he must forfeit of his presumed right to privacy, to comply with social exigencies and economic expectations. The rich male becomes a *victim* of his circumstances, in what we may read as a parodic performance of white innocence.

> You can't cut yourself off like that from the world. It might work for a while, but then something bad'll happen to you and you'll have no way to deal with your suffering. Even if nothing bad happens to you your whole life, you're going to die and you're going to have to deal with your dying. (91)

Solitude is invoked as an argument towards relatedness, and towards connectedness. More so, it is menacingly figured in relation to the utter limit of death. Kathy's imperative address, as she expresses her political and personal concerns regarding Roger, reads as regulatory: a corrective on his self-regard, and his perception of his future. When Roger expresses his profound indifference towards the material immanence of his death – "I told you. I'm going to have lots of old women there who'll take care of me. I won't even fuck them" – Kathy reprises her love-bound, proto-humanitarian argument:

> Jesus Christ. What about all the people here who are suffering and starving all the time? Haiti's the poorest country in the world. There are almost no roads. Most of the people can't read. The rivers are polluted. There're almost no hospitals. How can you totally forget about everyone? (91)

These are the most explicit remarks made in the text regarding the overall economic, geographic, geopolitical and biopolitical determinants of life in Haiti, summarized by the absolute referent of it being "the poorest country in the world." Kathy's stark ethical injunction, then, is emotionally energized by her shock at Roger's utter indifference towards Haiti – or even, towards her version of how a rich, *mulatto*, Haitian man ought to feel about his national belonging. Of course, there is no pretense of dramatic conflict come to resolution. When Roger asks: "Did you like it when Duval put his hand on your titty" (92), punitively mocking Kathy, he does not rekindle the terms of their conversation as much as precipitate its dead end, once again encasing their conversation in inconsequential circularity.

As Roger and Kathy continue to fuck, we read:

> His fingers keep stroking the red lips in the same way. His fingers are stroking the red lips in the same way. Thoughts endless thoughts it's Rogers fingers who are stroking my cunt lips it's Roger's fingers who are stroking my cunt lips I am those fingers I am the tips of those fingers I've found a man who loves me and he

> is taking care of me this black man really loves me and he's a man the main thing he's a man his chest is broad he looks like a macho pig he's a businessman he's going to watch out for me and give me everything I've ever wanted I don't care if he has nothing to do with my life except sex sex is so important." (92)

Kathy's inner monologue repeatedly reiterates the sexual referent (i.e., Roger, and his fingers) as if to verify or approbate it. By the effect of linguistic repetition, masculinity is encapsulated in a definitional loop ("he's a man the main thing he's a man"). In fact, Roger embodies a normative ideal of masculinity. He corresponds with dimorphic, anatomic stereotype ("his chest is broad"); he is ostensibly, even excessively virile ("he looks like a macho pig"), and he provides economic and emotional protection ("…give me everything I want.") More than that, he becomes the catalyst for white supremacist fantasies about the black body, and its imagined sexual prowess. And in this context, sex is what matters most.

As Roger tells Kathy more about his life, he tells her of the time he spent in New York city:

> I have things hard. I want to be like everyone else, but no one will let me. When I was staying in New York City, every day I got mugged. That's where I got this bump on my head. This man beat the hell out of me cause he said I'm a black man. I couldn't fight back. (…) I don't like New York City. The white people hate us there. *I'd lose my life if I lived in New York City.* Here, when white people visit my father, they treat my father and the rest of us with a lot of respect." (my emphasis, 95).

When Roger compares his own geopolitical context to Kathy's own, it is the latter which is construed as untenable, figured as an unlivable necropolitical regime of structural exclusion and extreme vulnerability. After all, this is the context in which he is interpellated as a black man, and thus both codified as an agent of violence and subject to anti-black violence himself. Blackness is not lived (or narrativized) as an absolute position, but rather as a relative position. That is to say, it signifies contextually, and within a set of social relations. In *Black Skin, White Masks,* Frantz Fanon writes of the crisis effected by this interpellation and its constitutive effect on the self, charting an Antillean (i.e., regional) conception of racial difference:

> The black man among his own in the twentieth century does not know at what moment his inferiority comes into being through the other. Of course I have talked about the black problem with friends, or, more rarely, with American Negroes. Together we protested, we asserted the equality of all men in the world. In the Antilles there was also that little gulf that exists among the almost-white, the mulatto, and the nigger. But I was satisfied with an intellectual understanding of these differences. It was not really dramatic. And then... (Fanon, 83)

Within the Antilles, and amidst its primary black population, blackness is confronted in the abstract: "the black problem" is recognized as a globalized question of power, yet to a certain extent resolved within the narratives of knowledge which intellectual interpretation allows for. The "undramatic" situation Fanon describes – the normalized set of differences between "the almost-white," "the mulatto," and "the nigger" – holds a congruence of its own, from a context-specific point of view. It is not experienced as crisis and it does not merit intellectual mediation as such. "And then…" The incursion of the Antillean subject into "the white world" re-marks – even: racializes – the subject anew, in relation to their many historical pasts. There, the subject's morphological and physiognomic self-presence is disrupted, *in* and *as* alterity:

> In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty. (83)

Fanon emphasizes a specific refrain, a recurrent speech act he is subject to in this plateau, as exemplary of the forceful cogency of the white gaze: "Look, a Negro!." This disruptive interjection, normalized in the white world, precipitates a crisis of the self, by returning that self as *image*. In effect, "assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema" (84). In this context, the conceptual metaphor of the "white gaze" works as much more than a formal derivation from that of the "male gaze," as described by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey.[62] In fact, it aptly describes the overdetermination of the black subject by "white eyes": "I am being dissected by white eyes, the only real eyes." (87) Underlining the visual phenomenology of racialization, Fanon points to the capacity of white perception to render the black body in terms of its own. It subjects that body to dispossession, by making of physiognomy – the body's surface, specifically – the key to identity. This sets off a range of realizations, pertaining to the black man's location within the white imagination:

> I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: "Sho' good eatin'. (84-85)

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[62] In her seminal "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," an essay written in 1973 and published in 1975 in *Screen* magazine. (Mulvey, 1975)

As they dispossess the black subject of their corporeal self-identity, the forms of objectivation at work in this encounter render the fact of their physical being as an ethico-existential drama:

> On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood? But I did not want this revision, this thematization. (85)

However, within the political grammars of white supremacy, revision and thematization hold intractable power over the black body. They are inescapable. Fanon confers this scene of subjection with emotional detail, and dense literary texture. Mortified as spectacle, that body is given back to the self as an image alien to it, and well beyond the reach of desire, intellect, or volition. As a subjective and inter-subjective event, the black subject's incursion into the white world confronts that subject with their definitional limits, under the figurative and material authority of the white gaze. In fact, this brutal recodification does not report to ideology, but to the brutal factuality of the body's perceived immanence. "I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of an 'idea' that others have of me but of my own appearance." (87)

Roger's own incursion in the white world – his time spent in New York city – sets off this same, spectacular re-codification, remarking him as a black man, and transforming his constitutive materiality within the onto-epistemic theater of the racial encounter. At the limit, he too is that token of violence, risk, and menace towards the established order of things Fanon so cuttingly describes: "The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly" (86). Acker's text often works towards re-marking whiteness, and in doing so upsets sedimented regimes of racialization which neutralize the white body, always already signified as non-racial. At the same time, Roger's experience of New York and description thereof demonstrates the radical dissymmetry between the situation of the white woman in the black country, and that of the black man in the white world.

By counter-distinction, as Roger is redefined (as a black man), so is Kathy (as a white woman). While the two have dinner, Roger provides an explicit and detailed account of his extra-legal business affairs, including his father's collusion in economic corruption and his own delegation of physical violence to henchmen. The more his figure is sedimented as violently butch, the more Kathy's own is sedimented as vulnerably femme. This characterization reaches the point

of caricature when Kathy breaks down crying, overwhelmed by the brutality of Roger's way of life:

> What a nice man. Waah. Waah. Roger how could you kill someone? (…) It's not that you kill people. It's much more. Waah. Waah. All the poverty and misery and all the suffering. You suffer so much. You don't understand. (97)

The possibility of any dramatic weight is immediately dispelled by the absurdist rendition of Kathy's crying through comedic onomatopoeia, cartoon-like and exaggerated. All the same, the scene perpetuates Kathy's pedagogical rapport with Roger, mixing tremulous susceptibility ("You suffer so much") and presumptuous condescension ("You don't understand"). Kathy knows best what Roger endures, and even what the Haitian in general endure: the second-person address allows for that kind of conflation. This despite Roger having just described his own conduct, in implacable detail. Their conversation can only confirm the impossibility of reciprocal understanding, rather than create its conditions of possibility. The emphatic inadequacy of Kathy's sentimental appraisal of Haiti seems increasingly motivated by her nihilistic appraisal of herself in the first place. This dissonance (in perception, and in affection) reverberates along both a personal and a political axis: Kathy/Roger; Kathy/Haiti.

When the two leave the restaurant, Haiti itself seems to read differently. The brutality of the country's socio-economic and political situation becomes inescapable, and their surroundings are metaphorically reenergized by the edge of the necropolitical:

> They walk outside (…) the night sky is a grouping of second-to-second changing light and heat and moving substances. Everything moving and changing and they call this 'death' and they call this 'life'. The ocean is a black still mass, a black monster hiding under his own death, and the town is absolutely still. A dead mass of houses and shacks and slums, jumbled, shackled, no reason at all, just there. The faraway mountains lead slowly down, flatter and flatter land, to the rich houses the rich houses look way down on the poor houses. To the left of the poor houses a secret police shark chute swings down to the sea. This is death. Stillness. (98)

So far, the ocean has figured as a centrifugal sense-scape, providing pleasure, relaxation, and leisure. Here, it transmutes into an amorphous, inanimate object. It is marked and immediately remarked as black, remitting to that "mass of black flesh" earlier in the text, and various other metaphors of darkness and/or blackness active throughout. By doing so, the scene calls back to as early as the first chapter, fracturing enduring visual fascinations with the seascape, and its latent

sociality as a space of fantasy and desire. If anything, the ocean becomes monstrous: an inhuman elementality, bound to death in the abstract, but also to its own death as a living being.

The paradigm of the undead, figured earlier through Kathy's reference to herself as an "abortion" or as a "mass of squirming worms" persists, as metaphors of the necrotic translate from the psychic to the elemental. The town itself is subject to no intelligible rationality, itself another "dead mass," indistinct within a larger agglutinate: that which is black; that which is dead, and that which is still. If the urban landscape expresses some kind of urbanistic or architectural intent, it takes the form of a hierarchal separation, along a vertical axis. Rich houses "look down" on "poor houses," literally as well as figuratively. Elsewhere, the text's visual ecology turns to the supple, to the animate, to the lived and lived-in. Now, it turns towards a necropolitical or even necropoetic limit, which in fact transverses the whole text as a latent set of contradictions. The definitional limit of the necropolitics of colonialism emanate, inanimate: "This is death. This is stillness."

That stillness is only interrupted by the "violent unsuspected movement" (98) of Kathy and Roger, as they ride around town in his unusually expensive car, in an effusive display of power, entropy, and pleasure:

> Break all speed records. Keep going. You're the gray sportscar and you're moving. I'm the richest prick in town. I wanna go out farther. I wanna get more fucked up. I want to go out there right now. Me go way me me. Moving as fast as the car winds. Grab the cock and up the energy. Anything to up the energy. Get right out there. The faster I go the faster the stars go maybe we'll all stop moving. (98)

Their conversation winds up and breaks downs into disjointed exchanges, clamorous proclamations colliding in excessive, effulgent noise. Speed is an imperative, counter to stillness, figured as the limit of death. Sentence structure breaks down, rhythmically dysregulated, sped up towards the limit of nonsense. The outer limit of which is nonetheless stillness, intractable. Kathy and Roger prepare to part, agreeing to meet the following Saturday, to attend the voodoo dances. As the chapter closes, we read: "The car keeps going around and around the boulevard. The fastest and the only car on the road. It's almost dawn." (100) The two lovers remain enchained in a circular, self-enclosed circuit of surface play and uninterrupted, inconclusive motion. This image doubles as an intra-textual token of the novel's own construction through mechanisms of repetition and reiteration, surrounding its empty narrative center.

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2.6. “Papa”: the political truth

Roger is Kathy’s primary sexual partner from the second chapter (“Love at First Sight”) to the next-to last precisely (“Two Days Later”), as Acker’s rigidly rationalized structural architecture demands. Much of the text circles around the choreography of their relationship, the incidental minutiae of circumstances and conversations surrounding, their respective social standing and experiences, their intensive and extensive sexual rapport, and finally – but no less importantly – their mutual emotional and ethical alienation. The fact that “A Trip to the Voodoo Doctor,” the book’s very final chapter, dispels the seeming importance of this strained, opaque relationship is surprising only to the extent that expectations of narrative causality may yet persist. To wit:

> After a week and a half of anxiously waiting, Kathy decides to go to Port-au-Prince to look for Roger. As soon as she reaches Port-au-Prince, she forgets about Roger. (153)

Within the scope of just two sentences, Roger is swiftly evaporated from the textual scene. Likewise, the relationship between the two is voided of any remarkable kind of affective or causative substantiality, whether as an independent plotline, or as a constitutive experience for Kathy. Kathy’s own characterization resets to the superficial indetermination of a barely woven persona, lacking psychologic depth. If their relationship is of note, it is so because it is both sexually powerful and emotionally precarious, refracted amidst a range of mutual misunderstandings and wider structures of power, and finally deferred into representational silence. This notional twist in fact corroborates the work’s digressive compositional logics, as much as its cerebrally concocted architecture.

“The Children,” the book’s antepenultimate chapter, follows these same principles of formal and structural organization. In it, Kathy visits the Mystere mansion upon Roger’s invitation, to spend further time with him and finally meet Betty. Eventually, Kathy decides to head to the seaside, as she often does, to enjoy herself in public. There, she mingles with a group of local children, who she seems to be on a familiar basis with. Although their conversation seems amicable at first, the children – “a group of eleven year old boys” (102) – begin to reproach Kathy, regarding her sexual morality. They are aware she and Roger are having an affair, and repeatedly taunt and threaten her with this knowledge. Repetition is used to exhausting effect, as Kathy’s “badness” becomes an intangible focus of tensions amidst the children. One boy accuses another of making Kathy “bad,” leading to the counteraccusation that “Mr. Mystere makes you bad” (103). Another still admonishes Kathy that “If Mr Mystere makes you bad, I fight him for you” (105).

When officers of the *tontons macoute* – the national secret police – approach the group, the circular conversation between Kathy and the boys is interrupted, as they run away in fear. Kathy tries to address the officers in "lousy French" (105), yet they remain silent. Given the scene's circular causality, the officers' silence can only confirm the boys' suspicions regarding Kathy, and reenforce their menacing – if slightly absurdist – mode of address. The scene's stubborn sense of inertia and persistent suspension of dramatic relief coincide with a sudden, anti-climactic ending. Exhausted, Kathy tells the boys "'I'm getting out of here". With the ensuing line break, and through an abrupt narrative cut-away, a distinctive scene is set: "Papa and Kathy are sitting on the dining-room terrace that overlooks the ocean". (112)

From this position of comfort, Kathy and Papa talk about Haiti. The "Papa" designation is loaded with semantic and dramatic density, invoking Papa Loi, Papa Doc, and the syncretic co-relation between the two. That density is diffused in irony immediately: Papa is, in fact, "a seventy-six year old American perhaps ex-CIA sailor" (112) whose existence the plot has never anticipated in any fashion. In a position diagrammatically convergent with that of Marguerite in the second chapter, Papa is as much an interlocutor as he is an informant: someone who holds special information and insight about Haiti. Because of this distinctive situation of privileged perspective, I suggest we conclude this reading by focusing on some key points of their conversation.

When Kathy asks Papa why the *tontons macoute* would have approached her, he heeds that she take care: "You better watch out for those guys. People disappear around here." (113) Papa is referring to political disappearances, deployed by the Duvalier regime as a punitive tactic. He reinforces the exceptional status of American people in Haiti and in the eyes of the Haitian government: "they don't bother Americans unless they think you're trying to overthrow their government" (113). This explicit conversation about the dictatorial regime brings up the threat of foreign political agency. It also contextually redefines Kathy's own discourse on the possibility of revolution, and her occasional attempts at mobilizing those around her (and especially Roger) towards social change.

This is, in fact, the question raised next:

> Do you think there's going to be a revolution here? The people in the country are so poor. All those boys out there are going to starve this fall cause of the drought. (113)

A certain sentimental humanism persists, as Kathy scopes the possibilities for revolution. Papa's response points to structural overdetermination, resulting from the totalistic reach of the dictatorial regime over social relations at a national level. He puts the situation in blunt, unequivocal terms:

> There's not going to be a revolution here. There can't be. These government blacks have the country sewn up. No one can get into this country to start a revolution. (113-114)

The impossibility of revolution results from the dictatorship's implementation of politics of fear and terror in everyday life, for the purposes of surveillance and control. The white male American – a former state-sanctioned agent of defense, no less – retraces the ongoing portraiture of Haitian with explicit tinges of anti-black racism. Kathy retains a stance of curious and trustful inquiry. Implicitly, she trusts militaristic U.S. authority without qualification, even as she insists on the point of revolutionary possibility, at a point asking about "guerrilla groups who work in the country" (113). Papa remains dismissive, completely concentrated on the immutability of the country's situation, as a self-enclosed sovereign system:

> Who're you kidding. First of all, these people are,' he whispers, 'Voodooists. They'll tell you they're not, but they are, every last one of them. They're not going to fight Baby Doc, honey, cause they know he's Papa Loi. (114)

Kathy concedes on this point: "He is. He's got all the power" (114). Necessarily, this foregrounds the fact that Kathy's own interlocutor is called "Papa," something neither deem of note. But this designation speaks to yet another speculative refraction: the text seems full of authoritative and undisputed paternal figures, metaphoric and actual. Patriarchal power plainly expresses itself in the most concrete of terms. Papa goes on to describe how a network of Voodoo political power, active at a regional level, ensures the efficacy of mechanisms of surveillance and control, and wards off the possibility of dissenting political organization. Political sovereignty and spiritual sovereignty present as synonymous, and co-extensive. The "Voodooists," he explains, are not the village chiefs but rather the doctors, deeply imbricated as they are in the social life of each village:

> So this voodoo man knows everything. There's nothing that can happen in the village that he doesn't know. And the voodoo man goes and tells the sheriff, or whoever's the big government guy in the district, what's happening in the village. (115)

Kathy's political optimism remains unabated, as she successively points to potential exceptions to the rule. But Papa dispels the tenability of each of her intuitions, within the extant structural and material conditions. Keenly, while Papa provides indubitable insight on the politics of Haitian society, the two remain in a position of privileged perspective themselves, recalling the earlier visual discretion between "rich houses" (above) and "poor houses" (below). The visual economy of the text corroborates their standing as hierarchically superior, in more than one sense:

> [Kathy] looks at the beggar boys who are sitting on the low ocean wall, the blue-green ocean, the men working on the beach, the goats, chickens, pigs, dogs, and sand. (115)

Within this visual economy, Haitian folk are not (and need not become) interlocuters. Pointedly, they are the object of knowledge, just as they are the object of the gaze: a problem to ponder and place in perspective, rather than equitable participants in the description of Haitian society. The rigidity and fixity of that visual economy is further consolidated when Papa explains that some things have, indeed, changed: "you can hardly *see* [the tontons macoute] anymore" (my emphasis, 115). The field of visual perception fully covers the epistemic scope of social relations in Haiti. This emphasis on visuality (and visibility) plays off of an important lexical key: Baby Doc = Papa Loi; The Mysteres = The Loa; The Loa = *The Invisibles*. Acker's deployment of Voodoo cosmology, to produce a spectacle of specular diffractions, encompasses the denotative slippage between these various designations. And when Kathy replies to this claim, she describes the situation she previously found herself in as a drama of gazing: "I *saw* them. They scared the shit out of me. The boys knew what was going on and ran away. I sat in front of those cops and *stared* at them like a stupid dog." (my emphasis, 115)

As we raise the question of intelligibility, we must note how the question of reading figures here. Papa tells Kathy of a period in which he worked for the Haitian government and witnessed an instance where a police officer was not able to read, impeding an official protocol of transit across the country:

> We stop at one station and goddammit that army man can't read. He looks at our papers and he can't read a damn word. He's got his gun on us the whole time. You know you don't go to jail in Haiti for political crimes. You just disappear. Finally we persuade him to drive with us to the next village where there's a man who can read. (114)

This instance of reading (or the pretense thereof) is striking because it brings up the question of literacy as an implement of sovereign power and administrative violence: a form of

monitoring individual activity, rather than an individual asset in professional as well as personal terms. Even as an implement of political reason, it is one in crisis. Furthermore, the reiteration of the expression "You don't go to jail in Haiti for political crimes. You just disappear" puts previous references to imprisonment – especially those made by Kathy and Betty – into relief: incarceration, as it turns out, is a relative privilege in comparison to the possibility of political disappearance. Their conversation also cuts into the question of finance, and subsequently into that of marriage as the contract of social reproduction, altering the perception of Roger accrued so far. When Kathy asks Papa about Roger's stated economic power, his role as a dispeller of false fictions and informational distortions scales down from the national to the individual. In fact, it turns out Roger "doesn't even have a thousand a month for himself. (…) The father keeps all the money for himself. That way he can control the boys." (115)

Kathy's final realization? She asks Papa: "So Roger's always going to be controlled by daddy?." Papa replies:

> Of course he is. Do you know how much that father has stored up? Why just that one rum tank: that's going to gross a half-million this year. Sure he has expenses, but what are those? Haitian labor's cheaper than slavery. (115)

Papa's comparison between the value of Haitian labor in the 1970s and the costs of slave labor speaks to the systemic reach of racial capitalism – and the plural afterlives of slavery, in the contemporary moment. The nation founded by slave revolt, and through the reconstitution of the slave as sovereign subject, is perceived by the U.S. ex-military as perpetuating the same forms of radical de-valuation of black labor that the transatlantic slave trade paradigmatically instilled into contemporary structures of governance and finance. The full extent of the economic power of the Mystere industrial monopoly confronts Kathy with the inescapable recognition of the truth of material, economic and inter-subjective relations in Haiti – including those she has either witnessed or been part of. She quickly realizes Betty is not, in fact, "such a dope" (116). Rather, she is holding onto the possibility of wealth through patrimony.

How racial capitalism inscribes relations as a quite intimate level also becomes apparent. Papa has the following to say about Roger: "Well, Roger's a nice boy. He's still a boy, understand. He can't get his head out of that black stuff." (116). As an abstract, conceptual composite, "black stuff" calls back to early figures of "black flesh," black messes, and similarly racialized agglutinates. Kathy's reply abstracts itself from this statement, shifting from the terms of

racialization to those of sexualization: “Roger just likes pussy. Black white red old young. He’s rough.” (116)

The pair’s discussion of agency and comport of each Duvalier family member raises the definitional question of race more explicitly than ever. Criticizing Baby Doc’s ministers, Papa declares: “Those blacks are still in power and, I say, they never completely came out of the trees.” (118) Kathy does not react to the primitivist bile of Papa’s racially charged comment. Rather, her shock is at the notion that their blackness is in any way specific to them: “Everyone in this country’s black” (118), she reprises. This is an important admission, given how blackness is discursively constructed across the novel, both through semantic associations and specific deictic markers. But Papa triggers a reassessment of the perceptual precepts of racialization assumed throughout the text, calling attention to the fact of blackness, and its contestable definitions.

Papa has no problem asserting his own epistemic authority over race relations in Haiti. He corrects Kathy’s seemingly naïve conflation of regimes of racialization in the U.S. and abroad:

> No they’re not. There’s the blacks and there’re the mulattoes. Right now the blacks run the government, but the mulattoes have all the money. The blacks and the mulattoes: they’ve never liked each other. (…) A mulatto man’ll never go with a black woman. He doesn’t even like American women. He’ll go with another mulatto, or even better, with a French or French-Canadian woman cause that means he’s overcome his African blood.

Despite his strong stance, Kathy remains inclined to assume Roger is black, rather then poising the question of his racial identity (or identification) as such. “But Roger’s black?,” she asks, in a clumsy rhetorical corrective which may well read as wishful thinking. In Papa’s understanding, he is not:

> Are you kidding? That’s father’s almost as white as I am. And look at Nicolas, the second brother. He’s barely tan. I’ll tell you something. You look at Jean, Gerard’s younger brother. His gums are black as anything. Now and then you get a throwback, and there’s nothing you can do about it. (118).

At this point, Papa’s language veers into bluntly expressed evolutionary racism, hierarchically organized according to a sliding scale. To describe Roger’s father as the whitest, he must only say he is “almost as white” as himself. To describe Nicolas, he simply observes “he’s barely tan, implicitly positioning whiteness as neutral and blackness as a demarcation (or transformation) thereof. When he describes Jean, he selects the one physiognomic marker, metonymically reduces him to that racially overdetermined body part, and singles him out as an

unfortunate (but inevitable) regression, within a tacitly eugenic template of racial differentiation. Kathy does not dispute such claims, nor express discomfort: we are already aware of the humanist sentimentalism which governs her perception of political matters, and her unwillingness to shift perspective – in even the most literal sense.

Kathy's emotive perception of social relations persists against any and all indicators of political violence, which can only be interpretatively rendered as a question of misunderstanding or circumstance. "There aren't evil people.," Kathy tells Papa, and the reader. "People do what they have to cause they're stuck, and poor and miserable and they've hurt so much." In the end, Kathy's trajectory obeys no redemptive or transformative capacity – certainly not so within the scope of readerly apprehension. The book ends as the book begins, its events voided of significance and substance by the inconsequential cadence of events, distractions, and detournements. An opaque, yet recognizable through-line can be threaded, from the book's beginning to the sparse, elliptical styling of its very final sentence. In the end, Kathy finally meets a Voodoo doctor, and undergoes a ritual of self-inquiry through mirrors both metaphoric and actual. Then, we read: "Kathy turns around and walks outside into the sun. She's more dazed than before." (170)

2.7. Conclusion

Through the 1988 introduction to the *Young Lust* anthology, Acker advanced an account of *Kathy Goes to Haiti* that imbued it with a firmly oriented formal intent, and a strong compositional identity. These would seem to justify the text's standing, as a situated experimentation with the possibilities of prose writing, beyond those patterns the author was accustomed to and which were making her increasingly successful. But just a few years later, Acker's attitude towards the project shifted: she moved away from affirming the text's relative rationality, and towards the rationalization of its existence, separating it out from the rest of her work in the process. What was presumably explained or supported by the impressions gather in "Introduction to My Early Lust to Write" no longer held, as the political climate changed across both sides of the Atlantic.

Kraus describes Acker's eventual disavowal of the work:

> By the 1990s *Haiti* became a book Acker sought to distance herself from. Setting this art world porn romp against an impoverished third world backdrop had become an embarrassment. In a 1992 interview with

> Rebecca Deaton, she would describe the novel as *a joke... a parody of a porn novel. I tried to write the dumbest book I could... I wrote the novel really to make money – they were buying porn novels at the time.* (Unconsciously or consciously, she was confusing *Haiti* with [*Rip-Off Red, Girl Detective*] and [*I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac]*, her 1973 and 1974 experiments). (Kraus, 2017, 144-145)

Kraus's key claim is a political one: the work was now at odds with respectable politics of representation, and its contents could not reasonably be accounted for by its formalist motivations. Instead, the fundamental discrepancies written into the text's anti-realist rapport with the political reality of Haiti – as a post-colonial nation state, and a radically impoverished one at that – overwhelmed its eventual claim to literary legitimacy, or to strong enough an aesthetic standpoint. Kraus's choice of words is interesting, because the work is not singled out as an error or as an inconvenience, but instead as "an embarrassment." The devaluation of the text – which is economic, political, *and* aesthetic in kind – manifests at the level of affect, and of shame more specifically. It could no longer co-exist with Acker's other works without their corollary devaluation, and without tarnishing Acker's own public status.

The fact Acker misrecognizes the text – perhaps deliberately – is also of note.[63] On the one hand, it suggests a much more precarious sense of chronology and continuity than most scholarship is ready to recognize. Acker herself struggles to account for the text's temporal and compositional location, even though the four-stage chronology of her work that she herself suggested to organize critical reception to this day. On the other, it dispels the tonal confidence of "Introduction to My Early Lust to Write," when read in retrospect and as part of a set of conflicting accounts.

More than anything, it is Kraus's political argument which concerns me, especially as we chart how *Kathy Goes to Haiti* relates to the rest of Acker's work .and how Acker's later disavowal of it maps onto its reception. In this respect, present critical attitudes seem to align with Acker's own. Neither Georgina Colby's *Kathy Acker: Writing the Impossible* (2016) nor Emilia Borowska's *The Politics of Kathy Acker: Revolution and the Avant-Garde* (2019) create space for the discussion of *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, despite both being major monographic studies. Colby never refers to Haiti and refers to *Kathy Goes to Haiti* only once, in a subsection of its bibliography

[63] Kraus cites yet another interview, to demonstrate Acker's readjusted position on Kathy Goes to Haiti: "Two years later she'd elaborate '[Haiti was written in] 73-74, and I got very bored writing a porn book, plus laws changed and they no longer had these little porn publishers. So I made up all these rules.... I was very intrigued at the time by Raymond Queneau, by Cortazar... so I made up my own writing game... I did a grid, and everything was a mirror of each other... [I]t wasn't as amusing to write as I thought. So, in retrospect, I'm not very fond of that book.'" (Kraus, 2017, 145)

listing Acker's complete published works, which indexes both *Literal Madness* and the *Young Lust* collection. Borowska's study does the opposite. It never refers to *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, and refers to Haiti itself only once, when discussing *Empire of the Senseless* (1988), to foreground how Acker invokes the demise of the Duvalier regime in that later text.[64]

In practice, Colby's critical genealogy of Acker's compositional praxis across the decades shifts directly from the early 1970s work (including unpublished texts, available only in archive) to *Blood and Guts in High School*, suggesting *KGH* might as well be elided from critical histories of Acker's work across the 1970s and 1980s. Borowska's decision is more striking, given the stated intent of her study and its critical scope. The readings presented in *The Politics of Kathy Acker* are intimately tied to the ways in which Acker revisits and repurposes tropes of revolution and revolt in her texts. Borowska's key contention is that extant studies of Acker's work (overdetermined by the category of post-structuralism, and the discursive specter of post-modernism) fail to acknowledge Acker's agency as a socially committed and historically situated writer. But Borowska herself invokes Haiti apropos of its contemporary history only, and her commentary rapports neither to the category of race, nor to the country's longer history as the first republic founded by slave revolt against colonial rule. This strongly delimits the scope of her intervention and exemplifies important omissions in current conversations about Acker's work.

The decision *not* to submit Acker's conceptualization (and representation) of race to critical scrutiny, within wider discussions of the political intentionality of her work, suggests racial politics do not figure into radical politics, if not as a thematic or regional concern. These exclusions express a political reasoning of their own. The politics of Acker's work are defined in their radical intentionality and revolutionary potential through a selective kind of critical attention, which parses out that which cannot be readily mapped onto a regulated ideal of the author as a textual dissident. Regulated forms of reading often depend on such segmentations, which discriminate those aspects of the author's work which do not express or exemplify already codified expectations. A critical preference for the affirmation of Acker's politics seems to justify the

[64] By contrast, the earlier critical volume *Kathy Acker and Transnationalism* (2009) has nine main chapters overall, a third of which focus primarily or even exclusively on *Kathy Goes to Haiti*: Shannon Rose Riley's "*Kathy Goes to Haiti:* Sex, Race and Occupation in Kathy Acker's Voodoo Travel Narrative" (Chapter Two); Michael Hardin's "'More Dazed than Before': The Failure of Paradise in Kathy Acker's *Kathy Goes to Haiti* (Chapter 3) and R. J. Ellis's "Kathy Acker's Deconstruction of Jack Kerouac's 'Fellaheen' Dreams in *Kathy Goes to Haiti* (Chapter Four). All of these essays influence the present reading of the work, to one extent or another.

immunization of her texts against forms of critique that challenge the binary separation between positive/negative, celebratory/accusatory, or redemptive/denunciative. I would suggest the fact Acker's racial politics are all too often either subsumed under or substituted for a much stronger emphasis on the gender and sexual politics of her work results from such regulated forms of critical reading.

However, such segmentations, predicated on monothematic and monocausal critical attitudes, reduce the complexities of Acker's texts, including their capacity to exceed hermeneutic explication or confound political expectation. By contrast, readings sensitive to the complexities of Acker's work. And even to its internal contradictions, must attune themselves to non-dualistic interpretative pathway, .and strive for less rigidly defined or finite options for ethico-political understanding. In this chapter, I have tried to instantiate this kind of approach, which is not bound to the closure of the text and/or the author according to a unidimensional or unidirectional model of interpretation. Instead, I have attempted to dramatize the problem of race in *Kathy Goes to Haiti* by tracing and interrogating how it interrelates to the text as a whole, and to creative decisions which may read as unrelated to racial politics.

In doing so, I hope both to reassert the significance of *Kathy Goes to Haiti* as a moment in Acker's creative trajectory, and to craft a distinctive hermeneutic framework that holds space for political complexity and even political contradiction. That is to say, one that fosters mobile and adaptive forms of readerly engagement, committed to working *through* and *with* (rather than *against*) contradiction. Thus, this reading also presents as a primer of sorts for the overarching attitude through which Acker's work is discussed and disputed across this project.

Kathy Goes to Haiti inflects white subjectivity with parodistic energy and absurdist animus, defacing the imagined national and racial integrity of the "white tourist body," as described by Riley. The systemic specification of "the white girl" as such disrupts the self-evidence of that narrative standpoint. At the same time, Kathy's performativity as a sexual or romantic partner is enlivened as conflicting and equivocal, in a distortive representational key. The presence of Betty furthers this critical inquiry into white femininity, semantically and somatically picking apart at its seeming self-identity. By confronting white femininity with the sensorial and political realities of Haiti, it renders it as precarious, exposed, and/or imprisoned. When Kathy herself attains a surprising degree of psychic and discursive complexity, her turn towards the fantasy of the "New

Woman" (bound up with the idealized, filmic presence of Greta Garbo) reinforces the textual detournement and deterritorialization of white femininity, along with adjacent psychic and cultural fantasies. Moreover, the text estranges whiteness *itself*, subjecting it to nominal and narrative objectivation, and contesting its standing as unmarked and unremarkable.

Through those same representational procedures, and in accordance with the same compositional principles, the novel also performs a range of important exclusionary effects. Its aesthetic attitude works to reduce the heterogeneity of Haitian society, Haitian history, and Haitian subjectivity. Its conceptualist and formalist motivations implicate the deployment of linguistic and visual registers that reify the epistemics of white supremacy and colonialism. And Acker's own account of the book's creative and commercial conditions of possibility reiterates that strictly textualist rationale, while deferring a confrontation with the book's concrete implication in racial capitalism and imperialist international relations, in late 1970s North and Central America.

Where "Introduction to My Early Lust to Write" is concerned, Acker's playful performance of authorial intent actually dissipates the tenability of the authorial standpoint as such, and ultimately works to dispel its conditions of accountability. To insist on this recognition is to problematize how the white signature – both the fact of white authorship, and the *fiction* of white authorship – is constitutively bound to questions of sovereignty, governance, capitalism, and colonialism. Even when the authorial standpoint is one of disavowal or deferral, to the detriment of a more comprehensive and context-sensitive understanding of the work's literary agency. No less importantly, to insist on this point in particular is to raise the question of the work's conditions of production and reproduction, as well as those of the authorial performance embedded in its (retrospective) representation.

Kathy Goes to Haiti's stand-offish, inimical attitude towards conventional expectations of narrative representation is never more evident then when Papa suddenly intrudes into the textual scene. The character appears in this scene only, but he does so to authoritatively provide a comprehensive explanation of Haiti society and social relations to Kathy. There and then, the novel breaks with its subtler silences surrounding the structures of governance and political violence proper to the Duvalier regime. These are rendered intelligible from the standpoint of U.S. military intelligence itself, decontextualized in Haiti. Of course, the scene itself is saturated with irony, and it provides difficult to read as anything but a deadpan mockery of U.S. governmental and

institutional authority. The ventriloquistic use of a white, U.S. male character as a source of knowledge is a strong reminder of the text's economies of (in)sight, and it emphasizes their absurdity. Especially given the scene occurs so suddenly and interrupts another, with no intelligible points of transition between the two.

However, despite the formal mechanisms which modulate how the scene reads, the fact remains that Papa's standpoint is the *only* standpoint from which a perception of Haiti as a political totality is dimensioned. The issue lies not in the internal consistency of the scene, which ironic distance and formal estrangement render compellingly. Rather, it lies in the scene's relative position with the novel as a whole, and how that position nearly inevitably figures it as important to the narrative's conclusion. While the scene flares up Kathy's flagrant (and often flippant) inarticulateness, it also contrasts with the fact that none of her relations are endowed with a comparable degree of epistemic authority. This includes a number of Haitian characters, and their imagined experience of such structures of oppression. When Roger himself is captured in Papa's words, with a lucidity superior to that of any other narrative interlocutor, the immanent authority of the white gaze is demonstrated to implacable effect. Cruel irony is no lesser form of cruelty, and the scene stands as a stark act of representational violence, recentering the sovereign gaze of the white subject.

Not all relations between discrepant – even dissymmetric – subject positions are so flatly mapped or unidirectionally oriented in Acker's writing, as they are in *Kathy Goes to Haiti*. In fact, the author's confrontation with new political models and theoretical frameworks across the 1980s set off diverse realizations, which shaped the questions she became increasingly eager to raise, as well as those troubles she become performatively committed to and combatively curious about. In the process, the fact – or the *problematic* – of race is subject to a range of reassessments, through poetic inquiry and conceptual experimentation. By necessity, we remain attentive to these questions, even as our readings emphasize other categories of analysis.

More immediately, given this project's concern with Acker's writerly commitment to the deconstruction and reconstruction of identity, I suggest we turn to *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984) and probe into a distinctive cluster of dyadic oppositions – including those between male and female, between adult and child, and between heterosexual and non-heterosexual (or queer). This shift in critical focus helps us provide a less homogenous and unified account of Acker's

writing and its representational politics. Furthermore, it helps evince distinctive patterns of reading and writing at the core of her writerly project. Often, these are predicated on – even, propelled by – indelible concerns with sexuality, with sexual identity, and with sex itself.

Chapter 3: (Straight) Woman, Queer (Man): queer affinities, textual and otherwise.

> The task of queer social theory in this context as in so many others must be to confront the default heteronormativity of modern culture with its worst nightmare, a queer planet.
>
> – Michael Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet*, 16.

> Disidentificatory performances and readings require an active kernel of utopian possibility. Although utopianism has become the bad object of much contemporary political thinking, we nonetheless need to hold on to and even risk utopianism if we are to engage in the labor of making a queerworld.
>
> - José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 25.

3.1. Queer corpora: Acker and "the other tradition"

A fundamental structure in western social organization is often dramatized and satirized in Kathy Acker's work: that of compulsory heterosexuality, as a persistently enforced social norm, permeating the totality of social relations.[65] The fact Acker's female characters primarily – and nearly exclusively – engage in heterosexual relations does not, by definition, contradict the ongoing constitution of heterosexuality as a site of sexopolitical trouble. If anything, it justifies it. The predominant depiction of heterosexuality does not, by definition, entail the promulgation of heteronormativity, as a system of political fictions.

The textual presentation and re-presentation of queer men, and of queer male authors more specifically, is key to the sexually dissenting and gender disobedient agency of Acker's work. Through their incorporation as prominent characters in the novels *Blood and Guts in High School,* (1984), *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini* (1988)[66] and *In Memoriam to Identity* (1990)

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[65] In "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980), U.S. lesbian feminist writer Adrienne Rich coined the concept of "compulsory heterosexuality," to describe the structural naturalization and enforcement of male sexual power in heteronormative, dualistically gendered social relations, presenting it as an overdetermining social architecture. Rich conceptualized "compulsory heterosexuality" as a governing principle of all social relations, permeating both the public and the domestic, and constituting a systemics of sex/power/subjectivity at all levels of social life. Today, the terms "heterosexism" and "heteronormativity" have for the large part substituted for this concept in critical currency, and especially so in queer theory. See: Rich, 1980.

[66] *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini*, the title and content of which suggests it was originally prepared with the intent to sign as Pasolini himself, was first published in 1988, in the previously discussed *Literal Madness* anthology.

respectively, Jean Genet, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Artur Rimbaud occupy a duplicate position within Acker's work. They are both explicitly acknowledged as influences (meta-textually) and instrumentalized as fictional devices (intra-textually), departing from common perceptions of their personhoods. *In Memoriam to Identity* retells – by radically reinventing – Rimbaud's life with Paul Verlaine; *My Death My Life…* purports to address Pasolini's eventual death, through a first-person narrative in procedural format; *Blood and Guts in High School* interpolates Jean Genet as a secondary character, who the protagonist encounters late in the narrative.

Across these works, each author is recast as a conceptual/poetic construct, within Acker's dense intertextual mesh of citational relays. Their transformation into textual personae energizes how each text bends and breaks the norms that govern intertextual and inter-subjective relationality. This selective focus is congruous with Acker's acknowledged filiation to mostly male-dominated artistic and literary traditions, ranging from the European avant-garde to its afterlives in U.S. modernism and post-modernism. Jean Genet (1910-1986) figured in the former; William Burroughs (1914-1997) in the latter. Burroughs's work, from the Beat Generation to the so-called "post-modernist" moment, proved especially influential for Acker. In 1988, she wrote:

> [William] Burroughs never bores, for he and the other writers I think of as in "that tradition," "the other tradition," "the nonacceptable literary tradition," "the tradition of those books which were hated when they were written and subsequently became literary history," "the black tradition," "the tradition of political writing as opposed to propaganda" (de Sade would head this list) here I am not talking about American literary tradition), do what Poe said a writer should do. They present the human heart naked so that our world, for a second, explodes into flames. This human heart is not only the individual heart: the American literary tradition of Thoreau, Emerson, even Miller, presents the individual and communal heart as a unity. (Acker, 1989) [67]

[67] Acker begins the essay "A Few Notes on Two of My Books" by weaving some considerations on the writings of others. She describes how her readerly attention turned towards American literature ("That tradition.," as she describes it) after moving to the U.K. Acker values the "immediacy" of the writing of William Burroughs especially, and singles out English novelist J. G. Ballard (1930-200) as the one contemporary British writer who achieves that same effect. Apart from this exception, she describes the contemporary British novel as boring. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 - 1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) were contemporaries and mutual interlocuters, while Henry Miller (1891-1980) was profoundly influenced by both. Acker places all these authors within a wider continuum. Yet Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) was a staunch critic of 19th century Transcendentalism, which Emerson and Thoreau were major proponents of. In doing so, Acker seems to challenge the distances between these authors, especially so far as the binary between the individual and the social is concerned. For a discussion of the philosophical and literary debates surrounding Transcendentalism and Poe's objection to its principal tenets, see: Kopley, Richard. "Naysayers: "Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville." *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, edited by Sandra Harbert Pertulionis, Laura Dassow Walls, and Joel Myerson. Oxford University Press: 2010.

Acker's self-proclaimed tradition ranges across the Atlantic, from the Marquis de Sade to Henry Miller. Sade was fundamental for Acker's conception of pornography and representational violence: "De Sade, born a patriarch, understood patriarchy and raged against the walls of that labyrinth," she wrote in 1994.[68] Miller had no such strong impact, albeit he was likewise published (to controversial effect) by Grove Press, in the early 1960s. Acker invokes such a male-dominated tradition of innovative literature in more than one occasion, and here appeals to its capacity to articulate the individual and the collective, positioning the human heart as the (emotive) matter of politics. Against the grain of post-structuralist or post-modernist readings which emphasize the constructivist or textualist nature of her work, Acker affirms the relay between immediacy and political truth:

> "Marginal," "experimental," and "avant-garde" are often words used to describe texts in this other tradition. Not because writing such as Burroughs's or Genet's is marginal, but because our society, through the voice of its literary society, cannot bear immediacy, the truth, especially the political truth. (Acker, 1989).

The apposition of William Burroughs and Jean Genet through the specific nexus of political truth is an important one. In an interview with Sylvère Lotringer (conducted between 1989 and 1990), Acker advanced an account of her literary biography quite unlike the one suggested in "Introduction to My Early Lust to Write." In this interview, Burroughs and Genet are placed in relations of temporal proximity and political contiguity. Somewhat to the side of the critical narrative suggested in the introduction to the *Young Lust* volume, Acker dispels the notion that she was a committed poet in the early stages of her career. Rather, while departing from a training in poetry, Acker's central intent was to come to prose *differently*, through a poetic or generic understanding of textual possibility, distinct from the literary standards of her time. In her conversation with Lotringer, she describes the problem of prose-writing as pertaining to compositional method primarily, and addresses the idea of textual structure as totality:

> I always wanted to write prose. I was looking for models of fiction that were poetic and fiction writers don't work that way. They outline things before they write. They don't write by process. The only model I found in my world was William Burroughs. (Lotringer, 4)

This observation underlines how Acker perceived her work as processual, even as more akin to the compositional options presumably proper to artistic fields such as music or performance. Burroughs's use of the cut-up technique as a compositional method, consisting in

[68] Acker, 1994.

the disassembling and reassembling of multiple textual excerpts by hand, was of tremendous importance for Acker, who quite often adopted similar techniques, and importantly did so when composing *BGHS* itself. Georgina Colby has written about the composite materiality of the project's finished manuscript, emphasizing just how concretely collage was fundamental to its processual construction, while confronting the published version of the text with its conditional delimitations:

> The challenge that Acker was confronted with at the time of the book's publication was how to signal materiality in the face of its absence. Materiality in the published version of the manuscript is very different from that of the collage manuscript. Whilst the editors at Grove Press did everything possible to maintain the integrity of the original manuscript in the final published version of the book, through carefully and meticulously reproducing the variations in typography and reproducing the artwork, the materiality of the manuscript of *Blood and Guts in High School* is eroded significantly in the published work. As an experimental writer, Acker meets the necessary challenge of the process of book production, working from materials that in their raw form could only ever be exhibited as art. (Colby, 74)

Colby calls especial attention to the work as an interdisciplinary object, supplementing extant critical narratives of Acker's writing with a keen sense of the distinctive compositional craft that characterizes the final manuscript. In fact, Acker produced a series of written indications on the manuscript itself, addressing her publishers, regarding its visual presentation and how to present certain components, such as the illustrations she produced for the effect. Burroughs's own textual tactics were strongly bound to formal possibilities immanent to other fields of composition; he repurposed the cut-up technique as means of textual (re)composition after the experimental findings of painter/writer Brion Gysin (1916-1986) in the 1950s, who was then working with newspaper clippings and assorted objects.[69]

Acker contrasts Burroughs with another central figure in the Beat Generation:

> I like Kerouac but he worked too much from intuition for me and I wasn't interested in that kind of autobiographical work. Whereas Burroughs really was doing the major work because he was dealing with how politics and language come together, the kind of language, what the image is, all that early Burroughs work. Burroughs was the only prose writer I could find who was a conceptualist. (Lotringer, 4)

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[69] One would be remiss not to mention Burroughs's own approach to the theme of male homosexuality. "Queer," a novella he did not originally deem publishable due to its depiction of homosexuality, came out in 1985 (just one year after the publication of *BGHS*. Jamie Russell's *Queer Burroughs* (2001) is the one major study which has attempted to refine critical discussions on Burroughs's work within the rubric of queer literature and according to homosexuality as thematic, supplementing its incorporation into the avant-garde cannon of early 20th century U.S. culture and modern English-language literature on the grounds of textual or literary merit.

Unlike Kerouac, Burroughs crafts a poetics of his own. One which pertains to the materiality of language and of form, just as it does to language in its multiple capacities and possibilities. At this point, Acker is referring to a period in which she had moved back to New York city, but had yet to engage with the city's downtown poetry scene. Instead, while gauging conceptualist approaches to writing outside the conventional grammars of genre, she was engaged with the St. Marks Poetry Project, which she felt repelled by for its autobiographical tendencies. In conversation with Lotringer, she derides its participants as "hippies." Nonetheless, this was a formative moment in Acker's life, during which she complemented her creative labor with sex work. The latter practice supported the former, and Acker attributed a politically transformative effect to this intersection between disparate socio-economic scenes:

> I was working in a sex-show in 42nd Street and I had two lives, the poetry and the sex-show. I was in it only six months but it pretty radically changed my view of the world. (…) The 42nd Street experience made me learn about *street politics*. You see people *from the bottom up*, and sexual behavior, especially sex minus relationship – which is what happens in 42nd Street – *is definitely bottom*. Then you see it in a different way, especially power relationships in society. *Genet has the same kind of perspective. And I think that never left me.* (my emphasis, Lotringer, 4-5).

Acker traces an indirect yet successive linkage between Burroughs and Genet. The first stands out from the general trends of the Beat Generation, and from the poetry scenes she herself inhabited, by constructing a project of writing which ruptured disciplinary boundaries and inflected prose-writing with conceptualist intent. The later tapped into the imaginary she experienced as a sex worker – a poetic standpoint that the St. Marks Poetry Project did not, could not, or would not provide.

Importantly, the relative consistency of the relation Acker construes between the two lies in their politics: Burroughs's experimental inquiries into language and power; Genet's perspective of social relations "from the bottom up." Through the invocation of Genet, the 42nd street scene is incorporated in the lexicon (epistemic as well as poetic) of that "counter-tradition" Acker so valued. The split she describes between the poetry scene and the 42nd street scene thus maps onto the distance between distinctive literary and intellectual histories, the juncture of which she inhabits. Often, *Blood and Guts in High School* reads as a confrontation with that interstitial position, construed between disparate ethical and aesthetic milieus. More often still, it reads as the

crisis ensuant from the confrontation between those milieus and the multiple dissimilarities between them, when these cannot be rendered as anything but disjunction or contradiction.

3.2. *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984): a case-study.

Our cue for the present discussion is the interpolation of French experimental novelist and playwright Jean Genet into *Blood and Guts in High School* – henceforth referred to as *BGHS.* This decision is largely motivated by *BGHS*'s singular standing as a breakthrough work, with a continued hold over public attention. Published in the U.S. and the U.K. in 1984, through concurrent yet unrelated publishing contracts, *BGHS* remains the most critically and commercially successful of Acker's book-length works. Its momentum was decisive: the project played an important role in securing a continued relation with Grove Press as a primary publisher in the U.S., while inflating Acker's public notoriety in London, where she was living at the time of publication.

Reading *BGHS* demands that we attend with particular care to the contradictions, compactions, and nuances of its construction, and how these in turn dynamically occasion the interlocution of unexpected meanings – be they sexual, textual, or otherwise. What I hereby describe as the text's queer agency lies in its refusal of normalized structures of textual *and* political meaning, through concomitant processes of dissident articulation, Tyler Bradway's claim that Acker's work be re-located within the tangential corpus of queer experimental literature (as cited in Chapter 1) provides a provocative counterpoint to the present discussion – especially as our claims differ. But the concept of queerness is anticipated by another political heuristic, which proves nearly inescapable in discussions of Acker's work. Namely, the author's relative location vis-à-vis feminism, and her work's standing as feminist literature.

Four years after *BGHS* was published, Acker commented the following, regarding both the book's making and her own stance towards feminism:

> I don't say, "I'm a feminist," therefore I'm going to do such and such. A complaint people have had about my work is that I'm not working from a moralistic or ideological tradition. I take materials and only at the end do I find out what's going on in my writing. For instance, while writing it, I never considered that *Blood and Guts in High School* is especially antimale, but people have been very upset about it on that ground.

> When I wrote it, I think it was in my mind to do a traditional narrative. I thought it was kind of sweet at the time, but of course it's not. (Friedman, 13)

Unsurprisingly, Acker's statement stands as no authoritative assertion of unified and self-identical authorial intent. Consisting in a combination of assorted materials – some original, some plagiarized –, *Blood and Guts in High School* was crafted between 1972 and 1978. By the time of Friedman's interview, a full decade had passed since its completion, even if it only became publicly available (and publicly disputable) in 1984. Ambivalent markers of memory and temporality signal Acker's prolonged, durational engagement with the project. In fact, Acker's gradual retrieval of early material to redact the full manuscript of *BGHS* coincided with the publication of *KGH*, in 1978. The two works, seemingly so separate across time, are thus compositionally co-implicated in important ways. But theirs are profoundly different political and poetic logics, and the latter text speaks to a distinctive shift in Acker's writerly sensibility across the 1980s.

Acker's personal and creative identification with feminism was not unequivocal. Thinking through the politics of her work entails acknowledging its penchant for the non-systemic or anti-systemic, and an oppositional stance of non-compliance which generates frictions with common taxonomies of political thought. For one, resistant as it is to would-be "moralistic" or "ideological" filiations, her writing is often averse to the categorical congruence of feminism, as a finite political program. Here, I would emphasize Georgina Colby's description of Acker as part of a "third generation of innovative women writers", writing from 1960 onwards (Colby, 7). Colby argues that: "Second-wave feminism coincided with third-generation women writers and the fiction of their literary contemporaries gave expression to many of the second-generation feminist theorists' concerns" (Colby, 8).

This is a compelling account of Acker's chronological and political location vis-à-vis 20th century feminism, and innovative women's literature. But the explicative reach of these categories cannot quite account for Acker's adaptive processes of creative, conceptual, and political transformation across over three decades of literary practice. The scale of Acker's project and the endurance of her commitment to writing place these chronologically circumscribed categories in question. Her politics, much like her poetics, remained context-sensitive and open-ended, in important and troubling ways. In conversation with Lotringer, Acker has the following to say about her identification as a feminist:

> I'm not a straightforward feminist, but my interest is in feminism, *that's a change since I left New York*. And my best critics are feminists. That's simply where I would locate myself. (my emphasis, Lotringer: 18)

Chronologically speaking, Acker's reassessment of her position with respect to feminist politics is made to coincide with her move from New York to London, and with a new moment in English-language feminism across the Atlantic. She goes on to contrast the feminist critics she favors with what she describes as "the old feminists" (i.e., what we might describe as sex-negative feminists):

> I had trouble with the old feminists because of my interest in the nexus of sexuality and politics, and that was anathema to them. That was what I would call the con of equality, the flag the old feminists were waving, so there was a lot of antagonism. However, that's not true now, especially not true of feminism in the United States. (19)

Acker does not foreground her own political agency as a feminist writer. Nor does she define a specific set of characteristics which make her work more akin to the wider political project of feminism. If anything, she relates her situatedness to her publics, and more precisely, to her counter-publics: feminist critics, who she considers *the best* of critics. Given its contrarian favor for the "other tradition," even when notionally favoring traditional narrative, *Blood and Guts in High School* proves difficult to bind to concrete claims towards ethical or political instrumentality, be they feminist or otherwise. This is not to say it is not a politically motivated work, or a feminist one at that. But rather that its political intentionality is, itself, disjunctive. It does not comply with an identifiable political partiture or theoretical system, and it often reads against the grain of normative conceptions of the political. Acker's writerly bond to the contingent, improvised materiality of her praxis generates its own kinds of political affects and effects, and they are often at odds with political taxonomies in currency. And her own relation to feminism was an ongoing critical process, characterized by political doubt as much as it was by political truth.

A strong example of these contrarian dynamics is Acker's expropriation of the writing of U.S. novelist and satirist Erica Jong, in *Blood and Guts in High School* itself. Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973) was highly commercially successful and proved influential for second-wave feminism. In *BGHS*, Acker aggressively parodies the author, in a segment that had already been published as an individual work: the chapbook "Hello, I'm Erica Jong," published in 1982.[70]

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[70] Acker read some fragments of the text in her 1986 interview at the Institute for Contemporary Arts, in a conversation which often ties back to the question of Acker's relation to feminism – and to U.S. feminism, more specifically. This

The segment occurs when the book's protagonist, Janey, first meets Jean Genet in Tangier. Before they begin further interactions, Janey produces an account of her experience in New York, and especially of her affair with U.S. President Jimmy Carter. The segment consists in a disjointed mesh of linguistic registers, which repeatedly interrupt each other with sudden jags of narrative (and anti-narrative) momentum. As Janey narrates her experience of New York, Acker introduces her parody of Jong's work. The parody is preceded by a citation from Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1972):[71]

> 'EVERY POSITION OF DESIRE, NO MATTER HOW SMALL, IS CAPABLE OF PUTTING TO QUESTION THE ESTABLISHED ORDER OF A SOCIETY; NOT THAT DESIRE IS ASOCIAL; ON THE CONTRARY. BUT IT IS EXPLOSIVE; THERE IS NO DESIRING-MACHINE CAPABLE OF BEING ASSEMBLED WITHOUT DEMOLISHING ENTIRE SOCIAL SECTIONS.' (Acker, 1984, 125)

In context, this citation amplifies the political meanings of Janey's individual rapport, placing the politics of desire at the textual forefront. Because it directly precedes Acker's ventriloquistic imitation of Jong's standpoint, it also precipitates its critical estrangement, through conceptual counter-distinction: the friction between the two source texts works to upset the latter's identity, from a readerly perspective. The fact Deleuze and Guattari (on one hand) and Jong (on the other) are cited in the exact same format (i.e., in block capitals and amidst quotation marks) formally incites this confrontation between disparate registers, and it raises the question of their compatibility when re-presented together.

Them, Acker's parodistic expropriation of Erica Jong begins:

> 'HELLO, I'M ERICA JONG. ALL OF YOU LIKED MY NOVEL FEAR OF FLYING BECAUSE IN IT YOU MET REAL PEOPLE. PEOPLE WHO LOVED AND SUFFERED AND LIVED. MY NOVEL CONTAINED REAL PEOPLE. THAT'S WHY YOU LIKED IT. MY NEW NOVEL HOW TO DIE SUCCESSFULLY CONTAINS THOSE SAME CHARACTERS. AND IT CONTAINS TWO NEW CHARACTERS. YOU AND ME. ALL OF US ARE REAL. BYE.' (125)

This first paragraph reads as if it were a fragment of commercial copy: a reconstructed promotional blurb. In this performative fiction, Jong addressed her publics with candor. Her

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interview remains a useful historical document, as well as a strong example of Acker's penchant for public iterations of authorial performativity – including how she repurposes and re-presents aspects of her autobiography, or her performative ventriloquism of Jong's (supposed) narrative voice.

[71] In Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane's English-language translation, the passage reads: "If desire is repressed, it is because every position of desire, no matter how small, is capable of calling into question the established order of a society: not that desire is asocial, on the contrary. But it is explosive; there is no desiring-machine capable of being assembled without demolishing entire social sectors." (Deleuze and Guattari, 126-127, 1972).

statement suggests a simplistic attitude towards the representational economy of her work, affirming its mimetic value and its direct communication with the experience of its publics. While *Fear of Flying* is, indeed, the title of Jong's first major work, *How to Die Successfully* is a distortion of the title of her second novel, *How to Save Your Own Life* (1977). Its success is presumed to be based on the replication of the exact formula through which the first novel was achieve, and its merit lies in successful repetition. Because it departs from that same equation between literary representation and social reality, the writer and the reader meet on amicable terms within the textual scene. But this metatextual twist suggests a realist epistemology is already being usurped of its relative integrity, pushing the imagined text towards the terrain of deconstructive experimentalism.

By the second paragraph, Acker begins to burrow into this citational performance, to produce the opposite of what Jong's work was most celebrated for (and which the first paragraph objectifies through parody). Nearly half a page long, it further de-realizes Jong's signature, following on from the suggestion that the distances between writer and reader have begun to come undone. It begins:

> 'HELLO, I'M ERICA JONG. I'M A REAL NOVELIST. I WRITE BOOKS THAT TALK TO YOU ABOUT THE AGONY OF AMERICAN LIFE, HOW WE ALL SUFFER, THE GROWING PAIN THAT MORE AND MORE OF US ARE GOING TO FEEL.' (125)

Gradually, Jong's sympathetic realism becomes brutalist. While the model of direct address suggests unmediated intimacy, negative affects become preponderant. Realism seemingly intimates nihilism. Acker detours the fiction of Jong's writerly position to mock the governing precepts of the social novel, and the mimetic rationality of specific forms of social realism successful at the time of writing. In part, she does so by re-rendering Jong's authorial voice as politically caustic:

> 'LIFE IN THIS COUNTRY IS GOING TO GET MORE HORRIBLE, UNBEARABLE, MAKING US MANIACS 'CAUSE MANIA AND DEATH WILL BE THE ONLY DOORS OUT OF PRISON EXCEPT FOR THOSE FEW RICH PEOPLE AND EVEN THEY ARE AGONIZED PRISONERS IN THEIR MASKS, THE PATHS, THE WAYS THEY HAVE TO ACT TO REMAIN WHO THEY ARE.' (125-126)

What first reads like a piece of copy turns into a polemic: an irate tract against the state of U.S. society, and the inevitability of capture, subordination, and subjection (as signified by the political metaphor of "prison"). The use of block capitals, here and elsewhere, works to break the text's flow and to resist its eventual stabilization. In this case, block capitals emphasize specific

fragments as citations – or purported citations. But as the performative reconstruction of Jong's authorial voice continues, they also alter its impact on readerly sensibility, by producing incremental degrees of discomfort and dissonance. Acker imparts Jong's presumed voice with an acidic perception of U.S. society, even as she maintains a direct rapport with her publics. The content of what she articulates contradicts the idea Jong is addressing those attracted to her work, yet the persistence of that formal artifice heightens the aggressive impact of her performative re-characterization:

> 'WE NEED TOTAL OBLIVION. WHAT WAS I SAYING? OH YES MY NAME IS ERICA JONG I WOULD RATHER BE A BABY THAN HAVE SEX. I WOULD RATHER GO GOOGOO. I WOULD RATHER WRITE GOO-GOO. I WOULD RATHER WRITE: FUCK YOU UP YOUR CUNTS THAT'S WHO I AM THE FUCK WITH YOUR MONEY I'M NOT CATERING TO YOU ANYMORE I'M GETTING OUT I'M RIPPING UP MY CLOTHES I'M RIPPING UP MY SKIN I HURT PAIN OH HURT ME PAIN AT THIS POINT IS GOOD DO YOU UNDERSTAND?' (126)

Having transformed the "Erica Jong" signature, by imparting it with a catastrophically skeptical perspective on U.S. society, Acker then deflates the relative consistency of the resulting voice, by breaking discourse down to the point of nonsense. Nowhere is this more flagrant than in Jong's rejection of sex in favor of complete (and express) infantilization: "GOO-GOO." With this infantilizing transformation, Acker has begun to exploit the ridicule of conventional ideas of authorial identity and narrative intentionality. Jong's rapport ultimately breaks down into shapeless, stream-of thought sentences, surrounding impression and sensation. In a sense, values reverse: while the libidinal economy between Jong and her publics is first characterize by the pleasures of recognition, now pain emerges as that constant that disrupts discursive congruence, coincident with the rejection of readerly desire.

The final paragraph is also the briefest of the three, and the one which professes the most programmatic assertions. It reads: 'MY NAME IS ERICA JONG. IF THERE IS GOD, GOD IS DISJUNCTION AND MADNESS. YOURS TRULY, ERICA JONG." (126) From the beginning to the end of Jong's monologic address towards her readers, her discourse becomes increasingly disorganized and chaotic. At various moments, it seemingly collapses in on itself. With this final injunction, the formula "MY NAME IS ERICA JONG" is voided of any deictic value: it can no longer refer to anything but itself, as the linguistic debris of a signature broken down into nonsense. "GOD" figures as an absolute (and thus emptied) signifier, conditionally equated with disjunction

and madness. The valuation of disjunction speaks to the rejection of a project, whether textual or subjective, bound to causality and continuity. The valuation of madness, in turn, attests to a strong rejection of rationality, in its multiple expressions. If there are any absolutes, they are the absolutes of negation: of radical negativity, and contrarian subjectivity.

The Erica Jong parody is important for a few different reasons. First and foremost, it stands as a stark rejection of the discourses of liberal and cultural feminism of the 1970s-1980s. It places such discourses into question, to the extent their tenability is predicated on their legibility and acceptability, when presented to mainstream publics. Acker's assault on Erica Jong's imaginary suggests a radical disavowal of such precepts, and a turn against the acceptable and the legible. Her ventriloquistic expropriation of Jong's literary sensibility breaks with the politics of respectability completely, challenging Jong's public standing and refuting assimilationist aesthetics. And her incremental distortion of Jong's discourse denounces the author's realism as naïve, while ridiculing realism itself as a naïve epistemological option. At the limit, it breaks down Jong's discourse into atomistic units, cast in disarray.

Furthermore, it exemplifies Acker's attitudes towards the literary signature, and its relative authority as a nominal construct. Signatures are to be expropriated and reappropriated, disregarding the exigencies of a realist understanding of their concrete social function. Sometimes, such infractions against the relative integrity of the signature work to contextually criticize a specific author's body of work, or to celebrate it. But in most cases, they consist in processual forms of re-reading, which resist the adjudication of their absolute value: they propose no final judgement. This degree of indetermination subtends Jean Genet's textual presence in *Blood and Guts in High School*, and it motivates a queer reassessment of that author's textual reconstruction. And our own critical attitude towards Acker's work shares something of this enduring degree of indetermination.

Finally, the segment works as a structural primer of sorts. As a discrete textual moment, it speaks to the variety of compositional and formal tactics Acker deploys across the text. For one, its own construction is disjunctive: it seemingly establishes certain aesthetic and emotional formulae, only to break them down soon after, never allowing them to acquire full consistency. Each paragraph builds on what the previous one has established, while falsifying its narrative and formal identity. When need be, grammatic conventions bend to distortive, digressive effect. Even

Jong's signature figures in cursive, in what seems to be a digitalization of Acker's handwriting, further obfuscating the division between distinctive authorial identities. Even as the segment reads episodically, as an abrupt structural excursion, it speaks to the core motives of the book's composition.

Blood and Guts is a structurally broken-down project, with a much greater emphasis on the means (and meanders) of representation than on the figurative foreclosure the idea of "traditional narrative" would suggest. If a novel, it is one which challenges the definitional boundaries of the form at all turns. Acker deploys a range of compositional tactics and formal devices, unsteadily bound together by non-integrative, even non-narrative logics. Its discourse is obtusely anti-novelistic, fragmentary, and open-ended. Content generated through citation and/or collage is abundant, and interrupted in any given instance by incremental effects of formal estrangement. Forms range from numbered theatrical "scenes," presented in the form of feigned dramatic script, to pornographic drawings of various kinds, starkly interspersed amidst passages of text (Figure 1).[72][73]

[72] The briefer text "Florida," published in *Literal Madness* (1988), is predicated on the parodic precept of producing the script of a movie one has watched, yet the script of which one has never attained. It is Acker's deconstructed reconstruction (or reconstructed reduction) of 1948 noir film *Key Largo*, starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, in the form of a short story. More generally, the construct of dramatic dialogue and/or of dramatic script (as if coincident with, or expressive of some notional performative or audiovisual object) is a formal feature in various of Acker's texts, in purported play with her concerns (as well as challenges to) language, and literary language more specifically.

[73] The pornographic, the non-pornographic and/or the anti-pornographic are fundamental for an understanding of Acker's relationship to sexuality and literature, particularly as conceptualized in dialogue with thinkers such as de Sade, Herbert Marcuse, or Georges Bataille (one of her major intertexts in the aforementioned "tradition of political writing as opposed to propaganda"), particularly vis-à-vis a sexual politics.

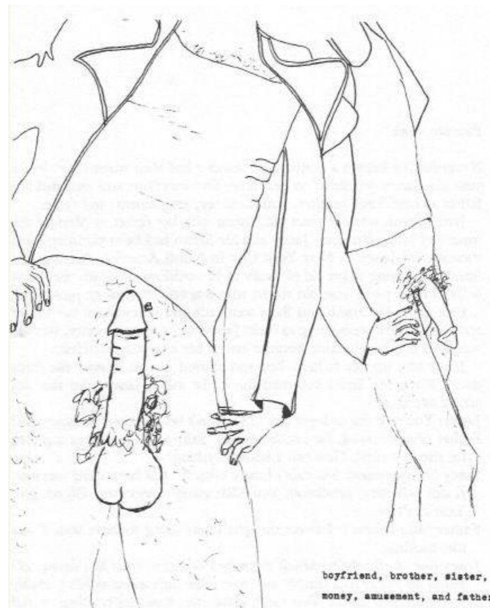

Figure 1 – Drawing of Johnny. The description of "boyfriend, brother, sister, money, amusement, and father" also occurs intext.

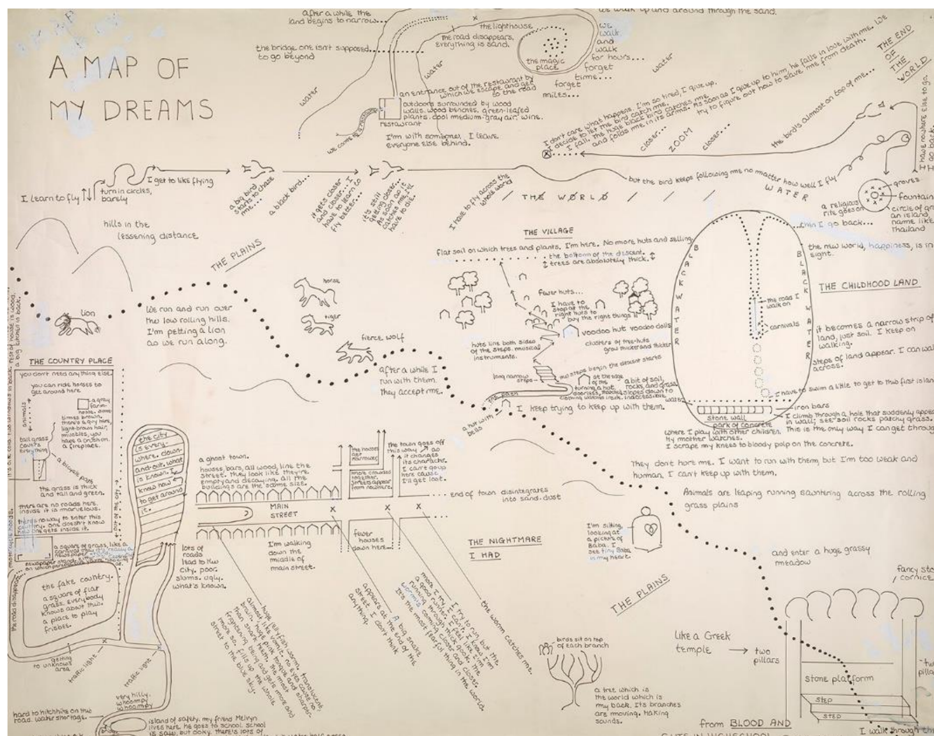

Figure 2 – Digitization of one of the "dream maps" Acker incorporated into Blood and Guts in High School, dated to 1977.

The novel's visual discourse is not limited to the pornographic imagery. Highly detailed diagrams of dreams which Acker experienced, purposefully abstract and abstruse in presentation, feature prominently (Figure 2). As do derisorily didactic representations of the Arabic *abjad*, as Janey begins to learn how to write (Figure 3). This is not to say the work's visual discourse remains

separate from its textual discourse. In fact, various experimentations with page formatting and non-standard typography are a key facet of how textuality is re-conceived and re-constructed in this project.

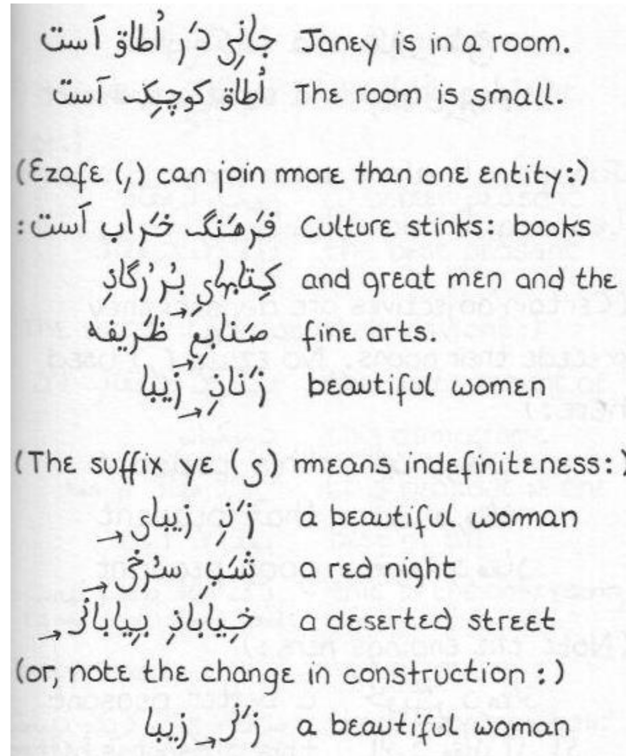

Figure 3 – Excerpt of Janey's writing. Also independently published as "The Persian Poems."

It is also one of the most confrontationally plagiaristic of Acker's major works. In this, it attests to the importance of Burroughs's experiments with the cut-up technique, as a challenge to the conventions of literary composition. Acts of creative citation include a "book report" on the sexual mores of Nathaniel Hawthorne's canonical text *Scarlett Letter* (1850); a rewriting of Genet's play *Les paravents* (1961), or the aforementioned excerpt from the first English-language translation of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti: Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1977). Not to speak of numerous other unattributed (or unacknowledged) intertexts.

A strong emphasis on the purposefully alienating dimensions of *BGHS* informs our discussion of it. The work's rejection of agreed terms of literary expression and communication occasions a unique kind of relational orientation, both towards and against its possible readers. At the level of affect, this might well correspond with what Acker euphemistically described as its lack of "sweetness." How the text performs repeated infractions against the implicit assumptions

undergirding the practice of reading, effectively disrupting readerly sensibility, is key to our understanding of it. Its resistance to legibility and to intelligibility must inform our hermeneutic attitude. Rather than reify the text in a holistic analytic form, quite unlike its own, I suggest we parse through and provisionally emphasize some of its moments, and some of its movements. In doing so, I mean to trace how the text *works* and what it *effects*, while de-emphasizing the question of what it might *be*, as demanded by the regulatory ideal of novelistic totality.[74]

Janey Smith, a ten-year-old girl, lives in Merida (Yucatan, Mexico) with her father, Johnny. The two are involved in a tumultuous, incestuous relationship. Dependent on him after her mother's death, Janey perceives Johnny "as boyfriend, brother, sister, money, amusement, and father" (7). Eventually, Johnny loses interest in Janey, as he becomes involved with an adult woman (Sally). Disillusioned, Janey moves to New York, to live on her own terns. She briefly attends high school, but when communication with Johnny breaks down, he stops financially supporting her. She joins a teen motorcycle gang, "The Scorpions," whose leader (Tommy) she dates. But when the entire gang dies in a car accident, Janey finds herself completely isolated in New York. Moving to the "slums," she struggles to survive in the city. She meets various sexual partners and has two abortions. While at home, she is assaulted and kidnapped by a "white punk" (59) and a "huge black guy" (60) who sell her into sexual traffic, plainly described as "white slavery" (61).

Mr. Linker, a former lobotomist who the text quite belligerently refers to as "the Persian Slave Trader" (59-60), attempts to train Janey as a "whore." Incarcerated, she learns the *abjad* from a Persian grammar book and produces what the novel presents as "the Persian poems," just as she discovers she has cancer.[75] Because of her ailment, she is no longer of use to Mr. Linker.

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[74] In the interview with Lotringer cited before, Acker addresses the structure/structuration (or lack thereof) of her works: "Oh, they're structured, they're carefully structured. There's always a beginning and an end. Well, to some of them" (Lotringer, 15) I suggest this claim works descriptively precisely *because* it is tremulous: because the confident affirmation of an overall norm of textual organization is promptly unqualified, yet in quite open-ended terms, given how the sentence-structure shifts towards its own end.

[75] "The Persian Poems" had already been published as an independent piece of work in 1980, with illustrations by Robert Kushner accompanying Acker's text, as was the case with the first printing of *Kathy Goes to Haiti*. Notably, the multiple illustrations, drawings and visual experiments throughout *Blood and Guts in High* School were Acker's own: the work features no collaborations with visual artists. Georgina Colby (2000) has written about the intermedia construction of *BGHS* – and of its manuscript before publication, more specifically – with keen attention to Acker's work with visual materials, as no lesser part of the *BGHS* project. One aspect she emphasizes, which this chapter does not have the space to discuss, is the experimental use of non-standard typographic options across the work and how they constitute an alternative (or a supplement) of language. See: Acker, 1980.

Freed, she travels illegally to Tangier (Morocco), where she encounters Jean Genet by accident. She becomes fascinated with him, and the two become travel companions. They travel together across North Africa, until they come to Alexandria (Egypt), where they are imprisoned as a local rebellion erupts. After the "Capitalists" discuss the crisis at stake, the two are expelled from Alexandria. Finally, as we approach the end of the novel, Genet departs to accompany the production of one of his plays, leaving Janey in isolation once again. Ultimately, she dies alone in the city of Luxor. The final subsection consists in an extended mythographic, metatextual experiment enacted through bare, descriptive language and starkly complex, discontinuous drawings by Acker herself (Figure 4). A very brief description of Janey's grave in Luxor (Egypt) follows, and the book ends with a sexually charged poem, followed by the announcement that: "soon many other Janeys were born and these Janeys covered the earth." (165).

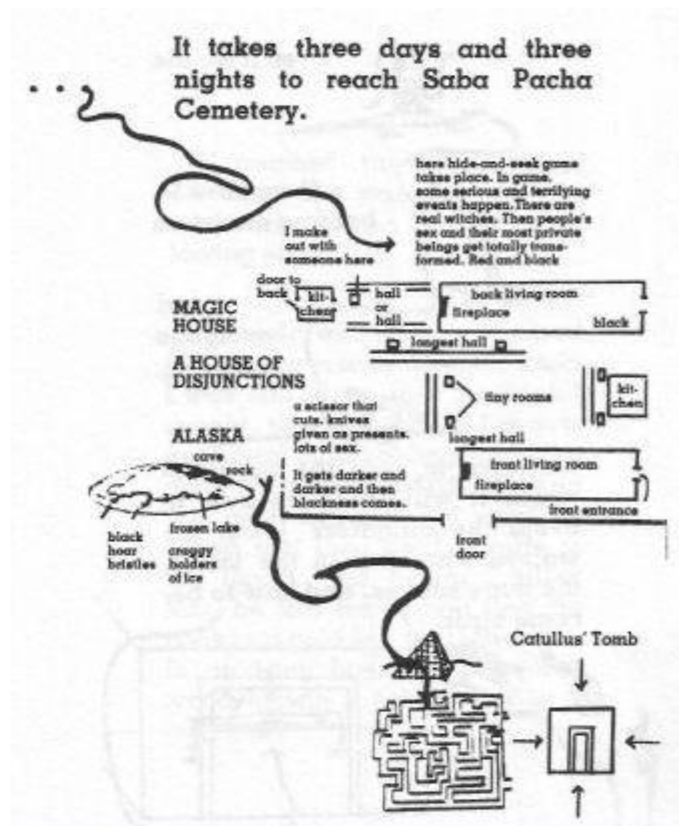

Figure 4 – Page from "The Journey" section. Note the interaction between written and visual discourse.

3.3. “I’m a writer.” Janey and Genet’s queer entanglement.

The book’s final chapter, “A Journey to the End of Night,” presents Janey’s relationship with Jean Genet. It is titled after the Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932), an experimental novel which proved influential for a large array of modernist and late-modernist literary movements. This includes the U.S. Beat Generation, which Burroughs himself was partially identified with. This citational gesture is just as cutting for invoking that work’s nihilistic, catastrophic and caustic energies (Céline was considered a literary innovator, who opposed the stark stylistics of spoken French to academicist bourgeois writing), as it is for tacitly challenging the writer’s avowed support for Axis powers during World War II, and his authorship of anti-Semitic pamphlets.[76] No less importantly, the chapter repurposes Jean Genet’s play *Les Paravents* (1963), a satiric meditation on French colonialism and the Algerian War (1954-1962), as a narrative template of sorts. Towards the section’s close, Acker writes:

> End of abstract haze. Now the specific details can begin in the terrible plagiarism of The Screens [Les Paravents]. The writing is terrible plagiarism because all culture stinks and there’s no reason to make new culture stink. (137)

Although the section later comes to this point of metatextual crisis, it first begins as a presentation of excerpts from Janey’s diary as she arrives in Tangier. The diegetic situation is unequivocal: the sentence “*(Excerpts from Janey’s diary while she’s in Tangier.)*” (117) precedes the main body of text. Having begun to write over the course of the previous chapter, Janey presents as her story’s own narrator. On arrival, she proclaims: “This time when I run after a man who doesn’t want me, I’m *really* going to run after him.” (117). By doing so, she anticipates a turbulent dynamic of attraction/rejection, which in turn mirrors the emotional conflicts she has already experienced with a range of other male characters (including Johnny/Father).

The unspecified object of this declaration turns out to be Jean Genet. When a friend (Michal) spots Genet at a café, Janey immediately notes his correspondence to her exact expectations: “He looks like I always imagined he’d look.” (117) Michal, a nondescript character who features in this scene only, is quick to warn her of Genet’s well-known anti-social nature: “He

[76] Acker herself was Jewish, which seems to inform her engagement with Jewish ethnicity and history in a few texts. No extant studies of Acker’s work foreground the fact of her ethnicity and religious/cultural belonging, despite long-term conversations about the problem of identity (as well as that of community) in Acker’s work.

doesn't like to meet people and he won't talk to you. He lives like a hermit. Everyone's told me that." (117). He attempts to ward Janey's yearning off: "You can't throw yourself on a famous writer like Genet, on a man who'll reject you. You have to learn to control yourself." (117) But these proclamations are beside the point. The decision to pursue Genet precedes the fact of his acquaintance and anticipates his rejection by default. As a form of emotional reasoning, the ideal of reciprocity cannot persuade her: it has been discredited already.

Having followed Genet out onto the street, Janey approaches him. When he asks her who she is, she replies: "I am a writer" (118). This articulate, sparse as it is, stands as a trenchant claim regarding Janey's identity, and sets in motion a complex set of identificatory and disidentificatory processes between the two, who hereby interact and converse *as writers*. Furthermore, it posits the question of writing *within* the scene of writing, by explicitly thematizing the authorial position. Finally, it reads as an iteration of the authorial performativity which energizes so many of Acker's experimentations with the tenets of literary convention. To wit: the text's protagonist becomes a writer herself, who then encounters one of the author's favored writers. In fact, it is that encounter which triggers her explicit self-identification as such.

This is not to say theirs are symmetrical positions. In fact, Genet expresses little interest in Janey at first: "He notices me but he doesn't want to" (118) For the most part, he responds to her with nonchalant poise, and measured distance. Still, he indulges her. As they walk together from café square to the "Hotel Minzah," they talk about "writers, writing, and some of the problems of publication" (118). Reflecting on the material structures of literary (re)production, Genet casually notes: "I don't like institutions." (118) By the time they meet the next day, at Café el Menara, his attitude towards Janey has begun to shift. "His eyes light up and he smiles," Janey remarks. "He's warmer to me than he was yesterday" (118).

With this second encounter, Acker generates a curious set-up. One which renders Genet's actual personal history, and his lived historical body, as sources of estrangement for the reader. Namely, she (she: Janey? She: Acker?) *interviews* Genet. The passage reads:

> [Janey] 'I don't understand why they haven't translated any of your books into Arabic.', I say.
>
> [Genet] 'I don't know. No one has asked me to do it. Maybe some day they will, maybe not. It depends on whether my things interest them at that point. Personally, I think the Arabs are extremely sensitive when it comes to questions of morality.'

> [Janey:] 'Did you have a hard time writing your first novel?'
>
> [Genet:] 'No, not very. I wrote the first fifty pages of *Nôtre Dame des Fleurs* in prison. And when I was transferred to another gaol they somehow got left behind. I did everything I could to get them back, but it was hopeless. And so I wrapped myself in my blanket and rewrote the fifty pages straight off.'
>
> [Janey] 'I know you didn't start to write until you were thirty.', I say. 'Thirty-two or thirty-three'.
>
> [Genet] 'That's right.'
>
> [Janey:] 'You haven't written anything for several years, have you? Do you consider your literary silence and your assumption of a political position part of your writing?'
>
> [Genet:] 'Literally I've said what I've had to say. Even if there was anything more to add, I'd keep it to myself. That's how things are. There's no absolute yes and there's absolute no. I'm sitting here, with you now, but I might easily not be.' (118-119)

From early in her career, Acker interrogated authorial self-identity, by playing around with performative refractions of the literary signature. She signed the early work *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* (1973) as the titular "Black Tarantula" herself, transmuting the character into a notional author. She signed the later *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec* (1975) as Toulouse Lautrec *himself,* thus expropriating another creator's signature. And by naming the protagonist of *Kathy Goes to Haiti* (1978) after *herself*, she effected a similar distortion, teasing at the limits between fiction and self-fiction. Acker's conceptual and creative options regarding the rapport between authorship and identity feign no authoritative claim to historical veracity or realistic congruence. If anything, they are intent on deconstructing or disintegrating the individual signature as a feasible construct. It follows that her poesis of Genet is inventive or imaginative, rather than testimonial or documental. This is not to say that Genet-as-character *substitutes* for Genet-as-author, but that Genet-as-fiction is more compelling a construct.

The formal construction of this exchange consists in a challenge against such categorical definitions, in and of itself. Because the "interview" Acker produces between Janey and Genet is in fact neither hers, nor Janey's. Nor, for that matter, are the scenes which immediately precede it. To construct this narrative, Acker reappropriated content from Mohamed Choukri's *Jean Genet in Tangier* (1973), as first acknowledged and discussed by Megan Milks (2009). Milks describes *Jean Genet in Tangier* as a "a diary of Choukri's daily meetings with Genet translated into English by Paul Bowles" (Milks, 93), and analyses Acker's creative reappropriation of Choukri's signature vis-à-vis the politics of subalternity.

In doing so, she demonstrates that the passages in question consist in rewritings of conversations had between Choukri and Genet, as written down by the first of the two, and later translated into English by Bowles. By the time Acker invokes it, that original conversation has thus been subject to transcription, to translation, and finally, to her own adaptation. Milk's characterization of the text emphasizes its critical depiction of Genet as a white, western author navigating social and institutional relations in Morocco, as witnessed from Choukri's standpoint: "[Choukri] comes to see the writer as self-centered and misanthropic, harboring a Western superiority indicated by a complete lack of knowledge of Arabic literature." (98) Moreover, Choukri's narrative emphasizes Genet's more intimate motivations, and his willingness to manipulate local authority:

> Genet concocts numerous plans to attain a passport for a young man named Zerrad who he wants to take to France with him, presumably as a sexual partner. After at last succeeding in bribing officials, he is able to obtain this passport, and finally leaves with Zerrad. (98)

Because of its portrayal of Genet's attitude and motivations, *Jean Genet in Tangier* already picks apart at the idealized precepts surrounding the author's public persona. At the same time, because the text refutes a moralistic conclusion on the question of his character (or his writing), it presents with that same degree of indetermination which *Blood and Guts* favors. To evince the historical fiction of the authorial persona, Acker fictionalizes a direct address, which in turn departs from an actual address. By contaminating the lines between truth and fiction, she accentuates the trouble proper to narrativizing Genet, or *any* celebrated author, emotionally as well as politically.

Genet's initial point about those "questions of morality" which condition the translation of his work into Arabic subtly insinuates the representational controversies surrounding homosexuality's representational viability, especially in intercultural contexts. His description of the making of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* (1943) corresponds with Jean Paul Sartre's own account of the novel's material history, in his existential psychoanalysis *cum* critical hagiography *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr* (1952) – although Sartre refers to the manuscript having been *destroyed* rather than "left behind" [77]. Finally, Janey's question regarding Genet's "literary silence" and "political

[77] Incidentally, U.S. queer theorist David M. Halperin named his critical biography of Michel Foucault, a figure of fundamental importance for contemporary queer theory and queer studies, after Sartre's own dramatic formula: *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (1995). Such speaks to the complex entanglements of French and English histories of (male) homosexuality, and more particularly to English-language receptions of French discourses on and of homosexuality, and authorship.

position" refer us back to his extended break from creative work (between 1952 and 1957), and his later engagement in radical politics on an international scale, after May 1968. Across the 1970s, Genet's political activities included collaborating with the U.S.-based black radical organization the Black Panthers, implicating himself in the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, and publicly expressing his support for the Baader-Meinhof Group.[78]

Somewhat rigid in form and format, the "interview" enables Acker to dimension some of her own propelling interrogations surrounding literary praxis, political action, and the ultimate rapport between truth and fiction. The willful artificiality of her writerly approach operates to uproot Genet (and to a degree, historical narrative itself) from the grounds of a realist episteme. Effectively, Genet-as-fiction is construed in the intervals between history-as-truth and history-as-fiction, and his own historicity is textually disassembled and reassembled. This is the peculiar shape of *Blood and Gut*'s "Genet," as a poetic and conceptual construct.

After this exchange, Janey tells Genet "some of the things that happened in [her] last weeks in New York City" (110). Her account takes up about a third of the chapter's overall duration, and recenters Janey's narrative amidst her gradual acquaintance with Genet, and the early scenes of their companionship. The section shuffles violently between disparate registers, although most of the narrative ties back to radicalized perceptions of repulsion, rejection, and abjection. This includes "secret letters" (123) directed at President Carter, who is portrayed as a "QUEER LITTLE PIG [who] leaves a THREE-INCH WALL of SHIT around his ASSHOLE" (119), and who has "CIRCUMCIZED HIMSELF […] so that he can make his COCK even FILTHIER by COVERING IT with a layer of SCUM, DRIED GREEN PISS, and SHIT." (120). As well as the already discussed parody of U.S. writer Erica Jong.

By the time Janey concludes this disjointed account of her more recent experiences, Genet has decided he would like for her to travel with him. He provides no explicit motivation for his invitation:

> Genet asks me if I have a passport.
>
> Why do I need a passport?

---

[78] French novelist's Hadrien Laroche's *The Last Genet: A Writer in Revolt* (Arsenal Pulp Press: 2010), originally written under the academic guidance of Jacques Derrida, is a full-length non-fiction reflection on this latter stage of Genet's life, focusing on the author's increased political engagement and gradual radicalization later in his life.

> He wants to know if I can travel.
>
> I explain I got to Tangier illegally. I don't think I can travel.
>
> Genet's going to leave Tangier. He wants me to go with him. (127)

Janey's re-presentation of this conversation is synthetic and to the point, narratively explicit, and stylistically. It contrasts profoundly with the various modes of narrative (and non-narrative) excess which precede it, including Acker's manipulation of Erica Jong's signature. Because of the passive tense, the reader is savvy to no more than Janey herself is, and she provides no more than the bare details of their dialogue. At a remove, Genet produces no recognition of what Janey has so far told him, nor any kind of interpretation for his decision that they travel together. His intentionality remains opaque, and out of readerly reach.

The next day, Genet holds a "small party" at his hotel room. When a "famous older male friend" of his asks who he is travelling with, he describes Janey as "a gardener." This lie of convenience protects Janey's position, while signaling a tacit agreement between the two, and some degree of complicity: "The strange man smiles. I'm accepted in this world. I shake hands with Genet." (128) For now, it seems, Janey has become one with the pariah community of artists which gathers in Tangier. And, truthful to Choukri's narrative, Genet illegally procures a passport for Janey, by paying off a local official: "We found a friend who knew a government official and we paid." (128).

This section (titled "Tangier") ends with a citation, purportedly drawn from Genet's *A Thief's Journal* (1964). Because it is not causally attached to the preceding conversation, it hardly reads as proper to the discourse of either character:

> In Journal du Voleur Genet wrote:
>
> Movies and novels have made Tangier into a scary place, a dive where gamblers haggle over the secret plans of all the armies in the world. From the American coast, Tangier seemed to me a fabulous city. It was the very symbol of treason. (128)

Of the three paragraphs attributed to Genet, only this first one is drawn directly from his writing. Even then, it involves some imaginative (mis)translation. In Bernard Frechtman's English-language translation, the passage reads:

> Movies and novels have made of this city a fearful place, a kind of dive where gamblers haggle over the secret plans of all the armies in the world. From the Spanish coast, Tangiers seemed to me a fabulous city. It was the very symbol of treason. (Frechtman, 59)

Acker's adaption of the fragment is striking in its simplicity. While she preserves sentence structure and grammatic content, she substitutes the Spanish coast for the American coast. Formally, this produces no immediate estrangement in relation to the text in translation (i.e., it presents as proper to it). However, the drastic geographical implausibility of observing the city of Tangier from the Eastern American coastline signals a slight of hand, an infraction into the original text's actual (and expectable) cartography. Deictically nonsensical, it transposes the speaking subject from continental Europe to the U.S. In effect, this slight alteration literalizes the continued influence of the so-called "continental tradition" (in literature, as in other areas) on North American counter-traditions. In addition, it evinces the extent to which Acker's imagined territories report to other textual repertoires, which overwrite the material realities they notionally re-present.

The following two paragraphs depart from Genet's text completely, and they recognizably read as Acker's own writing. But the capitalization of select words – "SEX" and "ADVENTURE," especially – refer us back to Genet's vocabulary once and again, and the points at which their imaginaries intersect. The pseudo-citation concludes: "This SEX – what I call SEX – guides my life. I know this Sex of traitors, deviants, scum and schizophrenics exists. They're the ones I want." (129)

In other instances, Acker's citations are literal and literalist, rather than disobedient and dispossessive. Just after Michal's final attempt to dissuade Janey from pursuing Genet (and just before she introduces herself to him), we read:

> Genet wrote: 'Loneliness and poverty made me not walk but fly. For I was so poor, and I have already been accused of so many thefts, that when I leave a room too quietly on tiptoe, holding my breath, I am not sure, even now, that I'm not carrying off with me the holes in the curtains or hangings'. (117-118).

Because it remains unaltered as an individual piece of writing, this direct citation from *The Thief's Journal* can only signify contextually: its relative location within the text is what renders it meaningful (or, possibly, meaningless). Here, it seems to serve somewhat of a scenic function: it provides some degree of insight into Genet's imagined biography. By doing so, it produces an increased sense of narrative context, while nonetheless interrupting the flow of narrative discourse and evincing its intertextual (and metatextual) performativity.

The amicable terms on which Janey and Genet interact at the party soon come undone. As they travel, Genet's casual contempt for Janey becomes inescapably apparent, as does his keen awareness of the power he holds over her. When they reach Alexandria, Janey is left to sleep "in the dirt outside Genet's ritzy hotel" (130), while he rests inside. And just as she wakes up, Genet confronts her:

> Genet enters and tells Janey she's totally ugly. Because she's so loud no one wants to talk to her. She's the worst kind of Jewish mama pig. She's vulgar and unrestrained and that is what Europeans especially hate most about Americans. (130)

He goes on to render the various hierarchies which govern their relationship brutally explicit, ultimately reorganizing their arrangement as the due expression of systemic power relations:

> The hierarchy is (Genet has to explain the nature of the social world to her because she's American 😉
>
> Rich men
>
> Poor men
>
> Mothers
>
> Beautiful women
>
> Whores
>
> Poor female and neo-female slut scum
>
> Janey. (131)

The unattributed, third person narrative (which might well be Acker's own) mockingly imparts Janey with a structural incapacity to comprehend "the social world," given her geopolitical location and national identity. By doing so, it implicitly legitimates Genet's brutalist reduction of said world to a set of irreducible hierarchies. Within this fantasized, secular rationalist description of the social world, "rich men" hold the most power, and "poor men" stand as their immediate subordinates. The intersection between class and gender thus presents as the first (and foremost) determinant of power. After men, whether rich or poor, women are differentially valued according to certain qualities or social functions. Those who maintain reproductive labor and social reproduction ("Mothers"); those whose physicality corresponds with regulatory ideals of female beauty ("Beautiful women").; those who practice sex work, and whose denomination already denotes their status as a stigmatized and undesirable demographic ("Whores")… Notably, none of

these positions are separate by an Aristotelian logic of non-contradiction. These are not discrete terms: they can overlap.

If not for Janey's exceptional situation as an individual referent of debasement and abjection, the utmost destitute stratum of Genet's scheme would be: "Poor female and neo-female slut scum." This striking figure of speech compacts poverty, unspecified gender divergence, and sexual proclivity in a nefarious multiplicity, (dis)organized as "scum."[79] This is a particularly reverberant term, at the historical interface between the U.S. avant-garde and feminist politics. It calls to mind Valerie Solana's infamous *SCUM Manifesto* (1967), a satirical tract expounding on the abolition (or strictly speaking: the nihilation) of men (S.C.U.M. = "Society for Cutting Up Men"). Moreover, it evokes Janey's own description of President Carter, and confuses their depiction.

Janey's location below such discombobulated "scum" specifies her as singularly devalued, or unvaluable. At the same time, it breaks up a presumed organization according to groupings: while other women are subsumed into collectives which overdetermine their worth, she figures individually. In a scheme the bottom-end of which disaggregates into multi-adjectival negativity, Janey somehow remains beyond categorical or taxonomical reach. Her own name functions as a sign of negation, and abnegation.

But Genet is not quite done yet:

> Then he kicks Janey around and tells her to be worse than she is, to get down, there, down in the shit, to learn. Go to the extreme. To make the decision. Janey girl still has pretensions. She has to be drained of everything. She has to be disemboweled. (131)

Genet's adamantly aggressive description of the social world ends on a prescriptive note: "Janey girl" must further destroy, disarm, debase herself. Genet does more than characterize extant social hierarchies and evince how they shape the duo's rapport: he actualizes them. In part, through express physical violence, and in part, through the demand that Janey, already come undone, go further still into nothing. Ventriloquizing Genet, Acker underwrites Janey into oblivion. Through that gesture, the literary hero is re-positioned as an agent of political violence, concomitant with

[79] The term "neo-female" is especially surprising, given its complete decontextualization: it rarely occurs outside the remits of life sciences discourse and animal biology, where it refers to quite specific anatomical phenomena (otherwise described as "sex-reversal"). In those few instances where it is used in a non-scientific capacity, it (pejoratively) refers to trans women. Given Acker's context of writing, it most likely refers to trans women and/or transfeminine individuals.

patriarchal dominance and the reification of the "social world" as he knows it. His final demand, that Janey "disembowel," herself, markedly evokes the novel's own title.

Janey complies, without hesitation. Genet's abuse produces its own kind of subjective truth:

> The more she tries to be whatever he wants, the more he despises her. Finally, she decides her black wool hood and dress aren't enough. If Genet thinks she's shit, she should be invisible. When she follows him around, she hides in the walls like a shadow. She secretly washes his dirty underpants. She takes on his moodiness and his hating. (131)

Genet's stark rejection of Janey's character (and of her curiosities about him) can only drive her into further forms of debasement. Because he rejects her, she must perform and actualize that rejection. And because she does so, she can only (and in fact: she must) confirm the truth of his judgement. In part, this self-abnegating attitude expresses itself in the ways Janey renders her physical presence: she must not intrude, and she must not be perceived. But it also takes form through incorporation. The identificatory bind between her and Genet is such, that it transforms both her conduct and her affects: it becomes *her* hatred. Meanwhile, Genet addresses some professional affairs with his personal secretary, M'Namah. "The most important thing is that I be the best possible writer.," he tells her (131).

With this turn, Acker promulgates the radical negativity of Genet's poetics and imbues them with a strong degree of political realism: they speak to the actuality of both characters' circumstances. Genet's ultra-misogynistic reduction of the social real is, in the end, both poetically and politically truthful. This act of expropriative ventriloquism calls to mind the Erica Jong parody, in that Genet's own signature is politically transformed in the process by which it is textually usurped: his authorial voice is made to articulate that which he would not or did not. But the positions are reversed. Genet's relatively stable image as an agent of anti-normative political protest is itself placed into crisis. Because he is a realist, he is a misogynist.

Genet's acts of political and emotional violence against Janey in no way deflate her fascination with him, nor do they impede their approximation. On the contrary. When Janey is placed under arrest "for stealing two copies of *Funeral Rites* and hash from Genet" (133), in an absurdist *mise end abyme* of intertextual expropriation, he intentionally has himself imprisoned too. He is driven by an intellectualized curiosity about Janey's own criminal impulse, and its potential consequences: "He doesn't love Janey, but he intuits it'll be wild to join her." (135).

Because she, like Acker, has unsettled his authorial authority via expropriation, her appeal as an agent of transgression increases – although it seems safe to assume her personal value remains the same. But his own acts of transgression hold quite a different meaning, in the context of colonial and patriarchal society. Whereas Janey's incarceration reads as nearly spontaneous, Genet steals "for months," until the immediate protection produced by "his reputation as a white intellectual" (135) finally gives way.

In the shared context of incarceration, the dissymmetry between the two seems to be exaggerated, rather than alleviated. "You stink more than this gaol does. You lousy stinking pervert," Genet tells Janey (136). Meanwhile, various figures of authority, collectively described as "the capitalists," come together to "discuss the Janey question" (135). As it turns out, Janey's arrest has had an incendiary effect at the level of local power relations, and the capitalists struggle to reassert political stability over their workers:

> Mr Knockwurst [one of the "capitalists":] The slave Janey stinks. My God. Workers are pigs, women are worse, but she's something else. I arranged to have her steal from that homosexual she lives with so I could have her locked up for the rest of her life, but now she's convincing criminals and prostitutes they're people. If they think they're people, they'll revolt against us. What are we going to do about her? (135)

Knockwurst's intervention retrieves the vocabulary by which Janey is once and again constituted as sub-human, somehow adjacent to than those categories already in currency, which work to differentiate undesirable subjects and undesirable groupings. Moreover, it reveals that he himself manipulated circumstances so that she be incarcerated, and thus separated from general groups of the population (including his own workers). But that very gesture surprises the reasoning of institutional power. Incarcerated, Janey becomes politically willful, capable of mobilizing other "undesirables" against undisputed local authority.

While the capitalists struggle to make sense of this situation, at one point wondering whether they ought to kill off all of their workers, they are surprised by one such "undesirable" figure: "*(An Egyptian sneaks in and sets fire to a tree.)*" (135). Because this action is presented through a diegetic indicator, the anonymous Egyptian is further distanced from the capitalists, who gather collectively and have individual speaking parts. Soon: *"(Another Egyptian sets fire to a tree.)*" (135) The capitalists dismiss these gestures of revolt, even as they anticipate them: "Those rebels are never clear. What they say doesn't make sense." (136) Because they "own the language," the capitalists maintain full confidence of their hold over reality. But the diegetic indicators keep

insinuating a more drastic situation: "*(Meanwhile, the theatre in which the play is being shown is set on fire.)*" (136). While the stage gradually "goes up in flames," Mr. Knockwurst condemns the rebels – and by extension, the workers one last time, his mind turning towards eugenic fantasy:

> Mr Knockwurst: They're all Janeys. They're all perverts, transsexuals, criminals, and women. We'll have to think of a plan to exterminate them and get a new breed of workers. (136)

Earlier, I made a point of re-marking how Janey's relative position within Genet's perfunctory portrayal of the social world was of note because she was identified as an individual, rather than grouped into a demographic, along with other individual subjects. Now, that same effect of individuation (which placed Janey into relief as exceptional) works to repurpose "Janey" as a general descriptor for the capitalists' undesirable workers. Keenly, Knockwurst's list of undesirable subjects groups sexual dissidence, gender disobedience, criminality, and womanhood together. Again, these aggregate as the lower stratum of society, speaking to an implicit taxonomy which runs through from Genet's confrontation of Janey to Knockwurst's final contestations.

The two prisoners are aware a rebellion is erupting, although theirs are quite disparate responses. Janey plainly states that "a war's coming," but Genet's detached demeanor does not allow for much of a reaction: "That's no news. Wars are capitalists' toys" (136). They look outwards, through the windows of their adjacent prison cells, to witness what happens outside. Power relations have begun to break down, and standardized sociability careens into entropy: "the upper-middle class women and cops smash store windows, beat up bums with chains, and wander about." (137). Again, and even as they confront the disarray unfolding outside together, theirs are quite different perceptions. Janey's mood is catastrophist: "Let us pray to madness and suffering and horror." (137) Whereas Genet reacts with a mixture of pragmatism and optimism: "We're going to die soon. Why don't you think about freedom instead?" (137). Because Janey enters their relation from a position of self-abnegation, she fully incorporates Genet's negation of her personhood. This transforms their relative positions vis-à-vis each other, so that *he* comes to stand as the (moderate) optimist by counter-distinction. And she, the willing nihilist.

The rebellion triggers a second meeting, only this time, it is the rebels who gather: the "Artist," the "Punk Rocker," the "Rich Do-Nothing," and "A Noveau-Riche Woman" (who ostensibly joins the rebels because they are "so fashionable") (137-138). The artist wishes to write a play, with large scale production values, budgeted at "at least 200,000 dollars." The punk rocker does not understand the rebellion underway, nor does he wish to: "This world is doomed. There's

nothing to believe in." The rich do-nothing protests the increased influence of the right-wing across the country and calls for the abolition of taxes and schools (his is the most structured critique). And collectively, they reject Janey, who has just escaped from prison with Genet: "You stink. Get out of here. We don't need shit-ass dogs like you. Go to the sewers." (138) Theirs is no different a reaction than that of the capitalists. Plainly, Janey's absolute location has rendered the relative location of her counterparts irrelevant: the capitalists and the rebels perceive her much the same way. Both to those who rule and to those who rebel, she signifies abjection.

Still, Janey pleads the rebels for important, impossible answers:

> Janey: Please tell me if the world is horrible and if my life is horrible and if there's no use trying to change, of if there is anything else. Is desire OK? (138)

She formulates this query not once, but twice, and with the exact same phrasing. There is no reply whatsoever: Genet asks for the whereabouts of a fellow field worker, and the rebels remain silent. Finally, "The rebels kick Janey out of the city" (138), and the scene closes around her final question: "Is desire OK?" The fact Janey articulates this query is as important as the fact that it remains unaddressed, and open-ended. Neither the rebels (her notional peers) are willing to comfort or inform Janey, nor is her accomplice and travel companion. This inconclusive moment says something important about the libidinal politics of *Blood and Guts*, and of Janey's narrative especially. She confronts the horrors of the (social) world, and of her own life by consequence. But she also confronts the inevitability of such horrors, and the inescapability of such conditions of (im)possibility. The question of desire, here a question *about* desire, is decisive, because it consists in a gesture towards "anything else," and a tenuous movement towards possibility. It cannot be resolved because it is an impossible question. Yet in a sense, through the material gesture of expulsion, it is.

Expelled from the city, Janey and Genet wander around the desert outside Alexandria. The desert's emptiness, and its implacable climate, make it a specular non-place. The two find nothing but diffuse refractions of themselves: "mirages or mirrors (…) images of the world which come out of themselves." (138) Unable to keep moving, Janey asks Genet where "they" are going. He pointedly corrects her, by repeating back the question: "Where am *I* going?" (my emphasis). Genet holds no especial interest in remaining with Janey, who he rejects completely, and who has now been rejected by society at large. In fact, he announces his departure:

> I'm going, me, alone; how can I be with you? The closer you get to me, the more I hate you. I'm going, OK? Far far away, the land of the monster. Even if it's where there'll never be sun, since you're tagging along, you're my shadow. (138)

At this point, Janey and Genet approach an outer limit of sorts. Walking around the desert, they move through and within social death, well beyond the regulatory tenets of organized society. At that outer limit, bare necessity becomes meaningless: "Poverty and the goal," Genet declares, "are just the beginning" (139). Soon, they will cease sleeping and be forced to eat "thistles" (139). The desert provides nothing, presents nothing, and finally reduces the world to nothing. Janey observes:

> There's really nobody. Nothing. Not a living thing. The stones are only stones. America and Europe're [sic] no longer anything. Things are winding down to the sea, to the sea, we to the sand. (139)

Janey's perspective no longer holds onto the distinction between a regional phenomenon (i.e., their immersive perceptions of the desert) and a global phenomenon (i.e., the actual truth of the world as is). Because they are radically isolate in this moment, and because hers is an intimate truth, that distinction cannot matter. "America" and "Europe," which metonymically substitute for hers and Genet's respective national belongings (i.e. the U.S. and France), while immediately signifying the geopolitical "first world," are gone. Those unabated bonds to recognizable cartographies of national identity collapse; only the sea and the sand remain. This immediate experience of a world come undone supersedes that "anything else" (138) Janey yearned for, as she pleaded with the rebels. Instead, she commits to Genet's decision to move towards "the land of the monster" with willful abandon. In fact, hers is such a fierce commitment, it nearly overwrites Genet's own:

> I want you to lead me without hesitation into the land of the shadow and the monster. I want you to plunge into endless misery and hardship. I want – because it's my ugliness, my lack of femininity, my wounded body, earned minute by minute that is all that is left to speak – I want you to be without hope. I want you to choose evil. I want you to feel hatred and violence. I want you to refuse the delicacy of thistles, the softness of rocks, the beauty of the darkness, the emptiness. (139)

Janey suggests the terms by which Genet would (ideally) perceive and inhabit his own condition. The cacophony of disidentificatory relay between the two has transformed Janey into a poet of oblivion. It is now *she* who dares Genet to go further still, and to the extreme. "To make the decision" (131). Janey's radical negativity could, at this point, signify a reversal of the relational economy which they inhabit. But Genet's stance remains unaffected by their relation.

Rather, it is Janey who has absorbed the negativity both she and the narrative attribute to Genet, and then radicalized it, on her own terms. Perhaps inevitably, these terms are bound to the fact (and the problem) of her desire: what she articulates are her wants. And she can only articulate these, and thus articulate desire as such, by accepting and inhabiting those negative traits by which she herself has become the object of negation: her "ugliness, her "lack of femininity," her "wounded body." They are exactly that which enables her to speak.

Ultimately, the endpoint of their shared trajectory (both actual and narrative) takes shape through neither character's words, but through impersonal narration. True to form, and genre convention, Acker's "terrible plagiarism" of *Les Paravents* concludes with an "End" section, which describes the narrative aftermath. We learn the rebels have "taken over" Alexandria (140), and their struggle is successful. Whereas Janey and Genet travel across Egypt, to Luxor, where "Genet hands Janey some money and tells her to take care of herself." He leaves Luxor, "to see a production of his plays." And Janey? We are told, quite simply, "she dies." (140)

The relationship between Janey and Genet professes – or properly *produces* – a speculative and affective identificatory relay between Acker and her own character, which has on one occasion been described as "the tandem identity Kathy-Janey" (Campbell, 175). If this articulation powerfully synthesizes the entanglement of author and character, it nonetheless resolves the estrangements of that entanglement under the rubric of identity: *the* (tandem) *identity*, as opposed to the disjunctive multiplication thereof. Acker's protagonists are often construed at an interface of autobiographical implication, citational repetition, and conscious opposition to the very notion of characterization. At one point, Acker intra-textually confronts the hypothesis of her character being conflated with herself, dramatizing the unsteadiness of the novel's narrative "I" in a sharp display of authorial performativity. During Janey's narrative (and immediately after the Erica Jong parody), we read:

> 'I is now she. She, Janey. Shit, Janey, shit. I'm glad someone's explaining President Carter to me. Why do I write this down? I read it. I might as well admit to everything I do. 'Me'? 'Everything'? (…) Janey can't deal with any situation which isn't a mirror of her desire. Janey isn't me. Which of the two do I think is real? (126).

This momentary incursion suggests a wider state of writerly immersion, which renders the objective obviation of the divides between truth and fiction precarious. Potentially untenable, even. No strong claim regarding the autobiographical specificity or veracity of Janey's narrative accrues,

and this is to be expected: the text is too skeptical towards conventional models of psychological and narrative realism to allow for unequivocal autobiography. When subjectivity *is* rendered, it renders as critical disjunction: opaque, contradictory, ultimately unintelligible. And this extends to authorial subjectivity.

Because *Blood and Guts* was composed across a prolonged period, and through the processual collision and confusion of multiple materials, principles of narrative causality do not quite hold. The text refutes that degree of relative consistency, congruence and coherence that would make it function according to narrative rationality. Collage, interruption, and improvisation impede it. While Acker *does* consciously disperse moments of self-fiction throughout the composition, they are rendered as discontinuous, or properly disjunctive.[80] Radical indetermination breaks narrative precepts wide open, while rejecting their eventual (representational) resolution. In this context, the appositive approximation between Acker and Janey cannot be resolved in the terms of convergence or correspondence: theirs is a discrepant textual relation, because all relations within the text are discrepant. This is *Blood and Guts*' characteristic representational economy.

How does this affect the work's critical re-writing of Genet? Historically, Genet belongs to a certain tradition of aesthetically and politically transgressive French fiction, which profoundly informed English-language modernism. Such works were the object of concerted attention in latter twentieth century avant-garde scenes across the Atlantic, including those Acker's work (and Acker herself) circulated within from the 1970s onwards. When Genet is recodified as an archival phantasm and reengaged as a speaking subject, Acker textually stages her own literary matrix – as a writer, yes, but no less importantly as a reader – within the scene of writing.[81] By doing so, she produces the conditions of possibility for a confrontation and reconciliation with the various narratives surrounding the author. Genet is transformed into a selective fictional construct, through which literary authority and citationality can be renegotiated, in a performatively bodied manner. This intertextual encounter is furthermore imbricated in a contemporary moment which bore witness to distinctive logics and languages, and through which Genet himself is interpellated and modified.

[80] This would include the partial portrayal of the end of Acker's intimate relation with Peter Gordon, as re-presented through the Janey/Father sections, according to Kraus' critical biography.
[81] Not just of Genet, for that matter, but also of the literature which surrounds him – including Sartre's *Saint Genet*.

This critical interpolation produces various effects. More immediately, this is one of the many actions of textual collage Acker performs across the novel. The historical figure of Genet is repurposed as so much textual matter, within the complex and multi-layered cultural archive she probes into and intervenes upon. Just as history is rendered as text, Genet is rendered as fiction. In a sense, Genet is deployed as just one of the numerous elements which Acker threads into complex historical/textual constellations, through the programmatic inter-articulation of highly dissimilar or disparate materials. But it also provokes standardized narratives about Genet's agency and subjectivity, which extend beyond his creative praxis, through his politics, and into his personal life. Effectively, it stands a critique of authorship, and of collective memory pertaining to specific authors – those in that "other tradition" we have discussed before. Finally, this rewriting sets off the question of male homosexuality as perceived and presented in Acker's writing, thus raising the difficult question of its queerness. How textual imagination and sexual identification interplay in disruptive and creative ways is our key concern as we broach the concept of "queer."

3.4. Critically queer: defining sexual dissidence

Two U.S.-based theorists are often recognized as the founders of what eventually came to bear the name of "queer theory," as an interdisciplinary project of critical inquiry. One is Judith Butler, whose *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) became a critical mainstay, popular well beyond the specific remits of the field. The other is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a feminist literary scholar whose work is inescapable within queer theory and queer studies, yet seldom receives due acknowledgment in other contexts. Sedgwick's seminal studies *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) and *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) ground much of contemporary queer theory. Unlike Butler, Sedgwick was especially keen on the very concept of "queer," and the definitional troubles proper to it. Often, she meditated on its linguistic and performative agency. In *Tendencies* (1993), she wrote:

> That's one of the things that "queer" can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically. The experimental linguistic, epistemological, representational, political adventures attaching to the very many of us who may at times be moved to describe ourselves as (among many other possibilities) pushy femmes, radical faeries, fantasists, drags, clones, leatherfolk, ladies in tuxedoes, feminist women or feminist men, masturbators, bulldaggers,

> divas, Snap! Queens, butch bottoms, storytellers, transsexuals, aunties, wannabes, lesbian-identified men or lesbians who sleep with men, or…people able to relish, learn from, or identify with such. (Sedgwick, 1993, 7-8)

This conditional definition of queer, sensitive to the word's indeterminate or indeterminable potentialities, is the one adopted here. In a first instance, it signifies negatively, via counter-distinction: it names something which *is not*, rather than something *which is*. Secondly, it gestures towards a wide spectrum of subjective positions, which it does not presume to be finite. Finally, it includes into queer that which is apposite to it, by combining identity (i.e., *to identify as*) and identification (i.e., *to identify with*) within a wider relational ecology. My base contention is that *Blood and Guts* be treated as one of the various "experimental linguistic, epistemological, representational [and] political adventures" Sedgwick refers to. This way of imaging the text does not depart from a classificatory impulse, which would demand Acker's sexual identity to read unequivocally, so her body of work may be reassessed and re-narrativized accordingly. Instead, this is a finer point about her writing's proximities with, curiosities about, and desires for queer subjects, queer narratives, and queer histories. Including Jean Genet, his body of work, and his biography.

The queer agency – if not the queer intentionality – of Acker's work cannot be underestimated. In its ethical and aesthetic inventiveness, it has proved key to Acker's ongoing importance for gender disobedient and sexually dissenting communities, as I hope to have demonstrated in Chapter 1. But the concept of "queer" flares up a set of ethico-political problems of its own, which must be pondered in the process of meaningfully and responsively repurposing it for this context. For one, we must evince the historical and political narrative of male subjectivity interpolated into *Blood and Guts*, a text supple in expressive contortions and mimetic distortions of normative femininity, as codified by dominant mores. In the process, the dynamic imbrication of sexual and gender politics becomes pivotal. Historically speaking, queer folk have been subject to multiple forms of oppression, repression, and suppression, which materialize as social, political, cultural, and legal processes of biopolitical governance. To this day, queer theory remains a field concerned with both the effervescent possibilities and the conditional impossibilities of queer life, queer love, and queer labor in a heteronormative, heterosexist world which enforces compulsory heterosexuality at the level of all social relations. A queer reading of Acker is one keen on these phenomena and the questions entangled therein, as they come to articulation.

Profound changes in LGBTQI+[82] rights across the 20th and 21st century have added further layers of complexity to present (and no less pressing) discussions of homophobic oppression, reshaping the political and cultural history of homosexuality. Political transformations attained in terms of legal rights frameworks, motivated by reformist intent and bound to the rule of the law, have proved fundamental in transforming the conditions of living (and citizenship) of queer and trans subjects across various national contexts (including the U.S. and the U.K). However, this process of adaptive assimilation into the legal and cultural text of society at large – which includes marriage rights, and other forms of institutional access – has led to an unequal distribution of rights and privileges amidst trans and queer people. These structural inequalities, aggravated rather than alleviated by the regulatory force of the law, continue to be criticized by various trans and queer scholars, who point to the radical disparities and violent asymmetries this political project has reified. For one, the prospect of contemporary queer abolitionism is very much grounded on a critique of the enforced equivalations between the narrative of identity politics, the reclamation of legal assimilation/incorporation into extant social norms, and the ultimate reification of sovereign subjectivity as crucial for the state's governmental instrumentality.[83]

In *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack On Democracy* (2003), Lisa Duggan uses the term "heteronormativity" to describe how specific groups of sexually dissident and/or gender disobedient subjects have come to occupy positions of privilege due to their political (as well as identitarian) alignment with the structures of heteronormative hegemony, in contemporary neoliberal western societies. The term has a long history amidst queer communities, wherein it often refers to assimilationist attitudes or politics. The homologous term "homonormative" was, in turn, already in circulation in the U.S. in the early 1990s, as noted by transgender scholar Susan Stryker in *Transgender History* (2008).

[82] There are various acronyms presently in use to refer to gender disobedient and sexually dissenting communities as a whole, and to evince their commonality as political subjects within cisnormative and heteronormative society, with a shared history of oppression and resilience. Instead of the more commonly accepted "LGBT," which stands for "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender" (or in some contexts, "Transexual"), I favor the adapted acronym "LGBTQI+," which includes by addition reference to queer and intersex folk, while suggesting other unlisted vectors of identification.

[83] Important contributors to these ongoing debates, which are characterized by their own forms of internal dissensus and ongoing critical reappraisal, include Dean Spade, Paul B. Preciado, Lisa Duggan and Heather Love. For a text which keys into the intersections between queer theory and Marxism, see: Crosby, Christina, Lisa Duggan, Roderick Ferguson, Kevin Floyd, Miranda Joseph, Heather Love, Robert McRuer, Fred Moten, Tavia Nyong'o, Lisa Rofel, Jordana Rosenberg, Gayle Salamon, Dean Spade, Amy Villarejo (2012).

Contextually, it was used by transgender subjects to critique the privileging of gay and lesbian lives (and narratives) within the political movement of the time:

> When San Francisco gays and lesbians who were active in queer politics in the first half of the 1990s were antagonistic to transgender concerns, we accused them of being antiheteronormative in a homonormative fashion. The term was an intuitive, almost self-evident, back-formation from the ubiquitous heteronormative, suitable for use where homosexual community norms marginalized other kinds of sex/gender/sexuality difference. (Stryker, 147)

A normalized – and coercively demanded – version of sovereign subjectivity and sexual citizenship has emerged, naturalized as the protagonist of the historical project of LGBTQI+ emancipation. This ideal subject is white, middle- or upper-class, cisgender, able-bodied, monogamous, liberal, gay, and male. As Duggan argues, narratives of this normalized subject's integration into hegemonic models of relationality and domesticity (within neoliberal political frameworks) have become culturally dominant in relation to the experiences of subjects who inhabit other social positions: the economically deprived, trans folk, queer POC, people with disabilities, the unemployed, trans and/or queer women, non-binary people… To name but a few.

It is politically crucial, then, to understand the historical contingency of "queer," a concept rerouted and repurposed in early 1990s North American academia and activism. To do so is to acknowledge that its disruptive capacity is historically variable, time-sensitive, and context-specific. Even relational, in an important sense. The decision to describe the fiction of male homosexuality present in Acker's late-1970s work as queer must be historically responsible, and avoid the naturalization of queer as a de-realized signifier of political contestation, as if inherently or intrinsically unaffected by historical change. As Acker presented the finished manuscript for *Blood and Guts,* the AIDS crisis had reached major necropolitical effect across the nation, yet it remained the object of systemic governmental indifference. The passive stance the Reagan administration adopted when confronted with the epidemic (which by 1984 was reaching pandemic status) had an incalculably galvanizing effect on the discursive turn towards queer politics in the long 1980s, as a radicalized response against heterosexist and homophobic political violence became inescapable.

Recontextualizing *Blood and Guts* in relation to ongoing forms of queer discursivity (both theoretical and political), or even *reclaiming* the work as queer, is to insist on its peculiar timing as a text composed in the 1970s, published in the societal context of the AIDS crisis and adjacent

narratives about sexuality, yet in circulation before queer politics erupted as such (and under that name). This is not a rejection of its temporality, but instead an effort to redescribe the peculiarities of its temporal and representational materiality, as a durational project. Doing so proves particularly fruitful where the intersection (and imbrication) of Acker's sexual and gender politics is concerned.

In a first moment, this critical process (what we might dub the text's *queering*), places a set of functional exclusions into stark relief. The authors Acker most esteems in that "other tradition" (i.e. Sade, Genet, Burroughs…), and who she sustains the most intertextual dialogue with, are nearly invariably white, western, cisgender and male. These factors necessarily impact how Acker perceives homosexuality, and sexuality more generally. This does not exclude queer as a potent heuristic in discussions of Acker's work. But it does render its own disputable delimitations as a concept, co-adjacent with those of the objects (textual and not) which it describes.

Acker prioritizes a specific version of politicized male homosexuality, as she plays about with the definitional remits of Genet as fiction, invoking his relative location against standing social mores and his reputation as a dissenting subject. Reading Acker's reading of Genet, we must remain keenly aware of the mythos surrounding the latter author in contemporary imagination. His body of work persists as one of the most cogent articulations of male homosexual desire as a force of transgression against social orthodoxy within western literature. To read queerly, then, is to read both *alongside* and *within* the cultural history by which Genet has, across different times and territories, become entangled in the contemporary queer archive. It is, on the one hand, to stake a claim about (queer) representation. It is, on the other, to produce a critique of how that representational project comes to take shape, especially when the very concept of representation (let alone representativity) may be at stake.

Jean Genet (1910 – 1986) was born into a working-class background. His mother, a maid, placed him for adoption in his infancy. By the age of 15, after a series of minor crimes, he was detained in the Mettray Penal Colony, where he was incarcerated for three years. This was the beginning of a recurrent experience of incarceration throughout his adult life, which profoundly shaped his literary imaginary. The criminalization of homosexuality seems to have had its own recidivist effect in Genet's life and affairs. After a brief period in the Foreign Legion, which ended

with his discharge on the grounds of accusations of homosexual behavior, Genet lived as a thief and sex worker. He travelled across Europe, spending most of his early adulthood in and out of prison due to various criminal offenses, ranging from acts of sexual misconduct to the use of forged documents. By 1943, after meeting playwright and illustrator Jean Cocteau, Genet published *Notre Dame des Fleurs*, garnering a surprising amount of attention among the French artistic and literary community. When nearly sentenced to a life sentence in 1949, for numerous perceived transgressions, Genet was exonerated after Jean Cocteau and various public figures (including Spanish painter Pablo Picasso) directly appealed to the French President. At this point, the conditions for his full commitment to the practice of regular, active literary creation were set. He gradually came to further prominence as a novelist, poet, playwright, essayist. And, later in life, as an activist.

If I take some time to retrace the general terms of Genet's biography at this point, it is because his life trajectory was profoundly implicated in his literary trajectory, and vice-versa. His pronounced notoriety as a public figure was consolidated when Sartre authored the *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr*, a highly celebratory biographical/textual analysis of the author. Willful forms of contact and confusion between fact and fiction, both in Genet's writing and among Genet's readers, justify their own form of textual attention. Genet's literary corpus emerged through the inter-weaving of lived experience and textual practice; most of his more notorious works were produced while he was incarcerated at various sites, and take up as their primary topoi the realms of criminality and sociocultural transgression. His textual personae range from the thief to the sex worker, from the homosexual to the murderer. Even when writing with some degree of autobiographic intent – as is the case with *Journal du Voleur* (1947) – Genet embroiders the factual and the fictional, twisting the narrative from the regime of the biographic to the horizon of the mythographic. The fictions of anti-sociality, homosociality, homosexuality, violence, eroticism and criminal transgression engendered in his writing are grounded in an irrevocable position of implication vis-à-vis these phenomena, as components of his lived experience. This implicated position, in turn, is key to the processual labor of myth-making his texts carry out.

These contextual considerations enable a distinctive approach to *Blood and Guts in High School,* and to the figuration of the Janey-Genet relation more specifically. First, we must acknowledge the specific kind of tense, fricative dynamic of (dis)identification set up between a dissident female heterosexual subject and a dissident male homosexual subject, as articulated

through the figures of Janey and Genet, respectively. What is at stake is not a clean-cut formal or structural equivalence between the two characters and, subsequently, between the two positions. The hierarchical nature of their lopsided, non-reciprocal libidinal investments in each other is rendered evident in implacable detail, and it obliquely attests to actual political disparities, in speculative fashion. Yet we should avoid lapsing, in a resolutive or reactive capacity, to schematizing a neat interpretative disposition which would focalize and intensify the binary cleavage between their disparate positionalities: female/male; heterosexual/homosexual; amateur/*auteur*, child/adult, North American/European. Or, for that matter, living/dead.

3.5. Identification/disidentification.

Here, our conceptual pivot is queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz's critical re-definition of the concept of "disidentification" in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999).[84] Muñoz presents his project as an attempt "to chart the ways in which identity is enacted by minority subjects who must work with/resist the conditions of impossibility that 'dominant culture' generates." (6) His project is propelled by a central interest in the bodies of work produced by so-called "minoritarian subjects," working within the wide-ranging field of performance practices. His attention to the concept of "disidentification" stems from a specific concern with the interfaces between queerness and race/ethnicity, as embodied and inhabited by performers who are queer, non-white, or both. Yet the critical vocabulary Muñoz works out in the process holds no less evocative power over other cultural objects and representational projects. In fact, his finding have already proved useful in the study of Acker's work: Tyler Bradway's discussion of Acker's politics of "bad reading," cited in Chapter 1, departs from Muñoz's discussion of (dis)identificatory processes and the formation of dissenting counter-publics.

Muñoz broaches the concept of disidentification by rendering it in its defining contradictions, and as the product of power relations. Rather than emphasizing processes of

[84] In this, Muñoz's work participates in a wider and important discussion of identity politics, kindled in the 1980s. The axis of that discussion is the contested definition of identity in terms of essentialism and anti-essentialism: a cleavage in understandings of the constitution of the subject (collective as well as individual), as predetermined and ontologically congruous on the one hand, or as socially constructed and thus contextually ductile on the other. For an introduction to this debate, as specifically applied to the field of gender and sexuality studies, see: Fuss, Diana (ed.) *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. Routledge: 1991.

identification in terms of congruence and closure, as finite or successful projects of subjectivation, Muñoz is interested in what supplements or surprises such processes. In doing so, he underlines the plural affects and effects which identification speaks to, and which cannot be reduced to a mimetic co-relation between disparate terms, or different subjects. His intervention enters direct dialogue with classical definitions of identification, and more specifically, those of orthodox Freudian analysis. He cites Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis' accepted definition of identification:

> [A] psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or. attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides. It is by means of a series of identifications that the personality is constituted and specified. (205)

In this definition, identification is the process by which a subject assimilates that which is proper to the other, and by which they are themselves transformed. Subject-formation occurs through a complex experiential continuum of identificatory moments or movements, which the render the self as such. Gradually, one comes to individuation through counter-distinction. But Muñoz points to the elliptical interstices of this definition, and the unaddressed possibilities patent therein. His theory does not substitute for Freud's, but it does seek to describe what his does not. Confronting this textbook definition, Muñoz ponders: "Can a self or a personality be crafted without proper identifications?" He goes on: "A disidentifying subject is unable to fully identify or to form what Sigmund Freud called that 'just-as-if' relationship." But Muñoz does not attribute disidentification to a dysfunctional psychic structure or interpersonal context. Instead, in his account "what stops identification from happening is always the ideological restrictions implicit in an identificatory site." (7)

By doing so, not only does Muñoz refer (dis)identificatory projects to the realm of the political, but also to representational politics. He thus confronts these conceptual models with the fact of power, and the political organization of psychic life.[85] What, then, defines disidentification, at that point where identification is impeded by dominant political relations? Muñoz writes:

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[85] Muñoz locates his inquiries into (dis)identification in relation to various critical and political contexts. In a first instance, he refers to critical race studies (as exemplified by Crenshaw) and to queer theory (especially Eve Kosofsky Sedgwicks's discussions of identification). Furthermore, he acknowledges that "French linguist Michel Pêcheux extrapolated a theory of disidentification from Marxist theorist Louis Althusser's influential theory of subject formation and interpellation." (14) His critical narrative thus both submits the concept of identification to intersectional scrutiny, opening up its capacity to describe distinctive experiential realms, and emphasizes its interdisciplinary interlacing, across distinctive (even discontinuous) schools of thought. In the latter context,

> To disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to 'connect' with the disidentifying subject. It is not to pick and choose what one takes out of an identification. It is not to willfully evacuate the politically dubious or shameful components with an identificatory locus. Rather, it is the reworking of those energies that do not elide the 'harmful' or contradictory components of any identity. It is an acceptance of the necessary interjection that has occurred in such situations. (12)

Noticeably, Muñoz insists on describing disidentification as a state or an action: that of *disidentifying*. The "disidentifying subject" is not one in pathological crisis or existential disjunction, but one caught up in the everyday labor of navigating normalized structures of meaning. "Disidentification" does not describe a fixed subject-position, but rather, any given subject's active confrontation and conciliation with hegemony, through dynamic processes of meaning-making (including partial identification and counter-identification). It follows that Muñoz often refers to disidentification as processual, especially by favoring its verbal form (as above) or its adjectival form ("disidentificatory").

The disidentificatory performances Muñoz discusses are endowed with an important degree of social and political agency. Rather than merely reactive, as counter-formations against dominant ideology, they are in fact creative practices which "strive to envision and activate new social relations." These relations, in turn, work as "the blueprint for minoritarian counterpublic spheres." (5) By confronting extant conditions of impossibility, disidentificatory practices produce novel conditions of possibility for minoritarian subjects, extending to unforeseen patterns of reception and forms of belonging. They are collective processes of reconstructive interpretation and resignification, effected collectively, because they report to shared structures of meaning, and by extension to collective struggles for meaning. Therein lies their generative agency and affirmative potentiality.

Muñoz is primarily concerned with subject-formations which come to articulation "in response to the cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy and misogyny," which he suggests "work to undergird state power" (5). Because his study departs from the recognition that these cultural logics interact in the constitution of subjectivity, he shifts his attention away from

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disidentification is defined as "the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposite it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology." (11)

so-called “monocausal paradigms” of oppression. Monocausal paradigms are those by which a single system of oppression is defined as the one through which all others take shape, as co-adjuvant phenomena. In fact, Muñoz underlines queer theory’s own propensity to normalize and universalize the lives and narratives of white subjects, while deemphasizing those of POC. In this case, a monocausal hermeneutic causes sexuality to substitute for other categories of analysis – including race. In support of this argument, Muñoz cites critical legal scholar Kimberlé William Crenshaw’s influential theory of intersectionality:

> Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality is meant to account for convergences of black and feminist critical issues within a paradigm that factors in both of these components and replaces what she has referred to as monocausal paradigms that can only consider blackness at the expense of feminism or vice versa. These monocausal protocols are established through the reproduction of normative accounts of woman that always imply a white feminist subject and equally normativizing accounts of blackness that assume maleness. (8)

This point about historical conflicts between black critical thinking and feminist critical thinking stands for other political partitures, and similar forms of substitutive reasoning. Queer theory and feminism, for one, have often entered conversation through and around such impasses, whereby one theory (and its respective political vocabulary) would notionally supersede the other. In contrast, a queer-feminist approach entails recalibrating our perception of such dissimilarities and disparities, through an intersectional emphasis on the points of connection, conversation, and cross-contagion between queer theory and feminism. This is, ultimately, the critical stance adopted throughout this chapter.

Because they attend to multiplicity, contingency, and complexity, intersectional frameworks support extant narratives surrounding identification, while refuting their eventual reduction to unitarian or absolutist solutions. Intersectional critique pays due mind to the interactions between the distinctive constituent elements of one’s identity and social situation, just as it resists the urge to centralize those which would explicate for (and thus overwrite) all others. Ultimately, its reasoning is combinatory, rather than exclusionary. Muñoz imparts his definition of disidentification with these same combinatory capacities and potentialities:

> Throughout this book, I refer to disidentification as a hermeneutic, a process of production, and a mode of performance. Disidentification can be understood as a way of shuffling back and forth between reception and production. For the critic, disidentification is the hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy. (26)

Thus defined, disidentification encompasses a range of positions and practices which might otherwise be conceived as antonymic, or incommensurate. For one, if the object of identification is an individual text, then this framework allows for an important set of questions to be opened regarding both the practice of reading *and* the practice of writing. Even, to re-dimension how the two practices interact, the one becoming entrenched within the other. This is an especially provocative point where Acker's work is concern, given how Acker's readerly and writerly impulses intertwine in her writing. Furthermore, disidentification does not default to dualistic foreclosure. In fact, it "resists an unproductive turn toward good dog/bad dog criticism and instead leads to an identification that is both mediated and immediate, a disidentification which enables politics." (9) As a concept which disavows dualistic certainty, disidentification provides a more comprehensive understanding of the relations between Acker's readerly sensibility (i.e., those disidentificatory processes which animate her work) and her writerly agency (i.e., the disidentificatory processes her work may in turn come to elicit).

Disidentification provokes a recognition of the contrasts between a cultural object's regulated intentionality and a given reader/receiver's contextual margin of interpretive agency, including those degrees of disobedience and non-compliance which foment subjective survival. In this sense, disidentificatory desires are transformative acts, which alter the conditions for interpreting a given text – if not its materiality. Even then, Acker's work demonstrates how disidentificatory desires can and indeed do intervene upon the materiality of texts, substantially altering their structure, their content, and their implicit intent. This is the point at which critical reading and creative rewriting intertwine as acts of the political imagination. And this is the method by which Genet-the-fiction comes to signify within both Janey's textual narrative and Acker's authorial narrative. The precise point here is to characterize two relations, and how they interface in the novel's making: one, the disidentificatory rapport between Acker and Genet; the other, the disidentificatory rapport between Janey and Genet. Finally, this recognition is both textually and contextually motivated: it approximates the failed processes of characterization articulated in *Blood and Guts*, as well as the subtending processes of interpellation and interpretation which surround its making.

An alternate account of heterosexual – or in the case, heterosocial – relations help us gauge how Janey and Genet's relationship in this novel is characterized by a permanent tension between the reproduction of a heterosexual political relation (*in stricto sensu*) and a more unlikely play of

complex (dis)identifications. Although these (dis)identificatory processes impart their relationship with a further degree of inter-subjective nuance, they neither neutralize nor negate the violence of the sexopolitical hierarchy inscribed therein. If anything, (dis)identificatory play might well reenforce the perceived *and* actual violence of that hierarchy. Janey and Genet's relation is characterized by a dynamic of repulsion, rejection, and violence, whereby Janey is inscribed as an undesirable (yet ever-desiring) subject. In contrast, Genet is privileged with the socially endowed patriarchal power of availing himself of Janey for his respective purposes, submitting her to various kinds of material, psychological and verbal abuse. In this sense, the heterosocial relation between Janey and Genet certainly appears to be follow the model of nearly all forms of heterosexual relation in the novel (including the ones Janey has with Father, with the Scorpions' Tommy, and with the Persian Slave Trader). This model is structurally characterized by systematic abuse, predicated on the exploitation and de-humanization of the female (of the female *child* more specifically), who struggles to assert her subjectivity both within *and* against these scenes of subjugation.

But agency matters here: both Acker's authorial agency, and the text's own agency in discord with dualistic thought and meaning. The question of *why* Janey pursues this relation cannot be reduced to a self-destructive drive, as classical psychoanalysis would describe it. Such an interpretation would flatten out much more conflicting patterns of representational and relational creativity, and therefore erase the textual cogency of a more idiosyncratic libidinal ethos. At the level of those operations of power which constitute bodies to be *within* or *outside* the parameters of legitimacy and legibility, there is strong reason to speak of a shared bind between Janey and Genet, which does not translate into sameness (or identity). Their being-in-common takes shape through self-contradicting processes of projection, attraction, abjection and (mis) recognition. Theirs are two pariah bodies connecting at odd, disjunctive historical pathways. This relational model suggests no objective redemptory effect (narrative, effective, or otherwise), nor does it report back to a self-evident order of moral over-determination.

What is at stake, then, is not the composition of a line of thinking akin to that of consolidated identity politics. The text does not operate in these terms, nor does the reading here produced. The critical intent is not to verify and further consolidate power structures, actualized through abuse and aggression, as a notional given. Nor is it to implement theoretical indetermination as the means for their romanticization, in an alleviatory or relativistic capacity.

Instead, the question is how to work through and within contradiction as the structural condition of inter-subjective relations, including gendered ones.

On this note, Janey is hyper-critical of what she perceives as Genet's fundamental misunderstanding of womanhood. When the two first reach Alexandria, we read:

> Janey to herself: Genet doesn't know how to be a woman. He thinks all he has to do to be a woman is slobber. He has to do more. He has to get down on his knees and crawl mentally every minute of the day. If he wants a lover, if he doesn't want to be alone every single goddamn minute of the day and horny so bad he feels the tip of his clit struck in a porcupine's quill, he has to perfectly read his lover's mind, silently, unobtrusively, like a corpse, and figure out at every changing second what his lover wants. He can't be a slave. Women aren't just slaves. They are whatever their men want them to be. They are made, created by men. They are nothing without men. (BGHS, 130)

This narrative reinforces the text's stricter set-up of a contrast between the seeming powerlessness of female subjects (understood primarily vis-à-vis their sexual desires, and yearning to combat intimate loneliness) and the willful abuse of both personal and political power perpetuated by male subjects. "To be a woman," which here signifies a concrete sexual, social, and affective situation within heteronormativity and patriarchy, is not an experience accessible to (or assimilable by) Genet. In his instance, this form of radical debasement before (and in favor of) the dyadically distinct heterosexual other is out of the question. In the extreme, this debasement deprives female subjects of any given specificity as subjects, reducing them to adaptable forms with the exclusive purpose of satisfying the needs of men.

Earlier, Janey's kidnapping into and training within the sexual slave trade explicitly placed the political phenomenon of slavery into relief. Here, it figures in the description of normalized gender relations, and of social life as a totality. From this perspective, Genet seems inextricably bound to power within the master-slave dyad that runs through the entirety of heterosexual dynamics figured in the work: he is one master among many. But Janey's resilient agency, as a disidentifying subject, reshapes this situation. Her perception holds onto those traces of Genet's irrevocable queerness, which perturb the linear closure of this dyad around their respective coupling. She *relates* differently, and in the process, transforms how their positions are rendered meaningful. As noted, Genet's repulsion never quite translates into Janey's rejection of him. In fact, after his brutally vivid explanation of social hierarchies to her, she seems more invested than ever:

> Little by little Janey begins to understand how beautiful Genet is. She's so enamored with him she's creating him. Truth and falsehood, memory, perception and fantasy: all are toys in this swirling that is him-her. She's predicting her future. (131)

Genet's reiteration of Janey's subordination is not, for once, a source of radical sexual dissatisfaction, but rather the motivational drive behind an increasing admiration *of* and identification *with* Genet. Not only does Janey desire him, but she engenders him through that desire. She disposes of the divide between truth and falsehood, and takes "memory, perception and fantasy" as the raw material of the constitution of a "him-her." This "swirling" would be the in-between of Janey and Genet, or perhaps, their final conjunction in a disjunctive dyad. It does not come to expression as a "tandem identity," but as a generative disjunction. The last sentence imbues Janey's thoughts with a certain prophetic dimension: in this moment, she either discovers or determines the fate of her relationship with Genet, as a being-with that confounds the limits between the two. Momentarily, this "swirling" cuts across the multiplicity of differences which define them: female/male; heterosexual/queer; amateur/*auteur*; North American/European; adult/child; master/slave...

Precisely to the extent their differences are exacerbated in the form of Janey's subjugation, the bond between both is vivificated. And to the novel's very end, Genet shows little interest in interrupting it. On a first level, there is the approximation between the two characters (and, as I have posited so far, of the two authors) through their depiction as writers. Acker enfolds herself within the textual scene, through an unsteady avatar, just she as does Genet, in a more unequivocal manner. There, they may engage partial forms of dialogue, as textual personae. Their embodied, historical figures encounter in (and as) fiction. Again: this is not to feign an absolute correspondence between Acker and Janey. For that matter, if Janey is an avatar, it is one of Acker-the-writer (and not so much of Acker-the-individual). Their early exchange on writing and the problems of publication, and the formally awkward "interview" which ensues, render writing itself as a problematic. In doing so, Acker does not seem especially preoccupied with establishing specific theoretical postulates; the text goes into no great depth in this sense, aside from providing semi-plausible responses on Genet's part. Which, in this case, are not of Acker's making anyway. More so, these narrative events establish a common ground between the characters, while evincing the inter-subjective nature of writing itself. It is through writing (specifically: through the composition of the Persian Poems) that Janey inhabits her training in confinement, under Mr.

Linker's enforced supervision. And it is through writing that she confronts the realization she has cancer, and decides to travel to Tangier, with the specific aim of pursuing a male figure in mind. This man, of course, turns out to be Genet.

Late in the novel, and within Acker's rewriting of Genet's *Les Paravents*, Janey finds herself working in the countryside, in "a rich man's fields" (131) to the south of Alexandria. This is not a peaceful situation: one co-worker in particular (Sahih) addresses their boss (Mr. Knockwurst) regarding Janey's incapacity as a worker, given her gender:

> Sahih: All she does is weep, Mr Knockwurst. You should get rid of her. We might be animals, but at least we know how to keep our feelings locked in us. Women are worse than [verify] animals, Mr Knockwurst. They don't understand what's happening as we do.
>
> Janey: For 2,000 years, you've had the nerve to tell women who we are. We use your words; we eat your food. Every way we get money has to be a crime. We are plagiarists, liars, and criminals.
>
> Sahih: I know what's discontenting her, Mr Knockwurst. It's always the same thing with women. She's living with that rebellious homosexual and she's horny. (132)

In this confrontation, Janey is immediately stigmatized for her overt vulnerability: "All she does is weep." This stands as a recognizable, misogynistic condemnation of overt sentimentality (already gendered as a feminine trait). Now, the text does not work to correct such precepts. It never points to Janey's rationality as that which could (let alone *should*) attenuate for gendered expectations surrounding her desire and her behavior. Instead, her motivations are primarily emotive in intent, and expression. If anything coheres in her depiction, it is how her affective volatility and vulnerability stand at odds with normalized (i.e., patriarchal) forms of shared understanding. Shahi's accusation is one further iteration of the misogynistic utterances that appear throughout the text, as articulated by the various male characters who exert violence against Janey. What surprises our attention here, however, is Janey's chosen reply.

She claims that for two thousand years (i.e., since the birth of Christ), women have been subdued through explicit restrictions on the possibility of their being, with the correlate that all forms of sustenance for women (within patriarchy) are fundamentally unethical. They are either plagiarists, liars, or finally and crucially, criminals. The text bears witness to each of these positions: Acker's own programmatic, assertive relationship to textual plagiarism; Janey's and/or the text's porous grasp on the relation between truth and fiction; Janey's ensuing criminal action, when she steals from Genet. This is one of the few moments in the text in which an explicitly anti-

sexist utterance is proclaimed, from one character to another. And in this gesture, we recognize the various stigmatized positions ascribed to women as positions which the novel affirms as possible sites for female subjectivity, albeit with no great positivity or re-constructive optimism.

Janey's insight into this historical narrative further complicates the relational bind between her and Genet. Genet remains protected from the extremes of violence that Janey is subject to. History, the literary cannon, material institutions, political fictions… All work in favor of reasserting his position. Masculinist power and male privilege do not cease to exist, as if by fantasy. Still, even here, the provisional commonality of the two personae is remarked. Both are consigned as socially abject, and something other than full subjects (or citizens). He is a queer and a criminal. She is a woman, and *therefore* a criminal. The last line of Sahih's address couples them as a "rebellious homosexual" and a horny woman (the first fact accentuating the latter). At this point, one might recall Genet's reference to "neo-female slut scum," who nonetheless remained superior to Janey. While her fundamental fault lies in her libidinal excesses and her (heterosexual) femininity; Genet's, in his political excesses and his (male) homosexuality. This mode of co-habitation, tinged with contagion, ends only when Genet chooses to move forward with his career.

3.6. Conclusion

Acker's readerly investment in a range of queer authors precipitates specific forms of engagement and experimentation within her work. It is not just that they are represented or reanimated. The intertextual as well as meta-textual intricacies of Acker's approach to Genet, Pasolini or Rimbaud affect the textual production and performance of her female protagonists (on one level) and Acker's own self-production, or self-performance, as text (on another). As fictionalized avatars of concrete historical figures, they complicate literary perspective and epistemic position, just as they dynamically disrupt the political fiction of compulsory heterosexuality and contest the totality of its reach. As textual personae, they are key to the construction of plot and personhood in Acker's work, even as plot and personhood are incessantly caught up in their own dramatization, deconstruction, and derealization. More and less adherent to the letter of the real, their textual presence involves a variety of denotative, connotative, and performative processes, and these trigger important questions surrounding the politics of

representation. This is especially true where the fictions – both literary and political – of gender and sexuality are concerned.

Acker's most brutal and direct appropriation of the mythos surrounding Genet and his work is ultimately not articulated through Genet himself, whose materialistic concerns and self-preserving instincts cut through the romanticized vision of the transgressive author. It is articulated through the figure of Janey, who when confronted with Genet, approximates the possibility of being-with or even becoming-Genet. In this sense, theirs is a singular relation. But he has the conditions to turn his back on these conditions of social abjection, so as to attend to his professional and artistic interests, whereas Janey ultimately dies alone in the desert, in the absolute extreme of destitution, that non-place that so aptly expresses the outside belonging permeating much of her experience.

Genet's queerness is deployed as a form of relative estrangement from patriarchal social norms. He occupies a contradictory position, split between the radicality with which is sexual identity is imbued by other characters' perceptions (not to speak of his criminal transgressions), and his preoccupation with the integrity of his literary projects, which ultimately leads him out of the textual scene. Acker's treatment of Genet is a decidedly ambivalent one. *Blood and Guts* avails itself of (and would seem to value) those historical narratives by which Genet is singled out as an avatar of radical aesthetics and political dissent: the abjected, thus beatified, "Saint Genet" Sartre writes of. At the same time, it ironically overstates that figure's self-involved, professionally motivated, and misogynistic character, and thus overwrites an extant mythos of authorial heroism. Finally, and most importantly, it never suggests either of these concurrent characterizations substitutes for the other, and somehow proves truer. Edification and derision intermingle in the text's sensibility, which rejects defaulting to the absolutes of celebration *or* denunciation.

My own point is not to ultimately and moralistically decide on Genet's character. Nor, for that matter, on the text's ethical intentionality. Rather, I suggest a responsive political reading of the work must allow for a greater level of undecidability, as embodied by Janey herself, who finds the conditions for her subjectivation precisely in, alongside, and against those of her objectification. Janey and Genet's joint narrative is politically meaningful insofar as it is inextricably ridden with contradiction. "The homosexual," "the criminal," "the writer": Genet inhabits a variety of positions which signify in tandem, and against standing social mores. His

multifaceted figure catalyzes Janey's (and perhaps Acker's) desire, which is the desire to rearticulate and reinhabit female desire *itself* as one possible site of dissent. And certainly, as a way of inhabiting other sites of dissent, and adjacent forms of ethico-political trouble. Janey's foray into the writing of violent and sexually explicit poetry, as well as diaries, speaks to this same project: these anti-social genres provide the templates by which she enters into language, as a writer.

At the same time, he is but one of many male figures who either implicitly or explicitly (through verbal discourse, through certain emotional attitudes, through a concrete course of action….) subject Janey to the explicit cogency of patriarchal power. Janey and Genet's relation thus works both as a fable of desires and (dis)identifications, which disrupt the coercive protocols of patriarchy and heteronormativity (suggesting other conditions of possibility) *and* as a pessimistic portrait of the totalizing reach of the conditional hierarchies undergirding both heterosexual and heterosocial relations – regardless of one's individual sex/gender positionality. This cruel and joyous tangle of optimism and nihilism never comes to a resolution, nor will it allow the process of reading to do so. In that persistent decision not to release of an immersive relation, which troubles the reader as much as it is troubled already by the world, one experiences the work's queer agency.

How *Blood and Guts* was constructed is fundamental to its representational politics, and to its anti-representational twists and turns. The incessant interaction between different processes of detournement and displacement produces an idiosyncratic form of fricative resistance against interpretation, disrupting formal integrity and undoing narrative totality. The crux of the work's poetic generativity lies in the irregular, unpredictable spectrum of effects it makes possible, it their pluralistic divergences, discrepancies, and desynchronies. Both as a processual work and as a finite object, *Blood and Guts* stridently challenges codified expectations of what the novel is – or should be – in the latter half of the 20th century. In fact, the question of whether it should indeed be received and remembered as a novel *at all* opens a vital path of inquiry all its own. The strong degrees of indetermination engendered by these structural and formal options are crucial in the work's purported re-construction of Jean Genet, as a narrative subject.

Acker's writing on the authors which she most esteems, and who directly impacted her work in constitutive periods of time, suggest a strong connection to the work of Jean Genet, marked by

admiration, surprise and identification. To the extent *Blood and Guts in High School* produces Genet, it confronts this fascination and the contradictions it entails. In fact, it performs a necessary conversation with Genet's historical presence, which incorporates historical facts, lies, fabulations, biographical data, secondary perceptions, and his own fictions. The text probes into Genet's perceived persona, exerting a set of pressures on its mythographic definition, and adjacent charms.

One of the fiercest conceptual decisions embedded within *Blood and Guts in High School's* construction is the rejection to settle the account: to choose either narrative; to choose either pathway. Genet's queer desire and queer poetics conflict with the fortitude of compulsory heterosexuality, locating him outside of societal normalcy and hinting at other modes of interaction. Simultaneously, his masculinity, and by extension his entanglement within homosocial networks of power, meaning, and interest, circumscribe his idiosyncratic relationship with Janey.

In a sense, he must feature as a character, because what is at stake is his very personhood – political and intimate –, as imaged and imagined by Acker.

Chapter 4: **Transitioning: *Empire of the Senseless,* and dreamings surrounding.**

4. 1. Introduction: transitional.

We have seen how both *Literal Madness* and *Young Lust* came out, in the U.S. and the U.K. respectively, across 1988 and 1989. The two anthologies, identical in content but for the one text, put back into circulation texts of Acker's which were by then commercially unavailable. As context-sensitive projects, they provide a disjointed yet compelling retrospective, suggesting something of the author's discontinuous creative trajectory across the 1970s and 1980s. The only explicit precept organizing both publications is historical, as they both engage with the same chronological framework. *Literal Madness*, the U.S. publication, includes *Kathy Goes to Haiti* (1978), *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini* (1984) and *Florida* (1987). *Young Lust,* the U.K. publication, substitutes *My Death My Life…* for *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec* (1975).

This chronological precept, however, does not translate aesthetically or conceptually. Instead, these collections present as juxtapositions of distinctive projects, bound to a diversified range of conceptual premises, compositional techniques, political curiosities, and aesthetic decisions. As a result, their internal logic seems somewhat arbitrary – demonstrative, but not quite chronologically or historically narrative. But because of this relative lack of cohesion, they bear witness to the heterogeneity of Acker's project. Perhaps even more so when they render certain works in uncomfortable proximity, rather than invoking relations of contiguity or continuity between them.

Concurrently, *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) came out, and marked a turning point in Acker's work, as the 1980s came to an end. *Empire of the Senseless* is commonly accepted as that moment in Acker's career where her writerly attitude shifted away from a previous focus on the denunciative responsibilities of the work of literary fiction, with the political intent of rendering structures of oppression and exploitation textually explicit. Instead, it expresses a more speculative and reconstructive intentionality. In *The Politics of Kathy Acker: Revolution and the Avant-Garde* (2019), Emilia Borowska attributes this perspective to Acker herself:

> Acker believed that with Empire of the Senseless (1988), she left the deconstructive phase that had culminated in Don Quixote and became interested in more constructive impulses. She wrote: "Perhaps our society is now in a 'post-cynical' phase. Certainly, I thought as I started *Empire*, there's no more need to deconstruct, to take apart perceptual habits, to reveal the frauds on which our society's living. We now have to find somewhere to go, a belief, a myth. Something real." (Borowska, 160) [86]

Alexandra Kleeman's introduction to the novel's 30th anniversary edition expresses a similar understanding:

> *Empire* was written within what Acker calls a "post-cynical" period in American society, where faith in the sanctity of middle-class domesticity had been displaced by post-Watergate disillusionment. She felt little need to further explain why or how or in what way society was rotten and gravitated instead towards the utopian, in the older, archaic sense of the term: an elsewhere, a reality deferred. The elsewhere she crafts is equal parts *Neuromancer*, *Story of the Eye*, and *Huckleberry Finn*, a slurry of histories that points the way to a future, another way to be. (Acker, 2017, ix-x)

In large part, the denunciative capacity of the work of literature is rendered redundant by the transformation of the political sphere, along with public perceptions of it. Once proof of governmental and institutional corruption becomes available to the wider public, it is engrained into common-sense. The critical function (and efficacy) of political counter-fictions, committed to the exposition and explanation of extant power relations, is compromised: they begin to supplement normalized understandings of the political, rather than surprise or transform them. This shift in political sensibilities impacts Acker's own writerly standpoint. A full decade after *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, the inflated caricature of class status and national identity achieved through Betty can no longer injure public perception quite the same way. Quite simply, the normative political fictions which underpin that parodic performance of white, middle-class femininity have already begun to fall apart.

This adaptive shift in Acker's writerly standpoint is what Borowska (and most critical narratives) describes as Acker's turn away from deconstruction and towards reconstruction. Which is not to say the deployment of deconstructive compositional techniques was any less important in *Empire*'s making: as Kleeman notes, the novel is as intertextually imbricated and fiercely plagiaristic as any other work of Acker's.

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[86] The passage Borowska cites stems from Acker's own text, "A Few Notes on Two of My Books" (Acker, 1989, 11).

Something else sets *Empire* apart from much of Acker's previous work. Namely, its standing in relation to genre fiction, as the direct expression of the utopian impulses Kleeman identifies. By drawing from William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), a popular sci fi novel within the subgenre of cyberpunk, *Empire* positions itself as a work of speculative fiction, both intertextually and intra-textually speaking. On the one hand, it invokes the grammars of the genre, by repurposing an important text within the sci fi counter-tradition, suggesting a shared vocabulary and imaginary. But it also inhabits those grammars with critical creativity, producing its own imaginative and imagistic provocations in relation to genre convention.[87]

The base elements which spark the narrative momentum of *Empire* – the search for a necessary yet elusive piece of code; the confrontation with structures of control and surveillance; cybernetic aesthetics and the power of information; a gradual entanglement within underground criminal relations… – stem directly from Gibson's *Neuromancer*. But *Empire* tells an altogether stranger story, which persistently perturbs readerly sensibility and narrative expectations. For one, its narrative infrastructure is much more rigidly defined than that of *Blood and Guts in High School* (to name one example). By comparison, it is even somewhat linear in construction. But the question of what the text purports to do *with*, *around*, and *through* that narrative infrastructure upsets its relative stability, as it bends and twists to unexpected effects. Both out of necessity and curiosity, my reading of *Empire* often traces these strained narrative ligaments.

In the loosest sense, *Empire* tells the story of lovers-*cum*-terrorists Abhor and Thivai, whose paths cross in Paris, in a seemingly mythical time of dystopic destitution and desolation. Their relationship functions as a narrative through-line of sorts, and often provides the emotional framework for unrelated situations. The multiple narratives which unfold throughout *Empire* – ranging from their organized attack against the C.I.A. to Abhor's ultimate rejection of the options afforded her by male-dominated society –, exceed the concrete terms of their intimate relation. More so than remaining at the center, their relationship pivots a disconcerting array of de-centralized movements across micro-narratives, disjointed plot sequences, and extra-narrative textual imaginings. It is, in fact, embedded into the text's formal structure: each chapter title is

[87] Characterizing this idiosyncratic occupation of genre fiction and its conventions, Kleeman herself turns to the metaphor of criminality. She writes: "Acker uses the scaffolding of the science fiction novel in the same way a looter might use as rock to bash in the window of a supermarket – a convenient tool to access someplace interesting." (xi) The conceptual vocabulary emphasized by Ronell (see: Chapter 2) resounds across receptions of Acker's work, signaling standardized patterns of interpretation.

completed by the indication "(Abhor speaks:)" or "(Thivai speaks:)."[88] This storytelling device enables the text to move away from the minutiae of their relation, while preserving first-person narration as the pivotal force which binds disparate events and elements together. Effectively, this narrative mechanism enables a relative sense of consistency, even as the text experiments with or exceeds its own narrative limits.

Another decision at the level of structure is key to imparting the text with a strong sense of narrative consistency. Namely, how discrete textual moments and movements are arranged together, through a strong set of structural separations. To begin, *Empire* is tripart: the book is divided into three major sections, titled "Elegy for the World of the Fathers," "Alone," and "Pirate Night." This diagrammatic disposition imbues the narrative with an important sense of totality, even as it unfolds across multiple directions and dissonant registers. Each section corresponds to a definable conjecture, a cluster of storylines, and a narrative timeframe. Moreover, each coincides with a discrete tableau within an overarching conceptual storyline. The first consists in the recognition and confrontation with the paradigmatic order of things. The second attempts to figure what may remain after Oedipal (or any) authority has ceased to function, by delving into the realm of taboo and transgression. Finally, the third section speaks to what might begin to take shape anew, within those zones of radical experimentation and indetermination.

The three sections are divided into various chapters, such as "Let the Algerians Take Over Paris" (from the first), "The Beginning of Criminality/The Beginning of Morning" (from the second) or "Black Heat" (from the third). Chapters are in turn divided into various sections, with titles such as "Male," "Me Equals Dead Cunt" or "The Violence of Those Who Are Alone in Jail/The Violence of Roses." And finally, sections are divided into subsections, which present with their own titles, and are sometimes even numbered sequentially. Often, passages of the text seem to lie outside or to the side of these various divisors, through variations in stylization, the introduction of further modulators, or the lack of orienting marks. One example of the digressive

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[88] Only the very first chapter, "Rape by the Father," disobeys this convention. Although it recounts the intrafamilial trauma experienced by Abhor as a child, sexually assaulted by her father on more than one occasion, the chapter presents as Thivai's retelling of Abhor's account. Thus, its chapter title reads: "(Abhor speaks through Thivai)." This deferral of narrative voice suggests a constitutive divide between the two, which modulates their respective conditions of articulation: Abhor first comes to speech through Thivai's perception of her. This formal decision places into relief a wider set of conflicts which transverse their relation, including the binary oppositions between male/female; subject/object; reason/unreason, or intellect/affect.

excursions which push beyond the text's more obvious structural limits would be the various drawings it features, produced by Acker herself, and the ways they interact with the main body of text – or fail to do so. A stronger example still would be the "Raze" exception.

The second chapter, "Raise Us from the Dead (Thivai)," is followed by an empty, unnumbered page, inserted before the ensuing chapter (43). The page is headed by the word "Raze," which reads as a chapter title, given how it is styled in accordance with other chapter titles across the text. Yet it features no further textual content whatsoever, nor is it listed in the book's table of contents. And it does not lead into a distinctive – if unlisted – chapter or section. In fact, the following chapter – "In Honour of the Arabs" – begins right after, its title styled much the same way (44). As a result, the page reads as an intermission, an awkward interjection which suspends narrative structure. And with it, narrative meaning. It breaks the flow woven through successive narrative segments, and it interrupts their more or less linear organization. It reads both as a delayed fragment of the section it follows, and as a one-word poetic statement of its own, that simultaneously challenges readerly expectations of narrative consistency or completion.

Within *Empire*'s multi-tiered narrative architecture, the very latter of the units (sections/subsections) follow the most unexpected organizational patterns, while the earlier (sections/chapters) the most readily intelligible. Repeated incursions against what would appear to be the internal logic of this complicated architecture further strain its ulterior legibility, as exemplified by the "Raze" exception. Concurrently, the text's anterior division into three major sections fortifies a sense of formal totality and of narrative intentionality, which underpins the processes by which it becomes fragmentary, non-narrative, or even anti-narrative.

Consider the book's opening section, "Elegy for the World of the Fathers." It incorporates seemingly disparate and dissimilar phenomena, rendered contiguous under the same political paradigm. "Elegy" introduces the novel's two protagonists, Abhor and Thivai, and delves into their respective histories of familial trauma, and the constitutive family dynamics which render them as the subjects they are within narrative time. In a first instance, it works as an indictment of a world organized under the edict of paternal – and quite concretely: patriarchal – authority, and the interpersonal complexities within and against which the subject takes shape, through the normative model of Oedipality. It holds a denunciative capacity, detailing either character's experience of intrafamilial sexual violence, emotional abuse, and ultimate alienation. But it also describes Abhor

and Thivai's first encounters, their entanglement in a terrorist ploy to hack the C.I.A.'s information systems, and the gradual preparation of Algerian immigrants living in Paris to take over the city. The titular fathers are patriarchs, but also masters within other systems of subjection and dominion – including capitalism, and colonialism.

The political metaphor instilled by the section's title holds through, as a non-realist critique of contemporary society (and its systems of governance) takes shape, grounding the ensuing narrative in a critical disavowal of the historical present. The section culminates with the Algerians successfully taking over Paris, in an entropic political fable that Borowska has compellingly argued "fuses the events of May 1968 in France, the Algerian revolution and the Haitian revolution to create a new global revolutionary space in the present." (160) Acker's narrative turn, it turns out, depends as much on her capacity to construct as it does on her capacity to deconstruct, borrowing from the historical archive as she would have from the literary archive. And it quite deliberately rejects any definite answer on the question of narrativity.

With the Algerian revolution, another threshold emerges, as consequence of a project which is political rather than psychic in kind, and whose agents are not characterized by their position within familial structures (i.e., daughter/son) nor their sexed or gendered position within societal structures more widely (i.e., female/male). Instead, what interrupts the Oedipal cycle, or the Oedipal paradigm more precisely, is a collective act of revolt and repossession by a collective subject, specified vis-à-vis their national belonging and geopolitical location. The Algerians occupy Paris, and immigrants from former French colonies repossess and destroy the imperialist metropolis. The Oedipal text does not fray from within, through Abhor or Thivai's individual source of action. Instead, it is made to fail from outside, through a political event which upsets and uproots extant relations of power, sovereignty, and subjectivity. The Algerian revolution takes place in "Let the Algerians Take Over Paris," the final chapter of "Elegy," which we will discuss in detail.

The second section, "Alone," depicts the fallout from the collapse of the paradigms of sovereignty which previously governed Abhor and Thivai's shared and intimate realities. It begins to probe into the possibility of a world where taboo itself is impossible, because the institutional and interpersonal relations of power which inscribe it as such – defining the outer limit of social possibility – have collapsed completely. Ironically, this means that taboo saturates the entire

section, as written out by Acker and lived out by the protagonists of *Empire*, along with various incidental characters. This portrayal of a society that has moved beyond taboo entails the explicit, confrontational, and often violent representation of various acts of transgression, whether presumed or actual. Incest, homosexuality, pedophilia, rape… All seem to figure much in the same way, in the prohibited domain of what could not have been, and now is everywhere. Importantly, this is the tableau within which Abhor finds new conditions for articulating her desire, within a confounding landscape of sailors, pirates and prostitutes that reads as distinctly unworldly. And sometimes, even dreamlike. Because of the interrelation between transgression, taboo, and sexual desire that the section puts into relief, we will look at one of its chapters in detail: "The Beginning of Criminality/The Beginning of Morning."

The title of *Empire*'s third (and final) section, "Pirate Night," emphasizes the project's fascination with piracy, privateering, and sailing, as just some components of a speculative lexicon that combines the narrative's more futuristic leanings with a much less linear temporality, which envelops the overall narrative: that of myth. At this point, the textual terrain becomes odder: stranger, and more estranging. It does not follow through on narrative process, nor does it wind down towards a conclusion which settles and integrates the text's multiple previous sections. Instead, it opens up again and towards the end. If Acker sought to redress and linguistically reconstruct an origin story of kinds across the book's first section, followed by the political myth of a spacetime in which everything is possible, then "Pirate Night" confronts these projective dreamings with their necessary finitude, in and as narrative storytelling. Of especial interest for our present concerns is the conclusion of Abhor's individual storyline, as told through the chapter "Black Heat" – the book's very final one. Accordingly, this reading of *Empire* concludes its discussion of novel with a close reading of that chapter, anchored by the very question of finitude.

The critical discourse Acker produced around the time of *Empire*'s publication supports the idea that the work consisted in a transitional project. As we have seen, this point has largely been accepted by critics at face value.[89] We cannot underestimate the relevance of Acker's multiple metatexts, especially across the late 1980s and early 1990s. The later publication of *Bodies of*

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[89] For one, when Ellen G. Friedman suggests in a 1988 interview that Empire of the Senseless "seems to indicate a new direction," Acker acquiesces, albeit she reinforces the fact that it involves as much plagiarism as previous pieces of work, contrasting with Friedman's suggestion that here "the plagiarism is not apparent." The formal, conceptual, and political novelties performed by *Empire of the Senseless* lie elsewhere, as we will see.

Work: Essays (Serpent's Tail, 1997) emphasizes the importance of Acker's critical and/or theoretical writings, even as it teases at the genre delimitations imbued within the idea of the "essay." Acker's critical texts constitute a plain of composition of their own, with a relative degree of autonomy, which is not strictly speaking coincident with that of her literary texts. The two discursive regimes converse, yet they do so through relations of apposition, juxtaposition, and cross-contamination. *Empire* incorporates essayistic passages of prose, through which Acker probes into the conceptual frameworks subtending the novel's construction from a more theoretical perspective. In doing so, she troubles the definitional reduction of the text/theory dyad to the conceptual metaphor of surface/depth, suggesting a more heterodox textual imaginary. We will see just how important such essayistic incursions are, as we discuss "The Beginning of Criminality/The Beginning of Morning."

The reading of *Empire of the Senseless* that I produce in this chapter is politically as well as historically motivated. In strong continuity with the inquiries performed throughout Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, I remain committed to an intersectional reading of Acker's work, concerned with the political agency of her texts, and sensitive to the contradictions and refractions patterned therein. To an extent, this expresses a preoccupation between more conservative and more transgressive impulses charted across Acker's writing; perhaps more importantly, it results from a more intransigent inquiry into the very poetic and political possibility of transgression. One of the more persuasive aspects of *Empire*, as a work of speculative fiction, is that even though it confronts this world's conditions of possibility, it also struggles to chart any others. This tension will come to the forefront in our discussion of its conclusion.

Furthermore, this intersectional reading derives from a recognition of the forms of conceptual and political labor which take shape through *Empire of the Senseless,* as well as their impact on ongoing conversations around Acker's archive. In many ways, *Empire* reads as a departure, leaning into new imaginative and speculative pathways, bound to an affirmative animus and to the reassertion of the conditional potentiality of narrative structure. It raises a range of questions which recontextualize previous works of Acker's, just as it continues with her ongoing engagement with the formal possibilities of the novel format. This justifies that we read the text against the wider context of her work – and here I use the word *against* quite deliberately. I suggest we interrogate not just how Empire of the Senseless reads alongside *Kathy Goes to Haiti* and *Blood*

and Guts in High School, but also how it reads at odds from them. That is to say, how it disrupts a set of precepts and presuppositions governing much of Acker's work up to (and including) that moment in time.

The metaphor of departure might in fact not be the keenest, given its latent suggestion that one fixed position is abandoned in favor of the eventual restitution of another, thereby producing a skewed sense of spatial or temporal separation. The multiple motions *Empire of the Senseless* performs are messier than that, both in logic and momentum. No singular point of passage, the text works on its own terms, while intervening into the compositional protocols governing Acker's writing across nearly two decades. Perhaps one would do best to describe *Empire* as a transitional *moment*, which rewrites the relative position of other texts of Acker's in the process of staking out a position of its own. Because it is future-oriented, it signifies historically: as it probes onwards and outwards, it precipitates a reassessment of what came before it.

The fact *Empire* came out the same year as two retrospective anthologies fortifies a sense of its transitional performativity and transformative acuity. A queer timing marks the unorthodox kinds of (dis)continuity which take form through Acker's work, across these three publications. This reading is therefore admittedly motivated by the text's year of publication, and its palpable material history.

4. 2. Languages of the body / Languages of the unconscious

My reading of *Kathy Goes to Haiti* in Chapter 2 began not with the text itself, but with what precedes or surrounds it. With *Empire of the Senseless*, I suggest something similar. Unlike either of the two works discussed so far, *Empire* features a dedication: "This book is dedicated to my tattooist," we read on the book's frontispiece. Acker does not invoke a lover, a colleague, a friend, or a family member, as one might expect from this standardized formula of address. Instead, she invokes what would conventionally read as a more distanced relation – perhaps, one of convenience. This dedication is important as a micro-performance of its own, which toys around with standardized expectations pertaining to a book's stated inter-subjective orientation, and its

eventual form of address. Moreover, it introduces (albeit discretely) a latent question, pertaining to book's textual identity, and its specific preoccupations with the disputable identity of textuality.

At the time, Acker was increasingly captivated by the creative and expressive capacity of tattooing; she perceived it as a distinct system of writing, which evidenced the materiality of the body in its concrete relations to language. Bodybuilding occupied a comparable location within her experience, and gradually, within her conceptual thinking and imagination. In the essay "Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body" (*Bodies of Work*, 1997), the author writes about her long-term experience with bodybuilding, which (after Wittgenstein) she describes as "a language game which resists ordinary language." (147) Her more immediate question is how to craft conditions for writing about bodybuilding, when bodybuilding itself "constitutes a language, a method for understanding and controlling the physical which in this case is also the self." (148) She maintains that the practice remains other to extant grammars of meaning and expression, yet that its own rhythmic partitures and controlled sensations provide conditions for understanding the corporeal self which ordinary language does not. This para-linguistic experience is what she calls "the language of the body." Ultimately, she concludes:

> In our culture, we simultaneously fetishize and disdain the athlete, a worker of the body. For we still live under the sign of Descartes. This sign is also the sign of patriarchy. As long as we continue to regard the body, that which is subject to change, chance, and death, as disgusting and inimical, so long shall we continue to regard our own selves as dangerous others. (150)

Departing from the more specific problem of how to write about the para-linguistic phenomenology of bodybuilding and the linguistic materiality of its processes of understanding, Acker's attention turns outwards. Here, she gestures towards a long-standing cultural paradigm, within which the body is disavowed as other to reason, to order and to meaning. The systemic devaluation of the corporeal within "our culture" (i.e., western culture) is attributed to the textual archive of western metaphysics (i.e., the Cartesian body-mind split) and to the endurance of patriarchy as an overreaching system of subjection and subjectivation. Markedly, the two systems are not differentiated. By doing so, Acker continues forms of conceptual labor performed across decades, in literary as well as para-literary contexts (including public readings, and other performances).

As local phenomena, both tattooing and bodybuilding evidence the materiality of the subject (as a bodied being), while teasing at a wide array of possibilities pertaining to the materiality of language, and to the materiality of literature more specifically. This is not to say Acker intended to reinstate a scene anterior to language, nor that she held special interest in substituting whichever of these systems for the other. More so, she was fascinated by the permutations and provocations produced by their interaction. In this sense, hers is a less nostalgic or separatist impulse that those of Luce Irigaray or Hélène Cixous, as they reclaimed the space of *écriture féminine* (although both authors markedly influenced her work).[90] In fact, one of the major contentions underlying *Empire of the Senseless*, conceptually as well as poetically speaking, is that non-Oedipal relationality is *not* tenable. Even as a textual imagining, it is bound to confront its failure, as paradigmatic models of sovereignty and subjectivity reassert themselves.

As far as *Empire's* poetics of embodiment are concerned, the book's dedication stands on its own terms. Acker dedicates *Empire of the Senseless* to a writer or co-writer, a co-author even, where the very matter of *her* body is concerned. Eventually, the text will re-render this initial micro-performance within the scene of writing itself. The book's own engagement with and entanglement in the problematic of the body – as concept, as figure, as theme, but also as *thing* – relates back to this inaugural action, in more ways than one.

3. Agone: flesh, desire, and myth.

. Tattoos come to the narrative forefront in "The Beginning of Criminality/The Beginning of Morning," the middle chapter of *Alone*. Within the triadic structure of *Empire*, "Alone" presents Acker's approximation to a non-Oedipal (or de-Oedipalized) society. It is based on the confrontational premise that the foundational taboos of western society can – indeed *must* – be articulated, if another society is to be possible.[91] Out of these three chapters, "The Beginning…" is most preoccupied with sexuality, and with homosexuality's standing as the (criminalized)

[90] That being said, the argument has been made that Acker's work *should* be contextualized and conceptualized within the wider ambit of *écriture féminine*, precisely because of those creative impulses more explicitly indebted to the theories of both Irigaray and Cixous. For an analysis which locates *Empire of the Senseless* within that feminist aesthetic, see: Neldner, Jonas. "'This book is dedicated to my tattooist': Corporeal Inscriptions as *écriture féminine* in Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless*." Gender Forum, Issue 74, 2019. Ps. 13-32.

[91] This triadic division mirrors the book's own division into three major sections, which emphasizes its centrality to the text's conceptual, poetic, and narrative construction.

counterpoint to heterosexuality, and its compulsory universality. Acker cited both Pierre Guyotat and Jean Genet as key intertexts for "Alone's" composition. How the chapter figures the underground, the unassimilated and/or the criminal is especially evocative of the imaginary of the latter of the two. By this point, the Algerian revolution has proved successful, and Paris has been transformed completely. Unrecognizably, even. In the post-revolutionary moment, sailors and prostitutes emerge as unlikely (yet compelling) collective protagonists, within a frayed refraction of the city's various histories – both actual, and textual.

The chapter begins with Abhor isolated, separate from Thivai or any other meaningful relations. She feels estranged in post-revolutionary Paris and cannot engage with the emerging forms of community. The revolution has not transformed the fact of her solitude: "I felt like a mutant in such a social, socialized city, but I've always felt I don't belong." (109) Nor, for that matter, has it reshaped her perception of the world: "I realized that the Algerian revolution had changed nothing. There is always a reason for nihilism." (110) Socio-political revolution does not translate as subjective revolution; intimately, this implausible *status quo* reads as distinctively indistinct. Her recollections of her partnership with Thivai – as lovers, and as mercenaries – are residual, and emphasize the "adversarial" structure of their mutual understanding (112).

Because she is radically estranged, both from Thivai and from society at large, Abhor confronts a constellation of unknown or unspoken facets of her pleasures, of her desires, and of herself. Unmoored, her sense of place fractures, and she confronts states of radical self-doubt and indetermination: "The urban areas of the Western world were now composed of dead and mutants. I was confused to the point of psychosis because I wasn't sure who I was." (110) Elsewhere: "I wasn't anyone, I was catatonic." (112) But something comes to shape at this critical disjunction, albeit painfully: disavowed fantasies, negated possibilities, and aspects of her history.

Radically displaced, Abhor approaches the conditions for articulating her desire. She wanders through the city, and gradually (re)encounters parts of herself. Deciding she wants her hair cut, she approaches "the slummiest part of town," where the sailors reside. As soon as she encounters them, openly gathering on the streets, we learn she had "always wanted to be sailor" (113). Her perception of the sailors is both poetically ornate and politically blunt:

> A sailor's left hand lies in his pocket because it is a knife. The knife of the hand will slice off the knife of the law. I say that a sailor is someone who came out of poverty which was hateful. Because a sailor was spat on

> and shits on poverty, the sailor knows that the worst poverty is that of the heart. All good sailors espouse and live the material simplicity which denies the poverty of the heart. Reagan's heart is empty. A sailor is a human who has traded poverty for the riches of imaginative reality. (114)

Sailors stand apart as a community because, having experienced poverty, they have transformed it into a form of comprehension, and construed other models of relationality which reject the letter of Capital. Instead of pivoting their truths (or joys) on their capacity to succeed within abiding socio-economic structures, they willfully inhabit "material simplicity." As a key agent in the consolidation of neoliberalism as a socio-economic paradigm, U.S. president Ronald Reagan stands as their (unlikely) counterpart: the spokesperson for a radical form of economic pragmatism.

The sailors' criminality is bound to this foundational disavowal of the so-called political real in favor of imaginative reality – that which their hearts enable and engender. This is not to say they are romanticized completely, or their actions redeemed as recuperative: "Criminal, continuously fleeing, homeless, despising property, unstable like the weather, the sailor will wreck any earthbound life." (114) Their actual and imaginary position as pariahs does not imbue them with any particular degree of ethical superiority over lawful society. They do not stand above the lawful. They move (and remain) outside: "Though the sailor longs for a home, her or his real love is change. Stability in change, change in stability, occurs only imaginarily. No roses grow on sailor's graves." (114)

Encountering the sailors confronts Abhor with her own desire, and she becomes entangled in their forms of community. The actual encounter, along with the imaginary which subtends it, incite a realization: "I needed to fuck and to be fucked." (114) She does not become actively involved in their relationships or their quotidian, but the position she adopts as a spectator provides other pleasures, and other forms of understanding. "Because I, Abhor, couldn't act for myself, I watched them having sex." (114) Reengaging the material tenability of her sexual desire places other facets of her identity into relief, including her gender expression: "I usually wear men's clothes. Why, I don't know. *I'm not a Freudian*." (my emphasis, 115)

Here, the rapport with the Freudian meta-text is sardonic and to the point: Abhor's preference in gender expression could only be feasibly subject to exegesis if psychoanalytic indoctrination demanded as much. But Abhor relaxes about such hypothesis, because hers (and the

text's) preoccupation is not with explication, let alone a hermeneutic reduction of desire to rationality. When she visits a fortune-teller ("The Crag"), dressed as a "male lieutenant" (115), the latter can only take her presentation at face value and render her as *him*. Because their conversation departs from this initial (mis)reading, it affords Abhor with an opportunity to articulate homoerotic desire, by provisionally inhabiting the fiction of male heterosexuality:

> Was it possible that someday – someday – I would hold naked in my arms, and continue to hold and continue to hold, pressed close to my body, a woman whose femininity and masculine strength I could lean, trusting, whose mettle and daring would place her so high in my esteem that I would long to throw myself at her feet and do as she wished? I dared hardly believe I was asking. I dared hardly believe myself. (117)

As "the Crag" tells "the lieutenant" his fortune, surprising the sexual truth of his situation (i.e., he is "trying to repress his sexual desires"), Abhor realizes she "no longer [wants] any men." (116). Through the jagged patterns of derealization she navigates from early in the chapter, Abhor scopes sexual possibilities which her relationship with Thivai had so far occluded or overwritten. Inhabiting the libidinal economy of heterosexuality from another standpoint puts heterosexuality itself into question, enabling other desires. Ultimately, the fortune-teller describes Abhor's dilemma in terms of a governing dualism: "you've had to pit your will against all desire, your own and others." (117) The question, then, is what happens when that desire comes to articulation, and gives shape to one's subjective and inter-subjective reality. In the process, the Crag calls Abhor's attention to dreams, and the potentialities of the imagination which abide therein.

Abhor's final question pertains to the actual source of dreams, as if this direct query could provide a key for her libidinally conflicted situation. The Crag does not produce a response to the question as such; explication for those "dreams which the ocean brings" (117) seems to hold no especial interest. Instead, she refers Abhor to dreams she has yet to experience, of a lover who will "always be about to come" (118), in comparison with whom all other people will seem "unreal" (119), and whom she will once and again search for when awake. Eventually, this "memory of love" will itself dissolve, and she will be left alone amidst "the sailors" (119). The Crag's vision of Abhor's imaginative reality as a dreaming/desiring subject does not offer an exegesis of those scenes of the unconscious as symptomatic of an underlying truth. It does not need to. Rather than subjecting dreamscapes to a positivist exegesis, which would read them as demonstrative or indicative (albeit indirectly), the Crag emphasizes the agency proper to dreaming itself.

Of course, Abhor knows no sailors; she relates to them solely as a spectator. The Crag's rendition of her future dreams is not prescriptively bound to a set of actions which Abhor could or should pursue. Nonetheless, their conversation moves her closer to them: even though it does not transform into action, it performs their approximation. The narrative's own wandering rationality, often relaxed in terms of causal motivation, turns at this point to the sailors' presence in the city, and the importance of one sailor in particular: Agone. Agone is the older half of "a pair of Cuban twins" (118) who rule over the "sailor section of Paris" (118). Together, they make frescoes of pimps and prostitutes, foretelling "the end of this white world" (119). But of the two, only Agone is an actual sailor.

Despite his artistic propensities, he has dreamt from early in life of becoming a criminal, and seafaring has afforded him the opportunity. To become a criminal is his core desire, superseding his artistry *and* his seafaring: it is an end onto itself, and one which somehow remains beyond reach. For one, his everyday attire ("flared pants," "huge black sailor's shoes," "a black wool sweater"), presents as a uniform of sorts. It is key to the visual performativity through which he reinforces his relative position as an outsider. Yet "[he] didn't care what he wore, for clothes could never make him criminal enough." (119-120) Criminality makes up its own regulatory ideal, somehow beyond the individual's reach, and unattainable. In Agone's case, it persists as the idealized (therefore, impossible) instantiation of his actual loneliness:

> Agone would never find criminality which could be equal to his loneliness. Since society hates and casts out its lonely, therefore its sexual perverts, Agone would never find criminality which could be equal to his loneliness. (120).

As the Crag puts it: "People generally believe they can see and have in actuality what has charmed them only in their fantasies." (118) She addresses these words to Abhor, yet they describe the bind sailors find themselves in. Imaginative reality does not *realize* as such, as much as it permits a realization of desire, always already bound to the unreal. Both Agone and Abhor experience their realities as being haunted by that which they yearn or have yearned for. This desiring position, in turn, binds them together. The bar where the two first meet is "a mixture of falsity and death, a mirror of the pre-revolutionary wealth" (120). It reads as a specular distortion of an anterior time, and an estranged territory where other imaginative logics can come to fruition. Regardless of whether it is in and of itself a dreaming, it is somehow both more and less than real.

Drawn to Agone, Abhor feels within "the memory of [her] dream" and begins to "find [her] dream's face" (120). It might well be Agone's, insofar as it is her own: struck by Agone's self-presence, Abhor recognizes something of hers in him.

> I used to think I was a lost being. That I didn't fantasize. That I had no sexual desire. Real sexuality or identity. Lost in a maze that, perhaps, was politically controlled. Just Agone's physical presence somehow mirrored, presented to me a sexuality which was mine and which I had never known. Due to Agone, I was no longer nothing. I was now on my way to being somebody. A criminal. (120)

Abhor's description of her past self (or non-self) equates sexuality and identity, in line with a markedly Freudian comprehension of how the two are constitutively inter-linked. Within this framework, to posit the question of sexuality is to posit the problem of identity, and vice-versa. To dimension them as distinct phenomena can only succeed as a provisional heuristic: an artifice of analysis. This tactic citation of the Freudian text is already entangled with Foucault's critique of psychoanalysis, and his characterization of the conditions of articulation of the modern subject. Sexuality is, in this reading, the fulcrum through which subjective truth is organized, be it individually or collectively. Finally, loss is not characterized as intrinsic to the subject – structurally proper to subjectivation –, but rather as the experience of a disorientation (a disorganization, even) vis-à-vis the sexualized other. Without a libidinal horizon, the subject cannot take shape.

What transforms this situation of non-being/non-wanting is identification, triggered by the other's "physical presence." Not his psychic interiority *per se*, or his expressed personality. Instead, his (perceived) physicality. As an object around which identificatory processes coalesce, Agone's body catalyzes a realization of the subject's own possibilities of wanting, from which follow its conditions of being. The metaphor of "mirroring" is powerful in a more immediate sense; at the bar, recognition turns to identification, and self-recognition. And mirroring underwrites much of the chapter, including the fact that Agone himself is a twin, or that the space wherein they meet is "a mirror" of another time and space. As Abhor's dreaming and desiring turn towards criminality, the two are twined and entwined. Through this specular relay, Abhor recalls the unreal – or *ideal* – lover the Crag had foretold would come to her in dreams:

> In the bar, I thought to myself about that woman about whom I had dreamed: What do I want of her? I should adore if – no, I don't want anything that stupid, that fearful! – I really should adore if she was feminine and a motorcycle rider. Tough as any weathered rider! Then I'd be able to ask her what to do! (121)

The use of the past tense (*dreamed*) transforms "that woman" from an abstraction yet to come, to someone already insinuated into Abhor's experience of the here-and-now. Because articulation defines the conditions of realization of desire, she wonders, and dares to raise questions. Whereas the Crag's depiction of the future lover was focused only on Abhor's experience, now Abhor begins to produce a projective fiction of her own: a fantasy. [92] Her earlier imagining ("Was it possible that some day…") acquires more definite contours, and unexpected details. The ideal lover figures as a motorcycle rider, a conventionally masculinized practice, which contrasts with her emphatic femininity. Simultaneously, this detail refers us back to Acker's stated interest in motorcycles at the time of writing. Finally, is consists in another form of non-belonging: a subcultural or counter-cultural standpoint, apart from and even opposed to the norms of lawful society. Abhor's rejection of heterosexuality and of lawful society interlace and magnify each other: her queer wanting *is* her criminal wanting. Whether this sexual fantasy incorporates or anticipates an identificatory project – and whether this distinction matters at all – is a question I would like to leave open for now.

Soon, we are reminded that the sailors' outlaw belonging – their reclamation and vindication of criminal identity – does not unbind them from organized society and its exigencies. The criminal individual is subject to their own set of rules, and respective social contracts. Madame, Agone's boss, demands of him that he smuggle a drug (named "O") through the highly securitized Customs. Agone is fully aware of his predicament; employment under Madame ensures his conditions of survival, yet complying with her order entails taking full responsibility for a severe transgression against authority:

> Agone thought: survival's not possible. It's impossible to survive when survival's not possible. I'd have to be drunk. I've got to get money so I can survive. I've got to get the drugs across Customs. To do that, I can't see what I'm seeing. I can't feel what I'm feeling. I can't see the prison bars. I can't feel these prison bars. (123)

[92] The concept of fantasy does not figure prominently in this reading for two reasons. For one, and as discussed before, Acker's conception of desire was markedly influenced by the theoretical work of Deleuze and Guattari, and their critique of classical psychoanalysis. Thus, her line of thinking (and its poetic expression) has more in common with their conception of "desiring-production" than with Freud's theory of fantasy, especially insofar as it relies on conventional conceptions of representation. Moreover, the concept of identification, which speaks to the entanglement of desire and identity, seems more expressive of the modes of cross-connection experienced by Abhor and Agone across this chapter.

Abhor recedes into a narratorial position, and an apparently omniscient one at that, with direct access to Agone's train of thought ("Agone thought…"). From here on out, her attention turns to Agone, and so does the text's. His monologue renders his situation as one of contradiction, proper to the conditions of the worker (including the criminal worker) under capital. To satisfy economic necessity and respect group authority, he must disavow that which he feels and perceives, and act from *within* impossibility. The decision not to comply is ornamental at best, given his very survival is at stake. And to comply, he must negate the actuality of his circumstances. The regulatory pressures exerted on him in this sociation are markedly treated as generic traits of economic relations in neoliberal society: "This criminality, being not the criminality of the businessman or society, but that of the disenfranchised, reminded him he was absolutely alone." (124) The specter of Reagan looms over the criminal underground.

To proceed, Agone will need a partner. Abhor, who remains in "lieutenant's drag" (126), reads to him as "a boy" (as we are told once and again). They become unlikely accomplices through a determining silence, which stabilizes the fiction of their mutual understanding: both men, both sailors, both criminals. Indeed, as Abhor inhabits the performative fiction of being a lieutenant, imaginative reality reshapes her perception of actuality: "now that I'm a lieutenant in the British navy, I must be rational." (126). For a moment, performativity becomes identity, and fiction engrains as truth. Acting and presenting as the lieutenant (externally) alters Abhor's perceptions and discourse (internally). These dimensions of gender indeterminacy are not proper to the characters, but rather to the milieu of post-revolutionary Paris, where gender does not quite seem to hold its expected truancy. As the two head to the harbor, hoping to obtain information on how to infiltrate Customs, we read: "Here and there, a few punks, leftover, *indefinable as to sexual gender*, sat on stone steps which led either to one of the bars or to nothing." (my emphasis, 129). Apparently, the revolution has broken down the sex/gender system, as identities disorganize and reorganize.

Often, a sexopolitical imagining outside the terms of reified sexual dimorphism, and the governing symbolic of the gender binary. For one, sailors are first described as male, while prostitutes are described as female. This points to a conventionally gendered occupational economy, split through the dyadic opposition between men and women. However, this more dualistic perception of post-revolutionary society is troubled repeatedly, with the strong suggestion

that the gender dyad undergoes mutations and permutations. And these exceed its rigid, essentialist definition. Consider the following passage:

> There have also and are now a few people, human fringes, scraps of dog food hidden in cracks under shoes, who say that sailor's hairs are silver and that sailors have huge dicks. Female. For today some sailors are females. (113)

The grammatic disruption surrounding the phrase "Female." Usurps gender meanings of their expectable realization. It does not produce a steady distinction between "sailors with huge dicks" and "sailors which are women." If anything, it is phrased so as to obfuscate that distinction. "Female" reads as a noun, suddenly supplementing the sentence that precedes it. But it also reads as an adjective, attributable either to sailors *or* their dicks. Such moments of indeterminacy perturb normative conceptions of (narrative) gender, resulting in instances of what might at first read as semantic contradiction – but would be best described as gender *contradiction*. The regulatory political fictions of manhood and womanhood fail, and the normative authority of the gender binary falters. This is the context that provides Abhor with distinctive conditions for experiencing (and experimenting with) her gender, and her sexuality.

Ultimately, Abhor and Agone approach a shop, "so narrow and signless [sic], it was invisible." (129). Agone immediately (intuitively, even) experiences the location as personally important, feeling himself to be "in a 'mysterious region', a place more precious than any he had ever visited. Here must be his sexual desire." (129). On entering, the two note "a clean white operating bench," attended by an anonymous male figure, both "shrunken and lively." (129) The anonymous space, the walls of which are covered in ornate illustrations of "female pirates" or "sapphire cats" (129), is a tattoo parlor. For now, neither character recognizes it as such. The anonymous man is a tattooer, but for now, he introduces himself as a fortune-teller. Even though Agone asks information on contraband specifically, the man insists on telling him his fortune instead. When he articulates the full extent of his knowledge, he does so suddenly and sharply (as we will see shortly).

Mirroring the Crag, he holds a revelatory capacity, as the conveyer of a (sexual) truth which the subject does not (or cannot) yet acknowledge. Indeed, his blunt remark could just as easily be addressed to Abhor, who is struggling with her own conditions for physical pleasure:

> What the hell's happening to me now? Me, Abhor. Do I hate fucking? Where's the physical pleasure in my life? Physical pleasure can only be pleasurable if it is pleasurable, not the cause of suffering and fighting all the time. I'm beginning to believe that physical pleasure can be pleasurable now. (127)

Eventually, this unexpected recognition of what Agone himself is yet to recognize transforms the tacit terms of their engagement, which becomes a complex choreography. Meanwhile, Abhor recedes further still into the narrative background, taking on a less active stance. In effect, she is not (and need not be) this scene's protagonist, as much as its witness. She retrieves her position as a spectator, her fantasies and identifications mirrored onto and through Agone's own. Agone, in turn, figures as an avatar of Abhor, not because he ("real") substitutes for her ("fake"), but because theirs is a shared inquiry into the conditional possibility of sexual pleasure. This relative remove informs Abhor's narrative voice. Her retelling of the two men's initial conversation is interspersed with various moments of exposition: blocks of informational content about tattoos, rendered narratively meaningless if for their formal proximity to the practice of tattooing itself. Abhor's intradiegetic voice does not integrate these disparate discursive elements into a congruous whole. Instead, they read as interpolations of encyclopedic or historical texts:

> Cruel Romans had used tattoos to mark and identify mercenaries, slaves, criminals and heretics. (…) Among the early Christians, tattoos, stigmata indicating exile, which at first had been forced on their flesh, finally actually served to enforce their group solidarity. (…) Tattooing continued to have ambiguous social value; today a tattoo is considered both a defamatory brand and a symbol of a tribe or a dream. (…) In 1796, when Captain James Cook 'discovered' Tahiti, he thought he had sailed to paradise. In Tahitian, writing is 'ta-tau'; the Tahitians write directly on human flesh. (130)

Taken on their own terms, these fragments contain a narrative trajectory of their own, tracing the practice of tattooing across western history. First, as marks inflicted on the bodies of those who do not belong, thereby separating exceptional groups from the general populace – including criminals, or mercenaries, such as Abhor and Agone. Later, they are reclaimed as tokens of voluntary self-identification, which bind subordinate communities together in relations of solidarity or complicity. From this point onwards, up to and including the contemporary moment, they can perform either function: to separate out subjects from society at large, or to unite them within a social reality of their own. And where they do not evince a social reality, they establish an imaginative one: a yearning, a common dreaming.

Having reached the present moment, we are referred to the "discovery" of Tahiti, a place the western text – whether religious or secular – could not account for, if not as "paradise." There and then, the onomatopoeic "tau-tau" designates an autonomous system of signification, the material means of which is the human body itself. The partial narrative produced by these fragmentary incursions into historical knowledge imparts the scene with an estranged narrative rhythm. As the two registers intercalate, sudden shifts in scale imbue the two men's early interactions with surprising historical density, without superseding the immediacy and intimacy of their rapport. Theirs is their own conversation, even as history encroaches; the one narrative dimension does not substitute for the other.

First, the two talk. The man, variously described as either "old seeming" or "disgusting," begins by acknowledging Agone's conundrum: he must "make a decision." He assures him he can give Agone what he wants – "if [he] wants [him] to." But his talent lies not in the telling, but in the making: "the only telling's the making," he tells Abhor (130). Unlike the Crag, who tells Abhor of dormant possibilities and latent truths, the tattooer's gift lies in what he may make of Agone's situation, or of Agone himself. Agone's base conundrum is re-presented as a conflict of desires, albeit one which confirms his conditions of subservience under Madame: "Part of you goes for cunts, and part of you hates them. *Make* them yours, or else, they'll *make* you" (my emphasis, 131). As the Crag had done for Abhor, the tattooer identifies Agone's core conflict. The insistence on the verb "make" foregrounds Agone's eventual agency in the transformation of the situation he confronts, substituting for a prior necessity for information which would *then* transform his course of action. As Agone consults the set of cards laid out before him, he experiences a vision:

> For a moment, he saw the world of the rich burning up in electric flames, a skeleton leading an androgynous boy or girl across a country which, whatever it had been, was now a desert. He wondered whether deserts have Immigrations and Customs. (113)

Agone's fleeting insight into another world figures its respective unmaking. "Electric fires" consume the rich, presumedly exposing and decomposing extant structures of socio-economic exploitation. The skeleton appears as a totemic personalization of death, and the anonymous youth it guides does not comply with the dualistic rigidity of grammatic gender: they remain un-marked, themselves. Together, the two transverse a destitute landscape, which seemingly holds nothing and ends nowhere; perhaps such deserts (such dreamscapes) obey laws other than those of national

sovereignty and national identity, permitting other forms of movement. "Make it yours, boy" (131), the fortune-maker insists.

At this point, the man tells Agone his fortune, obliquely tied to the vision he experiences (and that *it* which he is to make his): "Your fortune is what see you. You're a sex maniac and you want a man to fuck you." (132). Agone reacts aggressively, confronting the statement as "bullshit." But then, the fortune-maker says: "No roses grow on a sailor's grave." As an invocation of intimate knowledge, this refrain cuts across their discussion, hinting at an infra-structural understanding of the sailor's solitude, and the sailor's fate. Its reiteration proves regenerative, rather than solely descriptive. Something has, or can, change: "There was something else besides death," Agone ponders. Recontextualized, the refrain produces a sense of alterity and possibility. Because it is recognized, it is no longer a finite reality. Agone then asks to be tattooed.

When the man prompts Agone to "pull down his pants" (132), this triggers another movement in their exchange. Agone refuses and asks that they to go outside. The two have barely exchanged words, when Agone suddenly strikes the man by surprise. Spontaneously, the two "scrap," exchanging no further words. Verbal communication gives way to another kind of conversation, which need not articulate (nor mediate) questions or truths other to the body's self-presence. Their struggle is expressive, intimate, and joyful: "the sailor felt that joy free of fears which birds must feel when they sing." (133) The physicality of combat envelops them, instead of reinstating the rigidity of each one's position. It is unmotivated, and even somewhat senseless. "Since Agone felt lost, he felt happy. Perhaps for the first time in his life." (133)

Just as the conversation which precedes it, their combat invokes something of "imaginative reality" in Agone. He recalls "a boy he had once left." The text musicalizes the boy's youth, rhythmically repeating it: "The boy had been about thirteen years younger than him. Thirteen. Thirteen." An unlikely age gap, and an unlucky number which echoes, after the fact of its statement. At first, Agone finds comfort in this recollection: "'My baby's with me again. I'm happy'." (133) But as he recalls how the relationship was defined by "envy" and "harm," his perception shifts, as does his attitude towards the tattooer. He "is not serene." (133). Now realizing Agone is serious, the man draws a knife, which he has been using "to experiment with a new way of tattooing." (133)

At the precise moment he does so, narrative action stops. Suddenly, a set of theoretical and literary considerations on the political and poetic function of nonsense are interpolated into the narrative. These read as an essay, composed on its own terms, difficult to gauge as anything but Acker's reasoning around the conceptual processes through which *Empire* composed. This essayistic moment punctuates the overall narrative to evince its underlying programmatic, breaking with the text's fictional consistency. It begins by positing the "unconscious" as the sole defense against "institutionalized meaning, institutionalized language, control, fixation, judgement." (133-134) Having raised this abstract point about subjective resilience, and the constitution of something other to systems of power and control, the essay historicizes it:

> Ten years ago, it seemed possible to destroy language through language: to destroy language which normalizes and controls by cutting that language. Nonsense would attack the empire-making (empirical) empire of language, the prisons of meaning. (134) [93]

This temporal marker is key. Taken as an approximation, it would point to the first stage of Acker's critical engagement with the novel-form, from the early to the late 1970s, through assorted textual techniques. However, it also reads as the more exact denunciation of a previous piece of writing: *Empire* was copyrighted and published in 1988, precisely ten years after *Kathy Goes to Haiti*. The theoretical rapport points to a collective moment in artistic and literary creation, within which Acker's individual praxis emerged. At the same time, it directly and markedly points to *the one* piece of work, producing an implicit relation of contrast and comparison between the text being read and the text once written. Acker's disavowal of *Kathy Goes to Haiti* presents here (i.e., intra-textually) as the expression of an important conclusion about the conceptual frameworks underlying *KGH*, and other works of that time. In fact, the point might well extend to *Blood and Guts in High School*, completed that same year. Within this theoretical narrative, such texts could not perform the necessary political work, because they ultimately produce normalizing effects: "this nonsense, since it depended on sense, simply pointed back to the normalizing institutions." (134)

[93] Noticeably, Acker's vocabulary reports back to wider debates surrounding deconstruction, language, and politics in the U.S. across the 1970s and 1980s. The expression "prisons of meaning" is especially evocative, harking back to Frederic Jameson's "The Prison House of Language" (1975).

What, then, might transform the field of literary possibility to politically emancipatory effect? In Acker's understanding, the language of the unconscious. Yet this raises a definitional problem of its own. Namely, how one might describe and define that language:

> What is the language of the 'unconscious'? (If this ideal unconscious or freedom doesn't exist: pretend it does, use fiction, for the sake of survival, all of our survival.) Its primary language must be taboo, all that is forbidden. (134)

Acker does not divest from the project of transforming (or transformative) language. If nonsense cannot unmake sense, and is bound to reinstate and reify its primacy, then other linguistic practices are necessary. Notably, the word "unconscious" always appears amidst quotation marks across this passage; the concept is consistently treated as a theoretical construct, or a rhetorical device. In fact, Acker allows for the possibility that this "ideal unconscious or freedom" might not even exist, let alone be linguistically tenable. So, she invites the reader to imagine with her: "pretend it does, use fiction, for the sake of survival, all of our survival." By doing so, Acker mirrors the Freudian text itself. Many of Freud's purportedly scientific speculations on the structure of subjectivity were bound to such tentative hypothesis and speculative approximations, through which he performed his theoretical work. As Maggie Nelson writes in *The Argonauts*:

> [As] Winnicott has noted (along with Deleuze and Guattari), Freud's career can sometimes seem a series of intoxications with theoretical concepts that willfully annihilate nuance. (…) Such freely confessed swerves into the provisional are the pleasure of reading Freud; the problems come when he succumbs – or we succumb – to the temptation to mastery rather than reminding ourselves that we are at deep play in the makeshift. (Nelson, 85)

Acker's own makeshift conclusion is that the "primary language" of the unconscious must be that of taboo – that which is other to language, that which cannot come to articulation without disturbing or outright disrupting normalized structures of meaning, and subsequently, of identity. She continues:

> Thus, an attack on the institutions of prison via language would demand the use of a language or languages which aren't acceptable, which are forbidden. Language, on one level, constitutes a set of codes and social and historical agreements. Nonsense doesn't per se break down the codes; speaking precisely that which the codes forbids breaks the codes. (Acker, 134)

Acker's definition of her textual project remains combative: one must not only resist, or survive, but in fact *attack* the institutions of power. Codes, preponderant throughout the text in one

expression or another, can be broken only by that which they can neither decodify nor recodify. Transgressive poetic language must articulate the unspoken, even the unspeakable. The process through which "Alone" produces scenarios which transgress against the ethical and moral boundaries of organized society, we come to understand, takes place as the necessary confrontation of that society with its impossibilities. Tattooing is foundationally tied to such processes of transgression and negative poetics, which destabilize those "normalizing institutions" Acker cites.

As noted, the conceptual interlude performs curious effects on narrative momentum. On the one hand, it breaks with or away from the relative consistency of diegetic time, betraying readerly expectations, and contaminating the scene of writing with the conceptual ideation which governs its production. On the other, because it defers the realization of what the tattooer's "new way of tattooing" might just be, it produces a more acute sensation of suspense. The essayistic interlude produces the conditions for understanding at least some aspects of *Empire*'s narrative intentionality, while deferring its actual actualization as narrative, subsequently intensifying the following realization:

> This new way of tattooing consisted in raising defined parts of the flesh up with a knife. The 196ourageo then draws a string through the raised points of flesh. Various coloration methods can be used on the living points. (134)

The essay organizes our attention towards the problem of sense and signification, and the conditions under which language itself (or a plurality of languages) may come to transform language. Including the practice of tattooing. Then, our attention is turned back to narrative time, and the fact of the body's rewriting. It remits us to an experimentation with the technical and expressive potentialities of tattooing which implicates cutting under the skin and raising the flesh. If tattooing ("tau-tau") is writing, the body is both the page and something more convoluted, more complicated. After all, carnality is dense, striated, and layered. Writing on the body seems to rewrite the body, and to reconfigure its surfaces. The tattooer's experimental project reinforces a fundamental recognition: tattooing is not a surface text, and the division between surface and depth cannot hold.

Agone does not understand the knife *per se*, but he intuits what it embodies, even before the act of tattooing. It invokes within something of death, as an imperceivable absolute: "[it] was his, the only point, object and subject, purpose and being." At the same time, the knife presents as

an extension of the tattooer's physical presence: "the knife was the tattooer's being," held in hand. Both a phallic implement and a prosthetic supplement, the knife *is* Agone *and* the tattooer. The point at which their beings converge, it becomes the copula of the impossible: "By recognizing it, Agone was agreeing to allow the unallowable." (134)

As an instrument of incision, the knife's sexualization occurs both literally and metaphorically. It works as a conduit of desire, and excitation. It expresses or holds within their want, and it provides the means of their mutual recognition. It is, ultimately, a mirror: "The knife had become their point of looking at each other." Desire and identification become entangled once again, the one precipitating the other. As Agone recognizes "his mirror: his friend: the tattoer," he becomes aroused. "For the first time in his life, Agone began to feel something sexual." The tattoer reaches for him; the sailor concedes. Together, complicit and entwined, they become "two brothers," gradually walking back towards the parlor (135).

At this point, Abhor signals their return to the parlor. Briefly, her own desire intermits, surrounding and sculpting the events between them: "I was watching the shadows of my own desire" (135). Whatever comes to take shape between Agone and the tattooer, it is the obverse of Agone's actuality, and the actualization of her desires. Specular distance enables fantasy to come to fruition – through other objects, other subjects, other prisms. While the tattooer and the sailor finish their preparations, the sparse dialogue they exchange echoes erotically: "You came to me." […] "Has anyone done it to you?" […] "Does it hurt?" (136). And as the two become increasingly intimate, the text moves amidst different tonal and stylistic registers, which appositely connect poetic and pornographic discourse, in combinatory rather than exclusionary capacities. Neither seems to subtend nor support the other; more so, the two men's physical intimacy implies a polyvocal attitude. The languages of the body are also those which contact with, caress, and entice the body. Consider the following excerpt:

> 'My little pal.' The 197ourageo's calloused hand which had been resting on Agone's shoulder as Agone had been pulling off his sweater slid down the sailor's hard back muscles until it reached the curve of his ass. Agone moved his ass muscles, almost involuntarily. Feeling this the older man squeezed so deliberately that lust suddenly appeared brutal. Lust appeared without emotion. Just as brutally he slipped his free hand down into Agone's trousers. (137)

And how it contrasts with the ensuing paragraph, from the same page:

> Winds rode on the swords of the red fingernails of prostitutes. The winds were streams of carrot juice in what remained of the blackness of the bourgeoisie. Behind the winds, there was nothing. (137)

Note the contrast between the depiction of one body and the other: the tattooer's "calloused hand," which complements his portrayal as "old-seeming" and "filthy," moves across the sailor's "hard back muscles" and towards "the curve of his ass," which insinuate a conventionally desirable, athletic silhouette. Their body images are rendered in counter-distinction: older/younger; ugly/beautiful; soiled/sane. Lust's increase is proportional to emotion's decrease: their tacit understanding becomes affectless, and literary discourse adjusts accordingly, from the erotic to the pornographic. Connotative distance need not compartmentalize "ass muscles" or "cocks" apart from other aspects of the discourse (136-137).

The latter of the two paragraphs, however, renders the world surrounding them as a post-apocalyptic dreaming, where objects and elements transform in a-signifying excess. In a surrealist distortion of subject/object relations, the swords figured are not of prostitutes, but of *their red fingernails*. Whereas the winds figure as *streams of carrot juice,* like some absurdist animation of the vestigial commodities of the bourgeoisie. The most striking facet of the linguistic labor Acker performs here is how she intercalates dissonant linguistic registers, then pushes them towards the point where they must interact. Sometimes, the poetic and pornographic registers do collide, but because their respective limits are not finite, they find a relative degree of consistency within the scene's formal reasoning:

> The cocks now stood up. For the first time, Agone was both holding on and being held to: he lay, rocking, his mouth in the 198ourageo's ear, the tattoer lay his mouth on the other grey check. Carrot juice flowed out between legs. (137)

The complement substitutes for its presumed subject yet again: the cocks, as animate body parts, are not attributed through pronouns ("their"), or other linguistic markers. Where the separation between bodies is concerned, the men embrace in such a way that Agone both holds *and* is held. This dismantles the implicit presumption that their roles should be dualistically differentiated into active and/or passive positions, according to received sexual hierarchies (including that of age). "Carrot juice flows," cartoonishly, like some impossible pre-ejaculate. And Agone, immersed in pleasurable intensity, delivers himself onto the moment: "No. […] Keep on going. We'll keep on going… […] …forever." (137)

When the tattooer begins to fellate Agone, a messianic vision takes shape, where he emerges as a father and the latter as a child. "The father parted himself, all of His world, all of being, to let the child walk in safety." (137) The strangers transmute into brothers, into lovers, and for a moment, into father and child. The capitalization of the possessive pronoun ("His") suggests a Christian symbolic, where the Father makes way for the child, immaculate, to pass safely. Agone and the tattooer perform these distinctive dyadic pairings, which never stray too far from the versions of masculinity (and homosocial desire) reified by Freudian familialism. But here, those pairings are subject to confusion and contagion. No one position will hold in the absolute. When the "as-yet-hairless-child" caresses his father's hair, something comes to creation. "The dreams of sailors became alive." (138) The process of tattooing has begun.

The sailor is struck by the needle's first point of contact with his skin. Pain, "sharp and particular," surprises him. To cope with the sensation, he turns "his mind from the actuality of this pain away to dream," scoping an affective space wherein pain is attenuated. Dreaming provides possibilities other to those of immanent physicality: other sensorial and emotional conditions. Through counter-distinction, it interacts with actuality. While Agone dreams his way through the process, the tattooer begins to draw "the outlines of a sailing ship" (138). This figure, it turns out, presents itself as an emblem of dreamtime, in its multiple histories. Including non-subjective ones:

> Reminiscence of that dreamtime when humans were free. Historically, criminality is the only freedom humans have had. Like the edges of a dream during the waking state, tattooing showed the sailor that dreams are made actual through pain. Humans make themselves and 're [sic] made through pain plus dreams. (138)

Dreamtime seems other to waking life and lived actuality – but also anterior to it, temporally encoded as a distinctive time in human history. Within this abstract era, humans – as a universal collective – were "free." Our attention turns not towards the idiosyncratic artifacts of individual dreaming, but towards a hypothetical period where criminality functioned as the fundamental challenge to human law. Within this mythical fiction of human history, criminality is markedly characterized as the exclusive condition for freedom that humans have had at their avail. It is conferred with an exceptional capacity to disrupt the bounds of sociality, and subsequently, of those institutions Acker's essayistic intervention cites explicitly. Finally, pain and dreaming come together, in the making of human subjects.

The sensorial experience of being tattooed, and dreaming around the fact of its physical process, endows Agone with liminal insight. Pain is what actualizes dreams, giving shape to imaginative reality. Dreaming does not substitute for the body's immanent physicality, and its experience of worldly interactions. Instead, through the experience of negative sensation, it translates into the self. It does not contradict the realities of waking time. Instead, it is its necessary other, and its raw material. Gradually mediating the pain he feels, Agone comes to embrace it, rather than attempting to de-realize its effect: "Agone noted each stab of pain clearly since he no longer felt any fear" (139) Meanwhile, the tattooer proceeds with his design:

> The tattoo outline was huge roses surrounding a larger old-fashioned sailing ship. Below the ocean was a water dragon, a carp who had made it through the gate, who rose in folds and loomed over the ship. (139)

The tattoo suggests something not only of dreamtime, but of mythical time – and the two seem to overlap to some extent. Roses adorn the central point of the picture, the sailing ship, while alluding to that indelible refrain once again: "No roses grow on a sailor's grave." Its silhouette or structure remain unspecific for now. But an aquatic element takes shape, transfiguring the relation between the surface of the sea and its depths. A "water dragon," roughly comparable to "a carp," emerges from the underwater domain and envelops the ship, so that it is both below the ocean *and* atop the ship. The maritime does not comply with a reduction to its relative location underneath the ship; instead, it intermingles with the open space of the surface, and re-presents above, as it does below. Vertical axis of definition and differentiation become unsteady as the picture takes shape on Agone's body. Finally, the tattoer begins to color the tattoo. The colors mesh and meld, coming together as a pictorial and narrative whole, akin to a cosmogonic representation of the sailor's mythic worldliness. Visually, they signify their own bold, painful inscription on the sailor's skin, referring back to the process by which they are enacted on the flesh:

> Red plus black were the dream, living. As blue plus red became green, the dragon looked down at the ship over blood-red petals which had sprouted leaves. Their stems had thorns that caused pain. The inscription of this dream on to the flesh was painful. (140)

Through the melding of red and black, "dream" figures as thing, or agency. The preponderance of dreamtime as that cognitive and sensorial state within which the imaginable comes into rearticulation, challenging the constitutive boundaries of the possible, has been evinced once and again – especially in Abhor's conversation with The Crag. It is a key dimension of

imaginative actuality (as preferred by the sailors), and it confers shared reality with distinct conditions of possibility. These two regimes co-exist, and they come to definition through counter-distinction. However, they also across the reach of their defining limits: the dream comes to bear on the flesh and reshapes human physicality. The language of the unconscious re-makes matter, interweaving the real and the unreal, as subjective dreaming is rewritten through the body's carnal complexity.

The dream, itself, speaks to the reshaping of a certain psychic ecology: depth-surface relations are de-structured. Emphatically, the tattooed is performed "on to the flesh," rather than on the skin. It does not depart from the skin as a surface of inscription. Instead, because it is threaded through layers of flesh, it reshapes the division between interiority and exteriority according to its own expressive agency. Moving from that presumed interiority of the unconscious, to and through Agone's flesh, it moves much like the water dragon it re-presents. In fact, the tattoo signifies its own making in quite concrete manners: the thorns which cause pain can only figure on the flesh because that flesh has been subject to constructive, imaginative pain. The process of tattooing is embedded into the final figure of the tattooed. And the tattoo itself both symbolizes and actualizes its making: its inscription is both somatic and semiotic.

As fragments pertaining to the cultural history of tattooing reoccur near the chapter's end, interwoven with increasingly abstract and non-narrative moments of writing, the text becomes didactically clear about the point the chapter otherwise insinuates:

> In decadent phases, the tattoo became associated with the criminal – literally, the outlaw – and the power of the tattoo became intertwined with the power of those who chose to live beyond the norms of society. (…) In the same manner, normal society had ruled that he shouldn't touch another man, but he was, that he shouldn't love another man, but he was, that he shouldn't come simultaneously with another man, but – (140)

The sentence break, an abrupt point of disarticulation, reads as a pre-orgasmic gasp, which suspends sentence-structure and the satiation of meaning. But it does not come to climax, nor do the two men:

> Male hand on male hand. Stomach on stomach. Male feet on male feet. Mouth on mouth. Cock on cock. Agone pulled away from the 201ourageo before either of them came because he didn't want to reach any port. (140)

Sailors depart and keep departing. This is not to say they ever come to arrive. The passage above encapsulates the two men's bodies as mirror images, mutually reflexive and connective. Each body part cited, from hand to cock, coincides mimetically with its own image: they are placed in relations of direct correspondence. Markedly, none of these predicates points to a penetrative dynamic between the two men (anal, or otherwise). The preposition "on" suggests points of contact between body surfaces, and tactile pleasures experienced across the skin. This surface aesthetic explicitly contrasts with the discourse of penetration, habitually predicated on the metaphoric construct of a container/contained relation, where the preposition "in" figures topoi of interiority/exteriority. Instead, the two engage in frottage. The knife, as a phallic implement, has acted upon and through the sailor's body. But the erotics of their encounter operate somewhat to the side of phallocratic authority, and its circumscription of sexual sensation.

By de-emphasizing the moment of orgasmic climax, the text further de-centralizes the primacy of the phallus as a sexual signifier, and the organization of sexual pleasure according to the notional conclusion afforded by (male) ejaculation. Agone "pulls away" and rejects the moment of arrival. One reading of this gesture would be that the two thus remain in the spatial/temporal interval of pre-orgasmic intensities, which need not close around the fact of the male orgasm, or adjacent fictions of finitude. We might pose another, however, in which the gesture figures as a *recognition* of the finality of orgasm, and thus, as an anticipated rejection of identity. In this reading, theirs is the rejection of an arrival at identity – contextually, as non-heterosexual men. A sense that the sailor's trajectory must once and again avoid territorialization, or stabilization, is imparted by the final repetition of the refrain we have encountered across the chapter: "No roses grow on a sailor's grave." (140). Opaque, this refrain on the fortunes of sailors closes the account of the two men's encounter but refuses to purpose its conclusion. As a poetic truth of their common situation, it resounds, recurring recursively throughout. But arrival itself is never an option.

The chapter's very final lines read: "As the two men moved away from each other, I went outside into morning's beginning." (140). Abhor's night ends at that point where the men pull away, rejecting (orgasmic) finitude. The narrative time of the "night" she has experienced is porous and permeable; it renders as the night when she first encounters the sailors, and as the night experienced observing Agone and the tattooer's interactions. Her own quandaries and queries have

dissipated from the narrative forefront, as has the sailor's search for conditions of access to Customs. In fact, the two men's encounter never seems to call to mind the female lover she had previously hypothesized. Instead, it reads as her dreaming, come to actualization. Her approximations and experimentations with the actuality of her body and desires remain as such, and do not coalesce into a final form, or a specific deliberation regarding the terms of her own identity.

In the process, Agone is absorbed into a radical experience of embodiment and desire, his economic preoccupations and societal bounds forgotten – if for a time. The permutation of nighttime across these moments re-renders each character's respective experience within dreamtime, a plain of possibility and transformation, as foretold by the Crag. The tattooer's work, more concretely, speaks to a complex cosmogony surrounding the persona of the sailor, which comes to bear meaning on the skin, as a painful incision

As Abhor exits the parlor, into the dawn, she exits an experimental dreamscape which has afforded – through specular inventions, through shadow refractions – the chance to imagine (and experience) desire differently. She has not found the "source of dreams" which she asked the Crag about, but she has experienced its resourcefulness in kinds of feeling and of knowing. Nor has she found an object, identity or project, and the chapter refuses to translate into a developmental process for its (presumed) main character. Instead, having inhabited the transhistorical threshold of dreamtime, as a site where the implausible and the impossible proliferate, she exits onto unspecified daylight. The very next chapter, "On Becoming Algerian," begins with an abrupt shift to Thivai's narrative standpoint, who conveys his own perception of the situation in Paris:

> Hot female flesh on hot female flesh. And it doesn't go anywhere: flesh. Flesh. For the cunt opens and closes, a perpetual motion machine, a scientific wonder, perpetually coming, opening and closing on itself to ecstasy or to nausea – does it, you, ever tire? Roses die faster. Roses die faster than you, you whores of my heart.
>
> All the women in Paris were now whores. (134)

Thivai's first-person rapport revisits the same scenario as the earlier sections of the preceding chapter. But his phallocentric perception of the sexual economy at stake in post-revolutionary Paris – including the reasoning by which he concludes all women in the city are now "whores" – starkly contrasts with Abhor's own perception of that same situation. As a result of

this abrupt narrative cut, we are left with no obvious indication of Abhor's eventual orientation. We need none. Her dreaming has not been – and it is not – instrumental. It is still in the making.

Yet the paradigm within which (and against which) her desire comes to articulation is rigid, set, and sedimented. She inhabits the world of compulsory heterosexuality, and she must comply with the political fictions of the self, of gender, and desire that paradigm entails. As we proceed with our reading of *Empire*, I would like to confront two facets of its political imagination which are relatively continuous and consistent throughout. The first, precipitated by this reading of "The Beginning…," pertains to the ways it probes into and problematizes heterosexuality. The second, to how it performs critical work surrounding the crucial category of whiteness, and the long histories of colonialism. Ultimately, I aim to evince how these two facets of the critical labor performed across *Empire* intersect, speaking to the concomitant construction and actualization of both paradigms.

4.4. The pathology of heterosexuality.

With the previous section, we have come to a better understanding of *Empire*'s predisposition towards homosexuality. It figures as taboo, and as a touchstone of transgressive possibility. It points to the constitutive outside of heterosexual society – and thus, of society at large. Yet the question remains: if homosexuality stands as exemplary of outlaw society, what to make of lawful society and its respective standard? Namely, heterosexuality? In this section, I aim to address how *Empire* configures heterosexuality, as a political fiction. And to contextualize this discussion, I first engage with a central text in contemporary critiques of heterosexuality, as a system of political relations: "The Straight Mind" (1980), by Monique Wittig.[94]

Across the 1970s and 1980s, radical feminist discourse often centralized patriarchy as the central system of oppression, by which others (including racism, or classism) took shape as subsidiary systems of dominion. From a similar standpoint, Wittig proposes a radical re-description of the political system of heterosexuality. Within her analysis, heterosexuality is the one of the sets of political relations which provide the infra-structural template for society at large:

[94] The essay was first presented in 1978, at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association.

> For heterosexual society is the society which not only oppresses lesbian and gay men, it oppresses many different others, it oppresses all women and many categories of men, all those who are in the position of the dominated. (Wittig, 55)

Wittig's argument is a gender abolitionist vindication of the need for radical political action, that would usurp the gender binary of its historically inscribed and politically actualized meanings. Hers might be described as a feminism of difference – such as that of Luce Irigaray or Hélène Cixous –, insofar as it departs from a baseline affirmation of the irreconcilable difference between the sexes. However, it purports a reinterpretation of the social production of difference, which is especially important for our present reading. Anticipating what would later be formalized as intersectional theories of oppression, Wittig strongly emphasizes that difference is *attributed*; it is differentially assigned to concrete subject groups within society. Her argument points to the relational production of difference, as something made to inhere to subject groups – or "classes." She writes:

> Men are not different, whites are not different, nor are the masters. But the blacks, as well as the slaves, are. This ontological characteristic of the difference between the sexes affects all the concepts which are part of the same conglomerate. But for us there is no such thing as being-woman or being-man. "Man" and "woman" are political concepts of opposition, and the copula which dialectically united them is, at the same time, the one which abolishes them. (55)

Here, we might recall our earlier discussion of Wittig's "The Trojan Horse." In both instances, Wittig's conceptual narrative intersects lesbian, feminist, and materialist political theories of society, subjectivity, and history. In fact, Wittig explicitly translates the dialectic opposition between "man" and "woman" – and the eventual abolition of either category – into the vocabulary of class struggle, establishing a concrete point of comparison between systems of political dominion. In this, her account of heterosexuality has much in common with Marxist-feminist theories of the 1970s and 1980s. She explains:

> It is the class struggle between women and men which will abolish men and women. The concept of difference has nothing ontological about it. It is only the way that the masters interpret a historical situation of domination. The function of difference is to mask at every level the conflicts of interest, including ideological ones. (55)

Wittig's demystification of the ontology of difference has proven more influential than one might think. For one, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*

(1990), a staple in contemporary feminism and an inaugural text for queer theory, often engages with Wittig's work, and draws from its conceptual vocabulary. Much like the groundbreaking work which tacitly divulges her thought, Wittig has her own concerns about the strained relationship between materiality and signification. Especially insofar as collective processes of political transformation are concerned. Here, her reasoning differs from baseline Marxist understandings of the linguistic and/or the symbolic:

> I am sure that an economic and political transformation will not dedramatize these categories. Can we redeem *slave*? Can we redeem *nigger*, *negress*? How is *woman* different? Will we continue to write *white*, *master*, *man*? The transformation of economic relationships will not suffice. (55)

In her understanding, the political category of "woman" is irredeemable – much like "nigger" (or "negress"). Such categories do not hold potential for recuperation, or resignification. It is not a question of transforming their respective meanings, and to achieve their symbolic or semantic reconstruction. Rather, because they too actualize systems of exploitation – without which they cannot signify – they must be abolished as well. Thus, political transformation at the level of infrastructure, and the domain of economic relations, is not enough. To abolish these systems of dominion, language itself must be subject to transformation:

> We must produce a political transformation of the key concepts, that is of the concepts which are strategic for us. For there is another order of materiality, that of language, and language is worked upon from within these strategic concepts. It is at the same time tightly connected to the political field where everything that concerns language, science and thought refers to the person as subjectivity and to her/his relationship to society. And we cannot leave this within the power of the straight mind or of the thought of domination." (55)

The transformation of language, and of those concepts (or categories) which govern thought, is a matter of political necessity. But that transformation is accompanied by an analytical movement; it entails a critical confrontation with what (and how) language is. Wittig appeals to a "political semiology," through which standardized structures of meaning may be described and disputed. She cites "heterosexuality" as one of the categories – or political fictions – in need of critical intervention. Describing the "ensemble of heterosexual myths" as "a system of signs which uses figures of speech, and thus can be politically studied from within the science of our

oppression" (55), Wittig opens up conceptual trajectories towards critiquing heterosexuality as a regime of political relations, and as a field of discursive phenomena. It is precisely the labor of Wittig's hypothetic "political semiology" which concerns us in this section, as we approach Acker's creative reconstruction of the (various) myths of heterosexuality (55).

Early in "The Beginning…," Abhor thinks back to Thivai:

> I didn't know where Thivai was. Where in the hell Thivai was. In the post-apocalyptic mess. Fuck him, he was only a man. Men, *especially straight men*, aren't worth anything. A bit like success. Maybe, before the revolution, men had been too successful. Anyway, most humans are now women. In this city, women are just what they always were, prostitutes. They live together and they do whatever they want to do. (my emphasis, 109)

For moments, Abhor's perspective on post-revolutionary Paris suggests an upheaval of patriarchal narrative, whereby women (i.e., prostitutes) organize in communities of mutual interest, living together and acting out of their own volition. Of course, we have seen how she feels alienated from such forms of community, and eventually turns towards men (i.e., sailors) instead. Markedly, Abhor articulates her rejection of Thivai in terms of anti-male sentiment, and even a wholesale rejection of men. His individual personhood and conduct are redacted to the expressed fact of his masculinity. If men figure as *worthless* – a striking denouncement, in a text so preoccupied with the symbolics of Capital –, straight men are somehow even worst. This rejection of heterosexual masculinity propels Abhor across the chapter, up to and including the time she spends with Agone.

In Chapter 4, I reasserted the queer agency of Acker's work, as a poetic and political intervention into heterosexist textual politics. As we trace its expression, certain formal and stylistic options – extending to concrete forms of linguistic discernment – are just as important as the representation of whichever kind of explicitly, implicitly, or ambiguously queer personae. Intertextually, Acker engaged with Genet, Rimbaud, or Pasolini by entangling their personhood (and respective literary history) within her own fictions. And her work across the timeframe described includes various incidental non-heterosexual characters, as well as heterosexual characters who express a strong degree of sexual indetermination. But this critique of heterosexuality also occurs at the level of formal relations. Critiquing – or queering – the text of heterosexuality entails its own set of linguistic transformations. Case in point:

> Then in I passed through rollercoasters of concrete and other stones which made me remember the Monge section of Paris. Baudelaire, standing upright in his tomb, had sometime before that fallen in love with his girlfriend as soon as he had given her syphilis. A case of heterosexuality. Here, there were no ads. (51)

Abhor's narration casually incorporates clinical terminology: "a case of heterosexuality" reads as proper to scientific discourse, or to medical discourse more specifically. The expression underwrites an exemplary circumstance of heterosexuality as an observable phenomenon. The fact Baudelaire falls in love with his partner at that precise moment when he transmits syphilis to her provides a template, not for sexually transmitted infections (and adjacent forms of illness), but for heterosexuality itself, as malaise. Not only is the heterosexual contract fortified by the act of transmission, but it overwrites the one individual disease. It is, itself, disease.

This approach to the political fiction of heterosexuality relates back to a distinctive social and political moment, in the later years of the Thatcher-Reagan paradigm. Across the Atlantic, the AIDS crisis struck LGBTQ+ communities with especial brutality, throughout the 1980s and early 90s. Trans and queer folk were not only disproportionally affected, but also construed as deserving victims in public opinion. Moral discourse of the time, articulated by the Catholic Church, by conservative media, and ultimately by both governments, metonymically substituted AIDS for homosexuality. At the limit, they were coterminous: the first tentative recognition of the syndrome famously described it as "gay cancer."[95] Activist organizations – such as ACT UP, and Queer Nation – condemned Reagan's government for systemic mishandling of the crisis, ranging from misinformation to lack of financial support in the acquisition of necessary medication. In fact, they attributed direct responsibility for the epidemic's tremendous toll amidst queer communities to Reagan himself. (See: Figure 1).[96]

[95] A timeline of HIV/AIDS produced by the U.S. government, as an informational resource, suggests the expression was normalized within public discourse in the early 1980s. In fact, it cites the specific date of July 3rd 1981 as the point at which "the term 'gay cancer' enters the public lexicon'" – most probably the result of an article published in the New York Times that same day, titled "Race Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals." For reference, see "A Timeline of HIV/AIDS": https://www.hiv.gov/sites/default/files/aidsgov-timeline.pdf (last consulted on the 2nd of March 2021).

[96] The history of the HIV/AIDS epidemic has been amply documented, as has collective action taken against institutions held accountable for its ongoing impact amidst queer and other non-majority sectors of society. See, for instance, Schulman, Sarah. *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination.* (University of California Press: 2013) Schulman is also the co-founder of the ACT UP: Oral History Project (Link: http://www.actuporalhistory.org/, last accessed on the 31st of March 2021).

Around the time *Empire* was prepared for publication, Section 28 (“Prohibition on promoting homosexuality by teaching or by publishing material”) ignited public debate in the U.K. The proposed piece of legislation saw non-heterosexual personnel excluded from pedagogic functions within public learning institutions and forbid the dissemination of materials presumed to divulge homosexuality as a sexual orientation, lifestyle, or practice. It was approved in the House of Lords on February 16, 1988.[97] Acker wrote *Empire* while living in the U.K., and she would have been well aware of this pivotal crisis in public opinion. Thus, the textual proximity between references to Reagan’s public persona, metaphors of illness, and the politics of heterosexuality is no mere coincidence. Rather, Acker’s perfunctory rendition of heterosexuality as a clinical circumstance bluntly ironizes (and reverses) a concrete context of crisis, by reconstituting heterosexuality as critical.

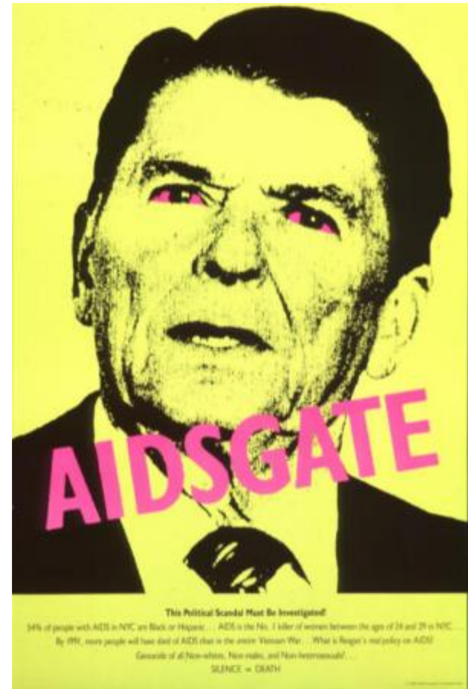

Figure 1 - Poster produced in 1987 by activist organization ACT UP, as part of the “SILENCE = DEATH” project. It depicts then President Ronald Reagan and the political emblem "AIDSGATE".

Later, Abhor encounters a professional photographer, with whom she seeks to collaborate as a model. She quickly understands she is being sexually coerced, and that non-compliance with the photographer’s advances will result in physical harm or death. Her assessment is summary, and brutal: “I quickly chose a raped body over a mutilated or dead one.” (64) Abhor places the question of volition into painful relief, bluntly obviating the inevitability of sexual violence, in tandem with gender violence. This statement promptly segues into a more general consideration regarding heterosexual love: “I didn’t know what to do about the useless and, more than useless, virulent and destructive disease named heterosexual sexual love. I’ve never known.” (64)

Abhor does not reduce the incident to a discrete, individual event. Nor, for that matter, does she describe it through a recognition (or a rejection) of patriarchal gender norms, and how they

[97] A full transcript of the parliamentary session in which Section 28 was discussed and approved is available online, as archived by British Parliament (“Local Government Bill - HL Deb 16 February 1988 vol 493 cc585-643.”) Link: https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1988/feb/16/local-government-bill-1, last accessed on the 23rd of March 2021).

organize sexual violence. More surprisingly, she names the grammar of political violence at stake as heterosexuality *itself*, suggesting sexual violence is proper to its political organization to begin with. Reiterated in this context, the metaphor of illness instills a sense of the banality of such scenes: this is just another "case of heterosexuality." Abhor's specific description of the "disease" expands its pathological meanings, by denouncing it as "useless," "virulent" and "destructive." Each of these terms holds a certain evocative power of its own; together, they complete a portrayal of heterosexuality that *Empire* is strongly committed to. Gradually but surely, Acker construes the political fiction of a world *ridden* with heterosexuality. By the time Abhor meets Agone, it has begun to come undone.

This political indictment of heterosexuality continues into "The Beginning…." When Abhor ponders the conditions of (im)possibility of her physical pleasure, she comes to a blunt conclusion: "No wonder heterosexuality a bit resembles rape." (127) This brutal adjudication of heterosexual relations figures them as inextricable from normalized sexual violence. By doing so, it speaks to a wider political debate. Namely, it points to Acker's ongoing conversation with radical feminism, across the 1970s and the 1980s. Just a year before *Empire of the Senseless* was published, Andrea Dworkin published *Intercourse* (1987). The work consists of an analysis of the power relations inscribed into heterosexual sex acts, and it became infamous for its presumed equation of heterosexuality and sexual violence. Dworkin's actual statement was that "violation is a synonym for intercourse" (Dworkin, 2009, 221), although this did not prevent mainstream media from distorting her claim. Acker hardly shared much common grounds with Dworkin, who staunchly indicted pornography as a system of sexopolitical violence. But here, she seems to retrace that stereotypical perception of Dworkin's argument – ironically emphasizing common misperceptions of it.

The photographer's aggression is one of many events that confirm Abhor's alienation from heterosexual society, far before the "revolutionary mess" has come about. And it makes her interrogate the very desirability of sexual activity:

> After that, I considered celibacy. My few friends in Paris had stopped fucking, for most sexual activity now caused physical illness and even death. My only straight male friend was celibate. Five years ago, he had been sleeping with a lovely social-climbing model who was, unknown to him, sleeping with other men and women. He knew she was publicly humiliating him. His face had been sat on once too often. The pangs of

> death drove him to abandon the cause of such pain, his sexuality. Being a romantic, Xovirax chose to remain faithful to his strongest orgasm or abandonment of identity. (64)

In Abhor's social circuit, heterosexuality is the exception, rather than the rule. And the one "straight friend" she refers to is gendered as male, so vectors of gender and sexual privilege are made to converge. At this point, sex has become catastrophic, and almost impossible. It is not sustainable, as a facet of interpersonal relations. In moments like this, Acker is and *isn't* talking about the AIDS crisis. Abhor's description of her friend's predicament drastically dramatizes the transformation of sexual relations, in terms of their very conditions of safety. Risk is both radicalized *and* generalized: it draws the defining boundaries of *any* form of sexual relation. Sex becomes, by definition, what some would describe as a "high risk [sexual] behavior." It is both clinically and socially unstable.[98]

Although it suggests something of the catastrophic impact of the AIDS crisis more generally (and amidst queer communities, especially), Acker's narrative in fact reverts its symbolic economy. First, because sexuality itself becomes necrotic, thus removing the focus from concrete forms of sexually transmitted illness (included, but not limited to, HIV); so-called "risk behaviors," which have since become the object of precautionary attention (including as the hygienic usage of needled in contexts of recreational drug use); or especially vulnerable groups of the population (specifically: black people, queer people, women, and the impoverished). The historical point may relay back to the AIDS epidemic. The political twist on this infra-text, however, is that crisis itself substitutes for non-critical (i.e., normative) sexuality. Sex, itself, is pathology.

The question at stake is not only *how* heterosexuality is described, but more importantly still, that it is *describable*. Because it is recognized, it can be discursively reconstructed or deconstructed. Because it is objectified, it no longer presents as obvious, self-evident, and self-present. Rather than being imperceivably reinstated as inherent to the pact actualized at each instance of reading, it is rendered as *something* within the scene of writing. Across *Empire*, Acker performs many such speech acts against the political fiction of heterosexuality, and its unequivocal standing as neutral and/or normal. Performed through speculative fiction, this "political

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[98] This expression is drawn directly from technical literature, concerned with the epidemiology of HIV/AIDS. Contextually, it is sometimes used as synonymous with "risky behavior" (which is habitually the favored term). For reference, see: Chawlam, Nishta and Siddarth Sarkar. "Defining 'High-risk Sexual Behavior' in the Context of Substance Use." January 2019. Journal of Psychosexual Health, Vol 1, Issue 1, 2019.

semiology" of heterosexuality remains important today, in a historical moment where sex, sexuality, and gender remain crucial sites of dispute and dissensus. Ongoing campaigns towards the de-pathologization of trans identities might be one of the strongest examples of such conflicts, on a global scale. Likewise, they exemplify the political uses of pathology, as a means of biopolitical governance.

On the historical medicalization of trans and queer people, Eric. A. Stanley writes:

> Inheriting a long history of being made suspect, trans/queer people, via the medicalization of trans identities and homosexuality, have been and continue to be institutionalized, forcibly medicated, sterilized, operated on, shocked, and made into objects of study and experimentation. Similarly, the historical illegality of gender trespassing and of queerness have taught many trans/queer folks that their lives will be intimately bound with the legal system. More recently, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has turned the surveillance technologies inward. One's blood and RNA replication became another site of susceptibility that continues to imprison people through charges of bio-terrorism, under AIDS-phobic laws. (Stanley, 7)

Stanley's summary portrayal of an ongoing history of institutional violence evinces the importance of medicalization in the constitution of trans and queer people as pathologic subjects, and the political instrumentality thereof. If anything, the pathologization of trans and queer people is concomitant with their subjectivation, and eventual articulation as political subjects. Institutions of power and institutions of care are never that distant. Medicine is the institution through which homophobic and transphobic violence is biopolitically – as well as necropolitically – actualized on the body. These processes of pathologization operate in tandem with socially generalized perceptions of gender disobedient or sexually dissident subjects. Necessarily, they depart from the standardized template of the cisgender and/or heterosexual subject. At the limit, they make heterosexuality coincide with the onto-epistemic definition of the baseline human body (within medical discourse); or of the human unconscious (within analytic discourse).[99]

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[99] Stanley's recognition of those histories of pathologization and medicalization that trans and queer subjects have been subjected to is nearly inevitably indebted to Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1978). Foucault's work has proven foundational for the contemporary project of queer theory and, to some extent, to that of trans studies as well. Foucault quite explicitly attributes the prohibitive and punitive functions of a set of concomitant discourses with a constructive or constitutive capacity; it is through them that gender disobedient and sexually dissident subjects find the conditions of possibility for their self-identification and self-articulation. Foucault argues: "There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the specifies and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and 'psychic hermaphrodism' made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of 'perversity'; but it also made possible the formation of a 'reverse' discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturality' be

But *Empire* disrupts heterosexuality's self-identity, by imagining its decomposition and deterioration as a binding structure of social (and sexual) relations. Furthermore, it linguistically emphasizes the materiality of heterosexuality as a political phenomenon. By re-marking that which goes unmarked or unremarked, *Empire* challenges not only the realist episteme of contemporary novel writing, but the authority of normative understandings of sexuality and identity, as underwritten by scientific positivism. The text disputes the underlying precepts governing hegemonic conceptions of (sexual) pathology, because its pathologizing speech acts read as artificial and intentional, distorting the equation between nature, heterosexuality, and truth.

This processual trope-reversal evinces the contingency of a social contract, the very coherence of which is based on its unequivocal self-identity, as part and parcel with the norm. The objectivity of heterosexuality, quite plainly, is put at stake by its objectification. But no homogenous ideal emerges in its place, discrete in conditions of articulation and expression. For one, queerness does not substitute for heterosexuality, within an abstract utopian paradigm. As we will see, it remains imbricated with heterosexuality, and proves no more resolutive or reparative a political fiction. It could not be, because it is of the same world.

The queer criticality of Acker's writing might just be *more* cogent and compelling where the very fact of heterosexuality is concerned. But when queer personae do figure, Acker's formal decisions suggest their distinctive standing, within a wider social order. For instance, early in the text, we read:

> Except for Manhattan, which had been left to the rich, all of the eastern American urban centres had been left to the packs of wild dogs, wild cats, and blacks who lived in and under the streets. There were no more whites there except for gays. (36)

In *Empire*, the critique of heterosexuality and the critique of whiteness are often intertwined, but they remain separate in key aspects. The unmaking of the one political fiction is seemingly concomitant with the unmaking of the other, but they are not presumed to be identical. In this passage, the use of collective nouns is important, because of the categorical divisions it performs, and the underlying taxologies it gestures towards. Rather than being referred to as "black people," "white people" or "gay people," each grouping is referred to through a collective noun.

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acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified." (Foucault, 1978, 101)

This simple formal decision strikes a dissonant chord today, when the propensity of collective nouns to produce a false sense of totality has been widely contested.

In a first instance, "blacks" are grouped with "wild dogs and wild cats." Their consignment to the scope of the inhuman or subhuman brutally attests to the political truth of systemic anti-blackness. Meanwhile, the marker "except for gays" produces an odd interval between the previous two groupings. "The gays," we are to take it, consist in an internally coherent and self-identical category – like "the blacks" or "the whites" do. But whereas these racial categories are produced through exclusionary counter-distinction, this third term could in fact interact with either of the two. Combined, they could describe specific subjects (i.e., a black, gay, person) or subject groups (i.e., white gay people). Instead, "the gays" seem to be imparted with an exceptional status in relation to the norm of whiteness and/or humanness. The only remaining "whites," they are the exception that proves the rule. Furthermore, given their singular standing, one might ask whether they place "the blacks" into relief as exclusively straight – again, through exclusionary counter-distinction.

Writing against the grain of normative sexuality provides a means to identify and defy gender norms at work in western culture at large. A finer question would be whether Acker's conceptual work with the categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality refers to a feminist politics primarily, or exclusively – and the subsequent centralization of gender as political fiction. Given the preponderance of feminist readings of Acker's work, and the dearth of queer readings comparable in scale and style, one might conclude so. Seemingly, where the sex/gender system is concerned, sex and sexuality are understood in a subsidiary capacity: sexual politics are subsumed into gender politics. In this reading, where sexuality – and sex acts, in particular – figure, they do so as instantiations of a gender hierarchy which subtends and underwrites all others.

My suggested reading rejects the reduction of critical engagement to either term because it disputes the tenability of separating sexuality and gender as disjunctive phenomena, to be understood in terms of either/or. My point is not to produce a queer critique in place of a feminist one, or vice-versa. Instead, I contend that *Empire* – like much of Acker's work – requires a queer feminist critique, capable of teasing out the intersectional imbrication of different facets of subjectivity and identity. These rarely translate into the terms of a "single-issue struggle," to cite

Audre Lorde's important formulation.[100] And if we consider the entanglement of gender disobedience and sexual dissidence expressed in the passages discussed so far, and recognize they participate of a wider textual continuum, we realize the text itself provides an answer of sorts.

Acker's political fictions report *both* to a feminist literary history, which includes the speculative subversion of patriarchal narrative, *and* to an understanding of the then incipient counter-tradition of queer theory, and a longer history of queer fiction. *Empire*, like *Blood and Guts* before it, charts a nuanced chartography of generative interactions between insubordinate female desire and prohibited queer desire. Moreover, the text is confident when confronting the definitional intersection between gender and sexuality Ultimately, the disjunctive split between "feminist" and "queer" strikes a much less dissonant chord than many of *Empire*'s other distortions and abrasions. That presumed separation never quite holds true.

This brings us to the last vector of our intersectional reading of *Empire of the Senseless*, and another fundamental facet of its political imagination. One way to describe it would be to cite the work's racial politics – its reconstructed fictions of race, or of racialization. But *Empire*'s critical approach to race is bound up with its concerted attack against empire, both as a conceptual metaphor and as a historical phenomenon. To discuss the text's critical relationship to the political fictions of blackness and whiteness is to raise the question of the text's abolitionist becoming: how it imagines the failure of empire, and a world that confronts its violent ends. The following section addresses these points, while placing into relief the project's confrontational attitude towards histories of colonialism, and the mythology of western modernity.

[100] Lorde, Audre. "Learning from the 60s." Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches. Crossing Press: 2007.

4. 5. "The end of the world of white men."[101]

There is an odd, discomfiting idea of race at work across *Empire*. It relies both on the reassertion of whiteness and blackness as categorical monads, enclosed from one another, and in their cross-contamination, through processes of semantic indetermination. Consider, for instance, Abhor's introduction as "part robot, and part black" (3).[102] This idiomatic syllogism produces a peculiar set of dictates, through logical exclusion. Abhor is not remarked as "part black, part white" (although she is), nor as "part human, part robot" (another possibility). Instead, Acker suggestively attributes only the negative (or excluded) term of either of these oppositions to her protagonist. For Abhor – or any character, for that matter – to be explicitly designated as "part white, part human" would prove redundant: the two terms are presumed to be complementary, and co-extensive. Whereas being "part black, part robot" excises her from the domain of the human on two different levels: while her technological artificiality renders her as meta-human or post-human, her blackness renders her as sub-human or inhuman.

Elsewhere, the text's representational grasp on the political fact of blackness seems less steady. When Abhor first arrives at the photographer's house, a "black man who lifted weights answered the door" (63-64). The photographer is immediately individuated through racialization. Even at a formal level, "black" is the primary qualifier of his characterization. Considering standardized models of literary discourse, this might seem unremarkable: the photographer's blackness is re-marked to distinguish him from other characters (i.e., those white, and unmarked). But Abhor's own identification as "part black" imbues the scene with a certain degree of ambiguity: it is difficult to gauge whether the prominence of his blackness works to evince his

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[101] This section draws its title from another original text of Acker's, "The End of the World of White Men." A brief prose piece, it was latter reworked and incorporated into the novel *Pussy, King of the Pirates* (1997), under the title "Once Upon a Time, Not Long Ago, O." See: Halberstam, Jack and Ira Livingston (eds). *Posthuman Bodies*. Indiana University Press: 1995 and Acker, Kathy. *Pussy, King of The Pirates*. Grove Press: 1997. By repurposing that title in this context, I wish to invoke how *Empire* underwrites the political dreaming emblematically insinuated by that sentence, and the poetics adjacent to it. Importantly, this same sentence resonates with the intra-textual rendition of "the end of the white world," through Agone and his brother's frescoes in "The Beginning of Criminality/The Beginning of Morning."

[102] The full line reads: "This is what Abhor, who's my partner, part robot, and part black, told me was her childhood:" (3). Spoken by Thivai, it is the first line in the text and the first instance of either character speaking. It sets the grounds for Abhor's early life narrative, and her ongoing characterization through Thivai's gaze.

alterity, or their shared identity. Certainly, the fact Abhor herself makes the distinction raises the question of why this information would be deictically meaningful. One strong possibility being, quite simply, that Acker defaults to a white-centric perceptual and linguistic attitude, even as she commits to the critique of race relations.

But *Empire's* construction of whiteness, as a world-engendering political fiction, is as important as its construction of blackness – or, for that matter, the more abstract category of "non-whiteness." The text persistently remarks the white norm, while envisioning a Paris both speculatively distant from the contemporary city and eerily realistic in its political proximity to it. This willingness to name whiteness, and thus, to materialize its political actuality through speculative narrative, sets *Empire* apart from either *Kathy Goes to Haiti* or *Blood* and *Guts in High School*. For one, its approach to the problem of whiteness is almost programmatic, and the political labor of its deconstruction is especially blunt. Moreover, because it articulates a radicalized epistemic standpoint, it evinces a more concrete perception of the problem of whiteness – and of the paradigmatic authority of whiteness – than is the case in other works. "White" figures as subject to play; "white subjects," as an object of formal critique. And where *Kathy Goes to Haiti* was styled with ironic acidity, *Empire's* poetic relation to white supremacy is visceral, violent, and explicit. The text knows it is entrenched, even embattled, within it.

At times, this critique of whiteness is tacit. It does not seem to report to an intentional cartography of race relations. But in key passages, that critique becomes central, and it evinces a firm conceptual grasp on the politics and poetics of whiteness. There, Acker's writerly sensitivity towards the actuality of these conflicts is strikingly multifaceted, shaping distinctive poetic formulae and a recognizable critical method. For all of its speculative animus, *Empire* is historically savvy and situated. It is strongly attuned to the many archives of colonialist exploitation and expropriation, but also to the necessity of working towards their disruption – be it through distortion, through recontextualization, or through acts of imaginative fabulation. In those moments, the text explicitly recognizes (and confronts) racism and colonialism, as historical systems fundamental to the onto-epistemic definition of western modernity. And because it stands *against* that paradigm, even its more casual (or subtle) gestures work towards upsetting regimented conceptions of race, and accordingly, of race relations.

Consider the following example. Having concluded her brief retelling of Xovirax's situation, Abhor remarks:

> But in those old days, those days of death, of a political turn to the right-wing then the only saviour seemed to be anything and anyone who was not white... It seemed to me that the body, the material, must matter. My body must matter to me. If my body mattered to me, and what else was any text: I could not choose to be celibate. (64)

In the context of "those old days," the transformation of a right-wing political paradigm can only be elicited by "anything" and/or "anyone" not white. Notably, this general claim does not bind "non-whiteness" exclusively – or even primarily – to the human, and the scope of human relations. Because it might as easily refer to things or abstractions, it reports to a non-subjective understanding of "non-whiteness," even though it figures as *the* savior. Subtly, this simple turn of phrase signals how the binary opposition between "whiteness" and "non-whiteness" is politically organized according to the binary opposition between "humanity" and "inhumanity." By doing so, it suggests a latent recognition of central arguments in the black radical tradition.

In Abhor's understanding, the transformation of the world-as-is cannot come to articulation (let alone to fruition) through those who inherit and master it. The political paradigm can only be perturbed by a turn towards its constitutive outsides, whereby other conditions of political imaging (and imagining) would upset the order of things. The non-white agent of political transformation is importantly unspecific: it is only negatively defined, by exclusion. It is not figured, nor is it imagined through any particular features. Their only determining characteristic is that they are not (and cannot be) white. Emphatically, this formulation re-marks the norm of whiteness, and invokes the definitional limits of its onto-epistemic identity. The near inescapability of its reach is troubled by this abstract invocation, which fundamentally points elsewhere (citing no place in particular) and otherwise (citing no project in particular). The pivot of political dreaming, then, lies somewhere at the limits of white supremacy, or even beyond them. Only the abstract position of non-whiteness – always already discerned as blackness – can expose and exploit the white world: its failings, its violences, its endings.

Immediately after, we read:

> One part of the Voodoo world is physical. The physical (in reference to a human, the body) an axis, crosses the other axis, mentality (in a human, the mind). A cross; a crossroads; the problem of human identity.

Jesus Christ.

Touissant L'Ouverture who used Voodoo to defeat Western hegemony said: 'If self-interest alone prevails with nations and their masters, there is another power. Nature speaks in louder tones than philosophy or self-interest.' (64-65).

This passage exemplifies the sudden shifts in stylistic and affective register which characterize *Empire*. Here, a seemingly intimate rapport gives way to an informative one, and a more emotive tone and turn of phrase dissipate. The passage is didactic, directly conveying information without emotionally enmeshing it into Abhor's experience. Which is not to say these comparatively impersonal considerations are at a complete remove from Abhor's more intimate experiences. The dyadic separation of mind and body, which we have seen Acker address through the indelible influence of Descartes on western thought, is a problem that motivates much (if not most) of *Empire*'s conceptual narrative, and Abhor's storyline more specifically. Of more immediate interest, however, is how the body and mind figure in counter-distinction to those tropes standardized within the western tradition. Physicality and mentality cross-connect, and at that juncture, the problem of human identity comes to articulation. The Christian cross is recodified within the Voodoo symbolic, as the image of a cross-connection or intersection between two separate domains of the one world or worldview.

The interpolation of "Jesus Christ" disrupts this informative register, with a keenly ironic sense of tone and timing. In a sense, it is completely contextually adequate, following through on the figuring of the cross within Voodoo cosmology. But it also reads as an absurdist interjection, perhaps one of frustration or surprise, which punctuates a more structured mode of address. Finally, the rapport moves from Voodoo – and through Jesus Christ – to Toussaint L'Ouverture. A key leader in the Haitian revolution and one of the founders of its racialized democracy, L'Ouverture previously figured in *Kathy Goes to Haiti* (as discussed in Chapter 3). There, Kathy encounters a public monument in his memory, as she travels across the country. Here, Abhor cites him directly, as if to attest to the political powers of Voodoo cosmology, in counter-distinction to the worldviews affirmed by western dominion. In his words, nature holds the power to overwrite conflicts of national or philosophical interest, placing human self-determination in check. As "another power," it is the one which draws the outer limits of the political.

Yet L'Ouverture himself is subject to an act of creative misappropriation – perhaps unintentionally. The statement Abhor cites actually stems from Abbé Raynal's *Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of Europeans in the East and West Indies*, first published in France in 1770. Even then, Acker's likelier source-text would have been John R. Beard's *Toussaint L'Ouverture: A Biography and Autobiography* (1863). Published nearly a century later, Beard's work remained a staple in studies of L'Ouverture's life across the 20th century, and via footnote, it cites Raynal's own work. In context, the full passage reads:

> If self-interest alone prevails with nations and their masters, there is another power. Nature speaks in louder tones than philosophy or self-interest. Already are there established two colonies of fugitive negroes, whom treaties and power protect from assault. Those lightnings announce the thunder. A courageous chief only is wanted. Where is he, that great man whom Nature owes to her vexed, oppressed and tormented children? Where is he? He will appear, doubt it not: he will come forth and raise the sacred standard of liberty. This venerable signal will gather around him the companions of his misfortune. More impetuous than the torrents, they will everywhere leave the indelible traces of their just resentment. Everywhere people will bless the name of the hero who shall have reestablished the rights of the human race; everywhere will they raise trophies in his honour. (Beard, 41)

While L'Ouverture did not profess these words himself, he is known to have read them, and felt enticed by the political promise of Raynal's writing. Within Raynal's projective political fiction, L'Ouverture would occupy that nearly mythic position of the "220ourageous chief," capable of expressing the collective will of his people and restore its rights. Within this visionary symbolic, L'Ouverture himself would be born from nature's presumed debt to those "vexed, oppressed and tormented": the enslaved, the colonized, the occupied. Beard certainly seemed to presume as much, claiming L'Ouverture yearned to embody Raynal's vision as a personal standard.[103] ✓

One possible reading of this misquotation is that it is plainly accidental: Acker unknowingly lost track of the juxtaposition of different texts, and the exact source of this passage. Another, that by rewriting its locutionary position, the misquotation makes a finer (if obtuse) point

[103] Beard hypothesizes that reading Raynal's work would have profoundly transformed L'Ouverture's self-perception:

> These eloquent words, says Dr. Baird, must have produced a deep and pervading impression on a mind so susceptible as that of Toussaint. […] Dwelling on those principles, pondering those words, consulting his own heart, and reflecting on his own condition, *he came in time to feel that he was the man here designated*, and that in the designation there was a call from Providence which he dared not disregard. (my emphasis, Beard, 41)

about the politics of attribution: where Beard would have L'Ouverture personify Raynal's vision, Acker would have him *envision* it himself, as the standpoint from which he undertook revolutionary political action. Either way, this citational confusion exemplifies the complicated processes of misattribution at stake in the reconstruction of histories of blackness, and of black lives more concretely. From this perspective, whether Acker was confused by the archive or sought to confound it seems somewhat beside the point. What speaks loudest is the permutability of locutionary positions, to the extent it evinces the enfoldment of the black political imagination *within* the white political imagination.

This sequence of considerations concludes with a brutalist rendition of the technologies of subjection that were deployed against the enslaved, by those same (white) masters Raynal refers to. In fact, Acker produces a primordial scene of sorts – albeit one radically disparate from those figured by Freudian orthodoxy. This conflict bears little resemblance to the libidinal and representational dramas of the "mommy-daddy-me" triad, as derisorily described by Deleuze and Guattari. Rather, this scene of subjection is bound to the colonialist exploitation and expropriation of both bodies and territories. Through it, the truth of political violence is rendered indelibly on the flesh. We read:

> These masters, white, had poured burning wax on parts of other bodies, arms and hands and shoulders, emptied boiling cane sugar over heads of their slaves, burned others alive, roasted some on slow fires, filled some other bodies with gunpowder and blown them up by a match, buried others in sand or dirt up to the necks then smeared the heads in honey, so that huge flies would devour them, placed some next to nests of red ants and wasps, made others drink their own piss eat their own shit and lick off the saliva of other slaves. *The minds of whoever survived lived in and were pain*. (my emphasis, 65)

The passage methodically lists the various forms of tortuous physical violence that enslaved (black) bodies were subject to, in the context of incarceration and forced labor. Importantly, it is emotionally featureless: neither Acker nor Abhor emote through this concrete summation of the brutal techniques of subjection that enslaved bodies were subject to. It is an affectless description. In it, the enslaved (black) body is construed as so much pliable matter, subject to the will of the white masters, who instrumentalize it as an experimental means for radical violence. Markedly, this violence is not rationalized as instrumental: what motivates these actions remains opaque, and unimportant.

Yet the actions themselves are saturated with political meaning. The use of fire calls back to a Christian symbolic, whereby it holds a purifying capacity – or a punitive one, as in the case of hellfire. Fire features in various of these acts of radical violence, either directly (as when the enslaved are burnt alive) or metonymically (as when burning wax is poured on their skin, or a lit match is used to trigger their explosion). The use of "boiling cane sugar" may read as one of the least radically destructive of these actions. However, its symbolic and sensorial brutality stems from its re-interpretation of the plantation economy: through fire, the sugar cane the enslaved (black) body is forced to cultivate and collect is weaponized against it. In this case, the imbrication of a regime of economic violence with a regime of corporeal violence is rendered brutally explicit, when inscribed on the flesh.

The techniques that do not make use of fire refer to the enslaved body's abjection. Or, more to the point, they perform its abjection. That body is buried alive, as if it were dead already. It is left to serve as foodstuff for various insects. It is made to break down the boundaries which define it, and its separation from others, by those gestures which confuse excretion and ingestion. Enacted with the purpose of inflicting radical hurt (both physical and psychic), these actions treat the flesh of the enslaved as undifferentiated organic matter, reduced to its inhuman immanence. They objectify that flesh, insofar as they demonstrate is expendability as an instrument of and for economic production. They express the immateriality of enslaved subjectivity, insofar as it can be (and seemingly *is*) reduced to the fact of the flesh. Finally, and fundamentally, they evince the objectivity – the *objecthood*, even – of that flesh, as something dispossessed of personhood.

The final sentence, and its unwillingness to decide between "lived in (pain)" or "were pain" says something important about the experience of pain. More importantly, it *does* something to it. These minds remained *in* pain, insofar as their immersion in a sensorial and/or emotional state of distress was inescapable. By force, they inhabited that state: lived through and within it. But pain is not figured as a defined, finite state or situation. These minds *were* pain, because the radical disruptions inflicted through that state of distress upset the definitional boundaries between *it* and *them*. As pain completely envelops and saturates their sensations, it transforms the experienced truth of these minds and bodies forever. It usurps them of their bounded separation from suffering as an isolate, or individuated, facet of experience. Even then, this rephrasing retains the grammatical inescapability of the subject/object separation: it/them. Acker's deconstructive use of

the copula is especially evocative because it troubles that separation, to invoke the radically dispossessive effects of pain. The disjunctive slash signifies something beyond the logic of meaning. Her turn of phrase painfully pressures the body into definitional crisis, transforming presumed relations of possession: the state the self is in supersedes, even substitutes for, the self's being.

The disjunctive condition of being/in, inflicted by the foundational violences of colonialism is both physical and mental in kind. As Acker writes, recontextualizing the scene within the vocabulary of Voodoo cosmology: "Mentality is the mirror of physicality. The body is a mirror of the mind. A mirror image is not exactly the same as what is mirrored." (65) This same vocabulary is deployed to describe Abhor's predicament, as she confronts her newfound conditions of solitude in exile. For her, the cross-section of physicality and mentality is where an overwhelmingly powerful desire comes to articulation:

> [It] seemed to me that my sexuality was a source of pain. That my sexuality was the crossroads not only of my mind and body but of my life and death. My sexuality was ecstasy. It was my desire which, endless, was limited neither by a solely material nor by a solely mental reality. (65)

Sexuality figures as Abhor's own, subjective wound. Its reach surpasses the domains of both the physical and the material, and true to Voodoo cosmology, it binds the realms of life and death together. Thus, the libidinal and the cosmological are entwined. However, this stark realization of radical desire is quickly surprised by another. Suddenly, Abhor finds herself captured within her own scene of subjection:

> Memories of my identity flowed through my head. I got up slowly, my eyes fixed on the muzzle of a black automatic pistol. The barrel seemed to be attached to my throat by a taut string. I couldn't see the string. (65)

Abhor is confronted with the threat of immanent violence, with potentially fatal consequence. Just as suddenly, a perception of the person holding that gun (and enacting that violence) takes shape:

> He was old, the Parisian, and white. Taller than my skeleton. His facial features looked female. According to my memory. (…) But my memory's always been poor. It's as if it lies somewhere in the deserts of North Africa, under shifting sands. The glory of my mind was formless. (66)

Abhor's recognition of her predicament abruptly interrupts her previous musings on Toussaint L'Ouverture, on Voodoo cosmology, and the radical violence of slavery. She intonates

no surprise about these circumstances, and the text itself bears no obvious mark of the violent shift in perception it suggests. Similarly, her description of the man threatening her is neutral, emotionally unremarkable. Purely descriptive, it seems almost aloof. A sense of alienation from her immediate surroundings is exacerbated by her own abstract, approximative perception of her memories. As a result, the background against which she interacts with the "old Parisian" seems, importantly, formless.

This encounter adds yet another direction to the narrative arch of the chapter, which is strained and striated already. Like any preceding scene or narrative fragment, it becomes enmeshed into a multifocal narrative dynamic, which swiftly centers and decenters it. Because these apparent interruptions transform into new narrative plateaus – which are then arranged or rearranged in interaction with others – the narrative finds its own, counter-intuitive momentum. Finally, this combinatory attitude towards narrative action engenders distinctive connections between the regional and the general, and in a sense, between the micro-political and the macro-political. Thus, when we read: "France owned North Africa. It was and is all a matter of devaluations: the owners of money or of total devaluation are invisible." (66), we are simultaneously struck by the blunt functionality of that statement, and savvy to its complicated entanglement in Abhor's intimate experience. This same, unsteady sense of scope characterizes the text in general.

In fact, while Abhor is caught in interpersonal conflict with the "old Parisian," a much vaster movement transforms Paris, just beyond his window. Abhor looks outside:

> Outside the windows Paris was in chaos. Thousands of Algerians were walking freely. Ragged. Dirty. Sticks. Dolls. Voodoo. Blood flowed eyeballs out. Hatred distaste from mistreated on every level desecration of human being botched up face. Blood flowed out of wound cornea resembled mad dog's or AIDS' case fingers extended into ivory carved razor blades. The uses of primitive art." (68)

The state of general disarray Abhor witnesses is transpersonal, even objectual in scope. Figures of personhood merge into generic traits, symbolic abstractions, bodily phenomena, shards of non-sense. Revolutionary commotion cannot be expressed through conventional grammar, so sentence structures bend and break accordingly. Because the revolution upsets the organization of perception, it upsets the organization of discourse as well. Acker deploys a discontinuous prose style to convey this. Its construction is unsteady, ill-sutured. Even musicalized in moments, as through the alliterative play of plosives and sibilants that flow through the sentence: "Hatred

distaste from mistreated on every level desecration of human being botched up face." Emphatically visual, the excerpt in question– probably crafted through selective use of the cut-up technique – produces an impressionistic vision of the uprisings.

Abhor remains both keenly attentive to her immediate surroundings, and aware of the chaos ensuing outside. Through her restricted perspective, a complex account of the revolutionary moment begins to take shape:

> White scholars have written essays. Once again a modern reminds us that the Ancients, the very scientists and philosophers who have transmitted present-day civilization to us, from Herodotus and Diodorus, from Greece to Rome, unanimously recognized that they borrowed that civilization from blacks on the banks of the Nile: on these bones the North Africans' human flesh hung like rags or banners of emotion. (68)

The Algerian revolution raises questions of history and possession. In this case, the western tradition's own foundations are at stake. Subjects of knowledge remain vague "white scholars" are only identified in terms of their racialized standing vis-à-vis the archive, while the theory of repossession proposed is attributed, quite simply, to "a modern." The end of the world of white men raises the question of from whom that world was stolen, and through whose tools or talents it was molded. The tangibility of (black) flesh contrasts with the ineffable physicality of the Parisian, and the tenuous identity of those who hold this knowledge. At the same time, the transformation of that flesh onto canvasses of emotion (whether intact or torn apart) contrasts with western rationality, and its sublation of physicality. Through modern recognition of ancient knowledge, another foundational myth appears.

This reconstructed account of the western tradition's beginnings places the Algerian revolution within a more complicated history of possession and repossession, beginning at the banks of the Nile and the (black) flesh. Because of it, the revolution holds a novel sense of historical continuity. It is even familiar, in the most vivid and literal of senses, as when Abhor encounters ancestry amidst the confusion: "From that room up there, I could hear the old women. My grandmothers." (68) Intergenerational histories resound through the revolutionary moment, as it actualizes traumas past.

In tandem, the old Parisian's whiteness is marked, and re-marked yet again. The text emphatically renders his body as an object of readerly attention, his whiteness salient against the background of black revolt. Abhor perceives him as a "ghost" – albeit one quite unlike the

immaterial presence of her foremothers. We read that “in the black” of his apartment, he “looked almost pure white” (68) Eventually, he reveals to Abhor exactly what is at stake, and whose fate is in question:

> The goat explained that, sick to death of the world of humans, of how humans hurt each other, he was about to suicide. But he cared for me, just like Hades for Proserpine, he was going to take me with him. He was sick to death even in his heart. (…) The old man, who had probably been through all forms of shock, smiling said, ‘One must learn how to suicide in this world, for that’s all that’s left us.” (69)

The old Parisian rationalizes his decision to commit suicide – and to kill Abhor in the process – as a radical rejection of the world-as-is. Or more specifically, of the world of human relations, and the degrees of suffering embedded therein. Evocatively, he resorts to the language of myth himself, to make sense of his bond to Abhor and the entwinement of their fates. And he invokes a collective person – “all that’s left *us*” –, that suggests his is a shared situation. This collective person does not remain unmarked, and thus presumably coincident with humanity. In fact, he continues: “What do I mean by ‘us’? We who rule… Probably because there’s nothing left for ‘us’ to do. A form of… civilized degeneracy. ‘We’ are…” (69). His nihilistic standpoint is generalized to those in power. Concurrently, the selective use of quotation marks estranges that collective category, setting it apart formally.

But his explanation is interrupted: “There were loud sounds in the street. Even a speech.” (70) An unspecified speaker, who seems to represent the Algerian revolution’s collective will, addresses the masters in abstract: “Bravo, our masters” they proclaim. They address those in power with confrontational acuity, and caustic energy:

> ‘Let this be your cry: MASTER. MASTER MYSTERY MEESTER WANNA COCK SUCK. With this cry – MASTER – let your places of business – our bodies and minds – resound. With this cry – MASTER – reap your profits in us, out of us. With this cry, by means of your press, press and oppress us. Oh. For then, pressed down by your irons, we shall become harder and stronger than iron. We who are darker than iron. By means of this cry – MASTER – your media have pressed their way into our middles. Doctors, by means of your media, you have successfully operated in us and turned us into stars. Now we shall burn away.
>
> ‘Bravo, masters, on your success! Like Prometheus, you have created fire or us.’ (70).

Revolutionary discourse expresses the absorption and incorporation of normalized structures of meaning, pointing to a structural imbrication between the dissenting and those in power. The latter position is confronted, in a first instance, through distortive phonetic play. The

revolutionary subject produces an incantation of sorts, that refigures the master's (linguistic) standpoint through alliterative disarray. Somewhat musicalized, this invocation of the master's standpoint triggers a set of recognitions – even reassertions – of the order of things, but also of its unprogrammed aftereffects.

For one, the Algerian's bodies and minds figure as part of the apparatuses of economic exploitation deployed by their masters. Physically and mentally, they serve a technical or properly *instrumental* function within the system of (racial) capitalism. Once more, the non-white (or black) body figures as pliable, ductile material, compliant with the controlled deployment of certain techniques. The use of irons on these bodies and minds pressures them into something "harder and stronger" than iron: presumably, more useful, and importantly, more valuable. The flesh is not made to disappear in this scene of technological transformation; it remains distinctive, still "darker than iron." And like iron, it matters most as an adaptable resource, with concrete economic utility.

The speech invokes industry, and the industrial transformation of mind and body that magnifies their capacities as means of production. But it points to core institutions, as well: the media, and medicine. Political meaning is expressed through form, as much as through content: the fact the *media* work the *middle* sound truthful only insofar as it is musical. The obfuscation of the distinction between the conventional press and the wider range of contemporary media fortifies this formal effect. And medicine, metonymically represented by the physician, intervenes into the flesh, completing this set of physical and mental transformations.

Yet the various institutions and material means deployed by the masters to instrumentally transform the enslaved and exploited are what defines their insurrectionary power – even, their "fire." Technologies of subjection become technologies of subjectivation. They craft the conditions for revolution, by altering (though suffering) body and mind alike. Fire, first used against the enslaved to discipline and punish them, now exceeds its stated intent. The exploited *are* the fire, much like they *were* the pain they experienced. Furthermore, by invoking Prometheus, revolutionary discourse arks back to mythic time and mythic meaning. The Algerians' collective revolt is recontextualized within the western imaginary, as yet another myth of creation.

At this point, the old Parisian reveals his personal history. He once knew a "rich man," who he hesitantly admits was his lover. But "because he was so unutterably intelligent," the man "became allergic to the point of autism. Autism within and without itself." The autistic lover is

then compared to a cat, which "when given two separate and opposite commands (…) becomes unable to move." This sharp metaphor for psychic distress speaks to fear, and its radical capacity to condition agency. Much like Agone, the rememorated lover is paralyzed by contradiction. But the old Parisian sees nothing exceptional in this condition. On the contrary, he finds "most people in this [pre-revolutionary] society are now autistic" (72). Barely having finished his story, he falls unconscious himself. Enraptured in memory, his pistol falls to the floor.

Abhor is unmoved by the old Parisian's story, or by his own lapse into "total insensibility" (72). He is not an emphatic interlocutor, with whom a point of connection might take shape. If anything, he is symptomatic – in his history, in his course of action – of the paradigm of mastery. Thus, while she does not think much of the "old fart" who just threatened her at gun point, Abhor does ponder on the collective process of suicide carried out by those in power, and the role this process impinges on her:

> There are different forms of suicide. Autism is a suicide in life. The rich who have suicided in life are taking us, the whole human world, as it they love us, into death. It seemed to me that any form of human suicide was neither a necessary nor an unnecessary act, but an act of unbearable anger, an act of murder in which the murderer self-destroys and desires to destroy the whole world." (72)

The old Parisian's suicidal course of action is placed in perspective. First, it is made to signify through the lens of class relations: his attitude is exemplary of a mass phenomenon amidst the wealthy. "The rich," who dominate relations of possession in the most concrete sense, ready for death and are willing to take the world – i.e., *their* world – along with them. Their suicidal ideation is not rendered meaningful as instrumental (or non-instrumental). Instead, Abhor intuits that it expresses "unbearable anger," which can only take shape as radical violence. And because the masters confuse themselves with the world of their making, that act of radical violence would annihilate the world by the same gesture it would annihilate them. "No suicide is guiltless," Abhor concludes, savvy to the violent urges embedded in this will for self-destruction. This a political understanding of suicide, insofar as it places the masters' anger in relation with a tacit interpretation of the world, and their respective standing in it. Just as importantly, it is an apathetic one, with little care or concern to spare towards those who would have the world erased along with them.

Aptly, the Algerian's own repulsion towards the world-as-is presents as a disavowal of human society: "Because, for the Algerians, the world of humans was creepy disgusting horrible nauseous shit-filled exacerbating revolting, humans not revolting, green smelling of dead rats…" (73) This run-on sentence, nearly nine lines long, engages the poetics of abjection to perform the opposite labor of demarcation and denunciation than it usually would. The Algerians stand as a general subject of articulation, whereas *humans* are reviled, through the language of disgust, of debasement, of dejection. A standardized symbolic economy is reversed, to produce the human as the necessary – and unwanted – other to the Algerians' self-identity. Ultimately, because entropic violence and necrotic vileness characterize the whole of humanity, the Algerians can only reject the tenets of human (i.e., western) society: "The Algerians, in their carnivals, embraced nonsense, such as Voodoo, and noise." (73) The revolution climaxes in disillusionment, and a confrontation with the emptiness remaining after those who mastered the pre-revolutionary world have departed.

For the most part, I have emphasized how impersonal the revolutionary process is: it involves multiple personae, agents, and speakers. It is not contained by a propertarian position of mastery over its flow, its objectives, or its meanings. Quite on the contrary: it decentralizes the hypothetical revolutionary subject, and it performs a range of dispossessive effects, on both subjects and objects. It is quite unlike Raynal's idyllic fiction of anti-colonial leadership, or L'Ouverture's presumed embodiment of that ideal. But the revolution does have its organizers, and perhaps even a leader. Importantly, he only figures as such after the revolutionary process is well under way. His name is Mackandal, and he is introduced through an origin story of sorts, which details his childhood and his rejection of white dominion:

> [Mackandal] wanted to unite his people and drive out the white Parisian owners. (…) Until then, his words were the words of hate. Mackandal was an orator, in opinion even of Mitterrand, equal in his eloquence to the French politicians and intellectuals, and different only in superior vigour. (74)

François Mackandal was, indeed, an important opponent to French colonial rule – in 18th century Haiti. A maroon leader, he was part of organized insurgences against colonial power in Haiti, and mobilized slaves to empoison their white masters (with indigenously produced concoctions). He also participated of direct, physical attacks on plantations, and their owners. While his eloquence was, indeed, praised and positively compared to that of European speakers,

this observation was made by Trinidadian historian C.L.R. James – author of *The Black Jacobins* (1938) – and not by François Mitterrand, the French President from 1981 to 1995.

In fact, Mackandal's insurrectionary efforts are temporally reinterpreted, now lasting from 1981 to 1985. As a result, they present as roughly contemporaneous with the novel's composition, and Acker's experiences living in the U.K. This transformation of temporal frameworks has another, more important effect: it makes the colonial paradigm coincide with the Hatcher-Reagan paradigm of 1980s U.S. and U.K. politics. And it strongly suggests the formal distinction between the two paradigms cannot hold, because they are one and the same. By substituting the colony for the metropolis and the black historian for the white politician, Acker manipulates disparate sediments of the history of French colonialism, representing them as coincident both in time and in kind. And by doing so, she produces a tacit critique of the endurance of those same models of colonialist exploitation and governance across time, and well into the 20th century.

Mackandal does not aim to reclaim possession over Paris, by codifying into law the Algerians and/or the blacks' legitimate belonging, or ownership over "the slums, the shadows, the alleyways, the deserted Metro stations" (76) they inhabit. Nor does he envision any reparation or reform from the majority white population. Shaped by the white world from infancy, and weary of the necropolitical limits of black life under white supremacy, he knows better. "Mackandal was no longer interested in petty violence: he dreamed of paradise, a land without whites. He determined to get rid of every white." (76-77) Only the annihilation of white lives can bring forth "paradise," and another chance to inhabit the world. Eventually, he takes cation:

> One day Mackandal arranged for the poisoning of every upper-middle and upper-class apartment in Paris. The old man didn't need to suicide. While due to their beloved, almost worshipped, victuals, the white Parisians writhed around bands of Algerians and other blacks appeared out of their shadows and alleyways. (77)

Like the historical figure, this fictional avatar of Mackandal resorts to poisoning as his primary tactic of anti-white violence and opposition. The narrative emphasizes how whiteness coincides with a range of privileges, including economic ones. Thus, his attack is geared towards the richer sections of the population, and underlying relations of material possession. The mass poisoning o white Paris renders the masters' suicidal ideation redundant – but it does not alter its meaning. The old Parisian decides to suicide because he is fully cognizant of his world's intrinsic,

inalienable definition by the necrotic: what he describes as its "degeneracy." Mackandal, on the other hand, was born into confrontation with the inescapable violences of white society. Ultimately, their wills converge on the necessity of white death, through dissymmetric recognitions of the white world as unbearable.

The narrative often signals how the fates of the master (i.e., the white subject) and the slave (i.e., the black subject) are entwined, and overdetermined by their mutual imbrication. Abhor's encounter with the old Parisian maps onto these same, overdetermined positions of power. Because of the imbrication of the two standpoints, insurrectionary dreaming first takes shape through available structures of meaning: it departs from the representational grammars of power. It follows that the revolution sometimes reads as a specular realization of prevailing models of power and meaning, even as it disputes them. A strong example of this is the recurrence of fire, within the revolutionary moment. As the effects of mass poisoning set in, the Algerians, "other blacks," and a group of Spanish sailors ("longtime anarchists") break into the homes of the rich (77-78). In the process:

> The flames of cigars and lit candles overflowing the churches falling on this mass of garbage ignited it, starting thousands of tiny fires which finally had to grow. The whole city was in flames. In the middle, a very tall very thin black man stood. Finally the winds, instead of fanning fires, swirled the dead ashes which used to be a city. (78)

The fires that consume Paris are not figured as intentional, or as due retribution for the suffering first inflicted on the bodies and minds of the enslaved. But fire, with its own impersonal agency, completes a cycle that began with the multiple techniques of torture enacted on the enslaves, as described by Abhor earlier in the chapter. And within the scope of just three sentences, the city of Paris is made to disappear. This event reads as abruptly as rendered here: there is no narrative preamble for the incident, which swiftly erases the city completely. The winds, another elemental and impersonal force, fail to assuage the flames. Instead, they swiftly draft the city's endings into nothing.

Fire will figure once again, as Mackandal is captured and punished. There, it retrieves a more instrumental capacity, as a means of capital punishment. After a group of U.S. soldiers successfully arrest Mackandal, they decide to burn him alive. Already aflame, Mackandal manages to free himself and flee from the scene. His ability to do so is not attributed to his individual will

or desire. Instead, an impersonal force interferes yet again. And an anonymous one, at that: "His body began to shake, not in spasms, but regularly, not as if from flames, but as if possessed." Whatever possesses Mackandal enables him to escape: "With a single almost invisible spasm the black leader in flames succeeded in wrenching himself out of his handcuffs." Something beyond the reach of his consciousness engenders the conditions for his freedom, and he ultimately escapes. Confounded, the U.S. soldiers thus fail to reassert control over the revolutionary process, or even to enact retributive justice. And although Mackandal disappears, the process he ignited continues without him: "Poisonings of whites continued: finally the Algerians won Paris. Except that more than a third of the city was now ash." (80)

At this point, Abhor has fully receded into the narrative background – presumably to retell the events detailed so far. When the chapter draws to an end, she reencounters Thivai, in the wreckage of what was once Paris. The representation of the city's destruction and of its vestigial remainders is pivoted on the physical metaphor of "ash," and its cartographical relocation. Abhor refers to the debris as "that city of ash" (81). After encountering Thivai, the two "looked at Paris which was now a third world." (82) Finally, Thivai gazes at the "black city. Black except for the white ash." (82) One of the last, most potent distortions Acker performs through this speculative fiction is the transmutation of Paris into something else, somewhere else. It can no longer figure in cartographies of power, capital, and dominion as it did before. Burnt down, it is absorbed into the generic, geopolitical rubric of the so-called "third world." Even then, rather than one amidst various locations within that "third world," Paris presents as "*a* third world" of its own.

The Algerians have been successful, insofar as Paris (and metonymically, the country of France) have been dispossessed of their geopolitical location within the west, and within the project of western hegemony. Materially, both city and country have become their own unwanted other. The metropolis is now indistinguishable from the colonies it once mastered. The imagistic opposition between "black city" and "white ash" is especially evocative. At the level of visual iconography, it reverts a racialized symbolic economy. After the Algerian revolution, the city itself renders as black, punctuated only by the whiteness of ash. Ash marks the homogenous blackness of the geographical background, as residual noise. It figures the demise of the white bourgeoisie, and of the powers that be. Whiteness becomes visible, salient even, only because it is no longer dominant. Now, the dynamic opposition between blackness and whiteness expresses the endings

of the latter, as the result of collective black action – along with various impersonal interferences (some of them, elemental).

But what to make of this outcome, from a personal or interpersonal standpoint? Amidst the wreckage, Abhor comes to a striking realization: "'That old man was my real father'. As soon as I said this, I knew it was true" (82). She is referring to the old Parisian, whose tale of suicidal despondency enveloped her while the uprisings erupted outside. This sudden recognition is important on a larger narrative scale. *Real* stands for *biological*, as opposed to her adoptive father, whose various acts of sexual violence are portrayed in the book's first chapter. But as she herself has emphasized, Abhor is an unreliable narrator: her relationship to her memories is remote, abstract, and tentative. Thus, it is especially resonant that this belated recognition of her familial link to the old Parisian occurs at the precise moment she articulates it. Her intimate reality is still in the making, and it takes shape through imprecise linguistic action.

This recognition could cause a narrative pivot, whereby familial histories are recentered in the text, as they were across the first two chapters. Instead, it figures as one amidst multiple variables which interact in revolutionary time, and the estranged temporality of its aftermath. It cannot signify, if not in interaction with a wider array of realizations and confrontations, which occur both at a micro-political level and a macro-political one. Because the revolutionary process encompasses so many disparate strands of information and emotion, Abhor's realization reads as an event both propitiated by and proper to the Algerian revolution as a collective phenomenon.

Finally, Abhor's retrospective places the problem of property into sharp relief, while troubling the limited scope of the personal and/or the impersonal:

> The Algerians had taken over Paris so they would own something. Maybe, soon, the whole world. 'The old man: there's something else about him. My father's no longer important cause interpersonal power in this world means corporate power. The multinationals along with their computers have changed and are changing reality. Viewed as organisms, they've attained immortality via bio-chips. Etc. Who needs slaves anymore? So killing someone, anyone, like Reagan or the top IBM executive board members, whoever they are, can't accomplish anything,' I blabbed, and I wondered what would accomplish anything, and I wondered if there was only despair and nihilism, and then I remembered. (83)

At heart, the Algerian revolution aims to attain ownership where there was none: the Algerians sought repossession. But Abhor's tenuous perception of her biological father triggers

another realization, pertaining to the conditional limits of revolutionary action. Individual figures of authority (such as her father) cannot be decisive agents of political power, because economic structures supersede and survive them. Encoded as information, the multinationals are technologically autonomous from human action. They function as independent organisms of exploitation. Thus, the totality of material, economic, and informational relations cannot be disputed through interpersonal conflict, or individual political action. Abhor, Mackandal, Abhor's father… No individual's course of action can perturb the impersonal permanence of these structures of power.

This finer political point doubles as a more intimate recognition of Abhor's biological father's ultimate irrelevance. The overwhelming scope of political power overwrites the meanings of interpersonal conflict. Because interpersonal power only exists impersonally (i.e., as corporate power), interpersonal conflict cannot matter. And where "L'Ouverture" had affirmed nature at that "other power" that encompasses relations of power and national interest, now it is *technology* which outlines the domain of the political. Abhor's confrontation with the inescapable reach of technologies of information (and the relations of power they actualize) also shapes her perception of the post-revolutionary moment. Because she intuits the insignificance of individual political action –even, of any kind of political action -, the post-revolutionary moment reads as a nihilistic denouement.

Abhor has nothing left to make of her relationship to the city of Paris, to the revolutionary process, or to her biological father. Unmoored, she prepares to leave. A "tall thin man" (82) – much like the one seen standing amidst the flames – tells her of a boat, through which she can leave the city. At this juncture, Paris signifies nothing but death or disaster. Thus, the boat figures both as a "lifeboat" and as an "escape pod." It provides the means of passage from death to life. As it approaches, Abhor is surprised by remembrance: "The body of an old man lay on the boat." (82) The vessel will lead Abhor outwards from death, and the enclosure within it she has experienced across the chapter. But is also confronts her with the immanence of mortality, and that of her own personal history. "In the boat my father I had never known was dead." (83) Before she can finally depart from the city of ash, Abhor must face her father – and his death – one last time.

This unexpected encounter figures the intersection between the macro-political and the micro-political with brutal acuity. Like the white ash punctuating the landscape, the old man's

dead body signals the demise of the paradigm of white dominion. At the same time, it invokes Abhor's confrontation with her own mortality, as the effect of that paradigm's necrotic intentions towards itself, and towards others. Finally, this body is singled out from an emotional point of view: although it is not familiar, it is *familial*. Abhor is faced with the persistence of her histories, within the same vessel that will transport her away from death. Through this dead body, the paradigms of coloniality and Oedipality sharply coalesce. One might say it figures the point of their convergence. This is the body of the white master. But it is also the body of the unknown father. Its innate authority forces Abhor's attention towards it – along with the narrative's own. The political fictions proper to either paradigm seem to unify in this scene, and the physical presence that pivots it. Obliquely, it expresses something of the concomitant histories of coloniality and Oedipality – even as each paradigm confronts its historical (and imaginative) failure.

Implicit in this recognition of what was – and to an extent, of what was not – is the idea that a certain cycle, both personal and political in scale, has come to a violent end. Abhor, as so often is the case across *Empire*, finds herself beginning anew. This recursive relationship with the incipient is, in my understanding, the single strongest feature of Abhor's narrative trajectory. Repeatedly, she finds herself caught up in the labor of articulating a range of recognitions and realizations. But rather than producing conclusions, these engender new conditions of doubt, of uncertainty, of instability. At every turn, they point to the necessity of beginning *again*. Having detailed Abhor's implication in both the revolutionary process and the post-revolutionary moment, I suggest we attend to this question – exclusively, and conclusively. As a result, our discussion of *Empire* comes to an end with the narrative's own refusal to do so.

4.6. CODE: Abhor's unlearning.

In *Empire*'s final chapter ("Black Heat"), Abhor moves towards an eventual – albeit elliptical – conclusion. In important ways, that conclusion doubles as the narrative's own. The chapter begins with a major decision on Abhor's part. She decides to join a motorcycle club, to craft a space untethered from her overdetermined history with Thivai. The decision presents as an expression of self-belonging, and as a conscious attempt to remove herself from relations of

interdependence – whether romantic, or otherwise. In fact, despite its tautological formulation, Abhor perceives the decision as an especially lucid one:

> Since I wasn't out of my head and I was determined not to be anymore out of anyone else's head who was out of his head, I decided I wanted to be part of a motorcycle gang. First, I had to learn how to ride a motorcycle. First, I had to find a motorcycle because I didn't have enough money to buy one. I said this out loud. (211)

Thivai derides the idea, perpetuating a line of reasoning which constitutes Abhor as unreasonable, and incapable of making her own decisions. His friend, Mark, provides only a moderate degree of support:

> 'Abhor's not a slave, even if she is a runaway nigger. She's as free as any creetur (sic) who walks this earth – 'Mark was trying to stand up for me, but too drunk. (212).

Even as it affirms Abhor's capacity for self-determination, Mark's off-hand remark reiterates her status as less-than-human. His point is not that she is akin to other humans – or even, that she is one. Instead, his appeal to the freedom due any "creetur" brutalizes both Abhor and the non-human in the same gesture, while notionally reasserting her (or *its*) rights. On the other hand, Thivai's rejection of the idea maps onto the stark opposition between emotion and reason that governs their relationship, and much of the narrative. Abhor concludes that: "Thivai was good on logic and wit because he didn't have any feelings" (212) Her remark suggests that reason and emotion remain causally intertwined, and mutually exclusive. Under the sign of Descartes, just as under the sign of patriarchy, the negation of feeling figures as the foundational condition for logic, or wit, to occur.[104]

Realizing she does not know how to drive, Abhor heads into the nearby woods. There, she retrieves a copy of The Highway Code (an "English book, dated 1986" [213]). Satisfied, she proclaims: "I had the CODE so now I could drive" (213). Abhor's reading of the Code enables Acker to perform a critique of those centralized structures of meaning she elsewhere described as "ordinary language." For one, Abhor questions the text's truth-value and functional utility, if it

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[104] This is not to say such categorical partitions work in the absolute. If anything, Abhor's frustrated experience of riding the bicycle, without technical or human aid, exemplifies the wavering of such categories at the level of personal experience. Abhor: "I rode the bike, which I could ride well, except for one thing. Everytime I used the clutch, the clutch stopped me. I didn't want to be stopped: I wanted to go. I got angry at the clutch and called him or her a shitsucker. This showed that both men and women do evil. But this knowledge and understanding didn't help me deal with my clutch" (my emphasis, 213)

reports back to the realm of common sense: "If The Highway Code was all commonsense, I could throw it all away cause I knew what commonsense was cause that's what commonsense is" (214). This tautological definition of common sense indicates that its instrumental rationality is both circular and unmotivated. Plainly: *it is because it is*.

As a technical text, the Code conveys normalized knowledge. But because its signification relies on the foundations it establishes itself (as part of common sense), its presumed objectivity is placed into question: the Code becomes equivocal. This standardized piece of writing – which effectively works to standardize individual conduct – becomes deictically meaningless. And thus, both unstable and unsafe. While working as a concrete critique of the discourse of common sense (or what Barthes once described as "Doxa"[105]), Abhor's reading of the Code also raises a finer point about the definition of language. Nearly inevitably, it suggests a tautological understanding: *things mean what they mean because they mean what they mean*.

Abhor's interpretative acts are arbitrary, and they ultimately contradict the Code's stated intent. Taken together, they present a procedural parody of standardized discourse, which evinces its contingency, along with its potential for arbitrary acts of (mis)interpretation. As a realist epistemology of language – and not just of *literary* language – is uprooted, misrecognition and failure become central to the practice of reading. Thus, when Abhor comes across a group of "five schoolboys who had never gone into their school only because they were too bratty," she concludes "that [her] proper driving course would be to kill them" (214). In another, particularly absurdist scene, Abhor acts out her confusion by interacting with the Code as a physical object: "Just like a dog who needs to piss or to sniff, I drove up against the fire hydrant, pulled out my *Highway Code*, pissed all over it, and opened it at random." (215).

Without the subtending protocols which regulate the practice of reading, a randomized rapport with the text feels as meaningful as any other. Abhor's reactions are emotional and intuitive, rather than rationally determined and organized. She improvises her interpretations

[105] The concept of "Doxa" figures prominently across much of Barthes's critical and theoretical writing, and is often used to signify the generality of common-sense and normalized structures of meaning. In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, originally published in English in 1977, Barthes writes: "The Doxa (a word which will often recur) is Public Opinion, the mind of the majority, petit bourgeois Consensus, the Voice of Nature, the Violence of Prejudice. We can call (using Leibnitz's word) a doxology any way of speaking adapted to appearance, to opinion, or to practice." (Barthes, 2000, 47). Often, he synthesizes the word's more complex historical and political meanings under the more general rubric of "public opinion" (48-49). It holds a primarily negative and prejudicial power, which Barthes describes as "oppressive" (123).

through a range of experimental and exploratory gestures. And while these *do* depart from a baseline understanding the Code's textual authority, hers becomes a *sensorial* exegesis. The Code is rendered meaningful through action, through interaction, and through invention. Which is to say, through the body.

Abhor struggles to make sense of the Code when confronted with what it does *not* refer to: the gaps or lapses afforded by what it does not explicitly describe further perturb her interpretation. The empty spaces surrounding (purportedly) objective statements inflict a state of confusion, because they alter each rule's respective semantic determination. In this case, having drawn a page at random, Abhor finds a rule regarding the minimum distance to be maintained between vehicles. But she finds it "confusing." Not only does it not apply to what she has experienced on the road so far, it does not apply to what she experiences at the moment: "there was no vehicle in front of me" (215). As a result, she reasons:

> I figured I had to find a vehicle in front of me so I could obey the rule. I patiently waited for fifteen minutes. Waiting for this vehicle was like finding someone to love when you're not in love. (215).

In the abstract, the rule in question would function as an individual unit of information. But because the rule is not integrated into an overall structure of discourse, and because Abhor cannot but attempt to fill out the intervals in her perception, she must take action to render it meaningful. In fact, she must produce the conditions by which she can comply with the indication. Read atomistically, the norm renders itself necessary, through tautological reasoning. Because she must ensure her own compliance, Abhor must first secure the rule's efficacy. The experience of waiting for another vehicle is, in turn, compared to lovelessly waiting for a hypothetical lover. Through the language of emotion, it is rendered intimately meaningful.

Empty spaces speak loudly to Abhor's existential and emotional situation. Hers has been – and remains – a state of relative confusion, and profound isolation: "I looked into the empty space and thought that, in this world, I have no one to rely on when I'm in deep trouble" (217). Her reading of the Code expresses an understanding of solitude and disorientation, which shapes her emotional narrative across *Empire* more generally. Another, finer point becomes apparent: Abhor is alone in language. Because both reading and driving are solitary activities, and both are characterized by uncertainty and insecurity, they further isolate her. And because they further isolate her, they motivate generative acts of the imagination.

After a few incidents – and a couple of accidents –, Abhor's attention homes in on Rule 55. Its interpretation takes up over a page and a half, as Abhor goes over each indication listed. Perceived and processed outside a collective context of interpretation, the discourse of common sense (regulatory and pragmatic as it may be) cannot make sense. It renders as textual opacity, the silences of which proliferate into nonsense. Where there is sense, it is overinvested: decontextualized, and disproportionate. This radically individualized reading contests the text's seeming objectivity and self-evidence, and points to its constitutive dependence on shared conditions of reading and meaning. In the case of Rule 55, nearly every indication is followed by its immediate disruption. Repeatedly, attempts to verify or falsify the rules break them down completely.

Consider line b): "Don't hang on to someone's tail lights; it gives a false sense of security." This indication is already recontextualized by our momentary glimpses into Abhor's own sense of isolation, and her sense of insecurity. Its emotional meanings are magnified by her individual circumstances, and the rule's emotional inflection shifts accordingly. Abhor reacts by attempting to memorize it: "I started to keep on remembering this by repeating it over and over in my memory because it was important" (218). She resorts to repetition as a standardized method of memorization, but her grasp of the rule remains imprecise. Line c), in turn, reports to speed: "Watch your speed; you may be going faster than you think." In this case, Abhor enacts the opposite of what the rule would indicate: she speeds up. "I switched gears twice and revved up even more so I was sure not to be going faster than I thought" (218). This occurs precisely because the rule refers to an imprecise, abstract value. By appealing to one's own individual perception, it renders speed as a decontextualized abstraction. By ensuring she goes as fast as she thinks she is, Abhor disobeys the rule's social meaning while actualizing its abstract meaning.

Abhor's interpretation of line f) – "See and be seen." – synthesizes her understanding of the previous rules, and of the prescribed course of action. Note the interjection preceding the ensuing train of thought:

> *This was it.* I switched into fifth and revved up to 120, then stared down my speedometer so I exactly knew my own speed. As I was driving correctly, naturally I did another correct thing. This shows how good a driver I had become. I did not hang on to the truck's tail lights. I smashed into them. I looked up. I saw and was seen. The hobo also stopped, lurched over the driver's window, and partly fell out so that he was draped over his left-hand mirror. (my emphasis, 218)

The accident occurs as the direct result of Abhor's individualized perception of the Code, at the moment it refers to perception itself: first, the perception of speed; then, the perception of visibility. The actualization of these regulatory indications renders them as nonsensical. They cannot perform their pedagogic and performative functions, outside of a social context and collective processes of interpretation. Instead, they produce the very accident they attempt to prevent, and a-social chaos ensues. The so-called "hobo" barely survives the accident. As she confronts the result of her actions, and acknowledges the old man's state of distress, Abhor hesitates:

> I was confused about what was happening because there were no more rules. Perhaps I was on the crossroads of Voodoo. One road was that the old man was trying to give me an important message. The other road was that the old man was trying to kill me. (218)

This reference to the crossroads of Voodoo cosmogony renders the accident as an ethico-existential drama, while placing it into a wider narrative continuum. At the outer limits of common sense, the accident seems to express some overarching intentionality, pivoted to the old man's hypothetical motivations. The actual roads, both underread *and* overread through the structures of ordinary language, transform into a metaphysical, spiritual, or cosmic scenario. Rules, it seems, have been exhausted completely. So, what remains?

> I jumped on my bike, U-turned and drove the other way. The problem with following rules is that, if you follow rules, you don't follow yourself. Therefore, rules prevent, dement and even kill the people who follow them. To ride a dangerous machine, or an animal or human, by following rules, is suicidal. Disobeying rules is the same as following rules cause it's necessary to listen to your own heart. (219)

Abhor's U-turn marks a decisive shift in her trajectory as a driver, and as a subject. Her unde39999rstanding of the rules gives shape to another important decision: the truth which lies in disregarding and disobeying them. Truth is equated with the individual heart, which stands in opposition to the normative functions of language, as a system of socially organized precepts and concepts. This epistemic ruse must give way to the subjective, vitalist intimacy of the heart as compass. Truth is not proper to positivist epistemes, as conveyed through the discourses of ordinary language (and, to an extent, common sense). Instead, it occurs as desire, as affect, and as sensation. Abhor's U-turn recenters the individual heart as the crux of truth, necessity, and meaning. She continues:

> I shifted the Honda back into fifth to listen to my own heart. The Arabian Steeds. *My heart said these words. Whatever my heart now said was absolutely true*. I pulled the bike up against a telephone pole some kids had twisted into a cock and took out a pen and the Code. (my emphasis, 219)

The U-turn translates into a distinctive course of action. Abhor repurposes the Highway Code as a surface of inscription, on which to express her heart's truths. She begins to draw on it, "cause it was the only paper [she] had" (129) In the process, she gives shape to a disjointed visual narrative. Now, the page layout presents various security-related pictograms, accompanied by textual fragments, contained within brackets. Each picture is preceded by the sentence: "This was the next picture I saw" (219-220). Text and image interact, apparently complementing each other. For example, having drawn the pictogram for "spontaneously combustible," Abhor writes:

> (This part of the world was so hot that the wild Arabian steeds had trouble finding water and motorcycles steamed up. People had to be mad with will to survive such heat). (220).

And after the pictogram for "oxidizing agent," she writes:

> (The sun's power was strong [sic] then the CIA's. The horses knew this. Riders and motorcyclists lounged around on dried earth which had once been the grounds of a thriving city.) (220).

Together, the pictograms and accompanying fragments of text produce an intermittent fiction, with its own degree of narrative consistence. The world portrayed may or may not be Abhor's own. For one, reference to a "thriving city" become "dried earth" inevitably invokes the city of Paris, and its destruction in the revolutionary process. This narrative may be a dreaming, or a reckoning. Perhaps it is both. Regardless, the explicative capacity of the textual fragments eventually breaks down, and so does the precarious narrative they give shape to. The pictogram for "toxic" is followed, quite simply, by the one-word sentence: "(Toxic.)" (221). Abhor's experimentation with drawing seems to circle back on the objective materiality of ordinary language.

Abhor draws in more ways than one. First and foremost, she draws from the heart, as a self-present source of emotional truth. This motivates the sequence of drawings she makes on the pages of the Highway Code, which is voided of its original intention, and becomes raw matter for creative expression. At the same time, Abhor draws from the Code, insofar as the drawings she makes coincide with its own visual discourse. She cites that discourse directly, even though she perceives and presents it as the result of her own, spontaneous, process of composition. This

expressive redundancy suggests that the language of the body – or in this case, of the heart – does not reinvent language, nor produce exceptional forms of discourse. Instead, Abhor's rejection of the Code leads to its realization. It is performatively actualized at the very moment it is disavowed as a source of textual authority. The subject, it seems, remains entangled within language, even as she surprises its conditional strictures. Her fiction concludes with the observation: "All of this came to me for no reason at all and so it had all to be true." (221).

The statement does not confer the passage with a particular sense of narrative totality or comprehensibility. Rather, it shifts the onus from the context of expression, to what motivates expression in the first place. By doing so, it raises a finer point about rationality, intentionality, and the creative imagination. Despite its detachment from conventional narrative logic, as organized through causal rationality, Abhor's experimentation closes in on the question of truth once again. In practice, it works to undo the intractable relation between truth, and perceived forms of literary realism. It circles back on the problem which precedes it – i.e., the confrontation with ordinary language – within a tight, tautological movement. For the length of that experimentation, emotions hold a generative agency untouched by the imperative of reason. To feel is to express; to express is to realize. The resulting narrative's claim to meaning is bound to its rejection of whatever kind of explicable – i.e., rational – motivation. Because it occurs with such plain immediacy, it *must* be true. Thus, it underwrites the definitional limits of creative agency, and suggests something of its indelible irrationality.

After Abhor is done with this sequence of drawings, she produces one final image. Again, the strong implication is that it synthetizes previous processes: "I drew a final picture which summed up all the other pictures." (221) The picture is re-presented as follows:

Figure 2: "Discipline and Anarchy." Abhor concludes her drawings.

As a portrait of her subjective endeavor, including but not limited to this chapter, it speaks to the many dualities which transverse *Empire* – and synthetizes them in the one, unlikely figure. Visually, the emblem (Figure 2) retraces various sediments of the text's poetic and political imaginary, by retrieving key visual tropes: the knife, the blood, the rose… For one, each element factors into the tattoo Agone receives in "The Beginning of Criminality/The Beginning of Morning," after confronting his most intimate truths and desires. The knife, as the actual tool of incision; the roses, there portrayed around the sailing ship, and finally the blood, which here substitutes the color red and its connotations. The latent relay between the two figures is made explicit when Abhor reencounters Thivai and Mark. Attempting to make sense of the violence the two men inflict on her, Abhor thinks "about how a sword pieces a cunt" (224). She goes on:

> Only the cunt is also me. The sword pierces me and my blood comes out. It doesn't matter who has handled and shoved in this sword. Once this sword is in me, it's me. I'm the piercer and the pierced. Then I thought about all that had happened to me, my life, and all that was going to happen to me, the future: chance and my endurance. Discipline creates endurance. All is blood. (224)

Unlike Agone's tattoo, this visual emblem incorporates the written word. And unlike the previous set of pictograms, the written word is positioned *within* the image, rather than alongside it. Textual meaning is enfolded within visual meaning. On its own terms, the dyadic coupling of "disciple and anarchy" presents no obvious answer to Abhor's quandaries across the text. In a sense, it captures the non-dialectic tensions which propel her across the narrative. In fact, the

sentence produces no strong demarcation between "discipline" and "anarchy," as discrete or mutually exclusive terms. If it signifies contradiction, it purports no especial preoccupation with its resolution. The copula puts the two terms in a state of co-relation, which supersedes their notional antagonization (i.e., discipline *or* anarchy; discipline *versus* anarchy). While it presents as a cathartic token of Abhor's experience, including her experimentations as a reader, it does not suggest dialectical conflict or its eventual resolution.

In the end, Abhor decides *not* to join a motorcycle gang. Mark tells her a convoluted story about a fellow gang member, which nearly inevitably ends in violence and disappointment. This dispels her impression that joining a gang might chance her circumstances in any significant way. Her very final decision is, in fact, this rejection. And hers is a generative refusal, that does not translate into immediate action:

> I stood there, there in the sunlight, and thought that I didn't as yet know what I wanted. I now fully knew what I didn't want as and what and whom I hated. That was something.
>
> And then I thought that, one day, maybe, therel'd [sic] be a human society in a world which is beautiful, a society which wasn't just disgust. (227)

The narrative ends with Abhor's imaginative negation of that which she does know, and the tentative invocation of what she posits as possible. Perhaps, even desirable. These would be *Empire's* final words, were it not for the following – and final – page. It depicts another version of the Discipline and Anarchy emblem, marking the narrative's elliptical endings., were it not for the following (and final) page: another version of the Discipline and Anarchy, marking the narrative's elliptical end. [106]

4.7. Conclusion

[106] These differences are subtle, and lie in the details of the design: the thickness of lines, the distribution of shadows, slight reinterpretations of the overall trace… Because these do not fundamentally alter the design, and because the drawing's repetition seems more important than the variations between its two iterations, I have decided not to incorporate the second image into this discussion.

Acker spoke of *Empire of the Senseless* with a programmatic sense of its textual intentionality, and explicitly indicated a set of conceptual and poetic motivations. These are vividly charted onto the text's actual narrative structure. Above all, she sought to probe into the definitional tenets of contemporary western society, and to confront the regulatory capacities of the Freudian text in particular. *Empire* performs a powerful critique of the political fictions governing subjective and social relations under the paradigm of Oedipality. Agone's encounter with the tattooer and Abhor's encounter with her father, both of whom unequivocally figure as older men, stand as strong examples of this ongoing confrontation with the paradigmatic authority of psychoanalysis, and of patriarchy. Furthermore, *Empire* moves towards the possibility of a non-Oedipal social reality, as a speculative negation of the conditions of living and imagining within contemporary society.

Insofar as *Empire of the Senseless* is more politically motivated and structured than previous texts of Acker's, its political agency is also bound to its critique of colonialism, capitalism, white supremacy, and heteronormativity as systems of oppression which fortify one another. But the denunciative capacity of the work of literature does not hold the power it once did, both contextually and theoretically speaking. Exposition and accusation do not suffice as critical actions, as covert projects of political violence become common knowledge. Thus, Acker's attention turns elsewhere, and even *elsewhen*. She shifts from a reactive standpoint, committed to the recognition and rejection of the political real, to an imaginative standpoint, which might yet engender another reality through the political. This emphatic turn towards "a reality deferred" (to retrieve Kleeman's term) starkly contradicts Ronell's portrayal of Acker, and the presumed inescapability of the western tradition: *Empire* quite vividly expresses the desire for another world, and other forms of being in the world. And although *Empire* cannot retrieve that mythical elsewhere, it can craft it, by abundantly borrowing from the west's many textual histories.

Eventually, the text confronts the actuality of an imaginary terrain beyond the grammars of power which organize shared, inter-subjective reality: the Algerian revolution is successful, and it transforms social reality. But rather than crystalizing around the affirmation of the world it has come to figure, the narrative turns elsewhere – and outwards – yet again. The overdetermined structures which govern and organize the very idea of revolution disrupt even its imagining. The real intrudes, once and again – and the revolution cannot but fail. Ultimately, each project or

program confronts its definitional limits. Thus, the text transitions into an elliptical space of experimentation and transformation, whereby it disavows the possibility of any programmatic, other than that of the here and now. Or, as Abhor would have it: of the individual heart. The crucial, persistent gesture across the narrative is a disavowal, always attuned towards what may yet come to be.

The conceptual metaphor of transitioning, as invoked earlier in the chapter, applies to Abhor as much as it applies to *Empire* or Acker. In each narrative plateau discussed, Abhor departs from a position of rejection, frustration, or alienation. She strongly disidentifies from her surroundings, and from her peers. But the trajectory of incipient action – which integrates other narrative contexts – always reaches a determining point of indetermination. Abhor's needs and desires never settle. Neither does her relationship with Thivai, for that matter. Each narrative arch ceases at a point of dissatisfaction, exacerbating the need to move onwards: towards morning, towards the city, towards an abstract beginning... Abhor's queries can only ever end with the recognition (renewed, once and again) of their own impossibility. The power of her story lies in the moving, and in the making. And her failure to arrive never loses momentum.

Empire, itself, resists resolution. The text moves through crisis, and then towards it yet again, rejecting the stability of sense and the satisfaction of narrative closure. Hypothetical calculi of thesis and antithesis collapse inconclusively, and the narrative can only end elliptically. Male/female; white/black; heterosexual/non-heterosexual; reason/emotion; human/non-human… The text does not resolve these dualities, and it provides no unequivocal answers on how to perceive or inhabit them. Rejecting the finitude of any given political narrative, it in turn rejects its own finitude. But this rejection is of a different order than is the case with either *Kathy Goes to Haiti* or *Blood and Guts in High School*. If there is rejection, it is of an imaginative and regenerative kind.

Abhor's words confront the world that is with the world that *could* be, and the powers of possibility. Much like Bartleby's "I would rather not."[107], that rejection consists in a creative and

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[107] Here, I refer to Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street," and the titular character's persistent disavowal of the demands placed upon him. In that brief narrative, the expression "I would rather not." becomes the protagonist's single, most important narrative action. Of course, in the abstract, this narrative refrain would *impede* textual action. It is a purely negative act, but one endowed with creative and constructive capacity through repetition and reiteration. See: Melville, 1853.

ethical action of its own. Likewise, *Empire* confronts its endpoint through and around the impossibility of revolution, but that confrontation pushes it onwards, still: "one day, maybe…." A suggestive, evocative lyricism persists in its imagining. Somehow, Abhor's exiting into morning is always just about to begin.

Conclusion: Now and After

For the poet, the world is word. Words. Not that precisely. Precisely: the world and words fuck each other.

Kathy Acker (x, 1996).

1. From the beginning.

We began our discussion of Kathy Acker's body of work with *Kathy Goes to Haiti* (1978). Admittedly, this is a somewhat unexpected – even slightly awkward – point of departure for the conceptual trajectories this project has scoped, as it confronts the representational politics of Acker's work. But this was not an arbitrary point of departure. To decision to begin with and through that work is firmly motivated by its unlikely, unsteady location within Acker's archive. That definitional awkwardness entices a degree of critical estrangement and of thwarted expectation that proves key to this project's political sensibility. Especially so as it aims to dismantle a received myth of contrarian heroism, and to trouble common perceptions of Acker's writerly politics.

Within the four-stage framework most commonly deployed to describe Acker's work, *Kathy Goes to Haiti* is uncomfortably situated, at the turning point between the first and the second of these. The first stage, coincident with her early 1970s work, concerns the unsteady reality of the linguistic "I." Often, it triggers its derealization, through a range of formal mechanisms which usurp the reader of a finer grasp on narrative voice, or narrative identity. The second stage, which coincides with Acker's early to mid-1980s work, describes her more plagiaristic attitudes and expropriative poetics – as aptly exemplified by *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984). This is not to say Acker's textual troubles had by then steadied, normalized by narrative expectation and genre convention. Instead, the perception she had *exhausted* the "I" (as a possibility, and as a problematic) turned her attention towards narrative possibility, towards the grammars of genre, and towards the novel itself as a core problematic.

As we revisit Acker's 1988 commentary on *Kathy Goes to Haiti,* we find strong evidence she perceived it as her first, successful approach to the format of the novel. For all the formal rationalization (and relativization) surrounding that work, the fact remains Acker perceived it as a novel – a fully realized one, at that. But the text does not quite chart onto either of the two stages, as previously described. It is neither as polyvocal and equivocal as her earlier work, nor as programmatically plagiaristic as her more successful 1980s work. A creative stopgap of sorts, it stands as the awkward artifact of a transitional adjustment – both conceptually, and compositionally.

This relative remove from a better defined programmatic might be what renders the novel's racial politics so striking, and so salient. A certain lack of conceptual identity seems to inform its unusual formal and narrative construction. But where critical reception has largely agreed to elide the work, in part because of its categorical undecidability, I reemphasize its peculiar standing. It is precisely its failure to satisfy codified expectations of what Acker's work is (and what it *ought* to be) that makes it an important element of analysis. To recenter it is to trouble received perceptions of Acker, and to challenge the motivations which reinstate (and reify) those perceptions.

Despite the relation of temporal contiguity between *Kathy Goes to Haiti* and *Blood and Guts in High School*, the latter is a remarkably different project. These dissimilarities stem, in part, from a range of conceptual ad compositional decisions Acker made as she transitioned between

projects, as outlined in Chapter 3. Where *Kathy Goes to Haiti* is methodic, casual, and cerebral, *Blood and Guts in High School* is brash, loud, and lyric. The latter work is saturated with emotional intensity, and with striking formal choreographies which craft their own discontinuous sense of momentum. Its narrative identity is tremulous, tumultuous, even *nervous*. Its construction jagged, irregular, and difficult. As a complete work, it is both emotionally immersive and formally disjunctive. Often, at the same time.

The temporal duration of each project's composition is another inescapable factor in just how starkly they differ. Although *Blood and Guts in High School* was published in 1984, it was copyrighted and 1978, and includes assorted materials written between 1972 and 1978. Its compositional process may well be described as durational, both in scale and in kind. The novel's prolonged compositional process contributes to its unwieldy structure, its vast range of affective registers, and the ductility of its formal and stylistic variations. No less importantly, it charts over half-a-decade of discrepant directions in Acker's conceptual framework and writerly standpoint. In comparison, *Kathy Goes to Haiti* is much more constrained and defined in scope: it was composed and published within the same year, and in accordance with the stipulations of the fund which subsided its making.

Blood and Guts in High School's plagiaristic poetics enable a disruptive incursion into the complexities of the western literary tradition, be it combative or commemorative in spirit. William Burroughs provides the methodologic template for the novel's composition; Jean Genet, the pivotal symbol of the counter-tradition it both critiques and continues. The work's palimpsestic performativity works as a confrontation with historical tradition, with the conditions of possibility of that tradition, and with the contemporary writer's respective position in relation to it. That position can be variously described as one of revolt, of rejection, or of conflicted admiration. Inevitably, it is an embattled standpoint, savvy to the troubles – textual, erotic, and political – it both invokes and engenders.

Through Janey, Acker crafts a powerful catalyst for feminist poetics, feminist desire, and feminist (dis)identification. Her individual storyline likewise stands as a political narrative of denunciation, indicting those systems of oppression and subjections contemporary to the novel's making and to our respective reading of it. As it dramatizes the determining reach of capitalism and patriarchy, *Blood and Guts in High School* forges a dissenting feminist ethos, both of writing

and of desire. Despite the critical negativity which runs across the text, Janey's dreamlike demise – and the narrative's own obtuse conclusion – intimates something of a utopian impulse. We can trace a yearning in those later scenes, that is future-oriented yet open-ended. And as a narrative horizon, it endows *Blood and Guts in High School* with a striking sense of potentiality.

Towards the later 1980s, Acker's speculative passion for myth, along with increased skepticism towards the denunciative functions of fiction, opened up wider horizons of poetic and political imagination. *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) marks the transition towards a reconstructive writerly standpoint, and a renewed commitment to the possibilities of narrative structure. Its strong invocation of the end of the world – as a desirable event, or one already under way – speaks to a strong turn away from deconstruction, and a previous emphasis on the ethics of critical negation. As a work of speculative fiction, *Empire* envisions the radical potential of the revolutionary event, and renders it meaningful in its relation to history – and its capacity to disrupt it. If my reading departs from contemporary reception, it is only to emphasize the finer point that *Empire* insinuates an abolitionist poetics. That is to say, a turn against the self-objectivity of the world-as-is, and a radical willingness to figure its endings.

That imaginative confrontation with the end of the world – and the wonder inscribed therein – confronts narrative storytelling with its finitude and places its definitional limits into relief. These are anticipated in subtler ways by previous works of Acker's, which *Empire* magnifies as it draws to an end. Endings are always beginnings of a kind, and this is vividly expressed by each text discussed across this project. In all three works, narrative fails or is made to fail. The governing principle of narrative causality is perturbed by narrative circularity, by elliptical hypotheses, by virtual becomings…

In its own way, each text contests its teleological determination according to a normalized notion of orientation, which would function as a regulatory ideal within the scope of contemporary fiction. This is one of Acker's more flagrant resistances against the finality (and the totality) of narrative thinking and narrative storytelling. It is also what most often impedes the closure of meaning from cohering, and moral interpretation to take shape. Even at their most narrative, Acker's works resist their respective conclusion. The political metaphor of transition, invoked in Chapter 5, foregrounds a deliberate departure, but also a radical availability towards failure – including the failure to arrive. Figured as an interim between two states or positions, we use it to

signal something of a transformative interval, the outcome of which is not predetermined by moral rationality.

This is most obvious in the first of the three novels. In the end, *Kathy Goes to Haiti* circles around and against the blunt fact of its narrative redundancy and digressive circularity. Its schematic, structural construction is rationally optimized to frustrate narrative expectations, and the very premise of narrative causality. If anything, the text weaponizes such expectations to render novelistic narrative as a failed enterprise. Its abrupt ending pointedly suggests diegetic time has produced no significant transformation. It could not have done so, to begin with. If there were an anti-narrative template traced in specular symmetry with the conventional Bildungsroman, *Kathy Goes to Haiti* might well be it: nothing whatsoever is achieved. If we accept it as Acker's first novel, we must likewise accept it as one of her most brutal invectives against the novel, both as a generic format, and as a regulatory ideal within contemporary literature.

In *Blood and Guts in High School,* Janey's primordial conflict with her father/lover reads, at first, as crucial: it is what first motivates narrative action. But the increasingly improbable and abstract sequence of events Janey finds herself caught up in remits this first conflict to the narrative background. It becomes little more than residual (narrative) noise. By the time the narrative has come to an end, Janey has died, exceeded death, and then spectrally multiplied across the planet. These are decentralized narratives in the strongest sense of the phrase: their narrative center does not hold. They cannot sustain a steady through-line of dramatic conflict and resolution, and more importantly, they *refuse to*. While "Janey" maintains some semblance of an intimate experience (of herself, and of her surroundings), the narrative scope of *Blood and Guts* is so distended, each narrative event seems arbitrary to an important degree. Happenstance, sudden – their meaning tenuous, and difficult to grasp.

In the abstract, *Empire of the Senseless* would be the exception that proves the rule. Its narrative structure is explicitly motivated – even rigidly regulated – by the confluence of intertwined conceptual concerns. These include the premise of a non-Oedipal society, the violent histories of colonialism, and contemporary anti-capitalist critique. Because the novel raises the questions of what was, what is, and what might yet be with such candor and rigor, one might well expect it to provide an answer of sorts. But Abhor's situation is importantly similar to Kathy's, despite the two narratives being so profoundly dissimilar. In both instances, the narrative scales

down to the individual, rather than encompassing a wider arrange of inter-subjective or collective processes. In *Empire*, Abhor's state of uncertainty, modified by a surer grasp on what she *rejects*, doubles as the rejection of the prospect of narrative climax. Her performance of rejection does not come to a comfortable end, other than the confirmation of disidentification, as what moves the character onwards. Even – in the abstract – beyond the narrative's end.

4. Race, gender, and sexuality.

This project intervenes into – and interferes with – standardized patterns of reception, by disputing the monologic celebration of Acker's work. While it attests to the radical potentialities of her writing across the 1970s and 1980s, it likewise probes into those processes by which it reinstates and reenforces normalized (and normative) structures of meaning. No less importantly, it suggests the more transformative impulses of Acker's work cannot be historically and textually understood without a recognition of its more conservative or reactive impulses, by which it retrieves and reproduces the language of hegemony. We have suggested a set of intersectional readings of three of Acker's works, so as to register the multidimensional complexity of their politics and poetics, in excess of monothematic – or monocausal – models of interpretation.

In the process, three categories – categories of thought, of identity, and ultimately of meaning – have proved indispensable to the critical labor performed across this project. Concretely, race, gender, and sexuality. This is not to say other categories need not be addressed in ongoing inquiries into Acker's work and its historical standing – indeed, we insist they must. But because of the remarkable prominence of these three categories and those cultural narratives surrounding them in the later decades of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st century, we maintain they merit concerted attention. Additionally, we call attention to the fact each of these categories – and the disputable meanings they contemplate – can only signify, whether textually or politically, as they interface and interact with one another, and with other constitutive categories of modern (i.e., western) identity. Finally, race, gender, and sexuality remain especially compelling as we contemplate and question the ongoing importance of Acker's work, both to the general public and to her various counter-publics.

Where racial politics are concerned – not to speak of racial *poetics* –, one of the most striking contrasts charted across this project lies in the distinctive attitudes towards race at play in *Kathy Goes to Haiti* and *Empire of the Senseless*, published a full decade apart. This is especially remarkable given Acker's introduction to the *Young Lust* volume nearly coincided with the publication of the latter of the two works. As a result of this idiosyncratic timing, the poetic and political dissimilarities between both become even more salient – and in a sense, contemporary. My reading of *Kathy Goes to Haiti* demonstrates how that work retrieves and relies on conventional representational economies of race and racialization, and it addresses the textual construction of blackness as pivotal to the text's own formal and narrative construction.

By contextualizing the work in relation to Acker's retrospective account of its making, I have emphasized how a formalist, conceptualist reasoning – concerned with compositional possibility, primarily – exculpates and supports the text's reiteration of racist textual conventions. Acker's theoretical narrative rationalizes the poetics of race at work in the text, repurposing the categorical meaning of blackness through the political metaphor of the "white negro." As a result, it further de-emphasizes the importance of blackness as a subject of narrative or poetic attention. At the limit, it abstracts it from its onto-epistemic objectivity. More simply still, it abstracts it from its complex political history, and its definitional entrenchment in histories of colonialism. In our understanding, Acker's 1988 retrospective actualizes the exclusionary politics of that work, and its objectification of blackness as an (indiscernible) other.

At the same time, we have emphasized how the narrative is shaped by the circular dynamics of heterosexual romance, as codified through the definitional markers of race and national identity. Kathy's description as a "white girl" is rendered nearly inevitable, in counter-distinction to the wider context of black social life in Haiti. The category of whiteness signifies contextually, singling the protagonist out and foregrounding her individual context. In contrast, black people – and black society, at large – figure as background. They are always present in the narrative, as abstract avatars of the quotidian, who the narrative identifies through generic visual traits. Without exception, the color of their skin is key amidst these. By adopting this economy of visual denominators, the narrative harkens back to racial hierarchies proper to Haitian society itself, and – arguably – to the categorical nuances of colorism. But rather then place those denominators into question, it reasserts their narrative function. By doing so, it becomes complicit with that same

visual economy, and in fact rigidifies visual understandings of race and social location. Effectively, it perpetuates U.S.-centric and white supremacist visual economies of race and racialization.

Concurrently, Haitians who interact with Kathy produce the background against which her trajectory becomes distinct and definable, both as a tourist, and as a lover. Roger is the only black character to accrue some degree of narrative agency, at times comparable to Kathy's own. But when their affair no longer proves narratively useful or compelling, he is made to disappear from the text completely. His individual trajectory is too insignificant for his disappearance to hold much narrative weight – but it certainly signifies politically. His immediate exclusion is the swiftest narrative solution, given his individual fate holds no particular interest. But the fact he is so immanently disposable raises the question of how and where black subjects chart in the narrative, and within Acker's poetics more generally. Indeed, the novel repeatedly positions black characters in vehicular positions. They are narratively meaningful to the extent they provide Kathy with resources, pleasure, or information. Throughout, she remains the novel's strong, albeit unstable center. As the narrative draws to an end, she resets to her initial situation: white, alone, and singularly unaffected.

This is not to say a reading of *Blood and Guts in High School* focused on its racial politics and poetics would be unmotivated, or redundant. Quite on the contrary: various narrative elements call for such a critical reading.[108] Overall, Blood and Guts in High School is a much more multifocal and multivocal text than *Kathy Goes to Haiti.* In part, this stems from its attention to a wider spectrum of cultural histories, locations, and traditions. Still, much *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, it remains pivoted to the narrative (and political) protagonism of whiteness, and to the political fiction of white sovereign subjectivity.

In its conceptual and aesthetic attitude towards race and its conditions of representation, *Empire* starkly differs from either of the previous projects. That difference proves most generative

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[108] The narrative's discursive treatment of non-white and immigrant people merits committed intersectional analysis. Consider, for instance, Janey's kidnapping into sexual slavery: one of the two men who capture her is explicitly re-marked as black, while his partner remains (racially) undifferentiation. The objectivation of the race of just one of the two characters results in a selective emphasis of racialized stereotypes. Another still would be the character of "the Persian Slave Trader," and the narrative motivations underlying this designation. In this case, the deployment of generic tropes of characterization invokes a caricatural stereotype, which in turn invokes dormant cultural narratives not only about race, but also about ethnicity and geopolitical belonging. An important question would be how such textual moments exemplify (and coincide with) wider tendencies across the work, where the attribution and description of race and/or ethnicity is concerned.

as we read the three works comparatively, and recognize them as situated forms of historical understanding. *Empire* is more invested, more precise, and more inquisitive in its representation of blackness – not just as a fact of social life, but as a narrative and political category. It recognizes blackness as a problem for (and of) thought, and as a problem of (and for) meaning. More importantly, it has a story to tell about – and sometimes around – blackness. It follows that its deployment of markers of racialization is more intentional, and more concrete in meaning.

This distinctive sensibility towards the representational politics of race is first apparent when Abhor is introduced into the narrative. The mere fact of her characterization as "part-black" promptly differentiates her from most of Acker's protagonists. The racial marker surprises readerly expectations, just as it engenders distinctive conditions for readerly (dis)identification. As a distinctive narrative element, it shapes the narrative's eventual perception and reception, and challenges the immanent centrality of white (female) subjectivity to the project of contemporary feminist poetics. Because of its subtle efficacy in reorienting established patterns of reading and reception, this is a key creative decision, which in turn anticipates the novel's wider ambitions.

Yet Abhor's racialization does not remain a discrete textual element. It is rendered narratively and contextually meaningful, in relation to a complex history of ancestry and exploitation. *Empire* is methodic in its interdisciplinary approach to the archives of colonialism, and savvy of their potential weaponization as means to denounce the western tradition, as one of exploitation, expropriation, and dominion. In some instances, those archives are deconstructed. In others, they are reconstructed, to produce novel conditions of political remembrance. The narrative's brutalist reckoning with the foundational scenes of slavery is exact in its depiction of the technologies of violence thereby invented and implemented. Likewise, the text is implacable in its confrontation with the continuity of such forms of radical violence, well into the 20th century.

But *Empire* does more than denounce the west and its histories, and emphatically refuses to remain in the past. Because of its standing as speculative fiction, the text is capable of interfering with the present – both as narrative, and as temporality. This enables it to perform the imaginative deconstruction of the present, and to evince other pathways for the political imagination. The single strongest example of this would be the Algerian revolution. As a discrete event, the Algerian revolution disrupts extant cartographies of power and meaning, ultimately unsettling white sovereign subjectivity from it seat of authority. Combining various sediments of historical time,

the revolutionary process undoes hegemonic relations of dominion, and culminates in the destruction of the material and symbolic structures of western hegemony. As Paris is reduced to ash, so is empire, metonymically.

This range of decisions, concerning race and the history of colonialism, could amount to exploitative spectacle: the constitution of black subjects, black lives, and black histories as textual commodities, used to harness and entice readerly attention. However, the text goes further than thematizing and problematizing blackness, by amplifying the historical and political complexities of its representation. It renders whiteness *itself* as a narrative and political category. It estranges it from its un-marked standing, as the silent and self-identical norm of thought and representation. It construes it as a problem, which can be textually defined. *Empire* works, to an extent, as a polemic against the onto-epistemic standing of whiteness, and the primacy of its expression across contemporary history. By extension, the text intervenes into the subject/object divide, by which blackness and whiteness are attributed their respective social standing and finite historical meaning. Because it evinces the definitional trouble of whiteness, and the existential trouble it in turn engenders, it provides a more radical critique of white supremacy – and of entrenched race relations – than it would by thinking *of* and *about* blackness only.

But *Empire* also figures in terms that are less historically, geographically, and geopolitically concrete. The third novel's invocation of empire – both in its title, and as a silent protagonist across the narrative – works to describe interconnected systems of oppression and subjugation. Just as it distrusts and disputes the objectivity of whiteness, *Empire* subjects heterosexuality – as a political fiction and as a political system – to equiparable degrees of critical scrutiny. To understand the variable attitude of each text towards sexuality (and, concomitantly, towards sexual identity), we must probe into the depiction and conception of heterosexuality at stake in each, and to do so with the same critical rigor one might probe each for (hypothetical) queer meaning. Which is to say, to trace how each work mediates the category of sexuality and its respective meanings, we must first recognize heterosexuality itself as a political and narrative category, with its own definable textual identity.

In *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, for one, homosexuality figures only fugitively. It is neither narratively nor conceptually important to the project, although one might argue its tacit critique of heterosexual stereotypes resonates with more recent queer sensibilities. The one notable instance

of a character perceived and presented as non-heterosexual is of minor importance. When a gay character does figure in the narrative, his sexual identity corroborates the heterosexual contract, rather than breach or produce alternatives to it.[109] His is the exception that proves the rule: heterosexual romance defines social relations in Haiti in their entirety. The fact Kathy herself only becomes sexually or emotionally involved with male characters further centralizes heterosexuality and confirms its absolute reach over interpersonal relations. Finally, because of the novel's relative location within pornographic discourse and embedded genre conventions, the textual primacy of heterosexuality is explicitly exacerbated. Because *Kathy Goes to Haiti* is so formally invested in sex, and so vividly depicts a number of sex acts, it becomes saturated with heterosexual desire and heterosexual intimacy.

The same cannot be said of *Blood and Guts in High School*. While the text holds as its unsteady narrative center the experiences of a straight, female character, it decenters and disputes the myth of heterosexual romance in a more incisive manner. To begin, the fact Janey is a prepubescent girl perturbs readerly perceptions of her narrative, and thwarts encoded expectations of age, as well as age-adequate behavior. Janey's narrative trajectory is decisively shaped by the range of heterosexual relationships she experiences, and their successive failure. Yet her age tinges the portrayal of these affairs with a determining degree of critical distance and ironic indeterminacy. Nominally heterosexual, these relations are estranged by that discrepancy. Later, Janey's imagined complicity with Jean Genet further complicates the text's emotional landscape, accentuating a marked remove from conventional (heterosexual) narrative.

This is not to say homosexuality becomes narratively important. On the contrary: Janey and Genet's conversations never rapport to his sexual identity, and narrative discourse itself pays little mind to the minutiae of his intimate life. However, it is conceptually and politically crucial, and imparted with a latent degree of narrative agency. Genet's sexuality, his criminality, and his creativity are intertwined facets of his authorial persona. They do not figure as discrete elements within Janey's perception, and they do not figure as discrete elements within the narrative itself. Genet's key role in the latter sections of *Blood and Guts in High School* – including his stark

[109] Api is a driver who Marguerite recommends to Kathy at the end of the first chapter, as she decides to travel from Port-au-Prince to Cap Haiti. When Kathy asks whether Api would be sexually invested in her, Marguerite replies: "No. That's why I tell you about him. He's what-do-you-call-it? a lesbian. [sic]" (Kathy corrects her: "A homosexual." (p. 31) He does not otherwise figure in the narrative.

diatribes against the social world – infuses a range of queer affects into the text and reorganizes its relational horizons beyond the binding limit of heterosexual romance. In the end, Janey's final partner is not a romantic or sexual heterosexual partner, but the queer criminal writer instead. Both In its narrative becoming and its fictional reconstruction of Jean Genet, *Blood and Guts in High School* is a committed project of queer affinity – even, of queer complicity.

Finally, one might argue that *Empire of the Senseless* presents the most trenchant relation to incipient queer poetics and/or queer politics, within the wider spectrum of Acker's work across the 1980s. The work produces a strong critique of heterosexuality, and its multiple meanings as a paradigm of social lie and subjective being. Its explicit nomination of heterosexuality as such, along with its confrontation with its standardized signification, renders heterosexuality legible as a political category. As heterosexuality is specified and described, it likewise becomes subject to critical scrutiny – whether by the reader, or the novel's own characters. This is especially true of Abhor, whose frustrations with the binding limits of heterosexual romance often translate into a pronounced skepticism towards heterosexuality *itself*. This critical perception of heterosexuality suggests it is, in fact, considered as a system of social and political organization. One which organizes the very conditions of possibility of desire, of intimacy, and of interpersonal understanding.

Abor's narrative standpoint, as both a spectator of queer desire and a desiring subject herself, brings us to our final point concerning the representational politics of Acker's work. Gender is an inescapable category in contemporary conversations about Acker's writing, and her own re-presentation of it across the years. More concretely still, the poetic and political possibility of anti-patriarchal narrative or anti-patriarchal meaning is pivotal to Acker's writerly praxis. In a sense, our considerations on sexuality and sexual identity anticipate the discussion of these finer points of her poetic and political imagination. Because gender and sexuality are so profoundly, even constitutively intertwined – as asserted in Chapter 5, the political fictions and normative definitions of each category place those of the other into sharp relief. The two categories are rendered politically and narratively meaningful through one another, in dynamic interaction. Thus, the discussion of sexuality provides important clues into the question of female protagonism. Likewise, it shores up the gendered meanings of each of the three narratives, and their position vis-à-vis a wider feminist politics.

One way to approach the problem of narrative protagonism and the complexities of feminist representativity is to retrieve the concept of authorial performativity. Contemplating how each novel presents distinctive attitudes towards the authorial standpoint, and its plausible incursion into the narrative itself, refines our understanding of each protagonist's conceptual construction. And, by extension, of their standing within more complex representational economies. In this matter, *Kathy Goes to Haiti* is the most frontal provocation of readerly expectations, teasing at a presumed correspondence between the novel's author and its protagonist. Here, the authorial signature is treated with acidic irony and playful detachment. The seeming proximity between author and protagonist is equivocal; if anything, it works to exacerbate a persistent sense of formal and emotional estrangement. Kathy is, more often than not, tacitly figured as an object of ridicule, given her various privileges and sense of entitlement. In fact, she may be the most unequivocally privileged out of the three protagonists, which may itself inform this acidic attitude towards her affairs and her troubles.

The conditional deterrents which disturb Kathy's circulation across the country of Haiti are perceived with the indignancy of rights foregone, for reasons unexplained. With the exception of the *tontons macoute*, these deterrents never put her actual freedom into question – let alone usurp her of it. At most, they redesign its conditional limits, defining the contours of her course of action, both as a U.S. citizen and as a single woman. This is not to say hers is a securitized standpoint, although it may be the least precarious. The episode where she is sexually assaulted by Duval proves otherwise, as does Roger's casual indifference towards the occurrence. Likewise, Kathy's later encounter with the boys who attack her suggests she remains susceptible in her solitude. No less importantly, it becomes apparent she can expect no form of restorative, recuperative or punitive justice. Kathy's narrative reads largely like a mockery of white, female, middle-class entitlement. Even then, it bears the marks of patriarchal violence, as normalized at the level of quotidian relations.

This being said, out of the three female protagonists, Kathy holds the most unequivocal power of decision, and capacity for self-determination. She is an adult woman, for one. But she is also a white, middle-class one. Effectively, she holds the degree of narrative agency one might expect from the protagonist of a conventional travel narrative. That characteristic range of privileges hardly translates into either Janey's or Abhor's experiences. In fact, if I have emphasized adulthood as a relative privilege, it is to emphasize Janey's constitutive precarity and susceptibility

as a prepubescent girl, nonetheless involved in adult affairs and activities. Again, this narrative element works to disturb readerly sensibilities, and disrupt readerly expectations. Janey's age produces a certain degree of cognitive dissonance – and subsequently, of affective distance – that persists across the narrative, and the entirety of her trajectory. It also renders the scenes of subjection she finds herself in all the more brutal, and more implacable still the violence she endures. After dropping out of high school, she confronts the economic cruelties of capitalism, and the reality of precarious work. But she is also captured and sold into slave trade and coerced into training as a sex worker. *Blood and Guts in High School* aesthetics of cruelty often render its protagonist's predicament violently explicit, and potentially even violent towards its readership.

Janey's latter experiences with Jean Genet profoundly alter the scope of her experience and imagination. Together, they chart territories – both actual and imaginary – well beyond the scope of 1980s U.S. society. And in contrast with most other male characters, Genet does not figure in a romantic or sexual capacity. Still, and despite the delicate disidentificatory relay between the two characters, he is no less an agent of patriarchal authority for not performing an expectable role within the script of heterosexual relationality. Genet is a poet, a criminal, and a truth-teller. He is also an icon of political dissent and contrarian creativity who actualizes the abuse and exploitation already experienced by Janey. As a compromised accomplice, he remains complicit with the normalized forms of gender violence already brutally portrayed across the narrative. And while his presence proves poetically and politically transformative, his swift departure confirms Janey's irrecuperable isolation.

Remarkably, the character of Janey functions as an inhabitable avatar for Acker's occasional incursions into the text, where Kathy did not. In *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, the nominal proximity between the novel's author and the novel's protagonist obfuscates the artificiality of that character as construct. Its suggestion of authorial intimacy produces the opposite effect: an inalienable emotional remove. Because of *Blood and Guts in High School* palimpsestic performativity and compositional history, it includes fragments of Acker's own (often unidentified or undifferentiated) narrative voice. Emotionally, she incurs into the text, and it incorporates something of hers. Performatively, she becomes intermittently entangled within her own textual troubles. This tangible performance of authorship raises a further set of questions, especially as Janey encounters and connects with Genet. In fact, the notable androcentrism of Acker's theoretical and literary constellations – which nearly inescapably report to male authors and figures

of authority – raises a finer question about networks of influence, and about the gendering of authorship itself as a male activity or standpoint. This remains an important line of inquiry, which contemporary studies have yet to address.

This brings us to the last of the three works, and the last of the three protagonists. As discussed, Abhor is differentiated in a first instance by her characterization as part-black (and, implicitly, as part-white). This explicit, diegetic marker sets the narrative apart from those of Kathy and Janey, especially insofar as these two (white) characters find themselves, whether unwillingly or out of volition, in primarily non-white social realities. As a racialized woman, Abhor inhabits the lived and imagined territories of the colonial metropolis, and it is from that minority standpoint that she traces her accidented trajectory. But *Empire*'s standing as speculative fiction makes other markers possible – even ones which do not chart onto recognizable reality. Abhor's simultaneous characterization as "part-robot" confirms the narrative's dystopian temporality, while corroborating genre norms surrounding embodiment and technology. It contextualizes her corporeal being within a milieu of advanced technologies of embodiment, which interface with the presumed organicity of the human body. Moreover, that degree of material artifice – inscribed at the level of the flesh – interacts with her concurrent characterization as part-black. The two markers interact to amplify her standing as non-human and unworldly, while distancing her from conventional models of narrative protagonism. As a correlate, they also complicate the patterns of (dis)identificatory potential envisioned by the previous narratives.

Abhor's standing as a criminal and as a political dissident further set her apart from either narrative protagonist. She is in stark dissymmetric distance from Kathy in particular, whose accumulated privileges become more salient by comparison. Kathy opposes the Haitian government and appeals to abstract humanist ideals of political transformation – especially with reference to literacy, and to education. Abhor acts as an agent of disruption, who opposes all institutions of state power, and subverts the rule of the law in favor of her individual interests. Kathy eventually attains insight into the more complex dimensions of Haitian society in conversation in Papa, who dispels the very idea of revolutionary possibility. Abhor in turn bears witness to the revolutionary process, as well as its unrecognizable aftermaths. In fact, she becomes personally entangled within it. In the end, her position in relation to the law is one of critical negation, and radical rejection.

As a result, her narrative becomes a compelling myth of contrarian agency and oppositional dreaming. It does not produce a rational template, adaptable into concrete political action. But it fosters a potent sense of transformative possibility, and it invokes the complex emotions proper to inhabiting the world oppositionally. The interaction of these various features also vividly distances Abhor from Acker herself. Of the three characters, she is the most dissimilar from the author, whether in the abstract or in detail. The two may converge in partial processes of identification, but they cannot be reduced to a relation of identity. It is this obvious divide between their respective positions which confers *Empire*' with its distinctive politics, both as a critical narrative and as a reconstructive myth. Abhor is importantly implausible, and at a remove from the world-as-is. Her intransigent performance of rejection, as a way of inhabiting the world, holds its own regenerative knowledge. It speaks to the powers of refusal itself.

4. Radical refusal.

As each text troubles its formal and fictional objectivity, it allows the imagings and imaginings of worldliness they perform to be enfolded within that trouble, to be captured within that failure. The rejection of a realist epistemology of literature, one of Acker's more decisive (and divisive) stances, unbinds representation from the primacy of the real. Her particular version of anti-realism usurps narrative fiction of its presumed integrity, ordained according to axis of space and time and compliant with the principles of efficient causality. It disorganizes the conventional grammars of genre, committed to inhabiting the fault-lines apparent when the representational and the real will not, and cannot, converge and cohere. This is especially pronounced in *Blood and Guts in High School* and in *Empire of the Senseless*, which render space-time through abstract ruptures and disjunctions, never quite readable through the prism of standardized – i.e., rational – perception.

But Acker's rejection of a realist epistemology does more than sever narrative fiction from the binding authority of mimetic causation. It consciously and systemically subjects fictions of worldliness to oppositional scrutiny, just as it evinces the epistemic and narrative shortcomings of normalized structures of understanding. Its patent critique of normative conceptions of representation, which can only subject representation to crisis once and again, simultaneously

places a certain version of the world – "our" world – under critique. More precisely, it puts into relief a version of the world already in crisis, at any given instance. Acker's writing performs the conceptual, textual, and emotional critique of those political fictions which govern the world-as-is.

It indicts the failures of ordinary language, both as the linguistic domain which makes the world what it is, and the one which might render it meaningful through fiction. As a correlate, her work fosters a critical tension with normative models of representation, and their presumed capacity to convey meaning, to express the truth, or to make sense. Insofar as it insists on asking "what?," "who?," "how?," "where?" and "when?," Acker's writing remains stubbornly politically realistic. And because they procedurally trouble the tenuous premises on which they are built, her fictions impede conventional grammars of representation from settling. Each prospective textual element is treated as provisional, approximative or implausible from the very moment it is articulated. As a result, estranging degrees of uncertainty and indeterminacy proliferate, and saturate the reading experience with doubt: they trouble received notions of textual truth, of textual meaning, and of textual meaning.

The rejection of a realist epistemology of literature is ethical and political in kind because it admits that the critique of a realist epistemology is co-extensive with a critique of the real, and an active entanglement within the epistemic pathways imaginable for its undoing. The finer point is not whether text or truth prove more truthful, more accurate, more actual. But rather that their self-identity, grounded in their *mutual* identity, grounds the onto-epistemic authority of the one and the other. And neither text nor truth can be unmade if the other is not, finally, at stake. I would suggest this is the abolitionist promise of Acker's poetics: the outer limit of those rejections she wrote of, where *rejection* itself becomes an inaugural creative and ethical gesture. Ultimately, we might define this as the wider remit of Acker's representational politics – but one might as well recognize it as the pivot of Acker's anti-representational poetics. Both are enmeshed, by necessity.

The negative space afforded by that rejection affords the conditions of possibility for other worlds, albeit not necessarily ones in the making. They may well in fact have already been unmade, only ever imagined, or already dreamed away. Because in a vivid sense, the real is *too much* and *cannot be as it i*s, the poetic imagination turns elsewhere, somewhat tentatively and irrationally. It touches on the edges of worlds which could have been within the one that is, and it sparks the

inkling of how this world could be or could have been. This is not to say the poetic imagination becomes politically instrumental, let alone politically rational. The fact it allows for the rejection of instrumental causality, and the litmus-test of pragmatics, is precisely what enables it to engender its worldings and unworldings, without them finally capitulating to the law of reason, to the law of capital, or even to the law of the word itself.

4. And now?

A key contention this project has staked out pertains to the indelible persistence of the specter of contradiction, as we read Acker in the contemporary moment. To a degree, this is the inevitable mark of a writerly praxis continued and transformed across the range of three decades. But we also recognize it as proper to the poetics and politics of Acker's work, and its standing within the archive of contemporary fiction. What we described as Acker's rhizomatic perspectivism – i.e., her experimentalist penchant for the disruption and variation of perspective – is propelled by explicit concerns with the political prospect of decentralization. Her work is strongly committed to critically disassembling and reassembling normative definitions of identity, of society, and of subjectivity. Hers is a disobedient, dissenting writerly praxis, which contests those political fictions at the core of western society, and of the western imagination.

Despite these commitments, her writing also works towards corroborating those normative definitions and political fictions it defiantly defines as paradigmatic. It cannot, by definition, be fully exempt from the architectures of oppression and subjection which constitute its very conditions of possibility. It is bound, to an extent, to comply with their defining reach over the poetic and political imagination. And where it is not, it may to do so regardless. The radicality of Acker's project interfaces, at every instance, with the systemic political realities of capitalism, of patriarchy, of white supremacy, of heteronormativity – to name but a few of a range of interlocking systems. Sometimes, her work disrupts their relative consistency. At others, it bears witness to their binding authority.

Yet these forms of complicity and collusion are not discrete (be it formally, or poetically) from the conditions of possibility of her writing, and the radical possibilities it envisions. The radicality of Acker's work is inextricable from its relative complicity with what it critiques, denouncers, or deconstructs. That irreparable contradiction, which narratives of redemption of recuperation cannot attenuate or alleviate, is key to this project's critical commitment to Acker's work. It is the crucial, ethico-political nexus of conflict, of confusion and confrontation which mediates our

readings, as mediated encounters with the politics of her work. In the end, it is the textual trouble proper to our own writing and reading.

Must critical narratives be narratives of convenience, focused on what one would rather affirm of the author's work and its political agency? What kinds of erasure do we produce (or perpetuate) when we corroborate the disavowal of undesirable texts, even as we reclaim the unfavourability of an author's work as central to its identity, intentionality, and ultimate importance in both aesthetic and political terms? We cannot write a full story, as readers. But we can mediate the critical lenses, the seemingly spontaneous emphasis, through which we read and recognize a body of work. Conflicting aspects of an author's body of work should not – indeed, they cannot – be reduced to those one would rather retrieve and reassert, to the effect of valuing, understanding, or divulging that work.

In Acker's case, to tell a simplistic tale – to unify an ethical and aesthetic understanding of her work – is to fail to grasp, on a conceptual and compositional basis, the complexities of work crafted across nearly three decades. If we do not perform the necessary critical labor, and probe into the conflicts embedded within it, we will inevitably consolidate Acker's belonging to normative and normalizing histories of power, literature, and meaning. The challenge then, is to acknowledge that we ourselves – as critics – work from within positions of complicity with systems of oppression. Recognizing and respecting these definitional contradictions is, itself, a crucial responsibility. It demands that we recognize textual trouble as such, even when – and *especially* when – it cannot be resolved or redressed.

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