

WHEN SHE DOES WHAT SHE DOES:  
INTERTEXTUAL DESIRE AND INFLUENCE  
IN KATHY ACKER'S NARRATIVES

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York  
2007

UMI Number: 3283144

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the  
Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the  
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

WHEN SHE DOES WHAT SHE DOES:  
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Douglas A. Martin

Adviser: Professor Wayne Koestenbaum

American author and performance artist Kathy Acker established herself as one of the most prolific, inventive, and vital voices of third-wave feminist culture. Her theoretically complex and extensive body of work more than warrants full-length study. Within the province of this dissertation, I deal not only with all of Acker's works published during her lifetime, but also posthumous volumes; I pull heavily from two extensive archives containing numerous unpublished manuscripts and rich correspondence. Concerned as I am with Acker's positioning and repositioning of theoretical frames for her fictions and her milieus, I devote a fair share of space to the writings of her peers, critics, and inheritors. I allow her texts to bounce me out to points of signed significance, while I also read across her timeline and trace the valences of many of Acker's repeating concerns; Acker's texts are never purely hermeneutically sealed endeavors, and it is within this spirit that I operate. Through intertextual figures she herself employed, I

show how she might be read in dialogue with the post-structuralism of a number of French theorists and their concerns. I also provide a sense of the lineage of avant-gardes Acker drew her feeling of expansive possibility from: art writers of the East coast, Charles Olson and Black Mountain poetics, Burroughs and his reality critiques, “New Narrative” and the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school, as well as romantically modern literary icons. Acker’s writing is all about this move: what, when, where, why, how, one might own (up to), how one might “spin” what one has done (in writing) and what one is about to do. Socially, psychologically, politically, in Acker, we will never be far from working and reworking definitions of who is normal, who has value, who is abominable and how and why, who is sick and who is sane, who should be confined, who is made to feel they warrant space, how, who belongs and who doesn’t. Through Acker, I draw a blueprint for a queer liberation involving the opening of eyes, mouths, legs, and ultimately minds.

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**Some (Provisional) Sense of Where This Work Comes From**

“Is she nothing/ Or is she your mirror?”<sup>1</sup>

—Kathy Acker

With seven major novels published in the 1980s alone by Grove Press (that fast fading flagship of transgressive letters), Kathy Acker was established as one of the most prolific, inventive, vital, and I dare say beloved voices of third-wave feminist culture. Three more major publications and a collection of three earlier works would follow before her tragically early death—at roughly fifty—in 1997. Her brief, lucid essay, “The Gift of Disease,” outlines the grounds for the life-altering and courageous decision she made to turn her back on Western medicine, to pursue—as she had for the entirety of her writing career—alternatives. “Eurydice in the Underworld,” one of Acker’s last texts, makes a metaphor of not only the physical plight of her illness, but the conditions of her life surrounding it; for example, “Orpheus” must be her lover. Within the province of this dissertation, I deal not only with all of Acker’s works published during her lifetime, but also with the posthumous volume of two early works, *Rip-off Red—Girl Detective* and *The Burning Bombing of America: The Destruction of the U.S* (2002). As well, my work here pulls heavily from two archives of manuscripts, many of these works unpublished, and correspondence: The Kathy Acker Papers housed at Duke University and The Serpent’s Tail/ High Risk Archive at New York University’s Fales Library. I devote a fair share of space to the writings of two of Acker’s “inheritors,” art and culture

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<sup>1</sup> *Eurydice In The Underworld*. London: Arcadia Books, 1997.

mavens Chris Kraus and Dodie Bellamy, as both have considered Acker's life and work, within the contexts of their own. Concerned as I am with Acker's positioning and repositioning of theoretical frames for her fictions, and her milieus of "compatriots" receptive or not so to her accomplishments and the charms of her practice, particularly her movement among and from contemporary venues for poetry, when writing works which on the surface appear to be nothing less than "poetry," I follow the bibliographical leads provided in one collection of critical essays on Acker's work, *Devouring Institutions* (2004; ed. Michael Hardin).<sup>2</sup>

In my examination of Acker's work, I am invested in fields of interpenetrating significance; to this end, I also call on *Lust for Life* (2006; ed. Amy Scholder, Carla Harryman, and Avital Ronell). These essays are culled from the two-day symposium of the same name, held at Fales Library, just five years after Acker's death; I will not list all the participants here, but I refer the curious to Scholder's preface to the collection. I would, however, like to single out three papers/presentations not included in the volume that I personally found enriching and inspiring: Caroline Bergvall talked about "dog writing" (Acker's *Don Quixote*, 1986, refashions Cervantes's Sancho Panza as a talking bitch); Susan E. Hawkins considered mourning and the maternal in Acker's late fiction, relating this as well to the characters of "cold war cowboys" in Cormac McCarthy's work; Liz Kotz proposed a reevaluation of Acker within a line of Cageian poetics. I began my doctoral studies in large measure as a reaction to not having my own proposed

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<sup>2</sup> Studies that are partially devoted to Acker's work include Joe Moran's *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America* (alongside Don DeLillo, John Updike, and Phillip Roth; 2000), Nicola Pitchford's *Tactical Readings: Feminist Postmodernism in Kathy Acker and Angela Carter* (2004), and Maureen F. Curtin's *Out of Touch: Skin Tropes and Identities in Woolf, Ellison, Pynchon, and Acker* (2003).

paper accepted; Professor Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick read, as a special guest, as part of the opening night presentations, a thread through Acker's 1993 work, *My Mother:*

*Demonology*. A second decisive factor in my candidacy was an encouraging letter exchange with Professor Wayne Koestenbaum, in which I'd submitted two of my more performative, lyrical essays—one angling itself up against and through Acker's novel of Colette Peignot, a.k.a. Laure, and Georges Bataille (this narrative is in the aforementioned *My Mother*); Acker transposes the romance to not only her own, extended family dynamics, but for one chapter (four, "Obsession") the famously psycho-sexual geography of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*.

Socially, psychologically, politically, in Acker, we will never be far from working and reworking definitions of who is normal, who has value, who is abominable and how and why, who is sick and who is sane, who should be confined, who is made to feel they warrant space, how, who belongs and who doesn't. I do not desire to "exhaust" Acker's texts in my work in any way, critically or biographically.<sup>3</sup> I allow Acker to bounce me out to signed points, but I also see across her timeline and trace some of the valences of her repeating concerns and (historical) references. Acker's texts are never purely hermeneutically sealed endeavors—more often than not, they are far from being anything near that. Acker's writing is all about this move: what, when, where, why, how, one

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<sup>3</sup> Issues with Oedipal identifications may be involved here. Acker's executor Matias Viegner writes: "I've known for a while that you were working on KA & it makes me happy. So you go!" In response to my fear of not adequately honoring Acker's work, and my resistance to "straightjacketing" it, hoping I might find a way to allow it to speak more for itself, he supportively offers: "It seems obvious to me (& was to K) that all interpretation is a form of appropriation, and there are no right or wrong forms to do that. More is better. It's not clear to me that KA's work is master-able, in fact I think it resists mastery both internally and externally, and I like that." (E-mail from Matias Viegner, February 19, 2007.)

might own (up to), how one might “spin” what one has done (in writing) and what one is about to do. In some ways, I see this dissertation as an archive, albeit a circulating one; if you will, it has legs. It has been a long time, if ever, since I was as happy as I was sitting among Acker’s (archived) writerly effects—knowing there was so much I’d not seen, and more than I could ever hope, or want, to completely manage. Still, I could know things I hadn’t known before. Little yellow Post-It notes, left behind by a worker there in her papers before me, dotted some of the folders and manuscripts, trying to put things more in order. These are complicated dynamics, to be sure.

I will end this preamble with a sense of what Bellamy’s exhibition<sup>4</sup> of Acker’s clothes brought back to me, in an almost *madeleine*-like moment. The body now absent, pieces of Acker’s wardrobe were strung above, at varying heights from the rafters of one of the gallery’s side rooms: like limp, shelled marionettes, or resting bats, draped wings, the extra flaps and coverings needed, gathered for the doors or windows, a motley patchwork, when embarking upon the makeshift dark tent of childhood respite. But it’s even more literal than that, or has a further engendering also, for me, I soon see, always having been accused of hiding up under my mother’s figurative skirt. She never had such nice things. It is almost impossible not to touch, as entering the curated space you brushed up against the Betsey Johnson tops, the Vivienne Westwood bottoms, or tanks, slips, or jackets, Comme des Garçons pieces, the Champion Sports Wear vest, gloves, Gaultier, the Japanese designer flourishes, and John Richmond’s “Woman” label, where the “A” of the gender designation is made like the one punks trademarked for anarchy, surrounding the letter’s lean-to and barred support with their circle.

Some shifts in the breeze created by my own body twist and turn these puppet-like strings. I walk under the hanging garments, dominated again by them, like being a boy, and hiding on the floor of my mother's wardrobe, while trying to be included; she and my sister are playing more acceptably, in front of the dresser, with the makeup and jewelry; she's going to try to find a ring for me, too. It gets to be too irresistible, despite my feelings of respect, to just touch something. I am in there alone, so I grab at the handfuls I can reach, even smell them.

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<sup>4</sup> "Kathy Forest," installation, New York's White Columns gallery, January 10, 2007; I

**I. Cultural Contexts**

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discuss this piece further in the body of this text.

1.

“getting a straight job would lobotomize me a wall breaks down”<sup>5</sup>

—Kathy Acker

In an interview she performs with theorist and *Semiotext(e)* publisher, friend and once lover, Sylvère Lotringer, Kathy Acker agrees: “I act through the novels.”<sup>6</sup> He provocatively comments, in one letter stored away in the archive of her papers at Duke University, on that rare combination of “tough and tender,” that is “how [he] likes [her],” after having seen recently some early video footage of his addressee. The intersection of the two qualities acquires a symbolic, surreal materiality on the spectacular cover of the first U.S. edition of her 1993 novel, *My Mother: Demonology*: from an aerial view, we see a bit of sidewalk, like two legs meeting up where they split, coming into design around a patch of bush-furred grass, groomed almost into a perfect triangle, only with softer points and tips. In one of her last works, 1997’s “Eurydice in the Underworld,” Acker writes: “Two white roses rise out of the small squares of wet soil placed in the concrete”; she then develops and reinforces the image: “I once said ‘a rose is my cunt.’”<sup>7</sup>

The qualities I am beginning to trace are also given to the rebel James Dean, love here his cause, to think-slash-say about Janis Joplin, in an early rehearsal of the two stars who will become major characters in one of the latter movements of Acker’s 1975 work

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<sup>5</sup> Pg. 32; *Portrait of an Eye*. New York: Grove Press, 1998

<sup>6</sup> Pg. 20; *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1991.

<sup>7</sup> Pg. 16; *Eurydice In The Underworld*. London: Arcadia Books, 1997.

*The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec*: “She really was a softy kid even though she pretended to be so tough.”<sup>8</sup> If there is a family romance in Acker, we’ll see, it is through her projection onto stars, filmic, mythic, literary, cultural, underground; there also exists what we might call an “anti-family” romance. Dean, as a figure of comparison, recurs in the aftermath of a cruising scene in *My Mother: Demonology*, as well as in 1997’s “Requiem,” where Acker’s logic goes: “*Billy looks exactly like the person [Electra] dreams is her ideal brother of all time and is her real brother...Since Jimmy Dean was gay, she can’t have sex with her brother.*”<sup>9</sup> In one of the “Age 16” sections (chapter 11), one of her noir-detective personages, “Red,” talks to one of her “underworld,” gang connections, as he’s beginning to look out for her on the streets. He says, “Shh, I’m not Harvey anymore. I’m Mommy.”<sup>10</sup> (Compare to, when seduction starts to go wrong: “ ‘Do you want,’ the French professor inquired, ‘me to be your mommy?’”<sup>11</sup>)

In Lynne Tillman’s prose account, “Selective Memory,” she recalls Acker “sitting on a table with her legs tucked under her. She’s holding the microphone close to her mouth and she’s whispering. She looks directly at the audience. She’s referring to people and incidents some of the crowd know about. She’s seductively hissing people’s names into the mike that’s now touching her lips.”<sup>12</sup> What’s done to me is not going to be done and gotten away with, without it having been re-marked upon by me. This

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<sup>8</sup> Serpent’s Tail/High Risk Archive, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

<sup>9</sup> Pg. 160; *Eurydice*.

<sup>10</sup> Pg. 71; *Rip-Off Red, Girl Detective and The Burning Bombing of America: The Destruction of the U.S.* New York: Grove Press, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Pg. 172; *In Memoriam to Identity*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1990.

sentiment subtends much of Acker's work. With the poet Alan Sondheim, Acker makes the 1974 film *The Blue Tape*, video footage I myself have seen; here, she provocatively, simply, slowly, lovingly, caressingly, plays with her breasts. In the memory of my viewing, she is describing too what she is doing, how it is making her feel. In the 1990 motion picture *The Golden Boat* (music by John Zorn), Acker plays the part of a professor, rather than masturbator, and we travel up the wide stone steps of a columned building, to behind the door of a department of, I'm led to imagine, because of the letters cut from the frame, [An]thropolog[y], to where she sits, playing herself basically (same recognizable close cropped hair, especially for a woman, heavy flashes of silver earrings down and around the lobe, red, red lips, jeans) in a surprising context, a typewriter on the desk, a Jean Genet poster up on a file cabinet behind her in the background; we hear her ask the student who has come to see her: "Do you think you're going to continue in this manner?" Then begins a very Ackerian formula: if "x" is a killing of "y" by "z," then there is an "a" that is "y" or "y" is dying, and "x" is a causing of "a" by "z"; we hear and she repeats; the bell rings, interrupting, for the next period. In the 1991 documentary film *Stigmata: The Transfigured Body*, Acker, flashing her gold tooth, discusses her piercings and her tattoos.

"Then the surgeon took my breasts off," she writes matter-of-factly, in "Act Three" of 1997's *Requiem*. "*Clean white bandages curve around the torso from below the armpits to the bottom of the rib cage,*"<sup>13</sup> she writes in "Eurydice in the Underworld," where Acker makes more of a metaphor of her present condition, struggling with a by

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<sup>12</sup> Pg. 68; *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. Vol. 9, no. 3, Fall 1989. ed. Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs.

<sup>13</sup> Pg. 4; *Eurydice*. Italics in the original.

then metastasized cancer. The text “Eurydice in the Underworld” is also from 1997, the year of her death. Though signed and released, the works from this year I feel in all likelihood to be only the cordoned-off parts of a foreshortened vision. An even more scaled-down version of *Requiem* is published in the December 6, 1997 issue of *The Guardian* in London as “the final piece” she wrote before she died; this text is in fact composed of Scene 1 and the end of Scene 2 (the final scene) of “Act Three” of the work published as *Requiem*. She dies November 30, 1997, in Tijuana, Mexico, after attempting to turn her back on Western medicine, seeking alternatives, a decision that will be taken up for debate in further pages of *The Guardian*, where Acker had also published book reviews while living in England; the venue as well where Acker will publish “The Gift of Disease,” and where Jeanette Winterson will later come to her defense, stating, “Kathy wanted to be ill in the way she wanted to be well: on her own terms.”<sup>14</sup> Finally resigned to a hospital, with her lungs filling up and needing to be drained, she dies not long after someone coming in to do her nails has made her quite happy; this we can know from a letter, left or sent, by her last lover’s brother, to let his brother (Matias Viegener) know.<sup>15</sup> Acker’s final hours are further documented, and more publicly, in this circuit: Dodie Bellamy (in “Digging Through Kathy Acker’s Stuff”<sup>16</sup>)

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<sup>14</sup> Pg. 24; December, 6, 1997, *The Guardian*.

<sup>15</sup> Kathy Acker Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

<sup>16</sup> My understanding is that this essay was publicly presented by Bellamy as part of the opening exhibit of her “Kathy Forest” installation, at New York’s White Columns gallery, on January 10, 2007. “Stuff” does at least double duty here in the title. Bellamy writes in her manuscript: “As everybody else is scooping, Matias and Connie Samaras, who were with Kathy when she died, tell how they removed Kathy’s piercings before she was sent to the crematorium. ‘The one in her labia was Kathy’s favorite piercing.’ These intimacies are revealed with a tone of reverence and a disarming matter-of-factness.

reports Connie Samaras's viewing of the death, which Samaras structures as pretty much the apotheosis of her own piece "Entries and Exits."<sup>17</sup>

How old Acker was when she died, in 1997, is up for debate; Gary Indiana, writing in *The London Review of Books*, puts her at 53, though this fact is just coolly floated, as is much of his take on Acker's work, the development of her career, and supporters or detractors ("she had the cachet of a fetish object and did her best to look like one").<sup>18</sup> According to Viegener, Acker's literary executor, in 2006 LA-based, teaching in the Critical Studies department of CalArts, and working on a critical biography of Acker (he writes in the memoiristic "Cannibal Acker" of how Acker tells a healer she is working with "she never really liked her breasts and was happy to look like a boy"<sup>19</sup>), her birth certificate, driver's license, and passport give 1947 for year of birth. Her Library of Congress information lists 1948. Grove Press, one of Acker's major American publishers, follows the Library of Congress date in its biographical notes on the back of at least the first editions, trade paperbacks originals, of two posthumous titles published in 2002: *Essential Acker: The Selected Writings of Kathy Acker* (introduction by Jeanette Winterson) and *Rip-Off Red, Girl Detective and The Burning Bombing of America: The Destruction of the U.S.*

In a footnote to the opening to *Devouring Institutions*, a 2004 collection of essays on Acker "only meant to be an *introduction* to her work,"<sup>20</sup> editor Michael Hardin cites

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Matias and Connie poking around in a dead woman's genitals with no acknowledgment of the strangeness of the image—that is *so* Kathy."

<sup>17</sup> See "Entries and Exits." <http://vv.arts.ucla.edu/terminals/essays.html>

<sup>18</sup> "Ackerville"; December 14, 2006, *The London Review of Books*.

<sup>19</sup> Matias Viegener, "Cannibal Acker." <http://www.suspectthoughts.com/viegener.html>

<sup>20</sup> xi, emphasis in original; San Diego: Hyperbole Books (San Diego University Press), 2004.

her birth year as appearing in different places as 1943, 1944, and 1945<sup>21</sup>; Hardin does not cite where, exactly, and it's very possible that these different places might very well be just Acker's fictions (his own contributed essay to his volume constructs reading Acker as a love relationship<sup>22</sup>). Acker fills her fictions with such autobiographical teases. One "I'm born" in 1973's *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula*, will come closest perhaps or is the truth: April 18, in the year of 1947. But I'm born, too, here "in the late autumn or winter of 1827," as another "I" confesses. Before long, another "I" will join that one, for the next section of part one: "I'm born poor St. Helen's, the Island of Wight. 1790." Our third section of the first part gives us yet another birth: "I'm born in Holly Springs, Mississippi, in 1837."<sup>23</sup> In 1993's *My Mother: Demonology*, where one of Acker's narrative strategies in this book will be to now "redo" her childhood, as the text states, her starting part of the life narration changes yet again: "I was born on October 6, 1945."<sup>24</sup> Her "childhood" includes a set of memories, dreams, and even texts which she wrote or rewrote when a younger writer.

No matter how apparently autobiographical the incident related, how easily conflated (and very rarely seamlessly) with what we believe we know of the facts of Acker's actual life, she was particularly interested in trying on the lives of her friends, boyfriends, co-workers, artists and writers. As she tries to see how well they might fit

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<sup>21</sup> In addition to Hardin's introduction, see the note in Nicola Pitchford's *Tactical Readings* (pg. 194, note 16).

<sup>22</sup> See "Between Theory and Autobiography: Negotiating Desire, Sex, and Love in the Work of Kathy Acker"; *Devouring Institutions*, ed. Michael Hardin (San Diego: Hyperbole Books, 2004); the theorists primarily called upon by Hardin: Roland Barthes, Joan Copjec in connection with Jacques Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari.

<sup>23</sup> See *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by The Black Tarantula; Portrait of An Eye*. New York: Grove Press, 1998.

<sup>24</sup> Pg. 8; *My Mother: Demonology*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1993.

her own thoughts, Acker tailors these other lives to her own ends. Though these other lives could be confused at times for her own, still, a “theoretical” life emerges over her work. An overview of some of the “highlights” would include: 1. sex work; 2. a withdrawn, though overshadowing and controlling mother, who wanted to abort her, who will one day suicide, if she hasn’t already; 3. an abusive (sexually, more often than not) dad, who’s not really her biological father.

She’d become a one-woman identity factory, forever spinning out new configurations: “I lie on the grass a stake through my heart I am every woman,” Acker writes in *The Burning Bombing of America: The Destruction of the U.S.*, a text speculated to originate from 1972,<sup>25</sup> formulating among other ideas—like the betrayal of friends, revolution, and total chaos—a communistic (socialist) embrace: “what is communism about? the desire of the heart for more than one love”; “how does one (we) recover?” “I change identity.”<sup>26</sup>

She writes and (self-) publishes early on in her career under a menagerie of constructed personalities: “Rip-Off Red,” sometimes with the hyphen, sometimes without.<sup>27</sup> Her correspondence stationery is letter-headed at one point in her life with the return address of “Red’s Detective Agency, Inc.” A postcard is sent to The Black Tarantula from Bernadette Mayer: “New book great but make em longer!”<sup>28</sup> Another

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<sup>25</sup> See the editor’s note in *Rip-Off Red, Girl Detective and The Burning Bombing of America: The Destruction of the U.S.* New York: Grove Press, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Pgs. 155-156, 160, 161; *Red*.

<sup>27</sup> The imprint is to be found both ways, in signed manuscripts, letters, and other miscellanea; Kathy Acker Papers, and the bibliography of *Devouring Institutions*, ed. Michael Hardin.

<sup>28</sup> Kathy Acker Papers. Acker sent Mayer a number of texts included as part of Mayer’s papers at the University of California, San Diego. Singled out in the register are “A Map of My Dreams” and “Records of Daily Life.”

correspondent with the Black Tarantula is Kenneth Rexroth. A calling card she sends out resembles Luck of the Draw in Community Chest or Chance in a game of Monopoly, asterisk ideogram sprouting elongating, curling legs, bending this way and that, out from the design, to create (her) perspective: “You are on the enemy list of The Black Tarantula,”<sup>29</sup> the accompanying script reads. She signs her contribution to the October 1979 issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine (dedicated to the politics of poetry, featuring also work by Terry Eagleton, Michael Palmer, Hannah Weiner, and others), “Miss Criminal.”

In her later books, over time, as she becomes more well-known, Acker’s construction of personality, multiple, will move to sites more within her books’ insides, away from the legal location of the overt authorial signature—as her public persona consolidates, accompanying the living, breathing performance that comes to be recognized as Kathy Acker. “Had decided I was going to act so I put on a disguise of a grey fedora, just like the one the judge used to wear *over the eyes* (Oedipus was blind), and a too-long navy coat, *like the ones the schoolgirls used to wear*, and black high-heeled shoes.”<sup>30</sup> Acker’s post-modern takes on the genre of detective fictions or mysteries will be books that attempt to solve issues of body/identity. These deaths can be literal (her *Toulouse Lautrec* opens with “The Case of the Murdered Twerp”) or more metaphorical ones, of bodies just too sexually alone, adrift. As she continues to grow, intellectually, as a writer, cutting her prose-teeth more, while sharpening her mind, her books will become increasingly complex in their multivalent rhetorical jugglings.

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<sup>29</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>30</sup> Pg. 224; *Identity*. Emphasis in the original.

In Acker, there will be no simple means and ends: In *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini*, that famous director's working-class cruises, and subsequent vulnerability at the hands of higher powers, can still be seen to lead to his death, but even after being killed, "Pasolini" in Acker will announce he is going to begin working on solving his own murder "by denying the principle of causation and by proposing nominalism."<sup>31</sup> I'm not sure exactly what this means—of course I could look it up—but I turn the page (Pasolini doesn't return). Where Acker will foreground intent ("this working a way of living"<sup>32</sup>) and procedure ("the procedural point of view we want to privilege"<sup>33</sup>) in her earliest work, as her already radically flexed subjectivity becomes more sophisticated/highly finessed, she will go more "undercover"—not unlike Pasolini's character in the book she elects to name for him. His initial life-text, which begins the narrative, moves on shortly to an extensive chalking out (by the author) of some underlying societal structures and an investigation of their attendant desires. In the case of Acker's "Pasolini" book, this is primarily done through a "deconstruction" of Shakespeare's plays, bastions of status quo schooling if ever there were ones; Acker revels in inserting her own autobiographical acting-out into the venerable bard's historical and romantic setups, taking on the (character) lenses of traditional, canonical schooling and re-fusing them. What does she have to do, and to whom, to see her own auto/biography here? Another thing Acker wants to get to the bottom of is just what the self might be left at liberty to dream—once our regulatory identifications have been enforced and taken place.

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<sup>31</sup> Pg. 183; *Literal Madness*. New York: Grove Press, 1988.

<sup>32</sup> Pg. 157; *Red*.

<sup>33</sup> Pg. 173; *Red*.

In “What Is An Author?,” Foucault asserts: “In writing, the point is not to manifest or exalt the act of writing, nor is it to pin a subject within language; it is, rather, a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears.”<sup>34</sup> Authorship itself will move along such lines of unstable signatories across the covers of Acker’s books. *The Childlike Life of The Black Tarantula* by The Black Tarantula becomes, eventually, through business channels, *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by The Black Tarantula* by Kathy Acker; *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec* by “Henri Toulouse Lautrec” (by Kathy Acker) undergoes a similarly signed, and nested, metamorphosis. The point of origin, with which the truth ultimately lies, might always be called into further and further question. “Do you know that *Books in Print* lists your books twice?” Acker is asked when interviewed in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*; this special issue is devoted to the work of Acker, Christine Brooke-Rose, and Marguerite Young. “It lists *Black Tarantula* by an author called Black Tarantula and then has a listing for *Black Tarantula* by Kathy Acker. The same with *Toulouse*.”<sup>35</sup> Later in her career, she sends work off to her agent: “Hot off the fried mind press named Acker.”<sup>36</sup>

“I was the Black Tarantula before I was Rip-Off Red,” Acker tells Lotringer in their interview, “Devoured by Myths,” conducted October 1989-May 1990, which serves as a preface of sorts for her 1991 publication *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*. In addition to the interview, this compilation includes: 1. an excerpt from what she calls her first work, 1968’s “Politics”—a mirror begun already between herself and those French seen as

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<sup>34</sup> Pg. 206; Michel Foucault, *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume Two: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and others. New York: The New Press, 1998.

<sup>35</sup> “A Conversation with Kathy Acker By Ellen G. Friedman,” *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Fall 1989, Volume 9.3.

outsiders, who self-politicized along the lines of class, gender, and sexuality; 2. 1981's "New York City in 1979"; 3. "Lust," also dating from 1981; 4. 1986's drama, "The Birth of the Poet," written for and directed by Richard Foreman, with music by Acker's second husband, composer Peter Gordon; 5. 1983's "Translations of the Diaries of Laure the Schoolgirl"; 6. 1984's "Algeria."<sup>37</sup> This interview with Lotringer has become something of a touchstone in the early years of Acker studies; the two of them are trying to date just how old Acker was, where she lived when she wrote what, who she was. Indeed, the "I" of Acker even in interviews is often shown to be just as confused as in her earlier, fictional self-constructions; I refer in general to the textual exercises she conducts primarily as The Black Tarantula in the 70s, collected as her "trilogy" in *Portrait of an Eye*. Acker seems particularly confused concerning these earliest years, when she's starting out and struggling to make a name for herself: "Oh memory, it gets everything mixed up"; "I don't remember, I honestly don't"; the first thing she dates with certainty here: "Wait, I can remember exactly because that's when my mother suicided."<sup>38</sup>

Keep having new people (identities) being born; keep having dreams; pick someone new to be; pick a new time and place to begin, to start out, differently, to spring from: this will be one of the many strategies to keep a narrative, beginning, going. Vary your (material) conditions along the way: "poor," "crazy," "man," "woman," surrounded by delusions ("my family thinks of itself as aristocratic, though it isn't, since my grandmother (mother's mother) came from Alsace-Lorraine to U.S.A. poor and in her

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<sup>36</sup> Correspondence; High Risk/ Serpent's Tail Archive.

<sup>37</sup> Included here as well is a translation of the German document (titled "Immoral") outlining a court decision in 1986 to place her novel *Blood and Guts In High School*, copyrighted 1978, on its list of publications harmful to minors; Kathy Acker, *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1991.

later life married a wealthy man”<sup>39</sup>), trapped in life (“My mother wanted to make me exactly like her”), imprisoned, more literally (“1789 [ ]<sup>40</sup> On account of my pro-Revolutionary attitude, they move me from my prison at Vincennes.... I’m concerned with my personal freedom I’m not insane by my standards”), penniless, motherless (“I move to New York because I write and I want to meet writers. I have no money...no parents”<sup>41</sup>); “I’m trying to become other people because this is what I find interesting,”<sup>42</sup> she writes, before going on to try to channel Sade (“Only interest in the ideas of the Marquis”<sup>43</sup>), at a loss for direction. In another section of this early work, *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, she instructs, commands, towards the end: “Redo myself,”<sup>44</sup> before the line breaks, no period, and the following paragraph commences.

Abandon all hope, ye who enter here, looking for straight answers. In Acker, there will never be just one mirror/reflection. No dream (language) of 1:1. As she says variously: “All mental existence is expression, a measure of distance”<sup>45</sup>; “One immediately comes up to language and learns either to be defeated or to let language fuck one, to fuck with language. To lie down. This is what I call ‘fiction’”<sup>46</sup>; “I, I am proud here to announce to a world I don’t at all know, I have never adjusted.”<sup>47</sup> Agency will always be conceived as a shifting dialectic, and this dialectic operates within her

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<sup>38</sup> Pgs. 2-3; *Lecter*.

<sup>39</sup> Pg. 77; *Portrait*.

<sup>40</sup> Throughout my text, irregular spacing within quoted passages will be designated in this manner.

<sup>41</sup> Pg. 81; *Portrait*. Ellipses mine.

<sup>42</sup> Pg. 86; *Portrait*.

<sup>43</sup> Pg. 88; *Portrait*.

<sup>44</sup> Pg. 87; *Portrait*.

<sup>45</sup> “Notes on Writing from The Life of Baudelaire,” Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>46</sup> Untitled, incomplete MS, Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>47</sup> “The Seattle Book,” Kathy Acker Papers.

understanding of the self. “I look at myself in the mirror I don’t understand whether I’m beautiful or plain or ugly I have to use what I see as an object make it as attractive as possible to other people. Now I’m two people.”<sup>48</sup> The terms of the dialogue may shift from text to text and within the text, veering often midcourse, in contradistinction to more straightforward, standard reproductions of “realism,” a term whose aptness, as a representation of our current social and psychic landscape in the modern world, is highly contested by Acker in her earliest alliance to William Burroughs and his authorial methods and aims.

Burroughs’s prior experimental methods of the cut-up, the fold-in, to sample just two in his arsenal, are queer: they don’t pretend to (natural) pro-creation. They were made together with another man, Brion Gysin, not alone. Acker herself never ceases looking for ways out, for more paths to foray, more ways to supplement old logics; to accounts of the divine and blind inspiration, she counters with an understanding gleaned through taking stock of prior experiences, the existences and orientations of her materials. “[Y]ou can make, but you don’t create,” she explains in “A Few Notes on Two of My Books.” Everything is already in the world—you are pulling always from other texts, separating yourself from what already is. She transposes the techniques of filmmaking into her writing, rather than “discovering” it. Acker will utilize what already exists in the world around her, bringing the techniques of other mediums to bear on her life and writing. For example, the montage: “the harder the cut the better,”<sup>49</sup> she says in one moment of addressing her own process in *Politics*, and her writing aims to play around with changing the speeds of its developments, its effects on the reader’s comfort zones.

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<sup>48</sup> Pg. 11; *Portrait*.

Acker dispels any claim of being the first or last word on any subject. Acker says Charles Olson said, “To write about something is academic, and to *do* it in your writing is visceral.”<sup>50</sup> What Acker does here is take a bit of Olson’s authorization to grant her own.

Classifications begin, even if self-elected. Acker herself points back in time repeatedly to Burroughs, for precedent. Though put in quotes, “called ‘The Female William Burroughs,’” the moniker is still the opening lead in the publicity for the acquisition of her archive by Duke University, an archive spanning 1972-1997; 1968’s *Politics*, excerpted in *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*, is not part of the collection. “I modeled my writing on [Burroughs]. I was 21! I’m 39 now. It’s very old hat,”<sup>51</sup> Acker claims in a video interview with cultural critic Angela McRobbie, dated, when dated at all, “198\_,” in the “Writers Talk: Ideas of Our Time” series, an extensive collection of videos on Modern Literature and Philosophy, and one for which Acker herself would eventually interview Burroughs himself: Acker is #41, Burroughs #52, of 106.<sup>52</sup> It will never be a case of simple math with Acker.

Though a line he espoused some version of for most his long writing life, this is William S. Burroughs in 1974: “[W]riters are still, for the most part, stuck to a representational position, a position they haven’t allowed themselves to get out of, where painters have been out of it for the last 60 years. I mean, no painter today could get away with pure representation in painting. And any writer who does anything else is accused

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<sup>49</sup> Pg. 31; *Lecter*.

<sup>50</sup> “Kathy Acker,” with Angela McRobbie; *Writers Talk Ideas of Our Times*, #41. *The Roland Collection*. ICA Video.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>52</sup> “William Burroughs,” with Kathy Acker; *Writers Talk Ideas of Our Times*, #52. *The Roland Collection*. ICA Video.

of being unintelligible.”<sup>53</sup> Author Edmund White, in introducing his interview with Burroughs, notes, “Of the writers in the generation to follow the great moderns (Joyce and Stein), Burroughs was the only one in English to remain constant to their ideal of continuing experimentation.”<sup>54</sup> Susan Sontag—whom Acker invokes, tongue-in-cheek, as we will see, in her version of *Great Expectations* (1982)—calls fiction “that sluggish art,” though she sees it eventually unable to “resist certain influences from other arts.” Sontag notes: “The aims of the postwar [World, II] period reverted to a kind of moral, sociological reportage in the tradition of the nineteenth century.”<sup>55</sup> Sontag also asserts: “The difficulty arises because so many critics continue to identify with prose literature itself the particular literary conventions of ‘realism’ (what might be crudely associated with the major tradition of the nineteenth-century novel).”<sup>56</sup> Burroughs’s “realism” (his representations of “psychotic realities”—as I parse Acker’s meaning in her essay on him) portrayed a future which Acker now sees, or in her essay of 1990 saw, as our present, contemporary landscape.<sup>57</sup>

Susan Sontag goes to the mat for Burroughs, among others: “For examples of alternative literary modes, one is not confined only to much of the greatest twentieth-century writing—to *Ulysses*, a book not about characters but about media of transpersonal exchange, about all that lies outside individual psychology and personal need; to French Surrealism and its most recent offspring, the New Novel; to German

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<sup>53</sup> Pg. 263; *Burroughs Live: The Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs 1960-1997*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 2001).

<sup>54</sup> See White in *Burroughs Live*.

<sup>55</sup> Pg. 36; *Conversations with Susan Sontag*, ed. Leland Poague. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995.

<sup>56</sup> Pg. 208; *A Susan Sontag Reader*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982.

<sup>57</sup> See “William Burroughs’s Realism” in Acker’s *Bodies of Work*.

‘expressionist’ fiction; to the Russian post-novel represented by Beily’s *St. Petersburg* and by Nabokov; or to the non-linear, tenseless narratives of Stein and Burroughs.”<sup>58</sup>

This is an expansion of literary possibilities that Acker is right at home in, and promiscuously so.

In Acker’s collection of essays, *Bodies of Work*, published in 1997, outside the confines of the 1990 essay she has devoted to him, “William Burroughs’s Realism,” Burroughs makes some other notable appearances. In “A Few Notes on Two of My Books,” first published in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* issue dedicated in part to Acker, Acker praises Burroughs for his “immediacy,” in contradistinction to “most of the writing in the contemporary novels of this country”—the preceding sentence, “Living in England, I keep returning to American literature,” keeps “this country’s” antecedent unclear—and she places Burroughs within a list she says Sade would head (for her). Dropping in Sade’s name is also how Acker begins in this particular essay to sidestep a purely American-English context in establishing a precedent for her writing, along with Burroughs’s, a movement she will continue to work on as the essay progresses: “‘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.”<sup>59</sup>

Acker once proceeded herself to collaborate with the collected fruits of Brion Gysin and Burroughs’s labors, *The Third Mind*, working her way through all their formal experiments, as she claims often in her own interviews. Burroughs provided an

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

alternative line of what one might pursue, how much further one might go: the word, the sentence, the punctuation (of a life) regulated is a control both acquired and imposed; the frame (of consciousness) might be moved out and out. Long lines of prior breakthroughs in consciousness are there to be uncovered, documented and re-spun to newly legendary purposes. Everything is permitted, Burroughs would have you know, Hassan i Sabbah, founder of the Assassins, is quoted as saying, last words on the deathbed; “Behold an age of *Assassins*,” Rimbaud commands, through prophesy, in his *Illuminations* (“Drunken Morning”), a sentiment Acker will make in her own translation read as, “Now is the time for murder.”<sup>60</sup> What Acker does here, as she will elsewhere in her adaptations, in multifarious ways, is take a liberty.

She calls the Beats the “grandparents” of herself and the artists of her generation. Intensifying for herself Ginsberg’s maxim, which she claims she is citing, when she remarks upon his, “First breath, best breath,”<sup>61</sup> she recasts instruction in terms that remove any trace of a mind-body split (for his “thought,” her “breath,” an action arguably even more primary, even less mediated and meditated). Thoughts take the form they come in. Acker is also potentially packing two of Ginsberg’s ideas into one, given that other adage of his of a line’s length as dependent on natural speech rhythm, as tied to breath.

Where Burroughs says of Brion Gysin in his interview, “He taught me to see a picture,” we might say Acker, over her career, too wants to keep teaching herself to see differently. “The ceiling, floor, and walls of the winding hall [her narrator is in as a

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<sup>59</sup> Pgs. 6-7; *Bodies of Work*. London: Serpent’s Tail, 1997.

<sup>60</sup> Pg 64; *Identity*.

<sup>61</sup> “An Actual Institution of Art,” Kathy Acker Papers.

child, at her grandmother's house] are tiny mirrors placed against each other. I dance through this hall, twist my body into possible positions, and become a hundred kinds of criminals."<sup>62</sup> Acker asks William Burroughs if there is any way to save ourselves, given the current state of the world, politics. Burroughs questions: Who do you mean by us? Who is this "we"? Too often we see it taken for granted that everyone has these same givens. Some of us want both/and; we don't want to have to choose one over the other, daddy over mommy, man over woman, the academic over the experience, or prose at the expense of our poetry. We want no one man to lead us, no one form to hold us.

In his interview with Acker, Burroughs will continue to emphasize the necessity of destroying what he calls "the word"—the symbolic order in its restrictive constructions, where the open-ended and any generous overflow of meaning falls by the wayside. In Art, "automatic" associations are those we should work to loosen and stretch, to trouble and expand. "Appropriate" are those responses that have been trained; they've entered us through the *normal*: acquisition of language and its usage under the tutelage of what we see in psychoanalysis as the Father's NO. This entrance into a Symbolic order, this training, is a weaning: it is learning a system of rewards, learning that there is a time and a place for everything, when we begin to do as *they* say. "Nightmare: her body mirrors/becomes her father's desire."<sup>63</sup> Words will come in the place of cries, and you might begin to ask nicely.

In Burroughs's compositional techniques, which Acker would mimic initially, seeing in him a good enough model, chance was to be sought and encouraged, the random scissor slip to be privileged over the premeditated, dotted line, excision.

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<sup>62</sup> Pg. 51; *Red*.

Burroughs's interests are juxtaposition, the collage, pieces superimposed and arranged over the flatter dimensions of the grids, and grinds, of daily existence. The reader happy at home in run-of-the mill realism reads along lines of regulated frames of perceptions, which clearly demarcate physical and mental experiences, but in the world of Burroughs's textual practice, everything doesn't fit quite so easily together. Everything doesn't fall quite so "naturally" into place, as in "real" life. Burroughs claims he wants non-dualistic systems. In her fictions, Acker proceeds to redress balances in society by heavily investing in, and in some ways "camping" out in, the crisis points of the "other" side—particularly once her work begins to consolidate along narrative lines that question and disrupt the (nuclear) family unit as a privileged and sacred locus for indoctrination into larger, societal versions of the same structure. This other side for Acker, it should be noted, is not the mother or some essentialist version of Woman; attempting to come into her own is in some ways escaping from both of those things as rarefied concepts and also realities for her. Acker faces—at the very least in her literature—the poor, the homeless, the starving, the insane, the diseased, and the generally outcast. ("Otherwise I don't exist: I'm a mirror for beauty."<sup>64</sup>) This is not done from a position of prescriptive measures, but rather as "lived." Her texts will disrupt as much as they please.

In childhood, we play by deciding who we are going to be that day—though even here we are seldom given unrestricted freedom; at some point gender enters with its considerations—consider, too, somebody has to be the bad guy. Someone has to be the person to be captured and locked up. "Prison. That's where Creon, my so-called dad, but

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<sup>63</sup> Pg. 54; *Great Expectations*. New York: Grove Press, 1982.

<sup>64</sup> Pg. 99; *Portrait*.

he wasn't my real dad...wanted to put me."<sup>65</sup> These lines are spoken by the character of Antigone, within a text that repeatedly reaches for and proceeds from such climactic realizations, designated "Antigone's Story," in Acker's late work, 1996's *Pussy, King of the Pirates*; though the speaker is identified, the reader has been told in a flourish of bold italics that opens the text that this "Antigone" has also been called "King Pussy, Pussycat, Ostracism, O, Ange."<sup>66</sup> (Like "Antigone's Story," "King Pussy's Story" and "Ostracism's Story" are included in a section of the novel carrying the designation "The Pirate Girls"; Pussycat will be one of the characters related *in* Ostracism's story. O and Ange, on the other hand, happen to meet in a whorehouse, by this point in Acker's career, towards the end, a repeating set, in a section titled "In the Days of Dreaming.")

Antigone, again: "They put me inside 'cause I'm a girl. I've heard there are societies in which girls stay in prison until they're married. I'm out now so I'm never going to go back there."<sup>67</sup>

Though it is only one prison, gender is tied to other personality lockdowns, for example, domestic servitude. (It is with as much seeming relief as loss for direction that the wandering "I" of an earlier, foundational work, 1973's *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula*, announces: "I'm not sure whether I'm a male or a female"; "I'm not sure what I am"<sup>68</sup>; gender indeterminacy, as explored in Acker, is as much a blessing, an escape, a departure point, as a hindrance.) Like the "Antigone" of *Pussy*, the "I" of Acker's *Don Quixote* is also a promiscuous rover, both as a signification and as a character, and punished by her mother's taunts: " 'You've come to prison of

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<sup>65</sup> Pg. 163; *Pussy, King of the Pirates*. New York: Grove Press, 1996. Ellipsis mine.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Pg. 185-186; *Pussy*.

your own free accord,’ my mother barked when I returned from the bathroom.”<sup>69</sup> (“I” has run there to cry, to try to escape her parents’ voices, after returning home from a disastrous attempt at self-expression in New York—“I didn’t feel normal in a normal household and, wanting to be me, I wanted to express me”—that ended in “suck[ing] cocks while their owners held guns to my head” and “running after men who might protect me,” where “[l]ove was rape and rejection,” where “[m]y only reaction to continuous devaluation was autism.”<sup>70</sup>) Unlike Antigone, who has vowed to never return, “I” has come back, to the mother character who goes on to assert that “[t]he family is the only refuge any of us has.”<sup>71</sup> Right on her heels: “ ‘You’re my property,’ daddy amended. ‘From now on, you will do whatever I woof you to do and, more important, be whoever I order you. This is a safe unit.’”<sup>72</sup> If daughter will only learn to comply, if she will concede to folding herself back safely inside the commands of previously established structures, Dad the wo(o)lf will protect her, from herself and from that outside world, both of which he claims. Characters like this “I” in Acker’s textual worlds will function to not only show, but also see, lawful identities as cages, bars of conjunctions of sex and place, in society; “I” should learn to stay under the wing of the/his house.

The women Acker picks as representative of sides of a self in her early work, *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* by *The Black Tarantula* (opening with the elucidating, “Intention: I become a murderess by repeating in words the lives of other

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<sup>68</sup> Pg. 31, 84, respectively; *Portrait*.

<sup>69</sup> Pg. 116; *Don Quixote*. New York: Grove Press, 1986.

<sup>70</sup> Pgs. 115-116; *Quixote*.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

murderesses”<sup>73</sup>) are born, have negotiations with their parents, and are then to marry men or get jobs. That was to be life. But desires could drive one towards other sensations, other mental pictures, and Acker from the start raises a fundamental, philosophical question: What keeps us separated from *them*? Stylistically, Acker’s work will not confine itself to frames and planes of reduction, of simple matters of what’s “true” and what’s “false”; Acker wants to dispense with bindings, of gender, of genre, and their conventions, to overflow them, to make her own texts more un-law-fully embedded with others, their texts, their lives, and by extension, to make her own state more awe-filled. To explore and point out this idea along developmental lines in her prose, Acker makes a metaphor of the “I/eye” “regressing”: “I’m a child; I sense through touch.”<sup>74</sup> I do not yet know what’s what. I feel more than I see. “I look at my body as if it were a web, solely a way of asking people to touch me. My body doesn’t exist.”<sup>75</sup> Where does the self, and where does memory, exist in such an unscripting?

In reading, we are trained to try to perceive identity in a series of more or less stable relations between one “I” and its surrounding characters. Identity is consolidated in this way, as lines are drawn in the sand, and we may be boxed-in. This boxing might take most obviously the form of gender and its regulated identifications, but there are others. Another such self/other dichotomy would be that between the human and animal. (*The Burning Bombing of America*: “we no longer want to be human.”<sup>76</sup>) In Acker, the mind and the body, as much as any book/page, are sites to be modified. In her ongoing attempts to leave behind prior definitions and dominations, these previous existences are

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<sup>73</sup> Pg. 2; *Portrait*.

<sup>74</sup> Pg. 54; *Portrait*.

<sup>75</sup> Pg. 96; *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*. New York: TVRT Press, 1978.

there to be journeyed over and through to her own liking, in complex and imaginative feed-loops. “I always think that the more I learn, the wider the ocean in front of me becomes,”<sup>77</sup> she says in one of her letters. I get the feeling this is not to be avoided but desired: this opening, this expanding, this more to reach for and explore. Acker will tend to her (individual) psyche like a rabbit hole of her own: full of a plentitude of reflections, distortions, ruptures, and potentials to reroute: “you are always your own home your love [ ] the child [ ] the mother [ ] and the father”<sup>78</sup>; “you know the world is your eyes.”<sup>79</sup> Imagination and desire, especially as they are sewn up by language, are a contestable space, found under almost constant bombardment in our advanced and visually saturated culture, where all our dreams may already be colonized and marketed back to us. There is a space in and around (recorded) language Acker wants to pry open, to cut loose, (queerly) opening the eyes, mouths, legs and minds. In the words of critic Guy Hocquenghem: “We want to explode the frigid, inhibited, mortified body that capitalism wants so desperately to make out of our living body.”<sup>80</sup> Or Susan Sontag: “Perhaps there are certain ages which do not need truth as much as they need a deepening of the *sense* of reality, a widening of the imagination.”<sup>81</sup> Acker’s works position themselves at various divides between public and private, to write and ride their collapses, to challenge

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<sup>76</sup> Pg. 163; *Red*.

<sup>77</sup> Richard Hell Papers, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

<sup>78</sup> Pg. 190; *Red*.

<sup>79</sup> Pg. 187; *Red*.

<sup>80</sup> Pg. 261; *Polysexuality*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1981.

<sup>81</sup> Pg. 50; Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Picador USA, 2001. My emphasis. I will come back to the further relevance of this essay (“Simone Weil”) I am quoting from for my subject.

preconceived and limiting notions of form and decorum; Acker hopes to express from what's been repressed.

All that separates the dream (vision/fiction) from "reality" on the page is an arrangement of the words, whether or not and how they are classified, a line separating in-the-world or in-the-head: at times in the *Childlike* work, Acker will have to tell us quite literally when we've just had what: "Fourth fantasy." This is Acker's writing with a beginning proposition: put two (different) I's on the page, side by side. Then put more. Then put yourself in a parenthesis among them. Go ahead.

"I" begins to live on a page among, by reading and repeating the at times confusing overlaps with their words, their marked or unmarked degrees of characterization, some murderesses, "moll cutpurse, the queen-regent of misrule, the roaring girl, the benevolent tyrant of city thieves and city murderers, the bear lady." "I" exists in close proximity, in fantasy, to the star ("Helen Seferis") of some of the "porn" being used by Acker as not only masturbatory material, but also as a means of creating further writing, that which can come out of and lead up to the moment of climax/crisis when toggling with another author's text. All she need do is set it down. As much as Acker identifies, or tries to, with Scottish "beat" and junkie Alexander Trocchi's character Helen in *Helen and Desire*, Acker identifies with the underhanded creator, he crafting the seduction of the intrigue, employing one convention—transgressive in the end by what it chooses to omit and, by extension, by what the reader is only left with, privilege—mediating the very pretense of "Helen"; these pages you are now being given to read, you are being led to believe, they are in actuality her journal-narrative, as found, with only slight edits and interjections, and, unfortunately, consequently, there are some

missing stretches. We are cut off from parts of the *Childlike* narrative of Acker, as subsequent sections of the text take up different fixations, lives and myths such as those to be found in the work of William Butler Yeats and finally, most infamous of those employed within Acker's *Childlike* pages, Sade, kink in the father machine if ever there was one. By writing his life, and holding her own up to it, by intercutting their two histories, Acker through this book-work stages (in part) her life, by folding events from her own time frame into Sade's and his philosophical temperament: at points, the two will become indistinguishable, even to her, as Acker has claimed.<sup>82</sup>

Let yourself come out, let yourself mingle with the other "I"s on the page: wonder who is ever going to be able to tell the difference, wonder if there will be a point where not even you can any longer see that supposed difference between you and others, even those our society has most demonized. These would be the accounts she could try to turn into her own, by slipping herself into them and by trying to take more account of herself from their vantages. The (at least) doubled I (the I that concedes it does and will see through others, the I that doesn't try to hide that it relies, in part, constantly, upon the identities of others for its own), could this I be seen to be a viable alternative? Narration in Acker's work exists in this premise of an "I" in flux. Acker calls out across a page, coming at herself from two ends. In her explorations, wrong will become relative, as will writing, its movement, its goals, where and how it directs itself, how stringently, how virulently, how efficiently.

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<sup>82</sup> See in particular pg. 7, *Lecter*.

“I began to separate myself: to watch the violence of my desires more and more.”<sup>83</sup> She would make a literature of writing these dreams and fantasies, believing that they held not keys to her correction, but to the expanding of a consciousness, an un-single-filing of it, a coming more up towards what could be known to be there to be further explored. Born rich, you might choose not to stay entitled, to dispense with identity traps. You might attempt to slough off completely the old and the set, the routine. “Any action no matter how off-the-wall—this explains punk—breaks through deadness.”<sup>84</sup>

Acker’s work repeatedly sections itself off, to invite you to make the jump-cut, navigating the chasm in reassurance through your own devices, becoming more fluid in them, laying the props of identity down for a moment—while Acker presents her tales through time, or spins her webs of intertexts and perspectives.<sup>85</sup> Acker’s structure accretes rather than restricts. It continues to add to itself, in multiplying its senses of self, never trapped behind just one pair of eyes (set of walls), never too framed or too immobilized for too long: “I sit against the white walls of the enclosed room and gibber. The walls are all white. The walls of an asylum. The walls of a hospital.”<sup>86</sup> New eyes offer new outs, as her techniques pull from wide-ranging artistic “schools” and cultural

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<sup>83</sup> Pg. 133; *Portrait*.

<sup>84</sup> Pg. 83; *Expectations*.

<sup>85</sup> Reading the spider metaphor, a metaphor by now having acquired its own history and dimensions, back into Acker’s work is not a move original with me, and I do not pretend it to be; Martina Sciolino does it in “Confessions of a Kleptoparasite”—the kleptoparasite a bird, insect, or other animal that habitually robs animals of other species of food, as Acker’s writing may be said to do with the writings of other authors. Juliana Spahr quite elegantly, in design and thinking, explores the metaphor between criticism itself and the texts it needs to continue to survive, fruitfully, in her poetic essay *Spiderwasp or Literary Criticism*. Sciolino’s interesting essay is collected in the Fall 1989 issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*.

fields. In changing the “I” mid-stream, or paragraph, or chapter, or page, in the process of the book, before our own eyes, Acker prompts our initial orientations to crumble, unconsolidating them, scrambling us forward in a leap of faith (or not) we make if we want to go on. We need to know now or we defer. The once knit-up threads of a fragile-proving web (identity—Acker’s, as author creating characters that do or don’t serve our own identifications) are no longer held so assuredly, on such solid ground, as her texts feed upon and generate their alternate identities and ends.<sup>87</sup>

Inside Acker’s *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula*, as with most of Acker’s writing, we’ll get a number of relations between self and other (“people are not only individual people,” “your eyes are inside mine”<sup>88</sup>), maybe just as many as that eponymous spider has of eyes at its disposal. We are told in *The Childlike Life* how “any person can become part of these composite insect eyes,”<sup>89</sup> as Acker underscores one of the rhetorical figures, and strategies, of choice within this work. These rhetorical figures also become the strategic motifs that structure *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* in the absence of stable characters along a steadily progressing timeline-plot. At times these motifs—of the character/author become spider, of how the

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<sup>86</sup> Pg. 36; *Portrait*.

<sup>87</sup> As Susan Howe, in *My Emily Dickinson*, takes issue with Gilbert and Gubar’s confronting her heroine with a prescriptive and reductive, for the sake of thematic coherence, approach, I struggle here with Acker’s work, not only between her covers, but across her writings, against short-sighted synthesis for the sake of more impressively unequivocal arguments. In many ways, Acker’s writing reflects what appealed to her about Sade’s: “I love Sade’s work because you can argue endlessly and no fucking person agrees. You can go through Klossowski, de Beauvoir’s, all the essays on him, and *nobody*—Bataille, Sarduy, anybody—can reach any agreement whatsoever. It’s magnificent!” (See “The Path of Abjection: An Interview with Kathy Acker,” in *Some Other Frequency: Interviews with Innovative American Authors*, ed. Larry McCaffery.)

<sup>88</sup> Pg. 139, 146, respectively; *Red*.

<sup>89</sup> Pg. 36; *Portrait*.

constituting environment contributes to the (individual) character—intersect and bleed into each other. Mirrors and walls are granted a metaphorical agency to conspire together. “I’m a mirror,” also “presenting a wall of shivering to anyone who tries to talk to me.”<sup>90</sup> I’m not quite so solely two-dimensional, as I’m not quite so deferential.

No clear lines between their “selves,” their objecthood, maintained, causing her symbols to conflate and collide, to join their forces to corner her subject, as they overturn and trade-off among each other, Acker pushes points and, consequently, her text, as her tension is built in anticipation of a rhetorical crisis then executed, as her metaphors become textually self-reflexive: “The walls are going to close around me: crush me....The walls are the legs of a huge spider.”<sup>91</sup> This figuring of further understandings, “consciousnesses,” among textual components in Acker’s work, in loops of relays, keep giving and contributing to that vastly more troubled understanding of any ever “main” character her work displays. Acker shows herself to have many selves subjected inside her. Her object of inquiry is shown to be subject to change. For as many “selves” as she has begun to sketch, there may exist possibly even more complements to take off from. Most optimistically, this has implications for how multiply something like love might be conceived. A form of this wager of the multi-faceted nature can be seen set down early in Acker’s unpublished “Journal/ Black Cats Black Jewels” (predating *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*), a path of connections that might need not be restrictive: “I love L. M. W. M. B. H. (L.)?”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Pg. 72, 69, respectively; *Portrait*.

<sup>91</sup> Pg. 36; *Portrait*. Ellipsis mine.

<sup>92</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

In this spirit of extension and complement, Acker's 1982 work, *Great Expectations*, in part an unwrapping and re-parceling of Dickens, does not confine itself only to putting Peter in Pip's place—"My father's name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than *Peter*"<sup>93</sup>—or Peter (Gordon) in Mr. Jaggers's place—"My lawyer Mr. Gordon duly sent me his address; and he wrote after it on the card 'just outside Alexandria, and close by the taxi stand'"<sup>94</sup>—but also plays around with Proust: "During our walks together, Gilberte talked to me about the way Robert was losing interest in her and increasing his attentions to other women"; "During our many walks together, Peter's new girlfriend Shang-shi talked to me about the way Peter was losing interest in her and increasing his attentions to other women."<sup>95</sup> Like Peter with these women, Acker will lose interest in the texts she's started with, and she will move onto others, a child playing with blocks, building different sets and houses (different "environments") and moving back and forth between them. "I wanted to do some sort of environmental writing, the way Bob Ashley was doing environmental music. [...] So I started doing my version of GREAT EXPECTATIONS, cutting it up, not even rewriting, just taking it and putting it together again, like playing with building blocks."<sup>96</sup> Her model that arises will not necessarily have its (four) walls and windows where we might expect.

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<sup>93</sup> Pg. 5; *Expectations*. Emphasis mine.

<sup>94</sup> Pg. 17; *Expectations*.

<sup>95</sup> Pg. 36; *Expectations*.

<sup>96</sup> Pgs. 15-16; *Lecter*.

In correspondence around *Great Expectations*,<sup>97</sup> Acker saw another material aspect for writing, which could become an element within her own. She confides, “endless worries: you don’t know what you’re doing anymore kid you’re off on your own process track no will ever understand you’re using language not language but given language, as in Flaubert’s, like paint, now just given material, sculpting it.”<sup>98</sup> Composed of the texts of others, Acker’s *Great Expectations* text will showcase the textures of other authors within their (and then her) sentences. For those other, angled purposes of her transports, the word, the book, will be made even more un-transparent, as the material of previous books will be made her new medium. Often from far-flung sources, the sentences of the book(s) will be arranged together over a page conceived in spatial dimensions. With headings, titled interrupts, more marked areas will be caused to be perceived, their angles of critique experienced and set off in sections of individual frames, like “I Journey To Receive My Fortune,” “On The Street,” “The Gritty State Of Things To Come,” “The Underworlds Of The World,” “Animality,” “The Beginning,” “The Beginnings Of Romance,” “Portrait In Red,” just to sample a few of the many narrative fields of *Great Expectations*. I am in some agreement with critic Larry McCaffery, who goes so far as to classify Acker’s works as “ ‘prose assemblages’ (to refer to them as ‘novels’ misses the point).”<sup>99</sup> (To refer to them as ‘novels,’ I believe, creates another point.) One could eventually be said to be able to walk both through and

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<sup>97</sup> These letters have been used to make and are part of another book, *Spread Wide*, subtitled “an encounter between Kathy Acker and Paul Buck with further interventions from Rebecca Stephens and John Cussans.”

<sup>98</sup> Pg. 78; *Spread Wide*. Paris: Editions Dis Voir, 2004.

<sup>99</sup> Pg. 14; *Some Other Frequency*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.

around Acker's books, especially as they develop over time, like a sculpture with panels of paintings set in relative relief.

Putting her life into the frame and among the words of the story/books of others, to see what of it they might hold, Acker reworks the use of other author's words and worlds within her own evolving logics, to descend from them and situate herself among them. Walls of her own constructed reflections are the only ones she wants to find herself up against. ("A few inches from my body I create a wall of bricks white concrete that exactly mimics the contours of my body I'm as tough as possible."<sup>100</sup>) These "walls" we'll keep coming back to, as Acker tries to reshape not only them, but also, in response, the bodies of her books. In another letter dating from her writing of *Great Expectations*, Acker identifies how an underlining thematic in the characters/texts she will pull from to compose her own will "logically" determine structure: Propertius "leads of course into Nietzsche [sic] because he too was up against the wall[.]"<sup>101</sup>

One of the walls one of the narrators, at a loss for direction, of *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* was up against was being alone in the apartment: "The windows are two huge eyes staring at me."<sup>102</sup> Acker's motifs of walls/windows/I/eyes underpin structure even when not more metaphorically invoked within the works' *mise en scène*, and in *Great Expectations*, Acker adds to the complexity of her compositional endeavors, when for example she brings her "I" up against Proust's, and dramatizes even how she subsequently incorporates pages and sentences of his into her own. Once absorbed in Proust's language, once she begins to look through the "window" of it, the reader sees the

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<sup>100</sup> Pg. 34; *Portrait*.

<sup>101</sup> Pgs. 99-100; *Spread Wide*.

<sup>102</sup> Pg. 36; *Portrait*.

narrator no longer alone in the book (the book we are reading, and the book the narrator is reading with its own narrator) in the very moment our narrator slides away from us to be held in Proust's narration. Proust is one (porous) wall of her own choosing—that she goes through, a vision of plenty Acker appropriates for part of her own, in taking up his book—not the empty, accusing space of the earlier, *Childlike* narrator's home environment.

Proust's language is privileged along the narrator's own material lines: "The only reason, at bottom, why I enjoyed looking at Proust's words was because I said to myself, 'It's pleasant to have so much verdure at my bedroom window,' until suddenly,"—and here is where the (glad) meeting of our I-to-I will take place, in a rich textual perspective shift, after the comma above—"in the vast, verdant picture I recognized—but brushed by contrast in deep blue simply because it was farther away—the spire of the church at Combray,"—what will become important here is the way the phenomena encountered yields discovery—"not a representation of that spire, but the spire itself, which, bringing thus before my eyes distance in both space and time, had come and outlined itself on my windowpane in the midst of the given foliage but in a very different tone, so dark that it almost seemed as if it had been merely sketched in."<sup>103</sup> This environment, clipped and pruned as it may be—I've had to break the moment into three, to try to clearly parse—begins to live inside Acker's own work, in miniature, as her narrator is taken into the discerning Proust narration. Her text anticipates and admires the image(s) from afar, before leaping forward, then floating off further into his landscape, shifting our shared direction. When, through the connection of a joining comma, her "I" becomes his, Acker

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<sup>103</sup> Pg. 35; *Expectations*.

creates an absorbing reading experience we have along with the narrator: one of (complete) integration into the emanating text.

Against the “robot,” the “lobotomy,” “the creeps,” “the shits,” Acker posits the desire of imagining, formulating other possible ways of being. Against the robot are written the muscles as they awaken and move during sex: love and sex, self and other, subject and object, high and low, literature and pulp, isolation and love, the contained and the open-ended, the holy and the debased, East and West, beautiful and ugly, the vertical and the horizontal, organized and scattered organic, the standing-up and the lying down, the erect and the passive (flaccid), writer and reader, creator and receiver—the enlightened model butts heads with instinctual bass notes; Acker will move forward within binary couplings, when she does, in order to make more wrenchingly apparent their interdependence, their mutual supports, to un-dam exchange and allow for the making of a *more*. (Roland Barthes speaks of “the pleasure potential of a perversion,” under the heading of “The goddess H.”: “perversion, quite simply, *makes happy*; or to be more specific, it produces a *more*.”<sup>104</sup> (Is it a stretch here to try to hear love in another language/tongue?) In Rimbaud’s “H,” in his *Illuminations*: “Erotic mechanics, her solitude; her lassitude, amorous dynamics.”<sup>105</sup> Of Rimbaud’s “H,” critic and translator Wallace Fowlie writes: “He defines elaborately with an eye to mystification and a will to deliberately obscure.” In the fragment “The Cuttlefish and its ink,” Barthes writes: “I am writing this day after day...I tie up my image-system (in order to protect myself and at the same time to offer myself).”<sup>106</sup> Both processes are applicable to Acker.)

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<sup>104</sup> See “La déesse H.,” in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*; emphasis in the original.

<sup>105</sup> See “H,” in *Illuminations*.

<sup>106</sup> Pg. 162; *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.

No more keeping to forms easily recognized, no more business as usual: this mental processing resounds with Acker's compositional procedures. In a writing made of reading, sex, and dreaming, Acker makes believe she is all sorts, types, and brands. Dreaming is a process she sees we could all stand to be more (freely) conscious of: "For the new life, I have to change myself completely,"<sup>107</sup> she writes in the doubly copyrighted (1974, 1980) *I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac: Imagining [!]*—that exclamation mark of the title lost or dropped once the work later becomes a part of her "trilogy" collected in *Portrait of An Eye*. Too often one term is set up over another: male over female, traditions over forward-thinking, practical measures over extreme postulates. If capitalism is a daddy-system and one that lubricates itself over the (dead) bodies of the daughters-wives kept in check and in house, Acker proposes a change of form and function: "I'm always destroying—the hell with the word deconstruction—rigidities, habitual meaning, habitual contexts."<sup>108</sup>

"My name is Kathy Acker."<sup>109</sup> This story begins by me being totally bored,"<sup>110</sup> the reader is also told in *I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac*, comparable to the line in Acker's earlier novel attempt of *Rip-Off Red*: "This is the story about how I have kept myself from being bored."<sup>111</sup> We are told in *Don Quixote*, by Kathy Acker, the story of how one woman will achieve her knighthood: "She had to name herself."<sup>112</sup> Knighthood,

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<sup>107</sup> Pg. 98; *Portrait*.

<sup>108</sup> "Kathy Acker," with Angela McRobbie.

<sup>109</sup> Throughout my text, paragraph breaks within quoted passages will be designated in this manner.

<sup>110</sup> Pg. 96; *Portrait*.

<sup>111</sup> Pg. 5; *Red*.

<sup>112</sup> Pg. 9; *Quixote*.

achieved when she “thought and acted as she wanted and decided,”<sup>113</sup> follows the abortion opening the book, through which she makes the decision to love (“the most insane idea than any woman can think of”<sup>114</sup>): “By loving another person, she would right every manner of political, social, and individual wrong: she would put herself in those situations so perilous the glory of her name would resound.”<sup>115</sup> While the aborting women all around our protagonist, among whose numbers she may now count herself, according to the narration, could be defined as “bums,”<sup>116</sup> Acker reiterates, “She needed a new life. She had to be named.”<sup>117</sup>

A wheelchair will be her steed (“hack”), upon whose term in one sense she’ll be prompted to reflect and linguistically refract—a writer, in her conception, is a bit of workhorse—as two terms mirror meeting in showdown: “meaning ‘once a hack’ or ‘always a hack’ or ‘a writer’ or ‘an attempt to have an identity that always fails.’” Early in this story, on the first page, we’ve been told how “this’s no world for idealism”<sup>118</sup>; Acker refers to the world of the aborting “Don Quixote,” a world held by and reflected in the bleak pages of her *Don Quixote*. “[S]he decided, ‘catheter’ is the glorification of ‘Kathy.’ By taking such a name which, being long, is male, she would be able to become a female-male or a night-knight”<sup>119</sup>; “she neither noticed nor cared that all the people around her thought she was insane.”<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Pg. 13; *Quixote*.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Pg. 10; *Quixote*.

<sup>118</sup> Pg. 9; *Quixote*.

<sup>119</sup> Pg. 10; *Quixote*.

<sup>120</sup> Pg. 13; *Quixote*.

In line with the great moderns, following them, working through and around them, in light of them, Acker settles into experimentation as a way of life. In doing so, she not only wants to move literature forward, but she also wants to mark it, to varying degrees, as issuing from the many pasts and paths; one notebook in her archive will be identified as “Ulysses Backward.” Acker’s experiments are manifold, and they develop, and change, complicate and rework themselves among themselves and others. In *My Mother: Demonology*, where the mythic man surfaces again, Acker clarifies: “To go beyond./ This sounds romantic—actually I don’t care if I have any mastery. I’ve no mastery of myself. I’m crumbling. I used to believe that I must understand and realize everything that constitutes me...and on this journey of realization, I came upon, just as Ulysses must have done, a monstrous cacophony./ I had no Penelope.”<sup>121</sup> Earlier in this book, in the chapter before, Penelope is used more directly against the narrator’s idea of an emerging self: “Why wasn’t I more like Penelope? Penelope was polite, well mannered...whereas I...I understood the real message clearly: I should become less than nonexistent” (her mother is yelling at her).<sup>122</sup>

After all the births that take place in the first chapter/movement of *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* novel/work, as we read forward, like the good little Westerners we’ve been trained to be, something Acker’s narratives will display much truck with (“Probation school at least taught excuse me trained her to act normal”<sup>123</sup>), as we watch the “I”s of the books as they multiply before our very own, as we come up with our strategies or we give in, to try and contain them, we move forward, born into

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<sup>121</sup> Pg. 249; *Mother*.

<sup>122</sup> Pg. 190; *Mother*.

<sup>123</sup> Pgs. 179-180; *Literal*.

different circumstances, into other possible identifications: “I’m born crazy in Barbican, four years after the defeat of the terrible Armada.”<sup>124</sup> The reader is set up and prompted, by the invitation to inquiry given on the back cover of *The Childlike Life*, when it is given its first publication by the TVRT Press: “In Troy, New York, an Irish bartender and his wife’s sister are brutally murdered.../ A tidal wave of thievery and terrorism hits London.../ A young girl is found with cut-up wrists on the corner of Fifth and First Avenue in New York City.../ I wake up and can’t remember anything./ Blood lies inside my legs. Have I gone crazy?/ Am I a murderer”—as we will in other books with Acker, we will attempt to proceed both less reined in and less singularly: “anything that destroys limits,” as the title page of what she marks as the “performance copy” of “New York City in 1979” reads (eventually crossed out).<sup>125</sup>

*Rip-Off Red*, like *The Childlike Life*, features a collection of motley, disastrous, possible alter-egos (some repeat between the two works): Henriette Cailloux, Lizzie Borden, Jane Cannon Cox, Florence Chandler Maybrik, Lydia Danbury Sherman, Madeline Hamilton Smith, Maria Marten, Adelaide Blanche de la Tremouille, Mary Ann Cotton. What do all these women share? They become other than well adjusted to the society they’ve been brought into and asked to live in. They’ll go then to murderous lengths, to take up for their husbands, or to get away from their husbands, or because they aren’t getting enough money, or because someone’s going to kick them out, or to stop their husband’s misery, or to stop their kids from suffering, or because they need money, or because the child is illegitimate, or because now “he wants to fuck her first time ever 11 years marriage,” or because someone raises a Union flag, or because he won’t marry

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<sup>124</sup> Pg. 23; *Portrait*.

her, or for reasons we can't understand, or because everyone denies her.<sup>126</sup> A manuscript of an unpublished 1977 work, "For the Ladies Who Sing: Three Stories," includes a note to self to insert "List of Murdresses [sic]."<sup>127</sup>

While one of Acker's first, more distinctive textual moves would be the constructing of her many-"I"-ed narrator, a drifting signification for a main point of reference, this floating "I" will give ways in later books to interactions as well with third persons. *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec* has as its initial framework an overarching conceit of a signed success, a voice from the historical-cultural past coming back to speak with (new) words in arrangements and the heightened vocabularies of Acker's making (as we will also see in *My Death My Life By Pier Paolo Pasolini*: "Did I ask to die? Was my murder a suicide by proxy?"<sup>128</sup>), but here there is too the subplot of Giannina's travails in the whorehouse with Vincent (Van Gogh) and Toulouse and the other whores. "'Any man'll fuck me,' Giannina tells Veronique in total privacy"—though a "total privacy" we as readers have the godlike ability to look in on, from our armchairs, from our beds of comfort, as we are given a bird's eye view by Acker into the whores' sanctuary and an ability to peep even further into their innermost desires by hearing their "private" words. Giannina wants an exchange, an understanding that would take place more than her usual "once or twice," a deeper relationship, and she goes on to grouse that her shallow connections are "like fucking the men in the porno movies I'm in. And I get paid to fuck when I make movies."<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Serpent's Tail/High Risk Archive.

<sup>126</sup> See pgs. 47-49; *Red*.

<sup>127</sup> Serpent's Tail/High Risk Archive.

<sup>128</sup> Pg. 175; *Literal*.

<sup>129</sup> Pg. 196; *Portrait*.

Then Giannina and Toulouse and Vincent and our initial set of concerns (“The Case of the Murdered Twerp,” “Longing for Better Things,” “The Desperation of the Poor”) and how the issues raised so far might all relate are moved “forward” through Chapter Four, “The Creation of the World,” to other stories, of other conflicts more various in tenor and source. Here is a fable, a biosphere of prose, philosophical in its gendered politics and evolutionary, colonizing concerns, of a little cat so in love with a big baboon she unwittingly helps him, by feeding him, to take over the world and create a new order for it. “She’ll do anything so the big hairy baboon’ll love her”<sup>130</sup>; “She’s starving”; “Now the horrible baboon’s stomach is so huge, it rubs against the white moon. The stomach is so dense, it weighs as much as the earth. So there exist three balls: earth, baboon, moon.”<sup>131</sup> The little cat sets to dreaming then of an Eden before the baboon, where it is only once the “white bears rise up,” once on their hind legs there, and “bat their paws against each other’s faces,” that we have our first period. The first sentence after the period confirms the end of the dream. “This is how the world came to be.”<sup>132</sup>

Our next story here, now that “the world exists,” brings war home, as we read, in the voice of a longing, frightened, and confused romantic little sap the harrowing story of a near date-rape, then further find the cause of her offending frigidity to be rooted in an earlier rape, by brother Ted, who had “just gotten back from Nam and he hadn’t quite adjusted yet to our peaceful home,” after he dresses her up in red silk pajamas, to give her

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<sup>130</sup> Pg. 227; *Portrait*.

<sup>131</sup> Pg. 229; *Portrait*.

<sup>132</sup> Pg. 230-231; *Portrait*.

“what all of you yellow bitches want.”<sup>133</sup> Though in the end, she’ll still get her prince. (“You can pretend you’re a little Vietnamese girl,”<sup>134</sup> her brother Ted tells her during the dress-up scene of how he’s been playing house overseas.)

A final story to consider in the mini-trilogy of Chapter Four takes up one of the Harold Robbins challenges of “guess who everyone is supposed to really be” in this book—this time in the one called *The Pirate*, and pirate indeed Acker does (or “hijack,” if you prefer; Lotringer calls her method “Terrorism in literature”<sup>135</sup>). Pirating force Acker becomes: re-investing the Robbins narrative again to its more obvious ends in her more overtly gendered, raced, and classed politics. (I want to stress too that many of Acker’s appropriations function through a desire to amplify, to complicate, and to further previous benchmarks, be they the “lows” of Robbins or those philosophical probes found in the tales of Poe; in *I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac*, “Peter’s story”—in part the story of the *Nymphomaniac* text’s primary “I” misrecognizing the self in part in “Peter,” and trying to make of Peter (and his story) her double-twin—Acker composes in large degree from another story with which “Peter’s” structurally couples and echoes, “William Wilson,” Poe’s text of unfortunate identity-split; Acker dogs an original that hounds her characters back.)

Acker begins to crack open the case of Robbins’s *The Pirate* with, “My name is Jacqueline Onassis” (“White bitch”), who will come to stand in for Robbins’s “Jordana,” who in Acker’s text finds herself located under the heading proclamation: “I WANT TO BE RAPED EVERY NIGHT!” Only too eager to oblige: “the tall good-looking black

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<sup>133</sup> Pg. 234-235; *Portrait*.

<sup>134</sup> Pg. 235; *Portrait*.

<sup>135</sup> See “Devoured By Myths,” specifically pg. 13; *Lecter*.

man”; “Nigger!”; “this wild cannibal”: “ ‘You better learn to beg a little if you want some black cock in your hot little pussy.’”<sup>136</sup> “Black” and “white” though they may be, the sexual dynamics of Robbins’s text and “role-playing” that Acker’s own will reflect can be pushed past the bedroom arena to that of a more public reception; Acker uses bestselling author Robbins to take her stroll downtown, becoming willing “punk” by flaunting their relative associative values.

Acker details her texts by redeploying the means in which others have decked theirs out. Acker will determine what she takes from Robbins into her own story and how she decides to use it innocently or not so innocently, all in fun and games. Both texts warn of “keep[ing] things in their proper perspective,” Acker’s a loaded regurgitation, which nudges and shifts the grounds of containment. Robbins’s “Jordana” (“she”) becomes “Jacqueline Onassis” (or “I”) in Acker’s version for herself of the story; when Jordana feels “the wetness between her legs,” “I” will feel it between “my legs.”<sup>137</sup> The bisexual “Jacques” is the basis for her similar predisposed “Jackie.” Where Jordana is conveyed by “the seventy-thousand dollar San Marco,”<sup>138</sup> Acker’s manipulation, “Jackie,” takes to the sidewalk for prospective invites, though what can be done on the open seas is perhaps better conducted inside a city’s bars. Where Robbins’s intrigue takes place in the environs of Cannes, Acker’s narrative transposes his setup to New York “resorts” (“The neon lights [of Times Square] were blinking at me, winking, inviting hot desires I had never known existed”<sup>139</sup>).

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<sup>136</sup> Pg. 237-244; *Portrait*.

<sup>137</sup> I am comparing here and throughout pages 237-244 in *Portrait of An Eye* with Robbins’ *The Pirate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), pages 150-157.

<sup>138</sup> Pg. 148; *The Pirate*.

<sup>139</sup> Pgs. 237-238; *Portrait*.

The slip of Robbins's text into her own Acker cues with the spoken command, "Look," copied from the mouth of Robbins's conniving character Jacques (who in his narrative is being employed to surreptitiously get compromising pictures of the pleasure-cruising—and married—woman, Robbins's Jordana, Acker's Jackie). Where Jacques and Jordana have been embroiled for over three months, Acker's unnamed stand-in for the man admits his motivation and tries to seduce with the pickup line: "Three nights I've been following you."<sup>140</sup> Acker proceeds through her appropriation—set tellingly, need I remind, under the directive to "look"—to explore the erotic nature of Robbins's story.

While some of this re-commanding of text is admittedly even less mincing of words (where Jacques says, "Look," to accompany the release of "his erect penis from his bikini," it is a "young dark-haired man" who gives the instruction with an erect "cock" in Acker), Acker's play with Robbins's text is not, however, only as simple as "topping" it. Acker performs a combination of textual moves: quoting the prior "fantasy" that moves along Robbins's text's machinations, heightening it, to be sure, but also recasting and interacting with the original. A man on the street, like a cocksure character out of a Harold Robbins novel, ironically, approaches the narrator, herself acting (in her/Acker's mind) as if she were the one and only Jackie O., performing a perverse mimeticism. The invitation to oral sex, which Robbins's Jordana dismisses in favor of a glass of white wine, Acker leaves more hanging, by cutting from the entreaty to the inside, next, of a disco.

Acker has little time there for Robbins's flourish of a jet set ("an actress who had finished a film with Peter Sellers, and had been with a group of people who had come

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<sup>140</sup> Pg. 238; *Portrait*.

down from Paris for the weekend”<sup>141</sup>). Ultimately, Robbins’s larger plot of blackmail does not interest Acker as much as the black male from “Cracker country,” the South, Georgia, in the words of Robbins’s character that Acker also parrots. “Papagayo” or “The Metropole” might be neither here nor there (“no one thought it strange that a woman or a man wanted to dance alone” in the south of France, and likewise, in the middle of New York City); who cares if the (black) man she’s dancing with went to a French school or a New York private one? At times, the dip into Robbins’s words pulls into Acker’s own such rare-find materials as “mudders” (“ ‘You look like a fast-track lady and there’s nothing but mudders out there,’ he said”). They’ll go back to his place, where after the “toke from the reefer” (as texts culturally date), they’ll both go up to coke.

Robbins has the black (dancing) man living just past “Le Gorille,” which Acker converts to “the Paradise,” her streets flooded with cops, where Robbins’s yachts are tied right up alongside the perused ones, where tourists with their pockets now empty stroll, where girls are left to wash up once no longer such attractive commodities—the tint of romance in Robbins giving way to harder socio-economic facts, as Acker sees them (“they were fourteen years old or older and too old for the streetwalker trade,”<sup>142</sup> as Acker has the undesirables, the detritus). Robbins’s street with its smell of “fried eggs and pommes frites” is pushed through Acker’s imagination to represent a New York-ish waft of “dried cunt juice and piss stains,” as she downshifts and lands the scene into one of an underlying squalor with even further tapped resources. Living in a building that has “a boutique on the ground floor” in Robbins’s setting becomes her retreating to “the

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<sup>141</sup> Pg. 151; *The Pirate*.

“dirtiest apartment building” for sex; the “more modern lock,” presumably necessitated by the sketchiness of the surroundings, or the black man’s relative prosperity, becomes a New York locale of “no lights in the hall.”<sup>143</sup> “Jackie” (“I”)/Jordana is slumming, remember, and she must be shocked by the state of affairs in the apartment she enters: “There was no other furniture besides an armless metal chair. A bathtub covered by a wooden board served as a table. I didn’t see a toilet, only a sink.”<sup>144</sup> Acker’s text paints what for many has become the New York City standard of living over Robbins’s more excusable, European bedsit; “ ‘It’s not much,’ he said, ‘but it’s home.’”

When facing off these two texts, source and reflection, positioning them side-by-side, what’s perhaps most markedly revealing is the moment and content of the paragraph Acker inserts in the place of Robbins’s own, more clinical and perfunctory, “He jackknifed her legs back and sprinkled the coke over her clitoris, then put his head between her legs.” Acker rather allows herself to go off on the lyrical tangent of, in “I”/Jackie’s voice: “I sang out, I could not help it now; and giving a grunt of astonishment he [wild cannibal] began feeling me.” Then, having come as far as she can with Robbins’s text, Acker syncs back into stride with him for a few more lines, before exiting his lead firmly on the foot of attribution given to the black man—“that giant beautiful tool”—through Jordana’s/the woman’s eyes, of course: “I wanted to swallow him alive, to choke myself to death on that giant beautiful tool.” From Robbins’s text, Acker can be seen to fashion a tool of her own.

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<sup>142</sup> Pg. 241; *Portrait*.

<sup>143</sup> Pg. 241-242; *Portrait*.

<sup>144</sup> Pg. 242; *Portrait*.

In *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec* by Henri Toulouse Lautrec, we cut back to the whorehouse that we are reminded we never actually left, no matter how caught up in the preceding fantasy of a woman called “Jackie O.” floating through a Robbins setup, stage designed as Acker decides a bit more fitting. The novelty of a new story is only good for so long, before reality (Acker’s metaphor for reality here in this text, as in many others, is being stuck in the whorehouse) once again rudely intrudes: “ ‘O, cut the shit,’ Norvins says, dragging her huge body into the room.”<sup>145</sup> “[Norvins] runs the hottest bar in Montmartre. In the back of the bar’s a whorehouse.”<sup>146</sup> Our whores, fantasy creators and fulfillers for hire, have just been telling each other bedtime stories, the latest featuring Jackie O., and we’ve just been following along, while Acker has been lying in wait with other narrative tricks up her sleeve. As Emily Brontë before her found it convenient to do, when her moor romance needed more expanse, Acker adds another layer to her text with further character introductions of a second generation; more time is needed to truly visit the sins of the whorehouse “fathers” upon the unsuspecting little lambs.

In *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec*, we meet now “Marcia, young daughter of Vincent Van Gogh,” who has taken up with a character only identified by his profession at first (“the architect”). These two young lovers, partners in crime, live in the house of the Alexanders, bearing the name of Acker’s own troubled birthright—Alexander being the surname she once carried before her first marriage to a young man, supposedly, of the wrong stock. It is this name from her first marriage that Acker keeps and under which she eventually publishes; Acker’s girl and women characters are also always taking up

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<sup>145</sup> Pg. 244; *Portrait*.

with the wrong type, especially once they get their genders more ironed out in the wake of her first “Tarantula” excursions. Conversely, “Alexandria,” with its familial, if slightly more mythic, ring, is found to function in Acker’s *Blood and Guts In High School* as not only “that city of gold,” a homeland site with the implicit pining such riches might (subconsciously) elicit, but also as the spot where Janey finds herself “in gaol...for stealing two copies of *Funeral Rites* and hash from [Jean] Genet.”<sup>147</sup> In *Pussy*, *King of the Pirates*, a “most famous whorehouse” is located there (Alexandria).<sup>148</sup>

These nests, webs, burrows of inbred interiors, novelistic floor plans and textual walls (“the wall[s] of my fantasies”<sup>149</sup>) with windows into and onto individual consciousnesses and the others that they come to hold—those of characters, the cultures outside them, and the reader’s call to synthesize them all together or not, viewer-receiver, as outside of one(‘s) self or inside of one(‘s) self—continue, and they continue to multiply over Acker’s career. The characters in Acker’s books, often constituted in part from characters from other books, bring with them some of the characteristics they hold outside of her textual embrace. These characteristics are complicated then, as they are slyly dealt with, or not so, by the “character” of the book (how Acker is fucking around with what she’s using this time to compose her writing—why and how these characters are being included, grafted in) into which she has inserted these outside influences. Such underhanded, or overt, rhetorical developments are furthermore complicated by the fact that characters (of the supposedly flesh and blood variety) are not the only loci where

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<sup>146</sup> Pg. 190; *Portrait*.

<sup>147</sup> Pg. 137, 133, respectively; *Blood and Guts In High School*. New York: Grove Press, 1984.

<sup>148</sup> Pg. 28; *Pussy*.

<sup>149</sup> Pg. 43; *Portrait*.

Acker trains her re-limning focuses: symbols, settings, words themselves gain “character” in Acker. She works selected ones up into a privacy of codes, a movement of language dressed and undressed, as she spots and camouflages in new coats of her text. One of the supplementary or side dramas in any of her books, just as much as the sex, just as much as the life being narrated and “exposed,” is the poetics Acker makes of her own repetition compulsions.

If Duchamp asked around in borrowing from others, clothes, hat, ring, to be in drag as the phenomenon that became Rose Sélavy, whose appearance he conceded as a collaborative effort—the creation of her does not belong to him, she is everyone’s<sup>150</sup>—as an “T”-artist, Acker borrows from him and his legacy when she places a quote readily associable with him—“I kept working on the ‘Large Glass’ for eight years, but despite that, I didn’t want it to be the expression of an inner life”<sup>151</sup>—next to another utterance, one more apparently (the more you know) linked to Acker’s own autobiography—“I keep trying to kill myself to be like my mother who killed herself.”<sup>152</sup> Acker metaphorically fulfills both desires by having both statements issue forth from a single, shared character/speaker, marked for all indications as one and the same, identified only and solely as “I.” This cunning, formal movement of balance of concerns under a single designation in the text of *My Death My Life By Pier Paolo Pasolini* appears only a couple of pages after Acker specifically evokes Duchamp and he is assigned a type of “autism,” after the question: “What is language?”<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Remarks by Mary Ann Caws, “Connecting the Dadaists: An interdisciplinary afterward to MoMA’s Dada exhibit,” CUNY Graduate Center, September 18, 2006.

<sup>151</sup> Pg. 222; *Literal*.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>153</sup> See pgs. 219-222; *Literal*.

In an essay draft, Acker writes the answer, “Language is or involves a community of memory.”<sup>154</sup> Acker’s “language” subsists within and simultaneously constructs her corpus, as she enriches words and concepts, the arms and limbs of her prose, for greater/self mobility. Of course I’m making a metaphor. Discussing her “trilogy” in the essay draft I’ve pulled from above, Acker writes: “By the third book, *Toulouse*, I rested where I was, in this sexual relation, so to speak, between chaos and the meaning that language is, this sexual relation we call identity.” Words become insistent looking-glasses that retain their imprints—standing before them—however subtle, however streaked, and however discernable only by certain lights. Words are ready-mades to be re-curated and re-infused. Some words become little areas of pain, attenuated or intensified by the mosaics within which they are then dropped.

Also in describing her development over the projects collected as *Portrait of an Eye*: “I realized that I had been working almost irrespective of language, as if language was a clear mirror, an almost Augustinian notion. However, I knew language is not a clear mirror, not even a mirror except, perhaps, for the mirrors in Cocteau’s films.”<sup>155</sup> Those mirrors are the ones that you can go through, if you are so persuaded, to follow your death; or ones we can dream up alongside, awakening into other places, outside the enclosures we were once in before; or ones that specters come forward from; or ones that bodies can disappear before.

Mirrors/language function as the doors, to other realms, something to smash for entry and escape, reflecting both ways, before and behind them; in Cocteau’s vision, becoming water-fields to submerge one’s self in, to glide and spring through, and as you

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<sup>154</sup> Untitled, incomplete MS; Kathy Acker Papers.

enter the supposedly solid, the mirror, it doesn't shatter but ripples out around you, releasing a frequency of sound that can surround and account for the entrance of your energies. As well, these mirrors of Cocteau's with their permissive qualities are featured in a movie version world where a poet can live as a fêted celebrity, known by any and everyone on the street, mobbed for autographs, "a national hero," to use the words of the Police Chief, whom Orpheus must now stand before as he has been accused of stealing the words from a missing man's poem.

Orpheus has figurative blood on his hands. What do you mean by "poet," he is asked in an underground interrogation, the court of Hades he lands eventually in, and Orpheus replies it's almost the same thing as "writer": "To write without being a writer," Orpheus clarifies. In death, though, he'll see, there is no almost. The underworld is where love is all accounted for, for once and for all, as he/OR (as Acker fashions Orpheus, again, in one of her final texts<sup>156</sup>) goes from judge to instructing judge: one is free from the fate of being kept down there, never re-emerging, only if one swears never to speak again of what one saw there.

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<sup>155</sup> Untitled, incomplete MS; Kathy Acker papers.

## 2.

“I’m simply exploring other ways of dealing with events than ways my lousy habits—  
mainly installed by parents and institutions—have forced me to act.”<sup>157</sup>

—Kathy Acker

In Acker’s *Great Expectations*, the narrator, as her Tarot (“a psychic map of the present, therefore: the future”) is being read, refers to April 18<sup>th</sup>—in this gambit—as her signifier.<sup>158</sup> Acker’s protagonist Janey uses a Tarot deck in *Blood and Guts* with her father, Johnny: “*Johnny’s fortune is that he’s gone through a bad time; now everything is clearing up; in the future a close friendship/marriage? With a woman; final result; a golden life*<sup>159</sup>; because Janey wants to be the one to stay with her father and stay happy with him, and we as readers know this, Janey’s reading is ironically inflected. This summation of the father and daughter’s convening then gives onto a second, further narrative shaping space, which will also prove uncanny in Janey/Acker’s hands: the dream—and every major Acker work will negotiate dreams, in a plethora of its definitions, as will many of her more minor texts. To witness one: “I didn’t remember anything about this first period of my life, about my childhood. After this not remembering, I remembered jewels. As soon as my mother passed away, a jewel case

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<sup>156</sup> See “Eurydice in the Underworld”; *Eurydice*.

<sup>157</sup> Pg. 86; *Portrait*.

<sup>158</sup> Pg. 5; *Expectations*.

<sup>159</sup> Pg. 119; in *Essential Acker*, ed. Amy Scholder and Dennis Cooper. New York: Grove Press, 2002.

was opened. The case, consisting of one tray, had insides of red velvet. Perhaps I'm dreaming my mother's cunt."<sup>160</sup>

If the Tarot provides foreshadowing of sorts, watchwords, the dream provides an alternate reality and clues. Dreams might be similarly interpreted as predictors, as the images shuffle out of the unconscious folds. In her writing, as in a dream, she can watch herself. The pages in the book, like the arrangement of the cards, can prompt or augur paths. Books, tracking, tracing themselves can tell her future. Even as she's doing it, she can see what she is (doing). Such interpretations might attenuate her anxieties, as the pioneer psychoanalyst Melanie Klein tells us, in her own modification of those theories and techniques that came before her, adding to Freud's endeavors the analysis of the child. Rather than telling what's felt inside her to a therapist, Acker will tell her dreams to her writing, to make more of them both.

A woman or girl in Acker is always trying to find her way out or through her dreams. Pondering what one might be left at liberty to imagine, she gives the bodily quest perhaps its strongest allegorization in the female (k)night: a woman like her "Don Quixote" character could go mad or begin to make her own myths. She could begin to try to illustrate a reality for herself. In *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, Acker pries open the cast(e) of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, and inserts girls right there along with the (girl) pirates, working through her writing her anarchic re-figuring, plundering, re-sourcing the "goods," planting girls everywhere. Literary heresy and a textual sorcery are not to be dismissed. I riff in large part here off of the theorization of Catherine

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<sup>160</sup> See, "Kathy Acker, "The Killers," in *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative*, ed. Mary Burger, Robert Glück, Camille Roy, Gail Scott. Toronto: Coach House Books, 2004.

Clément, in her contribution to *The Newly Born Woman* (1975), co-authored with Hélène Cixous.

Dreams tattoo the imagination. Acker draws them out: with id consolidated into identity, through the proffered routes of cosmetic, consumerist society, you find yourself deeply in the heart of a maze, in the center of which can be seen sitting trapped, above all else, a woman in that place of the monstrous and repressed. Acker maps these dreams out—and, with her tattoos, Acker maps her body. Drawings of dreams become one of the fabrics of her narratives and books, as she believes they might lead to treasures, for herself or for her characters, if she just figures how to see them best.

In *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec*, Acker sketches out the crime scene of the bordello in a line drawing of the floor plan of the house: in one room, the dining room, the dead body. There are other rooms, though, left identified with only question marks, “undiscovered,” shifting entrances and hidden thresholds; this is true as well of one architectural draft in *Rip-Off Red*. Rooms on other maps may be left by no longer existing in time, as typographical keys explain, supplementing the drawing designs: traditional notions of time fold in upon themselves, in “dreaming,” or masturbating: a “central room among many rooms” becomes through journeying out along a new perspective line a “bag within bag,” transformed, on “A MAP OF TIME AND NO TIME,” as illustrated in *My Mother: Demonology*.<sup>161</sup> (The early *Rip-Off Red* includes other pictorial elements: “signs” quite graphically marked as such, words laid out on the page, set-off and boxed in, like little metonymies for the book itself: “calling card”

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<sup>161</sup> See “A Map of Time and No Time,” pg. 194; *Mother*.

drawings, ads for services, notices—“WOMAN AND CHILDREN ARE ALLOWED IN THIS BAR ONLY IF THEY ARE SILENT”<sup>162</sup>—and mocks of newspaper headlines.)

The Tarot will help map directions, too, in which a plot might further evolve, in Acker’s books. “I asked the witch to tell me what was happening,”<sup>163</sup> the narrator explains in *My Mother: Demonology*, before the reader is presented with a graphic-spatial representation of the spread of the cards, their interpretative jurisdictions, and indications of which ones have been dealt from the deck. In 1988’s *Empire of the Senseless* (featuring a character half-human, half-robot, a literalization in some sense of Acker’s pet metaphor for the only way to live unproblematically under capitalism—the father, like a machine): “I threw a pack of Tarot cards to find out whether or not I should kill myself or not.”<sup>164</sup> This declaration is followed by a scatter diagram. An arrow along a vertical axis starts towards the bottom of the page, proceeding up from a point marked “time,” before being clarified by a columned caption, whose formatting creates poetic line-breaks in the description and its emphasis.

“(line of  
influences  
from past  
through present  
to future)”<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Pg. 100; *Red*.

<sup>163</sup> Pg. 217; *Mother*.

<sup>164</sup> Pg. 195; *Empire of the Senseless*. New York: Grove Press, 1988.

This keying-in is joined to the preceding arrow via a diagonally dotted pointer. If things couldn't be complicated enough already just with what "time" might mean, the center of the time-line is composed of the name of the missing love interest, "Abhor." This name bisects "My irrational self," as the horizontal axis is labeled within its respective middle; another dotted line out to the left hand corner of the graph elucidating further "My irrational self."

“(the present or  
the central  
question)”<sup>166</sup>

From “time,” through “Ab-hor,” the vertical line-arrow(s)—(technically there are two tips)—and marches up to a labeled coordinate.

“Alexander the Great  
looks out over the  
world he's conquered”<sup>167</sup>

In line with a left hand point marked “Art,” “My irrational self” horizontally lies.

“(line of

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

events  
 writing  
 from past  
 to present  
 to future)”,<sup>168</sup>

“My irrational self” also darts towards a right-hand point marked “a happy home,” a vector further complicated by a vertical column of text extending alongside and to the right of it, abutting up against the page’s right margin, and travelling the length of most of the chart’s surface area. From bottom to top, we read:

“self:  
 happy and lonely  
 environment.”<sup>169</sup>

(this particular colon opens onto nothing, or it takes in the above charted field, and its surround, or/and the “self” situated under it in the column, further classified). On top of the “environment”:

“desire:  
 to use myself

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

as well as

possible[.]”<sup>170</sup>

We may read “conclusion:/ death”<sup>171</sup> to override this desire. (“These cards clearly showed that I liked the messed-up world in which I was living and that I was going to die. But it still wasn’t clear, at least to me, whether I should kill myself or not.”<sup>172</sup>)

The archive of her papers at Duke University contains a (practically inaudible) audio cassette of Acker and a British astrologer discussing her astrological chart. Her actual faith in the elucidating powers of such a system is further substantiated by another document related to her life, this one in the Serpent’s Tail/ High Risk Books Archive, held as part of The Downtown Collection of New York University’s Fales Library. Here Acker notes the zodiacal implications for the twelve writing students she has before her at one time. Some of my particular favorites are “lion aristocrat” and “weird sex.” Interesting in terms of Acker’s own personality morphs in her earliest works is “hidden criminal depths.” Navigating the classroom is a potentially fraught, as well as rewarding, experience: “BEWARE (Scorpio 3X-Cancer rising)”; “abstract-intellectual, lost. underneath, hidden stubbornness” (a student has a set of thinking powers, as well as a need for guidance); another student is “perfect. analytic, precise”; another is “cute.”<sup>173</sup> Acker calls what she goes into when she teaches “zuzuland.”<sup>174</sup> Looking forward to

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Pg. 196; *Empire*.

<sup>173</sup> Serpent’s Tail/High Risk Archives.

<sup>174</sup> Correspondence; Serpent’s Tail/High Risk Archives.

meeting up with one of her publishers (and friends) in Kansas, she suggests: “We can go searching for delinquent students again.”<sup>175</sup>

Rimbaud is a delinquent student in *In Memoriam To Identity*, as is the “Laure” character in *My Mother: Demonology*, as is Janey in *Blood and Guts In High School*. A book report on *The Scarlet Letter* in this last title begins: “We all live in prison. Most of us don’t know we live in prison.”<sup>176</sup> Hester, with whom the author identifies—but perhaps not as much as Pearl (“She’s as wild as they come,” “makes no distinction between what’s outside her and her dreams,” “she’ll open herself up she is soft and totally hurttable that’s what being wild is”<sup>177</sup>)—“wouldn’t be quiet and hide her freakiness like a bloody Kotex” and “was as wild and insane as they come.”<sup>178</sup> Acker goes on: “Hester’s husband’s a top scholar. A scholar is a top cop ‘cause he defines the roads by which people live so they won’t get in trouble and so society will survive.”<sup>179</sup>

Acker herself is a student of languages, working through the possibilities they offer or past the limits that their traditional instruction ingrains; Acker works language in ways both philosophical and decorative. To learn another language outside of the mother tongue can supplement the environment one has been (repressively) reared in. Parents, in Acker, attempt to instill limits and take advantage of the vanished horizons they impose (“PARENTS STINK,” as *Blood and Guts In High School* puts it). In *Blood and Guts In High School*, the reader’s movement into “The Persian Poems” section begins with these two lines: “WHEN SOMEONE’S IN PAIN, HE CRIES OUT” (emphasis is conveyed

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Pg. 65; *High School*.

<sup>177</sup> Pg. 93 (unnumbered); *High School*.

<sup>178</sup> Pg. 65; *High School*.

<sup>179</sup> Pg. 68; *High School*.

throughout this book, and many of Acker's others, with all caps), and "One day Janey finds a Persian grammar book. She begins to teach herself Persian."<sup>180</sup>

Captured into (white) slavery, Janey, the daughter, tries but ultimately will not be allowed to leave her preordained, societal rung, no matter where she turns or looks. Gender, as constructed through language, is shown to be a big part of this, as gender both organizes and reinforces society. Agency would mean the body coming to and through terms for its own causes and effects. Acker shorts desire's circuit—daddy and daughter have been an item (when your boyfriend is your father, there's no way he can be good)—dramatizing what might be at the heart of the "functional" family ("I remember I wanted to be a good girl for my father"<sup>181</sup>), as she works literally inside the covers of this title with an exploded figuring of the Freudian family romance (mommy, unless she's Hester Prynne, is mostly a hindrance). Acker then extends her critique beyond America, New York City, New England, and English, as represented through Janey and her daddy and their relationship (in literature): Janey goes to Tangier.

The learning of a new meaning-making system, as I read it, takes the time of many pages and exercises, but Janey, even in prison, reveals herself to be a bit of a self-starter: "One day she found a pencil stub and scrap paper in a forgotten corner of the room. She began to write down her life...."<sup>182</sup> This learning experience—unlike the one with the Persian slave trader who has trapped Janey in the locked room where she now lives and "[t]wice a day...[comes] in and [teaches] her to be a whore"<sup>183</sup>—is a solitary endeavor, punctuated only by Janey's thoughts interacting with the new language she can

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<sup>180</sup> Pg. 70; *High School*.

<sup>181</sup> Pg. 67; *High School*.

<sup>182</sup> Pg. 65; *High School*. Ellipsis in the original.

use now to try to cry out in. We, reading along with Janey, encounter and learn about the *ezafe*, the Persian morpheme that “links two entities,” which displays some “rhyme” with the English “of” (i.e. “the night of Janey” requires the *ezafe* in Persian); such a linking unit is forgone with adjectives the language classifies as “deviant” and places differently.

How two entities *do* link up creates a dynamic trailing across these pages we are meant to read as those Janey is filling up, as she begins to play with the language, to pass her days. Through these poems Janey is writing, we see how she realizes she learns to construct her environment through a language-system (e.g. “(is not) (other) (a thing) (chair)” = “there is only a chair”<sup>184</sup>), that there are not words for some things in some languages, that “Janey hates prison,” and that textbook examples are not so innocuous, depending on one’s standpoint. The verbs she is given to work with: to have, to buy, to want, to see, to come, to beat up, to eat, to rob, to kidnap, to kill, to know. Janey becomes the object of these verbs, rather than the subject (i.e. “to have Janey,” rather than have Janey have).<sup>185</sup> She translates into her own (English) language, what aspects she chooses to emphasize, prioritize, intensify, and to allow to gain in relevance; the subtexts begin to seem blatantly apparent, once she tries to put herself back into her (own) language. In order to write “soul,” to mark it out in this language, there’s a mark you must use, to precede the other marks, making the meaning of what follows “immaterial.” Also explored through “Janey”/Acker’s written characters is how one represents notions of “indefiniteness.”

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid. My ellipsis.

<sup>184</sup> See “The Persian Poems” (pages unnumbered); *High School*.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

*My Mother: Demonology*, when it introduces the element of a “foreign” language (“German had been my parents’ language,”<sup>186</sup> we are told in the “I GO BACK TO SCHOOL” section of the book’s third chapter, “Clit City”) provides along with the second language nothing like Janey’s translations—helping us read what might be strange to our eyes, however liberal the equivalencies accompanying the Persian patches in *Blood and Guts*. No crib sheet can be found anywhere within *My Mother*’s pages when it comes to German (the Farsi here is another story...). Five sections of German poetry interrupt the book’s English; the copyright page provides that this untranslated text is from Ingeborg Bachmann’s “Lieder auf der Flucht” (“Songs of [or “in”] Flight”<sup>187</sup>). The first German passage appears, in the midst of the author’s German tour (“According to the promoters, the tour’s purpose was to present new American writing to Germans”<sup>188</sup>), after a discussion of loneliness, that comes in part from occupying a car with a playwright who speaks no English and “being lost on roads I had never known and cannot name.”<sup>189</sup> The first bit we get is the second stanza of part VI of Bachmann’s fifteen part poem. Given my limited German, my understanding here moves between the comparison (my *or*, or “oar,” in the trailing below) of two translations I’ve been able to procure, while also not neglecting how such stretches of “silence” (for/of Acker’s English) forces meaning to pool between and among a number of sources.

As Bachmann tells us, “initiated into love,” we are only here, or we are first knowing it here. Lava bolts down, or spills over: Acker’s character, meanwhile, is

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<sup>186</sup> Pg. 36; *Mother*.

<sup>187</sup> I base my work here on the translation by Mark Anderson included in *In the Storm of Roses* and the translation by Peter Filkins included in *Darkness Spoken*.

<sup>188</sup> Pg. 223; *Mother*.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid*.

figuratively bottled up, in the car, own voice absent for the eleven lines of Bachmann that pour through Acker's page. My translators agree that the lava (linked to entering love) is being personified with "breath" by Bachmann, an expulsion that only reaches, or hits, us. Such matters of degree remind me of Acker's own methods of "translation"—marked also by her at times as "rewriting"—as in note to herself on a copy of a poem by César Vallejo, found in her papers: "Make more FIERCE AND MAKE SEXUALITY STRONGER."<sup>190</sup> The "crater," now spent, or exhausted, finally surrenders, or reveals "the key," to, or for, "these locked bodies" ("diese verschlossenen Körper"). Of her mother, in Acker's essay "Seeing Gender," she writes, "as if she's a map, she's the key to my buried treasure."<sup>191</sup> Other undoubtably attractive aspects of Bachmann's poem for Acker would be its pastoral scenes of an idealized childhood, held up in distinction to "walls," "gaol," and "lonely sailor hands." The bodies here in Bachmann's poem are figured as rooms, or chambers, we enter and illuminate, or light. The body, I would add, can be like a book or text, in this regard.

"The Fire Sermon" section of *My Mother: Demonology* (the seventh chapter, "The Dead Man," which contains seven sections within it) where all of the untranslated fragments of Bachmann's German appear, opens with an unsigned epigraph—"When lovely woman stoops to folly and/ Paces about her room again, alone"—traced back and attributed on *My Mother's* credits page to Eliot and *The Waste Land*. Eliot uses his notes there to direct the reader to another book, his lines in part from somewhere else, too; Eliot pulls his lines' beginning from the song the character (O)Livia sings in Oliver

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<sup>190</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>191</sup> Pg. 159; *Bodies*.

Goldsmith's novel *The Vicar of Wakefield*.<sup>192</sup> Acker's text commences to name one of her love interests in Germany, "Georg."

After a line, set off as a quote, but without any accompanying attribution of speaker—"No new world without a new language"<sup>193</sup> (through my own sleuthing I find this also to be a sentiment originating with Bachmann)—comes the second section in Acker's work from Bachmann's poetry. Forgoing the (arguably maternal) image of breast and sea conjoined, Acker starts this time three lines into the second stanza of Bachmann's part VII, quoting the next five lines: your hips are a landing pier, or a quay. My ships are returning, or coming home, from journeys too far, or a voyage too long. Happiness weaves, or twines, a silver chain, or rope, to which I lie moored, or attached.

I may find myself more attached to the English here than the German, even in translation. "[The playwright] pulled my head into his stomach and placed his arm around me,"<sup>194</sup> the native text goes on—Georg has earlier tried to explain to our touring author why he can't sleep with her—before we get more German, Acker picking up the Bachmann poem where she left it off before: the tongue is only fledgling, or also nascent. "[W]ords kept getting lost in all I was seeing,"<sup>195</sup> Acker has confided. Acker lets Bachmann's line about the flesh ("dein Fleisch melonenlicht") compared to melon taper off before the analogy enters her own text, and three lines in Bachmann's poem go by in the original before Acker sets down the ones on tears and the supreme weight ("das mich einmal aufwiegen wird") of the other.

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<sup>192</sup> In addition to Eliot's "Notes," see Lawrence Rainey, *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot's Contemporary Prose*, second edition. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

<sup>193</sup> Pg. 224; *Mother*.

<sup>194</sup> Pg. 233; *Mother*.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid*.

A sentence in English interrupts the German, to tell how the playwright releases the touring author and instructs her to call him first thing tomorrow morning, as soon as she wakes up. More lines of Bachmann's (master) text are lost, where we are dropped in next for the fourth German passage: I conjure tunes, or I charm melodies, that would even enrapture, or charm, even death. The last instance of Bachmann in this book follows on the heels of, floats below, the line of text: "I'm discussing the realm known as *the loss of language*"<sup>196</sup>; Acker checks back in with Bachmann's text an entire six sections further on into the poem's sequence, at the beginning of the fourth stanza of part XIII: loosen, or free, the ice ("silver" or not). The metaphysical pining of Bachmann's verse is both grounded in Acker's own text and occluded by it. Pointed to as well must be the fact that what we get at times in the place of Bachmann's uninterrupted words, a complete text, are descriptions of the American authors holding forth in Germany on their own importance. Acker is obviously skeptical and describes her predicament, though she takes part, as "ridiculous."<sup>197</sup> (The Bachmann quoting concludes: "It is not I," or "I am not the one"; "I am," or "It is I.")

Acker does not simply drop flourishes into her text ("The dead, pressed against me,/ are silent in all tongues," goes a line of the Bachmann poem not voiced again in Acker's palimpsest). If language and the limits of its rules are presented as fundamentally implicated in the characterizing perceptions Janey has at hand in *Blood and Guts In High School*, allusion creates a further dimension to the basic récit, especially in a book like Acker's *My Mother: Demonology*. Her concerns are pointed, as are her designs. Bataille is ciphered in various ways throughout the text—one punning

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<sup>196</sup> Pg. 237; *Mother*. Emphasis in the original.

section is headed “A BAT AND I BECOME FRIENDS”—underwriting Acker’s narrative just as he underwrites Laure’s legacy, and the entirety of chapter seven is set under his imprint, sharing the title of a work of his, “The Dead Man.” The Tarot spread opening the chapter provides little consolation: “From these [cards] I learned that I’m a dead man, devoid of desire.”<sup>198</sup> We see here the “Card That Names the Problem,” (Ten of Swords, stabbed in the back), the “Cards That Tell What Will Happen If I Follow My Helpers” (in Acker, her lovers, supporters of her work, as well as the authors who guide and whose books set precedents for her own—often providing her with character, or “scripts” like those in *Don Quixote*, which she reenacts—as well as those she turns to for fodder for her own visions and explorations, those which she can “pulp”: the Victorian Dickens, the Cyberpunk of William Gibson—whom she hacks into literally), the “Cards That Name the Helpers” (Jean Genet appears in *Blood and Guts In High School*; *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini* not only begins with the author it is named for but is also dedicated to him in the book’s end; Rimbaud in *In Memoriam to Identity*); “Cards That Name the Present” and “Cards That Name the Immediate Present” are also given here in this chapter’s opening, as well as “Cards That Tell What Will Probably Happen.”

I wish to see Acker’s works on a continuum—a not necessarily straightforward one. In focusing on Acker’s investment in overtly or obliquely signed intertexts (and the Tarot can be seen as one that displays both a shifting and stability, even if less “literary,” that she works with just as she does “accepted” poetries), I do not, as you may see, primarily desire to isolate individual works of Acker’s or her utterances. In Acker’s text, there are as many roads to take as halls of mirrors to potentially trip down, or words

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<sup>197</sup> Pg. 223; *Mother*.

(signs, cue cards) to interpret within and without of their given contexts. It can be hard to get your footing. Even given these little puncta (in the Barthesian sense,<sup>199</sup> that which “pricks” me, a pricking often contingent upon my prior investments—Barthes himself would be one), my study can be said to default (or recourse) to a narrative of Acker’s career development, more often than not, in my desire to be thorough, to exhaustively survey, but as Acker herself writes in “The Seattle Book”: “Content is non-replaceable values (differences or words) in time.”<sup>200</sup> Or as such a concept is made metaphoric in “Lust,” a sailor laments: “Every one-night stand or man in a one-night stand is like every other one-night stand or man in a one-night stand because the sex in a one-night stand is without time and only time allows value.”<sup>201</sup>

Self-designations and alliances are contingent upon the contexts within which they are formulated and always up for debate. My presentation of the discursive valences to be found within Acker’s texts of shifting authorities I would like to read as a readjustment, placed in contradistinction to any more totalizing accounts of them or her, where theory applied to her work, fiction though it may be—though even that is rather indeterminate at times, as I will illustrate further, shortly—might be allowed to “top” her performances. (I should, still, make sure I parenthetically note here just how invested in the dramatics of herself as “bottom”—or for those less comfortable with such queerly defined theoretical positions and personalities, herself as “woman”—Acker’s texts and

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<sup>198</sup> Pg. 218; *Mother*.

<sup>199</sup> I am “adapting” from the formulation in *Camera Lucida*.

<sup>200</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>201</sup> Pg. 68; *Lecter*.

life prove to be.<sup>202</sup>) The older she and her work gets, paradoxically, the more Acker's resistances coalesce in a formulation of the difference between "childhood" and "wonder" and a dead adult world of mastery of norms. No less important, to her, to me, than how Acker comes to see her work (in the world) would be how Acker keeps coming-traveling, through and with her work, to (try to) see new selves, as she loses old ones (evolving-growing). I am seeking, pointing and pulling out some of the base notes from which Acker and her narratives proceed, though I want to be clear that I am aware my focus is selecting a frequency it preserves. We might continue to feel confined, like her, or we might try to open up and out—taking a position of further lighting out—of/through Derrida's trace, Lacan's little "a" object, Burroughs's association lines<sup>203</sup>—by cutting out; in part I mean a dallying with them, not taking any of them completely on board, though relying on them from time to time (strapping them on, even). As Acker writes in "Lust": "Cut off a leg and another limb grows stronger."<sup>204</sup>

Acker's life, story, would follow the form of her fictional output, and vice versa, as she folded one into the other, as she continued to explore the interconnection in increasingly complex ways, each one constituting, determining, inflecting the other. Interconnections will be further flexed and stressed as others, in her absence, fold her into their own communities, their own books, their own knowledge, fictions and truth claims. Acker and Sylvère Lotringer, whom I've already addressed in connection here, come up again in Chris Kraus's 1997 manifesto-diary-novel-letter hybrid *I Love Dick* (the ostensible *real* subject of Kraus's *I Love Dick*, British media theorist Dick Hebdige, best

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<sup>202</sup> See particularly, as this works itself out in her life and works, Belamy's "Delinquent" (in *Pink Steam*) and the letters to Buck (in *Spread Wide*).

<sup>203</sup> See particularly *The Ticket that Exploded* by Burroughs.

known for his influential, seminal book in subcultural studies, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, writes to Acker as she's dying: "Take good care, Kathy. I wish you the very best of luck on whatever journey lies ahead"<sup>205</sup>). Kraus writes: "Browsing through [Lotringer's] books she realized she was up against some pretty stiff competition, reading some of the inscriptions: 'To Sylvere, The Best Fuck In The World (At Least To My Knowledge) Love, Kathy Acker.'"<sup>206</sup> Sans accents, he is here. Kraus, admittedly, takes some of her cues from Acker (and is arguably who Acker is trying to get at in *My Mother: Demonology* when she writes: "My sense of the ridiculous, or loneliness, extended to personal relationships: one of my ex-boyfriends, another tour member had abandoned me for the woman who was now his wife and who was about to meet him in three days"<sup>207</sup>).

Acker documents a cultural history, as she watches it being made before her very eyes. We must make something of the fact that many of the theorists Acker lampoons or questions—Deleuze particularly (as we will see in *Don Quixote*, among others), whom Acker also seems to quote with all earnestness as an authority in her essay "Good and Evil in the Work of Nayland Blake"<sup>208</sup>—she calls upon in interviews to discuss her own aims in writing, though these aims are not static, and thus how appropriate or serving she finds any theorist at any given time to or for her own (individual) goals rightly illustrates a fluctuation in their valuation. Nothing should be set in stone.

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<sup>204</sup> Pg. 53; *Lecter*.

<sup>205</sup> Correspondence, Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>206</sup> Pg. 181; New York: Semiotext(e), 1997.

<sup>207</sup> Pgs. 223; *Mother*.

<sup>208</sup> See *Bodies of Work*.

I simultaneously perpetuate and fetishize the cachet of her (dated, increasingly historical) milieu in a document like this one. I do it because these “cards” also name my helpers (though this is a fantasy/fiction often much easier to maintain if I’ve not actually met the reference in question). Despite the fact that Acker becomes seemingly more reticent about “proper” identities in *My Mother: Demonology* than she’s shown herself to be in the past, it’s not so hard by the time of this 1993 work to link one of characters in particular, through the interventions of her interviews, to Lotringer; it is only a few steps from her admission in the “Devoured by Myths” interview, with him, in her *Semiotext(e)* publication, “Well, meeting you changed me a lot...,”<sup>209</sup> to, “My ex-boyfriend on the tour, a theorist, journalist, and fiction writer, explained that he had brought postmodernism into the United States.”<sup>210</sup> This is math any kid could do and feel some satisfaction in accomplishing.

“We like to mention each others’ names,”<sup>211</sup> the author known as Clay Fear writes in a text titled “I Don’t Expect You’ll Do the Same.” In the back of this booklet, above the information on how to reach the author, *The Black Tarantula* is given thanks; inside the text, the beseeching: “Since I am here mention me.”<sup>212</sup> Kraus proves to be not shy at all about dropping Lotringer’s name into her texts—and why should she be, as she states in an interview about her authorial methods, “The only thing I thought I could offer was a willingness to report on my subjective experience with some precision”<sup>213</sup>—and asserting her connection to his valuations of worth; Kraus even performs what could

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<sup>209</sup> Pg. 10; *Lecter*.

<sup>210</sup> Pg. 236; *Mother*.

<sup>211</sup> Pg. 5; Clay Fear, “I Don’t Expect You’ll Do the Same.” San Francisco: Musicmusic Corp., 1974.

<sup>212</sup> Pg. 10; *ibid*.

appear to be, if we would like to proceed so conservatively, and divisively, a “trumping”:  
 “For months *my husband* Sylvère Lotringer has been carrying around one of Antonin  
 Artaud’s famous notebooks in his backpack.”<sup>214</sup>

The subject of theory becomes part of the drama in Acker’s piece “Russian Constructivism,” credited as having first appeared in *Blasted Allegories* (“*An Anthology of Writings by Contemporary Artists*”), when it appears in her book of essays, and undated. *Blasted Allegories* is a volume including work by Laurie Anderson, Sherrie Levine (“Five Comments”), Jenny Holzer (“Truisms,” including such ones as: “A NAME MEANS A LOT JUST BY ITSELF”<sup>215</sup>), Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Richard Prince (the subject of another of Acker’s essays<sup>216</sup>). *Blasted Allegories* credits the “Russian Constructivism” piece as a reprint from 1986’s *Don Quixote* (only two other pieces in the book of Acker’s essays are undated: the note on “Postmodernism” and the rumination “Some American Cities,” first appearing in *Marxism Today*).

In Acker’s *Don Quixote*, “Russian Constructivism” appears as TEXT 1 of “The Second Part of Don Quixote: Other Texts,” though there are a few differences between it here and as it elsewhere appears, which I will now spell out while also trying to give a sense of how the piece moves and some of the territory it covers, as essay, fiction, and/or art text. The presentation of the piece within the fiction of *Don Quixote* includes the line, elsewhere absent: “Is there such a thing here as true love: that violence that’s absolutely

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<sup>213</sup> “Q&A: Chris Kraus.” <http://www.tarpaulinsky.com/Fall06/Kraus-interview.html>

<sup>214</sup> Pg. 140; Chris Kraus, *Video Green: Los Angeles Art and The Triumph of Nothingness*. New York: Semiotext(e), 2004. My emphasis, though I also believe the “closer” connection to Artaud might also be stressed.

<sup>215</sup> Pg. 104; *Blasted Allegories: An Anthology of Writings by Contemporary Artists*, ed. Brian Wallis. New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1989.

right?” Here is, ostensibly, St. Petersburg (“St. Petersburg is actually the Nevsky Prospect”; St. Petersburg is eventually shortened to “in Peter”). The colon following “no possible belief” in *Don Quixote* is followed by a space break, the next section of text starting flush left, where the essay version’s colon opens more simply onto the next paragraph, displaying not quite so large or pronounced a gap as in the former.

A touch of concrete poetry is made up out of a representation of a section of “newspaper below [the female weightlifter’s] fallen body.” We see only eight interrupted lines, running from both the left and right sides of the page, towards a center margin that designates two columns of the “newspaper.” What we are given is a negative, as the area outlined and filled with text represents that supposedly “hidden” underneath the body that has narratively fallen, creating this shape on the page. We might call this “action writing.” This inset text, framed due to the imprint of the body that’s landed upon it, is headed with the title “CITY OF PASSION.” The piece of text is laid over a dot matrix pattern (making a grayer background, simulating the newspaper “clipping” on the white field of the page) in the *Don Quixote* book that appears absent in the art book and/or reprint of the piece as essay. A minor difference, perhaps, but the trouble was taken in the first place.

In another section of the text, in the midst of a letter to “Peter” (“Please understand me. Please believe what’s in my mind at this very moment. I do everything you want”<sup>217</sup>) a Shakespeare appropriation is cut to, negotiated slightly differently on the pages; a parenthetical stage direction that interrupts the progress of the letter—“(My

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<sup>216</sup> See, “Red Wings: Concerning Richard Prince’s ‘Spiritual America’” in *Bodies of Work*.

<sup>217</sup> Pg. 45; *Quixote*.

nurse enters and binds me up.)”—in the text’s appearance as essay is placed at the end of the paragraph of the letter it halts. In *Don Quixote*, this moment in the text is given its own line/paragraph, flush left, and the dialogue between “*Myself*,” “*Nurse*,” “*Juliet*,” and “*You*” that now appears will follow this formatting for each new subsequent line; the essay version formats with paragraph indents for each new line/speaker (this minor difference is displayed in the first line of each new section of the text, too). The “speakers” are italicized in the essay version, though they are not in the text of *Don Quixote*. Part 2 of the text (“The Poems of a City”) also displays justification differences; formatting discrepancies now extend to the use of all caps, in the essay, to establish the six poems composing this part: ON TIME (whose all cap title is noticeably smaller in the essay book than the five titles for other poems that follow; in the novel, all poem titles are given the same visual weight), WILL VERSUS CHANCE, TIME IS IDENTITY, LONELINESS, TIME IS PAIN, TIME IS MADE BY HUMANS.

Outside of these formatting differences, one more textual variance exists before the passage most in question here (the passage in question will interrogate the worth of attention to such details I’ve just performed), in Part 5 (“Deep Female Sexuality: Marriage Or Time”): “I’m only interested in [*my*, inserted into reprint in *Blasted Allegories*, carried over to presentation of the piece as essay; my emphasis] abstract thought.”<sup>218</sup>

“ ‘I know you know a good many of my New York friends and I’ve always wanted to talk with you about your work[,]’ ” begins a dialogue exchange between unattributed speakers, first as five lines of dialogue composing one paragraph, followed

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<sup>218</sup> Pgs. 41-59; *Quixote*. Pgs. 106-125; *Bodies*.

by a single sentence paragraph/prompt (“What did we talk about?”), followed by a further setting out of this conversational exchange into another single paragraph, speakers still unattributed, this time for twenty lines, ~36 sentences (counting fragments of sentences dropped in and moved out of with more complete ones), and including one “curious” instance of lacuna, where a line gives over to much silent white space only, before the text starts back up, within the quote we are still currently within, to question whether or not the present party [the gender of both speakers throughout the passage is left unmarked] believes there is something “fishy” in certain (semiotic) theories (Deleuze and Guattari especially are pointed to). Our answer begins: “There’s a gap now...” After this point, the tentative use of ellipses begins to imply guesses, hazarding, trailing off, particularly around “absolutes,” before someone appears to pick up a book, and a quick, certain exchange on the subject ends in the next sentence, ending the dialogue: Kiss.

Somewhere near the middle of all this is the sentence/claim: “I remember in New York when semiotics came only it was Sylvère who brought it over, what it really did was give me a language with which I could speak about my work. Before that I had no way of discussing what I did, of course I did it, and my friends who were doing similar work we had no way of talking to each other.” In *My Mother: Demology*, Acker will also write: “[My ex-boyfriend] was ‘a kind of cultural emissary.’ In [importing theory], his only purpose had been to annoy and so, to wake up, the American left-wing academic establishment. For both he and the French theorists had understood, and understand, that postmodernism, all that theory, is a joke. To his amusement, the Americans had completely misunderstood postmodernism and turned it into an academic discourse.”<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Pgs. 236-237; *Mother*.

This is the joke that Acker partly wants to be in on, and that I run the risk of falling prey to in examining Acker's work and making too many high-minded claims for it. I should also remind the reader that above here we are in a supposed work of "fiction," a game we might often be hard-pressed to remember we are playing, as many of Acker's intertexts reverberate and link, when we find ourselves in some moments of her prose, particularly those that create another version of a story she's told elsewhere before. These tendentious couplings Acker's work often does everything to fortify. Periods of historical assertion in her prose contribute to and arguably allow for her work to succeed in its gravitation between genres; a fictional episode easily becomes the basis for some "art writing," if it contains the right kinds of "characters," or the essaying of some knowledge (of them).

Acker's expressed rationale, in her own determination of those writers she assigns a pride of place: "...it's the writer's work throughout time, a life-time, the process rather than any individual work that interests me."<sup>220</sup> I will say the same of myself, vis-a-vis Acker. Though they might seem on the surface unlikely allies, I will join her here to Sontag, who argues for a similar sense of liminality; we'll take the case of Burroughs, again, in my example. Sontag drops his name often; in 1965's "On Style": "Until one has grasped, not the 'content,' but the principles of (and balance between) variety and redundancy in Merce Cunningham's 'Winterbranch' or a chamber concerto by Charles Wuorinen or Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* or the 'black' paintings of Ad Reinhardt, these works are bound to appear boring or ugly or confusing, or all three."<sup>221</sup> Her thoughts on him go from, "At the time I wrote 'Against Interpretation' the new American writer who

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<sup>220</sup> "Ten Out of Many Women Writers," Kathy Acker Papers.

interested me most was Burroughs. He was the only writer who seemed to have broken some of the ‘realist’ stereotypes that limited American fiction,” to, in 1987, an amending: “I was only seduced by some particularly salient formal aspects.... Reading Burroughs’s subsequent fictions made me decide that I was mistaken about *Naked Lunch*.... If I’m at all engaged by somebody’s work, whether it’s a film, a dance, or a poem, then I always want to see or experience more of it.”<sup>222</sup> Sontag’s friend Mary McCarthy, initially laudatory as well in terms of *Naked Lunch*, apparently also had little further patience for Burroughs’s textual projects. Sontag goes on: “Each part changes for me as I know more and more of the whole work, which means to know the work in a deeper way.”<sup>223</sup>

In Acker’s *Great Expectations*, “Rosa” simultaneously writes to and tries to write off those in, or not in enough, or not right enough in, her life—Peter, Sylvère, David, Steven Maas (Mudd Club owner), God, and Susan Sontag. Despite requesting Sontag’s help in learning how to speak English, understanding that she (Sontag) is “very literate,” “Rosa” proves herself to be quite conversant in some theories in her exchanges, among her nastinesses and claims/acknowledgements of paranoia, frustration, desperation, and delusions. She tells Peter his new girlfriend is “only pretty because she’s wearing a mask” (summing up and referencing tenets of Jean Baudrillard’s *Seduction*, whom Acker more nakedly elicits in *My Death My Life* by Pier Paolo Pasolini—“The separations between signifiers and their signifieds are widening. According to Baudrillard, the powers of post-capitalism are determining the increasing of these separations”<sup>224</sup>—before having R[imbaud] decry in *In Memoriam to Identity*: “I’m sick of Baudrillard. The

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<sup>221</sup> Pg. 154; *A Susan Sontag Reader*.

<sup>222</sup> Pg. 233; *Conversations with Susan Sontag*.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

intellectual side of American postcapitalism. Cynicism”; putting him too in a poem she has R write (“Satan Triple-Master—cynic, money-hungry, pupil of Baudrillard”<sup>225</sup>)).

“Ours is the hottest love affair that has ever existed and I’m telling everyone that it is so.”

In further proposition, to Sylvère: “I think you should be nice to me because I’m just a helpless little girl”; “I’m counting on you to help me out.” Disgusting are “the half-artists the hypocrites the ACADEMICS who think it’s in to be poor”; “those CRITICS don’t know what it’s like to have to tell men they’re wonderful for money.” “Rosa” implies she does. To David (“Are you a Tibetan monk yet?”): “I should have stopped making demands that you not be the closet female-hating sadist you are”; “Your explanation that you gave up writing your visions in order to do commercial Hollywood script writing because you needed Francis Ford Coppola’s \$150,000 when you receive huge monthly estate checks rivals a university professor’s essay on the similarities between *Moby Dick* and Nazism. At least a university professor really has to make a living. Language means nothing anymore anyway.” God: “You are the world. I wish there was a man here who could put me back in touch with the world./ Love, Rosa.” After mentioning in passing how Sylvère fucks her, she then turns to and asks (Dear) Susan Sontag, “Would you please read my books and make me famous?”<sup>226</sup>

A number of the essays Sontag writes prior to Acker’s *Great Expectations* would indeed do her work great justice: “Against Interpretation” (certainly Acker practices what might be called an erotics of art, and I hope certainly I might be able to do the same in trying to read her, within her own oeuvre, within her own preferences, and up against my

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<sup>224</sup> Pg. 300; *Literal*.

<sup>225</sup> Pg. 6, 22, respectively; *Identity*.

<sup>226</sup> Pgs. 25-30; *Expectations*.

unlikely bedfellows); “Notes on Camp” (Acker camps not only gender, but theories of it; this is not a dismissal of the theory, but it is a playing with theory); “On Style”; “The Pornographic Imagination,” where Sontag takes up both Bataille (under the sign of whom Acker’s 1993 work *My Mother: Demonology*, as I’ve mentioned, is most markedly planted, figuring him through his relationship with Laure) and *Story of O* (which repeatedly surfaces in Acker’s work, and of which Sontag writes, “sexual arousal doesn’t appear to be the sole function of the situations portrayed,”<sup>227</sup> as would be obvious as well to any actual reader of Acker). They both deal with Artaud and preservation of his values (outside of his characterization in *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, in Acker’s speech for the 1994 “Artist In Society Conference,” Chicago), Genet, work with and read Pavese (Sontag’s “The Artist as Exemplary Sufferer”), quote from *Endgame* (Acker uses a modified stretch of it in a 1983 text<sup>228</sup>; “Clov” becomes “Maid”), appreciate Jack Smith, Canetti. It is not only Acker’s taking of her own cancer and fashioning herself, subsequently, through it, as “Eurydice,” that makes both of Sontag’s metaphor books—“Illness As Metaphor” and “AIDS and Its Metaphors”—relevant; notes on her method in writing “New York City in 1979,” as concerns Baudelaire (and by extension Jeanne Duval): “THOUGH HE HAD SYPHILIS, THEN A PLAGUE, I’M ~~PRETENDING~~ [replaced with “saying”] THAT HE HAS AIDS.”<sup>229</sup> In personal correspondence, addressing her desire to clear the air, Acker adopts terminology no less metaphorically loaded: “Too much festering these days”; and elsewhere: “Oh, it’s probably the cancer making me grow up. Hard teacher?” The technological equivalent of a slip of the pen

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<sup>227</sup> Pg. 208; *A Susan Sontag Reader*, intr. Elizabeth Hardwick. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982.

<sup>228</sup> See “Translations of the Diaries of Laure the Schoolgirl.”

can be evidenced as well; from the home keys, rather than the left pinky punching down in place, going up with the right middle and giving that finger, before it's brought back down to rest with the others: "[h]e's so mad he wouldn't know I coffin if he saw one" (Acker further notes here: "I should put all that in the indicative sense").<sup>230</sup> "The Imagination of Disaster" would be one way to go about reading Acker's *Empire of the Senseless*. Sontag makes one thing of Simone Weil's life (appreciation of her represents a "contemporary taste for the extreme in art and thought"<sup>231</sup>). Sontag places Weil in a line that includes, among others, some of Acker's personal favorites: Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Genet. "Some lives are exemplary, others not; and of exemplary lives, there are those which invite us to imitate them, and those which we regard from a distance with a mixture of revulsion, pity, and reverence"<sup>232</sup>; "No one who loves life would wish to imitate her dedication to martyrdom..."<sup>233</sup> What does it mean that Acker has her mother figure register for the impending suicide at a last hotel ("just as expensive, but newer, glitzier, for it caters solely to tourists") in this manner: "Will there be any luggage, Mrs.... (looks down at the slip)...Weil?"<sup>234</sup>

Acker drops an "l" from the end of her mother's name, or there is a typo in the *Eurydice* text, or a typo exists in Acker's typed letter to her father, included in her archive: "My mother is Claire Weill (Alexander) and I believe I am your daughter."<sup>235</sup> Sontag sees in Weil "contempt for pleasure and for happiness" and "ideals of bodily

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<sup>229</sup> Serpent's Tail/ High Risk Archives. All Caps emphasis in the original.

<sup>230</sup> Correspondence; Serpent's Tail/High Risk Archive.

<sup>231</sup> Pg. 50; Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Picador USA, 2001.

<sup>232</sup> Pg. 51; *Against Interpretation*.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Pg. 178; *Eurydice*.

denial.”<sup>236</sup> Weil is Acker’s (restrictive) mother who wastes away, denies herself (cultural) nourishment, metaphorically subtracting the self, an authority precisely “because of [an] air of unhealthiness,”<sup>237</sup> and ultimately a divine absence.

In tribute to Acker after her death, Diamanda Galás states, “I once had a conversation with her late one night in Switzerland, and I was astonished to discover not only a provocateur but an extremely rigorous thinker with an encyclopedic knowledge of her craft.”<sup>238</sup> I have a memory of this piece (now vanished from cyberspace) or another set of remarks by Galás, displayed as part of the “Discipline and Anarchy” (November 7, 2002-February 1, 2003) exhibit of Acker manuscripts, correspondences, and drawings curated by Brandon Stosuy; Galás wonders why she is just *now* getting to know this woman. Sarah Schulman remembers how she and Kathy went to a Galás concert together.<sup>239</sup> Acker mentions many figures of her current cultural context, in her works, as well as those more safely valued, more historical ones; these figures might or might not help her out along the way. “The night is made out of yellow Jell-O. Diamanda Galás is performing this night. Oh, yes, I know her, I tell a few girls who’re younger than me.”<sup>240</sup>

Acker writes in the 1975 *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec*, which she herself eventually signs: “Suddenly I noticed some man’s eyes on me./ He looked straight. I decided he was a creep./ He said...I’m Ron Silliman.../...I got to know Rae Armantrout, one of Ron’s closest friends, who’s bi like me. We hung out

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<sup>235</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>236</sup> Pg. 51, 50, respectively; *Against Interpretation*.

<sup>237</sup> Pg. 50; *Against Interpretation*.

<sup>238</sup> quoted in Wollen, “Kathy Acker”; *Lust*.

<sup>239</sup> See “Sarah Schulman Discusses Kathy Acker.” *Pavement Magazine* 2003.

together. I guess I got to know Ron gradually. My closest friend at that time, *Clay...*” I am the one to emphasize this name I will be going more into now; not having known Acker personally, I am not quite so assured on certain points as others, for example, Bob Glück’s confirmation-slash-announcement during his presentation at the 2002 symposium “Lust for Life: The Writings of Kathy Acker”<sup>241</sup> that “Cynthia” in Acker’s *Great Expectations* (1982) is Acker—another such directive came from Carolee Schneemann, “her mother was a bad breast”—but I would hazard a guess that the character Giannina is one of those semi-autobiographical portraits the Beats were so fond of, for example Kerouac as Sal Paradise in *On The Road*, Jack Duluoz in the “Legend of Duluoz” books (in *Kathy Goes to Haiti*: “The boy writes his name and address on the first page of *Desolation Angels*”<sup>242</sup>), Leo Percepied in *The Subterraneans*, Ray Smith in the *Dharma Bums*, Peter Martin in *The Town and the City*, and Mike Ryko in the unpublished manuscript “And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks,” co-authored with William Burroughs writing as William Lee. Acker: “I like Kerouac but he worked too much from intuition for me.... Burroughs really was doing the major work because he was dealing with how politics and language come together....”<sup>243</sup> Acker is doing work on how language and identity, and by extension, the politics of self-selecting communities, come together.

Scholar Michael Hardin lists Clay Fear as one of Acker’s earlier pseudonyms; he is not alone; an earlier bibliography, included in the Fall 1989 issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* partly devoted to Acker also lists “*I Don’t Expect You’ll Do the*

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<sup>240</sup> Pg. 174; *Pussy*.

<sup>241</sup> November 7-8, 2002, NYU.

<sup>242</sup> Pg. 23; *Literal*.

*Same* by Clay Fear” as an Acker work. Cataloguing of Acker at New York University’s Bobst Library and the Ron Kolm papers in the Downtown Collection of the Fales Library and Special Collections housed there links Acker and Fear as well, though Clay seems to have been a very real person, a real world individual not just crafted from Acker’s imagination. The “Fear” writing, as well, I find a bit more “conscious,” or succinct, more at ease with taking figured psychological concepts as givens from which to proceed—when I don’t find the vocabulary to be somewhat out of step with Acker’s own lexicon. To take just a few comparative examples:

1. “Watching a vampire movie is no substitute for having sex.”<sup>244</sup> Compare to, “As soon as the movie started, I wanted to lay my head on Johnny’s shoulder, but I was scared he didn’t want to feel my flesh against his,”<sup>245</sup> from *Blood and Guts In High School*. When Janey and Johnny, this time characters in “New York City in 1979,” and not daughter and dad, go to an all-night movie, *Some Like It Hot*, followed by *The Misfits*, “All during the first movie Janey’s sort of leaning against Johnny cause she’s unsure he’s attracted to her and she doesn’t want to embarrass him (her) in case he ain’t.”<sup>246</sup>
2. “He goes to big egos to have his ego fed.”<sup>247</sup> In *Essential Acker: The Selected Writings of Kathy Acker*, I do not find a single appearance of the word “ego.”
3. “...places where I live...can be like wombs”<sup>248</sup> is likewise maybe too simply stated or felt for Acker, her relationship to being carried/held—“the

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<sup>243</sup> *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1991.

<sup>244</sup> Pg. 14; “I Don’t Expect You’ll Do the Same.”

<sup>245</sup> Pg. 115; *Essential*.

<sup>246</sup> Pg. 144; *Essential*.

<sup>247</sup> Pg. 14; “I Don’t Expect You’ll Do The Same.”

womanly”—and asserting her individuality in the face of such embodied metaphors, proves much more fraught and potentially alienating, as textually explored. For example, “The coral reefs stretching into the sea look like mirrors of my cunt, my inner womb; then look utterly strange: black sea monsters skimming the surfaces of each other’s bodies for their communication”<sup>249</sup>; “a knife toward my womb I feel nothing I arch my back so that the top of his cock presses against the upper part of my cunt, the delicate opening of the skin below the cunt hairs, I’m scared I move back and forth quickly abandon myself to his rhythm as his legs tense, my tensed muscles the muscles around my clit shooting outward disintegrate I lose my sex by coming.”<sup>250</sup>

4. “President Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy serve as pepper and salt shakers.”<sup>251</sup> I’ve already shown how Acker makes an art *objet* of the first lady presented here; as for such male, presidential counterparts, Acker names names to make symbolic orders act out in unruly and devastating ways, upsetting the “dinner table,” so to speak. President Carter has “a shrivelled [sic] little thing, a dried apricot pit that Richard Nixon VOMITED up, a COCK”<sup>252</sup> and he “abandoned me.”<sup>253</sup> Reagan is an “evil enchanter” in *Don Quixote*; Bush, Sr. is a father who “rapes” in *My Mother: Demonology*—one can only imagine what she would have done with the son. “Good liberal

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<sup>248</sup> Pg. 32; “I Don’t Expect You’ll Do The Same.”

<sup>249</sup> Pg. 24; *Essential*.

<sup>250</sup> Pg. 26; *Essential*.

<sup>251</sup> Pg. 7; “I Don’t Expect You’ll Do The Same.”

<sup>252</sup> Pgs. 119-120; *High School*.

parents: they don't read much, but they think Kennedy could have saved the world."<sup>254</sup>

5. "The dog won't learn to take care of herself."<sup>255</sup> In addition to noting the third person, see: "And if dreams are dead, for the moment, I'm going to climb upon Chance, whose dog I will always be."<sup>256</sup> "I am now free to be mad and I will go to him and lay myself at his feet and say, 'I'm your dog.'"<sup>257</sup>

The narrator/author "Toulouse"/Acker writes in the "longing for better things" section of *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec*: " 'You know that city called San Francisco.... I want to go there, Vincent. I love this American poet Ron Silliman who lives in San Francisco.'"<sup>258</sup> Poet and critic, Ron Silliman exists as well in our "real" world of signs, and he is one current cyber-dispenser of little-known facts about Acker and her movements in her earlier years; for example: "Kathy Acker once did a piece that consisted of sending three of her current & former lovers to discuss her"; "...she was, literally, the first woman with a freshly shaved head I'd ever seen."<sup>259</sup> Silliman begins in his blog entry for Saturday, December 14, 2002, very matter-of-factly: "Of the 4,000 volumes of avant & post-avant writing I have lying around the house, none—not even the Clay Fear collection of Acker *imitations* with the blow job on the cover..."<sup>260</sup> The photograph here illustrates a spectacular phallus, an erection shot from below, reproduced

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<sup>253</sup> Pg. 127; *High School*.

<sup>254</sup> Pg. 74; *Red*.

<sup>255</sup> Pg. 14; "I Don't Expect You'll Do the Same."

<sup>256</sup> Pg. 229; *Mother*.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Pg. 29, 141, 207, respectively; *Portrait*.

<sup>259</sup> "Thursday, February 23, 2006,"; "Monday, December 5, 2005." *Silliman's Blog: A weblog focused on contemporary poetry and poetics*. <http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com>.

in black and white newspaper grain. This image we get, vein popping, takes up all of the front cover space of the volume. Once we crack the book wide, though, we'll see a larger picture, when we place it spread facedown. A stretch over space/time, the fold of binding here halves an image. Hidden away, on the back, is the rest of a story. Once we turn over the prominence, we will now see the woman's mouth, the rest of the message: our phallus all along has been anticipating (this) consumption.

By e-mailing Ron Silliman, I am told Clay Fear AKA Christopher Berg was a classical pianist by profession. Silliman also warns me that there is more than one Chrisopher Berg in the professional music world. The one I want has set the work of Frank O'Hara, Gertrude Stein, Nabokov, and Tim Dlugos to music. The "wrong" one—eerily, or not surprisingly, given that Acker is concerned particularly with the myths that suffuse our culture, and the Greek have a particular cultural capital all their own—still seems possibly a little right; he's the composer of a piece inspired by Orpheus and Eurydice. (In *Pussy, King of the Pirates*: "Everybody knows that Orpheus, or O, or Or, was the most famous poet who's ever existed in all of human memory, or Greek memory, which soon might not be remembered anymore..."; " 'What about Eurydice?' Now I remembered. That was the name of Orpheus's girlfriend"; " 'He lost Eurydice 'cause he was ignorant: he never knew who she was, just like we don't know who Eurydice was.'"<sup>261</sup> *In Memoriam to Identity*: "Quentin was Orpheus. He knew if he looked back, he was going to die. Looked back at whom? He didn't remember. Maybe a woman. So a writer has to be fucking alone, he said, not to a novelist, he avoided novelists for the

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<sup>260</sup> My emphasis; "Silliman's Blog: 12/01/2002—12/31/2002," *Silliman's Blog: A weblog focused on contemporary poetry and poetics*. <http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com>.

<sup>261</sup> Pg. 255-256; *Pussy*. Ellipsis mine.

ambitious poseurs they are and hated their literary talk. A writer has to be alone because if he really touches anyone, which must involve looking back, he dies. But to be a great writer, you have to perceive. So: you are playing with death.”<sup>262</sup>)

As concerns Acker works with over her entire career, myths, au courant and classical, and their uncanny simulations, are added to and supplemented by her understandings of the (New York) Art World and its attendant poetics (in addition to her processing of the Beats, Black Mountain and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E schools). Acker tells us, “I dreamed about New York City because New York City was Andy Warhol...” She also writes: “Until I started writing this, I had never realized how much Andy Warhol’s work and ethos shaped my own writing and life.”<sup>263</sup> In *Don Quixote*: “I was a member of a certain group—the art world—whose members, believing that they’re simultaneously society’s outcasts and its myths, blow up their individual psychologies into general truths.”<sup>264</sup> Acker, who wrote the occasional article for *Artforum*, has the honor of making one of their “Real Life Rock: Top Ten” lists, the column space largely dominated by Greil Marcus, though also contributed to by the likes of Mim Udovich and R. U. Sirius; it is Sirius who includes Acker’s *Pussy*, *King of the Pirates*, the last novel she published in her lifetime, in the October 1995 issue on his list of eccentric cultural radar offerings and interests (a CD-ROM, a drug, “The Return of Michael Jackson,” to give an indication of a few others). The citation is somewhat misrepresented in her publicity as being “chosen as one of *Artforum*’s top ten books of 1995.”<sup>265</sup> Elsewhere, attempting to situate her praxis, Acker paraphrases another’s idea, “Art was a finger

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<sup>262</sup> Pg. 175; *Identity*.

<sup>263</sup> “Blue Valentine,” Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>264</sup> Pg. 112; *Quixote*.

pointing to the moon. If any artist did anything else, for the sake of prettiness, commercialism, etc., he or she was unfaithful to his or her concept.”<sup>266</sup>

Another helpful link, in beginning to see how to read Acker, what she was going for, what desired effects she intended or hoped or guessed she might provoke, what seemed so obviously at stake for her, might be Cindy Sherman.<sup>267</sup> The two are graphically paired up when Acker’s essay “Realism for the Cause of Future Revolution” is given its first publication, in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*; here the text is accompanied not only with reproductions of paintings by Goya (from his “Black” period) which Acker’s essay explicitly discusses (along with Caravaggio) but a reproduction at its conclusion of one of Sherman’s photographs alongside a picture of its original, inspirational basis: Sherman makes herself look like a boy. Michael Hardin’s anthology was to initially feature “Untitled #216, 1989” from Sherman’s *History Portraits* series, the blond Madonna with the disconcertingly plastic-looking breast exposed and poised, centered (an appropriation of a painting by Jean Fouquet, dated 1450, 1452) as a cover, before this was replaced by an even more ripped-off Munch screaming piece. Sherman intersects with Acker in two other forums of publicity. *FILE*, published for a decade (1972-1989) in Toronto, features both excerpts of Acker’s work and in 1982 a six-page Sherman portfolio. Sherman would also eventually provide the German cover for Acker’s 1993 novel *My Mother: Demonology*. Acker writes in her 1990 essay, “Critical Languages”: “Returning to New York City in January, hungry for New York’s art community, or rather for my memory’s vision of New York’s art

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<sup>265</sup> See back cover; *Pussy*.

<sup>266</sup> Untitled, incomplete MS, Kathy Acker Papers.

community, I ran from gallery to gallery. Sherri Levine, Richard Prince, Jenny Holzer, etc. Artists from whom I had learned much. I now saw that these works equaled money.”<sup>268</sup>

We might think of Acker’s books in terms of the diorama, the time capsule, and the scrapbook of fleeing impressions. “I love my camera—it is like a paintbrush,” Sherman is quoted as saying.<sup>269</sup> (Consider the metaphorical-material development Acker makes in one of her titling moves: from Bataille’s “Story of” to *Portrait of*—and from “the” to “an” [Eye/Eye].) My pen, my typewriter, my computer, my paper, might be made equally mediumistic, as might my book. In “Requiem,” Acker’s commissioned opera (which “proved unsuccessful as an opera libretto”<sup>270</sup>), and also one of her last completed works, the character Acker puts through the paces of her life story this time is named “Electra.” That mythical, culturally-preserved plotter of the mother murder is

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<sup>267</sup> One could also draw a link to Frieda Kahlo, whose biography Viegener tells us Acker was reading in her hospital bed.

<sup>268</sup> Pg. 86; *Bodies*.

<sup>269</sup> *Veronica’s Revenge: Contemporary Perspectives on Photography*, ed. Elizabeth Janus (Zurich: Scalo, 1998).

<sup>270</sup> This verdict, from Grethe Barrett Holby, who was instrumental in commissioning the piece, was reached after “two early opera workshops.” Holby goes on to write of the attempt to develop the piece as a play with music. She calls the scenes in the play autobiographical (though I am skeptical, believing some strong aestheticizing still exists, as in the “Weil” moment) and plans to juxtapose them with “the fictional transpositions of these scenes in [Acker’s] novels” and hopes “to do so without losing the core of the piece. This work has begun, with Matias Viegener, Kathy’s literary executor, as dramaturge.” Acker, in her own statement on the project, where she names it “a retelling or appropriation” of O’Neil’s trilogy of plays *Mourning Becomes Electra* (“Homecoming,” “The Hunted,” and “The Haunted”), which she calls a “reversion” of Aeschylus’s trilogy, states: “Both *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *Requiem* are personal stories and yet they are not.” “Wednesday, September 01, 2004”; *welcome [back] to oblivion*. <http://www.calarts.edu/~acker/>

called upon by Acker's stage directions to be seen "*shutting her book which she never goes anywhere without—it doesn't matter which one.*"<sup>271</sup>

Such a romance with literature is a myth about herself Acker wants to make sure is preserved. Such a reliance on literature to hold one's self is given documentation in "Seeing Gender," from 1995, one of Acker's last essays; here she writes: "...I ran into the world of books, the only living world I, a girl, could find./ I never left that world."<sup>272</sup> Here the narrator traces a logic she locates in her "childhood" (as this section of the essay is named<sup>273</sup>): "I couldn't murder my parents because I couldn't imagine murdering them."<sup>274</sup> However, Electra could, and she'd call upon her brother for help in this department. In the "Seeing Gender" essay, Acker would also posit the pirates (who don't have parents, she tells us), who live in books, where she finds them, in distinction to the dead world of decorum, assigned to her parents ("my bossy mother and my weak father," "a man who isn't mean enough to her, who yields to her every silly whim"<sup>275</sup>).

The Acker text is always the scene of some transgression or "crime," and these underline scenes Acker returns to again and again, like spots of an uncontrollable, unprocessed love, a love that wants to be kept (wanting): "I want control over my environment. Like a fat spider I sit and wait. I float."; "I'm a cat"; "I'm a mirror."<sup>276</sup> I am not a woman or even a girl, really. Not yet. Here is how Acker understands, at one point, a Freudian model, as she sketches it (and underlines): "Things become sexual thru

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<sup>271</sup> Pg. 161; *Eurydice in the Underworld*. London: Arcadia Books, 1997.

<sup>272</sup> Pg. 159; *Bodies*.

<sup>273</sup> "Adult," "Looking for a body," "Searching for the body," and "Other than mimesis" are the others. See "Seeing Gender," in *Bodies of Work*.

<sup>274</sup> Pg. 158; *Bodies*.

<sup>275</sup> Pg. 159; *Bodies*.

<sup>276</sup> Pg. 57, 72, 72, respectively; *Portrait*.

representation in fantasy/ Fantasy—(the sexualization)—no object-end: therefore can take any position in the fantasy.”<sup>277</sup> Note how Acker’s own sentence/modification “lacks” the noun-subject, as she reels out her (proving) chain of logic, as she illustrates in language.

Acker will masturbate (on/through) her pages: “I begin to play with the spirals within me, my flames...”<sup>278</sup> An interpretation becomes one line, one thread of (re)composing, rebuilding the broken-down, with a bit now of the author’s own two hands in it. Text is tissue, Barthes tells us in his *Pleasure*, and Acker builds her (textual) body up, stringing it with variable weights, piercing and inking: a girl is trying to learn to feel her worth. Handling her fears through knowing her own recesses, a girl is creating the nuances of her experiences. “...I can think and masturbate and write, which is the only activity this evil society has left me capable of doing.”<sup>279</sup> “This is the only way I can act. This is the only way I can write. Bad,” she explains in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*.<sup>280</sup> (“This is the discipline of an artist today,” Fear writes; also, “I call myself an artist of many sides.”<sup>281</sup>)

“Of course, I disguise myself as a man,”<sup>282</sup> Acker writes within the *Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, where gender confusion is first overtly introduced into her work; it also marks the first real modification, with far-reaching implications, of Burroughs’s concerns. Imagine Burroughs imaging himself a woman, or feeling that his (textual) mobility might be increased, liberated, by this gender-drag. “When I wear tight pants, I

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<sup>277</sup> “Nice Girl, Gone Wrong 2”; Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>278</sup> Pg. 60; *Portrait*

<sup>279</sup> Pg. 83; *Portrait*

<sup>280</sup> “Notes on the Life of Baudelaire,” October 1979.

<sup>281</sup> Pg. 8, 6, respectively; “I Don’t Expect You’ll Do The Same.”

watch my cock rise and fall it looks like a small animal only I know it's me...."<sup>283</sup> The *Childlike* narrator imagines: "A cock feels like, it feels like me, I can sense it hang outward from my body sort of down, I don't really feel anything though I know it's there, I feel proud: a piece of flesh."<sup>284</sup> The narrative evolves, through its text, a reconstructed vision of the self: "brown very thick skin tender low breasts with huge violet nipples the skin below them curves downward over man's hips to heavy long spider's legs."<sup>285</sup>

An environment that informs and delimits is constructed around one's "I."

Within this environment, creating spaces for herself, framing herself with other texts, Acker plays with her images: spiders—the spider can make its home wherever it goes—cats, prized homos. Writing itself, too, is material. The undoing of the determining marks of gender, a neutrality English can take with animals and objects, all but the human, is an action illustrated in Richard Howard's translation of the "Théorie" fragment of Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text*. Watch how writing in its metaphorical move, not confined to "female," can enjoy an erotic slip of gender's restraints: "the subject unmakes **himself**, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of **its** web."<sup>286</sup> Though the *male* tarantula, indeed, does spin, too: the sperm web is a mat of threads made and rubbed up against to provoke secretion and hold its release. They burrow in two ways, making their own holes ("obligate") or retreating into those hollows already there ("opportunistic"). All tarantulas are cannibalistic, though most kept as pets, for their "gentle" natures, are female.

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<sup>282</sup> Pg. 57, 72, 72, 62, respectively; *Portrait*.

<sup>283</sup> Pg. 35; *Portrait*.

<sup>284</sup> Pg. 34; *Portrait*.

<sup>285</sup> Pg. 72; *Portrait*.

<sup>286</sup> See "Theory" in *The Pleasure of the Text*. My emboldening.

In *In Memoriam to Identity*, her Capitol, the female artist, the metaphor for Acker, lays out her motivations for reinterpreting what's come before her in the world she's been born into and asked, she feels, to take on its preexisting terms; she sees herself expected to apologize "for hating ownership, for finding postcapitalist and Newtonian identity a fraud," and, since this is a later work (1990) and Acker/Capitol now has a history of work behind her, backtracking now, taking something back now, means also saying she was sorry "for all her years of not only publicly hating an ignorant therefore unjust society but also of trying to make someone of herself." It is here that "I am an *other*" comes again, in a parenthetical aside, or realization, which Acker amends to the thought process she displays above; yes, *she* is; at least twice-removed: she is not Rimbaud, and she is being told now she is somehow not an artist—not of the ilk of the "old and rich" artist(s) she is being humiliated before ("but many artists don't make their own work").<sup>287</sup> Alienated from her assigned identity, Acker is also now finding herself thrown out of her adopted one.

"I" falls back upon and into history, back to its horizontal recline, the better to look all around. "I" takes itself out of its (primary) subject position, to create new "I" designs. The page becomes more of a leveled playing field, with its areas equally of exposures and obscurities. "The tree is in the wood," Juan Goytisolo tells Acker when she interviews him.<sup>288</sup> "Where we are is in a sentence," says Jack Spicer.<sup>289</sup> Where are

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<sup>287</sup> Pg. 261; *Identity*.

<sup>288</sup> MS, Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>289</sup> Quoted as epigraph, John Yau, "Between the Forest and Its Trees (Second Version)"; *A Poetics of Criticism*, ed. Juliana Spahr, Mark Wallace, Kristin Prevallet, Pam Rehm. Buffalo: Leave Books, 1994. Though there are further connections to be made to Spicer, kindly brought to my attention by Ammiel Alcalay, I regret that I will be going no further into him here.

we, in Acker, when we are in “someone” like, to take one particularly conducive example, Charlotte Brontë?

We are in a set of shifting relationships. In a version of a sisterly one: Letters to her from Emily make up the “CHILDHOOD: CATHOLIC BLATHERINGS” section of Acker’s text *My Death My Life By Pier Paolo Pasolini*. The correspondence we are presented with is a one-sided exchange. One sample: “Dear Charlotte, 1968 is over. 1981 is over. Future is between my legs ha ha.”<sup>290</sup> In an allusive one: “the night is all around the red room”<sup>291</sup>; “The usual *Jane Eyre* shit,” she states of a description of hers (“As my eye moved into the top floor of a house, it perceived that it was inside a school dorm. An immense room whose floor was wood. Narrow cots in rows covered the rough wood”<sup>292</sup>) in “Eurydice in the Underworld,” in the “in the school of the dead” section, and, “From Tsvetaeva: *It begins like a chapter in that novel Jane Eyre. The secret of the red room.*”<sup>293</sup> One character, Father, in *In Memoriam to Identity*, uses Charlotte’s example as authoritative grounds for knowledge of the opposite sex, in an argument with the character Rimbaud, transposed now across time and space: “ ‘You’ve never understood anything about women. She’s not bad: she’s sick. Women’re always sick with wanting to eat up your soul. It’s all in *JANE EYRE*.’ Father read books,” the narrator emphasizes, before turning to herself: “I inherited his love of reading which proves that inheritance is important for human beings. A huge inheritance can make a miserable person’s life happy.”<sup>294</sup> Another way Brontë’s bestseller enters Acker’s textual

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<sup>290</sup> Pg. 290; *Literal*.

<sup>291</sup> Pg. 143; *Red*.

<sup>292</sup> Pg. 20; *Eurydice*.

<sup>293</sup> Pg. 19; *Eurydice*. Italics in the original.

<sup>294</sup> Pg. 181; *Identity*.

body: “This room was the place I wanted to be.” (Our “I” here has left school because, “All I wanted was to fuck and be fucked,” and is investigating a new room for herself, after a string of hotels.) “It had no furniture, only the bed of *Jane Eyre*, which, of course, is wood, because it has been made out of wood from a building of the school that Jane Eyre attended.”<sup>295</sup>

The bed, or the cradle, the lesson, or the lens, is in the book, too—where Acker will live now. In another title where Acker plays Orpheus to her own “I,”—looking back is partly what the narrative is concerned with—*My Mother: Demonology*, where Acker, in the second part named “Out (In the Form of Healing)” has a chapter entitled “Redoing Childhood,” and chapter seven has a section which introduces the idea of “redreaming”—it’s true indeed that we must see here in part “red” and “reaming.” The “Clit [which in some ways for Acker *literature* is inside of ] City” chapter of this book includes the section “Preparation For The Unmentionable Based On A Pun.” These puns in Acker are both visual and aural. As well in this book, she is concerned with looking back on histories of persecutions of women deemed “witches,” and Acker writes: “In the first class I took, a class about theory, the teacher told us about the works of the novelist Juan Goytisolo. ‘Goytisolo uses plagiarisms (other texts) in several ways: sometimes his characters read, discuss, or see other texts. Sometimes two simultaneous texts compose the narrative. Sometimes Goytisolo changes someone else’s text in an attempt to contaminate and subvert something or other. Count Julian,’ Acker begins, then continues, subverting and contaminating herself, “I mean Goytisolo”—underscoring through her play at “slippage” a sense of her own irony; she is well aware of just how

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<sup>295</sup> Pgs. 209-210; *Mother*.

often the singer is confused with the song, and is invited to be; she knows she herself can be and is read as, for just one number, “Janey.” Acker goes on with the panegyric to Goytisoló’s prior example, with the relation of how he “subverts, invades, seduces, and infects all that’s abhorrent to him by transforming the subject into an empirical self, a text among texts, a self that becomes a sign in its attempt at finding meaning and value.”<sup>296</sup>

Let me more blatantly point out how Acker has just done this very deed, increasing the “complication” of Goytisoló’s text by making it just another text among her many texts. Acker, if you’ve been paying attention, she seems to want to scream, appropriates all of these techniques, and how, as she further takes Goytisoló for herself, in this cited lecture.

Where Rimbaud’s spider in the hedge (“spinning”—Paul Schmidt adds further in his translation<sup>297</sup>) is eating only violets—“*Mais l’araignée de la haie/ Ne mange que des violettes*”—Acker will sit now in literature, among its blooms, and she will subsist through it. Anything to keep this world of the set coursing, this page, from becoming too imprisoning: the walls of the novel will open out, hop along ducking down one rabbit hole after the next (“This is an Alice-in-Wonderland room”; “I remember mental states of Alice-in-Wonderland and the Caterpillar-on-the-Mushroom”; “As if I was in Alice in Wonderland”<sup>298</sup>), running into and through the halls of mirrors of philosophy-writing (“*Hegel, or the panopticon, sees all, except for the beginnings of the world*”<sup>299</sup>). She will even go as far as to sleep-write. Carla Harryman, a co-editor of the *Lust for Life: On the*

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<sup>296</sup> Pg. 52; *Mother*. She goes on to conclude the quote from theoretical teacher: “All that is left is sex alone and its naked violence.”

<sup>297</sup> See “Second Delirium: The Alchemy of the World,” in *Complete Works*, Arthur Rimbaud.

<sup>298</sup> *Portrait* (124); *Literal* (249); *Pussy* (244).

<sup>299</sup> Pg. 163; *Pussy*. Emphasis in the original, where it, and the rest of the introduction to “Antigone’s Story,” is also in bold.

*Writings of Kathy Acker* volume, compiled from papers and talks from the weekend long *Lust for Life* symposium on Acker (New York University, 2002), is a preserve of my last bit of anecdotal knowledge; Harryman herself appears as a dedicatee of a section of Acker's *Pasolini* book (this is the "Narrative breakdown for Carla Harriman [sic]" section of the "Language" part of the "Nominalism" section; of this book, Acker claims: "I think it's probably unreadable, but it fascinated me to write it"<sup>300</sup>). Acker misspells Harryman's last name.<sup>301</sup> I will quote Robert Glück's use of the story: "In *Empire of the Senseless* [Acker] dreamt the plot forward"; "After *Empire of the Senseless* was finished, she said she was glad to sleep through a night again, since she had been waking herself up for months to write down her dreams."<sup>302</sup> Acker either continues on with, comes back to, or simply fictionalizes the technique three books later, with *Pussy*, *King of the Pirates*: "I, King Pussy, see through my dreams...'/ King Pussy had to masturbate to see this one:/ 'I see two girls, can't distinguish all limbs, about to lose energy, dissolving, as if into gasps, hardly see figures.'"<sup>303</sup> Acker wants to live and breathe through literature; "...if I again have to prostitute by becoming straight, is life—fakery of living—that necessary to me?"<sup>304</sup> She will work to try to make her text a place of exchanges, more freed up. We will move both up and down, back and forwards, in and through (sub-

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<sup>300</sup> "A Conversation with Kathy Acker," by Ellen G. Friedman. *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Fall 1989, Volume 9.3.

<sup>301</sup> "Acker Un-formed" is the title of Harryman's essay included in *Lust for Life*; "Residues or Revolutions of The Language of Acker and Artaud," is included in Hardin's *Devouring Institutions*.

<sup>302</sup> See "The Greatness of Kathy Acker," pg. 55, in *Lust for Life*.

<sup>303</sup> Pg. 268; *Pussy*. Acker also discusses the technique in a February 1994 interview in *Artforum*, conducted by Laurence A. Rickels.

<sup>304</sup> Pg. 58; *Portrait*.

)liminality—a fog of reasons: writing might be made to yield up, to provide, hold and/or cloak.

In *In Memoriam to Identity*: “And later all the business people would be after her obscenity judges bloodsuckers born-again mealymouths her own dealers who had picked her up because she was famous but didn’t really know what her work was would turn around and say, ‘You’re foul. You make our decency and decent society into something black. Stripper nymphomaniac. If you want, you can still join us the tea party of those who are known in [sic] even control this world, but if not, you are doomed’”<sup>305</sup>; “You” here is the artist (Capitol) maker of “dolls”—here a metaphor for texts, over Acker’s career, as we can witness: “One of the smashed dolls was a Quixote, not the usual Quixote looking for love and purity in a society in which there weren’t. In a society where language (the expression of ideals) and acts had no relation to each other. But a Quixote writhing, like one of Capitol’s guts, into thinness from anger. A Quixote hating everything he knew, *not out of loneliness*, but in a world in which love and community had been so forgotten that the absence of love no longer occurred, was known.”<sup>306</sup> This female artist “could and would reply, “I had training in puking and in saying *no* even before I was born.”<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> Pgs. 249-250; *Identity*. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>306</sup> Pg. 240; *Identity*. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>307</sup> Pg. 250; *Identity*.

**II. Adaptations**

3.

“this is a doctrine call it what shit you want”<sup>308</sup>

—Kathy Acker

She does not become a novelist overnight. In her introduction to *Young Lust*, she writes, “Among the many lessons that 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.” “By the age of twenty, I knew I didn’t want to be [a] poet, for poets only talked to other poets.”<sup>309</sup>

Eleanor Antin is recognized in Peter Wollen’s contribution to *Lust for Life* as providing “a role model for Acker as a female performer and avant-gardist, one of the first women to make her mark as a conceptual artist.” Chris Kraus writes to Dick that Eleanor Antin is someone whom Kraus doesn’t know much about.<sup>310</sup> She became Elanora Antinova, who, as the “celebrated Black Ballerina of Diaghilev’s Ballet Russe,” designed, costumed, painted, choreographed, wrote, and performed the piece “Before The Revolution.”<sup>311</sup> Antin also “lived this persona” for a month, during an exhibit of works created as Antinova, as documented in the journal published as *Being Antinova*. This historically inaccurate black ballerina was just one persona that was created, before Antin subsequently expanded her stable to include The Black Movie Star, The Silent Movie

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<sup>308</sup> Pg. 157; *Red*.

<sup>309</sup> Untitled, incomplete manuscript; Kathy Acker papers.

<sup>310</sup> See Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick* (pgs. 117-122).

<sup>311</sup> The text of this piece is included in *Dialogue/Discourse/Research*. Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1979.

Director, *The King* (an idealization of a perfect man), and *The Nurse* (not only there for the King, but selflessly, or sexily, all of humanity).

Eleanor Antin comes to Acker's defense when a charge is apparently lodged from one corner (Bernadette Mayer's) that Acker's "poetry" is "didactic": "As if that were a put-down instead of the reasonable behaviour [sic] of an intellegant [sic] artist living in the U.S. in 1974."<sup>312</sup> Spelling is not particularly high on our list of priorities; urgent, passionate, expressive support is. "[F]riends disappear appear betray me,"<sup>313</sup> Acker writes in *The Burning Bombing of America*, recording even as she's anticipating, in part of that "stuff written during a part of my life I now hate and fear, so can't even read the crap to edit it, I'm scared of it. So it might be horrible (includes POLITICS)."<sup>314</sup>

Much is made of Acker's refusal to rewrite, but this was one developmental strategy of an evolving work, of her finding a way to continue moving forward through initial stumbling blocks: not looking back might be made to become part of the process, up and flinging yourself into another field of concerns, and chancing upon what might then return. Just as much is made of this slap-dash or unfiltered transcription of first thought, much is equally made of her (eventual) revision process; both Peter Wollen and Leslie Dick share in this understanding and contribute it to the *Lust for Life* volume: "Acker used to read her own texts too, each one eight times, re-drafting it after each reading—once for meaning, once for beauty, once for sound, once to the mirror to see how it looked, once for rhythm, once for structure, and so on"; "Acker rewrote her texts eight times: once for sound, once for meaning, once for 'beauty,' once for structure, once

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<sup>312</sup> Eleanor Antin, Correspondence; Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>313</sup> Pg. 142.

<sup>314</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

in the mirror for performativity, etc...”<sup>315</sup> How much more exhaustively I’d like to be able to get us into those eight times (like training each of the eight eyes of the spider, one at a time, back onto the composition) by knowing those missing two criteria that I cannot begin to imagine. I do, though, believe we might pinpoint more easily exactly where this regulated revision (regulating a displaced obsessiveness) begins: right around the time of *Empire of the Senseless*; or with the next book, with the turn to *making* of new myths, rather than taking apart all the old ones. *In Memoriam to Identity* is “cleaned up”; it’s “much more [narrative]”; “What I’m really interested in is this myth of romantic love.”<sup>316</sup> An early manuscript excerpt from *My Mother: Demonology*, which follows *In Memoriam to Identity*, contains throughout it the notation in margins “color,” as if it must, or should, be added next time around. “Just say” is another, seeming to indicate a need to shift from the fictional overlay Acker is currently engaged with to spelling out more the subtext, which is in these cases apparently how the sentiments—of Laure, of Bataille—relate to Acker’s own, actual life.

In her earliest work, Acker’s destruction takes the form of the line of the sentence, as a primary site to fundamentally disrupt. In *The Burning Bombing of America*, in *Politics*, sentences are not sentences as we’ve been taught to know them: they most overtly mark themselves as Burroughsian. We might not recognize them. They might not know when to start and stop, when to quit; they might not be contained. (Where this is true over the entire textual surface originally, more and more Acker moves towards creating “containers” for these moments. Writing becomes more how Acker places degrees of development in individual sentences and sections of her work, against others,

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<sup>315</sup> Pg. 1, 111, respectively; *Lust for Life*.

providing effects of telescoping and refocusing; this is *Pussy*'s technique of divided narrators, speaking through a preface together, intercut with the letter Artaud is rewriting and re-writing to George Le Breton, itself a document that moves from defense of poetry—a kind of “against interpretation” defense—to psychology to hallucination, through which Acker situates a reading of Heidegger's Being in light of Hilter, which she inserts into the letter, to a third-person section (situated “In the Days of Dreaming”), intercut with large swathes of quotations from outside sources, often unsituated and simply floating there, to other “manuscripts” found and folded in, etc.).

Disruption on the level of the sentence is true too of other early, unpublished work: for example the text “Journal/ Black Cats Black Jewels” (“B. becomes B. B. melts into B. I am anarchy”; “accept what emotion appears”; “I forget all recent developments”), with its capitalizing of only single letters to designate characters, with its irregular periods and holes of (white) space cut through pieces of sentences (“who am I [ ] echo [ ] who am I”). In the text “Entrance Into/ Dwelling In/ Paradise,” the above introduction of meaning-fade into the sentence-unit is brought home into word itself (“garden”), and the idea of a concluding sentence, succinct closure, is disrupted, this disruption visually set down on the field of the page: Acker has a final sentence repeatedly backing up on itself, a type cluster that runs more and more into itself at the edge of the page the further down it falls, words more and more impossible to separate out from a sentence above, developing, almost, an impasto. Both of these works are dated 1972, as is her “Homage to Leroi Jones,” given a publication (private) by the “Abort Gold Press.” All of these texts contain not only the mark of the influence of

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<sup>316</sup> Pg. 24; *Lecter*.

Burroughs—the violences of “technologies,” often rooted in cities, running through and (re-)constructing subjects—as we’ve considered and seen considered repeatedly by Acker in interviews and writings on her, both on the level of form and content, but they also exhibit high degrees of Stein’s coded auto/biographies.<sup>317</sup>

In notes for an early and apparently abandoned project, at least in this form, a translation of *The Thesmophoriazousae* by Aristophanes, taken up in the stead of an earlier proposed translation of Aristophanes’s *Lysistrata*, she writes, “I don’t want my writing even my translating to be an act that occurs apart from the other acts of my life”; “If I follow my hates, I don’t turn myself into a robot-tyrant so that I can get a job only way I can earn money which buys food and shelter, I have to depend on my brother’s slave labor working at a porno-shop two dollars an hour. Pain.”<sup>318</sup> Acker’s authoring procedure fights against the meaning-making of (pro)creating, its naturalness, its Godhead-given-ness, the making of the ever new and novel distraction sprung up, disconnected from all else, piercing to no heart of no already existing matter. Acker wants to use what’s already around her. She’ll take the influence, and she’ll run with it.

She tells an interviewer that David Antin, whom she classifies as a poet and an art critic and one of her main teachers, told her that if you want to be a writer you have nothing to do with academia.<sup>319</sup> “[W]riting is the use of information without the source of the information,” Acker writes in *The Burning Bombing of America*.<sup>320</sup> This is not to say that Acker does not cite sources in her essays at times, but attribution is a praxis with sporadic intent, not a process ever completely stood behind, or ironically inflected, as in

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<sup>317</sup> Kathy Acker Papers, these three texts discussed.

<sup>318</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>319</sup> See “Kathy Acker,” with Angela McRobbie.

note three of “Reading the Lack of the Body: The Writing of the Marquis de Sade, “Note de Sade’s realistic tendencies,”<sup>321</sup> substantiating the fact that his Madame de Saint-Ange has in twelve years of marriage slept with 12,000 men. (Counter-fact will be her preface to the volume collecting the essays: “I’m not sure I like my essays,” “I question the works you’re about to read”<sup>322</sup>). A piece titled “The Black Tarantula interviews David Antin 12/28/73” is an “interview” conducted through/taken from ON CERTAINTY by Wittgenstein (and “self”), and speculations will include whether or not Antin wants to sleep with her, the interviewer (Acker was his babysitter, after all) before: “All love to David,” she signs off.

As one way to pursue what proves to be a lifelong interest in intersections between philosophy (a philosophy that becomes increasingly cultural and queer) and classics, she’d begin but not complete post-graduate work at the City University of New York.<sup>323</sup> In *The Burning Bombing of America*, in the section headed “Information Sexual Ecstasy Revolution III,” this lexia—this jibe, this jab—appears: “CUNY-Nixon headquarters explode.”<sup>324</sup> In Acker’s dream or prediction, however premature, I find a note, be it less mannered, of Stein’s, “Dear Professor James, I am so sorry, but really I do not feel a bit like an examination paper in philosophy today.” In one of her more

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<sup>320</sup> Pg. 159; *Red*.

<sup>321</sup> Pg. 79; *Bodies*.

<sup>322</sup> Pg. vii, x, respectively; *Bodies of Work*.

<sup>323</sup> This nugget, though documented as abstractly, with no dates, in numerous sources, proves extremely difficult to be more clearly responsible about, given paper records—as one administrator attempted to move me along with—and the numerous permutations of Acker’s names, given, adopted, chosen, and modified. Vincent De Luca, in the records office (CUNY Graduate Center) suspects whatever work was done was probably through City College; various other sources list Acker as an alumnus of New York University; some sources cite her post-graduate work as a joint degree undertaken between The City University of New York and New York University.

prominent interactions with more mainstream publishing venues, an interview in *Publishers Weekly*, one is told how Acker's papers were once graded by Roman Jakobson—though one must acknowledge as well this article is rife with errors; “aboveground” does not necessarily equate with more factual felicity; two particularly prominent, glaring mistakes: the author cites and includes on the resource bibliography, inset as a text box in the middle of the article, “Hannibal Lechter,” and Acker's second husband is identified as “Peter Cooper.”

Here, in *Publishers Weekly*, it is pointed out to us that Acker has a jeweled-tongue, literally (amethyst, this day).<sup>325</sup> We are told too that Acker sold cookies for a while (see the “Mindless Salesgirl” who works in the bakery in *Blood and Guts*) and that in Acker's apartment the reporter spies a gray plush stuffed shark (compare this to a postcard she sent to poet David Trinidad: “I just bought a stuffed rat, otherwise everything the same”<sup>326</sup>; Compare to: “No, what she adored was to lay for hours in water. When, where there were lots of odors, those of the night, of owls hiding their eyes behind their own feathers, of rose lavender rosemary, of the buds that bloom in the dark. Of the evening and of dreams, snakes in search of *rats who were no longer stuffed*, leaves drenched in the liquid mud that was falling out of the sky.”<sup>327</sup> *Empire of the Senseless*: “Dinosaur, who was a stuffed animal, was sitting next to us. Dinosaur was female therefore a prostitute.” A sex scene evolves on the bed, which Dinosaur naturally takes part in—this scene is made on the page even more complicated in that the belly-button,

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<sup>324</sup> Pg. 165; *Red*.

<sup>325</sup> *Publishers Weekly*, December 11, 1995.

<sup>326</sup> David Trinidad Papers, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

<sup>327</sup> Pg. 203; *Pussy*. Emphasis mine.

remnant of the umbilical cord, is figured as a sexual entranceway—and where, interestingly given the shark seen above: “Tiny white shells appeared in that monstrous sea. ‘My little dead shark. Better than dead fish.’ I whispered to her while I fucked her in her asshole.”<sup>328</sup> These different animals enter her dreams and her writing because Acker keeps soft-furry stuffed versions of them to sleep in the bed with her.<sup>329</sup>

“Eurydice in the Underworld”: “*There [among her pillows], rolls onto her left side and encounters a wolf. Puts her arms around him, as she’s accustomed to do because he’s faithful to her and because she knows he won’t leave her whatever she does or whatever has happened to her.*”<sup>330</sup>

Books may be stuffed, too, in some senses: with poems, with diary accounts, with passionate interests. Books enter books, in Acker’s texts: the inner workings of her narratives change their dimensions, like Lewis Carroll’s Alice does, drinking from the bottle or doing what she must do to get through the next door, when Acker sets down another author’s name, or idea, or offering (her/his book, poem, song). Catullus is invoked at the end of *Blood and Guts In High School*, in “The World” section, after Janey our protagonist dies. “A second of time,” as a bold typeface, subscript to the announcing of her passing in the text above, underscores—this unit of meaning suspended there on the page, all the reader is left with, before “The World” division opens, on the next,

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<sup>328</sup> Pg. 93, 95, respectively; *Senseless*. See also Dodie Bellamy’s “Can’t We Just Call It Sex?”; Bellamy discusses her reading of this scene, work by David Wojnarowicz, and quotes Lynne Tillman; the title of the essay comes from Acker’s inscription in Bellamy’s copy of *Empire of the Senseless*: “New Narrative? Can’t we just call it sex?” (<http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/writingpostfeminism/carnally>).

<sup>329</sup> See also Carla Harryman’s “Residues or Revolutions of the Language of Acker and Artaud,” where she discusses the forms of rats in *Pussy* as figuring “interstitial ‘intelligence’” in line with Artaud’s positing in “On the Balinese Theater.” This essay is included in Michael Hardin’s *Devouring Institutions*.

facing page; “The World” text is an inset section (not listed on the book’s table of contents page) detailing the creation of (and expiring of) consciousness.

In “The World”: pictures are drawn and labeled by accompanying sentences that more pictures interrupt. “The most important book on human transformation is hidden with the corpse Catullus in the Saba Pacha Cemetery in Alexandria,” is followed next in the sentence by a pictogram, a black box/book, followed by the concluding, “because all books were written by dead people.” A square/arched façade is identified in “The Journey” subsection of “The World” as “Catullus’ Tomb,” pointed out from the surrounding maze; “Dead Catullus” wakes and tells a story of boxes within boxes within boxes, of setting out for the East River.<sup>331</sup>

Like the field, the land of the page, and all its attendant breaking-off, there is the expanse of the self, to work, to till, to explore, track, account for, and try to mend, to make new dreams within. Art and literature is itself a field. “There it is, brothers, sitting there for USE,” as Charles Olson writes in his “Projective Verse.” There’s Rimbaud, sitting there for mine. His most famous phrase, that encapsulation floated as both announcement and tease—giving what’s been called Rimbaud’s *Lettre du Voyant* its *raison d’être*—was made, it turns out, a couple of times: once to his teacher, Georges Izambard, May 13, 1871 and then again repeated to his friend, Paul Demeny, May 15, 1871. Rimbaud wants to make sure someone gets it. “It’s wrong to say *I think*: one

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<sup>330</sup> Pgs. 1-2; *Eurydice*. Italics in the original.

<sup>331</sup> Pg. 140, 147, 151, 153, 155, respectively: *High School*. “The World” pages, following 140, and Janey’s death, introduced by and following the emboldened “A second of time,” are not attributed with actual numbers; numbers resume with the last page of the text of the book, following the panel-illustration keyed “So we create this world in our own image,” with the section “So the doves...”

should say *I am thought*.<sup>332</sup> [...] I is someone else.” Or: *I* is an *other* (in Paul Schmidt’s *The Complete Works of Arthur Rimbaud* rather than Wyatt Mason’s *I Promise to Be Good: The Letters of Arthur Rimbaud, Rimbaud Complete, Volume II*). Rimbaud puns around with “penser” (to think) and “panser” (to groom).<sup>333</sup> Then Rimbaud excuses himself: *pardon du jeu de mots*—forgive the word games-play.

Acker plays her own games, and she has her guiding lights for thinking; she follows along, setting down what occurs to her along the way, through their words, through her exposures (to them). It is within this medium of Acker’s that I find myself, admittedly, somewhat passive, flaccid even at times; along with her, this becomes a permissive relief. The Black Tarantula says: “I’m not interested in what I, except as a medium, have to say.”<sup>334</sup> (Do not doubt Acker means here too that word to be heard as a body bridging the land of the living and the land of the dead.) An “I,” the idea of any stable identity, becomes for Acker a field to (de)range, the constitutive poles, points, angles of which can and might be moved and refigured, for a number of pages: my own set “I,” it logically follows, welcomes this metaphorical devouring within her textual medium-field. A utopian, for me, incarnation of this text would have my reader increasingly relaxed into Acker’s quotations and periodic assertions—I’d feel myself less called upon to declare the worth of her work with the punctuation of my own claims, but perhaps I only aim to shirk my responsibility.

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<sup>332</sup> Lacan, of course, performs a very similar move with Descartes.

<sup>333</sup> Pg. 303; Wallace Fowlie, *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966.

<sup>334</sup> Pg. 69; *Portrait*.

“I was introduced to Robert Kelly and Jackson Mac Low<sup>335</sup> and to the work of Charles Olson. So you might say I had an early training in Black Mountain School rhetoric....I must have been very influenced by them, but certainly in a perverse way. Charles Olson said that when you write what you have to do is find your own voice, but it all seemed to be very big, almost God-like, and I found this very confusing. I couldn't find my own voice, I didn't know what my own voice was.”<sup>336</sup> Once such statements become commonplaces, why, when and where does it matter who said them? Quincy Troupe emphasizes the same issue at his appearance (10/3/06) at the CUNY Graduate Center. Elsewhere, Acker remembers her man differently, in another rehearsal of the story of origins: “I remember that someone, was it Robert Creeley? said that you become become [sic] a poet when you find your own voice. [Creeley, on her *Great Expectations*: “The novel’s remarkable investment of hackneyed originals makes a prose of shimmering precision. Words, ideas, and the concepts that engender them come together in a singularly echoing tour de force of one woman’s life, like they say, in the many places where imagination has heretofore proposed it to be.”<sup>337</sup>] I remember that I couldn't find my own voice: I knew very well what I couldn't stand and whom. Pretty much the whole world which my family, school, and society had given me and tried to make me into. I

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<sup>335</sup> Ron Silliman believes he remembers Acker having birds named Jackson Mac Low and John Cage. (See interview with Gary Sullivan. *Readme*. Issue #3, Summer 2000.) A copy of *RipOff Red: Girl Detective* was sent to Mac Low in 1973. (Jackson Mac Low Papers, Mandeville Special Collections Library, Geisel Library, University of California, San Diego.)

<sup>336</sup> Pg. 4, 18, *Hannibal Lecter*.

<sup>337</sup> Back cover; *Great Expectations*.

was in revolt...above all, revolt against myself, the person everyone seemed to want me to be. A nice, pretty girl who never made any fuss and married well.”<sup>338</sup>

Or, in other words of Rimbaud we might adopt, whom Acker cites, holds up, and can often be seen to be paraphrasing: “I shall never have any hand!” As laid out in his “Bad Blood,” one of the opening, orienting poems in *A Season in Hell*, the loss of a hand is Rimbaud’s refusal to accept a “proper” use for one. Rimbaud is formulating his back-turning on what he calls “domesticity” (*la domesticité*). Later, before an angry mob, he sees himself “like Joan of Arc” (*Comme Jeanne d’Arc!*), she of the shaved head Acker would also one day relate (visually) to. She writes in exploring her identity: “I cut off my hair; I’m Joan of Arc. I lead soldiers in drag and kill everyone.”<sup>339</sup> Ron Silliman: “She was the first woman in San Francisco to regularly wear a crewcut.”<sup>340</sup> It is in Acker’s early work *Politics* that she writes, “I’m in the bathtub touching the bones in my face I have no idea what I feel like...I want to shave my hair off again...I admire criminals in my head knowing they’re shits businessmen motherfuckers like everyone else....”<sup>341</sup>

A crime too might be the literal inscription transgressing symbolic imperatives. (“By murdering I raise myself out of the death in which I’m living,” she writes in “Lust,” where she fashions herself as another homosexual sailor, and, “we’re making signs to each other that we’re unlike by displaying disease or murdering.”<sup>342</sup>) A proper woman does not do those things she desires to do, so flagrantly, and another code of conduct is adopted. “Both Baudelaire and Rimbaud posited themselves as writers against a society

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<sup>338</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>339</sup> Pg. 83; *Portrait*.

<sup>340</sup> Interview with Gary Sullivan (*Readme*. Issue #3, Summer 2000).

<sup>341</sup> Pgs. 34-35; *Lecter*.

<sup>342</sup> Pg. 55, 58, respectively; *Lecter*.

of power. They saw themselves, writers, as dandies, friends of whores, slackers—as anything but powerful.”<sup>343</sup> She writes of Artaud recognizing that Nerval desired to refuse his “cockhead.”<sup>344</sup> One “I” tells us, after an account of a (historical) murder: “I feel like I’ve done what I wanted. I feel elated. I’ve succeeded forgetting my parents.”<sup>345</sup>

An ultimate expression of (impotent) rage: murder, murder as a polar opposite of passivity, of being silenced, quieted; Acker sets this out in language, highlighting the matter of degrees, to be found in syllables, and how the constituents of language turn along a spectrum, in the concrete play of another early and unpublished work (poetry, by all appearances) dated by Acker from the Fall of 1972, “Entrance Into/ Dwelling In/ Paradise”:

der

I murmur<sup>346</sup>

she writes. “Mark comes up says that he thinks that no one if he didn’t feel restrained would be normal,” we are given, back in *Politics* again.<sup>347</sup> She tells Lotringer, “No, I never wrote poetry, I always wanted to write prose.”<sup>348</sup>

Acker’s *New York City in 1979* displays a number of settings, a number of historical contexts, characters, and characteristics of divergent genres—play, manifesto,

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<sup>343</sup> Pg. 40, “Proposition One,” in *The Artist in Society: Rights, Roles, and Responsibilities*, ed. Carol Becker and Ann Wiens. Chicago: New Art Examiner Press, 1995.

<sup>344</sup> Pg. 17; *Pussy*.

<sup>345</sup> Pg. 9; *Portrait*.

<sup>346</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>347</sup> Pg. 29; *Lecter*.

story, novel—her work, we will see, as part of a strategy of making it-keeping it NEW, expands and changes identities as it formulates itself. Originally published as an issue of Anne Turyn’s publishing venture *Top Stories*, *New York City in 1979* is awarded a Pushcart Prize in 1981, and it is shortly after this coup that Acker will begin to publish with larger houses, though her public literary rewards after this are few and far between. The only other “award” listed on the 1996 version of her CV, supplemented in parts by her agent, is a “Creative Artists’ Public Services Program New York State Grant For Fiction” for 1975-1976. Writing in “Humility,” ideas of which are incorporated into the ending movement of her novel *In Memoriam to Identity*, she begins to encapsulate already the ups-and-downs of the idea of a career: “As a child in sixth grade in a North American school, won first prize in a poetry contest.”<sup>349</sup>

Acker calls *New York City* a short story in her essay “A Few Notes On Two of My Books,” first published in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, later collected in *Bodies of Work*. Elsewhere, others will call it a novel. There is not much difference in length, though perhaps scope, between it and *Florida*, whose brevity does not prevent it from being classified as one of “three novels” eventually collected in *Literal Madness*. (Interestingly, where *Portrait of An Eye* is given the sub-designation “three novels” on the “Also by” page of *Essential Acker*, *Literal Madness* is not: “*Literal Madness: Kathy Goes to Haiti; My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini; Florida.*”) *Florida* may be the shortest novel ever written: one character retreats, checks into a hotel, has a memory, prepares to settle into oblivion, decides love (a gangster) is life and escape, waits it out

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<sup>348</sup> Pg. 4; *Lecter*.

<sup>349</sup> See “Humility,” in *The Seven Cardinal Virtues*, ed. Alison Fell (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1990).

during a hold-up at the hotel—all within only 14 of the 410 pages of the eventual *Literal Madness* volume.

If *Florida* is to be considered a novel, we might ask why should not the even longer “Lust” (which displays three settings—Germany, the church called “St. Marks-in-the-Bowery,” London—before the sailors and cops and poets and homeless and boxers and revolutionary radicals and non-revolutionary radicals give way to “Some Sort of Trial,” which two children play at, and “Alterations of Reality and Childhood,” where the boxer returns to the sailor and brings that “I” back to life; 24 pages in *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*) or “Algeria” (28 pages *ibid.*; though subtitled “a series of invocations,” it moves far and wide between New York and identifications of, with, and through the Algerian revolution, before ripping bits from what we’ve come to know of Acker’s biography, before scenes that take place in Algeria and New York and the “Underworld” of a version of “Black Orpheus,” invoking Levi-Strauss, and a terrorist “CUNT” planting a bomb in a cosmetic case in a bar, after a penultimate move to 42<sup>nd</sup> street’s “FUN CITY.” When Acker performs the piece at the Naropa University (6/13/1979), she cuts from Omar and Ali and the grandmother and her companion to the strip scene, a transition made by saying something along the lines of, “So what are you gonna do? You got to pay the rent, right?” Indeed, one of the scenes she moves over in the text is Omar being confronted by the “French Landlord” (the description of the archived sound file is as “selections,” including “her *poem*—I emphasize—‘Sex Show’”<sup>350</sup>). Acker employs in the text “Algeria” both a first-person and third-person voice and connects a cast(e) of characters through the designation “THE CUNT”: “THE CUNT my mother,” “THE

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<sup>350</sup><http://www.archive.org/index.php>

CUNT my grandmother,” “THE CUNT companion,” “a young CUNT,” “CUNT Waitress,” “CUNTS,” “young boy-CUNT,” and two peripheral characters also only identified by, but no further, “CUNT.” “CUNT” also serves as a subtitle of sorts for the piece, before the text really gets going: “Algeria/ A series of invocations/ because nothing else works// The land in Algeria is Pink/ Life in this America stinks// Cunt// In, 1979 before the Algerian Revolution begins, the city is cold and dank....”<sup>351</sup> Acker can most clearly be identified here as “Omar” (whose mother suicides, whose wealthy grandmother “likes me when I’m married”—i.e. will offer financial support—so Omar has to keep pretending to be married to “Ali.”) The texts “Lust” and “Algeria” are works reproduced in part in *Essential Acker: The Selected Writings of Kathy Acker*, along with *Florida* in its entirety. These page counts are of course, too, dependent on the dimensions of these books (their relative stages, as it were). I don’t question the status of “Translations of the Diaries of Laure the Schoolgirl,” because it is only approximately 10 pages long in complete publication, though it also contains more characters than *Florida* and more scenes—subplots, as they may be seen to be, in Acker’s work.<sup>352</sup>

What may prove to be the somewhat arbitrary rules of genre are those that Acker works against through developing her body of work, another point of troubling classification. This makes it somewhat hard on someone like Michael Hardin, who attempts to fit Acker’s work into a more standard bibliographic form with designations such as “Essays,” “Drama,” “Fiction”; “Fiction” as well contains its own genres within it, not to even consider what such a modification as “Literary,” attached or not, might divide and separate.

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<sup>351</sup> Pg. 114; *Lecter*. All Caps in the original and ellipsis.

At the very least, in terms of genre, there seems to be a marked distinction in Acker's mind between her books *Rip-off Red*, *Girl Detective* and *Politics*. Acker calls *Rip-off Red* "the first novel I've ever written,"<sup>353</sup> and we might take it as that interesting case of how the novel first begins to come into play for her, along what lines, what elements in her mind must seemingly be in place and called upon. Arguably, the "embarrassment" of this novel ("Very luckily it has never been published") is its more traditional contours—though its form is not nearly as methodical as *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, with its regulated back-and-forth, alternating chapters from two clear narrative forms, the "travel book" and the "porn book." *Kathy Goes to Haiti* is one of at least two of Acker's "pornographic mysteries"; *Rip-off Red* also qualifies, as might the unpublished "Peter Gordon: Ambiguity," copyrighted 1984, where, "The agent for our business there, a Mr. Gluck, picked me up at the airport. Later that evening he took me to a night club. All night clubs in Istanbul were also brothels," but also, "(Bohr, the dada physicist, felt there was no real contradiction between science and art, said that as continuity is to discontinuity, logic is to instinct.) Before I know what I'm doing, I have pulled out Mathis' revolver and fired it full in Banat's face."<sup>354</sup> In *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, Acker tells McRobbie, she just wanted to write a Nancy Drew porn book.<sup>355</sup> She also shows herself to disfavor this work, variously, but a letter to correspondent Paul Buck is also informative: "I kind of have a policy to disregard what people say about my books cause it's always so cocoo, but I'm getting a little bugged at to what extent people don't see

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<sup>352</sup> See *Hannibal Lecter*.

<sup>353</sup> pg. 2, *Lecter*.

<sup>354</sup> Serpent's Tail/High Risk Archive. Here as well, the correspondent "Bob": "You can look for clues to my feelings all you want, but you'd do better just to look at the facts." (Original emphasis.)

that KATHY GOES TO HAITI is a take-off on Nancy Drew plus stable porn: a genre piece, and therefore not simple, not really a novel at all: meant to be extreme of what the ‘20<sup>th</sup> century’ novel is: psychology etc. so of course there’s narrative etc. [...] KATHY GOES TO HAITI really is a nasty little machine and I shouldn’t complain when machines react to machines....”<sup>356</sup>

For all of its subversions—and there are some—there are further (formal) transgressions *Rip-off Red, Girl Detective* does not yet commit. Like *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, the work is more an experiment *with* (rather than against, outside of, among) genre(s). The genre is the (girl) mystery-detective story. Acker’s movement of deconstruction here settles into the playing field behind a sole pair of eyes mediating dream/reality, and its perception, which the reader may easily make out and track, regulated through one central character, one “I,” Red, within the book. (Such a “commercial” point, indispensable some might say in discerning “the story,” the one and only, Acker recuperates later in *Blood and Guts In High School*: “[Plot] came about only in the final draft, where I put something like plot on top of everything. So I tried to make Janey seem like one person....”<sup>357</sup>) Dream, reality, childhood, sexual confusion and ecstasies sit somewhat more understandably astride one another in *Red*, in keeping with a more realist tradition/vein. Here the “I” does not die (“When my form changes, I die, I am we and no more separation is possible”<sup>358</sup>). The “I” does not change its “form” all that much—even if it does declare: “I’m going to change my name.”<sup>359</sup> Then: “On the

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<sup>355</sup> See also the editor’s note in *Rip-Off Red*.

<sup>356</sup> Pgs. 48-50; *Spread Wide*. Ellipsis mine.

<sup>357</sup> Pg. 26; *Some Other Frequency*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.

<sup>358</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>359</sup> Pg. 8; *Red*.

18<sup>th</sup> of August I become a murderer. I've taken too much shit in this empire city"; "I become, shitheads, the greatest murderess (and detective) in the world."<sup>360</sup>

Structural restraints aside, as "embarrassments" go, there are also passages that appear as supplemental to the "EVIDENCE" section (chapter ten, in *Rip-off Red*), which is repeated with some variations as part 5 of *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*: the text marked "Age 11" will be marked "Age 12" and its first two paragraphs, as well as the concluding one, cut, in addition to the sentence "She turns to my sister: asks my sister to play cards with her and fetch her glasses of water." "[M]akes my sister her beloved, close friend, and servant" becomes "makes my sister her close friend, *lover*, and servant" (my emphasis). "Age 15": "WHORE. WHORE" versus "Whore. Whore," and gone into now without the concluding period after: "She starts slapping my face as hard as she can." "Age 17" becomes a second text of "Age 16."<sup>361</sup> Acker shuffles her childhood around.

In the *Red* text, we get on top of these passages texts for "Ages 1 through 10," "Age 11," and two for "Age 16" (both chapters eleven and twelve carry this sub-designation). Some points not repeated later in *The Childlike Life* from the *Red* text: "[My mother] always wanted to stop being Jewish"<sup>362</sup> (her name here, we are told, is "Clear"); within the narrator's year sixteen comes the disclosure, "My grandmother has bought [my parents] a summerhouse in Connecticut, a farm with real chickens and strawberries; they belong to an exclusive beach club, except that it's Jewish."<sup>363</sup> The mother and grandmother are called by the narrator "a cute couple"; the grandmother, not

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<sup>360</sup> Pg. 49; *Red*.

<sup>361</sup> *Portrait* (63-66), *Red* (59-79).

<sup>362</sup> Pg. 50; *Red*.

the mother, is the repository of art—it is she who lives by the *Moma*, she is the “queen dyke of the family.” Through this grandmother figure, Acker’s narrator gains an early vocational instruction. The grandmother “writes dirty poems”; her books “teach me most of what I know at this early age.” The grandmother character is a complicating of the nuclear parental unit, symbolized by Acker in her figure of the grandmother’s “triple-person bed” (see also, in *Great Expectations*: “my mother wanted to remain her mother’s child rather than be my mother”<sup>364</sup>). The grandmother “imitate[s] senility”<sup>365</sup> to get away with more, as Acker’s texts will later imitate “madness.” As part of the “Evidence” submitted in chapter ten, adding up to what makes “Red” read, the narrator dreams of ways to have her mother stop “putting me down for my shyness and ways I act”<sup>366</sup>; in chapter nine, identified as “Age 11,” Red wonders “when I’ll be old enough to get rid of my parents.”<sup>367</sup>

Whereas in future books, the (step-)father is the progenitor of molestation (“My father wants to fuck me, fears his desire which is the only honest part of him, and fears me”<sup>368</sup>) and incest, in *Rip-off Red* we will go round and round with Mommy. The father figure in Acker is variously a drunk or just dumb—“Daddy, you don’t even know who Dostoyevsky is”<sup>369</sup>—someone she wants or who is figured as a rapist. In both *Rip-off Red* and *The Childlike Life*, at “Age 17/16”: “My father tries to rape me.”<sup>370</sup> In an early

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<sup>363</sup> Pg. 74; *Red*.

<sup>364</sup> Pg. 151; *Essential*.

<sup>365</sup> See pgs. 50-52; *Red*.

<sup>366</sup> Pg. 65; *Red*.

<sup>367</sup> Pg. 57; *Red*.

<sup>368</sup> Pg. 43; *Portrait*.

<sup>369</sup> Pg. 12; *Expectations*.

<sup>370</sup> *Red* (66), *Portrait* (65).

short piece (unpublished) titled *Blood and Guts In High School*,<sup>371</sup> bearing little to no resemblance to the novel of the same name but for the protagonist named Janey, here the father is dying in the hospital after his fifth heart attack (comparable to the opening of “Requiem,” where we are told it is the father’s third heart attack that’s hospitalized him), before we cut from him to a poem:

“One day he came suddenly back to the winter

Apartment in the summer

And caught a boy’s tie in the bathtub<sup>372</sup>

He started to cry and told me

I shouldn’t go with any other men but him

He began to rub

My breast he told me

No other man could give me

Security

But him.

[...]

Watch how his role plays into a stretch of text in *Great Expectations*: towards the middle of a column-paragraph within which things are speeded-up, commas take the place of periods, letting us get a quick breath but not a full stop, before the next unit of

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<sup>371</sup> Serpent’s Tail/High Risk Archive.

meaning hits us; “the father” we open with (grabbing a candle) cuts quickly to the “soldier” (taking out his knife), and the writer fumbles for the right word for “his sex,” trying to capture it and get it pinned down—“his pincher his grabber”—as the scene(s) in the paragraph come(s) together, and the words “raping” and “rape” are used in the text before: “I walked into my parents’ bedroom opened their bedroom door don’t know why I did it, my father was standing naked over the toilet, I’ve never seen him naked I’m shocked, he slams the door in my face, I’m curious I see my mother naked all the time....”<sup>373</sup> Acker then tells in one sentence, still only marked off as any sort of unit unto itself by a comma preceding, rather than a period, still just a pause and not a full-stop, more marked distinction in time, a very complicated story: the mother then “closely watches” (her daughter it can be assumed or inferred, from this point on) and the next word, “inside,” seems to cue and shift us as readers in a retreat back into the father-soldier fantasy-story being read-dreamed earlier. Its subsequent tone, though, experiences a shift: “the young girl” now throws her own hand into the coupling in the book, sucks food out of the man’s mouth; at the same time as neighboring dogs escape their cages, there is the thought: “treat me like a dog.”<sup>374</sup>

The child’s polymorphous perversity is given full textual reign, in a section of “evidence” in *Rip-off Red* not repeated in *The Childlike Life*. In *Rip-off Red*, we simply can’t tell if it’s just a dream of Mommy or not. It’s left unclear whether the fantasizing that begins with the narrator “dream[ing] I’m Rip-off Red” continues or is interrupted by her mother’s entrance (in the flesh)—a fantasy that begins after picking her nose, rubbing

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<sup>372</sup> In Acker’s fiction, this detail is often upgraded to being caught fucking in the bathtub.

<sup>373</sup> Pg. 13; *Expectations*. My ellipsis.

<sup>374</sup> Pgs. 13-14; *Expectations*.

it on her lips, feeling her as yet undeveloped breasts, playing with her bellybutton and between her legs, comparing the taste to cookies. Remember Acker once sold them. Cookies and sex is a conjoining that recurs over Acker's work. In *In Memoriam to Identity*: "When I was a kid...just before I was about to go to sleep, I would put the middle finger of my right hand, cause I was right-handed, into the wet softness between my legs, then lick my finger. The liquid tasted like the vanilla between the two chocolate sides of a Hydrox biscuit. Afterwards I told the judge [here the father of narrating character "Airplane"] I wanted to eat only Hydrox cookies."<sup>375</sup> In "The denial of sexuality" section of *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini*: "Why do Hydrox cookies taste like cunt juice?"<sup>376</sup> In *Rip-off Red*, the name changes, but what's in a brand? "Mmm tastes like chocolate cookies, the Nabisco white-filled ones"—followed in the next sentence with, "I don't like cookies."<sup>377</sup>

Messages with the mother also get mixed. (In both *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula* and *Rip-off Red, Girl Detective*, Acker writes: "My mother and I look almost exactly alike; we have many of the same characteristics."<sup>378</sup>) Acker's intent, from the very beginning, in her first identity experiments and testings, was to try to go around or outside or past those "normal" plots provided for her. Mommy enters, the dream or/and the bedroom, in *Red*. Mommy wants to know if her darling does anything else with the boy her darling has told her she kissed ("Mommy, did you ever kiss men; take their clothes off?"<sup>379</sup>). This commerce with the mother—"I wouldn't do

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<sup>375</sup> Pg. 107; *Identity*.

<sup>376</sup> Pg. 222; *Literal*.

<sup>377</sup> Pg. 57; *Red*.

<sup>378</sup> *Red* (66), *Portrait* (66).

<sup>379</sup> Pg. 58; *Red*.

that to my little girl”<sup>380</sup>—is compared to “being wrapped in a blanket of white velvet skin,” “an animal being taken care of by its mother animal.”<sup>381</sup> The childlike mind wants it to be (safe) this way, though the mother is also the cause of “the melting beginnings of my lungs until my breathing stops,”<sup>382</sup> her molesting tongue also compared to a “poison dart,”<sup>383</sup> invading the child’s throat. “I don’t want her to take off her clothes...I learn every inch of her mouth’s warm insides, the damp softness of the sides, the strange roughness of her tongue...a maze in which I lose myself.”<sup>384</sup>

“I’m beginning to disintegrate,”<sup>385</sup> Acker writes in *Red*, as the text gets more and more wrapped up in its own rhythms: “I try to imagine my mother”<sup>386</sup>; “my whole shudders”<sup>387</sup>; “I become nothing I become whatever happens to pass through me.”<sup>388</sup> I feel similarly at times when reading Acker. Towards the end of this *Red* scene, chapter, age: “I love my mother.” “[W]e separate our bodies and she leaves.”<sup>389</sup>

The mother is a maze (which Acker hasn’t yet reclaimed through her own embellishing, the adoption of her eventual “labyrinth” metaphor, a layered conceptualization of both the body’s consciousness as configured through associations and the text’s keep and store of such traceable sites). “My tongue disappears I’m sucking without breathing; all that matters is the sucking”<sup>390</sup>; “something between in and outside

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<sup>380</sup> Ibid.

<sup>381</sup> Pg. 58, 59, respectively; *Red*.

<sup>382</sup> Pg. 58; *Red*.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid.

<sup>384</sup> Pg. 59; *Red*. My ellipses.

<sup>385</sup> Pg. 60; *Red*.

<sup>386</sup> Pg. 61; *Red*.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid.

<sup>388</sup> Pg. 62; *Red*.

<sup>389</sup> Pg. 62; *Red*.

<sup>390</sup> Pg. 60; *Red*.

me.”<sup>391</sup> The impassive is imprisoning. “My mother wants to be a wall,” Acker has one girl write in “The Meaning of the Eighties.”<sup>392</sup> The stone fortification (tough), that which surrounds—the prisoner (tender) might also try some nights to snuggle up next to that impenetrability. (As Acker is dying: “*Tenderly your hand rests on your current favorite stuffed animal, a ferret.*”<sup>393</sup>) You hit up against the walls, too; my mother is also now AWOL (hear that poetry, even when you can’t see it singing to you). Acker instructs (herself) early on to “follow desire wherever it leads you.”<sup>394</sup> As she notes on Jean Genet, whom she gravitates towards, queer exemplar of finding a way to hold yourself inside a world of your own self-selected kind, writing on his *Prisoner of Love*, “as usual [s]he is speaking both directly and poetically.”<sup>395</sup> Acker’s desire, to breach these walls, leads to her bastard texts.

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<sup>391</sup> Pg. 61; *Red*.

<sup>392</sup> Comprised of letters between two fictional characters, “SEVEN-YEAR-OLD GIRLS,” “ZOOZOO AND LINDA,” this essay was first published in the January 2, 1990 issue of *The Village Voice*: “Today my mother met William Burroughs. She got, she said, invited to this dinner party which was all men. As the token woman. [...] She said William Burroughs has the intelligence of the sharpest knife she’s ever met,” pg. 137; *Bodies*.

<sup>393</sup> For my purposes, this is perhaps the most useful bit of information to be gleaned from Samaras’s essay, “Entries and Exits.” Italics in the original.

<sup>394</sup> Pg. 167; *The Burning Bombing*.

<sup>395</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

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“THE ONLY GOOD THING ABOUT WRITING IS IT’S THE ONLY PLACE, OR  
 TIME, YOU CAN TELL THE TRUTH. AND THEN YOU CAN TELL THE PERSON  
 OR PEOPLE YOU’RE TALKING TO IT’S NOT THE TRUTH, I MEAN YOU DON’T  
 WANT TO DUMP ANYTHING ON ANYONE, THIS IS ALL FICTION.”<sup>396</sup>

—Kathy Acker

Acker takes the “novel” as a form to invent along with and through, comparable to her expressed plans for translating Aristophanes’ play: “Obviously even with translation of words of play there’ll be collage-style diary accounts intervening”; “I’m sure these concepts are wierd [sic] and unethical, but I’m wierd [sic] too.” In correspondence over her Tarantula productions,<sup>397</sup> Acker expresses a fear of being stuck in a diary, though she will never completely leave the diary behind; rather, it remains, albeit incorporated, within her surrounding “fictions”—providing relief from the more solitary confines (in her mind) of the debased practice.<sup>398</sup> (A similar case can be made for the place of “poetry” in her work.) Two dates run through *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, one that appears to be the date of the composing (copying, transcribing, transposing) and those dates in those sources lives are being lifted from; the fourth

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<sup>396</sup> Manuscript draft; Serpent’s Tail/High Risk Archives. All Caps emphasis in the original.

<sup>397</sup> Kathy Acker papers.

<sup>398</sup> Chris Kraus’s essay, “Shit On My Sleepmask,” is useful: “...diary-keeping is not a popular art. It sounds too much like something girls do. *Theories* of subjectivity sounds sexier and more important. Since diary-writing is subjective practice, it’s more fragile, looser, messier. As a transcription of live thought, diary-writing’s destined for confusion because the mind does not stay still for very long. As an art-making-practice, it’s

section of this work evinces a more daily dating (e.g. 7/18; 7/20/73; 7/21; 7/22, etc.). By the end of this work, Acker will have brought herself up to the point of trying to identify herself with/through two (male) authors who created works as well as sources of colorful biographies (Yeats, Sade). One thing Acker does in this *Childlike* and early work is not hide process. Acker amps it up.

What is an author? Is it someone to follow in the footsteps of? Is it someone who we let have the say, for us, and to accompany us through our days, to take living life cues from, someone to see the (emerging) self reflected in, whom we might then try to do as they do or did? In *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, we move from ideas of murderesses (individuals, even if historic, now in Acker's life in part because she has begun to investigate, to invest in them) to ideas of lesbians, when we move to San Francisco. But these are not equivalencies; these are movements through time in places, in such a day and age, exploring what one might have been instead. (When Acker does heavily invest a text in lesbian dynamics, her characteristic stakes play themselves out in more cartoonish, humorous ways: see all of *Pussy*, *King of the Pirates*, after its opening preface ending, "I stood on the edge of a new world."<sup>399</sup>)

A section of *My Mother: Demonology* identifies itself as "Bits From the Diary I Wrote in Germany—I Was Just Copying Porn Novels."<sup>400</sup> Life is refracted through another textual forum. A section of *Pussy*, *King of the Pirates*, "I Meet Myself," is given the sub-designation "Pages turn out of my first school diary"; after a parenthetical that claims "no date," we go on to read: "school is a dairy/ because all headmistresses are

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incoherent and therefore essentially flawed" (pg. 139; *Video Green*; emphasis in the original).

<sup>399</sup> Pg. 23; *Pussy*.

cows”<sup>401</sup>; we also read in this book, as a section, “From Antigone’s Personal Diary” (“so I just got out I upped and left put it however you want”<sup>402</sup>—the life she was living, “schools” of thought she was running among). “Eurydice in the Underworld” contains a section entitled “Diary written by Eurydice when she’s dead”; the logic here is dreamlike, at times; for example: “Inside, two girls have just been murdered. I know this is true because when I look at them, they look like store-window dummies. Therefore, the same could happen to me or to any of the girls who are with me”; “I *intuit*, that is I know, that the murderer’s here.”<sup>403</sup>

The body itself is a diary words/clues arise from or from which further words/knowledge may be pulled. In *Empire of the Senseless*, it is arguable that a significant other also fulfills something akin to this diary function, as Acker situates the issuing forth of her text from a body even more theatrically here. An opening parenthetical to this book orients us: Abhor “speaks” through Thivai, we read, before we are then told/read “her” story (Abhor’s/Acker’s words, reportedly coming from the source of “Thivai”). Bodies hold stories (stores) other than just their own: texts screen texts, as we read the words of one through another, and he keeps her history: contained, safe, or smothered, it is a matter of degrees; the feeling is in the life of the one beheld.

What the novel might mean, that was something to begin translating, too. Acker doesn’t just take it on board, and in *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, the novel itself becomes a

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<sup>400</sup> Pg. 218; *Mother*.

<sup>401</sup> Pg. 113; *Pussy*.

<sup>402</sup> Pg. 163; *Pussy*.

<sup>403</sup> Pgs. 15, 16; *Eurydice*. Emphasis in the original.

map<sup>404</sup>, as further evinced by the moment where the *mise-en-abîme* becomes part of the *mise-en-scène*, on a page where the narrator sets up that what we are now about to get is a “[s]ection of the map I’m looking at.” The illustration is headed by the caption “James Baldwin’s Novel,” and this heading is subtitled “Inside the book.” The chart that follows might best be described as a schematic echogram, but with lines blending symbolism and structuralism, along three levels, the middle of which holds a falling and rising and more “organic” (drawn) appearing squiggle that is keyed as the “blood stream”; we are told in one of the text “legends” below that the presence of the heart is that which magnifies. This design is perhaps the most visually extreme of Acker’s accompanying pictorial explications—in some ways most confounding for being so deceptively surface and scientific in its quasi-contours.

This “map” of the book is broken off from, before it’s gone back to, after a summation by the character Ange, who simply reads the map of James Baldwin’s novel we’ve just caught a glimpse of, “This is what it’s like to be a black man in our society.” Back on the map, a new section now revealed (“its insides”) “unfolded,” there is “light at the end of the tunnel,” penned in a hand which is not a straight typeface, which is somehow connected to the all cap word “BLOOD,” wedged between “PRISON” and “HEART.”<sup>405</sup>

In interviews, Acker relies most often on the designation “book”<sup>406</sup> to describe her works, expectations less, only “pages” and “words” and how these two come together

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<sup>404</sup> Viegner is somewhat right behind me: “What does her work *mean*? What is that which is now left in my care? A set of stories? No, more than this. A sensibility, a set of questions? Yes. A map, a documentation of treasure. Yes.”

<sup>405</sup> Pgs. 260-261; *Pussy*.

and interact, with the spaces around them. “Book” is also the designation artist Nayland Blake will use for his shared project with her. “I had told her about a dream and she made a book out of it, a book that also embodied the dream I hadn’t dared tell her about—the dream of belonging”<sup>407</sup>). It’s perhaps unsurprising that such generic confusion would exist in Acker’s work; perhaps part of the point is that it should—that we shouldn’t allow, ever, for simple, un-self-reflexive classifications.

In addition to “Fiction,” “Drama,” “Essays,” “Editorial Work,” “Music and Discography,” “Video,” and “Interviews,” Hardin includes thirteen items under the heading “Poetry” in the bibliography of *Devouring Institutions*. Michael Hardin: “Her poetry is the most difficult to track down, since much of it was published in tiny journals in the late 60s and 70s that are no longer in print.”<sup>408</sup> 1968, the year of *Politics*’s composition, if not its publication, is also listed as the date of the publication of four “Untitled” pieces—“there is a dream of love,” “you watch me pressing my breasts,” “you lie there against the sheets,” “your checks are pale”—given by Hardin in his bibliography as having appeared in a now vanished *Presence Magazine*. Hardin does tell us in the introduction to his bibliography how Acker often reworked earlier publications of shorter length into longer ones, and he attempts to document this process in his bibliography, though that attempt meets with many mistakes.

The earlier publication “Translations of the Diaries of Laure the Schoolgirl” does not appear to be incorporated into *Blood and Guts In High School* in any way, although there is indeed a section called “Translating” in this eventual book. The source text of

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<sup>406</sup> For example, “Kathy Acker,” with Angela McRobbie. Also seemingly preferred after the initial “novel” of *Red* in the Lotringer interview.

<sup>407</sup> Pg. 108; *Lust for Life*.

this chapter is clearly marked: “Since she had no idea how to write poetry, [Janey—Laure, communist poet, lover of Bataille, who does appear “reworked” in *My Mother: Demonology*, is not a character in this text] copied down all she could remember every pukey bit by the Latin poet Sextus Propertius which she had been forced to translate in high school.”<sup>409</sup> (Peter Guttridge’s obituary for Acker in the London Independent tells how “she had fallen in love with Latin at school, particularly the poets Catullus and Propertius.”<sup>410</sup> Sextus as a character is introduced himself in the third section (“The End”) of Acker’s *Great Expectations*, in a timeline entry for 29 B.C.: “Empire begins. Centralization of power which is thought. Any non-political action such as poetry goes against centralization. Ovid is expelled. [An equivalent to our modern day “imprisoned”; whether inside or outside the walls, separated from the homeland.] Propertius and Horace are told they have to write praises of the empire.”<sup>411</sup> The majority of this section, with some slight alterations and one rearrangement of text placement, becomes the five scenes making up “Act Two” of her play “The Birth of The Poet.”

“Lust: A Sailor’s Slight Identity” does not later become a part of *Empire of the Senseless*, though the latter novel does feature at points a sailor, not exactly a rare occurrence in Acker’s work. Also erroneously documented is the publication history of *Literal Madness* (a volume made up of *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, *My Death My Life* by Pier Paolo Pasolini, and *Florida*), which is not published as *Young Lust* (a volume whose contents rather include *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec* in place of the Pasolini text). Some of Acker’s earlier works, generally discussed as novels, have not been published in

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<sup>408</sup> Pg. 258; *Devouring Institutions*.

<sup>409</sup> Pg. 101; *High School*.

<sup>410</sup> *The Independent*, December 3, 1997.

England at all, as Acker emphasizes at the time of her interview with McRobbie, stating how much of her work is not known in England.

Three of the entries for “Poetry” are listed as becoming part of the fabric of Acker’s novel *Blood and Guts In High School*, completed in 1978 (“Translations” is copyrighted 1983) but not published until 1984, following her 1982 novel of *Great Expectations*. Signed now by Janey Smith, our main, fictional character, “The Persian Poems” change status in attribution here as they are housed within the prose. Granted the ability to write this “book” of “poems,” Janey’s character finds another realm of textual expression. Hardin lists a similar migration for “Ali and the Mosque,” though this appears more likely to become one component of “Act Three” of the play “The Birth of A Poet,” into which the poem “The Arab Woman’s Song for Her Lover Who Is Away from Her” is also incorporated. Acker’s *Don Quixote* contains “The Poems Of A City” (“On Time,” “Will Versus Chance,” “Time Is Identity,” “Loneliness,” “Time is Pain,” “Time Is Made By Humans”) in the text-essay entitled “Russian Constructivism,” which I discussed earlier more fully.<sup>412</sup> “Slavery,” classified by Hardin as poetry, is Acker’s entry in *The Poet’s Encyclopedia*. In this collection, Charles Bernstein provides an entry for “Casablanca,” akin to Acker’s take on the film *Key Largo* in her short work *Florida*,<sup>413</sup> while William S. Burroughs, not surprisingly, examines “Junk.” Other entries are Ginsberg’s for “Junk Mail,” Creeley’s for “Stubble,” and Charles Henri Ford’s for “Anal Intercourse.”

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<sup>411</sup> Pg. 104; *Expectations*.

<sup>412</sup> The reprinted “Russian Constructivism” in *Bodies of Work: Essays*.

<sup>413</sup> *Essential Acker* dates this text 1976; Hardin 1978.

The cover of this volume advertises: “finally the world’s basic knowledge transformed by 255 poets, artists, musicians, & novelists.” There’s Barbara Guest on “Frost” and “Porcelain.” Carolee Schneeman’s “Knitting” is a photograph captioned with: “Two women knitting on a Trailways bus, one said: It will all make sense when it is finished...I think”<sup>414</sup>; she provides a similarly composed entry for “Lover.” In 1975, Carolee Schneeman would pull out her (in)famous “Interior Scroll,” but some years earlier, in *The Burning Bombing of America*, Acker writes already, “out of her gorgeous hairy cunt comes a papyrus”<sup>415</sup>; Acker’s *Burning Bombing* text, designated variously in sections of its body as diary, as well as “ABSTRACT ESSAY COLLAGED WITH DREAMS,” is dated inside itself by her too (page 156: “a place of rest. end. 5/72”; page 182: “6/17/72”).

Hannah Weiner—one of the dedicatees of Ron Silliman’s edited volume *In The American Tree*—does an entry in *The Poet’s Encyclopedia* for “Ampersand,” the word presented in cursive, handwritten. Acker’s “Slavery” text in the collection under scrutiny here also concludes with a graphic sign, though my limited, trained, Western eye doesn’t know what to make of it; it to me could be just as much a picture as quite possibly a letter or a constellation of such lettered-marks. While this finish-flourish of Acker’s is not reproduced in *Blood and Guts In High School*—the piece not coming to the same conclusion there—“Slavery” is indeed, as Hardin claims, shuffled in part into the body of *Blood and Guts In High School*. After the first thirteen lines or paragraphs taking us up to the sentence, “I might as well not exist,” the “Slavery” text begins to undergo a

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<sup>414</sup> Pg. 164; *The Poet’s Encyclopedia*. New York: Unmuzzled Ox Editions, 1979.

<sup>415</sup> Pg. 151; *Red*. According to C. Carr (“Theoretical Grrrl,” *Village Voice*, November 6-12, 2002), Acker and Schneeman meet in the mid ‘70s.

reworking of sentence order and omissions until it is cut off by a parenthesis closing the which began around “*Janey’s slave poem*,”<sup>416</sup> returning the text to the previously interrupted “A throw of the dice never will abolish chance.” Acker’s “Un Coup de Dés: A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance” appeared itself in the Spring 1976 issue of *File Magazine*, according to Hardin—though Hardin does not list it as a previously published work inserted into a later fiction—possibly because of these substantial disruptions it displays? “Un Coup de Dés” is one of the poems we are told in *Blood and Guts* Janey wrote by herself.

The text “Slavery” as it appears in its cited publication as “Poetry” by Hardin contains no more formatting in line-breaks than any given novel of Acker’s. Her drafting of “Jeane Duval,” though replete with these overt thought/cadence markers, is classified and archived as “short story.” “How Spring Came to the Land of Snow and Icicles” (“from *Blood and Guts In High School*,” as a note accompanying the excerpt credits) when published alone, is illustrated with drawings both surreal and childish in their anthropomorphisms: a bear/beaver in a hat, a full-page corpulent dinosaur naked but for stilettos, pearls, and makeup. Acker sees what she is doing, and what she desires to do, in conceptual terms. (Another contributor to “*The Poet’s Encyclopedia*” is a performance artist who calls herself “Colette”; this “poet” is an explorer of fashion and female persona, and her entry will be for Sade’s “Justine.” Acker is not alone in her multifarious, overlapping fields of enquiry.)

This is the milieu she finds herself placed in, as Peter Wollen rehearses the story: “...she quickly abandoned the world of the St. Mark’s Poetry Project, her first port of

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<sup>416</sup> Pgs. 111-112. Emphasis in the original.

call...”; “Even the poets at St. Mark’s, considered an avant-garde mecca for Modernists, were baffled by her approach to writing.”<sup>417</sup> “Sol Lewitt subsidized me, that’s what happened.”<sup>418</sup> Barbara Kruger thinks she’s not positive enough.<sup>419</sup> One book will become one frame, as one chapter may, one character, just as one “I.” I don’t create the metaphors I work with; “I can see anything in a set of shifting frameworks.” “I see a frame around me: my space.”<sup>420</sup> Acker records the fantasies she is able to conjure from others’ acts, authorships and books; other books become not ends, not final words, but transitional objects, as do other authors or poets (and critics/theorists, even), for her own books, even within the pages of her own books. (As she notes at the end of one of the texts making up *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*: “All of the above events taken from *The Marquis de Sade The Complete Justine Philosophy in the Bedroom and Other Writings* by Count Donatien Alphonse Francois de Sade, *Portrait of de Sade* by W. Lenning, and myself.”<sup>421</sup>)

Poems might be distinguished from lyrics (song), which Acker’s novels will also include: penultimate to the final accounting of “Don Quixote’s Dream,” this novel includes a score of dog and pirate singing. *Pussy, King of the Pirates* includes a poem by the character Ange, “‘cause poetry is what *fucks up* this world,”<sup>422</sup> and shortly thereafter, Silver begins singing, the words/lyrics on the page; “[i]n their darkest hours, pirates

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<sup>417</sup> See Peter Wollen’s “Kathy Acker,” in *Lust for Life*; this essay first appeared in the London Review of Books as “Don’t Be Afraid to Copy It Out,” February 5, 1998.

<sup>418</sup> Pg. 9; *Lecter*.

<sup>419</sup> For this, see “Kathy Acker,” Peter Wollen, in *Lust for Life: On the Writings of Kathy Acker*, ed. Amy Scholder, Carla Harryman, Avital Ronell (London: Verso, 2006).

<sup>420</sup> Pgs. 58, 49, respectively; *Portrait*.

<sup>421</sup> Pg. 90; *Portrait*.

<sup>422</sup> Pg. 211; *Pussy, King of the Pirates*. New York: Grove Press, 1996.

rumbled love songs,”<sup>423</sup> we are told, before being given one. Explaining Acker as a catalyst for her feminist foray into music, Kathleen Hannah, at the forefront of the Riot Grrl movement with her band Bikini Kill, and later front woman of the still very unapologetically feminist but dance-groovier outfit Le Tigre, in an article in *The Nation* gives Acker this due as catalyst: “She asked me why writing was important to me, and I said ‘Because I felt like I’d never been listened to and I had a lot to say,’ she remembers. “And she said, ‘Then why are you doing spoken word—no one goes to spoken word shows! You should get in a band.’ (On the lyrics for Le Tigre’s song “Eau d’Bedroom Dancing”: “If the words sound like a poem you (ladies?) might have scribbled in your notebook at 14, consider these lines: ‘No one to criticize me then/ No one to criticize.’ Sounds like a pop song, reads like a lament”); the article also classifies Acker as a “countercultural icon.”<sup>424</sup>) Acker’s *Florida* ends with the lyrics of a “stupid popular song...everyone was singing back where everyone was still living and burning each other out.”<sup>425</sup>

Scholder begins her “Editor’s Note” in *Essential Acker* with the inspired analogy of Acker’s novels as concept albums, a link that is made more literal by Acker’s collaboration with the British punk band The Mekons, as whole sections of *Pussy, King of the Pirates* are set to music on an album of the same name. Mekon and artist Jon Langford, who suggested the project to Acker, sums punk up in discussing it as “the willingness to do anything.” When reviewed, Acker’s voice on the CD is called “a

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<sup>423</sup> Pg. 104; *My Mother: Demonology*. New York: Pantheon, 1993.

<sup>424</sup> Hillary Frey, “Kathleen’s Fire.” *The Nation*, January 13, 2003.

<sup>425</sup> Pg. 409.

wonderfully flexible instrument,” and the collaboration is favorably compared to old children’s recordings like *Peter and the Wolf*.<sup>426</sup>

The CD booklet folds out to reveal “Ye Map,” on the other side of the lyrics; here, along with the drawings of fish and ships, pirates and mermaids, skeletons and hearts and dogs and crossbones, you can get an impression, a written trace, of what went into making each song: samples used, arrangements, structures, and mixing directions. Into the arena of the “punk” club, Acker will bring such pleurably shocking, such out there gems as her equation of “squished” roses and orgasm, and take it further, feeding it back in, in symbolic loops, unabashedly embracing before her listening audience desired logic/logos (“off with their heads!” from the pirates, “off with her head!” from the Red Queen) disintegration: “this is what an orgasm is. When the skin of inside asshole comes out like a rose.”<sup>427</sup> “Oh no, I shouldn’t be doing this, coming out; asshole skin coming out; but it’s okay when it’s an orgasm”<sup>428</sup> (“Captured By Pirates,” track #13). Even with her band of punks, I feel and hear Acker clearly taking (exposing) liberties; with these musicians behind her, she compacts the *Pussy* narrative, unfolding it in different time frames/signatures, trading off with them, with varying risks and contrasting reference points: pulled in is a sound bite of a British weatherwoman reporting the imminent (emotional) gale; who is ultimately behind the mixing board, steering this ship, at the heart of it, is often heard to say. As best as I can make out (given Acker’s whispering-bedroom voice presentation, dipping down to just above a growl at moments of particular emphasis): “Inside is all field, cause there’s constant *journ-yeah-in* there.” “Captured by

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<sup>426</sup> Jane Rusconi, “Kathy Acker & The Mekons.” *Pulse Magazine*, March 1996.

<sup>427</sup> Pg. 270; *Pussy*.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid.

Pirates,” like all of the numbers narrated by Acker herself on the CD, alternating with the more structured songs from the book performed by the Mekons, does not have its “lyrics” included, but checking up against the novel, I find “journeying” is “churning”: constant churning inside, in the field (“oh my god bees”<sup>429</sup>). Acker’s contribution here highlights as well the often buried connotation in the band “playing” together.

Perhaps just as strong as Acker’s fear of being stuck in a diary, or coeval with that fear, is Acker’s desire to not find her work relegated or limited to only a close-knit circle of poet “friends.” In all caps, in one of the more manifesto-like stretches of the highly urgent, angry, and beautifully scattered early *The Burning Bombing of America*: “ST. MARK’S CHURCH IS A REVOLUTIONARY CRUISE-JOINT.”<sup>430</sup> Dick in “Lust” is a poet who makes his home there. He “hated feelings and cunts,” and his creed is “poetry is more powerful than politics.”<sup>431</sup> Acker feels the walls of such a poetry world ready to close in around her; this is not a crowd she would want to fit or blend into, ever, she decides. Poetry is no sanctuary outside of the polis if it also delimits the (appropriate) bodies from which it issues. Acker creates a haven-harbor for her own. Poems are all the time being smuggled, more or less covertly, into her novels-books; Acker, however, will now get to provide the surround, the environment from which they will announce their individual worth. She sets them up and showcases them as part of a larger—*her* larger—unfolding design. Chapter three, “In Honour of The Arabs,” in the first part of *Empire of the Senseless*, “Elegy for the World of the Fathers,” contains a section “Me Equals Dead Cunt,” beginning with a subsection/poem entitled “Algeria,” before moving onto a next

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<sup>429</sup> Ibid.

<sup>430</sup> Pg. 195; *Red*.

<sup>431</sup> Pg. 65, 64, respectively; *Lecter*.

subsection, the “prose” piece “Algeria’s Cock”: “My action now followed my desire. I went to Algeria. In Algeria, I watched the sun rise on the landscape of my childhood. The only thing I desire is innocence.”<sup>432</sup> A poem in both Farsi and English translated is part of the text of *My Mother: Demonology*.

The turns of her sentences themselves are poetic lines, even when Acker doesn’t feel the need to segregate and announce them as such. What gives the lines their voice is the body they issue from. Her poetry she allows and affords (by holding it still within her own covers, fields of designation) a maintained “naiveté.”

*In Memoriam to Identity*, not surprisingly perhaps, revolving largely around a retelling of sexual dynamics between Rimbaud and Verlaine, also contains poems: one called “To The Germans Both Nazis And Peaceniks” attributed to Baudelaire; one “R” (hear here the pirate, too: *arrgh*, Rimbaud) “copped from Baudelaire.” As Rimbaud can be said to descend from Baudelaire—Rimbaud consciously positions himself in one of his letters a heir (calling Baudelaire “first among seers, the king of Poets, *a true God*,” complaining “yet he lived in too aestheticized a world,” and declaring “the inventions of the unknown demand new forms”<sup>433</sup>)—Acker lets herself find precedents for her own textual ante-upping in the example of Rimbaud: not quite doing her “copying,” Rimbaud does get his “feels” from elsewhere, his sense of what can be entered and further expanded and expounded upon, and as in Acker, his life and work are married through and through.

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<sup>432</sup> Pg. 48; *Empire*.

<sup>433</sup> Pg. 37; *I Promise To Be Good: The Letters of Arthur Rimbaud, Rimbaud Complete Volume II*, Wyatt Mason. New York: The Modern Library, 2003.

In *In Memoriam to Identity*, lines of a poem start a chapter: “Idle youth enslaved to everything/ let the time come when hearts feel love.”<sup>434</sup> Acker held her childish belief that other poets, if real poets, would simply see and understand and accept what she was trying to do through her work and everything for which it stood. Other poems Acker includes in *In Memoriam to Identity*: “Ode To A Drunk Fly (in the Tradition of Landscape Poetry),” “Poem in the Tradition of The Poet Maudit,”<sup>435</sup> poems consisting of Acker’s own translating (“copping”) of Rimbaud’s poems, and other untitled pieces harder to place on first glance, as must be, pointedly, much of Acker’s work; this “work” I would extend to her winding her way through those publishing organs, venues, and institutions open and available to her, though never just stopping there. On no front, in Acker, is there a single master text.

In writing on/with Blake (William and Nayland), Acker uses an extract the origin of which is hard to locate. In fact, and much to my delight, Amy Scholder will e-mail me to see if I might know the source; Nayland himself is wondering, as he’s preparing to write on Acker’s essay on him, in a contribution for Scholder to *Lust for Life*. Acker uses the same text in writing about William Burroughs; both the Burroughs and the Blake piece are dated 1990.<sup>436</sup> For the most part, Acker allows herself to drift a long way from

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<sup>434</sup> Pg. 36; *Identity*.

<sup>435</sup> In her interview with Larry McCaffery, Acker clearly identifies with this category of creators, as outlined in Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*. (See “The Path of Abjection” in *Some Other Frequency*.)

<sup>436</sup> In this piece, in the “Burroughs version” of the quote’s appearance, I believe Acker is “quoting” the story of a friend, whom she introduces into the essay, in an attempt to show how she works, “cutting-up” the quote; this becomes clearer when one reads it re-“quoted” in the Blake piece (“Low”), as it is shifted out of the quotes and retold in a third person, and sees how another text is “leveled” onto the end of the earlier one; in the first version, the narrator of the story walks out, where in the second, he goes upstairs; it is here that he is reminded of a dream, a dream it turns out to be is Nayland Blake’s told to

her earlier days of the fanciful, yet by all appearances accurate and complete, attempts at citation of sources, following each of the individual textual units that comprise *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* by *The Black Tarantula*, in which her writing roots: “the above events (and thoughts) taken from,” the lists of read-utilized crime accounts (e.g. *Enter Murderers!* by E.H. Bierstadt, *Blood in the Parlor* by D. Dunbar), the historical accounts (*A Book of Scoundrels* by Whibley), “myself,” “my past,” “my fantasies,” etc. Gone are her days of trying to account for each and every one. The only other published novel-book in which such attribution will exist is 1990’s *In Memoriam to Identity*, concluding with, “Note: All the preceding has been taken from the poems of Arthur Rimbaud, the novels of William Faulkner, and biographical texts on Arthur Rimbaud and William Faulkner.”

“Beginning with *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* in 1973, Kathy Acker set out on a brilliant journey....”<sup>437</sup> So goes paratext of *Portrait of an Eye*, first published by Pantheon, one of Acker’s larger publishers in America.<sup>438</sup> To date the start of Acker’s career (“brilliant journey”) from 1973 allows her writing in its earliest inception to show itself to be, fittingly, concerned with “narratives” of origin. (In a line in a *poem* placed within the text of her *Great Expectations* work, we read: “*Fiction by my will will become*

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Acker, as he documents in his contribution to *Lust for Life: On the Writings of Kathy Acker*. (See Blake’s “Kathy Acker: ‘Because I Want to Live Forever in Wonder’” and Acker’s “William Burroughs’s Realism” and “Good and Evil in the Work of Nayland Blake.”)

<sup>437</sup> *Portrait of an Eye* collects three of her earlier works, *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* (1973), *I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac* (1974, 1980), and *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec* (1975), as three novels; *Portrait of an Eye*. New York: Grove Press, 1998.

<sup>438</sup> Pantheon’s publication of 1990’s *In Memoriam to Identity* and 1993’s *My Mother: Demonology* is read as a move up from Grove Press in Nicola Pitchford’s *Tactical*

*the most/ popular form.*”<sup>439</sup>) These early books, neatly, are texts with a number of presentational incarnations (lives). The first two works of the “trilogy”—*The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula, I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac: Imagining*—initially exist as a parceled-out mail art project, made up of six individual booklets each, reportedly sent out to whomever wanted them.<sup>440</sup> We might also set 1973 as our departure point for Acker’s journey if by that we mean a more organized publishing enterprise, a more sustained, concerted effort to get her work into the hands of others: “The first work I really showed anyone is *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula.*”<sup>441</sup> Acker refers to her “Tarantulas”—a procedural term that extends beyond *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*—as “redoings”; they are individual pieces based on other pieces—sketches, reinterpretations, caricatures. In the fifth part of *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, she’ll “become” Yeats—she being the “I” of this text—as she “explore[s] [her] miserable childhood,” incorporating the lens of his autobiography to add to and complicate her own firsthand knowledge of herself—she makes knowledges of selves sit together and try to reconcile themselves. We then freeze frame, as it were; we then pick up another life or set of lives. We find each of these slices of lives, experiences, and the writings that came out of them, boxed-off, confined to their individual chapters. If anything runs through the continuing pagination, it is that “I” of an Acker behind a process she’s documenting (deranging her own sense of the “I” and

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*Readings* (London: Bucknell University Press, 2002); see page 66. Elsewhere, Acker is just following her editor as he changes houses.

<sup>439</sup> pg. 118; *Great Expectations*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1982.

<sup>440</sup> See the interview in *Hannibal Lecter*, though this business is also often gone over in any Acker interview or accounting of her.

<sup>441</sup> “A Conversation with Kathy Acker,” by Ellen G. Friedman. *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Fall 1989, Volume 9.3.

the life she's living, where and how, while doing this: her work). We do not go back towards earlier threads to tie them in, to make them any part of some larger design.

Acker's work does progress towards such involved coherence and increased intricacy (“[you] can read wherever [you] want, at least up through DON QUIXOTE”; “Oh they're structured, they're carefully structured. There's always a beginning and an end”<sup>442</sup>) over time, a movement I see beginning already in the third work included in *Portrait of an Eye, The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec*. Gary Indiana, in his summation of Acker's writing career, sees that she desires “the freedom that poetry enjoys over prose,” but he also faults her work, in his feeling, “Too often her novels were a barrage of attacks on writerly skills she lacked.”<sup>443</sup> I will honestly admit the emergence at times of my own perhaps misplaced aggressions towards this textual body: many a day I have been struck by the sensation of trying to pick through a divine wreckage or finding myself only cleaning up after a child gone bananas in the playroom; please do not overlook my allusion to shit-throwing here.<sup>444</sup>

One way Acker's “Tarantula” work may be distinguished from her earlier, more “poetic” work like *The Burning Bombing of America*, is that texts before *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* do not concentrate themselves around issues of indoctrination into society-patriarchy of a (girl) child through traditional nuclear family-units. Her “child-drag” character, or “becoming-daughter,” and how that relates to dynamics of

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<sup>442</sup> Pg. 15; *Lecter*. Acker then concedes: “Well, to some of them. GREAT EXPECTATIONS has no beginning nor end, but there's cumulative effect.”

<sup>443</sup> See “Ackerville.”

<sup>444</sup> On a somewhat related note, I ask for pardon in my somewhat extreme scrutiny of Hardin's textual scholarship and hope my investigation, rather than rectifying any real “problem,” might serve more simply as an entrée into exploring Acker's drifts between genres.

prostitution, which Acker takes on, is not yet her focal point. Introduced in *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, much of Acker's subsequent novel work will also circle around this basic premise.

But Acker does bind and prepare work before *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, copyrighting it at least for herself, if no one else, work not yet seen to merit larger-scale productions. Acker types the "C" in the circle and the date and her name. Many of these earlier, preserved texts she often subtitled as "exercises," such as "Writing Asystematically," or "MURDRERS [sic] RUN (ON) THE MOON: Exercise #6: Transformation of Sentences"; "Create music through repetitions of own sounds," she tells herself in another of her exercises/experiments.<sup>445</sup> Here we may consider Acker to be still serving out something like her apprenticeship under Burroughs and Gysin's *The Third Mind*; often she will emphasize in interviews how she did all of the experiments in this book, that this was how she taught herself to write.

In the Lotringer interview, Acker attempts to give some sense of what *Politics* was: "I was writing a book called POLITICS, which was little prose poems"; "The center of POLITICS is a long autobiographical section about my life in the strip-show in which I was working."<sup>446</sup> It is from this center section that the fragment produced in *Hannibal Lecter*, republished in *Eurydice in the Underworld* and excerpted in *Essential Acker*, seems most likely to have come. When *Politics* is excerpted in 1991's *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*, it is with the parenthetical classification: "MY FIRST WORK, WRITTEN WHEN 21 YEARS OLD."<sup>447</sup> There it is copyrighted 1968 and claimed unpublished.

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<sup>445</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>446</sup> Pg. 5; *Hannibal*.

<sup>447</sup> My emphasis, pg. 26; *Lecter*.

According to Hardin’s bibliography, *Politics* does have a publication in 1972 by the Papyrus Press. Though research channels will lead me to the University of Houston, inquiries there will yield only the claim of no papers related to Kathy Acker. There is also a documented 1973 “private” publication of *Rip-Off Red, Girl Detective*, though this production is not warranted consideration, either, apparently, as Grove later presents the text for a more public consumption: “Recently discovered and never before published, these two short novels [*Rip-Off Red, The Burning Bombing*]...”; “Both novellas are published here for the first time.”<sup>448</sup> The posthumous volume *Rip-Off Red, Girl Detective and The Burning Bombing of America: The Destruction of the U.S* is titled after the two longish works<sup>449</sup> it collects in one book. (Editor Amy Scholder uses the designation “novellas,” where Grove Press opts for the classification “short novels”<sup>450</sup>; even as “short novels,” the works register substantially longer than our fourteen page benchmark of *Florida*, with no other qualification than “novel.”)

Other texts of Acker’s were self-produced, awaiting no (wo)man for publication; for example, 1981’s “Roman Day: Security and Punishment”<sup>451</sup>; “most privately printed/ in fact not even well typed” reads a note following the 1980 copyright date of “The

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<sup>448</sup> Back cover and editor’s note, respectively; *Rip-Off Red, Girl Detective and The Burning Bombing of America*. New York: Grove Press, 2002.

<sup>449</sup> “It would be futile to try to separate out materially works from texts,” Barthes allows in “From Work to Text,” pg. 156; *Image/Music/Text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1978.

<sup>450</sup> See the editor’s note and back cover respectively; *Rip-Off Red, Girl Detective and The Burning Bombing of America*. New York: Grove Press, 2002. In the “Preface” to *Lust for Life* (ed. Amy Scholder, Carla Harryman, Avital Ronell; London: Verso, 2006), my preferred designation of works is used to describe both texts.

<sup>451</sup> This information from the at times questionable bibliography included in *Devouring Institutions*, ed. Michael Hardin (San Diego: Hyperbole Books, 2004).

Seattle Book,” “for Randy and Heather”<sup>452</sup>—a text that begins with a versioning of Acker’s “ESSAY ON WRITING/ “the invisible universe,” before working its way into letters to Alfred de Musset and others. Rimbaud takes on Musset in his “Lettre du Voyant,” decrying Musset’s “angelic sloth,” “tedious tales,” “proverbs,” “his *Nuits*,” “*Rolla*” (“Every grocer’s son can reel off something Rollaesque, every seminarian has five hundred rhymes hidden in his notebook. At fifteen, these passionate impulses give boys boners [“hard-ons” in Schmidt]; at sixteen, they’ve already resolved to recite their lines *with feelings*; at eighteen, even seventeen, every schoolboy who can write a *Rolla* does—and they all do! Some may even die from it. Musset couldn’t do anything: they were mere visions behind the gauze curtains: he closed his eyes”<sup>453</sup>).

In “The Seattle Book,” Acker begins one of her own “seer” letters to Musset: “I adore your cock” (“If you go away from me for more than ten hours, I’ll die”<sup>454</sup>). She then triangulates Musset’s relationship with George Sand by working in letters from Flaubert to her: “Dear George Sand,/ Your cock is too large for me. It isn’t true women can stretch to accommodate any cock size: I’m not a woman and I can’t stretch to accommodate anything.” We go on from here, in this essayistic text, of which Acker’s fantastic, crudely philosophical, and revealing letters are only one part, to arrive at the injunction to, “Define to love.”<sup>455</sup> Acker will begin to do this by exploiting, and upsetting, our rhetorical models of logic. For example, after the opposition “love of knowledge” versus “love of sex” is established to “mirror” (Acker’s word) the “mind :

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<sup>452</sup> Kathy Acker Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

<sup>453</sup> I am quoting from Wyatt Mason’s translation. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>454</sup> “The Seattle Book”; Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid. Underscore in the original.



to pieces over delicate words like MEASLES and BUTTERED TOAST.”<sup>459</sup>) Pooh nods towards the conclusion, as we say a goodbye to Seattle—where Acker once was living, not very happily, with a man.<sup>460</sup> We exit the piece with a paragraph (unidentified) from “Act I, The Woodcutter’s Cottage,” of Maurice Maeterlinck’s fairy play *The Blue Bird*. Along the way to this end, Acker has also paraphrased-quoted such figures as Descartes and Keats.

Though they are more evolved and more sustained than earlier Acker “exercises,” the theory behind at least *The Childlike Life of The Black Tarantula* or *I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac*, I would like to argue, is not particularly or originally directed towards such formal intention as a “novel,” postmodern or otherwise—despite that eventual designation when collected within *Portrait of An Eye: Three Novels*. (I concede that the later publication under such a rubric does indeed push a point and create a slightly different interpretational frame for reading the works; now they will be read in light of other novels, how other novels work). If 1973 begins a journey for Kathy Acker, that may just be towards the increased, sustained composing by her of texts that might later more easily be classified, collected and called “novels.”

*Portrait of an Eye* is a volume that would bring together work Acker wrote while her experiment was, primarily, with what she would later have the words to call, in her essay on Colette, a “non-Oedipal I.”<sup>461</sup> Acker’s work never gives up what overrides and

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and/ One and two. One and two and no more.” And so forth. I imagine this is from Stein (pg. 243; *Literal*).

<sup>459</sup> Ibid. Caps in the original, my ellipsis.

<sup>460</sup> See *Spread Wide*.

<sup>461</sup> Acker’s 1985 essay “Colette” (see pg. 155; *Bodies of Work*. London: Serpent’s Tail, 1974); more generally, to Lotringer: “Well, meeting you changed me a lot because by

unifies these pieces, though it can be said to relax the more mathematical contours displayed here, particularly in the first two texts of the trilogy, further mediated by their periodicity of dispersal; these works, like all of Acker's "mature" works, are meditations (mediated) on identity and an eschewing or deconstruction of the reliability of the prop of any singular, self-contained "I"/one. Acker never stops looking in her work and through her work—and through the works of others—for more open sites of exchange, between versions of an "I," how it might exist over time. A way to skirt exasperation, to play about being something else: I contain multitudes, do I not, in one grounding of American poetics? 1980's "Fête" (unlisted on Hardin's bibliography; with an epigraph from Bataille's *Le Petit*: ... fête à laquelle je m'invite seul, où je casse à n'en plus pouvoir le lien qui me lie aux autres....) I might best describe as a pamphlet or broadside (though folded); text appears in a number of columns arranged around the field of the page, and here Acker equates the self with "the wound a kid gets on his knee all mushed up bottom-layer-skin blood dirt only all of me is this gush instead of the wound being in me so I am a fucked-up society."<sup>462</sup>

Within the books collected as Acker's *Portrait of an Eye*, some distinctions can be made between the composition of the first two parts, installments conceived and distributed under varying degrees of "anonymity," and the last. Still working under the cover of more overtly signed authorial personas, the third section of the *I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac* piece, for example, has as its title and author "Peter Gordon," husband at the time, copyright resting with The Black Tarantula. Acker will later amend to a copy of

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introducing me to the French philosophies, you gave me a way of verbalizing what I had been doing in language" (Pg. 10; *Lecter*).

<sup>462</sup> Serpent's Tail/High Risk Archive.

this particular section, archived at Duke University, “Not by Peter but I said by him as a present to him. I was always changing my name in those days.” (The Grove edition of *Rip-Off Red, Girl Detective* is published without the dedication found on at least the title page of the manuscript as bound in her papers: “For my brother, Peter Peter.”) “This is for CP & PP who has to be around 1 day a week: this will make him be around,” a dedication in another one of the *Nymphomaniac* volumes reads; the fourth is “for the person who helped me do this.” Authorship was not ever, only, a sole endeavor in Acker, but such dedications might be lost in the bigger pictures of print. The opening dedications that *do* still exist in mass circulation will be only two: “This book is dedicated to my tattooist” (*Empire of the Senseless*); “This book is dedicated to Uma” (*My Mother: Demonology*).

*The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec*, the third part of *Portrait of An Eye*, for me holds a distinctive place within a consideration of the development of narrative in Acker’s work; by the time of *Toulouse*, the story goes, too many people wanted Acker’s “Tarantula” pieces for her to continue going about production as she had in the past; this next work is created with a certain, heightened demand for Acker’s writing already in place. For this text, Acker has financial backing through Sol Lewitt (“Sol went to Ted Castle and Leandro Katz—Ted is an art-critic and Leandro a filmmaker—and he said he wanted to print these texts as real books. He basically became my patron”<sup>463</sup>). This, I believe, has implications for the larger “plot”; *Toulouse* is a text not constituted in segments individually “finished” and then distributed before further work under a current, ongoing, experimental design proceeds. *The Adult Life of Henri Toulouse Lautrec* adds

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<sup>463</sup> Pg. 9; *Lecter*. Notice Acker does not use the word “novels.”

to the identity explorations of the first two projects in the trilogy (and back into Acker's project) the idea of the detective that had been left behind in *Rip-off Red*, though this time it is not a girl: agency shifts. The reader is invited to hope that there might be some "solving" here. In its opening, "The Case of the Murdered Twerp": "Poirot'll figure everything out. He's my father."<sup>464</sup> (In *Rip-off Red*, "Red" is trained in "the Sherlock Marlowe School for Private Eyes"; she is to investigate where Sally's father disappears to every night at 10:00 P.M. for three or four hours.) Where *The Childlike Life* opens with a number of births, and *I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac* with boredom-horniness—these are the dynamics that set into motion the two evolving "narratives" (apprehended, if at all, by how one settles the relation of one "chapter" to the next; how stringently or creatively one searches for a rationale organizing the roping-off together of these distinctive textual spaces; or how pleasurably one floats between, stacks, arranges or collapses these "I" instances within one's imaginative store)—we follow more clearly in *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec* along with the mystery design.

In many ways, the *Toulouse* book is clearly patterned on Agatha Christie's *Hallowe'en Party*, where unattractive children are painted to have, unfortunately, fallen under the sway of corrupting elders, and underneath the artistic temperament is found lurking an evil character. The murder-mystery that Mrs. *Ariadne* Oliver and Poirot combine their talents of deduction to work out, Acker has her compositional pairing of Toulouse and Van Gogh take in. A girl's body is found face-down in a tub of bobbing apples. (Acker: "Do you always bob for apples? Whose idea was that?"<sup>465</sup>). Like the whore, the idea of the detective will keep coming around in Acker. In 1984's work, *My*

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<sup>464</sup> Pg. 199; *Portrait*.

*Death My Life* by Pier Paolo Pasolini, the director himself will investigate the state he's been brought to, announcing, "I, Pier Paolo Pasolini, will solve my murder by denying the principle of causation and by proposing nominalism." This decision for proceeding in the face of all likely odds is reached at the end of one of the book's first frames, ending the opening section, "My Death."<sup>466</sup> As late as 1996's *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, Acker begins with that functionary entering: "O went to a private detective. He called O a dame./ "I'm looking for my father"<sup>467</sup>; this character is also designated by her as "private eye."

*Hallowe'en Party* is an effort Christie critics find disappointing (but one I read as a boy, and thus my keenness on its appropriation): Christie's reusing of themes and old devices are felt to be more clunky in her trotting them out. Similarly, Acker speaks of "resting" with her *Toulouse* book—not pushing herself forward in terms of her "I" experiments, to some degree luxuriating in what she'd already found. This basic assessment is ungenerous, though, and the book anticipates many of Acker's later, more involved novelistic moves. In the case of *Toulouse*, Acker begins to thread her earlier "Tarantula" projects through a larger narrative structure—not quite an arc, complete with traditional climax, and one that does eventually collapse, but she is clearly composing links across these first chapters with resurfacing characters and her fledgling (mystery) plot. The whorehouse setting also proves to be an expansive narrative base, spawning not just the murder, but the artists' (whores') further stories, the "history lesson" we are given in chapter three ("the desperation of the poor," as Acker titles it, or an exposition of how

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<sup>465</sup> Pg. 198; *Portrait*.

<sup>466</sup> Pg. 183; *Literal*.

<sup>467</sup> Pgs. 3-4; *Pussy*.

Vincent Van Gogh got to be so low); even “Marcia/Janis Joplin,” of the book’s second generation (daughter of Vincent “and a clap-ridden sleaze-hag prostitute Vincent fell in love with in The Hague around 1881”<sup>468</sup>), issues from that domain.

Despite the novel start, however, it is really only a matter of time before *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec*, with its involved, nested, budding narrative development Acker was proceeding to erect, slides back towards her more wholly procedural ends of *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* and *I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac*. By the final movements of *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec*, Acker has allowed the bottom to completely drop out of the mystery, forgetting it, and we move from Christie to now charting an evolving Hollywood Romance (imagined between James Dean and Janis Joplin) before the Dean/Scott and Joplin/Marcia story gives way to (or metamorphoses into) “the life of johnny rocco,” concluding: “They weren’t even going to kill me. I ran out of that warehouse. I had no idea where to go. I kept on running.”<sup>469</sup> Our “I” is back now in full regalia. These *Portrait* “books” conclude when a given constraint-endeavor has run its course for Acker, marking an end that elicits somehow the need for a new title/series.

“Implosion,” running 16 pages in *Essential Acker*, and first published as a chapbook in 1983, most resembles a play. Like “The Birth of the Poet” (1981), it has three acts. These acts are further divided into three scenes, ten scenes, two scenes; there appear to be stage directions meant to function primarily as such. Acker incorporates the play form into her novelistic enterprises, putting such scenic divisions to good use in advancing both drama and (narrative) time: in *Blood and Guts In High School*, the

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<sup>468</sup> Pg. 246; *Portrait*.

chapter entitled “In Egypt, the end,” after an initial establishment of this section’s scenario, is further broken down into a number of wide-ranging moments marked as “scenes” 1-10. The “Implosion” text itself, in almost its entirety,<sup>470</sup> becomes scene 11 of “Violence,” the third part of the “Nominalism” section of the “My Death” book of *My Death My Life By Pier Paolo Pasolini*—an unwieldy effort even by Acker’s standards; re-presented here too are versions of *Hamlet*, which is partly transposed to “The art world of New York City,” before the book then begins to work itself at one point into a version of *Romeo & Juliet*, which we return to later in progress in French, and in which now “Orlando,” “Heathcliffe,” and “Catherine” are briefly characters, before eventually giving way to the characters “I” and “Nurse.” Also appearing here is a version of *The Merchant of Venice* under the heading “Adult Now (For Arabia)” and a “Teenage Macbeth.” On the level of characters for performance are included, among others: “Madonna,” “First Shadow,” “Second Shadow,” “Dyke Leader,” and “Elvira.”

In *Blood and Guts In High School*, dialogue is designated also like lines to be spoken in a play, summoning characters, any emotional qualifications kept to parenthetical italics. The beginnings of new scenes are often established in the manner of stage settings, as if striving after more immediacy for the encounters to follow in the narrative. We watch some scenes unfold, “*Inside a small East Village bakery*”<sup>471</sup>: customers like the “Fat Lady” (“What’s in that cooky [sic] there?”), “Thirty-year-old

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<sup>469</sup> Pg. 310; *Portrait*.

<sup>470</sup> Omitted are two lines of dialogue concluding Act I. There is also a slight shifting of designation in the qualification before “Scene 5,” “The Punk World,” which becomes in the Pasolini book a more marked division; that heading now is a dedication: “For the Punk World”; additionally, the last thirteen lines of the play are set-off as a parenthetical, classified as “My Grandmother’s Memory.”

<sup>471</sup> Pgs. 37-40; *High School*.

Man” (“Every time I come to this bakery, nobody pays any attention to me”), “A Thin Young Woman” (“I want ten loaves of rice bread, a dozen bialies [sic], three dozen assorted cookies, two vegetable juices, and two sandwiches wrapped to go. I need it now), and “Twenty-year-old Whore-like Jew Lady” (who wants to know if our salesgirl behind the counter is a whore, by the way) come in and out, making up the workday of “Lousy Mindless Salesgirl.” We hear her, among other things, have to turn it on for the “Middle-Aged Shrivelled [sic] Man” (“Certainly, sir”). Acker begins to make the world of the novel a stage, as the characters who people the bakery take their places, walking its boards, pulling out their personalities, our omnipotent set-designing author stepping back from the action, seeing this scene in a grander scheme of things, giving her a perspective from which to disdain such “people” as “A Wispy Blonde Hippy Girl” or “Parisian Hippy Salesgirl.”

In her work *Great Expectations*, the domestic drama that Acker shows unfolding, “Back in New York City, the tenth floor of an apartment building on 73<sup>rd</sup> street and Third Avenue,”<sup>472</sup> will stand in palpable contrast to the exotic escape passages which were more leisurely unfolding before—not “scripted”—of “EGYPT,” “the Palace” (nightclub), “[d]azzling sun effects”: “Being allowed to laze. This’ what it’s about”; “I live like a plant filling myself with sun and light with colors and fresh air.”<sup>473</sup> It follows that back there in “the horror that is New York,”<sup>474</sup> “HUBBIE” and “WIFE” would both know their lines/cues (“But you can’t leave me. It’s Christmas.”<sup>475</sup>). Ironically, in “Scene 2. The Husband’s Monologue,” the WIFE is still presented in its staging as a (speaking)

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<sup>472</sup> Pgs. 19-23; *Expectations*.

<sup>473</sup> Pgs. 17-19; *Expectations*.

<sup>474</sup> Pg. 19; *Expectations*.

interruption. The formal sense Acker employs here is echoed somewhat later in a scene in “Eurydice in the Underworld.” In “Eurydice’s monologue,” after a single confidence (“About five weeks ago, on March 30, a biopsy revealed that a mass less than five cm. in my left breast was cancerous...”<sup>476</sup>) from “YOU” (as Eurydice comes to be abbreviated), “ORPHEUS” interrupts and proceeds to dominate the speaking space—lyrically holding forth—for the rest of the scene’s duration.

In *Great Expectations*, Acker cuts from a section designated as “Mr. Anwar Sadat’s monologue” to another letter to Peter (“I’m finding it very hard to live without you”<sup>477</sup>), moving, dramatically, from the isolation of one (political) interior to a more personal pining. “HUBBIE” and “WIFE” and Sadat aside, the cast of other dramatic personages in Acker’s *Great Expectations* runs a gamut, from those reduced to the sum of their sex parts (“SHE,” “HE”), the pedestrian “CLIFFORD” and “SARAH” (not quite yet “HUBBIE” and “WIFE,” but on their way to the tragicomic sitcom script, if they aren’t careful...), “PROPERTIUS,” “AUGUSTUS,” “MAECENAS” and their chatty Roman whores.

In her *Don Quixote*, following *Great Expectations*, Acker will put her dramatic conventions to more pointed use. Whereas in “TEXT 4: WEDEKIND’S WORDS,” the play-like field gives us identifiable characters—Lulu, Schön, The Maid, Schigold, Alwa, Witch-Bitch, Thin Bitch, and Young Girl—for long stretches elsewhere in this work, no name at all lies to the left of the colon, the reader made to understand the line is originating from some elsewhere—just exactly where this other mouth is and to whom it

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<sup>475</sup> Pg. 20; *Expectations*.

<sup>476</sup> Pg. 9; *Eurydice*. Ellipsis in the original.

<sup>477</sup> Pg. 34; *Expectations*.

belongs is left up in the air. Acker uses this formal technique to more thematically underscore “TEXT 3,” “FOR THOSE WHO LIVE IN SILENCE”—their names are also erased. Somewhat similarly, in a subsection of “TEXT 2: *THE LEOPARD: MEMORY*” (“*The Prince: What People Say About Me After I’ve Died:*”), lines of speech hang on the page to the right side of the colon—the speakers’ on the left hand/living side occluded—the Prince no longer privileged to completely make out (their) “material” reality.

Acker will keep practicing her vocal expansion. In *Empire of the Senseless*, the reader is given access to the “characters” of an Arab Male and Female’s thoughts/dreams/beliefs—their “minds,” in short, as we are situated inside these respective “heads,” and they are brought into something resembling a dialogue with each other. It is hard to be so sure, exactly, how their expectations, vis-à-vis their own desires, will find ultimate expression: or how what runs through their minds, as Acker gives us the pretense of “unmediated” subtext, two (gendered) subconscious states, will find its way into the language shared.

In her later books, where she works primarily from her reinvestment and interest in narrative/myths, Acker has the character/speaker/role sign expand to a more full-blown and all encompassing storyteller function. The formality of the dramatic mark complicates any pretense to (authorial) objectivity in the novel space now being entered into, for this character controls the character of the text: Acker (clearly) pulls her strings through them. For example, in *My Mother: Demonology*, there is very little to the text that must not be attributed to the mother in some way, because almost the entire bulk of the book is “said” to issue from the mouth of the title character/concept. A single, short

paragraph precedes the line ending in a colon (“My mother spoke:”<sup>478</sup>) which will open us onto the rest of the text of the book, taking us “Into That Belly of Hell Whose Name Is the United States” (part one). The “preface” of *Pussy, King of the Pirates* calls upon the characters of “Artaud” and “O” to “speak” it. As their existences are both invoked and evoked by Acker, these two voices of narration, with their “mythic” status/texts (for Acker, at least), trade off between themselves, composing the text, orienting the reader, that design then giving way to Acker’s orchestration of her story of (girl) piracy. As in *My Mother*, and the “monologue” to a lesser degree of a (historical) character like Sadat in *Great Expectations*, she escapes any pretense of neutral narration. Acker dispenses with objectivity; she overtly makes character-objects do her narrative bidding. These part-characters, and the connotations they bring with them, trouble and announce “detachment”—this cuts both ways—by a number of shades. Characters like “O” and “Artaud” and “Anwar Sadat” exist in a shadowy limbo, depending on what the reader knows; they present as much as they are themselves being present(ed).

If the novel is seemingly no longer predicated on size (page count, as per my example of *Florida*), the status of “Low,” with a somewhat indeterminate length, included in *Essential Acker: The Selected Writings*, might also be thrown into question. An opening note to the selected writings states that the texts within are pulled from “the novels, novellas, and stories; not the essays.” Running only six pages when featured there, it extends up to fourteen when also printed in Acker’s essay collection *Bodies of Work*,<sup>479</sup> where these pages are entitled, and perhaps relativized, “Good and Evil in the

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<sup>478</sup> Pg. 3.

<sup>479</sup> London: Serpent’s Tail, 1997.

Work of Nayland Blake.”<sup>480</sup> The qualifying classification “*from* ‘Low’” then follows that title. So, where and how does “Low” exist, *really exist*, in its entirety? What, exactly, is “Low”?<sup>481</sup>

In the world of Acker’s textual practice, it is very possible that “Low” progresses from an opening story to an elaborating essay. The *Essential* selection<sup>482</sup> begins with a telling of Hansel and Gretel and ends with the independence of dead parents (Acker drops breadcrumbs of William Blake poems along the way towards the end). The piece in *Bodies of Work* proceeds to then pick up Deleuze on cinema (specifically on Pasolini) and presents working, essaying definitions of “Innocence,” “Prison,” “Dream Sexuality Art” (a non-binary amalgamation renamed by Acker “The Magic Woods,” in a parenthesis following) and “Vision.” The piece then concludes with a portrait of one artist as an Orpheus trying to escape unconscious rehashings in a natural history museum (Blake himself, or in his dream, we’ll later see: in *Lust for Life*, his piece), reanimated and teeming-full of ever-expanding phantasy come back to life, defying once again our easily caught and caged taxonomies.

Then does “Low” go on to return to the realm of fiction?

What’s missing from this sampling of “Low,” what keeps it from being “Low” in its entirety, on examination of the original publication of the work, is the absence of the reproductions and plates of Blake’s (Nayland’s) art dispersed throughout the piece and

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<sup>480</sup> This book collects essays under four headings: “On Art and Artists,” “The Words to Say It,” “The City,” “Bodies of Work.”

<sup>481</sup> The following, further information is given on the copyright page of *Essential Acker*: “‘Low’ was published on the occasion of a Nayland Blake exhibition at Petersburg Gallery, New York in 1990.”

<sup>482</sup> Scholder concedes in her introduction, “The title *Essential Acker* is paradoxical, for Kathy Acker was anything but an essentialist” (xiii).

two 1844 engravings—not Blake’s—that proceed and follow Acker’s text around Blake’s art/work: she holds his he/art in her own magic woods. We see pictures of Nayland Blake’s work, assemblages behind frames, under glass bell jars, with titles such as “Hysterical Arrangement (#2 and #3), “Come Armageddon” (after lyrics of Morrissey and utilizing a poster of this pop-icon), “Transport #4 (slung),” and “Work Station #6 (envy)”; utilizing such materials as: aluminum, steel, wood, glass, plastic, webbing, wax, mallard wings, cloth, string, potpourri, sea sponge, video cassette, latex, ceramic, vinyl, tortoise, slate, and canvas. Going back to Burroughs and his favored adage, quoted from Brion Gysin, of how far behind painting writing is, one can only imagine the exponential regress if the analogy were now struck and updated with plastic arts incorporating painting. Assemblages, too, are bound together between book covers. We gladly acknowledge the textile artist. New ways of seeing are new ways of believing. We should also, in light of post-modernism, pay heed to the textual artist. Acker collects, curates and strings for me things to exclaim over I wouldn’t otherwise read.

Acker’s work is also epistolary, with a more general, expanding address: those who will fall in line, who find they want to hear what she has to say, a call to arms, a gathering in from further corners, a self-selecting world. They will have to try to find her, the real “her”: “My sex operates as a mask for my need for friends”; “I have to stop acting like I’m shy.”<sup>483</sup> In a section marked “Addendum,” to one of the letters in the second chapter of *My Mother: Demonology* (“Letters from My Mother to My Father”): “If you want to contact me, you’ll have to find me./ If you really know me, you can do

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<sup>483</sup> Pg. 15, 25, respectively; *Portrait*.

this.”<sup>484</sup> Nayland Blake writes in his contribution to *Lust for Life*, “I read [Acker’s books] like they were letters written to me.”<sup>485</sup> One correspondent refers both hopefully and gleefully, as I read it, to a recently received text as “the latest episode in the flesh war.”

“Erotic mechanics, her solitude; her lassitude, amorous dynamics,” Rimbaud writes in his *Illuminations*<sup>486</sup>; I see such a credo running throughout Acker’s approach to writing in general. One *Nympho* correspondent calls the work “investigations,” another, “A handbook how-to maybe...specializes in the present, stroking it over and over with repetition. Reminds me a little of Huysmans’ *A REBOURS* which goes over & over various forms of man-made reality.” Acker herself talks about the “Tarantula” work as a process; in brainstorming a future collaboration and one way to go about it, “as I read your stuff do a TARANTULA on it (since that’s how I read carefully).”

Before Acker’s increasing stature as a literary presence would occasion further collection of those three of her early works together, the first series of pamphlets (*The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*) and last work in *Portrait of An Eye* (*The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec*) were each published as complete books by The Vanishing Rotating Triangle Press; others published by TVRT would be John Ashbery, Guy Debord, and Charles Manson. *I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac* is given a complete publication by Traveler’s Digest Editions prior to Pantheon’s *Portrait of an Eye*.

Though later many of Acker’s books will contain her own artwork, drawings, maps, tattoo designs, handwriting, floor plans and figured signs, the 1978 publication of

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<sup>484</sup> Pg. 22; *Mother*.

<sup>485</sup> Pg. 101; *Lust*.

<sup>486</sup> See his “H.”

*The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec* by the TVRT Press (back cover: “all she wants is love...”) includes drawings by William Wegman: a drawing of a label headed “PLEASE HELP ME,” with marked lines for Name, Address, City, State, Zip; a hybrid—a woodpecker swan; a toddler holding a couple hostage and captioned as such; a heart that says “I Love you” inside. She draws her own hearts too; in Acker’s projected “Book of Correspondences,” which was to be in part a comic strip, she draws a “Double heart that’s piercing itself,”<sup>487</sup> as Acker clarifies in the legend of sorts she scripts to accompany her design. In *Pussy*, crossbones become hearts, as, again, a lettered message accompanying the drawing points us further towards a meaning of the sign.<sup>488</sup> Consider Rimbaud’s “Alchemy of the Word,” and in light of how Acker might practice and write an alchemy of the symbolic: Rimbaud writes: “I loved idiotic pictures, fan-lights, stage scenery, mountebanks’ back-clothes, sign-boards, popular coloured prints, old-fashioned literature, Church Latin, ill-spelt erotic works, romances of the time of our grandfathers, fairy-tales, little books for children, old operas, silly refrains, ingenuous rhythms. [...] I arrested moments of vertigo.”<sup>489</sup>

Back in the early edition of *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec*, Wegman does a scripting of “Chinese Food” where the “C” and “F” are characters. Approximations of? I don’t read Chinese, and now I’m faced with that knowledge, an experience similar to reading the non-western alphabetic characters in Acker’s signature to the piece she publishes as “Slavery.” Persian alphabets feature in *Blood and Guts In High School*, Arabic in *Empire of the Senseless*, Farsi lessons in *My*

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<sup>487</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>488</sup> Pg. 189; *Pussy*.

*Mother*. A branch flowers simultaneously, we are told, by our illustrator Wegman, into monkshood, mistletoe, myrtle, millet, mountain laurel, and marigold.

As the line of drafting is moved and forced and allowed to evolve, Acker works the lines of prose. If cuts exist in her interviews—I'll myself go back to the one with Lotringer, time and again—these cuts are from the literal to the more metaphorical expansion. Lotringer reminds her of the time she'd planned to go sailing around the world, pleasure cruising the high seas, like Jordana (her Jackie) in Robbins's *The Pirate*, or like Marguerite Duras's female loner in *The Sailor from Gibraltar*—one of Acker's two favorite books by Duras; *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* is the other. Acker places both Duras titles on her "le recit" reading list,<sup>490</sup> and she calls upon *Le Ravissement* for an example in her introduction to a book on "Boxcar Bertha": "Nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide, but, like Marguerite Duras's Lol Stein, in the lack of self. Or, like Boxcar, keep on travelin', Girl."<sup>491</sup> "Yeah, but we didn't know how to sail...," Acker trails off in answer to Lotringer. "I guess I just want to go on a journey and so I start with a sentence and then the language twists and turns and you don't even remember where you've been, you're always faced with the present."<sup>492</sup>

To refocus our reading experience, we work back to an earlier pondering, like the one of our dear Alice: What is the use of a book without pictures or conversations? The 1980 (Traveler's Digest) publication of *I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac: Imagining* contains drawings by Michael McClard; here, for example, are peep show windows

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<sup>489</sup> Pg. 169; *Arthur Rimbaud: A Season in Hell and other poems*, trns. Norman Cameron. London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1994.

<sup>490</sup> <http://www.calarts.edu/~acker/work.htm>

<sup>491</sup> Pg. 130; *Bodies*. "This introduction is for my friend Melissa," Acker concludes the essay, in a parenthetical (pg. 132).

marked “Teller,” a woman on her back, legs spread, knife in her hand tipped to one buttock. McClard will also illustrate Acker’s 1982 chapbook, “Hello, I’m Erica Jong.” (Neither of these sets of drawings are reproduced when these texts are published again, in versions, by Pantheon and Grove.)

Taking up no more than two pages *Essential Acker*, “Hello, I’m Erica Jong” is also “folded-in”-to the 1978 novel *Blood and Guts In High School*, where the text undergoes a few temporal and typographical changes. The first paragraph’s “My novel contained real people that’s why you liked it” becomes “MY NOVEL CONTAINED REAL PEOPLE. THAT’S WHY YOU LIKED IT.” Becoming all caps, “etc.” loses its period, “Oh, yes” loses its comma, a second instance of “googoo” gains a dash, an “I” now divides the line “I AM ERICA JONG [I] FUCK ME YOU CREEP.” Six paragraphs (the four before breaking off in conclusion with no punctuation) are now formatted as three. All caps now, the text loses its title-heading, but for its conclusion it gains a graphic approximation of the handwriting/signature of the “author” Erica Jong. I am perhaps projecting when I find the handwriting just a bit thinner, taller, just slightly more reserved—scratchy—than Acker’s own handwriting, graphically reproduced in the same novel text as part of the keys to the “Dream Maps” which occupy pages 46-51, the word-pictures of pages 106-108, and the composition of “The Persian Poems” by Janey Smith—another Janey named like the “Janey” in *New York City in 1979*, by and large the novel’s protagonist—interrupting and becoming part of one of the novel’s chapters.

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<sup>492</sup> Pg. 23; *Lecter*. Ellipsis in the original.

“You get published how you get published,” Acker says later in response to her critical reception as a “punk” or “Downtown” writer.<sup>493</sup> It might be argued that before she was a “token maverick”<sup>494</sup> in the mainstream, she also belonged to the avant-garde of an emerging Language poetry. (Acker’s executor is somewhat in opposition here: “...a few writers I know...are determined to have K spun as someone who works in the tradition of and in dialogue with the Language poets. Now that’s a hard one; I just can’t see it.”<sup>495</sup> I see Acker believing she has moved on to less cloistered pastures.) Ron Silliman gives this account of the early Acker and her means of distributing her writing: “Once each month she would hand me these self-printed chapters from her ongoing work in progress.... Publishing chapters monthly, handing them out to friends, struck me as deeply romantic, going right back to Dickens as a model for the form, yet also extraordinarily brave. [...] The courage of Acker’s actions was an important impetus to me....”<sup>496</sup> It is six booklets or discrete publications that come together to form the whole of each *The Childlike Life of The Black Tarantula* and *I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac* [!].<sup>497</sup> Where Silliman uses the term “chapters,” these individual sections are called elsewhere by Acker “episodes.”<sup>498</sup> In the back of booklet #2 of the *Nymphomaniac* series, Acker writes: “I want to and have been sending these books out for free dislike asking for money. I’ve now run out of money and people to borrow from. It costs

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<sup>493</sup> Interview with McRobbie.

<sup>494</sup> Acker’s words/understanding in interview with McRobbie.

<sup>495</sup> E-mail from Matias Viegner, February 19, 2007. Viegner generously goes on: “But I would never impede them from writing anything, and would in fact help them if they needed permissions, bibliography (& certainly opinions!).” See also the description of a “lecture” given in *My Mother: Demonology*, where “Language Poets” are at stake (pgs. 170-171).

<sup>496</sup> “Monday, December 05, 2005,” Silliman’s Blog.

<sup>497</sup> The eventual Grove Press republication omits the exclamation point.

approximately \$100. [sic] to send out each of these *issues*. If you enjoy getting these and can spare the money, please do. *You'll receive* these of course whether or not you can help pay costs.”<sup>499</sup> She signs this note “The Fleshpots of Sin Return.” Elsewhere she notes: “...I want writing to be a job like any other job. One is a worker.”<sup>500</sup> (In *The Burning Bombing of America*: “this working is a way of living.”<sup>501</sup>) For an introduction of her students at a reading, she drafts: “No government, no power historically has been able to stop printing presses, offset, and now desktop publishing. No one has been able to stop writing from erupting. This [sic] all writing occurs in the name of freedom./ And so the writers you are about to hear, in the name of freedom.”<sup>502</sup> In the second part of the *Nymphomaniac* project, after detailing the difficulties of procuring a typewriter to do the work of writing, Acker claims: “I’m a poet and what I do is sacred. The people who keep me from the few lousy instruments I need to disseminate this crap are evil.”<sup>503</sup>

In *Rip-off Red*: “Narratives you know are purely for shit. Here’s the information go fuck yourself.”<sup>504</sup> This is where Acker will eventually find herself: she’ll find herself banned in Germany (*Blood in Guts In High School*, or, as the German title would translate: *Tough Girls Don’t Cry*), banned in Canada (*Empire of the Senseless*), and involved in legal problems with Harold Robbins. The charge is the later case is plagiarism—where she puts Jackie O. into the pages of his book *The Pirate* (where Robbins trades in Arabs)—which Acker disputes: “I have been very clear that I use other

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<sup>498</sup> Untitled, incomplete manuscript; Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>499</sup> Kathy Acker Papers. My emphasis on “issues,” second emphasis in the original.

<sup>500</sup> Untitled, incomplete MS, Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>501</sup> Pg. 157; *Red*.

<sup>502</sup> Serpent’s Tail/High Risk Archives.

<sup>503</sup> Pg. 110; *Portrait*.

<sup>504</sup> Pg. 53; *Red*.

people's material. [...] I've always talked about it as a literary theory and as a literary method. I haven't certainly hidden anything. [...] So it's quite clear, I took the Harold Robbins and represented it. [...] Obviously appropriation has been some sort of postmodern technique in the arts for a number of years, both in the visual arts and the literary arts...."<sup>505</sup> Robbins demands a public apology, a demand which Acker must ultimately cave in to; this public "story," and its implications for Acker, can then become a source material for her text "Humility," collected in the anthology *The Seven Cardinal Virtues* and reworked in part in concluding, as mentioned earlier, *In Memoriam to Identity*, Acker's work where, among other things, books are made metaphoric as dolls: "Harold Robbins' publisher phoned up the man who ran the company who owned the feminist publishing company"; "Feminist publisher replied that she knew writer was actually a sweet nice girl"; "CAPITOL MADE A DOLL WHO LOOKED EXACTLY LIKE HERSELF. IF YOU PRESSED A BUTTON ONE OF THE DOLL'S CUNT LIPS THE DOLL SAID, 'I AM A GOOD LITTLE GIRL AND DO EXACTLY AS I AM TOLD TO DO'"; "...sent a letter to the feminist publisher in which said that she composed her texts out of 'real' conversations, anything written down, other texts, somewhat in the ways the Cubists had worked." Acker adds in a following bracket: "Not quite true. But thought this statement understandable." (In the "Russian Constructivism" text: "Why's a Cubist painting, if it is, better art than a Vivienne Westwood dress?"<sup>506</sup>)

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<sup>505</sup> Pg. 13; *Lecter*.

<sup>506</sup> Pg. 47; *Quixote*. Bellamy: "Her papers are at Duke, but her clothes and accessories remain in the possession of her executor Matias Viegener. I will display a selection of Kathy Acker's clothes during my 5-day residency at New Langton Arts, and on Wednesday, July 12 at 7:00 I will give a presentation, 'Digging Through Kathy Acker's Stuff.' Last February while visiting Viegener in Los Angeles, I rummaged through Acker's extravagant designer wardrobe, and wheedled one of her Gaultier dresses from

“WHAT IS IT? CAPITOL WROTE, ‘TO BE AN ARTIST? WHERE IS THE VALUE THAT WILL KEEP THIS LIFE IN HELL GOING?’”<sup>507</sup>

Back in *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec*, our “I” for now is Toulouse, that whore doubling as author-for profit, through the creation of fantasies, writer/love-maker-machine, whom we may know in some sense, but only in some sense, stands in for Acker: she is different because she aims to disrupt our dreams of seamless blends in such ways as she can, trouble our notions of continuity by pointing out how she will, from time to time, tip her (narrative) hand and enjoy it—surely this shows she is above “petty,” uncomplicated motivations? “He” says: “ ‘If you’re nice to me and send me presents, especially money so I can get this trash printed,’ I exclaim, rolling drunkenly over my matchstick legs, ‘I’ll tell you another story[.]’”<sup>508</sup> That next story is “the true story of a rich woman” (the story of Jackie O.).

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him, and a couple pieces of jewelry. Possessing such intimate effects of a woman I wasn't so much friends with as in awe of, I felt compelled to write it all out. I meditate upon relics, ghosts, compulsive shopping, archives, make-up, our drive to mythologize the dead, Acker's own self-mythologizing, the struggle among followers to define Acker, bitch fights, and the numina of DNA” (posted to UB Poetics discussion group July 5, 2006; <http://listserv.acsu.buffalo.edu>).

<sup>507</sup> Pgs. 121-126; *The Seven Cardinal Virtues*, ed. Alison Fell (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1990).

<sup>508</sup> Pg. 237; *Portrait*.

**III. O & Co.**

## 5.

“I’ll risk my life freely as any slave, but it’s a drag.”<sup>509</sup>

—Kathy Acker

In *Blood and Guts In High School*, with the father as the be-all and the end-all, our options will be of necessity limited: “Never having known a mother, her mother had died when Janey was a year old, Janey depended on her father for everything and regarded her father as boyfriend, brother, sister, money, amusement, and father.”<sup>510</sup> In “Lust” (in the opening subtitled “A Sailor’s Slight Identity”) we are told, “Because he’s alone, a sailor’s always telling himself who he is,” before moving into the first-person voice, apparently, of one, who begins to relate his state. “Due to the increasing conservatism of this government, the cops’re enforcing more and tighter restrictions on every area of the private sector.”<sup>511</sup> Here will be recounted for us “the life of vermin.”<sup>512</sup> Capitol, in the “Girls Who Like to Fuck” section of *In Memoriam to Identity*, begins introducing her story: “Daddy was a drunk, and mom had decided to be a cripple, but I didn’t mind them too much. Quentin came back from Harvard with all these ridiculous theories. He told me Freud had said that all women are naturally masochists, though he didn’t say that that simply.”<sup>513</sup> Acker opens *My Mother: Demonology*, with a short passage that explains, before part one (“Into That Belly of Hell Whose Name Is The

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<sup>509</sup> Pg. 24; *Portrait*.

<sup>510</sup> Pg. 7; *High School*.

<sup>511</sup> Pg. 51; *Lecter*.

<sup>512</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>513</sup> Pg. 153; *Identity*.

United States”) begins, “My mother began to love at the same moment in her life that she began to search for who she was.”<sup>514</sup> R’s mom, in “The Beginning of The Life of Rimbaud” (the opening section of *In Memoriam to Identity*), introduces his character by what she thinks of him, with a lamenting: “a human homosexual,” “the product of this [abandoning husband(‘s)] dick.”<sup>515</sup> The sentence that begins the text marked “Before the Days of Dreaming” opening the “O and Ange” part of the “In the Days of Dreaming” section of *Pussy, King of the Pirates*: “O, a woman and a Jew.”<sup>516</sup>

Narratives start with our classes, with our nationalities, allegiances or no, our races, our ages, our resources, matings, hopes, and Acker’s books are no different: “Kathy is a middle-class, though she has no money, American white girl, twenty-nine years of age, no lovers and no prospects of money, who doesn’t believe in anyone or anything,”<sup>517</sup> she begins *Kathy Goes to Haiti* in 1978. My study of Acker does not center upon it, but some may find Acker’s German-Jewish-ness to be a particularly telling and emotionally productive route. Sarah Schulman: “To be born a German Jew is to feel entitled and endangered. She was born Kathy Alexander, the kind of German Jew that is known by real New Yorkers as “Our Crowd”—her family, the Alexanders, along with the Lehmans, Loebes, Ochs, etc. were the best educated, wealthiest, and most sophisticated Jews in the world.”<sup>518</sup>

She was actually, I believe, born Karen, not Kathy. “Age 11” (*Rip-off Red, Girl Detective*): “My mother tells me she hates my real childhood name, only gave me that

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<sup>514</sup> Pg. 3; *Mother*.

<sup>515</sup> Pg. 3; *Identity*.

<sup>516</sup> Pg. 27; *Pussy*.

<sup>517</sup> Pg. 5; *Literal*.

<sup>518</sup> “Sarah Schulman Discusses Kathy Acker.” *Pavement Magazine* 2003.

name because she didn't think at the time it was legal right to give me my nickname. Her husband's sister who is crazy and whom she hates has my real name. She always calls me by my childhood nickname as does everyone I know: institutions at this time call me by my real childhood name."<sup>519</sup> "Kathy," the childhood nickname I assume, she keeps; she endeavors in her earliest prose to work through ideas of madness (not being able to hold onto the self in time, not being able to distinguish dream/fantasy from reality, nymphomania); she combines the childhood name with the surname, the taking of which, through marriage, her first, will remove Kathy-now-Acker from her family's graces. Though born to money, she is disinherited. Acker claims, though not consistently, that this disinheritance is a result of whom she chose to marry. Acker sets her publishing, when she does forgo the fabrication of her pseudonyms, under these two signs: the tender (Kathy) protection of her childhood pet name abuts the one—Acker—that makes a mother's exclusionary laws quite explicit. Acker did not marry within her class or up.

She does not know her (real) father or who he is, though she later has her suspicions. As part of her talk on narrative, Acker matter-of-factly presents the discovery: "When I was 26 years old, through an accident, I traced my father's family." Acker does not elaborate on the accident.<sup>520</sup> A letter to a man she believes may be him, a man she's never met, she signs, "Kathy (Alexander) Acker/ (Karen Lehmann)."<sup>521</sup> This letter is dated 1976.<sup>522</sup> I imagine this letter will be widely quoted by others in future

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<sup>519</sup> Pg. 64; *Red*.

<sup>520</sup> See, "Kathy Acker, "The Killers," in *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative*, ed. Mary Burger, Robert Glück, Camille Roy, Gail Scott. Toronto: Coach House Books, 2004; pg. 14, in particular.

<sup>521</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>522</sup> Acker is now born in 1949-1950, or some years pass between her knowledge and writing. Cf. *Spread Wide*: "I am getting middle-aged I'm going to be 34!, I thought 33

studies of Acker and her work, but I find it still interesting to excerpt at length, and even more importantly, I find it in keeping with particularities of her voice:

I have always wondered who my father is. My mother and her mother refused to tell me who he is or what his name is. [...] Since I've never really had a father, I have no idea what relations between fathers and their children are supposed to be—if that matters at all. I would like to meet you. However I have no wish to impose on you; I can understand if you would rather have nothing to do with me. By the way—I'm sure it doesn't matter—my desire to meet you has nothing to do with my mother or her side of the family; actually, we're not very friendly. [...] Even if you don't wish to see me, any information you could give me about yourself and, if possible, though recalling the past can be a nuisance, about your marriage with my mother etc. would be more than welcome.

“Born For Trouble,” another one of those “poems” Acker never wanted to write, dating from 1974, begins:

“I never knew my father  
 I guess I didn't have one  
 When my mom was three months pregnant  
 The shit she lived with left her.

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and then Peter (xzee [sic] ex-husband who by the way is doing the music for the Forman

Cause the man she loved left her  
 My mom couldn't stand me  
 When she couldn't ignore me  
 She'd tell me I'm nothing.

So I love men  
 More than any of them knows  
 Each time I fuck one  
 I give him my soul.

[...]"<sup>523</sup>

Lyric or poem, it goes on. As biography, it is corroborated by the talk Acker gave on a panel called "In Extremis, Writing at the Century's End," April 29, 1993: "I have to tell you a few details about my childhood and about before my childhood.... I never met my father. Though he was married to my mother, he left her when she was three months pregnant with me." Acker then tells a story—her talk is concerned with narration: "[But] [I]et me start, since we're talking about narration, by telling you a story"<sup>524</sup>—about how

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[sic] play) came in town, and said NO, HONEY, 34, not 33" (pg. 126).

<sup>523</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>524</sup> This talks becomes the text "The Killers," as explained in a note accompanying its publication. Before its inclusion in *Biting the Error*, the piece appeared in the online journal *Narrativity* ([www.sfsu.edu/~poetry/narrativity/](http://www.sfsu.edu/~poetry/narrativity/)); its opening undergoes some changes, omitting three opening paragraphs: "I wrote a piece today and it's really just the beginning of something on narration. I've got time trouble because of overwork. You know: you're broke, and you take on too much work, and then you fuck up on everything. It's never ending./ So understand this is simple and it's the beginning of

she is given the idea that her real father might be an actual murderer; then, in one succinct sentence: “When I was 30 years old, my mother suicided.” Acker then puts an even finer point upon it all with her next sentence: “Enough of my childhood”<sup>525</sup>: childhood, by the implication of narration, lasts until she is thirty and her mother dies.

Childhood is her state that goes on and continues to structure itself through different memories and different crisis points, in all of Acker’s major fiction in one way or another. It can even be made to underpin her essays and “non-fiction” understandings. In writing on New York, her connection to it, she breaks her experiences into two “childhoods”: she recalls playing pirate, trawling the city streets of her juvenescence (“My life for New York, being the love for one’s place of birth or one’s birth, will die only when I do”<sup>526</sup>), and she calls this her “first childhood.” Her “second childhood,” according to her, began when she became an adult, a development she locates in the “underground,” the artistic center of which she tells us was New York City.

To refuse to marry well is to decide, of necessity, you will try to make your own way in the world. “Now I had to make money because money makes everything happen in this city & I had no idea how to make money,” Acker writes in “Jeane Duval”; in the

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something. You know, it’s totally open rather than anything else./ And I thought we were going to touch on two issues talking about narration. One is identity. That’s an obvious issue, the business about who am I—you know, this is all postmodernist shit. What, therefore, is real? Is there any real? And the other issue is raised by the quote from this little card that advertises this panel about writing for [notice Acker’s shift, in how she will confront, what she will take on: “at” in the panel’s actual title becomes here “for”] century’s end. Consequently there’s this trouble hovering in the air. The immediacy of all the danger we’re living in, of the possible end of both humanism [“If you scratch hard, you find that I’m a humanist in some weird way. Well, humanist, you know what I mean” (pg 17; *Lecter*)] and of humanity, that we might all be going the way of the dinosaurs very fast. And that culture is going the way of? of whatever—dinosaur culture. And when we talk about writing these two things, these issues hover there.”

<sup>525</sup>Pg. 14; “The Killers.” My ellipsis.

first manuscript draft she spells the first name with just one “n”—Jeanne historically, famously, that mistress Baudelaire gave syphilis to and then watched die, romanticizing this all the while. I find the Duval text seminal; Acker here is clearly first beginning to work out how to stretch her own, individual concerns into the greater form of a novel, or book, rather than “piece.”

She, Jeane, becomes Janey by the time a version of Acker’s telling of this story is ever actually published<sup>527</sup>; “What is really going on in NY?” reads a sentence in the back of one of the Jeane Duval journals.<sup>528</sup> In *New York City in 1979*, Janey is an Everygirl of sorts of the time and place; she wants Johnny. In one draft, the text carries the (later dropped) subtitle “To Jeanne’s Insulted Beauty” (the other “n” now making its appearance). Jeanne Duval is arguably further insulted in the text’s final, published version. Now when Baudelaire takes the stage in the text, she’s left unnamed, and placed among a cluster of demand-makers: “his parents, society, his mistress, etc.”<sup>529</sup> Jeanne Duval says in one of Acker’s drafts: “I think, the loneliness is beginning to drive me crazy. Then I thought that all the great mystics and saints in order to learn wisdom went

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<sup>526</sup> Manuscript draft; Serpent’s Tail/High Risk Archive.

<sup>527</sup> How the Jeanne Duval story is worked into “New York City in 1979” is dealt with in Acker’s “A Few Notes on Two of My Books”; see *Bodies of Work*.

<sup>528</sup> Kathy Acker Papers. There are two notebooks for “Jeane Duval,” one gray and wrapped around with light pink strings. The other doesn’t leave such an impression on me, though I am almost certain it is not yet the 80-sheet, 8 1/2 x 7 inches, 20 lb. green paper “University Ruled Notebook,” which Acker does eventually move to and within which most of the composing of the individual segments of *Pussy*, *King of the Pirates* and much later work takes place; a particular moment of recognition for me, as these are the same notebooks I first began keeping my own journal in. Kraus, in her essay “Shit on My Sleepmask,” also gives a thumbnail of one of Acker’s writing-containers: “National Brand, spiral, narrow-ruled.” Earlier, in this same essay, she notes on one that belonged to Artaud: “Because it is so ordinary, the notebook has a magical charge. It’s one of those kid’s notebooks with multiplication tables on the back cover.” (Pg. 141, 140, respectively; *Video Green*.)

into the desert and went crazy and passed to the other side of craziness./ I got a job in this theatre that was part sex show.”<sup>530</sup>

To make her way, her own legend has it, Acker worked for a time in a sex show in Times Square, and many of Acker’s characters resort in dire straits to some version of this occupation. “My friends were all respectable (i.e. had minimum money): I couldn’t ask them shit. So I opened the back pages of the *Village Voice*. In less than three hours I became a go-go dancer.”<sup>531</sup> “I figured I could sell my body, a resource open to most young women, not for a lot of money but at least for more than eighty dollars a week and less than eight hours a day.” Acker issues this sentence in the seventies; a quick perusal of today’s (2/21/07) *Village Voice* back pages entices still promisingly and competitively, considering inflation: “in need of girls who want to make \$1000/day”; “\$500 a day at least”; “Are you a Black or Hispanic woman with way too many bills?” In *I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac*, Acker records: “I was rolling my ass around in the lousy bar on Folsom Street the Folsom Street Bar where they hold slave-auctions....”<sup>532</sup>; “A go-go dancer is a strip-tease artist, midway in the hierarchy between a high-class call girl and a streetwalker.”<sup>533</sup> She’s to have no mind as docile, doll-toy, (sex) object to drive and move around the floor/field as seen fit. “I lived on the outskirts of, in the lowest part of, society because I worked a sex show; then I believed that I deserved to be shat on, that if

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<sup>529</sup> Pg. 41; *Lecter*.

<sup>530</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>531</sup> Pg. 143; *Portrait*.

<sup>532</sup> Pg. 149; *Portrait*.

<sup>533</sup> Pg. 143; *Portrait*.

I didn't pull myself up by non-existent bootstraps out of the muck I would die, and that I had to be very tough.”<sup>534</sup>

Becoming such a (silent) complement, unwittingly defaulting to man's most gainful employment, is part and parcel of the “lobotomy,” which recurs regularly in Acker's oeuvre as a shorthand for accepting the state of “just the way things are.” In *Memoriam to Identity*: “ ‘She couldn't work as a stripper anymore because it was making her sick,’ Harry said”; “ ‘Question: Why do girls become whores?/ ‘Answer: A lot of girls do for a while. The ones who don't just for a while, die.”<sup>535</sup> “Before she worked the sex show she had earned all the money she needed especially the money for all the medicines by starring, she was either the only one or one of two, in sex films. She had thought of earning her money this way because when she had gone to a top Eastern University a doctor friend had told her her face was ravishingly beautiful. She had gotten these beginning model jobs by looking in the back pages of the *Village Voice*.”<sup>536</sup> And so Acker's work begins. We might note the movement of signifier, as it loses its grounding in acceptable, social reality—no way to stop sliding down a chain, from one school of thought to the next; being instructed on her beauty, by a doctor, leads to modeling, i.e. (star of) sex films, that lead to live-shows, modeling in the actual (flesh).

We'll never get just one, definitive version in Acker, of this or other developmental narratives, but there will be stories we will come back to time and again, repeats in her designs. The dance of the stripper makes up large parts of *Politics*, or at least the excerpt published in *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*; it finds its way as gainful

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<sup>534</sup> Pg. 112; *Quixote*.

<sup>535</sup> Pgs. 241, 99, respectively; *Identity*.

<sup>536</sup> Pg. 86; *Expectations*.

employment into both *Great Expectations* and in *I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac*. In *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by The Black Tarantula*: “I leave my parents, then my husband, my career. I’m not very good at making money. I have two main problems: (1) how to earn \$200 to \$300 per month to eat, pay rent, without becoming a robot and with my clothes on....”<sup>537</sup> Again, we are still in the seventies; try finding an apartment today (the new millennium) for \$200 to \$300, forget about eating. The stocktaking here is written in a section before the narrative itself moves on to San Francisco, where prospects might be more “promising”: “All I talk about is money I’m moving to San Francisco I don’t know how I’m going to live in San Francisco model I’ll become a famous pornographer ha ha if I don’t get the money myself I’ll die starvation alone on the street I’m out of money right now”<sup>538</sup>—the abovementioned section ends with this parenthetical aside. In her essays, movement to San Francisco is “escape” and ultimately, towards the end of her life, a kind of utopia (“however weird a person thinks himself or herself that person will always find someone weirder in San Francisco”), as expressed in “Some American Cities”: “It could be that [San Francisco] provincialism, a lack of connection to corporate markets such as the New York art and publishing worlds, and a gay lifestyle are enabling San Francisco, for the moment, to combat the decay engendered by American postcapitalism and imperialism.”<sup>539</sup>

Even before its actual “workings,” the power of the strip scene, its dynamics of controls, is shown to be present in a couple of childhood humiliations in *Rip-off Red, Girl Detective*. First, the hands of her grandmother go to proudly show off just how mature

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<sup>537</sup> Pg. 25; *Portrait*.

<sup>538</sup> Pg. 28; *Portrait*.

<sup>539</sup> See pgs. 83, 136; *Bodies*.

our narrator is getting; here we see it beginning for a young girl on her eighth birthday, when taken to The Hotel Grift for her party: “[M]y grandmother lifts up my pink dress to show the headwaiter my new girdle [one with pink flowers sewn on it that her mother has “stuck” her into]. New York lechers. I hate this part of my life.” Next comes the initiatory dare, as grounds for becoming part of the childhood gang-club our heroine has established with some others, shortly thereafter in the text: “only by completely stripping in front of us on a rainy day in Central Park.” As an option of gainful employment, it’s moved through already as part of our opening, character profile, getting the narrative ball rolling: “I’m five foot three inches brown hair curling all over my face, bright green eyes, I’m 26 but my body’s tough from dancing if you know what I mean—well I got bored doing a strip, well first, I got bored doing that Ph.D. shit and being frustrated professors’ straight-A pet, especially being faithful to a husband who spent all his time in bed dealing out poker hands; I left school, descended to the more interesting depths and became a stripper, even that finally bored me, so I decided, on my 26<sup>th</sup> birthday, to become the toughest detective alive.”<sup>540</sup> Compare the above to one of the mother figure’s favorite pastimes, as we’ve seen; in “Requiem”: *CLAIRE and the girl sit themselves on the former’s bed. It is here that most of the life in this family happens./ CLAIRE reaches for the deck of cards that’s always on her bedside table and shuffles them pro-style.*<sup>541</sup>

Acker was, literally, tutored by Herbert Marcuse (“radical neo-Freudian emphasis on the role of eros in politics,”<sup>542</sup> is how Wollen sums up Marcuse), and Acker did some of her earliest traveling for him. When he left his position at Brandeis University—

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<sup>540</sup> Pgs. 52, 53, 5, respectively; *Red*.

<sup>541</sup> Pg. 166; *Eurydice*.

<sup>542</sup> Pg. 4; *Lust*.

where Acker was studying classics—to become a Professor at the University of California, San Diego, she followed. It was there that she was his TA, and it was there that she would meet another man, one half of a mentoring couple, David Antin. Acker seems to have had a propensity for inserting herself among such coupled configurations. Leslie Dick at the *Lust for Life* symposium spoke of how Acker would introduce Dick and Peter Wollen, couple at the time, as her parents.<sup>543</sup> Acker's letters to Paul Buck that will be published as part of *Spread Wide* begin initially addressed to both him and his partner at the time; it is quite a while before Acker begins to write the two of them separately; then: "Dear Paul,/ Just wrote Glenda and in a letter put some pertinent info like forwarding addresses future plans so can she give you the info so I don't have to repeat? I AM being tacky"; "If it's O.K.—only if it's O.K. cause I know you are different people—show this letter to Glenda—only cause I've poured my heart out (a bit) & now am (a bit) tired yet want to say hello to Glenda I miss you too."<sup>544</sup> Of course it's fiction, but she writes in "New York City in 1979" how Janey yawns, although "she doesn't fall asleep cause she's suddenly attracted to Michael who's like every other guy she's attracted to married to a friend of hers."<sup>545</sup> "...elly and i/ we were sitting by watching kathy acker die [ ] she was a dear friend of ours and an ex-student [ ] someone we really loved and we watched her die young and terribly of cancer [ ] and what do you

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<sup>543</sup> Both Wollen and Dick write at some point in their essays on Acker about her lovebirds (AKA "parrots": a word which Dick also mentioned, in her talk, in Acker's pronunciation sounded like "parents"); the other "critical couple" represented in *Lust for Life* would be Carla Harryman and Barrett Watten.

<sup>544</sup> Pgs. 78, 160, respectively; *Spread Wide*.

<sup>545</sup> Pg. 45; *Lecter*.

do in those circumstances [ ] sitting there you do the best you can,”<sup>546</sup> Antin writes of her, in his *i never knew what time it was*.

There, in San Diego, babysitting for the Antins, Acker makes of that a text, inserted into the end of the *I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac* project. David and her charge, young Blaise,<sup>547</sup> are imprisoned and treated harshly by the (penal) system for being “agitators” (thus possible “revolutionaries”), alongside the “dykes” the chapter is named after, in addition to a string of men classified as “management problems,” “militants,” “stubborn and hostile,” “Black.” Here, as well, The Black Tarantula, “*an American Indian*, [is] sentenced to five years to life imprisonment for first degree burglary”; “The Black Tarantula, like Peter Gordon [whom at the time of this writing is not yet her second or ex-husband] is sentenced to a lifetime imprisonment in a small cell.”<sup>548</sup> (The piece is copyrighted twice, 1974 and 1980; the 1974 version—a copy of which exists in the Downtown collection housed at Fales Library of NYU—does indeed already name and implicate Gordon.)

The dance of the stripper (Acker’s), compromised, I must differentiate from that medium of porn she enters into (safely) in her word-rhythms. That latter space of sexuality and exposure is by and large *porn* of a literate variety, or middlebrow works brought down to the level of their repressive premises—deconstructed into the “porn” dynamics they hide. I deem instructive some scenes from Bette Gordon’s 1983 film, *Variety*, with a script by Acker. (Reviewing it in the Times, Janet Maslin calls the

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<sup>546</sup> Pg. 37; David Antin, *i never knew what time it was*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. I am grateful to Brian Blanchfield for bringing this reference to my attention.

<sup>547</sup> Jackson Mac Low’s “22<sup>nd</sup> Light Poem” is “For David Antin & Eleanor & Blaise Antin.”

<sup>548</sup> Pgs. 173-184; *Portrait*. Emphasis mine.

screenplay “painfully underwritten.”<sup>549</sup>) Based on an “original story” by Gordon, this film illuminates Acker’s stance on the (commercial) side of such “adult” businesses. Never discrediting the minds of the women floating through such milieus, Acker nonetheless never approves of such a position, as necessitated by desperations of finance.

While “Christine” is working, sounds spill over into the lobby from the sex films she has gotten a job selling tickets to (“oh, oh yeah, God, uh-oooh”); Christine, on her cigarette break inside, paces around, up and down the stairs between the levels of the porn theater, while men exiting begin to cruise her, over sounds from the screens: “You’re a whore, aren’t you?” “I am a whore.” Christine sits down and smokes and thinks, before going up the stairs to the projection booth, to get her check. In another scene, Christine begins to tell her love interest about her new job: guys are there in the morning, waiting to get in, after it’s been Lysol-ed. She then goes into a recitation, telling a story of what’s usually happening on the screen, what the woman on the screen says, how she stares, undresses, says “fuck me”—a bit flatly, a bit baby-dollishly, unimaginatively, clueless, emptied out to a function. The man Christine tells this all to says he’s got to go, he’ll see her later.

Often the “porn” Acker uses is “erotica,” perhaps a fine distinction, as when she cites Leduc’s work, one consisting of those scenes initially deemed too explicit in their depictions of lesbian sex and subsequently removed and published, alone, from part one—*La Bâtarde* (*The Bastard*)—of Leduc’s projected but not completed four-part autobiography; *Mad in Pursuit* is the second, less successful volume, detailing Leduc’s fixation on and discovery by Simone de Beauvoir. Juan Goytisolo gives the heroine

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<sup>549</sup> March 8, 1985, *The New York Times*.

Leduc a rather scintillating documentation in the second volume, *Realms of Strife*, of his own autobiography; he refers to “her half-real, half-imagined attacks of madness and depression,” her “terrible physical appearance” that’s been documented, “her loneliness and isolation: she suffered or pretended to suffer from a persecution complex, but at times she would calm down and her vulgar face broadened into a cunning grin. She was a ‘play-actress and martyr,’ according to the expression coined by Sartre, and waxed ecstatic at the ‘happy couple’ of Monique [Goytisoló’s wife at the time] and myself. She wanted me to pass on to her an old pair of trousers, ‘with a drop of semen on the fly,’ she said plaintively, since she lived alone, without a man, and that souvenir of me would warm her up a bit.”<sup>550</sup> Goytisoló further dishes on how Genet, in a dramatic remonstrance, knocked over this woman’s supper table once because he didn’t want to eat when she insisted he must, as she’d prepared something. Goytisoló says Genet—the destiny of whom he admits he himself is “obsessed” with, in the same letter where he reveals his homosexuality to his wife, also included in his autobiography<sup>551</sup>—was one of the two passions in Leduc’s life.<sup>552</sup> All three of these authors strike chords in Acker, providing examples and precedents for her own revelations in unique and highly aestheticized registers.

Scholder in her “Editor’s Note” to *Essential Acker*: “What cannot be overestimated is the pleasure Kathy took in writing porn, finding the exactly right cadence and rhythm: using language, pushing limits, turning on.”<sup>553</sup> In one of Acker’s

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<sup>550</sup> Pg. 280-281; Juan Goytisoló, *Forbidden Territory and Realms of Strife*. London: Verso, 2003.

<sup>551</sup> See pgs. 357-360 (359 in particular); *ibid.*

<sup>552</sup> Pg. 281; the other claimed is Maurice Sachs; *ibid.*

<sup>553</sup> Pg. xiii.

“warm-up” texts, *Rip-Off Red*, when we move on to sex “Plan Number 1,” ironically, as the scrappy, fledgling street gang we are following have dubbed it, once they realize there’s no way they are going to win—there are too many of them, on the other side (“thousands of filthy disgusting chain boys”; it’s The Tomatoes vs. The Banana Followers)—we as readers rhythmically experience their live-sex (simulated) action: “start I again I relax enough to become,” and “I can hear his breathing grow harsher harsher.”<sup>554</sup>

Acker is never rewriting porn *films*, though movies themselves aren’t off-limits; the version of *Wuthering Heights* she works from in *My Mother: Demonology* is soon enough revealed to be primarily the 1939 screen version with Laurence Olivier. Here, too, is one of the ways she returns to Leduc’s *Thérèse and Isabelle*, which she first used in *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*: “I have always wanted my dreams to be like that of childhood or of Radley Metzger’s film of the book *Therese and Isabelle*.”<sup>555</sup> (A version of this text is also used to end *My Mother: Demonology*. Where Leduc’s “I” sees herself reflected in the toilet water—“a reflection of my face before the creation of the world”<sup>556</sup>—Acker’s “I” sees: “Above me, the roll of white toilet paper was covered with specks of black hairs.../ It was a reflection of my face before the creation of the world.”<sup>557</sup> This extreme assertion gains a complex level of pathos in Acker’s hands, developed in large part due to an increasingly “common” knowledge, as it is established and reiterated across her oeuvre, that in Acker girl children often come with mother figures in tow who

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<sup>554</sup> Pg. 54-56; *Red*.

<sup>555</sup> Pg. 41; *Mother*. French accents not used in the original.

<sup>556</sup> Pg. 4; Violette Leduc, *Thérèse and Isabelle*. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1967.

<sup>557</sup> Pg. 268; *Mother*.

have attempted to abort or delivered their daughters into the toilet, trying to wipe the child away, often mistaking the labor pains for appendicitis—as reported by the child. This wretched state also bears comparing to Clay Fear’s narrator’s more brazenly assured search for “self” in the toilets: “I write on the bathroom wall this place needs more faggots.”<sup>558</sup>)

Greta Garbo in *Queen Christina* is an ego ideal in *Kathy Goes to Haiti*.<sup>559</sup>

Pasolini’s *Salò* comes up in two works (“I had just finished making *Salò*”; “Just as if I were watching *Salò*...”<sup>560</sup>). “Janey” holds the noir-ish *Gilda* in her mind (Rita Hayworth, 1946: “There NEVER was a woman like Gilda!”), looking for some direction in a loaded, decisive tête-à-tête with her father/boyfriend. *Rebel Without a Cause* dominates chapter five of *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec* by Henri Toulouse Lautrec; Hardin cites this case as the first clear examples of Acker’s “plagiarism”<sup>561</sup>; Janis [Joplin] and Jimmy [James Dean] will go to a drive-in together on a date in this work to see *The Sun Also Rises*: “I got this vision and it’s driving me crazy. Like Zelda Fitzgerald,”<sup>562</sup> Janis says—Zelda, who, according to her biographer Nancy Milford, saw the domineering macho persona of Hemingway to be little more than posturing.<sup>563</sup> Acker writes, “In *Rebel*

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<sup>558</sup> Pg. 10; “I Don’t Expect You’ll Do the Same.”

<sup>559</sup> See pg. 77; *Literal*.

<sup>560</sup> *Literal* (178), *Pussy* (120).

<sup>561</sup> See pg. 143; *Devouring Institutions*. The distinction here seems to be a text where Acker does not rewrite to any marked degree but just “places,” as she does with stretches of dialogue from scenes of the movie; between transcriptions of the film’s dialogue, Acker provides an editorializing and synopsisizing commentary.

<sup>562</sup> Pg. 254; *Portrait*.

<sup>563</sup> *Zelda: A Biography*.

*Without a Cause*, Jimmy Dean plays himself.”<sup>564</sup> *In Memoriam to Identity*: “Said something like he liked the movie *Something Wild*; she said, she didn’t.”<sup>565</sup>

I must stress that Acker approaches what is deemed porn not because she wants to see more than she gets normally to see—in fact, she expresses her misgiving with the usual limits of its specular imagination in her writing on and in praise of the vision of David Cronenberg’s motion picture of J.G. Ballard’s *Crash*: “What interested me most was that, contrary and probably antagonistic to all porn conventions, the cock is not hard. Through sexual desire, both his own and that of his characters, Cronenberg has reenvisioned the dominant and always rigid phallus of the old king-must-not-die world as other, soft, another body part....”<sup>566</sup> In approaching the “pornographic,” Acker wants to get her rhythm down, a timing, just right; she wants to hear that pulsing and relieved voice inside her ear, the whispering, the breathing, over a spectrum of development.

“Until fairly recently, we had to be either prostitutes or wives. Therefore our very economic subsistence was absolutely dependent on our bodies, yet at the same time we weren’t allowed to talk about this. It was OK for a man to use certain terms, and even today you read Henry Miller, James Joyce and no one says that those guys are pornographic, but for a woman to use those terms, suddenly you get pornography.”<sup>567</sup>

Acker also says, “Words which formerly applied to degraded ways of life now are used

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<sup>564</sup> Pg. 252; *Portrait*.

<sup>565</sup> Pg. 215; *Identity*.

<sup>566</sup> See “The Future,” in *Bodies of Work*, esp. 175. Also of importance in *Crash* is a (male) desire for a more porous and penetrable body. Interestingly, given Acker’s early focus on madness, John Cameron Mitchell’s *Shortbus* (2006) equates sanity with (sexual) penetrability.

<sup>567</sup> Argonaut interview; Kathy Acker Papers.

proudly and words once used with sacred delight are now forgotten.”<sup>568</sup> This was to be one of the starting principles for her version/translation of Aristophanes *The Thesmophoriazusae*, or *Lady’s Day*, as it has appeared in English. An Ackerian premise: when criticizing, cultured tones are not going to cut it. In a draft of an essay to be titled “After the End of the Art World,” she quotes the beginning of the *Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*: “We are the modern cunt positive anti-reason unbounded unleashed unforgiving...”<sup>569</sup> Where Roland Barthes says in his fragment “Politics” in *The Pleasure of the Text*, “The text is (should be) that uninhibited person who shows his behind to the *Political Father*,”<sup>570</sup> Acker will show rather, and we will see, her “cunt”—her word, the choice to examine; “I open the red lips of my cunt and begin to laugh”<sup>571</sup>; “Swear by your cunt. Only your cunt is holy.”<sup>572</sup> A drafting of the Jeanne Duval text: “Because my memories are hiding in these hairs, this night, in order to ressurect [sic] my memories & make them deathless, I’m going to wave your cunt hairs as if they’re banners right now in front of the public’s faces.”<sup>573</sup>

In my indexing of *Portrait of an Eye*, the word “cunt” occurs at least 46 times; it occurs at least 54 times in *Literal Madness*, 26 times in *Blood and Guts In High School*, at least 15 times in *Great Expectations*, at least 22 times in *Don Quixote*, at least 44 times in *Empire of the Senseless*, at 36 times in *In Memoriam to Identity*, at least 32 in *My Mother: Demonology*, and at least 25 times in *Pussy, King of the Pirates*.

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<sup>568</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>569</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>570</sup> Pg. 53; Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1975.

<sup>571</sup> Pg. 85; *Portrait*.

<sup>572</sup> Pg. 162; *Quixote*.

<sup>573</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

The word appears to name genitals (“skin separates from skin in my cunt”; “I touch my cunt with my hand”<sup>574</sup>); it appears as identity, arguably, grounding (“my cunt is my center my cunt is my center my cunt is my center”<sup>575</sup>); it is a place of vulnerability (“Kick me again in the cunt, please”<sup>576</sup>), is elevated, connotes prize/reward (“I don’t want to become a secretary because I don’t want to eat shit I want to eat cunt”<sup>577</sup>), is derogatory (“You didn’t bring me enough money today you fart-faced cunt”; “Cunt. Tramp. Floozy. Flounder. Dead fish”<sup>578</sup>), is metaphor (“Park foliage squeeze open close like a voluptuous cunt”; “like the bliss of a throbbing red cunt dawn”; “In the swampy regions of the cunt, Charon rowed and plied his boat as if the skiff was a finger”<sup>579</sup>), synecdoche (“Now that cunt’s gone”; “I know he doesn’t care about me I’m a cunt he hates me”; “So as soon as Dad woke up to a cunt, he kicked her out of his house”<sup>580</sup>), metonym (“Cunt special”; “My cunt used to be a men’s toilet”<sup>581</sup>), societal oppression (“*Being in prison is being in a cunt*”<sup>582</sup>), exclamation of desire (“cuntcuntcunt”<sup>583</sup>), conceit, flourish (“you can’t eat cunt, writing isn’t a viable phenomenon anymore”; “Perhaps outside where the swans are sitting are the cunts of the night”<sup>584</sup>), construct (“On the other hand my construct (a cunt) and I had to find the code”<sup>585</sup>), abjection (“Climatically Algeria is a sluggish country and cunt”; “she’ll be unburiable—no dogs

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<sup>574</sup> Pgs. 7, 37, respectively; *Portrait*.

<sup>575</sup> Pg. 52; *Portrait*.

<sup>576</sup> Pg. 69; *Portrait*.

<sup>577</sup> Pg. 86; *Portrait*.

<sup>578</sup> *Portrait* (151), *Literal* (188).

<sup>579</sup> *Portrait* (156), *Quixote* (125), *Mother* (83).

<sup>580</sup> *Portrait* (193), *Literal* (58), *Mother* (93).

<sup>581</sup> *Portrait* (201), *High School* (36).

<sup>582</sup> Pg. 135; *High School*. Italics in the original.

<sup>583</sup> Pg. 136; *High School*.

<sup>584</sup> *Expectations* (123), *Identity* (205).

will stick their noses into this cunt—because the stink of rebellion that is named *menstrual blood*<sup>586</sup>), *objet petit a* (“In my heart of hearts or cunt I’ve always known what men want from me”; this substitution of signification is performed in *Don Quixote*, as well: “in her heart of hearts, or cunt”<sup>587</sup>); it’s a subliminal state (“In a river. In my cunt.”<sup>588</sup>), stigmata (“Her red cunt was the center of the cross”<sup>589</sup>), desiring machine (“For the cunt opens and closes, a perpetual motion machine, a scientific wonder, perpetually coming, opening and closing on itself into ecstasy or to nausea—does it, you, ever tire?”<sup>590</sup>), plane of immanence (“Cunts open and close whether or not they’re opening and closing on anything”<sup>591</sup>), Mother Nature, creation (“My cunt is a tree. Every leaf, every blossom, every fruit comes from my cunt...”<sup>592</sup>), subject (“my cunt is also me”<sup>593</sup>), conduit, element, knowledge (“the queen, the witch, who lights up her cunt in the pot of the earth, will never tell us what she knows,” quoting-translating Rimbaud; “without memory, the meat, my cunt, rots”<sup>594</sup>; “Father decided to make me the center of his portrait of New York. A crowd of males, including him, would stand around me. They’d set my cunt on fire”<sup>595</sup>), confirmation—Stein’s: “I am me because my little dog knows me”— (“I’m not dead: I’ve got my cunt. I’ve got my cunt; it’s not a hole; it’s an

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<sup>585</sup> Pg. 36; *Senseless*.

<sup>586</sup> *Senseless* (48), *Mother* (173). Emphasis in the original.

<sup>587</sup> *Senseless* (59), *Quixote* (105).

<sup>588</sup> Pg. 84; *Senseless*.

<sup>589</sup> Pg. 95; *Senseless*.

<sup>590</sup> Pg. 141; *Senseless*.

<sup>591</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>592</sup> Pg. 166; *Senseless*. Ellipsis in the original.

<sup>593</sup> Pg. 224; *Senseless*.

<sup>594</sup> Pg. 42, 263, respectively; *Identity*.

<sup>595</sup> Pg. 100; *Mother*.

animal and I love the animal”<sup>596</sup>), *méconnaissance* (“Mother didn’t put her cunt around loneliness and she suicided”<sup>597</sup>), transport (“Cunt is perfume waft of freedom”<sup>598</sup>), personification (“Part of the cunt’s mind thought, I want to get out of here”<sup>599</sup>), organism (“Let your cunt come outside your body and crawl, like a snail, along the flesh”; “there’s something provisional, fragile, something tenuous a seashell enclosing a skinless creature. A cunt”<sup>600</sup>), animating spirit (“The only way to raise the person from death is via the cunt”; “The cunt is always speaking”<sup>601</sup>), ideal-implication (“If Cathy was pure of cunt”<sup>602</sup>), color (“cunt-pink”<sup>603</sup>), a source (“my cunt, the well where all is bottomless”; “Pandora’s cunt”<sup>604</sup>), and dream symbol (“When her mother had died, a jewel case had been opened. The case, consisting of one tray, had insides of red velvet. O knew this was also her mother’s cunt”<sup>605</sup>).

“[T]hey don’t want to see anything but dead cunt,”<sup>606</sup> Acker writes in *Politics*, as the narrator speaks of her time in the scene of the strip-sex-show, which she is far from viewing as some “sex positive” experience. Acker does not find sexual liberation working in a place like that, but rather, by the end of her writing career, in the promise—call it “self-sufficiency,” mockery, or “alien-ness”—of bands of punk women and others seizing for themselves, and packing, going out into public with, their (obviously)

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<sup>596</sup> Pg. 148; *Identity*.

<sup>597</sup> Pg. 210; *Identity*.

<sup>598</sup> Pg. 216; *Identity*.

<sup>599</sup> Pg. 39; *Mother*.

<sup>600</sup> *Mother* (59), *Literal* (225).

<sup>601</sup> Pg. 122, 137, respectively; *Mother*.

<sup>602</sup> Pg. 128; *Mother*.

<sup>603</sup> Pg. 148; *Mother*.

<sup>604</sup> Pg. 35, 275, respectively; *Pussy*.

<sup>605</sup> Pg. 4; *Pussy*.

<sup>606</sup> Pg. 30; *Lecter*.

artificially constructed phalluses—just as effective as a means of entry—and making a travesty of that which has been lorded over them in the past (not taking it off but putting it on; the flip of Burroughs’s penetrable boy-species from other planets), decorating their own bodies, turning each other on. A repressed that will not stay that, Acker’s scene of the public strip will return often within her fictional contexts, but she will not only use it and assert it there. It will also be conceded to and called upon in the texts of knowledge of the world that Acker would script on her feet, before various, interviewing interlocutors, intervening witnesses, and as a mode of knowing, it will rear its head as well in her essays.

It comes in as part of the mating dance with her character “Peter” in *I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac*, “capable of deceiving both sexes,” who in his “long white silk skirts with thin nets of white and snow shaws” “looks both like a female faun [in *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec*: “Peter’s a lamb”<sup>607</sup>] and like a young boy who adores to tease”: “I once worked in a sex show,” our narrator whispers.<sup>608</sup> In interviews, the early divide, perceived between her daytime employment and her artistic ambitions, Acker claims and pinpoints as the root of that very “schizophrenia” she then explored in her first identity projects/texts along formal lines. “No one but I knew of these two identities,” she writes in *I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac*.<sup>609</sup> “I became two people. I now think the worst disease of our time is schizophrenia.”<sup>610</sup>

The scene of the strip-dance will become a primal one for Acker, and it will be one of the few places where she does not have any need to “fabricate” her perceptions in

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<sup>607</sup> Pg. 244; *Portrait*.

<sup>608</sup> Pg. 114; *Portrait*.

<sup>609</sup> Pg. 134; *Portrait*.

more aestheticized ways. “[W]e still had time left so I danced naked Ike and Tina Turner’s RESPECT he yelled at me to get on the floor in the doggie position I did immediately got up he said do it you’re supposed to do whatever I say I did it looked up at him and went rrrf-rrf rrrrf-rrf the shits broke up I started crying again I want to go home to mommy you stupid cunt I want to see my mommy you’re a brute I don’t want to be married to you any longer.”<sup>611</sup>

The dance/routine itself is a highly theatrical text that carries its own dressings up and confusions of what’s really behind what, where fantasy ends and begins. For another (two) example(s), Santa Claus, as told to the “doctor”: “Santa Claus was going to bring me Christmas presents I couldn’t go to sleep I was waiting and waiting and then and then you know what happened doctor Santa Claus came right into my room I’m taking my clothes my shoes off rubbing my breasts.”<sup>612</sup> We’ll see the “Santa Claus routine” again in “Algeria”: “Hacene: What do you and Santa Claus talk about, Miss Fendermast?/ Omar: We don’t talk at all. We play ‘horsey’ and ‘doctor.’ I like to play ‘prison’ best. It’s new.”<sup>613</sup> We see it again in *In Memoriam to Identity*, in another sex show routine: “Sex-show girl to sex-show guy: Doctor, I think I need a doctor./ Sex-show guy: I am a doctor”; “Having located her desires, the girl said, ‘Doctor. I want Santa Claus’”; “ ‘Santa Claus doesn’t exist.’ Now that the man had fucked her, he could show her what he really thought of her. The audience loved this one.”<sup>614</sup> Or, another routine: “I was a young

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<sup>610</sup> Pg. 133; *Portrait*.

<sup>611</sup> Pg. 29; *Lecter*.

<sup>612</sup> Pg. 25; *Lecter*.

<sup>613</sup> Pg. 137; *Lecter*.

<sup>614</sup> Pg. 134, 139, 141, respectively; *Identity*.

wife last night....”<sup>615</sup> (*Politics*, where the transposed scene and sense of Santa first appears, predates Acker’s mother’s suicide at Christmas time; in a manuscript draft in her archive, Acker also identifies Christmas, symbolically, as a site of appropriation, that of the winter solstice by Christianity.)

The strip-scene, surprisingly, or paradoxically, becomes Acker’s site of authenticity<sup>616</sup> (even if she uses the stories of other women she works with), and consequently, she learns to wield it as an authorization for her view of our world, the relations between sex and commerce and art. Acker puts a foot down on the grounds of this time she feels she’s done and sentence served.

Abhor: “When daddy wasn’t with me, he lived in a brothel. A sex-show was the brothel’s front. Since the sex show actors had only fake sex, this sex show’s legality was a cover for the rest of the filth which went on./ The desperate voyeurs who sought their sexual gratification in the masturbatory contemplation of a remote object...the degradation of the performers who not only put their flesh and *minds* on parade in the tradition of the Miss America beauty pageant but also were forced to watch this deterioration, this deterioration of themselves....”<sup>617</sup> Here Acker is clear, through her character Abhor, whose story is made even more “remote,” by having the reader understand Thivai is the one who is coming out with it. Acker takes the show of the

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<sup>615</sup> Pg. 29; *Lecter*. My ellipsis.

<sup>616</sup> “Not wanting to come off sounding sociological, [Acker] put all the [stories she heard from other girls also working in the sex industry] in first person, contributing to readers’ false impression that her work is entirely autobiographical” (pgs. xii-xiii; *Essential*). Indiana: “Although all the contributors to *Lust for Life* were either Acker’s friends or partisans, the broad range of interpretations and recollections they offer will help readers of *Essential Acker* to weigh the claims made for Acker’s work against the work itself, and to distinguish Acker’s actual biography from that roving fictional ‘I’ so often confused with it—a confusion which Acker herself did nothing to discourage.”

public strip/sex *act* as a veritable wellspring for the performers' (hired hands) internalization of alienation from the terms of their own desires, in the service of just one more man's frisson of transgression, heightened and stewed in a heady cocktail of shame, guilt, or even blasé disregard, you name it—revealed as a shallow miming of (his) surface signs; he has himself and her and her partners firmly in his employ, for the time being, and he doesn't have to stay there. As she's slotted over into third-wave or post-feminist camps, having actually worked in the sex industry, Acker comes to anything but its defense. This element of Marxism smarts: having once entered her body onto the stripping market, Acker, in telling her own tales of what was seen, but also felt, while working such a scene, attempts to re-script exchange values in a culturally critical reading. "Here language was degraded...into the demimonde of fake public sex, [Daddy's] speech turned from the usual neutral and acceptable journalese most normal humans use as a stylus mediocris into... His language went through an indoctrination of nothingness, for sexuality had no more value in his world, until his language no longer had sense."<sup>618</sup>

Acker must try to make a new sense of what her experience has shown her. Acker sees the world of sexual commerce as still a business (capitalist) controlled by and for men, and she can no longer just accept the "normal" order, the further she sees. She prompts questioning of positions through equivalencies she establishes over her textual body; for one, we might come to ask if "Marcia" (AKA Janis Joplin) is not just like all the other women to appear in this world of brothels, when reduced to "street chanteuse"

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<sup>617</sup> Pgs. 16-17; *Senseless*. My emphasis and ellipsis.

<sup>618</sup> Pg. 17; *Senseless*. First ellipsis mine.

in order to feed James Dean.<sup>619</sup> In *Pussy, King of the Pirates*: “I looked glam, but the truth is, when I was in the sex biz, I wasn’t. Sex biz is low and sleazy.”<sup>620</sup>

The stripper’s dance is a staging that may be done to control lingering childhood anxieties about stumbling upon what you don’t understand. Now in that “mother” position, the stripper—open all night, there all night—will be one “mother” like no other; here is the man-boy-child (when Acker is stripping, she is stripping for men, we must fairly, in all honesty, note, while proceeding to examine the relative positions of her set-up) being catered to in his comfortable seat, believing he is controlling, as he should be, all strings connected to his dollar bills, as long as he has them to spend. He can see she doesn’t have what he possesses. This strip-show/sex-show can be seen to function as a zero degree of the sexual politics for much of Acker’s writing, and it is from this position that Acker’s sexual (and aesthetic) theories may be said to find their primary (anti-capitalist) roots—here is how the personal becomes her worldview, though this perspective by no means seeks to negate or censor the body: rather, it desires to reclaim through the body an unchained definition of self not beholden to (familial) configurations of woman as purely complementary, to more exonerated (and public) male positions. In *Blood and Guts In High School*, Janey only becomes “beautiful” once she has demonstrated that she can “make a man feel secure, desirable, and wild.”<sup>621</sup>

When *In Memoriam* is reviewed in the Times by Stephen Schiff, she’s indeed punk, our writer says, if that means she doesn’t know how to play her instrument, though play her prose is *exactly* what Acker does do—in instrumental ways, posing it around,

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<sup>619</sup> Pg. 274; *Portrait*.

<sup>620</sup> Pg. 161; *Pussy*.

<sup>621</sup> Pg. 116; *High School*.

repossessing the blindly, unwittingly (re)appropriated codes of a comfortable “realism” that has been passing for “natural” and right. (As she says in her speech for the “Artist in Society” Conference, to be held in Chicago in October of 1994, “A difficult read, or listen, is not a proper commodity.”<sup>622</sup>) Like someone sleeping his way through another run-of-the-mill (writing) workshop, our reviewer then accuses Acker of telling and not showing, not too far of a cry for me ever from the school of just shut up and, yes, *strip* like you’re supposed to, give me what I want and how, allow me to make of you what I will within my ordinary perceptual, non-conceptual frames<sup>623</sup>: “Since I don’t support the status quo I don’t write in that method (laughs)”;

“My writing forces readers into a position of being unable to identify with certain identic structures, which is very disconcerting”<sup>624</sup>; or, even, in the words of *Politics*: “I hate giving these fuckers spreads opening myself...”<sup>625</sup> One “I” confesses in *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*: “I’m not happy but at ease open only when I’m in drag.”<sup>626</sup> In her translation notes for *The Thesmophoriazusae*, Acker emphasizes drag as a philosophy and a way of life: “high camp, not low camp, grand tragic speeches: all those disguises as Perseus and Andromeda, etc.” References will be clothing, costumes. When we open her books, we will either be pleased or not so moved by these harder pleasures to be found and worked through here or relaxed into—we might like the way Acker’s books confront, complicate, challenge, or even confirm our prior experiences.

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<sup>622</sup> MS, Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>623</sup> Similar, misinformed interpretations are in evidence among detractors of Elfriede Jelinek’s work (see for example the corresponding chapter in *Rewriting Reality: An Introduction to Elfriede Jelinek* by Allyson Fiddler); this review in Ron Kolm papers.

<sup>624</sup> Interview in *The Argonaut*, October 4, 1994; Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>625</sup> Pg. 30; *Leter*.

<sup>626</sup> Pg. 67; *Portrait*.

Some details—autobiographical, apparently—manifest themselves over and over again in her texts, and how, creating a default, locatable “Acker” identity. These lynchpins of a narrative history (in degrees perhaps even fabricated), we might see as instances of the “biographemes” that Roland Barthes makes a case and call for in his *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*, self-selected in Acker’s case.<sup>627</sup> (When Acker interviews Goytisolo: “I just wanted you to talk a little about your relationship with some of the French theory, like Roland Barthes”; Goytisolo answers: “Roland Barthes went on the theory and myself I made the practice of the theory.”<sup>628</sup>) These are a few of those things Acker won’t or can’t forget. Through her texts. These identity game-bits become definitional (k)nots: how our authorial site can be said to be not just like everyone else, no matter how many different books she might try on. These facts, in some measures of relief—mine, hers, structurally—emerge, as do the names I begin to follow.

Acker biographemes lay the bedrock of the psychologies of her protagonists and arguments, providing the connective arch across and through her textual landscapes, lending what Wittgenstein (as we’ve seen, Acker is aware of him, too) might call the “family resemblance” between many of the main characters, characteristic of her output: what she’d like to believe, what she’d like us to know, what she needs in order to ground her fictions, and other writings; these details are how she invests in her texts.

They become her blocks of memories, the things she would learn to play with, more so in her novelistic and dramatic enterprises than elsewhere, but often as well in her essays, be they “creative” or not. Acker herself has suggested the metaphor of blocks;

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<sup>627</sup> See “Preface,” *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*. Trans. Richard Howard. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997.

<sup>628</sup> Transcript, Kathy Acker Papers.

“like playing with building blocks,”<sup>629</sup> she says in describing how she worked on writing her version of *Great Expectations*, squaring off and isolating segments of some original text, moving them around, building upon them, articulating them, and she will use this building blocks metaphor again—another repeat—elsewhere, saying how a child plays with them, continuing: “My great joy was to take things, put them together, take them apart, see how they worked.”<sup>630</sup>

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<sup>629</sup> Pgs. 15-16; *Lecter*.

<sup>630</sup> Interview in *The Argonaut*; Kathy Acker Papers.

## 6.

“[“a close friend of mine, a poet”] desired to find her own structures, thus contents.”<sup>631</sup>

—Kathy Acker

Acker, like a child wandering, attempts to leave home, school, and this world as it is most commonly known, as it's been so far structurally defined and classified: “What has usually been called the world is the male world.”<sup>632</sup> One must leave that, she sees, make leaves of it, home, hay, to find oneself. She might call out, from the stacks, just for the echo: the mark, oh: “I remember that I hid among these books for a long time.”<sup>633</sup> “In this place, Miss St. Pierre, who looked like my mother except she wasn't beautiful, showed me books to read. Melville and Keats, Yeats and a battered *The Wizard of Oz*.”<sup>634</sup>

In the “Wedekind's Words” text comprising part of the second division of Acker's *Don Quixote*, she tries to translate her version through and onto another: she tries to give that doomed “Lulu” her new adventure, her new destiny, the make-over. (She's lamented, upon learning her gender: “It was then I knew that I could never be a pirate because I was a girl./ I couldn't even run away to sea like Herman Melville.”<sup>635</sup>) Lulu speaks: “As soon as I reached the ground, I ran to the sea. [...] Now I must find others who are, like me, pirates journeying from place to place, who knowing only change and

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<sup>631</sup> Speech for the *ARTIST IN SOCIETY* Conference; Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>632</sup> Pg. 37; *Lecter*.

<sup>633</sup> Pg. 197; *Mother*.

<sup>634</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>635</sup> Pg. 159; *Bodies*.

the true responsibilities that come from such knowing sing to and with each other./ Now I am going to travel.”

Traveling, journeying, is one of the key ideas we will come back to, time and again, in our movements through Acker’s texts; she tropes on it repeatedly. As early as *The Burning Bombing of America*, she’s writing: “this is a map for future journeys.”<sup>636</sup> Her last fully realized work, in my estimation, *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, concludes with an actual map as one of its endpapers.

Working on Acker is difficult, if one wants to remain true to her spirit, but while the challenge of fidelity exists (“If I had something to say about my writing outside my writing, something written which occurred outside my writing, my writing wouldn’t be sufficient or adequate”<sup>637</sup>), she also provides the liberty, the loophole and example: “I use your work, you use my work, we use everyone’s work.”<sup>638</sup> As a critic, I follow her leads. Acker’s job as writer becomes the collecting of her errant pieces, to handle, to hold, to treasure, to trove, spin, turn-over, to further explore, to move out into the vaster possibilities for meaning she coins “wonder”; it is one of her “languages of the body,” which she sets in contradistinction to “judgment”<sup>639</sup>; “...I want to live forever in wonder.”<sup>640</sup> (And here is where I would begin to work in earnest, with this concept, if I wanted to stress Acker’s critical-artistic movement towards Derrida, marrying the

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<sup>636</sup> Pg. 192; *Red*.

<sup>637</sup> Pg. 6; *Bodies*.

<sup>638</sup> Pg. 11; *Lecter*.

<sup>639</sup> See “Critical Languages,” esp. pg. 92; *Bodies*. Acker’s other “Languages of the Body” listed and qualified here: flux, contradiction, the material body’s languages (laughter, silence, screaming), scatology (its own kind of laughter), poetry’s playing power, those that announce themselves as insufficient, intensities (sexual and emotive), those that given over to chance (encounters).

<sup>640</sup> Pg. 159; *Bodies*. My ellipsis.

“wonder” state to his deferral; Acker claims in her interview with McCaffery: “Derrida was never as important.”<sup>641</sup> For her, as Deleuze and Guattari and Foucault were. This is an enlightening and *undated* interview; I will stress it as one moment in time, one reading, outside of which Acker’s particular fixations and fascinations move on—similar problems exist with taking the intervention of the Lotringer essay opening *Hannibal Lecter* as gospel. While McCaffery’s anthology itself is published in 1996, and though the selected bibliography he includes cites 1993’s *My Mother: Demonology* and 1996’s *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, neither of these works enter into their discussion, which peaks up around 1990’s *In Memoriam to Identity*. I will reconstruct and submit below a troubling of one of Acker’s previously held positions vis-à-vis Kristeva, as Acker further articulates her own writing aims.)

Acker gussies herself up as sailor, pirate, motorcycle (engine) harnesser, word wrangler and freer. What Acker tries to bring forth in her books are new visions of herself and for herself. Her books are collaborations fashioned between her memories, her daily existence she tries hard to make anything but unimaginative, her past books, her past stories she’s told about herself, past words, the words of others as she comes across them, and her own subsequent, changing through them. Through her playing-dreaming, her trying on of roles, masquerading or raging, her attempts to show the “nature” of society to be itself a blind appropriation, accepted, so unwittingly—secured further by non-boat-rocking preservations of status quo gender conformity—Acker feeds herself and her fantasies, in the loops which will become increasingly complex circuits over her career. (Her pirate-sailor I enter into analogy with Roland Barthes’s “La Papillonne”

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<sup>641</sup> Pg. 24; *Some Other Frequency*.

fragment—working around work, and getting around to work, through a technique, a technology of “cruising.”<sup>642</sup>) Traveling over the page, traveling over the body even when she writes, moving onto the keyboard, Acker drafts first in longhand, then types her work up, moving back into the books around her, moving back out—her appropriations pillage and critique society-culture-literature, yes, but they also, and perhaps most importantly, are aimed towards pleasing her. Picking up the literary pun Acker makes a conceit, highlighted in the title of *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*, we can see Acker skinning (Daddy’s) monuments, in a highly theatrical flaunting, exposing them for the flimsily disguised props they are, creating new uses for these old coverings, and strutting her own exposure and production of language, (body) politics and poetics.

Acker plays her writing in many different registers, none of which she owns as her “own,” ultimately, though they always pass through her body, or a reflection of it, and are subsequently changed by her body—its past history and circumstances, its current predicaments. Acker sets about trying to destroy any totemic nature of mother and father functions in her literature/life—to create a place where one might let go of all prior restraints, the regulated and supposed *right* ways of doing things, especially given one’s sex, leading to a finish of well-defined products that might be easily circulated within current, already existing markets and systems. One of her novelistic—post-structuralist, we might say—moves will be to create a jarring mix of ranges of voices given differing degrees of autonomies, and signed authorities, or ironic distances. Early on in her career, this was the “schizophrenic” she had embraced as a mode of production, a mad flight, as

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<sup>642</sup> Pg. 71; *Roland Barthes*.

“a fight against the fathers”<sup>643</sup>—Deleuze, whom I’ve mentioned Acker often brings up in her interviews, defines schizophrenia as that which occurs when the art-body is separated from the political-body; productively this might be paired with the hysteria Cixous valorizes.<sup>644</sup> Acker wants to use her art-body to define the politics surrounding her body and her own (body-)politics.

As Acker writes in *In Memoriam To Identity*, in a drift of gender-logic: “Since she hadn’t had and obviously wasn’t going to have a baby, must be a man. Or she had been born complete and instantaneous, she would have said, a hero.”<sup>645</sup> In the early *The Burning Bombing of America*, before Oedipus is name-checked specifically in her creative lexicon: “psychoanalysis? no. government? no. family? no.”<sup>646</sup> Once firmly entrenched in her “mythic” period, Acker will take Oedipus back, making the metaphoric story grounding Freud and his inheritors’ psychoanalysis just one more “classic” with which to play around. Acker begins to explore why Orpheus would do just as well, and much more poetically (he, by the way, always comes with Eurydice in tow, not a mother—the *kingdoms* at stake for Orpheus/Acker display differences).

Acker “mines” (I mean my verb in a double-sense here, as I collapse her career production into one word-fold I will dutifully, as well, unpack) transgression in two moves. Acker’s “schizophrenia,” as fielded, was one of rhetorical land mines: blowing up words, showing words to have no stable contexts, as she dropped them in and around each other, chunks and swaths of them destroying the independent unit-appearance of their neighbors. Her “smoother” constructions, post-*Empire*, 1988, create (rather than

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<sup>643</sup> Pg. 18; *Lecter*.

<sup>644</sup> See *The Newly Born Woman*.

<sup>645</sup> Pg. 224; *Identity*.

large-scale chaos) snags in the line-sentence—continuance of the law (the psychoanalytic “name of the father,” made “real” through Acker’s characters and tropes: the father made Judge, the boyfriend made Daddy)—or the negotiation between two, engulfing straight logic/linear (phallogocentrism, I will even stoop to ducking in here to script)—“poetically” interrupting—rather than just unruffling her feathers (“when I say fuck fuck means anything”<sup>647</sup>). She goes under. Opening one of her compositional notebooks for *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, Acker copies, inside, a Cixous quote from which to begin working: “There are two ways of clambering downward—by plunging into the earth and going into the sea—and neither are easy”; on another notebook’s cover in her archives, Cixous again: “Paradise is down below.”<sup>648</sup> (Still, we could read/see as the tarantula feeds: entering into the corpus of another, penetrating, with the fang-phallus-pen-finger-typing; that other body is set into a dissolve, as the tarantula begins to hold the destroyed mass together in the ball of silk it weaves around the other, then taking its nourishment from this sack.)

When I put down a word that cuts against the grain, or that goes both ways, you can no longer quite keep your bearings; you need to stop and look around, stay, relax a while, rather than getting on to the next (explicit/“real”) action. Her restlessness and desires will keep her going over her own dreams and memories, for her own self, in acts of definitional reclamation, putting them to her own uses, as she wouldn’t want to just turn them over to the likes of a Freud, who might, one fear is, want us more awake all the better to produce the same old (family) more efficiently. If all a woman is good for,

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<sup>646</sup> Pg. 193; *Red*.

<sup>647</sup> Pg. 145; *Red*.

<sup>648</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

according to the Law, is to have a baby, she must be something else; she must prove them all wrong. The father—“My father is not my *real father*”<sup>649</sup>—more symbolic than biological in Acker’s eyes and versionings of her life-text, is no great help in this. She takes a page from a madman’s lesson. “Artaud has shown us that the political structure of this society is inextricably tied to the structure of that which first socializes, the structure of the family.” She goes on to further quote him in her text for “The Artist in Society” conference: “this world of mother-father is justly that which must go away,/ for this is the world of split-in-two/ in a state of constant disunion/ also willing constant unification....”<sup>650</sup> Her lack here, as lorded over her not only by narratives of psychoanalysis but also society’s image-system of the (nuclear) family as natural and desirable above all others, underpins conservative culture as she sights it.

At the same time, Acker creates her own artistic families. For example, she’d call Ginsberg and the rest of the beats the “grandparents” of herself and those artists she identifies as of her generation.<sup>651</sup> She moves Ginsberg’s thought/line off the page and into the throat-lungs-bloodstream, just as she internalizes Charles Olson’s poetic field (art, too, visual, is a field); she works to re-realize these metaphors for technique with the complications of one individual body’s difficulty in navigating such a plethora of (God-given) “wor(l)ds.” Not only through Freud and his theories, the “father,” as Acker sees it, can also find his place, and root, within artistic (male) lineages—even those of more avant-garde stripes. As a recourse, Acker will attempt to subsume him—Freud-Oedipus—and all the other him-hymns she comes across on her way, if they don’t treat

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<sup>649</sup> Pg. 35; *Some Other Frequency*. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>650</sup> Speech for the *ARTIST IN SOCIETY* Conference; Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>651</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

her and respond to her as she'd like—if they do, they become “brothers”—*incorporating* their outputs into her grounds for further travels. She attempts to trace queerer lines than solely the Oedipal drama of identity construction, at the same time that she tries to work (consciously) in the face of him, “Oedipus”: “O” is a sign that includes and swallows, engulfs, takes Oedipus down into the (w)hole of itself. “[C]an’t remain in enemy territory,”<sup>652</sup> Acker riffs, so she makes Oedipus into just another story-poem, *cum* Cixous with Freud and Dora: “I read it like fiction.”<sup>653</sup> What Acker emphasizes, when she does and if she must take Oedipus as a starting point, is the orphan status. To begin with, he is abandoned by his parents, taken out into the desert where he is to be seen from never again; the last thing they expect is for him not to be killed, for him to find his way back home, eventually.

A transgression is a “cannibalization” of the (textual) forefathers—a murdering, a consuming, an actual ingestion (even if, just in jest)—and a sleeping with the mother she’ll never let herself become, or only for herself (then only in her art), as Acker tries to take down, for herself, all of their larger than (her) life powers. Acker plays with their body-ideas, like so many accoutrements, like so many manageable objects, and what’s been kept from her then becomes somewhat knowable and internalized. To be inside her body is to be inside the body that matters. Acker works to create a rift between herself and a 19<sup>th</sup> century, Victorian, realist view of the novel, in a reliance upon and privileging of poetic languages—as those can be seen to be capitalist-patriarchal order-revolting, as we might know further through Kristeva’s articulations: “...revolt, as I understand it—psychic revolt, analytic revolt, artistic revolt—refers to a state of permanent questioning,

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<sup>652</sup> Pg. 153; *Red*.

of transformation, change, an endless probing of appearances”; “to think is to revolt, to be in the movement of meaning”; “perennial interrogation-as-revolt”; “The word revolt comes from a Sanskrit root that means to discover, to open...”<sup>654</sup>

Acker opens herself by loosening her signifying system. Her “web” of texts and dreams and the interplays and overlays of her biographemes—their mutual provoking, prodding, and encountering, encouraging each other, to move, to uncover more—give rise to her eventual (mythic) metaphor of the “labyrinth,” which Acker comes to see as a potential form of all (bodily) writing. This structure, in contradistinction to her early prison metaphor, and her figuring of the mother as “a wall,” is not such a bad place to be, to get lost in, to wonder: it non-threateningly holds one, because one has had a large part/hand in designing it; one has conceded its goodness, full of twists and turns.

Journeys take place in the mind, through (textual) mirrors, in books. Our going from front to back can be one of these learned journeys, but no matter how queerly we might choose to attempt our navigation, what we come to consider the reading, the experience, is a time frame of concentration, held to whatever degree. Knowing begins—and then may break off from the gleaning at hand; knowing can then try to go somewhere else. Journeying is how Acker makes her identities: she strings her narratives along the setting out—progressing in the time(s) her book(s) might provide.

Journeying will be a plotting mechanism. The wandering sailor, the plundering pirate, the visionary masturbator-poet arriving at and seeking the climax (“R sat in his mother’s house and masturbated. He no longer wanted to go anywhere but

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<sup>653</sup> Pg. 148; *The Newly Born Woman*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

<sup>654</sup> Pg. 120, 39, 27, 100, respectively; Julia Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2002.

masturbating”<sup>655</sup>), even the ole standard-bearer of classic psychoanalysis, Oedipus, as we’ve seen, they are all defined by it. The directive is also doled out to the bastard—get out (of the house—“My parents kicked me out of the house because I wasn’t interested in marrying a rich man...”<sup>656</sup>). It’s what you do when you must go seek your fortunes, elsewhere.

The journey is how Oedipus is shown too eventually he doesn’t know just what he thought he did, didn’t know enough, really, or now knows too much to proceed along the same track as he was traveling before. Once the meaning of his dreaming is revealed to him, once O is all filled up, tilled, and the truth of what Cixous coins “the little circus”<sup>657</sup> has been seen—I would like to shift now to the ungendered “one” pronoun, but for clarity’s sake, I will stick to the masculine—he feels he must repress what he’s seen; turning that knowledge in upon himself, he goes to pieces, willing a rupture with symbolic economy. Acker, too, desires to investigate other “proactive” routes than simply “getting better”—successfully navigating or coming through her Oedipus complex, to put it in less lyrical and more clinically recognizable terms; such recovery would have her pegged and acknowledged as one leg—she’d simply support through her fundamental “lack”/absence—in a (grander) scheme.

Journeying is a prime means of constituting narrative business. Movement to San Francisco figures prominently in all the works collected in *Portrait of An Eye: In The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, the third part opens with the frame “i move to san francisco.” The fourth division of *I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac: Imagining* is titled

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<sup>655</sup> Pg. 8; *Identity*.

<sup>656</sup> Pg. 96; *Portrait*.

<sup>657</sup> Pg. 157; *The Newly Born Woman*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

“san francisco and...,” and this is where we read the deck stacked as, “Either I could get a new apartment in New York City or split to California, the only other place I had friends.”<sup>658</sup> Giannina tells Vincent Van Gogh that’s where she wants to go. But even before *Portrait of an Eye*, in unpublished but bound work of hers, Acker is writing, “I press my finger against my clit [ ] make plans to get to San Francisco [ ] no place to stay desire to move. [ ] end.”<sup>659</sup> Of Acker’s 1993 *My Mother: Demonology*: “Yearning to discover who she is, to better understand herself, Laure embarks on a journey of self-discovery....”<sup>660</sup> Her Don Quixote “is an indomitable woman on a formidable quest.”<sup>661</sup>

Allow me to journey now too, from the rhetorical figure as seen in her prose-narratives to an instance of her poetic explication, where Acker applies the thought to the words coming—showing her language itself to be on a quest for meaning, revelatory, lighting up/darkening in, a journey scripted as it unfolds. Let Acker illustrate:

“This is a word

That will flower

Flower as

Sentences climb

And this thought

Won’t stop thinking

As the air opens up

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<sup>658</sup> Pg. 143; *Portrait*.

<sup>659</sup> “Journal/ Black Cats Black Jewels,” Kathy Acker papers.

<sup>660</sup> New York: Pantheon, 1993, dust jacket.

In time

And this hand will

Continue its breathing

As the worlds spin

And divide

And the picture that's drawn

In this silence

Will sing in

Silent lines."<sup>662</sup>

The actor (the reader of other texts) in Acker experiences the making of new horizons as both a vocation and a medium (material). Others—immured as one may be in words—can become a jarring space.

In *The Burning Bombing of America*, Acker makes a conjoining, a two-legged signifying chain, in “EXPERIMENTS-JOURNEYS.” “Decentralization is absolutely major to me,”<sup>663</sup> she says of her pursuit of the non-hierarchical, a political disruption which she sees as not taken generally to be a focus of post-modernism in Anglo-Saxon culture; she also says this oversight is not surprising. Our stable grounds of knowing, pinpointing, she wants shifted in conjoinings she won't separate—like “HEART-SUN”

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<sup>661</sup> New York: Grove Press, 1986, back cover.

<sup>662</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>663</sup> Interview with McRobbie.

and “earth-sky.”<sup>664</sup> Acker marks, joins, equates, marries her own two forms throughout the *Burning Bombing* book: “thing-being,” “Women-Men,” “cat-children,” “desire-fur.” In *The Burning Bombing of America: The Destruction of the U.S.*, women turn into cats. And cats “mother”: “I serve a Cat [ ] I lick Her nipples continuously.”<sup>665</sup> (“there are no families [ ] but centers [ ] warm breast”<sup>666</sup>). As prominent as humans here are numerous other identificatory options: lions, elephants, deer, monkeys, dogs, goats, squirrels, birds of all sorts, and giraffes, the main, desiring characters in an early text signed by The Black Tarantula, “Voodoo” (“In Haiti, there are many animals,”<sup>667</sup> it opens; “Giraffe doesn’t need to boss around other giraffes and get bossed around by other giraffes”; “Giraffes fuck incredibly.... Horny all over”). Animals exist in a more plentiful and generous realm: “I’m going to travel and travel and see everything. I’m going to run with the animals with the wild biting horses and antelopes who run so fast they seem to fly their hoofs don’t touch the grass especially the thin gazelles cats and lions and tigers who let me pet them as we run, huge black wolves”—notice no lone, big, bad ones stand out alone here—“nothing hurts me; at first I can’t move very fast but very soon I learn to keep up with the wild animals, running effortlessly over smooth slowly rising and falling plains covered by grass, running and running and running,”<sup>668</sup> she writes, deciding, after leaving the dying father in the hospital, in the first, unpublished text she titled *Blood and Guts In High School*.

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<sup>664</sup> Pg. 201, 191, respectively; *Red*.

<sup>665</sup> Pg. 164; *Red*.

<sup>666</sup> Pg. 162; *Red*.

<sup>667</sup> “Voodoo,” Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>668</sup> MS; Serpent’s Tail/High Risk Archives.

As much as Acker identifies with the cats, big and small— “After stroking me, so I feel like a cat...”; “Cats who haven’t been nursed properly all their lives claw and I...”; “leopards prowl between my legs”<sup>669</sup>—animals to be worshipped, honored, and respected just as much as the human (the other than human may be a genderless preserve; the cat is also loved and fed again no matter how many times it wanders away from home, no matter how far), she identifies with Colette, a woman who too once did not write under her own name. Acker’s essay on Colette dates from 1985; Acker’s 1982 *Great Expectations* features pages from Colette’s *The Pure and the Impure*, copied, clipped, and reworded here and there, and these reworked pages are also part of Acker’s *The Birth of a Poet* play, copyrighted a year earlier.

“Being multiple her natural movement is to go outward, to roam,” Acker explains in her essay on Colette, a work divided into four playing/explanatory fields for Acker herself to tramp in while gathering significance.<sup>670</sup> (Prince, The Artist Formerly Known As, from 1993 to 2000, and now again, whom Acker writes of in *Don Quixote* in a text headed “INSERT,” should be elected President on grounds similar to those she celebrates in Colette: “When he was thirteen, which is a magic number, he ran away from home just like Huckleberry Finn. He had nowhere to run to, cause there’s nowhere to run anymore....”<sup>671</sup>) As much as Acker identifies with Colette’s gender nonconformity, Acker sees in Colette a new, *European* myth (“Deconstruction is always a reactive thing and as long as you’re dwelling in the reactive you’re really reinforcing the society you

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<sup>669</sup> *Essential* (33; ellipsis mine), *Identity* (8; ellipsis in the original), *Red* (177).

<sup>670</sup> Pg. 155, “Colette”; *Bodies*

<sup>671</sup> Pgs. 21-22; *Quixote*. My ellipsis.

hate.<sup>672</sup> So I got very interested with narrative. I started reading a lot of myths. I'm a Westerner with Greek myths...<sup>673</sup>). This myth might be opposed to Acker's view of the American cowboy: "In the United States, we're still living under the banner of the cowboy: that myth has led us to a supra-individualism, nationalism, and group paranoia."<sup>674</sup> (In Acker's Prince "INSERT": "Prince believes in feelings, fucking, and fame...he'll be thirty years old when he gets elected President of the United States. Thirty years old is the height of male cowboy American rock 'n roll energy...."<sup>675</sup>) This is one of the things Acker sees the artist Richard Prince's work responding to and subverting admirably: "When I see one of Prince's cowboys, I remember desire (my eyes on my father's cock), absence (daddy doesn't exist for me), and all the other feelings, contradictions, which show radical otherness or difference to me."<sup>676</sup> (The other Prince is "all-American because he's part black part white which is part good part evil."<sup>677</sup>)

The "Colette myth" functions and formulates itself as an escape *through* sexuality (here it meets up with Acker's romantic fashioning and reliance upon the "pirate"/sailor figure), a myth of sexuality as that by which to live, a myth that might escape any

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<sup>672</sup> In "The Path of Abjection," McCaffery asks, "Why inhabit other texts rather than starting out with something of your own?" Acker replies: "The honest answer has to do with my personality, even with my sexuality. Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* opened up this area for me so that I could understand certain aspects about myself and my creative process. [...] What I...recognize now is that I am passive. Deeply, deeply passive. So the quality of making or creation that comes out in me—whatever it is in me that had to do with making—is based on a reactive rather than an active principle. I don't see a blank page when I'm writing. Ever. Or when I do, nothing happens" (see pgs. 27-28; *Some Other Frequency*). By the time of the Lotringer interview, Acker has apparently begun working on *My Mother: Demonology*.

<sup>673</sup> Pgs. 17-18; *Lecter*.

<sup>674</sup> "After the End of the Art World," Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>675</sup> Pgs. 21-22; *Quixote*. My ellipses.

<sup>676</sup> Pg. 59; *Bodies*.

<sup>677</sup> Pg. 21; *Quixote*.

restrictive discourse of marriage and family as organized under one protective head honcho. “According to Jesus Christ Our Lord, you too can become head (HE) of a multi-national corporation if you, following the teachings of Jesus Christ, give up enough and stop giving head (HE),” the knight can now declare in *Don Quixote*, now that she is not afraid of anyone anymore.<sup>678</sup> “If I couldn’t marry well, I should be a doctor. If I had to be a writer, I should make lots of money. But that I, of my own free will, had chosen to live among the lowest of the low, pimps and strippers on forty-second street, and wrote unmentionable things in language which one couldn’t quite name, neither prose nor poetry, neither experimental nor commercial, no law-abiding citizen could forgive much less understand this.”<sup>679</sup>

In *Blood and Guts In High School*, the meaning of “Ode To [sic] A Grecian Urn” becomes this illustration: a drawing that is given the poem’s title as its caption and its own page is of a woman, naked, her arms raised above her head, bound at the wrists, her ankles and lower legs similarly bound. What we see becomes a challenge to our negative capabilities, if we can or not keep it open, unresolved—or do we have to see ourselves coming between its folds somehow, foreclosing open-ended-ness? The drawing opposite this one, taking up the left hand side of this spread of the book, is another illustration similarly executed, headed: “Girls Will Do Anything For Love.” Here, between the dark chalking, the hint of legs of a body on its back, below a dotted pattern of a pubic patch, Acker more deeply impresses and insets, front and center, the folds of the labia.<sup>680</sup> “The

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<sup>678</sup> Pg. 180.

<sup>679</sup> Untitled, incomplete MS, Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>680</sup> Pgs. 62-63 (unnumbered); *High School*.

obvious depictions do not leave anything to the reader's imagination,"<sup>681</sup> the court document banning the *Blood and Guts In High School* book says, in translation, of the illustrations like these ones here I've set out. (I've not gone over the father's penis, which it is also taboo to uncover, though Acker will draw one or two, or three, of those as well in *Blood and Guts In High School*.)

"What is this lack? This absence that drives me,"<sup>682</sup> Acker writes in working on Jeanne Duval. Her constant questioning/questioning disrupts a (safe) position from within which one may locate, comfortably, an ego/self: "self," that costume we might find mostly easily composed at and through the expense of an Other. Baudelaire waxing poetic about the love object, under Acker's hand in her Jeanne Duval drafting: "Aren't you the space in which I can begin to dream? Aren't you always wet inside? Aren't you the nipple out of which I suck memories' liquids?"<sup>683</sup> In her more post-structuralist vein (mining Lacan): "*All children come re[a]d out of the womb because their mothers know God.*"<sup>684</sup>

To see Acker's work clearly, we must understand how it works itself out to be "other" than the interpretations of woman/Other around her: "his middle finger slips into my ass: that's the center of my brain! That's where all my thoughts are located!"<sup>685</sup> Acker enters herself into relationship with "other" prior meanings. Acker fights the "fathers" by challenging their prized, formal positions. For her, the essentialist mother-function comes under this jurisdiction.

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<sup>681</sup> Pg. 147; *Lecter*.

<sup>682</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>683</sup> Ibid.

<sup>684</sup> Pg. 307; *Essential*. Italics in the original, my bracketed addition.

<sup>685</sup> Pg 12; *Essential*.

Desecration is through inversions: “Father was a dildo and a hanger-on.”<sup>686</sup> There are no apologies for the living in and out of those experiences lopped off as sub-human. “V also told Mme. V that he and R have animal sex,”<sup>687</sup> is how the cop report filed by “the parents” in *In Memoriam to Identity* ends. No apologies either for holding up those orientations considered “wrong.” In the archived text titled “Arthur Rimbaud Was Homosexual: “Above all Arthur Rimbaud hated hypocrisy, the deadness of the provincial bourgeois society into which he had been born. He wanted to go to a world that was pagan, a world in which politics sexuality language sensation and identity are interconnected.”<sup>688</sup>

Part of Acker’s plan, and one I hope to share some part in through writing on her, her work, her textual contours, wild calls to intellectual arms, is to redress somewhat the understandings of her life by troubling our more traditional coordinates of knowledge, to make them more permissive—less constrictive—and to revalue that which has been stripped of all its meaning but meaning made in hierarchical relations. A process of undervaluation is accomplished when one term is set in opposition to another more “normally” (readily) privileged, in the chains of signification that construct our Western metaphysics, as Hélène Cixous traces it in “Sotries: Out and Out: Attacks/ Ways Out/ Forays.” If man gets activity, sun, culture, day, if man is the head of the family, the intelligible guard of the logos, if his work has form, is convex, steps forward, seeds and makes progress, let us take another route, then, unabashedly, she suggests. Let us have options. Acker will never be one of those women (“mothers”) who place men before

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<sup>686</sup> Pg. 286; *Essential*.

<sup>687</sup> Pg. 74; *Identity*.

<sup>688</sup> “Arthur Rimbaud Was Homosexual”; Kathy Acker Papers.

their own daughters, forsaking them (“[Father] had once given me fifty dollars when I had begged him for it and the next day my mother had instructed me that if I didn’t instantaneously give it back to him and apologize to him, I’d have to leave their home forever”<sup>689</sup>), but Acker fights too what she perceives as Cixous’s simplifications: “Take Cixous’s argument against Kristeva, with Cixous saying that our problems all have their source in genital difference—so that the fact that men have cocks is what makes them evil. [...] She’s a separatist.”<sup>690</sup>

To begin with, Acker triangulates Cixous, philosophically, with another woman: she creates a difference, two poles, between two women. (I myself am given to triangulation, as my method of working here, through Acker, will strongly attest. This is due in large part to my sexuality and my identification with Acker—due in large part to my sexuality: I’m not sure I can find the chicken or the egg here.) “Kristeva’s argument that the real problem has to do with role models makes a lot more sense to me.”<sup>691</sup> It is the way society is organized, not the men in it (“*I like men*”<sup>692</sup>; “the milkman still has to deliver the milk [laughs]”<sup>693</sup>), with which Acker has her primary problem.

Her grievance with Cixous does not keep Acker from trying to work with her. This is partly the journey Acker is on in *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, as the notations from Cixous on the notebooks she composed sections and drafts of this novel within attest. Acker begins to take even someone like Cixous apart, to make part-objects of her theorizations—but she does not either confine herself to one (woman’s) theory; she

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<sup>689</sup> Pg. 296-297; *Essential*.

<sup>690</sup> Pg. 35; *Some Other Frequency*.

<sup>691</sup> Ibid.

<sup>692</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>693</sup> Pg. 32; *Some Other Frequency*.

fashions an array of such theoretical-phalluses, in many colors, in many sizes, of many temperaments, with which to pleasure her text. She makes Cixous's (spilling) articulations into a (manageable) body she can fuck around with, identify with satisfactorily, within the ebb and flow of her own fluctuating party-lines, riding the (punk) seas with her.

As I fear I am getting a little too close for my own comfort to consolidating an argument around the "phallus"—and part objects<sup>694</sup> need not be so gendered—or getting too high on my own theory-poetry, let me go ahead and knock the wind out of these sails a bit—with a story. Gather round. I was in the "galley," as it were, at the 2002 *Lust for Life* symposium, not presenting my own paper on Kathy Acker and Anne Carson's respective takes on/through Emily Brontë. Apparently, some people should just not be put in the bed together. But I was among the audience, and I believe they visibly blanched, when such thought-language lines of subversive phallus use (this time, à la Judith Butler, the lesbian one) were taken to a serious extreme and end, though quite gleefully, by Chris Kocela, and inserted again and again into Acker's *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, as an interpretive-skeleton key. I thought it was funny, though I also basically bought it. I have my own ambivalences, when it comes to too much high-minded, dry

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<sup>694</sup> For the history of the theoretical and clinical use of this word, see pgs. 378-380 in *A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought* (ed. R.D. Hinshelwood. New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1991). Though Klein seems somewhat off Acker's radar—or it is telling that Klein's name is not attacked or mentioned in the manner Acker reserves for (the name of) Freud—I believe Acker would have recognized Klein in due time through Kristeva—and perhaps set about "disrupting" or adding her own side of (biographical) knowledge to Klein's formulations (and Kristeva's interpretations)—if she isn't already. Klein is undoubtedly already working "unconsciously" in Acker. Klein is cited in note number 16 for chapter four of Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Kristeva is here rehearsing the conditions of (societal) division underpinning symbolicity; interestingly,

theory. Perhaps this is distasteful. We went to lunch.<sup>695</sup> But yeah, it's agreed, over noodles and sake, I mean, she was just hanging out with all these girls in dyke bars, back then in San Francisco, when she was writing the book in question. I want to grant that this is in large part what Acker means by her insistence that writing always be brought back to the (material) body. This is also the diary (function), in effect. From such moments, poetry also takes flight. Put the two together, through lots of (rhetorical-language) hoops and stays, and you have, in essence, the Acker novel.

In a draft of another of her essays, Acker quotes Olson as saying: "the private is public, and the public is where we behave."<sup>696</sup> Or, to a point, *Miss-behave*: "But, alive or dead, my pussy drips gold and red and tastes like skunk."<sup>697</sup> This is the text chosen for a bookmark series. More explicitly, Acker notes, in writing on/for "Jeanne Duval": "Play is the opposite of ownership and that's why the bourgeois whose sexuality is all about ownership hate us."<sup>698</sup>

Acker is on one of her (reactive) rants when, *In Memoriam to Identity*, she decides: "Who gives a shit how your mother died or if you have real father. Only stupid Oedipal-obsessive theorists care about that sort of thing."<sup>699</sup> Her intertexts confront and desire theory as much as her works try to assimilate it and move outside it: not unlike

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given "post-modernism," much is decidedly predicated on the separation of high-low. (See pg. 108; *Powers of Horror*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.)

<sup>695</sup> I believe the group was Amy Scholder, Nayland Blake, Ann Rower, Judy Bamber, and myself; I should also perhaps add that it was only through Scholder's intervention that I was even allowed to sit in the audience of this symposium, librarian Ann Butler intent on barring me from the premises for not registering prior to the event.

<sup>696</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>697</sup> Printed by Brian Jacobs, The Kavyayantra Press, 1996; three other authors in the series are Lyn Hejinian, Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, and Burroughs. Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>698</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>699</sup> Pg. 174; *Identity*.

Acker's ambivalent relationship with the mother character of her books. A complete picture, or (w)hole story, evolves back-and-forth between the two poles of her creative utterance, what she writes in her novels and the interpretation she scripts through her interviews.

In the interviews and essays written and conducted in her last and "mythic" period of compositional aims—Acker divides her career into movements in the Lotringer interview of, roughly, the "conceptual," the "nihilist" (her "American" deconstructions) and the making of new myths or narratives—where Acker has decided to begin to try to work past experiment as an end in itself, as a compositional mode, she begins to cite a number of (female) post-structuralist theorists, though as early as in one of her notebooks for the Jeanne Duval work she was already noting: "Jouissance adds/joins force to desire."<sup>700</sup> In interviews, she cites these (Oedipal-obsessive) theorists in connection with her own cultural undermining of society, when trying to explain, and place among them, her (new) brand of artistic productions. She is a poet-novelist who sees herself in the context of philosopher-writers. Her apparent favorite Kristeva might not be said to exhibit, in her more academic treatises, such an obvious concern for the writerly surface as the bite-size Barthes, the "escaping" Cixous, or the opaque Irigaray, but even Kristeva has "succumbed" to a sideline of aesthetic practice—ramping her vocabulary down a notch or two, in detective fictions she's penned, relaxing the point driven home.

In Acker's interaction with her interlocutors, there is a poetics to be found. In an interview in the magazine *Red Bass*, in addition to mentioning the name, Deleuze, you may have come to expect by now from her, if you've been following her career:

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<sup>700</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

“Kristeva’s work is real important, Irigaray’s in some weird way.”<sup>701</sup> (Given Irigaray’s “elemental” rewritings of philosophy—*Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*—the link seems to me actually rather apropos.) In her interview with cultural critic Angela McRobbie, Acker names Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* as a major work, and again mentions Irigaray. Acker here acknowledges a stylistic influence, primarily, though she concedes she also shares Irigaray’s interest and investment in the body.<sup>702</sup> A section of 1993’s *My Mother* is entitled, one can only hazard after Kristeva, “About Chinese Women.” Intertextual allusions to Cixous’s work appear, too: a section of “Eurydice in the Underworld,” entitled “in the school of the dead,” has its very likely intertextual source, both its complement and complication, in mirror, in her *Three Steps on The Ladder of Writing*.<sup>703</sup> Cixous is arguably the model and fictionalized in *Don Quixote*, where “Medusa” appears, *screaming* (“What the Hell do you know!”), with “[h]er snakes writh[ing] around nails varnished by the Blood of Jesus Christ. ‘I’m your desire’s object, dog, because I can’t be the subject. Because I can’t be a subject: What you name “love”, I name “nothingness.” I won’t not be: I’ll perceive and I’ll speak.’”<sup>704</sup> Acker quotes from Cixous’s collaboration with Catherine Clément, in *The Newly Born Woman*, when Acker addresses the work of artist Richard Prince; Cixous is specifically cited here after Acker’s assertion: “The fight against the patriarchal sexist

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<sup>701</sup> Ron Kolm Papers, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

<sup>702</sup> “Kathy Acker,” with Angela McRobbie; *Writers Talk Ideas of Our Times*, #41. *The Roland Collection*. ICA Video.

<sup>703</sup> Here Cixous postulates that something or someone must die in order for good writing to be born.

<sup>704</sup> Pg. 28; *Quixote*. Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa” appeared in 1975; Acker’s *Don Quixote* is copyrighted 1986.

society is the fight against the refusal to allow contradiction, difference, and otherness.”<sup>705</sup>

You could take a bit here from Cixous, a bit here from Kristeva, a bit here from Irigaray, and this is how Acker approaches the theories of these women, in further parts, inserting them into her own texts. She lays them there, and she plays with them there; she sees what happens when she holds them in sight, moves around their various angles and orientations with her own. (Just as well as you could dress up as a stripper, you could dress your writing up as a theorist.)

Acker creates in her work the place where it is difficult to separate the “theorist” from the “writer,” per se, and her list of “Ten Out of Many Women Writers,” “a list of writers who are female whose work matters to me” (a list which she clarifies is in no order of importance—“I don’t think like that”),<sup>706</sup> includes a number of those not so easy to classify themselves, as times change and require what may be seen as more radical textual measures to approach a reflective understanding. Acker adds a number eleven to the list of “Ten Out of Many” for Emily Brontë.<sup>707</sup> Brontë’s addition is “for wildness.”

“The Older Ones,” Acker calls Austen, Sand, and George Eliot, none of whom turn up explicitly in Acker’s major works, though she does play around with Sand in that manuscript not published until after her death, pulled from her archive, “The Seattle Book.” Acker’s more contemporary selections for this list include Hannah Arendt, for

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<sup>705</sup> Pg. 59; *Bodies*.

<sup>706</sup> “Ten Out of Many Women Writers,” Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>707</sup> In copying the list from the Duke Archive, I’d noted “Emily Dickinson” for number eleven. I believe this was though a slip of my pen, in my haste to get down as much as possible of all that excited me in the four days I had in Durham, North Carolina to work through Acker’s papers; or this manuscript exists in two versions. Passing by another

“the melding of precise feeling and reasoning,” whose *Men in Dark Times* Acker says she “most cherish[es]” (which Acker quotes from in her 1995 essay for the MMLA,<sup>708</sup> “Writing, Identity, and Copyright in the Net Age”: “When Arendt talks about story, about narrative and narrative, she is not talking about a *master narrative*. She is talking about language as it moves from one point to another point”<sup>709</sup>). Acker calls Arendt “the real tradition of humanism,” a concept that comes up for Acker elsewhere. In writing on novelist Samuel Delany, she concludes: “By choosing the novel as an area for conversation, Delany is revealing himself as a great humanist.”<sup>710</sup> And, in her interview with Lotringer: “If you scratch hard, you find that I’m a humanist in some weird way. Well, humanist, you know what I mean.” She trusts that Lotringer does; “You had to start constructing,”<sup>711</sup> he answers, reading the move Acker makes in developing her new narrative strategies after *Don Quixote*. Acker is wary of such a summation:

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copy of the list, at a later date, in the Serpent’s Tail/High Risk archives in New York University’s Fales library, I amend my original notation to “Emily Brontë.”

<sup>708</sup> There is irony in the fact that Acker is writing on copyright for MMLA; an earlier debacle saw her being threatened with a lawsuit over work that might or might not appear there; “Issues of intellectual property are at stake,” writes Pamela L. Caughie, as she threatens action, if Acker undertakes to publish a piece generated by the interview Caughie conducted with Eleanor Skoller. Rudolf E. Kuenzli defends Acker to the board by outlining how Caughie moved from her original idea of an interview with Acker towards the idea of conducting a conversation among “equals” (i.e. Caughie). Kuenzli remarks on Caughie’s “grand-standing” and attempt to overshadow Acker (“the primary player”) or not engage central issues of Acker’s current writing practice; to Kuenzli, who offered to allow Acker to revise the interview to her acceptance, “[Acker] mentioned...she felt she had been forced to enter Caughie’s space, terrain, etc., and not vice versa”; Correspondence, Serpent’s Tail/High Risk Archive.

<sup>709</sup> Pg. 100; *Bodies*.

<sup>710</sup> Pg. 65; *Bodies*.

<sup>711</sup> Pg. 17; *Lecter*.

“Construction sounds very positive. People say, Oh, you’re not so negative anymore. (Groans).”<sup>712</sup>

Other “contemporaries” on Acker’s list of “Ten Out of Many Women”: de Beauvoir, Christa Wolf<sup>713</sup> (“Her praxis is that of the Ismael [sic] of *Moby Dick*”), and Marguerite Duras. Duras is arguably the model for MD, one of the “girlfriends” in Acker’s late novel, 1996’s *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, where a couple of allusive-buried jokes directed around this character include a reference to being “dry” (“never touched a drop of the stuff”<sup>714</sup>) and “gift” for violent eruptions (“kicked a fish”<sup>715</sup>; an arguable intertext here is Duras’s scandalous “Albert of The Capitals,” which Duras prefaces noting, “Thérèse is me. The person who tortures the informer is me”<sup>716</sup>). Duras’s queer companion in her last years, Yann Andréa, just might lend Acker her character’s name; *M.D.* is his account of (one of) Duras’s hospital stays after nearly drinking herself to death. Andréa has his own couple of rhymes in Acker’s life/text, in *MV: Matias Viegner*. In Bellamy’s “Kathy’s Stuff” essay, after stating how a sense of solidarity between herself and Viegner has been established through disliking the same people, she confides to him (and the reader/listener) the contents of an email she received shortly

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<sup>712</sup> Ibid.

<sup>713</sup> Christa Woolf [sic] makes an appearance as well in Kraus’s *I Love Dick*, in a section that begins “Here are some notes I made about schizophrenia”; “I was at a dinner at Felix’s [“In Felix’s book *Chaosophy* there’s a great discussion on schizophrenia between him, Deleuze, and eight of France’s leading intellectuals. All of them are men”] loft with my husband, Sylvere Lotringer. [...] Sylvere would moderate a live discussion between Felix and Tony and the German playwright Heiner Muller. They needed one more speaker. [...] ‘What about Christa Woolf?’ I asked. [...] Finally the communist philosopher Negri graciously replied, ‘Christa Woolf is not an intellectual’”; pgs. 229-235.

<sup>714</sup> Pg. 221; *Pussy*.

<sup>715</sup> Pg. 202; *Pussy*.

<sup>716</sup> Pg. 115; Marguerite Duras, *The War: A Memoir*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986.

after the 2002 NYU conference. I quote from the manuscript in my possession: “*Matias was very odd. He seemed to have no self. He was like the fag valet of the great diva who only lives for her.*” Viegner smartly answers her back: “There were so many EGOS walking around that weekend, they didn’t need mine added to the mix.”<sup>717</sup> To get back to Duras and Acker though, and the influence of the former on the latter’s enunciations, compare “*crucified from within to all that’s intolerable in the world and proud of it—that’s my kind of writing,*”<sup>718</sup> as seen in *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, to Duras’s (mother’s) philosophy, as stated in her text (Duras turns her original story into both a play and later a film), “Whole Days in The Trees”: “I can understand everything that hunger and poverty make you do—that’s my brand of intelligence.”<sup>719</sup> This statement comes in a moment of bonding, after the mother’s son’s current girlfriend has hinted she’s been forced to resort to prostitution in the past to survive. In *The Burning Bombing of America*: “I go to Grand Street to give B. a book [ ] *Destroy She Said.*”<sup>720</sup> On her list of “Ten Out of Many Women,” Acker sums her love/affinity for Duras up with the statement: “We whose psychologies are made by outer circumstances or politics, who are distorted in and by a society whose nature is such that we are from our births apart, we are forced to consider our obsessions.”<sup>721</sup>

Of Maya Deren, Acker writes on her list, “the contemplative and the doer; join. She herself is a model for me.” Deren is also placed in Acker’s 1993 fictional work, *My Mother: Demonology*. The reference is in passing, but Acker is sure to give her her own,

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<sup>717</sup> Italics and all caps in Bellamy’s draft.

<sup>718</sup> Pg. 238; *Pussy*. Italics in the original.

<sup>719</sup> Pg. 28; Marguerite Duras, *Whole Days in The Trees & Other Stories*. London: John Calder, 1999.

<sup>720</sup> Pg. 153; *Red*.

whole sentence: “At my brother’s house I met artists. Romare Bearden. Maya Deren. This hint that it was possible to live in a community other than my parents’, a community that wasn’t hateful and boring, one of intellectuals, by opening up the world of possibilities, saved me from despair and nihilism.”<sup>722</sup>

Here again, on this list—if not Cixous, if not Kristeva—we will see Irigaray; “theory leads to passion,” is how Acker glosses this inclusion of Irigaray, the theorist. Acker calls upon Irigaray’s work in three of the essays collected in Acker’s *Bodies of Work*—itself as a title in all probability intertextually entwined with Judith Butler’s title, *Bodies That Matter*, with which Acker creates a “twinship” of sorts by citing it plentifully in the *Bodies of Work* essay “Seeing Gender”; Acker lets us know that she is reading the Butler essay through its anthologizing in the volume of essays *Engaging with Irigaray*. Acker employs Irigaray’s work in reading Sade and in her Colette essay, where Acker’s quotes from Irigaray are from *The Sex That Is Not One*, lending a (further, potentially) psychoanalytically dimension to Acker’s allegorizing of herself as reflected in Colette’s work: “Female sexual awakening is a process of traveling rather than of arriving coming and stopping.”<sup>723</sup> Acker also quotes from *The Sex That Is Not One* in the “Seeing Gender” essay, along with the Butler essay.

I find these lists of names enlightening and eye-opening, in a granting of new permissions, as was the case of my first sight of the “Ten Out of Many Women Writers” one, behind glass, and prominently displayed as part of the “Discipline and Anarchy” (November 7, 2002 – February 1, 2003) exhibit in the Tracey/Barry Gallery of The Fales

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<sup>721</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>722</sup> Pg. 14; *Mother*.

<sup>723</sup> Pg. 155; *Bodies*.

Library at New York University. It was one of the first things I looked for again in visiting Acker's archive at Duke University. The importance for me in this list is the hope that it might be used to set new precedents for approaching Acker's work, as it is most often aligned (maligned, even) solely within the traditions of those male authors she names in her point-making interviews,<sup>724</sup> perhaps none more so than the much discussed William S. Burroughs, a complicated relationship, to be sure. 11/18/1996: "main thing is/was the visit with William...the whole Kansas visit meant so much to me, Ira, my lineage"; to her surprise, this time, she finds Burroughs "open and openly kind (he's always been kind but scary to me on the surface)...he hugged me again and made an effort to speak to me despite my ridiculous shyness."<sup>725</sup>

Appearing to be from the end of Acker's life, to be some of the very last things she wrote, some loose sheaves of paper survive her. They might have one day, easily, given Acker's textual practice, been slipped by her into another book, collecting workings over her next period of compositional time, becoming one of the facets of a larger project—it's not unforeseeable that the hospital and dream drama of "Eurydice in the Underworld" and the three acts of "Requiem" would have met up between the covers of a venture expanded to include as well other characters and myths and happenings in Acker's life; I find this highly likely.

As it is, "Eurydice in the Underworld" is an unclassifiable text if ever there was one for Acker. "The Overworld" section, which begins with a first line telling us,

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<sup>724</sup> Acker's executor Viegner has also publicly discussed his sense of "the political" aspect of Acker being neglected for others; it will be interesting to see if and how his planned intellectual biography of her will take this up. See "May 23, 2003," <http://www.sfcall.com/archives.htm> ("Acker and Ginsberg").

<sup>725</sup> Correspondence, Serpent's Tail/High Risk Archive. Ellipses in original.

“Fifteen years later”—after an opening epigraph from Algerian feminist novelist, scholar, translator, and filmmaker Assia Djebar—is composed of nine parts that take divergent dramatic forms (Djebar subtitles the novel from which Acker takes her epigraph a “cavalcade”). Our sense of the text’s “reality” is mediated by stage directions, parts for characters, and lyrics to be sung; a good portion of the text arguably exists in a second person voice, as narration/story being told to and turned in on the self—Acker abbreviates Eurydice’s name and role at times to “YOU.” Parts six, seven, and eight are sub-designated “stations”; the final one further classified in a parenthetical as “death.”

“Oh, where is Eurydice?” asks Orpheus (or “OR”; Acker also shortens this character, signing how he’s not quite all there in front of her anymore, or undecided, the point her “I” might drift to, if not “YOU”); his question appears in part nine, page 14 in the volume I cite from, to give some sense of the brevity of this “play”/text, despite all its formal expanses I’m charting.<sup>726</sup> The text “answers” Orpheus by following next, stepping off its former stage, as it were, quite literally marked, with a “Diary written by Eurydice when she’s dead.” Recall Acker’s fear of being trapped in one. “I’m in the middle of dirt,”<sup>727</sup> this diary starts. Once he’s “returned to the realm of the living,”<sup>728</sup> Orpheus begins to refer to his partner in lyric as “U-turn”; symbolically, again, Acker changes his orientation (to her), as he gets to walk away, from death; she also changes his life. By the end of the text, no longer being written as a play, he’s taken himself out of the realm of possible (real-time, further) engagement with her. Her fate, her name, has

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<sup>726</sup> The entire text is 26 pages in the Arcadia Books publication, *Eurydice in the Underworld*, a reprint of Semiotext(e)’s *Hannibal Lecter*, minus the Lotringer interview, bookended by the opening “Eurydice” and closing “Requiem.”

<sup>727</sup> Pg. 15; *Eurydice*.

<sup>728</sup> Pg. 25; *Eurydice*.

been reversed, sealed, or supplemented by his decision; sometimes it's hard to say with Acker. In another, earlier section ("Orpheus") comes this assertion: "Maurice Blanchot says that Eurydice is the extreme to which art, Orpheus's art, can attain."<sup>729</sup> First framed as the singing of his severed head, and then further (temporally) oriented for the reader as a "letter found from Orpheus after his death," Acker's text does try to go on. "E" replies in a following section (page 24). But then a parenthetical concluding the reply reclassifies her response as a "poem," "just one of the poems that dead girls can write to each other in memory of the life above."<sup>730</sup>

In the "in the courtroom of the dead" section, we are given a map of a walk down a street that includes a "hole in reality." Acker's dream of hell here is filled with women bankers; our "I" wants to take out a loan, but she realizes she will soon be tried. By becoming insane, the narrator believes she might escape being judged. In the "in the school of the dead" section, we are given another "map," but "A picture of the Underworld,"<sup>731</sup> as it's labeled, is not much (escapist) consolation: a courtroom, a bank, two (moated) houses girls have been murdered in, "the fires of hell," "the judging table," plus "the lonely complex of buildings." Acker has pictorially rendered desolation here.

Copious notebooks lead to my speculation that the "Eurydice" text was never completed and planned as a much larger, evolving work, that what we have here may be only a dim shadow of another vision, one not met. The poetic excursions I've found in her archive and place towards the chronological end of Acker's life might have been joined to others through one of her past techniques or new ones, somehow shored up in a

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<sup>729</sup> Pg. 23; *Eurydice*.

<sup>730</sup> Pg. 25; *Eurydice*. In italics in the original.

<sup>731</sup> Pg. 21; *Eurydice*.

further, overarching dream-vision conceit, made into more of a (w)hole—or they might have been simply forgotten.

Acker’s focus now at the end of her life will be turned down to a couple of bare conceptual frames, in these single pages of typed sheets; here we will see, quite starkly, the lyric quandary: who calls out to whom, and how are each of those two points constituted, as separations, to become a part of the other, and through the other?

“Mother and infant

Infant and mother

I/you want I/you”<sup>732</sup>

“I/you”: try to establish who comes first. Acker is doing this too with her symbolic-sing play between Orpheus/“OR” or Eurydice/“YOU.” Try to establish which one needs to be more taken care of—priorities, how one looks through the other, to see oneself, cared for or not. Who provides the grounds for whose story to tread upon. Which one is in more need of the other, for sustenance, guidance, nourishment, metaphorical or otherwise—determining who takes whose hand, who follows.

“Mother and infant

Infant and mother

Which way to the full land?

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<sup>732</sup> This text, and its subsequent parts quoted: Kathy Acker Papers.

Mother and infant

Infant and mother

Safe in the imaginary space”

In the imaginary space that might let all spring up—but is still just that, at this point, “imaginary”—the haunting refrain, rocking, of only two points, two legs to a design not yet fully emerged or formed. Kristeva would call this the sacred space, the space of the mother still holding, containing, the child; here Mary and her Christ child leap out onto the (iconic) stage. “Part Two” of Acker’s late work “Requiem” is called “Christmas.” We’ll witness the hold Acker’s mother obviously still possesses on her child, as she returns to her again; this time she is at the center of the drama; Claire says to her daughter, “We’re all we’ve got, Electra. We’ve got to stick together.”<sup>733</sup> A month later, in the play, Claire is dead, and “Electra” sees her first dead body on Christmas Day. In Acker’s “Eurydice in the Underworld”: “It is Christmas Day when all the world goes under the earth.”<sup>734</sup> “E” replies to Orpheus’s letter, relating, accusing: “You said, ‘I’m not in this world in order to take care of you.’”<sup>735</sup>

The Virgin, like anyone else, must get her makeover in Acker: “I hallucinate that the Virgin Mary wears black leather pants and a black leather motorcycle jacket, she climbs trees, she doesn’t give a fuck for anyone.”<sup>736</sup> She changes her color and social function: “Educated by private tutor, the Black Virgin Mary, and I teach her to suck my

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<sup>733</sup> Pg. 174; *Eurydice*. Acker has the daughter in “Requiem” find pornography and Agatha Christie books in the hall closet (ibid).

<sup>734</sup> Pg. 16; *Eurydice*.

<sup>735</sup> Pg. 25; *Eurydice*.

<sup>736</sup> Pg. 4; *Portrait*.

cunt.”<sup>737</sup> She is an image to which people give trinkets that they’ve bought right outside the church in Merida (the main city in the Yucatan where ten-year-old Janey Smith lives with her father) that symbolize their problems (“an arm is a broken arm, a baby is problems with baby, a kidney, a little worker”<sup>738</sup>). Or they seek her out to absolve-resolve their problems: “In order to repent my matricide, I walked into Notre Dame, it was nighttime, and pissed on the statue of the Virgin Mary.”<sup>739</sup> She gives rise to a circuitous logic and instincts: “Religious white men hate women because and so they make women into the image of the Virgin Mary”<sup>740</sup>; “A guy was hugging a wood statue of the Virgin then he pierced the Statue’s cunt, if the Virgin had a cunt, with his knife he threw himself on Her his teeth biting Her cheeks and bruised lips, he asked Her to fuck him.”<sup>741</sup> Or she’s just another (public) sign: “Virgin Mary’s La Sirene’s Jesus Christ’s Duvalier’s private girlfriends’ names adorn every inch of the bus’ walls,”<sup>742</sup> an issue of distinction and violence: “I would have Mary Magdalene tear Virgin Mary’s flesh into shreds.”<sup>743</sup> An alienating principle: “ ‘Since I’m not the Virgin Mary, God, You hate me”; “The mother came to realize that she wasn’t the Virgin Mary though she was a mother”; “He was unable to relate to anyone except for the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ”; “For his wife was *the Virgin Mary* who must never, under any circumstances, be bothered, disturbed, or agitated, especially by such a foul thing as sex, in especial by R’s

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<sup>737</sup> Pg. 78; *Portrait*.

<sup>738</sup> Pg. 16; *High School*.

<sup>739</sup> Pg. 62; *Identity*.

<sup>740</sup> Pg. 178; *Quixote*.

<sup>741</sup> Pg. 159; *Senseless*.

<sup>742</sup> Pg. 159; *Literal*.

<sup>743</sup> Pg. 65; *Senseless*.

homosexuality”<sup>744</sup>; God’s bitch: “ ‘Every night do you bend down and worship your wife, the Virgin Mary?’”<sup>745</sup>; “I, all females who’re isolated, am the Virgin.”<sup>746</sup> “One result of this journey, or ‘identity,’ could be my loss of interest in ‘feminine power.’ Images of the Eternal Mother, the Virgin Mary, etc.”<sup>747</sup>

The psychoanalysts have much to say about the daughter’s difficulty in separating herself out from her mother, and so does Acker, just as much late in her life as very early on: “I can’t decide whether I’m a woman giving birth to a brat or a five-year-old girl,”<sup>748</sup> she writes in viewing a scene of desire, commenting on what she is in the process of creating, in *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula*. She is channeling her creation here through Violette Leduc’s work, *Thérèse and Isabelle*, a favorite, theorizing the subtextual possibilities in a lesbian romance: which one is the girl I am? Who is the mommy now? Whose book holds whom, what? “I read Sartre De Sade Laing Esterson and Leduc. I’m scared I don’t have my own space.”<sup>749</sup> In *I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac*, Acker writes: “Monster women surrounded me all the time. Now I hate women and sentimentality.”<sup>750</sup>

The white page with its bodies of black, Acker’s especial favorite Genet (they both see the world through a sexual lens) heavily metaphorizes at points in his *Prisoner of Love*: “In white America the Blacks are the characters in which history is written. They are the ink that gives the white page a meaning.” This follows after his opening:

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<sup>744</sup> Pg. 3, 4, 57, 72, respectively; *Identity*. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>745</sup> Pg. 56; *Identity*.

<sup>746</sup> Pg. 161; *Quixote*.

<sup>747</sup> Pg. 249; *Mother*.

<sup>748</sup> Pg. 29; *Portrait*.

<sup>749</sup> Pg. 38; *Portrait*.

<sup>750</sup> Pg. 151; *Portrait*.

“When I said the Blacks were the characters on the white page of America, that was too easy an image: the truth really lies where I can never quite know it, in a love between two Americans of different colour.”<sup>751</sup> Jean Genet is not an American, he recognizes. Before the consolidation of her character of the child—abandoned, abused, controlled—Acker writes: “WE HAVE NOTHING AMERICA [ ] DOESN’T THAT HAVE TO DO WITH EVERYTHING? WE HAVE NO GRAIN [ ] I FIND GRAIN [ ] I PROPOSITION THE GRAIN [ ] GRAIN COMING [ ] OUT OF THE MOTHER.”<sup>752</sup> Acker will work a conception of self/identity through a black dalliance: a compositional note to herself, among the drafts in her notebooks marked for the Jeanne Duval project, prompts, reminds, “Who am I? black.”<sup>753</sup> Her mother’s child, Acker casts herself out. Particular attention is given to the “American” in some of Acker’s last notebooks: “American, as they say. What does that mean? I kick butt with the best of them. I can’t hold myself in. Not sex, not anyway. The wild heart”; “I am a child of the forests and the wilds; I am all that is American.”<sup>754</sup> Acker will go over her story of origins again, a primal scene: “Four

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<sup>751</sup> Pg. 245, 5, respectively; *Prisoner of Love*, Jean Genet. New York: New York Review Books, 2003. Genet also goes on to write: “The black words on the white American page are sometimes crossed out or erased. The best disappear, but it’s they that make the poem, or rather the poem of the poem. If the Whites are the page, the Blacks are the writing that conveys a meaning—not of the page, or not of the page alone. The abundance of Whites is what the writing is set down on, and it forms the margin too. But the poem is written by the absent Blacks—the dead, if you like—the nameless absent Blacks who wrote the poem, of which the meaning escapes me but not the reality” (251).

<sup>752</sup> Pg. 201; *Red*.

<sup>753</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>754</sup> I am pulling from a selection of Acker’s last notebooks, published as “The Birth of the Wild Heart” in concert with Connie Samaras’s “Terminals” project/essay (<http://vv.arts.ucla.edu/terminals/acker/acker-1.html>). Viegner seems to be sharing; both Samaras and Kraus work with at least one notebook book in common; both speak of how the work came to be in their possession. Kraus also pulls from a notebook in which Acker is drafting her “copyright” talk (see pgs. 98-105 in *Bodies*), quoting: “Loneliness—it’s

months later when she tried to *about* [sic] *me*, I learned that I was hated and to hate myself, we were the same; most of all I hated myself for not busting out of that womb, not shoving my foot into the mucus membrane and there tearing a hole and emerging, emerging into light and woods, me American, because before her and him.”<sup>755</sup>

It is the “black” that might give us our definition. Kristeva, working from a Kleinian position, would have this be the/our *ab-ject*: it is how an ego is or isn’t formed in the face of a big “O” other the mother will or won’t become. Kristeva: “*ab-ject*, with this *a* understood in the privative sense of the prefix, that is, as vitiating the object as well as the emerging subject. It is a subject and object that, as such, are crystallized only through what Klein calls the ‘depressive position’ or, strictly speaking, through the castration ordeal, the resolution of the Oedipus conflict, and the creative acquisition of language and thought.”<sup>756</sup> Kristeva then goes on to assert something I am more concerned with than the reincorporation, through Klein, of the (gendered) dynamics of Oedipus and the family triangle: a link to the potential function (“difficulties posed,” as Kristeva puts it) of modern art is made, as analogous to states of the sacred and mystic in their bearings upon limit states of sublimation—or at least this is how I interpret Kristeva’s assertion in her Klein biography<sup>757</sup>; we experience these states (again) as like the narcissistic state of early object relation; the family—the mother/infant unit has not yet been fully divided in the (infant’s) mind by the entrance of the Symbolization of the Father (and his accompanying “Name”); this state before the oedipal triangle is made up

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the American way” (pg. 143; *Video Green*). Kraus also relates how Acker records in her notebook a Tarot reading amidst other writing.

<sup>755</sup> Ibid. My emphasis.

<sup>756</sup> Pg. 72; *Melanie Klein*, Julia Kristeva. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

of at least two already (en-)gendered terms. Presumably the child's successful—or clear cut—emergence (from Klein's paranoid-schizoid position) will have her/him identifying with one or the other of the two: mom or dad, as Kristeva drives home the point: “Like a band in a Möbius strip that is characterized by its limitlessness, the future subject is forever transported toward the “ab-ject” (on the side of the mother) and toward “primary identification” with the “father of personal prehistory” (on the side of the loved and loving and pre-oedipal father, who displays the traits of both parents)” —Acker would have the establishing of such (gendered) poles, before identification even sets in, a difficult endeavor: her mother is a dry one, her father cut-off/out. Avital Ronell has Klein pop her head into “Kathy Goes to Hell: On the Irresolvable Stupidity of Acker's Death,” mentioning how she “vexed” Freud by “backdat[ing] aggression, making one ready to rocket after just a few weeks of this existence.”<sup>758</sup> In her writing, even the womb is a dangerous and unloving place for Acker, already mediating the (unseen) father: “I know what it's like now to be in that womb all squashed especially my left arm, and she finds out, the woman who is me, the woman who is outside me, she learns that he is going to leave her.”<sup>759</sup>

It is the abject we might make our meanings in the face of—that “darkness.”

Words on the page provide the mirror-image: they have their backings, which can also be distorted. In her diary: “Remember that time, one of your most precious memories,

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<sup>757</sup> See pgs. 72-73; a corresponding note refers us to pages of Kristeva's *Powers of Horror and Tales of Love*.

<sup>758</sup> Pg. 24; *Lust for Life*. This comes in “The Good Breast” section of her essay. Ronell calls Acker that for her: “And like all good breasts, she invites ambivalence and poisoning, a reflex of destruction, as you saw occurring in the first lines of my homage to her” (ibid).

<sup>759</sup> Section 4; “The Birth of the Wild Heart.”

where the trees bowed to you and said, ‘You are now the princess.’”<sup>760</sup> When is a dark forest (“the beautiful forest”<sup>761</sup>) preferable to a white field? When you are not in it alone. (“Through the walls, the children could hear their parents planning their deaths.”<sup>762</sup>) Hansel and Gretel hold hands. Opening another entry, Acker writes: “Making the world into a womb.”<sup>763</sup> Acker wanted to set out upon the white page, to get away from the signs of fixed, determined significance, though she also needed the signs she wanted to leave behind to steer her course.

Who is “I,” indeed, if it doesn’t *want to be* other? Am “I” mother? Am “I” daughter? And or must “I” be both and all to myself? We might call this one particular strand in Acker’s work “the psychoanalytic imagination,” a provocative and generative issue of textual practice in Acker’s continued assembly of many. To make a new novel-text, or poetry, upon the foundational grounds of another, Acker grafts her own logic over prior enunciations, laying out the disconcerting aspects of her reading experiences, her own identification of concerns, in more, and further, words. We might call this the written-out exploration of what happens to your narrative when you never saw or want to see your family as a (valid) triangle to begin with, once the drama in many ways begins to move from a sublimated one, when the one who takes up the writing does not see the recovery of the family as a primary concern. (“Entering the true Heart—who am I now?”<sup>764</sup>)

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<sup>760</sup> Section 2; “The Birth of the Wild Heart.”

<sup>761</sup> Pg. 144; *Red*.

<sup>762</sup> Pg. 28; *Bodies*.

<sup>763</sup> Section 5; “The Birth of the Wild Heart.”

<sup>764</sup> *Ibid*.

The metaphors of semiotics become, obviously, freighted for Acker, as she's first literalized as a site of restrictions: "[Mother] had always been very tight with me: taking away my allowances, never buying me anything."<sup>765</sup> Again, back in her archive housed at Duke University, in a folder for the typescript of 1981's "The Birth of the Poet," a page from one of Acker's notebooks, trimmed around a text headed "THE INVISIBLE" (Lacan is cited in the back of a working notebook for *Pussy, King of the Pirates*: "the mirror-image is 'the threshold of the visible world'"<sup>766</sup>): "There is something called the countryside tho I never see it./ I know the flowers of shade and the flowers of water. Bloodstones and St. John's Cross, waterlilies every kind of red rose. I have learned that there are birds of the evening and of the night, bats, owls, screechers, babies fallen out of their nests and drowned in a bucket. They haunt my dreams. A willow again closes its branches around me,"<sup>767</sup>—and the text is cut (off) there.

To quote, and begin to bastardize a bit, that thinker-writer I love to play around with, Roland Barthes, from *The Pleasure of the Text*, his "Langue/Tongue" fragment: "No object is in a constant relationship with pleasure (Lacan, apropos of Sade)."<sup>768</sup> Identity, or the book, and how they each mutually construct each other, in the worlds of Kathy Acker, will be one such object (combined) that provides transitions to and through pleasure(s). Let me enter, though, Barthes's parenthetical clarification a bit more, before allowing myself to cross what I perceive as my finish line: if not Lacan, Acker placed

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<sup>765</sup> Pg. 60; *Expectations*.

<sup>766</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>767</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>768</sup> Pg. 37; Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1975.

great, evidential store in Sade.<sup>769</sup> I find a comment from Dennis Cooper, co-editor of the Kathy Acker reader (*Essential Acker*) with Scholder, in an interview with Robert Glück, instructive: “Sade’s work identifies its enemies and uses the construction of these enemies’ principles and rhetoric in the construction of its own narratives and philosophy.”<sup>770</sup> Acker begins making a mythic use of theory, as she relies on her evolving “theory” too of myth, interrogating and refashioning who holds the strings leading into and out of our stories of our selves.

I should perhaps point out, too, more explicitly, some of the things Acker herself locates in Sade, when writing on him (to not give the appearance of having wandered too far afield, letting Barthes lead me, through Acker, to Cooper; I am willing to entertain I may display, attempt to hide, act out and/or compensate for my own “castration anxiety” by refusing to stick to one body-point of consolidated meaning). Freedom is equated with despising the mother and virginity. “The daughter who does not reject her mother interiorizes prison.”<sup>771</sup> What does the critic do who is leery of trying to get too tight a handle on Acker? “A woman invariably gives up any hope of freedom, mentions

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<sup>769</sup> I find Lacan’s name twice in Acker’s work: in her “theorists” passage in *Don Quixote!* “Russian Constructivism” (see pg. 54 in *Quixote*, pg. 120 in *Bodies*), as well as in *My Mother: Demonology*. “Lacan” appears in this latter work in a parenthetical confirmation of sorts: “According to Elisabeth Roudinesco in her study of Lacan, around 1924 a conjuncture of early Feminism, a new wave of Freudianism, and Surrealism gave rise to a new representation of the female: nocturnal, dangerous, fragile, and powerful. The rebellious, criminal, insane, or gay woman is no longer perceived as a slave to her symptoms. Instead, ‘in the negative idealization of crime [she] discovers the means to struggle against a society [that disgusts]’ (pg. 30; Acker’s brackets).

<sup>770</sup> Cooper goes on: “My work doesn’t see itself as having enemies. I would never put myself in a class with Sade, as a writer or as a thinker, God [!] knows.” Pgs. 252-253; *Enter at Your Own Risk: The Dangerous Art of Dennis Cooper*, ed. Leora Lev. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006.

<sup>771</sup> See “Reading the Lack of the Body: The Writing of the Marquis de Sade,” specifically pg. 69; *Bodies*.

[Madame de Saint-Ange], as soon as she has a child. A woman who wants to be free, above all, must avoid pregnancy”<sup>772</sup>—both sodomy and abortion figure heavily in this program.

Barthes goes on in his fragment: “For the writer, however, this object [in a constant relationship with pleasure] does exist: it is not the language, it is the *mother tongue*. The writer is someone who plays with [“his”—her/the] mother’s body....”<sup>773</sup> The tenth woman on Acker’s list of “Ten Out of Many Women Writers” is, in her words, “The Mother of Us All: Gertrude Stein”: “Her meditative stance in writing—her insistence on breath, her refusal to subordinate any part of the narrative text to any other part, her refusal to exist in writing anywhere but in a calm which is *joy*—is an implicit rejection of the later 19<sup>th</sup> century myth that the artist must suffer in order to create. Writers and others have yet to explore and use her work.”<sup>774</sup> We might trace this *joy*, which I am emphasizing above—and we might lay aside the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* poets, as Acker seems so ready to do in considering those who have or have not explored and used Stein’s work, in her mind. Stein is put in a line of “I lonely praise you [ ] Gertrude Stein [ ] Walt Whitman [ ] Allen Ginsberg [ ] the *women* of you” in Acker’s early, posthumously published work, *The Burning Bombing of America*.<sup>775</sup>

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<sup>772</sup> Pg. 70; *ibid.*

<sup>773</sup> Pg. 37; *The Pleasure of the Text*. Emphasis in the original; Barthes follows his assertion above with a parenthesis, to bring in the source of his phrasing, citing now further the names of two writers, one of which is Lautréamont, and then a painter (Matisse); according to “Avant-pop” theorist Larry McCaffery: “Well, Lautréamont’s influence created almost a straight line to Dada, Surrealism, Burroughs, punk, and Kathy Acker”—another lineage, an alternative one, to be sure (<http://www.altx.com/interviews/larry.mccaffery.html>).

<sup>774</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>775</sup> Pg. 182; *Rip-Off Red, Girl Detective and The Burning Bombing of America: The Destruction of the U.S.* New York: Grove Press, 2002. Emphasis mine.

It is a joy which Acker moves to accentuate repeatedly throughout the 90s, that decade corresponding with her desire to begin making, for herself, new myths within which to live: “In these times which seem to be increasingly dominated by nightmares which are the interiorizations of the media-government alliance, there must be an opening into *joy*. Whatever that means and however that must be accomplished.”<sup>776</sup> Like quoting, in its entirety, in the midst of her text, William Blake’s “Infant Joy,”<sup>777</sup> or: “Dante called for help and then he went thro [sic] pain and reached *joy*.”<sup>778</sup> “Why do you deprive the body? The body wants sex, that is its *joy*, not namby-pamby little holier-than-thou—but *joy* full and in the face.”<sup>779</sup>

“Every time I ran away from school and walked into the Village, home of the Beats, I felt an edge of fear that isn’t fear but the beginning of passion and of *joy* and I knew, even though I didn’t really know these people yet, that I wanted to spend the rest of my life in this new world of openness.”<sup>780</sup> As Acker writes in her manuscript “Allen Ginsberg—A Personal Portrait”: “All of us come from parents. My parents were not my biological parents; they were the poets.”<sup>781</sup>; “...poetry’s only rule is that it is not about, it *is joy*.”<sup>782</sup> Acker writes too of this connection in the manuscript of her essay on Genet’s *Prisoner of Love*: “Of that joy found, *occasionally*, in that art named poetry.”<sup>783</sup>

“No voice.

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<sup>776</sup> “Allen Ginsberg—A Personal Portrait”; Kathy Acker Papers. My emphasis.

<sup>777</sup> Pg. 30; *Bodies*.

<sup>778</sup> Section 1; “The Birth of the Wild Heart.” My emphasis.

<sup>779</sup> Section 2; “The Birth of the Wild Heart.” My emphasis.

<sup>780</sup> “Allen Ginsberg—A Personal Portrait.” My emphasis.

<sup>781</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

<sup>782</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis in the original.

But, I'm going to write.

And I did and I am writing. And doing everything around writing. But this writing, writing by a woman who does not want to be a male, or a judge, to tell people how to think, who only wants to disappear, to go under, to subvert became, if you like something else.

Became, formally at least, a writing that is dispersed and that disperses, disperses narrative, gender, genre, character, language is always moving away from itself anyway...until, and this is what I want, subversion turns over subversion into joy.”<sup>784</sup>

Acker comes to her home, as we can see, within her own terms. And upon this note of joy, I feel compelled to leave her.

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<sup>783</sup> Kathy Acker Papers. My emphasis.

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<sup>784</sup> Kathy Acker Papers.

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