

"A SOCIETY WHICH WASN'T JUST DISGUST":
KATHY ACKER'S POETICS OF LIBERATION

By

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ABSTRACT

Kathy Acker, author of over 20 novels during her brief life, has been attacked by critics for creating tasteless, misogynist, and plagiarized nonsense that glorifies sexual violence. Indeed her work involves female victimization and gruesome sexual violence, and many of her words are cut and pasted from other books. And yet, it is precisely these negative qualities that Acker emphasizes to critique literary and social norms. Acker's inhuman characters, who lack not only gender specificity but also personality altogether, remain too amorphous, faceless, and superficial to prompt empathy from the reader. These "anti-characters" do not perform their expected literary or social roles and so tend to disgust and disturb the reader. However, within Acker's brand of nonsense are occasional moments of poetic beauty and humor that distract briefly from the chaos and violence of her plot action. Despite most critics' categorization of her work as a failure, a slightly different perspective can find inspiration and liberation in Acker's novels. Her realization of her dream of becoming a (literary) pirate and her reclamation of her body and therefore her voice through tattooing evoke the possibility of a less oppressive, phallogocentric, and capitalist world.

Critics and scholars of Kathy Acker vary in their interpretations of her argument, but there is wide agreement on a number of points: her work is pessimistic, voiceless, theoretical, and paradoxically seems to perpetuate the very ideologies it simultaneously attempts to undermine. Some go so far as to say it is generally bad writing, which, regardless of one's personal stance on the issue, is not a difficult position with which to sympathize after indulging in even a page or two of Acker's writing. The complexities and apparent inconsistencies of her literary attempt to overthrow patriarchy and capitalism have created difficulties for scholars and readers alike, and led many to conclude that her project is, ultimately, "a failure" (Redding 301). Homosexuality, freakdom, tattoos, appropriation, and postmodernism will not liberate women or anyone else, so the only way to cope with the commoditized, performative society we live in is to "EAT YOUR MIND" (*Empire of the Senseless*).

While this is a fair enough perspective, it's terribly unsatisfying. If we wade through Acker's insane novels, through countless suiciding mothers, raping fathers, medically complicated abortions, through all the Greek mythology, translated Latin poetry, words appropriated and plagiarized from various literary cannon, unsettling sketches of genitals and poorly drawn tattoos, and at the end of our journey the final conclusion is that nothing can change, nothing will change, then what was the point reading to begin with? Acker does admit to not wanting to "say anything" in her work, and her use of pastiche and blank parody has been studied extensively, but I cannot accept that there is not some glimmer of optimism floating among the nonsense (McCaffery 90). In this paper, I will investigate the possibility that despite her anger with the status quo and the apparent circuitousness of her directionless plots and faceless characters, there is in Acker's work and in her ideology

the occasional nugget of liberation and optimism for a better world to come. Although her work at first appears to consist mainly of nonsense and even possibly to be a failure, it has a definitive voice that makes positive claims upon its readers. From presentation and formatting choices to moments of explicit poetic beauty, Acker claims a literary identity that presents the possibility of literature as a positive, empowering project.

I must first acknowledge that Acker's work is largely nonsense, voicelessness, and violence, and recognize the validity of readings that see her purpose as deconstructive. David Foster Wallace, in a review of one of her novels, condemns Acker's work as altogether poorly done, calling her an author who presents "the thorny problem of possessing value without displaying much quality" (Wallace 154). His stance is understandable: Acker's writing is a confusing collection of plagiarism and poststructuralist theory that certainly fails to make the reader feel connected or empathetic. Of course, it can be presumed that Acker did this very purposefully. Her use of plagiarism is a solution to her denial of "having any voice at all," and her theoretical tendencies support her general thesis of dissatisfaction with phallogocentrism, or the societal tendency to put the phallus at the center of the construction of meaning (Hume 485). Ellen Friedman, who interviewed Acker and wrote on her extensively, calls the world of her books "a world filled with sets of disrupted moments over which not even discontinuity rules" (Friedman 37). Indeed Acker's brand of nonsense is unpredictable and impossible to follow, each book bleeding into the next with no themes, characters, or language to separate them. All this nonsense works toward expressing Acker's "problem with society," which is mainly focused on the bogus functions of gender and gender

performance (McCaffery 97). She longs from a young age to become a pirate but knows she cannot “because I was a girl” (“Seeing Gender” 159). One chapter of *Don Quixote* begins with the inscription, “BEING BORN INTO AND PART OF A MALE WORLD, SHE HAD NO SPEECH OF HER OWN. ALL SHE COULD DO WAS READ MALE TEXTS WHICH WEREN’T HERS” (39). This of course speaks to Acker’s own decision to plagiarize her male counterparts. Much of her work focuses on women on quests for love, raped and beaten by the men they pursue—a clear and aggressive attack on the state of heterosexuality, which Acker says “a bit resembles rape” (*Empire of the Senseless* 127). Critic Katie Muth also points out that Acker’s writing holds a mirror to the reader’s own complicity with things as they are, hoping to inspire in the reader a break from social norms (Muth 102). Acker’s use of pastiche and blank parody, poking fun at certain constructs (heterosexuality, gender, and capitalism) without taking a definitive stance on them, gives her writing its quintessential Acker-ness, refusing “in particular the commodification of reality” (Harper 46). She rejects phallogocentrism, capitalism, and the status quo in general.

The problem readers of Acker then run into is that she does not at first appear to offer any solution to the problems she points out except her brand of rambling nonsense, pornography, and violence. A lot of the moments in Acker’s writing where one expects a take-home message or a call to action seem to offer only hopelessness and despair. An oft-quoted passage from *Empire of the Senseless* is, “YOUR MIND IS A NIGHTMARE THAT HAS BEEN EATING YOU: NOW EAT YOUR MIND.” Ellen Friedman and other critics interpret this as clarification that erasing the social norms we know from our minds is impossible, and read “eat your mind” as instruction to give up entirely on ever being able to change the status quo (Friedman 48). This interpretation is seemingly clarified by a similar line in

Great Expectations: "NOT ONLY IS THERE NO ESCAPE FROM PERCEIVING BUT THE ONLY WAY TO DEAL WITH PAIN IS TO KILL ONESELF TOTALLY BY ONESELF" (41). Acker seems to be saying that from day one your mind has been corrupted by society's false truths, and there is no way to purify yourself of this corruption except to erase yourself completely. This is not a very helpful instruction and implies that there is nothing the reader can do to fix the problems with which she has been presented. As Friedman interprets, "there is no room, in her terms, to truly name oneself" (48). Karen Brennan agrees that Acker renders her female characters hopeless, and that the erasure of the feminine, "sealed by the authorial death that is exacted by the postmodern agenda, is inevitable" (Brennan 265). Although Acker denies categorization as postmodern, she fits into the niche well. If the "postmodern agenda" is going to destroy femininity, then Acker is working entirely against herself. One critic of Acker, Kathryn Hume, who insists despite contrary evidence that Acker does have her own unique voice, recognizes some hope for redemption in Acker's work. She reasonably acknowledges that love does not solve the problems Acker points out, but she does say that her subjects can find happiness by "achieving freedom from the pressures exerted by other people and institutions" (Hume 490). "Happiness" may be a bit of a stretch, but it is refreshing to hear someone express the belief that Acker does offer some kind of hope for the reader to overcome the grip the phallus has over everything. Hume recognizes that Acker has a voice and that her work has the potential to inspire the eventual liberation of women and other oppressed groups.

Despite Acker's apparent incomprehensibility and hopelessness, her work is widely read and admired, and, as Hume points out, her appropriation does create a distinctive voice. David Foster Wallace, who finds the quality of Acker's writing disappointing, still

admits that she is an important author: “She is certainly the first bona fide U.S. postmodernist, and the first American writer to see the implications of European poststructuralism” (Wallace 154). Even if most critics cannot find a call to action in her work, it does succeed in pointing out the problems of phallogocentrism. Muth says that Acker exposes the power of the phallus in both literature and life and “argues that [it’s] fundamentally oppressive” (Muth 98). Acker, by appropriating words from the “male texts” that she is forced to read, clarifies their power over her as a female author, rendered voiceless by her femininity. Her lack of cohesion, plot and character development are a method of dealing with the problem of power in society: she “suspends momentarily the business of power-plays by suspending the possibility of interpretation altogether” (Muth 99). As Acker writes in her essay “Critical Languages,” people who deal in commerce, and therefore in patriarchy, “cannot afford to live in chaos” (88). Her chaotic world is one in which capitalism and phallogocentrism, despite her frequent discussions of them, cannot survive. This choice to use mainly heterosexual and often violent interactions also sets Acker apart. She wishes to destroy gender but strays from the “strong female protagonist” that many feminist writers focus on, instead working within a more raw and gritty heterosexual context to illuminate the problematic dichotomy between the sexes (Harper 49). Acker’s project is not to write stories to which people relate or empathize. She openly admits that she “couldn’t even remember who my characters *were*” and wonders why anyone bothers reading her at all (McCaffery 90). Obviously, though, her work resonated with many people. As Hume points out, Acker’s brand of appropriation does create a recognizable voice—you could pick up any Kathy Acker book, read two pages, and immediately know who had written it, although you might not be able to tell which book it

was. Glenn A. Harper agrees that her plagiarism is more than pastiche. “She inserts the borrowed texts into the web of her own interests and constantly confronts them with her voice and her primal narrative” (Harper 47). Acker weaves plagiarized material written primarily by men into her narratives of women raped and beaten by society. DFW says her thesis is that being female in our phallogocentric society renders you voiceless and bodiless, which seems largely correct (155). The commodification of the female body is definitely an important point in Acker’s work and a significant part of what she is working against (Brennan 266). However, I see what Hume sees as well: a female author reclaiming her voice and her body as her own through writing and stealing from the literary cannon.

Less obvious but still explicit in Acker’s work are moments of beauty and poetic liberation and even something nearing optimism, plus an implicit reclaiming of identity through text and form. A few moments with Acker’s books will mostly show the reader pornography, repetition, and violence, but it is also not too difficult to spot bits of poetic beauty among the nonsense. In *Empire of the Senseless* there are quite a few. The female narrator, Abhor, decides “to keep on living rather than kill myself” (19). This is a simple gesture of survival but it does have a note of positivity to it, especially since it follows Acker’s frequently reiterated scene, “Rape by the Father.” There is also some surprisingly vivid imagery in the novel: “I knew that pleasure only gathers in freedom. For I was soaring through the sky, my huge white and grey wings stretched out to the horizontal limits of my vision. I was alone. In the sky. I was almost white” (12). This stands out from the rest of the text as poetic and almost pleasing to read, a rare but real occurrence in Acker’s novels. There is a purity to the “almost white” wings and the somewhat cheesy but

still enjoyable image of “soaring.” Abhor is flying, experiencing freedom and exuberance. In another instance an unidentified speaker wonders, “I don’t know why we fight each other since we’re all the same” (41). This speaks to Acker’s Judith Butler-inspired thesis that gender is performance, that at the core there is no difference from one person to the next that is not falsely ingrained by society. Rifts between people, Acker seems to be saying through her narrator, are created not by deeply felt differences but by superficial social constructs designed to separate people. This is a fairly utopian moment sandwiched between and therefore conditioned by discussions of death and prostitution. Acker’s notion that body to body people are basically the same is simultaneously idealistic and dehumanizing, undermining the importance of what goes on in our minds (because it has all been corrupted by society) in favor of our physical likenesses. This is one of many key paradoxes in Acker’s work that make it difficult to deconstruct. There are also a few passages that give hope to the outcasts of the world, which rely on another paradoxical reference to differences among people: singling some out as “freaks.” In *Don Quixote*, the narrator says, “Even a woman who prefers loneliness to the bickerings and constraints of heterosexual marriage, even such a woman who is a freak in our society needs a home” (202). On the same page she writes, “Even freaks need homes, countries, language, communication... It is for you, freaks my loves, I am writing and it is about you” (202). There is at least hope to this if not optimism that those who do not seem to belong anywhere can find a home somehow, and recognition that Acker is writing *for* someone, not just to hopelessly point out the faults of our society. She has an audience who she hopes her work will help: freaks. Brennan calls these moments in Acker’s work “the feminist hope that the new epistemological territory will offer a real liberation for women”

(247). Calling this hope “epistemological” seems to imply that does not exist in the concrete world; it is an academic illusion. Harper agrees that Acker’s “position never lapses into more than a momentary optimism” (Harper 51). Arthur Redding also seems to disrespect Acker’s attempts at optimism, saying her “self-destruction is always bound up with a utopian if somewhat solipsistic desire for a radical transformation” (Redding 285). Referring to her vision as “utopian” and “solipsistic” certainly makes it sound impossible and not in any way real. Rather than believing that Acker is giving up and letting the phallogocentric rule forever, Hume says “she refuses to accept suffering as humanity’s basic experience, even though that is manifestly what follows from her image of the natural world” (Hume 501). Acker recognizes that many humans, especially “freaks,” must suffer, but she does not simply wish to point this out to the reader and then go silent. At the end of *Empire of the Senseless* she writes one of those “utopian” sentences that Redding disparages, but it is rather effective: “And then I thought, one day, maybe, there’d be a human society in a world which is beautiful, a society which wasn’t just disgust” (227). As the reader and the subjects leave the chaotic world of the book and permanently reenter reality, Acker leaves us with the slightly hopeful if somewhat crudely articulated notion that she does believe in a future that is better than the present, in progress and change. Perhaps the “society” she imagines is the same place as the “home” for freaks in *Don Quixote*. Whether it is the future, a parallel dimension, or some type of alternative lifestyle, Acker seems to envision a home for herself and the other freaks of the world somewhere. What defines someone as a freak, why freaks are not “all the same” as everyone else as discussed in *Empire of the Senseless*, and whether or not non-freaks will also have a home in Acker’s “society which [isn’t] just disgust” remains unclear.

Another strategy of Acker's is to use formatting and wordplay to constantly remind the reader that he is reading, pointing back to literature as a method not of evoking empathy or creating a fictional world but rather a way to remind the reader of her purpose. Acker does not want us to get lost in a fictional world of language, feelings, and characters, so she pulls us back to our present situation regularly in almost all of her writing. This pulls the reader away from her far-away utopian vision in order to point out the problems at hand in the present. Acker does this because her novels are not designed as empathy-machines the way most novels are. They are designed to get the reader to consider not the significance of the world of the book but the problems in the physical world the reader occupies. The "authorial voice...that periodically invades the text" forces the reader to remember that he or she is in fact reading, and that this world is the one Acker is critiquing, not the world of her books (Harper 51). The best example of this using formatting is probably in *Blood and Guts in High School*, in which the first few pages contain prose, playwriting, poetry, full-page sketches of close-up genitalia, and a map of the apartment in which the "action" takes place. Acker never stays in one writing style long enough for the reader to get comfortable, always jumping from genre to genre every few pages, and in many of her books inserting the aforementioned charming drawings whenever she deems it appropriate. In *Blood and Guts* she also gives a sardonic book report on *The Scarlet Letter*, and spends several pages on Janey's handwritten notes for learning Persian. In *Don Quixote*, Acker uses some of the same strategies, although no illustrations. She switches randomly into all caps and references the book within the book with subtitles like "Intrusion of a Badly Written Section" (*Don Quixote* 185). She introduces "Mr. and Mrs. Nixon" as characters and then turns them, like many other subjects in the novel, into dogs,

tagging their dialogue as “Mr. Nixon barked” (115). She also names a character “Duranduran,” whose heart is “carved out...with a tiny dagger” (185). In *Empire of the Senseless* she also freely switches between lowercase and capital letters and refers to herself directly: “All I know is that we have to reach this construct. And her name’s Kathy” (*Empire of the Senseless* 34). She calls Baudelaire’s simultaneous contraction of syphilis from and descent into love with his girlfriend “a case of heterosexuality” (51). Without deconstructing it too tediously, this is humor. It’s funny. In the context of Acker’s chaotic and rape-filled novels, it brings the reader back to reality. One character asking another what someone died of, and reading the response, “Probably, death,” takes you out of the fictional realm you’ve been trying to get comfortable in and forces you to acknowledge the fact that your nose is indeed in a book (*Great Expectations* 38). Acker presents her pirated material in a manner that does not allow the reader to fully enter the world of the book without being reminded regularly of the problems she has with our current world.

There is also a call to action in Acker’s work, however subtle, to reclaim one’s identity through writing, stealing, and getting tattoos. In *Empire of the Senseless*, Abhor and Thivai are tattooed often and the detached narrative voice discusses the history and significance of tattoos extensively. When there is “nothing left to do,” Abhor and Thivai “went and got tattooed. Carved into roses” (86). “Carved into roses” is another subtly lovely quote, set apart from the ugliness of the rest of the book, and directly related to the effectiveness of tattoos in reclaiming beauty. It implies permanence and the precision of an artist or a sculptor, creating a brief moment of beauty and longevity. At another point, a sailor arrives at the tattoo shop and “for the first time...felt he had sailed home” (130). He, like the freaks in *Don Quixote*, needs a home, and has found it in the tattoo parlor. Like the

phallogentrism of the literary cannon that Acker cuts up and pastes into her own distinctive voice, tattoos were once a “defamatory brand” but Abhor, Thivai, and the other subjects of *Empire of the Senseless* turn them into “a symbol of a tribe or a dream” (130). In an interview with Andrea Juno, Acker similarly relates tattooing to Julia Kristeva’s idea of “ejection’: when you take that emotion and turn it *in* on itself—which is what tattooing does, or what women do” (Redding 289). Redding goes on to say that the body modifications of which Acker approves (tattooing, scarification, weightlifting, and makeup) are no different than the ones she condemns: extreme dieting, bulimia, anorexia. He says the modifications Acker encourages “strive to enshroud the artifice on which they depend” (Redding 289). However, evidence that tattooing and weightlifting can actually benefit the self-esteem of, in particular, women, seems to undermine the artificiality of these practices (Dowd). Tattooing as a body modification speaks to the importance of the body to Acker: “We live, perceive, and speak, in our bodies and through our bodies” (“Critical Languages” 91). Again in *Empire of the Senseless*, Acker insists that “the power of the tattoo [is] intertwined with the power of those who chose to live beyond the norms of society” (140). This and Acker’s own love for tattoos suggest that she truly does believe in tattooing as a way to stake one’s claim to one’s own body—an important action for women to take if they are indeed rendered “bodi- and voiceless” by our phallogentric society as DFW says (155). Acker’s use of appropriation and tattooing are also relatable to her early desire for piratehood. Another tattoo in *Empire of the Senseless* is “the outlines of a sailing ship. Reminiscence of that dream-time when humans were free” (138). Acker seems to see in pirates and sailing in general a potential for true freedom, and indeed pirates bring to mind a somewhat utopian, if dirty and violent, vision of equality from shipmate to shipmate, no

concept of able-ism as peg-legs and eye-patches are ignored and the disabled perform duties as usual, and the general enticement of being at sea, tied down to nothing and freely floating toward the treasure. Acker may have lamented not being able to become a pirate due to her female-ness, but I argue that she is indeed a literary pirate. She steals from her male counterparts and, as she told Juno, turns their work in on itself, changing its purpose from reaffirming the patriarchal state of things to questioning and challenging it and insisting that women, and everyone else, reclaim their bodies and voices by any means necessary.

Acker's paradoxical focus on rape, violence, and nonsense while seemingly arguing for equality, peace, and identity can be read as a way to cope with the scope of literature and what it can change. She does, according to Brennan, recognize that "postmodernism...does not liberate women" (250). However, even the anti-liberation happening in her novels assists my above argument that she turns the male texts she appropriates against themselves to make them liberatory. The trick is, and Muth understands this, Acker's work cannot be read the same way that we read the male authors she cuts up. Muth discusses a disappointing reading of *Blood and Guts in High School* in which Janey's propagation at the end of the book is seen as a perpetual repetition of the same phallogocentric tragedy that Janey undergoes. "The problem with this approach, however, is that reading *Blood and Guts* as a roughly linear narrative centered on the liberatory struggle of heroine and author alike...upholds the very binary we want the novel to undermine" (Muth 90). This is, of course, the constant problem with reading Acker: she seems to be undercutting patriarchy and encouraging it at the same time. Friedman goes

so far as to say “Acker presents women as accomplices to their own victimization” (41). Redding calls her work “a failure, naturally enough, a shambles, a mess: brash, shrill, petulant, and incoherent” (301). Even Hume points out that Acker’s disruption and destruction of plot and character creates a violence that “attests to a prior system of order still very much operational” (486). In the midst of all this failure, though, there is one passage from *Empire of the Senseless* that seems to speak more to success. She writes,

Ten years ago it seemed possible to destroy language through language: to destroy language which normalizes and controls by cutting that language. Nonsense would attack the empire-making (empirical) empire of language, the prisons of meaning. But this nonsense, since it depended on sense, simply pointed back to the normalizing institutions (134).

According to Hume’s argument that Acker’s fragmentation of plot points back to the system she wants to destroy, this passage should be in reference to Acker’s own work: “this nonsense, since it depended on sense, simply pointed back to the normalizing institutions.” However, Acker is not necessarily talking about herself. She is using past tense, and the passage begins by saying it *used* to seem possible to destroy language through language, by cutting it up. This is a fairly clear reference to Acker’s predecessor William Burroughs, who, along with Brion Gysin, invented and theorized the “cut-up technique”: cutting up books to make new books. It can be read to mean ten years ago it seemed possible to destroy language with language, but now we know it’s not; or it can be read as ten years ago it seemed possible to destroy language with language in this particular way, but Acker is trying it a different way. Maybe Burroughs’ paranoid ramblings “pointed back to the normalizing institutions,” but that does not mean that Acker’s work does the same thing. Acker does not try just to cut up the literature she appropriates but also to

turn it inward and against itself, to “eject” it as Kristeva inspired her to. The other quote which is often used to explain why Acker fails to change the institutions she hates is also from *Empire*: “NOW EAT YOUR MIND.” This, I believe, can also be interpreted in a positive way instead of just meaning that change is futile and self-destruction is the only escape. Instead of eating as an elimination, eating can be read as a consumption, a digestion. In “Critical Languages” Acker writes, “The will turns on, interiorizes or eats itself so that pure power turns into play” (90). Here to “eat” does not seem to require erasure but instead the same ejection or turning against oneself that Acker related to Juno in her interview. “Eat your mind” can mean digest your mind, process it, run it through the sieve that is Acker’s novels and see how it looks different when it comes out.

Acker does not entirely fail in her attempt to deconstruct our phallogocentric society. Her books are nonsense, confusion, and chaos, rife with violence and rape, but this does not just “point back to the normalizing institutions” she is working against. In her work are moments of liberatory beauty and poetry, characters who are only human in fleeting lines but in those lines give the reader hope for overcoming the challenges Acker points out. Her identity as an author and a literary pirate is claimed through her use of formatting and appropriation, never letting the reader forget the woman behind the bizarre words on the page. She encourages tattooing and body modification as a way to take back the body, and therefore the voice, and therefore the identity altogether. This is an important message not just for women and other oppressed groups but for anyone who feels trapped by societal performance. Acker wants you to “eat your mind,” but this does not mean you have

to kill yourself. It means you have to read, to think, to turn the things you hate in on themselves to create an art that liberates you, that liberates anyone who will take the time to understand how it works.

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