

“This book is dedicated to my tattooist”: Corporeal Inscriptions as *Écriture féminine*
in Kathy Acker’s *Empire of the Senseless*

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Abstract

This article reads Kathy Acker’s 1988 novel *Empire of the Senseless* in relation to *écriture féminine* as a specific form of text production. Acker puts French feminist Hélène Cixous’s theory to practice, thus offering a strategy of writing that challenges binarisms and the normative imperatives of a patriarchal order. Writing becomes a productive form of resistance and reinvention, not only on an abstract intertextual meta level, but as a very physical activity: the liberating potential that Cixous and Acker locate in the process of women’s writing is played out in Kathy Acker’s *écriture* in the motif of tattooing. Writing the body is enacted by writing *on the* body as a way of negotiating women’s ‘imprisonment’ in a phallographic culture working to erase its spiritual, corporeal, and political boundaries.

Raise Us From the Dead

1 Set in a speculative future amidst grotesque diseases, revolutionary movements and terrorism, Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) presents two protagonists, Abhor, “part robot, and part black”, (3) and Thivai, a sketchy pirate, venturing through a war-stricken Paris taken over by Algerian immigrants, and defying institutional social norms and regulations. The self-proclaimed terrorists and occasional lovers Abhor and Thivai are drawn into a maelstrom of sadomasochistic homo- and heterosexual relationships, rendering visible the relations within a sexist, incestuous, pedophilic, ableist, capitalist and (not at all entirely fictive) male-dominated order. Carefully outlining the omnipresent struggle for power in a “society [that] is only a filthy trick” (6-7), Kathy Acker’s *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) navigates through the political landscape of the United States in the Reagan Era, focusing on hegemonic structures which cast women as inferior property of men, claimed by literal, sociocultural, and literary fathers, and

(sexually) oppressed and incarcerated by male tormentors.¹ Thivai himself demonstrates a (toxic) fatherly attitude towards Abhor, treating her as his subordinate. Although both of the protagonists' backstories are thoroughly examined, Abhor's childhood is mapped out merely through Thivai's account. This portrayal bereaves Abhor not only of agency but also of the chance to use her experiences as a way of finding a new language and, by extension, identity. Through intertextual references² and the quotation of entire passages from Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), *The Highway Code* (1931) and William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), Acker assembles an identity by—what could be termed—plagiarizing, but—what actually should instead be understood as—the art of 'play-giarizing' by turning the known into the unknown and foregrounding the personal as the political.

2 Focusing on *Empire of the Senseless* this paper will illustrate the role of female imprisonment in Acker's evocation and refutation of sexualized hierarchies both within writing and society. Abhor's education by her literary fathers as much as by her literal father will be read against the backdrop of her eventual physical imprisonment. By continuously shifting between the singular and plural forms of the word 'father,' the text draws attention to the underlying relation between Abhor's biological father and her figurative fathers ranging from literary writers, politicians, police men to lovers. Here, different modes of (physical) writing (tattooing) are forced upon her, as a strategy to deconstruct the liberating process of (physical) female writing and how it is embedded in the plot as well as in its prose style. Acker's novel explores artistic resonances

¹ In this paper I will neither attempt to classify the genre(s) to which *Empire of the Senseless* may belong, nor will I attach meaning to a text that shows little interest in the normative expectations of what meaning might entail. Kathy Acker's ideological approach aims to depict gendered forms of societal injustice such as chauvinism, ableism or capitalism, at times quite drastically and nihilistically, in other instances in a more parodistic fashion, f.e. mocking political figures: "Dr Schreiber was paranoid, schizophrenic, hallucinated, deluded, disassociated, autistic, and ambivalent. In these qualities he resembled the current United States President, Ronald Reagan" (*Empire* 45).

² At the same time, *Empire of the Senseless* takes not only its title from the 1976 French-Japanese art film *L'Empire des sens* (愛のコリーダ), but also incorporates themes from it, such as sexual experimentation and words written in blood onto bodies ("Sada Kichi the two of us forever").

and liberating qualities of writing the self onto the body through tattooing and illustrates how the body as a text can be employed to address phallocracy within writing. By writing onto the body, the merging of ink and blood is evoked both metaphorically and literally (when Abhor writes onto paper with her blood), suggesting that the process of writing cannot be detached from the physical body of the author. Corporeal aspects factor into an argument for the specific qualities of (fe)male writing, and for a radical attempt to push the boundaries of the system of writing. Acker writes herself into the novel, incorporating her physical body in the text. This dedication to a specific way of writing not only emphatically embeds her argument in the text, but also establishes a link to the novel's paratext—*This book is dedicated to my tattooist*—and to Acker's political conviction and suggestion.

3 Acker's writing style displays a strong interest in the repetition not only of certain themes referring to the same semantic field, but, quite literally, of specific words (cf. adjectives) and even entire sentences. While the text offers insights into the materiality of the (human) body, the aim of this paper is not to aestheticize bodily textures as a socio-political commentary on the subjugation of the (fe)male body. Rather, I want to focus on female imprisonment against the backdrop of a male-dominated surveillance state policing any attempts at *écriture féminine*.

4 Hélène Cixous first proposed the concept of *écriture féminine* in her manifesto "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), in which she makes a plea for a radical change in writing and for the liberation of an all-pervasive female imprisonment. She asserts that

woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies . . . woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement. (875)

Cixous' feminist theory suggests that language and writing are a necessary prerequisite for a process of self-understanding, which is equally dependent on the corporeal body as it "vitaly supports the 'logic' of her speech" (881: the female "flesh speaks true" (881) when "she signifies

it with her body” (881). Hence, it is of equal importance to find that one body “to love herself and return in love the body that was ‘born’ to her” (881):

A woman without a body, dumb, blind, can’t possibly be a good fighter. She is reduced to being the servant of the militant male, his shadow. We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing. Inscribe the breath of the whole woman. (880-81)

Cixous’ concept of *écriture féminine* advocates perceiving the physical act of woman’s speaking as inscribed by a drive or desire to be expressed, drawing “her story into history” (881). As much as claiming the right to own one’s body Hélène Cixous argues to (re)consider that “woman [sic] would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs³ (876)”. Instead of perpetuating stereotypical de-classifications of women claiming sovereignty as ‘all lesbians’,⁴ Cixous asks to rethink womankind through the body: to actively contest male hegemony (882).

5 In response to Cixous’ argument that women have been driven away from writing “as violently as from their bodies” (875), the American feminist critic Elaine Showalter claimed that “the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text...[...] describes a Utopian possibility rather than a literary practice” (185, 186), an argument which is acknowledged by Cixous who admits:

with a few rare exceptions, there has not yet been any writing that inscribes femininity; exceptions so rare, in fact, that, after plowing through literature across languages, cultures, and ages, one can only be startled at this vain scouting mission. (878-79)

Accordingly, Nancy Miller refers to *écriture féminine* as a “textuality of the avantgarde” which can be linked to late twentieth-century experimentalism and should be perceived as “a blueprint for the

³ Similar to the process of writing, the production of a song as “a distinctive or characteristic sound or series of sounds” (“song”) relies on the described interaction and—as Cixous proclaims—shows how the “flesh speaks true” (881) and can be understood as the realization of “desires [that] have invented new desires” (876).

⁴ In Acker’s short story “New York in 1979” lesbians are referred to as “women who prefer their own ways to male ways” (“New York” 37). To stress the absurdity of this claim she not only typesets the word ‘lesbian’ in capital letters but also makes use of the rhetoric device of anaphora by repeating the word ‘LESBIAN’ three times.

future⁵” (37). Reading Acker’s poetics in (not only) *Empire of the Senseless* in relation to the concept of *écriture féminine* does provide fruitful insights into the ways in which the author links a distinct interest in the body and its perception in society. The theoretical frame of French feminist thought allows to use Cixous’ proposed “unique empire” (876) of difference as one way of moving past the long tradition of sexist binaries denouncing female creativity (cf. Showalter 187) and claiming that the “text’s author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis” (187). A more inclusive alternative approach to read and evaluate (fe)male writing and to attest to differences starts from the premise that there are a multitude of microscopic varieties that “offer each other new insights or methods” (172) to oppose “conventional modes of explanation, interpretation and analysis” (Grosz 173). Such a critical engagement with writing focuses on ways of channeling desires to produce new desires. Acker’s writing engages in such a process of destabilizing binary thinking in order to find a personal voice to call this “unique empire” (Cixous 876) bound to the correlation of mind and body. Acker, who did all of the illustrations in the novel herself, and who got a similar tattoo to the ‘Dead Fish Fuck’ symbol (*Empire* 176), also literally writes herself into the novel. Thus her actual handwriting in the text—with its natural deviations from print typography—adds the component of the “flesh [speaking] true” (Cixous 881). Although the inaccuracies of each of her strokes can be made visible only by microscopic scrutiny, this stylistic choice enacts *écriture féminine*, reclaiming the interconnectedness of mind and body in writing: “The body does not lie. Language, if it is not propaganda or media blab, is the body; with such language lies are not possible” (“A Few Notes” 12).

⁵ In hope for a better future of human society, *Empire of the Senseless* eventually ends after a 227-page tour de force of Acker’s emphatic engagement with societal injustices towards women on a cautiously positive note: “And then I thought that, one day, maybe, there’d be a human society in a world which is beautiful, a society wasn’t just disgust” (227).

6 Women who have been posited as Other throughout Western (literary) history can reclaim and devise a new language through writing. In this sense, Acker's writing not only deviates from stereotypical perceptions of male and female writing, but draws attention to the fact that "writing novels, women deal with ... the interchange between individual and society" (Spacks 4). This is a crucial aspect of *Empire of the Senseless* and Acker's production of *écriture féminine* (through 'play-giarizing').

7 Acker has spoken about her intentions before the novel's publication in an episode of the *South Bank Show* despite her pronounced "almost uncontrollable desire not to talk about [her] writing" ("A Few Notes" par. 1), which should speak for itself⁶. However, it is crucial to take Acker as author into consideration, as Chris Kraus has pointed out in a 2017 *Guardian* article emphasizing that "she'd become famous by projecting the highly sexualized image craved by male readers; she'd fought for the right to speak⁷ to the culture by any means necessary" (par. 1). Acker's agenda can be read as an attempt to reject the patriarchal system that was imposed on her and as a conscious move against the "ridiculous" (*Kathy Acker* 1984) persistence of the predominance of the 19th Century novel form:

I was revolting against everything I was taught. I mean really, I hated my fathers, you know the people who had taught me. I was angry at them, and so I did exactly what they told me not to do⁸. It's like a little child at first really, but to be very direct against the novels that came to me when I was growing up . . . where I just thought they were superfluous . . . and it didn't have anything to do with me and if it doesn't relate to my life, what do I care? As if I had to think this way, you know? A novel would give me a certain way that I was supposed to think, feel and act, to some extent of course, and I didn't. And if I acted and felt in that way it would be not allowing again the pain of my own life. It's as if being a

⁶ "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" ("A Few Notes" par. 1)

⁷ Chris Kraus notes in *After Kathy Acker* (2017) that "in a certain sense, Acker lied all the time" (14) and "she lied when it was clearly beneficial to her and, she lied even when it was not" (14). Kraus additionally points out that "the lies weren't literal lies, but more a system of magical thought" (14) which underlines Acker's mode of writing a self which is "created through means both within and beyond her control" (15).

⁸ In *Bodies of Work* (1986) Acker goes on to claim that "women need to become literary criminals, break the literary laws and reinvent their own, because the established laws prevent women from presenting the reality of their lives" (x).

female I had to be a male⁹. And I had to think in male terms and there was no female language given me. And I'm sure being a female has a lot do with this and if not wanting centralization and I wanted my own language. (00:09:34-00:11:34)

Thrown Into Nothing

8 For Acker—as well as for Abhor in the novel¹⁰—the desire for her own language is mapped out on her own body, which she perceives as a text to inscribe and alter. This pertains to physical human body as well as to the body of text printed and/or handwritten on a page or even tattooed onto the flesh; it functions as the embodiment of personal desires as well as the representation of identity. I propose to understand Kathy Acker's poetics as perceiving the body both as a text and as a cage that is supposed to be expanded. Hence, whether modifying/rewriting the body physically via bodybuilding and/or tattooing, or metaphorically via spiritual or cultural activities, these processes equally apply to the art of writing. With regard to her own life, while Acker's 'body of work' as a writer is freed from the restrictions of corporeality, her own experienced physical body and its cells slowly disintegrate. Diagnosed with breast cancer in 1996, Kathy Acker's bodily cage was slowly but steadily corroded by cancer. Recounting her experiences while receiving conventional cancer treatment, she wrote in a *Guardian* article titled "The Gift of Disease" (1997) that when "thick straps were placed around [her] arms and legs" she realized that

conventional medicine was reducing [her], quickly, to a body that was only material, to a body without hope and so, without will, to a puppet who, separated by fear from her imagination and vision, would do whatever she was told.

In the aforementioned episode of the *South Bank Show* (1984), Kathy Acker describes her newfound interest in bodybuilding as potential to change the "physical appearance in the world" (00:26:00-00:26:30) and constructs it as a "physical mirror in writing" (00:26:34-00:26:39), both,

⁹ Cf. Patti Smith's 1967 poem "FEMALE", in which 'female' suggests to 'feel male', as something that is picked up in both Acker's writings and this quote.

¹⁰ For such an approach it is necessary to read Acker as part of Abhor and Abhor as part of Acker, much like a Robot made out of individual parts.

through physical strength as well as through shaping the very look of every muscle to be seen. This ties in with her approach to writing the body as text to stretch the possibilities of women's writing and of cultural perceptions of normativity. By "enlarging the idea of female" (00:27:22-00:27:30) this dedication to bodybuilding breaks with stereotypical norms of the 80s. For Kathy Acker bodybuilding is not inevitably a male-dominated field of testosterone-laden endeavors and a vehicle to boost the ego; rather, it is about actively altering the physical body, an endeavor which does not have to be perceived as an either female or male turf. Hence, 'reading' bodybuilding as a male-defined field excludes women and classifies bodies along the lines of a value system defined by those who dominate it. Acker's approach to bodybuilding reflects her exercised *écriture* in writing, which is not interested in simply turning the tables, but in Cixous' words, in facilitating a process through which "the future must be no longer determined by the past" (872).

9 The process of tattooing and writing "directly on human flesh" (*Empire* 130) is about widening and stretching: not only with regard to the skin tissue, but also with regard to the pain threshold: "for the first time [he] found himself forced to pay attention to the pain. His pain" (*Empire* 138). Both the skin tissue and the endurance of pain are expanded over time; the tattoo foregrounds the continuous change of the skin tissue resulting in the fading of the inscribed ink on the flesh. In the merging of ink and blood tattooing can be evaluated as a process in which "dreams are made actual through pain" (138). Writing as "tattooing or marking directly on their own flesh" (136) is "about your own beauty" (136). The idea that "blood (is making) the body move" (139) is precisely what Kathy Acker's practice of an embodied *écriture féminine* is trying to achieve: the distinct involvement of the body in writing enables what Hélène Cixous calls putting "her into history" (881) and evokes "desires [that] have invented new desires" (876) to let the flesh speak true, projecting the potentiality of a "society which wasn't just disgust" (*Empire* 227) and freeing women from their phallogocentric prison.

Elegy for the World of the Fathers

10 *Empire of the Senseless*' first chapter is called "Elegy for the World of the Fathers" and sets the tone for the narrative as it centers on men—and thus on the exclusion of women. When turning the page, the repetition of the same sentence remains the sole piece of visible visual information to be extracted. The novel's first subchapter "Rape by the Father" (3) reiterates the violent emphasis on the father figure. Considering the paratext (*This book is dedicated to my tattooist*), this corresponds to the working mechanisms of actual tattooing as repeated inscription of the same piece of information onto a distinctly chosen spot on the body: The engraving of information (ink) onto the body (of the text) secures the lasting characteristics of a tattoo (or Kathy Acker's message in the novel's opening). In this way, the opening sentences of the novel are not only effective in inscribing a message but also affective regarding its actual content and (unpleasant) reading experience, just like a tattoo, which works both on an effective as well as an affective level throughout the process.

11 The phrase 'Elegy for the World of the Fathers' refers to an all-encompassing ("world") patriarchal system. It evokes Kathy Acker's remarks on feeling entrapped in a world of her (literary) fathers as well as political leaders, whose language she had to learn and consequently learned to hate. The word 'elegy' calls upon at least three readings: First, derived from the Greek *elegeia* (ἐλεγεία¹¹), the elegy must be considered as transition from the weight of grieving to the praise of a lost unique love and eventually to a farewell, ushering in something new emerging out of the burden of death. Acker's distinct use of the 'World of the Fathers' invites tracing her texts back to other texts, reading her *écriture* as being (mostly) made up of plagiarized/play-giarized male voices. However, rather than restricting her to these voices, I argue that this careful expression

¹¹ For a closer historical analysis of the term 'elegy' cf. Niklas Holzberg's *die Römische Liebeselegie* (1990).

of sorrow through the elegy implies the emergence of her *new* form of writing out of the death of an old one. Second, an elegy can be “a song or poem expressing sorrow or lamentation especially for one who is dead” (“Elegy”), used as the utopian setup for a world where fathers no longer reign and equality can be achieved for both—or rather all—sexes. Third, alternatively, the elegy can be read as men’s realization that ‘their’ world has been altered/rewritten by women: as Thivai does not allow Abhor to narrate her experience of childhood, the elegy might refer to his mourning of the changing societal order at a time when the so-called culture wars seeped into many fields of US society, but were fought out most visibly in the arts. At the forefront of this movement were women artists such as Cindy Sherman, Nan Goldin or Barbara Kruger who made use of female bodies (including their own) to address sexism and violence towards women igniting a public debate about women’s rights as well as about the funding of the arts.

Rape by the Father

12 The novel opens with a subchapter called “Rape by the Father (Abhor through Thivai),” in which Abhor’s childhood is narrated in relation to the experience of police brutality towards her grandmother (“part of the police’s duty has always been to combine against all who aren’t them and their own” 6), her father’s alpha-male attitude towards women, and the serial rape she had to endure. The constant usage of the word ‘father’ or ‘daddy’ throughout the book corresponds to what novelist Alexandra Kleeman¹² in her essay “The Future Is a Struggle” (2018) refers to as the “father-fucking societal ego of her time” (par. 1). The sole desire of Abhor’s father in life was to get “married because he wanted to propagate himself once” (*Empire* 9). The stark usage of the

¹² In her debut novel *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine* (2012) Alexandra Kleeman addresses the issues of a hyper consumerist society and much like Kathy Acker does so by employing the female body, depicting aspects of body shaming and/or psychological disorders based on a perception of the body against the backdrop of a media landscape with TV shows where female bodies are appraised by rating systems from 1-10, or where ‘locker-room talk’ enters the discourse.

personal pronoun ‘he’ and ‘his, him’¹³ in the novel emphasizes the father owning the child, Abhor, and the ability to act out phantasies of handling a human being like a blank sheet of paper, a *tabula rasa*, like an extension of the self. Abhor—or “Abhorra” (10) to emphasize her femaleness—has no agency, neither in her upbringing, being “educated the way he had been educated” (9) nor by ways of telling her story as Thivai’s writing of her childhood reveals. Much like the father’s objectification of Abhor, Thivai’s writing of her functions like a double-layered prison:

The only man she ever worshipped was my father. He didn’t care about her. He married her to have me. He cared about me. By him. His. He educated me. I was educated the way he had been educated. I looked like him. I smelled like him. I learned like him. My father had propagated. (9)

The complete erasure of the mother in this process foregrounds Abhor’s being not only his property (and extension), but also emphasizes the exclusive paternal role in bringing her into existence in this world.

13 The criticism of a patriarchal system forcing women to learn about themselves through its language is taken up in Acker’s “Dead Doll Humility” (1990), where she talks about the god-like status of male writers casting women as inanimate objects of pleasure:

the writer’s voice was a process, how he had forced the language to obey him, his will. The writer’s voice is the voice of the writer-as-God . . . All these male poets want to be the top poet, as if, since they can’t be a dictator in the political realms can be dictator of this world. (“Dead Doll” par. 10-11)

From the novel’s exposition onwards women are foregrounded as having no place in society other than in subservience to men: “This is what Abhor, who’s my partner, part robot, and part black; told me was her childhood” (3). The juncture between the dehumanization of Abhor in terms of

¹³ Dodie Bellamy observes in her 2015 essay “Digging Through Kathy Acker’s Stuff” that Kathy Acker’s repeated use of the dominant father figure who leaves the family behind is a trope that can be found in most of her writing, such as a collection of texts entitled *Hannibal Lecter, My Father* (1991) or a chapter called “Letters from my Mother to my Father” in *My Mother: demonology, a novel* to name just a few (par. 20). At the same time, the stark use of male personal pronouns is present, for instance, in her short story “New York in 1979” (1981) in which the pimp (father or daddy) figure is referred to by capitalizing “Him” (“New York” 36), thus elevating the nameless male protagonist who represents *any* man to the status of a God. This ties in with Acker’s stance on “the father-fucking societal ego of her time” (Kleeman par. 1) and supports her argument of a pervasive female imprisonment in a phallogocentric system.

gender and race emphasizes both concepts as socio-cultural constructions. Moreover, labeling Abhor as part robot¹⁴ and ‘not’ as part cyborg deprives her of the liberating qualities the term cyborg entails. Instead, Abhor as “part robot” (3) is presented as a programmable species, as “a construct” (34) destined for the use of any governing male authority. Therefore, the modes of Abhor’s emancipation through writing in jail are a crucial aspect of her finding a language of resistance and writing herself out of her physical and psychological enclosure.

14 In the opening section “In Honour of the Arabs” (*Empire* 53) of “Alone,” the second part of *Empire of the Senseless*, Abhor begins to speak, sharing her experiences written in Farsi. *Empire of the Senseless* is not the only example of Kathy Acker weaving Farsi into her writing. Other texts are “A Farsi Lesson” in *My Mother, Demonology* (1993), the section entitled “Persian Poems” in *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984), and the entire act III in “The Birth of the Poet” (1981). Allowing her to “say the unknowable in Persian” (*Empire* 53), Kathy Acker uses Farsi as a metaphor for writing herself out of a Western, i.e., Eurocentric patriarchal framework and for resisting a concomitant Western worldview:

I thought, as I wrote this section, that today, as the “Great Powers,” as they formerly known, meet and meld economically, then culturally, as more and more of the known world goes Cola-Cola and McDonalds, only the Muslim world resists . . . I thought, for Westerners today, for us, the other is now Muslim. In my book, when the Algerians take over Paris, I have a society not defined by the oedipal taboo. (“A Few Notes” 12)

Resisting the normative articulation of the self in English, Acker’s characters use “زبان شر از شدن” (language to get rid of language) (*Blood* 76) (Tanti 110). Acker’s multilingual approach tests out the potential of language and its limits. Considering that “the war is on the language level” (*My Death* 267), this also indicates the (non)translatability of languages which

¹⁴ The term robot, which is derived from the Czech “robota” (statute labor) first appeared in Karel Čapek's play R.U.R. (1920), and the term’s original definition derives from the expectation of a programmable machine/computer that is capable of carrying out a complex set of actions automatically and to be guided by an external—oftentimes superior—entity (SF encyclopedia).

“posit anatomy as the ground of sexual politics and social identities that are unquestioned in English” (Tanti 110). Not able to break out of the oedipal taboo, Acker acknowledges that she “found herself at the end of the second part of a dialectical argument [and that she] was back to [her] original question: In a society defined by phallic centrism or by prison, how is it possible to be happy?” (“A Few Notes” 13).

The Violence of Those Who Are Alone In Jail / The Violence Of Roses

15 The motif of women in prison is a recurring trope in various narrative forms across different media ranging from folklore to literature to film¹⁵. *Empire of the Senseless* is linked to this canon of female imprisonment: In the final moments of the novel Abhor’s imprisonment and her ability to write in order to break out of the prison signal the desire to find a language to write oneself out of a phallogocentric system. Here, as much as in Abhor’s father-centric education or Thivai’s in narration of her childhood experiences, men attempt to define her and try to make her “a great woman writer” (205):

escaping from jail is a difficult and dangerous thing for a man to do. ‘But I’m not a man.’ ‘Then you’re not going to get out of jail,’ Mark said . . . A man has to endure pain and more severe tribulations to show that he has the power to make someone of himself. Being maimed is the way a man show’s he’s a man. (202)

The multilayered imprisonment of Abhor equally pertains to her education as a child introduced to and incarcerated by a language and reason based on her father’s desires/ the Law of the Father, as well as to the way Thivai tells her story robbing her of the possibility to narrate her experiences to develop her own story/self. Similarly, attempting to teach her how to write like a “great woman

¹⁵ Examples range from Rapunzel locked away in her tower, the heroine of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Maria: or, the Wrongs of Woman* (1798) who is imprisoned in an insane asylum by her husband and learns to write to break out, Jane Austen’s heroines who are faced with actual and metaphorical, spatial, and institutional prisons, to Sylvia Plath’s controversial Holocaust metaphor in her poem “Daddy” (1962) as an expression of psychological imprisonment, to exploitation films such as *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* in which sadistic experiments on women test their capabilities of enduring more pain than men. To this day the trope is regularly recycled and revisited in shows such as *Orange Is the New Black* (2013) or the television movie *Prison Break: The Final Break* (2009).

writer” (205) cannot not result in the emergence of Abhor’s own language as the foundation of great writing either, but instead mirrors male desires and perceptions of woman as functioning robot-like in the service of male needs and laws. This education calls upon the literary fathers whom Acker “hated ... [as] the people who had taught [her]” (*Kathy Acker* 1984) creating the false illusion of wanting to help her out of imprisonment (“‘you’ve written your name properly. That’s how you write your name.’ Abhor felt she had made progress in writing. It’s necessary to make a child feel wanted.” *Empire* 205).

16 Mark and Thivai belittle Abhor by telling her that to be “as great as a man, she’d have to learn how to endure tribulations even more severe than pain and still keep her mouth shut” (*Empire* 203) in reference to the literary tradition of highly eroticized and violently sadistic experiments on female prisoners testing their higher pain endurance level compared to men¹⁶. The description of this process of writing equipped with “huge safety pins so she could draw lots of blood out of her skin with which to write down lots of memoirs” (202) evokes Kathy Acker’s agenda of inscribing her body as a text, as the body not only remembers—in terms of a moving scar tissue of inflicted injuries or applied tattoos—, but is also a “unique empire” (Cixous 876). Enduring pain is closely linked to the idea of writing and of freeing oneself, as all three acts are tied to Abhor as an individual who writes in her own blood on her skin, putting her physicality onto the page and inserting herself into her own story.

17 After finally having escaped prison, Abhor is able to write, taking her life—and the novel—out of men’s hands and incorporating her own story into it, as the chapter’s title indicates: “Abhor speaks” (*Empire* 209). Starting with a letter to Mark and Thivai, Abhor invokes her bodily experiences of writing: “I feel like I’m taking layers of my own epidermis, which are layers of still freshly bloody scar tissue, black brown and red, and tearing each one of them off so more and more

¹⁶ Cf. *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS*, where Ilsa, as the commandant of the Nazi prison camp, conducts experiments on men.

of my blood shoots into your face. This is what writing is to me a woman” (210). Concluding that “the whole world is men’s bloody fantasies” (210), Abhor depicts Thivai’s dominant handling of her as a way of matching her passivity to his alpha activity: “Thivai decided he was going to be a pirate. Therefore: we were going to be pirates. If I didn’t want to be a pirate, I had to be a victim. Because, if I didn’t want to be a pirate, I was rejecting all that he is” (210).

18 Riding a motorbike—a clichéd metaphor for freedom and individuality—Abhor attempts to re-write *The Highway Code*, or at least to rip the passages out that make no sense to her: “a biker should keep his (I had to substitute *her* here, but I didn’t think that changed its sense) bike in good condition” (*Empire* 213). The motorcycle as the automotive expression of freedom and the highway, as surface on which this freedom is enacted, is stereotypically connoted as male territory, where cars, as the extensions of male power struggles, rule. Abhor’s subversive (re)writing of *The Highway Code*—as much as Kathy Acker’s subversive (re)writing of the novels of her literary fathers—is a form of female empowerment, freeing women of their chains working towards escape. Foregrounding *The Highway Code* inserted into the text, the novel shifts the idea of what language could do and links it back to the idea of a tattoo design, a visual emblem, that “summed up all the other pictures” (221): namely, a dagger driven through a rose, together with the motto “Discipline and Anarchy”¹⁷ to sum up Abhor’s quest for self as well as Kathy Acker’s agenda to reject her imprisonment in a patriarchal system of languages (Dillard par. 10). Using the very language she rejects against the system she criticizes Acker asks to read her work as a way to fight back:

If a work is immediate enough, alive enough, the proper response isn’t to be academic, to write about it, but to use it, to go on. By using each other, each other’s texts, we keep on living, imagining, making, fucking, and we fight this society to death. (“A Few Notes” par.6)

¹⁷ cf. Joseph Conte’s essay “Discipline and Anarchy: Disrupted Codes in Kathy Acker’s *Empire of the Senseless*” (2000) for a more specific focus on the anarchic qualities of Abhor’s character in the novel.

The Beginning of Criminality/The Beginning of Morning

19 Following Acker's strategy of using others' texts in order to find her own voice is to reconsider the notion of originality: "If there is a basic lesson to be learned from poststructuralist theory, it may well be that our words are never our own and that we are less "original" than we sometimes like to believe" (Berressem 1). As much as our words are not 'ours', ideas are never truly ours as well, as Acker points out:

Shakespeare and company certainly stole from, copied each other's writings. Before them, the Greeks didn't bother making up any new stories. I suspect that the ideology of creativity started when the bourgeoisie—when they rose up in all their splendor, as the history books put it—made a capitalistic marketplace for books. Today a writer earns money or a living by selling copyright, ownership to words. We all do it, we writers, this scam, because we need to earn money, only most don't admit it's a scam. Nobody *really* owns nothing. Dead men don't fuck . . . you can make, but you don't create. Only the incredible egotism that resulted from a belief in phallic centricism could have come up with the notion of creativity. ("A Few Notes" 9-10)

Realizing and foregrounding this, one is able to distill one's own voice from all the other voices and amid those other voices to make oneself heard. In this context far too often men are attested the profoundness and unique creativity of a 'troubled genius', whereas ('their') women (and their artistic endeavors) are 1) defined by their male partners, and/or 2) are often blamed for being 'difficult, unstable and emotional'¹⁸. In this context Kathy Acker's voice emerges as a plea for an *écriture féminine*. Acker oscillates between boundaries of genre, gender and other ascriptions both

¹⁸ This is something most recently connected to Christine Blasey Ford in her sexual assault allegations against Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh, as she has been denounced by alt-right news media outlets and Republican politicians alike as 'too emotional to be trusted' (which she never was!). On the other hand Kavanaugh's emotional outbursts and conspiracy-inflected statements throughout the hearing have been portrayed by the conservative media as signs of a man in distress, because "his family has been under attack" (Rosenberg par. 12). Whereas Brett Kavanaugh has successfully ascended to the Supreme Court of the United States, Christine Blasey Ford was forced to move four times, hire private security and is not able to resume her teaching at Palo Alto University (Mak). See also Michelle Zauner's interview "Gender Diaries: Japanese Breakfast" (2019), in which she speaks about the difference in interviewing male and female musicians: "So sometimes when I see interviews with male musicians it can be a bit irritating to see them not being asked about all these questions about their character and their identities and their experience, and solely being asked the technical decision-making that went behind their work." (TC: 00:02:15-00:02:30). Famous couples like Yoko Ono and John Lennon, June Carter Cash and Johnny Cash, Courtney Love and Kurt Cobain, Zelda Sayre and F. Scott Fitzgerald, Veza Taubner-Calderon and Elias Canetti come to mind.

in form and content, proposing a voice which does not pretend to be original, but which is certainly a ‘new’ take on writing which makes her stand out:

If I had made up this journey, it wouldn’t have interested me . . . I make up nothing: I am a reader and take notes on what I read. Whether it’s good writing or bad by academic standards doesn’t interest me. It never has. What is, simply is as it is. Of course I am interested in learning, in what I don’t know, understanding, and if this is the “MAKE IT NEW” that Pound meant, then I subscribe to that tradition. (“A Few Notes” 13)

20 Focusing on the process of tattooing as a vantage point from which to study Kathy Acker’s novel *Empire of the Senseless* my reading may appear as tracing minor aspects or tiny dots in the larger scheme of her writing; but like sentences tattoos are nothing but a careful repetition of tiny dots, which morph into a more significant larger design over time. Hence, linking any of the novel’s tiny dots to the process of tattooing enables to admire the minute details of Kathy Acker’s poetics. If certain dots are already so painful as to make anyone experience a newfound madness, perhaps it is time now more than ever to “let our madness turn from insanity into anger” (*Empire* 169).

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