

# Gender and the Labyrinth

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## Abstract:

This essay analyses the labyrinthine nature of Kathy Acker's texts "Seeing Gender" (1995), *Blood and Guts in High School* (1979, publ. 1984) and *Empire of the Senseless* (1988). An understanding of Acker's writing as a re-writing of the concepts of sex and gender will be linked to her negotiation of concepts of corporeality and temporality as forms of entrapment of the self.

## Introduction

1 While several monographs have been published about Acker's writing techniques and the literary form of her works, little has been said about the concise structure of her works. According to Carla Harryman's analysis Kathy Acker's writing can be seen as a labyrinthine architecture akin to the notion of literary architecture conveyed in Denis Hollier's *Against Architecture* ("Acker un-formed" 36 -37). Although Hollier's monograph is not part of Acker's personal library, a two page teaching sheet written by her and found in her personal library refers to (page 59 of) Hollier's book: "p. 59 Ariadne's thread as it weaves the labyrinth becomes a Gordian knot, a shirt that covers the body by becoming it, for it adheres to the body. In this sense, the labyrinth is Ariadne's Thread." Moreover, architecture is also the term with which Acker describes her own aspirations as a young writer: "Having been trained as a poet, I was, and still am, interested in verbal architecture, in language and how language works" (*Young Lust*, viii). Making use of the traces left in Kathy Acker's personal library, the following analysis will look into the intricacies of Acker's labyrinthine architecture.

2 Acker makes three references to the labyrinth in her essay collection *Bodies of Work* (1997), two of which occur in her published texts about other writers, "The Words to Say It" (1994) and "Seeing Gender" (1995). An additional source of reference is Acker's personal library, situated in the English department at the University of Cologne, containing 6054 books, comics, magazines, 45 letters and two teaching sheets which Acker wrote for her classes at the San Francisco Art Institute. The annotations she left in these materials can help to reconstruct her notion of the labyrinthine text.<sup>1</sup> The first two of the four parts of this paper will relate Acker's essays on labyrinthine writing to the annotations left in her personal library, with a special focus on Bataille's essay "The Labyrinth" (1935).

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<sup>1</sup> The books and contents thereof will be referenced in the bibliography in the order of Cabinets of the Reading Room in order in, i.e. C1-Q15, and the shelf number of each cabinet, i.e. S1-S6, in order to account for the discoveries made, for example (D2/S3) or (O13/S5).

3 In her introduction to *Young Lust* (1989) Acker had already taken up the concept of the labyrinth as a concept of art derived from the myth of Daedalus, who built a labyrinth for the King of Crete to contain the human/animal Minotaur, a concept she reformulated in “Moving into Wonder” (1995): “The labyrinth, that construction of Daedalus’s covered up the origin of art. Covered up the knowledge that art was, and so is, born out of rape or the denial of women and born out of political hegemony” (97) and the trap of the concept of linear time (ibid.). At the same time, however, the creation of a textual labyrinth might serve as a form of resistance against patriarchal power and political hegemony, which Acker recognized in the writing of de Sade (Acker “The Words to Say It” 79). In this sense, Acker’s texts might be understood as an exercise in the (doing and) undoing of the labyrinth as proposed in “Moving into Wonder”: “. . . let us, by changing the linearity of time, deconstruct the labyrinth and see what the women who are in its center are doing. Let us see what is now central” (97). Following this trajectory the third and fourth part of this essay will trace the textual and temporal structure of *Blood and Guts in High School* and of *Empire of the Senseless* respectively.

### **Understanding the Labyrinth Part 1: Corruption**

4 The starting point for this analysis is Acker's essay “The Words to Say It” (1994), in which she analyzes the labyrinthine aspects of de Sade's texts. She distinguishes between two labyrinthine functions within Sade’s textual architecture, namely corruption and seduction (Acker “The Words to Say It” 67). The first serves to corrupt the reader and the values the reader believes in by presenting specific societal values in terms of corruption within the characters of the story as indicated in Acker's title of the first part of her essay: “1. To write in order to lead the reader into a labyrinth from which the reader cannot emerge without destroying the world” (“The Words to Say It” 66). The second aspect is that of seduction, or in Acker's words: “II. Reading a tale by De Sade: Writing or reading whose only purpose is to destroy itself” (“The Words to Say It” 71). Writing and reading in this context become indistinguishable, firstly because the author’s subject of writing is inevitably also a reading, and secondly, because the reader, if truly corrupted by reading, will rewrite or, in a Nietzschean vein, reevaluate given societal values.

5 The second aspect, de Sade’s labyrinth within the labyrinth, is constructed out of mirrors, as Acker states in her analysis of *Florville and Courval, or the Works of Fate* (1788):

Just as there were two poles, good and evil, or the husband and his ex-wife, in the outside story, here the reader, through Mademoiselle de Florville, meets Madame de Lérince whose soul is beautiful (and, presumably, whose body does not exist) and Madame de Verquin in whom ‘frivolity, the taste of pleasure, and independence’ reign supreme. (“The Words to Say It” 73)

The two poles within de Sade's texts correspond to what Bataille termed center and margin (175) in his essay "The Labyrinth". In de Sade's text, as told by Acker, we only see the polar opposition of these configurations through a third figure, the second labyrinth being constituted through the first.

6 Acker's reading of de Sade can be related to her essay "Seeing Gender" as a textual structural labyrinth consisting of an outside framework provided by introduction and conclusion, and a central text retelling Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (1871). This central text is a text constructed of mirrors corresponding to the labyrinth of seduction: "A mirror of a mirror: a labyrinth" (Acker "Seeing Gender" 162). Before analyzing this latter labyrinthine structure, however, it is necessary to analyze the frame of Acker's essay. The question of female agency is Acker's core question here, dealing with what Bataille called "ipseity", i.e. selfhood (173), in his conceptualization of the labyrinth.

7 "Seeing Gender" asks if gender is constituted exclusively by or beyond language, and if there is a female gender not constituted through patriarchal categories. Acker begins retelling a childhood memory of not being allowed to become a pirate, and finally realizing that this was due to her being a girl ("Seeing Gender" 158-159). It is here that Bataille's principle of insufficiency can be applied, according to which each individual sees others "unworthy of being" and thereby contests their existence in light of one's own reality (172).

8 Notions of femininity - girlhood and womanhood - are configured through institutional and cultural practices in accordance with specific discourses and fields of knowledge. For Bataille, knowledge and intellect suppress the forces of being: "'Being' increases in the tumultuous agitation of a life that knows no limits; it wastes away and disappears if he who is at the same time 'being' and knowledge mutilates himself by reducing himself to knowledge" (172). This contestation of her own being can be found in Acker's essay in the language used to define her: "For me, language was being. There was no entry for me into language" ("Seeing Gender" 161). Or, as stated in *Blood and Guts in High School*: "For 2,000 years you've had the nerve to tell women who we are. We use your words; we eat your food. Every way we get money has to be a crime. We are plagiarists, liars, and criminals" (132).

9 Like Bataille, Acker sets up an opposition between knowledge in terms of language and the body. In the edition of Bataille's *Visions of Excess* found in her personal library, Acker annotated a passage of "The Labyrinth" dealing with the contestation of the body by the rationalizing mind, with the note "The Guts" (172). This annotation might allude to Hollier's analysis of Bataille's writing, according to which "Labyrinthine discourse is decapitated

discourse, uttered by the absence of the head” (*Against Architecture* 64). This decapitated discourse, however, can be found only at the end of “Seeing Gender”, when Acker promotes the idea of languages of the body as opposed to ordinary spoken languages, a distinction similar to Kristeva’s differentiation of semiotic flux and symbolic language:

The semiotic is articulated by flow and marks: facilitation energy transfers, the cutting up of the corporeal and social continuum as well as that of signifying material, the establishment of a distinctiveness and its ordering a pulsating chora, in a rhythmic but nonexpressive totality. (Kristeva 40)

In Acker’s essay the flows and marks, rhythms and energies end in an auto-erotic stream of consciousness in which the body touches upon itself. “Seeing Gender” thus enacts a proposition Acker had already put forward in two other essays published in 1993, namely “Against Ordinary Language” and “Reasons to Get Happy”, using body building and masturbation respectively to outline such a language. “Seeing Gender” adds the realm of dreams to this outline, which is corporeal and 'real', rather than constructed and confined by grammar or spelling, proper words and proper language, which are thus subversively corrupted and transformed. Notably, Acker had already undertaken a similar experiment with Alan Sondheim in the *Blue Tape* (1972) and its follow-up (1974). Here sexual pleasure provided by one partner disrupts the intellectual discourse the other partner is trying to maintain. Sexual pleasure thus decapitates the analytic capacity which is supposed to rule everyday existence in a society where rationality is cast in the mind/body dichotomy, i.e. the Cartesian gap, which according to Acker separates us from ourselves (“Against Ordinary Language” 150).

### **Understanding the Labyrinth Part II: Seduction**

10 The second labyrinth at the center of “Seeing Gender” retells the story of Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, posing questions about gender, language and the body. According to Judith Butler’s definition of gender as a reiteration of norms, everyday practices and discourses (“Bodies that Matter” 12-13), the way we perceive sex is determined by the lens of social constructs. For Butler the body can parody and subvert discourses, but her concept of performativity seems to exclude the body as affective source of disruption. In many ways, Butler’s theory never truly accounts for nature. By contrast Acker aims at redefining the body and by implication the concept of 'nature' as individualized, creative, and in flux.

11 The question Acker poses in her re-reading of *Through the Looking-Glass* is how women are seduced into patriarchy and a concomitant notion of self-hood. This notion of self-hood, which is central to Bataille’s “The Labyrinth” as ipseity (173), is a notion of selfhood as fundamentally unstable:

*A man is only a particle inserted in unstable and entangled wholes.* These wholes are composed in personal life in the form of multiple possibilities, starting with a *knowledge* that is crossed like a threshold—and existence of the particle can in way be isolated from this composition, which agitates it in the midst of a whirlwind of ephemerids. (original emphasis; 174)

The individual is not only unstable and subject to change, but also part of a greater structure, which establishes itself as knowledge. This knowledge becomes a gravitational center around which the individual organizes the world: “The universal god destroys rather than supports the human aggregates that raise his ghost” (175). In “Seeing Gender” this divine oppression is embodied by patriarchal society, dictating a specific knowledge to women about themselves, which they - entangled in this organizational structure - are forced to reiterate and revalidate, as the language given to them is the only one at their disposal.

12 Bataille, as already cited, sees the knowledge created by society as an entity to be crossed like a threshold. Traveling from one pole of this labyrinth of knowledge to its center, one discovers that this seemingly universal concept or idea of life is, in fact, an illusion, a nothingness invoking laughter, a plaything Bataille terms a monster (177) in reference to the Latin origin of the word. Acker herself commented upon the notion of monstrum as ‘wonder’ in “Moving into Wonder” (95) as well as annotating the last passage in Bataille’s essay with the words “transcendence = transformation” (177). And while we can see this transcendence and transformation of symbolic language through a semiotic flow which is both associative and auto-erotic, there still remains the question, if there is a similar threshold to be crossed within the mirror labyrinth embedded in the middle part of her essay.

13 In “Seeing Gender” Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* is retold in six episodes (1. The Jabberwocky 2. The Forest, 3. Tweedledee and Tweedledum, 4. Humpty Dumpty, 5. The Old Knight, 6. The Coronation). Each episode contains a motif for which Alice, the protagonist, serves as what Victor Shklovsky calls a “threading device” (68), rendering the story a mirror labyrinth in the sense described by Acker in “The Words to Say It”: “The first poem is found in a looking-glass book and so, to be comprehended, must be read in a mirror. A mirror of a mirror: a labyrinth” (“Seeing Gender” 162). Each episode of the story, thus, constitutes a mirror, reflecting its predecessor in sequence. In the fifth episode, all previous episodes are accounted for by the old knight, who retells them as four different versions of his own story, tying them together to a self-reflective a narrative (Acker “Seeing Gender” 165). The last episode of the story constitutes Alice’s realization of what she has become and what her position in society is.

14 The first part, “Jabberwocky”, is read by Acker as a version of the Oedipus myth stripped of women. This is a clear evocation of Irigaray’s *Je, tu, nous* (1993), in which it is

stated that the masculine and the neuter in French are possessed by the same masculine pronoun (31-32). The Jabberwocky here is the neuter, while in Oedipus the sphinx, an animal body with a women's head takes its place. At the same time, the father and son entertain a homosocial bound in "Jabberwocky", whereas in the Oedipus myth the son murders the father in order to marry his mother, Jocasta. In the oedipal myth the female body, thus, both as embodiment of monstrous nature, i.e. the sphinx, as well as 'proper' social role of wife and mother, i.e. Jocasta, is the main cause for the discord between father and son, a disrupter of the social bond. In "Jabberwocky", on the other hand, the lack of women and femininity turns the monster into a neuter which can be conquered. Only by exclusion of women is a homosexual bond secure and the subjugation of nature guaranteed, as without the female gender all men are prone to desire each other. Women in the oedipal myth, thus, both take the place of an object to be desired as well as the place of a monstrous nature to be conquered. Women in the oedipal myth, thus, embody a paradox that disrupts the homosocial bond between men, while the exclusion of women from language is what, for Acker, rendered the Jabberwocky-Poem in her annotated edition of *Through the Looking Glass* non-sensical:

T'was a brillig, and the slithy toves  
 Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:  
 All mimsy we're the borogoves,  
 And th mome raths outgrabe. (Carroll 134)

15 The language from which Alice finds herself excluded is visualized in the forest she is lost in during the second part of the story. This fairy tale motif is reminiscent of the first lines of *The Divine Comedy* (1320) in which Dante finds himself lost within the forest after having strayed from the path of righteousness (3) giving himself up to deadly passions, such as the desires of the body. Acker had already used this theme of straying from a specific prescribed path in *Blood and Guts in High School*, describing Pearl from Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) as someone who strays from the "logic road" of Capitalism (94). Similarly, in *Empire of the Senseless* the cyborg protagonist Abhor is fined for bypassing junctions (224) after having found the Highway Code, which, in the novel, both metaphorically and humorously stands in for the Code by which the matrix of society can be hacked. Alice, however, contrary to these two figures is lost, because she has not yet found a language of her own in a patriarchal society.

16 Alice's next encounter, with Tweedledee and Tweedledum, functions as what Luce Irigaray called the "set-up stage of men's representation" (*The Speculum of Other Woman* 251), as they convince Alice that she is nothing but someone else's dream and thus will cease to exist, should this person wake up ("Seeing Gender" 164). The twins suggest to Alice that she, like them, has no reality of her own. Tweedledum, here, acts as the reaffirmation of Tweedledee,

thus, lending their suggestion a majority vote against which Alice cannot stand. Alice, realizing that she has no identity of her own, then encounters Humpty Dumpty, characterized by Acker as the person “. . . who can take care of her reality or essence problem” (“Seeing Gender” 164). Constantly on the threshold, sitting on top of a big wall he can fall from, Humpty Dumpty states that he has exact control over language. However, he is only in control of language insofar as he is in control over those who conform to the language he speaks. Seen from this perspective, Tweedledee and Tweedledum’s statement that Alice is merely someone else’s dream is merely a seduction, meant to lure her away from her own desires and into acting in compliance with the desires of the dreamer.

17 If the reality Alice is inhabiting is – as Tweedledee and Tweedledum stated – merely someone else’s dream, then Alice’s fifth encounter, the old Knight, is merely another re-incarnation of her previous encounters. Lamenting his own loneliness in four different songs – the exact number of motifs so far encountered in Alice story –, he reflects upon the ordeals that he has caused her in everything she has endured so far. Born out of self-pity not empathy for the struggles Alice had to endure, the old Knight’s contrition is merely a rhetorical ruse set-up to put his own interests first. Accepting the paradox between speech and actions, between verbal love and coercion, Alice becomes a queen, her coronation symbolizing her initiation into the world of men: “She has been initiated into language, into the reality of the world, for she has learned that, being female, she has no possible existence.”(Acker “Seeing Gender” 165). Alice’s empowerment proves an elusive seduction when, in an act of anger she wants to destroy the patriarchal world she is living in, grabbing the red queen, as if she were her enemy: “But she is only shaking a helpless kitten. She is destroying nothing. Can I escape by stopping reading?” (“Seeing Gender” 166)

18 As pointed out before, Alice functions as a threading machine stitching different motifs together to a story with which Acker then identifies: “I am Alice who ran into a book in order to find herself. I have found only reiterations, the mimesis of patriarchy, or my inability to be. No body anywhere” (“Seeing Gender” 166). This failure to find her own body in language and patriarchal structure, however, is a moment in which the reader is confronted with a false ipseity, or representation of the self, which offers women nothing but the illusion of their own power. Realizing this falsity means realizing that women actually do have power, but are turned away from it by being turned away from their own desires and socialized to behave in norm-conforming ways. Gender, in these terms, is a specific socialization of sex, which Acker desires to overturn.

### Understanding the Labyrinth III: Blood and Guts in High School

19 In this context a close inspection of Kathy Acker's private library can shed light on her writing technique. Acker, for instance, heavily annotated William S. Burroughs's *The Exterminator* (1973), particularly the chapter "You Die. We Die. Wind Die", which consists of a story within a story within a story about Mr. Bentley meeting with Mr. Capwell after reading a story about Mr. Seward meeting with Mr. Anderson, who is reading yet another story. Acker's handwritten annotation in the text foregrounds this technique as "the labyrinth: mirror" (in Burroughs' text 41). As Acker points out in the teaching sheet for her class of *Madame Edwarda*: "When mirrors face mirrors (the disintegration of the system), a labyrinth is formed." (1).

20 Another text annotated by Acker is a letter by John Keats to John Reynolds May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1818, in which Keats compares the life of an individual to a mansion, where one starts at the "infant" or "thoughtless chamber", before entering the "maiden chamber", a room of several doors, which represent a multiplicity of possible pathways and therefore possible identities (Keats 90-91 (O13/S5)). The letter is cited in the introduction to Keats' letters by Richard Packes, which Acker annotated: "Selfreflective thot or judgement. A mystery because pretending is seeing itself. it creates infinite mirrorings" (Annotation in: Keats 8 (O13/S5)). If the beginning of "Seeing Gender" resembles the infant chamber, then the center of the text, the labyrinth charged with the function of seducing, resembles the Maiden chamber.

21 Acker also marked specific passages in "You Die. We Die. Wind Die" (and other texts, such as her hardcover edition of Marguerite Duras' *Malady of Death*) with numbers marking specific passages as elements of a six-part sequence. As already shown in "Seeing Gender" the retelling of *Through the Looking-Glass* also makes use of six motifs. Likewise, *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* and *I Dreamt I was a Nymphomaniac* are divided into six chapters. This development of a formal structure is, by Acker's own account, conceptual for *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, as: "*Kathy Goes to Haiti* was mathematically composed: every other chapter is a porn chapter; each chapter, except for the central one, mirrors its facing chapter" (*Young Lust* viii). The central chapter in the novel renders a portrayal of its main character. The text is, thus, conceived as a cubical space with six reflective sides in which its main protagonist finds itself entrapped, as central seventh element. In "Seeing Gender" the textual labyrinth remains six-sided and without a core, because it is the rendition of machinery that is built in disregard for women. The number six, thus, imposes itself as sequential technique to create a textual space, but also as a complex machine meant to break down central topics she was working on within

her texts. This concept of the text being a box or cube can also be found in *Blood and Guts in High School*, which she wrote immediately after *Kathy Goes to Haiti*.

22 Janey Smith, the main protagonist of *Blood and Guts in High School*, embodies three societal roles, all of which were excluded from citizenship in ancient Greece, namely the child, the woman, and the slave (cf. Aristotle “Politics” 1143). Added to these are three Victorian societal roles, namely the laborer/pauper, the pupil, and the delinquent. All of these roles are in striking contrast to the dominant roles within the U.S. society in which Janey lives, represented by the man, the adult, the teacher, the employer, the owner, and the state. At the end of the novel, Janey embarks upon a journey to find the book of transformation contained within six boxes (153), corresponding to the number of roles she inhabits within the novel. Italo Calvino's remark about the stories contained in *The Arabian Nights* thus seems to apply to *Blood and Guts in High School* as well: “In other words, the stories are like boxes within boxes” (“Levels of Reality in Literature 116), into which the reader enters when opening it.

23 The book of transformation, consisting of the six stories forming Janey's life, might indicate a seventh box, a book the reader is invited to discover together with the protagonist. But this book, significantly, also corresponds to a specific signal-color that can be found throughout *Blood and Guts in High School*, beginning with Janey's illustration of her vagina: “My red cunt, ugh” (Acker 19). In the section entitled “The Persian Poems”, Janey learns Persian by describing herself in a self-deprecating way as the night, the night as red, concluding: “Janey stinks” (Acker *Blood and Guts in High School* 72). As the poems are written during her captivity by Mr. Linker who runs a human trafficking ring and who prostitutes as well as educates her, Janey describes herself the way she is told to think of herself. Soon after Janey has written a book review on Nathaniel Hawthorne's famous novel *The Scarlet Letter*, in which a puritan community stigmatizes a woman forcing her to wear the scarlet letter A as a sign of the sin of adultery. Hawthorne's novel is the third reference to the color red made within *Blood and Guts in High School*. The fourth use of the color occurs in the last part of the novel, when Janey embarks on the quest to find the book of transformation, which is also red (Acker *Blood and Guts in High School* 159). This latter usage of the color signifies a transformation of the three previous stigmata Janey carries, stigmata which women are forced to internalize in patriarchal societies on behalf of their sex, gender, and sexualities.

24 Acker had already used the color red in her previous novel *Kathy Goes to Haiti* in the central chapter, which describes the emotional world of the protagonist: “Terror horror the red means” (84). In the last chapter of this novel, the protagonist partakes in a voodoo ritual and is confronted with the *père*: “He picks up the small plastic red-frame mirror and passes the mirror

to her body. He shows Kathy to herself . . . Kathy's facing a red curtain. The père tells Kathy she has to return here . . . He tells her she can't look back" (Acker *Kathy Goes to Haiti* 169). In both novels woman's struggle for her own body and self-expression in a patriarchal society is signaled by the various uses of the color red in terms of a counter-cultural struggle with ideologies and discourses defining women: " . . . a struggle for possession of a sign which extends to even the mundane areas of everyday life" (Hebdige 17). Taking possession of this sign means taking control of one's body-identity, liberating it from society's consistent shaming.

25 There is another aspect to Acker's usage of the color red, as a sketch for page 159 of *Blood and Guts in High School* contained between page 104 and 105 of her 1973 edition of Philip Rawson's *The Art of Tantra* reveals. The sketch for the last part of the novel, "The Journey", contains a depiction of the book of transformation, which was not used for the novel, while the text on Catullus on said page was. More importantly, however, there is an image of Kali on page 105 book, which Acker appropriated for this novel scripting it: "The Devil is an image. Imagine Hell. We grab the book, and run" (*Blood and Guts in High School* 161). The usage of the indefinite article, makes clear that it is not the devil as the actual embodiment of evil that is meant here, adding a reference to Hawthorne in her novel, who commented on the author Fanny Fern in a letter to his publisher William Ticknor on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1855:

The women [sic] writes as if the devil was in her; and that is the only condition under which a women ever writes anything worth reading. . . . when they throw off the restraints of decency, and come before the public stark naked, as it were—then their books are sure to possess character and value. (308).

To be like a devil here means to transgress social conventions and disregard them, in other words. Arguably, Acker, already having referenced Hawthorne within the novel, probably used this trope in the same way, arguing for women not to become evil, but to liberate themselves from the shame that society casts upon them and their bodies.

26 The figure of Kali which Acker appropriated from Rawson's book on Tantra is also significant insofar as it is the first of ten spiritual embodiments of Kali, the black Kali, who symbolizes both death and rebirth:

One left hand holds a severed head, indicating the annihilation of ego-bound evil force, and the other carries the sword of physical extermination with which she cuts the thread of bondage. . . . In this form she is changeless, limitless primordial power, acting in the great drama, awakening the unmanifest Siva beneath her feet. (Mookerjee 62 )

Generally symbolized by a male corpse with an erection sprouting between her legs, this version of Shiva in *Blood and Guts in High School* is paired with a lizard on which Kali is standing,

which explains why the world at the end of the novel is repopulated with many Janeys, but not men, as the world is reborn in her image instead of Shiva's.

27 The tantric context from which the image of Kali is appropriated, is also present in the giant white Sperm depicted in the dream map as a giant white worm on page 48 and 49 at the center of *Blood and Guts in High School*. In tantric rituals the male principle is represented by the color white and a rectangular stone of the same color, the lingam, a stand-in for the penis and its sperm related to the red female principle of the yoni, symbolizing the vagina and its menarche in tantric rituals (Rawson 32), as described by Rawson: "Within every yoni, every active world-as-woman, is buried the lingam, the phallus, without which there would be no being to support her pattern" (183) The novel's four references to the color red, therein, can be seen to represent the female principle in which the lingam is embedded, the menarche, which, in tantra, is not abject. In this sense, *Blood and Guts in High School* is also re-enacting a sex-positive philosophy, within its critique of oppressive patriarchal structures, as sex in Tantra can be utilized spiritually as a means to finding enlightenment.

28 A handwritten note by Acker in one of her two editions of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* reads: "Concepts Come Easy. But Seeing? Really Seeing? Drawing helps exact Seeing." (Front page (P14/S1)). The last part of *Blood and Guts in High School* combines ordinary sentences, hieroglyphs, and pictures, in order to convey a vision of paradise. Recalling the image of Kali as a figure representing not linear time, but death and rebirth,<sup>2</sup> one must return to Acker's concept of vision at the very beginning of the novel:

Once we've gotten a glimpse of the vision world (notice here how the conventional language obscures: WE as if somebodies are the centre of activity SEE what is the centre of activity: pure VISION. Actually, the VISION creates US. Is anything true?) Once we have gotten a glimpse of the vision world, we must be careful not to think the vision world is us. We must go farther and become crazier. (*Blood and Guts in High School* 37)

The return to this passage, after the vision has actually occurred at the end of the novel, foregrounds that *Blood and Guts in High School* cannot only be read in a linear, but also in a cyclical fashion. Defying a conventional structure, the textual space of the novel also becomes a temporal space that the reader, by choice, can traverse either in a linear or a cyclical fashion.

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<sup>2</sup> Acker was aware that Kali is also a goddess of time, as an annotation by Acker on the back of the sketch found in Rawson's *Art of Tantra* shows, referring to page 112 of the book, where Kali is noted to be the goddess of time, and connected to death and rebirth.

### Understanding the Labyrinth IV: Empire of the Senseless

29 The novels *Great Expectations*, *My Death, My Life* by Pier Paolo Pasolini, and *Don Quixote*, which Acker wrote after *Blood and Guts in High School*, are all divided into three parts. Similarly, the 10 chapters of *Empire of the Senseless* are divided into three parts. The chapters are divided between two protagonists, one set being narrated by Thivai and the other by his lover Abhor, with the first chapter being subtitled “(Abhor speaking through Thivai)” (3). The first chapter, thus, provides a challenge to the reader, because although the narration is supposedly Abhor’s, Thivai remains the actual narrator. Thivai as narrator can, thus, ambiguously be either a medium through which Abhor speaks or a barrier. Throughout the novel Thivai narrates a total of six chapters, while Abhor only narrates four. If one, however, conceives of the first chapter as belonging to both protagonists, then Abhor possesses a total of five chapters, making Thivai her labyrinth, an entrapment she is trying to escape from. Both protagonists follow different trajectories in the novel’s plot with Thivai’s condition degenerating (due to gonorrhoea) and Abhor’s corporeal resurrection (of Abhorra) and cyborg existence regenerating and reconstituting herself, as attributed to cyborgs in Donna Haraway’s famous “Cyborg Manifesto” (181).

30 Thivai and Abhor maintain a sado-masochistic relationship within *Empire of the Senseless*, in which the only love that Thivai can provide for Abhor is abuse. Thivai’s manipulation as well as his emotional and mental abuse of Abhor is substantiated by his own account: “Because I had Abhor on a string and the string was tied around my little finger. Whenever I twirled her around, my finger moved, so I was never bored. I need to pull strings...” (ellipsis in the original ; Acker *Empire of the Senseless* 61.) Thivai might have even killed Abhorra, as Abhor, haunted by memories, realizes: “Memories of identity flowed through my head. I got up slowly, my eyes fixed on the muzzle of a black automatic pistol. The barrel seemed to be attached to my throat by a taut string. I couldn’t see the string” (Acker 65).

31 Thivai’s abuse manifests itself physically when he teaches Abhor how to write with her own blood: “Abhor felt she had made progress in writing. It’s necessary to make a child feel wanted” (Acker *Empire of the Senseless* 205). However, when Abhor reveals herself to possess a mind of her own, disagreeing with Thivai, she is punished by him (224). At the end of the novel, the physical abuse reaffirms that Thivai is the labyrinth imprisoning her, as it is Thivai’s last recourse of keeping her under control.

32 There are striking similarities between *Blood and Guts in High School* and *Empire of the Senseless*, as the female protagonists in both novels find themselves imprisoned but also educated by the men who imprison them, and are literally abused by men they look up to (Acker

*Blood and Guts in High School* 131; *Empire of the Senseless* 224). In *Blood and Guts in High School*, Jean Genet abuses Janey towards the end of the novel, forcing her to become complacent, and thus is juxtaposed to Mr. Linker who was her previous jailer and educator. In *Empire of the Senseless* Thivai embodies both of these figures: “Our newest plan was to make Abhor, though she was uneducated, or because she was uneducated, into a great writer so that she’d have a reason for being in jail for the rest of her life. And at that time, society needed a great woman writer” (Acker *Empire of the Senseless* 203). Abhor is not only supposed to become a writer, but explicitly a woman writer and taught to be so by a man. Abhor, thus, is imprisoned in order to be marketed and commodified. Like Janey or Alice, Abhor finds herself in a situation alienating her from her own body-identity, dictating her reality.

33 *Empire of the Senseless*, like *Blood and Guts in High School*, features the recurring themes of innocence and virginity. Thivai in this context has desires in which sadistic subjection and the heterosexual act are akin to each other (“In my imagination we were always fucking: the black whip crawls across her back. A red cock rises” 34), while Abhor yearns for lust in Christian terms: “My tears were the tears of whores. I would have Mary Magdalen tear Virgin Mary’s flesh into shreds” (65). In the same chapter, the Haitian rebel MacKandal is captured by American Marines and possessed by Loa Erzulie (80), who in voodoo mythology is akin to the Virgin Mary, being promiscuous but pure-hearted in ways akin to Mary Magdalen as described by Maya Deren (*Divine Horsemen* 143-144). The figure of the Virgin Mary recurs within *Empire of the Senseless*, inhabiting the toxic landscapes traversed by Abhor: “. . . almost every toilet, shack, and bar was filled with useless fetishes: candles and dolls, pictures of the Holy Virgin Mary as a mermaid always unable to fuck the lonely sailor” (Acker 118). The novel ends with the image of a knife stabbing through a rose in a literal and metaphorical act of de-floration (Miller *The Body Art Book* 45; 47). In the context of the novel this symbolism could also be read as a nod to the colonial myth of the virgin land, which described the land colonized not only as female, but also as uninhabited and empty (McClintock 30). The symbol of de-floration, thus, also symbolizes the violence and destruction both the patriarch and the colonizer have enacted upon other populations and the territory they took into their possession.

34 The figure of MacKandal is - as already noted by Robert House – taken from C.L.R. James' *Black Jacobians* (“Informational Inheritance in Kathy Acker’s *Empire of the Senseless*” 454). However, although Acker did mark the passage on MacKandal in her copy of James’s monograph with an encircled asterisk (*Black Jacobins* 21 (N12/S3)), she made significant changes to the story. In *Empire of the Senseless* he is no longer a marooner who died in 1758 in colonial Haiti, who cautiously led other freed slaves against the colonizer and who killed

plantation owners by poisoning their wells. Instead, he is a rebel leader on the side of the Algerian revolution fighting the colonizer in the 1980s in Paris (75). The Algerian Revolution depicted in the text is derived from the Algerian War that took place from 1954 to 1962. In January 1957 Mohamed Lebjouli was dispatched by the Front de Libération National to France to destroy metro and bus stations sabotaging the infrastructure, before being captured and imprisoned after two months (Horne *A Savage War of Peace* 236 et seq). In Acker's version of the Algerian War, the worst fears of the French come true: the colonial margin crosses the thresholds and enters the center with Algeria invading the French capital. MacKandal, however, is captured by U.S. marines, a detail alluding to the occupation of Haiti by the United States (1915-1933) that Acker would have known about through Alfred Métraux's book *Voodoo in Haiti*, of which she owned two editions (41). As the *Empire of the Senseless* includes a number of remarks on Ronald Reagan, this part of the story can also be read as a reference to various U.S. interventions in Latin American politics under Reagan, in which both the military and the CIA were involved.

35     Though the Algerian revolution is able to overthrow the colonizers' capital, it is not able to overthrow Capitalism, with multinational corporations still thriving in the countries which have managed to liberate themselves:

The streets were now the property of cars. The cars were now the property of those who had real (government) jobs. No prostitute had a car. This is why there were almost only women in the visible world. The men who worked in the corporations spent so much time in the corporations or driving to and from the corporations inside mirrored styrofoam cars, they were no longer visible. They were dead. (Acker *Empire of the Senseless* 110)

Cars, here, supply symbolic capital, functioning as a sign of modernization. As Kristin Ross has shown in *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* (1996), cars played a significant role in the reorganization of French culture after the Algerian War:

Modernization promises a perfect reconciliation of past and future in an endless present, a world where all sedimentation of social experience has been level or smoothed away, where poverty has been reabsorbed, and, most important, a world where class conflict is a thing of the past, the stains of contradiction washed out in a superhuman hygienic effort, by new levels of abundance and equitable distribution. (11)

Capitalism under the guise of modernization pretends to efface the very social asymmetries on which it is based and on which it thrives. In contrast to this concept of modernity as linear progression ending with death, Acker's Algerian revolution in *Empire of the Senseless*, appropriating historical figures for a fictional plot, follows a voodoo logic according to which "the dead help the living." (55). This alternative concept of temporality is in tension with

corporate Capitalism described by Acker in the same terms George Bush described Reaganomics, namely as a kind of ‘Voodoo economics’, coopting the spirituality of people’s lives, rendering them dead for the sake of keeping the economy alive.

36 Acker, arguably, creates what Bakhtin called a chronotope (Bakhtin 84), which defies linear space-time by making dead histories re-emerge in a fictional present foregrounding present-day politics as reiteration of the past. But the chronotope, as utilized by Acker, also disrupts what Anne McClintock terms “anachronistic space” in which the colonized are excluded from “history proper” in the geographic space they inhabited (30). The chapter on Abhor’s imprisonment toward the end of the novel is appropriated from Mark Twain, taking this technique to another level: “The third section of *Empire*, ‘Pirate Night,’ rewrites *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with Abhor as Jim, Thivai as Huck, and Thivai’s gay friend Mark as Tom Sawyer” (Hunter 93). Acker thus uses a text that has been read controversially as either showing the perils of racism or being racist itself.<sup>3</sup> A different analysis of Twain’s text, however, places the novel in the context of the American post-civil war Reconstruction era: “*Huckleberry Finn* is a realistic, if symbolic, treatment of the abandonment and humiliation of the freed peoples at the hands of their northern ‘friends,’ who were suffering from ‘compassion fatigue’ and, like Tom, wanted to get on with their own games.” (Koye 22). According to this reading Huck/Thivai informs Jim’s/Abhor’s former ‘master’ of her whereabouts, forcing her to return to him.

37 The return to the master is important in still another sense, as the lands confiscated during the Civil War, including plantations, were not used to enable freed men to become landowners: “By mid-1866, half the land in Bureau [The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands] hands had been restored to its former owners, and more was returned in subsequent years. ...The idea of a Freedmen’s Bureau actively promoting black landownership had come to an abrupt end.” (Eric Foner, *Reconstruction*. 143-144). Landownership was thus restored to former plantation owners and numerous freedmen were forced to return to work for their former ‘masters’, who now, under the ideology of wage labor, were their employers. Similar to the former colonized in Acker’s novel, freedmen were now, under Capitalism, bound to a new system of control. Though Twain’s text does not deal with these specific issues, it does

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<sup>3</sup> For further reference on the discussion of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* see: B.E. Kim, “Rhetorical Engagement with Racism: Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.” in: *Literator*. Vol 19, Issues 1, p. 65-78; Barbara Apstein, “Masterpiece or Racist Trash? Bridgewater Students Enter the Debate over Huckleberry Finn” in: *Bridgewater Reader*, Vol. 14, June 2000, Issue 1, p. 12-14; Cassender L. Smith, “‘Nigger’ or ‘Slave’. Why Labels Matter for Jim (and Twain in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn)” in: *Papers on Language and Literature*, Vol. 50 (2014), No. 2, p. 182-206; Daniel S. Traber, “‘They’re after Us!’: Criminality and Hegemony in Huckleberry Finn.” In: *Whiteness, Otherness, and the Individualism Paradox from Huck to Punk*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 19-38.

serve as a reference to them within Acker's novel, linking American history to the larger history of global colonialism and global Capitalism.

### **End of the Line: Ariadne's Thread**

38 Taken together Acker's two novels, *Blood and Guts in High School* and *Empire of the Senseless*, and her essay "Seeing Gender" can be read as example of a tripartite structure prevalent throughout Acker's work. Such a structure can already be detected in her first novel, *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, in which the first two chapters appropriate historical texts such as Dunbar's *Blood on the Parlor* and Whibley's *A Book of Scoundrels*, while the fourth and fifth chapter draw upon fictional texts such as Violette Leduc's *Thérèse and Isabelle* and Alexander Trocchi's *Helen and Desire*, whereas the last two chapters incorporate the biographies of W.B. Yeats and the Marquis de Sade. Similarly, *Kathy Goes to Haiti* consists of three pairs of chapters: the third and fifth focus on Haiti's politics and economics, the second and sixth deal with Kathy's wealthy lover Roger, while the first and last chapter take place in an urban setting centering on the working class family of the taxi-driver Sammy. In both *Kathy Goes to Haiti* and *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, the tripartite structure contained within both novels function as a coupling of two different perspectives on the same motif, while constituting, in their overall structure, mirror labyrinths of seduction.

39 In *Blood and Guts in High School*, by contrast, the main character Janey Smith dies three times, first falling into a coma after a car crash, ending her dependency on others (i.e. her school, her father, the gang she joined), while her second death can be seen as a loss of independence (being enslaved by Mr. Linker), before her actual death by cancer ends on a vision of her rebirth. Similarly *Empire of the Senseless* is composed of three parts, consisting of the Algerian revolution, the subversion of this revolution, and a last confrontation between Thivai and Abhor, revealing the world they desire in opposition to the world they live in. The number of chapters in each part of *Empire of the Senseless* decreases from five, to three, to two, to the point that Thivai no longer has the majority of chapters, leaving him and Abhor on equal footing in the last part of the novel. The structures of these novels, thus, constitute corruptive labyrinths akin to a machine that literally breaks down the subject matter it is dealing with to produce a vision or epiphany for the reader, the symbolic images upon which both novels conclude.

40 In "Seeing Gender" two tripartite structures can be detected, one in the essay as a whole, as a corruptive structure dedicated to the question of where gender can be seen, the other within it's core, the seductive labyrinth of *Through the Looking-Glass*. Constituted by an account of

her own childhood as an introduction to the topic of gender, “Seeing Gender” maps out techniques by which gender is constituted in its retelling of *Through the Looking-Glass*, before, finally, breaking down symbolic language to a semiotic flux in its last part. The central part of the essay is constituted by six motifs, consisting of three couplings, beginning with Alice's exclusion from language and a patriarchal civilization (Jabberwocky; the forest), followed by foregrounding her coercion (Tweedledee and Tweedledum; Humpty Dumpty), and finally centering on the reasons for her conforming to a patriarchal system of control and its consequences (the old Knight ; Coronation).

41 The seductive mirror in “Seeing Gender” constitutes it’s own module within the overall structure of the essay, whereas the seductive labyrinth in *Blood and Guts in High School* and *Empire of the Senseless* is more integrated into the overall structure of the novel. In *Blood and Guts*, Jean Genet and M’Namah share a homosocial bond akin to father and son as shown in “Jabberwocky”, whereas in *Empire* Thivai shares the same bond with his partner Mark. The homosocial bond in both cases is a re-affirmative relationship, akin to the relation of Tweedledee and Tweedledum. Both Janey and Abhor, lonely and left to their own devices, are confronted by this majority. Both Genet and Thivai, thus, initiate violence against Janey and Abhor respectively, in the same sense that Humpty Dumpty enacts violence toward Alice. Both Janey Smith and Abhor, like Alice, are initiated into language by abusive father figures, which imprison them. In contrast to Genet, however, Thivai is the only one who finds himself hurt by his own actions similarly to the old knight: “This lonesomeness hurt me. We had the river all to ourselves; Abhor didn’t want me.” (Acker *Empire of the Senseless* 191). Both novels, thus, incorporate the same seductive labyrinth into their overall structure which “Seeing Gender” has at its core.

42 Another similarity between Abhor and Janey Smith is that they are both women of color, black, as a sketch for *Blood and Guts in High School*, found between page 68 and 69 of Leroi Jones *The Dead Lecturer* reveals: “~~(throwing off her bakery disguise & appearing totally black~~”(O13/S4). The sketch originally refers to Janey as “BG”, i.e. blood and guts, and has been eliminated by Acker, who in all probability realized that using race as a symbol for poverty would only re-affirm a stereotype. A sketch in Janey Smith’s dream map, as published in in *Blood and Guts in High School*, affirms this being entitled “inside of my black cunt” ( 51). The reason behind this phrasing might be linked to Janey Smith becoming the embodiment of the black Kali at the end of the novel that brings about the destruction and rebirth of the world. As the original proofs of *Blood and Guts in High School* were handwritten, drawn and collaged in Citadel Notebooks (Colby 70), it can be assumed that Janey Smith is the actual ‘author’ of the

book, the meta-narrative, who brings destruction to the very society that entraps her. At the core of Acker's novel is a feminine force, which breaks through the oppressive system that yearns to turn women away from their own desires, destroying its linear temporality. Abhor, being resurrected from death, but also as liberating herself from imprisonment, can be seen in the same light as Janey Smith embodying Kali. The labyrinthine structure of Acker's texts thus not merely serves to entrap and corrupt an oppressive value system, while illustrating the oppressor's techniques of seduction, but to liberate new and different models of womanhood and femininity.

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