

Kathy Acker's Dildos: Literary prosthetics and textual unmaking

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Abstract:

Reading Acker through the lenses of Paul B. Preciado, Linda Williams, Pierre Guyotat and Georgina Colby, Finch proposes to think of Acker's literary practice as a series of "dildos": textual prosthetics that perform protocols of textual unmaking. Finch bases her textual reading on Acker's early typescripts, recently published for the first time, providing an original analysis of these archival materials that works to bridge '70s avant-garde literary practices with current queer theories of immersive embodiment.

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1 It seems so obvious now, but a few years ago it wasn't common practice to label Kathy Acker or her work as queer. At least not in France, where I research and teach. I used to lead reading workshops where we would focus on sexually explicit passages from Acker. I taught these scenes as a way to talk about how literary texts can decenter the body, relocating its erogenous zones wherever, reframing sex as a socially imbricated negotiation of power between subjectivities who come to a non-administratively regulated agency through intense sensation. Students would stop me and say, *But I just can't get into it, it's too heteronormative*. What's heteronormative about it? I ask. *There's so much cock*. This surprised me, I realized, because I was reading all of Acker's textual cocks as dildos, and all cunts as charged fields of possible interpenetration with no specific sexed identity. Currently it's somewhat common to label Acker as queer. Perhaps partly because the term "queer" has gotten a lot of recent traction in the art institutions that have been instrumental in representing Acker to the public, doing the tasks of packaging her production thematically, making sense of the many often contradictory things that she said about herself and her work, and bringing her artwork and archives out of difficult-to-access university collections. Part of the current attribution of Acker's queerness has to do with her aesthetics: she was afab but looked so butch, or so gender nonconforming. Part of it has to do with access to more biographic information, including her letters and diaries and emails, that show and tell who she was having sex with and how, and this information largely fits into acceptable boundaries of what we call "being queer." But I want to shift the conversation about Acker's queerness, focusing instead on how Acker's writing practices function in a queer way. Specifically, Acker's writing depicts the body caught in overlapping

lines of power, ownership, technology and history; and then she gives us the tools to reorient our bodies in the world. She gives us the hacks of sensation and imagination. In the context of this essay, the object that I use to shift how we think queerness in Acker's writing is the dildo.

2 Georgina Colby reflects that the majority of attempts to summarize Kathy Acker's literary innovations focus on what is termed Acker's technique of "appropriation," with few in-depth studies of her detailed and evolving practices. Colby's study importantly is the first to name and trace multiple techniques. Some of these techniques have existing referents, such as collage, montage, intertextuality, and ekphrasis. Others gain their specificity in Colby's analysis, such as writing-through and literary calisthenics (Colby, 2016). Additional names given to Acker's processes that refuse to reduce it to appropriation include Caroline Bergvall's "twisting through" or Amy Scholder's "sampling."¹ These terms all work to pull Acker into stories about avant-garde literary techniques, noting Acker's proximity to visual art and music as she was working. I add the dildo to this list of practices – or perhaps it is more accurate to convert what the dildo does into a verb, "using a dildo." What does this mean? The dildo functions to describe a process of textual prosthetics, complete with the Derridean implications of augmentation, iteration, and the decentering of any presumed original. It also, importantly, gives us a vocabulary that comes from current queer theories. This lets us situate Acker's work, much of which was written before "queer" as an academic or literary term was in common use, into the present of queer studies². Acker's work anticipates many of queer theory's epistemological innovations, most importantly that of recognizing that we produce the body as an allegedly stable, sexed, and ahistorical entity through the production of knowledge, truth, and norms. In his *Countersexual Manifesto*, a book that gives us a semiotic-historical exegesis of the dildo and proposes the body as an assemblage of infinite potential dildos, Paul B. Preciado writes that: "Robert Venturi was onto something when he said architecture should learn from Las Vegas. It's time for philosophy to learn from the dildo. / This is a book about dildos, about prostheses and plastic genitals, about sexual and gender plasticity" (Preciado 2018 [2000], 20). Let's follow this graft into literature: tracing textual prosthetics in Acker's work, focusing on how we can read her descriptions of bodies as suggesting "sexual and gender plasticity," it's time for literary theory to learn from the dildo.

¹ See Bergvall (ed.) 2002 and Scholder (ed.) 2002.

² I've written about the ways in which "queer" has come into academic discourse, focusing on its translation between the United States and France and the corresponding asymmetric canonization effects that this movement has had, in my contribution to a recent collective article in the French journal *Littérature*. Highlighting the BDSM contract an "extra-literary" object, I briefly point to what scholars Paola Baccheta and Jules Falquet have named the split between "white queer theory" and "decolonial queer theories." See Blesch, Finch et. al. 2018, Baccheta and Falquet 2011, and de Lauretis 1991.

Literary prosthetics and textual unmaking

3 Over the course of this paper I use the concept of the dildo to accentuate two protocols that are key to Acker's process, and that describe the mechanism by which her writing performs the queer work of decentering the normed body. Those two protocols are literary prosthetics and textual unmaking.

4 Literary prosthetics comes from a crossed reading of Acker with Preciado's theorization of the dildo and countersexuality in the *Countersexual Manifesto*. The *Countersexual Manifesto* was first written in French in 2000, after, Preciado writes, coming to Paris to follow Jacques Derrida's 1996 seminar. It's a weird and funny book, part theory and part protocol. The energetic center of the book is a "countersexual contract," written and formatted to follow contractual language and layout, which invites readers to renounce the benefits of heteronormative gender definition and bodily belonging. After this renunciation, the readers/signators enter explicit and negotiated collective practices that last for a specified amount of time. The very serious joke that animates the contract is the layering of the BDSM negotiation over the social contract, a transmogrification that makes obvious the implicit negotiation that brings the (sexed, gendered) subject into being as a legally representable entity. What happens to us as we take part in Preciado's contractual exercise? Here I re-write the contract in plural terms to better implicate us in its collective project: once we "renounce... all privileges... proceeding from [our] sexual condition within the framework of the naturalized heterocentric regime," we "recognize [ourselves] as a dildo producer and as a dildo transmitter and diffuser on [our] own bod[ies] and on all undersigned bodies. [We] foreknowingly renounce all privileges and obligations that may proceed from unequal positions of power created by the reiteration and reinscription of the dildo" (Preciado 2018 [2000], 40). The mechanism which I'm calling literary prosthetics is based on the description of the dildo's kinetic ability as described here: the dildo acts through constant reiteration and reinscription, and these movements always work to explicate and negotiate whatever positions of power are implicitly in play.

5 Preciado's reading of Derrida is also central to how we can think the "prosthetic" in "literary prosthetics," drawing it towards a sense of the body that doesn't multiply the phallogocentric fixation on the penis as the spectacular center of (cis)masculine definition, but instead, to use Acker's word, "decenters" it entirely³. This decentering gives us bodies of various gender declensions that have the option to augment the skin surface with a multiplicity

³ See Kathy Acker's interview with Sylvère Lotringer, "Devoured by Myths," p. 16.

of dildos, or none at all. Preciado writes, “Countersexuality affirms that in the beginning was the dildo. The dildo preceded the penis. It is the origin of the penis. Countersexuality recurs to the notion of the ‘supplement’ as formulated by Jacques Derrida and identifies the dildo as the supplement that produces that which it supposedly must complete” (Preciado 2018 [2000], 22). As Preciado uses Derrida to explain, the dildo is not the penis. Meaning, that even with its medical and therapeutic history of being used in the same way as one might use a penis in penetrative heterosexual sex, its very mutability and moveability shift the supposed centrality of the penis in the sexual encounter - or of any genitals. With the dildo as prosthetic, we see that the prosthetic functions not in terms of what it supposedly completes, but in terms of how you use it, where you move it. The dildo is changeable, exchangeable, removable, multipliable. You can attach a dildo to any part of the body and have sex with that part of the body. You can take the dildo off and still have sex. Any part of the body can be used as a dildo, whether you’ve strapped something on or not. The entire body becomes an interplay of surface, protocol, and use. The dildo reminds us that the body’s orientation, motivation and direction at any cross-section of time and space is not naturally occurring, but is the residue of repeated movements and actions. “Like love, [the dildo] is transit, not essence,” writes Preciado (2018 [2000], 73).

6 How does the dildo become *literary* prosthetic? What happens when we think the dildo as textual graft? If we treat the composed text as a series of dildos, or as a compositional field in which other texts can intervene, then what comes to the surface is the “reiteration and reinscription” of power dynamics that Preciado elucidates in his manifesto. I’m suggesting specifically that instead of thinking about Acker’s text-borrowing and blending practices as “appropriation” or “plagiarism,” we think about them as literary prosthetics. This allows us to maintain the sense of iteration, legality, and ownership which the two prior terms indicate, while shifting the focus onto what the act of performing these textual grafts *does*: the dildo-text forces an explicit attention to implicit power relations. It urges us to imagine how we can assemble them otherwise, or at least use them how they currently are, to enhance our pleasure, and in so doing, to discover our own sources of potential agency.

7 To describe in more detail what the text-dildo *does*, I turn to my second key term, “textual unmaking.” I borrow this phrasing from Georgina Colby’s description of Kathy Acker’s 1972 text *The Burning Bombing of America*. Colby reflects: “*The Burning Bombing of America* is an early text that engages with the idea of desire as a form of **textual unmaking**, which in term functions as resistance against the external world of America in 1972” (Colby, 60, my emphasis). This thought is part of a larger discussion on the French writer Pierre Guyotat’s influence on Acker, particularly as Acker’s first readings of Guyotat’s *Eden, Eden,*

Eden inspire her writing experiments in the early and mid-seventies. In this sense, I am reading textual unmaking as Acker's version of what Guyotat terms elsewhere the "destruction" of language.

8 Guyotat's description of his writing practices are notoriously invested in a performance of excessive virility. A translation of Guyotat's "Body of the Text" published in the 1981 *Semiotext(e)* journal *Polysexuality* reads:

Initially, orgasm is followed by a relapse into mystical and liturgical phantasies. This switch, at the very moment of orgasm, from a mentality and a body stretched to the limits of prostitutional desire to a mentality and a body slipping back into the visual, tactile, auditory and olfactory sensations of a society liturgically immaculate, a process so imperceptible in its switch of energy, of forces, crowds, and rituals, that it has always convinced me, not only of the energy of my drives, but also of the drive behind all human and material activity.(Guyotat 1981, p. 19).

Guyotat is talking about how he masturbates when he writes. And here he clears up any confusion about the spermlike spray of his writing: for him all creative urges are ejaculatory. If Guyotat's method of language destruction is linked to a creative urge that is itself attached to virility, how can a writer with a different embodied stake, with a different body, take the principle of Guyotat's practice and convert it to something else? Acker's textual unmaking is one possibility. Crucially, this is not just a conversation happening between Acker's writing and Guyotat's writing, but a conversation that is indicative of a larger trend in avant-garde literary practices of the '60s and '70s.⁴ To write as an afab person in that literary tradition was to write from a non-majority position. As the above Guyotat citation illustrates, this difference plays out on the level of desire and the expression of desire, in other words, on the level of libido and the economy of creative drive and production. I am not talking about sexed or gendered writing, but rather pointing out that the avant-garde norm was already skewed toward a historical and social experience of virility, yet this epistemic and creative bias was largely unstated, if it was noticed at all. The fact that Acker occupied the rare role of being an afab person trying to write into and with that specific avant-garde tradition indicates that the experimental strategies she invents are products of this position. Particularly because, unlike other writers have historically done (Nathalie Sarraute comes to mind), Acker never proclaimed

⁴ Here I am again indebted to Georgina Colby, whose research in the Duke University Acker archives offers the first rigorous book-length examination of Acker's compositional practices. Perhaps even more importantly in the terms of this project, Colby does the feminist work of situating Acker as a female writer within a US avant-garde poetic history that has largely left its intersection with feminism un-reckoned and unanalyzed. At the conclusion of her analysis of Acker's interaction with Guyotat's texts, Colby writes: "Acker's early experiments clearly place her works in the context of the post-war avant-garde groupings in the America in the 1970s. The works link the collective struggle of a predominantly male avant-garde to write against the oppressive structures of normative grammar and the struggle of a woman writer to make meaning. These two filaments, each enquiries into meaning-making, are brought together and inflect on another in Acker's works" (Colby, p. 64).

a universal creative process. Instead, she reflected continuously on gender, on being female, on how literary voice is attached to and contingent on gender as a locus of social and historical residue. This is why I am labeling Acker's practice of textual unmaking, the action-effect of her textual prosthetics, as a queer response to Guyotat's textual destruction. In order to analyze more precisely what the difference is between the two, or how Acker's textual unmaking operates compared to Guyotat's textual destruction, I turn to what Acker herself writes about her relationship with Guyotat's writing.

9 Specifically, I direct us to a 1984 article in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* entitled "The Invisible Universe." I should note that Acker mostly expresses admiration for Guyotat; the analysis of how his practice fits into underlying trends of '60s-'70s US avant-garde virility is my own. Yet in this essay, Acker does something particularly interesting with Guyotat that illustrates that whatever her admiration for his writing was, her actual project was never one of imitation, but rather of conversion. She took elements from Guyotat but refigured them to work within her specific context and economy of desire. In "The Invisible Universe" we see this process in play.

10 The essay starts with a reflection on the function of writing: "How does writing destroy? // By breaking down idealisms. I bring everything to the material level" (Acker 1984, 83). Further down, body is paired with text: "The text has roots simultaneously in the body which acts and the body that writes. I use three levels of writing. At first, a savage text that I wrote when I was fourteen. For me the sexual desire has always been bound to this savage desire to write. I write as I masturbate" (Acker 1984, 83). If the mechanism is in destruction or breaking down, the tool is the body. After a page and a half, the reader arrives at the following textual insert: "[EDITORS' NOTE: Above based on interviews with Pierre Guyotat in *Literature L'Interdite* (Gallimard, 1974).]" (Acker 1984, 83). We realize that the descriptions we have been interpreting as Acker's unveiling of her process are, in fact, her ventriloquizing Guyotat.

11 This procedural choice is an example of the dildo, the functioning of the textual prosthetic: Where we initially believe we are reading a divulgence of method, a glimpse behind the curtain at the "real" process by which the author performs literary work. Then we come to see that what we understood as original is a reproduction, and that the manufacture of our belief is a crucial role that the reproduction plays. We could have continued reading and never recognized the source, perhaps noting disparities between the text and what we know about Acker, but attributing these to choices that still assume Acker's original "ownership" of whatever we're reading. What comes forward in this gap that we, as readers, are negotiating

between original and reproduction, between Guyotat and Acker, is the example of how Acker alters Guyotat's process of destroying. We see Acker performing textual unmaking.

12 Specifically, after the editor's note, the text continues to describe a process of literary destruction, but written into a different social and political context. And, importantly, with the aim of making otherwise, of using the act of destruction to transform. Acker writes, "Any genre of writing—political analysis, romantic novels, mathematical proofs, Ronald Reagan's vomittings—as soon as its meaning is destroyed becomes literature. The hotter the writing, the greater the tension between the meaning(s) and the ongoing destruction, the more literary the work. / For those to whom reality is unbearable" (Acker 1984, p. 84). Let's think about this entire passage as Acker in Guyotat drag. One of queer theory's common theoretical moves is to think drag and camp as examples of the normative rendered excessive, the supposedly natural pushed to the absurd.⁵ "The Invisible Universe" is Acker in Guyotat drag; the moment when she pulls off the first layer of costume – the "editor's note" – Guyotat's literary stance is revealed as excess; when "worn" by Acker, the costume of the virile writer is absurd, campy. What is brought forward by the "reveal," the theatrical stripping that is part of the number in order to take us to something else? A recipe for "tense", "hot" writing. Writing for "those to whom reality is unbearable." We can hear an echo of the phrase that Caroline Bergvall chooses to introduce Acker's method: "She writes: 'I was unspeakable so I ran into the language of others.' [...] Simultaneously, [the process] is conceived as a salutary way to escape an abject subjectivity: 'I was unspeakable.'" (Bergvall, 18). For whom is reality unbearable? For those unspeakable according to history. In this case, literary history, functioning as an appendage of oppressive hierarchical organization in its correlate social history - a long library shelf full of acceptable speakers and unacknowledged omissions. What Bergvall describes as the "salutary escape" from the unbearable lies in tense, hot writing. The implication is that the destruction process for Acker doesn't end with dismantling, but opens the possibility for a more bearable world. Or, at the very least, gives a strategy for "bearing": for holding the residues of an oppressive world (here, rendered literally materially in language), and then unmaking as both an act of resistance and a process of counter-production. The remainder of "The Invisible Universe" leads us further in this direction: the authorial voice discussing its practice abruptly ceases and the reader encounters instead an accumulation of recognizable and less-recognizable literary texts, punctuated by notes on the process of writing. "Mothers have no right to be

⁵ See Jose Muñoz's discussions of drag as a mechanism to both allow for disidentification and to open a gap for utopic possibility in *Disidentifications: Queers of color and the Performance of Politics* and *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. See also Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, and J. Jack Halberstam's *Female Masculinity*.

women and women have no right to have cunts they should be devoted to their children. Because they don't cut out their liver and feed them braised in marsala to their children..." leads to "How does a great writer come into being?" then to language that recalls the philosophical treatise "That human life is but a first installment of the serial soul..." and on to a sampling of A.A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* with the character Owl acting out Acker's semiotics: "But the circularity of the signification to any particular signifier itself caught in the circularity of the signification of language... so Owl goes on and on, using longer and longer words, until at least he comes back to where he started but nobody can remember where that is." It could seem like mess, pure destruction, but the text sampled at the end of the essay, the final literary prosthetic, puts all the preceding into a story of revolt by language.

13 The essay's final paragraph starts with "Tylyl has no sooner turned the diamond than a sudden and wonderful change comes over everything." Tylyl is a character from *The Blue Bird*, a play by Maurice Maeterlinck novelized by Georgette Leblanc. In the story, two children from the slums find happiness through enchantment, which basically consists of magically seeing everything in their terrible surroundings as better than it is. The unhappiness in question is kicked off by seeing how good life is for their rich neighbors; the moral of the tale seems to be that simplicity is better than being rich, but it comes off as romanticizing poverty. This is the thread that Acker picks up on, that gets heated and pulled forward through the process of literary unmaking. The essay ends with:

... the flints of which the slum-building's walls are built light up...The junk furniture takes life becomes resplendent; the deal table assumes as grave and noble an air as a marble table; the clock face winks its eye and smiles genially, while the door which contains the pendulum opens and releases the hours which, holding one another by the hand and laughing merrily, begin to dance to delicious music.

Language can be used to obscure, to recast something terrible as something not as bad, to manipulate and diffuse blame. The image of the dancing slum clock is absurd. The reader is left recognizing the pleasure that Acker is getting from the process of working with the language (the final image of "delicious music"), but the pleasure is ambiguous; we are invited to join in the process not of pretending things are different, like the children in *The Blue Bird* are urged to do, but of joining in the process of destroying language, refiguring it, revolting through it. The revolt of textual unmaking extends the "fantasy" of magical transfiguration indefinitely, using the space opened up by imagination not to mask social violence but to unmask it, to convert it, repurpose it. To summarize, Acker's literary unmaking as a transformational counter-action is the effect of the literary prosthetic; language dismantled in this way serves, as does Preciado's dildo, to reiterate and reinscribe.

Dildos and cocks, 1971-1975

14 What characterizes Kathy Acker's textual dildos? How and when does she use them? What specific reiterations and reinscriptions do they permit? Here I continue with my analysis of Acker's texts from the mid-seventies, as begun in the discussion of *The Burning Bombing of America* and Acker's interest in Guyotat. This period is of interest within the scope of this essay first because it is marked by a particularly rich variety of experimental practices, coupled with Acker's interest, after reading Guyotat, in inventing processes to reduce language to the material, to perform literary unmaking. Second, the texts from this period have not yet been a part of critical reception of Acker, as most of them have been in archives. Recent publications of Acker's typescripts from the '70s provide us with a new body of writings that have yet to be analyzed. I have begun the process of this analysis in my critical notes to Editions Ismael's 2019 *Kathy Acker 1971-1975*, and I extend it here.

15 In this section, I follow Acker's invention and use of the textual prosthetic by narrowing in on her use of the word dildo and what I argue is the present-day dildo's correlate in these '70s texts: the word cock. The point of doing this was initially to have a smaller language field to work with, and I wanted to trace what Acker herself said about the actual prosthetic to see if it matched with my hypothesis of how she used what I term the textual prosthetic. What I discovered, somewhat against my own expectations, is that the words dildo and cock turned out to be particularly apt objects of study, precisely because it is in the use of these words that Acker is able to juxtapose pornographic codes and obscene language with lush masturbatory description. The result of this juxtaposition is the beginning of a process, developed and reworked throughout all of her writing, that proposes an ontology of sensation as an alternative to the supposed reality of surface meaning and representation, the "what you see is what is real" way of thinking that stabilizes authoritarian versions of sense and knowledge.

16 First, I want to give more context on the early '70s work, and to situate it within existing Acker scholarship. As I have already indicated, this period of writing is particularly interesting as a source of analysis because it corresponds with the time leading up to and just before the serial texts (*The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula*, *I Dreamt I Became A Nymphomaniac: Imagining*, and *The Adult Life of Toulouse-Lautrec*), which to-date have formed the base of any analysis of Acker's "early works," with the addition of *Politics*, *Rip-off Red Girl Detective*, and *The Burning Bombing of America*⁶. Yet in addition to these

⁶ In Grove Press's two 2002 releases: *The Essential Acker* and *Rip-Off Red Girl Detective and The Burning Bombing of America*. *Politics* also appeared in the Semiotext(e) edited 1991 *Hannibal Lecter My Father*. Excerpts from early texts including "Diary," "Journal Black Cats Black Jewels" and "Homage to Leroi Jones"

already published '70s texts are a significant number of long typescripts, some of which were published in excerpt form in literary journals, and some of which were the textual base of other projects (as is the case with a text titled "Breaking Through Memory Into Desire, or, I Become Jane Eyre Who Rebelled Against Everyone" – a text that was initially intended as a [never-published] fourth serial, and which forms part of the textual exchange between Kathy Acker and Alan Sondheim that is captured in their *Blue Tape* collaboration).⁷ The reason that these typescripts are important has to do with Acker's composition process: much of her work was first written by hand, and was only typed at a later stage. If a long text exists as a typescript, the likely indication is that it has already gone through an initial process of editing and composition, as Acker rearranged the handwritten material and typed it.⁸

17 From these mid-70s archive materials, we also get Acker giving a rare early definition of her process, which she names a "TARANTULA". The TARANTULA, as we will see, involves the procedural cut-up and identity work that criticism has attributed to the serials. But it also entails a procedure of immersion in the psychic and linguistic fields of the texts that Acker is working with, a transformational project that is often simplified in descriptions of these works as "Acker's identity exploration phase."⁹ The immersive and mutational aspect of the protocol that we can infer from these '70s archival materials is in line with textual prosthetics and literary unmaking. The TARANTULA, when read in tandem with the other '70s archive materials and transcripts, becomes a dildo. This dildo aspect of the TARANTULA is most visible when we connect the two descriptions of her practice that she gives in letters to Charles Doria of Black Sparrow Press, and to Alan Sondheim. In a 1974 letter to Alan Sondheim, she writes, "I thought we could send each other as much information as possible, not only then via tape, written, video, but also overwriting, redoing (as in TARANTULAs) etc. establishing complicated feedback relations" (Acker 2019, 442). This "complicated feedback relation" is further clarified when she writes to Black Sparrow Press's Charles Doria, describing an immersive translation experiment she is testing out, in an attempt to write a (never completed) version of Aristophanes' play *the Thesmophoriazusae*. She explains:

I'll run down some of my main ideas about my translation 'translation' so to speak, then give you the introduction I want to the play which is basically a TARANTULA of ideas in juxtaposition to the TARANTULA of fantasy that follows, I like sharp juxtapositions

appeared in *Homage to Leroi Jones and Other Early Works*, edited by Gabrielle Kappes and released as a chapbook in the CUNY Press Lost & Found collection (2015).

⁷ Kathy Acker, *Kathy Acker 1971-1975*, Editions Ismael, 2019.

⁸ For this analysis I am grateful to the work of Sebastien Jallaud, who collected the '70s typescripts and conceived of the editorial project for *Kathy Acker 1971-1975*.

⁹ See Spencer Dew's critique of the tendency to categorize Acker's work in separate phases: identity, deconstruction, myth/invention, writing of the body. As Dew notes, threads from these four interests run throughout Acker's production, and often inform one another (Dew, 2011).

even if it is a wierd [sic] concept of translation, but then I had to do all this reading about 450 B.C. and after Greece and about Aristophanes so I could see what I was experiencing and I didn't want all of that experience to be left unrecorded (Acker 2019, 350).

The TARANTULA, then, is her practice of producing related auto-fictional material and then writing that material into *the textual field* of another text. As Preciado reflects, the dildo is transit not destination. The TARANTULA, rather than being a standard process of cutting-in, is an embodied process that takes place over time, inserting the author's body as an intervention into existing literary texts.

18 Turning to my analysis of the way that Acker uses the word "dildo" in her '70s writing, I argue that "dildo" and its coeval correlate, "cock," function as flecks of energetic language that incite a process of literary unmaking. At the end of this particular example of literary unmaking is Acker's challenge to specular logic and elitist classifications of knowledge, which she expresses through sensation-based writing. The initial decision to analyze both "dildo" and "cock" happened nearly by accident: a scan of Acker's 1971-1975 targeting the word "dildo" yielded only three hits. Two of these refer to the literal object, used as a prop in sex work aimed at a heterosexual (cis)male 1970s Times Square public. It's the same literal object as the one that Preciado evokes in his 2000 manifesto, it's a silicone sex toy, but without the procedure of corporeal deterritorialization that queer theory enacts (reading the dildo as Preciado does through Derrida, but also Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Donna Haraway, and Judith Butler).¹⁰ A scan of the term "cock" however yields over thirty hits, including multiple instances in which "cock" seems to signify what "dildo" does in queer sexual practice as presented by Preciado: an inorganic yet graftable prosthetic, between sex toy and cyborg appendage.

19 For example, in *Politics* (1972): "now he has three cocks he uses one as a sledgehammer to prove that he's female"; "Mother who is good to us all and very cruel come down no cocks, cocks in each hand sprouting out of each toe like dried red Indian corn" (Acker 2019, 179); "a black angel comes down and runs her huge feathers down my head and around my back her wrings are the hairs around the cock her yes flip out she senses with her mouth pressing into mine..." (Acker 2019, 156). These are cocks that do not seem linked to any specific morphology, that, like the dildo, can be moved and used otherwise – although always with a sense of parodic gender excess, like in "he uses one as a sledgehammer to prove he's female." In "Portraits and Visions" (1971) the cock is barley human. Instead, it belong more to a register

¹⁰ Preciado 2018, p. 9.

that mixes visual descriptions of baroque décor with dream-like mostly female utopias. These bring to mind French author Monique Wittig's tightly imaged accumulated paragraphs in her Amazonian political fantasy *Les Guérillères*. In these "portraits" Acker writes:

her world is formed by friendship not by love she keeps in touch with herself by drawing in 1970 male-females a boot on one foot ... long fingers bony hands they are skinny and tall their navels showing the rags part around half-erect **cocks** with jewels or ribbons hung around them in 1971 she draws females and serious comics copped from some old Baron a woman partly evil and very innocent beautiful leaping towards a moon hidden angel a curtain frame of curling and rising **cocks** a curtain frame on which two women lie one supine and one sitting her hand lifted above her face and her face partly hidden... (Acker 2019, 128, my emphasis).

or again,

a muscle extends from the edge of her left breast to her navel hair falling around our hands and eyes the senses hidden she has her own smells cat smells and unearthly air smells and sun hair from beneath our glands our own smells we never each her **cock** moves behind us and within us, and her stronger more hidden sex the holier sex we move up through her arms through her sexes her eyes and mouth through her thick black lips blue lips darker than the night the heaven she knows darkness of its symbol dark caves and earth and curing doors dark waves with no distinction between the sea and the air the darkness of the glands arms crossed the shaved female head (Acker 2019, 130, my emphasis).

As I argue below, when I pivot from the cock to the dildo, this imagistic language is deeply important to the process of textual unmaking that Acker operates through the use of literary prosthetics. Here, the specific prosthetic that she is using is a visual one, as the title of the text suggests: the language of these "portraits" is consistent with what Georgina Colby labels Acker's work with ekphrasis. Ekphrasis, as Colby explains, drawing on a definition by James A. Heffernan, refers to the process of rendering a visual representation into text (Colby, 23). Yet Acker is not performing literal transcriptions of images; instead, she uses the technique of ekphrasis to probe the space at the limit of the text, to try to render in language the technology of the image. Colby describes the process like this: "In Acker's final works, her practices of ekphrasis and literary calisthenics enable the emergence of silent languages that give voice to unrepresentable states" (Colby, 246). The phrase "a curtain frame of curling and rising cocks a curtain frame on which two women lie supine" functions to invoke movement within the static text: the reader, as if making meaning from a painting, is drawn through the image, the same way that light functions in a visual stimulus to direct the gaze. The second example uses the same strategy of visual direction "a muscle extends from the edge of her left breast to her navel" before immersing the reader into a more sculpture experience of disorientation anchored by texture and smell: we are "beneath" "behind" "within," "up through her arms," "no distinction

between the sea and the air.” As the reader is moved through the description, she is caught in the moments of sensory stability: the odor of “her own smells cat smells and unearthly air smells” and the final texture of “the shaved female head.”

20 Yet this textual prosthetic functions specifically because the word “cock” has an obscene connotation that throws the reader between the surface of the text and the non-surface immersion in sensation. The imagistic descriptions in “Portraits” are offset by the energetic pornographic coding of “cock” in *Politics* (1972): “President Nixon is fucking his wife Mrs. Nixon he sticks his red cock into her body he touches her face. there is a four-star emergency in the room” (Acker 2019, 176) or, “I’m writing this and that’s a joke I could at this time be blowing off Nixon’s legs sucking cock.” (Acker 2019, 177). Here we see the textual prosthetic in action: Acker inserts the word “cock” in a variety of different textual fields, playing on the word’s pornographic coding to mutate the language around it, spiraling between visual registers to the political, to cartoonish images of sex and war. In other words, Acker uses cock here to perform literary unmaking. In order to arrive at this analysis of the word “cock”’s doubled function, I’m drawing from Linda Williams’ analysis of the pornographic, which she describes through her concept of “ob-scene” and “on-scene.” Pornography, as Williams reflects in *Hard Core*, pulling from a definition of Walter Kendrick, is defined as such through the process of censorship, the moment when something is categorized by a dominant group as being “obscene” and so pulled from view.¹¹ What is deemed as politically safe is always bordered by the politically obscene, and this border between the in- and out- of sight, a border that is informed by political dominance and cultural control, is what Williams is playing on. Williams writes:

21 If *obscenity* is the term given to those sexually explicit acts that once seemed unspeakable, and were thus permanently kept off-scene, *on/scenity* is the more conflicted term with which we can mark the tension between the speakable and the unspeakable which animates so many of our contemporary discourses of sexuality. In Judith Butler’s terms, it is both the regulation that inevitably states what it does not want stated (1997, 130) and the opposition to regulation that nevertheless censors what it wants to say. On/scenity is thus an ongoing negotiation that produces increased awareness of those once-obscene matters that now peek out at us from under every bush. As Williams highlights, drawing on Judith Butler’s reading of Michel Foucault,

¹¹ “Observing the futility of censorship, since a censored text immediately becomes desirable, Kendrick decides that the only workable definition of pornography is the description of this very process: pornography is simply whatever representations a particular dominant class or group does not want in the hands of another, less dominant class or group. Those in power construct the definition of pornography through their power to censor it. [...] Kendrick thus holds—correctly, I think—that the relatively recent emergence of pornography is a problem of modern mass culture” (Williams 1989, pp. 11-12; she’s referencing Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture*, 1987)

what the “obscene,” modified in her vocabulary to be the “on-scene”, throws into high relief is the tension between the speakable and the unspeakable, here transformed into the showable and the un-showable. Acker’s writing recognizes and exploits this tension. She does this by sometimes juxtaposing “cock” with imagery that seems to come straight from the “acceptable” and even canonic field of classical painting, sometimes relying on its pornographic content to provoke a reaction, the obscene. The obscene which is dragged “on-scene” is the “hot” content that forces an acknowledgment of what is and isn’t deemed an acceptable literary object, which in turn must always provoke a reflection on how and why codes of moral and aesthetic acceptability are established.

22 I conclude this paper with a final analysis of textual prosthetics, now returning to the object “dildo.” Acker’s juxtaposed use of the word “dildo” in her 1971-1975 writings directs us to one segment in particular of *The Burning Bombing of America* entitled “Personal Life.” This text is one of the rare places in her fiction of this period where Acker reflects at length on what it means to be a female writer experimenting within the American avant-garde tradition. Her use of the “dildo” in that text is integral to this reflection, inciting the particular strand of textual unmaking that is central to Acker’s queer project: that of writing a body that breaks free of its sexed orientations, promoting a subjectivity that comes to being through sensation. In the sections that follow I devote detailed attention to Acker’s interaction with feminist thought, analyzing how this segment of *The Burning Bombing of America* fits into feminist interventions in literature since the 1970s. It is important that what I’m labeling Acker’s “queer project” – that of rethinking the body’s materiality outside of heteronormative apparatuses through a process of textual unmaking—predates the legibility of what we now call “queer theory.” Acker’s arrival at this particular type of literary prosthetic – this particular embodied interest through text – is enmeshed with her own implication in both feminism and avant-garde production, two strands of praxis whose intersection is tense.

23 As I noted briefly before, the word “dildo” appears two times in the 1971-1975 typescripts and once in the 1972 *The Burning Bombing of America*. In “Section from Diary,” Acker’s 1970 long text in which she begins experimenting with identity through the diaristic first-person “I”, we read: “Kali tells me that as she was dancing then pretending to use a dildo Bob was in the back saying come on come on more get that cunt up there come on get it into it” (Acker 2019, 39). The tone and Times Square setting are mirrored in the 1973 *Stripper Disintegration*, an intermediary text between *Politics* and *Rip-off Red*, in which the episodic sex mixes with vignettes on the city and politicians but without *Rip-off Red’s* plays on characterization and crime narrative. We read: “shows go over badly tonight I don’t have any

hair I'm not a real female give me a double dildo I dance slow slower Bree kisses Ginger I kiss Bree and Kathy Kat Cybil takes my phone number." The fact that two out of the three mentions of "dildo" include it as a matter-of-fact prop that characterizes the strip club scenes that Acker works through *Politics* and "Stripper Disintegration" throw the third appearance into even starker relief.

24 The appearance of "dildo" in *The Burning Bombing of America* occurs at the end of the first section of the chapter titled "Personal Life," one of Acker's pieces of fiction that most closely approaches a manifesto for writing as female. Acker writes:

Personal Life // to be female wo-man is alone constantly on guard as independent as possible always prepared to be without shelter possibilities of talk a secret language daily language to be various ways to talk various ways are strong weapons live a life which is secret to nonwomen who live otherwise the only way in which to be women is to act in certain ways to think in certain ways sexual gender no longer exists to know you have to be strong at every moment to be able to talk to X each other without having to puzzle what to say without having to plan how to control X you are always your own home your lover the child the mother and the father it is necessary for the survival of the earth perhaps universe life that more all humans become decide women effeminacy fem twine we must be mentally masturbatory in the mountains the caves a foot below the waters of the canyons the cockroach cities you must act out there is no more choice I am going to die whatever I do I We are related to the huge strong-limbed giants in the moon. the ants march by kill H. they live in the holes the green sores of the street pus drools out of their mouths they do not die disappear like yellow dust. Sunday. H. calls I don't want her I fly away. it is necessary decide you are female. Women ← → then ← → women, men are humans who are bred trained they can do anything they are almighty they must not be concerned with daily life. their essence is rape. their desire is murder. they are forced to destroy. sexual gender not exist. you do what you want. write about as you live. the dance begins. the cats appears prow through the gardens the clocks move back. dwarves. giants come out of the caves **giant dildos strapped to their thighs**. you are the child of the princess your hair is burnt away by a star. (Acker 2002b, 190 – 191).

First, I analyze this passage in terms of Acker's explicit feminism, which in the context of her later work is remarkable. The segment's beginning places the text without a doubt in a discussion of gender, "to be female wo-man," and extends sexual categorization to the practice of writing: "possibilities of talk a secret language" "... to talk various ways are strong weapons..." leading to the declarative "you do what you want. write about as you live."

25 The attribution of a feminist or later, a queer label to Acker's work is largely retroactive; Acker herself did not describe her work along explicitly gendered political lines until the '90s, perhaps most notably in her essays "Moving into Wonder" (1995) and "Seeing Gender" (1995). In a 1988 interview with Ellen Friedman, Friedman says, "There's a great deal of overt

feminism in your work. [...] I'd like to comment on that aspect of your work." To which Acker responds:

I never really thought about feminism until I got older and realized that the society was deeply sexist. [...] I realized that *Don Quixote*, more than any of my other books, is about appropriating male texts and that the middle part of *Don Quixote* is very much about trying to find your voice as a woman. So whatever feminism is there is almost an afterthought, which does not invalidate the feminism in any way. I don't say, "I'm a feminist," therefore I'm going to do such and such" (Friedman, 13).

In spite of this open conversation about her feminism with Friedman, in an interview two years later with Larry McCaffery, they discuss Acker's feminism as "ambiguous," at least in the terms that McCaffery uses (notably limited and based, somewhat erroneously, I would argue, on a conflation of feminist politics with separatism):

LM: I want to ask some questions about your ambiguous role in feminism. You are obviously not advocating any kind of radical lesbian, exclusionary, visionary approach (favored by some feminists) in your last few books? Why not?

KA: Because it's a hippie line, and the hippie line hasn't worked. To my mind anything that is separatist is going to have the same problems the hippies had. You can't separate yourself from the society at large (McCaffery and Acker, 96).

The variations in how Acker refers to her own feminism can partly be attributed to historical shifts: in the '70s, when Acker was writing the texts that are at the basis of this analysis, feminism was just coming into more widespread political and academic legibility. The approaches that Acker takes up in her '90s essays, which include readings of Irigaray and Judith Butler, are informed by all of the feminist epistemological work that developed between the '70s and the '90s. Notably, the US interest in what has been termed "French Feminism" in the 80s, and which can be quickly glossed as an interest in analyzing sexual difference as a tool for decentering, through language, the monolithic and implicitly male-centric subject at the core of the historical, political, and linguistic imaginary; and the discourse-centered epistemic shift in the '90s that largely tracked US feminist readings of Foucault and proposed gender as a residual effect of repeated discursive protocols, such as in landmark texts by Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick.¹²

26 Segments of "Personal Life" such as "the only way in which to be women is to act in certain ways to think in certain ways sexual gender no longer exists to know you have to be strong at every moment to be able to talk to X each other without having to puzzle what

¹² See Butler 1990 and Sedgwick 1990.

to say “without having to plan how to control X” thus show a remarkable tension between the more second-wave feminist acknowledgement of social gender differences, accompanied by a desire to find a space away from these differences where communication can happen freely, and what we now might qualify as the queerer desire to abolish gender entirely: “sexual gender no longer exists.” This is how I propose that we read Acker’s complaint against “separatism”: while she does share what might be interpreted as a separatist urge to establish an “elsewhere” away from hierarchically imposed sexual definition, this place is not all-female, but rather non-gendered – specifically, full of a multiplicity of gender expressions and practices that are based on protocol, not biological essence. This is how I read that final dildo, as a transformational opening into a way of doing and experiencing based on embodied experimentation. The dildo here acts as the key to this experimentation: “sexual gender not exist. you do what you want. write about as you live. the dance begins. the cats appears prowls through the gardens the clocks move back. dwarves. giants come out of the caves giant dildos strapped to their thighs. you are the child of the princess your hair is burnt away by a star.” Writing and the dildo are the two tools that make this scene of emancipation possible, the capacity to “... do what you want. write about as you live.” The word dildo here is remarkably close to the how Preciado defines it: as a site of reorganizational potential that can be associated with any part of the body: “giant dildos strapped to their thighs.” It’s this deterritorializing sex act that splits open the imaginative potential for an unknowable world, an imagined but unrepresentable place outside of Acker’s political contemporary. In the text, after the word dildo, we are blasted into a series of pages about the “violet women.” These beings, even though they keep the word “women,” have shed their “sexual genders,” and exist in an unstructured light field of ecstatic text: “UNBELIEVABLE LACK OF STRUCTURE CHAOS IN LIVE-LIVING HOW BEAUTIFUL!” (Acker 2002b, 199) Through the dildo, which intervenes here in between feminism and avant-garde experimental techniques, Acker accesses chaotic beauty, a proto-version of the “wonder” which animates her future texts as she searches for increasingly more precise language to describe the physical processes that animate her embodied experience: the pleasure of desire and of orgasm, the pain of muscle tear in her later bodybuilding-influenced work. Other textual prosthetics will emerge: figures that we follow through multiple Acker books like Laure, the motorcycle, or the pirate; different techniques for transmitting sensation like associative organization by cinematic color, or the accumulation of collected dreams.

27 I have argued that thinking Kathy Acker’s textual practices in terms of the “dildo” as it has been theorized by recent queer thought allows us to shift the way in which we characterize Acker’s “queerness.” Instead of it being just a question of what she looked like or who she had

sex with, it's also about her belief in the physically transformative potential of language. It's about the way in which "hot" language strips away the mechanisms that pin bodies to strict grids of social orientation, solidifying in residues thrown off by systems of racism, or heterosexism, or the attribution of monetary value. Acker's literary unmaking denudes these systems; her textual prosthetics offer tools for working within them. The final image of chaos in language is also one of hope, of pleasure in finding the tense spaces in which communication seems impossible. At the intersection, for example, of avant-garde experimentation and feminist practice, where, following Acker, we can imagine other grafts and strange tools.

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