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Kathy Acker: Portrait of an Eye/I

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About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

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Editorial

by Daniel Schulz

1 If gender is enacted like a script, then Kathy Acker's oeuvre can be seen as a re-writing of that script. Acker's texts feed on and rip off other texts with subversive irony, transgressing the sociocultural script of what women and literature ought to be. Coming from an upper-class family, she chose to speak to the working classes. This conscious choice is linked to her disinheritance because of her marriage to a man beneath her status and her subsequent divorce. Significantly, Kathy Alexander appropriated the name Acker from her first husband, while emancipating herself from the institution of marriage. Similarly, her appropriation of texts as a writer indicates her divorce from these texts, a rewriting of the terms she was expected to agree upon, of the script she - as a woman - was expected to follow. This divorce enabled her to see the upper class narratives she had been brought up with in a different light, as she started working in sex shows and as a stripper. It is this intersection of class, sex, and gender, which defines the trajectory of Acker's writing.

2 Acker came to realize how disconnected the heteronormative upper class world she had been brought up in was from the 'real' world. One of the characteristics of Acker's writing is that it not only treats 'low' and 'high brow' literature equally, but that it rewrites 'high brow' literature with a pulp sensibility, while at the same time queering the characters of formally straight narratives. The books she used as raw material are an invaluable source for research on Acker's writing. Her private library was donated to the English Department of the University of Cologne in 2015 by Matias Viegner, head of the Acker estate. In 2017 I had the honor of providing the inventory of the library, which included not only the cataloguing of books, but also of additional material (letters, flyers etc.) and of handwritten marginal notes by Acker in books and documents. The inventory was completed around the time Chris Kraus' study *After Kathy Acker* was published (2017), inciting new interest in Acker's work. Since then, the library has been visited by scholars and students alike, and has been part of a number of exhibitions.

3 Thus an edition of Cervantes' works used by Acker for her *Don Quixote*, was on display at the *Don Quixote* exhibition *Weißhaus Gallery* in Berlin (2018). Moreover, 1000 of her books were part of "Get Rid of Meaning", the first exhibition on Kathy Acker's life and work, curated by Matias Viegner for the Badischer Kunstverein in Karlsruhe (2018), followed by the ICA's exhibition *I,I,I,I,I, Kathy Acker* in London (2019) and an exhibition in conjunction with *The Kathy Acker* in *Seattle Symposium* (2019), put together by Larry Reid and myself with Fantagraphic Books and the Goethe Institute in Seattle. In October 2019 éditions ismael

launched their book *Kathy Acker (1971-1975)* and a subsequent expo concerning Acker and her writing in Paris, further demonstrating the widespread, international interest in her writing.

4 The questions raised by Acker's writing are not merely aesthetic, but existential, putting into question the confines that society imposes on identity, gender, and sexuality. Acker's writing defies the gendered mold of patriarchal one-dimensionality and its co-option by mainstream aesthetics in favor of an expansive multiplicity (of femininities).

5 Dedicated to Kathy Acker and her oeuvre, this edition of *Gender Forum* opens with Dodie Bellamy's letter to her friend. This piece, entitled "Deviant," is a masterfully cut-up text and literary essay that confronts core concepts of Acker's writing, asking about the meaning of the notion of deviancy in Acker's writing between transgression/subversion and containment as product of the structure that is being challenged.

6 Continuing the investigation into aspects of deviancy, Jonas Neldner's article "'This book is for my tattooist'" analyzes Acker's writing as a form of *écriture féminine* to overturn the patriarchal rule which in *Empire of the Senseless* is literally inscribed onto the female body. Neldner explores Acker's reclamation of the body from heteronormative subjectification, which, in *Empire of the Senseless*, is enacted in the literal imprisonment of Abhor, the main character of the novel.

7 The theme of imprisonment is also taken up in my analysis of Acker's text "Seeing Gender" and her novels *Blood and Guts in High School* and *Empire of the Senseless* as textual labyrinths, a notion first suggested by Carla Harryman. Using the notion of the textual labyrinth implied in various essays by Acker as well as in the annotations she left in the books of her personal library, my article "Gender and the Labyrinth" explores the relation between Acker's concept of gender and the architecture of her writing. The labyrinth, understood as following a single line folding into structure with a center, corresponds to the linear concept of patriarchal capitalism, which Acker's writing uses in order to subvert it.

8 Claire Finch's essay on "Kathy Acker's Dildos" adds a queer perspective to readings of Acker's literary writing. Drawing on Paul B. Preciado's concept of the dildo Finch analyzes Acker's use of other authors' texts as a form of literary prosthetics drawing 'explicit attention to implicit power relations' and to a textual pleasure subverting heteronormative concepts of the body, sex, and sexuality. Finch's essay sets out to reconceptualize Acker's literary borrowing as a 'transformational counter-action' exploring 'sources of potential agency'.

9 Another angle on Acker's work is provided in Danae Hübner's review of Emilia Borowska's study *The Politics of Kathy Acker*. The book focuses on the revolutionary politics within Acker's literary oeuvre, analyzing the writer's use not only of fictional texts, but also of

historical texts pertaining to revolutionary movements. Hübner reads Borowska's study not only as an innovative approach to Acker Studies, but also as an important contribution to Gender and Political Studies in a wider sense.

10 The collection of articles of this issue of *Gender Forum* intends to inspire further interest in Kathy Acker's oeuvre, as well as in art as visceral engagement with the very 'reality' we live in.

Delinquent

It's not easy to love a delinquent girl.

She's vulgar, she's coarse. She despises the world.

— *G.B. Jones Retrospective*

Throughout most of the movie she is a victim of monstrous schoolmates and a monstrous mother, but when, at the end, she turns the tables, she herself becomes a kind of monstrous hero—hero insofar as she has risen against and defeated the forces of monstrosity, monster insofar as she has herself become excessive, demonic.

— Carol Clover on *Carrie*

Paint was covering everything. That must mean that I destroy either myself or the world whenever I fuck.

— Kathy Acker

My Mother: Demonology

Dear Kathy,

At Nayland's dinner you explained the dynamics to me: the bottom (you) is given permission by the top (whomever) to be bad. "Run down the street naked." "Okay." You can't be bad on your own because you were raised to behave, to curtsy to your mom's rich friends. I imagine a tiny homunculus of Kathy rotating on a pedestal as she recites Miss Manners' rules of etiquette like Bible verses. Here's a sick story from *my* childhood: when I was four and a barking dog frightened me, I climbed into my father's arms and cried, "Daddy why don't you shoot that son of a bitch!" As my mother recalls this, tears of laughter come to her eyes. Beyond occasionally washing my mouth out with soap she didn't try to civilize me. I grew up with no internalized wall of Good to bounce my Bad against—maybe that's why I've never seriously gotten into SM. "Run down the street naked." "Fuck no." All those instruments, those contraptions of containment—I'm more of a natural type of gal, morality flopping around me like a fish out of water.

In white gloves and ruffly slip little Kathy worshipped the girls who were bad:

Bad means *slimy* or *dripping with sexual juices* thus *messy* and *mean*. I knew that the rankest possible sperm was drooping out of the lips of these girls. While mouth sperm flowed in them, their hands moved under their skirts. They weren't awake without masturbating. They masturbated everywhere except when they were getting screwed.

I knew that the girls were dirtier than all these images.

I too was dirtier than these images. I used to crouch in the alley with the boys, rolling and mashing damp sand into lumpy cylinders we threw at one another, "Here, have a turd!" Giggle. "Fuck those mud pies!" Giggle. We talked dirty to establish dominance. My father was a construction worker—I could spout obscenities those boys had never heard. "Wow, Dodie you are so cool." Thus began I to use words to show off, to woo.

Later I would meet girls who actually were as wild as I thought boys were. Girls carrying cunts who breathed, like those monstrous clams I found on ocean wastes, slime each time they opened, the way I know a heart will if it's separated from the body: the vulnerability of openness.

I hadn't yet met a boy, except for a cousin who couldn't play basketball as well as I could, nor had I met one of these girls: I didn't need actual beings to know that they existed. And I knew something else. That I was akin to them because I was wild, but that my wildness consisted in my lack.

The wildness of lack: not an assertion of self but an emptying of self. Your badness rages around a void, the place of no-Kathy, the cunt. Things tumble into it. *The knife which was the extension of the murderer pierced her flesh. The flesh around the entry line became a cunt.* Like a command the knife penetrates the girl and the girl swallows back. *Your enormous lips are greedily parted and you secrete saliva like Pavlov's dog. Crying out for all of it, yes, and then wanting more, you wail.* In place of the self is an ever-renewable insatiable hunger, a chasm that devours the world: an obsessive buffet of indistinguishable lovers, the contents of a room,

somebody else's story, a psyche, the master's blade. Writing is an eating disorder—you/it gulp(s) down the Brontës, Argento, Dickens, Leduc, Faulkner, Laure, Von Sternberg, De Sade and spit(s) them back up. What comes out comes *from* the self but is *not* the self. *Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or will not be at all.*¹

Gulp.

Feminism failed because women are thieves. Never having owned anything, not even their selves, they filch texts ... souls ... dreams ... space. The text has no power over its own violation, thus its name is WOMAN.

When I was in junior high, bad girls rode the bus downtown to drink cherry cokes and to steal. They sat at the back smoking Kools and popping bubbles round as their teased heads. One girl purses her chalky pink lips, pulls out a tasteless wad of Bazooka, grinds her cigarette out in it and hurls it at me. In home ec Miss McMorrow says rats and roaches nest in her hair, in her never-washed AquaNet hair. Wrapped in candy-yellow angora her boyfriend's ring bulges from her finger; her stomach is flat as the Gene Pitney and Dion 45's stuffed down her stretch pants. When a bad girl flirted with another's boy a skirmish would erupt in front of the school. Tits flopping back and forth like punching bags SLAP SLAP the girls kicked bit and scratched 'til they drew blood, pulled out crackly tufts of ratted hair. Eager for a glimpse of girdle or bra strap the boys rallied yelling, "Catfight! Catfight!" Afterwards they patched their nylons with thick globs of nail polish that blotched their calves and thighs like a contagious disease. The hems of their wide cotton skirts were turned under half a foot or more and roughly stitched in place. Bad girls didn't trim away the excess material because they were lazy. I was lazy myself but bad girls didn't interest me, they were too much like my mother, coarse and old. Whenever I raised my hand in class they hissed, "Shut up!" I was more like Carrie, the mousy weirdo who looks up "telekinesis" in the card catalogue. An intellectual. Eventually the girls got pregnant—their cunts were made of bubble gum, sperm blew inside them swelling their bellies enormous. The boyfriends took back their rings.

1 Taken from: (Breton 19)

In writing it's so easy for the worm to turn. Take the evil carnival crackpot ... ZAP ... he's a chicken man squawking in his own shit.

I'm sorry I used your affair with the zen monk in my Mina letter. It's just that you exude a daring and panache that wallflowers like me only dream of. You and the monk, me and Kevin—we couldn't get into the Kafka movie because *Premiere* had given out twice as many passes as seats. Weaving through a mob of drips who kept bumping into one another desperate for their freebies I said, "Damn!" Whereas you, your shaved head swiveling across the overflowing auditorium, smiled and announced, "This is a very Kafka experience." See what I mean? Did the monk really have a picture of a Thai girl with a Coke bottle up her cunt? *All that is left is sex alone and its naked violence.*

Re: appropriation: my pastiches are the misdemeanors of a bicycle thief, while you Kathy Acker are grand auto all the way.

I realized that I no longer understood
any customs or laws.

The realms of Death, where I've
never been, have customs and laws which I don't know.

Who tells you to be bad in writing? Who commanded you to write "Clit City"? *Its walls were painted with manure. I was the only human here. Did Heathcliff, or better yet, Dario Argento appear to you in the night, "Write this down, slut!" The taxi driver pulls cunt hairs out of the surrounding flesh—part of the cunt's mind thought, I want to get out of here—"The school," she said, "was burning down." No. Our cunts.—she saw gigantic cat's eyes looking at her and touched the bottom of the cross, her cunt—blood streamed out of every part of her and made all of the apartment smell like bleeding cunt—maggots were coming out of my cunt because maggots come from meat—houses are cunts—maggots don't come out of cunts because maggots can be born only in dead flesh—I will come into the Sacred Heart of Blessed Jesus which is truly a cunt—cunts just want to be cunts—that's a cunt not a girl—in my dreams the cunt was triangular: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—in the swampy regions of the cunt Charon rowed and plied his boat as if the skiff was a finger reaching up—Circe's cunt can summon up night, chaos and death.*

The text is Daddy and everything else is Mommy and you are the incredible voracious hole. Appropriation is another name for incest. Gulp.

I tried to end everything: to lose myself, to get rid of memory, to resemble whom I don't resemble, to end... Sometimes when I encountered myself, I was so strange that "I" had to be criminal—all the time I was totally polite and, simultaneously, my language was brutal, filthy,

I meet a star
go and am there.

It's chic these days to toss around "transgression" as if it were an English word in a foreign language. Kinkiness as a cerebral exercise pisses me off—poseurs flaunting their tit clamps their "difference"—let's mutilate them let's destroy them let's suck their blood and spit it on the ground. As the Haitians told Maya Deren, "When the anthropologist arrives, the gods depart." Behind the transgression of obscenity, pleasure protrudes, "My cunt is a camera," the simple sensuous pleasure of rolling those words across my tongue and lips. You're right, Kathy, we could all use somebody to tell us to be bad. Mina Harker speaks through me, the voice of the vampire goddess—I sit down at the computer and pretend I'm in the alley with the boys again, "There's this really neat trick I do with sand."

You run away from childhood like you flush a huge turd down the toilet—the taxi driver is a snob, the shit in my asshole—the dog shit right here becomes you—the headline said "BAN ABORTION" into the shit that was gurgling out of the black and brown gratings—when she came to she found herself lying in a shit pool that wasn't going anywhere—two young girls are tranquilly shitting into the holy water basins—she spurts bits of shit forth so that the altar breaks into pieces beneath her—we'll shit on you because you as politicians taught us what shit is—you fucking shitting skunk of a bumblebee—at last it is clear that the Church reels in its own shit and that every text is a text of desire.

Shit is the oxygen of your literary atmosphere. The cunt is the mouth that breathes it in. Sex is a nightmare of effects: narrative discontinuity, abrupt changes in position and lighting, unexplained losses, confused durations—a writing with the primitivism of a stag film, that "seems to want to remind viewers of their position in the theater or at the smoker, on the edges of

a frame that cannot be fully ‘penetrated,’ witnessing a spectacle that still has aspects of what could be called a (genital) *show* rather than identifying with actions of a temporally sequenced (genital) *event*.” (Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible*) Our expectations fester, bleed, dissolve. You’re so good at being bad in your books that some fools assume you’re a dominatrix—straight men who need to be set even straighter. “I’m not a top hon,” you drone matter-of-factly, “That’s not what I’m *into*.” As the Haitians told Maya Deren, “He who wears the shoe knows best where it pinches.”

Life doesn't exist inside language: too bad for me.

My dynamic is more like this: I’m bopping along minding my own business and some people go *insane*. I could never understand why Miss McMorrow hated me. I eagerly cooked and sewed for her, and I always wanted to wear dresses, the frillier the better. I looked like a small tank in them but I loved them. Once I played Slaughter in a white blouse and wool sheath. The boys and I divided ourselves into two gangs, lined up facing one another, and when somebody yelled “Charge!” we raced and tackled. The side with someone left standing was the winner. My mother found me in the backyard writhing against some boy with my skirt hiked mid-thigh, kicking and biting like the mutant offspring of Audrey Hepburn and Godzilla. She freaked, “Dodie you can’t do that!” She grabbed my elbow and started pulling me back to the house. “But Mom, my team was *winning*.” From behind her humongous glasses Miss McMorrow squints her squinty eyes, her frizzy red hair squints too, she shakes her finger and hisses, “Tomboy!”

I don't belong in the normal world whose name is sanity.

I threw down my flat-chested Betsy McCall and exclaimed to my best friend Pam, “Lets pretend we’re boys today!” Skipping down the alley we hooted cuss words, climbed fences and dumpsters, knocked stuff over, pulled mildewed *Playboys* out of the garbage. I taught her how to make sand turds. When Pam went home filthy and disheveled, and confessed all to her mother, she wasn’t allowed to play with me anymore. “*Listen,*” I whispered to one of the female variety, “*if you think that your vaginal smell is better than a rosebush’s, you’re kidding yourself.*” Kathy will at least go to the movies with me. Sometimes. You leave a message on

my phone machine, “Sorry I didn’t make it to *Army of Darkness*, but we just started fucking and I got majorly distracted.” BAD. “It was fantastic.”

Let your cunt come outside your body and crawl, like a snail, along the flesh. Slither down your legs until there are trails of blood over the skin. Blood has an unmistakable smell. The cunt will travel, a sailor, to foreign lands. Will rub itself, like a dog, smell and be fucked.

When Toronto artist and rock singer G.B. Jones visited my apartment one Thanksgiving she left behind an extra-large Fifth Column T-shirt and a fine orangy smudge of face powder on the phone receiver. Make-up is powerful. She lifted a pale hand and in her husky baritone whispered, “Call me Gloria.” When I met the other band members I was surprised at what nice well-scrubbed girls they were, bouncy and jokey, writing quirky messages on anything I would push in front of their faces—it was like having an autograph session with the Monkees, like having the Monkees in my very own living room—a far cry from Gloria’s rendition on the T-shirt, tough girls in studded leather pouting up tons of attitude around a motorcycle, their poses aggressive and rough as G.B.’s technique, a drawing with the oomph of a prison tattoo. *I can only be concerned with the imaginary when I discuss reality or women. ... Bad means slimy or dripping with sexual juices thus messy and mean.* G.B.’s glorification of the women-behind-bars mode echoes the philosophical confusion at the end of *Grease*, when Olivia Newton-John makes her glorious metamorphosis to black leather—if good becomes bad, could bad really be good? This bending of categories leads to what is for me the central question of postmodernism: what’s the difference between a moral stance and fashion? Over my head I pull the stretchy white tube of the T-shirt. Gulp. I am swallowed by Art. I look down at the screened images—upside-down Caroline’s face is as large as Gloria’s torso. Directly beneath my chin a tiny skinhead guy floats behind the girls, his right leg growing out of the top of Caroline’s head. I think of a line I stole from an artist on PBS: “Perspective gave us the artificial feeling we could get away from things.” In G.B. Jones’ drawings perspective is subverted—rather than allowing you to get away from “things,” she fists them in your face. Good and bad battle across my chest until my breasts feel like two brothers on opposite sides of the Civil War. The coffee I spill on the T-shirt falls, appropriately, in the shape of an exclamation point beside Gloria’s full spiky bangs. Wearing this T-shirt I dream killer mosquitoes have taken over the world, but there’s an AIDS convention in town and it’s discovered that AIDS blood will kill the mosquitoes and save humanity—this is

a far cry from the popular monster antidote of 50s sci-fi: sea water, an ordinary substance, a simple liquid, innocuous. I sit up bare-assed on the edge of the bed scratching my forearm. Bad. Good.

I wish you had met her.

Love,

Dodie

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² All subsequent indented or italicized passages are from this manuscript. In two of the paragraphs I string together unrelated lines from Acker's novel.

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

by Jonas Neldner, University of Cologne, Germany

Abstract

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

Raise Us From the Dead

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁶ "If I had something to say about my writing outside my writing, something written which occurred outside my writing, my writing wouldn't be sufficient or adequate" ("A Few Notes" par. 1)

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

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

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

Thrown Into Nothing

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Elegy for the World of the Fathers

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

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

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

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

Rape by the Father

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Beginning of Criminality/The Beginning of Morning

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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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.¹ 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).

¹ 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 bond 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 3rd 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 2nd, 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,² 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.

² 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 Lebjaoui 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.³ 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

³ 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 its 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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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.

Kathy Acker's Dildos: Literary prosthetics and textual unmaking

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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Emilia Borowska: *The Politics of Kathy Acker: Revolution and the Avant-Garde*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019

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1 In recent years, the New York novelist, poet and post-punk-icon Kathy Acker and her writings have received increased interest and critical attention resulting in a considerable corpus of texts, informed by postmodern, poststructuralist and feminist discourses. Michael Hardin's *Devouring Institutions: The Life Work of Kathy Acker* (2004) and Carla Harryman's and Avital Ronell's *Lust for Life: On the Writings of Kathy Acker* (2006) have familiarized the reader with the complexity of Acker's literary production. Polina Mackay's and Kathryn Nicol's study *Kathy Acker and Transnationalism* (2009) has proposed a more political and cross-national approach, while Georgina Colby's *Kathy Acker: Writing the Impossible* (2016) has examined Acker's experimental use of language. Following the latter's attempt to rethink Acker's work outside of the territory of postmodern discourse, Emilia Borowska provides an innovative reading of Acker's novels, which successfully tackles Acker's radical politics and revolutionary objectives.

2 Borowska's *The Politics of Kathy Acker* decisively differs from Spencer Drew's *Learning for Revolution* (2011), which mainly sheds light on Acker's pedagogical programme as a revolutionary project. Situated "at the intersection of historical, theoretical, artistic and scientific contexts" (42), Borowska investigates Acker's search for inspiring revolutionary models of the past such as Spanish anarchism, Russian nihilism, and the revolts of the 1960s as the writer's attempt to resuscitate their transformative potential and to develop her own political vision. Thus, Acker continues and re-politicises the project of the historical avant-gardes as she invokes "an eventual understanding of revolution, broadly understood as a moment of possibility" (6). Borowska's book is an over-due innovative contribution to the existing Kathy Acker criticism, as it proposes Acker as a revolutionary voice, which lost none of its pertinence in the here and now.

3 While each of the five chapters of Borowska's book focuses on specific Kathy Acker novels, the 'Introduction' sketches the shifting notions of revolution and their different meanings over the course of time. Sifting through past revolutions, Borowska aims to acquaint the reader with a number of foundational theoretical approaches by thinkers such as Alain Badiou, Hannah Arendt and Gilles Deleuze. Chapter one explores Acker's literary configurations of revolutionary terrorism in two of her early works, *The Burning Bombing of America: The Destruction of the US* (1972) and *I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac: Imagining*

(1974) in relation to “twentieth-century militant Maoism and nineteenth-century Russian nihilism” (51). Borowska traces Maoist ideologies and the imagery of an exploding bomb in *Burning Bombing* as part of the urban “terrorist turn” (42) of the evolving counterculture of the 1960s and shows how this emblematic explosion and its “politics of dissolution” (51) are further underpinned by means of textual fragmentation and additional spacing. In related terms, Acker’s *Nymphomaniac*, which is modelled on Blaise Cendrars’s novel *Moravagine*, shifts Cendrars’s depictions of revolutionary Russia in 1905, to a later American setting. Drawing on “the wave of prison riots of the sixties and early seventies” (67), Acker relates the prisoners’ revolutionary martyrdom and sacrifice to Russian anarchist philosophies. Analysing Acker’s transnational compilation of revolutionary terrorism, Borowska brilliantly succeeds in demonstrating how Acker’s radical politics transcends temporal and spatial borders, while foregrounding the infinite potential of past revolutions and its failed heroes.

4 In the following chapter Borowska turns to Acker’s novel *Don Quixote: Which was a Dream* (1986), which is deeply informed by a widespread cynicism within Western societies in the 1980s that successfully contained revolutionary and utopian beliefs. According to Borowska, Acker’s reinterpretation of Cervantes aims to fight modern cynicism with its subversive turn to classical tradition, hoping “to instil revolutionary spirit into politically barren times” (87). In this attempt, Borowska identifies “[p]arrhesia (truth-telling), the grotesque body, and satire . . . [as] the three classically Cynical tools that [Acker] . . . employs repeatedly to advance [her] . . . potent critique of a modern cynical rationality” (91). Borowska’s subtle analysis exposes modern cynicism’s deficiencies, which *Don Quixote* brings to the fore, by uncovering its resemblance to a Hobbesian logic of totalitarianism and a Machiavellian realpolitik. Acker – according to this reading – endeavours “to replace cynical realpolitik” (126) with what Borowska calls a ‘dreampolitik’, the political agenda of which is located by Acker in the example of the Spanish revolution. Borowska’s complex – if sometimes overfraught – philosophical and historical analysis successfully foregrounds Acker’s creation of her own political vision through re-configuring revolutionary models of the past, which could have otherwise been read as portrayals of repeated revolutionary failure.

5 The next, comparatively short chapter continues this exploration as it provides a reading of *Don Quixote*’s middle section entitled ‘Russian Constructivism’ “outside of the context of postmodern discourse of appropriation” (138-9). As she traces Acker’s explicit aesthetic borrowings from the Russian avant-garde, Borowska foregrounds ‘Russian Constructivism’s “engagement with revolutionary history and [its] affiliation with the visual arts” (138) that has been largely neglected by 1980s and 1990s (postmodern) Acker criticism. More specifically,

Borowska points to Acker's affinity to cubism in terms of the "plurality of materials" (141), and the use of abstraction in Acker's textual collage. By revisiting post-revolutionary Russia and subsequent "Constructivism's revolutionary passion" (155) on American ground, Acker hopes to create new possibilities in the present. Borowska closes this chapter suggesting that Acker modelled her abstract, yet passionate depictions of St Petersburg on Sherrie Levine's *1917* installation.

6 Chapter four looks into Acker's novel *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) and "its proximity to an evental past" (43). Focusing on the novel's political intricacies, Borowska's meticulously detailed analysis draws attention to the ways in which, "Acker fuses the events of May 1968 in France, the Algerian Revolution and the Haitian Revolution to create a new global revolutionary space in the present" (160), resuscitating the "Situationist avant-garde project" (160) and its transformative figures of turbulence and topology along with its closely connected concepts of femininity and fluidity in *Empire's* revolutionary chaos. Borowska's unconventional intertwining of history, art and science turns out to be a fruitful interdisciplinary approach in uncovering the novel's revolutionary potential, which is not to be equated with revolutionary success, but is first and foremost, "a chance of achieving that goal" (202).

7 While the chapter on *Empire of the Senseless* draws the reader's attention to the historical event as a moment of political possibility, the final chapter of Borowska's study looks into *In Memoriam to Identity* (1990) to explore Acker's insistence "on the role of individual commitment in realising and sustaining evental promise" (202). In keeping with Badiou's notion of subjectivity, Borowska traces Acker's search for a comparatively open concept of the subject amidst the atonal worlds of 1871 Paris as well as 1980 America and England. According to Borowska's analysis Acker uses Arthur Rimbaud "to explore the becoming of a political subject and a responsible artist" (43), evoking both, "the lost potentiality of childhood" (214) and the Paris Commune, whose genuine creativity and revolutionary strength may thus be read as a "suppressed evental promise" (241) ensuring the becoming of a truth-seeking, decisive subject. Despite Borowska's plausible outline of Acker's prospect for a responsible subject, her compilation and application of historical and philosophical ideas to *In Memoriam* appears to be fairly far-fetched. Her short concluding remarks turn to Acker's last work *Eurydice in the Underworld* (1997), which "combines autobiographical material with the collective voice of responsible [female] artists" (246), with whom Acker aligns herself, becoming in turn a responsible artist herself.

8 As a whole, Borowska's book successfully unravels the revolutionary fervor inherent in Acker's novels. It is a remarkably well-researched study with an impressive and

interdisciplinary scope that is imperative when exploring Acker's unwieldy body of work. Occasionally, her complex web of historical, philosophical and political threads might be difficult to follow for readers not thoroughly familiar with Kathy Acker's work. Individual chapters tend to be overfraught with meticulous historical accounts while seemingly providing little evidence drawn from Acker's texts. Overall, a fundamental contradiction surfaces in this study, foregrounded by Borowska herself, who believes that Acker's revolutionary fervor "follow[s] an invariably Brintonian cycle of attraction and disappointment . . . [in that] Acker positively wills revolution into being, while simultaneously depicting it as repeatedly failing" (2). Acker's utopian outlook proposed by Borowska is thus accompanied and counteracted by Acker's invariably gloomingly hopeless and traumatic literary landscapes. Borowska's study shows how this tension underscores Acker's revolutionary politics as "radiat[ing] with possibilities" (144).

9 Borowska's monograph provides a necessary novel account of Acker's historical rewritings and revolutionary politics, thus pushing existing criticism on Kathy Acker's work into a radically new direction. By emphasizing the universal responsibility of artists to "return to past [historical] events as a resource brimming with potential for transforming the present" (41), *The Politics of Kathy Acker* is an exceptionally topical text with wider applicability, offering a utopian political vision without imposing a rigid blueprint.

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