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Kathy Acker and the Postmodern Subject of Feminism

By conflating her own lover's discourse with seemingly mutually exclusive productions such as canonical literature and pornography, by using performative prose to launch political and aesthetic diatribes, Kathy Acker's narrative methods are exemplary for postmodern feminism. Materially didactic in its decompositions, any fiction by Acker engages a poststructural skepticism regarding the constative efficacy of language. Aware of its late capitalist milieu, her fiction replicates consumer dynamics in its own narrative cycles. Engaged with her social context, she typically includes the debris of an information age in montage that forces associations between material culled from radically different registers. Acker writes hybrid texts—part narrative, part essay. Her fiction enacts a critical imitation of literary moments by putting them alongside what the academy has traditionally, if tacitly, bracketed off from the literary.

The identity of every term is tenuous in these liminal productions signed by a woman. Contesting conventional boundaries by closely investigating difference activates both poststructural theory and postmodern fiction. But boundary ambiguity has a specific resonance within feminist theory, where it is often used to acknowledge the peculiarities of female individuation.

There has been a great deal of theorizing literary postmodernism, almost always in terms of male writers—as if postmodern literature, an understanding of which is almost impossible without considering the modalities of desire, has no obvious relation to gender difference. As the supposed progenitor of postmodernism, Joyce feminizes narrative, but those who are said to write in his wake are rarely female. (See, however, Hayman and Anderson, who include Helene Cixous' experimental prose.) On the other hand, feminist literary theory coincides—not always harmoniously—with poststructuralism, a discourse that is itself still a dissonant score-in-progress. When postmodern fiction is put in dialogue with poststructural theory (by major critics in this field, such as Ihab Hassan and Jerome Klinkowitz), feminist voicings are left out, left over. Subsequently, writings by women become dangerously supplemental to the theorization of postmodernity. This omission produces a field that is alongside, or submerged beneath, the scene of postmodern canon formation.

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To invoke a Freudian metaphor despite its binary axis, the latent content of feminism (typically repressed through the dream-work that is criticism) may explode upon the manifest content of postmodernity and expose it as a state-of-the-art patriarchal discourse by glossing the fantastic aporias of male desire, exclusive fantasies that seem as operative in contemporary canon formation as ever. Kathy Acker's writing is already inserted between these latent and manifest postmodernisms, challenging their separation in a constructed dream-work of her own. A writer of innovative narratives that converse with theorists as diverse in their constructions of desire as Georges Bataille and Andrea Dworkin, Acker creates fictions that are theories-in-performance, speculative fictions that act out the suppositions of both poststructuralism and feminism.

If we take a moment to isolate and compare some of these suppositions, however, we might understand how Acker's performative project is saturated with impossibility. Take, for instance, the issue of the subject. In poststructural discourse, woman is the male subject displaced by the throes of desire (operant in *écriture*)—a process of figurative feminization that Alice Jardine calls "gynesis." One may trace this displacement in Derrida's works, particularly *Spurs* and *Glas*, as Gayatri Spivak does in "Displacement and the Discourse of Woman." There Spivak remarks that the male writer's displacement from the privileged site of subjectivity, his dislocation by postmodern writing or poststructural reading into the philosophical category traditionally marked feminine, doubly displaces women.

So how does Acker write postmodern prose *as* a woman? In addition, as desire is always operative in her writings, how can it affect a character who would be construed by *Spurs* and *Glas* as "indifferent" to "difference"?

As I have already suggested, a postmodern discourse that performs feminist critique would gloss male desire as such. The question arises: where is female desire? Still taking place in a poststructural absence privileged as enviable by male writers sensitive to the end of patriarchy? In a sense, Acker glosses *Glas* (See McCaffery). Her fiction displays female desire as a process whose vicissitudes impede a reader's attempt to distinguish between two master narratives about female desire. The first is made of local narratives which constitute or enable the female subject as an absolute entity—as she is understood in existential, utopian, or bourgeois discourse. (Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics* indicates where such assumptions inform Anglo-American feminist theory.) The second master narrative of female desire includes local narratives that deconstitute or prohibit a woman's being in favor of becoming. This register offers problems of its own, for Acker's fiction not only demonstrates consciousness in a rhetorical medium, it shows that "coming to be" is full of gaps, folds, and disappearances. A narrative becoming requires strategic decomposition, in reading and writing.

First of all, Acker works her reader through a deconstruction of the female subject; the phrase "female subject" is here understood through social conventions that still operate to predicate a woman in American culture. This is a fundamental project in all of Acker's early work, especially *Blood and Guts in High School*, and it reaches its fullest disclosure in *Don Quixote*, where Acker dialectic-

tically thinks through the myth of romantic love as organized by monogamous, heterosexual conventions. This dialectic is worked through dialogues between Don Quixote and her dog. Here, as in *Great Expectations*, Acker considers how a woman's desires are already constituted by various myths—narratives of being—that fully inform the speaking subject even as she speaks. Thus, how can one write a revolution to find a space for her own desires when she is already written by patriarchy? Don Quixote has internalized patriarchal discourse in the very process of learning her craft, an apprenticeship that necessitates reading: BEING BORN INTO AND PART OF A MALE WORLD, SHE HAD NO SPEECH OF HER OWN. ALL SHE COULD DO WAS READ MALE TEXTS WHICH WEREN'T HERS (58). It is from this dubious position that Don Quixote speaks, and Acker writes, the discourse of female desire.

While art for Acker is resistant to dominant culture, seeking to emancipate the writer and the reader, such an existentialist perception of art often rests upon a humanist theory of subjectivity. Here is another point of divergence between Anglo-American feminist theory and French theorists such as Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva, whose writings position the subject in a fluid rhetorical play. Although Acker envisages her art pragmatically, as a weapon, she challenges the view that the individual subject results from violent mastery as supreme or autonomous: it is this limit that creates desire. Whether the writings that speak to her are as marginal as Burroughs' or as fully established as Thoreau's, all "present the human heart naked. . . . This human heart is not only the individual heart: the American literary tradition of Thoreau, Emerson, even Miller, presents the individual and communal heart as a unity. Any appearance of the individual heart is a political occurrence" ("A Few Notes" 31).

Acker puts these values into play when she returns to the opening scene of Dickens' *Great Expectations* in her novel of the same name. The condition of being an orphan like Pip suggests a fantastic autonomy, and the suggestion is supported when Pip goes on to name himself. However, his name is a misprision—a reading of his parents' tombstone, a revision of "the name of the father," Phillip Pirrip. (Not that it matters in Acker's version of *Great Expectations*, because the speaker soon becomes a young girl. Here Acker indicates the tenuous relations between name, gender, and identity while simultaneously exposing the sequence that a reader engages to orient herself in narrative.) Finally, both Dickens and Acker deny their respective characters escape and bind them in their relationships to others, thereby demonstrating exactly how the desire for individual autonomy is fantastic, wishful, a dream that constitutes and deconstitutes character.

Again, Acker's writing acts out the suppositions of poststructuralism and feminism while critiquing both in relationship to one another. Differences between and within each field are put into operation here, so that the relationship between poststructuralism and feminism would seem to imitate the love/hate relationship that is a source of endless drama in Acker's fiction. Through her desiring characters, she wonders: where does love become hate, adoration, rivalry? Sometimes poststructuralism and feminism exist in mutual adoration, sometimes in mutual exclusion. Feminists are new subjects of history. What dissonance

sounds between the death-throes of the humanist subject and the birth-pangs of new historical subjects?

How can a woman be heard in this noise? From what position can a woman write and claim her experience when authority is under erasure? Acker responds to this contemporary positioning of the woman writer through a technique of plagiarism/autoplagerism.

In a recent interview, she describes her early fiction as thematic engagements with identity enabled by experiment in autobiographical narrative. In *The Child-like Life of the Black Tarantula By the Black Tarantula, I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac! Imagining*, and *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec*, she “put autobiographical material next to material that couldn’t be autobiographical” (“A Conversation” 15). By so doing, Acker problematizes any simple relationship between female experience and the writing of fiction and leads us to examine the claim of experience that often justifies scholarship of women’s writing. Perhaps writing actually unravels the knot where experience and authority are conventionally bound—bound, that is, by conventions in feminist reading. In such reading, it would seem that Acker’s fiction has a signature weave composed of specific preoccupations and repeated reference to events—rape by the stepfather, suicide of the mother, work in a sex show. However, the equation of Acker’s writing and her experience is impeded by the fact that Acker is not an autobiographer but an autoplagerist (a term Beckett used to describe Proust’s fictionalization of his biography in *A la recherche du temps perdu*). The autoplagerist takes the phrase “life-story” literally—as a literary term.

Acker’s experiments with plagiarism include *Great Expectations*, *Don Quixote*, *My Death My Life* by Pier Paolo Pasolini, and the most recent *Empire of the Senseless*. In the latter, Acker makes characters that are projections of herself, but not original creations. A dialogue between Abhor and Thavai demonstrates the difference. Thavai (a male character) is looking for “Somebody who knows something. Whoever he is, the knower, must be the big boss.” His partner Abhor (who Thavai says is part robot, part black) answers: “‘All I know is that we have to reach this construct. And her name’s Kathy.’”

‘That’s a nice name. Who is she?’

‘It doesn’t mean anything.’ (34)

Thavai wants an author, a stable source, an originator. Instead, Abhor, a construct, describes a maker who is herself made.

Acker’s experiments in plagiarism take issue with the notion of artistic authenticity underlying conventional authority. Like Foucault, Barthes, and Derrida, she celebrates the death of the author, the beginning of writing, of textuality as coproduced by reader and writer, the idea of reader as writer. Yet, Acker’s cheery wake over the Author’s corpus is informed by a feminist imperative. In “A Few Notes on Two of My Books,” she writes that no one creates anything because “no one. . . . is more powerful than the world”:

Only the incredible egotism that resulted from a belief in phallic centrism could have come up with the notion of creativity.

Of course, a woman is the muse. If she were the maker instead of the muse and opened her mouth, she would blast the notion of poetic creativity apart. (33–34)

Acker has spoken of her affinity for Sherry Levine's photography, which decontextualizes and re-represents photography by men: "When I copy, I don't 'appropriate.' I just do what gives me pleasure: write" (34). Because she exposes the nature of possessive signing as patriarchal, especially at the start of *Great Expectations*, Acker's technique would seem to interrupt the suppositions of Showalter's gynocritics, which assumes relatively stable relationships between signature and gender, writing and a woman's experience.

Showalter's sometimes useful division between feminist critique and gynocritics often perpetuates among those who employ it an *a priori* assertion that women's writing and men's writing are constituted differently. Due to the simultaneity of plagiarism/autoplagerism in Acker's fiction, identity is plastic. It mutates in Acker's innovative characterizations; gender is often, finally, in indeterminate relationship with identity. Moreover, both identity and gender are social constructions, works-in-progress whose very indeterminacy enables a politically motivated interruption. And in Acker's fiction, interruption is activated by montage—the cutting up of other writings, removing them from their original contexts to place them in new and unexpected relationships. (See Owen for a description of similar techniques in the photography of Cindy Sherman and Sherry Levine.)

The question of whether women's writing and men's writing are constituted differently cannot be answered in any general way, although one could deduce as much if one considers the poststructural conflation of writing and reading alongside feminist theories of reader response. If gender is a social construct that informs reading in crucial ways, and if reading and writing are simultaneous activities as Acker's plagiarisms demonstrate, then gender would seem to affect writing just as emphatically as it affects reading. Certainly one may dispute the premises here, but another problem is locating exactly where gender informs writing, especially if I produce the text while reading it. If I cannot say where writing ends and reading begins, I cannot say exactly where any document marks itself as a woman's or a man's; in fact, if I'm doing the reading, they are all women's texts. And yet both Acker and de Beauvoir remind me that, as a woman, I am made and not born. The point is that gender difference is not immediately or adequately marked by signature alone. But of course we cannot speculate finally upon the differences between works signed by men and women until canons are reconstituted to include both.

So it seems that the poststructural elements of Acker's fiction do not automatically mesh with American feminist literary theory. As for the deconstruction of presence, of authority, of the priority of speech over writing—what about the status of the spoken word in women's and artists' communities, in most ex-centric communities that make texts out of earshot because our dominant dis-

courses are document obsessed? (The term “ex-centric” is Linda Hutcheon’s and indicates marginal discourse; however, Hutcheon defines postmodernism to include only ex-centric discourse, no matter what the writers’ circumstances are. When she wished to designate the productions of non-white non-males, Hutcheon uses the rather unfortunate phrase “minoratarian discourse”—unfortunate because it rhymes with and therefore brings to mind “authoritarian discourse.”) In *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec*, Acker records (that is, makes) the speech of female characters who are marginalized by the male artists they desire. These speakers are therefore at the periphery of a periphery. But here Acker glosses the Parisian art scene of Vincent Van Gogh by imagining women there speaking to each other: “Sure we’re waitresses. We’re part of the meat market. That’s how we get loved” (24). And by making Lautrec a woman, Acker brings the already marginalized communities of artist/men and prostitutes/women together as if to say that a cultural heritage that would honor one must honor both. (A similar repositioning occurs in the “Seattle Art Society” story of *Great Expectations* [77–87].)

A more recent example of speech in Acker’s fiction begins *Empire of the Senseless* when Thivai tells us Abhor’s life story, which—he says—Abhor has told him. Thus even when Acker refers to an oral transmission, her very writing of it separates the speaker from her narrative (which, by the way, repeats the events of Acker’s “life-story”).

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Acker’s experimentation with plagiarism and autoplagerism makes gynocritics and feminist critique simultaneous rather than separate activities. The female writer whom feminist critics may want to claim for their own project hides in, is composed through, the play of textuality—the active material between herself and other readers/writers—including texts made with women, with men, and sometimes with texts not written at all but photographed, televised, spoken.

Acker’s narrative techniques interrupt our tracing any source or event absolutely based in the author’s experience. Fortunately, she also puts reading/writing on the same ontological level as experience. A ceaseless confessional marks all of her fiction, makes it one text, an autoplagerism in progress. Says the character “I” in *My Death My Life*:

I keep trying to kill myself to be like my mother who killed herself. I kept working on the “Large Glass” for eight years, but despite that, I didn’t want it to be the expression of an inner life. (222)

Even at this moment of (apparent) full self-disclosure, Acker is speaking through the work of Marcel Duchamp, whose cubist painting “The Large Glass” was produced through years of interrogating the gaze.

Acker’s (auto)plagiaristic technique foregrounds issues that are crucial to critical theory. One debate (carried on, for instance, by Fredric Jameson and Henry Louis Gates) attends the conflict between the deconstruction of the humanist subject (which demystifies authority as functional and fictive rather than absolute and essential) and the power of utterance desired by new subjects of history. Feminist criticism is a new historical discourse. Again, what seems desirable

by feminist critics often entails a conceptualization of identity and authorship that poststructuralism questions.

For instance, feminist challenges to the academic construction of modernity and postmodernity necessitate a compensatory criticism that, in turn, risks privileging signature. Happily, this risk has its rewards. (See Friedman and Fuchs, *Breaking and Review*.) In *Feminist Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern*, Patricia Waugh reads female authors whose narratives perform a subjectivity that is neither traditionally humanist nor deconstructed. What Waugh describes, through Woolf and others, is a relational subject who coexists in narrative relations to other subjects. Character made in this way is never completed nor stable; its integrity depends upon otherness.

This relational subject articulated in Waugh's compensatory criticism may allow us to note finer distinctions within ex-centric traditions of modernism and postmodernism. For instance, Acker imagines a relational subject through narrative experimentation, as does Gertrude Stein. Stein is an autoplagiarist herself, most certainly in *The Diary of Alice B. Toklas*, where she makes a cubist I, an I formed through several perspectives grafted onto one another so that they happen simultaneously, as if in a visual field. But in *Gertrude Stein's America*, Stein appears to propose a rather utopic text that proceeds without any linkage—in fact without any subject, without a speaker, without a referent. “Language should move, ‘not just moving in relation to anything, not moving in relationship to itself but just moving’” (91). Because this line is offered in the indeterminate frame of quotation marks, it would be a mistake to take it at its autotelic word.

Similarly interested in the possibilities of writing a moving text, Acker's *Great Expectations* speculates a narrative subtle enough to express the state of being in between states:

There is just moving and there are different ways of moving. Or: there is moving all over at the same time and there is moving linearly. If everything is moving-all-over-the-place-no-time, anything is everything. If so, how can I differentiate? How can there be stories? Consciousness just is: no time. But any emotion presupposes differentiation. Differentiation presumes time, at least BEFORE and NOW. A narrative is an emotional moving. (58)

A narrative moves because a character is a work-in-progress: engaged in a ceaseless process of negotiating selfhood through relations to the world, to time, to other characters. Thus, the difference that constitutes identity is contingent—interrelational and contextual. In a word, that difference is moving, as moving as the subject who desires.

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