

WRITING VIOLENCE: KATHY ACKER'S TATTOOS

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Kathy Acker. *Empire Of The Senseless*. London: Pan Books, Ltd. and New York: Grove Press, 1988. 229 pp.

Plagiarism

As likely to provoke denial as social criticism, Kathy Acker's latest novel, *Empire Of The Senseless*, like her previous work, is a caustic, dadaist splicing of stolen rethought literature to defiant language and twisted contemporary theory. Acker's methods are those of W. S. Burroughs, her writings postmodern cut-ups.¹ Acker has rewritten scenes from de Sade, lines from Ginsberg, tales from 1001 Arabian Nights, and characters from Gibson into a punky street vocabulary and grafted them onto barrages of criticism about transnational capital and hegemonic power structures, which weave through dramas of father/daughter incest, maternal suicide, and lover betrayal. Acker has never attempted to disguise what she herself calls her plagiarism.² It is one among many of her uncivilized methods aimed at blasting through "institutionalized meaning, institutionalized language, control, fixation, judgement, prison."³

Acker's poisoned pen circumscribes a "world full of people who no longer feel,"⁴ where the CIA performs Nazi experiments on prisoners, where the "AMA controls death because they can make more profit off the living,"⁵ and where the words and ideas of liberation are taboo. It is a world of concrete, graffiti, and violence. A world whose fuel for excessive production is the exploitation of those who have, historically, been least able to object (women, children, minorities, and third world countries). The enemies here are corporations, government bureaucracy, and interpersonal carelessness. Rendered bare without the illusion that a suc-

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cessfully functioning democratic government operates in our best interests, or that scientific experimentation is anything other than masturbatory, sadistic, and profitable, this empire (the USA) is likely to make you feel "empty and sick."⁶

Empire Of The Senseless follows Abhor and Thivai, star-crossed co-protagonists, on picaresque journeys through degradation, loss, and betrayal. However, like most picaresque journeys, they are not without hope. Their adventures are deconstructive gestures which, perhaps, "[designate] the crevice through which the yet unnameable glimmer beyond the closure can be glimpsed."⁷ The glimmer beyond the closure of hegemonic patriarchy is the possibility of another type of writing which does not foreclose the diversity of human voices into a single possible type of (rational) writing. Reason, writes Acker, "always homogenizes and reduces, represses and unifies phenomena or actuality into what can be perceived and so controlled."⁸ Acker's plagiarism, her use of foul language, her shocking narratives of incest, murder, and suicide aim at cutting through rational discourse. Rational discourse, which, in its certainty and authority, is one-dimensional and totalitarian: it smooths over the violence perpetrated by our institutions, silencing those with different visions.

Abhor and Thivai

Abhor and Thivai first encounter each other in a scene rewritten from William Gibson's sci-fi novel *Neuromancer*, a novel set amid corporate surveillance, computer mainframe crime, and the mysterious control exerted by a certain "artificial intelligence" named Neuro(necro)mancer. *Neuromancer* is set in a wildly unfamiliar century where civilization functions beneath artificial sky, most people are cyborgs, and human consciousness can leave the material body to circulate on the information network commonly known as cyberspace. Gibson's protagonist, Case, is a cyberspace cowboy who "runs" the network to make his shady living. Thivai's role as a pirate in *Empire Of The Senseless* is parallel to Gibson's cowboy protagonist, Case. Neither can have relations with women unless they are destructive and silencing for the woman. Neither can bear en(case)ment in the living flesh of their own bodies. Case is able to leave his body at will, "jacked into a cyberspace deck that project[s] his disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that [is] the matrix."⁹ (The matrix is a vast transnational information network stretching from Tokyo to the Boston-Atlanta Sprawl and beyond: "bright lattices of logic unfolding across that colorless void."¹⁰) Case's engineered consciousness is a product of war experiments. (In Acker, it's Dr. Schreber who wants to experiment on Thivai.) Case is hooked on "the bodiless exaltation of cyberspace."¹¹ Return to en(case)ment in the materiality of his own body was, for him, The Fall.

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Case and Thivai's disembodiment are key to Acker's fears: she is worried about the loss of what Burroughs calls "The Third Mind,"¹² created when two minds meet. Thivai doesn't seem to be able to do anything but betray Abhor: turning her into the police, coming up with absurd schemes to get her out of prison — schemes so theoretical that they cannot be put into practice — warning her (for her own good) that she cannot do what she wants to do because she hasn't read the appropriate text about it. Abhor is someone he can never seem to reach, despite his desires to do so. For Thivai, all women are prostitutes:

I went back in to get something to eat. While I was choking on some nuts, the girl sat on my shoulders so that her cunt juice ran down my neck. The skin at the back of my neck and my eyes felt allergic. My eyes were burning as they should be. I took hold of her thighs. I ran my hands around them. I put my mouth on them. I bent her forward so I could run my hands up and into the ass. Red head backwards, she kissed me on the lips. I had her ass.

Dinosaur, who was a stuffed animal, was sitting next to us. Dinosaur was a female therefore a prostitute. I could see her cunt. Cherries were sitting on top of her thighs."¹³

Thivai is unable to discover any other vision of women than as an irrational and parasitic species, who exists primarily to be ejaculated into. Unable to arrive at The Third Mind together, Abhor and Thivai are involved in a repetition compulsion cycle of betrayal and longing, which ends when Abhor finally leaves a farewell note to Thivai's friend, not Thivai:

Both of you would be better off if you'd [sic] at least admit that you think that women aren't human, but that men are. You believe that women are wet washcloths you can use to wash the grime off different parts of your body or to fling into the face of another person (a male). Every time I talk to one of you, 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 of my blood shoots into your face. This is what writing is to me a woman.

Even though I love you, Mark, because you're a man, I hate you. I'll explain why.

The whole world is men's bloody fantasies.

For example: Thivai decided that 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. He, then, had to make me either repent my rejection or too helpless to reject him. Then, he decided that he loved me. By the time he decided that I was in jail...¹⁴

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Even after this letter, Thivai cannot or will not understand, the ways in which his being oppresses Abhor. Before Abhor rides away on her motorcycle for the last time, he tells her that she cannot ride a motorcycle because she has not read "The Highway Code."

Forbidden Language

The journey of the picaro is traditionally an endless journey. Picaresque novels tend to be truncated rather than brought to closure. The journey of the picaro is a search for an elusive destination. In many picaresque novels, the search seems to be desire for return to the unchaotic unconditional warmth of the womb, the pre-linguistic... Eden. Acker's picaros are on similar searches, but not for a place prior to the domination of reason, patriarchy, and institutions. These picaros desire "access to the territory in which everything can and should be said."¹⁵ As Acker explores this territory, she targets one sacred American institution after another: the presidency, the CIA, the AMA, the family. She shows heterosexuality, as exhibited in Abhor and Thivai, to be a worn out fetish, irredeemably flawed by carelessness and mutual sadism. The only nonabusive sexual interchange in the book occurs between two men: a sailor and a tattooist.

Indeed, Acker dedicates *Empire Of The Senseless* to her tattooist. The tattooist inscribes painful hieroglyphics directly onto the flesh as in the "far seas ... [where] people lived harmoniously with themselves and their environments. Their writing was tattooing or marking directly onto the flesh."¹⁶ Tattooing is the writing of an ancient amazon civilization who resisted expulsion from their capital city, Athens, as long as they could.¹⁷ Now the tattoo is taboo and associated with the biker, the sailor, the prostitute, the outlaw. A recovery of the tattoo for Acker, is not only a gesture toward what the French feminists would call body writing; but an index to The Third Mind, the transferential moment, between the sailor and the tattooist when the tattooist doubts his power and the sailor fears the pain of the inscription. As Abhor ponders, "it seemed to me that the body, the material, must matter. My body must matter to me. If my body mattered to me, and what else was any text: I could not choose to be celibate."¹⁸

The forbidden is, for Acker, the site from which the forces which repress and deny may be deconstructed: "speaking precisely what the codes forbid breaks down the codes."¹⁹ Thivai, and particularly Abhor's, adventures provide access to these forbidden notions. Acker is not popular with reviewers, but not because her writing fails. Like dirty words which would get our mouths washed out with soap when we uttered them as children, Acker's words violate the codes. It is not surprising that Acker is considered offensive: "The mouth was and continues to be the most threatening opening of the feminine body: it can eventually express what shouldn't

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be expressed, reveal the hidden desire, unleash the menacing differences which upset the core of the phallogocentric, paternalistic discourse."²⁰

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Notes

1. Burroughs, W. S. *The Third Mind*. New York: The Viking Press, 1978.
2. Jurek, Thom & Pat Smith. "Plagiarism and the Crucifixion of Creativity: An Interview With Kathy Acker." Unpublished interview with Kathy Acker. Transcription by Paula Moritz. Kathy Acker's previous novels, *Don Quixote* and *Great Expectations*, are cut-ups of the familiar classics.
3. Acker, Kathy. *Empire Of The Senseless*. London: Pan Books Ltd., 1988, p. 134.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
6. Feinstein, Elaine. *London Times*. May 5, 1988. p. 17b. To Feinstein, this remark is meant as criticism, however, it would seem that only powerful writing would provoke these feelings.
7. Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974. p. 14.
8. Acker, op. cit., p. 12.
9. Gibson, William. *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace Books 1984, p. 5.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
12. Burroughs, op. cit., p. 6.
13. Acker, op. cit. p. 93.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
15. Valenzuela, Luisa. "Dirty Words." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Fall 1986. p. 13.
16. Acker, op. cit., p. 139.
17. Wittig, Monique and Sande Zeig. *Lesbian Peoples: Material For A Dictionary*. New York: Avon Books, 1979. p. 137.
18. Acker, op. cit., p. 64.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
20. Valenzuela, op. cit., p. 13.