

Expropriating the Canon: On Kathy Acker's Plagiaristic Poetics

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ABSTRACT:

This article traces some of the key compositional strategies deployed by experimental U.S. writer Kathy Acker (1947–1997). These include citations, pseudo-citations, translations, pseudo-translations, the ventriloquistic exploitation of other authorial signatures, or their figuration within Acker's own narrative fiction. Given its polyvocal, multi-layered and palimpsestic composition, *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984) provides a strong example of the poetic and political efficacy of such concerted acts of textual transgression. Conceptually motivated, these speak to a programmatic critique of the forceful authority of the Western tradition, and of Western literature in particular (both as an institution and as a history). By keying into specific moments in Acker's work, with a particular emphasis on *Blood and Guts in High School*, this article aims to demonstrate the importance of textual expropriation for Acker's sustained invectives against the regulatory ideals that define the contemporary novel, along with those principles governing the legitimacy of literary authorship and literary creativity.

RESUMO:

Este artigo traça algumas das estratégias composicionais chave em uso na obra da autora experimental estado-unidense Kathy Acker (1947–1997). Estas incluem citações, pseudo-citações, traduções, pseudo-traduições, a ventriloquização de outras assinaturas autorais, ou mesmo a figuração de outros autores nas ficções narrativas de Acker. Dada a sua composição plurívoca, multidimensional e palimpséstica, *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984) constitui um exemplo persuasivo da eficácia poética e política destes actos intencionais de transgressão textual. Conceptualmente motivados, tais atos atestam a uma crítica programática à autoridade forçosa da tradição ocidental, e da literatura ocidental em particular (enquanto história e enquanto instituição). Através da leitura de episódios seleccionados da obra de Acker, com particular ênfase no romance *Blood and Guts in High School*, este artigo tenta expor a importância da expropriação textual para as invectivas contínuas de Acker contra os ideais regulatórios que definem o romance contemporâneo e contra os princípios subjacentes à legitimação da autoria e da criatividade literárias.

KEYWORDS:

Kathy Acker; textual expropriation; intertextuality; citationality; plagiarism; experimental literature

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

Kathy Acker; expropriação textual; intertextualidade; citacionalidade; plágio; literatura experimental

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1. The idea-thief: experimenting with expropriation

Kathy Acker's writing expresses a programmatic approach to plagiarism and the conceptual and poetic potentialities afforded by the practice. Indeed, her continued experimentations with various modes of textual appropriation and expropriation seem inextricable from the material and formal identity of her work. In this regard, her writing stands as a powerfully provocative exploration of the ethical and political ramifications of plagiarism as praxis, exemplifying its various compositional uses within the wider scope of innovative and/or experimental literature. If William Burroughs's use of the cut-up technique provided a compelling model of collage as a means of intermedial textual innovation — and thus, as a procedural critique of the notional integrity and self-identity of any given text — Acker's work exemplifies the efficacy of such strategies in the context of wider interrogations about gender, identity, sexuality, politics, and writing itself.

This is no less true where Acker's more narratively minded projects are concerned, including the experimental novels which made her a prominent voice in experimental literature (and counter-cultural discourse at large) across the 1970s and 1980s. Acker's formal training as a poet informed a radically innovative — and radically skeptical — approach to the generic conventions of the contemporary novel. Her conceptual motivations are well-documented (Vechinsky, 2013; Colby, 2016),¹ as is her fierce critique of the realist epistemologies of representation which undergird the so-called realist or social novel (Muth, 2011). Acker's own novels, in turn, hardly read as such, given their deliberate disavowal of those literary standards that inscribe legibility and intelligibility as integral to the reading experience. Better described as novelistic experimentations in intertextual collage, they were most often produced through the juxtaposition of wildly discrepant source materials, and through the combination of a wide array of compositional techniques (Robinson, 2011).

We might do well to wonder whether Acker would have become a writer at all, if not through plagiaristic inventiveness. In a 1991 interview, she remarked:

The truth is I have always used appropriation in my works because I literally can't write any other way. When I was in my teens I grew up with some of the Black Mountain poets who were always giving lectures to writers to the effect that, "when you find your own voice, then you're a poet." The problem was, I couldn't find my own voice. I didn't have a voice as far as I could tell. So I began to do what I *had to do* if I wanted to write, and that was appropriate, imitate, and find whatever ways I could work with and improvise off of other texts. When I was in high school I was imitating Shakespeare. It's been that way ever since. What it comes down to is that I don't like the idea of originality. (McCaffery and Acker, 1991: 90–91)

Insisting she has "no voice",² Acker recognizes appropriation as the means by which her readerly position can be meaningfully transformed into a writerly

¹ Colby's work, in particular, informs the present discussion, given her nuanced and context-sensitive approach to Acker's deployment of different compositional techniques, which helps better distinguish different modes of textual appropriation in their technical and conceptual specificity.

² This idea has been reiterated through critical reception of Acker's work as part of a marked tendency towards prioritizing Acker's own rapport regarding her motivations and decisions. Hume (2001) and

position, while dispelling the authoritative demand for originality. Acker figures this inaugural rejection as an aesthetic attitude: a lack of interest, a *dislike*. This dismissal of the historical importance of “originality”, as a pivotal value for dominant understandings of creative practice (especially as codified by nineteenth-century Romanticism), coincides with a broader refusal of those prescriptive norms and ideals which configure the work of literature in the Western (literary) tradition. Burroughs’ more conceptual understanding of literary composition, along with his fiercely experimental approach to the objectual materiality of the written word, provides one model (among many) for Acker’s work, and Burroughs’ *The Third Mind* (1977) proved especially influential in this regard.

Because Acker was committed to disrupting the political fiction of authorship itself, her work frustrates hermeneutic templates that would demand for some ulterior signifier to subsist, and to finally justify (or rectify) the collective effect of her textual transgressions. Moreover, because her methods were elaborated and revised across the span of decades, in conversation with various theoretical and artistic milieus — ranging from the Black Mountain Poets and the Beat Generation, through punk counterculture and French post-structuralism, to the beginnings of queer theory and the dawning of a new informational paradigm — they merit their own forms of critical (re)description.

In a 1980 interview with the French journal *Libération*, Italian psychoanalyst and activist Félix Guattari is confronted with the more compacted and inaccessible aspects of his writing. Specifically, the interviewer points to “the extremely abstract nature of the language, the neologisms and the variety of vocabularies borrowed from other disciplines” (Guattari, 2009: 21), in large part referring to Guattari’s collaborations with Gilles Deleuze. Guattari does not dispute this characterization, instead reframing the problem presented by appropriation. He responds:

Borrowing is not a problem in itself, except on the level of the semantic foundation of a new word. For example, our term “deterritorialization” was based on a concept of territory borrowed from American anthropology. This reference was quickly forgotten and the term integrated into very different disciplines, where it took on syntactic, rhetorical and even stylistic dimensions, which in turn guided us in certain ways. (Guattari, 2009: 23)

Here, an etymological definition of “territory” (or “territorialization”) is overwritten by the kind of interdisciplinary detournement that might increase its critical utility, beyond the scope of its originally intended meaning. In fact, Guattari suggests that where “the conceptual field is concerned” (i.e., theoretical and critical discourse), “efficacy” proves much more important a criterion than “comprehension”. Interrogating normative structures of linguistic meaning, Guattari emphasizes instead the means of experimental textual action that might heighten the possibilities latent in a given critical discourse or vocabulary — including some “borrowing”, when necessary. In fact, he is quick to reclaim an insinuated accusation

Colby (2016) have compellingly argued for a more precise definition of Acker’s own tonal and stylistic specificities.

of plagiarism and disciplinary indeterminacy: “I claim the term falsifier for myself, being an idea–thief, and a shuffler of second-hand concepts” (23).

As a programmatic plagiarist, Acker expressed a similar sensibility. Her disregard for originality involved not just accepting, but actively *embracing* the disputable legitimacy of her methods, and the entropic efficacy of her expropriative gestures. Like Guattari, Acker “borrowed” from other texts and contexts abundantly, with no particular concern with the commensurability of such textual actions under the aegis of a unifying category or value (let alone that of comprehension). In either case, the derivative and appropriative dimensions of writing do not present as a problem to be accounted for, but as the intentional expression of a set of conceptual and compositional principles that inform the methodology of either author’s work.

The comparison between Guattari and Acker, through which the elusive metaphor of the “idea–thief” takes shape, is enlivened by the latter’s indebtedness to the first: Acker explicitly acknowledged Guattari as one of the post-structuralist theorists who most influenced her work.³ The speculative relay intimated by our own “borrowing” of Guattari’s formulation becomes even more compelling when his own work is subject to appropriation in Acker’s writing, as we will see later. Through a brief citation in *Blood and Guts in High School* (henceforth referred to as *BGHS*), “borrowing” seems to come full circle, from one “idea thief” to another.

Yet it is one thing to borrow — even to outright steal — from the writings of Dickens and Cervantes (in translation), as Acker did with the novels *Great Expectations* (1982) and *Don Quixote* (1986), the titles of which quite candidly admit to their derivative conception. While both authors are authoritative figures in the Western canon, an irreconcilable temporal distance separates Acker’s writing from theirs. As a result, Acker’s textual transgressions are not subject to the exigency of copyright legislation, and adjacent forms of regulation over intellectual property and creative license. The same cannot be said of her rapport with more recent authors, including her contemporaries. Here, the practice of theft is juridically rather than poetically adjudicated. And thus, the practice of plagiarism is confronted with the conditionality of the law.⁴

The legal conflict — and public controversy⁵ — surrounding Acker’s appropriation of writing by Harold Robbins, and its long-term effect on Acker’s own professional standing, remains the strongest example of this confrontation with the binding authority of the law. The intentionality of Acker’s transgression, as a concrete infraction on copyright legislation, is unequivocal: Acker promptly acknowledged the use of passages from Robbins’ work and refused to apologize for doing so — despite Robbins’ publishers and representatives demanding as much. In

³ “You see, there was no way I had of talking about it, really, until the punk movement came along and I met Sylvere Lotringer [Semiotext(e)]. That was about 1976. Sylvere introduced me to the work of Félix Guattari, Gilles Deleuze, and (somewhat) Foucault. [...] *But it was only then that I began to find a language for what I was doing.* Especially the ideas of decentralization, and different notions of sexuality, and of the relation of sexuality to language and politics” (McCaffery and Acker, 1991: 91; my emphasis).

⁴ Acker eventually recognized the need to reconcile copyright legislation (and its prohibitive limits on literary innovation) with the tenability of writing itself as a social practice. See: “Writing, Identity, and Copyright in the Net Age” (Acker, 1997: 93–98).

⁵ Chris KRAUS (2017). “Sex, Tattle and Soul: How Kathy Acker Shocked and Seduced the Literary World.” *The Guardian*, 19 Aug.

"Dead Doll Humility" (1990), a highly stylized (and at times, fictionalized) retelling of the experience, Acker wrote:

Began constructing her first story by placing mashed-up texts by and about Henry Kissinger next to "True Romance" texts. What was the true romance of America? Changed these "True Romance" "texts only by heightening the sexual crudity of their style. Into this mush, placed four pages out of Harold Robbins", one of her heroes', newest hottest bestsellers. (Acker, 1990)

And later:

Wrote, had made apparent that bit of politics while amplifying the pulp quality of the style in order to see what would happen when the underlying presuppositions or meanings of Robbins' writing became clear. [...] What happened was that the sterility of that part of American culture revealed itself. The real pornography. Cliches, especially sexual cliches, are always signs of power or political relationships. (Acker, 1990)

Acker positions her appropriation of Robbins' work as politically meaningful, motivated as it is by an underlying critique of the stylistic and thematic conventions of certain kinds of literary representation. Such conventions are placed under pressure by the text itself, which procedurally critiques the linear allocation of authorial identity, by consistently omitting those pronouns that would refer to Acker herself (i.e., "Began...", "Changed...", "Wrote..."). This deliberate distortion of grammatical convention suggests an important continuity between textual expropriation and authorial depersonalization: as concomitant subversions of literary convention, they usurp text and author alike of their bounded, finite identity.

In this context, infringement upon copyright legislation is not only acceptable, but in fact *desirable*, as the full articulation of a critical relation to literature and society at large:

Wrote, living art rather than dead art has some connection with passion. Deconstructions of newspaper stories become the living art in a culture that demands that any artistic representation of life be non-violent and non-sexual, misrepresent. To copy down, to appropriate, to deconstruct other texts is to break down those perceptual habits the culture doesn't want to be broken. Deconstruction demands not so much plagiarism as breaking into the copyright law. (Acker, 1990)

There is no patrilinear "anxiety of influence" at stake here; no sanctimonious elevation of a collective literary patrimony codified as canon.⁶ There is, instead, an oppositional — even properly antagonistic — relationship to such conceptions of property, propriety, and possession, and how these align through the individual figure of the author. Acker's infractions upon notions of legitimacy surrounding literary authorship evince a contrarian ethos, starkly opposed to the protection and perpetuation of the literary status quo. Texts do not merit the reassertion of their

⁶ Here, I refer to Harold Bloom's notorious *The Anxiety of Influence*, along with the psychoanalytically inflected reading of relationships of influence between different (male) authors advanced by that text (Bloom, 1973).

identity and the preservation of their integrity. They demand a disruptive (and properly deconstructive) inquiry into their relative degrees of internal consistency, so that the structures and relations of power actualized through them may be rendered tangible, and disputable.

2. *Blood and Guts in High School*: a few, key interpolations

Published in the U.S. and the U.K. in 1984, *BGHS* remains the most critically and commercially successful of Acker's book-length projects. Its momentum was decisive: the book played an important role in securing a continued relationship with Grove Press, her primary publisher in the U.S., while increasing her public notoriety in London, where she was living at the time of publication — well before the so-called “Harold Robbins affair”.

Reading *BGHS* demands that we attend with particular care to the contradictions, compactations, and nuances of its construction, and how these in turn dynamically occasion unexpected meanings. For one, its systematic characterization of misogynistic violence, and its resource to intertexts that help produce that characterization through multiple scenes of aggression, debasement, and degradation justifies both an inquiry into the book's own politics, and an assessment of its position in relation to a range of other works — some canonical, some not. Four years after *BGHS* was published, Acker noted the following, regarding the book's composition and her own relationship with feminism:

I don't say, “I'm a feminist”, therefore I'm going to do such and such. A complaint people have had about my work is that I'm not working from a moralistic or ideological tradition. I take materials and only at the end do I find out what's going on in my writing. For instance, while writing it, I never considered that *Blood and Guts in High School* is especially antimale, but people have been very upset about it on that ground. When I wrote it, I think it was in my mind to do a traditional narrative. I thought it was kind of sweet at the time, but of course it's not. (Acker and Friedman, 1989: 13)

Unsurprisingly, Acker's statement stands as no authoritative assertion of unified authorial intent. Consisting of a combination of assorted materials — some original, some plagiarized — *BGHS* was crafted between 1972 and 1978. By the time of Friedman's interview, a full decade had passed since its completion, even if it only became publicly available (and publicly disputable) in 1984. Acker's own description of the equivocal “sweetness” of the project signals the book's complicated relationship to a male-dominated literary tradition, to the possibility of a feminist poetics, and to a contested rapport with culturally dominant forms of feminist thought.

Acker's ventriloquistic imitation of American novelist Erica Jong provides a strong example of such conflicted rapports. Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973) was a commercially successful (albeit highly controversial) debut, and became widely influential for second-wave feminism in the U.S. If Robbins' work featured “soft-core porn” from a male perspective, Jong's work incorporated candid discussions of female sexuality, in obvious discord with mainstream, patriarchal perceptions and expectations. In an act of pseudo-citation, Acker aggressively parodies Jong's work,

in a segment originally published as an individual work: the chapbook *Hello, I'm Erica Jong* (Acker, 1982).

The segment in question appears as the book's protagonist, Janey, first encounters Jean Genet, upon arrival at Tangier. Before they begin to travel together, Janey provides Genet with an extensive account of her experience in New York, including her affair with then-U.S. President Jimmy Carter. Yet Janey's account consists of a disjointed mesh of linguistic registers, each successively disrupting another, in sudden jolts of (anti-)narrative momentum. No less importantly, it bears no resemblance to any of Janey's experiences, as previously represented in the narrative.

As Janey concludes her account, Acker introduces the Erica Jong segment — but not before incorporating yet another intertext. In this case, a direct citation from Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1972):

“EVERY POSITION OF DESIRE, NO MATTER HOW SMALL, IS CAPABLE OF PUTTING TO QUESTION THE ESTABLISHED ORDER OF A SOCIETY; NOT THAT DESIRE IS ASOCIAL; ON THE CONTRARY. BUT IT IS EXPLOSIVE; THERE IS NO DESIRING-MACHINE CAPABLE OF BEING ASSEMBLED WITHOUT DEMOLISHING ENTIRE SOCIAL SECTIONS.” (Acker, 1984: 125)

In context, this additional citation amplifies the political meanings of Janey's individual rapport, placing the politics of desire at the textual forefront. Because it directly precedes Acker's ventriloquistic imitation of Jong's own writerly standpoint, it also precipitates its critical estrangement, through conceptual counter-distinction: from a readerly perspective, the friction between both texts conditions the legibility of either. The fact that Deleuze and Guattari *and* Jong are cited in the exact same format (i.e., in block capitals, amidst quotation marks) formally incites this confrontation between disparate discourses and raises the question of their commensurability when re-presented together.

Then, “Erica Jong” speaks:

“HELLO, I'M ERICA JONG. ALL OF YOU LIKED MY NOVEL FEAR OF FLYING BECAUSE IN IT YOU MET REAL PEOPLE. PEOPLE WHO LOVED AND SUFFERED AND LIVED. MY NOVEL CONTAINED REAL PEOPLE. THAT'S WHY YOU LIKED IT. MY NEW NOVEL HOW TO DIE SUCCESSFULLY CONTAINS THOSE SAME CHARACTERS. AND IT CONTAINS TWO NEW CHARACTERS. YOU AND ME. ALL OF US ARE REAL. BYE.” (125)

This first paragraph reads like a fragment of commercial copy, as Jong candidly addresses her public. Jong's opening statements suggest a naive understanding of literary realism, and her work's own capacity to directly communicate with its public. While *Fear of Flying* is the title of Jong's first major work, Acker distorts the title of her follow-up novel, *How to Save Your Own Life* (1977). Since the latter project departs from that same equation between literary representation and social reality, the writer and reader ultimately meet on equitable terms, *within* the text itself. But this metatextual twist suggests that a realist epistemology of representation is being usurped of its integrity, as the codified distances between writer and reader come undone:

“HELLO, I’M ERICA JONG. I’M A REAL NOVELIST. I WRITE BOOKS THAT TALK TO YOU ABOUT THE AGONY OF AMERICAN LIFE, HOW WE ALL SUFFER, THE GROWING PAIN THAT MORE AND MORE OF US ARE GOING TO FEEL.” (125)

Jong’s amicable realism acquires an increasingly brutalist edge. While the mode of direct address suggests unmediated intimacy, *pain* becomes preponderant as an affect experienced by writer and reader alike. Realism seemingly intimates nihilism, as Acker uses Jong’s signature to critique U.S. society and the very idea of literary realism, thereby openly ridiculing the prospect of a “real novel” through hyperbolic (mis)characterization. As a correlate, Jong’s fictional voice becomes politically caustic, seething with skepticism:

“LIFE IN THIS COUNTRY IS GOING TO GET MORE HORRIBLE, UNBEARABLE, MAKING US MANIACS ‘CAUSE MANIA AND DEATH WILL BE THE ONLY DOORS OUT OF PRISON EXCEPT FOR THOSE FEW RICH PEOPLE AND EVEN THEY ARE AGONIZED PRISONERS IN THEIR MASKS, THE PATHS, THE WAYS THEY HAVE TO ACT TO REMAIN WHO THEY ARE.” (125–126)

What first read as a piece of copy has turned into an outright polemic: an irate tract against the state of U.S. society, and the inevitability of capture, subordination, and subjection. The use of block capitals, here and elsewhere in the text, works to break up the text’s flow, preventing its eventual stabilization at the level of form. In this passage in particular, block capitals are used to differentiate specific fragments as citations — or pseudo-citations, as is the case. But as the performative expropriation of Jong’s authorial voice continues, they acquire a properly affective capacity, producing incremental degrees of dissonance and unease. The persistence of this formal artifice only works to heighten the aggressive impact of Jong’s words:

“WE NEED TOTAL OBLIVION. WHAT WAS I SAYING? OH YES MY NAME IS ERICA JONG I WOULD RATHER BE A BABY THAN HAVE SEX. I WOULD RATHER GO GOOGOO. I WOULD RATHER WRITE GOO-GOO. I WOULD RATHER WRITE: FUCK YOU UP YOUR CUNTS THAT’S WHO I AM THE FUCK WITH YOUR MONEY I’M NOT CATERING TO YOU ANYMORE I’M GETTING OUT I’M RIPPING UP MY CLOTHES I’M RIPPING UP MY SKIN I HURT PAIN OH HURT ME PAIN AT THIS POINT IS GOOD DO YOU UNDERSTAND?” (126)

After imparting “Erica Jong” with a catastrophically skeptical perspective of U.S. society, Acker in turn deflates the consistency of that standpoint completely, reducing it to the point of nonsense. Nowhere is this more flagrant than in Jong’s rejection of sex in favor of complete (and express) infantilization: “GOO-GOO.” With this infantilizing imitation, Acker exploits conventional ideas of authorial identity and intentionality to the limit: Jong’s rapport ultimately breaks down into shapeless, stream-of-thought sentences, surrounding personal impressions and sensations. In a sense, values reverse: whereas the libidinal economy between Jong and her public is first characterized by the pleasures of recognition, now pain emerges as the constant which disrupts discursive consistency, in an apparent rejection of readerly desires and expectations.

The final paragraph, the briefest of the three, is also the one that professes the most programmatic assertions. It reads: "MY NAME IS ERICA JONG. IF THERE IS GOD, GOD IS DISJUNCTION AND MADNESS. YOURS TRULY, ERICA JONG" (126). With this final injunction, the formula "MY NAME IS ERICA JONG" is voided of any deictic value: it can no longer refer to anything but itself, as the linguistic debris of a signature broken down into nonsense. Its iterative repetition reduces it to an image of its own inscription as a moment of metatextual performativity. And if any referents remain, they are the absolutes of negation: radical disruption and unreason.

The Jong parody is significant for a few different reasons. First and foremost, it stands as a stark rejection of the discourses of liberal and cultural feminism of the 1970s–1980s. It places such discourses into question, to the extent their tenability is predicated on their legibility and appeal, when presented to mainstream publics. Acker's aggressive expropriation of Jong's literary voice breaks with the politics of respectability completely, hyperbolically heightening the controversies surrounding Jong's own work, and fiercely refuting an assimilationist ethos. Concurrently, her incremental distortion of Jong's discourse denounces the author's realism as naïve, while ridiculing realism *itself* as a naïve epistemology of representation.

No less importantly, the segment works as a structural primer of sorts: as a discrete textual moment, it speaks to the variety of compositional and formal tactics Acker deploys across the text. For one, its own construction is disjunctive, and unsteady: it seemingly establishes certain aesthetic and emotional formulae, only to break them down soon after, never allowing them to settle completely. When need be, grammatical conventions bend to digressive effect. Jong's signature even figures in cursive, at the very end of the passage, in what seems to be a Xerox of Acker's own handwriting, further obfuscating the division between their distinct authorial standpoints. While the segment reads episodically — as an abrupt structural excursion — it speaks to the core motives of the book's composition and exemplifies its discontinuous narrative architecture.

3. "I am a writer": Janey and Genet

The book's final chapter, "A Journey to the End of Night", takes its title from Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932), a work of experimental fiction that proved influential for a large number of modernist and late-modernist writers. This citational gesture (itself achieved in translation) is just as cutting for invoking that work's nihilistic, caustic energies, as it is for tacitly challenging Céline's avowed support for Axis powers during World War II, and his authorship of anti-Semitic pamphlets. More importantly, the chapter repurposes Genet's play *Les Paravents* (1963), a satiric meditation on French colonialism and the Algerian War (1954–1962), as its narrative and structural template. Towards the close of this interpolation, Acker writes:

End of abstract haze. Now the specific details can begin in the terrible plagiarism of The Screens. The writing is terrible plagiarism because all culture stinks and there's no reason to make new culture stink. (1984: 137)

Although the section will eventually come to this point of metatextual crisis, it begins with excerpts from Janey's diary as she arrives in Tangier: "(*Excerpts from Janey's diary while she's in Tangier.*)" (117) precedes the main body of text. Having begun to write over the course of the previous chapter, Janey now presents herself as her story's narrator. On arrival, she proclaims: "This time when I run after a man who doesn't want me, I'm *really* going to run after him" (117). By doing so, she anticipates a turbulent dynamic of attraction/rejection, which mirrors the emotional conflicts she has already experienced with a range of other male characters — including Johnny/Father, her partner/parent at the beginning of the novel, and the so-called "Persian Slave Trader", whose capture she has just evaded.

The unspecified object of this declaration turns out to be Jean Genet. When a friend spots Genet at a café, Janey immediately notes his correspondence to her exact expectations: "He looks like I always imagined he'd look" (117). A friend is quick to warn her of Genet's well-known anti-social nature: "He doesn't like to meet people and he won't talk to you. He lives like a hermit. Everyone's told me that" (117). He attempts to ward Janey off: "You can't throw yourself on a famous writer like Genet, on a man who'll reject you. You have to learn to control yourself" (117). But these proclamations are beside the point. Janey's decision to pursue Genet precedes the fact of his acquaintance and anticipates his rejection by default. As a form of emotional reasoning, the ideal of reciprocity cannot persuade her: at this point in the narrative, it has been discredited completely.

Following Genet out onto the street, Janey finally approaches Genet. Asked who she is, she replies: "I am a writer" (118). This statement, sparse as it is, stands as a trenchant claim regarding Janey's identity and sets in motion a complex set of identificatory and disidentificatory processes between the two, who hereby interact *as writers*. Moreover, it posits the question of writing *within* the scene of writing, implicitly problematizing the authorial position of either as a narrative element. Finally, it reads as another iteration of the self-reflexive, authorial performativity that energizes so much of Acker's writing: having become a writer herself, Janey encounters one of Acker's favorite writers, and it is that same encounter which triggers her self-recognition as such.

Genet expresses little interest in Janey at first: "He notices me but he doesn't want to" (118). For the most part, he responds to her with nonchalant poise and measured distance. Still, he indulges her: as they walk together from the café square to a nearby hotel, they talk about "writers, writing, and some of the problems of publication" (118). By the time they meet the next day, Genet's attitude towards Janey has significantly changed: "His eyes light up and he smiles" (118), Janey remarks. "He's warmer to me than he was yesterday" (118). With this second encounter, Acker produces a peculiar set-up, which renders Genet's persona (along with his actual personal history) as a source of formal estrangement. Namely, she (she: Janey? She: Acker?) *interviews* Genet.

The passage reads:

[Janey:] "I don't understand why they haven't translated any of your books into Arabic", I say.

[Genet:] "I don't know. No one has asked me to do it. Maybe some day they will, maybe not. It depends on whether my things interest them at that point. Personally, I think the Arabs are extremely sensitive when it comes to questions of morality."

[Janey:] "Did you have a hard time writing your first novel?"

[Genet:] "No, not very. I wrote the first fifty pages of *Nôtre Dame des Fleurs* in prison. And when I was transferred to another gaol they somehow got left behind. I did everything I could to get them back, but it was hopeless. And so I wrapped myself in my blanket and rewrote the fifty pages straight off."

[Janey:] "I know you didn't start to write until you were thirty", I say. "Thirty-two or thirty-three."

[Genet:] "That's right."

[Janey:] "You haven't written anything for several years, have you? Do you consider your literary silence and your assumption of a political position part of your writing?"

[Genet:] "Literally I've said what I've had to say. Even if there was anything more to add, I'd keep it to myself. That's how things are. There's no absolute yes and there's no absolute no. I'm sitting here, with you now, but I might easily not be." (118–119)

From early in her career, Acker interrogated authorial self-identity, by playing around with performative refractions of the literary signature. She signed the early work *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* (1973) as the titular "Black Tarantula", transfiguring the character into a fictional author. She signed the later *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec* (1975) as Toulouse Lautrec *himself*, thus fully expropriating another creator's signature, in parodistic mimicry. Acker's conceptual and creative decisions regarding the rapport between authorship and identity feign no claim to historical veracity or realistic congruence. If anything, they are intent on dismantling the feasibility and authority of the individual signature. It follows that her poetic reimagining of Genet is inventive or imaginative, rather than testimonial or documental. This is not to say that Genet-as-character *substitutes* for Genet-as-author, per se — but Genet-as-fiction certainly seems to be more compelling a construct.⁷

The formal construction of the exchange, itself, challenges crucial categorical distinctions, including the division between truth and fiction. Because the "interview" Acker produces between Janey and Genet is in fact neither hers, nor Janey's. Nor, for that matter, are the scenes which immediately precede it. To construct this segment, Acker drew from Mohamed Choukri's *Jean Genet in Tangier* (1973), as first acknowledged and discussed by Milks (2009). Milks describes *Jean Genet in Tangier* as a "diary of Choukri's daily meetings with Genet translated into English by Paul Bowles" (Milks, 2009: 93), and critically reads Acker's appropriation of Choukri's work vis-à-vis the politics of subalternity, and Acker's respective standing as a white, western writer. Emphasizing Bowles' agency in the translation of the text, however, proves crucial to this recontextualization.

Milks demonstrates that this passage consists in a rewriting of conversations had between Choukri and Genet, as written down by the first of the two, and later translated by Bowles. By the time Acker invokes it, that original conversation has thus been subject to transcription, to translation, and finally, to her own adaptation.

⁷ Due to space constraints, I am not able to discuss at length the nuances of those processes of characterization by which Acker explored the porous boundaries between truth and fiction, as she figured a number of authors — and queer authors, in particular, including Arthur Rimbaud and Pier Paolo Pasolini — in her work.

Milks' characterization of the text emphasizes its critical depiction of Genet as a white, western author navigating social and institutional relations in Morocco, as witnessed from Choukri's standpoint: "[Choukri] comes to see the writer as self-centered and misanthropic, harboring a Western superiority indicated by a complete lack of knowledge of Arabic literature" (98). Moreover, Choukri's narrative emphasizes Genet's more intimate motivations, and his willingness to manipulate local authority:

Genet concocts numerous plans to attain a passport for a young man named Zerrad who he wants to take to France with him, presumably as a sexual partner. After at last succeeding in bribing officials, he is able to obtain this passport, and finally leaves with Zerrad. (98)

Because of its portrayal of Genet's attitude and motivations, *Jean Genet in Tangier* already picks apart the idealized precepts surrounding the author's public persona. At the same time, because the text refutes a moralistic conclusion on the question of his character (or his writing), it presents that same important degree of indetermination favored in *BGHS*. To evince the historical fiction of Genet's authorial persona, Acker fictionalizes a mode of direct address, in turn modeled after an actual address. And by contaminating the lines between truth and fiction, as she did with Jong before, she accentuates the trouble proper to narrativizing Genet — or *any* celebrated author — without defaulting to reductive characterizations of their character and their work.

Genet's initial point about those "questions of morality" that prevent the translation of his work into Arabic subtly insinuates the controversies surrounding representations of homosexuality (among other transgressions) in his writing. His description of the making of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* (1943) corresponds with Jean-Paul Sartre's own account of the novel's material history, in his existential psychoanalysis *cum* critical hagiography *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr* (1952). Finally, Janey's question regarding Genet's "literary silence" and "political position" refers to his extended break from writing (between 1952 and 1957), and his engagement in radical politics on an international scale, after May 1968. Somewhat rigid in form and format, the "interview" thus enables Acker to factor some of her own concerns about writing, political action, and the rapport between truth and fiction into the narrative itself. The willful artificiality of her treatment of Genet — sometimes tangible at the level of form — helps uproot the author (and to an extent, historical narrative itself) from the grounds of a realist episteme, or a realist epistemology of representation.

This specific section ends with a citation, purportedly drawn from Genet's *A Thief's Journal* (1964). Detached from the preceding conversation, it hardly reads as proper to either character's diegetic standpoint:

In *Journal du voleur* Genet wrote:

Movies and novels have made Tangier into a scary place, a dive where gamblers haggle over the secret plans of all the armies in the world. From the American coast, Tangier seemed to me a fabulous city. It was the very symbol of treason. (Acker, 1984: 128)

Of the three paragraphs attributed to Genet, only this first one is drawn directly from his work. Even then, it involves some imaginative (mis)translation. In Bernard Frechtman's English-language translation, the passage reads:

Movies and novels have made of this city a fearful place, a kind of dive where gamblers haggle over the secret plans of all the armies in the world. From the Spanish coast, Tangiers seemed to me a fabulous city. It was the very symbol of treason. (Genet, 1964: 59)

Acker's adaptive mistranslation — or more exactly, pseudo-translation — of the fragment in question is striking in its simplicity. While she preserves sentence structure and grammatical content, she substitutes the Spanish coast for the American coast. Formally, this produces no immediate estrangement in relation to the text in translation (i.e., it presents as proper to it). However, the drastic geographical implausibility of observing the city of Tangier from the Eastern American coastline signals a sleight of hand, an infraction into the original text's actual (and expectable) cartography. Deictically nonsensical, it abruptly transports the speaking subject from continental Europe to the U.S. In effect, this minor alteration literalizes the continued influence of the so-called "continental tradition" on North American counter-traditions — including the creative contexts that shaped Acker's own work.

In other moments, Acker's citations are literal and literalist, rather than disobedient and dispossessive. Just before Janey introduces herself to Genet, we read:

Genet wrote: "Loneliness and poverty made me not walk but fly. For I was so poor, and I have already been accused of so many thefts, that when I leave a room too quietly on tiptoe, holding my breath, I am not sure, even now, that I'm not carrying off with me the holes in the curtains or hangings". (Acker, 1984: 117–118)

Because it remains unaltered as an individual piece of writing, this direct citation from the English translation of *The Thief's Journal* can only signify contextually: its relative location within the text is what renders it meaningful (or potentially meaningless). Here, it seems to serve a scenic function: it provides some degree of insight into Genet's imagined biography, preparing for the pair's first encounter. By doing so, it provides a fuller sense of narrative context, while concurrently disrupting the flow of narrative discourse, and shoring up the intertextual (even metatextual) performativity of that discourse.

The amicable terms on which Janey and Genet interact at the party soon come undone. As they travel together, Genet's contempt for Janey becomes inescapably apparent. When they reach Alexandria, Janey is left to sleep "in the dirt outside Genet's ritzy hotel" (130), while he rests inside. Just as she wakes up, Genet confronts her, telling her she is "totally ugly" and "so loud no one wants to talk to her" (130). He calls her "vulgar" and "unrestrained" — the "worst kind of Jewish mama pig" (130). He then proceeds to render the hierarchies that subtend their relationship brutally explicit:

The hierarchy is (Genet has to explain the nature of the social world to her because she's American):

Rich men
 Poor men
 Mothers
 Beautiful women
 Whores
 Poor female and neo-female slut scum
 Janey.

Then he kicks Janey around and tells her to be worse than she is, to get down, there, down in the shit, to learn. Go to the extreme. To make the decision. Janey girl still has pretensions. She has to be drained of everything. She has to be disemboweled. (130–131)

Genet does more than characterize extant social hierarchies: he actualizes them. In part, through express physical violence, and in part, through the demand that Janey, already come undone, go further still into nothing. Ventriloquizing Genet, Acker underwrites Janey into oblivion. Through that gesture, the literary hero is re-positioned as an agent of political and interpersonal violence, complicit with patriarchal dominance and the reification of the “social world” as he knows it. His final demand, that Janey be “disemboweled”, markedly evokes the novel’s own title and constitutes a further transgression upon Janey’s disputed bodily integrity.

With this narrative turn, Acker bolsters the radical negativity of Genet’s poetics, while imbuing him with a disconcerting degree of political realism: his words and actions speak to the actuality of both characters’ circumstances. As far as the text is concerned, Genet’s ultra-misogynistic reduction of the social real is, in the end, both poetically and politically truthful: because he is a realist, he is a misogynist. This act of expropriative ventriloquism calls to mind the Jong parody, insofar as Genet is made to articulate what he did not, could not, or would not. Yet their positions are reversed. The Jong parody radicalizes those aspects of the writer’s work that most catalyzed public interest and frustrated mainstream sensibility. In turn, Genet’s relatively stable image as a figure of literary transgression and political dissent is decisively placed into crisis.

Genet’s acts of violence against Janey in no way deflate her fascination with him, nor do they halt their relationship. On the contrary: when Janey is placed under arrest “for stealing two copies of *Funeral Rites* and hash from Genet” (133), in an absurdist *mise en abyme* of intertextual expropriation, he intentionally has himself imprisoned as well. Driven by an intellectualized curiosity about Janey’s own criminal impulse, “[Genet] doesn’t love Janey, but he intuits it’ll be wild to join her” (135). Since she, like Acker, has unsettled his individual authority through expropriation, her appeal as an agent of transgression increases. But whereas Janey’s incarceration reads as nearly immediate, Genet steals “for months”, until the protection provided by “his reputation as a white intellectual” (135) finally gives way. Here, it is difficult not to recall Choukri’s own skepticism surrounding the author’s use of his privileges, and Milks’ interrogation of how subalternity figures in the text.

Expelled from the city, Janey and Genet wander aimlessly in the desert. Unable to keep moving, Janey asks Genet where “they” are going. He pointedly corrects her: “Where am *I* going?” (138; my emphasis). Genet holds no special interest in remaining with Janey, whom he finally rejects completely, and who has, at this point, been rejected by society at large. In fact, he announces his departure:

I'm going, me, alone; how can I be with you? The closer you get to me, the more I hate you. I'm going, OK? Far far away, the land of the monster. Even if it's where there'll never be sun, since you're tagging along, you're my shadow. (138)

The endpoint of their shared trajectory (both actual and narrative) takes shape through neither character's words, but through impersonal narration. True to form and genre convention, Acker's “terrible plagiarism” (137) of *Les Paravents* concludes with an “End” section, which describes its narrative aftermath. We learn that rebels have “taken over” Alexandria (140), and their struggle is successful. Whereas Janey and Genet make their way across Egypt to Luxor, where “Genet hands Janey some money and tells her to take care of herself” (140). He then leaves the city, “to see a production of his plays” (140).

And Janey? We are told, quite simply, “she dies” (140).

4. A coda? “The Sapphic escape route”

In the first version of *BGHS* come to print, the text's final section takes up less than a page. Its title is “So the doves...”, and its first paragraphs read:

So the doves cooed softly to each other, whispering of their own events, over Janey's grave in the grey Saba Pacha cemetery in Luxor.
Soon many other Janeys were born and these Janeys covered the earth. (165)

A poem follows, unattributed and unsigned, difficult to gauge as to its provenance. Given Janey has passed, it would seem sound to assume it is articulated from another standpoint: perhaps Acker's own? Certainly, the text's strong rejection of realist precepts allows for this question to remain unanswered. The poem reads:

Blood and guts in high school
This is all I know
Parents teachers boyfriends
All have got to go.
Some folks like trains,
Some folks like ships.
I like the way you move your hips
All I want is a taste of your lips,
Boy,
All I want is a taste of your lips. (165)

Sing-song in style and structure, the poem begins with the book's title, marking one of its various incursions into the main body of text, and presenting its complete form for the first time. In moments, it reads like a playground rhyme, or a belligerent punk chant: “Parents teachers boyfriends/All have got to go.” In others, it recalls a

pop song, with recognizable erotic tropes: “I like the way you move your hips/All I want is a taste of your lips.” Writing on Acker’s citation and rewriting of authors from Classical Antiquity, Katherine Wasdin (2017) has argued this poem consists in a reconstruction of one of the largest surviving fragments of Sappho’s (c. 630 BC — c. 570 BC).⁸

Where many critics have noted Acker’s propensity to feminize characters, authors, and other personae, so as to deconstruct patriarchal precepts governing representation, Wasdin calls our attention to the opposite phenomenon. Here, Acker rewrites an explicitly homoerotic text, expressing the poetic subject’s desire for another woman, by reconstituting the object of desire as male. In a sense, she both masculinizes *and* heterosexualizes the poem. Wasdin’s persuasive contention is that this alteration, which reinstates the representational primacy of heterosexuality, speaks to Acker’s programmatic critique of patriarchal gender norms just as much as her acts of feminization do.⁹

She writes:

Both the choice of Sappho and the gender changes in Acker’s version are programmatic statements. One of Acker’s recurring concerns is how a woman as subject can express heterosexual desire without being completely subjugated by gender norms. [...] [Her] translation shifts Sapphic homosexuality to radical heterosexuality from a female subjective viewpoint. (Wasdin, 2017: 281)

Moreover, Wasdin suggests this “Sapphic escape route” (282) speaks to another dimension of Acker’s work. Namely, a rapport with a range of female authors which most readings (feminist or otherwise) have largely failed to acknowledge, arguably stemming from Acker’s own public discourse on male authors and male-dominated literary, theoretical, and artistic traditions. More easily identifiable textual relations are thus surprised by an unexpected echo, which exceeds normalized perceptions of Acker’s work.

In stark contrast with Jong and Genet’s objective (and assertive) textual presence, the Sapphic allusion is quiet, elusive — just out of readerly reach. And where Genet, regardless of his sexual identity, forcefully actualizes patriarchal mores, Sappho — if we agree with Wasdin’s reading — is suggestively situated in a more elliptical relation to the text, suggesting latent cartographies of desire and imagination. At the moment when Acker could have retrieved the mythos surrounding the Sapphic lyric, and a libidinal economy other to that of phallogocentric sexuality, she chooses to neutralize the element which would most

⁸ The opening stanza of fragment 16 V, as translated by Anne Carson, reads: “Some men say an army of horses/and some men say an army on foot/and some men say an army of ships is the/most beautiful thing on the black earth. *But I say it is what you love*”, while its final stanza reads: “I would rather see her lovely step/and the motion of light on her face/than chariots of Lydians or ranks/of foot soldiers in arms (Carson, 2002: 27; my emphasis).

⁹ This tendency towards disrupting expected gender roles — treating gender identity as volatile, ductile, and fungible — informs contemporary readings of Acker’s work from a trans critical perspective. For a discussion of what we might describe as the latent trans potentialities of Acker’s writing, see Wark (2021).

flagrantly read against the grain of heterosexist relations of meaning: Sappho's express desire for another woman.¹⁰

"Borrowing" Sappho's lyric, and rerouting it through contemporary sensibilities, Acker makes a finer point about collective memory and the marginal position of women writers in the Western literary canon. As Wasdin notes, Sappho was profoundly influential for authors such as Catullus and Propertius, who Acker explicitly cited in more than one instance — including *BGHS* itself. Her rewriting of Sappho thus evinces her historical position as a "foremother" (Wasdin, 2017: 282), while performatively reenacting that same silence which has historically functioned to exclude women from the canon.

This tacit recognition of Sappho's work reinforces our sense of the text's poetic (if not quite properly narrative) horizon. Refashioned into a form more akin to a radio-friendly pop song than to a piece of lyrical writing, the poem forges an unlikely bond between the Greek lyric, the avant-garde novel, and the contemporary moment. This results in a powerful juxtaposition, whereby the contemporaneity of Janey's situation remits back to long-term forms of patriarchal violence and female subjection. The lyric's invasion of the novel's conclusion reshapes its historical situation and de-emphasizes the novelty of the scenes of subjection depicted within it.

As a coda of sorts, it suggests something else than the world as it is — something which holds within it the libidinal possibilities of the Sapphic imaginary, yet yearns still for an eventual reinvention, or rearticulation, of heterosexuality. Janey's demise might be read as fatalistic, but this poetic passage, through which her individual story is rewritten as a metaphor for collective becoming, suggests a surprising spark of possibility. Perhaps even a "kernel of utopian possibility", to retrieve José Esteban Muñoz' compelling turn of phrase (Muñoz, 1999: 25). Desire — and female desire, specifically — does not collapse under or dissipate against the rigidities of patriarchal society.

At the limit, it not only survives — it multiplies.

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¹⁰ Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, in particular, proved influential for Acker's theoretical understanding of women's identity, embodiment, and situated relationship to language. See, in particular, the essays "Seeing Gender" and "Reading the Lack of the Body: The Writing of the Marquis de Sade", both collected in the anthology *Bodies of Work* (1997).

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