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A WOMAN OF GREAT EXPECTATIONS:
SOCIAL AND POLITICAL VISION IN KATHY ACKER'S
DON QUIXOTE: WHICH WAS A DREAM, EMPIRE OF THE SENSELESS, AND
IN MEMORIAM TO IDENTITY

by

Lorrie B. Graham, B.A.

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfillment for the degree of
Master of Arts

Department of English
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
August 1993

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"A Woman of Great Expectations:
Social and Political Vision in Kathy Acker's
Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream, Empire of the Senseless, and
In Memoriam to Identity"

submitted by Lorrie B. Graham, B.A.
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

Thesis Supervisor

Chairperson, Department of English

Carleton University

Abstract

This thesis examines political and social vision in Kathy Acker's Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream, Empire of the Senseless, and In Memoriam to Identity. Foregrounding gender issues, these novels deconstruct, and even annihilate, Western capitalist patriarchal culture. Through notions of subjectivity and feminist theory, the following are considered: women trying to express themselves in language codified by and for men; heterosexual relationships in a society where women are taught from childhood to be submissive; and the finding of a place where "the others," those who live on society's margins, can feel safe to be themselves without fear of violence or repression. As a result, Acker's work emerges as political, deeply concerned with understanding how people become bound by societal chains. More importantly, her writing offers suggestions as to how those bonds may be cast off.

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Dedication

For Steven and Dylan

Legend

AE	<u>Art Forum</u>
AL	<u>Algeria</u>
AW	<u>Angry Women</u>
BG	<u>Blood and Guts in High School</u>
BT	<u>The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula</u>
CF	<u>Review of Contemporary Fiction</u>
DN	<u>I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac: Imagining</u>
DO	<u>Don Quixote</u>
ES	<u>Empire of the Senseless</u>
GE	<u>Great Expectations</u>
HL	<u>Hannibal Lecter, My Father</u>
IM	<u>In Memoriam to Identity</u>
KH	<u>Kathy Goes to Haiti</u>
MR	<u>Mississippi Review</u>
NG	<u>The New Gothic</u>
RA	<u>Radical American Abroad</u>
RR	<u>Art After Modernism</u>
TL	<u>The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec</u>
TO	<u>Imprint</u>

Chapter One

Perfume Waft of Freedom

I've seen too many English departments destroy people's delight in reading. Once something becomes academic it's taken on this level--take the case of semiotics and postmodernism. When I was first introduced to the work of Foucault and Deleuze, it was very political; it was about what was happening to the economy and about changing the political system. By the time it was taken up by the American academy, the politics had gone to hell. It became an exercise for some professors to make their careers. (CE 20-21)

I can only travel there by means of smell. For smell is the one perceptual mode that, uniting body and mind, disappears and so reveals the realms that are unknown. Smell's the sense that leads to experience that's as real as death but not death. (NG 308)

Coming into Kathy Acker's texts can be like walking into a room filled with strong perfume: claustrophobic, cloying. Some readers never return. Others are drawn back, compelled perhaps by some memory of the perfume on a younger self, on a mother, a sister, a friend, in a different place and time. Acker's writing repels then attracts, pushes then pulls. If one reenters the heavily scented rooms of her narratives, one finds windows to open, passageways to explore. One confronts mirrors that both reflect and distort reality. "Pain" is the name of the perfume. Acker's narratives exude it: the pain of young people, poor people, women searching

for an identity, a voice, in a patriarchal society where the only language is the language of men.

Born on April 18, 1947, Kathy Acker grew up in Manhattan, New York, on 57th Street and First Avenue, daughter to a wealthy Jewish family. As a teenager, she was introduced to underground filmmakers like Stan Brakhage, Stan Rice, and Gregory Markopolos. She studied at Brandeis University, the University of California in San Diego, New York City College, and New York University. "Memory, it gets everything mixed up" (HL 2), she says, which makes pinning down exact dates from her past difficult. At some point, she moved to San Francisco and wrote Rip-Off Red: Girl Detective, "a pornographic mystery story" (HL 2) which, she claims, has "very luckily...never been published" (HL 2). Estranged from her family, and penniless, Acker returned to New York and "hung out in the poetry scene" (HL 4) with writers from the St. Mark's Poetry Project. To survive financially, she started working in a sex-show on 42nd Street where she learned about street politics, "especially power relationships in society" (HL 5). Dramatically different from university life, this experience had a profound effect on her politics.

Details concerning her past remain unclear, even though she often writes, in fictionalized form, about her personal life. In interviews, she acknowledges having been married and divorced twice. When Acker was thirty, her mother

committed suicide; consequently, the theme of maternal suicide appears in several novels. Looking back, she realizes that her novel, Great Expectations, deals with her mother's death; yet, at the time of its writing, "that knowledge was buried somewhere deep inside [her]" (MR 92). At age thirty-seven, she left New York to live and work in London. After almost ten years in England, Acker recently returned to the United States. Heavily tattooed, she eats a vegetarian diet, body-builds with a professional trainer, teaches writing part-time at the San Francisco Art Museum, and works on her next novel.

Much of her early writing was dedicated to "doing everything [she] wasn't supposed to do" (HL 8), including rejecting "the bourgeois story-line" (HL 23) because it privileged closure. After POLITICS, a book of "little prose poems" (HL 5), she wrote a trilogy of novels whose "major theme was identity" (CE 15), specifically the identity of "the 'I' of the text" (MR 88). This trilogy consists of The Childlike 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. Judging by the titles, most readers would not mistake these works for realist or what Burroughs labels "old-style novels" (1984, 4). Rather, they are research into notions of fictionality and textuality. By experimenting with juxtapositions of "real" and "fake" autobiographies,

intertextuality, memory, and repetition, much of this early work corresponds to current theoretical investigations into the "reality" of autobiographical and historical texts. Robert Siegle, in his book, Suburban Ambush, envisions a time when readers "will understand that textuality means fiction" (400). After completing the trilogy, Acker reached the same conclusion. "What became more interesting to me wasn't the 'I,'" she explains, but rather the text, "because it's texts that create the identity" (HL 7). As a result, these experiments led to an increased interest in "plagiarism," a method which came back to haunt Acker during her stay in England.

Part of the text of Toulouse comes from Harold Robbins' novel, The Pirate. In the section Acker appropriates, a rich white woman goes to a disco, picks up a young black man, and has sex with him. Acker named the woman Jackie Onassis, and entitled the section, "I Want to be Raped Every Night." When a journalist alerted Robbins' publishers to this, they demanded that she either sign a public apology or face immediate withdrawal of Toulouse from circulation. According to the law, Acker claims, plagiarism "represent[s] someone else's material as your [own] material" (HL 12). She contends that she has always talked about her "method of appropriation" (HL 13), freely discussing sources in both interviews and theoretical texts. To her, intertextuality is a "literary theory" (HL 13). Although she considered it

a "piddling little incident" over something she wrote "twenty years ago about something Robbins wrote thirty years ago" (MR 84-85), Robbins did not agree. An apology was signed, "a very specific statement" (HL 13), that, she claims, "was published in all the literary magazines" (HL 13). After resolving this painful incident, she returned to the United States.

Acker turns to literary history when discussing conflicts over plagiarism. Because the retelling of stories was commonplace among the Greeks, she questions where the "ideology of creativity" (CE 33) began. She also notes that "Shakespeare and company...copied each other's writings" (CE 33). A contemporary of Acker's, Gilbert Sorrentino, does not embrace the ideology of creativity either. Instead, he regards writers as a "'collaborative' band, each adding a stratum to the work done by others, each stratum possible only because of that work" (263). According to Acker, when the bourgeoisie "made a capitalistic marketplace for books" (CE 33), copyright sales became how "writers [made] their money" (HL 12). This, she reasons, resulted in the veneration of originality.

More difficult to dismiss are charges of obscenity. Foregrounding words like "cunt" in much the same way some Blacks have reappropriated the word "nigger," and groups like Queer Nation deconstruct labels applied to them, her writing "appalls the literary establishment" (CE 22).

Likewise, themes of young girls having sex with their fathers, being raped by their brothers, and abused by their lovers, disturb many readers. Acker does not condone these practices. She merely reflects a society where "men want young tight fresh girl skin" (GE 48); a society where a woman has to deny "her father's sex and have no father or fuck her father and have a father" (GE 54); a society where "all rich businessmen get richer while wars are always fought on top of the bodies of poor people" (GE 25). Painful, ugly, shocking: Acker's narratives often repulse.

In 1986, The German Federal Inspection Office for Publications Harmful to Minors decided that Acker's Tough Girls Don't Cry, (Blood and Guts in High School), be added to the list of titles harmful to minors on the grounds that it contained child-sex, sadomasochism, and was not creative (142-148). The book was banned. This novel, Acker admits, contains sadomasochism, but she is astounded that the German government interpreted the sex scenes literally between the young protagonist, Janey, and her father. Clearly, the use of the father as a metaphor for patriarchy was beyond the intellectual scope of the Federal Inspection Office. The metaphorical aspects of Blood and Guts in High School eluded Canada Customs as well. On January 15, 1993, twenty-seven publications destined for an Ottawa bookstore were confiscated at the border, among them Acker's Blood and Guts in High School. Also seized were Pornography: Men

Possessing Women and Women Hating, two "seminal works against pornographic degradation and dehumanization" (Nerenberg 2), both by radical feminist Andrea Dworkin. Clearly, these books were initially restricted on the basis of their titles. After reviewing the contents, Dworkin received an apology; Acker did not.

This thesis explores the social and political visions in her three latest novels: Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream, Empire of the Senseless, and In Memoriam to Identity. Current debates abound concerning whether or not certain literary categories, in particular postmodernism, are inherently historical or ahistorical, political or apolitical (Eagleton 1985, 1990; Graff 1979; Hutcheon 1988; Jameson 1984). A number of critical texts attempt definitions of postmodernism (Hutcheon 1988, McHale 1987), while some critics and writers refuse to acknowledge the term. With thinly veiled irony, Siegle notes that the word postmodern often "tells us more about the individual using it than about what is out there" (395). In an attempt to avoid current debates on whether or not certain literary categories are inherently "apolitical" or "ahistorical," this thesis does not situate Acker's work within any particular literary camp. Instead, her writing is treated as highly political due to its exploration and foregrounding of feminist issues.

Feminism is "where I would locate myself" (HL 18), Acker declares. Chris Weedon, in Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory, maintains that feminism is a politics "directed at changing existing power relations between women and men in society" (1). Writing about a society where "all things are sexist" (AW 177), Acker comments:

...the novelist who writes about the poor Cambridge vicar who can't deal with his homosexuality is giving us no tools for survival. Whereas William Burroughs' writing methods, his uses of psychic research, are weapons in the fight for our own happiness. (CE 34)

Rejecting totalizing discourse, Acker offers instead strategies which she feels are helpful to the survival of women, and other marginalized groups, within patriarchy. By attacking "common sense" notions about gender differences, for example, she provides a glimpse into a world not defined by rigid notions of masculinity and femininity. This thesis draws on a wide spectrum of feminist discourse, as well as materials concerning discipline and punishment by Michel Foucault, Chris Weedon's and Louis Althusser's ideas pertaining to subjectivity, and Mikhail Bakhtin's theories on discursivity.

The first novel examined is Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream, a book, Acker states, "very much about trying to find [her] voice as a woman" (CE 13). Deeply political, it focuses on issues such as women's inability to move about in a world which is dangerous for them simply because they are

women. The novel reflects Acker's "hatred of gender...a hatred of the expectation that [she] had to become [her] womb" (AW 177). The female protagonist in Don Quixote attempts to overthrow Nixon's evil empire; after this is accomplished, she realizes that simply triumphing over one administration is not enough: she must understand "the myths of the beginning of America" (DQ 117) in order to defeat what America has become.

Empire of the Senseless begins "the search for a myth to live by" (CE 17). Acker knows that one "can't get to a place, to a society, that isn't constructed according to the phallus" (CE 17); nevertheless, she struggles toward finding a place within patriarchy where she can work against the centre from her position on the margins. The idea that something constructive can be accomplished replaces the notion that "we are really really powerless" (GE 25). Resenting the fact that, as a child, she "couldn't be a pirate" (AW 177), she explores, in Empire of the Senseless, the myth of pirates and what she sees as "the most positive thing in the book...the tattoo" (CE 17). Tattoos, she feels, are a way of "doing your own sign-making" (CE 17) through "art that's on your flesh" (AW 179). This move toward what she views as constructive ways of living becomes increasingly evident in her latest novel, In Memoriam to Identity.

In this novel, "the smell of sex is everywhere...it lies on the skin and it's the air in the mouth" (IM 117). By taking the reader into the life of Arthur Rimbaud, the source of "one of the first major poetic myths for us" (HL 24), Acker explores the myth of romantic love. Memoriam, she explains, still uses intertextuality, but "it's cleaned up so that the primitive narrative is coming through more strongly" (HL 24). Works by Rimbaud, William Faulkner, and various biographies of both men are used; however, she does not work with these materials to subvert them. "I'm not so interested," Acker asserts, "in pulling [these texts] apart...cause I respect them" (HL 24). For her, these works provide a door through which she may enter and perhaps become a part of the literary canon.

Though Ellen Friedman labels Acker's writing "profoundly political" (37), and Siegle hails it as "the most devastating narrative critique of Western culture to appear in American literature" (48), many critics ignore Acker's political messages. Instead, they chose to attack her on a personal level. Reviewing Blood and Guts in High School, Cosmo Landesman claims that Acker is "a casualty of poor toilet training as a child and too much symbolist poetry as an adolescent" (34). Brian Morton dismisses her work as "graduate school experimentalism that is already well out of date" (29), while Neville Shack claims that Blood and Guts in High School "induces more stupor than retching" (136).

Anticipating these assaults, Acker comments that writers in the tradition of William S. Burroughs "have always been attacked on personal rather than on literary grounds" (CE 31). Shocking, angry, powerful, exciting, her writing is politics:

The idea that art has nothing to do with politics is a wonderful construction in order to mask the deep political significance that art has--to uphold the empire in terms of its representation as well as its actual structure. (CE 21)

Chapter 2

I, The Female Pirate Speak

As we've said, her wheeling bed's name was 'Hack-kneed' or 'Hackneyed', meaning 'once a hack' or 'always a hack' or 'a writer' or 'an attempt to have an identity that always fails.' Just as 'Hackneyed' is the glorification or change from non-existence into existence of 'Hack-kneed', so, she decided, 'catheter' is the glorification of 'Kathy'. By taking on such a name which, being long, is male, she would be able to become a female-male or a night-knight. (DQ 10)

So [Quixote] went on stringing together these and other absurdities, all of the sort his books had taught him, imitating their language as well as he could....he was eager to encounter at the earliest moment someone on whom to test the valour of his mighty arm. (Cervantes 30)

During an interview, Acker proclaims herself "the most disoriented novelist that ever existed" (HL 10). In her literary realm, people do not "remember their names" (HL 23), are not "sure of their sexuality" (HL 23), and are uncertain if they can "define their genders" (HL 23). This "confusion" allows her characters, whether male or female, to roam freely through strange worlds. Envyng men their freedom of movement, Acker states: "I can never travel being a woman" (HL 23). As a result, creating flowing, mystical landscapes holds great appeal for her. Unable

physically to lead the life she desires, Acker becomes a literary pirate, plundering other texts, usually by men, in order to sail imaginary seas.

The first part of this chapter provides an overview of Acker's works prior to Don Quixote. In The Pleasure of the Text, Roland Barthes states: "The text is (should be) that uninhibited person who shows his [or her] behind to the *Political Father*" (53). Through her writing, Acker has been doing just that for many years. Evolving from a despairing tone to one of hope, her writing reflects a world that she claims "is always making itself" (CE 33). In Acker's Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream, appropriation is both a literary method and a political weapon. By short-circuiting established master-narratives, in this case, the knight in shining armour, Acker frees her female Quixote to roam. From her handling of Cervantes' text, it is clear that she has sympathy for his knight as well as her own. Near the end of Don Quixote, Acker gives a description of anarchist Michael Bakunin and others like him. While not insisting that their views are correct, the text presents their ideas in a positive light.

Acker's juvenilia includes POLITICS, The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula, The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec, and I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac: Imagining. While attending university in San Diego, Acker took a part-time job as a stripper. POLITICS was created from "incredible

stories" (AW 178) told to her by women with whom she worked. To build the text, she used cut-up techniques made famous by William S. Burroughs, a writer, she claims, who deals "with how politics and language come together" (HL 4). For Burroughs, the cut-up method "brings to writers the collage, which has been used by painters for fifty years" (1982, 35). This technique, destroying as it did "the possibility of a static representation or portrait" (GE 81), excited Acker when she applied it to her writing. The titillating subject matter in POLITICS drew the attention of several big publishers. Realizing that they wanted to market the book solely for its explicit sexual content, Acker, wary of "a frame" (HL 5) being put around her writing, turned down all offers. In 1972, she published POLITICS with a small press.

After POLITICS, her use of "plagiarism" grew, and became a technique which she defines as "juxtaposing other people's texts" (RA 17) with a view to "re-presenting our cultural heritage" (RA 17). This technique is crucial to her work because, for her, "the blank page is like an invitation to paralysis" (MR 91). Acker claims that some of her mentors among the Black Mountain poets, notably Robert Creeley, Charles Olson and David Antin, advised writers that "'when you find your own voice, then you're a poet'" (MR 91). She states: "I wanted to be a writer; I didn't want to do anything else; but I couldn't find my own voice" (CE 33). This idea of a creative voice puzzled her. Further writing

experiments led her to conclude that "only the incredible egotism that resulted from a belief in phallic centrism could have come up with the notion of creativity" (CE 34). In "What is an Author?" Michel Foucault notes that "we are accustomed to presenting the author as a genius, as a perpetual surging of invention..." (119). Although intimidated by definitions of an author's "empirical characteristics" as a "transcendental anonymity" (104), Acker continued to write.

Beginning to view "writing or making [as] magic" (CE 32), she states: "For a while, back in my early days of writing, I looked for a voice, a self" (CE 33). By experimenting, she concluded that "in fiction there is no 'true' or 'false' in social-realist terms" (CE 33). In addition, she reasoned that the self, if it exists at all, "isn't the centralized phallic I/eye...it's probably the world" (CE 33). These conclusions come from experiments in Tarantula where she integrates "fake autobiography of murderesses" (MR 88) with her own autobiographical materials. They are distinguished from each other by placing quotation marks around her personal experiences. She gradually removes the quotation marks from the "real" autobiography, causing a blurring of identities. It becomes difficult to distinguish Acker's life from the lives of the murderesses. As a result, Acker concludes that the text has nothing to do with realism, becoming instead its own

"fictional" world, whether or not it contains, for example, subjective autobiographical references. The epigraph for Tarantula, "Intention: I become a murderess by repeating in words the lives of other murderesses" (BT 1), comes true in a literary sense through Acker's flaunting of conventional writing techniques.

Experiments in memory and repetition dominate I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac: Imagining. "If I repeated the same text," Acker wondered, "would it be the same text?" (HL 8). Long sections of the novel are duplicated several times; therefore, the same words are encountered, resulting in confusion and disorientation for the reader. After a time, one begins to relax, comfortable with the familiarity of the words. Eventually, one begins to doubt one's memory. Is it the same text, or are words deleted, meanings changed? A close reading reveals that, yes, slight changes occur. In one instance, the sentence reads: "I see a library empty of books" (DN 115), while in the next section, the sentence is: "I see a library of empty books" (DN 123). The relationship between meaning and time also comes into question. If one reads a passage, then rereads it three minutes later, has the meaning altered? The experiential world of the reader changes as it moves ahead in time; therefore, Acker posits, meaning must vary as well.

In The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec, Acker's Lautrec is female and Paul Gaugin works as a cleaning woman.

Toulouse laments: "No one will ever fuck me because I'm a hideous cripple" (TL 194). The novel explores identity, poverty, and the pain Lautrec feels as she searches for acceptance and love. Commenting on Toulouse in "Kathy Acker and the Plagiarized Self," Naomi Jacobs claims that, by presenting Lautrec as a woman, Acker casts new light on traditional views of women's pain as "female hysteria" (53). According to Jacobs, Lautrec remains in our consciousness as a famous painter, a man "vibrant as the dancers and racehorses that he loved to paint" (52). Being male, Lautrec is a "valorized referent" (52) who lends credibility to the "devalued female pronoun" (52). When placed in a female context, the meaning usually generated by the names of famous men takes on new meaning.

Later novels, with the exception of Kathy Goes to Haiti, all rely heavily on intertextuality. Haiti is a linear text, with closure, which she wrote "just to show" (RA 17) she could do it. Although no longer interested in creating this type of narrative, she does not want to be "cut off from the very powerful resources of the linear story (RA 17). Appropriating Cervantes' episodic Don Quixote solves, for Acker, "the problem of sequence" (RA 17). Acker even models My Life My Death by Pier Paolo Pasolini after the detective novel, which Brian McHale, in Postmodernist Fiction, labels the "epistemological *genre par excellence*" (9). After following Agatha Christie's "epistemological

orientation" (MR 87), Acker found she was not "interested so much in solving [Pasolini's] murder" (MR 87) as exploring "his life and his work" (MR 87). Acting as grids over which she places her narratives, the structures of other texts play a crucial part in Acker's fiction.

Published in 1984, Algeria takes a harsh look at the French colonization of Algeria, and the subsequent flood of refugees to France, where they lived in "garbaged cities in which they worked for French bosses for almost nothing..." (AL 3). Blood and Guts in High School, the most linear of her narratives with the exception of Kathy Goes to Haiti, attacks both the educational system and parenting. What happens to the young protagonist, Janey Smith, is horrific in the extreme. Motherless, she becomes a prisoner of her feelings for her father. An incestuous relationship having developed between them, coupled with his threats to withhold affection, leaves her confused and in despair. Filled with self-loathing, she cannot escape the pain. "It's possible to hate and despise and detest yourself," Janey says, "'cause you've been in prison so long" (BG 66). The novel criticizes patriarchal society where women are socially conditioned to expect pain--and enjoy it. It also examines a culture seemingly devoted to destroying the innocence of children through contemporary family and educational systems. Though most of her work reflects serious societal concerns, Acker does not reject the ludic impulse. In 1982,

she came out with a chapbook entitled Hello, I'm Erica Jong, an hilarious parody of both Jong's fiction and the public's zeal for it.

Because Acker loved Dickens' Great Expectations, she chose it as the primary intertext for her novel of the same name, which "is about [her] mother's suicide" (MR 92). Several other themes emerge in Acker's Great Expectations, among them politicking in the art world, the problems encountered by a female artist who "doesn't know who her father is" (GE 82), societal violence, both on a large and a small scale, and gender issues. Siegle, in Suburban Ambush, states that Great Expectations "becomes almost religious in pushing the dark envelope of identity and values" (92). The first segment of the novel counterpoints a narrative of a mother's suicide with a brutal story about soldiers raping children. Acker slams these disparate narratives together, creating powerful feelings in the reader, feelings of anger, revulsion, desolation. This technique falls within the range of what Mikhail Bakhtin terms, in The Dialogic Imagination, heteroglossia, a "Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages" (278). In Acker's hands, it becomes a powerful tool used for social criticism.

To date, Acker has penned ten full-length and two shorter novels. Always eager to explore new genres, she has written two plays, the libretto for an opera entitled The Birth of a Poet by composer Peter Gordon, as well as the

screenplay for a film called Variety. Several of her short stories have been published, and one, "New York in 1979," won the Pushcart Prize. In addition, she has contributed articles concerning art and literary theory to journals such as Art Forum and Open Letter. These eclectic pursuits bring a broad spectrum of experience to her fiction, ranging from the rhythms which she claims to copy from music as she writes, to the painterly qualities her work often reflects with its collage cut-up and cubist planes.

Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream appropriates Cervantes' text, leading the reader into a world which has Acker's Quixote tilting at injustice, while taking readers on "the greatest adventure any person can take, that of the Holy Grail" (DQ 9). In this world, where there is "no possibility for human love" (DQ 17), Acker's female Quixote dares "[to] conceiv[e] of the most insane idea that any women can think of. Which is to love" (DQ 9). Although Cervantes' Don Quixote has not reached his fiftieth year, Acker's knight is sixty-six years old. In a society where women "learn early that old women are neither attractive nor dignified in the eyes of men, even old men" (Caplan 113), Acker makes her knight's journey through our culture even more difficult.

The idea to appropriate Cervantes' text came to Acker while waiting in a hospital to have an abortion. In order

to take her mind off the operation, she began to copy Don Quixote which she had been reading for pleasure. This act, she claims, was her "version of a Sherrie Levine painting" (MR 91). A successful American artist, Levine seeks to thwart "the most hallowed principles of art in the modern era: originality, intention, expression" (qtd. in Marzorati 90). One of her most interesting areas of exploration comes from rephotographing famous photographs taken by men. This appropriation is important for her because "the whole art system [is] geared to celebrating these objects of male desire," and, as a woman, she is "angry at being excluded" (qtd. in Marzorati 93). Similarly, Acker claims that Don Quixote "is very much about trying to find [her] own voice as a woman" by "appropriating male texts" (CE 13). "Plagiarism" becomes more than a literary technique: it is a political gesture, a pirate's tool.

Cervantes' satirical romance acts as the perfect vehicle for Acker's female knight. The mythos of the journey allows her Quixote to move through fantastical situations, while at the same time keeping alive the spirit of Cervantes' story of a man driven insane by the proliferation of chivalric discourse. Merlin becomes the nemesis of Cervantes' protagonist, while the evil enchanters Acker's Quixote seeks are people such as "the editors of TLS or Ronald Reagan" (DQ 101). Her reference to the Times Literary Supplement swims in sarcasm. In one particularly scathing review of Blood

and Guts in High School Plus Two, Neville Shack claims that "genital fantasies are almost invariably boring" (136). In Don Quixote, her knight fights despite criticism, madness, and a sense of hopelessness.

In an article for Art Forum, Acker states that "the only reaction against an unbearable society is equally unbearable nonsense" (RR 35). Obsessed with notions of chivalric codes, Cervantes' Don Quixote sets out with his faithful servant, Sancho Panza, to right "every kind of wrong" (27). Acker's Quixote has for a companion St Simeon¹, her "cowboy sidekick" (DQ 13), who transforms himself, throughout the text, into both male and female dogs. They too set out to "right all wrongs" (DQ 14). Jacobs writes:

Through...pastiche-appropriations of famous literary texts, and outrageous manipulations of historical and literary figures, Acker attempts simultaneously to deconstruct the tyrannical structures of official culture and to plagiarize an identity, constructing a self from salvaged fragments of those very structures she has dismantled. (50)

Unquestionably, Acker manipulates Cervantes' Don Quixote, but not in an attempt to make it an object of derision. On the contrary, she handles Cervantes' work with respect. Certainly, Acker recontextualizes the original material; nevertheless, the motivation for doing so is not to demean Cervantes' writing. In her article, "Now Eat Your Mind: An Introduction to the Works of Kathy Acker," Friedman notes that, while Acker seeks, through plagiarism, to undermine "the notion of the master text," she also unites "with the

political messages of particular texts" (44). Aligning her Quixote with Cervantes' protagonist, Acker shows respect for both of these marginalized characters.

Acker's novel divides into three parts. The first is called "The Beginning of Night," the second, "Other Texts," the third, "The End of the Night." Part one, "The Beginning of Night," chronicles the start of Quixote's journey. Reminiscent of Cervantes' "knight of the green overcoat" (519), Acker's Quixote dresses in a "puke green paper [hospital gown]" (DQ 9) which acts as her armour. The problem of making choices becomes one of the dilemmas faced by Quixote in the first section of the novel. Her first decision, to have an abortion, frees her physical body to travel; however, the lack of empathy from friends causes her to remark:

'My wound is inside me. It is the wound of lack of love. Since you can't see it, you say it isn't here. But I've been hurt in my feelings. My feelings're my brains. My feelings're now nerves which have been torn out. Beyond the hole between my legs, the flesh torn turned and gnashed, inside that red mash or mess, lies a woman. No one ever ventures here.' (DQ 17)

Instead of invoking her friends' compassion, they are "aghast at femininity, determined to burn it out" (DQ 17). The abortion, Quixote feels, is one of the "trials sometimes so perilous, you become mad and even die" (DQ 15), that a woman must go through in order "to become a knight and have adventures and save this world" (DQ 15). After the

operation, having acquired her "kighthood or nighthood" (DQ 12), she sets out on her quest.

During her first adventure, she comes across a boy, about fourteen years old, being savagely beaten by an old man. Quixote orders the man to stop, telling him that she is "fighting all of your Culture" (DQ 14). Turning to the knight for reassurance, the boy begs her not to make him go with his tormentor. An "existential double bind" (Siegle 98) plagues Quixote. What world can she send the boy to other than the one in which he lives? Defeated, the boy tries "to enjoy the beating because his life couldn't be any other way" (DQ 15). Freedom becomes its own prison when every choice represents destruction either of the physical body, the spirit, or both. This incident comes directly from Cervantes' novel: a farmer promises Don Quixote that, "by all the orders of knighthood" (41), he will not only stop flogging the boy but pay his back wages if the boy will come home with him. Naive and trusting, Don Quixote takes the farmer at his word. When he rides away, the farmer beats the boy, leaving him for dead.

A funny, yet serious, "Insert," appears in part one. The narrative voice pleads with the electorate of the United States never again to "vote for a croaker [Reagan] (DQ 22). The narrator wants the musician Prince elected, a man who, because he wears a cross, "stands for values" (DQ 21). The voice continues:

President Reagan doesn't believe this crap he's handing out or down about happy families and happy black lynchings and happy ignorance. Worse: he might. Whereas The Prince believes in feelings, fucking, and fame. Fame is making it and common sense. (DQ 21).

The campaign for Prince continues, the narrative voice noting that "he's all-American because he's part black part white which is part good part evil" (DQ 21). This segment foreshadows the vicious attack on the American political system and American culture that comprises part three of the novel. In view of the cruelty and insanity of Reaganomics, plus the bizarre workings of the Nixon administration, the suggestion that Prince become president compels further consideration. His lack of knowledge "about governmental politics" (DQ 22) is, for the narrator, a method of getting rid of political techniques that are "the praxis and speech of the controllers" (DQ 22). "Let Prince give Americans what they want," says the narrator, "fucking, food, and dancing" (DQ 22). Though offered with an ironic tone, this proposal sounds somewhat compelling given the records of many career politicians.

Before Quixote's death in part one, she asks St Simeon: "Who am I?" (DQ 29). Sharp-tongued, like Cervantes' Sancho Panza, St Simeon replies: "Who cares?" (DQ 29). She informs him that it is the notion of "what [it is] to be female" (DQ 29) which she questions. St Simeon answers: "To be a bitch" (DQ 29). Giving up her metaphysical musings, Quixote returns to her quest, where fighting "big men" is necessary

in order to search for love. Even when a man "hit[s] her so hard she almost die[s]" (DQ 23), she will not give up her crusade. When St Simeon recovers from a brutal beating by two travellers, who "[are] humanists" (DQ 25), he complains, like Sancho Panza, that he is "sick of being poor" (DQ 26). Quixote tells him to be patient, that "knights have to take on all this world's suffering" (DQ 26). There has never been, she reminds him, "in history, that is, in novels,...a being such as [Quixote]" (DQ 27). Very early in the text, however, unlike Cervantes' protagonist, Acker's Quixote abandons her search for love, leaves her worldly possessions to St Simeon, and dies. Mary Daly refers to women who dare to step outside cultural convention as those who take "the Wild Journey" (49). By metaphorically killing Quixote, who returns later in the novel, Acker frees her knight to move outside societal bounds into a wild place where her spirit may roam unfettered.

Quixote's "death" takes this notion one step further: not only is Quixote removed from societal constraints, but she is safe, and free, "[to] remak[e] the texts of which [her] world is composed" (Siegle 103). Part two, "Other Texts," begins with this statement:

BEING DEAD, DON QUIXOTE COULD NO LONGER SPEAK. 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. (DQ 39)

Of course, she does much more than merely read them: she "fabricates four very different cultural texts" (Siegle 103). "Text 1" reworks Andrei Bely's Petersburg. The narrative voice declares: "Petersburg isn't Russian: it's a country on its own" (DQ 42), where ghettos "physically cross cause the rich're...buying all of its real estate" (DQ 42). In Acker's version, most of the homeless are Puerto Rican or Black. A young woman, Juliet, lives in "Peter," where she writes letters to her married lover Peter. Sometimes, when "the girls" (DQ 52) are sitting around, they share stories about relationships. "'I've lied down,'" one woman says, "'for enough artists cause I prefer men who hurt to men who want to own me'" (DQ 57). Again, Acker presents women with choices which are unpleasant in the extreme: either they love men who want them to be property, or they love artists who are indifferent to them.

"Text 2": The Leopard: Memory," works with Giuseppe di Lampedusa's The Leopard. Here, Acker plays with memory, even though the prince in the narrative insists that he does not "remember anymore because all [his] memories hurt" (DQ 63); nevertheless, he decides to tell the story of The Leopard and "have life" (DQ 63). Recounting his love for a commoner, a beautiful young woman with whom he becomes obsessed, the prince fears the intensity of his love. As a result, he arranges for her to marry his nephew, for she will be in his family but, because of her marriage, remain

beyond his reach. Near the end of "Text 2" is a section entitled "The Prince: On My Death," which appears to be a series of comments made by the prince; one statement, however, stands out. The voice describes a hospital with a "pale green ceiling" (DQ 67), which is reminiscent of the hospital where Quixote had her abortion. By "mixing characters to 'destabilize' the projected world" (McHale 1987, 4), Acker intrudes into the master-narrative. Quixote may be marginalized, but it is from the fringes, the wild areas, where she strikes at the centre.

"Text 3: Texts of Wars for Those Who Live in Silence" has Catherine from Wuthering Heights stating: "If I can't get Heathcliff into my arms because we're too poor, I'll go off adventuring" (DQ 69). Following this, two monsters, in the tradition of Japanese Godzilla-like creations, appear. United States' history becomes the subject of the narrative voice's commentary on foreign policy, the World Bank, and U.S. military policy. Also, by mixing so many discourses in this section of the novel, Acker fights against what Bakhtin calls "unitary language" (271), which he defines as

...forces that unite and centralize verbal-ideological thought, creating within a heteroglot national language the firm, stable linguistic nucleus of an officially recognized literary language, or else defending an already formed language from the pressure of growing heteroglossia. (271)

For Bakhtin, unitary language represents "the correct language" (270), a centripetal force whose job it is to keep

social and historical heteroglossia, which is centrifugal, outside the circle of the "True Word" (271). "Contamination" is inevitable; nothing short of a total core melt-down will satisfy Acker.

"Text 4: Wedekind's Words," according to Jacobs, "conflates Wedekind's femme fatale Lulu with Shaw's Eliza Doolittle" (54). With much of the text written in play form, it retains the spirit of Wedekind's drama. Discovered selling flowers on a London street, Lulu goes home with Professor Schön who wishes to teach her how to speak her "soul's language...[,that of] Milton and Shakespeare and the English Empire" (DQ 78). The drunken Schigold, her father, attempts to get money for his "rights as a man" (DQ 80) from Schön. After Schön pays him ten pounds for his daughter, Schigold leaves temporarily. When he returns, Lulu must deal with three men: Schön, who would change her; her father, who attempts to seduce her; and Alwa, Schön's sadistic son, a theatre director and the man Lulu loves. Alwa teases Lulu with deep kisses and passionate embraces; still, he refuses to make love with her. Lulu finds herself in hell.

In order to be free, Lulu must cast the three devils, Schön, Alwa, and Schigold, out of hell. Schön reminds her that "there's nowhere to go" (DQ 89). Lulu reasons: "If memories are realities, this world is a prison" (DQ 89); thus, in order to escape, she must destroy her memories.

Schön pistol-whips Alwa, shoots Schigold, and Lulu shoots Schön. Now, Lulu has "no more memories" (DQ 90).

Symbolically, she has killed the patriarchy; nevertheless, ideology being pervasive, it is difficult to leave it behind. Jailed for shooting Schön, she begins "to speak her own words" (DQ 91); furthermore, she escapes by creating a new script for herself.

Lulu enters a huge house where she finds three women. Desperate for shelter, she gives them her money in return for a room. Unfortunately, her eyes are "accustomed to darkness" (DQ 95); but Lulu understands that she must begin to see. She goes to the window, only to find it barred from the inside. When she pries open the door of a huge wardrobe, a sailor's dead body falls on her. Confused, Lulu looks, "like a lover" (DQ 96), into his eyes. She perceives no message there, for she is "so wrapped up in helplessness and fear, in nihilism" (DQ 96), that she sees nothing. One last time she looks into his eyes, and an idea comes to her. After removing his clothes, she fashions them into a rope, lowers herself "through the now unbarred window" (DQ 97), and runs to the sea. Here, Acker uses the sailor's signifiers, his clothes, to liberate Lulu from her prison. "Now," she says, "I am going to travel" (DQ 96). Lulu decides to become a pirate.

The notion of becoming a pirate recurs in much of Acker's fiction. For her, one of the most debilitating

results of patriarchal oppression lies in the fact that, as a woman, her movements are restricted. Areas of exploration are closed to women because they fear unprovoked violence simply because they are female. Walking alone at night becomes a risk, and women are warned to be careful, to walk with friends in well-lit areas, to be constantly on guard. No one would argue that these precautions are not sensible. Placing the weight of responsibility for preventing violent attacks on women's shoulders is what rankles. Mary Daly, an influential and often witty radical feminist, shares Acker's interest in being a pirate. One section of her book, Gyn/ecology, is entitled "My Pirate's Craft." She writes: "I have come to see that taking charge of my Craft [skill and cunning] has become one of my primary primal tasks as a Pirate, for this is overcoming the 'woman as vessel' motif that prevails in Stag-nation" (xxvi). By pirating other texts, Acker plunders the cultural heritage handed down to her by her "fathers." By making them her own, she creates new worlds in which her female characters can roam.

The third part of Don Quixote, "The End of the Night," finds Quixote very much alive and ready to do battle. While searching for her dog, St Simeon, she attempts to understand the dogs who rule Washington, "evil enchanterers" (DQ 102) like Nixon and Reagan. Needing sexual companionship, she involves herself in relationships with dogs who do not love her. In order to defeat the evil ones, she must understand

how the American political system works. After examining the records of several presidential administrations, she decides that "the U.S. government is run via the media by dogs' greed" (DQ 104). Simply eliminating Nixon, she realizes, does not "defeat America" (DQ 117). American ideology lies deep in the people's consciousness. In order to change the system, she must understand "the myth of America, for economic and political war or control is taking place at the level of language or myth" (DQ 117). She examines the myths surrounding the beginnings of America, concluding that the United States remains "religiously intolerant, militaristic, greedy, and dependent on slaves" as all democracies have been" (DQ 124). Disillusioned, Quixote has no faith in the Right, the Left, the Middle, or nihilism.

This final section of Don Quixote bombards the reader with a cacophony of mixed-up identities and genders. One of the dogs Quixote turns to for companionship tells her the story of its life. The dog, whose name is Villebranche, tries to free herself from men by loving only women. This separatism fails, however, because it does not "heal the initial sickness: why [she] had let [herself] be treated so badly" (DQ 126). While living in London, the dog, when lonely, visits a local theatre studio. Here, Villebranche notices a man who looks like a girl. They stare at each other for many days, until, finally, the man speaks to her.

The narrative switches to her instruction in a girls' school, where they try to teach her how to be a woman, then chronicles her attempt to experience male power by dressing as a Nazi captain. Eventually, Villebranche and De Franville decide to have a relationship, but their genders are constantly shifting, making it difficult for them to become an "acceptable" heterosexual couple. Finally, Villebranche asks herself what she most fears. Deciding it is "having someone control [her] so that it's possible [she will] be rejected" (DQ 134), she suggests a sadomasochistic relationship where they both wield the whip, so they will each have an opportunity to be in control. Disgusted by the dog's story, Quixote questions how she became this way. The answer lies in the dog's childhood. In typical Acker fashion, the dog's family consists of a host of grim characters: a distant, unloving mother; an abusive father; and a violent brother. "Still," the dog tells Quixote, "a child, being human, has to love" (DQ 142), even if the child's perceptions of love become distorted.

The knight's final battle is with "white religious men" (DQ 179): they begin jousting with words, and she tells them about a vision she had while in a deep pit. This parallels Cervantes' tale of the Cave of Montesinos. In Cervantes' version, Don Quixote is lowered into the cave on a rope. While there, he meets an old man, Montesino himself, who wears a "rosary of beads bigger than good-sized filberts"

(550). Should he be mortally wounded, the brave knight Durandarte wished to have his heart cut out by Montesino and presented to Lady Belerma. The old man does so, being careful to pickle it so it will not smell. Merlin, the evil enchanter, imprisons all of them in the cave until a valiant knight, Don Quixote, can come and free them.

Paralleling Cervantes' story to a degree, Acker's Quixote goes into the pit where she finds an "old male creep" (DQ 185), a knight named Duranduran and the girl Belerma. In this version, the old creep cuts out the knight's heart while the knight is alive. After coming back to life, the knight writes the old man a poem. Secure in the notion that he has not murdered the knight, symbolic of all people metaphorically murdered by patriarchy, the old creep rejoices. When Acker's Quixote leaves the cave, she tells all the dogs who are following her what she saw. The old knight fears what has become of her, for she no longer seems to have feelings for those she once wanted to champion. The dogs ask Quixote if the evil enchanters, "poverty, alienation [and] fear" (DQ 190), have destroyed her ability to see visions. Quixote replies: "Yes, I am a failure" (DQ 190). After this incident, Quixote speaks to God, who also feels unable to change the world.

Acknowledging her limitations, God Herself tells Quixote: "I am no more, forget me. Forget about morality. Forget about saving the world. Make Me up" (DQ 207). The

dogs have become pirates, society a "slave ship" (DQ 199), with every part of it "cracking open" (DQ 199). At last, Quixote admits that "she [is] mad" (DQ 200). Night falls. Walking along with her horse Rochinante, Quixote feels "like a person drunk for so long she no longer knows she's drunk" (DQ 207). It would appear that Quixote's adventures were without success; nevertheless, there are positive points in the novel.

In his article, "Making Yourself a Body Without Organs: The Cartography of Pain in Kathy Acker's Don Quixote," David Brande claims that Acker "offers no resolution or blueprint for a post-revolutionary utopia, only constant struggle" (208). While partially correct, this statement ignores clues Acker drops into her text which, while not promising utopia, do point toward what she views as possible political initiatives. By deciding to write poetry, Acker's Quixote is "inventing a community" (DQ 191), for "language is community" (DQ 191). Others who speak her language will be attracted to this collective; consequently, she will feel less isolated, more connected to those with similar ideas. One problem nags at Quixote: "No one reads poetry in this society anymore" (DQ 194). Her search for answers continues.

Once again, Quixote dies. After her death, she writes down some thoughts, among them her interpretation of historical events in Spain. "The Spain of the Spanish

Republic of 1931," Quixote notes, "is my dream or model" (DQ 204). Mentioning the famous anarchist Bakunin, she states:

...the early anarchist leaders resembled the mendicant friars of former centuries: abstemious wanderers, proud to possess little and to be under-dogs....They were motivated by that inner certainty which by its very being denies human leadership and any hierarchy except for that of gentleness and kindness. The anarchists, being nights, were knights. (DQ 204-205)

Clearly, Quixote admires people like Bakunin, a man for whom "every command slaps liberty in the face" (qtd. in Dolgoff 3). Identifying with their struggles, Quixote recognizes that they, too, are knights.

Creating a "Woman of La Mancha" gives Acker's protagonist a precious gift not available to many females in our culture: the freedom to travel as a man would. Acker admires women from history, like Annie Bonney, who would "disguise themselves as men" (AW 177) in order to roam. By harnessing Cervantes' narrative, Acker creates a fantasy world in which movement is not restricted by gender; nevertheless, she does not allow the reader to believe that women are free from oppressive ideologies. If they travel, they must be willing to fight the battles they are certain to encounter. Drunk, Quixote begins to leave the text; yet, she comes out of her stupor, awaking "to the world which [lies] before [her]" (DQ 207). Perhaps she will meet Lulu, who, at the end of part two, remarks:

Now I must find others who are, like me, pirates journeying from place to place, who knowing only change and true responsibilities that come from such knowing sing to and with each other. (DQ 97)

Chapter Three

No Roses Grow on Sailors' Graves

After having travelled through innumerable texts, written texts, texts of stories which people had told or shown me, texts found in myself, Empire ended with the hints of a possibility or beginning: the body, the actual flesh, almost wordless, romance, the beginning of a movement from no to yes, from nihilism to myth. (CE 36)

The tattooer was drawing the outlines of a sailing ship. Reminiscence of that dream-time when humans were free. Historically, criminality is the only freedom humans have had. (ES 138)

Empire of the Senseless takes the quest of Acker's Quixote "forward under other names into the socially apocalyptic era of the eighties" (Siegle 107). Characters search for "somewhere to go, a belief, a myth" (CE 35), in a society which, according to Acker, has "totally disintegrated" (HL 17). Here, the cities of the Western world "are composed of yuppies and mutants" (ES 109). Cultural apocalypse has occurred; the only safety lies in "psychosis and drugs" (ES 27). Revelling in the sailors' motto, "ANYPLACE BUT HERE" (ES 156), Empire lashes out at patriarchy, denounces poverty, celebrates sensual pleasure, and sails into the unknown toward "a society which [isn't] just disgust" (ES 227). This search, for a place "that

allows us the fullness of what it is to be human" (AW 184), takes Abhor and Thivai, the young co-protagonists in Empire, through a myriad of adventures.

Empire confronts several controversial issues. Using certain ideas expressed by Robin Morgan in The Demon Lover, this chapter deconstructs the notion of terrorism, viewing it as a complex social construction currently subject to a condition Fredric Jameson calls "our historical amnesia" (1988, 28). In addition, obstacles to radical social change are examined. In a world where the CIA, or groups like it, either start or take over revolutions, true social transformation may be impossible. Finally, her use of "forbidden" language as a weapon against patriarchy is considered. By finding out "what [is] taboo and rendering it in words" (CE 17), Acker attempts "[to] kill the father on every level" (CE 17). As a result, her narratives concerning incest, homosexuality, sadomasochism, and the tattoo become weapons with which to assail patriarchy. Highlighted are Abhor's attempts to learn the highway codes, which are symbolic of man-made language systems. "Part robot...part black" (ES 3), Abhor journeys through this terrifying world with her boyfriend Thivai.

William Gibson's Neuromancer serves as the primary intertext which transports Abhor and Thivai through Empire. In Gibson's novel, Molly, a young soldier of fortune, enlists a young man, Case, to help her find a construct

named the Dixie Flatline. Formerly a cyberspace cowboy, Case double-crosses the wrong people and has his ability to connect with the matrix destroyed. Computer-generated, cyberspace refers to the mental state "experienced by computer operators whose nervous systems are directly interfaced with the computer system" (McHale 1992, 155). If Case helps Molly, his ability to hook up with the matrix will be restored. Because he hates the "prison of his own flesh" (Gibson 6), Case agrees to assist her. Similarly, in Empire, Abhor enlists Thivai to help her reach a construct whose "name's Kathy" (ES 33). Together, they find a special code hidden in a library system: it is "the American Intelligence's central control network, its memory, what constituted its perception and understanding" (ES 36). When they discover the code, it says: "GET RID OF MEANING. YOUR MIND IS A NIGHTMARE THAT HAS BEEN EATING YOU: NOW EAT YOUR MIND" (ES 38).

In the first section of part one, "Rape by the Father," Abhor speaks through Thivai, for, at this point, her voice remains hidden, even from herself. Thivai relates the story of Nana, Abhor's grandmother, whose family enters Paris "[to] escape pre-Nazi ghettos" (F1 3). Unfortunately, "wealth was the price and cost of political escape" (ES 3). In order to support her parents, Nana, at age ten, is "put out on the streets" (ES 3). Her young boyfriend, Alexander, has been raised by "a lousy mother" (ES 40), his childhood

so emotionally damaging that he can only love Nana "by hating her" (ES 5). Because they are immigrants, the Vice Squad believes that they must be "militants of revolutionary class struggle" (ES 4); consequently, they are labelled "terrorists." After falsely accusing Alexander of pimping, the Vice Squad imprisons him.

One explanation for this fear and mistreatment of immigrants, and other marginalized groups, lies in the discourse of common sense. Appearing to be "natural, obvious and therefore true" (Weedon 77), common sense seems irrefutable. The notion that immigrants are dangerous becomes accepted wisdom in any society which, as Michel Foucault states, "compares, differentiates, homogenizes, excludes. In short, normalizes" (195). When members of society, like Alexander, differ from "the norm," they are sent to prisons, which are

apparatuses for transforming individuals. How could the prison not be immediately accepted when, by locking up, retraining, and rendering docile, it merely reproduces, with a little more emphasis, all the mechanisms that are to be found in the social body? (216)

After his "normalization" in prison, Alexander answers a violent society with violence: he buys a shotgun, then shoots every Vice Squad member he can find. They execute Alexander; Nana learns the valuable lesson "that society is only a filthy trick" (ES 7). According to the text, the only recourse available to the poor is "collective crime or

war. One form collective crime takes is marriage" (ES 7). Nana marries a rich man, leaving her granddaughter Abhor the legacy of only knowing love "when it's allied with hate" (ES 7). Applying the label "terrorist" to Alexander and Nana seems ludicrous. Victims of poverty and bigotry, both children, because they are "other," become suspected of criminal acts.

In Empire, Acker deconstructs the idea of terrorism, questioning who applies the label and to whom. Feminist writer and activist Robin Morgan, in her book, The Demon Lover, challenges the whole notion of terrorism, claiming that it "is a figment of our imagination--and more, a figment of our lack of imagination" (33). Morgan illustrates the word's subjectivity by pointing out that for Ronald Reagan, "the Nicaraguan Contras were 'freedom fighters'" (33), while the "militant South Africans and Palestinian paramilitary groups were 'terrorists'" (36). While not denying the pain, fear, and suffering violence causes, Morgan questions the notion that "terrorism" always appears as an activity of "the other." In Empire, Thivai recognizes "the huge extent to which the media now divorce the act of terrorism from the original sociopolitical intent..." (ES 35). To most people, the word terrorist signifies evil. Governments use this cloak of signification to justify their own brands of annihilation, which are deemed necessary in order to rid the world of these menaces.

Morgan's book mirrors the world of the patriarchy constructed in Empire, where "Capitalism needs new territory or fresh blood" (ES 33). Echoing this idea, Morgan claims that "terrorism reinforces the State" (130). Terrorism is big business, for weapons must be obtained to fight it, personnel trained to deal with it, propaganda written to justify counter-attacks to control it. The decision to bomb Hiroshima, a city largely populated by women and children, in lieu of "the emperor's palace or the centre of government in Tokyo" (131), was part of a carefully constructed plan. Caution was exercised not to destroy "the official State and all its machinery of bureaucracy" (131). A spectacle of horror was needed, something so heinous that no resistance would be attempted. In a society where atrocities like Hiroshima can happen, labelling Nana and Alexander terrorists seems insane. In this mad world, Thivai and Abhor must endure or die.

Although she loves Thivai, Abhor runs away from him for a time because he wants to control her. While hiding in an old section of Paris during the height of the Algerian revolution, she meets an elderly white Parisian who invites her to his room. Symbolic of patriarchy, this wealthy man "thought he controlled everything, even Death" (ES 71). Fearing the imminent success of the Algerian revolution, he threatens to shoot both himself and Abhor. She escapes, only to wonder later whether or not to return. "They always

say that money equals safety," Abhor claims, "though I'm not sure who 'they' are or about whose safety they're speaking" (ES 80). Meeting up with Thivai, who has been searching for her, they see a boat float by carrying the old man's body. Abhor says: "In the boat my father I had never known is dead" (ES 83). Although deceased, patriarchy leaves its "children" to rule: the multinationals and the government agencies.

The Algerians win Paris; however, the CIA takes over the revolution and nothing changes. Disillusioned with social reform, Abhor realizes that the death of the father has passed unnoticed because multinationals, along with their complex computer networks, have become organisms. "They've attained immortality via bio-chips," she declares, "so killing someone, anyone, like Reagan or the top IBM executive board members, whoever they are, can't accomplish anything..." (ES 83). The revolution fails, the father dies. Thivai and Abhor feel lost. "There [is] nothing left to do," she laments, so they get tattooed, "carved into roses" (ES 86). Dedicated to Acker's tattooist, Empire views the tattoo as "primal parent to the visual arts," a sign which transfers "to the bearer some sense of existing outside the conventions of normal society" (ES 140). Long associated with outlaws, pirates and sailors, tattoos are usually the exclusive domain of men. By acquiring a tattoo, Abhor places herself firmly on society's outer limits.

In order to show how societal pressures affect both men and women, Acker presents a male perspective as well. Like Gibson's Case, Thivai finds little comfort in feelings or relationships, preferring fantasies about women in bondage; he explains: "[T]hey will never...be other than me, be not me, be against me..." (ES 62). By colonizing a woman's body, "she becomes his property, even an extension of his own body" (Siegle 109). All his life, he has wanted to be a pirate. Attempting to control Abhor, he wants her to be his mirror image, but cannot "understand why she would think fucking more important than being a pirate" (ES 148). At one point, after a long absence from Abhor, Thivai admits that he is "glad to see her...because [he had] been through loneliness" (ES 177); still, he neither understands the nature of his loneliness nor learns to love. Although male and therefore privileged, he is bound by his culture as tightly as the women in his fantasies are by leather straps. Fearing his feelings for her, he turns Abhor over to the CIA for breaking into a Washington computer library.

Abhor's imprisonment takes place in the third part of Empire, entitled "Pirate Night," where Huckleberry Finn provides the intertext. Thivai wants Abhor confined because "she [is] as strong as [he is]" (ES 192). Her incarceration has another benefit: "If they put Abhor in prison," he reasons, "[I'll] be able to see her every day and [I'll] collect the pirate loot" (ES 192). Clearly, Thivai has

found the perfect method for keeping Abhor under his control, while at the same time allowing him the economic freedom he needs in a capitalist system. Thivai realizes, however, that his behaviour results from his construction as a subject. "When I was young," he muses, "frivolity and trivia had been my weapons" (ES 33). "Now," he says, "I [do] whatever I [am] told because I am no longer me" (ES 33). Along with his homosexual motorcyclist friend Mark, Thivai comes up with "escapes [for Abhor] so elaborate they [have] nothing to do with escape" (ES 210). They discuss "dynamit[ing] her up" (ES 210), or "smuggl[ing] her a pen knife...so she could cut off her own leg" (ES 200). Finally, they give her a pen so she can turn "into a great writer so that she'd have a reason for being in jail the rest of her life" (ES 203), and her writing lessons begin.

Thivai tells Abhor that if she wants to be a great author, "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" (ES 203). Following this, he "cut[s] into Abhor's four fingers" (ES 204) with a penknife, then reminds her "that a great writer cannot afford to be sentimental in his or her writing" (ES 206). Abhor listens to Thivai and Mark. Although "looking at these two men [gives] her eye cramps" (ES 209), she acknowledges that "they were the two who taught [her] how to write" (ES 209).

In an effort to make them understand how she feels about being an author, she sends them a letter which states:

Everytime 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. (ES 210)

Unclear concerning which path her future should take, Abhor decides to become a motorcycle gang member. Claiming that she does not "know the rules of road behaviour...The Highway Code" (ES 213), Thivai attempts to dissuade her. This does not deter Abhor.

Following her release from prison, she gets a motorcycle, a copy of the code book, and begins to apply the rules. Aware of the difficulties she faces, her back etched with roses, Abhor prepares to face her future, determined that it will not be "only despair and nihilism" (ES 83). Seeking her own form of terrorism, she chooses language with which to fight for freedom; but, first, she must learn the codes used in the empire of the senseless. She has blood with which to write. She has a copy of The Highway Code. In her body, in her blood, exists her "only defence against institutionalized language, control, fixation, judgement, prison" (ES 134). Understanding, even as she dips her pen into her blood, that "the demand for an adequate mode of expression is senseless" (ES 113), she still turns to her body for answers. It is important to note, however, that

writing from the unconscious does not represent, for Acker, "women's" writing which results from biological essentialism.

Such essentialism, which Toril Moi in Sexual/Textual Politics defines as a theory "that reduces all behaviour to inborn sexual characteristics" (28), creates strict definitions of masculine and feminine. Moi claims that "the pursuit of sex differences in language is not only a theoretical impossibility, but a political error" (153). Defining all women as necessarily feminine and all men as necessarily masculine is, Moi states, "precisely the move that enables the patriarchal powers to define, not femininity, but all women as marginal to the symbolic order and to society" (166). During an interview, Acker expresses her "hatred of being defined by the fact [she has] a cunt" (AW 177), adding that women are taught "not to go out and hit someone" (AW 179), but to hurt themselves instead. In this sense, she sees some women's art as different from some men's simply because it comes from "a gesture of power turned against itself" (AW 179). If a man were acculturated in this way, his writing would also reflect power turning against itself. Acker's notions of gender parallel those of Julia Kristeva. In her article, "Woman Can Never Be Defined," Kristeva states: "The belief that 'one is a woman is almost as absurd and obscurantist as the belief that 'one is a man'" (137). According to Moi, Kristeva does not have

a theory of femininity or femaleness, but one of "marginality, subversion and dissidence" (164). This resonates with Acker's portrayals of "outlawed" groups, male homosexuals for example, who, along with women, exist on the margins of patriarchy.

Abhor knows that "the whole world is men's bloody fantasies" (ES 210), where "there are three types of females: dead, dumb, and evil" (ES 29). In order to survive, she must decipher the codes laid down by the men who dominate her culture. Because "history shapes all of us" (ES 66), Abhor understands that she can never be truly free from past ideologies. This echoes Louis Althusser's claim, in his article "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," that "an individual is always-already a subject, even before he [or she] is born..." (97). It once seemed possible, Abhor reflects, "to destroy language which normalizes and controls" (ES 134) by using "nonsense [to] attack the empire-making (empirical) empire of language, the prisons of meaning" (ES 134); yet, this idea, "since it depended on sense, simply pointed back to the normalizing institutions" (ES 134). Wrestling with these problems, the notion of "a language of the 'unconscious'" (ES 134) occurs to her. She plans to use it as a weapon against the old code systems.

While exploring the unconscious, she comes to believe that a perfect language cannot exist; nevertheless, she

pleads for the suspension of disbelief: "If this ideal unconscious or freedom doesn't exist: pretend it does, use fiction for the sake of survival, all of our survival..." (ES 134). She defines the language of the unconscious this way:

Its primary language must be taboo, all that is forbidden. Thus, an attack on the institutions of prison via language would demand the use of a language or languages which aren't acceptable, which are forbidden. Language, on one level, constitutes a set of codes and social and historical agreements. Nonsense doesn't per se break down the codes; speaking precisely that which the codes forbid breaks the codes. (ES 134)

In Empire, arguably, the most controversial taboo is incest. Charming, handsome, and dangerous, Abhor's father adores her because she "look[s] like him...smell[s] like him...learn[s] like him" (ES 9). When he rapes her, she claims that "part of [her] wanted him and part of [her] wanted to kill him" (ES 12). This notion of victims desiring their own victimization is often misunderstood in Acker's fiction.

Acker neither blames women for their subjugation nor denies that women are, to use Althusser's term, "interpellated" as victims. Interpellation refers to individuals becoming subjects within specific ideologies. Weedon explains interpellation in this way:

...in taking on a subject position, the individual assumes that she is the author of the ideology or discourse which she is speaking. She speaks or thinks as if she were in control of meaning. She 'imagines' that she is indeed the type of subject which humanism proposes--rational, unified, the source rather than the effect of language. It is the imaginary quality

of the individual's identification with a subject position which gives it so much psychological and emotional force. (31)

Both men and women are, among other things, subjected to what Morgan calls a "thanotic interpretation of romantic love" (120), an interpretation where "passion demands a victim [,an]...idea blessed by men's religion, rationalized by men's philosophy, beautified by men's art, and practised by men's politics" (120). As Abhor struggles to find her voice, her language, her freedom, she must come to terms with one of her most frightening memories: "What I suddenly remembered or knew," she says, "is that I sexually desired my adopted father" (ES 67). This realization terrifies Abhor. Acker acknowledges that feelings of guilt may be present in patriarchal societies where, according to Weedon, "the family...encourages women to seek satisfaction in constantly deferring to men" (40). This does not suggest that women are responsible for seducing their fathers or brothers. Rather, it implies that some guilt feelings are a normal reaction for women in light of their socialization.

Another taboo addressed in Empire is homosexuality. While being tattooed, a young Cuban sailor named Agone falls under the spell of his tattooist. The perspective here shifts from the normally privileged male and female relationship to male relating to male. They make love: "For the first time, Agone was both holding on and being held..." (ES 137). Then, by weaving the sexual encounter with a

sensual description of the pain-pleasure of tattooing, the text charges both the application of the tattoo and their love-making with an electrifying eroticism. Like Acker's language, which cuts through traditional writing styles, "this new way of tattooing consist[s] of raising defined parts of the flesh up with a knife. The tattooer then draws a string through the raised points of flesh..." (ES 134). The ultimate tattoo results: the body as text.

Abhor survives the death of the father, the rise of multi-national corporations, the failure of revolution to make important social changes, and betrayal by her lover. Armed with the highway code, she decides to ride her motorcycle. By "reading and memorizing the rules...before attempting to drive" (ES 215), Abhor becomes a good cyclist; still, the codes are not right for her. She begins to adapt them. When the manual says, "see and be seen" (ES 218), Abhor does not "hang on to someone's tail lights" (ES 215); she "smash[es] into them" (ES 218). After a time, she decides to ignore the rules, abandon the notion of being in a motorcycle gang, and fulfill her life's ambition. "I've always wanted to be a sailor" (ES 113), she says. This will not be an easy path because "in order to survive a sailor's muscles must be huge" (ES 116); nevertheless, Abhor has the discipline required. She makes her own rules now.

"The trouble with following rules," Abhor says, is that "if you follow rules, you don't follow yourself" (ES 219).

Abhor draws a picture. A sword pierces a rose. The words discipline and anarchy twine around the base of the sword; drops of blood drip down. The rose symbolizes a vagina, the sword, a penis. Abhor tells Mark and Thivai: "Once the sword is in me, it's me, I'm the piercer and the pierced" (ES 224); thus, one is never far from the fathers' traditions, nor can one ever be completely free from them. One should acknowledge the legacy, decode its messages, and make one's own rules. Abhor states: "From now on The Highway Code no longer matters" (ES 222). In an interview, Acker says she does not "know how to talk about a Utopian world" (MR 180); Abhor, however, does offer some advice about living in this one:

"It's carnival time! From now on we celebrate" (ES 105).

Chapter Four

The Deserts of Pierced Childhood

R felt that the world was his mother, V's family, the Parnassian poets, and that V and the whole world were an army fighting his one-man army. R knew that he would survive, but he didn't know how. He didn't know where happiness was, geographically, in these deserts of pierced childhood. (IM 81)

How can we unhook ourselves from the points of subjectification that secure us, nail us down to a dominant reality? (Deleuze and Guattari 160)

Those who have read Acker's other texts will recognize many similarities to In Memoriam to Identity: sex show performances; drunken, abusive fathers; suicidal, indifferent mothers; narratives where "some women who are in a situation which is terrible for them don't see a way out, so they adapt" (AW 180). Even readers familiar with her work will probably not recognize a new strength in the female characters in this novel, a strength which comes from understanding how they came to be. In a memoriam to identity, these women lay the "problem" of identity to rest.

This chapter examines Acker's exploration of what she calls the "myth of romantic love" (HL 24). As explained in Susan and Clyde Hendrick's book, Romantic Love, this utopian notion evolved from courtly love, emerging "as a social

phenomenon after the Middle Ages" (45). To illustrate this myth, Acker primarily appropriates materials by and about William Faulkner and Arthur Rimbaud. Drawing on several theorists who concern themselves with masochism and subjectivity, among them Chris Weedon and Paula J. Caplan, this chapter posits that Memoriam, along with Acker's other works, privileges the notion that gender differences and masochistic behaviours are socially, rather than biologically, produced. Finally, Acker's ideas about "the blood," reminiscent of those in Empire of the Senseless, are considered. Acker avoids traps which might lead to definitions of women based solely on their biological differences from men. Living or writing from the blood represents, for her, something primal: a scream, a cry, not solely the voice of "woman," but a cry heard mostly, in patriarchy, from marginalized "others" of both sexes.

Anarchic behaviour, disdain for the literary community, and a volatile relationship with the poet Verlaine combine to make Rimbaud, according to Acker, "our idea of the poet" (HL 24). In Rimbaud: The Myth of Childhood Wallace Fowlie states: "The story of Verlaine and Rimbaud in London and Brussels is one of the literal epics of our age, in which the myth of the modern artist is related" (46). The obsessive nature of their love affair, Rimbaud's "otherness" in terms of his sexuality, and his brilliance as a poet are the materials necessary to produce a romantic myth. Acker

shows, through her reconstruction of his life, that romantic love may be exciting to read about, but it may not be as wonderful to live.

In addition to being a romanticized figure, Rimbaud provides Acker with a male protagonist whose subjectivity is constructed as "other" because of his homosexuality. This allows her to illustrate that victims of patriarchy are not always women. It is an important distinction, because describing women as the only casualties of patriarchy reduces them to definitions of their sexuality. This can have negative consequences. Weedon explains:

While many women may wish to see the emergence of a female sexuality which is not constructed by and in the interests of men, to make such a sexuality the basis for women's language is politically dangerous, since it reduces women to a version of their sexuality. (65)

As long as patriarchy remains dominant, meanings given to the female body and desire will rarely, if ever, work to women's advantage. Consider, for example, gendered language.

Mary Daly claims that "the sacrificing of women requires the silencing of women, which takes place . . . myriad ways..."(18). One method involves a simple pronoun. The generic "he," it is argued, has come universally to mean he or she; nevertheless, if one suggests that "she" could be adopted instead of "he" as the universal signifier for persons, the notion is generally dismissed as ridiculous.

Psychologist Paula J. Caplan, in her book The Myth of Women's Masochism, describes a study carried out with adults and children. Both groups were asked to choose pictures for a book entitled Man and Culture. Overwhelmingly, adults and children alike picked mostly pictures of men. When the same groups were asked to select pictures for a book entitled Human Culture, both groups chose far more pictures of women than before (39). Capitol's father in Memoriam states: "Given the welter of female emotion, the female is unable to know or value work" (IM 177). Defining women as primarily nurturing, giving, and submissive creates "common sense" notions that they are best suited for raising children and remaining in the home. Language is power.

Memoriam is divided into four parts: "Rimbaud," "Airplane," "Capitol," and "The Wild Palms." Part one tells the story of Rimbaud's life, and includes "A Japanese Interlude" which chronicles the love-hate relationship between Tomomori, a married man, and Uneme, his mistress, plus a retelling of the Medea myth. In addition, the novel appropriates much of Faulkner's work. At one point, the narrative voice states: "In Faulkner's novels, men who are patriarchs either kill or maim by subverting their daughters" (IM 220). Part two deals with a young woman named Airplane whose character is based on Faulkner's Temple Drake from Sanctuary. A university student, her upbringing does little to prepare her for life. Based on Faulkner's

Charlotte in The Wild Palms, Capitol, the seventeen-year old protagonist in part three, struggles with her family as well. Eventually running away from home, she becomes a performance artist who smashes dolls. Section four, "The Wild Palms," completes the novel. Airplane comes to terms with her masochism, while Capitol decides whether or not to continue being an artist. Having chosen to become a pimp earlier in the novel, Rimbaud does not appear in this section.

Rimbaud, Airplane, and Capitol all struggle to understand the nature of their identity. All come from homes where they were mistreated as children. All seek escape. Both women struggle toward freedom, even if it seems they sometimes trade one form of slavery for another. Ultimately, they both have their work and their lives. R, however, leaves the text after part one, only to return later as Rimbaud, Capitol's brother. Even after claiming he would "rather suicide than live in the bourgeoisie" (IM 28), he becomes a pimp determined to climb "up the ladder of common sense" (IM 194). Patriarchal and totalizing, this discourse of common sense represents much that Acker views as wrong with bourgeois society. It convinces people, subtly and insidiously, to behave in a manner approved by society, whether or not such behaviour is in the best interests of the individual.

Rimbaud chooses to make his living by prostituting his sister. In order to understand this decision, it is necessary to examine the construction of Rimbaud's identity as put forth in Memoriam. Referred to in the "Rimbaud" section as R, he "had his myth: The mother is evil" (IM 17). Of Rimbaud's mother, the narrative voice states: "This particular mother hated and abused this particular child" (IM 34). Having been mistreated, R enters the world of men, a world where, "in these dead provinces, the other is a freak" (IM 23). Because "the disaster of childhood had killed R" (IM 60), he seeks "pain and being controlled which're going to cut through [his] autism" (IM 5). A series of men physically and mentally abuses him: African Pain, his uncle; Dubois, the leader of a motorcycle gang; and Father Fist. Because "violence [is] the only emotion to which the child [can] relate" (IM 10), Rimbaud loves them all for the pain they inflict. Then, he meets Verlaine. "One night," Rimbaud recalls, "thinking I was strong, I seized LOVE. I found him--hurtful" (IM 79). Sadly, love and pain have become fused in the child's psyche.

The narrative voice intrudes at intervals into this section about Verlaine and R's relationship, adding its own reminiscences about love. "Desire is innocent" (IM 60); the voice says later: "I remember you were enough for me" (IM 61). Set against the tragedy of Rimbaud's love for Verlaine, the narrative voice's love story takes on a

mythical quality. Poignant and full of pain, the voice mirrors R's suffering, acting as a refrain or chorus. Carried into the present by the narrative voice, the power of romantic love becomes, perhaps, one's own thoughts in cathartic harmony with R's story. At one point, he says to Verlaine: "I don't think it's possible for us to go anywhere. Actuality's against us" (IM 61). R's disastrous childhood, and his failed love affair with Verlaine, offer insight into his inability to overcome societal pressures. Acker knows that society creates both men and women as subjects. As a result, R tries to love and, because of his "otherness," fails. Determined to be different, he cannot escape what Althusser labels "Ideological State Apparatuses" (73), such as family, education, and religion, which replicate people who will not question "the system." This is not to say that people do not change. Weedon writes: "It is important to see subjectivity as always historically produced in specific discourses and never as one fixed structure" (90). Later in the text, R attempts to prostitute Capitol, establishing himself as an exploiter of women's sexuality, a perfect occupation in a world ruled by the phallus.

Both Airplane and Capitol possess strengths not found in the Janey Smith of Blood and Guts in High School. Janey, Acker admits, "was a more cardboard figure" (CE 17). In order to understand how characters can be both masochistic

and strong, it is helpful to explore Acker's attitudes toward masochism. Just as she acknowledges the impact patriarchy might have on a male subject, so she illustrates, through her female characters, what it is like to grow up in a world where "'NO' is the very first word you learn and it's burnt into your flesh" (AW 179). On the subject of masochistic women characters, she states:

Frankly, I feel that this business about positive role models is just as stupid. If you're arguing that the society is sexist, why do you want to argue that everything is happy? And why do you want to insist on having these strong, wonderful, terrific women? That implies there's no reason to have this violent struggle. That's cuckoo. (MR 96)

When Capitol's brother Quentin returns from Harvard, he tells her that "Freud had said that all women are naturally masochists" (IM 153). This notion of female masochism as biologically induced remains one of the master-narratives of psychological discourse.

Airplane's childhood memories are clouded by a hatred of her parents that "was nausea to [her] because [she] knew [she] wasn't supposed to hate them but only passively allow their hatred of [her]" (IM 100). Her father, a judge, is an alcoholic. Her mother, a socialite, commits suicide before Airplane is "old enough to know her" (IM 109). "I grew scared," Airplane says, "because I realized I was how someone had made me" (IM 102). Aware of her subjectivity, Airplane becomes obsessed with questions of personal identity. She states:

Everything that happens to you, even things that happen to other people that you read about, becomes memories; these memories lie, somewhere in the body, maybe not even in the mind, wherever that is, and shape all you do, the body. Your desires. I was still a girl, and there were no memories in me but those of childhood.... (IM 109)

In what appears to be a dream, Airplane is taken to a house. "Identity must be a house," she muses, "into which you can enter, lock the door, shut the windows forever against all storms" (IM 118). Realizing that she must become very strong in order to block out "all storms," she enters the building.

A whore and three men inhabit the house. While inside, Airplane tells the whore: "I want to go." The whore replies: "You make your own decisions" (IM 105). One of the men rapes Airplane; nevertheless, she stays with him, because "for a female to get her power or to survive, she had, at least at first, to get it from a man" (IM 115). For women, absolute control of their bodies proves difficult within patriarchal structures; consequently, Acker refuses the dictum: "You can't be a feminist if you say women are submissive" (AW 185). She states: "Of course women are submissive: they've been trained to be submissive" (AW 185). By admitting that women may have masochistic tendencies, rather than trying to pretend they do not, Acker "open[s] up language and subjectivity to history and the possibility of change..." (Weedon 90). In order to survive, Airplane decides "to go along with a men's world and then kill it"

(IM 126). Ironically, she leaves the rapist, but can only find work as a sex show performer at a place called Fun City. While there, she becomes ill "between her legs where identity partly lies, [in her] blood" (IM 126). Even though the sex is faked, the rage she feels at having to exploit herself this way manifests itself in sickness.

Airplane ends up in the emergency ward of the city's "most well-endowed hospital" (IM 130), a facility which provides "almost no care for all those who [do not have] medical insurance" (IM 130). In order to pay a proper doctor, she must continue working at Fun City. The societal bondage experienced by women from physical, psychological, and economic pressures manifests itself again and again through Airplane's struggle for personal freedom. Finally able to leave the sex show and make her living as a writer, she meets and becomes romantically involved with a married German reporter. Their relationship is sadomasochistic. Airplane explains: "I trust myself enough that I'll know when I'm in danger and act appropriately" (IM 222). Doubting this, her lover does not understand that being "able to act weak" (IM 222) relieves Airplane from always having to be strong. Airplane, who has been "trying to learn a new language" (IM 146), succeeds in forging an identity for herself. She notes: "Men have history, carved out history, historical periods...Since women don't have history, they don't have a chance to be adolescent for just

one period... IM 218-219). Airplane now sees clearly the world and her place in it; still, she values dreams, for "you need at least, one dream, to live" (IM 148). Keeping alive the dream of loving someone, Airplane continues to survive.

Capitol, like Airplane, grows up in a family which does little to strengthen her sense of personal worth. Breakfast for her mother consists "of dex" (IM 169), after which she becomes "everything the American mother should be" (IM 169). When Capitol's father comes home from work, her mother takes "her first librium" (IM 169). Meanwhile, the children are warned that "drugs are evil" (IM 169). Capitol "fuck[s] every boy in town" (IM 171), including her brother Quentin. Her older brother Rimbaud treats her cruelly. While driving them somewhere one day, he hits her. With irony, she notes: "He could have run over someone while he was hitting me. Men don't have any sense of responsibility" (IM 185). Like Airplane, Capitol knows when she has had enough pain: after her mother's suicide, she rebels when her drunken father and Rimbaud try to prostitute her. Stealing the money her mother left with Rimbaud for her education, she runs away from home.

In the final section, "The Wild Palms," Airplane begins to understand her masochism. Mirroring her childhood, Airplane's German lover gives her "rejection and absence [but] this time rejection and absence won't kill [her]" (IM

219). In Sadomasochism and Everyday Life, Lynn Chancer notes the importance of recognizing "the legitimacy of individuals' consensual pleasure in S/M play and fantasy," while at the same time criticizing "the very real social structures that play partially reflects" (25). Through Airplane, Acker achieves this balance. "I'm reliving childhood," Airplane muses, "because now I'm strong enough to handle it" (IM 219). While this relationship with a married man brings her sorrow, she finds herself moving "not into love, but into freedom" (IM 221): no matter what happens, she will survive and grow stronger.

Along with Airplane, Capitol searches for some sense of her own power. In an effort to look like a boy, Capitol cuts her hair very short. Anticipating Freudian interpretations of this gesture, she claims wanting short hair has nothing to do with desiring a penis, for "Freud didn't understand the relations between sex and power" (IM 143). "Looking like a boy," she insists, "took away some of my fear" (IM 143). In an attempt to break the chains of heterosexuality, she tries lesbianism, but her "sexuality [isn't] lesbian" (IM 144). Rather than questioning who she is, she asks: "What's my story?" (IM 154). Because "women have always been taught to hate themselves" (IM 155), Capitol decides to write her own script, for "we're not nothing, we're our stories" (IM 156). In "The Wild Palms" section, she lives a frenzied life for a time with a

filmmaker. Exhausted and relieved when he leaves, she returns to her gentle lover, Harry, who shocks Capitol by rejecting her. Next, a "big fat pig" (IM 261) artist sues her for replicating one of his dolls. Alone and depressed, Capitol considers suicide in order to "lop off the consciousness of memory" (IM 264). Deciding not to take her own life, she resolves instead to throw her memories away, and live in the unknown.

"If memory is a tool by which I'm making myself," Capitol wonders, "why do I make painful, even deadly parts of myself? I'm not sure who's in control" (IM 186). She understands that identity has something to do with blood. Rimbaud knows "you can't teach a bitch nothing because bitches live in blood" (IM 189). By having Rimbaud speak these words, Acker shows the contempt men hold for women because women are supposed to be closer to their blood. "Bitches" are incapable of change because of this "natural" state. At one point, Airplane says: "I sensed that blood is who I am" (IM 117). Over and over, Acker returns in this text to the idea of living in the blood.

In the Capitol section, the narrative voice describes oppression in England as worse than in America because, "in England, they've internalized their oppression for so long that the only revolution they can conceive is to become their oppressors" (IM 200). Unable to accept the political atmosphere in England, the narrator "[leaves] the dinner

table" (IM 200), for she is not "used to eating their blood" (IM 200). In this instance, blood clearly refers to certain political discourses. Blood, then, may be a metaphor for identity, but not necessarily an identity with its essence in biology. Rimbaud, a male character, realizes that "the memory of childhood, being the same as childhood, drags with it through our blood certain images" (IM 66). Acker establishes that his behaviour results from a childhood which was an "autocratic mixture of neglect, torture, and tortuous love" (IM 4). Thus, Acker creates a plurality of meanings for blood.

Whether male or female, the novel implies that the body supplies answers which are closer to unconscious desire than conscious memory. In some ways, it seems as if Acker posits the notion that the blood is pure, its answers always true. This would constitute a totalizing discourse, which is something Acker seeks to avoid. In Empire of the Senseless, the narrative voice equates the unconscious with "that part of our being (mentality, feeling, physicality) which is free of all control" (ES 133); Memoriam, however, casts doubt on the notion that the unconscious is void of cultural interference. "Perhaps I had become too polluted," Airplane muses, "not down there but socially, as everyone becomes, to be pure even down there in the blood" (IM 133). Airplane's realization that she is "sick between her legs where identity partly lies" (IM 126) agrees with Weedon's

assessment that subjectivity changes through time and in specific discourses. Over time, society changes, and people change with it. If the culture becomes sick, it can infect the people living in it; still, Acker strives for the purest form of expression possible.

In an Art Forum article, entitled "Models of Our Present," Acker addresses the notion of writing from the blood. She states:

Examine the two statements "Help!" and "I need help." The first language is a cry; the second, a description. Only the cry, art. rather than the description or criticism, is primary. The cry is stupid; it has no mirror; it communicates. I want to cry. (AF 64)

Bakhtin explains this idea of stupidity, or incomprehension, by defining it as "a polemical failure to understand generally accepted, canonized, inveterately false languages with their lofty labels for things and events..." (403).

Among these would be poetic, scholarly, or religious languages (403). For women, or others on the margins of society, this crying out provides a means by which to break the chains of patriarchy. In her article, "From the Scene of the Unconscious to the Scene of History," Hélène Cixous claims that she "translate[s] into words what is being written in fevers, in heartbeats, in luminous songs..." (1989 1). For Acker, manifesting this primal cry in writing offers an escape from "wallowing in our own fucking nihilism" (HL 17) by breaking down accepted language codes.

In a further effort to avoid totalizing discourse, Acker never allows the reader to become complacent about the "meaning" of her text. Early in the text, the narrative voice proclaims that "all romanticism is stupid" (IM 45). Later, Capitol says that "love cannot exist, but if the dreaming of it dies, there's no more love" (IM 202). Political messages thread through Acker's writing; Acker's placement of them, however, often keeps them from appearing dogmatic. In the middle of a confusing piece of narrative, with characters changing identities, she will place something like this:

Marxism is irrevocably tied to certain rationalist and positivist tenets of nineteenth-century thought. Mechanistic determinism lies at its heart. The same could be said of Freudianism. The problem now is that theory dependent on absolute models can't account for temporal change. What is given in human history and through human history is not the determined sequence of the determined, but the emergence of radical otherness, immanent creation, nontrivial novelty. (IM 52)

Unrelated to the surrounding action, this passage becomes highlighted because of its difference; consequently, the post-structuralist message is subtly foregrounded. Occasionally, Acker pokes gentle fun at her audience. Her character Rimbaud teases the reader:

You. Though I know I'm a coward in several little ways, for you who love the absence of moralism or social-realist tendencies in a writer, I'll tear out certain hideous, overwritten pages from my notebook on being damned. (IM 80)

Political messages are often either veiled with humour or presented in such a way as to render them almost subliminal.

Airplane, Capitol, and Rimbaud all thrive on romance; nevertheless, they must come to terms with their own identities before their relationships can be healthy. Disillusioned with romance, Rimbaud tries to become a pimp in order to profit from women's bodies. Capitol and Airplane, although wounded by disturbing sexual experiences, do not give up on love. Turning to their blood, even though it may be tainted, both Airplane and Capitol listen to the messages it holds for them. They grow. Identity no longer mystifies. In an interview, Acker herself seems to want to put the question of identity to rest when she states:

If, every day I thought about all the things I'm "not supposed" to do because I'm a woman, and all the ways in which I'm not supposed to be--I couldn't exist.

(AW 179)

Chapter Five

The Other Tradition

Burroughs never bores, for he and the other writers I think of as in "that tradition," "the other tradition," "the nonacceptable literary tradition," "the tradition of those books which were hated when they were written and subsequently became literary history," "the black tradition," "the tradition of political writing as opposed to propaganda"...[These writers] do what Poe said a writer should do. They present the human heart naked so that our world, for a second, explodes into flames. (CE 31)

This thesis avoids labelling Acker's work for a simple reason: there is no consensus, among critics or academics, concerning where, exactly, her oeuvre fits. Elizabeth Benedict, in an Esquire commentary on Acker's fiction, groups her with punk aesthetics. According to Benedict, punk literature "tends to read fast because there aren't any words you have to stop and look up" (282). A review of Great Expectations, in West Coast Review of Books, has Charles Schlotter referring to her writing as "composed of all the time-honored gimmicks that were considered avant-garde sixty years ago!" (38). One New York Times reviewer, Bertha Harris, claims it is "interesting to meet a 'female artist' with a lot of nerve," but adds that Acker "lacks the persuasive courage of conviction this kind of

outlaw fiction requires" (30). Not all reviews are negative. Larry McCaffery calls her "one of postmodernism's boldest and most original fiction innovators" (MR 83), and Sally O'Driscoll, in The Village Voice Literary Supplement, notes that Acker's "experiments produce an authentic voice, which is a rare commodity in fiction today" (14). Acker's writing splits critical opinion, not only about what area it fits into, but what it expresses.

While cautiously accepting various classifications of her work, she deftly qualifies alliances with any particular literary movement. "I think that sometimes," she maintains, "the word 'experimental' has been used to hide the political radicalness of some writers" (CE 21). During an interview with Acker, Larry McCaffery labels her work postmodern. While conceding that this word provides a starting point from which to discuss her writing, Acker claims to have "had no idea what the term meant when [she] started out writing, and [she is] still not sure [she] understand[s] it today" (MR 88). Having frames put around her work is anathema for her. Perhaps this is wise, considering the present debate about whether or not postmodernism embraces political ideals.

In "Capitalism, Modernism, and Postmodernism," Terry Eagleton argues that in postmodernism "the avant-gardist dream of an integration of art and society returns in monstrously caricatured form..." (1985, 61); however, the

difficulty with any debate on the political achievements, or lack of them, by artists labelled postmodernist, becomes hampered by the term itself. Some people refuse to accept the expression, using instead labels such as supra-modern, post-contemporary, or trans-fictional. In his article, "The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodernism Debate," Jameson articulates the instability of postmodernism as a word within the literary community. He asserts:

The problem of postmodernism--how its fundamental characteristics are to be described, whether it even exists in the first place, whether the very concept is of any use, or is, on the contrary, a mystification--this problem is at one and the same time an aesthetic and a political one. (1984, 53)

Surely the political content of a writer's work must not solely depend upon the literary "age" in which it is written. Rather, it must rest with the individual author. Acker's "terroristic cultural assaults" (Freidman 41) attack many commonly held notions and ideals.

This female literary knight has been jousting with her society's views of sexuality, women, language, and a host of other politically charged issues for over two decades; still, for the most part, Acker's works have been excluded from the literary canon. Though a plethora of books have as their subject "the other tradition" of literature (Graff, Hutcheon, Kuehl, Waugh), her name rarely appears in their indexes. One cause for her banishment from the halls of

academia is, no doubt, her choice of language. Consider the following passage from the short story "New York in 1979":

The old actress isn't good anymore. But she keeps on acting even though she knows all the audiences mock her hideousness and lack of context cause she adores acting. Her legs are grotesque: FLABBY. Above, hidden within the folds of skin, there's an ugly cunt. Two long flaps of white skin speckled by black hairs like a pig's cock flesh hang down to the knees. There's no feeling in them. Between these two flaps of skin the meat is red folds and drips a white slim that poisons whatever it touches. Just one drop burns a hole into anything. An odor of garbage infested by maggots floats out of this cunt. One wants to vomit.... (HL 47)

Reflecting ageism, which Mary Daly calls "a feature of phallic society" (15), this heartbreakingly poignant description might disturb readers not accustomed to such raw reflections of cultural attitudes.

Another possible explanation for Acker's exclusion from the literary canon lies with her refusal to provide answers in her novels. She does not claim to be a metaphysician. "I don't think that I do understand the world," she says, "and I'm basically confused about ninety percent of my conscious time" (TQ Mar. 15, 1993). Rather than concern herself with centralized structures, she explores "centres where [she is] most fascinated and most confused" (TQ Mar. 15, 1993). If, as Eagleton claims, the avant-gardist dream integrates art and society, Acker, by trying to understand her society, instead of imparting absolute "truth" to her audience, achieves this political end. In Western culture the white, male, European ruling class believes itself to be

unified and self-controlled: the centre of the world. These notions are supported by religion, philosophy, and language. Her writing reflects this world, then smashes it apart with its own weapons: her appropriations of its codes, its language.

Acker builds her narratives from other texts. This is in the tradition of Tristan Tzara, the poet who, at a surrealist rally in the 1920s, attempted to create a poem by pulling words out of a hat. So shocked were his colleagues that a riot resulted. This method, based on Tzara's idea that "poetry is for everyone," evolved into the cut-up method of Brion Gysin, which was adopted by William Burroughs. Acker acknowledges her debt to Burroughs. Following his example, her multiple perspectives introduce a polyphony of discourses. Many critics claim that this multiplicity confuses readers: if readers are not told what "truth" is, they will be lost in a cacophony of voices, suffer a sort of paralysis, and be unable to make decisions. Michael Ryan, in Marxism and Deconstruction, argues that this type of criticism "assumes that the prerequisite of action is some sort of absolute knowledge, which is not necessarily the case" (213). In Acker's works, characters are often confused; nevertheless, they do make decisions, and, certainly in her later texts, they experience emotional growth.

When this journey into Acker's domain began, readers were invited to enter the heavily perfumed rooms of her narratives. Some readers turn away in disgust. Others, compelled by curiosity, peek behind a door or two. Still others return, again and again, lured by the heady scent, excited by the eclectic decor. Listen! Can you hear a woman's voice? She speaks about the future:

Someday there'll have to be a new world. A new kind of woman. Or a new world for women because the world we perceive, what we perceive, causes our characteristics. In that future time a woman will be a strong warrior: free, stern, proud, able to control her own destiny, able to kick anyone in the guts, able to punch out any goddamn son-of-a-bitch who tells her he loves her she's the most beautiful thing on earth she's the greatest artist going fucks her beats her up a little then refuses to talk to her, and able to fuck (love and get love) as much as she wants. In that future time the woman will be beautiful and be the hottest number whose eyes breathe fire, who works hard, who's honest and blunt, who demands total honesty. Greta Garbo in *Queen Christina*. (KH 77)

Notes

Chapter Two

¹Several St. Simeons are listed in The Penguin Dictionary of Saints. In all likelihood, Quixote's faithful companion is named after Salus Simeon. Nicknamed "the crazy," Salus Simeon's birthdate is unknown, but he died at his birthplace, Homs in Syria, in 590. Devoted to caring for the most destitute among the people, he was especially kind to harlots. (311)

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