

**Angel of Anarchy, Angel of Desire:**

**The Work of Kathy Acker**

**A Thesis**

**Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies**

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**in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Degree of**

**Master of Arts**

**by**

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**ANGEL OF ANARCHY, ANGEL OF DESIRE:  
THE WORK OF KATHY ACKER**

**BY**

**TAMARA STEINBORN**

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University  
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree  
of  
MASTER OF ARTS**

**Tamara Steinborn 1997 (c)**

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## ABSTRACT

"Angel of Anarchy, Angel of Desire: The Work of Kathy Acker," addresses the notion of the postmodern subject and its highly contested place in the twentieth century, in light of poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theories of narrative, subjectivity and representation.

The importance of psychoanalysis in determining the development of subject identity is explored by theorist Julia Kristeva. Her study of the 'subject in process' dialogizes the discourse of both postmodern and feminist ethics, making room for new conceptualizations of gender identity.

Character development in the novels of Kathy Acker challenges traditional views of the Western unified subject and its evolution into a discursive site of theoretical debate. The psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theory of Julia Kristeva further refines this debate which Acker's novels *Empire of the Senseless* and *In Memoriam to Identity* open up. Kristeva's notion of the 'subject in process' lends insight into Acker's desire to find revolutionary potential within the postmodern subject of her texts.

Through the work of both Acker and Kristeva, a new ethics of the subject is offered, pushing past the frustration and despair often encountered in postmodern fiction and theory.

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## Introduction:

### The Unfulfilled Subject of Postmodernism

In *Modern French Philosophy*, Vincent Descombes writes that "academic realism had failed to take into account the rivalry inherent in the very notion of the subject" (23). This "rivalry" still exists in the twentieth century. How fulfilled are we, as subjects, in our twentieth century culture? Are we searching for a new sense of teleological completion? Are we staring, faceless and powerless, into the chasm of nihilism, of Jean Baudrillard's "simulacra?" Are we still struggling to see ourselves in the numerous identities of the twentieth century cultural matrix – the politically correct, the environmentally friendly, feminist, generation-X slacker, technologically wise? The diversity of identity positions is overwhelming, and the tension stands high as we wait for new theoretical twists to define our sense of being. At the same time, culture assumes an already understood definition of its 'postmodernist state,' with its postmodern fashion, T.V., music, shopping malls, videos, and postmodern coffee to start your day. The concept of postmodernism has been introduced, studied, and packaged for our consumption.

Yet, in this contentious age, we are still faced with a culture at great odds with itself and possessing a profound unfulfillment of identity. In his article, "What is at Stake in this Debate on Postmodernism," Warren Montag acknowledges the radically divergent forces which make up the postmodern debate on the subject: "Either the subject is master of itself, its own thoughts and actions or it has simply vanished into the pure systematicity of the historical present" (Kaplan 88). There are still disturbances in the manner in which we unfold as

individuals and in the ways in which we form ethical relations with others. The hope for a dialectic still plays itself out in moments of history – the unification of Germany, the formation of the United Nations at the end of World War Two, the movement towards de-segregation in America. We bear witness to two simultaneous desires – culture is busy with a postmodern discourse of disenfranchisement while at the same time searching for some foundation for relationships between self and others. As we go on living and using each other, our happy endings beginning over and over again in a vicious, revolutionary questioning, the subject of this movement expresses itself in a continuous theatre of performative energy.

In an attempt to shed light upon the cultural fix of the twentieth century, this thesis will examine how the epistemological questioning of twentieth century subjectivity concerns itself with the relationship between theory and the postmodern text. Our examination of postmodern theory will attempt to understand how writers explore these new ways of thinking, and produce innovative models of writing and creating "meaning." The notion of postmodern narrative is a useful tool for writers who look back to history as well as forward in a generation of limitless fiction. As Vincent Descombes concludes in his study on modern philosophy, the story/narrative of history never ends (186). Writers show that a postmodern narrative is a vital way of understanding the various existing tensions within our culture. Descombes points out two vital characteristics to bear in mind in coming to terms with this narrative:

It has always already begun, and is always the story of a previous story; the referent of narrative discourse is never the crude fact, nor the dumb event, but other narratives, other stories, a great murmur of words preceding, provoking, accompanying and following the procession of wars, festivals, labours, time.

It is never finished, for in principle the narrator addresses a listener, or 'narratee,' who may in his turn become the narrator, making the narration of which he has been the 'narratee' into the narrated of a fresh narration (186).

Certainly modern-day fiction has seen a narrative play upon these lines. We will see how American writer, Kathy Acker, investigates this notion of narrative, as her texts travel along a complex gradient of voices/narratives which include works such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, Erika Jong's *Fear of Flying*, Charles Dicken's *Great Expectations* and Antonin Artaud's poetry. This investigation hopes to reveal how certain texts reflect cultural assumptions, both historically and in the present. New fictions then display a desire to further challenge these representations, in a dynamic reassessment of our value systems.

Our way into the analysis of the text will be through the philosophical precepts which have informed literary productivity and have lead to our postmodern culture. The question still remains whether one can discuss postmodernism without essentializing it, without trimming it down to a few catch phrases used to critique a text. For the purpose of this thesis, it will be important to touch on some of the debates surrounding the term/movement in order to more effectively contextualize the new writing. The purpose of this examination is to analyze notions of subjectivity which predicate the writing and reading of a text. In chapter one, I wish to trace a movement from the subject borne of modernism to the present self. The movement from modernism to postmodernism includes a study of possibilities for the restructuring of an ethics for the subject, in particular the female subject.

As Chris Weedon suggests in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, literature has long been observed as a powerful articulation of



cultural concerns: "In this process the reader is offered subjectivity..." (171). I believe that Acker concerns herself with the notion of when and how we are to articulate our postmodern culture. Her novels involve themselves in an examination of a subject borne out of the unified European cultural heritage. Her characters find themselves in an America which is quickly losing hold of its influential and impressive European edifices, resulting in a narration which unfolds in despair and confusion. Acker traces the actions and desires of her characters as they are trapped between revolutionary potential and complete ethical chaos. Her work fits in with a movement in postmodern fiction which expresses how "our ways of understanding in the West have been and continue to be complicitous with our ways of oppressing. These writers have laid bare the vicious circles of intellectual imperialism and of liberal and humanist ideology" (Jardine 24).

The increased production of feminist theory coincides with the wide reaching proliferation of postmodern theory in a manner which has caused some theorists to wonder at this coincidence: "The fundamental concerns with the proper relationship between sex and class, with understanding sexuality and with exploring feminine creativity all tend toward the destruction of androcentric and heterosexist regimes, towards a challenging of the word 'human' as applied to man's inventions" (Marks and de Courtivron 23). Nevertheless, critics still maintain the importance of fully analyzing female specificity in political, social and cultural discourse. Rose Braidotti observes that although these current critical tendencies seem to fall under the same theoretical umbrella, it may be more beneficial to approach the two concerns in a dialectical manner, rather than to have the concerns of feminism drawn in under the "greater"

discourse of the philosophy of man (59). Braidotti asks, "why is it that as soon as feminists began thinking out loud for themselves, male thinkers took up the 'feminine' as their own cause?" (59-60).

In Chapter Two, I will examine Julia Kristeva's psychoanalysis of the subject which is developed in her books, *Powers of Horror* and *Desire in Language*. Her work on psychoanalysis derives from the theoretical formulations of Lacan and Freud, but evolves past these theorists in an attempt to elevate the notion of the subject beyond their rigid definitions. Kristeva desires to create a notion of the subject which has about it a sense of openness to the unaccountable. For our purpose, the relevance of this theory will lie in the application of Kristeva's notion of the 'subject in process' to Kathy Acker's texts. I will show how this reading of subjectivity can be traced through Acker's texts as she attempts to disturb and to penetrate the status quo, the linearity of thought, the transparency of codes, all in an attempt to re-open the question, 'who are we?'

Both Acker and Kristeva enter into an analysis of revolutionary language and text. Poststructuralist thought has nuanced structuralism in its examination of language as the site for social and political organization as well as the site for the construction of the subject. Jacques Derrida observes that

"everyday language" is not innocent or neutral. It is the language of Western metaphysics, and it carries with it not only a considerable number of presuppositions of all types, but also presuppositions inseparable from metaphysics, which, although little attended to, are knotted into a system. (19)

To Derrida's assertion, we add Kristeva's studies in psychoanalysis which use the notion of language in determining the subject. Both Acker and Kristeva analyze language as a site which (per)forms a notion of the

female subject and which is also informed by various tensions.

The study of subject development in feminist theory, and certainly in psychoanalysis, subverts staid beliefs about language as a unitary concept, and thus effects the notion of gender difference, a contributing factor to the current struggle with postmodern identity. At issue in this debate are notions such as essentialism and identity. The essentialist position, taken by theorists such as Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, seeks to extend legitimacy of women as subjects by "naturalizing" the notion of the female subject. The work of Julia Kristeva will be compared with that of Cixous and Irigaray in order to better understand the ways in which essentialism creates a fixed identity. As Fay Weedon points out that "[t]he political significance of decentering the subject and abandoning the belief in essential subjectivity is that it opens up subjectivity to change" (33). The tension between essentialism and poststructuralist thought is an ongoing concern for feminist theorists, such as Weedon, who wish to avoid being swept under one defining system of thought. Yet, they also recognize the necessity of establishing some form of communication/dialogue between the genders which goes beyond a polarization of language as is presented in feminist theory such as that of Dale Spender. In criticizing Spender's concept of polarized language constructivism, Moira Gatens notes:

If thought and reality are dependent on language, and if it is men who have produced and controlled language, with women playing the part of mere consumers, then how does the question of distinct male and female realities arise at all? If these realities are dependent upon humanly produced classificatory systems, and in patriarchy this production is restricted to men, then women as consumers of this language should be in perfect agreement with male thought and male-constructed reality. (77)

Thus, while feminist theorists acknowledge a desire to understand a "woman-centered" experience, they also recognize the need to analyze and comes to terms with the systems of representation.

The close of the twentieth century brings with it an abundance of information about "who we are," with more lines of inquiry developing continuously. What is increasing as well are what Alice Jardine calls "spectres of separatism," (57) which leave us, in academia in particular, dislocated from one another (writing articles, books etc. from increasingly smaller cubicles/offices). Isolated, perfecting our wholeness, it becomes more and more difficult to connect with "the other." And, as Alice Jardine observes, Kristeva's studies show that "the other" is most often the other sex (114). Although Simone de Beauvoir originally made this connection in *The Second Sex*, years later Kristeva brings to it an invigorating analysis of language and a reconceptualization of "thinking woman." Kristeva's hope for the 'subject in process' can be read in part as a desire to bridge some of these separations. She tries to convey a desire to know the other, and it is in this process that we may hope to find a continuation of the discourse upon postmodern subjectivity that reaches beyond the atomistic despair of our information age.

## Chapter One

### Situating Kathy Acker

*I am against the word anti because it's a bit like  
atheist, as compared to believer. An atheist is just  
as much of a religious man as the believer is.*

Marcel Duchamp

Postmodernism contests the notion of the modern subject born out of the rational and scientific humanist enterprise of the mid fifteenth century. This modern subject is author of her existence, proprietor of both body and mind. The fifteenth century witnesses a shift in focus from the transcendental signifier of Christianity to the notion of the subject. Descartes' now famous dictum, "I think, therefore I am," creates a subject which becomes the epistemological locus and reference point for ethical behaviour, creating a split between subject (I) and object (the world). A symbolic order fixed within "mankind's" mind instead of in the flesh of Christ is born, creating a base for a universal mind cut off from its body, a ruling consciousness which quickly becomes fixed and homogeneous. Knowledge of the world is supplied by the knowledge within consciousness.

The assumption of an existing metaphysical "Truth" of humanism is one which is related to the very being of subjectivity, an essence of being which exists prior to language and the outside world. Central to the humanist project lies the search for a common ethical, political and cultural basis upon which to establish "human relations," a basis taking the form of rational human behaviour. The great liberal humanist, John Stuart Mill, states:

The only part of the conduct of anyone for which he  
is amenable to society is that which concerns  
others. In the part which merely concerns himself,  
his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself,  
over his own body and mind, the individual is

sovereign. (68-69; my emphasis)

The hope for humanism which is evidenced in the work of Mill is that it will lead to an attainment of absolute freedom and rights for all individuals by elevating the rational subject above all that which may conspire to influence it unconsciously. Liberal feminists were involved in the foundation of a rational being as well, in that they aspired for women to be credited with the same rationality. For Mary Wollstonecraft, the burden of proof lies upon women to show that they are as capable of rational thought and behaviour as men are. In fact, she admonishes men who believe women are "by nature virtuous" because "it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason" (Wollstonecraft 52). Wollstonecraft upholds reason as integral to the development of virtue in women, just as Mill upholds reason as a necessary component for the freedom of mankind. It is assumed that we are all capable of reason, and the exercise of this faculty gives us transcendence over "others."

The humanist project, for all its good intentions, leads to a notion of consciousness which, in its "absolute" right and knowledge, uses language as its transparent reflection. There is no site for political or social struggle, because humanist notions rely on an understood certainty of "good and bad" human behaviour. This ideology leaves language, the word, dead. Ultimately, it leaves human potential stunted and circumscribed to a preordained knowledge of oneself. Humans are superior and make the world they live in as the mind imposes its distinctions of what is real and what is not real upon everything. Everything outside of this consciousness is objectified in direct relation to this centre. Thus, the separation of "I" from the world is insured, doing

violence to any sense of embodiment or otherness – the world, the body, nature and women. It follows that the modern subject of humanism creates a concept of clear, authorial intent in literary productivity, one which is still perceived as a universal consciousness, the One which represents all of society.

If we come to face the self-referential modern subject, this "One," we are placed in the role of its mirror – we are nothing more than the flat surface upon which the modern subject sees itself and the world, in a medium which is removed from cultural, political and social involvement. The modern work of art produced by this subject becomes an autonomous work of unity, one not integrated into the world. The period of modernism in literature is characterized by texts whose voices represent the "for myself" self-consciousness of humanism, a self-same view of one-dimensional unity.

*The text desires to laugh at itself. – Kristjana Gunnars*

Postmodernism and the experimental novel involve a rising up against this autonomous subject/work of art which displays a humanism contingent upon a split between a unified consciousness and heterogeneous forces. Postmodern texts attempt to question the ontological position of the subject as it evolves out of the modernist tradition and enters the playing field of the late twentieth century. As well, the modernist subject and its representations are questioned by postmodern theorists and writers concerned with the relationship between the subject and its socio-political landscape and with challenging the metaphysical profundity of the humanist subject.

*In Modern French Philosophy, Vincent Descombes points out the*

importance of the relationship between the self and the other brought on in philosophical thought by the Hegelian dialectic:

Non-dialectical thinking would hold to the opposition between the rational and the irrational, but any thinking which aspires to be dialectical must, by definition, induce in reason a movement towards what is entirely foreign to it, towards the other. (13)

The Hegelian model of communication is based upon an opposition which is meant to eventually move toward meaning and a resolution of the opposition in a higher truth. Dialectical thought and action marks a profound break with monological authorship and the formalism of the modern text. The concept of authorship as dialogic is further advanced by Mikhail Bakhtin, whose work on the dialogic introduces a cacophony of voices and poetic laughter to the notion of a narrative:

Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naïveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. (123)

The dialogical thinking and metanarrative questioning of postmodernism problematizes the singular referentiality of experience in a move towards a more multifarious way of approaching subjectivity. As Linda Hutcheon states, these fictions "...offer fictive corporeality instead of abstractions, but at the same time, they do tend to fragment or at least to render unstable the traditional unified identity or subjectivity of character" (90). The instability of unified identity derives from an "openness of authorship to the listener," creating what Bakhtin labels "new forms of speech and meaning" (Bakhtin 16).

In further questioning the apparent mastery of the modern subject, postmodern fictions set up subject representation in parodied



instances, subverting the closure of fixed representation. The technique of pastiche is often employed to parody the apparent originary unity which human consciousness depends upon. Identity is anything but originary in such works. Rather, it is a made-up composite of bits and pieces, each destabilized and made questionable by its incomplete nature. In his book, *Uncommon Cultures: Popular Culture and Post-Modernism*, Jim Collins identifies this layering as one of the most important differences between postmodernism and modernism:

"...[postmodernists] replace "poetic" stylization with a *bricolage* of diverse forms of already well-established aesthetic discourses. This process...radically undermines the "purity" that defines...the Modernist period" (75). These texts also introduce that which cannot be accounted for by the unified humanist subject, ranging from the unconscious to the absurd, thereby introducing the notion of a split subject. This is a subject which must not only confront itself as a whole, but also as an other. It must also struggle with the world which surrounds it as there is no escape from that which surrounds, that which creeps towards and into this subject. Involvement with the world marks a transition from the modernist text to a text reminiscent of the seventeenth-century literary genre which produced the carnival and dialogic work of Rabelais. Bakhtin's study of Rabelais and carnival laughter comes close to describing the subversive nature of postmodern techniques. Following Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva pinpoints his study of carnival as having developed a notion of a dialogic, revolutionary intertextuality (*Desire* 80), creating, as Bakhtin sees it: "Such speech forms, liberated from norms, hierarchies, and prohibitions of established idiom..." (187-188).

*A woman, especially if she has the misfortune of knowing anything, should*

*conceal it as well as she can.* – Jane Austen

With the appearance of postmodern fiction by women we encounter an increasing interrogation of the apparent ungendered neutrality informing the modern subject. This "new fiction" is troubled by the supremacy of the male subject, and therefore examines the assumptions behind the male subject of humanism, the "authorship" of the modern text, and the resulting political implications for the female subject. No longer content with the social dramas of Austen (despite the ironic present-day resurgence of her popularity in cinema), the female subject has travelled centuries to 'rest' with uncertainty in the hands of contemporary writers. With a delicious sense of stalwart impropriety and experimentalism, writers such as Banana Yoshimoto and Lynn Tillman are telling stories meant to test the limits of what we know, supplanting who we are and challenging our given belief in image and representation.

A certain understanding of postmodern theory, then, is necessary in contextualizing the writing of Kathy Acker, whose work is an example of late twentieth century writing that experiments with the new role of the female subject. Acker's novels can be seen as a crossover between current theoretical concerns and fiction. Her subjects are left to fend for themselves in this murky battlefield of postmodern subjectivity, as Acker tries to make her way through the playground of liberal pluralism. For this reason, her narratives are an appropriation and reshaping of many exemplary voices, texts, and histories, in particular those of the avant-garde genre. She strives to stimulate the same revolutionary contestation as this genre has produced, but in new ways, using both new and old voices. For example, in an attempt to convey a notion of the avant-garde pertinent to post-modern culture, Acker examines 'punk,'

and its rejection of traditional values.

Acker is intent upon working her way through the present discursive position of the female subject in Western capitalist society. As Linda Hutcheon asserts, "[t]o reinsert the subject into the framework of its *parole* and its signifying activities (both conscious and unconscious) within an historical and social context is to begin [to] force a redefinition not only of the subject but of history as well" (159). As Acker questions the position of the subject in postmodern culture, her narrative structures itself as an experiment which examines the interplay between the world and the word, hoping to effect change. In this ambiguous, messy in-between, where world and word, self and other collide, Acker takes up the subject identity of characters such as teenage runaways, tattoo artists, poets, girl pirates, and other marginal figures. The uncertainty of subject position is where Acker develops the potential for a revolutionary disturbance in the everydayness of the world. Julia Kristeva says: "...the calling into question of language and of the individual, which represents a microrevolution, is something that affects the social fabric and can potentially challenge...the entire social framework" (Kolocotroni 215). In examining the fringe dwellers of culture, Acker wishes to examine the heterogeneity of subject positions. In looking at heterogeneity, she questions the stasis of subject transformation which, for both Kristeva and Acker, is a necessary move towards change at a political and cultural level.

*Knock hard - life is deaf! - Mimi Parent*

Contextually, Acker's writing coincides with her earlier careers as a stripper and performance artist. In the late 60's, these two careers

entwined in a messy embrace, eventually spilling over into her prose. In describing Acker's performance and writing, art critic Sayre wonders: "Who is this 'I'? What does she want? If these are fantasies, what kind of psyche do they depict?" (81). Certainly when reading the partially autobiographical *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, we sense that the motivation for her fiction at this time is exactly the question "who am I?".

While working as a stripper in New York during the avant-garde scene of the late sixties, Acker also mixed in New York underground circles with a wild variety of artistic personae such as Andy Warhol and John Cage. Acker identifies the works of these artists as well as those of William Burroughs, Georges Bataille and Jean Genet as having influenced her own writing, primarily in the use of the body in performance and text. Involving the notion of the body in her work became, for Acker, a technique of revolt against the status quo of the clean, literary productivity of the 1960's. The performative aspect of poetry and art brings about a sense of an unfixed motility, or what Sayre calls, in reference to Allen Ginsberg's poetry performances, a "breath event," which sees the writer/artist locate a becoming in the text/performance.

Borrowing from her experience in performance, Acker brings a materiality back to the frame of the narrative by playing with language in both the form and content of the text. She draws in her novels, includes maps, tattoos, and strange hieroglyphic sidebars in a pastiche and unrecognizable form much like that of Robert Kroetsch's long poem, "Seed Catalogue."

For critic Ellen Friedman,

...Acker, perhaps more directly than many other women writers, creates the feminine texts hypothesized by Hélène Cixous in essays such as "Castration or Decapitation?"...Like Acker, Cixous

feels that women must overthrow their education, the metalanguage of their culture, in order to really speak...(39; my emphasis)

Friedman makes links between Acker and Cixous' "writing the body," a specifically feminine creative impulse which can be expressed in a move to subvert the phallogocentrism of language. "Writing the body" is meant to interrogate the logic of sameness which is set up by the modern subject, the male body politic which we see all around us. Both Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray criticize the phallogocentrism of psychoanalysis for assuming the *a priori* of the male subject in analysis. In extending female specificity beyond an economy of the male, universal subject, these theorists, while celebrating female difference, often run the risk of sounding utopian and idealistic. In desiring to expand upon this notion of "woman," Irigaray insists "woman has sex organs just about everywhere" (103), and that "woman holds the secret" (101). Developing this secret, Irigaray hopes for woman to "tacitly go on strike, avoid men long enough to learn to defend their desire..." (106). Some American feminist theorists also pursue the notion of the specificity of the female body and the absolute split between male and female experience. American writer and critic, Adrienne Rich, calls for us to examine "the miracle paradox of the female body and its spiritual and political meanings" to create a new language for women (290). Experimental French-Canadian writers Nicole Brossard and Louky Bersianik's version of *l'écriture féminine* involves creating a parallel women's language in literature through play with female eroticism and the French language. Motivating these theorists is the desire to validate women's experience after centuries of their having been bypassed.

While Friedman sees Acker's fiction as a specific writing through the

female body, I see her writing as an interrogation of the binary which such a position promotes. Essentialism – a subjectivity pursued through biologism – understands identity in a fixed, static way, that is, as nature proclaims it. I would propose that although Acker writes through the body, she pursues a notion of a revolutionary subject which not only considers how it is informed by the biology of the female body, but also looks at the language and cultural practices which inscribe themselves upon this body. In doing so, I am encouraged by theorist Gill Rye who asserts that "it is questionable whether [women's bodies] can be disentangled from socio-cultural representations of them" (103). Acker pursues a notion of materiality for women (addressing needs and capabilities which derive from biological formation), in order to better understand how women and men can exist together in new ethical relations within society.

The work of Acker stands out against that of other contemporary writers primarily in her rigorous interrogation of the female subject. The texts of novelists such as Margaret Atwood, for example, do not work in the same medium as do Acker's. Although the writing of Atwood, among others such as Marge Piercy, Alice Munroe and Carol Shields, can be categorized as being equally involved with feminist concerns, I would argue that this type of literature lacks the radical dismantling and examination of the subject as witnessed in postmodern fictions such as Acker's. As a result, postmodern texts are often not only very difficult to read, but as Gail Scott finds: "We found ourselves constantly monitoring our language to be clear...Is that why I resent the fictional representation of Atwood's Elizabeth as an ice-cold broad? My desire would have been to have her captured in a process of becoming..." (*Spaces Like Stairs* 22). While we can often enter into a smooth and easy

engagement with an Atwood novel, the relationship between the reader and Acker's more scabrous texts is a brutal and bloody love-hate affair. Acker's texts are not alone in their difficulty. Novels such as Kristjana Gunnar's *The Prowler*, and Gail Scott's *Main Brides*, employ techniques which displace the reader from her familiar position of "receiver." These novels employ metanarrative techniques which address the reader, boldly challenging the assumed meaning of the text to her face and hiding characters behind a dialectic engagement which often misleads and confuses. As Penelope Engelbrecht tells us:

Acker leaps from classical Latin poetry to Hawthorne's Rev. Dimwit to a new *Story of O* to outlining Dickens' *Great Expectations* pip-pop, and I perceive her *Don Quixote* casts a wavering shadow of sordid, pallid postmodern malaise whether female or male or then or now. *Don Quixote* as first written by Cervantes was, of course, initially sequelized by a "plagiarist," a fact that I'm sure appeals to Kathy Acker's (recyclable/regurgitative) appropriative vision. (31-32)

It is as if we are engaging in Freud's game of fort-da, repulsed and horrified, we desperately want to throw the book against the wall, while holding on to it in fascinated need. Acker's texts all play with Freud's idea of the *Unheimlich*, exploiting the familiar comfort of *heim/home*. The disturbing neatness of her female characters (sometimes we can associate with them, more than not we are mortified by their actions), plays on Freud's assertion that the *unheimlich* nature of women's bodies, in particular that of their genitals, causes great general discomfort. Freud warns that

often...male patients declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genitals. This *unheimlich* place, however, is the entrance to the former *Heim* of all human beings, to the place where everyone dwelt once upon a time and in the beginning. (Freud 51)

This Freudian image conveys an intense repugnancy and putrescent horribleness, and this *Unheimlich*, combined with unfamiliar narrative technique, makes Acker's novels a challenge to the easy representation of the world we expect to see – the self-same we seek through our mind's eye. Acker takes us back a few steps and demands of the reader an involvement which quickly becomes painful and horrifying. We can compare her prose to the performance art of Karen Finley, which critic C. Carr describes as "...obscenity in its purest form – never just a litany of four-letter expletives but an attempt to express emotions for which there are perhaps no words. An attempt to approach the unspeakable" (121). In fact, the unspeakable emotions of these artists create what Carr calls a "rude-girl network" that begins to provide for women the kind of context that the "tradition of foul-mouthed visionaries" – of Céline, Genet, and Lenny Bruce – has for men (123).

The postmodern 'rude-girl network' challenges the thematic and often moralizing realism of the early feminist texts of the seventies which often remain within the existent systems of representation. In her essay, "Women's Time," Julia Kristeva sees this early feminism as having

aspired to gain a place in linear time as the time of project and history....The political demands of women; the struggles for equal pay for equal work, for taking power in social institutions on an equal footing with men; the rejection, when necessary, of the attributes traditionally considered feminine or maternal in so far as they are deemed incompatible with insertion in that history – are all part of the logic of identification with certain values...with the logical and ontological values of a rationality dominant in the nation-state.  
("Women's Time" 193-194)

The more traditional texts of this genre were an attempt at levelling the playing field by inserting a woman's experience into the literary landscape, without examining that very landscape. Feminist theorists now



note how such a position, ultimately problematic, tends to overlook the umbrella of liberal humanism under which we all operate – recalling the sense of woman's invisibility and man's universality. The call for egalitarianism does very little to undermine the notion of hegemony which remains intact.

In contrast to the tradition of twentieth century realist fiction by women, Acker's fictions come across as excessively violent and pornographic, claiming this salacious excess as their throbbing centre. In fact, reading Acker's texts comes close to the experience of reading the sybaritic prose of Georges Bataille, whose style Susan Suleiman likens to a kind of literary pornography (118). In the early part of her writing career, Acker's texts appear as a mutation in a scene which still expected a much less obscure and vulgar prose style from its female writers. For Suleiman, Bataille's work, as well as that of other avant-garde writers, generally employs a technique of providing within itself a commentary upon the productivity of excess within culture. By "duplicating" the same literary techniques, it is also the intention of Acker to include such commentary upon the repressive and hypocritical state of a culture which strives to sugar-coat itself in its apparent, pleasing homogeneity. Like Bataille, Acker displays a sense of alienated awareness, a foreignness and suspicion of totalitarianism reminiscent of avant-gardism. For Bataille:

[h]omogeneity signifies...the commensurability of elements and the awareness of this commensurability: human relations are sustained by a reduction to fixed rules based on the consciousness of the possible identity of delineable persons and situations; in principle, all violence is excluded from this course of existence. ("Psychological" 137-138)

Bataille laments the repression of heterogeneity for the sake of what he

calls "the development of a servile human species, fit only for the fabrication, rational consumption, and conservation of products" ("Use Value" 97). At the same time, Bataille celebrates the intellectual process which is able to produce "of its own accord its own waste products, thus liberating in a disordered way the heterogeneous excremental element" (ibid.).

Acker's own uncontrolled liberation of the "heterogeneous, excremental element" creates a text which reverberates with disgust and disillusionment at culture's grand spectacle of illusory prosperity. She uses unequivocal forms of violence to criticize the apparent notions of social freedom sanctioned by liberal humanism, much in the same way Dada artist Marcel Duchamp combined ready-made, everyday objects in obscure and absurd collages to challenge the apparent unity of status quo good taste. Similarly, the ready-made, instant gratification of pornographic interests is recombined, reassessed and served up in a problematic manner that is meant to cause a moment of pause, of thought, and, for Acker, of revolutionary anger.

*The people are becoming a Knowing and Judicious People, Affliction hath made them wise, now Oppression maketh wise men mad. - William Walwyn*

It is in this poetic anger and hope that Acker's texts touch ground theoretically with those of Julia Kristeva. The history of poetic text (the avant-garde), is the genre which Kristeva focuses on in her examination of a revolutionary text. As we have seen, this tradition is important to the understanding of Acker's search for a postmodern subject. Acker credits writers such as Genet, Artaud and Rimbaud with presenting "the human heart naked so that our world, for a second, explodes into flames" (Acker, "A Few Notes" 31). Both Acker and Kristeva

work their way through the avant-garde tradition of questioning and despair, bringing to it their own commitment to social and cultural engagement. Acker does so in the conviction that "[b]y using each other, each other's texts, we keep on living, imagining, making, fucking and we fight this society of death" (ibid.).

A postmodernism for Acker would include the "fight," a radical rethinking of the signification process, of cultural engagement and of the system created out of the history of philosophical thought, a system which has created "woman" as a masculine object of discourse. A postmodernism for Acker also includes the desire to mark the debate about discourse with an ethical concern for our future. For Acker, this involves a movement through postmodern despair and nothingness, which we see evolving from her earlier works primarily concerned with women (*Blood and Guts in High School*, *Kathy Goes to Haiti*), to concerns for hopeful and creative relations between all humans (*Empire of the Senseless*, *In Memoriam to Identity*).

The destabilization of "grand narratives" which postmodern discourse points towards, leads to a problematization of foundational ethics. Discourse is becoming increasingly localized and relative, leaving us with an unaccountable feeling of ethical chaos. In the introduction to his book, *The Postmodern Scene*, Arthur Kroker asks:

For who can speak with confidence of the future of a postmodern scene when what is truly fascinating is the thrill of catastrophe, and where what drives onward economy, politics, culture, sex, and even eating is not the will to accumulation or the search for lost coherencies, but just the opposite – the ecstatic implosion of postmodern culture into excess, waste and disaccumulation. (i)

Although Kroker is fascinated by the "thrill of catastrophe" and "implosion of postmodern culture," this scene also describes an horrific

cultural and ethical estrangement for the silent and immobile subject. Such a crazed subject of our information-overload culture is seen in Don DeLillo's novel, *White Noise*. DeLillo presents a world filled with overwhelming, meaningless noise in which it becomes impossible to assert a subjectivity or relations with others. There seems to be very little standing between this non-foundational subjectivity and the threat of fascism, such as we see recreating 'human nature' according to its shifting needs in George Orwell's seminal novel, *1984*.

There seems to be little reason to behave one way rather than another, compounding our difficulties in attempting to establish a postmodern ethics. While postmodern texts serve as a basis for the investigation of an ethics of the subject - how we read ourselves in twentieth century culture, what modes of production and activity inform our subjectivities, and how we establish relations with others - at the same time we fear the brain rush which sends us hurtling towards a 'Baudrillardian end of the millennium simulacra.' In his study of postmodernism and the avant-garde text, Henry Sayre makes an astute assessment of this "postmodern bind," pointing out that we seem to be left hanging in a position of extreme tension between modernism and postmodernism:

There are, then, two separate poetics of the present - a largely modernist one which sees in the "present," in the immediacy of experience, something like an authentic "wholeness," a sense of unity and completion that is the "end" of art, and another, postmodern one which defines the present as perpetually and inevitably in *media res* as part of an ongoing process, inevitably fragmentary, incomplete, and multiplicitous. This would be a straightforward enough situation, except that for so many the recognition of the latter in no way mitigates their nostalgia for the former. It is as if, having lost formalism, we necessarily long for its return, as if, having lost

the present – or, rather, the fullness of presence  
– we are somehow embarrassed to admit it. (175)

*A white spider rose from a black mesh; there were people who loved...differently.*  
– H.D.

This vast landscape of pain and ugliness is, in its purest form, a search for love – a different ethics. Acker holds up the relationship between Charles Baudelaire and Jeanne Duval as a model of this kind of change. As Duval's face is taken over by smallpox, Baudelaire's love for her increases. For Acker this is "...ugliness [which] changes through worse ugliness, even destruction, into love" ("A Few Notes" 32). Acker's texts become uglier and uglier as she progresses through these cruel stories. Yet in this world which is replete with every form of horrendous violence imaginable, there is still a careful poetic gesture signalling for something else. Acker's use of language triggers a declaration of love as described by Barthes in *A Lover's Discourse*:

Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire. The emotion derives from a double contact: on the one hand, a whole activity of discourse discreetly, indirectly focuses upon a single signified, which is "I desire you," and releases, nourishes, ramifies it to the point of explosion (language experiences orgasm upon touching itself); on the other hand, I enwrap the other in my words, I caress, brush against, talk up this contact, I extend myself to make the commentary to which I submit the relation endure.  
(73)

Acker's love for language and its potential is obvious. Her desire for the other and a need to create a relationship with it places the notion of postmodern cynicism and nihilism on trial. She calls it a "search for centres:" "I think the other choice is," other than destruction and nihilism, she tells us, "to find what your value is...People are searching

for their centers...And in this search - that's when someone starts being interesting, and stops being like jello" (Juno and Vale 181). This is a torturous, creeping re-thinking and gesturing of the word in search of a cautionary warning before we submit to Kroker's vision of a cultural nothingness and isolation.

We sense in Acker's literary struggle a criticism against the quick fix "isms" of this culture and the nihilistic impulse which takes over much of postmodern criticism, leading, in the end, to the decrying of metaphysics altogether. In *Positions*, Derrida declares that ultimately even he does not believe that we will be able to completely escape metaphysics (17). In an interview with Edith Kurzweil, Julia Kristeva cautions American poststructuralists who too quickly treat the notions of history and ethics as Enlightenment deadwood:

We assume that there always is a sort of dialectic between the metaphysical postulates and something else, and this dialectic enables us to consider such fields as ethics and history. In America, the so-called deconstructionists think that, because ethics and history belong to metaphysics and because metaphysics is criticized by Heidegger or his French followers, ethics and history no longer exist. (Kurzweil 148)

The commitment to change is the site upon which Acker's postmodernism can be located - the commitment to find a postmodern subjectivity which practices a dialectic upon the seam, this scar which is identity. Exploring this tension is the heart of her project. Although Ellen Friedman sees Acker's search as turning up "nothing," it would be unfair to even suggest a comparison between her work of *Refusal* and Kroker's pessimistic *NO*, or the slow brain-fade of DeLillo's *White Noise*.

## Chapter Two

### A Haunting Jouissance: Sliding into Julia Kristeva's Semiotic Playing Field

*But Plato, you make us shit; and so do you, Socrates,  
Epictetes, Epicurus; and you, Kant, and you, Descartes,  
too.*

Artaud

*Encroach: to intrude gradually, stealthily, insidiously  
Loom: to seem ominously close, to dominate or overhang*

The theory of meaning now stands at a crossroad: either it will remain an attempt at formalizing meaning-systems by increasing sophistication of the logico-mathematical tools which enable it to formulate models on the basis of a conception (already rather dated) of meaning as the act of *transcendental ego*, cut off from its body, its unconscious and also its history; or else it will attune itself to the theory of the speaking subject as a divided subject (conscious/unconscious) and go on to attempt to specify the types of operation characteristic of the two sides of this split, thereby exposing them to those forces extraneous to the logic of the systematic... ("System" 28)

Julia Kristeva's seminal analysis of linguistic systems and their relationship to literature and art is a re-energized re-assessment of structuralism and formalism, deriving from her belief that "[o]ur philosophies of language, embodiments of the Idea, are nothing more than the thoughts of archivists, archaeologists, and necrophiliacs" (*Revolution* 13). Viewing language as a closed-off, unified entity, as the lovers of the old and the dead do, creates a subject which positions itself *vis à vis* this perceived static reality. Kristeva investigates a new dialectical system - one which subverts the monologism of the current system, but which at the same time works to support the Law.

She criticizes the linguistic system for having "ethical foundations [which] belong to the past..." (*Desire* 24). Kristeva's new signifying system goes beyond the established system of language to incorporate the play, pleasure and desire which Kristeva sees as missing in the structural approach to language.

*All true language is incomprehensible. - Artaud*

In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva attacks the formalism which underlies the structuralist notion of language and the subject, insisting that

this thinking points to a truth, namely, that the kind of activity encouraged and privileged by (capitalist) society represses the process pervading the body and the subject, and that we must therefore break out of our interpersonal and intersocial experience if we are to gain access to what is repressed in the social mechanism: the generating of significance. (13)

In the late 1960's, Kristeva took part in the *Tel Quel* group whose concerns included exploring the emergence of poststructuralism, avant-garde writing and political leftism. During this time, she took part in a movement which mediated critics such as Bakhtin to the West. At the time of *Tel Quel* and the newly developing discussions concerning the subject, Kristeva began looking at the subject of structuralism. Her theory began concentrating on the need "to 'dynamize' the structure by taking into consideration the speaking subject and its unconscious experience on the one hand, and on the other, the pressures of other social structures" (*"My Memory's Hyperbole"* 225). Taking the position of the subject in poststructural thought into account, Kristeva works towards a new system of signification which shifts the focus from a unified, static subject or structure, to one which is replete with multifarious drives,



introducing a desirous body and its processes to the concept of the subject.

Kristeva criticizes the transcendental subject of phenomenology for not venturing outside of the contained function of the symbolic. As a result, she devotes her studies in psychoanalysis to the re-development of the "generating of significance," which shakes the subject loose from its fixed position in Enlightenment philosophy. She discovers that "the process of signification is more than just a language," maintaining that it also exhibits "[a] complex array of nonlinguistic representations [which] foster the very practice of language: drive, sensation, prelanguage, rhythm, melody, and so on" (Guberman 268). She applies the work of Freud and his theories of drives and sexuality to the Enlightenment project, thereby opening to language a discussion of the subject and its development. Kristeva picks up on the psychoanalytic notion of social, cultural and familial influences upon the subject, which Freud outlines in his notion of human sexual development during the Oedipal complex.

*Does the mirror stage appear out of nowhere?— Kristeva*

Kristeva's purpose is to establish the necessity of an anterior function to the post-Oedipal positioning of the subject. For her, the 'desire in language' is traceable through this function, which she calls the 'semiotic,' and, for the purpose of this thesis, is the key to the 'unfulfillment' of the postmodern subject. It is a desire inscribing language to grow, to move toward flux, change and a continual becoming, caused by a semiotic "distinctive mark, trace, index, the premonitory sign, the proof, engraved mark, imprint – in short, a distinctiveness admitting of an uncertain and indeterminate articulation..." (*Desire* 133). This direction

In psychoanalytic thought, with its focus on the unconscious, breaks with the therapeutic, "curing" nature of ego analysis which strives to recreate for the patient a sense of wholeness and unity.

Acknowledging a debt to both Freud and Lacan, Kristeva offers a rereading of their studies in psychoanalysis in order to elaborate upon their 'speaking subject' for the purpose of creating her 'subject in process.' In introducing the semiotic and its drives to the signifying subject, she transforms Lacan's notion of the signifying practice of language in order to pursue a subject derived not only of the symbolic but of something other which escapes meaning. Lacan identifies language as being essential to the symbolic stage, which is responsible for the establishment of the social function and the realm of signification, and thus responsible for psychic and material subject formation. This function systematically creates the language processes which constitute the structure of society and the individual, as identity predication becomes the primary function of the Symbolic.

Kristeva qualifies the notion of the progression into language and the symbolic order and the linguistic communities, while challenging the notion that this function is responsible for creating a determinate subject and community. In expository detail, Kristeva analyzes Lacan's theory of the symbolic in order to uncover the way in which the apparent homogeneity of this stage creates an identification with a sense of autonomy which "seems" complete, providing an illusory idea of having left the fragmented self behind. According to Lacan, the child enters the mirror stage at six to eighteen months, at which point it recognizes its autonomous self over the object in the mirror. Suddenly, this acquisition of the I/eye is filled with symbolic importance. While the pre-Oedipal

stage, the imaginary, is a stage of undifferentiated unification with the m/other, the symbolic creates a split between the m/other and the child causing the child to see for itself. Also important is the assumption of a specific corporeality by the child. The child will identify with either the body of the mother or father as it moves into the symbolic and assumes a position vis à vis the phallus.

Because she follows human development through the psychoanalysis of Freud and Lacan, Kristeva is often criticized by feminist theorists who believe she has fallen prey to the phallic structure of the Oedipal complex which, as the child struggles to become a signifying self, aims to secure the other (woman) in signification. This criticism often involves a misreading of phallus as penis - as inherently, biologically male. Lacan himself equates "the phallic term" not only with "the pure and simple erection," but also with "the pure and simple raised stone [and] the human body as erected" (Borch-Jacobsen 216).

As Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen points out in *Lacan: The Absolute Master*, "[t]he erection of the phallic statue properly belongs to man, as homo erectus" (216). Naturally, in contrast, the female sexual organ, in its hidden folds cannot claim such uprightness, and furthermore, because language identifies what it sees best, the phallus as penis has become over-signified as the ruling order. But, most significantly, we can think of the term phallic as it applies to 'mankind,' that is to say, in its dominance over all things. This authority/control in its absolute form, as well as the lure of the ideal, unified image, is what concerns Kristeva.

Kristeva's analysis picks up on the fact that the maternal function is repressed in Lacan's narrative of the mirror stage. According to both Lacan and Freud, the child's fear of castration acts as a rite of passage

in which the child completely rejects all identification with the mother, thus creating a conception of woman as 'lack of' and man as 'presence of.' Along with this image of woman as lack comes a proliferation of images which link woman with lack of morality, substance, integrity and physical and intellectual strength, to name but a few examples. Thus, Lacan develops the symbolic in a manner which widens the gap between the male and female, a process which ends up privileging male subject identification.

*So glister'd the dire Snake, and into fraud / Led Eve our credulous Mother, to the Tree / Of prohibition, root of all our woe... - Milton*

For an example of this phallic order of identification we may turn to John Milton's "Paradise Lost," a poem/world without a mother, where symbolic reasoning is made up of the 'voice of One' - God, the Father. As Eve identifies herself for the first time in a pool of water, her response is to prefer her image to that of Adam, who beckons to her. In turning back to her own image, she is called upon by the commanding Father: "Return fair Eve, / Whom fli'st thou? whom thou fli'st, of him thou art" (IV, 481-2). She yields to the voice of 'the Law' and exclaims "from that time see / How beauty is excell'd by manly grace / And wisdom, which alone is truly fair" (IV, 489-90). She is instructed by Divine Law to follow Adam, to forsake her own image and live forever in an Oedipal world of the Father's making - the first 'castrated' mother. Contemporary critical theory has witnessed a deconstruction of this archetype. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes warns us of mythifying the Oedipal narrative:

if it is true that every narrative, every unveiling of the truth is a staging of the (absent, hidden or hypostatized) father - which would explain the solidarity of narrative forms, of family structures, and of prohibitions of nudity, all collected in our culture in the myth of Noah's sons covering his nakedness. (4)

And, as we see in Nicole Stellan's delightful poem, "Eve," the eternal anguish of post-lapsarian life is a hellish experience of unfulfillment, where the mother (woman), is given the short end of the stick in the old familiar triangle:

When I bit into that sweet apple  
 I knew what I was doing.  
 I wasn't tricked by no snake.  
 Adam kept pulling the "That was my rib" shit  
 I was through with it.  
 So I found an out.  
 Anything had to be better  
 Than pruning bushes and stroking  
 Two enormous egos.  
 "The absence of God is hell," He said.  
 I didn't ask the little prick to join me,  
 But he did,  
 Now it is. (1-14)

The narrator in this poem, the subject, is forever frustrated, damned to always already exist in the fallen state. We are always positing our desires from this state, we always define ourselves according to the moment before the apple is bitten into – idyllic identification. In a move of absolute abrogation, Edenic womb-like security is yanked away by the religious law of the Father, covering up the nakedness of the flesh. It is in the expressive act of biting into the apple that Eve displays what Hegel calls the "eternal irony of community," because she will always remain an unfulfilled subject, in amused discord with social standards. Stripped and naked until this moment of transgression, desire and shame, lust and prohibition collide in "Paradise Lost," an example of the mythified Oedipal triangle which effectively strips woman forever after of her biological body.

*The poet is there...forbidding any 'I' to doze off... – Kristeva*

The eye looking into the mirror sees an 'I' which presents itself as

a visual image of the unified body, a complete package, the "bounded I" according to Kristeva. In this identification, Kristeva sees the symbolic as the "inevitable attribute of meaning, sign, and the signified object for the consciousness of Husserl's transcendental ego" (*Desire* 134). Although Lacan presents a unified subject of the symbolic, Kristeva propounds that "[t]he war is never over and the poet [eye], shall continue indefinitely to measure himself...against the mirror image" (*Desire* 133). For Lacan, as Borch-Jacobsen points out, "the human subject has no interiority, no interior in which to store or save for himself the so-called unconscious representations...he is always already projected outside, into the openness of a public space" (149). Thus, we have the identification with what we see – the penis, and what we do not – the vagina. To this absolute exteriority, Kristeva introduces her analysis of the semiotic function which exists in "either a negative or surplus relationship to it" (*Desire* 133). Pre-verbal experience of the child's relationship to the mother's body and its rhythms will crash forward into the symbolic as "[m]emories of bodily contact, warmth, and nourishment" (*Desire* 281) to the point at which "we must reckon with the mother's desire..." (*Desire* 282). After the birth, "[t]he imprint of an archaic moment, the threshold of space, the "chora" as primitive stability absorbing anacletic facilitation, produces laughter" (*Desire* 283). For Kristeva, the confrontation between the semiotic and the symbolic is unending, for "it is within our 'adult' discourse that these potential meanings and topological latencies are at work" (*Desire* 291). Signification will become a struggle (the wound) upon the boundary between the two poles. When the symbolic tries to pass over it will be challenged by the violence of the semiotic (the biological) and vice versa.

With this shift of focus in meaning from structuralism to a signifying process which she calls 'signifiante,' Kristeva directs her analysis to the elaboration upon what she terms "subject in process", a subject which exists within the realm of the Law, but will always remain in a state of flux, on trial, because of an otherness, an unaccountable excess, which hovers close by, threatening identity. The subject will create an identity based on the logic of the language systems, but can oscillate wildly towards the difference which comes of rejecting the Law:

I shall call signifying practice the establishment and the countervailing of a sign system. Establishing a sign system calls for the identity of a speaking subject within a social framework, which he recognizes as a basis for that identity. Countervailing the sign system is done by having the subject undergo an unsettling, questionable process; this indirectly challenges the social framework with which he had previously identified, and it thus coincides with times of abrupt changes, renewal, or revolution in society. (*Desire* 18)

The interruption by the semiotic of the normative discourse creates "abrupt changes" in the creation of the subject. It constitutes the pleasure of the autoerotic body, the mother's cleaved, desirous body, an anarchic, semiotic, transgressive quality which provides the destruction of the notion of the modernist subject as fixed and unitary, while insisting upon an embodied subject which is fully involved in history and culture. Kristeva aims to decenter the homogeneity of the subject and elaborate the process of a speaking subject which will be forced to "tally with its homogeneity..." (*Desire* 135). The given reason and unity of the humanist subject will be torn apart by the uneasy ambiguities developed in Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory.

*First let's make a poem, with blood... - Artaud*

For Kristeva, the repressed drives of the semiotic are articulated

through a poetic sublimation within literature, in order "(t)o elucidate the intrinsic connection between literature and [to break] up social concord: because it utters incest, poetic language is linked with 'evil'..." (Desire 137). This poetic function is displayed by avant-garde texts, whose writers are examples of 'subjects in process.' For Kristeva, the work of Artaud, Mallarmé and Céline for example, comes up against the sign-system text of traditionalism, challenging the teleological quality and structure of the written word. The poetic language of these texts provides a materialization of the semiotic because it

postulate[s] the heterogeneity of biological operations in respect of signifying operations, and [studies] the dialectics of the former...[it] infringe[s] the code in the direction of allowing the subject to get pleasure from it, renew it, even endanger it...("System" 30)

The revolutionary aspect of this poetic voice charges ahead into the apparent linearity of textual history, creating a text where "the struggle between symbolic authority and the drive-based call from an archaic mother is always present and is at the very heart of the creative process" (Boucquey 111).

Rather than focus upon the unification of subjectivity through smooth, 'm/otherless' analysis of the Symbolic, Kristeva concentrates on borderline cases such as that of Artaud, which "constitute p: opitious ground for a sublimating discourse...rather than a scientific or rationalist one" (Powers 7). In Artaud's experience of poetic madness the electroshock which is administered to him cannot harness his drives - throughout his life he becomes more and more delirious. Kristeva desires to "lay bare, under the cunning, orderly surface of civilizations, the nurturing horror that they attend to pushing aside by purifying, systematizing, and thinking..." (Powers 210). She maintains that it is in art



and literature that the ethics of transgression is best displayed. In her article, "Women and Society in Literature, or Reading Kristeva and Proust," Carol Mastrangelo Bove credits Kristeva with having established a "delicate balance...between form and content, between linguistic and social structures, and the vital bridge that she uses to connect the two can be seen as one of the great strengths of her approach" (264). This crisis points to the "double bind" of identity. In *Desire in Language*, Kristeva explores a subject which exists on the borders, taken to task by the unaccountable, contaminant desire of the semiotic function. In *Julia Kristeva*, Jonathan Lechte stresses that Kristeva strives for a kind of 'equilibrium' between the semiotic and the symbolic, whereby "[m]eaning and non-meaning come to exist side by side" (209). I think equilibrium can be replaced with tension and Kristeva's own term, 'ambivalence.' Because she is not concerned with an absolute "denaturing" of the "other logic," "[t]he term 'ambivalence' lends itself perfectly" to the notion of a "coexistence...of 'the double of lived experience'...and 'lived experience' itself..." (*Desire* 89). Artaud, the borderline subject, is unable to reconcile "the double of" and "the lived experience of life" that pushes him further and further into a state of psychosis. Because the danger of this psychosis always looms near, Kristeva recommends that

[o]n the basis of this fact...one must try not to deny these two aspects of linguistic communication, the mastering aspect and the aspect that is more of the body and of the impulses, but to try...to find a proper articulation of those two impulses. (Baruch 117)

The tension between these two impulses is necessary in order to establish a subject in process which exists between extremes and resists containment within the trappings of complementarity or opposition.

As Dawne McCance points out in *Posts*, to locate a clean bifurcation

between the semiotic and the symbolic "is to miss the ambivalence of Kristeva's signifying subject, its undecidable process between semiotic and symbolic..." (97). In fact, clean lines and scissions are abandoned for raised and indeterminate, scarred surfaces. The subject in process wavers somewhere around this uneven surface, somewhere between art and ethics, between life and death. McCance's careful exploration of Kristeva's ambivalence and signification reminds us of the challenge which Kristeva sets before the 'dissident' of postmodern theory: "[t]orn between being the guardian of the law and that instance which disavows the law, hasn't philosophy turned away from thought?" ("New Type" 300). McCance's reminder/remainder traces us back to Kristeva's own continuous reminders of the hazy ambiguities and indistinctions entwined in her project, all leading towards a re-examination of 'thought:' In the subject in process we encounter a "psychic structure much closer to what is seen now as borderline..." (Baruch 120). "It is poetic language that awakens our attention to this undecidable character..." (*Desire* 135).

For this reason, it is not unsurprising that, when feminist theorists discuss French feminism, they often disregard Kristeva or too easily categorize her work alongside that of Cixous and Irigaray. American feminists Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, in their introduction to *New French Feminisms*, remark that these "French feminists" "attack where it hurts most. They poke fun at the male erection, the male preoccupation with getting it up, keeping it up, and the ways in which the life and death of the penis are projected into other aspects of culture..." (36). Yet Kristeva's theory varies in subtle degrees from that of other "French feminists". Upon close reading one realizes that a theoretical concern for thought and care is woven throughout her

work, folded into the seams of all her arguments.

*If men could see us as we really are, they would be a little amazed--*  
Charlotte Brontë

He lifts the Lid, there needs no more,  
He smelt it all the Time before.  
As from within Pandora's Box,  
When Epimetheus op'd the Locks,  
A sudden universal Crew  
Of humane Evils upwards flew\_ (Swift 81-86)

"Humane evils" is Swift's poetic way of saying the feculent stench of shit. This defilement floats upwards, outwards, encircling the narrator who is confronted by his own revulsion and horror. Imagine his repulsion as he looks down at his lover's excremental left-overs, she who is the most beautiful, the most undefiled of women. Suddenly faced with the treacherous, internal messiness of this beautiful body, this woman is no longer the same object of desire for the narrator. Her function has become hazy and blurred. Inside-out, the logic of their relationship is turned on its head and Strephon runs from the room.

Swift exhibits wonderful fecundity in his poetic analysis of the relationship between the lover and his beloved's scummy, unkempt boudoir, the 'nest of love.' The importance of the quotation from the poem lies both in its scatological element and in the horror felt by Strephon as he encounters this foulness. "Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death" (Powers 71). In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva analyzes the reaction of abjection such as we witness in Strephon, a reaction that attests to the desperate hold on order which the symbolic function provides. Once again we are reminded of the tenuous

ambiguity of subject boundaries.

Strephon's lover has neglected to perform the normal rituals which would spare him this reaction of revulsion. These rituals are meant to purify and cleanse, so as to keep abjection at bay and bodily functions clearly and specifically classified. In this case, there is actual, loathsome residual evidence of the ineffectiveness of the ritual, a trace of the abject. There is not only the revealing commode and its detritus, but also the remnants of her cosmetics, an incursion of items which otherwise produce an harmonious and aesthetically pleasing balance when on the face. Strephon is horrified at having to face this mess which is creeping its way into his domain of orderly images and sensations. His mood quickly shifts from romantic and indulgent to angry and disappointed, marking Swift's ironic tone towards man and his pastoral notions of woman.

Bodily fluids force us to recognize bodies as slashed open, gushing forth, uncontained, contaminating. Unable to reconcile the animality of man with his spiritual side, the subject experiences crisis as he is thrown into the world of the 'I' and the 'not-I.' The abjected excrement lies hovering somewhere between Strephon and his lover, causing extreme uneasiness. In an astute, humorous assessment of these human tendencies, writer Janet Frame reminds us of this double-edged uneasiness (both ridiculous and serious) in her novel, *The Edge of the Alphabet*: "Man is the only species for whom the disposal of waste is a burden, a task often ill judged, costly, criminal - especially when he learns to include himself, living and dead, in the list of waste products" (3). The excremental reminder/remainder that we are all mortal, too soon to be laid down into the earth again, is one which mankind abjects over and over. Artaud displays a perverse pleasure in playing with the notion of

death in his poetry, always feeling himself "to be the hideous corridor of an impossible revulsion" (185). A blight on supreme human consciousness, death disturbs our hold on immortality. It certainly disturbs Anais Nin, for, in imagining kissing Artaud, she writes in her diary, "I loved his madness. I looked at his mouth, with the edges darkened by laudanum, a mouth I did not want to kiss. To be kissed by Artaud was to be drawn towards death, towards insanity..." (229). Artaud's gaping mouth is an open wound defiguring identity, it is the lover's unpainted, haggard face from which Strephon recoils.

What Strephon experiences is a momentary unbalance, a hazy self-insecurity, a "narcissistic crisis" caused by confronting the abject. The stable narcissism, the "I am," is thrown into cataclystic exorbitance. Eventually his narcissism will again set in, as, (in Kristeva's words) "...a regression to a position set back from the other, a return to a self-contemplative, conservative, self-sufficient haven" (Powers 14). The ego becomes the centre again, the

agency of language since it is the "crown" of rhythmic thrust, limiting structure, paternal law abrading rhythm, destroying it to a large degree, but also bringing it to light, out of its earthy revolutions, to enunciate itself... (Desire 29)

Kristeva states that the positing of this centre is where " 'I' is bound to the sun" and where "solar mastery cuts off rhythm" (ibid.).

*Here Where the Mother eats her Sons...* - Kristeva

The abject confronts us, on the other hand, and this time within our personal archeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before ex-isting outside of her...It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling. (Powers 13)

Within our personal archeology the abject is the earliest

sublimated object and appears "only within the gaps of secondary repression" (Powers 12). There is a repression even before the mirror stage, prior to the division of subject from object. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva entitles the section devoted to unravelling the placement of abjection "Before the Beginning," where the subject is "always already haunted by the Other, to divide, reject, repeat. Without one division, one separation, one subject/object having been constituted (not yet, or no longer yet)" (Powers 12). By insisting upon abjection as prior to the mirror stage, Kristeva is able to concentrate on the relationship between the abject and the maternal, bringing out the complex relationship between the writer/speaker and mother in poetic language. The confrontation with the abjected m/other causes fear, "a fluid haze, an elusive clamminess" (Powers 6). Earlier, in *Desire in Language*, she has already insisted that "[n]o language can sing unless it confronts the Phallic Mother" (Desire 191).

The relationship between the m/other and the subject/writer/artist is one based upon the abjected position of the m/other, "this other of the linguistic and/or social contract" (Desire 30). As stated earlier, the maternal authority of the Phallic mother represents a disturbance to the Symbolic in her semiotic relationship to the child and the regulation by the mother of the child's body. Here, abjection is necessary because of the threat of the mother's gaping sex, which is seen as always ready to re-engulf the child into an indistinct world.

*The raw, dissolving gesture... – Artaud*

Céline writes: "You know, in Scriptures, it is written: 'In the beginning was the Word.' No! In the beginning was emotion. The Word came

afterwards to replace emotion as the trot replaced the gallop" (Kristeva "Psych." 317). Kristeva sees this as Céline's stylistic adventure, taking us back, through rage, to a place which escapes naming, 'confronting the Phallic Mother to sing.' Ironically, many critics maintain that it is in the resurrection of the role of the mother that Kristeva betrays her idealism toward the female role: "What is most damaging to Kristeva's theory from a feminist point of view—is her revival of the sentimental ideal of maternal devotion to tame the sinister forces of destruction..." (Meyers 151). Rather, far from a sentimental ideal of motherhood, Kristeva sees the poet as being forced to experience a nightmarish horror which they must sublimate in their writing. Tortured by the abject, Artaud confides

A nightmare never is an accident, but an evil fastened on to us by a whore, by the mouth of a ghoul of a whore who finds us too rich with life, and so creates by very exact slurps some interferences in our thought, some catastrophic voids in the passage of the breath of our sleeping body, which believes itself free from care. (Artaud 109)

From this site of abhorrence and horror is created a narrative which clears the way for new voices, new disruptive desirous bodies:

On close inspection, all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its socio-historical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so — double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject. (Powers 207)

Certainly Céline's beginning of emotion is not to be mistaken as an idealized aesthetic of Romantic beginnings. The text is horror laughing frighteningly in the face of Romanticism. In Kristeva's analysis we see how in being connected to the anguish of birth, Céline's prose is a dehiscence, burst open and pouring forth in loathsome agony. In

confronting the Phallic Mother, Céline can be seen as resigning the literary object and undermining his own authorial position in the writing out of this position of agony. This is the introduction of crime into art, the abject problematizing the normative position of modernist authorship.

We have a delirious love affair with the brutality of Céline's work. In *Journey to the End of the Night*, we witness a bizarre display of performative cruelty and loathsome propensities. In one section of the novel, he writes frankly about being taken on a tour of twenty-six corpses by the same young woman with whom he has just shared a sexual encounter. With unfailing candour, he recommends afterwards, "[s]uch moments are not to be missed. They put your eyes out of joint, but it's worth it" (333). The closeness of the sex, during which he "wriggled round her belly like a love worm" (332), to the corpses, which are described in a way that brings to mind the worm-invaded mess of decayed flesh, leaves one feeling ill at ease. Kristeva points out that this "black laughter" uncovers not meaning but "the faltering of transcendental consciousness" (*Desire* 145). The aesthetic style of Celine's writing is a semiotic violence which is channelled through sublime art into language which we can approach (just barely) – the meeting of apocalyptic horror with the symbolic word.

In *Reading Kristeva*, Kelly Oliver writes that "[h]uman life, human society, is founded on the abject separation of one body from another at birth" (57). From this comes the "body proper," closed off and autonomous to others. Because the abject, the threat of m/other, can cut across any system, the symbolic, in its desire to maintain the system, enforces its borders through ritual. The messy body, the blurring of m/other and child, opposes the idealized Western construct of the body, a construct which



Kristeva identifies as arising largely from the symbolic order. She studies the Bible in order to elaborate upon extreme religious prohibitions in a society formed upon the classification and demarcation of the body. Kristeva outlines various rites of defilement which "illustrate the boundary between semiotic authority and symbolic law" (Powers 73). The symbolic asserts itself through ritual to keep maternal authority at bay:

By means of the symbolic institution of ritual, that is to say, by means of a system of ritual exclusions, the partial-object consequently becomes scripture – an inscription of limits, an emphasis not placed on the (paternal) Law but on (maternal) Authority through the very signifying order. (Powers 73)

The ritual indicates an awareness of the permeability of boundaries, provoking the symbolic to jettison the abject from the system in a protective measure against its looming presence.

*Mother, Why did You give me this Hole... – Gail Scott*

As Kelly Oliver points out in *Reading Kristeva*, critics often take some of Kristeva's work out of context to provide arguments for her apparent essentialism of the female body, in particular the maternal body (48). Andrea Nye criticizes Kristeva for endorsing "rightest candidates against the socialists" and essentializing the female body through a "maternal semiotics" (213). As her argument against these "maternal semiotics" evolves, Nye calls for an "exposure of the symbolic form of the philosophy of man," for a new direction in feminist thought (217). Oddly enough this seems to be exactly what Kristeva's work points toward – a theory which will call the existing symbolic order into question.

The criticism of essentialization seems odd after reflection upon

Kristeva's large oeuvre, which, as I have already noted, calls for shapeshifting and reliance upon ambivalence. Although Kristeva invokes notions of 'the feminine' in her description of the semiotic, she is critical of strictly assigning the role of semiotic to 'women' and the symbolic to 'men'. She believes

if one assigns to women that phase alone, this in fact amounts to maintaining women in a position of inferiority, and, in any case, of marginality, to reserving for them the lace of the childish, of the unsayable, or of the hysteric. (Baruch 117)

At the same time, she is leery of women adopting the language of the Father to gain recognition because "this attitude can be accompanied by the denial of two things: on the one hand, of the question of power, and on the other, of the particularity of women" (ibid.). In fact, her essay, "Women's Time," is a wonderful examination of how she walks a careful line between the liberal feminism of the early seventies, and the radical feminism of the eighties.

Furthermore, Kristeva's work often criticizes both the symbolic reification of motherhood (the Virgin Mary), as a function which is used to describe the essence of 'woman,' and the cultural danger of abjecting all 'women' as such, rather than the necessary abjection of the Phallic Mother: "A woman is trapped within the frontiers of her body and even of her species, and consequently always feels exiled both by the general clichés that make up a common consensus and by the very powers of generalization intrinsic to language" (Desire 296). In this Kristeva begins a deconstruction of the binary between male and female, pointing out that 'woman' cannot reside within the 'unnameable' role in which philosophy has placed her. She does admit to a certain excess in the feminine element, a female specificity, but there is also always the Law. The split subject

of the mother points to the ambivalence between these two poles and "maternity [becomes] a bridge between singularity and ethics...at once the guarantee and a threat to its stability" (*Desire* 297). The maternal body represents the generation of cultural subjectivity which is threatened by otherness and difference:

[i]t is probably necessary to be a woman (ultimate guarantee of sociality beyond the wreckage of the paternal symbolic function, as well as the inexhaustible generator of its renewal, of its expansion) not to renounce theoretical reason but to compel it to increase its power by giving it an object beyond its limits. (*Desire* 146)

Kristeva's investigation into the notion of 'woman' uncovers the obscure relationship between the moral, the corporeal, and the feminine, the outcome of which is a biologization of the discourse of ethics. This ethics which she labels 'herethics,' is maintained by "an instinctual drive" which "refers back to an instinctual body," one which will cause language and flesh to collide in new, unpredictable ethical considerations (*Desire* 146). Suddenly, the subject must take into account the body and its instinctual drives, often seen as 'feminine.' As an examination of this drive unaccountability, writer Laurie Weeks, in her short story, "Swallow," has her narrator confessing to the confusion between word and body:

I often said things I neither intended nor felt, as if words congregated in my mouth, foreign particles, to swim forth and engulf me in a sticky murk...I had begun to get words mixed up with food; if it came inside my mouth, a thing seemed to have the ability to change me in unpredictable ways. (36)

For Kristeva, there is something in the transgression within the avant-garde text which she feels comes close to signifying 'woman,' "a contest against the sun supported by a feminine figure..." (*Desire* 30). The contest against the sun would also include the reigning umbrella of

humanism and its reigning subject – the voice and body of men as the reigning norm for ethics. About her own work, Kristeva believes:

[w]hat makes my work the work of a woman is that I pay close attention to the element of avant-garde practice that eradicates identity (including sexual identity), and I try to formulate a theoretical rebuttal to the metaphysical theories that censure what I just labelled "a woman." (Psych et Po 98)

She makes her work an exercise in putting thought into being, as if she were the foreigner in exile, in order to recreate, to push limits, to tap into this excess, to re-engage in historically and socially pertinent ethical discourse:

If it is true that the sudden surge of women and children in discourse poses insoluble questions for Reason and Right, it is because this surge is also yet another symptom of the Death of Man....[T]hrough the efforts of thought in language, or precisely through the excesses in language whose very multitude is the only sign of life, one can attempt to bring about multiple sublations of the unnameable, the unrepresentable, the void. This is the real cutting edge of dissidence. ("New Type" 300)

The relationship which she draws between the avant-garde text and 'woman' is, for Kristeva, a move away from the nihilism of some avant-garde writing and towards a social and political engagement. While there is a continuous threat from the drives, her work calls for a means by which these impulses can be taken to task. It is a connection between semiotic negativity and ethical imperative, in a world which has been cracked open and thrown into crisis.

The trailing horror and haziness of abjection takes the focus away from meaning and structure, and opens up a heterogeneity within meaning. This examination of poststructuralism by Kristeva is meant to

[break] free from what could properly be termed *identificatory thinking*. Identificatory thinking accepts the unity of man reduced to his consciousness and so

enjoys dissecting human practices into psychological or sociohistorical categories that closer analysis reveals to be recapitulations of the Aristotelian categories and the theological virtues...(Guberman 259)

*By focusing on excesses...we made passion into the unexpressed side of normalcy.*  
- Kristeva

The abject takes us beyond finite structures, as Kristeva reminds us of the unfulfilled and bifurcated subject of postmodernism, wavering somewhere, never fully assimilated by a rigorous, unquestioned ethical system. The shift in emphasis from full meaning in subject identity to the exploration of a material remainder, causes a moment of pause and wonder. The crisis of threatened identity, our incompleteness in the face of the other, forces a reassessment of this ethical system. Kristeva always reminds us that we must begin with the subject, and her call for 'openness' to 'thought' is intended to awaken us to the delicate tension between the postmodern subject and the world it lives in.

## Chapter Three

### Trash Bodies

*When we contemplate a creation made by a woman  
writer, we fail to see how dramatically exceptional  
she is.*

Kristeva

*I would rather take the idea by the throat, hold it  
like this, and look it in the eyes until it dies or I die  
myself from its putrid breath.*

Laure

The un-smooth, raw substance of Kathy Acker's fictions displays the transgressive qualities of Kristeva's semiotic, its protrusions unfolding within the rhythm of a pulsing narrative of desire. Disturbed by this desire, Acker's work assaults the reader with crude and beautiful images, poetic gestures and inescapable noise meant to challenge the notion of idyllic harmony. The sheer force of this passionate unveiling of the semiotic takes the form of an internal vulvaic exploration. This is not a pleasurable, soft-tissued joyride though - it is a primal and frightening search for a new subject. I, the reader, desire to abject this writing, because it both repulses and fascinates me at the same time. Reading Acker is like having your mother force cod liver oil down your throat - somehow you know it is good for you (or is it?), yet it tastes, smells and feels revolting. Much of the new experimental fiction by women is beginning to evolve in the same way. "You can't have the moon, sucker" (217), says the narrator of Sapphire's poem, "American Dreams," dispelling notions of easy reading. Kristeva tells us that "[w]omen still have a great deal to teach us about the hatred underlying...love..." (Boucquey 112).

Acker displays a desire to challenge the notion of the modern

subject. She creates a 'quest,' a female heroic voyage, which interrogates the notion of a given identity, much like Kristeva's subject in process does. We are all familiar with twentieth-century male heroic archetypes such as Hemingway's Henry in *A Farewell to Arms* and Kerouac's Sal in *On the Road*. In her desire to upset the pedestal upon which the traditional male hero rests, she creates a subject which shifts levels, continually testing locatedness. The texts are littered with female subjects who express material fluidity, change and a heterogeneity of identity. In her article discussing Acker's work, Martina Sciolino finds Acker's characters to be "in a constant state of metamorphosis" (64).

In denying any authoritative voice, Acker's texts lack a monologic focus. The ambivalence of the writer's authorship functions to infinitely disperse meaning. Kristeva believes this ambivalence functions as a move away from the inward subjectivity of the "I," and toward a positioning of that "I" in the world. There, "[i]t is the writer who 'speaks,' but a foreign discourse is constantly present in the speech that it distorts" (*Desire* 73). Acker's texts set this position of creative ambivalence against the univocal authorship in a move toward "narration...as a dialogue between the *subject* of narration...and the *addressee*... the other" (*Desire* 74). She incorporates a self-reflexivity which is found in much of our *fin-de-siècle* literature, and we see it in the media with programs such as "The Simpsons." Acker's rampant and excessive pornographic narratives are meant to leave the reader with the same sense of critical contemplation as Homer Simpson's unbelievably awful parenting skills do. Like Homer Simpson, Acker's subjects become victims of late-twentieth-century Mennipean satire.

As with Céline, Acker's texts find inscription in a defiance of

traditional and normative literary standards. For Acker, "[l]iterature is that which denounces and slashes apart the repressing machine at the level of the signified" (*Empire* 12). She is unconcerned with literature as a sacred and untouchable tradition. This is obvious in the way she shamelessly plagiarizes classical narratives and turns them into sexual peepshows and ritualistic sites of bizarre carnage, as traces of the past scattered through the text. She gives the past "new meaning while retaining the meaning it already had" (*Desire* 73). Such stylistic parody displaces traditional expectations and brazenly reveals constructions of discourse which systematize and categorize meaning and language. The representation of human consciousness as fixed and determinate is parodied by subject positions which are not only unfixed, but also situated outside the normative archetypal position. Although the text relies upon parody and other theoretical techniques, it is also filled with the unknown and the unrepresentable, carrying us forward into an inchoate narrative terrain, which fills the subject and the reader with a sense of quest. With this double layering of stylistic techniques and the unrepresentable, the "meanings" of the text become blurred. Further, a constant and prodigious onslaught of expletives has the effect of making this type of language seem almost "normal," causing us to question what is proper and what is not. Both Acker and Céline examine "what lies at the turning point of social and asocial" (*Powers* 35). Also like Céline, Acker ignores the standard notion of organic unity within a text, calling the "beginning" and the primacy of the Word into question. Emotion is, for both Céline and Acker, a "message which travels from the invisible to visible world," creating texts which act as "messenger[s] [which] would lead to revolution" (*Pussy* 10). Following the nonlinear and disjointed narratives



becomes emotionally confusing, an abject trip of desire for meaning, being, and language.

Abhor, an aptly named character in *Empire of the Senseless*, states at the beginning of the novel that "[r]eason which always homogenizes and reduces, represses and unifies phenomena or actuality into what can be perceived and so controlled" (12). In attacking reason, Acker's texts aim to subvert the power of the symbolic order, while calling for a new subject, created in part from desire: "Every position of desire, no matter how small, is capable of putting to question the established order of a society..." (*Blood and Guts* 125). Kristeva asserts that "[t]he dimension of desire, appearing for the first time in the citadel of interpretive will, steals the platform from the Stoic sage...and confers...a transforming power to these new, unpredictable signifying effects..." ("Psychoanalysis" 306-307). Beyond the rigid subject sits the subject of desire, a new, "knowing subject [which] is also a *desiring* subject, and the paths of desire ensnarl the paths of knowledge" (ibid. 307). In further questioning this unfulfilled subject, Acker plays with her reader's patience and sense of sexual 'morality.' In each text, she offers a narrative fraught with perversity and sexual gluttony, not only on behalf of the characters, but often in the autobiographical inclusions within the text. The sadomasochistic narrative serves as a dark correlative to spiritual transcendence.

The "heroic" voyages of Acker's nomads are filled with technological, cultural and political chaos and wonder. Each novel begins with an escape from the complex oedipal triangle. In her very early novels, such as *Blood and Guts in High School*, she drops her characters directly into a mess of eroding human relations, a postmodern cultural horror. These early novels

and short stories display an immediate and intense anger through the narrations of betrayed, orphaned and unwanted characters. We sense Acker's desire to reach the immediacy which she so admires in the texts of Burroughs and Genet.

In her later novels, of which I will be looking at *Empire of the Senseless* and *In Memoriam to Identity*, she introduces characters capable of the same type of senseless and destructive violence and delirium as that seen in her earlier work. Yet, we begin to suspect that something else also motivates these subjects, perhaps a desire for personal and social revolution. The ends of such revolution are always left open for questioning, but we sense that Acker is searching for a new commitment from her characters. Although she blows apart any remaining notions of a pastoral world, her subjects display a subtle yearning, perhaps a hunger to capture a momentary glimpse of this archaic world. The novels, particularly *Empire of the Senseless*, contain an often critically overlooked hopefulness and critique of nihilism.

*Spit in all the mirrors which control me - Acker*

*I wanna beee Anarchy - The Sex Pistols*

*Empire of the Senseless* is the unbelievable tale of two subjects, Abhor and Thivai, who set off, sometimes separately, other times together, to seek a sense of reality for themselves in a world which is filled with crime, capitalism and horrifying nihilism. *Empire of the Senseless* is an appropriate title for a work which seeks to upset the senses, to question the sensible. Both Thivai and Abhor come from very unromantic, senseless 'beginnings' - a breakdown of the Western family which is taken out on the bodies of the children in acts of 'unspeakable' sexual and physical violence. Thivai's first memory is of wanting to kill and Abhor's is of feeling pain:

[Daddy] taught me a final trick. He showed me how to insert a razor blade into my wrist just for fun. Not for any reason. Thus, I learned how to approach and understand nature, how to make gargantuan red flowers, like roses, blooming, drops of blood, so full and dripping the earth under them, my body, shook for hours afterwards. (9)

For Acker's characters, the experience of 'living among nerves' (*Empire 9*) comes first and, in its primacy, is the most important thrust in the book. Painfully, the characters learn what I will call *Schmerz-Love*, the anguished, nerve-racking love with which the symbolic wrecks the body. *Schmerzen* effects not only the physical body, but shatters the nerves, as is implied in the German language. Abhor tells us "[h]e forced me to live among nerves sharper than razor blades, to have no certainties" (*Empire 9*). This is a life similar to Kristeva's 'experiencing-of-limits.' Acker uses the bodies of her subjects to represent the uncertainties of this nerve-racking existence for the twentieth-century subject:

Let's say we divide "sensation" into: pain and pleasure. Everyone thinks they understand why you would want pleasure, but not pain...but pain can be interesting....In certain tribes,

rites of passage (when you go from one stage to another) involve a great deal of pain...There's a quote from Nietzsche: "That which does not kill you, will only make you grow." (Juno and Vale 180)

Through a metafictional technique, Acker positions herself in the novel, claiming her stake in the voyage as well. The goal of Abhor and Thivai's voyage is to discover "[w]ho is [Kathy]," since "[Kathy] doesn't mean anything yet" (*Empire* 34). Acker's writing represents "a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding....And the more [she] strays, the more [she] is saved" (Powers 8).

The voyage which the modern primitives of *Empire of the Senseless* are on involves diving into the abject which takes over their bodies, in a movement towards a system of signification which is driven by desire. Acker is exploring the notion of taboo, the abject being conducted upon the site of the body. She sets up the realm of the taboo against what Elizabeth Grosz has classified as the "historical privileging of the purely conceptual or mental over the corporeal" (187). In playing with the body, making it the centre (thrust), of her narrative, Acker questions the predominance of 'Man's' mind as the subject of epistemological analysis:

All the accepted forms of education in this country, rather than teaching the child to know who she is, or to know, dictate to the child who she is. They obfuscate any act of knowledge. Since these educators train the mind rather than the body, we can start with the physical body, the place of shitting, eating, etc., to break through our opinions or false education. (*Angry Women* 165-166)

The binary between reason and the body is problematized by Acker in her attack upon language through exploring its contradictions and ambivalences. Acker's desire is to examine why the body is sacrificed theoretically, creatively and politically for the sake of reason. "A Few Notes on Two of My Books," an article in which Acker discusses her work, finds her convinced that "[d]ualisms such as good/evil are not real and

only reality works" (36). At the same time, lest we think she is trying to create a master narrative of reality for us, she encourages us in *Empire*: "use fiction, for the sake of survival, all of our survival" (134). It is at the site of language that Acker attacks 'the absence of the body' and the gap it leaves, believing that "[a]n alteration of language rather than of material, usually changes material conditions..." (*Don Quixote* 27). For Acker, language is not a clean, abstract structure because it is susceptible to forces which are in continual agitation in the depths of our bodies, twisting language into raw flesh. Acker's use of the body comes close to the medieval concept of the body which Bakhtin says "present[s] a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life" (62). The lack of singularity in dealing with 'the body' blurs the limits between the body and the world/word. The symbolic distances the subject from the body while the semiotic pushes for a heterogeneity which acknowledges the presence of the body's desire, which is never satisfied.

The drives of the body push Acker's modern-day primitives to embark on a voyage of play and a search for revolution:

Those of us who don't want to split the mind and the body go through ways that are considered abnormal, and play is definitely an area where you can investigate certain things with some realm of safety...But it's a dangerous search, obviously, because there aren't many guidelines...really it's all about this search. (Juno and Vale "Acker" 181-182)

In *Empire*, "the search" involves an exploration of other lands and peoples. For Acker, the tattoo represents an alien signification which swims upon the flesh, changing and shifting meanings with each twist and turn of the body. An unrepresentable desire is inscribed upon these bodies by the characters - a struggle against the symbolic inscription enforced upon the body. The rituals which Thivai and Abhor submit their bodies to are a throwback to mysterious cultural practices, 'outside of language,' to a

world which stands in opposition to Western civilization. In an issue of *Re/Search* devoted to the examination of the modern primitive, editors V. Vale and Andrea Juno explain the desire to confront the repressed through the material defilement of the body:

Amidst an almost universal feeling of powerlessness to "change the world," individuals are changing what they do have power over: *their own bodies*. That shadowy zone between the physical and the psychic is being probed for whatever insight and freedoms may be reclaimed. By giving visual body expression to unknown desires and latent obsessions welling up from within, individuals can provoke change - however inexplicable - in the external world of the social, besides freeing up a creative part of themselves...

(4)

Tattooing is a postmodern act imbued with a sense of outlawed identity and the murky underworld of the criminal. Acker's characters will become tattooed outlaws and cultural deviants. Acker informs us that "[i]n decadent phases, the tattoo became associated with the criminal - literally the outlaw - and the power of the tattoo became intertwined with the power of those who chose to live beyond the norms of society" (*Empire* 140).

The underground criminal element is a function of ultimate privilege for Acker: "The realm of the outlaw has become redefined: today, the wild places which excite the most profound thinkers are conceptual. Flesh unto flesh" (*ibid.*). Through their journey, Abhor and Thivai recognize the need to think, to remain inside the symbolic, while admitting the forces of the drives which cause change within thought. For Acker, the outlaw embodies the tension between 'conceptual thinking' and 'flesh unto flesh.' Among the rituals Acker's characters undergo on their voyage, scarification is one which pushes them close to the point of death, thus bringing them face to face with the horror of the abject corpse. The ritual of scarification forces the participant to realize the corpse as

part of him/herself, as the abject from which we, through cultural taboo, try to run. The corpse represents that which we abject in order to exist in an ordered, civilized society. Abhor, often the voyeur, watches Agone, a sailor, considering the play of knife upon his flesh:

Agone couldn't see his own death. He was still too young. Yet he sensed it was there, his main interest in living. It was his, the only point, object and subject, purpose and being. It wasn't so much the hidden knife. It was that the knife was the tattooer's being, as if he was holding it fully in his right hand. By recognizing it, Agone was agreeing to allow the unallowable. (Empire 134)

In agony, Agone enters a *fin-de-siècle* conversation with death, the apocalypse of his person, "his main interest in living." Suddenly, in confronting his corpse, something both part of him and yet other, he transcends the boundaries of the symbolic/religious order which defines skin as off-limit, sacred. In fact, many of the characters in Acker's fictions resemble the walking dead, or at least cause us to wonder how they can still be alive after all their sufferings. Kristeva suggests that "the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life" (Powers 4). The law of the Father states "you shall not make any gashes in your flesh for the dead or tattoo any marks upon you" (Leviticus 19.28). The tattooed and scarred body is a brutal stymieing of aesthetic logic. The clean body maintains itself through the abjection of all otherness from its surface. All else is given taboo status. Facing one's own death, that pure materiality and "the most sickening of wastes" (Powers 3), points the subject towards its own finitude, its own inevitable decay. The subject becomes "therefore heterogeneous, pure and impure, and as such always potentially condemnable" (Powers 112).

Both Abhor and Thivai, portrayed as toying with many shifting sexual

identities, present subjectivities which are sexually destabilized. They begin their voyage to find a 'construct,' or 'code,' for being which includes venturing beyond 'normal' sexual relationships. Ultimately they find themselves in France, where they subject themselves to inexplicable bouts of masochistic behaviour. In his article, "Postface: Masochism and Polysexuality," François Peraldi identifies a masochist as being able to desubjectify his/her body (167). This 'desubjectification' (a crisis in identity), blurs the lines between what are understood as normal and abnormal sexual practices. The masochist's desires threaten the notion of stabilized, procreative relations, turning God's world upside down.

The delirium of the masochists, the willingness to succumb to a feral sexual humility, or an 'openness,' attests to a delirious dwelling in the abject which torments the borders of normal sexual behaviour. This masochism likens itself to the suffering and horror which Kristeva identifies as a disturbance to normative discourse. Abhor and Thivai display "[s]uffering as the place of the subject....An incandescent, unbearable limit between inside and outside, ego and other" (Powers 140). The subject simultaneously experiences a seeking of oneself and a losing of oneself.

In *Semiotext(e): Polysexuality*, Terence C. Sellers details the relationship between masochism and defilement acts such as urolagnia and scatology. The masochist longs for a space where he can create for him/herself

elaborate identifications with lowliness and self-effacement....He attains this end, and becomes utterly disgusting, when he professes his ambition and attraction to be as one with the feces and urine of the superior. These substances, unequivocally regarded as horrid, are revered and sought after by the masochist as the source of his true identity. (63)



Kristeva also has, in various writings, made allusion to the notion that abject lowliness and animality are connected through abjection. She writes that "[t]he abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal" (Powers 12). She often uses the term "human animal," thereby alluding to the material animality within humans, a purposeful veering away from the theoretical dominance of the spiritual. The quote by Swift in Chapter Two displays Strephon's difficulty in perceiving Celia as human-animal precisely because he is used to viewing her as the dignified woman of culture, and, as Kristeva has shown, culture demands that "[t]he body must bear no trace of its debt to nature..." (Powers 102). Animality, in *Empire*, points to a new way of informing subjectivity, where self-sufficiency is tested. For Acker, identity is tied to language which is, in turn, tied to the body. The senses and excess beyond language provide a renewed relationship between the subject and culture. It speaks of the sexual rapaciousness of her characters and their inability to disengage themselves from the perverse behaviour which has them in its hold.

Thus, the masochistic adventures of both Thivai and Abhor threaten to destroy the narrative with their sheer physicality, warning us that language must admit the body. As well, Acker seems to be at the mercy of their suffering just as the reader is. Along with Acker, we are meant to endure each new suffering as it unfolds in this abject and fragile "narrative web."

[N]ot until the advent of twentieth-century "abject" literature (the sort that takes up where apocalypse and carnival left off) did one realize that the narrative web is a thin film constantly threatened with bursting. For, when narrated identity is unbearable, when the boundary between subject and object is shaken, and when even the limit between inside and outside becomes uncertain, the narrative is what is challenged first. (Powers 140-141)

According to Kristeva, this threatened narrative leads to a "crying-out theme," one which is also seen in Acker's work, as she too seems to be painfully yet helplessly troubled by "the shooting sharpness of [her] suffering...[and] will look for a story, a verisimilitude, a myth" (Powers 145). This is a crisis risen to the surface, a subject damaged and wrecked (ibid.). Again we are reminded of this nerve-racking *Schmerz*, where for Kristeva, "sense topples over into the senses, the 'intimate' into 'nerves.' Being as ill-being" (Powers 140). In a senseless empire, the intimate side of abjection is suffering. Through suffering, Acker's characters confront the containment of their bodies within the horrible fascism which underlies the power structures of America.

As expressions of abjection, Abhor and Thivai push against the borders which are meant to instil an "unshakeable adherence to Prohibition and Law" (represented in *Empire* by the CIA), and flaunt themselves against the constraints of "Religion, Morality, Law," which are "[o]bviously always arbitrary, more or less; unfailingly oppressive, rather more than less; laboriously prevailing, more and more so" (Powers 16). The notion of political hegemony which Acker works against is summarized well by Dick Hebdige in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*:

The term hegemony refers to a situation in which a provisional alliance of certain social groups can exert 'total social authority' over other subordinate groups, not simply by coercion or by the direct imposition of ruling ideas, but by 'winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural'. (15-16)

Acker represents the infiltration of the CIA as a spider network of power and control which has its hands in everything from government organization to street drug dealing. Acker furnishes a critique of commodity culture, with the description of American capitalism and the

pervasiveness of the CIA at the heart of it. The CIA sets up its strongholds "[b]y means of the symbolic institution of ritual, that is to say, by means of a system of ritual exclusions..." (Powers 73). Jettisoning the crackheads, prostitutes and sexual deviants outside, the government keeps defilement at arm's length. Yet, we can barely turn away from this abject America, this "death-in-life" (*My Mother* 215). America is an underground of trash peoples and trash bodies: "[b]eing godless this trash had only itself to turn to" (*Empire* 75). In a society which is driven by consumption, each of Acker's novels shows her becoming increasingly obsessed with the detritus and remainder of culture's cast-aways. Acker forces us to confront the other as we are forced to follow Thivai on a junkie's hunt for drugs, like Renton in *Trainspotting*, who takes a dive into a horridly filthy toilet for his last fix of heroine. The ritual against abjection breaks down and the stronghold slips, as a trace, a track mark, follows us through our reading patterns.

Acker's disdain for American hegemonic power is matched only by her obvious anger at German fascism. In fact, all forms of fascism are categorized as Nazism, from the father/powerhead of the nuclear family to the CIA who control testing of "despised groups" in *Empire*. Acker shows how fascism creates lobotomized people, and how domination and control easily creep into such a society. With *Empire*, Acker tries to re-mobilize her subjects into thought and revolution in the face of these penetrating forces.

*I would rather be dead than a girl. - Acker*

The pursuit of a myth is conducted by Abhor, in her running to and running from the suffering and horror, through a post-apocalyptic Paris.

Abhor is on a painful voyage away from stasis, a voyage which disturbs the notion of the fixed locatedness of female subjects, and their place in the traditional domestic triangle. She becomes Kristeva's subject in process, the "devisor of territories, languages, works...[she] never stops demarcating [her] universe....A tireless builder..." (Powers 8). In creating a mobile 'desiring I,' Acker disturbs this commodity culture in which stasis robs its subjects of their revolutionary potential.

Part robot and part human, Abhor must struggle with the notion of "human." An oddity in a world of humans, she very quickly learns the impossibility of easy identification with the myths/models by which she is surrounded. In this way, Abhor represents most of Acker's female subjects, cast into a world filled with images of women which are produced by media-saturated representations - very specific images accompanied by specific poles of identification.

Abhor's search for sexual fulfilment is important. Her part robot state functions to question the inherent pleasure of 'woman.' "There is pleasure only in freedom," Acker tells us in each novel. For Abhor, this would then include freedom from prescribed pleasures. Part human and part construction. Abhor tests the boundaries to see where they blur on her body, somewhere between being human-made and woman-born. Acker leaves these borders deliberately unclarified, seemingly as a signal of her own discomfort in dealing with a definitive concept of the female body. As Carolene Bynum suggests in her article, "Why All the Fuss About the Body?," "there is no clear set of structures, behaviours, events, objects, experiences, words, and moments to which the body currently refers" (5). Acker seems painfully aware of the 'crisis' of the body and the treacherous ambiguities at hand in its discussion, particularly in terms

of the hyper-advancement of our techno-age.

Yet, Acker does make it clear that Abhor's part robot state is not an extension of rational, technological or hegemonic control. Although it is never clear who 'made' her, she desperately runs from being used as a machine, or from having her body incorporated into any man-made institutions. Abhor's state is still a challenge to the technological, capitalistic fix of our culture, because she does not exist as a scientific testament to the interests of organized 'male' technological advancement. In fact, she is far less motivated by her mechanical impulses than she is by her animalistic desires. Ironically, Abhor stands in opposition to the traditional organized view of cybernetic control which is described by Jeremy Campbell in his book, *Grammatical Man*. Campbell describes traditional cybernetics as designed to combat illness

[which] is entropic, irregular, an error in the living system, while healing is cybernetic, restoring the body to its original state, correcting the error. Natural selection is also cybernetic, disallowing genetic mutations which deviate from the norm in undesirable ways. (23)

The irony remains that Abhor is far from 'healed' or 'corrected.' In fact, despite her robotic state, she is filthy, diseased and highly undesirable. Illness and entropy collide in overlapping tropes which connect across her body. Abhor, the face of abject America, is aligned with the scum on the streets. She describes a fantasy in which she finds herself screaming as she and the homeless are surrounded and attacked by rats, a symbol which Acker uses to represent government officials in almost every novel. In *My Mother: Demonology*, abject America is at the mercy of "Rat/Bush," whose followers play a game to see whose balls will be bitten through first, a nasty S&M game Acker uses to describe Republican policy makers who put America to sleep with warm, honeyed

clichés while abjected millions suffer. The rats bite through the flesh of her subjects, leaving them paralyzed in their scummy existence, much as they would bite through Winston's eyeballs were he not to cave in to O'Brien's government sanctioned torture in 1984.

Acker is one among a few contemporary writers who develop a comparison between the image of insidious vermin and government corruption. In Sarah Schulman's *Rat Bohemia*, the narrator describes the impossible task of keeping rat infestation at bay. The narrator watches the decline of urban lives alongside the rapid increase of rat/government infiltration and control. She laments that

[s]ometime in the 1980s I started to see them scampering regularly in the playgrounds of Central Park. Reagan had just become president and I held him directly responsible. Rat infestation felt like something the U.S. government should really have been able to handle. (5)

Abhor, the defect and social contaminant, reminds us of an experiment gone horribly wrong. She is the ab(w)hored love of her Father and a nation, in which thousands suffer because of corporate and government greed, through advancement in "blood and change" (6). The clean, all-American identity preys heavily on the mind of Abhor in her messy state of perturbation. Yet, though she is at odds with her own identity in the face of this American myth, Abhor sees the duplicity of the hegemony which works to keep her in such a position of subservience. She is the shapeshifter, the liminal figure able to question the difference between appearance and reality, able to point out that, while Daddy was secretly raping her, all he "cared about was what society thought about him" (14). Narcissistic America, the face of her father, shudders at the mess Abhor is making of things. Meanwhile, there is a whole different set of standards in place for what is happening behind closed doors.

Three things are insatiable: the desert, the grave and a woman's vulva. -

Muslim saying

It is through the *Schmerz* and the woundedness of Abhor's body that Acker really explores the revolutionary potential of the poetic text. Abhor tells us that "[a] man's power resides in his prick. That's what they, whoever they is, say. How the fuck should I know? I ain't a man...If it's true that a man's prick is his strength, what and where is my power?" (127). At the very beginning of *Empire*, her body is initiated into this man's world by her father. We are mortified at witnessing the scabrous relationship which unfolds between them as this larger-than-life father inscribes reality upon the body of his daughter-lover through rape and incest. Her development as a subject relies upon how she is viewed through the gaze of the phallic eye, as a sexual and emotional possession. This makes her feel destroyed: "I wanted to kill myself just as my mother had killed herself. This is my madness" (19). Abhor is both wife to, and daughter of, the father. He even gives her the name of her mother and, in instances, she is forced into mothering him. Abhorrent to him, Abhor still functions in this tripartite way, in service to the Father, who is elevated to an apothotic level in this world. Abhor "actualizes the threefold metamorphosis of a woman in the tightest parenthood structure" (*Tales* 243), being fetishized by the monotheistic symbolic order into the role of powerless "other."

In most of her novels, Acker sets forth the role of the prostitute as a privileged outlaw of society. The whore (Ab/whore) is a useful character for exploring female sexuality because historically the whore has had access to greater freedoms than other women. The prostitutes in these novels are in a sense revolutionary, then. They all leave their

"owners," and in *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, whore "O" even burns down all of ancient Alexandria, leaving its ancient, corrupt civilization in ruins. We can read this as the unrepresentable (whore) breaking free from the representations of the symbolic, a necessary step, according to Kristeva, towards disturbing the fetishized notion of woman. The prostitute, able to express joy in sex, side-steps the role of wife and mother, shaking the oedipal triangle at the roots, like the whore/lesbian character in Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*, the outlawed outlaw, unclassifiable, not fitting in. To further push the whore's revolutionary and disenfranchised status, Acker sets up a connection between whores and avant-garde poets such as Janey and Genet in *Blood and Guts*, Medea and Rimbaud in *In Memoriam to Identity*, and O and Artaud in *Pussy, King of the Pirates*.

For Acker, the woundedness and 'ill-being' of women's bodies is a sign of the hand of God, "God the tyrant" (*Pussy* 20), God the Father. The monotheistic violence done to the image of the female body creates an idealized Virgin subject, which Kristeva labels "a carbon copy of the maternal receptacle" (*Tales* 243), sexless and closed-off. The mutilated and violated bodies of Acker's texts contrast sharply with the clean bodies of the saints which the girls in her fictions are generally taught to respect and emulate. *In Memoriam to Identity* has Medea informing us that "[a]ccording to the priest here, saints are people who can cope with anything" (88). The "alcoholic," "syphilic" and "despotic" priests in Acker's novels preach but provide no protection or salvation from the horrors which surround the female subject. In *Empire*, God is ineffective but controlling. Abhor calls him "Sickpig" and "Turdshit" (30), challenging the saintly, spiritual incorporeity upheld before women, while they remain



burdened with a body which is violated physically and sexually. Acker identifies religion as exasperating the mind/body problem, because in the Name of the Father it offers salvation. In *In Memoriam*, Medea complains that religious idealism causes "the body [to open] like a rose into wound" (88). Medea exposes the ways in which the religious prohibitions placed upon woman's body prevent her from tapping into her sacrificed sexuality. In an untitled poem by Laure (Collette Laure Lucienne Peignot, Bataille's lover), the narrator spits in the face of this religious monolith which helps control and label the female body:

Archangel or whore  
I don't mind  
All the roles  
are lent to me  
The life never recognized (1-5)

Acker examines all the roles which are lent to women through Abhor who is firstly her father's whore and then the whore of other men who pass through her life. Reminescent of traditional tribal rights, she is passed down from father onwards. Then in her desperation and madness, she runs from the house of her father to something of her own making - a recurring trope for twentieth century female writers. In Sapphire's poem, "poem for jennifer, marla, tawana and me," the narrator desires "to use [her] bones as spears" to

let them impale our killers  
and gouge out their eyeballs.  
and when the land bleeds clean of them,  
use my bones to build a house  
...a house where my father  
cannot come, unless  
he comes for forgiveness.  
(194, 198-201, 203-206)

Acker places a tattoo of two knotted whips on Abhor's back - one pulls her back into her father's house while the other she desires to use against her oppressors. This is the double bind, to have the love/control

of the Father knotted tightly together with an unfulfilled desire to escape him and re-construct oneself. Abhor tells us that this double bind makes her feel "inhuman because I am in the act of brewing my own blood" (51), while "memories of past events have and are shaping me" (52). The knotted whip also refers to the torture which her body endures. Through pain Abhor questions "what is this body?," this I? The knotted father's *Schmerz-Love* binds her as she cries over and over "[t]he only thing I desire is innocence" (48).

When Abhor begins to desire of her own accord, she performs an obvious transgression of the first relationship which launches the book. Acker wishes to displace the honorary position which the father holds in the life of the daughter by giving us a subject who, having found only unending unfulfillment in this world of the Father, has recreated herself through this sexual voyage. Against this dominant discourse of possession scratches the slow razor burn of Abhor's desire, that which grows into a power of discourse of her own, a desire to name herself.

Thus, Abhor, as the boundary between the respectable and the unspeakable, searches for an identity in the confusing abyss of female sexuality. In an article discussing Kristeva's abject, Elizabeth Grosz identifies the expulsion of the abject as "the unspoken hole into which the subject may fall" (87). Female sexuality is seen as that 'unspoken hole', the abjected "unknown" which culture keeps at bay. In the novel *Heroine*, which deals with finding one's way out of this abyss, Gail Scott's narrator anguishes at her abjected position: "o mother why did you give me this hole?" (31). Leading a life which seems to echo this desperate plea, Abhor represents the madness of a woman whose creativity and revolutionary desire is struggling to free itself from the totalizing

notion of 'woman' as lack. For psychoanalysis, the lack represents a hole which may always return to hold the man/child victim, deterring his progress toward symbolization. The constant lament, "o mother why did you give me this hole?," is a reminder/remainder of the patrilinear order of possession. It is also the narrator's desire to reclaim the potential negativity which is reflected by this position.

Abhor runs from the father to Paris where she aligns herself with the Algerians and their revolution. She dives into the world of voodoo and illicit carnival laughter. Most of Acker's quest is driven by an "unofficial" carnival logic, that of fantasy, the grotesque and the secular, offering an extra-linguistic potential to the world/word. Acker describes the Algerian revolution as an upside-down world, one guided by what Bakhtin calls "the peculiar logic of the 'inside-out'...of the 'turnabout'..." (11). Abhor's description of the Algerians brings to mind an image of grotesque carnival participants whose bloated bodies have ingested the entire corpus of high culture and, in their heavy and irrepressible state, regurgitated it in fits and bursts of inversion, recombination, mockery and ungodly degradation.

*Doubt that skims the surface of everything. This is not nihilism. This is a sort of skepticism. - Laure*

Ab/whored by society's standards, Abhor is most comfortable in the company of sailors and motorcyclists in an effort to assert her identity beyond the normal expectations. She represents a challenge to the declaration made by Senator George H. Williams of Oregon in 1866: "When the women of this country come to be sailor and soldiers...when they love the treachery and turmoil of politics...then it will be time to talk about

making the women voters" (Tannahill 388). Women may very well now have the vote, but for Acker there is still a higher level of political and social involvement and semiotic negativity required of women. In *Empire*, she makes this obvious through Abhor's association with the criminal element, in a nation whose "governments are right-wing and the right-wing owns values and meanings..." (73).

The Algerian revolution is momentarily successful, but Acker has the CIA quickly take over Paris to restore order and control. Thivai and Abhor react differently to the take-over of Paris. Abhor still desires, with a "blazing will to live: to live anew" (173). Thivai remains victim of a system of pessimism and closure. From the very beginning, Abhor has been informed that death is her code (52), and the world around her is informed by the same nihilism. Only halfway through the voyage, she already begins to realize "I had had enough of something" (81), enough of this nihilistic course. Shaken by the "unbearable despair of being human," she is stunned by the take-over of Paris after the revolution, yet, in the end she is still left with the undeniable desire to continue being. Acker's hopefulness at the conclusion of *Empire*, points to Kristeva's concept of the relationship between a woman's negativity and ethics. Rather than a Nietzschean fury, Kristeva asserts, women can work toward an ethics which embodies the negativity which we see in Abhor's voyage.

After the revolution, Abhor exists as an exile in Paris. She is at odds with this post-revolutionary city because the CIA has co-opted the revolution into its system. Thivai is revealingly told by a businessman that, "[a]ny revolution, right-wing left-wing nihilist, it doesn't matter a damn, is good for business" (182). By the end of *Empire*, Thivai seems to have slipped back into this commodity culture, while Abhor always

remembers that "[e]xile [is] a permanent condition" (63). Acker's rejection of closure signals the failure of an archetypal, triumphant hero's return home to 'his people.' Rather, she will always be at cross-purposes with culture (the coiled whip), the unfulfilled subject damned forever to voyage the myth of a hero's quest.

*Often my soul will yearn for a fuck with flesh. - Verlaine & Rimbaud*

A "blazing will to live" guides Acker's latest novelistic experiments even more so than in *Empire*. *In Memoriam to Identity* says a further goodbye to many of the binaries which drove much of her earlier fiction. Like Abhor's existence, the life of Rimbaud, which is loosely based on that of the poet, is not as black and white as that of her earlier characters, such as Janey's in *Blood and Guts*. In choosing a homosexual subject for this next project, Acker further complicates the normative system, while at the same bestowing on this subject a pitiable desire to be accepted.

The abject is a perversion, and in this text we encounter many types of perversions in the form of a grand farewell to the cultural pervasiveness of heterosexuality. In his essay, "Becoming-Woman," Felix Guatarri states that "homosexuality is no longer a moral matter, but a matter of perversion" (86). In her investigation of perversion, Acker explores what Kristeva calls "a crossing over of the dichotomous categories of Pure and Impure, Prohibition and Sin, Morality and Immorality" (Powers 16). The subject is made uneasy by a disturbance of the system and the inability to find comfort in a 'moral' space. In this space of crisis, the text and the subject become "implicated in the interspace that characterizes perversion..." (ibid.).

The perversion between the poets Rimbaud and Verlaine is traced

throughout Acker's account of their lives and the abject criminality of their homosexuality. For Guattari, homosexuality is a subversive system which transgresses the law of normative heterosexuality (86). Acker allows the torturous unfolding of the game of tug of war between Verlaine and both of his lovers (his wife and Rimbaud) to represent an examination of the borderline subject caught between social and biological demands. At one point, in the extremes of his delirium, Verlaine shoots Rimbaud in the wrist in his frustration at society's expectations of him and the perversion which Rimbaud symbolizes to him. Rimbaud, also delirious at the prospect of such criminality in the face of early twentieth century moral prohibitions, announces that "[m]ental war is constant" (95). He is simultaneously bound by his erotic desires and threatened by them (the knotted whip).

The memoriam unfolds in two ways in this book. It is a dehiscence which splits open to mourn a lost, unified identity, a guarantee of a stable (heterosexual), existence (which Rimbaud longs for desperately), and at the same time it is a continual, hovering, often painstricken uncertainty preying upon the subject. The memoriam is a constant mental war paying tribute to the series of splittings (crises), which both Kristeva and Acker believe the subject undergoes in life (birth, separation, death).

Also interested in splittings, Guattari identifies two poles of opposition along which all sexual activity can be located as the homo-hetero oppositions. He then defines an intermediary role, that of 'becoming-woman,' which he sees as "a point of reference, and eventually as a screen for other types of becoming...becoming-woman can play this intermediary role, a role of mediator vis-à-vis other sexed becomings"

(87). 'Becoming- woman' is not a simple bond between male and female, but a crisis of the two poles, a messy cross-over. In agony at his confused and painful locatedness in the hated Oedipal configuration, Rimbaud exclaims: "I know what hell most women live through" (95). All the world is constructed according to a neat little triangle in which the 'intermediary role,' in its ambiguity, is thrust aside. This intermediary position is one which Kristeva also upholds for the future of the subject: "I also think men can find analogous objects of knowledge through their bisexuality..." (Jardine and Menke 133). Furthermore, she warns that it is epistemologically as well as politically dangerous to "regionalize culture and consider one aspect as female, another as male," because "in that way, we castrate the essential polyvalence of subjects" (ibid.).

*Der Menschheit ganzer Jammer faßt mich an. - Acker*

In a desire for normalcy, to be part of this 'complaining mankind,' Rimbaud's search for the world of the Father in *In Memoriam* takes up most of the early narrative. In many ways it recalls Abhor's search for someone/something of comfort value in the world of ill-suited fathers. Rimbaud's search is doomed to disappointment, because it is a search based upon utopian idealisms, a hope for a cure for his 'abnormalities,' through an identification with the Father. This points to Kristeva's delicate tension between psychosis and ultra-rationalism, which will play itself out on the body of Rimbaud to great physical and psychological extremes. His search for symbolic realism sends him throughout occupied France, which, at the same time, he is surrounded and stifled by. Once again, Acker holds up the myth of the supreme Aryan race as a foremost historical force of homogenization, that which Rimbaud believes he should

emulate. The infiltration of a clean race of beautiful and brilliant people, 'father-figures,' is contrasted sharply with the way Rimbaud feels about his own abjected self/body and country. He declares to himself, "[i]f there's one fucking cannon left in these ruins of ramparts, bombard us with shit. Our own shit....Mein Herr General - myth" (91-92). The great Aryan myth of human supremacy makes Rimbaud feel like a slave to the Germans, who make him realize, in their supreme cleanliness, how abjected and filthy he 'really' is. He becomes obsessed with their transcendental brilliance, while his sexual actions become baser with each self-condemnation. He knows "lust has damned [him]" and that the obsession with lust has "become [his] brain" (92).

While he idealizes/idolizes the unified subject of the father (the Aryan), he is confused by the pain he is forced to endure at the hands of this 'master.' The unfulfilled desire of these subjects contrasts poignantly with the cruelty of the Law of the Father and its hollow promise of comfort and love. Rimbaud experiences the desperate *Schmerz-Love* for a unified, nurturing *Vaterland*, the Phallus. "[L]ove has equalled pain" (31), realizes Thivai in *Empire*. The narrative shows how this love sets the subjects up and destroys them at the same time, just like all of Germany after Hitler was done "caring for" his people.

Rimbaud's German teacher, Father Fist, causes him the most intense *Schmerz-Love* of all. This "love" echoes the twisted love for Big Brother which O'Brien teaches Winston in 1984. Through Room 101, which contains the worst thing in the world, Winston is utterly destroyed into loving Big Brother. In the same way, Father Fist believes Rimbaud "must be spread open. His heart must show. He must be open and available to my hands. The child wants above all to be destroyed" (14). Through control, the



## Conclusion

### Angel of Anarchy/Angel of Desire

*Women can do something right now by presenting new thoughts. - Kristeva*

In tandem with the struggle towards a postmodern ethic is the most recent work of Acker, *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, which serves as a 'conclusion' and a 'beginning' to this concern. It serves as a fictional interrogation of Kristeva's "third wave of feminism," an upside-down, 'riot-girl' heteroglossia of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, where ethics is based less upon a morality than upon a search for otherness, beyond Abhor's quick anger and overall isolation.

This third wave is a fitting conclusion to this thesis and a 'beginning' to the question of a feminist ethics. The female subjects of *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, are as revolutionary as feminists of the early 70's and 80's, but in their outlaw ethic they also strive for "something beyond demands," aware of the need to reconnect with the world, as Kristeva also urges for our future: "These mutations, these revolutions, contain as many delights as dramas...But also something beyond demands, with their explosiveness integrated into the fabric of time, of ethics" (Stanton 221).

The task of examining a postmodern subjectivity and ethics is still burdened by the question of difference and the evolving concern for what critic Robert Storey calls "categories of self-understanding" that are "alien to the inquiring mind" (Storey 47). And, as we have examined, Kristeva and Acker both make careful reference to the challenged and changing status of the subject and its relationship to the world. As David Fisher articulates in "Kristeva's Chora and the Subject of Postmodern

Ethics," the sense of embodiment which Kristeva strives for is one borne out of difference: "The problem is...discerning how embodied subjects of desire emerge from complex fields of difference and how this difference shapes ethics as a signifying practice" (193). Thus, like the outlaw girls of *Pussy*, the third wave of feminism tries to achieve a tricky balance in regard to the question of difference. The search for meaning which still maintains its multiplicity is surely the postmodern double bind we now face – the acceptance of difference, of the stranger, whilst establishing a foundation of ethical relationships amongst these different subjects, somewhere between tyranny and anarchy. The psychoanalytic criticism which we have encountered in the study of the abject and the other within, furnishes the project of a discourse of ethics with the tools to approach otherness in the world. In "My Memory's Hyperbole," Kristeva states that "[a] 'we' is alive only if it is never the same" (*The Female Autograph* 220). In fitting recognition of this difference, we can delight in being introduced by Penelope Engelbrecht to "John Doe's" personal hermeneutic approach to Acker's texts:

As (subjective) interpreters of texts, we rely on each other and on our mutual knowledge, as well as on context...What if I were not Pen Engelbrecht, but were Larry McCaffery, or John Doe? John Doe would (probably) not seek some indication of parody, not in his heart of hearts. John Doe takes Kathy Acker at face value. Kathy Acker tells John Doe what he already "knows." (39)

We have seen that the task of defining difference takes shape in Acker's oeuvre, although in a more horrifying and brutally unwelcome creation of subjectivities than is manageable in one sitting. In his *Border Crossing* article entitled "Carnival Love," Dennis Cooley quotes Margaret Atwood telling Eli Mandel that to speak of "freaks" would be offensive (10). Cooley wonders at our "fear" of associating this "...disturbing

nearness to our own bodies" (ibid.). Not only are we disturbed by Acker's gluttonous inclusion of outlaw and carnivalesque freaks, we are also left uncomfortable by Acker herself. There is something "freak-like" about this woman. Compactly twisted with muscles, her body is also littered with piercings and various tattoos. Intellectually, she is quick to criticize the literary canon and academia, although she teaches at a university and writes quite challenging and difficult novels. At the same time, she is a performance artist and was at one time a stripper. She is a strange hybrid creature who plays upon the contradictions and tensions in her person. Over the course of this study, Kristeva's subject in process has evolved in the same manner, in "no resolution of contrasts, only an experience of the contrasts" (Fisher 104). Like William S. Burroughs' melding of poetry together with the fusion jazz experimentalist group "Material," these subjects struggle toward/with a continual remaking of "what they know" (who they are).

Perhaps Acker's stint as a stripper, along with her interaction with the underbelly of 42nd Street in New York's punk 70's, informed her uprising against the modernist displacement of the poetic word from the world. Acker's work, and indeed her life, serve as a valuable way of understanding Kristeva's work on the subject, which is "beyond forgetfulness" (Fisher 104). An ethical working through, states Fisher, is the very impulse which will drive the notion of the subject beyond its "limits of present discussion" (ibid.). And so, beyond forgetfulness of 42nd street and even of "master narratives," everything becomes abundantly plagiarized, the morals of the "original" work bastardized by a writer whose literary ethical imperatives obviously include her involvement in both the world of the present and the past.

The discomfort felt in reading Kristeva's poetic and analytic texts is matched beautifully by the unease felt in reading Acker's debauched and passionate narratives. Reading them with the desire of making sense of the two together, becomes a monstrous undertaking – an unfulfilled, unending project, resulting perhaps in an arrogant, overly-optimistic application of theory to text, which would make Acker, who is skeptical of criticism upon her work, cackle with distaste. And perhaps "John Doe's" reading of Acker is the correct one. Beyond the critical application of Kristeva to Acker remains my "original" reaction to her work. In my own "memory's hyperbole," I remember thinking that if the literary canon had an asshole, Acker's textual finger of madness and hopeful illusion would certainly be up it, relentless in her creative litany of perilous and shocking horror combined with an abundant and glorious ability for hope and optimism.

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