

by CHRIS TYSH

Abstract of Nerve Alphabet

Written like a series of pressure points, "To Hell With Dying: A Nerve Alphabet (for Kathy Acker)" discusses a variety of issues dealing with appropriation, pornography, wordliness, and heteroglossia, among others. Although informed by critical theory (Deleuze and Guattari, Saïd, Lacan, Blanchot, Barthes), my essay renounces the classic academic format in favor of a more writerly and, I believe, more engaging expression. Starting with "An Image: Beggar Boys" which focuses on the implacable gender law enacted by the gang of 11-year-olds in Kathy Goes To Haiti, the paper moves to "Primer Factor," an elemental quality in Acker which I link to the same political agenda that informs Toni Morrison's Bluest Eye. Then follows a section entitled "Alphabet of Obsessions" which addresses Acker's recurring thematics of loss and death, which I tend to read as a rhizomatic linkage rather than an enactment of personal legend. "Savasana, Corpse Pose" examines the politics of appropriation using the tropes of liquidation (in the French sense of selling off) and post-mortem operation as ways to make sense of this radical strategy. The 5th section, entitled "Transfer, Please," deals with the presence of foreign languages in Acker's texts (from Creole to Farsi). My essay then delves into infantile drives briefly seen from a psychoanalytic view. "Theater of Voices" attempts to suture voice/fetish/intertextuality and jouissance. "Comics grrr!" makes visible the gender dialectic pulled between triumphant versions of femininity (kick ass femme Nikita types) and powerless abused masochistic women. I take pains to demonstrate Acker's acuity of political vision. The last section turns to the function of pornography ("Porn: a User's manual") within the Ackerian corpus. The paper ends with Acker's sense of wordliness and its historicized materiality (with Saïd à l'appoint).

Because of my emphasis on the poetic expression, this abstract will give you a very unsatisfactory sense of my paper. I hope I have conveyed enough of its discursive tenor to pique your interest.

To Hell With Dying: A Nerve Alphabet (for Kathy Acker)

I love you, but because inexplicably I love in you something more than you -- the objet petit a -- I mutilate you. --Jacques Lacan

An image: the beggar boys

After the crumbling shacks of Port-au-Prince, the green ocean begins. White decay, gray waves, rum, cigarettes. Vast plantations marked by greed, motionless under the Haitian sky. Kathy grinds her hips in a dark room. A gang of skinny black boys follows her to the pier. Rickets, polio, pandering and blow traffic. Like a geological zone, the beggar boys trace the lay of the land: sinuous and exposed. Tiny kung-fu warriors kicking up dust, begging for a coke. "Can I suck your titty?" The *tontons macoutes* step down from their jeep. *Ni vu ni connu*. Hibiscus flower bikini on a fat old man.

Although I can't help hearing a faint echo of the sublime Durassian mendicante, the mad mother who walks from the forest of Siam to end up on the outskirts of Calcutta, childless and leprous, nor of perhaps, more appropriately, the Yoruba Legba, lame dancer, signifier of difference and heterogeneity,¹ Acker's alliance with the Haitian wharf rats rhymes with another reason: the construction of gender roles and their implacable grammar. As powerless as these eleven-year-olds appear to be, lumpen runts at the bottom of the ocean wall (admittedly, their little sisters didn't even get a walk-on part), they carry patriarchal law like a second skin and execute it, not so much with disarming charm as with vicious exactitude and a sense of entitlement:

The red-head throws a rock at her head ..."I think the cops are coming after you. Whore. Miss Whore." "How much money do you take from men? I tell you what everyone says." (*Kathy Goes to Haiti* 127)

¹ For further elaboration on Legba, see Nathaniel Mackey. "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol." *The Politics of Poetic Form*. Ed. Charles Bernstein. New York: Roof, 1990. 87-118.

The primer factor

"The boat's rim is red" (*Kathy Goes to Haiti* 101).

"He's a killer" (*Florida* 398).

"She needs a shot" (*New York in 1979* 36).

Like teaching people how to make bombs in a time of insurrection, Acker's texts have this supreme audacity: bring it down to the stem cell. In other words, fuck parataxis, paradigmatic extensions and all that dirty reservoir water of bourgeois fiction. "The ocean is a green plate" (*Kathy Goes to Haiti* 154). "The world's hot" (154).

Such didactic intentionality not only stomps on the hallowed grave of the realist novel, but frames its close-up on the target at hand: knee punch kick! Let there be no mistake. This brutish albeit also poetic pointing is, above all things, a political strategy pressed by the demands of a writing engaged with the world at large. Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, can be read in this instance as radical exemplar wherein the anemic and programmatic Dick and Jane language functions to foreground Pecola's irremediable distance from the American dream: "Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family [...] Smile, Father, smile" (7).

Having stripped the whole white edifice, brick by nasty brick, Morrison inscribes the resulting violence on the child done wrong by all. In both writers, political analysis becomes the horizon line bending the primer toward clarity of thought and action.

The alphabet of obsessions

"a b c d e

I can longer speak" (*Time* 12).

Anyone familiar with the Ackerian oeuvre knows the eternal legend by heart, the one she has stitched like a banner, both veil and barricade against the burning past: "THE CHAPEL OF SEVEN PAINS (*Time* 15) [...] " I am seven years old. I am spitting on the blood of my dead father, suicided mother, and separated husband" (15). These walking ghosts, together with nana, the 800 AT&T missing shares, and the perennial abortions, crisscross the novels and agitate the narrative chain, partly as pageants reenacting the compulsive repetition drama underlying all obsessive compartments and partly, as rhizomatic² links in a boundless, ceaselessly repeated connection between all signifying systems, private and public, literary and social. Deleuze and Guattari's episteme prevents us from locating Acker's obsessions exclusively in some kind of personal *etymon*, ROOTing the subject in autobiography, a postmodern variant of, say, the Kerouackian legend. Because everything in Acker's fiction screams DERACINATION and vagrancy, I prefer to think her wandering-Jew positionality, her outlaw status, would put all notions of roots and their attendant comforts, under the knife.

Savasana, the corpse pose

"I remember the corpses stood up before me" (*Time* 15).

Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know. I got a telegram from the home: "Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours." That doesn't mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday. (*The Stranger* 3)

So begins Camus' famous novel.

No sarcophagus no funeral pyre strewn ashes over a mountain pass no white flowers crying widows no shrouds no bier no limo no telegrams no sitting in an airless parlor legs pressed thinking impure thoughts over an open casket like someone out of *Story of the Eye* The stiff that mob the scene—Bataille, Sade, Laure, Genet, Rimbaud, Faulkner, Brontë, Hawthorne, Dickens, Cervantes, Shakespeare and Lady Murasaki—to name the ones that jump at me, take up residence in a vast production of loss and exchange. Their dead tongues cease to belong to them. Lifting *les morceaux choisis*,

²For discussion of the rhizome, see Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. B. Massumi. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1987.

Acker performs her post-mortem (pomo) as a divine liquidation. Too much has already been written on this pivotal radicality of appropriation to rehash the argument here.³ Suffice it to say that in the final analysis, writing *brade* (i.e. sells off) all assets: authority, self-expression, subject and truth functions. Decentered and denarrativized, Acker's texts plunge into the borderless abyss where something utterly impossible and unnamable awaits: "The death of the Other: a double death, for the Other is death already, and weighs upon me like an obsession with death" (Blanchot 19). Arms and legs grow longer. Palms up. Nothing clings to the palate. Swallow. Rooted in stillness. Let all inessential thoughts go. Stay there.

Transfer, please

If everyone seems keen on remembering Acker's six-month tenure on 42nd Street, fewer people recall that she was a UCSD graduate student and a classics scholar. We have only to open any of her novels to stumble upon the uncanny presence of a foreign language, preferably one with a non-Latin alphabet.⁴ What she achieves through her notorious piracy—dissolutions of the self, disregard for the mimetic pact, shifting narrative frames, unreliable points of view integral to her postmodern writing practice – is further enhanced through the proximities of these strange lexicons which jostle each other unceremoniously, like anonymous lovers on a one-night stand. No identity check. Provenance and context confounded, writing is face to face with its other. "Prié pou'tou les morts: po' les morts 'bandonné nan gran bois" (*Algeria* 17).

The Acker who says, "I sit down every day and I have these texts and I'm like a kid. I'm like a painter, and all my paints are other books, and I don't know what the hell is gonna come out,"⁵ is the same experimentalist who painstakingly, sometimes

³ See my discussion of this issue in "Flagrant Delight: The Red-Handed Writings of Kathy Acker." *mark(s)* 1, June 1, 2000 <http://www.markszine.com/101/ctyshind.htm>

⁴ Greek in *The Childlike Life of The Black Tarantula* (20); Latin in *Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream* (47-48); Persian in *Blood and Guts in High School* (72-93); French in *In Memoriam to Identity* (22-23) and in *My Death My Life* 202-208); Creole in *Algeria* (17-18); Arabic in *The Birth of the Poet* (90-103); Farsi and German in *My Mother: Demonology* (32, 55; 223, 224, 233, 234).

⁵ Acker, Kathy. Interview with Thom Jurek and Pat Smith. *Straits* (Summer 1985): 19-20.

even crudely, copies and translates these foreign bodies. Here's a language lesson in which she is at once student and teacher, effacing herself in order to get closer, amatory tongue and mouth sheltering the new exiles. In "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin posits translation as a mode (70) whose purpose is "expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages" (72). Kathy Acker's ongoing romance with the poetics of translation belongs to a textual economy which favors such mutuality, mindful not to privilege one language over another, whether it be autobiography, lifted fiction, pulp fragment or a scene out of *Romeo and Juliet* rendered in high school French. The resulting heteroglossia returns us to the *plaisir du texte* which drives all her writing.

Infantile drives

Granted, I can't resist linking the bus-transfer metaphor to the notion of drives which would merit a serious investigation, whereas childishly I only aim at remarking upon a certain device Acker wields with delicious abandon:

"I want to go snarling and poisoning and teasing eek eek, curl around your hind leg pee, that twig over there [...]" (*The Birth of the Poet* 2.1).

Located on "the frontier between the mental and the physical," as Freud defines the instinct in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*,⁶ the infantile drive we recognize in Acker's fictional characters corresponds to the classic conflicts of the subject, say between hunger and love, sexual instincts and ego-instincts (215, 216). But it is the baby-faced onomatopoeia (the teasing "eek") which comes to derange the syntagmatic unfolding and which makes us hear its aggressive aim (to relieve—literally in this case - the tensions caused by the id).

"I would rather go GOOGOO," Acker bawls out in *Hello, I'm Erica Jong*, one of her most corrosive and riotous texts. Just as we prepare to laugh at this echolaic

⁶ quoted in J. Laplanche and J-B. Pontalis. *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Norton, 1973. 214-217.

impersonation that simultaneously ushers in the cute little infant and the naked expression of need, the rest of the text comes rushing in bold caps:

FUCK YOU UP YOUR CUNTS THAT'S WHO I AM THE FUCK WITH YOUR MONEY I'M NOT CATERING TO YOU ANYMORE

bringing the death instinct smack against the world into our consciousness. Acker steals the thunder from the child's voice to better sign its inexhaustible demand for love and its infernal logic of insatiable impulses.

Comics grrl

Despite the empire of abjection and its endless masochistic field sprawled large on Acker's map which lacerate subjectivity and leave it in ruins, there often crops up a cartoonish figure, half femme Nikita half Barbarella, who kicks ass and says what's what in the purest urban idiom this side of the Continental Divide: "[...] free, stern, proud, able to control her own destiny, able to kick anyone in the guts, able to punch out any goddamn son-of-a-bitch who tells her he loves her she's the most beautiful thing on earth she's the greatest artist going [...]" (*Kathy Goes To Haiti* 77).

True, immediately after the last word quoted we read "fucks her beats her up a little then refuses to talk to her" (77) and realize Acker must be ventriloquizing Rimbaud's oracular pronouncement regarding women.⁷ In other words, this babe isn't happening just yet. No matter how much we long for such utopian vision, Acker's acute awareness of women's oppression under late capital refuses to lull us with some cheaply triumphant wonder woman. The fact that she does appear, in filigree, behind the mauling beasts of power, signals her futurity and spikes up the gender struggle in a dialectical key.

⁷ "When the eternal slavery of Women is destroyed, when she lives for herself and through herself, when man—up till now abominable—will have set her free, she will be a poet as well! Woman will discover the unknown! Will her world of ideas differ from ours? She will discover strange things, unfathomable, repulsive, delightful; we will accept them and understand them." Arthur Rimbaud. "La lettre du Voyant." *Arthur Rimbaud: Complete Works*. Trans. Paul Schmidt. New York: Harper Colophon, 1976. 103.

Theater of voices

For all the sweeping textual innovations that are the mainstays of the Ackerian écriture, one cannot escape the fetishizing presence of voices, dramatically staged to fetch a supplement of liveliness, rhythm and song. We are not talking about interiority, psychic truth or naturalized dialogue, but rather about the novelist's capacity to bring speech into the fragile chasm of writing without losing its audibly constructed body, because as Roland Barthes says, "we really must last a bit longer than our voices" (3).

How is it possible then to trot out voice after voice, from Robespierre to Pasolini, from Lulu to Madame Delbène, from Don Quixote to Charlotte Brontë, and the whole wide literary who's-who in between, and not fall prey to the obvious perils of dispossessed sampling? The answer has to do with the use-value of these appropriations and a certain repugnance for the holy nature and sovereignty that such names summon.

One could de facto argue that Acker, "Bookworm parrot Legba biker orphan pirate poet," as Peter Wollen aptly names her, erodes the proper name of her sources and thus very deliberately loses each particular timbre, intonation or personal trait that marks the original in order to pour out "her" song, which is, of course, no more hers than her name. "You're a piece of meat among other pieces of meat" (*Florida* 397).

The resulting improprieties not only abolish the name of the father and its inevitable legacy, but serve to plug up these illustrious mouths with a language that has gone up and down the dividing line of the phallus. I hope it's not too far-fetched to claim that the voices function like a collective prosthetic (i.e. dildo), for ever denouncing its fakeness while procuring its share of joy. Needless to say, the complex structure of the web linking voice to fetish to intertextuality to jouissance remains to be examined in depth in another context. Meanwhile, Acker returns us to the human voice and its renewed potential for hailing the world without the petards of self-expression and univocal discourse. Hers is a song whose lyrics speak the fraught passage from text to voice and back again, and show us a social practice of language when the warehouse doors are kicked wide open.

Porn: a user's manual

She opens her legs wider and thrusts upward. The right part of her body rises higher than her left. Roger moves slightly backward so the back part of his cock rubs roughly against the skin at the back of Kathy's cunt. Then he moves forward so he's lying fully on top of Kathy. Kathy wants to come so badly she's thrusting and shoving and bouncing too much every which way. (*Kathy Goes To Haiti* 45.)

Lined up with her radical sexual politics, Acker's engagement with pornography is a dense matrix in spite of the simple and bracing lingo. As a paradigm of power inequities under patriarchy, the sex scene is a topos particularly well situated to convey the vast battles that arise in the name of Eros. And the female protagonists in Acker's fictions illustrate the point by acting out all the libidinal variants, from promiscuous slut to whore, to castrating bitch, to S&M mistress, to dyke leader, to name a few of the roles, with the requisite arsenal of gestures and dialogue.

But that's only part of the story. Beyond the revolutionary obligation to articulate sexual repression and its vicious regime, Acker affirms her right to jouissance by grinding her written expression down to its skeleton: "I use my writing to get rid of all feelings of identity that aren't my sexuality," a narrator states in *The Black Tarantula* (84). When all the chi-chi of characterization and motive, depth and setting, is swept out in the gutter, useless referential garbage, what remains is the pure rhythm of body parts, moving, shove by crude shove, toward release.

Although the ghost of Sade hovers over certain texts, Acker is less interested in the dance of the "erotic figures" and the Sadean "porno-grammar"⁸ than a kind of atavistic anonymity that comes from reciting word for word the x-rated lines. Shorn of narration's noble cover, the porn's performative function takes on a user's-manual identity, like a sex book for the masses or a reading primer with unusual content. No predication, no subordination of clauses, no rhetorical flourishes but the simple

⁸ Cf. Roland Barthes. *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*. Trans. Linda Coverdale. New York: Hill and Wang, 1985. 169.

declarative sentences in the present indicative which seem to be written in real time and hide nothing. The actual monotony of porn is both truth and metaphor which con us each time into believing we are alone with the forbidden pleasure.

Perhaps the guide we need across this Acheron is sci-fi visionary Samuel Delany, an artist Acker admired a great deal. Commissioned to write a piece for an issue on the unspeakable that my husband and I edited in the late '80s,⁹ Delany wrote a formidable metafiction in the form of a mobius strip, tracing the intersection of race and sex, porn and crack culture, the impossible and the repetition of desire. We are at the Capri, a porno theatre on Eighth Avenue, below 46th Street:

After three minutes, his hips began to lift in little twitches. He had both hands on his cock now. He shot in a couple or three four-inch spurts that fell, shiny as snot from a November sneeze, down the knuckles of both hands. He raised one and thrust the backs of three fingers into his mouth, turned them over, and sucked away the cum. Then he lifted the other, to lick more off, this time delicately. His tongue reached out pointed, but became broader, slugging slowly between one and the next knuckle, bright with saliva and semen in the video's flicker he still stared at. (73)

These are the conditions under which we labor to exchange word for flesh, image for feeling, while the reality levels go down with the houselights. Delany like Acker discharges us into the nude, disinherited scene of libidinal economy heedless of the superego who watches from the balcony while we lose our heads one more night.

I'm it, you're it

The disaster of modern subjectivity that Acker's work stages with a ferocious determination and passion, hacking at every possible deus ex machina, relentlessly putting into crisis every ideological ruse, every lie about progress and the shiny workman's future, always takes place within the unavoidable materiality of language

⁹ *Everyday Life*. Eds. Chris and George Tysh. In Camera: Detroit, MI, 1988.

and above all, is always firmly rooted on earth. "THIS ISNESS" (79) Acker dubs it in the prologue to the second act of *The Birth of the Poet*.

To recall Edward Saïd's notion of "wordliness" is to read Acker, our most subversive one, past the hipness coefficient, past the facile craze for sexual vernacular, past the chatty intimacy with pomo aesthetics and into a historicized sense which interpellates her written project and shapes its meaning: "Texts have ways of existing, both theoretical and practical, that even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place and society—in short, they are in the world, and hence are wordly" (165). Thus, no matter how dizzying some of Acker's novelistic strategies may be, how disorienting some of the meaning-effects, how unnerving her systematic critique of logocentric binaries, she is of this present world, with you and me and all of them too, and nothing, especially not her death, can remove that. "One dark tiny boat going down the turbulent waters" (*Florida* 398).

WORKS CITED:

- Acker, Kathy. *Algeria*. London: Aloes Books, 1984.
- . *The Birth of the Poet. Hannibal Lecter, My Father*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1991.
- . *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*. New York: TVRT, 1978.
- . *Florida. Literal Madness: 3 Novels*. New York: Grove, 1988.
- . *Hello, I'm Erica Jong*. New York: Contact II, 1982.
- . *Kathy Goes to Haiti. Literal Madness: 3 Novels*. New York: Grove, 1988.
- . *New York City in 1979. Top Stories 9* (1981).
- . "Time." *Wedge* (1982): 12-18.
- Acker, Kathy. Interview with Thom Jurek and Pat Smith. *Straits* (Summer 1985): 19-20.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*. Trans. Linda Coverdale. New York: Hill and Wang, 1985.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Task of the Translator." *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1969. 69-82.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *The Writing of the Disaster*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 1995.

- Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*. Trans. Mathew Ward. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- Delany, Samuel R. "On the Unspeakable." *Everyday Life* 2 (1988): 73-83.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. B. Massumi. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1987.
- Lacan, Jacques. "In You More Than You." *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1981. 263.
- J. Laplanche and J-B. Pontalis. *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Norton, 1973. 214-217.
- Mackey, Nathaniel. "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol." *The Politics of Poetic Form*. Ed. Charles Bernstein. New York: Roof, 1990. 87-118.
- Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Washington Square, 1972.
- Said, Edward W. "The Text, the World, the Critic." *Textual Strategies: Perspectives In Post-Structuralist Criticism*. Ed. Josué V. Harari. Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1979. 161-188.
- Tysh, Chris. "Flagrant Delight: The Red-Handed Writings of Kathy Acker." *mark(s)* 1, June 1, 2000. <<http://www.markszine.com/101/ctyshind.htm>>.
- Wollen, Peter. "Don't be afraid to copy it out." *London Review of Books* 20.3 (1998). February 5, 1998 <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v20n03/woll2003.html>>.