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Kathy Acker's french twist : translating sex in the Blood and guts trilogy

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KATHY ACKER'S FRENCH TWIST: TRANSLATING SEX IN THE *BLOOD AND GUTS*
TRILOGY

by

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Bachelor of Arts and Contemporary Studies, Ryerson University, 2007

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in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Communication and Culture

Toronto, Ontario, Canada 2010

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Abstract

Kathy Acker's French Twist: Translating Sex in the *Blood and Guts* Trilogy

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Arriving on the New York literary scene in the late 1970s, Kathy Acker has been hailed as a punk beatnik virtuoso. Her style of writing has been referred to as "equal parts gossip, kinky sex and high theory." Her stylistics have been eagerly digested according to the tenets of postmodern discourse while her protagonists are held up as proof of her generation's rage against "control societies." The transgressive sexuality enacted in her texts, including sexual masochism, sexual violence and self-mutilation, is frequently interpreted as anarchic attempts to circumvent this logic. I purport to show that these tactics do not, in fact, spring from a reactionary politics. Rather, Acker is attempting to convey an abject carnal sexuality that struggles for expression within the name-of-the-father logic that structures conventional language and a lack of alternative feminist propositions.

Key Words:

Kathy Acker, feminism, literary criticism, French feminism, sexuality, queer theory, linguistics, translation, visuality, third wave, mode or modalities

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Kathy Acker's French Twist: Translating Sex in the *Blood and Guts* Trilogy

“Fiction, far from being unreal is ‘another’ form of reality, enigmatic and uncanny.”

- Verena Conley in *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine*

Introduction: Anticipating the Third Wave in Acker's Literary Aesthetic

Arriving on the New York literary scene in the late 1970s, Kathy Acker has been hailed as a punk beatnik virtuoso. Her style of writing has been referred to as “equal parts gossip, kinky sex and high theory” (Moran 140). Fusing genres and genders, her stories have been eagerly digested according to the tenets of postmodern discourse, which seeks to elucidate the ways in which her narratives disrupt traditional dialectics, such as those between reader and author, subject and object, truth and fiction, and history and presence. Her stylistics, meanwhile, have been associated with avant-garde poetic politics, which advocate cut-up, pastiche and plagiarism in order to liberate art from commerce, while her protagonists are frequently held up as proof of her generation's rage against what Gilles Deleuze refers to as “control societies” (178). Meanwhile, the tactics employed by her narrators – including sexual masochism, drug use, and self-mutilation – are most frequently interpreted as anarchic attempts to circumvent the logic of late capitalism. I wish to demonstrate that these gestures do not, in fact, spring from a reactionary politics. Rather the outbursts, rage, and senselessness that pervade Acker's texts are active attempts to translate desire into language.

Perhaps owing to the sensational content and graphic sexual images Acker's novels have been dismissed by many feminists as a kind of punk pulp fiction that does not explicitly address their theoretical interests. When examined more closely, however, the author's marked

theoretical leanings combined with an experimental linguistic register indicate a highly sophisticated feminist position. Acker's questioning of heterosexual political paradigms, her recognition of the instability of sexual categories and her astute consideration of the varied material conditions that shape women's experiences predate similar stands that would be popularized with the third-wave feminist movement in the years following her most notorious publications.

In contradistinction to the universalizing agenda that characterized the late 1970s, or second-wave feminism, the third and fourth waves that followed adopted a more self-reflexive approach. The women's movement began to look inward, at its own constitution, and found many people unrepresented. Out of this self-reflexivity emerged key elements of lesbian studies, queer theory, ethnic feminisms and post-colonial feminisms. More attention began to be paid to images of not only femininity but also masculinity, not only heterosexuality but also lesbianism, homosexuality, bisexuality and other sexual identity models; regional, religious and economic distinctions were also brought to bear on questions of gender (Gubar 884). The validity of the term "woman" itself began to be questioned as Foucauldian and Derridian theorists challenged the metaphysics of presence that had enabled such a notion to persist. A new wave of feminists, including Julia Kristeva and Monique Wittig, famously asserted that "*woman* as such does not exist" (Kristeva *La Femme* 20). In "One is Not Born a Woman" (1981), Wittig exposes the category of woman as having sole currency within a hetero-patriarchal economy. These theorists, along with Judith Butler in her later publication, *Gender Trouble* (1989), moved to denaturalize gender by showing that the subject is constructed through a range of linguistic, psychological, social and political discourses. Acker's assertion of queer erogeneity and her aim to articulate a subject at the threshold of dominant western identity categories suggests that her sexual politics

anticipated the later movement towards the denaturalization of gender, more than a decade before these discourses would be established, institutionalized and popularized.

According to contemporary discourse, feminism is an attempt to posit the full potential of the subject's heterogeneity of experience. For women, this heterogeneity must include the experience of their bodies, an experience that has been censored most rigorously. French feminists showed this censorship to be an effect of patriarchal power relations, which seek to maintain discursive dominance at the expense of recognizing feminine difference in languages and sexualities. In the 1990s, third-world feminist scholars such as Spivak and V. Spike Peterson showed the ways that the female body has been exploited in the service of a privileged economy of reproduction, regeneration and, by extension, nationalism. Spivak refers to this as the "uterine organization" of the social world, which reduces women's bodies to the functions of pregnancy and maternity (210). Queer feminist theorists such as Butler and Wittig have shown the control of women's bodies and sexual identities in general to be the effect of a compulsory heterosexuality – a regime of sexuality that institutes a natural association between sex, gender, sexual desire and sexual behavior in order to maintain oppressive power relations. Both show the significance of dominant linguistic systems to maintaining these ostensibly natural divides between gendered bodies. Throughout these developments in the latter half of the twentieth century, the body remained of paramount importance to theorizing feminist politics.

The approaches to the body, however, have been marked with disabling contradictions. The most concerted effort to challenge the disembodied ideal of masculine consciousness that underpins western discourse was established by the French feminists. Even if this were all they offered, their contributions to current feminist discourse has been crucial. These feminists created a literary language and aesthetic that valued the body's pulses and the expression of non-

masculine sexual desire. In so doing, they enabled a female subject whose self-identity was not reliant on masculine definitions of femininity. These theorists sought to articulate and valorize the experience of female sexual pleasure. Their legitimization of female sexual difference in language was meant to provide access to a repressed female libidinal economy and to free the subject to form itself along an alternate social-sexual axis. The axis that they formulated, however, maintained certain key binarisms that, as I hope to demonstrate, Acker seeks to dissolve. The modality of translation operating in Acker's fiction draws attention to the difference within texts, as opposed to the difference between them. Using the terms available through developments in translation theory (which also contends with the inherent dynamism, difference and heterogeneity of literary texts), my thesis argues that Acker's works assert the possibility of a variable construction of identity by challenging the myth of original sexual difference.

Standard models of *écriture féminine* posit formalistic differences as manifestations in the language of sexual difference. As such, these theories accept such difference as that which pre-exists language. The relationship to the sexed body, its gendering in language, is made an issue, but the validity of sexual identities themselves is never questioned. In fact, these politics rely on the presumption of sexual difference. French feminist politics are, thus, caught in the logical impossibility of sexual identities that reduce the subject to sexualized fragments; vagina, womb, breast, penis – these become the markers of a person's substantive existence. Acker, however, challenges these markers themselves as politically constructed, and she does so by attending to bodily and linguistic boundaries.

Anxieties around bodily thresholds correlate to a hegemonic desire to maintain social norms regarding the singularly gendered and sexed being. The corporeal, erogenous and

linguistic liminal zones that recur in Acker's texts highlight the social limits to dominant bodily configurations. In line with the theories of Wittig and Butler, Acker posits the gendered body as having no ontological status apart from the various acts that constitute its reality. Instead, Acker's boundary play asserts a contingent sexual identity that is formed in and by a variety of social, psychic and material conditions. Acker's model of multiple coeval subjectivities provides new depth to feminist theory by challenging all forms of centrism, which rely on hierarchical, linear binary models that exclude a variety of experiences. Both in content and form, Acker's literary aesthetic puts forward a notion of translation as both an enabling discourse with which women's role in language can be reinterpreted and a literary practice that frees the text from the limiting conditions of univocality.

I begin my analysis of Acker's trilogy – comprised of *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978), *Great Expectations* (1982) and *My Death, My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini* (1983) – by showing, in Chapter 1, the way in which the author's carnal rhetoric is inflected by French feminist discourse of the 1970s. By having one of her characters peddle copies of the journal of French philosophy *Semiotext(e)*, Acker marks her engagement with this school of feminism and its exploration of the relations between language and subjectivity. As an extension of French philosophy, French feminism is particularly committed to a deeper analysis of the interrelations between phallogentric language and sexual subjectivities. Acker's metaphors develop central tenets of French feminism's three most notable thinkers: Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. To Cixous's feminine erogeneity Acker imparts a queer perspective, to Irigaray's idealization of a universal women's language she adds a postcolonial dynamic and to Kristeva's valorization of the subconscious she attaches a material awareness. As I demonstrate, although Acker is similarly invested in confronting phallic linguistic models, she provides a unique

response that returns to neither an essentialized feminine identity, nor the transcendental ideals that underlie French feminism.

Having established Acker's investment in language as a translation of bodily discourse, I then posit, in the first section of Chapter 2, Acker's use of visuals as a related exercise in visual-verbal translation, one that recognizes a carnal dialogism among images, knowledge and text. Acker's visual-verbal imbrications introduce an explicit polysemy to her texts that disrupts the givenness of any one system of meaning. Through her visual-verbal overlays Acker questions fundamental assumptions regarding the masculine tradition on which philosophical categories are based. This challenge is furthered by the author's use of non-English languages, the analysis of which I turn to in the second and final chapter.

The Persian poems, as well as the overall political emphasis on the Arab world, found within Acker's novel *Blood and Guts* have been discussed by Susan E. Hawkins according to Edward Said's concept of Orientalism. Through this paradigm, Hawkins claims that Acker's most prescient political insight is her recognition of America's Other as specifically Middle Eastern and the ways in which this "othering machine" (642) rationalizes America's corporate policies abroad.¹ The orientalist analysis of Acker's works, however, fails to take into account the pervasive use of non-English languages, other than Farsi, across her corpus. As I argue, in *My Death, My Life*, French language dialogue combines to form an interlanguage with Farsi text and visual rhetoric that span the *Blood and Guts* trilogy. This combination of linguistic modes suggests a larger critique of the efficacy of any singular system, particularly in regards to the rendering of desire. Acker translates the body into multiple languages, visual imagery and visceral metaphor in an attempt to render the excess that cannot be accounted for within traditional language systems, thereby challenging dominant systems of meaning. Her translations

across various languages point both to the instability of language and, more importantly, to the impossibility of translating a multiplicity of desires within a single discourse. My thesis concludes by demonstrating the way in which the language experiments, visual discourse and bodily rhetoric that pervade Acker's texts culminate to formulate a new discourse of a translating subject – one that enables a variable identity construction and a literary aesthetic to express a polygendered subjectivity.

End Notes

¹Hawkins notes that Acker's reading of Arab women's lives is "ambivalent if not problematic" (643) although her own analysis remains focused on Acker's critique of America's relationship with the Middle East, in particular with Iran, Egypt and North Africa. As noted by Hawkins, Acker posits the Persian slave trader in *Blood and Guts* as a product of the combination of western corruption and authoritarian rule in Iran; however, the complexities of this character, as well as images of harems, the white slave ring and veiled women have received little attention in current criticism of Acker's work.

Chapter One: Writing French Feminism Inside Acker's Social Body

Feminist critics have long challenged the masculine literary tradition associating creativity with the image of the male pen inscribing itself on the waiting female page. Challenging homologies between the pen and the penis or the womb and the page, French feminists of the 1970s sought to articulate an active literary consciousness that issues from the feminine body and releases suppressed libidinal drives.¹ They proposed the existence of a distinctly feminine aesthetic characterized by formal experimentation, the celebration of a plurality of meanings and the instability of the speaking subject. Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva sought to rescue women's sexuality, corporeality and expressive language from stigmatization. They embraced the potentiality within women's status as the "mysterious other" (Felski 37) in order to challenge the rhetoric attached to notions of women's difference from men. Later scholars, however, have questioned the essentialist underpinnings of these theorists' visions and the universalizing feminist agenda.

Both in structure and content, the jarring quality of Acker's work has much in common with the rhetoric of French feminism. She is aligned with the work of these theorists by the somatic character of her writing (although the diseased and violated body she is writing distinguishes her works from earlier examples of *feminine writing*). Moreover, the sexuality with which Acker imbues her protagonists is neither romantic nor seductive, accomplishing the prerogatives of French feminism by existing outside of male fantasy. However, Acker offers her own unique, constructive response to French feminism. In fact, her female characters' actions are often utterly self-serving, curbing the empathetic identification necessary for the universalizing femininity that underpins French feminist discourse of the time. In this chapter, I contend that,

while Acker's politics rely on key prerogatives of French feminism, she ultimately uses tenets of the discourse to address its own inadequacies. As I wish to argue, the diseased and inflamed bodies in Acker's texts, her emphasis on non-heteronormative erogeneity and the abject desire reflected in her work reveal an aim of exposing the limits of this discourse for theorizing queer, third-world and other marginalized subjectivities that cannot be reduced to gender-based models of oppression.

In the Name of the Defiling Father

While the father figure frequently stands as a symbol of paternalistic ideology in literature, the fathers in Acker's texts take on greater significance when considered within the rubric of French feminism. The French feminist movement of the 1970s is characterized by a preoccupation with Lacanian psychoanalysis, with theorists such as Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva seeking to articulate alternative propositions within Lacan's model of psychosocial development. The key points of contention for these theorists were that, according to Lacan's schemata, the denigration of the feminine is a necessary "condition of sociality or culture as such" (Leland 83) and that the transmission of this ideology has had a profoundly oppressive effect on female psychosocial development. Freud's Oedipal complex describes a process wherein the male child becomes aware of his mother's sexual difference, her lack of a penis, and fears being literally castrated. The consequence for the female child is envy and melancholy, which derives from her lack of this organ. Adapting Freud, Lacan instituted a symbolic economy based around the phallus, rather than the penis, as the single transcendental signifier of cultural arrival. Acceptance of phallic law marked the child's transition from a state of nature to one of culture. This state of nature is associated with the pre-Oedipal imaginary fusion with the

maternal body. The state of culture, meanwhile, is marked by the child's realization that this fusion is imaginary, that the child is a separate entity from the mother and the acceptance of an I/he or I/she subjective identity. The problem for French feminists was that both of these subjectivities support a masculine libidinal economy and negate alternative models of identity construction.

While each of the French feminists that I discuss in this chapter enacts subtly different responses to Lacan's model of subject formation, the violent repression of alterity that results from privileging Name-of-the-Father logic is a central point of contention for all of them. Similarly, throughout Acker's stories the youngest characters are raped by and suffer incestuous relationships with their fathers while husbands defile and degrade their wives. The role of fathers, stepfathers and lovers as rapists, abusers, bullies, sexual predators and objects of Oedipal desire in Acker's texts has been noted by Susan E. Hawkins, who refers to these as "avatars of the incestuous father" (645). Through the recurring trope of the defiling father, Acker aligns herself with French feminism and its primary concern regarding the inherent violence of phallic language.

According to the tenets of French psychoanalytic feminism, the entrance of the phallic signifier into the psychic life of the child refers to the entrance of conventional language into the child's social life. In order to adhere to conventional language, the child must adopt the social codes and ascriptions inherent to this language's functioning. Hence, the child becomes "subject to whatever sexual rules and gender prescriptions this entails in her or his society" (Leland 82). As such, the gurgles, babbles and coos of babyhood are replaced by the pronouns, syntax, grammar and verbiage of dominant linguistic structures. As Kristeva argues, however, on a psychic level this entails the repression of all the libidinal drives that motivate the "speaking

being" (*Language* 265). According to Kristevan socio-linguistics, symbolic language is a dead language, because it is the *chora*, or psychosomatic drives, that animate language, giving words their meaning, purpose and expressive power. The devaluation of the *chora* within society, then, reflects a deeper desire to devalue the maternal space as that of chaos and disorganization. Considered alongside Irigaray's socio-economics, the reasoning behind this denigration begins to emerge.

According to Irigaray, women function as objects of exchange within a male-libidinal economy. In order to enable their exchange in a symbolic economy that posits men as active agents of production (makers of meaning) and women as raw material (bearers of meaning), women must be represented as uncultivated nature. Thus, she purports to show that what is now accepted as normal feminine sexuality is a product of "the forms and laws of masculine activity" (Leland 86) and as such is representative of men's needs and desires. As a result, the natural properties of women's bodies are suppressed and women's self-image becomes a product of the extrinsic force of male sexual desire. Of central concern for the French feminists, then, is the lack of adequate terms and processes under which women might identify themselves as sexual beings. Irigaray's conception of *parler-femme* advocates for such a language by which women might represent, recognize and legitimize feminine difference.

Similarly, in Acker's texts, themes of bondage are overlaid with linguistic experimentation, highlighting her engagement with these key issues in French feminism. In the novel *Great Expectations*, for example, the characters "O" and Natalie struggle against "being chained to the text" (195). When "O" recalls her father's advances, she laments that her choices were "to either deny her father's sex and have no father or fuck her father and have a father" (201). With this "no win" scenario, the character echoes the sentiments expressed by French

feminists that women's choices are either to accept phallic law and enter culture by having done so or to remain trapped in the imaginary. Kristeva's view is even more restrictive. For Kristeva, there is no choice: if a woman chooses to speak, she must speak using symbolic language; the alternative is psychosis. By forcing the girl "O" to accept her father's sex, Acker makes clear the violent way in which Name-of-the-Father logic is enacted on the female psyche. Following submission to her father, "O" reveals her resulting "nightmare" that "her body mirrors/becomes her father's desire" (*Great* 201). In this revelation, Acker's accord with the central concerns of French feminisms is made explicit. The female character, like the female subject, accepts paternal law and subsequently sacrifices any chance for self-representation.

However, Acker also shows her divestment from central tenets of French feminist discourse. The character Natalie is literally chained to her genitalia by a sadomasochistic lover, Sir S. She is forced to lead herself around the room in this fashion, with her genitalia "ahead of her (being chained to the text)" (195). By depicting Natalie as chained to the text by her genitalia, Acker is criticizing the feminist literary politics on which she herself is building. Her text cautions against the risks of a return to what had oppressed women in the past, what Elaine Showalter has referred to as "anatomy [as] textuality [or the...] crude essentialism, the phallic and ovarian theories" (41). Herein lays one of Acker's greatest innovations, which, in the remainder of this chapter, I wish to explore in relation to Cixous, Kristeva, and Irigaray. Like her French contemporaries, Acker returns to the body as her seat of expression in order to challenge Name-of-the-Father logic. However, she puts forward a queer erogeneity and subjectivity that stands in contradistinction to the female sensuality underlying these theories in order to address recurring criticisms of the discourse. While she aligns herself with the movement toward a bodily consciousness, revels in the psychosomatic and rejects Name-of-the-father logic, Acker's

articulation of bodily politics opens the field to sexualized others and non-Western women traditionally excluded from mainstream feminist discourse and bodily politics.

Cixous and Acker: Non-normative Expressions of Erogenicity

Cixous's work stems from a desire to enable women to articulate a uniquely feminine bodily consciousness, to reveal "woman's voice without phallogentricity" (Ives 40). For her, writing is a form of insurgence by providing access to this subordinated voice. She claims that, through the act of writing, women's "goods, pleasures, organs, [and] immense bodily territories" (*Laugh* 880) are returned to them. These goods and pleasures, however, are distinctly linked to a woman's discovery of her female sexed body: vulva, vagina and womb take precedence in Cixous's bodily rhetoric. For her, the pen must be filled with "white ink" (880), or mother's milk. She claims that "a woman is never far from 'mother'" (880) and expresses her desire for further closeness with the female-sexed body when she declares "I want vulva...I have my vulva" (qtd. in Conley 60). By focusing on woman's sexual difference from men, Cixous enables a libidinal economy based on repressed unconscious drives that she claims are organized around a logic that is maternal rather than paternal, through a return to the pre-Oedipal space.

The pre-Oedipal space is idealized as a "source of goods" and the site of song -- "the first voice of love which is alive in every woman" (*Laugh* 881). It is conceived as the privileged space of a nourishing mother who "stands up against separation; a force that will not be cut off but will knock the wind out of the codes" (882). The maternal space is characterized by its excesses; "her language does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible" (889). Similar to Kristeva's notion of the *chora*, Cixous credits the maternal space with that which gives language its rhythm, force and urgency, that which "makes all metaphors possible

and desirable" (882). She legitimates the maternal as a productive space against a phallogocentrism that would order and negate these pre-Oedipal bodily drives. Thus, the disruptive potential of her *écriture féminine* lies in the articulation of imaginary closeness to the mother.

Cixous links the censorship of women's language to the repression that occurs with the introduction of the Law of the Father – the paternal logic that splits the subject from its primary unity with the maternal body and forces its adherence to an I/she or I/he subjectivity. She advocates for an approach to writing that revels in gaps, absences, the unsayable and unrepresentable in phallogocentric language as a way of accessing sexual/textual pleasure. Acker similarly criticizes the phallogocentric by adopting textual practices expressly associated with French feminism, such as self-reflection, self-consciousness, syntactical ruptures, intertextuality and sensuality.

Cixous's insistence on a maternal logic, however, traps her conception of feminine difference within troubling binaries. Cixous's feminist linguistics remains fundamentally focused on contesting the position of women within hierarchies of meaning founded on a patriarchal value system and binary thought. By highlighting that which is repressed by the acquisition of language, Cixous de-naturalizes the privileged codes of syntax and dominant rhetoric, "the language of men and their grammar" (887). Within this rubric, concepts, such as passivity, nature, night, emotions, sensitivity, pathos and the mother are negatively coded as feminine, in contrast to the positive ascription given to their masculine opposites. To subvert patriarchal binary schemes and articulate a new feminine language, Cixous rejects the loss of that privileged realm of the Imaginary, and turns to the Imaginary pre-Oedipal space. In so doing, she is led to

idealize the "Good Mother" whose body acts as a "dispenser of love, nourishment and plenitude" (Moi 115), in a pre-Oedipal space outside, but nonetheless still determined, by phallocracy.

Acker's insistence on a return to bodily awareness suggests her initial adhesion to Cixous's assertion that, "in censuring the body, one censures at the same time breathing and speech" (*Born* 179). The narrator of Acker's *Great Expectations* refers to the "simultaneous contrasts, extravagancies, incoherences, half-formed misshapen thoughts, [and] lousy spelling" (223) characteristic of the *écriture féminine* that pervades Acker's texts. Stepping outside the story, the narrator explains that these qualities are a part of "our mode" (223) of questioning. Acker aligns herself with the early tradition of textual play associated with feminist deconstruction and "female-sexed texts" (Cixous, *Laugh* 877) when the narrator goes on to tell the reader that "since there is not possibility, there's play" (233). This notion of play is a cornerstone of *jouissance*, the pleasurable transgression of aesthetic and cultural conventions advocated by French feminists.

Acker's narrators repeatedly insist on such transgression as a way of disrupting the socio-symbolic order. They do so, however, without advocating for the possibility of transcendence, and by actively challenging the functionality of a language and existence entirely outside of the symbolic realm that is idealized by the French feminists. In a chapter of *Great Expectations* entitled "Plagiarism," characters struggle to express themselves with the languages available to them. In one scene, a wife reverts to baby gurgles while fighting with her husband, "You don't want me to be a little girl. I'm ...mmwah [...] I'm a ...googoo. Don't you love me?" (180). Elsewhere, Acker interrupts a dialogue between the elegist, Propertius, and his muse, Cynthia, to ask the reader, "what signifies what? What is the secret of this chaos?" (233). Cynthia and others confide being plagued by the "unbearable contradiction[s]" (195) given within phallogentric

language. In an embedded appropriation of *The Scarlet Letter* within *Blood and Guts*, Acker's Hesther begs the renamed Reverend Dimwit to "Verb. Me." (95), in recognition of the way in which she is acted upon by masculine language. Operating in a social, political and cultural space that is alien to them, the women borrow masculine language only to find it deficient. While these exchanges reflect women's complicated and often antagonistic relationship to phallogocentrism in keeping with Cixous' denunciation, Acker's characters adopt a more problematized stance. In response, Natalie struggles to comprehend "this identity [that] doesn't exist" (195); she longs to "become another" – freed of the leash and collar literally linking her throat and genitals in the text, and perhaps more so freed from the trap of identifying the text with her female genitalia.

In *Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous calls on her readers to "split it open, spread it out, push it forward" (882). This response to the confines of patriarchal language conveys a sense of birthing a new order in contradistinction to that organized around the phallus. In *Blood and Guts*, the protagonist Janey similarly rejects the traditional order; she commands, "NO to you language" and questions how to "split open" the book (43), alluding to the sexual positions in which she and other characters are constantly "split" or "splitting" (42) themselves. Aside from the abundance of graphic descriptions of sex acts throughout Acker's work, a verbal dynamism aligns her texts with the "tactility" that Cixous declares to be a tenet of feminine texts (*Castration* 54).ⁱⁱ In passages from *Great Expectations*, "the day begin[s] to rise" (179) while New York City, "slowly rising," reveals itself to her: "passive and little [...] crying. [Her] fingers touch the concrete" (177). Overlooking the city from a window sill, "the sinuous folds" (221) of a silk curtain hide the narrator's body while she watches "tongues move," fingernails "froth," a "swerve" of the eyes, "the quickening of I" and "a quick jet of blood," with an "already-fevered

mind." The "jet of blood," "froth" and "fingernails" offset Cixous's sentiment, put forward in an interview with Verena Andermatt, that women writers give "birth to an amniotic flow of words that reiterates the contractual rhythms of labor" (42). While Cixous's verbiage pulses with the rhythms of maternity and birth, Acker's metaphors are punctuated with the rhythms of sex, and imbued with savage sexual pulses that are less romantic, less mystical and non-seductive.

Michael Clune notes that, for Acker, "language and the flesh are not separate" (507), the "word [is] blood" (506) and the "flesh is mind" (508). Clune posits Acker's writing as an attempt to represent "the purity of individual experience" (509) before the destructive and oppressive force of socialization reflected in conventional language. Clune's analysis, however, fails to take into account the ways in which Acker's individual *is* marked by gender. Her linguistic experimentation is interpreted, by Clune, within the rubric of trauma theory. According to Clune, Acker's language play creates a traumatic event by entering at the point of rupture between the authentic experience prior to language and the accretion of the social. Acker's aim is to rupture the body, creating a wound through which intimate, personal languages, unsettling experiences and distorted discourse might flow into public spaces with the "disturbingly intimate quality of blood." While this is an incisive depiction of Acker's methodology, Clune circumvents any discussion of what is, arguably, the most enduring theme in Acker's work: the representation of women's functioning within a phallic economy, which she shows as codified through different discursive systems that always result in female oppression.

Clune asserts that, in Acker's texts, the individual experience takes precedence over all social and conventional mediation. As such, the nature of the traumatic experience is unimportant to Acker's politics: "any wound will suffice [...] and the more the better" (Clune 511). The overabundance of wounded female sex organs in the novelist's writing, however,

suggest otherwise. If, according to Clune's schema, the wound is Acker's entry point, then her repeated choice to inflict trauma on the reproductive and sex organs of her female characters implies that the site of trauma does matter. The recurrence of pelvic inflammatory disease, uterine diseases, ovarian infections and sexually transmitted diseases such as herpes, gonorrhea and Chlamydia indicates that Acker is attending to these female-sexed areas as sites of initial rupture, as the point of entry for highlighting the particularly violent enactment of language on women's bodies.

Further, by drawing on an enduring literary trope, particularly in the history of female literary production, between "bleeding [and] telling" (Gubar, *Blank* 83), Acker demarcates the female-sexed body as a site of suffering.ⁱⁱⁱ The author cripples her female characters' abilities both to engage in pleasurable vaginal sex and to express desire. In so doing, she pinpoints the "madness" (Irigaray, *Women's Exile* 94) women suffer directly in their bodies as a result of phallogocentrism. However, Acker's metaphor of vaginal trauma suggests a critique of the particular suffering that comes from essentializing ascriptions of female identity that link subjectivity with a limiting conception of female sexuality. Ultimately, Acker's textual politics suggest that she is contending with the violent effects of phallogocentric language on women's bodies and expressions of desire, although her response to this repression does not fit perfectly with Cixous's insistence on a female-sexed language.

Acker's texts reflect the closeness to "the flesh of language" (Cixous, *Castration* 54) that Cixous claims to be indicative of feminine texts. However, her insistence on unconventional erogeneity points to a desire to distance herself from the biologism underpinning Cixous's "return to the body" (*Laugh* 880). Instead, the pervasiveness of anal sex in Acker's texts suggests that she is queering the body in order to direct her sexual politics away from a distinctly female

space. In *Great Expectations*, a female character masturbates in a confessional booth while confiding an erotic encounter of anal sex. The narrator of "underworlds of the world," a subsection of *Great Expectations*, avails her "ass [...] bare on taxicab fake leather" to the man beside her and is thrilled by the ensuing anal-erotic encounter (190-191). An adolescent Janey asks her eighty year old writer boyfriend to "fuck [her] in the ass [...] and like[s] it" (*Blood* 59). Characters throughout her stories also engage in anal sex as a result of vaginal, ovarian and pelvic diseases that disable sexual activity in these zones. Acker's texts introduce images of non-normative heterosexuality that encourage readings through queer political paradigms.

Queer discourse aims to denaturalize and disrupt common assumptions regarding the legitimacy of singular, nameable and coherent sexual identities. The theories that arose from queer visual and verbal aesthetics have worked to problematize the easy conflation of eroticism with identity. This stands in contradistinction to the female eroticism put forward by French feminists – an eroticism of the vaginal lips, vagina, clitoris, cervix, uterus and breasts (Irigaray, *The Sex* 28). Instead, queer theory focuses on "mismatches" between sex, gender and desire (Jagose 3). The eroticism enjoyed by Acker's female characters represents a form of "queer heterosexuality" (Fantina 11) – heterosexual sexual practices, transgressive acts and counterhegemonic gender positions that challenge patriarchal values and institutions.^{iv} Like queer texts, Acker's works challenge presumed connections between gender and desire, or between the sex of the subject and "proper" sexual performance. Instead, queer literature and theory focus on those instances where categories of sexual identity dissolve. Either due to desire or disease, Acker redirects the site of her characters' sexual activity to that of anal pleasure, thereby redirecting her sexual politics away from traditional feminine bodily rhetoric. In so

doing, Acker modifies her affinities with Cixous's feminism by intimating an equally strong affinity with the politics of difference that would emerge in the early 1990s.

Irigaray and Acker: The Problem of a Universal Feminine Emblem

While previous scholars have noted Acker's critique of Western capitalism, few have explored her critique of Western feminisms' complicity in similarly privileging a white universal, albeit female, subject. When Cixous calls out to a "universal woman subject" (*Laugh* 875) and Irigaray celebrates women's "laughter" (*The Sex* 163), the question intimated in Acker's texts is: To whom is Cixous speaking and who is laughing? Cixous's manifesto fluctuates between the first and second person: "I write this as a woman, toward women" (875). She asks, "why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you [...]" (876). The repeated use of first and second person narrative voices reveals an underlying presumption of knowing and speaking for all women. Furthermore, Cixous's polemic declaration "we are black" (878) intimates a troubling tendency within popular Western feminisms of the time to co-opt the language of civil rights while simultaneously "consciously and deliberately" excluding black and other non-White women (hooks 11).

Irigaray also counters the degradation of the womb and vagina in phallogentric discourse by exalting the labia, valorizing speech directed through the body via the metaphor of the two lips. For her, the two lips transcend the singular logic of phallogentrism by ascribing women an identity that is irreducibly plural. Irigaray's "revolutionary linguism" (Showalter 21), or *parler-femme*, seeks to free women from enclosure within patriarchal language and the reproduction of women's phallic representation. Like Cixous's abundantly sensual body, her murmuring lips are

posited as referring to an aggregate or class of women. Irigaray speaks of "*our body ... our movements*" (*The Sex* 214). She challenges the reader to "Touch yourself, touch me, you'll 'see'" (216). Like Irigaray, Acker critiques the organizing logic that structures phallogentric language, recognizing its detrimental effect on the female body and female pleasure. But Acker problematizes Irigaray's metaphor of the two lips by rendering women's lips and subsequent utterances as alienating. In so doing, she challenges dominant notions of women's interiority (and, by extension, the women's body politic) as a site of harmony.

Irigaray argues that a phallic conception of sexuality relies on women's otherness, and a phallogentric economy takes a masculine subject as its norm against which the other is measured. As a result women's sexuality is conceived of as identical, as opposite or as a complement to men's. These ascriptions refer to identifying the clitoris as a little penis, negating women's sexual organs and sexuality as not-male, or identifying the vagina as a sheath or receptacle for receiving the male organ. Within these terms, woman's erogeneity amounts to a "clitoris-sex that is not comparable to the noble phallic organ, or a hole-envelope[,...] a non-sex" (Irigaray, *Sex* 23). Irigaray advocates for women's sexual autonomy and specificity by articulating distinctly feminine sexuality, corporeality and language. One of the ways in which she tries to accomplish this is by instigating a new metaphor for feminine sexuality – that of a sex that is not defined against or according to one phallus but by its lips. The two lips operate as a symbol for the plurality of sexual subjectivities that are negated by identifications based on the phallus. As well, they literally open into and thus validate women's interiority.

Just as women's sexual pleasure has traditionally been defined according to male sexual activity, woman's expression of alterity is muted within a phallogentric language. Irigaray's metaphor of the two lips seeks to transcend the alternative between phallic constructions of

clitoral and vaginal sexual pleasure. Just as lips are irreducible to one, so is her conception of feminine pleasure; as Elizabeth Grosz puts it, "The two lips are never one, nor strictly two. They are one and two *simultaneously*[, ...] undecidably inside and outside, one and two, genital and oral" (115-16).

According to Irigaray, if one listens closely one will perceive "a murmur, an exclamation, a whisper, a sentence left unfinished" emanating from woman's two "self-caressing" lips (*The Sex* 29). Acker likewise redirects language through the body; however, unlike Irigaray, Acker offers bodies that "howl" (*Blood* 112), "cry" (*My Death* 351), "bark" (*Great* 238) and "scream[]" (*Great* 136) either as acts of defiance and frustration or to soothe themselves. Far from Irigaray's romantic idealization of self-caressing lips, Acker's characters frequently refer to "cunt lips" (*Blood* 33), while the narrator of *Blood and Guts* declares there to be "teeth inside my cunt" (137).^v Characters repeatedly refer to their female sex as "fish [or] cunt" (*Blood* 42), "mucus tunnel" (*My Death* 290) and other such derogatory metonyms. In short, female genitalia is invested with an alienating savagery and depicted as little more than the source of constant pain or degradation.

Thus, while Acker follows French feminists to the female body as the seat of expression, she challenges the idealization of the feminine that underlies Irigaray's conception of women's language. This is intimated in the words of one female protagonist who laments, "my lack of femininity, my wounded body [...] is all that is left to speak" (*Blood* 139). Here, the motif of a wounded female sex is explicitly linked with a disabling presumption of femininity, which leaves her to speak, not in the archaic language of the mother, nor in whispering caresses, but with a savagery that expresses her own alienation from her sexed body. This association between a wounded body and discourses of femininity explains the distorted language of Acker's lips as a

condition of her marginalization from dominant rhetoric related to women's language. The author's motif of wounded female bodies provides a critique of the presumption of universal womanhood underlying the French feminist politics that inflect her work. This motif combined with the queer corporeality developed in response to that of Cixous locate Acker's politics within a nuanced critique of these feminist politics as opposed to representing a contestation of the phallocratic degradation of the female body alone.

Acker's themes ally her writing in crucial ways with that of postcolonial feminists and others of the third and fourth waves of feminism who were wary of any reduction of women's experience to a "biologico-political" identity (Spivak 209). Gayatri Spivak, for example, advocates for a women's discourse but cautions against locating it so readily within the language of the body (204). She claims that, in so doing, French feminism denies the reality and forcefulness of social mediators that oppress women. Acker's engagement with Irigaray's metaphor of the lips serves to challenge the universalizing assumption at the core of feminine specificity that assumes that all women are equally oppressed. Within this context, the character of the French writer Jean Genet, in Acker's novel *Blood and Guts*, takes on a more nuanced significance. Acker's admiration of Genet's work is noted by Hawkins, who explicates the similarities between the former's style and the latter's "antimimetic, fragmentary, parodic, outrageous" practice, as well as his "refusal to romanticize *anything*, least of all the colonized" (651). Hawkins assimilates Acker's representation of Genet, who is ultimately painted as an abusive mentor in *Blood and Guts*, within a critique of "European white male [...] stories that enable phallic power" (651). Acker's recognition of Genet as a privileged white male, Hawkins contends, is her critical contribution to feminist readings of popular avant-garde textual practices.

Hawkins' reading, however, ignores Genet's exonerated role within the rubric of the French feminism that constitutes a main thematic in Acker's work.

According to Cixous, Genet is one of the few writers whose work exemplifies *écriture féminine*, or writing that "inscribes femininity" (*Laugh* 878). Cixous maintains that this writing is markedly different from "male writing" (879) by virtue of its ability to transcend the masculine libidinal and cultural economy that is the locus for the repression of women. "Feminine," in this context, refers not only to writing emanating from the female body but also to that which articulates an imaginary closeness with the maternal body that is repressed in all subjects. This is most succinctly conveyed near the end of Cixous's manifesto when she expressly locates the act of feminine writing "outside the mainstream," occurring within subordinated groups and enacted by "peripheral figures" (883). Kristeva also locates her revolutionary politics in the writing of alterity, which she sees exemplified in the works of male avant-gardists as well, pointing to Arthur Rimbaud and James Joyce as defining examples of feminine writing. Irigaray, Cixous and Kristeva each champion the belief that writing as women should provide "*the very possibility of change*" (879) by articulating an anti-logos that would represent a threat to every symbolic system and the political processes that are thereby upheld.

Ultimately, French feminists purported to show that the revolution in language brought about by avant-garde poetic practices provided the cornerstone for women's liberation. These theories rest on a rejection of masculine discourse, even if only temporarily, in order to assert, or at the very least strengthen, an archaic maternal presence in language. Acker's condemning references to Genet's art and theatre shed light on her criticism of French poetic politics and show her shared concern with later feminist literary critics who questioned the political effectiveness of such theories. Rita Felski, for instance, suggests a move away from French high

feminist texts and towards a revalorization of feminist narratives such as the confession and the feminist bildungsroman – forms of literary engagement distrusted by French feminism due to their necessary presumption of a stable subject. According to Felski, feminist narratives call into being a reading community whose identification with the narrative is personally and politically empowering. In its most ideal sense, the feminist novel implicitly speaks to a feminist counter-public sphere, bringing critical awareness to women's unique subordination that could influence public sphere activities. Within this context, writing itself is not an inherently political act but it connects individual women's stories, creating an implied community that might be galvanized by the critical awareness of a shared experience. Elaine Showalter shares this sentiment; she purports that, while psychoanalytic feminisms offer persuasive readings of texts, they "cannot explain historical change, ethnic difference, or the shaping force of generic and economic factors" (27) – factors that are most imminent to the experiences of women who cross class and colour lines.

Through this theoretical lens, Janey's relationship with Genet can be read as a critique of the exclusionary nature of Irigaray's (and Cixous's) emphasis on poetic politics and transcendental subjectivities. After becoming friends in Tangier, Genet invites Janey to travel with him across North Africa. Over the course of the journey, the man becomes increasingly abusive, "spit[ting] on her and kick[ing]" her (*Blood* 131). His work, he explains to both Janey and his secretary, M'Namah, is "the most important thing." In Constantine, Genet forces the heroine to dress in a constricting black dress worn by Arabian women. She must become increasingly invisible in order to remain in Genet's company, but she is "so enamoured with him" that she decides the "black wool hood and dress aren't enough[. . .S]he should be invisible" (131). Subsequently, what begins as an imposed condition becomes self-perpetuated. Janey

"follows him around, she hides in the walls like a shadow" all to "keep [him] a great writer." Later, after enduring his humiliation and abuse, she finally admits "I don't like this poetry" (137). Shortly thereafter Genet abandons Janey, handing her some money, advising her to "take care of herself" (140) and leaving to see a production of one of his plays, following which Janey dies. Genet stands in as a symbol for a discourse that is immersed in its own importance at the expense of those that have been invited to participate in it. Janey's dislike for the man's "poetry" alludes to the similar distrust of French avant-garde theory within post-colonial feminist circles. The heroine – dressed in burka and increasingly invisible – assumes the role of the ethnicized or third-world woman who is marginalized and neglected by a French feminist discourse that was being increasingly viewed as exclusionary.

As Spivak observes, the avant-garde poetic/textual practices venerated by French feminism are more politically significant for the producer/writer than the consumer/reader (196). Thus like Felski, Spivak criticizes French feminists' poetical revolution as that of "class- and race-privileged literary women" (188). Acker expresses a concordant sensibility. Within one of many disjointed narratives in *Blood and Guts*, a protagonist recounts the story of a sexual revolution that glorified "S & M and slavery and prison" (99). She speaks about how one woman's "freedom" leads her to participate in acts of bondage. Later, a riot takes place outside a prison in which Janey is being held: "*the upper-middle class women and the cops smash store windows, beat up bums with chains, and wander about*" (137). Acker's depiction of upper-middle class femininity participating with a corrupt and oppressive authority is intriguing, especially when read within the context of Acker's repeated motif of pelvic inflammatory disease and other infections. Together these themes indicate that her narratives are shaped around an overarching

criticism of presumptively heterosexual, white Western feminisms that positioned ethnic and queer feminisms as secondary.

Acker's protagonists stand alone as individuals struggling against the violence of phallographic language but, in keeping with women's literary tradition, their bodies also metaphorically stand in for a woman's body politic. Thus the diseases afflicting her characters' bodies reflect not only their individual struggles, but also the "dis-ease" (Gubar *What* 885) afflicting the women's movement at the time of her writing. While it is true that Acker is writing the body, her body does not portend to be universal. In fact, her somatic writing attacks some of the homologizing dangers within French feminisms' idealization of a feminine language. And her descriptions of women's utterances foreshadow the shift that occurred in the feminism of the early 1990s from a focus on women's difference, or specificity (to use Irigaray's lexicon), to an analysis of multiple intersecting differences out of which would spring lesbian studies, queer theory, ethnic feminisms and post-colonial feminisms.

Kristeva and Acker: Articulating the Thresholds of Identity

Kristeva claims that "To believe that one is a woman is almost as absurd [...] as to believe that one is a man" (*La Femme* 20). Acker's textuality is similarly invested in displacing gendered categories of being. Protagonists in *Great Expectations* and *My Death, My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini* continuously morph into and out of one another. A central character in *Great Expectations*, Peter, is depicted as having an isomorphic relationship with his sister; their identities fluctuate to the point that it becomes impossible to discern which character is speaking. Similarly, embedded within *My Death* is an epistolary exchange between Emily and Charlotte

Brontë that has the two fluctuate between sexual and social identities, morphing into their brother and each other's lovers. Acker differs from Kristeva, however, by accepting a relational and strategic use of gendered terms. Like Kristeva, she returns to the pre-Oedipal space in order to validate semiotic language and its role in the constitution of the speaking subject. She valorizes the semiotic because, within it, phallic logic "is not absent but is secondary" (Ives 79) to the logic of heterogeneity that dominates the pre-symbolic womb space. Acker puts forward a threshold subjectivity, however, that is shaped around an abject tension thus maintaining a distinct material consideration, which is missing from the discourses of Kristeva, as well as that of Cixous and Irigaray.

Acker's imagery reflects a unique application of Kristeva's conception of *chora*, *thetic* and *the abject*. According to Kristeva, human waste, excrement, wounds oozing puss or blood and menstrual blood signify "the border of my condition as a living being" (*Powers* 3); in other words, the border between inside and outside is objectified in these expelled materials. Kristeva claims that what "I" expel refers back to "the place where I am not and which permits me to be [...] or that elsewhere that I imagine beyond the present" (3-4). These materials are abjected or feared by the subject because they present evidence of a denied interiority and perhaps more so because of their undeniable materiality. Threshold materials such as excrement, menstrual blood and the cadaver make manifest the "excesses of nature and the constraints of culture, unraveling the polarity between" (Grosz 3). Those materials jettisoned from the body are abject not because they are unclean, but because of the way they disrupt conditions of identity, system and order. Through her imagery, Acker weaves an awareness of women's material reality into her discourse and in so doing is able to account for the relations between the subject and society in a way that Kristeva, and the rest of French feminism, do not.

Kristeva puts forward a theory of marginality that locates women within a class of others that is oppressed by a language over-coded by difference. She returns to the pre-Oedipal phase in order to validate semiotic language and its role in the constitution of the speaking being. The pre-Oedipal (Freud) or Imaginary (Lacan) space is maintained as that of the maternal and that within which the initial split that enables socialization occurs. She repossesses this space, however, as that of the *chora* and *thetic* – the liminal space connecting the subject to its pre-Oedipal existence, which subsequently leads to a more fluid understanding of the signifying process. Kristeva differs significantly from Cixous and Irigaray in that she takes symbolic language as a given. According to her, symbolic language provides the only framework within which women can speak. The disruptive potential, therefore, lies in the "strengthening of the semiotic, which knows no sexual difference" (Moi 165) – the pre-Oedipal space prior to "I" and sexual differentiation in which maternal and symbolic structuring impulses mingle. For Kristeva, it is this mingling that is the greatest threat to phallic dominance because it indicates the precariousness of such a subjective constitution, showing it to be only one of other possible variations in the signifying process.

A critical weakness in Kristeva's theory is the same criticism that has been levied against Cixous and Irigaray: a lack of recognition of specific material conditions that structure women's lived experiences and that structure these as individually unique. The subject of French feminism, critics have argued, reflects an abstraction of women's experience that is politically unsatisfactory. Furthermore, Kristeva's notion of marginality is problematic due to both its assimilation of varying struggles into one class of oppressed others and its insistence on the unconscious as the site of political revolution. This romanticization of the marginal and her idealization of avant-garde poetics, which she viewed as a point of access to the repressed

subconscious, is the crux of Kristeva's utopic fantasy. As noted earlier, Cixous and Irigaray put forward utopian ideals as well, and Acker, too, has moments of utopic fantasy. However, Acker's utopic fantasies are let loose within the less-celebrated female spaces of the brothel and the abortion clinic, and retain a political significance beyond the individual subconscious.

Acker's characterization of the women's private language retains some echoes of Irigaray's descriptions of "womanspeak" (*The Sex* 141). It is within the prostitutes' dressing room that the narrator of *Great Expectations* revels in the quick "half-spoken language" that circulates between the women and is enabled by the absence of men. Irigaray portends that the *parler-femme* that women speak disappears in the presence of men just as Acker's character notices that it is "as if once the slow-thinking male is banished every message from woman to woman is clear and overwhelming" (*Great* 236). The intimacy that the character observes in the brothel suggests that the fact of the women's material existences is inseparable from their potential to "clear[ly] and overwhelming[ly]" articulate them. This representation of the brothel in Acker's texts points to a key differentiation between her work and the tradition of French feminism. The brothel, as Acker uses it, constitutes a space utterly emblematic of the conflation between sexuality and capital.^{vi}

Both Acker's work and that of the French feminists dispel Oedipal structuring logic as a myth that sustains an economy based on the symbolic exchange of women. The classic Oedipal narrative alluded to throughout Acker's work establishes a critique of the psychological control of women by an oppressive phallic law that is represented and reproduced in dominant systems of signification. By adding a monetary dimension to the relationships occurring throughout her stories, Acker implicates capitalism in the sexual control of women as well. The pervasive fear of heterosexual sex experienced by multiple characters provides a critique of a dominant "uterine

social organization" (Spivak 210), which refers to the arrangement of the world (means of production) in a way that prioritizes the reproduction of future generations. The covert language circulated in the brothel, then, indicates that the exploitation of women's labour and bodies is a condition shared by women in a state structured around a masculine libidinal economy.

Janey's relationship with her father, in *Blood and Guts*, stands as another example of Acker's analogical rendering of dominant psychosocial logic and her imbrications of this logic with the functioning of capitalism. The author depicts Janey's relationship with her father as not only sexual but also monetary. In addition to their incestuous relationship, the father and daughter make a financial arrangement according to which the father agrees to pay for Janey's rent and living expenses following her move to New York. In this way, the paternal family is conflated with capital and the acceptance of a sexual order based on heterosexual logic. Acker denaturalizes capitalism as a formative construction within Western culture and discourse to show its complicity in the sexual and social control of women. Her conflation of the Oedipal myth with a critique of capitalism shows the way in which the normalization of patriarchy is derived from the "logic of sexual order" (54) that V. Spike Peterson compellingly shows to underlay the constitution of the masculine state and result in the social control of women's bodies.^{vii}

Hawkins purports to show that the lack of maternal influence in *Blood and Guts* is the author's way of depicting the corrupting influence of symbolic dominance over the female psyche and the relationship of this to women's exploitation. She notes, for example, the steady stream of abusive, sadistic men that form Janey's social education. The narrator begins: "Never having known a mother, her mother had died when Janey was a year old, Janey depended on her father for everything and regarded her father as boyfriend, brother, sister, money, amusement

and father" (*Blood* 7). The transition from Pre-Oedipal to Oedipal subjectivity requires the female child's identification with, and subsequent rejection of, the mother. Lacking this necessary identification with the mother, Janey remains trapped between the pre-Oedipal voice (the pre-verbal voice of rhythms and sensations) and the "phallic-obsessed" voice that repeatedly desires the father (Hawkins 646); she is unable to fully transition from nature to culture. Hawkins acknowledges that the lack of a maternal presence is a problematic absence if Acker's intention is to illustrate and critique oedipal relationships. She does not question this omission, however, despite the consistency of this maternal absence across the majority of Acker's novels^{viii}. Within Freud's schema, the mother is necessary to socialization. Both male and female children begin the socialization process after becoming aware of their mother's lack of male genitalia and turning toward the father to reconcile the resulting feelings of fear and envy respectively. The absence of the equivalent of a maternal relationship in Acker's texts indicates the author's desire to articulate a mode of subject formation that does not rely on the castration complex^{ix}. Without a maternal presence Acker's characters remain in a liminal existence psychically fluctuating between the pre-linguistic and symbolic stages of development. Acker constructs a threshold subjectivity that is inflected as much by psychic drives as by material and social factors in order to rework conceptions of the pre-linguistic and maternal space popularized by French feminists. As opposed to the fluids of maternity and *jouissance* – milk, saliva, the fluids of sex – Acker's pen is infused with the body's less mystical juices such as urine, feces, blood, phlegm and vomit.

Acker uses recurring motifs of waste, rot and feminine materiality as dynamic modes for expressing a unique bodily consciousness in contradistinction to the utopic feminine awareness informing the tradition of French feminism. In *Blood and Guts*, Janey and her boyfriend "shitted in the streets" (42), "smear shit" (35) in a store they vandalize and "smeared up" (42) street walls.

In *Great Expectations* and *My Death*, Cynthia and the narrator's girlfriend urinate on their lovers. In a sexual frenzy, Cynthia asks Propertius "to piss all over me[, ...] go over the threshold with me[. ...] The threshold is here" (235)." Bleeding and self-cutting are common means of expression, while "shit" and "piss" are smeared throughout the texts in scenes of war and urban violence. In "Janey Becomes a Woman," a subsection of *Blood and Guts*, "garbage and piss [...] drip[] through the walls" (57), while the grocery store resells rotting food in "*the slum where she chooses to live*" (56). By engrossing her characters in the abject, Acker grounds them in and by their own individual materiality. In so doing, she draws attention to the threshold that constitutes marginality.

Within a Kristevan reading, the subject finds these materials psychically troubling, however, not because of any filthy quality, but because of their connection to the *thetic*.^x Kristeva claims that "refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live" (*Powers* 3). In this sense, the cadaver stands as the most violent confrontation with the abject (abjected threshold object). The liminal space of the *thetic* blurs the boundaries between the proper and the unclean, subject and object, I and Other, or Inside and Outside. The *thetic* space is characterized by the intermingling of pre-verbal and pre-objectal drives with a Symbolic ordering impulse, or the intermingling of invisible pre-social bodily fields with conditions of social existence that act to repress and contain these fields. The womb is one such *thetic* space, where boundaries associated with the Law of the Father germinate. In Kristeva's conception, the Symbolic derives its necessity from the pre-existence of the subject's bodily pulsations. She does not conceive of these as disordered but as ordered around a logic that is unique to the maternal body's unity with the subject. According to Kristeva, the Symbolic is intrinsic to the maternal *chora* rather than existing as an extrinsic transcendental logic. For the *in utero* baby to attain

subjectivity, Kristeva claims, it will have to learn language and submit to "the Law," although it will never relinquish its desire to transgress it. Fear originates from the subject's awareness of the resultant frailty of the Symbolic, which may at anytime be swallowed up by the overwhelming maternal energies to which it owes its existence.

Within this context, the prevalence of abortion and "menstrual extraction" (Acker, *Blood* 34) in Acker's texts can be seen to take on a quintessentially abject meaning by virtue of the threshold existence that is metaphorically expressed in the aborted fetus. Within the rubric that evolves from Kristeva, the aborted fetus is abject: a jettisoned object without interiority but which signifies the competing drives, impulses and logics within the threshold of culture and nature – a threshold that Kristeva associates with the maternal *chora*. The abortion, then, represents women's interiority expelled, symbolizing "a forfeited existence" (Kristeva, *Powers* 9) not of the subject in process but of the repressed maternal logic. Since the aborted fetus never makes the transition into culture, it functions as a metaphor for that which escapes the rational. The extracted fetuses manifest the logical order on which social cohesion is based by representing that which, because it cannot be excluded, is abjected. The fetus is a penultimate signifier of imaginary closeness with the maternal body, the logic of alterity located in the *chora* and the interplay between psychosomatic and symbolic impulses of the *thetic*. The aborted fetus, then, draws attention to the abject position ascribed to these qualities within culture.

Notably, Acker's characters prove unafraid of the abject; rather, they revel in waste, rot, remains and other signifiers of materiality, particularly the female materiality reflected in the abortion clinic. In fact, the abortion clinic, like the brothel, provides one of the few expressions of tenderness in her texts. Janey remembers "a tiny blonde, even younger than me" (*Blood* 33) who is terrified and alone waiting her turn at the clinic. She is unable to speak or advocate for

herself, and gradually the other waiting women "gathered around her, held her hands, and stroked her legs [until g]radually she began to calm down." Janey goes on to reflect, "There was nothing else to do. We had to wait while each one of us went through it. Finally they came for her." Within the nihilism that dominates Acker's narratives, the empathy expressed here is markedly unusual. As with the brothel, the abortion clinic provides another all-female community within which private utterances are passed. In this case, however, unity is enabled by the recognition of an individual woman's struggle. As such, Acker provides a metaphor for the attention to the singularity of each woman that would come to define third wave feminism.

Acker anticipates the third wave's emphasis on individuality at a time when difference was being erased within monolithic conceptions of womanhood. Instead, the abortion clinic provides a metaphor for the competing drives that shape women's interiority and experiences – those between psychic (internal) and material (external) realms – in order to put forth a staunchly non-transcendental and non-reactionary bodily consciousness. Furthermore, Acker's utopian vision necessitates recognition of women's material conditions, as in the brothel, and a willingness to confront the threshold between interiority and exteriority, as in the abortion clinic. The women in Acker's texts keep this threshold close by reveling in the abject, a distinct attempt to move away from the embryonic interiority that characterizes traditional *écriture féminine*. Her subjects refuse to be confined to an idealized pre-Oedipal interiority; instead they force themselves to confront their own materiality and symbolic existence, maintaining tensions that constitute their real conditions of existence.

Conclusion: Acker's Carnal Twist

Acker's novels address central criticisms of French feminism while maintaining some of its most important contributions. The author addresses the essentialism of Cixous, the universalism of Irigaray and the obscurantism of Kristeva with a bodily consciousness that is more inclusive and informed by social and material realities. Reflecting a central tenet of French feminist discourse, one of Acker's protagonist's declares "writing isn't just writing, it's a meeting of writing and living" (*My Death* 299). The French feminists on whom Acker builds were primarily concerned with articulating feminine writing and living. There is some ambiguity over the definition of the feminine but, whether emanating from a female body or understood as the articulation of a maternal imaginary, these theories maintain the binary distinction between masculine and feminine logic. Kristeva's maternal language (and its related concepts: semiotic, *chora* and *thetic*) similarly divides the subject. Although Kristeva's theory allows for the strengthening of a semiotic presence in language, especially via poetic practices, she ultimately insists that the maternal (semiotic) must acquiesce to paternal (symbolic) law in order for society to function. Thus Kristeva's revolution is confined to subconscious fields. Those of Cixous and Irigaray are, conversely, situated in a transcendental field outside of the symbolic realm. The discontinuity of these theories with the lived material conditions of oppression experienced by many women is the point at which Acker enters the discourse.

In the vein of French feminism, Acker puts forward a literary consciousness aimed at accessing repressed sexual subjectivities. However, her literary aesthetic and bodily rhetoric are committed to expressing that "existence is the meeting of mental and material" (*My Death* 299). Acker's pen, therefore, inscribes a subject that is as much constituted by the legacy of masculine symbolic representation as it is by historically specific material conditions. In a prose poem

entitled "Language Breakdown," the author criticizes "the reduction to what is essential" by mixing references to obstetrics, menstruation and female sex organs with a final admonition of the reductiveness of "two lips" as a sexual identity (298). This allusion to Irigaray's metaphor, combined with alienating depictions of female genitalia and recurring assertions of queer erogeneity, indicate that Acker is applying a highly self-reflexive approach to women's bodily politics, in contradistinction to the feminine universalizing agenda that constituted early feminism. In line with a new wave of feminism that was emerging in the 1980s and 1990s, Acker reflects a movement towards the denaturalization of gender and the recognition of the subject's location at the intersection of multiple formative discourses.

The sadomasochistic relationships depicted in Acker's stories have to date usually been interpreted as a comment on the violent way in which patriarchal power relations are enacted on the female body. Within this context, her protagonists' masochistic acts are explained as attempts to reclaim the body by reconstituting pain as pleasure. Owing to the transgressive sexuality at play in the author's texts, however, few scholars have considered her subjects as desiring bodies in and of themselves. As I have tried to demonstrate, Acker is not writing a body whose desire is constructed entirely by external forces. Rather, she is attempting to convey an abject, carnal sexuality that struggles for expression within the Name-of-the-Father logic that structures conventional language and a lack of alternative feminist propositions. Acker represents a fresh articulation of what Cixous termed "insurgent writing" (*Laugh* 880), the expression of radical alterity that forms the political crux of not only *écriture féminine*, but arguably also Irigaray's *parler-femme* and Kristeva's *jouissance*. In the tradition of French feminism, Acker aims to access the repressed and "return to the body" (Cixous, *Laugh* 880). But the unconventional sexuality, diseased and mutilated quality of the bodies and the abject carnality in her texts voices

a desire to individuate herself from universalizing notions of femininity while maintaining the integrity of the body in transformative sexual politics.

End Notes

ⁱ The term "feminine body" is used throughout this study to refer to both the female-sexed body and a repressed closeness with the maternal body that is experienced by all sexes.

ⁱⁱ Irigaray also characterizes women's writing as "among other things *tactile*" (*The Sex* 79).

ⁱⁱⁱ See Gubar's "The Blank Page" for a comprehensive analysis of the functioning of blood in women's writing.

^{iv} Calvin Thomas's *Straight with a Twist* (2000) is credited as being the first detailed literary study of queer heterosexuality. Richard Fantina's *Straight Writ Queer* (2006) also provides numerous essays that engage with the concept. Celia R. Dileader's essay "Back Door Sex" is particularly insightful regarding "gynosodomy" as a sexual practice that enables women to circumvent the prescription of productivity within heterosexual sex. As well, her essay elaborates on the difference between "perfect sodomy" enacted between two men and "imperfect sodomy" as enacted between a man and a woman, the latter being most pervasive in Acker's texts. Finally, Foucault's *History of Sexuality* provides an account of sodomy as the "utterly confused category" (101) for those theorizing sexual politics.

^v Acker is also alluding to the *vagina dentata*, a recurring symbol in psychoanalysis, literature and folk culture for the fear of castration. The allusion is reminiscent of Cixous's appropriation of the Medusa myth. For further reading, Otero Solimar provides an in-depth cross-cultural analysis of various forms and functionings of this myth and its representations.

^{vi} For more on the brothel as a critique of capitalism, see Susan E. Hawkins's "All in the Family: Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*."

^{vii} My claims are based on V. Spike Peterson's article "Sexing political identities/nationalism as heterosexism," which provides a compelling analysis of the way in which nationalist politics are enacted on the female body, as the bearer of future generations of "pure" and threatened cultures.

^{viii} The mother's in Acker's texts most often commit suicide. They are not rejected; in fact they reject their roles. When combined with an also prevalent maternal drug use and other means of neglecting their children these forms of maternal activity open a dialogue with the psychoanalytic discourses of Melanie Klein and Karen Horney. These theorists put forward an active versus passive maternal presence and female sexuality that pre-exists the castration complex, which is posited as the subject's point of origin in Freudian and Lacanian terms. Karen Horney, in particular, shifts Freud's complexes into the social arena by positing castration and penis envy as results of women's thwarted attempts to first articulate a feminine sexual subjectivity. For further reading see *Mothers of Psychoanalysis* and Irigaray's "Psychoanalytic Theory: Another Look" in *This Sex Which is Not One*.

^{ix} When combined with the author's use of multilinguism, the absence of the equivalent of a maternal relationship in Acker's novels further points to the author's refusal of a mother-tongue.

^x For a complete delineation of the concepts *thetic* and *chora*, see Chapter One, "The Semiotic and the Symbolic" in Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language*.

Chapter 2:

Kathy Acker's Transformative Interlinguistics

In the previous chapter, I established that, in her writing, Acker revisits a carnal rhetoric initiated by French feminists, but she does not adopt it outright. One is lead to ask then, if her body is not expressing the archaic mother's language advocated by Cixous and Kristeva and if her lips are not murmuring caresses as predicted by Irigaray, what language is her body metaphorically speaking? I wish to argue that the answer is to be found in Acker's interlinguism. Barbara Godard defines "interlinguism" as the relationship between distinct linguistic systems operating through each other and the "inter-language" that is produced in the process (Godard *Translating* 112). In Acker's work, these systems include the English, verbal, carnally inflected language discussed in the previous chapter, as well as the visual and non-English verbal languages that I wish to discuss here. Acker builds on the French feminists' assertion that language shapes subjectivity by determining one's relationship to one's body, as well as their critiques of phallogentrism, according to which women must submit to representational systems that reduce them to a relation of dependence on men. It is my contention that, rather than accepting that the submission of the semiotic is inevitable, Acker uses interlinguism to reconfigure women's relationships to symbolic language as ones of exchange. Using the translation theory of Barbara Godard and Andrew Benjamin, I hope to show that the modality of translation operating in Acker's texts puts forward a combinatory theory of language that opposes the hegemony of symbolic logic. Acker's interlinguism enables a polymorphous metaphor of translation that disrupts the unifying logic of phallogentrism and the metaphysics of presence underlying this system of thought. In other words, each modality of translation

challenges the axiom underlying Western metaphysics that a thing can be known outside of its context and other relational factors.

Godard's theory posits translation as a "combinatory" (85) process rather than as an act of substitution. If women's relationship to the transcendental signifier is to be viewed as one of perpetual translation then a combinatory understanding allows the potential for women's position within language to be more fluid and active. Rather than subtending semiotic drives to the law of the father, a combinatory approach neither privileges symbolic logic nor advocates for its rejection. Instead a combinatory approach recognizes the "implacement" (Benjamin 163) of texts, which refers to the inherent reciprocity within semantic systems. Within this context, the sexual subjectivities that result from the transmission of phallic law via symbolic language are likewise only one possible variant within potential constitutions of the subject.

One of the two languages I address in this chapter is that of the visual. Acker's pornographic images expose the fiction of transparency underlying the hegemony of the visible. The author's "image-repertoire" (*Blood* 28) undermines notions of "pure VISION" (37) and the presumptively masculine subject who serves as the "centre of [this] activity." The narrator of *Blood and Guts* cautions that "we must be careful not to think the vision world is us," and goes on to declare: "We must go farther." This call to action is answered in Acker's final chapters, which indicate the extent of her sexual politics. The final pictorial chapters of *Blood and Guts* impart Acker's sexual politics, which not only disrupt stable gender identities but the stability of sex as an identity category.

The second use of language I wish to consider is Acker's communication through Farsi and French, which help her to subvert the givenness of the English language and the Western traditions underlying its logic. More specifically, the author uses both languages to draw

attention to the problem of pronouns in representational politics and the inherent foreclosure of marginal desire within univocal systems of meaning. Acker's manipulations of these linguistic systems challenge dominant systems of representation. Ultimately, however, it is in Acker's interlinguism that her greatest innovation arises. The modality of translation operating in Acker's texts puts forward a polyvocal textuality and polygendered subjectivity in contradistinction to the feminine textuality and feminine subjectivity voiced by French feminists.

Acker's Visual Verbal Displacements

According to John Berger, the language of images provides the opportunity to define our personal experiences and their relation to the past more precisely in areas where words are inadequate (33). The prominence of visual imagery in Acker's work suggests her own awareness of this communicatory potential. Her novel *Blood and Guts* is infused with what appear to be pages from her protagonist's sketchbook or journals. Hand-drawn sketches, elaborate dream maps, architectural drawings, childlike script and hieroglyphics suggest a valorization of found and everyday objects that are most akin to Dadaist cut-up artistic practices and postmodern pastiche. The same way that Acker appropriates pieces of canonical literary works by William Shakespeare, Miguel de Cervantes, Nathaniel Hawthorne and other writers, she recontextualizes discourses embedded in pornographic, technical, personalist and traditional images. Certain of these images, particularly the pornographic sketches and hieroglyphic fusions, have been discussed as evidence of Acker's counter-discourse: as a rebellious sexuality or an attack on capitalistic cultural appropriation. Taken together, however, these images suggest a visual discourse that does not exist in opposition to conventional language but that is part of a complicated set of mutual imbrications such as those explored by Jacques Derrida.

Recent theoretical engagements with visuality have benefited heavily from Derrida's concept of *différance* (Rogoff 25). In his work, Derrida exposes the binary logic underpinning linguistic systems as a process of difference and deferral through which every element of meaning is derived from a system of negative differentiation. Through textual play, he sought to free the linguistic signifier from these binds and to allow meaning to be reconstituted across multiple and potentially unrelated contexts: visual, auditory and philosophic. Within visuality studies, the visual field has likewise been viewed as replete with missing or suppressed constitutive elements. A major project of visual culture studies has thus been driven by an interest in repopulating space with all the deferred meanings – those unrepresented images that are concealed within the illusion of transparency that dominates the field of the visual. This project is undertaken by continuously reading culture through often hostile and competing narratives, thereby denying fixed and firm interpretive positions. Similarly, using a semiotic approach, each of Acker's images can be deconstructed in the same way as a linguistic syntagm, or sentence. The author's verbal-visual imbrications loosen the syntagmatic elements, or constituent parts of the images, freeing the signifiers in order to make them available for recombination that subverts dominant readings.

Much like the functioning of language in a collage, Acker's verbal and visual images become equal participants in a language born of their co-existence. Just as Derrida uncovered the free play of the signifier in written culture, images are better understood in relation to other images, sounds or spaces, and across contexts and epistemological relations. As such, the visual is a point of entry into "a multidimensional world of intertextual dialogism" (Shohat and Stam 55). Images within *Blood and Guts* – such as those captioned "My cunt red ugh," "GIRLS WILL DO ANYTHING FOR LOVE," "cause she wanted to fuck love more than she felt pain" and

“ODE TO A GRECIAN URN” – insinuate female exploitation and masochistic submission. These images depict sketches of wide-open labia, with clitoris and vaginal opening exposed, and women displayed performing sex acts or bound by wrists and ankles in classic pornographic postures. At first glance, these images seem to reflect woman as a “sight” (Berger 47), as an object *of* vision that is rendered as such for an assumed male spectator. Upon closer analysis, however, it becomes apparent that Acker uses subtle visual cues to connote a sense of self-possession that stands in opposition to the seemingly exploitative narratives and masculine scopophilia that dominate her storylines.

The term "scopophilia" refers to taking pleasure in looking, or “using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight” (Mulvey 840). Laura Mulvey argues that dominant representations of women are constructed around a male gaze, a distinctly masculine projection of desire and ego-idealization. The scopophilic instinct is manifested in the representation of women as passive, raw material onto which the active masculine gaze casts its desire and through which it legitimates its own position of authority. The pornographic image stands as a most ready example of the traditional exhibitionist role ascribed to women in the realm of visual culture.

Acker’s images, while stylized pornographically, disrupt the “to-be-looked-at-ness” (841) of the erotic spectacle, “through which women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong, visual and erotic impact.” Consider, for example, her use of female body hair. Long, thick underarm hair, pubic hair and pubic stubble are sketched onto the women in each of the aforementioned images (see Figures 1-2). In addition, throughout Acker’s texts female protagonists make reference to “lots of curly hair around [their] cunt[s]” (*Great* 174). Even more tellingly, within an exchange between Romeo and Juliet in *My Death, My Life*

Figure 1: "ODE TO A GRECIAN URN"

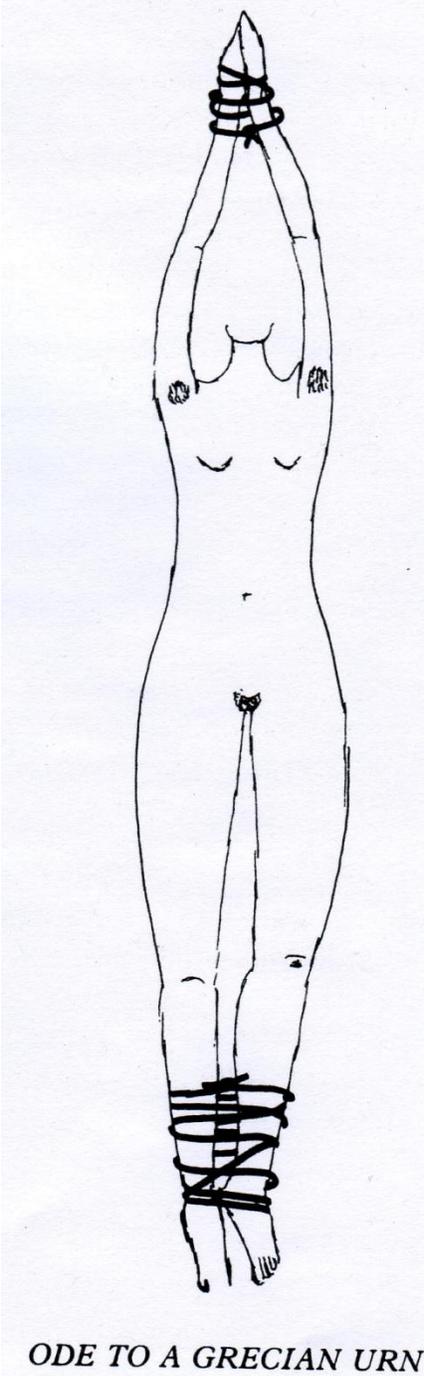


Figure 2: “cause she wanted to fuck love more than she felt pain”



by *Pier Paolo Pasolini*, Juliet warns Romeo that “Les cheveux de mon poisson s’etoufferont tes narines [The hair of my fish will suffocate your nostrils.]” (269). In the history of artistic convention, hair stands as a signifier of “sexual power [and] passion” (Berger 55). Elimination of women’s body hair has been a standard way of controlling women’s sexual passion in images from the Renaissance to the present. This elimination has traditionally allowed the presumed male spectator to feel that his desire is definitive of all desire. The prevalence of female body hair in Acker’s text and images disrupts the spectatorship associated with classic pornography by imbuing the images with passion and aggression that is – from a heteronormative male standpoint – non-seductive. The visual language, then, adds a semantic dimension that complicates the verbal text. If one considers only the verbal narrative, the protagonist might easily be viewed as a victim of oppressive social and material conditions. Janey is described as desperate for her father’s love, as well as needing him for “money and amusement” (*Blood* 8). But the visual rhetoric, which the reader is lead to assume was drawn by the protagonist’s hand, suggests activity on behalf of the subject that might otherwise be overlooked. That Janey refers to her father as a source of “amusement,” for example, becomes mocking when combined with the visual language, especially once the images of male genitalia and sexuality are read more closely.

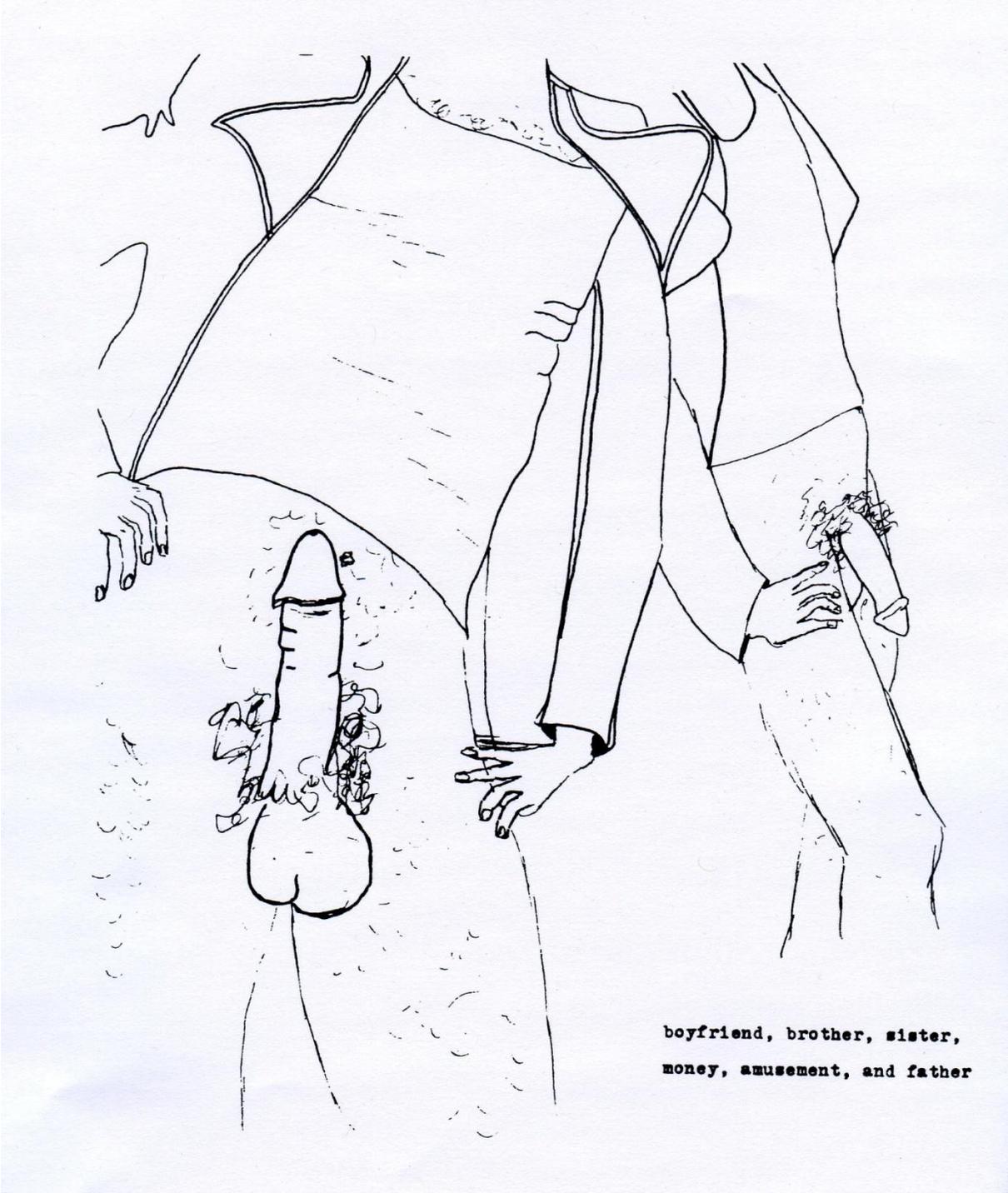
Set against representations of women in visual culture, images of men are, conversely, expected to convey a sense of power that adheres to dominant modes of masculinity (Berger 45). The images that Acker captions “boyfriend, brother, sister, money, amusement, and father” and “cause she wanted to fuck love more than she felt pain” feature sketches of headless male figures that are naked from the waist down with erect or flaccid penises. It is the posture of the three full male figures that is most significant. With hands delicately splayed on hips, a knee bent coyly

and hips jutting to one side or the other, the postures are distinctly non-masculine. The images convey a sense of body on display, posturing as a female model often does in a photo-shoot (See Figures 2-3). This emasculation is furthered by the amateurish character of the drawings – the childish scrawl and adolescent doodling that coalesce into the text’s “image-repertoire” (*Blood* 28). As the narrator of Acker's text comments, the image-language affords the author “innocence [and] indifferen[ce] to the proprieties of knowledge” (*Blood* 28). The headless male figures suggest that the proprieties of knowledge that are circumvented via the visual overlays are those of the “generic man” (Ahmed 76) on which Western, or Cartesian, rationalism is based.

The Cartesian split between male/rational/soul and female/irrational/body is manifest in phallogocentrism. As Cixous points out, “the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason[. . .] It has been one with the phallogocentric tradition” (*Laugh* 879). In other words, the language given to represent the world of experience is one that privileges the universal rational man at the centre of the phallogocentric philosophic tradition. Through her narrator, Acker suggests that the hybrid language created through these verbal visual overlays transgresses the bounds established by the rules and conventions of verbal discourse alone. Within this context, the sexually graphic depictions of women and pencil drawings of erect, flaccid and ejaculating penises throughout *Blood and Guts* can be recombined with the text’s verbal rhetoric to displace dominant meanings proscribed within the fields of the visible and verbal. The effect of this recombination of visual cues is to offset the plots and images of sexual abuse with a voice arising from an image-language that is subversive, aggressive and self-possessed.

The subversion of the verbal narrative is furthered by the protagonist’s curiously architectural drawings. Hand-drawn blueprints stand out amongst the emotionally charged

Figure 3: “boyfriend, brother, sister, money, amusement, and father”

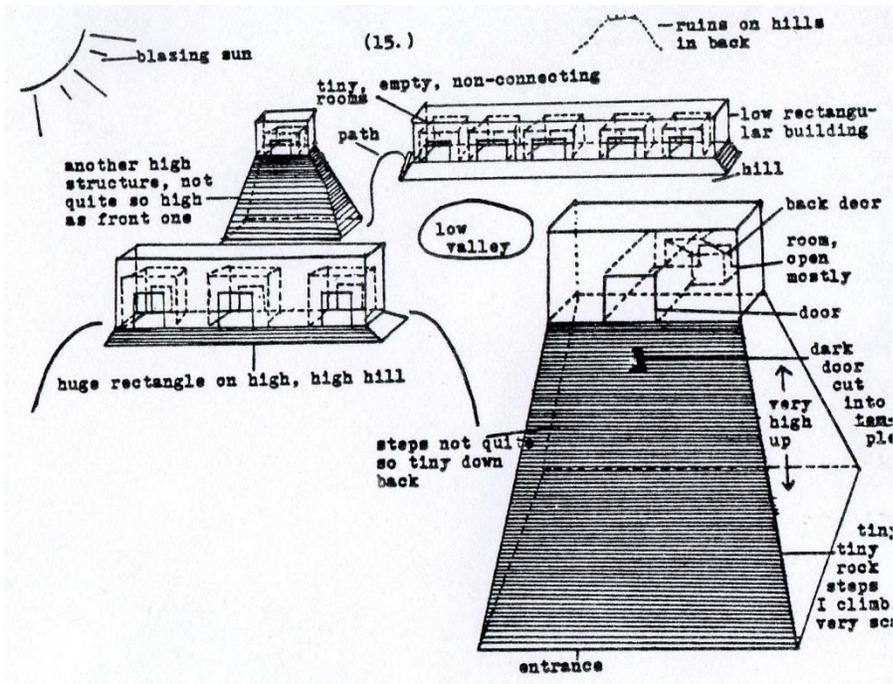


boyfriend, brother, sister,
money, amusement, and father

doodles and sketches within *Blood and Guts*. These blueprints appear within Janey's dream maps and as one stand-alone image. By their nature, blueprints denote foundations and frameworks that are meant to uphold existing or impending construction. Janey repeatedly draws herself "stuck" (48) within these structures, often being chased or watched by an "evil man" (51). The structures' metaphorical meaning is elaborated on in the juxtaposition of one such sketch with a drawing entitled "Merida" (14). This visual work depicts a woman's hand pointing to an engorged penis. Adjacent to this image is a blueprint of the city of Merida, as described in one of Janey's dreams (see Figure 4). It is an ancient city with "huge" ominous temples, "dark" passages and "very scary" stairs that are all illuminated by a "blazing sun" (15). The "blazing sun" that Acker, in this image, correlates with the penis alludes to Plato's *Parable of the Cave*, in which Plato associates the light of the sun with Truth, offering an implicit critique of the masculine foundations of Western logic.¹ In addition, the blueprint is comprised of geometric shapes. Correlating the penis with mathematical precepts that serve as a pillar of Western science further situates Acker's critique in opposition to masculine structures of knowledge. In this way, Acker co-opts the discourse of Western metaphysics to her own revisionist ends.

Within this context, the finger pointing to the male anatomy signals its presence as symbolic of not only an oppressive phallic logic but also a hegemonic belief in the substantiality of gender difference; the proof of which has been traditionally located in the visibility of the penis. Irigaray refers to this as the "optical jiggery-pokery" (*Speculum* 263) on which Western metaphysics is based, whereby the gap between the appearance of truth and the truth that is concealed is minimized by the perceived relation between the sameness of an idea with its representation. Therefore, men are conceived as having a more substantial Being than women, whose lack is verified by their not possessing the same self-evidence as is enabled by the

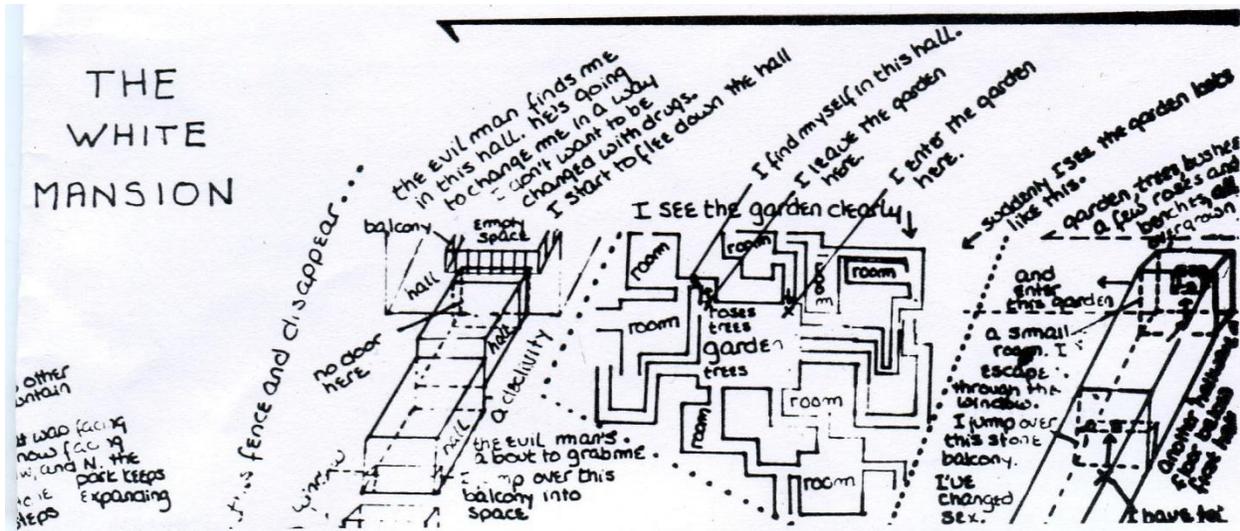
Figure 4: "Merida"



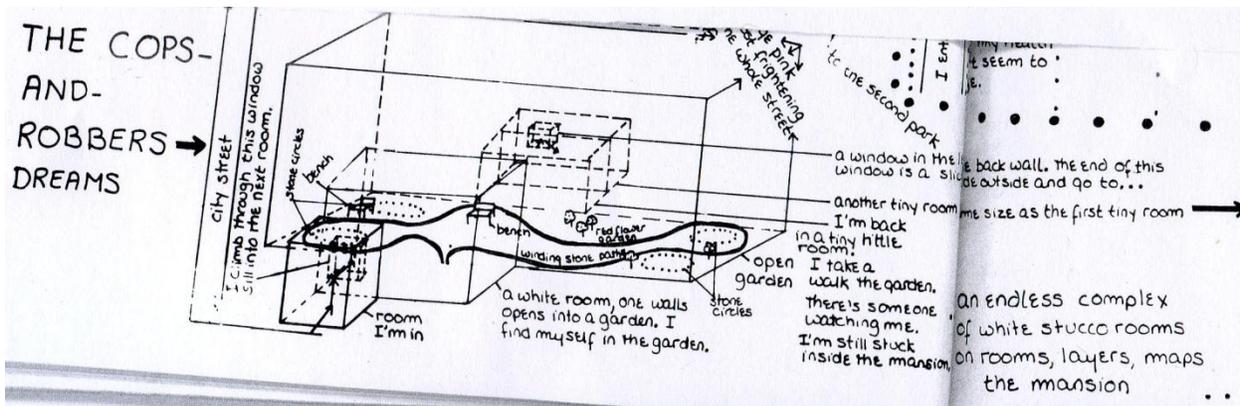
externality of the male organ. Thus, the juxtaposition of the “Merida” images implies that the imposing structure of sexual difference provides the foundation for social constructs just as the “concrete,” “stones” and “rock” hold up the temple walls (13, 15).

Acker does imagine an escape from this construct, however, which is conveyed in a dream map entitled “The Fairy Tale Begins.” In this and other dream maps, Janey is trapped in “The White Mansion,” a building drawn with the same meticulous hand as the temple drawing. The measured construction of the “Mansion” and temple drawing stands out from the curved lines of the free-hand drawings that are most prominent within the novel and within which the protagonist freely circulates in her dreamscapes (see Figures 5-6). The buildings visually convey a sense of restriction that corresponds to the protagonist’s verbal expressions regarding the constricting nature of language and dominant sexual identities. The author’s choice to paint the “Mansion” white suggests that, as with her corporeal writing, Acker is challenging both women’s confinement within phallogentric socio-linguistic structures and within essentializing ascriptions of maternal femininity, embodied in metaphors of “white ink” and “mother’s milk” (Cixous 880). Following the intricate details of being trapped in various rooms, Janey frees herself from the “White Mansion” by climbing out a window and changing sex. In short, Acker’s “Fairy Tale” connects changing sex with an escape from menacing archaic structures that support both an oppressive phallic logic and a limiting conception of maternal difference. In this way, Acker intimates her accordance with the sexual politics of Judith Butler and Monique Wittig, whose theories challenge the cultural construction of sex as a naturally occurring asymmetrical opposition between male and female. Instead, both theorists attribute the metaphysical substantiality given to sex – the subject of Acker’s visual critique – with a dominant heterosexual matrix of intelligence.

Figure 6: "The White Mansion"



"Escape," magnified excerpt from "The Fairy Tale Begins"



"Stuck inside" the white mansion, magnified excerpt from "My dreams stop, the visions begin"

A number of Acker's characters experience the heterosexual matrix as alienating and, in fact, dangerous. One character claims that "if you're not a couple you don't exist" (*Blood* 94). Another decrees that the "heart of fear for women is heterosexual sex" (225). The alienation and fear expressed in these sentiments respectively imply Acker's own wariness regarding the effects of "compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler 24), which Butler and Wittig describe as regulatory practices that delimit erogeneity and desire within the telos of procreation. Linguistic structures reflect the extent to which this logic has been naturalized. According to Wittig, language "stamp[s]" and "violently shap[es]" the body in the service of a "compulsory heterosexuality" that seeks to organize the social world and delimit sexuality according to the goals of sexual reproduction (*Mark* 4). Wittig asserts that sex is not a natural category and, in agreement with Butler, believes that its hegemony derives from a "regime of sexuality" (Butler 31) that seeks to naturalize a coherent identity rooted in the mythic alliance of anatomy, desire and sexual behavior.

The repetition of sexual difference in language is the most insidious operation of this naturalization. The pronominal differentiations between "she" and "he" that form the basis of speech legitimate gendered distinctions by which human beings are artificially divided into male and female sexes. Wittig notes that, outside of compulsory heterosexuality, this division makes no sense because it relies on the arbitrary assignment of particular body parts to a person's ontology; penises become the literal meaning of men and vaginas become the literal meaning of women. Furthermore, this distinction falsely assigns erogeneity to gendered bodies. The penis, vagina and breasts become normative sights of erotic pleasures, thereby closing off sexuality within a heterosexual paradigm that is oppressive to women, gays, lesbians and others. Wittig refers to this as a "coerced contract" whereby the linguistic category of sex compels the social

configuration of sexed bodies (*Mark 4*). Thus, when Acker's character admits, "I dream of having a body" (*My Death* 282), she is expressing her alienation from bodily discourses that legitimate pleasure as formed within a matrix of gender norms. Further, Wittig claims that gender finds its ontology in language, as "the linguistic index of the political opposition between the sexes" (*One* 48). When Acker's character realizes that her "identity doesn't exist" (*Great* 195), she is acknowledging her own impossibility or unintelligibility within the logic of heterosexism.

Acker's critique of "compulsory heterosexuality" is furthered by her strategic use of "Plagiarism" – a form of appropriative repetition that she employs throughout her work and the title of *Great Expectation's* opening chapter. According to Umberto Eco, repetition is the basis for the authority of any sign in a sign system, where the term "sign" refers not only to a linguistic unit but also to an image, sound, gesture or other communicative act or object. The sign is "everything that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as something standing in for something else" (16). However, the relationship between the sign's constitutive elements – the signifier (the image or object being perceived) and the signified (the concept being represented by that image or object) – is arbitrary and conventional. It is the result of repeated, learned, collective use, which means that linguistic meaning is ultimately the result of the imposition of dominant value ascriptions that become naturalized over time.

Acker's visual play highlights the effects of repetition as it operates in linguistic systems. Each chapter of Acker's *Great Expectations* is headed by images that appear as if rendered from copper or wood engraving plates. In addition to naming the story after a classic novel by Charles Dickens, her framing of the story with images resembling nineteenth-century book-art visually invokes the rhetoric of classic literature. Notably, it is not possible to fully view the images

because Acker has chosen to have each of them missing a block of the engraving, which is cut away to expose the grain underneath. The same image is repeated at the beginning of each chapter with a different section of the image blocked out and others subsequently highlighted. Just as some parts of the cover images are emphasized while others are omitted within each repetition, semantic possibilities are likewise established and lost within dominant representational systems.

In Acker's *Great Expectations*, the stories that follow these incomplete visuals appropriate the narrative of Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* and that between the elegist Propertius and his muse, Cynthia. Scholars have established both Victorian female characters such as that in *Portrait of a Lady* and the female muse in ancient poetry such as Propertius's as representing an idealized passive and desexualized feminine identity.ⁱⁱ In accord with her visualist politics, Acker's plagiarisms, or appropriations, of these characters, however, situate these relationships not within only issues of gender difference, but within the wider scope of compulsory heterosexuality. The character Sarah, Acker's version of James's protagonist Isabel, expresses being "scared" of her husband, Clifford (Acker's renamed Gilbert) (222). However, she explains that the "heart" of this fear rests in "heterosexual sex" (225). Therefore, the relationship is depicted as disabling not merely due to patriarchal constructions of gender but due to the overarching heterosexual matrix that conditions their relationship and the necessity that she "give up her desires and live with a man" (210). As with Acker's use of visual culture, the author also co-opts verbal narratives of hetero-normative desire to disrupt the unquestioned repetition of compulsory heterosexuality in both representational systems and the way in which this forms a meta-narrative of sexual identity.

Propertius's rejection of Cynthia is coded similarly. Disgusted by Cynthia's aggressive sexual advances, Propertius declares that "he doesn't want to fuck Cynthia again" because "she isn't female" (237). With this declaration, Acker indicates her adherence with the views of Butler and Wittig that sexual identities are inseparable from gendered ideals. Instead, Cynthia's desire sets her apart from a "proper" female identity. Not only does Cynthia express a virile sexual appetite toward Propertius but she also confides that sometimes she "wants a wife with a cock" and at other times she "changes and this real fem part comes out" (234). As such, Cynthia expresses a more fluid sexuality than is allowed for within heterosexual paradigms. Wittig asserts that the most insidious effect of conventional language is its ability to produce "reality effects" (*Straight* 9-20); the most pervasive of these is the naturalization of sexual difference, which is understood as the coherence amongst "proper" sexual behavior, desire, gender and sexual anatomy. Acker's reinterpretation of these literary heterosexual pairings combined with the incomplete visuals that frame the narratives cohere in content and form to highlight the selective representation of desire in both conventional language and established literary practices.

Wittig's notion of "compulsory heterosexuality" sheds light on the feminist context within which Acker's political visuality operates. Acker co-opts visual and literary figures that have established meanings within a hetero-normative dominant culture. Using repetition, Acker illustrates the way in which both visual and verbal representational systems operate to entrench meaning. The author further identifies the consequent suppression of non-normative socio-sexual identities as a central concern in her texts through the juxtaposition of these visual images with the stories' contents. While Wittig claims that language creates social realities, she also points to its "plasticity" (*The Mark* 4). Wittig posits language as malleable due to its reliance on the

repetition and confirmation of dominant meanings. As such, the sexual identities proscribed in language are the product of this repetition and, in her view, available for reinscription. Acker's plagiarisms of known literary characters create a motif of repetition. Acker appropriates a number of known pairings from the literary canon, including Hawthorne's Catherine and Heathcliffe from *Wuthering Heights* and Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. As well, the author frequently inserts literary characters that are known for their gender-play, such as Shakespeare's "Orlando" – a character from *As You Like It* which has already been famously reworked by Virginia Woolf – and "Viola" from the *Twelfth Night*. As opposed to Shakespeare's characters, which merely disguise themselves as other genders, however, the hero of Woolf's *Orlando* undergoes a transformation of sex that takes place over the generations through which the story unfolds. Orlando is a telling insertion within the rubric of Acker's sexual politics, through which she advocates not merely for fluidity of gender categories but the dissolution of sexual categories as well.

Taken together, Acker's visuals and plagiarisms serve to link motifs of repetition with themes of gender identity, sexual ambiguity and, ultimately, sexual transformation. The former is depicted as a product of representational systems that gain their authority via repetition through time. The latter categories of sexual ambiguity and transformation are posited in Acker's texts as liberatory goals and are to be effected by disrupting the repetitions that create oppressive sexual identities. Like Wittig, Butler argues that the category of sex has been constructed through historically specific regulatory practices that posit sexual anatomy as the cause of sexual experience, behavior and desire. Butler determines the task of current feminist political practice, then, as the critique of naturalized categories of identity within the historical present. The current critique must move beyond showing that gender is a social construction toward examining the

notion of two sexes as itself a construct. The duality of the sex/gender distinction leaves sex as a given and gender as constructed. Butler questions how this categorical split came to be (10). Is sex to be understood as anatomical, chromosomal, hormonal, natural, some combination of these elements, or perhaps something else? It becomes apparent that, when pressed, the category of "sex" does not hold up to analysis. Acker's visual rhetoric intimates a similar critique of the ostensibly natural fact of sex.

The pictorial chapters that constitute the end of *Blood and Guts* are infused with Egyptian imagery that connotes a sense of transformation. A person is carried on the back of an alligator into the afterlife. Birds streak from an underworld to the heavens. A human spirit rises from a corpse formed of birds, lizards and other animals. In an Alexandrian cemetery, "people's sex and their most private beings get totally transformed" (151) outside a tomb that is believed to hold a book with the secret to "becoming something else" (147). The ultimate prescription at the end of "the journey" (149) that constitutes the title and theme of *Blood and Guts*'s final chapter is to "create a world in our own image" (164). Acker's visual-verbal overlays argue that the transformation of sexual identity necessary to create such a world is to be affected through a reconfiguration of language via the permutation of dominant linguistic systems.

Translating Marginal Desire

Acker's characters refuse "faire d'accord avec leurs grandes modèles de la réalité" [to come to terms with their grand models of reality] (*Great* 268). Instead, they use "به را زبان" [language to get rid of language] (*Blood* 76).ⁱⁱⁱ In both *Blood and Guts* and *My Death, My Life* by Pier Paolo Pasolini, Acker experiments with non-English languages

as a way of circumventing the constriction of phallogocentrism. Instead, the use of many "tongue[s]" (Fars.) subverts the dominance of any one. The incorporation of multiple linguistic systems allows for discourses of translation to inform the interpretive process.

The role of semantics in translation theory has been to temper the project of "rational retrieval" (Benjamin 6), according to which the essential meaning of a text is sought (16). Semantics was established as a linguistic discipline much earlier than modern translation theory. Even historical treatises on translation express difficulties in achieving equivalence, whether one should translate the words or the overall meaning within a text. Since languages define their lexicons in different ways, and words are often polysemic, an exact equivalence of denotation and connotation becomes difficult in translation. In the search for equivalence, the translator has to explore the potential meanings of language in both the source and the target text. The polysemy articulated within the field of semantics and incorporated in modern translation theory enables an exploration of the boundaries of meaning and potential interconnectivity between texts. While the term "text" has come to stand in for all forms of literature, Gayatri Spivak shows this to be a simplification of its export from Derrida's lexicon where the text was meant to refer to both literature and subjects to show their dual construction by the shaping force of linguistic representation (McCabe xii). Within this rubric, Acker's linguistic experimentation draws attention to the "textuality" (38), or inherent plurality, of both the linguistic text and the speaking subject. Focusing on the textuality of texts reorients the interpretation process toward exposing a text's internal dynamism. Multiplicities of meanings are shown to inhere in literary texts just as the continual capacity for reinterpretation, displacement and redeployment inheres in the subject. Lexical, grammatical and syntactical particularities within Acker's French and Farsi inserts undermine the claims to universal law underlying phallogocentric constructions of language.

In as much as language shapes subjectivity, the phallic law governing subject formation is also displaced. Instead, the interlinguistic current throughout Acker's novels necessitates a polyphonic interpretation that recognizes both the plurality of meanings inherent in the literary texts and the heterogeneity of the speaking subject.

In uncovering the operations underlying other semantic systems such as that of Farsi, Acker shows that "language is a givenness like all other givennesses" (*My Death* 267). Her play with Farsi exposes the givenness of logocentric discourse as a falsity by showing "what we know as 'natural'" to be "tools to control us" (359). The visual dimension of the Persian language lays bare grammatical rules that are concealed within the structure of the English language. For example, Farsi makes literally visible the way in which subjective qualities are layered into linguistic signs by a series of provisional grammatical rules. As such, Acker's Farsi language-play flags the erased mastery inherent in phallogocentric Western discourse.

While held captive by a gang leader, the protagonist of *Blood and Guts*, Janey, discovers a Persian grammar book. She teaches herself Farsi and constructs a series of poems and lessons that elucidate many of the idioms pertaining to the literal act of translation and, by analogy, that of articulating desire across cultural schemas. Ellipses and typographical errors highlight the fragility of language, particularly within the Persian visual scroll by which the simple omission of a tick, curve or dot can render a word meaningless or of a very different meaning than the author intended. For example, in Farsi, the words "hit" and "woman" differ only by a letter, which Janey mistakenly adds, thereby turning the intended word "hit" into "woman," in a list that she terms "Irregulars" (*Blood* 84). Similarly, Janey substitutes the English word "pain" for the Farsi word for "loyalty" in a section called "(Translate into English:)" (85-87). In other lists, the Farsi for "Janey is black" becomes "Janey is blind" and the Farsi "Fate" is interpreted as

“time” (79, 88). Other words are complicated by their lack of word parity. For example “cot” has no strong correlative in Farsi, while “peasant” is translated differently in two contexts (74-76, 89). The mistranslated words highlight the way in which terms are complicated by associative, connotative and relational meanings. In this way, Acker disrupts phallogocentrism's own basis in equivalency (sameness) and substitution.

The Persian language is a provocative choice on Acker's part because it lacks gendered pronouns. In fact, there are no gender distinctions inherent to the language. Persian pronouns that translate as “this,” “that” and “it” in English are also used to denote what Western discourse sees as gendered subjects. Unlike English, Farsi determines gender within the context of the sentence. Janey's translations from English to Persian and vice versa are complicated by pronoun ambiguities that would not exist in English language texts. The relationality of gender as an identity construct is implicitly recognized in the Persian language since the gender of the subject cannot be identified outside of its linguistic context. Thus, the syntagmatic semantic system underlying the Persian language is distinguished from the paradigmatic operations on which an English symbolic language is based – operations that stem from a logocentric system of reproduction, repetition and likeness. Acker draws attention to this distinction in order to challenge the “order of the same” (Irigaray *This Sex* 197) that grounds the signifying chain within phallic constructions of language.

In a list called “Present stem” (*Blood* 82-84), Janey attempts to break Farsi grammar into English syntactical structures, seeking to put forward what would be the equivalent of English root words. Janey tries, for example, to isolate the present stems of the verbs “have/want/see/come [...] rob/kidnap” according to the rules of English grammar. But, in so doing, she renders the words a mere assemblage of letters with no meaning. Janey's verb

conjugations evidence the fallacy of attempting to transfer grammatical rules or lexical patterns from one language to another. These attempted conjugations show that, just as meaning is facilitated by linguistic structures, it is obliterated when structures are used deterministically. In addition, Janey's conjugations fail to take into account that verb tenses cannot be isolated in Farsi. The past tense is implied in the present tense of Farsi verbs, and the appropriate use can only be determined within the context of a phrase. As such, meaning in Farsi cannot be cordoned off from the interpretive chain as easily as within English. The effect of imposing English grammatical rules on the Farsi language stands as a metaphor for the flattening of heterogeneity that results from the superimposition of phallogocentrism on conventional linguistic systems. As explained by the French feminists, the assumption of paternal law results in the transference of grammatical and lexical patterns that suppress the heterogeneity of languages. Through Janey's conjugations, Acker is able to illustrate the over-determination that conditions phallogocentric language and the consequence that this imposition has on the expression of non-normative desires and identities.

Janey compiles a lengthy analysis of what she refers to as the "ezafe," which she translates as the "extra," a grammatical addition that determines the subject of the sentence (72-74). "Ezafe" is actually an Arabic term for a grammatical tool with the same function, further highlighting Acker's interlinguism. The opening lines of Janey's Persian poems are a series of descriptive statements: "Janey is a girl./ the world is red./ night is the narrow street[. . .]/ Janey is an expensive child" (72). In the next section of the novel, Janey translates a series of possessive descriptors from Farsi to English. The series introduces the ezafe as that which ascribes the subject's qualities. The Farsi words translate literally as "Janey's night / red's night / world's night / Janey is broken." The point of interest is the transparency of the Farsi language versus the

presumptiveness of English, which, for example, translates the Farsi “red’s night” as “the red night.” The ezafe in Farsi makes the layering on of attributes a visible phenomenon. This grammatical device acknowledges that the descriptor is not a natural quality of the subject but is applied manually.

This is dissimilar to the English language statement, which conflates the variable quality of the attribute with the subject’s state of Being. The use of the definite article “the,” in the English translation, implies the subject’s stasis and endows the subject (night) with a finite meaning located in the attribute “red.” In Farsi, the placement of the ezafe creates ambiguity that is lost in the English translation. In the Persian script it is indefinite whether “night” is a quality of “red” or “red” is a quality of “night.” Acker makes this complication explicit when she rewrites “the woman of smell” with two possible Farsi translations, one in which the attribute (smell) belongs to the woman and the other in which the woman becomes the attribute of “smell.” The writing of “beautiful women” and “a beautiful woman” in Farsi also emphasize the ambiguity of the relationship between subjects and attributes. In short, in the Farsi versions, the subjects of the descriptors are more fluid than in the English statements. Hence, the Farsi language encourages one to recognize the interrelation of terms and inherently problematizes natural associations between subjects and attributes.

The structure of the descriptive statements in the Persian language also exhibits a fluidity that does not exist in English grammar. The basic structure of English grammar: the subject/predicate formulation, fails to distinguish between nouns and noun phrases so that a series of attributes can be subsumed within the definitive identity of the subject, as in the example, “Janey [subject] is an expensive child [predicate].” Butler notes that the certainty of the Cartesian split subject is manifest in the certainty of grammatical categories: “I” is the subject of

“think.” Unlike the philosophy implicitly underlying the Persian language, Western philosophy separates a person's social context from the definitional structure of personhood. This division denies the force of environmental factors that act on the person and presumes the prior ontological reality of certain core substances and attributes – rationality, sovereignty and sexual difference being of the most significant. Each of these attributes, Butler argues, is itself merely the product of a linguistic reality. The English grammatical formulation of subject and predicate that starts Janey's Persian translations sets up a distinction between this formulation and other forms of meaning-making represented by the Farsi grammar. In so doing, Acker undermines the surety of Western discourse.

The treatment of sexual material within Janey's Persian translations shows the effect of the logic of sameness (phallogocentrism) on expressions of desire. The author replaces sexually charged English words with the prosaic in the Persian text. Farsi equivalents for the English words “cock,” “cunt,” “prick,” and suggestive verbs are omitted and replaced with generic nouns such as the Farsi for “window,” “door” and “chair,” and simple prepositions (79-80). In this way, the author implies that models of Western desire flatten non-Western or otherwise marginal desires by forcing them to conform to an internal logic which they do not share. Simply put, one form of desire cannot be substituted for another without a critical loss.

As with the Farsi sections of her work, Acker's French sections draw attention to the foreclosure of marginal desire that occurs with the imposition of a univocal system of meaning.^{iv} In *My Death*, for example, Juliet is frustrated by her inability to understand Romeo's professions of love. Nor can she express her own desire. Asking “What does this language mean?” (264), she concludes she must “*no longer speak English*” (268) and so switches to French. Within the ensuing French dialogue, Juliet implicitly criticizes phallogocentric language when she claims that

it is men who “prononcer la réalité” [articulate reality] and that, in so doing, they “nous rendent incapables de le langage parler” [render us incapable of speaking]. Herein, Juliet reflects a recurring theme in Acker’s texts – characters' expression of the impossibility of their positions within a disabling phallogocentric semantic economy. However, breaking into the dialogue, the narrator claims that “Cette écriture est réelle. Cette réalité est mon message á vous” [This writing is real. This reality is my message to you] (269). The implicit assertion is that some other reality that enables women to speak arises through the movement between languages^v.

Conclusion: Polyvocality as the Expression of Sexual Alterity

According to Yuri Lotman, the boundary between languages is the “hottest” site of semiotizing processes because it exposes the naturally occurring heteroglossia, or excesses of meaning, within a given text (136). The boundary serves as a point of constant exchange of the signs producing cultural value (Godard *Writing* 55). Current translation theory deemphasizes the search for the essential truth of a text, instead recognizing the impossibility of a unified archaic meaning or a definitive context that might illuminate any singular meaning. Instead, the threshold between texts is viewed as a locus of possibility. Acker’s work similarly attends to thresholds: linguistic, bodily and textual. The author transforms these limits, however, into sites of production. For Acker, the polylinguistic possibilities that arise in the fluctuations between texts also carries a potentially polygendered subjectivity.

According to French feminists the speaking subject is bound by symbolic law. The subject’s options are to either accept the Law of the Father and the suppression of non-Phallic desire that this entails or to revel in an imaginary realm outside the purview of Paternal Law. Acker’s work posits the linguistic threshold as a more tangible way to imagine women’s

relationship to a dominant and oppressive symbolic language. Her interlinguism reconfigures women's relationships to language as ones of perpetual translation. In so doing, the author inscribes a more enabling discourse than those offered by French feminists by imbuing this relationship with the activity of the "translating subject" (*Writing* 84) versus the subjugated "speaking being" (Kristeva 265) that is the focus of French feminism.

Acker's translating subject operates within the rubric of recent translation theory, which denies the presence of original meaning and negotiates texts within a context-specific paradigm. According to Barbara Godard, texts are not only interrelated but anticipate one another. Godard's theory contests the notions of original and translation by showing that texts are written with an inherent intension to be translated; none can be isolated from the interpretive chain. The status of the phallus as transcendental signifier, however, is based on its placement as the point of origin for the subject's formation. But French feminists have shown that the subject's formation begins before the acquisition of symbolic language and that the introduction of phallic law in fact represents a violent repression of the subject's natural heterogeneity instead of a point of origin. This repression of the subject's psychological heterogeneity is akin to the repression of heteroglossia that occurs within traditional searches for original meaning in texts. In this way, translation theory proves useful as "a tactic of intervention into the basis of linguistic identity" (Godard *Writing* 92). Recent developments in translation theory recognize the simultaneity of a word's use with all its contextual possibilities. This recognition is implicitly at work in Acker's interlinguistic texts as well. In so much as language conditions subject formation, it follows that Acker's polyvocality is meant to legitimate simultaneously existing differential subjectivities rather than establishing a singular yet oppositional linguistic structure that merely reproduces the divisions on which the phallogocentric tradition is based.

Just as concepts of original text and translated text are complicated in the translation process so are notions of subject and object or symbolic and semiotic when this theory is applied to an understanding of women's identity construction. Taking the French feminist assertion that language constructs subjectivity as a fundamental proposition, Acker's interlinguism enables a polygendered sexual subjectivity and the expression of alterity not provided in the use of conventional and singular linguistic systems. Instead, Acker puts forward a representational schema that is not defined in opposition to a masculine language but rather goes beyond this distinction to dissolve the binary on which feminine difference was founded.

End Notes

ⁱ For a full rereading of Plato's *Parable* and its implications for women's position within the Western philosophic doctrine, see "Plato's Hystera" in Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman*.

ⁱⁱ See Nancy Focott's article "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850" for an analysis of Victorian femininity. While the asexual angel-in-the-house model of Victorian womanhood has until recently been generally accepted, this reading has been complicated by scholarship that observes Victorian femininity to be more ambiguous than previously noted. See, for example, Yopie Prins's *Victorian Sappho* and Kurt Hochenauer's "Sexual Realism in *The Portrait of a Lady*."

ⁱⁱⁱ I am grateful to Shabnam Antinucci for transcribing the Persian language text and for her patience in teaching me the elementary forms of the language. Due to the difficulty of approximating the hand-written "Persian Poems" in Acker's novel, the Farsi language text will be transcribed in English from this point on with the designation "Fars."

^{iv} I would like to gratefully acknowledge Tara Katherine Spencer for her help with the French translations.

^v It warrants mentioning that Acker does not always transcribe the French language text accurately. Within the context of Acker's opposition to a western universalizing feminist agenda, this indicates a possible point for the deconstruction of the author's own inevitably Anglo-western viewpoint.

Conclusion: The Actual and Metaphorical Promise of Translation

While French feminist theory starts from “an outside” (Irigaray *The Sex* 68) that is exempt from phallocratic law, Acker’s metaphors of translation inculcate a subject at the thresholds of the divisions on which this theory is based. French feminists sought to articulate a women’s literary aesthetic that opposed both the phallogentric literary tradition and the dominance of phallic law over all forms of linguistic communication. This style of writing was chiefly characterized by simultaneity, as represented by Irigaray’s metaphor of women’s two self-caressing lips. The simultaneity refers to the co-presence of multiple possible sexual identities by virtue of the inherent plurality of women’s sexual organs; neither a woman’s vaginal lips nor vulva are reducible to a single self-identical part. While this reinvention challenged phallic constructions of women’s sexuality as chiefly vaginal and, hence, the inverse of masculine sexuality, the multiplicity advocated by French feminists amounts to a simultaneity of distinctly female experiences. The possible subjectivities arising from French feminist theory remain framed in terms organized around female genitalia, anatomy and biology. As such, these theories risk maintaining the diametrical difference and resultant power relations on which phallic models are based. Acker’s visual and verbal interlinguism, however, exposes the impossibility of anatomically organized subjectivities by showing the way in which these sexual identities collapse when pushed to their logical limits. The mode of translation operating in Acker’s texts, conversely, seeks to disrupt the very binaries on which hegemonic socio-sexual identities are based.

The French theorists posited a state of feminine heterogeneity against a fixed and monolithic masculine presence. They put forward an oppositional feminine “nature that resists all transcriptions” (Irigaray, *The Sex* 107). Acker’s metaphors of translation, however, put

forward a subject actively invested in the transcription process. Rather than resisting transformation, the translating subject actively participates in the articulation process. Acker's subject is imbued with a capacity for combination that is lacking in the speaking subject, who must ultimately suppress a naturally occurring heterogeneity in order to participate in the social realm. The shift represented through Acker's metaphors of translation is a move toward a subject who determines its social position as much as is determined by the play of social forces. With this added agency, Acker's translating subject enters the social world in roughly the same way that a literary text enters discourse, ensconced within a process of enrichment and expansion, rather than one of restriction and suppression.

Acker's texts begin with a gendered experience of the body, which she depicts as having psychical and social dimensions. The author exposes the way that symbolic language codifies women's bodies as lack, as well as the effect of this codification on the subject's construction, self-representation and self-expression. Unlike that of French feminism, however, Acker's female body is not abstracted nor is her subject ahistorical. The constitution of the female body within patriarchal economic conditions is a recurring theme. Acker's literary work differs from that of French feminists because it indicates the author's willingness to accept a gendered material reality that cannot be transcended. At the same time, Acker's writing accords with these theories by recognizing that any articulation of women's experience must include the experience of the female body. Acker's metaphors have actual and material dimensions. The author's use of wounded female bodies stands symbolically for the violence enacted on women by an oppressive phallic logic, but it also refers to the physical control of women's bodies for various patriarchal, capitalistic and nationalistic ends. Her metaphors of translation are similarly double-sided; they stand in for a more active way of imagining women's role within the socio-symbolic order.

However, the overarching metaphor of translation reaching across her works also indicates an actual literary practice that has, as of yet, not been fully exploited.

French feminism to date has existed as a “utopian possibility rather than a literary practice” (Showalter 15). Cixous herself concedes that *écriture féminine* cannot be defined, theorized, enclosed or encoded (*Laugh* 883). However, her attraction to the work of the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector, which spawned her notion of *écriture féminine*, points to an unarticulated and perhaps unwitting response to the innate potentiality within the material act of translation. As noted by Cixous’s translator, Verena Conley, “the force of *écriture féminine* works especially in the play between thematic and linguistic registers” (xi). Conley’s observation points to a literary practice which becomes more prescient when analyzed within Acker’s Anglophone context. The multiple languages operating within Lispector’s texts, as well as those of feminist translators such as Godard, have been accepted as a quality of the authors’ own multilingualism. Acker’s Anglophone appropriation of multilingualism, however, points to translation as a strategy for circumventing the fixity of symbolic language and the univocal systems of meaning it represents.

According to Acker, “the war is on the language level” (*My Death* 341) and death results when, in the words of Acker’s Charlotte Brontë, “females fighting against male hegemony [...] di[e] cause she can’t be male and a female” (348). Her heroine’s claim indicates Acker’s contention with socio-linguistic structures that demand a divided subject. The author’s choice to invoke anatomical categorizations highlights her concern with these as the grounds for sexual politics and social identities. Instead, Acker’s writing emphasizes the complicated relationship between linguistic texts and systems in order to similarly complicate presumed distinctions between sexualized bodies. Godard shows that, beyond the interplay of languages, translation

represents the rewriting of text in a different conceptual horizon (*Writing* 58). *Écriture féminine* represents a mode of becoming locked within a feminine paradigm with the speaking subject struggling to translate its heterogeneity into the fixity of symbolic discourse. As I hope to have demonstrated, however, the translating subject put forward by Acker, conversely, is charged with the creation of a third linguistic medium characterized by combination, invention and perpetual renewal. The translating subject, like the text in translation, is not exchanged linearly across linguistic systems; rather, it is part of a mutually shaping process of transformation rooted in the expressive needs of the impending subject-text. In the search to articulate different nexes between power, sexuality and politics, then, the subject-text is a representational strategy that empowers the individual to form its identity along multiple axes. As a methodology, the subject-text disables any easy location according to dominant meta-physical schemas. Acker's subject-text "make[s]" but does not "create" (120) its position. Moving beyond the dualism that structures phallic centrism – the before and after of the subject's formation through the Oedipal Complex – the subject-text makes no claims to its origin, or its creation but makes itself continually according to the myths and fictions that structure daily life.

In a personal essay Acker observes that there is no longer a need to deconstruct, to reveal the frauds on which western society is living. She says, "We now have to find somewhere to go..." (*A Few* 121). Reflecting on her own material and socio-sexual experience, Acker identifies herself as a writer and as a "perverse straight woman" (Schlichter par.1). She expresses frustration with early suggestions that she should find her own voice and assurances that in this she would also find her "self" (119). But how was she to do this when, in the words of one her protagonists, "language is silence" (*Great* 226). Acker responds with the cacophony of multilinguism. For her, the method is supreme (*A Few* 120). Within her multilinguistic

methodology, the slippages and displacements so highly theorized in feminist deconstructionist praxis are manifest. Furthermore, Acker's interlinguistic aesthetic maintains a state of non-equivalence that is central to her sexual politics. The subject is freed to construct itself without the limitations of univocality. Through Acker's use of multiple linguistic systems the hinges of representation swing open and the subject is unbound.

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