Interdisciplinary Research in Gender

KATHY ACKER

PUNK WRITER

Margaret Henderson

Kathy Acker

This project is a feminist study of the idiosyncratic *oeuvre* of Kathy Acker and how her unique art and politics, located at the explosive intersection of punk, postmodernism, and feminism, critiques and exemplifies late twentieth-century capitalism.

There is no female or feminist writer like Kathy Acker (and probably no male either). Her body of work—nine novels, novellas, essays, reviews, poetry, and film scripts, published in a period spanning the 1970s to the mid 1990s—is the most developed body of contemporary feminist postmodernist work and of the punk aesthetic in a literary form. Some 20 years after her death, *Kathy Acker: Punk Writer* gives a detailed and comprehensive analysis of how Acker melds the philosophy and poetics of the European avant-garde with the vernacular and ethos of her punk subculture to voice an idiosyncratic feminist radical politics in literary form: a punk feminism. With its aesthetics of shock, transgression, parody, Debordian *détournement*, caricature, and montage, her *oeuvre* reimagines the *fin-de-siècle* United States as a schlock horror film for her punk girl protagonist: Acker's cipher for herself and other rebellious and nonconformist women. This approach will allow the reader to more fully understand Acker as a writer who inhabits an explosive and creative nexus of contemporary women's writing, punk culture, and punk feminism's reimagining of late capitalism.

This vital work will be an important text at both undergraduate and graduate levels in gender and women's studies, postmodern studies, and twentieth-century American literature.

Margaret Henderson teaches literature at the University of Queensland. She has published extensively on feminist culture and women's writing, including a study of feminist cultural memory, *Marking Feminist Times*, and with Anthea Taylor, *Postfeminism in Context: Women, Australian Popular Culture, and the Unsettling of Postfeminism*.

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Introduction

The *fin-de-siècle* punk writer: the sense and non-sense of revolt

In 1995, two years before her death, Kathy Acker gave a reading in my home town of Brisbane, Australia. The night was a sell-out, as the city's feminist, music, student, queer, and cultural undergrounds packed the post-punk live music venue, 'Van Gogh's Earlobe', to hear Acker. The place was buzzing with anticipation—it had been a long wait for her readers since her breakthrough novel, *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984). And Acker didn't disappoint. Leather jacket, reflective sunglasses, that low New Yorker voice, just Acker and her novella, *Pussycat Fever*. The audience was silent, transfixed, even slowed down their drinking as the text came to life. Was this a book reading or a great gig? It didn't matter. The effect was the same. Afterwards, Acker stood around and chatted with the audience, signed copies, cracked jokes, was patient and unpretentious though she'd just worked really hard in a hot, humid room. Then we filed out into the night, sensing that something special had just happened. By 1995 Acker was a literary star; regardless, she was a woman of our underground, still raging against the system, still writing funny and smart and uncompromising stories for us, changing literature in the process.

There is no feminist or woman writer like Kathy Acker (and probably no male writer either). Her body of work—nine novels, four or five novellas, numerous essays and reviews, poetry, performance pieces, a film script, and two opera libretti published in a period spanning the late 1960s to the mid 1990s—is one of the most substantial bodies of contemporary feminist experimental and postmodernist work, and of the punk aesthetic in a literary form. More than 20 years after her death, she continues to disturb, to fascinate, and to inspire loyalty, as the night in Brisbane showed.[1] For Acker, literature, radical theory, politics, and the social order of the West in the late twentieth century are inextricably linked, as friend and writer Robert Glück observes: "Kathy Acker had the highest ambitions: to reorient literature in a true relation to the present and to crack the moment wide open" (56). According to Robert Siegle, this ambition made Acker's work "the most devastating narrative critique of Western culture to appear in American literature" (48), one that made gender politics central. Acker's ambition (no

less) was to transform language, modes of thinking, the patriarchal gender regime, and the ways in which literature functions.

This book aims to do justice to Acker's ambitious attempt "to crack the moment wide open": as such, I wish to historically, politically, and culturally contextualise Acker's *oeuvre*. While Acker is often analysed in terms of an aesthetic or historical postmodernism (Ebbesen; Hogue; Pitchford; Sciolino) or as a feminist experimental writer (Berry; Friedman; Milletti), I want to perform a more precise and hence bounded analysis. I position Acker as a punk writer—thus denoting a particular identity and genre—within the 'moment' of late twentieth-century capitalism, and particularly the United States in the century's closing decades. Taking inspiration from Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, in which he argues that punk is a continuation of "an unknown tradition of old pronouncements, poems, and events, a secret history of ancient wishes and defeats" uttered by radical avant-garde movements of the twentieth century and earlier (441), I explore the nature of Acker's relatively idiosyncratic mode of writing—its punkness, and what it tells us about the *fin-de-siècle* United States. Both senses of *fin de siècle* are apposite: a collective mindset characterised by a feeling of crisis and decadence arising from a post-revolutionary situation (in this case, the turmoil of the 1960s) (Showalter 2), as well as its literal meaning. How does Acker address her era and why does her work emerge at this point? These questions are best answered by examining her *oeuvre* so that its recurrent structures, techniques, and thematics can be identified and explored. Douglas A. Martin similarly advocates such an approach, because "across her timeline, [there are] references and valences of repeating historical concerns. The Acker piece is never purely hermeneutically sealed endeavor" (135).

Acker's writing career runs roughly parallel to and intersects with the emergence of two powerful political and cultural forces in the last three decades of the twentieth century: the women's liberation movement and punk culture. Her uniqueness lies in the ways in which her writing, deeply influenced by the European avant-garde (and their late twentieth-century take-up by French poststructuralism and postmodern cultural theory) becomes a sociohistorical, cultural, and political nexus of all three. Acker melds the philosophy and poetics of the European avant-garde with the vernacular and ethos of her punk subculture to voice an idiosyncratic feminist radical politics in literary form: a punk feminism. Acker's feminist radicalism suggests her debt to radical feminism, as well as her creative mutation of it. By radical feminism I refer to those late 1960s and early 1970s revolutionary feminists who positioned women as a sex class, and considered "male supremacy and the subjugation of women [as] … the root and model oppression in society and that feminism [has] to be the basis for any truly revolutionary change" (Donovan 139).[2] Like Acker, these feminists launched a visionary and uncompromising critique of Western culture.

Similar to punk music's attempt to express discordantly what the dominant culture ignored or suppressed, Acker's writing is desublimatory. With its aesthetics of shock, transgression, parody, Debordian *détournement*, caricature, and montage, her *oeuvre* reimagines the *fin-de-siècle* United States as a schlock horror film for her punk girl protagonist: Acker's cipher for herself and other rebellious and nonconformist women.[3] Schlock horror captures both punk's confrontational mode of engaging with and representing the perverseness of Western, and especially American culture—being simultaneously appalled and amused by the 'damaged goods' of the United States—its state of imperial decadence,[4] as well as Acker's crucial technique of mixing and rewriting high and popular cultural forms, tropes, and discourses to form a revelatory literary hybrid. Her work thereby continues a feminist radicalism and the avant-garde's cultural role in the subaltern and mutant literary form of punk writing.

This study concentrates on a substantial selection of the novels and novellas to explore three key topics linked to the nexus of feminism, punk, and the European avant-garde in which Acker worked. First, I delineate the contours of Acker's 'punk' literary aesthetics, aesthetics here meaning the underlying principles and characteristics of a particular genre or text. What does it mean to be a punk writer at the end of the twentieth century and what kind of writing is made possible by punk techniques? I then examine the ways in which Acker represents and critiques late-capitalist America: what does she articulate with her punk aesthetics? As part of this, I explore what happens when a woman writer takes on the role of late twentieth-century avant-gardist, becomes a figure of revolt, to use Julia Kristeva's term (*Sense* 2), and therefore becomes the protagonist of the latest chapter in Marcus's "secret history".[5] What difference does Acker's explicitly gendered account make to the way in which American culture is re-imagined, and the ways in which we understand punk, as a recent avant-garde emanation, to function?

The sense and non-sense of revolt

I position Acker's *oeuvre* (and punk more broadly) in two overarching sociohistorical and theoretical contexts: late capitalism and the European avant-garde, specifically drawing upon the conceptual frameworks of Ernest Mandel's and Fredric Jameson's accounts of late capitalism, and Kristeva's work on the sociopsychic determinants of poetic language and the role of the avant-garde. Acker's work is not only produced in, but engages deeply with post-World War II, or late, capitalism, and particularly its American version, while the punk movement, whether consciously or unconsciously, attempts to enact a Kristevan revolution in language and music.

Late capitalism, according to the Marxist economist, Ernest Mandel, is a continuation of, rather than a break from, the preceding imperialist,

monopoly-capitalist epoch (9). For Mandel, "*the multinational company becomes the determinant organizational form of big capital*" (316, original emphasis), and what he terms the 'Third Technological Revolution'—"the generalized control of machines by means of electronic apparatuses" (121)—impacts on the means of production, the rate of technological innovation, the labour market, the permanence of the arms economy, and uneven development among nations (8–9). In addition, an increased because more specialised division of labour leads to an expansion of the services sector (385), while "an advanced differentiation of consumption" gives us the consumer society (389). And while Jameson notes that 'late capitalism' may seem vague, "what 'late' generally conveys is rather the sense that something has changed, that things are different, that we have gone through a transformation of the lifeworld" (xvi). Threads of the features identified by Mandel are woven throughout a number of Acker's texts: the technological revolution in *Empire of the Senseless*, the permanent arms economy in *Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream*, the multinational corporation in *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec*, uneven development among nations in *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, and the consumer society in *Blood and Guts in High School*.

Mandel's work informs, to varying degrees, either implicitly or explicitly, accounts of postindustrial society (Bell), consumer society (Featherstone), postmodern culture and advanced capitalism (Jameson), neoliberalism and post-Fordism (Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, *Postmodernity*), and globalisation (Hardt and Negri). As Bell's, Jameson's, and Harvey's accounts demonstrate, the United States is the dominant form of late capitalism: its most powerful iteration and promulgator across the globe, being "a more open system of imperialism without colonies during the twentieth century" (Harvey, *Neoliberalism* 27). Jameson explains that it was "the brief 'American century' [1945–1973] that constituted the hothouse, or forcing ground, of the new system, while the development of the cultural forms of postmodernism may be said to be the first specifically North American global style" (xx).

Mandel's comments on the workings of culture are at a relatively general level, given his focus is economics, though as Jameson's comments above suggest, culture is critical to late capitalism, and takes a specific form: 'postmodernism'.[6] Postmodernism is a cultural dominant rather than simply a style, and marks and is produced by the integration of "aesthetic production … into commodity production generally" (Jameson 4). Jameson outlines the following characteristics of the cultural dominant: "a new depthlessness" as in "a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum"; "a consequent weakening of historicity" in both "public History" and our "private temporality" leading to cultural amnesia and new schizophrenic forms of syntax; and what he terms "intensities": "a whole new emotional ground tone" (6). He goes on to detail the ways in which various artefacts of contemporary American culture—including architecture, painting, cinema, and literature—express the cultural logic of late capitalism. And he is at pains to stress that

"this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world" (5).

Postmodernism is a descriptor often applied to Acker, though for her stylistics more so than for her critique of the American hegemon. To be more precise, I position the punk movement (as does Jameson 1), including Acker's work, as a subset of postmodern culture. Punk is a product of late capitalism, at certain points expressing its logic (Konstantinou 107)—as in certain bands being commercialised simulacra of rebellion, or representing one of postmodernism's "resistant" (Jameson) or "oppositional" forms of culture (McKay 5), until its incorporation by the larger system (Thompson 49), and/or diffusion into new wave (Reynolds) or no wave (Moore and Coley). Acker's writing, however, remained an uncompromisingly oppositional form of punk culture to its premature end, and indeed was part inspiration for later breakouts of politicised punk such as riot grrl (Ioanes 186).

While scholarly work on punk culture increases, there is a dearth of accounts that attempt to trace the deeper historical pressures contributing to the advent of punk—particularly those impacting the gendered subject—beyond the dynamics of late capitalist recession and music industry ossification. I turn to Kristeva's theorisation of the emergence of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literary avant-gardes, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*, and *Intimate Revolt* to address this gap, specifically to contextualise the emergence of Acker's punk writing in a time of the American hegemon.

Kristeva provides a theory of subjectivity, linguistic and literary structures, and their moments of rupture that is historical, social, and individual. In her landmark analysis Kristeva posits that the human subject and hence writing (as the product of her subject of enunciation) is conditioned by the interplay of psychosexual and sociohistorical forces. One becomes a subject by taking on a particular form of language: the infant renounces the semiotic *chora* (the pre-Oedipal) and enters the symbolic realm. These two orders are comprised by a particular mode of signification: the semiotic approximates the infant's pre-Oedipal relationship to the mother, and is rhythmical, musical, nonsensical; accordingly, it is coded as a feminine register. The symbolic is the language of sense and reason: orderly and controlled, as in science, for example (*Revolution* 24); consequently, the symbolic is associated with the masculine. Kristeva notes, however, that the subject is "both semiotic and symbolic", never entirely one or the other, rather, existing in a dialectical relationship (*Revolution* 24).

My particular interest is Kristeva's focus on exploring the historical moment (and its mode of production) when a signifying practice (specifically, writing) marked by a major eruption of the semiotic into the symbolic emerges (*Revolution*). She argues that the writings of Stéphane Mallarmé and Comte de Lautréamont represent such a moment, what she terms a revolution in poetic language, which "stands for the infinite possibilities of

language" (Roudiez 2). Instead of maintaining the dominance of the symbolic over the semiotic, Mallarmé's and Lautréamont's textual practice is a return to the semiotic *chora*: "By *reproducing signifiers*—vocal, gestural, verbal—the subject crosses the border of the symbolic and reaches the semiotic *chora*, which is on the other side of the social frontier" (79). Kristeva contends that this is a highly subversive practice, attacking the subject and the social order at their very foundations—language. By the writer's "semiotisation of the symbolic … [and] the flow of jouissance into language", not only is the writing subject shattered but potentially the social structure as well (79). According to Kristeva,

> The text is a practice that could be compared to political revolution: the one brings about in the subject what the other introduces into society. The history and political experience of the twentieth century have demonstrated that one cannot be transformed without the other.
>
> (*Revolution* 17)

As some critics observe, Acker's work, in attempting to give voice to a female anti-Oedipal subject, mobilises the semiotic register (Colby, "Radical"; Harper; Hawkins).

Kristeva is interested in why these revolutionary texts emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, and whether they were recuperated by imperialist capitalism. She identifies a number of sources of this semiotic upheaval that find parallels with Acker's writing. First, these texts represent a search for a language to bridge the gap between people's revolutionary desires and their representation in cultural texts; the nineteenth century is, after all, a time of intense revolutionary struggle across Europe (*Revolution* 210). "The problem, then, was one of finding practices of expenditure capable of confronting the machine, colonial expansion, banks, science, Parliament—those positions of mastery that conceal their violence and pretend to be mere neutral legality", she explains (*Revolution* 83). Second, relaxations in the mode of production and reproduction meant that these texts were no longer viewed as 'insane', instead they could be received as works of art (*Revolution* 105). And finally, the revolutionary text provides something that capitalism lacks or represses: negativity or rejection, "but keeps it in a domain apart, confining it to the ego, to the 'inner experience' of an elite, and to esoterism" (*Revolution* 186). Regardless of this almost repressive desublimation of poetic language, "[t]his signifying practice—a particular type of modern literature—attests to a 'crisis' of social structures and their ideological, coercive, and necrophilic manifestations" (*Revolution* 15). Punk culture, including Acker, is evidence of a late twentieth-century search for a means of representation with which to confront the late capitalist machine.

In her more recent works, *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* and *Intimate Revolt*, Kristeva revisits the imbricated fate of the avant-garde and the human subject in the current context of consumer capitalism and the

associated society of the spectacle. She argues that culture, specifically a culture of revolt, provides a society with its critical conscience (*Sense* 6). As she observes, "[t]he great moments of twentieth-century art and culture are moments of formal and metaphysical revolt" (*Sense* 7). The current social order denies, however, the subject revolt: "Though we are not punished, we are, in effect, normalized: in place of the prohibition or power that cannot be found, disciplinary and administrative punishments multiply, repressing or, rather, normalizing everyone" (*Sense* 5). As a consequence,

> an essential aspect of the European culture of revolt and art is in peril, that the very notion of culture as revolt and of art as revolt is in peril, submerged as we are in the culture of entertainment, the culture of performance, the culture of the show.
>
> (*Sense* 7, 6)

This society of the spectacle was a context of which punk and Acker were well aware. Without the notion of culture as revolt, Kristeva contends, a society stagnates, becoming one of "physical and moral violence, barbarity" (*Sense* 7), a position also shared by Acker and punk.

Kristeva's response to this crisis is an impetus for my study. She contends that "[t]here is an urgent need to develop the culture of revolt starting with our aesthetic heritage and to find new variants of it" (*Sense* 7). Moreover, "I see no other role for literary criticism and theory than to illuminate the experiences of formal and philosophical revolt that might keep our inner lives alive" (*Sense* 7–8). With this in mind, I understand punk as a relatively recent emanation of the culture of revolt discussed by Kristeva. So that while the politics of punk can range from Nazism to nihilism to communism, from misogyny to feminism, two consistent features inform its various political positions: an anarchic spirit, and an oppositional, desublimatory stance to the current social order (Hebdige 116; Sartwell 114). As Crispin Sartwell explains, "The punk fringe articulated the shape of the dominant culture, or both punk and dominant cultures (partly) defined themselves by mutual opposition" (101). And when an emancipatory politics meets punk, a punk negation rather than nihilism results, which "shows that the world is not as it seems" (Marcus 9).

In particular, I wish to illuminate Acker as a leading figure of late-twentieth-century literary revolt, and specifically, punk feminist revolt—an extension by mutation of early radical feminism with its "in-your-face-textuality" and ethos of personal and political "transformation through text" (Rhodes 22, 51). As such, this project joins other relatively recent attempts to revisit and acknowledge the importance of early radical feminist critiques (Melissa Deem as one of the first accounts, and more recently Breanne Fahs, Nancy Fraser, Natalya Lusty, Jacqueline Rhodes, and Amanda Third), particularly given the combustible twenty-first-century context suggested by a reactionary form of postfeminism, a neoliberal feminism, the beginnings of a

renewed broad-based feminist activism, and the rise of hard-right populism across the West. I attempt to draw out the conditions of enunciative possibility for a writer such as Acker, not so much in an individual biographical sense (the influence of her biography on her writing, as in Chris Kraus's fine study, *After Kathy Acker*), but in a cultural, political, and historical sense. Suitably enough for a writer who played with autobiographical and writerly mythologies throughout her work, indeed, a writer of autofiction *avant la lettre*, Acker is a cipher for exploring the conditions of possibility for and outcomes of the nexus of avant-garde, punk, and feminist textual revolt.

Reading and writing Acker as a punk feminist

Acker's project is uncompromising, risky, and, for some critics, a failure (Redding, Indiana). Acker has recently been the subject of a critical biography (Kraus), with another expected shortly (McBride), but only four scholarly monographs have been published: Georgina Colby's *Kathy Acker: Writing the Impossible*, Spencer Dew's *Learning for Revolution: The Work of Kathy Acker*, Douglas A. Martin's *Acker*, and Emilia Borowska's *The Politics of Kathy Acker: Revolution and the Avant-Garde*.

In what is an excellent and detailed study of Acker's techniques, Colby locates Acker as a continuation of modernist experimentation and of the post-World War II American avant-garde. In contrast, Borowska focuses on Acker's connection with the historical avant-garde and their revolutionary contexts as key to her literary politics, examining Acker's rewriting of "history [as] a potent source of revolutionary transformation of the present", though feminism is a relatively marginal concern (6). Martin takes a less academic, more *belle lettrist* approach to her work, weaving together the author and his subject, resulting in an insightful impressionistic reading. "Against the lobotomy, the shits, the robot, the creeps," he observes, "Acker posits desire in imagining, her formulating of other possible agency" (113). Dew's perceptive study, with its focus on the reception of Acker's work, emphasises the radical pedagogical element. He contends that her "novels were created in part, as contributions to ideological struggle, practical tools for 'revolutionary' political change within society", with her readers learning to read otherwise, forming a community, and being inspired into action (15). My interest, however, is primarily in Acker's textual production, and in addressing the neglected contextual frames of punk and second wave feminism. These frames are what makes Acker's texts distinctive in twentieth-century literary history—including feminist literary and cultural history—and are key to understanding her work.

The majority of critical accounts of Acker's texts are found in scholarly articles and chapters, however, the range and depth of these analyses are unavoidably constrained by length. As Nicola Pitchford notes, a major approach to Acker is an emphasis on questions of desire and the body, often using an ahistorical perspective (67). Another predominant and

complementary approach is the close reading of one Acker novel using a particular variant of poststructuralist theory, most notably, Gilles Deleuze or Lacanian psychoanalysis. While these yield fascinating insights, a more historically informed and contextually specific view of Acker's project is not generally a focus.

Studies that examine questions of context are less prominent, but have produced invaluable readings. So, for instance, a number of critics discuss Acker's critique of contemporary capitalism (Clune; Hawkins; Pitchford; Swope); her relationship with the historical avant-garde (Borowska; Mintcheva, "Paralyzing", "To Speak"), American imperialism (Riley), women's experimental writing (Berry; Friedman; Harryman; Houen), or punk and riot grrl (Feigenbaum; Ioanes; Konstantinou; McCaffery). Siegle gives Acker a prominent place in his study of the 1970s and 1980s new American fiction that he terms "poststructural fiction"; an overlapping context for Acker, the Downtown Scene of New York, is analysed by Brandon Stosuy in *Up Is Up But So Is Down*. Regardless, an expansive sociohistorically focused study—one that addresses her politics, her intellectual frameworks, and the spaces in which she wrote (punk) and wrote about (the United States)—remains to be undertaken.

Scholarly interest in punk, while rapidly increasing, is usually concerned with punk as a musical or subcultural phenomenon (Heylin; Marcus; Sabin; Savage; Thompson), or as a visual aesthetic or movement (Bestley and Ogg; Kugelberg and Savage). Thompson notes, however, that punk is comprised of a number of genres, and "together, these texts make up what I will term the 'punk project' "—with 'project' capturing punk's broader ambitions (49). Sartwell, in his study of punk aesthetics, observes that punk—regardless of medium—is a style, an attitude, a scene, a way of making culture, and a political stance: "Punk is usually thought of as a musical style. But first it is a style of all the arts" (100). And via its style, punk functions as a spectacular form of rebellion against late capitalism, even as (and because) it rejects "every aspect of the [late capitalist] spectacle" (Sartwell 103). As a consequence, punk culture relied on a distinctive use of language that echoed and reinforced its musical aesthetic, whether in its song lyrics, posters, fanzines, record covers, journalism, or argot, detailed in the following chapter.

As Daniel Kane, among others, documents, punk was also distinguished by artists moving between genres: Richard Hell, poet and band member, exemplifies this (Kane, "Richard"), while Acker collaborated with musicians (most notably, the Mekons), and brought a broader rock 'n' roll ethos to literary practices (Dick 208). Regardless, punk as a literary phenomenon is under-researched, although McCaffery suggested the potential of such an approach in his 1989 essay, "The Artists of Hell: Kathy Acker and 'Punk Aesthetics' ", as do Bernard Gendron's, Kane's, and Stosuy's excellent book-length accounts of the New York punk milieu. Lee Konstantinou's compelling reading of Acker's punk writing problematises her politics, demonstrating how her punkness could segue into "neoliberal apologetics"

(154). Significantly, however, he omits discussion of gender politics. In addition to Kane's comprehensive study of the mutually productive relationship between punk and New York poetry (*Do*), there have been a few attempts to connect punk with poetry (Ambrosch; Cowan; Davies; James), and a similarly small number of analyses of fiction that represents punk culture (Rivett; Schill).

With a few exceptions, such as scholarly work by Lauraine Leblanc, Helen Reddington, and Shayla Thiel-Stern; Vivien Goldman's journalism for *Pitchfork*; memoirs by female punk musicians (Bag; Albertine); and a 2012 special issue of *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* (Becker), punk's connections with feminism and gender politics have been neglected. Indeed, Marcus's wonderful reconfiguring of twentieth-century cultural history, centring on a political reading of punk, shows scant interest in women's roles, which led me to ask: where are the women?

Although often misogynist, the 1970s subcultural movement of punk is also distinguished by the freedoms it offered women, and by women's expanded and critical role in its practices. Caroline Coon suggests that "It would be possible to write the whole history of punk music without mentioning any male bands at all—and I think a lot of them would find that very surprising" (qtd in Reddington, *Lost* 2). As Rebecca Daugherty explains, "Coming into the late 1970s, women in music were still the chanteuse: the body, the voice … Punk was the first time in the history of popular music that a girl could start a band with a system to support her endeavour" (30–31). Punk's transgressions of middle- and working-class cultural proprieties also included militant confrontations with the codes of femininity: "Girls used punk precisely to interrogate gender and to rewrite the restrictive scripts that limit women's lives" (Daugherty 30). And "punk", as McCaffery observes, "was a natural area for certain women artists to investigate. For one thing, punk's emphasis on breaking with rigid traditions and defying authority and public discourses was an obvious attraction" (222).

Young punk women's confrontations with culture as well as on the street occurred simultaneously with the growth of the women's movement, both articulating a sense of social crisis and political disaffection in the painful shift from Keynesianism to a neoliberal form of late capitalism—Reddington ironically notes "the [gendered] equalizing effect of mass unemployment on young people in Britain in the mid-1970s" ("'Lady'" 239). From its beginnings, whether in terms of personnel, practices, or elements of ideology and discourse, punk had a complex and sometimes productive relationship with feminism: both shared a DIY ethos of cultural production and a political reading of culture, while punk's signifiers and ethos of rebellion influenced certain forms of feminism, and feminist ideology proved attractive to women and girls in punk (O'Brien 187). Acker's work exemplifies this crossover, hence is ideal to explore a gendered and political version of punk.

The centrality of sexual politics and female identity to Acker's revisioning of late-capitalist America, and her revolutionary literary politics, make a

left-feminist reading position productive. My feminism is informed by contemporary Marxist and post-Marxist insights, acknowledging that the mode of production and the gender regime are mutually determining to some extent, and that the current capitalist era is 'flexibly' patriarchal. It is a position that acknowledges the materiality of signifying practices, the importance of these practices to social reproduction, and the ability of patriarchal late capitalism to accommodate and profit from feminist progress and demands. This reading position can draw out the nuances of Acker's work, focusing on the distinctive ways in which women 'do' punk, and therefore is able to address Acker's political critique. Indeed, Acker claimed that feminists were among her best readers. Moreover, a feminist reading of Acker within the contextual frame of late capitalism challenges the absence of gender analysis that characterises so many accounts of late capitalist and postmodern culture, including seminal ones by Jameson, Harvey, and Jean Baudrillard that seem largely oblivious to the contemporaneous transformations achieved by Western women's liberation movements and the massive, global effects of women's movement into wage labour and post-traditional forms of intimacy and family. A feminist reading of a feminist writer like Acker, who makes the character of the punk girl central to all her narratives, is a powerful way to locate and focus on women's position in the late capitalist imaginary.

But how does one go about reading Acker, a writer who, in her critique of reason, conventional language, and literature, takes writing to the breaking point and often into the realm of nonsense? How does one analyse such anarchic, slippery, and dense material without losing sight of its historical and social surrounds? Her literary executor, Matias Viegener, aptly comments that "it's not clear to me that KA's [*sic*] work is master-able, in fact I think it resists mastery, both internally and externally" (qtd in Martin 135). Cognisant of the limitations of any reading of a writer as complex and rich as Acker—so many readings remain to be made—I choose an approach inspired by Walter Benjamin's *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* and *The Arcades Project* because of a number of productive synergies between Benjamin, Baudelaire, Acker, and punk. First, the historical parallels between Baudelaire and Acker suggest the usefulness of Benjamin's approach. Both Acker and Baudelaire are situated in transitional periods of capitalism (from market to monopoly capitalism for Baudelaire (Annesley 113), Keynesianism to neoliberalism for Acker), and are *fin-de-siècle* figures who, in attempting to engage with a sense of sociohistorical change and decadence, turn to aesthetic innovation. As a consequence, they are iconic figures of punk rebellion (Kane, "Richard" 344–348).

Second, I share Benjamin's emphasis on sociohistorical context to more fully interpret the writer and their work, and, accordingly, I derive my key analytical categories from his study. Benjamin wishes to explore how Baudelaire engages with late nineteenth-century *modernité*, and the implications of this space and time for his poetics. As a consequence, Benjamin's critical method

and form move away from conventional literary criticism. In *Charles Baudelaire*, he uses the analytical categories of figures to delineate the poet's context and motifs to capture the poet's work. Benjamin's identification and exploration of the figures of the *bohème*, the *flâneur*, and the hero of modernism, as well as the motifs of memory, shock, and the crowd, become the parameters of Baudelaire's work, providing an imagistic and rich interpretation of the poet, his poetry, his immediate milieu, and his times.

In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin's monumental study of the nineteenth-century Paris arcades (in which Baudelaire is major concern), Benjamin adopts the formal principle of montage to reflect his method and, I would argue, to reflect Baudelaire's times: "Not conceptual analysis but something like dream interpretation was the model" (Eiland and McLaughlin ix). The resultant critical text, "with its philosophical play of distance, transitions, and intersections, its perpetually shifting contexts and ironic juxtaposition" arranged into what Benjamin terms "convolutes"—sheaves of notes arranged by topic—is "a patchwork" of commentaries and quotations that produces "an *image* of that epoch" (Eiland and McLaughlin x–xi, x, original emphasis). While I do not adopt this fragmentary form, its uncanny resemblance to Acker's punk writing suggests the hospitable nature of Benjamin for my study.

Benjamin's categories of figures and motifs structure my inquiry into the contexts of Acker the writer and her narratives, and align with the two interpretive foci, hence two parts of this book. Part I "Contexts and configurations of Acker" is less conventional literary criticism, instead examining four contexts and/or figurations (social, subcultural, theoretical, and politico-literary) that make Acker a punk writer—the how and why she came to be the punk feminist. Part II "Acker's punk tropology" examines the motifs used by Acker as her punk lexicon of the *fin-de-siècle* United States—what she had to say about the times in which she was living, the particular rhetorics, tropes, and narratives she used to produce an image of her epoch. The particular contours of punk music—intensely focused and frequently centred on a few characteristically punk motifs—informs the shape of the chapters in Part II, each chapter dedicated to one novel and thematic of Acker's *oeuvre*.

Part I begins with an overview of Acker's punk times and her biographical connections with the subculture. Using textual analysis in Chapters 2 to 4, I then analyse three figures or, more precisely, configurations of Acker that refer to the writer, her work, and her contexts: Acker as an early punk writer, punk intellectual, and her culmination as a punk feminist. Significantly, these are all figures of potential revolt. Exploring them enables me to build a montage of the various cultural, intellectual, and political contexts in which her work can be located, and the sources of her aesthetics. Sometimes these contexts are overlapping, sometimes complementary, at other points antagonistic, thus examining Acker in this way resists an overly tidy interpretation. This approach allows us to ask questions of these configurations: why

do they emerge as facets of a writer in the final decades of the twentieth century? What forms of revolt do they entail, and what can they suggest regarding literature's relationship with late capitalism? The term 'configuration' encapsulates the constructed and external nature of these identities (a quality of which Acker was well aware), and parallels the form of her texts as assemblages—to which I shortly return.

Chapter 1 "Punk times: the scenes and sounds of punk writing" discusses the American and British contexts for punk, both scenes of economic and social decline and crisis. I outline punk music's aesthetics and its literary counterparts, and Acker's affiliation with a punk underground. Chapter 2 "The punk writer emerges: from counterculture to punk culture", discusses *The Burning Bombing of America* and *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, demonstrating how punk aesthetics emerge and become a strategy for the female radical writer in the aftermath of the counterculture. Punk poetics provides a repertoire of techniques and a potent sensibility that can respond to the limitations of countercultural literary form and a related sense of confinement for the politicised female subject.

Acker, I contend, is one of the most theoretically engaged fiction writers of the closing decades of the twentieth century. Accordingly, Chapter 3 "The punk intellectual: repossessing the European avant-garde" explores the intellectual frameworks Acker draws upon, and her mode of engagement with them in her writing and in her public persona, making her a 'punk lay theorist'. While Colby is correct to locate Acker within the post-World War II literary avant-garde, more influential are the writers and theorists who can be described as part of an earlier European avant-garde and counter-Enlightenment tradition, such as the Marquis de Sade, Georges Bataille, Arthur Rimbaud, and Antonin Artaud, which gains renewed prominence in poststructuralism and postmodern theory of the 1970s onwards. Acker 'repossesses' this largely male tradition for feminist purposes, a repossession that signifies major shifts in left political paradigms. The politico-literary outcomes of this feminist repossession are the subject of Chapter 4 "The punk feminist novelist: making the novel of cruelty and excess". I discuss *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec* to examine the ways in which Acker extends and intellectualises punk aesthetics to expose and reconfigure the bourgeois realist novel. The outcome is a literary punk feminism characterised by cruelty and excess, which functions as a necessary supplement to the moderating languages of American feminism from the mid 1970s onwards.

Drawing upon Benjamin's second analytical category of motifs, Part II shifts focus from the contexts and aesthetics that contributed to Acker's unique punk feminist literary production, to the content of her punk writing. Punk culture's distinctive style relies on characteristic tropes as well as techniques, even if being deliberately anti-aesthetic or "anti-design" (Hollis 188). Each of Acker's works, in their anti-narrative and anti-realist stance, can be read as a "punk assemblage" of tropes (Martin 20), some of which

are repeated across novels, others used only once but essential to a particular text. These tropes are foundational to the distinctive nature of Acker's punk writing, imbricating its excessive approach to literary form with radical political critique, and as a consequence producing a confronting, even spectacular literary rebellion. Acker was not so much interested in telling a story through coherent narrative, but rather, in parallel to Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire, sketching out a dissonant, even frenzied version of a social regime, with her building blocks of compressed, intense, resonant motifs.

The selection of tropes in Part II comprise Acker's punk lexicon of patriarchal, and specifically American, late capitalist culture. 'Lexicon' here refers to its dictionary sense of being the vocabulary of a particular group of speakers, and a branch of that group's knowledge—in this case articulating a worldview and political critique (a type of knowledge) for punk feminists. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue, tropes—in the sense of motifs or figurative and rhetorical devices—are conceptual in nature: they are more than decorative, arising from and revealing a culture's patterns of thought. So, using metaphor as a subset of tropes, they explain that "the locus of metaphor is not in language at all, but in the way we conceptualise one mental domain in terms of another" (Lakoff and Johnson 203).

Each chapter in Part II examines a quadrant of American late capitalism—two conventionally associated with the private realm, namely, heterosexual desire and the family, and two with the public sphere, the polity and the economy—through an analysis of one novel's tropes with which Acker reimagines and hence critiques the sector in question. These foci necessarily limit the number of novels that can be discussed; however, Acker's techniques and her reading of the United States are consistent across her *oeuvre*. A crucial device is the use of the punk girl as protagonist in each novel, allowing Acker to harness the punk girl's especially transgressive status because, as Thiel-Stern explains, punk "girls are even further on the edges than boys, since rock itself was a masculine domain" (134). The punk girl's name changes from text to text (Janey in *Blood and Guts in High School*, nameless in "I Dreamt I was a Nymphomaniac: Imagining", multiple punk girls in *Pussy, King of the Pirates*), regardless, she is a consistent perspective, voice (Hulley 488), and type of subject: the rebellious, nonconformist female located in the liminal space between girlhood and adult femininity—between personal and hence political 'innocence' and the 'maturity' of social integration. It is her dissonant and painful experience of the late capitalist United States that is made graphic and articulated by Acker's punk lexicon. Unlike Baudelaire, she is more a '*combattante*' than '*flâneuse*'.

David A. Ensminger, in his reading of punk's visual culture, argues that intertexuality is core to the punk aesthetic, an insight that applies to Acker's lexicon (17–18). Each of her novels is framed by a literary text(s) and its associated genre, which together function as a 'master trope' or host: this is key to her revisioning and exposé of the particular element of the United

States. So, for instance, William Gibson's *Neuromancer* as representative of the cyberpunk genre is master trope to Acker's revisioning of the late capitalist economy traced in Chapter 8. These host texts or framing narratives range from one of the first Western novels, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, up to one of the most recent literary forms—cyberpunk—a historical range that suggests the breadth of Acker's vision, and her deep sense of the political power of literary representation. Joining, or often disturbing, the host text are the motifs of caricatured historical personae (President Nixon, for example); cultural icons or personages (such as a female cyborg); popular cultural texts (a sci-fi horror film, among others); and tropes that are closely associated with the female condition and feminist politics (rape, sadomasochism, and abortion). We thus have a lexicon that draws from motifs of high and popular culture, the respectable and the transgressive, women's corporeality, figures of institutional power, and subcultural figures—an underground and an 'overground'. And the method of arranging these tropes and framing narratives is equally critical to Acker's punk tropology—her construction of a punk assemblage is a major device to do the work of ideological desublimation. The novels are a specifically punk form of pastiche, comprised of a brutal intertextual suturing and maniacal appropriation. As a consequence, the various fragments, in their collision, leakage (Hulley 176), and faux stupid rewriting by Acker, reveal their political unconscious in schlock horror terms.

Like the vitriolic codes of punk's visual culture (Ensminger), Acker's punk tropology articulates a fictionalised, graphically confronting, counter-reading of recent American history and culture. The libidinal economy of each quadrant is made explicit in the punk girl's experiences, with Acker drawing upon and extending Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's radical reading of desire in/and capitalism.[7] Rather than psychoanalysis's position that sees desire as lack and/or as attached to a particular object, Deleuze and Guattari see desire as a productive force: it makes things happen, indeed, is "revolutionary", capable of upending a social formation (*Anti-Oedipus* 116). And unlike the dominant culture's conception of desire as ahistorical and restricted to the private domain, the intimate, and the individual, thereby keeping social production and desiring production separate, "the social field is immediately invested by desire" (29). As they put it, "social production is purely and simply desiring production under determinate conditions" (29); consequently, any social formation, including late capitalism, is marked by a particular libidinal economy: the ways in which desire circulates and is distributed.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the social reproduction of capitalism requires the routing of desire into safe, acceptable channels and sites. And psychic repression is a critical method to do this, most centrally via the family and what they call Oedipus—a term that includes the Oedipal family, psychoanalysis, and the Oedipus complex (118). Desire's explosive force is defused by being placed within limited and prescriptive frameworks of understanding,

such as the Oedipus complex, and concentrated in the domain of the family, so that we learn to desire a repression of our desires. To expose and destabilise these channels underpinning American patriarchal late capitalism is the punk girl's journey: "an agon between forces of control and her … personae who resist being shaped, modified, and limited" (Hume 488).

The discussion of *Blood and Guts in High School* in Chapter 5 engages with the legacy of the sexual revolution to trace the training of the punk girl for the deregulated circuits of sexually liberated America. Using a mutant genre of women's desire comprised by the American teen novel and the novel of women's quest for sexual liberation, Acker traces the underlying dynamics of heterosexual desire for women through the motifs of high school, sadomasochism, and slavery. In Chapter 6, the analysis of *Great Expectations* places the punk girl in a social context of the crisis in the American family and the associated call for a return to family values. Her location within a parodic version of the Oedipal family, and her revisiting of various versions of the family romance, reveal the conventional family to always be a place of crisis for the dissident girl, with family values severely circumscribing her 'great expectations'. The reading of *Don Quixote* in Chapter 7 shifts focus from the intimate circuits of desire to the public realm of the American polity: its domestic and imperial machinations. The punk girl's adventures in liberal democracy result in a disenchantment—in both senses of the word—with the system, as the punk girl knight-errant receives lessons in the gendered and changing contours of political power. The final chapter, a discussion of *Empire of the Senseless*, maps the transition in twentieth-century American capitalism from an Oedipal to a post-Oedipal form represented by the multinational corporation. The punk girl, now figured as a cyborg, has both increased exchange value in the new taboo-less economy, but still has no hospitable place in which to reside or to roam.

A feminist minor literature

Acker, as a female figure of punk revolt articulating an idiosyncratic and confronting feminism makes her a producer of a feminist minor literature, in Deleuze and Guattari's sense of being minor to an established category of literature (*Kafka* 18). In Acker's case, her *oeuvre* is minor in relation to women's literature (the object of feminist literary studies). An analysis of Acker's reception history shows that until 1989, Acker's work garnered far more interest from male critics and reviewers in the mainstream and the underground press than from feminist critics, reviewers, and literary periodicals. This marginal status is surprising, given her explicit interest in gender politics from the beginning of her career, the growth in the field of contemporary women's literature both inside and outside the academy during this time, and the importance of postmodernism to feminist critics and contemporary women writers (and their role in making a literary postmodernism).

I surmise that Acker's minor status can be attributed to three factors. First, realism is the mainstay of women's and feminist fiction (Rose 367)—women's experimentalism was and is marginal to women's writing. Furthermore, Marianne DeKoven's description of Acker in a 1986 review essay suggests the other reasons, providing clues as to how certain literary feminists 'handled' Acker in the first two decades (if not more) of her career. As DeKoven observes, Acker is "the notorious punk/new wave celebrity" who "appropriates for a (possibly or arguably) feminist point of view the violent pornographic imagery of the 'mainstream' male American avant-garde tradition of Henry Miller and William Burroughs" (14). Acker's association with a flamboyant, music-centred subculture of uncertain politics and often being accused of misogyny is not the usual milieu for a woman or feminist writer, and produces suspicions regarding a lack of literary and/or political seriousness.[8] Her fame is problematic—continuing the women's movement's 'tradition' of mistrust of the media and of high-profile feminists. Similarly, Acker's affiliation with the largely male avant-garde and its elements of misogyny and sexual explicitness are troubling, given the fundamental importance of critiques of pornography to the American women's movement, and the increasing controversies surrounding pornography and sexuality encompassed in what came to be known as the feminist Sex Wars of the 1980s. We also need to take into account the early and ongoing interest by feminist literary studies, both inside and outside the academy, in an images of women critical approach, one that stresses the importance of positive images of women in fiction and a clear connection between the literary work and real life. At that time Acker's punk girl heroine, mired in a world of pornographic desire, masochism, and failure, is a difficult figure for feminist literary studies to integrate, while her punk vernacular is arguably almost illegible.

And yet Deleuze and Guattari's concept of a minor literature helps us understand the specific, subaltern qualities of Acker's punk feminism, and hence its importance to women's writing. In their analysis of Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari argue that a minor literature is the literature "which a minority constructs within a major language" (*Kafka* 16), such as Kafka, a German Jew living in Prague and writing in German, and, by extension, Acker as a punk feminist (and with an Austrian Jewish background) writing in the *fin-de-siècle* United States (and the United Kingdom).[9] This cultural location helps explain Acker's sense of exile (MacDonald 108): "Acker saw herself as dispossessed—from her homeland, because of its politics, and from literature, because she was a woman" (Winterson ix).

The three qualities of minor literature also characterise Acker's. The first, "the deterritorialization of language", marks the writing subject's marginal and difficult position in relation to a major culture and language, making it "appropriate for strange and minor uses" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka* 16–17); as a consequence, "Expression must break forms, encourage ruptures and new sproutings" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka* 28). Deleuze

and Guattari's example is African American writers' use of English, while Acker's relentless intertextual pillaging of texts and frenzied reworking of fragments of discourse can be understood this way. Minor literature's second quality is that "everything in them is political … its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka* 17). This is an apt way of conceiving Acker's punk rendering of the second wave feminist slogan "the personal is political" (and vice versa). The cramped space of writing helps to produce the militancy of her texts, and contributes to their density and incoherence. And because of the relatively small size of a minor literature, "in it everything takes on a collective value", hence a minor literature is "positively charged with the role and function of a collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka* 17). Punk arose from a minor community and spoke directly to that community; Acker, in literary terms, addressed and brought into being a readership of punk feminists, which explains her ongoing interest and her readers' powerful attachment to her work.

I position these qualities and this study as a response to Jameson's provocative comments where, although he has argued that aspects of contemporary culture express the logic of late capitalism, he wonders if there is a way in which this culture can also resist this logic. "[T]he new political art (if it is possible at all) will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say, to its fundamental object—the world space of multinational capital", he contends, "at the same time at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last" (54). Acker, writer of a feminist minor literature, is 'ideally' situated at this historical juncture to provide just that resistance and representational 'breakthrough'. She is located in the aftermath and failure of the upheavals of the 1960s, the early phase of the neoliberal restructuring in the West, the emergence of postmodern culture (including punk as one of its first subcultures, as well as the turn to 'theory'), and the beginnings of the sense of the social and political decline of the United States.

Notes

1 For instance, Acker has recently been the subject of two exhibitions (the Institute of Contemporary Arts and the Badischer Kunstverein), and continues to be a popular subject for thesis writers, with the MLA International Bibliography showing more than 30 dissertations since 2000.

2 I term Acker a feminist radical to suggest her continuities with and differences from early radical feminism, rather than being allied to a particular ideological group in the American women's movement or reliant on essentialist conceptions of gender. As Chapter 4 discusses in more detail, Acker shares a number of features with late 1960s radical feminism.

3 Acker's affinities with Walter Benjamin's critical method of montage, and the centrality of the principle of montage to the historical avant-garde explain my preference for montage rather than collage (Bürger 72). Though Bürger, like many

others, uses the terms almost synonymously. Montage generally refers to an artwork comprised by a series of juxtaposed images from the one medium, for instance, photographs. Acker's writing works with the one medium of language, though juxtaposing a number of short texts from a wide variety of sources.

4 According to Andrew Ross, schlock is Yiddish for damaged goods that are sold cheaply (55).

5 Note that Kristeva's discussion of the etymology of revolt in *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* shows that the word is linked to verbs such as "to twist, to roll, to wrap" as well as to political and historical upheaval (2). This range of meanings is applicable to Acker as a figure of revolt via her particular mode of reexamining late capitalism: wrapping and twisting texts and languages; alternately and simultaneously cunning, obvious, and violent.

6 Most notably, Mandel identifies the expanding commodification and privatisation of cultural and recreational experiences and goods, and the increased role of advertising in managing consumer demand (393).

7 François Cusset contends that Acker was an early reader of Deleuze and Guatttari's work in the United States, and she made "a more personal use" of them (282).

8 Punk's dress codes borrowed from Nazi and sadomasochism regalia, for instance, are not going to reassure too many American feminists.

9 Brian James Schill terms punk fiction, that is, novels about punk culture, a minor literature to mainstream fiction (138). I wish to be more specific with Acker's work in terms of its textuality and its politics, hence terming it a feminist minor literature that is distinctive from, and must be read in relation to, women's literature and feminist literary, aesthetic, and political debates.

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Part I

Contexts and configurations of Acker

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1 Punk times

The scenes and sounds of punk writing

Despite some critics arguing that punk rock has either continued in a mutated form into the present, as in hardcore, or been recently revived after punk's initial demise by the end of the 1970s, the punk movement in which I'm interested is the one that emerges in the early to mid 1970s in Britain and the United States, before quickly spreading to other nations such as Australia. Its major form is music, though it permeates other cultural forms such as art, film, fashion, and, of course, writing. Punk therefore denotes a cultural movement and milieu—a scene, to use its own term (O'Hara 16)—based on an array of techniques and a cultural sensibility (Moore 2). As a musical form, it flowers briefly and then is quickly spent by around 1978, at least in the United Kingdom and the United States (Gendron 272; Reynolds). In other cultural forms, such as the visual arts, punk lasts into the early 1980s (Sladen 10), while Acker's career continues well into the 1990s. Punk music's rapid demise, however, should not hide its legacy to rock music and other cultural forms and politics. For Simon Reynolds, "It's arguable that punk had its most provocative repercussions long after its supposed demise" (xii). New wave music, for example, could not have occurred without punk's assault on rock music conventions and institutions. In an American context, Mark Sladen argues that "the 'culture wars' of the United States in the late 1980s can, in many respects, be seen as an aftershock generated by the artistic innovations of the punk years" (16). And George McKay, most heartenningly, suggests that "traces and activists from late 1970s punk rock have re-energized political activity and cultural radicalism since" (5).

The emergence of punk: decline, boredom, and chaos

Three motifs—decline, boredom, and chaos—are central to punk's frames of reference, iconography, and self-understanding. These motifs also encapsulate the sociohistorical context for punk's emergence: a *fin-de-siècle* atmosphere of social decline and crisis in the West after the upheavals of the 1960s, a feeling of boredom engendered by consumer culture and suburbia, and a sense that rock music had stagnated and become a big business, remote from rock music's role as authentic voice of rebellion and social change

(Moore 8). As an advertisement from a major record label said at the end of the 1960s: "The Revolution is on CBS" (Chapman 267). Jon Savage, for example, sets the scene for British punk:

> In 1974, the lights were going out: the OPEC oil-price rise of the previous year was pushing an already unstable economy into recession. Reeling from the three-day week of the previous December, the Heath government had finally fallen in February to a successful miners' strike and the collapse of its credit boom, which had been devised to buy their way out of trouble. The long postwar party was over, and with it the democratic consumer ideal. Advertisements which had celebrated, indeed taken you *into* the teenage experience now looked nervously at youth as a problem. Vandals and dead-end kids were not consumers.
>
> (77)

Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons, infamous *New Musical Express* journalists, describe the early 1970s music scene in Britain as "a soporific musical diet of Hip Easy Listening, Disco Fodder and Heavy Metal which had drenched young ear buds before Glitter Rock and regained its stranglehold by 1975" (11–12).

Both similar and slightly different tensions were found across the Atlantic—at that time, Acker's base. Legs McNeil explains American punk thus: "I hated most rock & roll, because it was about lame hippie stuff, and there really wasn't anyone describing our lives—which was McDonald's, beer, and TV reruns" (McNeil and McCain 253). For Mary Harron, early punk journalist and then feminist film director:

> Hippy culture had gone very mainstream: for the first time Bohemia embraced fast-food. It was about saying yes to the modern world. Punk, like Warhol, embraced everything that cultured people, and hippies, detested: plastic, junk-food, B-movies, advertising, making money—although no one ever did … There was nihilism in the atmosphere, a longing to die. Part of the feeling of New York at that time was this longing for oblivion, that you were about to disintegrate, go the way of this bankrupt, crumbling city. Yet there was something almost mystically wonderful.
>
> (qtd in Savage 133)

In these comments we gain glimpses of where American culture and society was, at least for the mainly white, proto-punks: cultural and social alienation, passification, and stagnation, albeit as symptoms of affluence rather than deprivation as was the case in British punk.

A sense of social decline and personal alienation were not limited to the punk subculture. Kim McQuaid observes that, "by 1968, American life was

characterized by a climate of crisis and a polarizing sense of unexpected complexity and limits to the possible" arising from the Vietnam War (9):

> Vietnam was part of an amalgam of political, economic, and social forces which by early 1968 had acted to produce a sense of flux and emergency in the minds of tens of millions of Americans of all ages, stations, and conditions. Vietnam, race relations, and "permissive" social attitudes were major concerns of the country and those who were leading it.
>
> (11)

Lyndon Baine Johnson's "The Great Society" programme had not been able to meet expectations of redressing social inequality, instead increasing social division (Jeansonne 100, 116). The war in Vietnam was failing and the New Left and the counterculture had launched a fierce critique of American consumerism, its political system, institutionalised racism, and militarism. As Todd Gitlin observes: "From social tensions came a tumult of movements aiming to remake virtually every social arrangement America had settled into after World War II" (5).

By the end of the 1960s, however, the progressive political hopes of the New Left and the counterculture had failed: for William L. O'Neill, because the New Left did not have a mature Leftist movement to draw upon; for Theodore Roszak, because of the lack of long-term organisation by the counterculture and the power of corporate America (O'Neill 304–305; Roszak xxix). The women's liberation movement, with its critique of the sexism of the New Left, sexual liberation, and the counterculture, as well as a rejection of the dominant culture's gender roles and ideologies, would, instead, be far more disruptive than either the New Left or the counterculture in the next few years. William H. Chafe argues that "no movement would prove a greater threat to the perpetuation of the traditional American Way of life" (322). The women's liberation movement (later morphing into the women's movement) would politicise the category of 'women', use spectacular forms of protest to challenge political and economic hegemonies and those of everyday life, exhort women to break down boundaries, and make cultural activism part of political work. These would prove inspirational to women in punk.

Signs of social and political fractures were mirrored by changes in the economy that would have far-reaching effects into the 1970s. After the affluence of the 1950s, the United States faced increasing international competition as its infrastructure and industry aged. Job growth stalled, while service industries started to replace traditional industries (Jeansonne 4). Yet such economic changes did not affect the growth of consumerism, which was to become a major subject matter for punk. Lizabeth Cohen explains that post World War II,

> Faith in a mass-consumption-driven post-war economy came to mean much more than the ready availability of goods to buy. Rather, it stood

> for an elaborate ideal of economic abundance and democratic political freedom, both equitably distributed that became almost a national civil religion from the late 1940s into at least the 1970s. For convenience sake I have dubbed it the *Consumers' Republic*. For at least a quarter century, the ideal of the *Consumers' Republic* provided the blueprint for American economic, social, and political maturation, as well as for export around the globe.
>
> (214)

Most importantly, she notes that America chose the *Consumers' Republic* as the method of producing abundance for the American people instead of the redistributive methods practised by social democracies; this would have far-reaching consequences when the economy later stopped expanding (220).

The related phenomenon of suburbanisation is a major event in postwar America (Cohen 218; Steigerwald 189), remaking the physical, social, and political landscape, and providing a locus of punk negation. "Mother cities, in effect, traded an economically stable group of residents for a poorer set. Well-to-do and middle-class whites streamed to suburbia, replaced in the city by blacks, Hispanics, and Appalachian whites who were searching for work" (Thomas 39). For commentators, while the attractions of suburbia are understandable—a chance to remake oneself (if you were white) on a new American frontier (see Hine)—it also represents a conformist, atomised culture that excludes African Americans and the poor, and leads to a neglect of the cities (Steigerwald 189; Thomas 39, 144), spectacularly demonstrated by the urban riots of the 1960s. And Rochelle Gatlin reminds us of suburbia's deleterious effects on women, regardless of their increasing levels of education and increased participation in the paid workforce. She argues that suburbia, consumerism, and women's post-World War II discontent are interrelated:

> Post-war suburbanization and consumerism reinforced the ideology of the "private" family and the traditional role of women in the home by further isolating women and children at home from men at work … Women did not even gain greater control over domestic life. Rather, the "private sphere" became permeated with market values and corporate authorities. Women's family role was glorified by advertisers to sell commodities, and the suburban home was the perfect consumption space—new, bare, needing to be filled with furniture, appliances and cleaning aids.
>
> (53–54)

Suburban anomie is potentially a far more intensified experience for women and young adults than for men, and not surprisingly provides one of the major targets for women's liberationists and for punk culture.

Punk was fiercely anti-suburban: suburbia represented respectability, banality, boredom, and consumerism, in which punks or proto-punks might

reside, but to which they did not belong, and from which they tried to escape (Medhurst 265). Not surprisingly, punk was largely an urban-based white movement centred on cities like New York, Detroit, and Boston (Stalcup). As in earlier Bohemian formations, the city represented freedom and artistic foment, providing the raw materials for a very different aesthetic to that of bands aligned with the counterculture or its apolitical successor, the West Coast Sound. In the wasteland of the early to mid 1970s the counterculture's pretentious and self-indulgent music, lifestyle of nostalgic pastoralism, and its utopianism regarding humanity would seem ridiculous and absurd to urban, nonconformist youth facing a career of unemployment. Punk, therefore, took different drugs, and foregrounded filth rather than nature, noise instead of melody, nihilism rather than optimism, crime instead of revolution, and perversion in the place of free love—a self-anointed cultural underground. Lydia Lunch's account of coming to New York in 1976 encapsulates the attractions of the scene, and could easily be the voice of an Acker heroine:

> I snuck out of my bedroom window, jumped on a Greyhound, and crash-landed in a bigger ghetto than the one I had just escaped from. But with two hundred bucks in my pocket tucked inside a notebook full of misanthropic screed, a baby face that belied a hustler's instinct, and a killer urge to create in order to destroy everything that had originally inspired me, I didn't give a flying fuck if the Bowery smelled like dog shit.
>
> (4)

By the early 1970s America's imperial power, self-image and structure were troubled by internal and external forces—regardless of President Nixon's attempts to consign upheaval to "the sixties" (Carroll ix)—a destabilisation that continued throughout the 1970s via the war in Cambodia, the Watergate scandal, the OPEC oil embargo, the defeat in Vietnam, and the Iran Hostage crisis. As Chafe claims, "The 1970s thus became a period of transition—marked by confusion, frustration, and an overwhelming feeling that America had lost its direction" (412). A similar sense was abroad in the United Kingdom, with the feeling that Britain was no longer 'great': it too, was a faded ex-empire (a feeling Margaret Thatcher was able to capitalise on). A major part of this transition in the United States was the breakup of the postwar liberal consensus (Kaufman 25) and the attendant rise of the New Right as a political force, which mobilised evangelical Christians and a broader politics of resentment resulting from the perceived excesses of 1960s radicalism (Chafe 423–424). A crucial part of the New Right is the neoliberal economic theory proposed by Milton Friedman and Friedrich von Hayek. Its core elements are an aversion to state planning and regulation—whether Keynesian or socialist—and a commitment to individual freedom. Neoliberalism, seeming to offer an economic (and social) solution to crisis,

began to gain influence in the United States from the mid 1970s, though was not fully actioned in government policies until 1979 in both the United States and the United Kingdom (Harvey 22). Punk's adversary, the society of control, was about to take a far more pernicious and powerful shape.

Yet, as Peter N. Carroll observes, social protest movements continued, with the women's movement being the foremost example. Moreover, "Americans looked increasingly toward alternative values and institutions to create a new sense of community" (Carroll x, xiii). Punk, and Acker's fiction, therefore, occur in, engage with, and are emblematic of a time of social and economic malaise, a questioning of Western institutions, political realignments, and the beginnings of major socio-economic restructuring. And both Acker and punk are part of ongoing social protests against the restoration of the post-World War II conservative hegemony.

Punk sounds

The early and influential writings on punk music aesthetics by rock music critic Lester Bangs—"its chief theorist", according to Bernard Gendron (233)—as well as Dick Hebdige's classic study of punk, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, suggest the basic contours of punk style and attitude, and its catalyst within the counterculture. Bangs's account is based on his pessimistic reading of the state of early 1970s music, in comparison to the earlier 1960s garage bands that he termed punk:

> As far as I was concerned punk rock was something which had first raised its grimy snout around 1966 in groups like the Seeds and Count Five and was dead and buried after the Stooges broke up and the Dictators' first LP bombed.
>
> ("The Clash" 225)

A resurrection of punk, for Bangs, offers the framework for revitalised rock music. With the advent of the Ramones and the Sex Pistols in the early 1970s, "Buying records became fun again, and one reason it did was that all these groups embodied the who-gives-a-damn-let's-just-slam-it-at-'em spirit of great rock 'n' roll" ("The Clash" 225). As we will see, Acker and her peers make a similar diagnosis of the state of American literature; her writing is therefore a solution: a "who-gives-a-damn-let's-just-slam-it-at-'em spirit" of writing stripped of its cultured, middle-class and masculine pretensions.

Bangs emphasises three elements in punk, the first being "sheer aggressiveness and loudness, the element of physical shock" (Gendron 233). This is necessary because "people have become this passive, nothing short of electroshock and personal exorcism will jolt them and rock them into some kind of fiercely healthy interaction" (Bangs, "Of Pop" 38). Joining this aggression are "minimalism and defiant rank amateurism" (Gendron 234). See, for instance, Bangs's article on the garage band the Troggs that

celebrates these qualities, writing that in "their consistent sense of structure and economy—I don't think any of their songs ran over four minutes, the solos were short but always slashingly pertinent, and the vocals [a 'punk snarl'] were not to be believed" ("James" 56). Similarly, the amateurism of proto-punk band the Stooges is key to their power: they made music that sounded "simplistic and stupid", however, "it comes out of an illiterate chaos gradually taking shape as a uniquely personal style" (Bangs, "Of Pop" 45). Punk music celebrates a stripped back and raw sound, returning rock music to its basic elements: guitar, bass, drums, and riffs.

While Bangs locates the shape of punk in a minor form of 1960s rock music, Hebdige's analysis of punk aesthetics focuses on the British subculture that emerged in the 1970s. Given the cross-Atlantic traffic from punk's beginnings, his insights are generally valid for American 1970s punk—Acker's early scene. Hebdige uses the concept of bricolage to demonstrate how

> punk style was defined principally through the violence of its "cut ups" … Anything within or without reason could be turned into part of what Vivien Westwood called "confrontation dressing" so long as the rupture between "natural" and constructed context was clearly visible.
>
> (106–107)

One of the key motifs of punk shows bricolage at work. The safety pin, a mundane and intentionally non-threatening object associated with babies and running repairs, is disconnected from its usual signification by punk and remade into a threatening object: the lynchpin of punk dressing and adornment (Hebdige 26).

As the safety pin demonstrates, punk bricolage and punk aesthetics in general are imbued with a desire to shock. Hebdige observes that "objects borrowed from the most sordid of contexts found a place in the punks' ensembles": items such as lavatory chains, rapist masks, and bondage wear (107–108). The sordid works to produce punk's shock value—its confrontation with the sumptuary and behavioural codes of the contemporary bourgeois world. With punk Svengali Malcolm McLaren's interest in the Situationist Internationale (SI), we can therefore read punk bricolage as an early 1970s revisiting of SI's strategy of *détournement*, in which the mass media-generated image is recontextualised to reveal its ideological subtext, and hence is literally and symbolically turned against itself (Savage 36).

Crispin Sartwell observes that punk is also an emotional stance and worldview, "which emphasizes sheer rage and hence negation" (108), and that Hebdige locates in three interrelated punk codes. Apocalypticism is one—born from a sense of social decay (Hebdige 27). Another code is illegality, as in the graphics and typography found in punk texts that resemble "graffiti … and the ransom note" (Hebdige 112), and hence forming an anti-bourgeois statement regarding law, morality, and private property. Further, in fanzines, a crucial genre of punk (Rivett 31), Hebdige comments that

"the overwhelming impression was one of urgency and immediacy, of a paper produced in indecent haste, of memos from the frontline" (111), thereby suggesting a dominant tone of punk. In addition, as a glance at any number of punk albums would suggest (the Ramones are exemplary here), punk also inserted a mordant and/or infantile humour into this rage and negation, a 'stupidness' that addresses the stupidity of consumer culture, and that contributed to its wild tonal oscillations, literalness, and schlock horror aesethetic.

When combined, the elements identified by Bangs and Hebdige mean that "the punk subculture … was constituted in a series of spectacular transformations of a whole range of commodities, values, common-sense attitudes, etc." to form an oppositional stance (Hebdige 116). In Acker's work, each punk element works to reconstruct writing as an anti-aesthetic object, as did punk with music and other elements of its subculture.[1] The sheer aggressiveness of Acker's texts—their amplification of anger and pain—aims for a visceral impact on the reader to shock us out of any post-1960s complacency or withdrawal. Acker writes a deliberately stupid and antiliterary prose, her fragments roughly sutured together make a brutal, minimalist, and 'amateurish' novelistic form. Sordid motifs from high, mass, and everyday culture course through her narratives, while her punk girl heroines are hopelessly pathological, trapped in a schlock horror film. Collectively, these produce a form of writing ideal for a radical woman writer in the closing decades of the American twentieth century—the novel as a punk feminist assemblage, and a unique form of feminist experimentation—a feminist minor literature.

The scene of punk writing

Acker as punk writer is conditioned by and a response to not only the broader social context, but also by her perceptions of the contemporary state of American literature and literary culture from the 1960s onwards. Paralleling punk's critique of rock music, it is the American literary establishment and some of its countercultural variants that represent boredom, decline, and irrelevance in the face of a changed social reality. Her diagnosis is shared by other writers she associated with in the Downtown Scene of New York City in the 1970s and 1980s, a milieu that is one of the prime locations of punk writing (Kane *Do*; Siegle)—even if its participants did not necessarily use that label.[2] As Acker explains, in what could be a punk literary manifesto:

> From the time of my high school days, I have known, in the way that one knows the streets of one's city and the laws of one's culture, the names of those in the pantheon of great living American writers. The big men. Norman Mailer, macho of machos; Philip Roth; John Cheever; etc. Perhaps at the head of the class, Saul Bellow. There weren't many, any,

> women. These heroes criticized United States society as it needed to be criticized in cultured tones.
>
> The problem with both their criticism and their manner of criticism is that neither American society nor American culture is cultured. To analyse and sound the faults of the American way of life in educated bourgeois terms and modes is a spurious exercise. For in its cultural, social, and political behaviour, the United States resembles a giant baby, perhaps mongoloid, almost uneducated and increasingly uninterested in questioning and education.
>
> ("William" 1)

With echoes of Bangs's critique of rock music, in this missive Acker, in typical punk manner, manages to mix highbrow discourse with lowbrow grotesquerie ("a giant baby, perhaps mongoloid"), to attack the emergent post-World War II canon of American writing personified by Mailer et al. and the American culture that reifies it. The canon is male dominated, bourgeois, and formally unadventurous—Cheever, Bellow, and Roth are the novelists of middle-class suburban life—while the broader culture regresses to philistinism.

Equally, the bourgeois literary establishment—critics, reviewers, as well as writers—seems blind to what is really going on in literary culture. In contrast, critics like Richard Kostelanetz and David Antin—both influences on Acker—document the ways in which American fiction and poetry expand during the 1960s to include new forms, voices, and topics, including what would come to be known as postmodernism. Similarly, Arthur Marwick observes that American fiction in this time becomes innovative, particularly in its depiction of sexuality (161). Yet Marianne DeKoven complicates a historical narrative of increasing literary diversity and progress: she notes that "sixties avant-garde fiction was almost entirely dominated in America by heterosexual white men", who produced "high-literary, writerly experimentalism … often accompanied by sexism and misogyny" (185). The then American literary avant-garde has more in common with "the pantheon of great living American writers" (Acker, "William" 1) than one might assume.

Sharon Monteith contends that "American literary culture seemed to be characterized by intellectually polarized factions and gridlocked racial and sexual relations" (101). One of the forces leading to this polarisation is modernism: the critical establishment remains fixated on it, to the detriment of emergent writing. Charles Bernstein notes the lack of interest in innovative work in American literary culture, commenting that,

> In the fifties and sixties most of the work published by the commercial and university presses represented a very minor and not very interesting kind of work that involved the most reactionary possible interpretation of the work of people like Pound, and even Williams.
>
> (26)

This is the context for John Barth's 1967 essay "The Literature of Exhaustion", while in poetry, Antin describes the situation thus: in contrast to the establishment, "[t]he poets of the sixties simply went about the business of reexamining the whole of the modernist tradition" (195–196), a gesture Acker was to repeat but in relation to a much broader literary tradition.

Another problematic and related aspect of the literary establishment was the way in which literary criticism was operating, whether inside or outside the academy, as in the liberal New York intellectuals, and the bourgeois taste-making newspapers and magazines such as the *New York Times Book Review* and the *New Yorker*,[3] before feminist literary criticism found space and legitimacy in literary institutions. In the 1960s academy (that is, pre-continental theory), the critical method of New Criticism—"the central intellectual force in our [academic] subculture"—was formalist in emphasis and, as a consequence, politically conservative (Ohmann *English* 70, 78).[4] Moreover, the canon—its texts and operations—had not yet been subjected to radical scrutiny by feminists, among others; consequently, literary studies in America remained conventional and conservative in values and approach (Lauter 7–8). As Acker notes above, it admits contemporary writers such as Cheever or Roth, but only because their social criticism was performed in conventional, liberal, and hence non-threatening ways. Richard Ohmann makes a similar point in his analysis of the role the review pages of the *New York Times* play in American canon formation, in which he observes that the seemingly critical and progressive novels given value by the literary establishment also contain major elements (namely, individualism) that reinforce bourgeois ideology ("Shaping").

It is contemporary mainstream and hence middle-class literary culture (often an unstated New York City-based one), however, which is the major target of the Downtown Scene and its punk manifestations in the 1970s and early 1980s. Robert Siegle's study of the Downtown Scene, *Suburban Ambush: Downtown Writing and the Fiction of Insurgency*, argues that:

> In the mid-seventies the time arrived for a "fiction of insurgency", an appropriately double genitive marking its passage beyond liberationist illusions of free space and unmediated time, but also its guerilla campaign against the imminent transformation of American consciousness into a shopping mall.
>
> (2)

Slightly later, in their introduction to the *Between C and D* anthology, which features representative Downtown writers (including Acker), Joel Rose and Catherine Texier characterise the surrounding literary culture as follows:

> If you were a writer living in Manhattan in the early eighties, and didn't feel any affinity for the school of "dirty realism" or weren't writing

> "sensitive" narration teeming with believable characters a reader could care for throughout the length of a novel, you were left high and dry on the Downtown shore.
>
> (ix)

And Brandon Stosuy notes that Acker and her peers were "often attacking the stiff literariness and bourgeois irony epitomized by the *New Yorker*'s short fiction and poetry" (17).

In contrast, the Downtown writers and punk writing not only wrote differently and included women as major figures (such as Acker, Constance DeJong, Eileen Myles, and Lynne Tillman), but were aligned with an entirely different cultural framework. Siegle, echoing punk rock's attack on the 'high-art' institutionalisation of 1960s rock, contends that the Downtown writers

> corrode rather than conform to the commodity formulae toward which latter-day modernist fiction tends, just as the writers who create them have chosen not to live in the more comfortable academic and professional worlds in which late modernist fiction still prevails.
>
> (2)

His comments suggest the Downtown writers as anti-institutional outsiders constituting the latest version of an urban bohemia, being located "on the margins of the suburbanization of America" (3): a literary example of punk's "international outsider aesthetic" (Savage xiv). Rose and Texier argue that the Downtown writers was not a movement or school, but "a common inheritance: they owe more to Burroughs, Miller, Genet or Céline or even to Barthes or Foucault or J.G. Ballard, then they do to Updike or Cheever" (xi). Just like punk music, their writing valued the immediacy of experience and the questioning of bourgeois good taste, manifested through their predilection for unrestrained stories of urban decay. And Daniel Kane's observation that New York punk poetry engaged with pop culture and rock music, as well as avant-gardism, is apposite for Downtown writing, so that "the old boundary lines between avant-garde art and commercial fluff, sung lyrics and lyric poetry, club music and concert-hall music were being merrily redrawn and at times erased entirely" (*Do* 4–5).

It is not only the canonical, the respectable, and the pseudo-edgy writers who are found wanting in Siegle's discussion of the "fiction of insurgency" (2).[5] In parallel with punk's aversion to hippies, punk writing, as typified by Acker, also represents a technical and ideological break with literary cultures such as the Black Mountain poets, the more academic postmodernism of Thomas Pynchon and Barth (Stosuy 18–19), the New York School, and, of course, the Beats—even if these are partial influences. Acker, for instance, narrates her development as a writer as partly stemming from failed interactions with the Black Mountain poets:

> When I was in my teens I grew up with some of the Black Mountain poets who were always giving lectures to writers to the effect that, "when you find your own voice, then you're a poet". The problem was, I couldn't find my own voice. I didn't have a voice as far as I could tell.
>
> (Acker, "Interview" 91)

Likewise, she was alienated by the St Marks Poetry Project:

> On the one hand, there were the [St Marks] poetry people, who were basically upper middle class, and on the other, there was the 42nd Street crowd … Politics was the cause of the divergence. It was a question of class and also of sexism. The poetry world at that time denied any of this. Sexism wasn't an issue, class, forget it. Money—we're all starving hippies—ha, ha. That I worked in a sex show for money was not acceptable at all, despite the free love rhetoric.
>
> (Acker, "Conversation" 14)

Elsewhere, she confesses that "Even though I have great respect for Robert Creeley and that range of work, I also hated it because it was so male, and I just didn't want to be that male" (Acker, "Path" 25). Indeed, like punk music, much of Downtown writing contains an implicit critique of the mainstream gender order, with Siegle contending that it "often seems to take feminist critique as its model for analyzing the formation of all subjects in our culture" (392).[6]

Other writers associated with the Downtown Scene are critical of surrounding or preceding cultural scenes, and particularly the New York School. Punk poet Eileen Myles, for instance, sets up the "International Fuck Frank O'Hara Movement" (Kane, *Do* 176, 181). As president of the movement, she sends a satirical letter to the editor of the downtown journal *Koff*, targeting both right-wing prejudices and the sexual mythology surrounding O'Hara: "in the interests of killing off vestigial interest in this (faggot) and paean of the 'people' (unverified) we wd [*sic*] gladly join forces for a giant burn-in', or, a suck-THAT-cock-baybee day" (Mancini, qtd in Stosuy 54). Similarly, Edward Sanders's poem, "The Age", is critical of the mythology surrounding the Beats, making clear that they are outdated:

> And this is the Age of the Triumph of Beatnik Messages of Social
> Foment Codes into the Clatter of the Mass Media over
> 20 Years Ago! Ha! Ha! Ha! How do we fall down to salute
> with peals of Heh heh hehhh! That the Beats created change
> without a drop of blood!
>
> (Stosuy 36)

And Siegle's description of Downtown writing contains a thinly veiled criticism of the counterculture: "Downtown writing seeks not liberation but

liberty, real rather than full sensation … And it surrenders the dream of Utopia in favor of *utopian*" (3).

Elizabeth Young makes some observations that help to explain the break that punk writing represents: "Few people who sprang from the sixties counter-culture were writing serious fiction. The youth culture of 1960–80 proved astonishingly resistant to the serious novelist" (5). Furthermore,

> In the early years of the sixties the culture shock was immense and no one, it seemed, could establish a language or tone to encompass the confluence of bohemianism, squalor, excess and black humour that comprised the counter-cultural world … Novelists, by and large, took a very long time to assimilate the profound societal shifts of the post-war world.
>
> (5–6)

Acker's writing, engaging with both the counterculture and the punk subculture, shows no such belatedness.

One core feature of the Downtown writing scene was a shared ethos of doing writing differently—within the pages of the text and in terms of literary institutions—to canonical, middle-brow, and ostensibly 'alternative' 1960s literary movements. This ethos is hinted at in the satirical letter to Susan Sontag in Acker's *Great Expectations* that begins: "Dear Susan Sontag,/ Would you please read my books and make me famous?" (27). Downtown writing was marked by a strong sense that surrounding and preceding literary forms were now inadequate to represent and confront the situation of America in the early 1970s, with its culture of decay, consumerism, and ongoing social and political crises. Literature itself is a sign of this decay by being integrated into the late capitalist system as a fetish item: a magical substitute for authentically dissonant writing, which appears powerful but is actually gutted. But it is not only a question of writing differently. Integral to this project, as in punk music, is the creation of counter-institutions to nurture and disseminate their work: presses, venues, magazines, organisations, and galleries (Kane, *Do* 8–9; Stosuy). In Downtown New York City, these included the venues the Mudd Club, the Kitchen, and Dancetaria; *Bomb* and *Between C and D* magazines; and Semiotexte and Autonomedia presses. Correspondingly, the scene featured a strong sense of community, both geographical and ideological (Siegle 3). These institutional, social, and geographical networks addressed and helped create and maintain a community, and hence audiences, for this work.

On a number of occasions Acker voices an archetypal formative narrative of punk: of disillusionment with the counterculture, including its literary version. Acker explains:

> The 42nd Street [New York City] experience made me learn about street politics … At that point the culture was hippy and all these hippies in

> the St. Mark's Poetry Project … were very much into fucking around with each other and writing about it … And working in a sex show really didn't make you feel very nice about sex.
>
> (Acker, "Devoured" 5)

Fortuitously, Acker was living in New York City in the early 1970s and, as Siegle notes, became part of the Downtown Scene of writers, working on the same terrain as the burgeoning punk rock scene, the lower East Side of Manhattan. With shared personnel, venues, and ethos, the Downtown Scene operated almost as the literary wing of punk (Kane, "Richard" 337), and makes fleeting appearances in a number of Acker's novels. Carlo McCormick notes how "the confluence created around particular venues where visual artists, musicians, performance artists and other new genres, such as video, literally shared the same space and creatively collided" (96). Acker explains the significance of this scene for her:

> You see, there was no way I had of talking about it [my writing], really, until the punk movement came along and I met Sylvère Lotringer … Punk was very important to me because it combined a lot of impulses I had already been drawn to.
>
> ("Interview" 89, 94)

As a consequence, Acker didn't just write punk, but embodied it in terms of self-presentation, cultural practices, and subcultural affiliations. Unlike musicians and music industry figures who attempted to cash in on the radical chic of punk rock, Acker's lived experience of punk provided her with a potent narrative of the self, mode of self-understanding, and repertoire of representational techniques.

Stosuy argues that Acker's work in 1973 and 1974 "presented an important template for works to come, separating her from the New York School before her and aligning her more closely with punk rock and a nonacademic nonbourgeois approach" (23). Acker's autobiographical narrative of 'coming to punk' is reinforced by the major historical accounts of this scene and by an examination of associated primary documents (such as posters, flyers, and little magazines) that suggest Acker's importance. Siegle describes her as "the most sensational of the downtown writers … [She is] among the first downtown writers … and remains the most influential" (xv). Constance DeJong recalls the first ever reading given at key Downtown venue, the Kitchen, in 1975, featuring herself and Acker: "Neither Kathy nor I actually read texts. Without consultation we prepared a performance. Kathy enlisted a number of performers to deliver sections of her text, a kind of ensemble act … but no one could call their presentation a reading" (qtd in Stosuy 29). Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s Acker is published, interviewed, and most importantly, sometimes given headline act status in numerous underground publications, readings,

and benefits.[7] Chris Kraus captures Acker's unique status as the first woman to attain the identity of "Great Writer as Countercultural Hero" (162).

Acker's ongoing association with the underground culture scenes of New York, San Diego, San Francisco, and London at various times from the late 1960s through to the 1990s, as detailed by Kraus's biography, and again evident in her collaborations, interviews, and readings, continues her identification with punk culture, as does her consistently iconic punk self-presentation (Henderson).[8] Arguably, some of these could be termed punk scenes (as in London of the early 1980s and San Francisco in the 1990s); others are more broadly alternative (for example, San Diego of the late 1960s). Regardless of city, time period, or her increasing fame, Acker is consistently allied with a transnational cultural underground, with which punk had at times been associated or at least shared certain ideological assumptions, so that there is an easy slippage between 'punk' and 'the underground'. This underground helped to sustain Acker's work, providing a supportive audience, alternative cultural institutions, and network of collaborators, and more recently, has helped to produce a revival of interest in Acker's work, notably, in Kraus's biography, Barbara Caspar's feature-length documentary, the exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Arts and the Badischer Kunstverein, and scholarly monographs (Borowska; Colby; Dew; Martin). Kraus was right to choose a leather jacket as the cover image for her biography of Acker, for Acker lived punk and continued punk in literary form. The next chapter explores how Acker came to write punk.

Notes

1 T.L. Cowan makes a similar parallel between words and punk objects in her reading of queer punk poetry.

2 Perhaps the rapid demise of punk rock by the end of the 1970s partly explains why Downtown writing was not labelled as punk even if the literary form of this underground continued, as Kane's study of the poetry scene demonstrates.

3 Richard Ohmann's "The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960–1975" gives an excellent account of the role that nonacademic institutions such as the *New York Times Book Review* play in the construction of the academic canon.

4 Vincent B. Leitch, however, disagrees with Ohmann's assessment, arguing that "the late 1950s and the 1960s witnessed a reversal: myth criticism and a wave of Continental philosophy swept the discipline, both weakening the hold of an already flagging formalist criticism" (xii). Regardless, it takes until the early 1970s for feminist literary criticism to make its presence felt in the American academy. See Annette Kolodny for a detailed and insightful account of early American second wave feminist literary criticism.

5 Siegle acknowledges Ron Kolm, poet, editor, and activist, as the source for his book's title (xi).

6 Though Emilia Borowska is less convinced of the progressive politics of punk and the Downtown scene because "Downtown writers abandon utopian imagination, finding alternative worlds no longer conceivable, as there is no escape from reification and repression" (23). One could argue that a punk critique of the

surrounding culture is a necessary first stage to clear the way for more utopian visions.

7 Acker was featured in the "New York City" edition (vol. 3, no. 2, 1976) and "Special Transgressions" issue (vol. 4, no. 2, 1979) of *File Magazine*; was regularly featured in *Bomb* magazine in the early 1980s; and read/performed at Armageddon and Dancetaria in the early 1980s (among other venues).

8 Acker, for instance, was interviewed by the *East Village Eye* (vol. 3, no. 2, June, 1982), *New Musical Express* (22 January, 1983), *The Face* (no. 45, January, 1984), *Interzone* (no. 27, January–February, 1988), *Fist* (no. 1, 1988), *io* (no. 2, 1994), and *Geekgirl* (1995).

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2 The punk writer emerges
From counterculture to punk culture

This chapter moves from the historical context of punk culture to the emergence of Acker's punk writing. To trace the development of her punk aesthetics, I compare two early novellas, *The Burning Bombing of America* (written around 1972) (Scholder) and *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* (copyrighted in 1973). This enables me to show the basic elements of Acker's punk writing, how this textuality enacts punk's aesthetic outsider status (Savage, *England's* xiv) and ethos of "social and cultural insubordination" (Poyner 21), and to outline the creative, intellectual, and ideological problems it allowed Acker to resolve. I demonstrate that these early writings, like punk in general, are a rejection of the counterculture, marking a shift in radical literary aesthetics from a late 1960s blend of avant-gardist and countercultural poetics to a punk textuality that will come to characterise punk culture more broadly in the mid to late 1970s. For the first time Acker sees the possibilities of a punk feminist aesthetics, as she begins to forge a distinctly punk vocabulary, syntax, register, form, and sensibility with which to articulate her confronting and unconventional feminist politics. As Dick Hebdige explains, punk culture "represents a 'solution' to a specific set of circumstances, to particular problems and contradictions" (81), in the case of Acker, those confronting a radical woman writer at the *fin de siècle*.

Acker is not the sole woman writer to attempt to destroy and remake literary form and language at this time, as studies of women's contemporary experimental writing illustrate (Berry; DuPlessis; Fuchs and Friedman; Mix). The second wave women's movement, as exemplified in the work of Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Monique Wittig, among others, makes the search for a feminine if not feminist language a central concern for innovative women writers from the 1970s on—a late twentieth-century attempt to reconfigure the available means of expression to align with women's revolutionary expectations (Kristeva 210). Acker is, however, one of the few to pursue this project along specifically punk lines, from outside the women's movement, and with such a resulting large body of work—her production of a feminist minor literature.

Farewell to the counterculture: *The Burning Bombing of America*

Acker's writing, like the author, did not emerge fully formed as punk. In the late 1960s and early 1970s arguably Acker was part of the counterculture, being part of the artistic underground of New York City, San Diego, and San Francisco, a student at Brandeis, a member of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) at the University of California, San Diego (Acker, "Devoured" 4), and becoming friends with Eleanor Antin, a feminist conceptual artist, and David Antin, poet, critic, and teacher of Acker (Kraus 8–49). An analysis of Acker's early (and possibly first) novella, *The Burning Bombing of America*, reveals Acker's debt to the counterculture.[1] This novella can productively be read as a countercultural text, possibly one of the counterculture's last fictionalised expressions before its diffusion into myriad forms, including "encounter culture" (Gitlin 423–424). However, the novella's proto-punk elements signify its historical location at a cultural crossroads, making it a transitional text, illustrating why and how Acker turned to punk in her next writings.

Given the centrality of cultural politics to the counterculture (Braunstein and Doyle 10), it is ironic that literary examples of the counterculture are either limited to the Beats and William Burroughs (Gair 142), elided by the categories of avant-garde or experimental writing, or, in some accounts, supposedly do not exist (Young 5). As in the case of punk, music is the counterculture's major form of expression. Julie Stephens argues, however, that a defining feature of the counterculture is that "a new language of protest was developed which aimed to transgress the boundaries between the political and the aesthetic" (22). By identifying the elements of this language in a variety of textual forms—including incoherence, non-linear communication, a rejection of seriousness, the figure of the outlaw, and the role of popular culture—Stephens emphasises the importance of discourse to the making of the counterculture. Acker's countercultural connections, the novella's *mise en scène* of revolutionary upheaval in the contemporary United States, and its time of writing (1972) make *The Burning Bombing of America* ideal to explore as a form of countercultural literature and, specifically, as a literary version of this new language of protest. As she did throughout her career, Acker, as a countercultural 'insider', rejects the forms of the bourgeois realist and modernist novels in order to represent the time and space of the counterculture in its own terms. And she is particularly interested in providing an imagined ending for the counterculture project: apocalypse as victory—an optimistic form of narrative closure absent from following works. The novella is a countercultural endpoint in another sense. *The Burning Bombing of America*'s uneasy mix of countercultural and proto-punk representational techniques also signals the end of the counterculture as an aesthetic formation, and the emergence of its successor, politically and culturally.

As the title announces, *The Burning Bombing of America* is concerned with social and cultural breakdown. The novella opens with an apocalyptic scene of contemporary America: there has been a violent uprising and a breakdown in the social order, a fictional (though not unbelievable) resolution to the political struggles of the 1960s. It charts the ongoing chaos, revolutionary struggle, and eventual victory of various radical groups such as the Weathermen and the Violet Women (based upon the Weather Underground and an imaginary radical feminist revolutionary group), interspersed with the narrator's personal and sexual dramas. As this summary suggests, the countercultural (and radical feminist) trope of apocalypse is central. *The Burning Bombing of America* is, however, not so much interested in telling a realistic or coherent story of political upheaval as in exploring a specifically revolutionary scenario and consciousness. This social breakdown is reflected in the breakdown of signification, so that as Emilia Borowska describes it, "*The Burning Bombing of America*, rather than merely inciting and describing revolution, *is* a revolution in writing" (62).

The novella's countercultural affiliations are announced in the chapter and section titles, and provide clear markers of Acker's difference from mainstream literature of the time. "The Burning Bombing of America", "The Betrayal of Friends", "Communist Aesthetics", and "Information Sexual Ecstasy Revolution III" encompass the characteristic concerns of the counterculture and radical politics in the 1960s such as apocalypse, revolutionary art and politics, and sexual liberation. These also suggest the typically countercultural intellectual frameworks informing the text, including Karl Marx, Wilhelm Reich, and Herbert Marcuse, while Borowska observes that the titles "read like abstract rubrics from Mao's *Little Red Book*", a popular text of the counterculture (56).

Complementing these intellectual frameworks is a psychedelic aesthetic to depict the time, space, and perceptions of the counterculture. Jonathan Harris explains the qualities and function of psychedelia to the counterculture thus:

> Psychedelic … was self-consciousness and body-consciousness, and a new *social* consciousness. To see the mind afresh, or the body or the world, involved the fiction that one could or would or should abstract and "get out of one's mind" via intense sensual and cognitive stimulation. (11, original emphasis)

In Acker's writing, psychedelia enables the fundamental Western categories of time and space, conscious and unconscious, to be thrown into question. The reader is launched into a trippy, surrealistic *mise en scène*: part dream, part nightmare, and part conscious reality—the boundaries are never clear. Even though the novella represents momentous events, temporal setting and chronology are similarly unclear, a vagueness amplified by the consistent use of present tense: "we desire a revolution in New York I'm here alone

always alone Mick Jagger jerks off I shoulder my pistols" (166).[2] Similarly, spatial referents are elliptically rendered: "is this in no place gentle? end of the journey. rubble piles of the shit of the poor green vomit clouds and darkness are around us … the ship leaves the harbor like a knife sapphire water" (159). Settings are an accretion of random and intense impressions.

A crucial part of this psychedelic *mise en scène* is the role and voice of the first-person narrator in articulating an altered consciousness. First person is in keeping with the counterculture's emphasis on liberating the self and "the exploration of the politics of consciousness" in mass society (Roszak 156). In a text of vague spatial and temporal coordinates and formal fragmentation the narrator is arguably the one unifying feature, however, we know little of the narrator except what can be deduced from her voice. There is neither background story nor physical description. Instead she is transformed by the psychedelic "processes of abstraction and distortion—getting 'out of one's head', 'bending' consciousness, flattening and stretching the image of things" (Harris 15). Accordingly, she is pure voice and consciousness, one that is comprised by intensely personal and sensuous perceptions arranged in a disjointed syntax, what Georgina Colby describes as textual "disjunction" (63):

> I'd tell you that I think you're wonderful. I'd like to be with you many hours I'm scared you'll reject me. think you'll like me. I haven't talked so openly to anyone in New York Margie? (blank) Harriet? no. among huge roses red purple a woman sits her legs are tied with thongs her thumbs up GOOD out of her gorgeous hairy cunt comes a papyrus.
>
> (151)

The Burning Bombing of America therefore represents countercultural headspace as making countercultural textual space: beyond realistic depiction and rational comprehension, a remaking and merging of the self and world.

The novella's core is the countercultural ideals of sexual and political revolution, and particularly their interrelationship.[3] The opening sentence makes the link between social order and particular regimes of sexuality overt. In this case, political anarchy is reflected in sexual anarchy: "armies defect first in the woods and polluted lakes the cities small towns are covered with the blood of God in the burrows and hidden alleyways of unknown anarchists criminals buggering and fucking for ages" (139). There is no movement, no incident, virtually no passage within the text in which sexual desire is not figured either explicitly or indirectly, thereby signifying its centrality to human subjectivity and the social order, thereby a pathway to personal and social liberation.

Acker depicts three contrasting types of sexual desire associated with particular ideologies: the repressed and hence violent sexuality of the government; the banal desire of the narrator as articulated in gossip and jealousy—suggesting unliberated desire; and the ecstatic and liberated desire

of the emergent countercultural order. In an optimistic resolution to the text, the revolution succeeds and a sexual utopia is brought into being. Accordingly, the writing becomes more intense and ecstatically surreal: "THE VIOLET WOMEN WE ARE BEAUTY STRENGTH SEX DEVOUR LET BE INTELLIGENCE OF THE STARS WISDOM COOL MILLIONS OF ORGASMS ENOUGH TO END ANYONE ELSE'S LIFE" (200). It is significant that Acker makes the Violet Women/the feminists the subjects of this new regime of plenitude and freedom, suggesting that they are the revolutionary victors, and the successors to the counterculture.

The ending of the book is an important hint that the counterculture and its representational imaginary are on the wane. As numerous critics have pointed out, women, including women's liberationists, were far from liberated in the counterculture, subjected to conservative gender ideologies (Echols 34; Reynolds and Press 231). "Instead of undoing the deeply rooted sexual double standard," Alice Echols comments, "free love only masked it in countercultural pieties" (34). Similarly, women writers were marginalised in countercultural literary circles (Gair 150). This conflicted position is enunciated in the text's use of proto-punk techniques, giving the novella a schizoid quality.

The breakdown of, and break with, a particular paradigm of making culture is announced by the novella's form, one of the first signs that Acker's will be a spectacular rebellion. She does not choose the transcendental flow of the Beats, Ken Kesey's psychedelia, nor Thomas Pynchon's labyrinthine narratives. Rather, influenced by conceptual art and William Burroughs, she uses the dissonance of the fragment. In what will form the basis of punk bricolage more generally, the reader is confronted with various types of choppily arranged pieces: chapters are extremely short, paragraphs appear as textual chunks of widely divergent length, sentences are chopped and rearranged into nonsensical units. This graphical fragmentation is mirrored in the narrative, fragmentation in form producing a fragmentation of plot. Action and events are described rather than narrated, motivations for actions are unclear, connections between incidents are left unspoken, and the exterior and interior worlds and their respective stories intermingle. We have, for instance, three major sections of the book titled "Communist Narration", "The New Life", and "Abstract Essay Collaged with Dreams", suggesting a shift from a political and public narrative, to a personal story, then to an amalgam of abstraction and the unconscious.

Although we could interpret Acker's writing as attempting to instigate an expanded consciousness that will lead to revolution, as typified by Burroughs's work (DeKoven 165), my interpretation is that the refusal of a clear destination for the sentence can be read as a parallel refusal of the ending (or sense of meaning) promised by the counterculture. For Acker, the fragment refuses countercultural holism or resolution in favour of dissonance and readerly discomfort. Writing in this way is therefore a transitional

technique that reflects her political ambivalences as a woman writer, one that looks beyond the counterculture towards punk's abrasive aesthetics.

Imbricated with the fragment is an austere minimalism, soon to be associated with punk aesthetics, which acts to destabilise psychedelia's excess. In what will be a characteristic tactic she uses to attack one of her primary political targets, the bourgeois realist novel, Acker strips back its fundamental elements, whether it is the narrator, the sentence, description, or characterisation. For instance, we know characters only through the narrator's consciousness; they are not described in terms of their appearance, speech, proper name, or thoughts, and we often do not know who is speaking in a scene. Similarly, Acker uses allegorical figures and historical personages to sketch a political understanding rather than nuanced character development. Richard Nixon and George McGovern are depicted via highly sexualised, often obscene fantasies as abrupt reminders of the perverse nature of the existing order: "we suck off Nixon and McGovern Nixon and McGovern embrace they are buggering McGovern wins" (193). These characters are so minimally presented that they bear little resemblance to the enlightened and liberated self of the counterculture or to the liberal humanist individual.

These abrasive elements are complemented by an ethos of shock, largely powered by assaultive writing. Any countercultural utopianism is undercut by a focus on ugliness, the sordid, and the abject elements. A system in decay is articulated by hyperbole and scatology, made hyper-visible by violent and obscene language. Satellites are "exploding" (192), fists "clench" (192), while the narrator observes "a broken bottle shoved up the cunt" (140). Words are weapons to shock the reader out of complacency or trippiness. As with the fragment, this diction directs the reader's focus on the impressions produced by encountering these words. Acker's shock tactics continually break through the countercultural psychedelia and, regardless of the beatific resolution, announce that another, less ecstatic, world is ever present. If psychedelia represents the beyond of the straight world, the beyond of the counterculture is suggested by the hyper-visible abject and by the fragment.

Although *The Burning Bombing of America*'s revolutionary possibilities of sexual desire and sexual liberation are typically countercultural, there is an insistent and subversive critique of both hegemonic and countercultural gender identity, patriarchy, and heterosexual desire, which will be a central element in Acker's punk feminism. In what could be read as a nascent feminist position, the narrator intermittently talks about "being a dyke", while the utopia described in the final sections could be read as the narrator becoming one of the Violet Women, who appear to be lesbians. Further, in the chapter "Description of the New World" she announces that "men become women women men" (180), while later, "it is necessary for the survival of earth perhaps universe life that more all humans become decide women" (190). Correspondingly, male sexuality is represented as violent and

destructive: "men are humans who are bred trained they can do anything they are almighty they must not be concerned with daily life. their essence is rape. their desire is murder. they are forced to destroy. sexual gender not exist" (190). As a consequence, the naturalness and unthreatening quality of unrepressed sexuality seems questioned by this counter-discourse as a fierce type of feminist sexual politics is foregrounded. (Chapter 4 returns to this question of Acker's feminism in detail.)

In this early work Acker presents a critical consciousness of the counterculture, a positioning replicated in her mix of representational techniques with her avant-gardist affiliations—including conceptual art and writing (Colby 26), and the New York underground film scene (Acker, "Devoured" 3). All are drawn upon to address the limitations of a countercultural textuality. There is a sense, however, of restraint and hesitation in the novella: while there are moments of excess it is not quite excessive enough to capture the apocalyptic moment and to blow the form apart, perhaps analogous to the counterculture itself and its de-fusion/diffusion. *The Burning Bombing of America*'s transitional nature therefore exemplifies a gap in late twentieth-century literature between women in the counterculture and the means with which to express their desires—a failing that punk culture and aesthetics will speak to. Acker has identified some powerful techniques to undertake a fictionalised burning bombing of hegemonic American culture, but her proto-punk techniques require scaffolding for their full power to be realised.

Early punk: *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula*

It does not take long for Acker to find these means of augmentation. *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula* is a short but intense example of the punk aesthetics that will characterise Acker's future work.[4] Written and self-published about a year after the writing of *The Burning Bombing of America*, *The Black Tarantula* explicitly announces Acker's new direction and immediately attracts the attention of her peers (Siegle 53). With her new array of techniques, the quality of abstraction is largely gone, and, in keeping with the times, Acker's political desires are liberated in non-psychedelic terms. Indeed, we appear to be in an entirely new cultural space, soon to be termed punk. And in Acker's version, this space is marked by an expansion and intensification of her assault on literature and on patriarchal capitalism. The novella therefore heralds the advent of Acker's punk feminism.

Even before the cover is opened, the DIY ethos behind the production and distribution of *The Black Tarantula* denote its cultural difference and the distinctive ways in which culture will operate in both punk and the women's movement.[5] Copying Eleanor Antin's strategy, Acker mimeographed and handed out or posted copies of episodes of the text to subscribers, one

chapter at a time, thus bypassing the publishing industry and drawing upon, and developing, a sympathetic and loyal audience (Kraus 82–83). As Acker notes, "there's always been MALE ART but now we have MAIL ART" ("Devoured" 9)—alluding to Mail Art and Fluxus's use of the postal service to circulate works of art outside art's institutional circuits (Home 69–70). *The Black Tarantula* was later published as a single edition by the small presses, TVRT and Viper's Tongue Books in 1975, then by Grove Press, never really moving into the cultural mainstream. The novella's processes of material production exemplify punk's and the women's movement's anti-institutional cultural politics, creating alternative cultural circuits, audiences, institutions, and communities.

The book's title and nominal author are another explicit confrontation with literary conventions, being Acker's earliest experiments with autofiction. Originally published with the author given as the Black Tarantula (a pen name sometimes used by Acker), the text announces its strangeness and playfulness regarding authorship and genre. The title suggests an autobiography, but destabilises the voice of the text: who or what is the author? And yet the name is carefully chosen by Acker to give a clear image of this voice: a spider with a fearsome reputation, with the female larger than, and a predator of, the male of the species. This will be an aggressively female authorial persona, typical of punk's predilection for playful and confronting pseudonyms (see, for example, Johnny Rotten or Siouxsie Sioux). Punk musician Alice Bag argues that adopting such names was part of punk's "discarding of old roles and old identities", including gender identities (238). Just as punk music attacked the music industry, including its creation of niche markets and stars, this peritextual intervention symbolises Acker's assault on authorship and literary classification that finds expression in this and later works.

A punk mode of creativity complements this method of material production, one that is cynical, plundering, and disrespectful, hence equal to the recessionary times of the early 1970s. *The Black Tarantula* is notable for being Acker's first full-scale use of appropriation or plagiarism, and although its use has attracted much critical commentary, where it is interpreted as an example of postmodern pastiche (see Karen Brennan, for instance), or as derived from Burroughs's cut up techniques (as in Rob Latham), I wish to frame this key technique in explicitly punk feminist terms. In a punk reconfiguration of the author–text–culture relationship, Acker, as an "avatar of bricolage" (Ensminger 17) and a "kleptoparasite" (Sciolino 63), repositions the mechanics of literary creation as bricolage and by extension, theft, and therefore consciously positions her literary creativity as derivative and illegitimate.[6] A glance at the various chapter titles makes evident her strategy. We move, for instance, from "Some Lives of Murderesses" to "I Move to San Francisco. I Begin to Copy My Favorite Pornography Books and Become the Main Person in Each." Each chapter of the Tarantula's autobiography announces that it is based on someone else's life, a punk feminist pastiche of the clichés of women.

Bricolage enacts a particularly punk and feminist ambivalence regarding culture, being a practice for the outsiders 'making do' with the detritus of the dominant culture.[7] Just as punk proclaimed that anyone could form a band, and any song is fair game for a butchered cover version, Acker demonstrates the outcome of a writerly identification with other authors' texts. Why can't she write a cover version of Sade? Men have been writing about women for centuries so women can return the favour. This is in keeping with punk's and feminism's desacralisation and hence democratisation of culture. Second, and as the chapter titles and content signal, bricolage is a method to critique literature, its institutions, values, and underpinning by capitalist property relations. Copyright, as well as authorship, originality, and creative genius—key criteria of Western literary value systems since Romanticism, and typically reserved for men—are confronted and undermined by Acker's technique of taking a particular text and rewriting or simply inserting herself into its narrative, then claiming it as part of her work. "If money, possessions, property are what ultimately matter in our culture," explains Christian Moraru, "Acker's plagiarisms and thefts mount a writer's symbolic attack" (151). And *détournement* achieved through montage, as punk realised, was a way of manipulating "the very images that were supposed to keep you down and ignorant", revealing their pernicious and/or absurd subtexts (Savage, "Punk" 148). In *The Black Tarantula* Acker does not try to hide her actions; rather, as a brazen punk she announces her sources at the end of each chapter. Acts of individual creativity are confounded in this demystified and socialised form of textual production, with Avital Ronell's description of Acker as a "literary communist" (23) apposite.

In contrast to the nascent feminist politics and countercultural consciousness of *The Burning Bombing of America*, Acker's intermingled anti-humanist and radical feminist politics are more fully expressed in *The Black Tarantula*. For the first time, Acker makes a punk feminist exploration of female subjectivity and experience central to this and later works, making the Black Tarantula the first iteration of the punk girl. Unlike early 1970s feminist fictions that centred on depicting authentic female experiences and subjectivity, Acker melds a punk aesthetics with an anti-humanist conception of human subjectivity to write an early version of her autofiction. Being post-countercultural cynical, punk is fascinated by the scam, the fake, and the criminal, thus for Acker: "I wanted to examine the word 'I'. What is identity? I placed 'real' autobiography next to 'fake' autobiography" ("Introduction" ix). Acker's choice of "childlike life" signals the infantilisation of women under patriarchy that is personified throughout her work in the punk girl heroine. The protagonist sees no split between world and text: the text is the world. Rather than finding or expressing the truth of the self in the autobiographical text, the Tarantula's childlike life is filled with other people's (some historical, some fictional) constructions of identity. Consider the epigraph to the first section: "Intention: I become a murderess by repeating in words the lives of other murderesses" (2); this suggests that

identity is brought into being by a representation of others' lives, not by mimicking others' actions.[8] The image and the word overpower the real. This also emphasises the quality of charade intrinsic to female identity. Accordingly, female identity as surface, charade, and textuality triumphs over psychological depth and the countercultural authentic self, just as punk bands took on cartoon-type identities. In contrast to the countercultural response to alienation, in which there is an attempt to reintegrate and/or expand the self, punk's response is to fictionalise, empty out, and almost celebrate the alienated self.

The female subject also struggles with the narratives and identities imposed upon her by the gender regime. Acker satirically explores these (pernicious) images of woman in the various narratives of identity that the Black Tarantula appropriates. For Robert Siegle:

> When Acker appropriates, it is less to escape "myself" … into someone else than to bring into a narrative of herself as the (predatory and repulsive female) "black tarantula" the social institutions, economic conditions, and cultural discourses that structure "scoundrels" as well as the heavily conflicted psyche she spins out in these pages.
>
> (52)

Acker's models are indeed scoundrels—both female and male: murderesses, the highwaywoman Moll Cutpurse, the Marquis de Sade, the pornographer and Situationist Alexander Trocchi, and Trocchi's nymphomaniac heroine, Helen Seferis. In a significant shift, the criminal replaces the revolutionary and inward-looking heroine of *The Burning Bombing of America*, marking the changed ideological and political landscape in which Acker now works. These characters are examples of the unrespectable forms of femininity typifying punk culture (O'Brien 189), and the 'bad girls' celebrated by sections of the women's movement in its critique of conventional femininity and morality. As we will see in Chapter 4, Acker's punk embrace of 'bad girls' heralds the role that excessive and pathological femininities will play in her aesthetics—in tone, plot, and characters.

Complementing these scoundrels is a distinctive female narratorial voice that will typify Acker's career. Acker replaces the psychedelic consciousness of her earlier work with a distinctively punk form, idiom, and tone: the voice of the punk girl, who provides a literary and feminist version of the punk scream's articulation of rage and despair (Sartwell 108), as well as Acker's mordant humour. Her punk girl heroine oscillates wildly between a controlled literary voice and one split between understatement and hyperbole: "My mother tells me why I was born … She won't get an abortion because she's too scared. She runs to the toilet because she thinks she has to shit; I come out. The next day she has appendicitis" (63). As well as signaling the conflicted existence of contemporary women, in punk style it also works as an assault on conventional codes of female and literary propriety. The

sordid and the grotesque are foregrounded to form a stupid type of writing that also oscillates between sophisticated and infantile humour. A feminine type of punk excess begins to be given full voice: "My mother tells me that carrot juice is going to come out of me where I piss sometime soon and I shouldn't get worried. All young girls eventually, once a month, watch carrot juice flow out of their piss-holes" (64). Kathryn Hume argues that this voice can be read as "a long-sustained lyric scream" of "the underdog" (491); for Ellen E. Berry, "Acker's voice is blunt, naïve, crude as a punk rock song" (15). I also consider the scream as articulating the nexus of punk and feminism in her work: both use the scream as a politicised emotion, a political device (Brown 457).

The combination of these discordant voices and textual appropriation are emblematic of, and enable, Acker's and punk's characteristic textual form: the fragment. The fragment also characterises *The Burning Bombing of America*, however, the means by which Acker achieves textual fragmentation from now on will differ and be expanded in scale. As Edward S. Robinson explains: "The second phase of her career is one of transition, marked by a shift from syntactic cut-ups toward outright plagiarism and a method that could be more accurately described as cut-and-paste" (154). While signifying social and psychic dissolution, use of the fragment also allows Acker vast cultural mobility and hence power: she can take what she needs from wherever she finds it to use the power of the image and the narrative against themselves. *The Black Tarantula* is thus a montage of registers, voices, words, and narratives, brought into dissonant proximity, as the narrating 'I' changes identity from chapter to chapter—in structural terms, the book is actually six novellas within the one novel—and within chapters as s/he switches among the textual pieces of pasts and presents. Rather than the merely unsettling and dreamy fragmentation of *The Burning Bombing of America*, *The Black Tarantula* is confronting and assaulting—more a "punk assemblage" (Martin 20) than a novel.

The various languages Acker incorporates—the pornographic, the historical, the poetic, the academic, among others—and the way in which they are intermixed destabilises any sense of a core discourse to the novel. Instead, we are left with a babble of competing and conflicting sentences and passages, heteroglossia in extremis. In the second chapter, for instance, the narrator switches from the punked eighteenth-century register of Moll Cutpurse to the 'pure' early 1970s voice of the Black Tarantula:

> I have a boy of mine send a message to jack-in-office his rich uncle in Shropshire's just died: he's inherited a fortune. So much for that schmuck.
>
> (A fat sadist at 7–11 grabs my comics you stuck your tongue out a me last time you were here I won't sell these to you that's against the law he's too stupid to talk to this is my store are you going to beat me up.)
>
> (27)

As the text moves on from each narratorial persona it seems as if the narrator is searching for a language that can meet the writer's expectations about how to express herself or communicate. At a couple of points a despair is expressed: "I'm going to stop writing. I can't write anymore", concedes the narrator (27). And yet the text emphasises if not celebrates language's dysfunctional nature in its repetitions, foregrounding of clichés, use of paradox, and banality:[9]

> The woman who gave birth to me speaks: "Yes, your sister's baby is just adorable. I love all babies; all babies are beautiful. I love all babies; all babies are just beautiful. Except for you and your sister: you were both ugly. Except for you and your sister: you were both ugly."
>
> (74)

Punk's penchant for schlock culture reveals the stupidity of cliché and stereotypes and, to an extent, embraces them.

The centrality of the fragment, whether this be of temporal or spatial location, or the shift between registers, syntactical forms, and discourses, produce a text that refuses seamless transitions between scenes or events, or regular rhythms of sounds. Instead, Acker gives us a novel that is discordant in its tonality—"punk noise" for Larry McCaffery (228), kaleidoscopic in its *mise en scène*, and erratic in its narrative pacing. In the shifting and unpredictability, the reader is faced with that most punk of motifs, chaos. This has major implications for interpretation and reading practice. The discordant rhythms of the text work as noise (rather than melody), thereby attempting to block surface meaning in favour of aural ideological subtext. This celebration of nonsense and chaos is a political strategy (Berry 57): it is critical to Acker's assault on rationalism, "the reigning logic of capitalism" according to Nicola Pitchford that, in its imbrication with language, for Acker is crucial to the oppressiveness of late capitalism (17). If any pleasure (and humour) are to be gained it is by going with the novel's erratic flow, feeling and *listening* to it. As punk bands moved people to dance differently, Acker moves the reader to her mode of perceiving the world: via a bodily and sensuous practice to a position of nonsense. The 'stupidness' of punk and Acker is actually a critique of and an alternative to hegemonic reason, as this aside from the narrator explains:

> I'm trying to get away from self-expression but not from personal life. I hate creativity. I'm simply exploring other ways of dealing with events than ways my lousy habits—mainly installed by parents and institutions—have forced me to act.
>
> (86)

Such a practice is suitable to represent the renegade female's experience detailed in Part II.

In a major shift away from the psychedelic and atemporal present of *The Burning Bombing of America*, historical time returns in *The Black Tarantula*—a symptom of punk's street smarts and political realism, and a major source of the novella's humour. History provides alternative models of femininity, such as the murderess, Charlotte Wood; history also offers symbols of political and cultural power such as Sade. Yet it is a punk refiguration of history, both "anti-mimetic and non-representational", with cartoonish and exaggerated characters that seem more realistic in their overt fictionalisation (Jacobs 50). See, for example, this speech from Moll Cutpurse:

> I'm a black dog; I have to stand in a white sheet at Paul's Cross during a Sunday service. I drink three quarts of sack, swagger off to the cross. Curse everyone who doesn't talk to me. I'm the black leather Virgin Mary. At this point I change my costume; for the rest of my life I wear only men's clothes.
>
> (28)

Acker's appropriations and reworking of history destabilise her fictionalised historical spaces and foreground the textual basis of historical knowledge. And history, like culture, is yet another exclusionary practice that the punk writer can take and rework without regard for its conventions or status. As Part II explores in detail, punk textuality acknowledges the role of history in understanding the contemporary American society of control, however, punk's simplistic approach makes explicit history as a selective representational practice, and literature as relying on historical stereotypes for its codes of realism.

Finally, Acker's post-countercultural interpretation of women's lives and her political understanding of cultural genres lead to a change in the representational dominant. The motifs of sexual liberation and the obscene figuring *The Burning Bombing of America* are relocated to mass culture. From now on the practice and representation of sex is typically figured as a mutated pornography: Acker's gendered iteration of punk's emphasis on the sordid (Hebdige 107–108). For punk culture, porn—as worldview, industry, trope, and style—becomes a favoured method to confront the straight world's hypocrisy regarding gender, desire, and love. For elements of the women's movement, porn encapsulates the commodification of women, but may also provide a type of feminine excess. A mutated porn is therefore a historically resonant choice for Acker, signifying the aftermath of sexual liberation and an increasing capitalist commodification of cultural genres and human desires.

By 1973, Acker has created the essential components of her punk writing: the punk girl heroine, the stolen and *détourned* textual fragment as formal principle, nonsensical syntax, a dynamic of shock, pornography and the sordid as worldview, and culture and history as image banks to be raided. These elements comprise Acker's answer to what can come after

the counterculture in political and literary terms, and will be expanded and intensified in later works. Just as "the politics of punk effectively addressed the problems of women in popular music" (Daugherty 30), punk allows Acker to reject the codes and narrative techniques of conventional women writers and of the literary establishment, instead taking on the persona and project of the artist-rebel—a voice from the street and the underground—to trace women's location in the libidinal economy of the *fin-de-siècle* United States. In the next chapter, we move from literary poetics to the realm of ideas, to see the configuration of Acker as a punk intellectual, and the ways in which she repossesses the male avant-garde tradition for her own punk feminist purposes, and as a critical dimension of her feminist minor literature.

Notes

1 Other examples of Acker's countercultural writing are her poems published in 1968 in the little magazine, *Presence: A Magazine of the Revolution*. See *An Author Index to Little Magazines of the Mimeograph Revolution* for full details. Acker, however, denies writing poetry ("Devoured" 4). Regardless, Colby provides an excellent analysis of Acker's early 1970s poetry, contextualising her in terms of Jackson Mac Low and the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. Acker's *Homage to Leroi Jones and Other Early Works* was published in 2015, including an introductory essay by Gabriel Kappes.
2 All page numbers from the novel throughout the chapter refer to Acker, *Ripoff Red, Girl Detective and the Burning, Bombing of America* (2002).
3 This connection signals the influence of Marcuse and Reich—both important countercultural figures. Colby also argues for the influence of Pierre Guyotat's *Eden Eden Eden* on the novella, however, Guyotat was only published in France in 1970, making it less likely that Acker had read it before writing *The Burning Bombing of America*. In addition, Kraus's biography of Acker has her discovering Guyotat's work much later.
4 Hereafter referred to as *The Black Tarantula*.
5 Toby Mott describes punk as having "an explosive DIY culture" (17).
6 I respect Colby's preference for the term collage rather than appropriation because of its specifically modernist associations. My framing of Acker as punk rather than modernist requires the term bricolage—arguably, a punk version of collage.
7 See the essay by punk graphic designer, Linder Sterling, for an insightful account of her use of the cut-and-paste aesthetic.
8 All page numbers from the novel throughout the chapter refer to "The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula" in *Portrait of an Eye: Three Novels* (1998).
9 Sam McBride's reading of Acker's *Great Expectations* offers a good discussion of her use of paradox.

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3 The punk intellectual

Repossessing the European avant-garde

Lidia Yuknavitch observes that Acker was "one of the most theoretically informed contemporary fiction writers of the twentieth century"; moreover, "She did not use critical theory in the way that academia does, to prove or disprove an argument. She used it for artistic production" (94). Critical theory, most notably poststructuralism, continental philosophy, and their related European avant-garde tradition (hereafter referred to as theory), are foundational to Acker's punk writing.[1] They figure its form and content, as well as her self-produced writerly mythology, such that Acker the punk writer is inseparable from Acker the punk intellectual. So although Judith Ryan argues that "in the last third of the twentieth century, a new strain emerged in postmodern fiction … that might be said to 'know about' literary and cultural theory" (8–9), working through these ideas and their blind spots, this chapter demonstrates that Acker's engagement with theory is of a different order, qualitatively and quantitatively.[2]

Acker's identity as a punk intellectual outlined here is a figure possessed by theory in order to repossess it: continually returning to and embodying avant-garde ideas rather than simply using or applying them, thereby rejecting the dualisms of theory/practice, art/life, and mind/body. The ambiguity of the words 'possession' and 'repossession' make them apt to describe the specific nature of Acker's engagement with the avant-garde, given its counter-Enlightenment lineage.[3] The demonic connotation of possession aligns with Steven Best and Douglas Kellner's description of leading figures of the counter-Enlightenment as 'demonic', a judgement "rooted in the critiques of reason by de Sade, Bataille, Artaud and others", as well as with Acker's 'haunting' by these figures (16).

Acker's repossession of these figures can be understood by the economic sense of repossession, denoting the avant-garde's and the counter-Enlightenment's debt to women—women as marginalised, elided, appropriated, or reduced to metaphor and/or muse, now taking back their metaphorical 'property' of radical, transgressive textuality—as in Julia Kristeva's account of feminine writing emerging from the semiotic (Kristeva, *Revolution*). In the late twentieth century, Acker is at the forefront of certain women artists and writers who will revisit this lineage to repossess it

on feminist terms.[4] I contend that Acker's intellectual trajectory, indeed her entire career, is a fraught but productive process of working through the legacy of the male European avant-garde on a scale arguably never undertaken by any other twentieth-century writer, to translate, even mutate this lineage from a punk feminist perspective and for punk feminist ends. As Svetlana Mintcheva observes, "at the end of that tradition, Acker continues it, radicalises it, but also launches a critique of its radical hopes: a gap opens between modernity and postmodernity" (52), and, I would add, Acker acts as a bridge between a pre-second wave feminist avant-garde and a feminist postmodernity.

I am not attempting an exegesis of Acker's influences, as the number and diversity of thinkers with whom she engaged is large and complex, requiring a separate study.[5] Rather, I am interested in the broad groupings, a particular lineage, a set of thematics, and a mode of (self-)presentation that coalesce as Acker's fictional version of theory, which recur in, make possible, and structure her punk feminist project. This chapter thereby extends, by taking in a different direction, the work of critics who have read Acker as a theorist (Punday; Sciolino), and those who have identified the centrality of the male avant-garde to her writing (Borowska; Mintcheva).

I begin with a short discussion of Acker as a lay theorist, a specifically punk type of intellectual, before examining, through two case studies, her first method and location of working with theory: the public intellectual as produced in author interviews. Interviews are where Acker speaks, embodying (in voice and in photographs) her theoretical frameworks, and where she produces a writerly mythology: the daughter of the avant-garde. And interviews are where the lay theorist propagates this lineage within and beyond the cultural underground—Acker is the punk interpreter.

This leads us to the second major site where Acker works with theory: her novels. I explore how Acker writes a contemporary novel of ideas using her punk techniques of fragmentation, appropriation, the frenetic intermixing of high and low genres, as well as personification and fictionalisation of key avant-garde figures. These techniques enable Acker to give a face and body to her lineage, and are an aid to her authorial autofictions and repossession of the avant-garde's ideas. Here Acker enacts Sylvère Lotringer's definition of theory as "joy rides for the mind" (131). She experiments with their premises: avant-garde ideas and practices are tested out, worked through from a feminist perspective, making her a punk feminist translator of the European avant-garde. Her work therefore typifies a strand in contemporary women's experimental writing that Ellen E. Berry describes as "feminist theory-fictions": "texts that use fictional methods to elaborate the consequences of theoretical perspectives that would be difficult to represent in other than antirealist terms" (7).

The chapter concludes with an interpretation of the context for Acker's role as a punk intellectual: a brief reading of the times of her repossession. Why does her working through and resurrection of a subaltern cultural and

intellectual formation occur in the closing decades of the twentieth century? I suggest Acker's intellectual uniqueness, her courage and boldness, lies in the fact that her persona and her work embody and continue in specifically punk feminist form the European avant-garde, beginning with its precursor, the Marquis de Sade, and continuing into the twentieth century with, most notably, Georges Bataille and Laure. That is, her theoretical frameworks are intellectualised and politicised versions of punk's characteristic excess, negation, and truncated transcendence, given imaginative life in punk writing. Her works are thus ethical counter-imaginings of the avant-garde to the dominant, gender-blind version of the Anglophone academy and male artists and writers at the end of the twentieth century. Acker exemplifies the "double allegiance" of contemporary women artists to the male avant-garde and to feminist critique observed by Susan Rubin Suleiman (xvii). I leave a detailed examination of the politico-literary outcome of Acker's repossession of the counter-Enlightenment to the next chapter.

The lay theorist as public intellectual

As some book reviews reveal, Acker can be too easily dismissed as faddishly postmodern (Mackinnon; Schiff), however, reading her personal papers shows someone who took seriously and could predict the importance of the emergent poststructuralist paradigms in the humanities. Her notebooks are filled with jottings she made while reading various critical theorists and philosophers such as Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, or Judith Butler, some of whom are not referenced in her published work. These notebooks show a rigorous engagement with, and the particular areas on which Acker concentrated, namely, the operations of language, sexuality, and social structures. And they show someone widely read in the classics and in the cultural underground.[6] Indeed, Acker attempted to maintain and practice the radical valences of this thought in her writing even as it was assimilated into the American academy (Cusset; Lotringer), and from outside the comforts of the institution for, like some of her avant-garde predecessors, Acker was a full-time writer and untenured radical.[7]

Regardless (if not because) of the seeming nonsense produced by her poetics, this punk writer should be understood as a lay theorist, consistently and rigorously engaged in an ethical intellectual project throughout her fiction, poetry, scripts, journalism, performances, and essays. Lay theorist is an ideal term for Acker's punk intellectualism and promulgation of theory as it alludes to her location, ethos, purpose, and the contemporary meanings afforded to theory. Acker the lay theorist is, for most of her career, located outside the academy—she does theory at a grassroots level, almost as a Gramscian punk organic intellectual.[8] Correspondingly, she is resolutely anti-academic institutions—a punk form of anti-clericalism. The heroine of *In Memoriam to Identity* declares that, "They teach you stupid things in universities and universities are no good for anybody" (153). Acker's friend

(and academic) Avital Ronell suggests that, "There is something about the institution of learning that has angered Acker—something that is associated for her with a studied curriculum of stupidity, the wrong side of memory tracks, heading only for memorisation techniques and vital depletion" (15). For Acker, academic institutions are yet another one of the lobotomising machines that structure American late capitalism—elitist, maintaining an artificial divide between theory and practice, and thereby gutting theory of its radical core and potentiality.

Acker's purpose is to reject this dichotomy and to preach this truth of theory to the grassroots, and later, as we will see, to the mainstream. The term 'lay theorist' also calls to mind the lay preacher, signalling the sacred overtones of theory for both the academy and Acker's scene: theory's high cultural value as an explanatory system, its purpose as a system of belief, and that it should be made available to all. Theory, being literalised and personified in the writer's self-mythologising and in her novels, is not a sacred abstraction but something to work with, to bring to life, to bend and break as part of a politically engaged and imaginative exploration.[9] Her feminist experimentation consciously and happily mutates theory via her method of repossession.[10]

Acker's print interviews provide an overview of the key components of her intellectual frameworks; in addition, interviews suggest a method of Acker's self-presentation, one that relies on concepts, proper names, and repetition.[11] Acker gave well over 40 interviews during her career that were published in a diverse range of periodicals, ranging from small press and underground publications such as *Red Bass* and *Tattoo Advocate*, to mainstream cultural journals including *Artforum*, *Meanjin*, and the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*. She was also an accomplished essayist, regularly contributing to *New Statesman and Society*, and published a collection of essays, *Bodies of Work* (1997). For an experimental writer aligned with the cultural underground, she maintained a high public profile and one that, as her fame increased, included mainstream publications and venues, leading Joe Moran to describe her as "a star of bohemia" (132), making Acker a highly visible punk intellectual.

Interviews, however, do more than suggest a writer's potential audience or popularity. John Rodden contends that the literary interview is "an instance of *performance* art" and "a rhetorical act" (6, 1). The form, quantity, and relative accessibility of the author interview, in addition to Acker's renowned skills as a performer, make it a prime site in which the authorial persona and *oeuvre* are constructed. Moreover, in the case of Acker, the volume and repetitious content of the interviews suggest that persona and *oeuvre* combine to produce a culturally valuable writerly mythology for both the author and audience. As I demonstrate, the interviews construct Acker the punk writer as a continuation of the European avant-garde, representing a late twentieth-century revolution in poetic language.

Throughout the interviews (though Acker's essays and journalism share this characteristic) her intellectual and artistic influences are a recurrent topic—(see interviews with Rebecca Deaton, Paul Perilli, and Noel King).[12] Although questions of influence are fairly standard for an author interview, the amount of space they occupy in Acker's interviews signifies something about the type of writer: she is already being framed by herself and by the interviewer as an intellectual, as complex if not 'difficult'. Specifically, the repetition of questions and answers regarding influence, antecedents, technique, and affiliations that mark these two genres become one of the key ways in which we know, classify, and therefore understand and value Acker's work. In addition, her thematically consistent responses to these interview questions are an important mode of authorial characterisation, producing over time the above-mentioned writerly mythology (Rodden 18). Each interview reinforces, as it adds to, Acker's intellectual genealogy. Also crucial is the role played by the frequent use of photographs of Acker using typical punk codes (spiky cropped hair, leather clothing, piercings, blood-red lipstick) to accompany these interviews. These highly distinctive images condense, embody, echo, and reinforce the spoken content.

Two lengthy but representative examples show this process of self-mythologisation at work: a 1988 interview with Ellen G. Friedman published in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* in 1989, and, towards the end of her career, a 1996 interview with Larry McCaffery published in his collection, *Some Other Frequency: Interviews with Innovative American Authors*. These exemplify the way in which Acker the lay theorist is constructed, and the particular schemata that enables this woman writer to carve out a punk feminist literature.

Occurring more than a decade apart, both interviews contain four elements that typify the ways in which interviews and essays configure Acker intellectually, and hence create her punk intellectual persona. First, there is the 'coming to theory' narrative, in which Acker explains the process of discovering critical or poststructuralist theory. As she tells McCaffery:

> You see, there was no way I had of really talking about it [Acker's work] until the punk movement came along and I met Sylvère Lotringer. That was about 1976. Sylvère introduced me to the work of Félix Guattari, Gilles Delueze, and Foucault. Derrida was never as important. And I never took to Baudrillard's work. But it was only then that I began to find a language for what I was doing.
>
> (Acker, "The Path" 25)

Or as she comments to Friedman:

> But we had no way of explaining what we were doing to each other. We were fascinated with Pasolini's and Bataille's work, but there was no

> way of saying why or how. So Sylvère Lotringer came to New York. His main teachers were Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze and somewhat Foucault.
>
> (Acker, "A Conversation" 16)

As Acker presents it, the arrival of French poststructuralism is a turning point in her career, indeed an epiphany: giving a name or structure to her ambitions and aims. Critical theory's interest in figures of the European avant-garde validates Acker's interest, while giving Acker a language with which to articulate (into) her work. We can observe the similar phrasing and underlying logic of Acker's 'coming to punk' narrative, noted in Chapter 2, and her 'coming to theory' narrative: both provide a language, a rationale, and a supportive community. This shared rhetoric, reinforced by Acker's punk image, suggests the complementary nature of punk and theory for Acker's project. It is significant that both emerge at a similar time.

Second, the interviews feature a detailed explanation of creative practice based upon either theorists or artists. So the arrival of French theory has this result: "It was mainly—for me—about decentralization, and in *Don Quixote* I worked with theories of decentralization" (Acker, "A Conversation" 16). Or, as she explains to McCaffery:

> There I was putting things together not by narrative but based on puns, and generally trying to put together a book [*My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini*] out of various noncausal ways of ordering. That approach grew partly out of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*—and with me consciously and obsessively fighting against Oedipal structuring.
>
> (Acker, "The Path" 27)

Such a rhetoric positions theory as an impetus and a technique that Acker integrates into her punk writing. The close linkage of a theorist and Acker's work signifies a way of practising writing as well as thinking about writing and the world. In effect, Acker rejects the theory/practice split, showing instead theory becoming praxis. This rhetoric subtly marks Acker's difference: theory is more than theory when it is located outside the academy—it makes things happen. And this linkage adds credibility and cultural value to Acker's idiosyncratic practice.

Acker's affiliation with a particular cultural lineage or tradition is the third recurrent element, which is achieved through the fourth element of citationality—specifically, the repeated citation of proper names rather than of concepts. Although concepts do feature in interviews and essays (with references to, for example, nominalism and minimalism), and artistic movements may be mentioned, it is the artist's or philosopher's proper name that is the major signifier of intellectualism and affiliation. Thus Acker's personification of artists and theorists in her novels is paralleled by her prosopopoeia, for, as Ronell drawing on Jacques Derrida, notes, "When we

cite and recite … we are calling to the irreplaceable one for whom there is no substitute" (14). Acker's use of the proper name suggests the *vital*—in the sense of living—importance of these thinkers to her—they are kin. In the interview with Friedman we see an aggregation of writers that Acker is reading and/or is influenced by: "I'm more interested in the European novel now. Pierre Guyotat. Duras's work interests me. Some of Violet [*sic*] Leduc, early Monique Wittig. Some of de Beauvoir's writing, Nathalie Sarraute" (this interview is atypical in its preponderance of female authors). She concludes with this observation: "For me, one lineage that I've come out of is that of Rimbaud. So to investigate Rimbaud is to go back to the beginning for me"—Rimbaud being the writer "who influenced me" by showing "how art can matter politically to society" (Acker, "A Conversation" 19, 22). So Arthur Rimbaud is Acker's paternal figure, her artistic origin.

In the McCaffery interview Acker agrees to his suggested lineage of: "Sade, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautréamont [*sic*], Jarry, the surrealists and Dadaists, Bataille, Artaud, Genet, Burroughs, Johnny Rotten, Patti Smith, Charles Bukowski" described as "the extremist avant-garde" (Acker, "The Path" 19). Acker characterises this tradition as a visionary one achieved by "transcending limits. What that lineage of people are all expressing in their work is finally always about *seeing*. And they certainly share a view of excess as being not exactly what reality *is* but what you want to see reality as. Seeing almost becomes reality itself" (Acker, "The Path" 20). In other interviews the names may change slightly: "I read Marguerite Duras and the line from Bataille through Blanchot" (Acker, "That Expat" 329); the descriptor for the lineage may alter, for instance, "'the non-acceptable' literary tradition" (Acker, "Kathy Acker" 29); but the strong sense of an avant-gardist tradition remains. Any variations add to rather than detract from the coherence of the network. These additional names are interpreted in terms of what we already know about Acker: she is transgressive, so they probably will be, and vice versa.

Moreover, Acker is not just a writer with a certain set of influences, rather, she is located historically and aesthetically as part of something larger, recognisable, and because of its label, to an extent unified. Such a positioning constitutes a major framework for interpreting, distinguishing, and valuing her work. To read this repeated rhetoric of the authorial self is to add one's own name to a list that comprises an alternative, oppositional, marginal, yet highly charged, cultural, and intellectual formation. Citationality speaks of Acker's sense of cultural belonging and her desire to inhabit this milieu, and it echoes her novelistic techniques of appropriation, intertextuality, and inhabiting characters. Citationality is an example of what Courtney Foster describes as Acker's "performative reading" process: "through the repetition of language [and texts], the narrator becomes specific historical and fictional people and things" (141)—"another text to repeat, another person to embody" (131). As a consequence, there is no separation between her writerly self and her textual genealogy.

Another consequence of citationality is that theory is given a face: it becomes personalised, condensed, and personified in these proper names and, as a consequence, more accessible. Schizoanalysis and desiring machines become translated into 'Deleuze and Guattari'; a vast cultural paradigm becomes compressed into the figure of 'Sade'; 'Bataille' could be shorthand for a number of approaches to taboo, eroticism, ritual, and so on. This personalisation signifies an ease, a familiarity with, and hence a degree of cultural competence, and echoes Acker's device of making artists into characters, and sometimes caricatures, in her novels as thematic ciphers. Spencer Dew describes these theorists as textual friends of Acker, and potentially of the reader: texts "that are the works of writers, artists, and thinkers with whom Acker shares some sense of camaraderie", and whom Acker wants the reader to read (48, 52). His phrase perfectly encapsulates the lay theorist's approach to an underground elite: anti-elitist and pedagogical in intent. Acker's prosopopoeia gives face to herself, a 'tradition', and conceptual abstractions.

Although the network constructed in Acker's essays and interviews reveals numerous influences, and a seemingly diverse range, it is both possible and useful for understanding Acker the punk intellectual to summarise them into five reasonably distinct groupings.[13] We have the counter-Enlightenment philosophes, namely, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sade, followed by the French symbolist poets—Rimbaud, Charles Baudelaire, and Paul Verlaine, and their predecessor, Gérard de Nerval. The next group could be described as a twentieth-century French literary vanguard comprised of Antonin Artaud, Maurice Blanchot, Georges Bataille, Pierre Guyotat, Marguerite Duras, and Alain Robbe-Grillet. A post-World War II American avant-garde, both literary and artistic, complements them, centred on William Burroughs and conceptual art. Contemporary French poststructuralist theory, as in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Michel Foucault, and Kristeva, forms the final strand.

As well as a coherent intellectual lineage, this typology suggests some common thematics and hence the parameters of Acker's punk intellectual milieu. Most significantly, the theorists are nearly all male and predominantly French, a crucial factor in theory's allure, and providing it with a sense of cultural 'otherness' in the American context (Cusset 275–276). All can be characterised as formal innovators and/or theorists of formal innovation, making them relevant to cultural workers outside the academy. Many can be described as belonging to a counter-Enlightenment tradition, or what Matei Calinescu terms aesthetic or cultural modernity, characterised by "its outright rejection of bourgeois modernity, its consuming negative passion" (42). They are thinkers of transgression, the irrational, and the repressed unreason of the West, with Sade and/or Nietzsche as paternal figures (Best and Kellner 22; Foley et al. xiv). Two sometimes overlapping strands of writers and philosophers can be ascertained; both are critical of the dominant culture, with their concerns including the operations of language and

of desire, the role of art and the artist, and the mechanisms of power and social control.

Acker consciously affiliates with an outsider tradition—whether in geographical or cultural terms, an alternative and politically radical tradition of thought and creative practice. This lineage, "the nonacceptable literary tradition" in Acker's terms (Acker, "A Few" 31), or McCaffery's "extremist avant-garde" (Acker, "The Path" 19) (my preferred term), can be interpreted as a protest by Acker against the limitations of American and of Western culture, and conventional frameworks for understanding the social, culture, gender, and sexuality. We can note the minor presence of Americans, who function more as peers and contemporaries than major influences, reflecting the fact that Acker's core influences are European, a mark of her cultural distinction.[14] This illiberal avant-garde, as we see throughout this study, is core to Acker's articulation of punk feminism, using its illiberalism to expose the libidinal economy of the United States.

As the volume of interviews show, Acker the punk intellectual is not only made possible by her lineage but, as a lay theorist, also wants to propagate it. Thus when she finds fame—especially in the United Kingdom—in the early 1980s with the publication *of Blood and Guts in High School*, she is an ideal conduit between the cultural underground and the mainstream, able and willing to interpret marginal and/or relatively obscure ideas in a context made receptive, or at least curious, by the women's movement, punk rock, and the increasing power of postmodernism as explanatory device for contemporary culture. Peter Wollen correctly observes that "her work signaled the tremors of a deep cultural shift, as she sought to negotiate a new relationship between avant-garde artist and popular entertainer, between esoterica and pulp" (2). Acker's writerly mythology fits the times.

As a consequence, Acker is regularly drawn on for her punk credentials to explain postmodern elements such as poststructuralism, the contemporary avant-garde, 'the margins', representation, the 'Other', feminism, and transgression. In the 1980s she was a guest and regular presenter at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts, and had an episode of the leading British arts television programme, *The South Bank Show*, devoted to her. The *Writers in Conversation: Kathy Acker with Angela McRobbie* programme makes apparent Acker's cerebral punk. In the solidly bourgeois genre of the arts programme, Acker—with her leather jacket and discordant narrative—is a confronting presence and marker of cultural difference: a new type of woman writer. The interview, however, shows Acker's skills as a cultural interpreter. She is articulate, sincere, and unpretentious; has an easy rapport with the conservatively dressed McRobbie; moreover, she moves easily between discussing punk rock and the New York underground to postmodern writing, feminism, and high cultural theory.

This interpreter role is clearly evident in the other episodes of the *ICA Talks* programme in which Acker is the host and she interviews key postmodern or alternative writers: Jeannette Winterson, Spalding Gray, and

Burroughs. Her self-presentation continues that compelling mix of the visual and the oral: the punk body and the voice of the down-to-earth cultural commentator and intellectual. She manages to both speak to the guests on their own terms (her dress announcing their shared outsider status) and, with her unaffected curiosity, to make them accessible to the audience. Her essays and reviews in the late 1980s for *The New Statesman and Society* similarly report back to the mainstream Acker's analysis of American culture from the underground. Acker's doubly-transgressive status as female inheritor of the avant-garde, while unique and alluring to readers and viewers, does not mean that her lay theory is uncritical, orthodox, or settled. Rather, it is an experiment in ideas, and how to work with ideas, as the next section illustrates. She remains true to what Lotringer identifies as the essence of theory: "Hypothesizing is really what the *theory* in French theory is about" (131, original emphasis).

The punk lay theorist as novelist of ideas

While Acker articulates her theoretical frameworks in attenuated and personalised form in the interviews (and in her essays), it is in her novels that her role as punk lay theorist is most fully developed, so much so that we can classify her as a novelist of ideas, an identity largely overlooked in discussions of her work. This section provides an overview of the techniques Acker uses to produce her novel of ideas, while Part II of the book examines in more detail how these are used in conjunction with tropes as part of her critical narration of the *fin-de-siècle* United States. Acker engages with theory in her novels via the punk devices of appropriation, fragmentation, literalisation, caricature, and fictionalisation of historical personages—specifically, of theorists and writers, to effect what Marilyn Manners describes as an "improper intermingling" of popular culture, theory (including feminist theory), and philosophy (100). As a consequence, theory is not seamlessly integrated; it is a dissonant but major presence—a haunting (and haunted) set of voices that Acker repossesses. Acker's compulsion to speak the proper names in her interviews is paralleled by her need to insert and animate these figures in mutated form in her novels so that she too can take her place as an avant-garde writer.

Similar to the fictional, often canonical works appropriated by Acker, theory is figured as an intertext, a fragment, often unattributed to a source but rather taking its place among the heteroglossia of the novels. This strategy keeps the chaotic architecture and the schlockiness of the novel undisturbed, even amplified, as in this passage from *Blood and Guts in High School*:

> FATHER: Do you mean you never want to see me again?
> JANEY: You said it's over.
>
> If the author here lends her "culture" to the amorous subject, in exchange the amorous subject affords her the innocence of its image-repertoire,

> indifferent to the proprieties of knowledge. Indifferent to the proprieties of knowledge.
>
> FATHER: I have to be alone.
> JANEY: I understand.
>
> (28)

As the passage illustrates, the segue is abrupt, a jump cut in Burroughs fashion; the author is unstated (it is Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*); therefore the connection needs to be made by the reader. Frida Beckman argues that this juxtaposition of philosophy and fiction suggests that "Acker seems to resist representation in favor of *a stuttering text* in which characters ebb and flow without a delineable subjectivity" (65–66, emphasis added). Beckman captures perfectly the rhythms of Acker's technique and the severance of thought from an identifiable source. One result is that the clash of (lovers') discourses repositions and resignifies them both. Barthes's elegance looks slightly pompous, while he adds an ironic perspective on the American soap opera language of Father and Janey.

Note also that Acker slightly rewrites the theoretical passage, changing the masculine pronoun to a feminine one, and repeating the final sentence. This DIY translation and juxtapositioning of a theoretical text into a reworked fragment disturbs theory's status as a master narrative and intensifies its message. Indeed, Georgina Colby terms Acker's translation of male works as transliteration, in that it

> is a strategy used by Acker to find a voice as a woman, which takes the form of a mark, a feminist inscription, a non-verbal stamp, an alteration of the male poet's language that is both inside and outside language.
>
> (129)

The theoretical text's stature is reduced as it is placed on the same level as the fictional actions and voices, simply one discourse among others. In addition, the intertext suggests the influence of conceptual art and writing on Acker, with their awareness of the politics of language and the aesthetic (Wood 52, 27), and their techniques of collage and citationality (Kotz 102).

Because of its location amid fictional, bizarre, and irrational voices and scenarios, we read the theory fragment differently. The reader must either work hard on a conscious level to make sense of the new voice in its shortened, intensified iteration—evidence of Acker's pedagogical intent for her "textual friends" (Dew 48)—or simply follow the abrasive flow of the text, letting interpretation occur subliminally. Theory thereby functions as a type of possession of the text: its shadowy outlines and unexpected presence make it both a weapon and object of critique, disturbing the boundaries of the fiction/theory and fiction/non-fiction divides. However, the fictional level of the text haunts theory itself, as with Acker's appropriation of a section

of Kristeva's *About Chinese Women* and its reduction into a fragment in *My Mother: Demonology* (in fact, Acker's translation of Kristeva). Kristeva's text is revoiced by the translator, then interrupted by the fictional narrative, destabilising theory's position of mastery over the subject matter. The fiction quietly speaks back at theory's claims:

> In China, when a woman doesn't believe in God, she, like everyone else, validates her existence by believing in man …
>
> I walked into the long, red halls. Here lots of maids were holding meat cleavers. Since they were all Chinese, I couldn't communicate with any of them.
>
> There were times when I thought, I shouldn't be here.
>
> I write in the dizziness that seizes that which is fed up with language and attempts to escape through it: the abyss named fiction. For I can only be concerned with the imaginary when I discuss reality or women.
>
> The Chinese maids, as fat as pigs, regarded me the way one gazes at an object that is so other it can't be human.
>
> (80–81)

This insertion of the theoretical intertext is one method for making a contemporary novel of ideas: ideas are fragmented and literalised, fiction and theory both now haunted.

Acker's own possession by theory is evident in her predominant method of positioning theory into the novel: using proper names of influence and affiliation as characters in her fictions, so that they become motifs and a sensibility. Although novelists, and particularly postmodern novelists, feature historical and cultural figures in their fictions (Hutcheon 5; Jacobs), arguably few make it such a central literary device as Acker does. Significantly, these characters are a specific subset of her intellectual milieu: literary figures from the extremist avant-garde rather than philosophers or 'pure' theoreticians such as Deleuze or Foucault, who are instead found in the shape of intertexts or in the conceptual schemata used by Acker to structure her novels. Across her career Acker reimagines Sade and Alexander Trocchi in *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, Jean Genet in *Blood and Guts in High School*, Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine in *In Memoriam to Identity*, Laure (Collette Peignot) and Georges Bataille in *My Mother: Demonology*, while her final work, *Pussy, King of the Pirates* features Artaud and Nerval. Sade's and Trocchi's eroticism and amorality; Rimbaud's exalted role for the poet and poetic language; Genet's politicised explorations of otherness; and Laure's, Bataille's, and Artaud's fevered search for a new way of being beyond bourgeois rationality and structures: these are the ideational kernels of Acker's punk writing to make a revolution in literary language that will excoriate contemporary America. They are intellectualised and personified forms of punk's excess, nihilism, and transcendence, hence sources of textual and philosophical experimentation for Acker.

This tradition is much more than an ideational source, however; it is a cultural mythology for Acker that inspires, nurtures, and provides a set of stories, characters, and morals—a repertoire, for her punk literary practice, and figures of (dis)identification for her as a female punk avant-gardiste. Just as she uses the intertext fragment as a method to experiment with the borrowed text's significance, as signifiers of the avant-garde project, characters such as Sade and Verlaine make cultural theory and philosophy personified, personalised, and embodied. As a consequence, Acker can experiment with their theories, making her use of these figures more complicated than that suggested by Dew's term "textual friends" (48).

With fictionalisation and personalisation Acker is not aiming for historical verisimilitude, conventional psychological realism, or hagiography. Instead, these personages are cultural icons, programmatic figures, and mythologies for the various narrators (including Acker) that can be worked with and through in fictional scenarios to expose and critique their politico-cultural positions from a late-twentieth-century feminist perspective. Martina Sciolino describes this process as "theories-in-performance, speculative fictions that act out the suppositions of both poststructuralism and feminism" (438), and, I would add, the European avant-garde. Janey, in *Blood and Guts in High School*, for instance, deifies Jean Genet as iconic cultural outlaw until she realises his misogyny and male privilege. One suspects that Janey's lesson is one that Acker also experienced. In *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, Artaud, who Carla Harryman considers to be Acker's "mirror", while represented as a creative outsider, is shown to think about women and love in conventional patriarchal terms (164).

Acker's personification and fictionalisation are enacted in a distinctly punk feminist fashion: characters are simplified, caricatured, intensified, and mutated as they are revisioned from a feminist perspective. They collapse distinctions between high and mass culture (specifically, theory versus the caricature), history and fiction, art and politics, and life and art. *In Memoriam to Identity*'s rendition of Rimbaud features two Rimbauds: the poet then the ex-poet. As the poet, Rimbaud is known only as 'R'. Acker accentuates and simplifies the sordid details of his early life: Rimbaud's influential teacher Father Fist, modelled on Georges Izambard, is portrayed as a sadist; R wants to join a fascist motorcycle gang (14). Historical verisimilitude is rejected in favour of rereading and updating the mythology. When Rimbaud the ex-poet enters the novel he does so in mutated form as William Faulkner's Jason Compton character: the patriarch of a dysfunctional and decadent American family. Rimbaud, the rumoured slave trader and colonial merchant, becomes American capitalist patriarch:

> Despite all [the family's bad genes] I got myself off the ground. I was once as low as you can get and I changed myself into a successful businessman. Now they all depend on me as if all I am is strength. Since the act of poetry's weakness, it's disease. I am proof, Americans, that a man

> who is low and filthy even perverted in his very mind can become the acme or acumen of American cleanliness.
>
> (182)

Auto/biography, mythology, fiction, and the external world merge in Acker's fictionalising of theory.

In *My Mother: Demonology* (published 1993) Acker at last finds a female associated with the extremist avant-garde with whom she can identify (Colby 192): Laure (Collette Peignot). Laure is an early twentieth-century experimental writer, ex-surrealist, Bataille's lover, and "first female member" of Acéphale, "a secret society that strives to recreate Dionysian rituals" (Herman ix). Acker, by making Laure the novel's narrator, explores the psychosocial making and *unmaking* of this rebellious female artist in excessive and confronting terms, whether voicing her confinement by the family, school, or her sexual relationships. In the chapter "Clit City", for instance, Acker focuses on Laure's time in the school system, as it symbolises a critical space for female disciplining and conditioning, and represents the broader patriarchal regime. As the psychiatrist, Gallehault says to Laure: "According to history, any school of all girls is a school of the dead" (77).

As an adult, Laure's relationship with Bataille is represented as an excessive version of female desire, and hence an enactment of Bataille's theory of eroticism in which death and sexual desire merge. She is masochistic and self-abnegating, desiring to be nothing, yet Acker presents this—as it appears to be for Laure and Bataille—as an experimental form of desire, potentially liberating, or as Colby describes it, a mode "of intimate revolt" for feminine subjectivity (200). As the following passage suggests, such a desire is beyond the current means of representation available to women:

> In or due to this loneliness, B was more me than me. Since I could no longer see anything in this state, I decided that I had to destroy my obsession. Obsession. The only way to do this, destroy my deepest being, it seemed, would be to become a man.
>
> The name of that man is Heathcliff.
>
> (116)

The following chapter, "Obsession" rewrites *Wuthering Heights* from Heathcliff/Laure's perspective. Laure must exorcise Bataille, and this is done via a cultural text—a novel, and switch in gender, a metafictional comment on Acker's practice. But there is no reunion with Bataille, only her death. The female artist who pushes the boundaries of ways of living and artistic practice has a specific set of strictures imposed upon her, one that Acker as 'daughter' of Laure inherits. In 1993, Acker's fictionalisation of Laure suggests that the transgressive female artist still suffers.

As a result of Acker's mutations, theory—a high genre of postmodern culture, an exemplar of abstraction, and a potential simulacrum of political

radicalism—is in Acker's hands desacralised, materialised, and politicised as it is brought to life via the fictionalised body of its author and recontextualised in the imaginative sphere of punk fiction. This continual use of personified theory in her fiction evinces a working through by Acker of her lineage across her *oeuvre*. Acker tests out her affiliation with this male tradition to arrive at a place within each novel and across her career where a specifically feminist avant-garde practice becomes possible. Her narrativisation of the extremist avant-garde is a quest to mobilise and update the transgressive languages of these male icons. Acker explores the texts of female eroticism via Sade and Trocchi in the early 1970s (*The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula*), Genet as a simulacrum of otherness in the late 1970s (*Blood and Guts in High School*), Rimbaud as a prophetic warning of the cooption of the contemporary cultural outlaw in 1990 (*In Memoriam to Identity*), Laure as a potential but tormented avant-gardist mother and/or sister figure in 1994 (*My Mother: Demonology*), to Acker's final novel-length work, *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, which centres on Artaud, her proto-punk twin, who must be left behind so that the reign of girl pirates—the female avant-gardistes—can occur. Significantly, in each of these narratives, the male artist becomes supplanted by either a female narrator, artist, or writer, paralleling my opening contention that women are central to the late twentieth-century revolution in poetic language, with Acker as the vanguard for a punk aesthetics of and for its time.

The times of repossession

In a typically postmodernist reversal of the avant-gardist dynamic of breaking with the past, a reversal that parallels Acker's punk forays into the literary canon (discussed in Part II), Acker finds she must return to, possess, and productively mutate a subversive tradition so as to find a way to represent the political reality of the present—another instance of the "new sproutings" of a feminist minor literature (Deleuze and Guattari 28). As the following chapter details, three key counter-Enlightenment predecessors provide the final layer for her punk feminist aesthetics and her remaking of the contemporary feminist novel, while Part II's reimagining of the *fin-de-siècle* United States demonstrates the powerful negation made possible by the merger of European avant-garde philosophy with punk's vernacular and devices.

Acker's lineage complements the cultural climate of the American conceptual art and post-World War II experimental writing scene with their rebellion against institutionalised modernism and search for a new and radical practice—based on a recognition that language is the key to political and social power, and a suspicion of creativity as a mode of personal expression (Wood 28, 33). And in more egalitarian and media-centric times, as a punk lay theorist she works to interpret and translate this underground and critical theory to a broader public. Acker combines more contemporary experimentalism—her punkness, with Sade et al. to produce her

characteristic texts of excess, darkness, the personified abstract, and the intellectual—a contemporary novel of ideas.[15]

The times are ideal for Acker's repossession of the counter-Enlightenment, considering the arrival in the 1960s and 1970s and then institutionalisation in the 1980s of French and critical theory in the United States and the United Kingdom,[16] Acker's membership of a receptive artistic underground with shared interests in the extremist avant-garde,[17] and her proximity to two important conduits for this material in the United States: David Antin and then Lotringer.[18] As Acker's interest demonstrates, Sade and his successors become progenitors and new forms of radical thought in a context of the waning influence of Marxist theory and politics, and the failure of the counterculture and the New Left. Acker's focus typifies this political and cultural change.

Sade et al.'s emblematic concerns and role as touchstones for a subaltern cultural practice across the decades mean that Acker's predecessors could qualify as proto-punks. As a consequence, when punk culture starts to emerge in the early 1970s, who better to help signify ideological difference from the counterculture and the mainstream for intellectual punks than figures like Bataille and Sade, so often read as nihilists and/or as anti-utopian? Who better to help articulate punk's fury, alienation, and rebellion against consumer capitalism than these iconic anti-bourgeoises? And punk, always aware of the power of the image, derives a style—personal and artistic—a set of gestures, and a sensibility from the extremist avant-garde. Acker's anti-tradition finds a homely space in her cultural underground.

It is Acker's gender and the co-context of the rise of women's liberation that make her project as a lay theorist and daughter of the avant-garde so unique, and what keeps her project 'grounded', that is, politically engaged. She is explicit in her desire to repossess these father and/or brother figures—unlike many women writers and artists who were suspicious of male thinkers and androcentric traditions. But in her role as a bridge between a pre-feminist and feminist era, Acker was well aware that they owe her, given their lack of attention to the specificities of female subjectivity and cultural production. Acker is therefore part of, while taking in a relatively new direction, the women's movement's tactic of uncovering women's lost cultural traditions and female artist and writer figures. By "stealing shamelessly from philosophical and literary discourse", Acker reconfigures these traditions, and overturns patrilineal laws of inheritance (Beckman 63). Thus a punk feminist becomes a reinvigorating force of the extremist avant-garde at the close of the twentieth century.

Notes

1 In his early discussion of postmodern culture, the 1983 essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", Fredric Jameson argues that "contemporary theory" is evidence of, and defined by, the "effacement of the older categories of genre and

discourse" that characterises postmodernism. Jameson explains that, "Today, increasingly, we have a kind of writing simply called 'theory' which is all or not of those things [philosophy, political science, sociology, or literary criticism] at once. This new kind of discourse, generally associated with France and so-called French theory, is becoming widespread and marks the end of philosophy as such" (129). By using the term theory I do not want to create a false unity of a diverse and often contradictory set of ideas and thinkers. Theory, as a specifically postmodern term, does reflect the way intellectual diversity came to operate as a genre of discourse within and outside the academy from around the early 1980s on.

2 Interestingly, Ryan doesn't examine Acker's work, instead analysing Margaret Atwood, J.M. Coetzee, and Thomas Pynchon, among others.

3 The avant-garde I refer to is the European historical avant-garde, defined by Charles Russell as being both anti-modernism and anti-modernity, in which "avant-garde [formal] extremism and militancy are directed toward changing the institution of art and the social conditions that place literature and art in such a problematic position" (15–16). Russell cites Baudelaire as "a common progenitor" (7), which helps to explain his appearance as a character in Acker's novel *In Memoriam to Identity*.

4 Colby and Wollen both identify Acker's debt to a post-World War II American avant-garde as well as an earlier European avant-garde (my interest here). I argue that the American avant-garde (most notably, conceptual art, and writers such as Antin and Burroughs) provide Acker with literary techniques—ways of thinking about writing, whereas the European avant-garde, as this and the following chapter demonstrate, contribute both a foundational philosophy and theories of writing. Wollen's overview of Acker's diverse influences is generous, succinct, and insightful.

5 This work has already begun, as in Robert Siegle's and Katie R. Muth's analysis of the role of poststructuralism in Acker, and Carla Harryman's discussion of Antonin Artaud's influence.

6 Chris Kraus's biography of Acker tells a similar story of Acker's voracious intellectualism, particularly in terms of friendship networks.

7 See Acker's notebooks in the following folders: "Seeing Gender Catalogue for the Gender Show, Paris, October 1995" in Box 7 of "Writings: Manuscript Drafts—Shorter Works, Magazine Articles, Miscellaneous", which contains jottings on Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, Hannah Arendt, and Jacques Derrida; and "Spiral Notebook: Jung Notes" in Box 6 of Accession 2002-0081, which has notes on Carl Jung; all located in the Kathy Acker Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University (accessed April 2008).

8 Towards the end of her career she does obtain short-term teaching jobs in the American academy.

9 Lars J. Kristiansen et al., for example, identify the following as the components of punk's philosophy: "nonconformity, DIY practices, the never-ending questions of authority, educating the self, … rejection of structures of power, belief in the good of humankind, … and rejection of common sense" (145).

10 It could be argued that the unstable boundaries of critical theory, philosophy, literary criticism, and literature are a defining feature of the thinkers and writers of the counter-Enlightenment. Leslie Hill, for example, argues that Bataille confounds the literature/philosophy distinction.

11 My focus is on the public version of Acker's intellectualism, though it should be noted that there is a substantial and informal history of her ideational schemata dormant in her archive.
12 Two examples are her essays "Proposition One" and "The Invisible Universe".
13 Her diversity of sources mirrors the "composite" nature of the related object, "French theory" (Cusset 26).
14 Colby also observes these two strands of avant-gardism in Acker (13).
15 Interestingly, Cusset argues that French theory was initially transmitted in the United States via punk means, such as "simple mimeographed typescripts" exchanged among people (60).
16 Cussset gives a symbolic origin to French theory in the United States as the 1966 conference at Johns Hopkins University: "The Languages of Criticism on the Human Sciences" (18); Lotringer notes the importance of the mid 1970s, namely, the commencement of his press, Semiotexte, and the 1975 "Schizo-Culture" conference in New York.
17 Lotringer posits the importance of the "New York art world" to the propagation of French theory in America (135).
18 See, for example, Antin's early essays in *Radical Coherency: Selected Essays on Art and Literature 1966–2005*.

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4 The punk feminist novelist
Making the novel of cruelty and excess

While Kathy Acker is frequently termed a feminist writer, the specific nature of her feminism is often assumed. This chapter examines the outcome of the intersection between Acker's early punk aesthetics and her intellectual frameworks to demonstrate the ways in which she remakes the novel form for a punk feminist politics. I analyse her early work, *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec*, to argue that Acker's literary punk feminism is a feminism of excess and cruelty—a politics that marks her *oeuvre*, and that mutates and extends an early radical feminism.[1] I choose this novel because it expresses the punk sensibility of the times (being written in 1975 and first published in 1978), and because it is one of the earliest and representative novel-length exposition of Acker's punk feminism, yet has attracted scant critical attention. Acker reimagines the life of Toulouse Lautrec by changing his gender to female—making Lautrec one of Acker's punk girls. This switch enables Acker to trace the tortured fate of a woman artist in nineteenth-century revolutionary France, with Lautrec's physical deformity analogous to the 'unnaturalness' of a woman as a radical artist, being a role overwhelmingly reserved for men. The parallels with Acker's situation as a woman writer in the 1970s are clear.

Acker's allegiance to an avant-garde European literary and philosophical tradition examined in the previous chapter strongly informs her literary politics. Moreover, given the avant-garde's and punk's refusal of the separation of art and life, her literary politics are inseparable from her political analysis of the surrounding world—her characteristic "fusion of writing and politics" (Indiana 24). As Jeffrey Ebbesen explains in his reading of *Toulouse Lautrec*, "She holds [literary] form partially accountable for gender oppression and oppression of the poor. In form, she sees a fundamental thought process which structures all of life" (7). For Acker, culture is not superstructure, but part of society's base.

Acker's particular interest in the writings of Antonin Artaud, Georges Bataille, and the Marquis de Sade, all of whom made excess and cruelty central to their sociopolitical and aesthetic theories and practice, influences her idiosyncratic literary feminism. Acker adapts certain key insights from them to construct a representational assemblage that, combined with punk's

extreme and iconoclastic aesthetics and worldview, enables her to take her writing to a representational space beyond that of her early punk poetics. Acker's full-blown punk writing intensifies her attacks on the certainties and ideological mystifications of the bourgeois realist novel that for Acker is a manifestation and an apparatus of late capitalist culture. "Our society, through the voice of its literary society, cannot bear immediacy, the truth, especially the political truth," she proclaims ("A Few Notes" 7). As the phrase "a feminism of excess and cruelty" suggests, Acker's use of Artaud, Bataille, and Sade produces a militant and disturbing type of novel and feminist politics with which to critique the intrinsically gendered excess and cruelty of her times.

'Cruelty' and 'excess' here refer both to their conventional definitions, and the specific meanings attributed to them by the writers Acker is influenced by. For Artaud, "The word 'cruelty' must be taken in a broad sense, and not in the rapacious physical sense that it is customarily given" ("Letters" 101). He uses the word to mean "in the sense of an appetite for life, a cosmic rigor and implacable necessity, in the gnostic sense of a living whirlwind that devours the darkness" ("Letters" 102). Cruelty is a life force, a creative power, by virtue of its destructive nature. Cruelty in the "rapacious physical sense" characterises Sade's work, wherein cruelty is a determining quality of human relations and subjectivity (Gorer 192–194). Bataille, on the other hand, argues that a society attempts to keep wasteful and excessive elements (especially violence, but also madness and delirium)—what he calls heterogeneous elements—under control and/or excluded ("Psychological" 138–142), this exclusion effected via work (*Erotism* 41). All three writers desublimate to explore these heterogeneous elements, positioning them as central to a more accurate understanding of self and society. Acker transposes these elements into her practices of reading, use of language and form, and representation of the social and of the feminine subject.

Two related contexts contribute to Acker's making of a punk feminism in the novel form in the 1970s. The more obvious one is the emerging neoliberal cruelties, commodified forms of personal liberation, and consumerist excess—often targeting women—of the late twentieth-century United States. The second and overlapping context is a moderating and weakening American women's movement. Ellen Willis observes that one effect of "the eclipse of radical feminism" in the United States was that "a women's movement deprived of a radical language could only respond [to the 'right to life' movement], with ludicrous weakness, that it was for 'choice' " (vii). It is an apparent paucity of feminist languages that Acker's *oeuvre* can be seen to address, using the combination of the ideas of the European male avant-garde writers and punk aesthetics to construct a disturbing and uncompromising supplement to the second wave feminist political and literary imaginary. This supplement is Acker's feminist minor literature.

The novel of cruelty I: staging the text–reader interaction

As the discussion of Acker's early DIY mode of producing and circulating texts suggests, punk writing is a communal practice: it addresses (and thereby brings into existence) a particular readership—an oppositional community of "exiled" or "freak "readers", making questions of reading crucial for Acker (Pitchford paras. 6–8). As a consequence, Acker's critique of conventional novelistic form and its political effects commences with her staging of the interaction between text and reader. Although writing decades apart, Acker shares with Artaud a diagnosis that their respective art forms are ossified and inadequate to address and confront their cultural contexts, hence to authentically and productively engage the audience/reader. For Artaud, realist drama was under threat from cinema, circus, and the music hall as purveyors of "violent satisfactions" ("Theater and Cruelty" 84). For Acker, "Well-measured language, novels which structurally depend on Aristotelian continuities, cannot describe, much less criticize, such culture" ("William" 2). Acker turns to elements of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty as a solution to revivify the novel's readerly effects, and particularly to jolt the reader out of complacency. Artaud asserts that "Everything that acts is a cruelty. It is upon this idea of *extreme action, pushed beyond all limits*, that theater must be rebuilt" ("Theater and Cruelty" 85, emphasis added). This description of the Theatre of Cruelty affords insights into Acker's punk feminist writing:

> The theater must give us everything that is in crime, love, war, or madness, if it wants to recover its necessity … Imbued with the idea that the public thinks first of all with its senses and that to address oneself first to its understanding as the ordinary psychological theater does is absurd, the Theater of Cruelty proposes to resort to a mass spectacle; to seek in the agitation of tremendous masses, convulsed and hurled against each other, a little of that poetry of festivals and crowds when, all too rarely nowadays, the people pour out into the streets.
>
> ("Theater and Cruelty" 84, 85)

As this account underlines, the effect upon the audience is paramount to the Theatre of Cruelty. The spectator is immersed in an all-encompassing, stylised spectacle of sound and movement. Rather than taking the form of dialogue, language is glossolalic, incantatory, and ritualistic: "screams, cries, groans and the sundry dissonant sounds of the body itself replace meaningful language" (Weiss 126). Similarly, the physical movement of the actors takes on the qualities of ritual. The result is that the spectator's senses are primary and the actors' dialogue is secondary. Such a use of ferocious and extreme images in spectacular terms—cruelty as mode of shock treatment—ideally has two related effects: it summons up symbols in the spectator's

unconscious that have been repressed in the course of ordinary life—so a desublimating function, and it "produces a purification" in the spectator (Artaud, "No More Masterpieces" 82). Theatre, by taking on the qualities of ritual, becomes more than entertainment, thereby regaining its seriousness of purpose.

With parallels to the specific nature of a punk gig—frenzied dancing, spitting, potential violence, and a wall of noise—Acker attempts to harness and extend these cathartic and productive qualities of Artaudian cruelty in her writing, and specifically, in the way in which the punk feminist novel engages the reader to produce "a visceral response" (Ioanes 180). As the narrator in *Blood and Guts in High School* comments, using the classic punk trope of the lobotomy: "Every day a sharp tool, a powerful destroyer, is necessary to cut away dullness, lobotomy, buzzing, belief in human beings, stagnancy, images and accumulation" (37). Spencer Dew observes that Acker is engaged in a "practical, pedagogical mission"—and a political one at that (20). Her novel of cruelty attempts to get the reader to reread the surrounding social formation and the patriarchal literary tradition (Pitchford).

The type and arrangement of language outlined in Chapter 2 is the first element in her restaging. In addition to being spent excessively (to which I return shortly), this anti-realist language in *Toulouse Lautrec* has a dual quality, aligning with the two aspects of her political pedagogy. The novel's diction and register oscillates between being amplified and recontextualised fragments of mass culture we saw in *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*—the film scripts, porn scenarios, and so on—and glossolalic and incantatory utterances. Singly, and in combination, these two registers attempt to shock the reader into a new awareness. In this exchange between Toulouse Lautrec and a beautiful man, female desire is spoken in the terms of porn:

> "Listen you goddamn shitface assbung," I [Toulouse Lautrec] announce, "you've got to fuck me. If you don't fuck me, I'm going to blow up every rat scum tenement in Montmartre. The cops'll shit in their pants. They'll have nothing left to do. If you don't fuck me Mr. Beautiful I'll kick your lousy dick inside out I mean it. You can't treat me like a piece of moldy shit."
>
> "I think you're extremely beautiful."
>
> "Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me. Take me to Brazil. Take me to Argentina. Take me to bed. You're the only person or thing who can make me happy. You can make me ecstatic right now."
>
> (191–192)

Porn amplifies and thereby desublimates the deadness and stupidity of so much discourse. Moreover, in the late 1970s prior to the normalisation of porn in mainstream culture (McNair), her punk girl utterances still contained

shock value, working to change the reader's perceptions of intimacy as well as to bar their empathetic identification with the characters.[2] Estrangement, rather than catharsis or immersion in patriarchal ideology, is the desired result.

Acker, however, also posits a counter-language—one lyrical, rhythmic, and incantory, often linked to the female body, which breaks out and beyond the register of mass culture in moments of authentic sexual desire or intense perception by characters, as in this sex scene between Giannina and Berthe:

> She hears Berthe scream and scream. Berthe screams and screams. Berthe's in a world composed only of sensations. She doesn't know anything except what she feels. She rolls around on this wonderful mass of flesh and bones, yielding and non-yielding, her nerves rub into warm, wet, rough hairs. She writhes reels quivers shakes turns spins falls rises bounces squirms wiggles pants. Her sense of balance's rolling against Giannina.
>
> Fucking. Fucking. Fucking. Feeling all the possible feelings which are needs in the world.
>
> (203)

The rhythms and repetitions of the sentences—rhythms derived from the female body—guide the reader towards an alternative mode of comprehension, one that privileges sensuous perception over the cognitive and rational. As a consequence, these incantatory moments point towards the characters' and the reader's temporary transcendence from the pornographic and the stupid registers that comprise the text's social reality. Thus shock works with and through a feminine lyricism to provide readers with languages of feminist critique and being otherwise, with the languages of being otherwise becoming increasingly important in Acker's later novels.

Acker also transposes Artaud's prescription that spectacle should guide staging so that the quality of ritual results. Her method of staging the narrative is architectural and dreamlike rather than temporal or logical. In its explicit staginess, the novel is not so much telling a story, but rather cues the reader that something else is going on—giving the novel the quality of a ritual. By architectural, I refer to the primacy of geographical space to *Toulouse Lautrec*'s *mise en scène* rather than narrative,[3] as well as the diverse range of settings and the abrupt and numerous shifts among them.[4] Complementing this is the absence of psychologically realistic characters and coherent actions, generating a particular reading practice. In the fourth chapter, "The Creation of the World", we commence with the frame narrative of the nineteenth-century Parisian brothel. One of the prostitutes recounts a story, "The Creation of the World", an animal fable, situated in no place other than prehistory. We then move to modern-day America for the schlock narrative of Bill and Claire's relationship, to the Jacqueline Onassis story set in 1970s New York, "I Want to Be Raped Every Night!", before returning

to late nineteenth-century Paris, and the new sub-narrative of Marcia and Vincent van Gogh. Each scenario, with its extreme language and action, immerses the reader in its world, before they are suddenly evicted. Such a dreamlike topography denies the reader a stable reference point via the usual coordinates of the novel, or empathetic relations with characters, yet plays upon their desire to make sense of a text (Ebbesen 78). The reader is transported to alien terrain, having to work consciously upon the text to try and make sense of the assemblage of spaces rather than through the usual connecting axes of actions or characters.

In contrast to the sedating effects of the bourgeois novel, Acker's architectural novel, like its language, enables and requires a dual reading practice: one politico-critical and one non-rational. The stages are set for the reader to learn "a geographical [and gendered] history lesson" of late capitalism, as well as enacting a feminist avant-garde sensibility (Swope 23). And in this puzzling configuration of brief, stylised, and intense scenes, the reader *feels* that something more than just a story is going on. With its discordant array of obscenities, spaces, and cultural fragments, the novel of cruelty enables literature to perform serious political work of simultaneous immersion and distancing, and momentary 'purification' through shock for the reader.

Excessive words: writing as non-productive expenditure

That something more than a story is going on is signalled in the excessive nature of *Toulouse Lautrec* (1978)—for it is 'excessive' in both form and use of language—which can be interpreted via Bataille's sociopolitical understanding of excess and, specifically, his notion of literature as a type of non-productive expenditure. Bataille contends that societies are organised around two forms of consumption, the first of which is the "principle of classical utility … the right to acquire, to conserve, and to consume rationally" ("The Notion" 117). Second is non-productive expenditure, or the expenditure of non-utilitarian items: items that are excess to definitions of use value—such as the arts—hence are commonly described as waste or excess. Non-productive expenditure is fundamental to human societies. To distinguish expenditure from ordinary practices of consumption associated with productive activity, the "*loss* must be as great as possible in order for that activity [of non-productive expenditure] to take on its true meaning" ("The Notion" 118). A society's excess elements, therefore, must be spent excessively, and can be spent in actual terms, as in spectacles such as war or festivals, or symbolically, as in literature and theatre, "through symbolic representations of tragic loss (degradation or death)" ("The Notion" 118, 120). Bataille argues that in the modern bourgeois era the principle of non-productive expenditure has been circumscribed: "the modern bourgeoisie is characterised by the refusal in principle of this obligation … The hatred of expenditure is the *raison d'être* of and the justification for the bourgeoisie"

("The Notion" 124–125). Instead, there is a social and symbolic "meanness" of bourgeois capitalism, for the bourgeoisie spends only on and for itself ("The Notion" 125).

Acker's literary excess is a response to this meanness, this rerouting of the principle of non-productive expenditure by the late capitalist bourgeoisie, as symbolised by the bourgeois realist novel with its carefully controlled narratives and sentences. "Her excesses", observes Alexander Howard of the later novel, *In Memoriam to Identity*, "act as a repayment of the gift of miserly subsistence offered by the late capitalist era" (116). To disfigure the bourgeois realist novel, Acker takes the non-utilitarian elements of American (and Western) culture that are literary forms, genres, and literary language, and uses them up—that is, expends them—as excessively as possible—rather like punk's disrespect for and gleeful destruction and/or disfigurement of pop songs, clothing, musical instruments, and bodies. She thereby returns literature to its proper, serious purpose of representing tragic human loss, with Acker specifically focusing on women's loss, to which I return.

The heteroglossia of Acker's punk aesthetics noted earlier is taken to the extreme in *Toulouse Lautrec* in terms of genres and language. Each of its seven chapters draws on one or more genres: the detective story in "The Case of the Murdered Twerp", the artist biography of Toulouse Lautrec and Vincent van Gogh, the gangster story of "The Life of Johnny Rocco", and teen romance in "How Love Can Lead Youngsters to Murder". Within chapters there is a similar textual diversity. The chapter "The Creation of the World" contains an animal fable, a soft-core porn narrative, as well as a pulp fiction story: Claire is raped by her brother, the deranged ex-Vietnam veteran. The effects of this range of genres are intensified by their arrangement: they are not logically connected, stories don't finish, sequence is denied, and shifts between genres are abrupt. Randomness, discordancy, and writerly voraciousness appear to be the principles of narrative assembly, and respect for genres as discrete literary units is absent.

The excessive form of the novel is mirrored and reinforced by its approach to language. *Toulouse Lautrec* is marked by a profligacy of word play and narrative structure—a non-productive expenditure of language. Words are repeated, syntax is jarring, languages and registers shift abruptly, and narrative events erupt for no apparent reason. The chapter "The Future" demonstrates this profligacy:

> The managers are becoming owners, deriving an ever-larger proportion of their income not from their managerial skills but from the stock they own in their own corporations.
>
> You don't give a damn if he never comes around. You never want to see him again. Fuck his round face and his blonde hair and his five feet ten inches lean body. Fuck him in shit. Fuck his screwed-up mouth and his skinny legs. Fuck him in piss. Fuck his broad shoulders fuck his "good-guy" manner fuck his 155 pounds fuck him with a needle fuck

> his filthy toes and his lousy cynicism that covers his naiveté that's totally fake fuck his sexual uptightness fuck his sacredness fuck his egotism fuck everything he's ever done fuck everything he's ever said everything he's ever said is false stick it in a barrel and send it to me. I'll stick dynamite in it and up his ass and light 'em all. *KERPOW!* Fuck him in my blood.
>
> Marcia woke up one morning and realized Scott no longer loves her. (280)

In the space of one page Acker moves from managerial discourse to a highly emotional stream-of-consciousness section to a restrained third-person narrative voice. One sentence seems to generate a slightly altered copy in the next so that the passage takes on an incantatory quality: "Fuck him in shit. Fuck his screwed-up mouth and his skinny legs. Fuck him in piss." With words tumbling forth in an emotional chain of logic, Acker inverts the purpose of words in general, as well as conventional literary language. By spending words anarchically, allowing them to play and to be unconstrained, to come from multiple sites including the obscene and the scatological, Acker aims to create sensation and a ferocious sensibility rather than sense and rational communication. The carefully crafted literary sentence, the carefully chosen word, and the desire for a measured aesthetic effect are absent. Acker's overt non-productive expenditure renders words useless—at least in utilitarian and conventional literary terms. Like the novel form, words are spent until they are emptied out.

These two types of excess—form and meaning—posit an oppositional literary and cultural economy to late capitalism's valorisation of particular forms of excess that work to hide the culture's deeper miserliness. Acker's punk feminist economy of embracing excess parodically mirrors late capitalist consumption (frequently associated with women)—spending for its own sake and as sign of status—while critiquing capitalist culture by rerouting non-productive expenditure back to its proper function. The punk feminist novel wastes the status symbols that are bourgeois language and the bourgeois novel to benefit the outsiders. Acker's economy of excess has a gendered dimension as well: the context she addresses is *patriarchal* American late capitalist culture. The anarchic impulse found in *Toulouse Lautrec* is a feminist one, confronting and confounding patriarchal bourgeois language, and proposing an alternative way of using words and texts. As the previous passage from the novel shows, this is a promiscuous, capricious, emotional, seemingly nonsensical way of putting words and narratives into action—all qualities stereotypically feminine, but ones reclaimed for political purposes. Acker's literary excess enacts a specifically feminine and feminist form of non-productive expenditure: unrestrainedly and promiscuously expending masculine and feminine cultural forms and language to clear space to articulate scenarios of women's loss traced in Part II.

Such an excessive use of genres and words makes *Toulouse Lautrec* into a pastiche, an assemblage, rather than producing the bounded coherence of a conventional bourgeois novel. Its extravagance fills the book with fragments that, while giving the novel too much content, also empty out the novel form—expanding and expending the conventional novel (as a meaningful entity) into nothingness, a process that could only be hinted at in the novella form of *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*. This non-productive expenditure enacts a particular relationship to cultural production and to literary institutions. *Toulouse Lautrec* rejects bourgeois literature's classificatory systems—what is a novel, what are high- and mass-cultural genres—and its associated value systems: most notably, authorial originality and the classical values of order, balance, and restraint that find their way into the well-made bourgeois novel. Acker spends other people's texts and, in so doing, to an extent she undermines her individual literary 'capital'—her unique authorial voice and the authority to confer meaning on to a text, which is a literary form of bourgeois individualism. The literary mode of production is socialised, contributing to the communal nature of the reader–text relationship.

The novel of cruelty II: Sadeian scenarios

Complementing Acker's restaging of the novel are the Sadeian-inflected scenarios that provide the various plot lines in *Toulouse Lautrec*. Acker's punk feminism draws upon Sadeian conceptions of human nature and the social order that, for Sade and Acker, is always a regime of gender. In "Reading the Lack of the Body: The Writing of the Marquis de Sade", Acker argues that "De Sade, born a patriarch, understood patriarchy and raged against the walls of that labyrinth" (79). In *Toulouse Lautrec* she substitutes patriarchal capitalist law for Sade's natural law as source of human behaviour and social structures. Acker therefore repositions Sade's vision of the centrality of cruelty to human subjectivity, sexual relationships, and social relations as the substrate of patriarchal late capitalism: its required disposition (Acker, "Reading" 79). This interpretation of the world as a sadosociety informs all her work and its series of brutal tableaux, and is a more intellectualised and political version of punk's unsentimental, pessimistic reading of human nature, and recognition of an overarching system of social control.

The various plot fragments explore the ways in which cruelty is a fundamental principle operating in individuals, relationships, and the broader social order. This in turn reveals that the gender regime shores up an economic regime, and vice versa. Accordingly, Acker structures the novel into two main and criss-crossing strands: the first that follows the failed search for love by its heroines—Acker's ur-narrative—the second being the intertexts drawn from history and economics relating to the development of capitalism, and particularly American capitalism, globally. These include

accounts of Henry Kissinger, the origins of imperialist capitalism, the recent history of the Dominican Republic, and the economic malaise then affecting the United States. These documentary intertexts interrupt the various love narratives, literalising the determining role that the sociohistorical and the economic play on individuals—including intimate life. Crucially, the documentary sources are revealed to be lacking—incomplete and partial—when read adjacent to the fictional plots that, in their relative simplicity, expose the base sadomasochistic elements of gender relations and how they inform transaction and consumption as foundational to capitalism.

Toulouse Lautrec begins and ends with the murder of an unnamed woman: the twerp in Norvins's brothel (frequented by Toulouse Lautrec) in the nineteenth century, and the Dame in the gangster's warehouse in 1960s America. The killer in both cases remains a mystery, an irrelevance, as the real focus is on the cruelty inflicted on the victims and its unremarkable nature, which symbolise the treatment each of the novel's punk girls (and particularly Toulouse Lautrec) receive from an anonymous system. Indeed, Emilia Borowska describes them as "martyred heroes" (81). Furthermore, the explicitly historical framing of their deaths signifies the transhistorical nature of a patriarchal dynamic as Acker tracks capitalism's development across time and space. Toulouse Lautrec, Marcia, and so on are driven by a Bataillesque notion of eroticism (to which I return shortly)—an excessive libidinal economy at odds with capitalism, and thus they are thwarted and treated cruelly by men. The following subplots typify Acker's Sadeian scenarios where the imbrication of sex with money for men (and hence the economy) leads to cruelty, particularly against women, as an individual and collective mindset and practice.

Using a childlike register that cuts through the sanitising obfuscation of academic discourse, the animal fable, "The Creation of the World", allegorises and literalises this gendered emotional–economic dynamic and offers a myth of origin for patriarchal capitalism. The female cat is in love with the male baboon, and answers to his every desire, hoping this will make him love her. '"You can't make me love you, stupid!" the baboon growls. "All I care about is power. I want to control everyone in the world"' (227). The cat leaves him while he continues to consume every foodstuff and creature around him until there is nothing left to eat, except the starving cat. The baboon then realises he's in love with her and tries to seduce her. The fable ends with the cat dreaming of animals coexisting with each other. Male dominance is enacted by cruelty and violence, and is entwined with capitalism's voracious appetite. The fable, in its faux naïveté, also corrects the documentary accounts of the history of capitalism that Acker inserts throughout. These accounts, in their "overtly didactical social-historical-economic prose, omit any consideration of gender, of effects on individuals, while the violence that the system relies on is sanitized" (Ebbesen 103). See, for instance:

> Capitalism as a world system had its origins in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries … Ever since then capitalism has consisted of

> two sharply contrasting parts: on the one hand a handful of dominant exploiting countries and on the other hand a much larger number of dominated and exploited countries … Gradually the element of force receded into the background to be replaced by "normal" economic relations of trade and investment.
>
> (275–276)

Her fable as origin story of capitalism makes the link between the gender order of the baboon and the cat and the dryly phrased binary of dominated and dominant countries.

The final chapter, "The Life of Johnny Rocco", a gangster story, is an extended account of the imbrication of gender, sex, and imperialist capitalism; and of crime and violence in the workings of US imperialism—a narrative described by Robert Siegle as a "condensation of thuggery and the operations of the State, the beatings by one equivalent to the covert interventions and assassinations of the other" (67). The chapter also explores the emotional reification involved in the US state's operations. Johnny Rocco is both businessman and gangster, doing errands for the CIA such as drugs and gun running to prop up dictators. Significantly, his warehouse where business if transacted is a homosocial realm: "No dame's ever come into this warehouse. Dames aren't part of the business," he states (293). A dame does, however, arrive on the scene to try and warn Rocco of his imminent betrayal by the government. Her boss bashes her, and she ends up beheaded—her head thrown through the window of Rocco's office. His response is telling: "It was the dame's head. The one who had worked for the Feds. Better her head than my head" (310). Rocco's individual cruelties enabled by emotional detachment parallel the cruelties of American capitalism; the violence experienced by the unnamed 'dame' symbolises the violence visited upon the feminised client states. And the women's (his molls' and dames') attraction to Rocco suggests the masochism also required to keep heterosexual desire (and the American state) functioning.

Acker's revisiting of Sade in the mid 1970s as a narrative kernel of her punk feminist novel was prescient, sensing that the decaying order of post-World War II capitalism was to be replaced with something more cruel and less restrained, and that the emergent ideology of neoliberalism would be able to process complementary aspects of women's liberation, such as women's desire for sexual and economic independence, while expanding the reach of capitalist cruelty through economic libertinage.

Excessive female subjects: eroticism and transgression

The excessive ways in which Acker spends words and literary forms are paralleled by the excessive qualities Western culture attributes to the female body and subjectivity—too fleshy, too emotional, too needy. This specifically feminine form of excess enables Acker's use of Bataille's theories

regarding the importance of eroticism, taboo, and transgression to construct her narratives of female sexuality and subjectivity embodied in the punk girl heroine. At the time of the novel's publication, Acker's tableaux of female degradation and death chart emergent terrain for the representation of female desire by women writers—Acker's politicised version of punk's attraction to the sordid. Paralleling Acker, female punk musicians were recording discordant narratives of sex and desire that accentuated the putative excess of women, as in Souxsie and the Banshees, X-Ray Spex, and the Slits, while punk posters used similar macabre and schlocky iconography (Ensminger 185).

Bataille's notion of eroticism imbues the sexuality of the heroines in *Toulouse Lautrec* and throughout Acker's work. Defined as the quality that separates human sexuality from animal sexuality, eroticism is sexuality freed from a reproductive function, "a psychological quest independent of the natural goal", thus, "eroticism is the assenting of life up to the point of death" (*Erotism* 11). Bataille thereby provides a complex, dark account of sexual desire, one that recognises the ambiguities and ambivalences surrounding sex, one suited to the feminist critique of motherhood, monogamy, and marriage, and the post-sexual revolution 1970s (Richardson 3). Acker's feminist politics, however, complicate eroticism, placing it within a gendered context. Not one female character, though sexually active, shows any interest in having children, nor voices any connection between sex and pregnancy.[5] These absences of maternity and maternalism suggest the possibility of a non-procreative feminine desire, and can be read as implying that the maternal role blocks women's access to eroticism—a confronting insight.

Acker embodies feminine eroticism in the transgressive figure of the nymphomaniac—a reclamation of a female pathology, and a recurrent trait of her punk girl. The nymphomaniac character underlines the unstoppable, potentially extreme, but not necessarily pleasurable nature of eroticism. Whether Toulouse Lautrec, Giannina, or Marcia, all are sexually voracious to a pathological extent, with the narrative structured around their search for sexual satisfaction until desire erupts. For instance, Marcia's sexual excess breaks out once her relationship with Scott ends: "What I wanna do is fuck every man in sight. Fuck every man who comes near me and fuck every man who looks at me like he wants to fuck me" (281). For Toulouse Lautrec:

> All I think about is sex. At night, nights, I lie alone in my bed: I see the right leg of every sexy man I've seen on the street, the folds of cloth over and around the ooo ooo … I ache and I ache and I ache. I feel a big huge hole inside my body.
>
> (190)

While a parody, Acker is also writing feminine eroticism: destructive, unrelenting, and not completely conscripted for capitalist social reproduction.

Acker, however, does not suggest feminine eroticism is beyond history or the current libidinal economy: her nymphomaniacs rapidly come to understand their desires in terms of heterosexual romantic love. Immediately after the male prostitute's pornographic description of what he's going to do to her, Toulouse reflects: "I figure he wants to fuck me. I feel a lot of tenderness for him. Tenderness that's opening me up physically. / Will I fall in love with him?" (193). The figure of the nymphomaniac looking for love reflects the quasi-liberation of women: they are free to reject the maternal role, capable of enacting eroticism, but remain trapped by patriarchal circuits of female desire more fully explored in Chapter 5.

This split quality of their desire explains its anguished nature. As Marcia reflects:

> Feeling lonely. Feeling lonely, and crazy all the time cause so lonely. Always wanting and wanting and the wanting's never satisfied. Hate myself for wanting so much and for feeling lonely cause it's disgusting and lowering to need someone else and to feel lonely.
>
> (289)

Toulouse Lautrec—or Tooloose as one male addresses her—is crippled, her deformed body reflecting the pain, inadequacy, and loneliness that surround her as desiring artist and the novel's other nymphomaniacs. Importantly, as Naomi Jacobs observes, by making Toulouse, the great artist, a woman, her "female pain, legitimized by the still-male locus of the name, is transformed from a merely pathetic and even embarrassing phenomenon to one of gravity, to be pitied and seriously examined" (53).

Acker explores and complicates other forms of feminine excess by her portrayal of a range of transgressive female characters. Bataille recognises that the human is an excessive subject:

> Man has built up the rational world by his own efforts, but there remains within him an undercurrent of violence … There is in nature and there subsists in man a movement which always exceeds the bounds, that can never be anything but partially reduced to order.
>
> (*Erotism* 40)

This drive towards excess finds expression in sexuality as well as in violence, therefore societies institute taboos and the discipline of work to attempt to keep excess under control (*Erotism* 41). Moreover, Bataille contends that societies shore up taboos by the mechanism of transgression: "There is no prohibition that cannot be transgressed. Often the transgression is permitted, often it is even prescribed", and is thereby organised by society (*Erotism* 63). So transgression is a type of spending of excess, and allows the taboo to be delineated and strengthened by its periodic breaching. "*The*

transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it" Bataille cautions (*Erotism* 63, original emphasis).

Acker's punk girl heroines are deeply transgressive, continually breaching social taboos associated with female identity and particularly sexuality—indeed, transgression drives the various narratives here and throughout her work. For Acker, the primary taboo breached is the prohibition of autonomous female desire: we have Toulouse as the starving and sexually frustrated artist, the brothel Madame Norvins and her whores, Jacqueline Onassis engaging in interracial casual sex and drug use, the gangster's moll committing suicide by throwing herself under a car, lesbian sex between Giannina and Berthe, and Marcia's promiscuity.

Because of the ways in which female desire is organised in patriarchal late capitalism, Acker, however, is at pains to show that the various transgressions shore up, if not complete the taboo. So while prostitution is transgressive, it underpins the commodification of women's bodies and emotional needs. Similarly, promiscuity or casual sex, with their articulation in pornographic terms, are shown to primarily benefit male heterosexual desire. The lesbian encounter between the prostitutes ends with Giannina saying, "If you were a man, I could love you" (204). The punk girls either return to what Bataille terms the world of social homogeneity, or die, or are left emotionally desolate. Transgression shows that another way of being female is possible, however, the heroines' fates shows that the taboo remains intact, acting as a warning for supposedly liberated times. The repeated statements by characters regarding love and sex as commodities symbolise the social structure organising the transgression. "Maybe some man will love me if I pay him for it," says Toulouse (194). One of Norvins's prostitutes observes: "We're part of the meat market. We're the meat. That's how we get loved. We get cooked. We get our asses burned cause sex, like everything else, is always involved with money" (201). This is the system delineated across her works that manages effectively the outbreaks of feminine excess. In Acker's punk feminism, the excessive female subject acts out the possibilities of feminine subjectivity, but also their recuperation or destruction by patriarchal late capitalism.

More liberated and liberal times?

Acker's punk feminist assault on the bourgeois novel also speaks, formally and thematically, to the condition of second wave feminism. Her feminism of excess and cruelty needs to be situated in relation to the ascendency of liberal and cultural feminisms and the related defeat of early radical feminism, which contribute to those "paucity of languages" Willis referred to earlier. According to Alice Echols, radical feminism was the dominant strand in the American women's movement until around 1973: "Once radical feminism was superseded by cultural feminism, activism became largely the province of liberal feminists" (5).[6] Acker's project can be read as a mutation

and extension of late 1960s radical feminism to confront and address the weaknesses of cultural and liberal feminist languages of protest in the 1970s onwards. As explored in this chapter, her punk feminism has strong affinities with early second wave radical feminism. These features include positioning sexual relations as the archeplot of oppressive social structures, a revolutionary politics, women as a sex class-caste, and a violent rhetoric. In addition, both share an apocalyptic quality, a metacritique of the social formation, and the use of spectacular political tactics (Third 108, 115). Ironically, the European male avant-garde provides the radical components of Acker's punk feminism, enabling her work to bear mnemonic traces of a revolutionary feminism, a reminder that things could be otherwise for a moderating American feminism.

How so? Consider the contours of cultural feminism, the movement that evolved from and supplanted radical feminism (Echols 6). In a controversial formulation, Echols characterises cultural feminism as a lifestyle feminism, a feminism of retreat (281). The key elements include maternalism and a celebration of women's difference, spirituality, women's space, and a women's culture, and campaigns concerning anti-pornography, violence against women, peace, and environmental activism (294). Acker's feminism of excess and cruelty, however, rails against this cosmogony. As *Toulouse Lautrec* demonstrates, maternalism is of minor importance; women are driven by eroticism and transgression rather than feminine spirituality and nurturance. Rather than separatist utopias, women's spaces—namely, the brothel—are tainted by capitalism and cruelty. Porn is the dominant language with which to articulate feminine desire, while a women's culture, given the power of the culture industries, is impossible to construct.

Now consider the defining features of US liberal feminism identified by Zillah R. Eisenstein: an emphasis on liberal individualism, a rhetoric of freedom of choice and equality of opportunity (178), expressed through a desire to bring "women into the mainstream" as the exemplary liberal feminist group, the National Organization for Women (NOW), puts it (193). Its tactics prioritise the public sphere as a space of activism via legal reform and lobbying governments and parties (Eistenstein 194, 180), allied with the use of a traditional hierarchical organisational structure (Davis 94). At its core is a "liberal-individualist conception of self and power" (Eistenstein 196). Liberal feminism provides the women's movement its reasonable face, and potential integration into the American liberal democratic metanarrative of progress (a process Acker targets in *Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream*, as discussed in Chapter 7).

Acker's punk feminism, however, is an illiberal politics, with its foundation in Sadeian laws of cruelty and Bataille's heterogeneous (wasteful, excessive) elements of the social order. This basis in the excessive and the unreasonable as means to conceptualise and confront contemporary capitalism is an implicit critique of American liberal feminism. The fundamental roles that cruelty and taboo play in organising social systems suggest the limitations

of reformism. Furthermore, Acker's excessive syntax, characterology, and narrative are contrapuntal to liberal feminism's appeal to reasonableness and the specific ratiocination and subjectivity upon which it is based. Acker's discordant and unstable writing is beyond the bounds of logical, transparent feminist speech and its location in the masculine symbolic. And her punk feminist heroines are a fundamentally different type of feminist self to the rational female individual of liberal feminism. The punk girls are endlessly desiring, endlessly lacking subjects who rarely exhibit a cohesive or reasonable self. Instead, they speak in voices that oscillate between "protest and anguish" and the "lyrical scream" (Hume 490–491). Finally, Acker's novel of excess and cruelty rejects bonds of empathy and persuasion—the liberal approach—turning instead to estrangement, shock, and lyricism to interpellate the reader.

Seen in this way, then, the introjection of elements of the counter-Enlightenment into Acker's punk writing produces an idiosyncratic strand in American feminist politics of the 1970s–1990s. By means of her narrative kernels of cruelty and excess she brings into being a radically different feminist subject, audience,[7] and type of novel to those imagined by the rhetorics and practices of liberal and cultural feminism, what Ellen E. Berry describes as a "limit feminism not easily assimilated within conventional rationalist frameworks" (2).[8] This "limit feminism" takes narrative form in a feminist minor literature, thereby complicating histories of post-1970 women's writing as well as those of modern feminism. Acker's punk feminist novel is, like Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, a plague that attempts to purify a moderating American feminism and its associated cultural category of 'women's writing', and, as Part II shows, to infect the *fin de siècle* with a punk feminist tropology.

Notes

1 Hereafter referred to as *Toulouse Lautrec*. All page numbers from the novel throughout the chapter refer to the following edition: "The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec" in *Portrait of an Eye: Three Novels* (1998). The novel was first published in 1975 by TVRT Press.

2 For detailed accounts of Acker's use of shock, see Christina Milletti's and Ann Bomberger's essays.

3 Marjorie Worthington argues that Acker prioritises space throughout her work as a means to delineate a gender order (395).

4 Carla Harryman, drawing on Denis Hollier's study of Bataille, uses the term "anti-architecture" to describe Acker's fictional geography. She comments that "Acker produces … a *something* that 'opens up a space anterior to the division between madness and reason' in Bataille and also between nonsense and sense or child and adult in Acker" ("Acker" 41, original emphasis). I concur with Harryman, but use the term architecture to emphasise space and staging.

5 For a detailed discussion of the absent mother in Acker's fiction, see Georgina Colby, Susan E. Hawkins, or Pamela B. June.

6 Flora Davis also shares this analysis (137–138).
7 Harryman, among others, notes that Acker's "text is directed toward communal knowledge or practice" ("Rules" 117).
8 Melissa D. Deem's observation of an unorthodox ideological strand of feminism personified by Valerie Solanas finds parallels in Acker's feminism. Deem argues that Solanas creates scatological "minor polemics" and, as a consequence, is neglected in the standard histories of the women's movement (522–523). Acker echoes Solanas's outsider status, though she is more of a literary polemicist.

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Part II
Acker's punk tropology

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5 Heterosexual desire

Blood and Guts in High School (1978)[1]

In Acker's breakthrough novel, *Blood and Guts in High School*, Acker's punk feminist tropology focuses on the hegemonic form of heterosexual desire. Through the *Bildung* of the punk girl, Janey Smith—her learning to be a desiring heterosexual woman—*Blood and Guts in High School* desublimates the underlying mechanisms and dynamics of heterosexual desire in the post-sexual revolution 1970s. Rather than being a revolutionary force, Acker identifies heterosexual desire's ongoing, even intensified, imbrication with American patriarchal late capitalism, and their transmutation of female eroticism. Her punk feminist critique contests liberal narratives of progress and emancipation particularly addressed to women, and hegemonic narratives of romantic love. The punk girl's *Bildung* is highly confronting, demonstrating that women's heterosexual desire in late capitalism, whether liberated or not, is pathological.

Blood and Guts in High School narrates through a series of textual fragments 10-year-old Janey's sexual and emotional adventures: her romantic relationship with her father, time in a teenage gang, being kidnapped and trained as a sex slave, cancer diagnosis, failed quest for romance with Jean Genet, and then death at age 14. While many readings of the novel have justifiably focused on Janey's oppression by patriarchal structures (Dane; Ioanes), her masochism (Brown; Floyd), and the influence of the Oedipal structure (Hawkins; Henke; Muth), the historical context of the American sexual revolution is largely overlooked, as is the ways in which Acker's critique parallels, extends, and takes to breaking point early radical feminist critiques of romantic love and desire, and of the sexual revolution.

Acker's host genre is a hybrid of the teen novel and the 1970s novel of women's quest for sexual liberation.[2] This mutated hence typically punk product allows Acker to expose then contemporary cultural scripts of heterosexual desire through the core tropes of high school, sadism and masochism, and slavery. This lexicon encompasses both the (re)production of the individual woman's heterosexual desire and this desire's role in the reproduction and expansion of American capitalism. As the novel's title and these tropes hint, *Blood and Guts in High School* accentuates the continuing colonisation of women's bodies and desires in the putatively post-sexual revolution

landscape, with its mythology of the sexually liberated woman, and a promise of sexual freedom and fulfilment to all—what Stephen Heath described as "the sexual fix" (3). The education of young Janey illustrates that the patriarchal *ancien régime* continues for women in a mutated, but even more pernicious, form, as their colonisation continues in the name of freedom and self-realisation. And there is a broader social and geopolitical critique operating concurrently with the exposé of sexual liberation that expands the link between sex, money, and empire explored in *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec*. As the narrator comments: "Having any sex in the world is having to have sex with capitalism" (135). For Acker, given that the sexual revolution is contemporaneous with the expansion of American multinational capitalism, an emancipated heterosexual desire is both a metaphor and method of US imperialism (Abrams 115–119).

Blood and Guts in High School explores the aftermath of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, which "saw a series of events in Western countries that created new perspectives and practices regarding sexuality and brought a flood of eroticised texts and images into the public realm" (Hekma and Giami 1–2). The sexual revolution "indicate[s] important changes in sexual behaviours and beliefs that led to greater freedom and extended agency for individuals" (Hekma and Giami 1–2), though Stephen Garton argues that it is part of a longer history of a liberalisation in attitudes towards sex during the twentieth century, if not longer. "Nevertheless," he contends, "the sexual revolution associated with 'the pill and permissiveness' does stand out as an unprecedented moment of cultural spectacle. Sex came to the forefront of public debate in the 1960s and 1970s" (217). Sexual liberation was a path to personal fulfilment, seemingly available to all—a democratisation of desire (Heath 4), and, as Heath argues, non-reproductive sexuality became "sacralized" (53).

Sexual liberation, though hotly debated, was also a priority for the women's liberation movement (Hogeland 58). Some argued that increased sexual freedom for women led to their increased exploitation—"the right that is a duty" (D'Emilio and Freedman 312), whereas many early radical feminists argued that sexual liberation and women's liberation are compatible (Echols 57). Regardless, a revolt in traditional attitudes to sex and sexual behaviours occurred, leading to "a dramatic transformation in attitudes" towards marriage, divorce, monogamy, cultural codes of sexual representation, family structure, homosexuality, sexual practices, and ideas of normality (Garton 222). The sexual revolution thus contributed to more liberal and egalitarian attitudes to desire and intimate relationships, and was seen to destabilise the bedrock of American social structures, particularly marriage and the family.

Pertinent to Acker's novel is the centrality of the United States to the sexual revolution. David Allyn argues that it "was a deeply American revolution, filled with the contradictions of American life. It was spiritual yet secular, idealistic yet commercial, driven by science yet colored by a romantic

view of nature" (8). Importantly, Allyn stresses how the revolution became commercialised: "the process of commodification took on a whole new dimension in the early seventies as product after product promising sexual liberation entered the market" (228–229). In a perverse twist to what the political sexual radicals like Herbert Marcuse and Wilhelm Reich had hoped for, sexual liberation, rather than being a force for social and political revolution, became a commodity circulating throughout the capitalist economy. By the mid 1970s, however, in many places a time of recession, Allyn argues the sexual revolution faced a counter-revolution (273). The mid 1970s on was a time of economic and moral crisis for mainstream America—a nation that had seemingly lost its way; the permissive society arising from the sexual revolution seemed to be a symptom of this decline (divorce rates, teenage pregnancies), and significantly, given Acker's excessive poetics, "pornography had become a symbol for everything that was wrong with America. This view gripped the left as well as the right" (Allyn 277).

Garton, while acknowledging "the [American] movement for a new sexual moralism … in the 1980s and 1990s", contends that the women's movement and gay liberation "transformed the social and sexual climate in profound ways" (227). Indeed, Barbara Ehrenreich et al. proclaimed it as a specifically "*women's* sexual revolution" (1, original emphasis): "if either sex has gone through a change in sexual attitudes and behavior that deserves to be called revolutionary, it is women, and not men at all" (2). It is in this space of sexual revolution and liberalism, and an emerging counter-revolution, that Acker's confronting punk feminist lexicon of heterosexual desire emerges and it is this space that her writing disturbs.

A mutant genre of desire

To engage with the sexual revolution and its aftermath Acker creates a mutated genre as her host motif, because, as Catherine Belsey observes, "Desire in Western culture is inextricably intertwined with narrative, just as the traditional Western fiction is threaded through with desire … Desire presses to be written, to be narrated" (ix). Acker intertwines what I term "the 1970s novel of women's quest for sexual liberation"—as typified by Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*—with the gritty American teen novel, exemplified by S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*. These two genres are relatively recent and popular ways of narrating late-twentieth-century love and desire for a particular readership: women and teenagers, respectively. They encapsulate a cultural moment and provide the cultural scripts for how to perform ways of being—hegemonic or otherwise—a disciplinary power of which Acker was highly cognisant. John Frow notes that "genres actively generate and shape knowledge of the world" and are thereby "bound up with the exercise of power" (2). The punk girl Janey, whose story connects the two genres, contests both: undoing the core narrative of women's quest for freedom underpinning the former, and the narrative of personal growth and

integration of the latter. Acker's mutant genre thereby provides a narrative and contextual structure: framing, (dis)organising, and commenting upon scripts of heterosexual desire.

While Jong's *Fear of Flying* is exemplary—"perhaps the most well-known sexual liberation fiction in contemporary fiction" (Farland 401), there are numerous and highly popular examples throughout the 1970s: Lisa Alther's *Kinflicks*, Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*, and Alix Kates Shulman's *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*. These novels not only blend a confessional narrative with an ethos of sexual revolution from a woman's perspective, but do so in feminist terms—to varying degrees. So while the heroine is on a quest to explore sexual freedom, the novels reveal the obstacles facing her: marriage, family, Freudianism, and "the US culture of femininity" (Altman 9). At the genre's core is a contemporary narrative of the already, or potentially, sexually liberated woman, undergoing various adventures in love and desire—largely heterosexual in nature—so that Meryl Altman is correct to observe a reliance on the romance plot (15). Because of its subject matter and narrative form, I use the term 'the novel of women's quest for sexual liberation' rather than categories such as Rita Felski's "the novel of self-discovery" (122), Altman's "feminist novel of love and sex" (14), or Lisa Maria Hogeland's "the feminist consciousness-raising novel" (23). The heroine of the novel of women's quest for sexual liberation is, as Robert J. Butler describes Jong's Isadora Wing, a female picaro, and the genre can be seen as a contemporary and female version of the American journey book, with its narrative of the search for freedom via the exploration of frontiers (309–310). By implication, the territory that the contemporary American woman can claim is sexual and emotional, and that sexual desire is a technique of empire—to which we return.

Hogeland argues that "The [consciousness-raising] novels were an important part of the movement of radical feminist ideas and practices into the mainstream", although "for the most part … the CR novels moderated the radical feminist issues of sexuality they addressed" (54). Imelda Whelehan, for example, contends that Jong's novel "is often seen primarily as a celebration of heterosexual freedom at the beginning of the Sexual Revolution" (98). It is precisely this 'moderation' and celebratory nature that made these novels problematic for feminist literary critics, and for Acker—though textual politics are equally an issue for her.[3] In a fictional letter from Erica Jong part way through *Blood and Guts in High School*, Acker sets out her punk feminist critique of the novel of women's quest for sexual liberation, namely: realism as literary mode, optimism, and a sanitised version of women's desire:[4]

> HELLO, I'M ERICA JONG. ALL OF YOU LIKED MY NOVEL FEAR OF FLYING BECAUSE IN IT YOU MET REAL PEOPLE. PEOPLE WHO LOVED AND SUFFERED AND LIVED. MY NOVEL CONTAINED REAL PEOPLE. THAT'S WHY YOU LIKED IT …

> HELLO, I'M ERICA JONG. I'M A REAL NOVELIST. I WRITE BOOKS THAT TALK TO YOU ABOUT THE AGONY OF AMERICAN LIFE, HOW WE ALL SUFFER, THE GROWING PAIN THAT MORE AND MORE OF US ARE GONG TO FEEL. LIFE IN THIS COUNTRY IS GOING TO GET MORE HORRIBLE, UNBEARABLE … OH YES, MY NAME IS ERICA JONG I WOULD RATHER BE A BABY THAN HAVE SEX. I WOULD RATHER GO GOOGOO … YOU'RE LEAVING ME WITHOUT SEX I'VE GOTTEN HOOKED ON SEX AND NOW I'M …
>
> (125–126)[5]

The letter is preceded by a fragment from Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* that also gets the upper-case treatment by Acker: "EVERY POSITION OF DESIRE, NO MATTER HOW SMALL, IS CAPABLE OF PUTTING TO QUESTION THE ESTABLISHED ORDER OF A SOCIETY; NOT THAT DESIRE IS ASOCIAL; ON THE CONTRARY. BUT IT IS EXPLOSIVE" (125). Acker deliberately juxtaposes two accounts of desire—the one she sees as authentically revolutionary and political, followed by an ersatz model that purports to represent the reality of sexual liberation for women.

For Acker, Jong's liberal 'fakery' is voiced in its use of the codes of realism, hence Acker's repeated "real people", these people we can identify with—"I WRITE BOOKS THAT TALK TO YOU" (125). This model of putative psychological realism is critiqued formally by the slow disintegration of controlled, punctuated, clear sentences—the sanitised voice of desire, the voice of a baby—into an aggressive, hysterical rave: "I ERICA JONG I FUCK ME YOU CREEP WHO'S GOING TO AUSTRALIA YOU'RE LEAVING ME ALL ALONE YOU'RE …" (126). With its echoes of Janey as the hysteric (Brennan 266; Dane 10), this is the submerged voice of women's desire breaking through the patriarchal script of both the novel and theory, an "explosive" desire as Deleuze and Guattari would put it: angry, fearful, embodied, unreasonable—neither the ironic, humorous, savvy voice of the heroine of the sexual liberation quest novel, nor the controlled, masterful, and disembodied voice of the theorists.

Acker also inserts a social context and a social narrative of decline into the letter: "LIFE IN THIS COUNTRY IS GOING TO GET MORE HORRIBLE, UNBEARABLE, MAKING US MANIACS 'CAUSE MANIA AND DEATH WILL BE THE ONLY DOORS OUT OF PRISON EXCEPT FOR THOSE FEW RICH PEOPLE" (125–126). Here, Acker challenges the optimism and sense of progress—for the heroine and by implication, the nation—that characterises the women's quest novel, as well as the quest novel's humorous take on the patriarchal obstacles placed in the heroine's path. Acker's 'Jong' is confessing that sexual liberation does not lead to a more just society or fulfilled individuals. Rather, the United States is heading towards an apocalypse, an observation that mimics and inverts conservative critiques of the sexual revolution. The sexually liberated heroine is not

evidence of America's capacity to progress, to be a pluralistic and inclusive liberal democracy. Rather, the United States remains a carceral society (Skoll 15), its giving of freedom to groups such as women augmenting the number of inmates by creating new or increased needs, as in 'Jong's' confession: "I'VE GOTTEN HOOKED ON SEX" (126).

To contest the Jongian genre, Acker merges it with the gritty teen novel, in the process mutating them and spectacularly desublimating both genres' repressed subtexts. In effect, Janey's *Bildung* as a heterosexual punk girl provides the pre-history of the 'sexually liberated' heroine. The teen novel is ideal because of its quintessentially American identity (Trites 9)—the teenager was an American creation born of post-World War II capitalist affluence and liberalism (Savage 453, 465)—and it is a form of *Bildungsroman* for teenagers, frequently centring on love, and, in its more controversial iterations, articulating the figure of 'the troubled American teenager'. Fiona McCulloch explains that "The Bildungsroman … is ideally positioned as a pedagogical model of childhood development within children's and young adult (YA) fiction" (YA fiction being a more recent term for the teen novel) (174). The *Bildungsroman*'s narrative structure of the young hero/ine's quest, undergoing various challenges in unfamiliar territory until reaching maturity, has a twin focus: it "presents the growth and development of a character that embodies the criteria of personal and social success, and manages to successfully inhabit both a personal narrative and be forged by a social script" (McCulloch 174). Similar to the adult *Bildungsroman* (Moretti), the teenage version represents social integration, often by a form of apprenticeship (Jeffers).

Acker targets the gritty realist version of the teen novel rather than the 1950s "innocent romances" iteration (Moss 8) because it purports to offer "a more clear-eyed and unflinching look at the often unpleasant realities of American adolescent life" (Cart 29). Regardless of this intention, Acker suggests that the structure of the *Bildung* and a naivety (or wilful ignorance) regarding sexual politics and deeper social structures limit this attempted realism. Instead, her heroine Janey will give you the authentic *Blood and Guts in High School* and *Fear of Flying*, a "textual demolition … of classic bildungsroman narrative elements and expectations" (Hawkins 643).

Acker revises *The Outsiders* in a number of ways and in varying degrees of explicitness. First, she replaces Hinton's male teenage narrator with punk heroine Janey; as a consequence, the thematic emphasis shifts from class conflict (the working-class Greasers versus middle-class Socs in Hinton) to gender conflict, and the terms of realism for an American teenager immediately shifts too. Gina Hausknecht classifies *Blood and Guts in High School* as belonging to "girls' own stories"—which are about not fitting in, rather than "girls' stories" which are about acquiescence" (22). The basic plot elements of *The Outsiders* are kept by Acker: the broken family, the child becoming orphaned, relationship breakups, teenage rebellion, dropping out of high school and joining a gang, working in a dead-end job and seeking

thrills through gang violence and petty crime, tough-girl language, and a cataclysmic car crash. These elements, however, are politically sexualised by Acker in the teen genre's own sensationalist terms to render explicit patriarchal dynamics, a force that the teen novel doesn't want to acknowledge.

High school: inside and out

In teen novels, high school is the major setting outside the home and metonymic of the public sphere, being a locus of socialisation, friendship and romantic networks, systems of social stratification, personal crises and challenges, and formal and informal learning. And high school at some point is a place that the characters leave behind—a marker of maturity and integration achieved. Here, as throughout her *oeuvre*, Acker uses the setting of the school to explore the disciplining of children into a regime of gender, with high school as the organising principle of the narrative of Janey's apprenticeship into heterosexual love and sex—the blood and guts of the title, and her *Bildung* of self-formation and education. Accordingly, the novel's first two parts of "Inside High School" and "Outside High School" mark Janey's trajectory "beyond family and friends to the ever-larger institutions of myth, education, language, and literature" (Siegle 81).

Central to the novel is the incestuous father/daughter relationship, another preoccupation in Acker's fiction. Acker deliberately chooses the nondescript and typically American names of Johnny and Janey Smith, signifying their Everyman status and containing childlike connotations. What happens to Janey is generic, not unique—a rejection of the individualism underpinning the *Bildung*. Janey and Johnny could be characters out of children's reading primers, suggesting that Janey's story has a pedagogic function: Janey is learning to do simple actions so we can learn them too, which is another comment by Acker on the social power of textual forms and genres. Moreover, Janey's young age—the novel starts when she is 10 and she is dead by 14—reinforces this sense of pedagogy and an apprenticeship, and makes explicit that the patterns of womanhood are laid down in girlhood and early adolescence. It also makes apparent the infantilisation of women.

The structure of Inside/Outside High School suggests that the linear progress central to the *Bildung* of the teen novel will be enacted. While there is a sense of linearity and progress through various scenarios of love and sex, it is more so repetition with a difference—"a recursive education" as Susan E. Hawkins puts it (645), and there is little sense of progress for Janey. Acker is foregrounding the perversity at the heart of young women's *Bildung*, since Janey's lack of personal development actually indicates her achievement of the goal of the young adult *Bildungsroman*, in that she does manage "to successfully inhabit both a personal narrative and be forged by a social script"—in this case, provided by American patriarchy (McCulloch 174). Janey remains, in spite of all her challenges, socially (but not psychically)

integrated as a desiring heterosexual young woman, as the novel's post-mortem lines, suggest: "All I want is a taste of your lips, boy, / All I want is a taste of your lips" (165).

"Inside High School" chronicles Janey's apprenticeship in desire both within and outside the family—with her father/boyfriend Johnny, in the teen gang Scorpions, with her boyfriend Tommy, and alone and poor in the city. All Janey's significant relationships in 'high school' are with men; all are sexual in nature; and importantly, the sexual becomes an inseparable, and near indistinguishable part of Janey's emotional neediness. Janey's broken family is figured as motherless, with the novel's opening sentence rendering the familial dysfunctionality in shocking terms: "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"—note that father is the last term in the list (7). The syntax indicates that the father's role as the provider of "everything" simultaneously expresses and obscures his power as the literal patriarch.

The alternative family structure in Hinton's *The Outsiders* of the older brother caring for the younger is replaced by a simultaneously perverse but also fundamental patriarchal family relationship—the incestuous father–daughter dyad. Acker uses this relationship and Janey's age to satirise and desublimate the Freudian Oedipal model of desire (Hughes 123)—specifically, the child desiring the parent of the opposite sex, and to show the socialising work performed by the male-headed family for capitalist social reproduction, a theme detailed in the following chapter. Like the protagonist in many teen novels, Janey too experiences the heartbreak of her first love ending, however, she's breaking up with her father who's leaving her for another woman:

> FATHER: We just slept together once. Why don't you just let things lie, Janey, and not push?
> JANEY: You tell me you love someone else, you're gonna kick me out, and I shouldn't push. What do you think I am, Johnny? I love you.
> FATHER: Just let things be. You're making more of this than it really is. (9)

Rather than a family tragedy, it is the end of Janey's first heterosexual relationship that leaves her orphaned (at least, she feels that way). This is Acker's satirical comment on the basic structure of the Freudian model of desire that finds mature form in the heterosexual love relationship, with women replaying the father–daughter dyad and being stuck in a state of childlike dependency. "I was desperate to find the love that he had taken away from me", Janey declares in that quintessentially teenage form, the diary (31).

As in Hinton's novel, Janey joins a teen gang, the Scorpions, as a replacement family unit, and it is here that the allusions to *The Outsiders* are highly

explicit through Acker's rendering of the alienation of 'troubled youth' in specifically punk girl terms. Acker supplements the streetwise discourse with the then taboo subject of abortion. So we have lines that could be straight out of Hinton:

> My friends were just like me. They were desperate—the products of broken families, poverty—and they were trying to escape their misery.
>
> Despite the restrictions of school, we did exactly what we wanted and it was good. We got drunk. We used drugs. We fucked. We hurt each other sexually as much as we could. The speed, emotional overload, and pain every now and then dulled our brains. Demented our perceptual apparatus …
>
> I don't remember who I fucked the first time I fucked, but I must have known nothing about birth control 'cause I got pregnant. I do remember my abortion. One-hundred-ninety dollars.
>
> (31–32)

The final line gives the exact monetary price paid by Janey for her sexual freedom.

Being "outside high school", the novel's second part, suggests graduation—successful attainment of learning, and moving beyond the first locus of self-formation—a move into the wider world of the public sphere. Janey, however, must continue to learn specifically feminine skills—one never stops becoming a woman, to revisit Simone de Beauvoir. "Outside High School" begins with one of Acker's typically sensationalistic plotlines. The section "Janey Becomes a Woman" sees Janey raped by hoods and then kidnapped by a sex slaver, Mr Linker, so her next challenge is to learn to be a whore-woman. We will discuss Janey as a sex slave in more detail later, however, the name of the slaver, Mr Linker—he connects her to a marketplace where she can trade sex—suggests that outside high school the public sphere for women is the market. You finish school, and you enter the market—whether for labour or for goods. Importantly, Janey, who expresses her punk rebelliousness in sexual terms, will be easily and profitably assimilated into the broader economy, whether this be the sex industry in Janey's case, or industries like the entertainment/media complex where rebellious female sexuality is an attractive proposition. And that Janey has to be raped as a form of initiation, then taught, indeed imprisoned, suggests that trading sex is not natural to women.

At the moment of Janey's graduation as whore—"She had demonstrated to [Mr Linker] that she knew how to make impotent men hard, give blow and rim jobs, tease, figure out exactly what each man wants without asking him, make a man feel secure, desirable, and wild" (116)—she gets cancer and, now being unemployable, Mr Linker abandons her. It's a suitably melodramatic ending to the "Outside High School" section of the novel, and it could be read as a dig at the massively popular 1970 romance novel by

Erich Segal, *Love Story*, where cancer derails the couple's happiness. And when Janey begs Mr Linker to marry her—"I want you. I need you. I want to marry you" (116)—it marks Janey's successful social integration into patriarchal economies of desire, while offering a feminist comment on the narrative closure of so many women's novels (Greene 12), and playing on the radical feminist critique of marriage being a form of legalised prostitution.

Punk feminist Hegelianism: sadism, masochism, slavery

Using the tropes of sadomasochism and slavery, Acker intensifies the social framing of women's heterosexual desire and particularly its role in the reproduction of capitalism. In a punk feminist caricature of Hegel, and in keeping with her reading of patriarchy as an ur-narrative of history, Acker superimposes gender and the required dispositions on to his master–slave dialectic to expose the dynamics of the libidinal economy, post-sexual revolution. In Acker's version, men are the masters and hence the sadists, while women, as in the figure of Janey, are the slaves and the masochists. As in Hegel, both master and slave are reliant on the other in a continuing struggle for recognition; however, the interpretation of 'recognition' differs according to gender. Although Janey wants recognition, aka love, the various men in the narrative (Johnny, Tommy, Mr Linker, Mr Fuckface, and so on), desire pleasure and/or profit from Janey, thus sadomasochism and slavery are the semi-submerged 'content' of narratives like Jong's and the discourses of the sexual revolution. Rather than the dialectic of master and slave being resolved in the putatively democratic and liberated times, the slave is able to make more profits for her masters, and never breaks out of the cycle of need. Moreover, both slavery and sadomasochism are deliberately disturbing tropes with which to confront the easily commodified liberal narratives of sexual freedom in a nation with a history of slavery and imperialism.

I use sadomasochism here as shorthand for the separate though often related practices of sadism and masochism, noting Acker's satirical equivalence between binary gender and sadism and masochism. Acker's primary interest is, however, in Janey's female masochism that, as Cristina Ionica argues, is a by-product of a sadistic social structure and a convenient male capitalist phantasy (281, 280). *Blood and Guts in High School* offers various obscenely rendered tableaux of love and sexual relationships—though Acker emphasises how these are indistinct for Janey—connected by the textual logic of the narrative of sexual liberation. One adventure follows another in the quest for 'freedom', in what Suzette Henke describes as a "pornographic pastiche" of romantic love because (106), as M.W. Smith explains, pornography "can be reappropriated as the language of women because they have always been objectified as sexual commodities" (94). Every tableau is figured by either the motif of sadomasochism or slavery. Every change in tableau sets up the expectation of progress for the heroine—towards love, another obstacle to be conquered, or sexual fulfilment, only to be confounded. Acker's jarring shifts in time and space, moving from

Mexico to New York City to Tangier and then to Egypt, lead only to more of the same for Janey, and hence Acker rejects the teleology of both the teen novel and sexual liberation narratives. Instead, as Henke argues, the novel provides us with parodic "obsessive-compulsive re-enactments of traumatic injury" that exposes and pushes to the limit stereotypes of desiring heterosexual women (98).

"Inside High School" is characterised by Janey's masochistic relationships with the sadists Johnny, the Scorpions, and Tommy. Slavery is the main trope in "Outside High School", and the final section of the novel features both masochistic desire for President Carter and Jean Genet (and their sadistic responses to Janey's entreaties), and Janey as a slave on a Western-owned farm in Egypt. This patterning reinforces a perverse sense of the heroine's progress in a faux Hegelian unfolding of the *geist*: Janey's destination is both as a masochist and a slave, exemplifying the way in which, "in our culture, women have been forced into a sadomasochistic economy of value" (Smith 95). In the context of the sexual revolution, it is a pornographic economy of value as well.

The focus on Janey's masochism both exposes and satirises the emotional dispositions supposedly required by the desiring heterosexual woman: to be normal is to be pathological. The most significant tableau in the novel's first part is the Johnny–Janey father–daughter relationship, in which Janey's masochism is established and nurtured. The relationship is in the process of ending, as Johnny wants to leave Janey for the 21-year-old starlet, Sally. *Blood and Guts in High School* makes explicit the incestuous nature of the dyad, and that this sets the pattern for all of Janey's relationships with boys and men. It is a compulsion to repeat. The fact that Janey is motherless, thus completely dependent on her father, appears to be the foundation for Janey's masochism. As Hawkins explains:

> In Acker's version, Janey's desire for Johnny apparently bypasses the usual circuit of originary desire for the mother, Oedipal rivalry for the father, and the necessary, final sexual identification with/as woman/subject. For Janey there is no emergence from the classic oedipal phase; she is perpetually trapped within it.
>
> (646)

Janey's orientation is therefore completely phallocentric. The clichéd scripts Janey and Johnny use to speak of their romantic relationship and their impending breakup articulate the 'normal' dynamic of heterosexual relationships, an example of Acker's focus "on the sadomasochism of everyday life" (Kauffman 202). Both shift roles throughout, but the father ultimately retains power, and Janey returns to the role of masochist:

> FATHER (*commanding*): Janey, come here.
> JANEY (*backing away like he's a dangerous animal, but wanting him*): I don't want to.

FATHER: I just want to hold you.
JANEY: Why d'you lie to me?
FATHER: It got late and I didn't feel like going to the party.
JANEY: What time d'you get home?
FATHER: Around seven.
JANEY: Oh. (*In an even smaller little girl's voice*) You were with Sally?
FATHER: Come here, Janey. (*He wants to make love to her. Janey knows it.*)
JANEY (*running away*): Go to sleep, Johnny, I'll see you in the morning.
JANEY (*a half-hour later*): I can't sleep by myself, Johnny. Can I crawl into bed with you?
FATHER (*grumbling*): I'm not going to get any sleep. Get in. (*Janey gives him a blow job. Johnny isn't really into having sex with Janey, but he gets off on the physical part.*)

(15–16)

With the emphasis on Janey's "little girl's voice", Acker emphasises Janey's infantilisation within the relationship. Her sole power is the ability to give or withhold sexual gratification.

Because Acker represents desire as graphically embodied, echoing what Jay Hood sees as Jong's "attempt[s] to promote a female conceptualization of the body", Janey not only talks like a masochist but manifests it physically (150). She has sex intermittently with Johnny as they are breaking up, and, as a result, catches pelvic inflammatory disease (PID)—Acker schlocky as ever. Regardless of the pain, they have sex one more time, with Acker using Janey's childlike, visceral, and uncensored language to narrate the 'break-up sex' (Hughes 127):

> She lay down on the filthy floor by his bed, but it was very uncomfortable: she hadn't slept for two nights. So she asked him if he wanted to come into her bed … He fucked her in her asshole cause the infection made her cunt hurt too much to fuck there, though she didn't tell him it hurt badly there, too, cause she wanted to fuck love more than she felt pain.
>
> (21)

"To fuck love" is deliberately ambiguous: a compound term that expresses the elision of love and sexual desire that plagues Janey, like her PID, throughout her quest—she wanted to fuck then rethought it as being love, or that love can only be expressed by sex.

Acker's conflation of love, sex, and masochism for women is made even more explicit in the scene at the abortion clinic—significantly, abortion was a staple theme of feminist consciousness-raising novels at this time (Hogeland 62). The abortion clinic is Acker's explicit comment on the sexual revolution and its 'benefits' for women's sexual freedom. Janey imagines abortion as a metaphor of sex for women: "Abortions are the symbol, the

outer image, of sexual relations in this world", though Acker as a punk writer literalises abortion too (34). Accordingly, Acker portrays the abortion process in emotive and negative terms. The clinic is like a factory rather than a place of care, with a long line of frightened and anxious women waiting. Janey observes: "We had given ourselves to men before. That's why we were here. All of us signed everything [the medical consent forms]. Then they took our money" (32). They have given everything away to heterosexual desire. She talks about killing babies, emphasises the numbers of abortions a doctor performs in a day, discusses the patient's screams, the offhand treatment by the medical staff, and the after-effects of the operation.

Abortion in the novel highlights the darker side of sexual liberation for women: they are the ones in the clinic paying the price for pursuing freedom. "It's all up to you girls. You have to be strong. Shape up. You're a modern woman. These are the days of post-women's liberation" comments the narrator (32). She continues: "Well, what are you going to do? You've grown up now and you have to take care of yourself. No one's going to help you. You're the only one" in a system of laissez-faire capitalist desire (32). And that so many women end up in the clinic undergoing this traumatic procedure—including Janey, who has a second abortion not long after the first—points to the masochistic nature of female desire. "Well, I couldn't help it, I just LOVE to fuck, he was SO cute, it was worth it" says one of the patients (32). Acker thus reverses, in confronting terms, abortion as feminist trope of liberation to literalise heterosexual desire's requirement for female masochism.

The final trope, slavery, is used to situate women's 'liberated' heterosexual desire as part of capitalist social reproduction and the imperial desires of the United States. Slavery is figured primarily in Janey's relationship with "the mysterious Mr Linker", the 'Persian' slave trader in "Outside High School". Representing women's desire as and through slavery—the antithesis of liberation—allows Acker to make a disturbing return to pre-feminist times when women were legally chattels to extend modern feminist debates regarding women's domestic and sexual slavery in marriage. This trope exposes the intensified commodification of women's heterosexual desires, particularly in the booming porn industries as one by-product of the sexual revolution. Moreover, Mr Linker, being a Persian slave trader, suggests the ways in which the United States uses the non-Western other as mask or screen on which to project its exploitative practices of desire, domestically and internationally. Hawkins argues that this geopolitical dimension is "Acker's most prescient political insight—her recognition of America's Other as specifically Middle Eastern and the ways in which this 'othering machine' rationalises America's corporate policies abroad" (642).[6]

Mr Linker as slave trader—a less sanitised term for pimp—is a caricature of men who profit from the commodification of women's desires—he could easily be a porn magnate, or a brothel owner, or a sex trafficker—all daddy figures. Just as Acker refuses to set up Janey's father as a classic symbol of

'hard' phallic power—instead, Johnny is the post-countercultural 'soft' father, with his needs and feelings—so with Linker the slaver. He is portrayed as an intelligent and cultured representative of entrepreneurial late capitalism rather than being a figure of evil or sleaze: "Culture is our highest form of life," he opines, "and it is literature more than any other art which enables us to grasp this higher life, for literature is the most abstract of the arts. It is the only art which is not sensual" (64). Linker's autobiography satirises the American fantasy of immigrant success in the New World, regardless of origin: "Mr Linker, having been a beggar's child, saw how society worked. He made himself clever and relentless, relentlessly determined to get rich" (64). And he has strong views on how society works: "The men who have taken the most extreme risks, who have done what may have disgusted other people or what other people have condemned are the men who have advanced our civilization" (64). Imperialist, entrepreneurial capitalism is equated with civilisation for Linker, hence capitalist operations can be justified in the name of civilisation. Mr Linker personifies the role of culture in capitalism: an antidote to, or mask of, its more extreme manifestations.

Mr Linker's various careers refer to developments in twentieth-century capitalism as a society of control that increasingly uses pleasure as a strategy: he first works as a psychologist, then a neurologist cum lobotomist, then he runs holiday resorts, before turning to white slavery. The common thread in these jobs is their pacifying role—their soft form of individual and collective control. Given Linker's theory regarding entrepreneurialism, the sexual slave trade and/or the commodification of women is the latest phase of advancing capitalist civilisation through managing women and men with pleasure.

Importantly, Mr Linker's 'Persian' background draws attention to Orientalism: the way in which Western culture projects and displaces its own desires, its own industries of sexual and economic slavery, on to the putatively less civilised non-Western other. As Hawkins observes, the novel "evoke[s] seemingly endless variations on the harem fantasy, including the white slave ring, the brothel, the veiled body" (648). In nearly every Acker novel or novella, and as will be seen in our discussion of the American polity and economy, Acker explores to varying degrees the libidinal investments of the American empire, that is, the ways in which desire has implications beyond intimate relations, frequently serving to legitimate economic and other forms of exploitation.[7] The character of Mr Linker, Western educated and cultured along European lines (the authors he mentions are all canonical European writers), connects sexual slavery to Western culture and to multinational capitalist expansion, metaphorically and materially. With Linker being Iranian, and taking an all-American girl hostage, I suspect that Acker is alluding to the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis: an event that played out, in reverse terms, America's treatment of less-powerful countries. The parallel being drawn is that American capitalism treats its client states like American women are treated: manipulating, exploiting, and commodifying them.

During Janey's imprisonment by Mr Linker, an alternative form of education occurs when Janey commences to write about her life, rather like Isadora's quest to become a writer in *Fear of Flying*. Janey turns to the classic work of American literature (and tale of sexual hypocrisy), *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne), to narrate herself, again positing a link between culture and slavery. Rod Phillips interprets Janey's adaptation of male canonical texts as showing that "we adopt—perhaps without knowing it—the language of our oppressors"—we act out their scripts (176). Using the student's genre of the book report, Janey's commentary on Hester Prynne becomes her life story:

> Nowadays, most women fuck around 'cause fucking doesn't mean anything. All anybody cares about is money. The woman who lives her life according to nonmaterialistic ideals is the wild antisocial monster; the more openly she does so, the more everyone hates her. Women today don't get put in gaol for being bloody pieces of Kotex—only streetwalkers and junkies land up in gaol, gaol-and-law now being a business like any other business—they just starve to death and everyone hates them.
>
> (66)

Acker posits here the contemporary disconnection of sex from morality, but also its replacement—sex's connection to capitalism, and therefore women's alienation from their desires. The capitalist market punishes all women, pathologising the woman who doesn't want to realise her sexual exchange value, who can't separate love from sex—a slave to men like Mr Linker, and imprisoning the streetwalker who does attempt to profit from her exchange value without an intermediary. And Janey learning a foreign language to narrate her desires is metaphor of other cultures 'learning' American forms of heterosexual desire through its culture industries of film, television, popular music, and literature, among others. As American capitalist structures and cultural narratives spread, so too does a particular model of heterosexual desire and its associated industries.

Acker, however, does not position the clear separation of sexual desire from love as the solution to women's masochism or slave status:

> Once upon a time there was a materialistic society one of the results of this materialism was a "sexual revolution". Since the materialistic society had succeeded in separating sex from every possible feeling, all you girls can now go spread your legs as much as you want 'cause it's sooo easy to fuck it's sooo easy to be a robot it's sooo easy not to feel. Sex in America is S & M. This is the glorification of S & M and slavery and prison.
>
> (99)

A revolutionary sexual freedom for women—a realised eroticism—must also take into account capitalism and its commodification, indeed reification,

of desires, bodies, and emotions, and the way in which sadomasochistic dynamics underpin all three.

After two periods of slavery and, although deserted and dead, Janey's masochism is intact. Her story is a powerful disturbance to literary and popular narratives of women's sexual liberation, a punk feminist revisioning that refuses to offer romance, absolution, acceptance, or transcendence in its conclusion. As Kathryn Hume explains of Janey, "All the conflicts of her life and values remain in tension at the end of this story, painfully unresolved" (435). Acker's punk feminist lexicon entwines literary genres, high school, the newly visible sign of commodified yet subversive sexual pleasure—sadomasochism, and the historically charged trope of slavery—to ferociously parody normal femininity, women's supposed emancipation, and an era of (hetero)sexual enlightenment or fulfilment. The mutant genre's delineation of the pre-history of the sexually liberated woman reveals that Janey, in being trained to be a masochist and hence 'normal', is pathological.

And Acker, in making white slavery and an Iranian slaver central to Janey's narrative, was prescient. With globalised capitalism and the Internet it is only a few years later that American narratives and images of heterosexual desire easily move across the globe, and sex slavery becomes a growth industry, no longer simply an Orientalist trope.[8] And by the end of the twentieth century, the freedom of women in the Middle East is used to justify another wave of American conquest. Indeed, as the novel states towards the end, "Soon many other Janeys were born and these Janeys covered the earth" (165).

Notes

1 *Blood and Guts in High School* had a circuitous route to publication that saw it published after *Great Expectations*, even though it was completed beforehand and should have been published first. Acker copyrighted the novel in 1978, and she had two publishing contracts prior to Grove Press and Pan that fell through before it was finally published in 1984. See Chris Kraus (152–153) or Acker's interview with Maja Prausnitz et al. for details on the novel's publication history.

2 I use the term 'teen novel' rather than the more recent category, 'young adult fiction' or 'adolescent fiction' because I wish to underline the specific post-World War II cultural phenomenon of the teenager and its American origins.

3 Hogeland, Whelehan, and Altman all note feminist literary criticism's past discomfort with these types of novels. More recent critical work suggests a rapprochement with feminist bestsellers (see Hood; Taylor; Whelehan). See Whelehan for a comprehensive account of Jong's reception by feminists.

4 Linda S. Kauffman provides an analysis of Acker's use of epistolarity, in "Not a Love Story: Retrospective and Prospective Epistolary Directions."

5 The piece was originally published as a stand-alone text, *Hello, I'm Erica Jong*, by the small press Contact II Publication in 1982. It included artwork by Michael McLoud.

6 Mexico is another setting for the novel, specifically, the town of Merida that is frequented by American tourists. See Karen Brennan's excellent analysis of the novel's spatiality: "The Geography of Enunciation: Hysterical Pastiche in Kathy Acker's Fiction".
7 America's leading role in the sexual revolution (Allyn) and the consequent global sex industry also means it is party to exploitation in the sex industry.
8 We should also note the grim statistic that in 2018, according to the Global Slavery Index, of the 40 million slaves, 71 per cent of them are women and girls. See www.globalslaveryindex.org/2018/findings/global-findings.

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6 The family
Great Expectations (1982)

With its focus on the family as a 'training ground' for adult femininity, Acker's 1982 novel *Great Expectations* can be read as a complement to *Blood and Guts in High School*, with both novels reimagining private domains in resolutely political and social terms. *Great Expectations*, by reimagining the thematic of the crisis in the traditional American family and the associated call for a return to family values, confronts discourses that emerge in the 1970s (Lassiter 14; Skolnick 4) and that become a powerful platform of conservative politics onwards (Alphonso; Horwitz). Traditional family here refers to the idealised model of the nuclear family—"a [male-headed] married [heterosexual] couple and their children"—the model taken as the norm by critics and proponents alike (Skolnick 44–45), regardless of its relatively recent emergence and racially and class-specific nature (Stacey 38–41).[1] Its attendant 'family values' are a critical ideological component of American patriarchal late capitalism, attempting to restore heterosexual male authority in the private sphere, and to justify an authoritarian rather than welfare state along highly moralistic lines (Stacey 3–4).

The traditional family is also the basis for Freud's theorisations of psychosexual development, most famously through the Oedipus complex; in effect, the Oedipal family is the unconscious of the traditional family. Acker, exploiting an archetype familiar to the American psyche and society, restages the "family in crisis" narrative using a parodic version of Freud's Oedipal family and its related narrative form of the family romance. Like its patronym, Acker's *Great Expectations* is a contemporary literary version of the family romance, a narrative genre that centres on the child imagining an alternative story of origins as a fantasmatic story of the self, exposing tensions within the Oedipal family.[2] In the place of Dickens's sprawling nineteenth-century linear plot and hero, Acker uses a series of fragments to trace a punk girl's imagined childhood origins and adult destination to explore her inheritance, whether material or psychic. What are her great expectations, given her feminine dissonance:

> I felt too strongly. My emotional limbs stuck out as if they were broken and unfixable. I kissed mother's friends too nicely when they were

> playing canasta. I was too interested in sex. I wasn't pretty in a conventional enough way.
>
> (58)

Just as Freud identified the normative role and pathologies of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European bourgeois family, Acker desublimates the dysfunctional functionalism for girls and women of the traditional American family ideal in an era when women are assumed to be free to pursue economic and sexual autonomy. Her revisiting of the Oedipal family provides us with a punk feminist journey into "the underworlds of the world" (37), a disturbing narrative and lexicon for conservatives, some feminists, liberals, and the Left who, with few exceptions, are unable to think beyond the conventional family as bedrock of society.[3]

Given *Great Expectations*' foregrounding of the heroine's masochistic desire and an idiosyncratic version of novelistic form, critical accounts understandably tend to focus on the novel's exploration of female desire (Beckman; Mukherjee; Saltzman), and/or its formal qualities and debt to Dickens (McBride; Kauffman; Mukherjee; Saltzman; Siegel). Martina Sciolino, in contrast, suggests the importance of the family to Acker's narrative by observing the presence of masculine and feminine economies related to the father and the mother, respectively (260–261). She argues that Acker asks: "how does a woman interrupt the intertextual weave of her own identity? How can she 'think back through her mothers when her own mother only leaves a legacy of masochism and suicide?" (247). This chapter draws together these critical foci of female desire and identity, textual form, and family, to show their inseparability and mutually constitutive nature.

Acker tropes the family in specifically literary terms, underlining the importance of family romance to literature (Robert), and the foundational role of narrative—and particularly literary narratives—to constructing and understanding the self and family. As Christine van Boheemen observes in relation to literary family romances, "narrative provides an unconscious pattern of cultural conditioning, a grammar of structuration, about which we reflect as little as about the grammar of our mother tongue" (14). Acker revisits a master narrative of modernity regarding the family, Freud's Oedipal family, to repoliticise it by literalisation and by the destabilising centrality of the punk daughter. Into this frame Acker has the punk daughter reimagine two literary versions of the family romance—Dickens's novel and Victoria Holt's historical romance, *The Spring of the Tiger*—and pairs each with a literary script of female sexuality: Pauline Réage's erotic classic *The Story of O* accompanies Dickens, and John Keats's poem "The Eve of St Agnes" is paired with Holt. The structural arrangement and narrative content of these literary tropes make explicit the perverse logic of the American family for girls and women. And recurring throughout these literary fragments is the motif of rape (typically by the father). Like Magwitch in Dickens's novel,

rape is a spectral presence, and the thread binding the textual fragments. Rape in *Great Expectations* is an allusion to and deliberate misprision of Freud's key element of the Oedipal family—the child's incestuous desire, and is a literalisation of patriarchal power.

Great Expectations shows the punk daughter's position within the family to be unavoidably traumatising, reproduced and delimited by cultural texts, and possibly irresolvable. As a consequence, the novel inverts and renders perverse conventional understandings of the role of the American family as locus of care, personal stability, and collective morality, and a haven from the outside world.[4] Rather, the family and its related narratives as *successful* methods of reproducing normative gender identity and intimate relations make it a source of female subjection, with the family's chanelling of female desire preparing girls to consent to the social logic of patriarchal capitalist exploitation and submission to male authority.

Moreover, Acker's political critique has a literary dimension. The formal qualities of *Great Expectations*—specifically its narrative restlessness and highly fragmented shape—question the ability of the conventional novel to articulate an adequate imago for the punk girl, while simultaneously sketching a counter-imago of the heroine—for a sketch is all that is possible for one who cannot 'settle' on a myth of origin.[5] As such, *Great Expectations* adds punk negation to the reconfiguration of the literary family romance that occurs post-1945 (Heller 11), and particularly to the second wave feminist critique of the nuclear family and to contemporary women's novels' reimaging of the family and of the mother–daughter plot. Given the continuing power of the ideology of familialism in the twenty-first century, such punk negation is worth revisiting.

The American family in crisis

According to Matthew D. Lassiter, "The postwar embodiment of the American Dream—a heterosexual nuclear family with a working father and stay-at-home mother living in an upwardly mobile suburban neighborhood—appeared on the verge of collapse during the seventies" (14). Increasing divorce rates and mothers in paid employment, a rise in the number of single parent families, and falling birth rates meant that "as early as 1975 the 'typical nuclear family', consisting of a working father, a homemaker mother, and two children, represented only 7 percent of the population" (Slocum-Schaffer 170). Reasons for these shifts vary, often according to political position. For conservatives, the decline in the family was attributed to cultural forces, specifically those emerging from the counterculture, including women's and gay liberation, the sexual revolution, and liberal parenting styles (Lassiter 15), along with the related "new hedonism" emerging from the counterculture of the 1960s (Skolnick 5). For the Left, the family was under pressure because of economic conditions: recession, the collapse in the number of workers receiving the family wage, and the beginnings of the

shift from an industrial to a postindustrial economy with its emphasis on feminised service industries at the expense of male jobs in traditional sectors of the economy (Lassiter 15).

Considering that "in the United States the family has always been perceived as the most important social unit next to the individual" (Heinemann 7), and a sign of the moral superiority of the United States (Stacey 41), critics such as Stephanie A. Slocum-Schaffer and Natasha Zaretsky link the change in family structure to a broader sense of national cultural crisis. "Over and over again, and in remarkably varied and contradictory ways," explains Zaretsky, "the family stood at the center of the major debates about national decline that surfaced in the early 1970s" (4). Slocum-Schaffer contends that "there was widespread fear that institutions, the government, the family, and even individual personalities were completely breaking down" (199). Judith Stacey, however, reminds us that the crisis in the modern American family was actually a patriarchal crisis, as men lost their traditional authority (50).

The response by both sides of American politics was to promulgate traditional 'family values' during this decade and beyond: positioning the nuclear family as bedrock of American society hence deserving government support, and for conservatives, a bulwark against the 'permissive society'.[6] Gwendoline M. Alphonso observes that "the late twentieth-century period was distinctive insofar as 'family values' exploded into political significance and were articulated by all legislative contingents" (123). For conservatives, family values is code for a number of elements in which gay liberation, government interference (often through the provision of welfare), feminism, and by extension women, and particularly working women, are seen as the problem (Lassiter 15–16). Especially pertinent to Acker's novel is Robert B. Horwitz's observation that for 1970s Evangelical Christians, "female sexuality … remained a force that needed to be disempowered and subdued within a patriarchal family structure" (176–177). As a consequence, the discourse of family values restores the traditional power of the male as head of the family and breadwinner, and the family as responsible for its own care, with obvious implications for the status of women. Those who espouse 'family values' valorise marriage, are anti-abortion, and are critical of no-fault divorce laws, potentially consigning women yet again to unhappy marriages, unwanted motherhood, economic dependence on men, or to limited forms of sexual relationships.

Acker's Oedipal family

Acker's parodic version of Freud's Oedipal family reimagines and critiques the American family not only because of their shared structure, reliance on narrative, and time of emergence—both emanations of industrial capitalism, but also because of the influence of, and centrality of desire and sexuality to, Freud's account of the family. And a Freudian parody is an ideal lingua franca for a time and place where therapy culture is increasingly powerful

(Illouz 163, 165). In effect, Acker uses Freud against himself to diagnose and expose the traditional family, and particularly its implications for the punk girl who seeks to resist it by constructing an alternative origin, and therefore an alternative self. By the time of *Great Expectations* Freud's legacy had been subject to criticism, most importantly for my argument by feminists in terms of his limitations regarding women and girls (Kate Millett and Germaine Greer, among others), and by post-Marxists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari who identify an obfuscating and depoliticising familialism.

Deleuze and Guattari's influence on Acker is highly pronounced in *Great Expectations*' complication of the Oedipal family and narrative and, particularly, its treatment of incestuous desire. Deleuze and Guattari argue that Freud's Oedipal conceptualisation of the family is critical to capitalist social repression and reproduction by the chanelling of potentially disruptive desiring production in and through the family: "The family is the delegated agent of psychic repression, or rather the agent delegated to psychic repression; the incestuous drives are the disfigured image of the repressed" (*Anti-Oedipus* 119). They explain this work of psychic repression thus: "*It is in one and the same movement that the repressive social production is replaced by the repressing family, and that the latter offers a displaced image of desiring-production that represents the repressed as incestuous familial drives*" (*Anti-Oedipus* 119, original emphasis). Desire is kept within the family structure, and is only comprehensible within the Oedipal triangle, rather than attaining its revolutionary force in the social field: "As for Oedipus, it is another way of coding the uncodable, of codifying what eludes the codes, or of displacing desire and its object, a way of entrapping them" (*Anti-Oedipus* 173). Incest has a critical role in this process:

> By placing the distorting mirror of incest before desire (that's what you wanted, isn't it?), desire is shamed, stupefied, it is placed in a situation without exit, it is easily persuaded to deny "itself" in the name of the more important interests of civilization.
>
> (*Anti-Oedipus* 120)

As a consequence, we learn to desire our own repression and to keep desire limited, and disconnected from social structures and hence power relations.

Yet, as Gayle Rubin, among others, reminds us, "As a description of how phallic culture domesticates women, and the effects in women of their domestication, psychoanalytic theory [specifically, Freudian] has no parallel" (56). Acker draws upon this descriptive power, but also addresses the family as agent of psychic repression for the young girl. Moreover, Acker wishes to address the cultural authority of the Freudian family in America. Historians of Freud have observed the far greater influence of Freud in the United States compared to Europe (Ruitenbeek; Samuel; Zaretsky, *Secrets*). Nancy Schnog, for example, contends that "since at least the 1920s middle-class Americans have been educated into understandings of self and psyche

shaped by mainstream concepts of psychoanalytic thought" (3), while for Lawrence R. Samuel, "psychoanalysis entered the vernacular of [American] popular discourse, part of our everyday conversation and way of looking at the world" (xviii). So when Acker restages the family in crisis in Freudian terms, she is using it to subvert a set of ideational frameworks with continuing, if residual and unconscious, explanatory power, and in a time when therapeutic explanations of individual and social malaise are ever more prominent.

Acker parodies the Oedipal family through a combination of her punk literary stylistics, a militantly gynocentric perspective, and reworkings of established family romance narratives, and, as a consequence, the repressed contents of the traditional family surface, and are connected to the social field and its power relations. She continues her schlocky bricolage to write a family that is *unheimlich*: familiar but also bizarre. The following passage, another of Acker's mimicry of soap operas or sit coms, parodies the importance of the genre to the ideal of the American family (Stacy 102). Characters are ciphers of their social roles: they speak their culturally predetermined lines, until a moment of weirdness appears:

> HUBBIE: All I do is work every day! I never say anything about anything! I do exactly what every other American middle-aged man does. Everything's my fault.
>
> WIFE (*soberly*): Everything IS your fault. (*The wife starts to cry again.*) You don't love me enough. You don't want me to be a little girl. I'm … mmwah (*her hands crawl at one of the lapels of his red-and-black hunting jacket*). I'm a … googoo. Don't you love me? Bobby? Do you love me and be nice to me and don't desert me cause I love you so much?
>
> (20–21)

We have heard the first few lines a hundred times until the brief interruption by the caricature of a baby's voice, before the clichés resume. But in that gap, something submerged becomes visible, and the preceding lines of dialogue shift in meaning. The wife's baby voice and wanting to be a little girl desublimates problematic Freudian precepts such as the infantile quality of women and their 'natural' submission to the male head of the household, and draws attention to the infant's supposed desire for the father. As such, the family ideal circulated by the mass media and conservative politics is temporarily disturbed, and we have a momentary realisation that women are structurally positioned as infantile, and (uncomfortably) maybe even desire this.

Acker's gynocentric perspective on the Oedipal family is a working through in order to correct Freud's neglect of the specificity of the female infant's experience of the Oedipus complex (Laplanche and Pontalis 284), and the cultural emphasis on understanding the Oedipal structure along father–son lines—a priority that reproduces as well as expresses patriarchy.[7]

I return to this aspect soon, however, *Great Expectations*' difference of view produced by displacing the Oedipal son with the punk daughter enables her fate to be explored and expressed in the typically punk terms of literalness and excess. This focalisation also allows Acker to address another blind spot in the Oedipal family: she replaces the father–son plot with the mother–daughter plot as central to the narrative and, by extension, positions the mother–daughter dyad as critical to the dynamics and politics of the family, and to the girl's subjectivity. She thereby works with one of the characteristic plots of women's literary fiction identified by Marianne Hirsch, who argues that in its more contemporary form, "The feminist family romance of the 1970s is based on separation not from parents or the past, but from patriarchy and from men in favour of female alliances" (135). As I demonstrate, however, Acker's punk feminist rendition of the mother–daughter plot as core to the family romance rejects such an optimistic narrative arc, resulting in a fragmented and unresolved female imago.

The significance of the mother–daughter plot is announced in the novel's third paragraph, when the narrator explains that, "On Christmas Eve 1978 my mother committed suicide and in September of 1979 my grandmother (on my mother's side) died" (5). She continues:

> Terence [the tarot card reader] told me that despite my present good luck my basic stability my contentedness with myself alongside these images, I have the image obsession I'm scum. This powerful image depends on the image of the Empress, the image I have of my mother … My image of my mother is the source of my creativity. I prefer consciousness. My image of my hateful mother is blocking consciousness.
>
> (6)

From the beginning the mother is imagined in contradictory terms: as dead, yet making the daughter ("my image of my mother is source of my creativity"), indeed haunting her—"blocking consciousness". This ambivalent and at times carnal relationship with the mother—the first description of the mother's body focuses on her cunt and breast (9)—is positioned as the primary relationship in the Oedipal family and tracked throughout the novel: "My mother is adoration hatred play. My mother is the world. My mother is my baby" (14). This intermittent but continual return in the novel to the memories of the mother marks the mother–daughter dyad as critical to Acker's reconfiguring of the 'family in crisis' narrative. Ankhi Mukherjee observes that "the mother's suicide can be considered a logical copula that holds together various (unrelated) scenarios of oppression and victimization" (113). Accordingly, the mother is figured by the daughter in radically different terms to the venerated homemaker of conservative politics, oscillating between being terrifying, blissful, disappointing, dissolute, or unreachable, both victim of and implicated in the Oedipal family's workings. And regardless of the mother's imagined power for the daughter, as we soon

see Acker's patriarchal family romances reveal its constraints: the feminine economy the mother represents, to use Sciolino's terms, remains attenuated and ghostly compared to the patriarchal economy.

For Freud, the Oedipal family is the origin of pathologies, as well as being the place in which cultural law is instituted, namely, the incest taboo. *Great Expectations* focuses on this pathological quality: the normal family is always broken—especially for daughters, and arguably for mothers as well; the father is a marginal though menacing presence (or absence); and families produce female pathology. In the first family romance based loosely on Dickens, the father is a figure of weakness rather than patriarchal power:

> My mother thinks my father is a nobody … Daddy's drunk and he's still whining, but now he's whining nastily. He's telling my mother that he does all the work he goes to work at six in the morning and comes back after six at night … We all know he goes to work cause he drinks and he doesn't hear my mother's nagging). He's telling my mother he gave her her first fur coat. My father is never aggressive. My father never beats my mother up.
>
> (12–13)

Being "never aggressive" and not a wife beater, the father is set up to resemble the more liberal father figure of the post-World War II democratic family (Coontz), similar to Janey's father, Johnny, in *Blood and Guts in High School*. In the novel's second family romance, a restaging of *The Spring of the Tiger*, the father, as befitting a historical romance, is a more traditionally masculine figure of mystery, being a rumoured murderer: "Last year he killed someone, shot him, who was trespassing on his yacht", according to his aunt (61). Regardless of which version of the father she reimagines, as demonstrated below, there is little difference in outcomes for the punk daughter, suggesting the structural nature of patriarchal power dynamics and their adaptability in a time of women's putative liberation.

Scripting the family romance

Freud's 1909 essay "Family Romances" discusses the process in which a young child attempts to be liberated from the authority of the parents by imagining an alternative story of origins—his or her family romance. This, according to Freud, is "one of the most necessary though one of the most painful results brought about by the course of his development" ("Family" 237). Being a key way in which an autonomous identity occurs, it is a process that has especial valence for the dissident punk girl. The impetus for the child's invention is "revenge and retaliation" against the parents who have, in some way, disappointed or slighted the child—by giving attention to a sibling, for instance (Freud, "Family" 238). As a response, "the child's imagination becomes engaged in the task of getting free from the parents

of whom he now has a low opinion and of replacing them by others, who, as a rule, are of higher social standing", such as by imagining oneself as an orphan or as adopted (Freud, "Family" 237–38). Acker's punk girl's recitation of family romances can be read as revenge and retaliation against the conformist femininities and patriarchal power reproduced by the family.

The critical role the family romance plays in creating a story of the self finds parallels in the genre of the novel. Literary theorists such as Marthe Robert have argued that the family romance is intrinsic, even foundational, to the novel: "it is the genre, with all its inexhaustible possibilities and congenital childishness … which … recreates for each of us a remnant of our primal love and primal reality" (31). For Christine van Boheeman,

> Since the generic task of the novel is to portray the history of individual lives, accounting for and sketching human subjectivity by relating it to origin, the genre itself may be considered a version of what is usually taken as a specific instance of the form: the family romance.
>
> (24)

She also contends that "just as the family romance of the individual is his personal construction of identity, the generic function of the novel may well be to serve as the family romance of Western culture", representing "humanity's ideal image of the self" (25). As a genre the novel plays out the quest for the self who attains a transcendent ego by repressing the other—the feminine, and specifically the maternal as origins of the self (van Boheeman 28–29). This fantasy of the self modelled by the novel further explains Acker's attraction to the family romance. In effect, *Great Expectations*' punk feminist recreation of the family romance operates at both the individual level—as the story of the punk girl's self—and at the metalevel of the novel—exploring the ways in which the novel as family romance establishes an imago of a gendered self. Understandably, given the gendered repression on which the novel relies, the punk feminist version doesn't imagine a 'better' iteration of the family romance, or produce a transcendent self, or find an origin worth holding on to, instead the punk girl's literalisation of the family romance confounds and destabilises it, and, by implication, the family.

Dana Heller's account of the cultural and political significance of the family romance elucidates further Acker's use of it as key motif of the American family. "[W]hat Freud invites us to consider," she explains,

> are the implicit representational strategies by which the family, as private experience, comes into alignment with romance, or historical fantasy. The family romance is thus defined as the interpolation of the individual *in* patriarchal history and patriarchy *in* individual history.
>
> (23, original emphasis)

As Heller makes clear, the narrative form of the family romance is a nexus of identity, fantasy, the patriarchal social order, and literary genres—familiar terrain for Acker's punk feminism. In addition, the family romance's subtext of social aspiration and the form's literary significance for girls and women—whether in the orphan character of the nineteenth-century women's novel, or in the consistent centrality of the mother–daughter plot in women's writing (Hirsch)—are additional attractions for Acker. And in terms of the broader American 'family in crisis' discourse, a reimagining of the girl's desire to be from somewhere else and to go somewhere else other than her birth family, and the nature of her eventual destination, provide narrative terrain that is both discomfiting and fertile.

Rather than Dickens's sprawling tale of the male protagonist who learns from experience and attains wisdom and maturity, arriving at "a rebeginning, not a return", Acker's heroine works through two versions of the family romance and a very different adult legacy (Mukherjee 115). Sciolino describes the novel as "several stories folded together, 'enveloped' in a structure that gives the effect of continuous narration without the linear logic inherent in that conventional form" (245). Both family romances are figured through a preexisting literary text and a nested (read semi-submerged) intertext—the main romance's 'unconscious' and narrative outcome. Each version roughly aligns with the two main sections of the novel, and in each Acker takes her usual punk liberties with the source texts as part of her parody. Part 1, "Plagiarism" draws upon Dickens's literary classic *Great Expectations*; its nested intertext is the erotic classic, *The Story of O*. Part 2, "The Beginnings of Romance", revisits Holt's popular historical romance novel, *The Spring of the Tiger* and inserts Keats's poem, "The Eve of St Agnes" as its intertext. In both, the family script is succeeded by and juxtaposed with a script of female sexuality—a literal outbreak of female desire, but as we will see, still constrained by narrative, genre, and familial-Oedipal codings.

In place of nineteenth-century uplift and coherence Acker gives us late twentieth-century fragmentation and pluralism in the genres chosen—using "genres without becoming any of them", as Sam McBride observes (346), but also pursuing a deliberate analogical structure (Sciolino 247). This evocation of a range of genres suggests the power of cultural narratives to the production of gender identity and the family, as well as their confining qualities for girls and women, regardless of the plot. In her aside on post-impressionist painting, the narrator provides an explanation of the novel's analogical structure:

> The Cubists went further [than Cezanne]. They found the means of making the forms of all objects similar. If everything was rendered in the same terms, it became possible to paint the interactions between them. These interactions became so much more interesting than that which

> was being portrayed that the concepts of portraiture and therefore of reality were undermined or transferred.
>
> (81–82)

Various family narratives are rendered in the same terms—as a fragment, as a family romance—causing them to interact; as a result repetitions emerge and the hegemonic version of the reality of the family is exposed—a punk feminist family portrait takes shape. As such, the adumbrated and dissolving versions of these intertexts mimic the dissolution of the contemporary nuclear family and the psychic fragmentation of the female narrator. The family romance, in Acker's punk version, disrupts rather than shores up the unity of the family.

Acker's choice of literary genres that have masochism as their core allows her to make explicit and to parody the literary equation of women's romantic love with masochism (Siegel 9, 4). Having the narrator work through two alternate but echoing fantasy scenarios signifies a punk rejection of the status quo, but by giving them a similar closure underlines her inability to escape the narrative, as well as the parallels between the two versions. Family reproduces, or rather, delimits, adult sexuality; as a consequence the daughter is confined by Oedipal family structures and narratives. As we will see in what follows, apparently different romance, same echoes of rape and incest haunting the stories, and a similar destination as abject. Psychically beholden to the parents and held within the frame of the family, the punk girl has only a limited way of imagining the self—"an evacuated 'I' " as Paul Saltzman terms it, existing in a liminal space between girlhood and supposedly autonomous womanhood (125).

Family romance 1: Charles Dickens into Pauline Réage

In Acker's first version of the family romance, drawing upon Dickens, the opening paragraph makes clear the centrality of the family romance to the novel as well as the girl's traditional cultural exclusion from the genre. While there is a degree of ambiguity regarding the narrator at this point (it could be Rosa's boyfriend Peter, the female narrator, or both), Acker slightly rewords the opening to Dickens's novel, substituting "Peter" for "Pip": "My father's name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Peter. So I called myself Peter, and came to be called Peter" (5). Acker does not bother to change the gender of Pip to female, drawing attention to the centrality of the boy to this cultural narrative (and to the Oedipal drama). The punk girl is destined to mimic the boy's narrative. Further, Sciolino observes that Acker omits Dickens's reference to the name of Pip's mother on the tombstone, "making the mother nameless in death" (247). As a consequence, "her revisions indicate that her protagonist's self-naming will occur in a masculine register—in a world where naming has been appropriated by patriarchs" (248). In such a world Acker's heroine has to use this novel as her opening—partly

explaining the section title "Plagiarism": she is fantasising the origins of the self using borrowed (male) texts. Having the nominally male Pip as opening voice increases the dissonance when the female narratives are mobilised, as they soon are. And the inadequacy of masculine narrative forms is reiterated in the range of very short intertexts the punk girl uses to repossess her past—Proust, Collette, Ben Jonson, among others—a textual restlessness that parallels a punk daughter's restlessness.

After the first page Acker makes only one or two explicit returns to Dickens. Instead, she rewrites his orphan's story in the daughter's and more contemporary terms—but arguably Dickens's novel is always present as a haunting frame narrative, in which Pip inherits wealth, learns to be a gentleman, and falls in love with the 'wrong woman', demonstrating what Mukherjee calls an "almost exhibitionistic masochism" (114). Rather than Dickens's orphan who is introduced virtually *ex nihilo* (at his parents' gravesite), Acker emphasises the family's dysfunctional quality before the daughter becomes an orphan. The parents are unhappily married; the father is largely absent; the mother is a powerful, yet stereotypical figure of the tranquilised 1950s wife, eliciting deep ambivalence from the narrator—intense happiness but something disturbing as well: "My mother is the person I love most. She's my sister. She plays with me. There's no one else in my world except for some kind of weird father who only partly exists part out of my shadow" (10). But then, "I love mommy. I know she's on Dex, and when she's not on Dex she's on Librium to counteract the Dex jitters so she acts more extreme than usual" (14–15).

Yet within this caricatured, but slightly menacing domestic banality, Acker confronts and reworks the incestuous desires foundational to the Oedipal family with the motif of rape, typically but ambiguously aligned with the father. *Great Expectations* attempts to disclose the truth that Oedipal incest veils: patriarchal power exercised forcibly on the girl. In a discordancy that desublimates, *Great Expectations* moves seamlessly from the above soap opera rendition of the nagging wife and alcoholic husband to a graphic, stream-of-consciousness account of a daughter being raped by a soldier, with the father powerless to stop it and having to watch (showing the influence of Pierre Guyotat's *Eden Eden Eden*). This is interspersed with flashbacks to this American family, with the daughter's sighting of the father's penis a clearly Freudian allusion—the penis/phallus revealed:

> The clouded moon turns [the curly brown-haired soldier's] arm green, his panting a gurgling that indicates rape the sweat dripping off his bare strong chest wakes the young girl up, I walked into my parents' bedroom opened their bathroom door don't know why I did it, my father was standing naked over the toilet, I've never seen him naked I'm shocked, he slams the door in my face, I'm curious I see my mother naked all the time.
>
> (13)

The description of the rape and its domestic intertext continues for the next two pages, with the girl's response to it ambiguously rendered. Lidia Yuknavitch notes that throughout Acker's work, stories of war and sexuality merge because, for Acker, "war is a mirror of our sexuality" (75). Yuknavitch explains that "the terms of war for Acker no longer have to do with sons and fathers, but rather with daughters and fathers, or the story of all our sexual and psychic development" (94). The Oedipal script is a war story for the daughter made graphic in *Great Expectations*.

The incident also suggests that the father's power is psychic rather than social, and ongoing. Soon after the rape incident the narrator comments: "This is the dream I have: I'm running away from men who are trying to damage me permanently. I love mommy" (14–15). This early sequence references the mother as first love object, as well as the pathological nature of the Oedipal family's relationships and the narrator's ongoing dysfunction. Rather than the daughter harbouring incestuous desires for the father—the 'normal' dynamic in Freud, it is the father who rapes the daughter. The motif of rape recurs three times in the novel: one attempt by the father, rape by a stranger, and rape by the father's lookalike cousin. Acker's Oedipal family thus enacts a different form of familial crisis: that trauma for the daughter is the norm, the family is an unsafe space for girls, and the nuclear family is the bedrock of America, but it is also the foundation for a normalised female pathology. And even as the father's power appears to wane, as in his representation as a whining, useless slob, his psychic power over the daughter continues as she searches masochistically for his replacement. The formative quality of this schizoid family scenario is evident in the chapter's bleakly ironic final sentence: "Thus ends the first segment of my life. I am a person of GREAT EXPECTATIONS" (16). Note how Acker uses "person" rather than the male pronouns used by Dickens ("he" (164), and "a young fellow of great expectations" (165)), or the more accurate "woman"—as if gender will not matter to expectations or their realisation.

The quest for status is central to the family romance, and the types of status fantasised in both versions are crucial to Acker's critique of the traditional family (Freud, "Family" 238). *Great Expectations* turns from American sitcom and popular Victorian fiction to European high-culture porn to track these great expectations into adulthood, and to signify a brief, but narratively constrained outbreak of the punk girl's desire. In contrast to Pip the male masochist who becomes a gentleman, the now orphaned narrator becomes Réage's heroine, O (literally, nothing), the archetypal sex slave to the aristocratic Sir S. By playing out and satirising Réage's script her 'inheritance' is shown to be Freud's specifically feminine condition of masochism ("Femininity" 579–580).[8] Acker literalises to expose women's assumed aspirations within the Oedipal family and in patriarchy. Regardless of a useless father and a mother from a wealthy background, the heroine 'chooses' status gained through a male at any cost.

And by making explicit Sir S as the father's replacement, Acker revisits the incestuous nature of the traditional family's father–daughter relationship,

and its role in policing the girl's desire via its shaming, to use Deleuze and Guattari's terms. Sir S becomes the father's replacement, and thus O's abjection via the desires of Sir S is an attempt to please the absent father and to realise *his* incestuous wishes.[9] O dresses like a little girl so that "everywhere Sir S takes her people think she's his daughter" (43). That the incestuous desire is the father's is made clear in her nightmare that "her body mirrors/becomes her father's desire … O had to either deny her father's sex and have no father or fuck her father and have a father" (54). With the daughter as a 'willing' accomplice, or as a participant in a rite of passage, rape by the father becomes transformed into a more palatable shape. Acker thereby makes explicit the non-choice women have in Freud, in the traditional family, and in the cultural narratives of female sexuality—there is little space for autonomous female desire.

O's relationship with Sir S also embodies our internal colonisation by Oedipus so that we learn to desire our subjective and sociopolitical repression within the family, and in terms of the family. Her role as his sex slave is a literalisation of her adult desires once the mother is dead. Sir S's physical and emotional sadism embodies another form of patriarchal paternal authority to that of the slob caricature of the birth father, and a type of authority desired by O. The political implications of this are clear: people learn to wish to be ruled by demagogues, aristocrats, bosses, the police. And Sir S's later decision to send O out to work as a prostitute and to share her with his friends makes explicit the libidinal economy of the traditional family, and therefore its role in capitalist social reproduction. He enacts in extreme terms the cultural law of woman as object of exchange among men (Rubin 44–45), O's 'willing' acquiescence to this, as well as the apparently 'successful' resolution of her Oedipus complex—giving up the 'father' for other men. In "The Underworlds of the World" Acker shows the return of patriarchal power in the 'orphan's' psyche partly enabled by the dead mother—all that is left is to obey the father/boss figure.

It is unsurprising that the first family romance concludes by repeating the motif of rape by the father. The narrator, now working in a brothel, has a flashback to the father attempting to rape her when she was 17: the father pleads: "Your mother won't fuck me, those boys don't respect you enough, I'm the only man who's respecting you" (54). Acker's use of Réage as the unconscious and aftermath of her *Great Expectations* family romance makes explicit the types of wealth and status available to women, and hence the external world's and Freud's underlying structure when the mother—or a feminine economy, in general terms—is imagined as absent or relatively powerless.

Family romance 2: Victoria Holt into John Keats

The second scripting of the family romance, drawing upon Holt's historical romance novel, *The Spring of the Tiger*, initially appears to move in a different, and more optimistic direction to the compendium of Dickens and

Réage. Acker borrows Holt's plot: upon the death of her actress mother, the heroine, Sarah Ashington, inherits wealth and a country estate. This good fortune, however, complicates her pursuit of romantic love. The similarities between Acker's two versions of the family romance, however, are hinted at by the way in which the section "The Beginnings of Romance" eventually degenerates from the register of the historical romance to the sitcom script that characterised the earlier part of the novel. This suggests that the daughter's achievement of wealth, status, and love is headed towards a similar fate.

Again, the mother is critical to the drama, the family is broken, and the father is a pathological figure, however this time parental roles are reversed. The mother is initially present, the father is unknown, having deserted the mother after she becomes pregnant with the narrator, and the daughter is supposedly unwanted by the mother. Accordingly, the primary trauma here is not the mother's suicide but the daughter's problematic origins:

> "I never wanted you," my mother told me often. "It was the war." She hadn't known poverty or hardship: her family had been very wealthy. "I had terrible stomach pains and the only doctor I could get to was a quack. He told me I had to get pregnant." "I never heard of that. You got pregnant?" "The day before you were born I had appendicitis. You spent the first three weeks of your life in an incubator."
>
> (57)

The absurdity of this origin story suggests the daughter's sense of vulnerability resulting from being unwanted by the mother who is an actress (suggesting inauthenticity), and the fraught nature of their relationship: wanting to be wanted but also wanting to break away from her through this narrative of origins. "She craved my love as she craved her friends' and the public's love only so she could do what she wanted and evade the responsibility," the narrator comments, "I didn't know there was a world outside her". Yet, "Mother wanted me to be unlike I was" (58). As in the first family romance, the mother is the all-encompassing though narcissistic figure of love for the infant: "when my mother died, the 'I' I had always known dropped out. All my history went away" (64). From this moment, the daughter enters patriarchal history, literalised by finding her father.

Her father, being wealthy, mysterious, and menacing, is another version of Sir S. Her aunts warn her about his violence and wildness, with the opening sentence of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* incorporated as the first image of him: "He … was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters. It was the color of an old football" (62). In the daughter's fantasy, this striking image foreshadows castrating violence against the Other—herself. Her father is only a brief presence in the romance and, despite the above image, is revealed to be a kindly figure for

the daughter—again, Acker upsets our expectations of patriarchal power. However, like Sir S, he arranges a potential suitor for Sarah; then when Sarah first meets that suitor—Clifford, an artist—she mistakenly thinks that he might be her father—the daughter is destined to seek out a father replacement. The lover/father double suggests Sarah's location in the same Freudian-patriarchal economy underpinning the first family romance.

When her father dies and Sarah inherits his estate, she realises her changed value as a woman: "I knew I was no longer a person to a man, but an object, a full purse. I needed someone to love me so I could figure out reality" (68). Sarah is unable to navigate the world as an economically independent woman, but is reliant on a libidinal economy in which women have a material and sexual exchange value that is managed by men (usually the husband). At this point, the partner intertext, a reworked version of Keats's poem, "The Eve of St Agnes", enters the narrative as a portent of their arranged marriage, and as another attempted outbreak of female desire. Keats centres on the rituals of the Eve of St Agnes, which allows virgins to have visions of their future husbands, to recount the sexual union of two lovers, Madeleine and Porphyro. In Acker's revisioning, the future husband Clifford visits Sarah that night, however, the encounter is a drug-induced rape rather than the semi-mystical union of the original poem: "I did what he wanted me to and I hated myself for doing it. I was feeling good because the hot liquid relaxed my body and my tension; this growing ease made me a traitor to myself" (73). Again, the heroine has no autonomous desire within the confines of the cultural text—drugs replace Romanticism's mysticism; and with Clifford resembling the father, and being her future husband, the family's and marriage's control of women's desire is apparent. That this control produces female masochism is articulated in the following exchange, in which Clifford confesses to raping Sarah:

> "Is love always disgusting?" I was still regarding his perspective as useful.
>
> He laughed. "What do you say, my pet? What does your body say when I touch it? I'm a man, Sarah; I'm not the mealy-mouth you think you want. You'll never know who I am."
>
> "I still think it's disgusting you raped me and you planned to rape me."
>
> "Your heart is telling you the truth," he said.
>
> I didn't know if I loved my husband, or not.
>
> I hated him I hated him but I knew if he should leave me I would die. (75)

The melodramatic tone may differ greatly from the high culture cool of *The Story of O*, regardless, the female's value as determined by men, her equation of love with masochism, and her confusion of economic capital with emotional-sexual capital, are the same.

Regardless of social status or type of intertext chosen to invent a family romance—high culture, popular culture, poetry, television script, or prose—the commonalities of the heroines of *Great Expectations* delineate the underlying dynamics and function of the traditional family and its cultural scripts in a time of women's supposed liberation. The Oedipal family and its intrinsic trauma for girls is positioned as a source of mature female sexuality: the family script writes the script of sexuality, but not in the way the dominant culture expects. As a consequence, *Great Expectations* concludes with Acker's revisioning into an American soap opera script the lamentations of the Latin poet, Sextus Propertius to his mistress Cynthia, which draws the two romances to a common outcome. Rather than the lessons learned about love and the fresh start afforded to Dickens's hero, we have a heroine—a prostitute, "dissatisfied, disgusted, and sick with desire" (Mukherjee 115).

As the two versions of family romances also make evident, rape and father–daughter incest haunt the family and punk girl's story of the self: a motif of patriarchal capitalist disciplinary power. While father–daughter incest is increasingly common in American literary and cultural narratives from the 1980s on, Acker's explicit linking of rape and incest to the social reproduction of capitalism avoids the "seeming banality" characterising many of these narratives (Harkins 2, 11). Rape and incest are figures of the punk daughter's desire being turned against itself, indeed colonised. Any traces of female rebellion and emotional ferocity are safely chanelled into a shaming, heterosexual, quasi-incestuous desire, thereby defused and exploited by patriarchy. The punk girl's economic wealth is confused with, and traded away for the currency of sexual love. While the parody is, by virtue of its extremism, bleakly humorous, there is a core of pain that binds the fragments—as figured in the mother as suicide, Dex addict, or reluctant parent—suggesting the frustrations of thinking a story of the self, or the mother–daughter plot, otherwise.

Great Expectations thus provides a highly confronting parody of the traditional American family in contemporary times. Placing the punk girl at the centre of the various family romances allows readers to ask: 'where is the girl's space in the contemporary family and its supposed crisis?' when women and girls are free to choose their sexual partners, have an independent identity, and to be economically independent. *Great Expectations* shifts the terms of the debate around family values and the family in crisis, taking its terms—permissive parenting, broken families, child abuse, and the crisis in moral authority—and graphically reconfigures them to produce a feminist exposé of the *fin-de-siècle* American family.

It is in crisis for both intrinsic and historical reasons, and particularly because second wave feminism and Acker interpret familial dysfunction and the private sphere in political terms, and positions mothers and daughters as central concerns. In minor literature fashion, the novel's "cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka* 17).

As a form of punk negation, Acker's mother–daughter plot, however, refuses to offer much optimism, or any solutions, instead offering fragmented stories of the female self that index girls' and women's subjective wounds, conflicts, and grief in the current psychosocial order. Or as Sciolino comments: "Acker does not nurture; she provokes. She does not let us rise above patriarchal economies, but buries us within them for the duration of our reading" (253). Regardless of women's formal equality, these stories of the punk girl's family reveal the difficulties of escaping the gendered outcomes of the ruse of Oedipus and the difficulty in achieving an autonomous desire.

Notes

1 Though 'traditional', as Anthony Giddens reminds us, is a misnomer, given the relatively recent and short-lived nature of this model of family. 'Conventional' family is a more accurate descriptor, however, because Acker engages with the traditional family as an ideological construct, I will use 'traditional' throughout.
2 To distinguish between Acker's and Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Acker's text will be referred to simply as *Great Expectations*, and Dickens's novel will be Dickens's *Great Expectations*.
3 See Judith Stacey or Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh for accounts of the shift towards traditional family values by American political progressives.
4 Christopher Lasch's *Haven in a Heartless World*, his study of the American family, forms part of the families in crisis discourse.
5 Frida Beckman argues that "*Great Expectations* is Acker's most fragmented work" (104).
6 Gwendoline M. Alphonso notes that "Jimmy Carter was the first president to make strengthening of family a goal for his administration", while Ronald Reagan campaigned on the platform to "restore the family" (121). He was voted in by an alliance of the pro-family values New Christian Right and the neoconservatives (Horwitz 239).
7 Gayle Rubin comments that, "Until the late 1920s, the psychoanalytic movement did not have a distinctive theory of feminine development" (48).
8 Freud explains female masochism thus: "The suppression of women's aggressiveness which is prescribed for them constitutionally and imposed on them socially favours the development of powerful masochistic impulses, which succeed, as we know, in binding erotically the destructive trends which have been diverted inwards. Thus masochism, as people say, is truly feminine" ("Femininity" 580).
9 Beckman's 2010 reading of *Great Expectations* offers an alternative interpretation of Acker's exploration of masochism—masochism in the Deleuzian sense as an "impersonal desire", a goal-less desire (105, 106).

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7 The polity

Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream (1986)

I now shift focus from the private realm and the punk girl's connections with, and framing by, the social field to the social field's imbrication with the sexual and the gendered. This chapter reads *Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream* (hereafter *Don Quixote*) as a novelistic exposé of the American polity by the punk girl, one that addresses a time of political disenchantment and transition. Acker's *Don Quixote*, similar to its namesake, is a picaresque tale of a knight's quest to find love so as to save the world. And like her ancestor, the punk girl, once knighted, embarks on a series of adventures cum trials, falls in love a couple of times, attempts to battle the forces of evil, and encounters various strange creatures and intertexts in "America the land of freedom" (101). Contra to the usual outcome of a romance narrative, the punk girl does not find love, but finds enlightenment in the form of knowledge about the realities of the American polity. Acker, however, refuses any nostalgia for a supposedly once healthy American liberal democracy. Rather, the punk girl as knight errant discovers the polity to be an increasingly sophisticated mechanism of social control, and foundationally illiberal and patriarchal. As the narrator comments, "The political mirror of this individual simultaneity of freedom and imprisonment is a state of fascism and democracy: the United States of America" (187).

As her journalism and essays attest, Acker was an insightful commentator on politics, including government policy, class, and geopolitics. *Don Quixote* is one of her most explicitly political novels—in the sense of engaging with conventional politics and the contemporary context of American (and British) politics, as did the broader punk movement. Most of the third part of the novel narrativises Acker's punk feminist take on post-World War II American politics and history, a focus that receives only cursory attention in most critical readings, reinforcing the sense of Acker as a writer of a sexual and/or literary vanguard rather than a novelist of the *fin-de-siècle* United States. Not surprisingly, *Don Quixote* is commonly read as a female quest for subjectivity (Jacobs; Kauffman), love (Walsh), or alternative models of heterosexual desire (Schlicter). As a consequence, many critics focus on the novel's sexual politics and questions of gender identity. Linda S. Kauffman argues that "the paradox confronting Acker is

how to reconcile the need for love with a critique of romance's ideology" (209), while Marjorie Worthington observes that the novel "explores the issue of what possibilities exist for a female subject within the phallocentric construction that is a novel" (243). I extend their insights to argue that the punk girl's failed search for romantic love is a crucial and gendered marker of the operations and effects of the American polity. In shades of Herbert Marcuse, authentic love for women, in the sense of eros and as a symbol of human freedom and equality, is shown to be impossible in the current political system, being founded on what Carole Pateman describes as "a sexual contract": the repressed patriarchal aspect of the "political story" of civil rights and freedom that is the social contract (*Sexual* 1). She explains that,

> The original pact is a sexual as well as a social contract: it is sexual in the sense of patriarchal—that is, the contract establishes men's political right over women—and also sexual in the sense of establishing orderly access by men to women's bodies [through marriage and prostitution]. (2)

In effect, "political right originates in sex-right or conjugal right" (3).

The historian Joshua B. Freeman observes that "by the mid-1970s, the economic and political structures that had brought wealth and power to the United States for a quarter century after World War II no longer could sustain economic progress, domestic harmony, or international dominance" (287). Freeman notes that domestic politics were marked by corruption, ineptitude, and the power of big business to circumvent government regulation, leading to a general disengagement from and distrust of politics (319–320). Richard M. Abrams provides a similar *fin-de-siècle* narrative of political decline, though he extends it to include the divisive legacy of the 1960s social movements, and the emergence and eventual dominance of neoconservatism:

> The Watergate scandal notwithstanding, a profoundly regressive antiliberal wave washed over the country for the remainder of the century and on into the new. In fact the scandal, coming at the climax of America's calamitous engagement in Indochina, seemed only to increase Americans' disenchantment with government generally, a disenchantment already activated by agitation over some of the effects of the social revolutions and government's role in promoting them. (200)

Abrams thereby interprets the post-war period as "the story of the collapse of the liberal Democratic coalition—and its replacement by a radically regressive Republican coalition during the last quarter of the twentieth century" (200). Joan Hoff also observes a change in the nature of the presidency since the Cold War, becoming more powerful and imperial: "[Presidents],

rather than Congress, have become the major force driving U.S. diplomacy", including authorising numerous "covert and overt military interventions abroad without congressional approval" (110–111), and embodying American Cold War exceptionalism (114). In the same period we have the women's movement dramatically impacting on American culture, society, and politics. American feminism redefines politics and activism, foregrounds and intensifies women's identity as political subjects domestically and internationally, and makes incursions into, and demands upon, the polity to advance women's rights and freedoms. As a consequence, there is a crucial gendered aspect to the decline and conflicts outlined by Freeman, Abrams, and Hoff.

To explore these conflicts and malaise in feminist terms Acker creates a punk allegory of the American polity using a lexicon comprised by two cultural texts, Cervantes's classic, *Don Quixote of La Mancha* and the 1973 B-grade sci-fi horror film, *Godzilla versus Megalon*; the historical personages of the rock star Prince, President Nixon, and what Acker terms the religious white men; and abortion, a social and political flashpoint for the United States. Allegory is a traditional weapon with which to satirise political power (George Orwell, Edmund Spenser), and allows Acker to personify, literalise, and magnify in punk vernacular the abstract, brutal, and complex forces that are the mechanisms of American political power, and to exploit allegory's moral purpose. In Acker's hands, allegory solves "the perceptual problem involved in any attempt [by political novelists] to see the American political system as it is", caused by the polity's split between abstract, noble-sounding principles and the devices used for the "actual exchange of power" (Epps 76, 80). *Don Quixote*'s tropes suggest a complementary Manichean, even eschatological quality, as high- and mass-cultural texts intermingle; real and imaginary characters interact; monsters, humans, cultural works, and objects are mobilised; and centuries are traversed with an underlying sense that there is a major, defining struggle being played out for the punk girl—in this case, between an ascendant neoconservatism and its opponents.

I begin with the framing motif of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, followed by the opening trope of the novel: the heroine's abortion—a specifically female rite of passage. Then, echoing the two dimensions of the polity and the knight's lessons in politics, I move from the surface or superstructural level of American politics—Prince and Nixon as personifications of political power, to the polity's substrate—its foundations, expressed through the cult film of nuclear war, *Godzilla versus Megalon*, and the trope of the religious white men—a contemporary reincarnation of America's Puritan founding fathers. I conclude with comments on Acker's punk version of the novel of American politics as a type of activism. Given developments in American politics in the early part of the twenty-first century, most importantly, America's War on Terror, the rise of the alt-right, social media as a factory of simulations, and the election of Donald Trump as president, Acker's apocalyptic reimagining of the American polity was farsighted.

Acker channels Cervantes

Most critics of *Don Quixote* have only briefly remarked on the significance of Acker's appropriation of Cervantes's novel, noting the use of Cervantes's quest structure, or its role as another of Acker's appropriated canonical texts.[1] Richard Walsh argues that "Acker's use of material and motifs from Cervantes … functions as no more than a fine thread of allusions, points of anchorage in the host text" (149). Like Claudia Cao, I contend, however, that Acker's engagement with Cervantes's *Don Quixote* operates on thematic, narrative, "figural", and technical levels, making it the host text of her allegory (72). And, unlike her sometimes antagonistic relationship with her other host texts discussed in this study, Cervantes's work is a haunting presence, guiding and commenting on the action.

As numerous critics of Cervantes's novel have commented, *Don Quixote* is a novel of historical and literary transition. For David Quint, "*Don Quixote* tells and retells a master narrative of early-modern Europe: the movement from feudalism to the new order of capitalism that will become the realistic domain of the modern novel, the genre this book does so much to invent" (x). It is also a novel of disillusionment and decline, being about "the discovery of a crass, real world that does not live up to Don Quixote's dreams and that tells of the decline of Spain after her great century of empire" (Quint xii). The chivalric dream world inhabited by Cervantes's knight marks his state of being out of time in emergent capitalism, and he must learn this hard lesson. Acker transposes the story to the space of the late twentieth-century United States—significantly, both Freeman (319) and Abrams use "disenchantment" to characterise Americans' relationship with politics, and I argue that this is the enlightenment that the punk girl achieves.

To expose and analyse this contemporary context of a declining and increasingly reactionary American empire, Acker makes her punk girl the knight Don Quixote. This switch in gender is critical to the knight's adventure in American liberal democracy, as it allows Acker to work through the contradictory political status of women in a time of feminism. The punk girl knight is a novel political subject—putatively equal, but also, by virtue of her gender and nonconformist femininity, an outsider to the system. As a consequence, like Cervantes's hero, Acker's Don is out of time and seemingly deranged, "but [her] inappropriateness conveys, by contrast, a satirical understanding of that society" (Garrigós 117). Acker gives her knight a typically female quest to find romantic love that is also framed in masculine, knightly terms so that her quest has a higher-order political or ethical aspect. The Don thinks that "by loving another person, she would right every manner of political, social, and individual wrong" (9). She battles (or wants to battle) agents of political repression who attempt to keep her away from her imagined beloved (a brothel madam and the dog, Saint Simeon): monks, Nixon, the religious white men, and Ronald Reagan. Yet she too becomes disenchanted in both a positive and negative sense, as her quest is thwarted

and she must change direction from attempting heroic deeds, to uncovering the foundations of the polity, until her final realisation of the impossibility of living in the system on her own terms.

Acker's *Don Quixote* should also be read against two other contemporary appropriations of Cervantes identified by Carol Siegel: the 1970s hit musical *Man of La Mancha* and the 1973 republication of "Charlotte Lennox's 1752 parodic romance *The Female Quixote*, which would subsequently be carried into academic popularity by the sweeping feminist revision of the literary canon in the 1980s" (7). For Siegel (and arguably for Acker), the musical's "Don Quixote is transformed from a saint whose actions and beliefs are mad … into a cheerful force for attainable social good", while Lennox's novel "tacitly endorses eighteenth-century regulation of gender and sexuality through arranged marriage and wifely submission" (8–9). Acker, however, challenges these appropriations by using this European master narrative to tell a tale of a contemporary narrative of political mastery with no optimistic resolution: an indirect and decidedly punk riposte to the enchantments of Reaganism encapsulated by Reagan's 1984 election slogan: "It's Morning in America". The punk girl ends up mad and without love: it is her mourning in America.

Cervantes's *Don Quixote* provides cultural capital through its canonical status and guides her approach to form, a 'palimpsestic' use of Cervantes, in which Acker "attempts to write over the already written in order to project a new signifier onto old signifieds" (Garrigós 116). With Cervantes Acker creates a new sense of what the contemporary novel of politics might be, a task necessitated by the altered political landscape of women's liberation and women's participation in the public sphere, and changed forms of political control. Making the punk girl knight central, Acker's version of the novel of American politics will take back and rework, indeed mutate Cervantes's text, at the same time mimicking what Cervantes himself did with medieval romance: satirising and superseding it (Quint ix; Smith 96). As Acker's narrator explains, "Being born into and part of a male world, [Don Quixote] had no speech of her own. All she could do was read male texts which weren't hers" (39), a comment that also applies to the unremarked patriarchy of liberal democracy. Acker uses a number of Cervantes's literary devices that she 'punkifies'—namely, pushing these towards excess to form a language that can shock the punk girl and the reader into knowledge—disenchantment, and speaks to the punk girl in her own vernacular.

In addition to Cervantes's melancholic humour, Acker adopts his principles of narrative structure, namely, his use of juxtaposition and interpolated stories (Quint x). Major examples are "Insert" and "Another Insert" in Part 1 that, as the section headings suggest, are short, seemingly unrelated texts inserted into the narrative flow, and the entire second part, aptly titled "Other Texts", in which Acker inserts and/or rewrites lengthy sections from Catullus's poetry, Frank Wedekind's Lulu plays, the *Godzilla versus Megalon* horror-sci fi film, and two novels (Andrei Bely's *Petersburg* and Giuseppe

Tomasi di Lampedusa's *The Leopard*). These textual 'interruptions' by explicitly political fictions are Acker's metafictional comment on the operations of, and possible resistances to, contemporary political power, and an offering to the punk girl of alternative forms and narratives of politics. Knightly action has to pause while she encounters these works; like the monks or the president, the intertexts are characters or political actors in their own right. Such an assemblage is necessary to disrupt the relentless flow of signs that construct contemporary political power—the media, opinion polls, spin doctors, targeted messaging, and so on—while "challeng[ing] all authoritative versions of the social texts as being themselves nothing more than powerful fictive representations" (Smith 96). By revisiting, indeed chanelling Cervantes, the punk girl brings into being a new type of political novel, one that articulates and attempts to challenge at the very level of form these changing historical and political configurations, and to give voice to the new political subject of the rebellious and idealistic young woman.

Enfranchisement: the knight's abortion

Liberalism and its related system of liberal democracy has been subject to feminist critique for its highly gendered, but often unremarked assumptions (Okin; Pateman, "Feminism"). Feminist political theorists argue that liberalism's rights-bearing citizen is defined by disembodied reason, but women are seen as embodied and therefore unreasonable; that what occurs in the private domain is irrelevant to the public sphere, which is where, until recently, women have been confined (Donovan 4); and that "social inequalities are irrelevant to political equality" in a liberal democracy (Pateman, "Feminism" 210). Moreover, the "'individuals' who form a social contract for the protection of their lives, their fortunes, and their property are in John Locke's and subsequent liberal theorists' view male heads of households" (Donovan 4), making a patriarchal family structure the basic unit of a liberal conception of society and politics, hence Pateman's identification of liberalism's sexual contract (*Sexual* 2). Abortion, given its controversial nature, whether as a relatively taboo subject for literature, or as a political flashpoint during and after the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling—"the most important single issue around which feminist and anti-feminist positions have been defined"—is a confronting trope with which to explore women's position in liberal democracy (Lauret 169). Abortion brings into collision public and private, body and mind, choice and coercion, emotion and reason, and familial reproduction and independence.

Don Quixote commences with the punk girl having an abortion in a clinic—her entrée into the polity: "From her neck to her knees she wore pale or puke green paper. This was her armor … [T]he green paper would tear as soon as the abortion began" (9), announcing that this will be a gendered exploration of the political system, including its sexual politics.[2] Acker's is a humorously perverse punk take. Rather than destroying a potential life, as

the Right to Life movement puts it, abortion is instead figured as productively destructive, indeed, in Acker's bleak hyperbole, not just liberating but ennobling for the girl:

> Because to Don Quixote, having an abortion is a method of becoming a knight and saving the world. This is a vision. In English and most European societies, when a woman becomes a knight, being no longer anonymous she receives a name. She's able to have adventures and save the world.
>
> (11)

Georgina Colby interprets the abortion trope as "resistance to the corralling of women's identity and a transgression of the law", being a "refusal of the role of the mother and the passive female" (119), while Marjorie Worthington explains that "an abortion [in the terms of the novel] is a means of gaining power by taking it through what those in power would call 'unnatural means' " (246). Now knighted, the punk girl ascends to the male elite and enters the public sphere.

Yet the punk girl's abortion exposes the hierarchical structure of gender that is partially hidden by American liberalism in its political, sexual, and feminist forms. Instead of the more 'respectable' female rites of passage, such as deflowerment or marriage, Acker uses abortion as the punk girl's rite—her enfranchisement. "According to what she had read about the ceremonial of the order, there was nothing to this business of being dubbed a night [*sic*] except a pinprick, and that can be performed anywhere" (12–13). As Don Quixote's *rite* of passage, abortion echoes and connects the feminist slogan "abortion: women's right to choose" and liberal democracy's key tenets of individual rights and freedom of choice, with the punk girl's abortion confounding both positions. The abortion allows the punk girl to rebel against the neoconservatives' continued attempts to control women's bodies and sexuality via banning abortion: it is her seemingly rational and free choice and leads to freedom. However, abortion as a mode of enfranchisement is explicitly linked to women's sexual desires and procreative function, which reveals women's contradictory position within the polity. "By having the abortion, she reclaims her body and sexuality from the religious and political institutions," explains M.W. Smith, but "she "must 'abort' her femininity by entering into the masculine text to search for love" (97), and, more crucially, to enter the phallocentric order "of the pinprick" as a subject.

Pinprick is deliberately ambiguous, referring to the moment of conception (to be pricked by a prick), and its termination by the abortionist's 'pin'. 'Prick' connects the two senses, and functions as both noun and verb to literalise the phallocentrism of liberal democracy and its hostility to women—as sexed, embodied subjects. Female suffrage is shown to be 'sufferage'. That

the punk girl "receives a name" post-abortion makes obvious that women don't have an identity in and on their own terms, and alludes to the related rite of marriage and obtaining the husband's name. Furthermore, unlike the male subject of liberalism, as sexed individuals they must suffer from their desire—sexual or otherwise—to attain an agentic subjectivity: they must be pricked. To be free, to have a distinct identity, and to be an equal participant in the public sphere means to abort a part of oneself, reject the maternal, and take on masculine conceptions of identity and freedom, as in the martial, elite figure of the knight. And as a result of exercising her rational choice, Don Quixote has gone 'crazy' "because she was about to have an abortion" as are "all women who're about to have abortions" (11).[3] Craziness captures this alienation of women from their gender, the irrationality against which liberal choice is defined, and that women are still positioned on the side of unreason. So women's ascension to political subjectivity is not an unambiguously rational entrée into full subjecthood, so not much of a choice at all.

Significantly, Don Quixote is a 'night' rather than a 'knight'—only awarded part recognition and partial equality by the system, paralleling the ways in which a women in public roles are defined (and diminished) by gender—a 'woman president' or a 'woman CEO'—and pointing to women's continued association with castration and 'the dark continent': being night to man's day in one of the fundamental binary oppositions of phallocentric thought (Cixous).[4] And Acker is careful to note that attaining a knighthood is Don Quixote's 'vision' rather than a reality: is the (k)night's dream of action and liberty actually wish fulfilment even after exerting her freedom of choice? Will the punk girl remain a peasant, like the other frightened, passive women in the clinic's waiting room, who, post sexual liberation, and granted reproductive rights and formal equality before the law, continue to suffer for their (and men's) sexual desires? So with this opening sacrifice, the punk girl (k)night is ready to save the world, and her craziness will confound and be confounded by her adventures in the American polity.

Figures of power 1: (the) prince

The (k)night's adventures, however, are temporarily halted by the interpolated story "Insert" in order to give the Don a short counter-narrative of contemporary politics. In a faux essay or school debate style—a satire on American civics education—the narrator argues why Prince the rock star should be the next president of the United States. Prince is used to personify a politico-historical transition in the nature of political power, namely, the increasing importance of the manipulation and control of signs and symbols. As the (k)night proclaims:

> Evil Enchanters such as Ronald Reagan and certain feminists like Andrea Dworkin, who control the nexuses of government and culture,

> 're [*sic*] persecuting and will continue to persecute us until they have buried and downed [*sic*], drowned us in our own human forgetfulness.
> (102)

It is this "nexus of government and culture", that is, images as method of political control (including by censorship, hence Dworkin being named here), which is a constant theme throughout *Don Quixote*, with the Don's desire to confront and defeat the Evil Enchanters mirroring Acker's task as a novelist of American politics. Using Prince as a sign of image-based power echoes Machiavelli's *The Prince*, the canonical text of political pragmatism and ruthless force, in which "rulers … may have to act outside the law in order to restore good government or ensure stability" (Wootton xxx–xxxi). As occurs in the following passage, quietly adding the definite article to Prince, would-be president of the United States, transforms him into the Prince, the cynical and amoral aristocrat (who reappears as *The Leopard*'s Italian prince in Part 2, "Other Texts").

The narrator mimics "the delusional style of [Cervantes's] *Don Quixote*" to make her argument (Kauffman 213–214): "President Reagan doesn't believe this crap he's handing out or down about happy families and happy black lynchings and happy ignorance. Worse: he might. Whereas *The* Prince believes in feelings, fucking, and fame" (21, emphasis added). The narrator continues:

> It has been said that Prince presents nothing: he's dead, an image. But who do you think you are? … Prince accepts his falsity. Prince uses his falsity. Prince, being conscious, can lead us. We must be conscious in order to fight outside control. Make Prince who may be conscious the next President of the United States.
> (22)

The motif of Prince gestures to what Pitchford identifies as "the lack of separation in postmodern culture between politics and representation" (18), and condenses the emergent core elements and mechanics of Acker's American polity: the imperial and now celebrified president, the simulated nature of liberal democracy and its mutation into spectacle, and the related importance of what Acker terms "the controllers", or the manufacturers of reality. As the (k)night is warned: "All political techniques, left and right, are the praxis and speech of the controllers" (22).

Acker's reiteration of the falsity of Prince and uncertainty regarding Reagan's sincerity points to the reduction of politics and broader reality into a culture of simulation (Smith 86, 96). The stable opposition between truth and falsity (and by extension, sincerity and insincerity) has collapsed into a realm of signs manipulated by "the controllers" so that the leader is an attractive image of power. And although Reagan initially represents the split between image and reality, Prince is not the opposite—where reality

and image coincide. Rather, Prince is a pure and unstable sign: he "presents nothing" (Acker 22), and may or may not be conscious, yet may also be dead. He is a void to be filled by the controllers with whatever the populace desires—"male cowboy American rock 'n' roll energy" (22), for instance, but he will still be the Prince—an elite figurehead of the society of control.

Acker's choice of Prince not only relates to the rise of charismatic politics exemplified by Reagan (Pitchford 60), but an emergent and adolescent American system of values reproduced through popular culture (Kauffman 213; Walsh 153), in which pleasure is recruited for purposes of social control: As the narrator observes,

> The Prince believes in feelings, fucking, and fame … he'll restore to us and restore us to those lowest of pleasures that are the only ones we Americans, being stupid, desire. Fucking, food, and dancing. This is the American Revolution.
>
> (21–22)

Political apathy or enchantment, to use the novel's terms, is the result: "we're slowly being turned into fake people, zombies" (22). The conservative, patriarchal figure of presidential power like Nixon is made over into a glamorous, sexualised, seductive, androgynous, biracial—"He's all-American because he's part black part white which is part good part evil" (21), and hence seemingly more representative political leader: "[Prince]'ll be thirty years old when he gets elected President of the United States. Thirty years old is the height of male cowboy American rock 'n' roll energy" (22). However, similar to making the punk girl attain a knighthood in order to be an agentic, political subject, the use of (a/the) Prince alludes to a liberal democracy being run for and by elites—a new nobility of the American empire. And while Prince represents a new type of political power and leader, he is, yet again, a male, attesting to the adaptability of a patriarchal liberal democracy. Having been warned of an imminent future, in which a rock 'n' roll polity might seduce punk girls, the (k)night is ready for the present.

Figures of power 2: Nixon, the sovereign dog

In the novel's third part, when Don Quixote is separated from her beloved she realises that, "In order to defeat the Evil Enchanters of America, Don Quixote first had to find out how the American government works" (102). What follows is a series of vignettes centring on President Nixon as distillation of state power, which reveal to the Don another aspect of the mechanics of the American state, including its sexual imaginary, for, as her narrator observes: "In humans, human sexuality is closely tied to power" (178).

In narratives of American political decline and disenchantment Nixon occupies a special place: a complex symbol of political expediency and moral bankruptcy exemplified by the Watergate Crisis, foreign policy

breakthroughs, and a willing accomplice of post-1960s state repression (Freeman 291–293). As a consequence, for Acker, Nixon personifies the political system, or more precisely, Nixon as figurehead bridges the surfaces and substrate of the polity. Pitchford argues that Acker's Nixon personifies realpolitik (83) in the sense of political pragmatism that marked Nixon's foreign policy with the USSR and China (Schoen 6). In fact, Acker retranslates realpolitik into its literal meaning, so that she exposes the underlying ('real') political impetuses in America's foreign dealings through her caricature of the president. Nixon, by virtue of his lengthy conversation in the novel with Thomas Hobbes, author of *Leviathan* and pictured in the novel as the Angel of Death, represents the sovereign who rules us by fear (Newey 4)—a figure of contemporary imperial power.

Acker's interest in Hobbes the political theorist has two related sources. First is Hobbes's pessimistic theory of human nature that conflicts with liberal capitalism's rational and self-interested subject. For Hobbes, "The specific cause of an act is desire, and a desire is always for some specific and direct object" rather than selfishness (Minogue x). Acker concurs throughout her works: she believes that human beings are driven by desire and this permeates and makes the social field. As a consequence of this drive, "men without government would live in a perpetual condition of nervous insecurity", that insecurity manifested in violence and war (Minogue xv). Hobbes therefore argues for the necessity of the sovereign, or the leviathan: "an absolute ruler in the form of either a single all-powerful individual or … a 'sovereign assembly' " to maintain order (Newey 5). According to Glen Newey, "*Leviathan* stresses the role of sheer force in human affairs, and force can be used for good or ill" (4). He argues that the central issue for society is "how to make an 'artificial man' who will bear the person of the commonwealth, or in other words act as the political representative of the people as a whole" to avoid anarchy (49).

For Acker, Nixon is this 'artificial man', the embodiment of the American sovereign, including its mentality. Given her Hobbesian reading of the polity, Acker's punk literalisation sketches Nixon (and other characters) with dog-like features, such as barking. As Richard Walsh explains: "her canine vision of humanity [is] a metaphor about the materialist reduction of society, and therefore human relations, to Hobbes's state of nature" (155). Or, as Acker's Angel of Death explains to some Puerto Ricans who are also dogs: "The life of a dog, even if the dog's dead like me is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, short. The condition of a dog is a condition of war, of everyone against everyone" (114). Pessimism, paranoia, and misery underpin the sovereign's society of control.

As her quest progresses, the (k)night is confronted with various symptomatologies of the sovereign, which function like the Pentagon Papers and the Watergate tapes as exposés of the true machinations of the Nixon presidency. Her lessons are either intertextual fragments from Seymour M. Hersh's *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House*, or

are written to mimic his fierce, investigative reportage (Borowska 102), a discourse of anger and idealism to which the punk girl can relate. One vignette concerns the complex and corrupt relations among the CIA, Nixon, and the Greek junta in the 1960s and early 1970s, which involved money laundering, contracts, illegal arms trading, campaign donations to Nixon, and manipulation of and by the media. The (k)night's lesson here is "The USA government is run by greed". After Nixon and Kissinger leak a false story to the *New York Times* to justify their arms trading with the Greek junta, this lesson is revised to: "The USA government is run via the media by dogs' greed" (104), a further instance of the manipulation of signs by the controllers.

Another lesson is the Biafran crisis, in which Nixon's cynicism—a supporter of Biafran independence in 1968 as presidential candidate, backing Nigeria when president—and the American state's complicity with an avoidable humanitarian tragedy, are explicit. Acker details, almost verbatim, Hersh's account of the convoluted and cynical political machinations of the state:

> So, in order to get the Nobel Peace Prize, Kissinger barked an order to Morris to woof negotiations secretly with the Foreign Minister of Biafra in the SATURDAY REVIEW's editor's apartment. It didn't bark to [Richard] Morris how to negotiate. The Biafrans fled from these stinky negotiations to NATO in Brussels.
>
> (106)

She continues: "'It [Kissinger] had no rational reason for letting those kids starve; it just did cause it was scared to alienate Richardson [the undersecretary of state] cause it and Richardson have other fish to fry', woofed Morris" (106).[5] The political leaders' slangy, juvenile language encapsulates the disturbing disjunction between Nixon's realpolitik and America's self-image as leader of the free world.

While revelations of political cynicism and moral bankruptcy are no longer surprising, Acker wishes to go one step further. As an adjunct to abortion's gendering of the subject of liberal democracy, she wishes to identify the particular gendered and sexual imaginary characterising the sovereign, in contradistinction to the supposedly gender-neutral, asexual state.[6] Again, Acker draws upon a documentary source, the Watergate Tapes, that "revealed an ugly picture of a mean-spirited president prone to vulgarity and rambling, obsessed with enemies, racist and anti-Semitic" (Freeman 290). When Nixon is confronted by one of the dogs and then by the Angel of Death:

> Nixon Gave Them the First Definition of the Freedom of America … "I'll tell you about this country. That is I'll tell you why I support nuclear weaponry. I Richard Nixon support nuclear weaponry because. This

> cunt stinks. No wonder I have to work with the Mafia. Bitches never get enough. We all have to make it as fast as possible, ALL OF US, cause if we don't … we'll be drier than the Sahara that's raping us."
>
> (108)

His diatribe continues for another eight or so lines, in which non sequiturs, sentence fragments, and sexualised language articulate the misogyny and paranoia of the sovereign.

In the next scene, in which Nixon is having sex with Mrs Nixon, the Angel of Death appears. When the Angel of Death tries to warn Nixon and the nation of impending doom—"You have summoned the Despair and Nothingness of your constituents: you have summoned your own destruction" (110)—Nixon continues having sex, while defending his nuclear warfare strategy:

> Kissinger and I believe that it's good to spread nuclear weapons around the world. But we're constantly being hampered in every way, shape, at every step: we can hardly do anything for the world … The Soviets want disarmament talks. Our own people woof about the nuclear plants. The Europeans're barking foreign (that is American) economic control which they think is their starvation … I have one message to Europe. This is a nuclear world so if you're not sci-fi, you're not canine.
>
> (110)

Paranoia and a sense of deluded nobility combine with ruthlessness. Paralleling the trope of abortion, Acker uses this powerful, almost taboo image of Nixon having sex to literalise the imbrication of (male) desire with worldly (political) power. The sovereign has no boundaries, whether personal, national, or matters subject to his power.

Reiterating the libidinal economies of *Blood and Guts in High School* discussed earlier, the parallel between fucking his wife and fucking the world is explicit, a perverse echo of Don Quixote's quest to find true love and hence to right all manner of social and political wrongs. Instead, with Nixon we have sex aligned with all manner of political wrongs. His use of the FBI and the CIA to control dissent, moral bankruptcy, and eventual resignation makes him an ideal trope for the American state. The constant presence of Reagan in the novel, however, suggests that Nixon is not an ending, but rather a beginning or an intensification of a specific and gendered American form of political and economic power that aims to subjugate the other—including the feminine non-American world—by various means.

The monsters of reason

That the polity relies on a particular, gendered mode of reason to reproduce power is exposed in more detail when the narrator makes the (k)night 'view'

Acker's rescripting of the poorly made 1973 Japanese cult film, *Godzilla versus Megalon*. The *Godzilla* series of films, beginning in 1954, explores the effects of nuclear weapons, the dystopia portrayed being a metaphor for the post-Hiroshima and Cold War world. The plotlines of the 1973 film, being a schlock allegory of the American military-industrial complex, make it an ideal and appealing motif for Acker to represent the core of the polity's mentality to the (k)night—an allegory within an allegory. This characteristic mode of reasoning was hinted at in Nixon's rant discussed above: "This is a nuclear world so if you're not sci-fi, you're not canine" (110), and is especially pertinent given the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (with the perfect acronym MAD) in the United States and Reagan's Strategic Defence Initiative programme (tellingly known as Star Wars). Both monsters of the title are created by nuclear tests, with Godzilla the progeny of American nuclear testing. The film centres on "the underground civilization Seatopia [, which] has been affected by nuclear testing conducted by the surface nations of the world".[7] Another nuclear test occurs damaging Seatopia, and the Seatopians send their protector, Megalon, a giant insect, to the ocean's surface. Godzilla battles Megalon and eventually wins, saving human civilisation.

Acker begins her rescripting with a scene of an American family fleeing from a monster emerging from a lagoon, a deliberate reiteration of America's Cold War fear of invasion and sense of geopolitical innocence, which justifies the need for nuclear weaponry. She then focuses on the avenging Megalon's rampage to reflect on humans' capacity for destruction: "The Insect conflagration disintegration destruction erasure lobotomy control dispersion is destroying everything. Total destruction is rational because it comes from rational causes" (71). It is humans' ability to reason and to appear as rational that leads to destruction. Reason can justify nuclear war, and rationality can produce a split consciousness in the human: "Why are humans beings still rational, that is, making nuclear bombs polluting inventing DNA etc.? Because they don't see the absolute degradation and poverty around their flesh" (71). But it is only the monster, the non-reasonable beast, Godzilla, "who not only isn't human but also wasn't made by humans therefore is unidentifiable and incomprehendable to humans can give the human world back to the humans" (71–72). Being more reasonable will only create more of the same destruction.

This sense of a myopic consciousness is explored further when Acker's Megalon and Godzilla pause during their battle to have a philosophical discussion, titled "Anti-Rationality" (72)—rather like Nixon's pause during sexual intercourse to explain foreign policy. This ironic strategy draws attention to the way in which reason (coded as masculine) is supposed to supersede all other baser attributes (associated with the feminine). The monsters voice fragments from a seminal work of late modernity: Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (and Jochen Schulte-Sasse's gloss of Adorno and Horkheimer), which analyses

the hegemony of instrumental rationality through its two strands of social and technological reason. Acker's Godzilla and Megalon discuss the ways in which instrumental rationality became hegemonic, and its function as a "means of domination aimed at exercising social and political power" (72): "this exploitation or reduction of reality to self-preservation and the manipulable other has become the universal principle of a society," says one of the monsters (72). Pitchford perceptively observes that the monsters "identify reason as *the* central dynamic of 'democratic' capitalism", contending that it works simultaneously to both level everything to a universal principle (namely, capitalist exchange value) and to increase inequality through its subjugating dynamic (62). The monsters then discuss the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and multinational corporations, suggesting the connection between this universal principle and the construction of post-World War II American economic hegemony. The non-American world—America's other—is to be manipulated and subjugated in the interests of the American polity's desire for self-preservation.

Having monsters from a cult film speak in such reasonable language to discourse upon reason has obvious humour value, the obverse of human politicians who bark and woof. Pitchford, however, interprets the conversation as signifying that "the monsters are themselves at once reason's progeny and its opponents. They depend on reason for both their language and their very existence", as both are the materialised offspring of technological reasoning in the form of nuclear testing (62). And science (based upon reason) defines them as monsters, as other to reason (an allusion to Goya's artwork, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*). Megalon and Godzilla demonstrate that, even as other, they are still within the purview of instrumental reason, thus Acker rejects the notion that otherness is external to the political system, or that appeals to reason can lead to justice—a principle of liberalism. So the punk girl may not be like the other women in the abortion clinic—"I had the abortion because I refused normalcy which is the capitulation to social control"—making her a monster of gender, but she too is an offspring of reason (18).

History lessons: the religious white men

Although Don Quixote does manage to get rid of Nixon after learning how the American government works, this is only a superficial solution. Instead, her quest must remain at the level of knowledge and the nation's foundations, for, as the narrator cautions, "to defeat America she had to learn who America is. What is the myth of America, for economic and political war or control now is taking place at the level of language or myth" (117).

Don Quixote's exploration of the polity's substrate leads her to "the myths of the beginning of America"—specifically, its Puritan origins. The answer the novel provides, "the desire for religious intolerance made America or Freedom", is personified in the trope of the religious white men (117). With

this trope Acker is explicitly critiquing the myth that feeds into American exceptionalism (Hoff 2–3); equally important is her recognition of the growing power of the religious right in American politics and its reliance on myth (Horwitz 33–34). The trope of the religious white men suggests that white America's puritan origins is another, if not fundamental, source of the polity's mentality, and by extension, its capitalism. So the instrumental reason that Acker identifies in the trope of Nixon and *Godzilla versus Megalon* and the sexualised reasoning of Nixon have religious antecedents, with specific implications for women.

Before battling the religious white men, Don Quixote is given a satirical history lesson by the narrator, who provides a counter-story of white America's origins—an adjunct to Pateman's sexual contract. The narrator's version replaces the American myth of religious and individual freedoms with a religiously based pragmatism, repression, and intolerance. Thus commences the lesson:

> Theology, or politics, took place, not as in the Mother Country on the level of theory, but in terms of praxis … [T]hese New Worlders had left England not because they had been forbidden there to worship as they wanted to but because there they and, more important, their neighbours weren't forced to live as rigidly in religious terms as they wanted.
>
> (117–118)

America is a theocracy from the start. Another lesson is that "American freedom was the supremacy of technology over ideology (as in nuclear government)", as we saw in the motif of *Godzilla versus Megalon* (118). The (k)night is also reminded of the early Massachusetts law that required individual behaviour to be modulated to the needs of church and state—so much for freedom of the individual (118). The final lesson, "freedom and money must be intertwined", is explained by a mock historical essay that sets out the economic rationale for transporting the poor from England to the New World: "Britain will grow rich by sending her Poor Abroad" (119). Liberal democracy requires or is equivalent to capitalism.

Equally, if not more important is the gendered dimension of American capitalist theocracy. Early in the novel Don Quixote refers to "Our Bible or The Storehouse of Language" that "tried to tell women who they are: The-Loving-Mother-Who-Has-No-Sex-So-Her-Sex-Isn't-A-Crab or The-Woman-Who-Loves-That-Is-Needs Love So Much She Will Let Anything Be Done To Her" (27). Given that Acker considers language a prime method of social control, and that the Bible is an early source of language that defines women, Acker suggests Christianity's foundational role in producing a gendered polity, being a primary Evil Enchanter. This becomes apparent when Don Quixote encounters the religious white men during her last adventure. This group of penitents, clothed in psychedelic white rags, "are now standing up in numbers because they think they have the power of God"

(177), Acker's reference to the growth and "political mobilization" of evangelical Christianity from the 1970s on (Noll 22, 188). Although Don Quixote "thought that these poverty-stricken cultists were stranger than the Born-Agains who were murdering women who tried to get abortions in the United States", Acker is being disingenuous (177). Playing on Cervantes's knight's misrecognition of what is real and what is a dream, and the broader split in the American polity between surfaces and deeper mechanisms, the Born-Agains are the cultists, regardless of appearances.

Don Quixote repeats this mistake of confusing appearances with reality when she wants to fight the religious white men because she thinks they are kidnapping the Virgin Mary. One of the dogs, however, corrects her: it's an image of the Virgin Mary being taken (179). Here Acker combines the power of the image and religion as methods of social and individual control: the veneration and kidnapping of a virgin exemplifies Christianity and the polity's desire to control the free expression of women's sexuality, which finds contemporary articulation in the religious right's struggle against the free expression of sexuality, as well as their adroit use of signs, as in the Christian culture industries and censorship. This connection between political power, religion, signs, and sexuality leads the narrator to reflect, in a postscript to the sex scene involving Nixon: "What are the sexualities of those white men who have almost complete political control?" (178).

The story of the hyena that Don Quixote recounts to the religious white men is one answer, and shows how much she has learned from her adventures—she is now the speaker of the tale. In this counter-parable of the religious foundations of the United States—a punk feminist version of the American sexual contract, the ambitious and greedy hyena—"*He* is short for hyena" asserts Don Quixote, making the gender of the protagonist clear—wants to "get famous like God" (180, original emphasis). God tells him that the "Hyena would have to suffer and sacrifice again and again. Just like everybody else" (180), giving up his worldly desires—in Hyena's case, money and possessions. Hyena does so and God makes him head of a multinational corporation, and then after another bout of suffering by the Hyena, God helps him defend the corporation from internal and external enemies: "Hyena was now rich and secure" (183). The sexual contract here is between men and God, with men having to suffer in exchange for greater worldly power and possessions. Acker suggests that men's worldly power, as in Nixon, is a displacement of sexuality, with this power based on masochistic denial. Relatedly, the parable demonstrates the transferral of a religious creed or dynamic—sacrifice and suffering—into the economic and political realms. The penance of the religious white men—their control of desire—thereby only produces more suffering and other manifestations of control, usually of women. This echoes the destructive reproduction of instrumental reason evident in Acker's use of the *Godzilla versus Megalon* trope.

Considering the context of Acker's *Don Quixote*—the increasing power of the religious right and the advent of theocratic regimes in Iran and

Afghanistan, two of America's chief antagonists in this period—imagining the American polity in similar terms (the penitents' white robes resembling Imams' garb) is a powerful albeit controversial move by Acker. Positing the religious white men as a logical and intrinsically gendered manifestation of America's origins, rather than an aberration, is similarly disturbing. At the conclusion of her quest, the (k)night does not attain her beloved, but she does have a counter-myth with which to speak a gendered truth to power.

Disenchanting the novel of politics

I conclude by considering the ways in which Acker's novel is a form of opposition to the Evil Enchanters exemplified by Ronald Reagan, and specifically, how her *Don Quixote* satirises and attempts to supersede the American novel of politics, as Cervantes aimed to do to the chivalric romance centuries ago. As her narrator declared in her essay on Prince, "We must be conscious in order to fight outside control" (22). Don Quixote's specifically feminine madness—arising from her abortion, and intensifying towards the novel's end, like Cervantes's knight-errant's madness, marks her as an outsider to this system. Her various quests to find love or to learn more about the world in some reasonable and reasoning fashion so that she can act effectively on and in it—the novel's merger of the picaresque and the *Bildung*—seem inconclusive. Drawing upon Foucault's historical reading of madness, Carol Siegel instead argues that Acker attempts to "resanctify madness" into what I see as a feminist politics, so that it regains its power to challenge the US hegemon, particularly its instrumental mode of reason and dualism of reason and irrationality (21). This occurs in two ways: through bodily passion (Siegel 22), evident in the book's constant revisiting of a constructive masochism, and the attempt at a communicative nonrationality, achieved through Acker's visceral, intense, embodied writing (Dix), and punkified logic. Pitchford argues that Acker is not against reason, but anti-dualistic thought, so that "Quixote's tactic is not to reject rationality entirely, but rather to undermine its basis in dualism" (83). Communicative non-rationality—with its nod to and supersession of Jürgen Habermas's political tactic of communicative rationality—captures this anti-dualistic sense of Acker's project: it is non- rather than anti-rationality, paralleling Acker's privileging of nonsense throughout her work. Communicative nonrationality is a means of confounding (rather than opposing) the mind controllers, the Evil Enchanters of the contemporary polity who rely on a seamless procession of signs and images. "Mad language is consciousness in myth" proclaims the (k)night before her final vision (193). Mad language as consciousness of enchantment is her reward rather than love, which is an impossible dream in the current era of liberal democratic capitalism.

This form of language occurs not so much in an entirely other form of language, a typical way of conceptualising the speech of the mad, but rather is drawn from already existing discourses, made 'mad' in its punk

assemblage as well as in the sources chosen, exemplifying the "ruptures and new sproutings" of a feminist minor literature (Deleuze and Guattari 28). It is mixed speech, hence improper speech, and is potentially disruptive to the polity and the usual fictions of politics: "These words sit on the edges of meaning and aren't properly grammatical", explains Don Quixote (191). As in the example of Nixon's angry, sexualised rant about nuclear weapons, this improper speech is revealing. The use of faux and real historical intertexts—the *Godzilla versus Megalon* rescripting, for instance, because of their discordant locations—are estranging but connecting. The strange syntax of Don Quixote—sometimes digressive, at other times abruptly ending—enunciates some other form of reasoning and hence being in the world:

> At the end of time prior to the morning, my catatonia. I'll no longer speak because you are not hearing and will never hear me no matter how I speak. So I am a mass of dreams desires which, since I can no longer express them, are foetuses beyond their times, not even abortions. For I can't get rid of un-born-able unbearable dreams, whereas women can get rid of unwanted children. So I no longer know what I'm doing. (194)

Acker's colourful and disparate motifs bring into being a political allegory, a set of counter-myths functioning through caricature, discordancy, and humour, which attempt to both close the gap between the appearance and the reality of the American polity, as well as reveal the polity as comprised by images—as assemblage of enchantment. As a consequence, the smooth spectacle and simulacra of *fin-de-siècle* politics is confounded by an untidy, sometimes obscene, and seemingly random assemblage of images to form a political language of and for women, a language that can only be broadly legible in a time yet to arrive.

Notes

1 Christopher L. Robinson and Cristina Garrigós are two exceptions. Garrigós provides an excellent analysis of the Spanish context and its relevance to Acker's novel.
2 Note that abortion is a trope in other Acker novels, most notably, *Blood and Guts in High School* in which it is used to complicate narratives of women's sexual liberation. See Chapter 5 for a discussion.
3 Annette Schlichter provides a detailed analysis of the novel's critique of heterosexuality.
4 I will use the spelling "(k)night" throughout to draw attention to the female knight's diminished version of knighthood and her subsumption into a masculine concept.
5 Acker refuses to use gendered pronouns for dogs to emphasise that gender is a human construct and the dog's status as nonhuman.

6 Carole Pateman's *The Sexual Contract*, however, reveals the paternal and fraternal dimensions of the state. As she explains, "The story of the original contract tells a modern story of masculine political birth. The story is an example of the appropriation by men of the awesome gift that nature has denied them and its transmutation into masculine political creativity" (*Sexual* 102).

7 See http://godzilla.wikia.com/wiki/Godzilla_vs._Megalon, date accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

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8 The economy
Empire of the Senseless (1988)

In *Empire of the Senseless* Acker moves from political sovereignty to the interlinked economic form of sovereignty to capture the zeitgeist of the 1980s, marked as it was by the dominance of Reaganite and Thatcherite neoliberalism and accelerated globalisation (Jones 34).[1] As Acker explains, "I live in a world which is at least partly defined by the multinationals, the CIA, etc. Nowhere else" ("A Few Notes" 13).[2] *Empire of the Senseless* offers a fictional psychosexual geography of twentieth-century American capitalism from the perspective of the punk girl, one that imaginatively documents the move from an Oedipal-based form of capitalism, centred on a patriarchal and hence hierarchical structure, to a post-Oedipal capitalism marked by the multinational corporation and the shape of the network. This chapter therefore charts the next phase and culmination of the private and public channels of capitalist desire explored in Part II. The influence of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* is again evident in the novel's representation of "the social field [being] immediately invested by desire" (29) as Acker revisits the role of the family and Oedipus as agents of psychic repression that keep the economy functioning (118).

Psychosexual geography encapsulates this framework and Acker's gendering and spatialisation of the contemporary capitalist economy. Her punk girl protagonist and use of space to represent eras of capitalism make visible what is usually obscured in accounts of the economy and multinationals; in addition, foregrounding space challenges the annihilation of space by time that characterises contemporary capitalism (as in David Harvey's time–space compression (*Condition*)). The male narrator, Thivai's, observation: "War, you mirror of our sexuality" can be productively revised into "Sexuality, you mirror of the economy" to suggest one of Acker's main coordinates (26).

Acker specifically focuses on the multinational corporation because of its role as a major element and distillation of the contemporary capitalist economy—"one of the primary drivers of the flows of investment, trade, and knowledge across national borders" (Jones 3)—as well as the multinational's historical and ongoing importance to US capitalism.

The multinational corporation has been a crucial method of advancing American power throughout the world, from the American multinational's seventeenth-century beginnings to the present (Tolentino 23–24).[3] Political theorists such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that the multinational corporation has replaced the nation state as locus of power (304), and as organising principle of the late twentieth-century world: "sovereignty has taken a new form, comprised of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule" (xii). This sovereignty they term "empire", which is characterised by "no territorial center of power and [which] does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers" (xii). And while Hardt and Negri argue that empire is not synonymous with a further development of imperialist or American capitalism (9), the United States does have "a privileged position in the new global constitution of imperial authority" by virtue of its military force, post-war economic and political power, and the imperial nature of its constitution that provides the blueprint or architecture of the world of empire (182). Hardt and Negri's is a powerful account, though silent on how gender works in empire, regardless of the numerous studies that show the critical role of women's labour in transnational capitalism and the reconfigurations of gender that result.[4]

Fredric Jameson warns that representing multinational capitalism is fraught but crucial: its complex and frequently invisible contours lead to the subjective sense of 'being lost' and, as a consequence, being unable to critique or to act against the system (127). He observes that

> we know that we are caught within these more complex global networks, because we palpably suffer the prolongations of corporate space everywhere in our daily lives. Yet we have no way of thinking about them, of modelling them, in our mind's eye.
>
> (127)

As a consequence, a pressing task for the Left is to cognitively map its operations, including, I would add, by means of the imagination (Jameson 127). *Empire of the Senseless* should be read within that frame for, as Joseph Tabbi comments, "Acker is one of comparatively few women writers in America to have taken up Jameson's challenge to map ourselves cognitively onto the postmodern space produced by large systems of global power" (222). Similarly, Michael W. Clune places the novel into the recent American literary genre of "economic fictions", containing works that explore the dominance of the market (4).

Acker's punk girl, transmuted into a cyborg heroine, appears to channel Donna J. Haraway's "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s" to rectify *en avance* the typical blind spot of gender afflicting the male left, exploring a version of where women might be in multinational capitalism and beyond.[5] Haraway's 1985 manifesto, an early and influential feminist analysis of women's location in what has

been termed 'the new economy' and its critical element, technoscience, uses the motif of the cyborg to signify women's hybrid identities and roles in a networked globalising economy and lifeworld increasingly defined by information and communications technology. As Haraway explains, in a world marked by the collapse of various boundaries—machine–human, public–private, human–animal, to name the key ones—that results in hybrid subjects, "the cyborg is our ontology" (150). Given this context, as well as the patriarchal economic and imperialist manifestations of the American polity explored in *Don Quixote; Which Was a Dream* (hereafter *Don Quixote*), it is a logical move for Acker to revision the *fin-de-siècle* American economy through the figure of the female cyborg.

In an interview in 1989, Acker identifies a turning point in her career represented by *Empire of the Senseless*: It is "the search for a myth to live by. The purpose is constructive rather than deconstructive as in *Don Quixote*" ("A Conversation" 17). *Empire of the Senseless* is, however, a despairing novel, articulating not punk nihilism but rather a punk feminist frustration, with Acker herself acknowledging the difficulty of this 'going beyond' the existing system.

> I went through every taboo, or tried to, to see what society would be like without these taboos. Unfortunately, the CIA intervenes; I couldn't get there … You can't get to a place, to a society, that isn't constructed according to the phallus.
>
> (Acker, "A Conversation" 17)

Acker uses the CIA as shorthand to refer to the myth of the phallus and its attendant phallocentric social structure, however, the CIA can also be read more literally as referring to the military-intelligence networks that work as empire's police force, and that are increasingly enabled and empowered by technoscience.[6]

In a 1989 essay, Acker comments that "today, as the 'Great Powers', as they were formerly known, meet and meld economically, then culturally, as more and more of the known world goes Coca-Cola and McDonalds, only the Muslim world resists" ("A Few Notes" 35). Acker's sentiments parallel and literalise the constant theme in accounts of contemporary capitalism that there is no outside, and possibly no clear alternative to the current system—a sense intensified by the break-up of the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s and China's move to a market-based communism, largely removing communism and socialism as horizon for the Left. In Hardt and Negri, empire constantly expands so that the idea of insides and outside, fundamental to modernity and modern politics, collapses, so "in its ideal form there is no outside to the world market" (187, 190). At the opposite end of the political spectrum, a similar sentiment is voiced in Margaret Thatcher's slogan advocating the market society, "There is no alternative". Punk culture of the 1970s, although from an antithetical position, similarly

held that consumer capitalism was a system of total control, able to absorb rapidly and profit from musical or other types of rebellion, including punk. "As soon as any ostensibly dangerous new musical phenomena appear in the sweaty clubs giving a righteous finger to the status quo," explains Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons, "it is enticed in from the cold by the same old dangled carrots of sex/drugs/cash/fame and run through the mill of commercial assimilation. What were once sharp, angry fangs are rendered soft, ineffective gums" (85).[7]

I argue that the novel does not reveal the difficulties faced in mapping late capitalism; instead, its host text, William Gibson's cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer*, and its tropes of Sigmund Freud's Judge Schreber, Algerian revolutionaries, and a female cyborg offer an imaginative gendered and (raced) geography that is simultaneously a history of multinational capitalism. Regardless of how radically new or different the operations of multinational capitalism supposedly are, patriarchal dynamics are flexible and adaptive. Again we see the feminist conundrum of late capitalism: although women are freed from the traditional identities of mother or wife, in an economy without taboos, the main exchange value of women workers is narrowed down to sex. Acker thus captures capitalism's dynamism and its conservatism.

I begin by discussing Gibson's *Neuromancer* as Acker's host text that, like all of Acker's host genres or texts, is a cultural artefact—an object that captures and compresses a cultural moment, a sensibility. With its tale of Case, a burnt-out computer hacker who takes on one last technoheist, *Neuromancer* appears in the 1980s to herald a new fictional mode of writing a capitalism underpinned by global corporations and information and communications technology—a textualisation of the ensemble of time–space relations of multinational capitalism. Acker, however, reassembles and supplements the artefact to redress its imaginative and political limitations. I then examine Acker's contours and mechanisms of twentieth-century capitalism figured through the motifs of Judge Schreber—son and patriarch of capitalist modernity, and the Algerian revolutionaries in Paris—space of post-Oedipal capitalism and the multinational. Schreber is a transitional figure, a bridge between Oedipal and post-Oedipal capitalism, embodying the disciplinary mechanics of these systems. The Algerian revolutionaries are another historical pivot point: they allegorise the forces of post-World War II political decolonisation (explaining Acker's comment above that "only the Muslim world resists"), as well as the newly independent nations' economic recolonisation. I conclude by discussing the punk girl cyborg, Abhor, who is making a feminist cyberpunk pilgrimage across these terrains, her narrative thereby feminising multinational capitalism (Hughey 123).

Neuromancer: hosting the multinational corporation

Jameson's contention that cyberpunk is "the supreme *literary* expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself" (419)—cyberpunk as

the novel of multinational capitalism—makes obvious why Acker would choose an early and now canonical cyberpunk novel, *Neuromancer*, as "host text" (Berresem 402). Tabbi explains that:

> From the moment of its appearance, cyberpunk could be all too easily recognized as an aesthetic suited to the excesses and economic hubris of the Reagan era; … a decade when a much-hyped research program in "artificial intelligence" was at last delivering not a simulation of embodied consciousness but numerous expert systems of corporate organization and control.
>
> (213)

The corporate mergers typifying this era find a structural homology with the hybridised form and identities characterising cyberpunk (Tabbi 211), while the exotic products of a deregulated financial sector (hedge funds, leveraged buyouts, etc.) are mirrored by the generalised sense of immateriality of the novel's locus of action. If Acker's career, like her Don Quixote character, is read as a quest to find out the underlying gendered power structures of the United States, then capitalist technoscience is an inevitable destination. And cyberpunk is a primary form in which a literary exploration of technoscience during the 1980s was occurring, extending, and, for Brian McHale, "recycling" postmodernist writers like Thomas Pynchon's and William Burroughs's earlier attempts to come to grips with 'the system' (233). Moreover, both Tabbi and Lynn Hughey observe a technological aesthetic in Acker's work (Hughey 123; Tabbi 14), with science fiction motifs present, for example, in *Don Quixote* (McHale 233).[8] Cyberpunk is a 'natural' fit for Acker's interest in the ideological ramifications of literary forms and genres.

Cyberpunk's originally underground, masculine ethos and cutting-edge location—"an unholy alliance of the technical world and the world of organized dissent—the underground world of pop culture, visionary fluidity, and street-level anarchy", according to Bruce Sterling (x)—only add to the attraction for Acker and her strategy of reassemblage. As Tabbi comments:

> To the embarrassment of those who would claim cyberpunk for some emergent literary avant-garde, when this fiction is not invoking traditional family structures against systematic technological domination, it frequently follows the popular pattern of the American detective hero—in Gibson's case a cyberspace cowboy—who must get his own back from a hostile class structure and diabolical political machine.
>
> (216–218)

Neuromancer can therefore be read as a boys' own adventure story for the late twentieth century: "an almost cosmically male world" contends Istvan Csicsery-Ronay (230); a "new version of the frontier so prominent in the

American literary and philosophical imagination" for Victoria de Zwaan (462). Here, the young male's state and/or corporate induced paranoia (the Big Mother or Father—perhaps both) meets the fantasy of bodily transcendence via and into networks of expert and covert specialist knowledges (controlling or going beyond the Big Parent by hacking and computer codes). Predictably, cyberpunk was originally a male-dominated field (Tabbi 211),[9] reinforcing the male dominance of science and technology. *Empire of the Senseless*, in what de Zwaan calls "a narrative of desublimation" (461), addresses the limitations of the masculine technoscientific imaginary that—regardless of developments in reproductive technologies, robotisation, communications technology, and genetic engineering, to name just the obvious ones that impact gender—has difficulty reimagining a different gender regime.[10]

Acker's reassemblage of *Neuromancer* involves both rewriting elements and supplementation to address aspects of the multinational corporation that Gibson's novel is unable to delineate. *Neuromancer* supplies the narrative kernel and architecture of multinational capitalism—the rebel characters involved in a shadowy plot against the overarching system, with Acker both rewriting and at times barely rewriting sections and elements, and supplementing it with literary and historical intertexts.[11] The major reworking of *Neuromancer* occurs through setting, or what de Zwaan calls "the sf frame" (465), protagonists, and narrative supplementation. De Zwaan argues that "Acker strips her version of *Neuromancer* of the basic structuring principles of the source novel, that is, of the 'neu' " (464). Removing the 'new' suggests that what was a future type of capitalism for Gibson is already present for Acker. De Zwaan continues, "AI, which means "Artificial Intelligence in cyberpunk … refers to 'American Intelligence' here; … references to 'Screaming Fist' are expunged and replaced by references to the Korean War; … most significantly, *there is no mention of cyberspace*" (464, original emphasis). De Zwaan's examples make apparent that Acker is substituting precise and politically inflected references to the historical real. This, combined with the lack of reference to cyberspace, is Acker's type of cognitive mapping: she counters the intense abstraction and futurism of typical representations of cyberspace with a politico-historical groundedness and a sense of the present. To denote "Artificial Intelligence" as "American Intelligence" is arguably more accurate, suggesting the source and primary purpose of the bland term "Artificial Intelligence". And so when Acker rewrites the episode in which Gibson's Panther Moderns attempt to break in and steal the Dixie Flatline construct, she renames the burglars as the modern Terrorists, and they break into AI—the American Intelligence's library. By using and recontextualising some of Gibson's words (italicised in the following extract), she also makes a subtle criticism of terrorism and of Gibson's model of political resistance:

> The modern Terrorists are a new version, a modern version … of the hoboes of the 1930s USA. Just as those haters of all work (work being

> that situation in which they were being totally controlled; the controllers didn't work), as far as they were able took over their contemporary lines of communication, so these Terrorists, being aware of the huge extent to which the *media* now *divorce the act of terrorism from the original socio-political intent*, were not so much nihilists as fetishists.
>
> (35, emphasis added)

The subtext is that the modern Terrorists, although realising the split between the action and its representation, continue to fetishise earlier forms of political tactics—namely, direct, violent action. As we see with the Algerians, such tactics are out of time in multinational capitalism.

De Zwaan argues that Gibson's conventional realist aesthetic, another example of his lack of the *neu*, also marks his mode of characterisation: "despite the *idea* of cyborgian constructs, he gives us rounded characters in the mode of Dickens or any other realist writer" (465). Acker, who consistently refuses to write realist/ic characters, displaces Gibson's hero, Case, with the female cyborg, Abhor, "part robot, and part black" and her sidekick and male lover, Thivai (3). Acker therefore literalises Haraway's female cyborg, another way in which the novel cognitively maps the specific gender regime of multinational capitalism.

To desublimate the repressed gendered and political narratives of *Neuromancer* Acker supplements it with other intertexts. Quite early in *Empire of the Senseless* Abhor successfully kills Schreber, a CIA "boss" and a father figure of imperialist capitalism. This act, however, does not bring down the system. In keeping with the amorphous power structure of empire, the novel expands and ultimately moves beyond Gibson's cyberspace scenario, using elements of Pierre Guyotat's and Franz Fanon's narration of the Algerian war, C.L.R. James's account of the Haitian slave uprising, and then *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to complete the narrative of twentieth-century capitalism.[12] Cyberpunk is not enough, it seems, to chart the space of multinational capitalism; indeed, its masculine imaginary acts to obscure its dynamics and sources. Acker turns to radical and canonical literary and historical classics, moving across fictional and real times and spaces so that "the text still invokes the code of realism even as it undermines that code" (Stratton 90). Such textual supplementation is Acker's method of confronting a critical structure of multinational capitalism, what Haraway terms "the informatics of domination"—the "polymorphous" systems of information and knowledge that are social control (161). The seemingly random, violent, and disruptive assemblage of a late eighteenth-century slave uprising in Haiti with 1950s Algerian decolonisation (Berresem 403), being relatively marginalised and radical knowledges asystematically arranged, are Acker's counter-codes to produce perceptions that might disrupt AI's library. As Thivai explains: "The Library was the American Intelligence's central control network, its memory, what constituted its perception and understanding … It was called MAINLINE. The perception based on culture is a drug, a necessity for socio-political control" (36). Richard House argues that Acker's

"memetic citation and iteration are conceived here as intervening in conceptual and material realities, not just expressing ideational content" (453). As throughout her *oeuvre*, the rewritten and relocated fragment is a conceptual and perceptual apparatus.

Schreber: father and son

To address the ahistorical abstraction of *Neuromancer*'s understanding of multinational corporation, reinforcing empire's problematic atemporality, being "an order that effectively suspends history", Acker structures her novel as an imaginative gendered history of the multinational (Hardt and Negri xiv). The tropes of Schreber and the Algerians in Paris are used to represent the development of multinational capitalism and its underlying dynamics and mechanisms. In effect, what appears in *Neuromancer*'s terms as purely technical and technological structures are placed on to other axes of comprehension—the psychosexual, raced, and the gendered. *Empire of the Senseless*'s major narrative is the shift from Oedipal capitalism, which is Acker's rereading of imperialist capitalism, to a post-Oedipal version of capitalism exemplified by the multinational. Robert Siegle describes this as "translating 'the Father' from a personal nexus of power, oppression, and meaning to the rather different patriarchy of the era of multinationals", a structure that is more diffuse, decentred, and without taboos (71). In the novel's first part, "Elegy for the World of the Fathers"—a title clearly announcing its Oedipal and patriarchal location—Acker uses one of Freud's case studies, the paranoid schizophrenic Judge Schreber, to provide her with a father and son figure of Oedipal capitalism, and a bridge to post-Oedipal, multinational capitalism.[13] The psychoanalytic case study, a putatively scientific approach to producing knowledge of the neurotic and the unreasonable, is an ideal tool with which to identify imperialist capitalism's latencies, while Schreber as paranoiac satirises the pretensions of reason and the security state necessary for the multinational corporation.

Acker revisits and updates Schreber's biography and his eventual diagnosis as a paranoid schizophrenic. In the cyberpunk narrative, Schreber is the AI boss for whom Abhor and Thivai work, a suitable career considering his delusions of grandeur and of being watched and controlled that are central to his *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*. He is no longer Freud's Judge Schreber, but is a medical doctor cum torturer, a shift indicating a move from juridical power to biopower, and specifically, medical technology as method of social control, a constant theme in Acker's novel. Borrowing one of Gibson's plotlines, Dr Schreber, for instance, can cure Thivai's illness that is vaguely described as "neurological and hormonal damage" (32): "Schreber had the enzyme which could change all my blood", with the result that "I, whoever I was, was going to be a construct" (33). Blood here equates with an authentic subjectivity, while biotechnology empties out the human into a construct (of the AI), making her one of empire's senseless.

Acker's case study of Schreber functions as an explanation of his work for the AI and provides the underlying psychosexual architecture of imperial-Oedipal and then post-Oedipal multinational capitalism. Accordingly, and echoing the punk girl's inheritance from her family in Chapter 6, the Oedipal nature of Schreber's childhood is central. Acker emphasises the alleged childhood cruelty inflicted on Schreber by his sadistic father, Moritz Schreber—an expert on child-rearing, listing the torture practices and implements ("toys") the father invents, such as "a 'straight-hold', an iron cross-bar fastened to the table, by pressing against the child's collarbones and shoulders, prevented both bad posture and any movement" (45).[14] Tellingly, the child becomes a masochist: "Daddy, please beat me up again" (45), illustrating the role the family plays in teaching the dispositions required by capitalism, and the place of sadomasochism in Oedipal society (Conte 19). Schreber's Saxon identity is also key to the trope, for it alludes to Nazism in general (unreason breaking out in a totalitarian empire of reason), and more specifically, to any of the Nazi scientists who moved to America after World War II to work for the American military-industrial complex.[15] Hence Abhor's ironic aside: "I'm not hinting at any possible link between the micro-despotism inherent in the American nuclear familial structure and the macro-political despotism of Nazi Germany" (45). She quickly continues, more seriously, with "I am giving an accurate picture of God: A despot who needs a constant increase of His Power in order to survive. *God* equals *capitalism*" (45–46). In typical Ackeresque compression, in one page of Schreber's childhood, imperialist capitalism's triangulated and hierarchical structure—a structure of sadism and masochistic dependency, and its status as a monotheistic system of belief—is shown to be mirrored in and reproduced by the nuclear family.

As in *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, Schreber's upbringing attains full expression in his adult career, reinforcing from another angle Chapter 6's argument that it is the family who makes the functional worker for Oedipal capitalism. In this example, the family transmits the socially necessary sadism. As C. Jodey Castricano observes, "Schreber thus figuratively and literally reproduces the 'horror' of the 'apparatus' which produced him" (209). Acker makes Schreber "a significant member of the American Medical Association", to which she rapidly adds that he invents and uses various torture implements, for instance: "'The head-crusher' resembled the metal egg-cap the doctor's father used to ensure his son always maintained his proper posture" (46). While the ironic humour is obvious, by linking a peak institution dedicated to the Hippocratic Oath to torture, Acker is also making a serious connection between medical science, institutions, and social control—exemplified by Nazi doctors and, as we soon see, the CIA. At a number of times in the novel, the link between the AI and the American Medical Association (AMA) is made explicit ("the AI … who're backing the AMA" and "the AI controls information. The AI control the medical mafia" (40, 41)); Acker thereby formulates a medical science-intelligence complex,

a key component of contemporary biopower and multinational capitalism's informatics of domination.[16]

Rather than (or perhaps analogous to) delivering justice as a Saxon jurist, Schreber works as an intelligence operative for the AI during and after the Korean War: "He spied on spies who spied on spies. He had forgotten what side he was on, if he had ever been on a side" (46). Schreber, as paralleled by his historical location—located both before and after World War II, is a transitional figure. While he is both a son and father figure of Oedipal capitalism, he also 'gives birth' (another ironic allusion to the Freudian Schreber's fantasy) to the disciplinary mechanisms of post-Oedipal capitalism emerging after World War II that are part of a US-centred multinational capitalism. With parallels to Michel Foucault's argument in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* regarding changing forms of punishment, namely, from the spectacle of torture to the carceral, Schreber's work represents a development from physical torture to chemical and more high-tech forms of torture, the goals of which are to extract information.

In an updating and politicisation of the Freudian Schreber's paranoid delusions of being invaded by nerve rays, one day Schreber awakes to find a needle in his arm, his blood appearing to have been drained from him: "he was lower than any junk victim. Therefore the chemical research department of the Pentagon began using him as a guinea pig in their tests of a [*sic*] endorfin cure for terminal despair" (47). Again, the removal of blood and replacement by chemicals represents control and dehumanisation—an updated form of eugenics. Schreber's comment while in the psych ward: "Who am I not?" gestures to a model not of individual repression but of limitless possibility. So again, Schreber is linked to the extraction of information, the remaking of subjectivity—an expanded version of mind control, and the production of knowledge by biomedical torture. Regardless, he is cured and his career as spy-torturer can recommence in new American fields of economic expansion: "No longer a victim of terminal despair [in Algeria 'the land of the free'], he started working for the AMA" (47). We will return to the significance of Algeria shortly.

The 'case study' of a paranoid schizophrenic who works for AI is clearly a comment on the mentality of the American state and imperialist capitalism, a fictional revisiting of Richard Hofstadter's classic study of American political paranoia in which he identifies a sense of persecution to a nation or a way of life from conspiratorial groups. This plays out in ironic form in Acker's Schreber's loss of bodily and psychic integrity to the post-war state (by penetration from a phallic needle), thereby returning to the father's power and a feminised position of no resistance. Moreover, the Freudian Schreber's fear of penetration and of having sex as a woman also alludes to the patriarchal masculinity of Oedipal capitalism, and its repression of the feminine. The specific effects of Oedipal capitalism on women will be detailed in our discussion of the trope of the cyborg, however, it is significant that it is a woman, Abhor, who kills Schreber, commenting just before she

shoots him: "My father was inside me and my boss was outside me" (59), encapsulating the merging of the psychosexual with the economic, and the critical role women's labour and feminist ideology inadvertently plays in making the new capitalism happen. This killing of the father Schreber by the daughter is a portent of the ending of Oedipal capitalism, with its successor structure delineated in the motif of the Algerians taking over Paris.

"Let the Algerians take over Paris"

As we saw in *Blood and Guts in High School*, settings and characters from the Middle East are Acker's strategy to identify American orientalism and its economic, social, religious, and political implications—an anti-orientalist Orientalism. In *Empire of the Senseless*, Acker displaces American neo-imperialism on to French colonialism to explore revolutionary upheaval and decolonisation as the historical pivot point between Oedipal and post-Oedipal, multinational capitalism. Decolonisation is its preparation, a dynamic also noted by Hardt and Negri (51), among others. It is here, however, that Acker's political pessimism becomes apparent as the deterritorialisation represented by the Algerians becomes rapidly reterritorialised by multinational capitalism, even in the potentially 'liberated' space of the post-Oedipal—a place seemingly beyond the phallus.

In the final chapter of Part 1 "Let the Algerians Take Over Paris", Acker narrates the build-up and eventual success of an Algerian revolution in contemporary Paris. Bringing a 1950s colonial revolution belatedly to the centre of a European empire in the 1980s, and site of the first of the modern revolutions, typifies Acker's representational techniques and reading of revolutionary struggle in the context of multinational capitalism. Acker's narration of revolution has a dual focus—attempting to be an oppositional form of writing, a way of thinking critically about revolution, including women's liberation, but also a mirror to the structures and dynamics of multinational capitalism. Most obviously, she plays with temporal and spatial markers: she updates the Algerian revolution, inserts elements of the eighteenth-century Haitian uprising, and collapses the imperial distinction between centres and peripheries, relocating the uprising from the colonies to the heart of empire. As a character observes: "We looked at Paris which was now a third world" (82). The post-revolution space is temporally and spatially confused, but readable as allegory.

Angela Naimou describes Acker's merger of the Algerian struggle with the colonial and postcolonial history of Haiti as historical "conflation". This conflation is evident in the textual melange used by Acker, such as making the Haitian eighteenth-century slave leader, Mackandal, one of her leaders; the figuration of the Algerians as zombies—a reference to Haitian culture (Naimou 138);[17] allusions to the twentieth-century Haitian dictator, Papa Doc Duvalier in Acker's character of Papa Death; and the intertexts of revolutionary struggle upon which Acker draws. Naimou identifies James's study

of the Haitian slave uprising, *The Black Jacobins*, and Pontecorvo's film, *The Battle of Algiers* (134); Salah El Moncef adds Fanon's classic of decolonisation, *Black Skin White Masks* (127); while Lidia Yuknavitch identifies Fanon's account of the Algerian revolution, *A Dying Colonialism* and Guyotat's novel of the Algerian war, *Eden, Eden, Eden*. The result is, as Naimou puts it, "In the storyworld of *Empire*, Haiti is Algiers, and Haiti simultaneously is Paris" (134). And crucially, Paris is now Algeria—an allusion to the large-scale immigration of Algerians to France throughout the twentieth century, and specifically, the riots that occurred in the immigrant suburbs of Paris in the 1980s, which Acker briefly revisits in the narrative.

Naimou explains this historical conflation in two ways: first, it extends "these narratives of anti-colonial revolution past the celebratory moment of independence and into their neoliberal, postcolonial afterlives" (134–135), to which I would add that these narratives of decolonisation are portents of women's struggles for liberation and their afterlives. Relatedly, "Acker fuses [the revolutionary narratives'] discursive potential even as she deflates their masculinist, Marxist-historical prophetic modes." Naimou continues: "[Acker] thus directs us away from the narrative of a progressive unfolding of freedom in the world even as she directs us toward the desire for freedom, guaranteed to last because it is impossible to satisfy" (136)—shades of the Arab Spring. Revolution in *Empire of the Senseless* is now occurring within the postcolonial space of multinational capitalism, hence the near inevitable (for Acker) failure of 'conventional' revolutionary struggle against the now outmoded structure of nation states. As Abhor remarks:

> The Algerians had taken over Paris so they would own something. Maybe, soon, the whole world … My father's no longer important cause interpersonal power in this world means corporate power. The multinationals along with their computers have changed and are changing reality. Viewed as organisms, they've attained immortality via biochips. Etc. Who needs slaves anymore? So killing someone, anyone, like Reagan or the top IBM executive board members, whoever they are, can't accomplish anything.
>
> (83)

Nicola Pitchford helps to explain Abhor's comments thus: "'fatherhood' [as represented by Schreber and his father] has been replaced by a more diffuse system … It fights from within and can only be fought from within" (97).

This changed spatio-temporal context of revolutionary struggle is apparent in two forms of mimicry in the novel. First is the way in which Acker's representational strategies mirror the dynamics and architecture of multinational capitalism. Her pastiche and conflation echo the mergers and restructures, temporal dislocation into an ever-present present, and a collapsing of geographical boundaries that typify the multinational

corporation. Second, the Algerians use mimicry as a political tactic: they too, like their colonial masters, use poison to suppress their opponents. The first type of mimicry suggests (as Karl Marx noted) that revolutionary dynamism belongs to capitalism as well as to the working class (and the punk writer). By extension, perhaps the most successful contemporary revolution is that of multinational capitalism, one that is masked by the seeming victory of liberal respect for 'otherness' and 'difference' (the Algerians)—which as Hardt and Negri among others argue, is intrinsic to empire (142). In addition, both forms of mimicry suggest that there is no outside to the structures of multinational capitalism: ways of writing (hence thinking) and acting are now contained within the multinational structure.

The containment of the Algerian revolution as well as the contours of multinational capitalism are signalled by how quickly the post-revolutionary government reverts to forms of social control, and how other aspects of society don't fundamentally change. Excessive and taboo forms of sex mark the post-Oedipal regime and its unrestrained desire, and "Paris is governed by all manner of filth, by all that has been scarred, removed, and rejected" by the imperialist capitalist regime (Redding 296). Significantly, Thivai observes that "the women had all become prostitutes. I didn't understand why" (93). His comments suggest that there is no outside of sex as exchange value for women in the era of the multinational, in which the economy (and the economic) permits everything, subsumes everything, including emotions and desire—providing one meaning of the novel's title. Sex is fused to money in the figure of the prostitute, suggesting that like money, sex can now be exchanged for anything (Curtin, "Between" 162). Importantly, that all women, rather than men, are prostitutes in the post-Oedipal means that their alienation as workers is specific to their gender: the worker's alienation characterising Oedipal capitalism is replaced by the alienation and expropriation of women's feeling and desire—as we will see in the case of the cyborg, Abhor.

The New Revolutionary Arab Police also arrive quickly on the scene and soon begin imprisoning people, including Thivai and Abhor. Moreover, in a replay of Schreber's career, the CIA, whom Pitchford describes as the multinationals' "international defense body" (97), set up their mind-control and torture experiments in a brothel. Schreber may be dead but the forces of biopower he worked for remain: "Just as material is always attracted to a vacuum, some CIA flew to Paris and took over Madame's whorehouse for their own purposes" (142). Acker is alluding to the MK-ULTRA programme that "was designed to find safe ways to cause total human amnesia" (142), including research into mind control via drugs.[18]

The political tactics of poisoning and conventional physical torture aligned with the colonial slave masters continue in the pursuit of knowledge, tactics that have contemporary parallels with America's global network of offshore sites for torture and interrogation denoted by the "Extraordinary Rendition Program".[19] Moreover, that mind control occurs in the brothels

is Acker's comment on sex as another form of social control in the space of the multinational.

The buildings that do remain after the revolution reflect the victory and materialise the architecture of the multinationals, rather like Jameson's classic reading of the Bonaventure Hotel (Curtin, *Out* 96–97). While there is chaos and fire throughout Paris—signifying the end of the social as previously known—high-rise buildings of black glass dominate the landscape:

> These Parks For The New Bourgeois Workers seemingly intangibly, seamlessly metamorphosed into the largest bank in the world. Under the bank, there was a building of opaque grey glass which was nameless. "Nameless" meant "useful"; there was no end to the depth of the building.
>
> (110)

The misleading title of these buildings alludes to Soviet utopian architecture (such as Tatlin's designs), while the metamorphosis into "the largest bank in the world" and the principle of usefulness captures perfectly the masked nature of the true revolution that has already occurred, in which finance capital and utilitarianism are guiding principles, and the worker/bourgeoisie dichotomy has collapsed. When Thivai asks himself soon after the uprising: "What are we going to do now there are no more bosses?" (82), the answers are provided by the urban landscape of corporate towers, prisons, and taboo-free wastelands. Ostensibly this is Paris, but is also Reagan's America, signalled in the brief but apocalyptic description of Harlem (164–165). The boss is dead, long live the multinational.

The punk girl as cyborg

The final trope of the female cyborg, Abhor, locates women as central to Acker's psychosexual geography of multinational capitalism. Hughey characterises Abhor as a cyberpunk pilgrim who ventures into the mind and across the apocalyptic exterior world, seeking the profane rather than the sacred as enlightenment (123). As such, Abhor provides a punk feminist response to Haraway's three thematics she posits as necessary to analyse women's location in multinational capitalism: the informatics of domination—the "polymorphous" systems of information and knowledge that are social control (161); the 'home work' economy that now occurs outside the home—the incorporation of large numbers of women in the developing world into wage labour; and women in the totally integrated circuit—which refers to the dispersion of formerly discrete domains, the private and public spheres, and their replacement by the network as organising structure. Abhor, as an embodiment of "the myth of the biform creature" (Nolan 209), is an assemblage of both the Oedipal and post-Oedipal eras: a

fusion of the old and the new to represent multinational capitalism, and to signify how patriarchy reterritorialises women in this reconfigured economy.

Similar to Haraway, Acker's "part robot, and part black" cyborg embodies the collapse of a number of hierarchical dualisms and exclusions that have structured modernity and thus Oedipal capitalism, and gestures indirectly to others (Castricano 202). Obviously, the human–machine dualism is effaced, and, as a consequence, the culture–nature opposition—signalling the technological restructuring and invasion of the self (Pitchford 99), one that has specific implications for female gender identity. Women's conventional association with nature through their reproductive capabilities comes undone through female robotisation represented by advances in reproductive technologies. So an essentialist understanding of gender is troubled as a techno-social constructionism is literalised in Abhor's body and the maternal function is technologised and outsourced: "A transdermal unit, separated from her body, connected to the input trodes under the [leg] cast by means of thin red leads. A construct", the narrator punningly explains (33–34). This represents a decentring of the female from the maternal, the bodily, and the natural, and her placement in technological networks of knowledge and control, whether the seemingly banal ones of cosmetic surgery to the more culturally valued ones of genetic testing and *in vitro* fertilisation (IVF). I return to the implications of this for the gender binary later.

Second, what Moncef terms Abhor's violent origin myth, of being raped by her father, literalises the breaking of the Oedipal taboo, and as a consequence shatters the father–child hierarchical dualism that is the foundation of the modern bourgeois nuclear family. Moncef argues that "this traumatic event signals [Abhor's] divorce from the familial world and the beginning of a personal *Gotterdammerung* … [namely] her freedom to experiment at the limits of a 'socializable' being"—that is, in a post-Oedipal space (129). The model of organising social reproduction in the private space of the family and of forming a correctly sexed subjectivity through the Oedipus complex are disrupted, as is the foundational dualism of the private and public spheres. In addition, by explicitly racialising her cyborg a much broader politico-historical terrain of modernity comes into view: Abhor embodies a feminised narrative of the shift from colonialism to postcolonialism, one that mirrors the incorporation of the decolonisation process that we observed in the trope of the Algerians in Paris. She is a specifically postcolonial cyborg—"a mosaic of minorities" (Moncef 134), hence the use of classic texts of anti-colonial struggles. Given that Abhor's grandmother was a German Jew, Abhor troubles the white–black racial distinction and the modern obsession with racial purity—as in Schreber's paranoia of bodily penetration, and, by extension, the imperial model of centre and colonial periphery and its associated master–slave pairing alluded to in the figure of the Haitian slave leader, Mackandal. Abhor is a reminder of this 'heritage' even as she undoes it.

Abhor may have killed the father-boss Schreber, however, the racialised and exploitative nature of women's work post-Schreber is outlined in Abhor's narrative, and more explicitly in the prostitutes who now populate Paris. Abhor, as pilgrim and as woman (therefore equals prostitute), signifies the women from developing nations increasingly drawn into wage labour at home and abroad. This labour is often done in the Special Economic Zones, with their reduced labour, taxation, and environmental regulations, affecting the gender order of these nations. Furthermore, Abhor's robotic elements are metonymic of the nature of these women's work—in manufacturing, as production-line 'robots', as well as the industries in which they work—in the multinationals' assembly plants for high-tech goods such as computer hardware and smartphones, for instance. And the Special Economic Zones can be read in displaced form in the relatively lawless spaces of post-revolution Paris. As a consequence, the twentieth-century emancipatory narratives of decolonisation and the revolution of empire's others are further troubled in the novel by the spectral presence of 'non-white' women's labour.

Moreover, the equation of women with prostitutes delineates the post-Oedipal libidinal economy, which also suggests the extension and profitability of certain conceptions of women. We need to revisit briefly the novel's opening section, "Rape by the Father", in which the libidinal economy underpinning Abhor's historical narrative of capitalism is first introduced. It begins with the story of Nana, Abhor's grandmother, in which sex for women is inextricably linked to money. Nana, being a German Jew, flees pre-World War II Germany for France "cause of all the pre-Nazi nationalistic shit murkiness in Germany" (3). She has to work as a prostitute, and her lover is killed by the police. "Being poor, Nana had learned that society is only a filthy trick", so she marries a rich man to survive (6–7). That "society is a filthy trick" is Acker's reference to the social contract that, for relatively powerless women, is an illusion. As Don Quixote discovered, Nana's form of social bond is a sexual contract, exchanging sex for money and security, with marriage promising a respite from the purely economic realm of the prostitute. The pattern is repeated with Nana's son (Abhor's father): he inherits the family wealth and marries a woman who wants his money. Like Janey in *Blood and Guts in High School*, women are on and in the market rather than experiencing the fraternal and patriarchal bonds of the social.

With "the women had all become prostitutes" (93), Acker points to the defining characteristics of women's labour and women's (affective) ontology in the regime of the multinational, and their method of integration (read control) into this permissive order. In post-Oedipal capitalism marriage is absent, suggesting the subsumption of all social bonds like marriage and family into the purely economic. The status of prostitute (the literal 'working girl') highlights what women have to offer as exchange value, their 'penetration' by multinational capitalism, and the resultant form of their alienation. In a deregulated economy that requires pleasure and desire of its consumers,

and that has liberated women from the traditional identities of wife and mother, sex is the commodity par excellence. Yet its exchange leaves women workers seemingly alienated from a non-commodified form of desire—an explanation of why it is an empire of the senseless. Women's desires must be reified (turned from love into sex) to be invested, to be of value, in the multinational economy. While this economy of sex can be read more literally to suggest the expanding global sex industry, the author is primarily using sex as an abstract essence of, a form of symbolic capital for, women. That sex is women's currency underlines how, in some ways, little has changed for women. Women may no longer be equated with nature or the maternal (deterritorialisation in action), but they remain known by the sign of sex (simultaneous reterritorialisation) and are now purely economic actors.

This flexible resilience of contemporary patriarchal capitalism—its ability to manage gender difference to now incorporate more women as workers thereby offering supposed economic freedom—is reiterated in Abhor's frustrated post-revolution pilgrimage. Men continue to attempt to control her and to be the obstacles to her freedom, whether it is her romantic relationship with Thivai, being imprisoned by the Algerians and then schooled by Thivai to be a Great Woman Writer, or her attempts to form alternative communal bonds (as in joining a bikie gang). Regardless of her escape from Oedipalisation, and her position as cyborg in a space beyond most of the hierarchical and controlling binaries of modernity—that in between subjectivity denoted by the mestiza (Anzaldua; Haraway; Moncef)—patriarchy maintains a powerful if reconfigured presence in multinational capitalism.

Empire of the Senseless, although slightly pre-dating the fall of the Berlin Wall, can be seen as Acker's post-communism novel. Ten years after the high point of punk music, the novel expresses a shared sense of the market-driven economy as all-powerful—subsuming culture, the individual, and the social—and despair: from where might resistance come? It is similarly critical of an emergent form of capitalism, such as Silicon Valley's early technophoria, which will supposedly address economic and broader social decline. For Acker, the imagination and particular forms of writing are critical means of resisting and 'seeing' capital,[20] or at least creating an oppositional space, even identity.[21] With her punk lexicon of the cyberpunk novel, a son and father torturer figure of paranoid modernity, the collective revolutionary identity of the Algerians, and the female cyborg, Acker attempts to cognitively and imaginatively map, as a punk feminist novelist, the new post-Oedipal empire in which all is permitted, yet everything is more efficiently controlled than ever before.

While not to deny the importance of cultural politics, is this literary form of "word magic"—to use Sean McCann and Michael Szalay's term for the sacralisation of language and literature as a type of political activism (447)—and its individualistic focus a match for the society of the spectacle, in which the individual, the individual's 'imagination', and culture are rapidly incorporated, if not already spoken for? Is a cultural solution enough

to effectively contest empire, even if the economy more than ever relies on culture and representation, and the boundaries between economic base and cultural superstructure are no longer distinct? As a consequence there are two crises being enacted in the novel: first, the muted, even veiled socio-political crisis that is a consequence when that society is dictated to, indeed, subsumed by the restructured neoliberal economy (Harvey, *A Brief* 70–80)—what Hardt and Negri term "the global society of control" (325).[22] Second is the resultant crisis for left and feminist politics of how to counter this capitalist revolution when a Marxist-derived analysis and/or politics is absent. As Mintcheva observes, "The result is not utopic, but exploratory political fictions" (60), which gives us the multinational corporation not as a myth, but as a new reality in which we live.

Notes

1 Robert M. Collins describes globalisation as "the silent revolution of the 1980s" (102).
2 On a biographical level, Acker spent much of her 1980s under Thatcher's rule, and Thatcherism and Reaganism are consistent themes in Acker's journalism. See her 1990 essay, "The Meaning of the Eighties", a comparison of the two regimes.
3 Geoffrey Jones observes that "in 2004 the United States remained, by a considerable margin, the largest home economy" of multinational corporations (39).
4 These include: Juanita Elias, *Fashioning Inequality: The Multinational Company and Gendered Employment in a Globalising World*; Gillian Youngs, *Global Political Economy in the Information Age: Power and Inequality*; and Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy.*
5 Kraus's biography of Acker and my readings of her personal papers held at Duke University contain no mention by Acker of Haraway's work.
6 Arguably, phallocentrism is a version of a military-intelligence network.
7 Stacy Thompson and Joel Schalit provide excellent analyses of punk's failure to establish an alternative economic structure.
8 Later in her career Acker shows interest in the feminist potential of cyberspace. See her essay "The Future" where she discusses the relationship between art and technology. She was particularly interested in the work of the Australian cyberfeminist collective, VNS Matrix.
9 Sterling's *Mirrorshades* anthology, for instance, has no female contributors.
10 The 2017 sequel to *Blade Runner*, *Blade Runner 2049* is a case in point: flying cars, plenty of naked women, and prostitutes who look the same as they do in 2017 (Villeneuve).
11 Brian McHale's *Constructing Postmodernism* identifies two passages where Acker barely touches Gibson's original.
12 Pierre Guyotat's, *Eden, Eden, Eden*; Franz Fanon's *A Dying Colonialism*; and C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*.
13 Schreber is also central to Deleuze and Guattari's analysis, being a figure misunderstood by the Freudian Oedipal schema (*Anti-Oedipus)*.

14 Rosemary Dinnage argues that "suppression, control, total obedience are the keystones" of Moritz Schreber's child-rearing method (xvi).
15 See Anne M. Jacobsen, *Operation Paperclip: The Secret Intelligence Program that Brought Nazi Scientists to America* for a full account.
16 Andrew Strombeck traces Acker's interest in torture to a number of exposés of state torture that occurred during her career (49).
17 "Paris was in chaos. Thousands of Algerians were walking freely. Ragged. Dirty. Sticks. Dolls. Voodoo", Acker narrates (68). Such a description is Acker's ekphrasis of the classic scene in zombie films, as in Jacques Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), set in the Caribbean. See Naimou for an excellent discussion of the figure of the zombie in *Empire of the Senseless*.
18 Jon Stratton's reading of *Empire of the Senseless* provides background details regarding the MK-ULTRA programme.
19 For a detailed account of the renditioning programme, see Stephen Grey's *Ghost Plane: The True Story of the CIA Torture Program*.
20 Kathryn Hume correctly identifies Romanticism as part of Acker's heritage (107–108).
21 Haraway, for example, argues for the importance of storytelling, particularly for women of colour—her Mestizan writing, and for writing as a cyborg strategy because "cyborg politics is the struggle for language … against perfect communication" (175, 177).
22 Hardt and Negri's observation parallels Gilles Deleuze's diagnosis of the contemporary shift from a disciplinary society to "societies of control" ("Postscript" 4).

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Conclusion
What Kathy did

Now, well into the twenty-first century, to look back at Acker's work is to observe a singular achievement from a woman writing from outside the women's movement and who came belatedly to feminism, instead being located within a cultural underground and using a largely male intellectual lineage to make a literary form of punk and a punk form of feminism. Acker reimagines women's location in the late twentieth-century United States as something strange and estranging, but also uncomfortably familiar for many Western women, making her one of Jacqueline Rose's "women in dark times" who

> forge a new language for feminism. One that allows women to claim their place in the world, but which also burrows beneath its surface to confront the subterranean aspects of history and the human mind, both of which play their part in driving the world on its course, but which our dominant political vocabularies most often cannot bear to face.
>
> (ix)

Acker refused the comforting and optimistic narratives of women's progress and liberation and a "sanitised" feminism (Rose x). At the same time she, like her punk scene, held "the desire, indeed the demand for 'something else' that is not the holding patterns of a devastated present, with its limits and impasses. This demand is for a dystopian that functions like the utopian" (Muñoz 98). While it is easy to be distracted by the more spectacular elements of punk such as haircuts and clothes, punk was a desire for freedom from a deadening system. Given the current context of arguably even darker times than Acker's 1970s to 1990s, the political languages she provided were prescient and worth revisiting.

Acker used her punk girl heroine to undertake a desublimating journey into high and mass culture, as well as the everyday, the intimate, and the public quadrants of the United States as its brief century ended. Ellen E. Berry's comments regarding *Blood and Guts in High School* are apposite for Acker's *oeuvre*: "Acker's goal is not to prefigure a new order, but rather to imaginatively ruin the old one and so to hasten its disappearance"

(48). She configured her punk writing and her punk girl to perform this ruination for all the girls and women who were too smart, too angry, too fed up, too wanting, too 'angular'—emotionally or physically—to fit the enlarged though still circumscribed places grudgingly made available to them. Extreme parody of the patriarchal imaginary was a prime method of ruination and an index of this confinement: Acker let it all hang out in every novel so she could throw it back in the system's face. With a lexicon of nymphomania, abortions, pelvic inflammatory disease, lobotomies, a Dexedrine-addict mother, perverts, brothels, rape—this was hers and the punk girl's *fin de siècle*: schlock horror as heartbreaking, funny, and berserkly realistic. And in the characteristically punk combination of "innovation and annihilation" she gave these women their own form of punk negation (Muñoz 98).

The significance of such a specifically feminine form of negation—that the world is not as it seems for women—is not to be underestimated. Arguably, women have not had a negation of their own until second wave feminism, and Acker, came along. Her feminist radicalism was an abrasive heterodoxy: marriage, motherhood, the family, work, literature, and men are at best stupid and conformist, at worst, catastrophes for the punk girl; desire is explosive, but largely tamed and contaminated. Acker exposed and refused to let go of woman as object of exchange in a contemporary libidinal economy; the deep psychic pain for women that results from this position; and the cultural apparatus's role in reproducing this formation. She held to the position that words and the imagination are one of our best hopes for fighting and surviving, while having the courage to recognise that failure is likely. For Acker, 'moving on', as we now blithely say as solution to just about any tragedy or misdemeanour, was improbable.

And the significance of Acker as an embodiment, indeed an icon of politicised negation should not be undervalued. With her relentless mining of her mythological autobiography and her streetwise, anti-literary image, Acker was a figure of cool feminist radicalism—a figure of women's freedom—who spoke to and for many women. "If there is one American figure apart from Patti Smith," observes Claire MacDonald, "who exemplifies the memory of that thrilling, transgressive quality of seventies punk—that curious mix of attitude, lyricism, and raw sexuality—it is Acker" (108). Linder Sterling, one of the great punk artists, comments that "punk was cutting out the question: 'Can I do this?' " (qtd in Savage 148). Acker showed us that a woman could have creative ambition to continue a politically committed avant-garde, live as a figure of revolt who doesn't settle down and compromise, and who could stay committed to the underground without ending in failure, compromise, or neglect. And anyone who teaches Acker's texts in a university classroom can probably attest to Acker's continuing role as figure of identification and disturbance, one whose self and work provide that Benjaminian 'shock of recognition' for young women almost three decades later. Her uncompromising, far-sighted mapping of a patriarchal late capitalist dystopia continues to be a source of hope,

testifying to the importance of finding and fostering the women artists and writers who provide us with a secret history of preceding epochs and of oppositional politico-cultural movements such as the extremist avant-garde.

In a review essay on Chris Kraus, Jenny Turner comments "how much Acker there is curled up inside that book [Chris Kraus's novel, *I Love Dick*]" (14). Turner captures here how Acker did change the possibilities for women's writing. She refused the highly popular realist novel of women's lives, the influential utopian strand of contemporary women's experimental writing denoted by *écriture féminine*, and the more accessible and polished version of women's postmodern fiction exemplified by Angela Carter and Jeannette Winterson. Rather, she forged a feminist minor literature as a bricoleuse who 'made do' with the culture's treasures but more often its detritus, to create a punk assemblage of cruelty and excess, intellectualism and seeming stupidity, flashes of beauty but mostly the squalid. With parallels to punk's creative role in making new wave music possible (Reynolds), Acker ripped literature up to start again for the dissonant woman writer and reader, but also for succeeding women writers. They could take her devices and strategies and redeploy them in less excessive and abrasive terms in an institutional and cultural space where women's writing is firmly established, and where appropriation, pastiche, a fictocritical mode, metafiction, fan fic rewrites, and autofiction are mainstream techniques with a receptive readership. As Winterson reminds us,

> Do not underestimate how radical this was when Acker started doing it … Acker was not alone, but she was one of the few, and she was one of the few I was able to look to in the 1980s, when I wanted to put myself into my work in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, and, later, to use invented worlds, outside of the confines of realism.
>
> (viii)

And in a fitting homage, Olivia Laing's elegant and elegiac 2018 novel *Crudo* makes "Kathy" her heroine—to me, a hybrid of Acker, the punk girl, and Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway—finally finding happiness in love as the world teeters on the brink of destruction. Laing's blend of punk and modernist icons and novelistic forms acknowledges the space opened by Woolf for women's experimental writing, with Acker continuing the project as a *fin-de-siècle* vanguard.

To return to Kristeva's schematisation of the pre-conditions for a revolution in poetic language (*Revolution*), I argue that Acker's secret feminist history and punk writing closes the gap between women's revolutionary desires articulated from the 1960s onwards and the available means of representing them. Her writing is that contestatory "representational break" that Fredric Jameson doubts the possibility of in postmodern culture (54). As punk feminist writer she takes on the role of authentic avant-gardism advocated by Jean-François Lyotard, who "observe[s] that the true process

of avant-gardism was in reality a kind of work, a long, obstinate and highly responsible work concerned with investigating the assumptions implicit in modernity" (93). In the context of postmodernity, punk writing enables her to literalise, spectacularise, and powerfully condense the semi-submerged patriarchal assumptions of the late twentieth-century United States. Her 'bad' writing, renegade punk girl, exploitation of the pornographic imagination, and mordant humour make her a social anti-realist, and a maker of the ironically named, feminist 'minor' literature.

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