

**DISCIPLINE AND ANARCHY: DISRUPTED CODES IN
KATHY ACKER'S *EMPIRE OF THE SENSELESS***

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ABSTRACT

Kathy Acker's novel, *Empire of the Senseless* (1988), investigates the relationship of discipline and anarchy in a postmodern Paris that has fallen to Algerian terrorists and libertine pirates. The competing principles of pain and pleasure, intentionality and impulse, control and freedom are inextricably linked in the novel. Acker's writing articulates a treatise of anarchism: she plunders the cultural storehouse of Western literature, liberating the classics through plagiarism; she violates every known taboo, revels in obscenity, smashes genre rules, and commits violence on her characters that would make the Marquis de Sade blanch. But like Sade, she displays a penchant for discipline as control as well as punishment. She envisions her novel as a three-part structure with a rather deliberate progression of effects: the deconstruction of the patriarchal order, the liberation that follows from an end to repression and inhibition, and the formation of a new society on the very ground of transgression. Anarchism eventually runs its course without resistance, entropically feeding on the fuel of stale and repressive social order until it is exhausted. And discipline carried to any restrictive extreme at last inspires revolt.

I like a look of Agony,
Because I know it's true—

Emily Dickinson, Poem #241

Good authors, too, who once knew
better words,
Now only use four-letter words
Writing prose.
Anything Goes.

Cole Porter, *Anything Goes*

A double-edged dagger, hilt up, on which is impaled a whorled and leafy rose. The rose, a heart, bleeds droplets. Around the blade and point are intertwined banners that read “Discipline and Anarchy.” This hand-drawn figure appears at the close of Kathy Acker’s *Empire of the Senseless* (1988), a book which she dedicates to her tattooist. Although this tattoo design is inscribed on the back of the book, the pain of its needle and the poison of its ink are felt throughout the novel. Acker drives the sword of pain through the rose of pleasure; she binds the cords of discipline and unties the knot that restrains anarchy. The iconography suggests that the competing principles of discipline and anarchy, intentionality and impulse, control and freedom are inextricably linked in the novel. The Pandora of postmodernism releases a flurry of evil and disease into a culture ready to receive it. Acker’s writing is anarchistic to the core: she plunders the cultural storehouse of Western literature, liberating the classics through plagiarism; she violates every known taboo, revels in obscenity, smashes genre rules, and commits violence on her characters that would make the Marquis de Sade blanch. But like Sade, she displays a penchant for discipline as control as well as punishment. Anarchism runs its course without resistance, entropically feeding on the fuel of stale and repressive social order until that fuel is exhausted. And discipline carried to any restrictive extreme will at last inspire revolt.

With the pain of her own writing in mind, Emily Dickinson declared that “The Attar from the Rose...is the gift of Screws” (Poem #675; *Final Harvest* 171). The belle of Amherst was no stranger to agony and violence in her work; literary form can only be painfully “expressed.” The writing of *Empire of the Senseless* more vigorously courts anarchy. The reader may well be appalled by the mayhem encountered on any page. But the text finally deports itself in a disciplined fashion. Acker claims in an interview that “it was the structure [of *Empire*] that really interested me—the three-part structure” (Friedman, “Conversation” 17). The question nags as to why a text so engrossed with disorderly behavior would be preeminently interesting to its author for its structure. Acker the plagiarist might want to lift a line from that most patriarchal poet of suburban Connecticut, Wallace Stevens: “This is form gulping after formlessness” (411). She envisions her novel as a triptych with a rather deliberate progression of effects: the deconstruction of the patriarchal order in “Elegy for the World of the Fathers,” the liberation that follows from an end to repression and inhibition in “Alone,” and the formation of a new society on the very ground of transgression in “Pirate Night.” Acker provides the structure’s rationale as follows:

The first part is an elegy for the world of patriarchy. I wanted to take the patriarchy and kill the father on every level. And I did that partially by finding out what was taboo and rendering it in words. The second part of the book concerns what society would look like if it weren’t defined by oedipal considerations and the taboos were no longer taboo. I went through every taboo, or tried to, to see what society would be like without these taboos... The last section, “Pirate Night,” is about wanting to get to a society that is taboo, but realizing it’s impossible. (Friedman, “Conversation” 17)

I want to discuss these three effects and the turbulence that accompanies each in turn. But Acker’s statement reveals something important about her methodology as

an artist. As the princess of violation and disruption, Acker can be expected to disregard the traditional rules of fiction. But an aimless thrashing of the novel form does not follow. Instead she claims adherence to the method of conceptual artists such as David Antin and William Burroughs. In an interview with Sylvère Lotringer, Acker argues that “Form is determined not by arbitrary rules, but by intention.” Her emphasis has been “on conceptualism, on intentionality” (*Hannibal Lecter* 3). On the one hand Acker rejects the plotting of conventional fiction writing and the proceduralism of some other avant-garde novelists as overly constrictive. On the other hand she finds reliance on impulse and intuition alone to be inadequate to her task. She writes “by process” (4), but finds the form of the novel in conceptualism. In this way the event of the novel as a whole can be orderly even though its many actions may be chaotic. Acker’s methodology thus weds impulse and intention. She envisions the collapse of the patriarchal order into a state of liberating and enabling anarchy as a function of the book’s structure. Her methodology is directly supportive of the concept of *Empire of the Senseless*, which is not unlimited anarchy but the intrinsic relation between discipline and anarchy, as the banner on the tattoo declares.

I. THE DECLINE OF ORDER: SADO-MASOCHISM

In “Elegy for the World of the Fathers” Acker contemplates the utter corruption of the patriarchal order, attacking monotheism, capitalism, the phallic power bestowed by Freud in the Oedipal myth, marriage as a “collective crime” (*Empire* 7), and the relegation of the sexual body to a commodity. Acker’s female protagonist, Abhor, is described as “part robot, and part black” (3). The character’s name and her cybernetic-minority status (derived from William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* [1984])¹ suggest the contempt, the abhorrence that patriarchal society has traditionally bestowed upon women, half-breeds, and the disenfranchised poor. Acker deliberately neglects to develop her character’s status as robot or black, which suggests that these are political identities —“sub-human” designations— against which Abhor must struggle as an individual. The initial chapters purport to provide the protagonist’s genealogy and early years, a gesture toward the *bildungsroman* which Acker quickly deconstructs. Part I of the novel is preceded by a tattoo drawing of a skull and rose branch bearing the legend “My Family Fortune.” Abhor’s paternal grandmother is a German-Jewish refugee fleeing Nazi persecution and the father-führer; upon her deliverance in Paris, she is immediately forced into child-prostitution. For Acker, who documents her performances in Times Square sex-shows during the 1970s, any sex within the patriarchal system becomes equated with money. Or, as literally stated by Abhor, “Sex was joined to money” (9).

Acker wastes no time exploring the primal taboos of incest in the first chapter, “Rape by the Father.” Abhor is already a victim of patriarchal moralism: “I knew I was evil because I was fucking” (11). Her teenage sexual activity inspires Daddy’s transgression. Her appeal (by telephone) to her mother hardly delays father’s actions because the female lacks the authority to enforce a taboo within the patriarchal order. Abhor’s reaction to her violation is typically complex: “Part of me wanted him and part of me wanted to kill him” (12). Western culture has of course punished women for both responses —admitting desire for the father, and patricide. Acker explores the

divergent and yet related responses of submission (desire) and revolt (hatred). In trying to enforce taboo the patriarchy has declared “Neither. Nor.” Abhor’s release from that order is her willingness to contemplate both the unthinkable desire for her father and the resentment for his unspeakable violation of her. She sees her oppression and her freedom in the same figure.

Daddy’s transgression of the moral code may not have been salutary for Abhor, but it makes an important contribution to her concept of social order:

Daddy left me no possibility of easiness. He forced me to live among nerves sharper than razor blades, to have no certainties. There was only roaming. My nerves hurt more and more. I despised those people, like my mother, who accepted easiness —morality, social rules. Daddy taught me to live in pain, to know there’s nothing else. I trusted him for this complexity. (10)

The moral code enforces an absolute distinction between “right” and “wrong.” It rewards conformity with “easiness,” an illusory sense of self-satisfaction. The world, approached from comfortably within these “social rules,” is simple. But for Abhor the simplicity of the moral code and those who adhere to it are despicable. Rather than endure the restrictions and submit to the governance of the patriarchy, she prefers to dwell in uncertainties and in pain. Abhor recognizes that to defy the dominant order is to invite discomfort, insecurity, and conflict. But no matter how much the dominant order rewards conformity, that in itself does not give it sole purchase of the truth in reality. The dominant order always seeks to suppress conflicting systems, ambiguity, and any form of disorderly conduct.² Ironically, Abhor finds in the amoral figure of her father the impetus to defy the oversimplification of the world, embrace pain, and seek out complexity. Just as her grandmother, charged with prostitution, realizes that “the Vice-Squad swore whatever the Vice-Squad swears in order to maintain the scheme of things. Which might or might not exist” (5), so Abhor realizes that the patriarchy has imposed a falsely simplified order to maintain its power. Her father’s transgression introduces her to a complexity in the world which is both more painful and more truthful.

Consistency in the narrative style of a novel orients the reader to the social order that the fiction describes. The sophistication and urbanity of the Jamesian narrator constantly reminds the reader of the Anglo-European aristocracy through which he moves. The folkloric and dialect quality of Samuel Clemens’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* locate the reader within a mid-American community and an unpretentious, populist milieu. Low-life confidence men and swindlers such as the king and the duke appropriate and mangle elevated discourse to comical effect: “I say orgies, not because it’s the common term, because it ain’t —obsequies bein’ the common term— but because orgies is the right term. Obsequies ain’t used in England no more, now—it’s gone out. We say orgies now, in England. Orgies is better, because it means the thing you’re after, more exact. It’s a word that’s made up out’n the Greek *orgo*, outside, open, abroad; and the Hebrew *jeesum*, to plant, cover up; hence *inter*. So, you see, funeral orgies is an open er public funeral” (134). Acker disturbs the confidence with which the reader ascertains the social order from narrative discourse. Such transgression of the boundaries between high and low art forms is a recognized tenet of postmodernism. Acker’s Abhor is supposedly illiterate because “being black,

she was uneducated" (*Empire* 201). She generally speaks in the patois of the urban teenager. But her language and intellectual engagement just as often smack of the political theorist or the psychoanalyst. Acker herself has been a student of the urban punk movement, left-wing political theory, and post-Freudian analysis, but the turbulent mixing of these discourses does violence upon the readerly conventions of fiction. The first-person narration in which Abhor accounts for her father's amoral upbringing provides a good example of such cross-coded discourse:

[H]e had no morals, for any morality presumes a society. Since my grandmother loved him, she saw no reason to teach him anything or that he should learn anything. This substitution of *primitivism* which must be *anarchic* (in its non-political sense) for *morality* gave my father his charm. His charm blinded not only his parents but even every old farty schoolteacher to both his complete lack of social awareness and of education. Politics, for my father, was, always, a hole. (8)

Abhor's defense of her father's primitivism (which she supposedly shares) and her attack on the educatory system of "old farty schoolteachers" that enforces both a moral code and social order is nevertheless couched in the abstract terminology and the structure of argument that suggests a higher standard of education. Acker charges that education is chiefly a measure of the individual's training in obedience to the dominant culture. In the same gesture she defeats the readerly conventions that have trained us to expect a consistent narrative style and characters that remain locked within the referents of a single social class.

The scrambling of levels of discourse in the novel reflects Acker's anarchistic methodology, undermining the reader's presuppositions of dominant-intellectual and subordinate-proletarian cultural positions. Acker combines the use of essay-like titles for several subsections of the novel, such as "3. Beyond The Extinction of Human Life" (31), with crude and frankly obscene passages: "'If you finance her fucking for money,' said my father whose IQ was 166, 'I'll let her do it.' My father knew his mother-in-law was the cheapest thing on earth, even cheaper than himself" (16). Her characters are just as likely to be pimps as economics professors and she challenges the social order that distinguishes too finely between the two. Intensive, poetic, and gratuitous obscenity, "almost as beautiful as a strand of my grandmother's cunt hair" (4), can be followed without pause by the high abstractions of literary theory:

The German Romantics had to destroy the same bastions as we do. Logocentrism and idealism, theology, all supports of the repressive society. Property's pillars. Reason which always homogenizes and reduces, represses and unifies phenomena or actuality into what can be perceived and so controlled. The subjects, us, are now stable and socializable. Reason is always in the service of the political and economic masters. It is here that literature strikes, at this base, where the concepts and actings of order impose themselves. (12)

This passage, no doubt plundered from her reading, appropriates theory in defense of Acker's radical poetics. Like the German Romantics or the anarchist who assassi-

nated President William McKinley at the Pan-American Exhibition in Buffalo, NY in 1901, Acker intends to shock (through obscenity) and upbraid (in theory) the bourgeoisie. For Acker, the purpose of literature is indeed to assault the authority figures of an imposed order. The conjunction of obscenity and literary theory so that one is no less capable of affective impact than the other, and the very introduction of a passage of commentary in the midst of an uneducated character's discourse, work to deconstruct (or fuck up) the reader's well-trained expectations for novelistic discourse.

But why stop there? Acker commends Sylvère Lotringer for introducing her to the "French philosophes" Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault: "I didn't really understand why I refused to use linear narrative; why my sexual genders kept changing; why basically I am the most disoriented novelist that ever existed." Their theory places "a whole language at my disposal... I know exactly what they're talking about. And I could go farther" (*Hannibal Lecter* 10). In addition to the conflicting modes of discourse in *Empire of the Senseless*, Acker's disorientation as a novelist compels the reader to abandon other orderly conventions of reception. The many irruptions in causality in the novel defeat the reader's understanding of why one event proceeds from another. This apparent disorder collides with the vestiges of argumentative structure and the hectoring tone of the narration that propels the reader through the three sections of the novel. A temporal uncertainty ensues from the setting of the novel in a future-imperfect world (after the sack of Paris by the Algerians), yet with many references to the institutions and insults of the Reagan Eighties.

One section of "Elegy for the World of the Fathers" carries the academic subtitle "1. A Degenerating Language" (53). Acker's novel attempts a daring break from the prison-house of patriarchal language, shattering signs and conventions as she goes. At times she makes her text unreadable, "a sign of nothing" (53). She interpolates text in Persian, an invasion of the Western literary tradition by an Eastern literature which few are capable of reading except in translation. The Persian text, which is read from right to left, literally disrupts the flow of her text in English from left to right. Although the Persian text is "unknowable" for most readers, it still signifies the arbitrariness of literary conventions. Logocentrism is indeed supportive of a repressive society.

Acker views the degeneration of language, the collapse of the rules that guide and restrain the writer, as a largely positive effect of the death of patriarchy. As a literary terrorist, she does her part in eroding standard English constructions and promoting slang expressions. The conditions of language, sexuality, and anarchy—the word, the body, and the body politic—are directly related: freedom in one sphere is an expression of freedom in the others; repression in one is signatory to repression in the others. This relation has a disturbing effect on daddy:

Here language was degraded. As daddy plumbed and plummeted [sic] away from the institute of marriage more and more downward deeply into the demimonde of public fake sex, his speech turned from the usual neutral and acceptable journalese most normal humans use as a stylus mediocris into... His language went through an indoctrination of nothingness, for sexuality had no more value in his world, until his language no longer had sense. Lack of meaning appeared as linguistic degradation. (17; Acker's ellipsis)

Daddy's "stylus mediocris" remains in force so long as he is bound to the moral strictures and social institutions that restrict his personal freedom. Such "neutral and acceptable journalese" is a commodity of exchange sanctioned and controlled by the social order, permitting little if any individual expression. Personal expression becomes equated with deviance because the sense-value isn't immediately transmittable. The degradation of daddy's language and sexuality is expressed in terms of a pirated text riddled with lacunae: "This is what daddy said to me while he was fucking me: 'Tradicional estilo de p... argentino. Q... es e. mas j... de t... los e... ntro d. [...].' He had become a Puerto Rican" (17). The unreadable Spanish text ironically codifies the qualities of traditional style in Latin America. Acker's anarchism acknowledges a lapse into "nothingness," the absence of rules and the disappearance of conventional values. Daddy's transgression of the taboo against incest consigns him to a subordinate and oppressed racial identity and to unintelligibility. But for Acker linguistic degradation is also linguistic freedom. Language confined to the transmission of codified values has no appeal. Language liberated from conventional meaning entertains at least the possibility of individual expression amidst disorder.

In order to understand the oedipal society, Acker devotes her attention to the Sadean obsession with dominance and punishment in the first part of *Empire of the Senseless*. As with her incestuous desires, Abhor experiences a strange attraction to the forces of control and obedience: "I saw a torturer. He was spending most of his time sticking electrodes on the genitals of men who protested against the government. He was paid to do what he was told to do because he had a job. I saw I wanted to be beaten up. I didn't understand" (51). A beating would confirm Abhor's sense of marginality in the oedipal world; pain insures her identity as renegade "other." But her confusion only reflects the role of sadism within patriarchal culture. Sade was imprisoned or confined to asylums for 27 years, punished for what society called the deviance of his devotion to sexual violence and physical discipline. His pleasure was his deviance, the violation of socially-adjudicated rules and inhibitions. Michel Foucault points out that "in Sade, sex is without any norm or intrinsic rule that might be formulated from its own nature; but it is subject to the unrestricted law of a power which itself knows no other law but its own.... [T]his exercise carries it to a point where it is no longer anything but a unique and naked sovereignty: an unlimited right of all-powerful monstrosity" (*History* 149). For Sade the denial of inhibiting regulation leads to despotism. Abhor recognizes that the perennial devotees of sadistic punishment are those regimes most concerned with enforcing conformity to phallogocentrism. The torturer operates within an economy of instruction; one is paid to do what one is told. Sadism is both attractive for its deviance and repulsive as a weapon beloved by right-wing dictatorships. Acker makes that connection explicit in her comments on *Empire*: she turned to "the Marquis de Sade because he shed so much light on our Western sexual politics that his name is still synonymous with an activity more appropriately named 'Reaganism.' Something of that sort" ("A Few Notes" 35). Sodomasochism, which derives sexual pleasure from simultaneously inflicting pain and enduring punishment, informs Abhor's reaction: "This isn't enough. Nothing is enough, only nothing. I want to get to what I don't know which is discipline. In other words I want to be mad, not senseless, but angry beyond memories and reason. I want to be mad" (51). Abhor's quest for anarchy, which she cannot know within the patriarchal

system, leads her in the track of discipline. Although a half-robot, Abhor wishes to depart from the empire of the senseless where her behavior is automatized—performed unconsciously—in order to emerge among the “mad,” in revolt against reason.³

In the revolution that closes Part I of the novel, Algerians lead by a one-armed proletarian guerrilla named Mackandal wrest Paris from the control of François Mitterrand, the bourgeoisie, and the French government.⁴ “Paris was in chaos. Thousands of Algerians were walking freely. Ragged. Dirty. Sticks. Dolls. Voodoo” (67). Acker considers the only remaining source of resistance to Western capitalism and its homogenized culture to be the Muslim world. “I thought, for Westerners today, for us, the other is now Muslim. In my book, when the Algerians take over Paris, I have a society not defined by the oedipal taboo” (“A Few Notes” 35). The principal methods by which the French middle class retain their exploitive control of the African labor force are the media and disease. The Algerians chant “With this cry—MASTER—reap your profits in us, out of us. With this cry, by means of your press, press and oppress us” (70). The inescapable saturation of the media controls the minds of the masses, disciplining them to their social responsibilities and enslaving them to materialist needs. But in Acker’s near-future world, disease controls the proletarian body: the Algerians protest, “No longer will you work in our muscles and our nerves creating herpes and AIDS, by doing so controlling all union, one and forever: being indivisible and narcissistic to the point of fascism, you have now closed down shop” (71). Sexually transmitted diseases become a device of the moralist middle class in suppression of the proletariat. Their “union” is corrupted, their bodies are stigmatized. Pervasive STDs are an intrinsic form of punishment that holds the Algerians in check. Mackandal’s response is a terrorist campaign that involves the poisoning of the Parisian middle class using readily available herbs: “Poison entered the apartments of the bourgeoisie. There is a way to stop guns and bombs. There’s no way to stop poison which runs like water. The whites had industrialized polluted the city for purposes of their economic profit to such an extent that even clean water was scarce. They had to have servants just to get them water and these servants, taught by Mackandal, put poison in the water” (77). As the bourgeoisie sought to discipline the proletariat through the transmission and stigmatization of a naturally-occurring disease, the revolution of the dispossessed is fostered by the introduction of a natural toxin. The terrorism succeeds by striking at the weaknesses created by the bourgeoisie’s exploitation of their human and natural resources. Disease as discipline confronts its twin in poison as anarchic revolt.

II. DOMINION OF ANARCHY: BREAKING THE CODE

The second part of the novel, “Alone,” explores the possibility of society in which phallogocentric domination “on the political, economic, social, and personal levels” has collapsed (“A Few Notes” 35). The section is preceded by a tattoo-drawing of a storm-buffed schooner with sails furled, pitching through the roiling waves. The legend below reads “The Deep” (88). Acker’s figure for individual freedom from social restraint is the pirate. “Sailors leave anarchy in their drunken wakes” (113). But the turbulence that follows in the wake of these (now frequently female) pirates can be as

creative as it is destructive. In a chapter titled "The Beginning of Criminality / The Beginning of Morning," Acker advances an aesthetic and political theory of creative disruption. Criminality as a violation of the established law is regarded as destructive; but criminality in an environment of instability has the capacity for genesis—the beginning of morning. During the dark centuries of European colonization and enslavement of Africa, the Algerian coast became a stronghold of pirates. The oppressive rule and the claim to human property by Europeans fosters "criminal" transgression of property law. In the Algerian revolution (1954-1962), those Muslims who fought the war for independence to dislodge the French from Africa turned criminal revolt into nation-building. Abhor proposes that "All good sailors espouse and live in the material simplicity which denies the poverty of the heart. Reagan's heart is empty. A sailor is a human who has traded poverty for the riches of imaginative reality" (114). Acker's pirates are also equated with artists whose creative powers enable them to transcend materiality. "Such an act constitutes destruction of society thus is criminal. Criminal, continuously fleeing, homeless, despising property, unstable like the weather, the sailor will wreck any earthbound life" (114). The artist, the sailor, and the revolutionary challenge the Western illusion of material permanence and ownership. Their production of the new arises only out of the destruction of the old: "Though the sailor longs for a home, her or his real love is change. Stability in change, change in stability occurs only imaginarily. No roses grow on sailors' graves" (114). Acker proposes a generative instability.

Acker challenges the literalist who perceives order only in stable forms and unchanging institutions. These literalists are invariably shocked when confronted by the sudden obsolescence of a familiar order because they have denied the process of change. They cannot understand that *an* order is always impermanent, and as a limiting and limited case, not to be taken as *the* order of things. It emerges from a vast array of possible orders—as much by accident as by action. Like a wave it eventually dissipates, possibly supplanted by another formation. One proponent of "stability in change" is the male pirate, Thivai. While searching for a whore, he declares, "If there is any variability to reality—functions which cannot be both exactly and simultaneously measured—reality must simultaneously be ordered and chaotic or simultaneously knowable and unknowable by humans" (102-103). Just as the "beginning of criminality" (or the violation of an apparent order) can also be the "beginning of morning" (or the creation of a new system), so the presence of variability in reality signifies the simultaneity of order and chaos. It takes a pirate mind to appreciate that order and chaos, the measurable and the unmeasurable, are not exclusive to one another in experience but co-present, the one emanating from the other in continuous change and exchange.

Acker's pirates question whether "the demand for an adequate mode of expression is senseless" (113). The pursuit of an adequate means of expression leads to conventional discourse, its methods and rules governed by the empire. The unique expression of the self is imprisoned, rendered senseless to the individual in being made accessible to and consumable by the many. Acker challenges the function of adequate language through the tattoo as writing and the flagrant disregard for convention and decorum in a taboo language. For Acker, "writing the body" represents a profoundly ambiguous system of signification and is thus less susceptible to

commodification and devaluation by the empire.⁵ The arrival of Abhor and her newly-acquired friend, Agone (a male Cuban sailor) at a tattoo parlor allows for a short disquisition on the etymology and cultural history of the art form:

Cruel Romans had used tattoos to mark and identify mercenaries, slaves, criminals, and heretics.

For the first time, the sailor felt he had sailed home.

Among the early Christians, tattoos, stigmata indicating exile, which at first had been forced on their flesh, finally actually served to enforce their group solidarity. The Christians began voluntarily to acquire these indications of tribal identity. Tattooing continued to have ambiguous social value; today a tattoo is considered both a defamatory brand and a symbol of a tribe or of a dream. (130)

The tattoo can be both an artistic expression and an identification mark. It is an embellishment of the body through design, and an ineradicable injection of poison ink under the skin. The Romans used the tattoo on the early Christians, and the Nazis on European Jews, to identify and control the heretic and pariah. The sailor welcomes this identifying mark of difference. He celebrates his outcast status. That writing which facilitated the control and purging of the undesirable becomes an expression of group identity. The double value of “defamatory brand” and “symbol of a tribe,” purging and bonding through identification of difference and sameness, a painfully forced marking and a defiant self-expression makes the tattoo an ideal signifying system for Acker. In searching for a myth in *Empire of the Senseless*, Acker says that the “most positive thing in the book is the tattoo. It concerns taking over, doing your own sign-making. In England... the tattoo is very much a sign of a certain class and certain people, a part of society that sees itself as outcast, and shows it. For me tattooing is very profound. The meeting of body and, well, the spirit—it’s a *real* kind of art, it’s on the skin” (Friedman, “Conversation” 17-18). The Algerians, pirates, and sexual pariahs in the novel seize control by taking as their own the very means by which the empire has suppressed them. The tattoo is a figure for Acker’s art: a non-linear writing that foils the plot-driven causality of traditional fiction; an all-over writing that entwines its subjects rather than pursues its conclusion; a writing of the body (either female or male) expressive of sexuality and the visceral as opposed to the rational, concentrated mind. The tattoo-drawings that appear in the novel—at the start of each section, and at the conclusion—are more than illustrations: they are expressions of the artist’s control of her medium, signs of her revolutionary discourse.

The disquisition on tattoos in the novel concludes with the declaration, “In Tahitian, writing is ‘ta-tau’; the Tahitians write directly on human flesh” (130). On the equation of writing and tattooing Acker says, “I’m fascinated with the relationship between language and body... I’m interested in the material aspect of the tattoo... Erotic texts at their best—I don’t mean pornographic, which is something else—are very close to the body; they’re following desire. That’s not always true of the writer, whereas it’s always true that the tattooist has to follow the body. That’s the medium of tattoo” (Friedman, “Conversation” 18). Acker’s novels follow desire, and they seek a “language of the unconscious.” Intervening in the action as the tattooer approaches Agone with a knife, Acker calmly describes the crisis in language: “That part of our

being (mentality, feeling, physicality) which is free of all control let's call our 'unconscious.' Since it's free of control, it's our only defence against institutionalized meaning, institutionalized language, control, fixation, judgement, prison" (133-34). Acker wishes to emulate the freedom of the unconscious in her writing, to pursue desire without arresting it, to wrest language from its civilizing discipline and reinvest it with an anarchic impulse.

Acker reflects on her efforts to free language from institutional control: "Ten years ago it seemed possible to destroy language through language: to destroy language which normalizes and controls by cutting that language. Nonsense would attack the empire-making (empirical) empire of language, the prisons of meaning" (134). The cut-up texts of William Burroughs, for instance, employ aleatory operations to defeat the writer's culturally infused determinations and thus oppose the empire's senseless blague with nonsense. To some degree Acker's plagiarism as an excision of classic texts participates in this conceptualism. "But this nonsense," she recognizes, "since it depended on sense, simply pointed back to the normalizing institutions." The binary opposition imperils avant-garde writing as simply the negation of conventional discourse, defined by its opposition to the institutional code without actually eliminating those codes. Acker prefers instead to attack the codes themselves through speech that is not unintelligible but forbidden, to speak the unspeakable:

What is the language of the "unconscious"? (If this ideal unconscious or freedom doesn't exist: pretend that it does, use fiction, for the sake of survival, all of our survival.) Its primary language must be taboo, all that is forbidden. Thus, an attack on the institutions of prison via language would demand the use of a language or languages which aren't acceptable, which are forbidden. Language, on one level, constitutes a set of codes and social and historical agreements. Nonsense doesn't per se break down the codes; speaking precisely that which the codes forbid breaks the codes. (134)⁶

The prison houses and asylums are suffused with the shouts and screams of their inmates. The system has no need to suppress the nonsensical protests of the damned and convicted. But these institutions forbid the subversive communication that passes secretly from cell to cell—plotting the demise of the guardians of civilization and the downfall of the warden of culture. Punishment is the silencing and the isolation of the law-breaker. Acker smashes codes and disrupts societal agreements through the insinuations and assaults of proscribed speech. Her achievement lies not in opposing the linguistic code with meaningless cipher but in forcing the repeal of prohibitions through relentless violation—the code must then be revised to permit what it previously denied.

The literary code that Acker most flagrantly violates is genre. She upsets the literary hierarchy of genres that designates the linguistic difficulty of poetry or the subtle aestheticism of the *künstlerroman* as elite modes and the world-making of science fiction, the action-adventure novel, and the sexual arousal of pornography as populist modes. Her method in this postmodern leveling of high and low cultural signifiers is the mixing of familiar characteristics of these genres when the literary code would normally demand their separation. Leslie Dick points out that genres acquire their power

through the formulaic assertion of rules: “a specific genre can be an ‘enabling device,’ a formal structure that allows and controls and prevents meaning, a syntax” (208). Acker frequently invokes the syntax of genres only to thrust the pelvis of a taboo language at them. The pirates’ quest ends in pornographic satisfaction, as the obscene reality of buccaneering confronts *Treasure Island*: “the pirate who had been fucked bent over the child tightly bound in ropes, already raped. His hands reached for her breasts. While sperm which resembled mutilated oysters dropped out of his asshole, he touched the breasts” (21). The figurative language only further confounds genre rules. In response to the rigidity of literary genres, the artist can (according to Leslie Dick) “isolate and extract forms from the institution, without getting involved in the institution” (209). Acker’s piracy certainly extracts cultural booty from high and low genres, but her aesthetic of the taboo demands a frontal assault on the institution; or as Dick concludes, “it’s more like scavenging, ripping the genre off. It’s making use of some of the elements of the genre, while discarding the implicit values of the genre as institution. It’s destructive, and disrespectful of the genre, which it treats like an abandoned car ...” (209). As an example, Acker introduces the character of Sinbad the Sailor among her rogues in the second part of *Empire*. Although lifted from the oriental tale, he describes his family history in the code of science fiction: “My father, I remembered, came from Alpha-Centauri. His head, the case with most Centaurians, had been green and flea — or dried-drool— shaped. Unlike him, my mother, a moon-child, was just a good-for-nothing. She was beautiful by night-time or lightless standards. Like the moon which hides behind the sun, mommy kept her brains hidden” (154). This passage takes advantage of the science-fiction genre’s capacity for invention — any combination is possible in a new world— but still attacks the present code of gender inequity which relegates female intelligence to pale reflection of the dominant bull-Centaur. Sinbad reflects that he is thus a product of “cross-racial union. Multi-racial marriages usually lead to disaster” (154). In crossing the codes of genres, Acker challenges the institutional enforcement of racial and literary homogeneity. Her multi-generic fiction is one method by which the institutional code of language is broken.

III. HER RULES: RE-INVENTING THE CODE

In the third part of *Empire of the Senseless*, “Pirate Night,” Acker’s renegades are questing after a “society that is taboo,” that is established on the very ground of transgressive acts. This section begins by plagiarizing *Huckleberry Finn*, which Acker describes as “one of the main texts about freedom in American culture” (“A Few Notes” 36). Thivai and his gay friend Mark (Huck and Tom) go to elaborate lengths to liberate the imprisoned Abhor (Jim), who is part black and referred to as a “runaway nigger” (*Empire* 212). In Acker’s transformation, Abhor’s enslavement is not to racism but to sexism; after much effort to spring her from prison, Abhor walks out of the jailhouse unmolested and determines to form a motorcycle gang. Male assistance in breaking the chains of sexism is worse than ineffectual; on the other hand, breaking out of the restraints of the old order won’t suffice to establish a new society. Abhor forms a motorcycle gang “because motorcycle gangs don’t let women ride bikes” (212). Rather than protest her exclusion from a male-dominated activity or attempt to

dissolve the institution for its discrimination, she acts on her own to establish a social order based on that tabooed behavior. In one of many ruptures of causality and probability in the novel, Abhor—lacking the cash for a new or used bike—simply “finds” the motorcycle, gasoline, and oil that she needs: “I turned around, walked into the woods, and found a Honda which was only a year old, prerevolutionary, and in perfect shape except for one cracked mirror” (211). Abhor’s unlikely discovery occurs outside of the capitalist economy of labor, wages, and the purchase of commodities; and it also violates the fictional economy of motivation that demands a reason for the motorcycle’s presence when and where it’s desired. Launched into a taboo society, the forbidden is not only permissible but unquestioned.

Abhor’s motorcycle adventures represent the struggles involved in the creation of a taboo society. Never having been allowed to ride a motorcycle, Abhor becomes frustrated as she attempts to engage the motorcycle’s clutch properly: “I got angry at the clutch and called him or her a shitsucker. This showed that both men and women do evil. But this knowledge and understanding didn’t help me deal with my clutch” (213). Acker toys with the politically-correct injunction against sexist language, in particular those instances when the speaker adopts the masculine pronoun to refer to someone whose sex cannot be identified. As a recently-published handbook for writers advises, “If you want to avoid sexist language in your writing, follow the guidelines in Chart 99. Also, you can avoid sexism by avoiding demeaning, outdated stereotypes, such as *women are bad drivers* or *men are bad cooks*” (Troika 400). Abhor hopes to shatter the stereotype that a woman is incapable of riding a motorcycle. But the clutch—which obviously has no gender as an inanimate object—frustrates her efforts. Both genders are capable of becoming angry and resorting to profanity. Following the non-discriminatory principle of non-sexist language, Acker (through the persona of Abhor) admits that her taboo society needn’t be theorized as a feminist utopia in which violence and evil have been completely expunged. The world of “Pirate Night” puts the brakes on such feminist fantasias as Abhor concerns herself with the challenges of vehicular realpolitik. Abhor learns that “a clutch controls power; to get more power, you have to control power. That was good” (213). Only recently freed from patriarchal captivity, Abhor learns to master power on her own, for her own purposes. She refuses to identify evil with a single class of oppressor, nor does she deny the continued need for discipline and control.

Abhor’s male accomplices are skeptical, however, of her ability to ride because she doesn’t know the “rules of road behaviour. They’re found in a book called *The Highway Code*” (213). Her demonstration of individual capacity and self-governance runs afoul of this instance of “prerevolutionary” regulation and restriction of freedom. Abhor declares, “I had never heard of any rules so I didn’t know that there were any, so I went back into the woods where I found a wet copy of *The Highway Code*. This was an English book, dated 1986. I had the CODE so now I could drive” (213). In *Elements of Semiology* Roland Barthes points out that the Highway Code is one of the most intractable of semiological systems: “by reason of its very purpose, which is the immediate and unambiguous understanding of a small number of signs, the Highway Code cannot tolerate any neutralization” (84). Neutralization refers to “the phenomenon whereby a relevant opposition loses its relevance, that is, ceases to be significant” (83). Thus the opposition of red and green as signifiers and their signified

behavior must be maintained. The Highway Code is irreproachable. Or as Barthes suggests, it “must be immediately and unambiguously legible if it is to prevent accidents” (80). Barthes describes the Highway Code as one of the most rigid and limiting of semiological systems because, unlike the fashion system or literature, it forbids polysemy. It is a distinctly masculine, authoritarian system that regulates by establishing arbitrary but inflexible conventions. Abhor learns to ride by feel and intuition; the masculine code is a deterrent to her feminine experience.⁷ She observes, “Its first rule for bikers said that a biker should keep his (I had to substitute *her* here, but I didn’t think that changed its sense) bike in good condition. Since this bike wasn’t mine, I could keep her in any condition. Since this is only commonsense and commonsense is in my head, I tore out this section of *The Highway Code* and tossed it into a ditch” (213). The masculine Code’s presumptions of appropriate gender behavior, its discriminatory language, and its property fetishes don’t deter Abhor from being a free-thinker or acting on empirical observation. Nevertheless, her fitful attempts to follow the Code rather than discard it entirely lead her to vehicular chaos. The restrictions of the Code in a postrevolutionary era provoke anarchic behavior.

No theme is more prevalent in issues of *Outlaw Biker* magazine than the libertarian beckonings of the open road. And yet Abhor halts at the intersection between transgressive-taboo behavior that acknowledges the Code in its violation of it and a fully invested, self-determined behavior that invents its own customs. In order to disrupt the male Code of the Motorcycle Gang that forbids the woman driver, Abhor must first be initiated into the Rules of the Road. She pays literal attention to

Rule 55.

c) Watch your speed; you may be going faster than you think.

She assumes that she “was driving correctly by staring down at the speedometer” (218). Following the rules, when the rules don’t mediate female experience, has its dangerous consequences; the result is a rear-end collision with a truck. Following the code prevents following the road. As the injured truck driver approaches menacingly, Abhor realizes that one paradigm of behavior has been destroyed by the revolution though no other has yet taken its place: “I was confused about what was happening because there were no more rules. Perhaps I was on the crossroads of Voodoo” (218). The remnants of patriarchal order and its unambiguous Code are thus incompetent in the world of orderly disorder into which Abhor has rushed and from which a new Code has yet to be created. The monologic, hermeneutically-forbidding Highway Code has given way to the terrible beauty of a free polysemy. Abhor has entered the domain of crossed signals and Voodoo intersections: “One road was that the old man was trying to give me an important message. The other road was that the old man was trying to kill me” (218-19). Rather than the neutralization of opposing signals, Abhor encounters the ambiguously legible, potentially fatal, crossing of the blinking yellow light.

In denouncing the impositions of patriarchal order, Abhor (most probably speaking for Acker) issues the politically-charged pronouncement that “the problem with following rules is that, if you follow rules, you don’t follow yourself. Therefore, rules prevent, dement, and even kill the people who follow them. To ride a dangerous machine, or an animal or human, by following rules, is suicidal. Disobeying rules is the

same as following rules cause it's necessary to listen to your heart" (219).⁸ Acker endorses an essential principle of anarchism, that the impulse to personal freedom more frequently leads to salutary and creative behavior, whereas authoritarian strictures imposed on individuals more frequently lead to violent and destructive behavior. In their essay on the discourse of the Paris Commune of 1871, Donald Bruce and Terry Butler point out that anarchy has been historically "synonymous with the notion of chaos understood to mean 'utter confusion, the absence of all order, disorder.'" In the Paris Commune, however, and in the postrevolutionary Algerian-controlled Paris of Acker's *Empire*, the "actual political notion... should rightly be understood as the *radical decentralization of authority*: in other words a type of *order within disorder* (Bruce and Butler 231, their italics). Abhor's repudiation of externally-imposed authority in favor of listening to the heart implies a commitment to spontaneity, self-discipline, and self-organization. "From now on *The Highway Code* no longer mattered. I was making up the rules" (*Empire* 222). The anarchy of Acker's postrevolutionary Paris conforms most closely to the definition of chaos that provides for an intrinsically-originating creative dimension, that is, as an "*order [which] arises out of chaotic systems.*"⁹ Drawing here on the propositions of Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers in *Order Out of Chaos*, Bruce and Butler argue that in a community in which self-organization and spontaneity are emphasized, "an explanation of chaos envisages (physical and social) systems which are capable of renewing themselves. Instead of falling victim to the inescapable entropic diffusion of all energy concentrations in the physical and social universes (as postulated in the second law of thermodynamics), this notion of chaos proposes a theory of renewal by which complexity arises out of simpler physical and social systems as a response to surrounding conditions" (235-36). In the chaotic social system of "Pirate Night," Acker theorizes a generative anarchism that initially hastens the collapse of repressive systems characterized by a simple homogeneous order, and in the erosion of closed-system boundaries, has the negentropic capacity to invigorate the newly opened environment. Abhor's declaration that "I was making up the rules" represents the possibility of self-organization and renewed complexity in an anarchic, heterogeneous society. Acker's confidence in the creative capacity of anarchy invokes a comparison with the poet Arthur Rimbaud,¹⁰ whose call for a "'dérèglement de tous les sens' constitutes a chaotic subversion of order the aim of which is to let *emerge* a spontaneous and as-yet-unknown order" (Bruce and Butler 236, their italics). Abhor's world suggests as well a "twofold vibration" (to borrow the title of Raymond Federman's novel) comprised of sadism and masochism, the instigation of anarchism and the declaration of self-governance, spontaneity and organization. She reflects, "I'm the piercer and the pierced. Then I thought about all that had happened to me, my life, and all that was going to happen to me, the future: chance and my endurance. Discipline creates endurance" (224). A new order emerges from the subversion of the old; anarchy and discipline are closely entwined. Anarchy permits the irruption of chance that may destroy life, but discipline fosters the endurance that sustains life.

Abhor's creativity takes the form of rewriting the authoritarian *Code* as a book called *The Arabian Steeds* because "My heart said these words. Whatever my heart now said was absolutely true" (219). Purportedly illiterate, Abhor draws pictographic images over the familiar diamond-shaped warning signs of the *Code* that are repro-

duced in the novel, icons of a Western industrialized, petroleum-dependent, contaminated, asphalt-topped, inflammable society. Abhor converts, deciphers, and performs a hermeneutical transformation of the warning signs of an industrialized world in collapse into the vitalism, free will, and Bedouin-nomadic values of North African cavaliers: the motorcycle becomes Arabian steed; the partitioned and industrialized city of Paris becomes open desert; cold metal becomes hot sand; and masculine becomes feminine. Thus, for example, the icon for “corrosive” (a property of acids that causes the gradual destruction of metals, and so inimical to an industrialized society) is translated as “Let anger be anger: neither self-hatred nor self-infliction. Let the anger of the Arabian steeds be changed through that beauty which is blood into beauty” (221). In Acker’s conception of the postrevolutionary nomadic social order anger isn’t neutralized—as the chemist treats an acid with a base—but transformed in a salutary, sublimated manner. The corrosive aspect of anger, as a warning sign of the entropic breakdown in the steel sinews of industrialized Western culture, becomes a proclamation against a psychological and emotional breakdown in the individual through self-hatred. Anger is transformed, not neutralized in this post-patriarchal society from self-infliction to self-definition. Abhor’s adoption of the nomadic creed expresses the release or de-institutionalization of the individual from metallic cocoon of Western culture. Here Acker appears to draw upon concepts of “deterritorialization” and “smooth space” in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, especially in their discussion of the nomad: “the nomads make the desert no less than they are made by it. They are vectors of deterritorialization. They add desert to desert, steppe to steppe, by a series of local operations whose orientation and direction endlessly vary... The variability, the polyvocality of directions is an essential feature of smooth spaces of the rhizome type” (382). The free range, self-definition, and polyvocality of nomadic life express Abhor’s liberation from and transformation of the fixities, entrophobia, and hortatory univocality of Western society.¹¹

With something of the air of a cartomancer turning over the last card at a reading, Abhor declares, “I drew a final picture which summed up all the other pictures.” This picture appears in the text as the tattoo design of the rose-piercing sword, around which is the legend proclaiming *Discipline and Anarchy*. The enlacing banner does in fact summarize the interdependent domains of Acker’s novel: sexuality and language; political identity and individualism; sadism and masochism; order and disorder; striated and smooth space; literary and subliterate genres; masculinity and femininity. Acker’s tattoo of the piercer and the pierced entwined slashes at the designation of one component or subject position as the dominant and the other as the subordinate. She refuses to replace the crumbling patriarchal order in an oppositional hierarchy with a feminist-utopian world that merely reverses the polarity of values. Acker finds that even in the domain of anarchy—in nomadic space, after the disruption of the state apparatus, where women ride motorcycles—there must be discipline present. Just as Abhor attains her feminine identity through the realization of her anger, and in the chaos of the postrevolutionary state a self-governing system reveals itself, so discipline and anarchy are recognized as interdependent functions. Discipline without anarchy is repressive; discipline in anarchy promotes endurance. Anarchy without discipline is destructive; anarchy in discipline promotes creativity. Spontaneity *and* organization. Beauty *and* violence. A rose and a sword.

Notes

- ¹ Brian McHale carefully examines Acker's appropriation and rewriting of material from Gibson's *Neuromancer* as a form of blank parody distinct to postmodernism in "POSTcyberMOD-ERNpunkISM," in his *Constructing Postmodernism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992) 225-42. McHale's essay is included with modification in *Storming the Reality Studio*, ed. Larry McCaffery (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1991) 308-23.
- ² In his discussion of the "antihegemonic" tendencies of Acker's fiction, "Expectations of Difference: Kathy Acker's Regime of the Senseless," Joseph Natoli pursues a similar line of argument regarding her refusal of clarity, cogency, and orderly behavior. Acker creates "an empire of the senseless only because her constructions are wary of sense and its empire, only because sense is reward for following an order already established to communicate sense. A formation of her own signs, a putting an ending to her own following of that arrangement of signs she is already producing *within* as well as already produced *by*, and a devising in a way that the reader begins to construct and not to follow, a creation of desire so as to uncode desire—this is Acker's empire of the senseless" (*Mots d'Ordre* 140-41).
- ³ Arthur F. Redding offers a more thorough evaluation of the interplay of sado-masochism and disgust in "Bruises, Roses: Masochism and the Writing of Kathy Acker."
- ⁴ For a further disquisition on the Algerian revolution by Acker, see her *Algeria: A Series of Invocations Because Nothing Else Works* (1984).
- ⁵ Greg Lewis Peters asserts in "Dominance and Subversion in Kathy Acker" that "Acker takes [Hélène] Cixous's concept of 'writing the body' very seriously indeed. Her texts are attempts to make the abstract physical through ('through' meaning literally in one side and out the other) the body, giving a visceral form to the feminine writing hypothesized by Cixous and Luce Irigaray" (150). Likewise, Ellen G. Friedman in "'Now Eat Your Mind': An Introduction to the Works of Kathy Acker" argues that for Acker "the body, particularly the female body, becomes the site of revolution. In this regard, Acker, perhaps more directly than many other women writers, creates the feminine texts hypothesized by Hélène Cixous" (39). The tattoo thus becomes the central figure equating the body with the text.
- ⁶ This rather Foucauldian passage may be an instance of Acker's infamous "plagiarism." As she remarks in her interview with Friedman, "I did use a number of other texts to write [*Empire*], though the plagiarism is much more covered, hidden. Almost all the book is taken from other texts" ("Conversation" 16). Michel Foucault, of course, has had much to say about language and the prison. One passage from "The Discourse on Language" seems directly relevant to Acker's concern with taboo: "In a society such as our own we all know the rules of *exclusion*. The most obvious and familiar of these concerns what is *prohibited*. We know perfectly well that we are not free to say just anything, that we cannot simply speak of anything, when we like or where we like; not just anyone, finally, may speak of just anything. We have three types of prohibition, covering objects, ritual with its surrounding circumstances, the privileged or exclusive right to speak of a particular subject; these prohibitions interrelate, reinforce and complement each other, forming a complex web, continually subject to modification. I will note simply that the areas where this web is most tightly woven today, where the danger spots are most numerous, are those dealing with politics and sexuality. It is as though discussion, far from being a transparent, neutral element, allowing us to disarm sexuality and to pacify politics, were one of those privileged areas in which they exercised some of their more awesome powers. In appear-

ance, speech may well be of little account, but the prohibitions surrounding it soon reveal its links with desire and power" (*Archaeology of Knowledge* 216).

⁷ Peters observes in "Dominance and Subversion," "In *Empire*, Abhor... is imprisoned linguistically and sexually as well as literally. She is eventually freed from literal prison to form her own, one-cyborg motorcycle gang. In this world without patriarchy and taboo, she creates chaos by attempting to drive on the highway according to the rules of the Highway Code, computing stopping distances and measuring speed while other vehicles crash all around her. She is metaphorically learning the codes of a language that has no semantics to accommodate her. Just as Acker explodes patriarchal language by reinventing/plagiarizing its sacred texts, so Abhor's actions reveal the fundamental uselessness of any male code to express a specifically female experience. That both Acker and Abhor reject the spirit of the codes while working within the letter of them is one more form of capitulation, but a reasoned capitulation that is subversive in intent" (154-55).

⁸ One wonders just what it means to ride a human by the rules. What equipment would be called for? What injuries might result?

⁹ See Prigogine and Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos*.

¹⁰ As an indication that Acker is enamored with the figure of Rimbaud, she includes a fictionalized biography of the symbolist poet, "Rimbaud," as the first section of *In Memoriam to Identity* (1990).

¹¹ For an interesting application of the principle of the nomad and smooth space in Deleuze and Guattari to Acker's earlier novel, *Don Quixote* (1986), see Douglas Shields Dix, "Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote*: Nomad Writing."

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