

Kathy Acker and Transnationalism

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Edited by

Polina Mackay and Kathryn Nicol

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To Kathy Acker, that wandering mind who left us more dazed than before.



Kathy Acker with Ellen G. Friedman on Acker's 41st birthday.
Courtesy of Friedman.

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FOREWORD

KATHY ACKER: WANDERING JEW

ELLEN G. FRIEDMAN

The Germans are always around.¹
The kid said he was Jewish.²

This volume on travel and global and transnational considerations in the texts of Kathy Acker is among the most sophisticated literary criticism produced on her work. It captures a great deal of the complexities and nuances alive in Acker's treatments of these issues. In this foreword, I include comments on these pieces in an essay that begins in the personal.

For less than a decade, from the second half of the 1980s to the end of 1994, I knew Kathy Acker fairly well. I included her in a book I edited with Miriam Fuchs called *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction* that came out in 1989 from Princeton University Press, and in my own essays in *PMLA* and *Modern Fiction Studies*. Along with Fuchs, I also edited the 1989 volume on three avant-garde women writers for the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*—Marguerite Young, Christine Brooke-Rose, and Kathy Acker. That issue of *RCF* includes an interview, which is widely available online and cited several times in this current volume. It was that interview that gave impetus to our relationship. I met her at the Chelsea Hotel, an icon of New York City literary bohemia, where she was staying. We spent the day together, first doing the business of the interview and then just hanging out.

The writing I did on her reflected the feminist postmodernism I practiced then. Unlike other living writers I have published on—among them, Joyce Carol Oates, Joan Didion, Christine Brooke-Rose, and Marguerite Young—who seemed satisfied with the contained contact of interviews, occasional lunches and dinner parties, letters, or in the case of Didion, no contact at all, Acker entered my life insistently and demanded friendship. During another day in New York City, Kathy told me that she was not going to reconcile with her estranged sister because the sister

wanted to bring her children to their first meeting. I remember trying to explain to Kathy why her sister wanted to bring her children. I hope that meeting happened, though I have my doubts. Her sister's request felt to Kathy like personal rejection—a distancing strategy when Kathy craved sisterly closeness. At the 1988 Annual Writer's Conference at the College of New Jersey where I teach, I invited her to read and conduct a workshop. I was also teaching a contemporary U.S. literature class centered on her texts that semester. With Kathy's permission, I invited my students to a soiree at my house, where she was staying. It was April 18th, her 41st birthday, and I ordered a Carvel ice cream cake with her name on it, something I did for my kids' birthdays. I dimmed the lights, we sang Happy Birthday, and she blew out the candles—totally delighted. By 1994 our friendship was more-or-less defunct. Together we had attended a Loyola University conference on her work. She invited me to her hotel room and then suddenly left it for about half an hour, requesting that I wait for her. A few weeks later she phoned, asking whether I took her Mont Blanc pen that was on the desk in the hotel room. I told her that I remembered seeing it but that I didn't take it. That was the last communication I had from her.

In front of me as I write this essay is a photograph a student took at Kathy's birthday party in my house. In the photo, Kathy, buzzed hair bleached blonde with black fringe bangs, is looking directly at the camera, flirting with it, managing the image it would produce. Acker's extreme self-consciousness, her attempt to direct the gaze aimed at her, is relevant to her writing. Her texts have an undeniable autobiographical layer; the Kathy, Cathy characters, as well as others, are performative of Kathy Acker: her mother committed suicide; her father abandoned the family; Acker had abortions; she was the family black sheep. She was in her body more deliberately than most people are in theirs. She had fetishes associated with her body. When she awoke in the morning, she wanted silence for an hour before she got out of bed. She had to have a certain volume of water before breakfast. She had personal trainers and personal nutritionists. She was heavily tattooed; she lifted weights and calculated everything she ate and drank. She was terrified of disease, especially breast cancer.

. . . a lump in her right breast was cancerous. . . . The lump wasn't cancerous.³

She patrolled her body and carefully tended its boundaries—despite the calculated physical risks she took with it. Her body was her home. "My body must be my home."⁴

METHOD: A MUSCLE'S BUILT WHEN AND ONLY WHEN ITS EXISTING FORM IS SLOWLY AND RADICALLY DESTROYED. IT CAN BE BROKEN DOWN BY SLOWLY FORCING IT TO ACCOMPLISH MORE THAN IT'S ABLE. THEN, IF AND ONLY IF THE MUSCLE IS PROPERLY FED WITH NUTRIENTS AND SLEEP, IT'LL GROW BACK MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN BEFORE.⁵

Her famous “sex work” as far as I know consisted of dancing as a stripper in a protected space in one of the dives on the old 42nd street. As she explained to me, this was the era of sexual liberation and she was testing it in ways that were possible then. Think of Diane Wakoski’s claim in the poem “Belly Dancer” in which the dance is for the dancer to experience her own body herself, not the leering men.⁶ Although she talked and wrote about girls in Catholic school uniforms, she was by all accounts straight. She was bohemian and fiercely feminist and independent in the style of the times: she went from husband to husband and boyfriend to boyfriend.

When Acker spoke to me about her childhood, I saw in it a privileged, rebellious New York City poor little rich Jewish girl, private-schooled, pushed out of or escaping the nest too early—maybe both. Raised on 57th Street and First Avenue in New York City, she was the child of upper-middle class Jewish parents. She put me in mind of Jane Bowles, an avant-garde writer of the 1940s and 1950s who had a similar background and wrote a brilliant, quirky novel, *Two Serious Ladies* (1943), about travel in Central America. Acker described herself to me as abandoned by her family. She went to Brandeis, the university of Jews. It’s where you send your daughters to meet a nice Jewish husband. She received a degree in Classics instead; the Jewish husband came later, in California, where she went in order to follow a mentor from Brandeis.

I am attempting to weight this description in this way—towards relative normalcy—in order to prepare the case that the anarchical, autobiographical voice permeating Acker’s fiction is very much a Jewish voice.

My Grandmother

She’s my father’s mother. He came out of her. And she came out of a German-Jewish family which was real wealthy.

But when she was still a kid, cause of all the pre-Nazi nationalistic shit murkiness in Germany, you know about that one, her family had to leave Germany. . . . In order to escape from those pre-Nazi ghettos the family had to pay, with its wealth. Wealth was the price and cost of political escape.⁷

That is, Acker's texts are consistent with certain myths and traditions having to do with Jews. It also accounts for Acker's emphasis on the body, her own body and the physical body as represented in her texts.

STORYTELLING METHOD: THE ACT OF BODYBUILDING
PRESUPPOSES THE ACT OF MOVING TOWARD THE BODY OR
THAT WHICH IS SO MATERIAL IT BECOMES IMMATERIAL.⁸

Moreover, it helps to explain the sense of homelessness and the sudden shifts in landscapes, the frenetic wandering travel that mark her texts.

The legend of the Wandering Jew was already known in Christian Europe in the thirteenth century. A figure in hundreds of literary texts from the Middle Ages to the present, it is based on the legend of a Jewish man who was rude to Jesus as he made his way to the Crucifixion. In response, Jesus cursed (some say blessed) him by telling him he would walk the earth until Jesus returned—in the Second Coming. This legend is consistent with the diasporic experience of Jews in Europe, where they were persecuted and expelled, chased from country to country. They came to depend on what was transportable—money, yes, but more important learning, and most of all (although it is an unusual construction of the situation), their bodies. Because their bodies were their homes.

Where will she go without home? She is homeless. She realizes that she can be safe (live) as a wanderer. Free.⁹

Michael Chabon's "Afterword" to his 2007 fable *Gentlemen of the Road* about a Jewish wanderer offers an eloquent description of this phenomenon:

The story of the Jews centers around—one might almost say that it *stars*—the hazards and accidents, the misfortunes and disasters, the feats of inspiration, the travail and despair, and intermittent moments of glory and grace, that entail upon journeys from home and back again. For better and worse it has been one long adventure—a five-thousand-year *Odyssey*—from the moment of the true First Commandment, when God told Abraham *lech lecha*: Thou shalt leave home. Thou shalt get lost. Thou shalt find slander, oppression, opportunity, escape, and destruction.¹⁰

It seems to me important to situate the narrative voice issuing from Acker's texts in the way I have just described: Cathy, Kathy, the shape-shifting personae, despised, isolated, raped, beaten, robbed, abandoned, lonely, humiliated, with hundreds of stories, poems, histories, philosophies streaming through her texts—repeatedly reemerging in yet another

underworld as picaresque pirate, criminal, prostitute, zombie, a reviled wandering Jew carrying the books of the world in her head. In her cut up technique, they come out of her fractured, vomited back at the prevailing culture, reformed and accusing:

What is it to be human? A girl, Leda, fucked a swan, had bestial sex. Subsequently she gave birth to Clytemnestra who murdered her first husband. Afterwards Clytemnestra gave birth to Orestes. Bestiality; husband murder; patricide; incest.¹¹

As she wanders through Western culture, the narrator pronounces her judgment.

In the abjection of her personae, in the outcast's view of culture and politics, in the extreme emphasis on the body and the body as home, in the crowded literary references, on the prominence of, as Richard Swope writes in this volume, "spatial indeterminacy," Acker as Jew is one explanatory narrative of the particular position out of which her narratives spill. Although Acker includes a Jewish ancestry for some of her protagonists (but doesn't dwell on it) and although they appear in various outcast forms, mainly as women, the aggregate of markers attached to them are consistent with traditions and legends of Jewish identity. Early in her dazzling essay here, Maureen Curtin, commenting on Acker's *Empire of the Senseless*, notes "the central role that stateless Jews play in Acker's . . . [account] of incest," which she argues suggests "something at the interstices of sovereignty and capital."

Megan Milks' brilliant essay explores what she characterizes as the manipulation of the voice of the subaltern in Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*. Her essay explores the "contradiction" between the protagonist's first world position and her appropriation of subaltern status:

But Janey is a first-world subaltern, a contradiction in terms. . . . Reading Acker through Spivak, we must ask whether, in her exposure of the power structures that create subalternity, Acker merely replicates, perhaps even exploits, the problems of the textual representations she re-represents. If not, if she is able to expose without exploitation, in what ways does she bypass or address the difficulties inherent in working to insert the subaltern on the path to hegemony?

This contradiction marks all of Acker's texts and the subaltern presence in them unless we allow the position of Acker and her protagonists as Jews or an "as if" they were Jews position. And although one is taught not to confuse the author with her fiction, Acker's insistent autobiographical presence invites this confusion, one of her numerous modes for subverting

traditional fictional practices. The way in which Acker translates her Jewishness, the way in which it is played out in her texts, entitles her, more than some, to inhabit the subaltern. Milk's virtuoso reasoning about this position is astute and honest. Here she writes about *Blood and Guts in High School*:

If the text is read as parodic, however, we can argue that Acker mocks not just the male texts, but also the radical feminist discourse that props up her own, thereby exposing her complicity in the power structures she is appropriating to prove her point.

While it is tempting to fully exonerate Acker for getting away with these appropriations so skillfully, in ways that are illuminating, the following point remains: she gets away with them in part because of her subjectivity. A non-Western writer would likely be seen as a thief where Acker is seen as an artist . . .

However, if we understand her as a Jew, Acker moves just a little bit closer to occupying honestly the ground of what Milk means by "non-Western" writer. In her essay, Angela Naimou suggests that "the condition of the colonized is also that of the zombie." She quotes Michael Richardson's relevant description of the zombie: "a being trapped in a state without identity and denied the right to a means of life that is rightfully its own . . . and acts upon [the world] as an unspoken condemnation." As we look back upon European history from the perspective of the twenty-first century, the leap from zombie to Jew is nearly effortless.

One characteristic of this identity is that it is held in place, makes no progress. Cristina Garrigos, in her essay on Acker's *Don Quixote*, offers this observation:

Women, boys, black people, dogs, all become victims of a multifaceted system. However, she does not provide any possibility of transcendence for them, but rather portrays a masochist attitude of passive resignation.

Acker's characters rarely learn as the result of the journey of the text. They remain static, despite trauma and upheaval, and although they traverse the earth, they do not leave an imprint except in the Foucauldian sense. In their role as the despised, they suggest what is desired.

In distinguishing Acker's representation of tourism in *Kathy Goes to Haiti* from Jack Kerouac's, R.J. Ellis astutely concludes that, in contrast to Kerouac's *Tristessa*, in female sex tourism

the female predator is also the prey, as young men in the visited country mimic male tourist behavior and seek to engage in serial sexual congress with visiting female tourists.

Unlike Kerouac's tourist, Acker's tourist never gains. She is, as Ellis observes, left in an "epistemological void." As the novel ends, "She's more dazed than before."¹² Michael Hardin makes a similar point in his essay on the theme of "The Failure of Paradise" in *Kathy Goes to Haiti*. He points to the romanticism of the main character's quest for "pre-lapsarian, precapitalist desire," a contemporary form of Eden. In her role as outsider she can only, as Hardin points out, question "the initial framework for sin, taboo, and pretext." She cannot affect it or enter paradise, or find love, which is the form paradise takes here. Her role is to remind us of what is missing.

Shannon Rose Riley shrewdly probes the association of Acker's text with older popular culture texts that use the "goes to" trope, such as Cole Porter's 1939 hit "Katie went to Haiti," Hollywood flicks such as "Mr. Deeds Goes to Town," Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," "Gidget Goes to Rome," as well as children's books that use this trope to introduce white U.S. children to new situations and cultures. In the Cole Porter song, Riley argues, Katie is a sexual explorer reinforcing received ideas of black masculinity and exotic tourism—"Katie knew her Haiti/And practically all Haiti knew Katie." She is the promiscuous white woman, laughed at by Americans and revered by Haitians who don't know better. This trope is reframed, writes Riley, by Acker into a powerful sexual woman with agency. Yet this agency is ambiguous. On Kathy's visit to the voodoo doctor in this text, one of his curative acts is to draw a "cross on Kathy's forehead." The weird conversion fails. Although unlike Katie, as Riley notes, Kathy does not die, she does not emerge cured either. Rather, she emerges into the sunlight "dazed," and unchanged.

Included in the trope of the Jew is exile, an idea that contributes to Garrigos' examination of the intertextual relationship between Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Acker's. She cites Harold Bloom's understanding of Unamuno's idea that "Quixote went to seek his true fatherland and found it in exile." Bloom, in summarizing Unamuno, romantically connects exile and freedom, as well as Quixote's exile with that of the Jews and the Moors who accepted Christian conversion but continued their own practices in secret:

The Don, like the Jews and the Moors is an exile but in the mode of the *conversos* and the *moriscos*, and internal exile. Don Quixote leaves his

village to seek his spirit's home in exile, because only exiled can he be free.

Although the quest for freedom, love, and selfhood dominate Acker's texts, exile is *a priori*, an unchosen, necessary condition of life. The fatherland may be exile but the condition of exile is anti-utopian, as Garrigos contends. As Naimou argues in her accomplished analysis of a scene in a section of *Empire of the Senseless*, freedom is permanent because it is "impossible to satisfy" the desire for it:

She 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.

In writing about Acker's *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec*, Richard Swope gives an inspired reading of the "breakdown in the spatial imaginary" that Acker offers in this novel. In analyzing Acker's use of the detective, he argues that Poirot's function to restore order in designated spaces always fails because the very institution Poirot represents calls out disrupted forces, disorder. The exile, the outcast, the criminal, the prostitute, the Arab, the Jew—all purveyors of disorder are necessary elements. The "separation of the disorderly from the orderly as well as the transgression of such boundaries: whether along class, gender, or any other lines" defines the very nature of the city. Swope delineates the impossibility of permanently containing the uncontrollable that characterizes what he calls the "history of Western space." As the detective searches for the new offender who creates disorder, the wandering Jew in the history of the Christian West sows that disorder, which represents both threat and hidden desire.

These essays signify the maturation of Acker criticism. As earlier criticism probed the startling texts associated with Kathy Acker, discovering ways into them and assessing how they fit or did not in the context of U.S. and women's literature, these essays move into headier intellectual territory and make connections that honor the reach of Acker's creativity, politics, and prophetic imagination. Inspired by the editors' delineation of the topic of this volume, the essays consider national, colonial, and transnational themes in a way that seems like a profound conversation they are having with one another. Some of the essays even seem to engage the unconscious of earlier criticism. Leif Sorenson's argument that

The textualized space that *Pussy* opens up is a space of potentiality, in which new configurations of the transnational (and indeed attempts to move outside of the discourse of the nation altogether) may be thought, imagined and experienced

evoked for me the repressed in an essay of my own on the “not-yet-presented” in women’s experimental fiction suggested by Jean Francois Lyotard’s idea of the “unpresentable” in modernism and postmodernism.¹³ What impressed me a great deal were essays that addressed Acker’s idealism. Curtin’s is among the most remarkable essays in this regard, particularly in the following statement about *Empire of the Senseless*:

[W]e see how the writer offers a trope for the kinds of indeterminacy . . . paramount to the maintenance of democracy. That is, the Central Intelligence Agency figured in the novel functions something like the unconscious, knowing more than it knows it knows—full knowledge constantly deferred—and thereby enabling the kinds of indeterminacy which protect democratic states from sliding into totalitarian ones . . .

Kathy Acker both personally and as a writer engaged in intellectual, geographical, and emotional quests—a romantic, restless Jewish wanderer never at home, but in the seeking of home keeps the idea alive in its most expansive and utopian sense.

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Notes

1. Acker, *In Memoriam to Identity*, 89.
2. Ibid., 21.
3. Ibid., 249.
4. Ibid., 249.
5. Acker, *My Mother: Demonology*, 112.
6. Wakoski, *Emerald Ice*, 20.
7. Acker, *Empire of the Senseless*, 3.
8. Acker, *My Mother: Demonology*, 110.
9. Ibid., 142.
10. Chabon, *Gentlemen of the Road*, 203.
11. Acker, *In Memoriam*, 77. In the *Oresteia* trilogy, Orestes is the son of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, whom she murders. In the final play of the trilogy, *The Eumenides*, Orestes is put on trial for matricide. Athena exonerates Orestes because the crime of matricide is the lesser of the crimes since a mother is not as important as a father. Clytemnestra murdered Agamemnon because he had sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia for a good wind to take him to Troy. The trilogy thus includes more barbarity than even Acker describes. An additional irony is that this trilogy ends in the establishment of a more civilized justice system—one of courts and juries.
12. Acker, *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, 170.
13. Friedman, "Where Are the Missing Contents," 240-52.

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INTRODUCTION

THE POSTMODERN, TRANSNATIONALISM, AND GLOBAL IDENTITY

POLINA MACKAY AND KATHRYN NICOL

Since Kathy Acker's death in 1997 the body of critical work on her fiction has continued to grow, and even to flourish. The continuing critical attention that her work has received is testament both to the complexity and intellectual scope of her many artistic and critical projects, and to the continuing relevance of her concerns and ambitions in the recent and contemporary world; a world that her fictions prefigure and interrogate in ways that we perhaps could not have recognized during her lifetime.

Two significant collections of essays on Acker's work have appeared in recent years: *Lust for Life: On the Writings of Kathy Acker* (2006), edited by Amy Scholder, Carla Harryman, and Avital Ronell, and *Devouring Institutions: The Life Work of Kathy Acker* (2004), edited by Michael Hardin, who also contributes to this collection. As Amy Scholder notes in her preface to *Lust for Life*, the variety of topics and contributors to be found in both of these collections signifies "the breadth and interdisciplinary reach of Acker" (viii), and it is the aim of *Kathy Acker and Transnationalism* both to continue the dissemination of the author's work to a wider audience, and to continue to develop new critical frames through which it can be read and explored.

In studies of Acker's fiction thus far, notwithstanding the diversity of the collections mentioned above, the identification of her work with postmodernism and experimental literary aesthetics has dominated the critical field. Recent examples of this include Jeffrey Ebbeson's *Postmodernism and Its Others: The Fiction of Ishmael Reed, Kathy Acker and Don DeLillo* (2006) and Nicola Pitchford's *Tactical Readings: Feminist Postmodernism in the Work of Kathy Acker and Angela Carter* (2002), while wider-ranging studies that include substantial considerations of Acker's work include Joseph M. Conte's *Design and Debris: A Chaotics of Postmodernist Fiction* (2002), Marcel Cornis-Pope's

Narrative Innovation and Cultural Rewriting in the Cold War Era and After (2001), and Laura Hinton's and Cynthia Hope's *We Who Love to be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics* (2001). However, as Ebbeson strongly argues in relation to the politics of class and gender, and as many critics and commentators have noted in their tracings of the sympathies and dissonances between Acker's work and feminist theorising,¹ the relationship between Acker's fiction and postmodern theory is anything but straightforward. Her fiction has as often been deployed as a means to complicate and interrogate the "postmodern" as a critical category as it has been used to defend postmodern politics, or to verify the existence of a distinctive postmodern literary aesthetic. In this collection, we do not set out simply to replace the critical frame of the "postmodern" with the critical frame of the "transnational" but rather attend to the relationship between the "linguistic" and "spatial" turns of recent and contemporary critical thought, and to bear witness to their interconnected origins. And it is a tribute to the profound and prophetic nature of Acker's fiction that her work enables us to do so. As a result, this book aims to contribute to the work of historicising the postmodern era and its modes of literary production in the context of local, national, and global shifts in geopolitical relations, increasingly interdependent economies, forms of sovereignty, and modes of social organisation and cultural reproduction. More specifically, the essays in the collection, through Acker's fiction, engage in a decisive and essential dissection of the United States' self-identification as the pre-eminent world power during this period of global history.²

This initiative has been taken up in several recent essays on Acker's fiction and the question of international politics, key among them Paul Giles' "Historicizing the Transnational: Robert Coover, Kathy Acker and the Rewriting of British Cultural History, 1970-1997," published in the *Journal of American Studies* in 2007.³ Giles usefully locates Acker's fiction within a particular period of transformation in international relations and the global order, and identifies Acker's comparative analysis of British and U.S. politics and political figures as an example of the replacement of "categorical difference by structural analogy" (27) inherent to this transnational era. The essays in this collection build on Giles's periodization of the transnational era and analysis of the interpretative and representational strategies this era demands, but also explore a wider range of Acker's work and its location in multiple contexts that extend beyond transatlantic British-U.S. relations. Identifying important zones of transnational interpenetration and exchange in Acker's explorations of U.S.-Haitian relations, her engagement with the European literary canon,

her representation of colonial and postcolonial territories and personalities, and her production of extra-territorial figures and spaces, the essays in this collection indicate the breadth and depth of Acker's engagement with the complexities of transnationalism and the transnational era.

Although transnationalism is neither singular, nor new, many critics in a range of disciplines have identified the recent and contemporary period with an intensification in transnational relations and exchanges, and have located the transnational and studies of transnationalism as vital fields of research in any attempt to understand and describe our contemporary world. The field of "transnational studies" has grown exponentially in recent years, and the term, like the term "postmodernism" before it, now has such an expanded range of reference that it is in danger of becoming meaningless.⁴ Although the nature and meaning of the "transnational period" remains hotly contested, we believe that some key features can be outlined here.

Twentieth-century global capitalism has not only led to an ever-increasing proliferation of goods and bodies in circulation, but has also reconfigured the identity of the nation-state, in part through the transformation of the role of the nation-state in the management of national economies under the auspices of neoliberalism in the last decades of the twentieth century.⁵ As an increasingly mobile global population circulates through diverse and often intensely contrary paths, set in motion by conflict, labour, and leisure, diasporic, rather than national, models of identity have become increasingly significant.⁶ Simultaneously, as national governments have ceded control—through force or choice—of significant aspects of national governance, the inadequacy of traditional, liberal western, models of citizenship and national belonging as means of describing contemporary social and political configurations have been revealed,⁷ as has the unevenness of modernity as a global phenomenon.⁸ During this period, extra-national and international institutions and bodies, from trade organisations and international judicial bodies to NGOS, have posed significant threats to the power and authority of the nation-state, even as these organisations simultaneously function to carry out the interests of some nation-states within the territories of others. Despite these shifts, however, the nation-state continues to function as a significant locus of social and political power.⁹ The intense current critical interest in the nature of sovereignty in the contemporary world clearly reflects the contested condition of the nation-state itself in contemporary times.¹⁰

The flourishing of new media technologies that cross national boundaries, the intensification of the scope and speed of international circuits of demand and supply, and the globalization of popular culture,

even if this global culture is “localized” at its points of reception, have all led to a warping in the space of the global. This shrinking of the distance between formerly distant points on the globe into multiple and overlapping transnational spaces that do not conform to but reshape geographic space, is also a reorganisation of global time through the simultaneity created by new technologies and the temporality of global markets. Transnational space and time, therefore, indicate not only the between of “nation-spaces,” or exchanges between national spaces and national subjects, but the reshaping and reordering of global space and time under the multiple pressures of contemporary technology, capital, culture, and politics.

As this suggests, one consequence of the transnational turn in contemporary studies across a range of disciplines has been the production of increasingly nuanced critiques of the structuring binaries of previous critical work, such as the polarities of the global and the local, “foreign” and “domestic,” static models of First World / Third World relations, and population studies that distinguish between the “rooted” and “routed” in James Clifford’s terms.¹¹ In part this shift has been the result of detailed studies of material culture and the circulation of goods and people in contemporary global culture that reveal the inadequacy of critical divisions between global zones of “production” and “consumption,” and that record the reconfiguration and reappropriation of cultural objects as they pass through transnational space. By demonstrating the reappropriation and reinterpretation of cultural products as they travel from zones of production to zones of reception, such studies have undermined any simplified understanding of globalization as “only” domination and the imposition of western culture on the “rest.”¹² Moreover, the cycle mapped by these trade routes has been further complicated by the fact that travel occurs in both directions simultaneously, whether through the circulation of material goods, bodies, or signs. Further, work on the “minor transnationalisms” that are formed by systems of exchange and circulation that bypass the West altogether, and that therefore have gone unrecognized in earlier research, has provided vital alternatives to colonial and postcolonial mappings of international relations dominated by the model of relationships between the centre and margins.¹³

This work reflects key shifts in the debate on the project of modernity that has occupied social theorists for much of the twentieth century. Roland Robertson documents this history in detail in *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (1992), where he identifies a number of paradigm shifts in social theories of modernity, the national, and the global from the Enlightenment to the late twentieth century. Robertson identifies the turbulent decade of the 1960s as a point at which theories of the nation

as the key element in modern subject formation, and the project of modernity as an international project of progress based on the model of the Western nation, came into conflict with theories of underdevelopment, attacks on the unequal and destabilising effects of contemporary capitalism, doctrines of national self-determination, and the after-effects of competing political ideologies that had emerged during the Second World War. As a result, the twentieth century has witnessed “the increasing acceleration in both concrete global interdependence and consciousness of the global whole.”¹⁴ In the later twentieth century, concepts of the “global” and the “international” have taken on divergent meanings, as the terms have been claimed by competing actors at local, national, and global levels, as signs of future progress, or of apocalypse. It is this context that powers new concepts of the diasporic and the translocal. And it is within this conflicted transnational world that Kathy Acker writes.

Acker both writes and critiques transnationalism. She addresses transnationalism through the prism of transamerican travel, geopolitics, postcolonial relations of power, and international relations. The author’s transamerican travel narrative, *Kathy Goes to Haiti* (1978), is a critique of U.S./Haitian relations. The novel’s strategic ventriloquizing of hegemonic American views of Haiti, through the autobiographical narrator, attempts to go beyond the centre/margin dyad of U.S./Haitian relations. The book, however, does not attempt to construct a U.S. American subject position from which to speak, for the American narrator is a parody of U.S. hegemonic language and discourse. Acker’s narrative successfully exposes the power relations involved in each form of travel.

Kathy Goes to Haiti’s intertextual debt to Jack Kerouac’s *Tristessa* (1960) is not merely an instance of postmodern ventriloquism, parody, and critique. Acker’s reading of Kerouac advocates the view that engagement with transnational discourses—in this case with Kerouac’s transnational book about sexual tourism—is a form of reading. The global subject reads, interprets, and reappropriates global culture in a transnational manner, without ever losing sight of the constant exchange of discourses. These transnational exchanges/readings, Acker tells us in her fiction, are informed by postcolonial relations of power. Acker begins to think about the place of Europe as colonial power early on in her career in two of her most popular novels, *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978) and *Don Quixote* (1986). These narratives problematize and complicate any straightforward understanding of a temporal and an historical division between Europe and the “New World” of which the United States is part. Rather than respect such traditional historical and ideological divisions,

Acker's works strive to explore and expose U.S./European collusion in colonialism and the development of multinational capitalism.

Acker's fiction tries to articulate and critique postcolonial relations of power by narrativizing notions of Empire: "Empire" is a significant theme in Acker's work and one addressed in a number of her major texts. In *Blood and Guts in High School*, for example, she plagiarizes two fictionalisations of the male subaltern, Jean Genet's *The Screens* (1961) and Mohamed Choukri's memoir *Jean Genet in Tangier* (1973). The novel rewrites subalternity from a feminist postcolonial perspective, exposing both the phallocentrism and imperialism of colonial discourses. Similarly, Acker's later novel *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) links neo-colonial power structures to patriarchy. The narrative's focus on the female body as a site of inscription, as the victim of a colonial, patriarchal Empire that lacks sense and sentiment repeats Acker's identification between colonial power structures, capitalism, and the politics of the patriarchal family. Acker re-imagines "Empire" not merely from a transnational perspective, but also within transideological lines; in Acker's fiction ideologies—imperialism, anti-imperialism, state capitalism, anarchy, etc.—flow into each other, inform each other, and cancel each other out.

It is this simultaneous conflict and symbiosis of nations, cultures, and ideologies that characterizes Acker's transnational politics. However, we should not take the author's transnationalist view of the world as a straightforward celebration of postmodern dissent in a global context. Her fictions negotiate between the positions of the global and the local, and crucially deconstruct the possibility of a global perspective, either as a mode of domination or a site of resistance.

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Notes

1. See for example Pitchford, *Tactical Readings*; Manners, "The Dissolute Feminisms of Kathy Acker;," Brennan, "The Geography of Enunciation."
2. Significant contributions to this debate include Cornis-Pope, and Nadel, *Containment Culture*.
3. Other notable recent essays in this field include Michaels, "Empires of the Senseless: (The Response to) Terror and (the End of) History," and Clune, "Blood Money: Sovereignty and Exchange in Kathy Acker."
4. Jackson et. al. provide an excellent critical history of the term in recent work in the humanities and social sciences in the introduction to their collection *Transnational Spaces*, 1-23.
5. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.
6. See for example Cohen, *Global Diasporas*. Cohen's identification of a range of diaspora conditions further reminds us that the "diasporic" is itself not a singular nor generalisable condition.