

**T.G. Rapatzikou on *Kathy Acker and Transnationalism*
(Polina Mackay and Kathryn Nicol, eds.)**



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- 1 *Kathy Acker and Transnationalism*. Eds Polina Mackay and Kathryn Nicol. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009. Pp. xx + 203. ISBN 978-1-4438-0570-4.
- 2 Polina Mackay and Kathryn Nicol's volume constitutes a thoroughly conceptualized editorial attempt to approach Kathy Acker's subversive work from the perspective of transnationalism and global capitalism within the broader context of postmodern theory. Starting with a forward by Ellen G. Friedman, this volume contains nine essays which focus on the exploration of urban spatiality, race and gender politics, decolonization and capitalism, plagiarism and transnational resistance with attention paid to particular novels written by Acker between 1975-1996 even though light is shed on lots of her other works. Acker constitutes one of the most transgressive contemporary American female writers who received limited recognition during her lifetime despite the politically and culturally dissident character of her works. Since 2005, there has been increased scholarly interest in her writings: Michael Hardin's *Devouring Institutions: The Life Work of Kathy Acker* (2005) and Carla Harryman and Avital Ronell's *Lust for Life: On the Writings of Kathy Acker* (2006) introduce the general reader to a variety of perspectives as regards Acker's literary production. Mackay and Nicol's volume though does take the whole venture a step further as it attempts to approach her novels from a much more politically informed point of view. This collection of essays definitely constitutes an essential contribution to the development of Acker's scholarship as it opens her novels to multiple readings and approaches "in the context of local, national, and global shifts in geopolitical relations" (2).
- 3 Friedman's forward provides both a personal and an academic insight into the kind of character Acker was by using the notion of the "wandering jew," which in the present collection is not simply a comment on Acker's Jewish family background but it functions as a trope used to highlight the divergent cultural as well as political character of her narratives. Acker, as Mackay and Nicol also note in their introduction, did not simply comment on transnationalism but challenged it for the promotion of her

literary experiments and political views: “in Acker’s fiction ideologies – imperialism, anti-imperialism, state capitalism, anarchy, etc. – flow into each other, inform each other, and cancel each other out” (6). This is exactly where the value of the present collection lies, in its ability to engage its readers much more deeply with Acker’s writings by acknowledging their simultaneous elusive and deviant character. Certainly, Acker’s books should not be taken for what they appear to be arguing for, since there are many more multiple contexts they open up to. For this reason, the uninitiated reader may find quite a few of the concepts the essays in this volume deal with quite provocative. However, they do succeed in bringing on the surface the intricacies of Acker’s works. Each one of the essays contained here is followed by well-informed notes and bibliographical references that facilitate the evaluative process of Acker’s writings.

- 4 The first essay in the collection by Richard Swope focuses on a re-evaluation of Acker’s so-called detective novel *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec By Henri Toulouse Lautrec* (1975). What this paper attempts to do is to acquaint the reader with the unruly way this detective novel works. By constantly upsetting spatial order and the classic detective story formulas as to the solution of the mystery, this work takes the reader to various locations from “nineteenth-century Paris [...] to the Hollywood of James Dean” (13). Its fragmentary narrative and disruptive spatialities do bring the readers face to face with its “indeterminate ontological status” (21). Although it seems as if Swope’s writing style follows the constant juxtapositions that Acker’s narrative practice relies on, his essay does effectively highlight Acker’s argument as to the way the western conceptualization of space works: “not [as] a tale of rational planning and subsequent order, but rather of an ongoing struggle to contain detective style, that which repeatedly resists efforts at both intellectual and physical domination” (24).
- 5 The following three chapters written by Shannon Rose Riley, Michael Hardin and R. J. Ellis respectively focus on the commentary of Acker’s novel *Kathy Goes to Haiti* (1978), each one contributing its own unique point of view to the evaluation of such a confrontational text. In the first instance, the reader is invited to re-visit the socio-political context constituting the background to the novel as well as re-consider those cultural taboos that it seems to be promoting, that of pornography and miscegenation. Although Acker’s text seems to be working on a superficial level, it does so much more than it actually admits to. The illustrations that seem to be “decorating” the printed text do serve as additional narratives that extend the potential of the main plot line. As for miscegenation, as Riley writes, “Acker is able to invert [its] power dynamics in the white national imaginary” (33). Without overburdening her criticism with too many theoretical readings, Riley clearly delineates the erotic, racial and tourist narrative strands that Acker’s novel contains in an attempt to highlight its multivocal subversiveness rather than its apparent homogenized writing style. In the second essay, emphasis is placed on the Paradise myths this novel tries to defy as regards the idyllic manner Haiti is presented as well as seen by Kathy, the female character, in the novel. With Paradise constituting one of the main themes in early American literary texts, Acker uses it in order to talk about sexual and physical beginnings and not about spiritual regeneration. Hardin argues that the notion of Paradise is re-conceptualized here, since it does not relate to sin and restraint but to sexual and personal freedom as to the understanding of the situation the female character is in. By examining the way in which Kathy negotiates desire in the novel, Hardin points towards Acker’s treatment of apocalypse by bringing to the fore “the tensions between patriarchal society, second

wave feminism, and ‘desire’ and allows each to critique the other” (59). In this case, Acker’s text moves from the mere illustration of facts to the acknowledgement, and not necessarily to the solution, of certain misunderstandings as to the way the notions of gender and sexuality appear to be treated in it, given that active confrontation is what Acker is after. In the third essay, Ellis deals with the intertextual connection that there is between Acker’s novel and Jack Kerouac’s *Tristessa* (1960) in an attempt to underscore the non-conformist and dialogic potential of the former. Through the use of multiple textual examples and quite an argumentative style of writing, Ellis concentrates on the way in which Acker’s intertextual engagement with Kerouac’s novel intensifies the groundlessness and inauthenticity of her female character in opposition to the female tradition of the travel journal that Kerouac’s novel does not seem to be contesting so openly.

- 6 The next two chapters do also explore the issue of intertextuality by actually approaching it from the perspective of plagiarism. Both contributors, Megan Milks and Christina Garrigós, talk about Acker’s avant-gardism by respectively commenting on Acker’s ability to “maneuver between her own text and the texts and discourses she appropriates and critiques” (92) and “rework canonical texts [...] as a way of approaching literature from a new perspective” (113). In her essay, Milks deals with Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978), which constitutes an effective example of a postcolonial feminist text, since it focuses on the link that there is “between commerce and the female body” (93). Through the adoption of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s notion of the subaltern and Marilyn Randall’s criticism on plagiarism, Milks turns to Mohamed Choukri’s *Jean Genet in Tangiers* (1973)—translated from Arabic into English by the American writer Peter Bowles—and Jean Genet’s *The Screens* (1962) in an attempt to show how Acker’s plagiarism technique works. Milk argues that Acker does not merely plagiarize but she actually revises or even re-writes these texts by putting female characters in the place of the marginalized male ones so as “to contrast the differences between [...] male and [...] female subjectivities and affinities” (99). In order to substantiate her argument, Milks supplements her essay with an Appendix featuring various cases of plagiarism, as detected in the texts noted above. What one notices is that Acker parodies what she initially plagiarizes. By shifting her attention from male to female representation, Acker succeeds in exposing the superficiality of radical feminist discourse, turning plagiarism from a scandalous into a guerilla tactic. Garrigós takes the argument a step further by concentrating on the discussion of Acker’s *Don Quixote, which was a dream* (1986). In her interesting analysis, Garrigós views Acker’s novel as an attempt to re-write Cervantes’ original text which results in the elevation of plagiarism to the level of a “privileged literary technique” (115). What Acker does differently here is to “deliberately filter [the text] through her own experiences” (117). However, Acker’s reference to her own experiences does relate to her political and cultural concerns as regards “the role of the woman in a patriarchal world” (117) as well as to the rising of conservatism in North America in the 1980s. By revisiting Don Quixote’s tradition, she “reinterpret[s] traditional or local stories in a new, different and foreign context” (119) in addition to challenging the way one reads or writes about them. In this sense, her novel, under the guise of quixotism, heralds her personal dissatisfaction with certain dominant discourses at the time of its publication. Cervantes’ views on love, madness and marginal characters, as expressed in his text, translate into Acker’s version into “a parallel universe of dreams, which exists on its own, but may sometimes collide with the real world” (126). As a result, Acker’s

plagiarism takes on the significance of a transnational gesture that exceeds the potential of a mere literary technique by enabling the individual to understand but also parody its place in a controversial world.

- 7 The following two chapters discuss Acker's *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) in relation to C.L.R. James' historical study *The Black Jacobins* (1938) plus Gillo Pontecorvo's film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) and Sue William Silverman's memoir *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You* (1999) respectively. In the first case, Angela Naimou turns the attention of the readers to the way Acker uses the notion of conflation with regard to the zombie motif. Naimou argues that "unlike metaphor, conflation collapses syntactical distance so that there is no evident comparison between two words: their associative power is left unacknowledged, as if hidden in plain sight" (136). In this case, Acker conflates the Haitian historical mapping of her novel by fusing various events—Haiti's anti-colonial revolution is staged in the novel in Algiers and Paris—and places—Haiti, Algiers and Paris—so as to suggest that colonization and decolonization is an on-going, transnational process. This is exactly what happens with the zombie motif when the figure of the Haitian zombie conflates with the U.S. one. This leads to the production of a re-constructed and transnational figure of revolt and self-awareness that in Acker's narrative aims to unmask "emotional indifference and exclusionary sociality" (143). Naimou also focuses on the conflation process Acker follows in relation to the revolutionary leaders that appear in her novel—Mackandal, Boukman and Ali la Pointe—whose names come from James's and Pontecorvo's source texts, as already mentioned. Naimou writes that "through Acker's conflation of leaders, she undercuts the strong tradition of paying homage to patrilineage" (147) by making us think much more deeply about freedom and oppression as well as about the rhetorical tone certain historical narratives of national revolutions adopt. In her chapter, Maureen Curtin explores another contested notion, that of incest in families. By comparing and contrasting Acker's novel with Silverman's text, Curtin argues that incest is no longer taken to be a sexual or taboo term, but "the salient feature of an order of pleasure which knows no boundaries [...] thus an imaginary order which has usurped [...] symbolic arrangements of all kinds [...] what we take to be politics itself" (156). In particular, in Acker's novel the pretext behind the incestuous act is the increase of material/capitalist property, while in Silverman's memoir this is seen as a gesture of bodily/geographical assimilation and re-appropriation. Curtin does turn to a number of theorists in order to support her views—Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri; Joan Copjec; Michael Clune; Marjorie Worthington—which sometimes overburdens her argumentation. What becomes clear though is that both Acker and Silverman view incest as an act of empowerment by turning one's attention to "the prevailing power of biopolitics" (171), in other words to the exposure of private life as a means of political action against sovereignty.
- 8 In the final chapter of the volume, Leif Sorensen concentrates on three novels, coming from different stages of Acker's career, so as to highlight the way her transnational imagination develops through the use of "guerilla literary tactics to produce disorienting texts that attack stable narratives" (182). The novels *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, *Empire of the Senseless*, and *Pussy, King of the Pirates* (1996) show a gradual progression in the way transnationalism is tackled as they move from consistent and straightforward narratives to textual piracies. This proposes a new way of textual construction with transnationalism placed beyond "thematics, subject matter, and authorial biography" (180). By mixing in her third novel "anti-colonial revolutionary imagery with

postmodern mappings of power” (182), Acker succeeds in constructing “antifactual” (Mackay and Nicol 193) spaces. In particular, “female piracy is the dominant trope of resistance” (189), since female pirates in Acker’s novel go “a-pirating” instead of “spoils-taking” (Mackay and Nicol 193). This reinstatement of piracy not only does it challenge the expected pirate storyline, but also it leaves space for further experimentation as evidenced in the textual maps, diagrams and typographical gaps that Acker introduces in the narrative. In this case, piracy has nothing to do with the crossing of geographical boundaries but with the re-organization and re-evaluation of textual space itself as it extends beyond the navigable space of the printed page.

- 9 Textuality is indeed what Acker so provocatively challenges and subverts in all her writings. Each one of the essays contained in Mackay and Nicol’s volume elucidate the multi-facetedness and transgressive potential of her works in addition to the controversial contexts within which they are situated. Friedman, in her Forward, notes that Acker always attempted to “direct the gaze aimed at her” (xii). This is exactly what each one of the essays contained here attempts to do: redirect the readers’ gaze to what is actually hidden behind Acker’s narratives. When it comes to her work, one realizes that is not just the storyline but the conflation of storylines that matters, as it enables each one of them to move beyond socially and historically valid conceptions, discourses and expectations. This is exactly where Mackay and Nicol position Acker’s transnationalism: in its ability to move beyond mere representation of facts and “boundaries” allowing for the re-configuration of linguistic, textual and political space.
- 10 Tatiani G. Rapatzikou, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece