


January 2018

A Space to Write Woman-Becoming: Reading the Novels of Kathy Acker as Simulacra

Jennifer Komorowski
Western University, jkomoro2@uwo.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/wordhoard>

 Part of the [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Fiction Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Nonfiction Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), [Poetry Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Komorowski, Jennifer (2018) "A Space to Write Woman-Becoming: Reading the Novels of Kathy Acker as Simulacra," *The Word Hoard*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 6 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/wordhoard/vol1/iss6/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Word Hoard by an authorized editor of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact tadam@uwo.ca, wlsadmin@uwo.ca.

The *Word Hoard*

/ward/hôrd/ n. 1. A journal open to all Arts and Humanities scholars.

A Space to Write Woman-Becoming: Reading the Novels of Kathy Acker as Simulacra

Jennifer Komorowski

The novels of American experimental novelist Kathy Acker make strategic use of plagiaristic techniques that function as simulacra, which serve to undermine the original Platonic Ideas upon which they are based and in doing so create a new aesthetic existence. In Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* (1968), he examines the role of the simulacra in overturning Platonism by denying the primacy of "original over copy, of model over image" (66). Deleuze's concept is central to interpreting the work of Acker as a piece of literature that subverts phallogocentric writing traditions in order to overcome patriarchal hangovers. I begin by providing an explanation of this paper's theoretical groundwork, which is based on several of Deleuze's writings on the concept of simulacrum. After explaining the theory and the importance it holds in relation to Acker's work, I will then attempt to situate and connect her writing within a tradition of art and literature that was emerging during the 1960s and 1970s. By using a Deleuzian framework to discuss the concept of the simulacrum in relation to Acker's novels *Don Quixote* (1986) and *Blood and*

Guts in High School (1978), I argue that we can understand the way in which she simultaneously exposes how the simulacrum functions while also making use of the simulacrum to subvert phallogocentric language by "appropriating male texts ... and trying to find [her] voice as a woman" (Friedman 13). Acker admits in an interview with Ellen G. Friedman that act of rewriting *Don Quixote* (1605) by Miguel de Cervantes was an attempt to copy out the text with the explicit idea of seeing "what pure plagiarism would look like" (13).¹ Instead of the result being a copy of the original novel, however, Acker's *Don Quixote* "breaks up the homogeneity of culture, exposing the numerous and varied discourses that at any moment influence and shape each of us" (Pitchford 59). In doing so, the novel becomes Deleuze's simulacrum. Thus, Acker's novel is "an image without resemblance" rather than a simple copy, what we could call "an image endowed with resemblance"

1 Academics describe her writing differently, with Nicola Pitchford terming her writing process pastiche, which "builds her novels out of scraps from various literary and popular traditions" (59).

(Deleuze 357). Through this image, Acker creates a new aesthetic existence whereby *becoming* becomes possible. Opening up the possibility for becoming means taking a line of flight through the process of writing in order to become a minority. The one and only function of writing is to deterritorialize through lines of flight to expose “all the minority-becomings of the world” (50). This is where the potential exists for Anglo-American literature to serve as the “hair of the dog,” and alleviate the patriarchal hangover that is predominant in the Western canon.

In the 1970s, feminism was already a social production for Acker. In the interview with Friedman cited above, she discusses her disinterest in the work of most feminist writers, claiming they are too interested in social realism. Acker complains, “it’s too much, ‘I used to be in a bad nuclear marriage and now I’m a happy lesbian.’ It’s diary stuff and the diary doesn’t go anywhere, and there’s not enough work with language” (19). Although feminists had started to praise Acker’s work by the late 1980s, she claims, “I was damned by them,” and she believes they hated her (22). She is openly critical of feminists like Andrea Dworkin in her novels, seeming to dislike the radical feminist approach they take, but at the same time admiring their willingness to take a stand for feminism. Carol Siegel affirms in “The Madness Outside Gender: Travels with Don Quixote and Saint Foucault” that “Acker was at least as avant-garde in her feminism as she was in her writing style” (34). She traces the trajectory of the feminism of the 1970s, when Acker emerged in the literary scene, as presenting

“various versions of feminism that [reinscribed] binary difference and [supported] conservative attempts to regulate sexuality” (34). With this in mind, Stiegl explains that “a crucial determinant of how one understands feminist practice has become whether or not one finds bourgeois domesticity bearable” (34). This form of political feminism was dependent upon “bourgeois assimilation,” another form of patriarchal control that continues to hang over women, and which Acker would not have been able to tolerate (34). Her writing did not set out to become ideological, but nevertheless opened up the idea of finding one’s voice as a woman by appropriating and fundamentally changing male language. A criticism often applied to Acker is that she is not ideological enough, but that is not the way her art works. She sets out in a certain direction in her writing and ends up taking numerous lines of flight before she is finished, then completes her work by framing it within a certain context (through the use of the epigraph, reorganization of the content, etc.) (13).

In order to interpret Acker’s avant-garde literature through a Deleuzian lens, we can first turn to the dialogue between Deleuze and Claire Parnet, “On the Superiority of Anglo-American Literature,” from *Dialogues II* (1977). In this dialogue, Deleuze and Parnet discuss the ability of Anglo-American literature (in comparison to French literature) to “[discover] worlds through a long, broken flight” (36). They characterize the work of writers such as Thomas Hardy, Herman Melville, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Wolfe, D. H. Lawrence, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Arthur Miller, and

Jack Kerouac as “departure, becoming, passage, leap, daemon, relationship with the outside” (36). Acker can be situated in this group of writers because of her ability to deterritorialize the hegemonic patriarchy through her writing and to create a fissure where becoming can become possible. Although Deleuze and Parnet do not explicitly mention the concept of the simulacrum in their discussion of literature, in Deleuze’s earlier work he connects the same concepts—becoming, daemon, and relationships with the outside or other—to the overturning of Platonism through simulacra. In “The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy,” from the Appendix of *The Logic of Sense* (1969), Deleuze emphasizes the difference between the simulacrum and the copy with the example of the catechism. Man was created in the image and resemblance of God, but through sin man has lost the resemblance but keeps the image of God, thus “we have become simulacra” (257). The sacrifice of man’s moral existence in exchange for aesthetic existence reinforces the “demonic character” of the simulacrum (258). This demonic characterization provides a direct connection to the lines of flight which Deleuze and Parnet see in Anglo-American literature revealing the possibility for a piece of literature to be a simulacrum. The discussion on Anglo-American writing involves lines of flight which are characterized not as imaginary, but real; the writer is “forced to follow, because in reality writing involves us there, draws us in there” (43). Following the lines of flight through Acker’s writing makes this reality a becoming, “nothing to do with becoming a writer,” but rather becoming a minority (43). Deleuze and Parnet define the

concept of woman-becoming as a line of flight that is created not by the gender of the writer but by the way they write in order to embrace the “minority-becoming of her writing,” thus one cannot “force themselves to write like women” (43). The becoming that is found in Acker’s writing denies the “powers that be” (44) the support they would seek through redundancy in the act, and instead engages in “life-experimentation” (47) through the act of writing where the aim is not to finish with the act of woman-becoming, but to move beyond minority-becoming until one is becoming-imperceptible.

Deleuze recognizes that the Platonic motivation is interested in “assuring the triumph of the copies over simulacra, of repressing simulacra, keeping them completely submerged, preventing them from climbing to the surface, and ‘insinuating themselves’ everywhere” (257). Deleuze continues by defining the simulacrum through its difference in relation to the copy of the Idea. Rather than being “an infinitely degraded icon,” or a copy of a copy of a copy, the simulacrum is a false pretender, a subversion which maintains the outward appearance of a copy, but in fact is dissimilar from both the copy and any original Platonic Idea; to overthrow Platonism, Deleuze believes we must deny the primacy of “original over copy, of model over image; glorifying the reign of simulacra and reflections” (66). The simulacrum exists through the action of challenging and overturning “the very idea of a model or privileged position” (69), and in this act of overturning any resemblance between the original and the copy is destroyed. It is in the act of overthrowing the privileged position through

the simulacrum that we can look for real experience, rather than possible experience, and create a “lived reality of a sub-representative domain” (69). Rather than the simulacra being something that is inferior, or seen as coming after an original, Acker’s work as simulacra subverts the privileged position of male writers like de Cervantes, and works to overthrow phallogentric language and open a space for becoming-woman. Thus, Acker’s work allows us to experience a simulacrum which subverts the privileged positions that dominated Western society in the 1970s and 80s.

In her interview with Friedman, Acker reveals that she sees herself as part of the same tradition of writers like Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and the Black Mountain School of poets. Although most critics would now group Acker together with other postmodern women writers such as Angela Carter or Ann Quin, she sees her writing as part of a writing tradition dominated by male writers like those mentioned above. This group of writers make up a system of simulacrum that can “affirm divergence and decentring” (278). Her work is connected to these other writers in an “informal chaos” in which “no series enjoys a privilege over others, none possesses the identity of a model, none the resemblance of a copy” (278). Acker’s relationship to other women writers and artists is a complicated one because she dissociates herself from other feminists of the 1970s and 80s, but she still identifies herself as a feminist. Her initial problems with second wave feminism stemmed from the dislike they had for her work. Furthermore, both *Don Quixote* and *Blood and Guts in High School* contain open criticisms of feminists such

as Andrea Dworkin, who Acker believes is too dualistic; in the same interview with Friedman, Acker also criticizes lesbian literary tropes (13). Her inspiration for what she describes as plagiarism actually originates in the work of photographic artist Sherrie Levine. Levine was part of the Pictures generation and became famous for her series of photos “After Walker Evens,” which have been described as the “feminist hijacking of patriarchal authority” (metmuseum.org). Levine describes her art with the following statement: “The world is filled to suffocating. Every word, every image, is leased and borrowed. We know that a picture is but a space in which a variety of images, none of them original, blend and clash” (“First Statement” n. p.). This description for Levine’s art is an uncanny depiction of the way Acker integrates numerous pieces of literature within her pastiche novels.

When we examine Acker’s *Don Quixote* in comparison to de Cervantes’ version, it would seem that Acker has simply copied the text in an effort to “see what pure plagiarism would look like” (Friedman 13), but by changing Don Quixote from a male to a female character Acker has made the text about “trying to find your voice as a woman” (Friedman 12). In creating a simulacra based on de Cervantes’ work, Neo-Platonists would say that she has created a false claimant which sits in second place, or in “simulacral fashion” (Deleuze 62) compared to the earlier novel. Following this line of thinking and ancient custom, the “false claimants must die” in order to prevent the usurpation of the position of power. The primary example Deleuze focuses on is Plato’s Sophist, who is the “false claimant *par*

excellence" (61); the ability of the Sophist to "lay claim to everything without any right" (61) can be called into question through the "glorification of simulacrum" (66). The original *Don Quixote* is unable to create the same ideas found in Acker's version because she has the ability to write woman-becoming and deterritorialize the products of social production, while de Cervantes does not.

Acker creates a simulacrum through her use of language. Experimental language is the reason she was influenced so greatly by Kerouac, and she continued the tradition of experimental writing in her own work. In most of Acker's writing she plagiarizes other texts, but we often do not notice because she is able to keep it "covered, hidden." In her interview with Friedman she notes that her novel *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) is almost entirely made up of texts which she has plagiarized, noting that she has taken from authors like Jean Genet and William Gibson, as well as Freud and de Sade (16). Unlike *Don Quixote*, which she believes is deconstructive, *Empire of the Senseless* constructs "a myth to live by" in order to understand how you can "live free in a society that isn't" (17). In Acker's earlier novel, *Blood and Guts in High School*, she sees her character Janey as being much more cardboard than her later characters (like those in *Empire of the Senseless*). However, it is through Janey that Acker uses other texts to deconstruct patriarchal systems of control. She plagiarizes and creates a simulacrum out of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), for example, by introducing the narrative through Janey's book report, which she writes while imprisoned as a sex slave, and not in school

as one would assume. Janey describes the plot of Hawthorne's novel as being "about a wild woman. This woman challenged the society by fucking a guy who wasn't her husband and having his kid. The society punished her by sending her to gaol, making her wear a red 'A' for adultery right on her tits, and excommunicating her" (*Blood and Guts* 66). Janey's analysis of the novel is filled with profanity, transforming the Puritan world of the original novel into a simulacrum wherein it is possible for Hester Prynne to be "snake-insane" (66) with female desire. Within Acker's work, it is the society that is "fucked-up," not Hester, and she makes the important point that Hawthorne was able to freely criticize Puritan society because it was not his own. Therefore, his criticisms would not offend, but it is the society which "created the society Hawthorne lived in, the society that created the one we live in today" (67, 66), and thus his criticism is just as pertinent today as in 1850.

Deleuze believes that creating a new aesthetic involves the merger of "the point where the being of the sensible reveals itself in the work of art, while at the same time the work of art appears as experimentation" (Deleuze 68). This new aesthetic involves the "abandonment of representation" (69), which eventually becomes a chaos in which repetition occurs in order to decentre and diverge. Acker's ability to abandon representation and lead us into chaos can create a line of flight from the point of writing something as mundane as an Agatha Christie novel and turn it into a simulacrum by throwing in some sex, violence, and experimental language. With respect to her

retelling of *Don Quixote*, she claims that she was not declaring: “I am a woman, a feminist, and I’m going to appropriate a male text” (Friedman 13). Instead, Acker notes that she saw it as a role in the theatre that she took on, allowing for the act of becoming to occur—in “the different, the dissimilar, the unequal” (Deleuze 128). Taking on this role she is not creating defective copies, she is making new “models themselves, terrifying models of the pseudos in which unfolds the power of the false” (Deleuze 128). The question that Deleuze poses about whether the simulacra possesses the power to subvert the concept of both the model and the copy can be answered through an examination of the simulacrum that Acker creates. Going further than the triumph of Plato’s *Sophist*, Acker rejects “the imprint of a transcendent Idea” (Deleuze 128), instead raising the possibility of the creation of new ideas.

Don Quixote begins with a change in identity of the protagonist through the process of an abortion. In Nicola Pitchford’s *Tactical Readings: Feminist Postmodernism in the Novels of Kathy Acker and Angela Carter* (2002), she points to Joe Moran’s interpretation of Acker’s work as texts in which “the self can be reinvented at the same time as it points to the existence of an innate, deep-seated identity” (66). Pitchford seems to disagree with Moran, and gestures to the essentialist viewpoint of postmodern otherness within Acker’s work. She argues that this is manifest in Acker’s “frequent representation of acutely painful bodily desires as absolutely fundamental to her characters’ social experience—and in her search for a language that can break free of

existing codes to express those desires” (67). The “bodily desires” of women are expressed from the beginning of *Don Quixote* in the section titled “Don Quixote’s Abortion” (67). Pitchford interprets this section as Don Quixote losing control to the doctors and nurses performing the procedure, and in this loss of control she “marks the death of her identity” (84), but that does not seem to be entirely the case. Don Quixote does say, “when a doctor sticks a steel catheter into you while you’re lying on your back and you do exactly what he and the nurses tell you to; finally, blessedly, you let go of your mind. Letting go of your mind is dying. She needed a new life. She had to be named” (9-10). This passage is the basis of Pitchford’s argument, but there are several important points about the abortion which make it an empowering act; prior to the abortion being performed and naming herself Catheter or Don Quixote, she has already taken on the identity of a knight in training, assuming her armour of “pale or puke green paper” (10) and setting her sights on adventures like seeking the Holy Grail. In the act of the abortion she actively rejects the role that her patriarchal society has set out for her and embraces the identity of a “female-male or a night-knight” (10). She compares herself to the other women waiting for abortions, who are “middle-aged and dumpy” (11) or young, innocent, and afraid of anyone finding out about their abortions. Don Quixote does not resemble the other women because to her “having an abortion is a method of becoming a knight” (11), leading to other benefits like receiving a name, having adventures, and saving the world. This is an active

rejection of bourgeois domesticity, and in this rejection she is subverting patriarchal control and the roles of women, like wife and mother, “as it is territorialized by her culture” (Siegel 33). The description of the abortion procedure is also an attack on feminist Andrea Dworkin’s “dualistic argument that men are responsible for all the evil in the world” (Friedman 13). This attacks Dworkin’s “dangerous” (13) idea that the evils of patriarchy stem from the act of sexual penetration by simulating sexual intercourse through the doctor’s insertion of the steel catheter. This is not a violent sexual act but a medical procedure that Don Quixote pays the doctor to perform, which she sees as leading to her freedom from the burden of motherhood and, thereby, to her knight-becoming. The steel catheter is the phallic object which frees her from the pregnancy, rather than impregnating her, and by naming herself Catheter, after the phallic object, she is embracing the becoming of “female-male or a night-knight” (*Don Quixote* 10).

Acker self-consciously exposes the ability of literature to create lines of flight which do not support the “powers that be” (44) through the power of art and writing. When Don Quixote is sick and needs help from her friends (the feminist, the Leftist, and the Liberal), they diagnose her condition as having “read too many books, instead of suffering like a normal child” (16). The Leftist tells her that literature is actually responsible for her abortion, and that she needs to “become normal and part of this community” (16). This attempt at reterritorializing her act of becoming a knight by telling Don Quixote to become normal and putting her to bed only causes

her to wake up screaming, “I had the abortion because I refused normalcy which is the capitulation to social control” (17-18). Her refusal of normalcy can be read as a way “to produce the real, to create life, to find a weapon” (Deleuze and Parnet 49) through flight. For Don Quixote, the production of the real means discovering how female desire works, asking, “How can a woman love? By loving someone other than herself. She would love another person. By loving another person, she would right every manner of political, social, and individual wrong: she would put herself in those situations so perilous the glory of her name would resound” (9). Pitchford identifies the problem at the origin of Don Quixote’s quest as being “‘conceived’ at the moment of abortion” (84). While this may be ironic wordplay from Pitchford’s, the idea is not actually impossible if you consider the act of abortion as a simulation of sexual intercourse that leads to the birth of her knightly quest.

For Acker, woman-becoming involves blurring the lines between male and female, and so opening up the possibility for women to become more than what society tells them is acceptable. Pitchford points out the unlikeliness of Don Quixote’s quest because of her gender, commenting that “women’s socially defined identity does not include the active expression of desire” (84), thus undermining “gender dualism” (84) throughout her quest for female desire. In “On the Superiority of Anglo-American Literature,” Deleuze and Parnet specifically address the role of the knight in English and American novels, characterizing knights as anti-heroes who are “absurd, strange, and disoriented [creatures] who

wander about continually, deaf and blind” (74). The wandering knights “no longer know their name or destination” (74) and follow a zig-zag line, which becomes the point of deterritorialization. This deterritorialization places Acker’s work into the category of writing which rejects “conforming to a code of dominant utterance” (74), and instead becomes a becoming. Siegel makes note that Acker’s interest in transgressing gender norms is rooted in her “much reiterated interest in the 1960s New York art scene, this evocation of the iconography of male prostitution as captured in Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey’s *Lonesome Cowboys* (1969)—not to mention John Schlesinger’s *Midnight Cowboy* (1969)—immediately associates St Simeon with gender role transgression” (13-14). Thus, Simeon, described as Don Quixote’s cowboy sidekick and Don Quixote, as a knight, are both transgressing traditional notions of femininity and masculinity.

For Acker, the concept that women have “a history of overrepresentation in men’s texts” (Pitchford 89) means that rather than lacking space for her own writing-becoming, she undermines the male texts by rewriting them and destroys the pre-existing representations of women by confronting them directly and sardonically. In this way, Acker’s text serves as a theoretical guide for undermining patriarchal society, not as the only way in which this act can be achieved. Don Quixote describes herself to St Simeon as strong, valorous, sincere, slim and boyish, devious as hell, charming, cajoling, “the most marvelous fuck in the world,” devoted, and “totally callous just like Machiavelli” (26). She believes she is

a “chameleon who has no goal except to change this world” (26), and she asks St Simeon (as well as the reader): “have you ever, in any book, read about a human being such as me? Has there ever in history, that is, in novels, been a human being such as me? You have to totally love me” (27). We are told we should love Don Quixote because she is a new type of human, not just a new type of woman. By creating a woman who upholds characteristics which are typically attributed to men Acker is creating a line of flight in the narrative of women. We are being told we should love this new woman-becoming, and thus reject the old ideas of what a woman should be, as found in “Our Bible or The Storehouse of Language” (27).

Acker’s focus on history being the history found in novels and books is a reference to the importance that she places upon language and the role it plays in political life. She also says in her interview with Friedman that her fascination with Burroughs was tied to his interest in “how language is used and abused within a political context” (Friedman 14). In the section “HISTORY AND WOMEN,” Don Quixote reads a book on the history of women by Cid Hamete Benengeli, a fictional character from de Cervantes’ novel whose task is to chronicle the adventures of Don Quixote. In the Acker version of *Don Quixote*, Benengeli has been transformed from an author who chronicles the adventures of the male Don Quixote to an author who has written the “main tome” on the history of women. His history begins by stating: “Be assured ... that the true history of women is that

of degradation and suffering” (29), but “history shows us that no woman nor any other person has to endure anything: a woman has the power to choose to be a king and a tyrant” (29). This statement undermines the roles that have been laid out for women by opening up the door for a woman like Don Quixote to exist. As Acker continues the repetition of Don Quixote she incorporates more changes like this which help to abolish resemblance between the two novels, eventually reaching the point where “one can no longer point to the existence of an original and a copy” (Deleuze 69). This is where Deleuze says we must look for real experience and will eventually “find the lived reality of a sub-representative domain” (69).

The connection Acker makes between death and female desire becomes apparent in “HISTORY AND WOMEN” when she tells St Simeon, “just as death destroys pain and time memory, so magic does away with history” (30). History has become propaganda, and “it’s history’s opposite, death, which shows us that women are nothing and everything” (31). In *Blood and Guts in High School*, Janey characterizes the past in which Hawthorne sets his novel *The Scarlet Letter* as a lie (66). While sick with love, Don Quixote meets a handsome man in the brothel who tells her “as soon as a woman loves, she’s in danger” (33), subject to the rejection of love from men, physical and sexual violence, and pregnancy. The choice a woman is faced with, according to the handsome man, is to be dead or to die. She is faced with the choice of becoming normal or dying, but she cannot be normal because she cannot escape the desire for love and the “truth of

[her] life which is [her] sexuality” (33). Similarly, in *Blood and Guts in High School*, Janey reinforces what we learn from the handsome man in *Don Quixote* when she affirms that “Hester was being a good dead girl” (67) by not having sex while waiting for her husband to show up. Hester exposes her “wildness or evil” to her Puritan society due to the need to fulfill her desire; it is this society’s conception of her which changes who she is, turning her into “a total freak” or “worse than a piece of garbage” (67). *Don Quixote* reinforces the emphasis on real experience: at the end of “The First Part of Don Quixote: The Beginning of Night,” Don Quixote announces her will, rejects writing and being right as illusions, and posits the only cure for her lovesickness to be “the mingling of our genitals” (37).

Though Don Quixote renounces the act of writing, she is engaged in the act of writing a will and at the end of the novel in the section “DON QUIXOTE’S DREAM,” the dead Don Quixote writes down and shares some important thoughts. On language she says, “Language presupposes community. Therefore without you, nothing I say has any meaning. Without love or language, I do not exist” (202). The problem with the use of language is the meaning that society inscribes upon it, but through the simulacra Acker is able to subvert the phallogocentric use of language and open up a space for the language of women. In M. W. Smith’s *Reading Simulacra* (2001), he compares Acker’s use of language to the work of the Critical Art Ensemble, whose art is anti-institutional and works to “detritorialize desire, identity, and the body by reappropriating and resigning them” (86). Smith’s analysis

of simulacra groups Acker's work together with various pieces of popular culture, such as Jean Baudrillard's *America*, Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*, and the O. J. Simpson Trial, thereby situating her work within the postmodern milieu, but not specifically connecting her with other avant-garde women writers. The connection to experimental art is clear and has been well-established throughout Acker's career, and this relationship is significant to the examination of how her novels work to create lines of flight. In *Blood and Guts in High School* Acker deterritorializes desire in this same way, and she self-consciously lets us know that this is her goal when Janey is contemplating Hawthorne and says, "There's going to be a world where the imagination is created by joy not suffering, a man and a woman can love each other again they can kiss and fuck again (a woman's going to come along and make this world for me even though I'm not alive anymore)" (100). Thus, by writing woman-becoming Acker is opening up space in the phallogocentric tradition of writing for both women's voices and desire. This new space allows women to say things like "Fucking's the most wonderful thing in the world" (69) without being called crazy because "people have and can change the world" (69). Acker does the same type of thing with language in her writing when Don Quixote explains poetry to dogs, telling them: "Language is community. Dogs, I'm now inventing a community for you and me" (191). By inventing a new language in order to overcome the lack of understanding between dogs and humans, or women and men, Acker is creating a line of flight which takes "the world into the future" (Smith 86).

Acker takes advantage of the long-established connection between the simulacrum and repetition by incorporating repetition into her novels as a way to disrupt the status quo and create new lines of flight which will lead to new becomings. Deleuze establishes the link between the death instinct and repetition in *Difference and Repetition* when he cites Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. He makes the point that the disguises found in "dreams or symptoms" create a connection between repetition and the death instinct, which is an "integral genetic element" of repetition (Deleuze 16, 17). Like Deleuze's simulacrum, this type of repetition can never be traced back to an originary "first term" because there is no point of bare repetition. Instead of tracing the repetition back to real childhood events to serve as the "ultimate disguised terms" (Deleuze 17) Freud has instead replaced the event with a fantasy "immersed in the death instinct" (17). This means that "symbols or simulacra are the letter of repetition itself" (17), and when we encounter a fantasy with repetition built into it we must look for the built-in difference which reaffirms the status of the simulacrum. Acker frequently uses repetition in her novels, and portrays a conscious awareness of the fact that simulacrum keep repeating when she titles one of the final sections "THE LAST ADVENTURE: UNTIL THIS BOOK WILL BEGIN AGAIN" (*Don Quixote* 175). This indicates that just as Acker has copied the text of Don Quixote, and in doing so created a simulacrum, she expects others to repeat the same process again and again. It is through the power of the imagination being used to create simulacra that human

beings are able to change society, just as we have been able to invent “cures for polio and syphilis by imagining” (*Blood and Guts* 69).

Early in *Don Quixote*, Acker includes a section of poems whose English translations seem to reaffirm the Deleuzian idea of the simulacrum. In “Poems from a City,” she writes, “By repeating the past, I’m molding and transforming it, an impossible act” (49), indicating the possibility of repetition of the aesthetic appearance, only containing a completely different substance. This repetition of the past is the repetition of real experience, and serves to reinforce the idea that you cannot repeat the same experience without the occurrence of a fundamental change. In the same set of poems, Don Quixote goes on to say, “The imagination is will” (49), which once again provides a connection between fantasy and reality. For Acker’s protagonist, the fantasy is real heterosexual love, or the ability to express female desire, thus the link in Acker’s writing between female desire and death. The female characters engage in repetition in order to find a way to express their desires, but the hurdles presented to them in the form of various anti-progressive men, politicians, and “friends” like feminists and leftists cause their desires to go unfulfilled.

The difficulty of actually molding and transforming something through the act of repetition is made apparent throughout Acker’s writing. While she denounces the education of a patriarchal society, Acker dreams of a re-education that begins with the physical body, “the place of shitting, eating, etc., to break through our opinions or false education” (166). In Acker’s email

correspondence with McKenzie Wark, *I’m Very Into You* (2015), she explains how she feels about her complicated relationship with the feminine and the masculine saying,

I prefer disavowal of being man. Or of man. ‘Cause drag as perfection of the feminine makes me hate the feminine even more ... I don’t want that. But then ... sometimes ... I fetishize the masculine ... spreading legs and drinking beer and grunting...and sweating and being stupid and rubbing your crotch...it turns me on. Must be a sort of mirror ... (Am I being clear?) I’ve got to get over my fears around the feminine ... oh all this shitty past ... the sexist society past. (Acker and Wark 113)

Acker’s responses establish the physicality involved with transgressing the gender norms of society, and the idea that we have reached a moment in history where we should have moved past the existence of a “sexist society” (Acker and Wark 113). However, we are still grappling with the consequences of this sexism, which can be described as a patriarchal hangover (113).

Those who teach the education of our patriarchal society are people like Roger Chillingworth, Hester’s husband in *The Scarlet Letter*, who is referred to as “a zombie and a ghoul” because he works to replace “living dangerous creatings with dead ideas and teach these ideas as the history and meaning of the world” (68). Acker connects the dead idea of patriarchy to a physical sickness when she represents Don Quixote as lovesick, and when she describes the Reverend

as “spreading mockery and hatred and vomiting” during his interrogation of Hester (68). These symptoms are indicative of a physical sickness, much like a hangover. By overcoming patriarchy through the pleasures of the physical body, the link between language, desire, and woman-becoming is established through the physical realm. For re-education to occur we are told we must “act against our opinions,” which, rather than emphasizing a parallel structure, allows the language and ideas of women take lines of flight which can go anywhere; St Simeon tells this story of re-education to Don Quixote, and in doing so excessively makes use of repetition in order to drive home how many repetitions it takes to break through our “false education” (166) to create a simulacrum.

During the process of re-education we must discover what joy is, and in St Simeon’s story this is done through the pleasure received by sexual acts. Every question that the teacher (a re-educator, not an educator) asks is repeated three or four times, as is each answer and each sex act. The process of re-education begins like this:

Since the body is the first ground of knowledge, my teacher made me take off my clothes. A mouth touched and licked my ass. A finger stuck into my asshole. A dildo thrust into my asshole and a dildo thrust into my cunt. Both dildos squirted liquid into me which I saw was white. I was so over-the-top excited, I came. The main thing for me

was my body’s uncontrolled reactions.
(168)

After repeating this four times each reaction is analysed four times as well. Eventually the re-education process reaches the point where the teacher herself overcomes any restraint imposed upon her by society and says, “I’ll abandon my belief that I’m worth something in order to fuck!” (172). Here the point has been reached where repetition is no longer necessary to create the simulacrum, and the teacher has taken a line of flight away from the lesson of physical re-education in pursuit of her own radical female desire. The sexual acts that are performed as also a simulacrum of sex with a man, replacing penises with dildos which are able to squirt liquid. The loss of Laure’s virginity is also achieved with a dildo. While discussing what will happen we are told, “a small rod is the correct size of a rod” because “women know better,” indicating the authority women have over their own bodies (174). This idea emasculates the sexual desire of men, while making room for the desire of women. The removal of the need for a man in this re-education symbolizes the rewriting of men’s writing, which needs to occur to create simulacra and make room for woman-becoming and women’s writing.

Through the process of appropriating works of men’s writing and creating a simulacrum from them, Acker creates a new aesthetic existence in which woman-becoming is possible. Simulacra deny the primacy of an originary Idea

or an original copy and, in doing so, they empower the ideas which come into being through deterritorialization. The subversion of male writing through the act of rewriting texts serves as a stepping-stone that can allow a space to open up for women's voices in literature to be recognized. The simulacrum holds primacy, not the original text, and by creating something that is a radically new Idea women can change the world.

Pitchford, Nicola. *Tactical Readings*. Associated UP, 2002.

Siegel, Carol. "The Madness Outside Gender: Travels with Don Quixote and Saint Foucault." *Rhizomes*, vol. 1, 2000.

Smith, M.W. *Reading Simulacra: Fatal Theories for Postmodernity*. State U of New York P, 2001.

Works Cited

- Acker, Kathy. *Blood and Guts in High School*. Grove Press, 1978.
- . *Don Quixote*. Grove Press, 1986.
- Acker, Kathy and McKenzie Wark. *I'm Very Into You*. Semiotext(e), 2015.
- After Walker Evans: 4*. Met Museum. metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/267214. Accessed 8 March, 2017.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. 1968. Columbia UP, 1994.
- . *The Logic of Sense*. 1969. Columbia UP, 1990.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *What is Philosophy?* 1991. Columbia UP, 1994.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Claire Parnet. *Dialogues II*. 1977. Continuum, 2002.
- Friedman, Ellen G. "A Conversation with Kathy Acker." *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1989, pp. 11-23.
- Levine, Sherrie. "First Statement." *After Sherrie Levine*. [Aftersherrielevine.com](http://aftersherrielevine.com). Accessed 10 March, 2017.