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An Interview with Kathy Acker

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LARRY MCCAFFERY

AN INTERVIEW WITH KATHY ACKER

During the somnolent, repressive 1980's decade of Reagan/Bush/Helms/Bennett, Kathy Acker established herself as one of postmodernism's boldest and most original fiction innovators (and one of its most controversial as well). Her major works during this period included her "re-writes" of classical Western novels (*Great Expectations* [1983] and *Don Quixote* [1986]), as well as several other novels that pastiched a broader variety of prior literary works: *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984), a combination of Acker's own drawings and "dream maps" with plagiarized sections of Genet, Deleuze and Guattari, obscure pornography, and radical feminist criticism which produces a grotesque "coming of age novel" quite unlike any other; *Empire of the Senseless* (1988), a book which clearly displayed Acker's movement away from "deconstructive" methods towards a more positive "constructive" literary approach, and which includes striking interventions into William Gibson's "cyberpunk" classic, *Neuromancer*; and her most personal and passionate novel to date, *In Memoriam to Identity* (1990), which appropriated materials ranging from ancient Japanese fictions to Rimbaud and Faulkner as a means of re-exploring the myth of romance.

The following interview was conducted April 12, 1990, at Acker's Greenwich Village apartment (she has since moved to San Francisco, where she teaches writing part-time at the San Francisco Art Museum). Acker had returned to settle in the U.S. after spending nearly a decade living in London. Acker had arrived in London having gained some recognition within the outer fringes of America's literary avant-garde on the basis of having published a series of radically experimental texts with small presses during the 1970s (these works included: *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, *by the Black Tarantula* [1973]; *I Dreamt I Became a Nymphomaniac!*:

Imagining [1974]; *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec, by Henri Toulouse Lautrec* [1975-76]; and *Kathy Goes to Haiti* [1978]). As perhaps the most visible “weird American artist” in London, Acker soon was having her novels published (with spectacular Robert Mapplethorpe photographs on their covers) by major commercial houses (Picador in England, Grove in the U.S.). Controversy inevitably followed, as Acker was attacked not only by the predictable sources of conservative opinion but by feminists, many of whom felt uncomfortable with Acker’s unabashed depictions of emotional and sexual masochism, her obscenity, and her on-going devastating portrayal not only of political and cultural repression but of many of the utopian ideals usually associated with 1960’s liberalism and hippie-dom.

Larry McCaffery: You first of all took up residence in England permanently in the early ‘80s, and you just recently returned to the United States. You’ve said somewhere that money was one of the main reasons you went to England in the first place (that is, you couldn’t make a living here in the U.S.). Was money the main reason that you came back?

Kathy Acker: I didn’t come back to the States for financial reasons. I was making a very good living in England. My decision to come back here was based on several reasons, some of which are so personal that I don’t really know what the truth is about them. But the *more* true are certainly personal and not practical reasons. I had a bad summer. It was a personal crisis. A long, two-year relationship I had with someone broke up and I found myself sitting around England waiting for it to happen again. Finally I decided that six months of sitting around waiting was enough. I had to do something to get myself out of the muck, and coming back here seemed like an obvious first step.

The other reason was that my own publisher let me know that they were taking one of my books off the market because they had been informed there was some chance that Harold Robbins might sue me over some material I’d appropriated. Anyway, it was a horrendous experience that completely disrupted my life. I couldn’t even answer my phone for three weeks, so I just had to get out of the country for a while. I was also feeling very threatened as a writer. I kept thinking to myself, Look, this is a minor, piddling little incident really—it’s about a book I wrote twenty years ago

about something Robbins wrote thirty years ago. But what if I was ever *seriously attacked* while I was living in England? Because despite all the bullshit going on right now here in the States about censorship and the N.E.A. and so on, this country is still very anarchic—there's a Bill of Rights, and artistic communities support their own. That's not true in England at all. There is no Bill of Rights, and communities do *not* support their own, at all. So what if I was in this country and anything seriously political ever happened to me? I could see how vulnerable I'd be to that sort of thing. I'd be screwed. So from a personal and practical standpoint, it was time to get out. So I did.

LM: You've said of the situation you had originally found in England that you were accepted as a writer, whereas you had not been here in the United States. What was the source of that acceptance? Were you the token "accepted" strange person there, or is there a stronger tradition of acceptance of the avant-garde?

KA: There's no tradition like that in England at all! It was more that, yes, I was the token caged animal. It's quite accurate to say that I was "accepted" there in that I was famous. Yeah, I was very well known, I could easily make a living. It was as if I had a little sign around me that said "Strange American." So I was the one who explained strange America to the British. Which they loved and hated. They have a real double relationship to America. It being a colony. [Laughs.] Overall, I'd say I was probably as accepted as an American can become over there without marrying into it. Which is to say about five percent acceptance.

LM: Is there really no tradition of avant-garde acceptance in England?

KA: There's no acceptance of the avant-garde there because the avant-garde doesn't exist there. You have to keep in mind that *everything* in England runs along class lines. That country never had a revolution, really. Sure, they had the Magna Charta, but that didn't produce a real change in the class structure. What makes it better for writers there is simply that England is more of a literary society, so that if you're a writer, it's easier to make a living than it is over here. So you have straight writers, who have mainly a social realist or naturalist narrative bent—you know, with cause and effect, the thing Barthes talks about in *Writing Degree Zero*. Balzac and so on. Then you have the writers who are *slightly* disjunctive in terms of not following that cause and effect business. Writers

like Jeanette Winterson can more easily make a living in England than writers here. You don't have to be Tama Janowitz to earn a living in England. But if you are *very* avant-garde in England there just isn't any place for you at all unless you have a university teaching job. If you really look carefully, they don't have any radical novelists except for J. G. Ballard, and until the success of *Empire of the Sun*, even Ballard existed on the edge of the British writing world, except for the science fiction publishing world, which is where he made his money—and he made very little of that until *Empire of the Sun*. The other radical writers you find over there are Scots—and they're starving. Oh, I guess Alasdair Gray and James Kelman are doing okay, but they certainly aren't English.

LM: One of the defining features of postmodernism seems to be the breakdown of the distinctions between "high" and "low" art—this willingness by "serious artists" to incorporate materials from pop culture, genre-forms and so on. Clearly this applies to your work, which has been improvising with and otherwise appropriating materials from several of these despised genres you mentioned—SF, pornography, detective fiction, and so on—all along. Could you describe what features in these forms interest you in terms of your own work? Let's take a form like detective fiction, which at first glance seems more epistemological than political in its orientation. What might draw you to the form, then?

KA: First off, let me go backward for a moment. I was appropriating this kind of materials prior to the use of this word "postmodernism," so I don't think that my interest in this sort of thing in any way has to do with my awareness of what was happening in the "postmodern movement" as such. I can't trace exactly when the use of this started, but it was already there in the very beginning of my work, back in the late '60s and early '70s. In terms of detective writing specifically, the last time I appropriated a detective novel was at the beginning of *Pasolini*. The detective format seemed appropriate in the first section of the book because I wanted to try and solve his murder (basically I wanted the first section of the book to be about his death and the second part to be about his life). I was very interested in that whole media circus that surrounded his murder and the way what really happened had been covered up at the trial. It was a very epistemological notion—this idea of trying to find out who did something, how, and why by writing this Agatha Christie version of Pasolini's murder. Of course it didn't

work out the way I planned. I didn't want a political way of solving the murder, so I chose three categories that seemed appropriate—sex, language and violence—and then let myself just go off in whatever direction I wanted to with each one. And once I really got into those categories, I found that I wasn't interested so much in solving his murder (that was impossible no matter what categories you chose because everything was so completely covered up) but in his life and his work.

LM: I found it interesting, though, that there you were appropriating Agatha Christie, who was very much a "classical detective writer" rather than someone like Dashiell Hammett, who had a very different take on detective fiction's epistemology—and on what that form could be used for generally.

KA: Right, Hammett's work wouldn't have been suitable for what I was doing there. And in fact I never really had much interest in Agatha Christie beyond the fact that I found the epistemological orientation of her work appealing and useful in that instance. As a writer and in terms of what he was saying about the culture, I'm much more interested in Hammett. I've never appropriated him, but if I did, my interest would be quite different, because Hammett gets politics, and a certain view of American culture generally, into his works in a way that Christie never does. Chandler does this, too. It's very interesting with Chandler because all this comes through in his novels mainly through this style rather than content per se. Because the style is so radical and calls attention to itself, the reader winds up getting this vivid take on American culture that is based on mannerisms like his use of adjectives. So he'll write something like, "She unzipped her teeth," and you get a whole view of an environment.

LM: You've been doing more things with science fiction recently—*Empire of the Senseless*, for example, uses a variety of SF motifs generally and appropriates materials out of William Gibson specifically. Do you like SF generally or was it specifically cyberpunk that appealed to you?

KA: In the case of *Empire*, my interest in SF specifically had to do with having read *Neuromancer*, which excited me enough that I actually wrote Gibson a fan letter (which I never do). By the time I was working on *Empire* I had already worked through several different traditional genres, and I was wanting to move into present

genres—and expand my muscles in a way. Do I like science fiction? Sometimes, sometimes not. I do like cyberpunk, especially Gibson.

LM: As you said, you began writing your books back in the '70s, before the term “postmodernism” was popular. But obviously even your very earliest works seem to contain features that later on would be called postmodernism—so how do you now situate yourself within this area?

KA: I suppose the term “postmodernism” has been useful for me personally because now people have a label they can use when they talk about my work. But I certainly had no idea what the term meant when I started out writing, and I’m still not sure I understand it today. When I started out, I didn’t know about the work of Foucault, or—what would be more important to me—Deleuze and Guattari. I knew I wanted to plagiarize, but I didn’t have a clear theoretical justification for what I was doing or why. So I just started finding these different texts and putting them together. The first book I kind of wrote seriously (that is, the first one I’d even want to talk about) would be *Tarantula*. At that point I was really fascinated by schizophrenia, and I think I took the model of the centralized “I”—and I don’t think I would’ve even used the word “centralized” in those days. I was reading R. D. Laing and David Cooper, and what I was trying to do in *Tarantula* was to see if, rather than trying to integrate the “I”, if you could *dis-integrate* it and find a more comfortable way of being. The question that was on my mind was, “What was this ‘I’?” And I was more concerned with the “I” of the text than the “I” of *me*. I wasn’t interested in autobiography or in diary writing, but in what the textual “I” looked like. So what I did was set a real autobiography next to fake autobiography—that is, I took some biography and made it into an autobiography. I took what I figured out “I” wasn’t, which was a murderess. Figuring that out wasn’t as simple as it sounds, because it’s hard to tell what you aren’t or haven’t got if you just list qualities. But I knew I wasn’t a murderess because I hadn’t murdered anybody. So just at the beginning of the whole process I placed the fake autobiography of murderesses next to a lot of quotation marks—the real autobiography—to see what would happen. And then, not to make not a long story but a lot of writing short, after working some of these ideas through in several books, I found I wasn’t so interested in that anymore. What was much

more interesting was the actual text itself. It was right about that point when I started *Great Expectations*.

LM: That sounds a little like what William Burroughs was doing with the cut-up form. Was he one of the sources for the kind of experimentation you were doing?

KA: Burroughs has been a major influence in my work—in fact, he was probably my first major influence. When I was starting out, I was coming out of a poetry world, the Black Mountain School. People like Charles Olsen, Jerry Rothenberg, and David Antin were my teachers. Burroughs was important to me early on because I wanted to write fiction and not poetry, and Burroughs was about the only model around at that point as far as a prose writer who was interested in what I was—which was in writing essentially non-narrative prose. Actually the main impulses in my work early on were actually coming from outside literature altogether. For instance, I was very influenced by Bob Ashley's music, and the way I would have spoken about what I was trying to do at that time was to talk about trying to make a text that was an "environment" rather than a centralized, meaningful narrative. I guess what I wanted was to have a narrative that was a kind of "de-narrative." If there is such a word. You see, there was no way I had of talking about it, really, until the punk movement came along and I met Sylvere Lotringer. That was about 1976. Sylvere introduced me to the work of Felix Guattari, Giles Deleuze, and (somewhat) Foucault. Those were the main ones for me. Derrida was never as important. And I never took to Baudrillard's work. But it was only then that I began to find a language for what I was doing. Especially the ideas of decentralization, and different notions of sexuality, and of the relation of sexuality to language and politics. And all that. Then when I read Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* that was another step, but that had nothing to do with Sylvere. And that is when I wrote *Pasolini*. So does all this have to do with postmodernism? I'm not sure.

LM: Were these experiments expressing your intuitive sense that personal identity (either your own or that of others) is unfixed? Those early books like *Tarantula* and *I Dreamed I Was a Nymphomaniac* seem like they're using some of this semiotic slippage of textual transformations to literalize the notion that identity is unfixed, or to question the whole concept of stable female and masculine identity.

KA: At the time I was writing the books back then, I would say those kinds of issues weren't consciously involved in what I was doing. Understanding how they *might* apply to what I had been doing, and how I can explore them differently in other ways, was one of the things that made my discovery of Deleuze and Guattari and the others so useful. All I can say is that back then (and I'm very aware that in talking about what was *now*, I'm applying a theory to a past act) I honestly did not understand why I was doing what I was doing. I knew I was very angry. I knew I didn't want any centralized meaning. Even though I have great respect for Robert Creeley and that range of work, I hated it because it was so *male*, and I didn't want that. My way to escape that male, centralized meaning was to keep my interest in writing as purely conceptual as I could. So I wasn't interested in "saying" anything in my work. The only thing I could use my works to say is "I don't want to say things!" I couldn't say anything beyond that. I didn't give a damn if one character was another or not—I couldn't even remember who my characters *were*! And I couldn't understand why anyone would read me. I honestly thought I was writing the most unreadable stuff around. And then when I read this stuff that Sylvere turned me on to, I suddenly had a theory for what I was doing. Even more importantly, it was a theory that made sense to me because it wasn't just abstract theoretical garbage. It was grounded very much in the political and social world I saw around me. It explained my own anger, which was very much an anger against the centralization of the Phallus, to put it in academic terms. And now that I understood what I was doing, I could start using some of this stuff more consciously, with a greater degree of control and precision about what I was doing. So by the time of *Empire of the Senseless* I could even *plan* things! Whereas before I never even wanted to touch anything that was rational, because I thought that that would intrude on what was going on.

LM: Your use of appropriation seems to change just about the time of *Great Expectations*. Was there a conscious shift in the way you began to use your materials?

KA: Appropriation is not a literary strategy I've chosen to manipulate what's happening in my books in certain ways. The truth is I have always used appropriation in my works because I literally can't write any other way. When I was in my teens I grew up with some of the Black Mountain poets who were always giving lectures

to writers to the effect that, “when you find your own voice, then you’re a poet.” The problem was, I couldn’t find my own voice. I didn’t *have* a voice as far as I could tell. So I began to do what I *had to do* if I wanted to write, and that was appropriate, imitate, and find whatever ways I could to work with and improvise off of other texts. When I was in high school I was imitating Shakespeare. It’s been that way ever since. What it comes down to is that I don’t like the idea of originality.

LM: What’s the reason for this inability to write in your own voice?

KA: The honest answer has to do with my personality, and even my sexuality. What I recognize now is that I am passive. Deeply, deeply passive. So the quality of making or creation in me that comes out—whatever it is in me has to do with making—is based on a reactive rather than an active principle. I don’t see a blank page when I’m writing. Ever. Or when I do nothing happens. I can’t even write people letters. I’ve never applied for a grant. The blank page is like an invitation to paralysis for me, not to creative activity.

LM: What reasons did you have for choosing the framing texts that you were deconstructing in those two novels, *Great Expectations* and *Don Quixote*. For example, with *Don Quixote*, did you start out thinking you wanted to take this great text, *Don Quixote*, the myth of the romantic hero whose blindness is gradually revealed, or—

KA: No, once I got started with the book I kept with it for certain specific reasons, but *Don Quixote* was chosen by random. That was the book I had taken with me to the hospital when I was about to have an abortion. In fact, the first scene in *Don Quixote* is exactly what I wrote prior to the abortion. I couldn’t think while I was waiting, so I just started copying *Don Quixote*. It was my version of a Sherrie Levine painting, where you copy something with no theoretical justification behind what you’re doing. I keep being asked if I chose *Don Quixote* out of any kind of feminist perspective, but that wasn’t really it. There were some places in the book where I wound up dealing with feminist issues—like there’s one part where I was trying to deal with Andrea Dworkin’s view that men are basically totally evil and responsible for all the shit that’s ever existed in the world; and after I got into the middle of it, I began to see that the book was, in a way, about appropriating male texts and about trying to find your voice as a woman (I deal with

that a lot in the second part of the book). But it really started out with my fascination with Levine's notion of seeing what happens when you copy something for no reason.

LM: Was the same thing true with *Great Expectations*?

KA: Not exactly, because I had read the book before and what I wanted to do was destroy this book I had always absolutely loved. But I worked on the book for essentially the same reason in that, as with *Don Quixote*, I was fascinated with the book. I'm sure there were a whole range of reasons why I chose *Great Expectations*, but these weren't things I was accessing at the time. To my mind, now, the book is about my mother's suicide, but I didn't know when I started writing it that it would be about my mother's suicide—or if I did, that knowledge was buried somewhere deep inside me, within my emotions.

LM: Clearly your works are written in a way that must be consciously designed to shock. Do you write shocking works because the world is shocking, or is shock more of an esthetic effect that you affect because you think it is valuable in and of itself?

KA: I don't think I've ever written with the idea of shocking anyone, except really minorly. It took me a long time to even have an audience in mind and I'd still say I write mainly for myself and maybe my friends. Shock is definitely always there in my books in the sense of trying to break through the reader's habits and perceptual blinders. But you can do that better by the breaking of taboos, or through transgressions—which both in form and in content run through my work endlessly. I don't think that's the same thing as shock (though shock might accompany this when you break taboos). After all, the people in our culture positively *live off* shock in our media, we feed on it, but this doesn't seem to have any positive effects in the sense of helping people to break perceptual habits.

LM: Let me list several authors that I recently taught in a course that finished by looking at your work: Sade, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautremont, Jary, the surrealists and dadaists, Bataille, Artaud, Genet, Burroughs, Patti Smith. Was I right in putting you in that literary line of descent? And if so, what would you say you share with these authors?

KA: There's also no doubt that I place myself in that lineage. I very much hope I do enough significant work that I can someday be seen as belonging to that lineage. If someone tries to place me in

another lineage, they are mistaken. One thing we all share is a perspective that is deeply sexual, a perspective which insists upon the connections between power and sexuality. Their work is also finally always about seeing, and there is certainly a view of excess as being not what reality is but what you *want* to see reality as. Seeing is almost reality itself. And that particular way of seeing has to do with excess. Most of these guys believed that you can't see properly unless you have gone over the limit. There's also the use of language that is not social realist, that is very involved with areas of the mind which are not rational. It's almost like we all have the same favorite color. And that color would be black.

LM: Your books always return to the site of the body in all kinds of ways: as a source of power, as a center of struggle for power, as the place we finally exist in (as opposed to our thoughts). Why are you so interested in the body, as opposed to whatever else you might be exploring in your work?

KA: The Western attitude towards the body in the twentieth century has to do with the fact that when reality (or the meanings associated with reality) is up for grabs—which is one of the central problems ever since the end of the nineteenth century—then the body becomes the only thing you can return to. You can talk about sexuality as a social phenomenon, so that it's up for grabs; and you can talk about any intellectual thought and it will be "up for grabs" in the sense that anything can mean anything else and hence be completely perverted. You get to Baudrillard's black hole. But when you get to something called the actual *act* of sexuality, or that actual act of disease, there is a kind of undeniable materiality which *isn't* up for grabs. It's in the body finally which we can't be touched by all our skepticism and ambiguous systems of belief. The body is the only place where any basis for real values exists anymore. Something like Mishima's *Sun and Steel* is fascinating because he returns again and again to the body.

LM: You mentioned that you've been interested in Japanese texts recently—and I notice that you appropriate materials from an ancient Japanese novel in your new book, *In Memoriam to Identity*. What's drawn you to Japanese works?

KA: Mishima, for one thing. Mishima was the only writer I knew who was working in body building. And then because the Japanese are so interested in this very controlled use of myth and image. For instance, the way Kawabata will seem to have a

narrative but what he's really doing is using that structure to develop a specific image or myth. His "House of the Sleeping Beauties" really fascinates me. In a lot of works you end up not knowing what's happened from a narrative standpoint (the narrative is there, but it doesn't quite make sense). But he's managed to produce a definite emotion. You know what the textures and environment are, but you can't really say what the plot was even though you seem to have read all the causally related stuff. This seems very mysterious to me because there's nothing avant-garde in Kawabata's work that you can point to. But it's absolutely brilliant and mysterious.

LM: You mentioned punk earlier. Why was it important to you?

KA: Punk was very important to me because it combined a lot of impulses I had already been drawn to. I missed out on it in England, but from what I've been told punk over there was very much a youth thing, and was very political—a response to how fucked up the whole political scene was over there, "No Future," and all that. Over here I don't think punk was a political movement—like a New America Movement. It was produced by a certain generation of artists—the artists right below Laurie Anderson and Vito Acconci—who were very fed up, for a lot of reasons. They were basically a bunch of middle class people who suddenly were finding themselves broke and living in a system that disgusted them. They didn't like hippies, they couldn't talk about poverty, and they didn't like the fact that their audience was upper-middle-class white art gallery audience. They were *angry* and they wanted to find a way to express that anger in their work—and they wanted to find something that would make people notice them because they also felt that they weren't getting enough attention. And because a lot of them were interested in doing anything to get out of that system, they started forming bands because that seemed a way to finally get attention and because there were a lot of possibilities there. A lot of different things all came together. And it was pretty intense when it did.

LM: Even though your work deals with sex a lot, its effect rarely seems erotic to me. Are you, in fact, interested in turning your readers on?

KA: You never know what might turn some people on, but mostly I can't see how people would get aroused by the sex I'm describing in my books. Certainly titillation isn't what I've been

after except maybe in a few early ones like *Tarantula* and *Toulouse*. It's not that I write erotic or pornographic materials (although I have, obviously, within specific sections of my books), but that my general view is erotic or sexual. I think I share this very deeply with that lineage of writers I said I feel I'm working out of—Genet, Sade, Rimbaud, Bataille, those sorts of writers. I agree with what a friend of mine, Simon Watney, said: that there are those people who think that it's sexuality that deeply disturbs their identity—whatever it is you call "identity". I know there are some feminists who think you can choose your sexuality, and that you should be politically correct in your choice of sexuality. But I don't agree at all. That's one of the rare theoretical opinions that I have. So since I'm very much interested in this whole issue of identity—and in both the textual and personal aspects of it—sexuality has naturally appeared a lot in all my books. I've also had a constant concern with sex and power, and how they join and reinforce each other. As a woman but also just as a person looking around at the way things operate, it's hard for me *not* to be concerned with that; it's almost an obsession. And, then, to be honest, I think my own sexuality probably colors my books very deeply, both in content and in structure.

LM: You've performed in live sex shows on 42nd Street during the early '70s—and you've said your involvement in that was the beginning of your political awareness . . .

KA: It was the beginning of *a lot* of awarenesses. I'm sure this is partly where I began to see the sexual orientation of things like identity and power, because I was seeing how sexuality really colors the world. The sex shows we did were fake but even so, doing them suddenly put me in such a different social class than anybody else. Being in that kind of world made me see things so differently. For instance, I could see that politics were what was involved in separating me from the St. Mark's crowd—class (because they were basically upper middle class, while 42nd St. wasn't) and sexism. All this stuff that the hippie crowd were totally denying at the time. And working in a sex show is very much about sex and power, and so you begin to see these connections literally being acted out around you every day in ways you don't think about when you grow up not *having* to think of them.

LM: I want to ask some questions about your ambiguous role in feminism. You are obviously not advocating any kind of radical

lesbian, exclusionary, visionary approach (favored by some feminists) in your last few books? Why not?

KA: Because it's the hippie line, and the hippie line hasn't worked. To my mind anything that is separatist is going to have the same problems the hippies had. You can't separate yourself from society at large. The milk man still has to deliver the milk [laughs]. Or whatever. It just doesn't work. Either the whole thing changes or nothing changes. Which doesn't mean you can't change things slowly, or on a person-to-person basis—that's what I was suggesting at the end of *Empire of the Senseless*. But a model based on separatism just doesn't work. I didn't think the '60s generally worked. And basically I see lesbian separatism as being part of the '60s. I also don't feel comfortable with the simplistic descriptions you get from a lot of radical lesbians about what a human being is—say, the ideal of someone free from jealousy, free from all the bad stuff. And I certainly don't find the general dislike of power, which you find among some feminists, as being at all satisfying.

LM: Certainly your work has come in for a lot of criticism by feminists who don't like what they take to be your "pessimism"—your portrayal of female victimization and masochism (that weird way that your characters almost enjoy their victimization, or have a schizophrenic response to it, fighting it but getting off on it).

KA: You're right that what really gives them a problem about my work is what they take to be my masochism. But frankly, I feel that this business about positive role models is just as stupid. If you're arguing that the society is sexist, why do you want to argue that everything is happy? And why do you want to insist on having these strong, wonderful, terrific women? [Laughs.] That implies there's no reason to have this violent struggle. That's cuckoo.

LM: You say somewhere that "My father is not my *real father*"—the implication being that the basic problem women have isn't necessarily with men, per se. That the "real father" isn't necessarily the awful, power-wielding tyrant who keeps fucking over (and fucking) your women characters. It's an anti-essentialist view—that, again, I suspect gets you into trouble with some feminists . . .

KA: That's true. I don't think the problem *is* with men. Take Cixous's argument against Kristeva, with Cixous saying that our problems all have their source in genital difference—so the fact that men have cocks is what makes them evil. This being so, the only thing to do is escape from men. She's a separatist. And

Dworkin's position is the same sort of thing. Then you have Kristeva's argument that the real problem has to do with the role models. That makes a lot more sense to me. This may not be a politically correct thing to say but *I like men*. I don't have any problems with guys. But I have lots of problems with society.