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Writing, Identity, and Copyright in the Net Age

Kathy Acker

In my confusion, I look to older writing, as I have often done when I am confused. I look to find a clue about my own writing.

Unfortunately, the school systems in this country are being allotted less and less government funding. I will regret if the culture of our society, through the loss of education, loses its sense of history. I shall regret if those who are involved in culture no longer think historically, if they no longer turn to their, to our histories for models, for examples.

Looking, I turned to the writings of Hannah Arendt, a philosopher whose thinking is deeply embedded in the historical. "Even those among us," Arendt writes, "who by speaking and writing have ventured into public life have not done so out of any original pleasure in the public scene, and have hardly expected or aspired to receive the stamp of public approval." And she continues, and now she is truly beginning to help me, ". . . even in public they [those among us] tended to address only their friends and to speak to those unknown, scattered readers and listeners with whom everyone who speaks and writes at all cannot help feeling joined in some rather obscure brotherhood." As I continue to read, her words clarify more and more of what I, and perhaps many of you, are feeling right now. And perhaps this is how literature works: "I am afraid that in their efforts, they felt very little responsibility toward the world; these efforts were, rather, guided by their hope of preserving some minimum of humanity in a world grown inhuman while at the same time as far as possible resisting the weird irreality of this worldlessness—each after his own fashion and some few by seeking to the limits of their ability to understand even inhumanity and the intellectual and political monstrosities of a time out of joint."

The Task of a Writer

This is what I want to talk about: a time out of joint. The name of the collection of essays from which I've borrowed, which I've used, these bits of Arendt's writing are from *Men in Dark Times*.

For many of us, these are dark times. Are they harder or easier than the times in which and about which Hannah Arendt wrote? A useless question.

Certainly these times are hard, if not for us, then for our friends. If not for our friends, then look at the streets, the homeless, the ghettos, incurable diseases, the persistent if not increasing presence of racism, homophobia, of prejudice heaped upon prejudice and hatred upon hatred, worse, fear upon fear. We are aware that we know both and, perhaps, are both victim and victimizer. For historically we have and still do participate in so many of the ownerships in this world.

We can throw away history, our history, as we seem to be trying to throw away education for all but the rich. But if we do throw history away, if we do not accept historical thinking, what kind of civilization are we negotiating? What kind of culture? If we throw history away, we are depriving ourselves of potentialities, potentialities for actions. Models and paradigms for actions. Potentiality is kin, and I am talking politically, kin to the imagination.

If we don't throw history away, if we think historically, what do we do about the hardships, the sufferings that we both experience and cause? Hannah Arendt suggests that the meaning of a "committed act," that is her phrase, is revealed only when the action itself has come to an end and become a story susceptible to narration. That is, "insofar as any *mastery* of the past is possible," thus, insofar as any mastery of suffering is possible, "it consists in relating what has happened."

When Arendt talks about story, about narration and narrative, she is not talking about a *master narrative*. She is talking about language as it moves from one point to another point. She is talking about meaning as it reveals itself and so is co-equivalent to language.

Arendt knows that writing, narration, does not end suffering: writing masters nothing. Narration, writing does something else. It restores meaning to a world which hardship and suffering have revealed as chaotic and senseless.

Writing, narration, then, allows us to be human: the stories of this world, the myths we name histories, make us human. This is what we as writers do.

Hard Times

But what if times are really hard? So hard that the very existence of writing, which bestows humanity, is in danger? The loss, not of art, but of community, the loss of history and of writing as the ground of history—that loss in this world is a kind of death.

If we look at the literary industry today, writing is in trouble. Very few writers who spend most of their time writing and those who want to spend

most of their time writing, can make a living by doing what they do most of the time and by what they love to do the most. Those who can and do support themselves writing do so, on the whole, by virtue of something called *copyright*. Copyright's existence, I believe, is based on the following assumptions or sentences: *An author is the only person who has written her or his own work; an author owns her or his own work.*

Now in the first sentence – *an author is the only person who has written his or her own work* – the assumed definition of identity is questionable. For instance, I do not write out of nothing, or from nothing, for I must write with the help of other texts, be these texts written ones, oral ones, those of memory, those of dream, etc. In the second sentence, *an author owns her or his own work*, the verb *to own* must be questioned.

In other words, as writers we depend economically on copyright, its existence, because we are living and working, whether we like it or not, in a bourgeois-industrialist, in a capitalist society, a society based on ownership. One needs to own in order to survive, in fact, in order to be.

Our society, however, is in the process of, or has already changed into, a post-industrial ex-national economic beast. I hope that I am saying this correctly. As economic grounds change, so do all others. Both language and communications and the place of language and of communications in our society are rapidly changing.

For instance: I teach writing courses at the San Francisco Art Institute. Each year, fewer and fewer of my students read books. I don't mean that they don't read. They do, though they might not admit it. They read magazines, 'zines, they go to art performance, to spoken word events; they eagerly participate in such events; they buy CDs in which rock stars and poets perform. More and more students and, I might add, my friends, and myself are using the Internet as a location where we can place our work. For the moment, the Net is a free zone . . . for those who can afford or access the necessary equipment. Whether it will remain free or whether our government will be able to enact strict controls, or whether various multinational corporations will be able to turn the Net into a cross between TV media land and a shopping mall, an elephantine version of America Online, this no one knows. Certainly, there are those who think that the Net cannot be controlled. Now, I have no idea whether or not it will be, that is, whether or not it can be. But either way, there is one thing I suspect. I suspect that *copyright* as we now define it will become a thing of the past.

I have taken a long-winded route to make one simple point, something that I think most writers now know: if it is at this historical moment difficult for a writer to make a living by depending on *copyright*, in the future it may prove impossible for all but the very, very few.

It is not the case that the Net is providing an alternative method of book

publishing and distribution. Not at the moment, as the technology stands. No one is going to download a whole book, for it's far easier to run to the nearest bookstore. The existence of the Net is threatening the literary industry in another way: my students, people who work, which probably means that they work more than eight hours a day and have little time to read, many, many of the people in this society are preferring to engage in writing and in writerly activities outside the realm of books. And so, to a large extent, outside the realm of *copyright*, as *copyright* now exists. These are indeed hard times.

Without Copyright

If we get rid of *copyright* as it now exists, do we have to throw writing away?

In order to answer this question, I think that it's necessary to try to see clearly, to see the society in which we're living. I should say *societies*, for sometimes the only entities that make our societies single seem to be McDonald's hamburgers and Madonna. We need to see how we as writers fit into our societies as and while these societies are changing. How can we, as Hannah Arendt says, even in worlds that seem to have become inhuman, remain obligated to these worlds? *Obligated*, for being writers, our job is to hear and put together narrations and so to give meaning even to what seems to be or is inhuman.

How can I, as a writer, be of use to and in my societies? That is the question that underlies the one of *copyright*.

I think that it is hard to understand what writing is in our society because writing has become so entangled with the literary industry. Entangled to the point that there no longer seems to be any difference between the two. For instance, if a writer is not *big business*, she or he is not a good, that is, finally, not a *publishable* writer.

Let me paraphrase and so repeat Hannah Arendt's question: To what extent do we remain obligated to a world even when our presence is no longer desired in that world? Are we, writers, obligated to the literary industry and to the society behind that industry? Here is Hannah Arendt's answer: "Flight from the world in dark times of impotence can always be justified as long as reality is not ignored." *Flight* does not mean *abandonment*.

As it now stands, the literary industry depends upon *copyright*. But not literature. Euripides, for instance, wrote his version of *Electra* while Sophocles's "copyright" was still active. Not to mention Shakespeare's, Marlowe's, and Ford's uses of each other's texts. My worries with *copyright*, however, are not so academic. My worries concern the increasing marginalization of writers and of their writings in this society. Whenever writers are considered marginal to a society, something is deeply wrong,

wrong in that society and wrong with the relations between writing and the society. For *to write* should be *to write the world* and, simultaneously, *to engage in the world*. But the literary industry as it now exists seems to be obfuscating relations between this society's writers and this society.

Once more we need to see what writing is. We need to step away from all the business. We need to step to the personal. This is what I mean by *flight*. Business has become too heavy, too dominant. We need to remember friends, that we write deeply out of friendship, that we write to friends. We need to regain some of the energy, as writers and as readers, that people have on the Internet when for the first time they e-mail, when they discover that they can write anything, even to a stranger, even the most personal of matters. When they discover that strangers can communicate to each other.

The bestowing of meaning and, thus, the making of the world, the word as world: this is what writing is about.

Friendship

In our society, the excitement, the energy, and the power is no longer located in writing, that is, in the writing world. The excitement is found in film, as in *Pulp Fiction*, or in the TV of David Lynch. Perhaps we should ask why the writing industry, in terms of the overall culture, is emasculated. (I should say, *e-femin-ated*.)

Back to Hannah Arendt's words. You see, my lazy mind never goes anywhere: it only returns. Writing, as defined by the literary industry, is all about individuals. *I own my writing; that is copyright*. "Power arises," Arendt writes, "only where people act together, not where people grow stronger as individuals."

To write is to do other than announce oneself as an enclosed individual. Even the most narcissist of texts, say Nabokov's *Lolita*, reaches out to, in *Lolita's* case grabs at, its reader. To write is to write to another. Not *for another*, as if one could take away that other's otherness, but *to another*. To write, as Gertrude Stein and Maurice Blanchot both have said, is to write to a stranger, to a friend. As we go forward, say on the Net, perhaps we are also going back, and I am not a great believer in linear models of time, to times when literature and economics met each other in the region of friendship. "The ancients," comments Arendt, "thought friends indispensable to human life, indeed that a life without friends was not really worth living."

Friendship is always a political act, for it unites citizens into a *polis*, a (political) community. And it is this friendship that the existence of copyright (as it is now defined) has obfuscated.

The loss of friendship, the giving over of friendship to business based on

individualism, has caused loss of energy in the literary world. Think, for a moment, with how much more energy one does something for a lover or for a close friend than when one acts only in the service of oneself.

In his remarkable essay about the writings of his friend Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot opposes two kinds of relationships, that of friendship and that of totalitarianism. Both Blanchot and Bataille lived through Nazism and Stalinism. A totalitarian relationship, Blanchot states, is one in which the subject denies the otherness, therefore the very existence of the other person, the person to whom he or she is talking. Thus, the totalitarian relationship is built upon individualism as closure. Individualism as the closing down of energy, of meaning. Whereas, when I talk to my friend, when I write to her, I am writing to someone whose otherness I accept. It is the difference between me and my friend that allows meaning; meaning begins in this difference. And it is meaning, the meaningfulness of the world, that is consciousness. You see, I am finally talking about writing.

Note: Kathy Acker wrote this essay for presentation to the Authors Guild in Palo Alto, California, in March 1995.