

## Midwest Modern Language Association

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Paragraphs

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# Paragraphs

Kathy Acker

Growing up as a kid, given my class background, my religious background, or what not, I was expected to marry well, or, when my parents realized I wasn't going to do that, I was expected to be a doctor or a lawyer or a scientist, and that was all that was allowed. I wasn't going to fit into any of those roles. So I found a sort of pocket. "Bohemia." At that time, there was something called "Bohemia" and it made a lot of sense. I lived in Bohemia. You know, one makes various compromises or rather, one puts on various masks, identic masks or identities, in order to survive. So, when I was in my teens, I hung around one of the forms of Bohemia, the poetry world; it was mainly guys there, a few women, but very few; you could see those women being on the edges of hysteria in order to maintain their position in that world. My position, as a teenager, was to listen to the big men and to keep my mouth shut. And I did it. That was the only way I could have done it. I do think you have to have a bit of power in order to do something else. You have to have other women breaking free. We can't do these things alone.

I think that now, I see this among my students, there's a move in progress, a move away from this world of duality, precisely, from this world defined by two set genders: not everything now has to be coded male or female. This is just the beginning: even those codes, male and female, can be played with.

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History is moving however it's moving, apart from what we think is right and wrong. I hope it's moving toward the overthrow of the two-party gender system. Because it's not men who are messed-up, though they are; it's the whole system. The whole system of dualistic thinking. I don't think that any of us would disagree that we, being women, are messed-up.

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I've never regarded identity as anything more than performative. However, there are always contexts. For instance, a close friend of mine,

Jeffrey Weinstein, once told me this story. A number of years ago when, I hope, things were different, he was staying with his boyfriend in a posh hotel. They were not allowed to display their affection for each other publicly; they could not even stay in the same room. In order to fight against this homophobia, they had to use the word *gay*, they had to announce themselves as *gay*.

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I love Catholic stuff, but I have no genetic relation to Catholicism. My real name isn't Kathy. My mother didn't think she could legally name me Kathy, so she gave me this name she hated. I've never been called by my legal name. Only when very drunk do I mention that name.

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I always notice how *The Nation* uses the word *queer*: they use it to mean gay. They don't draw any difference between the two; they don't indicate that queer politics is not identity politics. I take *queer* as involving a political position that's neither right nor left, but stands against "the norm." In this country, "the norm," whether majority-based or not, happens to be right-wing. That is, you can be gay and pro-Gingrich: that's no contradiction. I don't see how you can be queer and pro-Gingrich. In a sense, queer is somewhere between counterculture and gay. It indicates sexualities other than straight heterosexual. That is, you could be S/M heterosexual and be queer. But I'm not sure that anyone agrees what *queer* means, nor have we yet examined its relation to class.

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I don't have to think a certain way to use a text. Usually I don't know what a text is going to mean when I use it. At any rate, I'm always questioning and "meaning" is always contextual. When I wrote *Empire of the Senseless*, I knew Frantz Fanon's work, but I wasn't thinking "this" would mean "this" in this context; I was more curious what parts of Fanon's discourse would do. I was looking for any narrative form besides the white Oedipal set-up. Since narrative structuring is always a mode of thinking, I was looking for other than the white Oedipal way of thinking, for other than Cartesian structuring. Also, when I was using Fanon's texts, I was thinking about friends of mine, Algerians living in Paris, about the growing racism of the French Parisians. And I was thinking, for my mind always slips, about Puerto Ricans in New York City.

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I don't think that "this" equals "that"; I don't think in that kind of mode, that way of thinking. That kind of thinking, "this" equals or means "that," is *identity* thinking, thinking concerned with meaning as closure. Let's look at this problem another way: I don't work in any way that is pure. Either, as a writer, you take a stance that one is going to talk only about oneself, whatever that "self" is – and if you can find it, you're doing pretty well – or you engage in practices that are impure, and if you're going to engage in practices that are impure, you make clear, a bit à la Sartre, that they *are* impure. What I do is obviously very impure. I don't re-enact other texts, I directly appropriate: I directly and bluntly use these other experiences which aren't "mine." Only they're mine because I've read them. Or heard them, etc. This is part of what it is to be human: to realize that one can't see from the perspective of absolute morality, be it even a literary morality.

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The title *Empire of the Senseless* came, as far as I know, for I don't work entirely consciously, from the title of a series of slasher/horror movies which were being shown at the ICA in London, England and from Oshima's movies. At the same time, a band named The Mekons did a song "Empire of the Senseless." I don't know if my book or their song came first. Now we're friends, the Mekons and I; none of us can decide who first thought up the title.

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Sometimes I don't remember why I use parts of texts. In the subchapter "About Chinese Women" in *My Mother: Demonology* I use Kristeva, but I'm also using a Dario Argento film, a scene in that film when the heroine walks upstairs and sees this fat cook. In Argento's actual scene, there are no Chinese women. The whole chapter "Clit City" in *My Mother: Demonology* is a rip-off of Argento's *Susperia*. And in the kitchen scene, my appropriation, I wanted to see what would happen if I used Kristeva. I think I was curious about women traveling into strangeness, a so-called white woman into Asia, a so-called democratic woman into a so-called communist state. But I was disappointed in Kristeva's text, for there she indicated that she seemed unable to leave herself. In the Argento film, however, when the heroine walks upstairs, she's thinking that there's something that she has to find out and then she realizes, as if suddenly, that she doesn't understand at all, that she's in a semi-magic horror world in which

she is not able to understand. When she reaches the top of the stairs, the kitchen is the first room she sees. A room, but it's as open as a hall. And sitting on a chair is a huge, fat woman with a cleaver. That's a fabulous image. That image, in my mind, linked to the abstraction named "otherness," "otherness" especially in relation to women.

I had only glanced through Kristeva's book when I started appropriating it. My using the text resulted in my reading the whole book. Sometimes I work with books I hardly know and sometimes I work with books I know very well.

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I'm probably concerned with *my* mother in my texts. I'm concerned with *the* father and *my* mother. The majority of the autobiographical material in my books concerns my mother. I don't actually write all that autobiographically, but now and then, there's some direct autobiography. However, the section "Letters from My Mother to My Father" in *My Mother: Demonology* is not autobiographical. Laure is narrating all of the book except for a tiny section toward the end, where B describes Laure. So those letters are from Laure. At first, my fictional Laure was going to be a mixture of my actual mother and the historical figure Colette Peignot, whose pen-name was Laure; thus part of the reason for the rubric "my mother." But by page three of my manuscript, Laure was interesting me and my mother wasn't. So I should have changed the title "Letters from My Mother to My Father."

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I prefer Irigaray's position on the maternal to Kristeva's. According to Irigaray, we, being female in a patriarchal society, might have a double and ambiguous relation to our mothers: On the one hand, my mother was or is my lover. On the other hand, my mother was a victim in the male-defined society. So, if I identify with her, I'm forced to define myself as victim. So how do I deal with this double bind? Go mad? (Pun intended.) Irigaray says we, females, have to reinstate the mother as another person. I take that rather seriously.

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In this new Catherine Clément book I'm reading, *Syncope*, there are fascinating discussions about age and women. In one section, Clément posits depression as a signal of the need to leave the world, to escape the socio-political world, to escape all its burdens, and to come into a new kind of

knowledge or experience. At the same time, she talks about the actual physical body, its hormonal cycles, its relation to sleep. Clément is linking two genres of analysis, genres rarely linked. She clearly says, that she has taken a lot of this from Bataille, who did this kind of thinking, or work.

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Bataille's *Story of the Eye* is some book. It's a vicious book. I always begin by asking my students, "What do you think of this novel?" Usually they reply, "Why are you making us read pornography?" After we've analyzed it, gone through it, they exclaim, "Oh, my God!" Basically we trace the images, see how the narrative is based on image development. In its beginning, the book presents a limited vocabulary of images, then builds on that vocabulary. In this text, Bataille plays with color, with image-repetition, with image reassembling, until his or this narrative, like the narrative of desire (remember Ariadne and the Minotaur) winds and ends where it desires, in a picture of an eyeball sitting between two labia: an image of the new Jesus Christ, if you like. Bataille was attacking absolutes, such as that of religious transcendency.

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My fascination with body building has changed in kind over the years. I don't know how to start talking about this, this business of language and the body, so I'll just start somewhere: When I started writing *My Mother: Demonology*, I was aware that it was increasingly hard for me to find an interior space. Any interior space that was free. I can write only from, in, that free space. In other words, I felt that I was interiorizing a lot of crap. You know, the expectations people had of me as a writer, etc. Sex as text and not had stopped being a free place for me, for all sorts of reasons, reasons which I'm sure we all know. Searching for freedom, I turned to dreams. An old Surrealist move. Older than that. And at the time, I happened to be reading *Ecstasies*, a book by Carlo Ginzburg, a text purportedly about the Black Sabbath, but actually about a great deal else. Reading this book led me to realize that a history I had taken to be minor, the history of witchcraft, could be viewed as an alternative major history, as a history of women. So I became fascinated by witchcraft and by related subjects, such as dreaming. I started working with some people who knew those disciplines. *My Mother: Demonology* came from that place.

Dream was a language I accessed; I did not make it up. I did not compose it. I became interested in languages I could access, find. I realized that there were other such languages, languages which could be found. When you bodybuild, or go through any such intense athletic activity – dance –

you move into and through language, but you don't remember that language once you've stopped the activity in question. Most athletes sound dumb, but they're not; they're just using a language that can't easily be accessed. Now how could I reach, like Alice in *Wonderland*, into the rabbit's hole and pull such a language out? How could I see what such a language looked like? When I passed through intense sexual activity, through orgasm or orgasms, what did "my" language, which is not just my language, look like? I've been working on finding or throwing light on these languages. You know, our orgasms – I don't know how it works for men – can last for a while, and through most of it, there's language. This language seems to be architectural: it has spaces; it might have something to do with Kant's categories. I've only started doing this work so I don't know. The language seems to look like shifting spaces, many halls and walls and doors. I'm interested in the language I'm accessing, not in metaphorical relations. I just want to see that language.



You have to have a sense of humor to read me. Some people ask me, "How can I make sense of your writing?" I then say, "Don't bother. Don't make sense. Eat your mind." As a novelist, I construct a world. I'm not concerned with what that world means, for to mean is to be something other. There are sets of arguments about sexuality and identity in my texts, but no absolute meanings. There are tons of meanings and all of these meanings collide. Meaning shifts.