



Kat Moore

Rupture in Time (and Language): Hybridity in Kathy Acker's Essays

*We transition through genred spaces, but when we except that texts like bodies
can be genre-queer then the possibilities for both interpretation and artistic creation are boundless*
— “Genre-Queer: Notes Against Generic Binaries” by Kazim Ali

Kathy Acker wrote in choppy sentences, and elided information—which mirrored the way girls are elided from language—which created a jag in time.

Kathy Acker was a poet, a writer of fiction and essays, a feminist, and a major influence on the nineties Riot Grrrl Movement. In 1989, a spoken word poet took a workshop from Kathy Acker. Acker told the poet that if she wanted people to listen to her then she needed to “start a band” (Frere-Jones). This poet, Kathleen Hanna, took Acker’s suggestion and formed Bikini Kill, a band who is now synonymous with Riot Grrrl.

Linear time rarely exists within an essay. Or, at least, my favorites essays are never linear.

Queer theorist J. Jack Halberstam claims, “...what has made queerness compelling as a form of self-description in the past decade or so has to do with the way it has the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space” (1-2). The essay is, in part, defined by self-description, and its potential to be nonlinear, a form of queer time, offers new ways of presenting narratives and literary critique.

Bikini Kill saved me when my teen self was being crushed so, in a way, Kathy Acker did too. Their music spoke my language. A language of deviance and defiance. A language that revealed girl as grrrl as something not only defined by her relation to man (man as cis-man as patriarchal man).

Time slips and memories move on the page, a push and pull between the persona and memory, or, as essayist David Lazar would say, “contrasts between memory and desire, producing resistance through friction” (44).

I remember reading about Acker’s novel, *Blood and Guts in High School*, in a Riot Grrrl zine. I bought the book from the local bookstore and consumed it. Her fiction experimented and teetered on the indecipherable (at least for me at fifteen), but her language, like Bikini Kill’s, felt deviant and defiant. Recently, now much older, and an essayist who has fallen in love with autotheory and other hybrids, I ordered her essay collection, *Bodies of Work*, and though I am ABD in a PhD program, I still found her writing puzzling, yet alluring. I longed to figure it out. While reading, I had to pause and unpack her sentences and her juxtapositions—“The fragmentary nature of their juxtaposition is to encourage the audience to wrestle with ambiguities created by disjunction” (Hammer 149)—in order to find meaning. Through a close reading (all great works of art require close readings/an essay is nothing without the meaning), the essays in the collection reveal that Acker understood that time and language were not only constructed but were both the container that keeps the constructs in place. Or, in simpler terms, Acker fucks up time and language.

In “Moving into Wonder,” Acker says, “I am going to tell you a true story...It is also the story of the origin of art” (93). Acker’s memory is the memory of myths, of the stories told about women and to women, and her desire is to expose the man-made machinations within these stories, and, ultimately, (here is the friction) to undo these systems to reveal woman free from her man-made cage—rib/time/language.

Daphne was a priestess for “women who enjoy their ability to menstruate,” and Daphne, when in an “orgiastic mood,” ate children (93). Acker’s Daphne—coming child-eater—watched over women who love to shed their uterine wall. Go forth and multiply, not I, said this Daphne. Not us, said these women.

“Daphne was also named Medusa” (93) for all women are the same, are monstrous like Medusa with her stone-cold gaze and snake hair. Acker’s persona was both Daphne and Medusa. I am both Daphne and Medusa. Victim and monster. Yet, Acker’s Daphne wasn’t a victim. Acker’s Daphne, while being attacked by Apollo, no longer called out to her father, the river god, to get turned into a laurel tree. Instead, Acker’s Daphne cries out to her mother, Earth, and Earth rescues her by whisking her away to Crete and “in her daughter’s place, left a laurel tree” (34).

I once told a professor at my MFA that I wanted to develop a theory on hybrids. He laughed and called hybrids a fad. This was in 2013, decades after Kathy Acker, decades after Audre Lorde.

The essay form already presents myriad possibilities for essayists to explore and to dissolve boundaries. In “Queering the Essay,” David Lazar calls the essay a queer genre and then expounds, “In the way that queer theory defines queer as a continuing instability in gender relations that undermines the traditional binary of gender, replacing it with indeterminate, transgressive desires. The desire of the essay is to transgress genre” (61). Lazar’s theory of the essay may be extended into hybrid essays in how they not only transgress genre but also, like Acker’s, transgress the ideologies of gender. What even is genre other than a box of rules? What even is gender?

Apollo confuses the laurel tree for Daphne—“Apollo came up to the tree saying, ‘Then you are mine’” then, like now, nature and woman became like one—“The laurel became the crown of a poet. For chewing on a laurel turns a human mad; poets are often insane” (94). The male gaze equates women with leaves and trees, with nature who man thinks he has dominion over. Acker means that the male gaze is insane—

for what once was poetry but men placing their eyes and minds (phallus) onto women or nature?²—not insane as in a legitimate mental disorder but as in unjust, unreal, flawed, and lacking. Man as lack, not woman.

The woman, (she is the same woman), in Acker's myths continues to shift from Daphne, Medusa, to Pasiphae, and to Ariadne without any clear distinctions between them. Ariadne escapes the labyrinth of white dust, and becomes the persona. This is where the "I" statements begin—"Afterwards all I remembered was white dust" (95). The persona, the "I," places herself within the lineage of the mythological women, as one of the constructed myths of women. She moves into a surreal sequence, stumbles through rooms in an attempt for

the persona/woman/I to locate herself/myself
beyond these myths.

She moves through spaces with different variations of light and past spider filled mattresses—Ariadne, arachnid, arachnia. Eventually, the persona finds a mirror and sees a pimple on her forehead and, as it swells, it turns into an erect penis. The "I" wants to "pop" the man right out of her head, man and his language, man and his rationale (96). But the "I" realizes she is still in the labyrinth, am I still in the labyrinth?, yes, we are always in the labyrinth for "When time is understood as linear, there is no escape. No escape for us out of the labyrinth" (97). Therefore, linear time must be ruptured.

Linear time follows a straight trajectory, a march that follows "birth, marriage, reproduction, and death" (Halberstam 2). And in order to break free of the constructs (a synonym for *constructs* is *erections*), linear time must be recognized as subjective, something built for a purpose to delineate—which then means that there are other temporalities—"let us, by changing the linearity of time, deconstruct the labyrinth and see what the women who are in its center are doing. Let us see what is now central" (Acker 97). Outside of straight time, outside of my ticking biological clock which I never can hear, which I never understood, only in queer time, can my body/ her/ their body without phallus/without baby can exist.

Once the “I” of the persona, the self within the essay, emerges from the mythical woman, she writes, “All stories are true. I tell you this. No story, unless it is made up by one person, can be false. For as soon as something is told to another person, it begins to exist” (96). The man-made constructions of gender and genre are both true even if not fixed or stable, or factual. Acker is not stating that there is no truth or that fake news can be real. Acker deconstructs ideologies to reveal them as man-made and not an irrefutable fact. In the actual world, the labyrinth, or what Lacan would name the Symbolic (language) because there is no real, people mostly adhere to these ideologies. The essay, as a queer genre, and the hybrid essay, as a further transgressing of an already queer genre, allows these “truths” to be undone through the use of queer time.

“Within the life cycle of the Western human subject”—whitesettlercolonialismcapitalism—“long periods of stability are considered to be desirable”—marriagebirthworkdeath—“and people who live in rapid bursts”—I read that memoir was once domestic, for women, written through episodic fragments almost like diary entries (a place for our interior lives), or like rapid bursts of prose which is like the lyric fragment hybrid or the way a drug addict lives life (I should know, I am one, was one, then and now, it wasn’t a straight line to recovery)—and those who live in these bursts “are characterized as immature and even dangerous” (Halberstam 5). I am in my forties. A woman, at least ten years younger, called me a kid, said I would always be a kid—I have no children—(now sober, what is now?)

I still live inside rapid bursts.

Am I dangerous?

Are women dangerous?

Some women, a lot of white women, live inside linear time.

Like with genre, we need to step outside.

Another essay from *Bodies of Work*—"Seeing Gender"—ruptures language—a segmented hybrid that weaves together fragmented personal narratives, literary analysis, and theory. Time first, and now language. How will she/I ever find my body?

Her world "was a dead world...Since pirates lived in my books, I ran into the world of books, the only living world I, a girl, could find. I never left that world "(159). Lacan defined women as a lack (of phallus), it meant she was nothing. It made her world dead. But inside the books, inside these tales filtered through her/my own imagination, she could live in a world (as a pirate) where she was not nothing. Her interior life made her alive, made her not lacking. I remember my interior life as a child. My girl dreams. But even then I struggled to see myself. I once wanted to be a model, but only because I wanted other people, boys, to find me beautiful. I couldn't see myself. Hold up the mirror and I only saw the boys, their gaze on me. The only other things I wanted to be was stripper, I wanted the men to clap for me, and writer (this one was for me). As an essayist, I write myself, place my gaze on myself, on the world.

Acker tells about Irigaray, the French theorist who exposed the sexism in Freud, who said, "her sexual organ represents the horror *of nothing to see*"—a hole. Dark and deep. Freud called women a dark continent. Even in theory, the female body cannot be found.

Acker continues with Judith Butler and how gender is assigned based on the body so therefore biological sex organs have signification and therefore the body does not exist separate from language—then the body cannot escape language and language cannot find the female body if language has already signified it as a lack, an absence (dark continent). *There is no there there*. Acker wants to locate the female body, her girl body, my girl body, as separate from man, separate from the dominant patriarchal culture. I want to find my genre, my body (of work), as separate from man. Yet the words I write are from language. Language exists outside of me, without me, while I am stuck inside this body, this nothing according to this very language that I must write in. She writes,

I knew this as a child, before I had ever read Plato, Irigaray, Butler. That as a girl, I was outside the world. I wasn't. I had no name. For me, language was being. There is no entry for me into language. As a receptacle, as a womb, as Butler argues, I could be entered, but I could not enter, and so I could neither have nor make meaning in the world. I was unspeakable so I ran into the language of others. (161)

Inside language, as inside chrono-time, only a phallus can find her body, define her body. In my twenties, my cousins asked me when I was getting married. My living brother cannot believe I have never been pregnant. People assume I'm a Mrs. and, thus, begin all correspondence with it. Women are often defined by their wounds—once the gaping hole has been entered. Only a phallus proves her body/my body exists. This is may be true, but it isn't factual.

Theories on the hybrid now exist, anthologies have been published from *Blurring the Boundaries* to *Bending Genre* to works on autotheory—theories written by Nicole Walker to Barrie Jean Borich to T Clutch Fleischmann to Kazim Ali. Hybrids are not fads.

Acker's persona, her "I," reads *Alice Through the Looking Glass*—a book by a man obsessed with a little girl. Eventually, as we all know, Alice becomes a queen once "she's been initiated into language, into the reality of the world, for she has learned that, being female, she has no possible existence. So now she can be an adult" (165). Alice has moved out of girlhood and into her role in patriarchy, her role in relation to man and his language. In *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, Acker doesn't find her body: "I am Alice who ran into a book in order to find herself. I have found only the reiterations, the mimesis of patriarchy, or my inability to be. No body anywhere. Who am I? Has anybody seen gender?" (166). In the book, the mirror never shows Alice, until she fulfills her role for the patriarchy, a queen, a matriarch that exists only as part of the hierarchal order that patriarchy and its language uphold. Still no Alice. Her reflection cannot be seen. She is no longer woman, no longer girl, but now queen. A position of power in a constructed system

within the empire. It's really just a metaphor for mother. Not an actual mother, actual mothers are women (once girls, sometimes men/but not patriarchal cis-man) and also live in queer time. Maggie Nelson wrote that pregnancy queered the body. But patriarchy stole the birth narrative—god the father/Adam's rib—Alice as a matriarch to enforce patriarchy. A matriarch to teach us linear time and language. Alice was written by a man with man words. She writes,

I am looking for the body, my body, which exists outside its patriarchal definitions...The dreamer, the dreaming, the dream I called these languages, languages of the body there are I suspect a plurality of more of such languages one such as the language that moves through me or in me or... For I cannot separate language body and identity... when I am moving through orgasm or orgasms. (167)

Through orgasm, Acker's body, her speech and identity, are no longer separated. She no longer has to use the language of men. Her body is no longer defined as nothing, and instead her own speech and body merge as one. *clear our forest water animals plants spout...the tendrils are moving over the waters...* (167). Her sentences/speech lack conventional syntax but use nature words—woman and nature—but here, in her orgasmic speech, man does not have dominion. Anyone who has had a female orgasm understands its shattering revelations—rapid bursts in multitudes—which come from the clitoris and not the phallus. Freud said real women have vaginal orgasms. At sixteen, I visited my older sister at college and sat in on a Psych class. The professor, a woman, mocked Freud, laughed at his ignorance. She said that the vaginal wall does not have nerves and that if it did, child birth would be impossible. I have orgasmed with my whole body, but in the center of it all was the clitoris (it is important to note that cis-women are not the only ones with a clitoris, cis-women are not the only ones outside of language). Even the g-spot is an extension of the clitoris. The clitoral orgasm makes a body quake, makes a body speak.

the body has taken over consciousness

Language is no longer speaking—her body’s speech breaches semiotics—the arbitrary system of signs, the relation between the signifier and the signified, which, in turn, her coming-words demolish the signification of the gendered girl body. Acker then ends, the post-orgasmic bliss, by asking, “Does gender lie here?” And she means where the pleasure from her own body causes her to split with the hierarchal language systems, where her body’s pleasure, proves she is real. I am real...because I come.

Writer Lidia Yuknavitch, like Acker, writes like a clitoral orgasm, writes the woman body/ girl body on the page, and she tweets frequently—“make art in the face of fuck.” In *The Chronology of Water*, Yuknavitch writes about Acker as a mentor. She also writes the best woman to woman sex scene I have ever read. At AWP 2019, Yuknavitch read it aloud to a large room full of people. I cried. Beautiful tears from my body. I once tweeted that I wrote in star-like explosions that mimicked the clitoral orgasm. These are my favorite moments, when I explode onto the page, utterances, images flying around. Like Acker, I’ve written women as myths (as saints as junkies as whores as dancing in the fiery glow of their/our own hysteria—it was once believed that orgasm cured hysteria, and I always thought this sexist, and yes, the execution of it was—lack of consent/rape—but of our own choosing, our own autonomy, our bodies burst forth, the realness of our flesh that houses our minds, our minds are matter too, and we find ourselves, I find myself, in this swirl of orgasm on the page, this art in the face of fuck and as the fucking. What is hysteria but the enforcement of time and language upon our bodies?). I’ve been told to tone it down, to lessen the body on the page, to straighten the time, Acker gives me permission to stay fragmented and to write through my body, my body as a source of pleasure and not pain.

Acker’s essays, while not the only ones or even the first to do so, illustrate the power of hybridity—fragmented/experimental/queer-punk—to disrupt gender and genre, and to free both (along with time/being/body/bodies) from hetero-patriarchal time. It is no wonder that Acker was a major influence on the Riot Grrrl movement.

Of course (Hélène Cixous) the Medusa is laughing.

I found the location and speech of my body (of work) outside of straight time, outside the linear narrative arc. Bikini Kill sang, “I believe in the radical possibilities of pleasure babe,” and so did Kathy Acker, and so do I. *I do I do I do.*

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