

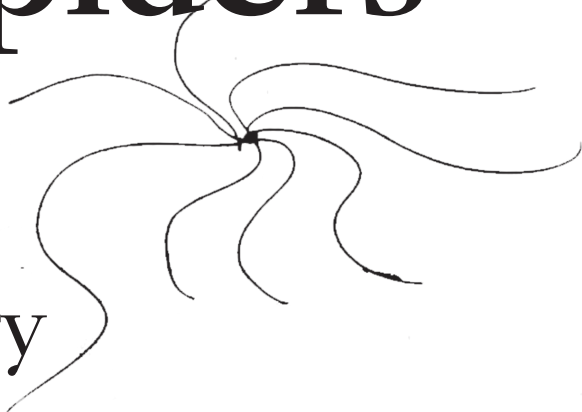
philosophy
for spiders on the
low theory of
kathy acker
mckenzie
wark

Philosophy for Spiders

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philosophy for spiders

on the
low theory
of Kathy Acker



McKenzie Wark

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In memoriam:

Kato Trieu

And: dedicated to all the Janeys,
Janeys everywhere.

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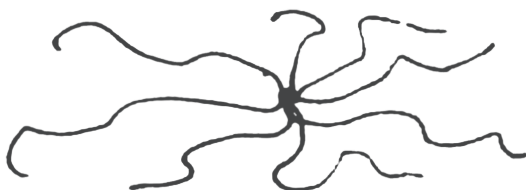
Whoever wrote this story said that history is philosophy,
therefore, sexual history is the philosophy of religion.

—KATHY ACKER (*PUSSY, KING OF THE PIRATES*, 99)

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the city of memory

Part I



I've arrived at the conclusion that there's a profound
connection between ex-boyfriends and clichés.

—KATHY ACKER (ACKER PAPERS, 22.06)

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The First Resort

When Kathy Acker checked in there, I knew something had changed.

It's a quiet place, empty and calm. A place where nothing ever happens. Like a resort hotel in the off-season. The décor is classy but generic, a banal, high-end nonplace. Kathy took me by the hand and led me through the big portal doors.

This was unexpected. Why was Kathy leading me to this place that is so familiar to me, from my own recurring dream? I have been coming here in dreams as long I can remember. It is always quiet and still, the light cool and mute. There seem to be staff keeping it running but you never see them. There appear to be other guests, but they have just walked around a corner. Or you hear laughter from the elevator as it arrives, but when it opens it is empty. And yet there's nothing either weird or eerie about it.

It always looks the same but sometimes it is on a cliff overlooking the sea and sometimes it is in the woods or by a lake. It always feels partly familiar to me in the dream, and partly not. It is a place to go so you can temporarily not exist. A vacation from life. A nonplace for nonlife.

That is why it is so strange that Kathy took me by the hand and brought me to this place, in my dream. I was surprised that she knew about it.

McKenzie: "But how do you know?"

Kathy: "It is the place the dead make for the living. It is always here."

She showed me what it is for, this resort from life and nonlife alike. She showed me that the dead make it for us. The dead make a place without

qualities. They make the space of dreams itself. The dead don't want us to be like them. They have nothing to give us that has any features or qualities. They just make this place for us, this generic nonplace, and leave us alone.

Kathy knew all about this. She came back in a dream to remind me that I have been here too. She came back to remind me why one comes here. Maybe we all visit this place but forget all about it. The hard part is to go back and still remember what it is for.

This is how it has always been for us moderns. The dead refuse to tell us anything. And so we feel like they have finally left us alone. Which can make us go crazy. Kathy knew where to find them.

Actually that's not true. Nobody knows. She was one of the ones who knew where to find their absence. She found the place they had left. That they left for us. You can come here and be in their absence and come back.

Let's go.

Bestiary

Content warning: This book contains the language of sex, violence, sexual violence, and spiders.

Form warning: This book has elements of memoir and criticism but is neither.

I wanted to write about what I learned from Kathy in person and what I learned from reading Acker's texts, based on who I could become (in part) through knowing her both ways.

I didn't know her person for long at all. There are many others who can write with a lot more understanding about who she was. Nor am I a specialist in her writing or even in the kind of writing she wrote. I haven't dug deep in her archive, nor interviewed people around her. I make no claim that anything to do with Kathy Acker is my private property. I will note

in passing that we shared a dislike for both writers and scholars who treat some body, or some body of work, as if they owned it.

The bourgeois writer is an acquisitive animal. A creature of power, ownership, and control. What it writes it owns; that which writes is the kind of being that can own. Kathy was a different beast—or beasts.

Martine Sciolino: “A kleptoparasite is a spider that appropriates another’s web and eats the prey entrapped there. In a sense, the deliberate, overt plagiarisms of Kathy Acker are klepto-parasitical—*Great Expectations*, *Don Quixote*, *The Story of O*, Acker steals these and other narrative webs, but it is not easy to tell what victims are coiled in these already woven fictions. Because Acker always recounts her own life story as if it, too, were a stolen text—and because this *auto*-plagiarism always involves the victimization of the teller—the knots in these stolen, intersecting webs are unraveled to reveal an insect within, whose form mirrors that of the spider unwrapping it.”¹

This is not an *interpretation* of the life or work of Kathy Acker.² As if she was something over which I had claims that would be verifiable facsimiles or likenesses of her essence. Rather: She made texts. She lived and wrote in a particular way, the living and writing being a connected kind of *praxis*, the warp and weft of the same act of transforming things. The form of the praxis makes the texts in their own distinctive way. Here is a text made out of her texts, using a different praxis.

I learned a lot from Kathy as a human and Acker as a writer, and about four of the grand obsessions of our times: love and money, sex and death. She made a sort of gift toward me, and I’m returning it, after a fashion.

Here is a little about what that gift was: A body that writes is a body that fucks. There are peculiar asymmetries of the ways bodies may fuck: dom and sub, top and bottom, penetrator and penetrated, writer and reader, butch and femme, male and female, trans and cis, and so on. These differences find their way into and out of the way bodies write. A body that fucks with fucking can be a body that fucks with gender and a body that fucks with gender can be a body that writes where the writing fucks with gender and a writer embodied as fucking with gender can be a writer who fucks with genre, that most nucleated family of forms.

Patrick Greaney: “Baudelaire writes of the ‘immense intellectual profundity in popular expressions, holes dug by generations of ants.’ Clichés are burrowed through with subterranean passages that poets can explore and exploit in their battle against the truths that these clichés are supposed to support. But to do this, poets must enter into enemy territory and repeat the locutions that they undermine. In this repetition, poets burrow into language, but they, too, are dug into, penetrated by the very language that they want to overcome or keep at a distance.”³

Kathy wrote prose, as I do, although she wrote much more interesting prose, better prose, and with different methods. Like the poets, she entered and was entered, fucked and was fucked, with language.

Tom McCarthy: “As a schoolchild, I had to learn collective nouns for animals. Jellyfish, for some reason, get two of these: bloom and smack. Open, morphing, endlessly penetrating or being penetrated by the scenes around them, Acker’s bodies channel and act as hubs or mainstays in a world of viscerally networked continuity—like jellyfish quivering as pulse signals reach them through a viscous sea. Or rather (lest we start getting holistic), they both anchor this world and serve as its disjecta: more smack than bloom.”⁴

What follows is in two parts. The first is about Kathy, as a body that fucks. The second is about Acker, as a body that writes. The first part is how I began a lesson with her about fucking, back in the nineties. The second part is how I began a lesson with her texts about what is between acts of writing, thirty years later. At a time when I was in transit between acts of genders.

Comrades, contemporaries, cunts: I come neither to critique Acker nor to blurb her. What makes her books enduring is the other books you can make out of them, and their difference from each other. This book is its own evidence of this concept.⁵

Let’s not devote too much time on which writing her writing digests. I don’t much care to give her a lineage of great forebears. Nor cast her by the lights of some master theorist. There’s something not only bourgeois but also patriarchal about writing having to have owners and these own-

ers having to have illustrious fathers, even if those fathers are sometimes mothers.

Vanessa Place: “Consider the phrase ‘artist’s shit.’ Consider the mimetic effect of such excrescence, pace Piero Manzoni, who literally put his shit in ninety 30-gram cans and sold it for its weight in gold. Consider its metamorphosis, given that what’s left of this shit is now worth more than its weight in gold, so that Manzoni could have been said to have shit gold bricks. Consider its lament, à la Erykah Badu, who says: ‘Keep in mind I’m an artist and I’m sensitive about my shit.’ Consider how Kathy Acker could be part Quixote or some such shit. As I have noted elsewhere, citation is always castration: the author’s lack of authority made manifest by the phallus, presence of another authority. What better way to play the gendered part. I like this.”⁶

Kathy died when she was fifty. I turn fifty-seven as I write this. I wanted to write about her for the longest time. Somehow it never quite seemed like the moment. I had to live not only up ’til her age when she passed but past it, before I could start.

Reading Kathy again helped me to transition: I came out as trans in the midst of reading and writing about her. I wanted to escape masculinity, but I didn’t know where to. Kathy just seemed intuitively to be the writer to hold my hand through that.

I told Matias Viegner, the executor of the Kathy Acker estate, that I was probably writing a book about her, and he said, “Well of course you are.”

Woolloomooloo

We first met at the Ariel Bookstore on Oxford Street, in Sydney, in June 1995. Kathy read, I don’t remember what. Mythical characters were involved. It was a launch event for an issue of *21C* magazine.⁷

Noel King: “Leathered from top to toe, she told how the initial contact between her and *21C*’s editor, Ashley Crawford, came via email. They began a correspondence, he seemed a nice and interesting guy and here they

finally were in person. At this point a separatist sister interjected that obviously these virtual forms of communication could be very misleading. Without missing a beat Acker said 'I still like the object in the flesh,' and went on with the launch."⁸

I was also a 21C writer, so you could say it was Ashley Crawford who brought us together. She liked to write for Ash because he had a light hand cutting copy.

There was dinner after Kathy's reading, at the restaurant near the Wharf Theater, in The Rocks. Justine Ettler sat next to Kathy, I think. Justine appeared to all the world as quick and glamorous. She was the author of *The River Ophelia*, probably the only Australian fiction that showed what you could do with it if you had read Kathy Acker. A sensational book that drowned in the swamp of marketing and media that typecast it as "grunge."⁹

Surprising that Kathy talked to me. Perhaps it was the fluke of sitting close together. When she finally turned toward me, it was as if we were alone at that long candlelit table. The others fell away. I have no memory of them.

Then we were in my car together. (Which car was it? Did I have the little red one by now?) I drove Kathy back to Morgan's, her hotel on Victoria street in Kings Cross. I stopped in the loading zone out front. The car idling. It was not quite parked, pulled over as if for a quick drop-off. She asked me what the hell I thought I was doing. I had no idea. Impatience. "Well, are you coming in or not?"

All I remember of the hotel room is the color of sage and her stack of books. Maybe five books. "That's what I've been working on," Kathy said. I only remember the top book on the stack: Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. She was not quite done making *Pussy, King of the Pirates*.

There was not a lot of ceremony. We ended up naked on the futon. I told her that sometimes I don't want to actually fuck. That I just wasn't in that kind of relation to my body where I would want to fuck her. I don't know why I was so candid about this. She seemed to invite a kind of sexual frankness. At least in me. She was not at all bothered.

She was older than me: forty-eight to my thirty-four. This was an older woman's body, as is the one I have now. I was curious about this aging body. About the state of this flesh. This flesh liked being close to that flesh, of her.

This flesh wanted to learn about that flesh, starting with what made it feel what. A finger runs around cunt lips. Touching her clit, which reacts as if electrified, so finger backing off, redirecting attention to the multiple piercings in this labia. I had never seen this before. Touching them gently, touching the metal to move the flesh. Seems this is good. She touched my cock but I pushed her hand away. Felt more like doing the exploring. We were starting at the peripheries of each other's nervy surfaces.

Dodie Bellamy: "We sit in the living room on his boxy green sofa and Matias tells me that even though Kathy slept with many women she really wasn't a lesbian, and even though she was into s&m that wasn't her thing, not really. What really mattered to Kathy was to be fucked really well."¹⁰

Arranged crouching before cunt and licking, especially where piercings enter flesh. Hint of vanilla. Wiry hairs, crinkly skin. Licking outer lips, inner lips, poking tongue entering into the opening just a little. Then quietly edging closer to clit.

Kathy relaxed back into herself, arching, releasing, breathing rising and rising, not too hard and fast, then exhale and release, a little wave cresting just as another surges. Licking sinking into the rhythm, the rise and fall. Raft and ocean. Sailors adrift. And since I didn't come and she never stopped coming, I came in the same way that she did. "This was a fine perversion," Kathy said.

She pulled me up for air. We kissed again. Bodies pressing, my cock pressed into the curve of her hip. I felt cum leaking from it. I had been up on a crest the whole time, a slow-motion time. Flushed all over, heart slowing. Electric tremble and treble tapering down.

Felt the need to explain myself: "Sometimes . . . sometimes I just don't feel like fucking. I just feel, I don't know, like aroused, but all over. Not in my dick so much as everywhere, everywhere else, even," I said. "For me, every

area of my skin is an orifice. Any part of your body could do anything to mine,” Kathy said. She had a great way of describing such things.

Amy Scholder: “What cannot be overestimated is the pleasure Kathy took in writing porn, finding exactly the right cadence and rhythm, using language, pushing limits, turning on. Still, sexuality is a site of confusion—and it’s within that confusion that her female characters come alive, expressing who they are and what they want.”¹¹

She was tired, lagged, out of sorts. I asked if I should stay. She wanted me to stay. I didn’t sleep for a while, just watched her breathing, watching the carp tattoo anime across her shoulder blades. Woke nesting her head in my hands.

Upon waking, she was up, showered, dressed. She wore the same pink leather bustier as the night before. I remember it coming off, her softs unleashed from its form. Over that, she wore something low cut and patterned, maybe animal print, in black and white to show off the pink leather. Bare legs and boots.

She wanted to eat at Morgan’s as it would go on the hotel tab which was covered. Breakfast was subdued. Like we had just met. A first conversation sober is indeed a first conversation.

I remember the café-restaurant at Morgan’s. It faced the Victoria street scene. Inside, it was steeply terraced. The servers teetering down the staircase up the middle while balancing plates and trays. But we all went there quite often in those days, as it was open late, so I don’t know if I remember it with Kathy or just remember it.

The next few days are a Sydney haze. I became her guide to the city, this city whose twisty ways I knew and she did not.

The only thing I can remember, or think I can remember, that we saw together, is the graffiti, not far from Whitlam Square, that said, “One cannot commit evil in evil,” signed “Genet.” Which another writer had changed to “Genetalia.” Yet another hand added “Et Alia.” Now I’m looking for that building on Google Maps: corner of Liverpool and Hargrave, two-story and darkly painted, it’s still there: the spray-paint thread is not.

The night after we met. Dinner again. Then I dropped Kathy off at Morgan's, but did not come in. Did not occur to me that she wanted my company to continue into the night again. I thought very little of myself. But she took it to mean I thought even less of her. The common language that divided us.

And she was mad at me for missing her big performance at Artspace in Woolloomooloo. The show was sold out. A review later called it a mix of "blood, grunge and gynaecology."¹² Which is not particularly helpful, and doesn't address the galvanic effect that her performances could have on people. Apart from the very low-key reading at Ariel I never saw her read.

Eileen Myles: "Each of us had to read for 8 or 10 minutes and Kathy would read for 21. And miraculously she didn't kill the room. I'd watch her going on and on same fucking story. I think how can she do this. Deadly. But she was okay. More than that. People were riveted. I mean her work was so artificial and ritualized, all on the outside, I thought. Constructed for the performance of Kathy and she made that corpse walk night after night."¹³

Pam Brown:

the day after
the very long reading,
at the very cool venue,
we, the audience, *were*
those sluts, those girls—
rats in our hair
vampires in our anus
blood, piss, shit,
spit, bones, vomit—
Kathy Acker's
drunken girls,
she meant *us*,
that's the way she read
to us¹⁴

I missed it because I had to teach my class. She did not think this was a good enough reason. I was starting to discover that Kathy rarely thought any reason was good enough reason for not giving her what she wanted. I met up with Kathy after the show.