

"I'm a person like any goddamn man's a person": Feminine Cognitive Embodiment in *Kathy Goes to Haiti*

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Introduction

Little scholarship on Kathy Acker draws a direct connection between her work and the autotheoretical tradition—but if autotheory sutures together the author and theory, then Kathy Acker predicts and enacts autotheory by enmeshing her body in the theoretical concerns and narrative strategies of her 1978 novel, *Kathy Goes to Haiti*. Admittedly, the work and persona of Acker elude easy definition, though critics generally identify Acker with postmodernism and punk aesthetics. Acker sought unreadability in both her novels and her lifestyle as she traversed major cities, artistic communities, and creative expression in the late twentieth century. Her best-known work draws on literary pastiche—she parodies and plagiarizes classic literary texts in satires like *Great Expectations* (1982) and *Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream* (1986). These works challenge critics and readers as she struggles to resist interpretation, canons, and identity categories altogether.

Acker's early work merges her own life experiences and body into her writing. *Kathy Goes to Haiti* was composed during a trip sponsored by the Creative Artists Public Service (CAPS) grant, through which Acker received a stipend to travel to Haiti in 1976.¹ The resulting book fuses two genres: travelogue and pornography. Toronto-based Rumour Publications published the project shortly afterward for its graphic sexual content. In the story, Acker reflects on her trip to Haiti and the possibilities of language and theory. In the story, the fictional Kathy, a twenty-nine-year-old New Yorker, indulges in sadomasochistic sex with strangers while vacationing in Haiti. She intends to see the ocean upon her first arrival on the island, but male strangers waylay her from the outset, propositioning her with requests that she “be my girlfriend” and soliciting sex.² Unaccountably from most normative readers' perspectives, Kathy almost immediately agrees. Kathy's affair with a married Haitian man, Roger, serves as the main arc of the story.

Kathy Goes to Haiti has drawn critical attention to Acker's intertextuality, transnationalism, and colonialism—themes from Cole Porter's 1939 song “Katie Went to Haiti” and Jack Kerouac's 1960 novel *Tristessa* appear in Acker's novel. Several critics analyze the voodoo tropes present in *Kathy Goes to Haiti*,

and explore the racial significance of her presence as an American white woman within a postcolonial nation.³ Yet I contend that the novel functions as an autotheoretical literary work through Acker's destabilizing of language, portrayal of madness, and frankly pornographic narrative based on her involvement in the sex industry. *Kathy Goes to Haiti* becomes a space where she engages theory through "the language of the body"—or, more autotheoretically, her body.⁴

During the 1970s, two intriguing movements sought to recapture language and place it within the body: New Narrative and French feminism, specifically, advocates of *écriture féminine*. Acker was associated with New Narrative, a movement that spanned the 1970s and 1980s in San Francisco. New Narrative seeks subjective experience—"the horizon of possibility wherein one's body meets the world"—realized through the pens of non-normative authors.⁵ New Narrative destabilizes notions of rationality, institutions, and classic texts as its authors seek to rejoin the body with social space.⁶ Bruce Boone and Robert Glück among others pioneered the movement, which emphasized queer textual performance, disjunction, and metafiction directed towards an imagined utopian future. Such hopeful futurity, sexuality, and embodiment in New Narrative was possibly a response to the crisis of the AIDS epidemic. More graphic renditions of sexuality grew common as pornography and other guerrilla aesthetics appeared in New Narrative work.⁷

During the same period, other literary theorists began to consider the limits of language and embodiment. In her 1976 *The Laugh of the Medusa*, French feminist Hélène Cixous proposed her famous *écriture féminine*, which argues that women should take up language and change it—exploit gaps, silences, words, and other alterations to reflect complexities of the female body. In accordance with Cixous, other French feminists like Monique Wittig, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray questioned a woman's ability to effectively articulate her body using the rhetoric created by men. The scholarly conversation surrounding these theorists has generated an extensive body of work since the 1970s. Scholars like Tyler Bradway note the obvious influence this French feminism had on Acker as she sought

to destabilize masculine narrative strategies and rhetoric.⁸ Yet Acker's involvement with madness and graphic sexualities nuances the possibilities of the cognitive states, and hybrid embodiments, of women. I situate Acker's *Kathy Goes to Haiti* at the intersection of these two movements to illustrate the use of feminine cognitive embodiment as a reimagining of *écriture féminine* and New Narrative.

Acker's work lays important groundwork preceding autotheory's approach to the cognitive life of women and thus forges a new linguistic form at the nexus of linguistics, disability, and sexuality studies. I call this nexus in Acker "feminine cognitive embodiment." What is distinctive about Acker's feminine cognitive embodiment is that it positions the female body and mental states *between* traditional boundaries of language—a linguistic decentering; a place, perhaps, of madness. In lines that mimic this double displacement in their syntax and punctuation, Kathy reflects: "The guy who wants me to be the tough girl he desires and expects and who has his own goddamn problems, panic and leaves I'm alone all the time I want to throw everything out the windows the jibberjabbbers are getting me again and mad whirling energy I've got to get away from myself I've got to get away from myself."⁹ Acker's second and first-person interjections in the novel are both "confessional and theoretical"—a move integral to the autotheoretical form.¹⁰

In this paper, I will first analyze the contexts and influences surrounding both New Narrative and French feminism, before positing Kathy Acker's unique positioning between these movements in her 1978 postmodern novel, *Kathy Goes to Haiti*. By engaging with this connection, I argue that *Kathy Goes to Haiti* introduces feminine cognitive embodiment into texts through madness to subvert notions of masculine order and rationality. Her novel mobilizes madness by changing the point of view between third person, second person, and confessional first person at crucial moments, producing something akin to an interior monologue. She removes formal syntax and spirals her female character's thoughts into a monologue devoid of formal grammar. Acker further connects this madness to sexuality and thus places Kathy within her physical body to reinforce the anatomical setting for madness. By charting this link, I

will contribute to efforts to historicize autotheory and trace its lineage. I intend to establish *Kathy Goes to Haiti* as an autotheoretical text *avant la lettre*, which looks forward to works like Chris Kraus' 1997 *I Love Dick* and Maggie Nelson's 2015 *The Argonauts*. By reclaiming female embodied consciousness Acker challenges the dominion of rationality, male embodiment, and language.

I. Failures of Language and Ex-Centric Points of View

Kathy Goes to Haiti invokes the failure of language at the nexus of *écriture féminine* and New Narrative. In doing so, Acker foreshadows autotheory via her refusal to participate in masculine, normative verbal infrastructures. The gaps in understanding generate a space for feminine embodiment through dialogue. Kathy arrives in Haiti from New York, alone, and attempts to navigate Port-au-Prince. Her rhetorical instability begins with the obvious fact: "she can't speak the language."¹¹ Such distancing allows madness to enter into the spaces—something literary scholar Shoshana Felman cites as "movement of *ex-centering*."¹² The distancing effect and failure of language appear at the outset of the work. Upon her arrival at the airport, Kathy tries to engage transportation to a hotel from the airport and begins a conversation with Sammy, a local cab driver:

"How much will it cost for you to take me there?"

"That depends."

"What does it depend on?"

"Do you like me?"

"Yes."

"I'll take you for nothing. You'll be my girlfriend."

"I don't know."

"Why not?"

“I don’t want to stay in Port-au-Prince more than one night. I want to go to Jacmel.”

“To be my girlfriend you’ll have to stay in Port-au-Prince a week. I can tell. You’re going to like it in Port-au-Prince a lot.”

“I don’t know. I don’t think I’m going to stay here.”

“Do you speak French?”

“A little.”

“Speak French.”¹³

As the conversation progresses, Sammy foregrounds language issues and asks that she speak French, and Kathy admits that she speaks French poorly.¹⁴ The request for Kathy to move between these dominant language systems is significant for her expression, as both French and English are masculine language constructs that “discreetly dictate” its users according to their concepts.¹⁵ By generating a sense of confusion Kathy subverts these paradigms. She moves instead into the void—a deliberate failure of translation—between these two masculine spaces. She does not assent but indirectly answers these interrogatives.¹⁶ Between these narrative gaps, a new feminine cognition forms through misunderstanding and the lack of logical assent.

Shifts in point of view and narrative perspective further reinforce Acker’s engagement with the failures of male language—and the space of feminine unreason, thus combining the provocative notions of New Narrative and the embodiment of *écriture féminine*. *Kathy Goes to Haiti* begins in third-person omniscience but the text evolves. Deprecatory first-person, second-person, and third-person narratives appear at unpredictable intervals in a chapter called “Passions”:

You don’t know the difference between friends and strangers and you’re unable to give anyone, especially the people who say they want to fuck you, ordinary human affection. You’re beyond the bounds of being human. You’re inhuman. You’re now out of control and you’re showing only the

slightest pretense that it's otherwise. "I love you," Roger says to Kathy. "I love you so much I think I'm going to die."¹⁷

Here Acker creates an ex-centric second-person narrative, which unsettles the "you" to which the narrative voice refers—Kathy, Roger, or the reader. Such subject-object ambiguity continues to define Acker's style throughout *Kathy Goes to Haiti* and uproots expectations of the rational male narration. The second-person narrative carries a confessional tone, which is often associated with the first-person feminist turn to autobiography.¹⁸ I posit that this second-person voice in *Kathy Goes to Haiti* operates similarly—a move that creates space for Acker's narrative modes to express her ex-centric feminine cognitive embodiment. Her alternate use of narrative voices remains autotheoretical in its exploration of Acker's emotions, especially the desultory passions of her "inhuman" mind and body, which she seeks to write.¹⁹

The shifts in narrative voices further decenter notions of a masculine, rational voice. As the point-of-view switches and narrative illogic grows apparent, the question of madness enters the language. As "Passions" continues, the narrative switches to first-person before returning to third-person omniscience. In addition to destabilizing the reader's expectations of the storytelling, Acker's use of shifting narrative emphasizes the "performative role in constructing the storyteller self-critically" in accordance with New Narrative.²⁰ The failure of language brings the reader further into Acker's spatial use of feminine cognitive embodiment, which defies the masculine notions of linear narration, cognition, and erotic relationships.

II. "Beyond the Bounds of Being Human": Madness and Feminine Cognitive Embodiment

Acker's use of madness subverts the idea of rationality and normative relationships in *Kathy Goes to Haiti* too. She seeks a negative space outside of binaries altogether (especially that of reason/unreason). Postmodern literature often engages with madness and parodies, or sometimes

explores, feminine associations with cognitive instability. The current body of scholarship surrounding Acker acknowledges her use of madness in her later novels—especially *Don Quixote* and *Great Expectations*, which use plagiarism, pastiche, and madness to subvert classic texts. Current scholarship on *Kathy Goes to Haiti* provides important attention to political and postcolonial perspectives, but few approach the layering of madness and pornography. In this section of the paper, I will analyze these themes, before relating them at the conclusion to the autobiographical lineage by connecting Acker’s madness to Chris Kraus’ 1997 novel *I Love Dick*.

Disability studies and its interrelated field, Mad Studies, troubles the borders between sanity and insanity.²¹ Disability theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thompson connects feminized mental states to larger cultural contexts, in which female bodies produce unstable behaviors: “such conditions as anorexia, hysteria, agoraphobia are in a sense standard feminine roles enlarged to disabling conditions, blurring the line between ‘normal’ feminine behavior and pathology.”²² I posit that Acker uses language-as-consciousness and grammatical dissolution to draw readers into the space of madness and further blur the lines of “normal” behavior in the female body and mind. In doing so, Acker generates madness in the text. She forces the reader to encounter abstraction and the variety of being—“literal individuation run amok”—that accompanies disability.²³

Poststructuralist attention to language, and its locus of power, is important to consider when situating Acker. Madness is captured, in Foucauldian terms, within language. In Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization*, he describes the liminal positioning of madness in geographic and spatial terms as the madman “is put in the interior of the exterior, and inversely.”²⁴ Foucault’s description of this space predicts the “ex-centering” described by psychoanalysis. Shoshana Felman argues for the madness that arises out of the confrontation between different contexts—be it linguistic, gendered, or cultural conventions, which I will also refer to as codes. Felman draws together divergent contexts and identifies

the space between codes as a site of madness due to “dialogical and differential meaning.”²⁵ Rather than converse, these different codes ex-center one another.

This context is usefully applied to Acker’s text to illuminate the role of gender in language and grammatical codes, though Felman does not propose gender as a central component of her analysis. Instead Felman considers French theorists like Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault, but the presence of women, or non-white, theorists are conspicuously absent from Felman’s analysis, which limits the gendered consideration of madness within her book. This conflict between gendered codes—and subsequent sites of madness—is exemplified in *Kathy Goes to Haiti* as Kathy expresses disputes with boundaries, including those within the normal ranges of human relationships. Such relational exclusion pushes Kathy “beyond the range of being human” and decenters her assumed masculine, rational humanity.²⁶ The notion of “being human” grows more complex considering her feminine sexuality, which complicates her relationships with others. Such analysis strengthens the applications of Felman’s theory and allows language coded by gender to ex-center one another.

The narrative’s gradual removal of grammatical sense and the use of repetition re-embodies Kathy through the text. Here the text devolves into an explicit sensory expression, devoid of sensory cohesion:

I don’t know what to do anymore, mommy. Mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy
mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy mommy
mommy

Middle finger of left hand presses down cunt lips above clit. See hand with ring. See
bluejean jumpsuit and scarf twisted black yellow red blue orange. Have to stop to say colors. Don’t
stop when see. Feel fingers pressing down lips. Lips feel. I feel. I can see.²⁷

Kathy’s initial phrase in the passage, “I don’t know what to do anymore, mommy,” begins with a statement of psychological dependence—which belies the narrator’s age. This is reinforced by the

vulnerable title of “mommy” itself. Rather than Mother, or even the more common “Mom,” Acker moves a step closer to a childlike mentality, which further connects her to irrationality. Kathy demonstrates the loss of agency through her loss of grammar and descent into the repetition of the name “mommy.” This repetition creates a querulous effect often associated with one denied a caregiver’s attention. Through these rhetorical strategies, Acker pushes feminine cognitive embodiment towards ambiguity and disorder order while blurring relational notions of emotional independence.

The juxtaposition of a childlike cry of “mommy mommy” with a sexually explicit scene disorients the reader and further creates a site of madness. Such a movement in Acker’s prose, which literary critic Sam McBride calls “fusion,” creates a rhetorical effect “which fuses two incongruent concepts . . . to destabilize the reader and to undermine the rationalist approach.”²⁸

Further fusion—through putting together incongruent concepts— happens on a smaller scale within the explicit section of the passage. This text conflates a variety of sensory expressions, which fractures narratives of pleasure and grounds them in the female physiology: “Have to stop to say colors. Don’t stop when see . . . Lips feel. I feel. I can see.” Several senses are at work in this passage as Acker’s narrator moves between physical movement, speech, sight, and feeling. By shifting interchangeably through expressed senses (“say colors” and “I feel. I can see”) and directives (“Have to stop to say colors” and “Don’t stop when see”) Acker invokes a disjuncture between senses. This female physiology brings a further embodiment to the text and creates inroads into feminine cognitive embodiment as a site of madness.

The conflict of codes and subsequent madness demonstrated by Acker occurs along relational, sexual lines—a trope demonstrated in the more established autotheoretical texts like Chris Kraus’ 1997 *I Love Dick*. In that book, forty-year-old Kraus experiences erotic dysphoria upon meeting Dick, a colleague of her prominent academic husband Sylvère Lotringer. As the book progresses, she falls into an obsession. A series of cultural codes fracture in the aftermath of Kraus’ encounter with Dick, especially

those concerning her marriage, gender, and lack of status in the academy. Like Acker, Kraus steps into an ambiguous ex-centric space to express the tension of her desires: to love her husband and to love Dick; to express her female sexual desire; to interpret her emotions and competing impulses. The narrative becomes a place to write these tensions into existence and to find the uncharted language of her passion. The narrative follows a similar stream-of-consciousness method found in Acker's writing. Kraus removes the rules of grammar and narrative logic. Within the rhetorical instability, madness arises. Thus, Kraus describes the feeling of love for Dick as a form of mental illness:

Of course it's no surprise when Félix Guattari talks about love in the same breath as schizophrenia. Here's a passage that I found three weeks ago when I started writing this and now it's August and I can't find the citation, and anyhow it's my translation, i.e., a cross between what he wrote and what I wanted him to say:

"It's like this: someone falls in love and in a universe that once was close, suddenly everything seems possible. Love and sex are mediums for semiotizing mutation."

I disagree, at least I think I do, about the "semiotizing" part (Dear Dick, Dear Marshall, Dear Sylvère, What is semiotics?). Love and sex both cause mutation, just like I think desire isn't lack, it's surplus energy—a claustrophobia inside your skin—²⁹

In the passage, Kraus expresses herself through fractured language and codes of conduct. Her disputes with language appear in the first paragraph of the passage, which involves faulty translation and citation of a quote by Félix Guattari. When interpreted in light of Acker's contribution to the failures of masculine language, Kraus' translation similarly fails to express the possibilities of her own experience. Thus, she describes Guattari's quote as something that incorporates her desires: what she wants him to say.

Kraus invokes schizophrenia and claustrophobia as the prevailing indicators of love, a connection that uses a sense of mental instability to express the erotic. Such sexual exposures solidify the ultimate

interrelationship between fractured language and madness demonstrated in Acker's feminine cognitive embodiment and draw it further into the female sexuality inherent to these expressions of madness in the texts. My intent in drawing this connection is not to essentialize the female body or mind as inherently irrational in Acker or Kraus' works. Rather, Kraus creates an ex-centric space through her narrative, one that departs from masculine rationality. An autotheoretical lineage emerges as Acker and Kraus uncover a new, indirect language—a language of the body.

III. Pornography in *Kathy Goes to Haiti*

For Acker, pornographic representations of women reclaim depictions of female sexuality and connect them to madness and destabilized language. This impulse links Acker's work with the sexual embodiment found in *I Love Dick* and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*. In all three texts, feminine cognitive embodiment moves beyond madness and demonstrates the physical sexuality that accompanies cognitive, linguistic fragmentation.

Sexually explicit content layers with the travel narrative of *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, a deliberate decision that mirrors Acker's involvement with the pornography industry as a young writer.³⁰ Acker's use of pornography proves autobiographical due to her involvement with the trade, a contentious move given the strong controversy surrounding the ethics of pornographic consumption and representation. During the 1970s and 1980s, when Acker wrote her texts, the anti-pornography movement gained traction under the leadership of Andrea Dworkin. Acker dismissed this approach and critiqued Dworkin's tendency to reinforce gendered binaries in her 1986 book *Don Quixote*.³¹ In an interview with Ellen G. Friedman, Acker disagrees with Dworkin's view that men are "responsible for all the evil in the world"—a condemnation that struck Acker as dangerous in its implied essentialism. The ethical debates surrounding pornography during the 1970s make Acker's engagement with the form important to consider, especially within a disability framework. I contend that her textual pornographic

representations invite readers to explore a variety of subject positions, allowing readers to “step out of a binary relation between self and Other, consumer and consumed”—a shifting power relation not easily afforded given the male-dominated industry.³²

Acker grounds feminine cognitive embodiment in sexuality through pornographic imagery and grants Kathy agency as both the subject and object of sexual expression. The passage in *Kathy Goes to Haiti* that juxtaposes “mommy mommy” with pornography fuses together disparate verbal imagery. First, the passage refers to Kathy’s mother before moving to a sensory, sexually explicit expression. The juxtaposition of the two is emblematic of the types of sexuality sometimes ascribed to those with disability: childlike, asexual innocence, on the one hand, and kinky pornography, on the other. By drawing these passages together, Acker ex-centers both. She creates a new sense of female sexuality in the in-between spaces.

Here, I’d like to again return to a close reading of the pornographic imagery:

Middle finger of left hand presses down cunt lips above clit. See hand with ring. See bluejean jumpsuit and scarf twisted black yellow red blue orange. Have to stop to say colors. Don’t stop when see. Feel fingers pressing down lips. Lips feel. I feel. I can see.

In this section, Acker mobilizes Kathy as both the subject and object of sexual expression; who is feeling? Whose hand? The narrative moves from third-person omniscience to first-person and complicates the sense of agency in the text. By employing both subject and object, Acker opens up erotic potential through linguistic ambiguity. The object and subject of action within the text remain ambiguous; Acker does not reveal who is acting upon whom. The mixing of sensory apparatus (sight, touch, etc.) further contributes to physical exchange—bodies that are both touching and touched.

The permeability of flesh and the tactile sexual experiences present in Acker’s work further reflects the writer’s investment in French theory. Specifically, Acker’s language is usefully viewed

through the lens of disability scholar Margrit Shildrick's notion of "intercorporeality," a notion influenced by French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) who emphasized the permeability and exchange potential between bodies— an idea that possibly reached Acker by way French feminist Luce Irigaray, whose intellectual influence on Acker is well-documented.³³ Though Acker does not state her devotion to Merleau-Ponty, his philosophy repurposed by Shildrick usefully informs the grammatical and sexual nuances of the passage. Acker creates intercorporeality through her linguistic structures and mixes sensory expressions in the passage, as it becomes difficult to distinguish the separation of bodies throughout the sexual encounter. Intriguing psychoanalytic possibilities exist in the fragmentation of bodies, which suggest that adult sexual desire has a lingering nostalgia for the fragmented, incomplete body dependent upon the maternal form—a critique that further illuminates Acker's juxtaposition between the maternal and the sexual in the passage.³⁴ From this perspective, Acker takes up the incomplete nature of bodies within sexual acts and draws the maternal body into her expression of desire—a complex manifestation of female desire that later appears in autotheoretical works.

In another section of the chapter "Passions," Kathy parodies the influence her sexuality has on her ability to reason, and in doing so, she parodies the medical model which considered her feminine sexuality a detriment to women's cognitive ability: "You've lost your sense of propriety. Your social so-called graces. You're running around a cunt without a head."³⁵ The lack of social graces, outside of normative relationships, ex-centers Kathy from normalcy and incites sexually-driven impropriety. She describes herself as a "cunt without a head," which shows an interesting conflation in the text. Rather than describing herself as irrational, Kathy describes herself with derogatory sexual language. Thus, the cognitive embodiment is grounded again in female genitals and physiology.

Such verbal fusions, and the deliberately mad spaces created, implicate the reader in an affective state as articulated by Tyler Bradway: "Yet, as we will see, pleasure is *not* annexed from the event of reading; rather, by becoming-masturbatory, Acker's writing performs an erotic experiment with affective

thresholds that cannot be easily circumscribed by the categories of reader, writer, or text.”³⁶ Such blurring of roles draws us to the autobiographical elements of disability, and how theory “can do more the closer it gets to the skin.”³⁷ Language thus draws closer to lived, embodied experience.

Graphic sexuality centers the female body in *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, a move that appears in later manifestations of autotheory—many of which are explicit but not pornographic. In the opening paragraphs of Maggie Nelson’s 2015 *The Argonauts*, Nelson confesses to loving her partner after anal sex: “Instead the words *I love you* come tumbling out of my mouth in an incantation the first time you fuck me in the ass, my face smashed against the cement floor of your dank and charming bachelor pad.”³⁸ Nelson includes and analyzes the sexual relationship she shares with her partner Harry Dodson in graphic detail throughout the remainder of the book. The inclusion of sexual encounters from various subjectivities remains a central tenant of the book, and Nelson notes the omissions for non-normative sexual embodiment in theory and literature, especially concerning the problematic Freudian erasure of female genitals and “pleasure distorted into a cautionary tale.”³⁹ *The Argonauts* includes these explicit scenes to re-embodiment female genitalia and pleasure in the text. She writes her body in a manner that focuses on both hybrid subjectivities and the female body through graphic sexual expression. In centering these themes within her textual embodiment, Nelson participates in an important autotheoretical move—she describes her desire and her acts to further intertwine her female sexuality with her personhood.

The Argonauts draws upon another uncommon pairing between female sexuality and the maternal body—an ex-centric move which Acker makes within her textual fusion of “mommy” and sex. Nelson’s exploration of motherhood juxtaposes with similar aggressive sexuality as she discusses the eroticism of breastfeeding, the “autoeroticism” of pregnancy, and her obsession with her mother’s body.⁴⁰ An autotheoretical necessity exists in this combination—given her position as a daughter and a mother, Nelson continues to draw upon her life experiences within her body to link graphic sexuality and

maternity. These tropes fuse unexpectedly in both of these texts and create the ex-centric notions of the female body by upending expectations of normative, passive, maternal sexuality.

The use of graphic sexuality remains important to these texts to engage the complexities of the female body. Acker writes towards the controversy of the late twentieth-century pornography industry by writing grammatically ambiguous, graphic sexual subjectivities based on her life experiences. Her willingness to do so anticipates the hybridity and embodiment of language that proves central to the autotheoretical turn. She anticipates the sexual, deeply human possibilities that could be opened and carried through writing—that words could become good enough.⁴¹

IV. Conclusion: Acker in the Autotheoretical Lineage

By working at the nexus of French feminist theory and New Narrative, Kathy Acker engages the pivotal questions of rationality, language, and embodiment. The novel's fractured language arises out of Acker's own experiences with her body and her mind, and as a result, the boundaries between fiction and autobiography are rendered permeable in *Kathy Goes to Haiti*. While *Kathy Goes to Haiti* has long been swept into other categories—a fictional travelogue, pornographic novel, or a failed early work of Acker's canon—Acker places herself within the lineage of autotheoretical texts and anticipates disruptive works like Kraus' *I Love Dick* and Nelson's *The Argonauts*. The inclusion of this novel within the autotheoretical canon is justifiable on these grounds, yet the question remains: what are the stakes of the autotheoretical lineage and Kathy Acker's feminine cognitive embodiment—a mad and pornographic confessional based on the life experiences of a woman who sought to express “the language of the body?” I believe that Acker demonstrates the influence of New Narrative's queer critical theory—and its imagined social possibilities—within the autotheoretical lineage. The spatial dimensions inherent in Acker's ex-centric language critically anticipate autotheory's hybrid subjectivities and embodiments. Perhaps most unusually, Acker engages pornography from a female perspective to exhibit agency over the female

sexual experience—an unusual move in a time when men dominated the pornography industry. Acker’s sexual expression operates as a mode of self-exploration and exposes Acker’s understanding of language through her body. By making sexuality a graphic center to the work, Acker imagines the possibilities of the female desire and sexuality where it had existed before only in the male imagination or in obscurity.

Acker later addresses these multivalent possibilities between the body and language in her essay collection *Bodies of Work*:

Let us name this language game, *the language of the body*. In order to examine such a language, a language game which resists ordinary language, through the lens of ordinary language or language whose tendency is to generate syntax or to make meanings proliferate, I must use an indirect route.⁴²

Acker’s attentiveness to the theoretical implications of her language makes *Kathy Goes to Haiti* a critical anticipatory work, one that illuminates the subversive theoretical roots of sexuality, disability, and language that gave shape to autotheory. Through *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, Acker seeks to find the interconnected, fused spaces between the female body and mind. In doing so, Acker grants readers access to a new space: an ex-centered place of madness and un-reason, which grants new freedom to language and the borders of the body that her language creates.

¹ Chris Kraus, *After Kathy Acker* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotexte, 2017), 247

² Kathy Acker, “Kathy Goes to Haiti,” in *Literal Madness* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 7.

³ Kathryn Nicol, and Polina Mackay, eds., *Kathy Acker and Transnationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009)

⁴ Kathy Acker, *Bodies of Work: Essays* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1997), 148.

⁵ Rob Halpern, “Realism and Utopia: Sex, Writing, and Activism in New Narrative.” *Journal of Narrative Theory* 41, no. 1 (2011): 87.

⁶ *ibid* 89.

⁷ Kaplan Harris, “New Narrative and the Making of Language Poetry.” *American Literature* 81, no. 4 (January 1, 2009): 808.

⁸ Tyler Bradway, *Queer Experimental Literature: The Affective Politics of Bad Reading* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US 2017), 114.

⁹ Acker, “Kathy Goes to Haiti,” 78.

¹⁰ Lauren Fournier, “Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Selfie Theory: Autotheory as Contemporary Feminist Practice.” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 33.3 (2018): 655.

¹¹ Acker, *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, 5.

¹² Shoshana Felman, *Writing and Madness: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985), 20. She goes on to write, “the confrontation of the different contexts is thus not a spectacle but a dynamic, an inter-action which displaces other domains and decenters them with respect to each other. What is at stake is not simple exchange, but a movement of *ex-centering*.”

¹³ Acker, “Kathy Goes to Haiti,” 7.

¹⁴ Multiple layers of “foreignness” in this encounter work in this section for both Kathy and Sammy, and it’s important to note the national, racial, and class-based distinctions before pivoting to the language. The Haitian setting nuances Kathy’s conversation with Sammy, especially given the erotic tone that arises when he requests Kathy to become his girlfriend. As the novel progresses, distinct references to pornographic sexual encounters and Kathy’s American citizenship appear throughout the text. In *Kathy Acker and Transnationalism*, scholar Shannon Rose Riley comments, “It is precisely the interracial pornography between the ‘American white girl’ and men of color in Haiti that dramatizes U.S. national anxieties; the ultimate transgression is the novel’s fierce perversion of the racial and colonial fears and fantasies that ground U.S. nationalism” (33).

¹⁵ Felman, *Writing and Madness*, 19.

¹⁶ More on this in Felman’s introduction, pages 18 to 19.

¹⁷ Acker, “Kathy Goes to Haiti,” 77.

¹⁸ Notably, Acker invokes a first-person narration later in the chapter.

¹⁹ Rob Halpern, *Realism and Utopia*, 88.

²⁰ *ibid* 88.

²¹ The relationship between madness and disability is complex, and it is importantly connected within recent theory. Elizabeth Brewer writes: “In 2013, *Disability Studies Quarterly* published a special issue on ‘Disability and Madness,’ and the guest editors, Noam Ostrander and Bruce Henderson, identified recent scholarly work on madness as “draw[ing] heavily on Disability Studies to trouble the borders of normal/abnormal and sane/insane.” At the same time, mad studies emerged in 2008 as its own location of humanistic inquiry into psychiatric disability, and scholars writing in that field repeatedly make their connections to disability studies clear. Richard Ingram claims in defining mad studies that it owes a great debt to disability studies. Similarly, Jennifer M. Poole and Jennifer Ward express feelings of indebtedness to disability scholars like Eli Clare who have told stories before them, encouraging them and others to ‘break open the bone’ by narrating their mad experiences (100).” Elizabeth Brewer, “Coming Out Mad, Coming Out Disabled.” In *Literatures of Madness: Disability Studies and Mental Health* ed. Elizabeth J Donaldson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 12.

²² Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 27

²³ *ibid* 24

²⁴ For the complete passage from Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization*, page 11: “The madman’s voyage is at once a rigorous division and an absolute Passage. In one sense, it simply develops, across a half-real, half-imaginary geography, the madman’s *liminal* position on the horizon of medieval concern—a position symbolized and made real at the same time by the madman’s privilege of being *confined* within the city *gates*: his exclusion must enclose him; if he cannot and must not have another *prison* than the *threshold* itself, he is kept at the point of passage. He is put in the interior of the exterior, and inversely.”

²⁵ Shoshana Felman, *Writing and Madness*, 20.

²⁶ Acker, “Kathy Goes to Haiti,” 77. In this passage Roger, the Haitian with whom Kathy has an affair, says that loving Kathy might kill him.

²⁷ Acker, “Kathy Goes to Haiti,” 87. Indentation is in accordance to the original text.

²⁸ Claudia Cao, “The Rhetoric of Madness in Kathy Acker’s *Don Quixote*.” *International Journal of Comparative Literature & Translation Studies* 5, no. 3 (2017): 76.

²⁹ Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick* (Los Angeles: MIT Press, 2006), 239.

³⁰ *ibid* 8

³¹ Cristina Garrigós, “Kathy’s Acker’s Spanish Connection: Plagiarism, Madness and Love in *Don Quixote*” in *Kathy Acker and Transnationalism*, eds. Kathryn Nicol and Polina Mackay (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2009), 123.

³² Nicola Pitchford, *Tactical Readings* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2002), 169

³³ Bradway, *Queer Experimental Literature*, 114.

³⁴ Margrit Shildrick, “Dangerous Discourses: Anxiety, Desire, and Disability.” In *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 8, no. 3 (2007): 235.

³⁵ Acker, “Kathy Goes to Haiti,” 77.

³⁶ Bradway, *Queer Experimental Literature*, 104-5.

³⁷ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 10.

³⁸ Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015), 3

³⁹ *ibid* 69

⁴⁰ *ibid* 90

⁴¹ *ibid* 3

⁴² Acker, *Bodies of Work*, 147.

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