**Penetration as philosophy – Tessel Veneboer**

Review of McKenzie Wark's *Philosophy for Spiders: on the Low Theory of Kathy Acker* (Duke University Press, 2021)

In *Philosophy for Spiders* McKenzie Wark reads the novels of the punk avant-garde writer Kathy Acker as philosophical texts, or as the title proposes: as "low theory." Low theory rejects the privileged terms of "high theory" and likes to remind the reader that the philosopher has a body. This theory "from below" often talks about sex and makes theoretical thinking a bodily task. Wark also finds this kind of thinking in Kathy Acker's literary experimentation. Acker's "null philosophy" comes from below – from the body and self of the author – while undoing that same self.

As scholar and writer, Wark has made significant contributions to the fields of media theory and cultural studies with *Hacker Manifesto* (2004), *Molecular Red* (2015) and *Capital is Dead: is this something worse?* (2019). More recently, she turned to gender theory and memoir writing with *Reverse Cowgirl* (2019) and now she has published this personal-critical reading of Acker's experimental prose. *Philosophy for Spiders* comes with a content warning for "sex, violence, sexual violence and spiders" as well as a form warning: "this book has elements of memoir and criticism but is neither" (4). As the subtitle of the book suggests, Wark proposes to read Acker's work as philosophy, more specifically as low theory, a term first used to describe the work of cultural theorist Stuart Hall and popularized by Jack Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). Wark follows Acker in her view that perhaps she was not writing novels: "they're big chunks of prose, but are they novels? More groups of stories. Some of them aren't even that" (54). Rejecting a clear-cut division between the novel and a philosophical text allows Wark to read

Acker's prose as "philosophical treatises" (54). The reader might wonder what the low in low theory reacts to: is it the dominance of the "master discourse" of high theory, or does the complicated content of high theory make the genre inaccessible? , Developing low theory as an aspirational genre, Wark longs for a kind of philosophy that emerges outside of a (patriarchal; and even matriarchal) tradition:

> It is a philosophy without fathers (or even mothers), and so no more of their Proper Names will be mentioned. This philosophy for spiders is not a philosophy in which gentlemen discourse on the nature of the beautiful, the good, and the true. It is philosophy for those who were nameless as they had to spend their time working for the money. A philosophy not by those who could arise from their place to announce it, because their place was to be on their knees, their mouths full of cock. A theory in which otherwise quite tractable bad girls and punk boys go off campus and conduct base experiments in making sense and nonsense out of situations. "Recruited due to our good intentions, V and I've instead learned a brutal philosophy: ignorance of all rational facts and concepts; raging for personal physical pleasure; may the whole Western intellectual world go to hell." (81)

Where Wark aims for a philosophy without "Proper Names" Acker turns to the literary and philosophical canon to think with and write through. Acker's work refers to (but never cites) a wide range of canonical thinkers such as Jacques Lacan, Georges Bataille, Marquis de Sade, Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud who inspire her to question the primacy of rationality and the Cartesian subject. In one of her first novellas Kathy Acker writes: "I'm trying to get away from self-expression but not from personal life. I hate creativity" (Acker 1998, 86) and in her short story *New York City in 1979* the character Janey "believes it is necessary to blast open her mind

constantly and destroy every particle of memory that she likes" (Acker 1981, 6-7) Acker's work rejects the idea that an author should have an original voice, which for her is a bourgeois conception of literature that only serves to support the capitalist "cult" of individuality. For Acker there is no creativity involved in creation. As Wark asserts, "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" (5). Acker's interest in anti-creativity stimulates her appropriation of "found" material such as canonical texts, overheard conversations and dreams – for Acker they are all as "real" as any other event. Throughout her work Acker compulsively recounts and repeats events from her life; her mother's death, painful romantic encounters, unrequited crushes, dreams, gossip, and jobs she did. At the same time, Acker consistently lies about all of those aspects of her life – to the extent that even her date of birth is contested.[1] Treating events of her own life in a similar manner to the texts she plagiarizes, everything is part of Acker's "anti-creative" project. Her work is sometimes seen as aggressively opposing meaning-making – thanks to her oft-cited mantra of "Get rid of meaning. Now eat your mind." But Acker's ambitious rewriting of the literary canon is not simply a postmodern displacement of meaning. Her literary experiments are concerned with procedure, method, and memory.

One of the ways Acker explored her interest in (and suspicion of) memory was writing "fake autobiography": a rewriting of her life interwoven with found materials, like conversations she overheard and texts she copied. In her early text "Politics" (1972) for example, she collages conversations between her stripper-colleagues together with scripts she wrote for a live sex show

[1] Library of Congress gives her birth date as 1948 while most obituaries used 1944 as date of birth.

on 42nd Street with (clearly fictional) incestuous lesbian fantasies. In her biography of Acker Chris Kraus suggests that Kathy Acker's numerous lies must be seen as a fundamental part of both her life and work. She even goes as far as to propose that her consistent lying was a condition for writing:

> Because in a certain sense, Acker lied all the time. She was rich, she was poor, she was the mother of twins, she'd been a stripper for years, a guest editor of *Film Comment* magazine at the age of fourteen, a graduate student of Herbert Marcuse's. She lied when it was clearly beneficial to her, and she lied even when it was not. [...] But then again, didn't she do what all writers must do? Create a position from which to write? (Kraus 2017, 14)

In Wark's recounting of their shared past (Wark and Acker met in Australia in 1995 and embarked on a short affair) she is fully aware of Acker's self-mythologizing tendencies. Wark fictionalizes their meeting and points to the gaps in her own memory as well as Acker's habit to treat her life and her literature the same:

> Not everything Kathy ever said to me was—strictly speaking—true. Particularly when we got to New York. It was as if we were inside a Kathy Acker book, written on flesh and city. […] I knew nothing about New York at the time. Anything Kathy told me could be true to me, was true to me. She showed me the New York of myth. We wandered from Central Park toward the East River, to Sutton Place. Sutton Place, she told me, was her childhood home. In the psychogeography of New York, it is certainly a place from which a Kathy Acker should hail. It is in countless movies, from *How to Marry a Millionaire* to *Black Caesar*. Lou Reed has a song that mentions *not* walking there. It's in *Catcher in the*

> *Rye*; it's in *Great Expectations* and *My Life My Death by Pier Paolo Pasolini*—by Kathy Acker—and some of her other books. (33)

Considering all the ways in which Acker put herself on the line in her work, her body as a performer, autobiographical material, her creation of the persona, makes it possible for Wark to read Acker's life and work as a spider web of narratives, identities, and concepts. In the early 1970s Acker started publishing her first appropriative texts under the pseudonym "The Black Tarantula" and copying from the Marquis de Sade and a book of portraits of female serial killers. In her work Acker often puts everything she copies in the first person but she did not only steal from other texts, she also stole from her own life. Wark's construction of a spider web of Ackers takes its cue from Martino Scioliona's suggestion that Acker's auto-plagiarism becomes a narrative web in which "Acker always recounted her own life story as if it, too, was a stolen text" (in Wark 2021, 5).

Weaving a web of Acker's selves, Wark unwraps herself too, at least the selves that Acker made possible in their affair and in her texts. Wark met Acker in 1995 at a reading in Sydney. At the dinner after the reading the two writers connected and started a short affair. An email correspondence followed their meeting and was published in 2015 as *I'm Very Into You*: an intimate document of the flirty and intellectual emails they exchanged over a period of a few weeks. Both *I'm Very Into You* and the memoir part of *Philosophy for Spiders* reveal how Wark felt seen in her femininity in this meeting with Acker in the 1990s and how this might have informed her recent gender transition. In 1995 Wark wrote in an email to Acker: "There are reaches of me that I can only put in language as feminine, and those reaches exposed themselves to you, felt comfortable next to you sometimes. That doesn't happen very often" and now in her *Philosophy for Spiders* Wark says she wanted to escape masculinity and that "reading Kathy again

helped to transition" (7). Wark remembers: "who I was starting to be with Kathy. I was starting to be her girlfriend. That concept" (22). In search of more concepts, Wark (re)reads Acker's complete body of work almost thirty years after their initial meeting in Australia. From Acker's texts Wark assembles phrases and claims around different concepts like "love," "capitalism" and "penetration." In so doing *Philosophy for Spiders* sketches a web of Acker's selves along with concepts Wark finds in Acker's work, providing a glimpse into what might turn out to be a philosophical system.

Wark rightly points out that Acker's texts are "studded with philosophical questions" (56) and that these questions predominantly center around desire, subjectivity, form, and the failure of language. Her novel *Great Expectations* (1982) is exemplary for how Acker's philosophical mode, if we can detect one, rejects the linearity of logical thinking:

> Stylistically: simultaneous contrasts, extravagancies, incoherences, half-formed misshapen thoughts, lousy spelling, what signifies what? What is the secret of this chaos? (Since there is no possibility, there's play. Elegance and completely filthy sex fit together. Expectations that aren't satiated.) Questioning is our mode." (Acker 1982, 107)

Acker's philosophical mode questions hierarchies of knowledge by asking the "big" questions of philosophy as if they were dumb questions. Moreover, this questioning mode is inherently tied to the body, and thus to sex and gender. In her essay "Seeing Gender" (1997 [1995]) Acker reflects on her writing practice and directly responds to the work of "high theorists" like Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray. In the essay she looks back on her writing practice, the (gender) politics of plagiarism, and her ambition to find what she called "the languages of the body." In a typical Ackerian manner, she takes the figure of the young girl – in this essay she uses Alice from *Alice*

*in Wonderland* –who has yet to discover the limits of her being and knowledge. As a child, the girl wanted to become a pirate – the only way to see the world – but since "I wasn't a stupid child, I knew that I couldn't." Still, she knows what "the pirates know", namely that in writing and being "*I* do not see, for there is no *I* to see" (Acker 1997, 159). Instead, "to see was to be an *eye,* not an *I*." The essay progresses as a theoretical inquiry into gender and the body through Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1979) and Butler's reading of that text in *Bodies that Matter* (1996). Acker's ambitious quest for self-knowledge and knowledge of the world come together in her observation of the self: this conflation of the eye and the I, consistently destabilizing the second through the first. In Acker's logic then, a feeling *is* a concept. This doesn't mean that experiencing an emotion will directly lead to knowledge, but that to *see* is a way of knowing. Since Acker's girls don't have a language of their own, they can't know themselves except through feelings. In *Don Quixote* (1986) Acker writes that "real teaching happens via feelings" (159) and "my feelings're my brains" (17). Barred entrance to the world of knowledge, the "stupid" girl as philosopher can make sense of her own subjectivity through sensuality, not rationality. Quoting a letter from the Romantic poet John Keats from 1817, Acker reflects in *Great Expectations*:

> Only sensations. What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth – whether it exists materially or not – for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all, in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty… The imagination may be compared to Adam's dream – he awoke and found it truth. I am the more zealous in this affair, because I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consecutive reasoning – and yet it must be. Can it be that even the greatest philosopher ever arrived at his goal without putting aside numerous objections? However it may be Oh, for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts! (Acker 1982, 64)

Acker rewrites Keats but keeps his opposing two notions of truth here: the reasoned truth of the philosopher and the truth of the artist which, for Keats, can only emerge through sensations and passions, through the imagination. As Wark's Acker web suggests, Acker is not interested in a mastering feelings with language, rather the opposite: "I feel I feel I feel I have no language, any emotion for me is a prison" (Acker 1982, 24).

Wark follows Acker in that she lets the intensity of their mutual crush precede the thinking. In the first chapters Wark serves the reader queer sex scenes before she turns to Acker's philosophy. Both the story of their affair and Wark's readings of Acker are tied to questions of gender and a dysphoric experience of the body. In "The City of Memory" Wark recalls:

> In our room at the Gramercy, sometimes I was Kathy's girl. I wanted to watch her strap himself into her cocks. The leather harness was all black straps and shiny buckles. Its odor an appealing blend of leather, lube, and sweat. Kathy did not want my help with it, but she took her time. Choosing cocks. Inserting a cock in the harness, another in his cunt. Strapping on the harness without either falling back out again. Even after a few drinks Kathy was deft at this. I Just lay back and admired her technique, his presence. (35)

Using this descriptive mode for a "phenomenology of the body" (81) allows Wark to narrate Acker's genderqueerness too, underscored by the use of alternating he/she pronouns. Wark shows how remembering their encounter will always also be a rewriting of the meeting. Throughout the book Wark's receptiveness and passivity are important--in bed but also in their shared thinking: "She had philosophical questions. I could only describe things" (22). In *Philosophy for Spiders* Wark connects Acker's multiplication of the authorial self to gender and what she calls a "penetration theory" (92). Acker's appropriative and autoplagiaristic writing becomes a practice

of "selving: reproducing self-ness" (54). Wark shows how thinking about gender in terms of penetration destabilizes a coherent sense of the self as gendered. This is also a textual concern because reading and writing turn out to be processes of penetration too. In *Reverse Cowgirl*, Wark finds that "the great asymmetry of human being" is the division between the penetrators and the penetrated and this asymmetry allows for trans identifications:

> If I could not know who I was from the world touching me from the outside, prodding 'til I felt a self; then I would become one by being touched from the inside. Edward's cock would press my insides against their boundaries, pushing what would become, when pressed, against skin from the inside, a being I could call, a being I could call I. This coming into being, this inside out subjectivity, would change things between us. (Wark 2020, 53)

Both the penetrator and the penetrated are "involuntary agents" but allow for different experiences of gender. In *Reverse Cowgirl* penetrative sex makes it possible for Wark to feel a "temporary non-masculinity" (Wark 2020, 176). In this space of "non-existence" the body comes first, negotiating power dynamics and identity through a relationality of being penetrated, penetrating and penetrable. Acker too was interested in penetration, particularly the penetrable body as a site of knowledge. In her experimentation Acker soughtliterary forms for "the languages of the body" (Acker 1997, 143) by way of masturbatory writing, bodybuilding and writing pornography. Foregrounding the body creates an articulation of gender as an asymmetry of sex rather than a binary position. This allows Wark to read the bodies in Acker's work as "potentially trans:"

> Just as the eye and I, or sensation and desire, differ, so too the fucker and the fucked. This asymmetry of sex might be just one of the zones in which to think about gender, although in the Acker-text the asymmetries of sex acts can arise in all sorts of ways out of all sorts

> of bodies. There's no essential diagram of gendered bodies. In that sense all Acker bodies are potentially trans. (90)

Bodies are trans here to the extent that they are assumed as not-cis. Still, assuming that desire always destabilizes sexual difference doesn't necessarily illuminate our understanding of what gender is, because as Wark writes in *Reverse Cowgirl* "there is never any symmetry to what wants" (26). To desire is to *not* know or understand that desire. Both in *Reverse Cowgirl* and in *Philosophy for Spiders*, Wark is interested in the way penetration potentiates a different experience of the body and self-consciousness: "being-penetrated creates a node around which every other difference—sensations, selves, genders—can disperse" (Wark 2021, 91).

In Acker's logic, penetration centers the self and makes thinking possible. In Wark's words, to be penetrable and penetrated is "to have an axis for sensation in the world" as opposed to those who do the penetrating. They "act as subjects in the world but they don't react, they don't let the world in much" which leads Wark to claim that to penetrate is "just not that interesting" (92). The question left unanswered here is: uninteresting for whom? And how are we expected to view Acker's role of the penetrator in the sex scenes Wark describes? An obvious answer would be that switching positions allows access to both experiences but in this book being penetrated appears to be the privileged position because the penetrable body has access to a specific form of knowledge as it "comes to know itself, not its penetrator" (153).

For Acker, the question of penetration is a problem of language. In her early text *Breaking through memories into desire* (2019 [1973]) Acker asks: "Language. How do I, fucked, use the language? I don't want to be doing this writing" (381) and in *My Mother: Demonology* (1993) Acker writes that "the more I try to describe myself, the more I find a hole" (in Wark, 154). A temporary centralized subject emerges in the destabilizing encounter of sexual penetration. This is

where Wark finds a first philosophical concept in Acker's work: a phenomenology of the body or what she calls Acker's "phenomenology without the subject" (54).

Wark's reading of Acker's "languages of the body" as low theory raises the crucial question of how sex relates to knowledge. To theorize through sex is to choose confusion over rationality, non-knowledge over knowledge and to problematize the subject's relation to knowledge. Sexuality clearly interests Acker, not necessarily because it precedes patriarchal discourse or cannot translate the experience of sexuality to language, but because sex does not affirm a self or one's personal pleasures. For Acker, sex is a crucial site of negativity: her texts reveal the failure of language to express identity and introduces sex as a question of the (incoherence) of subjecthood. Sex is the moment in which the self is destabilized, displaced once more, and thus where knowledge breaks down. [2]

Acker's recurring character Janey fails to be a sovereign subject in the patriarchal structures imposed on her. Her obsession with sex ruins her education as a proper young woman because rationalized knowledge is inaccessible to a "stupid" young girl like Janey. Her failure to know how to use language, how to behave properly, how to be, illustrates the typical young girl's experience of inhabiting available structures of knowing and their limits. Stupidity in Acker's work is not necessarily non-knowledge or absence of knowledge, it is more an investigation of the unknowability of the subject herself and the limits of her language. Avital Ronell has pointed out

[2] In her book *What is Sex* (2017), philosopher Alenka Zupančič takes psychoanalysis as a philosophical problem and proposes that sex is the missing link between epistemology and ontology: "sex is messy because it appears at the point of the breaking down of the signifying consistency, or logic (its point of impossibility), not because it is in itself illogical and messy: its messiness is the result of the attempt to invent a logic at the very point of the impasse of such logic. Its "irrationality" is the summit of its efforts to establish a sexual rationale" (*What IS Sex*, 43).

how Acker's texts explore the emancipatory potential of stupidity.[3] Acker's characters embrace stupidity in that they refuse knowledge in the form it is given to them. In her book *Stupidity* (2002) Ronell proposes to take stupidity seriously as a philosophical position because it does not "stand in the way of wisdom" (5) and asks how it can be turned into a productive category of thought and as a locus for the unmaking of language – one of Acker's literary concerns too. Stupidity, Ronell writes, is a "political problem hailing from the father; it combines with conservative desires for stability, comfort, and authenticity, but it also opens up other spaces of knowing" (16). Wark makes a similar point:

> A philosophy of emotions, like a philosophy of language or sensations, has to start from doubt, uncertainly, confusion – with nonknowledge. "My emotional limbs stuck out as if they were broken and unfixable." (GE 58) And: "I don't think I'm crazy. There's just no reality in my head and my emotions fly all over the place." (63)

The problem of the speaking subject in Acker's work becomes a project of asking the "stupid" questions. This way, Acker's project is concerned with a philosophical position from which to think "stupidly." Reading Acker's texts as philosophy should therefore not be a question of what ideological tendencies or feminist politics are being thought or taught, but a much narrower question: how to establish a thinking self without relying on the Cartesian model of the subject. Acker asks: "But what if I isn't the subject, but the object?" (in Wark, 142).

As her literary experiments started to take shape in the early 1970s, Acker sought words and ideas to understand what she was doing. Considering her radical decentralizing approach to

[3] See "Kathy Goes to Hell: On the Irresolvable Stupidity of Acker's Death" by Avital Ronell in *Lust for Life: On the Writings of Kathy Acker* (2006).

identity, Acker found a home in the thinkers of poststructuralism. But any attempt to uncover intentionality in her work is tricky because she successfully mystified her own methods and theoretical influences in interviews. In an interview with her publisher Sylvère Lotringer, Acker claims she started to understand her experimental writings strategies when she got to know poststructuralist thought through Lotringer's publishing house Semiotext(e). Interestingly, Acker places herself on the same level as the French philosophers she admired and was even surprised they didn't know her work:

> I was like a death-dumb-and-blind person for years, I just did what I did but had no way of telling anyone about it, or talking about it. And then when I read ANTI-OEDIPUS and Foucault's work, suddenly I had this whole language at my disposal. I could say, Hi! And that other people were doing the same thing. I remember thinking, why don't they know me? I know exactly what they're talking about. And I could go farther. (Acker 1991, 10)

Whether Acker really was not aware of "French theory" before meeting Lotringer is disputed by Chris Kraus, but the typically poststructuralist concern with identity and desire through the fragmentation or decentralization of the "I" is present from her earliest published work in the 1970s. In 1975 Acker did take her place among the philosophers: at the "Schizo-culture" conference Lotringer organized with French thinkers like Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Jean-François Lyotard as well as American artists and writers like Richard Foreman, Philip Glass, and Acker's literary idol William Burroughs. Lotringer's introduction of the "then unknown radical philosophies of post-'68 France" (as MIT Press retroactively describes the event) to the American avant-garde marked a shift in how Acker relates to theory in her work. Acker's poststructuralist tendencies were a perfect fit for the academic zeitgeist and appear to have contributed to the "meteoric rise of her academic reputation" (Punday 2003). Her texts proved

popular among academics who aimed to lay bare the ways in which Acker engaged with theory: in her rewriting of film scripts, one might find a reflection of Baudrillard's ideas; her wild science fiction novel *Empire of the Senseless* must be the result of reading Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*. But as the Acker scholar Tyler Bradway recently pointed out, these theoretical readings of Acker "obscure her ultimate frustration with the way that these discourses, particularly deconstruction, made her writing too narrowly readable, rendering it ironically subordinate to and exemplary of an external master discourse" (Bradway 2017, 106). Still, Acker's typically fragmented and "unreadable" texts continue to resist such theoretical interpretations – hence Wark's interest in reading her as low theory.

To render the text unreadable, to think non-intelligibly, writing stupidly, obviously implies a questioning of the distinction between false and true knowledge. Embracing stupidity as a philosophical mode blurs the line between true and false statements, but also informs Acker's ambition to develop a non-authoritarian use of language. In 1984 Acker writes in *Art Forum*:

> I write. I want to write I want my writing to be meaningless I want my writing to be stupid. But the language I use isn't what I want and make, it's what's given to me. Language is always a community. Language is what I know and is my cry." (Acker 1984)

Writing the immediacy of thought through a nontransparent use of language – language as a "cry" rather than expressive of an idea – leads to a "false clarity" (Harper 1987) and in Acker's case results in a logic that sounds consciously contradictory and finds a ground in excessive affect. Acker's writing of sex and romantic crushes seems personal and very intimate but the feelings she describes are not "hers" in the way that they belong to Kathy Acker, they are taken from or inspired by the texts she reads while writing. Wark proposes that in Acker's work, "emotions, feelings, affect, might be keys to a certain kind of understanding that is subjective but not necessarily

individuated" and that "feelings can become concepts" (63). The question of desire and self-reflection in narrative is crucial for Acker. In *Great Expectations* (1982) Acker writes that "narrative is an emotional moving" and in *Eurydice in the Underworld* (1997) that "as if reality was emotional, I perceived solely by feeling" (in Wark, 63). Acker works consistently against the idea that feeling opposes knowing. We can "know" our feelings but the feelings are not pieces of knowledge themselves, at least not in the kind of "high theory for whom Plato is daddy" (Wark, 54).

To understand how Acker's texts both work with and reject philosophy as high theory, it is worth considering her contribution to the Lotringer's Schizo-culture conference, which was neither theoretical nor particularly literary. At the conference Acker presented translation exercises: Janey's "Persian Poems" which would later become part of Janey's education from age ten to fourteen in *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984). The translation exercise is short but unambiguous about Janey's position as object: "to have Janey / to buy Janey / to want Janey / to see Janey / to come Janey / to beat up Janey" (1984, 84). In these evidently false translations Acker reaffirms her concern with how language constrains rather than liberates. The only possible agency for Acker's recurring protagonist Janey is to surrender to the position of object. In these translation exercises and throughout Acker's work, Janey is doomed to be the predicate of the sentence, the object to the subject. The first numbered lines are succeeded by a translated line that overflows, exceeding the initial format as it turns into a passionate address:

> 5. The streets are black. You haven't fucked for a long time. You forget how incredibly sensitive you are. You hurt. Hurt hurt hurt hurt hurt. You meet the nicest guy in the world and you fall in love with him you do and you manage to get into his house and you stand before him. A girl who puts herself out on a line. A girl who asks for trouble and forgets

> that she has feelings and doesn't even remember what fucking's about or how she's supposed to go about it because she wasn't fucked in so long and now she's naïve and stupid. So like a dope she sticks herself in front of the guy: here I am; understood: do you want me? No, thank you. She did it. There she is. What does she do now? Where does she go? She was a stupid girl: she went and offered herself, awkwardly, to someone who didn't want her. That's not stupid. The biggest pain in the world is feeling but sharper is the pain of the self.
>
> 6. Is there any fresh meat? (Acker 1984, 88-92)

The turn from the interpellating "you" to the descriptive "a girl" signals a shift from an intimate address to a distant observation of the girl's being as defined by rejection. The "there she is" is characteristic of the way the figure of the girl features as an ontological negation throughout Acker's work; she momentarily comes into being through an encounter with lack, in this case simple and clear rejection, and thus when she starts questioning her own desires. These painful desires reveal how feelings are a problem for Acker's subject: "the biggest pain in the world is feeling but sharper is the pain of the self." In Wark's reading the only agency Acker's girls have is their "amorality and ability to exploit their own desirability" (151):

> Girls are, among other things, objects that power perceives as a thing to desire. As if they had no subjectivity. Rather than claiming to be subjects, girls in the Acker-web escape into unknowability, as far as power's gaze is concerned. Their bodies may be penetrable, and that is the function assigned them as objects, but otherwise they can choose not to be known at all. The girl too is not an identity but an event, something produced by chance and fluid time. Lulu: "you can't change me cause there's nothing to change. I've never been." (151)

Acker's radical determinism about the symbolic absence of woman in language and literature generated a wide range of feminist interpretations of her work, particularly as being exemplary of *écriture féminine* by studying Acker's experimental literary form as a critique of the male canon (which it undoubtedly is) and her sex writing as expressive of a female voice. Even if Acker's texts themselves appear to reject academic interpretations, Acker herself was a fanatic reader of philosophy, including "French feminists" like Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Helène Cixous. As she writes in "Seeing Gender", philosophy pointed her towards knowledge she had experienced intuitively herself, namely that "woman" does not exist: "She has no essence, for all that comes into being, according to Plato, partakes of form. 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." (Acker 1997, 161) Acker's concern with the linguistic "I" as a being that always lacks, and thus must copy if she is to speak, also reveals the role that sex plays to understand the failure of language.

Wark is not the first to suspect that Acker's interest in the immediacy of language and sex can function as a form of theorizing. Martina Sciolino pointed out in 1990 that we might read Acker's fiction as performative philosophy: "A writer of innovative narratives that converse with theorists as diverse in their constructions of desire as Georges Bataille and Andrea Dworkin, Acker creates fictions that are theories-in-performance" (Sciolino 1990, 438). Acker's "theories-in-performance" reveal different ways in which lines can be drawn between the author and her theoretical material. To see how this kind of "performative philosophy" can function outside of an already established philosophical discourse, it might be helpful to turn to Chris Kraus again who reads the diaries of the French philosopher Simone Weil as philosophical investigations. For Kraus, the only condition for a text to be philosophical, to read these "personal" texts beyond

memoir, is that the text must be concerned with rhetoric: “In Weil’s philosophy, just like in narrative or phone sex, it’s not the story that we’re really hearing, it is the fact and act of telling it” (Kraus 2004, 77).

Considering the significant reception of Acker’s texts in the world of “high theory” and Wark’s reaction to these readings through the concept of low theory, the question of the intentionality of Acker’s project lingers. It is complicated because, for Acker, the subject always emerges as a being of language for whom no “genuine” agency is possible; in Acker’s world agency is limited to being a receptacle. To do is always a being done to. In this sense, it might not be particularly helpful to look at the influence of theory *on* Acker’s work because it assumes a text outside of, or a “before” reading theory, while Acker’s writing practice itself is a reading practice as much as it is a writing practice.

Leslie Dick has observed how Acker’s writing functioned as an extension of her reading, that “her plagiarism was a way of reading, or re-reading, appropriating and customizing what she read, writing herself, so to speak, into the fabric of the original text” (Scholder et al. 2006, 1). Her writing consists of readings of texts that provoke her reaction, evoke a fantasy or stimulate her to rewrite the texts she is consuming. In this sense, her writing has always been a form of critical writing. In *Learning for the Revolution* (2011), Spencer Dew reads Acker’s work as instructive, labelling it a “pedagogical project,” and Martina Sciolino describes Acker’s work as “materially didactic” (437). Harper (1987) specifies Acker’s critical project further as “less a conscious political philosophy than a pursuit of the immediate the unregulated present” but argues that Acker “consciously participates in the poststructuralist project of the liberation of the signifier from fixed meaning” (47). In *Philosophy for Spiders,* Wark smartly avoids the question of intentionality by

emphasizing the inseparability of reading and writing and how that relation creates subjectivity in the text. Wark frames this as a relation of passivity and, again, penetration:

> The Acker-field is a sequence of books about—no, not about. They are not about anything. They don't mean, they do. What do they do? Get rid of the self. Among other things. For writer but also reader. If you let them in. You have to want it to fuck you. It happens when there's a hole. Rather than say *one reads*, one could say that *one is booked*. A body can be booked a bit like the way it can be fucked. A body uses its agency to give access to itself to another. A body lets go of its boundedness, its self, its selfishness, and through opening to sensation disappears into the turbulent real. (156)

For Wark the reader as well as the writer is a hole, ready to be penetrated by other texts. Not that the author has no agency at all but in writing she is also being written. This is how Acker's philosophy can be understood in terms of stupidity and unknowledge; it rejects the idea that anything we think we know or want is "ours." Acker's naïve lyrical I is also a displacement of the position of the philosopher.

This penetrative relation between self and text is also what Wark scrutinizes with Acker's words in *Philosophy for Spiders*. Wark's reading of Acker is clearly this kind of "penetrated writing:" Wark herself does not emerge as a particularly original thinker here but instead lets Acker do the thinking. For Acker the impossibility to speak as an authentic self is at the center of her work and Wark's proposition to let Acker talk to herself creates an interesting encounter of voices but is oftentimes awkward, especially when the reading lacks interpretative strength. Wark offers us Ackers on a plate but does not interpret this group of texts. The voices in Wark's web of Ackers sometimes sound detached, as isolated sound bites. Wark appears to share the view of the artist

Vanessa Place, who she cites early in the book: "citation is always castration: the author's lack of authority made manifest by the phallus, presence of another authority" (7) but Wark does not really do the work of *using* the citations to create a different text. This makes it at times difficult to feel where *Philosophy for Spiders* is going with this mapping of concepts and raises the question what is exactly at stake in this low-theoretical reading of Acker. Is it to make way for other, more detailed, theoretical readings of Acker's work, or for Wark to create a personal encounter with Acker's texts? Both are of course possible and fair reasons to write the book, but the wide range of concepts and citations at times are puzzling when they are not brought together in a reading.

The sex scenes in the book offer a way to read the book: Wark's reading of Acker lets itself be penetrated by Acker. The meeting of texts as the meeting of bodies:

> Maybe gender is transitive in another sense. Between any two bodies is a difference. Maybe that difference is gender even when it is not, actually, gender. It's what top and bottom imply, a difference. Maybe the genders could be transitive verbs, and can be applied in any situation where part of a person acts on another through that gender as an action: Kathy manned me.

This difference that is not sexual difference leads Wark to formulate an "asymmetrical" theory of penetration which can be mapped onto gendered bodies: "the body penetrating is often (but not always) male and the body penetrated is often (but not always) female" (93). Wark's interest in penetration and penetrability sounds almost instructive when she tells us that "everyone ought to know how to top: ethics" (22). The lesson for the reader here seems to be that these dynamics in sex reveal "gender as an action" which in turn affirms the action of passive and active in terms of feminine and masculine – at least Wark herself when Acker "manned" her. Wark's reading of

Acker's texts as making space for transness relies on this evocation of the "dysphoric body" and its needs and desires, "a category that maybe overlaps a lot with the trans body but is not ever identical to it" (178). Wark develops three "philosophies" of Acker in the book. The first is a "null philosophy" centered around the question of the self. Wark finds this philosophy in Acker's questions around emotions, memory, and exteriority. The second philosophy is the encounter with the other, with sections ranging from "library" and "rape" to "fathers" and "death." The third philosophy that Wark discerns is concerned with capitalism and Acker's questions around sex work, the commercialization of art, and Acker's fame.

Acker's legacy has had many faces. First as punk and transgressive in the NYC art and performance world, then the critical reception with poststructuralism in the 1980s and 1990s and today we are seeing another one of Acker's afterlives in contemporary (auto)fiction, for which she functions as some sort of precursor, like in the works of Olivia Laing and Kate Zambreno.[4] Perhaps together with the publication of the emails *I'm Very Into You* these books stimulate the cultivation of Acker's persona. In her blurb for *Philosophy for Spiders*, Sarah Schulman asserts that Wark's "highly personal sex memoir evolves the growing 'My Kathy' genre in trans directions." One recent publication in this supposed 'My Kathy' genre is Olivia Laing's novel *Crudo* (2018), whose fictional narrator is called "Kathy" and bears some characteristics of what we know of Acker's life but at the same time functions as a placeholder for Laing to talk about developments in her own personal life: her approaching marriage to an older well-known poet during a summer holiday in an Italian villa. This kind of autobiographical writing would undoubtedly be the classic bourgeois novel form for Acker, despite the appropriation of the voice

[4] See Olivia Laing's *Crudo* (2018) and Kate Zambreno's *Screen Tests* (2019).

of "Kathy."[5] In *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (2012) Schulman positions Acker as a central figure in an art scene that was "radically queer" and describes how Acker's fiction "faded from view" due to gentrification: "[H]er context is gone. Not that she was a gay male icon, but rather that she was a founder and product of an oppositional class of artists, those who spoke back to the system rather than replicating its vanities" (Schulman 2012, 53). Even though Schulman is referring to a post-1980s gentrification, we might ask if the growing 'My Kathy' genre indicates a new kind of Acker reception. Now that Acker is no longer "fading from view" because of gentrification, might her renewed popularity point towards a new kind of gentrification? To see how Acker's persona is being used today raises the question if she, as the typical transgressive and outcast writer, functions as some sort of token for radical literature in personal memoir and autofiction writing. And where can we situate *Philosophy for Spiders* in the web of Kathy Acker's afterlives?

In the afterword Wark claims that she wants to "push her back in the direction of a minor literature – *trans* lit: the writing of and by and for trans people" (170). Not to retroactively label Acker's person as trans, but to think of her texts as a writing "among those for whom being cis gendered is not their state, their homeland, their family, their fantasy" (170). Wark wants to make space for Acker in a genre she calls "trans girl lit." Wark's own autofictional undertaking in *Reverse Cowgirl* might give us a clue as to how an author can be the "involuntary agent" of her own writing when Wark, high on shrooms, reflects on the narrative web she has created à la Acker: "*Reverse Cowgirl* made sense to me, finally, as a sort of autofiction account of someone who was

[5] In an interview with Sylvère Lotringer Acker explains that she "always hated the bourgeois story-line because the real content of that novel is the property structure of reality. It's about ownership. That isn't my world-reality. My world isn't about ownership. In my world people don't even remember their names, they aren't sure of their sexuality, they aren't sure if they can define their genders." (Acker 1991, 23).

trans all along and did not know it yet. In this case, even the writer didn't know the shape of the web she made" (175). Like in Acker's appropriative writing, other people's texts have authorial agency and Wark's own life is reframed as a web of unconscious narrative turns. Penetrating or penetrated, neither the life story nor the texts are in the author's hands.

Now that the reputation and position of Acker's work is moving towards canonization and perhaps even gentrification, can we view Wark's book indeed as a pushback against the canonization of Acker? Wark's reading of Acker as "minor literature" provokes a shift in the reception of her work in two ways: to consider Acker as a theorist, which I'm sure will bring about various new Acker readings, as well as to pose the question of the "non-cisness" of Acker's work.

As such, Wark's move does secure Acker's radical work from being completely assimilated into a literary world where bourgeois story lines, plot development and stable subject-positions still reign – even if Wark does this work in the very contemporary self-reflective autofictional mode. On a more theoretical level, Wark's reading of Acker is slightly opaque in a style we might call "after Kathy Acker," namely dealing with (philosophical) knowledge as a question of subjectivation and sex. The knowledge in the text does not belong to the author-philosopher or the reader when the theorist refuses to engage with her material in a straightforward top-bottom relationship. Perhaps "theory" as a label is even outdated. Wark writes, with Acker:

> There's no consistent and self-same subject that can be the author of theory from on high, and who could survey history, discover its hidden concept, and announce its destiny. "Since all acts, including expressive acts, are interdependent, paradise cannot be an absolute. Theory doesn't work." (138)

As "switchy philosophers" Wark and Acker want to be topped and penetrated by the texts they encounter but in so doing they do not get rid of mastery completely. It cannot be denied that in the top/bottom difference Wark explores, the bottom has power too and can even be a form of mastery in itself,[6] especially in this case, when producing a new text. This is perhaps how the genre of low theory can function as a form of mastery as well. Even if we accept that low theory is accessible and not pretentious like classic high theory, it imposes a reading that is hard to object to. Whereas the critical reader can oppose high theory with arguments, low theory does not allow for a similar debate because it already preempts theoretical objections. Using the terms of penetration theory we might say that low theory works with the power of the bottom. A seduction that can hardly be countered – surely not with theoretical arguments. And this seems to be what Wark has learned from Acker and *Philosophy for Spiders* shows in a smart way: to think about and with the penetrable body as a site of power and (self)knowledge. In Kathy Acker's texts the lyrical I as theorist emerges as an inarticulate subject who cries stupid phrases and expresses illogical desires: a girl. And even if "theory doesn't work," Acker's girls and Wark's web of Ackers remind us that as long as there is feeling, there will be thinking.

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[6] In *Homos* (1995) Leo Bersani shows how S/M relations demonstrate the power of the bottom over the top and as such S/M practices have "helped to empower a position traditionally associated with female sexuality" (82). In light of Wark's "penetration theory" this would mean that the position of the bottom is not necessarily female or powerless because for Bersani "the reversibility of roles in S/M does allow everyone to get his or her moment in the exalted position of Masculinity (and, if everyone can be a bottom, no one owns the top or dominant position), but this can be a relatively mild challenge to social hierarchies of power" (86).

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