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KATHY ACKER'S CITY: THE POLITICS OF GENDER AND SPACE

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Introduction

Scholarship on Kathy Acker's work has never been a big in numbers, but it has been present since the 1980s.[1] Already during Acker's lifetime (1947-1997), scholars researched Acker's work. Their work consisted mostly of connecting Acker's writing practice to postmodern theory, which was popular among academics in the humanities in the 1980s and 1990s. Her techniques were regarded as exemplary for postmodernism because of their deconstructive nature: with montage, collage, drawings, and by plagiarising canonical texts, Acker problematized the idea of an original and organic literary text. Feminist scholars too found Acker's work a rewarding research subject as her work shows the performativity of gender identities – her characters often switch gender – and because Acker's plagiarism can be seen as a feminist critique of the male-dominated literary canon. Nevertheless, Acker's feminism was contested: mainly outside of the academic world, Acker's writings were not as much appreciated by feminists. Anti-porn activists accused Acker of portraying women as weak because her characters often find themselves in masochistic relationships in which they do not resist their victimization. Since feminists seemed to be Acker's main critics, she developed an ambiguous relationship with feminism and was never keen to call herself a feminist.

Kathy Acker's work offers more than a feminist interpretation of postmodernism, it reveals new experimental writing strategies and explores a variety of still urgent themes. The renewed popularity[2] of Acker's work among young feminists affirms that Acker's literary experiments and explorations of identity and queerness are not yet outdated. Instead, they speak to a new generation of readers today. It is necessary, therefore, to continue researching Acker's work but also to shift the focus from postmodernism and feminism to other aspects in her work. Although many possible research topics are thinkable regarding Kathy Acker's oeuvre, I believe it is important to look at the role that fictional spaces play in her work, considering that Acker's novels are almost exclusively set in urban environments. As with the fluid identities of narrators and characters in Acker's work, locations can change abruptly which forces the reader to continuously adjust to new perspectives. Therefore, one could argue that locations play a similarly substantial role in Acker's experimenting with narrative. In this thesis, I will

[1] The first academic article dedicated to Acker's work appeared in 1987: Harper, Glenn A. "The Subversive Power of Sexual Difference in The Work of Kathy Acker." During the 1990s the number of articles on her work steadily increased. After a rather quiet period during the 2000s, scholarly interest today is growing again now that her work has gained a new readership.

[2] Since the publication of Chris Kraus' biography of Kathy Acker in 2017, a new and young Acker readership has emerged. This will be further discussed in the first chapter.

look at the significance of urban spaces and examine the role of the city in Acker's work. To reveal Acker's engagement with the city, I will discern different writing strategies with which Acker deals with identity and space, and their inevitable connection.[3] Furthermore, not only Acker's depictions of the city are important to consider, the attitudes of her characters *towards* the city must be taken into account as well. As we will see, Acker's narrators often take a critical stance in regard to city life.

Approach

Before I begin my analysis of Acker's engagement with the city, it is necessary to provide an introduction to her work. Since Acker's work is a hybrid of different genres and imbued with complicated writing strategies that are in conversation with other texts, traditions, and societal issues, at least some elemental context must be provided. To illustrate Acker's writing practice, I will draw mostly from *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984), arguably Acker's most fragmented work and a novel I value to be a prime example of Acker's experimental writing strategies and thematic concerns. With Georgina Colby, who recently published the first extensive formal study of Acker's writing, *Kathy Acker: Writing the Impossible* (2016), I will situate Kathy Acker's writing within other experimentalist traditions in literature. In doing so, I will also draw from the interviews with Acker published in the collection *Hannibal Lecter, My Father* (1991) and the collection of essays *Lust for Life: on the writings of Kathy Acker* (2006), the publication of the first symposium dedicated to Kathy Acker's work at New York University in 2002. Together, these perspectives provide the theoretical basis that enables me to analyse Acker's practice of experimental writing in general and Acker's engagement with the city specifically.

In the second chapter, I will argue that the narrator in Acker's work should be considered as an urban subject. I will position Acker in the framework of New Narrative, a school of writing that aims to find new ways to express the queer experience of daily life by experimenting with narrative techniques. It will become clear that Acker's narrators too are rooted in the city and construct their subjectivities around a particularly urban poetics. Queer experimental writing and New Narrative writing in particular, has been an academic topic for some time,[4] but the specific depictions of the city in New Narrative writing have not yet been examined much. One of the rare exceptions is Dianne Chisholm's *Queer Constellations:*

[3] With her feminist critique of postmodern geography Doreen Massey has showed how the construction of (gender) identity is tied to space. See *Space, Place, and Gender* (Polity Press, 1994)
[4] See for instance: Bredbeck (1995), Harris (2009), Halpern (2011)

Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City (2004), which considers experimental queer writing in "critical conjunction" with Walter Benjamin's city writing and shows how "a queer perspective on inner-city reality exposes contradictions otherwise obscured by mythic narratives of progress" (Chisholm 24). Although Acker was part of the group of New Narrative writers which Chisholm foregrounds in her book, Chisholm does not deal with Acker's work. Although it is unclear why she did not include Kathy Acker, Chisholm did open up the academic ground to research queer experimental writing and the city. Chisholm writes: "these [New Narrative] narratives are similarly characterized by the allegorical and the real; but their primary motif is the narrating and narrated subject "who" constructs her "self" from the detritus of commodity capital, "who" traverses a one-way street of desire and abjection." (Chisholm 29). In the second chapter I will show that Chisholm's characterization of the "narrating subject" in New Narrative writing can be applied to Acker's narrator as well. As we will see, Acker's characters are often in conversation with, and aware of, the gendered and capitalist nature of the Western city and they consciously construct their identities upon those conceptions of the city. Kathy Acker's work should thus be considered in the light of New Narrative writing and, as Chisholm argues about New Narrative, considered as city writing too. To show how Acker's narrative techniques are tied to the experience of the city, I will make use of a two primary texts by Acker: *New York City in 1979* (1981), a short story about a summer night in the city, and the essay "Russian Constructivism" (1986).

When the city subject in Acker's texts is established, I will continue with an analysis of one particular writing strategy of Acker's: pornography. I will point out that sexual desire serves as an urban narrative as the characters are led through the city by their desires. Pornography should be seen as an important strategy because through her insertion of graphic sex scenes – featuring public sex – Acker challenges a conventional understanding of the experience of public space. Together with Paul B. Preciado who argues for "a new hermeneutics of porn",[5] I will consider Kathy Acker's pornography as a writing strategy with which the gendered separation of public and private space can be challenged.

In the fourth chapter, I will focus on Acker's first novel, *Rip-off Red, Girl Detective* (1973). I will argue that the journey of Acker's detective is engaged with the complications women experience in public space. In this book, Acker presents a hero – the detective – who defies the dangers of city life and whose sexual desire leads her through the city on an

[5] Preciado, Paul B. "Museum, urban detritus and pornography" (31).

adventurous journey. With Sally R. Munt, who has theorized the queer *flâneur* and the female detective,[6] I will analyse the journey of this hero. I will show how Acker's heroic narrative defies the genre of the classical detective story and argue that with her rejection of the detective genre, Acker creates an escape from the restrictions that gender imposes on the typical female detective in public space.

Having discussed several aspects of Acker's work that are engaged with the urban in literature – the narrator as city subject, narrative techniques, and the figure of the urban hero – it is time to focus on particular spaces in Acker's portrayal of the city. In the fifth chapter therefore, I will look at how Acker's disintegrated city functions as a place of resistance. Focusing on the space of the brothel in *Pussy, King of the Pirates* (1996), I aim to reveal the significance for the shaping of identity in this space that is governed by sexuality and power relations.

The difficulty of interpreting Kathy Acker's texts

The experimental structures and non-linear narratives in Acker's work make her works as Georgina Colby calls it, "non-organic": "the forms of Acker's texts in her practices of collage, montage, and intertextuality, resist the illusion of wholeness that the organic work promotes." (Colby 3) One could say that Acker's work resists interpretation, or even comprehension, as confusion is inevitably part of the experience of Acker's reader. In her texts, emotions and desires seem to be the principal narrative structures. The reader's knowledge and sense of temporality and spatiality is often challenged. Acker's experimenting with non-linear narratives can be seen as a critique of the idea that knowledge is tied to rationality as Acker seeks to create "a site for the harbouring of the unknown" (Colby 14) Acker called *Great Expectations* – her rewriting of Charles Dickens' classic – a piece of "unknowledge" and stated that the book has "no beginning nor end, but there's a cumulative effect" (*Hannibal Lecter* 15). Therefore, one could question if Acker's works should and even can be read in a linear manner, from beginning to end. My approach in this thesis is therefore not structured around the progress of narrative as such. I read Acker's texts as she wrote them: in fragments. With my introduction to Acker's work in the first chapter I hope to provide a framework with which the complications and implications of her experimental narrative techniques can be grasped. Only then will my analysis of Acker's texts appear as comprehensible.

[6] The queer *flâneur* in *Heroic Desire: Lesbian Identity and Cultural Space* (1998) and the feminist detective in *Murder by the Book* (1994).

For the sake of coherence, my thesis is structured around specific works – one or at most two per chapter – and consistently considers two axes of writing: narrative techniques and the representation and meaning of urban spaces. The scope of this thesis is too limited to examine the issue of space in the wholeness of Acker's extensive body of work. By focusing on the works that I see as important engagements with the city, I aim to give an indication of the significance of urban spaces in Acker's work. The texts I have chosen can be considered as a fair representation of Acker's writing practice since they comprise a rather wide timeframe: from her first novel, *Rip-off Red, Girl Detective* (1973), to the 1980s with *New York City in 1979* (1981) and *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984), her essays from the 1990s in *Bodies of Work*, to her very last work, *Pussy, King of the Pirates* (1996).

Paying attention to fictional spaces in texts produces new ways of seeing those texts and how space plays a role in the shaping of narrative, identity, and desire. With this thesis, I aim to show that the city plays a significant role across a variety of Kathy Acker's texts. Not just in her experiments with narrative techniques, but also in her imagining a radically different world, a world in which the hero of great literature is a fearless young girl prowling the city.

1. An introduction to Kathy Acker's work

> BEING BORN INTO AND PART OF A MALE WORLD, SHE HAD NO SPEECH OF HER OWN. ALL SHE COULD READ WERE MALE TEXTS THAT WEREN'T HERS.
>
> – Kathy Acker [7]

Experimental writer, post-punk icon, performance artist, scholar of the classics, and feminist: the American writer Kathy Acker (1947-1997) – an underground phenomenon in the 1970s art scene in New York – acquired her first fame in the 1980s. From Acker's infamous serial novel in 1972, *The Black Tarantula,* up to her last work in 1996, *Pussy, King of the Pirates,* Acker produced a varied body of work as she worked in many different genres and produced essays, plays, short stories, and over thirty novels. Acker's oeuvre is extensive and complicated and it is one of the most significant collections of experimental writing in English.[8]

Thirty years after Acker's first success, her work continues to appeal to readers. Since the publication of the biography *After Kathy Acker* (2017) by Chris Kraus, the first Kathy Acker biography,[9] there seems to be a resurgence of interest in Acker's work. Two of her novels and a short story were recently republished in Penguin's Modern Classics series[10], the American author Douglas A. Martin wrote a book-length essayistic reflection on Acker's work and life[11] and in 2019, Acker was included in Penguin Random House's *The Last Interview* series.[12] In the art world too, there seems to be an Acker revival. In 2018, the Badischer Kunstverein (Karlsruhe) hosted the exhibition "Kathy Acker: Get Rid of Meaning" and currently there is an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (London), "I, I, I, I, I, I, Kathy Acker" (1 May – 4 August, 2019), bringing together contemporary artists who respond to Kathy Acker's work

[7] *Don Quixote: which was a dream* (1986, p. 83)
[8] The scholar Georgina Colby makes this claim in *Kathy Acker: Writing the Impossible* (2016).
[9] Kraus' biography is considered by some to be 'subjective' because Kraus and Acker were in the same art scene and have both been in a relationship with the publisher of Semiotext(e), Sylvère Lotringer. *After Kathy Acker* is therefore not considered to be the 'official' or authorized biography. Since it is a literary biography anyway, Kraus constructed the evolvement of Ackers life based on her texts, not life events. A biography focused on Acker's life is due to be published in 2020 with Simon & Schuster: Jason McBride's *Kathy Acker: Her Revolutionary Life and Work*.
[10] *Blood and Guts in High School* (2017), *Great Expectations* (2018), and *New York City in 1979* (2018).
[11] *Acker* (2017) is a book of essays that was initially written as part of Douglas A. Martin's phd at the City University of New York.
[12] The series is published by Penguin Random House and is ongoing. The aim is to collect (lost) interviews with thinkers, writers, artists, and musicians, ranging from Graham Greene and Jacques Derrida to Prince and Jane Jacobs.

in their art today.[13] The curators of this exhibition insist on the continuing relevance of Kathy Acker's work in the accompanying text to the exhibition: "[Acker] provocatively confronted the strained relationship between desire and reality within culture, sex, patriarchy, the body, war, money, the family, mythology, colonialism, sickness, and the city in ways that remain critically relevant to our current times."[14]

Kathy Acker has had a notable influence on contemporary writers such as Ali Smith, Jeannette Winterson and Olivia Laing, whose debut novel *Crudo* (2017) consists of Kathy Acker quotes interwoven with Laing's own autobiography and describes the summer after the presidential election of Donald Trump. In fact, this blend of autobiography and copied writing from other authors is typical of Kathy Acker's work. In her writing, Acker merges different texts, genres, and identities and in doing this, she created a position from which she could tell her own story. Acker's explorations of the literary canon resulted in a blend of autobiography, Greek mythology, visual art, poetry and prose, high and low culture, pornography and literary criticism. Acker does not favour high culture over low or one genre over the other. With her ground-breaking literary experiments and radical approach to generic distinctions, Acker has created a tradition of writing in which authors and artists are still to working today.[15]

1.1 Fake autobiography

Writing about Kathy Acker's work means writing about Acker herself too as her life and work are inextricably intertwined. Acker studied classical languages at Brandeis University and emerged from a "structural school", where she learned to approach literature and language in a strictly formalist manner. In her own work, formalism played an important role as well, form was a crucial concern for Acker. She categorized her work as "conceptualism" and, as she stated in an interview, "[she] couldn't care less about content."[16] Acker's move to New York City however, signified a turning point in her writing because there, she became acquainted with the world of pornography and sex work.[17] To be able to spend time writing,

[13] A more detailed description and a critical analysis of the Kathy Acker exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts can be found in my review in *De Witte Raaf* (2019: no. 200)
[14] This quote is from the curators of the I, I, I, I, I, I, I, Kathy Acker exhibition. The complete text can be found in the booklet of the exhibition and on the website of the Institute of Contemporary Arts: www.ica.art.
[15] One could argue that Acker's experimenting with (fake) autobiography and fiction can be seen as the predecessor of the autofiction genre that appears to be so popular today among Anglophone writers. I'm thinking about writers who, like Acker, defy genre distinctions in their work: among others; Joanna Walsh, Sheila Heti, Olivia Laing, and Maggie Nelson.
[16] The Face magazine (1984, no. 45)
[17] For a more extensive account of how Acker's experience of sex work is connected to her early work, see "Kathy Ackers canon: porno, plagiaat & Propertius" (Jip Lemmens & Tessel Veneboer) in *De Nederlandse Boekengids,* (2018, no. 6).

Acker figured, she needed to earn money without working too many hours. She started working in a live sex show on 42nd street, the notorious neighbourhood also known at *The Deuce*. As Chris Kraus shows in her biography, this job turned out to be formative of Acker's first writings. Acker was allowed to create her own scripts for the role playing in the sex show and she enjoyed creating absurdist role-playing scripts, imbued with literary and cultural references. These scripts would come to play a significant role in her novels as she explored s/m relationships, most prominently in *Don Quixote, which was a dream* (1986). The sex work made Acker realize that form could not be the only issue she engaged with in her work. Writing as a woman and as a sex worker, her work inevitably carried political content. She started writing erotic prose poems and published them as a collection called "Politics" (1972, published in *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*), a text in which she merges her own dreams with conversations between strippers she overheard. But, as she states in an interview with her publisher Sylvère Lotringer, "[she] did not want to be a sociologist" and therefore put all the stories in the first-person singular, including some of her own dreams (*Hannibal Lecter* 7). With the "Politics" text, Acker created her first cut-up work and applied her "fake I", as she called it, for the first time. A writing strategy that would become central to all of Acker's subsequent work.

In her biography, Chris Kraus asserts that even the conversations that Acker supposedly overheard were made up. Acker did not only lie in her work, she lied about her life too. She lied about her reasons for doing sex work for example: she was not as poor as she pretended to be and did not do the sex work for money, but rather for the experience.[18] Douglas A. Martin aligns Acker's desire for experiences to the importance of embodiment in literature: "she would know the poor, the homeless, the starving, insane, the diseased, to generalize, the outcast, and not from a position of prescriptive measure, but rather as embodiment of lived experience" (Martin 10). The personal and autobiographical are vital to Acker's writing practice as she makes room for anecdotes from her childhood, romantic experiences, feelings, dreams, gossip and conversations with lovers and friends. At the same time, Acker lied about exactly *all* of those aspects of her life – to the extent that even her date of birth is contested. The author herself becomes as unreliable as her narrators. Chris Kraus argues that Kathy Acker's numerous lies must be seen as a fundamental part of both her life and work, and even goes as far as to argue that her consistent lying was a condition for writing, it enabled Acker to become a writer:

[18] Kraus makes this claim in *After Kathy Acker* (2017).

> 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 14)

Ever since Acker wrote "Politics", content has been just as significant as form in Acker's work. Putting fictional and found – in the case of "Politics" eavesdropped – material together in fragmented collages and using a "fake I", Acker started writing false autobiography.

1.2 Decentralizing the "I"

Kathy Acker's engagement with the politics of the first-person narrator in literature derives from her rebellion against her literary "forefathers". Having grown up with the work of the Black Mountain Poets, Acker rebelled against her literary predecessors. This group of postmodern poets was centred around the Black Mountain college in North Carolina. They founded their "poetics of authenticity" on the work of modernists like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, who believed that every person has a unique voice and that it is the task of the author to give expression to that voice. Acker found fault with this conception of authorship since "finding your voice" was not as evident for Acker as it had been for her literary forefathers:

> Charles Olson said that when you write what you have to do is find your own voice, but it all seemed to be very big, almost God-like, and I found this very confusing. I couldn't find my own voice, I didn't know what my own voice was. And I'm sure that's where I started to write in different voices and started to deal with schizophrenia. This was behind it, was in a way a fight against the fathers, because they were very much my fathers. It all fits nicely. (*Hannibal Lecter* 18)

Thus, Acker's first experiments with cut-ups and montages were a response to the poetics of the Black Mountain poets and in doing so, she aligned herself with experimental ways of writing, most notably with William S. Burroughs, one of her favorite literary role models.[19] In

[19] The admiration was reciprocal: Burroughs praised Acker's work and called her "the postmodern Colette".

an effort to "find her own voice", Acker started plagiarising first-person narrators from other authors. Acker directly appropriated voices of writers and characters from canonical works. She lets her narrators speak with the voice of the poet Arthur Rimbaud for instance, or Hester Prynne from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Since identities are performative,[20] there is no essential difference between the real and fictional "I" as they are both *narrated* selves. For Acker, the fictional and real first-person narrator are essentially one since one "I" is not more real than the other:

> I was splitting the I into false and true I's and I just wanted to see if this false I was more or less real than the true I; what are the reality levers between false and true and how it worked. And of course there is no difference. By the end of the TARANTULA, when I do the de Sade business, I can't tell what's true or false, except for actual dates. If I say I was born in 1748, I know that's false… (*Hannibal Lecter* 7)

Finally, through using the voices of others, Acker found the ability to narrate herself and with this bold move, she left the poetics of authenticity of the Black Mountain poets behind.

1.3 Situating Kathy Acker's literary experiments

Despite Acker not viewing her work as being experimentalist, the term is often used to describe her work. Experimental writing is a very broad term and its strategies are numerous. Experimentalism is often equated with avant-garde writing, but they ought to be distinguished as different writing practices. Since experimentalism is part of different schools of writing, it is more useful to consider experimentalism as a strategy, not as a literary movement. In this sense, Kathy Acker's work can be seen as experimentalist. The term "experimental" should be used with care: it is often used to describe works that diverge from classical genres but the danger of this use is that the term serves as an umbrella term for every text that cannot be categorized based on conventional distinctions in genres. As Isabel Waidner argues in *Liberating the Canon*[21] genre distinctions work excluding because historically, formal

[20] The philosopher Judith Butler has showed most significantly in *Gender Trouble* (1990) that gender is socially constructed through speech acts and nonverbal communication as they work performatively and define and uphold identities.

[21] *Liberating the Canon: An Anthology of Innovative Literature* (2018) is a collection of experimental writing that aims to "[capture] the contemporary emergence of radically innovative and nonconforming literatures in the UK and beyond. The anthology edited by the scholar and author Isabel Waidner and was published by Dostoevsky Wannabe.

innovation and political writing have not been put together.[22] Acker herself made a similar statement in her essay "A Few Notes on Two of My Books" (1989) when talking about the marginalisation of certain genres of writing:

> Burroughs never bores, for he and the other writers I think of as in "that tradition," "the other tradition," "the non-acceptable literary tradition," "the tradition of those books which were hated when they were written and subsequently became literary history," "the black tradition," "the tradition of political writing as opposed to propaganda" (de Sade would head this list) (here I am not talking about American literary tradition), do what Poe said a writer should do. They present the human heart naked so that our world, for a second, explodes into flames. This human heart is not only the individual heart: the American literary tradition of Thoreau, Emerson, even Miller, present the individual and communal heart as a unity. Any appearance of the individual heart is a political occurance. (*Bodies of Work* 6-7)

In this statement it becomes clear that Acker was aware of the politics of experimental writing and with awareness, she is involved in a sense of utopianism inherent to experimental writing. Connecting the "individual heart" to the "communal heart", Acker is defending a genre of experimental writing that pays attention to emotions and feelings and ties the utopian potential of writing to that presence of feelings. Acker's statement that "any appearance of the individual heart is a political occurance" corresponds to the definition of a feminist revision of avant-garde writing that Elisabeth A. Frost proposes in *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry* (2003)*:* "the avant-gardist assumes that a daring new artistic practice has the potential to change the world by inciting a change of consciousness. […] More than an aesthetic choice, experimentation bears the full weight of social conviction." (Frost xiv-xv). I would argue that in the case of Acker, this change of consciousness as Frost calls it, occurs in Acker's effort to make emotions and the corporeal present in the literary text. Acker's "languages of the body"[23] – that often draw on taboo and abjection – generate alternative capacities of feeling and for Acker, those affects have the capacity to realize a political consciousness – in particular regarding gender and sexuality.

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[22] Isabel Waidner believes that a lot of important experimental writing has been overlooked because they have been simplified as genre writing. Genres of science-fiction or so-called "chick-lit" have historically been separated from avant-garde writing even though, Waidner argues, interesting innovative works have been written within those genres.

[23] This is Acker's term. See: "Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body" (1993).

Experimental writing has a long tradition, from modernism – with writers like Gertrude Stein and James Joyce – to postmodernism, the movement Kathy Acker is most often considered to be part of. Due to Acker's fragmented style and deconstructive approach to language and meaning, her work is often labelled as postmodernist. However, it is impossible to reduce all of Acker's work to one denominator as there is more happening in her work than just a postmodernist attitude to literature. In her book *Kathy Acker: Writing the Impossible* (2016), Georgina Colby argues that it is too simple to deem Acker's work as typically postmodern. Instead, Acker's practice is "[a] continuation of radical modernism's preoccupation with the crisis of language, and the avant-garde concern for producing art oriented towards the transformation of society" (Colby 1). Therefore, Colby positions Acker in a different tradition, which she calls "radical" modernism; a modernism that "maintains a critical stance towards its own social and historical conditions" (Colby 2). The post-war avant-garde however, is concerned with both the social context as well as the formal aspects of writing. Colby also aligns Acker with post-war avant-gardists like John Cage, Samuel Beckett, and Jackson Mac Low because like them, Ackers work shows the complexities of writing and making meaning in the post-war climate in which she was writing.

In the 1970s, the post-war avant-garde was confronted and connecting with the French post-structuralist theories of Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard. Key figure in this connection with French theory was the academic and Semiotext(e) publisher Sylvère Lotringer. Lotringer organized the "Schizo-Culture" conference at Columbia University in 1975, which had over 2000 participants and among its speakers, William S. Burroughs, Gilles Deleuze, John Cage, Richard Foreman, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, and Kathy Acker. Acker became acquainted with continental philosophy and as she recounted in an interview with Lotringer, that meeting opened her eyes to the theoretical aspects of her writing:

> Meeting [Lotringer] changed me a lot because by introducing me to the French philosophes, [he] gave me a way of verbalizing what I had been doing in language. I didn't really understand why I refused to use linear narrative; why my sexual genders kept changing; why basically I am the most disoriented novelist that ever existed. (*Hannibal Lecter* 10)

Seemingly unaware of this theory,[24] Acker developed in her writing practice similar post-structuralist tendencies, such as the decentralization of identity. Acker did not want to be "herself", one self, instead she looked for a multiplicity of selves. For Acker, the use of the first-person singular was, in fact, plural, as she utilised the "I" in her writing to inhabit different identities from her own life, literature and history, acknowledging her complicated relationships with family, friends and lovers. Depending on the focus, Acker's writing practice can thusly be situated in a variety of traditions; modernism, postmodernism, post-structuralism, and feminist avant-garde writing.

1.4 Plagiarism as strategy

Kathy Acker's false autobiography coincides with her resolution to "decentralize herself" and the method of plagiarism is to be the most logical strategy for that project. By (re)using characters and storylines from different texts and interweaving those narratives with her own life into a "collage form", Acker creates unstable narrators and characters. There is only one character that returns across several works: Janey. She is the main character in, among other texts, *Blood and Guts in High School* and *New York City in 1979. Blood and Guts in High School* might be Acker's most fragmented work, at the same time it features Acker's most stable character Janey. Georgina Colby argues that these contradicting strategies show the tension between the form and the content of this work since "Acker's professed drive to make Janey a unitary subject is in conflict with the fragmentary, indeterminate and unresolved nature of the collage form" (Colby 90).

I would argue that *Blood and Guts in High School* shows precisely why in Acker's work plagiarism as a method, resulting in the collage form, is tied to the question of gender and thus of content. *Blood and Guts in High School* – Acker's most famous novel – describes the incestuous relationship between Janey and her father. Janey is kidnapped and kept as a slave by a man who pursues to train her as "a perfect prostitute". In her prison, Janey starts translating poems from Latin and Persian to English. Putting Janey in the position of a pupil learning languages, Acker shows how a girl – who does not have her own language – is forced to use the languages of others. Acker writes in her 1995 essay "Seeing Gender": "When I was a girl, I wanted to be anything but be a girl, for both *girl* and *woman* were the names of nothing" (80). As a result, "I was unspeakable so I ran into the languages of others" and although "I couldn't be named, everyone was naming me" (80). Janey's translations in *Blood and Guts in*

[24] This statement is contested too, Kraus suggests that this might just be another one of Acker's lies.

High School reveal the frustration of not being able to speak as a woman. Janey can only describe herself in ways that she has no control over and since she is using the languages of others, she is owned by others. A Persian grammar exercise shows how Janey is limited by her gender:

> To have Janey
> To buy Janey
> To want Janey
> To see Janey *(Blood and Guts in High School* 82*)*

Later in the novel, Janey proclaims: "we use your words; we eat your food. Every way we get money has to be a crime. We are plagiarists, liars, criminals" (112). The parallels between Janey and Acker's own authorship, including the criminalisation of her plagiarism,[25] are obvious: since all forms of language are defined by and in favour of men, she has no choice but to use their language to her own advantage, meaning: using their texts to create her own. Therefore, the Janey character that comes back in Acker's collages functions as a sort of reminder of why those collages are there in the first place. Only by using "the male texts which weren't hers", she is able to express a female subjectivity in her work. A strategy that Marjorie Worthington (2004) has framed as a form of resistance to the literary tradition as Acker creates a narrative space in which female agency becomes possible:

> Acker's textual pirating […] marks an attempt, through creative juxtaposition, to construct a narrative space in which female resistance is possible. What Acker's overt piracy evokes is a bridge or shift between different literary time periods; this recontextualization of previously published texts into her novels disrupts the literary timeline. (Worthington 400)

Worthington underlines yet another way in which for Acker, form and content are related: Acker's act of piracy is often accompanied by the figure of the pirate. In several of her novels, characters take off on pirate ships or turn into pirates when they are trying to break free from the structures that confine them.

[25] When Kathy Acker was accused of plagiarising the best-selling author Harold Robbins she was asked to sign a public apology but refused.

1.5 Spatiality in Kathy Acker's work

In her article "The Territory called Women's Bodies: The Public and Pirate Spaces of Kathy Acker" (2004), Marjorie Worthington explores spatiality in Acker's texts. Worthington proposes that Acker's experimental narratives must be considered as narratives that are spatially structured rather than temporal, as is often the case with linear narratives. Worthington places Acker's innovations and challenges to narrative traditions in the genre of "spatialized contemporary fiction".[26] Acker's fictional spaces however, are not realistic depictions of actual spaces, they are often mythical, magical, and symbolically significant. Acker's texts are permeated with empty streets, dark alleyways, grim brothels, and all-girls high schools. These spaces have an ambiguous meaning as they are both confining as well as liberating. In *Blood and Guts in High School* for instance, Janey is literally imprisoned by her slave-master but the prison is also the place where she starts teaching herself new languages and finally, finds the ability to find her own voice, and as we have seen, the language she then develops provides an escape from patriarchal structures. With Acker's piracy in mind, Worthington calls the spaces in which an emancipatory potential is possible, "pirate spaces":

> Acker's work recalls the pirate, as it rejects traditional, "official" narrative forms and constructs a sort of outlaw structure that ignores, breaks, or resists the rules of storytelling. Thematically, this resistance takes the form of female characters taking to the road, leaving the places of their various prisons, and reclaiming the spaces that represent freedom of movement. (Worthington 403)

Since Acker's novels do not centralize a linear progress of events, they focus more on "the strategic juxtaposition" (Worthington 395) of events and characters. Therefore, Worthington argues, spatiality is privileged over temporality in Acker's narratives. Worthington's analysis of Acker's works is useful because she accentuates the role of spatiality in Acker's experimental narratives. At the same time, because of her primary focus on contrasting spatiality and temporality in narrative theory and Acker's narratives specifically, Worthington tends to overlook the specificity of the spaces she discusses. As we will see, Acker's fictional spaces are important not just for her experimental narratives, but for the constructing of identity too.

[26] Worthington builds upon John Berger's conception of the genre of spatialized fiction, "which must take space and spatial issues into account or it is "incomplete and acquires the over-simplified character of a fable" (Berger 40)".

As mentioned before, Acker's literary experiments are most often denominated as postmodern. It is expected then, that the city she depicts is a postmodern space or that it is at least depicted in a postmodern manner. Keeping in mind my critical notes on Acker as an exclusively postmodern writer, I do align Acker's depiction of the city with the postmodern city as Günther H. Lenz (2003) defines it. He argues that, in reading the postmodern city, "we have to explore metropolitan culture(s) as a palimpsest of multiple and different layers and contending meanings and urban literary texts as intertextual and intermedial force-fields of competing fictions" (Lenz 12). As we will see in the next chapter, Acker's literary montage corresponds to this imaging of the city as a composition of urban texts and competing fictions.

2. Kathy Acker's narrating city subject and literary montage as city writing

> We used porn, where information saturates narrative, to expose and manipulate genre's formulas and dramatis personae, to arrive at ecstasy and loss of narration as the self sheds its social identities.
>
> – Robert Glück[27]

As stated in the introduction, there are virtually no academic texts published on the role of the city in Kathy Acker's texts. To be able to show Acker's engagement with the city, I will therefore first connect Kathy Acker's work to the genre of New Narrative writing and then examine why New Narrative writing ought to be considered as a genre of city writing. Subsequently, I will be able to reveal the similarities between Diane Chisholm's conceptualization of experimental writing and the city in *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City* (2005), as well as the ways in which Acker differs from both. I will illustrate the particularities of the way that Acker's city subject narrates – Acker's "narrating city subject" – by providing a close reading of her short story *New York City in 1979* (1981) and her collaged essay "Russian Constructivism" (1986) as both reveal similarities and discontinuities with what Chisholm conceives of as the experience of the city regulated by capitalism.

2.1 The origins of New Narrative

New Narrative writing has been around since the 1980s and was first used as a critical term by Steve Abbot in his article "Notes on Boundaries: New Narrative" (1984), which discusses a variety of experimental writers that were connected to a particular writing scene in San Francisco. This scene of New Narrative writers gathered around Bruce Boone and Robert Glück: two writers who were heavily influenced by the so-called "Language poets" and subsequently started their own experimental writing course in the Small Press Traffic bookshop in San Francisco. Since they were not satisfied with the "non-narratives" of the genre of Language poetry, they started experimenting with alternative forms of narrative. Kaplan Harris (2009) insists that when talking about New Narrative, "one might always put "narrative" in

[27] "A Long Note on New Narrative" (p. 21), published in the collection *Communal Nude: Collected Essays* (2016).

quotation marks because of the formal devices that undermine structures of continuity, order, and resolution traditionally associated with fiction" (Harris 806).

The Language poets believed that textual effects can challenge existing political and economic power relations and, in an effort to destroy the illusions of authority and originality, abandoned narrative altogether. As a result, their poetry focuses on complicated textual structures so that as a consequence, it becomes the reader's task to attach meaning to their work. In "A Long Note on New Narrative" (2000), Robert Glück calls this foregrounding of the linguistic aspects of poetry, the poetry of disjunction, a "luxurious idealism." For Glück, this was an isolated way of writing, since "whole areas of [Glück's] experience, especially the gay experience, were not admitted to this utopia" (14). Instead, Glück goes on to argue, writers ought to *keep* narrative while integrating the – often physical – context in which a poem or a prose text is being written:

> Meanwhile, gay identity was also in its heroic period – it had not yet settled into just another nationalism and it was new enough to know its own constructedness. In the urban mix, some great experiment was actually taking place, a genuine community where strangers and different classes and ethnicities rubbed more than shoulders. This community was not destroyed by commodity culture, which was destroying so many other communities; instead it was founded in commodity culture. […] Writing can't will away power relations and commodity life; instead, writing must explore its relation to power and recognize that group practice resides inside the commodity. (Glück 15)

New Narrative writers show that literature cannot be separated from culture and power relations. They are forced therefore to incorporate the late capitalist tensions at play in their lives in their texts. New Narrative's strategy appears to be the rejection of hierarchies in literary genres and the incorporation of the corporeal experience of daily life, which often revolves around sexual desire. The New Narrative genre foregrounds autobiography but emphasizes identity as a social construct and followingly refuses to make a distinction between fact and fiction. As Robert Glück asserts in his "A Long Note on New Narrative":

> [I]f personality is a fiction (a political fiction!) then it is a story of contradiction in common with other stories – it occurs on the same plane of experience. This "formula" sets a novel and a personality as two equals on the stage of history, and supports a new

version of autobiography that rejects the distinction between "fact" and fiction." (Glück 20)

The narrator in New Narrative texts is often aware of the textual performance happening in the writing of a text so that, as a consequence, the text starts to function as a metatext that deconstructs the idea of a literary text itself as an organic or authentic whole. From that writing position, a new kind of realism emerges, one in which the narrating voice is being deconstructed: "the text-metatext takes its form from the dialectical cleft between real life and life as it wants to be" (Glück 17).

Kathy Acker was one of the students in Bruce Boone and Robert Glück's improvised writing course in San Francisco. There, Acker found peers with whom she could further develop her ideas about deconstructing the novel and her critical approach to autobiography. It is important to realize that, although Acker is often praised as *the* transgressive experimental writer, she was definitely not alone in her experiments with narrative. Authors like Dodie Bellamy, Kevin Killian, Lynne Tillman, Eileen Myles, and more recently Chris Kraus have all been writing in, or are at least indebted to, the genre of New Narrative.

2.2 New Narrative as an urban genre

Since most of the New Narrative authors were based in the city centres of San Francisco and New York City, it makes sense to mark New Narrative as an urban genre from the outset. The texts produced by authors working within the genre confirms that assumption: the majority of texts that fall within New Narrative feature urban subjects whose experience of the city is described in detail. For instance, Bruce Boone's short story "My Walk with Bob" (1979) – a text that considered to be the very first New Narrative text [28] – depicts urban activities such as *flânerie*, window shopping, and cruising in gay bathhouses in San Francisco. Moreover, throughout New Narrative texts, there appears to be an awareness of Walter Benjamin's writings on the city. New Narrative's dealing with the city is aware of "theory", or more specifically of cultural theory reflecting modern city life, and sometimes mocks that theory. The author Gail Scott even wrote a novel, *My Paris* (1999), about a lesbian *flâneuse* tracing Walter Benjamin's footsteps in Paris. As Diane Chisholm puts it, New Narrative's narrator is

[28] Dodie Bellamy makes this claim in the introduction to *Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative 1977-1997.*

> an autobiographical fiction "who" constructs a provisional "self" from scrapheaps of captions and slogans, slips of speech and poetic devices, pornographic fantasies and theoretical pretensions. Not just a mirror of cultural semiotic, she is above all, a *city* subject, and her (de)composition interrogates the regimen imposed on her by urban (dis)order. (Chisholm 30)

In her book *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City* (2004), Diane Chisholm focuses on this representation of the city in several New Narrative texts. More specifically, she considers these texts in the light of Benjamin's writings on the city. Like Benjamin, Chisholm argues, the writers of these "new narratives" invent graphic literary techniques "to transform reading, walking, dreaming, and cruising the city into a praxis of amplified perception and cognition" (1). In comparing Samuel R. Delaney's work[29] to Walter Benjamin's writings, for instance, Chisholm focuses on "the erotic as the terrain and perspective from which to recast the shock of urbanization" (6). In her book, Chisholm shines a light on the city subject as the hero of late capitalism "who absorbs the aura of urban sensuality and uses commercial space for public sex" (6). As we will see in the subsequent chapters, similar themes, intentions, and urban figures emerge from Kathy Acker's work since her characters are often in conversation with, and aware of, the gendered and capitalist nature of the Western city. Furthermore, Acker's protagonists consciously construct their identities upon those conceptions of the city. Chisholm's study, however, emphasizes the aura of urban sensuality and public sex of gay *male* sexuality as having a public character. As we will see in the third chapter, in Acker's work the public character of sex in the city is not exclusive to men.

In response to Benjamin's key concept of the "constellation," Chisholm develops her own conception of constellations to describe those writings that depict queer spatial practices and consequently lay bare the paradoxes of late capitalism:

> "Queer constellations" are dialectical images of (queer) city/space as represented through a variety of optical and perceptual devices. These devices include techniques and motifs that Benjamin invented and deployed in his city writing for representing a revolutionary world of metropolitan industrialism: literary montage, the *flâneur* and *flânerie*, the *bohème*, allegory, porosity, topographical memory, and monadology. The

[29] Samuel R. Delany is an experimental science-fiction author whose work has been important in both queer theory and black studies.

> art of dialectical imaging is a form of spatial practice, one that represents the space of the city and the space of city history in montage. If Benjamin images the city of *high* capitalism, queer constellations image the city of *late* capitalism, where paradoxes of development are intensified. (Chisholm 10-11)

For Chisholm, literary montage can function as a literary tool with which the city of late capitalist societies can be genuinely depicted. Juxtaposing a variety of city images, montage techniques show the contradictions of the late capitalist city which as such can heighten the reader's awareness of what Chisholm calls urban "antitheses" (11), like homelessness and gentrification. A similar narrator emerges from Acker's texts – with Chisholm's definition of New Narrative's narrator in mind. This is especially the case for the narrator as a "fragmented self." Indeed, Acker's narrators express themselves in different writing modes. As we will see from my analysis of Acker's *New York City in 1979*, both the fragmented subjectivity of the narrator as well as the role and influence of certain late capitalist antitheses in the city feature in Acker's urban narratives.

In line with Chisholm's definition of the urban subject, Acker's narrator pays attention to urban decay and poverty but also to the eroticism that is part of the urban scene. What is particular for Acker's city subject however, is her *dealing* with narrative: the presence of found material, such as overheard conversations, often determines the narrative. As such, a dialectical image of the city emerges from Acker's montage of urban scenes – one in which the poor and the rich live together in different realities.

2.3 Kathy Acker's literary montage as city writing

Acker's short story *New York City in 1979* was originally published in 1981 by Anne Turyn in her chapbook series *Top Stories*, and reissued in 2018 as part of the Penguin Modern Classics series, whose editors sensationalized the story as "a tale of art, sex, blood, junkies and whore in New York's underground."[30] The story is set during a warm summer night and features Acker's recurring protagonist Janey, who in the story operates as a sort of reporter of the nocturnal city. The story starts with a critical note on the city's government:

[30] This quote is from the back cover of the 2018 edition published by Penguin Classics, written by an unnamed editor.

SOME people say New York City is evil and they wouldn't live there for all the money in the world. These are the same people who elected Johnson, Nixon, Carter President and Koch Mayor of New York. (*New York City in 1979* 1)

The story is divided in different sections and starts with The Whores in Jail at Night, a section that describes "overheard" conversations of sex workers who worry about money and abortions. Next, the narrator observes the entrance of a night club where people are fighting with the bouncer. The voice of Acker's city subject is not *one* voice: it can be seen as a plurality of voices since she is both observer of the urban scene, of conversations, and of fights in the streets, as well as a participant in the urban scene, for instance when she plots a terrorist attack on "the rich with limousines" (10). The narrative technique in this story, with disparate sections that appear to be glued together, epitomizes the fragmented experience of Acker's city subject.

Acker's montaged narratives merge not only different times, locations, and scenes, but also different *kinds* of texts. Often, when talking about or depicting the city, other texts – mainly presented as found material – become an integral part of the narrative itself. For instance, in "Russian Constructivism" (1986), a story disguised as essay, Acker describes her city but instead of talking about New York, she calls this city Petersburg, referring to the Russian city Saint Petersburg but possibly also to her lover Peter, who is the object of the narrator's love-interest in this story. Consider this excerpt from "Russian Constructivism":

> City of simultaneous inner and outer space where each day a new human disease appears, whose inhabitants, like rats through sickness remain alive and work. Who can tell me if I'm too sick to be alive? My sickness is life. You, my city, romanticism of no possible belief:
>
> In Peter one morning, the female weightlifter fell out of her loft bed. It was a beautiful day, late in September. Larks were singing and drops of sunlight were filtering through the navy blue Levelors (through the clouds through the pollution through the surrounding buildings' walls) which she hadn't opened since she bought them 'cause she didn't want to see junkies shooting up.
>
> A newspaper below her fallen body:
>
> CITY OF PASSION
>
> a non-achiever George was totally wrapp

non-leader, non
and non-romantic
former classmate
lentine.
He was 18, George
Stined to end up
Then a horrifying

up in the fantasy world
comic books.
He was also cons
With TV–especiall
ture shows,' said
By high scho
had withdrawn

Meanwhile, in the alleyways,
Dear Peter, I can't stand living without you. […] (*Bodies of Work* 108)

In this narrative, a weightlifter falls out of her bed, onto the street and depicts a polluted and dirty city filled with sick people. The newspaper she fell upon by chance tells the story of George, a "non-achiever" who loses himself in the world of comic books. This supposedly found material is only half readable. Whatever the reason for the unreadability of the text, the fragment starts to look like a poem, also because the title it is given. The "poem" is then followed by a change of location, "meanwhile in the alleyways", and continues with a desperate love letter from the narrator to Peter. First, the narrator gives a "realist" perspective on the city itself (the junkies), then a narrative within the narrative (George who is destined to not end up well) and then she starts writing a love letter in an alleyway (to Peter), apparently a place for expressing desperation. This passage is exemplary of the way Acker's narrating subject deals with the city, namely in an intertextual mode. The narrator's fragmentary dealing with city life, literally with scraps of paper, is in line with Elizabeth Wilson's (1992) notion of urban narratives:

> [W]hat distinguishes great city life from rural existence is that we constantly brush against strangers; we observe bits of the 'stories' men and women carry with them, but never learn their conclusions; life ceases to form itself into epic or narrative, becoming instead a short story, dreamlike, insubstantial or ambiguous. (Wilson 11)

Wilson argues that the fragmented stories that one encounters in the city must lead to a narrative that is ambiguous and fragmentary, since no simple or holistic conclusions can be drawn from the form and content of these found stories themselves. Furthermore, Acker adds another layer to the multi-layered experience of the city: that of the opposition between dreams and reality.

Since Acker's narrator in "Russian Constructivism" has just fallen out of bed, she is in a state in betweenness – in between dreams and reality – and from that position she starts to describe the city. Acker's "Russian Constructivism" therefore indicates how an urban narrative can result in a fragmented and, as Wilson has it, *dreamlike* form of storytelling in which thoughts, dreams, random encounters, and even scraps of paper structure the narrative.

2.4 Acker's urban antitheses

The late-capitalist antitheses that Diane Chisholm discerns in her enquiry into New Narrative works are present in Acker's texts too. In Acker's work, these antitheses are often expressed in the opposing images of poverty, sickness, gangs, and drugs in the streets but also in critical observations of the wealthy urban classes. In the section In Front of the Mudd Club, 77 White Street, the narrator hangs around a club and plots to become a "terrorist" by stealing a limousine from "the rich" (11). The antithesis that is shown here is the obvious opposition between the rich and the poor, and in particular how the presence and behaviour of the rich affect the urban environment of its less affluent inhabitants:

> Two rich couples drop out of a limousine. The women are wearing outfits the people were in ten years ago wore ten years ago. The men are just neutral. All the poor people who're making this club fashionable so the rich want to hang out here, even though the poor still never make a buck off the rich pleasure, are sitting on cars, watching the rich people walk up to the club. (*New York City in 1979* 9)

As is still the case with contemporary, late-capitalist Western cities, the rich inhabitants gentrify poorer neighbourhoods because those are the fashionable and "edgy" places of the city. In Acker's story, the rich people do not get into the club and the narrator shifts her focus back to the street. There, a fight erupts between a drunk girl sitting on a car and the bouncer of the club. The narrator focuses her gaze on the body of the girl, who is desperate to get away from the scene and offers a cab-driver a blow-job in exchange for a ride:

> We see the girl throw herself back on a car top. Her tits are bouncing so hard she must want our attention and she's getting insecure, maybe violent, cause she isn't getting enough. Better give us a better show. […] Now the big girl is unsuccessfully trying to climb through a private white car's window now she's running hips hooking even faster into an alleyway taxi whose driver is locking his doors and windows against her. She's

> offering him a blow-job. Now an ugly boy with a huge safety pin stuck through his upper lip, walking up and down the street, is shooting at us with his watergun.
>
> The dyke sitting next to me is saying earlier in the evening she pulled at this safety pin.

This ending of the scene indicates a shift of focus on the narrator's part. She chooses not to finish the story of the drunk girl. Instead, she shifts her gaze yet again to a different event: to a boy walking by. Only then she notices the woman sitting next to her. Throughout the story, the observation of the city around her remains incomplete, there is no sense of wholeness to it. The narrator is a passive participant in the urban scene; she is distanced from the city but at the same time close to it as she is invested in what is happening around her. The discussed scene from *New York City in 1979* thus illustrates how Acker's narrator is constantly repositioning herself in regard to her direct environment: the city.

Nevertheless, in the next section the narrator does focus on the city as a whole. She feels overwhelmed and states in a sort of stream of consciousness mode that "all of New York City is fake is going to go all my friends are going crazy all my friends know they're going crazy disaster is the only thing that's happening" (5). In a very Ackerian manner, through the foregrounding of emotions and sex, the narrator in *New York City in 1979* takes a critical stance towards the city when she shows the contradicting experiences of life in the city. The last section of the story is a pornographic scene that takes place in a cinema, where Janey meets a man at an "all-night movie". She is not sure if he desires her but after the movie ends the narrator decides to take control of the situation because "her body takes over". In other words, her body determines her actions. After she has taken control and experienced sexual pleasure, her perspective on the city changes from a bleak view on urban insanity to an experience of the city as a place of passion – which certainly satisfies her:

> New York City at six in the morning is beautiful. Empty streets except for a few bums. No garbage. A slight shudder of air down the long long streets. Pale gray prevails. Janey's going to kill Johnny if he doesn't give her his cock instantaneously. She's thinking ways to get him to give her his cock. Her body becomes even crazier. Her body takes over. Turn on him. Throw arms around his neck. Back him against car. Shove clothed cunt against clothed cock. […] At the door to Janey's apartment Johnny's telling Janey he's going to call her. Johnny walks out the door and doesn't see Janey again. (*New York City in 1979* 40-41)

New York City in 1979 starts with sex – with sex workers discussing their clients – and ends with sex – the pornographic scene inside and outside of the cinema. It is clear that in Acker's text pleasure and public sex are important to the way the city is experienced and how they in the end, determine the narrator's mood and understanding of the city. The implications of this public character of sexuality will be further examined in the third chapter.

As we have seen from the close reading of Acker's *New York City in 1979* and "Russian Constructivism", Acker's narrating subject in these texts is concerned with the social reality of the late-capitalist city and expresses the narrative of this urban experience in the form of literary montage. Therefore, we can conclude that Acker's narrator is undeniably a *city* subject as imagined by Chisholm. Namely, the narrating subject "who" constructs her "self" from the detritus of commodity capital, "who" traverses a one-way street of desire and abjection" (Chisholm 29). Acker's texts and narrators must therefore be considered as being deeply embedded in, and critical of, urban life. As we will see in the subsequent chapters, this multi-voiced narrating of a "self", while governed by desire and abjection, results in narratives and fictional spaces that are structured by that desire.

3. Reading Kathy Acker's pornography as a refusal of the public-private dichotomy

> EVERY POSITION OF DESIRE, NO MATTER HOW SMALL, IS CAPABLE OF PUTTING TO QUESTION THE ESTABLISHED ORDER OF A SOCIETY; NOT THAT DESIRE IS ASOCIAL; ON THE CONTRARY. BUT IT IS EXPLOSIVE; THERE IS NO DESIRING-MACHINE CAPABLE OF BEING ASSEMBLED WITHOUT DEMOLISHING ENTIRE SOCIAL SECTIONS.
>
> -— Kathy Acker [31]

In his essay "Museum, Urban Detritus and Pornography", Paul B. Preciado argues that pornography is a form of cultural production, and therefore a crucial space for analysis, critique and "the micro-politics of gender, sex, race and sexuality" (31). According to Preciado, this is not the case today, since pornography is merely considered to be "cultural detritus" (31). It is not seen as a worthy subject for philosophical study since it does not merit hermeneutics, it does not provoke (literary) interpretation. Preciado writes: "pornography is seen as the zero sum of representation, a closed and repetitive code whose only function is and should be that of acritical masturbation – with criticism viewed as an obstacle to masturbatory success" (31-32). What Preciado goes on to show in his essay, however, is that pornography is *unquestionably* a field of cultural production. Preciado presents a genealogy of pornography and reveals how pornography works as a technique for the separation of the public and the private sphere.

3.1 Regulating sexuality in public space

The term pornography derives from *porno-grafei*, "painter of prostitutes, writings on the life of prostitutes" and was first used in the nineteenth century to designate (depictions of) activities that were predominantly expressions of sexuality outside of the heterosexual marriage, activities that were closed off from the public sphere, and even considered as a matter of hygiene:

[31] *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984, p. 125)

> The term was used [in the nineteenth century] to describe the hygiene measures taken by urban planners, police forces and health authorities to manage sexual activity in the public space, regulating the sale of sexual services and the presence of lone women, but also 'detritus, dead animals and other carrion' in the streets of Paris and London. (Preciado 34)

Tracing the limits of the visible and invisible, and thus of the public and private, Preciado examines the relationship between pornography and the production of subjectivity, and discusses how pornography works "within the political mechanisms of normalisation of the body and the gaze in the modern city" (32). Historically, the city has provided a space in which pornography could emerge, since it was often urban environments where prostitution, adultery, and "deviant" sexualities could be expressed and lived anonymously. The visibility of some expressions of sexuality and the invisibility of others was – and still is – a matter of structuring the physical environment of the city:

> We could redefine pornography as a policy of space and visibility which generates precise segmentations of public and private spaces. This is a question of walls and of holes-in-the-wall; of windows, curtains and doors (open or closed); of spaces that are accessible or inaccessible to public view; of facades and interiors; of how to cover over the uncovered and how to reveal that which is hidden; of separating clean women from dirty ones; edible animals from carrion, useful items from refuse, the heterosexual bed from the street and its perversions. (Preciado 34)

By excluding sexuality from the public sphere, the notion of pornography – as Preciado presents it here – functions as a technique for managing public space and keeping the excited and excitable body under control. Preciado argues that female sexuality in particular is governed by this principle, since the gaze that pornography produces is a *male* gaze. Together with sexual minorities, female bodies in the city are governed by a normative gaze[32] as their own gaze is restricted: "the upper-class male body emerges as a new politico-visual (we might even say politico-orgasmic) hegemony: the body that has access to sexual excitement in public,

[32] Since the public sphere has historically been the domain of men, women taking up space has been, and still is, a challenge. Preciado connects this division to access to sexuality and calls the normative gaze *male* because men were historically the ones to access to sexual excitement in public.

as opposed to those bodies whose gaze must be protected and whose pleasure must be controlled" (Preciado 35) .

3.2 Interpreting Acker's pornography

Preciado's insistence on a "hermeneutics of pornography" is useful for approaching the role of the city in Kathy Acker's work. Acker, through her writing and engagement with the city, challenges the distinctions between public and private as outlined in Preciado's genealogy of pornography. By deliberately drenching her city with female sexuality, Acker reveals the tensions that are provoked when the public-private barrier is dismantled by the presence of explicit sexuality in the streets. In Acker's experimental narratives, her rejection of the public-private dichotomy emerges through the insertion graphic pornographic scenes in the narrative. For example, in Acker's *Rip-off Red, Girl Detective* a conventional detective scene might be followed by a graphic pornographic fragment. In *New York City in 1979*, a casual dialogue might switch perspective to the mind of the narrator who at that moment can only think about sex. With such alterations in narrative, Acker leaves a realistic scene behind and lets (sexual) fantasy take over, sometimes resulting in what appears to be a stream of consciousness narrative.[33] These fantasies might seem benign, since they concern the desires of one person in one moment in time, but the meaning and cultural implications of sexual fantasies should not be underestimated. As Tyler Bradway writes: "fantasy is of course, *only fantasy*, not to be taken seriously as social content; and yet fantasy offers a narrative mode for expressing desires that cannot be attributed so simply or reductively to an individuated subject" (Bradway 3). Erotic fantasies express more than just an individual's desire. Rather, they lay bare societal issues around sex, taboo, and power.[34]

Written pornography is often considered not to be "literary". Considering Acker's background as an experimental writer with a broad knowledge of the literary canon and its conventions, her insertion of pornography must be seen as a deliberate move. And with Preciado in mind, Acker's pornography too must be considered as a site of cultural production. For these reasons, Acker's written pornography must be interpreted as a significant aspect of her experimental writing practice.

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[33] Towards the end of her writing career, Acker started to experiment with what she called "orgasmic writing": writing a stream of consciousness narrative while masturbating. See her "Seeing Gender" essay (1995) for her intentions and for an example of such a narrative.

[34] Historically, visual and literary representations of sex were often forbidden by "obscenity laws" because the bad effect they might have on their viewers and readers. As mentioned in the introduction to Kathy Acker's work, her first novel was initially forbidden in the 1980s in Germany by an obscenity law for its depiction of taboo sexual interactions.

3.3 Public sex

Another way in which Acker's engagement with the city challenges conventional conceptions of public space, is her refusal to keep sexual activity in the (heterosexual) bedroom. In several of her works, Acker's characters have sex in public spaces: on the plane, in the zoo, on the streets – often in "the shadows of the buildings".[35] When the detective in *Rip-off Red, Girl Detective* is followed by a man who finds her "so nice and beautiful", he wants to introduce her to his parents. Red is confused by his demand and insists they have sex first because, only then, she believes she will be able to understand him. She convinces him to do so, but as soon as they start having sex, she realizes she is becoming more vulnerable too:

> I'm in a small alley filled with cardboard boxes, garbage, the boy is standing over me, one of his hands on my stomach, gently presses and strokes. I allow him to fuck me, although I know if he fucks me, he will then be able to murder me. My body leans flat against a concrete wall, the upper half of the body leaning to the right; my body snaps into two pieces. (*Rip-off Red, Girl Detective* 88)

Having sex in a dark public space with a stranger can be erotic and exciting, but at the same time such a sexual encounter is informed by an anxiety that is particular for women's experience of public space. This motive brings us to a motive that returns throughout Acker's books: the fear of being sexually assaulted. Although the sex is consensual in the case mentioned, Rip-off Red still fears assault, and possibly worse, being murdered. The sexuality of Acker's characters may seem liberated given the public character of their sexual encounters, but it is important to realize that Acker's presentation of the expression of female sexuality that is never completely unrestricted. As the film theorist Peter Wollen writes: "the presentation of sexuality [in Acker's works] is always bound up with issues of power, violence, and pain, whether explicitly through sadomasochism and rape or implicitly through a generalized oppression" (*Lust for Life* 8). For Acker thus, power relations are inevitably part of *any* sexual relation. Indeed, if we follow Janey's line of thinking in *Blood and Guts in High School*, the sexual revolution of the 1960s did not liberate women at all:

[35] In *Rip-off Red, Girl Detective* (p. 89) but more often in Acker's work, the public sex takes place in dark places in the city.

> Once upon a time there was a materialistic society one of the results of this materialism was a "sexual revolution". Since the materialistic society has succeeded in separating sex from every possible feeling, all you girls can now go spread your legs as much as you want 'cause it's sooo easy to fuck it's sooo easy to be a robot it's sooo easy not to feel. Sex in America is S&M. This is the glorification of S & M and slavery and prison. (*Blood and Guts in High School* 99)

For Acker, all sexual relations are power relations, but as her work shows, giving account of these structures does not necessarily designate all women as victims. For Acker, being dominated as well as appropriating the dominant position of power are both viable desires. Wollen again: "women, in Acker's books, are both sexually exploited and sexually voracious, an antinomy which generates a cascade of complex discourses, crystallized in the figure of the outlaw heroine, both flaunting her independence, defying her oppressors and bolting in desperation, abject and humiliated (*Lust for Life* 8).

With her erotic texts, Acker has become what Preciado would call, a "subversive producer" of pornography. Even though her work predominantly features heterosexual sex, Acker makes the reader aware of the norms that accompany sexuality by presenting gender and genitalia during sexual activity as fluid features in the narrative. At the same time, she consistently emphasizes the power relations that are present in society *and* the bedroom. In short, Kathy Acker's production of pornography can be considered as a subversive act since her pornography does not reproduce the normative conventions of pornography but appropriates and contests these.

3.4 Rejecting the public-private dichotomy

Not all cases of public sex in Acker's works are characterized by this combination of fear and excitement, or take place in public spaces – such as alleyways – that are dark and hidden. Occasionally, the sex is enjoyable due to fact that it is taking place in public. In the zoo for example, Peter and Red "will fuck in front of the lions until we're howling more than they are" (*Rip-off Red, Girl Detective* 9) and in *Great Expectations*, "sex is public: the streets made themselves for us to walk naked down them" (9). In *Pussy, King of the Pirates* too, sexuality is conflated with public space: "often sex occurred publicly, genitals joined; made hot skins our streets" (151). In the latter novel, the protagonist O – a prostitute – feels shame, not because the sex with her client is taking place in public, but rather because she is enjoying it:

> O drew away from John. Now she was conscious – if her mind was eyes, a veil had been drawn away from them – that she was experiencing sexual delight in a public space and this was wrong. One shouldn't open up sexually in public to a man one didn't know when one was bleeding. Nevertheless she was doing this. And adoring this. (*Pussy, King of the Pirates* 47)

That it is the public space of the city that provokes these desires and fantasies for Acker's characters, indicates a rejection of the dichotomy between public and private. Even though they often are, at least implicitly, part of public space, sex and sexuality are, according to conventional norms, not supposed to be part of the public sphere. In a similar vein to Preciado, Nancy Duncan (1996) argues that the public-private separation has been used to regulate sexuality in public space. Duncan argues that the public-private distinction is a gendered distinction. The private sphere has historically been the domain of women; as daughters, wives, and caretakers.[36] The domestic, the private sphere, is thus meant for the *personal* – which includes sexuality:

> The private *as an ideal type* has traditionally been associated and conflated with: the domestic, the embodied, the natural, the family, property, the 'shadowy interior of the household', personal life, intimacy, passion, sexuality, 'the good life', care, a haven, unwaged labour, reproduction and immanence. The public *as an ideal type* has traditionally been the domain of the disembodied, the abstract, the cultural, rationality, critical public discourse, citizenship, civil society, justice, the market place, waged labour, production, the polis, the state, action, militarism, heroism and transcendence. (Duncan 128)

Acker's refusal to abide to the public-private distinction must be seen as both a refusal of the private-public division as Duncan presents it here, as well as a refusal of the conventional definition of pornography as Preciado presents it. Acker presents a rejection of the notion of pornography as a separation: a managing of public space that "keeps the excited body under control". Instead, Acker presents a city in which female desires are viable, and a city in which random encounters can turn into a sexual encounters at any given moment. Very often, these

[36] Janet Wolff has called this "the culture of separate spheres". For more on exclusion of women from public space, see her pivotal essay "The Invisible Flâneuse" (1990)

can be commanded at will since the sexual encounters are fantasies – if they actually happen in the story or not can remains ambiguous. Since her characters use public space to their advantage by means of imagining, expressing and articulating their sexual desires and feelings, Acker blurs the binary distinction between public and private. In Acker's work the city thus comes to the fore as a space in which contingent but genuine encounters are possible and enjoyable on the condition that sexual feelings and desires are allowed. As the narrator in *New York City in 1979* proclaims: "New York City will become alive again when the people begin to speak to each other again not information but real emotion. A grave is spreading its legs and BEGGING FOR LOVE" (6).

4. Rethinking heroic narratives and public space with Kathy Acker's detective

> This is the old days of New York when a child could walk safely down a New York street, a New York Street in the rich ghettoes, and wouldn't get busted or raped. Rich people still took taxis. I still wasn't sure of my sex.
>
> – Kathy Acker[37]

Rip-off Red, Girl Detective (1973, further referred to as ROR)[38] forms an exception to the themes of suffering from romantic love and the impossibility to speak as a woman from Acker's earliest works. This novel, as opposed to the other early ones, features a legitimate hero, who believes she can handle the world by becoming "the toughest detective alive" (*ROR* 5). The novel is not a realistic detective story; instead, Acker gives the classical detective quest a magical touch as she – again – blends dreams and fictional reality. Acker's detective does not necessarily experience her gender as restricting and her heroism can therefore be seen as a precursor for the myths Acker will develop later in her work.

In this chapter, I aim to show how Acker's detective narrator can serve as a queer counterpart of the classical detective. I will first outline how *Rip-off Red, Girl Detective* can be understood in relation to Acker's other work. Then I will outline why the detective story is an urban genre and consider how the investigating detective can serve as an observing *flâneur*. Finally, with a close reading of Acker's own detective novel and in conversation with Sally R. Munt's work on the detective genre, I will show how Acker's heroic narrative defies the genre of the classical detective story, and through her rejection of the genre, creates an escape from the restrictions that gender imposes on the female detective in the city.

4.1 Creating impossible myths

In her insightful essay "Seeing Gender" (1995), Kathy Acker reflects on her writing practice and explains how she became interested in piracy – the practice of plagiarism. Acker asks how the body and gender can be located in a text. She compares herself to Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*, "who ran into a book in order to find herself", but instead of wonders, Acker

[37] *Rip-off Red, Girl Detective* (p. 53)

[38] *Rip-off Red, Girl Detective* is Kathy Acker's first novel and was completed in 1973 but published posthumously by Grove Press in 2002. It is her first and arguably her most explicit pornographic novel. As Kraus has shown in her biography, Acker hoped that if she inscribed herself in the lesbian pornographic pulp tradition, she would start to earn money with her writing.

writes, she only found "the "mimesis of patriarchy" (*Bodies of Work,* 84). Acker asserts that she never tried to create a new language with her writing but is more interested in languages that she can "only come upon, as a pirate upon buried treasure" (84). As discussed in the introduction to Acker's work, Acker's turn to plagiarism derives from her not being able to speak as a girl. The "Seeing Gender" essay however, reveals yet another aspect of her interest in the practices of stealing and piracy. She writes that immersing herself in literature as a child, the adventures and heroic figures she encountered in literature turned out to be incompatible with her limited freedom. For Acker, a pirate represents liberty but even as a child she knew that she could never *be* a pirate because she was a girl and she "couldn't even run away to see, like Herman Melville" (*Bodies of Work* 78). The restrictions that patriarchal culture imposes on girls implies the absolute impossibility to become a writer and adventurer. For Acker, it is inconceivable to escape that confinement:

> I am looking for the body, my body, which exists outside its patriarchal definitions. Of course, that is not possible. But who is any longer interested in the possible? Like Alice, I suspect that the body, as Butler argues, might not be co-equivalent with materiality, that my body might be deeply connected to, if not be, language. (*Bodies of Work* 84)

Here, Acker formulates a resolution to the struggle with the limited possibility to express herself as a writer: her answer lies in no longer being interested in the possible. Moving towards the impossible rather than the possible indicates a paradigmatic shift in Acker's writing practice. In order to imagine heroes with which it was actually possible to identify, Acker started to create her own myths. Greek mythology plays an important role in her writing because those stories often involve storylines and landscapes that are different from realistic narratives. For Acker, mythical stories offer more narrative freedom. As she stated in an interview: "you're allowed to just move, you're allowed to wander. It's like travelling. I've always envied men this and I can never travel being a woman. I always wanted to be a sailor, that's what I really love" (*Hannibal Lecter* 23).

As outlined in the introduction, Acker's earlier work was mostly concerned with the struggle to speak as a woman in a patriarchal society and in conversation with the male-dominated literary canon. The women in Acker's earliest texts struggle to speak and are – sometimes literally – imprisoned by patriarchal structures. As Acker suggests, speaking is not the only problem. The ability to *move* is just as important and for a writer, these two are inextricably intertwined. Later in her writing career, Acker started to imagine mythical figures

who liberate themselves from their gender and become adventurers. Janey and the other young suffering girls in Acker's earlier works start to make room for more complex mythical figures. Characters like pirates – in *Pussy, King of the Pirates* (1996) – and cyborgs – in *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) – provide a liberation from the gendered limits of writing and adventure. These heroic narratives deal with patriarchy in a manner that is not defined by the struggle of "man vs. woman". Instead, prominence is given to a multiplicity of gender expressions as the genders of Acker's mythical figures change as they go along on their adventurous journeys. Since Acker's cyborgs and pirates appear to suffer less from romantic love than the girls in Acker's earlier works do, myths appear to provide a way out from the suffering that the girls are subjected to in her earlier works. Forming an exception to Acker's earlier work, her detective can be better understood as a genderfluid hero when placed in the context of her later novels.

4.2 The detective genre

The detective genre is conventionally a genre that works with linear narratives: the detective narrative often consists of the journey towards the resolving of a crime. Furthermore, morality plays an important role in the detective story as the genre depends upon notions of right and wrong and logic and rationality. One of the most well-known detective genres is the "hardboiled" detective story that features a so-called "private eye". The hardboiled detective story, however, has been "initially dominated by male writers and had a distinctively antifeminist and even misogynistic animus" (Cawelti 7).[39]

That the detective genre is not necessarily by definition male-dominated and antifeminist, becomes apparent from Sally R. Munt's *Murder by the Book: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (1994). In this study, Munt gives a critical overview of feminist crime novels and the way female detectives have enabled the expression of new sexual and gender politics. Munt frames these detective stories as heroic narratives and as vital explorations of identity and patriarchy:

> The use of the heroic in the detective novel has been adopted successfully by the lesbian reader to explore notions of selfhood, set against a corrupt and hostile society. […] The process of narrativity, of story-making itself, is thematized and problematized by the

[39] John G. Cawelti makes this point in his chapter "Canonization, Modern Literature, and the Detective Story" in *Theory and Practice of classic detective fiction* (ed. Jerome H. Delamater & Ruth Prigozy).

> form. The lesbian feminist heroine is allowed to invert the meanings ascribed to her by the process of reverse discourse and use narrative structures self-consciously to ram the message home: dominant (patriarchal) society is hence the evil world of crime, and the lesbian feminist perversely the perfect citizen, the repository of morals and all goodness and truth. Her personal narrative of conversion and agency has roots in the early lesbian feminist novel, her politicization is common to all protest literature. (Munt 1994: 94)

Besides being a tool for exploring morality and identity, the detective story is a particularly urban genre. As early as 1840, Edgar Allan Poe – who is often seen as the originator of the detective story – featured a detective as a *flâneur*[40] in his short story "The Man of the Crowd" (1840). Walter Benjamin, the great theorist of the figure of the *flâneur*,[41] also saw a role for the *flâneur* as detective. In an essay on Charles Baudelaire's poetry, Benjamin writes that "the masses appear as the asylum that shields an asocial person from his persecutors" (Benjamin 40). If this is the case, everyone in the crowd becomes suspicious; "no matter what trail the *flâneur* may follow, every one of them will lead him to a crime" (Benjamin 41). The way the detective moves through the city can be seen as an urban exploration. Still, the gaze of the *flâneur* is different from the gaze of the detective. For both, observing from a distance is crucial, but the gaze of the detective is characterized by suspicion instead of passive observation. Because of that suspicion, the city changes in character too. Carlo Salzani (2007), following Walter Benjamin, argues that "the literary genre of the detective story snoops into the 'dark side' of the metropolis, transforming it into a place of danger, fear and angst" (168). As we will see, in *Rip-off Red, Girl Detective* too, the city becomes dangerous and dark as Acker's detective moves through urban space, with the exception that in Acker's version of the detective story that darkness is strongly intertwined with sexual desire.

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[40] In *The Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory*, the *flâneur* is defined as an essentially untranslatable French term describing a psycho-social type emblematic of modernity. According to that definition, the *flâneur* "existed on the margin of both the city and the bourgeoisie, consuming images of both as a spectacle or phantasmagoria". The *flâneur* thus sees public life as a spectator watching a show. The poet Charles Baudelaire was one of the first to use the term in "le peintre de la vie moderne" (1863) and exemplifies Poe's "Man of the Crowd" as a typical *flâneur* (Baudelaire 7).

[41] The German philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) coined the term *flâneur* as a fundamental concept for literary analysis. In *A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (Verso, 1997), Benjamin suggests that the first kind of literature featuring a *flâneur* was the nineteenth-century panorama literature in which the writer entered the streets as a casual stroller and "looked around as in a diorama" (35).

4.3 Rejecting the prototypical detective

In *Murder by the Book* (1994), Sally R. Munt presents the detective hero as an outlaw which followingly implicates a parallel with lesbianism: "He is alone, isolated, on the edge, an observer, not a participator. [...] So, the detective hero exhibits a paradox: he is at once a representative of society and a critique of it" (Munt 1994: 117). Munt argues that popular lesbian-feminist crime novels from the 1980s have tended to produce a particular version of this antithesis. They oppose patriarchy but implicitly they depend on crucial aspects of the mainstream detective genre carrying along a manifold of patriarchal elements such as the importance of notions of good and bad, notions of unified subjectivity, natural justice, and tidy textual closures. Munt argues that all of these can be addressed as masculine forms. Throughout her work on gender and space, in both *Murder by the Book* (1994) as well as in *Heroic Desire* (1998), Munt focuses on binary conceptual oppositions. For Munt, texts, genres, narratives, and desires, can either be male or female. And, relating to Munt's work on lesbian identity in literature, one is either heterosexual or homosexual. Focused as she is on comparing these different experiences, Munt tends to ignore positions that fall outside such dichotomies, such as bisexuality and genderqueerness. Therefore, when Munt analyses the detective novel and queer identities in urban space, she considers identities that deviate from the heterosexual norm but at the same time upholds the conventional binary opposition in gender and sexuality.

Kathy Acker's novel *Rip-off Red, Girl Detective* offers a revision of the conventions of the detective genre. The novel presents ambiguous moral values, blurs the binaries of female and male and hetero- and homosexual, and rejects the notion of a unified subjectivity. The titular narrator of the novel, Rip-off Red, embarks on a detective quest in which she tries to solve the murder of a lover. The story consists of a series of diary entries, dream sequences and descriptions of the detective's experiences on the city streets. Rip-off Red wants to solve the murder of Sally Spitz, who has been murdered just after she had sex with Rip-off Red. Unlike the classical detective, Acker's detective is not concerned with the oppositions of good and bad and right and wrong. Rather, Rip-off Red is aware of what is expected of the prototypical detective but refuses to conform:

> This isn't typical of a hard-boiled detective, a detective who chooses intellectual pursuits over emotional ones. I have no right to be scared. Well, I'm a female detective; I don't pay attention to that shit about intellectual versus emotional. (*ROR* 17-18)

This refusal of this binary of good versus bad is yet another version of the refusal of the authority of rationality that returns in Acker's work. In *Rip-off Red, Girl Detective*, the detective's investigation is not based on rationality and deduction. Instead, she lets herself be led by her emotions, sexual desires, and by chance. In Rip-off Red's "first vision of New York" (*ROR* 20) for instance, she meets Sally Spitz, has sex with her – during which Sally appears to have a penis – and promises Sally to investigate her father's strange absences. Soon afterwards, Sally is murdered and Rip-Off Red has her first murder case to deal with. Red's intention to solve the murder is not only out of interest for Sally. Her resolution to find the violator can be traced back to her own experiences, as Red herself has been attacked on the streets and seeks revenge:

> I've taken too much shit in this empire city: Spitz's death three knifings in my side; I decide to revenge myself! Protect myself! I'll get Spitz's murderer, whoever's rooking Spitz's father, the strange way. I become completely elegant. (*ROR* 49)

In this same "vision of New York", Rip-Off Red walks through the city and is attacked by a man who subsequently dominates her in a role play. A long and graphic pornographic scene follows before Red continues her investigation. As this excerpt shows, dreams, desires, but also *fears* determine the narrative in *Rip-off Red*, *Girl Detective*:

> A man walks past me, sticks a knife into me. I get up I don't understand what's happening, I walk into the crevice between two buildings. A man walks past me; as he passes the crevice, his arms swing out to the side and he slips a knife into my body. […] Our white eyes stare at each other. I'm in a cafetaria; a man approaches me; orders me to lie down flat, back on the table and take off my pants. (*ROR*, 21)

As Calzani argues, in the detective story, the city is experienced as a dangerous place. This passage from *Rip-off Red, Girl Detective* shows that it is not merely because of a suspicious person in the crowd but that the danger is rather produced by the darkness of the narrow alley between two buildings – thus by the city itself. This reveals how the danger and literal darkness of the city make the female detective a vulnerable participant in the urban scene.[42] On a

[42] The urban theorist Jane Jacobs was the first to theorize the gendered nature of urban planning. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) Jacobs showed in how urban spaces – especially if they are without light – make women more susceptible to violence.

different but related register, it also reveals how being in a vulnerable position provokes sexual excitement for Rip-off Red.

Acker's novel can be situated in the tradition of feminist detective writing that Munt proposes since *Rip-off Red, Girl Detective* features a self-conscious and female detective. Yet, Acker's novel problematizes the conventional form of the detective novel. She diverts from the classic detective narrative by giving her narrative a magic-realist touch through the insertion of dreams. *Rip-off Red, Girl Detective* contests Munt's conception of the feminist detective as well, as Acker's protagonist is neither a lesbian nor an outspoken feminist. Rather, Acker's detective story narrates an experience that is not essentially female. In fact, Rip-off Red's fears in public space do not originate exclusively from the fact that she is a woman, since she is ambiguously gendered. In a scene in the subway, for instance, a man zips open his pants and tries to intimidate Rip-off Red by showing her his penis. Red however, is not impressed even though "he's bigger than [her's]", indicating that Rip-off Red also has a penis. Moreover, Rip-off Red occasionally cross-dresses as a man for the purpose of her investigation. At other times, she disguises herself as a "top-class whore" (*ROR* 34). One could say that Red would perhaps not be considered a morally "good" feminist by Munt's standards as she uses sex to her own advantage and to the advantage of the investigation:

> Should I go to the Irish Saloon as a man or a woman? I contemplate wearing my mod Mad. Ave. disguise: brown curly mustache slightly lighter than my hair, light makeup on cheeks to give the appearance of roughness, green corduroy pants and vest, a tie with black designs. I think I'm feeling fem tonight. Besides, Spitz's father is a man; I'll have to persuade the men at the bar, probably, not the women, who know something to tell me what they know. In this case, better be female. (*ROR* 86-87)

This excerpt shows how for Rip-off Red, her gender is not particularly restricting. She uses the performativity of gender identities to her advantage when she decides not to dress as a man because she is "feeling fem tonight". The desires and fears that public spaces generate for Rip-off Red are not determined by her gender. In this way, Rip-off Red resists the identity of a female or lesbian detective and can therefore be considered a *queer* counterpart to both the male detective from the hardboiled detective novels as well as to the lesbian feminist detectives that Munt presents in her book. Moreover, Acker's revision of the possibilities of the figure of

the detective in literature must be seen as a revision of grand heroic narratives in a broader literary tradition.

As she offers the reader a bisexual and genderfluid detective, Acker provides a potentially different dealing with space, in which one's safety – and thus the ability to move through the city – is not determined by gender. Sally R. Munt has pointed out how powerful the rethinking of heroic narratives can be as they are "productive and constitutive, operating by harnessing utopic identifications through the focusing and configuration of desires" (Munt 1998: 26). Considering the power of heroic narratives, Kathy Acker's revision of the detective genre must be considered as a significant contribution to thinking about gender and spatiality in literature.

5. The city as brothel: the radical potential of urban disorder

> You see, I have a dream. A world of delight birds sing to a real sun in a real city no one leaves out anybody. Everyone does what he she wants. A materialist revolution is happening: whatever you have you get more. Everyone is a Rockefeller only everyone is a real person everyone steals jewels gold bars opens banks heists trains hauls narcotics masturbates. There are no more moralists.
>
> – Kathy Acker[43]

In an essay Kathy Acker wrote for *Marxism Today*, "Some American Cities" (1990), she reflects on the malfunctioning of urban policies in San Francisco, Detroit, and New York City. Writing in the time of the AIDS-epidemic and urban decay in the 1980s, Acker felt that American cities were disintegrating while also recognizing that "in the United States, the death of urban order is no new story" (*Bodies of Work* 135). For Acker, the only city that is able to "combat the decay engendered by American postcapitalism [sic] and imperialism" (136) was San Francisco, due to the "gay lifestyle" (136) there. Acker's fictional cities too are disintegrating: the urban spaces she depicts are crowded with gangs, street dogs, crimes, and her characters often live in what in Acker's work are called "slums", including the East Village in New York City – where Acker lived for a long time. In "Some American Cities", Acker connects the disintegration of cities to the disintegration of capitalism:

> Perhaps New York City isn't disintegrating. Perhaps one system, that order based on a certain kind of capitalism, is disintegrating while another world, one of tribes, criminal and other, anarchic, is rising out of the rotting streets, sidewalks, and bridges. (*Bodies of Work* 135)

If the city has a revolutionary potential, then – which for Acker here would mean the destruction of capitalism – it lies in the possibility of anarchy provided by the chaos of the city. Acker's wide range of heroic figures sprout from the late-capitalist cities that are characterized by decay and chaos. In Acker's own texts thus too, urban disorder provides the breeding ground for revolution.

[43] *Rip-off Red, Girl Detective* (1973, p. 39)

In her writings on Walter Benjamin, Elizabeth Wilson looks at what she considers as an underexplored theme in Benjamin's work: that of sexual life generated by capitalist relations. She argues that the city is a labyrinth and that the labyrinth symbolizes male impotence. The *flâneur* then, is the embodiment of the labyrinthine city which Wilson presents as passive and feminine: "in the writing of fragmentary pieces, he makes of himself a blank page upon which the city writes itself" (Wilson 12). *Pussy, King of the Pirates* (1996, referred to as KPK), Acker's last novel, explores both the city as labyrinth as well as the city as governed by sexual relations. The novel challenges the notion of Elizabeth Wilson's *flâneur* as Acker's attention for the urban space of the brothel forces us to ask who is free to observe city life and who is not.

In this chapter, I aim to show the dystopian traits of Acker's city. Her decaying and dystopian city, and in particular the space of the brothel, function as the loci of meaning-making and identity-forming for the young girls in *Pussy, King of the Pirates*. Moreover, this chapter tries to show that *Pussy, King of the Pirates* reproduces a perception of the city as labyrinth: firstly because the city, or cities in this case, are presented as a maze, and secondly because of the fact that inside the brothel, the protagonist aspires to become a "nobody" so that she can start to "see". As we will see, *Pussy, King of Pirates* reveals how spaces that are at once dystopian and utopian determine the personhood of the characters in the book.

5.1 The city as labyrinth

Pussy, King of the Pirates is not set in one particular city. Indeed, by the end of the book all known geography is abandoned. Still, traces of existing places, such as London, San Francisco, and an undetermined city in China, can be found throughout the text. *Pussy, King of the Pirates* starts with the French avant-garde poet Antonin Artaud as the narrator who tells the story of "O". O is a young girl who ventures into the city to find her father. The city is experienced as unreal as it is "the repository of all dreams" (*KPK* 3). At the same time, as Artaud describes it, the city has always been decaying. As it turns out, "in the center of this city, her father had hung himself" (*KPK* 3). The narrative drive here is quite a hopeless journey since O is looking for her dead person in a decaying city. O decides to go to a city in China, where she ends up the same way as she "usually came to cities when she had been following a guy" (*KPK* 7). There, it becomes impossible for her to attach meaning to her direct surroundings for all known signifiers have disappeared:

> It didn't matter, the name of this unknown city to which I came. All the unknown cities, in China, held slums that looked exactly like each other: each one a labyrinth, a dream, in which streets wound into streets which disappeared in more streets and every street went nowhere. For every sign had disappeared. (*KPK* 7)

This equation of slums with labyrinths, and consequently with dreams, is emblematic of Acker's dystopian city. The city as a labyrinth indicates a city without one central point. In this way, the journey through the city is circular rather than linear. Uncoincidentally, in her essay "Moving into Wonder" (1995), Acker states that art, and by extension conventional narrative time, depends on the exclusion of women. Acker connects that excluding narrative to the image of the labyrinth: for her the labyrinth is a space in which women are hidden. Acker proposes that through experimenting with narrative, the labyrinth can be unraveled and the women revealed: "let us, by changing the linearity of time, deconstruct the labyrinth and see what the women who are in its center are doing. Let us see what is now central" (*Bodies of Work* 97). *Pussy, King of the Pirates* is exemplary of this effort as the novel – with its temporal and geographical shifts – reveals the hidden urban spaces where women are at its center. As we will see in this chapter, in Acker's case those revealing spaces are primarily brothels – or as Acker's narrator calls them, "whorehouses".

In line with the way Acker portrays the city in *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, Elizabeth Wilson asserts that the dreamlike and unstable character of the city as a maze can become frightening as well: "one never retraces the same pathway twice, for the city is in a constant process of change, and thus becomes dreamlike and magical, yet also terrifying in the way a dream can be. Life and its certainties slither away from underfoot." (Wilson 4). The labyrinthine city that Acker depicts in *Pussy, King of the Pirates* appears as a frightful place too, but O enters the city deliberately, in order to "find the origins of whoredom" in the old Alexandria where it was still "the days when women were economically either wives or whores" (27). Still, O enters "the most famous whorehouse in Alexandria" and starts describing the personalities and daily habits of all the women living in the brothel. In Alexandria, the city is characterized by disintegration but it is not experienced as distressing since "O loved decay" (53): "the two ex-whores were standing in their favorite spot in Alexandria; unordered clusters of broken walls; pools too fetid for the filthiest of birds; substances between the sand and mud which reeked of the strangest of excrements." (53) As we will see, the slum-like city in *Pussy, King of the Pirates* is equated with both the space of the brothel as well as the labyrinth, culminating into a space that serves as the territory for the meandering but purposeful journey

of Acker's "whores". The protagonist decides to enter the labyrinth to teach the whores how to masturbate since the rhythm of masturbation is "the rhythm of the labyrinth" (33). Here, Acker connects the rhythm of the city to the rhythm of masturbation. In a similar vein to what we have seen in the previous chapters, Acker's narrating city subject experiences the city in connection to her experience of sexuality.

5.2 The brothel

The city in *Pussy, King of the Pirates* is one that is centered around the economy of sex: the buying and selling of sexual services. The brothel, a space that returns throughout the novel, comes to represent a space where that exchange of sexuality is made most explicit. The brothel is a closed-off space where social relations and norms are different from the outside world:

> Outside the whorehouse, men fear women who are beautiful and run away from them. [...] Inside the brothel, the women, however they actually look, are always beautiful to men. Because they fulfill their fantasies. In this way, what was known as *the male regime*, in the territory named *women's bodies*, separated its reason from its fantasy. (*KPK*, 8)

Marjorie Worthington (2004) maintains that the brothel is what Foucault has called a heterotopia, "the spaces which characterize the contemporary world" (Worthington 396). Acker's brothel too differentiates from public space in the way that its meaning is inherently dependent on the position of the person in that space. Since in Acker's work gender determines one's societal position, the meaning that a particular space will have for a person is determined by gender too (Worthington 397). The identities of the girls who work at the brothel, then, are particularly regulated by their direct environment – especially since they live in the closed-off space they work in. Moreover, the women's bodies *themselves* become public spaces as they are continually observed and used by men. As Worthington argues about brothels:

> In these public spaces, which are characterized by women's sexual slavery and immobility, the characters have no agency: they cannot move, cannot own, cannot be. They are public material, available for use by others, existing in spaces in which time has no meaning. (Worthington 396)

As the narrator Antonin Artaud interprets her actions, O wants to please her boyfriend, so she starts to "whore for him" (*KPK* 8) and agrees to live and work in a brothel named Ange. Opposed to the other girls in the brothel, O asserts that she entered the space of the brothel by choice because she believes that "only when [she] was nothing would [she] begin to see" (*KPK* 9). For O, being nothing is the equivalent to being alone: "I was a whore because I was alone" and "I was trying to get rid of loneliness and nothing would ever rid me of loneliness until I got rid of myself" (11). This equation of nothingness and "whoredom" indicates that O's purpose in going to the brothel is to set herself free, meaning: getting rid of her identity. At this moment in the narrative, the narrator's voice switches back to Antonin Artaud, who as a young boy lived in the slums too, but in an attempt "to counteract the poverty that was without and within [him], [he] ran into poetry". O herself can't leave the brothel however, because "inside the whorehouse [she] was nobody and thus "there was nobody to walk away" (*PKP* 9). Nevertheless, the submission to the humiliation of working and living in the brothel, O's becoming a nobody consistently forms a desirable position since she can no longer be lonely when she is nobody.

The space of the brothel itself appears to expand in space and is consequently conflated with a slum when "[t]here were many prescients in the slum. The whores, in their spare hours, visited these fortune-tellers" (9). Since O has become nothing and can finally "see", the world as she knows it expands and the brothel comes to represent an entire world; an ever-expanding city slum in which all the girls live together. Now that the brothel is no longer a confined space, O feels free to leave. Artaud is watching the brothel from a distance and observes O as she finally exits the building:

> I watched this girl begin to breathe. I watched her encounter poverty for the first time, the streets that my body was daily touching. The streets whose inhabitants ate whatever they could and, when they no longer could eat, died. […] In the whorehouse, O was safe because, here, there were no humans. In the whorehouse she had become naked. […] I watched O walk down street after street, searching for who she would be. (*PKP* 13)

Next, Artaud wants to visit O in the brothel but because he does not have the money to pay to be with O, he is thrown out of the building. He sees his rejection from the brothel as a denial of his sexuality and resisting that denial would mean the start of a (sexual) revolution:

> Their denial of my sexuality planted in me the seeds of rebellion. There would be other women and men like me in that slum. Ones who would do whatever had to be done in order to change everything. (*PKP* 18)

Subsequently, "the revolutionaries" – i.e. the poor – meet up and buy weapons. O's boyfriend, the one who put her in the brothel, follows Artaud through the slum's streets, "which now reeked of more and more revolutionaries, and into alleyways which were blind" (23). In one of those alleys, the boyfriend kills the poet, O leaves the brothel in revenge, and then finds herself "on the edge of a new world" (23). This passage shows how for Acker, as she already indicated in the essay "American Cities", the revolution will arise from urban spaces such as slums and brothels; spaces characterized by urban disorder, where poverty reigns, and sexuality is at once denied as well as carried out.

5.3 Escaping the capitalist city

After Antonin Artaud's adventures in the brothel in the first chapter, O tries to find "the origin of whoredom" (27) in the old Alexandria, where "the days when women were economically either wives or whores […], of this Alexandria, no longer anything remains" (27). Still, O enters "the most famous whorehouse in Alexandria" and starts describing the personalities and daily habits of all the women living in the brothel. The city ruins of Alexandria as well as the more modern urban decay of cities like New York and San Francisco in *Pussy King of the Pirates* depict a rather deteriorated state of the city. Reading the different descriptions together, the urban scenes portrayed by Acker again accumulate into *one* city; a city that appears to have an apocalyptic character because of the ways in which it has been affected by economic inequality. In order to escape the city, O thus must be liberated from her economic position first:

> O: "let's crawl through all the houses of the rich who once fucked in this city and see if we can find anything to enable us to reach Europe".[...] These buildings were broken; some without doors or a wall; sometimes so shattered that they were no longer edifices. They resembled sets of Dario Argento movies. Though a few of the upper class had remained in this city, O and Ange met only nonhumans who, like them, were on their hands and knees. (*KPK* 60-61)

Later in *Pussy, King of the Pirates,* the narrator steals a dress because she "didn't have any money nor capability for earning money in the urban society" and "stealing is part of the city" (*PKP* 83). These passages reveal how the city is not simply deteriorating; the city is *experienced* as such because of O's precarious economic situation. Similar to her awareness of and attention for gender and sexuality in the city, class is inevitably part of Acker's city too. Acker's city subject thus is a critical subject as she moves through the city and accentuates all the ugly and messy sides of city life. The journeys of Acker's characters depend upon these circumstances – they know the dirty and dangerous spaces in the city best. They live with these particular spaces and are unquestionably confined by them. Nevertheless, their territory provides the breeding ground for a possible resistance, a liberation from economic despair as well as the confinement of gender. Finally, escaping the disintegrated city in Acker's texts means destroying the existing economic relations in the city.

In conclusion, the city in *Pussy, King of the Pirates* is a space that is both imprisoning and liberating. The brothel in this novel comes to represent the city as a whole when the closed-off space is conflated with the city as labyrinth and the city as a slum. The space of the brothel plays a very important role in this novel because it makes the reality of women's sexuality in the city visible and explicit. This unveiling can also be placed in Acker's broader pursuit to "unravel the labyrinth and show what is at the center": female sexuality. Even though the brothel turns the women's bodies into public spaces and the girls often feel imprisoned, the brothel is still a desirable space for the protagonist. As outlined in the introduction, this paradoxical experience of power relations and space returns throughout Acker's work as her protagonists continue to struggle with the restrictions of their gender. Since they are imprisoned anyway – be it psychologically or physically – the possibility for escape lies not in the denial of their imprisonment but rather in their critical attitude towards the economy of sexuality, as they at once acknowledge as well as take pleasure in their position. Thus, Acker's decentralization of identity works as a liberating tool for her female protagonists who feel trapped in their direct environment. In *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, then, the release from the constraints of identity functions in a two-fold manner: first, the embracing of the position of "the whore" in order to become a "nobody", and secondly, the escaping of the poverty of the slums by "running in to poetry". In the light of Acker's "Seeing Gender" essay as well as Elizabeth Wilson's conception of the *flâneur*, the being "nothing" that O aspires to in the brothel in *Pussy, King of the Pirates* is a condition from which Acker's narrating city subject is able to *see*, and thus to write.

6. Conclusion

> Desire provokes new relationships, attachments, connections, and propels them. Desire is profoundly spatial and produces an erotics of distance and nearness; we are moved by it, to it, from it and within it - think for example of the rhythms of 'attraction'. Desire pushes a space for identities to form: we want to become. These identities are not complete, but pass from here to there, in a process of reconstitution. Desire, expressed through motion, can produce a multivalent self resonant with the specificities of its past, in the ephemeral, temporal, flash of the present.
>
> – Sally R. Munt[44]

> Ange, St. Barbara, Louise Vanaen de Voringhem, and the rest of the whores learned that if language or words whose meanings seem definite are dissolved into a substance of multiple gestures and cries, a substance which has a more direct, a more visceral capacity for expression, then all the weight that the current social, political, and religious hegemonic forms of expression carry will be questioned. Become questionable. Finally, lost. The weight of culture: questioned and lost. [...] Lulu and Ange decided to masturbate so they could find a reason to live.
>
> – Kathy Acker[45]

In Kathy Acker's work as a whole, pornography and masturbation serve as tools of resistance with which a conventional understanding of society, literature and thus also of spatiality, can be "questioned and lost". Acker's engagement with the city is one of the central pathways by means of which she questions the power relations that structure patriarchy. More specifically, Acker problematizes prevailing notions of rationality and morality, the public-private dichotomy, capitalist forms of life, and the restrictions one's gender imposes on one's capacity to move through urban spaces. Therefore, Acker's narrating city subject is first and foremost a *critical* subject. In her writing, Acker presents a particularly ambiguous experience of the city: an experience defined by the structuring limits of social life as well as by their potential to

[44] *Heroic Desire* (p. 26)
[45] *Pussy, King of the Pirates* (p. 31)

transgress these. For Acker, the disintegrated and chaotic spaces of the city provide fundamentally the site for a possible social revolution.

Undoubtedly, in Acker's work, the potentiality for resistance can be found in the power of sexual desire. As she switches from sexual fantasies to reality, from the interior of the bedroom to the exterior of the streets, a fragmented experience of desire – and of the city – emerges from her texts. The utopian potential that can be found in Acker's texts arises from the absolute refusal to be governed by the restrictions imposed on women in public. As we have seen, Kathy Acker continually takes up a critical attitude towards city life. In *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, Acker calls the city straightforwardly patriarchal:

> Every city is born, continually being born, out of configurations of minds and desires: every city is alive. This city was patriarchal, that which allows the existence of none but itself, for it had arisen and was arising only out of the rational, moralistic bends of minds. (*Pussy, King of the Pirates,* 83).

For Acker, a patriarchal city indicates a city that is structured on hierarchies, with men and rationality at the top. Still, women are at the center of Acker's perspective on city life and her experimental narratives are driven by sexual desire rather than rationality. The city in Acker's work can therefore be seen as a refusal of the hierarchization of the gender dichotomy and the subordination of desire under rationality. Acker's city may contain traces of patriarchy – her city too produces a public space in which power relations determine one's position based on gender and class – but Acker's city is first and foremost a place where these "configurations of minds and desires" come to life and as such show their fluidity. The underlying revolutionary and anti-patriarchal potential of the city then, lies in Acker's emphasis on eroticism and sexuality in public space.

As we have seen in the second chapter, Acker's narrating city subject is a fragmented self and constructs a city in which dialectical images and experiences are put together. Acker's use of literary montage produces new possibilities to address and express the experience of the city and should thusly be considered a form of city writing. In this consideration, Kathy Acker's connection to the genre of New Narrative writing must be emphasized because it situates her work in broader context of city writing. Together with the Diane Chisholm's concept of "queer constellations", I have shown how in Acker's experimental narratives too, the city emerges as a place of antitheses. Through the juxtaposing of a variety of city images, Acker's writing

strategy of literary montage reveals the paradoxical and fragmented nature of the experience of the late-capitalist city.

In the third chapter, I stressed the significance of Acker's pornographic writing strategy to account for these dialectics. Considering Paul B. Preciado's plea for "a new hermeneutics of pornography", Acker's pornography too must be seen as a site of meaning and thus be interpreted. I argued that with her emphasis on sexuality in public space, Kathy Acker undermines the public-private dichotomy present in the city. Connecting Paul B. Preciado's conception of pornography, which emphasizes how the excitable body is kept under control in public space, to Acker's work, which does feature public sex, Ackers pornography emerges as a writing strategy with which the gendered separation of spaces can be challenged.

The fourth chapter reveals how Acker's first novel *Rip-off Red, Girl Detective* defies the classical detective genre in which gendered divisions live on. In conversation with Sally R. Munt's work on the detective genre, I have tried to show how Kathy Acker's detective signifies a queer alternative to the classical "hardboiled" detective as well as Munt's essentialized female detective. Since Rip-off Red is not necessarily confined by her gender, Acker presents an engagement with public space that is different from conventional detective stories. Acker's detective is ambiguously gendered and, through a multiplicity of gender expressions, is able to deal with the typically dangerous city of the detective genre. This seemingly arbitrary work – as it may be considered as simple pornography – must be seen as an important contribution to Acker's thinking about gender and public space.

The fifth chapter finally, examines the function and meaning of the city as labyrinth in *Pussy, King of the Pirates*. Merging the image of the city as maze with the city as slum and subsequently as brothel, Acker portrays the city as a space governed by economic and sexual power relations. The city as brothel turns out to be at once imprisoning and liberating for the girls living and working within it: imprisoning because they cannot leave, and liberating because they can masturbate. That is to say, in the novel the rhythm of the city is tied to the rhythm of masturbation. Again, Acker's narrating city subject experiences the city in connection to her experience of sexuality and with that, undermines conventional understandings of space.

Through the fearless and absolute expression of sexuality in her texts, Kathy Acker challenges conventional understandings of the reciprocal relation between gender and urban space. In my effort to reveal the ambiguities which characterize this relation, I have focused on a limited number of Acker's texts that are exemplary for her engagement with gender and the city. This

thesis therefore, ought to be seen as only a starting point to flesh out how Acker deals with the city in her work. In an academic context, these aspects of her work remain severely underexamined and further research is very much needed. I believe that Acker's extensive body of work provides the ground for numerous interpretations and, as I have hoped to show in this thesis, ought to be considered as important material for the research field of gender and spatiality in literature.

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