

“We Must Learn to Speak to Each Other So That We Can Embrace from Afar”:

Dodie Bellamy *reading* Kathy Acker, an account in words and clothes

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Abstract

Writing on Kathy Acker, the avant-garde punk writer who is well-known for her transgressive persona, is becoming increasingly commonplace nowadays. The fandom that has developed around her figure has taken multiple shapes, yet few of these representations have been capable of grasping Acker in her difference and her otherness. Amongst those writers who did do justice to her transgressive persona is Dodie Bellamy, one of Acker’s contemporaries. Bellamy, in her autobiographical narrative, is capable of staging a performance wherein the forces of the other –in their alterity- are continually undoing and questioning the stability of the narrative ‘I’. This essay considers the intertextual friendship amongst Bellamy and Acker, as it is staged by the former in her 2015 genre-binding piece “Digging Through Kathy Acker’s Stuff”. Drawing on Lynne Huffer’s thinking-feelings ethics of alterity and her concept of narrative performance, as well as by taking a Deleuzean orientation towards fashion, I attend to the relationship amongst affective fashion, performative language and the act of constructing extended kin within the practice of writing, reading and thinking amongst thinkers. I situate Bellamy’s and Acker’s bond first in dialogue with the affective relationship between Acker and her wardrobe, and the equally intriguing relationship Bellamy forges between herself and Acker’s clothes. Secondly, I juxtapose this affective approach to fashion with the performative force of Bellamy’s mechanisms of textual construction, which allow Acker’s voice and body to emerge within the text. Finally, I provide an overview of how both clothes and language are overtly linked to the construction of an intertextual friendship undergirded by a thinking-feelings ethics of alterity.

Keywords

Dodie Bellamy, Kathy Acker, alterity, friendship, affective fashion

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Open your lips; don't open them simply. I don't open them simply. We - you/I- are neither open nor closed. We never separate simply: a single word cannot be pronounced, uttered by our mouths. Between our lips, yours and mine, several voices, several ways of speaking resound endlessly, back and forth.

Luce Irigaray, *When Our Lips Speak Together*

“It belongs to Suzy,” Sarah snarled. “Who cares who it belongs to, it's a nice blouse. These Americans!” Her anger was incomprehensible to me. Even then I sensed that an appropriated blouse is not just any blouse, it leaves traces of its original owner. It's like watching 3-D without your 3-D glasses, those wobbly lines of energy bleeding from objects. I wonder how things would have gone down if it had been Kathy who was wearing Suzy's blouse. Would she have attributed it or not? Would it even matter? Kathy had such élan, everything she touched was somehow made grander.

Dodie Bellamy, *Digging Through Kathy Acker's Stuff*

Lynne Huffer, in her work *Are the lips a grave?* (2013), situates the problem of alterity at the heart of a rethinking of an *ethics of the other*. Drawing on Luce Irigaray's *ethics of alterity*, as developed in her 1980 essay “When Our Lips Speak Together”, she revisits the “performative/narrative opposition in the context of the queer/feminist split” (ibid., 14). Huffer proposes that an oft-feminist associated “narrative coherence”, with its investment in a stable ‘I’, can be read alongside a queer “performative

disruption”, which posits the inclusion of others in the narrative (ibid., 16). Her claims are premised by the idea that an ethical approach to the *other* should always take into account an encounter with alterity, “an uncertain, embodied, disruptive encounter of subjects with others” (ibid., 16). What she thus calls “narrative performance” is the enactment of a narrative ‘I’ which, while holding a stable identity, remains open to a critical evaluation of its subjectivity. And, for the latter to happen, the ‘I’ needs the inclusion of the other in all its *difference*; it needs to be aware of its fissures and cracks within an intersubjective context, that is, it must interrogate his/her identity, in a “self-transformative, self-undoing labour” (ibid., 16) in relation and against others.

It seems to me that one crucial space where this *narrative performance* can be enacted is within women’s autobiographical texts. It is precisely here, “in the mutable, capacious space and time of the written (that is the public, published) text”, as Jeanne Perrault notes, wherein women’s voices “and ethics recombine under, or through the sign of the ‘I’” (1998, 191). As Donna Haraway (2016) also asserts, it is in this composed space that an *extended kin relationship* can be constructed in the materialist practice of thinking with other thinkers. Indeed, the various kinds of intellectual and affective *affinities* explored by women in the last half-century¹ can shed light on the multiplying lines of flight which a “thinking-feeling ethics of the other”, as Huffer calls it, can enable (2013, 22).

These reflections represent some of the concerns haunting the lines that follow, where I offer a reading of Dodie Bellamy’s genre-binding essay on Kathy Acker, “Digging Through Kathy Acker’s Stuff” (2015). My aim is to unpack an intertextual

¹ For a further development of affiliations in theory see Judith Butler, Hélène Cixous, and Avital Ronell (2012) in conversation about the notions of affinity and disruptive kinships, *The New School*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8k91WwJlh18>.

affinity as performed in the autobiographical. Dodie Bellamy², on the one hand, is one of the most notable postmodern writers of the *New Narrative*, a San Francisco based movement which came into prominence during the 1970s, and which blended together experimental writing, fragmentary narratives and critical theory. Kathy Acker, on the other, the star of Bellamy's piece, was the *avant-garde* and *punk* writer "known as 'America's most beloved transgressive novelist'" (Kraus 2014), who died from breast cancer in 1997. While both Bellamy and Acker are recognized as part of a "counter-tradition" which "is often called the 'literature of transgression'" (Breu 2012, 266), one could say that it is Acker who took this transgression to its limits, engaging in what critics of her work have identified as a *punk poetics*. Acker, as Margaret Henderson writes, was celebrated as "a punk feminist: a writer associated with the punk scene of the 1970s, who sutured a punk stylistics and ethos with a feminist politics" (Henderson 2017, 202). Her "punk textuality" (Ibid., 277), indeed, was twofold: it came to surface in her writings, where she constructed an assemblage of "syntactic cut-ups" and experimental forms of "textual appropriation" (Henderson 2015, 292), but it also underpinned her transgressive persona, where, just like in her work, fragmentation took place "via a montage of registers, voices, words, and narratives, brought into discordant proximity" (ibid). This punk textuality is likewise one of the hues which marks Bellamy's intertextual affinity to Kathy Acker; an intertextual affinity which, in the essay that concerns us, unfolds mainly through "an emotional engagement with materiality" (Bellamy 2006, 82).

Perhaps this is why Bellamy's piece starts with the narration of her first encounter with Acker's clothes and accessories in Matias Viegner's – Acker's

² Bellamy's recent publications include the buddhist (Publication Studio, 2011), Cunt Norton (Les Fignes, 2013), The TV Sutras (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2014), When the Sick Rule the World (Semiotext(e), 2015). Together with her partner, Kevin Killian, she has also coedited the anthology *Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative Writing, 1977–1997* (Nightboat Books, 2017).

executor – house, wherein “all [she] wanted was a piece of her jewelry” (Bellamy 2015, 124). From here, she constructs a meditation upon “relics, ghosts, compulsive shopping, archives, make-up, our drive to mythologize the dead [...]”, amongst other subjects, and about the connection she shared with Acker, which she herself felt compelled to put into words, even if they did not have such an intimate friendship (Bellamy 2007). This shared connection, embodied in Bellamy’s prose, is one possible answer to the question Chris Kraus posits in her literary biography on Acker: “Where to inter the remains of those who live in a state of perpetual transience?” (Kraus 2017, 21). It is also that which sediments a friendship between Bellamy and Acker.

For if we think about *friendship* precisely as that affinity grounded in a material and communal practice of writing and reading together, wherein, as Irigaray claims, “several voices, several ways of speaking resound endlessly, back and forth” (1999, 85), then one might say that Bellamy and Acker were (and still are) *friends*: they hold an intertextual friendship which cracks the limits between life and death. In what follows, I wish to explore this affiliation, which gestures towards the preservation of alterity in-between the words uttered by *our lips -yours and mine-*, and which Bellamy performs in the intersubjective space of the *autographical* essay. I thus aim to call attention to the *constellative* ways in which she deliberately stages, in her narrative performance, her friendship to Acker, a friendship wherein the forces of the other are continually undoing and questioning the stability of the narrative ‘I’.

So, what’s the *difference*?

“Everything Kathy did was grand, was instantly transformed to myth” (Bellamy 2015, 140). So claims Bellamy when writing about Kathy Acker. But it was not only her transgressive and contradictory persona that which turned Acker into a maker of myths. It was also her own desire to build, as Amy Nolan writes, “a new myth to live by”

(2012, 203). Nolan refers to Acker's willingness to tell stories in an innovative manner, crafting a different sort of relationality, one that would inaugurate a radically distinctive community, unlike the “predominantly masculine model that is based largely on storytelling derived from the myth of Oedipus” (ibid., 203). However, after her death, the new myth that Acker intended *to live by* seems to have been dissuaded. As Bellamy writes, her fans came back “with a vengeance, plotting conferences, group readings, exhibitions, anthologies” (2015, 129) about her. Everyone wanted to write about Kathy; everyone wanted to become her. This proliferation of writings echoes Acker’s own prophetic words; as Kraus (2014) reminds us, “by 1995, she had become less than enchanted with her own persona”:

As she wrote to media theorist McKenzie Wark, who she’d met on tour in Australia that summer: ‘... the KATHY ACKER that YOU WANT is another MICKEY MOUSE, you probably know her better than I do. It’s media, Ken. It’s not me. Like almost all the people I know ... I’m part of a culture that doesn’t want me. ... Our only survival card is FAME’ (ibid.)

In fact, as Henderson notes, by then, “regardless of Acker’s critique of cultural commodification and romantic ideologies of creativity, “Kathy Acker” functions as both brand and signature” (2014, 542).

So, given “certain people’s attempts to control and police her image”, of trying to own her (Bellamy 2015, 130), my question immediately arises: what would set apart Bellamy’s account of Acker from those which continue to reproduce “the discursive violence of repetition” (Huffer 2013, 45) which takes place, as Irigaray would have it, on the plane of the *Same*? One appealing response to such question is that Bellamy, in her essay, embarks on the quest of hearing Acker in her alterity. Or, to put in Huffer’s terms, she stages a relationship with her through a *thinking-feeling ethics of the other*. Bellamy, in so doing, pays tribute to Acker’s refusal to let the “structures of a society [she] didn’t pick to be born into determine how [she] relate[s] to people” (Kraus 2017,

99). She opts, in turn, for writing about Acker rather by opening a space for her otherness. And this space for alterity is a particularly interesting one: as Bellamy inhabits it, she challenges the established meaning behind the act of *writing on someone*; “for to ask ‘what’s the difference?’”, Huffer rightly notes, “is to reopen the question of reading” (ibid., 44) within the task of writing itself.

The materialist practice of thinking/writing/reading together undergirds Bellamy’s urge for possessing something that belonged to Acker; in her text, the verb “to possess” plays with the multiple configurations and contours it can acquire in its several *becomings*, where *becoming* must be understood “as the eternal, productive return of difference” (Staggol 2010, 26). This *becoming-other* starts to take place as Dodie’s stuff suddenly goes missing – her “travel mug, the front of [her] car’s CD player, [her] reading glasses, [her] fountain pen, [her] kitten Sylvia’s toy”, etc. (Bellamy 2015, 135) – while Kathy’s possessions she takes from Matias’ house – a pharaoh ring and a black Gaultier dress – begin to take over her life. Rather than *possessing* Kathy’s stuff, Dodie begins *being possessed* by Acker’s belongings – “As I reach into my bag Kathy’s pharaoh’s ring slips into my pinkie” (141) – by that strange “energy that clings to things” (136). By trying to possess and yet, at once, letting herself *to be possessed* by them, she constructs a conceptual plane wherein differentiated virtual forces and voices can emerge. If Bellamy, then, asserts that “possession” is indeed “nine tenths” of Acker’s wardrobe (129), perhaps, the remaining one tenth belongs to those movements of *becoming* being mobilized as Bellamy writes about/through/with her.

On Clothes

‘Acker: *To live was to stay alive and not be reduced to materiality*’ (147)

The movements of becoming which suffuse “Digging Through Kathy Acker’s Stuff” are especially related to the intimate relationship that Bellamy forges between herself and Acker’s clothes. It is from between the *folds* of these clothes from where Bellamy writes about Acker as distinctive.

Gilles Deleuze defines the “fold” as “an instance” where “forces of the outside” fold “the inside” (O’Sullivan 2010, 107), which “is divided into folds, which are tucked inside and which spill onto the outside” (Deleuze 1993, 35). For him, anything can fold *ad infinitum* and into each other: matter, selves, animals and worlds. In fashion, this particular practice of folding becomes relevant as it offers “new ways of producing connections and assemblages between bodies and materials” (Seely 2012, 164). As the body folds into clothes, clothes fold into the body; they both *become-other* in a space of indeterminacy or, as Anneke Smelik writes, the fold creates “a double movement of liberation”: it “is freed from the body, just as the body is freed from the restrictions of material clothing” (2014, 44). As the boundary between body and matter cracks, a gap is opened, which, in turn, renders possible a practice of becoming in that who wears the garments.

An *affective* approach to fashion, as described above, fits perfectly with the plane of connections Bellamy traces between herself, Acker and Acker’s clothes. As she writes, “Kathy managed to create exactly the effect she intended” (Bellamy 2015, 132) when she wore clothes by “Gaultier, Vivienne Westwood” or “Comme des Garçons” (131), yet, “as she moved through space”, a gap “between [her] intentions and the effects” (132) she created always opened up. This gap hints at the multiple spectrums of *becoming* which affective clothes enable as they “configure bodies otherwise”, “even if the new forms of embodiment” they engender “are not permanent” (Seely 2012, 139). Kathy’s garments, as described by Bellamy, seem to possess the characteristics of *becoming* Deleuze claims belong to the fold. As Bellamy writes,

Acker’s clothes spark imaginations. It is hard “to figure out how you’re supposed to wear them”; one looks “like a gas mask”, and is hard to determine if another one looks like “an amorphous black blob” or a “ballet slipper” (Bellamy 2015, 139).

But Bellamy is not the only one infatuated by these clothes. Kaucyila Brooke, a Los Angeles based artist, in 1999, “photographed over 150 of Kathy’s outfits” (Bellamy 2015, 139). She did a “photographic study of her clothes”, featuring most of her extravagant fashions. Looking to bring out Acker’s spirit from her “little-girl white dresses, sailor suits, sophisticated black dresses” or “biker costumes” (Brooke 2013, 105), Brooke formed geometric and organic shapes with the clothes to photograph them. In an utterly chilling manner, she hanged each piece with “an aluminum hanger from invisible thread” (ibid., 105), making them “awkward and misshapen” (Bellamy 2015, 139). Her intention was indeed to transfer, “through form and fabric”, Kathy’s movement of *becoming* and “the performance” of her “different personas” to otherwise inanimate garments (Brooke 2013, 105). Echoing this fascination for Acker’s clothes, in 2006, Bellamy curated an exhibition of several of these outfits; she named it “Kathy’s Forests” (Bellamy 2007).

As with the twirling (Bellamy 2015, 139) spirit of these exhibitions, in Bellamy’s description of Acker’s clothes, there seems to be a subtle invitation to the reader to submit to these garments’ terms, to get drawn towards them and get caught between their folds. If one of “Kathy’s tiny stretchy dresses”, Bellamy writes, would have “pulled tightly across” her body, the latter would slough its skin, “oozing perspiration” (135). By way of intensities, Bellamy draws an otherworldly connection between attire and body, suggesting that Kathy’s body would indeed *become-other* in merging with the dress. In this particular relation she outlines, garment and body eerily converge in “a zone of indetermination, of indiscernibility” where “things [...] and persons [...] endlessly reach that point that immediately precedes their natural

differentiation” (Deleuze and Guattari, 173). In her words, body and cloth seem to fold into each other, spilling into “new modes of bodily being and becoming” (Seely 2012, 264).

Because the body which folds into the clothes exerts on them “an intensity of spiritual force” (Deleuze 1993, 122), without *her* body, “stuffed haphazardly in packing boxes”, “Kathy’s clothes feel devoid of will, abandoned, subverting sentimentality by their strangeness, their creepiness” (Bellamy 2015, 132). In order to *become* more, to develop their affective qualities, they need another body; in Bellamy’s essay, this body is Dodie’s. And yet, when you wear something that is not yours, Bellamy writes, “wobbly lines of energy bleed” from the garment, an energy not entirely yours yet not completely foreign; it is, in fact, like “watching 3D without your 3D glasses” (128). This energy *in-between* folds could also be read as “the gap between the subject and the other” (Huffer 2013, 59), a gap whose acknowledgement becomes an honoring of the other’s singular alterity. So, when Bellamy asks if Kathy’s energy will change her, if it will “work some spell on [her] life” (Bellamy 2015, 135), she is also putting forward the possibility of an intertextuality -literally through the clothes’ folds- which “speaks to that binding ethical openness” (Huffer 2013, 60).

This means that the fold is also, in a forceful sense, a critique of a fixed and transcendental subjectivity, one which would account for “a simple interiority and exteriority” (O’Sullivan 2010, 107). Hence, the fold can also be read as the processes of becoming taking place amongst the extended kin relationships forged in writing and reading. Mirroring how Acker’s language spends “words anarchically, allowing them to play and to be unconstrained” (Henderson 2017, 206), Bellamy writes about Kathy’s clothes as they “shift and twist”, as they keep uttering the words “*listen to me listen to me*” (Bellamy 2015, 147). Perhaps this comes down to saying that, in Bellamy’s account, clothes open, as Huffer would put it, “the ethical, narrative, and performative

space of alterity that is repetition with a difference” (2013, 56). In their *folds* and *becomings*, they open for the subject a gap wherein to hear and read the singularity of the other.

On Language

Writ[h]e: v. ‘To change or fashion *into* [...] some form [...] by wreathing or twisting’ (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2017).

There are many ways of inhabiting the space for difference opened up by Acker’s eccentric garments. Bellamy’s embodied use of language is one way of doing so. Just like Acker’s clothes open up a plane of relations as they *fold*, Bellamy’s language aesthetics apprehends how, either overtly or covertly, words bring together the elusive performance of two alterities coming nearer, of one relentlessly folding onto the other.

One gets the sense, in Bellamy, that language is above all a matter of the body. Indeed, evocations of the body recur throughout her work, often in unanticipated ways. As Christopher Breu observes, she “presents [...] body and language as interpenetrating and partially mutually determining, yet also as crucially distinct and discontinuous” (2012, 272). Such a coexistence persists all along her essay on Acker. As Bellamy tries to write about “Kathy’s unwashed Gaultier dress” which “sits on [her] dresser” (Bellamy 2015, 143), she articulates her relationship to Acker not as a “site or a space” but as “an energy” (Perrault 1998, 194). She writes the movement of her body. In so doing, she makes the reader aware of her bodily situation in relation to Acker’s dress: “I write: Kathy’s Gaultier dress sits on my dresser, me on my bed writhing and grunting” (Bellamy 2015, 143). Here, *writing* folds into *writhing*; the twists these words make bring us into the intersubjective “present tense” (46) of Bellamy’s piece,

wherein language is embodied, just as dresses are worn. Yet, Bellamy's body in movement is not the only one reenacted with her words; for instance, as she writes "Memory: Kathy holding court in a femmy short plaid dress, empire style, tight around her bust then flaring out" (132), she also recreates Acker's bodily presence. Bellamy's emphasis on this image being in fact a sudden memory which interrupts her narrative linearity lets the reader experience this presence in all its alterity, just like those moments on TV when "the image" would "suddenly pixilate, disrupting the predictable flow" (143).

But it is in Bellamy's text quoting Acker directly where she incorporates not only her body, but also her voice: "Acker: I was wild because I was protected—I could do anything—who was going to touch me—really touch me like those others, like those poor people in the world—are touched?" (132). In so doing, she creates a space, within her narrative, where Acker can speak; she opens, through the self-othering power of language, the possibility of the other folding into her own self. Therein, Acker's voice can ask "*who was going to touch me—really touch me (...)?*" (132), while Bellamy can perform figuratively this *touching* action. In *keeping in touch* with Acker's words, Bellamy gives way to a language structured through a whirling configuration, where what matters is not "meaning", but rather "accident, pattern, connection" (148).

"Burroughs said that cut-ups predict the future. But it's not just cut-ups. Intense writing creates a vortex and the world opens to be read" (148); so writes Bellamy talking about Acker's way of merging words and worlds. This attempt to write the porousness of the borderlines where two singularities encounter is perhaps that which best captures the concept of the "barf", which Bellamy inaugurates "as a literary form" in her piece "Barf Manifesto", published together with this text. For her, "The Barf is feminist, unruly, cheerfully, monstrous"; "[it] is expansive as the Blob, swallowing and recontextualizing, spreading out and engorging. Its logic is associative, it proceeds by

chords rather than single, discrete notes” (2015, 63-64). Her essays are *barfs*. In her essay on Acker, as “in the great toilet bowl of memoir” (49), Bellamy’s words collide with Acker’s.

The passage where she alternates fragments from a series of Acker’s texts with an experimental reflection on talismans clearly illustrates this idea. It becomes the perfect example of a language featuring “deconstructed ‘80s and ‘90s glitz” (132). It follows the episode where Dodie unearths “some kind of mojo bottle” which belonged to Kathy at Matias’ house, which she describes as “a rectangular bottle filled with brightly colored liquid”, “floating herbs” and “other unrecognizable stringy things” (137). Grounding her words on yet another object belonging to Acker and paralleling the oft-cited cut-up technique, Bellamy juxtaposes a series of definitions of various mojos - “Mojo for the return of an estranged lover”, “Mojo to remove a jinx”, “Mojo for a wish to come true”- with a spell of her own: “I got my black cat bone, all pure and dry / I got a four-leaf clover, all hangin’ high./ Got my hoodoo ashes all around your bed / Got my black snake roots underneath your hair” (138). And, amidst these words, as if invoked by Bellamy’s chant, we once again hear Kathy speaking: “Acker: My body has gone crazy. Shit lies over everything, the counterspace, the windowsill. Dripping down” (138). Here, by way of incorporating a “collage-rendered narrative” (Nolan 2012, 204), different chords of being are harmonized, possible worlds are brought together into new frames and the voice of the other is recontextualized with every iteration.

Yet, as Avital Ronnel puts it, citations are also linked to an evocative memory of the other in its difference, because “when we cite and recite, when we quote the other, we are calling to the irreplaceable one for whom there is no substitute” (2008, 229).

Acker: *Inside my house, I started to scream. I couldn't stop. Mucus poured out of my nose and mouth. I had been coughing convulsively for days. My body is a scream. I got a gypsy woman givin' me advice/ I got some red hot tips I got to keep on ice./ I got a rabbit foot, I know it's workin' right/ I got a strand of hair I'm keepin' day and night. Acker: Our father who beginneth all things I will not collude with you I will not die* (Bellamy 2015, 138).

As the passage cited above shows, Bellamy is not claiming possession over Acker's words; she is rather letting them exist on their own. One might situate this "folding -or doubling- "of Bellamy's "own thought into the thought of another" (O'Sullivan 2010, 107) in what Huffer recognizes as "language's performative force" (2013, 41), a force which "is not under [our] control, though sometimes it seems that way" (*ibid.*, 41). This is because, in language, the presence of the other is always putting the self and its supposed knowledge into question: it becomes a force of unknowing.

At the same time, this adheres to the question brought up by Breu when pondering on Bellamy's bodily aesthetics: "How are we to understand this paradoxical injunction to both write the body and recognize the impossibility of doing so?" (2012, 271). Or, put yet another way, Bellamy recognises that writing the body, that is, framing alterity within language, constitutes a practice which challenges a totalizing system of representation; it is, echoing Nolan's notes on Acker's narrative, a "constant interruption of the conventional drive toward unity and meaning" (2012, 205). This is made clearer when Dodie writes about herself in the third-person, parsing her own body in two within a recipe for voodoo:

On the internet I find that to inflict pain on Dodie, all you need is:
2 black candles
A voodoo doll
Nail clippings on hair follicles or any item belonging to Dodie
Pins or another sharp object (Bellamy 2015, 136-137)

Gesturing towards Huffer’s words, one might say that, alongside its capacity for revealing an ongoing negotiation “between identification and disidentification”, the voodoo metaphor embodies a concept of alterity which both grounds and challenges “the narrative dimension of subjectivity and belonging” (Huffer 2013, 58). In many ways, Bellamy renders visible the radical impossibility underpinning the logics of alterity, a disruptive force which throws both the narrative and the I out of balance.

And it is precisely this disruptive force that comes to mind when we think about Bellamy’s emphasis on Matias’ house having a *labyrinth* structure, on being “a world of basements within basements within sub-basements like Dario Argento’s film *Inferno*” (Bellamy 2015, 130). Indeed, her depiction of Matias’ house bursts with phrases hoarding the narrative. One might say that her choice of words is longitudinal; it is “overflowing with books, discarded electronics, boxes” (125). Bellamy’s narrative *creates* space, making the reader aware of the “**sharply angled** ceiling” (125), the “concrete patio **scattered** with photo lamps” or “the dressing room’s still **crammed** with men’s clothing” (125). And her use of language echoes what Nolan points out about Acker, how, with her words, she seems to “evoke multilayered labyrinths, wherein pieces of the structure are missing, in ruins, and paths are overgrown with reiterative, weed-like language.” (2012, 201).

Indeed, Bellamy’s words flow in multiple directions. She deploys a language structure which mirrors Acker’s own “architectural” forms. By which I refer, following Henderson, to the primacy of a narrative which spaces out geographically rather than in a “temporal or logical” layout (2017, 210). She succeeds in putting together an “angled” narrative, where “amidst its gothic angles and secret rooms”, the reader must “slip [herself] into a state of mystery and suspicion” (Bellamy 2015, 126); she must “navigate her way through the text, as if stepping over the ruins of a lost city” (Nolan 2012, 205).

For Deleuze, architecture – like clothes – is also related to folds; yet, when in relation to buildings and their correspondent levels folding into one another, the Deleuzian fold takes a new turn: it now “involves an opening up of the closed chamber of the upper floor and the concomitant affirmation of difference, contact and communication” (O’Sullivan 2010, 108). So, if we think of Bellamy’s language alongside Matias’ house, where “shooting off of every room is another room, as if the house were continuously spouting new limbs” (Bellamy 2015, 125), one might note how her words also *sprout new limbs* – disruptive, unpredictable limbs – as they open up their *closed upper chamber* and fold into Acker’s. Here, the self is no longer written as fixed, rather as open to transformation, a transformation which “is the site of the mutable self-engaging with language” (Perrault 1998, 194). A language, in turn, which is “full of trapdoors” (Bellamy 2015, 129).

On Friendship

But what does Kathy’s affective clothes or Bellamy’s performative language have to do with Bellamy and Acker’s virtual relationship, or, for that matter, with their *friendship*?

For Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the friendship exercised in philosophical thought is always “traversed by a fissure” (1994, 206) as it consists of processes of becoming which bring “two thinkers together as singular subjects in thought” (Schonner 2010). Alterity, in this understanding of friendship, is spoken, rather than kept silent. In her essay, Bellamy reckons with Acker’s alterity, as she sees herself in relation to her, without erasing either of them. This act of seeing is grounded on a politics of disidentification (Huffer 2013, 57). Bellamy writes: “[w]e both knew that if we came too close it would have been *Godzilla meets Mothra, screeches and roars, scales and feathers flying*” (2015, 133). This disassociation becomes crucial, as it

underpins the critical practice of self-undoing, which Huffer claims being central to an *ethics of the other*.

Reading Avital Ronell’s essay on her *friendship* to Kathy Acker, which the title of this section partially “mimes and recites” (Ronell 2008, 228), gave me a deeper grasp of Bellamy’s connection to Acker. Ronell puts forward the clear disjunction between a friendship grounded on “narcissism, where I claim the friend is a part of me”, and one which recognizes alterity, where one does not aim to “operate a reduction of the friend to the same or to the friend as other” (ibid., 234). Remembering Kathy’s way of creating bonds with others “wherever she went” (ibid., 231), Ronell outlines an understanding of friendship rooted in community, but a community which does not rely “on transcendence—a community without communion, without fascistic bonding rituals or strangulating close ties” (ibid., 231).

Yet, how does one construct a *friendly* narrative where the self is included and, all at the same time, the duties to a friendship with the other are paid? You let your friends be your ghosts, Bellamy would say, and “if you care for your ghosts, you leave them offerings of food” (Bellamy 2015, 145). Feeding your ghosts, for her, is writing about them, or rather writing together with them. It is letting them live and think inside of you, without attempting to contain their otherness: “Acker: *I want to live, I really really want to live*” (145). “This essay is food for Kathy”, Bellamy writes, and later on, “[t]he dead are uncontainable, all we can do is greet them, allow them their otherness. Hello, Kathy, I humble myself before your otherness, an otherness I will never comprehend. I promise I won’t even try” (145). It is as if Bellamy was also inhabiting Irigaray’s words in *When Our Lips Speak Together*, where Irigaray speaks to a ‘you’ in order to assure her she is part of her skin, that she is one who avows for her existence, yet she is not her duplicate, her counterpart nor her copy (1999, 89).

Bellamy's affinity with Acker reenacts an understanding of friendship which gestures towards Irigaray's ideas, as it involves divergences and rifts which, in their difference, are all the same powerful. In her narrative performance, she reconstructs her friendship to Acker in a textual space, visualizing how when we write and think together with others, friendship also becomes an *act of thought*. Yet, this *act of thought*, in its staging, goes beyond a friendship constituted by two. As the concept of friendship is rewritten, it becomes "the readable site of an inscriptional relation to an *other*" (Huffer 2013, 46). Put yet in a different way, in consonance with an extended conception of kinship relations, Bellamy is going beyond a mere inclusion of Acker's voice; she is moving horizontally towards other voices, in order to transform her 'I', her point of enunciation, into a "third person" pronoun (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 65). For instance, in the passage below, her voice folds into Acker's and Acker's voice folds into Pamela Lee's, another writer mentioned by Bellamy:

The students complain they can't read their assignment, so I find a white piece of chalk. It's still difficult to write, but I finally manage to scratch out: "Write about a box—or build a box—that represents the otherness of death." Acker: *Let one of art criticism's languages be silence so that we can hear the sounds of the body: winds and voices from far-off shores, the sounds of the unknown.* Pamela Lee: *The subject loses its borders—its figure—in succumbing to "the lure of space."* Acker: *Over and over again, in our false acts of absolute judgment and criticism, we deny the realm of death* (Bellamy 2015, 133).

The performative force of language, while following a narrative, nods towards the ethical dimensions of intersubjectivity. It embodies a "responsiveness to others—a heightened form of relationality" (Poletti 2018) which is both material and affective. Their friendship plays a scene where Bellamy is able to think with Acker, but also with other writers cited in her essay such as Kevin Killian (Bellamy 2015, 129) or Thurston Moore (132), and, by affinity, with thinkers such as Luce Irigaray and Lynne Huffer, amongst others. She is able to feel their alterity, to touch and be touched by their words.

* * *

I have tried, in these brief meditations, through an exploration of Acker’s affective garments and Bellamy’s performative language, to interrogate the ways in which Dodie Bellamy stages her friendship to Kathy Acker. This friendship, as I have shown, seems to be rooted, recalling Huffer’s words, in a narrative performance which enacts a *thinking-feeling ethics of the other*. The broader significance of Bellamy’s piece, thus, lies in that it demonstrates how writing becomes itself an aesthetic act when it enables us to see a greater complexity in the relations we have with ourselves (it enables a self-undoing, an act of unknowing) and with others (it recognizes alterity). Following Henderson, one might say that in “Digging Through Kathy Acker’s Stuff”, “the writing remain[s] punk” and Acker’s “persona remain[s] abrasively punk, to the end and beyond” (Henderson 2014, 548). By which I mean that Bellamy shows how the concept of *friendship* can reach expansion and be kept alive, shaped and reshaped, in the contours of the essay, as an event, with its comingling points of enunciation and possible worlds in flux.

It remains to be restated, lastly, that Bellamy’s essay interrogates and rethinks the structures of language and telling, as she makes us reconsider how can stories which perform this kind of friendship can be political (Huffer 2013, 23). Here, I understand *politics* in Jacques Rancière’s terms, as the act of always effecting a redistribution, a reconfiguration of what is understood as static in the structures of the common world. It is precisely in this way that Bellamy’s piece can be understood as political, inasmuch as in her writing she reenacts the gap between “identification and disidentification’ [...], subject and other, narrator and narratee, text and world” (ibid., 57) where an ethical relation of friendship starts to take place. It is only in this sense that, for

Bellamy, wearing Kathy's words and clothes, in all its "tantalizing intimacy", becomes "a tribute to her" (Bellamy 2015, 128).

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