

A Human Is a Being Halfway Between an Alligator and a Bird Who Wants to Be a Bird:
Blood and Guts in Kathy Acker's Bestiary

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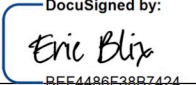
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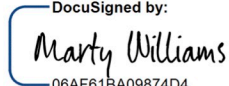
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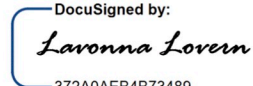
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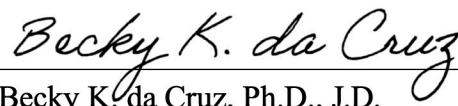
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ABSTRACT

The writing of Kathy Acker from the 1970s to the 1990s has been analyzed extensively for its critique of capitalism and patriarchal norms, for its punk aesthetic, for its cut-and-paste, plagiaristic style. It has been critiqued for its explicit sexuality and willingness to carve a feminist path decidedly different from that of her contemporaries. Her explicit, continued reference to animals, however, has gone largely unexplored. It is a surprising omission, as Acker's depiction of animals is not ancillary to her broader feminist critiques or those rooted in the poststructural theory that so captivated her. Animals are central to both her storytelling and the theory that undergirds it, though her depictions of and arguments about animals changed over the course of her career, best understood as traversing a bell curve. She begins her career by finding liberatory possibility in nonhuman species until she finally reaches apotheosis in a becoming-animal, the ultimate weapon in her battle against limiting human power structures. As the curve bends back toward a baseline, Acker begins in her later career to question the viability of such embodiments, and animals begin to assert themselves more forcefully as agents who have their own interests, beings with value outside of any human gaze. That conflict ultimately redounds to open animal hostility toward human engagement as her writing, cut short by a cancer that would kill her in 1997, comes to an end. This thesis tracks the trajectory of her representation of animals over the course of her career.

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“Of Acker’s writing about the animal world, about humans that become animal and vice-versa, and Acker’s personal love of her nonhuman companions (real and stuffed), a whole other book could be written.”

—Jason McBride

INTRODUCTION

The List to Call the Animals Back Home

Sometime, most likely in 1988, Kathy Acker wrote a review of Suzanne Kappeler's *The Pornography of Representation*, a book that she found problematic in a variety of ways. One of Kappeler's more troublesome metaphors, for Acker, is a comparative model that "links a human devaluation of animals or anthropocentricity to sexism" (Acker, "Representations and Misrepresentations," Box 23, Folder 11). Acker quotes Kappeler quoting John Berger, who argues, in Kappeler's telling, "What distinguished man from (women) was the human capacity for symbolic thought" (Kappeler 68; Berger 9). But as Acker explains, "In Berger's book, the word 'women' is actually the word 'animals.'" Acker criticizes the transposition: "It's no longer necessary to use the oppression of black people or of animals to explain women's social conditions. That historically and at present the male hegemony control human culture is a fact by itself" (Acker, "Representations and Misrepresentations," Box 23, Folder 11).

It is a strange criticism coming from Acker, who would consistently use animals to "present the male hegemony control human culture" in her novels, despite its standing as a fact by itself. Even her familiarity with Berger demonstrates Acker's concern for the theoretical underpinnings of the role of animals in human gender dynamics. Her criticism, then, is less a rejection of the metaphor itself, and instead a rejection of the way Kappeler marshals that metaphor. She is, for Acker, too straightforward, too on the nose. Species dispossession does not exist with human gender dispossession in a one-to-one ratio. Species dispossession circles around gender dispossession in a kind of kinetic venn diagram that elides such simplistic

comparisons. Animals have been and can be used by the powerful as a tool of patriarchal control; they have been and can also be used by women and other dispossessed humans as vehicles of liberation. There is no gendered construct that doesn't refract animality from multiple points through multiple lenses. Reducing the lightfields of that entanglement to a pinprick on a dark wall, sourced by a unidirectional beam reflected from a mirror, she seems to be saying, is an act of unenlightening reductivity that confuses more than it clarifies. To adequately capture the refraction would take, say, a lifetime of speculative fiction, filtered through multiple theoretical models.

So that is what Acker did.

And for all of Kathy Acker's passion for theory, it was fiction that gave her the best vehicle for such refractions. "To identify," she argues, "is to enter into fiction, to have a fictional relationship with the self; it is this fictionalizing, it is the imagination-made-actual that allows happiness" (Acker, *Statements*, Box 23, Folder 15). So much of Acker's imagination-made-actual engaged the human relationship with animals. While elements of that relationship as depicted in her novels remained static, hers was largely an evolving depiction of other species, one that ranged from abject fear to full embodiment and becoming. Her thinking about animals can best be understood as her own halting version of a bell curve. She begins her career by finding in nonhuman species a liberatory possibility in the quest for that seemingly elusive identity until she finally reaches apotheosis in a becoming-animal, the ultimate weapon in her battle against limiting human power structures. As the curve bends back toward a baseline, Acker begins in her later career to question the viability of such embodiments, and animals begin to assert themselves more forcefully as agents who have their own interests, beings with value outside of any human gaze. That conflict ultimately redounds to open animal hostility toward

human engagement as her writing, cut short by a cancer that would kill her in 1997, comes to an end.

Within the maelstrom of that kinesis, however, Acker's animal vision maintains decidedly static elements. She consistently depicts a hierarchy of dispossessions within human civilization rooted in the vicissitudes of capital, gender, and species, a structure built with intentionality to give preference to those wealthy, male, and human—and to exclude everyone else. That animals are always part of Acker's "everyone" distinguishes her version of capital and gender analysis just as much as her more analyzed sexual exhibitionism, extending her critiques of class and patriarchy into more expansive, capacious spaces, where the human supremacy underlying both ties them together and undergirds all orderings rooted in cultural construction. That she did so as she began her writing career at the onset of the 1970s was fortuitous. Though she was not part of the animal rights movement, its modern incarnation really began contemporaneously with Acker's early experiments in fiction. Richard Ryder coined the term "speciesism" in an anti-vivisection pamphlet in 1970, and it was popularized by Peter Singer in the years that followed, bringing the movement out of what Robert Garner and Yewande Okuleye have described as "a long period of quietism" from the 1920s to the 1960s (79-80).¹ And though Acker's theoretical impulses went in decidedly different directions than those of animal activists, her connection to and understanding of nonhuman species remained a vital part of her life and her writing for the remainder of the century.

¹ Speciesism, Ryder argued, was "the widely held belief that the human species is inherently superior to other species and so has rights or privileges that are denied to other sentient animals." It could certainly encompass oppression and physical cruelty, but oppression and cruelty were not necessary. Speciesism was any set of "beliefs and behaviours if they are based upon the species-difference alone, as if such a difference is, in itself, a justification" for those beliefs and behaviors (Ryder quoted in Corman and Calling 36-37). Singer concurred, seeing speciesism as "a prejudice or attitude of bias toward the interest of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species," and argued that it could only be properly understood in relation to other dispossessions like sexism and racism (7).

Unlike those seeking the liberation of animals, however, Acker's concern is always for her own liberation through animals. Hers is a quest for identity in which nonhuman species always play a role. "The intense subjectivity of Acker's prose is itself a weapon of becoming," argues Douglas Shields Dix. "Rather than allowing herself to be identified on the molar level as a member of a group, she subverts these segmentations through her intense emotion, the intense suffering that she expresses as a result of the pain the various social/political assemblages are causing her" (57). Acker is engaged in "deconstructing the binary distinction between interior and exterior, self and society, subjective and objective, the personal and the political" (59). What Dix and so many others miss, however, is Acker's deconstruction of the binary distinction subsuming all the rest, that of human animal and nonhuman animal. Subjectivity, identity on the molar level, is broken down most effectively when disowning species, or at least in disowning fealty to species as a marker of identity. Claire Finch, for example, describes what she calls Acker's "literary prosthetics," additions to traditional form that posit "an ontology of sensation as an alternative to the supposed reality of surface meaning and representation" (63). Finch never mentions animals as part of the prosthetic process, but they become in Acker's hands ideal representatives of an ontology of sensation, one that challenges surface meaning. Glenn A. Harper has noted that Acker's "dog motif" in *Don Quixote* (discussed further in Chapter 5) is "a projection of her basic anti-humanism, a position that separates her from most American feminist writing," but doesn't carry the analysis farther than that, leaving dogs behind in favor of more strictly human concerns (51). Margaret Henderson similarly acknowledges that Acker's "radical and explicit sexual and anti-capitalist politics" come attendant with an "anti-humanist poetics," but never elaborates on the shape and scope of that anti-humanism ("Reviewing" 44). But her anti-humanist poetics are always there, hiding in plain sight from so many of her adherents and

critics; their ubiquity both bounds and enhances her sexual and anti-capitalist crusades in ways that make them fundamentally unique from those of her contemporaries.

And, fittingly, that anti-humanist poetics is also an integral part of her own conception of identity. “Acker wants an authentic identity that makes potent claims against alienation and assimilation and works as a site of resistance to social disciplines” (Clune 498). At the same time, Michael Clune argues, any “authentic experience is traumatic because it removes the comfortable, numbing shield of prescribed identities and exposes the person to real contact with the world” (511). But if authenticity could be found within the natural world outside the human-social, resistance can come attendant without latent trauma. Embodying animals, or enlisting them in a resistance project, allows Acker to “recontextualize the body of antiquity within a modern avant-garde framework for new radical purposes” (Colby, “Reappropriation” 8). Animals allow her to “transgress a politically imposed inexpressibility” on certain aspects of human culture, giving voice, even in their lack of human language to that which is “anathematized and censored by the conventional aesthetic of the prevailing culture” (Colby, “Reappropriation” 9).

Or, framed differently, Acker’s “revolution was not for the restoration of any identity,” McKenzie Wark argues. “Not for their adding of ever more identities to an official list. It is a revolution to unleash the generative, generous capacity of non-identity—for anyone and everyone” (155). And in a world wherein identity is rooted in a web of constructed human meanings, the path to non-identity is through those without the weight of human coding, giving them freedom but also a lightness of being valued in particular by those freighted with crises of identity or identities, all of them tied directly to the body.

“The Western attitude towards the body in the twentieth century has to do with the fact that when reality (or the meanings associated with reality) is up for grabs—which is one of the central problems ever since the end of the nineteenth century—then the body becomes the only thing you can return to,” Acker explained in 1991. “It’s in the body finally which we can’t be touched by all our skepticism and ambiguous systems of belief. The body is the only place where any basis for real values exists anymore” (McCaffery 93). At the same time, however, Arthur F. Redding notes that for Acker, “the body and the discourse in which it is enfolded are not distinct entities at their schizophrenic limit” (284). The irony of Acker’s work is that in her characters’ search for bodily subjecthood (Nolan 201), what she called in one interview “the fullness of what it is to be human,” the path to that human subjectivity comes most readily by way of a path through the nonhuman, the animal (Juno 184). Though seemingly paradoxical, and certainly deviating from the traditional hero’s journey, Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope remind us that when “women are portrayed as heroes, their journeys do not conform to traditional theory” (177). Acker’s heroes are certainly non-conformist, but there is, in truth, a long history dating at least to the Greek mythology Acker relied upon so much for her own storytelling of human and animal interaction and transformation in aid of achieving heroic ends. Perhaps, then, she is less engaged in a rejection of conformity when it comes to her treatment of animals, and more pursuing a selective conformity that hues more closely in certain ways to the ancient myths than humanist critics are able to see.

There are, of course, legitimate impediments to a vision of such hueings. Acker’s fiction “displays female desire as a process whose vicissitudes impede a reader’s attempt to distinguish between two master narratives about female desire,” one seeking to “enable the female subject as an absolute entity,” and the other trying to “deconstitute or prohibit a woman’s being in favor of

becoming” (Sciolino 438). If “women’s desires” are the products of social construction, civilizational myths told by a largely masculine power structure, “how can one write a revolution to find a space for her own desires when she is already written by patriarchy?” asks Martina Sciolino of the Ackerian project. The answer, at least in part, is through escaping the human structures of patriarchy by moving rhetorically into nonhuman representation.

Acker’s is, in the words of Gayatri Spivak, an “appeal to or ‘call’ to the ‘quite other’” (294), and Melissa Tanti notes that this “quite other” that Acker seeks “refers to welcoming an other that is not the self-consolidating other—the one ‘like me’ on which liberal frameworks are based—but the radically other with the potential to unseat me” (4). That radical other, one without corollaries for the human self, finds its most translatable form in nonhuman animals, beings with which humans are familiar, but at the same time beings that are wholly unfamiliar in so many ways.

“The problem with expression is that it is too narrow a basis for writing,” Acker argues, “for it is pinned to knowledge, knowledge which is mainly rational. I trust neither my ability to know nor what I think I know. Moreover, the excitement of writing for me, is that of a journey into strangeness” (*Bodies of Work* viii). At the same time, however, she did feel confident to know certain things. In one of her notebooks, Acker writes that “everything in the world is alive and I understand what animals say. I’ve always been this way.” She travels into the woods and communes with woodpeckers and cardinals. “The squirrels run right up to me, but I don’t have any food. They’re angry because they’re wasting their time. ‘Angry’ is the wrong word. I don’t have trouble understanding the squirrels but I find it hard to translate into this language. Not angry—more like ‘I’m not good enough.’ Squirrels want to overrun the world just so they can eat everything. The possums & the coons & the skunks & the badgers & the deer are something

else. They stay in the woods” (Acker, “End of Poetry,” Box 19, Folder 8). Acker’s ability to “understand” the animals connects her to the natural world through access that most humans do not possess, that disconnect made all the more prevalent through her stated inability to translate that understanding into human speech. Translation is less important to her because the human is pedestrian. “This,” on the other hand, “is magic,” she writes. “I am making the woods” (Acker, “End of Poetry,” Box 19, Folder 8).

So much of Acker’s work is magic, a repetitive attempt to “make the woods.” Her characters “dream themselves into existences of hysterical suffering and sublime ambiguity in order to avoid confronting pain and extermination” (126), Lynn Hughey argues, often taking the form of animals who undoubtedly experience their own pain, are victims of regular mass extermination. But in Acker’s fictional worldmaking, they are a compensatory escape from such suffering, a representative of the natural world outside the bounds of human civilization. They are “sublime forms of mysticism,” Hughey notes, “illustrating the transgressive potential of revelation,” that which comes from outside the recognized, lived reality of those receiving the revelatory message (129). Much of that mysticism comes from a cut-and-paste style, wherein Acker plagiarizes canonical texts and modifies them to her own ends, again as a method of finding subjectivity.² The cut-and-paste approach is another method of her non-conforming conformity, an analogue, as Edward S. Robinson notes, for “the formation of identity in the postmodern world” (169). It also adheres to what Fredric Jameson referred to as “pastiche,” one that serves as a counter to “healthy linguistic normality” as prescribed by the patriarchal order

² Martina Sciolino describes Acker’s plagiarisms as kleptoparasitical, as fundamentally animal in nature. “A kleptoparasite is a spider that appropriates another’s web and eats the prey they entrapped there.” Acker steals “narrative webs, but it is not easy to tell what victims are coiled in these already woven fictions” (63). Acker herself admitted as much. “I make nothing new, create nothing: I’m a sort of mad journalist, a journalist without a paid assignment” (Acker, “A Few Notes,” Box 19, Folder 4).

that she is critiquing (Jameson 65). As Acker herself notes, “Novels which structurally depend on the Aristotelian continuities, on any formal continuities, cannot describe, much less criticize” (“William Burroughs” 2).

Acker’s novels “develop a sort of mythic space and cyclical, non-linear time that folds back upon itself and repeats, where events from vastly differing temporal moments are presented simultaneously and often more than once” (Worthington 394). Their inherent argument, then, is that space and time are culturally constructed just as are the gender binaries that force women into subservient, docile roles. Recruiting the animal to confront those artificial binaries, Acker emphasizes those who exist outside human construction, outside the human conception of time and the sanctioned areas of civilized space. Her human female characters seek to overcome a vulnerability created by such constructed binaries; they “search for spaces which could be their own, over which they might have autonomy” (Worthington 398). The human social prison of time and space, male and female, baked into the understanding of civilization itself, leads many of those characters to seek respite outside the bounds of the human social entirely, to see animality as a model of rebellion against linear time, static space, and the seemingly immutable gender hierarchy that pervades human institutional structures.

“The problem of feminine subjectivity is a textual, as well as a sexual, one,” argues Karen Brennan, as women become objects of both “discourse and desire” (246). Jacques Lacan, with whom Acker would wrestle often, goes so far as to deny the possibility of feminine subjectivity (“God” 145), one of many Lacanian entanglements Acker attempts to unwind. Luce Irigaray’s own counter is that Lacan never addresses the possibility of any feminine articulation, nor the ability of those in power to hear it. And that was a strategic move, for in raising such issues “it might mean that there may be some other logic, one that upsets his own. That is, a logic

that challenges mastery” (90). Acker’s own ability to marshal logics on the other side of mastery to challenge those in power certainly relies on the human feminine, but also on the embodied logics of those outside the human altogether, extending Irigaray’s Lacanian critique by widening her species lens.

Irigaray, to whom Acker often returned, explains the commodified woman as being “divided into two irreconcilable ‘bodies’: her ‘natural’ body and her socially valued, exchangeable body” (180). Acker’s engagement of animals across the breadth of her work is a demonstration of her own discontentment with such a binary dialectic; there is, she argues, a third body, that of the animal, the biological being outside of social construction, one that, unlike Irigaray’s “natural” body allows for a total escape from the confines of the human. For Lacan, meanwhile, naming provides bodily integrity, and naming is a function of paternal law and social custom (*Le séminaire* 202). Selfhood, then, has the patriarchy baked into it, yet another reason to find escape through those whose bodily integrity is not tied to human nomination.

As Richard House explains in relation to Acker’s work, “We have good reason to be suspicious of anthropocentric, narcissistic narratives of history in which all credit goes to autonomous human agents” (453), and in plagiarizing canonical texts of the past in aid of attacking “the presumed autonomy of the liberal, bourgeois individual subject” (453), Acker makes that suspicion manifest, using animals and animality as a weapon against anthropocentrism and the assumed infallibility of human agency. When Derrida asks, “Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a ‘coded’ or iterable utterance?” (*Signature Event Context* 18), Acker’s animals scream their approximation of YES.

There is here room for Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, as those dispossessed can use the tools of their dispossession against their oppressors, can take that which is considered defiled

or outside social norms and revel in it as a way to destabilize culturally-constructed meanings (202). In a human society built on the mass slaughter of billions of nonhuman animals, reveling in the animal through embodiment, proximity, or alliance is its own destabilizing tool, an enacted praxis of Kristeva's theoretical paradigm.

When asked in an interview about works detailing new structures for women, Acker cited both Kristeva and Irigaray (Acker, "Interview," Box 19, Folder 5). In a discourse on Colette, Acker notes Irigaray's emphasis on masculinist discourses that frame female sexuality as a "lack" or "atrophy," a disappearance of the feminine in a society dictated by gendered power relationships.³ Colette herself became a kind of model for Acker, but fit Irigaray's paradigm when her husband, whom she soon left, published her first novel as his own. Acker focuses in particular on "Les Vrilles de la Vigne," a short story Colette published soon after her separation, wherein a nightingale sings until "a vine wrapped up her limbs, imprisoning her, imprisoning her mouth, during the sexual nighttime. The bird escapes and now sings all day and night so that she will never again be imprisoned" (Acker, "Colette," Box 22, Folder 11). Thus by combining the work of Irigaray and Colette, Acker finds an escapist identity in the animal, and the bird in particular, as a coping mechanism for the disappearance of women in modern sex and society.

In one set of her private notes, Acker attempts to work out her thinking on the body, reminding herself to remember Judith Butler's "discussion of Irigaray's dissection, deconstruction of Plato's discussion of materiality." She has similar problems with the Platonic ideal. "I am female because I can point to certain genitalia, thus according to Plato the female does not partake of form." For Acker, "the body as material is based on certain philosophical &

³ Acker, in another document, lists Irigaray as one the women writers who are most important to her. "Theory leads to passion," she says in explanation (Acker, "Ten out of Many," Box 23, Folder 16).

political presuppositions, those of the phallogocentric society. In other words, & please excuse my long-winded minor discourse, we do not know what the body is outside phallogocentric formations” (Acker, “Notes: Subject of conference,” Box 28, Folder 9). But as Butler, Irigaray, Plato, and Acker are all referring to the human female form, Acker finds a way out of the Platonic trap by embodying an animality, either in sex or in fiction, as a way to defeat, at least temporarily, those phallogocentric formations generated by the paternalism of human social structures.

She cites Kristeva’s *Soleil Noir* in describing an effort to overcome “states that those who deem to themselves incomplete or unwhole, identities only partly conceived by some Creator.” For Kristeva, by way of Acker, those with such identity problems “are cured, to the extent there is a cure, eased and brought to peace by the transformation of the ambiguities of language into verbal music” (Acker, “Current Reading,” Box 22, Folder 14). For Acker, that music comes from a literature of the nonhuman, songs sung from the mouths of animals.

And one of the literatures she admired most was that of William S. Burroughs, another progenitor of the kind of cut-and-paste technique that Acker employed. In an essay on Burroughs, Acker emphasizes the centrality of identity to his work, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s own conceptions of identity, which were so important to her own thinking about becoming and animality. “Indeed, one could see that a great deal of early theory constituted an attack, and therefore a kind of continuation (I am thinking here of the work of Jacques Lacan), an attack on the Oedipal model, Freud’s picture of identity” (Acker, “Burroughs on Burroughs,” Box 22, Folder 8). It is clear that Acker triangulated much of her thinking about both social and familial identity on the works of those like Deleuze, Guattari, and Lacan, using the prototype of Burroughs’s form to frame her response.

Acker's obsession with Burroughs directly affected her conception of becoming-animal. She and McKenzie Wark discussed "The Lemon Kid," a Burroughs short story about "becoming wolf" (Acker and Wark 19). In "The Lemon Kid," Aubrey Carsons and his friend Jerry smoke opium and snort cocaine before literally becoming-wolf, "in a cool limestone cave licking the sheep blood off each other they are covered with it from head to foot it's been a great night with the sheep and they laugh at those stupid ranchers and often carried poisoned meat for miles in their jaws and flip it into ranch yards to kill the yapping yellow-toothed wolfhounds" (9). After Jerry is killed by a hunter, the story moves on from the wolves, but that kind of animal-embodiment-as-representation-of-human-transgressive-behavior would be a tactic from which Acker liberally borrowed.

Acker's books "are designed to force a confrontation between readers and all conventions" (McCaffery 218). She "grossly and violently exaggerates the effects of the material structures of late twentieth-century American society" to make clear her critique of power relations, those of capital and gender (Fare 98), but also of the humanity at the root of those structures themselves. Glenn A. Harper sees Acker's "project [a]s a deconstructive attack on the retentive and protentive dissolution of the immediate under the domination of social power" (44). She "wants to step outside the discourse of commodification and the socially constructed self" (46). If the immediate is a function of human time-stamping, just as socially constructed as the human, commodified self, then engaging the animal becomes the light at the end of a particularly dark tunnel. Acker's work "signposts a deeper reality and way of life premised on a rejection of the conventional codes of dress, grooming, language, taste, and behavior" (Henderson, "Kathy Is a Punk," 539), a rejection lived by all of those existing beyond such codes, namely those not

within the scope of human civilization. To be a rebel, to be a punk, to be a pirate, to be an avant-garde writer: they are all, in one way or another, nonhuman states of being.

Her representation of animals, then, resembles her own version of that bell curve, wherein she begins by seeking animals as liberatory agents in a world built on human dispossessions. Her search for identity, for subjecthood in a world that objectifies those not deemed on the right side of capital and gender binaries, leads her into the woods, to places outside the walls of human civilization. That search reaches its apotheosis in *Blood and Guts in High School*, wherein liberation comes from an embodied animism that expands her vision of the possible beyond the bounds of the human. From there, her disillusionment with such becomings forces a reconsideration of those relationships, doubting the viability of using the natural world as a way out of human hierarchy. Animals exist for their own reasons, outside the dictates of any use-value imposed upon them by artificially constructed meaning. Acker represents animals in her later career as pushing back against those humans doing the constructing, species relationships becoming frayed until their transcendent possibilities, which never fully disappear, exist uncomfortably with an open antagonism as the curve returns to its baseline.

The chapters that follow trace that bell curve. Acker's early writing career began with a search for an escape hatch from the symbolic order, a quest for the Real, away from the cultural constructs that propped up a hierarchy of inequalities that left her feeling powerless. She found as a way out of that order, out of the gender and capital dispossessions that governed so much of her life, denizens of the natural world outside the bounds of human civilization. The symbolic order was built on language predicates that foisted humans into social categories that constructed the ceilings that kept them in place. At the beginning of her career, Acker realized that animals constituted real liberatory potential from such categories, as they were free not only from the

tropes created by human language systems, but from human language itself. The first chapter deals with that realization and Acker's early writing as an awakening to the power of animals as vehicles for both traversing the human symbolic order and finding an exit from it.

The search for such an exit, and the categorical imperatives that prompt it, however, are traumatic experiences for those on the wrong end of social dispossessions. As the early 1970s gave way to the latter part of the decade and the early 1980s, Acker began to focus on the trauma created by a life lived within a symbolic order built to benefit those not female, not poor, and not artists. Trauma, of course, is not simply an individual entity; it spreads through time and space, disturbing those in temporal or geographical proximity to the tip of a power structure's spear. Animals experience trauma, as well, in numbers that dwarf those of humans, but their trauma is different in that it lacks the generational legacy embedded in human suffering. Acker interpreted that absence of a historical element to animal trauma as a potential escape from the cyclical nature of her own experiences. Chapter 2 analyzes Acker's engagement of animals in relation to trauma at the turn of the decade.

It was in that period that Acker completed one of her seminal works, *Blood and Guts in High School*, which advances her animal project further by turning to animal becoming as a form of feminist critique of social systems. Through a sharing of identity, a literal embodiment of the animal, Acker fully identifies the triangulated dispossessions of gender, capital, and species, analyzing how they work together in society and interpreting a kind of species-level code-switching as a tool to navigate those hierarchical boundaries more dependent on human codings. Only animals have a way out of such boundaries; becoming-animal, then, is the apotheosis of liberation, while those engaged in the practice maintain the ability to exist in human society, buffeted by the protection provided by their individual embodiments. Such becomings facilitate

better positioning to attack those dispossessions more rooted in human social structures. In Chapter 3, the narrative turns to those becomings and their consequences, emphasizing in particular their depiction in *Blood and Guts*.

The fourth chapter follows by tracking Acker's early disillusionment with such becomings in *Great Expectations*. There are instances of becoming-animal in the new work, but Acker focuses the bulk of her attention on the potential pitfalls of identity formations in such attempts. Human failings and animal mistreatment constitute a declension narrative about the perils of traversing the hierarchical dispossessions of the symbolic order, Acker calling upon the American jeremiad, a core constituent of the national discourse since the eighteenth-century Great Awakening. In this later formulation, Acker argues that the limitations placed on humans through gender and capital relations hinder a capacious view of the animal. Whereas the author early interpreted animals as a tool to help humans cope with gender and capital, in *Great Expectations*, gender and capital push back, limiting the human vision and understanding of animals.

Acker traces much of those social dispossessions to a Cartesian mind-body dualism that she always rejected. Just as problematic was Descartes' insistence that animals were nothing more than automata, that human reason was the marker of supremacy. In *Don Quixote*, the subject of Chapter 5, Acker uses animals to push back against Cartesian dualism and the human supremacy that resulted from it. She intentionally foregrounds dogs in the novel, as dogs were the regular victim of Descartes' cruelty in the seventeenth century. They are also a species, unlike many of the others she emphasizes in earlier works, that has been tethered historically to human civilization, domesticated for roughly ten-thousand years. Becoming-animal remains in

Don Quixote a casualty of the Ackerian jeremiad, but her defense of dogs and rejection of Cartesian speciesism uplifts a species that exists as animal within decidedly human spaces.

After *Don Quixote*, Acker embarked upon a series of dystopian novels far darker than her previous efforts. Her work of the late-1980s and early-1990s presents a series of anti-human manifestos, using the freedom of animals to demonstrate and criticize the failings of human beings. Attempted animal-becomings fail in *Empire of the Senseless*, *In Memoriam to Identity*, and *My Mother: Demonology*, not because animals are no longer free, no longer paragons of those-outside-the-symbolic-order; they fail because of the humans attempting the becoming. In her darker work, the animals attack, pushing back against the humans who have done so much to limit their freedom. Animals become more imposing in these novels, more willing to interpret humanity as an enemy, even if the representatives of that humanity are victims of capital or gender dispossession. The bond between groups who were earlier fellow travelers has frayed, and Chapter 6 analyzes the fracture and the fallout that results.

In her final novel, *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, Acker's interpretation of the human-animal relationship feels the effects of that fallout. The animals she encounters are often more antagonistic to human contact, more threatening, less fluffy and cute. Animals like rats depend on human spaces to survive, and humans attempt to separate themselves from them in the name of safety and hygiene, often coded in the symbolic language of capital that differentiates those above and below the poverty line. Rats, meanwhile, refuse to recognize the boundaries humans create for them, oblivious to such cultural codings. In *Pussy*, written while she was fighting the cancer that would ultimately kill her, Acker does not fully relinquish her sense of animals as vehicles of transcendence, but she more readily positions them in adversarial relationships to the would-be transcendents, demonstrating the residue from her previous works of dystopian

antihumanism. Chapter 7 evaluates *Pussy* and Acker's final, more complicated relationship with animals.

As Marcella Althaus-Reid has explained, Acker's ultimate goal was "to find a new language to express what has not and cannot be said: the undecidable" (167). One of her strategies to do that is to focus her attention on those without the human language to actually say. Her work performs what Emilia Borowska has called "a Cubist collage," including "foldings of space and time, which make manifest neighborings that are invisible in traditional historical and geographical representations" (381). One of the easiest rhetorical moves to make in creating such neighborings is to juxtapose humans bound within socially constructed settings with their fellow animals not similarly constrained. It is a strategy that "forces the feminine and the evental back into consciousness," the "breaking apart of the dominant order—patriarchal, capitalist, individualistic, imperialist, and conservative" to bolster the "creative project of the opening of nonlinearity and possibility" (390). Animals are useful in that sense because they stand wholly outside that dominant order; if linearity is a creation of those social and political norms, then they are nonlinear exemplars of the possible par excellence.

Of course, animals were also useful to Acker because of her own real-life relationships with them. She had many dogs in her life, all of them poodles, just as had her mother (though her grandmother kept a spaniel, instead), and she also had a variety of cats who followed her through her myriad travels and life situations (Krauss 71, 72; McBride 9, 13, 71, 73, 97). When she moved to San Francisco in 1973, she added two hamsters and two parakeets to her household (McBride 111). She regularly spent hours later in her life playing with her psychic's dog, Chelsea (McBride 292).

When her constant travel made keeping living animals too difficult, she began collecting stuffed animals (McBride 152). Acker felt a real kinship with them. “My main stuffed animals are Gulfie otherwise known as Woofie who is a feral witch I mean wolf only I just washed him so he looks almost sweet which is very disconcerting but probably needs my stinky body next to his so he can become feral again,” she explained to McKenzie Wark. “And then there’s Ratski (Rat) the star of my new novel [*Pussy, King of the Pirates*] ‘cause the pirate girls’ banner is RAT EATS ALL.” Finally, “there’s WITCH or BITCH who is very powerful so I tongue kiss her a lot all my animals are very penetrable” (Acker and Wark 24). In addition to those, Acker had “a huge fat white cat who used to be the queen of the world because she was so aristocratic but now has been mashed by too much sleeping with me and looks like a rat though not feral.” Then there was “a shark but he stays in the living room ‘cause he’s not furry” (Acker and Wark 25). There was also, of course, a stuffed tarantula (Wark 19).

She had a tiger tattooed on her left arm and another on her ass, a domestic cat tattooed on her right arm, and a large koi fish across her back (McBride 262-263; Kraus 15, 229). When friends overheard her having sex, they reported hearing her barking like a dog, literally embodying the animal in a fundamentally animalistic act (McBride 248). Hers was a multispecies life, which translated into multispecies works of fiction—works of fiction whose multispecies elements have been largely ignored by the growing body of literary criticism on Kathy Acker.

That multispecies life was ultimately cut short by cancer in 1997. In her final moments, suffering from delirium and surrounded by her friends, she asked them to “*look for the list*. What list? *The list to call the animals*. Kathy, we didn’t make a list. *It’s the list to call the animals back home*. Okay. *Would you look for the list?*” (Krauss 277-278)

What follows is my attempt to find that list, the full scope and evolution of Kathy Acker's bestiary.

CHAPTER 1

The Animal Real:

Acker's Work in the Early 1970s

Jacques Lacan's Symbolic Order is rooted in the signs and symbols of language, the construction of a distinctly human being, complete with a kind of Cartesian "therefore I am" that ultimately separates individuals from others, and from the mother, in particular. Lacan sees "language as a network, a net over the entirety of things, over the totality of the real. It inscribes on the plane of the real this other plane, which we here call the plane of the symbolic" (Lacan, *Seminar I* 262). Humans spend the bulk of their lives combing through the Symbolic Order in search of that lost connection, that lost other, what Lacan calls the *objet petit a* (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 168). Acker's life and work was spent searching for her own *objet petit a*, sometimes represented by her mother's distance or cruelty, at other times represented by the literal severing of their relationship in Claire Alexander's suicide in 1978. At the same time, however, she was constantly in search of a path off that particular quest, an escape both from the cultural constructs that drive the Symbolic Order and the desire for a reattachment to her mother. The ultimate goal of that fraught and desperate detour was The Real.

For Lacan, the Real is "the lack of lack" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* ix); "There is no absence in the real" (Lacan, *Seminar II* 303), making it a particularly enticing windmill at which to tilt for those like Acker who suffered a series of traumatic psychic separations. "For the real does not wait, and specifically not for the subject, since it expects nothing from the word. But it is there, identical to its existence, a noise in which everything can be heard, and ready to

submerge in its outbursts what the ‘reality principle’ constructs within it under the name of external world” (Lacan, *Écrits* 95). Lacan’s Real is beyond phenomenological appearances. It is nature beyond culture, triangulated in Lacanian thinking with the Imaginary and the Symbolic. As Catherine Clement explains, the Lacanian Real “partakes of both the Id’s disconcerting and unpredictable powers—always ahead of its time—and the terrifying archaic images associated with the Mother” (Clement 169). The oeuvre that Acker would develop over the years would be filled with terrifying archaic images associated with her mother, but those images would begin well before Claire’s suicide. The physical separation created by her death would only exacerbate a psychic separation that appears throughout Acker’s early work.

Her attempt at discovering the Real, however, would be filled with frustration, stops and starts, mirroring the form of her fiction. “The real remains what is, an unspeakable is, an impossible, inexpressible, ineffable and undifferentiated space outside language,” Fred Botting explains (24). It “disrupts the symbolic order of language, entangling the already complex array of links and differences on which subjectivity, reality, inside and outside hinge” (25). Acker is, in other words, taking the path presented by the Symbolic Order, and using its tools to escape its tight grip—an untenable state of affairs that leaves her (and left her) unhappy and unfulfilled.

And so she turns to other sources, other paths. For Lacan, the Real is essentially an impossible state, but for Acker, animals provide a functional connectivity to the Real. The Real, after all, “is the mystery of the speaking body, it’s the mystery of the unconscious” (Lacan, *Le Seminaire Livre XX* 118), and Acker’s work is nothing if not a meditation on the speaking body, epitomized by both her own sexuality and in the beings of nonhumans, who have no choice but to speak with their bodies. Animals are the ultimate exemplars of those beyond language, beyond the constructed realities of any symbolic order. The natural world, then, seemed for Acker her

best bet for escaping the world of signs and symbols, a path trod by others who could shepherd her along the way.

For Derrida, for example, “the real” is that beyond language, as it is in Lacan; more significantly, however—building on the work of Rousseau, though modifying it substantially—Derrida admits that nature is the ultimate state of self-sufficiency. Human culture and the constructs that undergird them are, then, fundamentally unnatural, pushing the bounds of the natural world farther from the center of society. “Nature’s supplement does not proceed from Nature,” Derrida argues (145); it stands, in fact, in opposition to nature. Still, his framing of “Rousseau’s attempt to establish an opposition between nature and the unnatural, the inside and the outside, the thing itself and the unnecessary supplement,” Arthur Bradley argues, “cannot control the differential logic that binds all these concepts together: each term cannot exist without the other. The state of nature is not a pure or complete presence that is corrupted from without by inferior or unnatural supplements, in other words, but an originary lack that stands in need of supplementation” (105). Fitting a study of Acker, Derrida uses as an example Rousseau’s frustration with masturbation, “this dangerous means” with which he relieves his sexual frustration (Rousseau 108). Derrida interprets Rousseau’s problem with the practice as its status as an unnatural act; at the same time, however, masturbation is the result of natural desires (151). It straddles, as would Acker, both sides of the “natural” line.

So the human social world, its codes, taboos, vices, and strictures, is not just outside the natural world; it is a threat to the natural world, an imposition on that which humans seek to hide. It generates the condition of animal metaphors to describe “unnatural” human behavior. For Acker, such metaphors, and the deconstructive position that nature itself could provide a release from language games and the consequences of Lacan’s Symbolic Order, turned her to animals as

the ultimate escape hatch. Animals, existing outside human cultural constructs, represented freedom, the ultimate liberation from what Frederic Jameson called “the prison-house of language.” At the same time, however, for whatever liberatory potential animals hold for humans, Acker is still unable to fully escape that prison-house, engaging, for example, in the same kinds of animal metaphors that prop up the Symbolic Order of human civilization. Hers is a failed attempt, an unerringly human attempt, as are most efforts to tilt at windmills. But her use of animals in the tilting, her desire for escape in the nonhuman, remained consistent throughout her career, though it manifested in different forms along the way. It is an overt presence even in her earliest efforts at fiction.

In one of her early manuscripts, a poem from 1972, a young Acker describes a paradise wherein “small birds on branches sang with melodious recite, / and the thousand-noted nightingale shrilled with her / varied shrigh; the turtle with her cooing filled the site; / the blackbird whistled like human wight and the ring-dove / moaning a drinker in grievous plight” (Acker, “Entrance,” Box 22, Folder 18). She had yet to find her voice, but her conception of animals as constituent parts of her ideal was there; it would sit waiting for a more jaded, mature Acker to find it as an escape from the human world that caused her so much pain.

Acker’s “first work” (25), as she describes it, is a story titled “Politics,” a semi-autobiographical account of her time as a stripper and sex worker in San Diego written when she was twenty-one. Even in this first effort, her complicated but insistent presentation of nonhuman animals is present. As they would in later works, roaches signify disgust, peacocks haunt her dreams; men in her life are associated with animals: “Lawrence is a romantic Kangaroo” (26), Mark “ran like a frightened rat” (31). More significant is her own association with animals. “I the fucking cats” (26), she says, attempting to escape an unfulfilling work and sex life by associating

with the being of another species. “I wanted to get out of there back to the cats,” she says later, “I want to see my cats” (27). Acts of becoming and acts of association both provide outlets, elisions of a human society that has placed her in positions she finds uncomfortable. Throughout her career, Acker will depict human social norms as stifling and artificial, generated specifically to deny the animality of the human. In various forms of animal relations, she finds the possibility of release and relief.

That relief, however, comes partly in the association with the animal and partly in the choice to make such associations. When choice is removed, relations with animality, particularly those couched in metaphor, can morph into degradation. In one scene in “Politics,” the man with whom Acker’s narrator is performing in a sex show yells at her to get down on all fours, “in the doggie position.” She instinctively does, but then gets up. “He said do it you’re supposed to do whatever I say I did it looked up at him and went rrrf-rrf rrrrf-rrf the shits broke up I started crying again I want to go home” (29). As will be the case throughout her work, choosing animality can be a liberatory act, but forced animality is always a belittling. There is, in other words—and for all her reverence for animals and animal life—a hierarchy that remains, her own version of the medieval Great Chain of Being wherein nonhuman animals exist not in a fixed position but on a sliding scale, able to rise above humans on the metaphorical ladder when human choice and intentional identity formation lifts them up, but remaining below humans at other times, marks of degradation that emphasize the hierarchies embedded within the human section of that chain. Embodying the mannerisms and voice of a dog, in this instance, becomes a scarlet letter marking women’s degraded place in the human social hierarchy of sex work.

Animal metaphors as symbolic of human power relations can also work the other way, Acker animalizing the powerful to demonstrate their cruelty or abuse. Her employer at the sex

club, Bob Wolf, “the Shit Boss Mister Wolf call me Wolf” (30), is a shady and elusive character who also runs a prostitution ring. Here Acker relies on both animal associations—the wolf as a dangerous and predatory animal—and literary ones to make her case. Fifty years prior to “Politics,” F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby earned his wealth through illicit means, allying himself with a mafia leader named Meyer Wolfsheim (69). The 1920s and its attendant prohibition presented organized crime with new opportunities for wealth and power, and the mob had a higher profile in the decade than it ever had before or since. But the name Wolfsheim provides a particularly menacing portrait, combining an aggressive, predatory animal with a Jewish suffix. Wolfsheim is responsible for fixing the 1919 World Series as part of his criminal deeds. He serves in that capacity as a stand-in for Arnold Rothstein, the leader of a New York gambling syndicate that actually did bribe players from the Chicago White Sox to throw the World Series in one of the most sensational scandals in the history of sports (Lehan 51-52). But in keeping a traditionally Jewish suffix while changing the beginning of the gambler’s surname to “wolf,” Fitzgerald insinuates that there is a predatory nature in Jewishness. The Jewish Acker dispenses with racial diminution but engages the same wolf trope to describe another powerful figure of a kind of organized crime, calling back to a foundational text of twentieth-century American literature to signify the more dangerous version of animality her boss at the sex club and the power relations he engenders represent.

The rage such power relations create lead directly to her next substantive piece of writing, a screed titled *The Burning Bombing of America: The Destruction of the United States*. The novella features “the recurrent juxtaposition of objects,” animals among them, “with synonyms for explosions and fire provid[ing] a thematic unity and creat[ing] an apocalyptic scene that suggests what the destruction of America might be like” (Edward Robinson 156). It

begins with a landscape of devastation, a seeming precursor to Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us*. With the bulk of humans dead, "there are insects there are animals" (139) as "the world turns communist" (140). For all the human horror, however, it is "in spirit the opening of paradise beginning trees and water come back birds huge red feathers blue jays mynah birds maggots of purple silk" (140). Human social conventions are gone; animality is free to roam. "We open at night with our recorders and turtle shells we slowly walk on the sky into the white light down again into each other's rooms the peacock opens her tail scraggly hair eyes pop out until there's enough food a red cat leaps onto another licks its head under its neck its stomach. the cat makes noise through its nose on a blue silk cover among gold cupids and flowers on the wall and a red-and-yellow poster celebrates the burning of the banks" (140). The inherent case Acker makes is that one—the freedom of animals—cannot happen without the other—human destruction that includes, for example, the burning of the banks. When that destruction happens, however, it releases "elephants small deer three black stripes around their asses giraffes run their whole bodies in the air and swaying. Birds come through the air imitating the monkey noise" (140-141).

At the same time, just as human society ultimately shapes lived reality for so many animals, so too does the absence of that society turn back on those humans. "Cat-children prowl on the second layer of the world they chase after a rolling dark blue pipe cleaner" she describes. "Cat-women howl on the bridges houses thin as a lace a bird more fiery than a peacock lights on the top steeple" (141). The transfiguration of women into cats echoes Acker's own attempted transformation in "Politics," itself an argument that true human freedom can only be found in animality. That so much of nature is coded as female—in images ranging from Gaia to Persephone to Mother Nature—allows even the trees themselves to transfigure. They look in this

new America “like salukis white-and-black spirals smells of cat-sperm” (141). Acker’s is a vision of a world transformed to a state of animal freedom, wherein a variety of avian and mammal species live in full liberation, and cat-children, cat-women, and even dog-trees walk among them, liberated themselves by their own embodied animality (Borowska, *Politics* 59-60).

And they are out for revenge. In a section titled “The Betrayal of Friends I,” Acker writes that “our cats are our daggers they will cut out your eyes they will slowly unravel your brains twine them into tiny yarn balls.” The cat-people “carefully search out each human who is not yet a robot convert him by giving him a job” (142). Robots are those who take on the mantle of all socially constructed assumptions, who play by what Acker sees as an arbitrary set of rules that keeps them bound within civilized human culture and eternally divided from the natural, animal world. It is a distinctly Lacanian point. For Lacan, “the real is beyond the *automaton*, the return, the coming-back, the insistence of signs, by which we see ourselves governed by the pleasure principle” (Lacan, *Four Concepts* 53-54). At the same time, robots also represent the other side of a posthuman divide. Taking those beyond the bounds of the human as viable subjects, arguing that humans and nonhumans “codetermine one another” (Schatzki 10), requires conceptualizing those beyond those bounds as both the animals with whom humans have always shared the globe and the technological creations they have added in the modern era, including robots, artificial intelligence, and other manifestations of quasi-sentience, either real or imagined. Whereas animals are traditionally interpreted as being less than human, as existing to a smaller degree within the boundary already understood by humans, emerging technologies transcend existing human boundaries and thus appear, building from traditional Cartesian thought, superior to humans and their limits. But Acker reverses that broader Cartesian trend (a reversal to which she would continue to return throughout her career); in her conception, it is animals that move

beyond human boundaries whereas technological advancements, robots, are locked within a decidedly human frame, automatons that serve as slaves to the constructs of those who created them. The independence of animals, meanwhile, generates their freedom, their possibility, their more-than-humanness.

In the second installment of “The Betrayal of Friends,” Acker depicts two children walking through the forest in chains, “their feet are beaten with thin horsewhips they are thrown into a closed pigpen fed with pig shit rotten grain. They grow fatter and fatter” (144). This is the fate of the vast majority of farmed animals. After the American late industrial revolution, beginning in the early twentieth century, the beef and pork industries began using feedlots to fatten and “finish” cattle to create more meat for a growing human population (Fitzgerald 16; Horowitz 135). It was a process that, by the time of *The Burning Bombing of America*, had become institutionalized as concentrated animal feeding operations, CAFOs, a trend pushed by the deregulatory policy of Eisenhower’s Secretary of Agriculture, Ezra Taft Benson (Bergera 95). When Acker was beginning her work, more than ten billion farmed animals were being slaughtered globally each year (Fitzgerald xii; Gunderson 260). In Acker’s version of events, however, the children representing the fate of farmed animals get one over on the witch who keeps them bound. In the Hansel and Gretel story she retells, the children shove their captor into an oven, allowing her to experience the ultimate end of animals who experience the horror and degradation of the farm, that hidden entity that maintains the human civilization that turns so many of its citizens into robots. After their deed, finally free of that civilization and the farming that sustains it, they are “communist children playing with goats five dogs and five cats in the new forest trees shelter them from the rain plants feed from them as suns” (144).

“Communist Story II” describes a beleaguered tailor, lonely and abused by the humans around him. Street boys steal from him, “older men stick fingers into him.” His only respite is at home, away from the world outside. There “he hears the goats talking the birds tell him his stories the stars assure him he will win.” At home there are “cloths of purples and reds gardens in which are talking birds deer who are half-people gentler than the other people royal cats perched high on the stars arching their backs” (146). He tells the animals, the half-people about his violent revenge fantasies against the humans who do him harm. “The words are sad the cats lay still and listen” to his story. “The animals all fuck each other don’t give a damn who fucks who any animals fucks in the head the tail the cunt they race around fuck again sixty times a day. The birds chatter among themselves they know men will soon disappear the preservation of the earth they eat the insects off of the fur of the animals fly off to the dying moon” (146-147). It is here, even in this earliest work, that Acker establishes the human-animal dichotomy that she will cling to for the rest of her writing career, for the rest of her life. The tailor is undone by the slights and crimes of humanity; he escapes to a world of animals, empathy, and licentious freedom. The goats, the birds, the cats, the deer: they are the embodiment of all that humans are not, free of their strictures and their cruelty, representatives of the Real.

But the Symbolic Order always pushes back. “A man walks along takes a huge black horsewhip out of his bag SWISH the cats go flying SWISH the world is going to be blown up.” Acker’s response, her defense of the Real is “to make love,” to fall in love, “planned forays into the forests squirrels in winter” (151). When she rests, she knows that “the evil city is waiting,” but she takes refuge in “huge snakes the noncolor of jellyfish raise their heads above me” (155). Ultimately, “the city cursed for a thousand years is destroyed by a man who can’t walk a stupid man deer-cat-man doesn’t talk so well last son man” (156). The deer-cat-man

has thrown off the intelligence of the constructed, civilized world, he has thrown off the prison-house of language. He has accessed the Real through animal embodiment and slayed the Symbolic Order.

So has she. “Our cunts are the fur of animals cat-animals,” Acker says (158). “The cat-weather (wo)men rise up are killed arise from the dead,” she writes in another apocalyptic scene. “Huge cats eat the leaves...she throws out her arms cat at every pore cats whose tails are curled around the dirt of the three worlds.” She does, however, offer an olive branch of reconciliation. “Heaven gives to the deficient,” she says. “Cats love human-people” (159). The sentence at first seems a non-sequitur in a narrative bemoaning the human over and against the animal, but the cats themselves are representatives of heaven, tails curled around the three worlds. They give to the deficient human-people who stand in contrast to the robots, the automatons, that Acker finds so abhorrent. And though she offers no broader explanation of the “three worlds” around which the cats’ tails are curled, it is reasonable to assume they represent the Lacanian tripartite order of Symbolic-Imaginary-Real, thus becoming the realest of the real. Just sentences later, in a rage, she tells one her despised automotons, “You fuck-puke nonperson you think your preach language says anything human/real” (160). *Burning Bombing* carries little punctuation, but whether she’s asking a question or just deriding an assumption, it’s clear that “preach language,” in her formulation, offers nothing real; it is a prison-house keeping people from the Real.

The best temporary measure in lieu of full escape from such language is to be “home safer territory (cats),” wherein “huge cats prowl inside my toes and legs they’re at war extend claws through my cunt” (161). The violent image can disturb those not “cat-weather (wo)men,” but it is the “safer territory” for those, like Acker, seeking to escape the world of automata.

“Animals deer with hands for legs run down the pavilions people with them,” she writes in a less caustic segment. “Birds with red and purple feathers grow out of the branches of trees on one small tree” (162), another place of refuge, but one that would ultimately be compromised by a human presence. “She changed into a small white bird a huge fish in the pond we had to jump across a fat townsman tried to make his horses kill us tried to flay open our flesh with thin whips worms came out of our ass.” The horses, however, are on the side of the animals, the worms appear to protect them. “We ran inside to a small building a deer served us a falcon bid us good day we no longer want to be human” (163). Safety, protection, the Real, all functions of animal presence or animal transformation.

Or both. “The Cat-Women are meeting their purring decides our lives their huge thighs house our sperm I serve a Cat I lick Her nipples continuously,” Acker writes. “I mix the cream of goats grind corn and wheat I rub my hair into the inside of Her legs I depend for comfort upon every one of Her moods I stick my tongue into Her black leather lips” (164). It is a kind of deistic servitude, a fawning acknowledgement of animal presence, but it is one in service to transformation. “Beautiful human-animals I also am part human I have given up my humanity I am one of the black-winged vulture killers of light” (165). Vultures, of course, are not killers; they are scavengers, but Acker resolves the seeming contradiction when she explains that “Cat-Women prey on dead meat their long legs come down from the sun” (165). The Cat-Women are scavenging, too, choosing to nourish themselves with the already dead rather than taking new life. Acker’s devotion to the Cat-Women is a quasi-religious experience, one that ties animality to nature, then sees in nature an approximation of the Transcendentalist divine mind.¹ “Nature is

¹ She explains later that “forty thousand years ago tigers fucked small men swamps preserved them the huge cats sat on the stone walls ivy grows out of our cunts” (182), a kind of Edenic origin story for her Cat-Women, representatives of the divine.

already, in its forms and tendencies, describing its own design,” writes Emerson. “To what end is nature?” (2).

Acker’s answer is, to be sure, unconventional, but it is, for all its brazen language, decidedly within the Transcendentalist tradition: “O to sleep between the warm thighs of a Cat-Woman hair and eyes given vision by her cunt you mutilated Cat-Woman your home is in the reaches of the insane moon you are my partner you are my partner in the destruction and discovering of paradise” (166). Like Emerson, like Thoreau, Acker interprets nature, her Cat-Woman, as a place of respite from the world of cultural constructs, from Lacan’s Symbolic Order, a place for humans to use to their benefit, an aid to discovering paradise. If the Divine Mind was the nineteenth-century American version of the Real, Acker is pulling it into the twentieth century to escape from automatonized culture. The Cat-Woman is a Walden Pond of the mind. And just as Thoreau’s argumentation would have collapsed had access to the woods around his pond been cut off by the human technological advancement of infrastructure projects, crisis returns for Acker when “the cats have disappeared women are hidden under Central Park” (166).

The formation of human society itself, as Gerda Lerner has explained, was rooted from its inception in a patriarchal assumption that meant male supremacy need not be defended because the men who created the standard never experienced a world where masculine dominance was not a constituent part of the social structure (15-16). That being the case, in the new de-masculinized Transcendentalism, women, the victims of a patriarchy embedded in the origins of human civilization itself, turn to the one green space, the one woods, that they have access to in New York, left to hide underneath it until the Cat-Women return. When they do, the naturalistic presence isn’t a cure-all. The burning and bombing is still ongoing, but “I move out

onto the streets tigers and rhinoceroses surround me I sniff in the direction of the stars,” Acker says. “Pearls ride on the top of whales I am I I am you we: the new identity if people are going to remain possible” (167). And even after human destruction, “cats roam through the deserted city...animals graze through our legs...I’m a purring cat” (168). Access to an animalized Walden has stanching the crisis, reconnected her to a divine mind wherein “angels who are hermaphroditic fly around my foot-long fingers in which the magic cats sleep” (168), giving her reason to purr.

Or to fly. “I’m a white bird huge curved beak I fly above your head,” Acker writes later in the narrative. “Feathers joined to my hands at the shoulders flow down my back the tips of my heels are small feathers” (172). That kind of embodiment, a stand-in for connection to the Divine Mind, a method of accessing the Real, is not simply an act of personal healing; it has transformative possibilities for others. “The birds who have hidden in your neck make tiny sounds SHT SHT nonlanguage you could become a bird you could try to support yourself you could try to destroy” (173). To take on a state of nonlanguage is to move beyond the Symbolic Order, but moving beyond is only a first step for Acker; the goal is ultimately to destroy that order, requiring an animal army rather than a simple act of individual embodiment. “Birds fly through the iron rods the broken dead rot limbs red green yellow no one will show up here people don’t exist anymore” (174). The revolution against human society is an animal revolution.

When the revolution is complete, when the burning bombing of America has reached its zenith, the new world is one where “deer and cats run through the universe” in ecstasy. “We open our mouths the cat sticks her tongue in,” in an animalistic inversion of the eucharist, a transcendent manifestation of the divine in animal form (179). In that new world, “we walk over

to purple gold magnetic horses...fish leap through our hair,” a celebration leavened by diligence against a return. “People will destroy not return to being people animals” (180).

In their vigilance, “cats become people roam the countries sniff nose,” she writes. “Green cats lions ten-foot-long whiskers frighten away the Evil Ones...silver ears grow through the tops of our heads...the Violet Women are now animals cats glowing burning panthers prowl on the tops of your bodies there is nothing you can do” (187). That protective act is fundamentally animal, but it is just as fundamentally female, a gendered revolution embodied by animal transformation. “Men are humans who are bred trained they can do anything they are almighty...their essence is rape. their desire is murder” (190). Men are, then, treated, in a sense, like animals, the subject of breeding and training, but that animal treatment is in contradistinction to the kinds of embodied animalization experienced by Acker’s women. Like abused dogs trained to fight for the pleasure and gambling of humans, men are bred and trained to be rapists and murderers, to victimize women and force them into escapist transformations.

Women, in consequence, turn to “Earth Mother Mother of Skies,” whose “messengers are the cats” (191) and who gives power to the Violet Women, a group existing among “orange blue fish in the glades star-alligators.” The Violet Women “are the deliverers” (191), and their act of deliverance dually frees Acker and those like her from both the patriarchal system of society and from the Symbolic Order from which it derives. “The cats of the universe,” after all, “have two tails” (192). The world of animals, women, and animal-women that results is a sort of apocalyptic paradise where the problems created for both nonhuman and female human have been removed. It is a quasi-religious apotheosis, fitting the trenchant, idealistic narrative that led to it, but one that inverts animals from a traditional place of dependence in most dominant religions to one of saviors of those abused by overt masculinity and Lacanian language games.

Animals become in Acker's vision all aspects of the holy trinity: the gods seeking catharsis, the saviors come to earth, and the spirit within the women who connect to an animal-feminine Divine Mind to achieve revelation and, ultimately, revolution. Acker blends poststructural psychoanalysis, second-wave feminism, and a variety of spiritual traditions together to create her particular apocalypse, and the binding agent for all of them is the animal. That insistent reversion to animality as a salve against problematic human life and behavior would continue throughout her career, even as her writing became more focused, more disciplined in its form and function. The guttural scream that is *The Burning Bombing of America* would be channeled in different ways in the work that followed it, but the liberatory presence of animals remains constant throughout.

In *Rip-Off Red, Girl Detective*, for example, Acker's next novelistic effort, she attempts to impose a structure onto her scream, to infuse her narrative with sex and at least some semblance of a plot. But with the Cat-Women looking down on her, with animals as her model of salvation, they would remain in that novel, as well. "We're going on a journey," the novel's narrator says at one point in a direct reference to Acker's former work, "first to Egypt, home of women who are half animals" (78).

Red, née Acker, begins the story in bed with Peter Peter, and the animals are there with them. Cats and dogs howl in the streets as they have sex. Peter's cock is "a swan's neck," her orgasm like "electric eels inside my nerves" (7). As they finish, "I watch a mosquito dash against the light bulb" (8). From there, they "wander through the zoo; when the zookeepers are in the bathrooms, shooting up, we'll jump into the seal ponds with the seals. We'll nibble at their black velvet ears, with our secret hands rub their businessmen bellies; we'll fuck in front of the lions until we're howling more than they are" (9). She has, in the opening of *Rip-Off Red*, moved from

the magical, metaphorical world of *Burning Bombing* into something resembling a more traditional story, but the animals remain, with her from the novel's inception.

That said, like all of Acker's work, something resembling a more traditional story soon gives way to magical and metaphorical elements. "I'm both inside the airplane and outside, a true beautiful angel sailing among white elephants and kangaroos" (12). She is "like a fox," she says, "suspended in space by strings of diamonds the paws of cats rub against my ears" (13). In one of her dreams, "the space in the room became a huge ocean in which dinosaurs and green lizards leaped about" (22). In another, more malevolent dream, she describes being chased by a snake with "huge jaws sharp white teeth a white tongue darts in and out." She runs from him, but "the faster I run, the closer the snake writhes toward me." It is "the worst evil I know" (31). The account of that dream is a reification of one originally presented in *Burning Bombing* and one fully fleshed out in *Blood and Guts in High School* (see Chapter 3). More characteristic of her animal dreams is one wherein "a world of delight birds sing to a real sun in a real city no one leaves out anybody" (49), an image of animals as conduits and representations of harmony and an end to human hierarchy and bigotry, solutions to the Symbolic Order that keeps humans from Lacan's Real.

To that end, the animals are also there when she wakes from her dreams. "I wake up just as the birds start crying, the small birds, inside and outside of me" (69). Actual animals exist throughout the novel. Their corpses are part of the food she eats, the clothes and furniture she uses; her mother has a dog named Pepper who "takes out a newspaper bundle from the garbage can, chews it up, drags it around the house." When her mother sees the damage, she blames Acker. "Tells me I'm dirty and evil I'm selfish and don't do anything for anyone but myself. She's right" (65). Pepper here serves as a rival for her mother's affection, a contest that the dog

wins and that the narrator internalizes.² And just as in her snake dream, animals also accompany acts of internalized or physical violence. When Acker learns that a boy is plotting to bomb New York, she sees “peacocks walk past the balustrades.” The incident prompts another dream wherein she kills a duck, “so I’m evil” (67), continuing the internalized self-loathing prompted by her relationship with her mother’s dog Pepper.³ When Acker’s grandmother buys her parents a summerhouse, she purchases “a farm with real chickens and strawberries” (74), only continuing such bitter associations.

In another incident, a woman walks into a room, leading Acker to brandish a gun. It is then when “a black dog with long knotted fur wallops over to me, I play with him, he’s going to shit, move him” (84). The association of animals with violence continues in further meditations on jellyfish, carried over from *Burning Bombing*, who appear just as she is being chased by a hatchet-wielding gang (85). At a bar, a man in a gray suit sits down next to her. “I used to own greyhounds but I sold them all, put my money into Yam-Ham stocks,” he tells her in an attempt to convince her to sleep with him. “What the fuck are you talking about?” she asks, refusing to go with him to his hotel room. The association of animals with internalized and actual forms of violence has its limits.

At the same time, Acker associates American business with animal cruelty, playing on Sloan Wilson’s 1955 novel, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, a runaway popular bestseller which became symbolic of the discontent and alienation created by American business culture.

² That said, her mother does provide comfort to the narrator in one scene, that comfort directly manifested in nonhuman terms. “My face transforms into fire, an animal being taken care of by its mother animal, fed by its mother animal, separated from fear” (59).

³ In a play, “Memories of Electra,” Acker describes Pepper as “so fat, he can hardly stand, but that doesn’t matter to anyone because Pepper is vicious. He loves only one living being, Claire. Anything else that moves is regarded as meat” (Acker, “Memories of Electra,” Box 22, Folder 43).

Acker's man in a gray suit has become discontented and alienated from greyhound racing, a phenomenon, like farmed-animal feedlots, developed in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. It was a different kind of animal cruelty, growing in popularity in the 1920s to sate a different kind of American need. Gambling was a common human diversion, but the greyhound industry was continuously cited for its animal cruelty, known for destructive breeding practices and abusive treatment of the dogs who participated in races (Thayer). By tying American business culture directly to animal cruelty, Acker connects the alienation of human workers to the alienation of animals trapped in an abusive system, one built on luring dogs around a track using a mechanical rabbit that even the winner will never actually catch.

The use of animals as a form of corporatist criticism also returns with Acker's framing of humans trapped in both the capitalist and broader symbolic order as "robots" (112, 115, 121, 130), extending her posthuman critique on the other side of the human-animal divide. In that same vein, the massage parlor at the heart of the conspiracy Rip-Off Red is investigating is named Monsieur Hawk, Lt., a home to sexual licentiousness but also revealed to be "the head of one of the units of conspiracies to overthrow the United Nations in New York" (127). The robots of capitalism, the men in grey flannel suits, are attempting to destroy the free world.⁴

And nowhere is that freedom demonstrated more immediately than in the act of sex, one that eliminates the Symbolic Order, turns humans, in Acker's formulation, to the Real, and does so specifically in its embodiment of animality. She refers to herself as an animal during the sexual act throughout (and would continue to do so throughout her work). In one encounter, "I'm a forest huge flakes of snow falling catch on the thick black branches hang there on the fur of

⁴ Acker's work, for Margaret Henderson, is the "literary form of punk's anarchic resistance to late capitalism" ("Kathy Acker's Punk Feminism" 202).

wolves on the rivers covered by layer on layer on layer of ice wild dogs with long black hairs who can howl like wolves chase after the man-eating wolves” (104). The language of sex is the language of animality, the two acts combining as manifestations of freedom from the human world outside the bedroom.

It is fitting, then, that Peter Peter, Red’s lover, is the one who has a vision of ultimate freedom. “Women and men, women-men and men-women parade around an open field. Large birds huge red and purple feathers mixed with black fur land start walking around us. I put my arm around one of the long necks of the birds,” he tells her (100). “On the black sand, thousands of tiny fish, brought in by the huge waves, leap over each other, fuck, lay eggs, are left stranded on the sands. Silver on silver” (101). In Peter Peter’s vision, the constructs of capital, gender, and species are thrown aside in a pure manifestation of the Real. The Symbolic Order, strung together by capital, gender, and species, is gone; animals themselves have helped salvage the world. That Lacan would not have seen animality as a cure-all for his Symbolic Order is less important than Acker’s continued insistence that it could, that psychoanalytic theories that posed questions rooted in the human mind could only be solved by those existing outside the constructs created by that mind. Animals are, for Acker, the sentient but unaffected, manifestations of the possible outside of the Gordian Knot of Lacan’s stifling triumvirate.

The final, overriding animal reference in *Rip-Off Red* isn’t present in any quote from the text, is not in any direct nonhuman engagement. Framing a story suffused with animals—and creating of them an ultimate solution to the Lacanian riddle—with characters Red and Peter, is itself a reification of Kafka’s short story, “A Report to an Academy,” wherein an ape named Red Peter describes being taken from his animal life in a West African jungle, caged on a ship, then mimicking the humans around him as a way to escape the treatment that most animals receive.

“There was no attraction for me in imitating human beings,” Red Peter tells his audience. “I imitated them because I needed a way out, and for no other reason. And even that triumph of mine did not achieve much” (Kafka 257). He finds in the end that he can no longer identify with apes; he has become too human. He has succumbed to the Symbolic Order. Acker is attempting to reverse that process, to find her way from civilization to the jungle. To turn Lacan on his head, she has to do the same with Kafka, a kind of reverse-embodiment that puts her in the place of the animal.

Her next project only expanded that effort at embodiment. Acker began calling herself The Black Tarantula in 1973, mailing out a serial novel called *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* to a select literary list. Here the embodiment begins on the title page itself, Acker has become a tarantula both in the text of her novel and in her own identity as author (Acker, *Black Tarantula*, Box 1, folder 1). During the time of her writing, Acker was even calling herself The Black Tarantula in her private correspondence (Acker to Alan Sondheim, Box 30, folder 11). She had a stamp made for her manuscripts that listed her San Francisco address and her name as “The Black Tarantula,” embodying the animal even in the preparation of her draft copies (Acker, *Ripoff Red*, Box 1, Folder 8). She created business cards that said, “You are on the enemy list of The Black Tarantula” (Acker, “You are on,” Box 31, Folder 10), and even listed herself in the telephone directory as The Black Tarantula (Wollen 3).⁵ “I want to be a mermaid” (4), she says early in the narrative, continuing the project she begins in her earlier work. “I’m weird, I’m not a robot” (5). Her denial of robots continues (6, 8, 18, 20, 46, 58)—“I think I would rather die than

⁵ For Jason McBride, the name The Black Tarantula “suggested danger and death. It could have been the name of a superhero, or a spy. It made her something other than a woman, other than a human” (104).

submit become a robot let them lobotomize me” (61)—punctuating her insistence that human liberation only happens on one side of the posthuman divide.

Childlike Life, from “the novel’s opening sentence,” establishes “the two core elements of her linguistic performance: repetition and embodiment” (Foster 131). That embodiment can be found in the content of her novels, like *Childlike Life*, but also in “her method of bodily inhabiting these texts” that she appropriates for her own use (Foster 135). That appropriation, copying, plagiarizing, is “a physical performance” of repetition that leads necessarily to embodiment (Foster 138), foregrounding a willingness to traverse boundaries as a baseline for everything that happens within the novel itself; and the most immutable, assumed boundary line in human society is that of species. “Acker’s destabilization of singular identity” (Foster 140), then, flows directly from the formal elements of the text, from its own animal-self, existing beyond the bounds of recognized novelistic structure and plot. “What I was trying to do in *Tarantula*,” Acker told an interviewer, “was to see if, rather than trying to integrate the ‘I,’ if you could *dis-integrate* it and find a more comfortable way of being” (McCaffery 88).

In the world she creates in *Black Tarantula*, “dogs eat the limbs of living humans and howl” (12). Acker becomes “the bear lady, the leather coated eyes, the tough brawler-queen of the jewels of the slums.” Here protection comes not from escape to the animals but in the taking-on of a kind of animal toughness. “Baiting, in the Bear Garden, is and will be my favorite sport,” she explains. “I learn to fight, cudgelplay, in all ways, take care of myself” (23). Bear-baiting had taken place in Britain since at least the twelfth century. The practice of chaining a bear to a pole and forcing him to fight dogs or other animals at a disadvantage was incredibly popular. Shakespeare even included London’s Beargarden and one of its famous competitors, Sackerson, in his *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (Act 1, scene 1). It was a another cruel animal sport, one that

was brought to colonial America by English colonists before finally falling to animal welfare objections in the nineteenth century, wherein other cruel—but less overtly cruel—animal sports like greyhound racing took its place (Griffin 148-150).

The story is a crib of the biography of seventeenth-century Moll Cutpurse, a pickpocket, fence, and pimp featured in Charles Whibley's 1912 *A Book of Scoundrels* (57-76), and while bear baiting was a regular working-class entertainment in Cutpurse's 1600s, her biography does not intersect with the practice. The bear is, in other words, all Acker. The creation of a bear-like exterior can protect her from a variety of forms of physical violence, but it is less effective against the violence of capital. She is poor, and in her impoverished apartment "rats scurry up my cunt, nibble my body" (24). She is desperate to earn enough money to eat and pay rent "without becoming a robot and with my clothes on" (25).

Still, rats have been stigmatized by humans throughout history. Birgitta Edelman has described the brown rat in particular as having arrived in England in the eighteenth century, becoming a part of the cultural mind through industrialization and urbanization in the Victorian era. Rat-killing and rat-catching became professions during the period, but at the same time, so too did rat-breeding, fulfilling a pet-keeping demand. Rats were also used as bait in animal bloodsports. Edelman thus concludes "that by the end of the 19th century the rat had established a dual identity as both dangerous vermin and cherished pet" (5). By the late 1960s and early 1970s, rats had become signposts of urban poverty, particularly the urban poverty of racially marginalized groups. Black neighborhoods had been artificially created through redlining and the broader bigotry of the housing market, and rats became the lived embodiment of those red lines on insurance maps that helped define what "ghetto" meant. Stories of rat bites affecting small children living in slums only reinforced that imagery (Aiello 177-187). When rats scurry up

Acker's cunt, she marks in her own way the poverty and alienation that she experiences in the city.

Still, Acker's poverty only draws her closer to those she sees as co-victims of the tripartite violence of capital, gender, and species. "I take my sex with animals," she says. "I give each of my dogs a trundle-bed, wrap them from the cold in sheets and blankets; I give them part of the gang's well-cooked food." She stands as "parrots fly through my black hairs, scream at me until I rub their red and yellow necks" (26). The section closes with her act of becoming one of the animals she helps. "I'm a black dog; I have to stand in a white sheet at Paul's Cross during a Sunday service" (28).

Black Tarantula was Acker's most brazen use of plagiarism to date, the author taking the stories of female criminals from the past and making them her own in each installment of the serial—and much of the act of making them her own involved inserting animals and animal identity into the narratives. Cutpurse, for example, lived a sexually libidinous life, challenged gender norms, and dealt at times with crippling poverty, but she was never known for caring for homeless animals nor for identifying as a bear. Infusing an animal identity into any human self-perception, however, can be a slippery slope. Acker describes herself as "a single animal fending for myself" (32). When she imagines herself as a man, "I watch my cock rise and fall it looks like a small animal" (35). From there the transformation occurs in the buildings of San Francisco. "The windows are two huge eyes staring at me...these composite insect eyes." She feels the walls closing in on her, and "the walls are the legs of a huge spider" (36). What begins as a functionally healthy form of animal identity devolves into one taken over by the constructions of the civilization from which she seeks to protect herself. The Symbolic Order, as it were, is always encroaching.

Which, as if in a tautological loop, only encourages more animal identification. “I fight, all the time I fight,” she says. “I see myself: I’m a leopard” (39), continuing the feline embodiment of her earlier work. “I’d rather make love with parrots and cats I like and bite them they lick and bite me” (51). At other times she becomes a parrot (49) or a spider (50, 54, 56, 57), but cats remain constant in her sense of self. “I feel like a cat,” she admits while having sex with a stranger (52). “I don’t care about the men because they’ll make me feel safe; I know now they see me as an animal” (53). Her reckoning with the male gaze in that regard is eased by her own act of animal embodiment, particularly in relation to sex. “We slide over each other animals who live at the bottom of the deepest parts of the ocean” (56). That she combines sex and animality so insistently in *Black Tarantula* as she has previously is partly a creature of an emphasis she will sustain throughout her career. It is also partly because portions of the narrative are lifted directly from *Burning Bombing* and *Rip-Off Red*, both unpublished at the time she began sending out installments of her new work.

And just as in both her earlier and later work, her embodiment of cats comes attendant with a reverence for birds. “I know what the birds cry at night as if in their dreams,” she says, mimicking Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem “Sympathy”: “I know what the caged bird feels” (40). That poem closes with a note of hope: “I know why the caged bird sings” (41), one that argues that Black joy is itself a political act, and one that was borrowed in 1969 by Maya Angelou for her autobiography, a book with which, three years later, Acker would have been familiar. But Acker’s version abandons both the racial connotations and the inherent hopefulness of Dunbar and Angelou. Hers is an understanding of lament, a connection to the bird’s eye view of humanity’s failures and the constructs that breed them. That connection leads her to “like watching the bluejays robins grey sparrows grey pigeons hawks barn owls parrots kinkajous fly

into the trees above the silver-blue lake” (73), her vision connecting with their vision, providing her a kind of comprehensivity of sight for the crumbling world around her. For Dunbar, the caged bird “beats his bars and he would be free” (41). For Acker, birds are not the representations of repressed humanity, they are its antidote.

Which creates a desire for greater connection as the novel closes. “No evil results if I fuck animals,” she writes. “All laws of all nations should allow us, rather, not stop us from creating our favorite perversions because Nature creates these desires for perversions in us before we create the actual perversions” (89). Hers is not a desire for actual bestiality—“I want to fuck women, hamsters, trains, criminals” (89)—it is instead a dual desire to overthrow a moral code generated by a version of Lacan’s Symbolic Order and to join herself to the animals already free of it. “Humans aren’t any more important than any other animal. Obviously: because I fuck my hamster. This isn’t true: only men are capable of destroying forever the human and the living world” (89). Acker worries at times in her writing about jellyfish, snakes, and worms, but their power to destroy is ultimately limited. Only humans can destroy everything. They are the ones to fear, they and their symbols. Animals, the Black Tarantula argues, are the way out.

Acker followed up her first serial with another in 1974. *I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac! Imagining* continues the trajectory initiated in *Black Tarantula*, and its author was still listed as The Black Tarantula (“Book production materials,” Box 34, folder 3). “My name is Kathy Acker,” the Black Tarantula admits. “The story begins by me being totally bored.” She is alone in her apartment, imagining that her cats are showing her affection, rubbing up against her, even though “my cats didn’t exist” (96). There is immediately upon the story’s inception a boredom and loneliness that translates into a desire for an animal presence, a return to the cats that have dominated so much of her previous early writing. Fitting that boredom,

Acker then begins a repeated account of a dream wherein she rides through a forest on horseback. “I have to ride my horse through the dark forest, the winds swirling around” (103). The story repeats four times, demonstrating the feedback loop of loneliness and boredom and inaugurating a tactic that Acker would use throughout her career.

As in *Rip-Off Red*, Acker is “in love with Peter,” who looks “like a female faun” (111) and dresses like a woman in furs, “feathers and white skunk” (113) as the two attend a wealthy ball in Paris, another vignette that is repeated immediately after its conclusion. The play with capital, gender, and species reimagines Acker’s core themes, the elements of the Symbolic Order that trap humans in social constructs and turn them into robots. Loving a gender-nonconforming faun who gatecrashes the parties of the rich demonstrates the vulnerability of those artificially created categories to her assault on human institutions. “In this city which is based on money-lust oversexuality poverty false anthropomorphism suffering, I can do nothing else but act as part of the city: evil out of love” (126). Acker is impoverished, constantly in need of money, she is hyper-sexual, constantly suffering, and anthropomorphizes animals regularly in her texts. She can only act as part of the city. But hers is not an endorsement of those social groundings. Her poverty and suffering are created by the city itself; her sexuality is not based on female objectification, but rather on an escapist empowerment that allows her to cope with her other problems. And her anthropomorphism is not “false” in the way she sees the contradictory fetishization of animals in a human civilization that constantly abuses them. She falls into the city’s categories while simultaneously undermining them from the inside: evil out of love.

The push-and-pull such categories create leads at times to contradictory presentations, wherein depictions of actual animal behavior are juxtaposed against scenes of animal embodiment. At one point, Acker “had some stupid fantasy about dogs: one dog, a light brown

mutt low, was tearing at the mouth of another dog. The left side of the mouth began to bleed. Both dogs were emitting a low constant growl as cats do in their most vicious fights” (135). It was a stupid fantasy, but also surely an act of remembrance, a scene regularly present on the streets of cities where homeless dogs roam. Remembering itself, however, exists as stupid fantasy because “when I remember, I remember an awareness, not an object. I don’t remember my hamster, I remember seeing my hamster. Or: I remember seeing my hamster, I remember my hamster directly as I become my hamster, I go back and forth” (137). As she doesn’t know the street dogs, the remembrance plays out as fantasy, but her relationship with her pet hamster turns remembrance into an act of becoming. “My remembering seeing my hamster, I’m aware, differs from my seeing my hamster. Or ‘repeating’ doesn’t exist” (137). Fantasy turns into becoming, lived experience turns into memory. The animal presence changes each time it is experienced, ensuring new forms of animal engagement every time a human thinks about those animals (Borowska, *Politics* 71-72). When Acker admits, “I prowl like a hungry deserted cat I become aware of my body” (153), her awareness comes from the knowledge of hungry deserted cats, but she becomes aware of a decidedly human body, as the memory turns the animal presence of street cats into a human presence of animality; the description is less metaphor, she argues, than a going back and forth between human and animal that creates a new awareness.

And if the early writing of Acker demonstrates any consistent emphasis, it is that going back and forth between human and animal, an act of remembrance and embodiment that serves as a coping mechanism for the world of symbols and constructs—as an avenue to her version of the Real. The street dogs and Cat-Women, the memories of animal pasts and fantasies of human-animal becomings, serve as a shield against the crushing weight of human societies’ norms and regulations, its expectations and impositions. She reconciles the trauma of the Lacanian triple-

bind by escaping into the animal—in acts of embodiment, in flights of fantasy, and in sex—
hoping to find the Real on the other side of the natural world.

CHAPTER 2

The Trauma of Monsters and Men:

Animals as Palliatives in Acker's Late 1970s And Early 1980s

"I'm too ugly to go out into the world. I'm a hideous monster" (190). Thus begins *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec*. Acker takes on the voice of the artist, a "deformed crippled beast" (190), a "totally hideous monster" (194).¹ The transformational embodiment that defined her work of the early 1970s has changed in the late 1970s, an approximation of animalization becoming monstrous in the form of Toulouse-Lautrec, who broke both of his legs early in life, stunting his growth and leaving him hobbled. A notorious denizen of Parisian brothels, the artist's biography allows Acker to set much of her story in those settings. Vincent Van Gogh, among Lautrec's cohort in life and in the story, tells one of the prostitutes, Giannina, "You're too much like a cat. You're not tough enough, you don't like people enough" (207-208). What had previously been a source of strength for Acker appears as a weakness, an appendage to monstrosity.

That appearance, however, is less a function of Acker's change in perception and more an indictment of the male gaze. Lautrec sees himself as monstrous, Van Gogh sees cats as weak. But "Giannina the cat's not listening to his claptrap. She's too sensual to be smart." She longs for

¹ Naomi Jacobs notes "Acker's habit of disclaiming authorship by attributing authorship to her titular subject," creating an effect that places "the entire work in quotation marks." It is a strategy designed to "emphasize the derivativeness of all texts; their mediated, unreliable and quite probably falsified status" (51; see also Wasdin 275). Cynthia Carr described Acker's narrators as "different names tagged to the sound of one voice raging—obscene, bewildered, and demanding to be fucked" (*Village Voice*).

the “possibility of living in a world to which she’s not always alien” (208). It is significant, however, that Acker doesn’t speak in the voice of Giannina; she speaks as Lautrec, taking on the mantle of the male artist, the customer of prostitutes rather than the prostitute herself. Her identification, then, is with the creative process rather than a gendered position.¹ “Vincent always blamed himself alone for his sufferings,” Lautrec says of Van Gogh, in a description that could have been made about Acker. “A frustrated and misunderstood child, not given its due need of affection, ends as a man without roots, in rebellion or bewilderment, almost always embittered. Such are myself, Gauguin, and Van Gogh: sufferers who make others suffer” (216).

And there are, inevitably, layers to that suffering, as the humans experiencing dispossession or social violence not only experience the specific trauma of a given act, but also live with a historical memory of similar acts practiced on their ancestors or confederates, wounds that can be reopened through human language and metaphor that nonhuman animals are unable to access. The resulting scars, whether physical or psychical, evince what Cathy Caruth has called the “belatedness” of trauma, one that comes through the process of knowing. “The complex ways that knowing and not knowing are entangled in the language of trauma” define the modes in which people experience past trauma in the present, particularly when the underlying basis of that trauma has remained a constant lived reality (Caruth 4). As Jennifer D. Williams has explained in relation to lynching, the “traumatic effects” of violence for humans “tend to transpire through acts of secondary witnessing like oral culture, photographs, literature, and journalistic accounts” (Williams 86-87). The collective trauma isn’t simply in the act itself, but also in its retelling.

¹ “Female pain, legitimized by the still-male locus of the name,” explains Jacobs of Acker’s Toulouse-Lautrec, “is transformed from a merely pathetic and even embarrassing phenomenon to one of gravity, to be pitied and seriously examined” (53).

Caruth was part of the first wave of trauma studies that saw such suffering as an “unrepresentable event,” an “unsolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent contradictions of experience and language” (Balaev 1). While neurobiological and other hybrid compensatory theories of trauma have followed in the twenty-first century, the Lacanian psychological approach of Caruth and others best represents Acker’s own engagement with the phenomenon. Acker’s novels are rife with “symptoms of trauma,” Tom LeClair argues, “the howl of guilt and anger inflicted by the suicide of a mother dominated by male notions of femininity” (10). As with her challenge to Lacan’s Symbolic Order and her marshaling of animals as a vehicle to the Real, animals for Acker serve as a potential solution to the unsolvable problem of the unconscious, a way to transcend the generational trend of traumatic effects.

The trauma of patriarchy, capital, and social violence in all of their forms exist in both the past and present; or, perhaps, in the various presents in which they are experienced, by those who are killed and those who are left behind to experience them in collective memory and literary and artistic representation. In their foundational text on trauma theory, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub describe “the practical hazards of listening—of coming to know,” which “lead to a rethinking of the crucial role the (always threatened) preservation of the truth, of knowledge and reality, plays in the enablement of psychological survival—in the very ability to sustain and continue life after catastrophes” (xv). In describing the trauma of World War II in Europe, they make a case applicable to various forms of social violence in the United States. It is “a trauma we consider as the watershed of our times”; it is not “an event encapsulated in the past,” but a “history which is essentially *not over*, a history whose repercussions are not simply omnipresent (whether consciously or not) in all our cultural activities, but whose traumatic consequences are still actively *evolving*” (Felman and Laub xvii).

That omnipresence and its reification in human language creates differences between violence against dispossessed humans and violence against nonhuman animals because the nonhumans can't push back against such linguistic constructions. It then creates a further problem that necessarily requires vigilance in analysis because only one of those groups carries historical traumas. But the fact that trauma for nonhuman animals is not generational becomes the catalyst for embracing them in Acker's work; they are beyond the bounds of the human, beyond the bounds of historical trauma, even though their individual traumas are just as real as Acker's. Because their trauma lacks that generational element, they can be a means of escaping cyclical suffering, a way of solving the "unsolvable problem of the unconscious" (Balaev 1).

As in all of Acker's narratives, she moves on from her original story to others, later taking *Rebel Without a Cause* as her text, turning the film into a love story between James Dean and Janis Joplin. As the story begins, Jimmy lies drunk on the sidewalk, "curled up next to a toy monkey he is whimsically trying to cover with a piece of paper" (258). He is a "child with his mechanical toy who wishes nothing more than to be left alone with his dreams" (259). Again Acker places herself in the role of the flawed, male artist, clinging, as she did, to toy animals for comfort (see chapter 4). As her version of the story comes to a close, "Jimmy began to realize that his affair with Janis was forcing him to remain human. Remain stuck on the ground when he wanted to soar into the air, a myth" (271). Relationships were problematic for Jimmy as they were for Acker; they met a clear and insistent need while simultaneously denying that desire to be left alone with animals, toy or otherwise: to remain human. In the end, love proves "stronger than the desire for immortalization" (271), and Jimmy and Janis escape Hollywood, change their names, and live in Paris. For Acker, who wasn't a man, wasn't a Hollywood star, running away never seemed to work, so she returned to her animals.

In the novel's story of "the creation of the world" (226), a cat with one green whisker and one white whisker falls in love with a "big hairy baboon who won't notice her" (226), stand-ins for Acker the cat and the prototypical human man (Henderson *Acker: Punk* 87-92). The cat is desperate for the baboon. "What can I do to make you love me?" she asks. "I'll do anything for you I want you to know that" (227). The baboon warns the cat that nothing she could do would make him love her, but says, "You can bring me some food to show me how much you love me" (227). After she brings him "all the food that exists in the world" (227), he eats all of it, leaving none left for anyone else. Surely that will make the baboon love the cat. But he does not. Instead, he tells her he wants to have power over snakes. So she catches all the mice and rats, "plays with them until they're dead," then ties them on a string, leading all the snakes to begin following her. She gives the string to the baboon, who now controls all of the snakes. She wonders if now he loves her. "You can't make me love you, stupid!" he tells her, now demanding that he wants to "control everyone in the world" (227). The desperate cat draws a moral line at universal control, leaving the baboon to hide in "an old falling-apart house" (228).

Meanwhile, with all of the world's plants eaten by the baboon, the animals are forced to eat each other to survive. "This is known as scarcity and depression. The lizards alligators crocodiles eat the fish. The hippos snap up the crocodiles. The red ants nibble at the hippos. The anteaters yump up the ants. The wild black hairy boars swallow the anteaters. The hungry black leopards attack the boars" (228). The baboon, meanwhile, eats any animal he can find, growing larger and larger as he gorges. Fish, insects, parakeets, doves, giraffes, horses, zebras, water buffalo all become his victims. More carnivorous animals like tigers, leopards, and crocodiles can't retributively eat the baboon because he has grown too large, making them vulnerable. He eats them, too. An elephant tries next, but the baboon is too big for him, as well. "Now the

horrible baboon's stomach is so huge, it rubs against the white moon. This stomach is so dense, it weighs as much as the earth. So there exist three balls: earth, baboon, and moon" (229).

The cat watches all of the devastation, but finally has to emerge from hiding because she is starving. The baboon sees her and, finally sated, now wants her. He sings her a love song to woo her, but "the cat doesn't move. She's too hungry to love anyone" (230). In her delirious state, the cat dreams of "a forest where white leopards lie down among the free-floating giraffes," where "tiny bears graze in the low bushes" (230). The crocodiles are there, too, waiting "to snap at the stupid deer the wolves who talk to each other" (230-231). "Small white bears rise up bat their paws against each other's face. The little cat's not dreaming anymore. This is how the world came to be" (231). Acker's framing of the world's genesis does include humans—"a human staring at his long red prick he doesn't know what to do with it a wasp lands on it and stings" (230)—but they are fundamentally decentered and largely inconsequential; hers is a vision of the world of animals. And while the baboon is a representative of men and patriarchal human society, the vast majority of animals behave as animals. They are not idealized. The crocodiles snap at the deer; the animals kill each other to survive. Acker's world is a natural world, one that would ultimately be corrupted by humans, a secularized genesis story that removes God, his favor toward humans, and the demeaning of human women.

The story not only demonstrates Acker's belief in the power of nature, in the role of animals in sustaining the viability of the world, but it also establishes a point of return for when humans inevitably traumatize that natural vision. When that reconciliation finally happens, for example, "nature had come into her own again... The woods, always a menace even in the past, had triumphed in the end" (288). Trauma can come in a variety of ways, many of them decidedly naturalistic: the world can be an ugly place. But Acker's trauma stems from the imposition of

social constructs on her own ability to navigate human civilization. The curative for her, temporary as it may be, is to escape to a place outside of those constructs, outside the grips of the traumatizing hands of patriarchy and capitalism, where, to be sure, traumatic events still occur. “The awareness of the impossibility of escape from the hierarchical dominance of the male and of the embodiment of a different role than that assigned to women is one of the prime reasons for the splits between reality and dream, reality and fictional world, that characterize a large part of Acker’s production,” Claudia Cao argues (73). There is physical violence in nature that Acker doesn’t ignore. But the social violence of finance and masculinity doesn’t exist there, creating a space for Acker—and, extending the story forward, for human women more broadly—to heal.

As if to underscore the thesis, Acker closes her narrative with the story of a Brooklyn woman who finds a skunk in her kitchen. She captures the skunk and gets on a bus, telling the driver to “tell me when we get to the end of the line.” She tells him she has a skunk she needs to get as far away from her house as possible. The driver has her sit in the back of the bus, and after a time, he yells out, “Will the lady with the stinkin’ pussy please get off the bus?” In response, “all the women on the bus cross their legs as tightly as they can. Six women run out the rear door” (302). Here a woman is conditioned by cultural constructs to remove her house from the natural world (while removing a representative of the natural world from her house), attempting to take an animal as far away from her home as she can. She is rewarded for her effort by a man in charge who screams at her to leave the bus because of the smell of her pussy, forcing the rest of the women into their own traumatic reactions. The women are part of the natural world; denying the fact leads to patriarchal control and reifies the trauma of other instances of embarrassment surrounding the threat of their genitals in their natural state crossing constructed

boundary lines of human propriety, a cyclical trauma that won't go away as long as those boundaries exist. There will always be another bus driver; there will always be another baboon.

In Acker's next effort, the novella *Florida*, the baboon is a wayward boyfriend who takes over an island hotel. "Don't get any funny ideas," he tells the guests, among them an aging senator. "Brave pigeons become dead pigeons. Remember: to me you're just pieces of meat" (403). Acker feels trapped in the relationship and forced into the act of terrorism. She has previously interpreted birds as a conduit to escape anthropocentric problems, as facilitators of bravery, but now she finds herself in a situation wherein brave pigeons become dead pigeons, wherein her conduits are gone. That the author frames herself as, however unwittingly, one of the perpetrators of the takeover rather than one of the victims, reinforces the broader argument of her earlier work that it is not individual willed acts that create her crises, it is humanity itself, its codes and symbols, that does the work of killing pigeons. As if to emphasize the point, the granddaughter of the senator, in responding to the threat, "looked like an outraged mother hen, only her baby was an old man in a wheelchair and she was probably a virgin" (403). The only other woman in the story had become a flightless bird, one biologically unable to fly above the trauma in front of her. She then tells Acker's narrator, "You're a flea, or some kind of...amoeba who just accepts things" (404), further pushing women down the animal hierarchy, the Great Chain of Being, ultimately to a single-celled organism. As the novel closes, however, Acker returns to her dominant themes. Blocking out the trauma in front of her, she sings a "stupid popular song" to comfort her. "It's about a woman who loves to go wrong / She gets contented like a big fat cat / Only when she's lying flat on her back" (409). There is no resolution to the crisis at the hotel in the story; Acker's resolution is simply to turn back to sex and animality, to return to a state of catness, leaving whatever may have happened at the hotel, for her, beside the

point. A trauma that denies animality is solved for her by a return to animality; the physical human demands of that trauma cease to matter to her, so the story abruptly ends.

Acker spent much of her career regularly tying animality to sexual behavior.² “The animal comes out of its lair. Whenever it sniffs you, word or sight, and the animal has a hey day. First it goes sniff sniff on the dirty brown ground. It has a huge cold black nose,” Acker writes in one of her notebooks. “It rubs its sorry stomach against the dirt & waddles. Then it wriggles all around, horizontally, getting ready to move. It can move slow & it can move fast. You’ve freed this animal & now this animal who’s talkative is out in the open & ready to play. Come you say to the animal. The animal is walking across the chair. Its trail is wet like a drooling nose. Movement such as wriggling fingers attract this animal” (Acker, “Notes: Now she lies here,” Box 28, Folder 5). In such instances, mimicked at points in almost all of her published work, there is no correlative animal, no statement about animals. Animals are simply stand-ins for Acker’s own sexual desire, unfettered in the way she sees the lives of animals as more broadly exempt from the kinds of social strictures placed on humans. Entering into a sexual encounter is, for Acker, much like entering the forest was for Thoreau; it is an act of liberation, a rejection of traditional power formations and a submission to a different, more natural order.³

Ellen G. Friedman has explained that “the language of the body in Western culture is taboo, therefore not as thoroughly constructed by the cultural powers as the mind,” and that makes it “the site of revolution” (“Now Eat Your Mind” 39), a site wherein women, according to Hélène Cixous, can “‘de-phallocalize’ the body” (52). It is a revolution that can be enacted

² “Acker deploys transgressive violence to destabilize the systems of meaning that the antiporn movement took to be self-evident,” argues Anna Ioanes (181).

³ Acker “had a constant concern with sex and power, and how they join and reinforce each other,” she told an interviewer in 1991. “It’s almost an obsession” (McCaffery 95).

through sexual transgression, but can also come from the human bodily transgression of embodying the animal—that which cannot be contained by human social norms.⁴ “Every society has an imaginary zone for what it excludes,” Cixous argues with Catherine Clément. They see women as embodying the “group of anomalies showing the cracks in the culture” (7-8). How they expose those cracks, exploit those anomalies, however, is replete with multivalent possibilities. “Acker’s constant target is the infrastructure of Western patriarchal society,” Friedman says, “the government, business, education, and legal institutions that construct identity and which the oppression of women serves to sustain” (“Now Eat Your Mind” 44). And while all of those institutions are decidedly patriarchal, they are also decidedly human, and transgressing them through animals, particularly when enacting such transgressions from the human female form, provides a holistic revolutionary contravention.

Despite the abrupt ending, *Florida* features a narrative plot that moves forward in a more-or-less typical progression, against the dictates of her previous work. Acker was, however, willing to make attempts at traditional structures. In a 1977 poem, “Lullabye,” Acker describes “wild animals” who “start roaming through the street,” allowing her to “take flight from all weariness.” She carefully describes a tiger, a lion, and an alligator, each portrait ending with, “All the stars lie in her hairs / Pulsating glittering.” The poem closes with the stanza, “Go to sleep my lover / Tender, tenderly / Sleeping in the forest / Of the naked beasts” (Acker, “Lullabye,” Box 22, Folder 42). Animals are a retreat, an elision, naked beasts who allow humans to rest away from the crush of civilization.

In a 1981 story titled, “Time,” Acker describes entering a garden. “White butterflies flew above the canal bank, a swarm of mosquitoes came into my face, so much disappeared that now

⁴ “I’m fascinated with the relationship between language and body” (Friedman, “A Conversation” 18).

things were simple.” She describes “birds of the evening and of the night: bats, owls, screechers, babies fallen out of their nests and drowned in a bucket. They haunt my dreams” (Acker, “Time,” Box 3, Folder 5). Flying animals, birds and insects, facilitate simplicity, serve to blind her to realities outside of the garden. At the same time, however, their fragility mirrors her own, leaving them to haunt her dreams. Those animals, however, exist in a succinct, straightforward narrative. Her next attempt, *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, would apply that more traditional structure to a full novel, the only time in her career that she makes such an effort (Riley 29).⁵ Based on an actual trip the author took to the embattled island nation, funded by a \$7,000 Creative Artists Public Service grant (Krauss 130, 141; McBride 149), she describes herself in the opening as “middle-class, though she has no money.” She is an “American white girl, twenty-nine years of age, no lovers and no prospects of money, who doesn’t believe in anyone or anything,” and “one summer she goes down to Haiti” (5).

Haiti’s original publication included illustrations by Robert Kushner, among them a small black pig and a goat (Acker, *Haiti*, Box 2, Folder 3). Much of the verbal animal presentation in the novel is less the sort of magical embodiment of previous and later work and more a function of setting. She sees “the children in torn dresses, the men in cut-off sandals shirtless lead the yoked cows and mules” (7). People sit in shacks “and talk and carry baskets and have dogs and quarrel.” The “dogs and chickens run from the shacks into the street” (9). Many of those chickens are killed for food that she is served in various homes (14, 15). “Against the stucco white wall by the highway a woman sits by a small black pig,” who will almost certainly become a similar victim (25). Goats bleat. “Weeds rise up everywhere. Birds and crickets are making

⁵ *Kathy Goes to Haiti* is “a parody of a porn novel,” Acker claimed. “I tried to write the dumbest book I could” (Acker, “Deaton Interview” 281).

noise” (55). At one point, she lies down in a vacant dirt field. “Thousands of different kinds of insects crawl over her. Wasps the size of bumblebees and small red ants large red ants and small black ants and thin-bodied fliers translucent green wings and grasshoppers and big black beetles” (57).

There is in the depiction a direct connection to the nation’s poverty. The humans are in close proximity to animals, thereby making them poor, rural, exotic. Even the birds are associated with weeds. Lying in a field leads to insect attacks. Citizens sit in shacks around dogs, chickens, mules, and goats. As in much of *Florida*, Acker turns her previous animal escapism on its head. The people she encounters are wrestling with the twin traumas of poverty and political instability; the animals around them offer no means of escape, largely because they have been divorced from the natural world and placed into the same traumatic setting as the humans, forced to endure the same poverty as their captors. Physical proximity, then, disallows the kind of escapist embodiment that might otherwise salve the wounds of political and economic trauma. Acker can imagine birds and crocodiles and wolves as totems of some magical place of comfort, but those living with animals don’t have that luxury. Their reliance on those animals for survival and for participation in the artificially constructed economy ensures their inability to fetishize those animals as a form of release.

If animals serve as a kind of scarlet letter of rural poverty on the residents of Haiti, though, so too do the humans serve as a scarlet letter for the animals surrounding them. Creating associations wherein animality is a function of human poverty demeans those animals in the process. Just as a human standing in the living room of a vast mansion will be interpreted by onlookers differently than a human standing in front of a hastily constructed shack, so too will animals be seen as less important for the comparison. The veneration of animal being that

defines much of Acker's early and later work, the two ends of the bell curve, is gone in these depictions, the insects and pigs and chickens and horses seeming less meaningful in their status as placeholders, signifiers of a desolation that makes it almost impossible to see them as arbiters of transcendence. Just as humans are often belittled by animal comparisons—fat pigs or sons of bitches, for example—animals can find themselves guilty by association in the other direction. And there is real data to demonstrate the conceit. American police, for example, shoot dogs and other companion animals at an average of almost one per day, and the bulk of those animals are killed in the same Black and Brown neighborhoods in which the police commit the majority of their human shootings (Bloch and Martínez 153). Proximity to human marginalization, particularly related to poverty and race, creates similar vulnerabilities for animals.

And Haiti is the hemisphere's largest Black neighborhood. Though founded as the hemisphere's only Black republic after the successful overthrow of French control in 1804, the country struggled in succeeding generations to maintain political and economic stability, a struggle exacerbated in 1957 with the election of François Duvalier, a US-trained medical doctor who came to power on a populist platform before becoming a ruthless autocrat who, in 1964, declared himself president for life (Matthew Smith). Known as "Papa Doc," Duvalier tortured and murdered his political opponents and used bribery and other forms of corruption to enrich himself while driving his nation further into poverty (Marquis). Upon his death in 1971, his son Jean-Claude Duvalier, known as "Baby Doc," took over the country's leadership, extending his father's reign of terror and corruption during the period of Acker's trip to the island until his eventual overthrow in 1986 (Ferguson). Theirs was the embodiment of trauma imprinted on a national frame, generational in its impact both economically and individually, in the felt reverberations of the thousands of murders the Duvaliers used to maintain their power.

Acker's placement of animals as signposts of that turmoil and trauma, however, does eventually give way to more substantive engagement. While in Haiti, Kathy begins an affair with a married factory owner named Roger, who is unapologetic about cheating on his wife and introduces his mistress to her. Betty, Roger's wife, tells Kathy that she wants a horse. She was scared of them as a child, "but even then I couldn't stay away from them. I know I'm not scared anymore. If I had a horse, I could go anywhere around here" (60). Horses are, for Betty, a vehicle of human freedom, a method of escape from a disastrous marriage. Her fear of the all-too-human Roger has eclipsed her fear of horses; the animal has become for her, at least in fantasy, a means to evade human confinement. Betty, then, demonstrates the general trajectory of Acker herself: feelings of human imprisonment mollified by dreams of liberatory animal encounters. When Kathy asks Betty why she doesn't get a horse, Roger answers for her: "She doesn't know how to ride," patriarchal domination, the arbiter of Betty's confinement, showing itself in Roger's dismissive claim to speak for his wife. Though Acker presents the conversation in a traditional narrative form, she brings to it the interplay of fantasy, gendered power dynamics, and animal escapism with which she infuses her more abstract writing. Betty tells Roger that if she had a horse, she "could keep it here real cheap. It wouldn't cost anything" (60), including capital, Acker's other principal theme, into the presentation. When Kathy suggests that Betty practice on the mules walking around the factory, Betty rejects the idea. The mules don't match her fantasy; no one could escape captivity by riding a mule. At the same time, though, mules do not come attendant with the capital outlay and prestige that Betty attaches to horses.

"She talks all the time about horses," Roger tells Kathy, diminishing his wife's desire. "If she tried riding one, she'd get so scared, she'd run away yelling 'Eek, eek'" (60). Roger's cavalier attitude toward his wife's concern for at least some animals has further consequences for

Betty. She is “crazy about animals,” he says. Betty wants to bring her dog from the United States to live with them in Haiti, “but I wouldn’t let her do it. It would cost a fortune. She really loves that dog. Betty, show Kathy pictures of your dog” (61). Kathy empathizes. “Every time I’ve had a pet, it’s killed me, not killed me but you know what I mean, to abandon it. You always have to leave a pet and it hurts so much, I’m scared to have a pet again. I think pets are babies” (61). Of course, you don’t always have to leave a pet, particularly if they are babies. Dafna Shir-Vertesh has described the kind of human-animal relationship embodied by the conception of Kathy and Betty as “flexible personhood” (420), a human way of thinking about pet animals that incorporates them as functionally temporary parts of the family, meriting care and concern while present, but expendable in the broader family outlay when better circumstances come along. And by creating flexible definitions of personhood with animals living in the immediate vicinity of humans, those outside the bounds of civilization are surely all the farther from human respect.

In this context, however, Acker is returning to her economic theme, using pets as a way to demonstrate the precariousness of an existence lived without financial security. Women without money—or, in the case of Betty, women without power—have to sacrifice nonhuman relationships for the sake of their own survival. In Haiti’s corrupt taxation system, bringing Betty’s dog from the United States would cost the couple seventy-five dollars. “He’s really a beautiful dog,” Betty tells Kathy. “He’s so big he’s as big as Roger but he wouldn’t hurt anybody” (62). The difference between Betty’s relationship with Roger and her relationship with her dog is not one of species but one of demeanor; the two are defined in Betty’s mind by their relative cruelty, her inherent argument being that Roger would hurt someone, has, in fact, hurt her.

Kathy responds by suggesting that Betty get another pet, one from Haiti that wouldn't require punitive Haitian import duties. "I once kept a cat here," Betty tells her, "but Roger kicked him out of the house. Roger says animals don't belong in a house." Roger emphatically agrees. "Animals belong outside a house. That's how things are in Haiti." His argument has nothing to do with the relative merits of animals living within or without houses; instead he focuses solely on culture, human constructs that ascribe certain human values to certain geographical locations. "He doesn't understand," Betty says, turning the cultural argument back upon him. "In Kansas we have animals running around all over the place" (62). The power dynamics are thus expanded to colonial relationships. It is, in that sense, a version of Edward Said's Orientalism writ onto the lives of nonhuman animals. Said's insight that Western writing about the East was inherently bound by the colonial traditions that shaped the vision of commentators and authors came attendant with a critique that such scholarship not only misrepresented the East, but that it actively served to damage representations by those in power in the Middle East and Asia. Betty uses animals in service to those representations, signposts of behavior deemed proper based less on morality and more on the history of power relations between two geographical and cultural locations. Just as Betty maintains a hegemonic control over her dog, and Roger maintains a hegemonic control over Betty, the culture of the United States maintains a hegemonic control over Haiti, ensuring that Roger couldn't understand the way things are done in Kansas. The maintenance of calcified power relationships, Acker argues, radiates outward, appearing at every level of social relations, from human to animal, to human to human, to nation to nation, with that human-animal relationship at its root.

As if to punctuate the dynamic, Kathy goes to the restroom, where she sees "a beautiful long-hair cat skin" (63). Horrified, she asks if she is stepping on Betty's pet cat and if the cat

died naturally. “We killed him,” Roger tells her, before disclosing that the animal wasn’t Betty’s pet. “It was just a stray cat,” Betty tells her, creating yet another power dynamic, one that places different values on the lives of cats deemed pets and those deemed strays. And for all her seeming insistence on the value of animal relationships, and despite the trauma of the event, Kathy’s internalized notion of flexible personhood allows her to endorse this particular display of power. “I got scared for a moment,” she says. “I thought you were horrible people” (63). There is, in her mind, a dubious moral difference between killing and skinning a cat that a human claims to own, and killing and skinning a cat that a human doesn’t.

Sill, Acker draws clear distinctions between her own moral thinking about animals and that of Roger and Betty. She asks at one point if she can pet one of the goats in the couple’s yard. “Sure you can. He’s tied to the tree,” Roger tells her. Kathy, however, is unsure. “I don’t want to torture him. That’s no way to love an animal” (73), she says, referring to the goat being tied to a tree. Roger doesn’t want animals in his house, but he is comfortable with binding them and taking their freedom outside of it, a prospect that someone who has spent so much of her time meditating on the liberatory politics of animals and animality finds difficult to stomach. When the two see cows coming in for the night, Roger points to one that he used to wrestle as a child. “You must love him,” Kathy says, and Roger says that he does. But he no longer plays with the cow. He has put childish things away, binding the cow metaphorically as property just as he has tied the goat physically. Age, then—a presumed maturity—provides an additional power differential to the scene.

And those differentials have their effect on Kathy. “You don’t know the difference between friends and strangers and you’re unable to give anyone, especially the people who say they want to fuck you, ordinary human affection,” she tells herself. “You’re beyond the bounds

of being human. You're inhuman. You're now out of control and you're showing only the slightest pretense that it's otherwise" (77). While the language of her lament is similar to that of previous works, here that inhumanity is not liberatory; it restricts her ability to relate to the world, an all the more pressing concern because she is not at home, unable to hide from those humans outside the walls of her apartment. In travel, she finds herself forced to adapt, to maintain as much humanity as she can, the only language easily translatable across linguistic barriers. But the animality that is, at home, her blessing, is, on the road, her curse. Animals that were previously depicted negatively as threats, then, in Haiti become internalized. "You don't do anything useful," she tells herself, "you hate to work all of you is one mass of squirming and totally disgusting worms that squirm against each other hate each other" (86).

Roger's hold over Kathy and his own problematic relationship with animals causes her internalization, but it also causes his own transference of animal thinking onto humans. "I know how the world is," he tells Kathy. "We're all animals. Anyone who thinks otherwise is fooling himself" (149). But his acknowledgement of human animality is not in aid of arguing for a baseline level of equality between species. Quite the opposite, Roger's is a hamfisted method of justifying his cruelty. "I married Betty cause she's a donkey. She has no friends and she has no one she can run to for help. I wanted someone who was nothing. Who was like an animal to me" (149). Betty was someone with whom he could wrestle, then tie to a tree when he was finished. She was property that would have the kind of flexible personhood that would leave him unencumbered. By using animal designations, Roger was able to free himself from concern over the trauma felt by the cow, the cat, the goat, the wife. In another scene, Kathy tells Roger, "You can't treat the poor people like animals" (98). He demands services from them and doesn't pay them, knowing that they have no money. He was tying them to the tree, as well.

In another essay related to Haiti, Acker, signing herself as The Black Tarantula, ruminates on giraffes she experiences on the island, a particularly interesting essay because giraffes themselves do not live in Haiti. Still, Acker patiently describes the lives of giraffes, their ability to feel and smell. “Giraffe reactions and decisions define the territory. ‘This,’ says the giraffe to himself, ‘is my territory. The rest is not my territory.’” She spends much of her time in the essay detailing the giraffe’s senses of hearing and smell; he is a self-reliant and capable animal. So “why does one giraffe have anything to do with another giraffe?” she asks. “The giraffe needs other giraffes desperately.” Their proximity to one another provides a safety in numbers. “The territory in which they’re sitting really becomes giraffe territory. It stinks of giraffes. It smells more of giraffes than of leaves. All the other animals recognize this smell: recognize there’re too many giraffes in this area for them to enter the territory. Not one little measly giraffe a bear can attack. Fuck you” (Acker, “Voodoo,” Box 23, Folder 26). It is clear that Acker’s rumination on the lives of giraffes is, at least in some measure, a metaphor for her own sense of safety in seeking out others. Fitting the metaphor, she spends the last pages of the essay imagining giraffes having sex. At the same time, however, she never specifically draws a human comparison. In her only essay of the kind, she simply focuses on one species and describes it from a distinctly Ackerian perspective, one made all the more nebulous by the opening sentence: “In Haiti, there are many animals,” and the real absence of giraffes she would have encountered on her venture in the country.

The intersection of gender, patriarchy, capital, and species negotiate trauma in decidedly different ways when a white woman visits an impoverished Black nation. When she returned to the United States, she produced in 1980 a small text titled, *The Seattle Book, for Randy and Heather*, wherein she argues that literature itself is the destruction of meaning. “Any genre of

writing,—political analysis, romantic novels, mathematical proofs, Ronald Reagan's vomitings [sic],—as soon as its meaning is destroyed, becomes literature” (1). Her framing, however, is not a denial of her previous animal claims; it is instead a method by which she can critique the human project on familiar ground. “If literature concerns itself with truth values only insofar as it concerns itself with referentiality, what is reality for a writer?” she asks. “If the reality is the words themselves, words are existences whose values depend on differences. Words are precise measurings of specificities,” whereas more valued human creations like money were not. “Money as it occurs in our society is the opposite of such occurrences. Since money now defines the greatest proportion of human relations, valuable or specific human relations aren't occurring.” As an example, she recounts the 1972 Christmas Bombing in Vietnam. “On Christmas Day an American pilot can, by machine, write MERRY CHRISTMAS on a bomb and send it down to Vietnam only because he, I presume it's a he, doesn't know reality or value” (2). Gender, patriarchy, and capital combine in a broad critique of the human and the human-social. A great writer, then, comes into being through “hatred antipathy to humans” and “fear of everything” (4).

But if writing is part of her self-definition, a portion of her way to negotiate trauma, then so too is love, and she soon sets herself the task of defining “to love.” As McKenzie Wark has written of Acker's work, “There's a connection between the absence of love and commodification. The latter reduces everything, including bodies, selves, to sameness, and love can't endure in sameness.” That being the case, “if love exists at all it is in its impossible, negative relation to human differences. Love is impossible, is absolute, eternal—approachable only in the negative, but within the time of capital not approachable at all” (131). The intervention of capital, then, destroys the capacity for love, or the human capacity to comprehend it; it makes that kind of human connection to another human less accessible than a viable human

relationship with the natural world, the world beyond capital, represented most readily by the animals who reside there. Being with or identifying with or becoming animal helps create a more accessible love, one not fraught with the vicissitudes of capital intervention and the power relations generated by modern cultural constructs.

There are, for Acker, two significant instances of the act: “(1) To love knowledge. (2) To love sex.” She interprets them as an oppositional mirroring: “the opposition mind:body.” But “the lovers of knowledge and the lovers of sex both love cats,” and “the love of cats resolves the opposition mind:body.” Animal relationships, then, are the binding agent for mind and body, for knowledge and sex, leading her to posit two definitions of cats: “Cats are: (1) powerful and tender (hot); (2) chilly and self-contained (cold).

“Being both powerful and tender and chilly and self-contained leads to pride.

“The opposition cats (hot:cold) leads to pride.

“Pride is the unification or resolution of that which can't be united or resolved” (8).

Pride—along with being a descriptor of a group of the largest cats, lions—is for Acker the reconciliation of the “fear of everything,” a self-empowerment that can serve as a palliative for the effects of trauma. And it comes from embodying the two oppositional traits of cats. In working through her own vision of the relationship of animal embodiment to love, trauma, knowledge, and sex, Acker provides a map for interpreting her previous depictions of liberatory cat fancy and those depictions that will arise in her later work. Animality becomes the shield with which she deflects her “fear of everything” and the sword with which she manifests her “antipathy to humans.”

To emphasize the point, she closes the work by taking as her appropriated text A.A. Milne’s *Winnie-the-Pooh*. Acker’s version of Eeyore stands pissing and thinking about the end

of the world, ultimately deciding that “the cogito is temporal and must come from outside: it cannot come from a purely internal certitude” (9). When Winnie-the-Pooh comes along and begins discussing matters with him, the bear explains that “either a tail IS there or it isn't there. You can't make a mistake about it. And yours ISN'T there!”

“Then what is?” asks Eeyore.

“‘Nothing.’

“‘That Accounts for a Good Deal,’ said Eeyore gloomily. ‘It Explains Everything. No Wonder’” (10).

As Eeyore looks for his tail, Pooh continues on and meets Owl, in his own existential crisis over the “circularity of the signification of any particular signifier,” which leads him to use “longer and longer words, until at last he comes back to where he started but nobody can remember where that is” (12). The act of animal embodiment is, Acker argues, an act of simplification, of throwing off the Symbolic Order that adds layers of complexity to life and ultimately feeds traumatic reactions. When the process goes the other way, when animals embody human traits, they are lost in complication, thinking themselves out of a belief in their tails or driving themselves into signification loops that make understanding and, ultimately, meaning impossible. The opposition human:animal, then, is not divisible as is mind:body, hot:cold. It only serves a beneficial function moving in one direction.

Acker’s final illustration in *The Seattle Book* she titles “Missing New York City: A Story.” She includes drawings of swans and fish. “Once upon a time there was a cat: A cat-brat-rat-hat,” she writes, before describing the “soldiers and clouds of garbage and the arms of bums” (14). After Haiti, after Seattle, she is desperate to travel home, but she will do so as a cat, bracing for the trauma of city life by embodying the “resolution of that which can't be united or resolved”

(8).⁶ As she goes home, there aren't Cat-Women leading her from the skies; she is the cat-woman, making her way east with, if anything, pride.

That being the case, her *New York City in 1979*, written in 1981 after her arrival home, returns to her traditional themes.⁷ “As soon as I've gotten fucked, like a dog I no longer care about the man who just fucked me,” she writes (4). And being a dog is a superior state, as “humans are repulsive” (14). They are part of the “robot world” (34) that sees emotion as weakness, propping up a domineering patriarchal state. “We're not people, can't treat each other like people, no feelings, loneliness comes from the world of rationality, robots” (18). She admits that it “is confusing to be a human being, but robotism is what's present” (20). Her argument is that the state of humanity itself is potentially repairable, that the Symbolic Order of Lacan can be overcome, but such would require a reconciliation of trauma unavailable to robots in a civilization that encourages denial as a formative coping mechanism. “Glory be to those humans who are absolutely NOTHING for the opinions of other humans,” she says (35). Animality is a way out, but so too is an emotional reckoning, a relationship to trauma that acknowledges its causes and effects.

Acker's other principal work of 1981 was a screenplay for Bette Gordon's film *Variety*. The film follows a woman, Christine, who takes a job in a New York porn theater and becomes obsessed with one of the male patrons who frequent it. She stalks him throughout the city, losing relationships along the way, both determined and befuddled by her own determination. The film allows Gordon to make the working-class elements of the city itself an important character, the

⁶ “In the city, street violence is on the increase,” she writes in one column for the *New Statesman*. “Perhaps this is one final stage in late capitalism: alienated relations have developed and developed into a society of dark-age tribes, none of whom speak similar languages” (Acker, “New York,” Box 22, Folder 46).

⁷ “To survive in New York is to be a little like those hamsters on a wheel,” she told an interviewer, “the wheel turns faster and faster” (Friedman, “Conversation” 18).

action returning again and again to the city's Fulton Fish Market, where the subject of Christine's obsession often does business (Acker, *Variety*, Box 21, Folder 4).⁸ Long shots of dead fish, poked and grabbed are interspersed throughout the slow-paced chase scenes. When Christine's boyfriend takes her out to dinner at an Asian market, similar long shots of dead animals hanging from public Chinatown windows accompany the dialogue. There is in the imagery an argument for what Carol Adams calls the "sexual politics of meat," wherein women are fetishized as animals—and figurations representing the carcasses of animal bodies are fetishized as human women—feeding from the existence of both as an absent referent in society. "Once the existence of meat is disconnected from the existence of an animal who was killed to become that 'meat,'" she explains, "meat becomes unanchored by its original referent (the animal), becoming instead a free-floating image, used often to reflect women's status as well as animals" (13). But Acker and Gordon, all too aware of the animal, feel the weight of the sexual politics of meat not as the result of an absence, but of a presence, one experienced regularly in the underbelly of the city, in the spaces where tourists tend to stay away.

Fitting that imagery, Christine tells her friends the story of a woman with a snake sliding between her breasts; the next night the woman has a tiger with her, with whom she has sex. Animal fetishization and the sexual politics of working-class New York merge together, combining Acker's critique of patriarchy, capital, and species to describe the trauma of being a poor woman in the city, to be the meat consumed by employers, by men, and by her own obsessions. Writing Christine was, in so many ways, Acker writing herself, and it was those

⁸ When Acker returned to New York in 1981, she sublet an apartment in the fish market district and lived there as she wrote the screenplay (Krauss 195).

intersections, those obsessions, that would ultimately lead to perhaps her most popular work,
Blood and Guts in High School.

CHAPTER 3

To Be or Not to Be a Bird:

Becoming-Animal in *Blood and Guts in High School*

Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* closes with a statement on the human condition, one that develops from a systematic progression throughout the preceding text. "A human is a being halfway between an alligator and a bird who wants to be a bird" (165). It is more than a whimsical aside, more than a simplistic metaphor for good and evil, for the moral choices that humans ultimately make. Building from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Acker describes a becoming-animal, a sharing of identity between human and nonhuman, a process that begins in the novel's first pages and continues throughout. It is the pinnacle of her oeuvre's animalistic bell curve.

"Acker's characters do not only lack the capacity for self-reflexivity, they also lack the immediate recognition through which thinking could proceed along the path of common sense," argues Frida Beckman in one critical reading of the novel. They display "the common sense of the philosophical idiot." Acker "ridicules the Cartesian agent capable of improving himself through thinking" (65). Beckman describes a "writing of idiocy" that "neither naturalises the capacity for thought nor mourns its loss." But Acker "repeatedly rejects the possibility of a complete circle of self-reflexivity that would allow her characters as well as her texts themselves to become capable of coherent thinking" (69). To make her case, Beckman compares Acker's characters to Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the Russian idiot, based on the work of Dostoevsky, who "fails to adjust to th[e] supposed self-evidence of thought" (57). It is this kind

of analysis that can benefit from an animal studies approach to Acker. That she “simply refuses to create her fiction and her characters in accordance with a tradition that does not account for any movement outside the circle of self-reflexive thought” (69) makes far more sense, and could be far less frustrating to critics like Beckman, if Acker’s framing of the human in a state of becoming-animal—another element of Deleuze and Guattari’s thinking—is taken into account. Hers is not the creation of a new literary idiot, but a representation of a kind of becoming-thought, challenging human conceptions of nonhuman animal mental capacity that builds from a legacy rooted in the very Cartesian agent that Acker ridicules. If humans are beings halfway between alligators and birds who want to be birds, then this, Acker argues in every cut-and-paste, every act of plagiarism, is the literary structure that best represents that wanting, that becoming, that liminal space between alligatoriness and birdness.

Karen Brennan says of the end of *Blood and Guts* that Acker “instructs us to change our paradigms, to imagine the world differently.” That imagination will ultimately “create our freedom; fictions, hysterical and female, may make possible our human transformations” (268). Those transformations, however, aren’t human. Critics themselves fail to imagine the world differently, to change their paradigms, because they fail to see beyond the human, beyond the Cartesian version of agency that Acker attempts to counter.

Katie Muth has, at least, acknowledged that “the novel recognizes literary production as already complicit in the disciplinary mechanisms of biopower” (99). Power interventions designed to aid those humans already in power against subaltern humans and all animals have been a consistent refrain throughout history. Michel Foucault coined the term for such interventions “biopower,” an effort to control and order populations in decidedly human forms for decidedly human ends. The biopolitics that results from such orderings uses biological

frameworks to keep certain groups of humans, the ones doing the ordering, in power, while a variety of dispossessed human groups face subjugation (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 140). Muth's concern in examining Acker's biopolitical frame, however, is largely limited to "the politicization of the body—both the body of allegorical Everygirl Janey Smith and the body of the text" (98). That politicization is real, but so too is the animal experience as lived through a biopolitical frame and the becoming-animal that develops through the trauma of the novel's characters.

Blood and Guts in High School begins with a fight between a jealous ten-year-old Janey and her father/boyfriend. When she confronts Father about having sex with another woman, Sally, she protests that "you told me you were just friends like me and Peter (*Janey's stuffed lamb*) and you weren't going to sleep together" (9). While the lamb seems to serve an infantilizing function, to emphasize that Janey is, in fact, ten years old and having an incestuous relationship with her father, its role is larger than that. Janey is a version of Acker herself, and Acker was, throughout her life, incredibly close to stuffed animals, clinging to them even through the multiple movements of a largely transient life. She collected them, named them, turned to them in times of crisis. "I always got the sense that animals were protective for her," said one of her students; her stuffed animals "were totems for her" (McBride 289). That Acker maintained a large collection of stuffed animals was less a demonstration of her own inability to grow-up, though certainly her biography lends itself to that interpretation, than a use of the visage of animals to soothe her in difficult circumstances. By introducing an animal at the outset of the novel as Janey's reliable friend, over and against her father, Acker establishes a dialectic that will continue throughout wherein animals, or at least certain animals, become the thesis to all of life's human antitheses.

Kathy Hughes has argued that in posing Janey as a female child, Acker seeks to emphasize core gender and capital dispossessions by framing her protagonist as particularly powerless (110, 112). But it would be just as reasonable to extend that interpretation of Acker's character positioning to include animals as the ultimate powerless, pushing back by their very existence against patriarchal and capitalistic power formations. Young girls are excluded from positions of power in human society by such binaries; animals are excluded from society writ large, exterminated in mass by the millions just in the time it takes to read this sentence. Acker is concerned with "the internal collapse of identity for the human subject trapped in postmodernity," Lynn Hughey explains. "Her pilgrims are society's dispossessed," forced to "confront the horror of sublime forms of mass destruction or individual extermination" (123-124). They are, then, like animals.

Actual animals first appear in Acker's description of the Yucatán villages surrounding Merida. There are iguanas and a variety of lizards, turkeys, chickens, ducks, pigs, and dogs, among them "two funny-monkey-hideous-dog-jaguar faces and paws back-to-back. Janus? The sun?" (13) The dogs here, like the other animals, represent rural poverty (as they do in *Haiti*), unidentifiable mutts with hideous faces, but they also form the image of Janus, the Roman god of beginnings, endings, and transitions—of the synthesis that follows thesis and antithesis. They appear after a fight between Janey and Father, wherein Janey first decides to go to the United States. She reads portent into their presence. At the same time, the seeming ferality of the dogs demonstrates that their own lived reality is far from god-like. The villagers eat "lots of meat, mainly turkey" (13), presumably the turkeys she sees around her. In one of the villages, the men get drunk on Sundays, the leader receiving their drunken praises. "He will get, they say, the first newborn girl. In return, he says, he will give them a pig" (13). There is, in one sense, an

equalitarian aspect to this presentation of pigs as equivalent trades for human girls. But while the girl's life as currency will surely lead to a variety of problems, she will also not become a modern version of Mayan sacrifice, as happened with relative regularity in the first millennium AD in the Yucatán region. The pig, however, surely will, destined for a place among the "lots of meat" consumed by the locals. Acker ends the episode with the drunken men by noting, "The women watch" (13), punctuating the dehumanization of women that exists in the culture (Brennan 253). But the bulk of the descriptive text leading to the girl-pig bargain describes the villages' animal residents, not their women, forcing an acknowledgement of more than one victimization, more than one sacrifice.

When Father returns home and the argument resumes, Janey backs "away like he's a dangerous animal, but wanting him" (15). Animals here are not unthinkingly valorized as paragons of everything humans are not. Dangerous animals are dangerous, but Janey is drawn to them anyway. Not all animals are as dependable as Peter, the stuffed lamb, but their status as animal pulls her toward them nonetheless, an acknowledgement of Janey's own self-destructive tendencies, but also of the seeming virtue present even in animals considered frightening or menacing by humans.

After the confrontation, Janey finds herself in Merida, touring the ruins and marketplaces of the city. She finds in one market "beetles about an inch to two inches long crawling in a box, their backs covered by red or blue or white rhinestones" (16). Among the ruins "every now and then a huge monster rattlesnake sticks its head out" (16). Eagles fly overhead in search of prey. Inside one building is a statue of "a small jaguar whose teeth are bright white, mounted by a reclining man" (17). The back-and-forth representations of animals as victims of human caprice—the beetles, the jaguar—and animals as potential threats—the rattlesnakes, the eagles—

both mirror Acker's framing of human categories and betray her sympathy and vision for nonhuman animals themselves. "Why does Rockefeller need more money so badly he kills the life in the waters around Puerto Rico?" she asks after touring the ruins, probably referring to the Rockefeller Foundation's economic and environmental colonialism in the first half of the twentieth century (Villianatos 38-39). "Why does one person follow his/her whims to the detriment (deep suffering) of someone that person supposedly loves?" (17) Janey's identification with animals becomes more direct. She is the life in the waters around Puerto Rico and the human of deep suffering, Father the Rockefeller that treats life so cavalierly and follows his own whims to her detriment. She has, in a sense, become animal.

Deleuze and Guattari describe a "becoming-animal" ultimately "traversing human beings and sweeping them away" (237). It is more than a "correspondence of relations" (237); this becoming is an actual transition. "The becoming-animal of the human being is real, even if the animal the human being becomes is not," they explain (238). But while the becoming-animal itself is real, "the human being does not 'really' become an animal any more than the animal 'really' becomes something else. Becoming produces nothing other than itself" (238). There is, then, what Deleuze and Guattari call an "involution," a term borrowed from mathematics wherein the subject and object of an inversion are equivalent and can therefore share an identity (238).¹ That identity sharing, that continuous act of becoming that creates a relational correspondence, is at the core of Acker's animal thinking in *Blood and Guts*.

¹ Jennifer Komorowski extends the understanding of becoming by drawing on Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, wherein he argues that simulacra are not secondary to that which they model, as the Platonic tradition would have us believe (Deleuze 66). Her simulacra of previously authored texts contain "a new aesthetic existence whereby becoming becomes possible" (Komorowski 50). In a dialogue between Deleuze and Claire Parnet, the two discuss woman-becoming as generated not by a given writer's gender, but by the "minority-becoming of her writing" (43).

It does so even though she didn't initially have the theoretical background to yet describe it. "When I started out, I didn't know about the work of Foucault, or—what would be more important to me—Deleuze and Guattari," Acker explained in 1991. "I knew I wanted to plagiarize, but I didn't have a clear theoretical justification for what I was doing or why" (McCaffery 88). Acker began working on *Blood and Guts*, or at least on segments that would eventually become part of *Blood and Guts*, as early as 1976 (McBride 164). Soon afterward, one of her lovers, Sylvère Lotringer, a professor of French literature at Columbia and founder of the journal *Semiotext(e)*, first introduced Acker to the work of Deleuze and Guattari in 1977 after the first volume of the pair's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* work, *Anti-Oedipus*, appeared in English (Krauss 162).² She found it revelatory. "It was the first time I've found people who are talking about what I'm doing," she told Lotringer. It would be the subsequent volume, *A Thousand Plateaus*, published three years later, that developed the concept of becoming-animal, but it would have been one with which Acker was decidedly familiar. Biographer Jason McBride explains that the work of Deleuze and Guattari, along with that of other theorists, "would shape and inform her writing" (McBride 174), particularly when she continued the writing of *Blood and Guts* in 1978 (Krauss 145, 151).

And there were other theorists, particularly feminist thinkers like Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous, who influenced Acker's portrayal of the social condition of women. When Janey resumes her desperate argument with Father, for example, the young girls he pursues are "fresh meat." Janey herself is "tough, rotted, putrid beef. My cunt red ugh" (18).

² "Sylvere [Lotringer] introduced me to the work of Felix Guattari, Giles Deleuze, and (somewhat) Foucault," Acker explained in an interview, dating the introduction to 1976. "Then when I read Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* that was another step" (McCaffery 89). (She later mistakenly placed the date farther along in her personal timeline. "It wasn't until after *Great Expectations*, right before I wrote the Pasolini book that I started reading postmodernist theory," she explained in a 1992 interview. "Deleuze and Guattari's work and Foucault helped me understand what I was writing" (Acker, "Deaton Interview," 276).

She has become animal, but here she has become animal remains, the metaphor simultaneously calling attention to the cavalier way the bodies of farmed animals are treated and the fleshly object status of women under the sexual gaze. It is another example of Carol Adams's "sexual politics of meat," the fetishization of women as animals (see Chapter 2)—the overt, seemingly indiscriminate way that Father commodifies women, both other girls and herself, animalizing them with his sexual behavior.

That kind of equation continues as Janey evaluates her fight with Father. "I knew that I was hideous," she says. "I had a picture in my head that I was a horse, like the horse in *Crime and Punishment*, skin partly ripped off and red muscle exposed. Men with huge sticks keep beating the horse" (20). The horse in *Crime and Punishment* appears in an early dream Raskolnikov has of his childhood, wherein he sees a drunken group of adults abusing an old packhorse who is unable to pull a cart loaded with people. It becomes a spectacle, Mikolka leading the crowd but everyone participating in the abuse until finally the horse is killed (Dostoevsky 59-64). Janey becomes-horse in the process of her argument, but does not associate with the freedom and speed usually attributed to horses. She is an urban horse, one abused for the desires of humans as in Raskolnikov's dream. The "men with huge sticks" who abuse the horse resume the sexual animalization narrative from her previous argument. Janey is no longer animal remains; she is instead alive, in the process of becoming remains, abused for the pleasure of men and their phallic demands.

The violence of the men also provides a point of reference for the abuse of actual urban horses. As Clay McShane and Joel Tarr have noted in their study of urban horses in the nineteenth century, the animals were considered by many to be technology more than sentient beings. They were machines, and those who profited from the use of those machines "compared

them closely in terms of cost and efficiency to other animals, including humans, as well as a variety of mechanical technologies” (228). In the last three decades of the nineteenth century and the first three of the twentieth, the number of horses in society expanded exponentially to accommodate growing urban spaces from Dostoevsky’s St. Petersburg to Acker’s New York. The horses suffered horrid working conditions, and while the kinds of group beatings felt by Janey and authored by Mikolka were less common, individual acts of violence against urban horses were all too regular (McShane and Tarr 236). Acker’s becoming-horse, then, connects her both physically and historically to a legacy of abuse directed at the vulnerable.

The suffering of the human horse in *Blood and Guts* and the animal horse in *Crime and Punishment* bends time from the twentieth century to the nineteenth, and Acker continues her play with time in the section that follows, as a story of Janey and Father repeats several times. In each instance, the two eat “raw fish salad (*cerviche*) at a Lebanese joint” (21, 22, 23, 25), animal remains abused over and over again just as Janey-as-animal sees herself as repeatedly abused. Janey here turns from abused to abuser, but she is unable to visualize the abuse in the same way, as she and Father are happy; they hold hands; they don’t “talk about Sally or anything heavy” (21). Her identification with animals, then, is spurred by traumatic events, laying bare the trauma at the heart of the human-animal relationship. That trauma serves as a kind of corrective lens that allows her to see what in times of relative peace she is unable to acknowledge. When that relative peace is broken, for example, she immediately associates her plight with the “YOUNG HORSES OF ATTILA THE HUN” (23), wild horses of the central Asian steppe the Huns trained to use in battle. The dangerous animals have returned. She is, in the bend of time and narrative repetition, no longer the horse. Instead, the horses are coming for her.

Janey responds with aggression of her own, joining a gang known as THE SCORPIONS, named for the venomous, predatory arachnids long a literary and artistic trope in human cultures across the globe. Among her closest companions in the gang is Monkey, with whom she takes meth and shoplifts from Bloomingdale's. Monkeys are humans' closest relatives, intelligent and mischievous, social animals who, like Acker and the members of her gang, seek out the companionship of others. During the shoplifting excursion, Janey's prize theft is a leopard coat, a mimic of another predator, one who uses camouflage to hide from those he hunts, a solitary animal who shuns the kind of species-specific social interaction engaged in by humans and primates.³ So Janey joins a gang of scorpions, consorts with a mischievous monkey, and leverages those relationships to take the predatory leopard from a bastion of capitalist consumerism. It is a story that doesn't require animal references to make its point, but at every turn Acker signposts the steps in her journey of becoming, and of her own becoming-animal, with references to other species.

And it isn't an accident. "Every day a sharp tool, a powerful destroyer, is necessary to cut away dullness, lobotomy, buzzing, belief in human beings, stagnancy, images, and accumulation," Janey realizes after her visit to Bloomingdale's. "As soon as we stop believing in human beings, rather know we are dogs and trees, we'll start to be happy" (37). Here she turns the becoming-animal narrative on its head. We are already animals, she argues; the quest lies in removing the effluvium that blocks such realizations. Civilization itself is an organized attempt by humans to escape from their animal being, a series of cultural constructs that mask the natural

³ Marion May Campbell reads the episode as one in which "dream-propelled Janey has transformed herself, escaping entrapment in the lures of capitalist space"; it is a "becoming-leopard" that "announces a regal degree of self-affirming agency" (169). (Like so many other critics, however, Campbell never pursues animal becoming further.)

reality behind the artificial shibboleths that carefully cover them. Images and accumulation are the building blocks of such constructs, belief in human beings their lived practice, and dullness, lobotomy, buzzing, and stagnancy the effects of addiction to them. The cure, she argues, is to renounce the lived practice of human civilization, to know we are dogs and trees, part of the natural world and co-inhabitants on the planet with other dogs and trees so often undervalued as a result of the “civilizing” process. Also undervalued are working-class and other vulnerable humans, like Janey, who see themselves defined out of full human being, out of the cultural constructs that would otherwise give them more ready, legal access to places like Bloomingdale’s and its products. There is, as a result, a greater closeness to animality, a lived connection to the natural world for Janey and her scorpion cohort, one that constitutes a path to happiness for those who choose to take it.

Civilization, however, still exerts its demands. Janey soon finds that a straight job, like the one she takes in a bakery, places her back within the civilizing paradigm. “I hated most that I didn’t have any more dreams or visions,” she says. “It’s not that the vision-world, the world of passion and wildness, no longer existed. It always is. But awake I was disconnected from dreams. I was psychotic” (40). Psychosis is the result of the lobotomy of human constructs, one that takes Janey from wildness, from the world of animals, the world that allows her to dream.

Passion, and at least a version of compensatory wildness, usually comes to her from sexual contact, that biological function that humans share with their fellow mammals. After her stint at the bakery, she meets Tommy, whose “tongue travelled in and covered mine. His hands ran huge insects down my back” (41). Sex is a reconnection with the animal, the wild. When her legs are spread apart, “fish is open,” and “Tommy was a SCORPION” (42). Tommy is a member of the gang, but in the moment he has become-scorpion; she has become-fish, even as he runs

insects down her back. Sex is the most consistent, present animality, and therefore the most potent means of escaping human being and its civilizing constructs.

Janey's time with THE SCORPIONS ends quickly, with a car crash that kills all of its core members save Monkey, who is brain damaged as a result, and Janey. It is an immediate trauma, the violent death of a group of animals, scorpions, and the wounding of another, the revenge of civilization on those who have discovered their animal selves, and that trauma ultimately drives the narrative in a decidedly different direction, one that centers animals in a way that the novel has yet to demonstrate: a seven-part story of a monster and a beaver accosted at their home by a bear.

The story begins with "a big ugly hideous monster" (44) and a beaver living a domestic life in a hut under a frozen waterfall in an icy, desolate land. The monster does all the chores of the house, cooks and cleans for the beaver, who shows no gratitude to the monster for the work. Still, theirs is a relatively peaceful existence until a "big brown bear" (45) arrives. He is "cold, hungry, and tired" (45), unable to find fish or other food in the snow and ice. When he sees the hut, he knocks on the door asking to be let in. The monster refuses, worried that the visitor might be a rapist or murderer. The bear, using the voice of a little girl, assures the monster that he is neither. "I'm a little girl who lost her way in the woods last night. I want to call my mommy 'cause she's worried to death about me," he says from the other side of the door (45). The skeptical monster asks why he was out in the snow all night, and the bear responds with a story of poverty and disability, claiming to live in a slum with a mother without limbs, ten paralyzed sisters, and ten sisters who are bank robbers and abuse her regularly. He claims, as the little girl, to have gotten lost picking weeds for the family's food and stranded in the cold. The monster, who experienced a similar temporary fear traveling outside the previous night, is sympathetic

and opens the door to the supposed little girl. Upon seeing the bear, the monster slams the door shut then runs to tell the beaver, who secures all of the doors and windows.

The bear, however, is determined to get into the house. He tries to force the door of the hut open by shaking and banging on it. The monster, who assumes the unwanted guest is a bill collector, tells him to go away. "I don't have any money and I'll never have any money. This world is a pit-hole and a garbage dump. It's 'cause of people like you" (52). The bear continues trying to force the door open. "And if I had any money, I wouldn't give it to you," the monster continued. "I'd piss on it and set it on fire...I'd feed it to the rats who live in my house, but I wouldn't give it to you. I hate you" (53).

Among the rats who live in the monster's house is a red-eyed white rat named Fritzzy, a pet. When Fritzzy runs outside through a special pet door in the hut after being accidentally burned, the bear captures her. The cunning Fritzzy avoids being eaten by telling the bear that keeping her alive and using her as leverage to get into the hut would be far more fulfilling. "The guys who keep me are bigger and taste better than me. Rats are poison" (53). The bear does just that, and the monster, distraught, plans to trade its own life for Fritzzy's. Beaver, however, won't let the monster do that. "Monster, I love you. I adore you. I'll give myself to the bear!" The two run down the stairs, racing to see who can first trade their own lives for Fritzzy's. Not hearing any answer, the bear, meanwhile, decides to eat Fritzzy, but as he lifts the rat to his mouth, Fritzzy bites him and runs away. The bear, too, leaves in pain, and when the beaver and the monster arrive outside, there is no one there.

To this point in the story, the big, ugly hideous monster is the immediate embodiment of Janey's sense of self and a broader stand-in for women trapped in the domestic sphere. The monster sees itself as doing all the work of the house with no demonstration of appreciation on

the part of the beaver. It is the monster who suffers the abuse and duplicity of the bear upon his arrival. When the monster believes that the bear is a bill collector, it takes on Acker's voice, denouncing the capitalist system that makes bill collectors possible. Though the hut is in a frozen realm, situated behind a waterfall, the monster includes in its screed a denunciation of New York electric company Con Edison. The monster has a pet to whom it is devoted, mirroring Acker's own love of animals and devotion to pet-keeping as a salve against the world beyond the bounds of her apartment-cum-hut.

But the becoming-animal of Deleuze and Guattari is not a static process, one wherein a human embodies an animal in a kind of final transformation. Becoming-animal is rather a kinetic operation, one that instead embodies a process of becoming itself, a process without finality, without a completion of the transformational process. So Janey, née Acker, continues transforming. As the story continues, the bear, defeated, continues to stare covetously at the house before seeing a white horse running through a green field. The icy environment is gone, replaced by "sloping meadows, meadow-hills, tiny houses nestling in the hills, patches of all-colours flowers" (54). After watching for a long time, the bear notices the white horse lying down, now in dirt, dying. "A huge open red wound gaped in his right side. Several humans with sticks were plunging their sticks into the wound" (54). Dostoevsky's horse has fallen headlong into the story, reifying Janey's own experience of feeling like the horse from *Crime and Punishment*. She has moved from becoming-monster to becoming-horse, contextualizing her own abuse through the lens of a magical version of Russian realism. The transition is the first real inkling that the animal story is more than a non-sequitur insertion into Acker's narrative. It is Janey's dream of becoming-animal, incorporating earlier becomings into its menagerie of references.

Soon the bear's anger at seeing the human cruelty toward the horse turns him into an elephant. "Elephant rose up, mighty mighty grey, on two legs and roared. Roar of the Universe" (54). The elephant travels to find water. "His long trunk stuck food in his snake-shape mouth. Every now and then ROAR to tell the forest who he was" (54). But he was also still a bear. He next appears in the room of a little boy, telling him a bedtime story about a giant who eats ears of corn "and, now and then, the heads off of human beings" (54). Even the animals themselves are presented in a state of becoming, transforming from animal to animal, from climate to climate, from urban to rural. Ever since the bear had seen the abuse of the white horse, his teeth had been chattering, and they chatter still in the little boy's room. "Why was he shaking like this, like some crazy woman who's possessed and turning, like a white horse being ridden by a rider for the first time?" he wondered. His instinct is to run away, "but he knew if he left this bondage, there'd be nothing else left in the world" (54-55). The bear has transformed yet again, moved from becoming-elephant to, ultimately, becoming-Janey. The animal who began the story as the oppressor of Janey, in her role as monster, has now become the personification of Janey herself, the narrator absorbing her abuse and embodying it, shaping it, making it her own.

As a result, the world that had been formerly white and icy becomes black. "All over was just blackness, a layer of blackness" (55). The blackness is a spinning ball enveloping everything, erasing the self of those within it, tossing them around in the inky dark. "You feel all your characteristics, your identities, slip around so you go crazy" (55). It is an existence reserved for "Rebels. Creeps. Outcasts. Loners. People who hate everybody. People who feel uneasy around everybody. People who know everyone hates them. People who hate being tied down, restricted, constricted, and huge whirling snakes. The snakes climb around your neck and arms. The woman who's the mother of snakes takes you in" (55). The bear, now a stand-in for Janey,

finds the darkness soothing. (Janey—and Acker—associates herself with the rebels, creeps, outcasts, and loners; she exists in a darkness, but one in which she feels comfortable, able to plot a stable course through the spinning black ball.) And so the bear is happy. He dances and sings. He sweats hailstones and cries thunderballs. “The bear was causing all the weather” (55). He sings a song about a “sweet bird in the darkness” living in his heart (55); the bird flies away and he follows. “I don’t give a shit about anything,” he sings. “I don’t have to do anything, everything lives” (56). After his song, the colors return, the blackness is gone. The bear now has wings like the bird in his heart, and he uses them to rise into the air and fly away from the beaver and monster’s hut. Janey has finally found a version of transcendence through her dark episode, through her transformation between various animal representations, between oppressor and oppressed, predator and prey, victim and rebel.

After the story, there is a different kind of becoming animal. Acker tells of a working-class slum apartment building occupied by a variety of minority and immigrant groups. The landlord burns down the building in an insurance scam, then sells the now-vacant lot to McDonald’s. “This is how poor people become transformed into hamburger meat” (56). Puerto Rican families are treated like cows, corralled into slums with “no hot water or heat,” the fences that pen them borne of “avenues of junkies, pimps, and hookers” to the north; “the southern border drifts off into even poorer sections, sections too burnt-out to be anything but war zones; and the western border is the Avenue of Bums” (56). Just like actual cows, their makeshift homes are then taken from them, their plight transformed into fast food for humans who never noticed their existence because of an intentional binding that kept them from view.

Soon after the story, Janey is kidnapped, taken into the sex trafficking industry at the behest of a lobotomist named Mr. Linker. “The only thing we have,” Linker tells his kidnappers,

“which separates us from the beasts is Culture. Culture is our highest form of life” (64). And he singles out literature as the highest form of culture. Linker’s narrative would, at first, seem to contradict much of the animal work done previously by the novel, equating literature with that which separates humans from “beasts.” It is significant, however, that Linker is ostensibly a villain and that Acker is situating her work in opposition to mainstream forms of literature. Her cut-and-paste, her plagiarism, her lack of cohesive structure and plot comprise a kind of anti-literature literature. She writes against the villains, against the gatekeepers of the literary canon. Linker is her captor, the arbiter of high culture; Janey, née Acker, is the beast. Hers is a literature framed in opposition to those like Linker, a literature of the animals.

Acker demonstrates that opposition in her rewriting of the Hester Prynne story of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, returning to wildness, to animality, as a compensatory counter to the human condition (Phillips 176). “It’s possible to hate everything that isn’t wild and free,” she writes. “A girl is wild who likes sensual things: doesn’t want to give up things being alive: rolling in black fur on top of skin ice-cold water iron crinkly leaves seeing three brown branches against branches full of leaves against dark green leaves” (66). Such is the wildness, the animal freedom, that Hester sought to liberate her from the cloister of a closed society. She was overtaken by “a little unsuspected ecstatic crazy-making overtaking wildness like a big King Viper spreading his hood.” That, Acker argues, is “what love’s like, snake-insane” (67). Sex and love are giving the body over to passion, to a wildness and animality shorn of imposed constraints, whether those constraints are the artificially constructed dictates of human social norms or the physical constraints of Linker and his hoodlums. If human society both mentally and physically stifles the animal nature of humans and the freedom that nature represents, then sex and love become the trap doors that allow at least a temporary escape. It is not a permanent

haven from human caprice; it is rather a kind of passing, a performative act that provides a sustaining modicum of animal connection in an unkind human world.

That unkind human world, meanwhile, sees the animality in such behavior, as well, but interprets it as a moral failing. Hester's husband describes her infidelity as a "horrible inhuman thing" (69). If humanity is the standard for worth, in that it stands as a mark of civilization, a separation from the animal, then displays of wildness, of that-outside-of-civilization, must of necessity be cataloged as horrible. There is no room within the civilized human mind for an acceptable, liberatory animality. Animality itself is horrible. For those like Acker who celebrate the wildness of animality, Hester Prynne becomes a paragon of freedom in literature, a character who represents Acker's own sense of place outside of establishment thinking. Prynne is also a paragon of freedom in history, Hawthorne's colonial setting demonstrating that American moralism has, in a sense, always been like this, has always othered those outside a specific human paradigm, whether they be libidinous women, native humans, or actual animals themselves, whose habitats were destroyed upon Puritan settlement in the New World. "*Wild* in the Puritan New England society Hawthorne writes about means *evil anti-society criminal*. Wild. Wild. Wild. Going wherever you want to go and doing whatever you want to do and not even thinking about it" (93). Animality is freedom, and real, sustained freedom is criminality in any human hierarchical scheme.

Deleuze and Guattari explain that "society and the State need animal characteristics to use for classifying people; natural history and science need characteristics in order to classify the animals themselves," and those "animal characteristics can be mythic or scientific" (239). Among them is the trope of the "lone wolf," which "is not fundamentally a characteristic or a certain number of characteristics; it is a wolfing," (239) an act of embodiment. Metaphor doesn't

become reality in a biological sense, but it becomes a reality in the lived sense of becoming itself. Though early in her narrative, Janey finds comfort in her gang, the SCORPIONS, after their car accident she embodies her own version of a wolfing to push back against societal classifications, just as had Hester Prynne.

Janey feels the weight of that Puritan legacy locked in her room after being kidnapped. Her incarceration ensures that “whatever desires are arising in me are rampaging around everywhere as wild and fierce and monstrous as gigantic starving jungle beasts” (95). Wildness, the animality of jungle beasts, is the freedom she has been denied. But that “rampaging around everywhere” is also the wildness of animals outside of the jungle, those caged for human interest. Hers is the frustration of the zoo animal, of the laboratory animal, of the shelter pet—a wildness stifled not like that of the criminal, who has, in most cases, been judged to have committed an act harmful to others in human society and thus imprisoned. It is stifled instead like that of the animal, caged for no other reason than her status as nonhuman, as Other, through no fault of her own, leading her wildness to rebel at the horror of captivity, to ache for a return to liberation, to the world.

“I like moving until I get beyond and I’m insane,” she says in the novel’s poetry section, “meaning I can’t think anymore meaning I’m a robot meaning I’m a dodo meaning I’m a creep meaning I’m stupid” (110). Her desire for insanity, for wildness, takes her to both sides of the posthuman divide. On one side of such considerations is artificial intelligence, technology created by humans that has made taking only human interests into account functionally obsolete: the robot. On the other is the animal, the beings who have always been within the human sphere but have not always seen their interests taken into account: the dodo, an animal extinct largely as a result of its contact with humans. (Dutch explorers first encountered the bird on the Indian

Ocean island of Mauritius in 1598. Subsequent hunting and the arrival of invasive species brought by humans to the island left the dodo extinct by 1662. A wild animal living freely on the island for more than seven thousand years was destroyed by contact with human civilization in just over six decades.) That same human society replicates the damage it causes wild animals by framing wild humans as stupid creeps. The naming imposed by civilization, then, only reinforces Janey's becoming-animal through social coding and naming practices. They create what she calls "mind slavery," wherein "I live in a partially human world and I want people to think and feel certain ways about me" (111). That mind slavery, the imposition of norms, ensures that Janey's identification with wildness and animality is not solely a creature of her own desires; it is foisted upon her by the world she seeks to escape.

And so she turns to those animals as her defenders, her supernatural arbiters of morality:
I swear I, by the Fates by-no-one-able-to-be-reversed,
may Death-Dog thus to be gently bark,
that I was true to you. If I'm lying, that most-fearful-in-the-world snake my
will hiss at tomb and on top of bones lie (114).

The Death-Dog and the snake are agents of fate, manifestations of Janey's conception that wildness is not bereft of a moral center, that those who push back against the constructed dictates of human propriety are not nihilistic; they are instead counter to the nihilism inherent in those very dictates. To be wild, to be animal, is to find morality rather than to accept it as an imposition.

After being released from her captivity, Janey again begins to roam, an animal in search of sustenance. Upon reaching Tangier and seeing Jean Genet, Janey ensures that "one of my eyes is on the human goats and dogs milling around in the square; one on Genet's bald head" (117).

There are two ways to read her statement. In one, Acker's lack of concern for punctuation could mean that when scanning the public square, Janey notes the presence of humans, goats, and dogs—the principal species of her problems along with two decidedly non-wild animal species—while keeping her attention on Genet, a wild man who serves as the counter to those in the square. In the other reading, Janey keeps one eye on human goats and dogs—co-conspirators, humans with the animal spirit, who have connected to the wildness outside of cultural constructs; those fellow travelers, then, frame the presence of Genet, another human with the animal spirit, one who breathes that animality into his own anti-literature literature, a model for all of Janey's writerly ambitions.

Either interpretation would maintain the consistency of her animal narrative, but it is her time with Genet that ultimately begins to break that consistency. She gives the writer a screed against Jimmy Carter, for example. "He's HAIRY as a RAT," she tells him. "He's a QUEER LITTLE PIG" (119). For the first time in the novel, animality becomes an epithet, rats and pigs stand-ins for political criticism. The shift is undoubtedly the work of Genet, who later whispers to her about a government official, "He's a pig, a brute" (128). In a fit of anger, he tells Janey "she's the worst kind of Jewish mama pig" (130). It is a dramatic turn from the animal embodiment that has guided the text until it reaches Tangier, one specifically tied to her time with Genet.

Away from him, she again becomes-animal. "I ROAMED the streets, not WALKED the streets because I was a cat," Janey says. "Cats adore being loved, but they don't want to be in prison" (123). Animal wildness returns. Janey's desperate need for affection and the trauma of her sex trafficking ordeal are embodied in the image of the cat, surely feral, roaming the streets as simultaneously needy and independent.

Eventually, though, that roaming does lead to another form of imprisonment, as Janey begins working as slave labor on a brutal plantation filled with Egyptian workers. One of them, Sahih, and the plantation's overseer, Knockwurst, discuss Janey's presence on the farm. Sahih acknowledges his status, "I'm an animal," but interprets a female presence in the fields as problematic. "We might be animals," he tells the overseer, "but at least we know to keep our feelings locked in us. Women are worse than animals, Mr Knockwurst. They don't understand what's happening as we do." Knockwurst agrees: "She's a woman. She doesn't know what it is to be a human" (132). In another instance, Knockwurst says, "The slave Janey stinks. My God. Workers are pigs, women are worse, but she's something else" (135). The world of work is a masculine world, the farmhands agree. The slaves might internalize a form of animality, but it is not the animality of wildness that Janey embodies. Theirs is an internalized animality that demeans themselves and demeans actual animals in the process, that interprets animals as subhuman rather than posed against the human. That disdain for animals, then, is also marshaled in service to a disdain for women. Women are animals because they are mindless and unable to control their emotions, argue Sahih and Knockwurst, a trope exemplified by the concept of female hysteria, a medical diagnosis that used impulsivity and emotionalism to stigmatize women, a diagnosis first used, not coincidentally, in ancient Egypt, where slave agricultural labor was also common. Acker here is able to tie the animalizing nature of organized, hierarchical society to the long histories of misogyny and bound labor, demonstrating how the stigmas associated with slaves, animals, and women intersected and still intersect to create a variety of dispossessions for all three groups.

Fitting that history, Janey is soon thrown into an Egyptian prison, "surrounded by bars like a caged animal," wherein judges walk by her cell and criticize her. "You're a whore a thief a

liar a smelly fish a money dribbler an egotistic snob,” one says. “You’re a woman,” says another. Her jailer tells her, “You strut around like a peacock” (133). Woman equals fish equals whore equals peacock. Sex work, animality, and gender categorization are intertwined as a form of slur, ensuring that none of the three can escape association with the others in the minds of those beholden to the human social order. Demonstrating the point, after Janey and Genet escape from jail, a group of would-be rebels—an artist, a punk rocker, and a rich do-nothing—tell Janey she stinks, that she should leave. “We don’t need shit-ass dogs like you. Go to the sewers” (138). One need not be in physical bondage to be ensnared in the broader binding created by metaphor. Janey’s wildness, her animality, is her liberation, but it is also the excuse used by men to demean and reject her. Those men are, in a sense, simply living out the historical model set for them, one consistent in its presence since at least the time of ancient Egypt.

That kind of contrapuntal depiction of animals can also be seen in Acker’s most striking use of the nonhuman in *Blood and Guts*: the drawings and images included in the work. The first of those animal images appear in the initial map of Janey’s dreams. As with the novel’s demeaning metaphors, some of the animal depictions are decidedly negative. Acker depicts a “huge jellyfish worm,” one that is “translucent, almost like vomit. No eyes cause no brain. Huge pink tongue and sharper-than shark teeth. The most frightening being and gets more and more so.” The worm travels down the main street of a ghost town, “fills up the whole street to the blue sky” (46). Janey—Acker—also sees a large snake in the street as she runs from the worm in terror.

The map is one of three consecutive images depicting Janey’s dreams, and the worm reappears in both of those that follow. The scene on the ghost town’s main street is repeated in the second dream map, but the narrator admits that now she has become the worm. In the third

map, “I’m riding the white worm. I am the white worm,” and that act of becoming-worm is a harbinger of her own demise. “I’m going to die soon,” she realizes. “The worm is my death” (50). She also encounters Cerberus, the three-headed dog who guards the underworld in Greek mythology, caged behind iron bars, “jumping and yapping, dying for meat,” though the drawn image of the animal only has one head. Cerberus “wants to go everywhere. This is me,” she explains (50). In the trauma of the dreamscape itself, Cerberus represents the finality associated with the end of life. If becoming-worm is acknowledging death, then becoming-Cerberus is acknowledging life-after-death, one that is sure to be as unpleasant as the original life that created it. She also meets the “God of Death,” to whom she refers as “You God of the Underwater,” making it likely that she is referencing Poseidon rather than Thanatos. “Putting your golden necklace around my neck/All the fishies swim around us plop plop/Little fishes leaping and splashing even though there’s no air to splash with” (49). The surround of animals themselves, their noise and motion, frame the act of dying, the transition to an unforgiving underworld.

While the depictions of worms, fish, and dogs (or, at least, one mythical three-headed dog) may at first seem to contradict the novel’s broader, more sympathetic portrayal of animals, Acker has never been engaged in a one-to-one correlation between humans and animals, a black-and-white melodrama that pits one as unqualified evil and the other as unqualified good. The bear and the beaver, for example, each demonstrate negative qualities. Nonhumans can be just as frightening as humans in some situations. But they can also, as befits the larger narrative theme, be agents of liberation from that terror.

After escaping the worm, Janey moves through a temple into a grassy meadow, wherein she finds that “animals are leaping running sauntering across the rolling grass plains.” In this

setting, the animals are not frightening. “They don’t hurt me. I want to run with them, but I’m too weak and human,” she says. “I can’t keep up with them.” She finally recovers and is able to run with the animals. “They accept me.” Accompanying the image are pictures of a wolf, tiger, horse, and lion. “We run and run over the low rolling hills. I’m petting a lion as we run along” (47). From there, Janey learns to fly and rises into the air, where a large, black bird begins to chase her, a representation of death that convinces her that “as soon as it catches me, I’ll have to die.” She tries to escape, but the bird keeps following. Finally, exhausted, “I decide to let the bird catch me. I fall. The huge black bird catches me and folds me in its arms. As soon as I give up to him, he falls in love with me. We try to figure out how to save me from death” (47). Her trials with the black bird represent the reconciliation of her fear. Even when they are disconcerting, animals prove themselves to be liberatory agents. One is left to assume that had she been similarly tired when running from the jellyfish worm, that animal too would have revealed motives that were far less nefarious than Janey originally supposed. It is yet another contrapuntal depiction. Whereas humans present themselves to the narrator as kind or, at the very least, benign, then go on to demonstrate more destructive traits, even the animals who originally appear to have those destructive traits reveal themselves to be benign or, at the very most, kind.

And it is significant that a bird is the agent of the revelation. In another portion of the first dream map, for example, Acker depicts “a tree which is the world which is my back,” wherein “birds sit on top of each branch.” Birds are literally on top of the world, watching over it even as “its branches are moving. Making sounds” (47). Flight is a form of liminality, a venture between two points of functional stasis, and birds are often used as literary tropes for the act of liberation, but Acker’s use of birds here, and particularly later in the novel, ventures beyond traditional bird metaphors as signposts of transitional states. A bird serves as the bear’s salvation from darkness

earlier in the novel, for example. After Janey has been kidnapped by the nefarious Mr. Linker, he tells her a story of his wife spending five years making a rug that featured “tiny birds silver and white and pale blue clustered around bunches of grapes and the pale grey moon” (65). The wool she was using made her sick, but she continued to work on the rug until, coughing up blood, she died while continuing her effort. His wife, then, clung to her birds despite injury and warnings of death, their transitional power the one hope to which she hewed in an otherwise bleak life of waiting hand-and-foot upon Linker. The birds failed ultimately to save her, but they were, nonetheless, her salvation.

The next drawing of a bird appears again to rescue a Janey in crisis. “IIIIIIIIII,” she writes. “I wish there was a reason to believe in this letter” (108). But then the images of birds appear. “Birds fly. Life GLOOGLOOGLOO FUCK YOU SHIT PISS” (108). The birds have, in a sense, taken her self-doubt and turned it into confidence, rebellion. Birds appear again at the end of Janey’s life over the skies of Alexandria. They “call in the air. They’re being scared by the increasing numbers of sudden loud noises,” engulfed, like Janey, by the modern world and the alienation and ennui it produces (137). After Janey’s death, “doves cooed softly to each other” over her grave in the Egyptian city of Luxor, a living preamble to a poem that gives the novel its title.

The bulk of the book’s images come at its conclusion in two sections, “The Journey” and “The World,” originally printed out of order in the novel’s first editions.⁴ “There are no more judges, there are only thieves, murders, firebrands,” the sections begin. “Wild horses. A forgotten city” (144). It is a portentous image of the kind of future that had been felt by the birds

⁴ In addition to Acker’s drawings in the text itself, the book’s original cover featured a drawing by Sue Coe, an artist who often emphasized animal rights activism in her work (Krauss 197).

flying over Alexandria, but Acker, née Janey, posits a way out. “Even if we die, if we have to become monsters, and everyone hates us,” she says, “we have to read the book because it will teach us how to avoid the alligators’ jaws, the wolves who wait in the forest, the huge snakes, and how to become birds” (146). The dialectic of the novel’s first pages has changed, a different kind of synthesis required. The rebels and outcasts, the monsters, are the image of vitality, even if, like the SCORPIONS, they are hounded by the law, or if, like the “hideous ugly monster,” they are hounded by domesticity. They are the humans posed against cultural convention, represented here by a different set of predatory animals: alligators, wolves, and snakes, the antithesis that seeks to oppress them. But literature, to “read the book,” offers a liberatory opportunity, creates its own becoming-animal, wherein humans can become birds, can fly above a muddled Alexandria instead of dying within its walls.

Deleuze and Guattari distinguish in the context of becoming three types of animals. There are, first, “individuated animals, family pets, sentimental, Oedipal animals each with its own petty history, ‘my’ cat, ‘my’ dog” (240). Then there are “animals as they are treated in the great divine myths, in such a way as to extract from them series or structures, archetypes or models” (240-241). Finally, there are “more demonic animals, pack or affect animals that form a multiplicity, a becoming, a population, a tale” (241). All three appear in Acker’s narrative, from her individuated, sentimental stuffed lamb, to her pack of scorpions, to those infused into her own mythical archetypes at the novel’s conclusion.

On her “journey,” Janey encounters a placid mule (150) and a far more invidious snake protecting a series of boxes in a temple. “Two times I killed the snake. The third time it died,” she says. “I scattered the swarms of serpents,” giving her access to a golden box with which she absconds (151). Then, “I read the book and became a bird” (152). Her trials, however, haven’t

ended. Her wife and children fall into the East River and die, as does Janey, in bird form, clutching “the book” with her beak, even as so many of the predators are seeking it. “We can no longer be human,” they say. “We’ve got to have that book” (153). It would, for Acker, be the worst of sins: the arbiters of cultural convention having access to nonhuman states would turn becoming-animal into a commodity, a capitalist hustle that would diminish the rebels, outcasts, and monsters, along with the animals themselves.

And so the death of Janey and her family is temporary. One image depicts birds flying out of the East River. “Darkness closes behind us. Light is before us and we fly” (156); and the final depiction in “The Journey” shows a land free of temples, of buildings, of the trappings of modernity. It is instead a pastoral scene, with birds flying and standing on the banks of a river where the alligators and snakes leave them to attack and eat humans. “So we create this world in our own image” (58). Alligators and snakes are no longer stand-ins for human conceits. They have, themselves, (re)become-animal, allying with their fellows to end human control and create a better world.

“A light came into the world,” continues the novel’s final section. “Dazzling white light that makes lightness dazzling burning Happiness. Peace. The forms of the ancient arts of Egypt this is the time that wolves come out of the trees” (160). Pictures of a wolf, a dog, a horse, an elephant, a kangaroo, and a snake all follow, along with a shining sun that holds a variety of animal species within it. “The sun is the world,” reads its caption (161).

But Acker’s vision was never utopian, and as the novel closes she weaves one more dialectic to encapsulate her meaning. She tells a story of ancient Egypt, wherein “giant alligators lived in tall weeds. The King of Alligators is Power” (162). That power, of course, could be marshaled in various ways, focused on commodifying hegemony or upon the birds—or on the

becoming-bird; an image accompanies the narrative of a human with bird wings flying through the air. “The soul,” it says, “has freedom to wander at will” (162). Predators, however, are still predators. “At night the wolves snap at the flying bird. The alligators lie in wait to yump him up. And huge snakes wait. The alligators are the biggest” (164). The thesis of birdlike freedom is met by the antithesis of predation, resolved by the synthesis of becoming. “A human is a being halfway between an alligator and a bird who wants to be a bird,” the novel closes. “The ancient books say there are ways humans can become something else” (165). But it isn’t just ancient books. Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* haunt Acker’s final pages. “Shall we look for this wonderful book?” she asks. “Shall we stop being dead people? Shall we find our way out of all expectations?” (165). Expectations themselves become representatives of death, the binding agent that keeps humans who are halfway between alligators and birds from becoming the birds they want to be. It is reading itself—considered, intentional reading outside the bounds of capitalist commodification—that facilitates the final becoming-animal, the liberatory state of escaping, of enacting the final, most comprehensive of human rebellions.

Blood and Guts in High School “occupies a pivotal position structurally and politically in terms of Acker’s trajectory as a writer” (Hawkins 638), ushering in the appropriative plagiarism that would come to define later texts like *Don Quixote* and *Great Expectations*. It also, however, ushered in a consistent meditation on animals as liberatory vehicles that would similarly continue throughout her career. The act of becoming animal and the state of becoming-animal would haunt the pages of those novels, too, but its distillation in *Blood and Guts* is a fulsome depiction of that becoming, accompanying a broader insistence that nonhuman animals are worthy of being taken seriously, can be exemplars both of what humans are and what humans could be if they paid attention to the living beings in their midst. That said, Acker’s vision of becoming as

depicted in *Blood and Guts* will be troubled in her novels that follow; as Acker's life and writing become more complicated, so too does her vision of the animal. Such troubling would appear fully formed in her next offering in particular: *Great Expectations*.

CHAPTER 4

The Nonhuman Jeremiad:

The Failed Expectations of *Great Expectations*

Acker began her next novel, *Great Expectations*, as *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari's second installment of their *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, appeared in English. It was that volume that enunciated their thinking on becoming-animal that would both describe much of what Acker had been doing and influence much of what she would do. That influence certainly appears in *Great Expectations*, but so too do two other important elements. First, Acker only more firmly embraces plagiarism as a grounding model of her writing, taking both her title and introductory material directly from Charles Dickens. The first section of the novel is even labeled "Plagiarism." Second, and more germane to this study, the book plays with the becoming-animal so blatant in *Blood and Guts in High School*, still clinging at points to its tenets but also depicting a falling away from such identity formations when prompted by problematic human actors or problematic behavior toward animals. The story of *Great Expectations* is, then, one of expectations thwarted, a declension narrative with animals and animal relationships at its root.

As the novel opens, Peter/Acker is receiving a tarot card reading wherein the first card turned "was a fat purring human cat surrounded by the Empress and the Queen of Pentacles" (5). She has, then, maintained her sense of hybridity, the becoming-animal of *Blood and Guts*, identifying on the novel's first page with not only catness, but with a human cat. That the cat is surrounded by the Empress and one of the deck's queens is also significant. All declension

narratives need a place from which to decline, and by beginning the narrative with an embodied animal surrounded by two of the most powerful female visages of the tarot creates a powerful feminine animality from which to fall.

Acker was a believer in such spiritual traditions. Particularly later in her life, she would regularly consult psychics and spiritual healers (McBride 3-6). She studied astrology and created natal charts for herself and others (Kathy Acker Natal Chart, Box 32, folder 6). When she eventually suffered from cancer, she turned to New Age natural remedies in favor of traditional chemotherapy and other mainstream medical treatments (McBride 316-333). Even in her earlier life, at least as early as the late 1970s, psychic readings and tarot were part of both her recreational reading and personal spirituality (Krauss 155). Her study of ancient religions and naturalist philosophy led her to create a variety of alternative worlds in her writing replete with animal representations of the feminine sublime. Mapping those representations onto a depiction of tarot continued the trajectory of her literary development and her personal practice.

Much of that emphasis on nontraditional spirituality was located in meditation on her own dreams, from the dream maps of *Blood and Guts* to private obsessions about the meanings of her dreams. In a dream she describes in *Great Expectations* soon after the tarot reading, “The PIG I see on the edge of the grave is the PIG me neither death nor social comment kills. This TERROR is divine because it is real and may I sink into IT” (7). The PIG she sees is on the edge of the grave, not in it; it is the PIG version of Acker that can’t be killed by death or social comment. Her animal state serves to protect her, the common trope of the vulnerability and weakness of pigs turned on its head to evince a barrier between her and human language, the social comment that so bothers her. And it does bother her. Acker’s career was beset with reputational concerns and rivalries based on her desire to be well-received as a writer. She

regularly ignored and undermined other women authors and worried that they were, in a fashion, competition for her own esteem or distinction (McBride 144-146). Just as both Janey in *Blood and Guts* and Acker in real life cling to animals, including stuffed animals, as a kind of barrier from the slings and arrows that befall them, Peter/Acker envisions herself as animal, a PIG who can take her outside the human. Such becoming does not diminish her fear, but it does provide a vital impermeability. Life she clings to, but she needs no protection from fear, because TERROR is itself something real, something that transcends beyond the bounds of the human social. It is visceral, animal, allowing even a pig, an animal known for its skittish fear, to serve as the mode of protective becoming.

But there is more to fear than social comment, more dangers that result from human civilization and its dictates. When soldiers arrive in the dream and begin to trample “just-born babies,” a cab driver “shoves his fist into a goat’s face,” mimicking the violence against human children. The rival army she describes as RIMA, possibly referencing the French Marine Infantry Regiments, are “wethaired-from-sweating-during-capture-at-the-edge-of-the-coals goats,” driven in “caterpillars of trucks.” While riding away, “the soldiers sleep their sex rolling over their hips drips they are cattle, their truck-driver spits black a wasp sting swells up the skin under his left eye” (8-9). At the camp to which they return, the soldiers string tents along a grotesque trench filled with “slush from meat refuse vomit.” Two men “tie the animals to the rears of the tents,” the cheeks of one “crammed full of black meat” (11).

Animals serve in the war segment in two ways. The first, more common way is as metaphors. The wet and weary soldiers look like goats, their multi-wheeled military trucks move like caterpillars, huddled together “they are cattle.” That their status as cattle is a function of being herded together on military trucks is significant, as cattle in those situations are being

taken to their deaths, against their will, uncomfortable and scared, their bodies soon to be rendered into food for humans in a society far from their suffering. That reality is only heightened by the other way animals are used in the segment. A cabbie punches a goat in the face, animals are tied to posts in a filthy camp, a wasp stings the face of a truck driver. The soldiers stuff their faces with black meat, the effluvium of which causes the miasma of the trenches. The cattle consume the remains of cattle, exist in “slush from meat” that poisons the camp; Acker makes a direct connection between the horror of cattle cars and the horror of their ultimate outcome. One begets the other. It is a statement about the real, daily suffering of cows and simultaneously a statement about the expendability of soldiers in war, destined for a fate similar to that of farmed animals.

The depiction of actual animals in the war dream, however, also shifts the common perspective of nonhuman animals in war. Usually valorized as heroes or criticized as machines, the role of animals in war has a long history. The account of the early Persian Wars by Herodotus is replete with references to cavalry horses and other animals (108, 162, 207, etc.) The uses of horses in war would continue through the World Wars and beyond, but a variety of animals suffered in battle. In World War I, the German army took Jenny, an elephant imprisoned in the Hagenbeck Zoo in Hamburg, for use as forced labor in France. The Allied forces created the Imperial Camel Corps to operate in Palestine and the Sinai. Camels also provided much of the means of transportation during the 1916 Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Turks, especially in the Hejaz campaigns and the capture of Aqaba in 1917 by mounted forces led by Auda abu Tayi and T.E. Lawrence, “Lawrence of Arabia” (Wilson). In November 1935, Italian forces invaded Ethiopia, deliberately bombing and machine-gunning a camel caravan bringing ammunition and other supplies from the port of Berbera, from what was then British Somaliland

to Harrar (Barker). During World War II, the British army maintained a company of seven hundred elephants in Burma (Gowers). The Soviets used dogs to carry explosives for use against German tanks (Lemish 89-91). While mechanized vehicles were being developed, they were often irrelevant because they could not operate in the vast fields of mud created by the conflict. Military commanders thus considered it essential to use animals. Horses were divided into various categories according to the functions they were forced to serve. Light draft animals were assigned to pull ambulances and wagons while heavy draft animals pulled artillery. Although we do not know for certain how many horses died in transit or on the battlefield, it is evident that huge numbers of animals suffered unimaginable torments because of the war. Many died before they ever reached the battlefield. Those who did reach it were subjected to a grueling regimen of labor under harsh conditions. When chemical warfare began, all such compounds were tested on animals (Hediger). In every way, animals were made vulnerable by violent human disputes. In Acker's war, the animal presence conforms to the pattern, is realistic despite the author's more fabulist language and presentation. A goat is the victim of seemingly non-sequitur human violence; animals are tied to posts in conditions worse than those of human prisoners of war; wasps react to the chaos that disturbs their routines. And, of course, the corpses of animals litter the trenches and move through the bowels of those who reside near them. While horses and mules have historically suffered greatly in military history, and have at times performed heroically despite their role as unwilling participants, the vast majority of animals who suffer in war are those whose lives and habitats are upended by organized human violence. Acker's dream reframes animals in war just as it reframes pigs in cemeteries, giving lie to common assumptions about animal behavior and suffering.

And about military valor. The soldier who stuffs his face with black meat is a pedophile and rapist, as are several of his cohort. One has a mutilated forehead “cause he was raping over an eagle’s eggs the eagle scalped him” (13). The original soldier, “black meat still stuck to his teeth” rapes one girl on the metal grating of dog kennels. “The dogs waking up at the metal gratings leap out of the kennels their chains gleam treat me like a dog drag in the shit.” The soldier, meanwhile, “nibbles the young girl’s gums his teeth pull at the meat fibres” while “the dogs howl their chains jingle against the tar of the road their paws crush down the hardened shits” (14). The animal not bound by mechanisms of human imprisonment, the eagle, is able to fight back, serving as an advocate for the vulnerable girl being raped. Those imprisoned are unable to do so, but that doesn’t stop them from trying. They leap out of their kennels, howling at the violence being enacted beyond the reach of their chains. It is clear that the dogs are treated poorly, forced to live in their own shit; they are fellow travelers with the young girls, similarly bound. The soldier’s knees, for example, “imprison the young girl’s thighs” (14). She has, in her vulnerability, become animal (“treat me like a dog drag in the shit”), one who cannot escape her own chains, even as her fellow prisoners howl for her release. Or, perhaps, she is an eagle egg, without a mother eagle to protect her, to scalp her rapist. Acker frames eagles and dogs as protectors of the young girls; they have no constructed fear rooted in military insignias, no reason, as would similarly vulnerable human adults, to stay away from scenes of sexual violence. Unbound by the fictions of war, they become surrogate protectors, sometimes successful and sometimes not.

While conflict in various forms defines *Great Expectations*, the physical violence of war itself soon disappears from the narrative. In the transition of space and time customary for Acker’s novels, she eventually finds herself walking along an aqueduct in Alexandria, Egypt.

“Stray dogs sleep and walk in the sun. Carrion vultures wheel through the sky.” She watches as “the dogs are tearing at a donkey’s leftovers, especially the head which is still completely covered in skin: the head is the least edible part of the skeleton. Always birds begin with eyes; dogs like the stomach or skin around the asshole. They all move from the tenderest to the toughest” (17-18). Egyptian street animals are forced to scavenge to survive, taking what they can from those who have fallen in the wake of human avarice or neglect. Since at least the nineteenth century, urban Egyptian landscapes have been filled with stray animals, the majority of them dogs who feed on human refuse to survive (Baedeker lxxviii; Dolbee 1-20). Their constant presence in life and the association of stray animals with poverty have led to a variety of culling campaigns, most infamously in Cairo, to rid the city of a public nonhuman presence (Debre). The depiction remains objectively descriptive, but draws sympathy through its content to the donkey and the dogs. So gruesome as it may be, the scene does not stop Acker’s self-association with animals. “I’m a scaredy-cat. I run away from everything,” she says. “I made a list of human characteristics: every time I had one characteristic I had its opposite” (19). Seeing the displacement of animals within human society only draws her closer to them. They, like Acker, are forgotten, outcasts, left to fend for themselves. That the narrator has never been forced to gnaw on the head of a dead donkey just to survive is less important for her identity formation than the internalized sense of alienation that draws her to such scenes.

As time and place shifts in the novel, however, much of that alienation remains. From Egypt, the narrative swings back to New York, where a husband abandons his wife on Christmas to go hunting on Long Island. He defends his choice as a just reward for working “like a dog all year to keep you in trinkets and furs.” His unhappy wife calls him a “louse” in response. “It’s always my fault,” he tells her. “Everything’s always my fault. When your dog died when you

were four years old it was my fault” (20). The scene presents a multivalent depiction of animals. There are real consequences for real animals in both hunting vacations and the fur industry, consequences easily forgotten by humans not forced to think about the value of the lives of quadrupeds. Such behaviors have a numbing effect on those who participate in them, either in the killing space of hunters or the capital space of fur purchasers, and that numbness then allows for animal epithets like “louse” and caustic unconcern about the loss of childhood pets. There is in the scene a subtle jeremiad, a declension narrative from animal-as-product to animal-as-epithet, all in service to unhappy, destructive marital behavior.

The family itself is often a cause of such metaphors. “My mother is a dummy and a piece of jellyfish,” Acker writes. “The most disgusting thing in this world is her. My worst nightmare is that I’ll have some of that jellyfish in me” (24). While the statement seems at first glance a repudiation of the close identification with animals presented by the narrator in previous scenes, the earlier declension narrative has established animal metaphors’ relationship to family strife, and her turn from the human, despite such statements about jellyfish, is real.¹ “I just don’t believe there’s any possibility of me communicating to someone in this world,” she says, almost in the same breath. “I hate humans who want me to act like I can communicate with them.” It is, in a sense, the lament of the jellyfish, whose ability to communicate beyond the bounds of species is decidedly limited. “I feel I feel I feel I have no language,” the narrator says, and thus “I think talking to humans, acting in this world, and hurting other humans are magical acts” (24). There is in such statements a more fulsome association with animals than previously presented, one rooted not in specific animal behavior but instead in the real barriers to communication with

¹ Acker is engaged in “destabilizing family identities,” which “dissolves this drama that maintains the family. Such dissolution reverberates everywhere, collapsing the distinction between inside/outside,” between public and private, and between those within social structures and those, like animals, outside of them (Brennan 258-259).

humans that exist in much of the nonhuman world, particularly in those non-mammalians like jellyfish without vocalization abilities and motor functions similar to those of humans. The narrator's animal identification has turned from a source of comfort to a limitation on human social interaction, a hindrance rather than a help. "Any emotion for me is prison" (24) because its fundamental inexpressibility in a human context limits her ability to release that emotion to other members of her species. Whereas pigs, for example, can communicate their emotions to each other, as can humans, relaying those emotions across the species line is more difficult, so the human-become-animal, engaged in a kind of transspecies identification loop, can use that identification for comfort, but it is the comfort of isolation. And isolation also severs the ties that bind members of the same species, particularly social species like humans. Acker has, then, against her will, moved in her transspecies development into the very form she sees as so repulsive in her mother. Her "worst nightmare" has come true; she is, in her isolation, a jellyfish.

But that doesn't mean that she rejects contact with animals as a result. When writing a letter to Sylvère Lotringer, she tells him when he visits to "put in your cat because I need affection and you don't need anything" (27). Again, with her human contacts severed, her affection comes from outside her own species. She also writes a letter to her ex-husband Peter in which she describes staying in a Tansonville house with one of the bedroom walls covered in garden roses, "and on the wallpaper of the other birds from the trees have come to join you and keep you company" (35). It is the humans she is writing to, reached only by distant post; it is the nonhumans, the cats and birds—or, the hope of cats and the images of birds—who provide the actual affection and company Acker craves.

The human and animal connections come together in a reimagining of *The Story of O*, the erotic French novel by Pauline Réage originally published in 1954. Just as O is made subservient

to members of an elite male club for sexual domination, so too is Acker's character. In a section titled "Animality," she describes "sparrow-hawk, falcon, owl, fox, lion, bull: nothing but animal masks, but scaled to the size of the human head, made of real fur and feathers, the eye crowned with lashes when the actual animal has lashes, as the lion has, and with pelts and feathers falling to the person-wearing-them's shoulders" (45). She is in putting on the masks taking on the literal visage of the animal, a kind of becoming beyond association or description, fusing the human and nonhuman into one being. At the same time, the masks used to appropriate that animality are "made of real fur and feathers," have taken the lives of actual animals to facilitate that becoming, so that each mask itself is an emblem of cruelty, a cruelty that will be transferred from the animals who originally suffered for the production to those humans wearing the masks. Acker's favorite is "the owl mask because tan and tawny fathers whose colors are her cunt hairs make it; the feathery cape almost totally hides her shoulders, descending halfway down the back, and the front to the beginning of the breasts' swell" (45). She is, in other words, most able to hide her human form, transforming most fully into the animal she is embodying.

But then there is the cruelty, transformed from the original animal cruelty to a different kind of human-animal cruelty. She is paraded on a leash, a "chain stuck in her cunt" (45). She is whipped repeatedly. When recovering and examining her bruises the following day, she notes "the contrast between the fur on her belly and the feathers on her mask (46), taking on the identity of the animal even when not wearing the mask, internalizing her animality even as she internalizes the degradation she experiences at the hands of the wealthy club men. She becomes "deaf to human language and dumb." Back at the club that night, she experiences the degradation, which she enjoys, as "unhuman" (46). There is in such sexual encounters a comfort that fuses her relation to animality with her desire to escape the isolation from humans that

results from it. She is participating “not to get fucked but to get love” (46), to create in her performance a conduit between human and animal. Or, perhaps, in a reversal of her becoming-animal, she is in a counter-phase, an animal-becoming-human, finding that the only way into a real, felt humanity is through an animal state.

It is, however, a failed effort. “You are a perfect whore so you’re not human,” she admits (48), remembering “laughing in those faces of big businessmen who look like pigs” (49). Her attempt at real, felt humanity is impossible because those with whom she is consorting are so decidedly unhuman themselves. As Acker has already, earlier in the narrative, become a PIG, the human communication she craves is no more than two nonhuman animals speaking an animal language and performing acts that are, in human parlance, decidedly animalistic—degrading acts that ultimately turn Acker/O, at least temporarily, away from that animal state. “What’s it like to be without brains?” she asks. “Not to have any worries about how to get along in life how to keep up respect (among men) how to manage my career and children how to maintain my image and underneath the image...? What’s it like to live in that one (animal) place?” (52). Animal has become the state that O can no longer attain, one that ultimately represents her suffering rather than her outlet from it. “The jellyfish is the rapist,” she says, recalling her earlier description of her mother in service to describing her father’s attempt to rape her as a teenager. “This night O has a nightmare. A huge jellyfish glop who’s shaped into an-at-least-six-story worm is chasing her down the main sand-filled cowboy street. All of her WANTS to get away, but her body isn’t obeying her mind” (54). The image pulls directly from the second Dream Map in *Blood and Guts*, which visualizes the worm moving down the “cowboy street.” But the focus here is less on the worm than on the jellyfish that becomes-worm, chasing her not as animal but as rapist. Her “S&M relationships” that follow include men who “dug their fingernails into her flesh slapped

her face then jellyfish wanted to become her whinedabouttheirproblems wanted to become her” (54). For the first time, O, née Acker, resists becoming-animal, pushes back against an act of becoming in the face of what she interprets as animalistic problems in a life of sexual submission.

Her transition back to her animal state is similarly contradictory. When describing her mother’s irresponsible spending, Acker claims that “she didn’t talk to me or to anyone directly. She lifted up her favorite poodle, walked out of the apartment house, and didn’t return” (61). There is, in the scene, a reorientation of the animal frame, wherein the poodle is given more motherly attention than is the narrator (for more on Acker’s troubled relationship with Pepper, her mother’s dog, see Chapter 1). “I would have done anything for her,” she says of her mother (61). There would be, in other words, tangible benefit to becoming-poodle, to becoming again part of the natural world. “Trees always make my heart beat quickly,” she says. “Bronze chrysanthemums. Dahlias around a pond in which two ducks quack, black and gray” (61). Finally, those heartbeats, the benefit of animal affection, bring her back from the prisonhouse of O to her original position. “I like the ways animals are socially. I would rather be petted than be a part of this human social reality which is all pretense and lies” (66). Her mother has abandoned her, the wealthy club men beat her relentlessly. The social world of humans has again proven corrupt, even when couched in animal garb. Theirs was not an act of becoming, theirs was minstrelsy; becoming-animal was the salve against such hostile acts.

But the residue of that earlier hostility to animals does not just completely disappear. The narrator yearns for “a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!” She wants “silks satins quilted satins taken from grandmother’s bed thick satins black fur shorn from living lambs cotton steel wool the density of shit chewed-up cinnamon bark clustered angora and linen goose and duck

feathers slumber” (69-70). Her revelry in a life of sensations is one built on cruelty toward living lambs, geese, and ducks, even after she has been enchanted by two ducks in a pond. She displays in the moment a common human disconnect between the animals they see and enjoy and those they use and abuse, a disconnect that reinforces the species separation at the heart of O’s masked ordeal—they are there for comfort and sublimation, and they are there to be whipped and beaten. Soon after her reverie in animal-based comfort, she says of herself that she “doesn’t believe what she believes so she follows anyone. A dog. She doesn’t know a goddamn thing” (71). The recapitulation of the O story has similarly recapitulated her hostility to animals; she sees in herself an act of becoming-animal, but one she resents. The jeremiad has returned, as the declension from animal cruelty to animal metaphor moves from the apartment of a troubled marriage to the author’s chair, to the narrator’s physical space.

It then moves to Victorian-era Ceylon. In a section based on Phillipa Carr’s *The Spring of the Tiger*, Acker, now embodying the name Sarah Ashington, marries a man out of fear rather than love. “What do you say, my pet?” he asks her. “What does your body say when I touch it? I’m a man, Sarah” (75). Again the animal trope is used to demean her rather than provide the comfortable hiding place she desires. Her husband is the man, she the pet, in another in a long line of unhappy marriages as the declension narrative continues. Later, the couple is eating in a restaurant. Her husband orders “curried beef, the wonton soup, and the fried dumplings.” He tells Sarah to get what she wants. “I’m getting what I want. If you like, you can eat a fried poodle” (92). The last reference provides a permission structure for the narrator to revenge herself on the animal that her neglectful mother so cared for, but the broader picture is one of consumption itself. Her husband has established himself as “the man” and Sarah as the animal, the pet. They then go to a restaurant wherein he is consuming animals and even encourages her to consume a

pet. Animals here serve to reinforce a gendered power dynamic in marriage, a human captivity wherein a becoming-animal is forced, as in O's men's club, against the will of the becomer, the second parallel declension in the story.

And that jeremiad only reinforces the story's original declension narrative. "I think sexism is disgusting. Men who want women to do the housework and bow to them are pigs" her husband argues in an ironic defense of himself. But "she kept whining while I was sleeping and I need my sleep I work like a dog-shit every day trucking I don't have time for whining which is pretense" (98). The consumption of animals at the restaurant has created the declension to metaphorical animal narratives.

Declension narratives have defined much of American cultural discourse, though they existed in their original form for decidedly human ends. The Puritan jeremiad tied the religious project to the governance of society and the political project to the will of god, acting often as warnings of declension and at other times frustrated diatribes of reticent optimism. If you don't become better, went the common message, you are doomed; and if we don't collectively become better, we as a society are similarly doomed. It was the backbone of a rhetoric that unified, at least ideologically, the Puritan populace, before infusing itself into the American character and continuing to survive after the Puritans had disappeared. Though the Puritans (and, for that matter, everyone that came after them) were not a monolithic group, there was no alternative ideology than that officially endorsed (with the possible exception of the ideology they chose to leave in coming to America in the first place). "Not infrequently, their affirmations betray an underlying desperation—a refusal to confront the present, a fear of the future, an effort to translate 'America' into a vision that works in spirit because it can never be tested in fact" (Bercovitch xiv).

Perry Miller argued in “Errand Into the Wilderness” (1-15) that the Puritans originally came to America to continue the project of cleansing England of Anglicanism, but that after Cromwell’s fall, turned inward, essentially changing their “errand” to cultivate the self. They did not like what they saw, so then turned to the lamentations we now call jeremiads to whip themselves back into shape. Bercovitch argues, however, that jeremiads had been going on forever, and that the Puritans had been using them since day one. The fact that the Puritans grew more devoted over time also argues against this discovery of inner disgust. Bercovitch uses Samuel Danforth’s 1670 election-address to demonstrate that rather than ambiguity, Danforth issued a hopeful if harsh message. “In all this, Danforth’s strategy is characteristic of the American jeremiad throughout the seventeenth century: first, a precedent from Scripture that sets out the communal norms; then, a series of condemnations that details the actual state of the community (at the same time insinuating the covenantal promises that ensure success); and finally a prophetic vision that unveils the promises, announces the good things to come, and explains away the gap between fact and ideal” (Bercovitch 16). He argues that “the dynamic of the errand, that is, involves a use of ambiguity which is not divisive but progressive—or more accurately, progressive because it denies divisiveness—and which is therefore impervious to the reversals of history, since the very meaning of progress is inherent in the rhetoric itself” (Bercovitch 17). Once it spread, spatially and temporally, the jeremiad “played a significant role in the development of what was to become modern middle-class American culture” (Bercovitch 18).

For Bercovitch, the modern understanding of the symbolism of America itself belies the continuity and effect of the jeremiad. “Only in the United States has nationalism carried with it the Christian meaning of the sacred,” he argues. “Of all symbols of identity, only *America* has

united nationality and universality, civic and spiritual selfhood, secular and redemptive history, the country's past and paradise to be, in a single synthetic ideal" (176). Left unstated in Bercovitch's account is the effect that binding of civic and sacred selfhood had on a nonhuman population not included in that identity, an identity built on a human supremacy that preferenced humans as beings created in the image of God, bearers of souls who were fundamentally superior to those not made in the same image. Acker removes the Puritan symbolism and human supremacy from the declension narrative but relies on the distinctly American trope to the national culture in much the same way as colonial Congregational ministers.

It is a strategy she uses throughout the text while still turning to other cultures to make her point. Soon Acker's narrative shifts to a reimagining of the relationship between Roman poet Propertius and the subject of his love elegies, Cynthia, who Acker depicts as a whore. As she argues with him, "a bones-sticking-out cow is dragging a cart by glittering religious objects past a dead murderer" (105). The "bones-sticking-out cow" represents the failure of empire after the ascension of Julius Caesar and the end of the Roman republic. Centralization, she argues, killed meaningful poetry and exacerbated the divide between rich and poor. The animals themselves are starving. But post-jeremiad, the uglier animal metaphors remain. Propertius calls Cynthia a "stinking fish" (108, 116), she in turn notes "that all society people are such pigs" (109), turning the original insult of Sarah's husband on its head.

But as Cynthia has replaced Sarah as the stand-in for Acker herself, she pushes back against such animal cruelty, reifying the identity formation of earlier Acker incarnations. "I'm all over you like a raging blonde leopard and I want to go more raging I want to go snarling and poisoning and teasing eek eek, curl around your hind leg pee, that twig over there" she says to Propertius during sex (113). Intercourse is, for Acker, always an act of becoming-animal, one in

which she finds, in this case, her leopard self. But when Propertius leaves Cynthia, she turns to animals in a different manner. “I hope he goes to hell I hope he gets POISONED wild city DOGS should drive their thousands of TEETH-FANGS through his flesh” (114). When she sees Propertius enter his house with another woman, she hears that “one of the dogs on the street starts barking” (117).

That barking, in turn, leads her to imagine a “street of dogs,” wherein a dog outside a townhouse hunches over a laundry basket as two others watch, leaning out of their apartment windows. “Their teeth are sharp and white and they have long red tongues. One dog over her basket of wash gossips with another dog. Two young dogs are mangling each other next to the curb” (117).² The imagined scene prompts Cynthia, née Acker, to bark like a dog. “I can’t help myself anymore I really can’t I’m just a girl I didn’t ask god to be born a girl. When I think, I know totally realistically I’m an alien existent. I hate or have nothing to do with everyone. I’m a whore” (117-118). Hers is a becoming-animal in aid of maintaining a baseline level of comfort or normalcy. She is a girl but does not see herself as a girl. In feeling alien, or alienated from humanity, her principal response is to begin barking, to embody the dogs outside the building where Propertius is consorting with another woman. “Madness makes an alcoholic sober, keeps the most raging beast in an invisibly locked invisible cage,” she reasons, “turns setting masses of smoke air into calm white, takes a junky off junk as if he’s having a pleasant dream” (119). She

² This section of the novel is rehashed from Acker’s 1981 play “The Birth of the Poet,” which features a similarly tortured relationship between Propertius and Cynthia, one that would remain a common theme for the author. Much of the text in *Great Expectations* is pulled directly from the earlier play. Among Cynthia’s curses for Propertius, for example, is a hope that “wild city DOGS should drive their thousands of TEETH-FANGS through his flesh.” On a “Street of Dogs,” animals lean out of apartment windows and howl; they gossip with one another. “Two young dogs are mangling each other next to the curb.” Cynthia responds by barking like a dog. “I can’t help myself anymore I’m just a girl I didn’t ask God to be born a girl. If I think realistically, I know I’m an alien existent” (Acker, “Birth of the Poet,” Box 18, Folder 2). The text is virtually identical in both the play and the novel.

interprets becoming-animal as a kind of madness, but a beneficial madness that provides a corrective to the various self-destructions wrought by human society.

In that sense, Acker reverts to a Renaissance understanding of madness. Michel Foucault described an understanding of insanity in the period as both a special form of wisdom and its own form of jeremiad, reminding the sane of the shibboleths that separate them from the animal. With the rise of the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason, however, madness was interpreted as a defect, a deviation from the rational that jeopardized the social structure undergirding the human world. The new professional class confined those deemed deviant and insane so as to create a default definition for the rest as rational beings. Beginning in the nineteenth century, the motives of confinement were encumbered with a mission to cure those deemed unfit for society, but the maintenance of the structure of civilization and the social hierarchy remained the principal goal. Madness was now mental illness, but the disconnect remained. “Modern man no longer communicates with the madman,” Foucault explains. “There is no common language, or rather, it no longer exists.” It has been replaced by “a rupture in a dialogue, gives the separation as already enacted, and expels from the memory all those imperfect words, of no fixed syntax, spoken falteringly, in which the exchange, between madness and reason, was carried out” (*Madness* xxvii–xxxix). It was only that separation, that disconnect, which created the space for the decidedly human language of psychiatry to develop.

In response to his situation, it is Propertius who turns to animal metaphors in aid of demeaning Cynthia in particular and women more broadly. “I know I’m a macho pig,” he says, but “my woman is the black hole of vulnerability and takes everything from me and Not Human.” To all women, he says, “I’ll trample on your passions needs even if they cause you to die, I’ll be as elephant-like as I can” (121). His is a recrudescence of the various representatives

of men throughout the novel, the living embodiment of the jeremiad that leads from mistreatment of animals and mistreatment of human women to animal metaphors in aid of demeaning both. He closes the novel by speaking again to Cynthia. “Every human is so stupid they're only ravenous wolves. Cats and dogs now gone wild are gnawing the crumbling white concrete blocks” (126). Women like Cynthia, like Acker, who find themselves in acts of becoming-animal, he argues, are destroying human society and the white concrete blocks upon which it is built. The masculinist presentation that views hysteria in such becomings pushes back against what it interprets as anti-social and thus anti-human behavior, behavior that challenges the kind of male privilege that allows men like Propertius to trample on women, elephant-like, in the animal guise of macho pigs.

Thus the jeremiad comes to its conclusion, leaving the great expectations of women more broadly, and Acker in particular, thwarted in the face of patriarchal domination and animal cruelty, leaving transitions between human women and animals a failed project. The human men, the narrative argues, always seem to win. Acts of becoming can be palliative, but both women and animals will always occupy a place in the hierarchy below men. Unity between those two lower rungs on the social ladder will not compensate for male dominance and will not fully eliminate the cruelty that dominance wields to protect itself.

Acker's next project was a reimagining of the life and death of Italian artist Pier Paolo Pasolini, whose own life was a model of declension. The openly gay author and director lived, like Acker, an outsized life, one that made him one of the preeminent public intellectuals in mid-twentieth century Italy. His novels, plays, poems, and films all combined a Marxist criticism of post-World War II consumerist values with frank depictions of sex. His work was in many ways a model for Acker's writing, and he was, like Acker, a controversial figure, one who created his

own declension narratives until his violent and unsolved murder in 1975 (Rohdie; Siciliano). In *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini*, Acker takes on Pasolini's voice, the author admitting that "every human being is connected to every other human being and the intentionality of these connections in language." But "what happens when there's no language or when language doesn't mean?" Passolini wants "people to treat me as an animal, in the irregular indefinable movements of the foliage, of the waves. To be matter. To be matter to matter" (183). The hold of human connection is tenuous, stitched together through the loose affiliation of language; but that language is just another structure maintaining civilization, an artificial system of control. When language and definitions break down, true meaning and mattering reveals itself to reside in simple being, in animality, the "irregular indefinable movements of the foliage." *My Death My Life*, then, begins with its own great expectations, its own quest for meaning in both the human and nonhuman worlds.

Acker's immediate access to nonhuman worlds is through her cats. She explains in a section of straight autobiography that she had three cats while living in San Diego, cats who would come into her apartment and leave again through the kitchen window. "To me these appearances were magic or causeless because I couldn't follow my cats because I can't leap across roofs" (200). But one day she does follow, finds her male cat in the street and trails him to an area behind an old car where he meets a group of other cats. When they hear her human presence, they scatter. She soon finds a similar congregation of dogs, each species with its own town: "Definitive meeting points and certain streets or paths that linked the points defined each town. I almost but couldn't know these towns that were my towns" (201). There are, in other words, worlds within worlds, even the animals commonly assumed to be domesticates carving out space for themselves to exist away from the prying eyes of humans. Acker's own sense of

alienation, her similar desire for separation, allows her to “almost” know such animal spaces, but her species places a decided ceiling on her ability to know. “How available are the (meanings of the) specifics of all that is given?” she asks. “Language is a givenness like all other givennesses” (201), but its givenness is only really a point of access to those humans who are able to speak and understand it. It provides its own ceilings, both to large swaths of the human population and to virtually all nonhuman populations. At the same time, its inaccessibility to certain others provides its own ability to hide, a de facto cat town that provides space for separation or a reprieve from the given that provides its own method of escape. By using that which is given to shield herself from givenness, from contact with others, Acker envisions human language as having a kind of reverse-power, actually counterintuitively driving humans toward the secret towns of nonhuman animals.

But if language can actually be agentic in human-animal relationships, any sense of declension portends a death in the exchange. In reimagining the story of Romeo and Juliet, Juliet’s nurse describes her as an angel “because she never wanted to hurt another living being even a human.” The only suicide note she leaves is “to her poodle” (209). In a contentious argument with Romeo, Juliet explains that “human beings have been mean to themselves and each other in various uncountable ways ever since they were orangutans” (211). Romeo counters that the couple is “tearing out each other’s hairs and mangling like mindless mental beasts” (210). That framing of the bestial, also marshaled for descriptions of animallistic sex (220-221), is itself a case that evolution has changed very little for human behavior, that if anything it is a devolution, wherein humans adopt the most problematic traits of their animal forbears and add the worst, like language and certain forms of violence, of humans. Human life itself, then, makes declension a *fait accompli*. “I hate any feeling and a human has feelings,” Acker says,

embodying the role of Juliet (222). “According to all the histories I’ve read humans are always malicious” (223).

And that maliciousness always has consequences. “If God has made all of us in His image, part of this image is pain and hell” (240). There is a seeming argument in the statement that those defined out of God’s image are free of the shackles of maliciousness, pain, and hell, but the problems of humanity seep inevitably into the nonhuman world, which then sends them back to humans in a kind of vicious cycle. “Wild bears sink their teeth into the man who hunted them. The pig struts into the bedroom and eats the child in the cradle. Madness goes everywhere” (241). In the face of that madness, caused by humans (or by their God) but spreading to all of the animal world, Acker is left hoping for “someone to talk to like I talk to my stuffed animals” (246). In a period of declension, proximity to those animals outside the vicious cycle only comes from their inanimate representations.

Any kind of meaningful communion with real animals comes freighted with the scars of the cycle. Acker describes getting a new kitten, but “I can’t give this much affection the kitten torn away from its mother demands something mental in me rends, I don’t want to love inappropriately, I’m too something to be touched. I invent an allergy and run the cat back to its mother” (250). Stuffed animals do not come with such pressure to love appropriately, with the guilt of taking a child from its mother. The ceiling that limits human-nonhuman relations is always present, even in domestic relationships, until the human shifts its devotion to human-created representations of animals instead.

Or until the human develops a solipsistic assumption that the ceiling is itself a measure of supremacy. In a crib of the French Revolution, Acker’s version of Danton has a fishing dream wherein the hook with which he caught a fish falls out of his quarry’s mouth. “This made me

very upset,” he says. “Surprisingly, when I put my hook back into its seemingly smiling therefore sly mouth, the fish readily accepted it” (277). What can easily be seen as a metaphor for the human terror of the revolution is also representative of human assumptions about animal dominion, wherein humans, bolstered by the assurance that they are made in God’s image, accept their control and abuse of nonhuman animals as a divine right, one that animals will readily accept if given the proper opportunity. Acker uses the self-justification of human violence against humans to make a similar case for the human treatment of animals. To a similar end, and playing on the theme of declension, Acker then has Emily Bronte write a series of letters to her sister Charlotte. “This world isn’t dream, but death,” she says of proximity to Black people. “Alligators eat you up. Crocodiles even eat each other. Africa’s the land of predatory animals” (294). She does here for colonialism what she does for violent revolution in embodying Danton, playing with concepts of predation—it is the Brontes and their ilk who are the predators in the colonial project—to simultaneously critique human categorizations of animals, emphasizing that the assumption of danger inherent in those non-domestic species is even harder for humans to know than the mysterious cats with whom they share their homes.

The separations between humans and animals are “separations between signifiers and their signifieds,” and they, in the typical form of the jeremiad, “are widening,” fed by “the powers of post-capitalism.” Paraphrasing Baudrillard, Acker argues that “political power is determining economy. In the case of language and of economy the signified and the actual objects have no value don’t exist or else have only whatever values those who control the signifiers assign to them. Language is making me sick” (300). The power structures of capital, in this formulation, don’t directly intersect with the power structures of species; instead they reify them, model themselves on human-animal power dynamics, only ensuring that both will stay

firmly in place, buffered by the language that could, in other circumstances, provide Acker's reverse-power vision, wherein language actually aids the human-animal relationship. Capital, and the version of language that grows from it, diminishes that vision. In another of Bronte's letters, Emily tells her sister that "all the phenomena in the world are just signs for other truths. Our job as humans is to find out what each thing represents." Among those truths is that "human existence is a malignancy. Malignant because it's real and we can't understand it" (311). If self-understanding is impossible, interspecies understanding is even more so. Capital's effect moves from metaphorical to actual, limiting the opportunity for human-animal connection by limiting the human connection with the self.

And the consequences for animals are real. "*This* is a turkey, *this* is a wild duck, *this* is a pigeon," Emily tells her sister. "They put pigeon's feathers in the pillows. In my sleep I don't die because my pillow has pigeon feathers in it" (316). The disconnect between humans and animals created by capital allows capital to kill animals in service to its own ends, a reality driven home for Emily while watching other birds flying over the moor. She then finds a bird's nest "full of little skeletons. H___ set his trap over it: the mother was too frightened of the trap to get to her dead children. I yelled at H___ . I made him promise to never again be cruel to a nonhuman." The incident leaves her wondering about the lapwings she sees in the sky. "Did he kill those lapwing children? Are their bodies red? I will look at every bruise myself" (317). As is proscriptive in most jeremiads, Emily comes to the conclusion that recompense is made through witnessing, accurate moral evaluation made through a determination not to look away, as capital's predation of species is premised on its ability to make humans look away. Animals become, in that scenario, "those who aren't rational logical or understandable to humans," either nonentities or "witches" (323), an invocation of gender almost inevitable in Acker's tripartite geography of

dispossession. “I’m unnatural because I’m female,” she laments. “Females are those beings who only want revenge. My humanity has tempered infinite revenge into caused revenge or ambition. Irrationality, Animalism, and Night: own me” (325-326). The dominos of commodification fall in a declension that binds together gender and animality, victims of capital twinned in their dispossessions.

It is a formula only bolstered when Acker moves to a reinterpretation of Macbeth. When the wife of Macduff cries that she doesn’t “want to live always by fear,” her child suggests: “We can be animals” (341).

Mrs. Macduff: They say the poor’re eating dogs. There can be nothing as natural as a human or an animal anymore.

Macduff’s Child: Why do you call “human” such a small thing? When an animal’s hungry, it does everything it can to eat. I’ve seen Flopsy do this. Animals’ve always been eating each other. Isn’t this how the world is?

Mrs. Macduff: Oh my baby. Should I eat you? If it’s natural to eat you, human motherhood must be unnatural. Humans’ve always been unnatural (341).

The exchange exemplifies the declension of triangulated dispossession in microcosm. Capital creates fear and diminishes the natural world; when the innocent child suggests animality as a way out of such fear, the more experienced woman, jaded by fear, cannot accurately interpret the child’s explanation, magnifying a metaphor of animality that diminishes humans by diminishing animals themselves. When the child attempts to correct her: “Humans’re all things,” including animals, his mother remains within the grip of the Ackerian triple-bind of capital, gender, and species: “Humans are criminals” (341). The ceilings of gender and capital keep Macduff from a more capacious view of animality, have created their own internalized jeremiad; her child,

innocently unfettered from such dispossessions, can still take a wider view of the possibility of human animality.

The inherent assumption in such scenarios is that as the child grows up, becomes less innocent, that capacious view will shrink, will suffer its own declension as it becomes enmeshed in the binding of capital-gender-species. Acker's vision of becoming-animal that was present in *Blood and Guts* has finally collapsed in the wake of a broader nonhuman jeremiad, spilling from the great expectations of youth to the jaded, fearful assumptions of unnaturalness bred by adult human social life.

CHAPTER 5

Nailing Cartesianism to a Windmill:

The Dogs of *Don Quixote*

Acker's version of *Don Quixote* begins in an abortion clinic with the titular protagonist fretting over the nature of life and death. "Can a soul exist without a body? Is physical separate from mental?" she asks herself. Her answer is that "the mind is the body" (10), a conclusion that convinces her of the wisdom of having her abortion. At the same time, her questions wrestle with the great Cartesian dilemma at the root of so much bigotry against nonhuman animals. Descartes reduced nonhuman animals to the status of non-sentient automata. Humans thought, therefore they were. Animals did not, therefore they were not (Gibson, 1987; Smith, 1963). It was ultimately a secular revision of Augustine, whose emphasis on reason was more than anything a justification of religious faith built on the concept of free will, which Descartes would spend much of his time defending. Free will became the human conduit to both God and self, thereby grounding western theology and philosophy for centuries to come. There was no empirical evidence for the belief in free will, and modern social psychology and cognitive neuroscience have since cast reasonable doubt on its very existence (see Ravven, 2013; Zimbardo, 2007), but the influence of the line of thought developing from Aristotle to Augustine to Aquinas to Descartes would cement the concept as both a fundamental truism and a principal point of differentiation between humans and nonhumans, meaning that the former had ethical and historical value and the latter did not.

In his most infamous demonstration of reducing animals to non-sentient automata, Descartes held public experiments wherein he nailed unanesthetized dogs to boards, flaying them and showing their internal organs. He mutilated them, burned them alive. The animals screamed in pain, but Descartes dismissed their cries not as a reaction to pain or a function of sentience, but instead as a mechanical response similar to that of a malfunctioning machine (Francione 2). The absurdity and malevolence of the Cartesian position did not, however, limit its influence on modern thinking about free will, mind-body dualism, or human supremacy over nonhuman animals. Acker's *Don Quixote* is, in part, a challenge to that position, using the dogs that Descartes tortured to turn his argument and his influence on their heads. Starting with her conclusion that, against Descartes, the mind is the body, she goes on in the novel to tackle his other misconceptions about animal sentience and agency.¹

Breaking out of the Cartesian trap, however, is not an easy or immediate task. When Don Quixote suffers an infection following her abortion, for example, she crawls to her friends. "I've had a dead abortion," she tells them. "I mean: an abortion by a horse." Her friends, however, correct her. "The horse isn't responsible for your abortion. Literature is" (16). She attributes her infection to the carelessness of the abortion doctor, using animality as a representation of that carelessness. Her friends, however, counter that her illness is the result of her expectation that she can engage in whatever behaviors she chooses without fearing consequence for them, a flight of fancy generated by literature, the happily-ever-after of stories. Acker intends to show that two subjects of her most intense devotion have conspired to fell her, but in the process she holds to a

¹ It was not a new position for Acker. "Consciousness just exists: no reason: it is useless," she wrote in 1979. "There is no meaning in the world. Consciousness creates meaning" (Acker, "Notes on Writing," Box 19, Folder 1). As reason is at the heart of the Cartesian argument for human supremacy, the elevation of consciousness as the sole arbiter of being diminishes human supremacy as a result.

Cartesian principle of animal-as-automaton, and a failed automaton who botched her surgery. But the real culprit was literature, she learns, and when faced with the Cartesian animal and fanciful literature, she decides to pursue correctives for the latter in aid of reconciling the former—to tilt against the windmill of multiple infections.

She begins by engaging the kind of literary animal signposting she engaged in earlier works like *Kathy Goes to Haiti*. “In the United States, packs of roaming wild dogs now indicate a decaying urban area or an increasing separation between the universal military government and the national civilian populace” (20). Unlike Haitian chickens and goats, however, the dogs begin speaking, gossiping with one another. Don Quixote is certain that the leader of the pack is her closest companion St. Simeon, a stand-in for the original *Don Quixote*’s Sancho Panza.² Quixote blames St. Simeon’s transformation into a dog on “a malign enchanter” pursuing her, “this time outside my dreams, for he’s transformed your hunky body into a dog’s.” Unlike many of the animal embodiments previously depicted in Acker’s fiction, the transformation of St. Simeon is imposed from the outside, fitting a mold more reminiscent of ancient mythology than feminist escapism, Acker building from the Greeks just as Descartes had previously. Aristotle, for example, perhaps the greatest influence on Descartes, devoted his thinking about animals to organizing them into a hierarchy based on their “kinds of souls” (188-189). He elevated rationality above all else and saw free human men as preeminently rational, more so than nonhuman animals, human women, and slaves. And Aristotle would cast a long shadow. Both of the ancient philosophical schools of Stoicism and Epicureanism held human life as the single point of reference for substantive value. Epictetus, in the second century CE, described “man” as

² Suzette Henke has claimed that St. Simeon’s transmogrification into a dog is symbolic of the “figurative Hobbesian ‘dog-eat-dog’ world” Acker is seeking to critique (94). Hobbes himself plays a later role in the narrative (see below).

a rational being. “Then, by the rational faculty, from whom are we separated? From wild beasts. And from what others? From sheep and like animals. Take care then to do nothing like a wild beast; but if you do, you have lost the character of a man; you have not fulfilled your promise” (119). Transformation into a dog, then, would in any Aristotelian or Cartesian paradigm be a diminution, a loss of soul.

But not for Acker. “It is clear from the first section of *Don Quixote* that Acker rejects standard conceptions of revolutionary transformation,” Douglas Shields Dix argues. “If we are to escape, we must become schizoid.” One of the core symptoms of schizoid disorder is disconnection with other humans, leaving nonhumans as candidates for connection outside of imposed social orders. “In a society where materialistic, hyper-rational, capitalist instrumentalism reigns, love is nearly impossible, affect is nearly impossible” (Dix 56). What is left is that which skirts the outer margins of human affect.³

Thus the men have become wild beasts. “Nevertheless, dog,” Quixote says, “please love me because as for me I’m not so attached to appearances that I’ve stopped loving you. With us, friendship’ll last forever” (20). Still, the dog responds by trying to bite her hand. She tries to hug or carry the dog, but he kicks her. “Since dogs aren’t supposed to kick, Don Quixote knew that this was really her friend. The dog, like all friends, started to run away” (20). The absence leaves Quixote to wrestle with more Aristotelian or Cartesian questions. “If my best friend’s a dog, what am I? How will anyone ever love me? I’m doomed to be in a world to which I don’t belong” (20). Turning back to St. Simeon, now a dog, she wonders whether the transformation

³ A “stable new identity never emerges from Quixote’s quest or from Acker’s novel,” Nicola Pitchford explains, “for the characters move from one borrowed text to another, frequently switching names, genders, and even species.” But “the failure of identity to become stabilized creates a sense of liveliness, play, and subversive possibility” (Pitchford).

portends good or evil but also understands her responsibility in a world dominated by Cartesian assumptions. “No one could really possibly love you except for me,” she tells him, “because no one sees truly except for me, because I love” (21). In a society that doesn’t see animals, only those who love have that ability. Quixote’s encounter with the animal, with her closest companion, provides an avenue out of human social strictures.

After that encounter, “because he was hungry, the dog followed Don Quixote, out of the church” (21). That the conflict took place in a church, and that the human and the animal leave the church at its conclusion, is also significant. It was early Christian theologians like Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas that provided the binding agent between the ancient Greeks and Enlightenment thinkers like Descartes. Augustine borrowed from both Aristotle and the Stoics, arguing that animals could not be part of the divine community because they lacked reason (Sorabji). Aquinas would follow Augustine’s lead, arguing that animal value was purely instrumental, that only humans had any significant value. Aquinas did make a case against cruelty to animals, but his argument centered around the possibility that such actions might lead to cruelty to humans, or that animal cruelty would damage human property and interests. That religious thinking would in turn influence secular theories of natural law and philosophy, which preferred rationality over and against any supposed sentimentality and grounded its dicta in hierarchical thinking, theories popularized by Descartes. In walking out of the church, Quixote and Acker walk away from those hierarchies and the cruelty toward animals that follows in their wake.

As a result of those hierarchies, that cruelty, “we’re slowly being turned into fake people we’re alienated from themselves, or zombies” (22), a reification of her robot disquisitions from previous work. As she sets out on her adventure, Quixote sees a group of hundreds of men.

“How full of air they are!” she tells St. Simeon, “who was now a dog.” Eventually, some of the men begin attacking her; one “man hit her so hard she almost died. The dog came running over to her, but by the time it reached her, she could hardly speak, and it couldn’t speak either.” St. Simeon’s lone early responses are “woof” (23). Association with animals, then, is beneficial for those hoping to avoid the zombie of Descartes, but it isn’t a cure-all, limited as it is by a verbal communication barrier. That barrier ultimately disappears in Acker’s story as St. Simeon begins to talk in between woofs, but that isn’t a cure-all either. Coming upon a group of drunken Benedictine monks, Quixote calls them “lousy stinking shits! All you ever do is talk about good and evil.” The monks ask to be beaten up as a penance. “I know you don’t love women,” she tells them. “I know Catholicism is really a secret order of assassins” (24). She attacks one of the monks, the dog biting his clothes. Two travellers arrived, but “since the travellers were humanists, they beat up the dog, left it for dead, and rescued the monk” (25). There is embedded in the story a critique of both the Catholicism of Augustine and Aquinas and the humanism of Descartes, two ideologies that had proven violent, hostile to women and nonhuman animals.

When the dog begins to recover from the beating, “painfully, out of love, it inched over to Don Quixote and licked her feet”; Quixote tells him, “I’m the one who should lick you.” St. Simeon the dog begins a lament about the pair’s poverty: “it’s creeping; crawling; restrictions; constant despair; gray; final disease.” Poverty is, in other words, the systematic creation of some humans toward others, creating a slow death that eliminates those lower in the hierarchy. “Repression is ruling my world,” says St. Simeon. “Humans’ most helpful and most pernicious characteristic is their ability to adapt to anything. First, Gestapo camps; now, here” (26). It is the jeremiad revisited, this time in aid of a critique of capital that Acker had been emphasizing throughout her career.

St. Simeon then turns to death, asking Quixote what happens when a human dies. “When a human dies, another human cuts the first one in two. Next, the second human glues these two body parts together—Plato told us this—and pours medicine down the first human’s throat.” The Greeks, in other words, represented here by Aristotle’s teacher, got it wrong, and that failure has had lasting consequences. Women, for example, become “the cause of human suffering... Women are bitches, dog. They’re the cause of the troubles between men and women.” In the Bible, “or The Storehouse Of Language, we tried to tell women who they are: The-Loving-Mother-Who-Has-No-Sex-So-Her-Sex-Isn’t-A-Crab or The-Woman-Who-Loves-That-Is-Needs Love So Much She Will Let Anything Be Done To Her. But women aren’t either of these” (27). They can’t be. “Women exist with the deer, the foxes of redness, the horses, and the devious cats” (28). They exist outside the storehouse of language created by men to control them; they have access to animality if they choose it. “You who own this world are dead corpses: Our friends the pigs’re eating your ears. The foxes’re nibbling at your cocks ‘n you’re coming. Poor men needing mothers. Poor idiots.” Quixote turns to St. Simeon, the dog: “There’s no human suffering that humans haven’t created” (28).

The tripartite critique of capital, gender, and species is familiar to all of Acker’s work, but here it is presented anew, Quixote directly tracing the creation of patriarchal hierarchy from the Greeks to the Catholics to the Nazis—from Aristotle to Augustine to humanism—trapping women in a storehouse of language, leaving their only method of escape the animals without language. Whether robots, zombies, or corpses, those still trapped in the gordian knot of Lacanian subjectivity are both victims and perpetrators of a system they don’t entirely understand, because they remain trapped in the same storehouse; they’ve never known

independence from that subjectivity, have never seen the shadows on the wall of the cave, the same cave originally described by Aristotle's principal teacher.

For Acker's characters, subjectivity is "a point of alienation and confusion for women whose identity is constructed within male culture by naming, clothing, and through cultural narratives" (Brown 171). They traverse different genders in the span of pages, particularly in narratives like *Don Quixote*, but just as often they traverse the boundaries of species. "In fact," argues Terry Brown, "most of what we know about Don Quixote's life is revealed to us through her dog, her other, who constructs Don Quixote's identity as he tells her life story as if it were his own story" (172). Don Quixote's entire quest in Acker's telling is to find an authentic identity, Brown argues, but her failure stems from the "mutability of the constituents of identity—gender, memory, familial and cultural history, language" (172).⁴ Species as a categorical imperative is no less mutable in Acker's worldmaking, but it is outside the boundaries of cultural construction and therefore a viable alternative space for identity formation. The animal is a site of authenticity without the burden of human social boundaries that rely on Cartesian conceptions of reason.

"Without faith and belief, a human's shit and worse than dead," Quixote laments after losing the capacity to love for a year, "which is as good as forever." St. Simeon, however, comes to her rescue. "Since it wasn't human and didn't believe, it could believe without dying" (34). The dog plans to sacrifice his own life so that Quixote can live; he begins whipping himself unmercifully until Quixote rushes to stop him. "I love you too much for you to hurt yourself," she tells the dog (35), but assuming that stopping his self-abuse would ultimately bring her own

⁴ As Christopher L. Robinson has explained, *Don Quixote* tells the story of "the abortive efforts of a heroine driven to revolt against the silence and objectivity to which she is subjected as both a female reader of and a character within romance" (112).

death, she finds herself forced to make a will: “TO THE DOG: I give my dog everything. Please, dog, forgive me for my selfishness; please, all the ways I have not understood you, for I haven’t been intelligent enough” (36). Acker, in the person of Don Quixote, makes recompense for the flexible personhood with which she has treated pets in her life. Dogs are more intelligent, less selfish than humans, she argues; St. Simeon represents the intellectual curiosity and devotion of dogs, over and against human problems generated by devotion to artificially imposed hierarchies.

Among the texts Acker appropriates in *Don Quixote* is Giuseppe Lampadeusa’s *The Leopard*, a novel that follows the life and family of Don Fabrizio, Prince of Salina, tracking the erosion of the aristocratic age in Sicily at the time of the Risorgimento. Its inclusion is not happenstance. Not only is an animal featured in the novel’s title, but a dog is one of the principal characters, and animals of all kinds, both as physical and symbolic presences, populate the book. Alexander Lee has argued that no dog in the history of literature “is more mysterious—or historically consequential—than Bencicò the great dane,” in Lampadusa’s *The Leopard*. He admits that the dog “appears to play a rather peripheral role,” but argues that the appearance is deceiving (Lee 85). Bencicò’s role is significant, as is the story’s inherent argument for the importance of dogs. Describing his novel to Baron Enrico Merlo di Tagliavia, Lampadusa described the book as evoking “a Sicilian nobleman at a moment of crisis (not to be taken to mean simply that of 1860), how he reacts to it and how the degeneration of the family becomes ever more marked until it reaches almost total collapse.” On the back of the envelope, however, he added an important caveat: “The dog Bencicò is a vitally important character and practically the key to the novel” (Tomasi xiii).

Bencicò does not appear in Acker’s version of the story, but his presence hovers for those who understand her reference. Acker’s *Leopard*, however, does include an animal presence. She

describes the Sicilian landscape as “dry shrubs tiny little animals who have nowhere to hide” (60). She recreates a scene from the novel wherein Don Fabrizio goes hunting with “his flunky” (61), though without the dead animals populating Lampedusa’s account. They describe the mayor’s wife as “an animal” (61). Acker argues that *The Leopard* is a book of memory and the refusal to repress memory. “I won’t repress I won’t be a zombie, despite the pain, I will have life. That’s why *The Leopard*’s romantic” (63). Unstated though ever present, hovering above the novel’s reimagining, her reframing of romantic memory, is one of the most “mysterious” and “historically consequential” dogs in the history (and the memory) of literature.

From there Acker leaves the sympathetic portrait of Fabrizio to the more popular melodrama of Megalon and Godzilla. “Males dumber than nonhuman animals’re running the economic and political world,” she argues, not acknowledging that Fabrizio was among that class (69). She describes South Pacific nuclear tests, after which “prehistoric monsters were born returned.” It is an evil created by wealthy, human males, and “since evil’s a human problem, nature, naturally, isn’t evil” (70).⁵ It isn’t evil, but it is still vulnerable to evil, represented for Acker by Reaganite capitalism, bent on nuclear annihilation in aid of American profits. Humans in its sway “don’t see the absolute degradation and poverty around their flesh because if they did, they would be in such horror they would have to throw away their minds and want to become, at any price, only part-humans” (71). Godzilla, then, becomes the hero of the story; he “not only isn’t human but also wasn’t made by humans,” so only he “can give the human world back to the humans” (71-72). The birth of nuclear weapons and the threat of their use demonstrate the

⁵ Acker’s original plan for *Don Quixote*, far afield from Godzilla retellings but still allowing her similar inroads to the natural world, included an attempt to “approach Nature by tracing the writings and life of the nineteenth-century British agrarian working-class poet John Clare” (Krauss 211).

fragility of humanity, a fragility highlighted by the fact that “the monsters created from human beliefs and acts will no longer follow human orders” (72).

Their retributive anger leads to the rise of an “ape monster” who wears a white toga, “which signifies the highest form of human culture knowledge and being-in-the-world in our Western history.” The monster looks down on nature. “I can’t tell the difference between tree and tree-shadow or tree-image,” the narrator explains. “Nature is either a reflection, or else nothing. I’m a reflection or else I’m nothing” (75). Maintaining her animal embodiment, Acker sees herself reflected in nature; at the same time, however, the rise of monsters changes the depiction of dogs in the tale. The humans are “both dogs and skulls” in the wake of the monster takeover. “There are no women among the human-dogs or maybe the humandog whose face is anonymously or nauseously also approaching-skull (simultaneously either-or life and death) is male and or female and it no longer matters.” One of the humandogs “pisses on the floor because they’re bums pissing in concrete doorways” (75). Another tries to take sexual possession of a woman. “Now animal is superior to human” (76). But animal in this monster-controlled world is also becoming-human, taking on the traits of the Reaganite capitalism that created it. Thus the dominionism, the rape. “Human understanding can only be circular,” she explains. “Humans can’t understand much.” She describes a dog sticking his head above a barricade. “The only language you hear and can hear is ‘Woof’” (76).

Acker’s rewriting of the monster saga is decidedly different from her rewriting of *The Leopard*. Whereas the dog of Lampedusa’s original text was conspicuous by his absence in her reconception, dogs are violently inserted into the Godzilla revision. The male humans become dogs with decidedly masculine traits and defects. The dogs depicted here are unlike St. Simeon. Theirs is a world controlled by monsters, a world fundamentally changed by nuclear apocalypse.

Nature remains, and Acker sees herself in that nature; but the combination of man and dog unleashed by the cataclysm has complicated an animal picture that was previously favorable when compared to that of humans. There is no sense of redemption in animal embodiment when Godzilla roams and the world is controlled by an ape monster. The natural world has been fundamentally altered, Acker imagining a scenario wherein the triple-bind of capital, gender, and species is disrupted when capital and gender combine to fundamentally diminish species. The old order is gone, but the one that replaces it is even more problematic, a reminder that for all the problems that exist under the grip of the gordian knot of the Lacanian Symbolic Order, things could still be worse. And, more frightening, all of the categorical bigotries of capital, gender, and species are already in place to make them worse, whether or not Godzilla actually rises from the sea.

Acker follows the Godzilla tale with a revision of the “Lulu” plays of German dramatist Frank Wedekind from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, themselves depictions of “a society riven by the demands of lust and greed” (Williams 1062). The choice wasn’t accidental. The first of the “Lulu” plays, *Earth Spirit*, opens with the characters introduced by an “Animal Tamer,” framing them as though they are animals who are part of a travelling circus (Wedekind 7). Wedekind describes Lulu as “the true animal, the wild, beautiful animal,” the “primal form of woman.”

“She was created to incite sin,
To lure, seduce, poison—yea, murder, in
A manner no man knows.—my pretty beast” (Wedekind 9).

In Acker’s hands, Dr. Schön, attempting to tame the animalistic Lulu, tells her that she is “a living being with a soul and thus with the divine gift of articulate speech. Your soul’s

language is the language of Milton and Shakespeare and the English Empire” (78). Taming the beast is another form of paternalistic hierarchy; the woman is an indigenous animal, the colonized, the man is both a creature of empire and the imposition of empire upon the colonized, animalistic woman. If Lulu is “naughty, and idle, you will sleep in the kitchen among black widow spiders and be hit by my chauffeur with his huge car rod” (79). Failure to comply with patriarchal social demands will lead to punishment both animal and phallic. Acker traces the predicament to the Renaissance, and “men’s new belief that they, not God, were the centers of the world. They can do anything. That they can do whatever they want. So Schön, who is now rich, believes that he owns the world” (80). He thinks, therefore he is; and in being, his Cartesian solipsism leads him to impose his will on those humans who aren’t wealthy men and on all sentient beings who aren’t human, “for there is no other reality than anthropomorphism” (80).

As in so much of Acker’s work, the wealth that fuels Schön’s animalizing patriarchy also generates an animalizing classism. Fate, in her ancient Greek conception, is “the nine-headed snake, the Hydra of the poor.” To elaborate the point, she returns to using rats as signposts of poverty as she had in *Black Tarantula*. “There are rats. There are rats everywhere. They creep. They sneak. They have brains. They carry diseases. I cannot get rid of my rats. Rat!” For Acker, “the rat rot is deep, deep: there are so many enemies and people at war that sooner or later the world is going to end.” The bridges that divide man and woman, human and animal, rich and poor have become too far, and every member of those dialectics will be affected. “After the end of this world when humans are no more, the machines for human paradise will run on their own. Just as McDonald’s now runs” (81). That McDonald’s is a nearly ubiquitous purveyor of dead animals to working-class humans, one that has stretched its arms of economic colonialism around the world, only heightens the metaphor. The human avarice at the heart of the binaries

created by gender, capital, and species will destroy everyone—human and animal—leaving only the machines in their wake.

The critique continues when another of the play's characters, a beggar named Schigold, thinks of entering society. "They said, 'Here, dog. Play along with us and we'll let you into society so you'll begin to have a few friends.' What dog wouldn't lick a little? What man here is so naive that he is too purist to survive?" he asks. "But I'll tell you something: the tongue that licks their hands, even slightly, is torn out. They are the masters of intelligent torture" (84). The fickle and transactional nature of wealthy behavior toward the poor is not only framed as a human-dog relationship, but that canine identification has been internalized by Schigold, demonstrating for him the impossible chasm that would have to be crossed for him to enter the wealthy world. The triangulated dispossessions of gender, capital, and species, once initiated, metastasize on their own, seeping into the minds of the dispossessed to ensure that the categorical boundaries remain intact.

In a similar manner, Lulu speaks with a witch who "was as fluffy as a puffed-up parrot" (91), who "watched me like a starving cat, a beast of wet sexuality. If I moved, she would eat me" (92). Here the internalization is rooted in gender rather than capital, but it too is tied directly to species as a point of differentiation. Lulu describes entering a room wherein "a woman who's a mother is sitting locked up in a tiny bird-cage. Big-beaked bird is guarding her. This cage rocks on a row-boat on the same sea as the pirate sea." Another woman "is crawling dog-fashion out of the sea on to a sliver of sand or security. Because all men are above women, a lowly hotel valet bearing a king's crown on a silver platter is riding the bitch" (93). That the woman-become-dog is being ridden by a "lowly hotel valet" makes Acker's case that among those triangulated dispossessions, species is the most constant, the most invidious categorization—the women are

being treated as animals as a form of degradation—followed closely by gender, as “all men are above women.” Capital in this framing becomes the magnifier for the other two categorical bigotries, allowing women and the poor both to be pilloried as animals and to see themselves as animals when reflected in the mirror of their human dispossessions. Acker follows the description with one of her mother’s suicide, among the author’s most common themes after the death of Claire Alexander in 1978, wherein “a naked woman is sitting on a dark blue-purple fish-face,” and “a walrus-like-head whose eyes are red is giving head” (94), further emphasizing the social animalization of gender.

When Acker returns to Don Quixote and St. Simeon, the pair are in New York, where Quixote meets a dog-catcher. “They’re all dogs in this city,” Quixote tells the dog-catcher, “but mine’s a real dog.” Or perhaps he isn’t. “St. Simeon the dog may or may not be real because the St. Simeon in my heart is certainly my idea.” Why then, the dog-catcher asks, can she not take the dog? “Because of the evil enchanters!” Quixote tells her. “The only thing that’ll destroy me is to be apart from the dog. The dog (or saint) and I’re two peas in a pod. Evil enchanters such as Ronald Reagan and certain feminists, like Andrea Dworkin, who control the nexuses of government and culture, ’re persecuting and will continue to persecute us until they have buried and downed, drowned us in our own human forgetfulness” (102). Quixote’s connection to the dog, the saint, is her sole source of sustenance, one that could only be undone by those with physical or social currency. Reagan is the representation of modern social conservatism and the bigotry it wields to maintain hegemony, but Dworkin, a harsh critic of Reaganite conservatism, initially seems like an inclusion out of place. Radical feminism, however, has never been a monolith, and Dworkin’s version included a sustained critique of pornography as a form of patriarchal violence against women (see, for example, Dworkin). For those, like Acker, who

found liberation and enjoyment in pornography, the moral imposition of the anti-pornography crusade made it seem similar to the religious grandstanding of Reagan and his acolytes. And as she does with her revision of Wedekind, she weds this kind of moralistic social control with a desire to separate her from the dog, the saint, on whom she is reliant.

Still, dog-as-metaphor remains viable for Acker. Reagan is a dog; Nixon is a dog (103); Kissinger is a dog (107). “The USA government is run via the media by dogs’ greed” (104). Don Quixote writes a letter urging people to “WRITE LETTERS TO YOUR LOCAL CONGRESSDOGS” (106). The negative framing of dogs initially seems to reverse the work Acker has done in the first half of her novel, but she is building on a post-Wedekind argument about internalization. If animals are the most universally dispossessed beings in her tripartite series of dispossessions, animal metaphors cover all humans on either side of social categorical binaries. Participating in human society, then, requires such labeling; human society itself is on the other side of the animal binary: men and women are both within the bounds of society, as are the rich and poor. But humans on one side of a dialectic and animals on the other ensures that animality itself is bound to be both abused by human society and internalized as a metaphor of difference and dispossession, mirroring the animal internalization of Lulu. That this version of that internalization applies the dog label to the villains rather than the victims proves the universality, the ubiquity of the disconnect between human and animal and the results that can accrue to all humans, men and women, rich and poor. Quixote’s tale soon begins framing all Americans as dogs, some of whom woof back at the powerful and others who whimper instead (112). The ideation of internalization spreads like a virus.

And “pleasure happens to a dog only in the ideational world,” says Thomas Hobbes, framed in Acker’s account as the Angel of Death (113). Hobbes was a contemporary of

Descartes, but he was no Cartesian thinker; the two corresponded but never agreed on much. Hobbes's role as the Angel of Death in Acker's story results from his famous dicta from *Leviathan* that the social contract between ruler and ruled requires a sovereign with absolute power to govern the messy and disordered will of the governed, the kind of top-down framing that Acker critiqued throughout her career. But Hobbes's engagement with Descartes came in his theory of mind. It is also in *Leviathan*, for example, that Hobbes describes understanding as "imagination that is raised in man (or any other creature endued with the faculty of imagining) by words or other voluntary signs" (Hobbes 11). Which is to say that, for Hobbes, understanding, and the ability to conceptualize language, is not limited to human minds. For nonhuman animals, that conception is necessarily limited: animals have an understanding of will, whereas humans can suss out the "conceptions and thoughts" of speakers (Hobbes 11). It is not coincidental for Acker's appropriation here that Hobbes uses a dog as his example, explaining that a dog will understand the command of "its master" (Hobbes 11). Humans, though, are able to reason the motives behind those commands in a way that the dog cannot. So Hobbes diverges from Descartes both on the limits of the human mind and the presence of the animal mind. Still, that's not good enough for Acker; Hobbes is the Angel of Death, who insists that "canine pleasure and meaning, then, reside in hope and good actions" (113). Since Acker has combined the human and animal in a universal internalization of dogness, the Don Quixote version of Hobbes's claim is also in aid propping up his vision of absolute sovereignty over the mass of humanity, again combining animality and capital as interconnected tools of oppression.⁶

⁶ Naomi Jacobs reads the effect of making dogs of Thomas Hobbes, Richard Nixon, and others as "ludicrous, particularly in passages from Hobbes where the disjunction between elevated diction and canine referent cancels the sobriety with which we normally receive official discourse, philosophical or political" (54). Jacobs, however, ignores the larger role of animals in *Don Quixote* and in Acker's oeuvre more broadly. Animality is its own legitimacy, an elevation beyond diction that Acker applies with seriousness to those of whom she approves and disapproves.

That combination becomes clear as Hobbes continues speaking. “What is this power which is the basis of a dog’s life?” he asks. “Money. A dog has to make money. Especially in this city with rents or landlords the way they are” (114). The dogs and the humans have become one. “The maintenance of a dog’s life or of dog-like life depends on unequal (power) relations between the subjects or dogs” (114). Here Acker moves more explicitly to Hobbes’s political theory of the social contract in human relations, but she does so by framing those humans hustling to make money and suffering unequal power relations as dogs. Hobbes finally tells Richard Nixon, “The only way it’s possible to be canine and survive is to be a traitor” (117), advice that has nothing to do with actual dogs but becomes normative in Acker’s transformation of all humans and reinforces the expendability of the governed. In another act of plagiarism, Acker reproduces an anonymous piece of promotional literature for the Georgia and South Carolina colonies, possibly written by James Oglethorpe (Boorstin 78), that encourages migration because of the cost of living in England, crudely reducing people to their earning power. But what, in its original, describes “A man who is equal in ability, only to the fourth part of a laborer, (and many such there are,) we will suppose to earn four-pence per diem, five pounds per annum, in London; his wife and a child of above seven years old four-pence per diem more” (Anonymous 60-61), Acker caninizes to “A dog who is equal in ability, only to the fourth part of a laborer, (and many such there are,) we will suppose to earn four-pence per diem, five pounds per annum, in London; its bitch and a puppy of above seven years old four-pence per diem more” (119). The broader critique concerns the methods used to conceive human value, but framing the humans as dogs makes it impossible not to read the account as a corollary criticism of the human marginalization and commodification of animals themselves.

It is significant in that context that Don Quixote does not herself become a dog. In lamenting her failures, claiming that “I did what I could,” a dog to whom she is speaking tells her, “You didn’t even become a bitch. Whereas I, like every born bitch or bitch by birth, have had to be the idiot the token at the dinner table parties of upperclass closet fags” (123). The animalization of artists, of the poor, can only exist if human social norms see animals as entities fundamentally below that of humans. Bigotry against animals is built into the structure of society itself, so embodying any social bigotry in aid of fighting against it necessitates a transformation, a becoming-animal, to legitimately identify with humans suffering under the strain of capital or gender dispossession.

That inability or unwillingness to transform, however, does not stop Quixote from loving the dog. “My world is only dog, for love, by its nature, is total,” she says. So what, then, “is this doggish being?” Her answer is that “doggish being, like all being being itself, must be love” (126). Quixote takes the quasi-Hobbesian unity of human and dog as a result of class and transforms it into a unity built upon mutual affection and regard. She is, to be sure, tilting at a windmill in the construction, as the human performance of that unity is always inconsistent, but framing doggish being as love is a method of countering the animalization of the poor and vulnerable; if doggish being is love, then association with dogs becomes a value added to disaffected humans. It is a stakes game all the more important because, as the dog tells Quixote, “the world of society or this city is the world of appearances” (130).

In the process of the conversation, the dog takes on male and female genders, the complaints of the animal moving back and forth between the problems of men and women. Soon, the dog begins using parenthetical pronouns: “she(he),” “her(him),” “his(her),” “he(she)” (134-140). By the end of the discussion, however, her gender stabilized: “The dog wasn’t human,

only female” (141). Embedded in the usage is a commentary on the animalization of gender in the same way that the poor are animalized. But Acker emphasizes not only the diminution of women, but also of the nonbinary nature of the gender spectrum—and she does so in 1986, decades before broad acknowledgement of gender as existing on a spectrum and the declaration of personal pronouns. Not all human animalizations, then, hide in plain sight. Prior to the twenty-first century, gender nonconformity was among those categories largely hidden from wider public view but only further animalized by lack of attention, the silent suffering of those outside of societal norms.

The curative in Acker’s formation is in recognizing the value of animality. “Since, when humans appear in this world, they’re less important than the non-humans: the world outside the window pane also contains no monsters” (143). The monsters are all inside, the humans that author animalization narratives, belittling through false depictions of capital, gender, or gender identity. It is the nonhumans who are important, to whom animalization is a positive good. “Humans’re just small figures in the midst of everything or nature” (143). Nonhuman animals are, as well, but their insignificance does not come attendant with the hubris that creates social categorizations and other artificial differentiation values. So “bring forth the animals: the bear whose curly-clawing palm holds the dove; the truncated-trunked elephant and the arrogant giraffe whose neck had stolen the elephant’s truncated trunk; the dog who’s the ugliest thing in the world. Shall we tell the stories of all these singular creatures?” (151) Every animal is a singular creature; all of them have stories of their own. They are just as valuable to “everything or nature” as the rich human or the poor human, the man or the woman, the gender-conforming or gender-nonconforming human.

The story ultimately told in response to the request is that of the raven and the lambkins. Acker tells the story of a lamb who is born to a raven, ostracized and self-hating because she is so different from her mother. Her life is difficult; she suffers a variety of indignities. Her mother at first doesn't want her because of the glaring species difference. But the mother raven attempts to soothe her lamb child. "You ask me if there's anything else. For lambs," the mother says (152). "There is everything else. There're animals who live only at night; there're animals whose beings are mirrors, who are only what they imitate; there're animals whose physical movements're sexuality; there're animals who speak to each other in complex ways." All of the animals, she assures the lamb, "who're more capable than you rejoice in you, for you need love so desperately" (153). Acker interprets a collective unity in animals not available to humans, but she also sees her own problems in those of the lamb. For all the animals who rejoice in the lamb at the end of the story, for example, many others condemned the lamb before its conclusion. The lamb is an animal often associated with vulnerability, the raven with portentous evil, a representation of Acker's mother whom the author often accused of not wanting her. Animals in the story, then, are flawed, are stand-ins for a decidedly human autobiography, but their taking the shape of animals gives Acker reason to hope, to assume a collective network that will help her to cope in a cruel, Hobbesian world. (In one segment planned for *Don Quixote* but not included in the final published version, Acker describes her grandmother cutting out the eye of a rabbit with a razor, allowing white mucus and blood to drip into a "chipped lightly gray china bowl" [Acker, "Rejects," Box 5, Folder 4]. It is a graphic, hideous description, continuing a broader theme of the toxicity of family—and of her family in particular—affecting the possibility of animality and its attendant liberatory function.)

As if to further the metaphor, Acker then takes on the persona of a dog visiting the doctor. The dog laments the abuse she has suffered and the self-loathing it has produced. “You’re canine,” the doctor tells her in response, “you’re not just the mechanical results of incidents” (153). In one sense, Acker is making a similar case for human resilience; in the other, she is directly confronting Cartesian automata assumptions. Canines are not the mechanical results of incidents. Dogs are people, too. And though they suffer as do all people, human and otherwise, their subjectivity is neither mechanical nor wholly deterministic. Enlightenment thought, Acker continues to explain, has failed us; it has driven the disconnects in human social thinking that create the bigotries of gender, capital, and species, to the detriment of everyone not wealthy, human, and cis-male.

Acker, still embodying the dog, says that she lives “in my own world of playgrounds trees animals books” (156), a biographical reality connecting her directly to the animal. “For a long time I’ve been a cat whose fur’s being rubbed the wrong way but doesn’t know how to get touched right. Like the winds, I the cat act without thought carelessly recklessly non-consequentially gaily because without thought, no thought” (158). In her autobiographical reverie, Acker the dog briefly becomes Acker the cat, an association so common in her earlier (and later) work. By giving voice to a dog as her representative, however, she also gives further personhood to dogs. The act of becoming-animal is not simply a human act; animals can become-animal, too, can cross species lines, can embody other animals. The brief turn to catness is a loud reification of animal ability and personhood. In another scene, Acker-as-dog sits reading while “my white stuffed cat sat on my right arm” (162), an autobiographical conceit (see chapter 3) that also demonstrates another kind of becoming, a figuration of the animal that comforts the dog-Acker in a different way.

When the story returns to Quixote, she gives the dog to a human woman to care for. “No woman, being a bitch, will deal with any woman against her own pleasure. The body cannot lie.” The dog asks in return, “What if I’m not a bitch?” which leads to a discussion on the nature of the self. For Quixote, “In the beginning of me, I am. Therefore I am.” But the dog isn’t satisfied with a Cartesian construction. “What about me,” she asks. “If I am to me, am I to you?” Cartesian thought is solipsistic at its heart. “What concerns me,” Quixote says, “is me” (176). Enlightenment thinking fails in its ability to validate relational subjectivity, leaving its preference for the human incomplete at best, insidious at worst, with dogs and others denied subjectivity by various bigotries asking, What about me?

Quixote in response leads a pack of dogs, “valiant beasts,” in a fight “against the religious white men and against all the alienation that their religious image-making or control brings to humans” (178). Quixote and the dogs would take on the wielders of capital and gender politics, along with the Symbolic Order that gave them their power. When they confront the religious white men, however, Quixote stops and tells them a story about hyenas, with the dogs gathering around to hear. “Hyenas are the greediest and most ambitious of animals. *He* is short for Hyena,” Quixote tells them (180).

The hyena wanted to be famous and powerful; God told him that he would have to sacrifice and suffer to gain his power, though “sacrificing isn’t natural, but social. This proves that society isn’t natural” (180). The hyena, after suffering, becomes head of a multinational corporation, but suffers a variety of setbacks, including theft. “I already taught you about theft, didn’t I?” Quixote asks one of the dogs. “Oh, yes,” the dog replies. “Stealing is one of the first ways by which we can de-control ourselves” (181). The frustrated hyena, meanwhile, returns to God, who tells him, “Your only problem is that you are not rich. This is the problem with all of

you poor people. Why don't you just give up your damn desire to have our money?" (182) The hyena has to suffer more; he goes to live in a squatters' village on the river Thames, where the humans around him steal his meat. But "God does not like to see His animals slaughtered. God does not like red meat," so he punishes the human squatters and ensures that they "would never again eat meat. God moves in mysterious ways" (183).

In the end, the hyena goes to the police and accuses the squatters of stealing from him. "Of course the police and the courts uphold any accusation against the poor" (183). The hyena thereby thwarts the poor, regains his multinational corporation and becomes wealthy and powerful. The religious white men, however, weren't listening to Quixote's story because they were "busy with bombings of abortion mills" (183). The story encapsulates Acker's social and animal view. Society isn't natural; it is a construct built on a symbolic order that preferences rich white religious men over everyone else. Deviation from that order—by stealing, for example—is a method of stepping away from social control, an act of liberation. And killing animals is against any viable conception of religious thinking. All such views are couched in a denunciation of the wealthy, the religious, and the male as the ultimate persecutors of those who do not fall into such categories, categories created by the vestiges of Enlightenment thinking in society.

That the protagonist of Quixote's story is a hyena is also significant. Since the time of ancient Greece, hyenas have been associated with greed, a characterization common in particular in African folklore (Glickman 516, 525-527). And though hyenas tend to shy away from any human presence, they have also, particularly in Harar, Ethiopia, become street animals decidedly similar to dogs. They live among the human citizens of the town in a unique situation governed by a history of socially constructed norms. But "the defined, contested, but agreed-upon boundary was not only a social construction of the hyenas," argues Marcus Baynes-Rock, "it was

also a social construction of the human population” (134). The cultural history of linguistic and social semiotics, in other words, directly impacts the lived existences of both human and nonhuman animals in a given space. Hyenas are able to exist as quasi-street dogs in Harar because of a complicated detente between human and animal; everywhere else, however, hyenas are less like the street dogs who populate Don Quixote and more associated with the opportunistic greed that Acker defines as a distinctly male trait. Thus, “*He* is short for Hyena” (180).

That emphasis on Africa, and on negative perceptions of animals, continues in another story of Ogun, the Yoruba spirit. Ogun, in Acker’s telling, reaches waters wherein live “fish that liquid gravity has flattened into steel-like weapons, crocodiles whose teeth burn more than the rays of light, whales materially or actually beyond human perception.” They are frightening imaginations, but “our monsters hold Ogun as their king” (188). Animals have become-animal, they have become-human. Now they become-weapon, become-light, move beyond the human ability to perceive them. They have their own version of religious devotion, their own hierarchies. They become, therefore they are.

“Language is community,” Quixote tells the dogs. “Dogs, I’m now inventing a community for you and me” (191). Jennifer Komorowski has argued that “by inventing a new language in order to overcome the lack of understanding between dogs and humans, or women and men” (58), Acker charts a potential course for a future without gender or species dispossessions. Acker “queers the conditions of representation by deploying the oppositional potential of ‘bodies and pleasures’” in *Don Quixote*, argues Annette Schlichter, using both animal presence and animal embodiment to generate that queering in aid of countering “a heteronormative Lacanian symbolic order” (Schlichter).

Toward the end of the novel, the dogs sing a song:
Because it isn't true that animal life is over,
because we are not worthless dogs,
because we are not slaves, oh landlords, oh J. Paul Getty,
even though now and then you pat us on our heads or fuck us,
throw us scraps of food and love, give us doggie walking suits
to make us slaves,
because your human history which is the history of slavery is
not our history,
because your culture is slavery: (198)

The song never concludes, but it doesn't need to. It encapsulates the novel's critique of capital through the lens of species, arguing that human history is one of slavery and domination of the poor by the wealthy. Humans, even those in slavery or poverty, ostensibly have to accept that history as a lived reality, a function of the past pushing into the present to affect various forms of human social relations. But dogs can reject human history, can throw away the perils of self-definition borne of the past. Becoming-animal as an escape from Cartesianism, or from the slave society and industrial capitalism that followed from Enlightenment ideology, does not take the same form that it takes in earlier Acker novels. For the dogs of *Don Quixote*, escaping to nature or a mythical realm isn't possible. Dogs have been tethered to humanity for thousands of years. Instead, the human act of becoming-dog empowers those becoming to reject the animalization of their social betters. The embodiment here is not an animal embodiment; it is a linguistic embodiment wherein those who suffer under the thumb of categorical bigotries take the animalizing language of the wealthy, the religious, the male, the powerful, and turn it around,

embodying the epithets themselves to become the animals they are accused of being. They embrace being “worthless dogs,” and in the process discover that they are not, in fact, worthless. And if that is the case, then dogs cannot be worthless, either. If dogs cannot be worthless, then neither can the other animal species so often abused individually and whose names are used as further epithets for the poor, the female, and the nonbinary. “God,” after all, “does not like to see His animals slaughtered” (183).

CHAPTER 6

The Antihuman Manifestos:

Animals and Humans in *Empire of the Senseless* and *In Memoriam to Identity*

The story of *Empire of the Senseless* begins with Alexander, who “loved snakes. His mother, a real snake, had been a lousy mother.” Alexander grows up in war, and thus is “as open as a wild animal.” It makes him look like “a young fox whose I’s are permanently crossed” (4). The other protagonist, Thivai, is told upon his introduction that in the beginning “there were no animals. That is, no wild animals. Oh there were cats and dogs who are somewhere between humans and real animals. The cats were so thin they looked like knives. Predatory knives ran down the streets” (7). The day after the world’s inception “large black worms” with white feet “crawled into the holes at the ocean floor’s bottom.” Back on land, “a burro had fallen asleep. His large head lay next to a sleeping dog’s larger head. The bees were bigger than horses” (8).

The narrative then shifts to a dystopian nightmare long after the creation story. Humans are “driven into the corners of rats, of garbage cans filled with plague” (13), but the narrator, addressing herself to Thivai, soars through the air on “huge white and grey wings stretched to the horizontal limits of my vision” (12-13), she swoops into the ocean, creating a tunnel filled with a “fountain of light.” The people, now freed, say, “Now the mad bird has won” (13). But the narrator isn’t so sure. In her dream, “thousands of tiny fish were translucent and looked like worms. They leapt, with their tiny sharp teeth, out of the water at me. The teeth bit through the thin feathers into my flesh.” One of the fish “leaped so high, he bit through my rotting teeth with his teeth. Then through my tongue tip. Many fish tore my wings off of me out of hunger.” Her

wings are torn; there is no rescue; “I could neither fly nor cry. Nor could I stay alive” (13). And so still “the cities are full of rats; the rats are bored; people seem as lonely as they are bored” (14).

In what is to be a story of catastrophe, the animals are in revolt. There are, in some sense, familiar Acker tropes in the novel’s opening. The snake mother, the fear of worms, the association of rats with urban poverty, the flexible personhood of cats and dogs, the escapism through bird-becoming: all are rags well worn by the author in her previous work (Borowska, *Politics* 177). But here their use is expressionist in manner, each thrown against the wall as they stick in places that seem to have little connection to one another. The burro sleeping next to the dog and the large bees do not provide any descriptive or comprehensibly symbolic value. It is almost as if Acker took her previous animal references, put them in a blender, then poured the result onto the page. Perhaps because of that scattershot approach, or because the story is one of catastrophe, her escapism through bird-becoming is, this time, decidedly unsuccessful. Carnivorous fish attack her, tearing her wings and ultimately leaving her for dead. By 1988, when *Empire of the Senseless* was published, the order that animals had imposed on Acker’s world had given way; wanting to become a bird could no longer save her. Chaos seemingly remained.

When Thivai begins telling her own story, Acker returns to some of her other previous strategies. A grizzled pirate captain calls his lazier sailors “a group of pigs” (21), flies and lice serve as signposts of poverty and decay (23, 25). More significant is her developing criticism of humans and humanity. Thivai explains that she is “useless, as are all human beings and as most most human beings, the ones who aren’t rich, believe they are.” Not only are humans useless, running on a wheel, important only in the context of the artificial cultural codes that govern their

perception, but those without the palliative of great wealth carry with them an inherent understanding of that uselessness, creating an ennui that separates them from themselves and the society that produces those artificial codes. “It’s a policy of mine,” says Thivai, “don’t believe in human speech as anything but a stuffer of time” (27). When humans do nothing more than run on a wheel, their commentary on those elements of life beyond the wheel, beyond the constructed reality they see, becomes meaningless, a stuffer of time. It is less a case of humans not being able to see the forest for the trees; instead, humans cannot see (or comment on) either the forest or the trees for the plastic plants placed in front of the woods.

With that framing, the powerful are “like parrots” who ultimately doom themselves. “Except for Manhattan, which had been left to the rich, all of the eastern American urban centres had been left to the packs of wild dogs, wild cats, and blacks who lived in and under the streets,” Thivai explains. “There were no more whites there except for gays” (36). As she has in so much of her previous work, Acker associates animals with the poor and marginalized, species entangled with capital, gender, race, and sexual orientation. The non-white, non-rich, and non-straight have been left with the animals, but the white, rich, and straight do not demonstrate any redeeming qualities, and Acker had long presented animals as forces of liberation, of revolution; they are victims of marginalization themselves but also serve as vehicles out of marginalization for the humans who share their fate. Non-white, non-rich, and non-straight humans are left in the forest with the animals, their plight just as invisible to those in power seeing the fake plastic trees in front of them.

Fitting that scenario, Thivai has a nightmare “that the world is full of people who no longer feel. They are carrying on their businesses as usual, in fact better than usual, because they no longer feel” (38). The plasticity of human construction spreads from without to within; in a

world where speech is simply a stuffer of time, a lack of feeling makes production easier, eases the burden of running on the wheel. Still, hers is not an endorsement of psychopathy; the vision is, after all, a nightmare. And the conjoined methods of escape that Acker has always proposed for such nightmares is social deviance, art, and animality. The “Modern Terrorist” leader who Thivai consults describes his newest employee, a burglar, “a rat who goes by the name of Ratso. Since rats are very intelligent, Ratso has a fondness for art objects. The rat craves art” (40). The story seems at its outset to be the perfect liberatory vehicle, combining social deviance, art, and animality, but escapism can no longer happen in the new chaos of Acker’s imagining. Ratso’s most prized find is a dead human head, a work of art that he cherishes. American Intelligence and the American Medical Association, however, come for the head, sending a weight-lifter to retrieve it. “I know he was a real man,” the terrorist tells Thivai, “because I knew I was staring into the eyes of death” (40). The American powerful retrieve the head and kill, exterminate, the rat.

Such is the fate for millions of rats. But so too, Acker argues, is the fate for so much art, so many social deviants. Not only have rats long been tied to the impoverished and dispossessed (see Chapter 1), making the death of Ratso a death-by-association of the non-white, non-rich, and non-straight, but the killing of the rat is the killing of a thief, someone who challenges social norms through acquisitionist sabotage. And it is the killing of art in that the head, the work of art itself, which Ratso loves so dearly, is recovered by the representative of the powerful. Animality becomes the umbrella under which race, poverty, sexual orientation, social rebellion, and cultural production all fall. When the rat is killed, they all suffer as a result.

When Abhor takes her turn at speaking, she, too, reifies Acker’s consistent themes. Her story begins with an embellishment of the biography of the schizophrenic Daniel Paul Schreber,

a fin-de-siecle patient of Sigmund Freud. Schreber, in Abhor's telling, invented a device he called "the crocodile," which "ripped off the penis" (46). And that trepidation over crocodiles is coupled with a decided love of cats.

Pounce, my cat, and walk over this craving heart,
For a moment put away your nails;
Cat, I drown myself in your eyes;
Cat: you see flecks of diamond and shale.
When my fingers lose themselves in your head and your elasticity,
When my hands are besotted by pleasure from your electrifying body,
I see him. His look,
Bestial, icy, cuts like a shock
Your stale piss odours his cock (47-48)

The crocodiles of Acker's previous work have become a violent machine known as a crocodile; the cat-women and cat-becoming of those earlier novels are replaced with a poem of devotion, of the comfort and pleasure found in the human relationship with a cat. Even with the scatological final line of the stanza, the poem is, by any Ackerian standard, sweet, a declaration of the personal meaning that companion animals can have to the humans who share their lives. Before the reader leaves the page, there is a "scarlet pigeon nibbling at the blood seeping out of my cunt" (48), but in the poem, Acker does away with the symbolism and social critique, if briefly, to show a different kind of dedication to animals, one that takes the author's obsession with animality as an outlet and depicts it in a new, softer way.

But only briefly. Soon another pigeon, or "a pigeon's body, as if preserved in aspic, lay mashed between chunks of large dead branches and punched-in plastic milk cartons, where

empty vodka bottles floated in the river” (52). The pigeon nibbling at her cunt is now dead, signposting the decay that litters the bleak vision depicted in the novel. The sweet moment with the cat is gone, but it is only made more effulgent by being bounded on either side by darkness.

That darkness is rooted in an overt frustration with humanity, one an ever-present undercurrent in much of Acker’s writing but pushed to the fore in *Empire of the Senseless*. “Humans relate to other humans by eating each other,” she writes. “I realized the human part of me always felt pain, therefore was always sick. I wondered if I could escape. Myself” (54-55). Whereas her earlier inclination was to deal with the pain of being human by transforming into an animal, now it seems the only route of escape is to excise the humanity from her being.¹ She turns, in other words, from outward-facing to internal solutions. “Within my unbearable despair at being human, it seemed to me no human goes anywhere” (55).

As explained by Patricia MacCormack, “Humans do not create symbiosis. Humans do not reciprocate. Humans use” (12-13). Her *Ahuman Manifesto* argues that humans know “what we are doing and why it is literally murdering the earth, but we do not know how to get out of this scenario” (13). Hers is a theory that describes the flaws of both humans and humanism. In MacCormack’s framework, even posthumanism “has shown an insipid incapability of the tremendous grace in not knowing and in leaving be” (13). Even the kinds of becoming-animal so emphasized in early versions of Acker’s work are “utilizing the other through converting it into an apprehensible anthropocentrized ideation” (12). Ahuman theory thus “negotiates the question of what becomes of the human when it is neither posthuman cyborg nor animal fetishist,”

¹ Still, the broader theme of *Empire*, according to Michael Clune, is the act of transformation itself, about the movement “of terrorists into pirates” (486). The “free-market profiteers” of Acker’s late work defy social norms, appearing “as the specters of a radical liberation from a postmodern society of control” (487). Georgina Colby has made a similar case, that “revolution—the ability to bring about transformation—is,” for Acker, “intrinsically related to experimental form” (291), though neither engage with the literary possibilities of animal transformation.

MacCormack argues in a screed that mirrors the ideas of Acker. “We remain non-nonhuman animals, yet we must still acknowledge and account for our biological organism’s place within the ecosophical series of relations. Ahuman theory promotes catalysing becoming-other from the majoritarian or all human privilege and renouncing the benefits of the anthropocene” (23). In this formulation, Acker can be seen as an early adopter of what would become ahumanism, seeking the human place in the broader biome and viewing becoming-other as a weapon against the power and privilege that comes from human majoritarian politics. And that ahumanist strain in her work is best exemplified by her dystopian, pessimistic writing of the late 1980s and early 1990s, *Empire of the Senseless*, *In Memoriam to Identity*, and *My Mother: Demonology* in particular.

“We, humans, need new blood,” Acker writes, still as Abhor. “I phoned up the doctor of zombies again. I begged him for blood. Blood that wasn’t in a dropper. I wanted something new” (56). Her frustration with humanity, and with her own inescapable embodiment of it, lead her to turn to the possibility of the monsters that so intimidate Acker in earlier presentations. Anything, seems to be her lament, would be better than this. “I wonder if human civilization is the same thing as alienation and isolation and, if it is, what can knowledge be?” (58) It is a rhetorical question, one where if you have to ask, then you already know the answer. The question itself emphasizes Acker’s argument that the problem of humanity isn’t a species problem, per se, but is instead a problem of the Lacanian Symbolic Order. Civilization and its constructs breed a civilization of discontents. Artificially created social structures alienate and isolate those who understand them as artificial. Those with that knowledge of artifice, who see the fake plastic trees for what they are, are the ones defined out of the epistemological conversation, pushed to the fringes, isolated and alienated. What, then, can knowledge be? And, perhaps more

immediately prescient for Acker, what can the sense of one's own humanity be without access to a structurally sound knowledge—without access to the actual forest? It seems an insoluble problem, leaving the landscape of the novel her darkest and most chaotic.

As in all of Acker's works, however, the human condition is inexorably bound up with the condition of animals. Even before wondering about human knowledge, Abhor sees "two bears so moth-eaten they should be dead huddle in an empty stone circle of the bottom level in the centre of the city" (58). The scene, a grim depiction of the Central Park Zoo, is a reminder that the avarice and artifice of human civilization does not simply create alienation and isolation in nonconforming humans. Animals, too, are a central part of the nexus of dispossession Acker emphasizes throughout her work. Abhor meets the schizophrenic Schreber "about two hundred yards from the bears" (59), wherein he threatens to kill her. "Cunt," he tells her, "you are what you get. You've got me" (59). Abhor is trapped, isolated by the powerful. But unlike the bears, she has a gun. She kills Schreber, eliminating her immediate threat, but, like the bears, "I felt hollow" (60). Killing Schreber doesn't fix the problem, because the problem is bigger than Schreber; the problem is the human civilization he represents.

Abhor quotes Toussaint L'Ouverture to distill that problem: "Nature speaks in louder tones than philosophy or self-interest" (65). His was not a denunciation of human civilization itself, but in Acker's hands self-interest is the oppositional purview of humanity, nature the free world of animals. Nature's louder tones, however, have far more trouble breaking through as a remedy in *Empire*. Abhor sees "a black-and-white cat lying motionless and fat against a stone fence," but "this sight means nothing. Whereas when you perceived such a cat in your home town, you would be seeing dowagers, Abolitionists and freethinkers, talking to each other over lace-clothed tables within seemingly nice houses, you would be seeing the beginning of

revolution always made by females.” But now, “in the strange city, I saw nothing” (66). The revolutionary symbolism of cats and women that populates so much of Acker’s work in the 1970s and early 1980s gives way here to frustration and doubt. Human civilization is ethically bankrupt and built on artificial constructs that enforce an embedded cruelty, and that human civilization is winning.

In the face of that reality, an old man, whom Abhor refers to as an “old goat,” tells her that “sick to death of the world of humans, of how humans hurt each other, he was about to suicide.” After all, “humanness shocks,” and “one must learn how to suicide in this world, for that’s all that’s left us” (69). It is significant that man-as-goat bemoans the world of humans and chooses suicide as a remedy, but even in his decision to die, he leaves Abhor with a hopeful message that “we’re still human. *Human* because we keep on battling against all these horrors, the horrors caused and not caused by us. We battle not in order to stay alive, that would be too materialistic, for we are body and spirit, but in order to love each other” (69). He frames civilization as a hindrance to love, humanity as a battle to maintain it against the civilization that humans themselves created. He describes the “autism” created in humans with a cat analogy: “if you give a cat two separate and opposite commands, the cat becomes unable to move” (72). So too humans, pushed and pulled by the Lacanian Symbolic Order, have no recourse but to stasis. Even when framing humans as the heroes, they are also still the villains, but the rare glimmer of hope in humanity is one that Abhor, and Acker, stuck in their own versions of civilizational autism, cannot abide.

The humans for whom Acker gives the most sympathetic treatment in the story are the Algerians and the Haitians. For the Algerians, “the world of humans was creepy disgusting horrible nauseous shit-filled exacerbating revolting” (73). As if to validate their assessment,

Acker tells the story of François Mackandal, the eighteenth-century Haitian slave who escaped bondage and dedicated himself to both Voodoo and the overthrow of the French system of bondage on the island, a revolutionary in the decades prior to the revolution carried out by L'Ouverture and his allies later in the century. In Acker's telling, Mackandal is transported to revolutionary Algeria in the 1980s, creating a delirium that comes from remembering Africa and the "many kinds of animals easily running, loping, over rolling hills—him running alongside of and as fast as these animals who accepted him as their friend" (74). The African landscape is more pastoral, the human connection with nature and animals more immediate, and thus, in Acker's hands, it is mythologized as existing outside the bounds of the more problematic elements of human civilization. That Africa had its own slave system, its own quasi-urban sprawl, and a long history of robust intercontinental trade matters less to Acker, who uses it, as so many white westerners do, as symbolic of a natural world outside the bounds of modernity.

And so her portrayal is historically inaccurate but intended to make a larger point about humanity and other forms of animality. "Obviously this black, like horses dogs cats and some wild animals, judged a human not by the skin's colours but by how she or he behaved," she writes of Mackandal. He and his followers from Algeria and sub-Saharan regions of the continent "hadn't been content only to hover in the shadows corners alleyways of the city like tamed animals who had once been animals of prey, who were not content only to be alive by dying, slowly" (75). There is a form of Orientalism in Acker's portrayal, well-meaning as it may be, but it is in aid of criticizing the alienation created by decidedly occidental norms. Human society as she knew it in the US and Europe had "tamed" its human population in a way that left them frightened and alone, clinging to life as something judged by its length rather than its quality. Nonhuman animals and African humans, by contrast, Acker sees as rejecting those fears

and striving for liberty, whatever the consequences to longevity might accrue. Associative ethnocentrism notwithstanding, Acker again, as she has throughout her career, frames animals and their human associates as the good guys, the “civilized” west and its powerbrokers as the bad guys.

When Thivai returns to narration, he travels to where child prostitutes are staying “in the section of Paris of the rats” after the Algerian revolution. “I found, for I’m consistently losing myself, myself seated in the middle of the fur of white wolves” (93). The animal symbolism itself has become darker when presented in the western context, the danger to him dually racialized and animalized as white wolves. When he engages with one of the child prostitutes, “one of her gigantic paws as if she was a wild cat grazed my knee in affection. The buzzing of a mad bee caught prisoner in the bathroom resounded from tile floor to tile floor.” Sex causes the metaphors to shift back to their traditional Ackerian register: the affection of the cat, the heightened awareness brought by sexual encounter. “Dinosaur, who was a stuffed animal, was sitting next to us. Dinosaur was female therefore a prostitute,” he says (93), folding into the story another of the author’s predilections. Dinosaur eventually “tugged at my army belt. Excited beyond belief by her touch, I threw myself on the animal. The young girl, excited beyond control, threw herself on me” (94). The regenerative power of sex not only stabilizes the metaphors; it brings the stuffed animals to life; it creates, if briefly, an avenue to wonder and imagination not available in the deadened world outside the bedroom.

As Thivai moves through the city, he uses common animal tropes. Dog shit and fleas and flies and cockroaches signify poverty. The policemen are pigs. The city is “the home of all rats” (99). But “in the urban environment the species of rat has more chance of survival than that of human” (103). The same place that has proven a prison for humans is like the African plain to

rats. Their survival and freedom depend on existing within human spaces. The two dominant species are the black rat, *Rattus rattus*, and the brown rat, *Rattus norvegicus*, the black rat being the smaller of the two, but the brown rat being the most common in tales of urban decay. It bred year-round, living in sewers and basements, under floors and in walls, and dispersed quickly throughout the globe, largely as a result of its ability to stow away on human ships. While rats can be found in almost every environment, the human built environment has historically been a comfortable place for the small animal to scavenge food and find shelter. When that built environment began to expand in the United States during the country's late Industrial Revolution in the second half of the nineteenth century, the rat population expanded with it, surviving on the garbage generated by metastasizing urban citiscapes and the mass production that made much of it possible. The explosion in the rat population, in other words, was a direct result of the explosion in the human population. Rats found in humans and their built environment an opportunity to survive. There was a world of welcome possibility as metropolitan areas grew (Burt 21, 30-32). But because of the darker vision in *Empire*, their freedom isn't liberatory. Thivai pits rats against humans. "They piss on human eyes and their blood hungry teeth kiss red lips," he says. "Rats own the city of piss. Do you know what a rat does to a human? It gets in somewhere, it gets in somebody, it stretches the ass-cheeks so far apart it can get in there and slit. That's the nature of the rat-human relationship" (106). The negative animal framing of white wolves and pig policemen gives way to an animal hostility not present in less dystopian Acker visions. Rats no longer simply signpost poverty in Thivai's accounting; they punish it. Rats punish the vulnerable just as the human powerful punish the vulnerable, Acker's lament against humanity bleeding over onto one of the species with a commensurate evolutionary pattern.

Abhor, however, is more sanguine about animals. She describes trading a “dead animal coat” for new clothes from a second-hand shop in Copenhagen. “The Danes love animals,” she says (115). She, too, is escaping animals, but whereas Thivai is running from rats he views as a dangerous menace, Abhor is removing herself from the cloak of dead animals on her body, the corpse of an animal not menacing to anyone but killed for the sake of fashion precisely because of that lack of menace. She finds a place that loves animals and takes comfort in the exchange. She meets a gypsy who provides her a tarot reading, another reversion to Ackerian themes. “What is the imagination of the fish?” the fortune-teller asks her. “What of the dreams which the ocean brings?” (117) The gypsy is referencing the sea voyage that Abhor will have to undertake, but she is also commenting on the possibility of knowing, on the inaccessibility of mind that so frustrates both of the novel’s protagonists and, by extension, Acker herself. While fish do have imaginative lives, their imagination cannot extend beyond the water where they reside. The limit to their ability to know is similar to human limitations; the ability of inference, long seen as a uniquely human trait, bumps up against a wall of inscrutability that leaves human minds little better equipped than that of the ocean’s denizens when reaching beyond the bounds of the human social world.

As if to emphasize this problem of the animal mind, human and nonhuman alike, and the different perspectives of her male and female protagonists, Acker then describes in detail two gulls having sex outside a bar, their effort and actions so similar to those of humans: clumsy, desperate, and dominated by the male. After twenty minutes of movement, the male gull “straightened his spine, spread his wings out, and screamed. The bottom gull hadn’t moved once. He fell off her” (121). Not only is the human sexual imagination bound up with animality, but the human and nonhuman sexual act itself is typically dominated by males, ensures their own

pleasure, and often leaves the female unfulfilled, confused, isolated. To build on that sense of stasis, Acker re-presents the autistic cat metaphor through yet another fortune-teller. A cat given two contradictory orders “handles the contradiction by becoming catatonic. Maybe there’s something you don’t understand. Some catatonia,” the fortune-teller tells a sailor, another catatonic cat pressed by decisionmaking into stasis (130).

When finally lulled out of that catatonic state, however, the sailor attacks the humans who control him. As his fists hit human skin, “the sailor felt that joy free of fear which birds must feel when they sing. Birds of prey sing since they live at night and need to see each other” (133). The bird analogy again becomes positive, a value-added to human existence, but it does so only through physical violence, and Acker makes it clear that the joyful songs of birds are less in aid of generating joy and more a pragmatic method of nightvision. The wistful birds who fly above the human violence of earth are replaced with those who also have to navigate a world beset by danger and isolation.

That even the joy of birds is reduced to a use-value politics of maintenance ensures that other animal metaphors not attached to joy will be even starker. “Humans are packs of wild dogs,” she writes. “When they speak, their teeth are new razor blades. Their institutions are crimson chain saws” (135). The packs of dogs, who roamed urban centers early in the novel, are now stand-ins for humans themselves, stand-ins for razor blades, for chainsaws. The more antipathetic depictions of animals, however, do not lead to commensurate positive depictions of humans. Humans are the markers of that animal antipathy. The metaphor itself is directed not at dogs, but at humans, to whom Acker’s real criticism is pointed. The problems of humanity, however, are learned rather than innate. “Historically, criminality is the only freedom humans have had” (138) in a civilization rooted in power structures that preference a few and leave

everyone else to fend for themselves. Society and social control are synonymous in this view, leading to Acker's consistent insistence that social deviance and crime are liberatory acts from such control. "Humans make themselves and 're made through pain plus dreams" (138), the former imposed from without, the latter pushing back from within.

Though the metaphor isn't directed at dogs, however, it soon would be. The humans who were like packs of dogs actually become packs of dogs. The city "was now void of humans. But not of bands of wild dogs and cats. Cats ran through the rare yellow snows" (146). Those dogs serve as guards for imprisoned humans; two of them play cards, but stop their game "long enough to attach us in pairs in chains" (147). It is another in a long line of declensions: the problems of humans negatively affect animals, their behavior is tagged with animal metaphors, then the animals themselves take on the disease passed onto them by humans.

Humans, then, are still the root of the problem, and dreams are not enough to overcome the human condition. Acker's sailor gets a tattoo in three colors of a ship surrounded by roses. The flowers' color, red, was the red of blood. The brown color of the ship was that "of excreted blood or shit." Then there was blue. "The same substance was below and above the ship. It was inhuman. It was inimical to and separate from humans. Its colour was blue and its shape was that of a dragon" (139). The blue of the sky and water, of the mythical, represented here by dragons, is beyond what humans could ever inhabit. Theirs is a world of restriction, hierarchy, and social control, one irreconcilably inferior to the free natural world of birds and fish and dragons. Again, the natural world presents itself not as the avenue of escape depicted in former accounts; now it is the barrier beyond which humans are unable to reach, the cloister that ensures that the prison humans have made for themselves is mirrored in the conceptual boundaries that keep humans tethered to the earth.

That being the case, when Acker takes on the voice of Sinbad the Sailor, she sails from France to “an island which turned out to be a whale,” one “so gigantic, it was unable to move. Trees and shrubbery shot out of the dirt on its flesh.” When Sinbad and the crew explore the island, they understand that “if the whale moved, we would drown.” When the whale responds to the visitors by shaking, “at that very moment I understood that my capacities for understanding are so puny that reality (for me) is Chance. Due to this ignorance, my will is useless.” Sinbad thus “floundered in the inhuman sea” (156). He then travels to another island where he meets a white horse, “as white as the hair of an old junky woman.” When he attempts to mount the horse, “she tried to trample me down” (157). The animals—dogs, whales, horses—take their revenge on humanity. Moving to a magical whale island is the kind of escape that would comfort the Acker of *Blood and Guts in High School*, but here, in a more pessimistic presentation, it only causes new problems. From there, “new-borns died while the rats watched them die. Rats, cockroaches, and fleas: the survivors of this world” (159). Those treated as vermin, as signposts of poverty, want their pound of flesh, as well. The rats move among the humans, “attracted by human sperm and bruised rotting human flesh, the rot that comes from malnutrition.” The rats “lick blood that’s running from body to body” (160).

Such visceral negative portrayals of animals, cutting against the trend of Acker’s previous work, soon turn at the hands of a revolutionary named Giauhava, who picks up one of the rats and reassures him. “You don’t have to tremble anymore cause I’m here: You can walk into my blood. You can crack and crash all my insides between your bitty teeth just so you’ll have enough to eat. You’ll never be lonely...little bitty...never again” (161). Acker’s revolutionary accepts the biological reality of rat needs, sees them as the necessities that they are. Human violence is not necessary, not borne of biological need; human violence is the creature of

hierarchy—of wealth, patriarchy, and species supremacy, all of them resulting from a constructed reality that feeds the anger and isolation behind the fake plastic trees. Under Cartesian models, humans have reason, but Giauhave acknowledges that rats, at least, have reasons. Their role as signposts of poverty stems not from rats themselves but from the neglect of poor neighborhoods by those humans in power. Rats are little and lonely, but they will never be so again.

To expand on the point, Acker turns to Harlem, the home of so much infighting over rat infestations in the author's developmental years. In Harlem, she says, "babies turn into punks; punks skewer gutter-rats for fun; gutter-rats live on human baby flesh" (164). It was a description drawn from real life. The *New York Amsterdam News*, Harlem's dominant Black newspaper, began a crusade in 1957 against rat infestations and the sometimes deadly bites they gave to small children, publicizing each new injury and laying blame at the feet of slumlords who refused to properly care for buildings in the neighborhood (Aiello 180). Acker, too, had plenty of criticism for landlords, but also saw the human treatment of rats more broadly as the real genesis of such problems. Humans may have reason, a sense of ethics or morality, she argues, but they don't use it skewering rats for fun. The rats may survive on baby flesh, but in doing so they don't abandon their reasons. Theirs is an act of survival while the punks simply kill for fun. Even were the rats to slough off their biological imperatives, the indiscriminate killing of their companions would be, in the logic of Acker's previous work, reason enough for a kind of revolutionary revenge.

As Acker has taken on the identity of an Algerian (the section of the novel is titled "On Becoming Algerian"), she describes the rage of those in Harlem and claims that though she is not Black, she understands it. "This is because I'm Arab. And I'm female" (164). It is another

version of Orientalism, continued in her depiction of Islam itself. She depicts an “Arab male” as describing the Koran as “a manual for fucking.” Fucking “like a drunken bird. Like a bewitched lovebird. Like a mad lovebird maddened” (165). The Arab female, however, recognizes the gambit. “I am not a lovebird in a man-made cage,” she tells him (166). That’s the thing about lovebirds and many other species of bird. Those flying free can generate a variety of liberatory representations for Acker, but those who have been caged by humans have far less freedom, far less pleasure, even when fucking. And the cages are always man-made. Acker again uses animality as a cudgel against the edifice of gendered bigotry and sexual domination, while simultaneously treading on racial and religious ground. When she begins running through Paris, she arrives at the Seine and sees that “the birds were fucking,” uncaged and free, an ideal far from the lovebirds of the Koran. “All I’ve ever wanted is freedom from fear or to fly” (171), she says, and cages, whether socially imposed and metaphorical or those of iron bars, are always generated by human men and always used to induce fear and limit flight.

At the beginning of the novel’s third and final act, “Pirate Night,” Acker includes an image of two koi fish swimming next to one another with the caption, “DEAD FISH FUCK” (174). The iron bars for the fish are death itself, or social death in containment in specialized ponds. Theirs is the sex of caged lovebirds rather than those with the freedom from fear or to fly. Sex for the fish is a palliative against their literal estrangement from everything else outside of their cloistered environment, a cloister felt by Acker and relieved, at least temporarily, by her own sexual activity. She continues the death cloister metaphor when Thivai sees a dog tied to a stick in the boiling sun. “I unleashed the dog and put myself in its or his or her mouth,” Thivai says, but “the dead don’t bite” (176). Eventually, the argument goes, the social death of confinement leads to the death of desire, of will.

It is a social death similarly felt through human racial hierarchies. As Afropessimist Frank Wilderson has described, the Human, as opposed to the Slave, the Black, is typically driven by the subconscious to maintain paradigms of “despotic violence” because he has never known anything different, and because those acts of violence largely occur away from him (86). The core of “non-Black subjectivity” is built on social death, violence against Black bodies and Blackness itself (94). For Wilderson, “Blackness is coterminous with Slaveness: Blackness is social death,” and there was never a previous position of social life to look back upon; there is nothing to attempt to regain, because the status of Blackness was always slavery and social death (102). The trials of dispossessed humans and nonhuman animals are fundamentally different, but animals, too, exist in a state of social death, everyone not human being defined out of the concept of society from its creation. Animality, then, or any human animalized or attached to animality, is forced to exist in the lovebird’s cage, in a state of social death.

But if Thivai sees social death in the lives of animals, he also sees a version of it in Abhor. When he meets her again, he sees her as a cat. “Meow meow. Meow,” she says (177). Soon after she “became a chameleon or, rather, reverted to the lizard that was deep down inside her” (183). She refuses to become a pirate with Thivai, mimicking the social death of the animals before her: the lovebird, the koi fish, the dog. Thivai experiences a similar becoming when a woman tells him that “rats’re meaner than humans” (181), a dictum he knows to be untrue. But that doesn’t stop her husband from grabbing a frying pan and chasing Thivai out of the house, “as if I was a rat” (182). Soon Thivai and Abhor are crawling around “like dogs. Abhor lifted up her leg, pretended to piss, and giggled. She had the sense of humour of a cat who’s wet and in heat” (186). As in previous Acker tales, the horror of humanity leads to acts of becoming for both the protagonists, but instead of fanciful escapism both Thivai and Abhor experience the

animality of social death, as the disease has been transmitted from the human to the animal. “Dogs eat dogs’ flesh when dogs is hungry enough,” explains a Revolutionary Algerian Policeman (189). Whereas the human powerful use metaphors to animalize and denigrate humans, the human disease in *Empire of the Senseless* transfers the ugliest parts of humanity onto animals, the inevitable consequence of the dystopian world through which the protagonists travel.

Thivai “was a snake and low and crawling on the ground.” Abhor “was a paranoid porcupine and a piece of shit and a stinky skunk naturally” (192), even as both look around and notice that “there didn’t seem to be any animals or insects around” (193). Soon, Thivai is separated from Abhor, and when he seeks to find her, he meets a prison guard and notices a dog bowl “with stinkin’ smelly food in it.” He asks the guard if he has a dog. “That’s for no dog!” the guard tells him. “You want to see what kind of animal it’s for?” (198) He leads Thivai to a wire enclosure wherein struggles Abhor, existing in a state of animalistic social death. When Thivai assures her he will “dig her free like a dog,” Abhor recoils at the word “dog,” and “tried to kick then bite me through the wire.” Human becomes animal as animal metaphor becomes human. It is, Thivai reasons, the inevitable consequence of war, “cause war breeds war like lovebirds” (199), a caged existence as human-animal, living through social death.

But Thivai is living in his own form of social death, as well. After the ordeal, when he finally reunites with Abhor, he kisses her “and started running around in formless shapes on the concrete, just like a lovebird who’s heard another lovebird—any old lovebird—squawking” (211). Despite their efforts, their running, their violence and wars, in the end they both remain lovebirds, caged by the human social world around them. Abhor ultimately decides that when she dies, she wants her body thrown into the ocean. “Then all the fish will have someone to eat

out cause they can eat me up” (222). It is one final attempt at becoming, but this one only in death. After receiving a tattoo late in the novel, Abhor describes it: “This is me,” she says (222), bringing her back to the bodily reality of the human. “Instead of relying on an ontologizing predicate,” Walt Hunter argues, “the sentence ‘this was me’ points deictically to the body itself, on which the tattoo is inscribed.” It is “prised out of the poetics of self-expression” and instead made part of the human form itself, a headstone to the humanity lost along the way (97).

The novel closes with one final screed against the horrors of humanity. A “teenybopper” is speaking to a biker, resentful of his patriarchal violence. “Nature’s a wonderful thing,” she tells him. “If I had my way, no biker would ever see nature. Cause the moment you see nature, you go out into it and foul up our streets with your noise and your greasy hands and your destructive machines” (225). The human destruction of nature doesn’t stop at the water’s edge of the forest; it continues with walling it in plastic trees, then bringing that destruction back to civilization, in creating hierarchies, and in transferring the language of nature onto those dispossessed through animal metaphors. The humans ruin everything, including the humans themselves.

“IN ANY SOCIETY BASED ON CLASS, HUMILIATION IS A POLITICAL REALITY. HUMILIATION IS ONE METHOD BY WHICH POLITICAL POWER IS TRANSFORMED INTO SOCIAL OR PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS,” Acker argues in her 1989 short story, “Dead Doll Humility,” one she wrote a year after *Empire*’s publication, detailing her perspective on a plagiarism controversy with Harold Robbins in which she found herself. “CAPITOL IS AN ARTIST WHO MAKES DOLLS. MAKES, DAMAGES, TRANSFORMS, SMASHES. ONE OF HER DOLLS IS A WRITER DOLL. THE WRITER DOLL ISN’T VERY LARGE AND IS ALL HAIR, HORSE MANE HAIR, RAT FUR, DIRTY

HUMAN HAIR, PUSSY” (Acker, “Dead Doll,” Box 6, Folder 4). The class dispossession created by capital, then, seeps into the social and personal, animalizing those humans it touches, and coding the dispossession by gender. It is, in a brief, all-capitalized statement, a distillation of the capital-gender-species nexus that defines so much of Acker’s critique of modern society. Capitol goes on to make “A DOLL WHO LOOKED EXACTLY LIKE HERSELF,” one who writes, “Nobody save buzzards. Lots of buzzards here. In the distance, lay flies and piles of shit. Herds of animals move against the skyline like black caravans in an unknown east. Sheeps and goats.” A horse laps water from a pool, and a hawk waits “for the inevitable onset of human slaughter” (Acker, “Dead Doll,” Box 6, Folder 4). Animals, she argues, will always exist, and will do so beyond the realm of the human; but they will also inevitably be affected by the human, ensuring that human class and gender dispossessions will always, in one way or another, redound to them.

Two years after *Empire*, Acker continued the theme, publishing *In Memoriam to Identity* in 1990, the title itself invoking the instability of self-definition in the face of multiple namings and multiple becomings. “Identity politics,” Patricia MacCormack’s *Ahuman Manifesto* emphasizes, “has various ‘human first’ claims about race and gender” that by their very framing ensure the impossibility of including animals in conceptions of dignity as “culturally insensitive and economically unattainable” (45). Identity itself, then, must be overcome for human supremacy to abate. MacCormack turns instead to Joan Dunayer’s definition of equality as an alternative to identity: “All sentient beings (nonhuman and human) have equal value” (Dunayer 124). It is a definition that Acker’s work doesn’t endorse, but it is the logical extension of the kind of animal representation in which she engaged.

The novel begins with a pseudo-biographical portrait of Arthur Rimbaud, his mother asking God, “Why didn’t I have a scorpion? Why’d I give birth to a human homosexual? Cause heterosexual fucking, which You gave the world, cursed me. Heterosexual fucking gives women pain” (3). At the top of all human-created hierarchies lies a god who builds into human orthodoxy systems that ensure the pain of women and the birth of humans destined to be targets for all the dispossessive metaphors and acts of those hierarchies. Better to give birth to a scorpion, an animal outside of human social constructs and one with the venom to defend itself against attack. In a way, Rimbaud’s mother got her wish, as her son “grew up to be a wild animal” (4), even cultivating “lice in his hair so he could throw them at his teachers” (12).

His literal and figurative nonhuman animality, however, is interrupted by the arrival of the Nazis in France, the ultimate scarlet letter against humanity and its hierarchies. “Cripples in greatcoats” were housed “behind barbed wire meant for animals,” Acker says. “There was little patriotism or religion left” (17). This time the animalization was systemic, national and religious identity laid bare as shibboleths in the face of institutionalized violence. It was the most significant effort at engineering social death in the twentieth century, drawing animal lines to prop up a selective human supremacy that simultaneously demonstrated the fallacy of such supremacy claims. Rimbaud and others were

Among jackals panthers

Lice scorpions jellyfish vultures,

Yelping slime—

The urban menagerie of destruction— (23)

Acker brings to bear animals from previous work, places them in an urban setting, and uses them all as a clustered definition for Nazi avarice, pushing the animalizing metaphors back onto the

animalizers to describe the logical end of the violence of human civilization. As if to drive home the point, Acker's Rimbaud writes a poem to Verlaine in which he describes bored sailors who "grab and mutilate the huge albatrosses who're following their graves." The deaths are incredibly violent, "Kings of the Sky now full of shame, / Their immense wings drag through their own blood" (24). This isn't a Nazi problem, he seems to be saying, this is a human problem. The poet who stands against such humans is "now exiled among humans who fear, / His immense wings stop his motion" (25). In a corrupt and violent humanity, the poets become the albatrosses, but when the corruption and violence is so all-consuming as it is during World War II, there is no liberation in the endeavor. Social death gives way to physical death.

"Humans always look for a reason for their suffering" (27), Acker argues, and Rimbaud follows suit. When the author places him in conversation with author and confidant Ernest Delahaye, he tells his friend, "Animality, freed from humanity, is monstrous. Animals stalk humans, eat them, assign humans values. Impossible animals issuing from a demented imagination are a paradise we've lost" (36). In an apotheosis of the inverted animal metaphor, Rimbaud uses animality as a gauge to measure the Nazi project. It is the kind of inversion that Acker would not have used in earlier work with less darkness at its heart. Humans stalk animals; humans have proven monstrous. But Acker, in the voice of Rimbaud, takes the trope she has been developing for two decades and turns it on its head, not to diminish animals themselves but to marshal them in aid of a critique of the Hitlerian project. Systemic human violence, here presented as animal violence, also keeps her own "impossible animals," formed in her own "demented imagination," from appearing, from providing an outlet. Hegemonic human behavior even steals our relationships with animals and the benefits that come from them.

But Acker does her best to restore them. In an interlude from the Rimbaud story, a reimagining of Japanese Noh theater, the protagonist, Tomomori, sees how his love interest, Uneme, “cuddles her stuffed animals as if they’re alive” (46). She is so beautiful that “she had become an animal” (47-48). It is, if briefly, a harkening back to an older form of Japanese storytelling, but also one to an older form of Ackerian storytelling: the stuffed animals as comfort, human beauty as animal in nature.² For the more dystopian Acker, however, the vast majority of humans were not beautiful. They “have been educated, trained, reduced into white pastry.” Humanity has devolved the earth into something small, “and on it hops the last human who makes everything small. He’s a happy human, for he never does anything bad. He only fears death, for he has no other values” (50). It is the message of *Empire* carried forward, but the message of the Noh doesn’t disappear. In the loneliness created by small humanity, she looks up to see an eagle soaring “through the air in wide circles, and on him there hung a serpent, not like a prey, but like a true friend, for she kept herself wound around his neck” (50). Humanity is the destructive problem for all the earth, but animals can soar above it, taking other animals with them and showing those humans who remain a way forward.

When Rimbaud returns and speaks with Verlaine, he describes being awed as “a bird, a gull, cries out from another world. A huge group of these birds screech as the light from a bridge suddenly illuminates them.” But coming into the light, becoming visible to humans, always denudes a measure of that otherworldliness. Soon a pirate ship makes banners “out of the wings of dead gulls and pigeons” (68). Humans are small, cruel; their obsession with their own money and power takes from everyone else. “In a crummy zoo three miles north of the Stock Exchange,” Rimbaud reminds us, “deer’re shoving their noses into the roses’ thorns, through

² Rimbaud, too, has his own stuffed animal for comfort, Tigger-tiger (94).

pools stained by the blood of murders, looking for parents” (69). While humans are busy in the pursuit of money and power, and decorating their sins with roses, they kidnap, imprison, and kill animals for their own enjoyment, a return to the Central Park Zoo and a broadening of the project of the pirate ship.

“What is it to be human?” Acker asks, turning to the ancients to find an answer. “A girl, Leda, fucked a swan, had bestial sex. Subsequently she gave birth to Clytemnestra who murdered her first husband. Afterwards Clytemnestra gave birth to Orestes.” So her response to the question of what it is to be human is: “bestiality; husband murder; patricide; incest” (77). And Rimbaud is desperately human. He gives up “any hope of human love. Like any beast that’s starving right now I leap on any affection that’s offered and I murder it,” he tells Verlaine (79). The beast, however, leaps on prey because of a starvation he can’t control; Rimbaud chooses his own starvation; he acts like a starving beast, but he is a human agent with less cruel options. In a dream, a devil tells him, “You’ll remain a hyena, desperate animal, monster, etc. Aborted hyenas can’t be loved. So every time you have desire, desire will bring you to death” (80). That inauthentic animal becoming, that embodiment without full embodiment, has sinister consequences for those who behave in sinister ways. He thus returns to Greek mythology, telling the story of Phrixus, to be killed by his father, the king Athamas. But just before the sacrifice, “a gold male sheep [ram] flew by, snatched the child up, and took him away to Colchis. Far away” (82). Taken in by King Aetes, Phrixus sacrifices the ram and gives its golden fleece to Aetes in thanks. While the story establishes the myth of Jason and Medea, Rimbaud’s presentation makes it impossible not to see the killing of the ram itself as part of the problem, as a progenitor of Jason’s effort, Medea’s betrayal, and the bloodshed to come. Killing animals unnecessarily leads

to killing humans unnecessarily. The golden fleece is simply an early manifestation of the Central Park Zoo.

Inauthentic becoming, however, is not solely a feature of Greek mythology, for Acker; it is woven into the human condition. “When an animal’s dying, the animal absolutely doesn’t want to die, but this ferocity often means nothing,” she says. But “when a human’s dying, the human sometimes realizes that this death, and this life, is meaningless.” Humans’ failed becomings mask the reality that they were animals from the beginning, that their sense of meaning is artificially constructed. “We all die alone, and so we live alone” (145). Humanity fails in this view because of its fundamental resistance to biology, its refusal not only to acknowledge its animality but to truly know its animality. Such doesn’t require an act of embodiment or becoming, only a meditative contemplation and a willingness for proximity. Soon Acker goes to the banks of a lake to sit with the swans. “Here I felt peaceful,” she says. She had been worried that the swans had died in the winter months and was relieved that “the swans were OK. They came glided ran over to me as if they were in the right proportion to the water and air and so controlled their own existences” (160).

For someone who so often felt a lack of control over her own existence, the surety of nonhuman animals was a grounding agent, something that humans could never provide. When “a swan dies, time dies,” she argues. “Time must be antihuman or time was human and humans were antihuman” (166). Time wasn’t simply beyond the human, for Acker, it was antihuman. Time is part of a world that humans could never inhabit, that opposes the human project of hierarchy and control. Time is with the swans, which places it in a state of direct antagonism toward humans, who could never be on the side of animals, have structured their existence

against animals. Their freedom from cultural construction gives animals a stability that is fundamentally “unhuman” (175).

Later, Rimbaud finds that “the sun was sitting inside his head so his blood felt inhuman, as if the sun had escaped humanity.” In need of escape he goes “outside where the swans are sitting” (205). He doesn’t “know what’s out there in the night because *all I will be is lonely*. Maybe swans know” (210). Another of Acker’s human characters “was beginning to be an animal. Only beginning to know” (218). *In Memoriam to Identity* also includes all of Acker’s common animal tropes. Her cunt is an animal (148); rats and dogs signpost poverty and destruction. But the core animal metaphor of the work is a continuation of her work in *Empire of the Senseless*, posing animality against the human in aid of critiquing the human project, even using the term “antihuman” to describe time and its relationship to the natural world, a world that humans would never be able to access, not because of a lack of proximity but because humanity has framed itself in opposition to all the world beyond them.

“Being belongs to the world of things,” Patricia MacCormack argues, “where being a subject is being one, albeit the most important, kind of thing, in a world populated by other things, systematically indexed and mapped out in orders of belonging and capacities of similarities and differences” (24). But humans fail in their capacity to reckon with that belonging. “Human knowledge negates the nonhuman other (and oftentimes the minoritarian human other)” (25). That kind of species-level solipsism ensures that “all discourse on nonhuman animals is between humans and ultimately reducible to being about humans” (45).

In one of her more desperate moments at the end of the novel, Acker claims that “all she needed was that innocent form of war called *wildness*” (238). Wildness could include a willful reclaiming of gender; it could include theft and other forms of social deviance. But principally it

is an embrace of the wild, of the forest beyond the fake plastic trees, that which is both beyond the human and antihuman. For MacCormack, similarly, “the human of colour and the furred, fanged and winged person are all perceived as chaotic because they are victims of Western capital remapping. This form of perceiving the wild nonhuman or barely human is representation as a form of violence devoid of imagination and entirely without art” (92). So for both Acker and MacCormack, art is the best way to push back. In the human-created dystopian hellscapes that Acker conjures in *Empire* and *Memoriam*, she pushes back with her war of wildness. It is the only way to defend oneself, to fight the war against the rot at the base of humanity.

In a 1993 essay, written just after *Memoriam*'s publication, Acker combines these dispossessions in the story of a mysterious guest who visits a brothel, a story cribbed from the Marquis de Sade. When the host sends the maid down to the basement to fetch some wine, the guest follows her down, because “I don't trust the sort of people who'd work in a place like this.” When he arrives in the basement, “he picked up a hammer and brained her. Walking back up the back stairs, he killed the cook and a cat and a dog.” Then he kills his host. He feels no remorse for the crimes, even recording them on paper and leaving it at the brothel: “Look upon this slaughter and regulate your life,” he writes. The short tale demonstrates the violent power of capital over gendered and animal bodies, treated in the story as equals. Acker frames her narrative with the work of Foucault and Bataille. “When man discovers freedom,” she quotes Foucault as saying, “he returns to nature.” From Bataille she takes that “society's one and only desire...is to maintain itself.” The two thinkers seem to be contradicting each other, and that is precisely what Acker intends. “Human liberty can exist,” she argues, “only in violation of the social contract.” Thus the power of human women and of animals, two groups of beings

unincluded in social contracts steeped in patriarchy and human supremacy (Acker, “Insoluble Problem,” Box 22, Folder 31).

She would continue that fight against patriarchal and species-based norms in her next novel, *My Mother: Demonology*, the apotheosis of her antihumanist position. “I hadn’t decided to be a person,” she says early in the novel. “I was almost refusing to become a person, because the moment I was, I would have to be lonely. Conjunction with the entirety of the universe is one way to avoid suffering” (11). Rejection of the human is, she interprets, her only viable coping mechanism, the refrain continuing with halting regularity as it had in her two previous dystopian visions. “Humanness throws her into a panic,” Acker writes of her mother (11). And then herself again: “The world outside me that’s human seems to be formed by economics, hierarchy, and class. I’m anything but free,” she says (12). “Eight years old, I was no longer human” (12). As an adult, she lives in Berlin with a “doctor named Wartburg,” who “put me in a dog collar; while I was on all fours, he held me by a leash and beat me with a dog whip. He was elegant and refined and looked like Jean Genet” (15). There is in the scene an element of the masochistic tendency that appears in many of her works, but coming on the heels of her screed against humanity, it also shows that the power of the human is to take animal becoming and turn it into a mode of abjection, of social death, to kill its liberatory potential for the human ends of power and domination.

“I need,” says Acker’s narrator, “to be invisible and without language, animal” (21). It is a call back to the top of her bell curve, a longing for the becoming-animal of her younger days. She tells the story of a man who meets a fortuneteller. “In a society of murderers, how can children be educated to something else?” he asks her. She tells him that “they should be raised with the wild dogs” (25). Remaining with animals is the only curative for a human world built on

the cruelty of power—or simply remaining animal. “My limitations are too painful,” Acker writes. “I transformed into the sex of a dog, red and unbearable to my own eyes” (44). The words are a modification of those in the 1968 film *Terese and Isabelle*, directed by Radley Metzger. In the film, “the rubbing was burning and painful my limitations were even more painful still...I transformed it into the sex of a dog red and naked.” As Georgina Colby argues, Acker’s “substitution of ‘it’ for ‘I transformed into the sex of a dog’ enacts a surreal metamorphosis through the change of pronoun” (*Writing the Impossible* 198), moves the narrator closer to the animal by taking on that transformation herself, treating the animal as a living being rather than trading object-for-object.

It is a consistent theme. Acker later tells the story of a fourteenth-century school for animals. “Every type of animal that had climbed onto Noah’s Ark, except for asses because they had stupidly borne Jesus’ cross, went to this school. At times, hanged and decapitated humans also attended, but they were ashamed to raise their heads in the classrooms” (76). The headmistress of the school could “restore life to dead beasts. But not to humans” (77). The story enacts less a metamorphosis than an exchange, pushing animals forward to pride of place in a direct rejection of the human. She then has a dream where she dines with a parrot and a monkey; she wakes up and befriends a bat and a rat (78-79). Her rejection of the human only metastasizes as the narrative progresses.

But just as in *Empire* and *Memoriam*, the animals in *Demonology* aren’t idealized. They are their own entities, and they are willing to fight back. “A monkey escaped from one of the laboratories in a third-world nation and bit a civilian,” Acker writes. “The ensuing disease,” as she describes it, “developed into the worst plague known in the twentieth century” (89). The book includes multiple pirates, a theme she would soon develop much more fulsomely in her

next work, and the “pirates knew that animals, kin to them, were also their natural enemies. As if civil war. Even if you hack animals to ribbons, pirates understood, if your sword hashes their flesh and rips their insides apart, in no time they recover their animal image and life” (102-103). Humans are the ultimate enemy, but escaping them through close association with animals only works in magical, romanticized scenarios. In reality, animals understand the human desire to hack and hash; human embodiment falters when the nonhumans also recognize that humans are the problem, that it is humans who are, in actuality, the worst plague known in the twentieth century. “Do humans rot in the same ways animals rot?” Acker asks (111).

In one of the stories of *Demonology*, Cathy (an alter-ego of Kathy) and her brother Heathcliff are usurped in their family by an imposter, leaving Cathy desperate. She sees a street sign, “NO HUMANS EXIST HERE.” She feels that she “can’t be other than Heathcliff because to be other than Heathcliff is to be human,” finally realizing that “I must die for Heathcliff so that I’m no longer a human” (122). The two wander away and eventually come upon a “a rich boy and girl who were their age dismembering a puppy. Heathcliff said, ‘They aren’t nice people, those who live inside houses’” (123). It is better, his argument goes, to live like animals. Not as animals. But like them, away from the abject, unnecessary cruelty of those who live in houses, those who would dismember a puppy for caprice, much as did Descartes so long ago. Animals are no longer the subject of becoming, but instead are subjects themselves, victims, like Acker, of a savagery borne of assumed supremacy. The goal is not to be animals, but to be more like them, to envision their moral sense as superior to that of humans. It is that goal that Heathcliff references when he says that he “threw away the rest of my human trappings and I became an animal that didn’t even clean itself. In order to toss their humanity into their faces” (127). He “became an animal” as a protest at the social setting around him, rather than as a

Deleuzian becoming-animal embodiment. The time for the latter has passed, in Acker's eyes, but that doesn't mean that animality itself isn't a viable rejection of cultural constructs and their attendant dispossessions. "The law that forms society is that which forbids all that reeks of the name humanity," Heathcliff says. "From the moment that I was born, I knew my society was corrupt" (142).

From there the narrative shifts to George Bush, who argues that the government spends too much money on prisons. "Several years ago," he says, "*Our* agriculture developed controlled methods of force-feeding cows their own leavings; *We* can do the same with prisoners" (185). The human avarice at the heart of the treatment of nonhuman animals merges into the treatment of those humans on the wrong side of the social order. The pushback from his own secretary only reinforces the animal bias. "Prions breed rats and rats live forever" (187). Bush then has a dream wherein his sister refers to herself as an animal. "I'm an animal because I've been forced to dream myself into existence, so dreams are my province," she tells him, again indicating a state outside the bounds of embodiment. If the veil that humans have constructed between themselves and their fellow animal species makes any meaningful animal contact a dream, then dreaming itself becomes a connection to animals and an escape from the social and political restrictions of the human. That said, Acker clearly envisions the piercing of that veil moving both ways. "Dream is that which is most sacred in human and/or beast," she concludes (215). Later statements like, "I lost my dreams," and, "I wonder about animals' dreams" (227) only reinforce her framing of the ethereal relationship created by the human bounding of civilization's walls, both physical and metaphorical.

"Here is why I talk so much about nature," she admits near the end of *Demonology*. "Nature is a refuge from myself, from opposition, from the continuing impossibility of me"

(249). It is a way to pierce the veil, to move past the fake plastic trees, a way to escape the human or to rest up for her ongoing war with the human. As the novel closes, she describes “the cries of humans and of the earth itself turning—THE VERTIGO—all these are found in the cuts—not just decadence and rot—but the entire human being is found there. No one can be more human than this. To welcome in this hatred. No being can be more human than this” (267). And if hatred is the core of humanity, and nature and animality are its antidote, hiding in plain sight on the other side of the socially constructed veil, then animals, existing as they do on their own terms are worth pursuing, worth emulating, worth dreaming, if for no other reason than as a salve against the hatred bred by simple human being.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Death of the Animal:

The Cats (and Rats) of *Pussy, King of the Pirates*

While *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, the last novel published in Acker's lifetime, veers away from much of the dystopian pessimism of her previous novels—returns to an earlier raucous escapism as the bell curve of her career moves back to the baseline—the residue of the darkness she demonstrated in those works, prompted in part by the struggles with cancer that would ultimately kill her in 1997, remained an overt presence. The story begins in a brothel where Acker's narrator toils as a sex worker. That Acker regularly refers to the institution as a “cathouse,” that it was named “Death,” and that it was owned by her father promises that her conflicted relationship with animals will continue throughout the work (10). The vision of a business that combines the death of cats with the sexual exploitation of women continues her themes of the tangled interconnection of species and gender dispossession. That the cathouse is owned by her father continues the long emphasis in her work on paternal criticism, prompted by her own bitterness at a father who left her mother while she was still pregnant.

The initial section of the novel is a combination of two simultaneous retellings, that of the 1954 *Story of O*, the erotic novel by Ann Desclos that Acker had already previously plagiarized in earlier work, and that of the biography of French artist and poet Antonin Artaud. In Desclos's novel, O is subjected to a variety of violent sexual acts, forcing her into submission to a secret society of wealthy, powerful men. Acker's version of O certainly feels that exploitation, but “for the first time in her life, in the whorehouse, O was safe because, here, there were no humans”

(13). The cloister of her ordeal, for all of its pleasures and problems, walls her away from the social constructs and hierarchies that had so ravaged her in the outside world. Being away from humans, in Acker's telling, is always a value added.

In one of her notebooks for *Pussy*, Acker describes the operator of the whorehouse as "the King of the Cats." The powerful men who dominate O in Acker's retelling are themselves cats who "wore the same collar around their necks, from which hung identification tags." Those men treat women poorly, but they do so specifically in aid of attaining power. "In order to obtain the strength and immortality of the gods," one of the powerful cats tells her, "we eat the boiled bodies of the gods" (Acker, "Story of O," Box 11, Folder 2). Though the framing did not make it into the novel's final form, Acker's willingness to take an animal that was a core source of her own identity and use it to represent the abusive power of capital and gender provides a telling clue to her thinking about the death of the animal in her later life. "However I felt was of no importance to cats," she writes (Acker, "Story of O," Box 11, Folder 2).

In the same notebook, however, she argues that "there is no morality other than that of the interdependence of the animal human & divine world" (Acker, "Story of O," Box 11, Folder 2), a seeming contradiction of the problematic interdependence she has been describing. Her notebooks, of course, constitute the roughest of drafts, a space to work out her thinking that even in final form could be contradictory, but she clearly sees the disconnect, writing soon after, "I HATE MAKING SENSE" (Acker, "Story of O," Box 11, Folder 2). The relative consistency of animal identity and animal metaphors provided stability for an unstable life, but when that identity changed, when those metaphors broke down, as Acker faced a cancer that would ultimately kill her, her sense of sense became virtually illegible.¹

¹ In another of her notebooks from the period, she compares herself to a "weasel-cat" playing in the ocean, but does not draw out the theme more coherently (Acker, "Loneliness," Box 11, Folder 8).

In another of her *Pussy* notebooks, she returns to a more traditional Ackerian framing: “To be a stripper is to be a cow-object, not even a cow, in a cow-pit,” the sexual declension of capital-gender-species creating a sexual politics of meat that diminishes both human women and nonhuman animals at the same time (Acker, “The Creation of the Wor(l)d,” Box 12, Folder 6; Adams). Female bodies “are sites of ambiguity,” she argues in a 1991 essay. “By means of their definitions of our bodies as solely sexual, men tried to control us in order to maintain and enforce patriarchy.” And there is no dodging that legacy. “Just as the physical is married to the mental, so both the self and the body are at least partially constructed by history, by communal history. Women’s bodies still reek of this history” (Acker, “Bodybuilding,” Box 19, Folder 11).² Several years later, in 1995, Acker quotes Luce Irigaray, noting that a woman’s “entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation. While her body finds itself thus eroticized...her sexual organ represents the horror of nothing to see” (quoted in Acker, “Seeing Gender,” Box 19, Folder 17). It is another formulation of Adams’s absent referent, the inability to see mirrored by the hiding of animal suffering to sate consumers of their bodies.

But gender dispossession tied to animal dispossession is also informed by the power formations of politics and capital. “The secret history of the United States,” she argues in one essay, “is that of populism.” While the European Left centered itself in political parties, “such centralization has never existed in the United States. Rather, various movements, loosely allied to each other, have and still form what is known in the U.S.A. as the left, the underground,

² In another essay concerning the Marquis de Sade, Acker writes, “A woman who lives in a patriarchal society can have power, control, and pleasure only when she is hypocritical and deceitful” (Acker, “Reading the Lack,” Box 19, Folder 14).

alternative society. Decentralization at its best and worst. The real American ‘melting-pot.’” Still, some always melt better than others. “On the left, and on the right, and in the middle and everywhere, men have used women’s sexualities and sexual needs and desires in order to control women,” facilitated by “attributes such as class and money” (Acker, “Coxey,” Box 22, Folder 29).

It is, to be sure, class and money that control women and their bodies in the early pages of *Pussy*. Eventually, however, the women set the cathouse on fire, which spreads throughout the city. After the city has been burned to rubble, the flames move to the forest. “Turning trees and air into black smoke, the fire touched the doves in their flight, and the vultures, and threw them, as they lacked breath, against the sun. Fire ate at the feet of the animals, who were racing, nostrils as wide open as mouths stuffed with living coals” (44). The “lions, serpents, pigs, even vultures, all chased by heat and smoke, passed and were passed by each other” (45). There may be fake plastic trees standing between civilization and nature, between the human and nonhuman worlds, but they are no firewall for the consequences of human behavior seeping into animal habitats. Whereas gendered revolution in earlier Acker novels is facilitated by animals in the form of either embodiment or identification, here the animals become collateral damage, demonstrating how patriarchal dominion has infused itself with human dominion. When the human powerful make decisions, or those dispossessed attempt to counter them, animals will inevitably feel the effects.

After the fire, O finds herself in a room with a witch, undergoing a ceremony that would allow her to access “the other world” (45). She receives from the witch an envelope filled with plastic dolls, each with “insects in their mouths, under their chins, and inside their palms. The most horrible possible insects, such as scorpions. They had something to do with sex, but O

didn't understand what" (46). Again the intersection of human power and animal presence, this time with scorpions and other creatures anathema to Acker's comfort. Whereas moving beyond human civilization in, say, *Blood and Guts in High School*, involved an act of becoming-animal, being shepherded away with the aid of birds, in *Pussy* that moving beyond requires confronting less palatable animals, those considered dangerous or ugly. That the insects are bound up in human representations, dolls, only exacerbates Acker's argument for a complicated and problematic interdependence on human spaces attempting to wall themselves off from animal spaces and the animals themselves who don't recognize those constructed boundaries. Shifting that trajectory—interpreting animals as vehicles of transcendence but positioning them in an adversarial relationship to the would-be transcender—demonstrates the residue left over from her more dystopian works.

That blend of human-animal positioning continues throughout *Pussy*. Standing near a lake, O and her friend Ange see “the gulls, and beyond the birds, where there might be other seas whose roads led to treasure” (53). Just as in *Blood and Guts*, birds prompt a magical journey, but Ange follows the revelation by telling O a story wherein a demon turns itself into a poisonous snake. “Demons, being without any gender, can become whoever and whatever they want” (55). The animal presence vacillates in a world that has become more connected, where the lines between worlds on both sides of the fake plastic trees intersect in new ways. Not only does the cathouse fire help erode the barriers between them, it forces the human characters to reckon with the reality that, despite the metaphors and caricatures, one unified animality on the other side of humanity simply doesn't exist. Not only are humans animals themselves, but birds and snakes are fundamentally different from each other, their only real unifying element coming from human categorizations of them as not-human and their ability to exist beyond the Lacanian

Symbolic Order that governs human behavior. O's association of scorpions and snakes with danger reifies tropes often used to denigrate those species, but it is also a reasonable fear not required of a human when staring at gulls on the banks of a lake. Acker thus problematizes the animal by showing that it doesn't exist. Animals, among them humans, live in an interconnected world wherein the actions of one individual or one species can affect the lives of others, but while the boundary between snakes and birds is not constructed with artificial human projections and internalized hierarchical bigotries, a real, substantive biological boundary between them does exist, one just as powerful as that dividing humans from birds and humans from snakes. "The animal," then, is one of those human constructions, itself a part of the Symbolic Order created by humans. In her late works, Acker pulls apart the final, most enduring construction of animality and lays it bare, separating animals from the animal, targeting both their divergent relationships with humanity and their individual selfhoods to ultimately create a more holistic understanding of the limits of categorization. In the process, she fully fleshes out her career-long argument for individualism—of all animals, human and nonhuman alike—as the core arbiter of free thought and free expression.

As Patricia MacCormack has explained in a critique of Deleuze and Guattari, their becoming-animal formulation stays "with the very vague word 'animal' because they mean nothing more than no-longer-human," leaving everyone else with "the animal, which animal, what animal, what is an animal?" In the end, "an animal is something that flees from the human because it knows it will be used or abused. It has no other definition. The human imposes. The animal proposes" (84). Everyone other than humans are reduced to caricature. The bird's retreat from the human is to fly, the scorpion's to sting, but both acts are fleeings from use or abuse. Acker's late work is a final effort at liberation, one that breaks the hold of caricature, a

recognition that in the interconnected dispossessions of capital, gender, and species, the only meaningful counter to one is a meaningful counter to all, and a meaningful counter to species dispossession is to acknowledge the multiple species that exist within that rubric. It is true that liberation for human women looks different than liberation for animals, but liberation for birds looks different than liberation for scorpions, too. If her previous work lamented the death of identity, her final effort is to rebuild a capacious working conception of identity that includes the myriad individuals who have populated her fiction. The bifurcated framing of human and animal no longer holds in this new world; the individual desires of all animals take precedence even while acknowledging the interconnected relationships among all species and all individuals within those species.

And so, in the burned out city in which Ange and O find themselves, they “met only nonhumans who, like them, were on their hands and knees” (61). The interconnection of individuals also ensures a shared vulnerability, one that, on large scales, can only be the result of human actions. The wealthy and powerful are not enacting a fleeing in their behavior; they are enacting an imposition, one felt by vulnerable humans and all animals, birds and scorpions alike, who have far more in common with one another than those vulnerable humans will ever have with the wealthy and powerful. When the two encounter a thick fog, it “gave them the sensation that they had arrived at the end of the world. There were only fish and birds, none of whom could be seen or heard and so were only sensed” (65). The differences between fish, birds, and humans are legion, but the three species exist together at the end of the world, an interconnection unseen because of the fog but acknowledged as part of the larger environmental grouping of individuals that comprise an ecosystem.

Later, Acker's narrator walks through "this forgotten city" (77) with another of her girlfriends when she sees that "a little cat was prancing ahead of us over the light gray concrete. She darted between my legs, raced around behind me, leapt ahead of me. Until she could no longer be seen" (78-79). The narrator calls out, "Pussy," and the cat returns, running through the tangle of legs. "She extended one of her paws. As if she was going to bat. It was the only way that she could touch me. She was just like me" (79). Here is an intimate form of individual identity, one that provides comfort among the rubble. Two separate beings, two separate species; and yet "she was just like me." The cat then tells her, "I'll never leave you," a further declaration of comfort. "As if I had been instructed in a more secret language, I then understood that, according to her nature, she goes wherever she wants whenever and at whatever speed, often disappears for days, and that if I welcome this, she'll never abandon me" (79). Fitting the ahuman critique, becoming-animal is no longer the escape. The narrator instead embodies the attitude of the individual animal rather than the animal category itself; in return she takes on a cat-like freedom and the cat agrees to stay with her as a companion through her adventures. "I liked this," she says. "This was how I got my name" (79). Pussy, then, develops her character in an explicit rejection of earlier acts of becoming embodied by Acker characters while still accruing similar benefits from relation to animals. The role of animals remains just as potent, even as the animal disappears.

But for every Acker protagonist who sees value in animals, whatever the relationship, the inherent power formations of humanity ensure that many more will be cruel to them. In one episode, she describes a boy sitting on a snake (97). "Humans are cruel," the protagonist learns early in life. As a child, she was sexually interested in the boy, but his cruelty to animals extended to her, as well. "A human who sexually desires another human automatically loses

power over the desired one” (99). Desire does not enact a becoming, but it places one in the position of animal in the human social hierarchy, creating a vulnerability familiar to all not wealthy, male, human, or a combination of the three. Eventually, the boy sets her on fire. “She turned into a mare so she could reach the nearest body of water as quickly as possible. Smoke flew out of her black nostrils as she raced through the unbearable sands” (100). This time she enacts a different kind of becoming, prompted by an immediate need, and one tethered to a specific animal rather than Deleuze and Guattari’s broad categorization of “animal.” Other than speed and black nostrils, there is no discernible form of embodiment.

Still, it is a becoming, a reversion to an earlier version of Acker, *Pussy* taking on the role of a latter-day Janey Smith. Before setting out on the pirate adventure that will dominate much of the novel, she again takes on the mantle of an animal, this time a canine. “Dead dog,” she calls herself. “You’re stupid because you gnaw at, and then throw away, everyone whom you most love. You’re dead and you’ve got to live. It’s living dogs who can search for treasure” (107). Again, however, “dog” is less an animal taken on and more a placeholder for her sense of self. She shares no traits with the dog, as dead dogs don’t gnaw at anything, and living ones don’t throw away those whom they love. These “becomings,” then, are not *Blood and Guts* becomings, nor are they blood and guts becomings; instead, fitting Acker’s later themes, they are associations of animal traits with human enactments, just as she does earlier with snakes and scorpions. Hers are associative gestures in *Pussy*, not incorporationist embodiments.

As if to emphasize the point, Acker next tells a story of “the girl who looked like me” who visits a graveyard with her boyfriend. She sees there a baby rat who comes to her and sits on her lap. “It held up its front paws, drew her face into its. Its lips, softer than it was possible for flesh to be, wanted to drink her, for she was a pool of water to the baby.” The girl picks up the

rat, “kissed, suckled it until all loneliness was gone.” Her care for the baby rat stops her pain, and “after she had stopped being hurt, she was able to make distinctions.” She realizes that “the rat was her lover. So she laughed and said, ‘Boys are rats.’ Then, she and the boy held hands and were happy” (109-110). What the girl who looks like Acker originally sees is a baby rat, one who provides the same kind of comfort that animals provide throughout her work. But when that comfort comes, she is able “to make distinctions.” She is able to see not that her boyfriend has become-rat, but that she has projected her boyfriend onto the rat. She realizes that care for the boy is what gives her comfort, so she laughs. Makes a joke. Holds hands not with a rat, but with the boy. With the death of the animal, embodiment turns to association.

When the girl finally becomes a pirate, she notes that “only the woman is doing the cooking because the man’s sexist. Since she’s a pirate, she won’t have anything to do with humans: either she’s cooking for animals or she’s cooking up an animal. One is the same as the other” (112). The animal’s dispossession and death, in this case, is no longer intertwined with the dispossession of patriarchal control; it simply serves as a demonstration of it. When the girl looks at a page from her first school diary, she reads a brief poem:

school is a dairy

because all headmistresses are cows (113)

The animal’s dispossession and sexual exploitation, in this case, is no longer intertwined with the dispossession of hierarchical human control; it simply serves as a semiotic representation of it. Such is not to say that Acker stopped caring about animals, that her concern for species dispossession dissipated in the final years of her life. The metaphors stand instead as exemplars of her new critique of animal categorization, demonstrating them as part of the range of human cultural constructions that maintain the Lacanian Symbolic Order. In another instance from her

school days, the headmistress tells the girl and her mother that good behavior will allow her “to kill two birds with one stone.” When the two adults move to the corner to speak privately, the girl notes that “to me, both of them were huge and birds” (117). The bird-killing metaphor for good behavior gives way to a new bird-killing metaphor for deviant behavior, but in neither of them are birds themselves actually present or emphasized. They hide in plain sight, the metaphors stealing their meaning as they are marshaled as symbols of expendability rather than, as previously, agents of liberation.

The consequences for actual animals in such meaning-making are real. “I used to pull crabs’ legs off their bodies,” she says. “Yellow blood gushed out of the holes I made there. In the nightmare that was the first dream that I ever had, these crabs came for me. Crabs of all possible sizes crawled closer and closer as their claws, which were becoming larger, opened more and more widely so that I could know that they were about to murder me” (127). The death of the symbolic animal leads to the death of actual animals; when the meaning of animals hides in plain sight in human language, their meaning is diminished in the real world. Pulling the legs off of crabs becomes the physical extension of a language game, though something in Acker’s young narrator knows that this linguistic and physical disregard is wrong. She has yet to emerge from the clutches of the Symbolic Order, but her nightmares belie an underlying disquiet at the simultaneous physical cruelty and social acceptability of her behavior. The crabs come to her for reciprocity, to take a life for a life. If the naming of animals, their visibility, creates a human permission structure for killing them, the crabs in the narrator’s nightmare arrive to name, to see her, thereby creating her own vulnerability. The nightmare, then, creates an awareness that brings such realizations into the waking world. When the girl enters the school restroom, “baby lobsters, blobsters, in a row were leaning against one of its outer walls. They were miniatures of

the dragons who lived in the oceans that lapped the edges of my bed every night, monsters who were ready to devour me as soon as I moved away from my bed” (129). Guilt over her own role in dispossession and death does not stop at the water’s edge of dreams. She finds its reflection in actual animals that live near her school, reminding her of the lives she has taken.

Her escape from such horrors comes from piracy, from leaving the known world behind and taking to the high seas. Her fellow pirates have names like Pussycat and Bad Dog. Bad Dog describes “a big furry animal” sniffing at her body every night, “usually her private parts,” which causes so much pleasure that “she lost consciousness” (133). Here there is a place for the human-animal relationship to flourish. “The living world had been left to the animals: in the sea, a young seal dove under, leaping upward, a half-circle, fell down again.” An older seal soon joins her, the two remaining together “while light withdrew from the rest of the world” (142). It is a scene contrasted with the “plague-ridden countryside where there’s nothing but a bunch of corpses who’re being pecked to death and vultures who’re the peckers” (144). In this new world, Acker has given up a liberation that comes by way of animal becoming; instead the liberation comes from traveling away from land, from the human world, and finding new animal relationships.

Because the old animal relationships, those emphasized in Acker’s earlier work, are dying along with her. In one scene, Acker has a dream wherein Pussycat, her alter ego, comes to her as a corpse. “There’s no one who gives a shit about me dead,” Pussycat tells her, surely reflecting the author’s own fears about the possibility that her cancer would ultimately kill her. “Is there anyone scaring away all the demons, ghouls, flesh-eating birds, and poisonous snakes who are living in my grave and resting on top of me?” (151) There is not. “This is what happens to those who have loved” (152). When death comes, it will take with it Acker, but also her

demons and all the animals she conjured in her fiction along the way. Any liberatory act, then, will be an escape to new conceptions of animality, new framings—in this case on the high seas—that leave behind the birds and snakes of the 1970s and 1980s who were the embodied manifestations of an earlier Acker’s becomings. Confronting mortality is a journey into the unknown, one wherein a veil drops behind the entrant, blurring the vision of earlier bird-selves and snake-selves, turning the image of them poisonous.

The dream-Pussycat-as-corpse tells Acker about a boy who was “so upset that there were humans and that humans were having babies that he didn’t know what to do” with his anger. “So he gave it away to a dead horse. She was sitting in water.” That dead horse, flush with the boy’s anger, “became the entrance to hell. There in the southernmost part of the world, flames began to shoot out of her mouth.” The dead Pussycat walks through the dead horse’s flaming mouth and travels to hell, and when she comes upon one of the corpses there, she asks why there is evil in the world. “There was neither good nor evil until humans were born,” the corpse tells her, “until creation began, until humans started having babies” (155). The horse in the story, much like the birds and snakes of Pussycat’s grave, is not an agentive force, does not serve as a manifestation of willed evil. Birds eat flesh, many snakes are poisonous; dead horses in water do not magnetically draw the anger of frustrated boys. And whereas living birds and snakes can exist as agents, can act with intent to serve their own interests—as could, for example, living horses—dead horses cannot. The horse’s mouth as a portal to hell, then, is not a continuation of the dystopian pessimism of *In Memoriam to Identity* or *Empire of the Senseless*. The horse’s mouth serves the same function in the Pussycat-corpse dream as the horse’s mouth serves in the common idiom used regularly in American English: it is a vehicle of information. It is through that fiery mouth that Pussycat, and Acker by way of Pussycat, learn that humans themselves are

the root of evil in the world. She hears it, as it were, straight from the horse's mouth. The birth of humans, and the continued rebirth of humans through procreation, generate evil as experienced by humans. Whether flesh-eating birds, poisonous snakes, or dead horses serve in human minds as signposts of that evil or not, their presence is not part of any causal chain. The links in that chain are every new generation of humans who serve as evil's agent. The Pussycat-corpse stops short of claiming that all humans themselves are evil, or that they intend evil in the act of procreation, but she is clear that, if nothing else, humans are the mechanism by which evil exists and thrives. When birds eat, horses run, and snakes poison, they are practicing the biological functions for which they have evolved. That humans foment evil, and that the presentation of that reality exists alongside such evolutionary animal practice, leads to the conclusion that evil is little more than the human biological legacy. The charity in such a formulation is that humans can't help it, that the Nietzschean will to power is less an actual act of will than the playing out of a biological imperative; the parsimony on the other side is that the human relationship with evil cannot be stopped, that it is inevitable, leaving those hoping to escape it no choice but to take to the pirate ship in search of animals with less destructive evolutionary gifts.

Even that, however, won't totally work as a means of evasion, either of humans or of the Ackerian past relationship with animals. When the narrator sits by a pool of water sitting within a mountain, "flies, roaches, roaches lie everywhere; the flies want to be my skin, but I tell them, 'Go away'" (170). But soon she leaves and finds a new town, one that also has a pool of water at its center. This place, however, "seems to work," largely because "birds, not humans, live here." She sees a white and black mallard standing stoically and staring in opposite directions. "A spotted bird moves past the two who don't move," and their presence provides Acker with comfort (171). In quick succession, she is present at two pools of water surrounded by flying

animals. In the first, she rejects the flies; in the second, she welcomes the birds. Despite her attempts to flee, she seems at first glance to fall back into the same patterns of her previous work. The insects are not valued, the birds are; one species excites her emotions, the other stays them. But the difference in flies and birds, for this version of late Kathy Acker, is not in their biological makeup, their relative brain function, or even their appearance. Flies have brief lifespans that usually last no more than two days. Their deaths typically occur within a relatively short radius of where they were born. Birds, meanwhile, cover long distances, they live longer lives; they serve the narrator as symbols of escape, of freedom, in a way that flies never could. The flies of *Pussy, King of the Pirates* aren't auguring any kind of grotesquery, nor are they haunting her dreams as portents of danger or malaise. Here, they simply aren't the vehicles that birds can be. Her judgments at the end of her life are rooted in assumptions about range of motion, the ability to provide freedom, the capacity to fly away. Birds can, flies can't. Her neo-Darwinian preferences serve what she feels at the end of her life to be her own evolutionary needs.

Those needs, however, still revolve, at least in part, around finding new animals with which to identify. She turns to Bad Dog, one of her fellow pirates, who goes shopping for "what she wanted the most." When she finds it, she is resolute. "I'm going to buy that turtle," she says, referring to a poorly cared-for animal (193). The purchase, then, is an act of rescue, and Bad Dog, so enamored with the turtle, sings a song to it.

Imagination arises
when there's no more reason
so the mind can make
a kingdom.

Halcyons will cease to prey on fish,
poisonous leaves become our food
all sailors be without remorse,
for your lips have been stained in blood (193).

Piratical escape is an escape from a cloistered reason that imposes itself from above, an arbitrary baseline set by the powerful to be marshaled against the powerless. As Foucault explains of eighteenth-century standards of reason and the assumed deviation of madness, the latter became “a thing to be observed, no longer the monster within, but an animal moved by strange mechanisms” (“The Insane” 145). It “took its face from the mask of the beast” (“The Insane” 147). Even the confinement mechanisms of asylums mirrored the animal cages of menageries. “The free animality of madness” irrevocably kept the patient from proper humanity, but those diagnosed could at least, like domestic animals, “be tamed” (“The Insane” 149). Acker plays on both those original imposed standards and Foucault’s interpretation of them. In her vision, imagination itself is an act of piracy, the creation of a fortress, a kingdom, that protects the mind from the tyranny of reason and of those who set the boundaries of its existence. In the kingdom of Bad Dog’s imagination, halcyon kingfisher birds no longer eat fish, nor do humans, who turn instead to poisonous leaves. It is a kingdom without animal death, where humans, sailors, choose to eat poisonous plants rather than take the lives of animals. The blood that stains their lips comes from the poison they have chosen rather than the animals they have killed. Hers is an ecological vision that stems directly from animal rescue, from the search for new animals and new animal identity that serves as its own form of sailing away from the prison of reason imposed by those humans in power.

As if to feel the new freedom provided her by the turtle, Bad Dog lies down on a bed in the store, then sees “her turtle shoot across the top of the room,” extending its tongue across the room, where it then “fastened itself, the disc near the tip of the tongue, which was white paste rather than mucous membrane, onto its prey.” Its prey, in this case, is the room’s opposite wall; animals are still protected in this particular vision, and Bad Dog is pleased. “Obviously I made the correct purchase,” she says (193). A television then appears, wherein she sees the turtle on the screen, but “the turtle was like a white horse, only stranger” (193-194). A man then appears on the screen, speaking about the environment; over the course of his speech, he becomes a revolutionary. “Environment terrorism erupted on TV,” and Bad Dog “especially liked this guy now that he was a white or an Hispanic incendiary” (194). The ecological vision stemming from animal rescue turns into a broader revolutionary environmentalism pushing back against more physically destructive outcomes of the impositions of human powerbrokers.

And ultimately it circles back to animal rescue. Bad Dog “began to think about what was stranger than horse or horse all the time because that’s what you do when you fall in love. Because she loved horse so much, she knew exactly what it was thinking: it wanted to go outside so it could eat. It was hungry as Bad Dog. Chomp, chomp.” Bad Dog understands that “horse wants to trot, gallop.” She is frustrated that she should have considered the horse’s needs sooner, that she should have purchased oats when buying the turtle, “because oats are what horsies eat. Should I let horse go outside by himself? It’s dangerous in the outside and horse has no protection. Am I hurting horse even worse by shutting him in here with me?” (194) Hers are the questions posed by all involved in animal rescue, by all pushing back against the standard of flexible personhood that dominates human thinking about domesticated animals. Domesticated care can benefit nonhuman animals; it also keeps them in a state of quasi-slavery, though one

enacted for their own health and safety. Acker's, however, is a narrative of freedom, and Bad Dog eventually decides to let the horse go, choosing the grant of independence over the guarantee of safety that comes attendant with fewer choices and a limited range of motion. To choose anything else would place Bad Dog in the position of human powerbrokers who use the same kinds of safety justifications to limit the range of human motion and imagination in the name of safety and reason. Pirates always choose freedom over control.

Pirates, after all, "came from the moment when animals became holy" (195). The pirate, for Acker, is "the revolutionary subject of an entirely economic social world," wherein "subjective desire is freed from any limit but the economic, and all interpersonal relations become market relations" (Clune 487). For Georgina Colby, "the pirate girls represent all that the male has suppressed in the female and all that a reactionary society fears in female sexual corporality," either the animal within them or that deemed animalistic by human (masculine) social norms (12).

Bad Dog describes a world "prior to all birth," wherein everything is wildness, with a god who is wild. But then human birth begins, governed by the Lord of Genealogy. But the Wild God would take revenge, setting everything on fire in response. The Lord of Genealogy then bargains with the Wild God, begging not to be set on fire. The Wild God responds that "there would still be birth and death in this world, that there would still be this world, only if the Lord of Genealogy made him Lord of the Animals." A desperate Lord of Genealogy agrees. "That's why there are pirates," Bad Dog concludes (195). The culmination of Bad Dog's encounter with animals further ties the freedom of piracy to the freedom of animality; those who refuse to be bound by the categorical imperatives of safety and reason are animalistic, but theirs is an animalism that they proudly claim, that they hold up as a mirror to reflect the problems of human

civilization. Their animality is not imposed upon them by a system set to imprison them or to define them out of antiquated, artificial social standards. Pirates turn Foucault's power structure on its head. Whereas in the theorist's eighteenth century, the liberated mind often resulted in a confined human body, in Acker's twentieth century, the liberated mind is facilitated only by a liberated human body, one that embraces animality as a curative against the strictures of confinement.

It is after this scene that Acker begins referring to Artaud as Our Toad, a seemingly silly homophone pun that nonetheless reinforces the kind of liberated animality she seeks as a pirate. "It must be understood that all intelligence is only contingent, that one can lose it," Our Toad says, in a translation of a stanza of his poem *The Nerve Meter*, "not as a lunatic who's dead (that's what I'm becoming), but as a living person who, at the same time, feels intelligence working in himself" (198). Originally published in 1925, Artaud's poem prefigures Foucault's interpretation of animal madness and liberation (Artaud 80-81); Acker's translation, its placement after Bad Dog's story, and her animal naming of the poet all reify the point that the death of "the animal" need not force anyone to succumb to the scarlet letters attached to the socially constructed animality of madness. That madness is instead a liberated intelligence. Whereas early in the novel, Acker bifurcates the animal and the animals, she now bifurcates the animal and animality as presented in those bound for the asylum. If "the animal" is a structure created and maintained by the powerful, so too is the animality of the lunatic; just as the former can be reconciled by a vision of the individuality of animals themselves, the latter can be reconciled by a confidence in the contingency of intelligence and the liberatory function such understandings of contingency can create. Animality—against the dictates of Foucaultian power formations—resides not in human lunacy, but in the liberation that comes with the recognitions

of contingent intelligence that mark the recognizer as a lunatic. For Acker, animality is the cure rather than the diagnosis.

She backs up that analysis with the story of Artaud's (*Our Toad's*) experience of electroshock therapy, and the development of the practice in 1938 after Italian physician Ugo Cerletti visited a slaughterhouse and witnessed pigs being administered electroshock prior to being killed; he reasoned that the shock "was rendering them more willing to die" and saw a practical use for human mental patients (200). Several years later, in 1944, Artaud received similar shocks in his own asylum confinement. That the procedure itself stemmed from the abuse of animals in an effort to kill them only reinforces for Acker the totalizing effect of the powerful's imposition of animality, of the animal, on human individuals that deviate from social norms. It is only by reclaiming animality as liberatory intelligence that the spell of such impositions can be broken. Like undoing "the animal" in favor of the animals, reclaiming the animality of social deviance as a value added rather than a reason for abuse, as a method of rendering human patients more willing to die, is a vital part of the piratical project.

It is a project, however, like all of Acker's projects, that is decidedly gendered, as well. Liberatory animality manifests differently for her female characters than it does for *Our Toad* and others. *Pussy* tells a story of *Slut Girl*, who found her greatest peace at night, lying for hours in water, surrounded by "owls hiding their eyes behind their own feathers" and "snakes in search of rats who were no longer stuffed" (203). She makes it clear that *Slut Girl* cares little for cleanliness; hers is not a bathing project. It is instead a reversion to a time when "everything was wildness" and the "Wild God" became "Lord of the Animals" (195). It is a social deviance less overt, less public than that of Artaud (*Our Toad*), but it is a gendered social deviance nonetheless, one that facilitates escape from the cloister of cultural constructions and the power

hierarchies they instigate, to lay in the comfort of wildness with the owls, the snakes, and the rats, not to become-animal, but to be with the animals, those who, unlike Cerletti's pigs, have the range of motion to exist outside of human domination. The inherent claim here is that all animals, be they owls, snakes, rats, or those humans dispossessed by various forms of powerlessness, become a version of Cerletti's pigs when forced into the constructed places conditioned by structures of hierarchical power. Soaking in nature, finding proximity to that animality, becomes in that formulation a transgressive act, one that reclaims some measure of autonomy for human women denied it in the crush of civilization.

As if to emphasize the consequences for the death of the animal and her turn from becoming, Acker follows that story with a demon cutting off the head of the son of Slut Girl and her boyfriend, Punk Boy. In response, Punk Boy "walked up to the first sentient being whom he caught sight of and cut off the head." That head is from an elephant, and Punk Boy picks it up and "placed it on his son's red neck" (204). He and Slut Girl name their new son Ganesh. Not only are the consequences of the act the literal death of an animal, but they are also a farcical *reductio ad absurdum* of the Deleuzian becoming-animal, as the pair slice off the head of an elephant and attach it to their decapitated human son. Acker then immediately follows the gory episode with a section titled "The Rules of Piracy," wherein she elaborates on the consequences of the relationship between animal (elephant) and human (pirate). The purpose of piracy, she argues, is to "find that place out of which we come," a purpose symbolized by the elephant, as "gaja," the Sanskrit word for "elephant," is a combination of words meaning "goal" ("ga") and "origin" ("ja") (204). Furthermore, the "Identity of All Those Who Undertake the Acts or Infiltrations of Piracy" is that of "Half-human half-beast," the substantive meaning of the preceding gruesome act of elephant murder (205). Thereby any pirate is of necessity part

elephant. Pirates have “crooked” methods, elephants have “crooked” trunks; “all pirates dream animals” (205). The reasoning is, to be sure, hardly reasonable, but Acker has already established her skepticism of human reason and the power sources who impose it. Significantly, though, and unlike scenes one might find in, say, *Blood and Guts*, the absurdity here is such that it upends the becoming belief that early Acker displays, and it comes attendant with its own imposition of power, the willful killing of an elephant who has neither interest in or frame of reference for human piracy. The animal in these becomings has become a prop; the word elephant may mean “the origin and the goal” in Sanskrit (204), but the hamfisted effort of Punk Boy eliminates any origin or goal for the elephant, killed for the caprice of human conceptions of becoming.

Acker closes her “Rules of Piracy” with a banner that includes a picture of a red-eyed rat above the slogan “Rat takes all” (207). She argues that the Sanskrit word for “mouse” or “rat” is “musa,” a word with the root “mus,” meaning “to steal” (208). “Everything,” she argues, sits inside the rat’s belly. “Whenever anyone in the world thinks she’s feeling pleasure, it’s Ratski who’s really feeling this pleasure because Ratski steals everything and anything.” The rat, Ratski, “lives inside the interstices of the world,” she claims, “and so the reign of girl piracy began” (208). Again she reduces becoming to semantics; or, perhaps, she begins with semantics then reverses the becoming role, as the rat is able to steal pleasure away from anyone who thinks she feels it, all while hiding away from the watchful eyes of humans. Again Acker turns her former visions of liberatory animism to farce; rats are caricatured by humans as being thieves who hide in unreachable places, so girl pirates will adopt the caricature for themselves to justify their own theft. In this more jaded version of animalized gender politics, women aren’t the embodiment of animals in contradistinction to the political powers of human civilization. They are the embodiment of tropes created by the same political powers that enforce gender norms in

society. The image of the rat manages to keep its head, but it is just as dead as the elephant who came before it.

In the opening pages of the novel's second and final part, "In the Days of the Pirates," Acker includes a picture of four rats emerging from a broken egg (212), and another of a dog with a double tail (213); she calls again upon rats to signpost poverty and desecration (214-215) and features a pub owner who refers to herself as an "old female dog" (216). Rats and dogs continue to litter the section's pages (220-221), the two eventually coming together in the person of Bad Dog, the pirate, who begins eating rats.³ "There was something in Bad Dog that was as emotionless, or nonhuman, as mean cold deceptive and smart, as a rat" (222). But she is also still a dog, one who drinks and drinks, becoming belligerent and "vile." Eventually, "none of us minded when, one dark night, she disappeared" (223). It is after Bad Dog's absence that Acker's protagonist "knew that I didn't belong in the human world" (225). After an involved break with her former relationship with animals, a reinterpretation of the meaning of animality and its role in human liberation, Acker essentially lays out a reminder of what exactly she is breaking from.

Or, perhaps, she is wrestling with conflicted feelings about the break. She soon finds herself in China, dating an alcoholic "rat-killer" (229). He takes her to "a Chinese shooting gallery where they shot rats," and she agrees to participate. But she soon "began being punished for rat-killing." Back in her room, she finds a mouse who begins playing with her. Whereas the former Acker would read an idealized freedom in the mouse's play and accept her as a playmate, here, at the end of her life, she covers the mouse with a cloth. "Tiny gray popped out between my

³ It is clear that rats were on Acker's mind regularly during her writing of *Pussy*. "We're rats walking tightropes we never thought existed," she told McKenzie Wark. "We have the relationships of too many rats in a cage. No, rats who are hungry. No, rats who don't have maps that work. Looking for maps that work" (Acker and Wark 48).

fingers. But my boyfriend was helping me. I knew this really was a rat, so I put a knife right through its body.” Whatever reclamation efforts she attempts in aid of finding again the early Acker, it is clear that the early Acker is gone. “Then I felt guilty, and guilt made me miserable” (230). The guilt and misery she feels as punishment, however, is nothing compared to the punishment experienced by the rats at the shooting range or the mouse in her room. The deaths of additional animals, this time at the hands of Acker’s avatar herself, present a kind of finality, a closing of the door on her halting attempts to find who she was in the 1970s and 1980s. She is now acting out her own species-level power relationships at the behest of a boyfriend. The gender and species dispossessions remain, but their framing changes the dynamics of those dispossessions, lays bare their fundamental inequality. The human feels guilty, the mouse will never feel again. She is no longer triangulating the power dynamics of capital, gender, and species; she is instead creating her own hierarchical chain of being, a system wherein everyone loses, but animals lose the most.

Another rat dies soon afterwards, poisoned by mescal (232), and even as he does a group of insects fly around the would-be pirates. “The thin wings and protruding eyeballs, hovering still in our minds, diseased whatever they touched there” (232). There are birds, as well, whose “beaks were as sharp as razors” (233). Acker then sees snakes. “I wanted to talk to the snakes,” she says, “but then I saw a marsh,” one that she is unable to move beyond. In not being able to cross, as it were, a rubicon has been crossed. The death of the animal has turned against the animals themselves. “Nature was metamorphosing me,” she admits (234). When she sees another bird, she can’t tell whether it is a mallard or a duck because “I don’t know what the difference is” (234). Then gulls begin to honk. “Through their language, which I didn’t understand, I heard, for the first time since I had been alone, what was human” (235). The birds that had formerly been a

conduit to take her away from the human are now unrecognizable; they bring her, in fact, toward the human.

In the novel's next section, Acker claims to descend from Hecate, who had the three heads of "lion, horse, and dog" (237), but through the imposition of the powerful, "I or my family was reduced to ordinary dog" (238). The declension in her own family down to an "ordinary dog" is a mirror of the declension in Acker's own assumptions about the possibilities that animals might provide her, a slide down her own bell curve. Soon after that description, for example, she is back with the pirates on their ship, where "water was soaking through everything, water polluted by slime and dead fish heads, fish mouths open as if treasures could be found within" (240). Pussycat "munched on a dead fish"; Mad Dog, another of the pirates, "just devoured a rat that wasn't yet dead" (241). The presence of animals is signposting disaster, but it also foregrounds the lives of humans with the deaths of so many nonhumans. Humans live, they move through a literal sea of dead animals, they kill those animals indiscriminately. The line between human animal and nonhuman animal that Acker's earlier work had done so much to erase has returned, seemingly immutable in its heft and weight, ensuring that any acknowledgement of human animality, much less acts of becoming, are now beyond possibility.

Pussy, for example, describes a dream she has about cats, animals once an agent of becoming, ones with whom Acker so identifies that they lent their name to the character. But in her dream, Pussy befriends a cat who belongs to two of her friends. She travels to a symposium, wherein she is told to "improvise on the subject of cats." Pussy stalls, not knowing what to say. When she does walk to the podium, it begins to grow as she shrinks. She eventually manages to carry the podium away, but she then sees the audience moving backward. "I began to talk to them by describing C's pussy. I thought I was making sense, but they kept on laughing and

talking among themselves” (244). Even the animals with whom Acker is close begin to disappear, to become untranslatable. Her repetition of animal stories and her emphasis on sex and human sexual organs intersect, leaving an audience backing away and laughing, making it impossible to “improvise on the subject of cats.” The cats do not die in the same way that the fish and rats die, but Acker’s catness, her ability to identify with cats, dies its own kind of death.

When standing at the edge of a small hill, she then is frightened by “something that looked human,” something that “might be a possum or a giant rat.” Her fear is rooted in not knowing whether the being is “human or animal” (249). In earlier works, that inability to decipher would provoke a concern that the being was human; here, however, after the death of the animal, her concern is that the being isn’t human. When she discovers that the being is, in fact, human, that it is Ange, finally returned, who explains her absence by saying that “I knew that I was a rat, that we were both rats, just like all the pirate girls.” Acker is relieved to see her, “so I held on to her and the world disappeared and there were no more rats” (250). Or, so she would like to believe, that human connection drives the nonhuman animals away.

But try as she might, the animals do not go away. Ange’s hair is now like that of a rat, her eyes have turned from green to red. “If we’re rats,” Ange tells her, “we should act like rats” (252). And they do, the two walking around on hands and knees “through a bunch of nature that was rotten by nature ‘cause nature naturally rots.” Nature, in this post-animal conception, is “a lot more useless than a decayed city” (253). Eventually, they arrive at a rat graveyard. “We thought of all the dead rats. How humans feared them ‘cause humans, above all, fear intelligence.” Humans, “scared out of their minds, gather whatever intelligence they can put their hands on and put it all in a central penitentiary named facts, whereas rats eat everything whether or not they’re hungry. Rats: pleasure rules their world. This is why Ange ‘n me would rather be

rats” (254). Their decision to embody rats is not the result of a positive rat encounter; it is the result of seeing throngs of dead rats, then making assumptions about rat lives based on human tropes. It is a way to move through a useless, rotting nature that was earlier in Acker’s career a place of solace from human civilization. Prefiguring Acker’s final writing project before her death, she tells Ange the story of Orpheus and Eurydice while they are suffering there in nature, the narrator replacing the role of Hades with a Rat King who bargains with a love-besotted Orpheus (255). Animals have become a manifestation of the devil.

As the book comes to a conclusion, there are more dead birds (261), dead crabs (262), dead fish (266), and another dead rat (263). A retelling of another ancient myth, that of Prometheus, emphasizes the vulture who “tore into this naked man’s liver” (274). The death of the animal, then, brings Acker from conceiving animals like birds as liberatory agents to closing with animals like birds tearing into a human liver, from animals as a source of becoming to animals as a source of death, from animals as the metaphorical bulwark against the Lacanian Symbolic Order to animals as the manifestation of the Virgilian God of the Underworld.

After completing *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, Acker began several additional projects that she was never able to fully complete. “Eurydice in the Underworld” features Eurydice clutching a wolf and mimicking a variety of other animals, though we soon learn that the animals are stuffed (7). The story is instead concerned with recovering the human. Orpheus laments that “Being human– / Is too hard” (9). Eurydice finds herself in a hallway devoid “of anything that makes life human” (11), then “a room designed to suck up human life” (13). In the play “Requiem,” Acker returns to more biographical content that emphasizes her own struggle with the cancer that will soon kill her. She includes her mother’s dog in the story, but never as a focus

of the attention; she does repeat that “I like stuffed animals” (185), but actual animals and their potential role as agents of liberation are entirely absent.

As it had to be after the transition of *Pussy*. Acker was dying, and she was taking the animal with her.

CONCLUSION

The Unicorn of Human Hunger

Giorgio Agamben, in his “Identity without the Person,” traces the concept “persona” to Stoic theater, those performing behind masks. “The struggle for recognition is,” he argues, “the struggle for a mask, but this mask coincides with the ‘personality’ that society recognizes in every individual” (46). He acknowledges, in the words of Kate Zambreno, “a gap between the self and personae that Western concepts of identity have obliterated” (xi). The career of Kathy Acker was one in search of that identity beyond what society recognizes. She struggled for recognition in a variety of masks, and many of those masks took on the shape and visage of animals, beings beyond the society she rejected, offering her a personality beyond Western concepts of identity. In taking on such masks, Acker was simultaneously able to wrestle with the species dispossession constituent to all human civilization. “Acker wanted to figure out,” Jason McBride argues, “how to engage a hegemonic, mainstream culture, which she called ‘the jailer,’ and transform its meaning or its relationship to ‘us’—us being the marginalized, the poor, artists” (137). And animals.

“While disappearing from our everyday life, the spectres of animals reappear in arts, theory and visual culture,” argues Oxana Timofeeva. “They become not only ghosts but welcome guests” (xii). Acker welcomed them in a variety of contexts, though their positioning in her work never remained static; Ackerian animals developed from the 1970s to the 1990s by taking on masks of their own, some of them human, some of them ethereal, and others formed from the identity of other animal species. In an essay titled, “Moving Into Wonder,” for example,

Acker tells the origin story of the Minotaur, wherein Crete's King Minos keeps a white bull. Poseidon intended him to sacrifice. The wife of Minos, Pasiphaë, falls in love with the bull, hiding in a wooden cow to allow the white bull to impregnate her. Though the child who results from the coupling is a monster, Acker insists that "monster comes from the Latin word *monstrum* or wonder" (Acker, "Moving into Wonder," Box 19, Folder 16). Though none of Acker's fictional avatars take the same kind of sexual step as does Pasiphaë, the story, and the defense of the act as one creating wonder, demonstrates a different kind of escape from the human, a different kind of becoming with the animal, one that combines the sexual act and the physical being of animals in what serves as a kind of exclamation point on the sentence of so many of her previous arguments.

Those arguments developed over the years in a kind of bell curve of animal argumentation. She began her career by finding liberatory possibility in nonhuman species until she finally reached apotheosis in a becoming-animal, the ultimate weapon in her battle against limiting human power structures. As the curve bent back toward a baseline, Acker began in her later career to question the viability of such embodiments, and animals began to assert themselves more forcefully as agents who have their own interests, beings with value outside of any human gaze. That conflict ultimately redounded to open animal hostility toward human engagement at the end of her career, though she never lost her love and shared identity with other species. In 1996, for example, she writes, "To be beautiful is to be a seashell, so open that all the oceans and the fluids of the earth, of the body, are heard through you." She describes an "openness so open that it turns itself inside-out and makes a snail-shaped labyrinth that leads to the future" (Acker, "Psyche," Box 23, Folder 7). Her connection to animals had been damaged in the last years of her life, but it was by no means gone. At each stage along the curve, she

consistently demonstrated how species dispossession worked with both gender and capital dispossession, triangulating them and their interactions as shaping each other and the broader human society she sought to critique.

“Acker wants to keep open the questions—in both art and life—of what a human is and what forms of life we might potentially create ourselves” (Clare). To do that, Acker engaged what the human is not, submerging her own identity into those of species outside the bounds of human civilization. She took on the animal; she hid herself in the work of other authors; she simultaneously subsumed her role as author in the canonical texts of the human social and the natural world far from either the human or the social. Foucault encourages us to “locate the space left empty by the author’s disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings this disappearance uncovers” (Foucault “What Is an Author?” 209). Acker found those gaps in, on one hand, a combination of plagiarism and social deviance, and on the other, in taking on the animal through proximity, embodiment, and symbol. She disappeared herself, finding the openings that disappearance uncovered in the species she thought to be liberatory agents from the hierarchies that so oppressed her and those she revered.

The Great Chain of Being that served as the larger windmill for her own private Don Quixote had been around in one form another since the ancient Greeks, codified formally in the medieval period, a combination of rationalism and morality that served as a convenient tool of oppression for those higher on the chain toward all of those who were lower. In each iteration of the Great Chain of Being, those humans not wealthy and not men found themselves closer to animals than to their fellow humans. So why not embrace the animality imposed upon them as a rejection of the chain itself? In the short film, *The Blue Tape*, which Acker made with Alan Sondheim, Sondheim reads her words: “Being human is too boring and difficult. Who wants to

be human all the time. I'm sick of being rational and doing things right I'm becoming a cat" (Krauss 103). Acker loved cats, but she wasn't becoming a cat because of personal predilections; her becoming was a protest, a tilt at the windmill of the social systems that animalized her throughout her life.

Of course, she also really did love cats. "I have about a hundred cats living in me and all of them are curious," she told McKenzie Wark in 1995 (Acker and Wark 73). In a sense, her writing project from the 1970s to the 1990s was a steady release of each of those hundred cats onto the pages of her notebooks and typewriter. Those cats came attendant with their own personalities, their own sense of self; they had their own identities, their own willingness to be in proximity to humans, their own hungers. In unleashing their curiosity onto the pages of her novels, Acker developed a conception of the animal that consistently validated nonhuman being while interpreting and reinterpreting that being's use value for human engagement, for her outsized piratical escape from the Great Chain of Being.

Four decades prior to those acts of piracy, Djuna Barnes encapsulated all that Acker would become. "Sometimes one meets a woman who is beast turning human," Barnes writes in *Nightwood*. "Such a person's every moment will reduce to an image of a forgotten experience; a mirage of an eternal wedding cast on the racial memory; as insupportable a joy as would be the vision of an eland coming down an aisle of trees, chapleted with orange blossoms and bridal veil, a hoof raised in the economy of fear, stepping in the trepidation of flesh that will become myth; as the unicorn is neither man nor beast deprived, but human hunger pressing its breast to its prey" (Barnes 41). Such was a distillation before the fact of Acker's artistic career.

Kathy Acker was beast turning human; the unicorn of human hunger, stepping in the trepidation of flesh.

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