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## Nu(de) Narratives

I can't remember what the first Kathy Acker book I read was. I can remember the first one I bought – *Empire of the Senseless*. I had heard about Acker from her foreword of Samuel R Delany's *Triton*. Forewords are usually skipped, but Acker's was bursting with energy, and her prose drove me along. One of the comments in that foreword “Every book is dead until activated by a reader” has lingered with me to this day. I would bring Acker's books to life every time I could via the inter-library loan system, but due to reasons of price or out-of-print-ness my collection wasn't off the ground. When I picked up a used copy of *Empire*, I was delighted, not only for the words Acker had written, but the many, many scribbles and marginalia the work had compelled from previous readers. Acker's works are entertaining and immensely readable, but often bizarre. Techniques like collage, illustrations, and translations are all interpolated into the work with a self-confidence that a reader cannot help but admire. Plato in the *Phaedrus* asks us to think of a text as a body. If we follow that line of thought, the bodies of Acker's texts are tattooed and confident and brave. The strangeness in these very bodies ask the reader to pay attention, to engage themselves in bringing the work to life. This sparked my interest in texts which have

interesting “bodies.” My interest in these texts ultimately resulted in this collection – a collection of texts which use bold and shocking formal conceits to confront ideas we might take for granted. I picked up a few more Acker books, and turned to other authors surrounding the “new-narrative” movement – Robert Gluck and Dodie Bellamy to name a couple. In *Communal Nude*, Gluck describes Frank O’Hara as talking about erotic writing using erotic prose. O’Hara was another author I hopped from library copy to library copy of forever, finally picking up his collected works this year.

Other texts weren’t as immediately related, but came to me via recommendations. That’s another thing about these books. Almost every Acker novel I’ve picked up has been a used one, almost each of which continues the trend of fascinating marginalia. The marginalia is clear evidence of the way in which these books encourage the reader to engage them on new ground, to involve ourselves with the text. These books engage with the “margins” of literature, many of them concerned with rereadings of classic works. Diana Hamilton’s *God was Right* uses an essay about rewatching television to talk about failed essays which ultimately becomes a reconsideration of the author’s own body. The reader being taken along on that journey is asked to make the same move.

The most lasting effect of these books has been their ability to form

communities. John Kinsella talks in the afterword to *I'm very into you* about a kind of "knowing through text" that Acker's work fosters. While collecting (a still-ongoing practice!), I've made friends because of books; I've come to know many of these books through friends. I've brought several poems from books in this collection to discussion group, and once the reflex against "strange" writing is conquered, the talk is always lively. Often, the strangeness of these works asks us to reconsider how we read. The idea that our experience is not universal, that good taste and guided style might be discarded can lead into deeper questions about why we hold onto those habits. Despite the experimental aspects of them seeming obtuse at times, these books open themselves to the reader who is bold enough to respond in kind. (One such reader is the anonymous annotator of that first copy of *Empire* - "We are being marginalized; to write in italics is a punk move!") To read in the margins is often to be asked to contort yourself around blocks of text. But even that contortion can be comfortable when held long enough. In these books, the margins are reactive - the text is a living thing; our reactions in turn reveal who we are - do we challenge the text? Go along with it? If this collection has taught me anything, it is that our own "punk moves", our own marginalia, can be as revealing as the words which are already on the page.

Acker, Kathy, *Don Quixote*, Grove Press: 1986

Acker's *Don Quixote* announces itself as "a dream" and as the novel progresses, it begins to resemble every kind of fantasia. Acker uses her knight to parody not only Cervantes, but a kaleidoscope of other canonical texts. *Quixote* is perhaps the best book to see Acker write about reading, and her irreverence and deep curiosity are indicative of how her own works are to be read.

Acker, Kathy, Wark, McKenzie, *I'm Very into You*. Semiotext(e): 2015

The collected emails between Wark and Acker is the latest addition to my collection, coming as an unexpected Christmas gift – the kind of book I was on the fence about buying for my self but couldn't quite pull the trigger. The candid correspondence sheds light on what makes both authors so compelling.

Acker, Kathy, *Empire of the Senseless*, Grove Press: 1988

The first book of this collection, and what a metaphorical sour-dough starter! On the book itself, I love the archeology of "used" stickers that it's dressed in, which make it feel like a good friend coming out of the airport after a series of layovers

Acker, Kathy, *Blood and Guts in High School*, Grove Press: 1978

The utter madcap delight Acker takes in this text is thrilling. Lurid and ramshackle in the best way, the text begins by flipping the bird and never stops. The second Acker book I picked up for myself.

Barthes, Roland, *S/Z* trans. Richard Miller. Hill and Wang Publishing: 1974

A delightful guide in reading a text which I have kept close ever since I picked it up at a library book sale. The readings of care and curiosity and daringness that Barthes explains here have informed the way I read texts, continually reminding me to enjoy myself.

Bellamy, Dodie, *The Letters of Mina Harker*, Library of America Fiction: 1998  
Initially read as an inter-library loan from this very library, I first read this book over the summer of 2019, a summer in which my own body felt like it was slipping away from me. Bellamy's Mina Harker, now a sort of possessive spirit, makes clear that she is NOT the text, that the text is only her "footprints". Bellamy uses the epistolary, at first to make the reader feel as if they are intruding on a conversation and eventually to make them feel as if they are complicit in something else entirely. As if to reward me for my patience, my eventual find of this copy at a used bookstore ultimately turned up a signed copy for cheap.

Bidart, Frank, *Half-Light*: FSG, 2016

*Half-Life* is a new and collected anthology of Bidart's work from 1977's *The Book of the Body* until now. Bidart plays with text-as-form in a way that is always a little unsettling, but his relevance to this collection comes from the persona poems, in which he plays with the reader's sense of body. Reading Bidart, you may walk a mile in someone else's shoes before realizing that's what you were doing all along – and you might be surprised where you end up.

Brown, Brandon, *The Poems of Gaius Valerius Catullus*, Krupskaya: 2011

I was led to Brandon Brown after reading *Don Quixote*. Acker's work incorporates inventive translations of Catullus and research led me to note that Brown was doing a similar thing. Brown's translations are far from literal. He rewrites poems as conversations, labels exegesis as translations, even placing a *Gossip Girl* screen cap for one poem. The reader is asked to reconsider what exactly a "translation" is, and how they are to read it. A book which I have had a marvelous time discussing with others.

Charles, Jos. *feeld*, Milkweed editions: 2017

Charles' poems are meant to be navigated carefully, a tendency which is manifest in the very title. One might see it as "feeled", a child's idea of the past tense of "feel". Reading it homophonically, however, means you are looking at a "field." Words are made strange and wondrous by Charles' use of olde english conventions throughout, leading to a delightful experience as a reader.

Chevalier, Faye, *futr.txt*, Empty {} Set Press: 2018

The other twitter friend on this list, I was lucky enough to grab a signed copy from the author herself after a recent trip to Philly. Faye incorporates the language from coding, iMessage, and the book of enoch to create texts which are painstakingly fragmented. The author has a second collection coming out later this month, which I am eagerly anticipating.

Fulton, Nora Colleen *Presence Detection System*, H' d' ng press: 2019

Half of a sub collection within this larger one of "books by twitter friends" and I am so so glad that the platform connected me to her work. *PDS* is a work which deals with many forms, but is permeated with an anxiety regarding the loss of meaning. "Suede" in particular is a poem which screams a series of lines written in 28 point font and formed like "Don't \_\_\_\_\_ into my \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_, ultimately culminating in the gutting "Don't point at my body and call it my body".

Gluck, Robert, *Communal Nude*, Semiotext(e): 2016

My guidebook to many of the other works on this collection, Glucks prose is wickedly entertaining. Reading this book always feels like a friend at the bar explaining something that they really love and exactly why they love it.

Gluck, Robert *margery kempe*, High Risk Books: 1994

I checked Thriftbooks.com at least once a week for 6 months until a copy of this book floated by. Gluck weaves in the personal tales of contemporary love with a historical novel about the titular Christian. The two temporalities allow Gluck to comment on the idea of self-description through the ages, as well as allowing medieval love poetry to intrude touchingly on the modern day.

Hamilton, Diana *God was Right*, Ugly Duckling Press: 2018

Hamilton came to my attention after my friend wrote her senior thesis on the idea of transitional narratives, and used a passage from Hamilton's "On Second Takes" as a means of illustrating the unknowns involved in navigating an online body. The essay is, somewhat in conversation with Barthes, about second readings; what it means to write about a body and the ways in which that writing is a reconsidering of the self.

Muchado, Carmen Maria *Her Body and Other Parties*, Graywolf: 2017

One of a couple books I bought while taking full advantage of Barnes and Noble's employee discount, this one at 30% off due to picking it up on employee appreciation day. A collection which is classified as horror, but which leaves the jump scares off screen, Muchado is concerned with the ways our bodies may betray us. Her prose, however, never betrays her, and the writing is assured and haunting throughout.

O'Hara, Frank, *Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*. Ed. Donald Allen, California Press: 1995

Perhaps the only work in the collection which could be considered a complete "body of work" in itself, O'Hara's poems are also engaged with the body on the level of both form and content. Take the poem "You are Beautiful and I am Coming". The poem is – or seems – breathless, with a Joycean kinetics starting with the adverbial "vaguely" and proceeding with odd enjambment. Closer inspection, however, reveals that the poem is a careful acrostic – the name of O'Hara's lover Vincent Warren providing the skeleton for the poem.

Powell, D.A. *Repast*. Graywolf Press: 2014

Yet another thriftbooks add, Powells text is perhaps the most visually arresting out of any other book in this collection. Powell takes advantage of the "wide-screen" format of printing afforded to him to create literal fields of text. The book concerns the ways in which our own personal fields – social, bodily – are navigated and infiltrated.

Salah, Trish *Lyric Sexology Volume One*, Roof Press: 2014

A very lucky find, brought on by a chance stop in Philadelphia bookstore Giovanni's room. Like *Don Quixote*, the poems here detour into conversation with the canon, and bring the potential for intertextuality to work as critique and flirtation front and center.

Spicer, Jack, *My Vocabulary Did This to Me*, Wesleyan University Press: 2008

Spicer's poems are textured. They are oceans with "riptides of rhythms and metaphor's seaweed." For much of this collection I felt as if I was being held at arms length from the poet. The inclusion of Spicer's heartfelt *Letters to*

*James Alexander*, however, changed all that. Spicer views his poems as “transmissions” received by his body, and learning to understand the man as a “silhouette” through the ways in which he appears to disrupt a text made for a fascinating reread.