Ralph Clare reviews *After Kathy Acker: A Literary Biography* by Chris Kraus.

Chris Kraus’s *After Kathy Acker* is tour de force stuff. In some sense, this is to be expected. Acker led a colorful, bohemian existence before and during her reign as the enfant terrible of postmodern literature. Legendary for her “transgressive” fiction and edgy punk image, Acker was one of the few writers—and only woman writer—to achieve a degree of fame as a countercultural figure in her time. Aware of the dangers depicting such a cult figure, Kraus has written a thrilling biography that respectfully lays bare the self-mythologization and image cultivation behind what would become Kathy Acker. Neither hagiography nor hatchet job, *After Kathy Acker* makes a strong case for the continued importance and influence of Acker’s work, a case that we may well extend to the fate of literary postmodernism itself.

Kraus’s account of Acker’s early years is fascinating. Kraus’s extensive archival research—parsing through Acker’s many notebooks, letters, and journals, as well as conducting interviews with those who knew Acker—gives us a raw and open look at the burgeoning writer. Kraus renders Acker’s life into nothing short of a full throttle kunstleroman, a genre Acker often employs. Carefully analyzing Acker’s earliest works—such as *The Childlike of the Black Tarantula* and *I Dreamt I Was A Teenaged Nymphomaniac: Imagining*—Kraus painstakingly traces Acker’s aesthetic development. All of Acker’s early experimental play with identity, genre, repetition, and plagiarizing eventually coalesces into her unique style: “accessing fleshy, emotive fragments of female experience within a framework of formalist rigor” (90). For Kraus, such apprentice work reaches maturity in perhaps Acker’s best novels: *Blood and Guts in High School* (which Kraus reveals was really composed out of Acker’s early work) and *Great Expectations*, both novels that fully grapple with the fluidity of identity and the rise of image culture. To be sure, Kraus proves herself a close and careful reader of Acker’s work, identifying many of its disparate “plagiarized” sources (which once led to a lawsuit with the popular writer Harold Robbins), from Faulkner, Dickens, Roland Barthes, and Proust to the less obvious Propertius, Ben Jonson, and even Ulrike Meinhoff (138).

We also follow the young Acker as she is married twice (by the time she’s twenty-four), moves coast to coast (NYC to San Diego), and supports herself via friends and lovers, and most famously by doing sex work that included live couples shows (with a boyfriend) and stripping. It is compelling to consider that Acker, the punk taboo-breaker, truly came of age at the tail end of the ‘60s, as peace and free love passed helter skelter into paranoia and self-destruction. The No Future motif in her work clearly follows from this. Yet curiously the theme of sex, so central to Acker, also comes out of the free love movement and the bohemian continuation of it—as the casual hookups (married or not), three and foursomes, and sex work that Acker took part in were simply how things were. Surprisingly, then, there are hippie roots in Acker, a point to which I’ll return at this essay’s end.
If sex and desire becomes increasingly problematic in her later works—as “the era of sexual liberation would be recast as dirges,” writes Kraus (56)—we can see how the groundwork was laid. While open relationships may have been agreed upon in theory, in reality they often worked out in messy ways—and Acker may not always have been so into them as she claimed—and they certainly didn’t end the troubles that many a bourgeois relationship suffered from. In light of this, it is obvious that Acker’s turn to S&M, which attempts to keep sex or sexual play within clearly established power dynamics (though admittedly danger persists, as Acker’s relationship in later life with a German man reveals) was never about the shock-value of “transgressive” sex. Acker was always interested in sex and negotiating relationships. Kraus touches upon Synanon at one point—an organization that pushed a kind of confrontational therapy involving games that provoked people into nakedly describing their feelings and fears in the moment (something that clearly comes out of Acid culture and gelled with Acker’s exploring consciousness in real time). The Synanon influence can be seen in a notorious and sexually explicit video/performance piece Acker made with Alan Sondheim documenting a Synanon-type “discussion,” The Blue Tape (1972) (something of this can be seen in the father/Janie transcripts in Blood and Guts in High School too). But without the time to process and reflect upon these emotions, such therapy doesn’t so much bring more clarity to relationships as it spurs something of an epic mind-fuck.

Acker’s itinerant life—she spent significant time in New York, San Francisco, San Diego, and London—meant that she acted as a kind of hip node connecting numerous scenes and ideas. There are few dull moments in Acker’s career. Kraus evokes the NYC downtown scene of the late 1970s and ’80s exceptionally well, but she also sketches something of the undocumented, if not forgotten, postmodern poetry/art scene in North County, San Diego at UCSD in the ’70s and ’80s (San Diego State would later become a bastion of postmodern literature, particularly via Larry McCaffery). So too does Kraus provide a look at the London literary scene in the late ’80s and early ’90s, as well as the subcultural scene of ’90s San Francisco.

With any scene comes namedropping, and there’s plenty of that. Acker’s early friendship with David and Eleanor Antin in San Diego and her connections to NYC poets, such as Bernadette Mayer (who directed the St. Mark’s Poetry Project for a time), helped her to get readings, publish, and, perhaps most importantly, build her cultural capital on the avant-garde scene. Indeed, Kraus explores some of Acker’s major influences: conceptual poetry and art, which allowed her the intellectual means with which to explore consciousness and identity. Throughout her life, Acker’s mentors, friends, and colleagues (many of whom were lovers too) tended to be writers, poets, artists, and composers, and included the likes of Jerome Rothenberg, Robert Ashley, Jackson Mac Low, Mel Friedlich, Ron Silliman, Alan Sondheim, Rudy Wurlitzer, Sylvère Lotringer, and Paul Buck, among numerous others.

Perhaps it shouldn’t be a surprise, then, that After Kathy Acker reveals a highly ambitious Acker who does not merely want to be a writer but one who seeks notoriety. Like many a bohemian born into class-comfortable circumstances (nee Alexander, Acker was born into an Upper East Side, upper-middle class Jewish family), Acker fudged her personal history and certain details about her life (that she took courses with Ramon Jackobson at Brandeis and that her first husband moved to San Diego to study with Marcuse at UCSD, for example) in a move of self-invention that, whatever the motives, is American as Apple. Nevertheless, Kraus attempts to give Acker her due. Acker’s lying may not have been “literal” but “more a system of magical thought” (14). And it is certainly in line with the kinds of romantic bohemians and artists that Acker admired and appeared in her works, from the visionary Rimbaud to the provocateur Pier Paolo Passolini.

Nor is this simply Kraus letting Acker off the hook. The evidence speaks for itself. Acker’s notebooks and letters—often rambling, stream of consciousness-like, and nakedly revealing—portray a driven, earnest, sometimes narcissistic, and occasionally manipulative persona, yet one who
is rigorous about her reading and disciplined in her work habits. Notably, finances and fame are major themes in many of her letters. Overall, Kraus discovers a dialectic at work in Acker; she is both a calculating and vulnerable person—at times even employing a “strategic” vulnerability (176) to combat the loneliness she often complained about. Nevertheless, the picture of Acker that emerges is richer because of it and far from the kind of static and deleterious cultural images that Acker’s work often deconstructed semiotically. Ironically, as Kraus points out, it is the very image of the rebellious Acker (which she actively promoted) that appears to have calcified and entrapped Acker herself when she fell out of critical favor. Thus, if her “life was a fable,” it was one “created through means both within and beyond her control” (14, 15).

Kraus’s novelistic powers are also on display throughout After Kathy Acker. Kraus is adept at recreating particular scenes, such as the description of one of Acker’s apartments in New York: “Mornings, the sound of the boiler kicking on wakes them up early, and they go back to sleep. Steam heat moves through the pipes, but it never fully warms the room. [...] There’s a second bedroom in the back of the apartment, with a desk and a typewriter, two sleeping bags, some spare clothes, and a piano that belongs to her boyfriend’s estranged wife but still hasn’t been moved” (26). Such wonderful details and writing abound in the biography.

Kraus, moreover, reverses the biography’s usual narrative order of life and death in the opening chapter, which depicts Acker’s final days and her death. Kraus’s compact, dramatic opening is compelling and immediately establishes the tragedy and controversy surrounding Acker’s death (she refused traditional medical treatment for cancer, opting for alternative methods). Kraus thus overturns our expectations of Acker as well. The Acker we meet at the biography’s beginning is broken and in pain, spirited but wasting away. It is a far cry from the tough, hip, sexy Acker we think we know.

Kraus also avoids what the genre of biography can sometimes do: reduce its subject’s work to an expression of his or her life. Kraus, of course, reads much of Acker’s fiction in relation to her personal life (including documenting its many roman a clef elements), but Kraus’s reading of the personal takes on added dimension when she credits Acker with creating the first American version of autofiction—fiction that blurs the boundary between truth and fiction, often by including an author-character (its status as fiction makes it different from the non-fiction or journalism of a Hunter S. Thompson or Norman Mailer, though of course Henry Miller deserves a shout out here). Autofiction is a currently in vogue genre (witness the likes of Ben Lerner and Sheila Heti or Karl Ove Knausgård and Elena Ferrante) that Kraus herself has long employed in her exceptional novels. Acker’s influence on American fiction can thus be seen as much more than just a contribution to experimental or postmodern literature.

True to literary form, Kraus at times makes this biography feel like an autobiography—or something in between. If one of Acker’s aesthetic breakthroughs was to find a way to work “memories” into something “a-personal, until they became myth” (58), then Kraus follows suit by weaving Acker’s words directly into the narrative. At times, Acker’s voice blends with a free indirect discourse to stunning effect:

She writes all the time, willing herself to break down the boundaries between waking and dreaming. You have to become a criminal or a pervert, she writes. I find I can only talk to those people who are loose in the ways they live to the extent of perversity a strange addiction to 42nd Street. At readings, when people ask what she’s doing, she never says writing. Instead, she tells them the sex show, and they say wonderful, great. Later she hates herself for it, but she still loves the attention. There’s no escaping the fact that the Fun City room smells of ammonia, piss, semen. Her dreams about childhood are scenes of escape: a river, a park, a small bit of earth in the cold, a damp lamp late autumn. Outdoors and alone, she feels strong...the beginning of great joy, she writes in her diary.(29 , italics in original)
The sense of immediacy here—the present tenses of Acker’s notebook and Kraus’s prose—reproduces the breathless whirl of artistic struggle and ambition. Kraus’s writing brings Acker’s story to furious life and makes it hard to stop reading.

While *After Kathy Acker* is clearly concerned with Acker’s legacy, the question of what will happen to the waning legacy of postmodernism haunts the biography (it was published by Semiotext(e) after all, which was seminal in bringing French poststructuralist theory [Baudrillard and Deleuze, for instance] to American readers). Acker, of course, is the quintessential postmodernist in terms of her writing’s plagiarism, genre shifting, language play, critique of the society of the spectacle, and identity, etc. But the seemingly radical aesthetic stance of postmodernism has come under even more political scrutiny in our neoliberal era than when Fredric Jameson defined it long before as entailing the complete commodification of art, nature, and culture. As a result, being called “postmodern” today is generally a slight.

Kraus quotes Michael Roloff, for example, who writes that the “greening of America” in 1980s New York became “the wildest kind of neo-liberalism” (152), as the money that poured into art and culture co-opted the supposedly radical underground that many had assumed was inherently anti-capital. In some ways, Acker’s life fits this model. She certainly created and maintained a “brand,” lived in gentrifying neighborhoods, and spent freely of her inheritance on fashionable things (she never made much on publishing). Then there’s Acker’s wholehearted belief at the end of her life in alternative medicines and therapies to fight cancer—in Marin County she visited psychics, nutritionists, healers, astrologers, past-life regressionists—that makes sense considering her ‘60s upbringing. Of course, the hippies became good neo-liberals too, weathering the big chill by marketing wheat germ and immersion tanks to mainstream consumers. And such west coast New Age spirituality and idealism has joined seamlessly today with the tech industry’s belief that capital and technology will make the world into a virtual i-utopia. Yet Acker’s interest in alternative medicines and culture, as we have seen, predates its eventual mainstream marketing and makes sense considering her ‘60s upbringing. Her beliefs are more in line with the countercultural zeitgeist in which she grew up than they are evidence of her buying in to their later commodification as signifiers for trendy lifestyles.

It would therefore be lazy to write Acker off as a neoliberal dupe. The work itself simply does not lend itself to any easy kind of consumption: it sticks in your craw instead. It stands alone as challenging and rewarding. Acker’s insistence that freedom is a process and not a product contributes to a body of work that always tries to imagine something new or different, questions received ideas and conventions, and keeps open the possibilities for change. It is not about reducing life to a technocratic or marketable set of drop down menu choices.

Postmodernism’s complicity with neoliberalism notwithstanding, Acker’s life is also something of a warning about the danger of so-called postmodern “irrationality.” Many friends broke with Acker because of her refusal to receive scientifically proven medical treatment for her cancer. Even if some of them knew that Acker’s healer’s claims were “more metaphoric than fraudulent” (18), Acker’s literal belief in these claims is something tragic, no matter her choice to abide by alternative therapies. True, it is also possible to read Acker’s decision in this case as a resistance to or protest against the for-profit medical system in America or of western medicine more broadly. To some degree it is. And certainly alternative medical treatments of diseases and disorders are often valuable and effective, particularly when practiced in conjunction with western medicine. Yet Acker was truly shocked to learn that she still had cancer after her healer had declared her cured. The problem is that belief, and the desire to believe, is a currency easily spent. One can, of course, believe in anything—gods, unicorns, a flying spaghetti monster—but it may not always be a good thing. Surely there are dangers with any system of thought that relies solely upon logic and scientific truth, as well as with any anti-systemic or purely mythical thought that throws science out entirely. Both lead to the possibility of gross manipulation, be it by warmongers and
technocrats or cult leaders and snake oil salesmen, or a mixture of both—i.e. Donald Trump. It is surely a strange turn of events that Acker passed away in a treatment center whose patients included those refusing medical treatment according to their religious beliefs and not as a form of protest.

There is a lesson in all this, something like the one in Louis Malle’s poignant My Dinner With Andre (1981), a film in which regular dude Wally [Wallace Shawn] meets his old friend Andre [Andre Gregory] for a meal and learns of Andre’s decades long participation in wild drug and social/artistic experiments that didn’t exactly lead to enlightenment. But in light of Acker’s case, it’s more like: what if Wally and Andre never shared a meaningful dialogue and reached understanding, or what if Wally had never shown up and Andre just rambled on about people turning into trees and about the final collapse of art into life, which is hardly liberating? Andre—a true child of the ’60s—wholeheartedly embraces the irrational to sometimes damaging effect. Yet the film suggests that there is a value in the worldviews of both the imaginative, if at times naïve, Andre and the more conventional Wally, whose complacency and self-satisfaction are troubling too.

Kraus attempts a similar intervention in After Kathy Acker. Far from casting judgment on Acker for her beliefs, Kraus, like Wally in Andre, listens and learns. At one point Kraus even employs an “astrological” metaphor to imagine Acker’s life at a turning point (the cyclical return of Saturn means chaos and possible destruction in one’s late twenties) and later engages in a tarot reading (168). But this is all within metaphorical reason, all in keeping with Kraus’s aim to tell Acker’s life as a “fable.” All along, Kraus has understood the value and place of the magical, the metaphorical, and the seeming irrationality of mythos, and she warns against always taking them too literally. Kraus shows how Acker critiqued image culture but also was caught up in it, and how Acker’s beliefs in alternative therapies may have cost her her life or years more of it. In telling Acker’s fable, Kraus reveals the agony and the ecstasy of myth building and believing.

If Acker’s postmodern fable doubles as a cautionary tale, we would nevertheless be wise not to scoff automatically at would-be visionaries. Such is the impulse in a disillusioned age in which, as Peter Sloterdijk’s Critique of Cynical Reason argues, we hold to our cynicism for dear life, as if it were a form of knowledge. Opening ourselves up to experience and acknowledging that we can’t know everything means becoming vulnerable—something Acker knew well and explored in her work. Perhaps that’s why Kraus—after lauding Acker’s understanding and critique of image culture and her development of an American version of autofiction—ends the book by considering those readers who, “may not read Acker’s jokes, her compositional strategies, or her fierce intellect, but something in her work connects deeply with them” (279). Kraus knows that quantifying Acker’s value intellectually only goes so far. The same might be said for the reputation of literary postmodernism. If Acker and postmodernism are to continue to matter, it will take readers whose felt connections transcend purely critical arguments, readers who can sense the intangible stuff that dreams and reputations are made on.

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