

A series of invocations because nothing else works

Laura Guy

Kathy Acker was a liar, apparently. Certainly the writing she published under her own name was often borrowed from elsewhere. Plagiarism, which is one word Acker used for this literary device, is a particularly sticky kind of lie. In law, it delineates a kind of theft that reasserts the value of the original over and above that of the (illegitimate) copy. Yet Acker figured plagiarism along different lines, to contest the increasingly this myth of sole ownership in any creative work. In 1995, some years after Henry Robbins sued her for plagiarising his erotic novel *The Pirate*, Acker addressed the issue of copyright in a short essay titled 'Writing, Identity, and Copyright in the Net Age'.ⁱ She does so in order to open of the concept of history, using a turn of phrase from the political philosopher Hannah Arendt *Men in Dark Times* (1968), 'a time out of joint', to think about how the construction of meaning evolves in relation to history. History, which for Acker is as necessary for writing as it is for any committed political act, is threatened by the claim that copyright makes to ownership since the mark of ownership produces an object without a history.

Kathy Acker shows up in *I Want*, mediated by the two-channel video, and by the body of artist Sharon Hayes.ⁱⁱ For the duration of the video, Acker, performed by Hayes, is something of a partial figure whose identity plays out on unsolid ground. That such a statement is true of any subject rendered as an image on screen, or for that matter subjectivity in general, should not be taken for granted. Acker, one of the fiercest and most astonishing writers of her generation, herself contributed to the postmodern interpretation of subjecthood as always already a performance shaped by repetition in which can be located no originary tale. From the outset of *I Want*, the viewer is aware of their role in the staging of Acker's identity. Beginning a monologue that will she continue throughout the video, Hayes says 'my name is Kathy Acker, I am a writer'. Acker, invoked by Hayes, then implores the audience to feel free to move around, saying she does not want us to feel 'oppressed', a sentiment that seems anachronistic, if not disingenuous, when taken in the context of the art world spaces in which this video circulates. Spoken simultaneously by Acker and by Hayes it alerts us to the significance of *I Want*, a video that represents a complex reflection on how identities are mediated not only through both screens and bodies but also how they arrive to us through time.

Hayes's performance is based on a video that shows Acker reading from her first novel *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec, by Henri Toulouse Lautrec* in 1975.ⁱⁱⁱ This grainy original footage that now circulates online shows a young Acker – before she had become the poster child for post-punk attitude – speaking directly to an audience at Western Front, an artist run space in Vancouver. Hayes's address to the audience in *I Want* recites Acker's word for word. Likewise Hayes wears a t-shirt similar to the one Acker was wearing, displaying the slogan 'If You're Not Weird Get Out'. Coupled with the candid address straight to camera, the rebuff seems to underscore the encounter with Acker that is now experienced at a historical remove. Throughout *I Want*, Hayes does a bad job of persuading us that she is Kathy Acker. She even tells us that she is not Kathy Acker at all, introducing her self again as Chelsea Manning, the trans ex-US military officer who enlisted as a male soldier in 2007 and perpetuated the largest breach of government intelligence known in US history. The serpentine exchange between

these proper nouns parallels the double image of *I Want*. The two projected images are nearly identical but not quite, showing the uneven footing of identity to be as much a facet of technologies of visions as it is of language.

In her own work, Hayes often uses her body as though as a vessel or a cipher through which to channel the past. Historic instances of collective political struggle are reframed within performances that show Hayes as a solitary figure, for example when she attempts to re-speak a script originally spoken by the heiress Patty Hearst, who was kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army in 1974, from memory. Or when Hayes – gendered female, white – stands on a street corner in mid-town Manhattan holding a sign that reads ‘I AM A MAN’, a slogan used by Black male workers during the Memphis sanitation strikes in 1968. Hayes’s work has become a form of shorthand for contemporary art that, for all its archival returns, doesn’t seem very contemporary at all.^{iv} Is *I Want* also a work by Sharon Hayes? Certainly her identity as an artist is mobilised here. But she is also a friend who has been roped in, as friends often are, to the production an artwork.

The script that Hayes speaks in *I Want* is partly compiled from a number of Acker’s novels and chap books including *I Dreamt I Was A Nymphomaniac, Imagining* (1974); *The Adult Life Of Toulouse Lautrec* (1978); *Blood And Guts In High School: A Novel* (1978); *Great Expectations* (1983) as well as the anthology *Hannibal Lecter, My Father* (1991). These writings, all of which exhibit the cut-up technique that Acker employed in her writing, are collaged alongside other texts so that new narratives emerge from old ones.^v In the script, Boudry and Lourenz have replaced the central character of Janey Smith in *Blood and Guts in Highschool* with Acker so that where once ‘Janey [was] Want’, Kathy becomes ‘Want’ instead. ‘Kathy is Want’, Hayes says. Acker’s desire, which is written through all of her texts, courses through *I Want*.

As Acker’s own words are re-written so that Acker becomes the protagonist, the proximity that women’s authorship has too often been said to bear to biography is drawn claustrophobically close. Except they never really were Acker’s own words, or not only. The collusion of biography and fiction has been a powerful tool for authors to mine, something that Chris Kraus’s writing has often performed. Recently I saw Kraus speak about the biography that she is currently writing on Acker. It seems implausible that Acker be treated through that genre, with the kind of knowledge it has historically claimed of the individual subject. The function of piracy and repetition in Acker’s writing affirms the presence of subjects who have been violently constituted through languages other than their own. Instead of claiming to know Acker, *I Want* borrows from the writers work strategies in order to shape its own articulation of experimental subjectivity. The many references that make up the script are as slippery as the lens work that jerks from Hayes to the other details of the bare set: a phone, a stage, a faux leather chair – of the type that are ubiquitous in upmarket offices – with the words ‘I Want’ carved into it.

In *I Want*, Acker’s acts of plagiarism, which she often referred to as a form of piracy, enmesh with the actions of Manning. The three million top secret documents that she made available through Wikileaks, revealed the extent of civilian casualties and torture perpetrated by the US and British armed forces in Iraq. In *I Want*, on-going references to Acker and her writing are intercut with text taken from chat logs recorded between Manning and the hacker Adrian Lamo as well as from Manning’s Wikipedia entry.^{vi} These logs record how the intelligence

officer apparently mimed Lady Gaga whilst reproducing data onto CD-Rs. For this act of piracy, Manning who acted single-handedly – that’s the way it’s put in the video – was sentenced to 35 years in prison. ‘This film is all just fake copied from other films’, says Hayes or Acker or Manning (or Hayes as Acker as Manning) directly to camera, ‘so you should go away and not watch any of it.’

As Dean Spade and Craig Wilkes write elsewhere in this publication, Manning’s identification as a trans woman held within US army custody raises a series of complex issues relating to the politics of recognition. Manning’s announcement that she wished to be known as Chelsea coincided with her dishonourable discharge from service invoked under the espionage act. If ‘want’ is the wish that keeps this video moving, it invokes the desires of Manning as much as it does those of Acker. The title of the work comes from a story that Manning, whilst still in service, had been found by colleagues curled up next to a chair into which she had gouged the eponymous words “I want.” The desire to assert the proper noun of identity tests the limits of recognition and the names that we are required to answer to. (Gaga ringing through my head: ‘I’m busy, eh, eh, eh, eh, eh, eh, eh / stop telephoning me’).

I Want reflects in our own time on the subject of war and imperialism through reference to the second Iraq war in which Manning served but also opposed her country. Acker’s work is similarly written through with resistance to imperialist wars. A section of her writing that references the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), one founder of which was the ex-Vietnam veteran Joe Remiro, is included in *I Want*. Hayes’s delivery of these lines blurs, again, the border between *I Want* and the artist’s own work. In ‘Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) Screeds #13, 16, 20 & 29’ (2003) Hayes was helped by an audience to recall from memory a script originally read to camera by heiress Patty Hearst after being kidnapped by the SLA. Hearst famously came around to the views of her kidnappers, a fact that is often pathologised under the name of Stockholm syndrome. Writing on this work, Hayes has referred to her performance as ‘respeaking’, invoking again the precarious relationship that exists between language and intention.^{vii} In *I Want*, Hayes respeaks Acker’s words and in doing so the intention of those words shifts relation to history, in light of the imperialist wars waged since the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Arendt wrote on lying in an article that hinged on the Pentagon Papers, a vast document relating to the Vietnam War that was leaked publically in 1971, revealing the myriad ways in which the US people had been misled about the reasons for the war. Titled ‘Lying in Politics: Reflections on The Pentagon Papers’, here Arendt speaks of lying as tied both to the idea of history and to the elision of historical fact. This is no moral assertion of truth, instead Arendt argues that lying is a necessary function of political life since it enables the liar to break with the conditions of the present.^{viii} Speech and action are related in Arendt’s work on lying. For Arendt, lying is a necessary function of politics because it creates a new space for action. Manning represents a cipher for different agent of political action to the one that Arendt imagined, that of the whistle-blower. In *I Want*, the invocation of Manning as truth teller seems at first to counter Acker’s acts of plagiarism. Yet Manning’s act, the reproduction of documents not belonging to her, also constituted a refusal of ownership, even as she, individualised by law as the sole author of her action, pays the price. As *I Want* plays out, nearing its end, Hayes returns to the stage after a brief interlude wearing a mask and a coat made of blonde hair that looks like an out-sized wig. This outfit seems to allude to the only image that circulates of Manning as Chelsea in which she wears an unconvincing blonde wig.

The masked character begins to move not to Gaga but to a track by Berlin-based queer producer Planningtonrock. Now disguised, the whistle-blower becomes a somehow more ambivalent figure. The possibility of recognition, which was the cornerstone for democracy in Arendt's political philosophy, is obscured by lies.

As a child one is led to understand that lies operate on different registers. There are terrible lies, the kind that one must never tell. And there are so-called 'white lies'. As I'm writing this, the Chilcot Report has just been published in the UK, assessing the legitimacy of the case for the second Iraq war. A report that took seven years to complete, it tells us what we, the people who marched in our millions against the prospect of this war, already knew to be true. Like Vietnam, the case was built on lies. Propelled by the narrative force of progressive democracy the central lie was not the false claim that Saddam Hussein possessed Weapons of Mass Destruction but that the war had been waged in the name of liberation, specifically the liberation of the Iraqi people. The entitlement of the liar to history, Arendt wrote, is not only a foremost function of the most totalitarian regimes but also of our own political democracies. The narrative force of progressive democracy is surely one that will underpin Manning's pardon too. Whether this will be a pardon of her actions or, as seems more likely, be reflected in the recent acceptance of trans people within the US armed forces, it will never excuse the lies that continue to be told by successive governments in defense of imperialist wars. One such lie was observable in the rhetoric surrounding the recent shootings in Orlando on 12 June 2016. The strategic acceptance of (certain kinds of) queer identities by government, who participate in the (re)production of various forms of homophobic violence, is a worrying character of our own times out of joint. In this climate of oppressive tolerance, the history of anti-imperialist queer politics, a history which locates the roots of gay liberation partly in anti-war movement of the 1960s, is now being re-written to legitimize colonial regimes.

The past is not simply something for us to learn from but if Acker's writing taught us anything, it is that a different ending is necessary. The question of action is central to *I Want*. woven through the references to Acker and Manning it is also central to the form of the work. As the video ends and the lights come up, the audience in the exhibition space finds themselves to be sat on a stage, as though poised for the following act. In Acker's work, piracy carves out its own textual space for action. But unlike Arendt's preoccupation with lies that have been constructed by those in power, Acker's use of plagiarism works to break with the present that has been written on the terms of the dominant power. Writing in *Algeria: A Series of Invocations Because Nothing Else Works*, Acker asked 'How can I who am disinherited act?'. To be disinherited is to be dispossessed. Acker suggested that we might forcibly reclaim the freedom to act by reconfiguring the very terms spoken by the very institutions that have historically cast us aside. The illegitimate claim to the right of property was Manning's crime as well. Taken without permission, her gift of deception was to the public. When undertaken by the dominant power lying is, of course, fundamentally unjust. For it enables the history of imperialist violence to be elided. On the other hand, perhaps lying is the only way for those incarcerated by languages other than their own to break with conditions that keep them within bounds. This, finally, might just amount to a historic claim to self-determination. Afterall, to claim an inheritance from the place of the dispossessed is to claim that history must always be open to change.

END

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BIOGRAPHY

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- i Sections of *The Pirate* formed the basis for Acker's first novel *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec* by *Henri Toulouse Lautrec* (1975).
- ii In a forthcoming article in the *Moving Image Review and Art Journal* (Intellect, December 2016), I formulate a different discussion of Boudry and Lorenz's *I Want* in the context of contemporary queer artist moving image.
- iii Video documentation of Kathy Acker reading from *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec* (1978) at Western Front on February 2, 1977. Western Front Media Archive.
- iv This is something that art historian Catherine Grant addresses to in her on-going writing on feminist re-enactment for example in her article 'Fans of Feminism: Re-Writing Histories of Second-Wave Feminism in Contemporary Art', *Oxford Art Journal*, 34 (2011), 265–86.
- v The technique was itself borrowed from William Burroughs and Brion Gysin's so-called 'fold-in' method.
- vi 'Manning-Lamo Chat Logs Revealed' in *The Wire*, 2011 (http://www.wired.com/2011/07/manning_lamo_logs/)
- vii Sharon Hayes, 'Temporal Relations' in Renate Lorenz, *Not Not! Now! Chronopolitics, Art & Research* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014).
- viii Hannah Arendt, 'Lying in Politics: Reflections on The Pentagon Papers', *The New York Review of Books* (New York, 1971).