

Myself as the Same or the Transsemiotics of 'Basihelm'  
Identity: Kathy Acker, Michel Foucault, and Jorge Borges Take on the  
Problematics of Static (Gendered) Language

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Originally submitted March 29, 2007, as mid-term paper for undergraduate seminar,  
Master Pieces of Literature, with Adjunct Professor, Eric Olson.

My whole being is nothing but gendered language, text, printed pages, stories that have already been written down (Foucault, 792). I am made up of interwoven words; I am gendered and genderless, wandering through the world among resemblances of gender (Foucault, 792). Yet not entirely so, for in my reality as a person who is labeled 'female' I can only become not-female by accepting the laws of 'maleness.' This is how western (English) language works. There is only 'male' and 'female.' This is my existence and my duty (Foucault, 793). I consult history, male to female or female to male; the "truth" of the books – 'male' and 'female' are static opposites with separate histories, characteristics, and form. Within this paradigm, male and female can never describe the same things.

Unlike Quixote, I do not accept these narratives. I am not captivated by the power of these words, nor do they inspire a quest of my own, in the same way that Don Quixote's texts inspired his quest. My task is to put these texts to the test to disprove them rather than prove them. The fact that I no longer want to be like 'them' means that I must put 'male' and 'female' to the test, that these (legible) signs no longer resemble (visible) people (Foucault, 793). I do not want to be a true likeness of all the signs from these books. All those written texts, 'maleness' and 'femaleness' of language; no one in the world ever did resemble them; gendered language remains suspended unfulfilled by any similitude; these words could be eliminated, eradicated (male, female, he, she, etc.) and the form of the world, our bodies, would not change (Foucault, 793).

In order to resemble these texts (language), (a scenario which I resist), of which I am witness, the representation, the 'real' analogue, I must furnish proof and provide the indubitable sign that 'male' and 'female' holds truth, that they are the language of bodies

(Foucault, 793). I must be ‘female’ or ‘male.’ My body wrought with estrogen must and can only signify ‘female.’ The chest, the crotch, the voice—the body in its incomplete parts—is forced to add up to a whole, either ‘male’ or ‘female.’ To become ‘male’ I must rid myself of all signs ‘female.’ Thus, language marks the body by its difference rather than its similitude; what is ‘male’ is not ‘female.’ I am both a basin and a helmet, I am ‘male’ and ‘female,’ and yet by being both I empty the words of their meaning. To use ‘male’ to describe the same chest and crotch that ‘female’ describes renders difference meaningless and joins difference to sameness within the same body.

Unlike Quixote, I do not believe in the books, yet I am made up of them. I do not and seemingly cannot exist without them. Even if I burn them, rip them apart; they live on in my memory and that of each reader, even those who have not read, know the stories, the history, the narrative of bodies. It is incumbent upon me to fuck with the promise of ‘male’ and ‘female’ (Foucault, 793).

Initially, my method was to be relatively simple: learn the ‘male’ language, return to the ideologies of gender but from the other side, fight against being female, forget the history of being socialized female from birth—be someone else (Borges, 239).

...but I discarded this as too easy (Borges, 239). Too impossible, rather! the reader will say (Borges, 239). Too impossible for top surgery to make me male (Borges, 239). Too impossible for testosterone to transform my body, leaving behind, rendering invisible, all previous signs of “‘femaleness’ (Borges, 239) That either top surgery or testosterone apart or together could eliminate the resemblances of gender, of all the impossible ways of bringing it about this was the least interesting (Borges, 239). To become male, to erase my femaleness, in a century still bound to the ideologies of

difference seemed to me to be a diminution (Borges, 239). Being, somehow, female and arriving thereby at the male—that looked to me less challenging (and therefore less interesting) than continuing to be myself and coming to genderlessness through the experience of gender (Borges, 239).

Initially, my method was to be relatively simple: learn a new language, return to the body I had as a child through top surgery, fight to be me, forget or rather unlearn my history from 1969 – 2007, unlearn the gendered history of the English Language—be (Borges, 239). To become neither male nor female, to erase my femaleness and my maleness by being both male and female, in a century still bound to the ideologies of difference seemed to me to be an evolvment (Borges, 239). Being, somehow, genderless and arriving there by being gendered—that looked to me to be more challenging (and therefore interesting) than continuing to follow the rules of gender and trying to come to myself through the experience of being gendered (Borges, 239).

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Finally, Don Quixote understood hir problem: ze was both a woman therefore ze couldn't be a man and a term in search of boundlessness (Acker, 29). Ze had had to become language, for ze could solve this problem only by becoming genderfucked (Acker, 29). It was necessary for hir to delve deeper into this matter (Acker, 29). Did ze really have to be male in order to not be female (Acker, 29)? What was a woman (Acker, 29)? Was a woman different from a man (Acker, 29)? What was a man? What was this

‘gender’ which, only having dreamt about, ze was now turning around hir total life to find (Acker, 29)?

“‘Therefore, who am I?’” ze asked St Simeon (Acker, 29).

“‘Who cares?’”(Acker, 29).

“‘Of course I’m not interested in personal identity (Acker, 29). I mean: what is it to be not-female and not-male (Acker, 29)?’”

“‘To be inhuman,’” the dog answered (Acker, 29).

‘If history, the enemy of time, is the parent of truth, the history of bodies must define gender (Acker, 29). The main tome on this subject or history was written by Cid Hamete Benengali, a man (Acker, 29). Unfortunately, the author of this work so major it is the only one is gendered, and that gender is known for its untruthfulness; but even though they (the gender experts) be our enemies, it may readily be understood that they would more likely have added to rather than have detracted from the history (Acker, 29).

“‘Be assured,” this book starts out, “that the history of being gendered is that of degradation and suffering” (Acker, 29). (True ze said to hirself, rubbing hir wounded chest (Acker, 29).) “‘Nevertheless, history shows us that no woman or man has to endure anything: a gendered person has the power to choose to be a magnate or an oppressor (Acker, 29).

‘Let us examine the history of gender in detail’ (Acker, 29):

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Miguel de Cervantes' character Don Quixote reveals the instability of semiotics and language's failure to stand in for something: an object or someone. Before Don Quixote, language identified difference rather than similitude; i.e., this is a basin and that is a helmet. Don Quixote collapses this division within language; recognition in the world for both him and text (written and verbal) is dependant on similitude rather than difference (Foucault, 793). In this way, Cervantes' text and its characters magnify the heteroglossia of language (Bakhtin, 32).

In "Don Quixote Which Was a Dream," Kathy Acker, also deconstructs language. In her essay, "Kathy Acker and the Plagiarized Self," Naomi Jacobs writes, "the works of Kathy Acker demonstrate in particularly challenging form the complex relationships of the historical figure to postmodern concepts of text, of identity, and of the authorial self" (51). Through Acker's writing style, appropriating and plagiarizing from existing texts, both the book and the character Don Quixote, critically deconstruct 'official' culture, text, and language (Jacobs, 51). Acker's Don Quixote employs her own language again revealing language as heteroglot.

This paper examines the similitude between Cervantes' and Acker's versions of Don Quixote. My focus here is not on the general aspects of these texts but rather the ways in which both authors magnify the variables of language. Using Mikhail Bakhtin's essay "Discourse of the Novel" as a lens through which to understand the process of 'individual becoming', we will look at the unique language both Don Quixotes. Taking the premise that the 'basin' is a helmet because it is employed as such, we will examine ideological discourse that presents language as constant (a basin is a basin and can never be a helmet) in contrast to the instability that Cervantes and Acker reveal.

Cervantes' Don Quixote sets the tone, establishing language as varied and unstable. Because the barber wears the helmet, its function shifts from vessel to protective head covering. Both the barber and then Don Quixote employ the 'helmet' as a protective head covering. Therefore, Don Quixote's Helmet of Mambrino cannot be a basin because it is not being used as a basin. What the object looks like, its difference, is conflated with its similitude. In fact, it is through its similitude (its characteristic) that Don Quixote is able to recognize the object; the basin transforms and becomes a 'helmet' despite its basinness. The basin/helmet scenario reflects how objects and persons gain recognition for their similitude. This Don Quixote also represents one person's language resisting the prior discourse of words, and creating their own language that is internally persuasive to them (Bakhtin, 41, 44). Thus, language celebrates sameness rather than difference.

Acker's Don Quixote disregards the 'prior discourse' of all things; exhibiting a unique language that decenters self, culture, identity, and ultimately the reader (Jacobs, 52). Don Quixote represents the inability to find and locate self when language (and thus ones ideological) becoming is unstable and constantly shifting. If language is fragmented, our ability to relate to the world around is also fragmented.

What is perhaps the most interesting aspect of both Cervantes' and in particular Acker's text are the ways in which language, even as it breaks down, still works—that it functions despite its apparent nonfunctioning or non-sense. "It [language] is unitary only as an abstract grammatical system of normative forms," writes Mikhail Bakhtin, "taken in isolation from the uninterrupted process of historical becoming that is characteristic of all

living language” (32). Language is full of potential because of its morphology, neologisms, and that as a living language; language is constantly changing.

That said there are still aspects of language that are static and fixed. Mikhail Bakhtin calls these “authoritative words” and sees the individual as ultimately faced with either adopting authoritative language and/or finding oneself unable to appropriate these words into one’s own personal language. These words enter our personal language with prior discourse, “its authority already fused to it” (42). According to Bakhtin, authoritative words demand acknowledgement and resist being appropriated into personal language (35). I would argue that Cervantes, and especially, Acker disprove Bakhtin’s premise. Don Quixote’s truth is in “that slender and constant relation woven between themselves [words] by verbal signs (Foucault, 794).” Equally, there is no authoritative language within Acker’s “Don Quixote Which Was a Dream” and with her own language Acker’s Don Quixote further deconstructs and dislodges the “prior discourse” of language. Additionally, Acker’s Don Quixote completely dismantles gender, linguistic structures, and official culture; and sculpts a self of Don Quixote, however fragmented it may appear, out of this (Jacobs, 53).

If certain words are fixed and thereby prevent persons from appropriating them, then these persons are also prevented from participating in certain dialogues (civil, scholarly, religious, gendered). According to Bakhtin, negotiating between authoritative and internally persuasive words reveals a disparity:

“[...] it happens more frequently that an individual’s becoming, an ideological process, is characterized precisely by a sharp gap between these two categories: in one the authoritative word (religious, political, moral; the word of the father, of adults, and of teachers, etc., and I would add, gendered) that does not know internal persuasiveness, in

the other internally persuasive word that is denied all privilege, backed up by no authority at all, and is frequently not even acknowledged in society (not public opinion, nor by scholarly norms, nor by criticism), not even in the legal code (41).”

If a person is unable to find oneself within the languages of one's culture, even amongst the heteroglossia of languages within a national language, as Bakhtin suggests, then it would seem that one's ideological becoming is dependant upon the tenuous relationship between authoritative and internally persuasive words. Again Bakhtin, “[...] many words stubbornly resist, others remain alien, sound foreign in the mouth of the one who appropriated them and who now speaks them; they cannot fit into his (her or his) context and fall out of it; it is as if they put themselves in quotation marks against the will of the speaker (35).”

The power of Don Quixote is that despite being caught up in navigating the “relation of the words to the world (Foucault, 794).” It doesn't matter to him, her, or his, that their words fall outside of ‘logic’, ‘culture’, ‘reality’, ‘truth’, ‘culture’, etc. (Foucault, 794).” Truth makes fiction reality. Reality--the present, instills fiction or the past with truth. In “Don Quixote Which was a Dream,” past, present, and future collapse and distinction ceases, the result is an “unmediated, unstructured and decentered” experience (Jacobs, 52).

“The Acker protagonist,” Jacobs writes, “embarks upon an anxious search for balance between the isolate nothingness of no-identity and the death of a fixed identity (52).” The nothingness of no-identity, as Jacobs describes it, and the death of a fixed identity, relates to what Bakhtin described as the relation between authoritative and internal persuasive words. Authoritative words, because they are fixed, produced fixed

subjecthood – or a visible but fixed self. Internally persuasive words can be read as producing the “nothingness of no-identity” if these words are not reflected in social-political discourse.

Unidentified voice, “I can’t tell the difference between a tree and tree-shadow or tree-image. Nature is either a reflection, or else nothing. I am either a reflection or else I’m nothing (Acker, 75).” “[...] Resemblances and signs have dissolved their former alliance; similitudes have become deceptive and verge upon the visionary or madness; things still remain stubbornly within their ironic identity; they are no longer anything but what they are [...] (Foucault, 793-94).” Jacobs writes “these fictions are also located at the edges of meaning, the edges of grammar, the edges of gender; a place where the emptiness and the fullness of the undefined personality coexist in a vertigo of anti-referential reference” (51).

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Don Quixote reads the world not to prove his books but to disprove them. And the only proof he gives himself are the glittering reflections of gender resemblances (Foucault, 793). His whole journey is a quest for similitudes: the slightest analogies are pressed into service as dormant signs that must be reawakened and made to speak once more (Foucault, 793). Clits, swishing hips, and breasts become once more the language of books to the imperceptible degree that they resemble dicks, swishing hips, and chests – a perpetually indefensible resemblance which transforms the sought-for-proof into derision and leaves the words of gender forever hollow (Foucault, 793).

Is this crazy? Is this madness to question, fuck with, and attempt to alter the identifiability of bodies, by forever changing gender into an unrecognizable thing? What is madness, if not the belief that through language or semiology, one can ever, actually impart meaning? What is madness, if not the belief that through language or semiology, one can ever, actually impart meaning?

“Don Quixote had only one choice, for there’s a remedy for everything except death. ‘I am mad,’ Don Quixote admitted to herself. ‘Since I am mad, I can believe anything (Acker, 19-20)’”

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