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You Get Off on Stealing: Kathy Acker, Travelogues, and the American Imperial Instinct

In 1939, near the end of the United States' twenty-year military occupation of Haiti, Cole Porter produced a musical called *DuBarry Was a Lady*. This musical featured a song called "Katie Went to Haiti," in which the titular Katie repeatedly prolongs her trip after meeting a succession of "natives." Playful but not circumspect, the song (which was sung at one time by Ethel Merman) describes a white American woman who travels to Haiti and enjoys bedding the population so much that she never comes back. The song's bawdy lines conclude: "So Katie lived in Haiti/Her life there was great/'Cause Katie knew her Haiti/And practically all Haiti knew Katie" (Martin). The song, with its conspicuous focus on Haiti as a zone for sexual exploration outside of American society, betrays a complicated relationship between those countries.

While remarkable in its bravado, "Katie Went to Haiti" is certainly not unique in theme. In the first half of the twentieth century, a wide array of American culture concerned itself with Haiti. Travelogues, radio dramas, zombie movies, plays, and novels took Haiti as their exotic subject (Renda 19). For these writers and much of America, Haiti represented a compelling confluence of ideas and themes. Like its neighbor in the Western hemisphere, the United States, it rejected a colonial ruler through a revolution. Yet it is also a predominantly black nation, one with a troubled history and questionable leadership. In her *Taking Haiti*, Mary Renda describes the intricate cultural process by which the United States adopted a paternalistic view towards this sovereign nation and used it as a site for its burgeoning imperial instincts. While American fascination with Haiti waxes and wanes, it has lasted into the twenty-first century, continually renewed with natural and political disasters.

Because of this complicated relationship, Haiti has an outsized presence in American arts and letters. This relationship is especially evident in what was once an ostensibly innocuous literary genre: the travelogue. Haitian travelogues, which were very popular in the years before World War II, offer a captivating depiction of the American cultural attitudes towards Haiti. These guides often approach their subject, the "contact zone," to use Mary Louise Pratt's term, with an unselfconsciously imperial gaze. They suggest racial and cultural superiority, reinforce imperial

relationships, and cast the occupants of the visited nation as “the other.” They are also ripe for parody.

In her 1978 novel, *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, Kathy Acker explores this territory by offering a mockingly self-aware satire of the travelogue. In an apparent reference to the Cole Porter song, Acker’s heroine, Kathy, aspires to lose herself in the country and to enjoy herself in the company of “natives.” However, Kathy’s integration is not as complete as Katie’s. She is continually frustrated and confused by her presence in Haiti. She cannot escape her own Americanness. Instead of a politically-neutral immersion in Haitian culture, Acker shows us that American tourism is subject to the imperial instinct. *Kathy Goes to Haiti* is thus a trenchant cultural critique of the travelogue genre. In her novel, under the guise of travel writing, Acker reproduces and satirizes imperial representations of Haiti: in the “other,” in landscape, in sexuality, and in more overt forms of imperialism. In this essay, I will begin with a brief description of America’s cultural relationship with Haiti to illustrate the origin and authority of the cultural representations that Acker adopts. Next, I will outline the theoretical framework of the cultural critique of the travelogue. Finally, I will show how these themes interact in Acker’s novel.

Haitian and American Cultural Relations

Mary Renda’s *Taking Haiti* describes the beginnings of the complex cultural relationship between the United States and Haiti. The United States began a military occupation of Haiti in 1915 with the goal of creating political stability and of securing strategic and economic interests in the region (Renda 10). Renda writes that the occupation not only had a lasting effect on Haiti, it also greatly influenced American culture. Haiti was seen as an “American Africa,” an exotic space, just off the coast of Florida, which captured the country’s imagination. In this regard, Haiti served a dual purpose – both a location for fantasy, but also an area for a newly-dominant country to test its power. Renda writes: “Exoticism provided at least one solution: incorporate the foreign into American culture, while at the same time inscribing its marginality and otherness. American exoticism toward Haiti thus contributed to an imperial culture organized, in part, around resolving the tension between nation and empire” (Renda 22).

Thus, the cultural sphere became an important location for a dialogue about American imperialism. In this era, a sexualized, primitive, and exotic idea of Haiti appeared throughout popular culture. One of the most lasting Caribbean cultural imports, the zombie, began to appear in American movie theaters and pulp novels at the time (Renda 225). On the most fundamental level, the zombie reflects a fear of losing control over one’s body (or a loved one’s body) to a dark, exotic other – the Haitian male. In 1932’s *White Zombie*, for example, a voodoo priest captures an American woman and changes her into a zombie. Upon discovering that his new bride might still be alive and under the control of a “native,” the hero exclaims: “Surely you don’t think she’s alive, in the hands of natives. Oh no! Better dead than that” (*White Zombie*). Zombies are a symbol of a common cultural attribution to Haiti, expressing the fear of an undifferentiated mass of “others” who threaten the American or European subject. Fictions like

White Zombie also suggest the fear of the sexuality of the other, and the power he might wield over women.

Similarly, voodoo is a deeply mythologized aspect of Haitian culture (Renda 246). It is perceived as a dark spirituality that runs counter to Christianity. One only needs to glance at the title of Edna Taft's Haitian travelogue, *A Puritan in Voodoo-Land* to observe the fevered juxtaposition of Western religion with the idea of an other. Where these irrational fears abounded, however, many Americans saw opportunity in Haiti. The exotic locale, seemingly contrary to American values, also presented the means to lose one's rationality. This desire, commonly known as "going native" has some resonance in both the contemporary culture and for Kathy Acker.

These ideas, formulated in the early imperial period, were merely extended in the second half of the twentieth century. America continued to manipulate its imperial hegemony over Haiti. This dominance of Haiti, in turn, continued to imprint itself on American consciousness. J. Michael Dash, in his *Haiti and the United States: National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination*, traces the contrapuntal images of Haiti and the United States in their literature. He writes:

The history of Haitian-American relations is filled with missed opportunities and tragic incomprehension. American intentions to reshape, control, and dominate Haiti because of the latter's threat to its interests, are sustained by an imaginative grid of stereotypes through which Haiti is filtered into America's consciousness. Images of the rebellious body, the repulsive body, the seductive body, and the sick body constitute a consistent discourse that has fixed Haiti in the Western imagination: the 'Haitianizing of Haiti' as unredeemably deviant. (137)

Dash's use of the word "imaginative" is important here. He uses it to not only describe the breadth of these stereotypes; he also reminds us that they are the product of our collective cultural imagination. They are not natural, but rather invented as tools of imperial hegemony. In the pages that follow, I will describe how travel writing is a significant aspect of this manipulation.

Cultural Criticism and Travelogues

As a literary form, travelogues prove important to understanding *Kathy Goes to Haiti*. Edward Said contributed some of the earliest postcolonial critiques of travelogues. He writes that "Travel books or guidebooks are about as 'natural' a kind of text, as logical in their composition and in their use, as any book one can think of, precisely because of this human tendency to fall back on a text when the uncertainties of travel in strange parts seem to threaten one's equanimity" (Said, *Orientalism*, 93). That is, once someone has told you what to expect from a place, it becomes very easy to find those expectations realized there, a self-fulfilling prophesy. He traces the impact that early travel writer Edward William Lane had on later literary figures such as Gustave Flaubert. Lane described Egypt in ways that Flaubert has internalized and cannot see beyond. Lane's account takes "what might have been the mere narration of travels in foreign parts,

turning an artless text into an encyclopedia of exotic display and a playground for Orientalist scrutiny” (161). In this manner, travelogues reify and perpetuate the cultural stereotypes.

Said extends this idea in *Culture and Imperialism* to show how these cultural attitudes enable colonial and imperial hegemony. He writes that works like travelogues implicitly argue that “the source of the world’s significant action and life is in the West, whose representatives seem at liberty to visit their fantasies and philanthropies upon a mind-deadened Third World. In this view, the outlying regions of the world have no life, history, or culture to speak of, no independence or integrity worth representing without the West” (Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xix). Exotic travel destinations are spaces for the Western subject to explore itself in the land of the other. In colonial discourse, these places only exist as reflected by the Western consciousness and have no agency of their own.

Chinua Achebe’s 1977 essay “An Image of Africa” provides a similar critique of another rich colonial text: Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. While Conrad’s work is fictional, Achebe characterizes it in a way that complements Said’s critique of the travelogue and even predicts Acker’s parody in *Kathy Goes to Haiti*. Achebe criticizes Conrad’s shallow description of Africa:

Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind? But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. (Achebe 788)

The reality of the white characters is privileged in *Heart of Darkness* to the degree that Africa is merely a stage for them to explore their own selfhood. Commonly, these “third-world” destinations are a place for Western literary characters to escape some semblance of their own consciousness, a theme that we will see repeated in Acker’s heroine in our “American Africa.”

Mary Louise Pratt, in her 1992 book *Imperial Eyes*, refocuses criticism on the travelogue genre. She uses her text to introduce some useful terminology to describe themes that occur throughout travel literature. Pratt employs these terms to deconstruct the politics of representation in the imperial mindset. First, the “contact zone” is defined as “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which people geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (Pratt 6). While this is not exactly a new idea, it is certainly a useful term. Next, the “anti-conquest” is defined as “the strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony” (7). That is, imperial powers can claim “anti-conquest” to distance themselves from a traditional colonial relationship. This term is especially important in considering American

imperialism, which is consistently denied in our culture. Accordingly, the notion of “anti-conquest” will illuminate Acker’s intentions in *Kathy Goes to Haiti*.

Also in her text, Pratt offers specific examples of how the travelogue’s representation of foreign lands facilitated an imperial approach to the world. Writers describe landscapes and structures as wretched, desolate, or rich in untapped resources, because this representation creates “possibilities of a Eurocolonial future coded as resources to be developed, surpluses to be traded, towns to be built” (61). Imperial travelogues do not simply want to visit and respect the landscape, they want to evaluate it in terms of their own nation. If the traveler bears witness to a situation that is less than prosperous, it legitimizes European or American authority. To describe a country as “underdeveloped” all but requires its development, usually in the service of an imperial objective.

Numerous authors have taken a feminist view of travel writing. Sara Mills, for example, suggests that female travel writers exist outside of the traditional imperial relationship. Female writers, Mills argues, “cannot be said to speak from outside colonial discourse, but their relation to the dominant discourse is problematic because of its conflict with the discourses of ‘femininity,’ which were operating on them in equal, and sometimes stronger, measure” (Mills 63). Because females are subject to male domination, they cannot assert imperial power in the same manner as men. These are important voices in postcolonial scholarship, but I do not find them applicable here. While it is tempting to think of Acker in terms of a female voice, she was often skeptical of feminist categories (Perilli 33) and often sought to subvert them. In *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, the heroine is obviously female, but I believe that she is more a representative of American hegemony than she is restrained by it.

In *Taking Haiti*, Mary Renda describes a handful of travelogues written by Americans in Haiti. These texts explore similar themes of escaping reason for an exotic, sexualized encounter. In William Seabrook’s popular 1929 account of his Haitian travels, *The Magic Island*, Renda writes “Haiti served as a literalized special representation of the Freudian unconscious, a place where... polymorphous sexuality could be revisited and unshackled” (Renda 249). Another famous account, Edna Taft’s travelogue, *A Puritan in Voodoo-Land*, described her personal, solitary journey to Haiti in a manner that predicts Acker’s novel. In Taft’s travelogue, Renda explains: “Taft eroticized race, recast gender and sexuality, and used her narrative of Haiti’s supposed racial and sexual landscape to assert herself as a modern female sexual subject. In effect, she appropriated the discourse of exotic primitivism to assert female desire” (Renda 255).

Taft begins her travelogue with the discovery that one of her ancestors was a slave trader. She finds pages from his diary – a travelogue itself – in a family Bible. Taft writes that reading his text was the motivation for her to seek out Haiti:

The names of these places were magic words to my young, unformed mind. I spend hours searching enchanting atlases and gazing intently at the globe of the world, seeking a tiny country named Haiti (the Saint-Domingue of my ancestor’s day) and exulting jubilantly when I had found it. I resolved that some day I would visit Haiti myself. (Taft 12)

In this passage we see two common themes in imperial representation. First, as with Lane and Flaubert, one generation's writing has already begun to shape the next. Taft's ancestor's exotic portrayal of Haiti prejudice limits her own portrayal in the pages that follow. Second, we see the unselfconscious manner in which the imperial mindset is reproduced. Taft does not express any remorse at the knowledge that her family's wealth comes in part from the slave trade. On the contrary, she lauds him as a "shrewd Yankee." This knowledge only encourages her to visit these exotic destinations and attempt to somehow replicate his experience in the land among the "beautiful women of mixed blood" (12).

Because these authors identify Haiti as a place for the exploration of a more exotic self, we see the obvious antecedents for Acker's conspicuously sexualized novel. As Dash writes, "Haiti... had been fixed textually since the nineteenth century as a literary sign, inexhaustively suggestive of mystery and carnality" (Dash 105). From its beginnings as the French colony Saint Dominique, Haiti was a highly sexualized place. In her article, "Natural Hedonism: Caribbean Islands as Tropical Playgrounds," Mimi Sheller describes the 1808 travel writing of American Eleanor Sansay:

The luxuriant 'hot-house' of tropical nature, with its 'unfading verdure,' casts a moist shadow into this vision of Creole debauchery and self-indulgent luxuriance, a kind of corrupting sink of sin, lethargy, and despotism, figured through feminine corruption. In sum, it was through the intertwining tendrils of an Edenic nature, the exercise of mastery, and a proximity to enslaved others that European and North American writers explored the risks and desires of being in the Caribbean. These elements of the imperial gaze have subtly informed the ways in which later tourists came to gaze upon the landscape and experience bodily the pleasures of Caribbean travel. (Sheller 27)

This sexualized designation, the ability to "experience bodily the pleasures of Caribbean travel," is a significant aspect of the imperial gaze, and it continues today. Sex tourism surged after World War II (Sheller 32) and continues today. Sheller concludes, in terminology that is notably similar to Dash: "The transgression of moral boundaries serves to reinforce the constitution of geographies of difference that define the North as 'civilized' and the Caribbean as 'unreal,' like 'going back in time.' These touristic performances reflect on a long history of the inscription of corruption onto the landscapes and inhabitants of these 'pleasure islands'" (35).

The promise of sex in Haitian tourism represents more than the imperial gaze, however. For white American women who seek gratification in the arms of black Caribbean men, a more complicated hegemonic relationship is at stake. As Jacqueline Sánchez Taylor writes: "It is not just sex these women are seeking but sexual experiences with the 'embodiment' of their racialized fantasies, and tourist destinations become a safe environment where female sex tourists can enact control over an imagined masculinity which is stereotypically constructed as aggressive and violent" (Sánchez Taylor 47). As we will see in *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, tourists often visit the Caribbean to live out sexual fantasies that reflect profound anxieties of racial difference.

Kathy Acker's Haitian Travelogue as a Critique of Imperialism

Kathy Goes to Haiti recalls the experiences of Americans who traveled abroad generations before Kathy in creatively destructive ways. In her novel, Acker undertakes a satirical mode of a travel writer to provide a critique of American imperialism. She reproduces imperial representations of the other, landscape, sexuality, and more overt manifestations of imperialism as objects for ridicule. In an interview with *Poets and Writers Magazine*, Acker explained that this novel “plays with a number of genres such as the diary and the porn novel” (Perilli 31). While she does not use the term “travelogue,” a diary that one creates while traveling most assuredly fits that definition. Acker approaches this form with a great deal of irony. Even though writing before theorists like Said and Pratt, she seems to recognize that the travelogue is a conspicuous tool of imperial hegemony.

Throughout her body of work, Acker has shown an interest in borrowing from and reworking cultural objects: creating a pastiche of multiple preexisting texts. Her novel *Florida* is an appropriation of the film *Key Largo*. Other novels, such as *Don Quixote* and *Great Expectations* are rewrites of classic novels (Perilli 29). Despite expressing misgivings with the term “postmodern,” Acker describes her desire to appropriate and rework existing texts to discover new meanings. In the *Poets and Writers Interview*, Acker explains: “All text is appropriated. It’s a memory, a story someone tells you, a conversation you had a month ago that you revise when writing it down. One is always using appropriated texts. Everyone does it.” (Perilli 32). In *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, Acker appropriates themes from the texts of America’s cultural and imperial relationship with Haiti. Reworking these texts into a new context enables her to comment on them in interesting ways.

While it is her most significant visit to Haiti, this novel is not Acker’s only grappling with that nation or its cultural forms. In her 1988 novel *Empire of the Senseless*, Acker places zombies and certain Haitian political figures in the Algerian revolution (Naimou 137). She seems to draw parallels with Haiti and Algeria’s struggles against French colonialism. In the introduction to *Kathy Acker and Transnationalism*, Polina Mackay and Kathryn Nicol write “Acker both writes and critiques transnationalism. She addresses transnationalism through the prism of transamerican travel, geopolitics, postcolonial relations of power, and international relations.” (5). Acker is well acquainted with these themes and cultural forms. Accordingly in *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, Acker has not chosen Haiti or the travelogue at random; rather, they allow her the representations she requires to advance a critique of American imperialism.

Her critique begins in the first lines of the novel with stark representations of her otherness. Kathy is an “American white girl” who has just stepped off of an “American Airlines plane” (Acker 5). She does not know where she is going to stay or anyone in Haiti. She claims it is the first time she has been outside of New York, only speaks a little French, and admits, “I know nothing about Haiti” (6). Acker characterizes Kathy’s presence in a deeply satirical way to emphasize the ridiculousness of her presence there: “Kathy hasn’t seen any other white people” (10). That is, Acker highlights Kathy’s otherness in stark juxtaposition to her surroundings. The

fact that Kathy seems to think that she can arrive unprepared in a foreign country indicates her privileged cultural relationship to Haiti.

Kathy's otherness is emphasized throughout the novel interactions with the Haitians, almost exclusively men, which are almost always sexually charged. Yet, in these interactions, she is continually frustrated and confused. Twice in the novel, Kathy repeats the sentence: "I don't understand what's happening" (42 and 79). In both instances, Kathy is with Roger and he's trying to explain their relationship to her. Over the course of the novel, Kathy becomes increasingly desperate and determined to invite this type of confusion, as if she is trying to lose her Western rationality in this exotic, sexualized space. In a voice that recalls the colonial idea of "going native" Kathy tells Roger: "Fuck me as hard as you can. Make me forget everything that's ever happened" (149). At the end of the novel, Kathy is brought to a voodoo doctor for a final bizarre encounter with the exoticized other. Throughout the ceremony, she is "getting dizzier and dizzier" (164). Only after relinquishing all of her money to the voodoo doctor, at the end of the novel, does Kathy emerge, "more dazed than before" (170). A tacit critique of the imperial relationship, these encounters with the other are always disorienting for Kathy. She does not seem to belong in Haiti, nor does she seem to gain any wisdom from her presence there.

Achebe's critique of *Heart of Darkness* is especially instructive to these passages. That novel, he writes, relegates Africa to a backdrop for the "break-up of one petty European mind." Haiti performs a similar function in *Kathy Goes to Haiti*. At one point, Kathy tells Roger that "I'm trying to find out who I am, my mind is basically occupied with this" (93). We see Kathy engage in often disturbingly self-destructive behavior in the pages of this novel. Considering her awkward and disorienting relationships with the other characters, Haitians are not on equal footing with her. More accurately, her engagement with Haiti is imperial. She has seemingly chosen Haiti as a space to locate her journey of self-discovery.

Interspersed among the dialogue in *Kathy Goes to Haiti* are detailed descriptions of the landscape, buildings, and people, which are almost always desolate and miserable: "This is what Kathy sees: First paper-thin paper-like-wall shacks on thin wooden platforms. Walls are dirty pink, dirty pale green, dirty tan." (8) Where the landscape or buildings are described favorably, they are associated with Americanness or whiteness: "The mansion looks like an American government mansion. White white steps lead up to the mansion" (9). Elsewhere, Acker enlightens the reader with long passages on the rum industry. These descriptions seem to directly recall (or, rather, predict) Mary Louise Pratt's critique of colonial travel literature. The landscape is represented in such a way that encourages and enables an imperial future. What is undeveloped, poor, or wretched could certainly be aided by American benevolence. Acker even provides a description of what little successful industry thrives on the island.

The descriptions of sex in the novel also suggest an imperial relationship. The sex begins almost immediately, when Kathy falls into bed with her taxi driver, one of the first people she meets in Haiti. The frequent sex scenes are written graphically, but artificially. The sentences are choppy, conspicuously devoid of exclamation marks, and not structured in a way that emphasizes joy, or ecstasy, or intimacy. Kathy's pleasure seems entirely false. This rampant, but mirthless and distant sex advances Acker's critique of the imperial relationship. If these passages read more

erotically, or if Kathy really seemed to enjoy them, then Acker would be condoning the idea of sex tourism. Instead, we are treated to this disconcerting farce, where we are not entirely sure what the characters are really feeling.

Even excepting the symbolic presence of imperialism, Acker provides some very specific evidence for the toxic relationship of American imperialism. Throughout the novel, Kathy's American self is continually reinforced. As the novel progresses, she becomes more aware of her role as an American in an uncivilized foreign land. Acker asserts this presence through allusions to military and economic hegemony. Early in Kathy's journey, the American presence in Haiti is hinted at rather ominously. The narrator notes that "the United States Navy waits a mile away in the ocean" (8). Papa, conspicuously, a "American perhaps ex-CIA ex-sailor" (112), is the only American male she encounters. He is the only character who claims to offer Kathy a clear picture of the socio-political situation in Haiti. Papa seems to exist in the novel as a powerful symbol of America's role there. He reminds Kathy, for example, that "Haitian labor's cheaper than slavery" (115).

While American military power is simply alluded to, its economic power is present throughout the novel. The narrator describes the economic relationship between the countries: "Almost all consumer goods are imports from the US. If a Haitian wants to produce cars or TV's in Haiti, he has to make the items in Haiti, export them to the US, import them to Haiti." (27) Haiti's economy is not only dependent on America's, it is beholden to it.

This hegemony exists both on global and on personal levels. Kathy tells the children she's befriended of the economic disparity: "Compared to you I'm rich, but back home in the States I am poor" (122). This dialogue, as much of what Kathy says, is a strikingly prescient example of what Pratt calls "anti-conquest." That is, Kathy denies her role in imperialism in the same breath that she reifies that imperial order. In this vein, anti-conquest also enables the United States government to deny its own imperial tendencies in the age of American exceptionalism. In an internal monologue, Kathy makes the ostensibly personal statement, "You don't want to steal but you don't know how to get along if you don't steal... Even if you don't need the money, you get off on stealing." (80). When considered in the context of American imperialism, however, this statement takes on an eerie relevance.

American culture makes interesting appearances in Acker's Haiti, in many ways reflecting cultural imperialism. It serves two purposes in the novel: First, it suggests the reach of American cultural authority. Second, it lends Kathy a frame of reference, a small taste of home, perhaps, when she encounters the Haitian other. When Kathy meets Roger for the first time, he is wearing a Donald Duck t-shirt (35). When she encounters a group of Haitians in their home, "everyone's watching 'Hogan's Heroes' on TV" (32). Kathy herself does her best to spread American culture. Apropos of nothing, when chatting with a group of boys, she asks them if they know Gene Kelley, the star of *An American in Paris*: "Do you know Gene Kelley? He can give you comfort... Gene Kelley's a good man. You have to see him when you get to New York, and then you'll be OK." (125)

In the beginning of the novel, Kathy is comfortable in her role as a tourist; however, as her journey progresses, she declares her American hegemony more explicitly. In a conversation with Roger, she sounds especially American in wondering why he doesn't take better advantage of his situation: "As long as you're fortunate enough to be rich, fuck, why don't you set things up exactly the way you want them?" (83). As she becomes more frustrated by her relationship with Roger, she reverts to her Americanness to find a semblance of power. After repeated baiting by the group of boys, she reminds them: "'I'm going to cause a lot of trouble for you,' the white girl says. 'I'm an American so I can do it. You'd better watch your fuckin' step'" (127).

When cornered, we see that Kathy relies on her Americanness as a form of power. Though she has deliberately left her native country and traveled to an unfamiliar place where she does not know anyone, Kathy has not escaped the imperial influence of her own country, even choosing to wield it when advantageous. Here Acker provides her most trenchant critique of the American imperial instinct. It is so deeply ingrained in our culture – our literary forms, our perceptions of other lands, our interpersonal relationships, and our sexuality – that we can never simply leave it behind.

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