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Women's Review of Books

Volume 35, Issue 2
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A.J. Verdelle on Brittney Cooper's *Beyond Respectability*

(See page 4)

Susana Morris on Patrisse Khan-Cullors's *When They Call You a Terrorist*

(See page 3)

Laurie Stone on Chris Kraus's *After Kathy Acker*

(See page 8)

Kathleen Cleaver," digital collage, 2015 by Elise R. Peterson

From the Editor

Dear Readers,

In 1983, when the *Women's Review of Books* was born, I was a 13-year-old girl in Fargo, North Dakota. I was your typical brace-faced, permed, acned, insecure, morose, and misunderstood teen—but also smart and ambitious. Three things saved me: theatre (in retrospect, *such* a safe way to get attention and feel special); feminism (my mother had *Ms.* magazine on the coffee table always, which gave direction to my ambition and support for my intellect); and books.

I've returned to the last two saving graces many times. After college, I became an intern and then an editor at *Ms.* magazine in New York. From there I wrote for magazines like *The Nation*, *Glamour*, and *Harper's* for many years and wrote six books about contemporary feminism, including *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* and *Look Both Ways: Bisexual Politics.* I directed and produced two documentaries, cofounded a feminist lecture bureau with Amy Richards called Soapbox, co-created Feminist Camp, toured the country talking about feminism in action, and became the publisher and executive director of the Feminist Press. I left FP in late 2017 to start an independent press called Dottir and to become the third editor in chief of this significant review.

The institutions of feminism are always important but they are especially critical now, in this moment of great upheaval, movement, and reckoning. Our institutions provide roots—ballast for the tall saplings of new feminist activism and vision.

As I went through the lists of writers kept meticulously by outgoing editor Amy Hoffman (and before her founding editor Linda Gardiner), I felt the scale of this root system. One thousand nine hundred and sixty-six names of contributors lined the pages, a roll call of luminaries, living and dead, such as Julia Alvarez, Patricia Bell Scott, Akasha Hull, Dorothy Allison, Susie Bright, Michelle Cliff, Rita Dove, Jo Freeman, Erica Jong, Jack Halberstam, Peggy McIntosh, Barbara Ransby, Adrienne Rich, Grace Paley, Ursula Le Guin.

So it is with great pride and humility that I take the helm of the *Women's Review of Books*, with the support of WRB's home at Wellesley Centers for Women (itself an awesome institution) and Old City Publishing. Together, we can continue to lift up essential serious writing and criticism by women—and provide deep, deep roots to support the next generations of smart, ambitious 13-year-olds.

Always,
Jennifer Baumgardner
New York City, February, 2018

Women's Review of Books is one of the things that has always made me proudest about leading the Wellesley Centers for Women. I cannot remember a time when I was not aware of *WRB*—a fact aided by the reality that the publication launched the year after I graduated from high school, just as my feminist/womanist consciousness was emerging. Without a doubt, *WRB* is one of the most palpable feminist successes of our time. Women came and saw the gender gap in the publishing world, self-organized to address it, and then turned what they had built into a veritable institution. This endeavor was aided by another feminist institution, the Wellesley Centers for Women (then the Center for Research on Women and the Stone Center) and, later, by some very forward-thinking men at Old City Publishing.

From Linda Gardiner's vision to Amy Hoffman's genius to, now, Jennifer Baumgardner's spirit of innovation—and, of course, with thanks to the hundreds of writers whose reviews have filled every issue and the thousands of subscribers and readers of all genders who have both supported and been the reason for WRB's publication—feminist action has changed history. May it continue to be so, throughout these pages and beyond!

Layli Maparyan, PhD
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Contents

3 REVOLUTION NOW *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir* By Patrisse Khan-Cullors **Reviewed by Susana Morris**

4 THE ORIGINS OF FEMINISM *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* By Brittney C. Cooper **Reviewed by A. J. Verdelle**

5 THE GAY NINETIES *We Were Witches: A Novel* By Ariel Gore; *Stray City: A Novel* By Chelsey Johnson **Reviewed by Jessica Jernigan**

6 EMBODIED POLITICS *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics: From Welfare Reform to Foreclosure to Trump* By Laura Briggs; *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* By Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger **Reviewed by Felicia Kornbluh, Lila Hughes, and Meghan Letizia**

8 KRAUSIAN *After Kathy Acker* By Chris Kraus **Reviewed by Laurie Stone**

10 SPOTTY *The H-Spot: The Feminist Pursuit of Happiness* By Jill Filipovic **Reviewed by Emily Toth**

11 FRONTIER LORE AND LAURA *Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder* By Caroline Fraser **Reviewed by Rebecca Steinitz**

12 EPISTOLARY AUTOBIOGRAPHY *The Book of Emma Reyes: A Memoir* By Emma Reyes **Reviewed by Marjorie Agosin**

13 SWEET CHARITY *Funding Feminism: Monied Women, Philanthropy and the Women's Movement, 1870 – 1967* By Joan Marie Johnson **Reviewed by Surina Khan**

14 PROGRESS AND PERSISTENCE *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* By Arundhati Roy **Reviewed by Marthine Satris**

16 PHOTOGRAPHY BONDS Photos By **Isadora Kosofsky**, Text by **Lisa Riordan Seville**

18 UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS *Women of the Street: How the Criminal Justice-Social Services Alliance Fails Women in Prostitution* By Susan Dewey and Tonia St. Germain **Reviewed by Marianne Wesson**

19 POETRY By **Paula Bohince**

20 HERMITESSES *The Ladies of Llangollen: Desire, Indeterminacy, and the Legacies of Criticism* By Fiona Brideoake **Reviewed by Lisa L. Moore**

21 FEAR, HUNGER, AND FEAR *Lioness: Golda Meir and the Nation of Israel* By Francine Klagsbrun **Reviewed by Eleanor Roffman**

22 VICTIMS AND HEROES *Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females, Tapestries and Sculptures by Linda Stein* Edited by Linda Stein **Reviewed by Catherine Dossin**

23 ALL MUSEUMS ARE SEX MUSEUMS *Sex Museums: The Politics and Performance of Display* By Jennifer Tyburczy **Reviewed by Patricia G. Berman**

25 THE INFIDEL *The Rabbi's Atheist Daughter: Ernestine Rose, International Feminist Pioneer* By Bonnie S. Anderson **Reviewed by Joyce Antler**

27 WE DO *Awakening: How Gays and Lesbians Brought Marriage Equality to America* By Nathaniel Frank **Reviewed by Alison Lefkovitz**

28 DISPLACED LIVES *The Women in the Castle* By Jessica Shattuck **Reviewed by Valerie Miner**

29 THE TENURE TIGHTROPE *Written/Unwritten: Diversity and the Hidden Truths of Tenure* By Marilyn Buck **Reviewed by Marybeth Gasman**

31 GOOD READS DREAMS FROM MY FATHER **By Trish Crapo**

32 MORE POETRY By **Sarah Bartlett**

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Maia, it's not enough for Ariel to make art. She also has to be paid for her art, and *We Were Witches* is as much about Ariel's struggle to navigate patriarchal systems as it is about the evolution of a young writer.

When the novel begins, Ariel is an unwed, teenage mother in the very early 1990s. The bedtime stories she reads Maia are chapters from Adrienne Rich and Gloria Anzaldúa. These authors—and others; there's a reading list at the back of the book—help Ariel imagine a world in which she deserves the life that she wants for herself and her daughter. These authors give Ariel the strength to seek public assistance and pursue an education and invent an idea of motherhood that encompasses Ariel's reality as a young, queer, single mom and an artist.

Ariel also discovers magic. Magic here is both dramatic and pragmatic. It is intent made physical—a mirror on a windowsill to deflect the evil eye, Crown of Success powder sprinkled on a college application—and it is an assertion that the way things are is not the way things have to be. Of course, "witch" is a gendered term. Ariel's spells are her response to the voices she hears on conservative radio, men like Rush Limbaugh and Pat Robertson, people who want her to be ashamed of her body and her baby. Magic, for Ariel, is a form of self-determination, just like writing is.

Ariel endures humiliation at the hands of people who are supposed to help her, and she has to pretend to be something she isn't in order to maintain custody of her child. But she also finds the community she needs, and she conjures into being a career that is both satisfying and sustaining. She discovers that she doesn't have to live the story anyone else has written for her. She can live—and write—her own.

Set in the late 1990s, *Stray City* can be read as what comes just after *We Were Witches*. Indeed, as a teenager living in Nebraska, protagonist Andrea Morales learns about a world beyond her small, conservative town from zines not unlike Gore's *Hip Mama*. She also learns that Nebraska is no place for a girl who likes girls. Arriving in Portland just as the Riot Grrrl moment is passing, Andy is nostalgic for a scene she never knew, but what she inherits is the safe, welcoming, openly queer community that women like Ariel helped to build.

Andy works at a letterpress studio. Her circle of friends includes a tattoo artist and a stripper. Just about everybody is in a band, and all these young adults are able to pursue their creative dreams while paying the rent and buying craft beers. And they have built families of choice to replace the families they've left behind. It's all precious.

Not that there's anything wrong with that! After watching Ariel fight against people and systems that want her to hate herself, there's something rather lovely in reading a novel in which being a lesbian is not an impediment to happiness. Indeed, Andy's major crisis is, ultimately, that she is deemed not lesbian *enough*. This happens when she reveals that she's pregnant.

Andy's relationship with her baby's father begins when she is reeling from romantic disappointment and betrayal. Ryan is cute. He's a good guy. And—and this is the important part—he wants Andy in a moment when no one else seems to. What begins as a spontaneous encounter becomes something of an experiment, and there's some ironic enjoyment to be had in the presentation of hetero sex being a passing phase in this young woman's life. But there's a lot of text between Andy's first kiss with a man, her first experience of straight intercourse, and the realization that she's pregnant. Andy and Ryan spend a great deal of time together. She even tours with his band. This section of the novel is not problematic because Andy continues to identify as a lesbian even as she acts very much like Ryan's girlfriend—Andy can identify however she wants—the problem is that Chelsey Johnson doesn't really interrogate the tension between Andy's stated sexuality and her behavior with Ryan, and their time together takes up so much of the novel.

Johnson also chooses to skip more than ten years of Andy's life, which leaves the reader with nothing more than reminiscences about her early days as a mother. By the time we meet her daughter Lucia, she is a charming, well-adjusted ten-year-old. We learn that, after Andy's friends got over her disloyalty to lesbianism, they welcome her back into their supportive embrace. The ex that drove her into the arms of a man has become something of a co-parent. And Andy has found the love of her life in Beatriz. It all seems very easy which—while there's nothing wrong with that!— is somewhat disappointing aesthetically. On the other hand, this is a novel in which happily-ever-after happens for women who love women, single mothers, and families that don't conform to conservative ideals. It's a pleasure to read.

It's tempting to linger in the hopeful glow of *Stray City*, but this is not a hopeful time, and witches are having a cultural moment. The sitting president has called the investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 election "the single greatest witch hunt of a politician in American history!" Responding to allegations against Harvey Weinstein, Woody Allen called the #MeToo movement the product of a "witch hunt atmosphere." Lindy West shot back with a widely-shared *New York Times* op-ed entitled, "Yes, This Is a Witch Hunt. I'm a Witch and I'm Hunting You." Echoing themes from Gore's book, West writes, "We don't have the justice system on our side; we don't have institutional power; we don't have millions of dollars or the presidency; but we have our stories, and we're going to keep telling them." Women having been carrying signs and wearing T-shirts saying "We Are The Granddaughters of the Witches You Weren't Able to Burn."

Which brings us back to Gore's novel, both to its spells and its bibliography. Gore and I are contemporaries. Her time at Mills College overlaps with my years at Bryn Mawr. I was reading Judith Butler and learning to smash the patriarchy at more or less the same time she was. Otherwise, my life has had a different, more conventional, shape than Gore's. I am sure that there was an era—when I had a well-remunerated corporate job, when I had a nice apartment, when I didn't have to think about what I put in my basket at the grocery store—during which I thought I no longer needed the second-wave feminists and womanists who had blown my young mind.

I have since outgrown that naïve confidence—in society, in myself—and I find myself identifying with the young Ariel that Gore has written, the survivor who reads Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa to her baby. I understand the appeal of witchcraft. And these words of Audre Lorde— "I become less willing to accept powerlessness"— cut me to the quick, again. ⓦ

Jessica Jernigan is a writer and editor living in Michigan. Her work has appeared in *Bitch*, *Electric Literature*, and *Nonbinary Review*, among other publications.

Embodied Politics

How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics: From Welfare Reform to Foreclosure to Trump

By Laura Briggs

Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017, 288 pp., $29.95, hardcover

Reproductive Justice: An Introduction

By Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger

Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017, 351 pp., $27.95, paperback

Reviewed by Felicia Kornbluh, Lila Hughes, and Meghan Letizia

Feminism in the Trump era is truly a mass movement. This seems normal to those of us who are undergraduates and shocks those who came up in the I'm-not-a-feminist-but 1980s and 1990s. It's great to feel the love from Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, Lena Dunham, and corporate *honchas* like Sheryl Sandberg. But today's challenges are still mighty:

- How do we ensure that institutions built over years, such as the Planned Parenthood Federation of America and its local affiliates, can survive when politicians are deriding and defunding abortion services and birth control?
- What will it take to ensure that all gender and sexual subordinates have an equal chance to set the feminist agenda? After all these years, why aren't the most elite feminists embarrassed by the narrowness of their program for mostly wealthy, white, cisgender, heterosexual women? When will all of us—trans* women, rural white welfare moms, Latinx migrants without legal documents, Deaf and disabled people, African American

lesbians, genderqueers of every variety—get an equal chance to shape mobilizations for gender justice?

- How can we maintain the momentum of last year's Women's Marches, and everything that has happened since, while deepening a shared sense of the feminist agenda? How do we make feminist communities smarter, more strategic, and more nourishing of the people in them and the work we must do?

Laura Briggs's *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics* offers some ideas about how to move forward on all of these questions as she examines late 20th and early 21st century US politics through the lens of reproductive justice. The book makes a contribution to the contemporary conversation that transcends the deep but narrow work of many academic historians. She is an ideal person to take on this task, a historian and gender studies scholar whose prior work focuses on the issues of gender, imperialism, and reproduction. She is an alum of the oft-mourned left periodical *Gay Community News* (*GCN*), and she uses the *GCN* archives and her own memories to tell stories that are often lost in queer histories.

How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics is the second volume in a new series on reproductive justice from the University of California Press, edited by the scholar-activists Loretta Ross, Rickie Solinger, Zakiya Luna, Ruby Tapiya, and Khiara Bridges. Ross, who led the organization SisterSong: Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective from 2005 to 2012, and Solinger, a historian and curator, inaugurated the series with their own volume, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction.* Their aim, they write, is "an expansive explanation of reproductive justice so that readers"—scholars and activists alike—can

> learn about this creative vision for achieving human rights protections. The primer will also help readers understand how reproductive justice is significantly different from the pro-choice/antiabortion debates that have dominated the headlines and mainstream political conflict for so long.

The inauguration of this series is a major event for feminist readers—and for anyone who cares about pregnancy, parenting, racism, public benefits, or inequality. It is part of an important trend: Briggs, Ross, and Solinger aim to use their expertise to inform social movements and keep hope alive. Although Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies have always been politicized fields, in the early 2000s, a "women's studies on its own" approach emphasized traditional markers of discipline formation, like departmental status and tenured faculty lines, and de-emphasized using knowledge to make feminist change. Now, however, the pendulum has swung back. Many feminist intellectuals have regained the interest of their predecessors in the first generation of Women's Studies programs in overtly supporting feminist action.

At the heart of both books under consideration is the term "reproductive justice." The phrase refers to an activist politics that emerged under different names in the late 1960s and early 1970s alongside what was then an increasingly successful movement for legal, accessible birth control and abortion. In New York, for example, the state legislature legalized abortion three years prior to the Supreme Court holding in *Roe v. Wade*. At roughly the same time, Helen Rodriguez Trias and others inspired by the Black Power movement and the Puerto Rican Young Lords demanded that the reproductive agenda expand to include opposing the coercive sterilization of poor and nonwhite women under US dominion. In the 1980s, organizations such as the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA)—a joining of white and nonwhite left-of-center feminists—fought restrictions on abortion access on the basis of income (as in the Hyde Amendment of 1977), and joined the causes of welfare rights and reproductive rights into a single agenda to expand parents' freedom to bear and raise their children.

The reproductive justice movement is more diffuse today than it was decades ago. Academic manifestations of it include Hampshire College's Civil Liberties and Public Policy project (CLPP) and the Center on Reproductive Rights and Justice (CRRJ) at the University of California Berkeley law school. The leading activist organization committed to reproductive justice is probably Ross's group, SisterSong. Many would argue, too, that #BlackLivesMatter and the "mothers of the movement" pursue reproductive justice when they insist that children raised by parents of color should not be killed in the street, and that the #MeToo movement regarding sexual harassment and violence is a reproductive justice effort when it implicates power relations in the workplace that shape the intimate lives of the most vulnerable workers.

Briggs's book, and Ross and Solinger's, present reproductive justice implicitly and explicitly as a recognition of the reproductive *in*justices facing women seeking to prevent pregnancy, to have children, and, explain Ross and Solinger, "to *parent* children in safe and healthy environments" [emphasis theirs].

Briggs's book is not a primer but rather a provocation. Briggs argues that "there is no outside" to reproductive politics in the modern US. She covers issues that are easy to see as reproductive, such as infant mortality, and others that seem far afield, such as the foreclosure crisis, which she suggests had a reproductive dimension because families headed by women and lower-income, nonwhite families were the ones most likely to lose their homes. Interestingly, although in common parlance "reproductive rights" usually refers to legal birth control and abortion, none of Briggs's chapters takes abortion or birth control as its centerpiece.

Briggs gives pride of place in her book to the welfare "reforms" of the middle 1990s, which she treats as paradigmatic and in some ways causal of what came afterward. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, drafted by a Republican Congress and signed by President Bill Clinton, attempted to change poor people's sexual, romantic, and parenting behavior, and sustained gender and racial stereotypes. The law's language (beginning with its title) suggested that poor people were responsible for their own poverty due to bad reproductive decisions, especially nonmarital parenting and teen sex. The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (TANF) created by the law, mandated waged work but did not provide childcare or transportation for women leaving the rolls. Once they were working, many lost their Medicaid health insurance.

Briggs points out that in 1997, the year the law went into effect, Walmart became the largest private-sector employer in the US. Three-quarters of its workforce was female. Walmart encouraged employees to apply for government benefits, demonstrating that its wages and others in the "McJobs" economy didn't come close to covering essential expenses such as food, rent, healthcare, and childcare.

Maintaining her expansive approach, Briggs delves into the histories of US imperialism and immigration, especially from Latin America. Empire and migration are inseparable from what Briggs terms "offshoring reproduction," or what the sociologist Rhacel Salazar Parrenas has termed the global "care chain." Briggs argues that, as neoliberalism keeps wealthy white women from balancing careers and family, they appoint women of color, typically migrant women, to fulfill their socially assigned reproductive labor. Migrant careworkers in the United States face all sorts of potential reproductive injustices: the fear of deportation may keep undocumented women from claiming abortion and birth control; they may be unable to care for their own family members, who are thousands of miles away; and they may face assault and abuse in their domestic workplaces.

Ross and Solinger add to Briggs's picture of cross-national reproductive injustice by documenting sexual assaults against Latinx women while they travel to the United States, and the accusation they face once they arrive that they are here to bear "anchor babies," who are citizens even though their parents are not.

Briggs discusses infant mortality and infertility as examples of reproductive issues that are plagued by racial disparities. In the wake of decreasing social supports and increasing financial instability, African American women, in particular, suffer from financial, emotional, and social distress—and, apparently as a result, infant and maternal mortality is much higher in black communities than in white ones. Giving in to their racial stereotypes, politicians and many citizens have focused on what these mothers were supposedly doing wrong, such as co-sleeping or smoking, instead of blaming the infant deaths on the structural determinants of reproductive experiences, such as poor or nonexistent medical care or daily stress. At the same time, upper-middle-class, white professionals are facing what Briggs calls "structural infertility"—an inability to conceive shaped by work stresses and mismatches between the best time during the life cycle to parent and the structure of professional careers.

Briggs includes in her exploration of reproductive politics a rich discussion of the battle for same-sex marriage. She differs from other radical queers who claim that same-sex marriage politics are inherently conservative. Briggs acknowledges ways in which campaigns for marriage participated in the privatization of reproductive and family functions. She notes that conservative reproductive politics, in the form of defending marriage for the sake of children, ultimately helped judges in appellate courts approve of same-sex unions. But she also emphasizes the injustices that preceded legal recognition of same-sex marriage, such as queer families' financial instability and partners' shaky legal access to one another in times of crisis.

Regarding this issue, she restores the plight and activism of the lesbian partners Sharon Kowalski and Karen Thompson to the central historical place they deserve. Kowalski had become disabled in a

car accident, and Thompson petitioned to become her legal guardian. Kowalski's parents contested the guardianship and excluded Thompson from visiting her partner. After a years' long legal struggle, the case was ultimately decided in Thompson's favor. Thompson's book, *Why Can't Sharon Kowalski Go Home?* (co-authored with Julie Andrzejewski, 1989) asked a question that was, in Briggs's view, as much a spur to marriage claims as were the tragic scenes of partners prevented from caring for one another in hospital AIDS wards. However, we were not entirely convinced that "reproductive politics" was the best umbrella under which to place Kowalski's and Thompson's childless lesbian union, which was disrupted by Kowalski's car accident and subsequent disabilities.

In addition to all of the things we admire about Briggs' work, we have a few quibbles: The most significant is a concern that, ultimately, although the book is about reproductive politics, it attributes agency to corporate employers such as Walmart. Patriarchy, or male supremacy, seems to play no independent role in producing the phenomena under study—nor do white supremacy or heterosexism. This doesn't quite work: in the case of welfare reform, for example, it is plausible that the prime movers behind its work mandate were low-wage retail and fast-food employers. But how do "McJobs" explain the many gendered aspects of the law that don't necessarily serve low-wage employers? Where in Briggs's picture is the human agency of the politicians who craft welfare, immigration, healthcare, and foreclosure policies?

Second, Briggs lays responsibility for "neoliberalism" at the door of Ronald Reagan and the Republicans without also decrying the practices of mainstream Democrats. The history of "welfare reform" of course makes this point—starting with *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), by Lyndon Johnson's Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Known as the Moynihan Report, the study argued that a black matriarchy had produced dysfunctional families, which in turn created poverty. It was Democratic President Bill Clinton who endorsed TANF, and Barack Obama whose My Brother's Keeper program blamed poor men of color for their families' economic plight. Clinton and Obama were also responsible for grotesquely illiberal immigration policies, which divided mothers from their children and exposed both to terrible treatment, reproductive and otherwise. Obama continued the bank bailouts begun under President George W. Bush and failed to create a mortgage assistance program that would truly help the families (disproportionately families of color, disproportionately headed by women) who were losing their homes.

Briggs's work is a great one to spur thinking. It may be less useful as a guide to policy. The solutions she proposes are breezy and brief. For example, the Fight for Fifteen movement, which Briggs endorses, runs into immediate problems when progressives want to implement it without making sure that low-income wage earners continue to receive Medicaid and other income-sensitive public benefits. Reproductive politics, considered as broadly as it is by Briggs, is of great analytical value. However, for feminist activists in the current environment, an agenda that stretches (in the words of Briggs's subtitle) "from welfare reform to foreclosure to Trump" may be too much to take on all at once.

Felicia Kornbluh is an associate professor of History and Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies at the University of Vermont (UVM). She is a member of the board of directors of Planned Parenthood of Northern New England and co-author, with Gwendolyn Mink, of the forthcoming ***Ensuring Poverty: Welfare Reform in Feminist Perspective.***

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Krausian

After Kathy Acker

By Chris Kraus

South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2017,

345 pp., $24.95, hardcover

Reviewed by Laurie Stone

Jorge Luis Borges said that the writing of Franz Kafka was so original, it created its own precursors. It made us read Kierkegaard and the ninth-century Chinese writer Han Yu as Kafkaesque. Without Kafka, we would not notice their calm ability to make strangeness ordinary and the ordinary strange. The writing of Chris Kraus is so layered and witty, it is causing things to look Krausian. The best way to read the writing of Kathy Acker is as a precursor to the writing of Chris Kraus.

No one, including Kraus, claims to feel pleasure reading Acker. In a recent phone conversation, Kraus said that, as an aspiring, some-kind-of-artist in 1980s New York, she got high enough on Acker's *chutzpah* to place her own subjectivity at the center of her sentences. That Acker does, as well as her menstrual blood, bad fucks, her ambition to be famous, torture porn, and rich-girl stealing from better writers to pay herself. On the phone, Kraus said, "I would see her at an art opening or a party, and my palms would get sweaty, and I'd be frozen with awe and terror." Years later, Kraus reports in the autofiction *I Love Dick* (1997), she was browsing through the books of Sylvère Lottringer, whom she

Kathy Acker, 1986. Photo by Robert Croma

would marry, and found a volume inscribed, "To Sylvère, The Best Fuck In The World (At Least To My Knowledge) Love, Kathy Acker." So there is that link, too.

Acker died in a Tijuana alternative health facility in 1997, at age fifty, from breast cancer she chose not to treat with chemotherapy. Five or so years later, Kraus thought of writing a biography of Acker but hesitated, sensing she didn't have the detachment she would need to find a story worth telling and a voice to tell it in. The story worth telling would not celebrate Acker's artistry, although there is daring and invention in what she wrote. She was an avatar of the great Lower East Side, do-it-yourself art camp, where anyone could put on a show in a hole-in-the-wall café and anyone could be an artist with a patchwork of found objects. Acker spliced her letters and diary entries between slabs of appropriated texts from Charles Dickens, Sextus Propertius, Emily Bronte, and scads of others, producing surprising formal effects and willing her experience into the body of Literature. No detail of corporeal existence was out of bounds. She could be rude, occasionally funny, and stark. Sentences here and there jump out with simple truth and wit. "Intense sexual desire is the greatest thing in the world (*Eurydice in the Underworld* [1997])." "Murderers know nothing about fashion (*My Mother: Demonology* [1993])."

Still, overall, Acker's writing is dull in its sameness. The narrators look in, not out. They feel, feel, feel, but we do not see, see, see what they are looking at. Their pronouncements are melodramatic, their images overblown. They ask for love, a pat on the head for their erudition, and agreement with their analyses and summaries. It's exhausting to keep having to say okay.

Wisely, Kraus turned her attention to the circus of Acker's life and to her disciplined march to a place in the world. Wikipedia lists 26 published titles in Acker's entry. By the time Acker was 32, she was the subject of an hour-long documentary as part of the prestigious British *South Bank Show*. She began by self-publishing and eventually formed a relationship with Grove Press. She became a literary superstar in 1980s England and in the US and elsewhere—a punk-glam luminary, performing on stage to large, appreciative crowds, marketing herself as a gender outlaw with her tattooed, pierced biker body and Comme des Garcons clothes.

She lived like a man, without pregnancy; she lived like a woman by putting her body at risk of pregnancy and having five abortions. She lived like a man by ignoring women; she lived like a woman