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KATHY ACKER'S DISINTEGRATED NARRATIVE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF TRAUMA STUDIES

Abstract. The central idea of this paper is to show how a narrative disintegrates within the context of trauma studies through the example of Kathy Acker's novel *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984). This idea is based on Shoshana Felman's claim that traumatic events provoke a "disintegration of narrative". Before the analysis of the novel, the theoretical background is provided in terms of explaining both physical and mental traumas, relying on the research conducted by Sigmund Freud in several of his studies and Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of Violence – from domestic abuse to political terror* (1997).

Key words: disintegration, narrative, Kathy Acker, postmodernism, trauma studies

1. Introduction

Kathy Acker, dubbed a "riot girl ahead of her time", is often associated with the New York punk movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s, which are also the years of the rise of postmodernism. Her works bear undeniable traits of postmodernist writing, which Fredric Jameson sees as writing featuring pastiche and schizophrenic fragmentation (*Postmodernism, or the Logic of Late Capitalism* 1997). There is also Jean-François Lyotard with his insistence that there is a general rejection of the grand narratives of the past in postmodernism (*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* 1984). However, this does not mean that there is a complete loss of all narratives, but the rejection of one, privileged narrative (Pitchford 2002: 48). All of these traits of postmodernist writing offer new possibilities of understanding the narratives written in that period, and the narrative taken for the analysis in this paper is Kathy Acker's novel, *Blood and Guts in High School* (first published in 1984), a novel particularly notable for one reason – the disintegration of its narrative. This paper therefore deals with the way a narrative disintegrates within the context of trauma studies, taken as a context for the analysis of Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*. In the first part of this paper, an overview of some of the definitions of narrative is provided. It is also argued that Kathy Acker's narrative is actually simulacrum. Another notable thing about her narrative is that it is imbued with plagiarism. In the second part of this paper, trauma and trauma studies in general are defined. Judith Herman's, Shoshana Felman's and Dori Laub's, Cathy Caruth's, and Sigmund Freud's definitions of different types of trauma offer the foundation upon

which further explanations of trauma, such as PTSD and bodily trauma present in the novel, which stem from rape, abortion, violence, and incestuous relationships. Their impact on the novel's narrative is also examined. The third and the final part is dedicated to the close inspection of the novel and its particular scenes by relying on trauma studies to offer a scientific explanation for certain aspects portrayed in the novel.

2. Narrative and its Disintegration

A narrative is usually taken as a sequence of events, either real or fictional, and in essence it is the same as a story (*Narrative*). There are as many narratives and types of narratives as there are people. In a study written together with Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Shoshana Felman provides a definition of a sort of narrative, which is, as she says, based on Maurice Blanchet, "[...] the tension of a secret around which it is elaborated, and which declares itself without thereby being elucidated, announcing only its own movement" (1992: 193). Essentially, there is a secret, an event, which initiates the beginning of a story, centered upon the event which brought it into being. In this paper, the focus is not placed on any narrative, but a *particular* one that exists in the face of trauma. Shoshana Felman also elaborates on a narrative in the face of trauma in the previously mentioned study. What she sees as a narrative is: "[...] a mode of discourse and a literary genre" (Felman and Laub 1992: 93). She sides with Barbara Herrnstein Smith and quotes her when she says that a narrative consists of "verbal acts consisting of someone telling someone else that something happened" (Ibid.). This act of telling someone what happened is narrative itself. As far as narratives during traumatic events are concerned, a rise in such narratives can be seen in postmodernism, due to the omnipresent sense of loss, pain, and trauma experienced in the aftermath of World War II, or, in the second part of the XX century, the time of the rise of postmodernist writing. Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* is one of the most prominent postmodern novels due to the fact that it deals with the traumatic life of Janey, who forms a rather fragmented narrative around her, and which showcases the disintegration of the narrative, body, and mind, which occurs in the face of trauma.

Postmodern narrative in general is a way of understanding the "various existing tensions within our culture" (Steinborn 1997: 2). Jean-François Lyotard claims that this period coincides with the completion of restoration in Europe, which is roughly the period after the 1950s, the years following the end of the Second World War (Lyotard 1984: 1). This period is marked by changes in technology and means of communication, which all lead to the creation of a post-industrial, computerized, mass-media society and omnipresent tensions. Lyotard claims that in postmodernism we see the spreading of capitalism, and its control and guidance over the acquisition of new and already existing knowledge. "Knowledge is and will be produced in order

to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange” (Lyotard 1984: 4). He sees two types of knowledge which can be exchanged: scientific and narrative knowledge (Lyotard: 1984: 7). Scientific knowledge is self-explanatory, however, narratives are stories which belong to every single community, and the purpose of those stories is to explain the past, present, and future (Maširević 2011: 93). Narrative knowledge is therefore important, as it is in the very core of human experience and community. Narratives tell the story of people and their world. There are two grand narratives, or metanarratives, of the past – the narrative of emancipation (where the heroes were the people), and the narrative of speculation (centering on the spirit of the individual) (Maširević 2011: 95). However, according to Lyotard, postmodernism is marked by an “incredulity towards metanarratives,” which is caused by the progress in science (Lyotard 1984: xxiv). Their purpose in the past was to: “[...] legitimize science in two ways: as an instrument of social liberation, and as an accumulation of knowledge as a good in its own right” (Petrović 2004: 301). But, as science develops, so do the possibilities an individual has, and the overall understanding of the world, all of which makes people question those grand narratives, as they seem to no longer hold as much value as they used to. Lyotard’s plea is to reject those grand narratives of Western culture since they do not have enough credibility to: “[...] sum up the ethos of postmodernism, with its disdain for authority in all its many guises” (in Stuart: 2001: 3). Such a rejection also contributes to the overall incredulity towards the rules that have been followed until that moment, and allows for the rise of postmodern writing shaped by the overall uncertainty, change, trauma, and tension of the era it is written in.

According to Vincent Descombes, there are two characteristics of postmodern writing, one being the fact that this type of narrative is always the story of a previous story, and the second being that such narrative never bases itself on only one fact or event, but rather on other narratives and stories, a myriad of voices (Descombes in Steinborn 1997). This notion can be found in the writings of Kathy Acker, particularly in her novel, which is the subject of this paper’s analysis. In it, we can encounter her narrative “travelling” along a complex combination of “voices/narratives”, including works by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Erika Jong, Charles Dickens, and Antonin Artaud (Steinborn 1997: 2). This borrowing which can be observed in Acker’s novel illustrates another particularity of postmodernist writing – the notion of plagiarism. A great number of her books are “undisguised re-workings of earlier writers’ fictions”, and she merges her own words with those borrowed to such an extent, that we, at times, fail to see the border between the two (Phillips 1994: 173). However, this borrowing or plagiarism is not accidental; rather, by rejecting and subverting the traditional form of discourse that has historically been dominated by males, Acker does not overcome the texts’ established meanings – she gives them new ones. (Phillips 1994: 180). This notion of narrative as subversion is elaborated on in great detail in Jennifer Komorowski’s paper *A Space to Write Woman-Becoming: Reading the Novels of Kathy Acker as Simulacra* (2018). Komorowski draws on a 1977 book *Dialogues II* by Gilles Deleuze, in which he examines his philosophical attitudes with Claire Parnet, and

in particular on *On the Superiority of Anglo-American literature*. Here, Deleuze and Parnet discuss the ability of Anglo-American literature to “[discover] worlds through a long, broken flight” (in Komorowski 2018). They place certain writers in a group of those who write in such a way, Acker included. Although Deleuze and Parnet do not explicitly mention the concept of the simulacrum in their discussion of literature, in Deleuze’s earlier work he connects the same concepts – becoming, daemon, and relationships with the outside or the other – to the overturning of Platonism through simulacra (Komorowski 2018: 50). In “The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy”, from the appendix of his book *The Logic of Sense* (1969), Deleuze tends to explain the difference between the simulacrum and the copy. “Man was created in the image and resemblance of God, but through sin man has lost the resemblance but keeps the image of God, thus, we have become simulacra” (in Komorowski 2018). He goes on to define the simulacrum through its difference in relation to a copy of the original Idea, in Plato’s sense. Simulacrum, as he sees it, is not a copy of a copy of a copy, or three times distant from the original Idea, but it is rather a “false pretended”, a “subversion”, which merely looks like a copy, but is essentially different from both the copy and the original Platonic Idea (Komorowski 2018: 51). “The simulacrum exists through the action of challenging and overturning ‘the very idea of a model of privileged position’ (Komorowski 2018: 69), and in this act of overturning any resemblance between the original and the copy is destroyed” (Komorowski 2018: 51). Using the simulacrum allows us to overthrow the privileged position and look for the real experience, which is what Acker does. Acker’s work as simulacra subverts both the privileged position of male writers she is accused of plagiarizing throughout her work to overthrow phallogocentric language and the privileged positions that dominated Western society in the 1970s and 1980s (Komorowski 2018: 51). Therefore, we approach Acker’s novel as a narrative which is based on plagiarism, in lieu of the postmodern spirit, but, as we proceed, “[...] the structure of Acker’s text becomes more confused and fragmented as Janey’s isolation and illness change the form of her discourse” (Phillips 1994: 178). As the narrative progresses, and as more traumatic events happen in her life, Janey’s story and her narrative disintegrate, as is analyzed in the final part of this paper.

Now that there is a foundation for the understanding of narrative, and postmodern narrative in particular, Sigmund Freud should be mentioned within the context of the disintegration of narrative. He is known for his “mastery of tradition” and his ability to construct a pattern out of the often random memories he has, while, at the same time, making us aware of the persuasive power of a coherent narrative: “[...] to make sense out of nonsense. There seems to be no doubt that a well-constructed story possesses a kind of narrative truth that is real and immediate and carries an important significance for the process of therapeutic change (in Chamberlain and Thompson 2003).” Kathy Acker’s narrative is at times far from coherent, rather, it displays a movement towards disintegration, but it is still made of random memories and experiences, and all of that contributes to making a meaning of her own, despite the disintegration caused by some rather traumatic experiences.

3. Trauma studies

Judith Herman opens her book *Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of Violence – from domestic abuse to political terror* (1997) by saying that the “ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness” (1997: 1). However, there is a problem that happens when atrocities refuse to be buried. In such cases, there is a conflict between the will to “deny horrible events” and the will to “proclaim them aloud” (Ibid.). In such situations, psychological distress may appear, due to the traumatic inability to forget and repress. The rise of interest in mental traumas can be traced back to Sigmund Freud and the incredible progress from his studies during the late 1800s, which focus on mental health and acknowledging that mental health is as important as physical health. He manages to do so by introducing psychoanalysis, in which the main goal is to heal people from the traumas they have suffered, or which have been inflicted upon them, without repressing them. The basic premise of his psychoanalysis is to bring forth that which is unconscious into the “realm of cognition” in order to analyze it, and, hopefully, overcome it. (Felman and Laub 1992: 16)

Bessel A. Van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth in their book *Traumatic Stress- The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society* (1996) claim that experiencing trauma is an essentially human trait, and that “history is written in blood” (1996: 3). However, despite it being an integral part of human experience, and even though art and literature have portrayed various coping mechanisms of people throughout centuries, the scientific study of trauma was not established until the 20th century and the era of postmodernism (Ibid.). The rise of trauma studies is thus connected with shifting the focus from the survival of the body towards the survival of the mind, considering the fact that the 20th century is filled with atrocities which inflict trauma not only on those who suffer from it, but also on the ones who witness it and testify about it, the survivors. The meaning of the word trauma means “wound” in Greek, and despite its initial connection solely with the injuries of the body, it became used for the wounds inflicted upon the mind, thanks to Sigmund Freud (Caruth 1996: 4). In his essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), the wound of the mind is defined as the “breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world”, and it is not something that is simple and healable, but it is an event experienced “too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known”, and can be available to consciousness only if it “imposes itself again, repeatedly”, usually in the form of nightmares and repetitive actions (Caruth 1996: 4). Cathy Caruth is one of the first people to recognize the importance of Freud’s findings for the field of trauma studies.

In her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Caruth bases her explanation of the importance of studying trauma by building her claims upon two of Sigmund Freud’s works: *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. She conveys Freud’s words when she says that sometimes catastrophic events repeat themselves, and they seem not to be initiated by “[...] the individual’s own acts, but rather appear as the possession of some people by a sort of fate, a series of painful events to which they are subjected, and which seem to be entirely outside their wish or

control” (Caruth 1996: 2). Another notion connected to trauma is the fact that we do not experience the traumatic event as it happens, but, rather, it returns to haunt us in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena (Caruth 1996: 91). It is quite difficult to express feelings about trauma, so this “unspeakableness” further affects the realm of language, and eventually, our ability to convey a cohesive narrative (Zaikowski 2010: 203). What happens when we experience trauma is that we lose our narrative abilities, when the traumatic event destroys our understanding of the world and disables our ability to normally function in various aspects of our lives (Zaikowski 2010: 199). This state of mind forces us to constantly feel unsafe, unable to believe our own senses, ourselves, and the world around us (Ibid).

In their book *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub take a particular approach to investigating trauma. There, they explain the nature of memory and the function of witnessing a traumatic act, with a focus on the Holocaust, one of the most traumatic events to happen in modern society. They interpret certain literary texts as testimonies, which serve the purpose of creating an “imaginative capability of perceiving history” in our own bodies by giving us insight and making it possible for us to identify and understand the core of a traumatic event (Felman and Laub 1992: 108). When reading books or literary works which portray a traumatic event, we, the readers, are actually reading a testimony of the traumatized characters, trying to understand what traumatized them, because, even though understanding eludes them, the distance that exists between the readers and the characters enables readers to testify, judge, and overcome. The readers become witnesses. Literary works serve the purpose of helping people seek reality, to explore the injury inflicted by that same reality, to try to grasp it, understand it, and, hopefully, “[...] reemerge from the paralysis of this state, to engage reality as an advent, as a movement, as a vital, critical necessity of moving on” (Felman and Laub 1992: 28). Narratives that contain such traumatized characters are considered *traumatized narratives* (Zaikowski 2010: 202). There is a spectrum of traumatic events which can be portrayed in traumatized narratives, including rape, incestual relationships, and abuse, both psychological and physical (Herman 1997: 3). In Kathy Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School*, we have the traumatized narrative of Janey, whose life begins with the trauma of being in an incestual relationship with her father and the trauma that occurred when he abandoned her, followed by traumas associated with rape, forced abortion, and even prostitution and cancer. As her story progresses through the novel, we can follow its disintegration as the effects of trauma finally take their toll.

4. *Blood and Guts in High School* in the Context of Trauma Studies

“What I have always hated about the bourgeois story is that it closes down. I don’t use the bourgeois story-line because the real content of that novel is the property structure of reality. It’s about ownership. That isn’t my world-reality. My world isn’t about ownership. In my world people don’t even remember their names, they aren’t

sure of their sexuality, they aren't sure if they can define their genders [...] There's a lot of power in narrative, not in story (in Baker 2016)."

In this paragraph, Acker summarizes the tendency of postmodern writers to describe trauma-caused uncertainty, a tendency that her work follows as well. What is particularly prominent in Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* is her ability to use carefully crafted sentences, drawings, and excerpts from other books, seemingly without order, all of which serve the purpose of portraying a traumatized individual whose narrative betrays her and disintegrates. In the process of its disintegration, we are drawn to that narrative as it creates an experience analogous to the "fragmentation and confusion" which traumatized people usually exhibit (Baker 2016: 277).

In *Blood and Guts in High School*, we have a narrative centered on the "splintered psyche of an abused little girl" (Zaikowski 2010: 204). Acker chooses a schizophrenic array of styles to express the trauma of a sexually abused child, because prescribed norms give no available mode of talking about such an experience. In this novel, we do not have an established voice that speaks, rather, it constantly changes, so we cannot be sure whether Janey, the main character speaks, some dissociated parts of her speak, or the writers which Acker carefully and plagiaristically intertwines in the narrative speak. However, the story still revolves around a traumatized, young girl. As Judith Herman points out, repeated trauma in adult life "erodes the structure of the personality already formed", but repeated trauma in childhood "forms and deforms a personality" (Herman 1997: 96). From an early age, Janey encountered situations a child should never be put in, such as being in an incestual relationship with her father, which damaged her rather early on in her life and left her traumatized and afraid of being abandoned.

Janey: I'm not crazy. (Realizing he's madly in love with the other woman.) I don't mean to act like this. (Realizing more and more how madly in love he is. Blurts it out.) For the last month you've been spending every moment with her. That's why you've stopped eating meals with me. That's why you haven't been helping me the way you usually do when I'm sick. You're madly in love with her, aren't you?

Father (ignorant of this huge mess): We just slept together for the first time tonight.

Janey: You told me you were just friends like me and Peter (Janey's stuffed lamb) and you weren't going to sleep together. It's not like my sleeping around with all these art studs: when you sleep with your best friend, it's really, really heavy (2017: 7-9).

This passage is perhaps the most disturbing one if one has in mind that Janey is a *ten-year-old victim* of incest, who not only suffers through physical abuse, but psychological abuse as well, as she feels her father distancing himself from her (Zaikowski 2010: 207). Her narrative is so overridden with sexuality, violence, and identity crises that it cannot comport with any kind of coherent, shared narrative with external reality (Zaikowski 2010: 205). In order to portray the disintegration of narrative, which initially can be followed before it transforms into blank spaces and drawings on paper, Acker uses a schizophrenic style, which is the only way a traumatic experience can be portrayed in order to be felt, in order for that pain, confusion, and fragmentation to be understood (Zaikowski 2010: 204). In addition to hyperaroused text, *Blood and Guts in High School* also displays myriad characteristics of traumatic

intrusion. Perhaps the most striking example of this is the array of disturbing illustrations and disruptions of narrative that happen throughout the first two sections of the novel. We have drawings of sexually explicit scenes abruptly interrupting the flow of the text, which serve as fragmented flashbacks and nightmares experienced by survivors of trauma (Zaikowski 2010: 206). These flashbacks occur in people who suffer from PTSD, which is an “overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 1996: 58). These illustrations of male and female genitalia and dismembered bodies in some sense express the unspeakableness of Janey’s experience (Zaikowski 2010: 206). Her whole life is determined by the men around her, which she is quite aware of, as she says, while waiting in line to get an abortion: “We had given ourselves up to men before. That’s why we we’re here. [...] I love it when men take care of me” (Acker 2017 32-33). Janey obviously has a distorted notion of what being taken care of means. Her traumatic relationships with men actually led her to feel peaceful when a man performed her abortion, demonstrating a sense of complacency, a common feeling among traumatized individuals. Intrusive thoughts overwhelmed her due to her traumatic experiences. Apart from the disturbing illustrations, the intrusive voices and narrative streams themselves repeatedly intertwine with one other, without any seeming order. For instance, as Janey is locked in the slave trader’s room to “learn how to be a whore”, the narrative suddenly cuts to a book report that Janey has written about her hero, Hester Prynne of *The Scarlet Letter*. By mentioning this book, Acker is trying to subvert the established notion about Hester Prynne which portrays her as an immoral woman, and she is rewriting Hester’s character – in quite a postmodern, pastiche way – as a woman who needed love and attention, who was abandoned and needed to seek comfort in someone else, whose body and mind both suffered due to being left alone. The pages we read are the parts of Janey’s mind.

Traumatic intrusion can also be followed in the repetitions throughout *Blood and Guts in High School*. From pages twenty-one through twenty-five, the story portrays an “uncanny sequence of exchanges” between Janey and her incestuous father, each exchange a slightly different version of the others, all of which begin with the same two sentences. Through various modes of fragmentation, dissociation, and lack of reference, the narrative is disintegrated. This disintegration is also obvious in the way Acker uses different identities, in some cases, Janey’s, and sometimes Hester Prynne’s or Erica Jong’s, all for the purpose of conveying fragmentation and an inability to convey coherent thoughts due to the numerous traumas that return to haunt Janey. Another repetition compulsion can be seen towards the end of the novel, when Janey encounters Jean Genet, and the same pattern of her being downgraded by a man, abused, and mocked is repeated, as Genet does things to mentally and physically damage Janey, as her father did, and all she can say is: “I’ll obey you” (Acker 2017: 139). This inability to break the chain of abuse is another notion which contributes to reading Janey’s narrative as a traumatized one.

In the last section, *The World*, there is a complete disintegration of both Janey’s

narrative and her body. “All bodies are verbs; they do not just contain, but are, living, active, dynamic inscriptions and de-scriptions of narrative. In this sense, all bodies are texts and all texts are bodies” (Zaikowski 2010: 213). The final part can be seen as a final disintegration of Janey’s narrative and Janey herself. Childlike drawings, random sentences out of a coherent order spread across almost twenty-five pages, guided by an unidentifiable omnipresent voice (Zaikowski 2010: 208). Janey’s body disappears from the textual body; her voice is apparently gone. Yet the text continues. However, it is in this complete disintegration that Janey finally finds her peace. There are no longer explicit drawings depicting traumatic scenes, sexual encounters, or dismembered bodies – the drawings represent “archetypal scenes” of animals, landscapes, and people, followed by poetic language with no traumatic undertones (Zaikowski 2010: 208). The ending states that: “Soon many other Janey’s were born and these Janey’s covered the earth” (Acker 2017:165). This can be comforting and disturbing at the same time – will those Janey’s repeat the pattern of trauma or will they finally break the chain? Her physical disintegration completes at the same time as her narrative disintegration – and it is in this complete disintegration that her traumas can no longer affect her.

5. Conclusion

This novel essentially describes the kind of omnipresent trauma postmodern people live with. There is rape, incest, abuse, addiction, mental illness, and poverty. There is sex trafficking, imperialism, racism, sexism, wars and threat of wars, and the destructive forces of global capitalism. In the postmodern world, the damage and annihilation of bodies takes place at an unimaginably large level. In other words, this is a chronically traumatized – and traumatizing – society, and we need narrative forms that can accommodate this reality (Zaikowski 2010: 217). That is what the plagiaristic, pastiche technique of Kathy Acker’s writing does – the way she creates her novels out of pieces from various literary and popular traditions breaks the established rules in our culture, and in doing so, presents disintegration that is omnipresent (Pitchford 2002: 59). Her novel portrays the disintegration that occurs when ways to cope with traumas are unattainable. Janey found a way out by disintegrating, a postmodern approach to the overall fragmentation people encounter every day.

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DEZINTEGRISAN NARATIV KETI EKER U KONTEKSTU STUDIJA TRAUME

Apstrakt

Glavna ideja ovog rada je da prikaže kako se narativ dezintegriše u kontekstu studija traume, a na primeru romana *Keti Eker Krv i iznutrice u srednjoj školi* (1984). Ova ideja je zasnovana na tvrdnji Šošane Felmen da traumatični događaji prouzrokuju „dezintegraciju narativa” (1992: 71). Teorijska pozadina prethodi analizi romana i sastoji se u objašnjenju telesnih i mentalnih trauma, a oslanja se na istraživanja Sigmunda Frojda iz nekoliko njegovih studija i rad Džudit Herman *Trauma i oporavak: Posledice nasilja – od nasilja u porodici do političkog terora* (1997).

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