




**Laurence
A. Rickels
talks with
Kathy
Acker**

BODY BILDUNG



Left: Kathy Acker. Right:
Laurence A. Rickels.
All photos by William Stern.

Kathy Acker was on tour this summer and fall promoting her new book, *My Mother: Demonology, a Novel*. She interrupted the California portion for this interview break. What I've always found so strong and futural about Acker's work is its close with adolescence, not as the phase or phrase everyone has to get beyond rather than stuck on, but as a channel that is always there, ready to be tuned or turned into, for example whenever you're in groups. The force field she works is what Freud called group psychology. Acker's work shows how the problems of adolescence or group psychology are always there, even or especially in one-on-one relationships. I'm thinking of her great dialogues (examples from *Blood and Guts in High School* come to mind), which are completely organized around the adolescent metabolism or perpetual ambivalence machine, in which making up takes turns with breaking up. It reminds me how over and over again we try to form couples, we try to be in individual therapy, we try to stay with the transference, and all the while we're pulled back into the group, with all the problems we face being in groups. Adolescence is a blender: the teen rebounds between extremes and short attention spans (for example, between asceticism and sexual or self-destructive excess) because the two sides of parental guidance or identification—the mother, the father—need to be mixed into the assimilated identity of ego or group member. The building blocks of development—early identification, sublimation, superegoic sadism—get libidinally mixed up between couplification and group processes. It's the group that permits teens to get around their parents, who are too out of it or off-limits to give them their sexual license, which they receive instead from the group. But even as their sex comes groupie-fied, teens receive another set of orders from the group—to form couples and reproduce (or reduce) themselves. Yet the group reserves mega-ambivalence for the couples, which are the genitals of the group but which the group is ever dissolving back into itself. Group psychology isn't just a symptom; it's not a problem of masses that are already a measure or mass of psychopathology. We are in groups. In Acker's work, language stays tuned to the ambivalence between groups and couples. It is a language that asserts identity, communication, then automatically group-formats the one-on-one.

Art that makes contact with the adolescent turbulence inside us risks having outer work experiences with midlife criticism. That's why the critical rep or rap always given works of ambivalence is that they're adolescent. They're then further name-called "perpetual," "pathological," you name it. Journalistic critics (I mean the pseudo types, like Camille Paglia, at the top of the best-sell-out list) forget the adolescent origin of their otherwise happy medium (which lies in the keeping of journals or diaries) while at the same time acting it out in the decontextualized, empty run of a short attention span. The deferred adolescents among us (who are at the one remove from perpetual adolescence that's only a heartbeat away from crisis coming soon) interpret the Teen Age only one-way. But the always foreclosed other way is what adds the stereo context (that of ambivalence, transference, or reading) to our understanding of cultural—that is, cathected—phenomena. The mono turn that shuts down the stereo describes from the inside out the one readily identifiable form of adolescent acting out that is around, along for the writing, in open hiding inside midlife criticism. —LR

LAURENCE A. RICKELS: Did your latest book start out with a particular identification or demonization?

KATHY ACKER: It started out as my fascination with Laure's work and with Bataille, and with wondering what that generation, two generations ago, was thinking. I was amazed reading her work that the same preoccupations I have are there too.

LR: It makes it an amazing time-travel book because, as you say, the '30s are back, like on the trip to Berlin which is any time, that is, one of the two times, before or after the Nazi station break.

I started wondering if sitting in the body there was a narrative that was something else. What do you hear when you're listening to the body, as in bodybuilding, or in sex?

KA: The work Bataille and Laure were doing in the '30s was model-building from the ground up. Neither the democratic nor the post-Leninist model was usable, so they turned to anthropological work and started looking into myth and sacrifice to come up with a new ground for a new social model. Whereas Breton settled for Stalinism after psychoanalysis, Bataille and Laure were looking for something else, where irrationality would not be just a matter of mental functions, and sexuality would be something more than just the repressed. We're in a similar situation today with regard to Russian communism and democracy.

In her search, Laure also looked consciously as a woman, which greatly interested me. So it was by chance (in other words by some determination that doesn't have a name yet) that in the course of working through Laure's texts I became interested in witchcraft. And this started my novel. The witchcraft material presented another history of women, or an-

ing, because the dreaming had become so important. I was having a real problem not sleeping twelve hours a night and not waking up five times to write down the dreams. I had to stop myself dreaming. At the end I really felt that I was just raping "myself." But something had broken open.

LR: *Sounds like you completely technologized yourself. But you also fed the machine; is there that element in the masturbation project too? Where you write something and then it's replayed in fantasy?*

KA: Dreaming and masturbation are different techniques of writing. The writings I get from masturbation aren't fantasy narratives but are descriptions of architectures, of space shifts, shifting architectures, opening spaces, closing spaces. I don't know yet what to do with this writing in regard to narrative; right now I suspect that the language accessed during sex has some relationship to Kant's categories. My narratives at the moment are based on dreams. Dreaming is something you don't think you can control. And it's something everyone does; one doesn't have to desire to dream. Bodybuilding involved a great deal of resistance and I had to turn to other texts to help me access that language, I had to turn to Canetti, for example, and I realized that the language I was trying to access was a meditative language, about breathing.

LR: *Nietzsche said that all style is breathing.*

KA: He was right.

LR: *So the techniques you're working out started with bodybuilding and tattooing?*

KA: Yes, the tattooing in a way, bodybuilding definitely. About five years ago I thought, I'm either going to have to stop bodybuilding or I'm going to have to incorporate it in my work somehow. It was becoming too important to me and there was a real time problem. But how do I incorporate it in my work?

LR: *I guess when you forget about the individual characters involved, bodybuilding is about metabolism in a big way.*

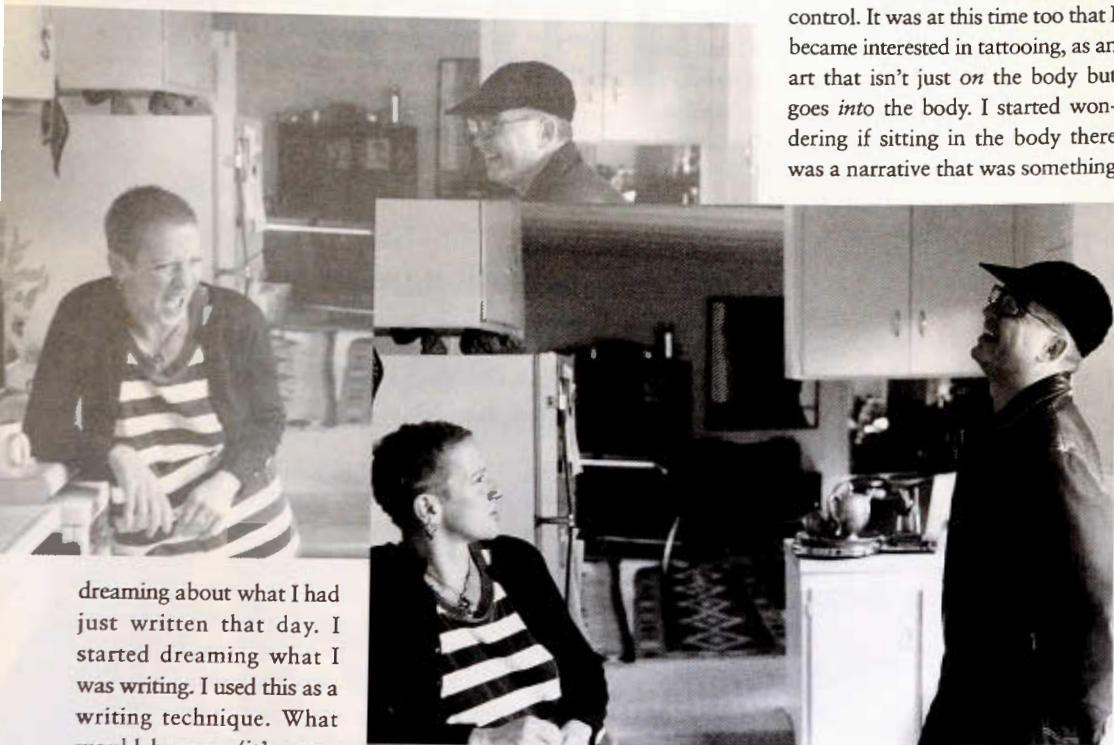
KA: It's also about breathing.

LR: *Right, and writing. It's totally techno-mediatic: you're externalizing big time or you're internalizing at the same time. What gets internalized is something like tattooing, I mean the scarification and internal bleeding that go down when you build up muscle. But if not bodybuilding, which you were into before you came to the Coast, what*

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other history—one not written by and about dominant men.

Regarding my personal history: when I began writing *My Mother: Demonology* I was worrying that I was internalizing certain censorships. Any member of a society does, as Ulrike Meinhof once mentioned. I used to go to sexual writing for my writing freedom. That place was no longer available to me, due to the changes in our society, and due to my own writing history—I didn't want to repeat myself. All writers are scared of internalizing restrictions; we're looking for places of freedom that take you by surprise. I read the witchcraft material, and dreaming did surprise me. Dreaming became a technique for deciding the next move in the writing. I don't know how, I started



dreaming about what I had just written that day. I started dreaming what I was writing. I used this as a writing technique. What would happen (it's especially clear in the *Wuthering Heights* section) is that I would rewrite, appropriate, plagiarize, whatever—copy (slash-and-gash method) *Wuthering Heights*, and that night I would have a dream, and the dream would be about *Wuthering Heights*. I started letting the dream decide where the narrative was going. So *Wuthering Heights* changed as I dreamed it. I didn't interpret the dream—like I dreamed about two basketballs lost in a pit and I told myself, in the dream,

“Well, you don't have to interpret that!” I would leave the dream alone and use it to interpret the text.

At the end of my version of *Don Quixote* I started turning to the body as a resource for new models of writing. For me, deconstruction was used up as a writing technique. That was the first time in my life that I started looking at narrative—that *Blood and Guts in High School* came together as a narrative really amused me. I've never been interested in creating characters or stories, I've never been interested in creating *anything*. I turned to narrative when there was nothing else to turn to; there had to be something more than taking apart constructions. I was coming out of a funny kind of nihilism. There had to be some kind of narrative, but one that wasn't only a means of control. It was at this time too that I became interested in tattooing, as an art that isn't just *on* the body but goes *into* the body. I started wondering if sitting in the body there was a narrative that was something

else. What do you hear when you're listening to the body, as in bodybuilding, or in sex? What are the language movements? I'm always looking for narratives that I don't make up but that I'm already hearing.

The work with dream comes out of work with the body: you can't separate language and the body from the realm of the imagination. *Empire of the Senseless* was where I first worked on the relation of body to language, but there it was more writing about some-

thing than really doing it. It took me until this book to know what I was doing with that body/language relation. Now I'm exploring connections between masturbation and language.

The first direct work I did on the body/language relationship happened because *Parkett* magazine asked me to write about bodybuilding, and I found out that I was blocking. So the piece became about why I was blocking. And I realized when people are doing things like bodybuilding or whatever (I'm sure dancers are the same way), there's a very complicated language going on, but it's not verbalized, it's almost *unable* to be verbalized. So people like bodybuilders and dancers sound stupid. I wondered how I could describe this language that won't allow itself to be described, and why it won't allow itself to be described. Why, when I do it, does it seem very complicated, and the minute I stop doing it (because I thought I would just go to the gym, work out, do a diary) it's gone? I wondered if it was the same language-barrier problem as in sex. I've often noticed that when I'm having sex, es-

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pecially during the movement toward orgasm, I'm having a largely mental affair, images that look as if they can be verbalized, but after it's all over I couldn't tell you what was going on. So I wanted to be able to access that language too.

LR: How can you do that, though?

KA: Well, with the masturbation project I literally stick a vibrator up my ass (up my ass! I mean up my cunt) and start writing, and it's working well. There was a bit of resistance. It was different with dreaming: at first there was a great deal of resistance, but by the time I finished *My Mother: Demonology* I was waking up five times a night so I could write down my dreams. I trained myself. Finally, I had a hard time *not* dream-

within the terrain of the image and information marketplace but that are discerning and mobile enough to identify and elude its ever changing consumerist and productivist imperatives. Part of what is needed is to conceptualize technological culture in terms of the larger, turbulent geographies and flows in which it is embedded, and to realize that the actual and potential violence of global polarization will have more of an impact on the future of our material lifeworld than anything we assume to be internal to a process of technological change. It is more and more crucial to challenge fraudulent neofuturist visions of a "wired" world. If new social ecologies (to use Félix Guattari's term) or novel convergences of the biological and the mechanic are ever to flourish independently of the market's laws of equivalence and exchange, they will emerge only through the creation of ways of listening to and learning from that majority of voices and bodies that are outside the circuits of compulsory communication and "augmented" realities. □

1. "Telecommunications," *The Economist*, 23 October 1993, p. 5.

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changes has California introduced into your work?

KA: The change would be all the girls, these crazy wild girls who are part of the San Francisco scene. They're the main characters in the new book. I think it's the first time in my life that I'm living in a girls' society—it's like girls' school. I've got to get out of here! I want to graduate! But there's real safety here too. Here's a tremendous freedom in daily living that I've never had anywhere else. My strongest desire (it's beyond desire, it's a need) is to make it possible for people like me to be in society. Perhaps it'll have to be a different society. This society tells me that a woman after 30 doesn't have a body unless she has children. You can't even be a whore after 30. What I'm seeing in San Francisco is the emergence of a community of younger women that seems revolutionary, and also a relation to the body that I've never seen before with women. There's a play with gender, too: I say "women" but I'm not even sure. This could be the emergence of a place for me, where a woman of color like me (Jews have only been passing as white for centuries) and a queer (I'm so queer I'm not even gay) is no longer marginalized out of existence.

LR: *Is there a separate story to your drawing?*

KA: I always worked closely with artists, but now that I've moved to a big press I had to drop the collaborations. The house felt it took away from the literary value of my work. I said my work doesn't have any literary value, so leave the pictures in. They were going to give my work literary value, they said. So that's why I started drawing, because if I draw the pictures they're part of the work, and they've got to stay in. That's why I do it. But I can't draw.

LR: *This kind of property dispute is a real feature of your reputation. I'm thinking of your reinventions of the notion of plagiarism. Was that part of your work all along?*

KA: Yes, but it wasn't there because I was thinking about plagiarism. I grew up basically in the conceptual part of the art world, and I was trained to think about writing a certain way. You have an intention, then you set up the experiment, you go ahead and do the experiment as you set it up, and anything that's outside that experiment detracts from what you're doing. The experiment was never about, say, good writing. I had other rules, like Don't rewrite, don't do anything unless it's part of the experiment. It was only

artists who understood what I was doing in my early work; to the literary world it was absolutely revolting.

In my first work I wanted to figure out what identity was. It was a real simplistic experiment. I just jotted down every day what I did, it was that stupid: I did this, I thought about so-and-so. Then I tried to figure out who I was the easy way, through the process of elimination. So the person I could say I most wasn't was a murderess, because I didn't think I'd ever murdered anybody. I started looking into biographies of murderesses and I picked pre-Freudian ones because I didn't want to get involved in that specialized language. So I went to Victorian biographies of murderesses, got every one you could, and started copying them. But when I copied them I put them into the first person, so there was this real autobiography and this false autobiography. And I went on from there. And I didn't know what was true and what was false by the end of it, I couldn't tell anymore. But I didn't have any theoretical language to talk about it. By now it's easy to talk about identity and construction because all the theory's been done. But in those days I just wanted to do this, I didn't really understand it. All I had was R. D. Laing.

By the time I got to *Blood and Guts in High School*, though, I realized that I wasn't interested in this business about identity at all. Identity was obviously constructed; it wasn't a big problem. What I was interested in was the texts I was using. It wasn't interesting writing diary work, I was boring myself to death; but it's very interesting to use other texts. And I simply got interested in copying. So with *Great Expectations* all I wanted to do was copy other texts. I didn't understand why—I knew I didn't want narrative, I didn't want characters, but I had this fascination with copying. I started reading Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari. So suddenly the theory had started to form in me, so I could start understanding what I was doing, which meant I could do it more. I find I can't write without having another text in front of me. I mean, accessing language is like having another text in front of me. Or writing a story someone told me. There's no such thing as nothing.

LR: *Something has to be metabolized.*

KA: Writing is either hearing, listening, reading—or it's destroying.

LR: *Did you find the constructed identity of the murderess, the constructed identification with these murderess narratives, having any effect on you? You chose something you felt was completely other and you incorporated it into the body of your work.*

KA: I did six months, six chapters; I'd take six months off, do six more months. At the end of each six months I'd have a sort of nervous breakdown. It made me quite crazy, crazier than writing has since then. People ask me, Doesn't it make you wacky, writing what you write? No, actually writing balances me.

LR: *But then you reach a certain limit, whether it's a breakdown, an exorcism. . . .*

KA: It's totally like a possession. But only with *In Memoriam to Identity* did I begin to realize that.

LR: *There's a kind of melancholia here, all the way to My Mother: Demonology. Plagiarism or whatever you want to call it is like an improper burial, or it's like taking something in, keeping it secret and alive, metabolizing it, yes, but more within the limits of recycling. The contours of the foreign body are still recognizable, like the vampire asleep in the crypt.*

KA: But how would you see the

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relation to the mother in *Demonology*?

LR: *Your relationship to your own body is always at the same time the relationship to your mother's body. And that's always the problem, because the mother's body is also off-limits—that's why it becomes a kind of limit to one's pleasure. That's the static or resistance, the melancholic legacy jamming the connection to one's own body.*

KA: I've often noticed that the men in my books are stick figures. In the new book there are basically only women, girls, except for Bush, another stick figure, but how does he fit into this body politics? Is the father's body just that foreign? Does he have a body?

LR: *The father is all about the kind of death that doesn't lead to melancholia; his mournable death is the antibody we inject into our systems to get rid of mother or demonology, but also maybe to get rid of the body altogether.*

KA: In the new piece (I know this chapter very well because I read it five times in a row on tour) there's only one little paragraph which is very personal, which goes something like this: "O says, 'My mother wants me to suicide because she suicided. I try to find a father to get rid of my mother but there are no fathers around anymore.' All of the whores agreed with O: it was the end of the white male world." It's one feminist line that men are different from women; for instance, men are aggressive, women are kind and gentle. If that's true, for women there is no fear or trembling involved in the incorporation of the mother's body; there is no demon aspect. Which isn't true at all.

LR: *But there is one difference: the only chance the father gets to come alive is the one the daughter has to libidinate or animate him so that she can be pulled out of the mother bond.*

KA: And libidination of the father is the biggest no-no. When some of the wild girls in San Francisco were asked to write the hottest stories they could, some father-fetishized. You know: I want to fuck Daddy.

LR: *Right at the time the family was being invented, in the 18th century, those bourgeois dramas were already picking up on it.*

KA: It's totally hot. Now everyone's favorite sin is child abuse. We all know that fathers want to sleep with their daughters.

LR: *It's amazing how in California (or maybe it's worldwide by now) one thinks that one can externalize something like that and get rid of it, I mean without taking it in. As with the sexual harassment charging down university corridors. Pedagogy is, certainly transferentially speaking, one of our biggest libidinal charges. Now teaching, seduction itself, must disappear.*

KA: What scares them is the demon part of it. So instead we go for dehumanized bodies, robot bodies—and teaching disappears.

LR: *It's learning without transference, or writing without reading.* □

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with the value of black art as such.

CW: True. It's also true that Jacob Lawrence is a true giant. And it's no accident that he would pick up on the theme of migration, a major theme of black history. The

novels tend to be concerned with rights, inclusions, integration, assimilation, these other things; it is mainly in painting and music that you get migration, in the blues for example. Farah Griffin's superb new book, *Who Set You Flowin'?: The African-American Migration Narrative*, challenges this.

AS: *What about Horace Pippin?*

CW: The fascinating thing is that he's a self-taught master who is obsessed with the everyday life of extraordinarily ordinary negroes. I see this as in the tradition of Emerson and Dewey, as well as in the long tradition of trying to keep alive black dignity and decency when black people are being trashed by white supremacy. And he does this in a way that sidesteps mere artist protest, and also sidesteps trying to prove to white people that black people are reasoning humans—the tradition of art expressing negro identity as always under the white gaze. The most fascinating moments of black life are not under the white gaze, when white people are neither put in the gutter nor on a pedestal, when white people just don't matter. The ideologies of whiteness are still operative in those moments, but the normative white gaze is being held at arm's length.

AS: *Isn't there an argument for black separatism and nationalism at the end of that line of thought?*

CW: Not necessarily. I see art like Pippin's as the occasion for a certain flourishing of black humanity, which is a precondition for black people being able to see themselves as democratic agents. Black nationalism *can* be a vehicle for democratic impulses: when you feel that U.S. nationalism won't protect you, won't recognize you, you go off and talk about forming a nation. Nothing wrong with that. As critical as I am of nationalism, in this situation it can be a form of democratic impulse. Anticolonialism is a grand example.

AS: *That brings me to multiculturalism, about which you've said some implicitly celebratory things, though you've also called it a "middle-class affair." Much multiculturalism seems to me in line with ingrained American traditions, from the colonial period on, of wanting to remain within a particular subcommunity. Conflicts between these subcommunities are resolved by separation, not in substance; you simply move somewhere else. Segmentation, in the sense of not wanting to deal with others, is extraordinarily entrenched in the U.S. Politics become spatialized and segregated.*

CW: Very American. Dewey had it right in 1927 when he argued that there is a proliferation of small publics but a disdain for public life. Small groups form around churches and synagogues, sex identities, enclaves, but the notion of a public life that you enter without necessarily being obsessed with your own, smaller public we hold at a distance. This leads to balkanization and fragmentation. If you're a radical democrat, you believe that some affirmation of public life is necessary to keep democracy vital. It's deeply dangerous if people shun public space, especially because it makes it more difficult to focus on the social misery in our society and in the world at large.

AS: *How do you fit the current interest in "cultural studies" into this?*

CW: Cultural studies is on the whole a response to the relative failures of English departments; it doesn't come out of philosophy or history. The issues of race, class, gender, and empire have had a tremendous impact on the narrower paradigms of literary criticism. In that way the de-

velopment of the cultural studies field is a positive move, since it reflects an attempt by literary critics to regain the historical sense they lost in the '50s. But it is also a purely professional affair—an attempt by those who have remained in the mainstream of literary studies to respond to African-American studies, women's studies, and social history, all of which have already talked about these issues of supremacy and inequality. Beyond that, I think cultural studies makes little sense without talking about scientific and technological culture. This isn't really what they tend to have in mind, though.

AS: *There is also a characteristic displacement to a second-order discourse, what might be called the "politics of representation."*

CW: Images, sounds, signs. It is limited to media. That is why it is incumbent to push people in cultural studies not to become just a displacement from old-style English studies to new-style English studies, recognizing race, class, gender, and Madonna.

AS: *Let's finally say a word or two about theory. You have usefully discussed the basic philosophical shifts of the '70s and '80s, emanating from both mainstream American pragmatic thought and that motley crew we like to think of as poststructuralism. These shifts, however, happened some time ago. Has anything happened in the last fifteen years?*

CW: There has been a proliferation of various forms of deconstruction, which have run into various forms of identity politics and dead ends. Why? Because of insufficient historical consciousness, because no real importance was given to explanatory significance, and because there was a total preoccupation with the contemporary. The appropriation of deconstruction had affinities with the politics of identity and with pluralist American models. It was facilitated by the fact that *pluralist models were already in place*. And a philosophy of skepticism that questions notions of wholes and totality, and focuses on relations and interactions, also reinforces notions of enclaves—reinforces segmentation and fragmentation. The connection between identity politics and deconstruction is actually fascinating.

These moves still have to confront historical consciousness, especially the historical construction of class, race, and gender in the United States. What you end up with, then, is a cul-de-sac—an overemphasis on the politics of representation and a distance from historical sociology. You have yet to confront a certain kind of radical democratic project that will in turn force you to develop a deeper sense of history.

AS: *I'd like to agree, but I'm not sure there is anything that would "force" the issue. The academic world is quite self-referential. It can produce discourse about discourse, since the politics of representation lend themselves to that sort of thing quite easily; it has no inherent need to check the discourse machine, the "exorbitation of language" and the "randomization of history," to use Perry Anderson's terms.*

CW: But you would think that as we try to come to terms with the multilayered crisis in civilization, that would spark a hunger for historical consciousness and understanding, a looking to the past for resources for the struggle in the present.

AS: *What will happen, then, to the theorization of identity?*

CW: It will still be there, only deepened. That kind of politics is here to stay, because we are living at a moment when issues of the protection of

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