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Writers Who Love Too Much

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Exploring narrative through an unfailingly complex prism of the self and bending it through a conceptualist framework, New Narrative produced stories likely to overshare and talk too much while addressing the meta-texts and sub-texts of a body-and self-obsessed writing, intertwining theory with gossip and the messiness of being a body and a mind. Two books published in 2017 set out, each in their own way, to map the relational topography such writing derived from: Chris Kraus' *After Kathy Acker* (2017) traces Acker's path to and within writing, the pirating it partly built upon, while returning the question of writing and entanglement to the biographer. The anthology *Writers Who Love Too Much* (2017) assembles texts from over 40 contributors (including Acker and Kraus) that continually re-formed New Narrative over a twenty-year period.





Chris Kraus: *After Kathy Acker, Semiotext(e)* 2017 und *Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative Writing 1977-1997*, Nightboat Books, 2017

After reading Chris Kraus' *After Kathy Acker* (2017), I had to keep thinking about something Kraus said at a panel in Denmark recently, about cannibalizing other artists to become a writer oneself. Kraus' book starts off with the sea-scattering of Acker's ashes by a small circle of people at Fort Funston outside of San Francisco; while this establishes Acker as a kind of literary force or ghost that lives on, it makes its point in the sense of a circle of «friends» perpetuating her work and intellectual spirit rather than as a literal re-inscription of her body into natural elements (although, as Kevin Killian recalls, this circle of friends was made up mostly of people she had hired for something—tattooists, bodybuilders, S/M practitioners, and herbalists—and very few actual writing peers or close friends). Acker's path to writing in part involved cannibalizing or pirating texts written by others, cutting them up, and reconfiguring them, at times letting them overlap with autobiographical material, thereby undermining the «confessional» mode.

The ‹after› in Kraus' title, aware of the conceptual baggage it carries, points towards this vampiric moment of writing that complicates notions of authorship or putting it another way: to be alive and write doesn't get you out of being in a horizontal sphere with other writers, and some of their work speaks to you in a way that resonates and partakes in the same sphere, asking for a kind of dialogue, or strong dismissal. And while Kraus' book traces so carefully all the moments that functioned for Acker as sparks igniting her writing in both a political and a more personal or aesthetic way, it feels that the love letters to Dick in *I Love Dick* (1997) delivered their own answer to the unavoidable question of where to write from, as a woman ultimately. *After Kathy Acker* may read as a straightforward biography, but the question of voice and whether it is purely one's own alone seems to come and go around; it's not just the vampirism of Acker, it's also the complicated entanglement between biographer and subject (Acker apparently stumbled into Kraus' own biography as a writer in many ways, including very personal ones, which the book only partially reveals).

It is this kind of mapping of the social and intellectual context writing derives from, in all its relational twists, contradictions and kinships, that leads to an anthology also published last

year, in which both Acker and Kraus figure alongside writers such as Robert Glück, Dennis Cooper, Gail Scott, Leslie Dick, Richard Hawkins, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Bruce Benderson, Laurie Weeks, Sarah Schuman, Lawrence Braithwaite and others. Put together by writers Dodie Bellamy and Kevin Killian, the anthology *Writers Who Love Too Much* traces in beautiful, chatty first-hand notes (Bellamy and Killian both were part of the scene) New Narrative writing, a writers' movement that formed at the end of the 70s in the San Francisco Bay Area, but was not strictly exclusive to this place. Writers included lived, and still live, in New York and other places in the U.S. and in Montreal. The comprehensive, heavy 500-plus page book gathers seminal works associated with what the editors consider the first generation of New Narrative writing, naming it *Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative 1977–1997* (Nightboat Books, 2017). The texts consist of ephemera, interviews, or talks; included are some short stories but for the most part excerpts from longer books.

New Narrative has been described as a transgressive «queer avant-garde» with its sexual frankness of confession, but to call it «self-expression» would miss the point: it combined a confessional mode with conceptualism, engaging in reader/writer-dynamics that play around with consumerist reader expectations, overworking them or delivering back the irritating remains of what reader and writer are ready to make up together. The squeaky toy lamb on the cover with its excited grin and exposed butt (a 1991 painting by Brett Reichmann) slyly underscores this. As the writer's life becomes more open to judgment and speculation, so does the reader's. And if appropriation is involved, the writer becomes a reader, too. Some of that produces writing that is strongly aware of its own meta-text, or narration that partakes in two levels: that of the story and that which structurally constitutes it.

Taking shape in reaction against the dominant mode of experimental writing at the time, Language poetry, which had abandoned narrative from it's pages with the argument of being ideologically corrupt—deriving from a neo-Marxist framework— New Narrative was built on a complex combination of alliance with, and interrogation of, Language poetry's basic tenets. The idea of resistance might always have been a focal point or totem for this camp, porn, punk and French theory-fueled writing, turning against a simplistic dismissal not only of narrative, but of kitsch and pop, thereby subverting an idea of criticality that again functions in a highly exclusive way. Robert Glück writes in *Long Note on New Narrative*[1] that the self-evacuating charge of Language poetry made for a kind of class struggle within himself. The body- and self-obsessed stories gathered in *Writers Who Love Too Much* speak from subject positions that often struggled to call the formalist utopia of Language poetry their intellectual and political home; they speak of, and for, a community that had a long shadow cast onto it during the AIDS crisis. The lyrical I here is one that has a physical body, that inhabits a situated space and time, reaching out to relational settings—and as Bellamy and Killian write, it was a writing that valued the clique, originating initially from the workshops held in the backroom of Small Press Traffic in San Francisco, by Robert Glück and Bruce Boone.

Was it fiction, autobiography, or theory that these texts call their genre home? With New Narrative, these confines occasionally get all hybridized. In Dodie Bellamy's excerpt *Dear Gail* from *The Letters of Mina Harker* (1998), Mina Harker, the heroine of Bram Stoker's fin de siècle masterpiece *Dracula*, possesses Bellamy's body and voices through her, making for an updated female vamp with a huge libido living in San Francisco in the 1980s. Mina consumes bodies and culture, spitting back re-embodiments of trash media and theory alike. What pushes this writing, like most of the texts gathered in *Writers Who Love Too Much*, is how desire reconfigures and extends the self (hence the book's title) in a double sense—as lyrical subject and as author self. Like Mina, who collects letters and newspaper snippets that make the final epistolary novel *Dracula*, Bellamy builds her novel on snippets coming from all kinds of sources; there is autobiographic material, letters to fellow writer Gail Scott whose

novel *Heroine* (1987) gets woven into Bellamy's, and so on.

Writers Who Love Too Much sets out to provide a kind of horizontal mapping or topography of authors and seminal works that «formed who we are as writers and what it means to be a writer and to exist as a writer within a community». While some of New Narrative's basic tenets and relations of the original, early community and specific political realities of the time may need to be historicized when looking at it now, as a system of writing highly responsive to cultural and political change and as a mode of personal address of political issues it should be able to reboot and reemerge under new and digital conditions, with new conversations and connections.

[1] Robert Glück, «Long Note on New Narrative», in: *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative*, ed. by Mary Burger, Robert Glück, Camille Roy, Gail Scott (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2004).

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