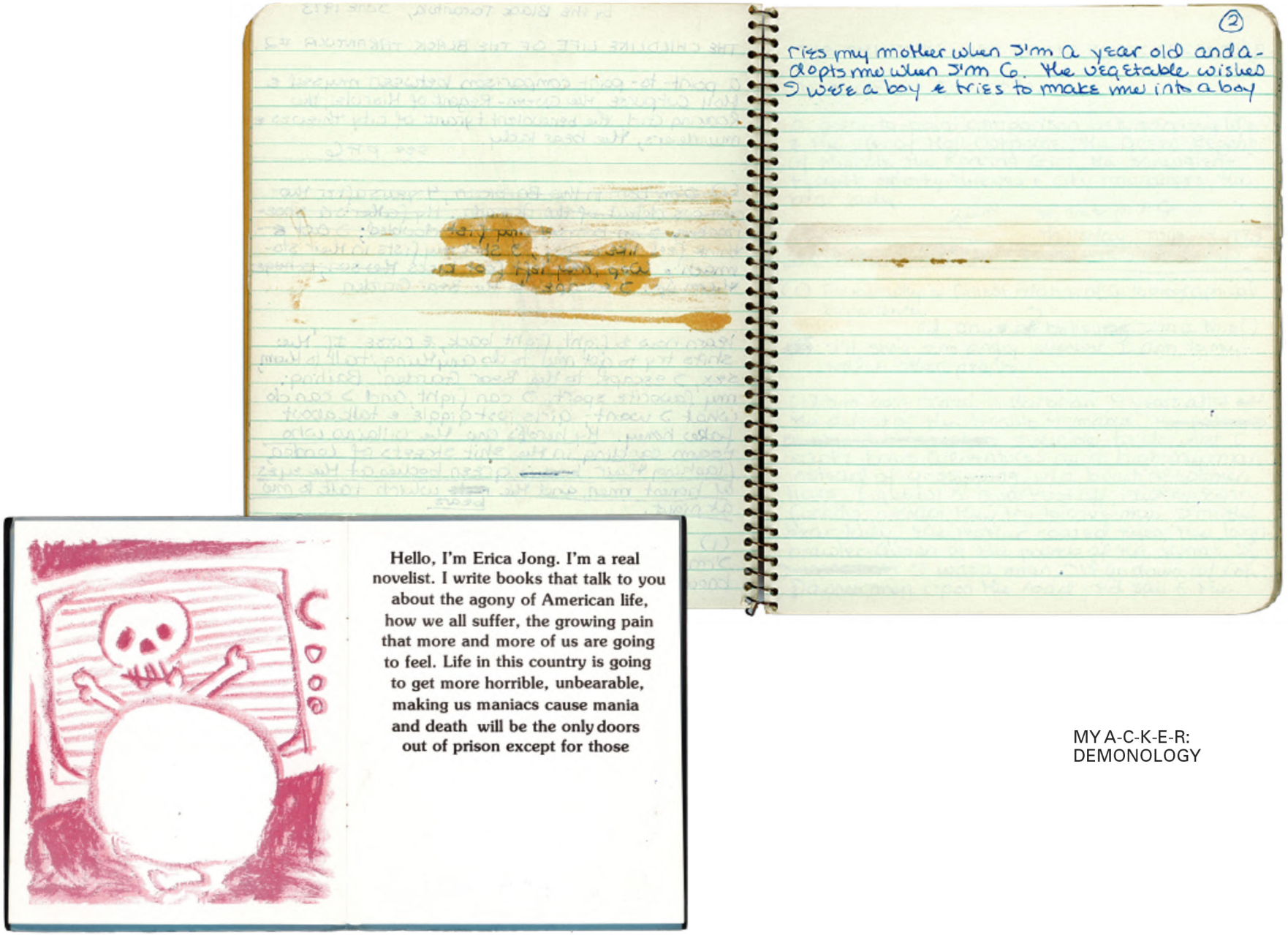
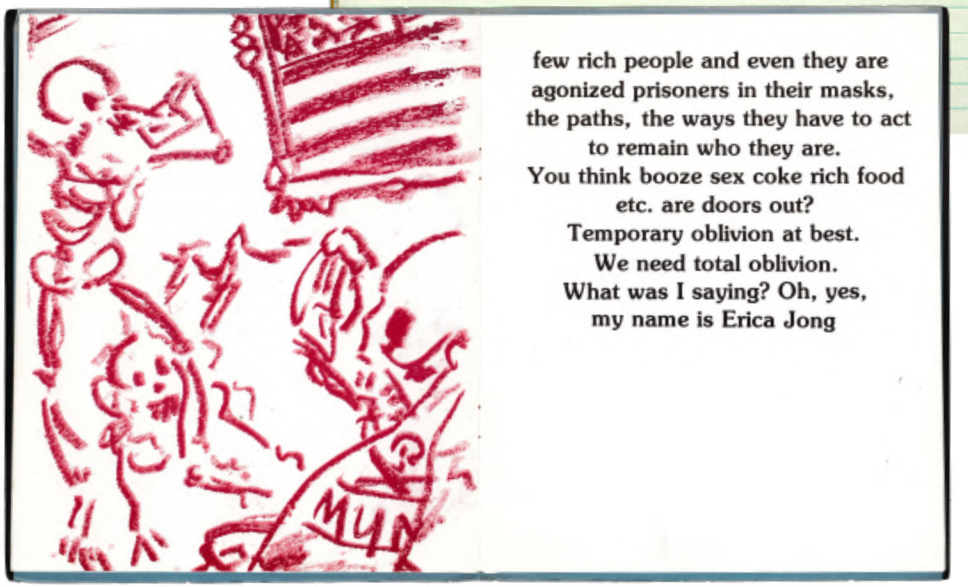


MY A-C-K-E-R:
DEMONOLOGY

Anja Kirschner



THE CHILDLIKE LIFE OF THE BLACK TARANTULA
#2

by the Black Tarantula

a point-to-point comparison between my life & the life of Moll Cutpurse, the Queen-Regent of Misrule, the Roaring Girl, the benevolent tyrant of city thieves & city murderers, the bear lady.

see p. #6

Thursday, June 14, 1973

THIS DOCUMENTATION DONE WHEN I'M TIRED

(1) Pornography = fullest relating of autobiographical experience.

(1 day I believe I'm a thief)

I'll show I'm angry whenever I am to myself & other people.

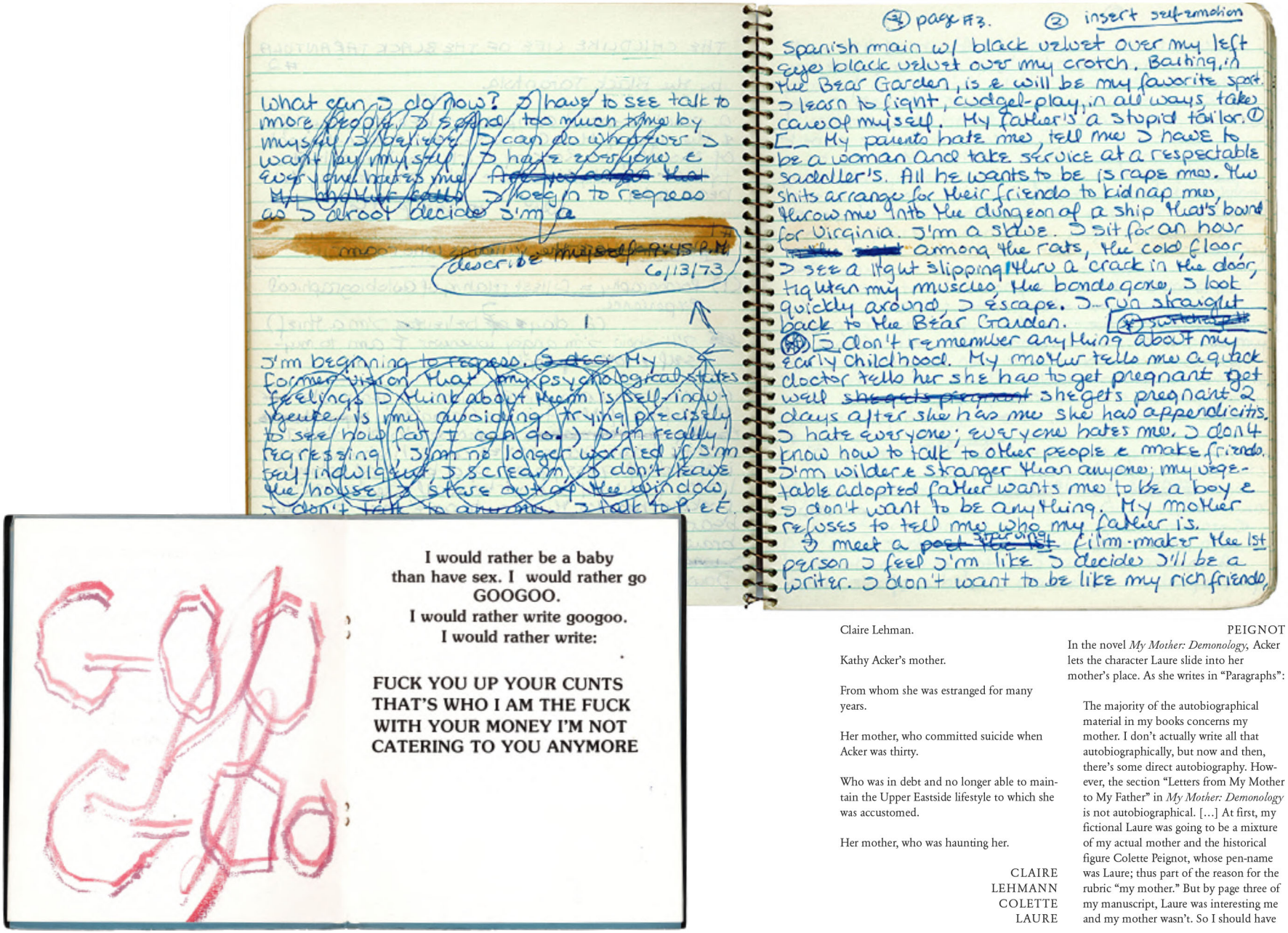
(1) I'm born crazy in Barbican, 4 years after the defeat of the terrible Armada. ~~My father's stupid domination~~ I decide to do what I want: have adventures as a highway man instead of gossipping w/ a bunch of women liars, fight w/ a quarterstaff, destroy every fucking needles they try to give me. I'm the bear lady, the leather coated eyes, the tough brawler-Queen of the jewels of the slums. If I was a man, I'd go down w/ Col. Downes men upon the road; I'd sail to the

DEMONIC WOMEN / CHINESE WOMEN / WOMEN IN DEBT / WOMEN WHO FAIL TO COMMIT MATRICIDE / WOMEN WHO FAIL TO EMANCIPATE THEIR CHARACTERS / WOMEN WHO MUST RADICALLY CONTEST REALITY IN ORDER JUST TO EXIST / ...



Imagine this text as a corridor in a boarding school-slash-maze, which has many doors, leading into many discrete rooms, some of which have internal connecting doors. It doesn't really matter in what order one enters the rooms, or if one enters all, or enters and exits the same room several times. There are also some secret doors. There are names on the doors, the girls keep changing, some are not even names, some are not even girls.

KATHY / SUZY / COLETTE / LAURE / B. / BEATRICE / MIRANDA / DEMONIC WOMEN / CHINESE WOMEN / WOMEN IN DEBT / WOMEN WHO FAIL TO COMMIT MATRICIDE / MATRICIDES / SUICIDES / FEMICIDES / WITCHES / MATER SUSPIRIORUM / CLAIRE / ...



Claire Lehman.

Kathy Acker's mother.

From whom she was estranged for many years.

Her mother, who committed suicide when Acker was thirty.

Who was in debt and no longer able to maintain the Upper Eastside lifestyle to which she was accustomed.

Her mother, who was haunting her.

CLAIRE
LEHMANN
COLETTE
LAURE
PEIGNOT

In the novel *My Mother: Demonology*, Acker lets the character Laure slide into her mother's place. As she writes in "Paragraphs":

> The majority of the autobiographical material in my books concerns my mother. I don't actually write all that autobiographically, but now and then, there's some direct autobiography. However, the section "Letters from My Mother to My Father" in *My Mother: Demonology* is not autobiographical. […] At first, my fictional Laure was going to be a mixture of my actual mother and the historical figure Colette Peignot, whose pen-name was Laure; thus part of the reason for the rubric "my mother." But by page three of my manuscript, Laure was interesting me and my mother wasn't. So I should have

changed the title "Letters from My Mother to My Father."[1]

Acker often drifts away from off her characters or switches their names–something that loosens the ties that supposedly bind them–and her. This is how seriously, how *literally* even, Acker takes the violence inherent in bourgeois identity. As art historian Kerstin Stakemeier writes in her book *Entgrenzter Formalismus* (2017):

> In the text "Critical Languages" written by Kathy Acker in 1990 there appears, between personal narration and pragmatic positionings, the phrase…"Identity, fragile, gives way to identity." […] In Acker's hands "Identity, fragile, gives way to identity" becomes a continuously de-hierarchizing process, in which fragility is not an interlude, but the very thing that infiltrates and reconstructs identity itself. The abstract self-ownership of the bourgeois subject is denaturalized. It becomes embodied as concrete subjection and dominations of itself and others…[2]

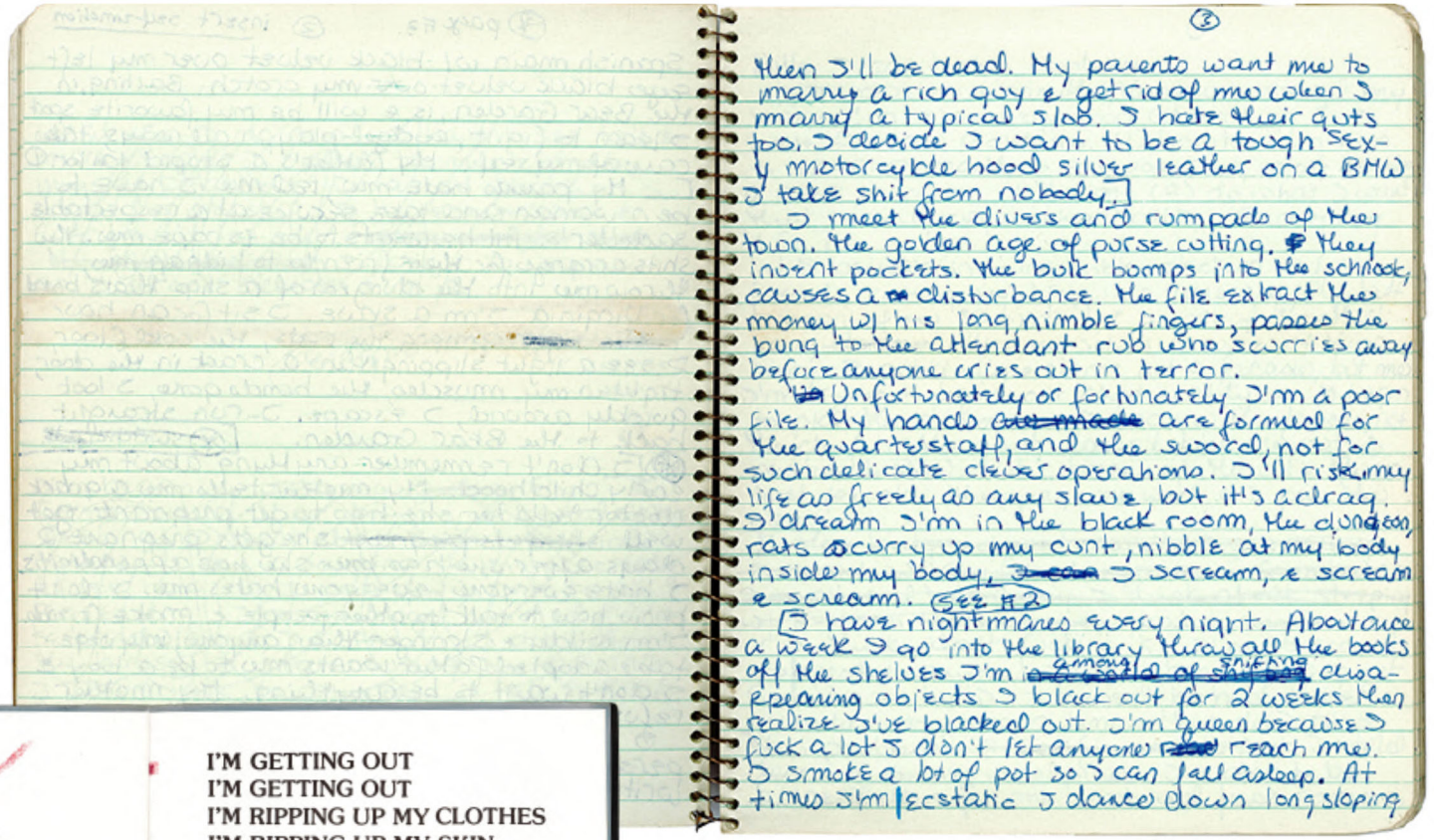
IDENTITY, FRAGILE, GIVES WAY TO IDENTITY.

This happens, too, in the particular drift from the mother to Laure.

The mother, who committed suicide when she was no longer able to maintain the Upper East Side lifestyle she was accustomed to leading, was bad at bourgeois self-ownership–not least since debt was increasingly a component of it. Stakemeier connects this explicitly to the present day, stating that Acker's fragile identities gain renewed topicality after the 2008 financial crisis:

> With the financial crisis this historically embattled and worn-out subject, whose identity continues to be based not least on being granted ownership, was allowed to witness its ongoing economic negation. The ownership of the self, the basis of bourgeois identity, always suffered brutal devaluation in capitalist crises. However, with the financial crisis, the binding of this abstractly secured identity to the concrete economic possibility of its reproduction was once more undone: the abstraction of ownership of the self *as* freedom became the concretion of the indebtedness of this ownership *as* unfreedom of the self.[3]



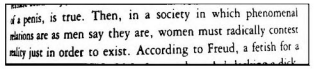


The fragility of identity. The violence on which it is founded and with which it is upheld. This and something else: the particular exposedness of women—the particular brutalization of the mother.

MATRICIDE SUICIDE

The particular brutalization of the mother that gives way to the necessity of *sliding something in place* of Mother. The latter will require nothing less than a personal and a political demonology: a visceral engagement with the congealing of figures into subjects who are made abject.

Acker says that, at the time of writing *My Mother: Demonology*, she had, amongst other texts on witchcraft and psychoanalytic theory, glanced through "Kristeva's book." I had assumed she was referring to *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980). Later, Leslie Dick told me it was actually *About Chinese Women* (1974).


of a penis, is true. Then, in a society in which phenomenal relations are as men say they are, women must radically contest reality just in order to exist. According to Freud, a fetish for a

Julia Kristeva stages the maternal body as that which must be made abject if one is to become a subject within a patriarchal society. According to Kristeva, female children who are not capable of "psychic matricide"—of rejecting the maternal body with which they also identify—develop melancholia and depression.

Acker writes:

My A-C-K-E-R Demonology

I prefer Irigaray's position on the maternal to Kristeva's. According to Irigaray, we, being female in a patriarchal society, might have a double and ambiguous relation to our mothers: On the one hand, my mother was or is my lover. On the other hand, my mother was a victim in the male-defined society. So, if I identify with her, I'm forced to define myself as victim. So how do I deal with this double bind? Go mad? (Pun intended.) Irigaray says we, females, have to reinstate the mother as another person. I take that rather seriously.[4]

This association of abjection and the maternal body loops back from the degradation of women and women's bodies to the slashes one puts into a female body, which become something different than as dashes interspacing the letters of another person's name. I want to focus on the consequential horror of this double, triple, proliferating, and ambiguous relation-slash-dash-separation.

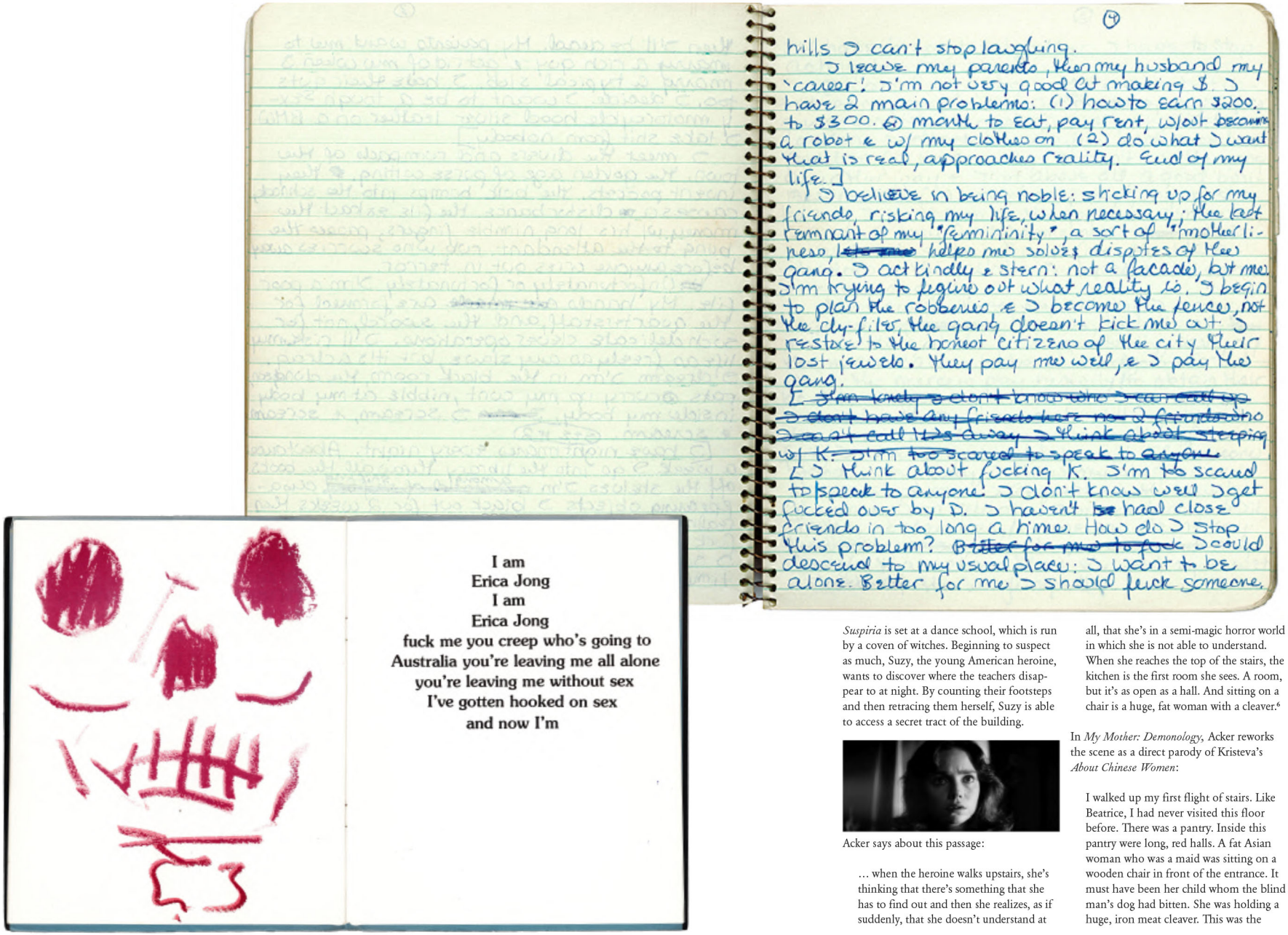
Acker says, that when she began pulling together material for *My Mother: Demonology* she started to realize that:

> … a history I had taken to be minor, the history of witchcraft, could be viewed as an alternative major history, as a history of women. So I became fascinated by witchcraft and by related subjects, such as dreaming. I started working with some people who knew those disciplines. *My Mother: Demonology* came from that place. Dream was a language I accessed; I did not make it up. I did not compose it. I became interested in languages I could access, find. I realized that there were other such languages, languages which could be found.[5]

LANGUAGES
WHICH COULD BE
FOUND.

The figure of the writer Colette Peignot a.k.a. Laure, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and Dario Argento's supernatural horror film *Suspiria* (1977) become the main material for *My Mother: Demonology*.





realm of the Chinese women. In China, when a woman doesn't believe in God, she, like everyone else, validates her existence by believing in a man. It amounts to the same. The only way she can escape this kind of structure (this society, this community, this language) is to make her own. But then she'd be outside society, or non-existent. I walked into the long, red halls. Here lots of maids were holding meat cleavers. Since they were all Chinese, I couldn't communicate with any of them. There were times when I thought, I shouldn't be here. I write with the dizziness that sizes that which is fed up with language and attempts to escape through it: the abyss named *fiction*. For I can only be concerned with the imaginary when I discuss reality or women. The Chinese maids, as fat as pigs, regarded me the way one gazes at an object that is so other it can't be human.

Racialization is everywhere. In Argento's version Suzy has to kill the head of the witches' coven, Mater Suspiriorum, the Greek immigrant directress of the school, in order to escape being killed herself. Mater Suspiriorum and her servants are foreign and evil. However, their magic Technicolor world full of symbolist flower ornamentations, lit in a red-and-blue color scheme Argento derived from Disney's *Snow White* (1937), exist embedded in a larger and still more terrifying mise-en-scène. For anyone familiar with the historical significance of the exterior locations used to shoot *Suspiria*, which are in Munich–although the *Tanzakademie* is in Freiburg, in the story–their connection to the Third Reich, though never directly stated, should be immediately apparent.



This implicit embeddedness is already established in the opening scene. Suzy arrives at the airport on a stormy night and hails a taxi to take her to the school.



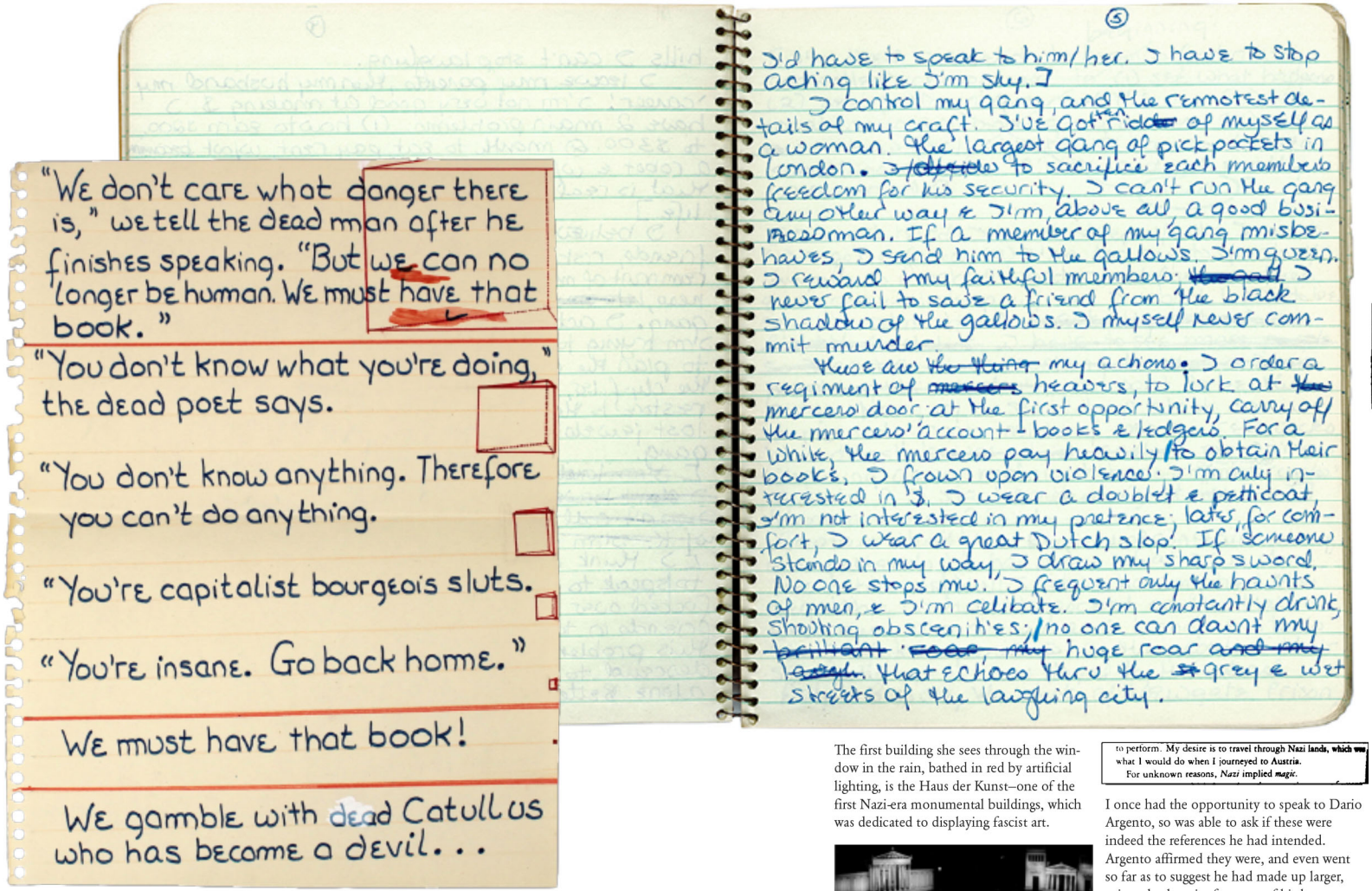
Suspiria is set at a dance school, which is run by a coven of witches. Beginning to suspect as much, Suzy, the young American heroine, wants to discover where the teachers disappear to at night. By counting their footsteps and then retracing them herself, Suzy is able to access a secret tract of the building.

Acker says about this passage:

> … when the heroine walks upstairs, she's thinking that there's something that she has to find out and then she realizes, as if suddenly, that she doesn't understand at all, that she's in a semi-magic horror world in which she is not able to understand. When she reaches the top of the stairs, the kitchen is the first room she sees. A room, but it's as open as a hall. And sitting on a chair is a huge, fat woman with a cleaver.[6]

In *My Mother: Demonology*, Acker reworks the scene as a direct parody of Kristeva's *About Chinese Women*:

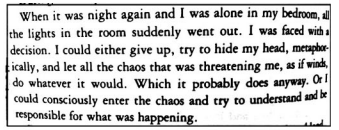
> I walked up my first flight of stairs. Like Beatrice, I had never visited this floor before. There was a pantry. Inside this pantry were long, red halls. A fat Asian woman who was a maid was sitting on a wooden chair in front of the entrance. It must have been her child whom the blind man's dog had bitten. She was holding a huge, iron meat cleaver. This was the



Kathy Acker
Manuscript for *Blood and Guts in High School*
undated
Kathy Acker Reading Room,
University of Cologne

been (or still were) fascists. It is one of several double, triple, proliferating takes nested inside this demonology. That sinking feeling, the infinite regress, which is at the core of horror.

I want to hold on to the idea that *Suspiria*'s "semi-magic horror world in which she is not able to understand" can nevertheless be navigated by Suzy by listening to and counting the footsteps echoing in the building. There is a rudimentary logic to this that can be transmitted and repeated.


When it was night again and I was alone in my bedroom, all the lights in the room suddenly went out. I was faced with a decision. I could either give up, try to hide my head, metaphorically, and let all the chaos that was threatening me, as if winds, do whatever it would. Which it probably does anyway. Or I could consciously enter the chaos and try to understand and be responsible for what was happening.

I retrace the steps.

If in order to not go mad–in order not to become the victim herself–the mother/Mater/witch has to be killed or reinstated as another person, then any daughter/boarding school girl/Anglo-American ballet dancer with a very basic system of orientation walking up a set of stairs has also to acknowledge herself not only in a world not meant for her to understand, but also in a world in which she is not able to recognize herself in those "fat, old, ugly" cooks speaking a foreign tongue. And they are not able to recognize themselves in her either.



The racialization of the women encountered, whom Acker turns from Eastern European into Chinese women, reveals greater differences than doing basic reproductive labor versus receiving an education in ballet. For Acker, their realities cannot be made commensurable by applying "woman" as a universal category. Acker describes a limit, one the Caribbean writer and philosopher Sylvia Wynter will arrive at from the other side.

In "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman,'" with the words "demonic ground" and "woman" set in quotation marks, Wynter

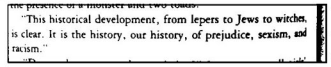
The first building she sees through the window in the rain, bathed in red by artificial lighting, is the Haus der Kunst–one of the first Nazi-era monumental buildings, which was dedicated to displaying fascist art.



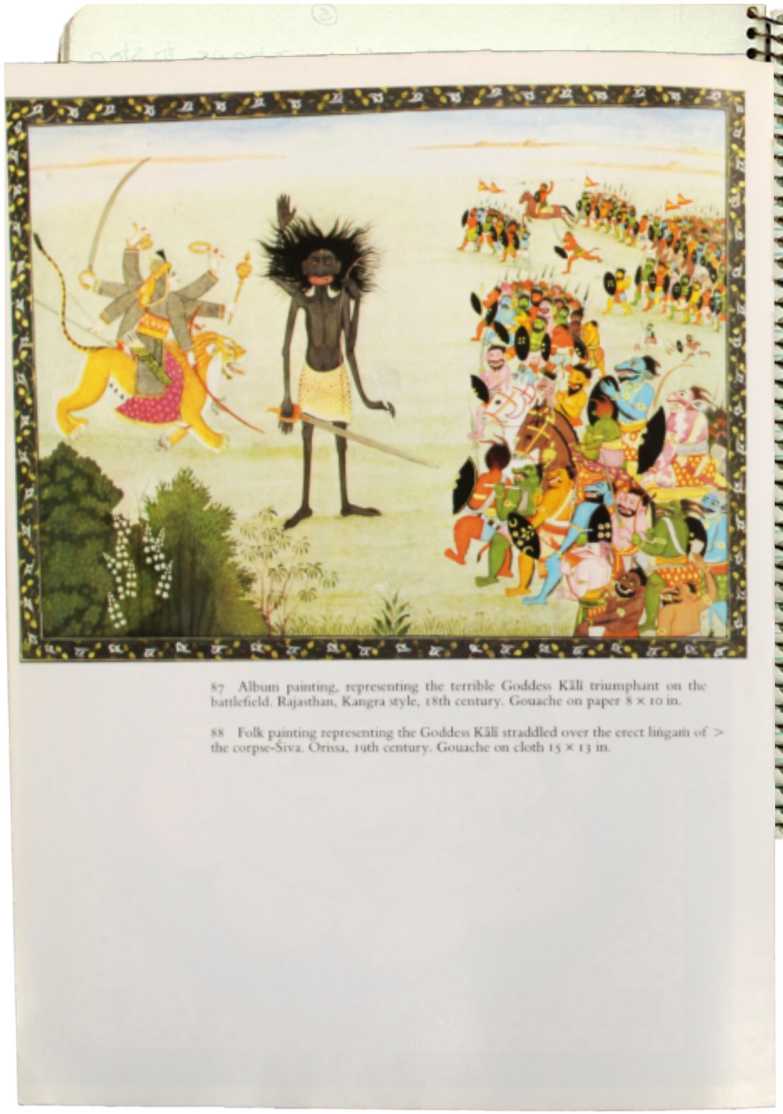
In another scene, the ballet school's blind piano teacher is mauled to death by his possessed guide dog, naturally a German shepherd, on the Königsplatz, a monumental square opposite the former National Socialist Party's headquarters, on which the Nazis frequently held rallies and parades.

to perform. My desire is to travel through Nazi lands, which was what I would do when I journeyed to Austria.
For unknown reasons, *Nazi* implied *magic*.

I once had the opportunity to speak to Dario Argento, so was able to ask if these were indeed the references he had intended. Argento affirmed they were, and even went so far as to suggest he had made up larger, private backstories for most of his horror films, and that some of them were set in a world in which the Nazis had won the war.


"This historical development, from lepers to Jews to witches, is clear. It is the history, our history, of prejudice, sexism, and racism."

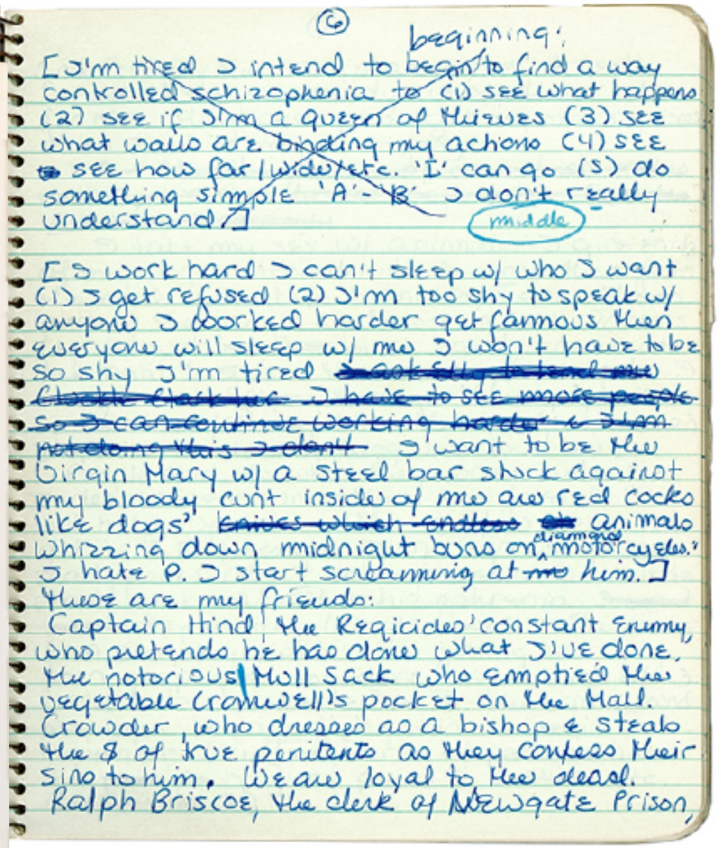
Suspiria also is about childhood for me–about growing up in Munich where almost all the old people, including grandparents and teachers, inevitably turned out to have



87 Album painting, representing the terrible Goddess Kālī triumphant on the battlefield. Rajasthan, Kangra style, 18th century. Gouache on paper 8 × 10 in.

88 Folk painting representing the Goddess Kālī straddled over the erect lingam of the corpse-Śiva. Orissa, 19th century. Gouache on cloth 15 × 13 in.

Philip Rawson
The Art of Tantra, 1973
Book
Kathy Acker Reading Room, University of Cologne



[I'm tired I intend to begin to find a way controlled schizophenia to (1) see what happens (2) see if I'm a queen of thieves (3) see what walls are binding my actions (4) see see how far/wide/etc. 'I' can go (5) do something simple 'A'-'B' I don't really understand.] middle

[I work hard I can't sleep w/ who I want (1) I get refused (2) I'm too shy to speak w/ anyone I don't ~~look~~ work harder get famous then everyone will sleep w/ me I won't have to be so shy I'm tired ~~I look ill I tend me~~ ~~Bottle Black Inc. I have to see more people so I can continue working harder & I am protecting this I don't~~ I want to be the Virgin Mary w/ a steel bar stuck against my bloody cunt inside of me are red cocks like dogs' ~~bones which endless~~ ~~the~~ animals whizzing down midnight suns on dramatic motorcycles.] I hate P. I start screaming at ~~me~~ him.]

These are my friends:
Captain Hind, the Regicides' constant enemy, who pretends he has done what I've done, the notorious Moll Sack who emptied the vegetable Cromwell's pocket on the Mall. Crowder, who dressed as a bishop & stole the $ of true penitents as they confess their sins to him. We are loyal to her ideal.
Ralph Briscoe, the clerk of Newgate Prison,

Kathy Acker's manuscript for the last sections of *Blood and Guts in High School* was revised before publication. She appropriated images for the novel from *The Art of Tantra* and other sources.

claims that "beginning with Western Europe's post-medieval expansion into the New World (and earlier into Africa) […] a mutational shift from the primacy of the *anatomical* model of sexual difference as the referential model of *mimetic* ordering, to that of the *physiognomic* model of *racial/cultural* difference" took place.[7] Wynter sees this shift exemplarily brought into play in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611):

> …if, before the sixteenth century, what Irigaray terms as 'patriarchal discourse' had erected itself on the 'silenced ground' of women, from then on, the new primary silenced ground (which at the same time now enables the partial liberation of Miranda's hitherto stifled speech) would be that of the majority population groups of the globe – all signified now as the 'natives' (Caliban's) to the 'men' of Prospero and Fernando, with Miranda becoming both co-participant, if to a lesser *derived* extent, in the power and privileges generated by the empirical supremacy of her own population; and, as well, the beneficiary of a mode of privilege unique to her, that of being the metaphysically invested and 'idealized' object of desire for all classes (Stephano and Trinculo) and all population groups (Caliban).[8]

Wynter then turns to the question of "the most significant absence of all, that of Caliban's Woman, of Caliban's physiognomically complementary mate." In order to unsilence *her*, Wynter, addressing herself to Caribbean and Black American women intelligentsia, writes:

My A-C-K-E-R Demonology

> … we shall need to move beyond this founding definition ['nature'], not merely to *another* alternative one, non-consciously put into place as our present definition, but rather to a frame of reference which parallels the 'demonic models' posited by physicists who seek to conceive of a vantage point outside of the space-time orientation of the homuncular observer… [9]In looking to Wynter, it is possible to say that Acker rejects being emancipated as "Miranda" to take the place of a co-rational being next to Man. If this seems like a stretch, then it is worth stressing that *My Mother: Demonology* starts with this quote, placing it within the violence of colonialism conquest.

> After Hatuey, a fifteenth-century Indian insurrectionist, had been fixed to the stake, his Spanish captors extended him the choice of converting to Christianity and ascending to Heaven or going unrepentantly to Hell. Gathering that his executioners expected to go to Heaven, Hatuey chose the other.

Kerstin Stakemeier describes how Acker's refusal to emancipate on such terms was taken rather seriously in Germany, where her first novel *Blood and Guts in High School* was indexed on the list of books judged morally harmful to the youth. According to the judgement "Acker was not, as had been claimed, a 'women's rights activist,' because she does not emancipate her protagonist, almost the only woman in the book."[10] As Stakemeier succinctly concludes:

> Thus within bourgeois-capitalist society woman remains obligated, even in the realm of aesthetics, to suffer the violence that society inflicts on her–because its representation–contrary to its libidinization–is to be judged by what is emancipatory and moral. She should emancipate herself from and through this violence and find her moral form on its basis. Acker's identity is, in contrast, not one of emancipation, but one of a permanent expropriation.[11]

areas, that he or she no longer [illegible]
Mayor ——— asked, "Why're you so concerned with horror?"
Father answered that he hated violence. He was both a liberal and a humanist, even though today both these concepts are treated with disdain. Because he was as he was, he saw that life in New York is violent and that violence is unacceptable. Father said, "Political violence, above all, isn't rational. When I portray violence, and this concerns how I portray violence, I want it to be clear as hell that violence is not understandable."

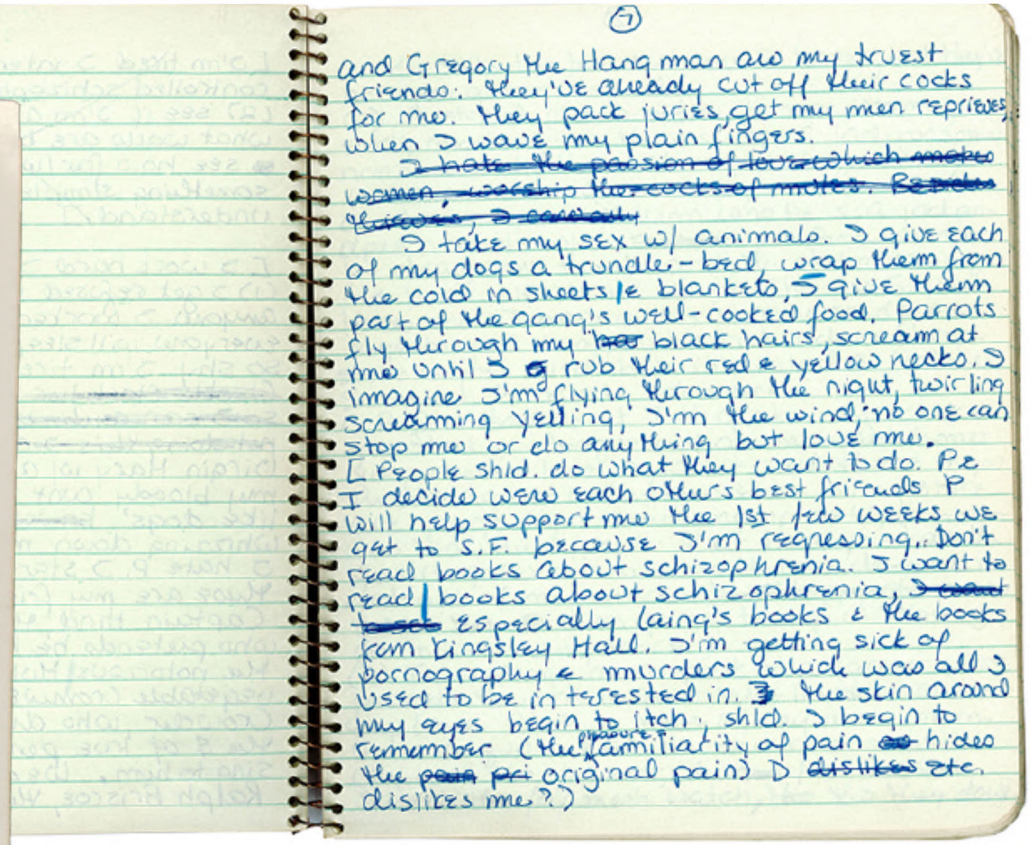
Acker mocks and refuses the artist-father for whom violence can be simply a material for his art and who shields his position as observer-perpetrator by claiming it to be



Overleaf:
89 Raktayamāri, a form of Yamāntaka destroyer of death, with his female wisdom.
Tibet, 18th century. Bronze h. 10 in.

90 A wrathful manifestation of the Void, in union with the abolition of selfhood.
Nepal, *c.* 1600. Gouache on cloth 56 × 38 in.

Philip Rawson
The Art of Tantra, 1973
Book
Kathy Acker Reading Room, University of Cologne



(7)

and Gregory the Hangman are my truest friends. They've already cut off their cocks for me. They pack juries, get my men reprieves, when I wave my plain fingers.

~~I hate the passion of love which makes women worship the cocks of males. Besides, I don't~~

I take my sex w/ animals. I give each of my dogs a trundle-bed, wrap them from the cold in sheets & blankets, I give them part of the gang's well-cooked food. Parrots fly through my ~~hair~~ black hairs, scream at me until I rub their red & yellow necks. I imagine I'm flying through the night, twirling screaming yelling, I'm the wind, no one can stop me or do anything but love me.

[People shld. do what they want to do. Pe I decide were each others best friends P will help support me the 1st few weeks we get to S.F. because I'm regressing. Don't read books about schizophrenia. I want to read books about schizophrenia, ~~I want to see~~ especially Laing's books & the books from Kingsley Hall. I'm getting sick of pornography & murders which was all I used to be interested in. The skin around my eyes begin to itch, shld. I begin to remember (the familiarity of pain ~~of~~ hides the ~~pain~~ pri original pain) D ~~dislikes~~ etc. dislikes me?)

1. Kathy Acker, "Paragraphs," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Identities, 28, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 87–92.
2. Kerstin Stakemeier, *Entgrenzter Formalismus: Verfahren einer Antimodernen Ästhetik*, (Berlin: b_books [PoLYpeN], 2017), 272–73 [my translation].
3. Ibid., 271–72.
4. Acker, "Paragraphs," 90.
5. Ibid., 91.
6. Ibid., 89–90.
7. Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/Silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman,'" in *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*, ed. Alison Donnel and Sarah Lawson Welsh (London: Routledge, 1996), 381–82.
8. Wynter, 383.
9. Wynter, 384.
10. Stakemeier, 276.
11. Stakemeier, 277.
12. Kathy Acker, *My Mother: Demonology*. (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 78.

"beyond understanding." For, as Wynter demonstrates, this violence has a long genealogy within the matrix of Western liberal humanism. Instead of claiming that this violence is beyond knowing, in *My Mother: Demonology* as in *Suspiria*, Suzy chooses to "enter the chaos and try to understand and be responsible for what was happening."[12]