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CHALLENGING  
PATRIARCHAL  
REPRESENTATIONS



*In Women's Metafictional Writing*

ARTWORK BY MARNIE ROBERTSON

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## Introduction

Friedman and Fuchs claim that '[i]n exploding dominant forms, women experimental writers not only assail the social structure but also produce an alternate fictional space, a space in which the feminine, marginalized in traditional fiction and patriarchal culture, can be expressed. Thus, the rupturing of traditional forms becomes a political act, and the feminine narrative resulting from such a rupture is allied with the feminist project' (4).

This statement makes a valid point in regard to the postmodernist feminist fiction by experimental women writers. When radically political fictional spaces are considered, the concept of metafiction proves to be particularly important. Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* (copyrighted 1978) and Sapphire's *PUSH* (1996) are two examples of narratives that, through their experimental form, especially the metafictional techniques, trouble the normative modes of representation and manage to establish radically feminist spaces of expression.

Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as: 'fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality' (2).

However, this method does not only question the fictionality but, 'through its self-exploration' (3), 'rejects the forms that correspond to the ordered reality' (7), namely 'the language of the traditional novel: the conventions of realism' (11) and thus draws attention to the 'impermanent structures' rather than a dictated 'common sense' (7). Imperatively, Friedman and Fuchs see the traditional realist narratives as a mode of writing embodying the patriarchal system, with its essential feature being 'the stance of mastery' (38) (elements like the omniscient narrator, linear plot etc.). However, as Mark Currie highlights, metafiction is committed to 'the idea of constructed meanings rather than representable essences' (15),

consequently becoming a method of subverting the conventional and "universal" realism of patriarchal storytelling. Acker and Sapphire's narratives exemplify this mode of writing, mainly through fragmentation, intertextuality and self-reflection and create "the fictional" as an opposition to ordered realism and question the essentiality of social structures, id est the patriarchal system.

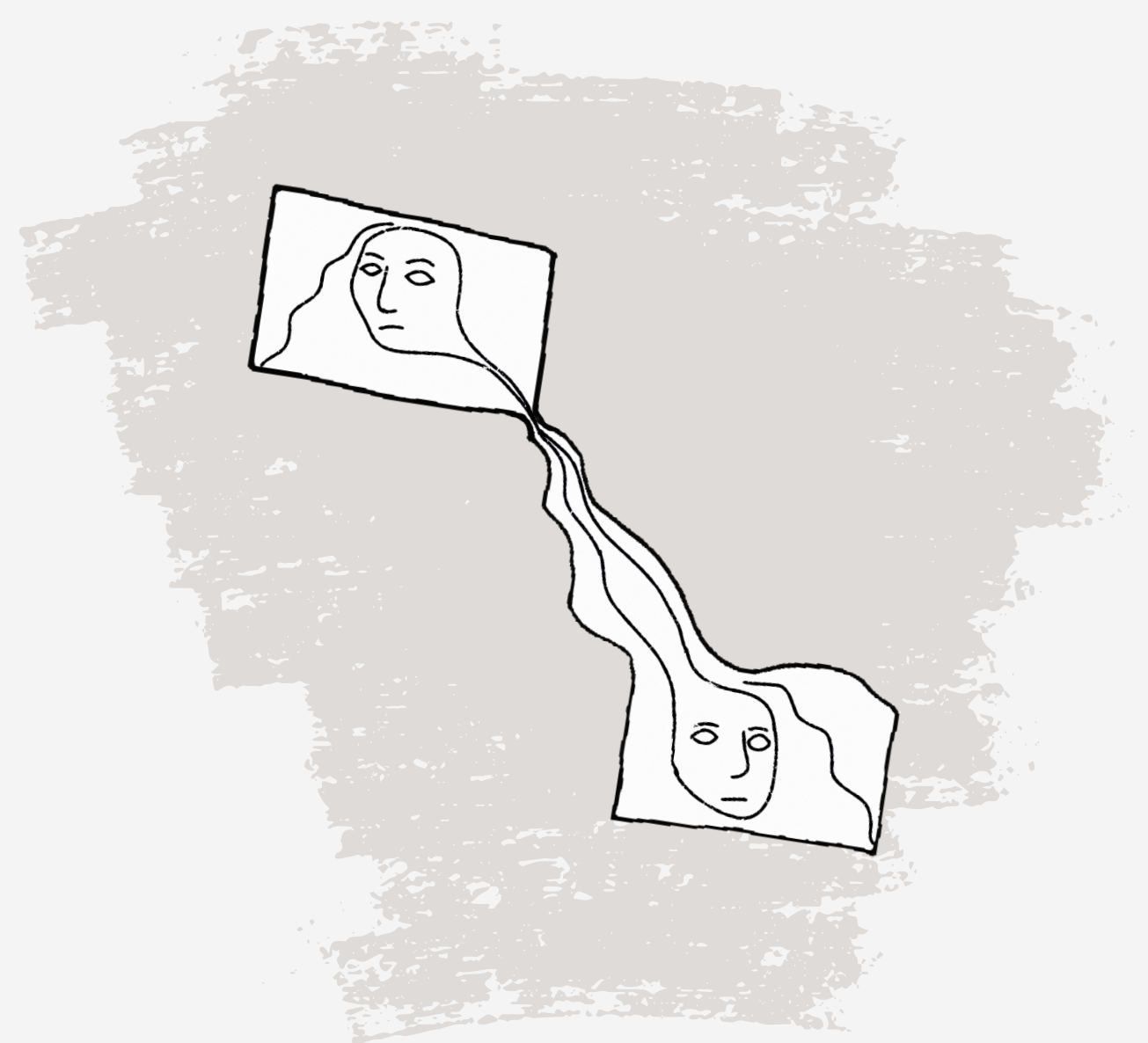
In line with Friedman and Fuchs's understanding of women's experimental writing, I argue that through the means of metafiction, which subverts the established notions of realism and stresses the constructedness of reality, authors like Acker and Sapphire create room and possibility for women's radical opposition against established norms of literary patriarchal structures as well as voice a call for their liberation. These works are rooted in the ideas of agency; through the experimental and metafictional form, they assert the writer's freedom and thus give power to the marginalised feminine.

### 1. The writer's freedom in expression

*Blood and Guts in High School* (henceforth *Blood and Guts*) by Kathy Acker is an experimental novel that tells the story of Janey Smith, who, throughout her coming-of-age, endures incestuous sexual relations with her father, rape, abuse, kidnapping and being sold into prostitution. Called by some critics a novel of cruelty which '[rereads] the patriarchal literary tradition' (Henderson 208), this narrative, in questioning the dominant and objective representations of truth and reality, establishes itself as a critique of literary conventions. Acker confronts the realist mode of writing, mainly through elements of metafiction, like fragmentation and intertextuality, as a result establishing fiction as a place of women's artistic expression free from realist modes of writing.

The primary technique of creating metafiction within *Blood and Guts* is fragmentation. Acker intertwines various forms: prose, script, poetry, and illustrations to put together a novel that radically defies the traditional, that is, realist forms of a narrative. Larry McCaffery emphasises the experimental punk aesthetics at the core of this novel, which aim to challenge traditional artistic forms by prioritising representations of power, obscenity and excess (220). Notable, though, is the use of illustrations within the story. Critics like Katie Muth see these drawings as ‘disruptions’, which aim to ‘aestheticise poststructuralist arguments’ embedded within the novel (91-92). However, I would argue that these images fundamentally but productively fragment the story, thus deconstructing it, but they remain reiterations of the main narrative. The text of the narrative is visualised in the drawings, for example in connection to Merida (the place where the first chapter of the novel takes place) – see p. 6, Figure 1 (Acker 14). The surrealist visual representation of the novel’s setting not only echoes the atmosphere of the place where Janey grows up: the “genitality” of the illustrations draws attention to her childhood being filled with sexual relations but also exposes an illusion of the narrative world as fictional or constructed. Besides the visual repetition of the setting and its mood, the narrative includes a series of drawings called “Maps” (Acker 46-51). In these illustrations, Acker retells the story through various (visual) allegories and metaphors, thus again using repetition as a mode of fragmentation and creating self-consciousness in the narrative, proving it metafictional. For instance, in the third map, “The Fairytale Begins” – see p.7, Figure 2 (Acker 50-51), Acker creates an allegorical story at the top of the illustration (e.g. ‘Baba takes me to the edge of the metal factory and sticks his cock in me. I’m his ‘wife’ (Acker 51)), which foreshadows the further parts of the narrative, in which Janey is kidnapped and sold to a Persian slave trader (‘Janey lived in the locked room. Twice a day

the Persian slave trader came in and taught her to be a whore.’ (Acker 65)). Moreover, in the centre of the map, Acker draws attention to the narrative’s ‘I’ being a writer: ‘I make myself a writer’ (50), identifying the fictional writer of the novel as the protagonist. This is emphasised further in the story: ‘One day she found a pencil stub and scrap of paper in a forgotten corner of the room. She began to write down her life ...’ (65). A motif of the protagonist as a writer introduces a crucial element of metafiction: the self-consciousness of the novel as an artefact (using Waugh’s term (2)) and further their ability to create a personal, subjective reality. As Friedman and Fuchs suggest, such stories problematise the idea of universal truths, freeing women’s writing from the conventions of realist fiction, which reinforces the patriarchal system (38). Therefore, *Blood and Guts* becomes a metaphorical commentary on the agency of a female writer, who, going against traditional realist storytelling, can create a space for the free expression of a woman’s life – experimental and not subdued by oppressive conventions.



The self-reflection of the narrative on its fictional status is combined in *Blood and Guts* with the critique of dominant stories within patriarchy. Acker achieves this ‘borderline discourse between fiction and reality’ (Currie 2) through another metafictional technique: intertextuality. This novel, being a pastiche, draws on various texts and myths existing in reality to undermine the predominant representations within patriarchy, particularly the feminine representations. Hutcheon identifies this (as some critiques, for example McCaffery 223; Pitchford 59; Freidman and Fuchs 39, name it) “plagiarism” as inherently postmodern in its way of questioning the ‘(historical) power of representations’, a technique ‘often used by feminist artists [...] to deconstruct them [cultural representations]’ (98). It is visible in Acker’s novel, for instance, through the play on the Oedipus complex, for instance, ‘Janey depended on her father for everything and regarded her father as boyfriend, brother, sister, money, amusement, and father’ (7). Acker deconstructs this popular psychoanalytic theory by inverting it, in which Muth sees a commentary on the concept of the Oedipal family (90) and thus challenges its universality. Particularly significant, however, proves to be the intertextual reference to *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, which appears in the narrative Janey starts writing her story:

‘She began to write down her life...

A book report

We all live in prison. Most of us don’t know we live in prison.’ (Acker 65, emphasis in original)

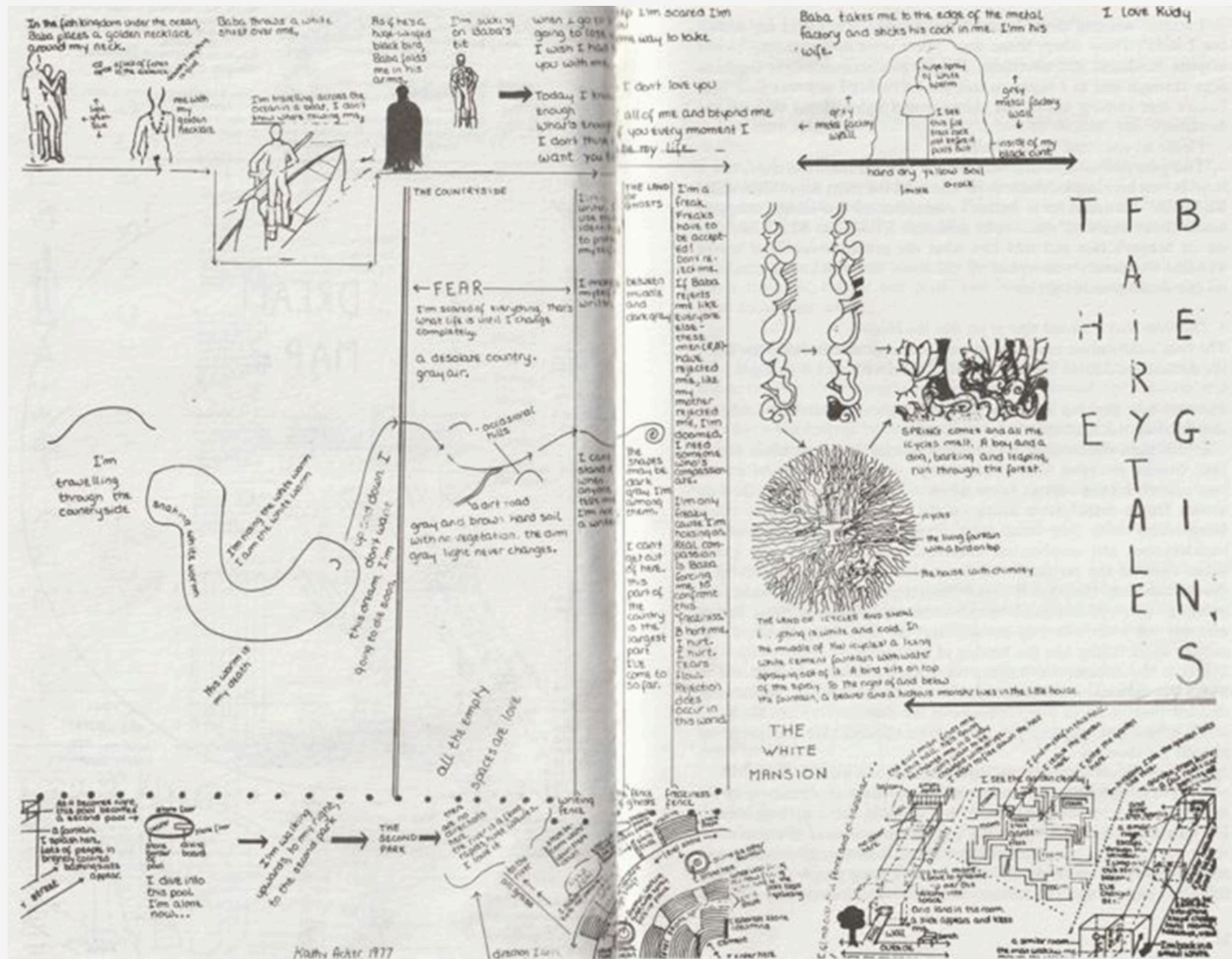
By placing this intertextual reference after the narrative self-consciously acknowledges its constructedness, Acker voices a radical criticism of the fictionality of representation. The metaphor of the prison (alluding directly to Hawthorne’s popular historical fiction novel) poses a question of whether the narratives of patriarchal culture “imprison”

women in their representations, whether the realist novel as a form perpetuates the prison-like conditions for the female characters and /or writers. Janey’s life becomes, thus, metaphorically written by the presentation of *The Scarlet Letter*’s protagonist, Hester Prynne. Pitchford sees in this a postmodernist technique, used by feminist writers, of challenging the “master narratives” (24-25). On the other hand, Henderson calls it ‘Acker’s “pedagogical mission” [...] to get the reader to reread [...] the patriarchal literary tradition’ (208). Thus, by using the experimental, metafictional mode of writing, Kathy Acker ‘takes the bourgeois realist novel and explodes its form’ (Henderson 202), ultimately challenging the patriarchal conventional representations. The fictional space of *Blood and Guts* becomes thus a feminist project of asserting the artist’s freedom and power to (self-) represent.

Figure 1: Acker, Kathy. “Merida”. *Blood and Guts in High School*. Penguin Books, 2017. p.14 (scanned)



Figure 2: Acker, Kathy. "Map 3: The Fairytale Begins". *Blood and Guts in High School*. Penguin Books, 2017. p.50-51 (scanned)



## 2. The woman's agency

The fictional women's spaces and the establishment of spaces for the feminine and female writers can take different shapes while still being centred around the means of metafiction. Sapphire's *PUSH* is a coming-of-age story of Precious Jones, who, after being repeatedly raped by her father, becomes a second-time mother at the age of sixteen. Learning to read and write in an alternative school *Each One Teach One*, the protagonist tries to challenge the forces of social determinism in her attempts to become a good mother and construct her life outside of the dysfunctional family. Similar to Acker's *Blood and Guts*, this narrative is also experimental in its form, through the use of African-American Vernacular English, the fragmentation through different modes of writing (prose intertwines with poetry, etc.). Nevertheless, it is particularly through the elements of metafiction that Sapphire establishes this novel as a radical feminist project

that exemplifies the importance of self-determination and the importance of each person's experience. Compared to *Blood and Guts*, the intertextuality in *PUSH* is not a challenge or an assault on patriarchal myths of representation but a means of self-discovery. This metafictional technique is constructed here by references to other works of culture. They are not criticised but seen as ways to empower oneself. Especially important proves to be a reference to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*: 'We reading *The Color Purple* in school. [...] that book give me so much strength' (Sapphire 81-83). The intertextual references in *PUSH* function thus as ways to emancipation. This notion is strictly connected to the quest for literacy within the story. David draws on the theory by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 'text created author' and claims that: 'being and becoming for black people involved reading and writing in order to disprove white supremacist claims of black inferiority and cultural absence' (182- 183).

The intertextual references function here as cultural representations and guidelines for Precious to discover stories through the newly learned language as well as to question the notion of Black women's invisibility within society. Many critics highlight the importance of the narrative's position within the broader literary tradition of African-American writing, id est the issue of literacy (e.g. Dagbovie-Mullins 446, Michlin 175, Venkatasan 117). As David states, this motif of learning to read and write is crucial as it 'holds a promise of a self-determined visibility in the wider world, a visibility that would counteract the [...] abjections, absence ...' (182). This idea is visible in the optimistic ending of Precious's story:

'He pulling on my earring, want me to stop daydreaming and read him a story before nap time. I do.' (Sapphire 140).

The first-person narrator asserts in this conclusion her own agency. The short sentence "I do." emphasises the power and freedom to read and through that fulfils her ideals of motherhood. The intertextuality in *PUSH*, thus, is a means of establishing the radical agency of its protagonist. Furthermore, Sapphire's novel, similarly to *Blood and Guts in High School*, utilises self-consciousness of its fictional status to create a feminist narrative. The first-person narration and self-reflexive elements of the novel (like poems or extracts from the class journal) emphasise the narrative's character as a creation by Precious. Michlin proposes to read the entire narrative as the protagonist's submission to the 'Life Stories' collection written by the class members in the Each One Teach One class:

'We have a class project – LIFE STORY. It's where we write our life stories and put it all in one big book. [...] One day when I have time I read you what the other girls wrote.' (Sapphire 94)

Thus, the novel *PUSH* becomes an optimistic testimony to the power and liberation through telling one's own story. It becomes a metaphor for self-representation and self-constructedness within stories. Sika Dagbovie-Mullins argues that 'Precious is victimized until she writes herself into being' (436). In such a way, the experimental elements of the story, especially its metafictional self-consciousness, become a way of asserting a woman's means to represent herself and assume a position among cultural representations. Therefore, Sapphire creates a fictional expression space for a marginalised protagonist – Precious is given a voice and freedom to self-represent.

### Conclusion

Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts* and Sapphire's *PUSH* are examples of experimental writing that becomes political through the radical uses of the narrative form. Substantiating Friedman and Fuchs's claim (see p. 3), metafictional elements of the novels draw attention to the constructedness of the texts and break with realist expectations. Through techniques like fragmentation, intertextuality and self-reflexion of the fiction, authors establish fictional spaces of resistance against conventions. Therefore, these works provide a space for feminist postmodernist opposition against the patriarchal modes of representation.



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Fig. 1: Acker, Kathy. "Merida". *Blood and Guts in High School*. Penguin Books, 2017. p.14

Fig. 2: Acker, Kathy. "Map 3: The Fairytale Begins". *Blood and Guts in High School*. Penguin Books, 2017, p.50-51