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“Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair”: Trauma, Writing and Alternative Communities in Sapphire’s *Push* and Its Film Adaptation *Precious*

Abstract: Similarly to the critically acclaimed novel *Push* by Sapphire (Ramona Lofton), an African American poet, performer and educator, *Precious*, the 2009 film adaptation of the novel, won numerous awards. In the supposedly post-racial era of Barack Obama’s presidency the film sparked off an intense debate about the representation of African Americans. In Poland this independent film premiered in 2010 and also received enthusiastic reviews. The film deserves attention because of its brilliant acting and its vivid visual rendition of such trauma symptoms as flashbacks and dissociations as well as some significant changes introduced into the original narrative; most notably a light-skinned character in place of a dark-skinned one, and the optimistic ending. The novel foregrounds the stages of the protagonist’s personal growth in journal writing and poetry as well as intertextual references to important works of the African American literary tradition, but it concludes with a less comforting double ending.

This paper explores the function of the narrative strategy of the dialogue journal writing employed in *Push* by the adolescent African American protagonist, Precious, to construct a counter story of an incestuous family life and social isolation. The self-narration of Precious in her journal entries exposes the sexual and physical abuse in her family and the neglect of educational and social institutions, and in the process brings about her self-knowledge, desire to change and gradual self-empowerment. Encouraged by her teacher, Precious finds her own voice and her journal writing becomes a “textualization of her own self” in search of new opportunities for growth (Harkins 2009: 219). Precious’s journal exchanges with her teacher, her creative writing of poetry and her interaction with the students from the substitute school and support groups also constitute an alternative to the gritty realist narrative about the cycle of poverty and abuse in late 1980s Harlem. However, Precious’s recovery is not smooth. The novel vividly depicts the destructive self-image and multiple post-traumatic stress disorders caused by long-term abuse and neglect. The psychic trauma Precious experiences at home and at school is rendered in the novel by the fragmentation of her narrative, frequent flashbacks and dissociations. The novel abounds in intertextual references to African American literature as Precious develops her literary competence and critical skills. The paper explores the significance of writing for recovery from trauma as theorized by trauma studies and scriptotherapy.

Well, son, I'll tell you:
 Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
 It's had tacks in it,
 And splinters,
 And boards torn up ...
 But all the time
 I'se been a-climbin' on,
 And reachin' landin's,
 And turnin' corners,
 And sometimes going in the dark
 Where there ain't no light.
 So boy, don't you turn back.

Langston Hughes "Mother to Son"
 In: Sapphire's *Push*, 112–113.

1. American reception of *Precious*, the film adaptation of *Push* and the debate about racial representation

Similarly to Sapphire's critically acclaimed 1996 novel, *Precious: Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire* (dir. L. Daniels), a low-budget independent film released in 2009, won numerous awards such as the Grand Jury Prize and the Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival, two Oscars, a British Academy Film Award and the award for Best Director for Lee Daniels at the Independent Spirit Awards.

American film reviews of *Precious* in the press were mostly glowing. For example, Lynn Hirschberg's review of *Precious* in *The New York Times*, bearing the title "The audacity of *Precious*," draws parallels between the story about an illiterate sixteen-year-old African American girl from an impoverished, dysfunctional inner city family and Barack Obama's memoir *The Audacity of Hope* (Hirschberg 2009). Betsy Sharkey of *The Los Angeles Times* compares *Precious* to a "rough-cut diamond." In her appraisal, "'Precious' cuts deep" the film is described as "a rare blend of pure entertainment and dark social commentary ... shockingly raw, surprisingly irreverent and [an] absolutely unforgettable story" (Sharkey 2009).

While the positive reviews, such as that of Betsy Sharkey, or Mary Pols's review of *Precious* from *Time* titled "Too powerful for tears," or A.O. Scott's *The New York Times*' review "Howls of a life, buried deep within," praised the film's casting, acting and character study, the film has also contributed to the debate on representation of African Americans on screen (Pols 2009; Scott 2009). For example, Hirschberg notes a few critical voices claiming that Daniels's *Precious* is not impartial on the subject of racial stereotyping because most light-skinned actors are cast to play positive characters. Hirschberg quotes Daniels's self-critical response to the charge of his colorism: "'Precious' is so not P.C. What I learned from doing the film is that even though I am black, I'm prejudiced. I'm prejudiced

against people who are darker than me ... Making this movie changed my heart" (qtd. in Hirschberg 2009). In addition, Daniels comments on the unique political climate surrounding his film: "As African-Americans, we are in an interesting place, Obama's the president, and we want to aspire to that. But part of aspiring is disassociating from the face of *Precious* ... because of Obama, it's now O.K. to be black. I can share that voice. I don't have to lie. I'm proud of where I come from" (qtd. in Hirschberg 2009). In this way Daniels seems to suggest that ethnic identity politics overshadowed other social issues such as class or child abuse.

In a similar vein, Felicia R. Lee acknowledges the differences of opinion concerning the reception of *Precious* by the African American audience in her review "To blacks, *Precious* is 'demeaned' or 'angelic'" (Lee 2009). One of the most vocal critics of the film, Armond White of the alternative weekly *New York Press*, accuses Daniels of reinforcing destructive stereotypes about African Americans by "offering racist hysteria masquerading as social sensitivity" and claims that "the spectacle warps how people perceive black American life — perhaps even replacing their instincts for compassion with fear and loathing" (White 2009). Armond White's crowning argument against *Precious* in "Pride and precious" is connected with the alienation he felt during the favourable reception of the film at the New York Film Festival: "Worse than *Precious* itself was the ordeal of watching it with an audience full of patronizing white folk at the New York Film Festival, then enduring its media hoodwink as a credible depiction of black American life" (White 2009). Contrary to White, Sonny Bunch of *The Washington Times* defends the film on the grounds that it is primarily "a tale of empowerment" and not denigration. As for the debate about the supposed reinforcement of negative portrayals of the African American community in *Precious*, Bunch reminds the reader of similar accusations having been brought against Bill Cosby's slightest criticism of the inner city's dysfunction (Bunch 2009).

Sapphire (Ramona Lofton), the author of the novel *Push*, also invokes the Cosbys and other positive political changes as a background against which her portrayal of the African American community is shown: "Just tremendous gains have been made. So I felt that the argument that this book shows a — only one aspect of the black community could no longer be a viable reason to not make a film of it. Well now, in 2009, we have tremendous range of black families in the media, from the Cosbys to the Obamas" (qtd. in Norris 2009). In response to the charge of propagating some of the negative stereotypes about African Americans, Sapphire argues that she did just the opposite. Having portrayed "an obese black woman as an intelligent person who dreams, as a person who wants the things she wants" she hoped to challenge the power of these stereotypes (qtd. in Norris 2009). In another interview, speaking about the threat of perpetuating negative stereotypes about African Americans, Sapphire points out again the significance of the context: "With Michelle, Sasha and Malia and Obama in the White House and in the post-'Cosby Show' era, people can't say these are the only images out there. ... Black

people are able to say ‘Precious’ represents some of our children, but some of our children go to Yale” (qtd. in Lee 2009). She also adds: “Child abuse is not black. What do you call the man in Austria who imprisoned his daughter for years?” (qtd. in Lee 2009).

Lee’s film adaptation of *Push* introduced a number of important changes into the original narrative. Most notably, a light-skinned actress (Paula Patton) was cast in the role of the dark-skinned teacher (Blu Rain). The film also downplays the lesbian relationship between Precious’s teacher, Blu Rain, and her live-in lover. Additionally, the film includes the scene where a concerned social worker confronts Precious’s mother about the sexual and physical abuse perpetrated on Precious by both her parents. Finally, the film ends on a quite optimistic note, whereas the novel concludes with an abrupt ending of Precious’s life narrative, which is followed by an appendix containing her class project of life stories by similarly traumatized classmates.

2. Polish reception of *Precious* [*Hej, Skarbie*]

In Poland, *Precious*, translated into Polish as *Hej, Skarbie*, premiered in 2010, receiving predominantly enthusiastic reviews in the most important Polish film magazine *Kino*, the Polish weeklies such as *Polityka* and *Newsweek* (Polish edition), and in the Polish quality newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*. Zdzisław Pietrasik of *Polityka* even acknowledged *Precious* as one of the best American films of the season in his review “Treasure from Harlem,” playing on the film’s title (Pietrasik 2010). Krzysztof Kwiatkowski of *Newsweek* contextualized the enormous success of *Precious* by comparing it favourably to other African American directed film genres often featuring mostly African American casts, such as the violent urban “hood movies” or often provocative films by Spike Lee (Kwiatkowski 2010).

In the 2011 issue of *The Americanist. The Warsaw Journal of the Study of the United States*, Agnieszka Graff, who views *Precious* as “a very radical ... thoughtful and progressive film,” in an interview with Elsa Barkely-Brown, titled “Race, sexuality, and African American women representing the nation,” also discusses the reception of *Precious* by African American audiences (Graff and Glass 2011: 33). Barkely-Brown points out that African American responses to the film are connected with a much narrower representation of the African American characters in the film than in the novel. She emphasizes that in the novel, Sapphire clearly wanted to address issues which are often silenced: “She wanted to enter the conversation we have been having about the parts of African American women’s lives that cannot be talked about in public because of the danger that talking about them in public reinforces stereotypes and will work to the disadvantage of black women” (Graff and Glass, 33). Barkely-Brown further specifies the issues Sapphire

addressed in her novel: "She was definitely trying to create a conversation about abuse, about silences around abuse, about obesity and silences around that, in a format that is very accessible" (Graff and Glass, 34).

To conclude, even though Daniels's film adaptation of *Push* had not been widely distributed in Polish cinemas in 2010, the film was also released on DVD in 2011 and, despite the quite unfortunate translation of the title, received much critical attention in Poland. In contrast to the black hood films featuring predominantly young black male characters and the hip hop culture romanticising violence and street gangs, which are popular in Poland, Lee's independent production introduces a new perspective on the African American urban community by highlighting a young African American girl who is devastated by black on black brutality.

3. Conceptualizations of psychological trauma, trauma fiction and scriptography

Although its representation of the African American community has dominated the discussion of the film adaptation of Sapphire's *Push*, it is not the central theme of the novel. *Push* is set in late 1980s Harlem during the AIDS and crack epidemics, but the novel's narration foregrounds the emotional and intellectual struggle of a protagonist seeking to recover from experiences of severe abuse and neglect occurring both at home and at school. Thus, the story of an illiterate African American teenager with two children by her father, experiencing the multiple consequences of her mistreatment, can be viewed primarily as an example of trauma fiction.

According to Anne Whitehead, who problematises the depiction of trauma in the novel, the emergent genre of "trauma fiction": "represents a paradox or contradiction: if trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation, how then can it be narrativised in fiction?" (Whitehead 2004: 3). Whitehead discusses a variety of strategies used to represent the overpowering experience of trauma in fiction "mimicking its [trauma's] forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, narratives are characterized by repetitions and indirection" (Whitehead, 3). As for other literary devices of "narrating the unnarratable" (Whitehead, 4), Whitehead states that "trauma fiction overlaps with and borrows from both postmodern and postcolonial fiction in its self-conscious deployment of stylistic devices as modes of reflection or critique" (Whitehead, 3). However, the novels Whitehead discusses as "trauma fiction" concern primarily trauma caused by historical events such as wars or the Holocaust rather than domestic abuse, as in the case of Sapphire's *Push*. Despite evoking a different type of trauma in her novel, Sapphire uses similar literary strategies to those described by Whitehead to convey the impact of trauma on the psyche of an adolescent.

Evidently, Whitehead's literary conceptualisation of trauma fiction relies on much earlier medical definitions of psychological trauma as described by Dr. Judith Lewis Herman, professor of Clinical Psychiatry at Harvard University Medical School, who pioneered the study of complex Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and the lasting consequences of sexual abuse of children and women, in her seminal study *Trauma and Recovery* (1992). Early research into trauma was closely connected with patients who suffered from historical traumas, such as Holocaust survivors or Vietnam veterans. It was only after consciousness-raising efforts within 1970s social movements and second wave feminism that the immense scale of interpersonal trauma caused by child abuse and domestic violence during peacetime was recognized, and the medical and sociological research into this previously invisible area of everyday experience intensified. The medical term "trauma" came into use in literary discourse following the recognition of the cultural and ethical impact of trauma in the 1990s in such American publications as Cathy Caruth's ground-breaking interdisciplinary anthology *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Caruth 1995).

4. Trauma, testimony and the process of recovery

Unlike natural disasters, Herman emphasizes, interpersonal trauma destroys the trust which forms the foundation of human interaction: "Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. ... They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience ... and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis" (Herman 1992: 51). Interpersonal traumatic events, Herman reminds us, are not only the results of combat but comprise also child abuse, domestic violence and physical or sexual abuse in the public sphere during peacetime. Recurring or chronic trauma is especially destructive to children as it deforms the core of their personality. Herman evokes numerous damaging aspects of the repeated overwhelming situation of the abused child: "The child trapped in an abusive environment is faced with formidable tasks of adaptation. She must find a way to preserve a sense of trust in people who are untrustworthy, safety in a situation that is unsafe, control in a situation that is terrifyingly unpredictable, power in a situation of helplessness" (Herman, 96). Thus frequent abuse destroys the child's immature psyche by provoking it to develop extremely low self-esteem and many eventually self-destructive defensive mechanisms.

Unable to cope with overwhelming experiences, traumatized people frequently develop three major symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. According to Herman, they include "hyperarousal ... the persistent expectation of danger, intrusion ... the indelible imprint of the traumatic moment, constriction ... the numbing response of surrender" (Herman, 35). She also divides the recovery process into

three major stages of "establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community" (Herman, 3). Significantly, Herman illustrates her analysis of traumatic disorders and the process of healing with the testimony of survivors, in the form of medical interviews, occasionally referring also to published memoirs such as Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* or Sylvia Fraser's *My Father's House*. The symptoms that make the long-term consequences of trauma especially devastating are the intrusions of the past trauma in present life:

Long after the danger is past, traumatized people relive the event as though it were continually recurring in the present. They cannot resume the normal course of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts. ... Traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep. (Herman, 37)

In Herman's analysis of the stages of healing from trauma, after the re-establishment of safety, the traumatized person in search of recovery should focus on a detailed reconstruction of the traumatic event(s), giving voice to overwhelming emotions, bodily sensations and other responses, and integrating the disorganized, fragmentary, largely visual recollections into a historical context. The conscious recollection of traumatic events should be accompanied by the reaffirmation of the values and assumptions once cherished by the traumatized person but which were shattered by the trauma (Herman, 178). Despite the frequent reluctance on the part of survivors to retell their traumatic story, which they find unbearable and yet intrusive, Herman insists that the recounting of the trauma is an indispensable stage in its integration by the survivor because post-traumatic denials and dissociation must be countered with the "restorative power of truth-telling" (Herman, 181). "In the telling, the trauma becomes a testimony," explains Herman. Following Apgar's and Jensen's work with survivors of political persecution, she asserts "the universality of testimony as a ritual of healing" (Herman, 181). By combining the individual and public aspects of giving testimony of trauma to an empathetic listener, the trauma story is transformed from being shameful and degrading evidence of one's worthlessness to an affirmation of the survivor's value and dignity. In addition, as neither trauma nor PTSD take place in a social vacuum, public testimony is a prerequisite of the last stage of trauma recovery, entailing a reestablishment of the social ties between the survivor and the community.

5. Cultural work of sexual abuse testimony

Just like Herman, literary critic Sonia C. Apgar argues in "Fighting Back on Paper and in Real Life: Sexual Abuse Narratives and the Creation of Safe Space" that survivors of sexual abuse (despite the intimate nature of this type of trauma) depend on relations with the community, which confirm both the survivor's experience and

her/his value as a member of the social network. Apgar situates the significance of oral and written testimonies in the cultural work they perform in society by making “(at least) tacit reference to both personal beliefs and social norms and expectations” which “allow for an examination and potential reformulation of the available subject positions and cultural constructions that endanger women” (Apgar 1998: 51). Furthermore, she maintains that personal narratives about sexual abuse trauma can empower a woman survivor “by confronting denial, sorting out the cultural narratives that cast women as victims, and reinscribing herself as self-empowered and resistant to attack” (Apgar, 51). As a result, such narratives can be read not only for their individual significance but also as potential collective critiques of the social structures that facilitate these types of trauma and then silence numerous testimonies about them.

Silencing of the narratives about sexual abuse can take many forms, from being viewed as an unsuitable subject for public debate, being undermined by charges of commercial profits, or being trivialized in mass media talk shows. As Louise Armstrong observed in her 2004 study of American public debate about incest narratives, *What Happened When Women Said Incest: Rocking The Cradle of Sexual Politics*, the constant noise could be as effective in stifling the debate about incest as the complete silence and repression which had preceded it (Armstrong 2004: 3). Yet, the establishment of the woman survivor’s new concept of self-worth and independence is closely connected to the process of reconsideration of her past trauma in the social context in which it took place. Moreover, Apgar claims that this process can bring about social change: “by (re)inscribing a positive sense of self-identity and (re)constructing her subject position through writing, a survivor empowers herself; by sharing these texts, communities of survivors can empower themselves; and by (re)formulating the metanarratives they can gradually transform the culture” (Apgar, 57).

6. Trauma survivors and writing as therapy

In *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women’s Life-Writing*, Suzette A. Henke shows that life narratives about trauma can perform the role of “scripto-therapy” (Henke 2000: xv). Like Herman and Apgar, Henke also underlines the potential of writing for recovering survivor’s agency: “The act of life-writing serves as its own testimony and, in so doing, carries through the work of reinventing the shattered self as a coherent subject capable of meaningful resistance to received ideologies and effective agency in the world” (Henke, xix). According to her, even fictional writing about trauma can be healing when it helps to express anguished emotions because “testimonial life-writing allows the author to share an unutterable tale of pain and suffering, of transgression or victimization, in a discursive medium that can be addressed to everyone or no-one — to a world that will judge

the personal testimony as accurate historical witnessing or thinly disguised fiction" (Henke, xix). In this context, Henke points out that the popular term "narrative recovery" invokes two overlapping meanings, as survivors stimulate their narrative recovery by exerting a conscious effort to recover and order the fragments of past experience into a coherent story, achieving in the process psychological reintegration (Henke, xxii). Drawing on Henke, Brenda Daly also asserts that both writing and speaking about trauma can be therapeutic, emphasizing that both are social acts and thus depend on the attention of the reading public or audience and their willingness to assert uncomfortable truth (Daly 2004: 139). In "When the Daughter Tells Her Story: The Rhetorical Challenges of Disclosing Father-Daughter Incest," Daly explores the negative effects of the backlash against women's incest narratives in the 1990s, which challenged the veracity of many memoirs and autobiographies and complicated the possibility of recuperation for survivors whose testimonies were questioned.

7. Trauma, writing and alternative communities in Sapphire's *Push*

In spite of the 1990s backlash against incest narratives, *Push*, the first novel by Sapphire, published in 1996, received a number of awards such as the Book-of-the-Month Club Stephen Crane Award for First Fiction, the Black Caucus of the American Library Association's First Novelist Award, and The Mind Book of the Year Award in Great Britain. It was also nominated for the NAACP Image Award in the category of Outstanding Literary Work of Fiction.

Precious Jones, an illiterate, obese and sexually abused adolescent protagonist who narrates the story, comes alive within the first page of the novel thanks to her distinctive use of African American vernacular English, the straightforward description of her situation, and her dialogic address to the reader: "I was left back when I was twelve because I had a baby for my fahver. ... I was out of school for a year. This gonna be my second baby. I should be in the eleventh grade, getting ready to go into twelf" grade so I can gone 'n graduate. But I'm not. I'm in the ninfe grade" (Sapphire 1996: 3). Information about her familial sexual abuse and the effects it exerts on her school life and her life choices is provided in the first sentences of the novel, so the issue of incest is not presented as a secret and does not create suspense. From the start, the emphasis seems to fall on the long-term consequences of abuse shattering Precious's self-worth and her ability to control her life, which allows for the discussion of *Push* as an inventive postmodern example of trauma fiction.¹

¹ For early representation of sexual exploitation in African American literature see also slave narratives such as Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). For the twentieth

Furthermore, the novel foregrounds the issue of writing a life story as testimony about the multiple disorders effected by trauma, which is complicated at the beginning of the novel not only by the scale of the abuses, but also by the initial functional illiteracy of the narrator. Yet, as she introduces herself and her life story, Precious immediately underscores the new possibilities that narrating her own life involves: "My name is Claireece Precious Jones. I don't know why I'm telling you that. Guess 'cause I don't know how far I'm gonna go with this story, or whether it's even a story or why I'm talkin' ... Sure you can do anything when you talking or writing, it's not like living when you can only do what you doing" (Sapphire, 3). She also affirms the significance of honesty in her narrative: "Some people tell a story 'n it don't make no sense or be true. But I'm gonna try to make sense and tell the truth, else what's the ... use?" (Sapphire, 4).

Even in these early passages, the self-presentation of Precious is far from that of a passive victim. Her voice is often matter-of-fact and streetwise, sometimes loud and angry, but clearly individualized and appealing. As we read the life narrative of Precious, we learn about the controlling metaphor which helps her to make an effort and gradually change her situation. The word "push," with which the sympathetic Hispanic male nurse encourages Precious during her first traumatic childbirth, acquires unforgettable resonance for her:

Pain walking on me now. Jus' stomping on me. I can't see hear, I jus' screamin' ... Some men, these ambulance mens, I don't see em hear 'em come in. But I look up from the pain and dere. The Spanish guy in EMS uniform. He push me back on a cushion. I'm like a ball of pain. He say, "RELAX!" The pain stabbing me wif a knife and this spic talking 'bout relax. He touched my forehead put his other hand on the side of my belly." What's your name? he say. "Huh?" I say. "Your name?" "Precious," I say. He say, "Precious it's almost here. I want you to push, you hear me momi, ..., go with it and push, Preshecita. *Push*." And I did. (Sapphire, 10)

The passage also evokes the vivid imagery Precious uses to describe her feelings and bodily sensations despite her ignorance of spelling rules.

After her removal from school for being pregnant for the second time, Precious faces the challenge of starting her education at an alternative school against her mother's wishes. Before deciding on breaking her imposed isolation at her abusive home and joining the new class, Precious has a nightmare of going so high up in the elevator that she is nearly dying when the atmosphere changes and the "coffee-cream-colored man from Spanish talk land" appears and whispers to Precious again "Push, Precious, you gonna hafta *push*" (Sapphire, 16). Although Precious's efforts to push through her trials do not always bring about positive outcomes, she decides to attend the alternative school despite her fears. To appreciate the circumstances of Precious's decisions, the reader is presented with the frequent symptoms of her post-traumatic stress disorder, such as flashbacks, dissociation, and feelings of pain

century's fictional treatment of the theme of incest in the African American novel see, for example, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970).

or body numbness. For example, when Precious is going to school, she has a sudden flashback and she involuntarily re-experiences the overwhelming details of the degrading sexual intercourse with her father, accompanied by verbal insults. During the intercourse she dissociated when the physical and emotional pain became unbearable, and started imagining herself to be in a radically different place and in much more appealing role: "Then I change stations, change *bodies*, I be dancing in videos! I be breaking, *fly*, jus' a dancing. Umm hmm heating up the stage at the Apollo for Doug E. Fresh or Al B. Shure. They love me! Say I'm one of the best dancers ain' no doubt of or about that!" (Sapphire, 24). Yet, the repeated multiple abuses destroy Precious's self-esteem and integrity. Although she is large and loud, Precious frequently feels invisible:

I big, I talk, I eats, I cooks, I laugh, watch TV, do what my muver say. But I can see when the picture come back I don't exist. Don't nobody want me. Don't nobody need me. I know who I am, I know who they say I am — vampire sucking the system's blood. Ugly black grease to be wipe away, punish, kilt, changed, finded a job for. I wanna say I am somebody. I wanna say it on subway, TV, movie, LOUD. I see pink faces in suits look over top of my head. I watch myself disappear in their eyes, their tesses. I talk loud but I still don't exist. (Sapphire, 31)

The potent African American literary metaphor of invisibility² used by Precious conveys the pain of being unacknowledged, unwanted, and aware of her low social position both in her family and in American society. This negative self-image translates into the erasure of Precious's feelings and bodily sensations: "Why can't I see myself, *feel*, where I end and begin. ... My fahver don't see me really. If he did he would know I was like the white girl, *a real* person, inside" (Sapphire, 32). The lack of respect for Precious's needs and feelings makes her feel non-existent and suicidal: "Sometimes I wish I was not alive. But I don't know how to die. Ain't no plug t pull out" (Sapphire, 32).

The most disturbing image that haunts Precious is the reflection of what seems to be her mother she occasionally glimpses in the shopping windows: "Sometimes I pass by the store window and somebody fat dark skin, old looking, someone like my muver look back at me. But I know it can't be my muver 'cause mu muver is at home. ... Who I see" (Sapphire, 32). Precious's negative self-image is not only linked to her abuse and her apathetic mother, but is also connected with her dark skin and the racial prejudice she is subjected to. However, the feature which most clearly distinguishes Precious from her mother is her desire for change, which is encouraged by the dedicated teacher during her literacy course at the alternative school. The practice of dialogue journal writing, which is corrected and commented by Ms. Rain, not only helps Precious to learn to express her thoughts and feelings in Standard English but also assists Precious in her building of a more positive image of herself. Sapphire continuously highlights the positive role of writing in recovery. As Precious learns to read and write, she also acquires social literacy and develops

² See Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952).

new aspirations. She distances herself from her mother's role of a "welfare queen," rejects the role of a "queen of babies," and redefines herself as a "queen of ABCs" (Sapphire, 81). Soon Precious's outstanding progress is recognized and when she receives the mayor's award, she begins to feel happy and optimistic about her future.

Even though Precious succeeds in improving her reading and writing skills, the story of her recovery encoded in her journal entries is not a smooth one. In *Telling Incest: Narratives of Dangerous Remembering from Stein to Sapphire*, Janice Doane and Devon Hodges compare *Push* to *The Color Purple*, invoked in Sapphire's novel, and argue that Sapphire resisted the formula of a simple "recovery story" by "insisting upon long-lasting and fragmenting effects of trauma" (Doane and Hodges 2001: 113). Thus the expected optimistic "fairy-tale" ending is substituted in *Push* with further complications depicting the far-reaching, devastating consequences of incest as Precious learns that her father infected her with HIV. Although Precious manages to move out of her mother's house to a house for battered women, the effects of parental abuse follow her even there.

Comparing her situation to that of Celie from *The Color Purple*, which she discusses at school, Precious bitterly observes the differences: "Man rape Celie turn out not to be her daddy" (Sapphire, 85). Soon after Precious's mother breaks the dramatic news to her, Precious experiences psychic disintegration and dissociates again: "Song playing in my head now, not rap. Not TV colors flashing funny noise pictures in on me, scratching and itching my brain at the same time. I see a color I don't know a name for, maybe one like only another animal thas not human can see" (Sapphire, 87). The indeterminate color she sees again underscores the distance from the optimistic *The Color Purple*, drawing a comparison between the devastated mind of Precious and that of an animal. Her disorderly sensations are rendered through figurative language and accompanied by critical questions: "Song caught on me like how plastic bags on tree branches. I sit on my bed. New pictures on the wall now. I got Alice Walker up there and Harriet Tubman 'n Farrakhan. But she can't help me now. Where my *Color Purple*? Where my god most high? Where my king? Where my black love?" (Sapphire, 87).

In an attempt to express her overpowering pain and recover from the shocking news, Precious turns to writing poetry. She adopts a new identity, signing her poems with "Precious Jones, the poet" (Sapphire, 90). She also uses figurative language more often when describing her emotions: "I cry for every day of my life ... And I cry for my son, the song in my life" (Sapphire, 96). Both Ms. Rain and her classmates assume the role of an alternative family and support Precious as she informs the class about her condition. When she becomes depressive and apathetic, Ms. Rain asks her to write about her distress and assures her of the sustaining and healing value of writing testimony about her trauma:

I don't have nothing to write today — maybe never. Hammer in my heart now, beating me, I feel like my blood a giant river swell up inside me and I'm drowning. My head all dark inside. Feel like a giant river I never cross in front of me now. Ms Rain say, You not writing Precious. I say I drownin' in river. She don't look at me like I'm crazy but say, If you just sit there the river gonna rise up drown you! Writing could be the boat to carry you to the other side. One time in your journal you told me you had never really told your story. I think telling your story git you over that river Precious. (Sapphire, 96–97)

Following the advice of Ms. Rain, who becomes her mentor, ("You can't stop now Precious, you gotta push"), Precious makes another effort to write the story of her life (Sapphire, 97). Indeed, as Gillian Harkins suggests in *Everybody's Family Romance: Reading Incest in Neoliberal America*, "Writing becomes the practice of articulation as translation, as survival" (Harkins 2009: 220).

Owing to the process of writing her life narrative and reading texts by African American authors such as Alice Walker, Audre Lorde and Langston Hughes, suggested by Ms. Rain, Precious gradually gains literary competence and critical skills. She also distances herself from her former idol, Louis Farrakhan, and widens her perspective to include other African American leaders such as Harriet Tubman and Alice Walker. When Precious learns that, despite her progress and her aspiration to study at college, the white social worker evaluates her abilities as insufficient for any other occupation but that of a home attendant, Precious expresses her frustration and resists depreciation of her educational potential by social institutions.

In her effort to regain her independence and recover from her trauma, Precious decides to join an incest support group and give a public testimony of her abuse. Sapphire shows the journey from Harlem to Manhattan where the incest support group meets from the perspective of Precious who arrives in Manhattan for the first time and is surprised to see a live poodle in the street and not on a television screen. In this new urban and social space, Precious shares her story of abuse and experiences empathy and support of the other survivors. To her surprise, the group consists of many women of diverse ages, classes and ethnic backgrounds, and Precious discovers a new axis in her identity, common to all women in the group: "Girls, old women, white women, lotta white women. ... What am I hearing! One hour and half women talk. Can this be done happen to so many people? I know I'm not lying! But is they? ... All kinda women here. Princess girls, some fat girls, old women, young women. One thing we got in common, no *the* thing, is we was rape" (Sapphire, 130). Precious realizes she can identify with others not only by skin color but also by similar traumatic experiences of abuse. The new relationships in the support groups help her reconnect with others in her alternative communities of the class, the house for battered women, and another support group for HIV positive individuals.

The conceptual ingenuity of *Push* is again visible in the unexpected double ending, signalling distance from the fairy-tale ending of *The Color Purple*. The

first ending of what seems to be Precious's life narrative is rather abrupt as it breaks off on a sunny hopeful day when Precious is holding her son and making cautious plans for future.³ It is followed by an appendix consisting of the class project of life stories written by Precious's classmates, which situate her individual story within the larger context of other stories of abuse and neglect. This last section opens with Precious's poem 'marY Had a little lamb but I got a kid an HIV that follow me to school every day' (Sapphire, 143). The poem clearly evokes the original approach Sapphire adopted to her protagonist and the trauma narrative. She manages to tell the story of a mistreated teenager evoking her post-traumatic disorders, giving testimony to her denigration both at home and at school, and establishing new social ties in substitute communities without sentimentalizing her protagonist or simplifying the narrative of partial recovery. Through the introduction of the journal writing technique, Sapphire endows her protagonist with the tool for self-expression that allows Precious to give vent to her overwhelming emotions, creating in this way an alternative to Toni Morrison's representation of a desolate incested child in *The Bluest Eye*.

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³ Sapphire's second novel, *The Kid* (2011) depicts the life of Precious's son, Abdul Jamal Jones, after his mother's death.

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