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OVERCOMING VIOLENCE: BLUES EXPRESSION IN SAPPHIRE'S *PUSH*

Wendy A. Rountree

In the novel *Push* (1996), Sapphire creates a young blues woman, Precious, who conquers physical and emotional abuse, reclaims her voice, and tells her story by masterfully weaving her painful experiences into blues expression. Precious faces her past directly and chooses to express her experiences, verbally and in writing. She does not allow her past to dominate her present or future, nor does she allow anyone, including her negligent mother, to determine her life's worth. Furthermore, Precious finds the guidance of positive women role models, and consequently, learns self-determination.

My presumption in this essay is that Sapphire has created a character who endures blues experiences, the pain and frustration of living in an oppressive environment. To produce the blues atmosphere in her work, Sapphire returns to the African-American oral tradition by using techniques of orature in her novel. For example, Precious speaks in the African-American vernacular.¹ Sapphire believes that the oral tradition and various African-American musical forms influence her novel. In an email interview I conducted with Sapphire on April 21, 2001, she says,

While I would categorize Precious' experiences as blues experiences, I'd classify the novel as a blues / hip hop / jazz novel because while there is acceptance, submission, and transcendence in the blues (and a lot of other things), it is in hip hop, the music of Precious' generation, that we find the open defiance, visibility of the formally invisible (ghetto youth), and the movement from the periphery of the culture to it's [sic] center, that characterizes some of Precious' life as she is being "born again." (Sapphire)

¹ To Houston Baker, Jr., vernacular is the language of the working-class or the "people designated as 'the desperate class' by James Weldon Johnson's narrator in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*" (3); Precious is a member of this social class.

Sapphire, indeed, has created a hybrid narrative—a novel infused with blues motifs (and also hip-hop)—that more accurately reveals the experiences of some African-American girls in the United States.

In addition, the novel is driven by first-person narrative. This use of the first person often appears in blues songs. In *Push*, Precious' voice, her *I*, is clearly articulated. As the novel progresses, the reader can tell that Precious gains in knowledge. For instance, her spelling improves, and she becomes more confident in her opinions and openly expresses them. By the end of the novel, Precious realistically understands her life situation, seeks to improve it, and is at peace with her own identity and place in the world.

In *Push*, Precious also experiences male domination and silencing. Precious matures in an isolated, urban space and experiences sexual trauma and abuse as a child, which forces her into silence. *Push* has graphic scenes of sex and violence, reflecting the blues tradition.² However, Sapphire is not interested in “love and trouble” relationships, which are from the blues tradition, but the silencing of a young girl's voice, primarily by familial sources. In a personal email interview, she says her “novel is about in many ways giving voice to a silenced person” (Sapphire).³ Precious eventually finds comfort and validation from adults and peers alike. Consequently, Precious is able to reclaim her voice, to achieve emotional and psychological healing, and to eventually become a true young blues woman who can “sing” her experience.

Precious' abuse begins even before she is old enough to fully discover that she has a voice. Years later, in a counseling session, Mary, Precious' mother reveals that Carl, her boyfriend and Precious's father, began abusing Precious when she was three-years-old. Eventually, Precious has two children by her father. Carl's actions of sexual, physical, and verbal domination of Mary and Precious are reminiscent of sadistic master / slave scenarios.⁴ For instance, Mary

² Oliver notes: “[T]he power-seeking manifestations of masculinity ... are denied most Negroes and are expressed instead through aggressive sexual fantasies. Sometimes these take the direct form in many blues devoted to weapons ... wherein violence is the theme—though the subjects themselves are potent sexual symbols. Sometimes these are extended into fantasies of unrestricted sexual aggressive viciousness ...” (255).

³ I conducted an Email Interview with Sapphire on April 21, 2001.

⁴ Interestingly, Janice Lee Liddell compares Carl to a character, Corrigedora, in the novel, *Corrigedora* written by Gayl Jones, another African-American women writer

is present the first time Carl tries to rape Precious, and she tells him to stop. However, she no longer protests after he tells her to shut up. At one point, Mary even reveals that Carl told her that he would not have sex with her unless she allowed him access to Precious, which she does. Mary's ineffectual voicing exposes Precious to years of molestation.

Over the years, the abuse becomes more extreme, with Carl slapping and roughly penetrating Precious. For instance, Precious recalls one incident when her father was raping her and saying: "[Y]ou LOVE it! Say you love it!" (111). Precious says: "I wanna say I DON'T. I wanna say I'm a chile" (111). Internally, Precious has a voice, one that rejects her father and loudly speaks against her abuse as indicated by the capitalization of the word "DON'T" in opposition to her father's stressed and ironic "LOVE." However, she does not verbally rebuke her father because she is afraid of him.

She has learned from previous instances of her father's abuse that the more she verbally protests the more violent her father becomes, so she remains silent and endures the abuse. As a result, Precious learns that voicing leads to punishment.

However, at this point Precious answers her father's abuse with physical reactions. Instead of projecting her anger onto others, Precious turns her fear, anger, and resentment onto herself. She says, "[A]fterward I go ba[th]room. I smear shit on my face. Feel good. Don't know why but it do.... I bite my fingernails till they look like disease, pull strips of my skin away. Get Daddy's razor out cabinet. Cut cut cut arm wrist, not trying to die, trying to plug myself back in" (111-112). Ironically, Precious wipes her face with her own excrement and cuts her own body to prove to herself that she is still alive, real, visible—"to plug [herself]back in" to life. Her father's abuse takes away part of Precious as if each sexual attack brings her closer to an emotional death, and Precious does anything that will make herself "feel good," to hold on to herself. Later in the novel, Precious regains that part of herself more resolutely after she goes to group incest survivors sessions and finally believes that "[M]ama and Daddy is not win" (131). She is able to share her experiences with others, breaks her silence, and recovers herself.

who has used blues expression in her literary works. Liddell says: "wherein a white slave master is biological father to both a mother and her daughter. The slave master, sexually possessing a female lineage of three generations, is an obvious agent to the same pain and pathology as is Carl" (144).

Precious also learns to distrust positive emotions and feelings of pleasure because sexual pleasure has been corrupted by her father's abuse. During the rapes, Precious feels physical, not emotional satisfaction, and is ashamed. She says, "I HATE him. But my pussy be popping. He say that, 'Big Mama your pussy is popping!' I HATE myself when I feel good" (58). Her aversion to "feeling good" spreads to other areas in her life. As a result, when she begins to learn to read in Miss Rain's alternative education class, Precious does not know how to react to her joy. Precious says, "I want to cry. I want to laugh. I want to hug Miz Rain. She make me feel good. I never readed nuffin' before" (54-55). On the surface, Precious, a product of an under-funded, overpopulated urban public school system, is grateful that she is finally learning to read and write at age sixteen, but she is conflicted about Miss Rain's concern for her welfare.

Precious has had little encouragement or paternal and maternal love in her life. Mary treats Precious like a servant, making her wait on her hand and foot; Precious is responsible for all the cooking and cleaning in the home. Mary also does not support Precious when her daughter decides to attend the alternative school to continue her education. Mary tells Precious: "[F]orget school! You better git your ass on down to welfare!" (56). Mary also encourages Precious to be overweight as she is. Unconcerned with Precious's health, Mary makes Precious eat mounds of food even when she is not hungry. As a result of her mother's mistreatment, Precious feels worthless. She says, "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" (31). Similar to her feeling emotional death when her father rapes her, Precious also feels an erasure of her being while performing the mundane activities of life like cooking and watching television under her mother's supervision. Tellingly, Precious does not openly question her mother's actions.

Mary is emotionally unstable and does not have a firm grip on reality, for instance, though Mary is aware of Carl's real wife and two children, she still refers to him as her husband. More importantly, Mary is the one who allows Carl access to Precious, so she must know that Carl is the father of Precious' children although she never acknowledges the fact. Mary is in denial, and her physical and verbal abuse of Precious hinders her daughter's emotional development and pushes her further into silence. However, Mary not only allows Carl to abuse Precious, but she uses Precious for sexual gratification too. Instead of protecting Precious from abuse, Mary adds to her daughter's abuse.

Precious' non-verbal reaction to her mother's sexual abuse is to make herself go to sleep. Precious' actions are similar to those of sexually-abused children who "leave" their bodies while they are being abused as a coping defense against the abuse. Later in the novel, when her counselor, Ms. Weiss, asks her about her first memory of her mother, Precious writes a short poem in her notebook, including lines, stating that her mother's "jaw open like evil wolf" (133). The simile that Precious uses to compare her mother's mouth to that of a carnivorous animal's mouth reveals the extent to which her mother's abuse has had on Precious. Her mother's demeaning words and abusive actions have torn into Precious' psyche and self-esteem like that of a wolf's teeth into flesh, causing pain. Precious' blues writings show that she obviously still remembers her mother's abusive behavior and that she never finds comfort and direction from her mother. However, she does find guidance and emotional support from Miss Rain, peer support from the young women in her alternative education class, later, in her "survivor" support groups, and, ultimately, in verbal and written voicing. In the email interview, Sapphire says, Precious "is able to transcend her condition because of the meeting of her inner resources with the positive resources of her outer environment—the alternative school, halfway house, etc." (Sapphire).

Precious' journey toward voicing is similar to those journeys toward literacy made by slaves in the nineteenth century.⁵ During slavery, of course, it was illegal to teach a slave to read and write. However, sixteen-year-old Precious is illiterate because she attends under-funded, overpopulated, urban public schools, where discipline—not education—is often the primary goal of teachers. That Precious resents this educational handicap is clear in the scene where Precious brings her math class to order by shouting: "[S]hut up mutherfuckers I'm trying to learn something" (6). However, while Precious speaks forcibly to her classmates, she remains silent on other issues that could change her life situation. She says she cannot tell Mr. Wicher why she has difficulties learning: "I wish I could tell him about all the pages being the same but I can't" (6). Precious is ashamed to tell her teacher that she is illiterate. She has fallen through the cracks and has made it to ninth grade because of "social promotion," not because she has learned basic skills.

⁵ The most famous examples of the slave's quest for literacy in the African-American literary tradition are Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Written by Himself* and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

Precious' lack of progress in school is also based on her sexual abuse as illustrated by her early school years. Precious likes school, but she says: "[K]innergarden and first grade I don't talk" (36). Precious' voice has been silenced because of the shame she feels about her abuse. By second grade, Carl's increasingly aggressive sexual attacks have further warped her self-confidence. Consequently, Precious becomes even less responsive in class; she no longer participates in classroom activities and begins urinating on herself while sitting in the classroom; as she says only to the reader: "I wet myself. Don't know why I don't get up, but I don't. I jus' sit there and pee" (37). As a result, the other children tease and ostracize Precious, and her teacher and principal dismiss her as someone who cannot learn. Eventually, Precious begins to believe in her ineptitude and no longer tries to learn how to read or write. She believes that her teachers, principals, classmates, and even her mother are correct—that she is worthless.

On the recommendation of her principal, Mrs. Lichenstein, when Precious is pregnant for the second time, she enrolls in an alternative school, where she meets Miss Rain and new classmates like Rita who become positive role models. Sapphire says in an interview with Mark Marvel that in the alternative school Precious is "allowed to have her innocence back. And these older women and fellow outcasts who are in the class embrace her. So she goes from being this object of ridicule and abuse to being like the baby" (30). When all of the young women struggle with the rudimentary aspects of learning the alphabet, Sapphire emphasizes the child-like quality of all the young women on the first day of class. Ironically, this child-like quality, which is never acknowledged in Precious' own family, is encouraged in the classroom which is a safe environment where Precious begins to build strong relationships which encourages her to rediscover her voice. For instance, one of Miss Rain's teaching techniques is writing in journals. Even though the girls do not know how to spell, Miss Rain encourages them to write in their journals, often by writing words the way they think the words are spelled. Miss Rain also encourages the girls to write about their feelings, and her technique teaches them to trust their own opinions, thoughts, and unique voices.

Later, Miss Rain also has the girls read novels such as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Precious identifies with the sexual, physical, and verbal abuse that Celie endures. Precious also shares with Celie the effects of silencing. She says: "I love *The Color Purple*, that book give me much strength" (82-83). Sapphire sees *Push* as part of

African-American women's literary tradition. She explains in an interview with Mark Marvel why she mentions *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* in her own novel: "I wanted to let this whole new generation who's [going to] read *Push* know that it was born out of *The Color Purple* and the other books I mention. I don't think I could have written *Push* if Alice Walker had not written *The Color Purple*, or if Toni Morrison had not written *The Bluest Eye*. They kicked open the door" (30).

Because Sapphire sees *Push* as a continuation of the literary tradition to which the blues novels, *The Color Purple* and *The Bluest Eye* belong, it is not surprising that Precious has the characteristics of a young blues woman. All three novels have similar narrative structures that follow "a pattern common to traditional blues lyrics: a movement from an initial emphasis on loss to a concluding suggestion of resolution of grief through motion" (Moses 623). In *The Color Purple*, Celie initially loses her innocence through rape and eventually loses her sister. Throughout the novel, Celie expresses her blues through letters written to God, and by the end of the novel, she has come to terms with her past experiences, learns to accept herself with the help of a woman blues singer, Shug Avery, and is finally reunited with her sister.⁶ Only a few weeks into the class, Precious has to leave to give birth to Abdul. While she is in the hospital, she continues to write in her journal, and Miss Rain diligently responds. Through this silent "voicing" Precious reveals her abuse and low self-esteem. By responding to Precious in writing, Miss Rain reinforces the value of literacy. She also uses the journal responses to encourage Precious to stay in the alternative school and not to take her mother's advice to go on welfare. Miss Rain loudly voices her concern for Precious through writing: "[C]OME BACK TO CLASS. WE MISS YOU," and "[Y]ou are learning to read and write, that is everything. Come back to school when you get out the hospital" (70). Through Miss Rain's communications, Precious learns that she has peer support from her classmates, and this knowledge continues to build up her confidence. Miss Rain also bolsters Precious' self-esteem when she says, "Precious you are not a dog. You are a

⁶ In fact, Kester argues in "The Blues, Healing, and Cultural Representation in Contemporary African-American Women's Literature" that "the meeting between the outwardly docile, frigid Celie and the wild, sexy Avery produces one of the most heart-wrenching healing processes in contemporary African-American women's writings, and [...] it shows that healing can only begin when women share the tradition of black cultural representation thematically inscribed as the blues" (120). Consequently, Celie finds emotional healing from her blues by expressing her feelings with a woman just as Precious does in her alternative school and in the survivors sessions.

wonderful young woman who is trying to make something of her life” (71). Such words never leave her mother’s lips.

The classroom also provides a space for Precious to develop healthy peer relationships and to validate her experiences and concerns. For example, when her classmates learn that she has not had prenatal care for Abdul, they are very upset with her. “Miz Rain fall out, I mean she fall out! when she finded out I ain’ been to doctor. PRENATAL! PRENATAL! The whole damn class is screamin’ preeeenatal! Whas that! You gotta this, they say, and you gotta that –” (63). Mary, of course, should have been the one to tell Precious about prenatal care; however, she is not fit to guide her daughter. Precious, instead, finds mother-substitutes in Miss Rain and her classmates.

Miss Rain and her classmates also encourage her to attend Survivors of Incest Anonymous. At the initial meeting, Precious briefly speaks about her abuse. She is inspired to speak because she hears and witnesses other girls and women talking out loud about acts of incest and rape. She is surprised to watch women, young and old, of all ethnicities, speaking about their experiences; for the first time, Precious realizes that she is not alone. This knowledge gives Precious the courage to speak. She remembers incidents of abuse: “‘I was rape by my father. And beat.’ No one is talking except me. ‘Mama push my head down in her...’ I can’t talk no more” (130). Although Precious can say no more at this time, it is enough. For later, when she and some of the others girls go to a café in Greenwich Village, she says she feels like she is “alive inside. A bird is my heart. Mama and Daddy is not win. I’m winning” (131). Precious is liberated by her voice. In speaking, she begins recovering her confidence, her identity, and self-determination. She marvels over, “[H]ow Mama and Daddy know me sixteen years and hate me, how a stranger meet me and love me. Must be what they already had in they pocket” (131). What is in the stranger’s pocket is compassion, conscience, and character—qualities Precious’ parents do not possess. However, by being in a support group, Precious is learning that she does not need her parents’ love for validation and that their lack of love does not mean that her life is meaningless. As with other protagonists who fully develop emotionally and psychologically in Bildungsromane, Precious learns to seek that validation within herself.

Precious is empowered by the stories of the other women, but also by telling her own story to others. Sapphire says, “every time I let Precious’ voice come through, I just felt the rawness and the

power coming from a worthy human being” (30). Storytelling is a healer and validates the storyteller’s experience.⁷ The concept is not new. Both the voicing in the Catholic confession and on the psychiatrist’s couch are recognized vocal confrontations with problems that lead to regeneration. Liddell posits that: “[T]he ‘push’ of the novel is not only Precious’s physical thrust to birth her father-fathered babies or her psychic discharge of the pain of her rape, but most important, Precious’s ‘push’ is the launching of her own agency, essentially the birthing of a new and self-conscious Precious” (144).

Liddell’s argument is consistent with my reading of the novel, for even when Precious learns that she is HIV positive, she focuses on planning Abdul’s future and educating him.⁸ Precious does not concentrate on the negative even though she says: “I’m not happy to be HIV positive. I don’t understand why some kids git a good school and mother and father and some don’t. But Rita say forgit the WHY ME shit and git on to what’s next” (139). Precious does “git on to what’s next”: her desire to complete school and the welfare of her child. Sapphire says, “[T]here is something very aggressive and assertive about being a female. We’re taught to be very laid back and passive, but if we’re to survive, if we’re to move forward, we have to have that pushing energy” (30). By the end of the novel, Precious has experienced that “pushing energy,” literally in birthing her babies, and acquired it spiritually by “birthing” herself.

Eventually, Precious becomes most comfortable expressing her voice in poetry. At the end of the novel, each of the remaining girls contributes a written poem or life story to the class’s book. Precious’ poems begin and end the book. Because Precious finds love and support outside of her family, she is able to effectively cultivate her voice to express her past. In the untitled poem that ends the novel and ends the “class’ book,” Precious uses blues expression to explain her past, and to try to make sense of her life: “[C]ONCRETE JUNGLE / it’s a prison days / we live in / at least me / I’m not really free / baby, Mama, HIV / where I wanna be where I wanna be? / not where I AM” (175). The poem moves from blues lament to her

⁷ In “The Blues, Healing, and Cultural Representation in Contemporary African-American Women’s Literature,” Kester says, “the blues is probably the most striking and characteristic literary image for healing and self-healing among women in contemporary African-American women’s novels” (126). This is most certainly the case in *Push*.

⁸ Precious once again finds support in an organized group for HIV positive girls 16-21 because “Ms Rain say people who help you most (*sometimes*) is ones in the same boat” (138).

decision to move on: “[P]LAY THE HAND YOU GOT / housemother say. / HOLD FAST TO DREAMS / Langston say. / GET UP OFF YOUR KNEES / Farrakhan say. / CHANGE / Alice Walker say” (176-177). By having Precious use other people’s words from everyday speech, addresses, and literature to aid her in expressing her blues, Sapphire once again incorporates the African-American oral tradition into the novel. Intertextuality, therefore, creates a hybridized text, and thereby, verbally connects Precious to other African-American experiences. The reader knows that Precious holds these words dear because she incorporates them into her own blues expression. Most notably, the heartening words of famous African-Americans—Langston Hughes, Louis Farrakhan, and Alice Walker—directly speak to Precious and her experiences. Through their individual works—Hughes’ poetry, Farrakhan’s speeches, and Walker’s novels, for example—each writer / speaker / motivator has addressed the “blues” of their people and have sought to elevate the psychological and emotional psyche of African-Americans. Precious selects words by these individuals because she is inspired by individuals who acknowledge and empathize with her pain (her blues) and offer her assistance (hope and motivation). “Additionally, Hazel Carby argues that blues singers had assertive and demanding voices” (758), indicated by the capitals in Precious’ poem. By the end of the novel, she has also developed her “assertive” blues voice which is made louder and truer by the voices of others.

If, as Angela Davis believes, “naming issues that pose a threat to the physical or psychological well-being of the individual is a central function of the blues” (33), it is true, then, in *Push* that Precious has successfully found her voice within the blues tradition. Precious finds her voice and self-worth by acquiring literacy and discovering the support of adult and peer relationships. As a result, by the end of the novel, Precious is not held back by her past but has liberated herself. Because Precious is able to find a mother-substitute, Miss Rain, she finds the emotional support that encourages her to develop her voice and to consider her life as valuable. As a result, Sapphire reveals the importance of strong female ties for the proper emotional and psychological development of young African-American women; and in the process, she creates a novel that speaks to those young women who struggle to rediscover their voices and to establish their own identities by loudly singing their own blues.

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