

A Politics of Emotion in Sapphire's *Push**

Sun-Jin Lee

[Abstract]

This paper examines the emotional dimension of the protagonist/narrator Precious's embodied experiences of oppression and empowerment in Sapphire's novel *Push* (1996) by drawing upon an intersectional framework that aims to investigate and redress complex social inequalities and injustices shaped by intersecting axes of power and upon Sara Ahmed's model of sociality of emotion. It first analyzes the ways in which multiple oppressions Precious suffers in various social institutions such as family, school, and welfare system operate through the emotions of hatred and self-hatred. In so doing, it demonstrates that Precious's self-hatred against for being a poor black woman is the effect of the intersecting power systems of race, gender, and class that constitute Precious as an object of hatred. Based on an assumption that emotion factors in agency as it affects bodily capacity to act, the paper then focuses on the transformation of Precious's emotions from self-hatred to self-love as she moves from victimhood toward agency by joining an alternative school to learn how to read and write. It argues that through new encounters with women of color at the school does Precious begin to unlearn her deeply seated self-hatred and to learn how to love herself and others. Developed by not only sharing their lived experiences of marginalization and violence against their race,

* This study was supported by the Fund for Humanities & Social Studies at Pusan National University 2017.

gender, class, and sexuality but also by building a learning community of mutual support and love, Precious's self-love is her growing power of understanding of herself and the world surrounding her and of acting upon that newly gained knowledge. Through Precious's story, the novel emphasizes the importance of both interrogating how such systems of social inequalities as racism, sexism, and classism intersect in oppressing African American women and women of color like Precious by listening to their silenced stories and recognizing how they assert and exert their agency to resist against those intersecting systems of oppression.

Key Words: Sapphire, *Push*, intersectionality, emotion, African American women

1. Introduction

As the title suggests, Sapphire's *Push* (1996) pushes its imagination toward the unspeakable domain of extremely devastating experiences by graphically portraying an African American sixteen-year-old girl-mother growing up in Harlem, Claireece Precious Jones, who has been raped, impregnated twice, and infected with HIV by her own father; physically and verbally abused by her mother; and suspended from school twice unable to read and write. Based on Sapphire's own observations of the women she encountered as a teacher at alternative schools in Harlem, the Bronx, and Brooklyn for seven years ("A Push out of Chaos" 34), the raw, gritty story of Precious's struggle with her wretched ghetto life narrated in her own African American Vernacular English is what makes *Push* often labeled as street fiction—also variously known as urban fiction, ghetto lit, or hip-hop lit—that features "the unflinching representations of street life" (Wright 42) of the so-called hip-hop

generation.¹) As a young member of the hip-hop generation “born between 1965 and 1984” (Kitwana xxii), Precious embodies such intricately interrelated distressing issues confronted by the hip-hop generation as domestic violence, adolescent pregnancy, illiteracy, urban poverty, drug abuse, HIV/AIDS, welfare, and homophobia.

The novel requires analytic tools that could help adequately explore the complexity of the issues the novel raises. The analytical frameworks I will employ are theories and discourses on intersectionality and emotion. By drawing upon the current intersectionality discourse that conceptualizes intersectionality as “an analytic sensibility” that conceives “of categories not as distinct but as always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power” (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 795), I will analyze the intersectionality of the multiple forms of violence Precious suffers. Widely adapted and practiced within and across a wide range of disciplines (humanities, social sciences, political sciences, etc.), the concept of “intersectionality” was introduced by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in her two ground-breaking essays as a useful tool for analyzing the ways in which not only antidiscrimination laws but also anti-racist and feminist politics fail to take into account black women’s intersecting location as both black and women and thus reinforce the marginalization of black women whereas recognizing black men and white women as their rightful subjects to protect from racism and sexism respectively. Intersectionality has shown its utility in “examin[ing] and redress[ing] the oppressive forces that have constrained the lives of black women in particular and women of color more generally” (Alexander-Floyd 4).²) Following Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge’s working definition of intersectionality, I define intersectionality as “a form of critical inquiry and praxis” (32) that aims to not only investigate but also redress complex social inequalities “shaped not by a single

axis of social division . . . but by many axes that work together and influence each other” (2).³ An intersectional framework can help analyze how such axes of difference as race, gender, class, and sexuality simultaneously factor in the multiple oppressions Precious confronts.

I am particularly interested in investigating the emotional dimension of the intersecting power systems of race, gender, and class, that is, the ways in which the intersecting forms of violence against Precious operate through emotions. Following the lead of Sara Ahmed whose work on the cultural politics of emotion examines what emotions does rather than what emotion is, I conceptualize emotion as that which “shapes the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time, as well as through orientations toward and away from others” (4). Ahmed’s “model of sociality of emotion” refutes the conventional understanding of emotion that presupposes the interiority of the subject as the origin of feelings:

Emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place, . . . [s]o emotions are not simply something “I” or “we” have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces and boundaries are made: the “I” and the “we” are shaped by, . . . contact with others. (Ahmed 10)

This shift from a subject-centered view that emotions come from within (inside out) to a social or transpersonal view that emotions come from without (outside in) allows me to explore the ways in which Precious’s self-hatred is produced. In so doing, I demonstrate that her self-hatred is the effect of the intersecting systems of power that constitute Precious as an object of hatred. As the other (of race, gender, and class) to whom hatred has been repeatedly attached and accumulated over time, Precious hates herself for being poor, black, and female.

Ahmed's theorizing of emotions as the effects of encounters with other bodies rather than as mental states further helps elaborate on changes in Precious's emotions from self-hatred to self-love in ways that reconfigure the relationship between victimization and agency. As Ahmed herself links her notion of emotion to Spinoza's conception of affectus as "the modification of the body by which the power of action on the body is increased or diminished" (85), emotion affects what bodies can do, or emotion factors in agency as it affects bodily capacity to act.⁴ Ahmed's redefinition of agency as "a matter of what actions are possible given how we are shaped by our contact with others" relocates agency "from the individual to the interface between individuals and worlds" (190). In this sense, agency is not a sole property of the subject, but rather what emerges through interactions between bodies. I further argue that empowerment for Precious involves the process of disorienting from self-hatred. Beginning with a disillusionment with the idea that self-hatred is attributed to an intrinsic quality residing in the subject, the process of Precious's empowerment is triggered and developed by her "alternative" contacts with women of color who not only share with her the lived experiences of marginalization marked by violence against their race, gender, class, and sexuality but also build a learning community of mutual support and love.⁵

It was not until the movie adaptation of the novel—*Precious*—in 2009 was critically acclaimed that the novel along with the movie has drawn scholarly attention.⁶ Frequently examined topics on the novel so far include traumatic father-daughter incest, motherhood, black women's subjectivity, education, literacy, adolescence, hip-hop aesthetic, maternal desire, Harlem, young adults in literature, and so forth. Much of criticism on *Push* has dealt with the main question of the novel—how Precious overcomes traumatic experiences—mainly with a single-axis approach; however, little has been written about how emotion factors in the

intersecting structures of power that produce multiple forms of violence against Precious and in the intersubjective, coalitional construction of her agency. With a focus on the emotional dimension of Precious's embodied experiences of violence and empowerment, this paper argues that the novel moves beyond the mutually exclusive notions of victimization and agency in exploring the complexity of black women's lives.

2. "I Hate Myself": An Affective Economy of Self-Hatred

Hatred is deathwish for the hated, not a lifewish for anything else.

(Lorde 152)

Precious's unadorned street language in depicting her life is loaded with intense feelings and emotions; one of the most predominant emotions is self-hatred. Even though Precious often uses the verb "hate" when she feels hostile to people around her including her mother, father, drug addicts, and school teachers, the most destructive one is hatred toward herself. This negative passion needs a deeper look since it involves its neighboring passions like shame, contempt, and anger. If emotion is not an "individual self-expression" originating from the subject but as "a social form" (9) coming from without as Ahmed asserts, the main question will be where Precious's self-hatred comes from, that is, how it is produced and impressed upon Precious. This focus on the emotion of self-hatred will illuminate "the matrix of institutional processes that construct violence against" (Carasthatis 62) Precious and how Precious becomes the object of hatred even to herself. Informed by Marx's

discussion of how the movement of commodities and money creates surplus value, Ahmed formulates an “affective economy,” a social, material and psychic processes in which affect is accumulated over time onto objects and signs: “[s]igns increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more signs circulate, the more affective they become” (45). Precious’s self-hatred in this light is what is accumulated over time onto Precious and shapes the surface of her body and her bodily capacities. This directs attention to how certain bodies become objects of hatred (the making of hatred), or Precious’s poor black female body becomes a hated body even to the extent that she is pushed into hating herself. This is to examine the “particular histories of association” underlying Precious’s self-hatred through which “some bodies are already encountered as more hateful than other bodies” (Ahmed 54).

Precious’s self-hatred is the accumulative effect of her having been an object of hatred in many of the primary relations she formed with her parents and social institutions. What constitutes Precious as a hated body is domestic violence by her parents. Especially rape by her father Carl that began when Precious was a baby in diapers is nothing but an act of hate fragmenting and reducing Precious to body parts like mouth, vulva, buttocks, and breasts to be exploited as an object of sexual gratification. The derogatory terms he uses in referring to Precious during sexual abuse contribute to reconfiguring Precious’s fragmented, sexualized body into a body that deserves abuse: “He slap my ass, You wide as the Mississippi, don’t tell me a little bit of dick hurt you heifer. Git usta it, he laff, you is usta it” (24). His dehumanizing equation of Precious with “the Mississippi” and a “heifer” not only erases the fact that she is a “chile” (13) but also reenacts a racialized sexist gaze that presumes the largeness of a black female body as a sign for her insatiable sexual appetite while belittling Precious’s large body size. Evoking the history of how the

European male gaze has constructed the black female body, Carl aligns Precious with Saartjie Baartman from South Africa, or more widely known as the Hottentot Venus, who was displayed at freak shows in early 19th-century Europe for her large rumps and elongated labia and used as physical evidence for African women's primitive and excessive sexuality. Carl even justifies his sexual assault by interpreting Precious's sexual orgasm as a proof that she herself is sexually precocious as well as wants it: "See, you LIKE it! You jus' like your mama—you die for it!" (24). Steeped in the traditional rape script circulated within the culture of male domination that blames the victim for tempting the sexual assault, this remark reshapes Precious into the seducer thereby imposing on her a sense of guilt. Moreover, he acts upon the long-standing prejudice against black women that hypersexuality is one of their inherent characteristics that is transgenerational from mother to daughter. Constructed as a lascivious seductress, Precious is to blame. The fact that she had orgasm in sexual intercourse worsens Precious's guilt to the extent that she comes to hate herself: "I HATE myself when I feel good" (58). While fearing and loathing her father's coercive sexual acts coupled with beating and insults, Precious reads her physical sensation of pleasure as an undeniable confirmation of her father's justification of his rape that positions her as a willing partner, not a victim. This convoluted idea that she is complicit with the violence committed against her directs hatred toward Precious herself. This self-hatred makes her remain silent about the incest and keeps her from breaking away from the vicious cycle of abuse since she thinks that something about her invites the perpetrator.

This re-formation of Precious into a willing partner is facilitated as she is reviled by her mother Mary who not only batters her brutally but also calls her names when she finds out about who is the father of Precious's first baby:

About three months after baby born, I'm still twelve when all this happen, Mama slap me. HARD. Then she pick up cast-iron skillet, . . . and she hit me so hard on back I fall on floor. Then she kick me in ribs. Then she say, "Thank you Miz Claireece Precious Jones for fucking my husband you nasty little slut!"

.....

I'm lying on the floor shaking, crying, scared she gonna kill me. . . . "Get your Jezebel ass up and fix some dinner 'fore I give you something to cry about." (19)

Mary displaces Precious from a victim to a "slut" who asked for it. Identifying Precious with "Jezebel," the racist stereotype of sexually avid and manipulative African American women, Mary turns sexual violence against a young girl by her own father into an evil daughter's betrayal of her mother. By attaching to Precious the sign of Jezebel that has been circulated with negative affective values accumulated over time, Mary reconstitutes Precious as a rival that poses a threat to her power and sexuality and thereby an object of her intense hatred mixed with jealousy. To this threat, Mary responds with harsh physical and verbal violence. In failing to cope with the sexual abuse as a serious problem that needs immediate interventions not only from herself but also community and blaming her daughter instead, Mary connives with her boyfriend Carl and in extension with white supremacist patriarchy that silences sexual violence against women of color. Even though Mary contributes to reinforcing the sexual abuse by offering Precious to Carl in exchange for keeping sexual relationship with him, Mary accuses Precious of "steal[ing her] husband" (74) with a threat to kill her when she returns home after giving birth to her second child Abdul. In an interview with Precious's social worker Ms Weiss after Precious left her apartment to avoid Mary's continuous abuse, Mary would not admit her responsibility for the incest: "I wanted my man for myself. Sex

me up, not my chile. So you cain't blame all that shit happen to Precious on me" (136). This denial indicates that Mary's stigmatization of Precious contributes to her self-hatred with a deep wound that she is not worthy of her own mother's love and care.

Mary's hatred against Precious manifested in her abusive acts drives Precious to see herself deserving nothing other than hate from others. Like Carl, Mary uses Precious for her sexual gratification by forcing Precious to perform cunnilingus: "I am choking between her legs A HUH A HUH" (59). Mary treats Precious like a servant making her do all the household chores. She forces Precious to eat, worsening her daughter's negative view on her body size. Not interested in how Precious does in school, Mary keeps calling her "stupid" (14) or "retarded" (58). Furthermore, Mary disparages her daughter's aspiration for education denying her intellectual capacities: "Go down to welfare, school can't help you none" (22). Mary "actively encourages Precious's degraded condition because she benefits from it" (Pollard 119). The main reason she keeps Precious is welfare checks provided to unwed, single mothers with low income who have children to take care of. Mary allows Precious to go to school only because she can receive welfare benefits on the condition that her daughter receives compulsory education. In addition, Mary takes Precious's "money for Little Mongo" (57)—Precious's first daughter born with Down Syndrome—by pretending that she takes care of Little Mongo. When Mary finds out that Precious "get [her] off welfare" by revealing the truth about Little Mongo that she is living with Precious's grandmother, Mary furiously threatens to kill Precious with her "BARE HANDS" (74). While Carl exploits Precious sexually, Mary exploits her economically as well as sexually. For Mary, Precious is not so much a "precious" daughter as a mere meal ticket.

Treated as an object of hatred by her own parents, Precious views herself with

hatred. The double bind of self-hatred that positions Precious as both the hated and the hater leads Precious to a destructive relation to herself. If hatred is “a negative attachment to an other that one wishes to expel” (Ahmed 55), hatred directed to oneself results in the expulsion of oneself. Precious hates her body as dirty that needs to be expelled or destroyed. In a white supremacist patriarchal society that condones rape as an acceptable way of asserting manhood and thus maintaining male domination (hooks, *Yearning* 59), what is dirty is not the violent act but the woman.⁷ Precious feels her body is dirty as many victim-survivors have “the feeling of being dirty” about themselves (West 75). Hating her body’s unwanted reaction to the rape, she recalls her earlier self as a dirty girl in “pink dress dirty sperm stuffs on it” (18). After being raped, Precious would dirty herself by putting excrement on her face: “My body not mine, I hate it coming. Afterward I go bathroom. I smear shit on my face. Feel good. Don’t know why but it do” (111). This self-defiling act, as Sika A. Dagbovie-Mullins points out, is to punish herself for feeling pleasure, and self-punishment gives her a sense of relief because “smearing the excrement confirms how she thinks about herself” (439). Resulting from Precious’s self-concept as “an embodiment of dirtiness,” this self-punishment is intertwined with the long-standing nexus of gender and racial ideologies that associate the female body with dirt or polluting force and the black body with stain as Traci C. West shows (77). Precious’s hatred against her black female body also takes a form of getting rid of what is dirty from her body. Precious is obsessed with “wash[ing] serious [her] legs and underarm” because she believes that her “dirty” body smells like her mother and father who stinks “between her legs” (21) and with his “pee-pee smelling thing” (18) respectively. Precious’s obsession with washing her body to keep it from smelling is another form of hatred against her own body parts that remind her of sexual abuses for which she is to blame.

It is not only home but also social institutions such as school and the welfare system that abuse and hate Precious. The word “ugly” Precious uses is deceptively simple given that Precious’s illiteracy limits her articulateness, but it encapsulates what attributes society attaches to its object of hatred as its inner characteristics; thereby it is not only descriptive but also derogatory about a wide range of attributes from physical features, intellectual capacity, morality, to economic status. It is what other people often use in referring to Precious and then it is internalized into her self-concept. Her second-grade classmates brutally humiliate her in every possible way sharing the idea that Precious is an embodiment of what is considered “ugly” by society: a fat black girl.⁸) For them, Precious is “ugly” (12): “‘Claireece is so ugly she laffing ugly.’ . . . ‘No, that fat bitch is crying ugly.’ Laff laff” (12). This denigrating word leaves a deep psychic wound onto her directly affecting her bodily capacities. Their daily insults on her language use and body size make her stop talking and moving. This paralyzing force of hatred often leads Precious to urinating at her back-row seat in the classroom: “My pee pee open hot stinky down my thighs. . . . I wanna die I hate myself HATE myself” (39). Whereas the students’s hatred is attached to Precious’s “ugly” body, teachers’s indifference at best and “hate” at worst (36) are directed toward Precious’s ugliness as an innate quality like intellectual capacity. They brand Precious as “one of the ones who can’t [learn]” (37). Furthermore, school’s decision to suspend her for being pregnant is based on the assumption that Precious is sexually immoral, which again places blame upon her. Public humiliation and ostracism at and from school make Precious hate herself for being “ugly” in and out: “I feel so stupid sometimes. So ugly, worth nuffin” (35). This devaluation is doubled by the welfare system’s view on Precious as a “vampire sucking the system’s blood” (31). Her underclass status here intersects with her race and gender, and what operates at this intersection is another “controlling image of

black womanhood—that of the welfare mother—developed for poor, working-class Black women who make use of social welfare benefits to which they are entitled by law” after the Civil Rights movement (Collins 78). Portrayed as “being content to sit around and collect welfare, shunning work and passing on her bad values to her offspring” (Collins 79), the welfare mother, usually a single mother with children born out of wedlock, is considered parasitic on the state, “a costly threat to political and economic stability” (Collins 79). Vilified as undesirable and responsible for her own poverty, the welfare mother becomes the main target of “social policies designed to shrink the government sector” (Collins 80). For example, the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Opportunity Act (PRWROA) of 1996 placed a 5-year time limit on assistance and required recipients to work after two years of assistance (U. S. Congress sec. 402). Combined with domestic violence that shapes Precious’s body as an object of exploitation, social institutions construct a teen black girl with nonmarital pregnancies like Precious as “ugly black grease to be wipe away, punish, [and] kilt” (31).

Hatred against Precious from her parents to social systems deeply affects her body and mind in ways that diminish her capacities manifested as physical and psychological symptoms. As M. J. Matsuda suggests, “The enactment of hate through verbal and physical violence hits right at the emotional place where we feel the most pain” (qtd. in Ahmed 58). Ahmed also points out that “hate has effects on the bodies of those who are made into its objects; Hate . . . works to unmake the world of the other through pain” (58). As the main character in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* concludes that after all the encounters with whites and blacks in both the South and North he is invisible to them, Precious also feels that she does not exist: “I watch myself disappear in their eyes” (31). While Precious’s “fat dark skin” (31) female body is physically hyper-visible, this hypervisibility ironically renders her being and

humanity invisible in a white supremacist patriarchal society where “pretty . . . girls with little titties like buttons and legs like long white straws” (31) are normative. Precious’s invisibility in society, or society’s refusal to see Precious as “a real person” (32), makes her wish to erase herself either by creating a fantasy world or by destroying herself. Usually activated when she suffers abuses painful enough to lose her mind or when she gets in panic during class, her fantasy world drawing upon popular culture consists of “movies of being someone else”: “someone not fat, dark skin, short hair, someone not fucked. A pink virgin girl. A girl like Janet Jackson, a sexy girl don’t know one get to fuck. A girl for value. A girl wif little titties whose self is luvlee just Luv-Vell-LEE” (112). These images illustrate how strongly Precious is invested into the intersecting norms of race, gender, and class to the extent that she holds a strong assimilative desire to negate herself and to become “someone not fat, dark skin, short hair.” Precious’s fantasy world furthermore mirrors how one’s physical appearance that conforms to the standards of beauty that privilege “blue-eyed, blond, thin white women” (Collins 89) is automatically perceived as being more attractive and valuable. The contrast between her reality and fantasy shows that both of these realms are two sides of the same world governed by the intersecting systems of power that privilege white over dark skin and slim over fat. This fantasy world thus provides only temporary comfort since its escapism that showcases Precious’s internalization of the view of the haters (mainstream American beauty ideals) does not help her break free from the entrapment of disempowering self-hatred. Another symptom of her self-hatred is a death wish. As Lorde eloquently asserts the destructive influence of hatred developed by the long history of racism onto black people including her own bitter experiences of hatred against her race and gender (147-53), Precious often wants to die: “Sometime I hurt so bad I want to not wake up, want to breathing to stop in my sleep. Have me *don’t* wake up” (57 italics

in the original). This desire to stop breathing attests to the devastating effects of the emotional workings of racialized sexism that victimize Precious as an object of hatred and deprive her of a will to live. The question is then how Precious gets out of this state of living death and learns to love herself.

3. "I Love Me": A Love Ethic⁹)

Learning to love ourselves as Black women . . . is empowerment—our strengthening in the service of ourselves and each other, in the service of our work and future—that will be the result of this pursuit.

(Lorde 174)

The turning point in Precious's life is when she joins the alternative school—Each One/Teach One—where she develops friendship and solidarity with Ms Rain the teacher and three classmates whose lives of marginalization and violence against their race, gender, class, and sexuality overlap with Precious's own. Ms Rain is an African American lesbian; Rita, with a Puerto-Rican mother battered and killed by a white American father, lives a life of "foster care, rape, drugs, prostitution, HIV, jail, rehab" (n. pag.); Rhonda, an immigrant from Jamaica, works as a janitor after years between homelessness and care-giving jobs for old white people once her mother kicked her out when she told her mother about the rape by her brother; and Jermaine, who was raped by her lover's father, left home when her fanatical Christian mother found out about her homosexuality.¹⁰) It is through these new encounters with these women of color that Precious begins to unlearn her deeply seated self-hatred and to learn how to love herself and others by sharing their lived experiences of violence and building loving relationships with others.¹¹) Mainly

following Precious's learning process of acquiring literacy, the novel presents literacy as a metonymy of the larger concept of agency she acquires and exerts in bringing changes to her life. If agency can be viewed as "a matter of what actions are possible given how we are shaped by our contact with others" (Ahmed 190), Precious's agency is made possible by cooperative interactions with Ms Rain and the classmates that enable her to recognize what she can do and thus to "dismantle the power of past abusive experiences" (McNeil 17). Education by which Precious learns how to undo the destructive effects of self-hatred is a threshold-crossing experience that opens her up to loving herself and extending that self-love toward others. Precious crosses a threshold to self-love that reclaims her self who embodies the value her name "Precious" means.

The first thing this crossing enables her to do is to recognize, reflect upon, and scrutinize her past. After the initial interactions with Ms Rain and the classmates who treat and help her with care, Precious feels "lonely" for the first time in her life:

I'm so busy getting beat, cooking, cleaning, pussy and asshole either hurting or popping. School I a joke: black monster, Big Bertha, Blimp B54 where are you? 'N the TV's in my head always static on, flipping pictures. So much pain, shame—I never feel the loneliness. It such a small thing compare to your daddy climb on you, your muver kick you, slave you, feel you up. But now since I been going to school I feel lonely. Now since I sit in circle I realize all my life, all my life I been outside of circle. Mama give me orders, Daddy porno talk me, school never did learn me. (62)

The feeling of "loneliness" comes with Precious's newly gained awareness that she has been entrapped by the network of abusive, injurious relationships that give her "so much pain, shame." Coming from a self-reflective view on her life that she has been "outside the circle" and that she has been isolated from any positive

relationships that recognize and value her, this loneliness indicates that she begins to see herself from a critical distance. The small acts of “friendly niceness” (48) from Ms Rain and Rhonda push Precious out of her closeted world of abuse and invisibility into an open space where she feels belonging and cared by others who treat her as a fellow human being with hospitality. For example, Ms Rain helps Precious, who is “scared” (39) of this school being “another like before” (42), smoothly participate in classroom activities and learn to read and write by creating an inviting, student-centered environment where Ms Rain “places herself with the class” (Stapleton 217). Rhonda, after asking what Precious needs for snacks with a smile, buys her chips. These whole new encounters with others make Precious “feel good” (55) that is totally different from the sensation of pleasure caused by the rapes by her father. They are also liberating in the sense that she is encouraged to find viable ways of freeing herself from the oppressive and exploitative grip, which she has wanted desperately to get out but not knowing how to. This loneliness is thus the first meaningful emotional marker of the transformative process in which she learns how to make lines of flight from isolation within the closed circuit of hatred and self-hatred and to form a new collective based upon mutual care and trust.

As Precious acquires literacy and develops dialogic connections with the teacher and the students, her capacity to ‘read’ her life and to act upon that new reading grows. Represented as a series of Precious’s journal writing in which Ms Rain not only translates Precious’s phonetic spellings into correct written English but also responds to her writing entries that contains “what’s on [her] mind” (60), Precious’s literacy acquisition process shows her gradually increasing power of recognizing and scrutinizing her life past and present in a self-conscious way and putting newly gained self-knowledge into practice. For example, Ms Rain’s questions in Precious’s journal as her feedback to her decision to keep Abdul motivate Precious to think

about practical ways of raising children and at the same time continuing education: “When you are raising a small infant you need help. Who is going to help you? How will you support yourself? How will you keep learning to read and write?” (73). More importantly, Ms Rain’s recognition of Precious as “a beautiful young girl” and “a wonderful young woman who is trying to make something of her life” (70, 71) encourages her to love herself and to push herself in ways that she could achieve her “purpose” (75): “I love me. I ain’ gonna let that big fat bitch kick my ass ’n shout on me. And I ain’ giving Abdul away. And I ain’ gonna stop school” (76). To begin a life on her own as a mother with two children, Precious leaves her “evil Mama” (75) and comes to live at an institution called “Advancement House” (80), or “1/2way house,” which helps Precious transit from “the life [she] had” to “the life [she] want[s] to have” (84). This means that Precious is safe from her mother’s abuse and no longer economically dependent upon her mother.

This action is powered by Precious’s growing sense of self-love which is manifested in her poem- or rap-like declaration of her identity, presence, and independence:

I am Precious ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRST
UVWXYZ
My baby is born
My baby is black
I am girl
I am black
I want house to live (76)

In the first five simple sentences that put emphasis on both the subjects and the complements, Precious proclaims who she is: she is a black girl. As the double

meaning of the first sentence—her name and value—indicates, she not only affirms her black female body which has been the object of abuse and blamed for the very abuse, but also claims that it is valuable as it is in contrast to the past when she hated herself so much that she wanted to be a light-skinned virgin girl. Moreover, by embracing her maternal identity despite the fact that her baby was born out of incestuous sexual violence, Precious shows that she no longer thinks her body is dirty but takes pride in her body that is capable of nurturing and loving others. The last sentence, in this light, presents Precious as a mother ready for looking after her baby by asserting that she is the head of a family independent from her mother who “got milk in [her] bresses but not for her but from Carl sucking” (135) and that she is determined to secure a place to live, which is one of the basic conditions for herself and her baby. Furthermore, this last sentence can be read as her claim for her lawful right to receive welfare assistance as a teenaged single mother who is and will be learning—as shown in the alphabet next to her name in the first sentence—and “would like a job” (81), which defies the denigrating stereotype of the welfare mother that has been implicitly associated with African American women and used to condemn dependence against the neoliberalist ideology of independence underlining such welfare reform as the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Opportunity Act (PRWROA). This self-assertion suggests that Precious begins to decolonize herself from the internalized hating gaze of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy and to assume a power to define herself in her own language.

Precious's self-love as self-definition further develops into her critical voice and agency that identify and counter her multiple oppressions as she reads books by and about African Americans with Ms Rain. By providing the larger social and historical contexts in which African Americans in general and African American women in particular have fought for their rights against the systems of oppression, the books

Precious reads not just help her gain insights into her self and the world surrounding her, but also work as a source of empowering inspirations. Introduced to the history of slavery through biographies on Harriet Tubman who “leaded over 300 black people out of slavery” (63), Precious connects her struggle to free herself from her oppressive mother to her predecessor’s fight for freedom. It is not accidental that Precious recalls Tubman, “an early icon of black women’s strength and tenacity” (McCaskill 48), when she needs some strength to come to terms with the depressing news of her HIV-positive diagnosis. Alice Walker is another inspiration that helps Precious “like being black” (96). Walker’s novel *The Color Purple* affects Precious profoundly. Identifying herself with the main character of the novel Celie who is raped and impregnated by her stepfather, Precious emotionally reacts to the novel with cries: “I cry cry *cry* you hear me, it sound in a way so much like myself” (81 italics in the original). Crying for both Celie and herself who went through similar abuse but survived, Precious finds the novel a source of strength for healing her wounds. Like Celie who speaks and heals herself through writing, Precious also gradually recovers from her traumas by writing about herself. More importantly, their dialogic way of writing—Celie’s letters addressed to her sister Nettie and God and Precious’s “dialogue journal” (94) and the class writing project—suggests the importance of communicating one’s story with others in developing self-love and self-awareness given that the tradition of black feminist thought including Walker’s womanism emphasizes the significance of coalitions among black women and women across differences. The quote from Walker—“CHANGE” (n. pag.)—in Precious’s poem inserted as part of “Life Stories” is a key lesson that she puts into practice in her move from victimhood to empowerment. African American men are not excluded from Precious’s sources of inspiration. Langston Hughes’s poem “Mother to Son” that Precious memorizes in class reflects her strong will to fight for her life:

Life for me ain't been no crystal stair
.....
Don't you fall now—
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair. (112-13)

Considering that the poem was written by Hughes who was concerned with harsh realities African Americans faced in racially segregated America and that it in the form of a mother's life lesson to her son advises a younger generation not to be defeated by racism no matter hard it may be, Precious's choice of the poem implies her growing understanding of living as a black woman. In assuming the voice of the mother-speaker who now has wisdom-knowledge about life from her own experiences to tell her son, Precious demonstrates her transformation from a silent victim into a resilient woman capable of asserting herself and taking actions for change. Precious's dreams to become a poet and her poems included in the novel as journal entries further evince Hughes's influence on her. Encounters with these African American figures by means of reading affect Precious in ways that she comes to have an improved consciousness and empowers herself by connecting herself to predecessors who not only survived but also fought against oppressions.

Along with those historical and literary African American figures, what fosters Precious's self-love as a process of empowering transformations is her friendship with the three students who help her join a community of women across race and sexuality. By means of "LIFE STORY" (94), a class project of writing and collecting their life stories into one book, the students share their lived experiences of violence, oppression, and hardships with one another and recognize who they are. This collective work of speaking for themselves and listening to one another is what

Lorde calls “self-revelation” that transforms “silence into language and action” (42). This in turn contributes to creating a strong bond and trust among them. They mean a lot to Precious:

These girlz is my friends. I been like the baby in a way 'cause I was only 16 first day I walk in. They visit at hospital when I had Abdul and take up a collection when Mama kick me out and bring stuff to 1/2way house for me— clothes, cassette player, tuna fish, and Cambull soup, and stuff. They and Ms Rain is my friends and family. (95)

In contrast to the classmates and the teachers at the previous school who humiliated and hated Precious, they respect and treat her with love, forming a kind of alternative family. Constructed by mutual recognition of their connectedness rather than in opposition to others, Precious’s self-love is not narcissistic but relational and integrative, opening itself to new encounters and changes.

As Precious grapples with her personal crises of the traumatic past of abuse and HIV infection in their larger social context, Precious’s self-love rooted in a dialogic relationship with others takes a “quantum leap” (139) toward a more interdependent form of self-love strengthened by her deeper understanding of herself as a self-in-relation. The news that she is infected with HIV from her father who recently died of AIDS is another reality Precious needs to come to terms with. Striking at the hopeful moment when Precious feels after two years of independence from her mother, “I’m on threshold of stepping out into my new life” (84), the news is so depressing that Precious cries out in despair: “Why me? I don’t deserve this. I not crack addict. . . . Why? Why?” (87). The news, however, instructive and enlightening for Precious in the sense that it gives her an opportunity to scrutinize her limited understanding of marginalized people. Walking along the streets in Harlem, Precious

is disgusted by the scenes of drug addicts and separates herself as “normal pepul” (105) from them. But she soon gets confused as she thinks, “Itz so uglee dope addicks—dey teef, they underwater walking, steeling. Spred AIDS an heptietis. But Rita was one of dese pepul an she is GOOD. I luv her” (106). She also says, “I cannot see how I am the same as a white faggit or crack addict” (108). Here Precious’s boundaries of normal/abnormal and bad/good blur. For Precious who assumes that AIDS is not so much a disease as an inevitable punishment “abnormal” or “bad” people like drug addicts and homosexuals get, the fact that normal and good people like herself and Rita are HIV positive does not make sense. Her confusion stems from her equation of abnormality with moral depravity and evilness. Precious’s prejudice against drug addicts and homosexuals is partly due to her uncritical adoption of the leader of the Nation of Islam Louis Farrakhan’s black nationalist rhetoric that demonizes homosexuality and drug addiction as “the corrupting influence of white society” (McCaskill 52) that plagues black communities. Farrakhan’s influence is counteracted by Rita whose remark that AIDS is “a disease, not a ‘good,’ a ‘bad’” (108) leads Precious to seeing that her confusion results from her problematic assumption. Her lesbian teacher Ms Rain also helps Precious revise her prejudiced view that what society defines as “abnormal” is inherently bad: “homos not who rape me, not homos who let me sit up not lear for sixteen years, not homos who sell crack fuck Harlem” (81). Likewise, through her friend Jermaine’s story of violence against her homosexuality, Precious reaches a new recognition that heterosexism is another form of oppression that places hatred onto homosexuals: “she shouldn’t be judge ’cause of that” (95). Precious realizes that her assumption that underlies her hatred against homosexuals is the same assumption that justifies and maintains the intersecting oppressions of racism and sexism that she suffers. Her interactions with those lesbians mediated by AIDS enable Precious to

critically examine her own heterosexism as well as to deepen her understanding of the systems of oppression: the systems of oppression are not separate but intersect race, gender, and sexuality.

With this improved understanding of how oppression works, Precious challenges and critiques the assumptions the welfare system makes about her race, gender, and class and resists being controlled by the system that determines what paths to take for poor black women. Precious steals the confidential file that contains her social worker Ms Weiss's reports on her while having counseling sessions about her past abusive relationship with her parents. Since Precious is "afraid of what it will say" (117) and not confident about her reading ability, she asks Jermaine to help with reading it. As used in suspending Precious from school, the file represents the official discourse about Precious that has power to dictate the course of her life: "file say what I could get, where I could go" (115). Precious's resistance against the file is presented in her own parenthetical comments as she reads Ms Weiss's writing. The alternate contrast between Ms Weiss's bureaucratic, impersonal style of writing and Precious's emotionally charged, refuting language effectively shows the gap between how Precious is defined by the state and how she defines herself. In response to Ms Weiss's assessment of Precious's literacy based on her TABE test scores (2.8) as "disappointingly low" despite Ms Rain's qualitative one as a "p-h-e-n-o-m-e-n-a-l success," Precious back talks, "(Not to Ms Rain! Not to Ms Rain!)" (118).¹² Here Precious challenges Ms Weiss's reduction of her into a number that fails to recognize her progress, achievements, passion, and capacity. Ms Weiss's quantitative view on Precious goes hand in hand with her cost-benefit analysis of her education that since it would take considerable "time and resources" for Precious to get a GED, she suggests that Precious should work by moving onto "workfare programs" (119). Reflecting "the rhetoric of welfare reform" that tends to

“frame women as if the welfare check was the end” (Fellela 38), Ms Weiss’s narrative regards Precious as a burden to the state. It further implies that the welfare system pays more attention to keeping the cost low by reducing “time and resources” (119) than providing proper social services for abused and disadvantaged young black women like Precious who are in need of help.¹³ In this welfare bureaucracy, Ms Rain’s focus on “writing and reading books” (119) are devalued, and Precious’s dream to be “a poet or rapper or an artist” (109) is not worth considering. What enrages Precious most is Ms Weiss’s delimiting prospect about her that reinforces the stereotypical view of poor black women on welfare: “Despite her obvious intellectual limitations she is quite capable of working as a home attendant” (119). Precious’s angry response—“I don’t wanna be no mutherfucking home attendant!” (119)—goes against Ms Weiss’s prejudiced assumption that Precious is not smart enough to have a job other than a home attendant. Ms Weiss’s ending remark that “she . . . seems to envision social services, AFDC, as taking care of her forever” firmly frames Precious into the stereotype of the welfare mother ignoring the fact that Precious mentions “independent living” (120). Ms Weiss’s failure to see Precious as she is enhances her invisibility in the system that reduces her whole existence into merely a “vampire sucking the system’s blood” (31). Later in her journal, she likens working as a live-in home attendant “wiping ol white people’s ass” to a kind of “slavery” (121), reasoning that she has to work for 24 hours a day but will be paid only for 8 hours with no time for school and her son. Moreover, she introduces her issue as a topic for a class discussion where she presents it as a case of the injustices of the welfare system that her classmates are also likely to experience: “They ain’ no mutherfucking therapists on our side they just flunkies for the ‘fare’” (122). In refusal to take the path dictated by Ms Weiss who sees her as an “ugly freak” (124), Precious confidently asserts her empowering self-definition not only as a “beautiful .

. . . black girl” (125) but also as “a tyger” (128), which symbolizes her strength to resist the oppressive forces that constrain her life.

Precious’s self-love shaped and strengthened by coalitions with women of color gains more power as she opens herself more to others and makes more alliances with others. An alternative to counseling with Ms Weiss who Precious doubts can help with her traumas, a meeting of the Survivors of Incest Anonymous becomes a site for transformative encounters. At the meeting, Precious is surprised to know that “all kinda girls” (129) are surviving traumas of incest similar to hers:

Girls, old women, white women, lotta white women. . . . Can this be done happen to so many people? I know I am not lying! But is they? . . . What kinda world this babies raped. A father break a girl’s arm. . . . All kind women here. Princess girls, some fat girls, old women, young women. One thing we got in common, no *the* thing, is we was rape. (130)

Listening to other survivors’ stories is another significant boundary-breaking experience for Precious. The reason why Precious is shocked by the fact that many women are incest-survivors like her regardless of their skin color, body size, age, and socioeconomic status is that it undermines her assumptions that light-skinned women are “treated right and loved by boyz” (113) and that white skin is privileged to the extent that it could protect violence like incest. In sharing what she has common with other women across differences, Precious extends her empathy and support to other women with whom she has not felt connected previously. Furthermore, small but caring interactions with other survivors affect Precious in ways that her self-love and love for others form a synergistic relationship. Along with the whole meeting, a blond girl’s compliment to her name—“Precious! That’s a beautiful name!” (131)—and a black girl’s invitation to her hair shop give Precious a sense of rebirth, freeing

her from the haunting memories of her abusive parents: "I'm alive inside. A bird is my heart. Mama and Daddy is not win. I'm winning. I'm drinking with hot chocolate in the Village wif girls—all kind who love me. How that is so I don't know. How Mama and Daddy know me sixteen years and hate me, how a stranger meet me and love me" (131). This strange but strong feeling that she is loved by those whom she met first at the meeting expands her capacity for love by convincing that she deserves love. The more she values herself by developing close relationships with those who love and respect her, the more Precious is capable of giving back with a heart big enough to "love more" (138) as she dreams to open a "house in Harlem for HIV womens and their kids" (126) with her friends.

4. Conclusion

Through Precious's story of her transformation from a self-loathing victim of multiple forms of violence into a self-loving young woman with two children and friends, the novel dramatizes what hooks calls "the process of decolonization" (*Outlaw Culture* 248) whose crucial steps are to articulate victimization and to move beyond victimhood toward empowerment in an intersubjective form of self-love deriving from coalitions with women of color. The process begins with listening to the stories of those who are wounded like Precious and recognizing their pain of self-hatred. This acknowledgement of their victimhood as reality is not to emphasize the victims' passivity or powerlessness but to interrogate where their self-hatred comes from. It is to probe the ways in which they have been constructed as the objects of hatred for their race, gender, class, and sexual orientation and how the intersecting systems of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism operate through

the cycle of hatred and self-hatred. This critical take on the emotional workings of the systems of social inequalities is a necessary stage for recovering from the pain and for taking personal and collective actions for social changes that will be fostered by a process of learning to love. Precious's change highlights the communal aspect of her self-love; she learns to love herself by opening herself to and building a mutually caring community with those women of color who go through similar oppressions. Precious's growing sense of self-love means her increasing knowledge and capacities for action manifested in her self-definition, critical consciousness about the intersecting power relations that shape her life, resistance against systemic injustices, and expansion of communal solidarity. The novel offers an open ending with a scene in which Precious reads to her son in a room full of sunshine at Advancement House, inviting the reader to imagine her future. It seems that she has found peace and recovered from her wounds, but she has crossed just one big threshold in her life. Precious still has more to come to terms with: how to live with two children as a HIV-positive single mother who desires to get college education, find love, and be a poet. She may have to confront more difficulties, inequalities, and injustices in her journey than she had in her childhood and adolescence, but she has strength and resources to push forward and fight through her unfinished struggle.

Notes

- 1) As an emerging popular genre of African American fiction heavily connected with hip-hop culture, contemporary street fiction according to David Wright focuses on "crime, drugs, and a cold, hard look at the less savory side of the street" written in "the voices of rappers, players, and gangstas, where the 'n-word' has passed from abusive epithet to defiant honorific to the merest pronoun" (42). What is interesting about the genre is that its rise in the late 1990s and ongoing popularity was led by African American women writers. While Sister Souljah, rapper and activist, with her best-selling novel *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999), rekindled popular attention to the genre whose earlier form can be ascribed to "black experience fiction" in the 1960s and 70s by African American male writers such as Robert Beck and Donald Goines (Gifford 217), Vickie Stringer established

the genre as the most commercially successful African American fiction with her self-published novel *Let That Be the Reason* (2001) written during her seven-year imprisonment for drug trafficking and later with the foundation of Triple Crown Publications. Most contemporary street lit in dealing with daily life in the ghettos of major cities features young African American female protagonists between the age of 16 and 23 “with dramatic complications to consider, such as drug dealing, drug trafficking, graphic domestic violence, and sexual encounter” (Morris et al. 19). *Push* is not a typical street lit, but rather the novel shares with other classic works of street lit a “keepin’ it real” attitude toward the challenging realities of the ghetto life. As Morris et al. show, these representations of African American inner-city neighborhoods are what attracts the biggest readership among African American young women (21). Populated with drug dealers, gangsters, and sex workers, street fiction, however, has been criticized for glamorizing drug culture and for perpetuating negative African American stereotypes.

- 2) Its tradition, however, can be traced back to African American women’s social movement activism in the 1970s when the Combahee River Collective clearly called for challenges against both racism and sexism in its manifesto “A Black Feminist Statement,” and further back to 19th-century African American female abolitionists and social activists who lamented that their gender as well as race contributed to their oppression such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Maria Miller Stewart, Anna Julia Cooper, and Frances Harper. For a detailed discussion on proto-intersectional analyses in “early black feminism from the 1830 to the 1930s,” see Gines. For other discussions on the history of intersectionality, see May.
- 3) The reason why Collins and Bilge describe their definition of intersectionality as “working” is that there is tremendous diversity in the meanings and uses of intersectionality (193). Their “expansive view of intersectionality” also reflects their conceptualization that intersectionality is not so much one single fixed knowledge project as a heterogeneous body of theories, methods, and practices. The ongoing debates on intersectionality—what Jennifer Nash calls “the intersectionality wars” (117) mainly among feminist researchers—imply that intersectionality is a work in progress. I draw on Collins and Bilge’s definition among many others because the six core ideas of intersectional frameworks—inequality, relationality, power, social context, complexity, and social justice—they enumerate basically overlap with the themes of the novel.
- 4) Since the affective turn in the first decade of the twentieth century many scholars have distinguished affect from emotion. Probably the most cited one is Brian Massumi according to whom both affect and emotion are bodily forces but affect following “different logics” precedes emotion: affect is a prepersonal intensity that is “irreducibly bodily and autonomic,” whereas emotion is “the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal” (28). Likewise, Jonathan Flatley states that “[w]here emotion suggests something that happens inside and tends toward outward expression, affect indicates something relational and transformative. One has emotions; one is affected by people or things” (12). Aware of this distinction, however, this paper uses the term emotion

in agreement with Ahmed's argument for the contiguity or interrelatedness between affect and emotion rather than the separation between affect as "pre-personal and non-intentional" and emotion as "personal and intentional" (207).

- 5) Collins and Bilge's theory of intersectionality resonates with Ahmed's theory of emotion in that both discourses focus more on "relationality" than on "static entity" (Collins and Bilge 27). As the former emphasizes the interconnectedness among such axes of power as race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation, the latter's view of emotion as "a matter of how we come into contact with objects and others" (Ahmed 208) is relational. This focus on relationality by both theories could help me explore Precious's emotions as a relational space between structure and subject.
- 6) Directed by Lee Daniels, the movie *Precious* was conferred three Sundance Film Festival Awards (Sundance Grand Jury Prize, Sundance Audience Award, and Special Jury Prize for Acting) and two Academy Awards (Best Supporting Actress and Best Writing, Adapted Screenplay). Whereas the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) endorsed the movie with six Image Awards, it received critiques from many sides as well. For example, Ishmael Reed, standing in line with those who were enraged and repulsed by the film, critiques the movie for reinforcing African American stereotypes and the "old Hollywood theme" of "redemption through learning ways of white culture" (n. pag.). The novel itself was received well when published in 1996 but drew little attention from the academia except two substantial studies by Janice Liddell and Monica Michlin.
- 7) hooks points out "the misogynist sexism" in the gendered discourse of black liberation struggle in the 1960s-70s that equated freedom with the restoration of manhood as shown in Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* that glamorized "rape as a weapon of terrorism men might use to express rage about other forms of domination, about their struggle for power with other men" (58). hooks persuasively argues that both white men and black men share "notions of manhood which make masculinity synonymous with the ability to assert power-over through acts of violence and terrorism" (59). It is at his intersection of racism and sexism that African American women face sexual objectification and exploitation. Like her predecessors such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, and Ntozake Shange, Sapphire does not shy away from dealing with such closeted topics as intra-racial sexual abuse and black female sexuality in relation to a politics of respectability that "construct black womanhood based on middle-class ideals of femininity, religious virtue, and sexual chasteness" (Weekley 183).
- 8) This paper regards Precious's body size as an embodied marker related to not only normative femininity but also class. By the beauty standards, Precious overweight body is considered "not beautiful." Her body size also is an issue of economic status. According to Noortje van Amsterdam, body size categorizations is an axis of signification intersecting with other axes, such as gender, race, sexuality, social class and age can "shape power differentials, normativities and identity formations and co-produce inequalities" (157-58

italics in the original). Precious's more than 200-pound body can be read in terms of her poverty. According to a CDC research, poor women of color are disproportionately affected by the obesity epidemic (Patterson 31). What matters more is that fatness is perceived negatively as a lack of individual's self-discipline in the neoliberal health discourse. Constructing the slender as the norm and emphasizing personal responsibility for having the normative slender body, the neoliberal health discourse "masks health disparities between populations from different social classes and ethnic backgrounds" (Van Amsterdam 161). "The notion that being black and fat is still unwanted and unacceptable, so those without these physically fit characteristics (fit arms and small waist) remain deviant and inadequate" (Patterson 32).

- 9) I borrow this phrase from hooks whose call for "love as the practice of freedom" (*Outlaw Culture* 248) is resonant with my conceptualization of love as not only an emotion but also an agential capacity manifested in Precious's acts of love.
- 10) These three characters' life stories are included in the "LIFE STORY" (94), the product of a class writing project through which the class members write about themselves. The "Life Stories" including Precious's two poems is typed in a different font and appended at the end of the novel with no page numbers. Their life stories as painful as Precious's provide a convincing common ground for their mutual support. Moreover, the fact that the stories of women of color are part of the novel helps us read Precious's story and the issues it raises beyond the boundary of African American women to a larger category of women of color who shares experiences of the intersecting systems of oppressions with African American women in many aspects. The inclusion of these women of color characters thus suggests possibilities for building coalition among women of color and black women across differences.
- 11) Lorde, astutely observing that "[w]e are Black women born into a society of entrenched loathing and contempt for whatever is Black and female" (151) and that black women treat each other with anger, argues that anger fueled by hatred is "a blind force which cannot create the future" (152) and calls for efforts to revive and reconnect the tradition of "mutual support and connection between Black women" (153). Self-love has been a long-standing, important theme in African American social movements and arts as well. To name a few, W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness," the New Negro figure articulated and celebrated by many African American artists during the Harlem Renaissance, the "Black Is Beautiful" slogan of the Black Power movement, and Baby Suggs a literary character in Morrison's *Beloved* who preaches newly emancipated blacks to love their bodies and themselves, Lorde's concept of "the erotic," and hooks's essays on love point out the importance of self-love (or the most basic emotion necessary for life as an independent being) in fighting against the damaging effects of viewing oneself from a white supremacist perspective.
- 12) The hyphens in the word "phenomenal" indicates that Precious reads the unfamiliar word

slowly. Not knowing the meaning of the word, she asks Jermaine who is also not sure about the meaning but guesses that “it must be good!” (118).

- 13) “[T]he new initiative on welfare reform” Ms Weiss mentions refers to policies “designed to shrink the government sector” (Collins 80) such as cuts in federal welfare budgets and time-limits on welfare benefits.

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국문초록

감정의 정치학 - 사파이어의 『푸쉬』

이 선 진 (부산대)

본 논문은 사회의 불평등과 불의가 복수의 권력축이 함께 작동하여 형성되는 문제로 보고 이를 해결하고자 하는 상호교차성 담론과 사라 아메드의 감정의 사회성 모델을 분석틀로 삼아 사파이어의 소설 『푸쉬』(1996)의 주인공이자 화자인 프레스스의 억압과 역능갖추기에 관한 이야기의 감정적 차원을 연구하고자 한다. 우선 프레스스가 가족, 학교, 복지시스템 등 사회 제도 속에서 겪는 다양한 억압이 혐오와 자기혐오의 감정을 통해 작동하는 방식을 분석한다. 이를 통하여 프레스스의 자기혐오가 인종, 성별, 계급이 상호교차하는 백인 우월주의적 가부장 자본주의 속에서 가난한 흑인 여성으로서 프레스스가 혐오의 대상으로 구성된 결과임을 논증한다. 다음으로는 감정이 몸의 행위역량을 변용시킴으로써 행위주체성 형성에 작동한다는 가정에 입각하여 프레스스가 대안학교에 들어가 자기혐오에서 벗어나 자기사랑으로 변모하는 과정을 분석한다. 이 변모에서 중요한 작인은 학교에서 만나게 된 유색인종 여성들과의 유대로 프레스스는 인종, 성별, 계급, 성정체성이 다르다는 이유로 그들이 겪어야 했던 불평등과 폭력의 경험을 자신의 경험과 공유하고 그들과 함께 상호 보살핌과 인정에 기초한 배움의 공동체를 구성함으로써 자신뿐만 아니라 타자를 사랑하는 법을 배운다. 그 속에서 성숙한 프레스스의 자기 사랑이란 자신과 세계에 대한 새로운 비판 의식을 갖게 됨에 따라 주체적으로 행동할 수 있는 힘을 의미한다. 프레스스의 이야기를 통해 『푸쉬』는 인종, 성별, 계급에 따른 권력구조가 프레스스와 같은 가난한 흑인 및 유색 인종 여성을 억압하는 방식을 문제삼을 뿐만 아니라

그와 같은 억압에 저항하고 그들의 가치와 권리를 주장하는 소설이다.

주제어: 사파이어, 『푸쉬』, 상호교차성, 감정, 아프리카계 미국 여성

논문접수일: 2018.09.21

심사완료일: 2018.10.09

게재확정일: 2018.10.10

이름: 이선진 (부교수)

소속: 부산대학교

이메일: sunjinlee@pusan.ac.kr