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Pilfering *Push* to Make “Precious:” Locating Langston in a Time of Crisis

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North Carolina A&T State University

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English

Major: African American Literature

Major Professor: Dr. Gregory Meyerson

Greensboro, North Carolina

2012

School of Graduate Studies
North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University

This is to certify the Master's Thesis of

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has met the thesis requirements of
North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University

Greensboro, North Carolina
2012

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Biographical Sketch

Demetrius Noble was born on May 29, 1979, in Greensboro, North Carolina. He received the Bachelor of Arts degree in Communications Studies, Public Relations and a Minor in English from University of North Carolina at Charlotte in 2001. He has published in the *Journal of Pan African Studies*, *The Journal of Black Masculinity*, and *African American Review*. He is a candidate for the M. A. in English and African American Literature.

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Abstract

Using the film “Precious” as a lens, this paper investigates how Hollywood “culturalizes” poverty so that our ideological concerns (and thus our political priorities) focus on “seeing” the poor rather than eliminating poverty. Furthermore, this paper examines how the novel *Push* was sifted and culled of its subversive content—specifically Langston Hughes—to make “Precious.” While Hollywood’s hegemonic dictates excised Hughes on the one hand, the release of “Precious” paradoxically augmented Hughesian discussions on the other. This paper argues that this simultaneous suppression and invocation of Hughes results from his broad ideological arc—a trajectory that encompasses both nationalist and socialist constellations. This essay aims to relocate the significance and the inconsistencies of this trajectory within the current historical moment as it relates to the movie “Precious,” specifically how it mystifies the systemic nature of poverty through its investments in identity politics.

CHAPTER 1

"Precious" and the (Post) Racial Mountain

In his book *The Trouble with Diversity*, fittingly subtitled *How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*, Walter Benn Michaels demonstrates how the discourses of diversity and multiculturalism have conditioned Americans to "think of inequality as a consequence of our prejudices rather than as a consequence of our social system" (20). This ideological stance ostensibly strives for social justice and equality, but in actuality, it reproduces hegemony through its tacit position that an egalitarian society can be realized without correcting the structural maladies of political economy. Moreover, it suggests that a democracy is achievable if people simply "stop being racists, sexist, classist homophobes," as if poverty results from our biased attitudes rather than the exploitative formations of class rule (20).

As important as Michaels' assertions is *how* America constructs and maintains these ideological paradigms that privilege identity over equality. Ideology is widely circulated and largely unchallenged via its dissemination in "common culture," which can be best understood as "the selective transmission of elite-dominated values." Building upon Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, Parenti notes, "[T]he state is only the 'outer trench behind which there [stands] a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks,' a network of cultural values and institutions not normally thought of as political, yet political in their impact" (16). Hollywood, as numerous scholars contend, embodies such a site.

Using the film "Precious" as my lens, I will investigate how Hollywood "culturalizes" poverty so that our ideological concerns (and thus our political priorities) focus on "seeing" the poor rather than eliminating poverty. Furthermore, I will examine how the novel *Push* was sifted and culled of its subversive content—specifically Langston Hughes—to make "Precious." While

Hollywood's hegemonic dictates excised Hughes on the one hand, the release of "Precious" paradoxically augmented Hughesian discussions on the other. I will speak to this incongruity in detail later, but suffice it to say now that this simultaneous suppression and invocation of Hughes speaks to his broad ideological arc—a trajectory that encompasses both nationalist and socialist constellations. I aim to relocate the significance and the inconsistencies of this trajectory within the current historical moment as it relates to the movie "Precious," specifically how it mystifies the systemic nature of poverty through its investments in identity politics.

The film's social context makes "Precious" an important site of inquiry. The plethora of reviews and responses written about "Precious" by scholars and lay persons alike attest to this fact. Released in the wake of Barack Obama's historic ascent to the United States presidency, "Precious" questions America's newly acquired post-racial persona via its classed and gendered depictions of blackness.[1] In doing so, "Precious" uncovers Hughes's trope of the "racial

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[1]In the immediate aftermath of America electing its first black president, conservative and liberal pundits alike obscured extant discussions of economic crisis with the utopian claims of a post-racial America. Similar to the discourses of diversity and multiculturalism, discussions of America's post-racial makeover mystify the racialized character of inequality by focusing on the dubious topic of race relations. Implicit in the discourse of race relations is the misguided premise that "racial animus is necessary for the creation and maintenance of racialized systems of social control" (Alexander 178). This is simply not true. Moreover, construing racism in these narrow and outdated terms precludes the ability to see how racism operates today—invisibly but efficiently—as it is embedded in the major institutional apparatuses of America's social systems.

mountain"—a reactionary concept that obscures the relationship of race, class and culture as it treats class ideologically rather than structurally. Properly critiqued, the racial mountain resurfaces with renewed pertinence in this contemporary moment of global economic crisis because it demonstrates that the symbolic victories of an Obama presidency cannot mitigate the racism intimately linked to the contradictions of capitalism.

Originally published in 1926, in the precarious aftermath of World War I and the Red Scare of 1919, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (henceforth referred to as "Mountain") is considered to be the most important critical essay of Hughes's career (Leak 13).[2] The import of "Mountain" resonates in its attempt to address equally the machinations of black cultural nationalism and white supremacist cultural hegemony relative to the larger political project of African American citizenship."Mountain," like many of the competing manifestos and polemics of the period, imagines popular culture as the principal site of struggle for black liberation. Its political impetus and moral center was forged from the lively debates "over issues

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[2]"The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" was originally published by *Nation* magazine to offset George Schuyler's controversial polemic "The Negro-Art Hokum" which was also published by *Nation* in the same year. Concerned with the potential reception of Schuyler's essay, *Nation* immediately enlisted Hughes to articulate his perspectives on black art. Schuyler challenged the dominant Black Nationalist ideologues of the period (i.e. Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. DuBois, etc.) by contending that there is no such thing as "Negro art" that is "made in America" (13). Schuyler concedes that Negro art exists "among the numerous black nations of Africa," but denounces the possibility of its "development among the ten million colored people in {America}" as "self-evident foolishness" (13). For Schuyler, skin color and race notwithstanding, the American Negro is first and foremost American. Thus, the Negro's aesthetic sensibility and the material art it produces are indebted to European (i.e. white) creative modes and traditions. As Jeffrey Leak points out, Schuyler's early affirmations of the cultural hybridity of "Negro" art anticipate the cultural politics of African American literary giants Albert Murray and Ralph Ellison. In the arena of black popular music, the cosmopolitanism of Stanley Crouch and Wynton Marsalis are also greatly indebted to Schuyler's early critiques of African American cultural nationalism. To further engage "The Negro-Art Hokum" and more of Schuyler's writings, see Jeffrey B. Leak, *Rac(e)ing to the Right: Selected Essays of George S. Schuyler* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001).

of black identity, culture, and politics during the 1920s" (Dawahare, *Nationalism* 30). By the time Hughes weighed in with "Mountain," the "postwar ideological fight between advocates of black nationalism, socialism, and American capitalism" was well under way as each group "struggled to position themselves as leaders of working-class black Americans" (31).

The bourgeois nationalism of the Harlem Renaissance ultimately won this ideological battle as it supplanted "the massive class and antiracist struggles erupting in the wake of the Great War and Bolshevik Revolution" (Foley 7).[3] Spearheaded largely by Alain Locke and his seminal 1925 text *The New Negro*, the Harlem Renaissance undertook a dogged racial culturalism that necessarily implies political conservatism. Authoritatively speaking on behalf of the black masses, Locke writes, "the Negro is radical on race matters, conservative on others" (990). But historical record suggests otherwise. In the aftermath of the Red Summer of 1919, there was a significant current of working-class black (and white) radicalism that held the conviction that it "would take the abolition of capitalism to overcome racism" (Foley 7). Locke's assertion about the monolithic conservatism of the Negro thereby appears to be more of a political fancy than it was a reality. This historical rejoinder notwithstanding, the cultural

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[3]While it is imperative to note the historical and political context from which "Mountain" emerged, it is beyond the scope of this essay to treat that context with the attention it fully warrants. Barbara Foley undertakes this project however with her brilliant text *Specters of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003). Foley combines archival investigation with political theory and literary criticism with intellectual history (ix) to testify to the significant involvement of African Americans in leftist politics (viii). By doing so, *Specters of 1919* not only explains how the culturalism of the Harlem Renaissance supplanted the postwar radicalism of World War I, it takes a critical stance in debates over race, class and nation that continue to shape political activism and cultural production to this day. This essay aims to follow Foley's lead in mapping the limitations of "nationalism—whether cultural pluralist nationalism, self-determinationist nationalism, or ethnic or race-based nationalism—as a means to emancipate those bearing the yoke of oppression and exploitation" (viii).

nationalism of Locke's *New Negro* (as opposed to the political nationalism advanced by Garvey in the 1920s) wrested the ideological fight from the stage of political and economic questions and situated it squarely in the "zone of culture" (2).

Locke certainly had allies. Prominent Harlem Renaissance luminaries such as Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. DuBois all helped to further delineate nationalism as the ideological checkpoint beyond which the New Negro culturalists would not trespass. But perhaps none, as Dawahare suggests, "tapped into the postwar nationalist ideology more fully" than Hughes did (*Nationalism* 57). I would further posit that none complicated this postwar nationalist ideology more than Hughes did with "Mountain."

These complications reflect Hughes's simultaneous disavowal and embrace of American nationalism. His ideological schizophrenia stems from the quixotic premise "that a 'good'—that is democratic—nationalism could be leveraged against the 'bad' nationalism of 100 percent Americanism" and made functional for African Americans in their pursuit of citizenry (Foley 6). This battle constitutes the "racial mountain," and overcoming the mountain means overcoming that "urge within the race toward whiteness," that "desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible" ("Mountain" 1311). "Mountain" aims to substantiate an *authentic* blackness in the spirit of cultural pluralism. This push towards pluralism is nothing short of a push towards capitalism in that it tacitly concedes status quo class formations as fixed social arrangements. The pluralist focus of "Mountain" thereby reveals its indissoluble ties to both antiradicalism and American nationalism (Foley 2). Moreover, it precludes Hughes (and indeed all of the New Negro culturalists) from challenging the racist hegemony that he rails against as he fails to ground the workings of race and racism within a larger structural critique of class inequality.

This is not to say that “Mountain” ignores class. To the contrary, “Mountain” predominantly concerns itself with how blackness is articulated along class lines. To this end, it reads like a critical rejoinder to DuBois’s 1903 “Talented Tenth” postulate. DuBois contends that “the Negro race” will be “saved by its exceptional men” for they “will guide the Mass away from the death and contamination of the Worst, in their own and other races.” Understanding the realm of culture as the principal political arena, DuBois calls for the bourgeoning and well-educated black middle class to be “missionaries of culture” for it is only “from the top downward that culture filters.” Beyond this stated purpose of “trickle-down” culture, Dubois intends for these cultural elites to redress the persistent caricatures of minstrelsy, or what Eric Lott characterizes as “the first formal public acknowledgement by whites of black culture” (4). The Talented Tenth answered this charge and regulated black cultural production accordingly. Black art was both produced and policed correspondent to a rigid code of mainstream (read: white) normative values and bourgeois respectability. Observing the genre of early twentieth-century African American novels in particular, Leroi Jones notes that these texts were “full of the same prejudices and conceits that could be found in the novels of their models, the white middle class. The contempt for the ‘lower-classed Negroes’ found in these narratives by black novelists is amazing and quite blatant” (132). Such contempt ultimately prompts Hughes to question *whose* culture was being “filtered” from the perch that the (seemingly self-appointed) Talented Tenth governed from. “Mountain” takes on this question.

The black middle class, in Hughes’s estimation, is not fit for the task of legislating cultural edicts for they cannot even “interest {themselves} in interpreting the beauty of {their} own people” (“Mountain” 1311). They are taught instead to never see that beauty or to be ashamed of it “when it is not according to Caucasian patterns.” For these “high-class” blacks,

"the word white comes to be unconsciously a symbol of all virtues" (1311). And here lies the problem for Hughes. The "Nordicized" (1313) black bourgeoisie is incapable of producing culture that is "distinctly racial" for they fear "the strange un-whiteness of {their} own features" (1314).[4] Hughes surmises that as they retreat from their "racial individuality" (1312) and "the eternal tom-tom beating of the Negro Soul" (1314) they, in effect, deny their own freedom. Hughes thus calls for a bold cultural blackness. He is in search of "the serious black artist" (1312), those "younger Negro artists" who "intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame" (1314). And because they do not cower from the "tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs," they will inevitably "stand on top of the mountain, free within {them}selves" (1314).

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[4]This claim by Hughes anticipates the scathing exposition of E. Franklin Frazier's 1957 text, *Black Bourgeoisie* and Leroi Jones's unforgiving treatment of the black middle class in his 1963 seminal work, *Blues People*. Like Hughes, both Frazier and Jones assert that the black middle class's disidentification with poor and working-class blacks results from their delusional desire to be white. This psychoanalytic assertion is predicated on the fact that class is realized ideologically. Thus, each of these theorizations regarding the black bourgeoisie assumes the reactionary fixtures of authenticity politics. The black middle class is not understood as a petit bourgeoisie that buttresses the exploitation of class rule as they act in their own class interests; they are understood instead as delusional race traitors suffering from some sort of psychoneurosis. Frazier contends that "the black bourgeoisie live largely in a world of make believe." And the feelings of "emptiness and futility" that they derive from living in this artificial state "causes them to constantly seek an escape in new delusions" (213). Jones claims "The middle-class black man bases his whole existence on the hopeless hypothesis that no one is supposed to remember that for almost three centuries there was slavery in America, that the white man was the master and the black man the slave. This knowledge, however, is at the root of the *legitimate* black culture of this country" {emphasis: added} (p. 136). Beyond these culturalist and psychoanalytic explanations of oppression, both Frazier and Jones talked about the social and economic plight of black people in real and lucid ways. This important functionality notwithstanding, one must question if these authors really want to actualize the egalitarian society that their texts point to. In other words, if poor blacks are the true blacks and the producers of an authentic black culture, then what would become of black people and black culture in a classless society? Bringing questions like this to the fore reveals how nationalism undermines the critiques of social injustice found in the respective works of these authors.

It thus remains “the duty of the younger Negro artist” to “change through the force of his art that old whispering ‘I want to be white’” by locating the political space that pronounces “I am Negro” (1314). And undoubtedly for Hughes, this is a proletarian space. He lionizes “working-class blacks” as “repositories of an authentic black culture” (Dawahare, *Nationalism* 57) because they, unlike the “Nordicized Negro intelligentsia” (Hughes, “Mountain” 1313), have not endured “[y]ears of study under white teachers” in which they were subjected to “a lifetime of white books, pictures, and papers” (1311). Indeed, Hughes joyfully boasts that their subjugated class position hinders them from being “too learned” or “too well fed” to “accept what beauty is their own without question” (1312). What a telling statement! It fundamentally underscores the antiradicalism of “Mountain” as it reveals how Hughes exploits racial pride to obscure the oppression of black class stratification. The black working class is important not because it is a central agency for proletarian revolution but because it is the site of cultural authenticity, of *real blackness* (tending to mean real black men).

While Hughes acknowledges the “wealth of colorful, distinctive material” (“Mountain” 1312) abounding in Harlem’s black working-class culture, he fails to recognize the economic suffering informing such cultural stock—the paltry incomes that fell well below the city’s average, shoddy housing at exorbitant prices and incredibly high mortality rates that surpassed all national averages due to no healthcare (Greenburg 28-33). Ignoring the material realities of the period, Hughes’s bombast suggests that poor blacks opted to forego “years of study under white teachers” to maintain their racial individuality. Historian Cheryl Greenburg provides a far more likely reason for why Harlem’s black masses are not “too well learned” (which had a lot do with why they were also not “too well fed”). She explains that rampant poverty and the discrimination of white employers made the attainment of any form of education, academic or

vocational, virtually impossible (Greenburg 18). Such gaping negations in "Mountain" evince Hughes's desire to establish a national, homogenous black identity at any cost. Moreover, this reactionary desire surrenders allegiance to American capitalism as it suppresses class distinctions and interests.

"Mountain's" failure to document the horrific conditions oppressing the very people it champions mirrors the ideological imperatives of New Negro conservatism as it insists on "the centrality of culture unrelated to economic and social realities" (Foley 3). But this begs the question of why and how the cultural arena gained prominence as not just a support for but rather *the site* of African American liberation in the 1920s (71). Foley contends that the heightened political significance ascribed to culture derived from the postwar left's shortsighted push to centralize their efforts around electoral politics. This tactical move supplanted the widespread radicalism seen in the postwar left's extrasystemic protest activity with a narrow focus on institutional representation. Accompanying the scramble to elect Socialists to public office was a misguided "view of the state as an area open to contestation and control by any and all classes, rather than, as Marx and Lenin had both maintained, an instrument of class rule" (78). The failure of the postwar left to interrogate the limitations of political representation in the democratic capitalist state contributed to the upsurge of a politics of cultural representation. Foley observes, "Reformism and culturalism, while operating in different discursive registers were intimately interrelated in their mutual commitment to representation as praxis" (78).

This explains how the movie "Precious" perpetuates the racial mountain and accompanying ideological discourses despite the election of Barack Obama. The black bourgeoisie's entrenched foothold in every level of electoral politics does not mitigate their predilection to negotiate political struggle via the cultural arena; it intensifies it! Adolph Reed

reminds us that the influx of black elected officials could not have been achieved without sufficient ideological work. In order for black politicians to reach a critical mass capable of sustaining formal political institutions like the Congressional Black Caucus and National Conference of Black Mayors, black politicians had to convince the poor and working-class black masses that they would work to resolve "black concerns"—a nationalist fiction in and of itself as these "black concerns" seemingly speak to all classes and no classes simultaneously (3). Black elected officials thereby succeeded in creating an elite division of labor in which political officials assume chief responsibility for articulating these class-amorphous but race-specific politics. As they convert black concerns into legitimate public policy agenda items, African American politicians routinely collapse the concerns of the black toiling masses into the homogenous and palatable category of middle-class interests. Popular culture is consequentially realized as a key battlefront where the black elite—through the deployment of "cynical ideologies of 'role models' and 'positive images'"—create "illusions of collective racial interest" to influence the black working-class to support bourgeois agendas that are opposed to their class interests and general welfare (7). Fortunately however, the cultural arena is also a site where proletariats can resist bourgeois ideologies and nationalisms and supplant these retrograde modes of thought with a revolutionary class consciousness. This dialectic provides the framework for the following discussion of "Precious" and *Push* relative to Hughes.

"Precious" recounts the individual story of a poor, illiterate, overweight, sexually and physically abused teenager growing up in a poverty-blighted Harlem in the 1980s. The film reintroduces the anxieties of the racial mountain by highlighting black "subproletarians" just ten months after President Obama's inauguration. The elevated visibility of this depressed class caused post-racial honeymooners to fret that "Precious" would tarnish the symbolic victories of

an Obama presidency.[5] Determined not to sit idly, noted journalist, author and political analyst Juan Williams promptly articulated his disdain for "Precious" in a *The Wall Street Journal* op-ed entitled "'Precious' Little of Value in Ghetto Lit."

Published more than ten days before the movie's national release, Williams chastises "Precious" for giving "prominence to the subculture of gangster-lit novels, bringing them into the mainstream." And while he is perturbed at the fact that they are "poorly written, poorly edited and celebrate the worst of black life," he is more "disappointed" by how such fictions overshadow the "theme of black middle-class striving." Stories "celebrating the beauty and strength of black family life, the power of education, and the desire to succeed in the workplace and in business—think 'The Cosby Show' or Stephen Carter's mysteries set among the black bourgeoisie—{are} now out of fashion."[6]

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[5]The designation of subproletariat is pertinent, especially in the current historical moment where increasing technological advances further consolidate the ownership of the capitalist class over the means and modes of production while relegating the black and brown denizens of the ghetto to chronic unemployment. Such terminal unemployment reflects the racist character of American capitalism as the black and brown toiling masses are forced to supply the bulk of cheap, unskilled labor at a juncture when unskilled and semiskilled occupations are rapidly disappearing (Munford 48-50). Subproletariats thus spend more time hunting for work than actually producing surplus value. Constantly denied a living wage, they survive on odd jobs and petty hustles. They are forced to live from handouts, that is, when they are not warehoused in ruling-class correctional institutions (52). While generally idled and appearing to serve no purpose, they are kept alive at a physical minimum because they are indeed "one of the necessary conditions for the reproduction of capitalist relations in the United States" (52). They are "a reservoir of dirt cheap occasional labor power" to be exploited or dispensed with as needed (53). The election of President Obama does not change this reality nor will it. The hope that it will is a nationalist fantasy that, at best, leaves black ghetto subproletariats with a fleeting sense of racial pride while they suffer from a brutal, unrelenting subhuman existence.

[6]Williams is far from alone in his praise for "The Cosby Show" which upholds the hegemonic values of America's (white) middle class. For an alternate reading that treats how "The Cosby Show" undergirds the "whiteness" and exploitative social relations that Hughes critiques and resists throughout the corpus of his work, see Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism:*

Williams's critique, like the "Nordicized Negro intelligentsia" of "Mountain," is informed by a narrow politics of representation mandating that black artists "be respectable, write about nice people, {and} show how good we are" (Hughes "Mountain" 1313). He chastises the film for reveling in racial stereotypes that "{have} always sold and sold well." His invective is nothing short of a meme for New Negro culturalism as he fails to trouble his analysis with a discussion of the social conditions that "Precious" depicts. Williams is not interested in cultural production that draws attention to the inequality of America's racist, heterosexist social order, he instead favors art that depicts African Americans occupying powerful positions and spaces of privilege within said social order.

Williams's arguments are consonant with the racial uplift politics of Hughes's Harlem Renaissance contemporaries James Weldon Johnson and W. E. B. DuBois. In his preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, Johnson proclaims, "The status of the Negro in the United States is more a question of national mental attitude toward the race than of actual conditions. And nothing will do more to change that mental attitude and raise his status than a demonstration of intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art" (883). Similar to Williams, and indicative of bourgeois nationalisms in general, Johnson establishes racist attitudes and cultural biases as autonomous causal categories that explains the economic alienation and disenfranchisement of poor and working-class blacks. Such poor causal analysis leads to a reactionary and futile political praxis of striving for "civil rights by copy right" (Lewis xxxiii).

The Cosby Show, Audiences and the Myth of the American Dream (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992).

Perhaps even more analogous to Williams than Johnson are the cultural politics articulated in Dubois' 1926 polemic "Criteria for Negro Art." Building upon his paternalistic "Talented Tenth" paradigm (a model that Williams has seemingly adopted without question), DuBois calls for the end of negative images that depict the "worst" of black life. Dubois goes so far as to state, "Our worst side has been so shamelessly emphasized that we are denying we have or ever had a worst side" (783). This revisionist aesthetic that favors the "socially acceptable" while advocating for the relentless erasure of *the already invisible* marked a key tension between the cultural politics of Hughes and DuBois during the Harlem Renaissance. This tension reverberates in Williams's editorial as he callously questions the appeal and value of art that reflects the lives of poor and working class blacks during a time when African Americans can boast to having "the largest black middle class in American history and even a black president."

Missing altogether from Williams's rant is a structural analysis of class. His negation of this structural determinant compels his hackneyed reading of black art and black life in general. According to Herman Gray, "[s]uch narrow political and cultural ideas about blackness" are "too often organized by myopic (and self-righteous) conceptions of what does and doesn't count as black culture, black representation, and (in some cases) black people." Moreover, these types of "deep investments in the politics of representation" fail to articulate "how *culture matters politically and how politics matter culturally*" {emphasis: author's} (3). Such cultural politics treat culture as if it is independent from political economy and relations of power. Williams's call for more positive images reveals his problematic "investment in a conception of cultural politics that continues to privilege representation itself as the site of hope and critique" (Gray 2). When the primary focus of cultural politics is the question of good or bad images, then the functional value of those politics will be reformist at best. Even when successful, struggles of

reform do nothing to challenge exploitative power arrangements and structural domination within the existing social order. They simply allot possibilities for historically marginalized groups to assume a stratification profile of status quo class formations. It follows, then, that under this brand of cultural politics, there remains a tacit acceptance (if not direct approval) of uneven power arrangements as long as the images produced under such arrangements can be read as “positive” or “good” images.

Even in more sophisticated responses to “Precious,” like Imani Perry’s “Embracing Precious: The Nuances and Truths in the Collective Stories We Tell,” race dominates the discussion. Like Williams, Perry subordinates class to race as she discusses class ideologically rather than structurally. Perry examines the significance of “Precious” upon the national consciousness as the film concretizes her notion that “[f]or African Americans, it is yet again a decade of dream and deferral.” These Hughesian points of reference are marked by “a Black president,” “a young Black man selling drugs on the corner,” “the Oscar worthy dysfunctional sexual abusing welfare mother played by Mo’nique” and “brilliant young Black women pursuing degrees at a world class university.” For Perry, “Precious” is a complex site of inquiry. It raises certain questions about race in a historical moment when a conspicuous black elite is countered (if not overwhelmed) by mass imprisonment, joblessness and the myriad other ways poverty is signed by the “concentrated blackness in major urban centers.”

Perry contends that this dichotomy of lived black experiences “highlight[s] the challenge of this moment when it comes to *race* in America” {emphasis: mine}. This misplaced focus, which reifies race as an autonomous causal category of black subjugation, prompts her to question how these “relationships reveal the resilience of inequality *or the promise of democracy*?” {emphasis: mine}. Although Perry offers no answer to this inquiry, deciding

instead to leave it as a rhetorical parting gift, she avers, "Asking and answering these sorts of questions is key for understanding *race* in the 21st century United States" {emphasis: mine}. Perry's insistence to foreground race and deemphasize class reveal a nationalist set of assumptions that undermine her larger inferences of structural racism and class inequality. She underplays black class differences in order to uncover some larger truth about "blackness" or "race in the 21st century United States." Implicit in this desire, is Perry's subscription to the nationalist fiction that a people with shared skin color "will somehow miraculously overcome the class divisions and conflicts endemic to capitalism without abolishing the structural inequalities of the capitalist mode of production" (Dawahare, *Nationalism* xvi-xvii). Perry contends:

> The challenge is this: When it comes to race: critically thinking members of this society have to consider the implications of symbolism (like the Black president, or the Oscar worthy dysfunctional sexual abusing welfare mother played by Mo'nique) at the same time we consider the messy, complicated, content of our society, *without assuming that these things have a clear or consistent relationship to each other* {emphasis: mine}.

Assuming the disconnectedness between black class formations (symbolic or literal) and the aggregate materials of America's "messy, complicated" social order leads Perry to theorize about race in problematic ways. Perhaps the most obvious is the way she discusses race (which she makes synonymous with blackness) without discussing racism. Her omission of racism's impact on poor folks in general precludes her ability to postulate the linked fates between black America and white America. This has to be a fundamental presupposition of radical black political struggle. Robert Allen cogently argues that "Black America cannot be genuinely liberated until white America is transformed into a humanistic society free of exploitation and

class division. The black and white worlds, although separate and distinct, are too closely intertwined—geographically, politically and economically—for the social maladies of one not to affect the other." White society, then, cannot be dismissively cast aside or cleaved from the black liberation struggle. This historical reality, as Allen contends, is "one of the clearest lessons of the black experience in America" (281).

Actualizing a truly liberated and egalitarian United States intrinsically tethers black America to white America and vice versa. This necessitates that race and racism be understood within the context of political economy and social relations at large. Thus, to heed Perry's call and not critically examine the social relations symbolized by a black president and a poverty stricken black woman dependent on public assistance is to ignore the impact of monopoly capitalism on the black ghetto. Perry's willingness to discount these linkages underscore her propensity to treat class as a depoliticized strain of black identity rather than the structural determinant informing the divergent ideological stances in the African American culture struggle. If class is assumed to be the former, then it is easier to homogenize blackness around the myth of a monolithic "black" political agenda that does not distinguish between the antithetical class interests of black subproletarians and the black bourgeoisie. This nationalist fantasy of solidarity mystifies the reality that the black bourgeoisie possesses interests that conflict with the political and economic aspirations of the toiling black masses. Moreover, the black bourgeoisie will exercise whatever resources and power they have to safeguard their interests, even if it means the continued subjugation of working-class black America (Allen 266). The contradictions of such nationalist claims are precisely why "blackness" is a "paradoxical" ideology and organizing precept. It is "classless," thus it is "ultimately deceptive" (Baraka, "Malcolm" 508). Without a specific class designation, blackness is a meaningless category,

especially when “black” politics can oscillate anywhere between Cynthia McKinney and Condoleeza Rice (or as Baraka notes both Roy Innis and Malcolm X are “black”). Race, then, is a “superficial” identity that the ruling class exploits as political overture. Baraka thereby contends that “blackness is only a job description,” while class stance is an ideology (508).

Gregory Meyerson furthers this line of thought in his essay “Marxism, Psychoanalysis and Labor Competition.” He argues that race and culture lack the “explanatory vocabulary” to accurately diagnose oppressive power relations when they are disassociated from class and reified as “autonomous causal categories in their own right.” Understood from this framework, the nationalist fetish to privilege race or racial identity (in this case “blackness”) thus masks more about race than it purports to reveal. Black skin may be a unifying thread connecting President Obama, Perry’s black female Princeton students, the drug dealer on the corner, and the wreckage of black lives that “Precious” depicts, but it is an imagined connection that does not hold under the material realities of class rule that necessitate and sustain such antagonistic relationships in the first place. The pervasive nature of racism in the United States notwithstanding, there is no uniform political agenda around which all African Americans organize, nor is there a homogenous black struggle. Ahmed Shawki notes, “[T]he Black middle class has supported certain extensions of Black rights, but it is sure not to pursue policies contradictory to its class interests.” The black bourgeoisie may vehemently voice some opposition to the system, but it will just as passionately fight to increase its wealth and influence within that same system (239). Shawki provides a fitting exemplar in his analysis of how the black middle class leveraged the Civil Rights struggle to gain increased representation into electoral politics:

> The integration of the Black middle class within the Democratic Party and other institutions of capitalism (like major corporations, the media, the military, and so on) is unlikely to be reversed, despite the racism within the Democratic Party and society at large. This, however, does not represent a victory for the mass of Blacks, but is rather the bittersweet result of the struggles of the 1960s. The creation of a Black political machine in cities across the country (and within the Democratic Party) is a victory over segregation to be sure. But the spoils of this victory are few and not spread throughout the Black population as a whole. Jesse Jackson's campaign did not help build an alternative to capitalism or galvanize large numbers of Blacks into action. Rather, it succeeded in channeling Black discontent in a safe direction (239-240).

This is certainly true of Obama's presidency as well. The black elite (like all other bourgeois class formations) will continue to protect and advance its class interests at the expense of poor and working-class blacks. Thus, antithetical class formations will continually augment the "resilience of inequality" while they foreclose on "the promise of democracy."

Turning a critical eye back to Hughes relative to Perry and their respective moves to "blackness," it has been argued that "Mountain," also embraces nationalism in its "chauvinistic" call for black art by black artists. Hughes diverges from Perry however as his nationalism functions through a hierarchy of race and working-class "blackness." "Mountain" not only champions blackness as it represents "Nordic" culture as "amorphously homogenous, 'dull,' and "implicitly incapable of providing the black artist with anything useful," it also overtures towards proletarian class consciousness as it maintains that the hope for black liberation rests with the black working class (Dawahare, *Nationalism* 58). The proletarian contrariety of Hughes's

nationalist aesthetic thus reflects an "emergent class consciousness" that is "nonetheless contained by the categories of race and nation" (49). Until Hughes fully discovered his radical socialist poetry of the 1930s, his 1920s writings, as indicated by "Mountain," were resolved to "promote social equality with unegalitarian ideas" (58) by insisting on "a nationalist view of oppression" rather than "a class analysis of oppression" (60).

Others have posited a disparate valuation of Hughes's cultural nationalism however. Jonathan Scott contends that the culturalism of Hughes's 1920s writings does not preclude proletarian class consciousness, but rather facilitates it through the blues idiom. Despite the blues being a uniquely "black" form that strictly espouses "the philosophy of African American everyday life," Scott argues that Hughes transformed the blues from "race music" to a "working-class ideology" (55) as "Hughes defined the blues with his characteristic emphasis on everyday struggle" (54). He thereby "maintained a strategic relationship with black cultural nationalism, never fully endorsing it yet never rejecting it either" (49). In other words, Scott contends that black cultural nationalism was merely a means not an end or overarching political philosophy. But in order for this to be true, the means have to be ideologically, politically and organizationally consistent with the end; and no brand of cultural nationalism is consistent with (or conducive to) the end of a revolutionary anti-racist, anti-sexist working-class struggle. Underscoring this point further, Shawki contends that of all the strands of nationalism, cultural nationalism is the most reactionary because unlike other Black nationalists, the cultural nationalists reject political struggle. They instead stress the importance of a distinct "African" culture (196).

While Scott correctly identifies the proletarian impulses of Hughes's "strategic relationship with black cultural nationalism," he mistakenly reads these flashes as evidence that

Hughes has *transformed* the blues into a "working-class ideology." This misreading occurs because Scott conflates Hughes's contradictions into a "streamlined" (7) creative trajectory in an attempt to forgive Hughes's more reactionary ideological stances. But it is a mistake to treat Hughes's corpus as an always already leftist cultural praxis in motion. Hughes's proletarian nationalism can best be explained by registering his left-wing affections as emergent but not yet dominant as he was still "ideologically boxed in by the dominant nationalist discourses of the time" (58). Hughes failed to "transform his criticisms of social {in}justice into a poetry that goes beyond the reification of oppression" as his cultural politics were primarily governed by the nationalism prevalent in "Mountain" (58-59). The same can be said of Perry with regard to "Embracing Precious." Perry's analysis is sensitive to the plight of poor black folks, but her nationalist tenets delimit her ability to discuss "Precious" in ways that don't reify the oppression of the raced, classed and gendered denizens that "Precious" depicts. Fortunately, "Mountain," does not mark the end of Hughes's ideological and political trajectory. Hughes's move to the left parallels his increasing awareness that racial pride and cultural pluralism are poor substitutes for social justice and equality. He thus traded in his reactionary culturalism for a socialist, internationalist worldview that undergirded his Depression-era writings with a revolutionary proletarian class consciousness.

CHAPTER 2

*PUSH*ing Towards Hughes and a Leftist Cultural Politics

Hughes's leftward shift to radical cultural politics did not come without costly repercussions. His decision to infuse his poetry with socialist politics greatly impacted how he was remembered, or more aptly, how he was *not* remembered. Subsequent to Hughes being interrogated by the House on Un-American Activities (HUAC) for his radical proletarian literature, Hughes's "communist" poetry was largely excluded from academic canons (Dawahare, "Langston" 21). The academy's patriotic leanings—often shrouded in multicultural and post-racial rhetoric—with respect to Hughes can be seen in the countless treatments of poems like "Theme for English B" and "I Too" while there is nothing on poems like "Ballads for Lenin" or "Letter to the Academy" (Scott 4). The omission of Hughes' socialist writings from legitimized discourses demonstrates "a debilitating neurosis in American society: that all-too familiar Cold War fear of the radical 'other' and in its shadow, that even deeper fear of one's own 'un-American' impulses" (Dawahare, "Langston" 21). The evacuation of Hughes from Hollywood's adaptation of Sapphire's novel *Push* attests to the fact that the anti-capitalist rhetoric of Hughes's Depression-era poetry still resonates as "un-American" and wholly intolerable.

As today's economic crisis recalls Depression-like magnitudes and the inherent contradictions of capitalism become harder to conceal, the ruling class will as always attempt to maintain hegemony and guard their class interests. History has clearly illustrated that the dominant elite will "assault" the "immaterial culture of a people" to "protect an assault on their material resources" (Ball 4). Thus, the anti-racist, anti-sexist and internationalist properties of Hughes's socialist writings were strategically culled from *Push* so the novel could be

bowdlerized to the screenplay “Precious.” The cinematic appropriation of the novel brings other significant alterations and omissions to bear, but it is my contention that these adjustments are made possible by the exclusion of Hughes. In other words, *Push*’s intertextuality with Hughes is the linchpin of the novel’s revolutionary force. The political decision to nix Hughes from the film, then, necessitates a host of reactionary adaptations. Thus, by voiding Hughes to acquiesce to Hollywood’s hegemonic demands, *Push* capitulates its insurrectionary impetus to market logic that packages “Precious” as an inspirational holiday film.

Such evacuations, of course, are not unique to *Push* and “Precious,” but rather standard operating procedures for what Ed Guerrero calls “the dominant Hollywood apparatus” (1). Like other instruments of social control (e.g. news media, television and radio programming, religion, etc.) this dominant Hollywood apparatus functions “to inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and state” (Herman and Chomsky qtd. in Dimaggio 13). Hollywood’s ideological efficiency derives from its expertise in merging “multiple standpoints” (hooks, *Reel* 3). Hollywood initiates this process by marketing and critically acclaiming particular films as “progressive.” It then deliberately mingles the radical standpoints of these films with conservative positions and attitudes. This confuses audiences and makes it difficult for them “to critically read the overall filmic narrative.” Audiences thereby “misread” reactionary films as “counterhegemonic narrative[s]” when they in fact encourage and promote “the conventional structures of domination” (3).

Although moviegoers are often duped by the “multiple standpoints” practice, the practice itself concedes Hollywood’s acknowledgement that the silver screen continues to be an intense site of culture struggle. And rather than suppress dissent and ignore ever-changing social pressures and realities, Hollywood absorbs and integrates “emergent and dissonant styles,

oppositional images, and resistant films into the framework of its vast commercial enterprise" (Guerrero 6). Consequentially, revolutionary material is "relentlessly co-opted, emptied of its social meaning, and sold by the entertainment industry as the latest fashion or fad" (Guerrero 7).[7] *Push*'s conversion into "Precious" and the concomitant extirpation of Langston Hughes furnishes compelling proof of this reality.

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[7]In his essay "Malcolm as Ideology," Amiri Baraka argues that Hollywood's ability to usurp the revolutionary agency of African American cultural production is, in many instances, enabled by the black bourgeoisie who aims to secure economic concessions from and inclusion into the ruling class rather than to abolish class rule. Their incessant attempts to "disconnect black culture and art from its material history and revolutionary essence" reveal their efforts as wholly "opportunistic" and "exploitative" (511). Although Spike Lee and his film "X" are the designated targets of Baraka's biting critiques, Baraka's discussion of Lee provides an interesting framework to analyze Oprah Winfrey and Tyler Perry, both of whom, in addition to their numerous cinematic projects, served as executive producers for "Precious." Whether as an actress, producer or executive producer, Winfrey has been centrally involved in the Hollywood cooptation and political debasement of prominent black protest novels (e.g. *The Color Purple*, *The Women of Brewster Place*, *Beloved*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Push*, etc.). Her connection to these projects allows them to boast a certain kind of racial/cultural authenticity, and as E. Patrick Johnson notes "[o]nce a cultural good has been declared authentic, the demand for it rises, and it acquires a market value" (5). After Winfrey authenticates these films and increases their market value, they become susceptible to Hollywood's "cultural usurpation" (4) which construct representations of blackness that are grounded in racist stereotypes and function to maintain the status quo. These stereotypes are then "reappropriated to affect a fetishistic 'escape' into the Other" to transcend the rigidity of whiteness while "feed{ing} the capitalist gains of commodified blackness" (5). This reinforces Baraka's claims that there is a faction of the Black bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie "whose *market* is imperialism, not other black people." They thereby serve imperialism and racial domination "as a sector of Black opinion" while reducing "Black struggle" to a commercial theme proven to drive lucrative profits (509). Perry's track record is not as extensive as Winfrey's concerning such cinematic adaptations of proletarian womanist fiction, but his involvement with "Precious" and his hegemonic alteration of Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* (Perry's film version is simply titled "For Colored Girls") may indicate the beginning of such a trend in Tyler's cultural production. Prior to these movies however, Perry's works have consistently reveled in a base (if not altogether spurious) "blackness" and draw from the most superficial traits of an "imagined" African American identity and experience. They are little more than minstrelsy and may be best described by what bell hooks calls "fictive ethnography," as in "this is about black life" (*Reel* 5). Perhaps what is most interesting about Perry is his commitment to using black working-class bodies to articulate ruling-class ideals without demonstrating how class has determined the material hardships and conditions that these working-class bodies have to struggle to overcome.

Before I address the specifics of this conversion however, it is pertinent to first detail the import of *Push*'s intertextuality with Hughes. *Push* invokes Hughes's radical creative energies through its narrative commitment to depict the insurrectionary agency located in proletarian literature —mainly poetry. *Push* subscribes to Audre Lorde's directive that "poetry is not a luxury." Lorde insists that poetry is a "vital necessity of our existence," a "revelatory distillation of experience." It "forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action" (37). Most importantly, poetry "lays the foundations for a future of change" as it "coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand" (38).

If ever a poet exemplified Lorde's directive, it was Langston Hughes. Throughout his career, Hughes used poetry for "political ends" and embodied in poetry "political energies" (Thurston 31). He compels his readers to "rethink the historical relationships between poetics and politics" (Dawahare, "Langston" 22) through the myriad ways he elucidates "the interdependence of poetic form and political expression" (Thurston 30). Hughes's corpus reflects an unwavering commitment to leverage poetry as an instrument that probes, critiques and disrupts the subjugation enforced by the multiple and intersecting oppressions of class rule. This certainly explains why Sapphire, a critically acclaimed poet in her own right, chose Hughes to be a guiding force and creative mentor for *Push*'s first-person protagonist Claireece "Precious" Jones.

For Precious, poetry is a lifeline. It is a tool that she negotiates to learn how to survive a life of horrific trauma and oppression. Through poetry, "she gives voice to her soul" and locates purpose within her existence. She thereby becomes "a living embodiment of Lorde's dictum" that poetry is not a luxury (Pemberton 1). Poetry is the revolutionary medium that enables

Precious to articulate and challenge the social injustices imposed on Harlem's black and brown subproletarian masses. It provides her with the resources to politicize a "vernacular that is insufficient to handle the depth of {her} raw intellect, emotion and experience" (3). Precious's investment in poetry's transformative potential is guided by Hughes's poetic legacy. And as Pemberton notes, Precious's belief in Hughes provides her with a "palpable sense of identity" (3)—an identity Precious performs daily to affirm the value and vibrancy of her life.

Prior to discovering poetry, Precious bemoaned, "Sometimes I wish I was not alive. But I don't know how to die. Ain' no plug to pull out. 'N no matter how bad I feel my heart don't stop beating and my eyes open in the morning" (Sapphire 32). Life is futile, and worse, unchangeable. It does not embody transformative possibilities; it only rehashes the pain and degradation of her vexing survival. Precious's outlook on life and its possibilities change however, once she becomes a poet. She now revels in the fullness of her aliveness. "I think how *alive* I am, every part of me that is cells, proteens, neutrons, hairs, pussy, eyeballs, nervus system, brain. I got poems, a son, friends. I want to live so bad" {emphasis: author's} (Sapphire 137). Precious's dedication to poetry reflects this new hunger for life. In her poem "everi morning" Precious explains, "Everi mornin/ i write/ a poem." This is a powerful proclamation considering what her mornings used to mean. The dreaded mornings that Precious once hated for her eyes to acknowledge now give way to mornings where she creates new poems. This fertile creativity symbolizes the daily opportunities to fight for a better life. Precious can envision new realities and formulate these imaginings into poems. She no longer regards her life as fixed and static. It can be changed just as a poem can be written. Her commitment to poetry thus embodies her commitment to the struggle for a life not marred by injustice and inequality.

But before Precious identifies as a poet, she mercilessly drags us through the dark contours of her youth where she had to negotiate survival as a poverty-blighted, physically-abused, sexually-assaulted black girl who never learned to read or write. Despite living under the constant threat of violence and the shame that "all the pages look alike" (53), Precious intuitively understands, even at the novel's onset, that "you can do anything when you talking or writing, it's not living when you can only do what you doing" (3). This introductory statement foreshadows the pivotal roles that literacy and poetry will play in Precious's life. The novel's plot dramatizes this theme through Precious's relationship with her alternative school teacher Blue Rain. Their bond grows beyond that of teacher and student as Ms. Rain helps Precious achieve a radical subjectivity that defies and transcends the pervasive raced and gendered stigmas of urban poverty.

Prior to meeting Ms. Rain however, this subjectivity was viciously suppressed. Precious was cowed by an oppressive dumbness and the abjection of "blackness," or what Lindon Barrett refers to as "the anatomization of violence" (1). As this yoke of forced silence and racialized violence renders Precious invisible, Precious becomes unrecognizable to herself. She states:

> I sometimes look in the pink people in suits eyes, the men from bizness, and they look way above me, put me out of their eyes. My fahver don't see me really. If he did he would know I was a like a white girl, a *real* person, inside. He would not climb on me from forever and stick his dick in me 'n get me inside on fire, bleed, I bleed then he slap me. Can't he see I am a girl for flowers and thin straw legs and a place in the picture. I been out the picture for so long I am used to it. But that don't mean it don't hurt. Sometimes I pass by store window and somebody

> fat dark skin, old looking, someone look like my muver look back at me {emphasis: author's} (Sapphire 31-32).

Tragically, these sentiments only deepen as Precious's distorted imaginings of herself give way to chronic feelings of invisibility and alienation. She frequently questions, "Why can't I see myself, *feel* where I end and begin" {emphasis: author's} (Sapphire 31). Sapphire suggests that the answer to this question lie in the power of language and literacy which culminate into the power of voice. In its absence, Precious recognizes the power of voice when she laments, "I wanna *say* I am somebody. I wanna *say* it on subway, TV, movie, LOUD" {emphasis: added} (31). But without a voice to make her existence, grievances and material needs known, Precious will continue to "watch {herself} disappear." She will fade from her own eyes as she has already vanished from the sight of "the men from bizness" (31)—that ruling class faction that maintains a blind eye to the suffering enveloping Precious and all of Harlem's poor, black and brown denizens.

Combatting silence and internalizations of inferiority is a major theme within the novel. Sapphire weaves this theme of resistance into *Push* via the novel's intertextuality with Hughes and other progressive literary figures like Alice Walker and Audre Lorde.[8] This intertextuality

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[8]The intertextuality with Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Audre Lorde's *Black Unicorn* reinforces *Push*'s thematic current of radical, black lesbian feminism—or what Walker herself may term "womanism" (for more on "womanism" see Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983). Although it is too much to discuss here critically, these texts provide a framework within which Precious can confront and overcome her own homophobia—the unfortunate (yet predictable) result of her subscription to the heterosexist rhetoric of Farrakhan's Black Nationalist discourse. The removal of these texts from "Precious" likewise necessitates the extirpation of Farrakhan, who occupies a particularly salient residence in *Push*. The joint intertextuality between Walker, Lorde and Hughes not only enables *Push*'s critique of the limitations of Black Nationalism, they contextualize Ms. Rain within a tradition of radical black queer politics. As previously stated, it is too much to unpack here, but I contend that the casting of Paula Patton as Ms. Rain was a deliberate move to further undermine the

helps Precious construct a "tenable version" of herself against "a world that has consigned {her} to a netherworld of gross stereotype and marginality" (Pemberton 3). But building Precious's self-esteem or even an oppositional identity is not the end goal. For the dominated and oppressed, moving from objectivity to subjectivity is just the first step in the revolutionary process. Paulo Friere asserts, "We cannot enter the struggle as objects in order to later become subjects" (qtd. in hooks, *Yearning* 15). This is why *Push*'s reliance on Hughes is critical. Hughes's internationalist poetry endeavors to ascribe the subject position of proletariat onto the alienated and dispossessed because it realizes that this is requisite for the struggle. And by dialectically preserving and transcending categories of race, Hughes's socialist verse also illustrates how the demeaning and pervasive stereotypes imposed on Precious (and by extension all poor African American women) function to support exploitative power relations.

In her seminal work *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins contends that "stereotypical images of Black womanhood take on a special meaning" within the "generalized ideology of domination." The goal of these stereotypes "is 'not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations.'" Thus these "controlling images" are engineered "to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal and inevitable parts of everyday life" (77-76).

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radical queer politics of *Push*. Patton, a fair-skinned actress and Hollywood sex symbol of mixed white and black ancestry, bears a stark physical contrast to the novel's description of Ms. Rain. In the novel Ms. Rain is depicted as dark-skinned with unkempt dreadlocks. Precious describes her as a "butch" (95), meaning a masculine-performing lesbian. This is a critical distinction! Ms. Rain's nonconforming gender appearance provides an alternate (and redeeming) lens through which black masculinity can be read against *Push*'s plotline. It also establishes yet another link to Hughes as it draws upon his subversive politics of a queer aesthetic. For a cogent read on Hughes's radical queer aesthetic, please see Anne Borden's essay "Heroic 'Hussies' and 'Brilliant Queers': Gender and Racial Resistance in the Works of Langston Hughes" (*African American Review* 28 (1994): 333-345)

These controlling images are established through a multiplex of socially constructed binaries (e.g. white/black, male/female, hard-working/lazy, moral/hedonistic, beautiful/ugly, worth/worthless, etc.) that objectify many African Americans for various types of exploitation. Collins contends that African American women in particular "occupy a position whereby the inferior half of a series of these binaries converge" (79) to mark and subordinate black women as "others" within "hierarchical bonds that mesh with political economies of race, gender and class oppression" (78). Hughes's socialist poetry undermines this panoply of socially constructed binaries by refusing to reify the predominant binary of race. By delegitimizing this spurious white/black dichotomy, Hughes lessens the potential of racist rhetoric to empower the other socially constructed binaries as "ideological justification for race, gender and class oppression (Collins 77). This is evidenced in his poems "Union" and "Tired."

"Union" (Hughes, *Collected Poems* 138) is very straightforward in its language. As the title of the poem suggests, it makes explicit demands for working class solidarity across racial lines. "Union" calls for "the whole oppressed/ Poor world,/ White and black" to "put their hands with mine/ To shake the pillars of those temples/ Wherein the false gods dwell/ And worn-out altars stand/ Too well defended,/ And the rule of greed's upheld" (138).This poem draws no artificial distinctions between blacks and whites for there is no hierarchical position to be gained amid their mutual class standing. Within the shared space of oppression, both groups must stand together to oppose the tyrannical "rule of greed." The racist, stereotypical and divisive controlling images that rob Precious of her being and voice do not find sanctuary within the proletarian ranks of class struggle. "Union" exposes the façades of whiteness and blackness for what they really are: false constructs that function ideologically to fracture working class solidarity and to justify the raced and gendered affects of class rule. Free of these facades,

Precious can thereby purge herself of all internalized white supremacy and feelings of inferiority. In so doing, she steps closer to attaining a revolutionary, internationalist proletarian class consciousness. This underscores Freire's point of entering into the struggle from the subject position. Moreover, by centering class as the sole legitimate binary, "Union" accurately posits that it is Precious's poverty and not her blackness that needs to be remedied. This truth will force Precious to realize that class struggle—not the impossible task of her "fahver," "muver," or "the pink people in suits" seeing her as a "white girl"—is the only means to end the domination by the ruling "men from bizness."

Hughes takes a different approach with "Tired" (*Collected Poems* 135). It substitutes the straightforward language of "Union" with abstract imagery and silence. Beginning with the latter, one can argue that what is not said resonates with as much gravity as the words on the page. "Tired" does not mention white or black, nor does it reference any particular nation through which race or nationality could be implied. It thereby assumes a truly internationalist form by engendering a radical space of "silence" where race and nation are omitted from the conversation. With this absence, the only thing left to focus on is the world itself. The poem thus begins with the declarative statement and question, "I am so tired of waiting,/ Aren't you,/ For the world to become good/ And beautiful and kind?" (135). The virtues of "good," "beautiful" and "kind" are attributes that only the world can possess. The poem therefore does not reinforce racist, sexist or nationalist ideologies that promote these qualities as characteristics inherent to a "superior" group. Goodness, beauty and kindness instead become the goals of an internationalist working-class struggle where the objective is to end the ruling-class domination precluding the word's ability to be a "good," "beautiful" and "kind" home for all.

The second half of “Tired” reads, “Let us take a knife/ And cut the world in two—/ And see what worms are eating/ At the rind” (135). Like the poem’s beginning, the remainder also maintains the raceless rhetoric of the poem while promoting inclusion and solidarity through the directive “Let *us*” {emphasis added}. The “knife” symbolizes the working class through its functional utility, and as the working-class, the knife alone possesses the power to expose and violently remove the “worms” “eating at the rind.” Of course the worms represent the parasitic capitalist class who greedily feasts on proletarian labor, but what exactly is the “rind”?

In the poem’s nature imagery, the rind represents the *outer* covering or protective layer of a fruit. As the world/fruit is cut open, the worms are *already* eating at the rind which means that the edible and immediate part of the fruit (in this case the domestic labor and resources of the metropole) has long been consumed. The rind, then, represents what is distant and not local; it is a metaphor for Western imperialism or what Lenin dubbed “the highest stage of development of capitalism” (qtd. in Dawahare, *Nationalism* 75). The rind symbolizes capitalism’s predatory expansion and pervasive tyranny through the colonization of foreign lands. The worms will not cease their pillaging conquests hence the speaker of the poem is “*so* tired” {emphasis: added}. In an age of increased globalization, “Tired” provides a needed addendum to Marx’s assertions in the *Communist Manifesto* where he states, “The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world-market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country” (qtd. in Harvey 19). The gluttonous monopoly capitalists, or Hughes’s “worms,” are thereby motivated by “new wants,” which require “the products of distant lands and climes” to feed their insatiable greed (Marx qtd. Harvey 19). This is why only the world’s dominated and dispossessed, including the poor black and brown urbanites of Harlem, are capable of making the world “good/ And beautiful/ and kind” (Hughes, *Collected Poems* 135). Precious reaches the

same conclusion by the end of the novel when she thinks about the gross disparities between rich and poor while observing the homeless sharing food. Precious asserts, "God ain' white, he ain' no Jew or Muslim, maybe he ain' black, maybe he ain' even a "he." Even now I go downtown and seen the rich shit they got, I see what we got too. I see those men in vacant lot share one hot dog and they homeless, that's good as Jesus with his fish" (Sapphire 138-139).

The homeless and dispossessed are a salient trope throughout Hughes's corpus, but they acquire a profound political agency via his revolutionary depression-era poetry. Prior to this period, however, the dispossessed were often depicted as "politically incapacitated by social oppression and lacking the political consciousness necessary for social transformation" (Dawahare, *Nationalism* 57). They sought resistance to (and freedom from) oppression exclusively in "African American cultural forms such as black music or religion" (Dawahare, *Nationalism* 57-58). This would change for Hughes with the cataclysmic economic uncertainty of the 1930s. Dawahare argues that witnessing the millions of unemployed, despotized white workers made it difficult for Hughes "to continue to believe that the 'white man' was master of his own fate let alone that of black Americans" (*Nationalism* 94). Hughes thus abandoned his political investments in African American culture in favor of the concrete strategies of resistance held in the multi-racial, anti-capitalist politics of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA). It is this Langston Hughes that Sapphire invokes in *Push*. And given Hughes's sensitivity to those dispossessed by capital, it is telling that the novel summons his presence at the critical juncture where Precious and her newborn Abdul are forced into homelessness.

After giving birth to Abdul, all Precious wants to do is "jus' take Abdul home 'n rest" so she can "hurry up 'n go back to school" (Sapphire 73). This simple desire however, is complicated by the fact that Precious has no home to return to. Precious candidly states, "[W]hen

I git home from the hospital Mama try to kill me" (Sapphire 73). Mama refuses to acknowledge that her husband (i.e. Precious's father) repeatedly raped Precious. In fact, she is enraged that Precious tells the hospital staff that Abdul (as well as Precious's first child Mongo) is the product of rape and incest for this revelation will cause the state to repeal Mama's welfare benefits. Faced with the threat of being evicted and permanently homeless, Mama's fury quickly escalates to violence. Precious states:

> …she git up off that couch 'n charge toward me like fifty niggers, I ran. I just grab Abdul, my bags, 'n hit the door. I got new baby boy in my arms 'n she calling me bitch hoe slut say she gonna kill me 'cause I ruin her life. Gonna kill me wif her 'BARE HANDS!' It's like a black wall gonna crash down on me, nuthin' to do but run. (74)

Precious flees the only home she has known and before she realizes what she is doing or where she is going, she states "my feets just take me back to Harlem Hospital" (74). After she explains all that she has been through and begs the hospital staff to let her stay the night, they coldly tell her "lots of people get out hospital wif no place to go, calm down, you not so special" (77). After being denied refuge and forced back into the winter cold without even a coat, Precious and her seven-day old son are forced to spend the night in a homeless shelter. This bad situation turns worse as she is immediately preyed upon by the other homeless women who, steal her blanket, her bag of clothes, the shoes off her feet and even take Abdul's diapers. Desperate for help and with nowhere to go, Precious turns to Ms. Rain.

This marks a pivotal point in the novel's intertextuality with Hughes for this is the first time that Hughes is explicitly referenced. After making countless calls to numerous individuals

and various agencies, Ms. Rain manages to procure the historic house of Langston Hughes for Precious and Abdul to spend the night in. This temporary lodging keeps Precious from spending another night in a homeless shelter while she waits for her permanent arrangements at Harlem's Advancement House to become ready. As Precious recounts:

> I can tell by Ms Rain's face I'm not gonna be homeless no more… No class, all of Each One Teach One is on the phone! They calling everybody from Mama to the mayor's office to TV stations! Before this day is up, Ms Rain say, you gonna be living somewhere, as god is my witness… She hang up phone, say, They can take her tomorrow. So they just have to find me a place for tonight. Everyone says I can stay over their house. But you know where I stay? Ms Rain got friend who is caretaker or something at Langston Hughes' house which is not but around the corner, it's city landmark. I SPEND ONE NIGHT IN LANGSTON HUGHES' HOUSE HE USED TO LIVE IN. Me and Abdul in the Dream Keeper's house! {emphasis: author's} (79-80).

While the placement of Precious and her son in Hughes's home prompts Precious to think of Hughes as the "Dream Keeper," it is Ms. Rain's commitment to securing them housing that invokes Hughes's radical politics. Ms. Rain's outrage over the homelessness of a teenage girl and her week-old child mirrors Hughes's increasing frustration with America's glaring inequality during the depression. In his autobiography *The Big Sea*, he writes, "People were sleeping in subways or on newspapers in office doors because they had no homes. And in every block a beggar appeared. I got so I didn't like to go to dinner on luxurious Park Avenue—and come out and see people hungry on the streets, huddled in subway entrances all night and filling Manhattan Transfer like a flop house" (319-320). Hughes could no longer observe the poor while

hobnobbing with the wealthy elite, especially since he knew that he “could very easily and quickly be there, too, hungry and homeless on a cold floor anytime Park Avenue got tired of supporting {him}” (320). Such stark economic disparities inform his poem “Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria.”

“Advertisement” juxtaposes the luxurious amenities of the Waldorf-Astoria with New York City’s rampant poverty. The poem urges the “HUNGRY ONES” to “Look! See what *Vanity Fair* says about the/ new Waldorf-Astoria” (Hughes, *Collected Poems* 143). After stating that the hotel has “All the luxuries of private home,” the poem cynically asks, “Now, won’t that be charming when the last flop-house/ has turned you down this winter?” (144). “Advertisement” maintains critical focus on exploitative power relations by sardonically insisting that the dispossessed join their oppressors at the Waldorf-Astoria. In one such stanza, the poem implores the “jobless” to “Dine with some of the men and women who got rich off of/ your labor, who clip coupons with clean white fingers/ because your hands dug coal, drilled stone, sewed garments, poured steel to let other people draw dividends/ and live easy./ (Or haven’t you had enough yet of the soup-lines and the bitter bread of charity?)” (144).

Push explores similar themes of inequality and labor exploitation, particularly as it relates to welfare and public assistance. Published in 1996, *Push* has the unique vantage point of reflecting upon three consecutive presidencies (i.e. Reagan, Bush Sr. and Clinton) of regressive welfare repeals. Moreover, it exposes the “welfare state” and its various reforms exactly for what they are—“strategies for regulating the poor” (Rosenthal 68). While welfare rolls can sometimes expand to “pacify social unrest,” they are must often cut back to enforce what Steven Rosenthal refers to as the “capitalist super-exploitation of low wage workers.” Rosenthal further explains that “[d]uring the last quarter of the twentieth century, U.S. capitalism has had a compelling need

to enforce low wage labor…The costs of union wages, health benefits, social security, and welfare programs all stood in the way of a leaner, meaner, more globally competitive U.S. capitalism" (68). Therefore, "broad sectors of the U.S. business community sought to down size the welfare state" to "reduce labor costs and to restore global competiveness" (68-69). Consequentially, at the same time that many working people were being dispossessed of their pensions, homes, healthcare and other welfare rights "the rate of remuneration of Wall Street executives and CEOs more generally was soaring into the stratosphere" (Harvey 309). This phenomenon of "accumulation by dispossession" is, as David Harvey explains, the mode of capitalist exploitation "that has filled the coffers of the upper classes to the point of overflowing" (312).

Push confronts this ruling-class malfeasance at every point and turn. Even before Precious meets Ms. Rain, she *knows* that the state's primary goal is to make sure that she is not "sucking the system's blood" and more importantly, that she is "finded a job for" (31). It is therefore no surprise that Precious's state-sponsored counselor Ms. Weiss favors forfeiting Precious's schooling to expedite Precious's entry into the drudgery of wage slavery. Ms. Weiss writes:

> The client talks about her desire to get her G.E.D. and go to college. The time and resources it would require for this young woman to get a G.E.D. or into college would be considerable… Precious is capable of going to work *now*. In January of 1990 her son will be two years old. In keeping with the new initiative on welfare reform I feel Precious would *benefit* from any of the various workfare programs in existence. Despite her obvious intellectual limitations she is quite capable of working as a home attendant {emphasis: added} (119).

Ms. Weiss, who Precious refers to as just another “flunky for the ’fare” (122), is not only ready to send Precious to work she believes that any of the low-paying workfare jobs will “benefit” Precious. From this standpoint, Ms. Weiss’s thoughts about Precious’s ability and *need* to work align with the rhetoric of both conservatives and liberals who argue that “work” itself is “the source of the values and discipline that workers require to lead stable productive lives” (Rosenthal 79). Such valuations about “work” justified New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s legislation to “force tens of thousands of welfare recipients to perform public service jobs” to “teach them a work ethic.” It likewise underscores William Julius Wilson’s arguments that the “government should employ people who cannot otherwise find jobs at below the minimum wage” because “the rehabilitative influence of work is crucial to changing the ghetto-related behavior of inner city residents” (Rosenthal 81). Competing ideologies notwithstanding, “super-exploitation of low wage workers” is prescribed as “the cure” for the cultural maladies of the African American ghetto within the democratic capitalist state (Rosenthal 68).

Precious and her classmates categorically contest these assumptions. Beyond the insult of being reduced to “wiping ol white people’s ass” (Sapphire 121), Precious realizes that there is no benefit to be gained from working (read: being exploited) as a home attendant. She learns from her classmate Rhonda, who previously worked as a home attendant, that it is an around-the-clock, live-in job. Said another way, Precious will only be getting paid for eight hours of work despite being “on call” 24 hours a day. She wonders “is the other 16 hours slavery?” Precious further realizes that her hourly wage will only be “$3.35,” but as she astutely observes, “you is not really getting that much cause you is working more than eight hours a day.” This hardly seems worth it when she questions “Why I gotta change white woman’s diaper and then take money from that and go pay baby sitter to change my baby’s diaper? And what about school?

How would I keep up with my reading and writing if I can't keep going to school?" (121). Perhaps her classmate Jermaine provides the best answer when she tells the class, "If all they wanna do is place us in slave labor shits and we want to keep going to school, then that means they have a different agenda from us. I wanna work, but not for no motherfucking welfare check…" (122).

These contradictions soon evolve into verse for Precious. And as does Hughes's "Advertisement," Precious throws class inequality into relief as she writes:

> (I am homer on a voyage/ but from our red bricks in piles/ of usta be buildings/ and windows of black/ broke glass eyes./ we come to buildings bad/ but not *so* bad/ street cleaner/ then we come to a place/ of/ everything is fine/ big glass windows/ stores/ white people/ fur/ blue jeans/ it's a different city/ I'm in a different city" {emphasis: author's} (Sapphire 127).

Observing this "different city" from her seat on the city bus compels Precious to wonder "Who I be I grow up/ here?/ where a poodle dog/ is not on tv/ but walking down the street/ on skinny white/ bitch lease." (127-128). These hypothetical inquiries quickly give way to more urgent considerations of station and agency. Precious asks, "This whose ass/ they want/ me to wipe?/ Push wheelchair for—". She defiantly retorts, "I kill 'em first." (128).

This marks a critical shift in the poem. The juxtapositions of wealth and indigence and of domination and subservience are replaced with militant violence. There is a similar transition in "Advertisement" where the last section of the poem, "CHRISTMAS CARD" (Hughes, *Collected Poems* 146), calls for a violent clash between the oppressed and the ruling elite. Within this section, Hughes appropriates the narrative of Christ's birth to symbolize two things: 1.) the

wanton cruelty of poverty and 2.) the threat of the dispossessed to the capitalist class. According to the biblical narrative, Jesus's "immaculate conception" was flanked by tyranny and social injustice. Mary gave birth to Jesus in a manger because she could not afford a room at the inn and because Jesus was prophesied to lead Israel out of bondage, Mary and Joseph had to go into hiding to avoid King Herod's massacre of all Jewish children two years old and younger.

In Hughes's reconstruction of this narrative, Jesus is recast as the "Christ child of the Revolution" and the poem's hungry, evicted, unemployed and homeless masses are analogous to Mary. The masses have been shunned by the Waldorf-Astoria and "put out in the street" (144), like Mary, forced to birth Jesus in a lowly manger or, Precious and Abdul, forced into a homeless shelter. But in this adaptation, the oppressed do not quietly settle for a manger. They do not leave the inn and find a stable. They gather instead as an insurrectionary mass right in front of the Waldorf-Astoria and demand that the ruling class's wealth be redistributed to the exploited hands that created it. The rebellious mass urges their "red baby" of "Revolution" to "kick hard" and emerge from the "bitter womb of the mob," for they are determined to seize "a nice clean bed for the Immaculate Conception." And once "the Revolution" is born and wrapped "in the *red* flag," the subjugated masses will struggle to transform the Waldorf-Astoria into "the best manger we've got" {emphasis: added} (146). It goes without saying that the "red flag" signifies the socialist character of the insurgent mob's revolution; and this socialist impetus empowers the revolution to wrest the Waldorf-Astoria from the capitalist class and reestablish it as a "manger"—the preeminent symbol of refuge for the poor and dispossessed.

The import of Hughes's resistance to accumulation by dispossession (as cogently demonstrated in "Advertisement") resonates with just as much gravity now, if not more so, due to global capitalism's decided turn toward this particular practice. This turn results from the

difficulty of the ruling class to generate surplus-value from the exploitation of labor (Harvey 312). Since the 1970s, accumulation by dispossession "has been revived as an increasingly significant element in the way global capitalism is working to consolidate class power." The production of homelessness—through forces like gentrification, eminent domain and foreclosure (all of which are concentrated in poor neighborhoods and disproportionately impact women and African Americans)—the repeal of welfare rights, the commodification of education and denied access to healthcare are all the prominent machinery of accumulation by dispossession (312). *Push* correctly identifies and ardently combats the structural nature of these poverty-producing mechanisms through its invocation of Hughes. Hollywood thus extirpates Hughes in its appropriation of *Push* into "Precious" to assert "culture of poverty" rationalizations that cloak the structural workings of class rule, specifically accumulation by dispossession.

CHAPTER 3

“Left” Out: Excising Hughes from “Precious”

The principal way that the film erases Hughes is to suppress Precious’s identity as a poet. As previously detailed, the maturation of Precious as a poet is the central chord of the novel’s plotline. Yet the movie features only a passing mention of Precious writing poetry, a fleeting reference that appears at the very end of the film when Mama tells Ms. Weiss, “They say my baby be writing poems.” Within the context of the movie, which denies any mention of Precious being a poet prior to this point, this statement gets processed as just another disconnected thread in Mama’s incoherent conversation with Ms. Weiss. In effect, “Precious” reduces the political utility that *Push* ascribes to poetry to nothing more than a random and meaningless outburst.

But the movie’s most effective suppression of poetry and Hughes occurs in the scene where Precious and Abdul spend the night with Ms. Rain. This scene also marks one of the movie’s most interesting adaptations. In the novel, Precious and Abdul spend the night in the historic home of Langston Hughes, not with Ms. Rain. This alteration not only deletes Hughes and his symbolic significance for Harlem’s poor and dispossessed but also sets up the conversation where Precious classifies her daily poetry-writing exercises as “just stuff.”

During this scene, Ms. Rain tells her girlfriend that she needs to adopt the daily regimen of writing everyday “like Precious” so she can finish her book. When the girlfriend turns to Precious and asks her what it is that she writes every day, Precious answers, “Just stuff.” Not poetry, “just stuff!” The movie deliberately removes poetry which thereby removes Hughes. The novel’s political investments in Precious reading and writing proletarian poetry is replaced with the movie’s individual and depoliticized practice of logging in a journal. The private and individualist aesthetic of keeping a journal means that Precious no longer requires a

revolutionary mentor like Langston Hughes. By not having to account for Hughes's presence, the movie can both swap Ms. Rain's residence for Hughes's home and delete the events that necessitated the need for Precious to spend the night in either location. The movie thus erases how the hospital denied Precious and Abdul shelter and forced them onto the streets. The film likewise omits the bedlam and violence exacted upon Precious and her week-old child in the homeless shelter. In doing so, the film once again conceals the structural workings that exacerbate the conditions of poverty.

Push refuses to obscure these systemic features. It highlights them in all of their inherent cruelty and ugliness, which makes *Push* just as somber as its literary forebears *Native Son* and *The Street*. But unlike these latter novels that consume their protagonists in a seemingly pre-determined fate, *Push* uses poetry to open up a subversive space within the novel's linear prose that "disrupts the text" (Griffin 25) to locate beauty, community, resistance and *possibilities* as narrative potentialities against the novel's seemingly fixed reality. But these patterned "disruptions" have been co-opted in the movie. Screenwriter Geoffrey Fletcher and director Lee Daniels replace Precious's poetry with a series of invented dream montages that do not exist in the novel. In fact, they work antithetically to *Push*. These flashing dream vignettes enable Precious to immerse herself within the trappings of capital. She is a dancing, singing idolized celebrity who is loved by paparazzi and doted on by her light-skinned lover. She in effect becomes one of Hughes's affluent tenants in "Advertisement" or one of the downtown poodle-walking rich people that she threatens to kill in her own poems exploring class inequality. The dream montages depict Precious identifying with (and longing to be a member of) the celebrated elite, whereas in the novel, her poems reaffirm her proletarian station and bourgeoning class consciousness. Unlike the novel's poetry that opens up revolutionary discoveries and new sites

of imagined possibility as it interrupts and disjoints the prose, the dream sequences do not "disrupt" the film. Instead they organize the film around a reactionary "American Dream" trope. Moreover, the dream motif suggests that an over-investment in popular culture is a viable (if not the *preferred*) way for the subjugated to address the oppressive terms of their exploitation. This type of cultural politics, according to Adolph Reed, is:

> nothing more than an insistence that authentic meaningful political engagement for black Americans is expressed not in relation to the institutions of public authority—the state—or the workplace—but in the clandestine significance assigned to apparently apolitical rituals. Black people, according to this logic, don't mobilize through overt collective action. They do it surreptitiously when they look like they're just dancing… This is don't-worry, be-happy politics. (qtd. in Iton 11)[9]

The movie's dreamscapes can only be categorized as nothing but "don't-worry, be-happy politics." They provide momentary levity at the expense of isolating Precious from her

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[9]Iton diverges from Reed concerning the efficacy of black popular culture as a site for political struggle. While he concedes that "an emphasis on the cultural realm can encourage facile commodification, accommodation and incorporation into status quo arrangements" (11), he challenges Reed's notion that cultural studies applies a false concept of resistance to contemporary black popular culture (130). Iton argues that African American popular culture depicts the "extent to which blacks are engaged in a full-blown class war" while such divisions are mystified by the pronouncements of black elected officials invested in nationalist discourses of black solidarity (130). This cogent observation certainly demonstrates Iton's sensitivity to black class stratification (as he is very attentive to how race, class and gender intersect in any given representation), but his post-structuralist ethic distances him from more functional Marxian constructions of class. For Iton, class is more of an ideological conception that resembles how Hughes formulates class in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." As previously discussed vis-à-vis "Mountain," there are limitations to theorizing class in this way. If contemporary black popular culture (or the scholarship analyzing its political merits) does not realize class as the structural determinant causing inequality and hierarchical power relations, then it is in fact "nothing more than an insistence that authentic meaningful political engagement" be relegated to a territory of "apolitical" signs and practices.

immediate environment and the malicious social conditions shaping Harlem. The dreamscapes symbolize the capitalist ethos of “hyper-individualism” in its most pronounced state. They offer Precious a psychic retreat (however brief) where she can pursue “personal gratification free from the needs of others, almost apart from any larger social context” (Parenti 119). This is a far cry from one of Precious’s untitled poems in which she explains how the Jamaica that Bob Marley sang about helps her to understand the “CONCRETE JUNGLE” and “prison days *we* live in” {emphasis: added}. It is a mistake to reduce the film’s dream montages to the creative license of Fletcher’s screenplay adaptations or Daniels’s directorial vision. They should rather be understood as actions deliberately calculated to suppress the internationalist politics of Hughes’s socialist poetry.

This internationalist impulse culminates in Precious’s final poem of the novel where she links the fate of her children with the “girls in/ for in countries” whose “babies dead.” *Push* actually concludes with this poem. The novel thus surrenders its linear narrative to a permanent disruption in which Precious urges everyone from passengers on the 102 bus to the “girls in for in countries” to “go into the poem/ the HEART of it.” Like Hughes, Precious understands that the “heart” of the poem is its revolutionary center. This essentially transforms the novel’s ending into a global call to action for all working-class peoples. The dream vignettes, by sheer virtue of their individualist construction, cannot facilitate such a militant outcome. The dreamscapes’ hyper-individualism—an essential trademark of the free market society in which it flourishes (Parenti 119)—thereby annuls the radical solidarity promoted in Precious’s poetry.

In addition to undermining Precious’s budding internationalist, working-class politics, the film’s omission of poetry also domesticates Ms. Rain’s radical pedagogy. Precious’s connection to poetry, and thus Hughes, directly results from Ms. Rain’s focus on literacy and the

revolutionary utility of black protest writing. Beyond Hughes, Ms. Rain introduces the class to Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, J. California Cooper and Ann Petry. There is no link to any of these authors within the film as "Precious" categorically effaces *Push*'s intertextuality with African American proletarian literature. Ms. Rain is thereby refashioned into a likeable and compassionate literacy teacher instead of a revolutionary cultural worker.[10] Ms. Rain understands that education represents "both a struggle for meaning and a struggle over power relations" (Giroux xiii). She strategically identifies authors and texts that will empower her students with the critical consciousness to resist becoming complicit in their own exploitation. Although the state intends for Each One Teach One to prepare its students to accept their roles as low wage labor, Ms. Rain determines that her classroom will not be a debased "reflex of the labor market" (Giroux xi).

The movie attenuates Ms. Rain's revolutionary work in several ways. The most critical perhaps is how it transfigures Precious's relationship with Ms. Weiss. It is through their antagonistic encounters that the reader learns just how insurrectionary Ms. Rain is. The film undoes this animosity, thus obscuring how Ms. Rain challenges the state's commodification of education through her focus on literacy and revolutionary black writers like Hughes.

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[10]As a cultural worker, Ms. Rain can be viewed as an heir to Hughes's cultural activism. Unbeknownst to many, Hughes himself was a teacher. He designed, directed and instructed writing workshops for inner city youth (mainly eight graders) at the Chicago Laboratory School (Scott 192). Similar to Ms. Rain's, Hughes's curriculum was designed exclusively to be a writing intensive course. Scott asserts that in this capacity, Hughes not only assisted "in the intellectual and moral development of youth" (193), but he operated within the Gramscian paradigm of "dynamic conformism," which resists making students "the object" of institutional planning and "reactionary ideologies" (11). This approach instead tasks education with instructing students on how to abolish "reactionary bourgeois systems of social control, those based on forms of national, racial, gender and class oppression" (11-12). Scott further expounds upon Hughes's radical work as a teacher (along with his youth-inspired literature) in chapter four "The Collage Aesthetic: The Writer as Teacher."

In the novel, Precious's dislike for and suspicions of Ms. Weiss deepen over the course of their relationship. These antagonisms reach their apex after Precious steals the client file that Ms. Weiss maintains to document their interactions. As Dubey points out, the stealing and *reading* of this file—an insurrectionary act wholly empowered by Ms. Rain's instruction—enables Precious to "grasp the injustice of welfare policies" (86). This critical revelation confirms Precious's suspicions of Ms. Weiss. She is convinced that Ms. Weiss, and every other social worker for that matter, "ain' no mutherfucking therapists on our side they just flunkies for the 'fare" (Sapphire 122). The file explicitly reveals that Ms. Weiss plans to displace Precious and Abdul from Advancement House, kick her out of school and transition her into workfare. All of this is excluded in the movie however, via their contrived friendship. In the cinematic makeover, Precious still takes Ms. Weiss's file, but their invented amicability necessitates that the information Precious finds within the file is suppressed—especially Ms. Weiss's disapproval of Ms. Rain's subversive curriculum. In the novel, the notes from Ms. Weiss's file reads:

> Although she is in school now, it is not a job readiness program. Almost all instruction seems to revolve around language acquisition… The teacher, Ms. Rain, places great emphasis on writing and reading books. Little work is being done with computers or the variety of multiple choice pre-G.E.D. and G.E.D. workbooks available at low cost to JPTA {sic} programs (Sapphire 119).

Ms. Weiss's comments reveal that Ms. Rain's focus on black proletarian literature

Opposes the objective of the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) to provide the poor and uneducated with just enough training to enter (and be trapped within) the ranks of low-wage labor. Instead of teaching her students how to submit to the systematic exploitation of the welfare

state, Ms. Rain encourages Precious to be “intellectually alive and curious.” This type of intellectual liveliness coupled with an education in literacy “offers Precious a means of moving out of dead-end jobs and of lifting herself and her children out of poverty” (Dubey 86). This is certainly more than Ms. Weiss can offer as social workers are “as effective in combating mass poverty as a spear is in knocking out armored tanks” (Tabb 97). Public assistance cannot cure or reduce poverty; it only helps the poor adjust to their oppression and think more positively about their inhumane conditions (Tabb 96).

Ms. Rain teaches Precious the importance of asking the question, “What has happen{ed} to me?” (Sapphire 124). Ms. Rain pushes Precious to understand the systemic workings that created the conditions of her environment. Contrarily, Precious explains that Ms. Weiss “look at me like I am ugly freak did something to make my own life like it is” (124). Although Ms. Weiss is not a teacher, her response to Precious’s suffering is emblematic of how institutions of education work in capitalist America. They promote a “governing set of ideas” that justify the “oppression” of the poor and working-class masses as “natural, normal, and even their own fault” (Ball 60). Ms. Rain upsets this hegemony by showing her students how the “acquisition of literacy” and black proletarian writing equip them with “the critical distance requisite to understanding their positions in society” (Dubey 85). And it is through Hughes’s poetry in particular that Precious begins to recognize, and thus resist, the structural oppression that has been incessantly imposed on her. This explains her resistance to workfare. Precious understands that it will subjugate her to wage slavery. She likewise comprehends that Ms. Weiss is an agent of the state and serves the interests of the capitalist class. Precious’s hostility towards Ms. Weiss thus represents her resistance to super-exploitation. As previously stated, *none* of this appears in the movie. By romanticizing the relationship between Precious and Ms. Weiss, the movie veils

how the welfare-state debases education into another hegemonic process that shuffles the poor into either low-wage, dead-end jobs or the perpetual idleness of chronic unemployment.

Another interesting screenplay adaptation that undermines the pedagogical value that Ms. Rain invests in proletarian literature is the class's field trip to a downtown museum. Instead of highlighting the literature of Hughes, et al., the movie invents a scene where Ms. Rain exposes her students to the "highbrow" culture of the museum. This blatant attempt to abate the revolutionary significance of Ms. Rain notwithstanding, perhaps the most significant point about the movie's field trip downtown is that it replaces the book's trip downtown.

Unlike the movie, in which downtown Manhattan is nothing more than the coincidental location of the museum, *Push* maps this space as the counterpoint to Harlem. Read together, they paint the quintessential picture of uneven development. This is not particular to New York City however. Urban development in Manhattan is consistent with national patterns of uneven development whereby the economic resurgence of one part of a city is contrasted by a sharp rise in homelessness and a reduction of low-cost housing in another. By juxtaposing Harlem and the subproletarians of uptown with Manhattan's downtown bourgeoisie, *Push* illustrates how "urban development has produced cities fractured along class and racial lines, exacerbating the spatial segregation and social isolation of the urban poor" (Dubey 59).

The causes for such spatial apartheid cannot be comprehended "in 'strictly American' terms" however (Dubey 61). Whether discussing New York City, Detroit or Los Angeles, these "geographies of violence" must be understood relative to American imperialism (Daulatzai and Dyson 42-43). Such an internationalist purview undergirds Hughes's communist poetry. In his poem "Always the Same" (Collected Poems 165), Hughes situates Harlem within a global

cartography of exploitation and tyranny. The "streets of Harlem" are intrinsically linked to "the docks of Sierra Leone," "the cotton fields of Alabama," "the diamond mines of Kimberley," "the coffee hills of Haiti and "the banana lands of Central America." By highlighting this global connectivity, Hughes demonstrates how imperialist motivations to generate wealth abroad lead to poverty at "home." Moreover, through the graphic imagery of his "exploited" and "robbed" "Blood running into/ Dollars/ Pounds/ Francs/ Pesetas/ Lire," Hughes illustrates the oppressive relations under which "the wealth of the exploiters" is increased (165). This certainly reinforces Marx's notion that capital is not a thing but a social relation that is "always dynamically exploitative and often violent" (Foley, "Marxism" 24). Marx furthermore contends that, "Accumulations of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation at the opposite pole" (709). The contemporary moment throws this contradiction into sharper relief as globalization increasingly informs public policy and uneven urban development within domestic borders.

Daulatzai explains that American cities, in particular, which once "were the engines of prosperity and progress" (46), were soon to suffer the ill effects of globalization "as the vulture capitalists feasted on the national carcasses of the Third World seeking natural resources, cheaper wages, and nonunion labor" (43). As capital fled the cities and poverty and joblessness escalated during the last quarter of the twentieth century, the raced and classed communities of urban America were scapegoated to "displace the fears caused by global capital" (46). America's worsening economic conditions were progressively seen as stemming from the moral decay of the city and the degenerate behaviors of its colored inhabitants rather than being inherent to the larger contradictions in capitalism. Poor and working-class black women bore the brunt of such ruling-class propaganda as corporate media elevated racist and sexist discourses over the

inherent nature and instabilities of capitalism as the central dilemma in American social and political life" (Watkins 561).

The decision to target African American women was one of happenstance. Black women became the face of inner city poverty as the growth of service economies displaced scores of black women from low-wage service jobs. Ferguson notes:

> Contradictorily, while many black women were concentrated in low-wage service jobs, still others in the 1970s and 1980s were pushed out of the job market altogether, as capital sought even cheaper third-world female labor outside the United States…The devaluation of African American labor is thus directly tied to the proletarianzation of third-world labor. (135)

Ferguson goes on to explain that U.S. capital was able to reject African American labor generally, and black women's labor specifically, "as foreign investment from firms within highly industrialized countries developed export manufacturing in less economically advanced regions" where "women often constituted the labor in manufacturing jobs" (135). As more and more African American women found themselves unemployed and seeking public assistance, political rhetoric succeeded in "feminizing" the ghetto and rationalizing poverty as the result of "ghetto" culture.

A complex assemblage of crisis-tinted discourses was subsequently mobilized around the postindustrial ghetto in mainstream media (Watkins 560). The ghetto became "an intensely charged symbol" that framed "discourses about crime and personal safety, welfare, familial organization and the disintegration of American society (560). Thus the public understanding of poverty was overwhelmingly influenced by discourses of family, race and culture rather than

inequality, power and exploitation (Dubey 64). Daulatzai cogently argues that "as racial anxieties and economic insecurities continued to form the twin towers of American political logic" the city itself was "demonized" (and I would add "feminized") as the "racialized other" to justify "a full frontal assault on the black and brown communities that lived there" (47).[11]

From failed schools to low-income public housing to rampant homelessness to a rising AIDS and crack pandemic, *Push* graphically depicts how public policy waged this "full frontal assault" against Harlem while popular media convincingly led Precious and Momma to internalize these horrific conditions as their fault.[12] Poor black women and their children were conflated with social and economic degeneracy through the "production and popular

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[11]Discourses about America's underclass were quickly tailored to include Latin immigrants who were constructed as economic and social burdens to white working-class and middle-class taxpayers. As in the discourses of the "black matriarch" and "ghetto youth," the contradictions of capital were displaced onto the immigrant home. Ferguson (*Aberrations in Black* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) contends that under this discursive environment, immigrant women of color, specifically Latina women, were demonized along the lines of reproduction. Quoting Lisa Cacho he asserts, "{Latina} mothers are cast as the harbingers and reproducers of social ills and pathology—providing children with empty folded tortillas that lead to lifetimes of crime" (136). "Pathologizing" Latina immigrants as "wild producers" and "women who spawn communities with no regard for the distinctions between liberty and equality" was and still is a way to justify cuts to public spending and to obscure the ways in which the American ruling class benefits from immigrant labor. Ferguson aptly contends that the "theory of the black matriarchy" helped to "generate discourses about other nonheteronormative racial formations, legitimating the exploitation of nonwhite labor and devastating the lives of poor and working-class communities of color" (136). Although this is not the focus of this paper, *Push* points to all of these things through the "Life Story" of Rita Romero. Geoffrey Fletcher and Lee Daniels, however, completely gut this storyline and political commentary from their bourgeois, hegemonic adaptation of the novel.

[12]Although it is not addressed in *Push*, it is imperative to note that a critical element in this "full frontal assault" is the rapid emergence of the prison industrial complex. Incarceration experienced unprecedented growth during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Daulatzai notes that the "prison population in the United States skyrocketed 500 percent between 1970 and 2000" *(47).* For a thorough analysis explaining this social phenomenon and its myriad implications please see Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

dissemination of the 'underclass' label" (Watkins 561). Classifying certain peoples and areas as "underclass" served as a thinly-veiled justification to disinvest in inner-city job training, social, education and crime-prevention programs. This systematic neglect of black urban America was celebrated as a much needed corrective to the "perceived excesses of big government." Simultaneously, the rhetoric of family values was championed as an "emboldened conservatism" promoted bourgeois, heteronormative notions of family as the chief way for the black "underclass" to transcend their indigence (561). *Push*'s diligent focus on how structural processes shape uneven development militates against such discourses endorsing familial stability as a remedy for urban poverty (Dubey 65). By making family "a site of unmitigated trauma," *Push* challenges right-winged conservatism that upholds nuclear familial patterns from a nostalgic social order as the answer to ameliorating poverty's crisis conditions. Dubey aptly asserts, "Although the novel takes great risks in depicting a dysfunctional black family that might appear to confirm current 'underclass' discourses, it makes abundantly clear that far from causing poverty, familial pathologies are produced and perpetuated by stringent public policies" (65).

The film's departure from this critical juxtaposition between uptown and downtown not only undoes the novel's astute critique of how capital shapes urban space, it blurs the connection *Push* establishes between the degradations of poverty and the debasement of domestic relations. "Precious" highlights black familial dysfunction outside of a context of uneven development which depicts Precious as the victim of a monstrous matriarch rather than the victim of oppressive class relations. By diverting attention away from the macro forces shaped by the structural determinant of class, the movie attempts to strip the working class in general, black ghetto subproletariats in particular, of its historical status as an exploited class. "Precious"

thereby circumvents "the most important facet of Marx's discussion of the history-making role of the proletariat—namely its status as an *exploited* class exclusively positioned as the agent to abolish classes by virtue of its being the only social group that *needs* to abolish class hierarchy as such" {emphasis: author's} (Foley, "Marxism" 14).

This revolutionary need also causes *Push* to realize downtown as a site of multiracial, intergenerational working-class solidarity. It is not until Precious travels downtown and attends the Survivors of Incest Anonymous meeting that she realizes that various types of women have been subjected to similar acts of sexual violence and gendered oppression. Precious tells us:

> Listen to girl rape by brother, listen to old woman rape by her father; don't remember till he die when she is 65 years old. Girls, old women, white women, lotta white women. Girl's younger sister murdered by the *cult*?... What am I hearing! One hour and a half women talk. Can this be done happen to so many people? I know I am not lying! But is they? I thought cult was in a movie. What kinda world this babies raped. A father break a girl's arm. Sweet talk you suck his dick. All kinda women here {emphasis: author's} (130).

Precious's revelation that "[a]ll kinda women here" is an important one. It manifests the pervasive and systemic character of patriarchy concerning the status of women as both laborers and reproducers of labor power within capitalist social relations. Despite the fact that the relationships between men and women "are mediated by their differential access to the conditions necessary for their physical and social reproduction," reproduction itself entails important commonalities of experience that cut across racial and class lines (Gimenez 18). These

commonalities constitute a material base for women's solidarity and shared interests (i.e. sexuality, reproductive rights, childcare, domestic responsibilities, etc.) (27).

For the women in the Survivors of Incest Anonymous meeting, this solidarity was forged through their collective experiences as victims of sexual assault. Precious states, "One thing we got in common, no *the* thing, is we was rape" {emphasis: author's} (Sapphire 130). Realizing this violent subjugation as a possibility for revolutionary solidarity evokes another common theme within Hughes's socialist poetry. Returning to the poem "Always the Same," Hughes states that after his "Exploited, beaten and robbed" body is "Shot and killed," he hopes that his blood "Runs into the deep channels of Revolution" and "Stains all flags red" (Collected Works 165). He desires for his blood to "make one with the blood/ Of all the struggling workers in the world--/ Till every land is free of/ Dollar robbers/ Pound robbers/ Franc robbers/ Peseta robbers/ Lire robbers/ Life robbers" (165-166). While the Survivors of Incest Anonymous meeting only points toward the possibility of solidarity and appears to be a long way off from articulating the explicit political aims of Hughes in "Always the Same," the meeting still prompts Precious to wonder, "What kinda *world* this babies raped" {emphasis: added} (Sapphire 130). This is a crucial question because it demonstrates Precious's attempt to understand the larger structural dynamics in play. Moreover, it is a critical inquiry for Precious to pose if she is to understand the capitalist foundations of women's oppression. For across the globe, "the overwhelming majority of women" are "propertyless and have to work for a living, facing similar forms of exploitation and oppression and similar constraints upon their life choices" (Gimenez 30). The struggle

against patriarchy, then, must also be a struggle to abolish capitalism if it expects to actualize anything better than “a stratification profile that mirrors that of men” (29).[13]

Impeding this type of revolutionary class consciousness is exactly what the movie “Precious” aims to do. The film’s adaptations torpedo *Push*’s intertextuality with Hughes so that the narrative’s utility shifts from protesting poverty to actualizing one’s selfhood. Sentimentality replaces social critique as “Precious” supplants the class consciousness of *Push* with investments in the dubious premises of the American Dream mythos. The cinematic makeover magnifies the symptoms of poverty but ignores how capitalism systematically creates economic inequality. As demonstrated in a number of reviews, this is perhaps best evidenced in the movie’s treatment of domestic violence (i.e. the physical, sexual and verbal abuse of Precious).

In his review of “Precious: Based on Sapphire’s Novel Push,” Roger Ebert only refers to Precious as a victim of abuse. Her indigence is never mentioned as he explains that Precious has been raped by her father and physically, verbally and sexually abused by her mother. When attempting to explain why Precious’s mother abuses her, Ebert asserts that the mother is “defeated by life” and “takes it out on her daughter.” Perhaps this is the best answer he could muster as a result of how “Precious” obscures the connection between poverty and domestic violence. This is a critical link to understand however. Disconnecting the problem of domestic violence from the question of class conceals the reality that domestic violence is “a function of

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[13]This is a key point to underscore as definite limitations exist on the political gains that would increase proportional representation in political office and leadership roles for women in the democratic capitalist state (and this certainly holds true for any minority and marginalized group). Gimenez aptly asserts that the penetration of women into these spaces will not “substantially change the conditions affecting the lives of most women (though it could benefit the most skilled, educated and economically privileged), just as the over-representation of men in political positions and leadership roles does not alter the vast political, class, and socioeconomic inequalities among men” (29).

the problem of economic inequality" (Michaels 119). Statistics routinely indicate that victims of abuse overwhelmingly come from lower income families with little education (118). The insistence therefore that women and children of every class are the victims of domestic abuse mystifies the reality that the great majority of victims are poor and that such abuse first and foremost is a crime of poverty (118). *Push* underscores this reality through the various autobiographical sketches rendered in the "Life Stories" creative writing project. Whether Jermaine, Rita or Rhonda, they all detail how poverty is intrinsically related to the abuse they individually suffered from their parents. And in the cases of Jermaine and Rita specifically, they also depict how poverty led their respective fathers to abuse their mothers. The omission of the "Life Stories" project, a component of the larger excision of Hughes from "Precious," leaves Ebert to make the claim that Momma is defeated by "life" rather than ruling class oppression. Neither "Precious" nor Ebert's review acknowledge how the degradations of poverty destroyed the familial bonds between Precious and her parents.

Despite Ebert not troubling his review with considerations of class mobility (or the lack thereof), he still manages to classify "Precious" as an American Dream text. Ebert contends that "Precious" is a "great American film that somehow finds an authentic way to move from these beginnings to an inspiring ending." In celebrating this trope, Ebert confirms Wideman's assertion that the American Dream is "one of the master plots that Americans find acceptable for black lives" (xxix). As metanarrative, the American Dream "consists of a basic *deep structure*" in which narratives of black life are posited and then worked out "in a bifurcated, either/or world" {emphasis: author's} (xxix-xxx). Plots motivated by this conceptual framework feature a lone protagonist that moves from one world to another. Some of the "classic crossovers" routinely achieved via this (African) American Dream paradigm include ignorance to education, common

criminal to successful professional, and ghetto inhabitance to middle class station and agency (xxx). The possibilities for these binaries seem limitless; and as Ebert demonstrates, these variations all mask the structural determinant of class.

In the case of "Precious," the star protagonist moves from subjection to subjectivity via her crossover from illiteracy to literacy. It is imperative to underscore that although her abuse and illiteracy stem from her poverty, Ebert constitutes these manifestations of poverty and not the poverty itself as Precious's troubled beginnings. Situating "Precious" within the dictates of the American Dream "master plot" encourages one to view and interpret the film through the lens of selfhood rather than class antagonism. It likewise enables Ebert to laud the film as inspirational despite the fact that Precious's material reality does not change. At the end of the film, Precious is still poor, without healthcare and infected with HIV. She still lacks the necessary skills to obtain a living wage and she and her two children are still subjugated by the welfare state. Ebert's ability to graft the American Dream construct onto such horrific conditions speaks to how effectively "Precious" denies class inequality. "Precious" is able to claim triumph in the protagonist's transcendence of abuse and illiteracy because the film never establishes her as a victim of poverty. This more than anything illustrates the reactionary politics of "Precious" as it naturalizes class rule by assenting to status quo power relations that allow for the atrocities of urban poverty.

The movie's hegemonic utility in turn propels its critical acclaim and commercial viability. This success is not exclusive to "Precious" however. Wideman contends that the "formula" of the American Dream template has been profitable for depictions of black life since the slave narrative (xxx). This formula "sells because it is simple." It accepts the hierarchical social arrangements already in play, and moreover, "it is about individuals, not groups, crossing

boundaries." It thereby "consoles those in power" while offering "hope to the powerless" through the persistent message that "although the existing social arrangements may allow the horrors of plantations, ghettoes, and prisons to exist," they also "allow room for some to escape." This logic infers that status quo power relations are not fundamentally criminal. No one is "absolutely guilty, nor are the oppressed (slave, prisoner, ghetto inhabitant) absolutely guiltless" (xxx). Inequality is thereby naturalized. And once it is understood as a given, inequality becomes something at best to be managed, at worst rationalized and reinforced as a reality that can never be seen as abolishable. By foregrounding the fate of one black individual, "Precious" (and the many films like it) removes its protagonist from "the network of systemic relationships connecting, defining determining and undermining all American lives" (Wideman xxxi). Critiques concerning the social injustice of class society ultimately give way to the reactionary and conveniently easy question, "If some overcome, why don't the others?" (xxx).

The tacit assumption that anyone can transcend their circumstances if they possess the will-power to do so undergirds this inquiry, and is both, the essence of the American Dream and the moral crux of "Precious." The way that Daniels dramatizes this will-power amid "the raw slice of life" that is "Precious," leads Pulitzer Prize-winning film critic Joe Morgenstern to describe "Precious" as "a shockingly beautiful film" that "is genuinely and irresistibly inspirational." Like Ebert, Morgenstern fails to mention the poverty enveloping "Precious." Maybe this is understandable as the movie is not at all about the myriad inequalities that capital brings to bear. According to Morgenstern, "[I]t's about unearthing buried treasure." The film illustrates "the power of kindness and caring" as it tracks Precious's "growth from a rageful child with a turbulent inner life to a formidable young woman with a life full of promise and hope." An "inspirational" crossover move is realized yet again while denying class and Precious's

unchanged material realities. Unlike the novel, which foregrounds the hellish conditions of Harlem and how an indigent group of students negotiate such circumstances, the movie singularly focuses on Precious's emotional and psychological wellbeing, what Morgenstern refers to as "the plight of her spiritual self." It becomes increasingly clear vis-à-vis the reviews of both Morgenstern and Ebert that the movie's excision of Hughes results in the film's supression of class rule and the ways in which poverty is systematically manufactured.

In rare instances where class is not ignored with regard to how "Precious" is framed it is reduced to ideology. Said another way, class is discussed within the limited purview of identity politics. This is the case with Lynn Hirschberg's The New York Times Magazine article "The Audacity of Precious."Hirschberg's riff on President Obama's bestseller *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* proves to be an effective signifier as she, like many other film critics, anchors "Precious" in the American Dream master narrative. Her article departs from the standard film review, however, as it sets "Precious" as a backdrop to highlight Lee Daniels's own Alger-like ascent from ghetto youth to successful Hollywood film director and producer. In doing so, the article successfully "culturalizes" poverty as it turns class position (in this case indigence) into culture (Michaels 200).

This ideological move promotes multiculturalist politics that privilege identity over equality by treating classes like races or cultures—"different but equal" (10). Upholding economic difference in this way is a strategy for managing inequality not eliminating it (10). It is especially pertinent to examine "Precious" through this critical lens as Daniels all but acknowledges that this is the ideological function of the movie. He states:

> "To be honest, I was embarrassed to show this movie at Cannes. I didn't want to exploit black people. And I wasn't sure I wanted white French people to see our world." He paused. "But because of Obama, it's now O.K. to be black. I can share that voice. I don't have to lie. I'm proud of where I come from. And I wear it like a shield. 'Precious' is part of that" (Hirschberg).

This is a telling statement. For Daniels, poverty is tantamount to heritage—something to be proud of (Michaels 200). And as he identifies with the horrific poverty depicted in "Precious," he suggests that these conditions are not just relevant to his personal experience; they are somehow endemic to the African American experience in general. Asserting poverty as an authentic marker of blackness enables Daniels to discuss poverty in terms of racial shame and cultural pride rather than the exploitative relations of class society. He nullifies the structural determinant of class as he celebrates how both President Obama and "Precious" have made it "O.K. to be black" and "proud of where I come from." While some may find this "equalizing" juxtaposition of President Obama and "Precious" reflective of an anti-elitist attitude, I find it indicative of Daniel's "mutual respect across the boundaries of inequality" (Michaels 101).

Daniels's adaptation of *Push* is governed by this sort of reactionary multiculturalism. His insistence on treating economic difference as cultural difference—something to be appreciated rather than abolished—turns inequality into a "consequence of our prejudices" rather than a "consequence of our social system" (Michaels 20). The objective of creating a more egalitarian society thus relies on the asinine project of curing discrimination rather than getting rid class, which is the *sole* determinant of inequality.[14] And as Daniels demonstrates via his reflections on

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[14]Here I follow Gregory Meyerson's theorization of class. In his essay "Rethinking Black Marxism: Reflections on Cedric Robinson and Others," Meyerson cogently argues that class is

"Precious," the seemingly infinite categories of identity can cause one to (mis)direct one's political efforts to everything *but* class:

> What I learned from doing the film is that even though I am black, I'm prejudiced. I'm prejudiced against people who are darker than me. When I was young, I went to a church where the lighter-skinned you were, the closer you sat to the altar. Anybody that's heavy like Precious—I thought they were dirty and not very smart. Making this movie changed my heart. I'll never look at a fat girl walking down the street the same way again" (Hirschberg).

This is the ideological value of "Precious." It posits that the problems in our society can be remedied by adjusting our attitudes towards certain people rather than changing the way that wealth is systematized into the uneven arrangements of power and subjugation, a class that dominates and a class that is violently dominated. Daniel's comments on how "Precious" helped him overcome his biases against dark-skinned folks and fat people further reveal how the movie deemphasizes class. Similar to the way in which Spike Lee dramatizes the antagonism between the dark-skinned "Jiggaboos" and the light-complexioned "Wannabees" in "School Daze" or how Mo'Nique pits "fat girls" against "skinny bitches" in her stand-up routine, "Precious" legitimizes complexion and weight as seemingly autonomous cultural categories. Moreover, Daniel's comments demonstrate that these categories should push us to change how we perceive Precious rather than push us to change the conditions oppressing her existence.

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not only "the primary determinant of oppression and exploitation," but it is "the only structural determinant." Race and gender are not structural determinants. Yet racist and sexist ideologies exist, as do raced and gendered divisions of labor "whose severity and function vary depending on where one works in the capitalist global economy." Meyerson contends that both ideology and the division of labor are properly understood when realized as functional and subordinate to class rule—facilitating both profit making and social control.

Indeed, the film's theme of self-acceptance establishes the question of Precious's image as its true focus. A host of reviews support this claim. Morgenstern argues that "one of the most telling moments" of "Precious" is at the end of the film when "the heroine glances at a mirror and sees herself." It at this juncture, he claims, that Precious finally accepts herself for who she is, thus creating space for a new "life full of promise and hope." Similarly, Ebert contends that real-life girls like Precious are rendered invisible because people fail to "*really* look" at them {emphasis: added}. They only "see, evaluate, dismiss." Hirschberg opines that the audience's disdain for Precious corresponds with a physical disidentification with her. All of these reviews intimate the conclusion that Precious should not only be seen, but more importantly, she should be accepted *just as she is*. But to accept her just as she is means to accept her poverty as integral to her identity. This has been a compromise that a liberal-oriented multiculturalism is willing to make. And once this compromise is made, then the poor are no longer people who have too little money, but people who have too little respect (Michaels 19). Thus, it is our "attitudes towards the poor, not their poverty, that becomes the problem to be solved, and we can focus our efforts of reform not on getting rid of classes but on getting rid of what we like to call classism" (19-20). The multiculturalist politics of "Precious" insistently ignore the obligations of abolishing class in much the same way. "Precious" instead takes up the obligations of diversity—the hollow agenda of respecting other people's identities while maintaining status quo social arrangements of domination.

The ways in which "Precious" replaces questions of inequality with investments in identity illustrate the extent to which the film mutilates the class analysis of *Push*. One has to look no further than the movie's numerous reviews to see how identity politics monopolize discussions of "Precious" on both the black and white side of the Racial Mountain. The movie's

subtitle may read “Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire,” but this is a thinly-veiled subterfuge. The excision of Hughes causes the film to function as the political antithesis to the novel. Hughes’s deletion not only results in an adaptation that lacks pointed critiques of how poverty is structured domestically, it denies “Precious” an outlet to contextualize exploitation at “home” within the global movements of capital. Hughes’s communist poetry operates with an internationalist purview that is now more necessary than ever as there is no spatial fix to the domestic contradictions of capital (Harvey 304). Moreover, globalization, as we seem to be reminded daily, is but a temporal remedy to immediate problems. Rather than solve the quandaries of capital’s inevitable incongruities, it simply “projects them onto a larger and grander geographical terrain” (304). And as I have already articulated with specific regard to uneven development in urban America, the contradictions that were projected outward boomerang viciously with crushing outcomes.

America is now experiencing the violent return of these contradictions and its ruling class is responding in the same manner as it always has. The capitalist elite have already begun the large-scale retrenchment of benefits and public assistance that the respective decades of the 80s and 90s observed. And just as the public discourses of urban decay, black familial dysfunction and underclass cultural pathology buttressed the hegemony for these regressive public policies, new ideological work is required to mobilize these current acts of state violence. “Precious” assumes its reactionary political utility in this context. It visualizes and sets in play the racist and sexist rhetoric (i.e. welfare queen, the hyper-sexualization of the poor, etc.) of past discourses through its animated use of poverty porn. “Precious” achieves its goal of helping us to “see” the poor against this backdrop. And with gross worldwide box office sales tallying more than $63 million in profits and another $21 million in domestic DVD sales, the movie proves that the

commodification of poor black women's oppression is not just good for (re)affirming moral panics, but it's lucrative business too! Under Daniel's directorial lens, "Precious" turns ghetto subproletarians into erotic spectacles that bolster hegemonic explanations of social crises that displace the ironies of capital back onto poor black women. I thereby agree that "Precious" can certainly boast of helping the exploited ranks of poor, black urban women realize a newfound visibility, but beyond that it affords them nothing else.

In closing, we must not overlook or downplay the dominant elite's ability to absorb radical cultural politics. Their ability, and moreover, their propensity to do so, indicates that the culture struggle is proof of a larger class struggle. In an attempt to quell a fomenting class consciousness arising in this current historical moment, Hollywood found it necessary to usurp *Push*'s revolutionary impetus and subordinate it to the hegemonic machinations of the dominant culture industry. This had to be done because *Push*, as I have argued, is a counterhegmonic intervention against many of the discourses that the ruling class will now need to employ as it ramps up efforts to further its accumulation by dispossession.

While Hollywood's usurpation of *Push* should, to use Gray's words, "trouble the ease" with which such cultural performances and artifacts "can be viewed as expressions of an already finished *oppositional* black cultural politics" {emphasis: author's} (14), it does not diminish the need for oppositional and *radical* cultural politics. The impact that the revolutionary work of Langston Hughes had on Precious attests to this fact. The urgent demands of Hughes's socialist poetry for an international, organized and united multiracial working-class front to dismantle the global capitalist class must not be lost in these crucial days of great social unrest. Hughes declared that the world could become free and beautiful again. Hughes believed that we could still actualize revolution and wrest our world back from the greedy clutches of the tyrannical

elite. In his poem "Good Morning Revolution," he invites us to stand with him in the boldness of his convictions:

> *Greetings to the Socialist Soviet Republics*
> *Hey you rising workers everywhere greetings—*
>   And we'll sign it: *Germany*
>   Sign it: *China*
>   Sign it: *Africa*
>   Sign it: *Poland*
>   Sign it: *Italy*
>   Sign it: *America*
>   Sign it with my one name: *Worker*
> On that day when no one will be hungry, cold, oppressed,
> Anywhere in the world again.
>
>   That's our job!
>
>   I been starvin' too long,
>   Ain't you?
>
>   Let's go, Revolution!

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