The Welfare Mother and the Fat Poor: Stereotypical Images and the Success Narrative in Sapphire's *Push*

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Abstract: This essay explores how Sapphire's novel *Push* (1996) operates and complicates stereotypical images about the poor—Welfare Mother and Fat Poor—for simultaneously propagating and criticizing the success narrative it employs. The essay introduces the image of the Fat Poor, discusses *Push* as a success narrative, and analyzes the novel's use of that image as limiting this narrative.

Keywords: *Push*; Fat Poor; Welfare Mother; poverty; poorness; success narrative

Introduction

In this essay I argue that Sapphire's novel *Push* (1996) is an ambivalent text that simultaneously supports, complicates, and criticizes the success narrative it employs. I investigate how the novel conventionally uses the success narrative and at the same time consciously explores the limits of this genre. For constructing and deconstructing its success story, *Push* also depicts its major characters as embodiments of different stereotypical images about the poor—the Welfare Mother, the Welfare Queen, and the Fat Poor.[1] Ambivalently using the success narrative and popular images about the poor, *Push* indicates that both—a journey according to the conventional success story and the refusal of a stigmatizing image—cannot be realized by its protagonist and narrator Precious. In this respect, *Push*—and even more so its movie adaptation *Precious*[2]—plays

[1] In my dissertation project I capitalize these terms to make clear that I talk about cultural images and stereotypes that are loaded with meaning and ideology. For example, welfare recipient is a more neutral term as it refers to a person receiving welfare benefits, whereas a Welfare Mother is not just a mother receiving welfare benefits but a woman who is also suspected of amoral behavior and social deviance.

[2] Whereas in this essay I focus on the novel *Push*, I also analyze the movie *Precious* (2009) by Lee Daniels in the context of my dissertation project on the image of the Fat Poor. Nevertheless I also briefly reference recent scholarship on *Precious* that supports my reading of *Push* in this essay.

with reader expectations and functions as a critical comment on the conventions of stories and images about the poor.

Push tells a story of success and failure, both being present in the novel's development of plot, images, voice, perspective, and style. On the surface, the novel tells the success story of its protagonist and narrator Precious, a young, poor, obese, African American mother who escapes violence and abuse, improves her life in major aspects like housing, education, and family relations, finds friends, support, and self-confidence, learns to read and write and to think critically, and finally manages to find her voice and tell her story. On a deeper level, the novel limits the extent of Precious's success tremendously; the protagonist's progress is seriously threatened, the story ends without closure, and it integrates other voices and perspectives instead of remaining Precious's narration. *Push* thus complicates and criticizes conventions of the American Dream journey, contrasting it with the circumstances in the novel's story world where this journey begins and—as the text points out—might as well end.

Furthermore this analysis investigates how the narrative of *Push* reenacts a contemporary shift in stereotypes about the poor in American culture, putting less emphasis on questions of the legitimacy and extent of welfare benefits, and instead focusing on the bodily condition of the poor. The novel first portrays its major characters Precious and her mother Mary as embodiments of the stereotypical image of the Welfare Mother and later differentiates between Mary, who throughout the novel remains an example of that image, and Precious, who consciously refuses attitudes and behaviors which would cast her as a Welfare Mother. Despite this differentiation Precious is nevertheless depicted as embodying the similarly stereotypical image of the Fat Poor, which contributes to the success narrative's limitation.

In this paper, I will first briefly explain the image of the Fat Poor, its origin, ideological framework, and cultural relevance. Second, I will show how the novel *Push* employs

images about the poor and the success narrative in order to tell its protagonist's story of progress. Third, I will analyze how the novel complicates these images and how it both limits and criticizes the success narrative it creates.

The Image of the Fat Poor[3] in a Cultural Context

At its core, the image of the Fat Poor is the idea of a person being both poor and obese with the two conditions being related to each other. Furthermore, the image contains several negatively connoted character traits, attitudes, and habits that are frequently related to either poverty, obesity, or often both conditions. The image comprises associations of being lazy, passive, immobile, resigned, and unproductive, characteristics or behaviors that are attached likewise to the poor and to the obese. Aspects of excessive consumption are part of the stereotype as well, though in the context of poverty this seems contradictory at first. According to the stereotype the poor and obese are marked by eating too much or unhealthy food, consuming legal drugs like alcohol or cigarettes, or using food stamps or welfare for their needs, which in the logic of the stereotype enables consumption without production in exchange. Not all of these features are necessarily present in each single representation of the image of the Fat Poor, but they contribute to the argumentative background of the stereotype.

The image of the Fat Poor emerges at the intersection of the two powerful and popular discourses on poverty and on obesity and combines aspects of these discourses in one stereotypical image. For analyzing this intersection and the respective image, two related theoretical and methodological concepts—intersectionality and multiple

[3] This essay is related to my dissertation on the image of the Fat Poor in contemporary American literature and culture, in which I explore the stereotypical image emerging at the intersection of the cultural discourses on poverty and on obesity. With this research interest in culturally and socially constructed ideas about poverty and the poor represented in cultural and literary texts, I locate my project and this paper within the recently emerged field of literary-critical poverty studies (cf. Gandal; Jones; Schocket; and the special issues of *Amerikastudien* and of *PMLA* devoted to this topic).

jeopardy[4]—are fruitful approaches. The intersection of poverty and obesity is remarkable because several similarities[5] between the discourses come together, strengthen each other, make a connection between poverty and obesity plausible, and thus facilitate the construction of a merged single logic of the stereotype in the first place.

The stigmatized conditions of poverty and obesity—or rather poorness and fatness as the cultural expressions of these conditions[6]—are connected in the image of the Fat Poor. They appear to be closely related and depending on each other in a plausible, inevitable, and almost natural way. The discourses on poverty and on obesity use the same or very similar thematic emphases, argumentative patterns, and ideological perspectives, almost to the degree of interchangeability, with the image of the Fat Poor being the most powerful expression of these similarities.

In the stereotypical image of the Fat Poor fatness functions as a bodily and visible marker of poorness and is not merely another condition of an individual who happens to be also poor. This does not mean that there is no possible connection between poverty

[4] Whereas studies using these concepts (cf. Brah and Phoenix; Crenshaw; King; McCall) primarily deal with the intersection of gender and race and especially with the situation of non-white women, both concepts are also explicitly open to further categories of identity, such as class, body, or age. Thus intersectionality, interested in intersections of categories, and especially multiple jeopardy, focusing on the marginalized positions of such intersections, are productive tools for my project on the image of the Fat Poor.

[5] Similarities between the discourses on poverty and obesity are: (1) the construction of the poor/ obese as the Other, (2) the attachment of negative characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes to the poor/ obese, and (3) explanations for poverty/ obesity ranging from the poor/ obese person's fault to both conditions are consequences of a person's (cultural) heritage. Furthermore, (4) the terminology of war and panic is used to define poverty and obesity as major, nearly epidemic threats to U.S. Society, (5) poverty lines and weight scales are used for seemingly neutral definitions of both conditions, and (6) both discourses share an emotional tone. Both discourses express (7) ideologically charged expectations of leaving poverty/ obesity behind by working or exercising hard, and (8) both discourses focus on preventing and fighting child poverty/ obesity.

[6] The differentiation between poverty and poorness is based on the assumption that there is a core definition of poverty including economic conditions and closely related aspects. In contrast to this concept of poverty, poorness describes characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes which are frequently attached to poverty but which are not necessarily or exclusively connected to poverty as an economic condition. Likewise, fatness functions as a cultural category including judgments and attached characteristics, whereas obesity refers to a medical condition. Laziness, for example, is a characteristic attached to both conditions and thus is a feature of poorness and of fatness, but not of poverty or of obesity.

and obesity in reality at all, which might be the case in some instances.[7] What is necessary for the stereotype to exist in the first place and to function in a plausible way is that the connection between the two conditions is drawn repeatedly in various discourses. Thus it is not of major importance whether and to what extent a connection between poverty and obesity can be made, but rather whether the idea of such a connection is convincing enough.

The image of the Fat Poor replaces previous stereotypes like the Welfare Mother and the Welfare Queen, which are less present and less popular nowadays, partly because the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996*[8] set a time limit to an individual receiving welfare for a maximum of five years total during his or her lifetime. This change in welfare legislation had an impact on the stereotypes as well: as receiving welfare benefits would end after a fixed period, it could no longer be a permanent lifestyle as these images implied. Now that the images lack one more connection to the presumed reality of the welfare system, obesity, having entered public discourses rather recently, functions as an argumentative substitute in images about the poor.

The image of the Fat Poor—its emergence and its very existence—captures two major topics discussed in US-American society: obesity as an issue more present on the public agenda in recent years, and poverty as a persistent problem in the US, but also increasing in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. The intermingling of the discourses on both topics, culminating in the image of the Fat Poor, is also reflected and negotiated in contemporary literary and cultural texts—the novel *Push* being one of them.

[7] Studies looking at actual connections between poverty and obesity are either interested in whether poverty encourages energy-dense nutrition and thus leads to gaining weight or in whether obesity limits job opportunities and thus reduces income, eventually causing poverty.

[8] As *Push* was published in 1996 as well, the novel can generally be read as a comment on debates leading to the mid-1990s' welfare reform and its drastic consequences for the poor.

Push as a Success Narrative[9]

The novel *Push* is set in the late 1980s. Its protagonist and narrator Precious is sixteen, lives in Harlem with her mother Mary, and is expecting her second baby. She is once more pregnant from her mostly absent father, having given birth to her first child at the age of twelve. Precious suffers, she is rather isolated, she experiences sexual abuse and violence from both parents, her mother humiliates her, makes her run the household, and neglects herself and her daughter. In the course of the story Precious learns to read and write in an alternative school, flees from her mother's home, settles in a safe place for people who suffered from domestic violence, finds a community of friends and supporters, and is finally able to tell her own story. The first part of the novel is this story told from Precious's perspective, merging first-person narration, journal-like passages, writing samples, poems, and letters.[10] The second part of the novel also includes her classmates' voices and stories, representing the supportive community Precious is then part of. The success story of Precious is traceable in different aspects of the novel, in its imagery, its plot and setting, and in its perspective, voice, and style.

Push uses popular stereotypes about the poor for telling a success story, as it first portrays Precious as an embodiment of the stereotype of the Welfare Mother and later shows Precious's refusal of and escape from this image. This change from embodiment to refusal is an important aspect of the novel's success narrative, as, in order to tell a success story, the novel first needs to characterize its protagonist as a Welfare Mother, thus leaving potential for change and success.[11] The description of *Push's* major

[9] As the focus of this paper is on the culturally constructed connection between poverty and obesity, questions of race and gender will only play a minor role in my analysis. Although gender, race, and further categories of identity play an important role in *Push*, I will, for the clarity of my argument, primarily look at the categories class and body and how the novel constructs and uses this intersection for telling a poor person's success story.

[10] Cf. Riché Richardson's comment on *Push's* "complex narrative economy [that] incorporates poetry, black English vernacular dialect, letters, drawings, and journal entries" (161).

[11] Cf. Katie M. Kanagawa, who points out that Precious's success not only relies upon the potential of change but also upon her mother Mary not being able to progress similarly: "It is important to

characters, the protagonist and her mother, resembles two stereotypes originating in the late 1960s and circulating up until the mid-1990s: the Welfare Queen and the Welfare Mother, stereotypes which referred to African American women who received welfare benefits.[12] Both images differ in focus. While the image of the Welfare Queen suspects women to commit welfare fraud in order to finance a luxurious lifestyle, the image of the Welfare Mother rests on the assumption of women being promiscuous and equating their children with money. In *Push* these images come together and are furthermore merged with the image of the Fat Poor.

Throughout the novel, Mary is portrayed as an embodiment of the image of the Fat Poor Welfare Mother: She is poor, obese, has no job or income, receives food stamps and welfare benefits for her child and grandchild, cheats the social worker, eats a lot, stays at home, and watches TV all the time.[13] In the beginning of the novel, Precious appears as a reincarnation of her mother, as both are poor and obese mothers sharing the same lifestyle dominated by food and television. Mary even demands that Precious apply for welfare instead of attending school (Sapphire 22, 51, 56). Furthermore, when still living at her mother's place, Precious partly adopts her mother's attitude equating her child's life with money: “My mama get check 'n food stamps for me 'n Lil Mongo. But it's *my* baby. Little Mongo is money for me!” (55) In the course of the story, Precious's attitude changes. Instead of thinking that her first-born “is money,” Precious states that “Money for Little Mongo should be [hers]” (57). Giving birth to her second child and leaving her

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acknowledge that these contrasts in person and place ambivalently defend an empowering model of black female agency that is essentially dependent upon the continuing marginalization and subordination of black working-class women like Mary” (128).

[12] As the Welfare Mother and the Welfare Queen are cultural stereotypes, they have primarily been analyzed by sociologists and media scientists (see Clawson and Trice; Davis and Hagen; Fraser and Gordon; Hancock; Kohler-Hausmann; Ortiz and Briggs; Ross; Seccombe, James, and Battle Walters; Thompson) and so far have not received much attention within literary studies, though the stereotype is an image which also appears in literary texts.

[13] Cf. referring to the movie *Precious*, Mia Mask interprets Mary as “[t]rue to the stereotype of the welfare queen who skillfully avoids work” (101) and Régine Michelle Jean-Charles reads Mary as a reference of the Welfare Mother, unfortunately as if this stereotype was real: “Mary occupies the Moynahanian role of the welfare mother whose existence was first elaborated in the 1980s context in which the film is set” (146).

mother's place, Precious refuses to be associated with stereotypes like the Welfare Mother or the Welfare Queen any longer. She does not consider her children as means to receive welfare benefits anymore, and asks herself: "What I gonna be, queen of babies? No, I gonna be queen of those ABCs—readin' 'n writin'" (75). She wants to be defined by her education, rather than by having children. Precious improves her school records, wins a literacy award, and starts to write poetry, which contributes to her refusal of the stereotype of the Welfare Mother/ Queen and to the novel's general success narrative.

The success narrative in *Push* also finds expression in the development of its plot, especially in Precious's transition that is carried out primarily via a shift from the realm of food to the realm of text and from the setting of Precious's home to her alternative school.[14] Precious's journey from illiteracy to becoming a poet is a change from forced consumption to creative production, as she leaves her everyday routine of cooking, eating, and watching television behind and instead becomes interested in reading and writing, and in books as a medium. At the end of the story, Precious has internalized this transition from food and consumption to text and production. When she wants to attend a meeting, a woman who meanwhile takes care of her son asks her: "'You got a lot of time before six-thirty, why don't you git you some dinner before you run out of here?'" and Precious answers: "'I was gonna take my journal book and write on the bus, 'steadda taking the train'" (137). This passage condenses the novel's shift from the consumption of food to the production of text and stresses that Precious is not just improving by luck, coincidence, and hard work, but also because of her internalization of the ideal of being productive.

[14] Cf. Riché Richardson on the connection between the realm of food and Precious's home in the movie *Precious*: "Precious is sitting in the dark in a waiting area and regurgitates after bingeing on chicken. Here the symbolic purging of the food primarily associated with her mother and oppressive home life is noteworthy" (171).

The shift from food to text is also reflected in other passages of *Push.* Precious first lists the meals she had at home (9, 19) and later names the books she owns in a similar way (80-81). Moreover, Precious's talents change in the course of the story. At her first day at alternative school, Precious is asked what she is good at, reacting: "I shake my head, can't think of nuffin'. [...] 'I can cook,' I say" (46). Later in the novel it is reading and writing that Precious is good at. She wins the mayor's literacy award, which "is good proof to [her that she] can do anything" (88), and imagines "being a poet or rapper or an artist even" (109), an aspiration that is eventually fulfilled, as the novel ends with some of Precious's poems.

Changes in perspective and voice further contribute to the novel's success story. For the larger part of the novel, Precious is ashamed of her body, her black skin (113-14), her obesity (11, 23), and the abuse she suffered (24-25, 35, 58, 111-12). As a consequence she feels and fears, or at other times wishes to be invisible (30-32),[15] and she imagines herself as slim and white on the inside (32, 35). In the course of the story Precious's perspective changes as she overcomes her voicelessness and the insecurity and shame concerning her body. She stops imagining another self and realizes that she is "not different on the inside" (125). Precious is able to accept her body, her black skin, and her obesity (76, 96), finds a way to express her self, and finally is able to talk about her trauma in the safe environment of a self-help group (128-29).

The success narrative is also performed on the level of style within the novel. In the beginning, the novel appears to be the spoken account of Precious's story. The almost oral text then also includes Precious's first and grammatically incorrect writing samples (61, 65, 69). The novel's reader can follow the narrator's progress in writing as Precious's mistakes decrease, her vocabulary becomes more diverse, and her texts finally turn into poetry. After the novel's first part telling Precious's story, a collage of biographical and

[15] Cf. Suzette Spencer on the (in)visibility of the poor as in *Precious*: Those who "are looked at but are not really seen, are rendered invisible or are rendered hypervisible as part of the conditions of their socioeconomic invisibility" (58-59).

poetic texts by different characters forms a second part, including three poems written by Precious. *Push* thus closes with Precious's more literate and poetic voice, signifying her progress and the novel's success narrative on a stylistic level.

Complicated Narratives and Images in *Push*

Push integrates themes and patterns of the American Dream narrative, the rags-to-riches story, the slave narrative, and also elements of the bildungsroman and thus has primarily been read as a success narrative despite the novel's conscious and drastic limitation of success. Only a few scholars read the novel *Push* as a critical comment on the success narrative. For example, Ann Folwell Stanford points out that at the end of the story Precious "is still infected with HIV and is still coping with poverty and the appalling lack of resources for single mothers" (134). Furthermore, Katrine Dalsgård states that Precious's "life is limited by her reality among the black inner-city poor" (185), and Elizabeth Donaldson discerns that "[d]espite Precious's faith in fairy tale endings, Carl is her biological father and she is also HIV positive" (53). Quite contrarily, Janice L. Doane writes that "Precious always finds some lifesaving crumb within her experience to nurture a growing healthy sense of self" (127), and Wendy A. Rountree states that "by the end of the novel, Precious is not held back by her past but has liberated herself" (142). Though Stanford, Dalsgård, and Donaldson touch upon the limitations of Precious's progress, they focus on other aspects in their writings and do not explore the novel's critique of the success narrative. Doane and Roundtree read the novel as a success narrative, overlooking its failure and limitation, and the novel's underlying critique of the success narrative. The ambivalence of the success/failure narrative seems

to be more obvious in the case of the novel's movie adaptation *Precious*,[16] probably due to its supposed happy ending.

Though refusing to embody a Welfare Mother/ Queen, Precious cannot escape prejudices and images about the poor entirely, as *Push* reanimates the argumentative and discursive frame of these stereotypes, and at a later point of the story portrays Precious as an incarnation of the stereotypical image of the Fat Poor. The novel thus tells the story of a poor person changing her poverty rather than leaving it. Also, Precious is able to change herself, but not other people's perceptions of herself. This is crucial, especially in the case of her social worker, who in her report characterizes Precious as such: "'The client seems to view the social service system and its proponents as her enemies, and yet while she mentions independent living, seems to envision social services, AFDC, as taking care of her forever'" (Sapphire 120). This passage evokes notions of the Welfare Mother/ Queen and condenses the limitation of Precious's progress within the story world. Also it is a moment in which the novel leaves Precious's perspective and instead describes her with the words of her social worker, thus complicating the success narrative the novel otherwise constructs.

Push's plot is full of progress and success, yet this development is limited, as Precious's journey is threatened by two major incidents: her HIV infection (85, 93), and her social worker's opposition to her schooling (119, 120-23). Precious is not just psychologically

[16] Cf. concerning *Precious* Katie M. Kanagawa argues that the movie "rejects the fantasies of 'unconstrained opportunity' and unlimited success" (132) and generally "cannot be categorized as essentially positive or negative in its approach to race, class, gender, and sexuality [...] *Precious* itself is a place where the progressive and the conservative come into contact and collide" (118).

David Hennessee on the potential danger of the success narrative in *Precious*: "We're familiar with this narrative from Horatio Alger, whose boy heroes achieve success through 'pluck and luck.' This narrative is dangerous in that it uncritically promotes 'American dream' mythology, sentimentalizes poverty, and ultimately reinforces complacency in the audience" (158).

Also referring to the movie Lisa Mullen writes that as Precious joins the alternative school "we assume Precious is going to be OK […]. But just when a little watery sunlight seems about to wash over poor Precious, there is bad news. Misery is not finished with her yet" (72).

Kanawaga's, Hennessee's, and Mullen's thoughts on the limitation of Precious's success story can be applied to both the movie *Precious* and the novel *Push*.

traumatized by being abused, she is also infected with a terminal disease, which, due to lack of medication in the late 1980s, is likely to be fatal, especially for a poor, black teenage mother with reduced access to medical treatment. Precious's social worker wants her to join a workfare program as a home attendant, which means she would have to quit school and give up taking care of her son during the week. Also, Precious would work in a position reminding her of her mother's home. Again taking care of somebody else's household, Precious does not seem able to escape a domestic role that others have chosen for her. With these two major obstacles, the novel sets a limit to Precious's self-empowerment and agency[17] and leaves open whether Precious's journey can continue in a successful manner at all.

Furthermore, *Push* complicates two major changes in the setting of the novel which appear positive, but which are also problematic in their cause. Fleeing from her mother's home and being expelled from public school is nothing Precious chooses voluntarily. The novel forces its protagonist to change and it is primarily luck and coincidence that enables Precious to turn these changes in a positive direction, finding a safe place and a school that helps her. Precious is not a protagonist who actively decides and shapes her life according to her will; instead, she reacts to the violence and coincidence she is exposed to.[18] In this respect *Push* undermines the success narrative as such, as the genre assumes that an individual is capable of overcoming major obstacles by free will and hard work.

Moreover, the novel ends without a closure and leaves open whether and when Precious has to leave the place she lives in, whether she can really continue attending alternative school or is forced to join a workfare program instead, and how her life

[17] Cf. Katie M. Kanagawa who interprets the movie *Precious* similarly: "Even as the audience may feel pleasure in this alternatively raced and classed girl power narrative [...], he/she also understands that Precious is likely to fail in her efforts to continue her education, raise her two children on her own, and survive AIDS (especially during a time when treatments had not yet been developed)" (133).

[18] A slightly similar dynamic is at work when Precious learns about her HIV infection, which is the cause for her starting to write poetry.

changes due to her HIV-infection. Although Precious is able to progress, the consequences of her opportunities are limited, especially in the case of her social worker. Though Precious openly, honestly, and repeatedly talks to her, the woman suspects Precious of cheating the welfare system and questions her intellectual capacity (118-19). Precious's transformation cannot overcome the social worker's prejudices, which is crucial as this person is responsible for major decisions concerning Precious's present and future.

Though in the course of the story Precious accepts her body (96, 140), stops imagining another self within (125), and is able to talk about the abuse she suffered (128-29), her body is still a site of conflicts and struggles. Being a poor, black, obese, HIV-positive woman, Precious remains marginalized and stigmatized, her body is highly vulnerable and doomed to suffer, and she will most likely die young. Precious's success is limited through her corporeal otherness, her body's infection, and because she is seen as a Fat Poor (Welfare Mother).

The success narrative in *Push* is opposed on a stylistic level as well. Precious's journal-like narrative ends rather abruptly and the novel continues with a second part[19] that includes several short biographical pieces by Precious's classmates and three poems by Precious. The novel changes from being Precious's exclusive narration, as it later includes corrections from her teacher (61, 65-66), short letters between herself and her teacher (69-73), quotes from the social worker's report (117-120), and finally becomes more diverse with the addition of her classmates' voices (n. pag.). This multiplication of voices and perspectives is highly confusing in the context of a success narrative that is traditionally told by the protagonist progressing and finding her voice. The other girls'

[19] Most scholars are interested in the novel's second part as a fictional document of a literacy acquisition class (cf. Dalsgård; Doane; Donaldson; Dubey; Michlin; Rountree) and thus primarily read it in the context of Precious's quest for literacy and not as the text's choice to put an end to its protagonist's journey on a stylistic level. Ann Folwell Stanford, who summarizes that "[the] novel ends with the presentation of a 'Class Book,' which contains the equally horrific and triumphant stories of Precious's classmates" (134), does no go any further in interpreting the novel's specific structure.

life stories are full of devastating and shocking experiences, yet these stories do not function as examples of failure in contrast to the protagonist's success story. Instead the novel's second part shows that Precious is not the only young woman who is struggling, and that her success is similarly limited. In *Push* the American Dream is a distant idea instead of a general formula and success is not merely exceptional, it is rather impossible for the poor and marginalized.

The novel ends with a long poem by Precious, testifying to the completion of her individual achievement of becoming a poet. As most of Precious's poems, this one also refers to HIV, its last words being: "go into the poem / the HEART of it / beating / like / a clock / a virus / tick / tock" (n. pag.). Equating the virus with a clock and ending the poem and the novel at the clock's "tock" is an obvious reference to Precious's limited lifetime. The infection is a constant reminder of a traumatic past which controls her present and threatens her future. In this poem the novel once more limits the success of its protagonist, as it is evidence for her literary skills and at the same time emphasizes the overall bodily limitation of her success. Though her poetry and her story will remain and though Precious is able to "go into the poem," to move even more into the realm of text and thus complete her journey towards literacy and writing, her body will nevertheless disappear.

Conclusion

This essay looked at Sapphire's novel *Push* and its development of images, plot, setting, perspective, voice, and style simultaneously and ambivalently constructing, complicating, and criticizing the success narrative of its protagonist Precious. The complication and limitation of the success narrative in *Push* demonstrates that not all individual struggles against poverty and marginalization can be won, that success is not just about will and work, and that failure—through no fault of one's own—is a likely

option. Sapphire's novel is also a comment on reader expectations concerning stories and images about the poor, as the novel questions the genre's idea of upward social movement as a consequence of strong will and hard work and complicates the use of stereotypical images like the Fat Poor.

Though *Push* tells a story of an American Dream-like journey from misery to hope, the novel's ambivalence of also limiting this success narrative is extensive, and the text's critical potential concerning the success narrative as a genre is convincing. In first portraying a character in a devastating and depressing situation and then following her or his journey towards a better situation, success narratives influence ideas about real-life poverty and the possibilities to individually and successfully overcome such hardship. Therefore success narratives are not fictional accounts of the possibilities of upward social movement, but rather expressions of ideas and expectations concerning the poor.

As this essay showed, approaching *Push* from the perspective of literary-critical poverty studies and using the concepts of intersectionality and multiple jeopardy to focus on the convergence of class and body is productive for understanding the critical potential of the text, its negotiation of poorness and of fatness as an aspect of poorness, and its use of the image of the Fat Poor. Analyzing how class and especially poverty are expressed in a text, how poorness is culturally constructed via discourses and images, instead of looking at a character's poverty as merely an economic condition within the text's story world, makes it possible to draw conclusions concerning the general understanding of what poverty entails and means in American culture. In this context it is crucial and useful to differentiate between poverty as an economic condition with its direct consequences and poorness as a cultural interpretation and expression of poverty which also includes stereotypes about the poor.

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