"Wipe that look off your face or I'll knock it off. Dry up," he'd scream, "and eat." —Toi Derricotte, "When My Father Was Beating Me" (1997)

In "When My Father Was Beating Me," Toi Derricotte recounts the two forms of parental abuse she endured—her father's physical abuse and her mother's silence and acquiescence. She writes, "I'd hear my mother in the kitchen preparing dinner. I'd hear the spoons hitting the mixing bowl, the clatter of silver falling into the drawer. I'd hear the pot lids clink and rattle." She continues, "though her sounds could come to my ears, my screams and cries and whimpers, his demands and humiliations, the sounds of his hands hitting my body, couldn't pierce back the other way" (13). In this instance, the image of a mother providing "beautiful food" yet withholding emotional sustenance illustrates a view contrary to that found in many black women's writing on food, cooking, and kitchens. Though many African Americans find community bonding and self-expression in women's space near the stove, sink, and kitchen table, the kitchen space (and by extension, food) can also subjugate and oppress. Such is the case in Sapphire's *Push* (1996), a novel in which the protagonist, Claireece Precious Jones, has a destructive relationship with food and, like Derricotte, suffers from violence within the home. Throughout her short life, Precious is raped and sexually abused; her body is exploited, misused, and beaten, and, in the end, diseased with HIV. To escape into numbness and achieve some sense of emotional safety, however illusory and precarious, Precious eats and overeats. Her unwholesome consumption of everything (everything her body ingests, digests, or absorbs, including but not limited to food, both involuntary and otherwise) is a result of a childhood and adolescence during which her sexuality is exploited and her human rights are suppressed. It is not until she stops consuming compulsively, radically alters her relationship with food, and begins "producing" (producing written words and literally producing and raising a child) that she acquires the tools needed to come to terms with her mistreated and "diseased" body, and is able to achieve personal freedom. *Push* brutally exposes multilayered issues affecting the black community and black women in particular: racism, poverty, sexual abuse, illiteracy, colorism, self-hatred, obesity, inadequate social institutions, and AIDS. Precious Jones is a victim of all of these problems. Her relationship with her body and her multiple diseases—social, emotional, and physical—all result from the brutality of patriarchal and matriarchal control over her body in her home, community, and society. Precious's father, Carl Kenwood Jones, enacts sexual violence, forcing Precious to "eat" him, while her mother, an agent of patriarchy, forces Precious to binge: "Mama give me orders, Daddy porno talk me" (62). Outside of the home, Precious's body continues to suffer under patriarchal "rules." As Joan Jacobs Brumberg writes, society "treats women's bodies in a sexually brutal and commercially rapacious way" (210). Precious fears the pain, humiliation, and dangers of sex and being sexualized, but having internalized societal standards of beauty, she still desires sexual acceptance. She describes a fantasy version of "light skinned, thereby treated right and loved by boyz," an indication of the extent to which her self-worth is dependent on male desire and beauty issues such as colorism (113).
Significant to Precious’s development is when she stops taking things “in” and pushes them out. The exception, of course, is when she takes in knowledge. Yet what her body and mind ultimately produce are the most important in terms of changing the downward spiral that her life has become. In short, as Precious learns language, writes poetry, and gives birth to a son she can love and protect (unlike her first child, whom she doesn’t raise), she “pushes out” the vileness in her past and “pushes out” words that reject the dangerous consumption of food and sexual perversion that have entrapped her in self-hatred and self-destruction. The story of her literacy acquisition departs from many African American narratives which, as Andrew Warnes maintains in Hunger Overcome: Food and Resistance in Twentieth Century African American Literature, “draw a profound connection between cooking and writing, insisting on the capacity of both processes to replenish two disabling voids—hunger and illiteracy” (2). Precious’s steps towards literacy take a different path, one that leads toward satisfying her emotional hunger yet rejects the perils of excess, particularly in terms of cooking and eating, that have dictated her life.

Although Push enjoyed impressive commercial success and prompted controversy, few scholars have published criticism on the novel. Nonetheless, some literary criticism has focused on the significance of Precious’s transformation from illiteracy and silence to agency through her reading and writing, especially poetry. Wendy Rountree maintains that blues expression informs and empowers Precious’s voice while Brenda Daly analyzes Push and Carovilla Herron’s Thereafter Johnnie, arguing that Precious finds her identity through dialogic language. Madhu Dubey reads Push in a postmodern context, discussing the significance of print literacy for Precious, who gains agency via this medium. Janice Lee Liddell centers on Precious’s mother, Mary, asserting that the characterization of Mary “dismantles every semblance of the ever-pervasive ‘good mother’ image” described by black feminists (138). My essay differs from these analyses in that it explores the connection between consumption and production and focuses on the motif of eating, literal and metaphoric, as it speaks to Precious’s transformation. “Kitchen spaces” often represent familial and communal bonding in African American literature and culture. However, unhealthy and/or excessive eating has been a health risk in the African American community. Precious’s move away from unhealthy consumption highlights the proverbial fine line between hunger and over-satiation. Precious’s plight also underscores the interconnectedness of corporeal enslavement and mental and/or emotional enslavement. When Precious’s relationship with food shifts, her dependence on forced or unhealthy eating begins to end. Drastically altering what and how she consumes importantly coincides with her confronting a series of devastating personal issues, encouraging her to produce positive changes in her life.

In Precious’s life, patriarchy shapes what and how much she consumes and limits what she produces. In other words, both in her home and in her outside world, Precious is victimized until she writes herself into being. Subsequently, food ceases to control her and instead provides spiritual nourishment. In this essay’s epigraph, taken from Derricotte’s “When My Father Was Beating Me,” the father orders his daughter to “Dry up . . . and eat.” His second command seems to speak to more than just dinner; it suggests that she also “swallow,” or endure his abuse and stomach the pain. Precious is also forced to swallow and “stomach”; her body is always taking in food or “taking in” physical and sexual abuse. From the time she is a baby, her body acts as the site of her father’s abominable actions. Precious’s mother says it began “wif his [Precious’s father’s] fingers between her legs. I say Carl what you doing! He say shut your big ass up! This is good for her. Then he git off me, take off her Pampers and try to stick his thing in Precious” (135). As a baby, Precious cannot defend herself and is not defended by her mother, who both abets the abuse, and abuses her daughter herself. Like many perpetrators of incest, Carl later successfully convinces Precious that she wants him sexually. When she is a teenager and orgasms
during sex, he says, “See, you LIKE it! You jus’ like your mama—you die for it!” (24). This both confuses Precious’s understanding of her role in her own abuse and advances her self-hatred. When her body responds to his sexual abuse, she feels guilty. Though she knows that her mother and father are wrong, she begins to think she too is wrong or at fault. Such mental disorientation and self-blame also affects Precious’s autonomy so that she cannot regulate what her body takes in, both in terms of food and sexual contact. Carl’s early rape of his daughter begins with this forced “eating.” She recounts that by the age of seven, her father is routinely raping her: “First it’s just in my mouth” (39). Later, when Precious thinks of her father, she remembers: “He stink, the white shit drip off his dick. Lick it lick it. I HATE that” (57-58). Precious’s father and mother force her to perform oral sex on them, making her literally and symbolically eat their abuse.

Precious’s language reveals how the abuse and the physical pleasure that accompanies it affect her psyche. As she recounts her father raping her, she thinks, “then I feel the hot sauce hot cha cha feeling when he be fucking me. I get so confuse. I HATE him” (58). Her description of the “hot sauce” feeling confirms that sex and food have so intertwined in her young life that she can describe her violation only as an experience related to eating. As Becky W. Thompson maintains in *A Hunger So Wide and So Deep: A Multiracial View of Women’s Eating Problems*, studies show that many women who have been sexually abused have eating disorders (47). Mark F. Schwartz and Leigh Cohn explain that “eating is often associated with family meals, nurturing, and proof that parents care for children. Thus, feeding and then abusing the child are incongruent, confusing, and difficult to assimilate and integrate” (xi). In Precious’s family, the grotesque entangling of food and sex begins when Precious is just a baby and Mary stands by while Carl’s desire to suck her lactating breasts turns into an incestuous desire to molest their baby girl. Mary tells the therapist that Carl’s sexual desire was initially directed at her. Rather than breastfeed Precious, her mother chooses to give Precious formula: “I bottle her, tittie him. Bottle more better for kidz. Sanitary. But I never git dried up ‘cause Carl always on me. It’s like that you know. Chile, man—a woman got bofe. What you gonna do? So we in bed. I put her on one side of me on pillow, Carl on other side me” (135). Mary’s rationalization reveals her unavailability as mother and protector. The fact that her mother gives her milk to Carl over Precious indicates her failure to put her daughter first. Mary fails at motherhood not because formula is harmful to infants; rather, she fails because Mary’s gift of breast milk to Carl ends up damaging Precious on multiple levels, particularly because this sexual encounter between two adults perversely prompts Carl’s sexual abuse of Precious: “Carl got my dtde in his mouf. Nuffin’ wrong wif that, it’s natural. But I think that the day IT start” (135). Sexual abuse of the daughter is tied to the unwholesome, destructive use of food and sex. The moment when Carl sucks Mary’s breast milk and Mary notices he is getting sexually aroused marks the fate of excesses for the entire family, including the love-deprived daughter.

Mary’s neglect of her daughter at a young age urges Precious to see herself as dispensable. Part of Mary’s mistreatment of Precious includes teaching her to hate her body, a hatred inextricably connected to eating and “taking in,” sexually and otherwise. When Precious’s body, pregnant with her father’s baby and her first child, reminds Mary of her own depressing existence, she beats twelve-year-old Precious and screams, “Slut! Goddam slut! You fuckin’ cow!” (9). Later, she blames Precious for being raped. Rather than seriously confronting what happened or admit her detestable wrongdoing, Mary selfishly focuses on herself: “So you can’t blame all that shit happen to Precious on me. I love Carl, I love him. He her daddy, but he was my man!” (136). It is clear that Mary is so much under Carl’s control that she copies Carl’s abuse and desire to maintain power over her daughter. Thus Mary’s abusive actions and behavior toward her daughter both signal her own victimization and highlight her complicity in stripping away her daughter’s esteem, power, and strength.
Precious is enslaved by her parents in both the bedroom and the kitchen. In the kitchen, Precious must cook for her mother despite the fact that she “get tired of cooking for her [Mary]” (56). In the kitchen, on the floor, Precious begins to give birth to her first child while mother beats her. The kitchen is also Precious’ immediate thought when her therapist asks about her first memory of her mother, a memory filled with dark imagery: “can of mackerel left open in kitchen on hot day that’s what make me remember, that smell. he put his ball in my face. ... mama jaw open like evil wolf” (132-33). Thus, even when Precious is not consuming, her mistreatment is often food-related. Yet, as black women writers such as Gloria Wade-Gayles and Paule Marshall have attested, the kitchen has historically provided a space and place for creative expression, fellowship, and empowerment for black women. The kitchen was a center for female bonding. As bell hooks writes, “On Saturday mornings we would gather in the kitchen to get our hair fixed—that is, straightened. Smells of burning grease and hair, mingled with the scent of our freshly washed bodies, with collard greens cooking on the stove, with fried fish” (“Straightening Our Hair” 111). Yet fictional kitchens do not always provide this kind of solace, and the image of the black woman in the kitchen does not always nurture. For example, in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola’s father rapes her in the kitchen while Pecola does the dishes (the same chore Precious does when her mother abuses her). It is also on Mrs. Breedlove’s employer’s kitchen floor (which she refers to as “my floor”) that Pecola accidentally knocks over her mother’s cobbler and is subsequently “knocked ... to the floor,” “yanked,” “slapped,” and verbally abused (Morrison 109). The parallels with *Push* abound since, as Precious recounts, one time Mary “pick up cast-iron skillet, thank god it was no hot grease in it, and she hit me so hard on back I fall on floor” (19).

After blaming Precious for sleeping with Carl and getting pregnant, Mary commands, “Git your Jezebel ass up and fix some dinner ‘fore I give you something to cry about” (19). Precious must not only cook, but also engage in gluttony despite not wanting to eat. Mary orders, “Go get a plate and stop acting stupid ‘fore I do hurt your shoulder,” and Precious follows her mother’s instructions (20). Food consumption—simultaneously mindless, numbing, and painful—soon consumes her: “Greens, corn bread, ham hocks, macaroni ‘n cheese; I eat ‘cause she say eat. I don’t taste nothin’.” (20). Such meals, dubbed soul food, often offer the comfort of warm memories of family, black culture, and togetherness, but here such so-called comfort food only torments. When her mother asks for more food for herself, she commands, “’N git you some more” even though Precious says she doesn’t want anymore. Though Precious feels “so full [she] could bust,” she returns “back to the kitchen.” She gets more food for her mother and makes sure her plate is full, knowing that if she doesn’t follow orders, her mother “just gonna make me go back again” (21). Precious has no control, no voice, no self-determination: “Eating, first ‘cause she make me, beat me if I don’t, then eating hoping pain in my neck back go away. I keep eating till the pain, the gray TV light, and Mama is a blur; and I just fall back on the couch so full it like I’m dyin’ and I go to sleep, like I always do; almost” (21). However, eating cannot numb all of Precious’s pain and it does not save her from further sexual abuse, for Precious’s mother soon continues the agonizing nightmare that Carl has begun.
Precious "almost" goes to sleep, but continues: "I feel Mama's hand between my legs, moving up my thigh" (21). Like in this instance when Mary molests Precious during a food-induced sleep, sexual abuse and eating become synonymous for Precious, making her feel ashamed and contemptible. She admits, "I feel so stupid sometimes. So ugly, worth nuffin'. I could just sit here wif my muver everyday wif the shades drawed, watching TV, eat, watch TV, eat. Carl come over fuck us'es" (34-35). Precious's fear and anxiety make her replay past bad memories of fear. During her first day at Each One/Teach One Alternative School, the program that eventually saves her, Precious's thoughts about sexual appetite and food appetite converge when her teacher, Ms. Rain, calls on her to read a page from a book: "My head water. I see bad things. I see my daddy. I see TVs I hear rap music I want something to eat I want fuck feeling from Daddy I want die I want die" (53). She repeatedly recalls the contradictory desire for pleasure and pain associated with the rapes. Sometimes her desire to eat and have sex seems to represent pain relief as much as a desire for pain. Such confusing feelings cause her to both confirm her negative feelings about herself and simultaneously escape from them.

Out of guilt for the pleasure she may experience, Precious punishes herself. Carl degrades her at the same time he pounds into her: "You LOVE it! Say you love it! I want to say I DON'T. I wanna say I'm a chile. But my pussy be popping like grease in frying pan. He slam in me again" (111). Again, like her description of a "hot sauce" feeling, Precious's description of her physical sensations relates to food, as if she can find no other language to describe the forced sex that she detests. She continues, "My body not mine, I hate it coming. Afterward I go bathroom. I smear shit on my face. Feel good. Don't know why but it do" (111). Wendy Rountree suggests that "Precious wipes her face with her own excrement and cuts her body to prove to herself that she is still alive, real, visible" (135). However, it seems that wiping the excrement on her face feels good because it is punishment for her orgasm, and it is the consumed food that has produced the foul waste. Smearing the excrement on herself is dirty, replicating Precious's view of herself and her bodily responses to sex. As Schwartz and Cohn assert, after sexual abuse "the body and sex organs become the enemy in the context of the distorted survival strategy of children who must maintain the belief that adults are good (safe) and therefore they (the body) must be bad and deserve to be punished" (xi). Precious "feel good" because smearing the excrement confirms how she thinks about herself. In Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics, Traci C. West discusses how feelings of "dirtiness" affects "victim-survivors" of color: "The feeling of being dirty often incorporates major portions of a victim-survivor's self-concept. Women may view themselves as soiled, ruined, or evil... Violence that dirties the body too easily transforms the victim-survivor into an embodiment of dirtiness" (68). West suggests that pernicious "cultural messages" about blackness, including racist misrepresentations of the black body, further black victims' feelings of inferiority and impurity. Black women have been deemed "dirty" both in terms of their labor and in terms of their supposed lewd and "savage" sexuality. Historically, black women have been forced to do the "dirty work." Bridget Anderson describes the antebellum South's dependence on binaries with regards to purity: "Black women's bodies were exposed through the exigencies of their physical labour, skirts pinned up, sleeves rolled up, and were exposed during punishment... So once again we have women divided into clean/dirty, moral/physical, virtuous/sexual, white/black" (132). Considering white racist inventions about the black female body, Precious's act of "dirtying" herself takes on greater significance. It ties in with her self-mutilation in that for multiple reasons, she feels that she is not even good enough to escape via food and only "allows" herself waste.

Wiping "shit" on herself demonstrates the extent that Precious has been shaped by social constructions of black female sexuality. As Alice Walker writes her in short
story, “Coming Apart,” in pornography “[w]hile white women are depicted as human bodies, if not beings, black women are depicted as shit” (You Can’t 52). In I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Maya Angelou also confirms the representation of black girls and women as shit, recalling that as a child, she “was described by playmates as being shit color” (17). As Precious internalizes her father’s abuse, she simultaneously embodies the false portrayal and destructive treatment of black women as shit. Her self-defacement and contradictory emotions following sexual enjoyment intimate her inability to comprehend or reconcile physical pleasure with pain and abuse. Rountree maintains that Precious “learns to distrust positive emotions and feelings of pleasure because sexual pleasure has been corrupted by her father’s abuse” (136). Precious has neither control of, or trust in her body. She can control neither her food intake nor her sexual activity; later, to become emotionally and physically healthy, she will have to push all the negativity out.

Valerie Loichot's essay, “Edwidge Danticat’s Kitchen History,” is particularly useful when thinking about food in Push. Both Breath, Eyes, Memory and Push tell the stories of young black girls who have distant relationships with their mothers and hostile relationships with their bodies due to sexual affronts and abuse. While Precious is sexually molested and raped, Sophie is the product of a rape and is routinely “tested” by her mother to ensure that she remains a virgin. Loichot claims that food in Breath acts as “an unavoidable and complex form of language” that Sophie uses to come to terms with her subjectivity (92). For example, Sophie uses a mortar and pestle used for spices to break her own hymen so that she can escape from her mother’s “testing.” As a result of feeling disconnected and powerless, she later becomes bulimic. Eventually, Loichot maintains, “[c]ooking is the thread that stitches the four generations of women” (Sophie, her mother, her aunt, and her grandmother) when Sophie returns to Haiti and offers to cook for her aunt and grandmother.

In Push, Precious also comes to terms with herself via her relationship with food, although Precious later learns that she doesn’t need to rely on consumption in order to stay emotionally stable. Loichot writes, “Each stage of Breath could be read as a step toward the acquisition and mastery of food and its language” (93). Like Sophie in Breath, Eyes, Memory, Precious changes her relationship with food as she acquires this language—in Precious’s case she literally learns a new language. Yet before she masters a new form of communication, she must stop over-consuming.

In the first few pages of Push, sixteen-year-old Precious describes herself as “big, five feet nine-ten, I weigh over two hundred pounds” (6). From the time she is small, Precious’s body invites ridicule: “Second grade I is fat. Thas when fart sounds and pig grunt sounds start” (38). Another self-description reveals how her self-perception intimately connects to eating: “I big, I talk, I eats, I cooks, I laugh, watch TV, do what my muver say” (31). Alice Walker defines womanist, among other descriptors, as one who “loves food and roundness,” yet food and roundness are not beneficial to Precious (In Search xii). Usually what her mother dictates involves eating, cooking, or sex. Mary typically demands that Precious cook all meals for the both of them: “fried chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, green beans, and Wonder bread” (9). When their conversations consist of more than Mary insulting Precious, they revolve around food:

Mary: “Fix us some lunch, it’s way pas’ lunch. You done ate?”
Precious: “I had some potato chips.”
Mary: “Thas all?”
Precious: “I remember ham ‘n chicken, don’t say nuffin’, ax her, “What you want?”
Mary: “I don’t know, see what’s in there. If not nuffin’ in there, get stamps out my purse and go to store ‘n get us’es somethin’ to eat.” (58)

Mary is herself a prisoner to consumption as she never leaves the house and “ain’ circus size yet but she getting there” (56). The mother passes this prisoner state of mind and being to her daughter so that both women remain dependent and discouraged.
It should be noted that while Precious's problematic relationship with food and eating initially keeps her powerless, occasionally her overeating occasionally intimates her defiance and rejection of her mother's tyranny. Loichot writes, "Once disconnected from its nourishing environment and its links to the memory of the past and to a community, the isolated body-turned-into-prey develops tools of resistance. Controlling food intake appears to be the only, albeit illusionary and devastating, way to master the body" (101). Though here Loichot refers to Sophie's diasporic disconnect from Haiti, Precious is similarly severed from any sense of community given her and her mother's physical isolation and Precious's emotional disconnect from family, friends, and community. While Danticat's protagonist vomits up her food, thereby controlling her intake, Precious overeats, maintaining a contradictory sense of control via being out of control. Yet her overweight (and pregnant) body is not always successful in its resistance: "I'm walking slow slow now. No one say nuffin' to me now my belly big. No 'You Big Mama' 'n 'all dat meat and no potatoes' shit. I'm safe. Yeah, safe from dese fools on the streets but am I safe from Carl Kenwood Jones?" (23). Like Sophie, Precious's resistance does not prevent further abuse or harm; she knows Carl will always be her sexual predator.

Until Precious achieves self expression and self-assurance, she remains trapped in fantasies shaped by the beauty standards set by patriarchal white culture. Living a traumatic and depressing daily routine, she is particularly susceptible to fantasy. After her second day at the alternative school, she thinks, "I go home. I'm so lonely there. I never notice before. I'm so busy getting beat, cooking, cleaning, pussy and asshole either hurting or popping. School I a joke; black monster, Big Bertha, Blimp B54 where are you" (62). In order to escape, Precious begins to imagine her body as slim, pretty, and virginal. When Ms. Rain asks the class to write their fantasies of themselves, "how we would be if life was perfect," Precious thinks, "I would be light skinned, thereby treated right and loved by boyz. . . . Then I get hair. Swing job, you know like I do with my extensions, but this time it be my own hair, permanently" (113-14). Her description of her body demonstrates how her fantasies connect to her sexuality: "I would be a virgin like Michael Jackson, like Madonna. I would be a different Precious Jones. My bress not be big. . . . My body be like Whitney. I would be tight pussy girl no stretch marks and torn pussy from babie's head bust me open" (114). Unsurprisingly, sexual activity often triggers Precious's escape fantasies. When her father rapes her, Precious "change bodies, I be dancing in videos! In movies! I be breaking fly jus' a dancing! Umm hmmm heating up the stage at the Apollo for Doug E. Fresh or Al B. Sure. They love me!" When Carl yells at her while raping her, she thinks, "He mess up dream talkin' n gruntin' " (24). Thompson notes that the "process of leaving the body during sexual abuse through numbing and denial parallels that of leaving the body through a binge" (47). Precious denies her painful reality by imagining herself somewhere else. This serves to numb her, the same effect her overeating has. Like food, fantasy provides fleeting comfort and serves to only deepen her emotional abyss.

Since food, sex, and fantasy blur, Precious always wants more though she eventually hates herself for it. She thinks, "I hate hear him talk more than I hate fuck. Sometimes fuck feel good. That confuse me, everything get swimming for me floating like more days sometimes" (35). Precious's fantasies of herself escalate such that she imagines what her mother should have said when the abuse started: "Can't j'ou see Precious is a beautiful chile like white chile in magazines or on toilet paper wrappers. Precious is a blue-eye skinny chile whose hair is long braids, long long braids" (64). After being raped, she again fantasizes she is "Someone not dark skin, short hair, someone not fucked. A pink virgin girl. A girl like Janet Jackson, a sexy girl don't no one get to fuck. A girl for value" (112). Sadly, the only time Precious feels valuable is when she imagines herself as someone else, again recalling The Bluest Eye's Pecola Breedlove. Pecola also has a desperate and dependent relationship on food; she fantasizes that she is someone pretty, white, and blue eyed when she consumes milk.
out of a Shirley Temple cup, eats Mary Jane candy, and after she feeds the tainted meat that Soaphead Church gives her to the old dog. Pecola's consumption is also connected to sex: "To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. Three pennies had bought her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane" (Morrison 50). It is interesting that both girls imagine themselves on wrappers, light paper that merely covers an object but is not valuable in of itself.

In her book review of *Push*, Susann Cokal writes, "Precious's vocabulary of images is so impoverished that in her mind the summa of beauty and love is attached to something to be used, in the most degraded way, and discarded" (186). Indeed, Precious's desire to be like the photos on toilet paper wrappers is ultimately self-deprecating and connects to her self-punishment of smearing excrement on herself. Yet Precious's and Pecola's desires also show the extent that they are shaped by a consumer culture and its images; both girls want desperately to escape ugliness, even if only via false extensions or pretend versions of themselves. Precious feels momentary acceptance when she participates as a consumer: "Woman at Lane Bryant on one-two-five say no reason big girls can't wear the latest, so I wear it" (37). As Brumberg writes, "Because the body is a proxy for the self, selecting clothes for it is always of vital concern" (128). For Precious, purchasing new clothes is even more crucial since rather than the body as a proxy for the self, her clothes are a substitute for her body. She frequently makes reference to her outfits and prides herself on keeping up with trends: "Reeboks, white! Better than Nikes? No, next shits I get be Nikes!" (22-23). Precious's clothes purchasing is an extension of her bodily consumptions in that it represents another item she "consumes" in order to be accepted. As her fantasies about looking like the images of toilet paper wrappers suggest, Precious's thoughts and desires are shaped by a culture that urges excess. As Walker reminds us in "Coming Apart," this culture identifies black women with shit while at the same time it entices consumer activity. Precious falls victim to being brainwashed in both ways.

Eating makes Precious feel guilty, ashamed, ugly, unworthy and wanting more, even as she abhors her gluttony. Sexual intercourse prompts the same feelings. In other words, her desires have been confused with her repulsions so much that Precious cannot stop excessively consuming. The first day of alternative school, she rushes out and thinks about how much she hated school as a child. Not surprisingly, these feelings result from sexual abuse: "Second grade my cherry busted." She continues, "I don't want to think that now" (36). After having these thoughts, Precious relies on her eating disorder and turns again to food for salvation: "I look across the street at McDonald's but I ain' got no money so I unwrap ham and take a bite" (36). This is not unlike earlier moments when Precious eats "till the pain... is a blur" (21). Precious cannot stop thinking about the pain she went through in the second grade when she began to urinate on herself in class: "Don't know why I don't get up, but I don't. I jus' sit there and pee" (37). Precious's shame about her body disconnects her from her classmates, silences her, and immobilizes her. As Margaret K. Bass writes in "On Being a Fat Black Girl in a Fat-Hating Culture," "Fat silences. Fat makes you alone and lonely even when you're nine or ten. The truth of it shames you; you do not tell when people hurt you" (222). Precious's silence is compounded by the sexual violence she suffers at home, causing her to feel alone and hopeless. In the pattern of seeking relief, Precious tries to block out this traumatic memory through food. Less than forty-five minutes since eating the ham, she thinks, "My head hurt. I gotta eat something" (37). She decides to go to a fast-food chicken restaurant, and steals her meal while the server goes to the back to get her potato salad: "grab chicken and roll, turn, run out, and cut down one-two-six stuffing chicken in my mouth" (37). But the instantly pleasurable feelings resulting from food soon dissipate. She hurries to the alternative school, steps out of the elevator and her memories of the past return to haunt her: "I'm walking across the lobby room real real slow. Full of chicken, bread; usually that make me not want to cry remember, but I feel like crying
My head is like the swimming pool at the Y on one-three-five. Summer full of bodies splashing, most in shallow end; one, two in deep end. That how all the time years is swimming in my head" (38). In this instant, Precious again remembers her experiences as the outcast in school. She recalls being depressed, hating herself, and being ignored by teachers and students. This memory leads her back to thinking about her father raping her: "He is intercourzing me. Say I can take it. Look you don't even bleed, virgin girls bleed. You not virgin. I'm seven" (39). Nine years later this thought physically and emotionally renders Precious frozen, so much that when her new teacher asks if she is okay, Precious must force her feet to move. Later, everyone in the class must introduce themselves, revealing "something you do good" (42). When Ms. Rain presses Precious for an answer, she "can't think of nuffin" (46). When pressed again, she responds, "I can cook," a talent linked back to food and sex in that cooking is something she is forced to do, something oppressive that ultimately forces her into the same cycle of consumption (46).

Before Precious begins her process of self-love, she hates her body: "Sometimes I pass by store window and somebody fat dark skin, old looking, someone look like my mudder look back at me." She continues, "I stand in tub sometime, look at my body, it stretch marks ripples." Still, she admits, "I try to hide myself, then I try to show myself. I ax my mudder for money to git my hair done, clothes" (32). Like Precious's mix of pleasure during and self-disgust following her father's incestuous abuse, her simultaneous shame and courage about her body reveal her confusion about her sexuality. One of her few confidences is her clothing: "One thing I do got is clothes, thanks to my mudder's charge at Lane Bryant 'n man se'U hot shit" (35). Yet, as suggested earlier, her desire to shop and dress her body seems only a momentary deflection from the corporeal. Moments she takes to think about her body are self-doubting: "I look at Mama and see my face, my body, my color—we bofe big, dark. Am I ugly? Is Mama ugly? I'm not sure" (84). Here Precious suffers from "matrophobia" or fear of becoming one's mother. Further, Precious's disgust for her body compounds her fear. When she sees another "fat dark-skin woman," she thinks, "I like light-skin people, they nice. I likes slim people too" (29). Given what she considers attractive—the Spanish EMS worker and Consuelo, the "coffee colored" girl in her class—her own beauty standards mark her as ugly.

When Precious produces, her feelings about herself and her place in the world shift dramatically. However, it is important to note that before Precious makes positive changes, she doesn't think her body, particularly her vagina, "produces" anything of value. Precious's understanding of her vagina mirrors a phallocentric view of the female body and the vagina as representing absence, lack, and inferiority. Her earliest memory of her mother's cruelty seems to influence Precious's disgust with her vagina: "mama jaw open like evU wolf. the smell deeper than toilet. her fingers pick apart my pussy" (133). All of Precious's descriptions of female genitalia thereafter are negative. She constantly refers to a "pussy smell" whether talking about Mrs. Lichenstein's "garbage smell" (31), the horror of having a "bad odor out my pussy" (8), or her mother's smell, associated with oral sex. Her feelings and descriptions mimic sociocultural expectations of the female body. As Virginia Braun and Sue Wulkerson assert, the vagina has been represented as the "(passive) receptacle for the penis" (20). Sociocultural representations of female genitalia present the vagina as taking in, symbolically and passively consuming. Precious buys into these representations, as she has not been taught differently, particularly from her mother who encourages her passivity. The fact that Precious's first child, Little Mongo, has Down syndrome, a genetic condition Precious doesn't understand, encourages her to see her vagina as "producing" nothing of value. Then, when her mother won't let her raise her child, she feels even more worthless.

When Precious discovers a new language she moves away from dangerous consumption, both in terms of what she eats and in terms of how she thinks about her

METAPHORS OF CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION IN SAPPHIRE'S PUSH

443
After giving birth to Abdul, her second child, she finally names her horrendous sexual interactions with her father: “I think I was rape” (68). Bell hooks begins her first chapter of *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*, by asserting that “[h]ealing takes place within us as we speak the truth of our lives” (19). Precious’s naming her abuse as rape breaks a form of silencing—it is the first time she has articulated the truth about her oppressive relationship with her father. Later, this understanding will help her name her abuse when she attends an incest survivor meeting. Precious forges a mother/son relationship with her baby, which also prompts her to reassess her body: “I push him out my pussy, but I didn’t meet a boy ‘n fall in love, sex up ‘n have a baby” (68). Rather than view her vagina as merely a receptacle and her body as property, she begins to believe she deserves her middle name, Precious: “I think how alive I am, every part of me that is cells, proteens, neutrons, hairs, pussy, eyeballs, nervous system, brain” (137). Precious realizes she has a reason to live: “I got poems, a son, friends” (137).

After Precious begins to feel true love and friendship, she begins to choose freely, no longer a victim of forced consumption. Signs of this change are evident in her use of food and her descriptions of the body. The first change in a food reference occurs during Precious’s first day at alternative school when a fellow classmate shows her kindness. During a class break, Rhonda offers to make a trip to the store to purchase snacks. Precious thinks, “I want somthin’ but I ain’ got no money” (48). To her surprise, Rhonda reads her mind: “Rhonda look me, say, I got you. I look up in her eye. She smile. I feel like I’m gonna cry again. . . . But this is what I always want. I say barbecue potato chips” (48). Here food is associated with fellowship and communication rather than coercion and violence. Rhonda’s simple offer signals that Precious’s isolation has ended; she will soon be a part of a group of young women who support and nurture one another. Previous to this moment, few people have smiled at Precious or done something for her just to be kind. Thus, it is fitting that in this poignant exchange between Precious and Rhonda, food does not equate escape or defeatism. Moments later, after meeting Precious, Ms. Rain helps her read a simple story. After Precious “reads” for the first time, she thinks, “I want to cry. I want to laugh. I want to hug kiss miz Rain. She make me feel good. I never readed nuffin’ before” (54-55). Precious becomes less dependent upon food as a pain reliever when she gains self-esteem and her life stops revolving around mindless consumption. The small gift of chips symbolically precipitates this change.

Giving birth to a son is Precious’s obvious major (re)production. Despite the obvious differences between giving birth and creating poetry, each generative act changes Precious’s relationship with her body, ends her unhealthy dependence on food, and frees her from emotional and mental imprisonment. In addition, both her physical and creative “productions” shape Precious’s self-confidence and self-love. Although Precious has given birth once before, she is never allowed to take care of her first child. Before she delivers Abdul (and after attending her first day at Each One Teach One), Precious thinks, “This baby feel like a watermelon between my bones getting bigger,” using food as her point of reference (57). Yet after the birth she admits, “I like baby I born. It gets to suckes from my bress. It gets to suckes from my bress.” She continues, “First I don’t like that. It hurt feel sore, then I like it” (68). Unlike Mary, Precious soon enjoys breastfeeding, a sign of her independence from her mother’s neglect and a departure from an oppressive life that limits her opportunities. When Precious has her first child at the age of twelve, Mary claims breastfeeding is “outta style. She [Mary] say I never do you. What that child of yours need tittie for? She retarded. Mongoloid. Down Sinder” (32). When Precious begins to break free from her mother, her optimism for life is reflected in her naming of her second child. Precious named her daughter Mongo because it “sound Spanish,” an indication of Precious’s color complex as she frequently admires “Spanish” light skin and hair. However, Precious names her second child Abdul because she likes the name. She learns after naming
him that Abdul means child of God. Such a realization, discerning the meaning of a name after the fact of naming, mirrors Precious's understanding of her own name: "My name mean somethin' valuable—Precious" (67). This is not to suggest that Precious does not know the meaning of the word beforehand; rather, her son's birth impels her to believe that her name actually applies to herself.

Precious's road toward recovery of self is not without obstacles, and even at the end of the novel she has a long way to go. Following the birth of Abdul, Precious so drastically changes that she soon begins to skip meals. Fasting is not a healthy or wise decision for a young nursing mother and this extreme change seems to highlight the fact that Precious is still learning how to change her thinking about herself and her life. In fact, some studies have suggested that fasting can be a result of sexual abuse. That Precious alternates between making healthy choices and making bad decisions seems to underscore that there are no easy or quick solutions to a lifetime of abuse. After her mother kicks her out, she returns to the hospital where the nurses ignore her, and eventually ends up in a shelter. In the mornings she feeds Abdul: "My body is his breakfast" (78). This is significant because it marks the beginning of Precious seeing her body as a source of strength, not weakness. Still, although she thinks, "I gotta get something to eat myself," she ends up skipping her meal: "Coffee out a steel pitcher, a little box of cornflakes, and a banana. I don't drink coffee. It's almost 7 o'clock. Fuck it, I got wait for Ms Rain in lobby” (78-79). She later writes about skipping meals as her journal entries become more poetic:

My favrt thing to take Abdul down to nursery at breakfas then not eat breakfas. n that giv me time to walk throo Harlem in morning to school (102)

When her housemother at the halfway house agrees to babysit, and advises her to "git you some dinner before you run out of here," Precious replies, "I was gonna take my journal book and write on the bus, 'stedda taking the train," again skipping a meal (137). Precious's skipping meals indicates that she still has a long way to go in terms of changing her outlook.

Going from overeating to fasting suggests that Precious's healing will not be simple. In his critique of therapy, Sam Warner writes, "Women are not disinvested of their sexual abuse simply through verbal rehearsal. From a post-structuralist perspective sexual abuse is not something that can be added and then subtracted in order to reveal the essence of a pure and prediscursive woman underneath" (120). Precious's healing emerges via writing rather than through "verbal rehearsal," yet Push also suggests that healing will require more than just a kind of repetitive expression (written or verbal), regardless of its cathartic power. In addition, Sapphire suggests that despite Precious's literacy development and journal writing, she will not resolve her issues by simply "subtracting" food. Precious's fasting symbolizes that she must find a balance in terms of developing a relationship with food and consumption that is enjoyable and natural. At the same time readers are reminded that Precious will be challenged to let go of destructive thinking on her road to recovery. Following Precious's decision one day to skip dinner and write on the bus, she reflects about all the positive things in her life. Yet she also thinks, "I got this virus in my body cloud over sun" (137). She thinks, "I git so mad sometimes. Mama jus' pour my life down the drain like it's nothing. I got all this shit to deal with" (138). The point is that Precious will need to go beyond merely moving between extremes (binging to fasting or extreme optimism to defeatism) in order to find emotional balance. Still, toward the end of the novel, her food related experiences are more positive, showing promise for her future.
One of Precious’s important steps towards achieving emotional balance and overcoming trauma is learning to read and write. Ms. Rain’s innovative teaching style involves her writing to students in their journals and encouraging them to write back, even before they know how to spell or read. Chaya Bhuvaneswar and Audrey Shafer assert that this pedagogical approach is necessary: “The strategy employed by Ms Rain—dialogical journal writing as an alternative to traditional didactic, hierarchal modes of learning or worse, rote GED workbooks—represents an effective departure from script, one that draws Precious and her classmates out of their suffering and into an imaginative, nurturing web of mutual caring and intellectual stimulation” (116). Indeed, Precious takes to this letter writing, adding poems to her journal. It is important to note the similarities between Celie’s acquisition of language in *The Color Purple* and Precious’s literacy development. There are clear parallels between the novels; like Precious, Celie is a teenager when she is raped by her father (or, more accurately, the man she thinks is her father). Celie has two of his children, who are taken away from her; Precious’s first child, Little Mongo, is taken by Precious’s grandmother. Unsurprisingly, when Precious reads Walker’s novel, she thinks, “it sound in a way so much like myself” (81). Both women learn about themselves via language: *The Color Purple* is written as a series of letters and sections of *Push* are excerpted from Precious’s journal writing and poetry. The letters Celie finally receives from Nettie act much like Ms. Rain’s journal comments and questions—in both cases the protagonists begin to overcome self-hatred through the combination of reading and creative expression.

When Precious writes, her life is no longer defined by eating, cooking, and forced sex, but rather by the words she puts together and the art she creates. Her poetry expresses her anger, rage, fears, and critiques of a social system where “everything is fine” for rich white people while poor black people are suffering (127). As Madhu Dubey maintains, “Once she joins the literacy class, Precious begin to acquire a sense of interiority and agency, and thereby to participate in the process of self-making that forms the hallmark of the modern tradition of print literacy” (85). Poetry is not just an art form for Precious, but a way to escape a discourse that does not speak to her or for her. In an essay on the relationship between oral tradition and written expression in *The Color Purple*, Valerie Babb writes, “[B]oth Celie and Nettie learn to master the written word and to modify its form and function so that they, as black women, are no longer complete victims of the racial and sexual oppression a white, ethnocentric use of writing can dictate” (108). A similar process frees Precious. For example, when Precious steals and reads the therapist’s file on her, she sees racism barely disguised in the language and academic jargon that Ms. Weiss uses to assess her. After Precious reads Ms. Weiss’s comments that “despite her obvious intellectual limitations she [Precious] is quite capable of working as a home attendant” (119), she writes a poem that reveals her ability to now transform language previously inaccessible:

This whose ass
they want
me to wipe?
Push wheelchair for—
I kill em’ first. (128)

Literature and literacy are empowering to Precious and her allusions to *The Odyssey* and the poetry of William Blake in her writing indicate this change. She asserts, “I am homer on a voyage” (127) and writes, “TYGER TYGER / BURNING BRIGHT / That’s what in Precious / Jones heart—a tyger” (128). Here she transforms and rewrites writing that she is not supposed to understand or relate to because she is poor, black, and female. Her allusion to eighteenth century British poet Blake, for example, reveals a postmodern appropriation that is liberating. As Hélène Cixous writes in her seminal essay “The Laughing Medusa,” “writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive
thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (879). Precious reclaims writing in the spirit of Cixous's *écriture féminine*, not only as a woman, but as a poor black woman. In Precious's final poem she rejects limitations and assumptions imposed by white society:

I can see
I can read
nobody can see now
but I might be a poet, rapper, I got
water colors
My child is smart

Being consumed with her journal writing saves Precious from inevitable depression and hopelessness. The possibilities she lists (poet, rapper) are quite different than Precious's earlier conviction that cooking is the only thing she does well. Symbolically, cooking and eating represent the power excessive consumption has had in Precious's life. If the body "is a crucial starting point for understanding female reading and writing, not only because woman is traditionally defined in terms of her body, but because the body serves as the literal and figurative site of female pain, pleasure, and production," then Precious's move from involuntary cooking and eating to voluntary writing demonstrates the liberatory potentiality of poetry for Precious's body, which had been exploited and abused (Singley 5).

As Precious becomes a more effective writer and more comfortable in sharing her feelings, food consumption signifies friendship instead of pain. When Precious finds out that she is HIV-positive, she shares the devastating information with her classmates: "We sitting in circle thas when I tell class. Jus' like it's cornflakes for breakfast. After so many days looking out the window, doing double talk in my journal, I just come out and say it" (93). Making a food reference to describe the ease with which she shares her news suggests that Precious's relationship with food has changed to a means for communion with others. Following the news, the girls comfort Precious and encourage her to be a fighter. The girls are Precious's sole support system: "These girlz is my friends . . . They and Ms Rain is my friends and family" (95). Later, at a restaurant sharing coffee with Rita and some other young women, Precious sees again that eating or consumption can accompany camaraderie and happiness.

When Precious attends "Survivors of Incest Anonymous" with Rita, her world opens up from isolation to community as she listens to women of all races and ages speak their horrors. In her essay on trauma, Kai Erikson confirms that rapport arises out of shared trauma: "Trauma shared can serve as a source of communality in the same way that common languages and common backgrounds can. There is a special kinship there, a sense of identity, even when feelings of affection are deadened and the ability to care numbed" (186). Erikson's essay focuses primarily on trauma shared as a result of events like human catastrophes, yet the emotional connections made between those who go through the same catastrophic event and those who go through similar personal experiences are the same. When Precious listens to different women talk about their abuse for an hour and a half, she is shocked that so many women have similar traumatic pasts: "All kinda women here. Princess girls, some fat girls, old women, young women. One thing we got in common, no the thing, is we was rape" (130). Another thing they have in common is their collective voice that rejects silence. Audre Lorde's examination of her past silences and the transformative power of finding her voice in some ways mirrors Precious's. Lorde writes: "My silences had not protected me . . . But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences" (Sister Outsider 142). Indeed, after Precious briefly
shares her story, she is amazed at what she has in common with other women: “One hour and a half women talk. Can this be done happen to so many people?” (130). When they go out following the meeting, consuming no longer means disappearing or temporary escape:

Afterwards we got out for coffee. I have never been “out for coffee” before Rita put her arm around my shoulder, I order hot chocolate ‘cause that’s what I like . . . . I’m alive inside. A bird is my heart. Mama and Daddy is not win. I’m winning. I’m drinking hot chocolate in the Village wif girls—all kind who love me. (130-31)

Later Rita asks Precious if she wants another drink but Precious thinks, “I do but don’t want to be greedy. Even if boyfriend do give her money she got better things to spend it on then Precious Jones” (131). Rita hugs Precious and orders her another hot chocolate anyway. Generously, Rita, a mentoring figure, wants Precious to enjoy another beverage. Selfishly and cruelly, Precious’s mother would force her to eat more.

Precious begins developing healthy relationships. Even the kitchen begins to be a space for productive dialogue rather than painful silencing. At the halfway house Precious thinks, “I’m on the threshold of stepping out into my new life, an apartment for me, Abdul and maybe Little Mongo . . . mo’ education, new friends” (84). After a frustrating session with Ms. Weiss and her mother, in which Mary tried to dodge any responsibility for her daughter’s abuse, Precious vents to her housemother in the halfway kitchen. Her housemother acknowledges her pain, joining Precious in a critique of Mary and agreeing to watch Abdul for her. When Miz Mom, the housemother, gives Precious a few dollars for the bus, Precious is touched by her generosity: “Something tear inside me. I wanna cry but I can’t” (137). She proceeds to cry anyway, surprised when Miz Mom hands her two more dollars. The interaction between Precious and Miz Mom serves to replace Mary’s detachment and abuse. The fact that they are in the kitchen begins to reestablish this female space as one that promotes female bonding rather than violence and coercion.

Precious begins to come to terms with her body due to the support and love from her family at Each One Teach One. Though she previously views her body and vagina as an extension of her ugliness and lack, she soon appreciates: “A boy come out my pussy. Was nothing. A dark spot in the sky; then turn to life in me” (95). The title of the novel intimates Precious’s salvation. Although she occasionally recalls people urging her to push when she was in labor, it is not until Ms. Rain encourages her that Precious understands the deeper meaning of pushing for her life. When the reality of AIDS sinks in, Precious finds it difficult to write: “I don’t have nothing to write today—maybe never. Hammer in my heart now, beating me, I feel like my blood a giant river swell up inside me and I’m drowning” (96). Ms. Rain continues to pressure Precious to write and though Precious yells “Fuck you!” Ms. Rain urges her to open her journal: “you can’t stop now Precious, you gotta push” (97). In this moment Precious understands that her survival depends upon her ability to engender her own emotional change through writing. The female body and female writing merge. Earlier in the narrative she is encouraged to “push” when she is in labor; both efforts require her to “produce” for the sake of her body and spirit.

When Precious looks at Abdul, she thinks, “In his beauty I see my own,” a major step towards ending destructive forms of consumption and oppression (140). Yet at the end of the novel, Precious is an HIV-positive mother of two children, one of whom lives with her in a halfway house. She finds out that Abdul is HIV-negative, “Something . . . that make me feel . . . there is a god,” yet her future is still precarious and she remains confused: “I don’t understand why some kids git a good school and mother and some don’t” (138, 139). Precious’s contributions to LIFE STORIES: Our Class Book, the final project of Precious’s Each One Teach One class, demonstrates that her unwholesome consumption has transformed into an emotionally and psychologically healthy production. In Precious’s second poem in the class book, “morning,” she describes her morning routine with Abdul:
Breakfast for kids
we go to kitchen
fix him something
good from what's there
what's there for baby is good
oatmeal
cream wheat
rice cream
appui sauc
or egg toast

Again, the kitchen now represents physical and emotional nourishment, a place where Precious can be a good mother. Precious's listing of breakfast food for her son sharply contrasts her food lists earlier in the novel: "collard greens and ham hocks, corn bread, fried apple pies, and macaroni 'n cheese" (19). Previously food was an oppressive force; she was forced to cook it for her mother and then forced to binge. In Precious's poem she “fix tea (don't like coffee)” and never eats or prepares food for herself. While this description doesn't necessarily imply that she is still skipping meals, the omission of food seems to speak to the fact that Precious is still developing a positive relationship with food and will need to continue working on her self-hatred. After all, her final poem, “untitled,” (and the last in LIFE STORIES) asserts,

I'm not really free
baby, Mama, HIV
where I wanna be where I wanna be?
not where I AM.

Precious is not completely free of her destructive food issues just as she does not feel completely free in her diseased body.

Ms. Rain's instruction to Precious that she “gotta push” despite feeling tired indicates that her movement away from forced consumption and into literacy will involve literal and symbolic production (97). As Precious experiments with writing, she begins to refer to herself as “Precious Jones the poet” (90). Ms. Rain reminds her that “telling your story over git you over that river” which Precious feels is drowning her (7). Indeed, Precious's story gets told via her poetry, and the more she writes, the better she feels. Her poetry symbolically responds to the questions Lorde poses in “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”: “What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?” (Sister Outsider 42). Lorde's use of the word “swallow” particularly speaks to Precious's past literal and metaphorical swallowing. Instead of swallowing, she spits out her story and communicates her dreams. While in the first half of Precious's poem, “untitled,” she questions her future pessimistically, the rest of her poem is hopeful. It reveals both her independence from destructive kitchen spaces (and by extension unwholesome consumption) and the connection between Precious's body and her writing:

On the 102
Down lex avenue
I do have lungs take in air
I can see
I can read

Previously, Lenox Avenue was imprisoning, particularly in terms of the both literal and symbolic control food had over her body. Earlier she recounts that her baby "was borned in the kitchen floor at 444 Lenox Avenue," her mother's apartment building, while now Lenox Avenue itself signifies new possibilities and freedoms, including literacy. The ending of the poem denotes the power of writing:
Ms Rain say
walk on
go into the poem
the HEART of it
beating
like
a clock
a virus
tick
tock.

Her words serve as a final reminder of the inevitability of time and her disease, but they also highlight her power of expression; though she may be a victim of multiple social and physical diseases, her poetry helps her fight. The reality is that though Precious has begun to find a balance between consumption and production on her road to literacy and freedom, her fate is unsure. Anson M. Green writes; “Bound by the time limits of welfare reform and an uncertain future with HIV, Precious will be sent directly off to work” (12). Precious’s counselor is equally uncertain about how long she will live. Still, while Precious’s writing may be unable to save her from AIDS, it saves her emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. The novel ends with Precious’s not only making real advancements in her everyday life, like her “quantum-leap” improvement in education, but also improving by leaps and bounds in terms of how she thinks about herself and her body (139).

Notes
1. *Push* has also been made into a film. In 2009 *Precious* debuted at the Sundance Film Festival and won the Grand Jury Prize and the Audience Award in the U. S. Dramatic category. The film received six Academy Award nominations and won two. In 2011, Sapphire published *The Kid*, a sequel to *Push* that centers on Precious’s son Abdul.

2. Excerpts of *Push* appeared in the *New Yorker*, prompting early talk about the book. Its first U. S. printing was 150,000 copies, quite a feat for a first novel. Talk continued after *Push* was published, provoking critical acclaim and mixed reviews. Kakutani describes *Push* as “a much-talked-about first novel . . . that manages to be disturbing, affecting and manipulative all at the same time.” At the time this essay was written, only eight academic essays had been published on *Push*. There is, however, an anthology on Sapphire and her works (including *Push*) forthcoming (edited by DoVeeana Fulton, et al.).

3. Various studies have linked unhealthy eating habits to high rates of obesity and other related health problems in the African American community. For further discussion, see Bailey (particularly chapter 4, “Food Preferences among African Americans”) and Flynn and Fitzgibbon.

4. As West writes, “Batterers and perpetrators of child sexual assault often specialize in psychological torment that includes purposefully ‘demonstrating’ to a victim-survivor that she is either a willing partner in the abuse or that she somehow caused and invited it” (71).

5. Thompson writes: “While sexual abuse does not automatically result in an eating problem, and having an eating problem does not necessarily mean that a woman has been sexually abused, studies do suggest that more women with eating problems have been sexually abused than women who do not have eating problems” (47).


7. In “Giving the Party,” Walker considers the potential heartening image of the stereotypical black woman providing food in kitchens. One day, in an airport cafeteria, Walker encounters “real life Jemimas”: “Using large black spoons, the woman ladled out beans and soup and gravy and rice.” She begins to view the Aunt Jemima/mammy image in a new light and writes: “It occurred to me that the black woman is herself a symbol of nurturing, and that these women, throughout all their incarnations in this country, and for millennia before they arrived here, would be standing or sitting just so . . . being sure that everyone was fed” (139).

8. One example is Lorde’s poem “Story Books on a Kitchen Table” which depicts a troubled relationship between a mother and daughter and a kitchen space that symbolizes the daughter’s isolation and disappointment.

9. Liddell claims, “At no time in African American literary history has a Black mother been accorded such conscious agency over the brutal downfall of her own flesh and blood, especially her only daughter” (143).
10. Such flashbacks indicate that Precious suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, which Caruth describes as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (57-58).

11. As Young writes, “Black is dirty, sex is dirty, and the two combine in Black sexuality” (190).

12. White discusses the images of black women in antebellum America in her seminal text, Ar'n't I a Woman?

13. Precious's meal of fried chicken is an interesting choice as Push can be read (and has been criticized for) promoting stereotypes. Sapphire comments, "How people react to the story tells a lot more about them than about the book. There are those who are ashamed of Precious. They think she reflects negatively on all black people. But some see her as a symbol of liberation" (Owen). See Williams-Forsom for discussion of the changing role of chicken in black women's lives.

14. Braun and Wilkerson write: “In work around HIV/AIDS risk factors, this perceived design and function of the vagina has been contrasted with the design of the anus, which is not meant for penile penetration” (20). Even Precious’s mother ascribes to homophobic misinformation, claiming she can’t have AIDS because she and Carl had sex “not like faggots, in the ass and all, so I know” (86).

15. Precious is more than just a victim because true transformation is possible. As Sapphire notes, “That’s why I wanted her to be so young; she has the capacity to change” (Interview).

16. Connors writes that some studies have shown “sexual abuse to be associated with frequency of dieting, feeling overweight, binge eating, fasting, and a variety of purging methods” (153).

17. For instance, when Precious reads The Color Purple in school and begins to engage in homophobic discourse, she recounts: “Ms Rain tell me I don’t like homosexuals she guess I don’t like her ‘cause she one. I was shocked as shit. Then I jus’ shut up” (81). Ms. Rain challenges Precious to rethink her own prejudices, something that also aids in her understanding her own socioeconomic position and familial issues: “Ms Rain say homos not who rape me, not homos who let me sit up not learn for sixteen years, not homos who sell crack fuck Harlem” (81).

18. Precious's writing and critical sense of the world suggests that she has developed what Freire describes as "critical consciousness." Engaging in a student/teacher relationship with Ms. Rain encourages her self-expression and prompts her to ask important questions, see Freire.

19. This poem is from LIFE STORIES (the Each One Teach One class project), which makes up the last thirty-seven pages of the novel and does not have page numbers. Subsequent quotations that are not followed by page citations are from this section of the novel.
