

# Sapphire the Author

**An excerpt from “Education as Resistance” section of the**

**Afterward the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition of PUSH**

In PUSH readers were struck by the ferocious-crazy-quilt-female artistry displayed in “a book that promoted colored female collectivity and caring over competition”. This was a caring that had historically been diverted from the Black community and distorted and usurped to nurture, bolster, and build up the Upper Westsides of New York and the world. High income white nuclear families demanded the low-paid labor provided by “nigger” and Hispanic nannies and maids, not too differently from the way whites during slavery and the years following the abolition of slavery furiously demanded the mother-nurture and female energy of the Black family, first for non-paid labor and then for low-paid domestic work, labor that enabled white families to rise and helped keep “niggers” in their place. Between the murder, harassment, and imprisonment of Black men and the derailment of Black women into service, the lower-class status of some Black people was often effectively sealed. This was so common, it was just understood: Black female energy was to be diverted for the raising and nurturing of our oppressors, keeping Black people in poverty as it elevated the financial and emotional well-being of those for whom Black people were forced to, or had little choice but to, serve.

In PUSH, spectacularly, we see that energy being used by women of color, most specifically Black women, for their own nurturance, their own spiritual and educational ascent which held within it the possibility of a step up from the bottom rung of the economic ladder in those—these! —savagely unequal and divided United States of America.

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Think of what America had seen before the film *Precious* based on the novel *PUSH* by Sapphire, when they encountered an obese, dark-skinned Black woman on the screen—Hattie McDaniel, Louise Beavers, etc. If these characters had, as *Precious* does, inner lives, sexual fantasies, romantic reveries, or ambition (“...but I might be a poet, rapper...”, says a radicalized *Precious* in *PUSH*), they were never shown. What was shown were neutered and loyal work horses whose loyalties were to the family they worked for and might even live with, either because of the total devotion needed to raise and nurture the white family’s children, or because they did not earn enough to ever be able to live independently.

In *PUSH* and in the film, *Precious*’s formidable intelligence, beauty, and potential do not revolve around upper class-white women who need her labor to achieve their feminist longings. And though the system urges her to cease her education, long before she even knows how to spell the word “college,” so that she can become a home attendant, *Precious* resists “No way!” *Precious* says, “I’m getting my G.E.D., a job...and then I go to college.”

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...A young Black film director and producer wrote and said he was ready! And as far as playing the part of Precious was concerned, I was not to worry. He had Brandy, the pop and R&B star, on call and ready to go. I said I appreciated Brandy's talent but I wanted someone who looked like the character in the book. He told me, Sapphire, there are no people in Hollywood who look like the character in the book.

That was twenty-five years ago. Now there are people who look like Precious in Hollywood. In fact, they were always there, but as I mentioned earlier, for the most part they played roles, and sometimes with great dignity and talent and humor, of women forced into enabling, through their labor, an oppressive caste system that elevated white women, white men, and their white offspring. The servants they played on screen were desexualized, subservient, second-class citizens trapped in low-wage work that allowed the whites who employed them to rise. I grew up seeing Black women who looked like Louise Beaver, Hattie McDaniel, and me in the movies, laboring in and building a world we were excluded from. We cleaned the lakeshore homes and penthouse apartments; we cooked and served and changed diapers and had children palmed off on us to raise. Read almost any upper-class white memoir of a certain era and you will be told about a "mammy" or colored nurse or Negro maid whom they loved and gave their old clothes to, etc. And they will fight you if you suggest to them that maybe they were not loved by said servant in kind. That this "love" took place as the recipients of it often grew up to undermine affirmative action or/and lobbied against the unionization of household workers, and how the

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“beloved’s” own children were sidelined or pipelined to prison is rarely part of the story.

It would take the genius of Lee Daniels to present a black female who looked like Precious as a child and depict a childhood that ascends from one of horror to one of hopes and dreams. Much has been said about the movie Precious, most of it very good. Precious received worldwide accolades, dozens of nominations in many award categories, including six Academy Award nominations. Lee Daniels won the People’s Choice Award at the Toronto International Film Festival, the TVE Otra Mirada Award, and the Audience Award at the San Sebastián International Film Festival. He received an Academy Award nomination for Best Director. Mo’Nique received more than 60 nominations for her role as Precious’ mother and won many including an Oscar, a Golden Globe, and a BAFTA award for Best Supporting Actress. At the Stockholm International Film Festival, where there was no Best Supporting category, Mo’Nique straight up won for Best Actress.

When an author and a director enter into an agreement to make a film, there is a transaction far more consequential than the legal contract, the financial arrangement, or even decisions about representation and interpretation. There is an issue of trust. For me the trust I put in Lee Daniels was simple. I trusted him to make a work of art, and he never wavered. In my opinion, and in agreement with A.O. Scott of the New York Times, Precious is a genuine work of art.

Read the entire Afterward by Sapphire, in **the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary issue of PUSH.**