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Hip-Hop Feminism: Representations of Female Development in *Roxanne Roxanne* and *Push*

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Résumé

Cette thèse se concentre sur les expériences des personnages féminins qui représentent les jeunes mères Afro-Américaines, dans le film biographique, *Roxanne Roxanne*, basé sur l'artiste de rap Lolita Shante Gooden; et dans le roman *Push*, de Sapphire, nom de plume de Ramona Lofton. Contrairement aux générations précédentes, aujourd'hui les féministes noires de la quatrième vague du féminisme analysent ce que les féministes hip-hop ont essayé de développer depuis la deuxième vague de féminisme. Le féminisme hip-hop permet d'examiner des questions liées à la misogynie de la culture hip-hop et parmi d'autres points concernent les femmes noires dans cet espace. Quel rôle jouent les hommes? Et qu'est-ce que cela représente dans un cadre culturel plus large? Comment les mères et les filles sont-elles représentées et affectées? Comment les enfants de ces femmes sont-ils touchés, et quelle dynamique se déroule alors dans la relation mère-fille? Mes questions servent à approfondir des sujets qui sont sous-explorées dans les études de hip-hop.

Le livre *The New Jim Crow* par l'activiste des droits civiques et avocate Michelle Alexander est fondamental dans le contexte de ce mémoire. Les informations historiques de l'enquête d'Alexander sur la campagne américaine, « The War on Drugs », dévoilent le système de criminalisation raciale aux États-Unis et ses infrastructures sociopolitique et économique. Ce système est conçu pour contrôler la population noire depuis l'époque de la traite transatlantique des esclaves. Les œuvres hip-hop féministes ne contribuent pas seulement à augmenter la sensibilisation sur les sujets intimes pour les Afro-Américaines; mais elles aident aussi à exposer les idéologies sexistes et raciales qui privent le corps féminin noir de ses droits dans la culture populaire.

Mots clés: hip-hop, féminisme, misogynie, Afro-Américain, inceste, viol, drogues, cocaïne, racisme, esclavage.

Abstract

This thesis focuses on the lives of female characters that left young mothers fending for survival in two works: the biopic, *Roxanne Roxanne,* based on rap artist Lolita Shante Gooden; and, the novel *Push,* by Sapphire—pen name of Ramona Lofton. Unlike previous generations, today's fourth-wave black feminists analyze what hip-hop feminists have been trying to develop since the second wave of feminism. Hip-hop feminism enables the examination of issues related to the misogynoir of hip-hop culture, and the struggles black females encounter in this space. What role do men perform? And what does this represent within a larger cultural framework? How are mothers and daughters portrayed, and affected by hip-hop culture? How are the children of such females impacted, and what dynamic then takes place in the mother-daughter relationship? My questions serve to dig deeper into topics that are underexplored in hip-hop gender studies—specifically in working-class urban communities.

Fundamental to my exploring hip-hop feminist issues is my reliance on *The New Jim Crow,* by civil rights activist and lawyer, Michelle Alexander. Using historical insight from Alexander's investigation on the War on Drugs, my thesis unveils the racial criminalization system in the United States, and the larger socio-political and economical infrastructure designed to control the black population since the transatlantic slave trade. The conditions of impoverished black communities, in turn, sabotage the development of black females. Feminist hip-hop works not only contribute to creating awareness about intimate, gendered issues; but also, they help

further challenge racialized ideologies that disenfranchise the black female body in popular culture.

Keywords : hip-hop, feminism, misogynoir, African American, incest, rape, drugs, crack, racism, intersectionality.

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Abbreviations

GGE: Girls For Gender Equity
PINS: Persons in Need of Supervision
G.E.D: General Education Development

In memory of Kathryn Crawford Briscoe,
and to J&J because you are the future

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Chapter 1 – An Introduction to the Construction of Hip-Hop and Misogynoir in *Roxanne Roxanne* and *Push*

Joan Morgan coined the term hip-hop feminism in 1990 in her book, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*. The goal for Morgan was to create a space to acknowledge the ambivalence of young girls who feel trapped because although they identify with hip-hop culture, they resist its misogynist form. *Roxanne Roxanne* is a biopic about the iconic rap star, Lolita Shante Gooden, as she strives to support her mother, sisters, and son while constantly facing barriers due to her absent father, scheming stepfather, and abusive boyfriend. Similarly, in the novel *Push*, by the author Sapphire,[1] the heroine and her friends experience dysfunctional relationships with the abusive parents and men in their lives. I am interested in, and argue that hip-hop feminism, exemplified in *Roxanne Roxanne* and *Push*, is a radicalized space that helps women cope with misogynoir. In *Hood Feminism*, Mikki Kendall discusses "misogynoir," a term coined by feminist professor, Moya Bailey. The term represents misogyny directed to only black women due to their race and gender, especially in hip-hop music and cultural performance (Kendall 88). The concept will be used throughout this analysis because it represents tensions around the black female body, the central dynamic in the works explored.

Morgan's hip-hop feminism theory is important because it contextualizes the point-of-view of young black females, and why they are drawn to or entrapped in destructive relationships. The complexity of hip-hop feminist pathology is that young black women feel the need to support the black men in their lives, no matter how chauvinistic—but, in doing so, they

[1] Sapphire is the pen name for the author, Ramona Lofton

often wind up defeated. Although it has been argued that hip-hop feminism has slowed down black female progress, on the broader spectrum it illuminates two things. First, it marks a space where race and gender struggles intersect with classism. Secondly, although the space of hip-hop feminist ideals seems counter-productive, without it there would be no way for females born within its often-working class culture to radicalize against misogynoir. Hip-hop feminists encounter an additional layer of sociopolitical and economical challenges compared to the ones middle class black feminists (or womanists) encounter. In other words, hip-hop feminists are stuck at the bottom of the barrel and cannot easily progress because of their class status.

My aim is to produce a representational analysis of females in poor, urban, black communities of the United States. To do so, I will use the lens of the inter-generational trauma derived from socio-political and economic tensions since antebellum slavery. The following authors provide the theoretical foundation for my close reading: lawyer and civil rights activist Michelle Alexander on mass incarceration in the twenty-first century; professor of gender studies, Maki Motapanyane, on mothers in hip-hop culture; sociologist and pioneer of hip-hop scholarship, Tricia Rose; authors Dorothy Roberts and Joan Morgan on gender and race; social theorists Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge on intersectionality; and award-winning journalists Kathy Iandoli on hip-hop feminists, Byron Hurt on hip-hop misogyny, and Nikole-Hannah Jones on the need to reread US history from the antebellum era to the present-day.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. This introductory chapter contextualizes intersectional issues relative to both works. Chapter Two, "*Roxanne Roxanne:* Mothers, Daughters, and the Relationships with their Black Brothers," explores the narrative behind Roxanne Shante's liberating hip-hop feminist voice. Ironically, although her call contributed to helping women radicalize, she could not always incorporate her music's transgressive womanism into her own life. Finally, Chapter Three, *"Push:* The Effects of Socio-economic Inequality on

Black Girls and Women*,"* conveys the psychological impact of the sexual, physical, and mental abuse of both mothers and daughters. The female characters ultimately create effective survival strategies when they form support systems, relying on collective forms of social engagement and allyship.

From Political Rap to Gangsta[2] Rap: The Crack Epidemic and Stigmatization of Hip-Hop

In *The New Jim Crow*, Alexander illuminates how the crack epidemic in the later twentieth century positioned black people as problematic; ironically, the War on Drugs, which was a political campaign declared in 1982 by former US president Ronald Reagan, was supposedly a solution to that problem. Alexander theorizes a racial caste system maintained by the criminal justice system of the United States. Her research shows an overwhelming increase of 2000% of imprisoned people in Chicago alone, "from 469 in 1985 to 8,755 in 2005"—and more evidence shows that people of color form the majority of those incarcerated and that these numbers reflect the thousands who have been arrested, convicted, jailed, and put-on probation (189). The result for these populations is a criminal record that reduces their access to basic civil rights, including securing jobs, education, healthcare, and voting.

By the 1990s, socio-political forums attempted to mask the reality of racism. Color-blind social models posited that racism no longer existed—which has never been the case. Evidently, the racial reckoning that commenced in 2020, including the emergence of the Black Lives Matters movement, illuminates how taboo the subject of race has been until recently. Hence, Alexander's statistical evidence that black males have been unjustly and disproportionately

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[2] Gangsta rap was a term created by the media, and it became adopted due to the stigmatization. Rappers of the nineties referred to this sub-genre as Reality rap.

imprisoned is alarming because of the burden it has placed on black working-class communities. These communities were blamed for being the source of the societal problems caused by structural racism and economic inequality. Therefore, if history repeats itself, attempting to control black populations could reproduce earlier twentieth century racial laws. Black codes, imposed by the Southern Confederate states since the Reconstruction era, are what created the racial segregation of the twentieth century, making it legal to discriminate against people of color since the abolition of slavery. If the black codes, also known as Jim Crow laws, were created as a tactic to keep the emergence of black influence and power at bay—then, in a sense, the War on Drugs campaign was not much different (Alexander 55).

Collins and Bilge, in *Intersectionality,* describe how in the late twentieth century, the emergence of the hip-hop industry provided a platform where African American youth finally could express themselves about racial injustice. The de-legalization of segregation in 1965 also marked the rise of the Black Arts Movement that is said to have lasted into the early seventies. Political rap emerged as the "exploitation of the energy and freshness of the black vernacular…especially to the lives and concerns of lower-class blacks, and addressed specifically to a black mass audience" (Abrams 24). One iconic example is rap star Public Enemy's infamous song, "Fight the Power," which advocated the principles of the black power movement led partly by Malcolm X: black separatism, black pride, and black solidarity (23). However, the contemporary genre of *gangsta* rap mutated from political rap because the political forum of rap that rallied for civil rights, like Public Enemy, was being scrutinized as being too revolutionary.[3]

Hip-hop went from being perceived as a black activist forum to a black criminal one. I would suggest that over time, that while hypersexual representations creeped into the core of hip-

[3] Simon Briscoe is a music enthusiast and former Art Director of the *Montreal Mirror* newspaper, who I interviewed the summer of 2020.

hop music, simultaneously, rap artists' newfound wealth led to enabling the publicization of their music; therefore, popular culture trends of black female hyper-sexuality contributed to the stigmatization of black women. Ultimately, political rap has been commercialized. Misogyny combined with the imagery of drugs and violence in hip-hop culture spiraled into a path that publicly gave rap music a bad name. Hip-hop's stigma is therefore related to Alexander's argument that working-class black males were victimized through the War on Drugs (174). The way hip-hop music was being portrayed by the media was only making hip-hop artists angry because it positioned them as criminals, not unlike how some television shows, like Cops, were profiting from targeting black Americans as law breakers during the same era.[4] Some highly influential rap artists rebelled by blowing representations of drug use, violence, and hypersexuality out of proportion, parodying black machismo through the exploitation of women. While the signifiers relied on by rap musicians were understood as parodical within hip-hop communities, outside of it, in mainstream American culture, the stigma related to hip-hop intensified. In this sense, negative stereotypical portrayals reinforced the misogyny of hip-hop.

The epidemic coincided perhaps too conveniently with the declaration of the War on Drugs. Alexander suggests that the crack cocaine that flooded the streets of poor urban communities was an intentional governmental strategy that was written off the books. In other words, it was a set-up intended for young black males to criminalize them or put them in prison to provide relief on economic pressures that the government was facing.[5] Therefore, I would suggest that hip-hop communities were targeted based on the hype the media was creating in the

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[4] Paramount Network stopped airing Cops on June 2020 in response to George Floyd protests. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cops_(TV_program)

[5] With the de-legalization of segregation in 1965, new laws came into effect to create more equal opportunities for black Americans, but the capitalist economy had to find new methods to keep the wealth of the country strong. The 13th amendment has a loophole till this day that allow forms of slavery to be run in privatized prisons, which helps drive wealth.

nineties. The more the issue of drugs was made to appear as rooted within impoverished black communities, the more hip-hop culture took the hit, growing increasingly stigmatized. Even before the crack epidemic, hip-hop was perceived as nefarious, though it could not be criminalized due to freedom of speech rights.[6] Therefore, racial profiling led hip-hop artists to ultimately embrace the stigma of how they were being stereotypically portrayed, as Michelle Alexander argues. Rap artist Ice Cube says that the rap music hip-hop artists were producing was what he and his peers called reality rap—while it was the media that coined the term *gangsta* rap (Grow par. 4).

Deconstructing the Stereotypes of Black Females in Hip-Hop Culture

In retrospect, black females were the real casualties of the newfound satire infused within the evolution of hip-hop portrayals. As Alexander points out in *The New Jim Crow*, hip-hop music has been, over time, entangled with the commercialization of its music and culture, resulting in *gangsta* rap's marketing of sex and the objectification of the black-female body. *Gangsta* rap can be thought of as angrier than political rap. Its pioneers blasted police violence and injustice through their music, but the growing aspect of hyper-sexualization and profanity did not help the cause. In Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, she argues that the *gangsta's* racialized profile was the consequence of a corrupt undertaking. Reading between the lines of Alexander's argument, governmental strategies with hidden agendas could have caused the increased criminal activity within working-class black communities. In this sense, the crack epidemic can be imagined as a decoy, advantageously manipulating socio-economic systems to the benefit of the capitalist

[6] Hip hop legend Luther Campbell discusses with podcast host, Jemele Hill how his band, 2 Live Crew, are iconic for their Supreme Court case that impacted the conversation about free speech. This is the reason why parental advisory labels were created. It informs buyers about explicit musical content, which are due to lyrics that are either overly-sexualized, drug-related, or express discontent with the police. See bibliography.

economy. In doing so, the government would have been consciously harming impoverished black communities that were already facing difficulties.

It this sense, over time, black males incorporated the villainization of black women in their music, and reproduced stereotypes of black women. Before Reagan's War on Drugs concept was publicized, African American mothers were targeted for criminalization. In "A Queer Cosmology of Mothering from Audre Lorde to MeShell Ndegeocello," Alexia Pauline Gumbs argues that prior to the criminalization of black males, black life had been "shaped by the criminalization of mothering," including "through the policing function of so-called social services" (Motapanyane 55). Prior to the era of mass incarceration that Alexander investigates, there was the era of criminalizing black mothers to make them look inadequate. For example, Reagan was also involved in propagating the sterilization of black women through the Eugenics program, as described by scholar Dorothy Roberts (Roberts, Jones 55). Alexander describes how the media made black mothers appear like crack whores to help justify racial profiling. I would suggest that in turn, this influenced the stereotypes and imagery that were found in popular culture, like rap music.

The history of *gangsta* rap shows the influences that shaped the genre, including how its negative portrayals of black women emerged. Motapanyane presents a series of essays by numerous authors, some of which explore hip-hop lyrical music produced by black males and their connection with black womanhood—from their maternal relationships to their intimate romantic ones. Their interpretations show that rarely do these artists focus on expressing feelings about their fathers, perhaps because father figures were missing from many of their lives.[7] That male rap artists are asked to explain themselves for exploiting misogyny in their music prompts

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In the chapter, The New Jim Crow, Alexander discusses the silence about mass incarceration (see bibliography).

the question: Do these males even know why they glorify such representations? Byron Hurt is an award-winning documentary filmmaker whose interests are black culture and hip-hop. In his documentary, *Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, a group of black female students from Spelman College request to meet with rapper Nelly, who was scheduled to sponsor and attend a bone marrow drive on campus. In the attempt to evade the questions of these determined young women who wanted to discuss his explicit hypersexual music, Nelly cancelled his appearance. Hurt, in his documentary, is seen either being turned away by rap artists or encountering resistance when attempting to broach the subject of misogyny in hip-hop music. And the resistance he faces is not active but rather passive, in the form of silence, signifying the elephant in the room where nobody wants to engage the issue. The few men who do speak up defensively suggest that, in addition to explicit lyrics about guns, violence, and drugs, consumers most desire those about women.

The centrality of the representations of black female sexuality in hip-hop is rooted in pre-conceived notions about black womanhood. There is a strong relationship between the contemporary exploitation of black female sexuality and the black female experience in slavery. In rap music, the strong black woman, the "wifey," and the baby-mama archetypes dominate representations of motherhood. Mothers are divided into the self-sacrificing strong black woman and the disreputable Jezebel (Motapanyane 5). The caricature of the monstrous, evil black mother draws on women who are overbearing, or even violent, and shows deviant sexuality. Therefore, in hip-hop culture, the black female body is perceived as a commodity, not only similar to chattel slavery, where black people were considered property, but also due to contemporary forms of sexism. Investigating the evolution between antebellum slavery and modern-day perceptions of black womanhood would likely show that the same stereotypes are still problematic today. I am suggesting that biased representations generally adapt to modern-day changes, like progress

around the ever-lasting issue of anti-black racism. One problematic in hip-hop music is that some black female entertainers reinforce stereotypes by performing alongside their male counterparts, such as in rap videos. For instance, the artist, Lil' Kim uses her sexuality as a form of empowerment to fight misogynoir within the hip-hop community. But publicly, her hypersexualized self-exploitation is misunderstood. Using sexuality as a form of empowerment in hip-hop underscores a kind of conundrum. On one hand it helps with womanist progress, but on the other, it contributes to false representations of and bias against young black women.

Chapter 2 – *Roxanne Roxanne:* Mothers, Daughters, and the Relationships with their Black Brothers

Roxanne Roxanne signifies, through the heroine's strategic reliance on her voice and sexuality, a womanist form of resistance against misogynoir. Although misogynoir is neither new nor unique to hip-hop music, *gangsta* rap blatantly relied on the negation of women, from lyrical content to hyper-sexualized rap music videos. For example, record company labels like that of kingpin Suge Knight's Death Row Records, which featured renowned performers like Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg, capitalized on the exploitation of the black female body, using degrading representations of its hyper-sexuality to reap profits. The film shows that although hip-hop culture created a type of alliance within poor urban black communities that was necessary to unify against racial and class oppression, the chaos the drug epidemic created in economically precarious neighborhoods intensified the struggles of black girls and women. Consequently, the chauvinistic attitudes and behaviors that helped rap artists acquire fame and fortune influenced public behaviour towards black women. Sociologists Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, in *Intersectionality*, explain that "because of the need to battle the larger frontline issues of racial social inequality, as a marginalized group within the black community, the problems African American females face are devalued and left on the sidelines" (3). Collins's and Bilge's point about black female concerns being secondary to racial equality suggests that challenges faced by women are less important than those faced by men; in addition, the hardships these impoverished black women face are intensified by their economic precarity.

Black motherhood in hip-hop culture, as depicted in *Roxanne Roxanne*, is unique to racially segregated urban neighborhoods. The women experience gender and racial conflicts that manifested themselves in the Jim Crow era. The stereotypical archetype of the angry and strong

black woman is personified by the heroine's mother, Peggy. Her story speaks to the importance of appropriately contextualizing black women by removing preconceived notions, as proffered by Tricia Rose in *Black Noise*. Peeling the layers of prejudiced thought gives visibility to the real issues and from where they stem—whether it be from socio-political or economic roots in the United States. Even if Peggy could have been interpreted with greater nuance, she can still be perceived as a hard-working, honest mother who seeks a better life for her daughters, in the process teaching them good values. From this perspective, I would argue that rather than take Peggy's persona at face value, investigating the role of the male characters reveals that many afflictions within the mother-and-daughter relationship are driven by misogynoir. Looking closely at the role of men under the theme of fatherhood reveals how misogyny creeps into the domestic space. Representationally, in the context of misogynoir women are often involved in issues, such as domestic abuse, rape, criminality, and drugs.

In addition to the setting, the film is infused with symbolism through the use of the color red, depicting Shante's weaknesses and strengths through her character development. In symbolic terms, red naturally draws attention. The color red has more emotional associations than any other color, linking it to passion, love, desire, power, anger, and rage. Red is a call to action, gets people motivated, and wearing red connotes confidence, strength, and ambition. Red is also associated with luxury–a red Porsche and the soles of designer shoes declare that a person has achieved material success.[8] In *Roxanne Roxanne*, the color red symbolizes various themes, such as Shante's claiming her sexuality as well as her ambivalence during her adolescence when she wears red lipstick; shoplifting clothing articles in a department store while wearing a bright red

[8] Kate Smith, an internationally recognized color expert offers her interpretation of the color red: https://www.sensationalcolor.com/meaning-of-red/

polo, and the anger that boils after she nearly gets caught; the fear from getting raped, emphasized through the sexual connotation of the short red pyjama bottoms she wears into her early teenage years; the vulnerability of her bare body, figuratively labeled as property, by her abusive boyfriend when he corners her in the bathtub and presents her with a necklace from a red velvet box that he affixes to her neck after being physically violent. A close look at how the color red signifies either forms of entrapment or Shante's resistance reveals representative examples of the issues faced by black women in hip-hop culture. Ultimately, Shante, among other womanist, pioneer, hip-hop artists who aimed to fight misogyny through their music, could never fully compete with the popularity of hyper-masculinized, hip-hop celebrities. But, as shown in Hurt's documentary, there has been progress thanks to the art form of rap and how women in such communities chose to engage through it.

Adultification: The Mother-to-Daughter Transfer of Responsibility

The progressive hip-hop feminist identity of Shante Gooden's character, Roxanne Shante, emerges from the mother-to-daughter bond, and is formed from the struggles they encounter as women from a racially segregated community. *Roxanne Roxanne* stars a young girl from the Queensbridge housing projects in New York City who is constantly challenged due to her gender, race, and class status. Yet, she kick-starts her rapping career as a street battle rap artist at the age of nine[9] and launches her hit single song, "Roxanne's Revenge," on the radio by the age of fourteen. During her adolescence, Shante is ambivalent about identifying as a young teenager and adult. Shante looks and feels grown up in red lipstick and gestures that allow her to identify with her mother. In the opening scene, when Shante is around ten years old, her mother, Peggy

[9] An online source provides a biography of Lolita Shante Gooden: https://www.biography.com/musician/roxanne-shante

Gooden, treats her like both a child and an adult. On their speedy walk over to a street *battle rap* competition, Peggy tells Shante to quit sucking her thumb and physically yanks Shante's hand out of her mouth. Discovering that her daughter is wearing red lipstick, she says, "You think you grown." Her tone suggests that, as the mother, she is the only person in their home who can wear lipstick. Peggy scolds Shante for sucking her thumb and wearing her red lipstick, which is juxtaposed with the next scene, where she gives Shante full liberty to curse like a grown-up in a public setting. When an older teenage boy sees Shante and says "What the heck is this? I ain't battling no little girl," Shante looks over her shoulder and discreetly nudges her mother over, whispering "can I curse?" Peggy responds, "I don't care what you have to do as long as you bring home that fiddy dollars." In this moment, Shante is infantilized for wearing red lipstick and thumb-sucking, yet permitted to curse publicly, like an adult, in order to bring home money to contribute to their livelihood. Shante seems to be set-up with the expectations of having to work like an adult to earn or "bring home" fifty dollars, indicating she wants to help her mother. But not once does Peggy ask Shante to work to bring home money; in fact, when Shante is working instead of going to school, her mother scolds her for having missed school. The fact that Shante feels pressure and presumes she needs to work suggests there are factors that make her feel she has such obligations towards her mother and family; in effect, although these factors are coming from her mother, as depicted in the film, they are also connected to gender and racial marginalization in which Shante is adultified.

For instance, Shante as a young girl inherits responsibilities of parenting. In the next scene, set years later in 1982, in the housing projects of Queensbridge, Shante, being the eldest of three daughters, helps to support her economically struggling single mother. At the age of thirteen, she is proud to be taking on grown-up responsibilities that Peggy does not necessarily wish for her daughter. For instance, Shante has to walk and pick up her sister from school

because of her mother's job, which is time-constraining. Shante attends a reputable school further away from where she lives, but because of a change in her mother's work schedule, she needs to attend the school that is closest to her home. The new home room teacher asks her why she would switch from the more reputable school. His tone suggests that the switch to the local neighborhood school is a poor choice, alluding to the problem of underfunded schools in low-income communities. Peggy has no choice but to rely on Shante's help in terms of switching schools, and Shante takes pride in justifying this to her teacher at the new school. After being asked why the switch, Shante happily shares her new responsibilities in doing "grown-people stuff," explaining that she now walks her little sister to and from elementary school. Shante's participation in co-parenting with her mother is what Mikki Kendall, in *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women that a Movement Forgot*, calls survival parenting. Kendall describes such communities as being at a disadvantage, in part because of unequal access to economic and social supports for struggling parents. For instance, within working-class communities of color, the concerns that mothers have might be less about esoteric institutional issues, such as funding for program development, and more about whether their schools will stay open, and, if so, will law enforcement be patrolling the building (240). The reality is that Shante is expected to participate in raising her sisters, therefore her opportunities are limited. Her educational limitations reflect the circumstances and particular forms of stress experienced by many working-class black girls.

Given the pressures put upon young black girls, Shante, in her determination to provide for her family, can only turn to illegal jobs. On one hand, she is a child who is expected to attend school, and there are no job opportunities for young children; on the other hand, she takes on parenting responsibility because without her, there is little to no household income. For the livelihood of her family, Shante takes on jobs that involve illegal activities. In a sense, Shante can be perceived as taking over the financial responsibilities of her father, and does so by the means

available to her: through petty theft at clothing stores and drug dealing in the neighborhood. When Peggy confronts Shante about skipping school, for the first time Shante is seen talking back to her mother. She says, "I'm doing it for us mommy. We need money." Shante appears confident in her red shirt, but her whiney voice in its high-pitched squeaky tone sounds like that of a child's. Shante is then seen in school where her teacher approaches her in the hallway about a social services request for a Persons in Need of Supervision (PINS) warrant, which has been requested from the educational system. Shante and Peggy had no warnings about the surprise element of a PINS warrant, and it appears no attempt to speak to Shante about her absences had been made, nor was checking in to inform her mother. The educational system lacks proper support, like in-school counseling. Instead, schools are equipped with law enforcement personnel, who often instill fear rather than offer proactive help. Tricia Rose, in her book, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, asserts that:

> The public school system, the police, and the popular media perceive and construct young African Americans as a dangerous internal element in urban America; an element that, if allowed to roam freely, will threaten the social order; an element that must be policed. (126)

In her critique of school systems, Rose demonstrates how innocent children become labelled as a threat because of their blackness. In a recent report by the Girls For Gender Equity (GGE) movement, "The State of Black Girls in New York State" reveals alarming statistical evidence that shows "Black girls are criminalized in their educational settings and adultified…excluded from the social construction of childhood" (GGE 1). Not unlike how black men are targeted through the mass incarceration system that Alexander describes, the report explains that although the public invests in protective measures for schools including the care of children, the fact that education becomes entangled with criminalization in the case of children of color draws attention to the intensity behind marginalizing black girls. According to the GGE, the

PINS system is being reformed because certain elements should not lawfully apply to children; however, in its existence, "[i]n New York City in 2019 for example, girls represented 68% of arrests at school under PINS warrants, 100% of whom were girls of color" (8). Shante eventually stops illegal activities like shoplifting after nearly getting caught. Although it is a source of income for her family and she is the only one who appears to be making money, she decides to completely stop before she ends up arrested.

Shante's experiences align with the GGE report because she is "excluded from the social construction of childhood," meaning her experiences are rather an extension of her mother's. They both face damaging relationships with men and struggle to make ends meet as a consequence of their gender, race, and class status. As Alexander explains, societal frameworks that make job opportunities difficult to attain create a financial burden in racially segregated households. With no job opportunities, there is the weight of financial stress and little to no ability to pursue ambitions, which is partly the situation in which Peggy finds herself. The gender gap shows that black women are often functioning as single moms, and such mothers are inevitably at the mercy of low-wage job opportunities. Peggy cannot overcome her limitations because she would need to prove "successfully to whites" that, as black people, she and her family are worthy of not being treated like second-class citizens. Although this strategy, related to W.E.B. Dubois's concept of double-consciousness, worked for a privileged segment of the African American community who, for example, had access to education, those who were uneducated and desperately poor found themselves unable to conform to the gendered racial expectations, public behavior, and economic activity deemed legitimate. It could be interpreted that there are two ways out: either succumb to notions that would rely on principles of anti-black racism, like the Politics of Respectability—which would mean submitting to a state of inferiority though allowing a more comfortable lifestyle—or rebel. This is to say that Shante consequently

finds herself in situations fighting misogyny too, and she does not have a chance to experience a gratifying childhood. Instead, Shante has societal pressure to take on more responsibility at a younger age.

Like Rose suggests in the introduction of *Longing to Tell*, her nonfiction transcription of life stories of victimized black girls and women, black mothers are too often villainized as the cause of their daughters' dysfunction. Peggy can be perceived in a similar manner. The stereotypes of the "sapphire" or "angry black mother" show the toll of respectability politics in the problematic portrayal of Peggy. For instance, Peggy's relationship with her boyfriend ends badly because he completely scams her of twenty-thousand dollars. This was money that she had saved up doing janitorial/custodial work, for a down payment on a house—as a chance for them to live as a happy family and have a better life. On the evening that the moving truck does not arrive to collect Peggy, her daughters and their belongings, Peggy breaks down and starts drinking herself into a depression with an empathetic friend because she realizes Dave ran off with the money for the down payment. Her daughters are seen standing a few feet away in the hallway with Shante sucking her thumb. Peggy turns around with anger and scolds Shante, calling her over in a threatening tone while asking Shante to expose her braces. She comments on the cost and tells her friend "she the only one in the projects with braces." Peggy's friend addresses the brewing mother-daughter conflict by preventing Shante from approaching. These traumatic experiences make Peggy's hopes fade away, leaving her brooding that their lives will never improve. Peggy's experiences with men—initially, in being left by her first partner with three children to raise, then robbed of her life savings by the other—signifies she is not the angry black mother as she is depicted in this scene, but rather a victim of the stigma around black mothers who are at the mercy of how they are portrayed in society and treated by their male partners.

Taking into account how Peggy has been cheated twice by male partners she trusted, and the reality of her striving to achieve home ownership as a working-class, black single mom, illuminates the film's incorporation of stereotypes in the portrayal of this character. The viewer is made to understand that she is, in fact, a good mother. When Shante comes home after curfew one evening, the door is locked. When the daughter knocks to be let in, her mother tries to teach her a lesson by shutting her out, stating that her door locks at nine o'clock. Although Shante is depicted as being frightened by her enraged and determined mother in this scene, the viewer comprehends Peggy puts in place measures to protect Shante from being out on the streets past nine o'clock. Although Peggy falls depressed and escapes her devastation through drinking, she still performs essential duties such as cooking meals for her daughters, or challenging Shante about staying out past curfew and missing school. Despite her monetary losses and emotional dysfunction, Peggy's actions exhibit her strength and determination where, not only was she surviving without a male partner but she also demonstrated the ability to provide a new and better home for family after saving up thousands of dollars that Dave ended up stealing. This reiterates the points made in *Mothering in Hip-Hop Culture*, where Pauline Gumbs states that the imagery of poor black mothers was based on stereotypes, which was "a particular form of repetitive storytelling practiced by politicians in the United States" (Gumbs 56).

For instance, the impact of paternal absence, as pointed out by several cultural theorists, is a central challenge that Peggy and her daughters are faced with. The one scene about Shante's biological father shows Shante and her sisters wearing pretty pastel-colored dresses, sitting on a bench outside their apartment building all day and all evening, waiting for their no-show father to take them for ice cream. In this scene, while the daughters are outdoors, Peggy remains indoors, cooking, drinking, and every so often poking her head out of the window to let them know there is cooked food if they are hungry. Peggy eventually comes out of the building late at night in a

stupor and says, “I want y’all to take this as a lesson, you don’t never wait for no mother-fucker. This is what happens when you think they love you and you find out they don’t.” Shante picks up her youngest sister and carries her indoors while Peggy says “give me my baby Shante,” and “don’t be giving me no attitude cause I ain’t him.” Peggy’s choice of words in using the pronoun “they” rather than “he” signifies the generalization that all black men are the same—thus extending this perception of black males to her daughters. The takeaway from this scene is that the way Peggy speaks to Shante makes her appear much older than a twelve- or thirteen-year-old, and Shante takes on the responsibility of mothering as she carries her sister. Shante subconsciously assumes responsibility to fill the void of the absent father, which is the consequential issue. In this scene, the exchange between Peggy and Shante, does not show that there is conflict within the mother and daughter relationship, but rather that the conflict lies in their feelings towards the absent father. Peggy only imagines Shante is giving her attitude because she is heartbroken for her children, feels guilt and, in feeling this way, is self-destructively reacting through her drinking. Shante does not utter a word while her mother lectures her three daughters. Her silence represents sadness because her father’s absence suggests he has abandoned them, resulting in a loss of security and stability. Like her little sisters, she too stays outside all day and all night waiting for their father to appear. The presence of Shante’s father would affirm a sense of parental security, especially after Dave steals their money and disappears, leaving them abandoned and penniless. In her father’s absence, Shante’s responsibilities in co-parenting increase, which, once again, alludes to the issue of adultification in economically precarious urban communities. A report summary entitled, “Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls’ Childhood,” states:

> Society’s perception of black girls leads to their adultification. The report shows that adults believe that black girls seem older than white girls of the same age, and think that black girls need

> less nurturing, protection, support and comfort than white girls. It also found that people assume black girls are more independent, know more about adult topics and know more about sex than young white girls.[10]

This tension in the portrayal of young black girls is reflected in Shante's ambivalence because, although she is a child, she is treated like an adult. When one of her sisters asks "Why we gotta wear these dresses anyway?," Shante replies, "because I said so." Like a parent, Shante assumes responsibility for her sisters and makes them dress up in pink and pastel colors; but like the child that she is, Shante dresses them up because she seeks approval from her father, implying that conforming to gender expectations by adhering to dress codes would entice him to see them more often. The pastel dresses symbolize assumptions about how "ladylike" girls should dress to prove themselves worthy of societal approval. This goes back to the idea of Respectability Politics. And this scene shows that even if Shante conforms to socio-patriarchal expectations, she does not succeed in gaining her father's approval. Shante is trapped between assuming authoritarian responsibilities and internalizing her identification as a child, which relates to thumb-sucking as a coping mechanism. In her co-parenting responsibilities, Shante rises at dawn not only to take her sister to school, but also to assume her mother's role because, once Peggy is robbed of her savings, she withdraws emotionally, using alcohol as a coping mechanism. While Peggy is seen sleeping in, after a night of drinking, Shante is seen brushing her sisters' hair, trying to get them to school on time. Her little sister runs away and nudges her mother to try and get her to comb her hair instead, saying "Shante don't know what she doing." But Shante's little sister's testimonial and her own anxiety reveal that Shante cannot fill her mother's role because she herself is still a child. Being so young—combined with the void of the love, loyalty, and

[10] A study done by Georgetown's Law Center on Poverty and Equality provides some statistics about the adultification of black girls: https://spmgmedia.wordpress.com/tag/adultrification/

commitment of a father figure intensifies both Shante's sense of being abandoned and her dissociation from the reality of her having been abandoned. Shante cannot entirely share Peggy's resentment towards her father, because she is only a child who feels loyalty towards him. In being so young, Shante cannot truly understand the complexity of her loss, which inflects her experiences with and expectations of males. Ultimately, Shante's ambivalence causes an additional layer of stress that she has not been equipped to handle. Rather, thrown into a situation of familial chaos and left to fend for herself with no support, she is expected to cope because her black femininity represents her maturity and emotional resilience.

The Role of Men

The male characters all deceive Shante, beginning with the abandonment of the father figures in her life, to the jealousy and greed of her male entourage, and sexual and physical abuse of male partners that she entrusts. In relation to the abandonment of fathers, Alexander's mass incarceration theory exemplifies that prison is the first place where fathers may have disappeared. Alexander says that although her research and that of others provides all the evidence required to validate the claim that black fathers in America have been unjustly imprisoned for minor offences as a racial consequence, nobody, neither politicians nor the media broach the subject. I would suggest the prison theory is the new taboo that replaces the former taboo, which is race awareness. And this is subtly, yet well depicted in the film because not only are the whereabouts of the father never actually revealed, but also the only other fatherly figure Shante trusts actually goes to prison. This is not to say that Shante's father is in prison, but rather to suggest that it relates to the only male character who acts like a fatherly surrogate, Antoine, who actually goes to prison for what appears to be a petty reason. The way Shante and her friends briefly discuss the disappearance of Antoine, is first, because she is waiting for a car ride from him to take her back

home after one of her live performances. This is when she is just starting to gain popularity at thirteen years old, and she is outnumbered by the presence of males in her shows, many of whom make subtle sexual advances to her at such a young age. In an earlier scene, Antoine is depicted protecting Shante from male predators. Antoine platonically cares for Shante, and he is seen keeping her worst predator away, James Cross (her eventual male partner who mentally and physically abuses her). In a sense, Antoine's character is representative of the victimized population of black men who are targeted due to anti-black racism in America.

Notably, the film was not construed to call out the circumstantial socio-political issues defined by Alexander; yet, the historicity exemplifies why there is so much intra-racial tension between black women and men in these representative situations. Black girls, like Shante, are robbed of fathers, which influences a significant change in the structure of the family household. For instance, black mothers, like Peggy, may feel abandoned by their supposed life partners; and black males, like Antoine, may feel cheated by the police. This would suggest that female and male gender tensions arise because of how each gender carries its own set of racial conflicts. As portrayed in the film, the consequences of Alexander's New Jim Crow system effects friction such as how Shante feels conflicted upon Antoine's sudden absence. In an earlier scene, Antoine says to Shante before she exits his vehicle, "we all like family here and we gotcha back," which makes Shante feel loved. Upon his disappearance, Shante is left alone, feeling vulnerable, and is unprotected. Antoine's character is representative of the population of black males who are targeted due to anti-black racism in America. Notably, the film was not construed to call out the circumstantial socio-political issues defined by Alexander; yet, the historicity exemplifies why there is so much intra-racial tension between black women and men in these representative situations.

Shante liberates her voice through rapping, especially after the frustrations that amalgamate due to losing her father, and other fatherly figures whom she cared for. Shante confides in her best friend, Ranita, telling her about the past events, including Dave's disappearance with the stolen money. In that moment, a boy who attempts to repeatedly bully Shante and Ranita triggers Shante by pushing the wrong buttons. As they are walking to school, he appears behind them in the midst of their conversation and says, "You ain't shit Shante." Shante, who has resisted rapping up until this scene, turns to confront him, and boasts her frustration through her freestyle rhyming, allowing him no space for rebuttal. The spontaneous and improvised freestyle speech quickly escalates to a space of release, where Shante can let out her frustrations in such a way that is not only understood by this boy and eventually by various audiences within her community, but also victoriously accepted by such audiences. In other words, the platform of hip-hop music creates a space where Shante can fight misogynoir and, in doing so, win the respect of the hyper-masculine crowd. If a male-dominant hip-hop crowd encourages the integration of female hip-hop artists who can outwit the best of male rappers, then hip-hop feminism, tucked away in the boroughs of urban spaces in the United States, creates a path for womanist progress.

Shante's voice becomes a weapon to fight against her oppressors—beginning with certain men in her community. This motif transitions to Shante rapping in the streets on different days—always in a red shirt and red lipstick, which symbolically represents the power of her resistance. Battle after battle, Ranita collects cash from neighbors as Shante wins. Street battle rap is a form of imagism using free verse, articulated in the black vernacular of urban communities. At the time that it emerged, it was a form of debate where one person would begin by targeting the opponent through improvising, and each would take a turn, with the goal of selecting the winner through the best verses. Battle rap, always rhythmic in pattern but never conforming to any pre-

conceived rules of poetry, was influenced by the rise of spoken word poetry arising from the Black Arts Movement. This is to say that the battle rap in *Roxanne Roxanne*, can be considered an extension of this vocal forum. And, Shante's classic song, "Roxanne's Revenge," was a response to the song, "Roxanne Roxanne" by rap group UTFO,[11] which was a song written about a black girl who will not give in to the demands of males who seek her attention. In the scene with the neighborhood boy who aggravates and insults her, Shante unleashes her internalized frustration through battle rap. Defending herself against the neighborhood bully causes her to eventually express her rage at Dave's betrayal of her mother and her own sadness resulting from mother's self-medicating with alcohol. These events become the foundation of the radicalization that results from her spoken-word rap battles[12] largely against male rappers.

As Shante continues to acquire fame and attention from fans, it turns other males in her musical entourage envious. Her producer, Marley Marl chastises Shante for accepting gifts when he sees her admiring a new ring just before a show. Marl tells Shante she shouldn't be accepting any gifts, and a dispute commences after Shante calls him out on his jealousy. In that moment, Marley Marl quits on her minutes before the show, taking his vinyl records with him, meaning she cannot go on stage without instrumental music. As soon as Marley leaves because he is envious of Roxanne's fame, Biz Markie, another male in her entourage, jumps at the opportunity to help Shante. Biz Markie is a legendary rap star who is famous for beatboxing orally. In doing so, he replaces the instrumental music that Marl would have performed using his vinyl records. Although Markie is made to appear heroic, it can be interpreted that he is taking advantage of the

[11] The context around the name and context of the songs are presented here: https://www.redbull.com/gb-en/roxanne-shante-and-the-first-rap-beef

[12] The term "battle" in hip-hop culture means the art of rapping in its rawest form, which originated in outdoor, urban neighborhoods of impoverished communities that were typically black and latino.

situation since he does not yet have the stage performance opportunities that Shante has, in terms of being a successful rap artist.

Shante is deceived by Ray and Tone, who are at first genuinely respectful young men that become emotionally hardened due to limited work opportunities, in which they try to capitalize off Shante. Shante is ultimately sexualized and endangered by both men. Figuratively, Shante is pimped by Ray and Tone. Ray ends up paying Shante less than she deserves at her concert gigs, uses her to get a Mercedes at her expense, and coaches her to use her sexuality in order to make him money or gain valuable assets. Ray also coaches Shante to use her femininity to flirt with males who approach her in order to take advantage of free luxurious gifts. When she is offered a Mercedes at only fourteen years old and not of legal age, she tells her admirer to put it under her manager's name—Ray is standing in the distance with a grin on his face because he is the one feeding off her reputation. This alludes to the idea of pimping, with Shante being loaned out as a type of escort to her admirers. Ray could have sold the car and given the cash to Shante but instead he kept it for himself. Years later when Shante appears to be eighteen or nineteen years old, it seems she has been out of touch with Ray for about four years. She is suddenly approached by Ray (with the Mercedes that should be in her possession seen in the background). The Mercedes is a reminder that he has stolen a valuable asset that should have belonged to her in the first place. Ray approaches Shante because he is presented with an opportunity by Warner Brothers, but the deal is that she, "Roxanne Shante," needs to be involved for the offer to work. Once again, Ray tries to use Shante to his advantage to sign a new record deal that would be lucrative for him. This time, Shante turns him down and says she cannot work for no pay. He confesses that he resisted paying her those years back and nothing further evolves because Shante turns him down.

Shante's childhood friend Tone provides her with a sense of security, like a fatherly figure, but he uses Shante to make money. Tone provides Shante with a home after she decides to not return home to her mother. She is thankful and hugs him like a big brother, conveying that she seeks comfort from him. He says, "It's all good Shan…we like family." At the beginning of the movie, Tone starts off by trying to get Shante paying gigs. Shante says her price is two-hundred and fifty dollars, in a tone that suggests he'll never be able to afford her. Ironically, in this scene where they are hugging, he charges her two-hundred-and fifty dollars a month in rent. Knowing she has no means to make money, he gets her involved in selling drugs, leaving her with no room to save money of her own. Shante sells drugs in a dark stairwell of a building, gaining the rent money required. What's worse is that the jar of cash that Shante adds her rent money to is seen just sitting there, collecting bills. This shows that Tone does not appear in need of cash and that he is taking advantage of Shante's distress. The scene in the dark stairwell with no windows and black walls depicts her entrapment and suffocation, alluding to an isolation room in a prison. Shante is locked in and those who need to obtain drugs from her obtain it by removing the doorknob to exchange the drugs for cash through a tiny peephole. Shante becomes dependant on Tone just like she is on Ray, because without them she cannot make any money—but with them she still does not make money. In fact, the confined space in the stairwell is like a prison cell, and not unrelated to the idea of policing black girls in segregated schools, such as described earlier with the PINs program. This shows that no matter what Shante tries to do to make it on her own, she needs to rely on the men in her life, but it does not do her any good. The closer she gets to them, the more endangered she is.

Next, Tone nearly rapes Shante rather than nurture her the way he appeared to when she first moved into his apartment—which leaves Shante bewildered because Tone was the last male role model that she thought she could count on. Tone comes in one evening and observes Shante

in her red pyjama bottoms, before sexually attacking her. He sits down at her kitchen table on his way out and takes out a line of cocaine, telling her she should not be walking around dressed like that, just before inhaling the drug. Shante confronts him because she does not understand what he is insinuating, telling him that “I always wear these pyjamas”. Tone then attacks her, throwing her down on the couch face down, holding her arms behind her back with one hand, and pulling down her red shorts with the other. When he suddenly realizes he is about to rape her, he becomes disgusted with himself, stops, and kicks her out of the apartment. This moment is particularly important because it reflects how the crack epidemic altered the lives of people in impoverished communities, beginning with behavioural changes due to substance abuse. Shante then insists that she will accept being raped because she feels she has nowhere to go and is desperate. The fact that Shante is consenting after Tone backs away can appear to portray the stereotypical hypersexual black girl who has no concept of degradation and is always consenting. In her essay “Race,” Dorothy Roberts explains that these notions invented during slavery justified the sexualization of black women (52) because rape did not apply to black women or girls. After the Civil War and into the Jim Crow era, these notions are what perpetuated modern-day stigma of the black female body. In this sense, Shante’s real weakness is her gender status because it works against her in the male-dominated sphere of hip-hop culture.

Shante’s most vicious oppressor is James Cross, the predator that Antoine tried to protect her from, but who managed to seduce her with material goods and a home. Like other mentors Shante initially trusts, James Cross is ultimately volatile, violent and manipulative. At the beginning of the movie, he is seen at a corner store where Shante and her friends, no more than thirteen years old at the time, are goofing around. His pager goes off and Shante offers to watch his son because he needs to go meet someone, presumably for a drug deal. Cross appears sage and mature in the beginning of the movie, dressed in a bright green sweater and clean slacks. A

year or so later, in the scene where Antoine is protecting Shante from Cross's advances, he is dressed in classic hip-hop fashion (Kangol hat, fur jacket, gold chains, baggy pants), portrayed as a stereotypical drug dealer. It is only after he undergoes a transformation from a father with a young boy to a drug dealer that he begins sexualizing Shante. In Antoine's absence, Cross jumps at the occasion to drive Shante home and stops at his apartment on the way to present her with a gift—matching white fur jackets—insinuating they are a couple when they go out in public. Shante, although skeptical, has never experienced a real romantic relationship, and especially not a loving one. For Shante, the material aspect of the gift and its value become equated to what real love feels like. They end up meeting Shante's mother together and she condemns Cross for having the audacity to be in her presence with her now sixteen-year-old daughter. The dispute leads Shante to follow Cross and they end up living together, and have a baby. He ultimately mentally and physically abuses her. Once he disfigures her face by displacing her jaw, she can no longer open her mouth. Suddenly, her one attribute that allows her to vocally radicalize against misogynoir, is taken away. Shante is silenced and trapped in a dangerous situation. Cross, like Tone and Ray hyper-sexualize Shante, particularly due to her success in hip-hop, which suggests that there is a gender power imbalance where the male counterparts feel threatened.

The more Cross is threatened by Shante's rap career and power, the more he physically dominates her to belittle her talent and diminish her self-esteem. Shante falls depressed and ends ups cutting off her hair because she blames herself and her singing career for having wound up with Cross. With her hair cut short, she is seen in the bathtub at her home where she lives with Cross and their toddler son, Kareem. The all-white bathroom and bubbles that surround her contrast with the bright red lipstick she puts on while she looks at herself in a handheld mirror. Applying the lipstick is a mechanism that provides her with confidence to assume the role she always wanted—to be "grown". But this scene shows that Shante is not grown because next, she

smears off the lipstick with the back of her hand while she begins to cry. The red lipstick is spread across her right cheek—bringing her back to the state of being a little girl who no longer wants to hide behind the mask. Shante pretends to have everything under control when she is on her own with James Cross, but the reality is he bullies and coerces her. In her *Hood Feminism*, Mikki Kendall argues that patriarchy and white supremacy affect communities of color, particularly within the domestic sphere. Thus, many black men who were not criminalized or imprisoned—like James Cross—believed that they could only achieve a sense of respect "inside their homes, because there was no chance of it outside" (73). In this sense, I would suggest that ultimately, the role of Cross, like Ray, Tone, Dave, and Marley, is to assert control over black women, whom as men they felt superior to.

The black female body, like that of Shante's becomes symbolic of possession. There are two instances in the film where Shante is presented with a lavish necklace to be fixed upon her neck, to claim ownership of her as their property. First, Ray presents her with a necklace that spells out Roxanne Shante, which is not her real name, but rather the name that has become a commodity in the hip hop industry. This alludes to Lawrence Hill's, *The Book of Negroes*, where a ledger compiled the names of slaves coming off ships. However, these names were in fact made up on the spot, a ruse allowing the cannibalization of the person's true identity. Slaves would then inherit names from their captors, not unlike how Shante's name has been branded as her new identity. She thus figuratively becomes the property of her road manager, Ray. The second instance is when her boyfriend, James Cross, corners her in the bathtub with a lavish necklace that he fixes to her naked body, saying, "I hit you because I love you." In this scene, Roxanne is wearing red lipstick and is covered in bubbles in her all-white bathroom. This alludes to the hyper-sexualization of black women during slavery, where the black female body would be exploited for sexual gratification by their owners. The two necklaces symbolize the

objectification of the black female body—it reduces Shante's corporeal independence to one that is bound for the gain and profit of men.

Fighting Misogynoir

After Shante is hospitalized from being physically assaulted by Cross, in that moment, her greatest act of resistance against misogynoir is when she is finally honest with her mother. Shante says "I lost my mommy" that night. Peggy welcomes her words with affection and kisses Shante on her forehead. As of this moment, with the unity of her mother and sisters, Shante is safe, transfigured, and once again able to find strength. Her life is no longer threatened because she rebels against the domestic abuse by not returning home to Cross. Peggy always welcomes Shante each time she returns home after choosing to leave. Not once does Peggy ever kick out Shante from her home. In fact, when Shante returns home after nearly being raped, her mother says to her calmly and softly, "give me one good reason why I should let you back in…because you're my daughter, that's why."

Shante, like her mother, discovers her own means of survival. Both thus rely on one another, which ultimately contributes to her character development—it is only when they come together that they can prosper. Shante's tone and choice of words by the end of the movie grow more confident—or stereotypically "angry"—not unlike her mother, the result of the trauma of intergenerational racism, inherited cultural values and coping mechanisms. This can be seen at the end of the movie when Shante encourages a young boy to come out of his shell to prove he can rap—and succeeds in unlocking his voice so that he is better positioned to discover his own potential. Shante is recognized as the battle rap champion of Queensbridge, a sport that is largely male-dominated, which not only tips the balance of gender power—and thus met with resistance and hostility within the hip-hop community—but also subverts gender role expectations. This is

because Shante, rather than wear pretty dresses, is outfitted in jeans and t-shirts—and even takes on the role of coaching young black men who want to learn how to rap. Or, as Peggy's neighbor declares, "Look at your daughter, she sounds just like you." Peggy's hardships, emotions, and conversations with friends about disappointing male behavior take place in their tiny apartment. The small apartment becomes emblematic of a private space for collective trauma, where the sisters and mother can share in their emotional pain. Together, the mother-daughter bond enables them to overcome an array of difficulties by building both sites of gendered resistance and emotional resilience.

Of course, any form of activism, especially when presented by an underaged black girl who seeks to actively challenge misogynoir, is met with resistance. As Shante continues to paint her lips red and radicalize through the art of her music, maintaining her status as the battle rap champion of Queensbridge, she is met with jealousy and misogynoir. From the neighborhood boy, who cannot find his voice when he is around her; to her deejay, Marley Marl, who becomes jealous of her fame and the gifts she receives; to her manager, Ray, who does not pay her as much as she deserves, and who encourages her to use her sex appeal to gain more free consumer goods, like cars and jewelry; to her violent boyfriend, James Cross, who disfigures her face, violates her body, and holds their son for ransom, she experiences the degradation of patriarchal violence.

Conclusion: The Sisterhood of Hip-hop Feminism

Fortunately, the culture of hip-hop ironically created a feminist space where black women from working-class communities could effectively tackle misogynoir. Or as Collins and Bilge underscore: "Hip-hop has grown far beyond critique to provide a space for an emerging identity politics" (174). Shante, not unlike Queen Latifah, outwitted patriarchal ideology in her songs, as

evidenced in Tracy Valentine's article, "The Roxanne Wars." In Roxanne Shante's era, iconic female artists included the female rap group Salt 'n Peppa, who devised a progressive campaign advocating for the practice of safe sex in their iconic song "Let's Talk About Sex." Lauren Hill set the record straight by being the first female rap artist to embrace motherhood by posing in an advanced stage of her pregnancy, exposing her naked belly for *Vogue* magazine. Women often wound up claiming an unexpected confidence through the forum of hip-hop, a forum that was designed both as a safe place for debate and a safe place to engage using novel aesthetic forms. Yet, despite the efforts of the hip-hop female collective, the patriarchal dominance in hip-hop music has resulted in mass popular culture celebrating the violation of the black female body—reducing the identity of these women to a gendered and racialized status of victim, as proven by Shante's real-life story. Roxanne Shante, although encountering patriarchal abuse, weaponized her voice to prevent men from hindering either her independence or ambitions for her sisters and mother. *Roxanne Roxanne* is loaded with innuendos that speak to the environment and circumstances of her life and the larger era. A close investigation of the setting in *Roxanne Roxanne* reveals the larger societal framework related to the crack epidemic discussed in first chapter.

According to Tricia Rose in *Black Noise*, women's "confrontational communication," meaning the style in which Shante was rapping, was considered "the female complaint." For Rose, "direct and legitimate criticism is reduced to *bitching,"* and presents challenges in how such female artists are perceived due to the hegemony of male-dominated black popular culture. However, Rose brings an important point that, regardless of any number of barriers, Shante was ahead of her time. Shante may be compared to Public Enemy or rapper Paris, who were considered too revolutionary. At the time that Shante started rapping, the style of rapping was in the form of *diss records,* also known as answer records. This meant that the whole point of being

successful in rap, at the time, was to directly battle your opponent in a live setting. Rappers in general would have to create records that would directly speak against the last successful vinyl record that was released. The idea of complaining that was attributed to Shante songs, became known through antiquated notions, as collective female hysteria. These sexist assumptions are what erased Shante from the public image of hip-hop because; in a sense, the male-dominated sphere of rappers within the hip-hop community successfully promoted sexism and misogyny, and further influenced these notions for their own gain.

The strongest weapon that Shante has at her disposal is not only her own voice, but those of the voices of a collective female sisterhood—without which hip-hop feminism would not exist. For instance, Queen Latifah's strategy for challenging misogyny was to sing about pro-woman empowerment—but without directly calling out any males or rappers. Her style was considered less aggressive and showed a sort of empathy towards black male rappers because she approached it from the perspective of embracing African roots. In addition, she was often seen wearing conservative African clothing to raise cultural awareness and spread the concept of peace within male-female relationships in urban, black, working-class communities—cloaking her own sexuality in order to decrease its threat. While Latifah's efforts were game-changing and remain popular today due to its peaceful approach, Shante's political stance did not stand a chance because of its revolutionary nature, not unlike Public Enemy. The difference is Public Enemy's main fight was against racism, which could be configured within a societal framework based on the revolt against that which impeded black progress; Shante's primary battle was against misogynoir, the tool of the male-dominated rap industry that needed to diminish black women, keeping the female presence under its control in order to profit monetarily and maintain its macho status. Shante's efforts may have been lost over the last two decades, but like many great artists,

her music today has resurged and is recognized for framing her resistance through the prism of her sisterhood, with women who stand together collectively as family and friends.

Chapter 3 – *Push* : The Effects of Socio-economic Inequality on Black Girls and Women

Sapphire's novel *Push*, set in the 1980s, captures the resilience of working-class African American women, in part through its exploration of the exploitation and stigmatization of the black female body. In a society that has often demonized, black women, the female characters strive to break down barriers. Investigating gender and racial stereotypes in *Push* can uncover the socio-political and economic limitations experienced by black females in urban communities. These limitations are caused by the lack of access to equal health and educational systems. Sapphire shows the effects of marginalization that black women have experienced and how that is then passed on inter-generationally, from mother to daughter. This creates conflicts related to racial trauma, sexual violence, reproductive justice, and educational inequality. Marlo David Azikwe's essay, "More than Baby Mamas: Black Mothers and Hip-Hop Feminism," argues that the sexuality and fertility of black womanhood since slavery have been harnessed into a system of capitalist exploitation. Thus, "Black women are no longer baby machines for a plantation economy, but what about a prison economy or a low-wage welfare economy" (348)? In her writing, Sapphire shows that the heroine strives to subvert forms of exploitation, gendered and racialized, through what are often acts of quiet resistance. Sapphire shows that through perseverance, by gaining more knowledge about civil and sexual rights, and especially in defeating illiteracy, the heroine subverts how misogyny and racism have defined her future. In doing so, she becomes stronger and more independent. Rather than continue to endure the abuse she experienced in her childhood home, she focuses on parenting her two children. Ultimately, Sapphire shows the only means of survival for black females is through self-reinvention, and

female allyship. With the help of her newfound friends, other embattled young women, the heroine, Precious Claireece Jones, overcomes the horrors of her childhood.

The Caricature of Black Females in Impoverished Neighborhoods

Taking into consideration how stereotypes manifested from slavery, to the Jim Crow or segregation era, and to Alexander's point, The New Jim Crow of the present, illuminates how gender, class, and race issues affect the lives of the black female characters. The main character is a young girl, Claireece Precious Jones, who is a victim of incest and child abuse. Precious's cognitive development is severely impacted due to having been frequently sexually abused by both her parents. Early in her childhood, she was sexually assaulted by her drug-addicted father and molested by her vindictive mother. Representationally, *Push* brings to the surface the terror black females endured throughout slavery. Sapphire presents the inter-generational black female experiences of Precious; her mother, Mary Lee Johnston; and her grandmother, Toosie Johnston. They are characterized in such a way that they fit the stereotypical archetypes of black females, including the more contemporary ones adapted from representations of hip-hop. Therefore, Precious, the sexually lascivious black girl who has no concept of degradation, is un-rapeable; rather her compliance is received as consent. In hip-hop culture, Precious is the "baby mama," meaning she enjoys having babies by diverse men. The endurance of sexual abuse is justified because Precious is portrayed as the strong black woman—who is able to endure physical pain. Precious's mother, Mary Lee Johnston, is the villainous, angry and evil black mother, who abuses Precious mentally, physically, and sexually. And Precious's grandmother, Toosie, is the mammy who appears to have no sexuality and serves only to nurture the children of others. Precious's narrative is formulated through a continuous stream of consciousness. Her private thoughts navigate to tell the stories of how she and the other female characters are domestically abused,

come to be villainized, and yet subvert these challenges. The stereotypical archetypes of black females in *Push* serve as an allegory. These archetypes unveil the sadistic brutality imposed upon black female slaves. The stereotypes of Mary and Carl's characterization are ironically an allegory for the white female and male slave-owners; Precious embodies the black female slave. From this lens, the way they interact with one another shows that these archetypes are rather rooted in the traits of those who owned the enslaved. For instance, Mary is associated to the stereotype of the evil black mother, but the traits of the evil black mother serve as an allegory of how white female slaveowners treated their female slaves. Black female slaves had no ownership of their bodies because they were considered property.

When Mary embodies the white female slave owner, she is delusional. Precious is at least seven months pregnant when Miz West, the neighbor, tells Mary that Precious needs help. Mary says, "She shoulda tole me she was pregnant!," and Miz West replies, "Jezus Mary, you didn't know. *I* knew, the whole building knew. Are you crazy—" (10). When Mary finds out that Precious told the hospital Carl is the father, she blames Precious for having slept with Carl. At the halfway house where Precious lives, Precious mentions that Mary never looks her in the eyes unless she is yelling at her (85). Mary visits Precious at the halfway house a second time to try to get her back home to cook, clean, and collect welfare. In a state of denial, Mary blames Precious for having supposedly seduced Carl. As an embodiment of the white female slave owner, Mary has been assimilated to a point where she believes Precious to be inferior. She calls Precious profane names, including the n-word, and blames her for causing her abuse.

A Raped Nation[13]: The Black Female Experience

There is a wide popular belief that black girls, in comparison to white girls, know more about sex (Roberts, Hannah-Jones 55). These beliefs are tied to the false interpretations influenced by scholars and historians who pre-date the transatlantic slave trade, going back to the sixteenth century. Travellers to Africa would document their impressions of African women by sexualizing them in their writing. Precious attempts to describe sex and pregnancy, yet her vague description shows she lacks comprehension.

> I'm twelve now, I been knowing about that since I was five or six, maybe I always known about pussy and dick. I can't remember not knowing. No, I can't remember a time I did not know. But thas all I knowed. I didn't know how long it take, what's happening inside, nothing, I didn't know nothing. (12)

The fact that she refers to sex as "that" and uses profane words to describe genitalia reflects her distorted perspective. Precious is actually describing that she has been "raped" since she was five or six, but she does not come out and say it. At the end of the novel, Mary describes to the social worker, Ms Weiss, that the very first time Carl, Precious's biological father, began to abuse Precious was when she was still in diapers, at three years old (135). Through a first-person point-of-view, Precious's narration at first suggests that she is somewhat disconnected from reality. In fact, the way Precious speaks about rape and incest is tied to the stereotype of black females as sexually lascivious. The second part of the passage shows her limited knowledge about procreation. Precious describes pregnancy when she says "what's happening inside" (12). In

[13] Precious re-iterates the expression "We a raped nation" by Ms Rain on page 68-69 of *Push*.

some instances, Precious vaguely uses terms like “intercoursing,” which suggests that although she has limited knowledge, her vernacular further explains what she does comprehend. Precious’s interpretation of sex is representative of how it has come to be defined within her community. In this sense, the profanity used throughout the novel suggests that sex is vulgarized, connoting violence and aggression. When Precious’s father rapes her and says, “I’m gonna marry you,” she thinks to herself, “how you gonna marry me when you my daddy! Fucking me illegal” (24). This shows that Precious understands that what her father is doing is morally and legally wrong, but she does not know how to react. Precious’s limited knowledge about health and sexuality explains why she is vulnerable and cannot fully grasp the severity of being raped by her father. Sexual coercion since infancy is all she has ever known. Precious does not have anyone to turn to at home because she is victim to both her parents.

Mary projects her own traumatic experiences onto Precious. We learn from the sequel *The Kid*, that as a child, Mary was not nurtured. The etymology of nurture comes from the Latin term “act of nourishing…to suckle, to nourish[14].” And to suckle is related to the theme of breastmilk in the novel. In this sense, one subtle and important example is that Mary justifies having given Precious’s first born, Mongo, to her grandmother, by saying Abdul does not need his mother to breastfeed, and that formula is better for the baby. According to an article, “Every Parent Should Know the Scandalous History of Baby Formula,” by Jill Krasmy, the baby formula campaign is a seventy-billion-dollar industry that intentionally exploited black mothers by marketing baby formula to black mothers. Such propaganda embellished the myth about black mothers being bad mothers, and prevented black babies from breastfeeding. Mary teaches Precious myths regarding

[14] Source from Merriam Webster online: “Nurture.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nurture. Accessed 6 Sep. 2022.

breastfeeding that derives from the commoditization of the breast milk of female slaves. Mary and Toosie are comparably portrayed as bad mothers because they do not nurture their daughters, but they are set-up to appear like they cannot nurture in the first place.

Mary's interpretation of breast milk representationally shows that black mothers are made to believe that their breast milk is not adequate for babies. Emily West and R.J. Knight, in the article "Mother's Milk: Slavery, Wet Nursing, and Black and White Women in the Antebellum South," say that this myth comes from how the breast milk of black female slaves was to feed the babies of their slave-owners, rather than their own milk. In a scene towards the end of the novel, Mary tells Miss Weiss during a meeting with Precious that breast milk is unhygienic and that babies are better off with formula. West and Knight explain how the babies of slaves were often communally breast fed; babies of black females would take bottled milk in order to preserve the black mother's breast milk for white infants. Precious's breast milk has been cut off from her first baby, Mongo, as a result of Mary's influence. After Mongo is born, Mary sends the baby to live with her mother, Toosie. This is to say that although Precious does not raise her daughter, she is able to gain control of keeping and breast-feeding her second baby, Abdul, by escaping her mother's house. Precious finds refuge in a shelter where she describes a foul smell coming from the dried-up milk on her breasts. This alludes to the notion of breastfeeding as unhygienic, but nevertheless, Precious feeds Abdul. The fact that Precious is literally homeless at this point, makes the notion of breastfeeding as unhygienic a moot point because Abdul needs his mother's breastmilk in order to survive. In this scene, Precious is robbed and the only thing she has left are the clothes on her back and the plastic lining of a cot. This puts even more emphasis on the significance of breastmilk. In regaining control of her breast milk for her baby, Precious breaks the erroneous beliefs about breastmilk as unhygienic, ideas conveyed by her grandmother and mother.

Mary projects her own traumatic abuse onto Precious. In the form of a paradox, Mary also embodies the black female slave, because she is at the mercy of Carl, who treats her no differently than Precious. Precious says, "Carl come in the night, take food, what money they is, fuck us bofe" (85). When Precious asks Mary whether Carl is her biological father, Mary says, "I was with him since I was sixteen. I never been with nobody else. We not married though, he got a wife though, a real wife, purty light-skin woman he got two kids by" (86). Mary is assimilated to the point where she believes being lighter skin is superior. These beliefs are then passed down to Precious as well. In a sense, for Precious, her desire to nurture her babies and her ability to mother Abdul, symbolizes resistance because they allow her to create a life separate from Mary and Carl.

From "Pre-K to Prison": Defining the Future of Black Females from Low-Income Communities

It is up to Precious and her friends to reform and educate themselves about their sexual health and reproductive rights. The more the plot unfolds, the more the theme of healthcare is significant because Precious is unable to gain access to health information. The course of events if she did have a better understanding about sexual abuse and pregnancy would have been different. Alexander states that 70% of New York City's poor black residents live in high poverty neighborhoods that are racially segregated. In comparison, 70% of the city's poor whites live in non-poverty neighborhoods, which have access to these vital health resources (196). This shows that the lack of health services in black communities is related to racial segregation and inequality. Trapped in underserved environments, black female inhabitants of such communities are dependent on learning from one another. For instance, in the late 1990s, Loretta J. Ross created "Let's Talk About Sex" conferences as a space where thousands of women of color could

gather to learn about issues like sexual abuse, STDs and HIV (Roberts 60). The work that hip-hop feminists have been trying to achieve in regards to black female youth having access to sex education reflects the needs of Precious and her friends. For these girls, the exploitation of the black female body has all too often been a normalized experience.

It is highly questionable whether Precious would have been treated differently within the healthcare system if she were not black. After delivering the baby on her kitchen floor, Precious is taken to a hospital by an ambulance. She says, “Somebody else there when I wake up…But they ain’ nice men. They pigs. I ain’ crazy. I don’ tell them nothing” (Sapphire 13). A nurse asks Precious to make a statement to police officials, but Precious refuses to because she does not trust the police. Even when Precious has the chance to seek help, she does not inform the police. The police take no legal action, let alone interest, when they learn about Precious, a sixteen-year-old minor, having been raped and having birthed not one, but two babies, by her father. In her writing, Sapphire subtly presents the notion of police officers who are very distanced in the narrative. The reader only learns about them through Precious’s point-of-view in a past memory. The police were at the scene for a very brief moment, which suggests that their distance and general absence underscores the lack of involvement from the police or other authorities in helping Precious.

Without even taking into account that there is no parental supervision to help in taking a statement, the police undermine the civil rights of Precious. The police scene is an anecdote, illuminating that black females from low-income communities are treated like second-class citizens. In turn, this treatment compromises Precious’s rights. Later in the novel, when Precious talks about the social worker she distrusts, she thinks to herself, “Why no one put Carl in jail after I have baby by him when I am twelve? Is it my fault because I didn’t talk to polices?” (Sapphire 125). This shows the lack of accountability on behalf of the justice and health systems. Linda

Villarosa explains the way doctors, nurses, and police have been manipulated into racially profiling is part of the problem. Precious returns home with her newborn into a high-risk environment and nothing is done to offer protection, let alone an investigation about her incestuous rape and resulting babies.

The change in Precious's living environment after moving from her mother's apartment to a halfway house, is essential for her to gain some level of education about sexual health. Sapphire creates awareness around the topic of reproductive justice because Precious's being infected with HIV as a result of her father's abuse is likely a familiar story for many other vulnerable young women. Kimala Price in "Hip-Hop Feminism at the Political Crossroads," states, "it is critical that feminists of color of the hip-hop generation are involved in the public dialogue on reproductive justice" (402). Price's reasoning is that females from these communities are statistically the ones hit the hardest with HIV, are the ones who will fight the hardest to ensure preventive measures around the spread of the virus that causes AIDS , and are a primary focus of concern and investigation within their communities. "In 2001, HIV was the number one cause of death for African American women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four" (402). We learn through Sapphire's sequel, *The Kid*, that Precious dies of AIDS at the age of twenty-five, and it is implied that Mary also dies of AIDS in chapter three. However, Sapphire brings a surprise element to this scenario because although Precious tests HIV positive in *Push*, her children do not. Precious does calculations and notes that her father disappeared for several years after he found out he impregnated her the first time in 1983. When he returns in 1987, it is insinuated that he is a crack addict at this point in the plot. Precious says "crack addicts and crackers…is the cause of everything bad. It why my father ack like he do" (34). In this sense, although the crack epidemic and the AIDS epidemic coincide, and Precious and Mary are victim to these circumstances, Abdul does not fall victim to the AIDS virus. As Price mentions, hip-hop

feminist activism works at trying to influence the establishment of outlets for sex and health resources. The fact that Abdul does not contract the deadly AIDS virus is symbolic of hope and health progress for a new generation. Even if quality of accessible health information is poor and under-funded, such as how it is depicted for Precious, these outlets signify the start of a health system that can potentially be improved over time.

Precious eventually learns more about sex once she meets and befriends a group of young girls in a similar situation as hers. Through this collective circle of females, Precious is able to make better choices based on her heightened understanding about sex and reproduction. Precious's circumstances relate to the reproductive justice movement in that it was pushed through to help assist young black women in working-class communities to better protect their corporeal rights. Collins and Bilge describe that reproductive justice is an intersectional path to include the sociological, political, and economic status of individual females. The distinction between the terms, reproductive health, reproductive rights, and reproductive justice, speak to Precious's situation. Reproductive health is the right to reproduce willingly and to have access to childbirth information, contraceptive pills and health services (Collins and Bilge 114). Precious experiences more reproductive health constraints because her low-income status puts her at a disadvantage. Up until Precious is sixteen years old, she believes giving birth on her kitchen floor is normal. Reproductive rights that emerged in the nineteen-eighties ensured that females had the legal and political ability to make choices concerning their sexual and reproductive lives (114). By learning more about her health and rights, Precious gains more autonomy and confidence, which allow her to progressively distance herself from the domestic violence.

Educational Barriers: Literacy and Poetry as forms of Resistance

Racial-profiling ties into prejudiced thought that mutates over time to cater to economic and political needs. For one, the fact that Mongo is sent away to live with Toosie alludes to how the separation of families in slavery was common. Black babies would get sold away from their birth families since the law dictated that children of the enslaved were born into slavery and therefore property. Matthew Desmond describes the evolution of rape and how "the control over Black women's bodies was key to creating a permanent labor supply" (50). The disadvantages in such low-income communities signifies the lack of concern for the well-being of its citizens. Another socioeconomic factor that contributes to gender-based racism in *Push* is the intersection with disability. Shortly after getting settled into the Advancement House, Precious cannot yet rescue her daughter, Mongo, because she discovers she has been placed in an institution. Precious names her daughter Mongo, which she says is short for Mongoloid because her baby has been identified with Down Syndrome. She refers to the baby as being "retarded" because she has Down Syndrome. The Global Down Syndrome Foundation, in their historical overview, states that, "It is important to remember people with Down syndrome and other intellectual and developmental disabilities were a key target in the eugenics movement in the United States…children with Down syndrome and other intellectual and developmental disabilities living in institutions were infected en masse in experiments related to vaccine discovery." Mongo has been taken from Precious because she is sacrificed. But the determination of Precious to overcome obstacles that prevent her from achieving both her dreams and maternal needs to be with her child has enabled her to save at least one of her children.

Contemporary times no longer need black females for economic gains since they no longer come with a price tag. Therefore, black girls and women are even more devalued and, in a sense, there is an attempt to racially erase them in exchange for saving on funding to aid low-

income families. Roberts notes that in 1973 " an estimated 100, 000 to 150 000 low-income persons [were] sterilized annually under federally funded programs" (55). In *Push* as in the sequel, *The Kid*, Mongo's fate remains ambiguous. It can be presumed that Mongo faces forms of exploitation in the institution. But Precious does not realize that she can attempt to retrieve her baby from the institution. She is rather told that she cannot mother Mango because she would be incapable of doing it on her own. Precious says, "They say even if she could be help, take a lot more than me to help, and ain't I got full load with Abdul" (84). This sounds rather suspicious, as Precious is informally cut-off from seeing her daughter without justifiable reason. It is ambiguous whether Mongo survives in *The Kid*, in which death is the actual fate of Precious and Mary in the sequel. From an intersectional lens, the deaths of Mary, Precious, and potentially Mongo, result from intergenerational factors related to their identities, like gender, race, class, and disability. Even through the social services made available to Precious, like the Incest Survivor group, the AIDS HIV group, and even prenatal care, there is nothing mentioned about the education of the disabled. Disability in the case of black females creates a barrier that is even more difficult to overcome because it adds an additional layer of prejudiced thought. A black female child with Down Syndrome from a low-income household, carries a potentially different outcome from a white female child with Down Syndrome and the same class status, because low-income white children are not locked into racially segregated neighborhoods, and therefore have more access to better health care and educational opportunities.

The setting displays the barriers that set back educational progress. However, Precious and her friends, through their striving and self-determination, obtain their G.E.D's, which is ultimately how Precious is able to grow. Precious and her girlfriends use writing as a form of therapy, distancing themselves from the domestic abuse that affects their learning capabilities. Sapphire explains that although the novel is fiction, the characters and events are based on the

realities of the black female students she encountered throughout her teaching career. Without understanding the day-to-day realities of black females like Precious, who live in housing projects like Harlem and attend under-funded schools, it is impossible to comprehend the prejudice directed against black females. For instance, popular culture has, over time, portrayed black girls and women in these communities as unfit, angry, unintelligent, dangerous, self-destructive, hyper-sexual, and criminal. In doing so, these associations create an inequitable divide, where black females of low-income communities are perceived as outcasts who do not belong anywhere. In institutional spaces, black girls like Precious can be presumed to have educational challenges, however the reasons behind them are neglected. Precious writes poetry in her journal, and in her classroom "book," that Ms Rain has created for her students to express their innermost feelings. In her private journal, Precious unleashes her trauma, slowly at first and with great difficulty. However, learning new words and formulating them into cohesive sentences, especially terms related to her personal issues regarding abuse and health, is what allows her to grow and persevere. A constant exchange of the journal between Precious telling her truths and Ms Rain consoling and advising her, turns into a therapeutic session. In the journal, Precious is able to convey her emotions through metaphorical phrases.

This reflects how Precious struggles to vocally share her experiences when she is put on the spot with Ms Weiss, the social worker; or in the therapy group, for incest survivors. The poetry that Precious includes in the class "Book," reveals how she feels through the use of metaphors mixed with rhetorical questions. Writing and poetry create a space for Precious to convey her private life circumstances and internalized trauma. For example, she writes: "marY Had a little lamb but I got a kid an HIV that folow me to school one day" (143). Although her poetry is a play on a nursery rhyme, it is more relative to a dance/hip-hop remix produced by the

rap group, Snap in 1990, entitled “Mary had a Little Boy”.[15] The remix of the rap song is about a male stalker who personifies the “little boy” who will not take no for an answer as he stalks Mary until he gets what he wants. This is not dissimilar to Precious’s interpretation of her father, who follows her to her room nightly during the years he was sexually assaulting her. Like Mary, she cannot say no. Spoken word poetry is an outlet that can encompass or contain elements of rap, hip-hop, storytelling, theater, and jazz, rock, blues, and folk music. Characterized by rhyme, repetition, improvisation, and word play, spoken word poems frequently refer to issues of social justice, politics, race, and community.[16] The content within Precious’s poetry is aligned with the lyrical content that hip-hop feminists use to voice their reality. Kathy Landoli’s survey of female hip-hop pioneers shows that Missy Elliot, L’il Kim, MC Lyte, Left Eye from TLC, La Chat, and others all encountered forms of sexual or physical abuse by family members or in romantic relationships. Missy Elliot’s classic song, “I can’t stand the rain,” reflects the metaphoric style in which Precious writes; similarly, like Precious, she was sexually abused as an eight-year-old. Elliot’s lyrical writing was known to be a sensitive issue for her because it reflected her trauma (Landoli 166). Like the many women who live in the spaces of hip-hop culture, Precious finds solace in her spoken word poetry to overcome her abusive past.

Representative of Precious and her girlfriends is that the ratio of black girls who encounter incest and rape is reportedly much higher, particularly in poor urban communities, which affects their ability to function in school. Ultimately, the determination to pursue their dreams is what allows them to cope. It is precisely from how they have been influenced that

[15] Snap was a popular Dance/hip hop group who created a remix song of Mary had a Little Lamb about a man stalking a woman: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDQ1wZYTg9s
[16] The Poetry Foundation provides a definition of different forms of poetry including spoken word: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/spoken-word

allow them to maintain an undefeatable will. For example, Precious wants to become a singer or movie star, and her classmates similarly aspire to be rappers or artists. These types of aspirations are influenced from popular culture trends. This is to say that their dreams are influenced by the ideals of the art form of spoken word and the emerging lyrical rap music. These expressive outlets are what make capable the very idea of resistance in their environmental circumstances. The fresh culture of hip hop at the time inspired youth to engage themselves through their voices to rebel against forms of racial oppression. The novel actually opens with the imagery of a stereotypical public high school classroom in Harlem. The classrooms are described as being filled with loud, obnoxious students, who are incapable of learning. Precious describes the interaction that takes place between her and the teacher after she takes a seat at the back of a classroom for first period math class.

> We don't have assigned seats in Mr Wicher's class, we can sit anywhere we want. First day he say, "Class turn the book to page 122 please." I don't move. He say, "Miss Jones, I *said* turn the book pages to page 122." I say, "Mutherfucker I ain't deaf!" The whole class laugh. He turn red. He slam his han' down on the book and say, "Try to have some discipline." He a skinny little white man about five feets four inches. I look at him 'n say, "I can slam too. You wanna slam?" 'N I pick up my book 'n slam it down on the desk hard. The class laugh some more. (4-5)

This scene appears stereotypically familiar, a classroom filled with problematic, undisciplined, multi-ethnic (therefore criminal-like) students in a poor community. Precious's thoughts that are juxtaposed with this charade, reveals that contrary to how it appears, she only seems rude and obnoxious in order to mask the real problem. "I didn't want to hurt him or embarrass him like that you know. But I couldn't let him, anybody, know, page 122 look like 152, 22, 3, 6, 5—all the pages look alike to me" (5). Precious has a learning disability and cannot follow the instructions—as opposed to being unruly and defiant which is how she is depicted. There are no measures in the school system that take into account external factors that challenge the learning

capabilities of the children who attend under-funded schools. When their families are poor or working-class, children with learning disabilities are often not provided with the proper resources to learn and succeed. In fact, Precious wins a literary award for her poetry including seventy-five dollars, but this is juxtaposed with her private school file, that states she will take on the line of work of being a house attendant (119). Precious is furious when she secretly reads her file and discovers how they perceive her progress, which is not aligned with her goals and ambitions. After Precious radicalizes in her classroom amongst her friends to protest the significance of her file, she is assured by Ms Rain, that she does not have to pursue the type of work that has been outlined specifically in her file.

The idea of discrimination and educational inequity within the public school system is demonstrated by the difference between the two schools that Precious attends. At her public school, when Precious is seven years old, her father rapes her nightly. She is caught by her teacher after peeing on herself and remaining in her seat. It becomes a recurring issue. The teacher is mortified and runs out of the room to fetch the principal, as if she has done something criminal (37). They call her mother and the principal says to the teacher, "Let it be. Be glad thas all the trouble she give you. Focus on the ones who *can* learn" (37). Precious is belittled or ignored at a young age by members of a school faculty who do not appear as concerned as they should be. In high school, Precious is called into the school principal's office due to being noticeably pregnant and gets suspended (Sapphire 8). The correlation between the school principal, Ms Lichenstein, and math teacher is that they are both white. And in Precious's narration, it is clear that she is uncomfortable opening up to them because of the racial difference. Ms Lichenstein jumps out of her chair screaming because of Precious's body language which frightens her. She screams, "Security Security!"(8) as if Precious will attack her. Even when Precious leaves the school building, she can still hear the principal screaming. If Precious was

white, or if Ms Lichenstein were black, the outcome may have been different. When Precious ends up attending an alternative school, her interaction with her new teacher, Ms Rain, comparably shows that Precious could never truly open up to Mr Wicher or Ms Lichenstein because they cannot possibly connect on an inter-personal level due to a gender-race difference within a black segregated community. Ironically, the Alternative school is called Each One/Teach One, which is an old proverb from slavery that stands for passing down the knowledge of education when one has attained literacy skills. The Alternative school is intended for students who have learning difficulties, and the rest of Precious's class is made up of a small group of girls who have all encountered some form of abuse. There are two points to make here. First, public schools in impoverished neighborhoods, like the one Precious attends, exemplifies the lack of concern about the lives of the students who most likely experience domestic or personal struggles because of their family income status. In *Intersectionality*, Collins and Bilge discuss the evolution of multiculturism that has morphed into today's popular term, diversity. Although socio-political campaigns will use the term diversity to represent advocacy of racially based incentives, it does not necessarily account for equity. It is not enough that schools are de-segregated to include everyone regardless of race or color because it still does not fix the problem of the additional challenges that students in such neighborhoods experience. Rather, the notion and challenge of equity is what should be addressed, for example how Precious finds the right support and comfort in Ms Rain and her new classmates. This suggests that more teachers like Ms Rain should be involved in teaching at public schools, especially because of racially segregated black communities. In Ms Rain's classroom and with her support, Precious is able to progress, learn, and escape her abusive parents.

Before Precious meets Ms Rain, who also symbolizes the role of a mother surrogate, her knowledge about race and its cultural legacy is very limited. In her writing, Sapphire shows that

Precious's values and knowledge are influenced by the information she gains within her community. Ms Rain, who becomes a caring presence for Precious, teaches at an alternative school rather than a public school. The public school, where students should do well, is designed to offer the opportunity for students to go on to college afterwards, whereas in *Push*, the alternative school, as evidenced by Precious's school file, is designed to re-direct students of poor communities into low paying jobs that would never allow them to grow intellectually. Precious is even referred to as "the client" as she reads Ms Weiss's notes about her "obvious lack of intellectuality" (118). Most of Precious's values are based on Louis Farrakhan's perspective. When Ms Rain hears Precious quote Farrakhan, she tells Precious that she is a lesbian in order to intentionally challenge her. Precious mentions that the first thing she sees every morning when she wakes up is Farrakhan's face on a poster (34). Ms. Rain suggests to Precious to watch *Roots* instead of learning about her ancestry from Farrakhan. Over time, Precious learns to challenge her own biases derived from Farrakhan, like homophobia and anti-Semitism, and to replace them with literary works.

The literary works that Precious studies in Ms Rain's class allow her to form a sense of identity, which increases her confidence. Precious occasionally mentions that she wonders about her parents, who they are, and why they treat her with such hatred. She is able to draw similarities or conclusions about questions she may have based on the literature or poetry she reads. For example, when her mother visits to inform her that her father, Carl, has AIDS, Precious wonders about Celie, the character in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. She says, "Man rape Celie turn out not to be her daddy" (85). This motivates Precious to ask her mother whether Carl is her biological father, which is important because she has very little verbal exchange with her mother throughout the novel. Precious's curiosity about the complexity of relationships in relation to her personal situation opens her up emotionally. Precious's psychological development is

increasingly noticeable as she adds more posters to her wall, posters which are portraits of her heroes. Farrakhan gets gradually tossed aside after she first adds a poster of Harriet Tubman when she learns about slavery. Next she adds Alice Walker, whose novel becomes an important reference source as she searches for answers about her sexuality, and her choices (87). Immediately after a counselling session with her mother, Precious frantically searches for Walker's book. Precious reads from classic African American literature, which increases her knowledge about her ancestry and how she identifies, both personally and culturally. Growing more comfortable with her identity, Precious finds happiness in the time she has left with Abdul, before HIV causes her untimely death.

Conclusion: The Naïve Heroine

The allegory in *Push* illuminates that stereotypes of black females evolve from slavery. Rather than act like a mother, Mary acts towards her daughter like an imperious white female slave-owner. From this perspective, the relationship between Mary, Precious, and Carl becomes clear. Mary is jealous that Carl no longer desires her, and pretends that she is unaware of the sexual abuse between Carl and Precious. As a result, she treats Precious with cruelty and sexual violence. Mary treats Precious like a slave, making her cook and clean, while taking advantage of her grandchildren to collect money from welfare.

In her book, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South*, Stephanie Jones-Rogers argues that contrary to historical and popular belief that male slave-owners held all the control, the reality was that 40% of white women and girls of the south were legally slaveowners. The violence and cruelty visited upon female slaves was part of slave culture where young white girls were trained to participate in barbaric acts toward female slaves. Doing so was a reinforcement of who held power. For female slave owners, owning enslaved

black people was an economic investment that secured income. This suggests that as an inherited culture, particularly between mother and daughter, there was a connection between black female exploitation within the private home and larger communities, such as represented in the novel. Precious and her babies are commodities, not unlike how black mothers were treated during slavery. The allegorical lens reflects new forms of slavery relative to prostitution and sex work as a means of survival for black women in impoverished environments. The issue of the availability of crack in the streets is mentioned several times in the novel, and is a core problem exacerbating tensions between genders. It partly answers the question to Alexander's rhetorical interrogation of "Where have all the black fathers gone"? in *The New Jim Crow*. The presence of the crack epidemic underscores a possible connection between Carl's behavior and his sexual abuse of his daughter. Had crack not been littering the community, perhaps Carl's actions and course of events would have been different.

Sapphire uses a form of structural irony, characterizing Precious as the naïve hero. This allows the narrator to tell the story from an unbiased point of view. Precious has no recourse other than to share her life story. The narrative allows the reader to engage with the character's thoughts while maintaining a secondary perspective to assess the situation from an objective point of view. For example, although Precious screams "rape," the connotation is dumbed down due to the rhetoric that reduces her plea to sounding like she is running away from her mother, because she got her hand caught in the cookie jar. Sapphire romanticizes the events to distance the reader from Precious's reality. In doing so, readers are able to engage and sympathize more with the realism that underlies the fictive plot. For instance, on the very first page, immediately after Precious casually reveals she's had two babies by her father, she says, "I got suspended from school 'cause I'm pregnant which I don't think is fair. I ain' did nothin'!" (3). Precious's reactions undermine the severity of the violence, which creates a tragic and comic effect.

Precious personifies the traits of the naïve hero's inability to understand the abnormality behind her mother's abusive nature. Doing so distances the reader from the truth and makes the circumstances feel more acceptable. Precious's "invincible simplicity" leads to putting an interpretation on affairs that the reader understands to be different through the authorial presence (Abrams 136). The reader can pick up on the actual issues that the narrator cannot see.

However, the way Precious describes the rape scenes by her father, and flashbacks of her mother's cruelty, is not unlike how slave narratives were also formulated. In fact, Precious even starts off by saying that she is writing to tell "the truth." The idea of the narrator making such a statement is not unlike the style of writing within slave narratives. For instance, Harriet Jacob's *Incident's in the Life of a Slave Girl*, published in 1865, during the time of the Civil War, used a similar approach to make the reader sympathize with the cruelty the heroine endures as a means to influence people to favor the abolition of slavery. A century later, Spike Lee's iconic film, *Bamboozled*, set in the 1980s, depicts a scene where a largely white audience fills the room of a modern-day minstrel show. This makes a satirical point about how detached from reality the audience is to the subject matter—insinuating that racism is more acceptable to African Americans in order to cater to a white audience. The romanticization signifies that the novel's contemporary racism, inflected by misogyny, is a modern-day adaption from the slave narrative, forcing its audience to ponder how black females were perceived during slavery, the Jim Crow era, and the present day. Sapphire's style of writing mirrors Precious's illiteracy through her stream of consciousness. As the plot unfolds, the protagonist's improvement in writing and speech symbolizes her radicalization and increasing intellectual sophistication. Through a hip-hop feminist point-of-view, Precious finds her voice as she learns to read and write, increasing her confidence, as a representation of the black vernacular and culture of the time and place.

Precious is enabled to grow and escape the confines of an oppressive household in order to save herself and Abdul.

Conclusion: The Voice of The Black Female Body

The female characters in *Roxanne Roxanne* and *Push* endure mental, physical, and sexual pain; in a sense, their bodies are rendered powerless vessels because of their ancestral legacy and the resultant stigmatization that still exists today. Although the African American female characters in both works exemplify struggles found within contemporary and popular culture, analyzing them shows there are many parallels to how black female slaves were treated. The black female body has been exploited to justify the reproduction of chattel slavery and the fortification of the American economy; its afterlife can be seen in both of these texts—and, by extension, the sociocultural, economic, and political crises of the twentieth and twenty-first century United States.

Alice Walker said, “My activism is the rent I pay for being alive on this planet,” which is what the heroines, Precious and Shante, do through their voices. The rise of hip-hop feminism that emerged in the early seventies is directly related to the culture that these embattled women, from impoverished and racially segregated neighborhoods, embrace. For one, hip-hop feminists are recognized for being active within low-income neighborhoods to make accessible programs about self-empowerment through forms of mental, physical, and sexual health. Fundamental to this is the rap music that works differently in each text. For Shante, it is configured as a competitive gender war in which she participates and vocalizes in freestyle performance. Being a hip-hop feminist for Shante means, despite being subjected to the physical abuse that many other women experience, she is able to claim agency through the creative slam of her rap grooves. For Precious, the hip-hop feminism is embedded in her poetry through the style of spoken word, a poetic performance that Sapphire personally makes use of in her work, as described in her biography. In a way, Precious’s stream of consciousness is not unlike how freestyle rap operates:

a mode that “reproduces the full spectrum and continuous flow of the mental process…in which sense perceptions mingle with conscious and half-conscious thoughts, memories, expectations, feelings, and random associations” (Abram 299). It is only when Precious discovers her path through literacy and poetry that she gains a new self-confidence. The moment of resistance for both heroines is when they find the courage to confront their traumas through the use of their voices. Finally, it is only when Precious and Shante bond with other women—including maternal figures and sisterly allies—that they can reject the dangerous security of abusive families and intimate partner violence. In doing so, they redefine family and claim the agency they always possessed.

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