

# Toward a Rhetoric of Body as Space

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**Abstract:** *This article introduces a rhetoric of body as space that exemplifies historical-cultural embodiment, rhetorical embodiment, and physical embodiment as points of analysis. To illustrate the theory the author constructs Precious, the protagonist of Sapphire's novel Push, as a rhetorical space, employing Roxanne Mountford's notion of rhetorical space as a springboard. Bringing in additional theories of embodiment, disability, and trauma, the article proposes that the rhetorical space of Precious' body affects her (in)ability to achieve self-acceptance by the story's end. The example application suggests that a theory of body as space allows for further exploration into embodied rhetoric as feminist rhetorical practice.*

**Keywords:** *embodiment, space, feminism and rhetoric, material rhetoric, rhetorical theory*

In their 2015 Key Concept Statement—"Embodiment: Embodying Feminist Rhetorics"—Maureen Johnson, Daisy Levy, Katie Manthey, and Maria Novotny affirm the need for a new trajectory in feminist rhetorical practices that focuses on embodiment. They call for approaches that recognize complex relationships across times and identities "to emphasize the role of the physical body in all rhetorics, to complicate the ways bodies are understood to work and perform as rhetorical agents, and to intervene in the ways bodies both inscribe and are inscribed upon" (42). It is no secret in the 21st Century that bodies create meaning, and are therefore rhetorical. Similarly, several scholars have made the same argument for places (e.g., Johnson, Mountford, Purdy and DeVoss). This article addresses Johnson, Levy, Manthey, and Novotny's call for scholarship on embodied rhetoric by constructing a body—Precious, from Sapphire's novel, *Push*—as a rhetorical space, not only juxtaposing rhetorics of place and embodiment but intersecting them.

In her acclaimed novel, Sapphire develops a protagonist who adheres to many cultural stereotypes of African American women. Precious, the protagonist and narrator, is abused sexually, physically, mentally, and verbally by her parents. She is obese. She is illiterate. And she is, as she discovers late in the novel, HIV-positive. It is no question that any reading of *Push* elicits compassionate emotion from readers, with its deep focus on the social stigmas of poverty and abuse. What is particularly interesting about Sapphire's characterization of Precious in this novel, though, is her portrayal of Precious' journey of

self-acceptance. Employing a theory of body as space to Precious, I argue here that though she may begin to pursue self-acceptance by the novel's end, the space of Precious' body does not allow her to achieve the full self-acceptance she desires. I therefore exemplify Precious, employing intersecting theories of feminist embodiment, disability, and trauma, to demonstrate how a rhetoric of body as space might contribute to current understandings and applications of rhetoric.

## **Intersecting Space, Embodiment, Disability, and Trauma**

This article constructs the body as a rhetorical space—an argument that assumes bodies operate in similar enough ways to spaces, or indeed *are* spaces. In suggesting bodies are rhetorical spaces I exemplify a new approach to rhetorical analysis—body as space—that might be applied to any number of other bodily constructions. This application of theory suggests that bodies communicate constantly, whether intentionally or unintentionally; that bodies are indeed rhetorical. Additional applications of this research and further inquiry on bodily rhetorics would help theorists answer questions about how and why cultural norms on bodies are developed and how these norms, in turn, affect certain bodies.

I employ Roxanne Mountford's (2003) theory of rhetorical space as a springboard for this analysis. Mountford bases her argument on pulpits, suggesting that preachers' spaces are not only gendered, but gender biased. For her, rhetorical space is defined as "the geography of a communicative event" (Mountford 17). She argues that rhetorical space, "like all landscapes, may include both the cultural and material arrangement, whether intended or fortuitous, of space" (17). She is clear earlier in the same paragraph that she is speaking solely of physical, material spaces—rooms, within buildings—in which people communicate. These spaces, she writes, "also have material dimensions that affect what we do there" (17).

Mountford cites the work of scholars in several fields—such as philosophy and anthropology—to further explain her theory of rhetorical space. Most notable for my approach to body as space is Mountford's use of Susan Ruddick's and Henri Lefebvre's works. Ruddick's role in Mountford's rhetorical space lies in her theory of the "social imaginary," which Mountford suggests "exists in and forms the boundaries of human behavior. The 'social imaginary' is, therefore, the cultural dimension of space: it is that sense of locations as having hierarchies and forming relationships between human residents" (24). For Mountford, the social imaginary is important for constructing pulpits as hierarchically gender-biased toward male preachers. A rhetoric of body as space

suggests that the social imaginary can be applied to bodies to construct them as hierarchically biased, too.

Henri Lefebvre is important to Mountford for his work with the material aspect of space. She suggests that Lefebvre essentially puts Ruddick's "social imaginary" into action. Mountford writes, "For Lefebvre, material space and the social imaginary work in tandem: material spaces can trigger the social imaginary because of the historical and cultural freight attached to the space" (24). This is perhaps better explained through the example Mountford supplies. She writes, "when I see a church, I think 'location for Christian worship,' whether or not the church is still being used for religious purposes" (24). Mountford, then, indicates that Lefebvre sees material space as a sort of "trigger," if you will, for the social imaginary.

She further argues that Lefebvre "suggests that particular spaces can move us in two ways: by suggesting symbolic associations and by causing us to form relationships with each other and the space through its structures" (24). Material space, for Mountford, cannot be separated from the symbols it triggers or the way it forces people to communicate through its physical structure. In an application of Lefebvre's ideas, Mountford argues, "Spaces exercise heuristic power over their inhabitants and spectators by forcing them to change both their behavior (walls force us to turn right or left; skyscrapers draw the eye up) and, sometimes, their view of themselves" (25). Thus, many times rhetorical spaces affect communication through sheer force; they have ultimate power over the people occupying the space.

While Mountford is careful to make it clear that her theory of rhetorical space is meant to be applied to material locations, it is equally clear how easily this theory can be applied to human bodies. After all, Mountford herself writes that "it is really not possible to think about rhetoric without drawing in considerations of the body" (8). For her, that consideration is how the body—and therefore communication—is affected by the material spaces in which bodies are located. The buildings and rooms our bodies occupy foster, inhibit, and affect communication. But in contemplating bodily rhetorical space—body *as* space—the consideration is perhaps more self-reflective, or reflective of the space of the body itself. While buildings and rooms certainly matter, in other words, there is another element of the body's own space at work; the body itself is always already a space of its own. When considering rhetoric's relationship to bodies we might consider how we make meaning from particular bodies and how bodily constructions affect communication.

There is, of course, an ethical undercurrent to this work. I advocate for a new theory that views bodies as spaces—material beings that are always already rhetorical, influencing and effecting communication that takes place about them and in them. Unlike spaces such as rooms and buildings, bodies

carry and are subject to emotion: We feel our bodies; we *are* our bodies. In light of this, Johnson, Levy, Manthey, and Novotny call for “an ethical reading of bodies and recognition of bodies as *people*—not objects” (40). The rhetoric of body as space demonstrated in this article responds to their call by exhibiting meaningful intersections between embodiment, disability, trauma, and space. The theory seeks to de-objectify bodies—in the example here, Precious’ body—by attending to communicative relationships (e.g., interpersonal, self-to-body) rather than “‘read[ing]’ people just by looking at them” (41). A rhetoric of body as space attempts to account for the whole person—the situation and context of the bodily space; *not* the space of a decontextualized, objectified body.

Moreover, a rhetoric of body as space works to contribute to purposeful, contextual applications. In seeking to understand how and what bodies contribute to rhetorical situations, applications of this theory should not only value bodies as people, but they should represent “a purposeful decision to include embodied knowledge and social positionalities as forms of meaning making,” as A. Abby Knoblauch suggests when she defines embodied rhetoric (52). Rather than attempting to analyze bodies as spaces for theory’s sake, applications of this rhetoric work toward extending understandings of worldly situations and, in particular, how bodies contribute to, affect, and change them. We all have bodies—a rhetoric of body as space suggests that our bodily positionalities, our bodily spaces, contribute to our own and others’ understanding of the world.

My application of rhetorical space to Precious’ body also relies on three additional theories: feminist embodiment, disability, and trauma. In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson discusses non-normative bodies and disability, writing that “representation attaches meaning to bodies” (5). She argues that both disability and womanhood are marks of abnormality, and she cites Erving Goffman’s notion of the “normate” to suggest that normalcy is mostly a myth. Yet to be normal, as Thomson implies, is to be acceptable to society, and as I assert in my application of rhetorical space, to be acceptable to oneself. As we will see in later sections, normalcy and self-acceptance are crucial to the implications of Precious’ rhetorical space.

Elizabeth Grosz’ argument in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* also plays a crucial role in the construction of bodily space through her discussion of Cartesian dualism, or the philosophical mind/body split. Grosz stresses that dualism presents problematic implications for feminism because the mind, seen as superior, is historically attributed to males, while the body, seen as inferior, is attributed to females (6-7). However, any denial of a mind/body split as Grosz’ feminist argument would suggest might also prompt the denial of one crucial aspect of rhetorical space, which is that the subject be a

physical location. Cartesian dualism seems to suggest that the mind resides in the body, which would make the body a “space” or capsule meant to house the mind. Grosz gets around dualism by connecting with Spinoza’s theory of substance: that “body and mind ... are merely different aspects of one and the same substance, inseparable from each other” (11). Spinoza’s substance allows for characteristic differences between mind and body, but it also requires a unifying threshold that constructs both as parts of a single whole (Grosz 10-11). Through substance, Grosz dismisses the binary male/mind/superior female/body/inferior alignments by suggesting that ultimately there is no material difference between mind and body; therefore the binaries and their alignments cannot exist. Her dismissal of these hierarchical alignments motivates her argument for the importance of the body in theory.

Theories of disability and trauma further suggest the need for discussions of bodies in scholarship and for this application of rhetorical space. Jay Dolmage revisits Thomson’s and Goffman’s notion of the construct of normalcy, arguing “Rhetorically, normalcy functions not to define itself, but to mark out what it is not” (9). We do not typically describe things as normal; rather we use the concept of normalcy to point out what is abnormal. Because as Dolmage claims “all bodies must be read through a normative matrix” (89), disability-as-abnormality plays an important role in the construction of disabled bodies, in particular, as rhetorical spaces. If all bodies are always already being compared according to (problematic) notions of “normalcy,” and disabled bodies are always already “abnormal,” then by virtue of their rhetorical space disabled bodies are always already disadvantaged or outcast. Trauma can play an equally important role for applications of bodily rhetorical space in that it acts similarly to disability. Trauma separates people into abnormal “others” by acting as a unique, individualized experience. Thus, normalcy acts as a thread that weaves disability and trauma together. Thomson suggests that disability is perhaps more “threatening” to those who identify as normal because of the possibility that anyone could suddenly become disabled at any time (14). Because disability could and often does have deep connections to traumatic events—though, to be clear, it does not always—trauma has the ability to change individual, societal, and cultural perceptions of bodies through the act of disabling.

## **Body as Rhetorical Space**

The analysis in the following sections incorporates theories of space, feminist embodiment, disability, and trauma to construct Precious’ body as a rhetorical space. Precious Jones, the protagonist of Sapphire’s novel *Push* and the title character of Lee Daniels’ 2009 film, is a 16-year-old woman from Harlem who has been the victim of incestuous rape by her father. She delivered their

first child when she was 12 years old, and she is pregnant with their second at the beginning of the novel. Precious is black, obese, illiterate, and HIV-positive. Although Precious may not self-identify her disabilities, she certainly understands her non-normativity. Throughout the novel she expresses hatred and self-deprecation because of her body. Body as space provides a lens through which to better understand Precious' experience of disability as a result of trauma and non-normativity in light of societal norms.

Therefore, I construct Precious' body as a rhetorical space in order to suggest that Precious' perception of her own body affects her inability to achieve full self-acceptance by the novel's end. Returning to Johnson, Levy, Manthey, and Novotny, this analysis suggests that Precious' bodily space has implications for how she is perceived holistically as a character—including her self-perception. How she sees her own body is, of course, heavily influenced by the ideology of normalcy that pervades her society and culture. Moreover, her physical body is influenced by the disabilities she has acquired—HIV, obesity—as a result of traumatic abuse. In constructing Precious as a rhetorical space, I demonstrate how her communication with herself—i.e., her self-perception and self-acceptance—and with others is affected by the space of her body. I further argue, then, that any number of bodies can be constructed as rhetorical spaces. Through analysis as space, all bodies contribute to rhetorical notions of identity and thus affect understandings of worldly positionalities.

Many locations in Precious' life could be constructed as rhetorical spaces according to Mountford's framework—for example, her mother's home, or her classroom at Each One Teach One, the alternative school she attends in order to learn to read and write. No place influences Precious' communication more than the space of her own body, however—which is disabled as a result of traumatic abuse. Revisiting Mountford's notion of rhetorical space, in the remaining sections of this article I share how Precious' body might be viewed through a lens of body as space, beginning with historical and cultural influences on embodiment and moving through communicative acts and physical attributes. From this analysis, I conclude that Precious' bodily rhetorical space has implications for her character's self-acceptance. Moving toward a rhetoric of body as space, I suggest that such analyses lead toward greater understandings of how we position bodies in rhetorical situations—how bodies contribute to meanings we make and take from embodied communications, embodied being.

## **Historical-Cultural Embodiment**

Like any physical space, Precious' body is shaped by a history and culture, as Mountford suggests rhetorical spaces are, and as Thomson and Grosz both suggest bodies are. When considering body as space, we might think of this

notion as a historical-cultural embodiment. Such a lens suggests that rhetorical bodies carry traces of historical and cultural notions of “the body,” of embodiment. This lens positions bodies in relation to one another and in conversation with bodies, situations, objects, and contexts that have been before and will be after. Furthermore, historical-cultural embodiment reminds rhetoricians, to refer back to Johnson, Levy, Manthey, and Novotny, that bodies are people, not objects; that bodies exist in/as histories and cultures and in relation to, in conversation with other people. In considering historical-cultural embodiment to position bodies as rhetorical spaces, we might be better situated to locate bodies in rhetorical situations and to account for bodily rhetorics as integral contributions to rhetorical practice.

This concept of historical-cultural embodiment applies to Precious in two ways: first, Precious’ body is shaped by the sequential history of her life and the culture in which she was raised. Second, Precious is shaped by the historical and cultural history of her race and her gender. Precious has been abused in practically every way by her parents. Her father, Carl Kenwood Jones, has been raping her since she was an infant, a fact that her mother, Mary, is keenly aware of and yet does nothing to stop. In fact, her mother hasn’t only played a passive role in Precious’ sexual abuse; she has both participated in Carl’s abuse of Precious and raped Precious herself in Carl’s absence. Moreover, Mary has verbally and physically abused Precious countless times, accusing her of “stealing her husband” (whom she coincidentally was never married to, because he has a wife and kids of his own). This history of abuse is what primarily shapes Precious’ life and actions throughout the novel, and she wonders what life may have been like had she escaped these situations earlier. “I don’t blame nobody,” she says. “I just want to say when I was twelve, TWELVE, somebody hadda help me it not be like it is now. ... Why nobody 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). Precious cannot separate her body from what her parents have done to it. Thus, her body, as a space, is influenced by its history.

Precious’ body is shaped by its culture, then, in a similar way. She has grown up among drug addicts in Harlem; has gone to school among bullies and teachers who did not care about her or her education. Perhaps most importantly, though, she has grown up in Mary’s household, where she must abide by her rules. Mary is presumably one of the only role models Precious had. We see Precious’ body affected by this culture most specifically in her obesity.

Early in the novel, Precious provides evidence that even her own eating habits have been explicitly controlled by her mother—a mother who, it’s worth mentioning, Precious says has gotten so big that she physically cannot fit into their bathtub. Precious describes a scene where, when she was twelve (and

pregnant for the first time), Mary made her cook dinner for the two of them, after she had physically and verbally abused Precious. Cooking the entire meal by herself—collard greens, ham hocks, corn bread, fried apple pies, and macaroni and cheese—wasn't enough, though. Even after Precious told her mother she wasn't hungry, Mary forced her to eat two heaping plates full of the food. "Eating," Precious narrates, "first 'cause she make me, beat me if I don't, then eating hoping pain in my neck back go away. I keep eating till the pain, the gray TV light, and Mama is a blur; and I just fall back on the couch so full it like I'm dyin' and I go to sleep, like I always do" (21). Her final statement here suggests that this is a regular occurrence, and it is no question that this behavior would contribute to her obesity. Thus, the culture Mary has created in their home has directly influenced the physical shaping of Precious' body as a space.

Furthermore, the passage suggests another attempt for Precious to reclaim her bodily space. In her effort to eat until she "sleeps" or "dies," Precious attempts, unsuccessfully, to gain the control of her body Mary has taken away. Because Precious eats the food as her mother directs, she is not exerting any fundamental control over her body. Furthermore, by going to sleep, she inadvertently allows Mary to sexually abuse her after the meal. Thus, Precious again loses control of her body despite her initial attempt to claim it. This is another example of the social imaginary at work in the novel. Precious allows the space of her body to control her actions by eating out of fear of pain, and she allows her body to control Mary's actions by not stopping her abuse, which she knows is coming. Her fear of being beaten—damage to her bodily rhetorical space—outweighs any control she could have over how her body is treated.

While Precious' own history and culture has played a large role in the shaping of her body as space, her body has also been shaped by the history and culture of her race and her gender. Thus, part of this second argument for Precious' historical-cultural embodiment lies in her identity as an African American girl from Harlem. For this argument I turn to Riché Richardson's 2012 article "Close-up: Push, Precious, and New Narratives of Slavery in Harlem." Richardson argues that *Push* and its film adaptation, *Precious*, parallel the structure of slave narratives and neoslave narratives in order to demonstrate similarities between contemporary traumas of African Americans (rape, illiteracy, etc.) and slavery. Much of his argument deals with how African Americans continue to rise above these limitations.

For Richardson, Precious' abused body acts as an indirect successor of slavery. He writes,

It is important to frame the ongoing expropriation of Precious' body for sexual abuse throughout her childhood by both of her parents in relation to the pervasive contemporary global sex trading and



trafficking of women's and children's bodies, a modern outgrowth of the institutionalized abuse, public display, and objectification of black women's bodies within the patriarchal system of slavery during the antebellum era. (Richardson 165)

Richardson, in other words, sees Precious' abuse in the larger context of sex trafficking among African Americans, and in turn he sees this sex trafficking as a successor of the ways in which black women's bodies were abused in slavery. Both of Precious' parents inflict abuse on her, thus replicating historic abuse of female slaves on her body. Therefore, Precious' body, in its abused state, is shaped by history and culture through that of the African American race. As a rhetorical space, then, Precious sees herself living under a constant normative disadvantage. Her cultural and historic shaping according to the treatment of female African American slaves suggests a racial disadvantage, and that disadvantage suggests to her that she is inferior as a black woman. As a result, she wants to change or "rearrange" her bodily rhetorical space into one that is more normative. "Why I not born a light-skin dream?" she asks. "Why? Why?" (Sapphire 87).

Moreover, I suggest it is Precious' identity as an African American *woman*, specifically, that is most important in shaping the space of her body. Tracey Owens Patton suggests that all American women, and specifically black women, are held to the same Euro American—white—standard of beauty, and that this ultimately creates adversity between black and white American women. Essentially, again, Owens Patton sees all women held to the normative standards described by Grosz, Thomson, and Dolmage. She provides a history of American beauty standards that seems particularly relevant to Precious' body in *Push*. Owens Patton argues that black women have been expected to conform to Euro American ideals of beauty—particularly in skin color and hair—since slavery in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. While female field-working slaves typically had darker skin and wore their (kinky or wavy) hair wrapped in scarves, for example, slave women working in the house (i.e., in close proximity to white people) usually had lighter skin and were expected to have straight, styled hair. Often, Owens Patton suggests, non-conformity to these standards in the house resulted in harsh consequences. Thus, "adopting many White European traits was essential to survival" for black women slaves (Owens Patton 28).

This history and culture of American beauty standards applies directly to Precious in many instances throughout the novel. Similarly, Precious often imagines herself in a different body. But the body Precious is often imagining for herself is nothing like her own. Precious is making a conscious effort to place herself in what Owens Patton's research reflects is a typical Euro American body, and what Grosz, Thomson, and Dolmage suggest is a normative perception of beauty. This perception, as I have discussed, is not only

culturally constructed, but it is largely fictional—very few people actually look this way, yet Precious shows that the “normate” body is the one she feels like she should have. If she “had” this body, she would see herself as capable of “being” it—thus eliminating her perceived mind/body dualism.

We see this in the novel when Ms. Rain, Precious’ teacher, has asked the class to write in their journals a construction of their “perfect self.” Precious says, “I tell you one thing right now, I would be light skinned, thereby treated right and loved by boyz. Light even more important than being skinny; you see them light-skinned girls that’s big an’ fat, they got boyfriends.” She continues by illustrating how she would be thin, her hair would be tame, her breasts would be small, and she would be a virgin (Sapphire 113-14). Precious’ “perfect self” reflects the typical beauty standard of the time, which leaves no room for her race, her obesity, or her abuse. It follows, then, that the space of Precious’ body is shaped by the history and culture of African American women by its non-adherence to typical standards of American beauty.

This passage in which Precious constructs her “perfect self” depicts one of the only passages in the novel where she acknowledges the convergence of her bodily traits. Usually, Precious fixates on one “flaw” that she is particularly interested in eliminating—her blackness or her obesity. But here she shows how all of the small traits come together to create one, whole, perfect body. Precious sees the fictional “perfect body”—the normate—as “allowed” to be whole, while her own real body must always be fragmented. This further indicates how Precious feels incomplete in her current body, and how she therefore cannot accept herself as a whole/complete person.

Precious’ non-adherence to perceived beauty standards bother her the most, toward the end of the novel, in her obesity. Even when she is beginning to accept herself as black, and is learning to read and starting to deal with her trauma, she still has trouble accepting that she is fat. In her essay “It’s a Big Fat Revolution,” Nomy Lamm illustrates the social changes she sees necessary for the world’s acceptance of obesity, and more importantly why “fat girls” have so much trouble accepting their bodies. She shares the struggles she has had personally with obesity, but also declares that she has finally accepted her own body for what it is—fat *and* beautiful. She argues that the two should not be, and are not, mutually exclusive.

Lamm’s idea of a beautiful-fat identity is something Precious never achieves. And Lamm, as a white middle-class female, discusses how difficult it must be for someone like Precious to achieve this self-acceptance: “I have to take into account the fact that I’m an articulate, white, middle-class college kid,” Lamm writes, “and that provides me with a hell of a lot of privilege and opportunity for dealing with my oppression that may not be available to other oppressed people” (456). In fact, according to Paul Ernsberger, author of

“Does Social Class Explain the Connection Between Weight and Health?,” there are strong connections between weight and socioeconomic status in adulthood. He writes that while “there is some evidence that poverty is fattening, there is much stronger evidence that fatness is impoverishing” (Ernsberger 32). Ernsberger’s work suggests that Lamm is right to note that “dealing with” her weight might be easier because of her privilege, despite her struggle in doing so. But what might this mean for Precious’ acceptance of her weight? If Lamm—who self-identifies as privileged—has trouble owning her obesity, then how can an underprivileged girl like Precious learn to accept her own fat body? Even Precious notes, in imagining her “perfect self” (Sapphire 113-114), that accepting her obesity would be easier if she were light-skinned. Lamm and Ernsberger’s arguments both suggest that social stigma plays a bigger role than any other in making underprivileged obese girls like Precious take shame in their bodies.

The complex relationship between Precious’ identities as poor, undereducated, and fat illustrate how her non-adherence to beauty standards shapes her historical-cultural embodiment. While Precious’ non-normativity is sustained through the social stigma of her obesity, it is the intersection of her obesity and her black skin that continues to limit her self-acceptance. Located through historical-cultural embodiment, Precious’ body—Precious—is positioned as space, providing a more holistic lens through which to rhetorically situate and analyze her character.

## Rhetorical Embodiment

For her framework, Mountford suggests that rhetorical spaces must affect and influence communication in that space. Working toward a rhetoric of body as space, we might consider a frame of rhetorical embodiment: No matter how we enact it, communication is a bodily act; bodies are inherently rhetorical. When we position bodies as integral stakeholders in rhetorical situations, we emphasize *people*, literally in body, as rhetors and place them at the center of rhetorical communication. Rhetorical embodiment, then, suggests that bodies should not be ignored in analyses of communicative events. For Precious, a lens of rhetorical embodiment suggests that both her internal self-communication and her communication with others are influenced by her bodily space. Precious’ communication with others serves to show her how/whether they accept her body, which largely influences, as Thomson and Dolmage suggest, how she is able to accept herself.

Firstly, Precious communicates with herself through her own bodily self-acceptance. By continuously judging herself on her physical appearance and comparing herself to “beautiful” light-skinned women, Precious is negatively, or perhaps mis-, communicating with herself; she is telling herself that

she's ugly, while others like Ms. Rain are telling her she's beautiful. We can see this sort of internal dialogue especially playing out when Precious is desperately trying to reverse or correct her life situation. Her revelation about her body toward the end of the novel best illustrates this concept:

I just don't always want to be crying like white bitch on TV movies. Since I ain' no white bitch. I understand that now. I am not white bitch. I am not Janet Jackson or Madonna on the *inside*. I always thought I was someone different on the inside. That I was just fat and black and ugly to people on the OUTSIDE. And if they could see *inside* me they would see something lovely and not keep laughing at me, ... that Mama and Daddy would recognize me as...as, I don't know, Precious! But I am not different on the inside. Inside I thought was so beautiful is a black girl too. (Sapphire 125)

In this excerpt Precious is having an internal self-communication about her own body. Furthermore, her body is affecting and influencing the way she can communicate with herself, because she bases much of her self-worth on her body's appearance. We know this because of instances where she says things like, "If [my father] did [really see me] he would know I was like a white girl, a *real* person, inside" (Sapphire 32, emphasis in original). Her perception of beauty, and therefore her physical self-worth, is highly, if not entirely, based on normative culture. Because the society around her says that beauty, as Owens Patton reflects, must be white, blonde, skinny, and altogether non-disabled, Precious assumes that she is not beautiful. Seen through a lens of body as space, Precious' self-communication on beauty demonstrates her rhetorical embodiment.

Precious' bodily space also affects and influences the communication she has with others. Although Precious is the only "inhabitant" of the space of her body, aside from her father when she is raped, other people must still communicate with her while she is in her bodily space. In this sense, the space of Precious' body affects and influences her communication with others in addition to her communication with herself. Her body does this primarily through its interpretation according to cultural norms. We first see this in the novel when Precious describes being bullied in school. She says,

I always did like school, jus' seem school never did like me. Kinnergarden and first grade I don't talk, they laff at that. ... Secon' grade they laffes at HOW I talk. So I stop talking. What for? Secon' thas when the 'l'mma joke' start. When I go sit down boyz make fart sounds wif they mouf like it's me fartin'. When I git up they snort snort hog grunt sounds. So I just stop getting up. What for? (Sapphire 36)

The other students at Precious' school mock her because of her body, outwardly, in that she is obese and black—attributes that do not reflect their normate ideology. They mock her too, however, because she is not talking. As we already know by this point in the novel, she isn't talking because of the abuse she suffers at home—another body issue.

Precious' silence, moreover, is part of her bodily response to the traumatic experience of rape. Since her body is the site of her traumatic experience, it, as Michelle Balaev asserts in *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels*, "defines the value of trauma" (xv) for Precious. In other words, when Precious is in the space of her body, she is constantly remembering the trauma that occurred there. The people she communicates with at school, however, do not know this. So when they ridicule her because of her bodily rhetorical space, she sees no other option than to be silent. She has nothing to say in defense of the place where her trauma occurred. Therefore, Precious' body directly influences how other characters react to and communicate with her, further influencing her self-communication. This is another example, too, of how Precious' body exercises heuristic power—it controls her ability to speak, therefore also controlling her schoolmates' reaction to her. As Thomson and Dolmage imply, perception of normativity relies on the cultural construction of normalcy, and Precious has been shown by others that her body does not comply with the standard. Thus, she cannot effectively self-communicate normalcy.

Precious' normalcy—and therefore communication—is further affected because the traumatic event that occurred in her bodily rhetorical space led to one of her disabilities. Precious learns later in the novel, as I have discussed, that she is HIV positive as a result of her father's rape. Just as she had started making breakthroughs in her recovery and self-acceptance, she regresses in her progress by shutting down when she discovers this news. She writes in her journal, "I was fine til HIV thing" (Sapphire 101). Even before she is diagnosed, though, Precious begins to despair because her mother tells her that Carl (her father), who has died, had the virus. "I got AIDS?" she asks. "HIV? What's the difference? My son got it? Lil Mongo [her daughter]? How I gonna learn and be smart if I got the virus? Why me? Why me? ... I think about this later. It make me feel stupid crazy, I mean stupid crazy" (88-89). Precious cannot effectively communicate a sense of bodily normality because she is constantly surrounded by the space where her trauma occurred. Her HIV, then, further disables her, which makes her more aware of her problematic bodily rhetorical space. Precious' body is positioned at the center of her self- and social communication, demonstrating how rhetorical embodiment might contribute to a rhetoric of body as space.

## Physical Embodiment

Mountford suggests that all spaces have “material dimensions that affect what we do there” (17)—i.e., they are rhetorically arranged. A rhetoric of body as space suggests that bodies, too, are “arranged” and that these arrangements influence how bodies are culturally and personally perceived. We might think of this arrangement as physical embodiment: bodily, material compositions that are not always easily changed but that are nevertheless rhetorical. Physical embodiment allows us to think about bodies at the micro level, to consider how one body or a group of bodies are composed and how their compositions contribute to holistic rhetorical situations.

Precious’ physical embodiment is exemplified through her black, obese, and female body—identifications that contribute to her material arrangement. Precious, as the narrator of the novel, does not provide a complete physical description of herself, perhaps intentionally. Instead, she usually focuses on describing one particular aspect of her body when it is what she currently would most like to change about herself—this tends to be either her size or her skin color. While Precious does not provide a comprehensive description of herself, she does compare her own material arrangement to her mother’s. She narrates, “Mama look bad, don’t have to get close to know she smell bad. But then I look Mama and see my face, my body, my color—we bofe big, dark. Am I ugly? Is Mama ugly? I’m not sure” (Sapphire 84). Here, the reader sees Precious’ perception of her and her mother’s bodies, which she is comparing to cultural norms of ugliness, and therefore normativity—because normalcy, as Dolmage asserts, is determined by what it is not, and ugly is not normal by cultural standards. This material arrangement of “big” and “dark” suggests for Precious that she and her mother may be ugly. This passage indicates, though, that Precious is conscious enough of her material arrangement, and thus its sociocultural perception, to ask whether her body is ugly.

Cartesian dualism seems like a simple description for physical embodiment. For Descartes, the body and mind are completely separate entities, only interacting so the mind can control the body. But as we see with Grosz and Thomson, Cartesian dualism presents problems for female and non-normative/disabled bodies in its hierarchical insistence that people should be disassociated with their bodies, especially when certain bodies are culturally deemed inferior. Thus, Grosz turns to Spinoza, who argues that everything—mind and body—is a different aspect of one whole unit—substance. As a space, Precious’ body is marked by non-normativity and disability through her identities as female, African American, obese, illiterate, and HIV positive, the last of which she doesn’t know until later in the novel. Precious struggles with each of these identifications throughout her story despite, as Michelle Jarman

notes in “Cultural Consumption and Rejection of Precious Jones,” never expressly identifying as disabled.

Jarman argues that while Precious does not self-identify as disabled, she does so in effect through claims she makes regarding “problem embodiment” (qtd. in Jarman 3)—traits such as her HIV and her identity as the mother of a daughter with Down syndrome. Jarman suggests that because Precious sees her differences as “problems,” she self-identifies as disabled. She further qualifies her argument by suggesting that Precious exhibits a “multilayered identity” that combines her heroic traits of overcoming the odds with the disability that continues to stain her life (Jarman 3). Jarman makes it clear that Precious sees herself (for much of the novel) as multilayered—she thinks the person on the “inside”—the mind—is different from the person on the “outside”—the body. Through disability studies Jarman is able to imply that Precious constructs for herself the kind of Cartesian dualism Grosz rejects, and in doing so, Precious demonstrates her physical embodiment.

Precious does not see the problematic nature of constructing her body in this way. Seen through a lens of body as space, Precious marks herself as other because she sees her bodily space as problematically different. Her self-perception provides an example of how people—especially trauma victims—are commonly portrayed as differentiating their minds and bodies. Trauma theorists suggest that as human beings we are able to separate ourselves from our own bodies by imagining ourselves as someone else; as someone or something outside of our physical bodies. In her 2002 essay “Surviving Sexual Abuse with an Out-of-Body Experience,” Carla Wills-Brandon shares her own harrowing account of abuse, which she quotes from her then-upcoming book *A Glimpse of Heaven* (2003). Wills-Brandon’s account exemplifies how Precious’ similar experience signifies a separation of mind and body through out-of-body experiences, demonstrating Precious’ physical embodiment.

Wills-Brandon labels her dissociation from her body as an “out-of-body experience” (OBE), a term first coined by Robert Munroe in 1958. Generally speaking, an OBE occurs when someone experiences the feeling of being somewhere outside of his/her physical body, usually while involved in a traumatic event. In some cases, the out-of-body experiencer can view the event happening to her/his body while s/he is not in it. In her personal account, Wills-Brandon writes,

I’m watching them (my offender and myself at age 5) from above and can see everything crystal clear. It’s very frightening and I feel sick to my stomach as I stare at the scene below, but I can do nothing to protect her.

Thank goodness I had an OBE! Dissociating from my body, leaving my physical self while he hurt me, enabled me to not have to feel, emotionally, physically or spiritually, the incredible shame, pain and terror, (the offender) was inflicting upon me. (Wills-Brandon 234-35)

She further explains that OBE is a common experience among trauma victims, and especially victims of sexual abuse.

Precious, too, faces out-of-body experiences in times of trauma when she similarly separates herself from her physical body in times of abuse. One instance of this is the first time she vividly narrates her father's incestuous rape. Precious says, "I fall back on bed, he fall right on top of me. Then I change stations, change *bodies*, I be dancing in videos! In movies! I be breaking, *fly*, jus' a dancing!" (Sapphire 24, emphasis in original). She extracts herself from her physical embodiment in order to cope with—or escape—the sexual abuse occurring there.

Precious is further able to separate herself from her body in a similar way to Wills-Brandon. In the excerpt below, Precious is dreaming about the sexual abuse she experiences from her mother:

That night I dream I am not in me but am awake listening to myself choking, going a huh a huh A HUH A HUH A HUH. I am walking around trying to find where I am, where the sound is coming from. I know I will choke to death I don't find myself. I walk to my muver's room but it look different, she look different. I look like little baby almost. She is talkin' sweet to me like sometimes Daddy talks. I am choking between her legs A HUH A HUH. ... Her hand is like a mountain pushing my head down. I squeeze my eyes shut but choking don't stop, it get worse. Then I open my eyes and look. I look at little Precious and big Mama and feel hit feeling, feel like killing Mama. But I don't, instead I call little Precious and say, Come to Mama but I means me. Come to *me* little Precious. (59, emphasis in original)

Precious' scene and Wills-Brandon's depict vivid OBEs, but what is most relevant is that in both situations the victim envisions herself watching the abuse take place from an outside location. This is the one time where Precious has not transported herself completely somewhere else, like a music video; she is watching it take place and wanting to do something about it. Seen through body as space, Precious' body mirrors Mountford's understanding of a rhetorical space through its inhabitability, as demonstrated through out-of-body experiences. Precious' body is a space that she sometimes feels the need to "leave." In this sense, her body's inhabitability is increased. Just as physical rooms are still places when no one is occupying them, Precious' body is a place because she feels the need to leave it.



However, Precious takes her OBEs even further when she effectively imagines herself as a different person. As we can see in the previous example, she can leave her body in order to imagine herself somewhere else, but she can also leave her body in order to imagine herself as *someone* else. In this sense, her body acts as a physical space because she can change locations—she can see and feel herself inhabiting different spaces. Precious first introduces this kind of experience when she imagines her mother defending her (Precious) to her father. Precious painfully reflects that her mother never “come in here and say, Carl Kenwood Jones—thas wrong! Git off Precious like that! Can’t you see Precious is a beautiful chile like white chile in magazines or on toilet paper wrappers. Precious is a blue-eye skinny chile whose hair is long braids. Git off Precious fool!” (Sapphire 64). Here, Precious is able to un-attach herself from her real body—black, obese and abused—to what, in her eyes, is a more desirable body—white, blue-eyed and skinny. This ability further defines her body as a physical space because she can envision herself with a physical embodiment other than her own, thus separating her mind and body as a result of personal trauma.

As the excerpts above suggest, trauma also plays a role in the construction of Precious’ physical embodiment. Her continuous abuse at her father’s hands makes her body a space in these moments. He forcefully inhabits the space of her body, and as a result she mentally goes somewhere else. Her individuality is tarnished by his forcefulness, too, because she does not want to occupy the same space as him. In essence, he was not invited to share her bodily space, so she leaves while he is there. His presence, however, has forever changed the space, which contributes to Precious’ strong desire to own/ become a different space. She wants to claim a body that has not been spoiled by someone else’s uninvited presence.

This uninvited presence Precious experiences in the novel is the perfect example of the heuristic power of rhetorical spaces: Precious’ body controls what happens in/to it, sometimes without her consent. Though Precious in no way wants her father’s sexual advances, she describes her body’s reactions to the rape. “I start to feel good,” she narrates, “stop being a video dancer and start coming. I try to go back to video but coming now, rocking under Carl now, my twat jumping juicy, it feel good. I feel shamed” (Sapphire 24). She feels “shamed” at her body’s physical reaction to the rape. Precious did not invite Carl to her space—she did not welcome his advances—and yet she cannot control how her body physically reacts with pleasure. The space of her body is controlling her communicative power. Furthermore, Carl comments on her reaction by saying, “See, you LIKE it! You jus’ like your mama—you die for it!” (24, emphasis in original). Even though she does not like it, her body is telling him that she does. This is an example, too, of the social imaginary at work. The

space of Precious' body is forming hierarchies between its residents, establishing Carl as superior to Precious because her body is "obeying" his actions rather than her desires. The most she can do, then, is feel ashamed by her body's betrayal.

## Implications and Applications of Body as Space

This analysis demonstrates how Precious' bodily space contributes to her character's rhetoric in *Push* through historical-cultural embodiment, rhetorical embodiment, and physical embodiment. Each of these points of analysis positions the space of Precious' body as rhetorical, from macro-level influences to micro-level individual traits. Therefore, I take up two goals to conclude my argument: first, to explore the applications of a rhetoric of body as space for Precious—what does this analysis mean for her character? Second, I suggest possible implications of a rhetoric of body as space as it might be applied to any number of rhetorical bodies.

### *Implications (for Precious)*

When Precious finally seems to realize that she is the same on the inside as she is on the outside, she says,

I just don't always want to be crying like white bitch on TV movies. Since I ain' no white bitch. I understand that now. I am not white bitch. I am not Janet Jackson or Madonna on the *inside*. I always thought I was someone different on the inside. That I was just fat and black and ugly to people on the OUTSIDE. And if they could see *inside* me they would see something lovely and not keep laughing at me, ... that Mama and Daddy would recognize me as...as, I don't know, Precious! But I am not different on the inside. Inside I thought was so beautiful is a black girl too. (Sapphire 125)

This passage can be read in two ways—self-accepting or non-self-accepting. While most readers might think that Precious is feeling body-positive at this point in the novel—finally accepting her body as it is—I see it in a different light. By saying at the end, "Inside I thought was so beautiful is a black girl too" (Sapphire 125), Precious is admitting that she is the same on the inside as she is on the outside. At this point she has finally eliminated (for her own self-image) the distinction between her "outside" and "inside" selves, creating one whole *disabled* self. Although she is beginning to acknowledge her own bodily complexity as un-fragmented, she is still seeing it as flawed; and because she does not come to terms with the individual flaws she focused on throughout the novel, she has not yet fully accepted the space of her body. Moreover, the

space of her body will not *allow* her self-acceptance because she sees it as wholly flawed, instead of wholly normal.

The implications of Precious' non-self-acceptance are twofold. Firstly, because the rhetorical space of Precious' body does not allow her to accept herself, the ending of the novel—which depicts Precious at the Advancement House (a women's shelter) reading a book to her son—may not be as positive as many readers assume. Precious makes great strides toward literacy, but she still has many obstacles in her way by the novel's end. She does not have a job, and therefore any money, nor does she have custody of her daughter (though she does have both of her children at the end of the film adaptation). While Precious has made several life improvements in the novel that give her—and readers—hope for the future, she still has a lot of work to do in order to be the person she wants to be. My argument in this article, however, is not that hope for Precious does not exist; I think it does. Rather, I argue that the ending of the novel leaves room for several more obstacles, in addition to hope. Precious will have to work incredibly hard to achieve freedom from her struggles, and this should not be forgotten because she has learned how to read and write. Her bodily struggles continue, and freeing herself from the bodily space that serves as a constant reminder of her traumatic past will not be easy. That separation is, however, necessary to her full self-acceptance, which in turn is necessary for a positive future.

Before Precious recognizes her body as a complete entity, she begins to accept her blackness. In the following passage, she is reflecting on how she and the girls at Each One Teach One treat each other and how she fears her son (Abdul) will someday treat people with bodies like hers. She says,

At least when I look at the girls I see *them* and when they look they see *ME*, not what I looks like. But it seems like boyz just see what you looks like. ... When [Abdul] grow up he gonna laff big black girls? He gon' laff at dark skin like he got? One thing I say about Farrakhan and Alice Walker they help me like being black. I wish I wasn't fat but I am. Maybe one day I like that too, who knows. (Sapphire 95-96, emphasis in original)

In this scene, one of the last times in the novel Precious reflects on her self-image, she can see how being black is OK—but she still cannot accept her obesity. She also directly mentions the gender discrepancy she's been dealing with throughout the novel. She fears that her son will laugh at people who look like her, because she has had so much experience as a non-normative woman being laughed at by men.

Interestingly, Precious never mentions acceptance of her HIV in this passage, because admitting to that requires admitting to her father's abuse, which

continues to send her into out-of-body experiences. We see one last short example of an OBE when Precious is at her first incest survivors meeting with Rita (a friend she meets in GED preparation class). Even as Precious is raising her hand to share her story, she describes how she has to push through “the smell of Mama” and the image of her father. And, after she has done that successfully, she cannot manage to say more than a few words (130). This shows that while Precious may be on the way to self-acceptance, she is not quite there yet. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of this scene with her fears for her son suggests that she does not trust men and is still heavily influenced by their perceptions of her. She cannot articulate her traumatic experience or reconcile her disability, then, because her bodily space does not allow it.

#### *Applications (for Rhetoric)*

Body as space, as a theory, has applications far beyond Precious Jones and *Push*. While this kind of direct theoretical application is in many ways necessary to demonstrate how a theory of body as space might operate, virtually endless applications of this theory might exist. Just as Mountford's notion of rhetorical space, while she applies it most directly to sacred spaces, comes with limitless possibilities—such as this remediation—so might the notion of body as space I've outlined here be applied, expanded upon, remediated, questioned, and problematized. To summarize, I submit that body as space includes three points of analysis: historical-cultural embodiment, rhetorical embodiment, and physical embodiment. While it could be appropriate to focus on one or two of these points of analysis individually, I caution readers against applying body as space in ways that might objectify, de-personify, bodily spaces. Rather, when historical-cultural, rhetorical, and physical embodiments are joined to form one holistic approach, we have a rhetoric of body as space that provides a fuller picture of the body's contribution to rhetorical situations.

As the authors of *Peitho's* Key Concept Statement on Embodiment remind us, “All bodies do rhetoric through texture, shape, color, consistency, movement, and function” (Johnson, Levy, Manthey, and Novotny 39). How we do that rhetoric—how bodily spaces create meaning, affect situations, contribute in discourse—can be interpreted through analyses of body as space. Moreover, not only can we apply this rhetoric to varied material bodies, but in addressing Johnson, Levy, Manthey, and Novotny's statement that “embodied methodologies and embodied rhetorics encourage complex relationships among past, present, and future, as well as across multiple identifications” (42), I argue that we *must* continue to explore multiple body-spaces, across identifications, to note the exceptional, intersectional ways material bodies matter. The theory presented in this article provides a move toward a rhetoric of body as space that might address such a call.

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