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On a beautiful Fall day, November 20 to be exact, Jan sat down with Columbia College Chicago professor Sheila Baldwin to discuss Lee Daniels' controversial new film PRECIOUS. (Please note that the film's full title is PRECIOUS: BASED ON THE NOVEL 'PUSH' BY SAPPHIRE.)

Jan Lisa Huttner: A program called "Each One/Teach One" figures prominently in this film, Sheila. Do you know if it's a real literacy program, or something Sapphire invented in her book **PUSH**?

Sheila Baldwin: I'm not familiar with that program, but it could be real. That's what's so fascinating about the novel. Sapphire had taught students who had deficient writing skills. So part of the intrigue of the novel is that the story is written in a way where the reader cannot tell. Did this happen to the writer herself, or is it all made up?

And apparently it is all made up, but it's based on actual facts, if that makes any sense. Sapphire said she heard the story in passing about a young girl who had two children: One was Mongoloid and one was born normally. I'm not certain if the story was that the father of the two children was the girl's father.

Jan: One of the things that I really liked about Sapphire's book was the way you can actually see how Precious is learning from the journal that she keeps. In the film too, there's always an interpretative process going on, with "Precious" (Gabourey "Gabby"

Sidibe) trying to find the sounds that match what's in her head, and then "Ms. Rain" (Paula Patton) trying to figure out the actual words even though Precious has misspelled them.

Sheila: I like it too, but that was the part that all of my students found to be so troubling. They did not want to read the book. It was foreign to them—that someone in their time would have to piece their language together this way. We had a whole session on Black English and how that differs from the way Precious writes—that she is really sounding out the words and doing the best that she can to get to the right words.

There's a beautiful scene late in the film when Precious decides she doesn't want to be a nursing attendant. She mispronounces or misuses one word and this other girl corrects her. It's the same way she discovers how to write. She makes the sounds and letters on the page that are in her head, and Ms. Rain comes back and says: "No, Precious, this is the way that it's actually said."



I just love the way that is displayed on film and in the novel, because then you begin to see like her. Right away, Precious is learning, and it's not like she's standing in front of a chalkboard; it's not like she's reading all these books. Ms. Rain is there saying: "This is the way 'cleaners' is spelled," and "This is the way 'Roosevelt' would be spelled." It's really fantastic.

Jan: There are a lot of things I like about the film, and I think the book is really wonderful. But I don't "love" the film, so I don't quite know what to make of all the hype about it.

Sheila: I do, because it will be **THE COLOR PURPLE** of this generation. When the film **THE COLOR PURPLE** came out, and even when the novel **THE COLOR PURPLE** came out, there was a lot of backlash from Black men—that Black women writers were putting them down. That stayed in the Black community for a long time.

The way that the mother in **PRECIOUS** is presented in both the novel and on film is unlike anything that has existed in cinema for a long time. If you compare the two works, the characters "Albert" (Danny Glover) in **THE COLOR PURPLE** and "Mary Lee Johnston" (Mo'Nique) in **PRECIOUS** parallel each other, in the way that Albert treats his wife "Celie" (Whoopi Goldberg) and Mary treats her daughter Precious.

In the Black community now, people are saying: "I'm not supporting this film. I'm not going to go see it. I think those images have been put out before us and I'm tired of seeing them." But the performances that Mo'Nique and Gabby Sidibe give are outstanding, because it puts that whole discussion of abuse on the national platform. And some people are disgusted.



Before it was not discussed like that. If you look at the mother, the daughter, the social worker and the teacher, those characters combined help tell the story of what had not been discussed before, and I think that in itself is such a remarkable achievement, both in a literary and cinematic sense.

With *Precious*, we see her in this horrible living situation and then we see her saying: "I'm not like this. I want so much more than this, and I deserve to have so much more than this." By the end of the story, both the film and the novel, we can say: "Oh, she is going to make it. She is really going to make it. She has two children, one who is disabled and one who is not." We see her saying: "This has to stop, and I'm going to stop it." It's just an awesome way to go!

Jan: But when I watched the movie for the first time, I said to myself: "Wait a minute. She's got two kids—one in each arm—and she's HIV positive, and she has no means of support. How on earth can she possibly make it?" So I feel like it's a fake and manipulative ending.

After I saw the film, I went back and read Sapphire's book. The last scene of the book is so beautiful and powerful; it's very restrained, just Precious and her son Abdul. My feeling is director Lee Daniels thought that he had to amplify everything if he wanted to be commercially successful.

Sheila: I was more concerned about the sex scenes, particularly in a film directed by Lee Daniels (who also produced **MONSTER'S BALL**). I think the sex scenes at the beginning of **MONSTER'S BALL** are uncalled for. There are some parts at the beginning of **PRECIOUS** where the father is having sex with Precious, but we don't actually see the act. There's a scene where the mother is masturbating, but we don't actually see the act. In the novel, those two scenes are pretty graphic.

Daniels said he left it up to audience imagination. I damn near fell out of my chair when he said that. I was like: "Well, thank you Jesus! You have just seen the light!" Because Precious represents "the Mammy figure" flipped around. Mammies are typically asexual, but the mother and father have made Precious a sexual object. If Daniels had shown those sex scenes in their entirety, it would have been more detrimental to the character than his ending. I was very happy to see that he did not take the easy way out with the sex scenes.

Jan: I'm entirely more cynical than you are, Sheila! I think the filmmakers physically exploited Halle Berry in MONSTER'S BALL because she's beautiful. They couldn't show the sex scenes graphically in PRECIOUS because they were dealing with someone who has a loathed body type. Daniels would have had to change the character and make her physically desirable—which leads us right to a discussion of the fantasy sequences in PRECIOUS. What did you think of them?

Sheila: I thought that they were displayed very well from the novel to the screen. The one that really strikes me is when she's getting dressed and putting on her clothes—Precious looks in the mirror and there's a White woman in there. She's saying: "Sometimes I wish I were White. Sometimes I want to escape this reality that I am of dark skin, a Black woman with two kids who has no loving family, nothing. If I were White, then I would be all right."

Jan: I'm wondering how the fantasy sequences fit together, though. Sapphire writes in the book that when Precious fantasizes about herself, she sees herself as thin, beautiful and sometimes even White. Yet except for that one mirror scene, Gabby, the actress, looks exactly the same in all her fantasies—the only change in the fantasy sequences is that they gussie her up her clothes, make-up, and hairdos. So that confused me: who is the person in the mirror? Maybe she's supposed to be a fairy godmother figure?

Sheila: I'm really stunned by your connection with the White female image being a fairy godmother. Precious has no fairy godmother. The image that she sees is how she wants to look; it's who she wants to be. Don't read anything into it other than her wanting to be White. The concept of Black people wanting to be White is a reality in humanity.

If I recall the placement of that scene, she and her mother have just had a fight. Her self-esteem has been just beaten down to a pulp by that point and this is how she sees herself: If I were White, skinny, blonde, somebody would love me. Among some Blacks in the community, anything that would get you closer to the White race is acceptable. Black people whose self-esteem is down don't see any value in what they have at all.

Jan: So from the perspective of a literature professor, what for you are the strengths and weaknesses of this adaptation?

Sheila: I think the strength of the film is that we actually see Gabby first. She's described as like an unbelievable human being. She's big. She's grotesque. She's dark skinned. She can't read. She can't spell. So we're like: "What is this creature? Who is this creature?" And at the same time, we're saying: "This is a piece of a fiction. This person doesn't exist. This is all in the author's mind." Then we meet her mother and then her father. The characters who we think are only fictional, we actually see come to life on screen.

I think it's good that there's a male character in the film, Nurse "John McFadden" (Lenny Kravitz), who shows that Black men can be human. It was important to me that he's light skinned, because Precious wants to be with a light-skinned guy. They have a

relationship completely absent of sex, and that is important because it shows that her fantasies are just fantasies.

One of the film's downfalls is that we don't get the background on Precious' classmates. In the novel, they're beautifully described and we understand all that they have gone through too. And I love the way that they are portrayed as rallying around her when Precious discovers that she's HIV positive. Here you have a group of young girls who each have challenges off the chain, in every negative social category that you could possibly think of. But they come together and support each other, and they love each other even to the degree where they carry Precious' journal back and forth from the hospital to Ms. Rain so she can continue her work. That is just like, oh my gosh, cool.

Jan: As readers of the book, we see that the credit sequence carries forward that image of letters missing in word, and how whole words come to be precious for Precious.

Sheila: I think the opening credits are beautiful. You're sitting there in the dark, you don't know what this film is about, and here are these letters forming. You're like, wait a minute, what is this? And then the word is filled in for you, and that's the way Precious learns to read. Even if you haven't read the book, you're able to struggle with that just the way that she would have struggled with that, and then you begin to see: "Oh wow, this is 'cleaning;' This is 'dry'."

Jan: What grade do you give this screenplay?

Sheila: I give it like a B+/A-. I think it was cast perfectly, from the little kids to the grandmother. I'm glad Daniels didn't show more of the father, because that would have detracted from the film.

Jan: I also love the way it was cast, even those couple of scenes with the little girl who plays the neighbor, showing the relationship that Precious has with her.

Sheila: This kid is looking for love in all the wrong places. When we first see her, she's just a little kid trying to play with Precious. But then later when she has a blackened eye, we're thinking: "Damn, how can you abuse your children like this? It doesn't matter if you're a large child. It doesn't matter if you're a small child. Abuse is abuse." And Precious sees herself in her little neighbor, and she ends up giving her a scarf. That was really, really good!

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Nov 20 interview conducted by Jan Lisa Huttner.
Condensed & edited with assistance from Dawn Rafferty.



Sheila & Jan at Hackney's on Dearborn.
Photo Credit: The nice guy at the next table ☺

FILMS FOR TWO® ADDENDUM: **About Shelia Baldwin**



Sheila V. Baldwin has been a professor of English and African-American Studies at Columbia College Chicago since 1986. Among the courses she teaches are African-American Cultural Experience Through Literature, African-American Women Writers, English Composition, and Introduction to Literature. She is the director of the Columbia College Scholars Program, a high school enrichment program for inner city and underrepresented students.

She has conducted research on the African-American Cultural Experience, and African-American Writers. Other interests include multicultural programs, student/staff development, and educational leadership/team building programs. She has recently completed research on a two-year joint study among the University of Notre Dame, Northern Kentucky University, and Columbia College on how students acquire and interpret race and gender issues.

Sheila is involved in a number of civic organizations and associations that promote the African-American experience. She has served as a consultant to the Chicago Public Schools to increase minority student enrollment in higher education, and is currently on the steering committee of African-American Women Evolving, promoting health issues for African-American women. She is an active member of the American Association for Higher Education Black Caucus, where she currently serves on the Executive Committee, and has served on a number of subcommittees.

She has presented papers at the National Conference on Higher Education, the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education, the Pedagogy of the Oppressed, and the Mid-Atlantic Writers Association. She has taken graduate courses in education from Northern Illinois University and Chicago State University. She is currently completing a doctorate in Education at Roosevelt University.

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