

*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 page 152, 22, 3, 6,5 – all the pages look alike to me. 'N I really do want to learn. Everyday I tell myself something gonna happen, some shit like on TV. I'm gonna break through or somebody gonna break through to me – I'm gonna learn, catch up, be normal, change my seat to the front of the class. But again, it has not been that day.-Precious, in Push by Sapphire*

This holiday season, I got a (brand new, recently reissued) copy of the novel *Push* by Sapphire as a gift from my sister. Now, many of us who work in adult literacy have known about this text for some time, but that a more general public has it on its shopping list could only happen in the wake of the Oprah-backed hype surrounding *Precious*, the film based on *Push*, which saw wide release in Toronto in November after much celebrated screenings at Sundance and the Toronto International Film Festival.

Set in Harlem in 1987, the story follows, for a few years, the life of 16-year-old African-American Claireece Precious Jones. She is pregnant for the second time by her father, by whom she had a baby (born with Down Syndrome) when she was 12. She lives in stultifying poverty with her terrifying mother who also sexually and physically brutalizes her, economically and psychologically abuses her, and force feeds her for good measure.

The narrative is shaped around Precious being kicked out of public school, where she is still in ninth grade, unable to read or write. She begins attending an alternative literacy programme called Each One Teach One 3 days a week, and to an extent thrives therein, moving eventually to a halfway house – giving birth, writing some poetry, moving on.

Neither the film nor the book conforms to the usual contours of a rags-to-riches story, rarely resorting to the manipulation, clichés, and sentimentality typical of other depictions of “rising up through the power of writing”. The story does not pretend that Precious’ intractable and lifelong problems can be solved in two hours. What sucks about her life is not simplistically overcome through the bits of love, community, and self-esteem that the literacy programme brings into it – in fact the thing about her life that, arguably, sucks the hardest remains unmediated by literacy. This in itself is impressive in a big-budget Hollywood movie.

But controversy is not absent from the ambient noise this film is making in our communities. Many of the reviews, editorials, salons and discussion boards feature voices ambivalent – or scathingly hostile – about how the characters are represented. The debates mainly focus on racial and class identities. Though these questions are superlatively important (truly they are the frame for all others, inextricable from any comprehensive discussion), my interest here is to focus on how the film represents the impacts of violence on learning.

It can be difficult to express briefly and accessibly how experiences of violence challenge our efforts to learn new things, and how they complicate people's relationships to "literacy". Now for the first time we have a shorthand; now that *Precious* has been widely seen by a mainstream audience, in trying to describe the theme in a loud pub, one might be able to say something along the lines of, "You know, like in *Precious*..." (When I say "mainstream audience" here, I am not sneering or implying that I am outside of it; I mean simply people who do not happen to work in adult literacy, that is to say, most people.) And what that shorthand offers to discussions where people are having their first explicitly verbalized exposure to the theme of violence and learning is a way to switch directions: instead of speaking of people as "slow", "unteachable", or simply "learning disabled", we can introduce, through *Precious*, ideas about how illiteracy is systemic in nature, and how the damages of violence are sustained by a whole person, including that person's capacity to think, remember, and function in relationship to formal instruction.

There are several touchstones in the narrative that support this line of thinking. An incomplete litany of violences and their impacts on learning, for *Precious*, would include:

- how profoundly internalised racial hatred and basically enforced obesity mutilate her self-image (and therefore her sense of entitlement, of which we need a bit in order to make changes in our lives)
- how she is mocked and abused by other kids both inside and outside the classroom, making school a battleground
- how both school and an overworked, dysfunctional social work system lack the necessary supports (Had no one noticed that she couldn't read and write by age 16? Did no one guess that the kindergarten child who was completely silent, or the second grader who would often freeze, peeing her pants at her desk, or the 12 year old bearing a baby – was being abused at home? Not to mention that she is ultimately expelled from school for being pregnant, a bizarre response by any measure)

- how her mother very actively discourages Precious from attending school, telling her that she is not worth such a station and ordering her to stay on welfare, and reacting with violent rage when Precious tries to go out
- how Precious is routinely tormented by flashbacks of being raped by her father and molested by her mother, often interrupting her thought processes when anything significant or risky is going on in her life (making an effort at school for the first time is of course experienced as both significant and risky)

Precious responds sanely to the circumstances of her life by freezing up and remaining silent, spacing out and escaping into her own mind, as well as acting out aggressively. None of these responses are unrelated to behaviours that helped her survive the violence in her life, and none of them serve her project of learning.

In the classroom scenes where these impacts of violence on learning play out, the methods of the instructor leave much to be desired insofar as she fails to address them. The unsound pedagogy is hard to watch (perhaps it reflects the cinematic constraints of Hollywood, and in the first place Sapphire is a poet and not an adult educator, oh well), but the redeeming qualities of the film's classroom are those that tend to redeem many learning environments in real life: a sense of community and loving, authentic relationships. It is worth bearing in mind that these adult literacy and mentoring programmes are real, and here as well as in the States, are made possible by limited government funding, along with volunteer and near-volunteer labour.

How the instruction could have been better, and the fact that ever-threatened public money underpins the story: these are just two useful discussions generated by *Precious*. They are worth keeping alive, along with the awareness that great numbers of real people are in situations similar to Precious'. Like her, they are *able*, and unique, having many other facets to their personalities beyond their problems.

This last point – how complicated and capable Precious really is – is made clear in the film thanks partly to an astonishing performance by Gabourey Sidibe. How tragic that this same mainstream media have offered an Oscar nomination with one hand while making racist, misogynist cracks about her body with the other. How electrically charged, all the tangled tensions among different voices' responses to the film and the artists involved in its production! How insistent, all

the calls for justice and for truth, maybe represented in problematic ways – but undeniably brought further into life, one way or another – by this story.

In real life there is no closure and no moving soundtrack that swells the heart at the end – there is no end, but there are the moments, “just like in *Precious*”, where so much feels possible.

*I got to be at school by 9 a.m. Today is first day. I been tessed. I been incomed eligible. I got Medicaid card and proof of address. All that shit. I is ready. Ready for school. School something (this nuthin'!) School gonna help me get out dis house. I gotta throw some water on my ass and git up. What I'm gonna wear what I'm gonna wear? ... I ain't got no money for lunch or McDonald's for breakfast. I take piece of ham out of frigidare, wrap it in aluminium foil, I'll eat it walking down Lenox, not as good as Egg McMuffin but beat nuffin'. I double back to my room. On top my dresser is notebook. Ol' Cornrows say bring self, pencil, and notebook. I got self, pencil, and notebook. Can I get a witness!  
I'm outta here!*