



**PLAYIN' AND PREYING ON 'PRECIOUS':
PEDDLING PAIN AND RACIAL PATHOLOGY**

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In a real and deep-rooted sense, it's not even 'bout the movie *Precious*, but about the People precious, about the value and priority we place on ourselves, about how we understand and assert ourselves in dignity-affirming or dignity-denying ways as we walk as persons and a people in the world. And it's about whether we will allow ourselves to be played and preyed on and our personal pain and social oppression be miscast and peddled as "poverty porn" and racial pathology in a movie, book or any public or private place in submissive silence or loud acceptance.

Moreover, it's about how the dominant society designs the times and terms of our discourse and discussions about ourselves, always framing it in pathological and pathogenic ways. This determination of both the time and terms of our conversations about ourselves seriously tends to conceptually imprison us, forcing us to focus on the sick, sorrowful and self-indicting, whether we want to or not. Locked in the language and imagery of pathology, we, then, consciously and unconsciously seek ways to make it have a deeper meaning and redeeming value.

Indeed, we are taught to talk about ourselves in times and terms of newly released movies and literature that mangle and mutilate our human conception of ourselves, and introduce us to the world, "whitely" defined, as repulsive practitioners of every human evil imaginable. And we are served "tea and sympathy" only to exact from us commodified and sellable conceptions of ourselves as pitiful expressions of the deformed and degraded. It is reported that the White woman who first put up the money for "*Precious*," said

she saw in it a "gold mine of opportunity," directed toward Whites, her "niche market." It was another golden opportunity to present Black racial pathology for White entertainment and reinforcement of false feelings of superiority, masquerading as art, sympathetic social concern and sites of shared suffering. Here Black acceptance is facilitated by Black celebrity endorsers and the naïve, but sellable notion, that Black persons' and people's pathological self-exposure in the movies and general media is somehow helpful and even healing. Of course, no such solution is posed for the ruling race/class or even its so-called "trailer trash" relatives.

Yes, we must confront our problems, break the silence and remove the veil of secrecy surrounding horrible and untreated injuries, destroy the breeding grounds of abuse and violence, and expand the space and process of healing in our families and community. But is it not important to choose carefully and wisely the venues and values we use to do this? Should we not build on our own best practices, reach within ourselves for the most ethical, insightful and effective ways to dialog, heal and restore hope and rebuild our lives and relationships? And should we not choose the times and terms of the discourse and the development and applications of solutions?

Who can honestly believe discussing racial pathology in a movie that resembles the Jerry Springer Show with an almost all-Black cast can heal or help or that a movie of mutilated beings and pop-culture counselors can give any solutions beyond the vulgarly individualistic urging of self-salvation? If we are serious about solving problems of family and community, we have

to do it, not in the theatre or after-party discussions, but in our relations and daily lives, in self-conscious, committed and continuing personal, family and communal efforts and social struggle.

This movie fits within a long tradition of racist stereotyping and pathologizing of Black people. And we can't talk as if we're on another planet where White people no longer present themselves as overlords and avatars, gods on earth in human form, episodically taking on our color, blues and concerns to appear as our kind and pretending to share our pain, but end up increasing it Clinton style. Unchallenged, they will still rule, demand racial respect, and monopolize wealth, power and status. And as a consolation prize, they will offer us Oscars for deformed depictions of ourselves, as a dope-dealing, murderous and corrupt-cop, a gapped-legged and good-time girl giving it up wildly to a racist prison guard, recently returned from killing her husband, or in this "post-racial era", an incestuous mama, bartering and sacrificing her daughter on the altar of an unimaginably twisted sense of the need for love.

In receiving her Oscar for playing the monster mama, Mo'Nique said she paid homage to Hattie McDaniel for having gone thru and endured things so she and others would not have to. But Ms. McDaniel knew she was stereotyped and exploited and struggled against it; Mo'Nique didn't seem to notice or even know it. Whatever we think about this movie, we must know it will soon pass away, and some new "Birth of an Incestuous Negro Nation" will be readied and released until racism is uprooted, rendered publicly pathological and treated with intensive in-patient or out-patient

therapy, depending upon how deeply entrenched the disease is in the patient's life.

The struggle we wage for an expanding realm of human freedom, well-being and flourishing will not be won in the movies, on TV or on the internet. It will be won at the many sites of struggle in our daily lives and in confrontation with the established order on countless battlefields. But there is no hope of ending oppressions of various personal, family, communal and social forms, if we do not internally strengthen and expand our capacity for struggle, increase our well-being and decrease our weaknesses. And this begins with taking the simple but indispensable stand that the fundamental notion and norm that undergirds and guides our lives is respect of ourselves and others, based on the ancient African ethical understanding of the human person as a possessor of dignity and divinity, worthy of the highest moral consideration, care and concern.

Indeed, each of us must be able to say honestly with that ancient and insightful writer of Kemet, REDIU KHNUM, "I know myself as a *precious* staff created by the Divine, endowed with excellence . . . a possessor of dignity, open-handed, noble in appearance, godly to behold; one who observes the (righteous) rules of conduct, is kindhearted (and) clear thinking." With this understanding, we will always insist on and give ourselves and each other our *rightful place* not only in the movies, but also in the Movement and in all public and private places, but especially in our relations with each other and in the ethical conception and conduct of our daily lives. For in the final analysis, it is rightful practice that proves and makes possible everything.