

Having a Moment and a Dream: *Precious*, *Paris Is Burning*, and the Necessity of Fantasy in Everyday Life

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Liz Taylor is famous. In a sense, so am I.

—Dorian Carey, *Paris Is Burning*

I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering ... but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are. That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth and, indeed, no church can teach. He achieves his own authority, and that is unshakable. This is because, in order to save his life, he is forced to look beneath appearances, to take nothing for granted, to hear the meaning behind the words. If one is continually surviving the worst that life can bring, one eventually ceases to be controlled by a fear of what life can bring.

—James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

Push is the 1996 debut novel by American author Sapphire. Thirteen years after its release, it would be made into the film *Precious: Based on the Novel "Push" by Sapphire* (2009), directed by Lee Daniels and produced by Oprah Winfrey and Tyler Perry. Released nationwide by Lionsgate Studio on November 6, 2009, the movie garnered considerable critical acclaim, ultimately earning several awards and becoming a commercial success. Produced on a modest budget of \$10 million, *Precious* grossed \$63 million worldwide—\$47 million domestically and \$16 million in foreign receipts. For any film, much less an independent African American one, this is, by all rights, a tremendous success. It would seem *Precious* would be cause for celebration. However, the film would also be slammed by critics for reinforcing negative stereotypes of dysfunctional black families and reinforcing the image of the black welfare queen. For example, Armond White, a film critic for the *New York Press* and chairman of the New York Film Critics Circle, declared: “Not since *The Birth of a Nation* has a mainstream movie demeaned the idea of black American life as much as *Precious* ... it’s a sociological horror show.”¹

While it is true that the filmic reinforcement of negative stereotypes is a valid and serious concern, it is still important to acknowledge that a critical aesthetics of

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looking may provide alternate perspectives. Sometimes things are not as simple as they seem. Although critiques of *Precious* largely focused on its negative portrayal of black families and its reinforcements of racial stereotypes, accusing *Precious* of exploiting racial dysfunction for the enjoyment of a white audience, this misses the point. These reviews remind us of what can be lost if we do not look critically, if we do not consider the larger political and psychological stakes involved. Consciously altering the way we look at images is a political choice, and a film like *Precious* reminds us to pay attention to the political and psychological stakes involved in the cultural discussions surrounding such films.

At a quick glance, *Precious* does seem to be about depressing people dealing with depressing issues in depressing ways. Featuring childhood abuse, incest, illiteracy, drug use, and poverty, *Precious* depicts some of the worst struggles of inner city life. However, a closer read, supported by an unexpected comparison with Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1990), provides a more nuanced perspective. Though superficially different movies, the parallels and commonalities between *Precious* and *Paris Is Burning* provide insight on exactly how complex *Precious* really is. Arguing against popular critics' assertions that *Precious* is simply a negative representation of the black family, this essay posits that we look at how formal aspects of fantasy operate through a discussion of *Paris Is Burning*.

In particular, the juxtaposition of the two films reminds us of the artistic forms of survival and recovery that can emerge as a result of trauma, and their importance to the creative process, as well as to the process of self-discovery and self-creation. In both these films, fantasy is not an escape, but rather a weapon, and a fundamentally cinematic one at that. It is a projection forward, a projection of desire and possibility. Liberation is achieved by moving emotion (which is reactive) into a world of projection (which is proactive).

This argument echoes that of Ann Cvetkovich when she discusses Dorothy Allison and the semiautobiographical book *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992). Cvetkovich concludes that the book's protagonist—who is sexually and physically abused by her stepfather while her mother does nothing to help (a plot eerily similar to that of *Precious*)—uses fantasies to position herself as a “triumphant victim,” providing her with “the sense of self that is her way out.”² In both *Precious* and *Paris Is Burning*, like in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, the protagonists create their own realities via their own fantasies, projecting the life they *want* onto the life they *have* and thus managing to find a way out of their personal hells. Often, the response to trauma is dissociation and affective shut down, if not complete denial. However, in these films, trauma also generates fantasy as a vehicle for agency and self-creation.

Precious fantasizes that she is inside vibrant and fabulous scenarios during periods of abuse. During these difficult moments in her life, she creates other realities full of flash bulbs and glamour, power and agency. Sigmund Freud argued that imitation and repetition were frequent ways of coping with trauma, and for *Precious*, this kind of artistic imitation and creation become ways to protect herself and deal with trauma. Trauma *can* be generative, not just destructive. As James Baldwin

writes in *The Fire Next Time*, “people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are.”³ Similarly, Polish psychiatrist and psychologist Kazimierz Dabrowski, who developed the theory of positive disintegration—which describes how a person’s development grows as a result of accumulated experiences—maintains, “Suffering and even death may...give birth to higher values... Hard experiences do not always dissolve psychic life, they often strengthen and improve it.”⁴ Or, as Terry Waite, who survived four years as a hostage in solitary confinement, puts it, “Suffering is universal: you attempt to subvert it so that it does not have a destructive, negative effect. You turn it around so that it becomes a creative, positive force.”⁵

This lens, of trauma as a force not only in identity development but as an instigator of creativity and fantasy, provides the underlying focus of this discussion. For *Precious* and the performers in *Paris Is Burning*, creativity is a retaliation, an act not only of agency but of glorious ownership of self. In this paper, I argue that trauma, both physical and emotional, can be a catalyst for creativity, and a dismissal of *Precious* as merely depressing misses the point. Specifically, I explore the development of self and agency through fantasy, examining not only how trauma feeds into artistic forms of survival and recovery, but the essentiality of fantasy—in particular, via *Precious*’s fantasy sequences and the drag performances in *Paris Is Burning*.

Significantly, in these two films, agency and self-creation are also tied to literacy. Literacy turns fantasy into reality. Letters—and words—bring freedom. Reading, in both *Precious* and *Paris Is Burning*, is crucial for survival and development. In *Paris Is Burning*, the parts about “shade” and “reading” reveal an attitude echoed in *Precious* that revolves around the significance of literacy, naming, and understanding in relation to fantasy, mimicry, and performance. The act of writing automatically distances one from his or her surroundings into a realm of abstract possibility. *Precious* starts to read, in the conventional sense, and then she starts to write, and it is language that provides her with agency for the first time in her life, becoming a tool against the racist, classist, and sexist oppression that plagues her.

This journey towards freedom and empowerment, from dark to light, can also be traced through similarities between *Precious* and the classic slave narrative, where freedom and literacy are also often linked. *Precious*’s dramatic escape from her mother echoes tropes common to slave narratives, both on a metaphorical level, with *Precious*’s growing literacy linked directly to her freedom, as well as on a visual level, as she flees with baby Abdul in her arms, echoing Eliza’s escape with her baby in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. We see *Precious* get on the subway, literally an underground railroad, before making her journey to safety through the assistance of others who help her find shelter and start a new life. Tellingly, as she walks down the subway platform, we hear her recite the alphabet under her breath: “A, B, C, D...”

Both *Precious* and *Paris* not only portray slavery as an event from which recovery never happened but from which trauma has continued over generations.

Characteristics such as fatherlessness, rape, labor, illiteracy, the instability and shifting in naming, the quest for freedom, and “ultimately, the claiming of voice and selfhood through processes of oral and written narration” are evident in both films, revealing “the residual traces of slavery on black subject formation and consciousness in the contemporary era,” writes Riche Richardson.⁶ Richardson goes on to argue that an examination of Precious’s respective traumas, which are all commonly linked to black pathology, can also be understood in terms of the “historical context of slavery, internalized oppression, and self-hatred as well as persisting forms of institutional racism.”⁷ Precious, herself, is a reflection of the way the black female has been abused (on screen and in life) from slavery to present day.

Precious and Paris Is Burning

Precious recounts the story of Claireece Precious Jones (Gabourey Sidibe) who cannot read or write. She lives in Harlem with her mother, Mary (Mo’Nique), who not only abuses her, but permits her boyfriend, Precious’s father (Rodney ‘Bear’ Jackson), to rape Precious repeatedly, leading to two pregnancies. Precious’s first child, “Mongo” (short for Mongoloid), has Down syndrome and lives with Precious’s grandmother, only appearing for welfare visits so that Mary can receive larger welfare checks. The family survives on welfare, with Mary seemingly unable to leave the house. Mary forces Precious to run errands, prepare food, and even satisfy her sexually. The ironic significance of the name “Mary” must be noted as Precious’s mother is clearly the “Anti-Mary” in terms of maternal figures.

Precious, despite being sixteen, is still in junior high. When she becomes pregnant for the second time, the principal sends Precious to Each One Teach One, an alternative school focused on unconventional educational methods. Thanks to the attention she receives there from her teacher, Blu Rain (Paula Patton), and the support she feels from her classmates, Precious finally learns to read and write. She then gains the courage to flee her mother after the birth of Abdul, her second child. Through the help of Miss Rain, Precious builds a new life for herself. By the end of the film, she has won a literacy award from the Mayor’s office. She is determined to continue improving her life as well as her children’s, despite the crushing discovery that she has contracted HIV from her father.

Released almost 20 years earlier, *Paris Is Burning* is considered by many to be *the* documentary of New York City drag balls, praised not only for capturing the ball culture and the African-American, Latino, transsexual, and gay contestants who fuel it, but also for its riveting depiction of race, class, gender, and sexuality in America. As Joe Brown writes,

Paris Is Burning is a poignant and profound, unsentimental and unexploitative examination of a subculture that until now has been invisible to most Americans. Built around elaborately staged mock fashion balls, this alternative world of black and Latin gay men and lesbians has its own elaborate jargon and its own intricate social structure, the self-protective hierarchy of “houses.” These substitute extended families (or “gay street

gangs,” as one voguer puts it) knock themselves out to imitate a society that, ironically, will not have them.⁸

Judith Butler observes that the different categories of these balls include a variety of social norms, “many of which are established in white culture as signs of class, like that of the ‘executive’ and the Ivy League student,” but not all the categories are taken from white culture. Military garb, for example, “shifts to yet another register of legitimacy, which enacts the performative and gestural conformity to a masculinity that parallels the performative or reiterative production of femininity in other categories.”⁹ Cutting back and forth between interviews and footage from the balls themselves, Livingston not only depicts the fabulousness of the balls but the fabulousness of the people and the culture surrounding it.

Produced for the modest budget of \$500,000 and taking seven years to make, *Paris Is Burning* would go on to gross almost 4 million dollars.¹⁰ It received rave reviews for its authentic portrayal of its subjects, most of whom were defying racism, homophobia, AIDS, and poverty through glamour, fantasy, and self-created families presided over by “mothers” like Pepper Lebeija and Dorian Carey. Film critic Hal Hinson declared it to be both a “brilliantly entertaining documentary look into the New York subculture of drag queens and transsexuals” and “a rapturous, desperate ode to self-invention.”¹¹ For these subjects, drag was a way not only to defy gender, class, and race, but also a way to express, construct, and invent identity. “You can become anything and do anything, right here, right now. It won’t be questioned. I came. I saw. I conquered. That’s a ball,” says Pepper LaBeija in the film.

Sweet, sweet fantasy

While the balls in *Paris Is Burning* seem to be the only moments of relief and escape for many of the contestants, the only reprieve from the brutality of Precious’s life are her elaborate fantasies. While Precious’s fantasies are arguably reactions to the trauma she experiences, they are also opportunities for her to exercise control, to create scenarios where she has an agency her real life does not afford. She may be at the center of this particular film, this may be her story, but for the better part of the narrative, Precious has no control over anything. Life, instead, is one cruelty after another. However, in her fantasies, as Katie Kanagawa writes, “Precious is in total control of her fate; she is wildly successful, empowered, and beloved. She is free to pursue and act on her own desires, which no longer seem impossible.”¹² This is where her fantasies become proactive rather than reactive.

It is not simply that she has power within her fantasies, but that she is desired and adored—by fans, by men, and by her mother—within these alternate realities. This is the life she wants and will eventually create. During one scene in the film, Precious is sexually harassed and physically shoved by a group of men, her body size ridiculed. As she falls to the ground, her mind darts to a fantasy sequence, one in which Precious dances suggestively on a stage, stared at adoringly by a

light-skinned man whom she eventually beckons to join her. This act, of calling him onto the stage, demonstrates not only her confidence but also her power as a woman, and a sexually desirable one at that, aspects of her personality that we do not see in Precious's current life. This fantasy sequence serves not only to empower Precious and reframe her sexuality and body size in a positive way, but it also demonstrates how Precious uses these fantasy sequences to maintain a sense of agency.

The way Lee Daniels sets up these fantasies is significant. Unlike common traumatic dissociation, where victims of trauma create separate selves or separate worlds in order to cope with trauma, Precious's fantasies are not completely isolated from her reality. She is not deadening herself, or floating above her body, watching what is happening to her. She does not become someone else. She remains Precious, just a brighter, more glamorous version of herself, the "After" in a magazine "Before and After" spread. Through various cinematic techniques, Daniels emphasizes the close relationship between Precious's fantasies and her reality, often relying on sound (rainfall becomes sizzling grease) or image (rain on Precious's face becomes water thrown from a bucket) to connect the two. For example, in one scenario, leaves on the pavement upon which Precious falls become leaves drifting through the air in a fantasy sequence.

However, just because there is overlap between fantasy and reality does not mean that these fantasy sequences are understated. As Stuart Klawans writes in his review of *Precious* for *The Nation*, Daniels "does not merely suggest Precious's inner world. He makes it explode in full movie color against a jumpin' soundtrack. The dimly lit box of daily suffering splinters apart, and Precious, suddenly draped in leopard skin and blessed with good hair, will sweep ecstatically onto a red carpet."¹³ In another fantasy sequence, Precious is onstage and singing with an exuberant choir supporting her, baby Abdul in her arms, colors bright and hyper-saturated, everyone transformed from their pre-fantasy drab browns into brilliant blues and yellows. We again have Precious's imaginary light-skinned boyfriend, staring at her adoringly, a small dog in his arms, the decrepit church now lit up with festive colored lights, ordinary clothing replaced with satiny robes and gold scarves. Precious beams, skin glistening, and, in fact, all the other singers look as if they, too, have received makeovers, before the music fades into the clicks and hums of the subway car, and the fantasy disappears.

There are several key moments in the film which take place in Precious's current life but which also contain fantasy elements, thus integrating her reality with the fantasy world she is proactively creating. Significantly, most of these moments have to do with aspects of Precious's education. A glowing and enveloping light often indicates transition and empowerment for Precious. We see this light not only spilling out of the Each One Teach One classroom but also enveloping Precious as she enters the room. When Precious walks down the hall to enter the classroom for the first time, for instance, the brightest light we have seen in the film thus far fills the hallway. It embraces her, as if a portal to another dimension.

Several scenes within the Each One Teach One classroom also integrate elaborate fantasy elements into Precious's current life. Blackboards become movie screens featuring Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, Melvin Van Peebles and images from Tiananmen Square, Precious seemingly in the center of it all as the camera pans around her, the images flowing into each other. This reinforces the argument that Precious is not passively escaping her life with these fantasies. Rather, these fantasies become strategies for her to understand the world and her place in it, and these strategies are intrinsically linked to education.

A turning point in the film occurs when Precious wins her literacy award. At first, the celebratory party scene with her teacher and classmates seems as if it could be a fantasy sequence, with the same kind of overexposed lighting used in the fantasy sequences, as well as dots of shimmery color, flash bulbs, and pulsing dance music also indicative of previous fantasies. However, all these elements exist in Precious's current life. It is not merely that the scene represents a flow from fantasy to new and improved reality, but that it demonstrates Precious's ability to use her fantasies to manifest change. This scene emphasizes that fantasy is not just an escape but also the opposite. It is a plan or roadmap not away but rather *toward*—and even straight through—something. Precious develops throughout the second half of the film, from her first day in the classroom onwards, but this scene is the turning point, a manifestation not only of her ability to enact change for herself, but of the role her fantasies play in her own success.

As a documentary, Livingston does not use tools of cinematic surrealism to depict the performer's fantasies within *Paris Is Burning*. But she does not need to. Makeup and fashion are the necessary tools. Roger Ebert wrote that some of the reviews of *Paris Is Burning* "called the movie depressing—because the dancers are pretending to be the kinds of people who would not accept them in real life." However, he saw the opposite. He saw a successful attempt "to dramatize how success and status in the world often depend on props you can buy, or steal, almost anywhere—assuming you have the style to know how to use them."¹⁴ And these performers have the style.

Dressing as women, and, in particular, *white* women, allows these contestants, in the words of bell hooks, "to symbolically cross from the world of powerlessness into a world of privilege."¹⁵ However, this crossing over is only symbolic. *Paris Is Burning* and *Precious* can arguably be viewed as depictions of the upper-middle-class aspirations and whitewashed dreams of poor and neglected teenagers of color. Both Precious and the black and Latino teenagers in *Paris Is Burning* aspire to whiteness, their ultimate ambition seemingly to achieve (white) upper middle-class lifestyles. We see this with Precious's fantasies about blissful domesticity in Westchester with her math teacher, and we see this with characters in *Paris* such as Venus Xtravaganza, who yearns for fame as she emulates white supermodel and actress looks. Significantly, Daniels was criticized for casting lighter-skinned actresses like Mariah Carey and Paula Patton in benevolent roles, reinforcing the stereotype that lighter means better.

Not only is this aspirational whiteness informed by legacies of racism and colonialism, but as Mia Mask argues, “happiness, safety, and security are particularly synonymous with a white suburban configuration of the American Dream.”¹⁶ Happiness, for Precious and the contestants in *Paris Is Burning*, is an elusive fantasy, uniquely keyed to skin color and class. Self-empowerment understandably seems color-coded, and both films serve as sobering reminders of what happens when you are not coded “correctly.” It is not merely, as Kanagawa writes, that Precious’ story reminds us of the limitations constraining the narrative of self-empowerment and success, but that girl power, in particular, “has tended to uphold the gendered, raced, and classed status quo, thus idealizing white, middle-class girl-consumers who approximate the girl power ideal.”¹⁷

In *Paris Is Burning*, when Dorian Carey declares that no black drag queen of his day wanted to be Lena Horne, what he is really emphasizing, as bell hooks points out, is that “the femininity most sought after, most adored, was that perceived to be the exclusive property of white womanhood.”¹⁸ It is true that the visual representations of womanhood seen in the film (such as the magazine photos posted on walls for inspiration and instructional purposes), much like the fantasy reflection of herself Precious sees in the mirror, are primarily white. bell hooks goes on to argue that this representation of whiteness is “as crucial to the experience of female impersonation as gender.”¹⁹ Similarly, as Mask describes, Precious’s fantasies also conform

to the hegemonic discourse of beauty she’s absorbed from mainstream white society ... In Precious’s mind, being a beautiful woman means appearing lighter-skinned than she is in real life ... Precious’s (petite) blonde aesthetic ambitions are particularly heartbreaking because they are antithetical to her full-figured, brown-skinned, brown-eyed appearance.²⁰

Psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, whose book *Black Skins, White Masks* explores the struggles and feelings of inadequacy Africans can feel while living in primarily white environments, writes that in the “white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his body schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity.”²¹ This inferiority complex, the psychological impact of being black in a white world, is in large part what drives both Precious and the cast of *Paris Is Burning* to aspire so strongly to appropriate white culture, to mimic the aesthetics of the colonizer. Significantly, when Precious looks into the mirror shortly before the end of the film, she finally sees herself as she is. This image demonstrates her freedom, her acknowledgment that she can define herself by her own terms, not by white culture.

Precious’s seemingly “kindred spirit” in *Paris Is Burning* is Venus Xtravaganza. Venus has the hair Precious covets, however artificially it is acquired and however brassy the blonde, and Venus, as a trans woman, is, similarly to Precious, unacknowledged and uncomfortable in her own skin. But with makeup and styling, Venus looks like a woman, described by Dorian Carey as an example of a “femme realness queen.” It is not a stretch to envision Venus as Melanie Griffith’s

sister in Mike Nichols's *Working Girl* (1988), commuting from Staten Island into Manhattan, bold earrings dangling off her ears, fine-boned features accentuated with a heavy dose of makeup. One of the first statements Venus confesses is "I would like to be a spoiled rich white girl. They get what they want. Whenever they want it." Her desire to be a rich white girl demonstrates just how much gender is connected to class, at least from Venus's perspective. Butler writes that, for some of the performers in *Paris Is Burning*, becoming real, and specifically becoming a real woman, "constitutes the site of the phantasmatic promise of a rescue from poverty, homophobia, and racist delegitimation."²² As real women, they would be liberated from their most crushing obstacles of class, sexuality, and race.

This sentiment echoes Precious's first statements, about wanting to marry her math teacher and live in Westchester. Both Venus and Precious are young New Yorkers constructing elaborate fantasies as escapes from the limitations life has imposed upon them. For Venus, it is her poverty and "that thing between my legs"—as she describes it—that prevents her from being who she really is. For Precious, it is her poverty, the color of her skin, the appearance of her body, and the abuse she receives at home. Venus runs away from home so as not to embarrass her family, and Precious runs away from home to escape her family, both women forced to rescue themselves from unaccepting families and difficult lives. The last thing we hear Venus say in the film is "I'm hungry," and here, too, she echoes Precious's lament. Both girls are hungry, for actual food and also for emotional sustenance, to be accepted for who they are, but also to become who they aspire to be. Unfortunately, their paths diverge, Venus's moving from light to dark, her body found murdered, whereas Precious moves literally and metaphorically from dark to light as she learns to read and pursues her independence. This divergence reflects the difference between the goals and aspirations of fictional narrative film and documentary. With Venus, the possibilities of fantasy reach a limit point. Her inability to conform (or transform fully) translates to a death sentence.

This limitation highlights a crucial difference between the worlds of many of the performers in *Paris Is Burning*, a documentary, and that of *Precious*, a constructed text. However talented the performers may be at creating their real-life fantasy selves, these fantasies may collapse off stage, as shown with Venus. Phillip Brian Harper outlines that it is not that the drag performance constructs a new and improved self, per se, but that it calls attention to the mechanisms through which gender and identity are constituted.²³ So, in turn, the drag performance could be described as a "critical deconstruction" whereas what Precious creates is more of a "re-construction," a vehicle towards building an actual new self.

Three strikes

The need to transcend boundaries and be glorified is especially acute for those in *Paris Is Burning* because their realities are so limited, because who they want to be is so different from who they are. *Paris Is Burning* opens with a voiceover stating,

I remember my dad used to say, you have three strikes against you in this world. Every black man has two—that they’re just black and they’re a male. But you’re black and you’re male and you’re gay, you’re gonna have a hard fucking time ... If you’re gonna do this, you’ll have to be stronger than you ever imagined.

Homophobia couples with racism and poverty to create a trio of difficulty and oppression against which these contestants retaliate with style, performance, and fantasy.

While Precious may not be gay, who she is and what she looks like, as well as the circumstances of her life, sets her up for trauma and hardship. Precious is a black woman growing up in miserable poverty—hungry, raped, abused—who is also obese. In her essay “On Being a Fat Black Girl in a Fat-Hating Culture,” Margaret K. Bass writes: “In our culture it’s unacceptable to be fat ... Fat is regarded as a deviation from the norm; it is considered ugly, unfeminine, offensive, even disgusting.”²⁴ Precious is trapped in her life and in her body, ignored, and ridiculed, much as Gabourey Sidibe was in actual reviews of the film. Armond White described Sidibe for the *New York Press* “as an animal-like stereotype—she’s so obese her face seems bloated into a permanent pout.”²⁵ He wrote that her obesity made her fancy-dressed daydream laughable and pathetic.²⁶ His references to Sidibe’s body are meant to support his case against the film, that its portrayal is harsh and depressing, but, rather, his descriptions further reinforce the connection between negativity and large body size. Other critics continued this line of thought. Anthony Lane of the *New Yorker* described Sidibe in similar terms, implying that her accomplishments were in spite of her weight: “She is grimly overweight, her face so filled out that the play of normal expression seems restricted; yet Sidibe does wonders with that sad limitation.”²⁷ *New York Magazine* reviewer David Edelstein described Sidibe’s “head [as] a balloon on the body of a zeppelin ... her cheeks so inflated they squash her eyes into slits.”²⁸ Obesity is linked not only with negativity but with obstacles and handicaps to overcome.

Kanagawa compares Precious to other female survivors of sexual violence or abuse who “experience feelings of exclusion, abjection, othering, and loss when they resist, or fail to embody, the dominant culture’s demands of conformity.”²⁹ Precious, as a survivor of sexual violence, does not conform, but this inability to conform is further exacerbated by the stigma of obesity. This is why it is significant that Precious’s fantasy life, like that of the performers in *Paris Is Burning*, reflects her position as an outsider from the American white middle-class dream, expressing desires that, because of her current identity and physical shape “exceed the possible or acceptable.”³⁰ While Precious may suffer from specific instances of brutality, like her mother’s physical and sexual violence or her father’s rape, she also suffers from the repeated exclusion from mainstream ideals of beauty, success, and happiness. Her fantasies, therefore, are a way of defying the limitations placed upon her, but they can also be seen as acquiescence to oppressive frameworks. Precious desires what she is not, and while she does eventually attain a desirable life, she never becomes a white girl living in Westchester, married to a math teacher.

In *Paris Is Burning*, as Vincent Canby writes in his review of the film for the *New York Times*, “the queens knock themselves out to imitate the members of a society that will not have them.”³¹ Much like in *Precious*, these alternate realities are significant because of the ways in which they are aspirational, for what they say about the ability to escape one’s circumstance into a self-made persona. Specifically, this type of performance, of cross-dressing, is a way of celebrating the artifice and malleability of identity. Identity, for these performers, much like it is for *Precious*, can be constructed. As reviewer Jim Farber observes, “The personality overhauls give the balls a subversive edge, stressing the sly mutability of identity.”³² Livingston shows us, literally, as Dorian Carey transcends the boundaries of self. Carey spends significant time applying what seems like layer upon layer of foundation, penciling eyebrows and lips, for all intents and purposes drawing on another face. By the time Carey emerges, face applied, gold dress glistening, wig adjusted, ball trophies resplendent behind her, she looks like a different person because she *is* a different person. She has become her public persona, her drag queen alter ego. She has created exactly who she wants to be, forcing us to question the relationship between authenticity and identity.

A reading rainbow

A key component of the learning process in Ms. Rain’s class is a personal journal the students write in every day. From the beginning, when many of them are still struggling with the basics of language, Ms. Rain tells them to write—regardless of spelling or grammar, and that she will write them back. By creating this collaborative learning process grounded in self-expression, the students are encouraged to find their voice, to take an interactive role in their own educational process. The world, much like their own lives, is in a constant state of transformation, and they are guided to play a direct role in this process. Appropriately, *Precious*’s first day at Each One Teach One ends with a giant flower blooming just behind her head. She is blossoming.

On that first day in the Each One Teach One classroom, *Precious* sits in the front of the classroom rather than hiding in the back, an auspicious step, and even volunteers to share personal information. With Miss Rain’s prodding, *Precious* is encouraged to acknowledge that she, too, is good at something—and in this case, she reveals that she is good at cooking. When Ms. Rain asks *Precious* how it made her feel to speak in class for the first time, *Precious* responds, “Here. Makes me feel here.” But it is not merely that she “feels here.” By sitting in the front, by speaking up, she is also willing to be seen. She is willing to be *known*. Education, like literacy, allows *Precious* to exist, to create, to *be*, and the kindness and attention she receives in the classroom provide the encouragement she needs to pursue her education. She is no longer merely an empty vessel, to be impregnated and abused. As Hélène Cixous writes in her essay “The Laughing Medusa,” “writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive

thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures.”³³ It is telling that, after Precious receives her literacy award from the Mayor’s Office, she begins wearing a gold necklace emblazoned with her name, Precious. By learning how to read and write, she is able to develop her own authorial voice and presence, both in the classroom and in the outside world. It is, ironically, the literal that allows her to achieve this fantasy.

As used in *Paris Is Burning*, reading is a slang term common in the 1950s and 1960s especially but not exclusively for blacks and homosexuals, an abbreviation for being “read the riot act.” Post-Stonewall, police officers “reading the riot act” became a euphemism for using harsh, unforgiving words and actions. In *Paris Is Burning*, reading allows the community to realize that, on one level, everyone is a text. Reading means to see through people, to tell them off, to recognize that they are texts, assemblies of ideas that can be broken down and held up against others for self-defense or illumination. Reading came first and then shade. As Dorian Carey explains,

Reading is the real art form of insult . . . When you are all of the same thing, then you have to go to the fine point. In other words, if I’m a black queen and you’re a black queen, we can’t call each other black queens. That’s not a read, that’s just a fact. So then we talk about your ridiculous shape, your saggy face, your tacky clothes. Then reading became a developed form where it became shade. Shade is “I don’t have to tell you that you’re ugly because you know you’re ugly.” And that’s shade.

Or, as Joe Brown writes, “voguing evolved as a competition from the black gay traditions of ‘reading’ (razor-sharp, fast-slashing, finger-snapping verbal abuse),” while shade is the attitude, the “body language version of reading.”³⁴

By being outsiders, by observing the way texts are assembled and perpetuated, these performers are able to understand how culture operates. This is a benefit to outsidership. When exposed to ideas about how culture, style, and language work, it is often easier for those who do not benefit to “get it,” whereas those who benefit may be blind to the mechanisms around them, much like a fish cannot notice water. Michelle Jarman maintains that it is precisely people with disabilities, people who are marked by some type of difference, who “are uniquely situated to recognize the coercive nature of ability, and to share those insights. Because of their liminal social position, disability identity connects with other minority identities to critique dominant social formations.”³⁵

We can see Precious “reading” in this way, as well, via fantasy sequences that, like the performances in *Paris Is Burning*, appropriate and remix popular culture. The source material for her fantasies clearly stems from the popular magazines and television that surround her. Her red carpet fantasy, for example, is an obvious derivation of the Hollywood cliché, flashbulbs blinking, reporters jostling with microphones, adoring fans cheering. Celebrity is not just aspirational for Precious. It provides a roadmap of what another life could feel like. Popular culture, as we see in *Paris Is Burning*, feeds creativity and liberates as it inspires. Ironically, during

the climactic final battle between Precious and Mary, the weapon Precious uses against her mother is the television set. Her mother, a few minutes later, uses the same set against her daughter, perhaps a physical manifestation of the battle between entertainment and social references, media and metaphor.

Stephen Joseph, in his outline of how people's psychological functioning increases after a traumatic event, describes what he sees as the three key steps. In the first one, "relationships are enhanced in some way," people feeling a stronger bond with their friends or family, combined with a longing for intimacy. Secondly, people's perceptions of themselves can alter, through an increase in wisdom or awareness of personal strength. Lastly, people's approach to life can evolve, with a keener appreciation for what is actually important, and, significantly, becoming "more able to live in the present."³⁶ What this theory has in common with *Precious* can be felt most strongly at the end of the film, during the party for the literacy award. Precious proudly wears her gold necklace, seeing herself for who she is, rather than relying on fantasies for escape and inspiration. She is linked into the community of Miss Rain and the fellow students, recognized for her accomplishments. She walks down the street, head held high, having discovered a sense of herself and her own capabilities.

While giving birth is obviously different than writing, both revolve around the act of (re)production, and this is why Abdul's birth has such a profound impact on Precious. His birth, combined with Precious's newfound literacy, is a crucial element of her development. She finally creates something of her own, which allows her, in turn, to make something of her life. As Joseph writes,

When adversity strikes, people often feel that at least some part of them—be it their views of the world, their sense of themselves, their relationships—has been smashed. Those who try to put their lives back together exactly as they were remain fractured and vulnerable. But those who accept the breakage and build themselves anew become more resilient and open to new ways of living.³⁷

Precious, like the flamboyantly confident performers in *Paris Is Burning*, has taken the traumas dealt to her by life, accepted the blows and the breakage, and fashioned herself as stronger and more confident, not necessarily in spite of the traumas, but perhaps quite simply *because* of them. The illusion may sustain and distract, but it is only when one breaks through the illusion, when one integrates the fantasy with the reality, that one can achieve true success.

Conclusion

Through narrative and cinematic technique, Lee Daniels dramatizes the relationship between Precious's fantasies and her growing literacy. Much like the contestants at the drag balls, who are able to look at themselves from the outside and actively construct their desired "selves," Precious sees herself as "other" in her sequences. In those sequences, she is the glittering and glowing Precious she wants to become (and the Precious she *does* become in the party for the literacy award).

Similarly to the contestants in *Paris Is Burning*, she constructs her identity through a knowing appropriation of cultural texts in order to empower herself, in order to transcend ordinary limitations imposed by life, race, and class. Livingston herself says, “The ball people I filmed could have turned out spiteful, angry or downtrodden, but instead they opted for a wildly creative life; the idea was to become as fierce as possible.”³⁸ So the dancers became as fierce as possible—with trauma as their fuel and fantasies as their fire. This was their way of manifesting something that may not be possible (yet) but that one day might be.

Precious and *Paris Is Burning* are not merely examples of queer or black narratives. Instead, these films are narratives to which anyone who cannot have what they want, or who are stuck in circumstances they cannot escape, can relate. They reflect the universal desire for a better (or different) life. *Precious* and *Paris Is Burning* also demonstrate how a subculture forms and why it forms differently for one group versus another. Provocatively, and possibly problematically, the richness of black and queer culture appears to emerge at least partially from dealing with trauma, as a response to years of oppression and displacement. This begs the questions—how important is that oppression to the culture? If the oppression disappears, if the trauma is eradicated, does development dissipate? Does culture, in fact, require oppression in order to thrive? Does fantasy require trauma in order to reach its full vibrant potential?

Precious closes with the dedication “to Precious girls everywhere,” turning her life and her name into a universal signifier. This is not the story of “the black woman,” much like *Paris Is Burning* is not the story of “the gay black man.” Rather, these are stories of struggle and victory, of the limits of life and the relentless push against those limits and the fabulousness and creativity that can occur as a result. Much like these struggles are complex, so, too, are the stories. It is essential to acknowledge that the dismissal of something as “difficult” or “depressing” may mean overlooking the richness and nuance of the bigger picture.

Notes

1. White, “Pride and Precious,” in *New York Press*, pp. 102–103.
2. Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, pp. 100–103.
3. Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, p. 98.
4. Dąbrowski, *Personality Shaping Through Positive Disintegration*, p. 31.
5. Joseph, “What Doesn’t Kill Us,” in *The Psychologist*, p. 143, p. 816.
6. Richardson, “Push, Precious, and New Narratives of Slavery in Harlem,” in *Black Camera*, p. 162.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 178.
8. Brown, “Paris is Burning,” in *The Washington Post*, para. 3.
9. Butler, “Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” in *Feminist Film Theory, a Reader*, pp. 386–387.
10. Box Office Mojo, “Paris is Burning,” in *Box Office Mojo*.
11. Hinson, “Paris is Burning,” in *The Washington Post*, para. 4.
12. Kanagawa, “Dialectical Mediation: The Play of Fantasy and Reality in Precious,” in *Black Camera*, p. 122.

13. Klawans, "Survivors," in *The Nation*, p. 2.
14. Ebert, "Paris Is Burning," in *RogerEbert.com*, para. 7.
15. hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, p. 45.
16. Mask, "The Precarious Politics of Precious: A Close Reading of a Cinematic Text," in *Black Camera*, pp. 98–99.
17. Kanagawa, *Dialectical Mediation*, p. 131.
18. hooks, *Black*, p. 148.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
20. Mask, *Precarious Politics*, p. 99.
21. Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, p. 110.
22. Butler, *Gender is Burning*, p. 387.
23. Harper, "'The Subversive Edge': Paris is Burning, Social Critique, and the Limits of Subjective Agency," in *Diacritic*, p. 94.
24. Bass, "On Being a Fat Black Girl in a Fat-Hating Culture," in *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African American Women*, p. 220.
25. White, *Pride and Precious*, para. 5.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Lane, "Making Peace," *New Yorker*, para. 8.
28. Edelstein, "Review of Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire." in *New York Magazine*, para. 3.
29. Kanagawa, *Dialectical Mediation*, p. 126.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
31. Canby, "Aching to Be a Prima Donna, When You're a Man," in *The New York Times*, para. 18.
32. Farber, "Clothes Make the Man," in *Mother Jones*, p. 75.
33. Cixous, Cohen, and Cohen. "The Laugh of the Medusa," in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, p. 879
34. Brown, *Paris*, para. 1.
35. Jarman, "Cultural Consumption and Rejection of Precious Jones: Pushing Disability into the Discussion of Sapphire's *Push* and Lee Daniels's *Precious*," in *Feminist Formations*, p. 166.
36. Joseph, *What Doesn't Kill*, p. 816
37. *Ibid.*, p. 817.
38. Hilderbrand, *Paris is Burning: A Queer Film Classic*, p. 26.

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