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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Fade to White

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JUDGING from the mail I've received, the conversations I've had and all that I've read, the responses to "Precious: Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire" fall largely along racial lines.

Among black men and women, there is widespread revulsion and anger over the Oscar-nominated film about an illiterate, obese black teenager who has two children by her father. The author [Jill Nelson wrote](#): "I don't eat at the table of self-hatred, inferiority or victimization. I haven't bought into notions of rampant black pathology or embraced the overwrought, dishonest and black-people-hating pseudo-analysis too often passing as post-racial cold hard truths." One black radio broadcaster said that he felt under psychological assault for two hours. So did I.

The blacks who are enraged by "Precious" have probably figured out that this film wasn't meant for them. It was the enthusiastic response from white audiences and critics that culminated in the film being nominated for six Oscars by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, an outfit whose 43 governors are all white and whose membership in terms of diversity is about 40 years behind Mississippi. In fact, the director, Lee Daniels, [said](#) that the honor would bring even more "middle-class white Americans" to his film.

Is the enthusiasm of such white audiences and awards committees based on their being comfortable with the stereotypes shown? Barbara Bush, the former first lady, not only hosted a screening of "Precious" but also [wrote](#) about it in Newsweek, saying: "There are kids like Precious everywhere. Each day we walk by them: young boys and girls whose home lives are dark secrets." Oprah Winfrey, whose endorsement assisted the movie's distribution and its acceptance among her white fanbase, [said](#), "None of us who sees the movie can now walk through the world and allow the Preciouses of the world to be invisible."

Are Mrs. Bush and Ms. Winfrey suggesting, on the basis of a fictional film, that incest is widespread among black families? Statistics tell us that it's certainly no more prevalent among blacks than whites. The National Center for Victims of Crime notes: "Incest does not discriminate. It happens in families that are financially privileged, as well as those of low socio-economic status. It happens to those of all racial and ethnic descent, and to those of all religious traditions."

Given the news media's tendency to use scandals involving black men, both fictional and real, to create "teaching tools" about the treatment of women, it was inevitable that a black male character associated with incest would be used to begin some national discussion about the state of black families.

This use of movies and books to cast collective shame upon an entire community doesn't happen with works about white dysfunctional families. It wasn't done, for instance, with "Requiem for a Dream," starring the great Ellen Burstyn, about a white family dealing with drug addiction, or with "The Kiss," a memoir about incest — in that case, a relationship between a white father and his adult daughter.

Such stereotyping has led to calamities being visited on minority communities. I've suggested that the Newseum in Washington create a Hall of Shame, which would include the front pages of newspapers whose inflammatory coverage led to explosions of racial hatred. I'm thinking, among many others, of 1921's Tulsa riot, which started with a rumor that a black man had assaulted a white woman, and resulted in the murder of 300 blacks.

Black films looking to attract white audiences flatter them with another kind of stereotype: the merciful slave master. In guilt-free bits of merchandise like "Precious," white characters are always portrayed as caring. There to help. Never shown as contributing to the oppression of African-Americans. Problems that members of the black underclass encounter are a result of their culture, their lack of personal responsibility.

It's no surprise either that white critics — eight out of the nine comments used on the publicity Web site for "Precious" were from white men and women — maintain that the movie is worthwhile because, through the efforts of a teacher, this girl begins her first awkward efforts at writing.

Redemption through learning the ways of white culture is an old Hollywood theme. D. W. Griffith produced a series of movies in which Chinese, Indians and blacks were lifted from savagery through assimilation. A more recent example of climbing out of the ghetto through assimilation is "Dangerous Minds," where black and Latino students are rescued by a curriculum that doesn't include a single black or Latino writer.

By the movie's end, Precious may be pushing toward literacy. But she is jobless, saddled with two children, one of whom has Down syndrome, and she's learned that she has AIDS.

Some redemption.

Ishmael Reed is the author of the forthcoming "Barack Obama and the Jim Crow Media."

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