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Feeling Bad and *Precious* (2009):

Black Affect, White Guilt, and Intercorporeal Subjectivity

Abstract

The article draws on 24 essays where university students in Sweden reflect on their affective reactions to the American film *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire* (2009). The essays pay particular attention to how scenes of Black suffering and the body of the character Precious called forth feelings immediately as well as more enduringly, and how participants' cultural situatedness directed the reactions and reflections. The article asks how seemingly unintentional, affective reactions intertwine with reflexive practices in film viewing and analysis, when both are understood as intercorporeal processes of subject formation. Especially intense moments of 'feeling bad' spurred the writers to dissect and question the need for 'sameness' or 'difference' between themselves and the bodies on-screen as incentives for engagement. Drawing on Black feminist thought and theorizations of affect, the article examines how 'feeling bad' can mobilize ethical subjectivities in encounters with racialized suffering and injustices.

Keywords: affect, subjectivity, intercorporeality, Black feminist thought, media ethnography, cinema

In the winter of early 2010, I left a movie theatre in Stockholm sobbing inconsolably. I had just seen the film *Precious: Based on the novel Push by Sapphire* (2009, USA, dir. Lee Daniels)[1] and spent the latter part of it crying. I could see and hear I was not the only one who had cried in the dark of the theatre, as many others were wiping their eyes too while slowly starting their post-movie chatter. I am no stranger to crying at sad movies but this time, the tears just did not stop and started to feel embarrassing. They no longer seemed like the appropriate reaction of compassion towards the film's main character, a Black, poor, fat teenage girl Claireece 'Precious' Jones (played by Gabourey Sidibe) whose devastating hardships the film depicts, but the reaction began to seem somehow obscene. Were my tears evolving into tears of guilt for my own situation, so distant from the one portrayed in the film? Were these perhaps meta-tears of being moved by my own capacity to be moved across such a distance? My white feminist tears in the face of Black suffering – for better or for worse, they just kept coming.

How we see ourselves (and others) as ethical subjects relates intimately to not only how we feel about things, but to how we feel we *should* feel about things, and to how we express, articulate and intellectually process those feelings. My memory of reacting to *Precious*, narrated above with the support of a diary entry I wrote at the time, underlines the conflict between the visceral reaction of tears and 'feeling bad' while beginning to reflect on the meaning of those tears. The reminiscence highlights questions of what kind of ethics and politics 'feeling bad' may and may not mobilize when it comes to racialized, class-related and gendered power relations. It also uncomfortably reminds of what Black feminist thinker bell hooks has called "learned helplessness" (2003, p. 26) as a white liberal attitude towards racism which, despite acknowledging racist structures and one's own privilege enabled by them, helps keep whiteness and white (bad) feeling in the center.

This article thus explores relations between understandings and experiences of affect as corporeal, seemingly non-conscious reaction, and affect as a process and practice of meaning-making. As such, the article participates in recent debates over definitions, methodological uses and politics of affect (see e.g. Massumi 2002; Ahmed 2004; Seigworth and Gregg 2010; Wetherell 2012, 2013; Blackman 2014). Simultaneously, the article relates these themes to Black feminist thought and critique of what popular representations of Black suffering and racial oppression do in the context of white-dominated societies and media audiences. How and under what conditions can 'feeling bad', while viewing and analyzing a film like *Precious*, mobilize embodied subjectivities and help unravel racialized power relations? The article's main body of research material consists of 24 essays on *Precious* written by university students in Stockholm, Sweden, the majority of them white Europeans, during a course I taught on gender and audiovisual culture.

One of the reasons for why the film *Precious* was chosen as a focal point of study was that the film has been seen as exceedingly hard to watch, in my own experience as well as in the majority of the student essays and journalistic reviews. Effortlessly falling into the category of 'feel-bad films' (Lübecker 2011), *Precious* prompts complex questions about what produces 'bad feeling' and for whom, and how to deal with these feelings, even if and perhaps exactly because they may at times feel overwhelming. As such, my choice of film played an important pedagogical role in a feminist, anti-racist classroom where the broad aim was to examine the often difficult, racialized, gendered and sexualized power structures embedded not only in what we see but also in how we feel about what we see.

Secondly, and connectedly, *Precious* is hard to pin down as a 'negative' or 'positive' representation of a subordinated group, such as Black women, leaving open the question of what exactly in the movie or its viewers might produce 'bad' feeling. As several Black feminist scholars and

commentators have pointed out, the critical reception of *Precious* has been starkly divided in this respect, especially concerning whether the main character of the film, the dark-skinned Black, fat teenage girl Precious (Gabourey Sidibe), is portrayed in a sympathetic light or not (e.g. Kaplan 2009; Edwards 2012; Mask 2012; Griffin 2014) – but also in relation to whether the film reproduces the long-standing trope of Black men as rapists and abusers or simply offers space for examining questions of race, poverty and sexual violence (e.g. Jean-Charles 2012). The film is easy to place in the group of media products, including films like *The Help* (USA, 2011) and the TV show *Orange Is the New Black* (USA/Netflix, 2013–), that have been called "trauma porn" (Shackelford 2016), "poverty porn" (Stevens 2009), or "carnival of black degradation" (White 2009): media products about Black suffering made mainly for the White gaze (Griffin 2014). Precious indeed suffers gravely: during the course of the film, she is physically, emotionally and sexually abused by both her father and mother, becomes pregnant and gives birth to her second child by her father, contracts HIV from him, and learns how to read and write only in a special school after getting kicked out of regular school.

On the other hand, *Precious*' predominantly Black cast and Black director Lee Daniels have been nominated for and won several respected film awards, including two Oscars. Especially Sidibe and Mo'nique who plays Precious' mother have been praised for their performances, and the film has also been seen as a story of hope and resilience even in the most desperate of circumstances (e.g. Lumenick 2009). Rachel Alicia Griffin (2014) and Bruce Baum (2010) have, respectively, located this dividedness in the 'post-feminist' and 'post-racial' US context of President Barack Obama, where racism and sexism are claimed to 'not be issues anymore'. For Griffin, white interest in and praise for the film as a story of resilience functions to alleviate white guilt instead of changing racist structures. (Griffin 2014, pp. 190–191; see also Baum 2010.) In a similar manner, Erica R. Edwards (2012) connects *Precious* to the lineage of what she calls black women's empowerment narratives

in film adaptation, arguing that the success of such narratives is linked to their disarticulation of personal empowerment from black feminist critiques of structural oppression. The film and its public response thus connect directly to broader Black feminist, queer and cultural theoretical discussions on how, if, and in what circumstances affective relations understood as 'negative', such as guilt, shame, disgust, discomfort, and anger, can function as engines for transformation (e.g. Ahmed 2004, 2005; Lorde 1984; Scott 2010). The reflection essays on experiencing *Precious* echoed some of the concerns in these discussions by pointing out the difficulty, or impossibility, of any fixed definition of what counts as 'good' or 'bad' feeling, or 'positive' or 'negative' representation. Sometimes, 'bad feeling' could turn out to be the only response many participants could 'feel good' about, and 'happy' reactions could quickly change into something else. As one student pointed out: "So the laughs I had… were funny at the same time that they were tragic after a second of realization" (anonymous, age 24, nationality not specified, male). Edwards (2012) writes about such moments of affective contradiction in terms of excess and "interruptions of the absurd", suggesting that these moments in *Precious* are the ones where a space opens up for Black feminist politics and for recognizing the absurdity of how popular culture treats non-normative black bodies. Honey Crawford (2012) also observed contradictions in how her inner-city Los Angeles high school students, many of which could be described as having similar life stories as Precious, perceived the film as a "belly-clutching comedy" (p. 185): they enjoyed quoting, re-enacting and watching online parody scenes of many of the most violent, abusive scenes in the film. In contrast with my students, Crawford's students refused to feel 'bad' about feeling 'good' or laughing. What kind of different – or similar – ethical implications do such affective contradictions produce in a primarily white university environment in comparison with Black feminist commentary, or a primarily non-white high school class?

Affective reaction and reflection

Bodily and felt reactions to media images, seemingly happening without thinking, may seem beyond one's control, and therefore difficult or impossible to change. For instance, when so-called 'negative' reactions, like ones of disgust, fear, or pity, become repeatedly connected to certain kinds of bodies in media images, these affective connections may begin to seem natural, as if inevitable qualities of the bodies that seem invoke the reactions (Ahmed 2004). This is why such reactions can be particularly forceful in producing and maintaining societal hierarchies, and this is also why I wanted to study them, and have my students reflect on them. Scholars in critical race studies, such as Darieck Scott (2012) and Sara Ahmed (2004, 2005), have interrogated how feelings like disgust or fear become connected to black and brown bodies in particular. Scott (2010, p. 12–13) argues that while self-alienation and disgust are something that all human subjects can and do experience, there is still something that connects blackness to abjection specifically, as "one of the go-to-figures for referencing abject" (p. 12). Of course, the character Precious combines more than one such a go-to-figure, adding to blackness the figure of the fat woman, also commonly connected to abjection (see e.g. Kent 2001; LeBesco 2004). Thus, what may feel like just a reaction-without-thinking is necessarily already conditioned, at least to some extent, by the pull of how one might expect to feel based on earlier affective connections, for example the pull of abjection.

Currently, there are several ways of understanding and using the concept of affect circulating in the humanities, cultural theory, psychology and the sciences. Social psychologist Margaret Wetherell (2012, pp. 2–3) has divided studies within the so-called turn to affect into two broad categories: topic-based ones that focus on bodies and materiality, examining what moves people and what attracts them, and theoretical ones for which the notion of affect marks a general paradigmatic shift from questions of discourse, representation and meaning-making to pre-conscious, non-signifying

forces and intensities beyond language. Many scholars, such as Brian Massumi (2002), Elspeth Probyn (2005) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003), clearly differentiate between affect and emotion, using 'affect' to refer to the reacting-before-thinking level of human corporeality but also to non-human, unpredictable, material forces that propel objects and worlds in general. In contrast, 'emotion' then refers to the more predictable ways in which affective forces are fixed into cultural and linguistic forms. (See also Featherstone 2010, p. 199; Leys 2011, pp. 434–438; Wetherell 2013, pp. 349–355; Blackman 2014.)

Many feminist scholars (e.g. Hemmings 2005; Ahmed 2008; Koivunen 2010), however, have also contested the necessity of a strict differentiation between affect and emotion, as well as the portrayal of the 'turn to affect' as something new and corrective to lacks in previous scholarship. According to them, the separation disregards the long histories of feminist and anti-racist scholarship that has attended to the materiality of culture and power. Indeed, we must ask: how to grasp, politicize and transform affect – such as a corporeal reaction of disgust while seeing specific kinds of non-normative bodies – if it is by definition beyond conscious reach? In this article, therefore, I follow a more assimilationist approach to affect, inspired for example by the work of feminist postcolonial scholar Sara Ahmed (2004), who does not distinguish between affect and emotion. Following Ahmed, I want to consider how both sensation and sense, visceral reactions and their narrative processing, move and shape racialized, classed, gendered bodies and subjectivities. Furthermore, I draw on Wetherell's notion of 'affective practice' (2012, p. 23) which connects affect not only to the spontaneous, helpless or improvised dimensions of relating to things, but also to questions about becoming trained in affective patterns, and how to train to feel or react differently.

Reflections on affective reactions enable exploration of the ways in which unstructured, sometimes confusing, intense and contradictory affective moments are made sense of, expressed, narrated, and processed. In empirical academic research, "retrospective reflections of sensation after the fact" (Paasonen 2014, p. 2) can be the only means available to explore affectivity and corporeal feeling, making it hard or impossible to decouple affect from emotion in practice. When I asked the students on a university course on gender and audiovisual culture to discuss and reflect on what they felt and what happened in their bodies while watching the film *Precious*, my aim was to interrogate precisely the dynamics between immediate, visceral reaction and more temporally dispersed, conscious and intentional academic reflection.

Research design and methodology

I received permission to use 24 student essays as research material which, along with my own diary reminiscence, allow no possibility for generalization, but they do offer insight into how 'feeling bad' can facilitate ethical and political subjectivities. I conceptualized the writing assignment not only as a way of producing research material for myself but as a pedagogical task for the students to practice situating and examining their ways of looking at and feeling with images as valuable parts of analysis, since "within a pedagogical context, rationality and affect are often placed in tension" (Petit 2014, p. 169–170). In the writing instructions, the students were first asked to write down their bodily and felt reactions immediately after watching the movie, either at home or at an organized DVD viewing in a lecture hall. They were prompted to pay attention to scenes or moments in the movie that they felt particularly strongly about, if there were any; to the context and space of the viewing; to factors in their personal history and in their cultural situatedness which might have affected their reactions; and if or how they thought the bodily appearances of the characters/actors had an impact on their reactions.

The course was offered as an optional one to Swedish and international students without any previous study requirements, thus some students had no background in media or gender studies, while others were at a Master's degree level. The participants were between 19 and 70 years of age at the time of participation, 14 of them were women, 9 men, 1 not available. Gender identification was voluntary and no categories were suggested. 16 of the participants identified as Swedish, including Swedish-Iranian, Swedish-Venezuelan and Swedish-Finnish, one participant each was from the US, Russia, and China, two from Germany and two from Iceland, as well as one who preferred not to specify. I did not ask participants about racial identity, but none of them explicitly identified as Black in the essays or during the course, although three of them identified as non-white. About a third of the essays were written in Swedish (I have translated the quotes from these essays), the rest in English. Notably, Sweden prides itself over its image as a feminist and anti-racist nation, but this image has also been critiqued for smoothing over or disabling discussions about existing racist and sexist structures and patterns (Hübinette and Lundström 2011). The friction between the taken-for-granted status of an anti-racist feminist stance and a cultural pull towards a certain 'color-blindness' characterized many of the essays, especially by Swedish or Sweden-residing students.

I had planned the timing of the essay on *Precious* towards the end of the course, so that there had been time to establish trust between myself and the students. The course included lectures, film and TV viewings, short writing assignments about viewings and literature, and discussion sessions. It was rather intensive, with mandatory attendance and up to 8 hours per week spent together in class and at viewings. By the time the option for research participation was offered, I had given all students personal feedback on their writing, with a focus on encouraging them to express their own critical voices and views. The course had already included themes such as post-feminist media

culture, the 'male gaze', Black feminist thought, 'women's genres', men and masculinity studies, politics of location, and emotion and affect in feminist media studies. Earlier on the course we had also already watched an another controversial film about Black suffering and sexual violence, namely *The Color Purple* (USA, 1985, dir. Steven Spielberg), and read Jacqueline Bobo's (1988) classic article on it which analyzed Black female spectators' reactions to the film. Thus, the course content participated in affectively orientating the students towards some of *Precious*' themes before the viewing of the film.

Connected to the film viewing, the students had read an article by Bruce Baum (2010) which compared *Precious* to the films *Avatar* (2009) and *Invictus* (2009), connected them all to American culture during Barack Obama's presidency, and argued that they offer a problematic white fantasy of a 'post-racial' world. This undoubtedly contributed to the students' critical stances towards their own viewing pleasures and practices, especially to the extent that they identified with whiteness and/or a relatively affluent western gaze. My being a white female teacher most likely also impacted how students engaged or did not engage with race in their essays, as they were very concretely writing for me. While a few students simply described how and when they had reacted in the course of the film, for the most part they demonstrated impressive reflexivity, and many seemed genuinely concerned with and interested in working through their racialized positions and contradictory feelings about the film.

Although there is an inescapable hierarchy between the teacher and the students, my feminist pedagogical aim was to treat the students as co-researchers (Olitsky and Weathers 2005) and subjects with scholarly agency, take their reflections as seriously as I would take my own reflections or any other academic text. When requesting permission to use their writing in my research, I explained this purpose along with the aims and theoretical underpinnings of my study,

and asked those who gave permission to specify whether they would like to be quoted by their full names, just like any scholar, or if they wanted to remain anonymous. Many students wanted to be quoted by their full names, some stated it made no difference to them, and many also wanted to be anonymous – wishes I have followed in the article. If there was no mention of preference, the student is quoted as anonymous. The option of not remaining anonymous gives at least some possibility to unravel the traditional hierarchy between the teacher-researcher as an interpretative authority, and the student's writing as 'research material' or 'research objects'.

In a similar manner as Rebecca Coleman (2009, pp. 68–75) does in her empirical study of affective becomings between girls and images, I attempt to not take the writings as "symptoms or signs of something else" (Coleman 2009, p. 71), like the students' psychic structures or what they 'really mean.' Rather, I consider the essays as works which have, in a sense, already done the scholarly job of reflecting on what affective reactions mean for the ones experiencing them. Therefore I treat them as scholarly reflections on par with published scholarly and journalistic takes on the film *Precious*, rather than interpret them from an authoritative 'outside' position – which also made sense pedagogically in a classroom context (cf. Skeggs and Wood 2012).

Another advantage of written reflections is that the format allows time for digesting one's reactions, and for considering the background of those reactions more carefully than in being interviewed or completing a questionnaire right after film viewing. Through time, the reflection process can more likely feed back into the affective level and potentially produce shifts in it. In Lynne Pearce's view (1997, pp. 27, 81), which I subscribe to as well, critical interpretation processes have an impact on what images feel like in the body, as interpretations are a specific way of orienting oneself towards images. Understanding processes of media engagement as intercorporeal formations of subjectivity

means that these processes need to be examined as beginning before the event of viewing, and continuing long after.

I understand subjectivity, in this context, as an embodied and intercorporeal process (Blackman et al 2008, p. 18) which never stops happening and is never fixed, even if it tends to fall into patterns that allow some stability for what is understood as the 'self.' On one hand, the student essays maintain such a fictional unity of selfhood and subjectivity (e.g. Braidotti 2002, pp. 22–25; Blackman et al 2008, p. 20) in faithfully accounting for and basing their analysis on rather fixed socio-cultural viewer positions, such as 'white, Swedish, middle-class, heterosexual woman.' On the other hand, the essays show that subjectivity – emerging and becoming undone through a process of viewing and reflecting – is not reducible to such markers but highly unstable and difficult to capture, even for the relatively brief time of watching a film and writing an essay about it.

Bad feeling as over-engagement and detachment

Sianne Ngai (2005) has suggested that so-called 'ugly feelings' often get associated with suspended agency and immobilization for the ones feeling them. In a related vein, Sara Ahmed (2006, pp. 134–5, 154) talks about spaces of comfort and discomfort. In spaces that feel comfortable, the boundaries between bodies and the world fade away and one fits in easily. In discomfort, one feels out of place and becomes disoriented, which in turn demands reorientation and, according to Ahmed, can open up new worlds much more effectively than comfort. Many Black feminist scholars analyzing *Precious* describe a similar process from discomfort into reorientation and remobilization. For example, Griffin (2014) argues that the film's success is based on how it "relieves White audiences of guilt and accountability" and "renders Precious hypervisible and yet largely unseen" (p. 190). However, she also emphasizes that through examining the film through

Black feminist thought, its dehumanization of Black femininity is revealed and deconstructed. Suzette Spencer (2012), on the other hand, takes issue with those critiques of *Precious* which dismiss the film as yet another perpetuation of Black stereotypes. For Spencer, these critiques actually immobilize the film and its viewers, for example by stopping them from recognizing how the film's Black female subjectivities are complicated and contradictory, and how the film demands questioning how 'we' watch Black bodies on screen.

Several of the student essays in my research project addressed strong discomfort in first watching *Precious*, even agency momentarily suspended by shock and feelings of over-engagement, being unavoidably pulled into the film's world. However, they all described a return to mobility by defying that discomfort and by reorienting themselves as analytical viewing subjects whose reflexive capacities have perhaps increased, especially if the course viewing was not the first time they saw the film.

> I have seen *Precious* before, then in the company of my mom and we really did not know what we were getting into. We wanted to have a film to watch while hanging out on the couch and ended up in the middle of an incestuous and gnawingly hellish feeling which made us grab a sofa pillow and not touch our snacks. So I carried with me this memory of something really uncomfortable when I was going to see the film again now. I steeled myself and was seriously prepared. – anonymous (age 23, Swedish, female)

Even if bad feeling had been overwhelming the first time, and such over-engagement had felt immobilizing, this writer felt confident that repetitive viewings and perhaps increase in reflexive capacities would allow more distance and less affective involvement. Some other authors, however – altogether 4 out of 24 – described their relation to the movie as *dis*engaged and uninterested (cf.

Petit 2014). This did not immobilize them as affective-reflexive viewing subjects, nor did it make their reflections on such (dis)affectivity any less engaged. Interestingly, all of these authors were white men. Would this kind of detached viewing have been possible for Black or non-white viewers? Among all the comments and scholarly analyses I read of *Precious*, none written by non-white authors addressed or claimed disengagement.

> Unfortunately, I think watching the movie mindful of the bodily reactions I was having caused me to have fewer reactions to the movie. … I mostly felt boredom punctuated with brief moments of slight humor, like when Precious confused 'insect' and 'incest.' … [W]ith melodrama I eventually get sort of inoculated to the constant stream of bad situations. (anonymous, age 20, American, male)

> The fact that I saw the film with the thought of observing my own reactions certainly dampened the experience. … But in the case of Precious, I think that the greatest obstacle for deeper engagement is that too many things in it are familiar clichés and conventions that I recognize from countless other films. (anonymous, age 22, Swedish, male)

Both authors connected their boredom to the repetitiveness of stereotypes or genre characteristics, which they saw as things that are separate from racialized power relations, but they also felt 'dampened' by the expectation of self-observation. They bring to the fore a methodological challenge in exploring affective subject formation in engagements with the media, namely that the frame and space of affect observation for research purposes, even self-observation, already impact the bodily sensations too. Here, bored subjectivity emerges through the friction between numbing experiences of repetition, and self-awareness which interrupts and slows down the flow of affect. Wetherell (2012, p. 12) has fittingly suggested looking at affect as patterns which are "always

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'turned on' and 'simmering', moving along, since social action is continually embodied. … [A]ffect also comes in and out of focus." Accordingly, disinterest should not be seen as lack of affectivity, but affect moving out of focus, simmering on a low frequency.

Moreover, these white male authors' interpretation that their disinterest had little to do with race still coexisted with critique of racialized and class-related power relations in the film – which, both of them explained, felt too off-putting to maintain their interest. In my reading, this way they tried to articulate disinterest in participating in racist hierarchies, evident in 'clichés' (cf. Mask 2012, p. 97), but they also highlight how white privilege works. Seeing disinterest in a Black story as a non-racialized affective relation can be seen to extend what bell hooks (1992, p. 167) calls liberal whiteness's "deep emotional investment in the myth of 'sameness'". The authors connected boredom first and foremost to film aesthetics and narration implicitly understood as non-racialized qualities. Such a view has been contested in Black feminist writing, not least concerning the narrative and cinematic language of *Precious* which Edwards (2012) sees to belong specifically to Black women's empowerment narratives, and as Mask (2012) points out, is filled with references to Black representation and cinematic styles like New Black Cinema.

Unlike for the authors quoted above, the affective relation of disengagement or 'too bland' engagement became an explicitly ethical question in the following essay:

> I didn't cry when watching *Precious*, now I feel guilty about it. When I slipped in the DVD disc I knew this was somewhat of a 'tear-jerker'. … I knew the plot touched a lot of heavy elements and I was pretty certain that sooner or later, I would cry. … Two hours later I found myself unhappy, but not near the point of crying. I also felt touched by the feeling of hope that the end and other scenes represented, but not near the point of crying. Does this make me a

bad person with no connections to my feelings, I thought to myself. … I, as the audience, have never been close to any oppression linked to this. If anything I have helped to keep these structures by not questioning them. Not able to identify with someone so far from myself. It's a shame that I'm learning about this so late in my life. I wanted to but I didn't cry. – Fredrik Sehlstedt (24, Swedish, male)

Sehlstedt's bodily reaction was quite exactly the opposite of my own reaction, described in the beginning of this article: he was unable to cry, I was unable to stop crying. However, we both saw our reactions as inappropriate in relation to the expectation of how (we think) we were supposed to feel and react, in order to maintain a sense of ourselves as 'good persons', ethical subjects capable of compassion. We both also connected the reaction's inappropriateness to the perceived distance between our privileged, white bodies and worlds, and the subordinated, suffering Black bodies and worlds represented in the film. For Sehlstedt, the visceral reaction of tears signified the only ethical and therefore 'positive' affective relation which he felt guilty for not having, and which undermines his perception of himself as an ethical anti-racist subject. For me, the same reaction started signifying an excessive and thus sinister bodily performance of compassionate, ethical anti-racist and feminist subjectivity. In Ahmed's (2006) terms, a potentially productive space of discomfort was opened up in both reactions, particularly in terms of white and class privilege. However, even though there was subsequent reorientation, it brought no relief to the discomfort, concretized in the corporeal inability to stop or force tears. The white 'compassionate' gaze that pulled both me and Sehlstedt toward itself became simultaneously intolerable – and unavoidable.

White middle class guilt and compassion

Guilt, and to a lesser degree shame, were mentioned more often in the essays than any other namable feelings. What, then, does guilt *do* in the self-reflections of largely white, middle class students and a white, middle class teacher? Black feminist writer Audre Lorde (1984) has emphasized how expressions of 'feeling bad' about white privilege can function contrary to their purpose as a form of self-centeredness. Through the focus on white guilt, white subjects can turn the attention back to themselves as the ones whose feelings matter the most. Sara Ahmed (2004, pp. 103–105) has analyzed the difference between shame and guilt in the context of racism by pointing out how guilt usually concerns an action perceived as 'bad,' for example racist, whereas in shame, that badness is transferred from the action to the whole self. This can make guilt easier to express and handle than shame. Ahmed points out how the very declaration of 'feeling bad,' such as feeling guilt for racist structures, or compassion for (other) people suffering because of such structures, still involves the self-perception of 'being good.' The problem is that declarations of feeling guilty do not necessarily do anything about the lived realities of racism, or unravel the persistent complicity of white subjects in racist structures.

African-American film critic Armond White (2009), in his review of *Precious*, addresses the dynamic between compassion and guilt by arguing that the film enables 'slumming' – identification on a fantasy level with no real consequences – for white, affluent, liberal-minded viewers. This also reminds of bell hooks' discussion of how the 'other' is consumed in popular culture, "offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate" to be "consumed, and forgotten" (hooks 1992, 39). In many essays, however, the writers were anything but naïve about the difference between feeling and action – whether it was guilt, shame, or "bad conscience," as in the quote below. This difference,

and the authors' sense of inability to act even if their affective reactions prompted them to, was also a source of more guilt, and could lead to questioning the ethics of guilt altogether:

> This bad conscience is produced by the "economical" and "intellectual" superiority I feel towards Precious while viewing the film. I've got middle-class white-collar parents and I've got an education while she resides on the margins of western society. … Characters in the film I am more liable to identify with would be those who in some way, however misguided, aspire to help Precious. These are either white characters, or very "light-skinned" Afro-Americans … If it isn't in the film that I – or the demographic to which I could be fitted – are to blame and that we instead hold the power to help/intervene, why do I then have a bad conscience? – Carl Wahlström (22, Swedish, male)

For Wahlström, the more self-involved feelings of bad conscience and guilt transformed, through the process of analysis, into anger and criticism towards the racist structures depicted in the film and the privileged white 'outside' subject position which the author felt the film pulled him into. He, similarly to scholars like Griffin (2014, pp. 185–188) and Baum (2010, p. 635), argued that one key reason for the pull of the white gaze are the racialized and intra-racial hierarchies within the film: that Precious' helpers are white or light-skinned Black people. He also criticized the whole essay task of self-reflection as problematically pulling towards subjectivity as a matter of white introspection and self-involvement instead of attention to racialized societal structures. However, for the most part the essay writers resisted this pull and insisted on looking at structures, just like Wahlström did himself.

Over half of the authors compared *Precious* to our earlier viewing of the film *The Color Purple* and brought up the potential significance of both films to Black audiences, a comparison that many

Black feminist critics have made as well (e.g. Edwards 2012; Jean-Charles 2012; Mask 2012). I would argue that through this comparison – which also points to the historical continuums of racism and Black representation – many students actually tried to shift attention away from their own subjectivities, away from the self-centeredness of the guilt-ridden white subject, to critiques of racist political, economic, and audiovisual structures.

In the reflection essays, guilt and compassion were closely connected. In a manner reminiscent of Ahmed's problematization of guilt, Lauren Berlant (2004) has argued that compassion denotes privilege: while the spectator is not actually suffering when watching, other than in a superficial and temporary way, compassion forges an obligation to recognize that someone else is suffering. But if the obligation "is more than a demand on consciousness – more than a demand to *feel right* […] – then it is crucial to appreciate the multitude of convention around the relation of feeling to practice" (Berlant 2004, p. 4). Here, the difference between Black critiques and the primarily white-identified essays became particularly underlined: while some Black commentators connected their discussion to practices such as anti-rape actions in Black communities (Jean-Charles 2012) and anti-racist educational practices (Crawford 2012), for most of the students on my course, the perceived distance between them and Precious seemed to limit 'practice' to attempts to at least 'feel right'.

Some authors addressed how they felt distanced by what they saw as an excessive amount of suffering in *Precious*.

> [Precious] has so many qualities that signal subordination that it's almost impossible to come up with anything more … This becomes so enormous in the end that it feels constructed. … The film ends in 'Hollywood style,' with a bright future. Precious has become confident,

decides to take care of her children, get an education and not let herself be bullied anymore by her mother or the social services. Of course it feels liberating, and it's hard not to get tears in your eyes, but again that is constructed and set up as the right thing to do. – Björn Revenäs (70, Swedish male)

Here, Revenäs discusses how not only the suffering but also the "liberating" ending of the film feel excessive. The excess produced hesitation in compassion and underlined the film as a fantasy which was not even meant to incite political action, although his body reacted with the expected tears. Of course, it is already a sign of gendered, classed and racialized privilege that the abuse Precious suffers is seen as 'too much' to be realistic. Crawford's (2012) previously mentioned American inner city, multi-racial high school students' reactions provide an interesting point of comparison. Crawford tells how she was first shocked by how unsympathetic and rude her students seemed towards Precious' situation, as they re-enacted and laughed at scenes of abuse like they were great comedic moments. After more careful consideration, however, Crawford suggests that her students' refusal to sympathize with or pity Precious – or accept her sympathy – allowed them to defy the hierarchies that compassion implies for their lives as well. This comparison highlights how compassion is deeply contextual and indeed intimately connected to privilege and distance. Proximity to Precious' world enabled or perhaps even necessitated reactions that refused compassion and took pleasure from the film's excessiveness, whereas racialized and classed distance from that world called for compassion as the only conceivable choice for the white liberal subject – even though under protest, and while recognized as dubious.

Intercorporeal proximity and ethics beyond 'similarity'

Philosopher Moira Gatens has argued for an ethics based on our ability to recognize commonality: to have concern and empathy for another is on a fundamental level to recognize another body as sufficiently similar to our own. However, this does not require for bodies to be similar in a specific way on a physical level (Gatens 1994, pp. 39–41). As thinkers like Audre Lorde (1984) have pointed out, one of the harshest and most persistent racist tropes in white-dominated representation has been the dehumanization of non-white, working class and/or female bodies, the tendency to deem them surplus, nothing-but-body, or already lost. Dehumanization can even be seen as a prerequisite for an encounter devoid of empathy or concern for others' lives. But is it enough for a sustainable ethical relation with another to see them as sufficiently similar or "human like me"? There are also risks in emphasizing the bottommost sameness of all people, which easily sweeps away the necessity of ethics that recognize racialized and gendered differences instead of denying them (see Lorde 1984; Ringrose, 2007).

All of the 24 reflection essays articulated the authors' distance from the world and body of Precious, whether it was in terms of body size, race, or class and economic situation, or simply temporal and geographic distance to 1980s Harlem. However, many participants recounted relating to Precious intensely through similarity which was invoked by specific scenes in the film. Indeed, most reflections did *not* see a visually recognizable, bodily similarity between themselves and characters in the film as requirements for deep affective involvement. For example, differences did not stop writers from reflecting, with much feeling and intimacy, on how Precious' body, and her and other people's depicted views of her attractiveness or repulsiveness, related to their feelings about their own bodies, and to gendered body norms overall. The reflections that worked through the writer's bodily self-perceptions in relation to Precious were almost exclusively written by

women. This tendency, in my view, is a part of the cultural production of gender *through* learning to self-observe one's body in relation to others, while accumulating reflexive capacity about body norms (cf. Skeggs and Wood, 2012).

> I'm actually not feeling different from or superior to the character Precious, not more attractive or accomplished. At the same time, after the viewing this realization also resulted in a feeling of guilt – that I'm not really allowed to feel that closely related to her, being 'white,' (generally considered) 'petite' and living under fully different life conditions. … But in the scene where Precious puts on her headband while seeing the blond girl in the mirror, it's inevitable: that's me too. – Malin Abrahamsson (21, Swedish female)

> Part of my identification with Precious is also due to the fact that I was rather an overweight teenager, and bullied at school. The bullying scenes hit me right in the stomach, I even got some flashbacks to similar events in my childhood. In those scenes I could feel that same chill in my bones as I did in those unsafe/anxiety inducing situations in school. Like Precious, I also fled into a fantasy world where I could be free. – anonymous (24, Swedish female)

The scenes of food-related abuse and bullying, as well as the film's fantasy sequences, were amongst the 'stickiest' (Ahmed 2004) moments of the viewing experience for many authors, and provoked vivid flashbacks and memories of similar or related experiences. Like in the reminiscences above, these moments were often not in a direct or obvious relationship to the participants' current self-identifications in terms of gender, ethnicity, race, class, or size – contrary to the idea that identification, or 'feeling with', would presuppose a recognition of categorical bodily sameness between viewing subjects and bodies on screen (Doane 1982).

The two authors quoted above were prompted to relate their own past and current feelings of self-alienation and self-abjection to what they perceived as similar feelings in Precious': her fantasies, her experiences of bullying. The authors recognize that the (self-)abjection Precious experiences in the film is racialized and size-related, and thus cannot be the same as theirs, even if they recognize aspects of it. Jean-Charles (2012, pp. 151–154) has argued that the film's fantasy sequences, where Precious escapes abuse to a world of white glamour – sequences the two female authors also discuss – make her abject reality more manageable for the (presumably privileged) viewers, creating distance as well as making viewers reflect on the limits of their identification with Precious. The two authors quoted above seemed, however, pulled in by moments of abjection and not comforted by fantasy sequences, even though those sequences did invite self-reflection. Their responses seem to align more closely with Scott's (2010) proposition that there is counterintuitive power in Black bodies depicted as abject: in abjection subjectivity is in movement, and its possibilities are fluid (also Kristeva 1982) – therefore fictional enactments of blackness as abjection can mobilize relations between the self and the ejected but compelling Other.

> One feeling that I actually offend myself by feeling is a certain amount of disgust. I have never really reacted like this before when it comes to overweight people, but in this whole tragic context, Precious body actually repulses me a bit. … In the slum where Precious lives, all the greasy foods, sweat, and so on, make me nauseous and disgusted. Now when I think about it, maybe it's more that than the actual vision of Precious as fat that disgusts me. – Annika Sterner (23, Swedish female)

> I have been asking myself will it make any difference if Precious was not a fat girl? … As a girl with a normal figure, I don't feel superior when I see the fat body of Precious, but I still

can't avoid seeing the body of Precious as a spectacle though I really don't want to. –

Hongyan Yu (20, Chinese female)

Sterner's affective reaction of disgust had first seemed to arise as if naturally from Precious' fat, Black body on screen, but through more careful reflection, Sterner concluded that the reaction actually resulted from audiovisual strategies that combined close-ups of greasy food to such bodies. Hongyan Yu also reflects on the seemingly unavoidable pull of Precious' fat body as a spectacle. Following Scott (2010), abjection indeed seems to have had counterintuitive power in these instances: the process of reflecting on affective reactions denaturalized the idea of specific bodily characteristics as self-evidently disgusting or spectacular. The rejecting reactions of these two authors became re-oriented from fat, Black female bodies towards the structures that posit them as abject spectacles – and pull viewers into compliance (see also Kyrölä 2014).

The essays, while reflexive on the distance and proximity between the authors and Precious, never pretend to be able to the bridge the gap between the fairly privileged students in Sweden and the racialized poverty and sexual abuse of Precious' world through film analysis. To claim otherwise would be highly unethical, even when moments of intimacy in (self-)abjection and 'feeling with' propose possibilities for intercorporeal ethics and subjectivities beyond simple demands for 'similarity' based on identity categories. The essays also highlight the ways in which contemporary subjects are entangled in hierarchical structures, partly through feelings of helplessness in the face of unbridgeable differences, partly through the pull of abjection connected to Blackness and fatness, and partly through spectatorial mobility enabled by white privilege.

Conclusion: self-reflection as transformation?

The essays on reactions to *Precious* show clearly that reflection and analysis can themselves be considered not only affective processes but practices of ethical subject formation, in the sense that they entail working through contradictory and racialized affective relations. They can be seen to constitute momentary senses of self through processes of intercorporeally relating to Black and suffering others on screen. Wetherell's (2012, pp. 11–13) previously introduced suggestion of thinking through affect as practice, not only process, further enables comprehending affect as political, driven by purposeful, repeated acts (which affective reactions also count as) towards transformation.

There is good reason to question, however – just like essay author Wahlström did – whether exercises in self-observation and self-reflection, like the ones in this article, are effective and worthwhile, when the aim is to unravel taken-for-granted structures of the white gaze (Griffin 2014) and racialized, gendered and sexualized power relations. When the people doing the reflecting are white and/or economically privileged in relation to the marginalized 'objects' of their gaze, does self-reflection only reproduce that relation of privilege? How to avoid the risk of keeping whiteness in the center? Like Richard Dyer (1997, p. 2–3) has pointed out, a key to how whiteness stays dominant is the way it appears invisible as a racialized position and instead, is depicted as the universal 'human' position in white discourse. Observing and reflecting on how the white (or white-identified) gaze orients one's affective reactions – even if the result is boredom or disengagement – forces the observer to consider their position as a racialized and gendered one, at the very minimum. But if self-reflection turns into wallowing in guilt, without turning affective reaction into affective practice and analysis of structures of power, these exercises can become counterproductive, just like in Lorde's (1984) and hooks' (1992) warnings about white guilt.

Overall, affective relations most often coded as 'negative' or 'bad', like disgust, guilt, or discomfort, prompted the authors into recognition of structures of white and economic privilege and Black subordination most forcefully. Moments of 'relief' from Black female suffering, like fantasy sequences and the invitation to identify with white or lighter-skinned helper figures , were experienced as more disturbing and sinister than any obvious 'feel-bad' moments that the film provoked. In this regard, the essays support many Black feminist critiques of the film, such as Griffin's (2014) argument that the fantasy scenes keep the film focused on the white gaze even in the absence of white characters, and Edwards' (2012) proposition that the excess of Black abjection retains its power through the moments of relief, signaling potential for Black feminist politics.

For the mostly white and privileged students, intense moments of feeling jolted out of one's privileged comfort zone and feeling really 'bad' functioned, even if problematically and controversially, as moments through which race, class, size and gender-related hierarchies came to the fore. As Ahmed states: "it is the very assumption that good feelings are open and bad feelings are closed that allows historical forms of injustice to disappear" (2010, p. 50). The *Precious* essays as well as Black feminist commentary on the film point towards a tendency where moments of discomfort, guilt, or disgust in watching – and in the case of the essay authors, especially the meta-guilt or meta-discomfort for these affective moments – are most forceful in eliciting reflection that does not forget historical forms of injustice.

[1] I will abbreviate the name of the film as *Precious* in the rest of this article, and refer to the film character Claireece 'Precious' Jones as Precious without italics.

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