In all three of the three presentations we have heard this afternoon, the phenomenon that permits the articulation of moral panic, the phenomenon most readily translatable into the figure of social decay, emerges in relation to what, as figure, the notion of decay reverses: the idea of healthy development that constitutes the work of acculturation. The specter of decay or deterioration that each of these papers engages, responds, that is, to a temporal anxiety, which is also to say an anxiety about futurity, that implicitly recognizes a gap, a failure, a delinquency in developmental logics—a constitutive division that the informs the ideological position of the Child. This position, as I suggested yesterday by way of Derrida’s reading of Rousseau, identifies the Child as embodying, simultaneously, the allegedly salubrious vitality of the natural and the perversion or deficiency that calls for supplementation. The hypostatized threat to the social order to which moral panics respond thus emerges from the contradictions that inhere in the figure of “nature” itself—contradictions that have everything to do with the fact that nature can only ever emerge in its constitution as an entity through an act of positing whose principle remains excluded from what it posits. “The natural,” in other words, is destined to figure something resolutely cultural: the establishment, by means of a founding act of political ideology, of what, were it not itself the tautological exemplification of naturalizing ideology, we would have to call its ground.

Such a ground, then, is always a figure of will, a figure that attempts to construct what escapes the necessity of construction and so becomes the reference point for the analogies, which are also here anal logics, on which rests the separation of ground from figure, proper from improper, pure from impure, health from disease. This anal logic that produces the human as the site of political analogy takes the form of a constant negativity manifest by insistent separation, by the ceaseless imperative of an expulsion, a purgation, that would make possible social bonds. Politics, as Agamben has helped us to see, depends on these founding acts of exclusion by means of which politics separates itself from what he designates as bare life, separates itself from the life to which social meaning has been denied, the life reduced to its mere capacity to be eliminated without breaking the law. As in every anal logic, the stake is purification—but that purification of the political order, as Agamben notes in Homo Sacer, requires an originary state of exception, an untying of the political bond, a capacity for exceeding or refuting that bond, in order to establish it. Like Benjamin’s meditations on the asymmetry between the violence that institutes a political regime and the violence that maintains it, this suggests that the negativity by which the political establishes the natural as its ground is intended to efface the spasm or contraction of its negative and “unlawful” constitution. In this sense it speaks to the central aspect of figure as evoked by de Man: the promise of referential security that denies the violent catachresis inherent in its initial act of positing. The politics of figure thus denotes the ungrounded ground of every politics, the violence
that has to be taken for order, the zero that has to be turned into one, the rubbish or waste, the informing fatality, that must be reconfigured as value.

Though we could approach these ideas in different directions with regard to the papers we’ve heard today; the large questions raised might center on the place of art or the aesthetic in the positing of the natural, the complicity of figure in what de Man would describe as acts of dis-figuration, the function of the Humanities in the educational scheme of modern Western democracies, and the affective devastations that can follow the violent derealization of the figures that lend consistency to our lives in the social order. It is this last question that Mary Traester, for instance, engages in her take on *Far from Heaven*. Though focusing on Cathy’s separation from the cultural imperative of subservience to her children—a separation that has a crucial function in its elaboration of melodramatic subjectivity—Mary’s paper establishes the framework in which the question of political figure is engaged in all three presentations: the framework of a natural order riven by artifice from the outset. This, of course, follows from Haynes’ belated, even decadent, take on the already belated melodramas of the 50s directed by Douglas Sirk, most crucially his vision of female desire in *All that Heaven Allows*. But this cultural genealogy, this line of transmission that situates the film in the context of a cinematic self-reflection that determines the status of its referentiality, informs the film’s meditations on the sorts of relation to “nature” that might be read into Cathy’s and Frank’s awakenings to their sexual desires. The film, that is, does not denounce the puritanical constraints of 50s America in the name of a liberation of natural impulses from artificial constraints; it knows, instead, that those very constraints are imposed in the name of the natural. The hyper-reality that infects the images of the natural in the film, recalling Benjamin’s trope of cinematic vision as an orchid in the land of technology, insists on the inevitable reliance of nature precisely on its putative second hand representation, the image. When Mary writes “only nature or the organic unproblematically gestures beyond itself to a symbolic world of signification,” we need, perhaps, to understand the apparent contradiction of this utterance as suggesting that only in ideology can we imagine an unproblematic gesture that would be associated with the natural, and that such a gesture, paradoxically, leads us back to the order of signification. Mary rightly observes that Cathy’s lot is to be cut off from, violently separated from, the order of meaning that has shaped her existence and that the pathos of the film arises from the incompatibility of what she calls a “private sexual world” with “a communal form of universality.” But the film, as a melodrama, also makes clear that this experience of separation, of exclusion from a place that would confer recognition and agency, is precisely the universalizing claim of melodrama—that it constitutes its intimate public, as Lauren Berlant has shown, precisely by establishing a space of collective suffering through the recounted experience of exclusion from collectivity. In this sense the film, despite its knowing exposure of nature as figure, appeals to the reconstitution of a natural experience: but that natural experience is not the “truth” of a private sexual world so much as the truth of the suffering encountered through the tension between our investments as subjects in the figure of a politicized reality and the reality of the political encounter with the dissolution of those figures.
Something similar occurs in Lindsay Nelson’s account of Fukasaku’s *Battle Royale*. If Japanese society in the 90s experienced a panicked response to the modernization that threatened its idealized self-image in the children who invested with the fantasy of maintaining its traditions, that panic called forth gruesome images of children engaged in violence that manifest, in the process, the normative fantasy of doing violence to those children. What, after all, is education but the violence of culture against the condition of children—a violence intended to preserve the figure of the Child from the contradictions that it means to conceal. Precisely because no children can ever coincide fully with the Child, the normalized fantasy of violence against children can serve the logic of continually sublimating the Child. In Fukasaku’s film, as Lindsay observes, the instituted warfare that consigns groups of children to the status of killers to avoid being killed, raises the question of whether the film is satirizing or participating in the promulgation of such violence, a question whose either/or logic, as Lindsay’s paper implicitly recognizes, parallels the logic of separation or exclusion that moral panics enshrine. The eroticization of violence itself, the jouissance to which one gains access by imposing the law against jouissance, speaks to the excess, the inescapable remainder of the catachrestic violence at the origin of figural logic as such. It could never, then, be a question of accounting unitarily for the film’s relation to juvenile delinquency or the eroticization of children; it is rather a question of how the very framing of all such questions in the context of panics about cultural values belies the destabilizing violence, the unbound energy I spoke about yesterday, that is needed to impose those values by way of binding them, through figure, to an ideational content.

And that’s what Christian Hite points toward in his approach to Joyce’s “An Encounter,” a story whose very title broaches the encounter with the something unnameable, something that carries with it the threat of a destabilizing opening onto the Real. Rightly refusing to give this encounter the comforting stability of a name—refusing, that is, to immure it in stable form as “masturbation,” Christian offers us a chance to consider this encounter as a parallel to the textual encounter with the cultural detritus of pulp magazines. In doing so he allows us to think about the moral panics that Mary and Lindsay deftly chart for us in relation to the ongoing project of forming and reforming children. The threat of the nameless encounter, which constitutes, in its very formlessness, an encounter with the disfigurations of jouissance, finds its corollary in the encounter with the culturally valueless counterpart of socially validated literature. The vigor with which Father Butler denounces the magazines that Leo and the narrator enjoy institutes the hierarchical privilege of a *studium* that strips the cultural artifact of the *punctum*, the wildness, the vitality, the incomprehensible “yaka yaka yaka” that adheres to its native condition. Literature thus functions, one might say, as the colonization of language by value. But the question of value is inseparable here, as it is in *Far from Heaven* and *Battle Royale* as well, from the contradictions of a capitalism in which the value of value becomes “pure” value, gets stripped, that is, of all content in favor of the marketing, as natural, as an essentiality that denies its own contingency, of a value that only remains faithful to the value of a imposing *a discourse* of values. In “An Encounter” we see the conflict between an economy of literary culture organized against the penny dreadful and a counter-economy in which the penny dreadful returns us to the excess devalued in and as cultural production. We might similarly suggest that *Battle Royale*
poses against the institutional culture conferred on the child by the school the actuality of economic warfare for which the Humanities, however badly, intends to prepare those children. And isn’t the consumerism that permeates *Far from Heaven* a representation of the consensus, of the very medium of our social relations, that the film, even while it depicts it as a cultural imposition, finds itself relying on as the ground for its own aesthetic?

As we turn to the place of a foundational anti-social violence in each of these papers, then, we might think about the confluence of the linguistic positing whose violence institutes the social and capitalism as the name for the structure that makes a profit on negativity. With that in mind, I’d like to ask each of the panelists to begin by thinking about how the natural might enter into the politics of figure anatomized in her or his work and how that politics is inflected or determined by its determining relation to capitalized value, a value that turns the child, at last, into nothing but human capital that solicits our affect to make us take literally the catachreses that we are.