Hysteria and Ruin: Feminine Immobility
And the Problem of Representation in Todd Haynes’s *Far from Heaven*

Melodramas such as Todd Haynes’s *Far from Heaven* engage with a politics that creates its vision of the future by way of disenchantment with the past. This politics involves an exploration of socially redemptive possibilities other than that of the reproduction of children, offering different directions love can take, none of which culminate in new life or signs of future fecundity. In the turn Haynes’s film marks from American Transcendentalist notions of the baptismal or birthing capacity of nature, what we witness here instead is the association of nature with death. It is significant that the film opens on a shot of a vivid orange, but closes on a branch of pallid white blossoms. While in the rising action of the film desire is represented as both sexual and social, this ending refuses to close on an image of either coupling or restored commitment to the community. Instead, winter arrives to enforce isolation, and to displace the sunny phrase that encapsulates the ultimate conservative desire for unity, that “happily ever after.”

But where nature’s regenerative possibilities have traditionally been mythologized as feminine, it would appear that feminine possibilities, associated here with childbirth, are also to some extent curtailed by this program of disenchantment. Can this be said when it is the disenchantment with the future that is enacted? How do the stakes change as the horizon is projected forward into the future? This paper takes up these questions with Lee Edelman’s *No Future* as a horizon in order to better understand the possibilities – whether of mourning or *jouissance* – that await this body politic.
As it emerges from its nineteenth-century predecessors, modern melodrama consistently identifies with the unhappy ending, with mourning and melancholia, by way of its emphasis on separation. This separation is stylistic, aesthetic, enacted in both space and time, and finally involves a loss of the baptismal or birthing capacity of nature, both of which have been traditionally feminized by way of the “mythic association of women’s creative powers with water and its powers of birth and miraculous revival” (Rowe 213). One of the most striking images in Haynes’s film that drains away the oceanic sublime occurs poolside, as Frank and Cathy Whitaker sunbathe during their vacation to Miami. A small African American boy comes running onto the otherwise white scene and proceeds to put his feet in “their” pool. His shouting father is unable to avert disaster, but quickly removes the boy and reminds him of his place. The most disturbing aspect of this scene is the white reaction; parents quickly pull children out of the water and to their sides as though protecting them from contagion. The camera lingers on the emptied pool lightly ruffled by the wind as if to demonstrate the emptied possibility offered by such exclusion. The purgative or purifying force of water is itself rendered poison by the insidious racism enacted at its edge; the possibilities of communion are foreclosed for discriminator and discriminated alike.

What melodrama depicts as its truth is not cathartic communion, but a continual fall from grace, or a fall from what Peter Brooks in his study of nineteenth-century stage melodrama calls the “traditional Sacred” (14). The loss of the body’s ability to make the transfer from an isolated position of subjectivity to a position of universality can be seen by way of contrast to the transcendentalism of the late nineteenth century in the United States. In this form of Romanticism, immersion is the key to conclusion; the body is
immersed in a larger, usually natural, whole, thereby resolving individual uncertainty.\(^1\)

While it might initially be suggestive to compare the endings of Edna Pontellier in Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Cathy Whitaker, Cathy, unlike Edna, is clearly not returned to the full sensuousness of nature at the end of *Far from Heaven*. For Edna: “The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (Chopin 109). Cathy meanwhile, after a final salute from her love interest at the train station, drives off under an iron sky in a blue wagon. The camera has to pan up in an artificial change of perspective to even afford a glimpse of the white unbeckoning blossoms in the scene’s final shot. Unlike the riotous oil-painted leaves with which the film began, there is no profusion of color that would substitute imaginative for bodily immersion here; the film ends with a distinctly metallic taste.

As the world behind the Technicolor images quickly sickens in this film, it might be possible to see in that simply a turn against nature being played out in a shift from an American Romantic view of untrammeled nature, to a more modern view of steam-driven change. But the victims of the film in *Far from Heaven* are all too human; the scenes of the most extreme violence are all enacted on bodies, not landscapes. Frank, Cathy’s husband, is caught up in the lines of sickness and health as he berates himself for his homosexuality; his effort to return to a “normal life” is shown to be undertaken under such pressure that it erupts in a nasty blow to his wife’s face. This aggressive act tends to obscure Frank’s own victimization in the film. The scene of the most extreme violence to a body, the long chase and stoning of Raymond’s daughter Sarah, occurs after a seemingly urbane afternoon at the museum. In the blows of the hand and rocks against cheek and temple, both the noise and pain are palpable. Yet, both of these acts are left

\(^1\) See Rowe, 202.
unredeemed. What leads to such an uncertain ending in Haynes’s *Far from Heaven* is this: the film seeks therapy for its characters and silently watching audience not by suggesting new objects, figures, or a new world in which to become invested, but by disenchantedment, which happens to be the same kind of aversion treatment Dr. Bauman offers Frank to “cure” his homosexuality.

Although there is loss of the object of attachment, which for Freud in “Mourning and Melancholia” would be the loved person or else an abstraction such as country, liberty, or ideal, (243) the subject does not likewise abandon its own embodiment in melodrama. It therefore remains not only site of possible future attachment, eruption of desire, fantasy, but also a potential source or carrier of meaning. The body in melodrama is not rendered or read as a letter, but continues to act figuratively, metaphorically. For Brooks the melodramatic body is read primarily through gesture. He writes: “Things cease to be merely themselves, gestures cease to be merely tokens of social intercourse whose meaning is assigned by a social code; they become the vehicles of metaphor whose tenor suggests another kind of reality” (Brooks 9). Personification becomes the primary mediation between the empirical world and a moral world. In *Far from Heaven* the interest in personifying the social structure can be seen in the figures of Mr. and Mrs. Magnatech, the honorary titles bestowed on Mr. and Mrs. Frank Whitaker. What is striking in the case of the symbolic, or fantasy-laden realm to which this pair refers is its insistent vacuousness. The audience is asked to flinch in response to Frank’s snide response to Dick’s appreciation of his wife’s beauty: “It’s all smoke and mirrors, fellas.

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2 It is possible to draw the dissimilarity between the tragic and melodramatic ending, where the tragic would conclude with “purification” or “purification,” possibly an avenging act, and a return to good health by way of discharging “dangerous” emotion.

3 And here I would insist upon the figurative quality of personification by means of literal bodies rather than the *personalization* Peter Brooks describes to map the same process.
That’s all it is. You should see her without her face on.” But in a sense the audience agrees, knowing that there is nothing behind the photograph of Mr. and Mrs. Magnatech; there is no corresponding life behind the front of their holiday party, of their kiss goodbye in the morning. Cathy makes a consistent effort to put a good face on things, as she must, given the social constraints, even as the entire edifice is read as false. Her world is full of empty terms, private secrets that defy communication rather than aid in expression. As she says, “Our entire lives just shut in the dark.” Where the bonds between them are read as inauthentic, these gestures fail to mean or to take on meaning to a larger society, and bodies stand rudely exposed.4

The uncomfortable remainder of the body, its inability to mean, is often described in melodrama in terms of repressed access to expression. Female hysteria, for example, has been pathologized in terms of an inability to access the discourse of desire. But where the object of desire is presumed lost, and where the discourse would likely be that of mourning if expressed, another interpretation might be that the feminine lacks access not to mourning, but to its opposite, mania. In “Mourning and Melancholia” Freud provides alcoholic intoxication as an instance of this economy (254). In Far from Heaven, alcohol at once propels Frank’s escape from the prevailing social order, provides a means of connection with potential romantic partners, and also helps him express his internal rage by pushing it to the fore at the holiday party.

Frank’s “own adoring wife” Cathy is meanwhile caught on camera, in type, or by malicious tongue-wagging each time she attempts to step in the direction of her own inclinations, or express any of her own thoughts or feelings. In Cathy’s case alcohol

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4 This reading would work equally for Fassbinder’s Ali: Fear Eats the Soul, another take on Sirk’s original. Here the body is constantly revealed as the awkward subject of a prurient – and condemning – audience’s gaze.
merely reinforces the status quo. After they discuss her write-up in the Gazette, the laughing group of her female friends sits down to a slightly tipsy lunch. But with nothing stronger than daiquiris to urge them on, the veil of propriety remains fixed in place; the sexual innuendo of the scene is limited, and only tends towards the sanctioned life of the married bedroom. In the face of relief that comes in girlish giggles, Cathy is unable to reveal her dissatisfaction with her sexual relationship with her husband, or otherwise “act out.” In her transfixion, her objectification by these means, the woman is rendered a living monument, a false front to psychic ruin, and as such she is left behind.5

In Haynes’s melodrama bodies point toward the inscription of meaning in a private sexual world rather than in a communal form of universality. The breakdown of the idea of history as distant and objective corresponding to a view of nature as a mythical or organic whole, to the view that it is instead deeply personal, predicated on individual subjectivity, creates extreme pressures on bodies generally, genderlessly, wherever they are being asked to stand for something else, something that has already been revealed as empty. And future possibilities are sharply curtailed: Far from Heaven ends without successfully transitioning to the next generation, to a changed world. The line of influence from parent to child is broken visually as in her haste to see Raymond off at the train station, Cathy leaves her children in the car, also leaving thereby a different image of herself, different from that of the self-sacrificing mother willing to abandon her own happiness for her children’s sake. As Raymond withdraws with his

5 This leave-taking is apparent in the topos of the departing train that recurs in the female melodrama, reinforcing along its sequential path both the relative fixity of the natural world, and the fixity of the woman left behind.
daughter in hopes of a better life in Baltimore, as her husband settles down with his new love, Cathy remains stationary on the platform in Connecticut.

In the case of the mother, a turn against the body involves a turn against her own flesh, which includes not only her person, but also her children. But in claiming that the body is hysterical or ruined, that it cannot gesture beyond itself to a communal, universal world, I return to the thought that only nature or the organic unproblematically gestures beyond itself to a symbolic world of signification. Does this film foreclose the possibility of reading the body like a letter rather than like a sign? Is achieving a “diasporic consciousness,” (Modleski 68) or the potential to move across borders by way of an expanded view of subjective capabilities impossible to achieve in this film, where possibilities are strictly tied to Earth? If the condition of diaspora is groundlessness, and if representation continues to descend on various spaces, the space of nature, the female body or womb, can these ever entirely be left behind without harm to some of its subjects (perhaps the mothers)?

Haynes’s film ends without either social or sexual consummation that would appear to be the world to which the body continuously gestures. The evils of the world depicted by Haynes’s melodrama are primarily social problems: the repression of female sexuality, the strict borders raised between races, the view that homosexuality is a disease that requires cure. Each problem is presented as the result of a division enacted between worlds, an effect that is heightened by Haynes’s stylistic treatment, but is ultimately unresolved in the film’s terms, or in any cathartic bathing at the film’s end. Instead, racial tension is diffused by a reinforcement of spatial separation, sexual tension is diffused by

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6 I also have in mind Sylvia Plath, who demonstrates a tough umbilical link with her children in Ariel. Her impulse toward suicide in “Edge” involves folding “Them back into her body as petals/Of a rose close when the garden/Stiffens and odors bleed/From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.”
separating a couple – and removing the presumably successful homosexual relationship from the camera’s view well before the film ends – Cathy and her friend Eleanor part estranged, and the unease of this society in general is blanketed by the coming winter. Without the possibility of attachment to objects, or appeal to higher power, “feelings” fly as remotely as that lilac scarf that cannot really be caught in *Far from Heaven.*

If the fantasy was that an argument about the future could be transported to a past genre, the experiment reveals a few inconsistencies. First, the subject in melodrama resists being read as a substance without substance, as the endlessly deferred “fixation of the drive that determines its jouissance” (Edelman 36). Second, what of the child? If characters in melodrama are consistently returned from any fantasy of the future to a present full of struggle, if the reproductive line is severed where it would seem best to start, does the child hold out any real promise? Despite the surface differences in this meeting between worlds, is it possible to agree that in both the body becomes a ruin, sterile, and that the body or human subjectivity in any guise as a topos of representation must be discarded?
Works Cited


