FROM BUDDY FILM TO BROMANCE: MASCULINITY AND MALE MELODRAMA SINCE 1969

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ABSTRACT

Men’s tears are considered rare, and women’s tears are considered profusive. Thus, we tend to think of tearjerkers and melodrama as the province of weepy women viewers. However, if we look back at the last several decades of Hollywood filmmaking, melodramas focused on men—or “male weepies”—have been a steady staple of American cinema. This dissertation explores cycles of male melodramas since 1969, placing them in their socio-historical contexts and examining the ways that they participate in public discourses about men, masculinity, and gender roles. Melodrama’s focus on victims, bids for virtue, and idealizations of not how things are, but how they should be, have made it a fitting and flexible mode for responding to the changing social landscape of America since the rights movements of the 1960s. Specifically, these films consider both the ways that white capitalist patriarchy has circumscribed the public and private lives of men and the ways that advancements of women and racial minorities are impacting (white) men’s lives.

This study analyzes the rhetorical effects of these films through both textual evidence and popular reception. Chapters are organized by chronology and subgenre, discussing buddy films of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Midnight Cowboy, The Last Detail, and Scarecrow), paternal melodramas of the late 1970s and early 1980s (The Great Santini, Kramer vs. Kramer, and Table for Five), films of sensitive men in the early 1990s (The Prince of Tides, Regarding Henry, and Philadelphia), and black male weepies from the 1990s and 2000s (Boyz in the Hood, Antwone Fisher, John Q, and The Pursuit of Happyness). The epilogue also considers the developing genre of the bromance, a hybrid of melodrama and comedy. By classifying and analyzing these films
as male melodramas, this dissertation challenges both the popular denigrating view that tearjerkers are “chick flicks,” and the continued gender bifurcation within film studies’ work on melodrama as a narrative mode, which tends to treat weepies as a female form of melodrama and action films as a male form of melodrama. While individual subgenres have received some critical attention, this dissertation is one of the first works to look at male weepies collectively. Putting the spotlight on male weepies reveals Hollywood’s interest in gender and the emotional lives of men, though the films display a mix of progressive and conservative strains, often common in Hollywood filmmaking. Specifically, these weepies tend to question and often even reject traditional masculine ideals, and thus exhibit some forms of gender “liberation”; at the same time that they show men suffering under patriarchy and even the pressure to be powerful, these films also shore that power up for men by never forfeiting it. As such, these films reveal the dangers of Hollywood “doing” gender critique: however inadvertently, they contain feminist, anti-racist, and anti-homophobic challenges and re-inscribe the various privileges of characters (in terms of gender, race, sexuality, and often class). However, the films also dramatize the ability of people to change and to empathize with others, and often invite the viewer to do so, even across gender and racial lines. In this way, male melodramas reveal a complex response to social changes; they are marked by an interest in men changing and a more equitable society, even as fully giving up privilege seems difficult.
To my father, William Woodworth, who cries talking about Cole Porter and old friends, and to my husband, Joe Samuel Starnes, who cries listening to sad country songs.
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The part of me that believes every experience, decision, and circumstance shapes who we are and where we end up is tempted to acknowledge every teacher, friend, employer, and relative who may have impacted me and thus helped me arrive at a complete dissertation. Doing so, however, would detract from the truest thanks I’d like to give to those that made the actual process—and product!—possible.

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Over the past three years, which also have been my most intense period of dissertating, I have been teaching full-time in the Department of Writing Arts at Rowan University in southern New Jersey. It is here that I have found a home amongst other over-extended, but enthusiastic teachers and scholars who share my desire to “do it all”—teaching, researching, writing, serving, parenting, talking, and laughing. While all of the bonds I have formed there sustain me, I am especially grateful to my chairs, Sandy Tweedie and Jeff Maxson, and the coordinator of First-Year Writing, Erin Herberg, who all have encouraged me, mentored me, and accommodated my crazy life as best they can.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

When male public figures cry, it makes the news. General Schwarzkopf, Michael Jordan, Brett Favre, and Barack Obama are among the many men who have generated whole new stories just for shedding a tear. Like the yeti, male tears are considered elusive and rare, with each new occurrence treated as if it is the first. A 2002 article on male viewers crying during the film Antwone Fisher appeared under the header “Sightings,” as if witness testimony was being offered for the phenomenon. Perhaps because male tears are believed to be so rare, they also are highly valued, like precious stones, and the men who shed them are often ennobled by them, if they weep properly. The belief in this rarity is one reason, perhaps, why our recognition of their cinematic equivalent has been so fragmented. Tearjerkers are popularly thought of as “women’s films” or “chick flicks,” and we imagine these women-oriented “weepies” as so abundant that they are low in their own comparative cultural value. Whether by contemporary film reviewers or later academic critics looking back over film history, male melodramas or “male weepies” have been treated as anomalies, if they are a unique and discrete occurrence.

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For example, in a 1991 piece of zeitgeist journalism, Los Angeles Times film critic Peter Rainer announced the arrival of “a newly minted genre for the post-yuppie era,” the “male weepie.”\(^4\) Like Rainer, a number of academic scholars have treated the early 1990s as a unique period of “male sensitivity” in Hollywood embodied in the “new” genre of male melodrama.\(^5\) Yet the character of the “sensitive man” and a genre of “the male weepie” or “male melodrama” have existed long before the ‘90s. Most notably, “the male weepie” has received substantial attention from a different set of critics as a unique subcategory of the “family melodrama” of the 1950s in an earlier body of criticism on melodrama.\(^6\) But between these two periods, the male melodrama hardly disappears; it just has not been recognized as such. One reason for this misrecognition is the association of the period—the 1960s through the 1980s, often referred to as New Hollywood—with a new generation of male auteurs, with “a presumably realist sphere of masculine action,” and with a dearth of the male melodrama’s more frequently studied

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\(^5\) For instance, Joy van Fuqua in “‘Can You Feel It Joe?’ Male Melodrama and the Feeling Man,” Velvet Light Trap 38 (1996): 28-38, and Fred Pfeil in White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination and Difference (New York: Verso, 1995). The term “male weepie” has been used interchangeably with “male melodrama.” While I also use these terms interchangeably in many moments in this dissertation, I will use the more precise term melodrama when I am concerned with melodrama as a mode, a mode that works as a narrative form of “problem-solving” that the concept of “weepie” does not quite capture. I will elaborate on melodrama as a mode later in this introduction.

female counterpart, the woman’s film. Some of the earliest scholars of melodrama saw the genre as about emotion rather than action, and since male characters in New Hollywood typically are peripatetic rather than confined to a domestic space, that period of filmmaking appeared to be bankrupt of male melodrama. But if we consider melodrama to be more of a sensibility than an aesthetic, we can see that male melodramas have been produced with regularity since the 1950s. Music, color, close-ups: these do not define melodrama so much as “a high quotient of pathos” and a sympathetic hero that is also a victim.

What I will argue in this dissertation is that male weepies are actually business-as-usual for Hollywood. A simple definition of “male melodrama” will reveal how common and flexible the genre can be. To create a working definition untethered to a specific period of time, and to help show that tearjerkers are not just about and for women, I will swap out the gender from Jeanine Basinger’s definition of the woman’s film, which has been treated as synonymous with women’s melodramas: “A [male melodrama] is a movie that places at the center of its universe a [male] who is trying to deal with the emotional, social, and psychological problems that are specifically connected to the fact that [he] is a [man].”

Put this way, we can see that films from Rebel Without a Cause (1955) to The  

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7 Linda Williams, “Melodrama Revised,” in Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1998), 50. Here, Williams discusses the historical “pat division” of realism as masculine, melodrama as feminine.


Deer Hunter (1978) to Gran Torino (2008) can be understood as male melodramas. Our ability to see this has been hampered both by the association between melodrama and women’s films and by the elevation of stories about men to “universal” stories, which render them unmarked by gender. Indeed, Tania Modleski has recently argued that the warm critical reception of Clint Eastwood’s films, for example, reveals the way that male melodramas have greater cultural value and usually are given a more respectable generic label than a “weepie,” which is reserved for seemingly baser films, usually about women. But at least until recently, the association between weepies and women’s films was somewhat encouraged by the body of feminist scholarship that grew in the 1970s and 1980s recovering “the woman’s film” as a site of female subjectivity within classical Hollywood filmmaking. This feminist interest in the woman’s film’s intersection with melodrama was followed by a boundary dispute over the term “melodrama” in academia.

Considered synonymous with the woman’s film for decades by feminist film scholars, melodrama has been reclaimed by several historicist film scholars (most vocally by Steve Neale) as an industrial term meant to connote “male” appeal through sensational action and thrills rather than emotions. Neale also notes that many women’s films from the classical period were labeled “dramas” rather than melodramas, leading him to chide feminist critics for using the term incorrectly. Neale is correct that the term melodrama,


or the slangier “meller,” was used within the trade to describe films that were sensational, tense, or thrilling, and I would add that “tearjerker” (or references to tears, sobs, or handkerchiefs) appears to be the most common way trade publications marked a film as a weepie. However, my own reading of Variety’s film reviews (which Neale also heavily relies on for his claims) reveals that they tend to be unconcerned with placing films in generic categories; rather, they are far more likely to try to just describe a film in terms of their effects (whether they are “heart-warming” or “moving”) and whether or not it will have box office appeal. There was not a consistent attempt in the industry to categorize films by genre. As Janet Staiger has pointed out, Hollywood historically has been less concerned with producing “pure” genres and more concerned with reaching the largest possible audience—often with two or more plot-lines—which perhaps accounts for why Variety doesn’t think in terms of genre.\textsuperscript{13} While there likely have been screenwriters, directors, and producers who understood themselves as working in a particular genre, genres are more so the concern of critics, as they need to discuss films as groups. In defense of feminist critics’ use of the word melodrama, Rick Altman argues that critics have the right to recognize and create genres in the effort to group films together to study patterns and themes of cultural interest.\textsuperscript{14} As I will discuss below, male melodrama can be found across a variety of genres, from war films to sports films to road movies. This may be why British film critic Raymond Durgnat, perhaps the first person to use the term

\textsuperscript{13} Janet Staiger, “Hybrid or Inbred: The Purity Hypothesis and Hollywood Genre History,” in \textit{Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception} (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 61-76. Staiger usefully notes the alternative ways that studios organized their projects, often group them by stars or very broad terms like “sophisticated stories” or “sad stories.” See Ibid., 68.

“male weepie,” believed that male weepies were presented in disguise, such as in Hollywood male adventure films or Italian neo-realist films.

While Neale’s research into the use of the term melodrama within the industry to describe sensational and thrilling films provided a valuable discovery, claiming that those “male” action-oriented films are the “real” melodramas endangers the productive discussions that have emerged from the work on melodrama as a mode. It strikes me that male melodramas that do appeal through emotions could challenge and complicate this skirmish over the term melodrama, much as Christine Gledhill’s and Linda Williams’s work already has. Gledhill and Williams have tried to reconcile this rivalry by placing male action films and the woman’s film on a shared family tree; they do this by theorizing melodrama as a transgeneric mode rather than a genre, a mode that can include both Stella Dallas (1937) and Dirty Harry (1971). What still needs to be amended, however, is the bifurcation of melodrama that makes “weepy” melodrama into the province of women and spectacular action films and other (purportedly) “non-weepy” melodrama into the province of men; this bifurcation essentializes gender and marginalizes films that do not fit this binary, particularly the male melodrama. Like the scholarship on men and sentimentalism in literature that eventually followed studies on

15 While a genre refers to a group of texts that share a specific set of characteristics (iconography, archetypal characters, setting, plot), a mode is a more general sensibility that can inform a wide variety of texts and genres. In this way, melodrama as a mode refers to “a broad category moving pictures that move us to pathos for protagonists beset by forces more powerful than they and who are perceived as victims” (Williams, “Melodrama Revised,” 42). As a mode, then, melodrama is found in a wide variety of genres, from war and action films like Rambo: First Blood, to courtroom dramas like A Time to Kill, to women’s films like The Color Purple.

16 I say purportedly because some action-oriented films could also be tearjerkers; Shane would be a good example.
sentimental women writers,\textsuperscript{17} male melodrama is ready for sustained attention within film studies.\textsuperscript{18}

What I hope to accomplish here is to establish that the male melodramas that critics occasionally spot are not anomalies. Rather, films focused on men’s emotional lives and relationships to others have been produced fairly steadily throughout Hollywood history, particularly since the women’s liberation movement beginning in the late 1960s. At the same time that traditional masculinity came into question during the 1960s, not just from feminist criticism, but also from the challenges of the New Left and other rights movements, male melodramas as a genre became a space for exploring what it means to be a man. Seeing this genre work as ongoing rather than limited to one moment in time also helps to nuance the idea of a “crisis” in masculinity. As Michael Kimmel has suggested, masculinity is always in crisis;\textsuperscript{19} part of its very nature is that it is not natural, no man (or woman) simply has it. Reminiscent of Judith Butler’s theorizing gender as a performance,\textsuperscript{20} Kimmel argues that masculinity must repeatedly be performed and also confirmed by other men, making it externally dependent. Male melodramas, in


\textsuperscript{18}Tania Modleski currently is working on a book on male weepies, which will be the first on this subject, and already has published an article “Clint Eastwood and Male Weepies” and presented a conference paper on the film \textit{I Love You, Man} on a panel that I co-chaired for the national conference of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies in 2013. I will discuss this work elsewhere in this dissertation.


many ways, are aware of this delicate state of masculinity, and their negotiations with masculinity generally reflect the shifting discourses around gender that are the context of their production.

As a feminist, I am interested in male melodramas not simply because they help to denaturalize masculinity, but because they also help to tell the story of Hollywood’s response to second wave feminism. “New Hollywood” has been characterized as having ignored the feminism that is its cultural context; yet this, to me, also seems slightly inaccurate. Molly Haskell has made several astute observations about this period in her book *From Reverence to Rape* that have gone virtually ignored by scholars—that the buddy film displaces heterosexual romance (one of the major plots of the woman’s film) and that both of the best feminist roles have belonged to Dustin Hoffman in *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979) and *Tootsie* (1982). 21 Many of these buddy films and father-oriented films such as *Kramer vs. Kramer* could be understood as male melodramas, as they depict virtuous male suffering and foreground domestic relationships. Not only does the male melodrama have a fuller history in Hollywood filmmaking than previously believed, but it is potentially a kind of response from Hollywood to feminism.

If melodrama’s mode is a restaging of innocence and a bid for defining virtue, how then is male melodrama a suitable genre for responding to feminism? And given the longer generic history of female melodrama (the woman’s film) in classical Hollywood, how might the male melodrama’s evolution in the wake of second wave feminism constitute not only a response, but potentially an appropriation? Assuming that male

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melodrama has a female audience as well as a male one, how does male melodrama “speak” to women through a genre long associated with women: is the relationship one of empathy and coalition-building, or is it one of colonization and control? Even if male melodrama operates under the banner of “male feminism”—and indeed, its sociohistorical context is not simply feminism, but “male liberation”—what are the dangers of feminism’s representation through men? The same year Rainer wrote on male weepies, Tania Modleski published *Feminism Without Women*, a large-scale warning that “however much male subjectivity may currently be ‘in crisis,’ as certain optimistic feminists are now declaring, we need to consider the extent to which male power is actually consolidated through cycles of crisis and resolution, whereby men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it.”  

If, then, the male melodrama depicts crises in male subjectivity and asserts a form of male feminism, feminists ought to be skeptical of the genre before embracing it as a gesture toward gender equality.

This dissertation will study subgenres of the male melodrama as they appear in discrete cycles from 1969 through the present and how the genre negotiates new male subjectivities in this period of tensions and shifts in gender relations in both the private and the public spheres. I choose to begin here rather than the 1950s partly because that cycle has already received critical attention, but also because that cycle is less directly engaged with feminism.  

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23 The male weepies from this period tend to support traditional masculine ideals; *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) is exemplary in the son’s desire for a more virile father, a virility that would be achieved by giving his emasculating mother a good slapping. Some of the 1950s women’s melodramas, however, seem prescient of Betty Friedan’s work *The Feminine Mystique* in terms of the middle-class housewife’s dissatisfaction with her own gender role and society’s mores, such as *All That Heaven Allows* (1956).
those that have “male feminism” and men’s movements as a sociohistorical context. I will approach these films as melodramas, working with the analytic of melodrama as mode as theorized by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams. My analysis will be historical and textual, particularly in terms of how the films engage with contemporary discourses around gender, and I will study the films’ receptions via trade publications and film reviews to see how these films have been understood by viewers.

The first chapter, “Playing House on the Road: Buddy Films of the Late 1960s and Early 1970s,” focuses on the subgenre of the buddy film, which was one of if not the most popular genres of that time period as it built on the success of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969). Specifically, I will examine Midnight Cowboy (1969), The Last Detail (1973), and Scarecrow (1973). Though these films are picaresque stories and depict plenty of boyish antics and banter, they also dramatize the emotional growth of characters. Frequently coming from the fringe of society, the men let down their rough exteriors to form intimate bonds with other men, to the point where the men could be understood as couples. Like so many melodramas, the men’s love is thwarted by tragic circumstances, such as death, disease, or imprisonment. Most interesting about this period of Hollywood filmmaking is that it often is described as having ignored the women’s movement, which was not only well in the public eye, but also was challenging sexism within the entertainment industry. Regardless of the films’ own silence, critics at the time saw the films as having a stake in the gender liberation of both men and women.

While many have read the marginalization of women in favor of male homosocial

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relationships of these films as a punishment for feminism, I argue that they explore men’s potential for emotional intimacy in ways that ultimately constitute a useful turn away from dominant masculinity. As the men learn to be better caretakers and companions with one another outside of traditional family structures, they eventually shift their love and care toward children in the next cycle of male melodramas.

Chapter 2, “Daddy Dearest: The New Father of Paternal Melodramas of the Late 1970s and Early 1980s,” picks up where the previous chapter leaves off. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, another significant cycle of melodrama appears, this time, the paternal melodrama. This cycle both challenges patriarchal fathers as antiquated and unacceptable masculine figures that oppress their children (particularly their sons) and celebrates a new kind of father, one that is nurturing and active in their children’s lives. As an example of the former, I will examine The Great Santini (1979), and as examples of the latter, I will examine Kramer vs. Kramer (1979) and Table for Five (1983). One noteworthy change from the buddy film to the paternal melodrama is that this next cycle often explicitly invokes feminism, often using a woman’s need to discover herself as a plot device for removing her from the home so that the father has the opportunity to evolve, even if not willingly at first. While these films have been criticized for pushing mothers out of the picture and potentially suggesting that mothers are “obsolete,” the men’s virtuous suffering as parents contains the more radical potential to earn childcare the respect it deserves as actual labor, even if performed out of love. These films simultaneously respond to demands for greater equity in domestic labor within heterosexual households, many men’s own desires to be active parents, and the negative media attention to deadbeat dads. Many critics have been quick to point out that the
number of single fathers in Hollywood films during this period is disproportionate to the number of single fathers vs. single mothers in reality, but as melodramas, these might be more usefully viewed as fantasies of what kinds of better fathers men could or already were becoming.

In Chapter 3, “Trauma and Transformation: The Politics of the New Man in the 1990s,” I examine the next major cycle of male melodramas, the melodramas of New Men from the early 1990s. If the early 1970s focuses on male friendships, and then the early 1980s on fathers and children, the early 1990s represents almost a final stage of men’s capacity for emotional intimacy with others: they become good romantic partners for women and even better friends for men of other races and sexual orientations than themselves. I start by looking at two films about white men from 1991, The Prince of Tides and Regarding Henry, which depict the men as wounded or traumatized and in need of reconstitution by their social Others (women and minorities). Most controversial is the suggestion of these films that if the men start out “bad,” it’s not really their fault; they have been socialized to be cold, competitive stoics and need Others to guide them into discovering the warm, good, virtuous man inside of themselves. In so doing, social change becomes individual rather than structural, and the focus on white, heterosexual, and usually middle class men’s “oppression” neglects the ongoing unequal distribution of power in the U. S. In the last third of the chapter, however, I shift to the film Philadelphia (1993), whose dual male protagonists include a gay man and a black man. While the film is largely about AIDS and contemporary fears of the disease, I see the narrative of the black male lawyer unlearning his homophobia and developing empathy for a dying gay man as an example of the way that personal change could in fact be an
integral part of political change. Winning court cases and changing laws is not enough to create an accepting and equal society; people’s consciousness must be raised and changed as well. In this way, Philadelphia’s take on “the personal is the political” suggests that other male weepies that dramatize personal growth might have greater value that they seem at first.

Finally, in Chapter 4, “From ‘Boyz’ to Dads: New Masculine Ideals in Black Male Melodramas,” I abandon the chronological structure of the first three chapters to concentrate on male melodramas about black men. The majority of male weepies are about white men—though of course interracial buddy films have been significant to the genre, including The Last Detail, which I discuss in Chapter 2—and no “cycle” per se of weepies centered on black men appears at a specific moment in time. Rather, the conventions of male melodrama get taken up and reworked to suit the more specific issues tied to black masculinities during the period since the Black Power movements. In particular, black men have been plagued by stereotypes of them as inadequate fathers, and they have struggled with redefining masculine ideals that both challenge white supremacy and white America’s preference for an “Uncle Tom” figure and that prove sustainable in a culture that has indulged in and even encouraged the kind of “thug” mentalities that endanger the lives of young black men. While all male weepies evince a mix of conservative and progressive strains, black male weepies have an additional burden of fighting negative stereotypes when there is no one way of doing so that pleases the various stakeholders in such representations. Because race and gender intersect, and the experiences of men of color are not the same as white men, I am choosing to examine how male melodramas have been taken up as a space to explore and validate black
masculinities and manhood in their own chapter; I see this chapter as giving critical attention to an understudied set of films in the canon of male melodrama. The films I will examine are *Boyz in the Hood* (1991), *Antwone Fisher* (2002), *John Q* (2002), and *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006). The years of production here reveal how these films are scattered over time, which may partially account for the minimal attention they have received.25

A few words on melodrama: as I have suggested already, melodrama has been understood as both a genre and as a transgeneric mode. When we treat melodrama as a genre, we are really looking at a tree in a forest. As I described early, within film studies “melodrama” has been used to refer to the family melodramas of the 1950s (particularly the films of Douglas Sirk and Vincent Minnelli), the woman’s film from the classical period (such as *Stella Dallas* or *Now, Voyager*), and even “men’s” thrillers for those examining the use of the term in trade publications. The shift to viewing melodrama as a mode, or a way of viewing the world, has been useful for seeing the extent to which American literature, theater, and film has used the narrative arts as a stage upon which to challenge injustices and argue for a different, ideal world. Melodramas are less about how things are and more about how things should be, or more precisely, they dramatize the difference. It is a place for the persecuted and downtrodden to be revealed as innocent, pure, or deserving of the same dignity and rights as others. Perhaps it is no surprise then that as various groups of men, such as straight white men or fathers of various races, have been villainized in U. S. culture as Angry White Men, deadbeat dads,

25 A few critics have examined one or two of these films: Stella Bruzzi discusses *Boyz in the Hood* in her book *Bringing Up Daddy: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Postwar Hollywood* (London: British Film Institute, 2005), and Donna Peberdy discusses *John Q* and *The Pursuit of Happyness* in her book *Masculinity and Film Performance: Male Angst in Contemporary American Cinema* (New York: Palgrave, 2011).
etc. that melodrama proved useful as a genre that could redeem them. Portraying men as victims—of masculine ideals, of modern culture, of feminism—has not always sat well with many critics, particularly when these men are white, as at these bids for attention seem to distract from the real problems of truly marginalized groups. However, in depicting not how things are, but how things could be, melodramas have the imaginative power to show how men and masculinities might evolve in the post-rights era into a new millennium. While I agree with Modleski that we need to think critically and approach with caution films where men change, we also need to recognize the ways that men are trying and have tried to form alliances with their various Others and to change in a meaningful way.
CHAPTER 2

PLAYING HOUSE ON THE ROAD: BUDDY FILMS OF THE LATE 1960s AND EARLY 1970s

Film historians generally agree that the 1970s represent a decade of mainstream filmmaking largely about the problems of men, which seems striking given that the women’s movement was a force of change in so many other areas of U.S. life and culture. As Peter Lev, for one, points out, “surprisingly little of [the public debate around women’s rights and roles] found its ways to the Hollywood film industry” in the 1970s.26 While there were some films about women’s autonomy (e.g., Klute, Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore, An Unmarried Women) made by both male and female directors, these shrink in comparison to the significant output of male-centered films, particularly those focused on male friendships, which we could call buddy films. The buddy film was not a new genre; certainly, there had been films focused on male friendship throughout the classical Hollywood period. But the sheer volume of those appearing between the years of 1969 and 1974 was unprecedented. A hardly exhaustive list of these would include The Wild Bunch, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Midnight Cowboy, Carnal Knowledge, Deliverance, Papillon, The Sting, Bang the Drum Slowly, Mean Streets, Scarecrow, The Last Detail, California Split, and Thunderbolt and Lightfoot.

It is tempting to account for this male dominance in film narratives as simply a natural effect of a male-dominated industry and a largely young and male film audience.27

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27 By the mid-1970s, seventy-six percent of cinema-goers were under thirty years of age. John Belton, American Cinema/American Culture (New York: McGraw/Hill, 1993), 290. According to Peter
The period of U. S. commercial filmmaking from 1967-1976, often called the New Hollywood or the Hollywood Renaissance, is typically associated with the final dissolution of the old studio system, the relaxing of the Production Code, and a response to the changing patterns in audiences as many older viewers chose to stay home and watch television programming instead of going out to the cinema.\textsuperscript{28} As cinema-going became an activity dominated by youth and a host of young, predominantly white, male directors came on the Hollywood scene, stories, characters, and styles of filmmaking changed drastically. Formerly, women were understood as an important film audience and thus Hollywood studios felt a great incentive to create roles for women.\textsuperscript{29} Therefore, it is hardly shocking that the greater control afforded to directors and the changing audience demographics of Hollywood would result in so many films focused on men.

Despite the logic of industrial changes, critics from that time period through today debate the relationship between the explosion of the buddy film and the women’s movement. While Lev is certainly correct that these buddy films almost never explicitly reference the women’s movement and directors themselves do not situate their films as a response to feminism, we know that Hollywood was not a bubble that insulated these screenwriters and

\begin{footnote}
Krämer’s synthesis of surveys from the period in industry publications such as \textit{Box Office}, \textit{Hollywood Reporter}, and \textit{Variety}, women and older audiences were more likely to be turned off by the shift toward more graphic representations of sex and violence in film, along with the poor conditions of movie houses. Peter Krämer, \textit{The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars} (London: Wallflower, 2005), 60-2.
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\textsuperscript{29} This was most profound during WWII when women dominated film-going audiences while much of the male population was enlisted. It is during the 1940s that we strongly see the rise of the “woman’s film.”
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directors from those public debates. In fact, industrial publications at the time had begun to investigate the status of women within the film industry. For example, the daily trade newspaper *The Hollywood Reporter* began a five-part series on this issue in 1970; the headline for the first installment was “No Lib Yet for Women in the Entertainment Industry.” This article concluded that there were “beds—but no places—for women in the profession,” echoing New Left women’s critiques of their own brethren that sparked the second wave of feminism in the U. S. Then in 1972, both the Screen Actors Guild and the Writers Guild of America formed Women’s Committees to advocate for women in their constituencies. Given the number of filmmakers and actors that were interested in politics and social change, along with the industry’s own growing attention to sexism, it seems likely that the makers of buddy films would be aware of contemporary debates about gender.

Each of the directors whose work I will explore in this chapter had relationships to politics in the early 1970s, and their bodies of work reflect an interest in social change. John Slesinger, a British director whose first U. S. film was *Midnight Cowboy*, was gay, out, and dating a young photographer who moved through the same circles as Andy Warhol. Hal Ashby (*The Last Detail*) “was highly politicized,” according to his biography, and had

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“written numerous letters to Washington to lobby for several environmental acts, help Hopi Indians, stop the clear-cutting of forests, and push for the abolition of the death penalty and the withdrawal of U. S. troops from Vietnam.”34 Ashby had also been on some freedom marches as part of the Civil Rights Movement; met with labor leader and co-founder of the United Farm Workers Association, Cesar Chavez; and donated to the Black Panthers.35 Like The Last Detail, his prior films explore less conventional romantic relationships, including interracial ones (The Landlord) and intergenerational ones (Harold and Maude). In general, Ashby’s work reflects a belief that no one has to “be” what society expects them to be, and it’s likely that as someone who consistently supported those challenging the status quo, he would be well aware of the women’s movement and perhaps even male liberation. Finally, Jerry Schatzberg is one of the less well-documented Hollywood directors, but prior to directing, he was a photographer who worked with left-leaning celebrities, including Bob Dylan for whom he shot the cover for the album Blonde on Blonde. His previous film to Scarecrow, The Panic in Needle Park (with screenplay co-written by Joan Didion), about heroin addicts, reveals a continued attraction to social outcasts and the fringe. While interviews and biographies generally do not discuss these directors’ views about the women’s movement, all three were tapped into a changing America and evinced a leftist dissatisfaction with what Howard Zinn called “the fraud and glitter of a distorted prosperity” in favor of human connection and emotional intimacy achieved between men.36


Schlesinger’s, Ashby’s, and Schatzberg’s films are representative of general proclivities in New Hollywood filmmaking to reflect the trend toward liberalism in the U. S. as a whole. While conservatism was alive and well, embodied in Nixon’s “silent majority,” the overall trend through the 1960s and 1970s was for the general population to increasingly share the political positions of the young. In surveys during this period, more and more Americans voiced liberal opinions on issues of sex, race, foreign affairs, and even gender.\(^{37}\) What is so puzzling about films of the 1970s is that they tend to match this liberalism in almost every way except for gender. Scholars hypothesize that these films served a compensatory function in the safe space of the cinema, where fantasies could be indulged that otherwise might not be publicly expressed in places like surveys.\(^{38}\) Although a direct connection is hard to show, this pattern is seen in the attitudes of young men who were part of the New Left: they supported the rights of various social groups and, publicly, this included the rights of women. However, in their actual daily operations, egalitarian relationships were harder to find within the New Left. Liberalism appears to not always have been as welcome at home in the private sphere.\(^{39}\)

This incongruity was not lost on film reviewers and critics of the ‘70s. Perhaps because the women’s movement was so culturally visible, receiving plenty of attention from major news organizations, critics and reviewers at the time grappled with the buddy film’s relationship to shifting gender roles based on textual evidence and a belief that films reflect the zeitgeist. These responses, however, offer a range of interpretations, from celebrating the


\(^{38}\) Ibid., 72, 77.

\(^{39}\) For more on this heterosexual dynamic within the New Left, see Judith Newton, *From Panthers to Promise Keepers: Rethinking Men’s Movements* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).
emotional intimacy that male characters achieved, to chastising the films for being immature, to condemning the films as hostile backlash against feminism. Film critic Arthur Nolletti, writing in 1976 after the landmark years for the genre, found these buddy films to be comforting not only for men, but for the general population (i.e., women too):

. . . . for U.S. viewers, male friendship is an archetypal form of emotional security, a pact of love and brotherhood. As such it is so powerful a myth that it reaches into the deepest recesses of the national psyche, fulfilling the vicarious needs of men and women alike for those things which it represents: purity, innocence, love, and human sensibility. . . . Undoubtedly these are the main reasons for the emergence and popularity of the trend rather than those explanations usually offered, such as the current lack of major female box office attractions or Hollywood’s nervousness in depicting women in these days of the Feminist Movement.40

For Nolletti, the buddy films of the early ‘70s are simply a continuation of a popular archetype that can be found throughout American literature. Later in the article, Nolletti also suggests that the homosocial bonding celebrated in these films might be a trial ground for male sensitivity from which women will eventually benefit: “In showing that manhood is not one guy’s outcooling another, in dramatizing the affection that one man bears another, the genuine film of friendship not only reaffirms our belief in the validity of bonds but also paves the way for improved relationships between men and women as well.”41 Worth noting about Nolletti’s essay in general is that it is occasionally marked by male liberationist discourse (he valorizes emotional bonds and nurturing over macho competition) and acknowledges feminism as a context, even if he doesn’t see the films as a political response. Male


41 Nolletti, “Male Companionship Movies,” 36. This echoes the male liberationist belief that “in working on their relations to each other, . . . men sympathetic to feminism might also move in what they saw as feminist-approved directions, by, among other things, becoming more emotionally open. This openness, many men argued, was transferable to relationships with women and, especially, as it would turn out, to fathering relationships with children.” Newton, From Panthers, 122. I will be taking up the issue of children in my next chapter on father-son melodramas of the late 1970s and early 1980s.
liberation, which also received mainstream media attention,\textsuperscript{42} followed women’s liberation by arguing that patriarchy also oppressed men by creating expectations for men to work as unemotional breadwinners that grind away at meaningless jobs in a competitive marketplace. As we will see in this chapter, the buddy films indeed echo many of the ideas associated with male liberation.

Other critics placed the buddy films within an American tradition of “male romance,”\textsuperscript{43} but they weren’t equally as affectionate as Nolletti. For example, in his 1973 review of Scarecrow “Just Another Locker Room Fantasy” for The New York Times, Stephen Farber expressed annoyance with the buddy film trend:

Women play a small role in these masculine fantasies, and when they do appear, they are little more than their tresses. . . . [The male protagonists] are living an adolescent dream where two buddies share the purest kind of love and women are seen as sexual diversion or the violators of a beautiful friendship. . . . American men yearn for the breezy, undemanding liaisons of a 12-year old’s life; they want to flee the threat of deeper involvement. . . . Aren’t there a few filmmakers who want to grow up and make honest movies about adult relationships, heterosexual or homosexual? Caught somewhere in between, these maudlin, juvenile fantasies of Boy Scout puppy love have been taken too seriously for too long.”\textsuperscript{44}

Farber’s criticism here about the lack of developed female characters and the depiction of women as tiresome civilizing forces from which men need to escape reflect a feminist perspective of the male romance that Nolletti celebrates above. Farber’s focus on gender

\textsuperscript{42} While it was a minority of U. S. men that became engaged in the male liberation movement, this response to feminism gained mainstream attention as early as 1971 when LIFE magazine ran a short piece about it as part of a series on “the woman problem.” See Barry Farrell, “You’ve Come a Long Way, Buddy,” LIFE, August 27, 1971, 52-9.

\textsuperscript{43} Classic works would include James Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking Tales (e.g., The Deerslayer) Herman Melville’s Moby Dick, Mark Twain’s The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and much of Ernest Hemingway’s work. The most famous discussions of male romance and the friendships often at their center are D. H. Lawrence’s Studies in Classic American Literature (1923) and Leslie Fiedler’s Love and Death in the American Novel (1960).

reflects the feminist discourse around representations of women during this time period, and advanced so matter-of-factly by a male film reviewer in a mainstream publication such as The New York Times, his argument demonstrates how widespread discussions of gender had become.

Finally, while Farber’s review suggested that makers of the buddy films are just simply unenlightened, feminist critic Molly Haskell went a step further to accuse these films as acting against the progress of women. Writing in 1974 in the wake of the buddy film boom, Haskell, like Nolletti, saw the ‘70s as a time when “released from their stoical pose of laconic self-possession . . . [men] discovered each other . . . [and] were able to give voice, or lyrical vision, to feelings for each other they were keeping under their Stetson hats.” However, like Farber, she also saw this period as marked by misogyny and severe limitations of available acting roles for women: “The closer women come to claiming their rights and achieving independence in real life, the more loudly and stridently films tell us it’s a man’s world.” Haskell identified the buddy films as a form of backlash against the women’s movement and the virtual exile of serious female characters as punishment for challenging patriarchy.

The problem with understanding these films’ relationship to the women’s movement and even the male liberation movement that followed is that evidence of the filmmakers’ intentions is hard to come by. However, given the limitations of taking filmmakers at their word (the intentional fallacy), I believe that relationships between these films and discourses around gender at the time are still visible through textual evidence and the films’ reception,

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46 Haskell, From Reverence to Rape, 363.
as sketched out above. Furthermore, though not explicitly referenced, one might argue that the women’s movement serves as a structuring absence: even choosing to ignore it is one sort of relationship to it. In this chapter, I will analyze three buddy films from the cycle from 1969 to 1974 to explore how they might be in dialogue with discourses around masculinity, male liberation, and feminism. Considering the mixed reception of these films as outlined above, we must ask to what extent the male protagonists’ emotional intimacy and the romanticization of male friendship constitute a progressive critique of the demands of traditional masculinity that would contribute to the “liberation” of both sexes, and to what extent the films represent a continuation of male romance that privileges male companionship and maintains that women are second-class citizens. If these buddy films as melodramas present men as victims of social expectations, at stake are the rhetorical effects of such films: do they act to quiet feminist voices, as Haskell suggests, or do they help feminism’s cause by contributing to a more thorough examination of gender, as Nolletti suggests?

The buddy films that I will be examining in this chapter are typically not classified as melodrama today because of their differences from the prevailing version of melodrama (as genre) as it was described during the 1970s and 1980s, particularly as melodrama has been seen in opposition to realism. These buddy films look more like slices of the “real world”—they are shot on location and typically use a more subdued color palette than the Technicolor melodramas that precede them, and generally use less dramatic music (Scarecrow, for example, has a simple jaw harp accompanying many scenes). They also feature a greater movement of characters through space, and the focus often appears to be on adventure rather than psychology; all of the films could be classified as road movies in addition to buddy
films. As the genre of melodrama is considered to be focused on emotion rather than action—in the false binary with realism that melodrama as mode challenges—the orientation toward goals in these films (trying to get somewhere or to find something) seems to place them more squarely in the “masculine” realm of realism, as do their settings outside of the home/domestic space. Finally, the characteristics of New Hollywood that oppose it to classical Hollywood, including a lack of conventional narrative arcs and closure, seem to separate these films from ‘50s melodramas.

However, approaching these films from an understanding of melodrama as a mode rather than a genre emphasizes that style and iconography are often misleading; more important is the films’ sensibility in terms of understanding them as melodrama. Melodrama as a mode refers to “a broad category of moving pictures that move us to pathos for protagonists beset by forces more powerful than they and who are perceived as victims.” If we look back at film reviews and articles from industrial publications of the early 1970s, we see that these films were in fact being discussed as melodramas, even if the exact term wasn’t always invoked. The capsule description for *Scarecrow* in *Variety* labeled the film a “meller,” a slang term for melodrama. Farber’s review of *Scarecrow* for *The New York Times* described the film as sharing the “sentimentalism” of *Midnight Cowboy*. Writing for *The New Yorker*, Pauline Kael called *The Last Detail* a “downer-tearjerker.”

47 Linda Williams, “Melodrama Revisited,” in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1998), 42. As I discuss in my introduction, melodrama and realism are not mutually exclusive; films may contain elements of both, as I would argue these buddy films do.


49 Farber, “Just a Locker Room Fantasy?,” 127.

these films were understood as pathetic at the time they were produced, though again, we often now associate New Hollywood with realism.

The pathos within these films comes from the thwarting of the blissful, loving relationship discovered between men. The relationship’s fate is largely shaped by an inability to access or live up to hegemonic masculine ideals or by the cruelty of a hierarchical masculine world. Arguably, the films share many of the concerns of male liberationists working during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Male liberationists constructed men as in many ways equally victimized by patriarchy as women: men did not choose to be dominant; rather, dominance was a role that was given to them and under which men suffered. Furthermore, as decades of male rebellion had argued, men had been duped into a bourgeois social contract that bound them to marriage and women, and the pressures of keeping up their end of the bargain, primarily “bringing home the bacon,” led to a life of stress and spiritual bankruptcy.51 While certainly there are negative consequences for both conforming and not conforming to the demands of hegemonic masculine standards, this positioning as victim often circumvented having to acknowledge individual men’s privilege. Power is, of course, not equally distributed amongst men, and so the types of men found in these melodramatic buddy films conveniently come from the fringe, either rejected by bourgeois society (Midnight Cowboy) or relegated to the lower ranks of masculine hierarchy (The Last Detail). As melodramatic heroes, then, buddy films often choose outsiders.

51 Barbara Ehrenreich, among others, argues that up through the twentieth century, heterosexual romance was offered as a comforting but imagined reason for marriage that covered over the ugly truth: that at rock bottom, marriage is an economic arrangement, largely benefitting women who, unable to earn equal wages to men, are often economic dependents. See Ehrenreich’s introduction to The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1983). Jack Sawyer argued that because men are ultimately judged by their performance as breadwinners, they are “not permitted to play freely, or show affect”; in this way, their lives are only partially developed. Sawyer, “On Male Liberation,” 32.
The characters of these buddy films are not part of the counterculture per se, but are part of a pattern throughout the 20th century of men rebelling against a middle-class vision of appropriate occupations and lifestyles for men.52 In Jerry Schatzberg’s *Scarecrow* (1973), an ex-con and a sailor become friends while hitchhiking together and moving through the American landscape like hobos. The ex-con is headed to collect money from a bank in Pittsburgh to start a car wash; for him, success is getting steak and “ass” whenever he wants it. The sailor, who has completed his tour of duty, is returning to visit the child he abandoned four years ago when he fled to the Navy and left his girlfriend pregnant. Both characters have avoided the “responsibility” that defines bourgeois masculinity. In Hal Ashby’s *The Last Detail* (1973), two hardened career sailors must transport a young, naïve sailor from Norfolk, Virginia to jail in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. The African-American sailor supports his mother, but has never married, and says “[he’s] not sure what [he] would have done if it hadn’t been for the Navy.” The white sailor was married once, but divorced because his wife wanted him to get the boring, but decent-paying job of a TV repairman; the idea of commuting to a repetitive job day in and day out was abhorrent enough to run away from a woman with “big tits. . .who wore angora sweaters.” Meadows, the kid they are transporting, is fatherless and his mother appears to have a drinking problem; she is absent when they stop in Camden, NJ, to visit her, and Meadows seems to have joined the Navy because he has quietly lost his childhood dreams and ambitions. Finally, in John Slesinger’s *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), an illegitimate and not terribly bright Texas bumpkin goes to New York to become a sex stud with the belief that rich women won’t be able to keep their hands off of him; this job seems glamorous compared to a life of washing dishes in a diner in a

52 Ehrenreich chronicles these rebellions through the twentieth century up until the early 1980s in *The Hearts of Men.*
dying town. Unfortunately, his cowboy image of masculinity seems gimmicky and unimpressive to New York women. After being first hoodwinked by him, he befriends a disabled conman nicknamed Ratso; the two squatters achieve some domestic satisfaction together, even if in squalor, until Ratso’s illness puts them on a bus for Florida.

The men in all three films have rejected the doldrums and the “false” values of bourgeois life, and they also find themselves in a world where relationships with women are not easy. Women no longer function as a mirror that reflects back and confirms men’s constructions of masculinity, “props to hold up a sagging ego,” in feminist Marjorie Piercy’s terms; while the men come to provide this function for one another and renegotiate their masculinity, these new, fulfilling intimate relationships are thwarted in some way by the films’ endings. In this way, though the characters and settings do not always “read” as melodrama based on their style, the virtuous suffering of the male characters as they sacrifice and devote themselves to one another in an often hostile environment presents arguments for the characters’ inner goodness, and their (masculine) redemption is characteristic of the mode. The question remains whether the ideology of these melodramatic buddy films works to contain feminist complaints or adds to a necessary progressive critique of society’s prevailing gender system. Either way, it cannot be denied that in the period of the late 1960s and early 1970s, it seemed unlikely that classic—if partially imagined—American masculine identities could remain the same. The buddy films of the early 1970s would explore the disorientation and discomfort of losing those identities.

Of all three films, the earliest, *Midnight Cowboy*, is the most pre-occupied with images and identity. The explicit invocation of the cinematic cowboy by Joe Buck (Jon

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53 See note 6 above.
Voight) as a model for his own masculinity is emblematic of what Robert Lang argues is a common practice both between movie and audience member and between people of the same gender identity. Although we enter the theater as “an already constituted ego,” the screen acts much like a mirror by offering “the opportunity. . . .to observe and evaluate the possibilities of how to ‘be’ masculine or feminine.”\(^{54}\) Lang goes on to argue that characters within films often operate this way for each other as well, much as relationships between people do in real life. As Judith Butler has theorized, gender is a performance; that is, gender is unstable and only appears to be static as the result of repeated behaviors that reconstitute it.\(^{55}\) Because gender is unstable, masculinity must be confirmed. And while women certainly have been used as mirrors for masculinity, Michael Kimmel argues, “Masculinity is largely a homosocial enactment. . . . what men need is men’s approval.”\(^{56}\) This process of performance and confirmation is dramatized in the buddy film. Within these male-male relationships is a tangle of what Eve Sedgwick calls “male homosocial desire,” a desire that even amongst self-identifying heterosexual men cannot be pulled apart from homoeroticism.\(^{57}\) As Henning Bech explains, “being or wanting to be a man implies an interested relation from man to man. This \textit{male interest} includes the pleasures of mirroring and comparing, as well as of companionship and apprenticeship” (emphasis in original).\(^{58}\)


\(^{56}\) Kimmel, \textit{Manhood in America}, 7.


While homosocial desire should not be confused with homosexual desire, a firm line between the two either may not exist, or at least not be unbreakable, according to Bech: “... the connections between wish, longing, body, male images, togetherness, sharing, security, excitement, equality and difference in relation to other men which are intrinsic to identification make it impossible to keep it apart from eroticism.”59 As Lang himself points out in his book *Masculine Interests*, which borrows from Bech’s phrase above, these complex connections between men are often narrativized in films about male friendship. I would argue that with the symbolic loss of women as mirrors for masculinity after the women’s liberation movement began, the need for other men to serve this role became more important than ever.

Throughout *Midnight Cowboy*, Joe’s identity relies upon the ideas and perceptions of others, and appropriates images from popular culture; these figurative mirrors are complemented by Slesinger’s use of actual mirrors and other reflective surfaces for Joe to examine himself, particularly during moments of crisis. Via flashbacks, we see that Joe’s identity has largely been shaped by two women during his formative years: his grandmother and Crazy Annie. Both women provided his first experiences of love, but unfortunately were not particularly stable: Joe’s grandmother took Joe in after his single mother left him with her to go on to another life without him, but while the grandmother was clearly affectionate, she often left him alone and provided some potentially confusing experiences of love and sexuality. In one flashback, he is in bed with his grandmother and one of her boyfriends (wearing a cowboy hat, no less); they are laughing and not engaged in sex, but the context of the situation is missing, which perhaps reflects Joe’s psychological confusion about this

59 Ibid., 55 qtd. in Lang, *Masculine Interests*, 3.
triangular relationship. Both the sexualization of Joe as a child and the association between cowboys and desire are captured in another flashback, this time to Joe’s grandma sending him off in his first cowboy hat; she tells him, “You look nice, loverboy, real nice . . . you’re gonna be the best-looking cowboy in the whole parade.” As a term of endearment, “loverboy” sexualizes Joe, even if in jest. The other woman that dominates Joe’s memories is his teenage lover, Crazy Annie, but flashbacks indicate that she was mentally disturbed in some way and the target of the sexual attentions of many young men in town. We hear her declare “you’re the only one Joe,” and her “choice” of him has given Joe the impression that he is particularly desirable, but everything else we see in the flashbacks (including her status as “crazy”) undermines her reliability.

Whatever encouragement and love Joe received from these two women—one now dead, the other in the crazyhouse—has been filtered through the lens of pop culture masculinity, in particular that of the cinema. (In fact, Joe approaches Crazy Annie in a movie theater in one flashback.) Joe’s connection between women’s desire and the image of the cowboy is carefully laid out in his arrangement of personal effects in his first hotel room in New York: he hangs a large-scale picture of Paul Newman torn from a poster for the film *Hud* next to a mirror, and in the frame of the mirror tucks a cut-out of a topless pin-up model. In this way, he can both behold his own image next to Newman’s and “mirror” it, but also shift over to the image of the topless woman to pair his own cowboy image with her. Worth noting is the use of scale and positioning; the Newman image dominates over the pin-up and declares itself more important, while her placement in the frame of the mirror literally marginalizes her. This fantasy of the cowboy as women’ desire, inherited from his
grandma’s directives, is so deeply a part of Joe’s own self-conception that he willingly ignores reality.

On the bus to New York, Joe listens to a radio program asking women what they are looking for in a man. The first response is Gary Cooper, the masculine Hollywood icon, famous for cowboy roles; but, the woman being interviewed adds, “he’s dead.” As the women’s list builds using more abstract descriptions, such as “someone I can talk to in bed,” “tall, definitely tall,” “the outdoor type,” and “young,” the sound of the voices develops an echo effect so that the last request from women that Joe hears—“you”—is marked as a fantasy. In this way, what began as an allusion to the cowboy being “dead” via the Cooper reference transforms into an affirmation that Joe Buck as a cowboy is indeed what women still want.

But as the film’s opening immediately signals, the cowboy is a thing of the past. The first image is a purely white screen juxtaposed with the soundtrack of a western. The camera zooms out to reveal that the whiteness is the blank screen of a drive-in theater; we hear gun shots and horses’ hooves galloping as the drive-in is revealed to be empty, except for a single child riding a paint-chipped metal horse on the playground. While no cinema goers would be there during the day, the sound of wind and the squeaking metal horse signify that this cultural site for consuming iconic American visions has been abandoned. The audience for the cowboy has left, and the sounds of the western film are but echoes of an increasingly distant past. While the blank screen no longer has films projected on it, it prepares us for Joe’s projection of his own image and his body as a canvas on which to paint his identity. The western tune he sings in the shower, “Git Along, Little Dogies,” overlaps with the empty drive-in, and the film cuts to him scrubbing himself in the shower and getting ready to put on
his costume.\textsuperscript{60} We then watch him carefully get dressed in his new cowboy clothes against alternating shots of his frustrated co-workers and employer asking, “Where’s that Joe Buck?” The answer is he’s in the mirror, into which he looks approvingly before heading out the door; his self is constituted by the image he has constructed.

Building an identity out of an image manufactured by Hollywood and American popular culture leads to a crisis as the film progresses. The people of New York question if he is “for real” and, most memorably, Ratso (Dustin Hoffman) declares, “no rich lady with any class at all buys that cowboy crap anymore; they’re laughing at you on the street.” According to Ratso, the cowboy image “don’t appeal to nobody except every Jackie on 42\textsuperscript{nd} Street—that’s faggot stuff. You want to call it by its name, that’s strictly for fags.” For Joe, the news that the masculinity he emulates from figures like John Wayne is now a calling card for men cruising or selling their bodies to other men is beyond degrading; it is abjection, which is frightening for Joe because it seems to confirm his earlier desperate break from his sense of self when he has a sexual encounter with a young man thinking he will be paid. Like the astronaut whose lifeline is severed from the spaceship during the the outer-space film Joe watches during this homosexual exchange in a movie theater, he feels at risk of being cut off from all that is familiar and plunged into a psychological black hole. The bankruptcy of the cowboy image is disturbing, but the reversal of what it can signify—queerness instead of straight masculine prowess—is so psychologically troubling for him that even Ratso takes pity and helps clean Joe up to reconstitute his lost image. To lose the image would mean devastation far beyond the squalor in which they live. Joe’s fear and confusion

\textsuperscript{60}Joe also drops his soap in the shower, perhaps an allusion to the same-sex encounters he will find himself in out of circumstance in New York, referencing the fear of straight-identifying men about prison and other homosocial (and violent) environments.
over not only what his clothes signify, but also what he himself might be register in scenes where he walks down 42\textsuperscript{nd} Street. He sees another “cowboy” on the street, and given that his only customers on this street have been men, this other hustler who serves as his reflection creates a deep unease about the stability of the identity he has constructed for himself.

Despite the assault on his cowboy masculinity, Joe has a hard time letting go, and Ratso helps him clean it up as an apology for calling it queer. But for all their polishing and deodorizing of Joe and his cowboy costume, his image just can’t swing it in the world of legitimate male escort services. It is simply too ostentatious and cannot pass as “realistic” in terms of desirable masculinity in mainstream New York. The only place Joe’s outfit seems welcome is at a party modeled after the happenings at the Warhol Factory. While he is flattered that the party’s hosts singled him out for an invitation at a diner—Joe is easily seduced by anyone finding him special and is too innocent to ask why—once he arrives at the party, it is obvious that the hosts see him in a very different way than he sees himself. In this new context, amongst the panoply of other guests, Joe has become a freak. He manages to fully enjoy the party without processing this message, but here—amongst the hippies, divas, and performance artists playing at the intersection of pop culture and art—the cowboy image is emptied of its original meaning. Instead, it becomes camp, rendered both banal and ridiculous.

It is here at the “Warhol” party that Joe finally seduces a woman, though the nature of her attraction isn’t totally clear. Joe is tall and handsome, and perhaps a rich woman who already dips into the fringes of society without worrying about appearances is the perfect customer. But certainly, Joe is just part of the experience of the “happening.” When he tells her his name is Joe, she declares, “Joe, I like that, you could be anybody.” His identity is
besides the point, and being anybody, Joe is also nobody. When Ratso, who aspires to be Joe’s agent, interjects to set a price on Joe, she asks if they are a couple, and later, when Joe is unable to perform, she suggests again that he might be gay. These are not unreasonable questions given the experimental party at which they meet, but these questions resonate beyond her own confusion about Joe. The film’s viewer as well might ask these. Joe and Ratso do become more like a couple as the film progresses, and a nightmare Joe has, which seems to be based on a flashback, implies that Joe was gang-raped as a teenager alongside his lover Crazy Annie. Bearing in mind that sexuality can be more fluid and complicated than the categories that culture often wants to impose on people, the film’s stance does seem to be that Joe’s identity is not fixed; the cowboy image is his lifeline to a sense of self, but it is perpetually under siege.

Not only does the cowboy image prove to be unsustainable, but so does the other part of Joe’s equation amongst cowboy, mirrored self, and women’s desire for him that he lays out in the earlier scene with the Paul Newman poster. He tells his co-worker back in Texas that rich women in New York are “begging for it, paying for it too” because most the men there are “tootie-fruities” and has a daydream sequence of rich women unlocking doors and inviting him in. In reality, women either reject or take advantage of him. The first woman he beds is herself an aging prostitute who feigns insult when he asks for payment; she ends up taking money from him. Other high class women flat-out reject him; one even scolds Joe for soliciting her—“You ought to be ashamed of yourself”—treating him as a bad child rather than someone with enough power to even be a real threat. Montages of women trotting down the streets of New York, absorbed in their own worlds with no interest in Joe, construct women as a separate species that he realizes he does not in fact understand. They
seem empowered and not starved for his traditional masculine sexual attention. While there are no direct references to feminism, women of New York don’t appear to need men and above all have no plans to act as a mirror for Joe to bask in his own image. Again, even the woman who finally takes him home manages to belittle him after he cannot perform sexually, first suggesting he drop the cowboy act (“maybe if you didn’t call me ‘m’am,’ things might work out better”), then suggesting that he might be gay, and finally even frustrating him with the game Scribbage because he’s illiterate. She wears a fur coat in bed while he is left naked and defensive of his own sense of self.

The flip side of this experience of rejection by women is the multiple encounters with men who do desire him, which are equally as confusing to Joe. Indeed, New York in this film seems to encapsulate a changing tide where sex, gender, and sexuality no longer align as they once did, at least in the imagination. As Barbara Ehrenreich discusses in *The Hearts of Men*, contexts for changing masculinities in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s included the increasing visibility of gay men in the U. S.; the sharper divide between between gay and straight men weakened the notion of “latency.” This, Ehrenreich argues, freed heterosexual men to “indulge in a wide range of formerly suspect behavior without ever losing the privileges of heterosexual ‘citizenship.’”\(^{61}\) This legibility, however, does not strike me as being easy for all people in all circles; the adoption of more “macho” fashion by gay men, and the lengthened hair and androgynous clothes of straight men was indeed confusing for many Americans.\(^{62}\) Joe begins with an inability to read people and situations beyond a heteronormative lens; once the world becomes more diverse than he had known, he seems


\(^{62}\) This confusion over physical appearance is dramatized in *Easy Rider*, when the long-haired protagonists are harassed by local men in the small, Midwestern towns where they stop on their journey.
beset by confusion over reading people and their desires. In *Midnight Cowboy*, this goes well beyond destroying any consistent alignment of sex, gender, and sexuality to a world populated by grotesque characters whose “problems” Joe cannot even begin to fathom, such as the woman at the automat who seems aroused from having her child scurry a rubber rat up and down her face. The quiet Texas town from which Joe hails seems part of an American past that has been lost, much like the westerns that no longer play at the drive-in, though that apple-pie version of America is clearly just as constructed as the movies, if we look at Joe’s childhood memories there. But his idealized New York turns out to be chaos.

It is fitting that the one person who finally welcomes Joe and gives him a chance—after stealing from him and playing a prank—is a con-man, an expert in presenting himself as something other than what he is. Both men are trying to get by hustling, though their angles are very different. Rico “Ratso” Rizzo is a small, ethnicized, sickly cripple, with a whiny Bronx accent. Besides his poverty from birth as the son of a shoe-shiner, his physical difference has marginalized him from bourgeois, elite Manhattan, the space that Joe too cannot seem to penetrate. While the two men are a stark contrast physically and verbally, Ratso eventually is moved by Joe’s plight and invites him to stay with him. Despite conning him when they meet, Ratso allows Joe to see who he really is, sharing his meager belongings, his childhood, and his dream of moving to Florida. His assertion of identity is strongest in his demand that he be called Rico rather than his street name Ratso.

The arms of seemingly platonic male love are a welcome safe harbor for Joe, as both the city and its women have coldly rejected him. At first he mistrusts Ratso’s intentions—after all, he’s conned him once—but sheer exhaustion leads him to fall asleep in his coat, clinging to his remaining belongings in Ratso’s den. For such a tall, handsome man who
dwarfs Ratso, Joe looks incredibly vulnerable lying on the old mattress. From here forward, the two men begin attending to one another and achieve something of domestic harmony in their squalor. One of the most obvious moments of Slesinger structuring their relationship as that of a couple is the scene where Ratso prepares dinner for Joe. Despite the meager ingredients, Ratso puts a lot of work into producing the best that he can for Joe, seasoning it and tasting it as he goes. Joe, meanwhile, sits at the kitchen table reading the comics and doesn’t look up once Ratso serves him. Ratso confronts Joe on his lack of appreciation for the homecooked meal, and the scene evokes that of a wife accusing her husband of inattention and complacency. This dynamic will continue throughout the rest of the film; the two will nurse, feed, bathe, and clothe one another.

The exact nature of their intimacy and attraction is ambiguous. While Joe’s dreams revolve around servicing women and being in demand, Ratso’s dreams incorporate Joe’s but with a different context. As Ratso waits outside while Joe attempts to intercept a real male escort’s date, he fuses Joe’s enterprise with his ongoing fantasy of moving to Florida. Here, the two of them run down the beach together, eat well, and hang out by the pool as women holler for Ratso as Joe’s pimp. Rico spends his days palling around with Joe’s female clientele, and neither of them is romantically involved with a woman. The two men are together as both business partners and life companions. Conveniently, Joe’s occupation keeps him single so that he and Ratso can continue their relationship. This dream sequence is placed here for comic relief—Ratso outruns Joe like a cartoon character and performs the same culinary skills from the earlier scene for a posh banquet. But paired with the soft-spoken declaration that Joe does indeed look good after they clean him up, delivered with an
affectionate light in his eye, Ratso’s feelings for Joe could be described as queer, if simply because it resists categorization.63

The importance of Joe’s new intimate relationship with Ratso is revealed in his decision to take Ratso to Florida instead of staying in New York for his next appointment with a client; even though his dream job is finally becoming a reality, he is willing to give it up for the new role he has come to inhabit, that of a caretaker. Joe performs this new narrative of identity in the mirror as well: when a john takes him back to his hotel room and Joe waits for him to get off the phone, Joe rehearses the speech he will deliver to get money from the man. Rather than preening his cowboy image and charm, he rehearses his need to save Ratso, a “sick boy.” While no relation is assigned between them, the relation is certainly familial, even infantilizing Ratso. Joe’s transformation from wannabe cowboy to caretaker is completed when he throws his cowboy duds away in the trash once he and Ratso arrive in Florida, replacing them with simpler slacks and button-down shirt. He also vows to get a “normal” job to support them. While he seems to be settling into a more bourgeois image of life in Florida, his sick, sweaty partner is a visual reminder that this will be an alternative family to the heteronormative vision of mainstream America.

Like the other buddy films to come in the 1970s, the fulfilling male relationship finally achieved is thwarted at the end of Midnight Cowboy. Significantly, the final scene on the bus to Florida evokes that of Hoffman’s previous iconic film, The Graduate (1967). In

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63 The term “queer” can mean many things. It is commonly used as a synonym for the collective term LGBT, or more generally to mean “non-straight.” In a broader sense, and this is how I use it here, it can include a range of non-normative gender constructions and sexualities that can include the activities and desires of heterosexuals that break from heteronormative ideals of romance, marriage, and family, such as prostitution, “swinging,” and BDSM. Because queer is a sort of “anti-category,” it is a useful term for describing desires that do not clearly fit standard categories and blur the overly neat lines between them. For a good introduction to queer theory, see Annamarie Jagose’s Queer Theory: An Introduction (New York: NYU Press, 1997).
both films, the couple in the back of the bus attracts the gazes of grotesque-looking passengers. While the couple that has formed at the ending of The Graduate is hardly a traditional one—the woman is in a wedding dress because she is fleeing a conformist marriage, and this new couple’s future is entirely uncertain—Hoffman’s character is a conquering hero of sorts. He has “rescued” the woman and at least seems poised to try to make his way in the world differently than the “false” way embodied in both of their parents’ lives. In Midnight Cowboy, however, Hoffman’s character dies just short of realizing his dream of living in Florida with the only person in the world who cares that he is dead. And Joe has lost not only his life companion, but his new narrative of becoming the hardworking, honest breadwinner of the family. Not only is the traditional masculine role as head of the heteronormative nuclear family closed off, but even that of a new alternative one. Sitting in his new “regular” clothes, with Voight’s giant saucer eyes darting about, Joe is vulnerable and identity-less. Through his sacrifices to try to save Ratso, Joe’s suffering here becomes virtuous; this marks him as a melodramatic hero even if the scene lacks the grandeur found in 1950s melodrama. Particularly like All That Heaven Allows, the characters find an ideal in unconventional love, a way they wish they could live that defies social norms, but that happiness cannot be. Social forces and mores in 1950s melodrama tend to be more explicit, but like so many New Hollywood films, Midnight Cowboy is more ambiguous, particularly its ending. Florida may present a new beginning for Joe, but the person who would have remained the one constant in his life is now gone. In his generic Floridian clothes—which finally suit the weather, to invert a line from the film’s theme song64—Joe again is anybody

64 The song is Fred Neil’s “Everybody’s Talkin’,” performed by Harry Nilsson.
and nobody, and whether or not he will find an authentic self free from the artificial
masculine role he tried to inhabit as a cowboy is left open-ended.  

The commercial and critical success of *Midnight Cowboy*, as well as *Butch Cassidy
and the Sundance Kid* (1969), spawned a robust cycle of melodramatic buddy films in the
early 1970s. Of these buddy films, *The Last Detail* stands out as an exploration of masculine
ideals. Though it is a foul-mouthed comedy with what Pauline Kael called “a satirical
approach to macho,” it also was received as a “tearjerker.”  

*The Last Detail* is a picaresque road movie that chronicles a trip three sailors make from the naval base at Norfolk, Virginia
to the naval prison at Portsmouth, New Hampshire; two of the sailors, Petty Officers
Buddusky (Jack Nicholson) and Mulhall (Otis Young), are escorting the third, Meadows
(Randy Quaid), to jail. Meadows has received an eight-year sentence and dishonorable
discharge for the attempted theft of forty dollars from a polio donation box, a punishment
that Buddusky and Mulhall believe far outweighs the crime. (When they first learn the
sentence, Buddusky asks, “Who’d he kill?”) Out of pity for “the kid,” Buddusky and
Mulhall use the stops at various Eastern cities as a way to give Meadows a last hurrah and to
initiate him into manhood before leaving him at the Portsmouth prison. While these
activities include conventional “good bad boy” forms of male bonding—boozing, brawling,
and brothels—they also include a visit to Meadows’ mother, ice-skating, and a winter
picnic.  

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65 Authenticity, of course, is a construction, but I deploy the concept here as male liberationists
themselves saw the “male sex role” as antithetical to an authentic self.


67 I take the phrase “good bad boy” here from Leslie Fiedler, who coins the term and elaborates on
this archetype in *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Robert B. Ray takes up Fiedler’s archetypes of
Buddusky and Mulhall (nicknamed Badass and Mule) are introduced to milquetoast Meadows as “mean bastards” by their superior to scare him into good behavior, and at first they seem emotionally distant from him. Their initial plan is to get Meadows to Portsmouth in record time, leaving themselves extra days and per diem money to carouse on their own. But Meadows is an emotional mess, and before they know it, they are caring for him and at times treating him like their child, they the indulgent parents. Looming over them is Meadows’ prison sentence—treated virtually like death—and at times Mulhall sees showing him a good time as pointless, though his real hesitation may be the level of emotional engagement it elicits. Caught in a system they have voluntarily joined (Buddusky and Mulhall are both self-described Navy “lifers”), they pride themselves on breaking protocol as they see fit, but must squirm under the ultimate limitations to their rebellion.

*The Last Detail* is a variation on the early ‘70s buddy film because it features a grouping of three men rather than two. This complicates the usual “odd couple” pairings in friendship: despite being of different races, black Mulhall and white Buddusky share the identity of “mean bastards” at the outset of the film, in contrast to (white) Meadows, who is gentle and naïve. But Buddusky and Mulhall also will find themselves in conflict with one another about how to best handle the situation of befriending and becoming intimate with a man they must take to jail. The conflict between dual desires—to engage in the pleasures of male companionship, but also to maintain enough emotional distance to not be hurt—corresponds to a set of paradoxes that the men live. In order to be free of the constraints of domestic life, they have fled to a highly structured space that controls most of their

movements. The system wherein they achieve their masculinity often emasculates them, as its hierarchies limit their power. They are subject to protocol, yet constantly break it. They self-identify as “lifers” in the Navy for a sense of stability, but also express discontent with its restraints and their lack of life choices. And by the 1970s when this film was made, servicemen are no longer traditional and admired heroes since the current war in Vietnam was not a “good” war. (Indeed, here, even some whorehouses exclude servicemen.) It is fitting, then, that Mulhall and Buddusky hold the naval status of being “in transit” and, both at the beginning and in the end, are waiting for their orders to come through: these men are dislocated, as is Meadows who simply doesn’t belong in the Navy at all, but appears to be there out of lack of life choices and opportunities.

One of the unique features of this buddy film is that it depicts interracial male buddies, but doesn’t take race as its subject, unlike earlier films such as Home of the Brave (1949) and The Defiant Ones (1958). While there are a few scenes where race matters to other characters, such as a bartender who says he is only serving Mulhall because “the law says [he has] to,” race seems incidental from the three main characters’ perspectives. Gender is presented as the more meaningful difference between human beings, and the men bond over shared wisdom such as “Any pussy you get in this world, you’ll have to pay for, one way or another.” Melvin Donalson sees the film as typical of Hollywood making interracial relationships too easy, noting the way the film does not foreground race relations as an issue.\(^68\) Again, while their personalities are distinct, Buddusky and Mulhall are fairly interchangeable “lifers,” presented to us as “badasses” and harboring shared conflicted feelings toward the Navy. Furthermore, Buddusky’s attack on the “redneck” bartender who

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won’t serve Mulhall and his lack of concern with Mulhall hitting on white women constructs the men as equals. Obviously, representing race as a “non-issue” between men is the point of view of the white male filmmakers, and this seems to align itself with white men of the Left more easily identifying as antiracist comrades with African-American men than as pro-feminist men. The inability of many men, however, to share such a common struggle across gender lines seems to emerge most clearly in the party scene when Mulhall declares, “those women would rather fuck each other than one of us.” These aren’t just any women: these women who invite them to the party are marked as part of the counterculture. Indeed, they seem more concerned about racism than Mulhall, as they question why he would work for “the man”; their conversations are all anti-war and anti-Nixon. The only women the sailors can interact with on good terms are prostitutes, who literally speak the same language when both whores and sailors call one another “honey.” In this way, the afflictions of modern gender relations are presented as transcending race.

The changing status of traditional masculinity is most symbolically captured in the sailor’s uniform. Like Joe Buck’s cowboy costume in Midnight Cowboy, here the men wear another classic outfit of American (imaginary) masculinity. But while Joe Buck inhabits his constructed image uncomfortably and appears woefully out of place at times, the men in The Last Detail seem to possess their images, right down to their tattooed skin. Mulhall and Buddusky’s attitudes, however, make the uniform’s signification ironic, and the image of the sailor exists in tension between a traditional icon and a potentially subversive one. While the uniform and affiliation with a state institution place the sailor very much within the system,

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69 As feminists, especially feminists of color, have stressed, gender relations and forms of sexism are not consistent across different racial and ethnic groups (or classes, religions, etc.). A Latina, for example, will share some experiences with women of other races and ethnicities, but she also will have a specific set of experiences unique to being a Latina as a result of the specific cultures of her own various communities and the stereotypes and beliefs about her from dominant and/or other cultures.
the men’s reasons for joining the Navy have little to do with patriotism or sense of duty. Rather, they have drifted there out of a lack of choice or as an alternative to a mundane nine-to-five job. Hailing from rural Louisiana, Mulhall likely had few career choices as a young black man, and he declares, “I don’t know what I would have done if it hadn’t been for the Navy.” While Buddusky probably had more options, he explains that he had once been married and “she wanted me to go to trade school, become a TV repairman. Drive around in all that smog and shit repairing TVs out of a VW bus. I just couldn’t do it.” Buddusky’s feelings mirror those expressed by men in the 1970s who found marriage restrictive and a sentence to life as an “economic drone.” While the TV repairman is not quite corporate, the allusions to commuting and a repetitive daily grind, along with the demands made by the woman for him to fulfill the masculine role of breadwinner, place Buddusky’s relationship to the Navy as a form of escape. Associated with travel and movement, along with a homosocial space, the Navy seems free of commitment, despite of course the commitment made while enlisted. Mulhall as well, who supports his mother, is unmarried and lacks heterosexual strings attaching him to domestic space. Both men are also positioned as transitory figures by the frame of the film: Norfolk is not the home base of either; they are both there “waiting for their orders to come through.” Despite being part of the organized, masculine hierarchy of the Navy, these men “without orders” or final destinations are unattached drifters not unlike those more associated with the counterculture, as in Easy Rider. The choice of the Navy as a site of escape, however, may signify a craving for a familiar masculine role to play.

While the Navy may be an alternative to some other conventional life for Buddusky, the figure of the sailor is presented as an outmoded and traditional image of masculinity. At times, the men try to cash in on the image of the sailor and engage in a semiotic struggle over it with outsiders, particularly women, only for the viewer to recognize it as bankrupt. At the party amongst people marked as the counterculture, Buddusky in particular attempts to use his sailor uniform and the role it constructs to seduce a woman, but his self-presentation becomes farcical, particularly as this radical woman is completely unimpressed, if not bored by him. Buddusky draws on a romanticized image of the sea and traditional gender roles in his attempted seduction, describing himself as “…doing a man’s job…talking to ships…across miles and miles of liquid real estate”; the woman walks off during his first monologue to get a drink. In his second attempt, he tells her, “I’ve seen things…I’ve seen men do things I wouldn’t even begin to tell you at a time like this, my fair darling,” his address to her an absurd reference to chivalric (i.e., obsolete) gender roles. Nicholson gives an ironic performance here: the choice of words are over the top, but the delivery lacks any sincerity; he himself seems to be going through the motions. As Dennis Bingham has noted about the film, “the signs of masculinity”—including Nicholson’s bare chest, tattoos, mustache, and cigar used in advertisements for the film—“are so overdetermined as to suggest parody.” After several failed attempts to get her interested in him, the woman seems to finally respond, but only as a way to amuse herself in the face of this unwanted attention. In response to his boast that he’s “seen men do things . . . [he] wouldn’t even begin to tell [her] about,” she replies, “I can see what it’s done for you; it must be the uniform.” While her words are ambiguous, she seems to imply that the male institution of

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the Navy deserves some credit for the absurd macho performance she is subjected to here, his distorted view of what she as a woman wants, and the lack of interest that he takes in her as a person. His speech reveals a fixation on his own masculinity, and though performed ironically, holds the assumption that appropriate masculinity deserves a reward (her sleeping with him). Buddusky is quick to pick up on the woman’s mocking tone and with more bite in his voice, asks about the uniform she has just referenced, “cute, isn’t it”? He then reverses this belittling emasculation of his image, by adding “one of my favorite things about this uniform is the way it makes your dick look.” Buddusky seems to explicitly associate the uniform with virility, but his own performance in this scene undermines its potency. The one place that the uniform is welcomed is the brothel they later visit, which appropriately, is a site of women’s simulated interest in male sexual prowess.

Even if the traditional image of the sailor is in many ways presented as empty of its former meaning, Buddusky still positions himself as a model of masculinity for the younger Meadows, endowing him with awareness of his own potency. In terms of the “flow” (emotional and sexual) that male liberationists at the time believed needs to be “unblocked” for male health, this includes both losing his virginity and accessing male rage and violence. Indeed, Meadows is initiated and his “natural” male energies are released in the companion experiences of visiting a brothel and participating in his first fight against some Marines in a train station bathroom. But despite Buddusky’s attempts to model a new Meadows on himself, the film also gives Meadows a voice in challenging the use value of anger. In one of the more important scenes in the men’s hotel room, Meadows identifies

with and tries on Buddusky’s image by learning the alphabet in Naval signals; he stands facing Buddusky and signals the alphabet with his arms in a reverse mirror image. Surprised at how quickly Meadows picks this up, Buddusky compliments him through likeness; Meadows, he explains, must have a natural gift for it, as he himself does. Not long after this, Meadows asks Buddusky why he was so angry with a bartender for carding him earlier that day, as the man was just “doing his job.” It becomes clear that Meadows is rarely angry, and in an attempt to find even some degree of his own rage in Meadows, Buddusky demands a story about a time Meadows was actually angry. Meadows describes it, and Buddusky follows in anticipation of the payoff, which would be Meadows knocking the other guy out, but is of course let down; Meadows never acted on his anger.

Having been worked up—or violently aroused—and then disappointed, Buddusky releases his animalistic flow of adrenaline and smashes a lamp and puts his fist through a thin wooden door. Of all three men, Buddusky is represented as the most primal and something of a natural man, the most sexual and violent, a figure celebrated in later men’s literature, films, and liberationist discourse. Like Michael in *The Deer Hunter* and Lewis in *Deliverance*, Buddusky partly earns our admiration because he seems unbroken by civilizing influences (which male liberationists see as blocking men’s natural energies), but he also

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73 According to Herb Goldberg, the American male in the 1970s has a “hurricane of repressed feelings within him. Today’s man is the product of massive, defensive operations against feelings. These defenses are geared to protect him for survival’s sake by transforming the host of powerful, socially taboo impulses, needs and feelings into acceptable male behavior. To survive and contain these repressed feelings he must detach himself . . . . Because feelings are not permitted free expression the male lives in constant reaction against himself. What he is on the outside is a façade, a defense against what he really is on the inside. He controls himself by denying himself.” From *The Hazards of Being Male*, 68; Goldberg’s emphasis. In other words, for men to be socially acceptable, they must repress their natural feelings and impulses which are considered dangerous and undesirable; asking men to be “civilized” has left men out of touch with their “real” selves. In different moments in time and for different groups, manhood has been defined both as the control over sexual and violent impulses and as the release of those impulses. We see this tension in the male buddy films: here, and in many of Nicholson’s other roles such as McMurphy in
seems out of touch and overcompensating for his own sense of weakness. He does seem at times to live up to the title of “mean bastard,” though along with his violent streak, emotional vulnerability will be uncovered as well.

Part of Buddusky’s and Mulhall’s masculinity at the beginning of the film is emotional reticence, one quality of traditional masculinity that male liberationists found repressive and unhealthy. While they do agree that Meadows got “screwed” by his sentence (Buddusky himself says, “they really stuck it to ya kid—stuck it in and broke it off,” reading him as emasculated and even raped by the penetration of a sadistic system), they attempt to remain emotionally uninvolved, even as they give Meadows advice and try to make him feel better by assuring him that he will probably get two years knocked off his sentence for good behavior. When Meadows later breaks down sobbing with regrets, Buddusky and Mulhall are clearly uncomfortable; “be a man,” Buddusky directs, and advises that they get him off the train because he is a “mess,” clearly not fit to be seen in public like this (especially seen with them). Meadows cries once more later, and in this case again, neither Mulhall nor Buddusky knows what to do about it—emotional expression (other than rage) is beyond their tactics for dealing with the situation. Mulhall for one sees emotional empathy as pointless because the destination (prison) can never change, and in recognition that Buddusky is becoming increasingly involved with Meadows, he privately confronts Buddusky and accuses him of being a “menace” for engaging in “horseshit psychological jive” and making things worse.

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, these natural impulses are partially celebrated; but they are also challenged by characters like Meadows and *Scarecrow*’s Lion.
But by the film’s end, they have clearly become attached to Meadows and have even taken on the role of affectionate parents. Watching him ice skate from the side of the rink, they are amused, and later express that he’s turning out well: “The kid’s come along in the last few days, ain’t he?” A lifetime of missing parenting has been compressed in these three days, and Buddusky in particular seems proud of his progeny. Like Midnight Cowboy and Scarecrow, this film dramatizes the formation of a new male family. The dark cloud hanging over them, however, is that though they’ve brought Meadows up to be “a man,” they cannot protect him from other men’s physical and sexual violence.

The film has a deeply ambiguous perspective on primal male energy. At times it seems amused by it in its more “good bad boy” forms; at other times, Buddusky seems like an ineffective caricature of it, and when Meadows’ impending jail sentence rears its head, it becomes dangerous and undesirable as Buddusky contemplates what awaits him in prison. Even as Buddusky takes pleasure in physical violence, he cannot bear the thought of this being inflicted on his symbolic son Meadows: “He don’t stand a chance in Portsmouth, you know? Goddamn grunts kickin’ the shit out of him for eight years. He doesn’t stand a chance. Maggot this, maggot that. Marines are really assholes, you know that? Takes a certain kind of sadistic temperament to be a Marine.” Besides the general physical and psychological abuse awaiting Meadows, Mulhall obliquely refers to the possibility of prison rape; Mulhall and Buddusky partially are motivated to help Meadows lose his virginity because when he gets out of jail, “he may not want it anymore.” Their concern for Meadows potentially prompts their first conscious critique of this masculine institution. But despite this raising of consciousness in their last hours together, the system bears down on them too heavily, and Mulhall and Buddusky sink back into their own defensive emotional reticence. When
Meadows tries to flee, they chase him down, and Buddusky pistol-whips Meadows to control him; in doing so, they accept the role they were given at the outset of the film, “mean bastards,” in order to cover up his attempted flight. The commanding officer reprimands them at the Portsmouth jail, and as they leave, they go their separate ways and deliver lines almost verbatim to those from the beginning of the film: “I hate this motherfuckin’ chicken shit detail.” They themselves appear to be the victims of “the hazards of being male,” to use Herb Goldberg’s term: male institutions will not allow the emotional development, affection, or softness that their time with Meadows had wrought. The brass-heavy march of the soundtrack as they stomp off ironically emphasizes their psychological erasure of all that happened on their detail; to retain the memory would be to acknowledge their own helplessness and inability to save Meadows. As male liberationist Jack Sawyer saw it, dominance is a role and not a choice.74 Patriarchy and its institutions have foreclosed the possibility of being an emotionally developed human being; Mulhall and Buddusky must repress much of their emotions and desires in order to survive within the system. This film, however, lets the viewer have it both ways: it provides this critique, while indulging in the “boys will be boys” fun that is characteristic of misogynist patriarchy. Like many other male liberationist texts, The Last Detail and the other buddy films of this period coopt the gender analysis of feminism to equalize oppression between men and women; by arguing that it is not a privilege to be a man, this discourse diminishes the role of male privilege within patriarchy and siphons some of the power generated by feminist critique. This pattern of focusing on men as victims of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy is found across buddy films from this time period, particularly the film Scarecrow, also from 1973.

Like *The Last Detail*, *Scarecrow* also works in the genre of the picaresque road movie. The film opens with two drifters trying to hitchhike on opposite sides of the road. Max (Gene Hackman) has just gotten out of jail and hopes to thumb his way to Pittsburgh and fulfill his dream of opening his own carwash; Lion (Al Pacino) has left the Navy and is returning to Detroit to meet the child born in his long absence, now five years old, to the woman he left pregnant and sent money home to, with no other contact. Max initially rejects Lion’s gestures toward companionship, but after Lion donates his last match and makes Max laugh, Max takes him on as his business partner. The good-natured ribbing and teaming up to hitchhike are reminiscent of the screwball comedy *It Happened One Night*, and in many ways this film is about the formation of a couple as that earlier genre was; this time, however, the couple are male companions.

The two characters are set up as an odd couple: Max deals with life’s problems by fighting (this is what landed in him jail, and will again later) and wears five or six layers of clothing, symbolic of his protecting himself emotionally by creating a physical barrier to others. Lion’s philosophy of life is that problems are more easily dealt with by disarming potential enemies with humor; in Lion’s fable, the scarecrow actually wins the crows as friends by making them laugh, and scaring them off is ineffective. Much of the film dramatizes Lion’s efforts to convert Max to his philosophy and to get him to shed his protective layers of clothing.

Max and Lion’s adventures across the country thrust them into an intimate living situation as the men share temporary jobs, sleeping quarters, women, and bathrooms. The trust and love that develop between the men help Max eventually shed those protective layers, but such a relationship in the world of the buddy film must come with homophobic
caveats that enforce heteronormativity. In the first scene after joining forces to hitchhike together and get to Pittsburgh to open Max’s carwash, Max makes clear that he needs to keep gender in clear categories in order to associate with Lion. Sitting at a diner counter, Max learns Lion’s given name for the first time, Francis Lionel. For Max, Francis won’t do—“I got a little trouble with Francis, you know”—and so he redubs him Lion. Regardless of the spelling difference—and frankly, Max may be so illiterate as to not recognize the difference—the gender neutral name makes Max uncomfortable. The name Lionel is not only more properly masculine to Max, but the nickname “Lion” provides an added dose of symbolic virility. While the problem with the name Francis is somewhat ambiguous, Max’s proposal that they become business partners contains a simultaneous threat of physical violence along with a stern warning that their relationship must be “straight”:

I gotta tell you something about me—I’m the meanest son-of-a-bitch alive, you know what I mean? I don’t trust anybody. I don’t love anybody. And I could tear the ass out of a goddamn elephant too. Hey, we’re gonna partners, OK? . . . But, you, uh, ‘ve got to be straight with me, right? Square—and we’ll have a real good carwash business. Otherwise, I’ll break your back.

While “straight” certainly means “honest” in this speech, it also has the double-meaning of “heterosexual,” particularly given its proximity to Max’s concerns about Lion’s gender-ambiguous given name. But despite Max’s homophobic warning, the film proceeds to renegotiate a more appealing and balanced kind of masculinity than the cold, brute one embodied in Max. All of the object lessons in interpersonal skills that Lion gives Max highlight gender as performance and involve a kind of behavioral cross-dressing. One of his favorite moves to distract Max and others from getting into fights is to start ballroom dancing with Max, rather flamboyantly. Max is distracted for a minute, certainly long enough to
disrupt his intentions to brawl, before he figures out he’s dancing with another man and brushes Lion back off.

Max remains resistant to Lion’s gender-bending antics until late in the film when it comes time to defend Lion in a bar, after Lion’s jokes have been misinterpreted as taunting an old, drunken man. The old man’s nephew wants to fight, but Max intervenes (remarkably, after Lion introduces Max as his “wife”). Seeing Lion’s disapproval of a brawl, Max first puts down his fists and dances with the man, à la Lion, then starts doing a strip tease, using all of those layers of protective clothing as his props. This scene allows us to see Max not only shed those protective layers that made him—symbolically—emotionally impenetrable, but also to convert to the gospel of Lion. He uses humor to win over his enemies and by the very specific means of letting his machismo go. The women and men of the bar cheer and whistle, and while Max’s unconventional appearance as a stripper is responsible for the good humor, this moment of community forged in the bar feels genuinely utopic in its momentary vision of a fluidly gendered space. From here forward, Max will become a nurturer, helping Lion through the darker events to come, willing to sacrifice his carwash dream to take care of his ill friend. In short, Lion teaches Max an alternative masculine style, one that is rather androgynous, to replace his destructive hegemonic masculinity bent on dominating others, and Max himself seems genuinely energized by this newfound self.

The coupling of the two men to seemingly become life partners, along with this newer, more sensitive masculinity, raises the usual questions about the nature of the men’s attraction to one another. The film cannot erase the erotic possibilities of homosocial spaces, but while in many ways the film seems to do the usual disavowals of homosexuality that are practically a prerequisite of ‘70s buddy films, Scarecrow is just as ambiguous about this as
*Midnight Cowboy*. In fact, characters often don’t follow through on opportunities for explicitly denying homosexual experiences or attractions, and much is left in the unspoken.

The primary example of this ambiguity is tied to a shared sexual experience between the two men. After a night of carousing, Max and Lion go back to their hotel room, with a live woman and a mannequin, respectively. While this is another joke of Lion’s, he disposes of the mannequin as the other two beckon him to bed while he goes off to wash his hands, and the scene ends with the implied sexual arrangement of having the woman sandwiched between the two men. As Eve Sedgwick has argued, triangular relationships between two men and a woman, where the two men are rivals, are really about the (homosocial) desire between the men.\(^{75}\) We see this in other buddy films of the period, such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, where the schoolteacher’s presence helps do the work of disavowing the homoerotic desire between the men. In a related theory, anthropologist Gayle Rubin argues that the transfer of a woman between two men is a way of constructing kinship or a bond; the woman symbolically connects the two men, and thus her role is more functional than romantic.\(^{76}\) Within these triangular relationships, the primary and homoerotic relationship between the men remains latent for Sedgwick and symbolic for Rubin, as the woman’s presence seems to heterosexualize the relationship. Here in *Scarecrow*, however, the two men and the woman are literally in bed together, and though the film cuts to the next scene after Lion approaches the bed, the erotic possibilities are much more obvious.

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\(^{75}\) This is Sedgwick’s major argument in *Between Men*. As explained earlier, the homosocial is distinct from the homosexual, but it almost inevitably entails the homoerotic.

While they were of course drunk, this sexual encounter does not sit as well the next day when the men are sober. Back on the road, Max comes out of the bushes next to railroad tracks, declaring that “getting laid sure is good for [his] regularity.” With last night’s events on the mind, Lion attempts to learn about Max’s sexual history, putting his arm around Max and asking point blank how he got laid in prison: “Hey Max, I’ve been meaning to ask you…in the joint…no women, right? So how’d ya get laid?” Max stops in his tracks and looks at Lion with enough coldness for him to remove his arm, then starts walking again, choosing not to answer the question rather than explicitly denying any homosexual activity. He then seemingly changes the subject: “Hey, I’m gonna have that carwash. Yeah. And a deep-freezer full of steaks. And ass, buddy, I mean ass.” While “ass” is synonymous with women in heterosexual masculine parlance, the context of the previous conversation leaves the whole to which the part refers rather vague. The gender of “ass” remains in question as Lion follows up with the warning, “Maybe you should be more careful where you drop your drawers—some scorpion will put a liplock on your big ass,” to which Max negates, “Uh huh, it would be his funeral” (emphasis mine). Max’s final line here is perhaps a delayed disavowal of the homosexual encounters about which Lion inquired.

While the possibility of Max having moved from not only homosocial relationships in prison to homosexual ones remains hanging in the air, it is worth pointing out that Lion himself is returning from the homosocial space of the Navy. While sailors at least have the occasional shore leave, long periods at sea also provide conditions under which otherwise self-identifying heterosexual men might engage in sexual activities with other men. Lion’s question may be motivated not only by curiosity about Max’s potential prison sex, but by a desire to either share or understand his own sexual experiences with or alongside men.
Technically, we don’t know what went on in the motel room the night before, only who was present, and Max’s silence on the precipitating events applies to Lion’s questions as well. Certainly the major question this scene engages is what counts as “gay” sex. The indeterminacy of when the homoerotic becomes the homosexual is heightened by Lion’s warning about scorpions in the bushes.\textsuperscript{77} Being bitten on one’s buttocks by a scorpion has erotic connotations as well, and shares the threat of sodomy that prison poses.

Like \textit{Midnight Cowboy}, these ambiguous allusions to homosexuality or queerness—which were never articulated clearly in earlier buddy films—likely is stimulated by the increased visibility of gay culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s, along with the end of the Production Code in Hollywood. The buddy films of the ’70s are willing to outright invoke questions about characters’ sexuality, but never quite answer them. On the one hand, the lack of definitive “answers” about characters’ sexual identities could be read as a more sophisticated take on the nature of human sexuality, informed by the thinking of popular sexologists such as Alfred Kinsey, where sexuality cannot be fit into rigid categories.\textsuperscript{78} On the other hand, the fear and duress that surrounds the most blatantly homosexual encounters in buddy films indicate some panic over the lack of stability in sexual identity and the ability to easily detect a person’s sexuality. Like \textit{Midnight Cowboy}, which featured Joe’s nightmare—implied as a flashback—of being gang-raped, rape appears here too as

\textsuperscript{77} The choice of animal here seems to reference \textit{Scorpio Rising}, the homoerotic 1964 Kenneth Anger film that explored images of bikers.

\textsuperscript{78} In explaining his own scale for measuring degrees of heterosexuality and homosexuality in a person, Kinsey argues, “Males do not represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual. The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats. It is a fundamental of taxonomy that nature rarely deals with discrete categories. . . . The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects.” Alfred Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, Sexual Behavior in the Human Male (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders Co., 1948), 639.
simultaneously an act of male violence, a reaction to a dearth of women, and part of a new moment in history where appearances are not a reliable indicator of a person’s sexuality.\textsuperscript{79}

Midway through the film, before his transformation into a jollier scarecrow, Max gets into yet another drunken brawl that lands both him and Lion in jail. Max blames Lion for their being there because Lion distracted him from his master plan of getting to Pittsburgh, and will not speak to him. Sociable person that he is, Lion befriends a fellow prisoner, Riley, who has achieved some power by providing the guards with whores and illegal gambling. Part of his cushier job in the prison is that he is in charge of the talent show. While Riley has swimsuit model pin-ups next to his bed, and his eventual come-on to Lion is presented as conditional to his eighteen-month sentence, he also appears to be coded as gay by his association with “show business.” The more Riley watches Lion attempt to make up with Max, the more Riley seems to want Lion for himself, extending more favors and offering him a position as his assistant director; he sees Max as a rival for Lion’s affections. Hanging out together alone one night, Riley first propositions Lion with euphemisms, suggesting he “give ole Riley a little relief.” Innocent Lion does not understand what Riley wants, and so Riley gets more direct and tries to kiss him. Lion pulls away and the two engage in familiar male tussling, though clearly Lion is uncomfortable and confused; he shifts into his usual defensive mode of humor, joking around like this scene is from a monster movie. However, this doesn’t go over well with Riley. He corners Lion and attempts to get him to give him oral sex. After Lion escapes again, Riley beats him. We never see Lion raped, as the film cuts from a shot of Riley punching him repeatedly in the face to a shot of Lion stumbling

\textsuperscript{79} This is not to say that appearances are ever a reliable “sign” of a person’s sexual identity, but as discussed earlier, the late 1960s and 1970s witnessed many changes in men’s styles, which included straight men adopting more androgynous looks and gay men adopting more “macho” looks.
back into the dormitory. He tells Max, “Riley tried to fuck me, so I had to kick the shit out of him,” but his own swollen and bloody face reveals that this is hardly what has happened.

Max’s later questioning of Riley before his vengeful beating of him—“you gave it to him, didn’t you?”—and Riley’s lack of denial imply that he did indeed rape Lion.

Lion’s rape is the most transformative moment for both men in the film. After this, Lion is never quite the same—he no longer clowns around and now appears shrouded with apprehension and gloom. Max, on the other hand, indulges in his final outburst of male aggression when he beats Lion’s rapist, though arguably this is the strongest motivator he has ever had. After this, Max shifts to Lion’s approach to dealing with conflict, partially to lure Lion back out of the shell that he has constructed around himself, post-rape. The aftermath of Lion’s rape presents a man’s rape as the most horrible experience in the world, and while rape is certainly a traumatic experience, the cinematic representation of men’s stands in deep contrast to the representation of the rape of women in ‘70s films. As Aljean Harmetz argued in The New York Times in 1973, female victims of rape were practically treated as disposable, and their rapes were primarily narrative devices to prompt a male character’s actions. As she put it so succinctly, “Raped men are allowed anguish. Raped women are ignored.”

And indeed, this difference is one of the primary qualities of 1970s films that make them misogynistic. In a moment when second wave feminists were challenging male privilege as it pervaded both private and public life, men in Hollywood who undeniably had more power than women there were able to dramatize the pain of being a man at the expense of using film to explore women’s experiences.

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80 Aljean Harmetz, “Rape—an Ugly Movie Trend,” New York Times, September 30, 1973, A1, ProQuest Historical Newspapers New York Times. Molly Haskell sees this treatment of women’s rape as part of the larger context of cinematic representations of women during the 1970s, which marked a period of highly limited roles in terms of both screen time and characters.
While of course rape is a part of prison reality, in *Scarecrow* and other buddy films, it seems to work on a more symbolic level: it is simultaneously a testament to the undesirable and dangerous aspects of the dominating male, and a testament to the consequences of not creating an emotional and physical armor against this type of male. Male liberationists understood that the desire to dominate was harmful to oneself and to others, but that the logic of hegemonic masculinity is that if you are not the predator, you are the prey; in other words, masculinity is often a Catch-22. So while Lion’s “scarecrow philosophy” seems privileged—emphasized by the film’s title and Max’s conversion to a more emotionally open nurturer at the end—the physical/sexual assault on the gentle Lion by his rapist and the psychological assault by his abandoned girlfriend—complicates the question of whether or not it really is better to make oneself emotionally vulnerable and to trust others. Lion’s experiences in the second half of the film suggest that his life philosophy is overly naïve and partially vindicate the need for the emotional defense on which Max relies. As patriarchy is a structure of dominance, not simply of women by men, but also of “weaker” or “inferior” men by other men, the consequences of being sensitive, gentle, or open leave a man vulnerable to brutes, be they physical, economic, etc. In fact, Lion’s eventual rapist compliments him when they first meet on being “open”; while he seems to mean in terms of making friends, this quality has marked him as feminized in Riley’s eyes, and Riley appears to repeatedly size Lionel up for his potential as a “bitch.” Max, on the other hand, remains out of danger because he treats other men as his competitors and enemies.

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81 Many feminists, socialist-feminists in particular, would argue that this idea that power is a zero-sum game is a masculine view of the world. Jack Sawyer articulates this concept in his essay “On Male Liberation”; we live in a world organized by domination, where one is either the dominator or the dominated. He too sees this as masculine and hopes that as women gain political power and help lead justice movements that they don’t fall into the same trap and instead reconstruct the world from a different ethical position.
Besides providing dramatic consequences for Lion’s bucking hegemonic masculinity, these prison scenes, including the attempted rape, follow up the earlier questions about the men’s sexualities. Here, Lion’s question about how one “gets laid” in homosocial spaces (military, prison) is answered, though it doesn’t do much to clarify the possible homosexual encounters on which the characters previously remained silent. While Lion seems genuinely naïve about Riley’s euphemisms for sex, and Max punishes Riley for the rape, rejecting sex with a particular person is not the same as rejecting desire for other people of the same sex. The assault by this interloper brings the male couple back together; I do not point this out to suggest that Max and Lion are “really” gay, but that same-sex desire is hardly foreclosed by the characters’ rejection of Riley. In fact, Riley himself embodies a kind of sexual ambiguity typical of this historical period and of the subtle explorations of men’s sexuality in these buddy films. Again, some elements of his character signify heterosexuality, and others signify homosexuality. His costume in particular encourages multiple readings: he doesn’t wear the standard prison uniform, but a white button down shirt with the sleeves cut off, revealing muscular and masculine-looking arms, and his hair is a little longer than the others, with a slightly dyed blonde cast.

The nature of desire between the men also must be considered in light of the film’s ambivalence about heterosexual relationships. The film’s representation of women is typical of the 1970s buddy film of the road movie variety, as Molly Haskell describes them: “In the road films, the women are . . . mere bodies, way stations where the heroes can relieve themselves and resume their journey.”82 Max seems to have few ambitions for getting married and is happy to sleep with any woman with big breasts who takes an interest in him.

82 Haskell, From Reverence to Rape, 336.
(of course, this is presented as making up for lost time in prison). Lion’s attraction to women is much less clear: again, it is implied that he joins in with Max and his conquest from the bar, but later when Max is seducing his sister’s friend Frenchie, Lion does not pursue Max’s sister in turn, even though this would be a typical pairing. Lion does seem willing to do her bidding by convincing Max to open the car wash in Colorado instead, but their relationship remains platonic. And when Max is flirting with Frenchie, Lion disrupts their getting closer; whether it is because he is oblivious or is jealous of either of them remains unclear. In Max’s mind as well, women are merely a replaceable distraction from the more important business of opening the car wash with Lion.

The film’s ambivalent attitude toward women culminates in the climax of Lion finally getting to Detroit and contacting the mother of his child, Annie, from a payphone. Annie is presented as a grotesque image of domesticity, in curlers and with mangled teeth; while this may make her subsequent actions seem meaner (outer crudeness signifying inner crudeness), it also ages her beyond her years to show what she has been through in Lion’s absence. Surprised by Lion’s phone call, she hesitates for a moment and then tells Lion she not only lost the baby, but the baby was never baptized and therefore is in limbo. The film gives her some sympathetic motivation: not only was she abandoned by Lion in all ways but financial support, but she ended up marrying Joey the Banana King, who, while a good man, is clearly not the man of her dreams. Telling Lion that the baby died both punishes him and keeps away this reminder to her of how life didn’t turn out. This false news wounds Lion so deeply that he hangs up the phone, but rather than share the news with Max, he lies and says everything is fine; Annie has a boy and is married and happy. Max congratulates Lion that he’s now “a man,” but Annie’s lie has denied Lion of this status. Her motivations construct a
moral ambiguity that does not judge her too harshly, but Lion’s subsequent mental breakdown—intensified by his earlier rape—makes him a tragic figure. Lion was ready to grow up and accept responsibility for his past actions, and he is punished anyway, potentially unfairly. Like the Catch-22 of hegemonic masculinity, it seems that Lion can do no right as a man, and these two traumas render him catatonic. However, Max is redeemed by Lion’s tragedy—he promises to get his car wash money from the bank in Pittsburgh and return to bring Lion back to health. Max confesses to the unconscious Lion, “I just can’t make it alone anymore”; he is ready to have a fuller life in the company of another man.

The men in these melodramatic buddy films are all burdened by the weight produced from the promises of masculine ideals left unfilled in a changing cultural landscape. In the cases of Midnight Cowboy and The Last Detail, the masculine roles protagonists thought they could play are reduced to costumes, to the point of seeming ludicrous to a female population that just can’t be bothered with them. Traveling and picaresque narratives are featured so heavily because frankly the men are lost and don’t know what to do with themselves. They often dream of paradise as somewhere else—Florida, or even Pittsburgh—other than where they are, but never make it there. Sickness and problems keep them from their dreams, though there perhaps was never much to them anyway. These men lack purpose, which was so fundamental to earlier definitions of American masculinity and to cinematic heroes. The men have little to offer to the world, but they can offer themselves to each other. Trying to make another man happy taps into something deep inside where human potential is reached not through the physical actions that once made a man heroic and an effective part of society, but through nurture. Of course, the films have an ambiguous relationship to the new kind of
masculinity being explored by male liberationists. In all three films, emotional openness leaves one vulnerable to various forms of pain. Nevertheless, the adoption of more feminine qualities potentially supports a cultural environment where strict boundaries between genders were weakening. In theory, this would benefit women, but unfortunately, progressive films about women were in the minority in Hollywood during this period.

To return to the question at the outset of this chapter, we must ask whether these representations of male-male love seek to contain the feminism that is challenging patriarchy and male privilege in this time period, or work as a parallel, pro-feminist project to critique the social institutions that have trapped both men and women. As Tania Modleski would argue in the 1990s when male academics and popular representations of “new men” were not simply “joining” the conversations of feminists, but burgeoning on taking over, there is a slippery slope from supporting to participating to coopting. While there were women working behind the camera in Hollywood, they were in the minority, and while there were memorable, protofeminist representations of women onscreen, such as Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore and Coming Home, the late ‘60s and early ‘70s were a man’s era.

It is easy to critique the representations of women in these films as another false binary; women here are depicted as either emasculating men or patiently waiting with their legs spread open. But while these stereotypes are troublesome, there remains something progressive about the films’ critique of hegemonic masculinity and the drive to dominate others. These films of course do this best in examining the ways that men’s desire to dominate other men violates the humanity of another person. Although there is a degree of spirited, “boys will be boys” violence in these films (such as the Navy vs. Marines brawl in

83 Modleski, Feminism Without Women.
the public bathroom in *The Last Detail*), this is usually between equals. The physical and sexual violence experienced by characters with less power that comes out of contexts such as prison inmate or military hierarchies is represented as inhumane, unethical, and psychologically devastating. To see how masculinity and patriarchy intersect with and maintain political, economic, and social power is a critical lesson to more general projects of liberation. In many ways, these films are most progressive when recontextualized with the social justice movements that interested men of the New Left. Jack Sawyer’s manifesto “On Male Liberation,” appearing in the journal *Liberation*, exemplifies the leap made from feminism to a total synthesis of rights and social justice movements:

> The affairs of the world have always been run nearly exclusively by men, at all levels. It is not accidental that the ways that elements of society have related to each other has been disastrously competitive, to the point of oppressing large segments of the world’s population. Most societies operate on authoritarian bases—in government, industry, education, religions, the family, and other institutions. . . . women and men might work together to create a system that provides equality to all and dominates no one.  

On the one hand, Sawyer is able to acknowledge the hypocrisy of sexism within the New Left and makes feminism, or anti-sexism, appealing by seeing it in relation to other movements and projects that have interested progressive men. On the other hand, by merging together all forms of domination, Sawyer potentially “skips” the necessary project of examining how sexism actually works in the everyday lives of men and women. This also eliminates the need and ignores the demand for the disempowered group to be heard and set the agenda.

Likewise, the buddy films of New Hollywood dominated a period of time when U.S. filmmakers could have paid more attention to women’s issues, and while the damage done by

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the masculine world is of course a worthwhile critique, to not examine the oppression of
women is to secure it all the more thoroughly. The films do this by falsely assigning more
power to women than they actually have. The social contract between the sexes that had
placed many women in the role of dependents is seen as a tool of women where men get the
short end of the stick. Heterosexual relations become a form of exchange whereby men lose
just as much as they gain. To repeat Mulhall, “any pussy you get in this world, you’re going
to have to pay for, one way or another.” In these melodramatic buddy films, men are
oppressed by other men in the public sphere and by women in the private sphere, making
them the greatest losers of all. Hence, the women in these films who are not whores can
choose to ignore the male leads and go on their merry way; as early as 1968, women already
appear to be more powerful. This is not to say that men do not, then or now, experience
genuine feelings of emasculation when they do not live up to the ideal of being potent and
powerful, but these films symbolically tell their audience that, simply, women don’t have as
much to worry about as men. Of course, as melodramas, the films do not depict how things
really are, but rather, how things feel. While it can be difficult to ascertain the latent
intentions of these films, we do know that during this period of filmmaking, questions about
sexism within the entertainment industry were being asked. Thus, however intentional or
not, the lack of attention to women’s problems in film could constitute a lack of support for
the women’s movement. It is in the next cycle of male melodramas, the father-son
melodramas of the late 1970s and early 1980s, that feminism is finally explicitly invoked,
and within that cycle, men continue to be misunderstood victims of sexism. Examining the
buddy films from the New Hollywood period usefully establishes a pattern of male
melodramas exhibiting both conservative and progressive ideas about gender that continues through the genre to the present.
CHAPTER 3


In the male buddy films that had come to dominate late ‘60s and early ‘70s U. S. cinema, the young men who are adrift, fumbling through life, and trying to find solace with one another are almost never fathers and often are missing fathers of their own. They share this with many of their literary forebears, either literal or symbolic orphans free to roam, however more trapped they are here in the contemporary America of these films. And lacking women and children in their own lives, these men are “free” of entanglements, though the all-male spaces they find themselves in are often figurative and literal prisons that trap them. While Lion of Scarecrow does have a child from the pregnant girlfriend he abandoned in all ways but financial, he only has plans to meet his son and has no intention of becoming more deeply involved in his life; instead, he intends to move to Pittsburgh with Max to start a carwash. Not only were Americans themselves increasingly viewing parenthood as restrictive by the ‘70s, but fathers were associated with the types of traditional masculinity that young men had been rejecting in the ‘60s and ‘70s, as I discuss in my previous chapter. These buddy films address fathers only obliquely, if at all; fathers are often missing from characters’ lives—most clearly, perhaps, for Joe Buck in Midnight Cowboy and Mulhall and Meadows in The Last Detail—and thus are often a structuring absence. While it’s possible to psychoanalyze

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85 Robert L. Griswold, Fatherhood in America: A History (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 229. In 1957, 27% of fathers viewed parenthood as restrictive; by 1976, the number had increased to 43%.
the effect of these missing fathers, the films themselves do not provide an explicit critique.

There are, however, other films in the ‘70s that do offer overt criticisms of traditional fathers, and these clear the stage for a new father to appear in the wake of feminism and male liberation. The domineering, individualistic, and emotionally limited fathers of films such as *I Never Sang for My Father* (1970) and *The Great Santini* (1979) would be replaced at the end of the ‘70s by the nurturing, emotionally connected, and strong fathers of films such as *The Champ* (1979), *Ordinary People* (1980), *Table for Five* (1983), and, the most iconic, *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979). This latter group of films, I argue, appropriates the subgenre of the maternal melodrama, which historically had been part of a broader genre, the woman’s film. This appropriation led to films that simultaneously produced images of men who had grown personally in the aftermath of the women’s liberation movement and criticized women for not valuing domestic work and child-rearing as much as culture had expected them to historically. These paternal melodramas are partially progressive in their breaking gender norms for fathers, but also conservative in their romanticizing of the hearth that women appeared to have abandoned. In this way, paternal melodramas could be read as a form of antifeminist backlash.

Within Hollywood, women’s liberation had become more prominent in the mid to late ‘70s and may have partially provoked the paternal melodramas that closed out the decade. After the buddy film boom quieted down after 1974, a spate of cinematic “feminist” texts appeared that questioned home-making as a satisfactory occupation for women, critiqued the emotional and physical abuse women often endured, and freed
women from narrative closures of heterosexual coupling. Both *Diary of a Mad Housewife* (1970) and *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974) represented housewives as psychologically damaged by their circumscribed lives. In *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (1974) and *Coming Home* (1978), women started new lives, asserted their own desires, and started working outside the home. Though in these latter films, women still found a heterosexual partner, in other films like *Private Benjamin* (1980), characters rejected romance or avoided the kinds of relationships that they recognized as unfulfilling or circumscribing. In all, the scope of women’s lives and their willingness to speak for themselves was expanding in ‘70s cinema, as it was in real life.

Dissatisfaction with a purely domestic existence was not merely the province of radical women; by the late 1970s, the need and desire for a life beyond one’s family were felt throughout U. S. society, making debates about gender harder to ignore. In 1963, Betty Friedan had diagnosed the “problem with no name” that afflicted women; essentially, the (generally more affluent and white) women that were educated and then became mothers and homemakers were not fulfilled by these routine and repetitive lives.86 While the number of working married women with children had already been increasing since the ‘50s, that number would more than double by the mid-1980s,87 a change owing in part to the women’s liberation movement. Perhaps more extreme, by 1973, after the movement had gained momentum and its ideas had become part of mainstream public discourse, some married women were reported to be leaving their husbands, even running away. *The New York Times* reported that “dropout” wives were

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86 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963). I must emphasize here the role that class played in these changing expectations of women: working class and poor women, of course, had been working outside of the home prior to second wave feminism out of pure necessity.

87 Griswold, *Fatherhood in America*, 222.
on the rise that year: “Detective agencies . . . report that the ratio of disappearing wives to husbands has risen from about 1 in 100 a decade ago to more than 1 out of 3 now.” This trend produced an anxiety about women leaving husbands and sometimes even children that shaped the cinematic narratives about new fathers that appeared by the decade’s end, but so too did the more general shift toward homes with two working parents.

Men’s response to women working outside the home was complex, in both life and fictional films. As working women’s attention became more divided and they no longer functioned primarily as limitless resources of attention and caretaking, men took an increasing interest in becoming active fathers. As Judith Newton writes,

Fatherly yearning . . . surfaced at a time when women’s increasing entry into the labor market, their feminist-inspired focus on self-development, and their increasingly critical consciousness of traditional gender roles had dislodged white men, in particular, as primary breadwinners and as the focus of women’s emotional energies. For many men in the 1980s, involved fatherhood may have functioned as another compensation for these emotional and material dislocations.

The sense of dislocation that Newton describes above had been symbolically visible in the buddy road films of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s; and in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s, fatherhood would indeed be the place where many men on film became reconstituted and

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89 There are no specific statistics for the number of women that left their children as well, but the anecdotes in the New York Times suggest that women usually take the children with them. In this article, the detectives themselves cite the need for personal fulfillment as a primary reason for women’s leaving, though many are fleeing domestic abuse as well. Ibid., 44.

90 Judith Newton, From Panthers to Promise Keepers: Rethinking the Men’s Movement (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 162.
fulfilled. These ongoing changes to family structures, alongside the shift to conservative views of the family that would gain potency with Ronald Reagan’s election and efforts to defeat the Equal Rights Amendment, provided a complex cultural context that fed a new cycle of male melodramas, what I will call paternal melodramas.

Paternal melodramas center on men who are or are becoming nurturing and child-centered fathers and must fight to have their parenting ability or “new” sensitive masculinity validated. Often, these fathers must contend with state or cultural institutions that do not recognize their virtue. Paternal melodramas have some continuity with the earlier buddy films: they continue to question corporate masculinity, as had the New Left men of the ’60s, as antithetical to parenting because it overvalues individuality and profit rather than interpersonal relationships and emotional well-being. The fathers in these films in many ways represent a new kind of man, one who has rejected many of the masculine ideals that had repressed him and others. However, the films also display conservatism and misogyny in their suggestions that men still make the best heads of household—albeit, of a different style—and in their frequently turning women into selfish and emotionally distant parents. In this way, although the films have entered a domestic space, they echo the classic “flight” from women as superficial and unnatural creatures imposing on men’s bonds that scholars like Leslie Fiedler had illuminated in American literature and that was revisited in the buddy road films earlier in the decade.

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91 While we often think of the women’s liberation movement beginning in the ‘60s as the catalyst for middle-class women leaving the home to work/pursue a career, the number of working mothers has been on the rise since 1948, contrary to the historical narrative that women went “back home” after having worked traditionally male jobs during WWII: “from 1948 to 1960, the percentage of mothers in the work force with children ages six to eighteen jumped from 21 to 36 percent, while those with children under six climbed from 11 to 23 percent.” Griswold, Fatherhood in America, 4.

It is no surprise then that the children of these new fathers are almost exclusively sons and the films often exalt all-male bliss. The more overtly maternal male characters, however, are so appealing that they seem progressive, admirable, and even ideal. This blend of conservative and progressive undercurrents places this cycle of films at an intersection of public discourse on fatherhood.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, multiple constituencies were interested in men’s relation to their roles as fathers, and these often came from completely different political backgrounds. Amongst more radical men, fatherhood was a potential site of social revolution: “spokesmen for black nationalisms and for largely white profeminist networks alike not only embraced loving fatherhood as a major form of personal development for men, but also speculated that it might be the most rewarding avenue of all for developing more open and emotionally expressive masculine ideals.”93 Traditional masculine ideals included the domination of others, and thus, new ideals had to be constructed in order to be a man without also being an oppressor. The nurturing qualities of parenting could be extended to other adults and also oneself. The connection between fatherhood and personal fulfillment was made not only by radicals, but men within more mainstream American life. Many middle-class fathers themselves displayed a desire to get on the “daddy track”; that is, they wanted to have good relationships with their children and, in order to attain this, were willing to transition into less lucrative or upwardly mobile careers in order to spend more time with their children, or to even co-parent. In a Newsweek article from 1981, reporting on the mini-trend of daddy-track fathers, a freelancer acknowledges the consequences of cutting down on work to spend

93 Newton, From Panthers to Promise Keepers, 158.
more time caring for his children: “It has to be hurting my career . . . But I've exchanged the benefits of the outside world for the benefits of the hearth.” Many men were even interested in being the parent who stayed home with the children while their partner went to full-time paid employment. Sociologists, however, take this eagerness to co-parent with a grain of salt: they have found that, often, fathers believe in a more equal division of household labor in theory, but don’t put in the actual time in practice. Despite this, the desire to be more than a breadwinner of a family was clearly expressed throughout studies and interviews published in the popular press during this period, and this desire to nurture represented a new kind of commitment to family.

Simultaneously, a separate agenda was pushed in the name of fatherhood: blockage of the Equal Rights Amendment, which would have assured, among other things, equal pay and rights for women in the workplace. Conservatives, such as Phyllis Schlafly, encouraged women to rally against the ERA because a woman also had the right to be a homemaker and have her husband support her; opponents of the ERA argued that it would free men to abandon their obligations to their families, and thus the amendment needed to be defeated to defend against male rebellion. Of course, in these conservative terms, fatherhood continues to be constructed as breadwinning and women are relegated to the role of dependents. However, both camps interested in men as fathers were working against the flight from commitment that Barbara Ehrenreich has

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95 Griswold, Fatherhood in America, 227. This discrepancy between sentiment and actual labor performed is not simply the result of men not paying attention; Griswold observes that many men actually “resist” equal participation in household labor and childcare. Fatherhood in America, 221.

documented as the trajectory of men in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century and that had been romanticized on screen in cinema of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s.\textsuperscript{97} The male melodramas of the very late ‘70s and early ‘80s often contained a paradoxical mix of these political strains, and the conflict between the two often creates the pathos that moves the films. These films both demand the recognition of fathers as equally good parents—if not better than mothers—and place the hearth and the child back on their pedestal. This latter gesture was repositioning the family to first place after the women’s movement had argued for shared commitment to family and personal fulfillment outside of the home.

Writing for \textit{The Nation} in 1983, Molly Haskell expresses suspicion for the cycle of paternal melodramas begun by \textit{The Champ} and \textit{Kramer vs. Kramer} in 1979, not simply for their potentially conservative politics, but for their marketing toward women.\textsuperscript{98} While it is hard to document that production companies aimed their marketing efforts at women,\textsuperscript{99} the films are tearjerkers, which historically have been considered a women’s genre. There certainly are plenty of films during which male spectators have cried or that are male-centered and deeply sentimental, but tearjerkers about parents, children, and custody have often been about mothers specifically. The most prototypical maternal melodrama might be \textit{Stella Dallas} (1937), to which \textit{The Champ} and \textit{Kramer} are strikingly similar. These maternal melodramas are a subgenre of what feminist critics

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid. In the public memory, the twentieth century is the century where women looked beyond marriage and parenting for a meaningful existence, but as Ehrenreich documents in her book, this was very much the desire of men as well.


\textsuperscript{99} Though \textit{Kramer vs. Kramer} ads contain an uncharacteristically smiling Joanna Kramer and all three family members hugging, perhaps to appeal to female viewers.
have dubbed “the woman’s film,” which is synonymous with the “women’s weepie.” Because the generic structure of the paternal melodrama is so similar to films that have already proved popular with women, Haskell has a legitimate hypothesis that these films about fathers are, in part, meant to appeal to women. In other words, based on genre, these paternal melodramas were films that women viewers would want to see as much as men, maybe even more so. Since paternal melodramas also had women as an audience, and very often were fed by the experiences of their male writers, directors, and actors, the films functioned as a cultural site of expression about gender and parenting in an era of changing families. While the central focus of the genre is indeed how fathers can best change for their children’s sake and their own, the films’ implicit messages for women are more controversial. Not only can these films be understood as a postfeminist male appropriation over the issues of gender roles and power, but also as antifeminist backlash. Like the buddy films from a decade earlier, this cycle of paternal melodramas evinces a mixture of progressive and conservative elements.

Prior to the films featuring the “new” kinds of fathers that some men were becoming in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s, there are father-son melodramas that focused on the tyranny of the traditional father. These include *I Never Sang for My Father* (1970) and *Sometimes a Great Notion* (1970), but the later *The Great Santini* (1979) is most explicitly clear that the patriarch should be considered a relic of the past, however affectionate the film sometimes is toward him. Directed by Lewis John Carlino, *The Great Santini* stars Robert Duvall as a Marine fighter pilot, Bull Meechum, who imposes

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the masculine hierarchies and ethos of his profession onto his personal life. As part of his profession, he relocates his family to new towns every few years and expects the kids to endure the difficulties of change without complaint: “You’re Marine kids and can chew nails while other kids suck cotton candy!” Though at times his exaggerated machismo and bad boy pranks seem amusing, his inability to communicate with his wife and children and understand their needs is destructive. The film’s emotional focus is on his teenage son Ben who must negotiate his own version of manhood while under the rule of his overbearing father.

When the film was released in 1979, reviewers often found its ideas to be old-fashioned; that is, they felt like the film was revisiting a generational shift that had already taken place. Richard Corliss of *Time* magazine hypothesized that the film’s success in Manhattan was owed to audiences who “care[d] to remember where they came from and what they might become,” an affirmation of the need for new masculine ideals and a warning not to backslide into old ones. The film text itself certainly is aware that Bull is antiquated and not with the times. In many ways, Bull is a cartoon of chauvinism and bigotry—like Archie Bunker as a Marine—who uses racial epithets freely and insults men by calling them girls. His daughter Mary Anne, who clearly feels like a second-class citizen as a female in the household, provides much of the comic relief by taunting Bull and attempting to press his buttons. For example, annoyed that her family’s evening revolves around her brother’s basketball game because her father is

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102 *The Great Santini*’s release was the same year that the television show *All in the Family* completed its run from 1971 to 1979. Archie Bunker had become so iconic as this “type” of white, straight, working class masculinity that Bull Meechum as a cinematic incarnation—however more physically dynamic—would seem not just familiar, but potentially tired.
obsessed with only his eldest son’s achievements, she challenges her father’s priorities and demands attention by baiting his prejudices:

MARY ANNE. Dad, let’s bare our souls and get to know one another.  
BULL. I don’t want you to know me. I prefer to be an enigma, like a chink.  
Now scram.  
MARY ANNE. Am I a Meechum, Dad? Can girls be real Meechums? Girls without jump shots? Or am I a simple form of Meechum, like in biology? Maryann, the one-celled Meechum. . . . Dad, I’m pregnant. I’m pregnant by a Negro, daddy. His name is Rufus. I didn’t want to tell you, but since we’re baring our souls to each other: Rufus is a pacifist! A pacifist homosexual!

Made in 1979, but set in 1962, the film uses Mary Anne to represent a younger generation of Americans that would adopt a Civil Rights consciousness and challenge white racist, heterosexist, capitalist patriarchy. That Mary Anne can deliver her criticism mockingly in a mainstream film is a marker of how widely accepted that discourse had become. The film criticizes Bull not simply as one father insensitive to his family’s needs, but also as the embodiment of dominant white, straight masculinity, which has historically oppressed others in terms of gender, race, sexuality. While Bull generally either ignores his daughter’s criticism or counters it with more socially offensive material, late in the film he admits that the masculine ideals to which he subscribes are both causing problems within his own family and becoming socially marginalized in the broader culture: “I recently observed that for certain throwbacks of the species, certain gung-ho dinosaurs, of which I proudly number myself as one, being a warrior without a war has its problems.” So while the film’s critique of militaristic, traditional patriarchs did not feel fresh to contemporary reviewers, the film is a social document of the mainstream understanding of masculinity and fathers in 1979, and sets off the new fathers that would be applauded in other films like *Kramer vs. Kramer.*
Bull’s son Ben represents the new kind of father that will appear in the paternal melodramas starting in 1979, and much of what makes him “new” is his ability to identify with his mother and to exhibit an ethic of care toward others. This identification with the mother is often neglected by critics of the film, as so much focus is placed on the father-son relationship. And indeed, not all critics are convinced that Ben represents an alternative masculinity to his father’s. In particular, some critics have raised concerns over the closure of the film: after the father’s death, Ben takes his father’s place behind the wheel of the family car and ushers his family through the father’s ritual of moving in the middle of the night to avoid traffic. In her study of fathers in postwar Hollywood films *Bringing Up Daddy*, Stella Bruzzi interprets this final scene as Ben as having assimilated the “absurd and maniacal idiosyncrasies of his deranged, deluded father,” suggesting that the critique of the antiquated version of masculinity and patriarchal order that is achieved throughout the body of the film is negated by this affectionate homage to the father’s ritual. While certainly maintaining the ritual is a way of honoring him, there is little evidence that Ben will become his father. I find Bruzzi’s reading dissatisfactory because it completely ignores a very prominent mother-son relationship and perhaps weights the film’s closing too heavily in terms of overall meaning. Throughout the film, Ben does challenge his father in his own way, often with a degree of approval from his mother Lillian. The nature of Ben’s confrontations are masochistic, and at times even appear to be forms of obedience; because his ways of rejecting his father are less conventional forms of rebellion, his opposition may not register clearly.

One of the most explicit illustrations of this masochism is in the aftermath of an Oedipal struggle between the father and son in a one-on-one basketball game performed for the rest of the family. For the first time, Ben beats his father at a game (noting that it’s the first time anyone in the family has beaten Bull at anything) much to the delight of his mother and siblings. Bull attempts to change the rules after Ben wins as the first to reach ten points, insisting that he needs to win by two points, in an attempt to defer his son’s ultimate victory. As Ben refuses these new terms and the rest of the family insists that he won fairly, the father becomes increasingly aggressive, following Ben to his room, bouncing the ball off the back of his head in an attempt to anger and egg him into another game. Along with this physical abuse, he verbally taunts Ben, accusing him of being feminine for refusing to continue the game: “Mama’s boy, I bet you’re gonna cry. . . C’mon squirt a few. One-two-three cry [hitting him with the ball], one-two-three cry. You’re my favorite daughter, Ben, I swear to god, you’re my sweetest little girl.” The son tolerates these smacks to the back of the head, choosing not to lash out or give in to another game—doing so would give the father perhaps what he wants, a mirror image of himself in his son’s behavior through reciprocation. The son’s tolerance of his father’s “beating” keeps identification with him at bay, and interestingly, he doesn’t contradict his father’s calling him a girl; instead, he ends the conflict by telling him: “This little girl just whipped your ass good, Colonel.” Ben’s behavior could be described as passive-aggressive, a form sometimes considered feminine. Ben’s way of dealing with his father here is characteristic of his own style of masculinity that will be repeated throughout the film, one that can resist without attempting to destroy another person.
For Bull, there is only one kind of masculinity that counts, and the world is divided between the girls and the men with, in his words, “gonads, big brass ones.” There is little, if any, middle ground, and Bull tells the mother Lillian that Ben has what it takes to be just like him if only she didn’t coddle him: “I think you gentle him too much. It screws up his instincts and his timing. There’s one thing I want to give my sons, the gift of fury. I want ‘em to gobble up the world; eat life, or it will eat them.” Bull believes that for men, life is about competition and a struggle for dominance between self and other, an ideology that male liberationists such as Jack Sawyer sought to deconstruct in the early 1970s. This struggle for dominance even extends to his relationship with his own son—he interprets their one-on-one basketball game as an Oedipal or primitive battle between young man and old, and despite his desire for his son to follow directly in his footsteps, he demands submission from Ben as long as he is still alive.

Although accused by his basketball coach of not standing up to his father, Ben does so in his own way and when he deems it necessary. In his one major act of defiance—going to help his African-American friend Toomer, whose life is threatened by local white racists, despite his father’s wish that he stay home because, Bull believes, Toomer can take care of himself—Ben rationalizes his disobedience as doing what Bull would have done. But as interested as Bull has been in molding Ben in his own image, this is unacceptable. He berates Ben for “disobeying a direct order.” By affirming his father’s lecture on order and rules with “yes, sirs” and repeating his phrases, Ben shoves Bull’s error into his face when Bull eventually realizes that Toomer is dead and that he was wrong for attempting to prevent Ben’s intervention. Bull asks, “why didn’t you tell

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104 For example, see Jack Sawyer, “On Male Liberation,” Liberation 15 (August 1970), 32-3, which I discuss at the end of the previous chapter.
me?” Ben explains, “no one can tell you anything, Dad,” indicating both that Bull doesn’t listen to anyone and that he is not a person Ben can confide in.

Bull’s failure as a father has led to Toomer’s death; had he a better relationship with his son—and, as Lillian says, “concern for human life”—the tragedy could have been averted. The ineffective communication and distance between father and son here appear to be typical, albeit rather dramatic in the film: Robert Griswold’s research on fatherhood discovered that “survey and psychological data from throughout the twentieth century suggest that . . . father-child alienation remains a defining characteristic of American family life.”

Through interviews, fathers in the traditional bread-winning role often confess that they don’t know how to have real connections with their children. One Middletown father lamented, “You know, I don’t know that I spend any time having a good time with my children. . . . And the worst of it is, I don’t know how to.” This problem of not knowing how to relate to and interact with children in an emotionally intimate way from which both parent and child can benefit is dramatized in paternal melodramas. While representatives of “new” dads in other films will learn how to do this, Bull Meechum is beyond repair. But however much his insensitivity and, at times, outright bullying are criticized here, he too is identified as a victim of sorts—Bull is the product of a time and place that did not always foster the kinds of fathers that could nurture, and he too suffers from a lack of emotional connection with his family. In fact, this inability to achieve emotional intimacy is categorized as a sickness.

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Once Bull realizes he was wrong to delay his son from reaching Toomer and that he and his family have no sense of mutual understanding, he goes on a drinking binge. Despite his revelation that “being a warrior without a war has its problems,” he comes home to get into a brawl with Lillian, in which Ben intervenes. After Ben has fought his father off his mother and Bull goes off into the night, ashamed of his aggression toward his wife and children, Ben finds him under a tree, drunk and muttering to himself. What comes out of his mouth is largely incoherent, but contains both a sense of Bull’s own identity as deeply tied to a masculine hierarchical world of giving and taking orders and that this masculine world is related to his inability to engage with even loved ones emotionally. Interspersed throughout his babble are chants of “defense, defense” and strings of “yes, sirs”; juxtaposed are the phrases “W. P. Meechum—terror of the skies” and “You guys, Lily and the kids, I’ll tell you what, you do my caring for me—deal?” The implication is that Bull has been trained by the masculine world of the Marines to keep emotional distance from other people, and so even at home, he is incapable of emotional engagement and sensitivity. When he realizes Ben is present, he shares “I’m sick, I’m sick, boy.” For Ben, this glimpse into Bull’s mental make-up leads to understanding, and on the way home, he repeatedly tells his father that he loves him, even as his father literally shoves him away and takes an unproductive swipe at him each time he says it. Ben has reached the conclusion that for all of Bull’s authority, he ultimately is helpless to prevent Ben from loving him: “I love you Dad, and there’s nothing you’re gonna do about it.” If Bull’s masculinity is a disease, Ben’s antidote is love, even if the patient will never be able to fully reciprocate. Approaching the world not through violence in kind, but through care seems to align Ben with his mother’s style.
of interacting with the father and more broadly, an androgynous style of gender if we associate an ethic of care with femininity.\textsuperscript{107} This style coincides with those advocated by male liberationists in the ‘70s, and its presence here demonstrates how commonplace the discourse of male liberation had become in public life by the end of the decade.

Lillian herself recognizes that there are multiple types of men or styles of masculinity. In the letter that she writes to Ben on his eighteenth birthday, the day he “becomes a man,” she says,

\begin{quote}
I wanted to write you a letter about being a man and what that means in a fuller sense. I wanted to tell you that gentleness is the quality I most admired in men; and then I remembered how gentle you already are, so I decided to write something else. It’s just this: . . . I’ve had my regrets and many sadnesses, but I will never regret the night you were born. I thought I knew about love and the boundaries of love until I raised you for these past 18 years. I knew nothing about love; this has been your gift to me.
\end{quote}

Worth noting about her words here is the use of the past tense—she most “admired” the quality of gentleness in men, placing this value perhaps before her marriage to Bull, acknowledging that he does not have this quality. She effectually tells Ben, however, that this is what women want, and very firmly correlates the quality with men, not boys. Also worth noting is her comment on the boundaries of love; we can only assume that the boundaries have grown wider for her as a mother or that they have been obliterated completely. Some, arguably essentialist, feminist theories of motherhood or care ethics see women as less likely to see boundaries between self and other in favor of

\textsuperscript{107} Carol Gilligan’s seminal work \textit{In a Different Voice} revealed that men and boys tend to think morally in terms of justice and rights while women and girls tend to think morally in terms of care and responsibilities. The work of Gilligan and other feminist ethicists has been misinterpreted as being essentialist; either sex has the potential to orient themselves to either moral framework. However, the moral framework of justice and rights is valued more highly in Western culture, and thus the nurturing qualities of both boys and girls can be discouraged as they move into the competitive public sphere. See Carol Gilligan, \textit{In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
interconnections between human beings. By sharing a concern for care, Ben aligns himself with his mother and with women, while simultaneously establishing this as an attractive quality that can be incorporated into a new masculinity.

Ben himself already senses this and values gentleness himself. In fact, after the basketball game against his father—during which Bull not only tormented Ben but lunged at his wife and daughter when they tried to get involved—he asks his mother whether or not she really loves his father, pointing out that he treats her “pretty crappy.” From there, she rationalizes Bull’s coarseness as a form of tough love and admits that he is a “strange man,” but that this is how he expresses himself. Ben remains doubtful and keeps his mother’s wishes and interests in mind throughout the film; he functions as her champion and is generally more critical of Bull’s treatment of her than she is herself. This seems to demonstrate a type of coalition with women, even if it leaves him vulnerable to his father’s accusation that he is less virile for caring what his mother thinks.

*The Great Santini* uses the mother to confer an appropriate and “improved” masculinity, and the use of women characters this way is typical of many other paternal melodramas of the late ‘70s and early ‘80s, such as *Kramer vs. Kramer*, and is used even more intensely in a later cycle of male weepies in the early ‘90s that includes *The Prince of Tides* and *Regarding Henry*. Similarly, *Santini* and those later weepies also use people of color and gay men as friends and sometimes helper figures to confirm or to shape the

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108 These include feminist ethicists, like Carol Gilligan, discussed in the previous note, and Marxist feminists.
new sensitive masculinity of their white, straight protagonists.\textsuperscript{109} Here in Santini, the one real friend that Ben makes in town is the son of the family’s black maid, who earns his living selling honey and wildflowers. Toomer is ridiculed for his stuttering by the primitive young white men in town, but Ben recognizes him as “a poet” in his musings on nature, and the scenes of them spending time together in sun-dappled fields collecting flowers and fishing under the stars represent Ben as not only a nice, liberal young white man, but also a symbol of manhood in a more “natural” state, uncorrupted by the world of domination that has ruined his father.\textsuperscript{110} But Ben does not simply enjoy his time more with women and minorities—he also fights for his mother and attempts to save Toomer, allowing him to inhabit a heroic role.

In this way, not only are women (and people of color and even gays) used to grant a seal of approval, but very often, these new sensitive (white, straight) men become almost advocates for women; this role of advocate perhaps allows men to recover some of the male heroism that white, straight men in particular lost during the second wave of feminism and other rights movements. But however “women-friendly” these new men are in their style of masculinity, they hardly represent the end to the asymmetrical power relations from which they benefit. Despite whatever style of masculinity Ben has, he still moves into the symbolic position of patriarch at the end of the film when he literally takes the wheel of the family car. Male weepies, even those that challenge dominant masculinity or see men as themselves victims of patriarchy or sexism, perform a sleight-

\textsuperscript{109} I will explore this theme in more detail in Chapter 3 on male melodramas of the 1990s.

\textsuperscript{110} The representation of people of color—particularly African Americans and Native Americans—as closer to nature, making their white companions also more “natural” by association, has been an ongoing feature in American literature in general, but also those narratives of male friendship that are the predecessors of the buddy film and other male melodramas. See Fiedler, \textit{Love and Death in the American Novel}. 
of-hand whereby a change in masculine style is substituted for change in structural relations. Using a traditional masculine style as the enemy in these films performs the function of “othering” that distances the New Man from patriarchy (and racism) as a problem. In this way, for however progressive the genre can be at times, there is a degree of conservatism that weakens the gestures toward more egalitarian relationships between women and men.

In short, like *The Last Detail* before it, *The Great Santini* dramatizes how masculine institutions and dominant masculinity not only support oppressive social relations, but emotionally stunt and limit those who attain power from them. In particular, it is critical of family structures modeled on such a hierarchy and explicitly constructs the patriarch in that family structure as undesirable and antiquated. The son represents a future where men can adopt new masculine ideals based on care and nurture even if they still appreciate healthy competition and leadership. Though Ben does not have children here, it is clear that he will be a different kind of father than his father Bull. He is prepared to be the father that other male characters must become in the paternal melodramas *Kramer vs. Kramer* and *Table for Five*.

Directed by Robert Benton, *Kramer vs. Kramer* tells the story of Ted Kramer (Dustin Hoffman), a middle-class ad man whose wife Joanna (Meryl Streep) leaves him and their five-year old son Billy to go find herself and do something besides being a wife and a mother. Ted starts off as a chauvinist who is bitter about the chores he is saddled with and who doesn’t even know his son’s school grade, but eventually becomes a caring and engaged father who can complete household tasks with ease, a model, if imperfect, parent. After a fifteen-month absence, Joanna returns to reclaim her son, and a custody
battle begins. Due to Ted’s demotion after family life interferes with his formerly demanding job and to cultural prejudice which claims that fathers are less adequate parents than mothers, Ted loses the case. In the end, Joanna realizes that home for her son is now with the father and relinquishes custody.

At the time it was released, Kramer vs. Kramer was simultaneously rewarded with multiple Academy Awards for what was deemed its emotional truth, but also heavily criticized for not depicting reality, or empirical truth. Feminist critics and pro-feminist male critics were concerned that Joanna was made into a villain, that women’s liberation was represented as antithetical to motherhood and family values, and that the film distracted from the fact that the vast majority of struggling single parents in the U.S. were women. In other words, this latter group of critics vilified the film for what they perceived as a backlash message, punishment for women wanting to be more than wives and mothers by simply shoving them out of the picture. The film also was criticized for representing a fairly antiquated version of child custody: in fact, there was a much-cited article in The New York Times about responses to the film from judges and child custody experts who argued that joint-custody was becoming a preferred resolution to such cases


112 For representative examples of these criticisms, see Rebecca Baum, “Kramer vs. Kramer vs. Mother-Right,” Jump Cut, no. 23 (October 1980): 4-5; Thomas W. O’Brien, “Love and Death in the American Movie,” Journal of Popular Film and Television 9, no. 2 (1981): 91-3; and the previously cited Haskell, “Lights! Camera! Daddy!”
and that the Kramers were an ideal couple for joint-custody. Furthermore, the child’s own wishes would have been taken into account, which they are not in the film. As the film touched on a number of salient and sensitive issues, the stakes were incredibly high in how they would be represented; in other words, the film would inevitably be controversial. A major problem that emerges when looking at the film’s reception is that there is no agreement on (or “right” answer to) what a realistic depiction of parenthood in 1979 would be: for while indeed the majority of single parents in the U.S. continued to be women and women continued to do the majority of the childcare at home even if they also worked outside the home, single fathers did exist and there were married and divorced fathers taking an increasing interest in child-rearing.

A man’s finding fulfillment in parenting was not just the stuff of fiction; in the late ‘70s, there was a growing cultural interest in becoming “new fathers.” As Judith Newton, among others, has documented in her book From Panthers to Promise Keepers, there were in fact many fathers taking on new, more active roles in child-rearing and to some extent housework, most of whom were still in their marriages. The new father was motivated to evolve by a desire to have a greater emotional connection with his child; becoming a nurturer was not always a duty thrust upon him by a wife abandoning ship, as it is in Kramer. If less focus is placed on Ted as a single, custodial parent specifically and more focus is placed on him as a father generally, the changes he undergoes in the film become more representative of trends toward active fathering in the U.S. in the late ‘70s. Not only did the film reflect this trend, it also provided a way of thinking and talking about fatherhood, and thus the film has become a social document and Ted

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Kramer a cultural touchstone. In a 1981 piece on the “new father” in *Newsweek*, one man called his process of becoming a better dad his “Kramerization.” The film had great appeal for its general representation of the new father, even if he was still in the minority of fathers.

While most of those “new” fathers willingly took on a more active role in their children’s lives, Ted Kramer, of course does not, and it’s the circumstances of his newfound parenthood that rankle so many feminist critics. The film distorts reality in terms of its representation of women’s liberation: the movement that encouraged women to be more than a wife and mother did not lead to women deserting their families en masse. A consistent feature of this film cycle, from *Kramer* to *The Champ* (1979) to *Author! Author!* (1982), is women giving up their children and leaving them with dad to pursue careers or go off with new lovers. This is not to say that no women left their families, but that the films collectively make this appear to be far more common than it was. Despite the technical inaccuracies, the genre is melodramatic, and thus it spoke to the various feelings of “new” fathers: as victims of the newly divided attention of female partners, as victims of cultural prejudice that saw men as less adequate parents, and as anomalies perhaps in their own communities which might see their nurturing as less than masculine or which lacked a cohort of other new fathers. If melodramas represent both how things feel and how the world should be, then paternal melodramas provide a dramatic stage to challenge the cultural privilege granted to mothers and to demand recognition for the nurturing that fathers can do.

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114 Langway, “A New Kind of Life with Father.”

115 See Nemy, “Dropout Wives,” 44.
Ted Kramer’s being unwillingly drawn in to new fatherhood and his status as what often appears to be the only full-time father in New York allow him to be a melodramatic hero for all new fathers. In many ways, the film has an archetypal hero plot: a reluctant hero is thrust into a situation he doesn’t want to get involved in, but rises to the occasion. This fits Hemingway’s definition of courage; Ted, while impatient at times with his son, ultimately achieves grace under pressure. Ted’s first taking up his burden and then coming to understand childcare as a joy is his virtue; this stands in direct contrast to his early accusation that Joanna’s leaving Billy was cowardly. “How much courage does it take to walk out on your kid?” he asks. Though Ted eventually becomes sympathetic toward Joanna’s motivations, for many critics, the sting of this judgment persists. Meanwhile, Ted’s repeated “sacrifices”—giving up a lucrative job to have more time with his son, being unable to actively date, paying over half his yearly salary to fight for Billy in court—mark him as virtuous, which is further enhanced by his losing battle in court. He is the underdog in a world that appears against the nurturing father, and his singularity as the lone full-time dad enhances this. While there were many fathers becoming more active in their children’s lives, Ted’s trial symbolizes the felt experience of the new father.116 And as a plot device, the trial allows the film to explicitly ask the question, articulated by Ted in the courtroom: “what law says that a woman is a better parent simply by virtue of her sex?”

116 Director Robert Benton says that Hoffman channeled much of his own experience into the role of Ted Kramer. During the making of the film, Hoffman was going through a separation from his wife, who had full custody of the daughter and his stepdaughter. In interview, Benton also describes Hoffman as a “natural” parent, and Hoffman himself expresses a form of womb envy: “[Pregnant women] have an aura that you don't see in a man with his kids. I hear music when I see them—definitely strings.” Journalist Gerald Clarke further reports that Hoffman “even imagines himself angrily taking his case for male pregnancy to God, a bureaucrat behind a desk in the Revised Hoffman Version [of Kramer vs. Kramer].” All quotations here are from Gerald Clarke, “A Father Finds His Son: The Magical Looking Glass of Dustin Hoffman,” *Time*, December 3, 1979.
As a melodrama, then, the film’s priority is to show the virtues of the father and to challenge the injustice of this cultural prejudice. The film interrogates the unquestioned assumption that mothers are better parents and identifies the status of “better parent” as a very powerful position. In fact, according to Judith Newton’s interviews, real-life fathers at the time often admitted that they wanted to be in that position of power, to be the one the child chose or ran to first.\textsuperscript{117} We see the cultural assumption that this magical person who can soothe the child is automatically the mother through the characters’ use of the term “mother” for that role rather than “parent.” Both Ted and Billy recognize that the new responsibilities that Ted takes on are what mommies do. It’s as if the gender-neutral term “parent” doesn’t even exist. Both father and son repeatedly reference “all the other mothers” when evaluating Ted’s parenting, placing him as part of this group, but also creating cognitive dissonance through the juxtaposition between the word “mother” and Ted’s male presence. This use of the word “mother” could be interpreted one of two ways: the first is that Ted is simply “filling in” during Joanna’s absence, and signaling that the duties performed indeed belong to mothers. The second is that this dissonance asks us to question his singularity: why aren’t there more dads here? Either way, there is clearly a linguistic problem—there isn’t a word for the kind of parent that Ted is, and this lack of an appropriate word was felt by real-life dads as well. One single dad from the early 1980s admitted that he called himself “a mother, because there is no male, no name for men, doing the job that I’m

\textsuperscript{117} Newton, \textit{From Panthers to Promise Keepers}, 163-4. One divorced dad admitted to Newton, “Involved fathering is a weapon men use against women too.” Ibid., 163.
Both the film and this real-life father suggest that without a term for this new kind of father, he is not culturally legitimized, and certainly the plot of Kramer vs. Kramer shows that the world does not accept this new figure.

Joanna herself calls upon the world’s belief that “mothers” are women to make her claim that Billy belongs with her in the courtroom scene. After first explaining her actions and why she is fit to continue to be a mother, Joanna turns to appeal to nature and the cultural prejudice, repeating simply “I’m his mother” twice, suggesting that a child’s belonging with his mother should be beyond question. “Mother” is the magic word to trigger the desired response from the court, and indeed, it works: when Ted’s lawyer breaks the news that they lost the case, he explains, “They went with the mother”; not “they went with Joanna,” which would mark this as an individual verdict, but “the mother,” as in the mother angle, the belief in motherhood. In interview, Dustin Hoffman shares that they improvised much of this scene and that he, at one point, offered the line “Because I’m his mother” when his character defends his right to the child. The line wasn’t used because director Robert Benton thought it would be “gilding the lily,” meaning, I suppose, that the audience could draw this conclusion on their own without being hit on the head. However, while labeling Ted the mother shifts a set of activities away from the female parent, thus denaturalizing nurturing as an essentially female trait, there is a semantic risk of continuing to associate nurturing with the concept of

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mothering. As fathering could include some of the traits associated with mothering, the term father needed to be redefined.

This redefinition fits the pattern of Ted’s transformation: at the outset of the film, Ted repeatedly identifies his role in the family as “bringing home the bacon.” Choosing this clichéd phrase works well to highlight Ted’s thinking as traditional and limited in terms of what a family can be and how a father can raise a child. And in the early stages of raising his son alone, Ted is like a fish out of water—the child must instruct him on how to make French toast and what laundry detergent to buy. By the end, of course, Ted is dutifully attending school performances, cooking breakfast and dinner, and rubbing his son’s back as he goes to sleep. And Ted doesn’t just perform all of these tasks because he has to: he genuinely enjoys it, despite sacrificing many of his privileges as a man.

The pleasure that Ted comes to experience is tied to the great self-fulfillment he feels as a person from learning to be a better father to his son. Many (primarily liberal and radical) men recognized that the new father had much to gain in terms of personal growth: “being with children and joining the immediacy of their emotional life may be a route toward reclaiming the spontaneous emotional awareness which our masculine training drove into hiding long ago,” wrote the co-editors of a 1974 pro-feminist anthology, *Men and Masculinity*. For many men, opening up emotionally with children felt safer than doing so with women or other men, and pro-feminist critics acknowledged

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the possibility that the sensitivity and nurturing qualities developed with children could be transferred to female partners and the community more broadly.\textsuperscript{121}

This very progression is dramatized here in the film, as we see that being a father transforms Ted as a whole person: the ability to nurture, to become more patient and interested in the feelings of others, extends beyond fathering to interacting with other people in his life. In other words, Ted transforms in a broader way from someone motivated largely by self-interest to one who is concerned for the well-being of others. When Joanna first leaves him, he expresses his anger at her in self-centered terms; their friend Margaret paraphrases sarcastically that she understands why he is upset: “[Joanna] loused up one of the five best days of your life.” Later, as he grows as a person, we see Ted express care for the women in his life. His conversations with Margaret are intimate, and he inquires about her thoughts and feelings; furthermore, he is able to identify with her and bond with her. This interest in Margaret complements his understanding of why Joanna left him. When Billy asks if it is his fault that his mother left, Ted explains, “I think your mommy left because for a long time now, I’ve been trying to make her a person she didn’t want to be, a wife…she just wasn’t like that. I wasn’t listening, I was too busy. I thought anytime I was happy, she was happy.” He also is fairly gentle with Joanna when she returns and seems genuinely interested in what she discovered about herself while she was away. Finally, Ted simply seems happy and content with his son. He is no longer angry if his son interrupts him while reading or working, and he no longer brings his work home at night. Ted’s consciousness has been raised, and he has

\textsuperscript{121} See, for example, psychologist Diane Ehrensaft’s book based on her study of white, middle-class, dual-income families, \textit{Parenting Together: Men and Women Sharing the Care of Their Children} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990).
become more than an egocentric, bread-winning machine, an identity that the male liberation movement also had been bucking for the past decade. He has visibly given up some of the privileges of dominant, white, straight, middle-class masculinity, and he seems to fulfill the hope that women will benefit from this transformation.

As is typical of paternal melodramas, the virtuous male character with new and improved masculinity not only can identify with women, but he earns their explicit approval. Like the mother in *The Great Santini*, here, Margaret quite literally testifies on behalf of Ted. The confidence he has earned is one mark of trust, but she also goes to bat for him in the courtroom, declaring him a wonderful parent and even encouraging Joanna—with whom she was friends first and encouraged to leave her husband—“oh, you should see them together!” As a mother and as a single woman, Margaret can confer his desirability, and female approval is a powerful mechanism by which paternal melodramas mark male virtue.

Ted Kramer earned the approval not only of women in the film, but also some real life feminists. Betty Friedan—whose book *The Feminine Mystique* essentially diagnosed Joanna Kramer’s problem, the “problem with no name”—saw in Ted the reconfiguration of masculinity and asked “[this is] a feminist triumph, surely?” In many ways, Ted’s defense of himself is a feminist one, and while he may have made jokes about women’s lib while he was still a chauvinist at the beginning of the film, here he has come to embrace its call for fairness. Again in the courtroom, he pleads, “My wife used to always say to me, ‘why can’t a woman have the same ambitions as a man?’ I think you’re right, and maybe I learned that much, but by the same token, I’d like to know what law is it that

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says that a woman is a better parent simply by virtue of her sex?” Here, he essentially is arguing that both women and men deserve equal access to careers and parenting. This question, even if for the rhetorical purpose of maintaining custody, is a deeply feminist one that resonates even today.

But despite the enlightenment that Ted has achieved, many critics raise concerns about the depiction of Joanna. Interestingly, male critics seem to view her more sympathetically, recognizing that she is a complex character. John Simon of The National Review declared that both Joanna’s and Ted’s characters are composed so as “not to offend either feminists or patriarchalists in any more than a momentary way,” and Frank Rich of Time magazine assessed, “Kramer avoids explicit feminist debates, and it does not provide heroes or villains of either sex.” Furthermore, Rich argues that Joanna’s walking out on Ted in the beginning earns her audience “affection,” and though Joanna’s return to take Billy back from Ted marks her as a villain, Streep’s performance has a “pull” that “confuses [audience] loyalties”; ultimately, Rich believes, most audience members will not choose sides. Perhaps it would be easier for feminist critics to see the complex character of Joanna as harmless if other films in this cycle of paternal melodramas didn’t evince a pattern: not just in Kramer, but also in The Champ and Ordinary People, mothers come to disrupt the harmony achieved in the father-son relationship. After a number of these films were released, both popular critics such as Pauline Kael and academic critics were disturbed by depictions of moms as cold and


124 Rich, “Grownups, a Child, Divorce, and Tears.”
heartless, and plots that eliminated mothers from the beautiful bond formed between father and son. More subtle than the potential problem of mothers serving as villains was the implicit argument in films like *Kramer* about domestic life: that the repetitive and mundane tasks associated with child-rearing were indeed fulfilling, and thus women should not aim to escape them. As Stella Bruzzi argues, “*Kramer* appropriates the feminine by glorifying routine, ritual, and repetition, the means by which the ‘beauty’ of Ted and Billy’s relationship is expressed.” Indeed, the scenes that demonstrate the connection achieved between parent and child—and that stand in contrast to the confusion and discord of Ted’s first attempts at parenting—center around the two getting up in the morning and preparing breakfast together, often without dialogue. The morning routine becomes a choreographed dance of the quotidian, and its fluidity and warmth provide an “inversion of feminism’s depiction of domestic drudgery as the enslavement of women.” This version of domestic life, along with the film’s suggestion that a child is worth every sacrifice an adult can make, serves to refute feminists’ claims that women want and need more than to take care of children. In the most extreme feminist readings, what the film suggests here is not only that women are wrong for wanting a life outside of the home, but that mothers are obsolete, and certainly, this is one of the many valid interpretations of such an open-ended text. Thus, while Ted Kramer represents a new kind of father, his predominance in the home has not been eliminated. In this way, *Kramer* perhaps claimed a new kind of power for men rather than forfeiting an old one.

125 Pauline Kael, review of *Ordinary People*, *New Yorker*, October 13, 1980, 184-190.
127 Ibid., 111.
In reality, mothers continued to be the vast majority of care-giving parents. What *Kramer* may have spoken to most were the sentiments that men wanted to be more active participants in their children’s lives and that even if their female partner worked, they should do more housework. However, the data shows that in the early ‘80s—and to some extent, even now—women continued to perform a “second shift” and households contained an imbalance in domestic labor, particularly child care. As a melodrama, *Kramer* often represented various desires—women’s desire for men to take on a greater share of domestic work, men’s desire to be acknowledged as a legitimate parent, and children’s desires to have an active father—rather than the actual material conditions of the household economy. This is not to dismiss the importance of those feelings: this new father figure was not just a fantasy that appealed to women who might want more active partners and children who desired better relationships with their father, but also a model for the kinds of fathers that men could become and that some, even if a minority, were indeed trying to be.

While *Kramer vs. Kramer* dramatizes the conversion of a father from one fulfilling only the most basic functions of breadwinner to one that is a nurturing and fully involved parent, the later *Table for Five* (1983) follows the transformation of a different kind of inadequate father, the absentee father. The family situation of this film is far more representative of dominant social trends of the time: while divorce rates increased

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128 Robert Griswold observes that there is a “sharp disjunction between what fathers think they should do at home and what they actually do.” In 1978, eighty percent of men thought that husbands and wives should split housework and child care 50/50 if both spouses work; however, estimates even eight years later found that, on average, men performed less than a quarter of this labor. For these statistics, respectively, see Joan Huber and Glenna Spitze, *Sex Stratification: Children, Housework, and Jobs* (New York: Academic 1983) and Sylvia Ann Hewlett, *A Lesser Life: The Myth of Women’s Liberation in America* (New York: Warner, 1986): 88-9. For a seminal work on the disparity between (paid) working women’s and men’s unpaid domestic labor at home, see Arlie Hochschild’s *The Second Shift* (New York: Avon, 1989).
over the course of the century, they reached an all-time high in the early ‘80s. In the majority of cases, children of divorced parents lived with the mother, and the vast majority saw little of their fathers; in one study, forty-two percent of these children reported not having seen their father at all in the previous year. Not only did many divorced fathers have a distant relationship with their children, but many failed to financially support them, even when they could have. This behavior, of course, stands deeply in contrast to that of Ted Kramer, and together, *Kramer vs. Kramer* and *Table for Five* represent the two paradoxical trends in fathers of the period. As Robert Griswold points out, “The irony is obvious: the emphasis on fatherly nurture of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s arose precisely when fatherhood for young men was becoming demographically less salient in American society.”

While some absent fathers felt guilt and sadness over their poor relationships with their children, others perhaps shared the increasing belief amongst both women and men that parenthood was restrictive and enjoyed being free of obligations. But as researchers have pointed out, not being able to fully participate in children’s lives may intensify the absent father’s belief that he has no

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129 Newton, From *Panthers to Promise Keepers*, 164.


131 A Denver study reported that not only were car payments often higher than child support payments, but fathers were more likely to defect on the child support than the car payment. Lucy Marsh Yee, “What Really Happens in Child Support Cases: An Empirical Study of the Establishment and Enforcement of Child Support Orders in the Denver District Court,” *Law Journal of Denver* 57 (1980): 21-36. And as Robert Griswold points out, this problem was not unique to Denver and articles on the problem of men failing to pay child support appeared in plenty of mainstream publications throughout the 1980s, including *Newsweek*, *McCall’s*, *Vogue*, and *Ms*. Griswold, *Fatherhood in America*, 335, note 48.

obligation. This complex dynamic of being willingly irresponsible, but also not being provided with the opportunity to become more involved is dramatized in the 1983 film *Table for Five*.

In *Table for Five*, Jamie Tannen (Jon Voight), a non-custodial divorced father and former pro-golfer who went by “J.P. Tannen,” takes his kids on a summer-long Mediterranean cruise to spend time with them. The children Trung, Tilde, and Truman Paul live with their mother Kathleen, stepfather Mitchell, and maid Rodessa, and the idyllic vision of life in the wealthy suburbs, replete with dog, in the opening scene cues the viewer to at first mistake this second marriage as the original nuclear family. Despite their affection for one another, Jamie and his kids don’t know one another very well or how to interact, and most of the cruise documents Jamie’s inadequacies and mishaps until he gets an overseas call from Mitchell with the news that the mother has died in a car crash. Mitchell arrives in Europe to claim the children and take them home, prepared even to win custody of them in court as the more “fit” father, but Jamie wants to finally be a full-time father to his children and learns both how to be a better parent and how to demand of Mitchell that he has this right and the capability. The film ends ambiguously with the three children and two fathers walking off together; whether they will share custody or even somehow all live together is left unanswered.

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134 It’s worth noting that Jamie goes not only by J.P., but also James and Jim. While there’s no clear pattern to the alternating uses of these names, J.P. certainly is his public persona. The variety might indicate how unstable Jamie’s own identity is, particularly his inability to cultivate himself into a father figure. I have chosen to use the name Jamie in this chapter because it seems to be the most frequently used name in the film.
In the film, Jamie is represented as the type of father sociologists had been documenting, the kind of father whose children go for over a year at a time without seeing; in the film’s language, which it develops as a refrain to discuss deadbeat dads, he sees his kids “on a weekend once in a while” and “calls on birthdays.” Because of this inactive role, his ex-wife points out that the children love him but have learned not to rely on him—he might show up to do the occasional fun activity with them, but it is their stepdad Mitchell who “take[s] them to the dentist.” It is this latter figure that children not only want, but need. Jamie and Mitchell are set up as two different kinds of fathers: Jamie has sired two of his three children (the third is adopted), but has not actually raised them; Mitchell has no biological children of his own, but in the film’s terms is virtually a model father, providing both financial support and the day-to-day nurturing involved in child-rearing. Mitchell himself makes this distinction between biologically fathering children and actually raising them to challenge Jamie’s claim to being children’s father: “Truman Paul has a fish tank full of guppies and they have babies too, but I wouldn’t call them fathers swimming around in there.” In this way, Jamie represents anti-feminist fears of what men become if they are permitted to rebel without legal pressure to be a provider: “they have to resort to muscle and phallus.”

The earliest scenes of the film emphasize that Jamie’s primary role in relation to children is procreation, as he both slaps his ex-wife on the behind as part of his greeting and spends the first few days on the boat chasing women. The first night on board, he expects the children to amuse themselves in their room until bedtime while he goes to the bar and club upstairs. Even when the children reveal that Truman Paul has a learning

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disability and might need to go to a special school if he can’t learn to read by the end of the summer—which should be a moment for both talking as a family and for comforting his embarrassed son—Jamie brushes this off by simply saying “we’ll fix it,” and going out for the night anyway. Furthermore, his older children even suggest that he going out looking for sex, and he does not deny this. To Jamie, “it’s [his] vacation too” and he’s entitled to go out and seek his own pleasure. While he eventually does sleep with a woman on the cruise—Marie, another single parent struggling with juggling her own needs and those of her children—his priorities shift greatly with the death of his wife.

From here forward, he becomes more asexual, even visiting Marie in her room while she is in only a bathrobe just to get advice on whether or not to seek custody and without trying to have sex with her while he is there. According to the film, appropriate fatherhood is divorced of sexual prowess, as illustrated by the more dutiful step-father, Mitchell.

One of the more unusual features of this particular paternal melodrama is the use of a second father figure to contrast parenting styles. Mitchell himself shares some features with the traditional father, but also breaks from this. On the one hand, he is a provider and from the more formal world of business; a lawyer, he wears dark-colored suits and possesses his wife’s deference. However, unlike Ted at the outset of Kramer vs. Kramer, he takes an active interest in the children’s lives, knows all their friends’ and teachers’ names, and comforts them in times of pain and struggle. These are what qualify him as the more appropriate father and through which he attempts to stake him claim on the children, demanding of Jamie during a confrontation,
Where were you when [Truman Paul’s] learning disability started? Where were you when he needed your support and reassurance? When he wished more than anything that you could see him in his school play? Or Tilde, who prayed that you might show up and surprise her at her recital? Or Trung at one of his soccer games? Where were you when it was time for having tonsils out, and Tilde cried so piteously that they had to put her in a sound-proof room? Did you know about any of that? And when she came out of the anesthesia she wept for you. Where were you, you goddamned son of a bitch, when I held those children in my arms and reassured them that you still loved them, even though on their birthdays you were nowhere to be found?

And yet, for all of the active parenting here in his litany, Mitchell has not done it alone—the children’s mother was present, and he has employed a maid who, he explains, is like a “second mother” to the children. Unlike Ted Kramer, he does not desire to usurp the mother’s role or pass himself off as a third one. As he later points out after the mother’s death, the maid’s presence is what in part makes the home he has established for the children a more appropriate and “complete” one.

To the extent that Mitchell is a model father figure, this film doesn’t make the same suggestion as Kramer vs. Kramer that fathers can be the same kinds of parents as mothers. In many ways, the kind of fatherhood it might idealize is just a more involved version of the traditional father. In a letter from Kathleen to Mitchell that Mitchell shares with Jamie as evidence of Kathleen’s probable preferences for custody, the thanks she expresses to Mitchell for coming into her and the children’s lives defines, in her terms, what a man is and a father should be:

I’ve been counting all these things for which I’m grateful. Mostly Mitchell [it’s] you, the gift you’ve given me and the children: A man whose arms and heart are big enough to shelter us all, and who manages the world with the same gentle authority that manages the tantrum of a child. You’ve taken us in as though we were your own and we’ve become your own. Your life is our life, and what a warm, safe and comforting life that is. . . . I’m grateful to you—you came into my life when I needed you, rescued us and nurtured us, and have given me the peace of mind that at last, I have a husband and my children have a father.
Kathleen’s description of Mitchell functions as a prescription for this adapted version of the breadwinning father: here, Mitchell is a figure of power and control in both the public sphere and the private sphere of the family; he rules over both realms, though he is posited as benign and paternal. In earlier scenes when Kathleen is alive, she often either defers decision-making to Mitchell or at least wants to include him in the process. But the word “nurture” suggests that he manages to be emotionally open and communicative even as he “manages” them. Here, perhaps, the parents complement one another and each has a clear role, though these roles do map onto traditional gender roles in many ways. In the opening scene, Kathleen sits beside her daughter playing piano; she is reminiscent of the Victorian angel of the house, with her hair up and her complete absorption in her family. Indeed, she even dies performing care work, as she was bringing the dog to the veterinarian in the rain. In this way, the film presents a conservative version of the new father—he may be more active, but he is still the man of the house and has not given up his power.

When Jamie reads Kathleen’s worshipful description of Mitchell, he displays visible disappointment and regret that he could not have been that father. In some ways, this is the challenge for him, to rise to the occasion and to become this kind of person. By the end of the film, he to some extent has: in the final scene, he wears a dark navy blazer rather than the leisure clothes he sported throughout most of the film, which makes him resemble Mitchell. And of course he wrests control of the situation from Mitchell, not only matching him by learning the names of his children’s friends and teachers, but also trumping him by motivating Truman Paul to finally read.
While becoming a better father is clearly a challenge for Jamie, the film suggests that he was always capable of doing so, perhaps arguing that it is realistic for all men to change and for society, maybe mothers especially, to give them a chance. In fact, screenwriter David Seltzer shares that the screenplay is loosely autobiographical; like Jamie, he took his four children on a trip “to prove myself to my ex-wife . . . She was remarried to a man who was a terrific father, and I wanted to show her I had the money and the guts and the love to take care of my children.” Unlike Jamie, his life already “revolve[d] around [his] children.” Still, the film offers a fantasy of an absentee father becoming the kind of father Seltzer and other men perhaps wished to be, or those that children and ex-wives wished them to be, as I will discuss further on. As sociologists have pointed out, many non-custodial fathers “lack a clear definition of responsibility and authority. . . .their role is ambiguous, and many feel unneeded. . . .” Jamie absolutely lacks these clear definitions and gets lost, but with the loss of the mother, Jamie gets to experience being needed, a circumstance necessary perhaps to give his natural inclinations the chance to flourish—the film represents him as a natural father who just needs to be given the chance to bloom.

The most telling sign of Jamie’s potential to be a good father is that he met his adopted son when Trung followed him around on the golf course at a tournament in the Philippines. The child was not only attracted to Jamie as a potential father, but Jamie explains, “he adopted me.” Also, in Jamie’s first scene, he is leaving his beach house for

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136 Chris Chase, “At the Movies: Of Fantasy, Responsibility and Obsession,” *New York Times*, February 25, 1983: C8. In interview here, Seltzer adds that the film’s actor Jon Voight, director Robert Lieberman, and producer Robert Schaffel also are divorced fathers, and that they, too, "had confronted their sense of failure."

137 Wallerstein and Blakeslee, *Second Chances*, 235.
the cruise and is allowing a Mexican family—presumably who work for him—to stay there for some summer beach fun while he is away. Finally, Marie—the single mother whose ex-husband is an absentee father—insists that despite his mistakes, she can tell that Jamie really is a good father at heart. In this way, Jamie is portrayed as kind and naturally family-oriented. His inner goodness is established early on so that despite some of his more distasteful behavior, the audience can recognize the untapped part of his being.

Typical of melodrama, Jamie is a virtuous character who is misunderstood. At times, his bad behavior feels like a self-fulfilling prophecy because he isn’t given a chance. When he tells his ex-wife at the airport that he has changed and wants to be more involved with the children, even suggesting “I don’t think any of you has seen the good side of me,” she counters that “you’re a loving man James but they’ve learned not to rely on you” and that his not telling her where he is taking the kids until they reach the airport is “typical” of him. In this way, he is told that he always is the same and can’t be anything different. This message is further sent home when Mitchell one-ups him on the boat by offering an alternative sleeping arrangement for the children than Jamie has planned and that better fits the children’s needs and sleep habits.

Not only does his ex-wife consign Jamie to the role of absentee father, but all the characters’ familiarity with this “type” speaks to how pervasive this kind of father was by 1983. Falling back into this role is easier than changing, and when Jamie fails to control and comfort his own children on the cruise, he writes a letter of forfeiture to his wife, explaining that he functions best as something more like an uncle—there for fun and jokes, but not to take on the harder sacrifices or labor of parenting. And to get along
better with his children for the duration of the trip, he suggests that rather than being a
dad and kids, they all consider each other friends and that they call him J. P., his pro-golf
name. After his defeat at trying to be a father, Jamie retreats into this public persona he
has cultivated, one that is safe and free of the conflicts that inevitably come with being a
parent. But later after his ex-wife dies, his oldest son Trung, at the moment of greatest
need for Jamie to be his father, insists “I need a father, not a friend.” While plenty of
children of divorced parents end up in a loving family rearrangement of one kind or
another, the film insists that children need their biological fathers too. And in his navy
blazer at the end, Jamie has achieved the status of new father or new patriarch. It is
tempting to allow the graphic match of the navy blazer and his attempt to learn the same
things about his children as Mitchell knows to signify that the end goal for a father is to
become Mitchell’s type. But, the blazer rests atop light-colored pants rather than
matching suit pants, and thus Jamie retains something of his former self.

Rather than Mitchell, the parent Jamie most resembles is Marie, and his
identification with her represents an undercurrent of more progressive attitudes toward
gender and parenting. While the primary purpose of the character of Marie as a
heterosexual love interest is to provoke change in Jamie, she is also someone with whom
Jamie identifies. When Jamie is faced with Mitchell’s insistence that the children return
to their home with him, Jamie goes to Marie for advice and asks, “what if there was
someone—who your kids really liked, really loved—who was wonderful with them …
[and] all he wanted was just to take care of them [and you could still see them]?” This
scenario, for Marie, would probably be a custody case between herself and the children’s
father; here, with this “other man” attempting to keep the children, Jamie is placed in
what would normally be the woman’s position. Marie states simply that she would “fight
them to the death,” despite confessing earlier that she is on the cruise in part because her
friends insisted that she take a break from the kids for the sake of her sanity. The film
does not judge Marie for lamenting the control her children exert over her social life,
particularly dating, and that they are so consuming that she at times feels like she will go
crazy; rather, she is presented as a normal parent. Furthermore, she is presented as a
good mother despite having a job and being away from them for so long as part of her
work. Her compliments over Jamie’s way with the children, her warmth, and her
declaration that if anyone tried to take her children away, she would “fight them to the
death” save her from the criticism that Joanna receives in Kramer. While Marie wants
more than a man and her children—a career and time alone—she, it seems, would never
walk out on her children. This intense passion for her children is what Joanna seems to
lack and is perhaps why so many critics feel that Kramer vs. Kramer represents her too
harshly.

In this way, Marie becomes a figure of balance, and as the more likeable model of
parenting in the film, allows Jamie also to be a more balanced figure. She is a working
woman, but also a devoted parent and “real” in her acceptance that parenting is never
perfect and smooth. It is clear that Jamie will never be the center of calm as Mitchell
appears to be, but he too is presented as a warm and natural parent. In fact, while
Mitchell does everything “right,” he does not possess the liveliness that makes Jamie and
Marie such attractive characters and parents. As Jamie’s finances are a bit unstable, he
won’t be the kind of provider that Mitchell is, but he has love in abundance and is
beginning to take on the kind of authority that the children seem to crave. In this way,
good parents come in multiple types—Jamie and Marie, Mitchell and Kathleen—which of course allows the category of good mothers to include working mothers. The film’s focus on imperfection and tension within families also avoids romanticizing domestic life, as *Kramer* does. In many ways, then, *Table for Five* contains progressive elements.

As discussed earlier with *Kramer vs. Kramer*, these paternal melodramas often seem benign when viewed individually: it is their cumulative effect that disturbs many critics. Coming on the tail end of the cycle after the more momentous *Kramer* and *Ordinary People*—which together generated their own flurry of critiques in 1980—*Table for Five* has received little attention. One of the few critics to discuss *Table for Five* is Molly Haskell, whose 1983 essay “Lights! Camera! Daddy!” takes ten films into account when assessing the messages and cultural meaning of this cycle of paternal melodramas. Her overall thesis is that ideologically, these films send the message that men are superior parents and that women are obsolete, and that the “best woman is a dead woman, especially a dead independent woman! Next best is one who pulls a disappearing act in a manner that reflects badly on her character rather than on her husband’s. . . . Although the women’s magazines like to tell us that we can ‘have it all,’ the message of these movies is that we can’t have much of anything.”

For Haskell, all of these films become man-child paradises where the kids can provide their fathers with “the hero worship once provided by their wives.” These paradises that exclude women are most often all-male (*Kramer, The Champ, Ordinary People, much of Author! Author!*), and *Table for Five* takes this tendency in a slightly different direction, ending the film with a family

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139 Ibid., 674.
formation that appears to be one with two fathers. In 2013, alternatives to the heteronormative family would be applauded, but this ending, Haskell argues, is hardly progressive—with two fathers, the kids have absolutely no need for a mother.

Screenwriter Seltzer said the genesis of the plot came out of the question “what if something happened to the children's mother? What would I do?” and the answer is that everyone would be fine, and the world would applaud the father for taking on the role of mother.

While I do appreciate Haskell’s reading of the subconscious desires of these films, I read them instead as symbolic representations of how men felt in the late ’70s and the early ’80s, particularly the feelings of their creators who often based the material on their own lives. *The Great Santini* was adapted from Pat Conroy’s novel of the same title, who also grew up in the military and whose own father was the inspiration for Bull Meechum. While Bull embodies an extreme form of dominant masculinity and megalomania, the tensions between fathers and children and especially the pressure placed on sons to walk in their father’s footsteps would have been deeply familiar to many viewers. Again, as Robert Griswold has argued, father-child alienation was a pervasive part of twentieth-century American life. And as the rates of divorce continued to escalate, *Kramer vs. Kramer* and *Table for Five* would capture the feelings of many divorced fathers and single dads, or even married men who wanted to be better fathers. Dustin Hoffman was separated from his wife while shooting *Kramer*, and his daughter

lived with her mother and step-sister. Like Jon Voight and his director and producer for Table for Five were all divorced fathers, and screenwriter Seltzer said they served as a “mutual support group” for one another. Collectively, these creators express that they want to have good relationships with their kids, and the films they have created dramatize this struggle. These feelings match the evidence found by sociologists and journalists that many U.S. fathers also desired better relationships with their children. It is no surprise then that these films proved successful—Kramer and Ordinary People both won Academy Awards for Best Picture—and that Hollywood would churn out so many paternal melodramas in a short period of time.

The popularity of these films, however, is owed not just to their appeal to a male audience, but to a female one as well. In fact, Haskell argues that these films are largely for women. Given the heavy emphasis on the word “emotion” in ads for Kramer vs. Kramer and the association between melodrama and female viewers, this is indeed possible. The question is, what do films from this cycle offer a female viewer? On the one hand, perhaps, is the fantasy of the kind of father that heterosexual women wished for as a partner. We see this fantasy in literature for women: for example, there is a scene in Alice Walker’s The Color Purple where Sofia clearly states that seeing her husband Harpo take care of the children is a major turn-on for her. And in Janice Radway’s

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143 See Griswold, Fatherhood in America; Newton, From Panthers to Promise Keepers; Langway, “A New Kind of Life with Father”; Wallerstein and Blakeslee, Second Chances.

144 For example, through a collection of blurbs from film critics, one ad promises “an emotional wallop,” “an emotional blockbuster” and a “major dramatic work . . . [that is] emotionally involving.” Kramer vs. Kramer. Advertisement. New York Times, December 23, 1979, D18.
analysis of the patterns and archetypes of romance fiction and female readers’ responses to them, she affirms that an important fantasy in romance novels is the hero taking care of the heroine; women, especially those who work in the home and spend far more time taking care of others than men do, find it appealing to have someone take care of them for once.\textsuperscript{145} The new fathers of these paternal melodramas, particularly Ted Kramer, become that nurturing hero, while maintaining more dashing qualities such as being able to run with a child in his arms for several blocks to a hospital. On the other hand, the new fathers may not be so much objects of heterosexual desire as narrative surrogates for the struggles of mothers.

Sadly, the sweat and tears of parenthood may only be acknowledged as heroic when a man performs this role. Rebecca A. Baum notes this double standard in her own analysis of \textit{Kramer} in 1980: within our culture, she says, “If [the mother] is a good parent she gets little recognition — it is her duty and is seen as a matter of nature. If she is bad she is abominable. If a man is a bad father — well, gee, too bad. If he's a good father, he's a saint.”\textsuperscript{146} By this logic, in order to make a sacrifice, to be a saint, one must give something up, especially something that one was entitled to. \textit{Kramer vs. Kramer} contains a close-up of an explicit list that Ted writes down of what he is “giving up” and must endure, at his lawyer’s suggestion to make a list of pros and cons before seeking custody. The list is composed solely of cons (though the overwhelming pro that outweighs them all is shown in the next shot of Ted holding his sleeping son): “1) money, 2) no privacy, 3) work affected, 4) no social life, 5) no let up,” with the last item triple underlined.


\textsuperscript{146} Baum, “Kramer vs. Kramer vs. Mother-Right,” 5.
Many items on here are things that mothers routinely give up, though we don’t think of them that way; a woman’s career wouldn’t be seen as something sacrificed because traditionally for a middle class woman, she shouldn’t have had expectations of one anyway. The single mother character of Marie in Table for Five does vocalize similar restraints that her children put on her life, but the audience is supposed to sympathize with those limitations as what Jamie faces should he choose to become a full-time father.

Yet, the efficacy of a father highlighting the labor and sacrifice of parenting makes sense. While I understand why feminist critics would be concerned about mothers being judged, and it certainly is sad that the domestic work of women is still often underappreciated, showing one sex performing what had been considered the gendered behavior of the other sex helps to denaturalize those expectations. In her book Gender Trouble, Judith Butler famously uses the drag queen’s performance as a way to argue that femininity is not part of the essence of the female sex; rather, it is a set of actions, behaviors, and signs that women “perform.” Gender only exists through this performance. The drag queen’s performance shows literally that a biological male can do it too, but more importantly, in doing so, that gender is constructed. While most cisgendered people perform gender unconsciously, those traits are not necessarily natural. While there may be dissimilarities in the analogy I am constructing, my point is that we can better see something that we normally take for granted when it is presented in a different context. Ted Kramer’s performance of some of the most mundane tasks of parenting makes them worthy of the audience’s attention. I am not claiming that this film would lead to a better appreciation of mothers within a culture that takes their labor for

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147 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1999), 171-190.
granted, but it does effectively make the viewer reflect on the challenges and burdens of parenting. Any hardworking parent, male or female, that identifies with Ted’s sacrifices is invited to inhabit this virtuous position and to earn the tears that the film wrings from viewers.

Thus, like the buddy films of the previous decade, these paternal melodramas provide textual evidence of optimism that masculinity was evolving in such a way that women, children, and even other men would benefit, but also evidence of misogyny and a negative response to women’s liberation. As Barbara Klinger has argued, the progressive text is a myth—within most texts there are both progressive and conservative currents, and this cycle of parental melodramas certainly exhibits this duality.\textsuperscript{148} The wildly different interpretations of the films depend in part on the elements that each critic attends to, particularly in terms of whether or not these films villainize feminism and argue that women should return to the home.

But the one unmistakable conservative element is that men retain or are accorded power in the end: the sensitive son of \textit{The Great Santini} becomes the man of the house, taking his father’s place at the helm; Joanna recognizes Ted’s bond with their son and gives him custody; and Mitchell cedes control over the children to Jamie. This paternal power is a birthright in the diegetic world of 1962 for Ben; for Ted and Jamie, they earn this power once they demonstrate their virtues as nurturing, new fathers. While in the latter contemporary cases, this power is not naturally or even legally automatically granted to the fathers, they affirm that fathers deserve their power. As Stella Bruzzi

argues, “the persistent paradox of the post-women’s liberation male [is] the dual desire to re-ignite belief in masculinity and patriarchy alongside the urge to discard traditional masculinity as inadequate.” The paternal melodramas of the late ‘70s and early ‘80s are exemplary illustrations of this paradox. These new cinematic fathers (and sons) are far more interested in interpersonal connections with loved ones than in individual ambition and breadwinning, and thus embrace a new masculinity that values male nurturance and verbally expressing emotions. However, by suggesting that men can be complete parents—both fathers and mothers, so to speak—and potentially even do a better job than women, these films also suggest that men should continue to be decision-makers or heads of household. If Jamie had always been the kind of father that he is at the end of Table for Five, he and Kathleen would probably not have ever divorced, and she would have been the dependent wife to him rather than Mitchell. While it may be hard to tell what kind of household economy and power relations are being endorsed since this genre generally ends with the father as a single dad—in other words, we can’t always see how the new father would actually negotiate household labor and decision-making with a second parent in the house—the implications for the nuclear family are there.

This cycle of paternal melodramas not only represents the feelings and desires of actual divorced fathers, but also symbolically represents those of heterosexual male partners who “lost” some of the attention historically expected from their female partners. In terms of social history, these films correspond to a period where many American men—particularly white, middle-class men—were figuring out how to be men after the

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149 Bruzzi, Bringing Up Daddy, 107.
challenges to their privilege and the questionings of traditional masculinity by the rights movements of the ‘60s and ‘70s. As Judith Newton has observed, changing relationships with children was a “safe” starting point for becoming new men. And as predicted by many critics, the new emotionally open relationships that were “practiced” with other men in the buddy films of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, and with children in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s, would be transferred to women and even “Other” adult men in the ‘90s, if not always in real life, then certainly onscreen in a new cycle of male melodramas.150

150 In terms of white “new fathers,” films representing them would venture into comedy after the “weepie” cycle had run its course; these include Mr. Mom, Three Men and a Baby, and Look Who’s Talking. Popular tearjerkers about African-American fathers and sons would appear in the early 21st century, including Antwone Fisher and The Pursuit of Happyness.
CHAPTER 4

TRAUMA AND TRANSFORMATION: THE POLITICS OF THE NEW MAN IN THE 1990s

The sensitive males of father-son melodramas would go into hiding after 1983. After that popular cycle of films, Hollywood became more preoccupied with what Susan Jeffords has called “hard bodies”—the Reagan Era action heroes that were both physically and emotionally tough, including Rambo, the Terminator, and Martin Riggs of the Lethal Weapon series.151 Jeffords has argued that these heroes came out of the same cultural matrix as Ronald Reagan and his administration, and shared the values of toughness, resolve, and power. It wasn’t until the failures and shortcomings of his presidency and legacy in George H. Bush became more apparent at the end of the decade that these heroes would be replaced by another cycle of more sensitive New Men. Even Arnold Schwarzenegger himself would make this transition in his film Kindergarten Cop. While those hard-bodied action heroes of the ‘80s had provided fantasies of power, control, and destruction, representations of men in Hollywood films of the early ‘90s suggest that (white) men were victims of either a changing society or self-destructive behavior. But these characters also provided a fantasy of power for the powerless as public discourse in the ‘80s constructed narratives of the white male as in decline and alienated.

In many ways, the new male weepies of the ‘90s—most of which were produced in 1991—could be called Clinton Era films, but the relationship here is one of correlation

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rather than causation as they precede his presidency. Both this new cycle of male weepies and the president that empathized “I feel your pain” emerged in a moment where personal pain became a cultural pre-occupation, particularly for white men; the self-destruction represented in films of the early ‘90s as a the result of living up to the standards of traditional masculinity would become a new kind of “white man’s burden.” This more open discourse on pain and suffering was a different style of response than the ‘80s fantasies of hard-bodied power to the same problem: the straight white male’s feelings of disenfranchisement as women and minorities became somewhat more prominent in the public sphere. According to economics professor Lester C. Thurow in his 1985 Los Angeles Times article “Average White Male No Longer Leads March to Prosperity,” the median white male income had dropped by 22% between 1976 and 1984, despite the GNP rising. He attributes this to male-dominated jobs (primarily farming and manufacturing) suffering from international competition while white collar jobs were expanding; this latter group of jobs had a large female presence. While the facts presented in this article are of interest, so is Thurow’s metaphorical representation of white men as both forgotten and emasculated. He points out that articles on the U. S. Census report tend to focus on the poor, women, and minorities and are unconcerned about working- and middle-class white males because U.S. culture assumes they can make it on their own. In lamenting how white males no longer are making it on their own, he depicts them as frontier heroes who regrettably now must rely on others: “. . . the American white male has lost his position as the great Lone Ranger of the American

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152 Likewise, Jeffords also notes that while the “Reagan Revolution” carries his name, Reagan himself did not cause the movement; rather, the movement gave him political life.

economy. He is not and cannot make it on his own any longer. From now on he will depend upon the equivalent of wagon-trains and community barn-raising in his fight for survival on the new frontier of international competition.”

This choice of metaphor is reminiscent of Leslie Fiedler’s and Nina Baym’s studies of literature’s preoccupation with (white) male independence and flight from civilization.

While such articles as Thurow’s were meant to report trends, they certainly contributed to an atmosphere of victimhood, anger, and finger-pointing, where women and minorities were responsible for depriving white males of access to their entitled sense of manhood. To extend Baym, white men in the ‘80s were experiencing a new kind of “beset manhood.” With their privileges outing, white men often felt that they were unfairly depicted as the “bad guy”: as journalist Andrea Stuart observed in 1992, “It’s hard to feel heroic when you’re the one everyone rebels against.”

There were two important media representations of white men during this period of “decline” (a “decline,” of course, that ignores the overrepresentation of white males in Congress, amongst the wealthiest Americans, etc.). One media representation that emerged from a flurry of trend reporting was the Angry White Male, arguably a mythical creature, who was connected to a more general feeling of white male paranoia.

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154 Ibid., F3, F8.


anger and paranoia blamed affirmative action for white men being set aside rather than the corporations whose decisions based on making profit led to the elimination of many jobs once held by this group. This angry white male subject was iconized in the 1992 film *Falling Down*, where the recently laid-off, divorced white father having a “bad day” lays waste across Los Angeles, often targeting minorities, as he tries to get back to his former home to see his estranged daughter for her birthday. While the film may not have intentionally heroicized this rampaging male, he has proved popular with audiences as a fantasy response to life’s frustrations. The restraining order against him, however, makes him more akin to the abusive husbands and fathers found throughout women’s films of the period, including *Thelma and Louise* and *Fried Green Tomatoes*, both appearing the year before *Falling Down*.

The other major representation of white men’s pain and alienation was more “sensitive.” A different set of films, journalism, and cultural figures also attempted to construct white males as victims, but here they are victims of the burdens and expectations of traditional masculinity rather than the advancement of women and minorities. Instead of being angry, this figure of the New Man suggested that men could “heal” by constructing a more sensitive masculine ideal. At the same time that journalists were declaring the “average white male” was in decline and newspapers and magazines

However, self-reporting can be a flawed mechanism for seeking objective data on something like “anger.” In discussions of political campaigning preceding the 1992 presidential election, it is suggested that two out of three white men had voted Republican in the previous elections and that these voted were won through pandering to those purported feelings of disenfranchisement and paranoia. Howard Fineman, “Playing White Male Politics,” *Newsweek* 28 October 1991, 27-8. Regardless of whether or not the “angry white male” was/is a significant phenomenon (I don’t mean to suggest there aren’t any), the perpetuation of the myth in the media made him an influential figure within culture, and Hollywood films did engage with him. See also David Gates’s “White Male Paranoia,” *Newsweek*, March 29, 1993, 48 as a major article disseminating these ideas.
were featuring articles on the new burdens of being a white man. Robert Bly’s book *Iron John* was ascending the *New York Times* best-seller list. Bly’s lectures and retreats for men advocated reclaiming a primordial masculinity, one that meant simultaneously growing under a male mentor rather than a mother, but also embracing a “female principle.” Bly’s work is best remembered for men’s retreats into the woods to bang drums and get in touch with their inner “wild men.” Though his followers were publicly ridiculed and appeared to represent a fringe minority of men, the book had sold half a million copies by November 1991: these sales figures suggest that a significant number of (largely white) men were interested in healing themselves and maintaining their sense of masculinity even as they became more “sensitive.”

The year 1991 also witnessed a new cycle of male weepies where white males who are alienated or damaged become healed. The reverberations between Bly’s work and these films are remarkable, though I wouldn’t claim that Bly has influenced these films directly; rather, they both emerge out of the same cultural milieu. The early ‘90s shared both a preoccupation with therapy, seen in the growing popularity of Oprah and family counselor John Bradshaw’s lectures that aired repeatedly on PBS. The latter

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158 Besides Thurow’s “Average White Male No Longer Leads March to Prosperity” and Andrea Stuart’s “Saving the Male,” see Donald A. Clement, “A White Male Lament,” *Newsweek*, July 2, 1990, 8.


161 Newton, *From Panthers to Promise Keepers*, 139. While the racial demographics of these readers are unknown, anecdotes from journalists and scholars attending Bly’s and other mythopoetic men’s events indicate attendees were almost exclusively white. For example, Andrew Ferguson claimed to have seen only two black men out of approximately seven hundred attendees at the First International Men’s Conference in Austin, TX, in 1991. Andrew Ferguson, “America’s New Man,” *American Spectator* 25.1 (January 1992): 28.
especially created space for literally everyone to have been a victim: Bradshaw claimed that “A lot of what we consider to be normal parenting is actually abusive,” particularly encouraging children to not complain and to control their emotions, and thus there is a “neglected, wounded child” in each of us. 162 Both Bly’s work and the cinematic male weepies of the ‘90s can be placed at the intersection of this therapy culture and ongoing discourses around New Men vs. Traditional Men. Decades of work on the “hazards of being male” and feminist analysis, alongside changes to family and work life left masculinity as ongoing subject of discussion. As Michael Messner points out, whether the discussions were feminist, anti-feminist, or something in between, “Like it or not, men today must deal, on some level, with gender as a problematic construct, rather than as a natural, taken-for-granted reality.” 163 Add in the kinds of social changes observed in articles like “Average White Male No Longer Leads March to Progress,” and you get a recipe for both fictional and non-fictional works representing (straight white) male suffering.

Both Bly and the ‘90s male weepies seem to see men (absolutely white in the films, and implicitly white based on the demographics of Bly’s followers) as suffering from the demands of traditional masculinity, that is, that they be self-made men, unemotional and in control. In order for men to reconstitute themselves and heal, they must go through a trauma. While a traumatic incident serving as a catalyst for self-change may seem like a familiar plot device from literary and film narratives, it is also a major part of Bly’s beliefs. He believed that manhood could not be achieved without the


experience of a wound—“No one gets into adulthood without a wound that goes to the core”\textsuperscript{164}—and that this wound served as a sort of male womb through which men could be reborn, with other men as the midwives.

In male weepies of the early 1990s, the typical plot features a white man with a mental or health problem who undergoes a life-changing experience whereby he becomes a more emotionally open, sensitive, and suitable father and mate. One key difference between Bly’s work and the male weepies of 1991 is that the helper figures/mentors of New Men in the latter texts are usually women, racial minorities, or gay men. As Jeffords has argued, it seems that white, heterosexual men are emotionally and socially inept because no one has taught them any better; while those social groups that have been historically dominated are well-adjusted, it is the white men that suffer and need help and attention.\textsuperscript{165} In making over its protagonists into more sensitive men, the ‘90s male weepie depicts men as equally oppressed by patriarchy and sexism as women are.\textsuperscript{166} The problem, however, which Michael Messner for one has pointed out, is “the view that everyone is oppressed by sexism strips the concept of ‘oppression’ of its political meaning, and thus obscures the social relations of domination and subordination.”\textsuperscript{167} Indeed, the first two male weepies I will examine in this chapter, *The Prince of Tides*


\textsuperscript{165} Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, 148 and 152.

\textsuperscript{166} Interestingly, the makeover is a major trope within postfeminist media, though usually they are performed through conspicuous consumption in addition to spiritual self-help. For a seminal article on this topic, see Charlotte Brunsdon’s “Post-feminism and Shopping Films” in her book *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes* (London: Routledge, 1997), 81-102.

\textsuperscript{167} Messner, “‘Changing Men,’” 73.
(1991) and *Regarding Henry* (1991), create symmetry between the patriarchal oppression of men and women that elides the asymmetry of gender relations to power in reality.

Most concerning about these films is the extent to which they speak on behalf of women, and they follow the trajectory of male texts doing “feminist” work that Tania Modleski examines in her book *Feminism Without Women*, which appeared in 1991 as well. Modleski discusses both the increasing number of men doing feminist work in academia and films produced by men that also engage with feminist discourse through the 1980s; both the academic work and entertainment have begun to examine men through the lens of gender, both in terms of masculinity and male femininity. Regardless of the (probably good) intentions of these male academics and filmmakers, the effect of male voices crowding out female ones in the name of feminism and focusing on the effects of male power and male hegemony on men can “efface female subjectivity” and lead to a cultural appropriation that isn’t necessarily in women’s best interest. Modleski warned that “however male subjectivity may currently be ‘in crisis,’ . . . we need to consider the extent to which male power is actually consolidated through cycles of crisis and resolutions, whereby men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it.” This is not to detract from pro-feminist men who responsibly take ownership of their privilege, nor to suggest that masculinities are less worthy of study than femininities; this work is important for understanding patriarchy, just as foregrounding whiteness as a construction is important for understanding racism, and

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169 Ibid., 7.

170 Ibid., 7.
alliances should be welcomed. My point rather is that a privileged group speaking for its less privileged counterpart always bears the danger of colonization.

In their first encounters with the male weepies of the early ‘90s, most reviewers did not approach the films in terms of gender. Many film reviewers interpreted these weepies as anti-yuppie films because the characters shift their values from greed and competition to a more “simple” life and “locating the child within [themselves].” Peter Rainer of the Los Angeles Times was one of the few to clearly label the films as “male weepies,” but though he did see the films as glamorizing a loss of power that would be considered emasculating in ‘80s terms, he didn’t go so far as to see the films in terms of gender or race relations. The filmmakers themselves also didn’t see their characters in terms of race, gender, class, or sexuality; rather, they discussed the films in more universal terms than political ones (thus allowing the straight white male to remain “universal”). For example, Mike Nichols saw his film Regarding Henry as about “redemption” and “a second chance at making a life,” and Barbra Streisand saw her film The Prince of Tides as about “love and forgiveness” and “the power of love to transform.” Only a small handful of critics challenged these as universal stories to


172 Ibid., 1.


point out the stereotypical use of people of color as helper figures and the conservative values that valorize the heterosexual nuclear family.\textsuperscript{175}

The appearance of the ‘90s male weepies in such a compressed period of time (most were released in 1991) did not leave much time for reflection. In hindsight today, the ideological work of the ‘90s male weepies and the figure of the New Man must be considered in the context of other popular genres and films that were released simultaneously. These include new women’s films, most notably, 1991’s female friendship/lesbian films \textit{Thelma and Louise} and \textit{Fried Green Tomatoes}, which represent alternative romantic relationships and family structures as viable to women. In these films, women find more rewarding relationships with other women, and at least one woman in each couple leaves an abusive or boorish husband. One takeaway from these films is that a woman doesn’t need a man to be happy, and in the case of \textit{Fried Green Tomatoes}, can rear a child with another woman. Given the high divorce rates and increasing number of women choosing to have children without male partners—most famously, perhaps, in the case of television’s \textit{Murphy Brown} during the 1991-1992 season—heterosexual marriage had lost some cachet. Male weepies seek to revise heteronormative relationships to make the traditional seem appealing. This re-enchantment of the traditional also follows through on the “backlash” films that depict ambitious career women negatively if they do not conform to traditional standards of femininity (e.g., \textit{Working Girl}, \textit{Fatal Attraction}, \textit{Baby Boom}). Male weepies reinforce the priority of the heterosexual nuclear family unit, and while men are given the chance

to adopt more traditionally feminine qualities—to their own psychological benefit—women are not offered the chance to adopt traditionally masculine qualities, at least not favorably. Meanwhile, the films portray women as the beneficiaries of this male growth. For these reasons, I think the male weepie contributes significantly to post-feminism as the new common sense logic of patriarchy.\footnote{While there are multiple definitions of the term post-feminism, here I use it to refer to the belief that feminism has been accomplished and is no longer necessary.} As the new cycles of the genre shift from narratives of direct struggle with feminism in the late 1970s and early 1980s (\textit{Kramer vs. Kramer, The Champ})\footnote{I discuss this cycle of films in the previous chapter.} to narratives that now seem to openly incorporate elements of feminism, they perform a sleight-of-hand whereby patriarchy takes on responsibility for revising (rather than eradicating) itself, covering over the way it maintains male power by swapping style for substance.

In this chapter, I first will analyze two representative male weepies from 1991, \textit{The Prince of Tides} and \textit{Regarding Henry}. The narrative arcs of the films from this year are so consistent—in fact, the stories of transformation into better husbands and fathers even pervades other genres, including comedy (\textit{Kindergarten Cop}) and Disney films (\textit{Beauty and the Beast, Hook})—that to examine more than two would be redundant. More interesting are the variations on this cycle that appear after 1991, which approach privilege within capitalism, racism, heterosexism, and patriarchy in slightly different ways. For this reason, in the latter part of the chapter, I will shift to an analysis of 1993’s \textit{Philadelphia}, where a homophobic black male lawyer is transformed through his relationship with a gay white client. Here, the emotional and psychological growth of the heterosexual protagonist demonstrates that the empathy attached to this growth has the
potential to benefit the larger community. *Philadelphia* raises interesting and useful questions about the political power of male weepies as a genre.

The male weepies I will examine first present narratives of white, heterosexual male self-revision. In both stories, the male protagonists have a wife and female children, and their relationship to them is tense and endangered by some sort of personal lack in terms of intimacy. Through relationships to friends and family as emotional helpmates, they become new men, and very clearly in the terms of the films, better husbands and fathers. As Tom in *The Prince of Tides* puts it, “For the first time I felt like I had something I could give back to the women in my life—they deserved that.” The films are resolved through the reunion of the nuclear family unit and a male protagonist who likes himself better. These endings reinforce heteronormativity, and while in many ways there appear to be equal power relations between husband and wife, the new masculinity of the husbands does not undermine male privilege.

*The Prince of Tides*, Barbra Streisand’s film adaptation of Pat Conroy’s novel, is the story of Tom Wingo, an unemployed teacher from South Carolina who must go to New York to help a psychiatrist, Susan Lowenstein, treat his sister Savannah who has attempted suicide a second time. When he departs, his marriage is on shaky ground because he cannot express his feelings toward this wife; his wife, who is a doctor and currently the breadwinner, feels emotionally estranged from him and is being courted by a co-worker. During his own sessions with Susan, traumas responsible for his intimacy problems are uncovered, and through her counseling and love affair with him, he comes to terms with his past and returns to his family a new man. Tom’s initial accounts of his and his sister’s childhood seem to locate the source of their problems in their parents’
psychological and physical abuse; while this remains true, the great revelation of the film is that he, his sister, and mother all were raped by three escaped convicts when he was thirteen. This confession, withheld for years by his mother’s instructions to never talk about the incident and to pretend that it never even happened, appears to be a burden responsible for his intimacy problems. The experience of rape is compounded by his obedience to what he calls “the Southern way”: “when things get too painful, we either avoid them or we laugh.” Crying is not an option. While his sister’s attempt at suicide sets the film’s plot into motion, the story essentially becomes Tom’s.

Tom and his sister both were raped, but for *The Prince of Tides*, Tom’s is the one that matters. The logic of his confession to their experience seems to be that raping women is normal in his cultural perspective; the raping of men is less common than that of women, making it more remarkable, and therefore, more worthy of sympathy because it is taboo. Tom says, “What was happening to me was unimaginable. I didn’t know it could happen to a boy. All I wanted to do was die—especially when I saw Luke.” In Tom’s flashback, his older brother Luke appears outside at the window, then comes in with a shotgun to rescue his family. Tom’s rape places him in a feminized position because victims, in his mind, are usually female. Furthermore, he was “rescued” by his brother and his mother once she got a hold of a knife; Tom offers the score “Luke 2, Momma 1, while I did nothing.” His own opportunity for revenge or self-defense denied, he is left in a passive, helpless position. Through this rape alongside his sister, Tom, as a man, becomes equally a victim of male dominance. On a symbolic level, the rapists demonstrate a lack of discrimination between the genders as objects to exploit and
oppress; Tom’s rapist calls him “raw meat,” reducing Tom to something genderless, if not inhuman, and representing the rapist as a primitive man.

The wound of this traumatic experience is compounded by another wound: his mother’s injunction of silence, a form of repression worse than the actual rape, he tells Susan. His mother insists that no one tell the father what happened and the incident is never discussed by the family again. The mother goes so far as to tell her children that “this did not happen” and that if any of them breathes a word about it, she will “stop being [their] mother.” In this way, Tom experiences two traumatic instances of patriarchal oppression: the first is the actual rape by an aggressive/dominant man; the second is through cultural sanctions around men and emotions. His sister, of course, is given the same instructions as Tom; however, she seems to continue to feel and express those emotions in alternative ways, through writing poetry and attempting suicide: “she could keep quiet, but she couldn’t lie.” Tom’s response has been to keep the emotions pushed away from his consciousness and to attempt carrying forward with a “normal” life. Susan suggests that crying would be therapeutic, but while Tom admits he does cry on occasion, these occasions are never personal; he cries “at weddings, the Olympics, I’m real big on the national anthem,” but not for, as Susan puts it, the thirteen-year-old boy inside of himself. Crying and experiencing emotion, then, are explicitly linked to his self-transformation in the film; once he has finally had a genuine cry, he will be emotionally expressive and capable of sharing his feelings with others. While Susan is grateful for Tom’s confession because it will help her to treat his sister, the film’s focus is Tom’s benefit: he will begin to improve from this point in the film onward.
Crying is linked, here, to a new type of man, one that stands in opposition both to Tom’s abusive father and to his traditionally masculine brother Luke. In a key childhood memory (shown as flashback) of his family at dinner, the father mocks Tom for enjoying his mother’s attempts at gourmet cooking, which his father hates. Tom begins to cry and his father commands that there is no crying in the house and smacks him around. When Tom continues to cry, his father tells Savannah, “go get this little girl one of your dresses,” a sexist response to his son’s emotional expression and penchant for cooking. Luke defends Tom by hitting his father back and challenging him for being “mean”; in other scenes, Luke responds to his father’s violence in kind, and Tom as an adult clearly views his older brother as courageous and himself as ineffective. Susan points out that Luke is dead, shot by the government after blowing up a construction site for a power plant on his family’s former island (sold by his mother who won it in her divorce), so Tom “must be doing something right.” While Luke seems heroic and more masculine to Tom, Luke’s mirroring his father’s image through his own violence has proven self-destructive. Tom, though he has buried his pain, has tolerated the abuse and rejected the father, thus becoming a different kind of man. In a scene that demonstrates his own understanding of what could be read as an essentially generational difference in masculine styles, Tom tells his father that his grandchildren love him. His father replies—seemingly on a different subject—that the Braves baseball team lost to the Dodgers the night before: “did you know that son?” Tom smiles gently in response, and says, “Yeah, I know that Dad,” signaling his acceptance that his father cannot express intimate emotion, but also perhaps that in the “did you know that son?” is a coded assurance that the father is saying “I love you” back in his own way. While the film
doesn’t excuse the father’s abuse of his children, it attempts to see physical expression of violence as a counterpoint to emotional repression.

While Luke’s old-fashioned masculine style leads to his premature death, Tom as New Man is given a new chance at life. Tom’s emotional growth seems balanced by the opportunities his trip to New York provides for him to remasculinize himself. Susan hires him to coach her son in football through the summer, and his relationship to her son allows him not only to flex his authority and engage in good old-fashioned male rough-housing, but also to pass his new wisdom onto the younger man and make him a better, more balanced and sensitive male than his biological father. Susan’s famous violinist husband is a boor, abusive of Susan and Tom. At a dinner party at Susan’s house, Tom forces her husband to apologize to her after insulting her in front of company: this forced apology along with Tom’s subsequent affair with Susan, who falls in love with him, confirms that he is the superior male of the two. Tom’s new brand of patriarchy, one that arguably believes in respect for women, honors family, achieves intimacy, and even enjoys the company of gay men (Savannah’s neighbor Eddie) without feeling threatened, wins the approval of all those around them. Indeed, Susan might serve as a testing ground for this. Once his sister seems to be in stable condition, and he is ready to return home, Susan says that one of the things she likes about him is that he is “the kind of guy who would go back to his family.” As mentioned earlier, he says his new and improved, more intimate self is a change that the women in his life deserve, and so both Susan and presumably the family he is returning to approve of and desire the sensitive, emotional,
and communicative masculinity that he now embodies. This openness for talking is, arguably, one thing that some feminists have been hoping for or encouraging in men.  

If the film seems to document the emotional oppression men feel in patriarchy, where generations of men, particularly those of the working class from which Tom hails, are encouraged to stoically avoid feeling and repress pain, it does so at the expense of marginalizing a woman’s oppression: Savannah’s. As an afflicted woman, a recurring role in the classic woman’s film, she is not only silenced, but also represented through a surrogate, her twin Tom. Initially in a coma and then sedated after her recent suicide attempt, she also has blocked out portions of her childhood. Susan asks Tom to “be her memory,” and Savannah later confirms this role, dedicating her new book of poems to “Tom Wingo, my memory.” While Tom and Savannah do share childhood experiences, and therefore Tom’s memories might serve perfectly well as a stand in for her own, his for hers collapses individual and sexual differences into an equivalence. In the film’s terms, Savannah is made knowable only through Tom. Within this specific story, Tom’s serving as voice for both of them might not seem problematic, but the three scenes where Savannah is capable of speaking again do not develop her own agency and voice. Instead, she physically clings to him, he calls her sweetheart, and all of her questions and concerns pertain to what “[she] put Tom through” and when he is going back home. The scenes are strangely Tom-centric and make Savannah into a damsel in distress. I do not

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178 Judith Newton, for one, who has studied men’s movements, sees many of the personal transformations of men she has witnessed as what “feminists had once dared to hope for from men.” Newton, From Panthers to Promise Keepers: Rethinking the Men’s Movement, 3.

179 See Molly Haskell’s chapter on the woman’s film in her book From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies (Baltimore: Penguin, 1974).
mean to belittle her trauma, but rather to point out the heroic role given to Tom. In his relationship to his sister in the film’s present and his rescuing Susan from her husband (she begs him, “please take me with you”), Tom is privileged as the agent of change and the vanquisher of old styles of masculinity. The women—and by extension, feminists—can commend their oppression to the New Man.

This side-lining of feminism becomes more blatantly obvious when we put the adaptation in relation to the source text, Pat Conroy’s 1986 novel, which was clearly engaged in feminist discourse and particularly the question of what it means to be a feminist man. In the novel, Savannah is a feminist poet (it is never suggested that she is a feminist in the film) who features more prominently, Dr. Lowenstein herself is a feminist psychoanalyst, and even Tom self-identifies as a male feminist. In fact, much of Tom’s goodness in the novel emanates from his tolerance and even masochistic pleasure of society seeing a male feminist as “the most ridiculous figure of our silly times.”

Tom’s wounds in the novel include not only his rape and repression of emotions, but also the wounds related to being a straight white male in post-Sixties American culture. The civil rights movement left him “undefended,” peace demonstrators “spit on” him as a participant in the “all-white, all-male ROTC program in college,” and finally, “the women’s liberation movement bushwhacked [him]” and placed him on the “other side of the barricades once again.” As Sally Robinson argues, the novel places Tom “among the ranks of the dispossessed, the disenfranchised, and the injured.”

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181 Ibid., 9.
representing Tom—and by extension, all white straight males—as misunderstood or engaging in the kind of pity or anger embodied in the figure of the Angry White Male, the novel suggests that radical feminists are right, that male power is violent and abusive. In part, Tom’s own recognition of this and his efforts to repress his own “natural” male violence make him admirable.

The film, however, abandons the novel’s explicit participation in discourses of gender and power: where Tom of the novel accepts that the southern white man “embod[ies] everything that is wrong with the twentieth century,” the film displaces the issue of privilege; and whereas Tom of the novel must engage in a complicated struggle between his impulses and his conscious politic choices about the kind of man he wants to be, Tom of the film seems capable of resolving his problems by just finally crying. The shift here from the political to the personal (without always seeing the relationship between the two) here is similar to the focus on personal transformation through talking about one’s own traumas in Robert Bly’s work with men, which essentially ignores the privileges that come with being a straight white male. I do not mean to valorize Conroy’s novel here, but it offers a more provocative argument that feminism almost necessitates a wounding of men by asking them to repress what in Conroy’s mind (and much of male liberationist literature) are natural male instincts for sex and violence, often intertwined. This more complex inner struggle is missing in the cinematic male weepies. Once they are capable of emotional intimacy, the male protagonists are treated as purified; there is no privilege for which they are responsibility. This purity is intensified by the representations of “bad” men (such as rapacious convicts

183 Conroy, Prince of Tides, 9.
or Lowenstein’s husband). The ‘90s male weepies’ easy, melodramatic binaries of good and bad allow the sensitive and chivalrous white male heroes to be aligned with feminism as they stand in contrast to the more strongly marked bigots that are represented as traditionally masculine. The New Man presents only surface-level alliances with women and other minorities, and doesn’t acknowledge that men can be sensitive and yet also maintain a disproportionate amount of political power. In other words, these male weepies often create false binaries that oversimplify personal and political relationships.

If the technique of *The Prince of Tides* is to shift agency for change to men themselves whereby they can heal their own wounds and put other traditional men in their place, *Regarding Henry* goes even further by giving its male protagonist a divided self, a Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde type of identity. This split within the individual makes it clearly men’s responsibility to revise patriarchy since the project is necessarily one of self-revision in the case of this film. *Regarding Henry* also shows what women and children have to look forward to in life with the New Man, picking up where *The Prince of Tides* leaves off by ending with Tom’s return home.

Henry is a lawyer who gets shot in the head and heart when he walks in on a convenience store robbery and is given a chance at a new life since the injuries include a loss of memory; he literally must start over, and this time is shaped into a completely different man. Henry’s old alpha male self is heartless, selfish, unaffectionate, domineering, competitive, and philandering, most of which is conveyed and represented as negative in the opening scenes, which include him legally defending a hospital and preventing a poor widow from suing for malpractice, chastising his young daughter for spilling juice on “his” piano, and acting two-faced at a party full of wealthy snobs.
References to Henry’s father—“like father, like son”—whom Henry affectionately calls “the old bastard” during a celebration of his win in court, make this “bad” Henry an exemplar of an old masculine style or Traditional Man, but the film also locates the source of the old Henry’s bad values in capitalism and U. S. work ethics.

After his brain injury, Henry becomes a clean slate, and his “second chance” and new self are shaped first by an African-American physical therapist, Bradley, and then his wife Sarah and daughter Rachel. These three figures—along with the family’s Hispanic housekeeper Rosella—seem to present an alternative ethos to those of white patriarchy, and the new Henry frankly does not like the old Henry. The conflict between the new Henry and the old Henry is a conflict between the values of family and emotional intimacy and the values of ambition, work, and economic accumulation; the opposition between these values is considered in terms of authentic vs. inauthentic living. When he returns home from the hospital, but is not yet back at work, Henry asks Rosella for a cue: “what do I do when I’m here?” She tells him, “You’re working all the time.” He follows up, “What do I do when I’m not working?” She reasserts, “You’re always working.” This prioritizing of career over family clearly has had consequences: we later learn that his wife sought out an affair from loneliness and see in early scenes that his daughter is uncomfortable around the old Henry, in part because she doesn’t even know him.

His work ethic, Rachel explains, came from his own father: she recites the lecture old Henry has given her that includes a litany of chores he did as a child that gave him his work ethic. Neither she nor new Henry, who now has the innocence of a child, knows what “work ethic” means, though the audience is meant to recognize it as a core American value. When Henry later takes Rachel out of private school, he retrieves her
from a lecture on the values of work and competition; this clearly is his rejection of that work ethic that has kept him from spending time with and nurturing his own family. “I missed her first 11 years,” he tells the schoolmistress; “and I don’t want to miss any more.” Playing on the belief that innocents see truth better than corrupted adults, the work ethic that is tied to the traditional male imperative to be a breadwinner is cast as damaging, as it prevents men (or women who have adopted this masculine ethos) from achieving a more authentic life of emotional intimacy with loved ones. Wife Sara supports Henry’s decision to bring Rachel home in terms that are supportive, but submissive: “whatever [he] want[s]” is what they will do. In this way, though the role of breadwinner is criticized as hurting men, Henry remains the head of household as a decision-maker, and Sara seems relieved. Almost consistently, the film allows new Henry to have it both ways.

By creating the wealthy elite as the “bad guys” and showing that what the straight white male wants is middle-class values, Henry is allowed to be sensitive and to reject the masculine ethos of one area of life without having to give up male privilege. In many ways, the film suggests is that what women should want is not equality, but simply an emotionally intimate partner; while the latter has value, it does not necessarily solve conflicts of gender inequity in the private or public spheres. In this way, the film is profoundly postfeminist. Sarah’s only problem as a working mother is that she suffers the loneliness that is a side effect of Henry being overinvolved with work and economic achievement. This seems to echo postfeminism’s identification of “emotional isolation for women” as a “possible consequence[e] of female independence,” a (heteronormative)
fear that the film displaces onto Henry’s ambition. In other words, like *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *Regarding Henry* represents the home and the family as the key to a fulfilling life and interest in one’s career as riddled with emotional and spiritual consequences. Henry’s new life decisions include selling the sleek, penthouse apartment they live in for a row house in the Village. While that home is still beyond most people’s means, it visually resembles the homes that have been romanticized as a middle-class aspiration in the American imagination, one that, of course, is filled by a family. Thus, while Henry is a New Man, his new future is shaped by traditional values.

Emotional authenticity as the key quality to the New Man is thrown into relief by the elite world’s superficiality: old Henry’s former friends and colleagues cannot be honest with one another or express their emotions, and they do not want to be burdened by the problems and emotions of others. For example, Sarah pretends that things are fine while Henry is in rehab and out of work. She tells her friend Phyllis that she does not want pity, “pity scares me. Actually, this whole thing is making me stronger.” Phyllis encourages her to tell the truth, but when Sarah does, Phyllis advises Sarah not to tell anyone else what she has just told her, and certainly to give no indication that she and Henry are having financial problems. Later, at a party, Henry and Sarah overhear Phyllis, who claimed to be Sarah’s confidante, talking about them behind their backs, expressing pity for Sarah: “what does she possibly have to look forward to [with Henry’s new child-like condition]?” While this scene uses Phyllis to demonstrate the phoniness of the wealthy elite, it also demonstrates how the competing sets of values are mutually

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exclusive: it is not simply that the accumulation of wealth doesn’t leave time to develop an emotionally intimate life; emotional intimacy is simply not allowed. This is why Phyllis cannot recognize the value of the renewed intimacy between Henry and Sarah, which Sarah herself looks forward to. In an earlier scene, Phyllis caught them standing on a bench in Central Park kissing, and while she clearly sees this behavior as eccentric and inappropriate, Sarah seems to enjoy his public display of affection. Sarah is surprised at first because “[he] didn’t use to [even] hold [her] hand . . . it bothered [him].” In many ways, the problem with emotional intimacy becomes a class issue, which leaves space to argue that a “natural” man is in touch with his emotions, much like Robert Bly’s primitive man, which could make him more appealing both to men and to heterosexual women as beneficiaries of this new sensitivity. Presumably, Henry is now a better romantic partner because he can show affection and express emotion, and heterosexual marriage is appealing again with New Man.

*Regarding Henry* attempts to confirm the straight white male’s inner goodness and to make his new masculinity “authentic” and “natural” by having an African-American male both enable and approve of Henry’s discovery of his “real” self. As Michael Kimmel has argued, manhood in America historically has been conferred by other men rather than women, and thus, Henry needs another man to help him maintain a sense of masculinity after his old version of manhood has been made repellant. The logic of the ‘90s male weepie, according to Fred Pfeil, is that men with less social power are less damaged, and thus the suffering straight white male, wounded by society’s
expectations of him, needs the help of an Other. Here, African-American Bradley serves this role, a role that draws on racist thinking that blacks are somehow more “natural” and that, in post-Sixties America, disavows suggestions that Henry as a white man is racist or has privilege. Bradley, Henry’s therapist from rehab, is called on by Sarah to help Henry cope with his transition to his new life, and his advice is aimed not simply at giving Henry the confidence to be his “authentic” self, but also at making him confident in his manhood even if it incorporates sensitivity and feminine values. Bradley shares his own story of having to find a new career after a college football injury: his own physical therapist inspired him to become one himself, even though his male friends called him a “nurse” and made jokes about buying him white dresses. Stanley’s friends use the nurse allusion—to a career traditionally associated with women that involves caring/nurturing others—as an insulting joke and a questioning of his masculinity; but Stanley confronts this jibing as sexism, sexism that can and should be challenged not just by women, but by men as well. The nurse anecdote refers not simply to divisions in paid labor along lines of sexual difference, but also emotional labor as it corresponds to occupations and roles both in and out of the home. Though Bradley is not a nurse, and the film creates space for him to assert his heterosexuality by alluding to his sexual conquests—another racist stereotype—he is a nurturing figure and one manly enough to confer upon Henry a similar male liberation from traditional masculinity. This


The use of African Americans as enablers/nurturers of whites or the representation of them as more “authentic” is typical not only of male weepies, but Hollywood in general, though some weepies address racism itself and feature African Americans as main rather than supporting characters. More recent examples of this are Antwone Fisher (2002) and Remember the Titans (2000); older films are the classic
alternative form of masculinity that Bradley advocates and Henry comes to embody is similar to the type of “third gender” that mythopoetic men’s movement leaders such as Robert Bly often idealized.

Like many other aspects of early ‘90s culture, including Bly’s work and the postfeminist shift from activism to lifestyle, *Regarding Henry* leaves the external and the political world and retreats into the internal and the personal: *self*-transformation is the process by which patriarchy will be reformed. If the old Henry stands for an old version of patriarchy, positioned as equally oppressive to men as it is to women, then the film makes the problem of patriarchy an internal, or psychic, one. Henry becomes responsible for changing himself, and if men are responsible for creating new styles of masculinity—women- and family-friendly styles—then feminism need not bother itself about men, the film suggests. Of course, the modus operandi of this film—like postfeminism and like many of the men’s movements, however well-intentioned—is that style is swapped out for substance. While the patriarchal capitalism of which the old Henry is a part may be the “villain” of the film, patriarchy and capitalism are too ephemeral and abstract to be isolated. While the law firm seems to symbolize it in terms of power and values, the film actually makes most of the people who work there partially sympathetic; the old Henry is the least likeable character and becomes its representative within the film. As an easy target of critique, however, he also becomes an easy task: not only is it easier to transform an individual than entire, intersecting socioeconomic structures like white

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187 For more on style vs. substance, see Michael Messner, “‘Changing Men,’” and Joy van Fuqua, “‘Can You Feel It Joe?’ Male Melodrama and the Feeling Man.”
supremacist, patriarchal capitalism, but having the character suffer memory loss makes it easier for them to change. One man’s change of masculine style, however appealing that change is, is not the same as a transformation in patriarchy.

If anything, ‘90s male weepies simply offer a new and improved version of patriarchy, a warm and fuzzy version. Like Tom in *The Prince of Tides*, here, the man who has changed and become more sensitive and capable of intimacy is represented as a better husband and father. Henry’s new style of masculinity is posited as what women deserve. While his wife and daughter are clearly the primary beneficiaries, the other women in his life—including those most subordinate to his power, his maid and his secretary—approve the new Henry and articulate their preference for him. Rosella, for instance, declares, “I going to miss you Mr. Henry—I like you much better now.” The film also ends with a restoration of the family unit as does the former film. While increased sensitivity to the needs of others is certainly laudable, the reformation of the nuclear family seems to have new ideological consequences. While the father-son melodramas of the late 1970s/early 1980s typically removed women from the picture (often related to women’s abandoning families from feminist encouragement to find themselves, such as in *Kramer vs. Kramer*), allowing the father to serve as an ideal, complete parent, this later cycle serves not just to keep fathers in the home—both films have moments where the father might leave the wife/family—but to keep both husband *and* wife there. This could be read as part of what Adrienne Rich calls “compulsory heterosexuality,” whereby women are conditioned through sociocultural forces to accept
heterosexuality as not only normal, but also desirable.\textsuperscript{188} For Rich, women’s liberation must include a denaturalization of heterosexuality and an embrace of women’s love for each other in all forms—as lovers, friends, mentors, or relatives.\textsuperscript{189} Indeed, the releases of \textit{Thelma and Louise} and \textit{Fried Green Tomatoes} in the same year as these male weepies represent very real alternatives of women creating better lives with other women, and pose a threat that the male weepies themselves partially attempt to contain.

In response to feminism’s challenge to heterosexuality, marriage, and the family—all of which patriarchy is predicated upon—\textsuperscript{190} the New Man is offered up as a redeemer of heteronormativity, and his desirability is confirmed through female characters. In \textit{The Prince of Tides}, Susan knows that Tom’s wife will want him back because she has “sampled the merchandise” (a nod to postfeminist consumption if there ever was one!). These films also can be read as part of the backlash that Susan Faludi has documented in mainstream cinema, such as \textit{Baby Boom}, that prioritizes the family over career.\textsuperscript{191} Though it may be the father who quits his high profile job in \textit{Regarding Henry}, it implies that family should be more important for everyone, i.e. women. While the male weepies may shape a new (specifically heterosexual and white) ideal masculinity by


\textsuperscript{189} Rich places all the ways that women love and support one another on a “lesbian continuum” that is not purely sexual. This could be considered an extension of political lesbianism. Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” 192.

\textsuperscript{190} For arguments that heterosexuality is necessary for patriarchy to function, see both Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” and Eve Sedgwick, \textit{Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire} (New York: Columbia U Press, 1985).

valuing qualities associated with motherhood and femininity (nurturing, sensitivity, etc.) for both men and women, they also leave patriarchy itself as a social organization intact. In this way, these films follow Modleski’s theory that patriarchy attempts to control feminism through incorporation.

Besides keeping wives/mothers in the picture, another significant change to this particular cycle of the male weepie is the choice of gender for the children. Earlier cycles of weepies, most notably those of the 1950s and late 1970s/early 1980s, depicted father-son relationships; these two films give Tom and Henry daughters instead. Why daughters? As already speculated, the New Man presented by these films is to benefit women, so the men need a diegetic female audience to approve them and love them for this change. More importantly perhaps is that sons present the opportunity for the generational passing on of male authority and values, the institutional maintenance of patriarchy. Removing the visible sign of succession enables the films to elide patriarchy. Furthermore, in the case of *Regarding Henry*, having the daughter attend a coed school that imparts the core values of patriarchal capitalism on both male and female students—and preached by a female headmistress, no less—makes women and girls as equally open to old patriarchal ideals. Along with female partners at the law firm, the adoption of capitalist, masculine ethos in relation to work and social class by women places this text in dialogue with postfeminism. The choice between the values of career and accumulation or the values of emotional health and family is no longer mapped onto a gender binary, even though women’s greater participation in the corporate world is hardly indicative of gender equity or the penetration of feminism into large-scale social structures.
Because these films revise masculinity only on the small-scale—within the family unit—they cannot fully address privilege within the context of culture at large. For example, the films elide intermale dominance as an issue: while non-hegemonic men have a presence through Bradley in Regarding Henry and Eddie in The Prince of Tides, they are marginalized within the narratives and their relationships to the privileged male protagonists are amicable. As enablers of the protagonists’ self-transformations, they not only also approve the new masculine style alongside women in the film, but their friendship covers over racial and sexual inequalities in the real world. As for gender inequality, even if Tom and his wife have a greater balance of power (since she is the breadwinner and he does the cooking) it cannot account for continued asymmetries of power in culture at large, such as the overall lower pay of working women. While changes to the emotional life of men are certainly good, this is only one small portion of what feminism hopes to accomplish.

If film genres are structured around social conflicts and even function as a textual form of problem-solving, then the male weepie’s appearance during periods of social change signals not only a desire or need to solve a problem, but also an attempt to shift the terms of the problem from a structural one to a psychological one. As fantasies, male weepies of the early ‘90s such as The Prince of Tides and Regarding Henry depict unity as the maintenance of heteronormativity via the father’s return to his place within the nuclear family, a return welcomed by wife and children. Traditionally, weepies depict a major loss, leaving unity as a thwarted ideal. Earlier male weepies, particularly buddy films such as Brian’s Song and some father-son melodramas such as The Champ, include this loss, as do women’s weepies throughout film history and up to those produced in the
same period as *The Prince of Tides* and *Regarding Henry*. That these male weepies of the early ‘90s depict the achievement of unity/the ideal might serve as a patch job of sorts: they plug holes where leaks spring in the women’s weepies, especially those that increasingly draw on the rhetoric of feminism and depict female violence. In the 1991 films *Thelma and Louise* and *Fried Green Tomatoes*, women shoot rapists and chop abusive husbands into barbeque meat. If the deaths of women in these films thwart the better lives they seek with each other and temporarily find, perhaps as a means of protest, the male weepies exclude loss and death; except, perhaps, in the loss of the Traditional Man, one who presumably will not be missed by feminists. The exclusion of significant loss creates a smooth, problem-free surface via the New Man as an effective solution to problems of gender and the family.

Male weepies may offer a new masculine style, but it is one that makes a better-functioning husband and father rather than offering women any new alternatives outside the bounds of heterosexual marriage and motherhood. Even if the masochism that is the structuring pleasure of the weepie as a film genre represents a rejection of the Father, this rejection is not the same as a rejection of white, heterosexual, middle-class male privilege and power. Using a traditional (white, straight) masculine style as the villain in these films may be a form of “othering” that distances the New Man from not only patriarchy as a problem, but also racism and heterosexism. Scholars have repeatedly identified this dynamic as a bait and switch, and thus have viewed these films with some contempt.¹⁹² Most troubling perhaps is that straight white men become the victims in these films, and

¹⁹² These include the previously cited Fred Pfeil, Joy van Fuqua, Susan Jeffords, and Sally Robinson.
women and minorities are responsible for releasing them from the curse of a new kind of “white man’s burden” of masculinity.

This pattern of ‘90s male weepies, which substitutes calls for change in structural relations to advocacy for personal change as the means for solving social inequality, becomes more complex in Jonathan Demme’s 1993 film *Philadelphia*. This film is often excluded from discussions of ‘90s male weepies because of its notable differences from its earlier counterparts: rather than a white, straight male protagonist, *Philadelphia* features black heterosexual and gay white males as protagonists, and it is also a courtroom melodrama. Understandably, the film does not seem to fit in discussions of the straight white male crisis, which has been the focus of criticism of the ‘90s male weepies. However, it offers new ways to think about the value of personal change in relation to social change.

*Philadelphia* chronicles two parallel stories. The first is Andrew Beckett’s lawsuit against his former law firm for a discriminatory firing, a firing he believes to follow the firm’s discovering that he is gay and has AIDS. The second story is the personal transformation of Joe Miller, the homophobic, ambulance-chasing lawyer who agrees to take Andy’s case. In many ways, the former depends on the latter: in order for Joe to construct a convincing case, he must get the jury and larger courtroom to confront their own homophobia, and thus must confront this within himself. Like the male protagonists of the weepies from 1991, Joe becomes a more sensitive man through the help of an Other, this time, a gay man dying of AIDS. The film is significant as the first mainstream film about AIDS, but here, I will examine it as a continuation of the ‘90s cycle of male weepies.
According to Donald Bogle in his seminal work on African Americans in U. S. cinematic history *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, the role of Joe was originally conceived with a white actor in mind, and certainly, the lessons Joe learns and the type of self he becomes are remarkably similar to that of the white males in earlier films. After all, homophobia is not the problem of one single racial group, and as the primary dynamic of Joe’s character is to evolve from a homophobic straight male into an accepting ally and friend of the gay community, his race may seem unimportant; any confident and macho lawyer will do. However, the ultimate choice for Joe to be African American provides a very important plot device—giving Joe a plausible reason to take on Andy’s case despite his homophobia and AIDS-phobia. Along with establishing Joe and Andy as similar in the film’s opening scene—the men both wear trench coats and jabber into cellphones in an elevator, mirroring body movements almost identically and reaching for their pockets simultaneously when one of their beepers goes off—they are further bonded through experiences of discrimination.

The central scene that establishes this bond and provides the turning point for Joe in his willingness to work with Andy is in the public library where both men are doing legal research. Earlier, Andy visits Joe’s office to seek representation after nine previous rejections; even Joe, the ambulance chaser who will take any case, no matter how farfetched, recognizes that Andy must be desperate to seek his counsel. Joe declines Andy’s case and then immediately visits a doctor to make sure he hasn’t contracted AIDS.

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193 Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 423. Bogle also argues that “race is almost an afterthought” in this film, “though African-American audiences often saw a racial subtext” (424-5). I argue here that race is not merely subtext—the experience of racial discrimination is in fact integral to Joe’s decision, and makes for a believable motivation for changing his mind about representing Andy that might have been harder to do with a white actor.
from Andy touching items in his office. Days later at the library, Joe eats a sandwich while working and looks up to meet the watchful eyes of a library monitor; the white monitor both isolates Joe and attempts to make him feel out of place. When Joe first notices Andy also in the room, he ducks behind his stack of books, but observes Andy’s interactions with another librarian. This librarian brings Andy a document he was looking for and then suggests that Andy work in a private room, away from the other patrons who have overheard that he is researching AIDS discrimination cases and can see clearly that Andy is sick. Andy also has been marked by the librarian as socially undesirable. When Andy’s confrontation with the librarian gets uncomfortable, Joe goes over to say hello and break it up, a gesture of alliance.

After the librarian departs, Andy asks Joe about his new baby girl, a gesture of good will that seems to make Joe feel bad about declining Andy’s case and makes it harder for him to leave. Joe lingers out of pity and legal curiosity to hear the basis for Andy’s case, and with professional discussion as a “safe” way to begin interacting, Andy shares with Joe the legal precedence. The scene is edited to alternate—visually and aurally—between Andy and Joe reading the decision of the legal precedent aloud. While Andy reads the part that specifically identifies HIV/AIDS as a form of disability covered by the federal Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Joe is given the final lines that address discrimination more generally: “this is the essence of discrimination—formulating opinions about others not based on their individual merits, but rather by their membership in a group with the same characteristics.” The definition of discrimination is inclusive of race, and thus Joe’s race and his experience of discrimination earlier in the scene create solidarity with Andy’s own based on sexuality and health. The two men are
united in a final overhead shot of them sitting at the same table with the document between them, visually representing their bond through both their love of the law and the discrimination that they have faced.

This document that Joe and Andy read aloud establishes that discrimination against those with AIDS/HIV is illegal, and thus, that Andy’s firing is the result of bad seeds in the system (the law firm as an extension of the legal system), not the system itself. As Joy Van Fuqua explains, the film suggests that “Andrew Beckett just happened to work for an AIDS-phobic law firm and, if he had just worked for somebody else, he might not have been treated so badly. In this way, the film resembles other ‘90s male weepies by focusing on individual behavior and personal change rather than systematic discrimination and the need for structural change. And indeed, the film makes clear that society can change the law, but that people’s feelings can be beyond the law’s control.

When Joe pushes a discussion of homophobia in the courtroom to both recognize the role it could have played in Andy’s dismissal and to prevent the jurors from allowing their own possible homophobia to shape their verdict, the judge states “in this courtroom . . . justice is blind to matters of race, creed, color, religion, and sexual orientation,” but Joe counters, “with all due respect, your Honor, we don’t live in this courtroom.” The focus of the trial is to show that Andy was fired because he is gay and has AIDS, and in so doing, Joe and Andy must demonstrate to the jury and the film’s audience the power of homophobia and AIDS-phobia and ask them to confront those fears. Joe himself demonstrates this dynamic: once he agrees to take on Andy’s case, he can make all the appropriate moves to build a good court case; however, even as he performs his

194 Van Fuqua, “‘Can You Feel It Joe?,’” 32.
professional task well, his personal feelings cannot be changed like an on/off switch. Thus, like the earlier ‘90s male weepies, a major part of the plot is the personal transformation of Joe.

Like those other weepies, Joe begins the film insensitive to others. Unlike those other weepies, the problem is not his lack of emotional intimacy with family, as he has good relationships with his wife and newborn daughter. Instead, Joe is intolerant and fearful of gay men (and to a lesser degree, lesbians). At home, he expresses his distaste and performs an exaggerated, mincing version of his imagined gay man for fun, based on stereotypes obviously in contrast to Andy’s appearance and behavior in the film. And in a drugstore, Joe becomes violent when a law student following Andy’s case asks him on a date, having assumed that Joe is also gay. So, while Joe isn’t struggling with a trauma per se like Henry Turner or Tom Wingo, he must go through his own trial in order to change; his own sense of masculinity is at stake, and the film represents how delicate this sense of masculinity can be. Because, according to Michael Kimmel, manhood historically has required the conferral of other men, both the taunts Joe receives from colleagues in a bar watching the case on TV and the genuine mistakes over his sexuality are threatening to his sense of masculinity, and thus he reacts by lashing out or leaving, literally enacting a “fight or flight” response.

While Joe presents homophobia as a general social phenomenon in the courtroom, the film clearly identifies homophobia as a specifically male problem. In reality, of course, homophobic women exist, just not in the world of this particular film. Joe’s wife is not homophobic and counts many gays and lesbians as close friends and relatives.

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Likewise, the women from the law firm that take the stand continue to express affection and empathy for Andy after learning he is gay. As part of the case, it is revealed that one of the partners worked with a woman with AIDS at another firm, but she was not fired, “only” treated as a walking disease, in part because she acquired HIV through a blood transfusion rather than a “deviant” lifestyle. The rationale for this double standard is offered in a flashback to Andy and his male colleagues in a sauna where they tell first a sexist joke and then a homophobic one, to Andy’s discomfort. Not only does the film not show women as subjects of homophobia, it also does not show them as objects of homophobia. In this way, the film represents homophobia as a condition of men and understands gay men as threatening to straight masculinity.

To become a New Man, Joe must learn to deal with his homophobia, and like the insensitive white men of other ‘90s male weepies, Joe must be taught. In those previous films, this rehabilitation is performed by social Others (women and racial minorities), and here too the emotionally evolving male is helped by an Other, this time a gay man. While other male weepies (and Hollywood films in general) often feature an African-American helper figure for a white protagonist, here there is a racial inversion (though clearly Andy is not just a supporting character). Andy’s sexual identity makes him an Other, and a clearly feminized one, connecting him to the female helper figures in other ‘90s male weepies, such as Susan in *The Prince of Tides* and daughter in *Regarding Henry*, but also the female nurse in *Dying Young*. This representation of gay men is of course tied to the stereotype that gay men are basically “like women.” Not only is Andy bonded with women in the film, as seen in scenes with friends and co-workers, but the
central scene of the film—and Joe’s ultimate transformation—literally has him channel a diva.

After a Halloween party at Andy’s loft apartment, Joe sends his wife home to bed so that he and Andy can prepare Andy to take the witness stand. Andy puts on an opera record, Andrea Chenier with Maria Callas, and unable to concentrate on practicing his answers for his questioning, he begins a conversation about the aria they are listening to, not only translating the lyrics, but performing the emotions of the character. Not only is Andy feminized through channeling the diva and using her song to express his experience in both being rejected by his law firm and dying, but the mise-en-scene also evokes heterosexual romance. The room is lit by firelight and the camera uses close-ups of Andy’s face as it would have for a classical female star. Emotion, it seems, is feminine, and part of being a “new man” means letting go of masculine emotional reticence. As Van Fuqua argues, it is here that Andy teaches Joe how to feel properly. Joe not only listens attentively, but seems captivated; when the music ends, it is as if Joe has awakened from a spell, and uncomfortable from sharing this deeply emotional experience with another man, he quickly grabs his things and leaves. He does, however, pause outside Andy’s door, wondering if Andy is OK, and considers going to check on him. While he doesn’t, that pause is quite a step for Joe as a character—he cares about Andy. And after experiencing the song of loss with Andy, empathizing with both him and the diva, he goes home to kiss and hold his sleeping baby girl and wife. Joe has already been shown to be a devoted father and husband, but like the other male weepies, it is suggested

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196 Van Fuqua, “‘Can You Feel It, Joe?,’” 33.
here that his emotional growth will foster intimacy with his family. Joe is becoming an emotionally complete man.

Unlike the white male characters from 1991 that transform and become more sensitive, Joe does not have a singular traumatic experience from which he must heal. Arguably, his everyday encounters with racism—primarily, being treated as a suspicious person because he is black, as seen in the library—are an ongoing trial, but Joe does not appear to be suffering in any explicit way. Rather, he appears to be successful and happy, both in his business and his home. He does, however, need to become a more sensitive person and grapple with his own homophobia to become a better person. In terms of archetypal hero plots, this personal change here is more heroic than in The Prince of Tides and Regarding Henry because Joe could have declined Andy’s case and gone on his merry way; Joe may benefit from his developed sense of empathy and compassion, but it is largely other people and society who gain from Joe’s transformation. It stands to reason that a change in consciousness would enable structural change and lead to a more equal society. This is captured in the final scene of the film. As Fred Pfeil has observed, the typical narrative arc of the white, straight male weepies from 1991 “is from an initial state of alienation, through trial and suffering, to reconnection with family and cosmos,”197 and finally a triumphant moment of inclusion as the film’s resolution. That final moment of inclusion, as seen in Regarding Henry and The Prince of Tides, is one of reuniting with the nuclear family. In Philadelphia, Joe instead is included as part of a symbolic, human family. In the final scene, Joe and his family attend a memorial service for Andy in his loft, embraced by Andy’s family and his

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197 Pfeil, White Guys, 38.
largely LGBTQ circle of friends. The court case is over, and Joe has no professional obligation to be at the memorial service; he is there of his own accord. The inclusion here is one of community across difference, suggesting that personal transformation can change social relationships, which in turn could lead to social change. I argue that Philadelphia, more than any other weepie of this period, raises doubts that a text’s focus on individual change is necessarily to the detriment of structural change, a common criticism of both male weepies and the mythopoetic thinkers like Robert Bly.\(^{198}\)

A more careful analysis of the film reveals that it does show that the law is inadequate and also that individuals and their personal beliefs are not separate from social and political institutions; rather, the two mutually constitute one another, and therefore, a change in individuals’ consciousness may indeed be necessary for radical social change. First, while the primary focus is on justice for Andy’s firing because people with AIDS are protected from discrimination under the law, the film also subtly identifies ways that same-sex couples do not have rights equal to heterosexual couples. For example, when Andy becomes sick to the stomach and goes to the hospital, his partner Miguel rushes there and immediately gets involved talking to the doctors and making sure Andy is properly treated. Clearly upset, Miguel challenges one of the doctor’s decisions and the doctor threatens to have him removed because he is not an immediate relative. Andy smoothes things over, both because he has a peaceful nature and because he knows the couple has no legal recourse; Miguel’s presence is dependent on the hospital’s good will. In this way, though the legal basis of Andy’s court case suggests that he is equal under

\(^{198}\) These critics include those I have cited throughout this chapter: Joy Van Fuqua, Fred Pfeil, Susan Jeffords, and Sally Robinson.
the law, other moments in the film question the extent to which all Americans are indeed legal equals.

Second, the film shows how more subtle forms of racism, sexism, and heterosexism permeate institutions that make explicit gestures of affirmative action, and these unofficial forms of prejudice can and will be perpetuated by individuals based in part on their consciousness. Both in the sauna and in the luxury box of the Philadelphia Sixers, where Joe delivers Andy’s former firm their summons, it is clear that the firm who does hire and even promote women and minorities is an old boys club. The business of the firm is conducted not only in the office, but in other bonding spaces that are (heterosexually) male; no women would be permitted in the sauna and only one appears in the luxury box at the basketball game (though not at the subsequent pow-wow over how to respond to Andy’s lawsuit). Furthermore, the homophobic joke in the sauna suggests that gay men are not welcome. In this way, the film actually addresses the ways that subtle forms of prejudice continue to shape society even as outward prejudice has been eliminated on the surface. When Andy’s paralegal Anthea shares on the witness stand that one of the firm’s partners suggested she wear less “ethnic” jewelry to work and that this is a form of discrimination, the defense lawyer asks about Anthea’s own recent promotion: “How do you explain the promotion of an obviously intelligent, articulate, qualified African-American woman in a firm which practices discrimination as wantonly and consistently as you and Mr. Beckett claim?” Anthea replies, “I think counsel tends to oversimplify the issue somewhat.” The lawyer leaves the burden of proof on Anthea, and

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199 Martha Burk, for one, has written extensively on the ways that the American corporate elite has kept women out, in part, by conducting unofficial aspects of business in male-only or masculine spaces, such as the male-only Augusta National Golf Club.
this in many ways represents the conundrum of bigotry in the post-Civil Rights era: equal rights for (some) minorities appear to be secured, according to the law, but everyday life is still affected by casual forms of prejudice.

I would argue that though *Philadelphia* has a heartily liberal surface—as it sees the courtroom as a place where justice indeed can be served—there are more radical undercurrents to the film. The most skeptical critics suggest that the film is overly accommodating of a mainstream audience—and indeed, interviews with its creators reveal their conscious negotiations to gain a wider audience—and that it is naïve in believing that learning to “feel properly” can solve social problems. But herein lies the political version of “the chicken or the egg” question: can the law change people’s consciousness or must people’s consciousness be changed in order to then change the law? In other words, is Joe correct that in order for society to transform, its people must transform inside, that Joe cannot win Andy’s case without also asking the jury to also confront the homophobia within them? While Joe’s personal evolution is most representative of this transformation in the film, a careful viewer will witness a jury member transform as well. The camera lingers on the facial responses of a middle-aged white male juror who seems to identify with the white male defendants in the beginning.

200 See William Grimes, “AIDS Is the Subject, But Who Is the Audience?,” *New York Times*, December 19, 1993, H11. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009) with Index (1851-1993).* Among the filmmakers’ numerous concerns with creating a film that would appeal to a mass audience—and sell tickets during the holiday season, where it would compete with comedies and feel-good movies—were its dealing with a “terrible disease”; creating sympathy for a gay character who is not a “funny, best-friend character,” but rather a “serious, complex man with a male lover”; and attempting to transmit what they saw as important “medical and legal information about AIDS.” The filmmakers included a straight lawyer, Joe, as a second protagonist with which audiences could identify; revised the script to be less angry and preachy than its first draft; made Andrew more “conservative” and “almost straight-seeming”; focused primarily on the court case rather than Andrew’s relationship to his lover; and kept physical contact between the male lovers minimal.
of the trial; he laughs along with one defendant’s macho representation of the Navy, including his and his fellow seamen’s torture and humiliation of a gay sailor on board. Later—after Andy himself takes the stand, reveals his stricken body, and becomes sick—through a quick cut to the jury’s deliberations, we hear that juror constructing a rationale for why the firm indeed fired Andy because he was a gay man with AIDS. He makes use of his own experience in the armed forces to construct an analogy that challenges the defendants’ claim that they were unhappy with Andy’s performance as a lawyer and gave him their biggest case to date in order to “test” him: “Say I got to send a pilot into enemy territory and he’s going to be flying a plane across three hundred and fifty million dollars. Who am I going to put in that plane? Some rookie who can’t cut the grade because I want to see if he can rise to the challenge? Or am I going to give that assignment to my best pilot, my sharpest, my most experienced, my top gun, the very best I’ve got?” The scene’s primary purpose is to share the outcome of the trial, but it appears to depict a man who either was homophobic or at least had been steeped in homophobic masculine institutions make his best effort to see past the lies of such institutions and treat Andy as any other plaintiff. One might call such behavior merely tolerance, but it suggests that the juror’s identification with homophobia earlier and the subsequent confrontations with this that the case forced led to some degree of self-reflection. Interestingly, the straight white men of the law firm are static characters—those who are virulently homophobic stay so, and those who are (relatively) sympathetic never go the extra mile to point the finger at the firm. This minor character, the nameless juror, represents a small step toward a huge problem—changing white supremacist, patriarchal, and capitalist ethos of so many large and powerful social and cultural institutions. Perhaps relegating the
transformed straight white male to such a small role indicates a degree of realism in that changing such deeply entrenched traditions does not happen overnight or, here, in one court case. Nevertheless, the film suggests that personal transformation isn’t necessarily separate from broader social change. Empathy can be integral to social progress, as many activists and scholars would argue in this same decade.\textsuperscript{201}

Grouping \textit{Philadelphia} with the male weepies from 1991 helps us to look at them in a fresh way. While it certainly admonishes straight white male whining by presenting larger scale problems that require collective effort rather than individual problems of suffering, it also makes individual change more valuable. That said, this does not excuse the other films for making straight white men the central interest of concern and relegating women and minorities to the role of cheerful enablers in this recuperation. While self-change can be important, it is myopic to represent the straight white male as if he is the only suffering person while neglecting to point out his continued cultural and political privileges even as the demographic has withstood some economic losses.\textsuperscript{202}

Disdain for the weepies of 1991 has been fairly consistent amongst cultural and academic critics, but I would argue that some elements of this cycle are undervalued. Like the father-son melodramas of the early ‘80s, these films are neither wholly conservative nor wholly progressive. Though many find the films disingenuous in focusing on the suffering of straight white men given that “most of the breadwinning

\textsuperscript{201} Judith Newton devotes a chapter “The Politics of Feeling” in her book \textit{From Panthers to Promise Keepers} about advocacy for empathy and love over individualism during the very late 1980s into the 1990s. Diverse intellectuals and activists arguing that “love work” was integral to both personal and social change included bell hooks, Cornell West, the Promise Keepers, NOMAS (National Organization for Men Against Sexism), and Anthony Giddens.

\textsuperscript{202} See again Thurow, “Average White Male No Longer Leads the March to Prosperity.”
roles go to [white] male actors,”

much of the protagonists’ goodness stems from their ability to empathize with others, even those of other social groups. The new Henry, for one, displays this empathy by delivering to the poor family that the old Henry defeated in court the evidence necessary for them to win their case against his former firm. The later Philadelphia certainly sees empathy and self-transformation as socially valuable, and its shift to more diverse characters reveals the flexibility of the genre. While the dominant narrative of trauma and transformation would continue to appear in white male weepies over the next decades, such as in Good Will Hunting (1997) and Million Dollar Baby (2004), a greater diversity of male weepies would appear that proved the genre’s viability for more marginalized men, particularly African-American men. These include Antwone Fisher and The Pursuit of Happyness, which would use the genre as a space for renegotiating black masculinities, particularly in the white imagination.

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203 Rainer, “A Touchy-Feely Summer.”
CHAPTER 5
FROM “BOYZ” TO DADS: NEW MASCULINE IDEALS IN BLACK MALE MELODRAMAS

In the previous three chapters, I have examined cycles of male weepies, that is, clusters produced within a very short period of time. While many feature characters of color and even a few focus on interracial friendships, the bulk of these weepies are focused on the transformation of a white male protagonist. There have been, of course, male weepies focused on protagonists of color produced over the last several decades, but they generally haven’t appeared in discrete cycles. Despite their being a bit more spread out, these male weepies are worth examining, particularly in comparison to their white counterparts since masculine ideals and access to these ideals are not consistent across racial lines. Gender and race intersect, and thus the experiences of men of color cannot be discussed in exactly the same terms as white men. For this reason, I want to consider on their own terms how the distinct discourses around black masculinities have shaped black male weepies and how those weepies renegotiate black masculine ideals. I am concentrating here on black men rather than other men of color because there is a more substantial output of films centered on black male characters and because more than any other race, historically, black men in the U. S. have been objects of political scrutiny in a culture dominated by whites.

There have been many male weepies with black protagonists over the decades which overlap with other film genres, particularly sports films, including *The Great White Hope* (1970), *Maurie* (1973), and *Remember the Titans* (2000). Here, I will focus on domestic melodramas that feature father-son relationships because they engage with a number of discourses around black masculinities, particularly fatherhood, and offer more
direct opportunities for comparisons to their white counterparts. As seen in the white father-son melodramas of the late ‘70s and early ‘80s and the white male weepies of the early ‘90s, the active parenting that was part of “new” men was so often represented by middle-class whites that it suggests this form of responsible fatherhood is inaccessible to poorer men or men of color. Though Hollywood has been happy to use black characters as figures of nurture (Regarding Henry) or witnesses for the appropriate new masculinity of white characters (The Great Santini), those black characters come from a more mythical tradition in the white American imagination where the characters’ main concerns in life are whites. Meanwhile, outside of cinema, actual black men have been considered failures as fathers, particularly in the wake of the notorious Moynihan Report from 1965, which I will discuss below. The male weepies I will focus on in this chapter—Boyz in the Hood (1991), Antwone Fisher (2002), John Q (2002), and The Pursuit of Happyness (2006)—take up and renegotiate “new” masculinities for black men and in ways that engage specific discourses around black masculinity and fatherhood in the U. S. context. In doing so, the films offer more complex characters that simultaneously show realistic struggles based on material and social conditions in the U. S. while also offering more positive representations of men than are found in the stereotypes that pervade U. S. culture.

Both film scholars and critics noticed the vast number of white male weepies produced in 1991, one even dubbing it “the year of living sensitively,” but 1991 also marked the release of a monumental film in Black American cinema, Boyz in the Hood. The film was so popular and received so much critical praise that John Singleton became

the first black director nominated for an Academy Award. While the film is normally
categorized as a drama rather than a melodrama or tearjerker, the ending of the film is
flooded with pathos and the film usefully sets up different masculinities that black men
can take up in the name of dignity and survival in a racist nation. *Boyz* also creates a
useful bridge between the construction of these new masculine ideals during the Civil
Rights and Black Power movements and the more contemporary contexts of the last few
decades. A central problem within the film is the effect of absent fathers, which evokes
the findings and controversies of the Moynihan Report, along with more contemporary
discussions of responsible fathering.

the leadership of Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan observed that one-quarter of black
households in the U. S. were headed by women, and that these matriarchies were to blame for the suffering and pathology of black families. Restoring men to their rightful place as heads of households was the patriarchal solution to problems within black communities. The report did much to solidify the idea in the white American imagination that “black fathers [were] inner-city, hypermasculine males who are financially irresponsible and uninvolved in their children’s lives,”\(^{205}\) and the reputation that the report has gained is for demonizing single black mothers. But despite how the report is now remembered, particularly amongst feminists, it did make some valid observations.\(^{206}\) The first is that higher incomes are associated with greater family


\(^{206}\) One misinterpretation attached to this report is that matriarchies are undesirable because they are unnatural. The report actually points out that matriarchies are not inherently bad; rather, the problem is
stability. The second is the impact of other male role models even in homes with a single mother and absent father. The Moynihan Report argued that what set black families apart from white ones in the latter regard is that white children saw white men outside of their own families working, while black children often did not; this discrepancy corresponded to unequal rates of unemployment. One conclusion of the report, then, was that jobs needed to be created so that more black men could work. But again, the legacy of the report is the interpretation that single mothers themselves are automatically the problem, even if the report does not actually say this; rather, poverty is the overall problem.207 In this way, the recommendation of more radical thinkers like bell hooks that black children need access to good role models of both genders who do not necessarily need to be biological relatives is not terribly different than the Moynihan Report’s findings.208 The promotion of patriarchy, however, is distinctly more conservative.

While not necessarily a direct response to the report, the men involved in black organized movements in the 1960s and 1970s offered images of strength and commitment to which younger men could actually have access. If manhood and

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207 Other scholars have pointed this out as well. See Stella Bruzzi, Bringing Up Daddy: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Postwar Hollywood (London: British Film Institute, 2005), 163.

citizenship had been tied together throughout U. S. history, the disenfranchisement and marginalization of black men had denied them access to hegemonic masculinity. And indeed, former slaves such as Frederick Douglass saw a relationship amongst freedom, manhood, and patriarchy. The question of whether the goal should be for black men to take their “rightful” patriarchal place as head of the household or the goal should be to reimagine social relationships as truly equal across different facets of identity ran through organized black movements, and black male weepies are engaged with this question as well. Indeed, as Judith Newton observes, studying and comparing multiple organizations, “The national attention that the [Moynihan] report directed to black men’s ostensible failures as husbands and fathers (and therefore as citizens) contributed to the tendency of Black Power to focus on ideals of masculinity, to call for limits on black women’s agency, and to identify the leadership of the movement with heterosexual males.” For black males, demanding that the patriarchal U. S. society acknowledge them as men often kept the link between manhood and patriarchy intact.

While different male leaders of Black Power would embody ideal masculinity in different ways, the foundation of these ideals was the image of Malcolm X. Malcolm X was his own sort of self-made man, having evolved from a young criminal to a revolutionary leader, but this was in a different vein than the individualist ethos associated with traditional (white) masculinity in the U.S. Rather, his ethos was one that “identified manhood with self-sacrificing but also defiant struggle for social

209 See bell hooks, “Plantation Patriarchy,” in We Real Cool.

Groups working in the wake of Malcolm X generally had community survival, often achieved through nurturing, at their core, but different masculine ideals sprouted with individual leaders. The biggest split between these ideals is represented by Black Panther leaders Eldridge Cleaver and Huey Newton. Like many other young black men (and women), Cleaver joined the Panthers in part because he was attracted to their powerful, warrior-like appearance with black berets and guns. Cleaver saw this warrior masculinity as a solution to the sociopolitical impotence experienced by so many black men as a result of a history of social, political, and economic oppression. And while he often praised black women, Cleaver evinced a belief in heterosexual patriarchy as he saw women in need of male protection and explicitly identified black homosexuals as “castrated” and the embodiment of a “racial death wish.”

Huey Newton, on the other hand, was less comfortable with the warrior elements of Cleaver’s version of masculinity and instead demonstrated his own masculinity as deeply tied to nurturing the community. Importantly, Newton saw the women’s liberation and gay liberation movements as allies. The masculine ideals of these two leaders become threads that can be traced in the decades that follow, and they inform the paths that characters face in Boyz in the Hood. In particular, the warrior masculinity of Black Power has largely been emptied of its politics, and what remains are the guns and toughness of street masculinity. The violence and misogyny of this warrior masculinity were glamorized first in black exploitation films in the 1970s and later in

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211 Newton, From Panthers to Promise Keepers, 59.


“gangsta rap.” While the political struggles of Black Power have not been obliterated, they have been overshadowed by these popular images that often feed into existing stereotypes of black men as unthinking, unfeeling brutes.214 This warrior masculinity, bell hooks and others have argued, threatens the emotional, physical, and sociopolitical well-being of black men in the U. S.215 Ironically, a masculinity that developed out of the need to fight white supremacy has the ability to support it.

Director John Singleton, for one, has created films to fight the negative stereotyping of black men, even as they also explore the complexity and diversity of black masculinities. Specifically, he shared during a roundtable on the crisis of black men in American that he “tr[ies] to have a strong black man in every picture that is responsible for other black men.”216 In Boyz in the Hood, the film’s political consciousness is most clearly expressed through the character Furious Styles (Laurence Fishburne) whose politics are informed by Black Nationalism, but other types of black masculinity are dispersed across its characters. The central conflict of the film is whether or not Tre (Cuba Gooding, Jr.) will give in to the models of warrior or street masculinity around him, which his sensitive-tough childhood friend Doughboy (Ice Cube) does, or will stay focused on his studies and survive one of the most vulnerable times in a young black man’s life. Through educating his son on how white supremacist capitalism works,

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214 Hip hop and rap are often an important cultural space for political resistance. Much of the negative imagery comes from work produced by white corporations and is often purchased primarily by white audiences. See Byron Hurt’s documentary Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes (God Bless the Child Productions, 2006) for both an examination of misogyny and homophobia in hip hop and a critique of white influence over the industry.

215 hooks’s book We Real Cool was written to raise the consciousness of young black men in the effort to save them from the masculinities that endanger them.

Furious is grooming his son into an alternative to street masculinity: manhood defined by a commitment to struggle.

These conflicts over how to be a man are engaged in discourses of black masculinity that were developed through both the Civil Rights movement and the Black Power movement. As explained earlier, one important difference between the street masculinity of the gangster as represented in *Boyz* and the arming of black men for survival as advocated by groups such as the Black Panthers is that the former often lacks the political motivations of the latter. The representation of Panthers as warriors had the context of defense against white violence (particularly the police) and a broader organization that developed community programs aimed at educating and maintaining the health of black communities. Singleton is interested in gangs as groups committing black-on-black violence, and as the gangsta figure has developed further in popular culture, this figure now seems more informed by a capitalist ethos of individual gains and competition rather than community-building. In opposition to the street masculinity that sweeps away Doughboy is black manhood committed to political struggle. Furious runs a small loan company that aims to keep black money in the black community and to protect it against gentrification, and he critiques the indirect racial genocide being committed by theflooding of the community with liquor and gun stores and a racist police force that is uninterested in saving the lives of African Americans. While this racism is of course white in origin, Singleton points to the ways that African Americans who are part of systems like the police force internalize this racism and then perpetuate it against other African Americans. The young men in the hood, then, clearly need their consciousness raised, and within the film, Furious works to do so, not just for his son Tre,
but in at least one moment for other young people as well. While a woman could potentially perform this community role, the young men are presented here as more at risk, and Singleton targets fathers and male figures as the necessary agents of change.\textsuperscript{217}

Singleton makes clear that the fate of the boys in the film depends upon their fathers. When Tre moves in with his father, Furious immediately gives him chores and lays out the rules of the house. He explains, “I’m trying to teach you how to be responsible. Your friends across the street don’t have that; you’ll see how they end up.” While Furious doesn’t say here that the lack of a father is the problem, other scenes indicate that Doughboy’s and Ricky’s missing fathers are hurting and endangering them. Tre had been living with his mother (Angela Bassett), who is finishing her master’s degree and has offered a well-kept and stable home, but she seems to think that her intelligent son’s outbursts at school can only be helped by a male parental figure. She explains to Furious, “It’s like you told me, I can’t teach him how to be a man—that’s your job.” Tre’s parents’ mutual understanding about the necessity of a male parental figure reveals an alignment between Singleton’s beliefs and the Moynihan Report. Not only does the film advocate the father as a solution to problems that are complex and systemic, but it potentially encourages the demonization of single black mothers. Tre’s mother is professional and polished, and she clearly cares about her son and has made an effort. But other single black mothers in the film are represented as incredibly irresponsible and even abusive. One drug-addicted mother allows her toddler to leave the house unattended and wander down the middle of a street; Doughboy’s mother calls him a “fat

\textsuperscript{217} Interestingly, hooks herself argues that black men are the ideal messengers for reaching younger black men, as they are the ones to construct and embody alternative masculine ideals to the oppressive ones continuously fed, but in her introduction, she claims that she got tired of waiting for a man to write the book she herself has written.
fuck” when he is a child. Within any group of people, there are probably going to be some wonderful parents and some inadequate ones, but Boyz has been widely criticized for perpetuating existing beliefs about black single mothers as bad mothers.  

Boyz does, however, issue a call to responsible fatherhood that was part of the discourse of the early 1990s. As Furious tells Tre, “Any fool with a dick can make a baby, but only a real man can raise his children.” Tre was born when Furious was seventeen, and he lectures to Tre that his friends were hanging out on corners and getting into trouble when he made his conscious decision “to be someone you could look up to” to challenge Tre to resist the models of masculinity that surround him. Furious’s choice resembles the calls of Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan to black men in the early 1990s. While Farrakhan did emphasize that adequate fathering was made difficult by racial injustices and white supremacy, he nevertheless called upon men with children to step up and become real fathers. Farrakhan’s speeches and the symbolic Million Man March of 1995 were part of an even broader discourse to address “deadbeat dads” of all races in the ‘90s, and figures as diverse as Farrakhan and President Clinton called for “responsible fatherhood,” a “social role to be publicly enacted rather than a natural or inherent process that men automatically enter into on becoming a biological father.”

While for some participants in the conversation around fatherhood, such as Clinton, the baseline for responsible fatherhood was making child support payments, others such as bell hooks have argued for the necessity of a less patriarchal role. hooks wants to abolish

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the idea that the male role is to sire children and even just to “exercise authority and provide for material needs”; instead, men need to “parent,” a verb meant to signify nurturing care performed by either gender.\textsuperscript{220} In Boyz, Furious fulfills this ideal role.

As hooks argues, “Boys, especially, need adult men to be role models to teach them how to negotiate the patriarchy in ways that are not soul damaging, to show them how to work around the system, and to create healthy alternative self-concepts” as opposed to those based on stereotypes, especially the thug stereotype.\textsuperscript{221} While for some white and/or middle-class Americans, the figure of the thug confirms racist and/or classist ideas about poor and working class African Americans as animals, thug life (a term celebrated in hip hop) offered a space of social rebellion. As media scholar Todd Boyd puts it, writing about professional basketball players, “When you reject the system and all that goes along with it, when you say, ‘I don’t give a fuck,’ you then become empowered, liberated, controller of your own destiny.”\textsuperscript{222} The problem, as feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins points out, is that the celebrity “thugs” so often admired are usually protected by their wealth, at least compared to young men still living in impoverished neighborhoods. Boyz in the Hood explores the street tough, thug masculinity that is encouraged and appears to be a method of survival; as Ice Cube claims in his song “How to Survive in South Central” that plays over the closing credits, step one is to “get you a gun,” a solution left in tension with the tragic death of Ricky and

\textsuperscript{220} hooks, \textit{We Real Cool}, 113.

\textsuperscript{221} Ibid., 116.

Tre’s escape to college as an alternative method of survival. Ultimately, the warrior masculinity promoted in Ice Cube’s song, however critical that song is of the failures of law and justice in the U.S., is undermined by the film’s opening statistics: “One out of every twenty-one Black American males will be murdered in their lifetime. Most will die at the hands of another Black male.” Singleton uses this song ironically, as it pummels the viewer with the message fed to young black men with limited options for survival, but that so often ensure their own demise. Furious’s speeches explain that warrior masculinity only benefits white supremacy, as it is an act of racial self-genocide. As a role model, Furious instead embodies another kind of masculinity, one based on commitment to survival of community, and attempts to shape the consciousness of those around him.

Much of the pathos of Boyz arises from the dangers that plague the “innocent.” While Boyz offers complex characters that are neither wholly good nor wholly bad (particularly Doughboy), there are many others that are trying to achieve social mobility through “honest” means. Tre and his girlfriend Brandi study in their homes with locked doors and the sounds of gunfire and helicopters overhead distracting them. Tre’s sweet-natured friend Ricky, already a father, seeks a football scholarship in order to get into college (and considers the military when he’s unsure if his SAT scores will qualify him for an athletic scholarship).\(^{223}\) Tre and Ricky avoid fights, don’t drink during the day, stay in school, treat their parents well, care for children, and commit to monogamous

\(^{223}\) Patricia Hill Collins points out that “upward mobility through sports” as a “gender-specific social script for an honest way out of poverty” is a myth in need of critique given how few men actually make it to become professional athletes. She also argues that sports become a morality play for defining “good” and “bad” black men; those who are good are “tamed” by their white coaches and don’t challenge the system, while those who are bad challenge their coaches and reject the demand that they serve as role models. See Collins’s chapter “Booty Call: Sex, Violence, and Images of Black Masculinity,” in *Black Sexual Politics*, especially 152-160.
relationships. (For Brandi, delaying sexual activity is her means of survival as a female, and also a means of distinguishing herself from other women around her.) Several moments in the film, though, punctuate how being “good” still offers no real protection. In one scene, Tre and Ricky are pulled over while driving, and Tre is presumed to be a gang member by a black cop who puts a gun to his throat and threatens to annihilate him: “I hate little motherfuckers like you. Little niggers. Little shits. Think you’re tough, huh? I’ll blow your head off with this Smith and Wesson and you couldn’t do shit.” This brush with death that was completely unwarranted pushes Tre to a breaking point where he later cries and punches at the air in frustration. His sense of powerlessness in controlling his life and the injustice of his treatment are incredibly moving, and the moral outrage is deepened by the death of Ricky. Having stayed out of trouble his whole life, he is murdered by a rival of Doughboy, an event that can be traced back to a simple misstep, calling out the guy for deliberately bumping into him while hanging out one night. He dies on the day his SAT scores arrive, scores that would have qualified him to attend and play football for the University of Southern California. Caught up in avenging his brother’s death, Doughboy is murdered two weeks later, as the end credits tell us. As a child warns ten-year old Tre and other kids in the opening scene of the film, “Mama says a bullet has no name on it,” meaning even the innocent are vulnerable in South Central.

In this way, while fathers are identified as agents that can shape the outcomes of individual young black men, systematic changes and broader movements are needed, as the total environment is not within the individual father’s control. Despite Furious’s best parenting, Tre still owns a gun, a symbol of the incredibly strong pull of warrior or street
masculinity. And again, though Tre does leave L.A. for Morehouse College, one of the best historically black colleges in the country, the incident with the police officer demonstrates that racist beliefs continue to endanger every young black man in the U. S., regardless of whether or not he’s done anything wrong. A young black man is suspicious simply by virtue of being black, a dynamic that not only endangers his life, but may psychologically contribute to a vicious cycle where he then in turn rejects the systems that oppress him through whatever means are at his disposal.224

Like Boyz in the Hood before it, Antwone Fisher (dir. Denzel Washington) focuses on the survival and well-being of a young black man, based on the true story of screenwriter Fisher’s own life. While Boyz focuses more on resisting the temptation to give into the violence of street masculinity and simply making it through a day in South Central Los Angeles without getting shot, Antwone Fisher focuses more heavily on the psychological and spiritual survival of a young black man. As a twenty-five year old in the Navy, Antwone (Derek Luke) has finally made it out of the foster care and shelters that gave him a sad and deprived childhood, and unlike his childhood best friend who was shot while robbing a corner store, he now has a career and an education ahead of him. To some extent, Antwone, like Tre of Boyz, signifies one path that involves physical escape and stands in contrast to the best friend (here, Jesse, and in Boyz, Doughboy) who succumbed to the deadly street warrior masculinity. However, having lacked the love and nurture of parents like Tre’s (even if they were not married) and instead being raised by a foster family that abused him, Antwone experiences a mental prison that holds him captive and leads him to lash out violently at others. Overcoming

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224 Again, see Collins’s chapter on black masculinity, “Booty Call,” in her book Black Sexual Politics.
his own sense of worthlessness—internalized from his biological mother’s abandonment and his foster mother’s hatred—is the major step he must take to renewing himself. Similar to other white male weepies focused on troubled young men, this healing is enabled by a surrogate father figure, his therapist.\textsuperscript{225}

In terms of his anger and inability to trust, Antwone is very much the young man that progressive thinkers like bell hooks are worried for and want to help. In her book \textit{We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity}, hooks writes, \“. . . practically every black male in the United States has been forced at some point in his life to hold back the self he wants to express, to repress and contain for fear of being attacked, slaughtered, destroyed. Black males often exist in a prison of the mind unable to find their way out.\”\textsuperscript{226} Rather than expressing the self, and revealing emotions and pain honestly, which leaves one vulnerable, many young black men—and often other underprivileged men—channel those repressed emotions into violent behavior and/or put up an impenetrable front to protect themselves. According to therapist Terrence Real, \“men . . . often seek to cover up emotional vulnerability by moving from helplessness to dominance and transmuting pain into rage.\”\textsuperscript{227} Here, Antwone repeatedly lashes out at others, seemingly unprovoked, and also refuses to share anything remotely personal with the other people who try to get to know him.

\textsuperscript{225} Therapists as father figures appear in the white male weepies \textit{Ordinary People} (1980) and \textit{Good Will Hunting} (1997). \textit{The Prince of Tides} (1991) has a variation where the therapist is female and a lover, though in that case the protagonist is an adult.

\textsuperscript{226} hooks, \textit{We Real Cool}, xii.

\textsuperscript{227} Ibid., 107. The book was written for a lay audience and thus does not have a formal citation for Terrance Real’s ideas.
The opening scene illustrates the relationship between Antwone’s pain and his behavior, especially as these are not clearly connected at first for the viewer. The first scene shows a young African-American boy standing alone in a field of wheat, facing a weathered white barn. A man appears in front of him, at first with an ambiguous expression that suggests the possibility of threat, but that breaks into a smile. He leads the young boy into the barn where there is a long table of food surrounded by dozens of people dressed in clothes from different periods of time, including nineteenth century days of slavery, suggesting Antwone’s desire to know not just his own parents, but a bigger, generational family. The warmth of this family scene along with Antwone’s own talents and love of art, which are revealed over the course of the film, also evoke African slaves’ own persistence in creating art and music even within a hard and degrading set of life circumstances, a testament to the will to persevere, find joy, and be human even when others want to deny that humanity. The little boy of the dream is given a seat at the head of the table in front of a big, beautiful stack of pancakes and welcomed; this vision of inclusion, however, is broken by the sound of a cow bell and a few quick, almost subliminal cuts to a woman’s face, followed by a young man bolting to a sitting position from sleep and sweating and panting. The vision was a dream, and Antwone gets out of bed to hit the showers as the morning whistle blows. There in the men’s room, he attacks a young white man for greeting him with “what’s crackin’,” telling him “your head if you don’t get out of my face.” The attack seems almost inexplicable and has no explicit relationship to the dream. We will later learn that after being born in prison two months after his father was murdered, never collected by his mother once she was released from prison, and then having grown up in an abusive foster home where he was told he was
worthless and unwanted, Antwone’s desire for a real family that loves and accepts him is what manifests in this dream. The cow bell is from a memory of the door to the convenience store where his best friend was shot, and the woman’s face interrupting the dream of a real family is that of his foster mother. These bad memories that precede Antwone’s attack on another sailor tie his aggression to his feelings of rejection and suggest a source of his own learned abusive behavior. But during those first few minutes of the film, the viewer lacks the information needed to interpret the dream, and thus Antwone’s actions don’t earn much empathy due to the lack of understanding. Without the causal chains to explain his aggression, Antwone seems to just fit the stereotype of the “brute” that has plagued black men and that helps to perpetuate racism in the U. S.\textsuperscript{228}

Part of the consequences for attacking a superior is getting psychologically evaluated, a process that Antwone initially resists. His psychologist, Dr. Jerome Davenport (Denzel Washington), wears Antwone down by making him attend sessions until he finally talks. Through these sessions, Antwone reveals his challenging childhood and explains that enlisting in the Navy became an alternative to living in men’s shelters, which is where he ended up after he turned eighteen. Davenport not only encourages Antwone to rechannel his anger to other places, such as the gym, but also to learn more about why his foster mother—Mrs. Tate—abused him, giving him a copy of \textit{The Slave Community}.\textsuperscript{229} Not only was Mrs. Tate physically abusive, but she called her two darker-

\textsuperscript{228} For a succinct discussion of this stereotype, see hooks’s preface to \textit{We Real Cool}; she targets “the image of the brute—untamed, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling” as being “at the center of the way black male selfhood is constructed in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy.” hooks, \textit{We Real Cool}, xii.

\textsuperscript{229} \textit{The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South} was first published by historian John W. Blassingame in 1972 and was one of the first historical studies of slavery to look at the system from the perspectives of slaves. Blassingame’s work challenged previous claims that slaves had been
skinned foster children “nigger” (often addressing them this way instead of by their own individual name) and showed favoritism toward her lighter-skinned, half-white third foster child. The book *The Slave Community* is meant to explain how some black communities today display an internalization of the racism learned from white supremacist society since slavery days. Davenport emphasizes that the book is not meant to excuse Mrs. Tate’s behavior; rather, it is meant to raise Antwone’s own consciousness and, we can infer, intervene in a cycle of violent and abusive behavior, which Antwone’s own violence will otherwise perpetuate.

While it is easy to see Antwone as transformed by his encounters with his therapist, like the male protagonists in other male weepies, Antwone’s innate goodness and his potential to become a gentler man are apparent early on. Alternating with Antwone’s therapy sessions are scenes of him awkwardly courting a female sailor, Cheryl. He is clearly interested in her and deliberately runs into her at her workplace (a bookstore on base), but he has trouble telling her about what’s going on in his life and asking her out on a date. But like other weepies, the interest that a pretty and smart young woman takes in the protagonist reveals that he is really a good guy, and his hesitant behavior toward her stands in contrast with his aggression toward men and reveals another “side” of him. Like white male weepies that use a variety of social Others, primarily women and people of color, to foster the reconstitution of the male protagonist, *Antwone* could be seen as using a woman this way.

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submissive and enjoyed their servitude, instead constructing a counter-argument about the psychology of slaves that the system itself shaped.
However, Cheryl serves another purpose here, which (like the wife in *Regarding Henry*) is to help the adult male work through his confused sexuality. Antwone is shy about dating because he was sexually molested by one of the Tates (a woman who appears to be in her twenties) when he was ten years old. He was disgusted by her treatment of him and has since avoided sexual contact with women out of fear. Now a twenty-five year old virgin, one of Antwone’s many fights is sparked by another sailor accusing him of being a “faggot” when he refrains from choosing a woman in a Mexican club/bordello. That Antwone does not take part in the ritual bonding of pursuing women puts his masculinity in question in this homosocial world of the Navy. The reason Antwone offers for rejecting a prostitute’s advances is that he now has a girlfriend, but apparently, that’s not a good enough reason for one of the sailors, though Antwone’s friends sympathize. His heterosexual masculinity, then, must be proven by the appearance of women as objects of sexual pursuit. As Michael Kimmel explains, masculinity must be repeatedly performed in order to exist.\(^{230}\) In this way, physical power and violence through fistfights becomes an alternative way for Antwone to assert his masculinity when he does not have other means.

As with *Midnight Cowboy*, *Scarecrow*, and *The Prince of Tides* discussed in previous chapters, the rape of a male is often presented as the most traumatic experience a male can endure, and male-male rape works as an indictment of the masculine value of domination. *Antwone Fisher* is unusual in that the child molester is a female. This isn’t the filmmakers’ choice per se, as the story is based on screenwriter Antwone Fisher’s own biography, but it nonetheless has its unique effects. As Mr. Tate, Antwone’s foster

father who is a preacher, seems largely absent from the home (absorbed in his church) and Mrs. Tate is the dominant parent, a pattern of abusive women is established. On the one hand, this pattern suggests that men are not the only violent, dominating, and abusive people in the world, and the sympathetic male characters suggest further that boys and men should not be demonized. On the other hand, abusive African-American women potentially evoke and encourage the perception of black mothers established by the Moynihan Report: that families where black women are in charge are doomed to pathological problems. This ideology is pushed further by Antwone’s mother abandoning him and having his dead father’s family—represented through both male and female adults and children—as the well-adjusted and functional one that welcomes Antwone when he returns. In both his dream about finding his family and his actual reunion, it is a grandmotherly figure who gives the most official welcome and signals when it is time to eat; however, the scarier and abject representations of poor black women are powerful. Because Antwone’s father was dead when he was born and Mr. Tate, whom Antwone actually seemed to like, wasn’t around, the film could encourage “the romantic myth that if only there was a black man in the house life would be perfect.” bell hooks argues that fantasy versions of fathers have contributed to the wish that a dad just like Bill Cosby on *The Cosby Show* would come home, but that in reality, many fathers (and mothers, of all races) are so dysfunctional that the child is better off with guidance from another, better-functioning male figure: “. . . the presence of biological fathers matters less than the presence of loving black male parental caregivers. These father figures shape the vision children have of who black men are and

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231 hooks, *We Real Cool*, 102.
What Antwone needs most as a young man in his twenties is a model of black manhood, which is provided by Davenport.

The film suggests that what the troubled young man needs, besides the love of a good woman, is a father figure.\textsuperscript{233} In fact, after several sessions of resistance, once Antwone has confided in Davenport, he wants to tell him just about everything and seeks his approval. Antwone deliberately delays his first date with Cheryl (she essentially asks him out) so that he can talk to the doctor beforehand and get a pep talk, and when it is over, he is so bold as to go to the doctor’s house to ring the bell at night and tell him about it. Davenport seems slightly amused by all this and is helpful while remaining formal, but when their three sessions are up, he cuts Antwone off, which is devastating to the latter. After a lifetime of rejection and distance from most people responsible for his care, Antwone feels his trust has been betrayed. In fact, the doctor twice gives Antwone a book as a means of continuing his healing when really what Antwone wants and needs is a father, an actual human being to talk to, confide in, and learn from.\textsuperscript{234} Unfortunately, for all his training and knowledge of psychology, Davenport is incapable of reciprocating the emotional openness that he fosters in his patients. The first time this happens, he explains to Antwone, “I only get three sessions to make an evaluation and recommendation,” revealing obedience to the protocol of a rigid, masculine organization. By handing Antwone a book and leaving him on his own to deal with his problems,

\textsuperscript{232} Ibid., 103.

\textsuperscript{233} This combination of helper figures (therapist as surrogate father and supportive girlfriend) are also found in \textit{Ordinary People} and \textit{Good Will Hunting}.

\textsuperscript{234} The other book Davenport gives him is \textit{The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey}. 183
Davenport encourages a kind of self-reliance that has been criticized for decades as a negative masculine ideal that hurts men.

While Antwone’s healing is the major story of the film, Davenport also needs to transform as a man and open himself up to feeling and expressing emotions. The first two scenes between him and his wife set up a marriage composed of small talk and lack of physical affection, which eventually are connected to something his wife wants to talk about, but he doesn’t, some kind of problem he, based on their conversation, seems unwilling to confront. In the very last scene of the film, Davenport reveals that they were unable to have children and that he sent his wife to the very best psychiatrist he knew, the one who trained him, but had ignored his own inner pain: “I, the well one, the strong one, went about the business of shutting down. Very subtle, very quiet, it was my little secret. Until one day a young man came into my office and into my life and he blew up that little secret, right in my face, and he put me to shame in a way I never thought possible. Because of you, Antwone, I’m a better doctor, and I’m learning to be a better husband.”

Davenport has suffered from the masculine imperative to repress rather than express emotion, as seen by which spouse he felt needed therapy. Not only does Davenport need to learn to express emotion and to be vulnerable, but he is pushed to do so by the emotionally needy Antwone who, with no one to confide in and nowhere to go on Thanksgiving, becomes a surrogate son. When Antwone responds angrily to Davenport for suggesting that they’ve accomplished what they can together and that he needs to move on and find his family in order to achieve closure, he confesses that his best friend, “the only person who loved [him],” is dead, and now he feels that “everyone is always leaving me.” Davenport is moved deeply by this and tells Antwone that when he gets
back from finding his family, he wants to hear all about it, hugging him and telling him “I love you, son.” Like so many consciousness-raising groups that were part of “male liberation,” the emotional confessions of another male open Davenport up. In this way, the film can be placed within the now decades-long celebration of men becoming emotionally intimate and rejecting the masculine ideal of stoicism.

While Antwone evinces more progressive views on gender, its critique of racism is at times weak. The film does identify racism as an agent in its protagonist’s problems, but it focuses on the ways that racism is perpetuated via African Americans. Just as Boyz focused on black men slaying one another—even if Furious recognizes that the drugs, liquor, and guns that flood the black community enable white supremacy—Antwone villainizes black characters who have learned to be abusive from their own experiences of abuse, which can be traced back to slavery. Davenport wants Antwone to understand the root cause of his abuse and explains, “what you went through was in part a result of the treatment that slaves received from their masters and then passed on to their own children, generation to generation to generation right on down to the Tates.” In this way, white supremacy is cast into the past. On board the ship are visions of interracial male friendship that involves the teasing banter expected in such a traditional homosocial space as the Navy, suggesting the Navy is free of racism. Furthermore, Antwone is portrayed as perceiving racism where none exists. The first fight we see Antwone start follows a well-liked white seaman’s coming up next to Antwone to shave and asking “what’s crackin’?” The phrase today is typically used as equivalent to “what’s up?,” but during his hearing, Antwone says that the young man made a racist remark, probably based on “crackin’” seeming like a reference to “crackers” or “crackin’ the whip” on a
slave. The other young man, technically Antwone’s superior, denies having made any racist remark, and the commanding officer believes him. Antwone also later accuses a black shipmate of being an Uncle Tom for having white friends and tells him that he needs to pick a “side.” Given how well the majority of men seem to get along across racial lines on board—and even go out of their way to befriend the surly Antwone—the film portrays Antwone as misinterpreting situations and relationships as a result of his abuse. In this way, the film suggests that contemporary white racism is not an actual problem. Granted, it is a two-hour film, and even gesturing toward systemic racism and inequality, past or present, is more than many other weepies do since they so often depict problems being worked out on the individual level. However, to ignore the psychological, economic, and social reasons for why Antwone’s mother never came to get him once she was out of prison and also the U.S. armed forces’ thriving on the enlistment of the working class and poor, particularly of color, prevents the film from contributing to greater cultural understanding.

Then again, asking audiences to see past the surface of the angry young black man and to empathize with him as traumatized and disadvantaged, but talented and full of potential may at least lead to a degree of dismantling of stereotypes. The film generates much of this empathy through flashback sequences to Antwone as a child, harnessing the moral power of children as innocent and vulnerable, a move common to melodrama since the nineteenth century. Playing with his friends away from his foster home, Antwone enjoys moments of exploring outside, playing pranks, and bonding, familiar sights to which anyone can relate. These brief idyllic moments that belong to a happy childhood

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235 Most iconic are the children of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Charles Dickens, a tradition taken up in early narrative film as well, such as the work of D. W. Griffith.
stand in sharp contrast to the moments of pain and terror endured in his foster home, where the punishments and abuse (physical and verbal) clearly do not match their “crimes.” A dirty handprint on the wall leads to Mrs. Tate tying up her two darker-skinned foster sons in the basement and whipping them with a wet rag. Here, and later when threatening him with a lit torch, the fear in the child is excruciating. Later as a teen, Antwone is mistreated for absolutely no reason other than Mrs. Tate just being malicious: she demands Antwone’s money that he earned raking leaves, and when he threatens to run away, she retorts, “retarded nigger, who gonna want you? Your own mammy didn’t even want you.” After all this abuse, it seems miraculous that a love of poetry, art, and learning wasn’t beaten out of him as well. Antwone’s own later articulation of this pain through his poem “Who Will Cry for the Little Boy?” directly asks the viewer this. And while Davenport observes that Antwone cries for himself, the film viewer is asked to cry for him as well.

In this way, a mainstream male weepie focused on a black character is faced with a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” situation. At the time Antwone was made, a marketable film was one that obeyed certain limits and didn’t offend white audiences. Donald Bogle’s explanation of Boyz in the Hood’s success could apply here to Antwone Fisher as well: “its appeal to a general white audience may be that . . . rather than focusing exclusively on white racism directed at African Americans, [it] instead addressed violence and conflict within the black community.”

On the other hand, progressive audiences will be alert to the failings to deal with larger systemic problems—a common trait amongst weepies, which tend to focus on the individual rather than the

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236 Donald Bogle, Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films (New York: Continuum, 2001), 347.
body politic—and the potential to fall back into stereotypes instead of challenging them. Both _Boyz_ and _Antwone_ certainly can pathologize black matriarchs further, even as they offer some alternative visions of black women.

For however watered-down the politics of many male weepies can be, their emotionally progressive strains may encourage some useful social compassion. In the reception of _Antwone Fisher_, the film is often categorized as simply “another dad flick” or “male weepie,” lumped in with male weepies focusing on white characters, and race receives inconsistent attention, sometimes none at all. In fact, two articles—one from the _New York Times_ and one from the [UK] _Guardian_—use reports of men leaving theaters puffy- and watery-eyed to talk about the phenomenon of men crying during movies in general.\(^{237}\) The _Guardian_ author, Stuart Husband, goes so far as to turn the film into a verb: when a man loses physical control over his emotions and gets choked up in a movie theater, “[he’s] been Antwone Fishered.”\(^{238}\) In pointing out that these articles are not attentive to race, I do not mean to suggest that male weepies focused on black characters should be treated as essentially different from their white-centered counterparts. What interests me is the ability of mainstream audiences to embrace a film that is partially about race and to identify with characters across racial lines. _Antwone Fisher_ seems successful in appealing to a wide audience, which likely stems from not alienating audiences, here, white audiences. While one might accuse the film of not doing enough with white racism as a major agent shaping Antwone’s life circumstances, and especially presenting the Navy as colorblind, its focus on Antwone and Davenport as individuals

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\(^{238}\) Husband, “Big Boys Do Cry.”
offers other visions of black masculinity that are often lacking in popular culture. And to accept the film into the male weepie canon without marking it as black or even identifying the races of the audience members who cried may be a sign of progress. In this way, while narratives about whites still dominate Hollywood, Antwone Fisher’s reception suggests some progress in moving past the black buddy roles so often assigned to black actors.

The same year that Denzel Washington played a surrogate father to a troubled young man, he also played a biological father to a dying child in the paternal melodrama, *John Q* (dir. Nick Cassavetes). While also a drama or thriller, the film displays more traditional qualities of melodrama than *Boyz* or *Antwone*, particularly its Manichean construction of good and evil: the film pits a loving and honest working class father, John Quincy Archibald against an insensitive, capitalist healthcare system that is willing to let his young son die if the family cannot raise a significant down payment on a $250,000 heart transplant surgery. After John and his wife Denise (Kimberly Elise) attempt to raise the funds by working, selling off practically everything they own, and collecting donations from church, and are still a few thousand dollars short, the hospital announces that they are releasing their son Mikey even though he is in critical condition and will inevitably die. The desperate father—at his wife’s urging to “do something”—takes the hospital’s emergency room hostage to demand that his son be put on the waiting list for a new heart. While the high tension and action make the film a thriller, as feminist film scholars Tania Modleski, Linda Williams, and Christine Gledhill have all pointed out, the

As he appears in so many weepies—not just these two 2002 films, but also *Philadelphia* (1993), *Remember the Titans* (2006), and *The Great Debaters* (2007)—Denzel Washington’s star text deserves some analysis. Almost consistently he is sensitive, but authoritative and in control, very much a paternal figure. This mix of qualities is strikingly similar to those associated with traditional manhood in the U.S., a manhood that historically was reserved for white men.
historical use of the term melodrama within the film industry denoted “male-oriented” action films and thrillers; however, these same films often contained the pathos that we now associate primarily with tearjerkers and even specifically women’s films.240

Certainly, the potential death of his son is one emotional focus of the film, but so are the feelings of helplessness that John experiences as a man. The film pinpoints ways in which contemporary social structures make it difficult or even impossible for men to live up to traditional expectations of manhood.

In the first scene with John, he is in bed with his sleeping wife watching TV news, specifically George W. Bush talking about the economy and claiming he understands the many Americans that have credit card debt, high energy bills, etc. John is up late at night worrying about these very things and so is able to hear the tow truck arrive to take one of the family cars away that he has missed payments on. The archival footage of Bush situates the film’s story in reality and also suggests that the presidential administration’s policies and ideologies (and those of other conservative administrations before Bush’s) are responsible for the problems that John and his family experience.241 The film clearly positions itself in opposition to the “hard bodies” found throughout Reagan and Bush I era action films a decade or so earlier, which represented fantasies of male agency and


241 The film also ends with clips of real celebrities and public figures discussing the need for universal, socialized health care, including Jay Leno, Hillary Clinton, hip hop artist Nas, and Bill Maher.
Here, John’s son Mikey is obsessed with body builders, and when his mother’s car is repossessed, his son asks, “What are you going to do, Dad? You know what I’d do? I’d get so big and crazy I’d go and kick somebody’s butt!” Of course, one problem with seeking resolution through a fistfight would be that the “bad guy” is not really an individual, but corporations, state institutions, and bureaucracies. The kernel of the family crisis is that John’s job has reduced his hours and U. S. corporations are “shipping jobs to Mexico,” as John explains; this not only leaves him with less money, but also a reduction in his insurance benefits. Part of the injustice is that John is a man who wants to work and is good at what he does, but finds himself forced to look for jobs for which he is overqualified, which in turn disqualify him. He is not only left out in the cold in terms of a job, but finds himself in a limbo zone where he is too poor to afford his son’s surgery, but not poor enough to get assistance. Much of John’s earliest attempts to pay for the surgery involve seeking social assistance through Medicaid, but he gets shuffled from one office to another and told repeatedly that something disqualifies him. In the complex institutional world that John tries to navigate, things are solved through (often arcane) paperwork, not sheer will or a powerful body. And even then, John’s working class body has a bit of a paunch. In this way, not only does the film critique the “hard body” fantasy of control of Reagan-era action films, but it also exemplifies how a film can contain elements of realism and melodrama simultaneously.

In fact, *John Q* deeply echoes the findings of Susan Faludi in her 1999 book *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man.* Here, she documents the feelings of men as they experience a changing economy and society, particularly as they experience the shut-downs of factories, shipyards, and other historically reliable sites of blue-collar male labor and bonding. Alongside this economic sense of powerlessness is the growing success of women in the workplace whom, as heterosexual partners, often exert more authority in the home as well. While many journalists have paid more attention to the ways that these cultural changes affect white men, in part because people of color are considered benefitting from these changes alongside women, the job losses in areas such as factory work were sustained by men of color as well.

Here and in *The Pursuit of Happyness,* wives often work full-time or extra shifts as the service industries—which typically contain “pink-collar” jobs, those dominated by women—have been less impacted by globalization and the outsourcing of labor to other countries. While women are still not paid equally, they are now more greatly employed than men. These films partly dramatize this shift in work, gender roles, and expectations within heterosexual couples. The wives/mothers work as hard as the men, if not harder or longer, in paid employment, and seem frustrated when the husbands/fathers cannot fulfill the role of head of household. In *John Q,* although both mother and father work to find a way to pay for their son’s surgery, the mother tends to spend more time at her son’s bedside and to demand of the father “what are you going to do?” In this way, much

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244 This journalistic coverage is discussed in my previous chapter. See, for example, Lester C. Thurow, “Average White Male No Longer Leads the March to Prosperity,” *Los Angeles Times,* October 20, 1985, F3. *Proquest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles (1881-1989).*
of the film’s pathos arises from the discrepancy between traditional expectations of men/fathers—to exercise authority and provide for material needs—and the resources and power to actually do so. This lack of power and means, therefore, becomes emasculating, and the emasculated male demands our sympathy.

The film does not, however, romanticize traditional masculinity or patriarchy. While John is the parent who wrests control over his son’s fate, there is some diversity to visions of “good” masculinity offered by the film. Besides John being an emotionally expressive father, there are several male nurses working at the hospital that display great compassion and care for children and anyone who is sick. Perhaps it is because these male nurses are lower in the hospital hierarchy than the heart surgeon that they are positioned as allies of the working classes who do what they can to help and most explicitly challenge the ethos of the health care system and those who profit from it.

Abusive men also are targeted as undesirable and in need of punishment. A young man who brought his girlfriend to the emergency room with a broken arm (that, it turns out, he broke) exhibits individualism in his lack of concern for other patients and determination to get himself out. When he attacks John with a used hypodermic needle and spray chemical found in the garbage and they both lose their respective weapons, his girlfriend gives John his gun back, maces her boyfriend with the spray chemical, and then kicks him while he’s down on the floor, all to the approval of the other hostages. She also pulls off her blonde wig and tells him she won’t be his Barbie anymore, overall incorporating a simplistic gesture toward feminism within the film.

Similar to other weepies, this young woman giving John his gun back signifies female approval of his masculinity versus the primitive and dominating version of an
unlikable male. John may have a gun and may be exerting some vigilante agency, but his treatment of his hostages reveals an inner goodness and gentleness that is reluctant to make good on his performed threats. The film’s audience, unlike the hostage negotiators and police, understand from the beginning that John is not insane or probably not even dangerous; rather, he is simply fulfilling his fatherly duties in the only way he feels he has left. As film critics point out, John’s relationships to his hostages are practically cliché at this point (most similar to *Dog Day Afternoon*), which actually create cinematic shorthand for character legibility. His empathy for others leads him to break his own lockdown numerous times, allowing ambulances to drop off gun-shot victims and pregnant women in labor to go to the maternity ward. He tries to make sure people are fed and comfortable, and he bonds with them while they wait for the hostage negotiator to call. Most importantly, it is revealed later that his gun isn’t loaded; he would never hurt anyone to get what he wants. As a melodramatic character, we are on John’s side because he is essentially good and he is misunderstood by the police. And like the white male weepies of the early ‘90s, women here are the ones to offer approval of his masculinity. Just as the Hispanic maid Rosella says, “I like you more now, Mr. Henry,” to the transformed title character of *Regarding Henry*, here a Spanish-speaking mother with a sick child whom John releases declares him a “good man” when the press approaches her. The pregnant woman and her husband whom he also releases like him so much that they bring their baby to his trial in the film’s Hollywood ending.

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The creation of easy enemies—greedy corporations and annoying little white men who abuse their girlfriends—allows both the hostages within the film and the film’s various audiences to bond across other social differences. While *John Q* focuses on a black family, it generally does not explicitly invoke race as an issue. The family has close white friends that work together, go to church together, attend school together, and play Little League baseball together. As working class families, they appear to share the same joys and struggles, and the film creates class solidarity across racial lines, choosing to target social inequities in terms of who can afford health care. Nevertheless, the film implicitly understands that African Americans are disproportionately poorer than white Americans. Just before John finally confronts the heart surgeon to give him one last chance to work with him before he takes the emergency room hostage, the viewer is shown who *does* have access to a heart transplant: a wealthy white man. Both the man and his wife are blond WASPs wearing country club-appropriate clothing—the man even sits in his wheelchair wearing an ascot—and joke with the doctor about his tennis game, marking the couple’s social class further with a reference to a stereotypical “elite” person’s sport. The couple stand in contrast to John’s and his best friend’s families that are marked by familiar working-class iconography: trucker hats, cans of cheap beer, pick-up trucks, and baseball. The hospital CEO, who sees everything in terms of dollars, and the surgeon, who is accused of being paid off by HMOs to not recommend tests and procedures on poorer patients, are also both white. This is not to say that there aren’t people of color in positions of power here; we see other black men on the police force plotting to take John down and running businesses that don’t hire him. But the wealthiest people here are white, which is fairly in keeping with the distribution of wealth in the
U.S. The hostages and masses of people cheering John from behind the police
barricades, however, are racially mixed, and indeed, make the protagonist’s name signify
John Q. Public, an everyman. In fact, one reason the (white) hospital security guard says
he isn’t doing anything to try to intervene in John taking the emergency room hostage is
that he’s “not sticking [his] neck out for $8.50 on hour,” another dig at the lack of decent
paying jobs in the U. S. The crowds outside the hospital cheer for John presumably
because they’re all sick of the health care system and other social inequities in the U.S.246

In this way, John is not always meant to represent black men specifically, but as a
representation of black fathers, he certainly counters the stereotypes often found in U. S.
culture. Not only is John present in and committed to his family, but he can work and
wants to work. The stereotype of black men as lazy is not simply inaccurate, but also a
convenient stereotype (of the poor in general, really) that makes the economic situation of
an individual his own fault rather than the result of larger political systems. John is the
kind of father that the Million Man March of 1995 called on black men to be, but his
situation reveals the very things that the march demanded must change in order to protect
and nurture families: health care, education, and employment.247

246 Both the cheering crowds outside the police barricades and John’s kind treatment of his
hostages are very similar to the hostage crisis around a botched bank robbery in Dog Day Afternoon (1975).
There, the crowds were on the side of the antihero bank robbers rather than the police during a time when
police brutality was drawing sharp criticism, with the film specifically referencing the Attica prison riot of
1971.

In fact, John typifies the type of noble masculinity that black communities need, according to Louis Farrakhan. Not only is he present, but paternal, striving to take care of his wife as well as child. This chivalrous duty is reflected in the parting advice he gives his son before attempting to kill himself to donate his own heart to his son:

>You always listen to your mother . . . do what she tells you to do. She’s your best friend. Tell her you love her every day . . . You’re too young for girls right now, but there’s going to come a time, and when it does, you treat them like princesses. . . . When you say you’re going to do something, you do it, because your word is your bond, son, that’s all that you have. And money, you make money if you get a chance, even if you have to sell out once in a while, . . . everything is so much easier with money, son. Don’t smoke. Be kind to people. Somebody chooses you, . . . you stand up, you be a man.

This speech acknowledges that socioeconomic class circumscribes the ability to be a man with its references to money as a social determinant and the idea that all he has is his “word.” In fact, John’s last attempt to gain the cardiologist’s cooperation includes a promise to pay the rest of the surgery’s cost, “I give you my word as a man,” which counts for nothing in the capitalist hospital. Later, his friend makes a speech on TV about how wrong it is to “back a man like that [one so noble] into a corner”; it robs him of his dignity. John’s speech to his son is also marked, however, by the need to be a patriarch (however benign) and take care of women, and the importance of never backing down. So while the film calls for equality, it also honors the traditional masculinity that in many ways can no longer be accessed. The only way left to attain that vanishing ideal is through sacrificing the only thing John has, his own body.

Like other parent-child weepies before it, giving up the child to give him a better life is the ultimate parental sacrifice and a major source of the film’s pathos. In paternal

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melodramas, this often means the father actually giving up his own life, whether through risking it in a boxing ring to support a child financially (*The Champ*) or putting on a happy face even in the face of genocide (*Life Is Beautiful*). Here, John decides to kill himself in order to donate his heart to his son, much to the approval of the women who are not under the Hippocratic Oath, testimony to how ideal a father he is. While losing his own life is a source of pathos, sacrificing seeing his own son grow up perhaps far outweighs simply dying, which makes the advice he must give his son now all the more poignant. The physical sacrifice of the father’s own body and life, arguably more typical of paternal melodramas, seems in keeping with leftist movements “new” masculine ideal of “putting your body on the line” for what you believe in. Here, this ideal is played out on the domestic rather than political scale, though one could argue that John’s action is also in the name of affordable health care, and therefore, the greater good.

Like *John Q*, *The Pursuit of Happyness* (dir. Gabriele Muccino) replaces the image of the “deadbeat dad” with the image of the “responsible father” for black males. Based on a memoir, Chris Gardner (Will Smith) is a father struggling to make ends meet as he attempts to move past a bad financial decision, investing his family’s life savings into bone density scanners that he sells to doctors door-to-door, but are heavy and expensive,

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249 There is a similar moment in the 1993 film *My Life*, where Michael Keaton’s dying character videotapes himself giving fatherly advice, such as on how to shave, to his infant son to watch later in life.

250 In contrast, mothers often undergo the pain of surviving their child and/or living without their child, for example, in *Stella Dallas* (1937), *Terms of Endearment* (1983), and *Steel Magnolias* (1989). In the latter two cases, the child dies. While I’m not convinced that we need to ask, “Which is worse: sacrificing your own life for a child or living without them?,” Tania Modleski does argue that Clint Eastwood’s sacrifice of his own ability to get into heaven (based on his Catholic beliefs) via the sin of the assisted suicide in *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) serves as a form of one-upsman ship of a film like *Stella Dallas*. Modleski’s thesis is that male weepies and men’s sacrifices are more highly respected and critically acclaimed than women’s, whose own are looked upon as trashy, emotional pornography. See Modleski, “Clint Eastwood and Male Weepies.”
and therefore difficult to sell. He lives with his wife Linda (Thandie Newton) and son Christopher (Jaden Smith) in the low-rent Chinatown neighborhood of San Francisco, and the family’s poverty is visible everywhere, from the low-quality daycare (that features the misspelled version of happiness from which the film takes its title), to the landlord’s threats of eviction, to the modest meals and birthday gifts, to the wife’s working extra shifts at the cleaners to make up for Chris’s lack of income. While the wife in John Q stays with her family and child, the mother here gets so fed up she leaves and gives up her son with only mild reluctance. Desperate to make a good life for his son, Chris takes an unpaid internship at the investment firm Dean Witter in hopes of being the intern chosen for a paid position. During the internship, Chris and his son are evicted first from their apartment and then their transient hotel, eventually staying in homeless shelters and sometimes subway bathrooms. Chris gets the job in the end, which validates what he had been proving all along: that he is a good father and will do anything to give his son a good life, even if it means skipping meals and sleep so that his son can have them.

Similar to John Q, the wife in Pursuit judges the father in terms of his ability to be an economic breadwinner, though her judgment here is far more extreme. (Though understandably frustrated about first losing her car and then potentially her son’s life, the wife in John Q still “stands by her man,” telling the hostage negotiator and hospital CEO, “You cannot use me to build a case against my husband; I support him in everything that he does. I’m on his side, not yours.”) In part, Pursuit redefines what makes a good father by comparing what both mother and father can offer here: one element of parenting is providing for material needs, a function that Linda serves more through her working
double shifts; another, however, is emotional support, which Chris can give, but Linda cannot. When Linda suggests that she take Christopher with her to live in New York, Chris points out “you know you can’t take care of him,” and she does not protest. Not only do we see Chris perform care-giving tasks—regardless of where they are spending the night—such as feeding and bathing his son, but we also see him provide a psychological sense of safety that is so critical to a child’s well-being. This form of nurturing is depicted movingly during the night they spend in the subway. Cold and tired, the little boy just wants to go home, which is of course impossible. Chris creates a game where they pretend the bone density scanner is a time machine and they have gone back to the Jurassic age; they end up hiding from dinosaurs in a “cave,” which is the subway bathroom to spend the night. Young Christopher sleeps in his father’s arms on the bathroom floor while Chris sits up awake and red-eyed, trying to ignore a threatening knock on the bathroom door in the middle of the night. Protecting his son from the traumatic experience of staying overnight in a public bathroom and later trying to maintain routines even as they move from shelter to shelter and room to room each night is courageous—Chris embodies “grace under pressure,” especially given the stresses of competition during the day’s job and the need for survival at night.

While the conditions of proving oneself a responsible father are far more extreme in Pursuit, the film in many ways engages the paternal melodramas of the early 1980s, though with significant differences. Like Ted Kramer, Chris is abandoned by a woman who cannot handle being a wife and mother, and while the stress of poverty offers some justification for the mother’s actions, Linda isn’t a very sympathetic character. A major difference is that while Ted Kramer really was not a good father to begin with—he only
provides for the material needs of son rather than emotional ones—here Chris already is one. Even in the earliest scenes, Chris seems more responsible for the emotional care of his son. Linda, however, judges him deeply in terms of his ability to be an economic provider, even when he appears to be trying his best. In this way, like in *Kramer*, the mother here is depicted as dispensable, a parallel response between discourses on black fathers and white fathers during contemporary history. The difference, though, is that while (middle-class) white males have been courted away from high-powered jobs and ushered onto the “daddy track,” black males (disproportionately working class and poor) have been demanding respect for providing nurturance without the financial cushions that often make this easier to do for white fathers. Both Ted Kramer and Chris Gardner reject the breadwinning ethic as the most important quality in a father in favor of love and emotion work, but *Pursuit* highlights the ways in which economic inequality impacts the lived experience and circumstances of parenting. Chris’s methods of balancing work and parenting are far more stressful than Ted Kramer’s, who gets to go home to a posh apartment and glass of wine: Chris deprives himself of water during the work day so that he doesn’t go to the bathroom and lose valuable time to make phone calls before leaving early to get his son from daycare and make several bus transfers to get to the homeless shelter in time for a room that night. It is almost impossible to save money in Chris’s circumstances and work his way out of poverty; while relying on a golden ticket works here, for most people, this will not be the case.

Chris’s narrative here is a rags-to-riches story, which arguably suggests that an ambitious and scrappy person can pull themselves up by their proverbial bootstraps, and therefore that poverty is a problem of the individual rather than the system. As Donna
Peberdy points out, the individual solutions of the fathers in both John Q and Pursuit “do little to challenge or counteract the wider cultural problems highlighted in their respective narratives.”\(^{251}\) The real Chris Gardner insists that he never felt racism as an obstacle in his path and instead felt his lack of a college education was a greater hindrance to social mobility, but the fact remains that African Americans and single parents—and especially black single parents of either gender—are more likely to live in poverty. While Gardner often offers himself as an example that one has power over his own fate, systematic changes are needed and cannot be left to individuals to fix for themselves.\(^{252}\) The Pursuit of Happiness represents and reaffirms the American dream that is harder to achieve for those with less privilege, and it avoids big political statements about inequality, particularly by ignoring race as an issue.

Nevertheless, it’s hardly a requirement that a film incorporate explicit messages to have an impact. With a real-life father and son acting onscreen, the press coverage surrounding the film’s release created opportunities to discuss African-American fathers. Gardner himself is often interviewed alongside Smith, and when he asks himself how he made it through a year of living on the street while training at a brokerage firm, he credits “spiritual genetics,”\(^{253}\) that this power came from his mother, an acknowledgment that diffuses the film’s marginalization of mothers. Will Smith, who also was the producer, clearly sees the film as a reversal of absent-father discourse: “We all do our own racial-

\(^{251}\) Peberdy, Masculinity and Film Performance, 192.


profiling, and the Black man fighting to have his son, or fighting to raise his son, fighting to be a father to his son is not the stereotypical picture that lives in our minds. . . . It felt like a story that I not only wanted to tell, but it felt like a story I needed to tell.”\(^{254}\) The star discourse surrounding Smith identifies him as a model parent, and interviews about *Pursuit* often include Smith’s (and his wife Jada Pinkett Smith’s) views on parenting. Interestingly, his expressions about parenting echo that of the psychiatrist in *Antwone Fisher*: “Our perspective is that Black families tend to raise their children based on slavery concepts: ‘Your kids are your slaves. They do something wrong, you [discipline] them.’ . . . Jada and I view our children as small people who need to be guided into command of their own lives, not slaves who have to shut up when people come around and get smacked when they don’t do something right.”\(^{255}\) Smith’s parenting style fits the call for not just black fathers, but all fathers, to become active parents that nurture their children’s intellectual and emotional well-being and not just give orders or provide merely for material needs; bell hooks, for one, would approve. In this way, Smith’s and Gardner’s interviews place the film in discourses around black fathers more explicitly than the film itself, which instead chooses to leave space for more parents to identify than just black fathers.

Depictions of African-American fathers often find themselves in a Catch-22: on the one hand, mild-mannered black men who don’t appear to challenge the system and are beloved by white audiences are not seen as adequate role models, according to critics like Patricia Hill Collins. Essentially, Collins argues that black male celebrities and other

\(^{254}\) Ibid., 56.

\(^{255}\) Ibid., 57.
potential role models who “fail to defy White male power” also “fail to defend African American interests”; in so doing, these men “tolerate and in many cases collude in reproducing the conditions in the inner city.” On the other hand, “strong black men” too often evince domination and misogyny, and are forgiven for this in the name of “saving the black male,” according to other critics, such as Mark Anthony Neal. In the attempt to overcome the emasculation and impotence, both psychological and political, that resulted from denied access to hegemonic masculinity by white racism, some forms of black masculinity, particularly the warrior variety, maintain the oppression of women and gays. While John Q. must become a warrior to save his son, Chris hardly displays any violent behavior; however, there is “little disturbance to the patriarchal order of things,” according to Donna Peberdy. The women weep on the sidelines demanding that fathers “do something” to save their families, and the fathers essentially do. But despite placing families’ efficacy in the hands of fathers, these films’ representations of fathers offer a revised style of parenting, one that is more centered on emotional nurturing. And certainly, these films do counter the image of black men as absent and irresponsible fathers.

While they vary in their distribution of conservative, liberal, and radical values, the black male weepies that have emerged over the past several decades have provided a much-needed space for black masculinity to be explored in cinema. Historically, men and women of color have often played the role of buddy or healer of suffering whites in


257 This is a major premise of Mark Anthony Neal’s book *New Black Man* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

258 Peberdy, *Masculinity and Film Performance*, 143.
melodramas, and these films shift the focus to allow black men to be melodramatic heroes. The more mainstream films often lack political bite in terms of addressing issues of race and socioeconomic class, but nevertheless, they provide alternative images of black men to more stereotypical ones found throughout the media. As bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Mark Anthony Neal, and others point out, the negative stereotype of black men as brutes not only perpetuates racism, but also creates a prison of the mind for real black men. And while other black masculine ideals have been developed over the decades that strive to fight white racism, such as warrior masculinity, the politics have often been drained to leave only the tough attitudes, which are potentially dangerous.

Like their white counterparts, these male weepies featuring black men are not wholly progressive, particularly when they marginalize women or lack a critique of the systematic forms of oppression that are partially responsible for the characters’ problems. However, while both black and white male weepies present their protagonists as victims—be they victims of damaging masculine ideals or unsupportive women—the cultural need for positive representations of men is quite different for these two racial groups. As I discuss in Chapters 2 and 3, the “burden” of white heterosexual males becoming the post-Civil Rights society’s “bad guys” is questionable given how much political power this social group still carries. Black men, however, live under the burden of stereotypes that have existed since the days of slavery and that have deeply affected their access to political power. In recent decades, these include the stereotypes of the deadbeat dad and the unthinking, unfeeling criminal. Given the power of these stereotypes, the male weepies I discuss in this chapter all offer important counter-images...
that recognize the challenges of working class and poor black men and that offer access points for the empathy of all audiences.
CHAPTER 6

EPILOGUE

While I have argued that subgenres of male melodramas have appeared in discrete cycles over the past several decades, those subgenres do not end with their major cycles; each has an afterlife and continues to evolve. One of the most common generic trajectories for a subgenre is to move into comedy. For example, not long after the buddy films of the early 1970s, came the films of the popular comedic duo of Richard Pryor and Gene Wilder, the first, *Stir Crazy*, in 1976. The paternal melodramas of the early 1980s were followed by comedies about single fathers and stay-at-home dads, such as *Mr. Mom* (1983) and *Three Men and a Baby* (1987). The weepies of male transformation from the early 1990s see a comedic afterlife in films such as *What Women Want* (2000) about a chauvinist who develops the ability to hear women’s thoughts after falling and hitting his head, making him more sensitive to women’s desires. Perhaps after a period of greater need for social commentary, these subgenres could be treated less seriously, and to some extent, their comedic iterations might be poking fun at their predecessors a bit. Or, these comedies may have been produced simply to vary patterns that work in order to keep product fresh. Most profoundly and self-consciously, the male melodrama has blended with comedy in the twenty-first century to form a new hybrid genre, the bromance. As of today, the bromance could be read as the apotheosis of the male melodramas I have studied throughout this dissertation, and thus, I will end with a discussion of them to reflect on what male melodrama ultimately is coming to mean as a cultural site for exploring gender and power.
Within film and television, the generic term bromance refers to texts that focus on non-sexual, but intimate relationships between male friends. Bromances often treat these friends as couples, drawing on the conventions of dating, romance, and/or domestic partnerships found in romantic comedies. Most remarkable about bromances is how they foreground and explicitly discuss gender and male-male relationships. My experience discussing this genre at academic conferences indicates that many critics are skeptical of these films and see them as too ironic to be sincere. The “man” in the bromantic expression of affection “I love you, man” potentially undermines true intimacy. Yet, comedy has long been understood as a space for expressing subversive ideas, and the ironic posturing might add a safe cover for men (especially young men) to speak and behave in ways previously vulnerable to homophobic chastising. At the end of the eponymously titled *I Love You, Man*, the friends reunited as groom and best man on one friend’s wedding day (after a “break up”) exchange their own vows of sorts in making up and then expressing their love for one another. The first “I love you, man” sets off a sequence of variations—“I love you, too, bud,” “I love you, dude,” “I love you, Bro Montana,” “I love you, “I love you, Broseph Goebbels”—that get continuously more elaborate and humorous. While one might argue that the exchange just devolves into immature, silly banter, both men clearly get pleasure out of this and are allowed to express their love repeatedly. Any commentary on masculinity, emotion, and male friendship here is implicit, but other films directly challenge the sanctions around homosocial affection. In *Superbad*, the high school friends settle down for bed in sleeping bags side-by-side, and one says “I love you. Why can’t we say it every day? Why

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259 The popularity of this genre has made way for some newer, raunchier films and shows about female friends as well, including the film *Bridesmaids* and the HBO series *Girls*, that latter of which is produced by Judd Apatow, the writer and producer of many bromances.
can’t we say it more often?” This exchange does occur while the friends are drunk, a conventional “excuse” for male tears that works especially well in comedy, but it does seem to match the changing ways that men talk about their relationships with one another.

Bromances would perhaps be greeted more warmly by feminist and LGBTQ critics and allies if so many of them didn’t prioritize male homosocial relationships over heterosexual ones (Superbad), represent women as killjoys ruining boyish fun (Knocked Up), and use the word “gay” as an insult (The 40-Year Old Virgin). Like the buddy films and paternal melodramas from previous decades, bromances frequently sideline women or depict women as complicated and incomprehensible. When described this way, bromances take up the baton in an antifeminist backlash relay race constructed over the decades. A more empathetic reading of the films might contextualize them in the bewildering world in which young men find themselves today where traditional masculine roles are no longer available to them.

As journalists and gender studies scholars have been observing, the growing economic power of women and changes to the job market, along with decades of challenges to patriarchy, has radically changed what life is now like for a young man in his twenties. Previous masculine ideals are either no longer accessible or no longer appear to be viable, leaving young men stranded on the path to adulthood. While traditional manhood had already been inaccessible for men of color and some working class men, women’s ascension along with changes to the global economy have made it harder for white middle-class men as well to meet the milestones that traditionally marked entry into adulthood, such as moving out of one’s parents’ home, getting married,
and having children. Add to this situation the choice of many women to delay marriage and/or children until later in life, and one can see, as Gary Cross does, that men “are allowed, almost obliged, to cling to their teenage mindsets” as they are denied the shift from hanging out with friends (or competitive gangs of other men, as primatologists might describe it) to the “pair bond.”

Michael Kimmel calls the lifestyle and the state of mind of this delayed adult male “guyland,” and Cross has dubbed young men “basement boys” because so many live with their parents, twice as many as do women of the same age. No doubt, women today struggle with their own sorts of identity, professional, and family issues—often all at once, under the banner of “having it all”—but heterosexual men also sometimes seem deeply confused. Of course, plenty of heterosexual men have responded to cultural changes very well and have happily taken up an equal or greater share of housework and childcare depending on their family’s circumstances and partner’s earning power, but the litany of news stories on these issues suggests that society is in a transitional stage riddled with anxieties about the possibilities and consequences of more egalitarian domestic relationships.

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these stories alone could stoke feelings of fear and paranoia, such as “The End of Men” and “The End of the Macho Man.”

In bromances, Guyland is celebrated with all its contemporary accoutrements: video games, beer, porn, “man caves.” On the periphery of Guyland are successful women looking in on it, often baffled. Like earlier male weepies, these beautiful and polished women manage to see something “good” inside of the man-boys, and the bittersweetness of the bromances’ endings—such as Superbad’s where best friends give longing, parting glances over their shoulders going up and down mall escalators—emanates from the women coaxing these young men to let go of Guyland, at least a little bit. As many other Hollywood films do, bromances, of course, end before the “boring” part when the men have to grow up a little bit; just as, say, screwball comedies offered fantasies of zany courtship, these films offer both young and older men a cinematic escape into the crude and carefree world of Guyland.

At first it might seem that, at best, bromances suggest that we should have greater empathy for the plight of young men today despite the frustrations they often create for heterosexual women looking for successful and mature romantic partners. But a few of them have slightly more radical kernels inside that deserve a second look. In I Love You, Man, the protagonist Peter is not really a citizen of Guyland: he actually is a straight man with mostly female friends, and for him, the best night of his life consisted of sharing a bottle of pinot noir and a summer salad while watching the film Chocolat with his fiancée. This is a refreshing change because typically in film and television, a man with

female friends must be gay, as Tania Modleski points out. While the basic plot of the film is that Peter needs to get some male friends to fill out his wedding party, and in so doing, gets to spend time in Guyland via his new best friend Sydney, Peter changes Sydney just as much as Sydney changes Peter, and both highlight the ways that masculinity itself is unnatural. Sydney’s coaching of Peter to be manly at times uses caricatures of the primal man whom Robert Bly and others tried to reclaim for contemporary men supposedly softened and wounded by civilizing and feminizing influences. Down at Venice Beach, Sydney facetiously describes himself as “[a] barbarian…every once in awhile, I go down to the boardwalk and throw my own feces like a gorilla.” While Peter does learn from Sydney how to stick up for himself—a valuable lesson for a person of any gender, but here offered as an essential part of being a man—much of the humor of the film is created by Peter’s awkward attempts at inhabiting a dominant, confident, and cool masculinity. He perpetually flubs his verbal expressions and botches imitations of iconic masculine figures, such as James Bond: “The name’s Bond, James Bond. I’d like a margarita.” In general, the film’s representations of masculinity are topsy-turvy compared to reigning stereotypes, with Peter’s gay brother more of a “bro” than Peter, and the most despicable men as those who are aggressive and domineering. Finally, Peter’s desire for a male friend is to achieve the kind of bonds that he sees between his fiancée and her friends. In this way, women are admired and are not represented as essentially different, and homosocial friendship does not need to be predicated upon misogyny and homophobia, as it so often historically has been for male

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265 Tania Modleski, “Mimetic Desire in I Love You, Man” (presentation, Annual Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Chicago, IL, March 6-10, 2013). Modleski’s conference paper also discusses the ways that the character of Peter shows how uncomfortable and unnatural masculinity can be.
bonding. In these ways, *I Love You, Man* accomplishes a unique balance of non-chalant progressiveness and lowest-common-denominator gross-out humor that appeals to mass audiences, particularly young men.

Returning to the idea of comedy as a sort of “safe space” for playing with the subversive, the word “bromance” and the frequent appropriation of romantic conventions for exploring men’s friendships, such as courtship through “man-dating,” blur the lines between where the homosocial and the homoerotic begin and end. As Eve Sedgwick has argued, these two kinds of relationships or “desires” between men exist along a continuum that has existed in the subtext of art and literature for centuries. What we are seeing now is this continuum foregrounded, which some critics have seen as useful. Writing for the *Gay and Lesbian Review* in 2010, Colin Carman argues that bromances “help to confuse friendship and sexual ties” and speculates that the films could be “Hollywood’s very own form of foreplay, of breaking the rules of friendship before tackling those of love and marriage and finally going all the way,” referring to same-sex marriage. In other words, Carman is suggesting that as immature and homophobic as some of the bromance characters seem, they are genuinely unsure about their homosocial desire for one another; as counterintuitive as it sounds, this confusion might be a sign of progress past the kinds of homophobic disavowals found in the male weepies from the 1970s. Like the male melodramas that come before them, bromances evince a blend of attitudes, both forward-thinking and retrograde.

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As I have argued throughout this dissertation, male melodramas are never completely conservative, nor completely progressive. Rather, the texts contain varying degrees of these attitudes, which explains why they have been read differently by their various audiences. I myself have tried to approach the films with a mix of both guarded skepticism and a willingness to empathize. Compared to more extreme anti-feminist backlash films, such as *Fatal Attraction*, and contemporary men’s rights groups, male melodramas have responded to changes in gender and power with some grace. And as more fathers work at home and strive to be nurturing parents, I imagine that many of these films vindicate their decisions and efforts.

Most concerning perhaps is the question of whether or not the personal changes dramatized in male melodramas function as a shell game that swaps out the demand for the structural changes that are necessary to achieve real social progress. This question is reminiscent of debates between liberal and radical feminists (and other activists) as to whether or not a change in consciousness must precede structural change or vice versa. For myself, I’m not convinced that this is an either/or dilemma; perhaps the shuffle forward may consist of alternating those two feet.
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