DivaTraffic and Male Bonding in Film: Teaching Opera, Learning Gender, Race, and Nation

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In the influential *Between Men*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points to “male homosocial desire” as the potentially erotic “continuum between homosocial and homosexual” that is the normal structure of all gender relations.¹ Sedgwick’s analysis is based in large part on Gayle Rubin’s interpretation of Claude Levi-Strauss’s study of “the male traffic in women” in kinship systems. In this classical anthropological view, “patriarchal heterosexuality” requires “the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men” (25–26). Rubin herself notes that this traffic in women is not confined solely to the so-called primitive world, but that it becomes only “more pronounced and commercialized in more ‘civilized’ societies” through “customs, cliches, and personality traits (among others, the curious custom by which a father gives away the bride).”² Following Rubin, one has to observe that the traffic in women operates also at the symbolic level of our cultural imagination. I intend to discuss one such example in this essay.

Diva traffic occurs in the following manner: a white male, who appears to have a marginal status in society, but in actuality has an enormous capital of high culture, teaches a man of color about opera. The success of the lesson is twofold. The tutored character is transformed toward a greater humanity and the relationship between the socially different characters is forged. This constitutes a trope that I will call operatic tutelage. The instrument that makes the lesson possible is the recorded voice of female opera singers.

This traffic in divas present in the films I am going to analyze underscores a particular discourse about what constitutes gender, race, and nation. A subtext of these films is that diva traffic redeems whiteness by imagining Eurocentrism as a requirement for membership in the newly racially integrated nations of the Western Hemisphere. In *The Shawshank Redemption, Philadelphia*, and *Fresa y chocolate*, the socially subordinated male character’s acceptance of a quintessentially European art form like opera demonstrates his capacity for full inclusion into the nation as a modern version of what Henry Louis Gates Jr. referred to in a different context as a “European-in-the-making.”

A juxtaposition of these three films for analysis is warranted despite the fact that they emerge from two distinct filmmaking traditions and institutions—market-driven Hollywood in the United States and the revolutionary Cuban Institute of the Arts and Film Industry (ICAIC). The two Hollywood films participate in an international economy that cultivates revenue and profits from audiences outside of the United States. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its subsidies to Cuba as well as the US embargo severely challenged ICAIC’s ability to resist market pressures. With funding from Spain and Mexico, *Fresa y chocolate* be-
came one of the first Cuban films specifically marketed to an
ternational audience. This type of marketing affects the themes,
narratives, and other cinematic devices employed in order to
gain a broad, international audience. For instance, all three films
are calculated to attract heterosexual audiences despite their
queer content. The only explicit homosexual acts in The Shaw-
shank Redemption result from forcible rape, so they require disap-
proval. The gay men in Fresa y chocolate and Philadelphia are chaste,
so viewers see neither explicit homosexual activity nor overt dis-
plays of affection between gay men.

Another important reason for considering these films
together is their queer content. In spite of fairly tepid representa-
tions of queerness, these films quite remarkably show the continual
formation of a transnational gay male culture. Paul Gilroy's obser-
vation in The Black Atlantic that the long-playing record may have
been the most important conduit of twentieth-century Pan-African
thought is especially relevant here. In Opera in the Flesh, Sam Abel
writes that opera recordings provide a “language” for forming “cul-
tural communities” for gay men, who have “no natural, demo-
graphically determined communities,” who are “not born into ex-
clusively gay families,” and who “do not grow up among large
clusters of people like [themselves].” The gay “opera queen” is the
most obvious member of this community and, as Wayne Koesten-
baum remarks in The Queen's Throat, this identity is a product of
opera recordings: “The quintessential opera-queen pleasures pass
through records: for example, the cult of Callas among American
gay men has been largely a love affair with her recorded voice be-
because her records arrived before she sang here in person.” When
the three films in this study use the trope of operatic tutelage, they
appropriate this gay cultural formation and they circulate this phe-
nomenon across national borders.

The Paradoxical White Male Protagonist
All of these films strategically use a paradox of the superior, but
wounded and outcast, white male. He is culturally (read socially)
superior, yet his wounded and outcast status bring him into con-
tact with the rabble, in this case men of color. Were he to remain superior and reap the benefits of that superiority, he would of course never come into contact with or need to bond with those not in his social or racial group. However, personal and national circumstances—the AIDS epidemic, prison, or the Cuban Revolution—have made his pairing up with a nonwhite male both a necessity and an opportunity.

The closeted Andy Beckett (Tom Hanks) in Jonathan Demme’s Philadelphia is a rising star in one of the most renowned law firms in Philadelphia, the city of “brotherly love” and the mythical cradle of US democracy, two points that the title of the film already underscores. Andy is a figure of shame since the film suggests that he contracted HIV by engaging in high-risk anonymous sex. His seropositive status signifies that he is far beyond the “good, normal, natural blessed sexuality” that forms what Rubin in “Thinking Sex” has called the “charmed circle” of our sexual value system. Andy’s sexuality includes the subcategories homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, nonprocreative, casual, public, and pornographic, which constitute seven of the twelve “outer limits,” according to Rubin, of “bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned sexuality” (13–14). His HIV status will lead to his termination on false grounds.

Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins), in Frank Darabont’s The Shawshank Redemption, is a bank vice president whose manhood has been wounded through cuckoldry. He is accused of the murder of his wife and her lover and is wrongfully convicted. Andy’s ostracism consists of his being stripped of all of his upper-middle-class privileges and sent to prison, where his humiliation and shame continue when he is repeatedly raped by a gang of sociopathic “prison wolves.”

Diego (Jorge Perugorría), in Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabio’s Fresa y chocolate, is a gay white photographer who works for a cultural organization in Havana. Although he is a believer in Cuba’s revolution, he maintains a highly principled commitment to aesthetics. His sexuality, however, is a source of pain for him. Diego has sad memories of Cuba’s persecution of homosexual males, especially from the mid-1960s throughout
the 1970s, when the Cuban state institutionalized homophobic practices such as the forced incarceration of homosexuals in the Military Units to Aid Production camps. Diego’s exile is provoked by his reaction to the banning of a sculptor friend’s show. A frustrated Diego writes an angry letter of protest to the authorities, which precipitates his banishment from Cuba.

Although Andy Beckett, Andy Dufresne, and Diego are outcast characters, they are not marginal figures. All of them share two things in common, visualized in the three films quite prominently: dominance over technology and the possession of a warehouse of cultural goods. Film critic Mas’ud Zavarzadeh’s observations about the young white male protagonist of an earlier movie, Jean Beineix’s 1981 film *Diva* (France), are relevant here. Zavarzadeh commented that although *Diva’s* protagonist, Jules, lives in the margins of contemporary society as a letter courier, “this does not mean that [he is] marginal”; rather, Jules is “at the heart of the contemporary world,” living a “postmodern lifestyle,” “conversant with technology,” and “at home with the many languages and codes of modern living.” Jules lives in an apartment over a garage that functions as a metaphorical warehouse for the latest electronic technology. From his technologically superior, yet marginal, location, he is able to record the voice of an African American opera singer illegally and initiate a traffic in the diva’s voice. Rather than being an outcast, Jules has retreated from the world in order to fully conquer it, thus representing the quintessential white adventurer-explorer.

Each of the films I am discussing uses this warehouse metaphor for its white male protagonist during a mise-en-scène that is reminiscent of Jules’s technology-filled apartment in Beineix’s *Diva*. *Fresa y Chocolate*’s Diego lives in a small flat that contains remnants of largely European and North American culture hard to find in a decaying Havana that seems to have renounced and cut itself off from high culture. *Philadelphia*’s Andy Beckett lives in a warehouse that has been converted into his living quarters. The first time we see Beckett’s apartment we are awed by its taste and sophistication: its impressive twenty-foot-high ceilings and wall-to-floor windows that allow copious light to stream into the apart-
ment, the carefully displayed matador’s suit and porcelain objets d’art. An oar from a boat suspended on a bare wall suggests participation in the elite college sport of crew racing. The warehouse metaphor is made explicit most surprisingly in the prison film *The Shawshank Redemption*. Smart and industrious Andy Dufresne has been diligently writing to state politicians, their wives, and wealthy individuals for donations to build a prison library. We see the warehouse metaphor as prisoners unload off of trucks scores of boxes and transport them into the new official prison library.

This warehouse metaphor is crucial for the scenes of operatic tutelage in all three films. The recorded voice of the operatic diva is one of the possessions in the white male protagonist’s warehouse. The white male protagonist in each of these films offers as a gift the disembodied voice of the soprano to racially and/or socially subordinate males. That the diva’s voice is a gift is important because, as Rubin comments in “The Traffic in Women,” gift giving “expresses, affirms, or creates a social link between the partners in the exchange” and confers on its participants “a special relationship of trust, solidarity, and mutual aid.”

The recorded voice of the diva is significant when looked at in the wider context of films from the 1980s and 1990s in which opera is symbolically presented as a gift. Notably, white male protagonists take their love interests to the opera house in films like *Pretty Woman* (dir. Garry Marshall, US, 1990), *Moonstruck* (dir. Norman Jewison, US, 1987), and *Hannah and Her Sisters* (dir. Woody Allen, US, 1986). In all three cases, the successful tutelage of the female love interest furthers the heterosexual trajectory of the films’ narratives, which end in traditional bourgeois marriage. While the white heterosexual male has the freedom and disposable income to woo his lover through the spectacle of a night at the opera, the wounded white male has forfeited access to the opera house, but still he is in possession of a technological substitute that confirms his superiority.

On the other hand, the 1993 *Household Saints* (dir. Nancy Savoca, US) provides an ironic and instructive reversal of this traditional heterosexual operatic tutelage. A wounded white male, Lino Falconetti (Victor Argo), attempts to woo Pat Shen (Dzeni Teng), the Chinese daughter of a laundry owner. Being poor, he
has neither the warehouse nor the economic means to bring his beloved to the opera house. Lino has only the democratic radio, a technology over which he does not have absolute control. When he brings his radio to the laundry for Pat to hear a broadcast of Madama Butterfly, Chinese opera comes out instead. Visibly disturbed, Lino returns to his flat and commits suicide, an ironic reversal of Butterfly’s Cio-Cio-San. Lino’s racial arrogance makes it impossible for him to imagine an alternative to the orientalist fantasies presented in Western opera.

In Opera, Ideology, and Film, Jeremy Tambling comments that when characters go to the opera house they experience the full spectacle of the performance, but when a character isolates a moment in a recording, he usually foregrounds a particular type of voice rather than dramatic spectacle. Typically, film foregrounds the female coloratura voice and, specifically, only those moments when “the voice becomes bird-like and ethereal, and wanders or soars through its range.”\(^{12}\) Tambling’s observations call attention to the dichotomy between technology and nature and the racial assumptions that accompany them. Both the opera house and the equipment to play music are products of technology. Historically, racial assumptions have been associated with this dichotomy: whites with technology and people of color, especially blacks, with nature.

The Shawshank Redemption, Fresa y chocolate, and Philadelphia continue this association, and a practice of scientific imperialism, when white male characters possess the technology and the capacity to overwhelm characters of color with sounds that imitate nature and transform its symbolic meaning. Furthermore, the white male protagonist’s mastery of technology initiates action by allowing him to give, at his will, the disembodied voice of the soprano to express his desire for a man of color. Through technology, the white male controls the experience of “the sublime,” which Immanuel Kant equates with the universality of the human condition.\(^{13}\) The universality of beauty, however, is always European and controlled by a man of European descent. In the three films’ scenes of tutelage, the moment at which the diva’s voice is exchanged becomes the symbolic moment in which universal humanity is transferred by a white male to a male of color.
Operatic Tutelage from a Prison Library

In *The Shawshank Redemption*, the scene of tutelage occurs shortly after Andy Dufresne begins receiving boxes for the prison library. One box contains Mozart’s opera *The Marriage of Figaro*. Andy broadcasts over the public address system “Canzonetta sull’aria” (frequently referred to as “The Letter Duet”) while all the prisoners in the yard and in the laundry room stop their activities to listen in rapt attention to the duet.

*The Marriage of Figaro’s* duet, Wye Allanbrook writes, uses the topos of the pastoral to represent a “green world” in which relationships can be established and cemented. The form of the duet is one of the opera’s five pastorales that eighteenth-century musicians used to suggest countrified music for the urban aristocrat. Susanna and the Countess sing about a beautiful garden in which each hopes to get the man she desires.

Countess:  A little tune on the breeze
           “What a gentle zephyr
           Will sigh this evening
           Beneath the pines in the thicket.
           He will understand the rest.”

The two women sing together only the final phrase, “*Il capriccio*” (He’ll understand), and they do so twelve times.

Andy’s “gift” becomes a patently clear expression of homosocial desire for the black protagonist, Red (Morgan Freeman), who implies that “he understands” when he summarizes in a voice-over narration the pastoral ideals that Mozart incorporated into “Canzonetta sull’aria.” Red’s voice-over narration is remarkable because it is done by a character who appears to have knowledge of neither the conventions associated with opera nor the Italian language. Red states:

I have no idea what those two Italian ladies were singing about. Truth is, I don’t want to know. Some things are best left unsaid. I like to think they were singing about something so beautiful, it can’t be expressed in words and makes your heart ache because of it. I tell you those voices soared
higher and farther than anybody in a grey place dares to dream. It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made those walls dissolve away. And for the briefest of moments every last man at Shawshank felt free.

One cannot help but notice the prominence in Red’s voice-over narration of statements such as “Truth is, I don’t want to know,” “Some things are best left unsaid,” and that something is so beautiful that “it can’t be expressed in words and makes your heart ache because of it.” Sedgwick, among others working in queer theory, calls our attention to the unspeakable and the unknowable in male homosocial relationships by pointing out that these are often covers or codes for the metaphorical circulation of women as currency for desire between men. In The Shawshank Redemption, Andy offers Red the voice of an Italian diva as a symbolic gift. Red, in return, smuggles posters of female film stars that Andy uses to decorate his cell. These posters hide the secret hole that ultimately will figure in their escape from prison.

At the end of the movie Andy and Red are together repairing a ship by an incredibly beautiful azure sea. They have found freedom by returning to a timeless pastoral, a remote beach on the Pacific Ocean that Andy describes as “a warm place with no memory.” This pastoral represents a yearning to escape an impossible present for a future that does not yet exist. Neither Red nor Andy can exist in the “real world.” Both are on the lam from the law—Andy as an escaped inmate and Red as a parole violator. The Shawshank Redemption’s ending represents a utopian world where the bonding of Andy and Red is possible. However, lest we forget, this bonding is possible only between social superior and inferior: Andy decides the location, has the knowledge about how to escape from prison, and provides the money for the escape, while Red acts as his assistant. Intrinsic to the poetics of this yearning for interracial male bonding are the racialized binaries of white/black and superior/inferior. Andy controls the bonds of friendship through the possessions in his warehouse of cultural goods, which include the diva’s voice that allowed an experience of the sublime for Red.
The Civil Rights Movement at the Service of White Men

In Philadelphia the scene of tutelage and the gift of the diva occurs after a costume party on the night before Andy Beckett has to testify in court. While Andy and his lawyer, the black male protagonist Joe Miller (Denzel Washington), are supposed to rehearse the next day’s testimony, Andy puts on the stereo Maria Callas’s big aria “La Mamma Morta” from Andrea Chenier. Andy asks Joe, “Do you like opera?” Joe responds that he doesn’t know anything about opera. What happens next is amazing for a movie that has been so overwhelmingly didactic. Andy walks about the room, while connected to an intravenous drip, explaining the plot of the opera and interpreting the aria for Joe. The lights dim. Red light from the fireplace floods the room. The camera angle changes to an upward shot from the floor that gives the viewer the impression of falling. Joe watches Andy with a look of astonishment while Andy, as Maria Callas’s Maddalena, proclaims, “I am divine!”

This scene is essential to the film’s retelling of the American civil rights movement as a second American Revolution in which rights were finally extended to all. However, the version of this history and its legacy in Philadelphia refers neither to a democratic movement nor to a mass mobilization of citizens. Instead, Philadelphia tells a story about the overthrow of an ancien régime
by putative representatives of a democratic America—a black man and a white man. Neither of them alone has sufficient means to topple the aristocratic legal firm that Andy accuses of wrong-
fully terminating him. However, together through friendship and love they conquer it. Early on, the film establishes the signif-
cance of the ideals of equality espoused by the American Revolu-
tion and its heir, the civil rights movement, through an image of a multicultu-
ral Philadelphia and the voice of Bruce Springsteen singing the film’s anthemic title song. But it is uncertain if Joe will
be able to don the mantle of either the forefathers who met in late-eighteenth-century Philadelphia to create America or the
black civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., who
redeemed their creation. The film presents Joe Miller as a crass legal whore who will accept any case no matter how flimsy. He
actually runs television commercials to advertise his wares. He
profanes the public space in the worst sense of a public woman who advertises her services for all to see. Joe’s commitment to the
revolutionary ideals of American democracy embodied in the law
has never been tested.

In *Women and the Public Sphere*, Joan Landes argues that the
salons run by Parisian women of the ancien régime served the
function of helping men rise in social status. As absolutist monar-
chy consolidated its hold on national life, bringing with it persons
often outside the traditional nobility into public offices, salon
women “became important in teaching the appropriate style,
dress, manners, language, art, and literature to these newcom-
ers.” In *Philadelphia* Andy Beckett is a modern day *salonnière*. His
apartment is a warehouse filled with the contents that Joe will
need to represent American values. The operatic aria is the most
significant of these contents. The aria the filmmakers select for
Joe’s tutelage reinforces the allusions to the salon and Andy as a
*salonnière*. Giordano’s *Andrea Chenier* is set before and after the
French Revolution. The filmmakers implicitly place Andy into a
female role of *salonnière*. The fact of Andy’s sexual orientation
reinforces the stereotype that gay men are women, which is again
suggested when he impersonates Maria Callas’s Maddalena in the
aria “La Mamma Morta.”
Aside from these points, the aria mentions a racist subplot of the opera, which the film conceals. After Maddalena’s former servant and now revolutionary hero Gerard professes his unrequited desire for her, she—an aristocrat about to be imprisoned—tells Gerard how the mob burned her house and killed her mother. She sings:

They killed my mother
at the doorway of my room;
she died, but she saved me!
Then, in the dead of night,
I was wandering with Bersi,
when suddenly a livid flash
blazed up and illuminated
the dark road before my steps.
I looked—my birthplace was in flames!
Thus, I was alone, and around me, nothing.
Hunger and poverty, need and danger!
I fell ill,
and Bersi, good and pure,
sold her beauty for me.
I bring misfortune to all who love me!

Bersi is Maddalena’s mulatto maid who is also a prostitute. Bersi disappears in Andy Beckett’s translation of Maddalena’s aria. Amazingly, at the very moment Bersi’s name is mentioned in the aria, Andy stops translating. For Bersi’s name, Andy substitutes musical analysis: “Do you hear the heartache in her voice? Can you feel it, Joe? Now in come the strings, and it changes everything. The music, it fills with a hope. . . . That’ll change again, listen. . . . Listen. . . .” Once the references to Bersi end, Andy returns to translating the aria, stating Maddalena’s words, “I bring sorrow [sic] to those who love me.”

Bersi’s actions simultaneously evoke the contemptuous nineteenth-century stereotypes of the black woman as Jezebel or Mammy. Legal scholar Regina Austin notes that Jezebel was in white ideology “the wanton, libidinous black woman whose easy ways excused white men’s abuse of their slaves as sexual ‘partners’
and bearers of mulatto offspring” in contrast to Mammy, who was “‘asexual,’ ‘maternal,’ and ‘deeply religious.’” As Jezebel, Andrea Chenier’s Bersi is a whore who sells her body for money. However, the opera redeems Bersi through the image of the mammy who uses her ill-gotten money to clothe and feed her white mistress. As either Mammy or Jezebel, the Bersi figure can easily be made invisible either through cutting—as studios did in the 1940s when they excised Lena Horne and Hazel Scott from movies in the fear that their dignified and sensual images would offend white southerners—or through appropriation and silence, as when the film makes no mention about Clarence Cain, an African American attorney who died of AIDS in 1990. Cain’s story was a basis for Philadelphia.

This omission of Bersi in Andy’s explanation to Joe does not pass unnoticed to connoisseurs of opera. Nor does it pass unnoticed that Joe is now filling in the space vacated by Bersi’s omission. Under Andy’s tutelage, specifically in his gift of the diva’s voice, Joe has experienced the sublime and his nascent humanity has been awakened. And yet it is initially unclear what this experience means to Joe. Has Andy’s performance aroused repressed homosexual desire in the homophobic Joe Miller? Philadelphia’s answer is resolutely no. The film presents Joe’s new experience of humanity as a deepening of his commitment to the heterosexual, nuclear family. The scene of operatic tutelage ends with Callas singing “La Mama Morta,” this time on the non-diegetic soundtrack, while Joe returns to his home expressing tenderness for his sleeping daughter and wife. The “good” homosexual, the film implies, uses his gifts to help make heterosexual men better family men.

Andy’s removal of Bersi from his translation, however, is an apt metaphor for the film’s view of history. In the film no one wrestles with histories of racism, homophobia, privilege, and entitlement. Philadelphia does not reveal the reasons for which individuals engage in political behavior. In fact, at points in the movie both Andy and Joe proclaim that this case is a legal issue, not a political one. Philadelphia’s evasion of histories of struggle recalls Toni Morrison’s concept of the “dehistoricizing allegory,” in
which "history, as a process of becoming, is excluded from the literary encounter" so that what is produced is "foreclosure rather than disclosure."\textsuperscript{21}

From its outset \textit{Philadelphia} presents a well-worn image of equality. We see two youthful male lawyers, one black and the other one white, arguing their case before a more mature white female judge. The black man and the white man in the same frame has been the predominant method of representing racial equality in hundreds of films and television broadcasts since World War II.\textsuperscript{22} The movie hits the viewer over the head with this symbolism when Andy Beckett goes to Joe Miller's office to request his help. Two relevant signs figure prominently in the encounter. The first is a portrait of the martyred civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. The two protagonists stand under this portrait shaking hands until Andy tells Joe he has AIDS. As Joe fearfully recoils from Andy the other sign appears.

This second sign is a painting next to King's portrait that recalls Allanbrook's green world trope. The painting is done almost entirely in shades of green except for two children in its middle, running hand in hand through a field in the summertime. This green world will appear later in the film as the site for the initial adhering of the relationship between Andy and Joe and, significantly, it will allude again to the rhetoric of equality in the civil rights movement. The scene is the law library. Hiding behind a stack of books and unseen by Andy, Joe observes a librarian's attempt to segregate AIDS-stricken Andy to a separate but allegedly equal room away from all of the other readers. Even though he has nothing to gain, Joe in an unexplained act of altruism intervenes and rescues Andy from the phobic librarian. Here the film uses the memory of the image of King in Joe's office as shorthand to explain Joe's altruistic behavior toward Andy and to draw parallels between the civil rights movement and the struggles of (white, gay) people with AIDS. Drawn to Andy because he witnesses him being a victim of discrimination, Joe asks him about his case. Andy explains that he is accusing his firm of violating the Americans with Disabilities Act. As Andy and Joe take turns reading the relevant passages about discrimination, we see an overhead shot of the two of them sitting across from each other bathed
in soft light emanating from all of the green-covered lamp shades in the library. Joe and Andy have become the two children in the field of green in the painting. Their reading together a law that was a direct result of the civil rights movement affirms a rhetoric of equality. This parallel is made again in the film when the well-known supporter of liberal causes, actress Joanne Woodward, playing Andy's mom, does racial transvesting as Rosa Parks, encouraging her son to take his case to court because, she states, “I didn’t raise my kids to sit in the back of the bus.”

Philadelphia appropriates the rhetoric of the civil rights movement in ways that have historical precedent. The formation of the white gay rights movement has shaped itself after the experience of African Americans. According to cultural critic Marlon Ross, since the early 1950s, gay and lesbian activists of “all political stripes” have relied “on the comparison to African American ‘minority’ culture to establish the legitimacy of homosexual culture.” The white gay male writer and the director of Philadelphia, respectively Ron Nyswaner and Jonathan Demme, continue this tradition in which European-American anxieties about sexuality and gender, and in this case AIDS, become, as Ross states, “intimately tied to matters of racial community within the United States” (193). Philadelphia argues that it is understandable that a black man—a member of a group that, historically, whites have despised—is the only member of the legal establishment who will find sympathy and compassion for a gay white male outcast with AIDS. Likewise, the African American struggle against white supremacy provides the pivotal language for the white gay man’s natal family to express their support for him.

The reasons for an alliance between the homophobic patriarch Joe Miller and the closeted careerist yuppie Andy Beckett are the racially determined results of “foreclosure rather than disclosure,” to recall Morrison. Philadelphia rather melodramatically tells us that individuals—black and white men specifically—have the capacity for an innate goodness that in the end triumphs over evil. The issue for the film is how to display goodness. We witness Andy’s goodness through his dramatic messianic suffering. Andy uses his accumulated cultural capital to bring out the decency inherent in Joe Miller. Not surprisingly in this moment
of sexual and gender crisis provoked by the AIDS pandemic. *Philadelphia* allows an African American to stand for, as Amy Taubin writes in her review of the film, the proverbial “Everyman” who “personifies mainstream America.” By working together, *Philadelphia* reassures us, good and decent black and white men can renew the American ideals of democracy. Unfortunately, this allegory makes no space for a living gay protagonist, since Andy will die at the end, even if he wins his case.

**Gay Man Teaches Heterosexuality, Again**

The Cuban film *Fresa y chocolate* is very much like *Philadelphia* when it presents as allegory a renewal of the ideals of the Cuban Revolution through the cementing of a relationship between seemingly different men. In the case of *Fresa y chocolate*, one man is swishy, predatory, and gay while the other is young, innocent, and straight. As in *Philadelphia*, the gay man will help the straight man become a better heterosexual. The two men are united by recognizing the innate goodness and decency in each other, as in *Philadelphia* and *The Shawshank Redemption*. Once this union between seeming opposites is cemented, *Fresa y chocolate*, like *Philadelphia*, cannot imagine the gay man remaining in the nation. As in all of the films I discuss in this article, racial difference is a significant aspect of *Fresa y chocolate*’s story of male bonding’s recuperative powers.

The scene of tutelage happens at the beginning of the film when Diego, the gay photographer, attempts to seduce the Communist student David (Vladimir Cruz) with an offer of books, photographs, and drinks. Diego puts on a tape recording of Maria Callas singing “D’amor sull’ali rosee” from Verdi’s *Il Trovatore*. David appears nonplussed; it all seems to be just one more sign of Diego’s perverse lifestyle.

On one level, the choice of David for tutelage is important. David is a *guajiro*, someone from the Cuban countryside where racial mixing is more commonplace than it is in the upper classes. Therefore the purity of his racial ancestry is more dubious than the urbane and aristocratic Diego’s. However, the film does not dwell on the ambiguities of ancestry. Instead it deals with
David’s innocence, which provides much humor in the film. A country bumpkin, he confuses Truman Capote with US President Harry Truman. In another instance, when Diego promises to give him a volume by the seventeenth-century English poet John Donne, David asks, “Are you friends? Do you write to him?” David’s innocence allows him to be a grateful recipient of Diego’s gifts. This is particularly true of the aria, which is easily seen as a reflection of the consequences of the mishaps that follow David’s innocence, as the doomed Leonora entreats “the rosy wings of love” to deliver a message of hope to her imprisoned lover.

On another level, racial difference assumes significance in this allegory through all of Diego’s gifts to David. All are marked by Eurocentric “whiteness”: the tea, the artwork, the literature, and, most significantly, a particular gay sensibility. The film legitimates Diego’s homosexuality through Eurocentric discourse. In one such instance Diego recites a list of real as well as mythical men who had sex with other men: Alexander the Great, Hercules, Achilles and Patroclus, Oscar Wilde, André Gide, and Federico García Lorca. Diego even includes Ernest Hemingway in the list, stating, “And some even say Hemingway. Yes, the guy with the shotguns, hunting lions.” This type of list making is a common occurrence in gay drama, as John Glum points out; gay dramatists use the list to educate audiences by affirming “gayness as a central part of human history and culture, and gay men as central in the formation of that culture.”

Thus this list affirms gay existence and Diego’s place in it, as well as proclaiming Cuban culture as an inheritor of a classical European civilization that extends from Alexander the Great to the Spanish writer García Lorca. The film never implies that there may even be an African or African-based New World Creole model for Diego’s homosexuality, despite the well-documented fact that men who have sex with other men frequently assume important roles in West African-based Creole religions in the Americas.

The elevation of Eurocentrism is important for Fresa y chocolate’s critique of Cuba. The film continually presents Diego’s gifts of Euro-American high culture as medicinal doses and injections to rejuvenate and regenerate a body that is either ailing or stagnating. The cure for this ailing body — David’s and Cuba’s —
is European civilization. When Diego plays Callas for David, Diego’s comments refer to stagnation: “Why can’t we produce voices like that? We can’t always listen to Maria Remola.” Diego’s comment is a criticism of the revolution, as Philip Kemp notes in his review of the film: “For Remola, a superannuated Cuban singer who refuses to retire, read Fidel, still heard blaring out daily on public loudspeakers. The revolution badly needs a new voice.”

Because the aria appears again at the moment David decides to examine his own choice that led him to abandon writing and literature for political science, it is also a metaphor for this young student as a prisoner to a stagnating revolution. European opera through the voice of a Greek singer is the energizing drug giving David the strength to pursue his dreams of becoming a writer. The filmmakers lost potentially rich possibilities of irony and subversion by not using the African American Leontyne Price’s recording of “D’amor sull’ali rosee.” Price’s Leonora is legendary. Critics are unanimous in their unqualified praise of her recording of the opera. Equally legendary are Price’s American and black nationalisms, on and off the stage. In light of the historical experience of blacks in Cuba, as well as some rather high profile defections by Black Panthers to Cuba, the filmmakers missed an opportunity to draw a parallel between experiences of those of African descent in the United States and in Cuba when they ignored Price for the more obviously queer icon Callas.

David’s transformation into a European in the making and his bonding with Diego represent a cure for Cuba. This cure is evident in the two men’s relationship with Diego’s suicidal neighbor, Nancy (Mirta Ibarra). When Nancy slashes her wrists, David offers his blood to save her life. Both contribute to her well-being and happiness, with Diego taking care of her after the suicide attempt and later doing everything possible to further the relationship between Nancy and David. Bejel comments, “Perhaps what all this means is that Nancy is that part of the Cuban nation which desperately needs to be saved from suicide. Accordingly, the friendship between Diego and David would represent an alliance needed to bring about Cuba’s ‘utopian salvation’” (emphasis added). The traffic in women has never been clearer. First Callas, now
Nancy. Diego moves from the symbolic exchange of the gift of the diva’s voice to the material gift of Nancy’s body.

It should not be lost on us that Diego’s gifts in *Fresa y chocolate* are racially marked. Bejel notes that the film makes the racial nature of Diego’s presents explicit in the film’s dialogue, such as when Diego

amuses himself by thinking about his superiority in drinking tea from French cups, while outside “the people are shouting.” [In the film the actual line is “los negros gritando,” that is, “the blacks are shouting.”] He also says that tea is for civilized people, while coffee is for the unrefined — especially for Black people. (Diego ironically sings a song called “All of Us Blacks Drink Coffee” when arguing this point with David.) When David, repeating slogans from the Revolution rather mechanically, answers that Blacks and Whites are equal, that “we all come from Africa,” Diego reacts strongly, retorting, “Not you and I.” (74)

Bejel notes the irony in Diego’s retort: “Diego affirms the Spanish legacy while denying the African, which is truly contradictory for a character who claims to be a believer in the Afro-Cuban religion” (74). Diego’s contradiction — his practice of an African-based religion, but his denial of association with Africa — reflects a racism and a racial reality found in Cuba in particular and Latin America in general, where white Eurocentric chauvinism results in the view of blacks as a threatening and dangerous population. More specifically, *Fresa y chocolate* participates in the historical practice of whitening when it privileges European culture as an antidote for an ailing Cuban body. At a macro level, whitening refers to state polices that encouraged white European immigration. This practice was widespread in Latin America, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century in Cuba following the demise of the African slave trade, and has not vanished even today. Whitening also occurs at a micro level, when, for instance, individuals describe themselves as white or some variant of it and deny their African ancestry. The anthropologist Gayle McGarity points out that another form of whitening takes place among women who aspire to have children by lighter-skinned or white men so that the children will be *adelantado*, that is, advanced, and not dark-skinned.
Diego’s gifts, and David’s subsequent acceptance of them, advance by whitening the racially dubious young Communist.

The Cuban nation that *Fresa y chocolate* represents is marked by a rhetoric that couples whiteness in need of reinvigoration with a silencing of blacks. A particularly notable instance of this rhetoric occurs when Diego guides David on a tour of Old Havana: “One of the world’s most beautiful cities. You just have time to see it,” Diego says, “before it collapses in shit.” David sees a splendid baroque Havana, much of it in decay. Two points are relevant here. First, at no point in the film does Diego tell his young pupil that African slave labor made possible Havana’s eighteenth- and nineteenth-century splendor. Second, since all of the shots on the tour are aerial from rooftops, the film conceals the fact that Diego’s stately La Havana Vieja is now populated mostly by blacks. Because we see buildings, but no people, we must wonder if Diego is referring to the blacks as shit.

While the film’s rhetoric silences Africanity, it also removes homosexuality from Cuba when it transfers Europeanness from the homosexual Diego to the heterosexual David. Diego disappears even though he boldly asserts, “I’m a part of this country. And without me you’d be missing a part.” However, one could question the degree to which this film really embraces the homosexuality Diego proclaims, in light of its disappearing gay characters (as in *Philadelphia*) and the resolutely heterosexual ending of the film in the sexual union of David and Nancy. Thus the film leaves open and uncertain whether it is Diego’s homosexuality or the Eurocentrism it represents that is an essential part of Cuba’s cure.

In a scathing critique of the film, Paul Julian Smith comes to a conclusion that supports the view that *Fresa y chocolate* is neither an embrace of homosexuality nor an apologia for the state’s homophobic policies. *Fresa y chocolate*, Smith writes,
terms of the film, to examine why “people who preferred strawberry” were sent to forced labour camps while “people who preferred chocolate” were not.\textsuperscript{34}

Remarks by people close to the film affirm the correctness of Smith’s observations. Senel Paz, who wrote both the screenplay and the short story that is the basis of the film, takes great pains to remove doubts that the film does not argue for redressing homophobic policies of the state. Paz insists forcefully that “the central issue is not homosexuality. The problems raised go much further: it is friendship and tolerance that are at stake.”\textsuperscript{35} When asked, “Why does homosexuality endanger the country?” Jorge Perugorría, the actor who plays Diego, echoed Paz’s sentiments. He stated, “I don’t understand, nor am I aware of the excuse for creating anti-homosexual policies.”\textsuperscript{36} Homohatred in Cuban policies is at best inexplicable and at worst the irrational excess of the Revolution, according to the rhetoric of Perugorría, Paz, and \textit{Fresa y chocolate}. The film celebrates both male bonding across social differences and the need for Eurocentrism to reinvigorate Cuba. The medium for male bonding is an exchange of women that is either symbolic, as with the diva’s voice, or material, as with Nancy.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The traffic in divas in these three films is a fairly sophisticated representation of men giving away women to other men as the linkages for their relationships. As the bonds of their relationships are strengthened, men are transformed toward greater humanity and are revealed to be decent and caring. The difference in social status between the men bonded through the traffic in divas reveals lessons about race and nation. European cultural artifacts are privileged and affirmed as sites for the expression of universal ideals about humaneness. These films reveal a postmodern sensibility in their ironic use of characters from socially subordinated groups—prisoners in \textit{The Shawshank Redemption} or gay men in \textit{Philadelphia} and \textit{Fresa y chocolate}—to represent the virtues of European culture. Although they are outcasts, these men retain their superiority, which they then use to forge relationships with
men from groups that historically have been dominated by whites. As viewers we witness their bonding and are rewarded with the allegory that historical differences characterized by violence and brutality can be overcome through friendship. This lesson confirms the observation that Benjamin DeMott made about race in US pop culture's ceaseless repetition of a "friendship orthodoxy," which holds that "racism is nothing but personal hatred, and that when hatred ends, racism ends." These three films provide allegories that render insignificant historically created and entrenched differences due to race, class, gender, and sexuality.

The cementing of the homosocial bond operates as a closure that provides eternity. The racially separate characters will remain friends across time and space. In these films, the metaphysical nation transcends barriers of class, race, and sexual difference through the homosocial practice of operatic tutelage and the traffic in divas as symbolic women. Although these films have an investment in an eternal nation, differing possibilities for the bonded males are present. In The Shawshank Redemption the protagonists have no nation that can contain their desires. Nevertheless, they are allowed to live in some place, albeit outside of history. Thus the film functions as a dehistoricizing vehicle for a period of time—marked by the posters of female film stars from Rita Hayworth (Gilda, dir. Charles Vidor, US, 1946) to Raquel Welch (One Million Years BC, dir. George Baker, UK, 1966)—in which the civil rights movement is occurring outside the prison walls. The walls, the filmmakers seem to want us to believe, isolate Andy and Red and remove them from participation and debate in this second American revolution. Once outside of prison, they are excused from the aftermath of the movement by being relocated to a so-called place "with no memory."

A different outcome occurs when the gay man disappears through either death in Philadelphia or exile in Fresa y chocolate. Gay men, these films imply, are a paradox: ultimately they have no nation, yet they can represent their nation's finest ideals. Certainly these films reinforce the old mandates of the closet and of punishment for any avowal of homosexuality.

For the men of color, a third possibility exists. These films demonstrate the success of their tutelage since men of color are
either the narrators of these films or the film’s putative subjects, who get to live and remain within the nation. However, the price for membership in the nation requires that these men follow the pattern of the earliest slave narrative and renounce, as Gates put it, the “African’s black mask of humanity.”38

What are we to make of these three possibilities? I believe that they point to the marginal and fragile social status of men of color and of gay men, especially in the United States and Cuba, despite the civil rights advances in both countries. The popularity of all these films among gay audiences and men of color implies a certain gratitude, perhaps, for mainstream representations that express tolerance. Although it is pleasurable to see “positive” portrayals of gay men and of men expressing tenderness toward each other, a rhetoric of tolerance in which the traffic in women continues to structure bonding between and among men—gay and straight, black and white, queer and not-so-queer—needs to be questioned, contested, and challenged.

Notes

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17. Patricia Hill Collins delineates these two stereotypes in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 67–90. For discussions of them in film and in literature, see Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History*


32. In their study of the Cuban census of 1981, de la Fuente and Glasco note numerous cases of whitening at the individual, self-reporting level. One respondent classified herself as a “white mestiza,” whereas another described himself as “mulatto” but referred to both of his parents as “black.”


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