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## QUEER SENSATIONS: POSTWAR AMERICAN MELODRAMA AND THE CRISIS OF QUEER JUVENILITY

*This essay analyzes the cinematic genre convention of the “sensation scene” as a vehicle for the representation of queer crises in American juvenility during the postwar era. Through popular cinema, post-WWII America organized and communicated concerns about the production of “fit” masculine and heterosexual juveniles who would be capable of carrying out the postwar expansion of American democratic and capitalist ideologies. The sensation scene was deployed by popular films to mark queer and racialized masculinities in an aesthetic system that mirrored institutional efforts to prevent “unfit” juveniles from accessing the benefits of full social and political participation. Today, the genre device continues to structure popular film representations of and common thinking about the relative value of young, male American lives.*

Keywords: *melodrama, queer, juvenile, masculinity, cinema, citizenship*

One is not simply dropped from the nation; rather, one is found to be wanting and, so, becomes a “wanting one” through the designation and its implicit and active criteria. (Butler & Spivak, 2007, p. 31)

This essay examines the American cinematic genre convention of the “sensation scene” as a vehicle for the representation of queer crises in American juvenility during the postwar era. As such, it reads the popular archive of American film for insights into the cultural politics of masculinity from the postwar period forward, linking eugenicist assumptions about the “polluting” effects of homosexuality to

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\* Hobart and William Smith Colleges.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to the author, Hobart and William Smith Colleges, 202 Demarest Hall, 300 Pulteney St., Geneva, NY 14456. Email: cael.keegan@gmail.com



the production of an aesthetic complex depicting homosexuality as a sensational failure to rise to the requirements of manly, democratic self-governance. Additionally, it connects the popularization of this aesthetic in American film to the simultaneous production by the state of systemic limitations to democratic citizenship for those institutionally labeled homosexual during and after the postwar years. Concerns about the “normalcy” and purity of the social body, which circulated around the emerging crisis of identifying and managing the problem of queer juvenility, were both reflected in and popularly represented by the films of the postwar era, most notably the “social problem” melodramas. In what follows, I read two signature postwar-era melodramas, *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *Tea and Sympathy* (1956), as containing defining examples of what I call a “queer sensation scene”: a scene that signals the potentially tragic failure to achieve the embodied fantasy of White, heterosexual, “normal” male citizenship in postwar American democracy.

In the early 20th century, American masculinity had become increasingly defined by a notion of civilized-yet-rugged “manliness” that was the exclusive property of adult, bourgeois, White heterosexual men. This redefinition of masculinity as specific to a certain class of White, male bodies was a response to complex shifts in American gender occurring as massive waves of immigrants and Black migrants entered northern American cities—cities where women were also agitating for suffrage, and where spaces of public homosexual activity were also beginning to form. White masculinity, which had for decades secured White men as a group in a position of superiority above all others, was in crisis, fragmented by various non-Anglo ethnicities, forced to compete with Black and immigrant labor, and under threat from masculine suffragettes and effeminate “inverts.” A solution to this national crisis in manhood was “the invention and promotion of the strong, forceful, muscular male as an icon of white heterosexual masculinity,” one that overtly tied notions of normative, heterosexual manhood to nationhood and that sought to eliminate the problem of “racial degeneracy” (Bronski, 2013, pp. 129-130). This icon, which reserved full democratic citizenship and social participation for adult, “normal,” manly White men alone, was to populate the everyday culture of the first half of the 20th century. By the late 1940s, it served as a public “fantasy” of “perfect postwar citizenship” (Creadick, 2010, p. 22).

During the decades prior to WWII, the American eugenics movement had successfully attached notions of disease, blood impurity, and feeble-mindedness to those engaging in or suspected of homosexual acts. By the early 20th century, the psychiatric and medical establishments had widely agreed that homosexuality was either a form of psychosis, a congenital defect that indicated biological degeneracy, or both (D’Emilio, 1998, p. 14). Over the first half of the century, an entire system of managerial institutions (juvenile courts and prisons, boarding schools, male youth clubs) had sprung up to police young men’s gender expressions and to sort male youth along a developmental trajectory into heterosexual adulthood (Romesburg, 2012). The new concept of developmental citizenship, articulated by contemporary political and psychological experts, promised “a gradual extension of various citizenship rights to individuals” as they “grew into adulthood and full civic recognition,” moving through potentially destructive youthful phases into a

mature heterosexuality (Romesburg, 2008, pp. 417-418). This model pathologized previously accepted homosocial and “homoromantic” periods during young men’s boyhoods, linking newly normative pressures to display heterosexual desire to the emerging developmental categories of “adolescent” and “teenager” (Dennis, 2007, p. 82). Developmental citizenship presumed a “natural, normal, and progressive trajectory” that would lead young White men who could prove their manliness into a position of stewardship over less worthy subjects, including the eugenically defective, all women, men of color, and less manly White men—“panty-waists,” “mollycoddles,” and “honey-boys” (Dennis, 2007, p. 12). This eugenically derived cultural system for producing “desirable” citizens contained sharply heteronormative requirements for sex and gender, which marked successful adjustment to adulthood, capitalist competition, and the pressures of democratic participation (Romesburg, 2008, pp. 417-418).

The end of WWII, which left Europe and Asia in ruins and America in an emergent position of global dominance, provoked existing apprehensions about the “fitness” of young men who would grow into citizenship in a nation enjoying a new, unparalleled status as a democratic capitalist superpower. Concerns about proper sexuality and manliness were also intensified by the political and social changes prompted by the Civil Rights movement: for the first time since Reconstruction, racial restrictions protecting White men’s hegemonic position in public space and within the citizenship hierarchy were seriously threatened. The desegregation of the military in 1948 and of public education in 1954 began to erode restrictions on contact between racialized bodies in both homosocial and heterosocial spaces. As the overt language of race began to lose its legitimacy for determining American citizenship, the same eugenicist anxieties about biological purity, “tainted blood,” and moral hygiene that had underpinned segregation and miscegenation law were officially redirected toward the impure and morally threatening figures of the adulterer and the homosexual. Heightened policing of sexual and gendered behavior began to supplant previously blatant modes of racialization as legal obstacles to full American citizenship (Somerville, 2005, pp. 83, 112). These mid-century shifts are evident in the codification of homosexuality as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association, the alteration of immigration policy to remove racial exclusions and add exclusions for homosexuality and adultery, and the homosexual purges of the government and military, all of which occurred during the “Lavender Scare” period of the early 1950s. By midcentury, homosexuality had become so intensely associated with illness—mental, moral, and physical—that an entire alternative disciplinary system had been set up to indefinitely contain “psychopathic” homosexuals in criminal and psychiatric institutions (Creadick, 2010, p. 93).

As popular cultural texts reflecting mainstream American cultural values, post-war American films reflect the growing national obsession with the developmental tracking of White male juveniles out of or away from queer “phases” or “tendencies” that might introduce homosexual or interracial intimacies, therefore delaying or preventing the achievement of ethical adulthood. In doing so, they reflect an increasing national awareness and anxiety about homosexuality as a potential threat to American national identity and power, as well as a subliminal

challenge to fundamental arrangements of sociality, race, and kinship. The cinematic queer sensation scene thus appears as an affective point through which codes of developmental citizenship are deployed, consumed, and reinforced, generating symbolic pathways that justified the institutional sorting of male youth according to quality and ability. The result is a popular cinematic rhetoric in which the emergent citizenship of White, heterosexually conforming male juveniles is supported by a desiring White femininity and prefigured by the spectacular failure of other, less “fit” queer masculinities. This popularly narrativized aesthetic system of “sorting out” young masculinities, with fitness determined by the ability to reject adult homosexual identification and to draw upon supplemental White female heterosexualities, reflects social and institutional processes of developmental citizenship that have supported American nationalism well into the 21st century.

#### AMERICAN POSTWAR MELODRAMA AND THE QUEER SENSATION SCENE

From the postwar period on, American film has functioned as a distinct site for the management of the homosexual body, its problematization of gender and sexuality, and the challenges it poses to both American democracy and nationalism. The Hollywood melodramas of the postwar era established a system of aesthetic negotiation that continues to structure representations of young, homosexual masculinity in American popular culture, providing an exceptional site through which to trace the managerial complex articulated between American democracies and melodramatic aesthetics (between political and emotional modes of knowing) as they seek to order the hierarchy of young male lives. These films work to establish the juvenile queer body as a crucial point of hegemonic management—a place at which the limits of social and political participation in the American nation were being redrawn around the sensational display of homosexual embodiment and identification. The films achieve a distinctive aesthetic, organized around sensational scenes of queer feeling and spoiled identity, that remains extremely significant in reading how homosexuality has been understood over the past half century of American history.

Two of postwar Hollywood’s most important “social problem” melodramas, *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Tea and Sympathy* are films that established the historical precedent for the signification of queer juvenility in American popular culture. Each sought to address the unsettled and contradictory nature of sexuality and masculinity in the 1950s. These “social consciousness pictures” functioned as sites for “the struggle over gender and also for the related struggle over ways of knowing—realistic and melodramatic” (Byars, 1991, p. 112). While in *Rebel* the issue explored is teenage delinquency, in *Tea* it appears to be male effeminacy or “sensitivity”—a foil that stands in for homosexuality, the film’s structuring absence. Although both films work hard to establish these topical issues and to eventually reconcile them with a re-inscription of the heteronormative, nuclear family structure, they both do so through the invocation of homosexual difference and an admission of the existence of queer juvenility. In this way, neither of these films can totally avoid being about homosexuality, even as they each force queer difference out of the text. Each film moves its potentially homosexual lead character through a series of queer “phases” that he must reject in order to re-join the dem-

ocratic community as an adult. Both *Rebel* and *Tea* thus disclose the ways in which heterosexual masculinity must constantly refer to and yet repudiate homosexuality and gender diversity for its own survival. Male juveniles who are targeted as potentially queer must learn to master the complex, modern process of homosexual recognition and repudiation that is bound up in the nationalist model of developmental citizenship: as popular texts, these melodramas consequently illustrated this process for an entire generation of young American men.

Both *Rebel* and *Tea* present queer juvenility as a site of negotiation, through which postwar American society sought to reconcile the gendered, racialized, and sexualized contradictions of this strained time in its national history. Each film subtextually mobilizes homosexuality to provoke a crisis in the democratic fabric of its symbolic community, which is then subsequently resolved through the achievement of ethical, heterosexual adulthood. These resolutions provide the viewer with a feeling of relief that works to reinstall an emotional investment in heteronormative arrangements of sociality, sexuality, and kinship. The films therefore “sentimentalize ethics” and call for sympathy from the audience in their attempt to fabricate a closing, poetic justice (Gledhill, 1991, p. 225) that successfully averts the dangers of their queer tendencies. However, this closure is never capable of fully erasing the narrative incoherence implied by the representation of homosexual feeling. Much like the American nation of this period, these films actively produce modes for the representation and recognition of homosexuality as pedagogic technologies that will serve to validate their claims about the desirability and importance of adult, heterosexual masculinity. Utilized to legitimate the ideal citizenship of White American manhood, the display of queer sensation serves in these films as what Lauren Berlant has called “an ethically incontestable legitimating device for sustaining the hegemonic field” (2002, p. 109). The incontestability of this legitimization rests in the affective force of the sensation scene as it narrativizes the spoiled identity—the failure to rise to the requirements of modern democracy—that coheres in the figure of the queer juvenile.

The Hollywood melodramas of the postwar era are the first mainstream American cultural texts to display what can be described as a “queer sensation scene.” The sensation scene is a melodramatic convention with origins in the dramatic theater, in which it is used to produce a moment of spectacular thrills that suspends narrative progress and discloses the moral intelligibility of the characters. In the typical melodramatic plot, a sensation scene usually reveals who is innocent and who is not (Williams, 1998, p. 52), generally through externalized, physical devices such as a fight or duel, a race to an endpoint, a fall from a high place, or a process of capture and escape. In other words, through the sensation scene, repressed issues are resolved through physical performances that make the characters’ ethical statuses “immediately legible” (Singer, 2001, p. 46). In the sensation scene, melodrama sets up a distinctive dialectic between moral significance and an excess of bodily expression aimed directly at the production of affect (Gunning, 1994, p. 51). The sensation scene thus exemplifies the manner in which melodrama seeks to achieve moral clarity through physical exaggerations that produce an emotive response, both diegetically and in the audience. In melodrama, the body serves as the site of moral truth—it cannot lie. The sensation scene is therefore a melodramatic process

through which “the body itself must pay stakes of the drama” (Brooks, 1994, p. 19).

Within the queer sensation scene, the queer body is textually seized in order to extract normative meaning from the incoherence that homosexuality exposes in the procedures of heteronormative institutionality and kinship formation. This seizure of the body is represented in both *Rebel* and *Tea* as the experience of being bodily overcome by the power of feeling: the body is contorted, twisted, bowed, and flung as it reproduces for the audience the sensational experience of “feeling queer.” In *Rebel* and *Tea*, the queer sensation scene enacts the legibility of queer difference even as it seeks to deny the potential of that difference and reclaim the ethical imperatives of heteronormative masculinity and democratic nationalism. The queer sensation scene is thus the point through which each melodramatic film text attempts to concurrently create and destroy the potential for queer subjectivity as it serves in the production and defense of nationalist heteronormative ideologies of citizenship. This, then, is how the young homosexual body emerges into representation in American popular culture—as a “wanting one” possessed by useless “compensatory strivings” (Romesburg, 2008, p. 432), fettered by impossible feeling and the silence it demands, yearning to discharge its spoiled identity: an overwrought sign emotively signifying everything but its own viability.

#### READING QUEER SENSATIONS IN *REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE*

*Rebel Without a Cause* opens in a police station where three teenagers have been brought in for illegal and/or suspect behavior: Jim for drunkenness, Judy for walking the street alone after midnight, and Plato for the horrific act of shooting puppies. Jim and Judy suffer from typical suburban teenage angst translated through a distinctly gendered lens: Jim struggles with his father’s effeminacy and inability to stand up to his demanding mother, while Judy’s father punishes her for being too overtly sexual and throws her out of the house. While both of these situations operate as exaggerations of the familial processes of gender itself, Plato’s situation is somewhat more classically tragic—abandonment by both his parents to the oversight of a Black nanny. Thus, while Jim’s and Judy’s situations can ultimately be resolved back into their family structures, Plato’s cannot because he literally has no family to which he can return. The film’s narrative will follow Jim in his search for heterosexual credibility, as he attempts to negotiate the aggressive gangs at his new school while rejecting and finally reforming his impotent father. Throughout the film, Jim and Plato form an affectively tactical duo, as Plato absorbs the attention and protection Jim affords and Jim cares for Plato in ways that his father cannot care for him. While this coupling at first seems to suggest queer possibilities, Jim is increasingly heterosexualized through his romantic interest in Judy, and Plato—whose very nickname implies the phenomena of “Greek love”—is left to bear the burden of queer juvenility alone.

From the very opening, difference attaches to Plato’s body in ways that suggest his eventual incommensurability with the film’s narrative telos. Although his name—John Crawford—carries no racialized tenor, he is darker-skinned than both the other teens, and while they possess clearly White nuclear families, he is the dispossessed ward of a Black woman. Plato is also physically slight and sensitive, as

Jim draping him in a variety of jackets repeatedly reminds us. In the film's world of highly competitive gang-affiliated teenage masculinities, Plato is clearly "less fit" for survival or for eventual citizenship than Jim. These factors, along with Plato's "palpable crush" (Barrios, 2003, p. 236) on Jim and the Alan Ladd photo he keeps pasted in his locker, work to mark Plato as perceivably queer. In popular American melodrama, queerness is consistently articulated as a problem of feeling, of experiencing the wrong affect. Throughout *Rebel*, therefore, Plato displays inappropriate affects that "stand in" for his subtextual sexuality; his possession of a gun, especially, marks him as affectively volatile and as a threat to the coherence of the film's community. His susceptibility, also, to apocalyptic thoughts figures his queerness as the absence of reproductive futurity while conflating queer sexuality with the destructive power of the atom bomb. Unlike Jim and Judy, Plato is an "authentic rebel" (Biskind, 1974, p. 35). It is his waywardness and instability—his very queer juvenility—that the film harnesses to drive itself toward a moral climax that will recuperate the nuclear family structure and its heteronormative gendering.

*Rebel's* queer sensation scene occurs after Jim, Judy, and Plato have absconded to an abandoned mansion, which provides them with a setting that suspends the problems of the outer world. Here, the three of them are free to "play house": Jim and Judy pretend to be a married couple interested in buying the mansion, and Plato gives them a grand tour. With the mansion as their playground, the three form a nuclear family, with Plato filling the role of the queer child. This structure, however, cannot hold under the film's melodramatic pressures. When Plato falls asleep, Jim and Judy choose to pursue romance by wandering off to a secluded wing of the house. As Jim kisses Judy, it becomes clear that he will never kiss Plato; Judy becomes Jim's affective object of choice, and Plato's ejection from the film text begins. Waking up alone, Plato is immediately seized by a terrifying feeling of abandonment. He screams that Jim has "left him alone," pulling out his gun and shooting wildly into the dark. Plato's extreme agitation discloses his queer incongruity with the film's drive to resolve the problem of juvenile delinquency into a representation of naturalized heterofuturity. Indeed, as he pleads "Save me!" Plato seems to extradiagetically understand that he cannot remain in the film's narrative.

Plato will not, however, be "saved"—largely because the film employs his expression of implied homosexuality as a conduit through which to realize its process of moral reconciliation. Running out of the mansion, Plato flees to the planetarium, where earlier he and his classmates had viewed an eschatological demonstration about a supernova destroying the earth. Jim follows and attempts to soothe Plato, but a squadron of police cars has gathered outside, and it is clear that Jim does not possess the authority to control the situation. Plato is "cold," so Jim gives him his jacket, which Plato presses to his mouth in a gesture of mourning. Manipulating Plato's trust in their friendship, Jim surreptitiously removes the bullets from Plato's gun, telling him "friends never lie" and implying that the police will let him go if he surrenders. Jim's deceptive promises, however, cannot calm Plato, who runs out of the planetarium with the empty gun in his hand.

He is instantly and fatally shot, and as his body is arrested by the force of the impact the camera tilts into a severe Dutch angle before righting itself as he falls. The

implication is that the disorder of the film has been corrected, that Plato's death has discharged the gendered conflicts plaguing the community. Jim's parents appear on the scene: Jim's father promises to be a better man, to listen to Jim and try to "understand" him. Jim introduces Judy to his parents, and all of them gather around Plato's body as Jim zips up the jacket, saying, "He was always cold." Here, the death of the queer youth provides a sympathetically instructive opportunity through which the community internalizes ethical messages about what kinds of masculinity are survivable, desirable, and democratically valuable. The last reference to Plato comes from his Black nanny, who stands alone, saying, "The poor baby got nobody, just nobody." Jim's White and heterosexual viability, along with the viability of his family, is therefore procured through a resolution that positions Plato's queer and racialized masculinity as definitively incommensurable with the heteronormative social body. The affective bonds of the nuclear family are thus purchased through the production, support, and sorting out of Plato's less "fit" queer body, which serves as an example of the dangers of homosexual object choice.

As film critic Peter Biskind has noted, despite its reputation as a daring portrayal of teenage rebellion, *Rebel* is actually a "profoundly conservative film" (1974, p. 37). Although it enacts the "presentation of alternatives" that American film melodrama is noted for, it concomitantly restricts the ability to choose anything but Jim's path toward "ethical," democratic, bourgeois, heterosexual masculinity. This is emphasized by Jim's rejection of Plato's affections as well as his denunciation of his father's bumbling impotence and his scorn for the anti-social, violent masculinities of the gang members he is threatened by at school. Despite his potential queerness, Jim's masculinity is modeled as ultimately redeemable: initially labeled a delinquent, he successfully negotiates the tightrope between homosexuality and destructively extreme homosociality, achieving moral adulthood and winning Judy's affections by the end of the film. While his father's manliness is restored through Jim's actions, Plato's queer juvenility is portrayed as psychopathic and beyond repair—beyond the reach of both institutions and the family to address or save. What is most useful about Plato appears to be his death, which gives Jim an opportunity to display moral leadership and to draw the community together around Plato's body in a symbolic representation of heteronormative democracy. The social implications of *Rebel* are clear: the film reflects a postwar culture in which queer youth of color were increasingly viewed as permanently damaged or "fixated," singled out, and subjected to brutal institutionally corrective measures, including imprisonment, sterilization, and castration (Romesburg, 2008, p. 434; Romesburg, 2012). The sensation scene in *Rebel* acts like a narrative hinge, through which the film's audience is instructed to transfer its sympathy from the irredeemable Plato to Jim, who is characterized as capable of heterosexually moving the family unit—and therefore the democratic nation—forward along a straight, White line.

#### QUEER SHAME IN *TEA AND SYMPATHY*

The postwar threat of queer juvenility found even more distinct expression in the 1956 studio melodrama, *Tea and Sympathy*. Set at a private boys' high school, *Tea*

explores the problem of homosexuality in young men without ever explicitly naming it. The film mobilizes queer signification while upholding the necessity of Hayes Code-era homosexual closeting, resulting in a “glorified medicine show” that pandered to the permissive upper-class audiences of the Eisenhower era (Barrios, 2003, p. 241). The narrative focuses on a student, Tom Lee, who is insufficiently masculine for the school’s homosocial setting. Tormented and persecuted by his schoolmates, who call him “sister boy,” Tom seeks solace in the sympathy of the headmaster’s wife, Laura Reynolds. Despite the injunctions of her emotionally distant and hypermasculine husband, Laura takes it upon herself to save Tom from his agony by giving him the emotional tenderness he craves and, eventually, sleeping with him. Thus, while the first half of *Tea* pushes toward an emotional climax manufactured through the subtextual possibility of Tom’s queerness, the second half of the film devotes itself to the erasure of that possibility by overwriting queer “tendencies” with heterosexual affects. In doing so, *Tea* displays what Eve Sedgwick (1990) has called “the spectacle of the homosexual closet” (p. 3) through the generation, display, and reinforcement of the “structured silence” (Gerstner, 1997, p. 14) it performs around homosexuality.

By implying that only those who have been wrongly accused of homosexuality deserve compassion, *Tea* exposes the disciplinary nature of its sympathetic identification: Laura’s sympathy for Tom, it turns out, is just as heteronormative as the male students’ ridicule. *Tea* therefore supports the contemporary postwar idea that adults had a responsibility to successfully lead young men through temporary homosexual phases and into full, adult heterosexuality. Typically, this would be the responsibility of married, heterosexual men who were deemed appropriate role models and who often worked as teachers, sports coaches, youth leaders, church officials, or counselors. However, *Tea* differs from the common wisdom of the period in its portrayal of a woman sacrificing her virtue by violating the rules of marriage and the generational sex taboo in an effort to save Tom from an unspeakable fate. *Tea* implies a role for White, heterosexual women in the supplementation and emotional support of male heterosexuality in its developmental stages: it suggests that in cases where homosocial institutionality, adult male leadership, or aggressive sporting activities were not effective, feminine sympathies and sexual access to women may have been successful in pushing young men through and out of a potentially dangerous homosexual phase. Of course, there is only a capacity for tragedy in and around the figure of the possibly homosexual juvenile to the extent that he represents a potential future—through marriage and the reproduction of desirable citizens—that might be lost. His Whiteness therefore figures as a critical factor in Laura’s attempt to rescue Tom’s sexuality, which might then be turned to the purpose of nation-building. *Tea* emphasizes this important point as it opens, depicting Tom as he reminisces about his time at the school, clearly wearing a wedding ring. As the film progresses, the memory of seeing the ring on his finger operates as an assurance to the audience that Tom will eventually move away from his problematically gendered “tendencies” and into manhood.

Throughout *Tea*, Tom’s effeminacy serves as a vehicle through which the homosocial community of the school polices its gendered and sexual borders. Only Laura, who is permitted to be feminine and to express tender feelings, can see the

violence of the school's imposed gender normativity, which is brutal and permits no flexibility. Laura serves as a managerial point of sympathetic contact through which the audience experiences Tom's suffering and reads the constraining effects of traditional American manhood. Laura and Tom are brought together because they are both victims of the same rigidly gendered world—Tom because he is feminine and Laura because her domineering husband, Bill, is withdrawn and sexually unavailable. The film implies that, while Laura and Bill are no longer in love because they do not touch physically, Laura and Tom may share love because they "touch" one another emotionally. Feeling is therefore posited as a solution for the inelasticity of human experience demanded by traditional masculinity. This critique, however, is made possible chiefly through the imputation of Tom's potential homosexuality, which Laura must sympathetically expunge by providing him with a rite of sexual initiation. While *Tea* therefore seeks to problematize the requirements of heterosexual masculinity, implying that the process of juvenile heterosexualization would be more successful if it was less draconian, it can only accomplish this argument for the expansion of masculinity through the subtextual invocation of queer difference. This invocation, however, cannot be allowed to persist, so that the film must release and yet simultaneously deny the queer difference to which it appeals for its moral logic. Much like *Rebel* before it, *Tea* performs this process through a queer sensation scene.

*Tea's* queer sensation scene occurs halfway through the narrative, serving as a dramatic fulcrum between the first and second acts of the film. At this point, Tom has been driven to desperation by the derision of the other students, and has decided that he must prove their accusations wrong by sleeping with the town prostitute, Ellie Martin. In positing this sexual act as a potential solution for Tom's "problem," the film reveals its intensifying conflation of effeminacy and homosexuality, which reflects common attitudes linking homosexuality to gender failure and then to the failure of marriage, reproduction, community, and finally the state, in a symbolically causal chain. Tom is hopeful that he can prove his manhood by successfully having sex with Ellie, who he has been told is a gossip and will spread news of the act all over town, thereby saving his reputation. Due to Tom's sensitivity and romantic nature, however, it is obvious that sleeping with Ellie will be an act not of affirmation, but of grave self-negation. Poor unwitting Tom does not expect that, ironically, the gossip about him being "funny" has already reached Ellie. Making light of Tom's inexperience, Ellie tells him that his hands are as "soft as a girl's." What is it, she wonders, that the other students call Tom? "Oh, that's right," she squeals in a fit of terrible laughter, "Sister boy!" Here, the problem of Tom's gender failure is pushed to a point of narrative crisis: his masculinity is so seriously at risk that even a prostitute, who is traditionally coded as totally dependent upon and therefore submissive to men, is called upon to bully him. The very tool Tom imagines will redeem him, Ellie's sexuality, becomes another vehicle for shame.

This moment of utter failure at the requirements for heterosexual masculinity precipitates *Tea's* queer sensation scene, through which Tom will be forced to feel "as if" he was homosexual. The effect of Ellie's insult upon Tom is physically instantaneous, as the process of presumed heterosexual initiation is immediately

transformed into a moment of sensational queer interpellation. The implicit accusation of homosexuality is literalized upon Tom's body, as his inability to fulfill the heterosexual contract subjects him to the wrenching imposition of homophobic disgust and self-loathing. The pathos invoked by Tom's gender failure depends upon the audience's sympathetic identification with this recognizably "queer" experience of shame. As Judith Halberstam notes, "The shame experienced by white gay men in childhood has to do with exposing their femininity and dramatizing their failure to access the privilege that has been symbolically reserved for them" (2005a, p. 226). This is precisely the role that shame plays in *Tea's* disciplinary emotional aesthetics. Falling to his knees, Tom cowers as if struck, tearing his hair and screaming, then snatching a knife from a drawer and hurling himself down the stairs. Later, when Laura learns of Tom's suicidal episode, it becomes clear that she will sleep with Tom out of sympathy for his suffering at this moment of imposed homosexual identification—a moment the film equates with death. Laura's "gift" to Tom is therefore the gift of life, of a heterosexual sympathy that will rescue him from the fate of the gender failure and spoiled identity that is homosexuality. The film subsequently establishes Tom's heterosexuality through an expansion of masculine identification that rests upon the emotional and sexual labor of adult, female heterosexuality as it is bent to the task of redeeming the potentially queer juvenile. The film's final implication is that pathways into adult masculinity should be ethically broadened precisely because nobody who is capable of heterosexuality should be made to feel like Tom was—that is, to feel queer.

On its face, *Tea and Sympathy* may appear progressive in its appeal for understanding and compassion for those young (White) men who could not automatically meet the rigid requirements of normative postwar American manhood. However, a closer examination reveals how *Tea* calls upon forms of supplemental gendered and sexualized labor—notably that of women—to accentuate potentially queer juvenile masculinities and move them in the direction of procreative heterosexual maturity. While *Tea* represents this labor as freely given by Laura, who loves Tom, it is clear that the film cannot allow Tom to simply fail at masculinity, to simply be queer. The film reveals a postwar American culture deeply committed to pretending that a social body so obviously saturated by compulsory heterosexuality nonetheless "naturally" produced heterosexual men—if not through socialization or institutionalization, then finally through the sympathy of good, White women. These efforts to redeem and rescue the queer juvenile, however, were and are highly dependent upon his symbolic and material value to the American nation as a potential husband, father, entrepreneur, and democratic steward. Race and class played and continue to play an immense role in the energies spent attempting to reform wayward or delinquent potentially queer youth. For every Tom Lee "saved" from the horrors of a life of shame and degradation, one can imagine a host of Platons, "wanting ones" who were and still are deemed unfit for full social and political citizenship, consigned to the halls of asylums, the beds of hospital wards, the cells of prisons (D'Emilio, 1998, p. 18).

CONCLUSION:  
QUEER SENSATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CINEMA

Although it first appears in the Hollywood melodramas of the postwar era, the queer sensation scene has been inherited into subsequent popular films, and continues to function as an important aesthetic device for the representational sorting of young, male American lives along a value hierarchy. Recent mainstream American films draw upon the historical precedent of the queer sensation scene in order to sensationalize their depictions of queer juvenility as a form of social crisis. While “progressive” instances of this sensationalization are today often used to champion the innocence of the victimized homosexual body, clear commitments to the value of Whiteness, desexualization, bourgeois class and kinship formations, and normative masculinity remain firmly embedded in popular American images of queer youth. Bodies capable of conforming to these requirements are routinely represented as deserving of additional measures of social and democratic inclusion, yet this is consistently at the expense of other, inferior masculinities that are coded as less valuable, more suspect, and desirable only in their dramatic illustration of spoiled identity and gender failure. These unfit masculinities are utilized to elucidate and police the invisible line that in American culture is drawn and re-drawn around the borders of the socially and politically enfranchised male citizen. These more recent examples of the queer sensation scene suggest that, far from radically expanding the requirements for masculine “fitness” and democratic stewardship, American society has instead made room for the development of one form of homonationalist citizen at the expense of a multitude of “unfit” bodies.

Both *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) are clear examples of how popular American film texts continue to pit marginalized juvenile masculinities against one another in competition for access to restricted amounts of social and economic mobility. In *Boys*, Brandon Teena's transgender masculinity is actually presented as nearer to the developmental heterosexual ideal than the crude, working-poor, racist masculinities of his hillbilly killers. However, while the film champions Teena's chivalrous performance of heterosexual masculinity as more authentic and therefore more valuable, the film can ultimately only perform this critique through the implementation of Brandon's sensationally tragic rape and murder. That is, the value of Brandon's queer masculinity as “more true” than the distinctly unfit masculinities of his killers can only be visualized through a series of queer sensation scenes that lead the innocent Brandon into a spectacularly violent end. The message of films such as *Boys* is that queer masculinities are valuable only in their ability to reveal, through tragic victimization, the hidden corruption of the American class and gender systems. The queer subjects of these films signify as “pockets of intense and naked oppression” that work to “shore up the attraction of democratic rule” and to promise viewers a better democracy, replete with a better experiences of gender, in the imagined future (Halberstam, 2005b, p. 34). Outside of this symbolic role, *Boys* seems to suggest, there is still no place for boys like Brandon in American society.

*Brokeback Mountain* provokes comparisons to *Rebel* through each film's representation of the repressive costs of heterosexual masculinity in two distinctly pre-

Stonewall American decades and locales. In both films, there appears to be no way to grow into a queer adulthood or queer masculinity that is survivable. Instead, both films portray young queer men “growing sideways” (Bond Stockton, 2009, p. 3) into forms of inhibited or hindered masculinity that can only tremble on the edges of the social and its contracts. In its portrayal of the doomed romance between social climber Jack Twist and open country loner Ennis del Mar, *Brokeback* provides an opportunity to observe how American popular film sorts two distinctly classed forms of queer juvenility as each tracks forward into its own stymied form of adulthood. Ennis, who was traumatized as a boy by his father’s tale of participating in a homophobic lynching, appears frozen in a state of permanent juvenility that prevents him from rising to the status of a social or political subject. Paralyzed with shame and fear, he refuses to identify as homosexual and largely represses his desire for Jack, rebuffing Jack’s attempts to establish a committed relationship. Ironically, Ennis survives, while the more openly queer and optimistic Jack dies tragically—possibly at the hands of queer bashers. Although the film traffics in the dramatic consequences of Jack’s false marriage and barely contained passion for Ennis, it is the tragedy of Ennis’ frustrated and inarticulate juvenile masculinity that becomes the film’s most poignant critique of American gender norms. It is Ennis who is given a queer sensation scene, which melodramatically communicates the paradoxical crisis of his queer feeling: if he hopes to retain his hard-won sense of working-class manhood, he cannot admit his desire for Jack; yet repression of this desire has itself robbed him of any chance for a lived autonomy. In this sense, *Brokeback* movingly represents the invisible price asked of young men by the nation and its institutions as it requires them to “move through” homosexual phases, or to “grow up” into heterosexuality, in order to increase their chances for survival or success.

Throughout the last century, young American men have been required to choose their sexualities, to choose correctly, and to police the choices of others, all the while pretending that this has been no choice at all. *Brokeback* represents an evolution in American social consciousness films about this system of sexualization and gendering: it implies that the real tragedy of American masculinity is not the untimely death of the lynched homosexual, but the lifetime of repressed emotion and stifled desire that ideological masculinity requires along with its conditional gifts of social and political dominance. In other words, *Brokeback* shifts the tragic register of the queer sensation scene toward a critique of naturalized, heterosexual White masculinity. However, this message continues to require the instructive death of the queer subject to make the stakes of its drama clear. The underlying message of *Brokeback* is therefore not so different from that of *Rebel*: appearing exactly 50 years apart in American history, each film implements the queer sensation scene as an aesthetic methodology for sorting young, male lives as they are measured against the American standards for ideal citizenship. While *Brokeback* appears to point progressively toward the essential experience of loss buried in social processes of normative gendering, it can only indicate this otherwise invisible tragedy through the pedagogy of sensational homophobic violence as it is directed at “unfit” bodies. That this use of the sensation scene continues to constitute such a persistent feature of popular American films about queer difference should leave us questioning how

far the nation has moved from its initial responses to the postwar crisis of queer juvenility. Contrary to prevailing narratives championing the nation's recent progress toward recognizing formal legal equality for gay and lesbian citizens, the films discussed here force a reconsideration of how pathways into political and social recognition are opened for some lives, still at the expense of others.

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