What Are You Crying For?: Renegotiating White Masculine Hegemony through Melodramatic Excess in the 1990s Films of Tom Hanks

Bryce Thompson

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/film_studies_theses

Part of the Film and Media Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Dissertations and Theses at Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Film Studies (MA) Theses by an authorized administrator of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact laughtin@chapman.edu.
What Are You Crying For?: Renegotiating White Masculine Hegemony through Melodramatic Excess in the 1990s Films of Tom Hanks

A Thesis by
Bryce E. Thompson

Chapman University
Orange, CA
Dodge College of Film and Media Arts
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Film Studies
May 2023

Committee in charge:
Kelli Fuery, Ph.D., Chair
Nam Lee, Ph.D.
Leah Aldridge, Ph.D.
The thesis of Bryce E. Thompson is approved.

Kelli Fuery, Ph.D., Chair

Nam Lee, Ph.D.

Leah Aldridge, Ph.D.

April 2023
What Are You Crying For?: Renegotiating White Masculine Hegemony through Melodramatic Excess in the 1990s Films of Tom Hanks

Copyright © 2023

by Bryce E. Thompson
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I can never fully express my gratitude and joy for my family, my friends, my partner, and my teachers. I carry a debt to all of them always. Thank you. I dedicate this work in loving memory of my Papa, Jim Ketchu. He was a good and decent a man, who loved me with his whole heart and who I will miss every day. I love you Papa.
ABSTRACT

What Are You Crying For?: Renegotiating White Masculine Hegemony through Melodramatic Excess in the 1990s Films of Tom Hanks

by Bryce E. Thompson

This thesis studies the emergence of a renegotiated masculinity in the 1990s predicated on the expression and containment of anxieties around White masculinity and an appropriation of the melodramatic mode. By establishing a historical and theoretical foundation from which to understand and analyze this unique cultural moment, this thesis demonstrates how such a renegotiation acted in tandem with a larger reactionary project. This foundation includes a critical review of the “crisis of masculinity” of the 1990s defined in Sally Robinson’s (2000) work; an engagement with the nature, reproduction, and self-preservation of hegemony, as explored through traditional theorists like Raymond Williams (1977) along with its context in R.W. Connell’s (2005) revised theories of masculinity; and finally the melodramatic mode, performance, and excess through the works of Thomas Elsaesser (1972), Steven Neale (1986), and Linda Williams (2001).

Acting as both exemplar and cipher for this movement, rising star of the 1990s, Tom Hanks and his films, illustrate this cultural reading and demonstrate how his performance of apparently sensitive and managed masculinity ultimately reinscribes traditional paradigms of gender and power. Specifically, this thesis focuses on his performance of emotional excess and tears within a selection of works from the decade and argues that they act as a critical means of understanding the underlying preoccupations and motivations of the films, which may be clarified by
interrogating for what and/or whom he is actually crying for. That is to say, this thesis demonstrates how patriarchal dominance is packaged in melodramatic tears. From this perspective, this thesis acts as a case study in how the reactionary movement within masculinity in the 1990s sought to undergird White masculine hegemony in the West during a time of perceived crisis by co-opting and appropriating non-hegemonic discourses.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Crisis of Masculinity</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Masculinity in the U.S. in the 1990s</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Masculinity and Hegemony</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Tom Hanks’ Renegotiated Masculinity of the 1990s</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 The Melodramatic Mode, Excess, Performance and Appropriation</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 THE PROXIMATE OTHER</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Philadelphia (1993) and the Abstracted Other</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 The Green Mile (1999) and the Vicarious Other</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 RE-NARRATIVIZING THE PAST</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Forrest Gump (1994) and the Appropriated Past</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Saving Private Ryan (1998) and the Nostalgic Past</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 TERRITORIALIZING APPROPRIATED DISCOURSE</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Sleepless in Seattle (1993), You’ve Got Mail (1998), A League of</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Their Own (1992), and Rejecting Feminine Tears</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 CONCLUSION</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTES</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This thesis studies the emergence of a renegotiated masculinity in the 1990s predicated on the expression and containment of anxieties around White masculinity and an appropriation of the melodramatic mode. By establishing a historical and theoretical foundation from which to understand and analyze this unique cultural moment, this thesis demonstrates how such a renegotiation acted in tandem with a larger reactionary project. This foundation includes a critical review of the “crisis of masculinity” of the 1990s defined in Sally Robinson’s (2000) work; an engagement with the nature, reproduction, and self-preservation of hegemony, as explored through traditional theorists like Raymond Williams (1977) along with its context in R.W. Connell’s (2005) revised theories of masculinity; and finally the melodramatic mode, performance, and excess through the works of Thomas Elsaesser (1972), Steven Neale (1986), and Linda Williams (2001).

Acting as both exemplar and cipher for this movement, rising star of the 1990s, Tom Hanks and his films, illustrate this cultural reading and demonstrate how his performance of apparently sensitive and managed masculinity ultimately reinscribes traditional paradigms of gender and power. Specifically, this thesis focuses on his performance of emotional excess and tears within a selection of works from the decade and argues that they act as a critical means of understanding the underlying preoccupations and motivations of the films, which may be clarified by interrogating for what and/or whom he is actually crying for. That is to say, this thesis demonstrates how patriarchal dominance is packaged in melodramatic tears. From this perspective, this thesis acts as a case study in how the reactionary movement within masculinity
in the 1990s sought to undergird White masculine hegemony in the West during a time of perceived crisis by co-opting and appropriating non-hegemonic discourses.

To elucidate these points and demonstrate the scope and overarching design of the reactionary project signified by this particular performance of masculinity, Hanks’ oeuvre of the 90s is considered through this thesis in three distinct, yet interconnected, sections. The first portion examines how melodramatic excess is captured within proximity to marginalized groups and counter-hegemonic discourses to appropriate claims of victimization and recenter the White, masculine, and – broadly – heteronormative experience through the films *Philadelphia* (1993) and *The Green Mile* (1999). This section outlines how this process changes when suffering and marginalization are and are not inscribed on Hanks’ body, emphasizing the vicarious use of Hanks’ body and Hanks’ vicarious use of others’ bodies to accomplish similar ends. The subsequent sections investigate how the primary generic modes of Hanks’ films in this decade created unique paradigms for melodrama and masculinity that assisted in the overall reactionary project. The first of these examine how melodramatic excess is utilized in the history film to re-narrativize and re-vision the past in a hyperreal prosthetic memory that revels in unassailed White masculine dominance and lays a foundation for the renegotiated version of masculinity proposed as the “new man” of the 1990s with *Forrest Gump* (1994), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), and a brief discussion of *Apollo 13* (1995). The last section demonstrates how the boundaries of these affective and appropriated discourses are policed, so that emotional appeals emanating from othered, or marginalized bodies, are rejected or otherwise compartmentalized in the romantic comedy genre, a traditionally validating space of feminine pathos and melodrama, with *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), *You’ve Got Mail* (1998), and *A League of Their Own* (1992).
This thesis aims to better understand the renegotiation and reaffirmation of hegemonic power, as facilitated by cycles of crisis. Masculinity was never under threat, but a deliberate paranoia produced an anxiety, that facilitated a reaction, which ensured the preservation of White masculine hegemonic power. This was accomplished through an appropriation and containment of threatening counter-discourses that initiated this very same anxiety. Melodrama is not only one of the counter-discourses assumed and co-opted in this moment of crisis, but also makes legible the reactionary project these films, and Hanks, are operating within. Hanks’ work in this era – and more specifically his tears – become a useful vehicle by which to study and engage the renegotiation of White masculine hegemony in a time of paranoid crisis to better understand both the process of appropriation undertaken and its overall affects to achieve these reactionary ends.
2 Historical and Theoretical Context

2.1 Crisis of Masculinity

To understand the ramifications of this renegotiation within hegemonic power, it is critical first to understand the cultural context. The renegotiated masculinity performed by Hanks is predicated on a perceived “crisis of masculinity” within the West in the 1990s: specifically a crisis of White masculinity.\(^1\) The concept describes the disaffection of White men in the modern world and was seen by early critics as symptomatic of Western society’s “feminization,” or otherwise an abandonment or rejection of masculinity and men.\(^2\) Importantly, the term and perception that this disaffection was in some way caused by a compromise within masculinity was codified at a time in which traditional hierarchies, and patriarchal structures specifically, were contested in Western counter-cultural movements during the 60s and 70s. Like these nascent challenges to entrenched power, academic theories around masculinity during this time matured into the mainstream priorities, culture wars, and policies of the U.S. in the 1990s.\(^3\)

For example, discussions around sexual liberation and advocacy for women’s rights became national policy through the passing of the Violence Against Women Act of 1994, queer rights in the wake of the AIDS epidemic became a major issue, and reckonings with entrenched systemic racism in the wake of the Rodney King uprisings became decisive in shaping policy. This is not to say that any substantial progress was achieved on these issues during this time, and in fact regression was common, as evinced by the passing of the Violent Crime and Law Enforcement Act 1994 in the U.S., which built modern policing and mass-incarceration that targets Black, Brown, poor, and otherwise marginalized communities. Regardless of the actual progress made
on these fronts, these debates pervaded U.S. public life in a manner that brought the issue of identity to the forefront of mainstream discourse.

Unlike these other discourses, however, the proposition of a crisis of masculinity reinscribed traditional power structures instead of displacing or diversifying them, suggesting that the crisis of masculinity of the 1990s in the U.S. was a reaction to these counter-discourses. As such, initial theories of a crisis within masculinity were eventually challenged in the 1980s and 90s by scholars like Joseph Pleck (1981), Peter Gabriel Filene (1986), Michael Kimmel (1987), and Maurizia Boscagli (1992) who demonstrated how counter-discourses, by their very nature, pose a challenge to conceptions of a unified and perpetual White masculine hegemony and distinguished these conceptions from the reality of a multicultural, multiracial, multi-gendered, multi-sexual, multi-masculine society. These revisions clarified how counter-hegemonic discourses posed a threat to the masculine economy of meaning making and power, not masculinity itself. The crisis, as it were, was actually a paranoid reaction to the potential loss of a unified, natural, and cultural default White masculine identity.

2.2 Masculinity in the U.S. in the 1990s

By the 1990s, as discussions of a crisis of masculinity resurfaced in mainstream discourse, there was an ideological split amongst those like Robert Bly (1990), who advocated the reality of a crisis caused by compromises within masculinity, to those like Boscagli, who argued that belief in a crisis was a far greater and revealing issue. A later theorist, Sally Robinson, notes in her exegesis of masculinity from the 70s through the 80s, the “crisis” experienced within masculinity during this period was the loss of anonymity of the White masculine identity, which was now qualified within the matrices of race, gender, and sexuality. That is to say, while the assumed
societal default had always been that of the White masculine perspective, dislocating counter-discourses demonstrated the arbitrary and artificial nature of this structure and identities generally. While there may have been a presupposition of a unified, perpetual, and innate masculine identity, feminist, multicultural, and queer discourses documented the constructed nature of identities and the multifaceted manner of their presentation. A straight White male was now understood within the marked identity of being straight, White, and male: one combination amongst nearly infinite. Robinson argues that while these counter-cultural social movements did not unseat White masculine hegemony, and may have actually posed no material threat, the anxiety induced by these dislocating discourses led to a victim mentality, which in turn produced a masochistic obsession with the suffering masculine body in order to relocate victim status – a point that will be discussed later in relation to the melodramatic mode and excess.⁵

Brenton Malin, in his work *American Masculinity under Clinton*, studies representations of masculinity and its claims of victimization through cultural products and embodiment in presidential politics of the U.S. in the 1990s. He, like Robinson, argues that crises of masculinity are more useful as a means to understand how masculinity claims victim status by expressing and defending itself from a perceived enemy, rather than actually demonstrating material historical threats to masculine hegemony.⁶ “Masculinity in crisis,” is thus tautological and performative discourse whose material basis in reality is broadly irrelevant given the resounding paranoid responses with which it uses the idea of a crisis as a *raison d’être*. It is these responses that are truly at issue, for they demonstrate how power and masculinity are renegotiated.

This sense of perpetual crisis within masculinity leads Malin to advise caution when considering the novelty of the sensitive “new man” of the 90s, and instead claims that this is simply the latest
 renegotiation of masculine identity borne and informed by its perceived threats. That said, Malin goes on to argue that in the United States in the 1990s the “cumulative meanings of manhood presented at a given time amount to a particular masculine zeitgeist or ‘structure of feeling.’”\textsuperscript{7} To this end, Malin states that the 1990s incarnations of masculinity indicates a conflicted masculinity that must contend with its “tough guy” predecessors and the counter-discourses of the contemporary moment, creating a hyper-/hypo-sensitive masculine representation, which this thesis studies through Hanks as a star text.\textsuperscript{8} Critically, then, Malin identifies a renegotiation of masculinity in popular culture within the U.S. at this time that is informed by a perceived crisis of masculinity, predicated on dislocating counter-discourses and claims of victimization, that resulted in a conflicted masculinity that is at issue in this thesis.\textsuperscript{9}

2.3 Masculinity and Hegemony

The restructuring of masculinity identified by Malin et al. implicates the hegemonic position of masculinity within the culture of the U.S. and raises issues over hegemony’s ability to constantly redefine itself yet retain power. Hegemony, a concept brought to the fore by Italian Marxist and theorist Antonio Gramsci, is the dominance and enforcement of a ruling class’ ideologies and mores over those of the rest of a culture. This concept identifies both the importance of the ideological and political superstructures for the retention of power, as well as the highly constructed nature of the status quo, or “common sense.” Importantly, the exertion of hegemonic coercion is not emanating from a single place, however, and is made up by the diffuse factions of the historical bloc that invests in the prevailing societal structures to reproduce and maintain its own power. These points were qualified by later theorists, like Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams in the development of cultural studies, to demonstrate the amorphous, constantly in flux, and existence of hegemony beyond “mere opinion or mere manipulation.”\textsuperscript{10} As Williams
phrases it, hegemony is continually “renewed, recreated, defended and modified... [but] also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not all its own.”\textsuperscript{11} Hegemony is a process, never settled, and which both integrates and creates oppositional lines of thinking and being.

To better understand these issues and how this thesis expands the understanding of hegemony’s malleability, it is worth examining how hegemony operates within masculinity itself, which may in turn help rationalize masculinity’s place within culture. While this thesis demonstrates the persistent power of masculine hegemony, it can only be understood through an engagement and understanding of the construction of hegemonic masculinities. R.W. Connell’s work – and subsequent revisions – on hegemonic masculinity posit, “At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others can be defined as the culturally exalted. Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.”\textsuperscript{12} Hegemonic masculinity, like hegemony itself, is never settled and reinvests and reinvests itself constantly to retain power.

Later, through an engagement with revisited theory and critiques, Connell qualifies his work to argue that “hegemonic masculine patterns may change by incorporating elements from the [subordinate masculinities]... our understanding of hegemonic masculinity needs to incorporate a more holistic understanding of gender hierarchy, recognizing the agency of subordinated groups as much as the power of dominant groups and the mutual conditioning of gender dynamics and other social dynamics.”\textsuperscript{13} Importantly, then, non-hegemonic masculinities still
operate to maintain masculine hegemony, and may in time be further incorporated into this
structure – as will be seen with the specific form of masculinity embodied by Hanks in his roles.

Power, as Michel Foucault (1976) demonstrates, is diffuse and productive. As such, hegemonic
power, when diversified, does not necessarily undermine the traditional structures or cultural
sources from which it originates, and thus it is worth considering the sensitive, emotional, and
progressive “new man” of the 1990s within a broader masculine project of power rather than a
self-effacing alternative to traditional hegemonic masculinities.¹⁴

Within this context, this crisis of masculinity and the rise in conflicted, effeminate, or non-
traditional forms of masculinity may be seen as a consolidation of hegemonic power and
hegemonic masculinity, rather than a compromise of it. As Tania Modleski points out, beyond
the reality or the paranoia of masculinity in crisis, ultimately this cultural reaction must be seen
as a cyclical process that is utilized to redefine and reaffirm hegemonic power: “however much
male subjectivity may currently be ‘in crisis,’ as certain optimistic feminists are now declaring,
we need to consider the extent to which male power is actually consolidated through cycles of
crisis and resolution, whereby men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by
incorporating it.”¹⁵ The rise of renegotiated representations of masculinity – divergent from
conceptions of a stable, unified, and distinctly non-effeminate hegemonic masculinity –
icorporated and contained threats to traditional White masculine power structures by
appropriating counter-hegemonic discourses and modes of performativity that might otherwise
have posed a material challenge to White masculine hegemony. Within the context of this thesis,
renegotiations of masculinity represented through Hanks and his mainstream Hollywood texts
are not only informed by, and incorporative of, anxieties within masculinity in this time, but also
sought to redefine hegemony in a reactionary manner that continued to serve masculine power rather than undermine it.

2.4 **Tom Hanks’ Renegotiated Masculinity of the 1990s**

While the manner and means of this renegotiation by Hanks is studied later, it is critical to first understand his bona fides as a representative of this redefined masculinity in the popular culture of the U.S. in the 1990s. A key factor in the selection of Hanks for this thesis was his critical and populist success in the 90s, during which he became one of the highest grossing domestic actors of the decade and gained four Oscars nominations for leading roles and won two of them.  

As Richard Dyer argues in his examination of the stardom and charisma, stars are often recognized within their respective times because the contain and stabilize a central tension, contradiction, ambiguity, or instability within a culture through their persona. As such, Hanks’ star text will be treated within this study as convenient vehicle for studying this cultural renegotiation in material terms: a representative symbol rather than a distinct ideological actor. This is not meant to deprive Hanks of agency or culpability, only to acknowledge that what he represents within the culture – demonstrated through the critical and populist success of his work – far supersedes any individual choices.

What Hanks represented, specifically, during this period is a renegotiated masculinity that came to define the era in U.S. popular culture. Joy Van Fuqua describes this form of masculinity represented by Hanks as the “feeling man” of the 1990s: one that engages and embodies the counter-dominant discourses that are traditionally viewed as effeminate or subversive, and which typically challenge conceptions of dominant masculinity. Hanks thus became a symbol of a sentimental, charming, and non-threatening presence that was identified in opposition to
traditional masculine characteristics and in-line with effeminate modes of being. Writing for 
*Ladies’ Home Journal,* in an article entitled “Why we love Tom Hanks,” feminist film critic 
Molly Haskell argues that it is the soft and humble nature of Hanks, his emulation and ability to 
work well with children, as well as his divergence from the “he-mannishness” of other leading 
men – like Brad Pitt and Mel Gibson – that specifically endears him to female audiences.19 This 
article is by no means exceptional, and instead demonstrates a consistent, constant, and 
unreflective casting of Hanks as the normal, every-, sensitive, soft, nice, boyish, and charming-
man of the 1990s – even amongst cultural critics, largely due to his ability to incorporate effeminate modes of performance.

Hanks is not the only actor whose characters demonstrate this conception of the “new man” of 
the 1990s. As Malin notes in his analysis, many actors who had previously established their he-
man bona fides in the 80s pivoted to more “sensitive” roles in the 90s: including Arnold 
Schwarzenegger in *Kindergarten Cop* (1990), *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991), and *Junior* 
(1994); Bruce Willis in *The Kid* (2000), *The Story of Us* (1999), and *The Sixth Sense* (1999); and 
Mel Gibson in *Hamlet* (1990), *Forever Young* (1992), and *What Women Want* (2000). Clearly, 
then, there was industrial advantage and desire for these roles to address and reinterpret the crisis 
within masculinity. The swell of these roles of reinterpreted masculinity both demonstrate new 
narrative possibilities and institutional appropriations that reflect hegemonic renegotiations.

Hanks, unlike the other actors that slotted into these roles, created his star text within this cultural 
moment rather than grafting or reinterpreting it into this new sensitive presentation of 
masculinity, thereby helping to define the new performance of masculinity instead of being 
defined by it. *Big* (1988), Hanks’ first Oscar nomination and critical success, quite literally
initiates him within a star text irrevocably tied to a state of arrested development that preempts the aggressive, muscular, or sexually dangerous masculinities represented in other leading men. The soft, or otherwise safe, masculine presence of Hanks allowed him to fulfill the role of the “everyman,” and act as a proxy for the renegotiated masculinity at the center of this thesis. While Hanks had been active prior to the 90s, filling primarily comedic television and film roles, his popular and critical success at this particular moment, during a time in which there was a perceived crisis in masculinity and with his specific embodiment and performance of masculinity, suggests that his work in this decade should be regarded as unique and illustrative of a culture renegotiating its perceptions around these issues. Hanks is thus an embodiment and a primary progenitor of the renegotiated masculinity that would come to define this decade and signify the perceived crisis within masculinity.

The conception of Hanks as a larger symbol, an “everyman” figure, is key to understanding how he can contain and express concerns around masculinity by engaging with diverse peoples, discourses, and situations while ultimately reasserting traditional power structures and masculinities. Nicola Rehling, in *Extra-Ordinary Men: White Heterosexual Masculinity in Contemporary Popular Cinema*, argues that while White heteronormative masculinity continues to hold hegemonic dominance in culture as what might be considered “ordinary” or “default,” this state further produces anxieties within dominant power. The matrices of identities described earlier by Robinson have still left this dominant position of *straight White male* as such, and thus it must contend with its own sterile, ordinary, boring position; that is to say, if it is meant to stand in for the universal, what actually distinguishes it? Rehling argues this process of centering the
straight White male identity within contemporary films ultimately serves for a redemptive or transcendent arc. To this point, Rehling notes,

The marking of the universal identity, primarily through the identity critiques that have dominated the political arena in the U.S. in the last four decades, has produced a host of anxieties, as well as desires, that are played out in popular films… while white heterosexual masculinity continues to be the dominant identity in terms of economic, social, political, and representational strength, its very ordinariness means that it is also haunted by the anxiety that it is a vacuous identity… Anxiety concerning the potential sterility and emptiness of White heterosexual masculinity has, I argue, been compounded by the celebration of difference and the investment in minority identity that attends postmodernism and identity politics.20

The everyman must therefore represent and engage with a diversified landscape in order to reclaim and reaffirm their place within the overarching cultural position.

It is worth considering how this anxiety of the everyman is embodied in Hanks’ own star text. For, while Hanks may represent the everyman, the situations his characters find themselves in are often in the extremes or exceptional. These scenarios thus reassert the virility of the White male body and demonstrate the ubiquity that it may have in space or Vietnam, depending on the film’s scenarios. The diversity of experiences and persons that Hanks’ characters interact with create a paradox in which his own persona is diversified and seen as engaging with a variety of peoples and discourses, while the White male body that his characters display is seen as unexceptionally exceptional. The perceived ubiquity of his body and persona thus creates dynamics in which his body may stand in for larger cultural concerns and issues in order to counteract the banality of this hegemonic identity. Hanks’ body becomes a proxy of masculinity, Whiteness, and even nation throughout his works in a manner that ultimately serves to uphold these conditions during a time of perceived crisis, despite the diversity of experiences and peoples that engage him throughout these films, and which his characters ostensibly integrate.
In an in-depth reading of Hanks’ star persona, Fred Pfeil meticulously identifies the arcs of Hanks’ career and his principal defining qualities: preeminent of which is the connection that Hanks maintains to boyhood, whether in embodiment or proximity to it. This quality determines his sexual apathy, his charming wonder, and political negligence. Pfeil goes on to say about Hanks that he represents a politically apathetic and complicit form of masculinity:

So, for all those who have come to view the on- and offscreen images of the lower-class white rampager with alarm, here is Hollywood’s alternative: this reinvigorated oedipality devoid of any impulse toward citizenship, this upscale straight man unattunished by desire and devoid of any race or gender ambiguity, this goofy but pointedly unwild boy-man who smoothly negotiates the potentially competing needs to buckle down and do what he’s told and to kick back and do what he likes…. Yet like many an earlier model of white straight masculinity, the innocence of the norm now incarnated by Tom Hanks pays tribute to these activities on which it depends by denying their existence and disavowing any connection whatsoever with them.  

Specifically, when Pfeil refers to the “activities” on which the normative model of masculinity Hanks represents, he is referring to reactionary policies like mass incarceration and a rejection of redistributive economic models. By performing a “multifaceted and intricate masculinity… whose wisdom and strength [is] tempered with fragility,” Hanks was able to negotiate and contain anxieties around central cultural issues – including but not exclusively the crisis of masculinity. Importantly, then, this tempered masculinity, which masqueraded in the rhetoric of counter-discourses and interfaced directly with marginalized groups, was one that nonetheless reasserted and recentered supposedly threatened White, heterosexual, masculine power, along with the societal structures that are a part of its historic bloc. Hanks thus becomes a symbol of a larger renegotiation in culture and masculinity specifically.
2.5 The Melodramatic Mode, Excess, Performance and Appropriation

Hanks’ star persona thus expresses and engages these counter-discourses so that it may contain the anxiety and paranoia of threatened White heteronormative masculinity. One of the defining counter-discourses Hanks appropriates, and through which he accomplishes this reactionary potential, is the melodramatic mode. Melodrama, as a genre or mode, has been traditionally marked by conventions such as Manichean portrayals of good and evil, excess in form and narrative, sentimental appeals by marginalized peoples, and provoking a good cry. Although most often associated with the “women’s film,” melodrama has an established history of study within the “male melodrama,” or “male weepie.” While a form of this genre has been around since the early days if cinema, it coalesced most explicitly in the 1950s and 60s in the post-war environment and in light of changing conceptions of masculinity.\(^{23}\)

Importantly, melodrama does not describe the world as it is but rather presents an argument for how it ought to be. Melodrama creates moral universes that designates and distinguishes good from bad. That is not to say that the scales always balance, or wrongdoers receive their just desserts, only that it will be clear who is right and who is wrong within the logic of the work: “Melodrama is the spectacular way in which popular culture has reassured its consumers that we are good and that those who threaten us are evil. Melodrama is not necessarily a drama of the victory of good over evil but rather the all-important recognition of both.”\(^{24}\) This lends itself to the creation of dichotomies, including that of victims and villains. This point will be discussed later with attention paid to the negative agency that is afforded the victims within melodrama, but significantly, it is the creation of victims within this structure that requires visible suffering to invoke a sympathy predicated on sentimentality.
As Martin Fradley points out in his survey of Hollywood cinema of the 1990s and early 2000s, the aforementioned anxiety around masculinity often manifested in a melodramatic paranoia that sought to visualize the suffering of White men and advocate a retreat into a hypermasculinity, as described by works like *Gladiator* (2000). This retreat into re-masculinization mirrors traditional readings of a crisis of masculinity and further compounds the conceptualization of an unerring, immovable, White masculine presence. It also recalls the masochistic enjoyment and means of sentimental appeal around suffering male bodies that theorists like Robinson, and Susanne Kord and Elisabeth Krimmer (2011) identify as well. It is curious, however, that all of these theorists identify the masochistic suffering of the powerful White masculine body as the primary mode by which this paranoia is addressed, since it operates almost exclusively within the traditional masculine economy that is being challenged.

The fractured and renegotiated masculine identities that were borne of this perceived crisis provide alternative avenues to re-establish and undergird White masculine hegemony by appropriating other bodies and discourses that might fracture or challenge this hegemony. By using the throughline of melodrama, from the hypermasculine displays Fradley identifies, to more tempered versions embodied by Hanks, a larger reactionary project can be identified, and a more nuanced discussion can be had around masculine hegemony and the process of appropriation required to maintain it. This thesis acts as a novel and counterbalancing study of the reassertion of White masculine hegemony during this period by highlighting a non-traditional performances of masculinity by Hanks and demonstrating the means by which it operates.

While Hanks’ appropriation of melodrama may at first appear somewhat amorphous, it is grounded within his embodied performance of emotional excess. Part and parcel with the
sensitized masculinity that Hanks represents is the permission to openly cry and be around others crying. As Modleski points out, true male weepies only seem to present at moments when masculinity is assumed to be in acute crisis.27 Boscagli further develops this notion by specifically situating this renegotiation of masculinity in the context of performance of masculine emotional excess and tears. Since this excess has historically been located in an effeminate economy, as Robyn Warhol identifies in her exegesis on the “good cry,” it has traditionally been an expression of gendered difference.28 The recontextualization of this display of sentimentality, then, demonstrates an appropriation or adaptation of an effeminate mode of expression that may either challenge traditional hierarchies or be co-opted to reinforce them. While Hanks was certainly not the first man to cry on screen, he does represent the anxieties in a particular era coalescing around masculinities.29 That is to say, while Hanks’ interface with the melodramatic mode was not devoid of historical precedent, the explicit and consistent manner with which melodrama and its excess was engaged as a form of appropriation and as a tool of appropriation is exceptional. By engaging with the melodramatic mode in this fashion, Hanks and his star text helped to redefine White masculine hegemony through re-visionsing melodramatic potential and proposing an alternative moral world.

What’s more, both the ability to perform within this modality and the performance itself reveal the internal mechanisms of appropriation undertaken. As such, Hanks provides critical insight into the way this cultural renegotiation occurred and demonstrates the actual embodiment of a hegemonic reorganization through a moment of perceived crisis. One of the most obvious manners in which sentimentality is transformed into sympathy, which will be discussed in detail later, are tears. The moral legibility, crystalized in either the tears of or for the victim, of course must be embodied to be made visible. The precepts and conditions of victim and villains
proposed in the text are mapped onto literal bodies which maintain inherent political and cultural significance. The bodies of the actors and the identities they perform become essential to the moral universe created within melodrama.

The significance of Hanks’ body cannot be divorced from the meaning produced in the films or the moral universe created therein. Further, it dictates how and in what fashion certain appeals may be made. For example, the perception of Hanks as an everyman lends itself to narratives that speak in broad, nonspecific, ideals and concepts like “justice and fairness for all.” This cannot, of course, be divorced from the specificity of his straight, White, masculine body and the intersection of his identity with these general concepts. How he may broach more specific issues, issues that deal explicitly with counter-hegemonic discourses, would seem to necessitate a different body: a body whose specificity challenges prevailing hegemonic structures. To circumvent this issue and to continue this project of expressing and containing perceived threats to this White masculine hegemony, Hanks engages the melodramatic mode and the excess produced therein. Excess is how meaning is created and structured within melodrama, and thus it can redesign the moral universe created within its discourse that supersedes material realities. Hanks’ performance, in both presenting and containing these perceived threats to White masculine hegemony, relies on the inherent excess of the melodramatic mode to reorder the material and moral universe of these films.

Melodramatic excess, then, is the emotional potential and sentimental appeal inherent within the melodramatic mode. It is a potential that, though often aligned directly within the body and intentions of the protagonist, may also be produced and appropriated from tangential sources or abstracted to a broader context. Excess and melodrama are of course inextricably linked and, as
Christine Gledhill points out in her analysis of the history of melodrama and its rise to critical and theoretical interest, it is the excess of these film texts that provides space for counter-dominant readings and subversive potential of conservative texts. The excess intrinsic and produced within this mode, however, is not beholden to one ideological position or even the body that engages it. The adaptable mode of melodrama, however, may invert this situation so that the excessive potential of melodrama may be reinscribed within the film to reaffirm traditional power structures and ideologies rather than subverting them.

To think of it another way, melodramatic excess is the surplus emotional labor produced by marginalized or displaced bodies and which can be capitalized on by dominant, hegemonic, forces. Modleski, in her analysis of Clint Eastwood’s later works within the context of the male weepie, notes that Eastwood’s characters will use the suffering of other peoples as cause to seek justice and make ultimate sacrifices that inevitably supersede and dismiss any potential for organized political action. What Modleski identifies here, and what this thesis expands upon, is the excess of melodramatic potential created within the worlds of these films that is siphoned off from counter-hegemonic bodies to recenter and reassert White masculine hegemony and traditional patriarchal power structures. While at times Hanks actually is the producer of this potential himself, such as his portrayal of a gay man dying of AIDS in Philadelphia, it is consistently framed in a manner that abstracts this embodiment through Hanks’ everyman persona and diffuses it into a broader, or otherwise displaced, issue that still reproduces this excess to be capitalized on by traditional hegemonic powers. Whether Hanks vicariously uses the excess produced by others’ bodies or his own body displaced, it consistently utilizes the subversive potential of melodrama to reaffirm White masculine hegemony.
While Modleski focuses on tears produced by others and eschews an investigation into the meaning behind tears shed by “real men” in the modern male weepie (who she suggests don’t generally cry or only shed a “few hard-wrung tears” anyway), it is this issue that is at precisely the center of this thesis.³² Tears not only help to align sympathy, but also betray underlying concerns and stakes that films invest in its characters. Furthermore, the fairly rare occurrence of male tears on screen suggests a unique investment in the performance of masculine tears and an anomalous situation for Hanks’ consistent and approbative use of them. By understanding the cause of tears and their operation in melodrama, one better understands how the renegotiation of White masculine hegemony utilizes them towards reinforcing hierarchal structures within Hanks’ films. That is to say, while the reason for the excess of Hanks’ tears in these films may at first appear quite obvious within the diegesis, they consistently betray a reinscription of White masculine hegemony regardless of their narrative context.

It is important, then, to consider both what tears within melodrama reveal and what they create. Steven Neale, in his exegesis on melodramatic tears, builds on the work of Italian literary critic Franco Moretti to argue that the elicitation of tears by melodrama is based on the delay of the coincidence of points of view (i.e. the dramatic irony held between the spectator and the characters) and the fantastical desire for a reconstituted union for the character, whether that is between romantic partners, the self and the world, or within the family.³³ Tears are thus related to a temporality, a delay, which means the coincidence may come about too late or just in time, “provided there is a delay, and the possibility, therefore, that it may come too late.”³⁴ Tom Lutz points out in his research of 1950s male weepies that part of this delay in the male melodrama is often the anxiety that the patriarchal order will not be reconstituted.³⁵ While this is not
necessarily the case for all of Hanks’ films, the threat or anxiety of a lack of reestablished White patriarchal order is often the root for the emotional displays of his characters.

This is ironic, however, as his characters are almost always crying ostensibly for or as a disenfranchised or marginalized person. It is in this manner that Hanks can appropriate not only the melodramatic mode, but the melodramatic excess of these marginalized bodies to reaffirm White masculine hegemony. Within the narrative dictates, the films present a kind, compassionate, progressive, diverse, effeminate, emotional, and safe form of masculinity embodied by Hanks whose tears for the unjust pain he or those around him feel are ultimately betrayed by the reactionary project that this renegotiated performance of masculinity functions to achieve. The mode of melodrama and melodramatic excess both facilitate this appropriation and progressive presentation while also inscribing the underlying reactionary project within it.

One manner in which the excessive potential of melodrama, and specifically tears, are used by Hanks to accomplish this reactionary project is through the relocation of victim status onto his characters. As Thomas Elsaesser points out, the subject position of victim in the melodramatic mode maintains a negative agency by simultaneously making suffering visible and creating a legitimate speaking position from which to operate.⁶ As Linda Williams points out in her own work, this creation of victim and villain dichotomy provides for the enacting of justice.⁷ This form of justice is highly personal and non-objective, depending on the moral universe created within the world of the film, and may actually invert the real-world sense of moral positionings. For example, Elsaesser posits that the desirability of victim position in melodrama can at times be demonstrated an expression of “guilt-management” in which the perpetrators of violence renegotiate their position into victims in order to attain the social cache provided therein.⁸ The
excessive potential of tears in melodrama therefore help to align a victim framework that carries with it the negative agency Elsaesser describes – even if it is predicated on guilt management – and redesigns a moral universe to a non-objective internal logic.

Ultimately, and as Boscagli argues, the exaltation of masculine tears in popular culture may be seen as attempts by hegemonic patriarchal power to appropriate and reestablish dominance within a now fractured, postmodern, cultural landscape.39 These moments of excess are not arbitrary, but are instead appeals to victimhood and lamentation of a universalized masculine experience that seeks to incorporates postmodern challenges while still denying specifically feminine pathos.40 Melodramatic excess thus becomes a means for masculine power to be reestablished through the virtuous subject position carved out by victim status and facilitated through a traditionally effeminate mode of expression, which is what actually renders the moral positions of these appropriated performances legible.

The focus on moments of emotional excess and sentimentality, therefore, help clarify the stakes the film is positioning and how Hanks’ engagement with this device realigns moral legibility and victimization. By understanding how Hanks’ star persona employs emotionality in on-screen performances, as well as its origination in the production of melodramatic excess, one better understands how White masculinity is able to renegotiate hegemonic control under the guise and through the appropriation of traditionally counter-hegemonic modalities. Melodrama therefore becomes the fundamental manner in which Hanks appropriates and integrates counter-hegemonic discourses, and the means by which one may understand the underlying reactionary project inherent in this appropriation, specifically through the tears he sheds.
How power is renegotiated through claims of victimization is accomplished through a process of proximity to marginalized bodies and the excess produced within the melodramatic mode. To demonstrate this process fully, it is important to distinguish the manner in which Hanks’ characters and his star persona operate within the context of particular works and what impels these differences. Specifically, whether Hanks’ body stands in for a cultural or conceptual other, or if it is only within the proximity to one. This distinction is made apparent in a comparison of *Philadelphia* and *The Green Mile*. These films represent Hanks’ everyman, hegemonic masculinity, attempting to negate perceived threats to itself by interfacing or embodying marginalized and minority bodies to appropriate their claims of victimization. The distinction between interfacing and embodying accomplished by Hanks is, of course, the disparity of visibility provided by sexualized versus racialized bodies. That is to say, while Hanks can play a gay man without any direct visual dissonance, he cannot similarly embody a Black man – or a cis-woman, for that matter, despite his work in *Bosom Buddies* (1980-1982).

Importantly, each of these films also speak directly to a perceived threat to straight White masculine hegemony, namely homosexuality (coded through the discourse of the AIDS epidemic) and multiculturalism. Later, this will also be demonstrated with the presentations of feminism and sexual liberation in *Forrest Gump*. While each of these narratives is ostensibly about the humanization and sentimental appeal of people pushed to the margins, each ultimately serve to reaffirm the dominance of White masculine hegemony by assuaging specific anxieties and perceived challenges to its dominance. This reactionary project is achieved and made
apparent through a discourse of melodramatic excess that can best be observed in the tears of Hanks’ performances. Even if the tears are motivated by the violence or pain being imparted, what they are actually for is a completely separate issue. As described by Neale, tears clarify and decode obscured motivations or meaning through their inherent excess. Consistently, a close reading of these scenes shows melodramatic excess captured within Hanks’ representative body in a fashion that serves to deny the progressivism and diversification associated with his proximity to these peoples and instead reaffirms White masculine hegemony.

3.1  *Philadelphia (1993)* and the Abstracted Other

Gaining Hanks his first Oscar win, *Philadelphia* finds him playing Andrew Beckett, a lawyer suing his firm for wrongful termination while alleging that it was borne of the senior partners’ homophobia and fear over Beckett’s AIDS status. To this end, he recruits a personal injury attorney, Joe Miller (Denzel Washington), to argue his case. Though reticent and explicitly homophobic at first, Miller eventually agrees and slowly overcome his prejudice towards Beckett. In one crucial scene, it is Beckett’s emotional performance and production of melodramatic excess which facilitates the change in Miller’s feelings towards Beckett.

The scene takes place after a costume party held by Beckett and his boyfriend, and immediately after Miller explains that his homophobia stretches all the way back to his childhood experiences. While Miller attempts to prepare Beckett for court the next day, Beckett invites Miller to listen to his favorite aria, Maria Callas’ *La Mamma Morta*, playing over the speakers. As Beckett dances around slowly, eyes closed, translating the Italian verses and guiding the emotional response of the piece, the scene turns rhapsodic and expressionistic. All light drops out except the flicker of a fireplace as the camera follows Beckett from an extreme and floating high
angle shot, while countering it with confrontational shots of Miller gazing at Beckett. The scene ends with Beckett in tears while Miller collects his things and leaves for the night. As Miller journeys home, the non-diegetic aria continues to play, even while he says goodnight to his newborn baby, gets into bed, and holds his wife; returning securely to his heteronormative order and away from whatever homoerotic crisis he may have experienced in Beckett’s apartment, he has nonetheless internalized the emotional experience.

The scene’s structure thus utilizes sentimentality as a pedagogical tool for Miller to sympathize with Beckett. Beckett, in the scene, takes on the burden of teaching Miller to sympathize and feel as a means to identify with others and overcome his prejudices, repeatedly asking Miller “Can you feel it Joe?” The emotional performativity of Beckett in this scene and his emotional midwifery invites a realignment in Miller’s eyes and a change in their relationship. This is never explicitly stated or marked out in any specific fashion. The ambiguity of the scene relies then on the emotional experiences of the characters and the audience rather than any concrete actions or words. As Fuqua writes, “Though there may not be an adequate narrative explanation as to whether Joe Miller is indeed transformed through his affective relation to Andrew, there is a cultural explanation for this desire to see transformation.”[^42] There is the overdetermined expectation for Miller to change and so he does.

This performance of sentimentality by Beckett garners sympathy from Miller, an essential precursor for him, and the audience, to recognize Beckett’s as a person and, eventually, a victim. While the scene is ostensibly motivated to garner sympathy for a gay man dying of AIDS from a homophobe, the performance never touches on the actual issues at hand as the film works to abstract it to the point of universalist humanist sentimentality. Beckett is the one crying, not
Miller, and this leads one to question the motivation and implications of these tears. The audience identifies not with Beckett as a gay man with AIDS, but with the compassion Miller experiences and it is therefore him who we follow home that evening.

The expressionistic performativity of Hanks in the scene does not then directly broach the issue of queerness, per se, and the anxieties of the straight audience are given space to be worked through without ever being directly confronted. In fact, the film takes pains to de-queer Beckett’s body throughout by de-eroticizing his relationships and consistently putting him in contrast to the other gay men of the film, including the casting of actual gay men being treated for AIDS at the clinic Hanks’ character attends. Hanks’ body is put in relation and within a proximity to the reality of the situation while never inhabiting that experience. The gay sentimentality is still othered and the empathetic experience is held in identification with Miller rather than extended to Beckett. The experience of the aria is an attempt at understanding queerness rather than true understanding or experience of queerness itself. Even while inhabiting this role and embodying this character, Hanks and the audience is only ever brought into the proximity of marginalization without embracing it; a point further compounded in the court case in which Miller repeatedly states that he is not fighting for queer or gay rights, but instead for his rights as an employee.

De-queering Beckett’s body is not only accomplished in the narrative of the film, but in the casting of Hanks as well. Hanks’ star text further contains and assuages any anxieties around the issues of homosexuality and AIDS as perceived threats to heteronormativity by dissociating Hanks’ suffering body on screen from a suffering gay body. For example, in an interview that involved questions of homophobic responses to the film, Hanks responded by identifying his own star image as means to broach the subject while not inducing anxiety in a straight audience:
“I honestly don’t see how there’s a risk involved. ... One of the reasons is this cheerful, nonthreatening image that I have ... I mean, if the studio is looking for someone to dispel whatever fears people have about the subject ... I’m probably the perfect guy.”

Similarly, at the end of an interview with Larry King, Hanks’ wife Rita Wilson called into the show to praise and beckon him home: “Honey, I just want to tell you, if I wasn’t married to you, I’d have to get married to you right now after those things you said ... You look really cute ... I’m calling to say, Honey, come home.”

Hanks tells Wilson he will be home soon and thus Hanks’ star image intervenes in the cultural discourse around the issue of homosexuality and AIDS to contain and make the issue palatable to a mainstream, heterosexual, audience.

As such, the site of the suffering body is opened up to readings that chafe the denotation of the text. Specifically, the ostensible suffering queer body may be instead seen as a suffering masculine, and importantly White, body. As Richard Corber argues in “Nationalizing the Gay Body,” the film grafts a deradicalized “discourse of Civil Rights” onto the stigma around AIDS in order to correlate the prejudice against homosexuality and AIDS patients with racial minority status.

This is further emphasized in the relation of Beckett to Denzel Washington’s Miller who, as a Black man, offers a point of historical victim identification that again positions him in proximity to suffering. Corber suggests that this rhetorical framework elicits sympathy from the audience, but ultimately undermines the activism concerning gay rights and advocacy for AIDS patients through gaps that are created in the substitution of a sexualized economy of the gaze for a racialized one.

The homophobia against Beckett is only actualized when made visible through lesions from AIDS and thus he is otherwise able to “pass” in other circumstances, identifying the visual priority of the film. By refocusing the issue into a visual economy of the gaze, the film further abstracts the issue of sexuality and AIDS from the film and contain the anxieties around
these issues by foregrounding the suffering of a white masculine body as victim. This repositioning, along with the de-queering of the gay body, exposes the film to readings that prioritize the pain of a suffering of a White masculine body over that of a White gay body.

This opening of reading and meaning within the film is dependent on the melodramatic excess within which it operates. Instead of being utilized to make a pointed political statement, it is appropriated within a deradicalized discourse of humanism and fairness of employment under a capitalist system. Although the excess is produced by Hanks’ body, it does not remain tied to it, and is instead siphoned off, abstracted, and appropriated by prevailing hegemonic powers which utilize it to undergird its own power. Prejudice, according to the film, is the fault of bad actors, not hierarchical structures of power like the state, the law, or patriarchal order generally, all of which are valorized in the film. It is the temporary and mutable ignorance of people, like the senior partners and Miller, that impede acceptance and thus require the hermeneutic of melodrama to understand the personhood of the other. As de-queered, desexualized, apolitical actor, Hanks’ everyman persona takes the foreground as the issues become generally applicable and removed from the specifics of the case. In the end, the rule of law prevails, Miller’s homophobia is overcome, and no institutional critiques of power are made. Hanks’ performance of emotional excess for a single prejudiced individual communicates this individuation of prejudice and thereby dismisses critiques of structural violence. The emotional excess performed by Hanks in the film thus allows a visualization and containment of straight anxieties around the queering of masculinity, thereby utilizing counter-discourse to individuate and abstract the issue from its historical and institutional circumstances and replace it with a generalized and depoliticized message of victimization that undergird existing hegemonic structures.
3.2  *The Green Mile* (1999) and the Vicarious Other

As Fuqua points out, however, the renegotiated and embraceable masculinity of the new man of the 90s, which Hanks represents, while dependent on a suffering body and victimization, did not require that body to be his own. It is instead far more predicated on the transformative experience of observing suffering, and could therefore be induced by observing the suffering of others. Unlike the hypermasculine masochism described by Fradley, it is enough for the feeling man, described by Fuqua, to internalize the pain of others – even if they are the cause of said pain. While this can be seen in a nuanced fashion in *Philadelphia* where melodramatic excess is utilized to divorce the visible body from its political and historical position to relocate victimization, it can be more explicitly observed in *The Green Mile*. While *Philadelphia* vicariously uses Hanks’ suffering body, in *The Green Mile* it is Hanks who vicariously uses otherized suffering bodies and launders the emotional excess they produce to reinscribe White masculine hegemony. *The Green Mile* comes at the end of the decade and casts Hanks as Paul Edgecomb; a kindly death row guard in the 1930s, opposite a wrongly convicted Black man, John Coffey (Michael Clark Duncan). Coffey, in the tradition of the “magical negro,” is able, in a Christ-like fashion, to take the pain away from others (solely White characters in the film) and dispel it through his body. As Linda Williams identifies in her analysis, Coffey’s gift is utilized in a fashion that both presents and disavows the sexual threat of Black phallic power, such as taking away Edgecomb’s urinary tract infection by Coffey suddenly and violently grabbing Edgecomb’s crotch: “Coffey’s miracles entail repeated, ritualistic, prophylactic enactments of interracial sexual threats that ultimately function to master White fear and paranoia.” As such, the film reflects White anxieties around a multiracial and multicultural society that manifested in mainstream discourse.
and policies with conceptions of “superpredators” and the 1994 crime bill that targeted Black and Brown communities. As with Beckett’s sexuality in *Philadelphia*, the bodies and discourses that pose a potential threat to White masculine hegemony are made visible only to the ends that they are disavowed and eventually assumed within this dominant discourse, as will be demonstrated shortly. Despite his extraordinary abilities and his innocence, Coffey is murdered at the hands of the state by Edgecomb who lives the rest of his days with the guilt of this act.

Two moments occur in the film that elicit tears from Hanks’ Edgecomb, with each cry acting in distinct and critical fashions. While both are predicated on the suffering of Coffey, the primary effect of the first cry is to appropriate and the second operates as an appeal of victimization by Edgecomb. The first instance of melodramatic excess and Hanks’ performance of tears in the film comes as Coffey shares a “part of [himself]” with Edgecomb. This comes after Coffey compels one of the prison guards to shoot to death another prisoner by imparting to the guard the “evil” Coffey had taken into his body from a recent healing of a White woman. Through Coffey’s magical hands laid on Edgecomb, Edgecomb is made privy to flashbacks of the other prisoner that prove that man’s guilt in the rape and murder of the two little girls Coffey is accused of victimizing. The flashbacks are distorted, and the sequence intercut with images of Edgecomb in the throes of an overwhelming force. At the end, Edgecomb collapses in tears as Coffey tells him “Now you see. That’s the way it is all over the world.”

The melodramatic excess of the scene— the suffering victims, the too late realization of innocence, the Manichean moral universe inverted, along with the impressionistic and performative excess – is created and facilitated by Coffey’s experience and body, but the import and affect are captured in Edgecomb’s. Edgecomb’s tears visualize his transformation and his
newfound sensitivity and empathy – generally and specifically for the racialized other. The tears reorient the excess of the scene away from Coffey or the tragic events and onto the affect they have on Edgecomb. Edgecomb is taught to feel and understand the pain of the world through this racialized other who acts to present and disavow White anxieties around Black bodies and recreate a moral order by killing the man that actually victimized those two little White girls.

This “gift,” or “curse,” given by Coffey stays with Edgecomb, and it is implied that it prolongs his life, resulting in him watching all of his friends and family die before himself. In a very literal manner, Edgecomb has thus internalized the pain and experience of a Black victim while still presenting in Whiteness. Through his proximity and literal touching of the racialized other, the counter discourse of multiculturalism and an awareness of toxic White masculinity is integrated into Edgecomb who repositions himself by the end of the film as a victim of his own circumstance, living with the guilt of brutally murdering an innocent, magical, Black man. To this point, Williams argues that while there may be the appearance of progressive notions around race being proposed in the film – such as the subversion of White anxieties around Black phallic power through its presentation and subsequent disavowal by Coffey – the film ultimately serves to assuage the guilt of the White characters and audience’s complicity in the sadistic violence against Black bodies: “What is striking in *The Green Mile*, however, is the remarkable extent to which the establishment of White virtue rests upon a paradoxical administration of pain and death to the Black body so that White people may weep.”

Coffey must suffer, and ultimately die, so that Edgecomb may learn to feel, and demonstrate that he can through tears that betray the priorities of the film.
Edgecomb must be made to feel okay with the suffering he creates, as this is part of the White virtue Williams identifies. One such moment comes when Edgecomb, after understanding Coffey’s goodness and innocence, offers to let him escape and “see how far [he] can get.” Coffey asks why Edgecomb would do such a foolish thing, to which he replies,

**EDGECOMB:** On the day of my judgment, when I stand before God, and He asks me why did I kill one of his true miracles, what am I gonna say? That it was my job? My job?

**COFFEY:** You tell God the Father it was a kindness you done. I know you hurtin' and worryin', I can feel it on you, but you oughta quit on it now. Because I want it over and done. I do. I'm tired, boss. Tired of bein' on the road, lonely as a sparrow in the rain. Tired of not ever having me a buddy to be with, or tell me where we's coming from or going to, or why. Mostly I'm tired of people being ugly to each other. I'm tired of all the pain I feel and hear in the world everyday. There's too much of it. It's like pieces of glass in my head all the time. Can you understand?

**EDGECOMB:** Yes, John. I think I can.

Not only is it Coffey that feels sympathy for what Edgecomb is going through and works to assuage his guilt, but due to the magical transference described earlier, Edgecomb has the great burden of feeling now, and this understanding he comes to further validates what he will do: because it is a kindness to kill a (Black) man that feels. Both Edgecomb and the White audience is made to feel good (not happy) about the imminent murder of this Black man.53

In the second moment of melodramatic excess, Edgecomb and the other men weep at the sight of Coffey’s execution, even as they are the ones facilitating it. These tears and the clear begrudging attitude with carrying out the task, realign sympathy from the Black man about to be murdered to these White men committing the act. All on the verge or entirely overcome in tears, Edgecomb must tell one of his deputies to wipe the tears from his face after he is done shackling Coffey to the electric chair. At the moment of execution, a tearful and reticent Edgecomb is regretfully encouraged by a deputy to fulfill his duty: “You have to say it. You have to give the order” so that they may kill Coffey. Not only is it his duty, but it also seems it is an inevitability by the
repeated phrase “You have to.” The White characters are given the space to identify and perform victimization while enacting violence on a Black body. At the moment of Coffey’s death, there is a brief image of his body seizing under the electricity before cutting around to the guards’ faces observing the scene, with lights bursting behind Edgecombe in a climatic finality. The priority of the film, set in the Depression era, Jim Crow, South, is clearly the moral duty of these White men, as arms of the state, to kill an innocent Black man rather than any recognition of the horror and continued violence that the United States imparts on Black people.

It is later revealed in dialogue that many of the men quit after the execution and left, and through the framing device, it is clear that Edgecomb is still affected by the event and his complicity in it throughout his interminably long life. The performance of emotional excess in these moments is thus a means of assuaging their complicity and guilt in state sanctioned violence against Black communities and placate the anxiety of the White audience. The priority given to Edgecomb and his tears emphasize the importance of the experience of this character over that of Coffey’s. Edgecomb, because he has been made to feel by Coffey, is situated as the true victim at the execution since he had to watch Coffey get what he has wanted: death. The tears performed by Hanks in the first moment of emotional excess thus demonstrate the integration of a counter discourse of feeling and understanding into White masculine power, embodied by Hanks, while the second moment highlights the lack of fundamental change that such an engagement brings with the execution of Coffey.

Whether it is accomplished within the proximity and discourse of queer or racialized identities, the moments of emotional excess within these films demonstrate and reaffirm the prevailing power structures they purportedly undermine through such engagement. Each of these films, in
some manner, deal explicitly with historio-cultural concerns and anxieties perceived by straight
White masculinity before disavowing them, whether that be homosexuality or multiculturalism.
These films, while they may nominally engage and represent a multiracial, multisexual,
multigendered society, they nonetheless reframe and prioritize the reconciliation of White
masculine hegemony. Hanks, acting as a representative of this renegotiated masculinity, thus
engages and stabilizes counter-discourses and identities by operating in their proximity and
capitalizing on their excessive potential that is produced through an engagement of appropriated
counter-discourses. The expression of melodramatic excess in these films, whether produced
through Hanks’ suffering body or the suffering bodies of otherized peoples, is appropriated and
made visible through Hanks’ tears, thereby relocating victimization and the negative agency
therein to reaffirm White masculine power structures.
Re-Narrativizing the Past

The scope of the appropriation and renegotiation accomplished in this reactionary project, however, supersedes the anxieties of the contemporary moment and utilizes the past to create a precedent and lineage from which this newly integrated hegemonic presentation of masculinity may draw authority from. The past becomes a landscape to identify and reject initial challenges to masculine hegemony that would coalesce into the perceived crisis within masculinity. Within the context of this thesis, this means that the renegotiation of hegemonic power represented by Hanks is assisted by a reinvestment in the past that relocates victimization by realigning the moral universes of the past. This allows for a nostalgic revelry in unquestioned White masculine dominance and restructured the identity of masculine power in a manner that comports with contemporaneous mores and values associated with the “new man” of the 90s. That is to say, these films provided space to enjoy the success and unfettered dominance of traditional patriarchal power structures while simultaneously containing the more egregious, or overt demonstrations of power within a temporal other, and laid a foundation for a nominally progressive or integrated masculinity identified in the modern moment. The melodramatic mode, and the excess produced therewithin, is mapped onto a hyperreal image of the past that creates new histories for White masculine hegemony to co-opt, appropriate, colonize, and provide sources of victimization. While at first a seemingly benign interplay with the past, this re- visioning of history demonstrates the power and danger of appropriation to reconstruct reality in a manner that overdetermines specific hegemonic power and disregards material events.
This project, as a means of quite literally re-visioning and projecting a past, achieves its aims through technological and nostalgic proximities to the past. This is directly related to hyperreality as theorized by Jean Baudrillard in his seminal work, *Simulacra and Simulation*. Baudrillard posits that society has lost strong controlling referents and instead escapes into a hyperreality of images with no basis in the real. History becomes a site of retreat into an interplay of signs and signifiers that evoke an empty nostalgia that has no material consciousness of the real: “History is our lost referential, that is to say our myth. It is by virtue of this fact that it takes the place of myth on screen.”\(^5\) The contested and increasingly hyperreal state of the past becomes fertile grounds for a restructuring of reality and a means to supersede the dislocating ideologies that produced anxiety within White masculine hegemony identified within this thesis. The past is re-narrativized in a manner that obscures and displaces perceived historical threats.

The desire that produces these historical myths brings not only an audience that seeks an experience of historicity, but also one primed within the hyperreal that identifies with the resemblances of a past that is nonetheless disconnected from the real. Alison Landsberg’s theory of “prosthetic memory” identifies how these re-visions of the past may actually replace the reality of the events within the cultural consciousness and within an individual’s experience of history. Landsberg writes that prosthetic memory is a new form of public cultural memory that “emerges at the interface of a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theater or museum,” and in which an individual sutures themselves into a larger historical narrative at a personal level despite the fact they never actually experienced it.\(^5\)

While Landsberg is fairly optimistic in the implementation of prosthetic memory to unify identities, the artificial nature of these reinvented pasts, coupled with the extreme technological
capabilities of the cinema, creates the potential for distortions of events and re-inscriptions of hegemonic power.

To this end, within these films the past becomes a vital landscape of contested ideologies that may be reworked into a new historical framework that serve dominant masculine power structures. This re-visioning provides space to revel in unassailed White masculine dominance and to create a foundation for the renegotiated masculinity of the modern era. As seen to some degree in *The Green Mile*’s utilization of the past and memory to frame its narrative, this temporal dislocation provides the opportunity to produce melodramatic excess that may be appropriated to the overall reactionary project identified in this thesis. These films therefore exploit the totalizing and nostalgic qualities of the history film genre to produce melodramatic excess and tears which may be shed to re-write said history and lament its loss. As Boscagli points out, inversions and renegotiations of power represented in things like masculine tears demonstrate attempts by prevailing power structures to preserve themselves in a postmodern hyperreal environment. A past that is predicated on the victimization and excesses of melodrama asserts a moral value, revealed through displays of emotionality that center their discourses, that may reaffirm the unquestioned traditional power structures that are ostensibly consigned to these pasts.

### 4.1 *Forrest Gump* (1994) and the Appropriated Past

One of the best examples of this is presented in *Forrest Gump*. The film explicitly revisions and recenters the past through the titular protagonist played by Hanks as the embodiment of nonthreatening White masculine presence in spaces where such figures were traditionally absent or otherwise antagonistic to progressive action historically. Hanks’ character has a learning
disability and is therefore apparently oblivious to the significance of the historical moments he stumbles into, absconding any responsibility for intrusion into these spaces and simultaneously proposing a de facto and acceptable masculine Whiteness throughout any historical event or engagement with these counter-discourses that would otherwise subvert White masculine hegemony. This unwitting presentation of the past empties it of political significance and creates a prosthetic cultural memory that provides an untroubled enjoyment of a divisive era that revels in the aesthetics and hegemonic comfortability, while simultaneously disassociating Gump from any presentations of toxic White masculinity and instead presenting him as a suitable and temperate masculine presence.

This unthreatening and politically ignorant form of masculinity that Gump represents establishes a precedent for the renegotiated presentation of White masculinity that Hanks represents in the 90s. The technological and narrative reframing of the past in the film, which utilizes photorealistic CGI recreations of archival footage and places Gump at the center of historical happenings – such as Watergate – reorients actual historical socio-cultural events into a prosthesis that strengthens White masculine hegemony. The reactionary and conservative project of the film, although couched in plausible deniability of progressivism, consistently acts to contain counter discourses and realign the moral legibility and victimization to the hands of traditional hegemonic powers. The project thus reframes and centralizes the experience of Gump throughout an era in which counter-cultural forces and discourses sought to upend the very hegemonic power and privilege Gump – and by extension Hanks – represents.

This counter-culture narrative is embodied and sadistically disavowed in the film through his romantic interest, Jenny Curran (Robin Wright), who spent the period participating in
traditionally subversive acts such as counter-war protests, drugs, free love movements, and sexual liberation. Like in *The Green Mile* with Coffey, Curran’s otherized body and its suffering is used vicariously by Hanks’ character to relocate victimization and appeal for traditional power structures. Gump’s general amiability and apathy therefore make what he does care about and cry over critically important. Once again, the emotional labor undertaken by a character set outside the dominant modes of society and power is capitalized within the body of Hanks to further a reactionary and counter-progressive project. Melodrama and its excesses become the means by which this sympathy and victimization is formed and through which it may be discerned. This process of renegotiation and disavowal in the film presents in two moments that illicit tears from Gump, both of which are predicated on Curran’s character reconstituting the patriarchal order: first by uniting Forrest Gump Jr. with Sr. and then through her death. These moments remove any threat to the institutional masculine order represented by Curran and her counter-cultural identity and instead aligns sympathy with Gump and his tears, which ultimately serves to create a hyperreal past that establishes the precedent for the renegotiated masculinity Hanks represents and a moral legibility that reaffirms White masculine hegemony.

The first moment comes when Gump reunites with Curran near the end of the film. Gump arrives at Curran’s humble apartment where Curran greets him in a waitressing uniform, telling him she’s just gotten off work. She invites him in and shows him all the press clippings of him she has kept over the years. She then pauses, and begins to apologize to him, stating “I just want to apologize for anything I ever did to you because I was messed up for a long time.” The apology, and her presently traditionalist routine in contrast to her previously bohemian lifestyle, imply that her counter-cultural involvement was an attack or affront to Gump, who is consequently understood as a victim of her subversive activity. Her *mea culpa* helps creates a moral legibility
within the logic of the film that aligns challenges to hegemonic power as threatening acts that must be apologized for and, finally, punished. Their reunion is interrupted by a neighbor dropping off Curran’s son who Curran then reveals is Forrest’s son as well.

As he begins to get misty-eyed, she assures him that there’s nothing he needs to do because he has “done nothing wrong.” She also assuages his fears that his learning disability is genetic by telling Gump that “He’s very smart. He’s one of the smartest in his class.” The only “fault” of Gump Sr. is thus remedied in the next generation who, unlike his father, will be able to recognize his own importance to the undoubtably historical moments he will find himself in. Whatever perceived sins there are of the father, even learning disabilities, are washed away in the son. Counter-hegemonic discourses and bodies are stabilized in this union of Curran and Gump, assuaging fears of compromise or liberation through the reestablishment of the nuclear family and the superior Forrest Jr. Recalling how tears may be borne of a delay in recognition or reconstitution, Gump’s tears here seem to indicate the resolution of anxiety that the patriarchal order and conservative establishment, which was placed in jeopardy by the figure of the liberated woman represented by Curran, would not return.

In the penultimate scene, the order of the father is confirmed through the demise of Curran and the challenge that her counter-cultural past represents in the home environment. In the second moment of emotional excess for Gump, he speaks to her grave where her reductive and paternalistic epitaph reads: “JENNY GUMP… Beloved Mother, Wife and Friend” – all of which are her relationship to one Forrest Gump or another. Her death, it is implied, comes from contracting AIDS and is thus viewed, in the rhetoric of the film, as a form of punishment for her association in counter-cultural lifestyles and sexual liberation, which were often contrasted to
Gump’s more “wholesome” activities during the same time. Once again Hanks’ character is placed in proximity to a suffering body but is not made to feel this pain directly. Curran’s suffering only matters in relation to Gump’s interactions and experiences with her.

This is further emphasized when Gump tells the tombstone that he has bulldozed her childhood home where she suffered physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her father, thereby displacing toxic masculine presence to the past, excising the association of the home with abuse, and reconstituting its moral position in her home with Gump. He then goes on to assure her that their son, “Little Forrest,” is being well taken care of by him, which is demonstrated in a series of flashbacks that establish their bond. He concludes by stating that Little Forrest is “so smart. You would be so proud of him. I am.” These last lines begin the deluge of tears that have been under the surface of the whole monologue. These tears, it seems, are borne of both the presence of a well-equipped son and at the absence of the mother. In this instance, the timing of too late and just in time described by Neale is applied to both the mother and the son respectively.58 The speech by the grave underlines Gump’s failure at having not “saved” Curran from herself in time and brought her home, while the recent flashbacks of father and son bonding emphasize his reestablishment of the paternal order and the bright prospects for its future.

The mother is made into a memory that now, like the rest of history for the film, may be re-narrativized into a non-threatening absence. The father may raise the son in his own manner without the interference or threat of castration posed by the phallic mother. The film closes with the dual themes of chance and destiny finding harmony in a repeated structure of a young Forrest Gump (Jr.) getting on a bus and heading to school, thereby demonstrating the unchangeable hierarchal order established in the film. As Thomas Byers articulates in his analysis of the film;
“Thus history culminates in repetition, and the old order is unshaken; what we see at last is that nothing has change… Repetition insistently erases variation, and in the forgetting of a counter-history, a history of struggle, the patriarch is all that is re-membered.”

The past, made the present in Forrest Jr., acclimates to the cultural moment to assuage guilt over the destruction of Curran while still reinforcing masculine hegemony.

4.2  Saving Private Ryan (1998) and the Nostalgic Past

The re-narrativizing of history undertaken in Forrest Gump is indicative, however, of a larger nostalgic project of re-masculinization in the era. Nostalgia, a tool often used by reactionary forces to homogenize and control discourses of the past and national identities, offers a means to connect disparate temporal and spatial locations to comment on and collapse the distance between the points. In the case of Forrest Gump, and as will be seen in Hanks’ war film Saving Private Ryan, nostalgia is deployed to both reimagine a past in which the discourse of the “new” man of the 90’s is fully integrated into a historical moment that validates and valorizes White masculine power. Gump’s inoffensive, sensitive, perpetual, and approachable White masculine presence signifies the renegotiated masculinity of the 90s while existing in and stabilizing a past in which counter-discourses that might threaten this hegemonic position were first coalescing. Within the context of Saving Private Ryan, the masculinity here still integrates the sensitivity of the renegotiated masculinity of the 90s but moves away from the ignorance of Gump to instead vindicate and valorize White masculine power.

As Neale Gabler points out, the film maintains the visceral aesthetic that has traditionally been associated with Vietnam war films but eschews the highly divisive setting of Vietnam. The result is a film that rejects traditional depictions of hyper-masculine heroes while describing a
moral project – both in the mission and the war – that obscures the post-WWII divisions and challenges to traditional power structures: “The text of the film may be warfare 1944; the subtext is unity 1998.” What Gabler identifies but fails to unpack is what has led to these cultural divisions – namely the very valid concerns advocated by feminist, anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and intersectional ideologies – and what is accomplished through this re-narrativization of a past that, though it may show the fallibility of man, ultimately takes refuge in the patriarchy’s ability to reestablish order. While *Forrest Gump* demonstrates a nostalgia that actively distorts and reimagines cultural rifts that nullifies or personalizes them to excuse and affirm Hanks’ White masculine presence, *Saving Private Ryan* employs a nostalgia that actively omits these divisions by relocating and constructing a national identity unified through unquestioned White masculine hegemony. *Saving Private Ryan*, therefore, utilizes nostalgic practices and displacement to revel in the glory and suffering of White masculine bodies and it is through this embodied experience that Hanks once again launders and abstracts the circumstances and melodramatic excesses of the film into detached principles that serve to undergird traditional power structures.

In the film, Hanks plays Captain John Miller, leading his company on a suicide rescue mission to recover the last remaining son, Private Ryan, of a family that lost three other boys on the same day. As Fátima Chinita points out in her analysis of the film, it maintains many of the hallmarks of the classic melodrama with stylistic excess, prioritization of the domestic, and emotional performance and affectation based off of delayed coincidence and suffering. Sarah Hagelin further posits that the film shows the male body “vulnerable, porous, and penetrateable, focusing obsessively on this vulnerability the way few films of its genre do,” and therefore destabilizes cultural ideas about gender and war that challenges hegemonic narratives of strong, able-bodied, men going off to war to protect the fragile, domestic, women back home. This challenge,
however, is ultimately undercut in the film’s performance of sentimental excess, first by Miller and later by the aged Ryan character. These moments deny the experience of war, the bleeding male body, and substitute a patriotic and moral mission that prioritizes the reestablishment of the domestic sphere.

Although there are moments of “manly” tears being shed throughout the film, there is only one performed by Hanks. In the scene in question, the company takes a key hill while suffering heavy casualties. Miller, after walking away from his men beating one of the German soldiers they captured, takes out a map and attempts to prepare for the mission ahead. Overcome with grief at those that have been lost and filled the anxiety of what is to come, Miller scans his surroundings and ensures that he is alone before breaking down into bracing sobs. Recovering his composure, he returns to the men and spares the life of the German POW.

Miller then gives a speech to his men in which he reveals his much-speculated profession is schoolteacher and the further insight into his motivations:

> Sometimes I wonder if I’ve changed so much my wife is even going to recognize me, whenever it is that I get back to her. And how I’ll ever be able to tell her about days like today. Ah, Ryan. I don't know anything about Ryan. I don't care. The man means nothing to me. It's just a name. But if... You know if going to Rumelle and finding him so that he can go home. If that earns me the right to get back to my wife, then that's my mission.

The mission therefore becomes a reconstitution of the heteronormative family structure. This is not only for Miller, but the film broadly as the family acts as the impetus for the dramatic conflict of saving Ryan and Ryan’s own aims of “earning” the sacrifice of Miller by being a “good man.” This is supposedly accomplished as an aged Ryan is seen at the close of the film weeping over Miller’s grave while surrounded by a large and loving family. Miller’s tears are thus borne out of the desire for the reconstitution of a union with his wife and the delayed
recognition of this moment. The context of war provides the masochistic abuse of White male bodies that contains the perceived present assault on their societal power and valorizes their ability to reconstitute this power.

While the tears these men shed may also be seen as “vulnerable,” it is a vulnerability that is accepted within the circumstances and is able to obscure the larger political and corporeal vulnerability that the rest of the film describes. This inversion thus comports with the overall reactionary project that this study outlines. While the “raw” and “visceral” nature of the film may generally shade the aesthetics of the film and its description of the suffering male body, it is the moments of masculine emotional excess that infuse the cultural perspective of the film. These moments of melodramatic excess therefore create a re-narrativized past that designs a masculinity in line with the renegotiation of masculinity happening in contemporary culture, vulnerable but not weak, and creates a prosthetic understanding of the past in which this masculinity functions. These narratives validate and reaffirm masculine hegemony in their own contexts and thereby create a precedent for the modern moment.

While Gump presents a form of masculinity that uses the suffering of Curran’s body vicariously, within Saving Private Ryan, Miller and the other men become the most visible suffering bodies that are able to stand in for abstracted ideals. Once again, Hanks’ body via Miller acts as a universal stand in – the proverbial every(White)man. This condition relocates the melodramatic excess away from marginalized bodies or particular circumstance, launders them through the representative body of Hanks, and abstracts them to undergird White masculine hegemony. The universalization of his body signifies the inscribed suffering beyond the corporeal dimensions of it. While Gump himself did not directly suffer to any significant degree, instead relying on the
excess produced extraneous to him through marginalized characters like Curran, Gump’s double amputee former commanding officer Lt. Dan (Gary Sinise), and his poor Black army buddy Bubba (Mykelti Williamson) who dies in battle to create an emotional appeal of victimization, it is Miller’s own suffering that acts as a vicarious vehicle for larger issues of masculinity and nation represented in the film. The narrative, centered on the moralistic mission of saving Ryan and defeating Nazism, enjoys the unified vision of national identity while simultaneously establishing the sensitive, resourceful, and paternalistic presentation of masculinity that would come to prominence in the 90s. *Saving Private Ryan*, therefore, once again relies on the melodramatic excess produced within the narrative to realign and reinforce White masculine hegemony, by locating victimization within the representative body of Hanks.

The past becomes a means of validating and masculine hegemony while proposing a model of masculinity that allows for the progressively integrated renegotiated masculinity of the contemporary moment. In his examination of *Apollo 13*, Dario Llinares describes this situation as a “retrotopia” in which the past is re-visioned through both technological and ideological engagement with postmodern principles. This concept fits into the model provided in these other Hanks films, but implicitly acknowledges *Apollo 13*’s almost exclusively masculine economy. All of these films, therefore, depend on the production of melodramatic excess facilitated through a re-visioning of the past. The resulting hyperreality of histories prioritizes and legitimizes White masculine hegemony through a revelry of unchallenged White masculine presence and establishing a precedent for modern forms of masculine performance.
5 Territorializing Appropriated Discourse

The use of the past as a means to re-vision historical precedence and establish new cultural narratives that solidify investment in renegotiated performances of masculinity are not the only manner in which traditional power structures maintained dominance in these moments of perceived crisis. Important to the overall project of White masculine hegemony appropriating counter-discourses, like melodramatic excess, is an accompanying process of territorialization. What had signified foreign and other is now incorporated into dominant thinking and discourse and must therefore be protected. This subsequently requires active demarcation and formation of boundaries that establishes this discourse fundamentally within dominant power and which denies its historical precedent or elicitation by counter-hegemonic entities. Within the focus of this thesis, this means that White masculine hegemony continues to deny the validity of other manifestations of emotional excess outside of masculine identification, as if to claim that these expressions do not rise to the level of import or seriousness that would necessitate such displays. By locating discourses like melodrama within the domain of masculine power that may then signify a universal subject, traditional power structures may reject the sentimental appeals of otherized bodies and peoples. To put it in Boscagli’s words: “While a man who cries is a human being, a woman who cries is a woman.” In many ways, it is an act of cultural colonization. Opposed to Hanks’ “manly” tears borne of extreme situations, then, there is a rejection and attempt to contain “feminine” tears and excess in Hank’s films throughout the decade. What’s more, these misogynistic dismissals are actually enacted by Hanks’ characters. Specifically, this rejection takes place primarily within the films that are within the “romantic-comedy” genre.
This situates this process of territorialization and denial within a framework of relationship and romantic partnership and are thus times in which Hanks’ heterosexual characters are forced to interface directly with women and their discursive modes. Since there is far more of a historical precedence for women’s tears in this genre from which this reactionary project seeks to distance itself from, this means that within these films women’s tears are put in contrast to masculine emotionality rather than a source of appropriation. That is to say, these films reject the sentimental appeal and power of women’s tears that traditionally exists in the genre by dissociating it from the process of appropriation of melodramatic excess accomplished in the films and by invalidating these performances of feminine emotionality.

This not only relocates claims of victimization away from women, feminized bodies, or marginalized peoples in the films – obscuring the wrongs that they have historically been treated to – it also fundamentally excludes them from the pedagogical foundation of pathos and reserves it for the masculine characters. A genre that has maintained the subversive potential of counter-discourses and melodramatic excess has thus been reoriented to invalidate the experience of women and the methods by which they may appeal. When romantic, or feminine, counterparts to Hanks’ characters demonstrate melodramatic emotionality it is denied, contained, and dismissed, thereby reserving as a valid expression of meaning making for Hanks’ characters. As Connell et al. point out in their studies of hegemonic masculinity, “There exists considerable evidence that hegemonic masculinity is not a self-reproducing form, whether through habitus or any other mechanism. To sustain a given pattern of hegemony requires the policing of men as well as the exclusion or discrediting of women.”66 This operation within the romantic-comedy genre thus reinvests masculine control of feminine emotion and discourse within heteronormative structures that relocate appeals of victimization to the masculine economy of meaning making.
5.1  *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), *You’ve Got Mail* (1998), *A League of Their Own* (1992), and Rejecting Feminine Tears

This can be seen best in the dinner scene from *Sleepless in Seattle*. The protagonist, Sam Baldwin (Tom Hanks), sits down to dinner with his sister Suzy (Rita Wilson), his brother-in-law Greg (Victor Garber), and his son Jonah (Ross Malinger), and lays out the central conceit of the film: Jonah called into a talk-therapy radio show, told the host that his father needs a new wife, and as a result Jonah has become fixated on one respondent that wishes to meet Sam at the top of the Empire State Building on Valentine’s Day. Suzy is overcome and exclaims “It’s like that movie!... *An Affair to Remember!*” She begins to weep as she recalls and recounts the melodrama of the film, to the growing discomfort and visible annoyance of the men who share looks of exasperation between one another. Jonah, who has moved from sharing a frame with Suzy to standing between the two men, asks Suzy if she is alright and Greg responds for her with a dismissive, “She’s fine.” As Suzy concludes with sobs, Sam writes off her emotional journey through her memories of the film by simply stating to Greg, “That’s a chick’s movie.” Later, when Sam clarifies what exactly he is looking for in a romantic partner, he mocks Suzy’s emotional display with the assistance of Greg by adapting her melodramatic response to the film by performing his own in reference to a traditionally “masculine” film:

**SAM:** I just want somebody I can have a decent conversation with over dinner, without it falling down into weepy tears over some movie.

**GREG:** She's, as you just saw, very emotional.

**SAM:** Although I cried at the end of *The Dirty Dozen*.

**GREG:** Well, who didn't?

**SAM:** Jim Brown was throwing these hand grenades down these airshafts. And Richard Jaeckel and Lee Marvin...

[pretends to start crying]

**SAM:** ...were sitting on top of this armored personnel carrier, dressed up like Nazis...

[pretends to start crying]

**GREG:** [also pretending to cry] Oh, God, stop it!
This scene relies on the emotional excess produced by a feminine body that is at odds with the discursive world of the masculine characters. The solution, therefore, is to reject this feminine emotionality, appropriate the melodramatic discourse, reinscribe traditional masculine power structures within the discourse, and thereby integrate it into a masculine economy of meaning making that, in turn, reaffirms masculinity as the source of meaning making. The overwhelming feelings of intertextual melancholy Suzy experiences as she recalls *An Affair to Remember* are entirely and completely dismissed and mocked by all three male characters in the scene. And when, the meeting on top of the Empire State Building actually takes place later in the film – impelled by Jonah flying across the country on his own and leaving his dad to chase him to New York – Sam’s tears at finding and embracing his son are entirely validated.

The scene and tears do not turn on the romantic entanglements of characters, but instead on the reconnection of father and son and the ability of the father to maintain their masculine family unit in the absence of a mother, with Hanks’ character asking his son, “What if something had happened to you? What if I couldn’t get to you?... What would I have done? You’re my family, you’re all I’ve got... We’re doing okay aren’t we, I mean, aren’t we okay? Aren’t we alright? I mean so far have I done anything really stupid? Have I screwed it up for the both of us?” to which Jonah answers “No.” It is a moment that is not dissimilar from the conclusion of *Forrest Gump*, with the exception that a viable romantic partner and mother figure is about to enter their life, though it is made clear that she is not necessary within their masculine order. While representations of feminine pathos or traditional melodramatic situations are outright rejected and mocked, it is this same melodramatic mode that is rationalized through a masculine centered condition that is predicated on the reestablishment of patriarchal order.
This type of denial of feminine pathos takes place in another Nora Ephron film starring Tom Hanks: *You’ve Got Mail*. During the course of the film, Hanks’ character, Joe Fox – heir to “Fox Books,” a Barnes & Noble type of big business – begins a romantic relationship with an anonymous woman in a chat room. That woman, as it turns out, is Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan), the owner of a small, family-run, bookstore he is running out of business. Even after he learns this fact, he still forces her out of business and continues to pursue a relationship with her online while manipulating her in person. At the climax of the movie, Fox reveals himself as the anonymous correspondent to Kelly. As Kelly begins to well up in a melodramatic moment of delayed of coincidence, Fox pulls out a handkerchief and gently admonishes her, “Don’t cry shopgirl. Don’t cry.” She tells him, “I wanted it to be you. I wanted it to be you so badly.” A small moment, but one that nonetheless seeks to contain the hurt and harm produced by Fox’s deception and reject the melodramatic emotional display from the gendered other. Not only is Kelly denied the ability to process her emotions or reckon with the manner in which Fox has manipulated her, but the audience is told that this is what she wanted all along. Fox is provided the time, space, and anonymity to process his own emotions, drive Kelly out of business, and create a perfectly constructed melodramatic moment that mirrors his corporate underhandedness, while it is the happy tears of Kelly that are refuted and reduced to masochistic desire. The excess of the scene is both created by serves to benefit Fox’s appropriation of the melodramatic mode.

Finally, in a manner similar to the admonishment that Hanks’ characters have given out to women in other films, in *A League of Their Own*, Hanks’ Jimmy Dugan wails the iconic line “There’s no crying! There’s no crying in baseball!” after inducing tears in one of his players by upbraiding her for an unforced error. Amazed that she would demonstrate such hysterics on the field, Dugan continues by justifying his position through a recentering of his own experiences
that demonstrates an internalized standard of masculinity based on an illogical tautology:

“Rogers Hornsby was my manager, and he called me a talking pile of pigshit! And that was when my parents drove all the way down from Michigan to see me play the game. And did I cry?... No! And do you know why?... Because there’s no crying in baseball!” Dugan is then gently chastised by the umpire and subsequently flies into a profanity-laced hysterical moment as he is tossed out of the game. These moments thus reflect attempts to contain the emotionality of those directly implicated in harm caused by Hanks’ character and seek to dismiss the gendered other’s emotionality as it would undermine the larger project of renegotiated masculine power.

There is an important caveat to the scene from *A League of Their Own*, however, for it is structured to demonstrate the solidarity of the female players and a rejection of Dugan’s standards and abuses, a point furthered by a mirrored moment later in the film when Dugan restrains himself from shouting at the same player while literally shaking in rage. While this may demonstrate growth in the character, it also betrays the process of how White masculine authority is renegotiated. Dugan understands the contexts wherein he can and cannot openly berate the players and is therefore accepted as a tempered masculinity that has been revised through his experience with these female characters. Although this ultimately does not challenge the overarching patriarchal structures dictating the world of the film – in which any such challenges are contained within its temporal framing device – Hanks’ character demonstrates how White patriarchal masculinity is able to be negotiated and ultimately become acceptable through an engagement with sentimentality. As Fuqua acknowledges in her work on the feeling man film, “the narrative goal of feeling man films is for the protagonist to learn to feel a certain way. While the production of such a feeling male subject may seem like a progressive step, all improper feeling (homophobia, racism, sexism etc.) is identified as an individual problem as a
lack of knowledge and experience.” Dugan is made an acceptable and embraceable masculine presence for simply not yelling at one of his players after she makes an error, not for in any fashion challenging or democratizing his power.

The reactionary project enacted and embodied by Hanks is able to physically deny feminine pathos and emotionality while maintaining it as an internal logic fundamentally within a masculine form of discourse. While the generic conventions require the heterosexual Hanks to engage and reconcile with women and their discursive modes – in these settings in which if not directly romantically entangled there remains a diegetic possibility – he interfaces with the gendered other to deny their emotional experience. Their tears, as expressions of joy or sadness, are totalized and rejected and put in contrast to his own emotional journey. The result is the melodramatic excess produced within the film may still be captured within the body of Hanks’ characters while the actual tears and their function within a feminine economy are rejected. This relocation of excess perpetuates the misogynistic rejection of melodramatic appeal while simultaneously co-opting it and policing its boundaries to the benefit of a White masculine hegemony. The reactionary project identified in this thesis thus goes beyond the incorporation of melodramatic discourse to preserve power and actually participates in a process of territorialization that demarcates boundaries of meaning making along the lines of gender that invalidate historical and generic establishments.
6 Conclusion

Hanks’ characters as extensions of his star persona in the era thus act as a pedagogy of sentimentality which describes how the new “feeling” man of the 1990s emotes through an appropriation of traditionally effeminate forms of excess. Importantly, this appropriation need not require the masochistic suffering of Hanks’ characters, and instead it is the impressionable nature of his straight White masculine body that allows the capture and capitalization of the displaced suffering of others. While the emotional performativity may at first appear to be acceptance of divergent discourses, it is consistently underwritten through reactionary motivations. Although ostensibly the tears of Hanks’ characters appear to acknowledge the pain or injustice suffered by marginalized peoples or some larger, noble, ideal, they are consistently revealed to be motivated by and for the retainment of traditional power structures.

The vicarious use of Hanks’ body, along with his vicarious use of otherized bodies, are predicated on his proximity to them and their suffering. The excess produced therein is capitalized on by Hanks and laundered to serve a reestablishment of White masculine hegemony. The scope of this project involved an investment in the past and exploited the history film genre’s engagement with the melodramatic mode and its nostalgic impulses. These qualities allowed for a remapping of the past into a hyperreal prosthesis that both presages the renegotiated masculinity represented by Hanks in the 90s and revels in unquestioned domination of White masculinity. On the other hand, when engaging the romantic-comedy genre, Hanks’ dismissal and invalidation of women’s tears demonstrated the project’s attempts to territorialize and maintain agency over this appropriated discourse – even within a genre that traditionally
operates within a feminine economy of meaning and through which Hanks is able to prove his heterosexual bona-fides. The scope and scale of this project demonstrate how power may reinvest and renegotiate its presentation to maintain a shared cultural power.

This process of renegotiation of White, heterosexual, masculinity in a time when such hierarchal power structures were perceived to be under threat is achieved and made visible through its engagement with the melodramatic mode. This process of appropriation did not finish with Hanks or this cultural moment but continues to be expressed in a variety of media, as well as larger political actions and policies – such as greenwashing, rainbow capitalism, sportswashing, and bad faith applications of the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments in the United States to restrict voting access and reinscribe White supremacy. All of these reactionary projects claim some form of victimization through an engagement with counter-discourses that are perceived as challenges to dominant power structures, but may betray their aims through a close examination of the expression of these engagements. What this study demonstrates, then, is a single instance amongst many in which a particularly inconspicuous form of renegotiation and appropriation of power took place to reaffirm White masculine hegemony within popular culture through the star persona of Tom Hanks and an engagement with melodramatic excess.
Notes

1 The term and early scholarship around the “crisis in/of masculinity” was first introduced in the 1960s and 70s by the works of George M. Fredrickson (1965), James R. McGovern (1966), John Higham (1970), and Gerald Franklin Roberts (1970).


9 Malin’s work is in a similar theoretical lineage as Susan Jeffords’ study of “Hard Body” masculinity of the 80s under Reagan – demonstrating how the perpetual reconfiguration of masculinity, as a response to the cultural pressures, ultimately serves to uphold its power structures. While Jeffords, and to an extent Malin’s work, are a bit broad in their pronouncements of unified conceptions of masculinity and selective in their models, this thesis utilizes their general structure to study more pointedly and directly the renegotiation of masculinity within a specific context and as a means to explicate the melodramatic mode’s use within it as a tool of a reactionary hegemonic project. To this end, the scope of this study is limited specifically to the 1990s as it provides a critical and discrete period to understand the “crisis of masculinity” as a time in which progressive and counter-dominant values challenged traditional patriarchal power structures, which in turn reacted to preserve themselves through a multifaceted strategy that included expression and containment of these challenges. Bookended by two dominant reactionary conservative movements in U.S. politics, a close study of the 1990s demonstrates how White masculine hegemony maintained cultural cache through a time of perceived existential crisis by adapting to the shifting cultural environment.


13 This critique is most notably informed by D.Z. Demetriou’s argument that hegemonic masculinity itself is already multifaceted and hybrid in nature as it adopts and internalizes multiple masculinities to retain and perpetuate patriarchal power. See R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” Gender and Society 19, no. 6 (2005): 847-848.
For a framework of studying historical renegotiations of masculinity, and the interdependent structure of hegemonic masculinity specifically, this thesis relies on a Foucauldian reading of power and the work of Steven Cohan, *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); and Susanne Kord and Elisabeth Krimmer, *Contemporary Hollywood Masculinities: Gender, Genre, and Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). Cohan, in studying the renegotiated masculinity manifest in the Hollywood films of 1950s, argues that masculinity is creative and established culturally through performatively means to establish normative and non-normative archetypes – both of which create a co-dependent system of support that underwrites their common cultural power. Kord and Krimmer describe a similar state of fractured and contradictory, but nonetheless complimentary, representations of masculinities within films of the 1990s through the 2000s. Throughout their exploration of the balancing act of violence and sensitivity in depictions of modern masculinity, Kord and Krimmer argue that there remains a consistent narrative of the wounded, emasculated man, reclaiming his phallic power: demonstrating how seemingly diverse and multifaceted forms of masculinity consistently advocate the same cultural myths and remedies.


26 To a similar end, Donna Peberdy, *Masculinity and Film Performance: Male Angst in Contemporary American Cinema* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) provides a study of male angst in Hollywood films, and uses the performativity of male angst as a byway to discuss the disaffection that results from the perceived crisis in current masculinity. While Peberdy does not link this performativity within an overall reactionary project and instead prioritizes the performativity of masculinity, this thesis utilizes the appropriation of melodrama, and the excess produced therein, to understand the larger cultural renegotiation and political project.


One notable moment and analysis of male tears in film comes in the postscript of Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 189-191. Cavell studies a scene from *Adam’s Rib* (1949) in which Adam (Spencer Tracy) demonstrates the capacity for men to use tears to manipulate—a quality he suggests women were thought to have full ownership of. Cavell is generous in his reading of the scene and offers it as an example of the film’s thesis that there is not a great distinction between the sexes: demonstrating both the capacity of men to feel and perform in the same way as women, as well restating the “unknownness” at the center of his thesis. I would argue, however, that the scene casts tears as a manipulative, feminine practice, and offers a permissibility to both utilize such sentimental appeals and reject feminine tears as artificial. Not only does this suggest a performative and cinematic lineage through which Hanks’ renegotiated masculinity and tears are used to mock, manipulate, and appropriate, but also provides a space to reflect on how this progressive mentality of indistinction between genders may be used to disenfranchise and undermine subversive discourses.


34 Steve Neale, “Melodrama and Tears,” *Screen* 27, no. 6 (1986): 11.


41 Steven Neale, “Melodrama and Tears,” *Screen* 27, no. 6 (1986): 6.

42 Joy Van Fuqua, “‘Can You Feel it, Joe?:’ Male Melodrama and the Feeling Man,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 38, (Fall, 1996): 34.

43 In Christine Gledhill, “Signs of Melodrama,” in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (Abingdon: Routledge, 1991), 210. Gledhill points out that stardom itself is an extension of the melodramatic mode into popular culture and thus plays on the extratextual reality of these personas.


51 It is worth noting that there is one additional cry for Edgecomb performed by Dabbs Greer playing an elderly version of the character. Greer’s tears as Edgecomb are actually the first seen in the film and come suddenly and forcefully when *Top Hat* (1935) comes on the TV in his retirement home and Fred Astaire sings “Cheek to Cheek” to Ginger Rogers as they dance. Through the course of *The Green Mile,* it is revealed that Coffey’s final request before execution was to watch “a flicker show,” and after seeing this film he quietly sings the song before being executed. This initial cry thus primes the audience with sympathy for Edgecomb, and the delayed understanding of its significance with Coffey’s murder create a closed loop of victimization for Edgecomb.


53 One might see this as an interesting subversion of the “White savior narrative,” in which a White character gain introspective insight as they act to save or rescue non-White peoples from unfortunate circumstances. Whereas these narratives and this film reinforce White hegemony and righteousness through the benevolence and superiority of White peoples, this film specifically frames this benevolence through the murder of a Black man. While Coffey is cast as the Christ-figure by performing miracles and being crucified, it is Edgecomb who is treated as Coffey’s savior by killing him rather than freeing him.


57 While Gump is portrayed as an unwitting interloper to the tides of history, innocuous and unthreatening, the structure of the film reaffirms and recenters the White masculine power he represents. This is quite literally done through the re-mastering of archival images to digitally insert Gump into them. As Robert Burgoyne points out in his reading of the film, the first-person narrative of the film prioritizes Gump’s subject position in such a manner that re-orients essential cultural moments of the 60s and 70s in a manner that denies the divisiveness of the era and reconstitutes it with an essentialized and unified national memory constructed from key cultural touchstones. See Robert Burgoyne, “Prosthetic Memory/National Memory: Forrest Gump,” in *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 117-119.

58 Steve Neale, “Melodrama and Tears,” *Screen* 27, no. 6 (1986): 11-12.


61 Ibid.


68 One of the best contemporary examples of the continuation of the renegotiation identified in this thesis can be seen recently in season one of the popular HBO show The Last of Us (2023-Present), based off a videogame series by the same name. Multiple tragic gay love stories are invented and incorporated into the narrative in a manner that reinforces and encourages the individualist, patriarchal, and libertarian thrust of the show – and the apocalypse genre generally. Despite this fact, mainstream discourse around episodes about these romances have hinged far more on identity politics, homophobia, and narrative adaptation than the episodes’ conservative political messaging, once again obscuring a reactionary discourse through non-hegemonic bodies and narratives. For exemplars of this discourse that praises the episode’s queer representation, admonishes homophobic audience responses, yet ignores the underlying political messaging of the show, see the contemporary articles Paul Tassi, “Surprise, The Last of Us Episode 3 Is Being Review Bombed,” Forbes online, February 2, 2023.; and Noel Murray, “The Last of Us Season 1, Episode 3 Recap: One More Good Day,” The New York Times, January 30, 2023.
Bibliography


