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Some Notes on Racial Trauma in Peter Weir's Fearless

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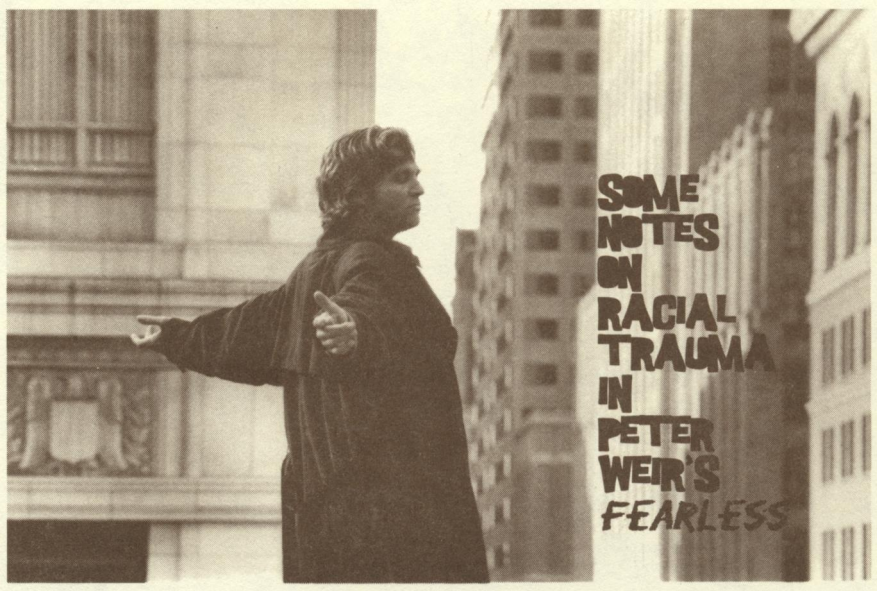
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“Cities, like dreams, are built from desires and fears, although the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules absurd, their perspectives deceptive, and everything hides something else.”
—Italo Calvino, *The Invisible Cities*

If Italo Calvino’s assertion is correct, that cities (or nations) are built from fears, what landscape might an absence of fear reveal? What borders might disappear, what walls come crashing down, what new identities be constituted?

My reading of racial trauma in Peter Weir’s *Fearless* has evolved from a series of questions: could Carla, the Rosie Perez character, have been played by an established well-known white actor—say, Glenn Close, Julia Roberts, or William Hurt? How would their visible ethnic and sexual markers have changed the trajectory of this story, its ideological landscape? Why is it necessary that Jeff Bridges’s counterpart in trauma, his partner in the voyage through this other city the crash elicits, be his sexual and racial other? What economy of desire do Rosie’s ethnicity and gender inscribe? From what cultural and social fears does his trauma (as opposed to hers) release him? What becomes possible when the white male hero loses his fear? How does his journey metaphorically suggest another upon which a traumatized nation might embark? What kind of guilt evokes such trauma? And where, with whom, in this filmic economy, lies salvation?

If we were to base our response to this last question on the film’s ending, salvation would seem to lie with the white, European, bourgeois wife and mother who can bring Max Klein back to the sober reality of his yuppie kingdom. But films are not made of endings, alone. Indeed, this ending could almost be taken for granted, as Hollywood films go. What I find interesting in this case is the racialized landscape that unfolds as part of the process Max Klein must undergo to “get home”—that is, in the film’s discourse, to “find the mother,” to be “cured” of his guilt and trauma, to choose life. He cannot get there without Rosie; he needs her to restore the identity this metaphorical crash calls into crisis. As such, the space of trauma maps out an imagined community¹ at once full of possibilities and painful limitations. It is a space that suspends the historically specific power dynamics that have traumatized and haunt mainstream American culture; and it therefore presents itself as being beyond politics—a dangerous space in which to believe.

I will focus here, then, on the “how we get there” and on what an absence of fear (or, in translation: the assumption of guilt, of an overwhelming national guilt) makes possible

before the film's all too comfortable closure. I will argue that at least on one level—that of the relationship between Max and Carla—the film functions as a national romance, and that as wounded ethnic “other,” Carla’s healing (Max’s ability to heal Carla) evokes an idealistic and finally quite racist resolution to larger, national, color-coded wounds. If the crash of Inter-city flight 202 echoes the ethnically marked violent crashing of inner cities throughout the U.S. in the eighties and nineties, *Fearless* suggests how we might save our privileged white selves while salvaging something from the wreck.

It has been suggested that borders are more important to the foundation of nations, to their integrity, than originary founding fathers, an idea that reverberates throughout this film. The film slips and slides along the Mexican-American or Latino-American border, suggesting that the reconstitution of U.S. national integrity depends on our “successful” navigation of this border. The opening sequence maps out the terrain: white noise, sounds of helicopters, a cornfield not immediately identifiable as such. Smoke, a feeling of disorientation. Jeff Bridges as Max Klein thrashing his way through the green stalks, a baby in his arms, a child close behind. The scene recalls the green jungles of Central America. There is no history, no context that allows us to make sense of what we’re viewing. The camera zooms back and we see a larger picture, people following Klein, dazed, as though they are emerging from darkness into the light. We realize they are winding their way through a cornfield, not a jungle. This is America, and yet it’s not: cut to three Latinos kneeling on the ground, praying. Mexican migrant farm workers, most likely. Only then does the camera sweep to the remnants of the wreck, only then do we realize we are observing what is left of a plane crash. We are standing with Max Klein and these Latinos near an edge, at some kind of border, in a place that is strange and yet familiar, victims of misrecognition, not quite knowing what we see until the fallen airplane names it for us.

From this beginning, ethnic markers abound. We later learn that the plane has crashed in Southern California. We have crashed on the border, we are its witnesses. We see the crash through the gaze and prayers of the three Latino men. We are in another country, in a scarred land that resembles a war zone. Families are split apart, babies separated from their mothers, children travelling alone in search of substitute fathers. Max Klein rejects the role of the father in this first sequence, leaves the boy he has saved to the care of another, points to the baby he’s holding and announces “I’ve got to find the mother.” The film could be read as his journey back to the mother, as the reconstitution of the American family, another wreck to piece together in this wasteland. But how to get back?

The psychiatrist in the film, played by John Turturro—an actor whose ethnic markers, significantly, are ambiguous enough—indicates a direction. He has the brilliant idea of putting Max and Carla together, so they might help one another work their ways back to health. Carla might reawaken the fear Max has lost in the crash, while he might be able to check hers—a perfect fairy tale scenario, replete with the obligatory power dynamics, fear of the other, and knight in shining armour (seen, of course, from the establishment perspective the psychiatrist represents). As privileged interpreter within the filmic narrative, the psychiatrist assumes a role Ana M. López claims for the Hollywood film industry, that of cultural ethnographer mediating between divergent, socially and historically distinct positions, searching for a “happily ever after.”

In a provocative essay on the representation of Latina women in Hollywood films, López asks “What happens when Hollywood self-consciously and intentionally assumes the role of cultural ethnographer?” (López 406). She goes on to answer this question (in a different context) by suggesting both a motive—the Good Neighbor Policy as the U.S. goes in search of new markets following World War II—and some ways in which Latina women consequently came to figure, in the 1940s, in Hollywood films. She writes:

Hollywood’s new position was defined by its double-imperative as “ethnographer” of the Americas; that is, by its self-appointed mission as translator of the ethnic and sexual threat of Latin American otherness into peaceful good neighborliness *and* by its desire to use that translation to attempt to make further inroads into the resistant Latin American movie market without damaging its national box office. What Hollywood’s Good Neighbor regime demanded was the articulation of a different female star persona that could be readily identi-

able as Latin American (with the sexual suggestiveness necessary to fit the prevailing stereotype) but whose sexuality was neither too attractive (to dispel the fear-attraction of miscegenation) nor so powerful as to demand its submission to a conquering North American male. (López 414)

Within this set-up, Carla—beautifully played by Rosie Perez—seems to fit quite nicely the very same requirements López outlines for “Good Neighbor” films, although for different motives and in response to an already altered (racially mixed) national landscape. Carla is readily identifiable as Latina “with the sexual suggestiveness necessary to fit the prevailing stereotype,” but in no case so overwhelming or threatening “as to demand [her] submission to a conquering North American male” (and it is difficult to recall a better representation in the last few years of that conquering North American male—albeit with a hint of sensitivity because deep down he’s suffering—than Jeff Bridges’s fearless Max Klein). The details may have changed today, but not the motives: how to bolster a national self (white, middle class, heterosexual) lost and quivering with fear (read: guilt) in light of the end of the Cold War, escalating racial tensions, Rodney King, riots and crime, Nafta and a global economy that threatens to do away with so-called pure, good, old-fashioned American values?

Given the economics and the socio-cultural context at work, it seems that one of the film’s messages is that “we” (white, middle class, heterosexual, especially male, Americans) have, in fact, nothing to fear: the “other” that we fear will devour us (à la Lupe Vélez) is actually quite loveable—in a needy, meek, and basically harmless way. This makes for a pretty tame national romance; Rosie Perez as Carla is not at all “the hotblooded, thickly accented, Latin temptress with insatiable sexual appetites” that made Lupe Vélez a star in the 1930s and ostracized her in the early forties” (López 412). And Max Klein admits no lust, only a “feeling of overwhelming love for her.” No danger of miscegenation, of contamination here. Indeed, the film sets the two up as potential lovers and almost immediately forecloses this possibility, the culmination of which is a single chaste kiss.

Again and again, the film insists on taming our fears as it tames this other: an other that respects boundaries, that seeks only friendship, and that will sacrifice relationship and personal desire for the sake of a whitewashed nuclear family’s survival. Rosie, as Carla, abides by the rules of a city built from fears, and thus she enables Max Klein to transgress, to enter her domain, one that up to now has remained separate and unfamiliar and scary. She is the vehicle for his holiday tour in a land that haunts him (as it haunts the hegemonic construction of “America”); she gives him access to those things against which his identity as successful white American male has been defined. If Max and Carla are ghosts, it is because they inhabit the land of the dead, the ostracized, the disappeared with respect to a consumer culture that has defined itself against most of the things they represent (truth-telling, cross-class and cross-racial bonding, rejection of materialism and the notion of monetary compensation). We catch glimpses of the U.S. as seen from their traumatized eyes—not a pretty picture, most of the time. So why go back?

The film’s answer for Carla is clear: to shop.

I am being only slightly facetious here. After all, the scene immediately preceding Carla’s “cure” takes place in a mall. A cathartic shopping experience thus sets the stage for her so-called salvation. It follows a scene in which Max has been driving Carla around the city, providing her with an education that enables her to see what he sees, in a high-brow aesthetic and seemingly a-political sort of way. He points out various styles of architecture, a mural with Latino motifs, a neighborhood in Oakland that was “going to be gentrified, but then the recession hit.” They agree that the country’s falling apart, and in Max’s words: “The United States is finished, but you and me, we’re in peak condition.” So what do they do? They go shopping.

The mall scene is perhaps the most obvious in a series of bizarre couplings that their attempts to navigate and domesticate the border produce. It brings together the Mexican Day of the Dead and a commercialized American Christmas to produce, in the words of *New York Times* critic Vincent Canby, “the film’s most saccharine sequence” (Canby B6). It consists of turning the Day of the Dead into a commercial enterprise from which American businesses can profit. The narrative thus suggests that Latinos could help in this rebuilding

of the nation—in the restructuring of the economy. Although Carla is resistant when Max first suggests they buy presents for their dead, she is finally persuaded and learns to enjoy the experience, if in a passive sort of way. Max thus guides her back to her ethnic past and reorganizes her relationship to it. The Mexican Day of the Dead traditions become absorbed as they enter a global market dictated by U.S. economic interests. The line seems to be: not to worry, we (Americans) will not be devoured by such rituals, we can turn them to our advantage. The Day of the Dead through this logic becomes yet another holiday defined by an expanding consumer culture, in which Latinos will prove key participants. Instead of making candy shaped like skulls, or praying, or adorning graves with flowers, or dancing with the dead, through such couplings Latinas will learn to shop in U.S. malls.

The mall scene thus performs what the psychiatrist—as representative of both the airline's economic interests and the American psyche—has already articulated as the best way out of guilt and trauma. As the officiator in this national drama, represented by the metaphor of the tribe he calls forth, he orchestrates the preferred ways in which this national guilt might be resolved. The scene which captures this most clearly is the survivors' meeting Carla (not Max) attends. In this context of survival, whether or not Carla should let go of her trauma, forget the loss of her child and hence the loss of a future that has been terminated by the crash of inter-city flight 202, is never even raised as a question. The assumption is that she should; the issue of responsibility for yet another young male life lost is explicitly voided.

Although the psychiatrist mentions the importance of re-telling and collective memory, only certain interpretive turns are permissible within this newly constituted community. In this filmic economy, the preferred reading articulated and mediated by the psychiatrist (as caretaker of this newly formed tribe) is that *no one* is to blame. When Carla lashes out at the stewardess who, as the plane is crashing, tells her to hold Leonardo (bubble) in her lap and that everything will be O.K., she is asking her to take responsibility for her role in his death. The stewardess sets the child up to die, and thereby also sets Carla up to assume the blame for that death; if only mothers kept a tighter grip on their children, such personal and national disasters might be avoided, both on inter-city flights and in innercity streets. By blaming the stewardess and the infrastructure of the plane (which makes it impossible for Carla to secure the child's safety with the seat belt), Carla can find an explanation for his death. But this possibility is forbidden by the psychiatrist who, for the sake of the tribe we are told, insists that "no one is to blame" (after all, if he let Carla blame the seat belt or the stewardess, he would be admitting negligence on her part and doing his client, the airline, a disservice). Such accusations, he argues, will not help the healing process. The only acceptable way for Carla to heal within this framework is by forgetting her own discourse of social responsibility. And with it, she must let go of her history, her pain and the political identity that might be forged through it. Her discourse of social responsibility is substituted by the psychiatrist's injunction to live in the present, not dwell on the past: to forgive and forget for the sake of "the tribe." And what better signifier of this than the consumer space of the mall—a space situated beyond both innercity and gentrified neighborhood that offers her no access to her class and racially coded damage? Max helps Carla by leading her into the shopping mall, consumer culture finally achieving the erasure of history that also erases Carla's politicized anger; join us, the boy could not be saved.

Max's salvation is a different story. If the film suggests how Latinos can gain access to privilege without harming anyone—so-called good, non-threatening conduct equals greater acquisition potential—it is less convincing when it comes to resolving Max's crisis.

The film's ending suggests that remembering the source of trauma must lead, inevitably, to the rearticulation of separate worlds. Max's and Carla's union cannot bear fruit in a nation defined by fears and forbidden desires; indeed, the desire that it would do so has been successfully redirected by the end. Carla, following a conversation with Max's wife where she says, "I have a son and I want him to have a father," visits Max in the hospital and makes him say goodbye. This is the last time we see Carla.

In an essay on "Gender, Race, and the Bourgeois Ideal in Contemporary Film," Robyn Wiegman offers one explanation for the impossibility of this cross-cultural romance. She argues that "it is hardly coincidental that representation—U.S. cinema in particular—finds

itself marked by the contradictory conditions of cultural racial ideology in this era," conditions she finds manifest in contemporary U.S. films: "on one hand, the rhetorical dream of a post-1960s egalitarianism manifested in greater visibility for black [and other ethnically distinct] actors while, on the other, the containment of this visibility by narrative scenarios that reaffirm white masculine power and its bourgeois basis of dominance" (Wiegman 312). In the case of *Fearless*, one thing the end makes clear is that Carla's influence must recede for white masculine power and its bourgeois basis of dominance to be reaffirmed. If the plot, on a superficial level, has pitted the two women in Max's life against each other—colored Carla vs. white European wife played by Isabella Rossellini—the face of Lancôme wins. It's true—Carla never really had a chance, mostly because she did not want it. But for the sake of narrative drama, it is still Isabella Rossellini as the legitimate, socially sanctioned partner who must secure for Max his old identity and save him. She is the signifier, par excellence, of that bourgeois basis of dominance, it being white, upper middle-class American power under siege. Only she can re-establish order, a proper allegiance, in a world gone berserk. And only their progeny can lead America into the future.

In the last few minutes of the film, Max Klein, back from the hospital and in the kitchen alone with his wife for the first time, looks at her and says, "I want you to save me." She's confused by this request, the doorbell rings, their lawyer's at the door, with champagne and strawberries, ready to celebrate their success in getting a huge settlement. Max's plea hangs in the air as the wife gets out the champagne glasses and Max reaches for a strawberry. Now, the strawberries are significant. They are the sign of an inverted world; they prove to Max—who before the crash had a deathly allergy to them—that, having faced his fear of death in the crash, he has become invincible. They are also a sign of that borderland he inhabits with Carla, where they live as ghosts, not quite sure if they are alive or dead, always on the verge of disappearing. He has been eating strawberries throughout the film with no adverse reaction. At this point, however, the camera's gaze aligns with the wife's gaze as he begins to chew; we see him, the wife screams, Max chokes and falls to the floor in convulsions. He thinks, "This is it. This is the moment of your death." It is up to the wife to save him.

Since seeing the film for the first time, I have been bothered by this ending. Why now, why at this precise moment must he choke on a strawberry, aside from it being necessary for filmic closure? It seems rather arbitrary, to say the least, and the film seems to be satisfied with the absence of an explanation. But I'm not. A friend suggested that the wife recognizes his vulnerability and registers it, reminding him of it and thus triggering the allergic reaction. She returns him to his old body, defines it for him, reinscribes his limits. And thus, her gaze reinscribes the dangers inherent in the altered state his post-traumatic stress disorder has mapped out—specifically death and the destruction of the nuclear family, not to mention loss of self. It is her fear that saves him.

It strikes me as very interesting that in the cultural logic of our time, only the socially legitimate wife with the appropriate racial and class markings can return this man (and us) to health. Only she can restore the home, rescue the father, put an end to the desire and fantasy Max's and Carla's invisible city maps. What I would like to highlight here is that in order to be saved, in order to become visible, Max must be recognized by his wife, reminded of his vulnerabilities and fears, and hence reintroduced into the family fold. Health means leaving the border to re-enter the city from which he has strayed; and he does so quite a rich man: "white masculine power and its bourgeois basis of dominance," thanks to the wife, are secure. And, in fact, they are *more* secure having been reaffirmed through this successful mediation of the border; having confronted his and our collective fears, Max can return from his journey knowing that there is nothing to fear and—or because—there is no one to blame. The final shot is of the two Kleins, rolling on the rug together, holding one another, laughing with relief.

Mrs. Klein's words, "I have a son and I want him to have a father," haunt me as I think about the consequences of a discourse of consumption and forgiveness based on guilt. Carla, by the end of the film, doesn't have a son, or a father for her son, and somehow this should be O.K., the final happiness of that other family erasing her loss. But what does this "have and have not" dualism set up? Whose family are we recreating, whose world is intact, who

will produce this new nation's sons—the sons of heroes or good samaritans for a newly articulated fatherland?

By successfully bringing Max back to the family fold, his wife reminds him of his responsibilities and their boundaries: Max is responsible for his child, but not for the little boy he saved or for Carla's dead child or for the hundreds of others he has been unable to save. Freed of guilt (purged of his lapse symbolized by his consumption of forbidden fruit—the strawberries) he can return to the fold as hero, capable of renewing this U.S.-European alliance whose progeny will survive and upon which lies the burden of the future. Carla's politicized discourse of social responsibility is thus replaced by the wife's, which goes something like this: among the reasons for choosing life, the most forceful is the responsibility of this father to his wife and child. Max Klein returns for them, and having accepted that responsibility above and beyond all others, he is released from the guilt of having left his friend behind. He has not been able to save everybody, but that does not make him complicit in their deaths; the solution for the nineties is to save oneself by owning one's responsibility only with respect to the individualized nuclear family. This family erases the material reality of all those other deaths, turns the focus in on itself, and triumphs over a social discourse of responsibility that demands we look beyond our homes to our communities and the power dynamics that shape our lives. De-politicized personal politics: another version of the "me generation" eighties, another reason to turn a blind eye in an increasingly more violent world.

I think it crucial to ask, in conclusion, which allegiances are important, finally, and what are their consequences? Which will be privileged? Although the film's closing sequence suggests just the opposite, I don't believe that in a world still shaped and torn apart by ethnic cleansing, we can afford to hide in the comfort of our own homes, accept responsibility only for our variously constituted nuclear families, and forsake all others. I, for one, want to privilege the kinds of questions the traumatized Max and Carla underline again and again, before leaving their invisible city: who's responsible? who's complicit? and who wins? They are questions the ending erases, as it erases the kinds of injustices and the quest for responsibility the crash made visible. But they are questions that continue to haunt, at least this viewer, along with another one that the ending, itself, provokes: can the market, Hollywood, global capitalism really accomplish the fairy tale ending—the absorption of difference, violence, and guilt—in which *Fearless* would make us believe?

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Notes

¹ I borrow this phrase from Benedict Anderson's discussion of nationalism and national identity in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.

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