

Racial Privacy, the L.A. Ensemble Film, and Paul Haggis's *Crash*

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This close-up is a widely circulated publicity image for Paul Haggis's *Crash* (2005), which was awarded the 2006 Oscar for best film after being endorsed by Oprah Winfrey and lauded by critics as “one of the best Hollywood movies about race” and a frank, intelligent treatment of “the rage and foolishness produced by intolerance” (Taylor, Denby).¹ In the frame, a wealthy, light-skinned black² woman named Christine clings to a strong, comforting policeman named Ryan. Her wedding band figures prominently in the image, and her face is a mask of distress, shock, or grief. But otherwise, the embrace

seems intimate—almost erotic: their lips just shy of touching, the couple seems on the verge of kissing (as couples tend to do on movie posters). Ryan's face, too, seems guarded, a mask of determination—of heroism, really, for Ryan has just risked his life to drag the woman out of her burning, overturned car, and despite his fellow officers' attempts to pull him away. The sequence leading up to this shot emphasizes Ryan's heroism: much of it occurs in slow motion, with close-ups of the policeman lying supine beneath the gasping, immobilized, and inarticulately moaning woman while attempting to cut her loose. This aestheticized (and hyperbolic) act of heroism, in turn, represents a moving instance of racial reconciliation in what turns out to be the climactic, scene of Haggis's film.

An earlier sequence has shown us what is being reconciled here: the night before, Officer Ryan arbitrarily stopped Christine and her husband—a black couple driving a luxury SUV—for engaging in oral sex while operating a motor vehicle, harassed and physically intimidated her husband, and then performed a lewd “weapons search” on the simultaneously outraged and powerless Christine. The rescue scene thus functions as a melodrama of “reverse racism,” in which Ryan heroically atones for violating the woman by saving her life, literally liberating her from her seat restraints. But in the rescue sequence, Ryan again plays an intensely active role as the (again) immobilized Christine, upon recognizing the man who recently violated her, screams for him to leave her alone but eventually submits to his heroic and disturbingly intimate act of rescue. Disgusted by her gratitude, perhaps, she hates how much she needs him; he, however, averts his eyes from hers out of respect, introspection, or relief. The movie's centerpiece—the car “crash” that metaphorically anchors all its myriad interpersonal and interracial encounters—emphatically reestablishes an image of white masculinity which has been threatened by carjackings, disease (Officer Ryan's father, who may have prostate cancer, finds it impossible to urinate³), and a black man driving a nice car. The reinscription, at the very moment of racial reparation, of a familiar model of white male heroic agency at the expense of the inarticulate, passive, victimized black woman⁴ seems problematic here, especially since this literal car crash provides the metaphorical anchor for all of the interpersonal and interracial encounters and relationships explored in Haggis's film.

How did such a film—with its genuine interest in exploring

and partially resolving difficult racial tensions and its naïve reliance on melodramatic moments of reconciliation or resolution—win such widespread approval as a supposedly “realistic” race film, and come to be screened in “diversity training” programs around the country? How does *Crash* represent and conceptualize racism and its amelioration, and what does its conceptualization of these issues exclude? This essay will investigate the generic, geographical, and political conditions that lay the groundwork for *Crash* by describing a subgenre of “ensemble films” set in Los Angeles, then looking more closely at Haggis’s own use of racial melodrama in creating a film whose unblinking representation of prejudice reduces the complex dynamics of racial formation to the scale of interpersonal relationships and privatizes race in insidious and politically reactionary ways. I will conclude by situating *Crash* in the context of Ward Connerly’s recent legal and ideological attempts to do away with race in California. Throughout, I argue that the ensemble film’s tendency to reduce race to individual characters undermines its explorations of an impossible sense of “community” or commonality among all Los Angelenos. A more nuanced exploration of the ensemble film’s most characteristic question—what is it that holds people together?—would require a sustained treatment of the intersecting economic, geographical, and racial conditions that keep us apart.

L.A. Ensembles: Film and Cognitive Mapping

As several of its reviewers point out, *Crash* inserts itself into an emergent genre of ensemble films set in Los Angeles. Of course, the ensemble film—which tracks the daily lives and interactions of a large cast of seemingly unrelated characters—has not always been tied to L.A.: Robert Altman’s *Nashville* (1975) and Steven Soderbergh’s *Traffic* (2000), for example, successfully apply the genre to more geographically decentralized subjects, namely, the country music industry and the international drug trade. But a distinct tradition of L.A. ensemble films can be traced back from *Crash* to Lawrence Kasdan’s *Grand Canyon* (1991), Altman’s *Short Cuts* (1993)—the film’s working title, *L.A. Short Cuts*, further emphasizes the link between its formal innovations and its geographical setting—and Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Magnolia* (1999).

These films share a number of common themes and formal strategies. Whereas the assassination of Barbara Jean at the heart of *Nashville* and the political economy underlying the “war on drugs”

in *Traffic* direct audiences to view these films through cultural and economic lenses, L.A. ensemble films focus more exclusively on interpersonal, sexual, and psychological issues. They also share a fascination (at least at a superficial level) with class stratification and racial tension, the mundane perils of driving in L.A., and the unifying terror of the city's natural disasters. Thus, *Short Cuts* is bookended by a Medfly epidemic and an earthquake; *Magnolia* climaxes with a torrential downpour of frogs onto the streets and automobiles of the San Fernando Valley; and *Crash* presents both a series of car accidents and a meteorological phenomenon nearly as surreal as the plague of frogs: snow falling over L.A. It is as if these films, having set themselves the impossible task of tracing the economic, spiritual, and physical connections among their diverse casts of characters, eventually throw up their hands and rely on L.A.'s rich assortment of natural and unnatural disasters⁵ to provide a vague sense that we are all in this together.

In addition to these common themes and narrative strategies, ensemble films share formal and stylistic elements like rapid cross-cutting or "short cuts," a propensity for montage and continual camera motion, scenes choreographed to music,⁶ and the use of rhyming visual threads and graphic matches—most often cuts between different characters driving cars or walking through doors to different buildings—to connect disparate sequences. Because they generally occur over the course of a few days, these films also take an interest in recurrent scenes and activities that emphasize the pace of everyday life. Finally, the juxtaposition of subplots and even particular images produces a sense of irony inaccessible to the individual characters' perspectives: *Grand Canyon* opens with a movie producer and a lawyer walking out of a Lakers game, and later shows black characters watching basketball games on TV; the woman who runs over a child in *Short Cuts* has no idea that, after walking home on his own, he will collapse, fall into a coma, and eventually die; *Magnolia*'s various characters have no clue that they are all connected by the quiz show "What Do Kids Know?"; the victims of Officer Ryan's virulent racism in *Crash* don't know (but does it matter?) that each night he watches his father suffer from prostate cancer.

But if this omniscient point of view promises the viewer a comprehensive grasp of the various "coincidences" or forces that draw these ensembles of characters together and mysteriously determine their

lives, it never quite delivers on that promise. The viewer's privileged perspective only yields further mysteries, additional examples of inexplicable, seemingly "magical" coincidences. For example, *Grand Canyon* portrays—but does not explain—two "miraculous," life-saving incidents intended to offset dozens of threatening encounters with street crime and thinly portrayed "gangbangers"; and the L.A. landscape of *Crash* is ironically suffused with Christmas displays and other Christian imagery. Anderson exaggerates these enigmatic coincidences, precluding *Magnolia*'s story with a pseudo-documentary that presents other inexplicable coincidences and then impishly interspersing dozens of references to the numbers eight and two—oblique references to the Biblical plague of frogs in *Exodus* 8:2—throughout the film.⁷ Finally, ensemble films are often partial in the most literal of ways, unwittingly reflecting the white male (and presumably liberal) perspective of their directors.⁸ When race is represented—usually in the form of a few black characters—most ethnic and demographic groups that constitute L.A.'s diverse population are simultaneously excluded.

What at once fascinates and inevitably frustrates in L.A. ensemble films is perhaps the most characteristic psychological malady of urban life, and particularly of living amid L.A.'s unique brand of automobile-centered (which is to say, fundamentally *decentered*) metropolitan sprawl. The social theorist Georg Simmel famously characterizes this malady, in his seminal essay on "The Metropolis and Mental Life," as a "blasé outlook" that devalues "the entire objective world": the shocking external stimuli that characterize metropolitan environments lead people to form an alienating, protective shell that mediates between their psyches and the outside world (329-30). Indeed, in this context L.A.'s automobiles seem like materializations of the urban ego's protective shell, mobile barriers that safeguard the self from contact with others. But a city's whirlwind of encounters and stimuli has also been described in positive terms: the cultural geographer Nigel Thrift, for example, suggests that to the extent that "cities may be seen as roiling maelstroms of affect," they can provide the emotional groundwork for the formation of new and politically progressive communities that transgress the familiar and constraining barriers of race, class, and gender. Jane Jacobs provides a rigorous account of the formation of local trust-based communities in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*—an account whose

emphasis on daily pedestrian encounters pinpoints just the kinds of contacts that L.A.'s freeways have eroded:

The sum of such casual, public contact at a local level—most of it fortuitous, most of it associated with errands, all of it metered by the person concerned and not thrust upon him by anyone—is a feeling for the public identity of people, a web of public respect and trust, and a resource in time of personal or neighborhood need. The absence of this trust is a disaster to a city street. Its cultivation cannot be institutionalized. And above all, *it implies no private commitments.* (56)

Ensemble films appeal to all these fears and fantasies: most of their individual characters and suburban couples share a sense of urban or suburban isolation, but the camera exposes or at least intimates connections even when characters feel most alienated: when characters are not unwittingly rubbing shoulders or crashing cars on the streets, cross-cutting shows that they are at least all unified by common experiences of family problems (*Grand Canyon*), sexual frustration (*Short Cuts*), loneliness (*Magnolia*), and racism (*Crash*). As I will argue below, these films respond to this lack of public trust by taking recourse in "*private commitments*," one-on-one relationships that occasionally cross racial boundaries and both allegorize and disavow the need for more larger-scale, public solutions.

Of these common L.A. experiences, the familiar motif of being lonely in the middle of a crowd provides a point of departure for all of these movies: who are these people we drive past every day? Whose are the faces in the neighborhoods that suburbanites learn to shun, what are these racist policemen, movie directors, cashiers, and doctors like when they are out of uniform, and how are they all interrelated? This isolation is intensified by L.A.'s unprecedented (but increasingly exemplary⁹) urban structure, its status as a centerless "edge city" whose freeway system and segregated suburbs close down spaces for civic or political interaction. As Michael Dear and Steven Flusty explain in their overview of the "L.A. school" of urban studies, this structure results in "the destruction of public space, the creation of forbidden cities sealed against the poor, mean streets where the homeless are deliberately contained, high-tech policing methods that have led to an invisible Haussmannization of Los Angeles, and crowd control through sociospatial segregation" (158). Michael Mann's slow-paced

crime thrillers lyrically evoke the resulting solitude of life in Los Angeles, where homes, offices, and other destinations are not unified by a public communal space so much as they're separated by immense desert distances and long, isolated drives (the very viability of the carpool lanes around the city depends on the majority of its drivers driving alone).¹⁰ Ensemble films, however, deploy external, geographical connections to demonstrate that dozens of connections exist *in spite of* felt loneliness. Here, the contrast among characters isolated in their mansions, apartments, and cars and larger webs of relationships perceived only by the viewer foregrounds the problem of conceiving of L.A. as a whole: what patterns, tendencies, or teleologies give shape to the metropolis's immense and amorphous sprawl?

In *The Image of the City*, the urban scholar Kevin Lynch introduces the notion of "cognitive mapping" to describe an architectural version of this problem: without clear landmarks and other visual cues, he argues, large cities have become too disorienting for their inhabitants to navigate or grasp spatially. Frederic Jameson borrows Lynch's term to describe a larger and more abstract form of disorientation in the era of late capitalism—"the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects" (44). Of course, Los Angeles resonates with both these theories of cognitive mapping: it is at once a decentered metropolis loosely joined by a serpentine network of often jam-packed freeways and a crucial node in an international network of commercial, informational, immigrant, and financial flows. Ensemble films encourage viewers' identification with the objective, all-seeing camera (rather than with any particularly sympathetic character) in order to attempt the impossible task of cognitively mapping L.A., or even a small portion of the metropolis—a handful of suburban houses or a few blocks of Magnolia Boulevard. The promise—if not the delivery—of a cognitive map of the metropolis¹¹ responds to an intense but directionless longing for community on the part of its inhabitants, as well as on the part of the cinematic audience (watching an ensemble film, one can hardly help wondering: who are these people sitting next to me in the darkened theater?).

In the imperialist imaginary of the U.S. and Western Europe, race often plays a key role in the cognitive mapping of a range of geographical spaces, from segregated cities and underdeveloped

regions to large-scale distinctions between nation states and their colonial possessions, centers and peripheries, "civilization" and *terra incognita*, as well as more abstract distinctions between people governed by reason and morality and others represented as mere savages. Racial distinctions locate individuals with respect to both legal protections and social distinction, providing the organizing principle for various regimes of dispossession, labor, and reproduction. But the imposition of racial hierarchies has often met with bitter resistance—a fact that L.A. ensemble films acknowledge and in part respond to by attempting to represent a city whose history has been characterized by race riots, white flight, and a scope of racial diversity that challenges structures of racism based on the opposition between white and black. In all of these films, and particularly in *Crash*, racial difference is what makes a sense of community so elusive—so difficult to perceive, imagine, or fully feel. In these films, race relations themselves appear as mysterious, chaotic, and disorienting; instead of providing easy geographical and metaphysical coordinates for spectators, race itself demands to be cognitively mapped. Before returning to *Crash*, I will conclude this section by tracing how each of its precursors deals with—or else ultimately evades—issues of racial inequality.

The first of the L.A. ensemble films I have singled out, *Grand Canyon*, presents the most direct commentary on black-white relationships across different neighborhoods. The film's main plotline involves a chance encounter between a wealthy, white immigrant lawyer (Mack) and a black tow truck driver (Simon) who "rescues" him from being intimidated and possibly assaulted by a black gang when his Lexus breaks down in a generic "bad neighborhood." A friendship grows out of the encounter, and Mack benevolently intervenes in the lives of both Simon and his extended family, setting up his new friend with the only black woman he knows, and helping to relocate Simon's sister and her children from a primarily black neighborhood to a safer area. Several contrived references to the film's title frame the grand canyon as a symbol of both racial division and its erasure: on the one hand, a movie producer played by Steve Martin likens the Grand Canyon to an unbridgeable rift that has opened up between "those who have money [and] those who don't"—and by extension between whites and blacks, suburban nuclear families and broken inner-city homes; it is from this social, economical, and racial rift that the movie's various violent encounters (the producer, for example, has been shot in the knee

by a thief) emerge. On the other hand, Simon suggests to Mack that the national monument is simply sublime—that it instills a sense of how small and insignificant all human lives are, and thus how insignificant racial tensions are when compared to infinite time and space. When Simon takes both his own family and Mack's to the Grand Canyon at the end of the film, a sudden change in point of view to panoramic helicopter shots accompanied by extravagantly sweeping music seems to correspond to this latter notion of the landscape as a sublime symbol of American universalism, rather than a menacing metaphor for racial or class divisions. Not long before the interracial trip to the Grand Canyon, a small earthquake also brings various characters together. These eruptions and rifts paradoxically compel an intensified and almost symptomatic sense of community and inclusiveness—but the feeling of community starkly excludes the film's cast of caricatured and barely visible "criminals," and the film's inclusiveness is limited to allowing one upwardly mobile black family to participate, belatedly, in "white flight"¹² from the inner city. Finally, conferring a portion of his own privilege onto Simon's family in his own privilege resolves a crisis in Mack's own marriage, enabling the white suburban family to continue thriving, cured of guilt and alienation.¹³

Short Cuts presents a more caustic anatomy of isolated white, suburban families tenuously held together by the very forces that threaten them: adultery, alcoholism, vandalism, depression, suicide, and both physical and emotional abuse enable the film's characters to press on in their sexually repressed roles as husbands, wives, parents, and children. Large-scale forces also play symbolic and social roles: the film is bookended by helicopters spraying the city during the Medfly infestation of 1990¹⁴ and a minor earthquake that unify all the characters under what Michael Davis has called L.A.'s "ecology of fear." Another force that keeps families together throughout the film is a host of minor black characters embodying an "Africanist presence"¹⁵ that presses inwards from the margins of the interconnected plots and settings. The film opens at a jazz club where a wealthy black couple asks a white cosmetologist and his wife to house-sit for them. Later, when the white couple throws a party in their black friends' apartment and the husband pokes fun at their black pornography and jokes about "do[ing] the right thing in their bed," the absence of the successful black family enables both their socialization and sexual titillation. The same jazz club (where a white woman is usually singing on the

stage) sets the stage for another interracial interaction later in the film: an aggressive black ex-convict propositions a white woman and then bullies and intimidates her angry husband, who later compensates for this metaphorically emasculating scene by beating a girl to death for resisting his own passes. These are just a few examples of how marginal black characters help precipitate small crises of white masculinity in the film.¹⁶ Because the Medfly spraying sets the film's events in 1989-1990, the earthquake and the barely avoided interracial violence could allude—like the pessimistic reading of the Grand Canyon—to the racially distributed inequalities in housing, labor, public health, transportation, and police treatment that led up to the L.A. riots. Formally, however, Altman's rapid cross-cutting maintains a heightened sense of contingency and spectatorial distance: because the film's pace and scope prevent its audience from identifying with any particular characters, the melodramatic suffering, reconciliation, and interpersonal reparations of *Grand Canyon* are not an option here.

Magnolia continues to explore the themes of dysfunctional suburban families and threatened white masculinity. The film's subplots develop towards moments of forgiveness and reconciliation: an angry, abandoned son visits his father's deathbed; a molested child becomes a prostitute and refuses to speak to her dying father; the prostitute wonders whether she can expect understanding from a naïve Christian policeman who has taken a liking to her; and a child genius works up the courage to tell his emotionally abusive father that "You have to be nicer to me." All of these subplots also highlight the fragility of white masculinity: a record-setting quiz show winner grows up to be gay and sexually repressed; an equally repressed Christian policeman loses his gun, to his great shame; a star contestant on the quiz show "What Do Kids Know?" wets his pants on stage; two old men who have cheated on their wives slowly die of cancer; and Frank Mackey's popular seminar, "Seduce and Destroy," teaches crowds of sexually insecure men how to "Respect the cock [and] tame the cunt."

Given these concerns, it comes as no surprise that blacks and other ethnic minorities figure in *Magnolia* primarily as psychologically one-dimensional criminals, street kids, and serviceable workers who maintain hospitals and deliver groceries. For example, a Hispanic man and a black woman appear among the team of adult contestants competing against three children on "What Do Kids Know?"—to which

the implicit answer is, “more than minorities know!” But the plotline that opens the film gestures towards a more complex development of black characters: responding to a reported disturbance, Jim—the white policeman whose loneliness and naiveté anchor the film’s movement towards redemption—forcibly enters a black woman’s home, argues with her, handcuffs her to a couch, and discovers a white man’s corpse hidden in her bedroom closet. Regarding the elliptical way in which he treats this story of a single black mother named Marcy and her gangster son (a mysterious hooded figure nicknamed “The Worm”), Anderson explains that originally

there was more of that, and I took it out, but here’s the thing. I stand by the fact that it does function really well the way it is now. It is the most truncated and elliptical bit of the movie, but I thank God that there is something truncated and elliptical in the movie, which does pretty much hit its points. The movie needs something that has mystery, and this one is sort of a representation of spending a couple of days in the Valley: that’s how much color would come into your life. (qtd. in Fuchs n.p.)

Among other things, this quote establishes that Anderson’s intended audience is white, and that “your life” is delineated by the marginalization (“thank God”)—or even the deliberate mystification—of “color.” Like previous L.A. ensemble films, *Magnolia* presents a totalizing image of L.A.’s community by deliberately relegating its black characters to the sidelines.

Yet racial inequality seeps back into the film’s main plotline, in which Jim’s awkward love rehabilitates a white woman who works as a prostitute in order to acquire cocaine. Several parallels connect the love interest, Claudia, to Marcy, the angry black mother who ends up in jail: Jim meets each of them when answering calls about domestic disturbances, both are emotionally distressed, and both women appear to be prostitutes. Claudia’s character functions as a sort of surrogate for Marcy, insofar as the viewer’s sympathy for her victimization by molestation, addiction, and prostitution displaces any sympathy we might have felt for Marcy’s broken home, her intense anger towards the police, her economic dependency on prostitution,¹⁷ and her desperate desire to protect her criminal son. Claudia’s body provides the stage where the two kinds of sin explored by the film—personal

transgressions (usually on the part of males) within the family romance and broader social and racial hierarchies—intersect, and where the personal overtakes and displaces the sociological.

L.A. ensemble films indulge in cinematic lyricism and magical coincidences in order to explore a nostalgia for a lost community—for a sense of community threatened by sexual transgressions against the nuclear family on the one hand, and black *ressentiment* on the other hand. *Magnolia* concludes with a *reductio ad absurdum* of this strategy as a torrential rain of frogs falls onto cars, streets, and bodies throughout the San Fernando Valley. For most of the characters, this plague of frogs comes as a form of redemption—a miraculous and unprecedented event that shocks them out of their trajectories of sin, obsession, and hate towards a resolution steeped in forgiveness. But the film's playful yet insistent references to *Exodus* 8:2 compel us to recall that the Biblical scene has less to do with redemption than *emancipation*. When God tells Moses to say to the Pharaoh, "And if thou refuse to let them go, behold, I will smite all thy borders with frogs," the point is not to bring the Egyptian people together and (to paraphrase the Aimee Mann song that concludes *Magnolia*) "save" them from their loneliness and *anomie*, but rather to liberate and empower an enslaved and oppressed people from a materialistic and intolerant regime. Along with its marginalized subplot about the suffering mother of a black criminal, the very title of *Magnolia* (as both a film and an iconic boulevard) suggests that racial exploitation and segregation—the socio-economic mechanisms that lay the groundwork for the beauty of the old South—persist in altered, mysterious forms in Los Angeles.¹⁸ The following section explores how the recent film, *Crash*, brings the formal and thematic concerns of the ensemble film to bear on the problems of racial intolerance that *Magnolia* and its precursors only gesture towards elliptically.

***Crash*, Melodrama, and Racial Privacy**

By reducing L.A.'s inconceivable sprawl and its vast, intricate webs of influence and control to a manageable (if unusually large) cast of characters who interact in meaningful ways, the ensemble film re-presents the city as a laboratory for carefully controlled ethical experiments.¹⁹ What would happen if a depressed and alienated woman discovered an abandoned baby in the suburban woods, asks *Grand Canyon*? What would happen, Altman wonders, if a group of fishermen who had recently harassed a waitress discovered a

naked woman's corpse floating in a remote river? And how should a policeman act, Anderson asks, when confronted with different characters whose criminal actions stem from profound psycho-sexual or socio-economic causes?

Haggis takes these ethically loaded encounters to an extreme in *Crash*, which opens with the following monologue: "It's the sense of touch. In any real city, you walk, you know? You brush past people, people bump into you. In L.A., nobody touches you. We're always behind this metal and glass. I think we miss that touch so much, that we crash into each other, just so we can feel something." In pursuing this theme of violent interpersonal contact, *Crash* reduces the city's sprawling geography, its lack of a definite center, its incredibly diverse and systematically segregated populations, and its monumental freeways and roads to what feels like a small town: as one incredulous reviewer puts it, "the 12 or 15 major characters of *Crash*—most of them strangers to each other—just can't stop bumping into one another, in a city of 4 million people spread over 465 square miles" (Fellerath n.p.). This reduction of L.A.'s scale has two effects: on the one hand, it focuses the film on interpersonal relationships and the ways in which individuals can (and ought to) change their racial attitudes and racist practices; on the other hand—as I will show in the concluding section of this essay—this reduction of racism to the scale of individual characters occludes crucial and harmful institutional, legal, and historical aspects of racism.

Haggis's interest in the racial ethics of interpersonal encounters frames questions of race in terms of a liberal philosophy that links individualism with an abstract universalism. The following interview excerpts demonstrate this dual commitment:

The film is really about individuals. I wanted to celebrate this.... I just wanted to follow some people that bump into people who carjacked the car. It wasn't about race or particular groups. I wish I planned it so I can take credit with it.... This could have taken place anywhere... not just in America, but Europe, all industrialized nations. (Haggis n.p.)²⁰

On the one hand, this focus on individual relationships foregrounds questions of ethics, and *Crash* consistently tempers its characters' racist outbursts by revealing their origins in personal anxieties, shame, and frailty. Haggis's interest in ethics aligns his film's interest

in the “chronic tragedy, vulnerability, and frailty” of even the most despicable characters with Paul Gilroy’s ethically oriented argument against identity politics in *Against Race*. Gilroy suggests that “The recurrence of pain, disease, humiliation and loss of dignity, grief, and care for those one loves can all contribute to an abstract sense of a human similarity powerful enough to make solidarities based on cultural particularity appear suddenly trivial” (17). But such an abstract, universal humanism dissipates the film’s supposed critique of racial relations in Los Angeles by sidelining the historical and political specificity of U.S. racial formations stemming from chattel slavery and the continued failure of Reconstruction, along with the historical formations of Native American, Chicano, and Asian American identities. This universalization of fragility turns a race-blind eye to the uneven distribution of fragility—to the diverse and often violent processes by which Native Americans were displaced from California, Hispanic ranchers and settlers were expropriated, and various waves of Asian immigrants were imported, exploited, deported, and detained.

Crash deploys several strategies to reduce or atomize these U.S. racial formations. The most obvious of these paradoxically involves a myopic focus on geographically specific ethnic origins, which effectively pushes “political correctness” to politically impoverished extremes. By constantly reminding us that Persians are not Arabs, Puerto Ricans are not Mexicans, and Koreans are not Chinese,²¹ for example, Haggis dismisses any identities or alliances that transcend these groupings (whether for historically racist reasons or in the building of antiracist coalitions), such as Asian American, Chicano/Latino, Arab Americans. A characteristic racist joke from the film, clearly intended to be simultaneously offensive and titillating, exemplifies this strategy’s subtle cancellation of progressive forms of identity politics:

Ria: How ‘bout a geography lesson? My father’s from Puerto Rico. My mother’s from El Salvador. Neither one of those is Mexico.

Graham: Ah. Well then I guess the big mystery is, who gathered all those remarkably different cultures together and taught them all how to park their cars on their lawns?

This joke made by a black policeman—which elicits a combination of guilt and laughter—transfers a potentially critical insight from a

socio-economic register to that of a cheeky rhetorical question. For the answer to this question is not *race* but historically specific practices of *racism*: housing discrimination, the middle-class abandonment of inner cities, discrepancies in employment and salary—as well as colonial inheritances including a Catholic antipathy towards birth control—leave large families from “all these remarkably different cultures” in need of cars (to commute to work, for example) for which they have no allocated parking spaces.

The film’s second strategy for atomizing historically sedimented racial formations takes the form of a melodramatic vision that foregrounds individual suffering. In the first scene that Haggis shot for the film, Officer Ryan offers a poignant account of his father’s experiences as a businessman who always treated black employees fairly, only to end up being ruined by affirmative action initiatives that preferentially granted government contracts to black-owned businesses. His father’s illness—for which a black insurance agent refuses to authorize treatment—thus marks both the Ryans as victims of a kind of “reverse discrimination” while exposing how political initiatives based on race unjustly neglect individual circumstances. And if this scene shows that the racist Officer Ryan has suffered from affirmative action laws, the rest of the film includes dozens of examples of nonwhite characters expressing racist views of their own: for example, it is a black detective who cracks the aforementioned joke about parking on lawns. The film takes as its point of departure the notion that everyone is racist in more or less the same way, and attempts to exorcise this racism by exorcising race itself. Thus, Bobby Morseco, who co-authored the screenplay with Haggis, explains that the writers eschewed “trying to be politically incorrect” because “*race is nothing if not ugly*, and no one’s going to pay any attention to the storytelling if we try to get around that” (n.p., emphasis added). With the exception of blacks and whites, most races in the film are presented in the form of one character or nuclear family; the prevalence of bourgeois minority characters—a film executive, a shopkeeper, a police detective, a locksmith, and an insurance agent—also occludes historical intersections between race and labor stratification. The only remaining trace of a racialized *people* (as opposed to atomized persons and families) is a van filled with smuggled Southeast Asian men, women, and children (who are repeatedly referred to *en masse* as “Chinamen”); despite the film’s attempt to give every character a

voice, these refugees or migrants do not speak at all, but rather gaze around them in fear, supplication, and finally wonder before finally being “freed” in Chinatown.²²

In order to highlight the ugliness of race, *Crash* repeatedly presents melodramatic scenes in which individual suffering and heroism trump racial loyalties. Even the film itself is billed as a gesture towards interracial forgiveness, insofar as Haggis claims its story originated in his own carjacking by two black youths fifteen years ago; instead of resenting the loss of his Porsche, he made this film. But the ethical dynamics of individuals’ hate and forgiveness accounts for only a fraction of racism’s impact on L.A. As David Theo Goldberg explains in “Hate, or Power?,” “the concepts of ‘hate speech’ and ‘hate crimes’ make racist expression turn on a psychological disposition, an emotive affect(ation), a dis-order—and so as ab-normal and un-usual”; whereas racist practices also include a panoply of *normal* and dispassionate relations of power that regulate and reproduce inequalities in access to resources (19).²³ Instead of representing racialization as a method of disempowerment, *Crash* emphasizes exceptional and misleading instances—involving affirmative action and politicians concerned with the “black vote”—where racial identity actually correlates with power.

By reducing race to a purely personal issue and racism to matters of formal equality and interpersonal respect, *Crash* presents a form of liberal²⁴ antiracism (or antirace-ism) that falls in line with recent efforts to impose an ostensible “racial blindness” among California’s political and educational institutions. Among the most prominent of these developments are Proposition 209—which banned affirmative action in all California state institutions in 1996—and Proposition 54—the so-called “Racial Privacy Initiative” that, had it succeeded in 2004, would have barred most government agencies from collecting racial data. Ward Connerly,²⁵ the former University of California regent who provided much of the impetus for both these campaigns, shares *Crash*’s distaste for historically inherited racial identities:

African-American is a term that I don’t like. In fact, I hate that term, because it presumes my ethnic background or my national origin, and when you say that I’m African-American, especially when my African ancestry is less than all the rest of me, you’re embracing that one-drop rule mentality. So, I

fight the one-drop rule, because I am of mixed origin. My wife is white, and my grandkids are all of me, all of my wife. Their mother is half-Vietnamese. For us, these silly little boxes on these application forms have got to go. Implicit in all that I do and say is my personal agenda of getting rid of those friggin' boxes and getting the nation beyond the point at which you demand that I identify myself as a black man or an African-American. (Connerly n.p.)

Connerly's frequent description of his ancestry as "one-quarter black, three-eighths Irish, one-quarter French and one-eighth Choctaw" takes *Crash*'s reduction of race to the individual scale even further, representing race in terms of mathematical fractions and, hence (despite his denunciation of the one-drop rule), in terms of blood rather than in terms of culture, history, or access to power and resources (Bearak 1,1).

The legal scholar Christine Goodman maintains that Connerly's endorsement of barring state collection of racial data is not in fact racially "blind" at all, since it would impede the collection of the kinds of data required to provide evidence of racial discrimination in employment, housing, and other areas: "this apparently neutral law imposes, and in fact was intended to impose, special burdens on racial and ethnic minorities who seek to vindicate their federally protected rights in both the courts and through the state legislature" (322). In the wake of slavery, internment, and other forms of state-sponsored racism, racism paradoxically assumes the form of "racial blindness": in the California of Ward Connerly, racism reproduces and propagates itself at systemic levels by ensuring continued discrepancies in public health, income levels, housing conditions, education, and the demographics of prisons and the armed forces. As a banal product of history, urban architecture, and state institutions, racism runs on autopilot, without much need for melodramatic acts of hate, intolerance, or malice. Goodman even suggests that a legal system that focuses too much on *intentional* racism dangerously misses the point: for too great a "focus on intent operates to 'normalize' white privilege by forcing litigants of color to prove the subjective intent of an alleged discriminator, thus increasing the difficulty of stating a *prima facie* case" (327).

Crash normalizes white privilege not only by presenting a

cornucopia of hate speech,²⁶ but also by suggesting that all races are equally intolerant—that blacks, Koreans, and Latinos all participate in and reap benefits from various forms of racism no less than whites. The L.A. ensemble film does not try to comprehend the totality of racial and economic relationships that both unify and segregate Los Angeles; instead, it imagines a false totality that substitutes melodramatic plots—mid-life crises, sin and redemption, the loss and restitution of white masculinity—for demographic scope or historical depth. Whether by exclusion or a universal, neoliberal form of *inclusion*, *Crash* and its precursors contribute to what Mary Beltrán calls Hollywood’s “New Raceless Aesthetic.” Beltrán suggests that the increasingly multicultural casting and narratives of mainstream action movies produce situations where “the embracing of an idealized ‘raceless’ ethnic identity is key to mastery in the urban environment” (63). But if these films disseminate further images of a “raceless” L.A., their popularity and their failings also suggest that the L.A. ensemble film has not yet come into its own. A more responsible cinematic mapping of L.A.’s social and racial architectures would require a blending of ethical relationships with an awareness of systemic inequalities, a refusal of the facile solutions of natural disasters, magical realism, or racial melodrama, and an insistence on the public and political nature of both racism and any viable responses to it. To provide a satisfying account of what such films would look like is beyond both the scope of this essay and the clairvoyance of its author. However, I will conclude by mentioning a recent film that at least errs in the opposite direction by (somewhat polemically) insisting on issues of labor, collectivity, and racial (in)visibility: Sergio Arau’s *A Day Without a Mexican* (2004). Despite its sentimental moments, its many stereotyped characters, and particularly its unfortunate caricaturing of black characters,²⁷ this film successfully deploys magic realist techniques (including the disappearance of all Hispanics from California and the appearance of an impenetrable wall of fog that materializes the state’s borders) to make political (rather than merely melodramatic) points about the hypocrisy of propositions to further strip undocumented workers of their dignity and rights. That the film partially inspired the national “Day Without an Immigrant” walkout on May 1, 2006 confirms both the efficacy of its emphasis on the need for public agency on the part of immigrants and the fact that it raises issues that resonate far beyond California’s Latino community.

Notes

Thanks to Bill Handley, Caleb Smith, Edlie Wong, and Janet Staiger for bolstering this essay with generous comments and hard questions.

¹ The African-American Film Critics' Association also selected *Crash* as the best film of 2005. Cara DiMassa reports that "Los Angeles Police Chief William J. Bratton has seen the film three times, and encouraged the deputy chief in charge of LAPD's professional standards to pass copies around the department." See also Steve Davis, who claims that "It's the most compelling American movie to come around in a long, long time." Roger Ebert specifically praises the film's treatment of racism, suggesting that *Crash* will move audience members to "look at strangers with a little more curiosity before making a snap judgment," and concluding his "Defense" of the film with an unapologetic and unreflective theorization of film as purveyor of false consciousness: "Real moviegoers are not constantly vigilant against the possibility of being manipulated by a film. They want to be manipulated; that's what they pay for, and that in a fundamental way is why movies exist."

² Haggis would possibly prefer the term "racially mixed" to "black," but the latter designation reflects my argument that racism has less to do with genetics than with how individuals and groups are historically positioned, perceived, and in this scene ritually re-produced.

³ Indeed, it is precisely this direct threat to the white father's sexuality that triggers Ryan's rage towards blacks and leads to his earlier sexual assault on Christine. For, immediately before pulling the wealthy black couple over for engaging in oral sex while driving, Ryan has a disappointing telephone conversation with a black health insurance agent who refuses to help his father see a qualified physician.

⁴ In one of the film's few fully negative reviews, Michael Sicinski makes a similar point: "The burning-SUV rescue, with its body contortions and spilled fluids, operates as a kind of vicarious miscegenation, essentially allowing Sgt. Ryan (and, presumably, the audience) the desired and dreaded coupling that his earlier roadside finger-fuck only hinted at" (52).

⁵ On the social and political production of the conditions of "natural" disasters, see Mike Davis, *The Ecology of Fear*.

⁶ *Short Cuts*, *Magnolia*, and *Crash* all feature musical montages that attempt to interconnect disparate characters' experiences through the

mood of melancholic songs; Anderson pushes this device to a self-conscious extreme when he has each of *Magnolia*'s major characters (two of whom are unconscious and dying) sing along to a line or two of Aimee Mann's "Wise Up."

⁷ Within just the first ten minutes of the film, the numbers 8 and 2 appear scrawled on a placard worn by a hanged criminal, as graffiti on a rooftop from which a boy attempts suicide, on playing cards in a casino, and on the weather forecast's prediction of an 82% chance of rain; as if this were not enough, the black woman who is arrested at the beginning of the film is later shown being photographed with the identification number 82082082082 in her mugshot. *Magnolia* also gestures towards a unifying conspiracy theory by depicting Freemasonry symbols on the walls of the television studio.

⁸ In a commentary on Altman's revision of Raymond Carver's short stories in *Short Cuts*, for example, Boddy writes that "Altman's film, committed to the idea that 'it is all one story,' provides only one perspective—the all-seeing, all-knowing directorial point of view; one that focuses on a particular brand of frustrated male aggression, and one which does not allow any interior life to his characters" (18).

⁹ Urban scholars have coined the term "edge city" to describe cities organized by external suburbs connected to the urban center by daily automobile commutes: "Lacking established community, social relations in the edge city are determined not by propinquity but via telephone, fax, and private mail service. Lacking a preestablished body politic, edge cities are administered by 'shadow governments,' that is, plutocratic alternatives to normal politics, accountable to wealth (as opposed to number of voters) and subject to few constitutional constraints" (Dear & Flusty 144-5). For a wide-ranging account of literary and visual representations of L.A.'s freeway system, see Handley.

¹⁰ *Collateral* (2004) studies the intense isolation of a taxi driver and an assassin as they shuttle around the nocturnal city visiting a series of lonely victims; but when it comes to loneliness in L.A. no film has surpassed the neo-noir heist film, *Heat* (1995), where a police detective and the criminal mastermind he pursues across the city share common feelings of determination, obsession, and loneliness, and yet meet so seldom and see so little of each other that viewers have speculated that Al Pacino and Robert DeNiro were never actually on the set of the film at the same time.

¹¹ See for instance the closing credits of *Short Cuts*, which are introduced as a panoramic view of the city taken in from the elevated home of the doctor and painter couple fades into a street and freeway map of Los Angeles.

¹² The white, suburban sensibilities of many of these films resonate with Eric Avila's *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*, which examines how elements of urban design and popular culture—from film noir and L.A.'s highway system to Disneyland and Dodger Stadium—have produced a “culture of suburban whiteness.”

¹³ See DiPiero, *White Men Aren't*, for a fuller treatment of the relationship between black and white masculinity in *Grand Canyon*.

¹⁴ Dear and Flusty provide a suggestive commentary on episodes like the large-scale and environmentally devastating aerial spraying of medflies, which they link to L.A.'s status as a postmodern city that expands the scope and intensity of multinational capital. Globally integrated consumption, they claim, involves “simplifying nature into a *global latifundium*. This process includes both a homogenizing intervention, as with California agriculture's reliance upon vast expanses of a single crop, and a forceful interdiction to sustain that intervention, as with aerial spraying of pesticide over the Los Angeles basin to eradicate the fruit flies attracted to vast expanses of certain single crops” (159).

¹⁵ I am alluding to Toni Morrison's influential argument, in *Playing in the Dark*, about the constitutive role of serviceable black figures in literature authored by whites.

¹⁶ In her discussion of the alterations that Altman made in adapting Raymond Carver's short stories, Kasia Boddy criticizes the film's focus on suburban middle-class characters at the expense of the working and unemployed poor, as well as its masculine preoccupations

¹⁷ The police report finding six hundred dollars and a big box of condoms next to her bed. Claudia's prominence in the film as a highly sympathetic, victimized white prostitute effectively disavows or turns away from the fact that prostitution—not only in L.A. but throughout the world—has become overwhelmingly the work of ethnic minorities, migrant workers, and illegally trafficked sex slaves. For racial statistics on prostitution in L.A., see Lever *et al.*

¹⁸ The brief scene in which policemen take mugshots of Marcy

resonates with W.E.B. Du Bois's oblique references to mugshots in the photographs he collected for the "American Negro" exhibit in 1900. Du Bois's deployment of the mugshot as a reference to the criminalization of black bodies leads Shawn Michelle Smith to suggest that "the white middle classes consolidated their cultural privilege not only in relation to legal offenders, but also in relation to racial others. In these overlapping paradigms, an image of 'negro criminality' provided a boundary that contained the cultural legitimacy of the white middle classes" (589).

¹⁹ Viewed as a laboratory for racial interactions, these films strangely dovetail with the form of television shows like MTV's *Real World* (whose casting ensures "meaningful" interracial dramas) or the recent drama, *Lost*, which literally isolates its cast of one or two dozen racially mixed characters on a deserted island when their airplane crashes on the way to Los Angeles.

²⁰ http://www.moviesunlimited.com/musite/cornstor_01_050805.asp.

²¹ "We cast two Korean people and then decided to call them 'Chinamen,' because that's what we do in the U.S." (Haggis, "Commentary").

²² It is worth noting here that Asians and Asian American characters seem to remain peripheral to the film's sentimental universalism: along with these speechless South Asian bodies, the Korean woman who instigates the film's first car crash and her slave-smuggling husband hardly speak in English at all, and when they do talk the conversation revolves around their own racism and trafficking. That these Asian characters traffic in other Asian bodies suggests that *Crash*'s melodramatic focus on black/white reconciliation relies on a projection of both slavery and global practices of exploitation onto unsentimental Asiatic profiteers.

²³ Ruth Gilmore provides a rigorous and suggestive account of these systematic effects of the "racial state," claiming that racism unevenly distributes vulnerability to "premature death" along racial lines (16).

²⁴ Cf. Sicinski, who observes that "Part of Haggis's political misfire pertains to the blinkered assumptions of American liberalism, a well-intentioned worldview that serves to occlude the structural roots of inequality" (52).

²⁵ Proposition 54 and Proposition 209 have implications and influences that reach beyond California's boundaries; nor should the defeat of the

"Racial Privacy Initiative" be regarded as an indication of the decline of "racial blindness" legislation. Because many voters opposed Proposition 209 primarily on account of its implications for health care, Connerly plans "to put a similar proposition, reworded to address health care concerns, on the ballot in 2006. Given the aftermath of Proposition 209, it is also likely that a modified version of this initiative will be proposed in other states as well" (Goodman 304-5).

²⁶ After being carjacked, the District Attorney's wife emits a litany of hate speech (primarily directed at the black carjackers and the Hispanic locksmith and housekeeper) whose function seems to be to convince the film's liberal and predominately white viewers that *they*, by contrast, are not "racist" at all.

²⁷ Arau's insensitive portrayals of empowered black men such as a policeman and border guard mark the intensity with which his film disavows any solidarity with L.A.'s black workers—this failure of expanding the scope of his collective vision is particularly nefarious given that the film was probably inspired by Douglas Ward Turner's Civil Rights era play, *A Day of Absence* (1965), in which a town of white Southerners is faced with the inexplicable disappearance of its black labor force.

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