White Liberal Identity, Literary Pedagogy, and Classic Realism

Barrish, Phillip

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Chapter Four

Trafficking in Liberal Masculinities

One hundred years after Kate Chopin’s publication of *The Awakening*, director Steven Soderbergh and screenwriter Stephen Gaghan released *Traffic*, an epic movie about the interlocking economies of drugs and money that traverse the United States and Mexico. Michael Douglas stars as Judge Robert Wakefield, the film’s central protagonist. The explicit concerns of Soderbergh’s movie differ markedly from those of Chopin’s novel, as do the gender and, hence, the relative freedom and social empowerment of each work’s leading character. But, taken together, *The Awakening* and *Traffic* make a productive critical juxtaposition for the purpose of exploring connections between the achievement of “liberated” gender identities on the one hand and, on the other hand, the reproduction of unmarked liberal whiteness.

In a movement that parallels Edna Pontellier’s changing relationship to conventional femininity, Judge Wakefield “awakens” from unthinking allegiance to a traditional model of manliness into a new, more liberal masculinity. The “new” masculinity into which he awakens strives to free itself from hardened conventions about a man’s familial and social roles. It thus becomes more available for contemporary white liberalism’s universalizing processes of identification. As we will see, Wakefield’s development of a new masculinity takes shape through the interplay of “real or fabricated” (recurring once again to Toni Morrison’s terms) white, Mexicanist, and Africanist elements.

Released in the final year of Bill Clinton’s presidency, *Traffic’s* depiction of Wakefield maps a trajectory of supposed liberal progress, from a Reagan-era style of law-and-order manhood to the nurturing, empathic style of masculinity projected by Clinton. Wakefield’s new, Clinton-era style of liberal masculinity—in the film’s final line of dialogue, he insists that his role as father is above all “to listen”—will allow him to reconstitute his own wounded family within a community comprised of people in “recovery” from addiction and its associated damages. *Traffic* ultimately
proffers the “new” Judge Wakefield as a harbinger for a newly liberal American polity.

In his influential study, *Moral Politics: What Conservatives Know That Liberals Don’t*, cognitive scientist George Lakoff has linked the “worldviews” held by conservatives and liberals on the contemporary U.S. political scene with two divergent models of child raising and family governance. Both conservatives and liberals, Lakoff asserts, share a “conceptual metaphor” of “Nation-as-Family,” with the government in a parental role and citizens as children. But while conservatives support a “strict father” model of the family, and thus of the national polity, liberals believe in a “nurturant parent” paradigm for familial life. The latter framework, which “seems to have begun as a woman’s model [but] has now become widespread in America among both sexes,” serves as a cognitive “prototype” for the liberal vision of how government should function.1 Whether in the “strict father” or the “nurturant parent” version, these family-based conceptual structures are “deeply embedded” in conservative and liberal viewpoints on a wide range of political and social issues. Moreover, it is because the nation-as-family metaphor usually functions at a level below conscious awareness that liberals and conservatives tend to misjudge each other’s motives and values. Not recognizing the divergent cognitive paradigms that underlie either their own or their opponents’ views, nor the basic family models on which the paradigms rest, both liberals and conservatives remain mystified by how the other can disagree on matters that seem merely common sense, such as the best ways to reduce crime.2 Lakoff’s cognitive modeling is unable to account for critical facets of Judge Wakefield’s move from a conservative to a liberal constellation of identity—preeminently the role played in his transformation by racial and sexual fantasies. Yet Lakoff’s emphasis on the nation-as-family metaphor and on two contrasting options for conceiving state and parental power, as nurturing or as strictly disciplinary, resonates with *Traffic*’s narrative elements and thus provides a useful starting point for our analysis. In Lakoff’s terms, I begin by exploring Wakefield’s shift from a strict father “worldview,” which initially determines his approach both to his own family and to the nation’s drug problem, to a nurturant parent model.

Appointed by his personal friend, the president of the United States, to be director of the Office of National Drug Policy (“drug czar”), Judge Wakefield works out of the White House itself. He begins the film, both in his “tough job” (Wakefield’s own phrase) and in his family, as a hard-edged embodiment of the Law with a capital L. Almost his first line in the film, uttered while presiding over a trial, is “when you make the decision to have marijuana on your farm, whether it’s one joint or an acre of plants, your property can be seized and your property can be sold.” Wakefield is
the leader and public face of the United States’ “war on drugs” (with a special fondness, as his wife points out, for using military metaphors to describe his work). In the course of the film, events push Wakefield’s identification with the law to its most extreme edge: a combination of the Charles Bronson–style “vigilante,” kicking in doors and throwing people against walls to get them to talk, and the implacable John Wayne–style “searcher,” dedicated to rescuing and redeeming the iconic white daughter from corruption by nonwhite men. Finally, however, Wakefield comes to recognize that the old-fashioned style of white masculinity in which he is expected to and does prosecute the drug war—as an authoritarian, hard-driving workaholic who usually has a glass of scotch in his hand—is in crisis. He ultimately comes to see this style of white masculinity as a hollow failure.

What is the relationship, I wish to ask, between Wakefield’s movement toward a liberal mode of masculine identity and the triangular “traffic” that Soderbergh’s film develops among its constructions of Mexicanist, Africanist, and white people and the spaces in which these characters are portrayed? The movie explicitly thematizes the intersections among racialized people and spaces that, in Chopin’s 1899 novel, require interpretative teasing out. The film self-consciously illustrates a complex crisscrossing of drugs and money among such racially and economically diverse locations as Mexico City, a desert outside Tijuana, the Tijuana–San Diego border crossing, Washington D.C., wealthy suburban neighborhoods in California and Ohio, and an African American ghetto in Cincinnati. In certain ways, Traffic demonstrates a higher degree of self-awareness regarding its own deployment of racial signifiers than does The Awakening. For instance, the film’s U.S. settings studiously include a minority prosecutor and judge. In addition, the two most visible street-level Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents in the film, Montel Gordon (Don Cheadle) and Ray Castro (Luis Guzman), are African American and Latino, respectively. And Benicio del Toro won an Academy Award as supporting actor for his portrayal of Javier Rodríguez Rodríguez, the courageous if opaque Mexican police officer with a commitment to justice. The movie’s explicit intention seems to be a multicultural portrait of interconnection and interdependence, one that breaks away from the simplicity of “us” (typically meaning white) vs. “them” (typically meaning nonwhite) that has been part and parcel of the drug war metaphor. Through most of Traffic, both good and bad guys come in at least three “colors” and at least two nationalities.

Yet despite Traffic’s multiple characters and story lines, Michael Douglas’s Judge Wakefield is at the film’s center. Douglas is the biggest star in the film, and his is the only character, for instance, who crosses into each
of Traffic’s primary locations. In addition, although other characters also undergo development and growth, Robert Wakefield’s character arc is most fully defined and, by comparison with other key figures such as Del Toro’s Javier and Catherine Zeta-Jones’s Helena, his arc is most accessibly readable. Judge Wakefield’s sixteen-year-old daughter Caroline, moreover, serves as the film’s most emotionally invested emblem for what Wakefield calls “our country’s most precious resource, our children,” a resource that has been “targeted” by the illicit drug trade. With all its multicultural characters and international settings, Traffic remains a work whose most focused concern is the fate of the white American family and the father whose task it is to take care of them in a dangerous and corrupt world.

Awakening to a Crisis in White Fatherhood

In the primary (but by no means only) irony that Traffic sets up, sixteen-year-old Caroline Wakefield’s descent into addiction, theft, and prostitution is paralleled by her father’s first months in his new job as national drug czar. He takes the job because, in his view, “the war on drugs is a war that we have to win, and a war that we can win.” Wakefield’s view of how to win the drug war and thereby protect America’s (white) children combines a tough-on-crime amassing of police and military resources to stop drugs from crossing the Mexican border with the encouragement of a zero-tolerance policy among American families, starting with his own. Making drug treatment more available does occur to Judge Wakefield, early in the movie, but only as an afterthought. When his daughter is arrested for drugs and spends a night in jail, he finds it ridiculous to consider whether she might need “any kind of therapy.” He prefers instead to “clip her wings” by grounding her.

It becomes almost immediately clear both to viewers and to Wakefield himself, however, that his mode of strict paternalistic governance is failing. This failure is most forcefully articulated through Wakefield’s increasing frustration that he cannot maintain either the United States’ external border with Mexico or, more personally horrifying for him, the internal border separating the African American inner city from wealthy white suburbs, such as where his own family resides. Regarding the border with Mexico, Wakefield discovers that it is, in the words of one drug runner, “disappearing.” Three times as many drugs are getting through now as six months ago, the movie claims. When Judge Wakefield visits the border, he sees, as described by the screenplay’s stage directions, “anarchy.” Here, the United States is losing (or, as a character insists, has “already lost”) the drug war. The Mexican drug cartels have more money and more sophisti-
cated equipment than does the DEA. Wakefield’s predecessor in the post of drug czar, a retired army general, has no advice to offer him other than on how to prepare an exit strategy from the job. Law enforcement in Mexico is corrupt and Wakefield has trouble finding a counterpart, somebody to “interface with on their side.” Mexico itself is mysterious and hard to read, visually depicted throughout the movie as grainy and ochre-tinted.

Mexico’s lengthy and historically vexed border with the United States renders “Mexicanism” particularly available to evoke the crisis of an America unable to control foreigners and foreign substances crossing into it from outside. The seemingly insoluble difficulties presented by the United States’ external border with Mexico threaten Wakefield’s patriarchal sense of himself as guardian of boundaries and of the law. But the strict father’s most personally gut-wrenching, life-changing failure occurs when he proves unable to maintain even the internal borders supposed to guarantee his own family’s purity and privilege. Caroline Wakefield serves as Traffic’s symbol of the horrors that can ensue when middle-class white suburban youth, alienated from those who should offer them love, understanding, communication, and support (“nurturant” parenting, in Lakoff’s terms) are sucked into drugs and drug culture. As played by Erika Christensen, Caroline is a visual icon of young white femininity, with blonde hair, large light-colored eyes, and luminous ivory skin. Caroline’s craving for Mexican drugs leads her to steal from her parents, run away, and then become a prostitute for an African American drug dealer. One might say that she is the movie’s traffic circle, around (and into) whose body flow not only drugs but the film’s racialized, sexualized themes and fantasies. She is, furthermore, at the center of her father’s movement from a conservative to a more liberal identity.

Cognitive science has no use for the unconscious in what Lakoff dismissively calls “the Freudian sense,” an unconscious that struggles to repress unacceptable thoughts, desires, and fantasies. Instead, Lakoff makes it a point that the cognitive paradigms he elucidates can be considered “unconscious” only colloquially, meaning simply that we are not always as attentive as we could be to their role in structuring our thoughts. Lakoff’s disdain for psychoanalytic insights (a disdain widely shared by other cognitive scientists) means, however, that his “cognitive modeling” cannot explain the role that racialized, sexualized fantasy and paranoia play in a film such as Traffic. The eruption in the movie of a paranoid fantasy central to the history of American racism proves key in Judge Wakefield’s eventual movement from a conservative, strict father to a more liberal and nurturing yet still masculine parent.

The scene in which drug dealer Sketch (Vonte Sweet) first has sex with
Caroline operates not only as the movie’s most intense, but also as its most racially-charged, emblem of the degradation that drugs inflict on white America through its prized signifier of innocence, white children. (Tellingly, the scene has been treated by reviewers as the nadir of Caroline’s downward trajectory—instead of, for example, the scenes in which her preppy white “boyfriend” Seth [Topher Grace] purposefully drugs her into virtual unconsciousness and then has sex with her.) In what follows, I dwell on Traffic’s portrayal of the sex scene or arguably, as we will see, rape scene between Caroline and Sketch because it is the moment in which the filmmaker’s desire to be politically and multiculturally correct seems to break down. My close attention to the interracial sex/rape scene may risk participating in what I believe is the film’s almost fetishistic need for that scene and also in the same narrowing of critical focus to white/black interactions that I have criticized within whiteness studies. Yet in order to understand Traffic’s specific geometry of racialized significations, and the manner in which that geometry ultimately produces a “new” white masculinity for Robert Wakefield, it is crucial to analyze why this liberal film includes a blatantly racist portrayal at almost precisely its midpoint. The scene between Caroline and Sketch adheres closely, in both form and content, to a primal fantasy within American racism, whose heyday was the white-supremacist, post–Reconstruction South: the fantasy of a white maiden violated by a black “brute,” with the corollary of a heroic white man “rescuing” her at the last moment and enacting violent “justice” on the supposed perpetrator.

The restaging of this virulent racist fantasy serves two related functions in the movie. First, it offers an almost crystallized final opportunity to test Robert Wakefield’s old-fashioned style of strong, uncompromising white masculinity. The director of national drug policy may not be able to control the confusing Mexican border, but he should be able to exert mastery over his domestic crisis—“domestic” in the sense of being both family-based and nationally familiar. A still-influential tradition of racist propaganda, including prominent pop-culture representations, urges that Judge Wakefield must rescue his daughter and punish her dark-skinned violator and, moreover, that he should be able to do so. But after Wakefield’s increasingly desperate, cowboy-like attempts to act as heroic white rescuer fail, it becomes evident that an additional purpose, directly central to the film’s liberal project, is served by Traffic’s projection of Sketch and Caroline’s encounter through the lens of classic racist paranoia. Traffic’s liberal project requires this seemingly anomalous restaging of a classic racist scenario because it ultimately allows Michael Douglas’s character to enact his own decisive “awakening” from a simplistic and often violent tradition of white identification with the Law. Wakefield’s finally deliberate turn away from
the heroic white role of violent rescuer and restorer has a meaning not unlike that of a white liberal’s determination to *Never Say Nigger Again* (see chapter 2). White liberals need the word “nigger” in order *not* to say it, and to differentiate themselves from *other* whites who do say it. So too, when Wakefield rejects the heroic and violent white masculinity that is traditionally triggered by the racist fantasy of violated white womanhood, he solidifies his claim to a “new” kind of enlightened, flexible, and ostensibly non-racist masculine identity.

The movie—and Robert Wakefield—unconsciously require a restaging of the racist fantasy of black brute violating white daughter. The way the scene is shot makes clear that the movie also derives a certain cinematic pleasure or excitement from that restaging. The sequence in question begins with an exterior establishing shot of Caroline, who has run away from her rehab center and now wanders as the only white figure through the crowded streets of an almost entirely African American ghetto. She has crossed without protection into a threatening, internally foreign part of America. Wandering, Caroline is trying to find the building where her preppy boyfriend Seth previously took her to buy drugs. Suddenly, the scene cuts to a disorienting shot, blurry and uneven, of a partially blocked view of a dirty ceiling and an unshielded lightbulb. The right side of the visual field is blocked by a large dark form moving up and down. As we hear grunts we suddenly realize that we now occupy Caroline’s point of view as the large black shape is (in the words of the screenplay) “pounding away” above her (us), on her (us), in her (us).

The startling temporal elision between this jerky handheld shot and the previous long-view exterior shot of Caroline on the street has edited out whatever talking or negotiating preceded the sex, thereby erasing Caroline’s agency and giving the scene, as she lies there stoned and passive, a rape-like feel. Dimly lit from behind, Sketch (Vonte Sweet) initially appears without features but simply as a pitch-black and thrusting mass. His face only gradually emerges as an insistent knock at the door makes him curse and get up from Caroline. We watch the naked Sketch walk to the apartment door, receive some money through a slot, come back toward the bed to retrieve drugs from a duffle bag, and return to the door to pass the drugs through the same slot.

The brief sequence of shots depicting this doorway transaction focuses almost entirely on Sketch’s naked body. His is the only body in the film that receives this sort of camera attention. As Sketch walks away from the bed toward the door, light glints off his brown skin, emphasizing the muscles of his back, buttocks, and upper legs, as well as the sheen of sweat derived from his exertions atop Caroline. The camera then roughly aligns with Sketch’s own point of view as he returns to Caroline the second time,
where she is, adapting Richard Dyer’s terms in an essay about Lillian Gish, “lit for whiteness.” Backlight trained on Erika Christensen’s hair emphasizes her blonde curls, creating a distinct halo effect. Key lighting picks out her white throat, arms, and shoulders against an otherwise dark background. One sees the blue in her eyes very clearly.

Still lying down, Caroline gestures languidly toward the bag in which she now knows Sketch keeps his drugs. He takes out a syringe. It will be the first time she has received heroin in traditional junkie manner, by needle. A remarkable series of frames is filled by Caroline’s lit face, with Sketch’s black hands visible in the lower center holding the syringe upright. Testing it, his hands make liquid ejaculate from the syringe, so that white splotches shoot straight up from it, blotching or marring the visual image of Caroline’s face (figure 1).

Finally, he moves down her body to pick up her right ankle, probing and turning it until, from above, he injects her in the upper foot, again penetrating her white skin. As Caroline’s eyes lose focus and she swoons back, Sketch takes a moment to relish her face on the pillow and then lowers himself onto and into her body. The scene closes as it began, with him as a featureless black mass “pounding away” on top of her. Sketch’s very name indicates his depersonalized and stereotyped function.

Caroline’s passive white femininity, as it is penetrated, contaminated,
and obscured by Sketch’s criminal black body, immediately places this scene within what Linda Williams has identified as “the most influential melodramatic story of all American culture: the story of black and white racial victims and villains.” In her incisive study *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson*, Williams has argued that this culturally pervasive melodramatic story about race exists in two complementary versions, “Tom” and “anti-Tom,” both of which ultimately support white-supremacist logic. Each of these two forms of racial melodrama is epitomized in recurrent scenarios.

“Tom” melodramas repeatedly show a black male body beaten by sadistic white men. By contrast, what Williams calls “anti-Tom” melodramas derive their force from images of stereotyped black “brutes” threatening or violating helpless white femininity. D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), with its notorious scenes of former slaves trying to “claim” white women during the Reconstruction era, is an ur-instance in American culture of the “anti-Tom” melodrama. The *Traffic* scene that I have been discussing directly recalls the most viciously racist scenes in *Birth of a Nation*. Indeed, the shot with which *Traffic*’s “sex” scene closes, when Sketch’s dark head pushes into the frame above Caroline’s swooning white femininity as he again starts moving on top of her, visually echoes the moment in *Birth of a Nation* in which Silas Lynch (George Siegmann) is poised to force

![Figure 2](From Traffic)
himself on the swooning Elsie Stoneham (Lillian Gish) (figures 2 and 3). The classic supplement to this scene involves a white hero, often a vigilante, thundering to the rescue. Gwendolyn Brooks’s poem about the vigilante lynching of Emmett Till captures “the beat inevitable” of this central white American fantasy, while also ironizing it: “The milk-white maid . . . Of the Ballad. Pursued by the Dark Villain. Rescued by the Fine Prince.” In Griffith’s Birth of a Nation, the rescuing “fine prince” is Ben Cameron (Henry Walthall) dressed as a white-robed Klansman galloping on horseback down the road toward the interior room in which the dark villain Silas Lynch has confined the helpless milk-white maid, Elsie Stoneham.

So too, the resolute Robert Wakefield doggedly drives through the ghetto in his car, searching for Caroline, at one melodramatic moment barely missing her as she cuts across a street on her way back to Sketch’s dark apartment. Wakefield’s crisscrossing of the ghetto in search of
Caroline also evokes John Wayne’s Ethan Edwards in director John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956), who rides hard back and forth along the western border desperately determined to reclaim his young niece from Scar, the evil Indian captor who wishes to make her his “squaw.” Wakefield returns home only for sleep and brief mechanical interchanges with his wife Barbara (Amy Irving). The historical and psychocultural weight on Caroline’s father of her specific sexual-racial “peril” pushes him here toward the embattled, antidomestic edge of his identification with law, mastery, and justice. During the search sequence, Michael Douglas comes closest to occupying the extreme “cowboy,” white masculinity of a John Wayne or Clint Eastwood, especially at such moments as when he kicks in a flophouse door or storms into a classroom and roughly yanks Caroline’s cocky prep-school boyfriend out of the room, growling to the frozen teacher that Seth has to go on a “field trip.”

This explicitly more menacing version of Robert Wakefield’s strict father identity has been elicited by his last encounter with Caroline before she runs away, a scene which makes evident that the embattled father’s violent aggression can be directed not only toward those who threaten his family, but also toward his family itself. In that scene, Wakefield has burst his way uninvited into his daughter’s bedroom. Caroline, oblivious, is seated on the toilet “cooking” her drugs in the private bathroom that opens from her bedroom. Wakefield turns the bathroom doorknob with increasing intensity, finally shouting in anger, “open your goddam door!” When she does open the door, having taken her hit, Caroline’s face has the same vague smile and her head lolls just as it does later on Sketch’s bed. Her father pushes her against the bedroom wall and takes her face in one of his hands. Turning it toward him so as to look at her eyes, he squeezes her cheeks, which forces her mouth to protrude and open. “Fuck you,” she says to him, still smiling dreamily. “Well, FUCK YOU!” he screams back at her, three times as loudly. He puts his finger in her face: “You are not going anywhere, young lady.” “You’re like the Gestapo,” she retorts. Wakefield’s dictatorial posture, for all of its threatening and implicitly sexualized rage (almost shoving his finger into her open mouth), achieves nothing. The scene closes with Wakefield slumped against the wall, looking weary and defeated. Very shortly after this scene, Caroline is in the streets and then in Sketch’s bed.

Technically, Wakefield’s character does not witness Sketch’s sexual “pounding” of Caroline, but that image is primal for the white-male subject position with which he becomes aligned during the search sequence. For him, the film’s racially melodramatic portrayal of Sketch with Caroline—which the audience has viewed before Wakefield begins his search—hovers as an unspoken fantasy propelling his increasingly frantic
efforts to find his daughter. Unlike American prototypes of heroic and relentless white defenders, however, Judge Wakefield’s final confrontation with the transgressing racial other proves fruitless and humiliating. Wakefield finally arrives at Sketch’s apartment (to which he has forced Seth to bring him) and hammers angrily on the door. Sketch opens the door to Wakefield with a big gun, which he holds to the head of the suddenly trembling federal judge. Threatening to kill Wakefield and put his body in a dumpster, Sketch warns him never to come back. When Wakefield offers to pay him a thousand dollars for information, Sketch tells him scornfully that if he wanted Wakefield’s money he would simply take it. For all Wakefield (or, for that matter, the viewer) knows, Caroline is behind the door of Sketch’s apartment at that very moment, either desperate to be rescued or eager for her father to be chased away, or perhaps too drugged-out to know what is happening. Unlike John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, or the Klansman in Griffith’s film, Wakefield’s rescue of Caroline will succeed only when he abandons what Seth calls the “vigilante thing.”

Judge Wakefield stumbles out of Sketch’s building, blinking, into the glaring daylight of a dirty street. Walking several yards ahead of him, Seth (who rarely shuts up) says patronizingly, “Look . . . man, I’m telling you. Don’t do this vigilante thing.” At the remark, Michael Douglas stops dead in his tracks, startling Seth who has now reached the parked car. Douglas stares at Seth as he takes something out of his pocket, his face growing darker, more frustrated and more grim. The viewer feels his frustration, his alienation, and his desperate rage. Because the camera stays above his waist and hand, we can’t see what Judge Wakefield is holding. He slowly lifts his arm and pauses, clearly pointing something at Seth, but we can’t quite make out what. It might be a gun. Here it comes, we for a moment think: Michael Douglas will now turn to the “vigilante thing” in earnest, ready to blow away all those who have hurt his daughter. Called vividly to mind is Douglas’s character in *Falling Down* (1993, directed by Joel Shumacher), where the actor played a frustrated divorced white male, known in the film by his license plate D-FENS (he worked for a defense contractor before being laid off), who snaps and starts shooting minority residents of Los Angeles in an attempt to recover his sense of patriarchal mastery. But in *Traffic*, when Robert Wakefield finally “shoots” we discover that he was holding only a remote control key to his car’s front door. The car beeps and Robert quietly gets into it, returning to the domestic sphere of his wife and home. He is reunited with his daughter shortly thereafter.

This key moment of transition—in which what might have been a gun-drawing gesture of macho vigilantism turns into a movement back toward
the domestic sphere—constitutes Judge Robert Wakefield’s most distinctly marked step away from the old version of white masculinity up to which he has heretofore tried to live. Using his remote control to open his car door and drive home at scene’s end—and, more broadly, becoming a liberal, “nurturant parent”—represents a change of policy and posture for him. In another movie, Wakefield might have returned to Sketch’s apartment with a gun even bigger than the drug dealer’s or with a “posse” of police and federal agents. Here, it is as if Traffic’s liberal conscience suddenly shakes itself awake and steers its protagonist away from the alluring white revenge fantasy. Wakefield pointedly extracts himself from the Birth of a Nation scenario: black brute violates white daughter; white hero destroys black brute, restoring racial order. Instead, he drives back to his home and enters into a newly tolerant, enlightened version of manhood. In so doing, Wakefield also establishes a protective zone of distance between himself and the racialized, sexualized fantasies of violent domination that help drive the U. S. government’s strict father mode of prosecuting the war on drugs.

Yet it is crucial that Wakefield’s switch of “worldview” to that of the liberal nurturer by no means eliminates the law’s need for violence in the world that Traffic portrays; it merely shifts the enactment of that violence onto the shoulders of an African American DEA agent in the United States and a Mexican policeman working the border. Meanwhile, the political organization and bureaucratic administration of this violence are left, when Wakefield resigns as drug czar, in the hands of the notably white staff of the White House. This set of displacements is integral to Wakefield’s assumption of a liberal, relatively unmarked whiteness analogous to that attained by Edna Pontellier in The Awakening.

A Dirty Job

It is no simple accomplishment for Traffic to portray Robert Wakefield’s giving up the fight against Mexican drug cartels and black street-level dealers as a renewal of white fatherhood, and ultimately of the American nation itself, rather than as their joint defeat. After all, the cartels still send drugs across the border at will, supplying dealers who then seek to push the drugs into every intimate fold of American life. The dangers to America’s children continue, and will perhaps even escalate. In ironic counterpoint to Wakefield’s resignation from his public post as hard-edged guardian of America’s children, California-based Carlos Ayala (Steven Bauer) dubs his new, supposedly foolproof technique for smuggling cocaine “the project for the children”: it involves shaping an odorless version of the drug into what look like innocent plastic toys.
Indeed, Ayala’s naïve wife, who until recently had no idea that her husband was anything but a law-abiding businessman, herself descends into the underworld to arrange a hit against the star witness in her husband’s trial; the witness is killed despite the cadre of cops supposed to protect him, and charges against Carlos are dropped. Even as Ayala, a “handsome, charismatic second-generation American in expensive conservative clothes” (as Stephen Gaghan’s screenplay puts it), enjoys his son’s lavishly overdone birthday party, staged in what the screenplay calls a “starter castle,” he uses his cell phone to arrange for his best friend and lawyer to be killed.10 Intended to exhibit home, family, friends, and wealth, the child’s birthday party—which constitutes the film’s third-to-last scene—instead exudes pretension, ruthless greed, and ready violence. Given such ever-spreading webs of corruption, crime, and danger, how can Judge Wakefield abandon his hard-edged persona as drug czar—how can he walk away from his public mandate to protect “our nation’s most precious resource, our children”—without appearing culpable or derelict?

Traffic is too committed to a gritty aesthetic of hard-boiled realism (and to the “realistic” view of crime and criminals that characterized Bill Clinton’s version of liberalism) to imply that the war on drugs can ever be concluded, let alone won. The movie makes clear that somebody still has to keep putting away the bad guys. As Wakefield himself puts it when he first takes his job, drug busts are crucial as “symbols,” ways of “sending a message” to drug gangs that the law remains “serious about putting the top people away.”

Differentiating what he calls the “hard-boiled” crime story from the classic “English country house” genre of detective fiction, Raymond Chandler writes that the former do not encourage the belief that “murder will out and justice will be done—unless some very determined individual makes it his business to see that justice is done.” Such individuals were “apt to be hard men, and what they did, whether they were called police officers, private detectives or newspaper men, was hard, dangerous work. It was work they could always get. There was plenty of it lying around. There still is.”11 Judge Wakefield passes through and then moves beyond the role of a “very determined individual who makes it his business to see that justice is done,” a role located at the hardest edge of strict father American masculinity. But Wakefield’s transcendence of that role does not mean that the “hard, dangerous work” of representing the interests of justice and law in a corrupt world is no longer necessary. There is still “plenty” of such work “lying around.” It may no longer be Wakefield’s personal “business” to embody hard justice, but a noir world such as that which Traffic has spent almost three hours establishing, in which corruption, hypocrisy, and violence always hover, continues to require “hard men” to
take up the classically male task of confronting the corruption and violence with uncompromising resolve, courage, and physical force. Given the vicious, power-hungry criminals Traffic has already so vividly portrayed, criminals that threaten America both internally and externally, the film's representational economy demands the continued presence of a dedicated and credible counterweight, "some very determined individual" who, as Wakefield initially says of himself, has signed on "to do a tough job," indeed to organize his identity around it.

Judge Robert Wakefield can "awaken" into a new and less constricting masculinity, one defined by openness, empathy, and emotional connection, only because of the presence of two minority characters in the film who serve to absorb the hard, dangerous work of personally ensuring that justice is done. As Wakefield's personal transformation gradually develops, parallel plot lines in Traffic follow two other representatives of the law, Don Cheadle's black DEA agent Montel Gordon in the United States and, in Mexico, Benicio del Toro's police officer Javier Rodríguez Rodríguez. After witnessing his longtime partner and friend Ray Castro (Luis Guzman) get torn apart by an Ayala hit man's car bomb, a fiercely determined Gordon starts over again at the end of the film with the difficult task of bringing the California-based Ayalas to justice.

Meanwhile, Rodríguez shifts into an active and high-level fight against Tijuana's drug cartels (he had previously worked for one of them). At extreme risk, Rodríguez personally initiates busts of several "top people" in the Juarez cartel, including his own former mentor. Rodríguez and Gordon become "very determined individual[s]," the "hard men," who, by movie's end, have assumed responsibility for the "hard, dangerous work" of ensuring that justice is at least sometimes done. Having effectively portrayed the primary threats to white American children as originating from bad, violent Mexican, Mexican American, and African American people and places, Traffic now concludes that these threats should be met on the "front lines" (in a phrase Wakefield himself formerly used) by African American and Mexican agents of the law.

But in taking on the personal identification with law and strict justice from which Wakefield extricates himself, Rodríguez and Gordon also assume the emotional and other isolations that come with that "tough job." Steely resolve and sealed-off interiority come with the territory of planting oneself in between insidious, aggressive evil and vulnerable innocence. Neither Rodríguez nor Gordon is portrayed as having a family. Indeed, the victory Traffic gives to liberal identity against strict father conservatism in their competition to define the "worldview" of the movie's protagonist renders the normative nuclear family as the exclusive preserve of white liberalism. By movie's end, both Rodríguez and Gordon seem
quintessentially alone; each has accepted the classically American roles not only of hard-boiled noir hero, but also of cowboy loner. Even their respective best friends have been killed by drug traffickers.

Consider as a pair the film's last and third-to-last scenes. The two scenes sandwich Robert Wakefield and his family's final appearance at a recovery meeting (which I conclude by discussing below). In the ante-penultimate scene, the now partnerless Gordon walks alone, without a warrant, into the Ayala house during the little boy's almost parodically luxurious birthday party. In the midst of tussling with two burly bodyguards, Montel achieves his goal of planting a surveillance bug under the dining table. He allows himself a small smile of success as the guards toss him out. Our last sight of Gordon is of his back, as he walks alone down a road.

In *Traffic*’s final scene, Javier sits among a crowd of Tijuana families enjoying the new well-lit baseball field as dusk descends over the game. The field, a valuable and unifying amenity for the community, was secretly funded by the DEA as Rodríguez’s payment for his dangerous machinations against the Juárez drug cartel. At this point, Rodríguez’s partner Manolo Sanchez (Jacob Vargas) has been executed by drug dealers, and Rodríguez has lied to Sanchez’s wife about it, trying to paint Sanchez as having died a hero’s death. Rodríguez’s own parents are dead from a flood because they lived in substandard housing. Rodríguez himself has turned over for arrest and torture the corrupt general who first promoted him to a position of power.

Director Steven Soderbergh makes visually clear in this final scene that, despite his being surrounded by an animated crowd, Rodríguez is essentially alone, separated as if by an invisible wall. When Rodríguez’s face comes into focus, those of the happy families become blurred. When all around him clap for a good play on the field, he waits several moments before joining in, and even then he claps more slowly than the others, in a different rhythm. Rodríguez’s status here recalls that of John Wayne in *The Searchers*’ bittersweet last scene. As Ethan Edwards, Wayne stands with his body framed by the doorway of the happy family that his heroism has made whole again; because of what he has seen and done, and because of what he still must do, he cannot enter the house and join them. Edwards turns and walks away; the door closes and the screen goes black.12

Updating *The Searchers*, *Traffic* reassigns Edwards’s isolating task—the task of preserving the homely values of family and community by going after the ruthless and immoral non-white “savages”—from white Robert Wakefield to Mexican Javier Rodríguez and black Montel Gordon.

In a version of the same crossings and interchanges that constitute *Traffic*’s titular theme, Gordon’s lonely walk down the road and Rodríguez’s status as among but not part of the crowd of Tijuana families
help make possible Wakefield’s immersion in the warm space of the U.S. recovery meeting, which is placed exactly between these two other images. The presence of these two hard, dedicated men in the film’s closing sequences, one inside the United States and one working the Mexican border, ensures that Wakefield’s shedding the military metaphor of “drug war” from his own outlook, and seeking to reconstruct himself as part of an egalitarian, emotionally sharing recovery community, will not leave a glaring hole in society’s protection against irredeemably bad people.

Recovery Nation

Robert Wakefield hangs up his badge, so to speak, as hard-line enforcer of law and order so he can become part of a community of individuals recovering from addiction. He has come to realize the value of human connection, emotional vulnerability, and intimacy. He now grasps that these are rendered impossible when one strives to embody justice and the law. Moreover, he has encountered the law’s own inescapable relationship with obscene violence; he understands that this obscene violence may take as its desired object not only lawbreakers but also those whom the law is supposed to protect. As he says when quitting his job, “If there is a War on Drugs, then our own families have become the enemy. How can you wage war on your own family?”

It is important to emphasize the distance that Robert Wakefield has traveled. Edna Pontellier’s awakening into New Womanhood in The Awakening entailed her differentiation from the heavily marked whiteness of the New Orleans’s ruling Creole establishment, a whiteness that was part and parcel of that establishment’s rigidly defined sex and gender roles. It was not only Pontellier’s movement away from the expected female role of (as Chopin puts it) “mother-woman,” but also, I have argued, her disaffiliation from aggressive modes of whiteness that made her available for her reception in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s as a general symbol of rebellious American woman. So too, when Wakefield literally walks away from his role as hard-line drug czar he detaches himself from a White House represented by English actor Albert Finney as White House chief of staff and D. W. Moffett as Jeff Sheridan, Wakefield’s smarmy and officious assistant. Wakefield also dissociates himself from the arrogantly privileged (and ironically named) neighborhood of “Indian Hills,” the affluent Cincinnati suburb in which his family lives and which seems most fully personified by the conceited and preppy Seth.13 (All of the Indian Hills teenagers and adults we meet in the film are white.) In separating himself from these two contexts, Wakefield renders himself seemingly more marginal to the trappings of power and privilege in
America. His whiteness thereby becomes less ostentatious, less obvious. He is more available for identification with the normal, the average, the universal, as well as more available for alignment, I suggest, with what *Traffic* envisions (or hopes for) as the nation’s liberal future.

Caroline’s recovery meeting constitutes the Wakefield family’s final appearance in the film. The meeting is replete with language and phrases derived from such “twelve-step” programs as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous. Despite the anonymity adhered to within real life twelve-step programs, though, the film implies that the presence of Caroline’s parents at the meeting is crucial to her recovery. Caroline’s first attempt at battling her addiction failed at least in part because her parents simply dropped her off at a treatment center but did not themselves join her recovery community. Now, however, the Wakefields sit gratefully in the audience during Caroline’s turn “sharing” at the podium. When asked if they want to share as well, Judge Wakefield introduces himself and his wife by their first names and, after pausing a moment, says that they are here to offer “support” and “to listen.”

It is noteworthy that the first, failed recovery sequence in *Traffic*, when Caroline runs away from the treatment center and directly to Sketch’s drugs and bed, depicts only white participants. The final, more successful recovery sequence depicts a group still primarily white but now strategically sprinkled with people of color, including Latinos and African Americans. A middle-aged Hispanic woman nods with sympathetic approval as Wakefield says that he is there to support and to listen. One catches a glimpse of the top of an African American man’s head, with a squared-off haircut that appears very similar to that of Sketch. However, if Sketch’s body-as-penis represented a visceral threat, the body and face of this black man are blocked from the screen, all threat erased, by a white group member sitting in front of him. The discussion leader at the recovery meeting is a white man named Jim. One can say here of *Traffic* what Rosalinda Fregoso has argued is true of John Sayles’s film *Lone Star* (1996), that the re-envisioning of a “multicultural order” is “subsumed and contained within the point of view of whiteness and masculinity which is privileged in the narrative.”

*Traffic’s* American portion closes with the recovery meeting in order to model a new liberal polity, one that serves to complement Michael Douglas’s “new” white masculinity and that intimates the film’s hope for a saner and more tolerant post–drug war America. Safe within a therapeutic space, the recovery community both turns away from and substitutes itself for a militarized nation devoted to the Sisyphean task of policing its borders yet rent by ugly internal divisions and hierarchies of race, class, and power. The meeting, where everyone is given at least the option to “share,” proffers a
seemingly liberal alternative to the failed national polity. Replacing the alienating hypocrisies of the United States’ official ruling circles, the multicultural recovery community acts as a kind of liberal utopia, one which provides sincerity, emotional connection, shared purpose, and a sense of egalitarianism.15

When a choked-up Robert Wakefield, unable to continue delivering his written speech, walks out of his final press conference as drug czar and gets into a cab, with the White House still in the background, the only words he utters are directed to the driver: “National Airport.” Of course this bit of dialogue fits into the plot’s diegetic surface, but it also carries the suggestion that when Wakefield leaves the putative seat of the nation for the space of the recovery meeting (where we next see him), he is heading for a truer and more real “National” space, a truer and more real America. The camera stays on his face for a lengthy close-up during the cab ride, emphasizing Robert’s newly opening interiority. The scene ends only when Judge Wakefield reaches up to loosen his constricting tie. He is, as Chopin says of Edna Pontellier, “casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world” (Chopin, *The Awakening*, 108). This marks a new beginning for him, as a father, a citizen, and a man. Yet Wakefield’s new beginning as a nurturing liberal has been rendered possible in *Traffic* not by eliminating the strict father, but by racializing him and his functions. The strict father’s functions both of embodying and administering the law have been divided and distributed among a tough and lonely African American cop, a mysterious Mexican police officer with vigilante characteristics, and the overmarked whiteness of the White House. In thus refiguring the strict father, this liberal movie succeeds in rewriting his national role from solo star to supporting cast. Center stage is cleared for the liberal, relatively unmarked whiteness of the new Robert Wakefield.