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The queer(ed) hotel in film

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ABSTRACT

This article asks after alternative genealogies that might appear, through the lens of Hollywood and arthouse cinema, if one were to trace queer (non) belonging in relation to the hotel rather than the closet. For sexual margin-dwellers, the hotel room has historically served as a haven, but the availability of the hotel room for non-normative intimacy also signals the transience of this connection, offering hope against the backdrop of the inevitable endpoint, the checkout time. Such a conjuncture that both invites and thwarts possibility means that the hotel room is ontologically a queer space, even before queer subjects come to occupy it. Once they do, however, the queer(ed) hotel room is charged with ambivalence, both comically and tragically, constituting a Foucauldian 'heterotopia of deviation' that is weighted by the melancholic affect of holding onto a disappearing moment in the face of future uncertainty. Tracing these spaces across four backward-looking films – *Some Like It Hot, My Own Private Idaho, Desert Hearts* and *Carol* – this article argues that the queer(ed) hotel room is a site where something thrillingly illicit can happen or at least be dreamed of, even though – and precisely because – this dream can never be brought 'home'.

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KEYWORDS Queer cinema; heterotopia; temporality; melancholy; hotels; motels

Amidst the treasure trove of LGBTQ+ shorts on YouTube is a film called *Hearts and Hotel Rooms* (James 2007), a gay romance that plays out in a hotel room on the same day over two years. Although the film begins in the present, with Jimmy arriving at the Hotel del Flores and asking for room 8, a close-up of the key in the door ignites a reverse-motion flashback, leading us backward through the familiar, heart-pounding stages of the one-night stand: giddily running to the hotel room door; nonchalantly checking in solo while the other person hovers nearby; exchanging gazes and drinks at the bar in a fluster of growing desire; catching the eye of an attractive stranger on the neighbouring barstool. The immediate future of this reverse narrative is not sex – at least not yet – but rather Jimmy's yearning for something

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memorable, something more than the one-night stand for which the Hotel del Flores seems designed. As Jimmy frets about the loss of love before it even begins, Brian touchingly reassures him through the mise-en-scène of filmic romance: a promise ring slipped on a finger, an array of tea candles, a tasteful sex scene bathed in blue. But the spectre of loss and forgetting, even in the midst of flashback storytelling, returns in the white light of the morning's departure. 'I hate leaving hotel rooms', Brian tells Jimmy outside door number 8. 'You always feel like you've forgotten something'. Jimmy's suggestion that they refute loss by returning to room 8 on the 8th day of the 8th month next year lands us back in the present, where a melancholically single Jimmy has given up waiting for Brian and abandoned the ring on the edge of the sink. But, in a cinematic *coup de coeur*, Jimmy is suddenly accosted outside by a voice from behind asking, 'Forgot something?', and Brian appears with the retrieved ring, repeating how much he hates forgetting things in hotel rooms.

This short film is both unusual and very much of its mid-2000s moment. On the one hand, after the roiling traumas of the 20th century – homosexual criminalisation, closeting, the AIDS crisis – and the reassessments of 1990s New Queer Cinema (Rich 1992; Aaron 2004), LGBTQ+ films of the 2000s dared to embrace hope. As one YouTube commentator on *Hearts and Hotel Rooms* puts it, 'finally, a gay vid with a happy ending, yay'. On the other hand, the fact that the film ends with the lovers coming together fails to overcome its melancholic affect, recalling Victoria L. Smith's argument that heterotopic spaces – including, as Foucault noted, motel rooms (1986, 27) – 'are also "aporetic" spaces – spaces of doubt and loss' (2018, 1). Indeed, the constitutive availability of the hotel room for non-normative intimacy also signals the transience of this connection, situating the lovers as already lost to each other in the shadows of memory. What is being mourned as a lost object – melancholically, in the Freudian sense that the subject 'cannot consciously perceive what [has been] lost' (Freud 1957 [1917], 245) – is the relationship-to-be, already tainted by its beginnings in the hotel room that made it (im)possible. The hotel room, after all, functions as a space of passage, associated with material as well as metaphorical journeys, but by definition this includes the imminence of moving on, of losing the promise of whatever encounter has just occurred there. In this sense, the hotel room may offer hope, even the possibility of transformation (e.g., from singlehood to coupledom), but this is also thwarted by its inevitable endpoint, the checkout time. Such a conjuncture that both invites and thwarts possibility means that the hotel room is ontologically a queer space, irrespective of who occupies it.

Nonetheless, as *Hearts and Hotel Rooms* slyly notes with its visual trope of the number 8 hanging askew on the hotel room door, it does matter whether there are queer subjects within. For sexual margin-dwellers, the hotel or

motel room has historically served as a haven, a place for activities and fantasies that can only be carried out behind closed doors. Richard Barrios, in his meticulously researched examination of queerness in classical Hollywood film, goes so far as to suggest replacing the notion of the closet with the hotel: 'In hindsight, perhaps "hotel" might seem a more accurate metaphor; some guests checking in under assumed names or in disguise, others sneaking in undetected, an ostentatious few sweeping in and moving directly into the penthouse' (2003, 5). Barrios rightly points to the metaphorical limitations of the closet to account for tropes of queerness projected brazenly, if generically, onto the big screen. But if we take the hotel more literally, as I wish to do here, then it turns out that there are not that many queer-coded characters occupying Hollywood's cinematic hotel rooms, despite a few ostentatious penthouse residents (think of Waldo in *Laura* [Preminger 1944]) and a Busby Berkeley film promisingly entitled *Hollywood Hotel* (1937) that has much more to do with Hollywood than with hotels. In fact, the queer(ed) hotel room remains metaphorical until well after Stonewall, when, with the transition of the Western to the road movie genre (Klinger 2002), it begins to appear in American film pointedly linked with journeys and transience. The coupling of transitory accommodation with the road movie also ushers in the common spectre of the motel, often unmarked or indistinguishable from the hotel. When looking for queer inhabitants, then, we may need to consider the hybrid space of the ho/motel (with apologies for the terrible pun).

In all cases, the queer(ed) hotel is a liminal space that encourages the crossing of categories, genders and sexualities. At these transitory margins, one thing is markedly clear: the queer(ed) hotel is connected to sex and sexuality, although rarely, if ever, to overt claims of sexual identity. In fact, expressions of identity seem to be at odds with the cover provided by the queer(ed) hotel room, which is more closely aligned with navigations of desire than with a politics of visibility. Rather, the hotel room stays open to ambivalence, both comically and tragically, staging desire as a discontinuous journey that foregrounds fantasy. In Foucault's provocative terms, the queer(ed) hotel is a 'heterotopia of deviation', peopled by 'individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm' (1986, 25). Unlike the rest homes, psychiatric hospitals, and prisons which Foucault lists as examples, however, the queer(ed) hotel in film embraces, and indeed seems to prefigure, practices of (deviant) sex and sexuality behind its doors. As the crooked number 8 signifies, this doorway is also the threshold of ambivalent affect, divided between the potential ecstasy of the goings-on within and the fear or frustration (soon) to be faced on the outside. This is not to say that the hotel is always drenched in queer melancholia, but, as I show here, the queer(ed) hotel room does tend to appear in wistfully backward-looking films (Love 2007), suggesting that it is weighted by the

impossible task, and aporetic affect, of holding onto a disappearing moment in the face of future uncertainty and even failure. Heterotopically, this situates the hotel in a time and place outside of the ordinary, where something thrillingly illicit can happen or at least be dreamed of, even though – and precisely because – this dream can never be brought 'home'. As a particular island in heterotopia, the queer(ed) hotel is a space that limns another topography of desire, a ho/mo(tel)topia occupied by fantasmatic figures shuttling to and from the past. Although the corpus of queer(ed) hotel films crosses genres, historical periods and sexualities, a pattern of retrospective liminality does emerge. Tracing these spaces across four culturally significant films – *Some Like It Hot* (Wilder 1959), *My Own Private Idaho* (Van Sant 1991), *Desert Hearts* (Deitch 1985) and *Carol* (Haynes 2015) – this article argues that the queer(ed) hotel is a heterotopia populated by the un-homed, offering an alluring fantasy that is punctuated, and punctured, by loss.

Ho/mo(tel)topia: *Some Like It Hot*

As Richard Barrios has richly documented, Hollywood cinema is rife with queer 'characters, allusions and situations' (2003, 2), from the early days of silent film to well beyond the onset of the Hays Code in 1934. In keeping with Hollywood's entertainment mandate, many of these queer characters appear in comedies, tapping into shared cultural knowledge about sexual 'others' while ensuring that queerness remains unthreatening, just a bit of harmless fun. While often signalled through gestures, props, or throwaway lines, the most common trope since the vaudeville era is that of cross-dressing, especially men dressing as women and hence – absurdly but engagingly – giving up their patriarchal power (Garber 2012). Barrios admits that '[t]he line between gender-switching and queerness can be troublesome, and remains so today' (2003, 8), but my aim here is not to police that boundary. Rather, drawing on Barrios' suggestion of the hotel as a metaphor for queer cinematic crossings, I aim to plumb the connection between cross-dressing and disguise as a source for imagining the possibilities of queer deviance while supposedly remaining under wraps. After all, of the three categories of queer guest that Barrios finds peopling the cinematic hotel, two of them – those 'checking in under assumed names or in disguise' and those 'sneaking in undetected' (5) – seem to be in the hotel for the purpose of doing something deviant while avoiding detection. Although this is not unlike the closet, the queer hotel in comedy is fun and flirty, toying with possibility under the cover of masquerade. Indeed, it is the delicious irony of watching cross-dressed male guests 'sneak undetected' into a hotel that provides the pleasure of one of the queerest comedies to come out of the twilight of the Hollywood studio era, *Some Like It Hot*. The pleasure is multiplied, moreover, by the fact

that there are double and triple disguises at play: Hollywood celebrities Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon disguised as deadbeat Prohibition-Era musicians disguised as women, one of whom then disguises her/himself as a romantically numb millionaire in order to seduce Marilyn Monroe (un) dressed as Sugar Kane. Such a blurring of identities and sexualities cannot play out in normative space, which is why the hotel room as queerly deviant heterotopia becomes central to this gender- and genre-bending film.

Foucault defines heterotopias as spaces that are in relation with other sites 'but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect' (1986, 24). Unlike utopias, which also belong to this category, heterotopias are spaces that 'exist in reality', where they exert 'a sort of counteraction on the position' that subjects occupy (24). Such a broad definition allows Foucault to fold together sites as heterogeneous as the mirror and the prison, but this heterogeneity can also be projected, following the steer of *Some Like It Hot*, onto the fantasmatic geography of the U.S. As a film made in 1959 that looks back at the Prohibition Era of the 1920s, *Some Like It Hot* traverses time in order to contrast dystopian with utopian space, converging on the hotel in the Act 2 climax. The first act is set in Chicago, in an unforgiving winter where our protagonists, Joe the saxophonist (Curtis) and Jerry the bassist (Lemmon), are down to their last penny and unable to find work, even before they witness a gangland shooting that forces them on the run, now disguised as 'Josephine' and 'Daphne' in an all-girl band. Act 2 is set in sunny Miami, at the Seminole-Ritz Hotel, where the band plays and love stories unfold in the tropic(al) spaces of the good life: the beach, the yacht, the all-night dance floor. In this inversion of the cold, poverty and precarity of Chicago, Florida is characterised utopically as the place where 'millionaires, lots of 'em! . . . go south for the winter, like birds', as Sugar explains to Josephine. Act 3 brings Chicago and Miami into violent juxtaposition when the gangsters arrive at the hotel for a convention of 'lovers of Italian opera' and pierce through the disguises of Josephine and Daphne, leading to numerous chase sequences across the hotel with our heroes dressed alternately as women, hotel boys or other guests, but never as 'themselves'. By the film's legendary ending, when the inevitable de-wigging of the cross-dressers leads to forgiveness and acceptance from their lovers – including the male-male pairing of millionaire Osgood and Jerry on the happy grounds that 'nobody's perfect' – it becomes clear that the heterotopic hotel has itself functioned as a queering mechanism.

This can happen only because, as Foucault notes but does not elaborate on, heterotopic spaces are always fantasmatic. Indeed, the comedy of *Some Like It Hot* comes not from ridicule aimed at cross-dressers, but rather from the queer fantasies that are generated by living up to one's gender-crossing dress. Unlike the utopian space of the yacht, however, which is

heterosexualised through Joe's seduction of Sugar and their steamy canoodling, the fantasising of queer possibility takes place in Joe and Jerry's hotel room. It is here that Joe, sporting the remains of his seductive disguise as 'Shell Oil Jr.', returns after his night with Sugar to find a deliriously happy Jerry-as-Daphne, still in pert blonde wig and black-sequinned finery, announcing her engagement to Osgood. When Joe tries to bring her back to gender-normative reality by insisting that 'you can't marry Osgood', Daphne refuses to see the gender problem, which is to say that she refuses to see gender *as* the problem. Osgood might be too old for her, his mother might stand in the way, he might prefer a different honeymoon destination than her choice of Niagara Falls, but Daphne's queer fantasy of being 'a lucky girl' is sustained. Indeed, the fantasy is arguably no less queer when Daphne, relapsing gradually into Jerry, finally reveals the pragmatics of the plan: 'I'll tell him the truth when the time comes . . . like right after the ceremony; then we'll get a quick annulment, he'll make a nice settlement on me, and I'll keep getting those alimony checks every month'. Refusing to let Joe destroy her 'last chance to marry a millionaire', Daphne/Jerry reveals that she/he only wants what every girl wants: security. It is not until Joe reminds Jerry of his normative responsibilities – 'there are laws, conventions, it's just not been done' – that Jerry mutters, 'I'm a boy, I'm a boy' and de-wigs himself, in an exact reversal of his 'I'm a girl, I'm a girl' incantation on the train ride to Florida, when, surrounded by women in negligees, he was trying to keep his (then) hetero-masculine desire in check. The heterotopic space of the hotel room – which a starry-eyed Sugar soon bursts into, forcing Joe to re-wig himself as Josephine – has done its queer work of reversal, even to the point of surreptitiously replacing the beats of comedy with the giddiness of hope. Why, after all, shouldn't all three of them be 'lucky girls' in this space of possiblity?

For all of the woozy wonder of this scene, however, this is a queerness tinged with ambivalence. The gangster who was chasing our heroes is killed, but in the process Joe and Jerry witness more gangland shootings, pulling the hotel, too, into the loop of violent retribution. Even in the heterotopic hotel room, the queer promise of the shift from Jerry's self-reminding 'I'm a girl, I'm a girl' to Daphne's chant 'I'm a boy, I'm a boy' does not excise the darkly muttered phrase in both incantations, 'I wish I was dead', suggesting that, whether as boy or as girl, Jerry's/Daphne's self-corrections are still underpinned by melancholy. Even though the ending of the film seems to recuperate this hopeless affect by bringing both couples together, culminating in Osgood's queer refusal to take 'no' for an answer from a dewigged Jerry, the pattern of transience in the lovers' relationships has already been laid. Sugar's compulsion to fall for no-good saxophonists who leave behind nothing but socks and toothpaste tubes, like Osgood's string of marriages to forgettable girls, suggests an instability to this queer resolution. The film thus ends, as it

must, on a moment of suspended potential, an implicit new beginning in the waving away of hetero-perfection that nonetheless can never play out and hence can never go wrong. Osgood's yacht, which the couples do not reach before the titles roll, might turn out to be a utopia, but the cycle of precarity and broken relationships indicates otherwise. The film, for all of its exuberant defiance of the 'laws, conventions' rejected in the space of the ho(mo) teltopia, freezes a fantasmatic past in order to foreclose the threat of future loss.

Hotels and the home-manqué: *My Own Private Idaho*

While the queer(ed) hotel in *Some Like It Hot* operates as a haven, both from gangland violence and for queer fantasies, the rise of the road movie in the New Hollywood era recalibrates this heterotopia in relation to the unattainability of home. If one is on the road, then by definition one is not at home. To be not at home in a queer context, however, carries meanings that are differently inflected than heteronormative associations of home. The home as the site of the nuclear family – what the queer protagonist in Gus Van Sant's breakthrough work of New Queer Cinema, *My Own Private Idaho*, refers to as 'you know, with a mom and a dad and a dog and shit like that' – has traditionally been a difficult space for those marked as sexually deviant and thus situated outside its borders. As Sharon O'Dair notes of *My Own Private Idaho*, 'the "normal" family . . . haunts this film but is not represented in it' (2015, 136), just as a film like Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together* (1997), about two male lovers from Hong Kong trying to sustain their relationship in Argentina, is haunted by an irretrievable Hong Kong that appears only as an upside-down shot in the film. In an optimistic vein, this dislocation from home may provide queer subjects with the impetus to build new homes and alternative kinship arrangements (Butler 2002; Weston 1991). But numerous films attest to the missing home as a wound to queer subjectivity, among them *Happy Together* as well as the elegiac *My Own Private Idaho*, which pairs the youthful River Phoenix and Keanu Reeves as tightly bonded hustlers in the American Northwest. While both of these films play with the symbol of the road as an escape from as well as longing for home, I am particularly interested in *My Own Private Idaho* because of a blind spot in the otherwise rich commentaries on the film. We know that this is a (perhaps *the*) queer road movie, as Robert Lang justly calls it in his book *Masculine Interests* (2002), and moreover a road movie about unrequited desire for the classic personifications of home: lovers and mothers. But what tends to be overlooked is the relationship between the home as lost object and the hotel as a place for staging fantasies of queer belonging. Unlike *Happy Together*, which uses a rented room in a cheap boarding house to stage the gradual but inevitable breakdown of the lovers' relationship, *My Own Private Idaho*

incorporates the hotel as an 'other' home, and hence a home for the Other, which somehow lies both in the past and always ahead, just out of reach.

My Own Private Idaho begins and ends with an empty roadscape, an Idahoan 'pastoral manqué' (O'Dair 2015, 134) occupied only by the peripatetic queer hustler Mike Waters (Phoenix), who recognises the 'fucked-up face' of this road as a place he has been before. When Mike suddenly falls into the first of many narcoleptic slumbers, the film unfolds from his dream vision into narrative flashback, signalling an oneiric structure of return that is heavily loaded with cultural touchstones. Refusing the phantasmagoria of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), the Idahoan road is a fucked-up version of the Yellow Brick Road, complete with a barn crashing out of the sky but not landing on a witch (Lang 2002), while the intertwined stories of Mike and Scott Favor (Reeves) are so heavily freighted with Freud and Shakespeare that O'Dair argues they don't stand a chance 'to create new forms of family and kinship' (2015, 131). Mike's narcolepsy, conveniently explained to the audience as a medical condition in response to stress, is coded by the perspectival editing as a mother fixation, which sends Mike into the embrace of his dream-mother whenever he encounters a blonde woman of a certain age. This dream-mother, configured as Freud might have imagined her had he ever moved to the Midwest, provides the putative goal of Mike and Scott's road trip, but she is also tethered in good Freudian fashion to the absent Oedipal father, expunged in Mike's case by his incestuous paternity and foreclosed in Scott's case by his hyperbolic rejection of his own wealthy father. Whereas the Freudian text can offer no hope beyond dreams to Mike, whose fatherlessness is 'just an extra Oedipal wrinkle in an already disenfranchised existence' (Taubin cited in Cunningham 2007, 173), Scott is favored by his explicit coding as Prince Hal in Shakespeare's *Henry* plays, which grants him both a 'true father' in Fat Bob (riffing on Falstaff) and an upcoming position as ruler-patriarch once he sets aside his youthful misbehaviour. Irrespective of their divergent futures, Mike and Scott are together on the road because their nuclear home is a home-manqué, a shadowy and inaccessible place that is missing from the world they queerly inhabit.

By contrast, the hotel in *My Own Private Idaho* is an other-home hiding in plain sight. Whereas the home-manqué appears in a number of melancholic guises on the road travelled by Mike and Scott – as a cozy campfire where love is hopelessly confessed, as a violent trailer home where incest is exposed, as an isolated Italian farmhouse where one of them is left behind – it is in the hotel that the queer imaginary is staged and overtly signalled as queer by its association with sex/uality. The neon signs of down-and-out hotels – the Hotel Gatewood, the St. Regis Hotel – first appear in establishing shots for the highly imaginative set-piece that brings to life cover-boys on porn magazines as they discuss their 'professional' values from the shelves of an adult video store. These hotels, like the animated magazine covers, are the

sites where the hustlers ply their queer trade, but the hotel soon morphs into a more homey space, when Fat Bob returns to Portland and gathers together his ragtag band of hustlers in an abandoned, derelict hotel overseen by an ageing housekeeper. In this other-home Bob offers himself as the Falstaffian father to all young hustlers but in particular to Scott, with whom he engages in a riot of Shakesperean repartee as they drink beer (labeled 'Falstaff'), plan a robbery and trade exaggerated tales of tricks. This vibrant space of sexual, juridical, and literary licence is only revealed to be a hotel, ironically named the 'Governor', by an exterior shot that introduces the police trying to break in because they are 'looking for a fat man'. The raid that follows scatters the denizens like the cockroaches they share the premises with, but leaves everyone untouched because of a further ruse, a play-within-a-play, that has the police apologising to the young Mr. Favor after they interrupt him in a supposed love-making session with Mike. All the hotel's a stage, after all, so nothing need be taken seriously.

The final hotel scene extrapolates the theme by presenting the queer imaginary in an even more stylized mode. On the trail of a postcard sent by Mike's mother, the boys arrive at the aptly named Family Tree Inn, where they find not the mother but the archly queer Hans (played by queer cult actor Udo Kier). In room 407, Hans shows the boys a 1920s-style photo of his own mother before grabbing a lamp and dramatically re-staging a performance from his earlier life 'on many stages', a song which seems directly imported from the Berlin queer underground, given its campily sinister refrain in German ('Angst und Schrecken!'). The song, 'Der Adler', was actually recorded as a single by Kier in 1985 and performed by him in 1986 on a German variety show ("Udo Kier" 1986), thus entwining Kier-as-performer with Hans-as-performer through a shared past that connects Van Sant to the cult directors Kier has worked with (Andy Warhol, Paul Morrissey, Rainer Werner Fassbinder) and queerly remixes the meaning of the 'Family Tree' hotel. What follows directly on Hans' performance is the closest we get to a graphic sex scene in *My Own Private Idaho*, but this, too, is highly staged, presenting the three men in 14 poses of sexual intimacy shot as though in freeze-frame, but actually requiring the actors to hold the tension of their pose for the duration of the shot. The sex is thus simultaneously frozen and dynamic, statue-like and palpitating; it is, moreover, staged as tableaux with an undertow of unrequited desire, as Hans repeatedly reaches toward Mike and Mike reaches toward Scott, while Scott concentrates on the business of pleasuring Hans. Something is definitely missing here – the mother, Berlin, even the queer liquidity of sex – but by staging such objets manqués the hotel as other-home also allows such things to be queerly (re) imagined.

As a heterotopic reversal of the home-manqué, the queer(ed) hotel subverts the home by offering a subversive home, a space that connects the past

(Shakespeare, Freud, the Berlin cabaret scene) with alternative intimacies in a potential future. The road may seem to function similarly, offering a line of flight toward the horizon, but in Idaho this road that 'will never end', according to Mike, refuses to fill in or imagine any future. Indeed, the cyclical structure of the film means that it ends on the same stretch of road where it began, with Mike collapsing into narcoleptic sleep. The only resolution offered is disturbingly ambivalent: first, an old pick-up pulls up and two men rob Mike of his backpack and shoes; then an extreme long shot shows another car stopping and the anonymous driver (could it be Scott?) picking up the somnolent Mike, placing him in the passenger seat and driving off. There is no indication, cinematographically or narratively, whether this ending will lead to the fulfilment or demise of Mike's dream. Indeed, the final screen graphic – 'have a nice day' – creepily suggests the worst. As with the ending of *Some Like It Hot*, there is an inarticulate weight in the final shots, what Barthes might call the punctum of a photograph (2000 [1980]), which points to future loss, failure, even death just past the last frame. It would have been better never to have left the hotel room, but, as we know, the subversive home comes with a checkout time.

Women going West: *Desert Hearts* and *Carol*

The hotel rooms discussed so far have been peopled with men (even if gender-bending ones), but it is impossible to overlook the importance of the ho/motel for lesbian films, especially in two films made 30 years apart, *Desert Hearts* and *Carol*, that combine an achingly touching romance between women with leaving home on a trip West. Although the films are vastly different in terms of aesthetics and budgets, they are nonetheless similar in the stories they tell. Both are backward-looking period films (Love 2007) set in the 1950s; both are recursive in that they end in the same space as they began; and both involve a socially established, blonde woman – Vivian, an English professor at Columbia University in *Desert Hearts*, and Carol, a New York society wife in *Carol* – going through divorce while feeling ineluctably drawn to a younger, dark-haired woman. While *Desert Hearts* plays out in the ranch-and-casino setting of Reno, Nevada, where divorce was legal in the 1950s, *Carol* evokes the photographic aesthetic of 1952 New York, drenched in the dull greys and greens of the post-war era before the lively onset of 50s' consumerism. With an eye to class and age difference, as well as intra-couple tension between lesbian self-acceptance and resistance, both films look back from a putatively more liberated future at the psychological and social shackles once constraining women who desire women. When the protagonists go West – to establish residency in Nevada or to escape an ugly legal battle in New York – the hotel rooms and the lovers within offer a haven from such constraints, yet the walls of the hotels are

porous to surveillance and the castigating judgement of others. In contrast to the other films discussed here, it is only women divorcing their husbands who can afford actual hotel rooms, but that is precisely the irony: the socio-economic, heteronormative conditions that allow Vivian and Carol insouciantly to rent a hotel room are the very same constraints that they are trying to escape from in these hotels. Whereas the hustlers in *My Own Private Idaho* live in relative invisibility on the social margins, occupying hotel rooms that are either abandoned or paid for by others, the women in these films can afford nicer digs, but only at the social cost of being watched and threatened with exposure.

Initially, the lawless, open-sky setting of the ranch, desert and casino in *Desert Hearts* signals this as a place of freedom and arrival, emphasized in the opening as Vivian, clad in a tight grey suit, disembarks from a train and is met by Frances, who rents rooms at her ranch to women seeking 'migratory' divorces. Part of what historian Alicia Barber calls 'the landscape of divorce' that dotted Reno with boarding houses, dude ranches and hotels (2019), Frances' ranch offers accommodation for the six weeks needed to establish state residency and thus operates as a quasi-home for women wanting to change their circumstances. Here, Vivian's attempt to hold herself apart as a 'respected scholar' from the East is undermined when she meets Cay, Frances' stepdaughter and an unapologetic lesbian, whose studio at the edge of the ranch (complete with a naked woman in her bed) and open-topped convertible label her as wild and free-wheeling. Amidst a filmic atmosphere of tactile, eroticized relations between women – where otherwise heterosexual women bathe, touch, and dance with each other – Vivian is drawn to Cay but remains remote in her rented room, until a night spent out in Cay's car brings a passionate kiss in a rainstorm, followed by swift social retribution. Kicked off the premises by Frances, Vivian transfers to the Hotel Riverside Casino, where the sex scene that could not happen in the quasi-home of the ranch tenderly unfolds. The hotel room is a haven, protected by the 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the door, but the walls are porous to social stigma, and the moment the women go out – to a saloon for dinner – Vivian complains of feeling 'exposed'. While the hotel room is a space of potential queer joy, the bright glare of daylight on the pavement outside the hotel recalls Cay to the transience of this relationship: 'We've been saying good-bye since the beginning'. Once Cay leaves, Vivian's final night in the hotel room shows her in dark silhouette, her fretful hopelessness framed against a dawning sky.

In *Carol,* it is the eponymous older woman who fascinates and pursues the younger Therese, whom Carol captures in her gaze while Christmas shopping in a department store where Therese 'serv[es] as both vendeuse and goods' (White 2015, 14). When Carol's estranged husband becomes suspicious of their intimacy, which warms even the cool formality of the

family's suburban home, he uses a legal 'morality clause' to slap her with an injunction against seeing her young daughter, to which Carol responds by 'going West for a while' and asking Therese to join her on what will become a 'journey through a succession of diners and hotel rooms [on] a flight without apparent cause or meaningful direction' (White 2015, 11). While the journey has no particular aim, the narrative arc of the women's desire is traced across the five ho/motel rooms they visit: first in separate rooms, in an unnamed motel where Therese enters Carol's room while she's in the shower and smells her clothes; second at the McKinley Motel in Canton, Ohio, where they share the presidential suite and 'play cosmestics counter' by putting makeup and perfume on each other (White 2015, 14); third, at the Drake Hotel in Chicago, where the mise-en-scène of fine food and furnishings only recalls their separation in terms of class and age; fourth, on New Year's Eve in a motel room in Waterloo, Iowa, where they (finally) kiss passionately before a languidly beautiful sex scene unfolds at Therese's behest. As in *Desert Hearts*, retribution for queer joy is swift and the walls turn out to have been literally porous, when in the morning they discover a private eye next door who has been recording their love-making in the pay of Carol's husband. All that now remains is the fifth stop on the journey: a hotel room in an unnamed town where they share one of two twin beds and fall asleep naked, before Therese wakes in the morning to find that Carol has left. As screenwriter Phyllis Nagy has noted, the motel is crucial to these women's 'life on the run' (cited in Smith 2018, 10), not only for the culmination of their sexual relationship but also as a heterotopic space of ambivalent isolation, where they are simultaneously alone together and apart, freed and surveilled. For women, the ho/motel is as much a promising subversion as a cruel incursion of the social relations that police and constrain the queer imaginary. Or, as Cay would put it, Carol and Therese 'have been saying good-bye since the beginning'.

But neither film ends there. Crucially, there is one more hotel in *Carol*, the Ritz Tower Hotel, whose stately restaurant frames the beginning and end of the film as the place where Carol and Therese meet again, months after the road trip. This hotel launches both the flashback that constitutes the narrative of their relationship and, at the end, a will-she/won't-she oscillation as Therese weighs Carol's proposition that they live together in a near-distant future. In a similar vein, there is one more train at the end of *Desert Hearts*, with Vivian boarding to return to New York and beseeching Cay to come with her as far as the next station. In both films, the formal recursive structure is broken in the last scene with a glance towards the future: Cay boards the train for (at least) the next station, and Therese moves slowly toward Carol across a packed restaurant as the two women gaze at each other with half-smiles. As in *Some Like It Hot* and even *My Own Private Idaho*,

these endings hold out hope that the relationships configured through fantasy and touch in the queer(ed) hotel room can be extended past the final frame, but the very hope requires that the frame be frozen before resolution in order to simultaneously welcome and ward off a risky future.

Conclusion

Within the pattern of retrospective liminality illuminated here, the denizens of the queer(ed) hotel room remain, as Patricia White claims about *Carol*, in an 'eternally present tense, while the viewer is given both a tantalizing taste of the past and glimpse of a queer future' (2015, 17). The affective temporality of this eternal present quivers with hope for the glimpsed future, nurtured by the queer(ed) hotel room as a space for fantasies of love and belonging, but this is also an aporetic tempo-spatiality, coloured by a future mourning for the queer encounter that was possible only in this temporary haven. The very availability of the hotel room for queer sexual intimacy, after all, relies on its being a transient space for the un-homed. Repeatedly, the cyclical structure of the films discussed here – whether in the form of a historical gaze, flashback narration, or the recursive longing for a lost object – suggests that, from the vantage point of the past, the queer future might be inaccessible, or worse, that it is the utopian destination of a different track than the one that starts in the heterotopic space, the other-home, of the queer(ed) hotel. From the viewers' vantage point, these films go back in time to (re) imagine the roots of queer history through the promise of the hotel room, but the hope that such reimagining might change our own present does not free us from the loop of mourning for the lost future lodged in the past. Inside the queerly imagined hotel room, everything seems possible, but – unlike what the Eagles assured us about Hotel California – you always have to leave.

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