The Locations of Politics: Highsmith’s *The Price of Salt*, Haynes’ *Carol*, and American Post-War and Contemporary Cultural Landscapes

*Margaret Sönser Breen*

University of Connecticut, USA

Abstract

This essay examines Patricia Highsmith’s lesbian novel *The Price of Salt* (1952) and its recent film adaptation *Carol* (2015). Reading the novel and film together and against each other, as well as against other mid-century artistic productions, allows one to recognize both texts’ affirmation of queer desires and, with that affirmation, a revision of conventional narrative structures to accommodate that affirmation. Such readings, however, also expose the lapses and ambivalences in both the novel and film: discontinuities that at least qualify and perhaps undermine a definition of the works as queer. How queer are these texts after all, and in so far as “queer” gestures toward social inclusion, how queer are these texts in their vision of America? Finally, how can a reading that focuses on the novel’s and film’s aesthetic and social politics of location facilitate a queer understanding of our own cultural moment? These are the primary issues that a combined analysis of *The Price of Salt* and *Carol* engenders.

**Keywords**: Patricia Highsmith (Claire Morgan), *Carol*, *The Price of Salt*, lesbian narrative, queer aesthetics, queer politics, intertextuality
The Price of Salt and Lesbian Literature

The Price of Salt tells the love story of Therese and Carol. Therese, a young woman, a near orphan, and an aspiring stage designer (in the film, a photographer), encounters Carol, a wealthy suburban married woman with a young daughter. Therese has a boyfriend, but she is not invested in either him or their “strange relationship” (24). While temping at a New York department store during the holiday rush, Therese serves Carol, and her attraction to and idolization of the woman some fifteen years her senior are instantaneous. The two begin to see each other, and when Carol, in the process of divorcing her husband, decides to take a trip across the country, she invites Therese along. During the journey their romance blooms. Unbeknownst them, however, Carol’s husband, Harge, has had a detective follow them, and he records them making love. The tapes become evidence against Carol in the divorce proceedings, and she hurries home to deal with the legal repercussions while Therese stays behind. Weeks pass during which time the women’s contact is limited largely to letters. In one of them Carol tells Therese that she releases her from their relationship. Therese is stunned. She asks herself, “How would the world come back to life? How would its salt come back?” (250). “Salt” here, as in the title, stands for flavor and, more resonantly, vitality and self-preservation. For Therese a life without Carol would seem to be a life without salt. Yet the price of loving Carol might well be emotional devastation. More time goes by, and it is unclear whether Therese still loves Carol. Therese gets a job working in an office. She no longer idolizes Carol. Eventually Therese makes her way back to New York to begin her professional career. Shortly thereafter, the two women arrange to meet, and Carol tells Therese she loves her. She explains that she is now divorced and that she has lost custody of her daughter. This is the price that she has had to pay for the love affair. She has taken an apartment in the city, and she invites Therese to come live with her. Therese declines. Carol has a dinner appointment later and, after letting Therese know that she is welcome to join her, leaves. Therese heads to an engagement of her own, a party with various theater people. She only stays a short time. While there she realizes that she still loves Carol and wants to be with her. Therese rushes to the restaurant where Carol is dining, and the novel ends with Carol silently welcoming her.

Inspired by her own experience of encountering a striking older woman in New York’s Bloomingdale’s department store and then quasi-stalking her, Highsmith sketched the story of The Price of Salt, told from Therese’s perspective, in a matter of days. The novel appeared some two years later. Ambivalent about the work and not wanting to be known or pigeonholed as a lesbian writer, Highsmith used the pseudonym Claire Morgan for publication. The Price of Salt,

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1 “Strange” is itself in 1950s and 1960s lesbian and gay fiction an adjective that suggests characters’ queerness. See, for example, James Colton’s 1965 novel Strange Marriage.
2 While the novel’s title refers primarily to the emotional and social costs that are exacted of Therese and Carol for falling in love with each other, there is also possibly a secondary meaning at work. Some readers are reminded of the biblical story of Lot’s wife, who is turned into a pillar of salt when she looks back at the burning city of Sodom, typically (if not perhaps accurately) understood as a site of sexual transgression. From this perspective, the title encodes the risk of destruction that Carol and Therese because of their affair face.
which she later renamed *Carol*, became a paperback sensation. Nagy’s powerful screenplay remains faithful to the novel; the film’s notable additions include a framing narrative and flashback sequence and the extension of narrative viewpoint to include Carol’s.

The above summary begins to address the questions regarding both the novel’s and the film’s textual queerness. When, in turn, the novel is read within the context of lesbian literature and the film analyzed in terms of a cinematic history of melodrama and film noir, one recognizes how both Highsmith and Haynes have reworked conventional plot and genre structures in order to expand the possibilities for affirming lesbian representation. The accomplishment, particularly in Highsmith’s case, needs to be underscored. The pulp fiction of the era typically offered storylines that ended with lesbians dying, being imprisoned, going insane, or discovering their own heterosexuality. Such plots in effect protected authors and publishers from censorship and prosecution. *The Price of Salt*, by comparison, grants its heroines the prospect of a happy life together. Such an outcome, proffered rather than fully realized, is possible because of Highsmith’s innovation on the level of genre. Hers is a hybrid text that, mixing elements of romance and thriller, presents love as desire, an unstable, potentially unsafe and dangerous condition: whether between a parent and child or between adults and whether normative or not, desire troubles. In effect, Highsmith disrupts the conventional equation of homosexuality with social destruction and realigns the latter with desire broadly defined. Like Radclyffe Hall at the end of *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), Highsmith here employs a strategy of negativity, wherein, as Terry Castle observes of the earlier landmark lesbian novel, “lies the possibility of recovery—a way of conjuring up, or bringing back into view, that which has been denied” (7-8). Even as one may be left feeling uneasy about the human condition, Highsmith humanizes lesbianism.

Highsmith’s infusion of a romance narrative with suspicion and surveillance did not simply constitute an effective defense against censorship. It also offered readers and writers alike a groundbreaking text whose reconfiguration of literary genres and conventional social definitions yielded a lesbian love story with a happy ending. Even the protagonist of *The Price of Salt*, Therese, seems aware that, together with Carol, the woman with whom she is falling in love, she is living out a storyline at once familiar and new. So, one-third of the way through the novel, the narrator records Therese’s growing realization: “Was it love or wasn’t it that she felt for Carol? … She had heard about girls falling in love, and she knew what kind of people they were and what they looked like. Neither she nor Carol looked like that. Yet the way she felt about Carol passed all the tests for love and fitted all the descriptions” (91). Despite the mid-century identification of lesbianism with butch-femme stylings and the broader equation of homosexuality with degeneracy, Therese recognizes that her relationship with Carol, neither conventionally heterosexual nor stereotypically lesbian, is nonetheless, classic. “A classic,” she tells Carol a bit later in the novel, “is something with a basic human situation” (152).

By comparison, Carol, older and more experienced, is wary. For her, the “classic” lines of romance can be as punitive as they are welcoming. They can sanction pettiness, jealousy, and even violence. Insofar as they regulate, they can manipulate and exclude. After all, “It’s the

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3 See my discussion of lesbian pulp author Ann Bannon 45-55.
clichés that cause the trouble,” as Jeanette Winterson’s narrator-protagonist remarks in Written on the Body (1992), published some forty years after Highsmith’s novel. Carol can readily imagine that when Therese’s boyfriend Richard says he “c[a]n’t compete” with Carol (149, 152), he is implicitly threatening her and Therese. Carol’s discernment proves prescient. Richard’s resentment anticipates the mixture of possessiveness and voyeurism that characterize the reaction of her own husband, whom she is divorcing: Harge hires a detective to tail her and Therese as they take their cross-country road trip. Carol, in effect, recognizes that they inhabit “an America that alienates, threatens, and suffocates” (Hesford 129). It is a location that reflects the cultural context in which Highsmith was herself writing. The Price of Salt, observes Victoria Hesford, “captures through its construction as much as its subject, the paranoia of early fifties America” (118): a world that culturally and aesthetically confounds the boundaries between thriller and romance.

Therese, for her part, decides to set aside her sense of foreboding. The younger woman may recognize in her boyfriend’s jealous anger a capacity for violence and surveillance: “He stared at her,” she thinks, with “fixed curiosity… as if he were watching a spectacle through a keyhole” (150). Even more so he seems “never so determined not to give her up” (150). Richard’s reaction gives her pause; in the moment it even frightens; she remains, however, undeterred, the affective bond with Carol unassailable. When, eventually, she and Carol make love, Therese knows, “she didn’t have to ask if this were right, no one had to tell her, because this could not have been more right or perfect” (180). In contrast to Carol, who can foresee the damage that will be done to her and to her relationship with Therese, Therese’s certainty about the rightness of her love resonates with metafictional significance, underscoring the novel’s canonical status within lesbian literature. Cultural prescriptions not only in the 1950s but also well into the twenty-first century have licensed the reading of same-gender desire as pathological, perverse, and shameful—as “an abomination,” as Carol reminds Therese (189). Even so, The Price of Salt, together with Todd Haynes’s film adaptation Carol, powerfully renders lesbian romance “a basic human situation.”

Indeed, even as Highsmith’s novel has received relatively little scholarly attention, one cannot overlook its importance for lesbian literature. The very hybridity of The Price of Salt, its mixture of romance and thriller genres, which has made it difficult to classify, has meant that the novel has been able to leave its mark on a wide range of lesbian works—from pulp to suspense

4 The lack of material on The Price of Salt is particularly striking when one considers the substantial body of criticism devoted to Highsmith’s other works, especially the Tom Ripley series. Of course, this inattention to the lesbian novel may be understood in terms of the general inattention with which pre-liberation lesbian fiction has been met. (Radclyffe Hall’s The Well of Loneliness [1928] is one exception to this rule.) Highsmith’s own ambivalence about her novel is also well known. Yet, these explanations only go so far. It is also important to question why critics continue to pass over the novel, even when doing so requires inaccurate and distorted representations of Highsmith’s artistic production. So, for example, Scott Dill in a recent article aligns a note Highsmith wrote about finishing her second novel, The Price of Salt with her first, Strangers on a Train. Dill terms the years she worked on that Strangers and her fourth novel, The Talented Mr. Ripley, “formative” (373), but he fails to provide any mention of The Price of Salt, her second.
to experimental fiction. Winterson and Sarah Waters come to mind as two very different contemporary writers influenced by Highsmith. There are also earlier examples, most obviously, Jane Rule. It’s hard not to recognize how consequential *The Price of Salt* proved for Rule’s *Desert of the Heart*. Published in 1964 and itself one of the few pre-liberation lesbian novels with a happy ending, the later text, like the earlier one, pairs a younger woman with an older one,\textsuperscript{5} takes on and dismantles the incest trope (so admirably deconstructed in Todd Haynes’ *Carol*, in which Therese closely resembles Carol’s young daughter),\textsuperscript{6} explores the possibility for intimacy within impersonal and temporary domestic spaces, and, relatedly, both engages and subverts the conventions of the progress novel.

Yet, with regard to narrative construction, it would seem that Highsmith’s (much more so than Rule’s) should be understood as not only a lesbian but also a queer novel. So, for example, while Therese can love and be loved, she shares with Highsmith’s later protagonist Tom Ripley an urge not simply to question but to discard customary social and familial bonds—to leave friends, work, and places behind and to distance herself from blood relations. Although *The Price of Salt* is, as Joan Shenkar points out, “the only novel Patricia Highsmith wrote in which murder is not committed” (217, emphasis in original), its protagonist is not simply unsettled. Discernable in Therese is what Shenkar terms “the Big Chill at the center of [all of Highsmith’s] work: the one she defined so aptly as ‘the presence of the absence of guilt’” (30). Michael Trask, writing of Highsmith in relation to her novel *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, offers a slightly different assessment that holds for Therese in *The Price of Salt*: “Prioritizing the self’s instrumentality, [she] forfeits a claim to the self’s authenticity” (608). That is, when she fears betrayal, Therese detaches, and her disappearances and reinventions, particularly in their psychological and aesthetic dimensions, disclose how nearly for her acts of self-preservation can come to resemble those of self-shattering. She can live on an emotional edge. So, too, can Carol. On the level of genre, elements of the psychological thriller complicate the story of their mutual attraction. Theirs is no straightforward romance. Individually and together, they resist teleological narratives of happiness rooted in accumulation and conformity; they refuse entrapment in what Edelman has termed “reproductive futurism,” which within the novel and in Todd Haynes’ moving film finds its objective correlates in the train and the dolls sold at Frankenberg’s department store. For Therese, the train is “like something gone mad in imprisonment, something already dead that would never wear out…” (8). Her work as a stage designer signals her

\textsuperscript{5} Admittedly, this pairing of a younger and an older woman pre-dates *The Price of Salt*. We see it of already in Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*. Where Hall differs from Highsmith, as well as Rule, is in the figuring of lesbian desire across a series differences (age and class, most notably) that work to structure a fundamental inequality between the two lovers. Both Hall and Rule, even as they acknowledge differences between their lovers and suggest the vulnerability of the younger woman, underscore that the lovers are well matched in terms of intellect and emotional strength.

\textsuperscript{6} The comparison between Therese and Carol’s daughter, Rindy, is initiated in the scene in which Carol and Therese first meet and Carol shows Therese a picture of Rindy. The comparison recurs again when, Carol, visiting Therese’s apartment sees a picture of Therese as a young girl about Rindy’s age. The one picture recalls the other.
fascination with imagining, configuring, and transforming spatial relations and so suggests an ability to envision and redraw the boundaries of the livable.

Carol, in turn, after a show-down with divorce lawyers, offers Therese the most sustained and clearly articulated indictment of a life story whose markers of pleasure are limited to marriage and heterosexual reproduction:

I wonder do these men grade their pleasure in terms of whether their actions produce a child or not, and do they consider them more pleasant if they do. It is a question of pleasure after all, and what’s the use debating…pleasure….But the most important point I did not mention and was not thought of by anyone—that the rapport between two men or two women can be absolute and perfect…. It was said or at least implied yesterday that my present course would bring me to the depths of human vice and degeneration. Yes, I have sunk a good deal since they took you from me. It is true…to live against one’s grain, that is degeneration by definition. (246, emphasis added)

Carol and Therese’s own relationship emphasizes pleasure and sex apart from reproduction, privileges the now rather than the future, and imagines intimacy in terms of flux rather than fixity. Defying conventional social narratives, their “course,” much like Therese herself according to Carol, is “flung out of space” (45, 181).

**Carol: Locating Lesbian Romance within a Queer Film History**

Like Highsmith’s novel, director Todd Haynes’s film invites discussion of its status as a queer text. A period piece with exquisite costumes and soundtrack, and starring Cate Blanchett in the title role and Rooney Mara as the ingénue Therese, *Carol* pays homage to both lesbian and film history. As Patricia White explains, *Carol* “uses the allure and potency of contemporary star images to explore lesbian historical agency and to sketch a dream-image of the mid-century movie that might have been” (8). In so doing, the film enacts, as White points out, “what queer theorist Heather Love has termed ‘the backward turn’ in queer culture… [It offers] an attention to and affective investment in negativity and heartbreak that honors queer history’s losses” (10). More might be said here. Not simply a history of loss but, more comprehensively, a historiographical method of accessing, encountering, and writing loss—that crucial aspect of queer critical engagement—characterizes the film. So Elizabeth Freeman’s concept of “temporal drag” comes to mind. That is to say, both in the explicit contrast in gender performances that the film (like the novel) draws between Therese and Carol, on the one hand, and the butch-femme couple whom Therese encounters, as Haynes explains symbolic stand-ins for “a different story” of 1950s lesbianism (Bale); on the other hand, and in its evocation and recovery of a particular queer history of film, Haynes’s *Carol* manifests “a counter-genealogical practice of archiving culture’s throwaway objects, including the outmoded masculinities and femininities from which usable pasts may be extracted” (Freeman xxiii).
Carol’s intertextual richness is particularly effective in Haynes’s exploration of a mid-century lesbian love story. Haynes explicitly engages David Lean’s *Brief Encounter* (1945) and Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and in so doing pays tribute not only to these films but also more broadly to the genres whose elements they intermix, melodrama and film noir. Melodrama, as E. Ann Kaplan has explained, exposes the “ideological contradictions” at work within familial structures particularly with regard to gender and sexuality; film noir, in turn, “stresses the ordering of sexuality and patriarchal right” (18). Haynes’s evocation of Lean’s and Wilder’s films, as well as of Michael Curtiz’s *Mildred Pierce* (1945), thus allows him to examine Therese and Carol’s love story in terms of genres that conventionally, for all the sympathy and attractiveness that they may accord their heroines, align women’s desires with heterosexuality and subordinate them to male authority. In the process of locating that love story within the context of post-war film, Haynes recovers a film history of queer desire or more accurately a counter-history of queer desire broadly defined, whereby mid-century directors, screenwriters, and actors, through their own personal lives and the films that they made, laid bare dominant norms regarding gender, sexuality, and race.

### a. Mildred Pierce

With its blend of noir and melodrama, Michael Curtiz’s *Mildred Pierce* (1945), starring Joan Crawford in the title role, is one of those films against which *Carol* may be productively analyzed. Haynes remade the former as an HBO miniseries in 2011. Curtiz’s version may not be explicitly referenced in *Carol*; nevertheless, given its infusion of melodrama with standard noir elements, including flashback, expressionistic camera work, the figure of the femme fatale, and crime, the 1945 film proves a useful point of comparison for considering Haynes’s treatment of gender and genre in his adaptation of Highsmith’s novel. As Pam Cook has argued, in *Mildred Pierce* the heroine’s narrative, inaugurated by her flashback and voiceover, contrasts with and is ultimately subdued by the patriarchal narrative of surveillance. The detective’s point of view, structuring the film’s “Truth,” contains and corrects Mildred’s mistaken desire for autonomy, as well as her excessive investment in same-gender relationships. *Mildred Pierce* affirms “the need to reconstruct a failing patriarchal order” (Cook 69).

Along the way, the film provides a cautionary glimpse of other failed gender performances. The action (or inaction) of the men in Mildred’s life calls their masculinity and sexuality into question. They are either unable or unwilling to earn a living (first husband Bert and second husband Monty, respectively); physically diminutive (Monty); promiscuous (possibly Bert; certainly Monty); or vaguely homosexual (sometime friend Wally Fay [emphasis added]). Mildred’s best friend and business associate Ida is herself coded as bisexual (Cook 77), while maid Lottie is foolish and ignorant. For spectators and characters alike, the most threatening character proves to be Mildred’s daughter Veda. An allegorical affront to “a war-time economy of lack or scarcity,” she is a “consumer vampire” (Doane 81). In this and other ways, she proves to be a femme fatale—that essential noir figure of danger and desire and seduction—and the film pulses with the multiple threats that she poses not only for movie-goers but also for Monty,
whom she kills, and her mother, who is unable to discipline her love for her daughter. Within the context of noir, Veda exposes Mildred’s desires for intimacy, agency, and authority as troubling gender fantasies. The film’s last shot of two kneeling women who are scrubbing the floors of the halls of justice speaks back to those fantasies and acts as a gender corrective.

By contrast, Haynes’s mixture of noir and melodrama produces a very different ideological effect. In Carol, Therese’s flashback inaugurates the love story that in turn confronts and eventually subsumes the surveillance narrative configured by Carol’s husband Harge, his lawyers, and the hired detective. In Haynes’s film as in Highsmith’s novel, questions of romance meet with suspicion, danger, and violence; however, both texts dismiss the conventional mid-century moral, legal, and social alignment of lesbianism itself with crime. Carol overturns the gender and genre power relations at work in Mildred Pierce. Screenwriter Phyllis Nagy’s decisions to make Therese a photographer rather than a stage designer and, within the developing romance, to complement Therese’s point of view with Carol’s own further underscore the authority of the women’s perspective. Further, as much as Carol is recognizable as a femme fatale in the noir tradition, the romance narrative reworks that role as well, transforming it into a femme vitale. In Carol lesbian vision directs the love story, and the film’s final image, a close-up of Carol’s welcoming gaze shot from Therese’s point of view, enacts a visual blazon, signaling the possibility of a happy ending predicated upon the women’s shared investment in erotic agency.

b. Sunset Boulevard

The question of Carol’s significance for Therese—the anticipation of the older woman’s transformation from generic femme fatale into particular romantic heroine—is one that Carol signals through its explicit homage to yet another mid-century classic combining noir and melodrama, Sunset Boulevard. A clip from Billy Wilder’s film—the tango scene between Norma Desmond (played by Gloria Swanson) and Joe Gillis (played by William Holden) —appears early in Carol. Directly after the flashback’s opening scene, when Therese and Carol first encounter each other, we see Therese along with boyfriend Richard and friends Phil and Dannie watching the tango moment on their own projector and small screen in a small room. The claustrophobic setting is telling. It enacts a spatial metaphor for a Hollywood culture besieged by “the antitrust laws, the coming of TV and the communist witch-hunts” (Hutchinson). Even more powerfully, the setting choreographs one of Desmond’s most famous lines—”I am big. It’s the pictures that got small!”—and in so doing delineates the issues of agency, desire, and gender that shape women’s lives, whether onscreen or off. This scene, in which the young characters watch and react to the Sunset Boulevard clip, as well as the narrative sequence that it forms with the

7 Hutchinson argues, “While Sunset Boulevard appears to attack the pretentions and excesses of the silent era, in fact its argument about the bad old days of Hollywood is more complicated than that. The horror at the heart of the film is that, as the studio system was starting to crumble, the beginnings of the industry were coming back to haunt it. Desmond’s pride mocks the fall of Hollywood just as it was teetering, rocked by the antitrust laws, the coming of TV and the communist witch-hunts.”
scene of the women’s initial meeting, thus serves to highlight these issues not only for the characters, especially Therese and Carol, but also for a tradition of movie making.

In Carol the tango clip exposes Therese’s romantic vulnerability, particularly with regard to the tailored and enigmatic Carol, whom Therese has assisted in the department store where she works. In that earlier encounter scene, a suggestion of flirtation accompanies their discussion of possible gifts for Carol’s daughter, but they have had no substantive conversation, and the hint of mutual attraction, the nuance of flirtation, proceeds primarily via gesture and gaze, as well as emphases and pauses in speech. In the subsequent scene, Sunset Boulevard does not provide Therese with a language as much as a rhetorical mode of suggestiveness and indirection for conveying her emotions. Indeed, Dannie, who is taking notes on the film, comments that he is marking the disjunctures between what the characters say and actually mean. The disconnection speaks back to Therese’s own situation, which is also a mid-century predicament: how does one identify, name, and articulate lesbian romantic attraction; can that attraction even properly be marked as a subject or must it be figured as an absence? Yet, insofar as Carol is at this point in the film more image than person, indicative of fantasy rather than relationship, Therese can find in Sunset Boulevard a primer on the dangers and delights of falling in love (or, for that matter, failing to fall in love) with an older woman, particularly with one whom she feels compelled to see (and watch) through the mediating lens of her camera.

Sunset Boulevard’s protagonist, Norma Desmond, is, like Carol “an older woman… seeking companionship, relevancy, and acknowledgement that she’s worth something” (Formo). It is then unsurprising that, whereas Richard has no interest in the film, Therese would want to watch it. Sunset Boulevard’s Norma Desmond is a femme fatale, but, in a reworking of type, she is dangerous in both her excess and her lack of sex appeal. That excess is signaled by her queer relationship with Max, her one-time husband and director, who has become her butler in order to remain close to her. In Max (played by Erich von Stroheim, who himself directed Swanson in Queen Kelly [1929]), the silent-screen-era actress finds a faithful companion enthralled by her star quality. Together, they enact a “sadomasochistic domestic equilibrium” (Brown 1220), disrupted only by arrival of Joe. For Max, Norma engenders a timeless appeal; for Joe, however, she is a mad, middle-aged Hollywood has-been. Out of self-interest, he moves in with her. (In this “black comedy” [Hutchinson], the diva’s age, as well as Joe’s “kept-man” relationship with her, signals her grotesqueness and perversion.) Ultimately, because he is not attracted to her as either woman or star, Norma proves lethal to him. Joe, in the hopes of furthering his own career interests, has fed her illusion that she will make a Hollywood comeback, and he has promised to help her. Eventually, though, he tells her that he neither loves her nor believes in the possibility of her triumphant return to the screen. She responds by killing him. “Stars are ageless, aren’t they?” she whispers. The tango scene captures the moment that Joe realizes that Norma is in love with him. In order to break with her he must dispel her fantasies.

Within the context of Haynes’s film, the tango clip sheds light on Therese’s own romantic possibilities and the narrative guidance that watching Sunset Boulevard can afford her. For her, it is the older woman and not the young man who sexually appeals and whose picture is
worth watching. On the one hand, there is boyfriend Richard, whom she does not love, and, on the other hand, Carol, Therese’s own potential femme fatale to whom she is powerfully attracted. *Sunset Boulevard* offers Therese a lesson in reading images and, significantly, reading them against convention.

c. **Brief Encounter**

Something similar might be said of Haynes as well, when one considers *Carol’s* indebtedness to *Brief Encounter*—an indebtedness at once explicit and substantial. *Carol’s* framing narrative recalls and reconfigures Lean’s film of impossible heterosexual romance in order to challenge the gender conventions that regulated the representation of female desire in mid-century women’s films. Based on gay writer Noël Coward’s one-act play *Still Life* (1936) and also co-written by him (though not officially credited as such), *Brief Encounter* manifests, as Richard Dyer and Andy Medhurst have argued, “a gay sensibility” (Dyer 10), even as critics well into the twenty-first century have been nervous about acknowledging as much. In both films, the touch on the beloved’s shoulder registers the desire that cannot be articulated in a public space. In the earlier film this subtle gesture of intimacy brackets the extended flashback sequence that, repeatedly cast in dimly lit spaces typical of film noir and guided by protagonist Laura’s voiceover tells the story of forbidden love.

In *Brief Encounter*, the framing narrative’s repetition of the lovers’ final moments together works to underscore that their romance has no future. These moments in which Alec (played by Trevor Howard) and Laura (played by Celia Johnson) sit together in a train station refreshment room appear at the start of the film in an approximately three-minute segment. They are then repeated and extended at the end of the film, over five of the last six minutes. In between, most of the story consists of a long flashback cast as a reverie: Laura, sitting opposite her husband in their parlor, recalls and recounts for the audience her affair with Alec. Protagonist voice-overs generally raise questions of authority, autonomy, and self-authorship: to what extent is the heroine’s position as narrator a sign of agency? In *Brief Encounter*, Laura’s narration

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9 In addition to Dyer, see Medhurst, who argues, “Noel Coward displac[es] his own fears, anxieties and pessimism about the possibility of a fulfilled sexual relationship within an oppressively homophobic culture by transposing them into a heterosexual context” (198).

10 See, for example, Medhurst’s discussion of the erasure of Coward’s credit in the making of the film. See, too, Phillips, who dismisses readings that foreground the ways in which the film points to how Coward’s experience of gay desire shaped the play and screenplay: “The film explores the anguish and frustration caused by having one’s desires thwarted by the pressures of social conventions, something that Coward had experienced. But this does not mean that Coward consciously implanted a homosexual subtext in the present story” (95).
makes clear her lack of agency, both given the content of the story she has to tell and its location inside the framing narrative, with its repetition of the scene of the lovers’ parting.

In both the earlier and later segments of the framing narrative, people interrupt Alex and Laura’s private exchange and so act as a barrier between the main characters, on the one hand, and the film’s audience, on the other hand. Impediments serve as both tenor and vehicle for the film audience’s reception of the lovers’ final interaction. In the initial segment, there are two interruptions: the first is more nearly a variation on the theme of thwarted love; the second consists of an incursion of mundane reality. Regarding the former, the film attends to a conversation between a barmaid and station attendant; as Mrs. Bagot rejects Mr. Godby’s friendly advances, the camera pans with a medium-range shot to Alex and Laura, a middle-aged, middle-class couple, who are talking quietly to each other. This view is immediately followed by a shot of Laura’s acquaintance Dolly entering the room. Her appearance constitutes the second interruption, for it in effect shuts down the inaudible conversation that the couple has been having. The rest of the scene is taken over by Dolly, whose talking would allow one to overlook Alec’s final pressing of his hand to Laura’s shoulder, were it not for the camera, which offers a close-up of the gesture. The last minutes of the film offer the second version of the same scene, an emotional heightening of the first. This second section of the framing narrative consists of more close-range shots of and conversation between the lovers as well as Laura’s voice-over of her own thoughts, as the camera moves in for close-ups of her face. All of these features serve to underscore the inevitability of the parting. Laura and Alec’s intimate exchange, now audible and accompanied by Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 2, consists of a series of negative expressions: “no”; “I don’t know”; “not for years”; “I want to die.” The final comment of this private dialogue, Alec’s assurance “We’ve still got a few minutes,” is undercut by Dolly’s ironic pronouncement, “Laura, what a lovely surprise!” With her arrival Dolly takes over the conversation. Laura and Alec say little else to each other before he leaves to catch his train. Together with her voice-over, the close-ups of Laura’s face, both within the station, and at home, as she remembers the moment, signal her emotional resignation and closeting. Her reverie ends. In the last minute of the film, she is seated not next to Alec but across from her husband, Fred, in their home. His words, which conclude the film, “Thank you for coming back to me,” are met with her sobbing. Seated in her chair, Laura may have had her reverie, but, in the end, she has nowhere to go and nothing more to say.

How very different is the relationship between the framing narrative and flashback in Haynes’s film. The opening sequence of the later film, even as it readily recalls the earlier one, offers slight but suggestive changes. So, for example, while Brief Encounter begins with the sight and sounds of a train speeding past, Carol offers a close-up of a subway grate as the soundtrack mixes the noise of trains arriving and leaving the station below with the film’s musical theme. The camera slowly moves back, drawing attention to the grate’s elegance and grit. This change to the opening is effective, for it allows Haynes to link the theme of mobility, which Carol shares with Brief Encounter, to subterranean activity, itself a rich metaphor for homosexual culture.
Haynes’s revision of the refreshment room scene, even as it recalls Lean’s, also heightens its gender implications. The camera moves from the grate, to a crowd exiting the subway station, to a man who enters a hotel and proceeds to its bar area. The man is Therese’s acquaintance Jack, who doubles for both the train station attendant and Dolly in *Brief Encounter*. The camera captures Jack’s banter with the barman, and then, following Jack’s gaze, settles on a shot of Carol and Therese, who are seated at a table and talking quietly. Jack recognizes Therese, calls out her name, and approaches her and Carol. The women’s conversation curtailed, Carol touches Therese’s shoulder and leaves. Jack does the same: he places his hand on Therese’s shoulder and then departs. Haynes here has complicated this moment, which recurs, like its counterpart in *Brief Encounter*, in expanded form at the end of the film. Like Dolly, Jack personifies the intrusion and surveillance of the everyday world, but his appropriation of Carol’s action—the touching of Therese—both delineates the issue of male heterosexual authority to which Laura herself submits and raises the issue of how Therese will react to Jack’s proprietary claim. His contact seems less an imitation or mimicry than a habitual marking of territory, a rehearsal of gender dominance; it reflects a self-assured masculinity that, at once casual and possessive (and in this sense reminiscent of Laura’s husband Fred’s), brings into focus the question not only of Therese’s but also of Therese and Carol’s shared agency: indeed, the ability of each one and both together to make space for their desire.

Haynes’s engagement with these questions is evident in both the extended flashback and the second, expanded iteration of the contact moment near the end of the framing narrative. With regard to former, the two touches to Therese’s shoulder are shortly followed by a shot of Therese entering a taxi cab. As the taxi begins to move, the camera focuses on her looking out the window. Thus begins the flashback of the lovers’ romance, which, significantly, is not told from Therese’s point of view alone but includes Carol’s. In contrast to both the novel’s sole focus on Therese’s viewpoint and the closeted narrative space of Laura’s reverie in Lean’s film, the doubled perspective in *Carol* reflects the generative, dynamic quality of the women’s romance. Stated in slightly different terms, the presence of Carol’s point of view may delineate the limits of Therese’s own but it also supplements and strengthens the younger woman’s perspective. Therese idealizes the exquisitely tailored and mannered Carol; the scenes that focus on Carol apart from Therese reflect the older woman’s vulnerability and resolve. In this sense the doubled perspective finds its objective correlative in Carol’s touch, which reawakens in Therese the frisson of desire.
In this sense Carol’s touch acts as a narrative switch-point that, at the end of the film, returns to and extends the hotel sequence. Here, as much as Jack’s appropriation of Carol’s gesture suggests the lurking presence of patriarchal and heterosocial (and heterosexual) plots, the women’s love story proves central. The repeated and expanded sequence starting with Therese and Carol’s meeting in the hotel, after months of separation, “subverts the male gaze” (Marcus). With Carol and Jack gone, the camera follows an agitated Therese looking for Carol. When she cannot find her, she enters a cab and heads to a party downtown, only to leave shortly thereafter in order to resume her search. What matters to her is not Jack’s but rather Carol’s contact, and the film’s structure bears out the narrative possibilities that that contact engenders. Carol’s touch does not portend the foreclosing of her and Therese’s love story; it rather indicates the dynamism of that story, as the final moments of the film, with yet another form of contact, bear out. Therese enters a restaurant and spots Carol seated and talking with friends. The camera follows Therese’s gaze. Then Carol’s looks toward her and their eyes lock. Whereas Brief Encounter “begins at the end” (Phillips 92), Carol ends by signaling a new beginning. The women’s earlier romance becomes the ground for the new love story toward which they, at the closing of the film, are moving.

d. Carol: Mid-Century Specters of Loss and Twenty-First-Century Erasure

With Carol, Haynes invests the genre of women’s film with a gravitas that critics have often denied it. Early on, some termed Brief Encounter a “three-handkerchief movie” (Phillips 99), while fairly recently John Ellis wrote of its “nearly hysterical attempt to control its meanings” (101). In this regard, Brief Encounter, shot over the last months of the war in Europe (Phillips 13) and informed by the naturalism of war-time documentaries (Phillips 86), may be said to mark conflict in yet another way, through the stories of gender it tells both within the film and within...
the context of mid-century cinema. By calling attention to the gender restrictions that govern the stories of mid-century heroines such as Laura, Haynes not only revives awareness of such dismissive assessments, including the disparaging gender overtones attending them, but also provides viewers with the opportunity to recognize and learn from his work’s location within a history of cinema’s own gender war.

Stated in slightly different terms, Carol, in its invocation of a corpus of mid-century women’s film, invites spectators to encounter a particular period of British and American cinematic history as an active history of loss with particular ongoing gender and racial effects. Thus, for example, when one considers the indebtedness of Haynes’s film to Brief Encounter, one invariably has to confront the erasure of Noël Coward from various film credits, as well as the subsequent growing disavowal of his importance for British film and theater. His fourth and final collaboration with David Lean, Brief Encounter may have been based on Coward’s play and further informed by his affair with a sailor during the filming of In Which We Serve (1942); he may also have contributed substantially to its screenplay; however, it was the other writers who worked on the script—and not Coward—who were formally listed as the screenplay authors and subsequently nominated for an Oscar (Phillips 88). As Andy Medhurst has pointed out, the year after the film’s release marked “the start of [Coward’s] long postwar decline, [whereby] the writer’s contribution to the … success [of his earlier collaborations with Lean] became progressively marginalized” (200). By the mid-1950s, shifting tastes led to a backlash against the mannered aesthetic favored by Coward; the rise of the hyper-masculine and -heterosexual “Angry Young Men” movement invited critics to dismiss Coward as effeminate and thus inconsequential. Medhurst continues,

This process … reached its peak with the 1974 publication of Masterworks of the British Cinema, a book that included the script of Brief Encounter but zealously forbade its readers to praise the man who wrote it: ‘Brief Encounter, indeed, constitutes almost a declaration of independence on Lean’s part from his fruitful but by 1945 no doubt increasingly constricting association with Coward’s writing.’ (201)

Carol’s engagement with Brief Encounter thus inevitably calls forth and pays homage to the queer specter that is Noël Coward within the context of mid-century film and theater.

Haynes arguably draws attention to another kind of erasure enacted by the mid-century film industry: the insignificance accorded black actors and the roles they played. In Carol five black actors (three men and two women) appear as extras playing minor un-credited non-speaking roles, reflecting in at least the first three instances a low social status: a Frankenberg’s employee, a train conductor, a maid, and two passersby. Serving as part of the film’s assemblage of social others, these shadow characters, together with a soundtrack that includes Billie
Holiday’s love song “Easy Living,” help frame, on the level of narrative, the marginal subjects that are the central preoccupation of Carol: Therese and Carol, along with their lesbian love story. Stated slightly differently, the black actors’ performances remind viewers of the disciplining force that both camera lens and social perspective bring to bear on what one sees. Even if in plain sight, people appear virtually invisible when the focus of systems of meaning-making lies elsewhere. This is also the lesson that Mildred Pierce, on the level of film history, provides via the character of Mildred’s black maid Lottie, the uncredited speaking role played by actress Butterfly McQueen. Lottie is not simply a comic character, who ludicrously mimics white servants and Mildred herself. Lottie signals both the outrageousness of Mildred’s desires for female authority and economic independence, on the one hand, and the racial instability that such desires engender, on the other. The film in effect corrects Lottie’s hyper-visibility by erasing the role as well the actress from the screen credits. From the vantage point of film history, the silent and uncredited roles of the five black extras in Carol bear witness to McQueen’s ghostly figuration within the making of Mildred Pierce.

While black figures also appear at the narrative borders of The Price of Salt, Highsmith’s interest in coding race and ethnicity proves resonant vis-à-vis other characters. For Haynes, however, the striking delineation of silent and subordinate black characters not only reflects his commitment to recording one key aspect of the racial politics of mid-century Hollywood but also functions as a marker of his awareness of the difficulties that attended the making of a lesbian film more than half century later. Indeed, the history of adapting the novel to the screen attests to how strategies of erasure leveled against women, people of color, and queers continue to shape decisions regarding which films are made and which then singled out and awarded prizes. As Patricia White explains, “the project came to Haynes after more than a decade in development, and it is hard not to suspect that at least part of the delay was due to its classification as a ‘woman’s picture’ pitched by women” (9), including screenwriter Phyllis Nagy and producers Elizabeth Karlsen, and Christine Vachon. The resistance to a film in which women and queers—Nagy and Vachon are lesbian; Haynes is gay—occupied central creative roles was in turn borne out at the Academy Awards. While nominated in 2016 in six categories, Carol did not win one award. When a number of members of the academy boycotted the awards ceremony that same year because no black actors or directors were nominated, the overlooking of Haynes in the best director category and Carol’s eventual shut out led some critics to suggest that the campaign of #OscarsSoWhite should be amended to #OscarsSoWhiteAndStraight.

11 The lyrics of “Easy Living” begin with “Living for you is easy living. It’s easy to live when you’re in love, and I’m so in love, there’s nothing in life but you.” In the film, Therese first sounds out the melody on Carol’s piano. Later, she gives Carol a copy of the Billie Holiday recording. Highsmith’s novel also references the song, but it is Carol who plays the Holiday recording for Therese.

12 I have found two mentions: one of Richard’s art school acquaintances is “a young black man” (48); in a hotel in Waterloo, where she and Carol first make love, Therese looks across the lobby and sees a “black man … shining shoes” (182). Arguably the novel’s mention of “Embraceable You,” which in addition to “Easy Living” Carol plays for Therese, is a reference to Ella Fitzgerald, whose recording of the song is so well known.

13 See, for example, Lee; see, too, Farber.
While Carol’s release may be regarded a partial triumph within a film industry historically invested in sexist, racist, and homophobic practices, the limits of that achievement have been further underscored by the fall 2017 news of the Harvey Weinstein sexual abuse allegations. Carol was distributed in the US by the Weinstein Company. In light of that scandal, the film’s status as a feminist work necessarily proves vexed, undermined by the company’s and more broadly the industry’s hypocrisy. From this perspective, it’s not the pictures that have gotten smaller (pace Norma Desmond); it’s rather Hollywood that’s refused to get bigger.

Highsmith’s Vision of Race and Ethnicity, or How Queer is The Price of Salt After All?

Given Nagy’s screenplay and Haynes’s direction, Carol links the lesbian love story to a wider message of social justice and solidarity. Through its rich intertextuality, the film captures and memorializes the erasure of black characters within a history of Hollywood. It is, however, crucial to recognize that Carol does not engage the key problematic ethnic-racial dynamics at work in The Price of Salt, disturbing dynamics that are upheld and validated by the novel’s narrative structure. Ethically and racially coded, Therese and Carol’s relationship is set against constellations of characters who, marked as Eastern European and/or Jewish, serve to mediate, shape, and even personify the atmosphere of unease and exclusion that surrounds the women’s love story.

So we return to the question asked at the outset of this essay: how queer are the novel and film? Haynes and Nagy’s adaptation offers an intertextually mediated vision of social justice, but it has also missed an opportunity, perhaps even an obligation, to address a problematic aspect of Highsmith’s storyline. Perhaps Haynes’s homage to Sunset Boulevard and, with it, Billy Wilder, the Austro-Hungarian-born director who fled Hitler,14 may be understood as a form of encoded resistance to the novel’s tinge of antisemitism. Such an interpretation seems, however, unlikely, for the clip from Sunset Boulevard is so brief and it is unaccompanied by any other suggestion of the film’s engagement with this troubling aspect of the novel. It is probable that, as Haynes and critics have repeatedly stated,15 the film was intended primarily to capture the emotional experience of falling love. From this perspective Carol foregoes—or even shies away from—acknowledging and responding to the ominous ethnic/racial politics normalized within the novel.

As for The Price of Salt, more than sixty-five years on, it continues to be relevant as a landmark work in LGBT fiction. In its hybridity the novel eludes conventional genre definitions, and the erotic salt that Therese and Carol together claim—their narrated desire and their desire for a shared narrative—is at once romantic, sexy, and unapologetic. Yet, Carol and Therese’s love story exists apart from any ethos of inclusion, which is to say, it is a queer love story without a queer politics. The Price of Salt exhibits what Michael Trask, writing of the Ripley novels, has termed her “fluent use of … society’s prejudices” (586). In both film and novel, the

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14 Billy Wilder was born in 1906 in Galicia (part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and now part of Poland), and grew up in Vienna. He began his film career in Berlin. With the rise of Hitler, Wilder fled to Paris and then, shortly thereafter in 1933, to the United States.

15 See, for example, articles by Prose and Virtel.
setting for Therese and Carol’s story is a post-war economy in recovery, with its threat of McCarthyism and broader culture of surveillance. Only the novel, however, locates that love story within a landscape populated by foreign-sounding, grotesque, and potentially exploitative characters, some of whom have recent immigrant histories. That is, Highsmith positions protagonists and readers uncomfortably close to a viewpoint that, seemingly disregarding the traumas of war, including the near history of the Holocaust, presumes the perils of an immigrant assimilation signaled by outsider groups in general.

So many of the novel’s characters have Eastern European and/or Jewish backgrounds. Therese is Czech American; Richard, Russian American; his surname, Semco, has, like hers, been anglicized. Then there are Mr. Nussbaum, the “indifferent” publisher with the German accent who fires her without notice (19); theater producer Ned Bernstein and set designer Harkevy, who eventually hires her; and Mrs. Robichek, who works at Frankenberg’s. These ethnically marked characters occupy very different social spaces from Carol (as well as her husband): disquieting spaces that capture and reflect commonplace prejudices of 1950s America and, quite possibly, a few prejudices particular to Highsmith herself. So, for example, Therese discerns in second-generation, Russian-speaking Richard a capacity not simply for possessiveness but for “hatred and violence” (150); the connection with him comes to represent her likely “imprisonment” in a narrative of lower-middle-class coupledom (147). His tendency to act like an overseer of gender norms, in evidence from the beginning of the novel, takes on a viciousness once she leaves him, and he condemns her relationship with Carol as “sordid and pathological” (239). Widowed Mrs. Robichek, in turn, represents a particularly “hideous” (168) version of a solitary woman’s entrapment in an immigrant and working-class past. Mrs. Robichek is a character whose kindness initially draws Therese to her. Soon, though, the one-time independent dress designer reduced to a Frankenberg’s salesgirl, with her accented English and her slow-moving and “grotesquely” positioned body (12), comes to “haunt” (170) her. One might also wish to take note of Mrs. Robichek’s surname. While Bernstein and Nussbaum are German Jewish surnames, Robichek, like Harkevy [or Harkavy], is Russian Jewish. (“Harkavy” is in fact a Belorussian expression for “Jewish.”) Robichek, taken together with these other names, not only reminds one of the novel’s historical closeness to the Holocaust, but also makes one wonder what role Highsmith’s own well-known antisemitism might have played in fashioning these characters, as well as her description of a dreary and stultifying Frankenberg’s, which she modeled on Bloomingdale’s. The novel may turn on lesbian love, but it is also propelled by fears of various racially and ethnically marked others: some of these characters, like Mr. Nussbaum and Harkevy, wield a professional power over Therese; others, like Richard and Mrs. Robichek, embody social immobility; given the self-possessed and fluent linguistic as well as social grammar that Therese values and identifies with Carol, all of these characters must

16 For discussions of Highsmith’s antisemitism, see Shenkar, Trask, and Meaker.
17 The distance between the novel’s and the film’s engagement with race may arguably be measured in terms of Carol’s homage to Sunset Boulevard, specifically director Billy Wilder.
be kept at a distance and their overtures of intimacy, if not rejected outright, then certainly only sporadically and then incompletely answered.

To varying degrees outsiders, these characters occupy situations that contrast starkly with the life of ease, acquisition, and mobility of Carol, with her “Nordic compactness” (43), and WASP patriarch Harge, whose inability to love her, Carol sardonically suggests, is a form of “racial suicide” (125). Carol, in turn, in refusing “to live against [her] grain,” that is, in affirming her lesbian desire, must surrender something of the racially-inflected upper-middle-class social privilege that also mediates her familial status. Only in the anomalous position of “mother without a child” (a term that appears in Jane Rule’s 1964 lesbian novel, Desert of the Heart) can Carol claim her lesbianism.

Understanding Our Own Cultural Moment through a Queer Analysis of The Price of Salt and Carol

What can we learn from Highsmith’s intermingling of ethnic/racial and lesbian otherness and from their latent intersection in Therese herself? Certainly, Highsmith is using ethnic and racial markers in order to figure the cost of same-gender desire for culturally mobile white women such as the artistic Therese and the poised and articulate Carol. Therese reads “Carol’s world” in terms of “Rapallo, Paris, and other places… [that] had for a while been the frame of everything Carol did” (177). At the end of the novel Therese imagines a shared life together, wherein “It would be Carol, in a thousand cities, a thousand houses, in foreign lands where they would go together, in heaven and in hell” (276). How very differently the issue of mobility—social, economic, and geographic—figures in the life of someone like Mrs. Robichek, to whom Therese turns for companionship until she meets Carol. Mrs. Robichek’s non-fluent English suggests an immigrant past in which travel is motivated by survival and need rather than Bildung and leisure. Does the linkage of the lovers to ethnically marginalized characters serve to encode a social ugliness that threatens to taint the lesbian romance? Does the novel reflect Highsmith’s own antisemitism and disregard for marginalized ethnic and racial groups?

These questions, whose answer is, I believe, yes, suggest something of the responsibility that we as critics bear not only toward literary texts, whether removed from or proximate to us in time, but also toward our own cultural moment. Insofar as we consider the novel, together with its film adaptation, in terms of the discontinuities, ruptures, and contradictions shaping and/or barring its textual queerness, whether aesthetic or political in scope, we also disclose something of the assumptions that inform our reading strategy: might that strategy be considered a queer reading praxis insofar as it facilitates an awareness and analysis of our own politics of location understood in terms of both temporality and spatiality and the human exigencies that shape or are foreclosed by those politics? If, to paraphrase Joyce Carol Oates, where we are going may well be where we have been, might any queer good come out of analyzing a novel that is on questions of social justice not that queer after all?

In the case of The Price of Salt, not simply the delight of uncertainty, subtlety, and surprise attends Therese and Carol’s love story; the omnipresent peril of social and legal
punishment looms over them, a menace perhaps most obviously embodied by the detective who follows them from Chicago to Colorado and “look[s]… like a machine set up and wound on a course” (215). More subtly, that danger of social loss and marginalization is engendered by the unassimilable Mrs. Robichek, who works hard and struggles and does not succeed. It is Mrs. Robichek who “haunt[s]” Therese, whose own yearnings, together with her abandoned, near-orphan status, position her outside of conventional narratives of cultural belonging. Yet Highsmith’s outsiders expose more than the punitive and violent gate-keeping that continues to attend middle-class constructions of the American dream and the myth of the melting pot. Those characters can bring us closer to recognizing the cultural failings of our own time and the price that various social outsiders have had to pay in their own desire for salt. They offer us an opportunity to examine our own cultural moment, when immigrants are once again the targets of US social and political intolerance; when Muslims, Latinos, Jews, African Americans, and queer people face renewed bigotry and violence; and when refugees continue to cross borders in order to flee military action, civil war, violence, and famine. What do all of these groups seek but to live and love free from persecution, danger, and reprisal? Theirs is, in Carol’s words, a “basic human situation” that because and quite possibly in spite of Highsmith reflects the continuing relevance of her lesbian classic.

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