

The Effect of Historical Recollection on John Sayle's *Lone Star*

Border towns are not only the intersection of two nations, they are the result of the beliefs, traditions, and cultures of two nations coming together intricately. However, history and how it is remembered by various cultures often prevents the people of border towns from coming together and forming a perspective that is reflective of the diverse cultural backgrounds present. In the film *Lone Star* by John Sayles, the central border town, Frontera, is an illustrative example of a town divided by racial lines due to a discrepancy in the remembrance of history between the Anglo and Indigenous, Mexican, and African American townspeople. Since the white townspeople are the ones with power, the minorities in Frontera are forced, or rather choose, to neglect a part of their cultural perspective and remembrance of history to succeed, but this abandonment of culture often leads to an exaggerated alignment with racist Anglo views and a lack of empathy for one's people. However, Sam Deed - a white man - and Pilar Cruz - a Mexican woman - overcome the racial divide in Frontera from a young age without abandoning their cultural perspectives. Their overcoming of the racial divide can best be understood through Gloria Anzaldua's "*La Conciencia de La Mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness*," as it is centered around accepting that multicultural identities exist in a region of contradictions between defined cultural perspectives. Deed and Cruz are able to surmount the complexities of multicultural exchange by entering Anzaldua's concept of the "*mestiza* consciousness," which

allows them to actively acknowledge all aspects of history and move beyond its implications on the present.

This theme of existing in between defined boundaries in *Lone Star* is not only explored through the plot of the movie but through the structure of the film. Although *Lone Star* appears to be a traditional Western at first glance, the film's structure places it in a metaphorical genre, "borderland" between Westerns and murder mysteries (Tarancón de Francisco 410). Much like in most whodunnits, murder is the plot driving force in *Lone Star*. In the opening scenes, the remains of the corrupt ex-sheriff, Charlie Wade, are discovered, prompting an investigation by the current sheriff - Sam Deed - which acts as the plot driver for the remainder of the film. As Deed conducts his investigation, he begins to suspect that his father, who was sheriff before him, murdered Wade, but everyone in Frontera - black, white, Mexican, and Indigenous - adamantly insists to Deed that his father was a man of great integrity. However, through the flashbacks of some of Frontera's most pivotal citizens, Deed discovers that although his father did not murder Wade, he helped cover Wade's murder up. These flashbacks and the portrayal of the perspectives of characters from different cultural and racial backgrounds throughout the movie are another way *Lone Star* departs from the classic Western, which solely depicts the perspective of the white male protagonist (Tarancón de Francisco 411). Additionally, the seamless transitions in the film, where "the past enters the present sequence of events as if past and present occupy the same space at the same time," illustrates that history is in attendance in the present regardless of whether or not one chooses to acknowledge it (Tarancón de Francisco 412).

The most blatant example of people trying to ignore history's presence and influence on the present in *Lone Star* occurs during a school board meeting where Anglo and Mexican parents argue about the version of Texan history they want their children taught. The scene occurs in a

dimly lit classroom with Pilar, other school administrators, and concerned Mexican and Anglo parents. Tensions rise quickly during the meeting because the white parents feel the non-Euro-centric history of Texas that Pilar is teaching neglects their history, and the Mexican parents feel as though not incorporating their cultural perspectives into the curriculum neglects their history. In response to one of the Mexican parents saying Mexicans have the right to have their history taught in America as well, a white father exclaims that “[Mexicans] got their own account of the Alamo on the other side, but we’re not on the other side” (*Lone Star* 17:29). The white father’s use of “side” is essential to understanding the racial divide in Frontera. When the word side is used, it implies there is a distinction or a divide, and that is arguably what the white father acknowledges is created by this difference in historical recollection. Although he is only one man, it can be argued that most whites in Frontera share the white father's views because almost all of the white characters in the film act according to his ideology, even if they never explicitly express it. Additionally, by saying that “they got their own account of the Alamo on the other side,” the white father establishes a binary of historical remembrances: a Mexican one and an “American” one, which he believes is an Anglo one (*Lone Star* 17:29). According to Anzaldua, this “binary” in border or intersectional communities is intolerant of those who come from multicultural backgrounds because it does not leave room for their identities, which exist in the contradictions of the various cultures with which they identify with (Anzaldua 101-102).

After the white father and some of the Mexican parents argue over his statement, one of the school administrators tells the parents that the administration is “not changing [history]. [They] are just trying to present a more complete picture” to the children, which causes a white woman to emphatically yell, “that’s what’s got to stop” (*Lone Star* 18:00). Up until this point, none of the white parents had been bold enough to say why they truly opposed Pilar’s lessons,

but the white mother reveals that they opposed Pilar's lessons, which were multidimensional and complicated, because they did not want their children to have a "complete picture" of the past that was not binary. Since most characters in the film center their identities around their historical recollections, this "complete" version of Texan history that the school is teaching threatens the identities of all the Anglo townspeople because they are based on a Euro-centric history that does not acknowledge the experiences of those from different racial backgrounds (Barrera 213). Furthermore, since acknowledging this "complete" history threatens the white townspeople's identities, they become unsympathetic to people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds who hold alternative historical perspectives, perpetuating the racial divide in the town.

Since the Anglo townspeople are unsympathetic to alternative historical remembrances, minorities like Mercedes Cruz are forced to abandon their multicultural account of history to succeed in the white-dominated town: Mercedes Cruz, the mother of Pilar Cruz, is the most prominent female figure in Frontera. She owns a successful Mexican restaurant, the Santa Barbara, and has gained enough reverence in the community to cut the opening ribbon for the courthouse named in honor of Sam Deed's father. However, she had to abandon the Mexican aspects of her cultural identity to rise to her prominence. In her pursuit of success, Mercedes adopted the Anglo historical perspective - which alters one's identity - to the extent of developing the racist ideologies of extremely Euro-centric Anglos (Barrera 213). For example, when she sees two men running away from the river that comprises part of the U.S.-Mexico border at night, she not only calls them a slur for Mexicans who illegally cross the border via the river, she goes as far as reporting them to border patrol. Cruz's actions are not only hypocritical, considering she is an "illegal" immigrant who crossed that same river, but they also demonstrate the extent to which she has dissociated herself from her Mexican identity.

However, Cruz shows that her alignment with Anglo perspectives is only a superficial front when one of her employees brings his fiance, who had gotten injured while illegally crossing the river, to her house in the middle of the night. In this scene, Cruz is not only forced to decide whether or not she is going to report her employee's fiance to the border patrol but between the Anglo perspective that brought her success in America and her Mexican identity. As she is deciding, the film flashes back to Cruz's crossing, where the viewer discovers that Cruz - much like her employee's fiance - had a near-death experience. Ultimately, Cruz's recollection of her crossing humanizes her employee and his fiance, prompting her to not only stop reporting them to border patrol but to call upon a favor from an old friend to provide medical care for her employee's fiance. It can be argued, by choosing to help her employee and his fiance, Cruz illustrates that the minorities who take up Anglo perspectives to succeed in Frontera still hold on to their multicultural identities deep down and that this multicultural identity that they attempt to suppress will emerge, regardless of how aligned with Anglo perspectives they may seem because it is a fundamental part of who they are. Additionally, Cruz illustrates that those who abandon their cultural perspective to overcome the racial divide in Frontera and succeed are not truly bridging the racial gap since they are suppressing rather than reconciling their multicultural perspectives, meaning the racial divide is only changing form into a less apparent version.

Unlike Mercedes Cruz, Pilar Cruz and Sam Deed genuinely overcome the racial divide in Frontera because they both enter Anzaldua's *mestiza* consciousness, which causes them to realize that all historical perspectives must not only be acknowledged but their dividing influence on the present must be overcome through the tolerance of multicultural identities that are both contradictory and ambiguous. Throughout the film, Cruz's actions are governed by a complete historical picture, whether it be during the school board meeting where she insists on providing

children with an understanding of how “cultures com[e] together in both negative and positive ways” in border towns or her personal life where she attempts to provide her children with an understanding of their Mexican heritage (*Lone Star* 17:44). Similarly, as Deed searches through history to find Charlie Wade’s murderer, he conducts an investigation that considers every single cultural perspective in Frontera by questioning at least one Anglo, African American, and Indigenous person. As a matter of fact, Deed demonstrates the extent to which he believes in acknowledging history when he demystifies the memory of his father by allowing his father’s involvement in Wade’s murder to go public. Although Deed does not publicize his father’s exact role in Wade’s murder due to the unjust implications it would have on living parties who were involved in the murder, he makes a point to not suppress his father’s general involvement to ensure he is acknowledging history.

Nonetheless, Cruz and Deed’s romantic relationship is the ultimate manifestation of their bridge of the racial divide in Frontera. At the end of the film, Deed and Cruz discover that they are half-siblings, but they decide to remain in a romantic relationship, meaning they are operating outside of the confines of the Anglo and Mexican cultures they come from. Anzaldúa refers to this movement outside of societal confines as a necessary part of developing the *mestiza* consciousness because the “[*mestiza*] operates in a pluralistic mode - [where] nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, [where] nothing [is] rejected, [and] nothing [is] abandoned” (Anzaldúa 101). Typically, Anglo and Mexican societies treat incest as taboo, but since Deed and Cruz have entered the *mestiza* consciousness, they can look past societal beliefs because they understand that the *mestiza* - which refers to a person who has overcome societal taboos in this case - is open to all ideas (Anzaldúa 101). Arguably, this openness allows Deed and Cruz to

overcome the racial divide in Frontera because it allows them to acknowledge and accept different cultural perspectives.

In the last seconds of the film, after deciding to stay romantically involved, Cruz looks at Deed and concludes the film with arguably the most important lines: “We’ll start from scratch. All that other stuff. All that history. To hell with it, right? Forget the Alamo” (*Lone Star* 2:11:13-2:11:23). Two things must be noted about Cruz’s first four sentences: firstly, the history she’s talking about is the familial one between her and Deed, and, secondly, Cruz waits to say “forget” until after she talks about her history. Although it may seem trivial, Cruz saying “to hell” with her history instead of forgetting it is essential to her embodiment of the *mestiza* consciousness because when she says "to hell with it," she is both acknowledging its existence and moving beyond its implications on the present. Despite how much simpler her life would be if she chose to forget her blood tie to Deed, Cruz acknowledges it because when one is in the *mestiza* consciousness they do not suppress history or perspectives; instead, they take in all outlooks and remain open to all courses of action - even incest (Anzaldúa 101). Additionally, Cruz saying “forget the Alamo” is her final emphasis on overcoming the racial divisions within Frontera through the *mestiza* consciousness. Within the context of her concluding monologue, forgetting the Alamo does not mean forgetting the historical Alamo; instead, it means forgetting the Alamo as a point of historical contention between Anglo-Americans and Mexicans (Tarancón de Francisco, 411). As depicted in the school board meeting with the Mexican and Anglo parents, the Alamo represents a binary of historical perspectives that leave no room for multicultural identities; therefore, forgetting the Alamo as a cultural standpoint would break this binary down and leave a boundless historical perspective that encompasses all identities - bringing together all races of Frontera.

Through their embodiment of the *mestiza* consciousness, Sam Deed and Pilar Cruz are able to acknowledge history and repress its diverging power to overcome the racial divide in Frontera. Although many traditional Westerns attempt to portray history as a single, unified phenomenon contingent on the white male protagonist's perspective, *Lone Star* illustrates that history, when looked at through various cultural perspectives, is multi-dimensional and often contradictory (Tarancón de Francisco 409-410). Furthermore, through characters such as Sam Deed and Pilar Cruz, the film illustrates that the only way to reconcile the racial divisions within border towns that are created by overlooking differing cultural perspectives is through cultural frameworks, such as Anzaaldua's *mestiza* consciousness, that account for and accept the ambiguous multicultural identities present.

Works Cited

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