CHALLENGING LEGENDS, COMPLICATING BORDER LINES

The Concept of “Frontera” in John Sayles’s Lone Star

The idea of the frontier is extremely well established as cultural common property. If the idea of la frontera had anywhere near the standing of the idea of the frontier, we would be well launched toward self-understanding, directed toward a realistic view of this nation’s position in the hemisphere and in the world.

—Patricia Nelson Limerick, “The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century”

My feeling, basically, is that I’ve made a lot of movies about American culture and, as far as I’m concerned, it is not revisionism to include Mexican-American culture or African-American culture or any of the many other different groups. If you’re talking about the history of the United States, you’re always talking about those things, from the get-go.

—John Sayles, “Borders and Boundaries”

Over the past century, the idea of the frontier as a defining place and phase in the history of the United States has taken on mythic status. During the mid-1990s, the traditional conception of the frontier in the American West was challenged from two different directions, but with similar aims and results. In published histories, Patricia Nelson Limerick argued for a revised historical conception of the West as la frontera—a new term for a new recognition of the different groups that populated and defined the West. At about the same time, in a depiction of the West on film, John Sayles rewrote the typical Western story to highlight the intersections among racial, ethnic, and social groups and placed it along the Rio Grande in a fictional Texas border town named Frontera.
Historian Limerick has written extensively about the need to redefine the concept of the frontier in professional histories—and in the public imagination. She is one of a group of historians, sometimes referred to as “the new historians of the American West” or “revisionist historians,” who are critical of traditional stories of ruggedly individualistic white men taming the wilderness and bringing progress; these revisionists have attempted, through their works, to recover the diversity and complexity of the history of the West.¹ In “The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century,” Limerick argues that a better model than the frontier is la frontera, which refers to the borderlands between Mexico and the United States and, in a metaphoric sense, to the borders separating countries, peoples, and authorities.

From Limerick’s work, a number of characteristics of la frontera, this reconceived and rehabilitated “frontier,” can be derived.² These characteristics find expression in the town of Frontera in the film Lone Star (1996). According to Limerick, la frontera as a concept focuses on a running story, not a neatly corralled model with a clear beginning and end in time (history) or in space (geography), nor with a simple solitary direction of movement east to west. La

In Lone Star, Sheriff Sam Deeds (Chris Cooper) investigates a murder from the past in a Texas border town called “Frontera.”

In *Lone Star*, Sheriff Sam Deeds (Chris Cooper) investigates a murder from the past in a Texas border town called “Frontera.”

Courtesy of Photofest.
frontera is less ethnocentric than the “frontier,” acknowledging that the West was and is multicultural, or, as one scholar has expressed it, was “an intergroup contact situation.” In la frontera, historical situations involve cultural and moral complexity, and social, political, and economic power relationships among groups are recognized. Reductionism is avoided, as Limerick writes: “Trying to grasp the enormous human complexity of the American West is not easy under any circumstances, and the effort to reduce a tangle of many-sided encounters to a world defined by a frontier line only makes a tough task even tougher” (“Adventures of the Frontier” 73). Limerick and White, when considering representations of the American West on film, have been critical of what they argue are the reductionist and distorting dichotomies of the frontier story as it has been expressed in the classic examples of the Western film genre.

John Sayles’s *Lone Star* is an example of la frontera in film. In particular, the movie is an attempt to move beyond genre conventions and renegotiate ideas about the American West. Sayles strives to represent the West as a place of complexity, where people are individuals more than types, and where Chicanas/os, Anglo-Americans, African Americans, and American Indians are living intersecting lives. Ultimately, Sayles represents the history of the West as a dynamic process, one in which personal history is intermixed with—and often in conflict with—“official” history. Frontera is a place where history, legend, diversity, and issues of American identity interact. Essentially, Sayles is exploring in film what Limerick has advocated for history.

Like Limerick, Sayles is interested in the reevaluation of legendary stories of the frontier, and he chose the Texas-Mexico border for such reexamination. During interviews, Sayles has described the idea about history that lies beneath *Lone Star*: “The germ of the idea came from seeing Fess Parker play Davy Crockett and the whole legend of the Alamo. As you get older, the legend gets more complex. Someone says it’s not true, or maybe parts of it are true and that the fight for freedom maybe had some economic interests” (quoted in Stein D1). For Sayles, as for Limerick, the notion of a border line is too simplistic; it deserves interrogation: “I wanted to have these three communities, where we were basically in a part of Mexico that somebody had drawn a line underneath and made into America, but the people hadn’t changed” (*Sayles on Sayles* 221). In fact, when the interviewers for *Cineaste* asked Sayles whether the vision of the United States that he presents in *Lone Star* is an attempt to
Matthew McConaughey plays the legendary lawman Buddy Deeds in *Lone Star*.

recognize that the nation is “an increasingly multicultural society,” Sayles backtracked to refocus their view: “It’s not increasingly multicultural; it’s always been so. . . . American culture is not monolingual or monoracial. It’s always been a mix” (“Borders and Boundaries” 15).

*Lone Star* is set in the present day. Evidence of a murder that was committed forty years ago has been discovered, and Sheriff Sam Deeds (Chris Cooper) finds himself investigating a crime in which his deceased father, Sheriff Buddy Deeds (Matthew McConaughey), may have been involved. As Sam dredges up evidence that contradicts the official, legendary story of Buddy Deeds, he also encounters the social structures that have maintained and supported the legend. Sam’s investigation into his personal history and his town’s history becomes a metaphor for a reexamination of American national history and identity.

This chapter examines three features of *Lone Star*: Sayles’s strategies for charting out unfamiliar Western cinematic terrain, including his representation of the people who inhabit Frontera; the perspective on history that is articulated in the film; and Sayles’s treatment of borders. The director uses numerous techniques to frustrate attempts to draw simple lines between two dramatically conflicting forces or groups (as in a typical Western genre film). He tells a different kind of story about the American West.
Charting Unfamiliar Cinematic Terrain

John Sayles was particularly well positioned to take on a rewriting of the Western story. Early successes with *Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1980), *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984), *Matewan* (1987), *Eight Men Out* (1988), and *City of Hope* (1991) earned Sayles a reputation as a writer and director of thought-provoking films in an industry dominated by formulas. Passion Fish (1992) and *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994), the two works that immediately preceded *Lone Star*, served to cement that reputation. Probably more than any other American filmmaker, Sayles deserves the labels “independent” and “auteur” because he carries credits for writing, directing, and editing on most of his productions. And, since 1983, when he worked with Paramount Pictures and had to make compromises on the final cut of *Baby It’s You*, Sayles has steered clear of the studios and has retained full creative control on his films (Ryan 84–86). The results are movies that reflect the struggle of an individual creative consciousness coming to terms with the social and political issues of our times.

The choice to make films outside the Hollywood system is a calculated one; Sayles knows the values and pressures on both sides. A novelist turned filmmaker, he does not like to have the stories “enhanced” for market appeal. Sayles has said: “To make a Hollywood movie, I’d have to say, ‘Here’s the story I’m starting with, but it’s up for grabs, folks. You add this, you add that, you put this actor in and you take this actor out.’ By the time you’re done, it’s just another movie” (quoted in Stein D1). Sayles should know—one of the ways he raises money for his film projects is by working as a script doctor and ghostwriter within the movie colony. For example, at the time *Lone Star* was released, Sayles had recently done work on the scripts for *Apollo 13*, *Mimic*, and *The Quick and the Dead* (Howell E1).

Given Sayles’s experience with Hollywood formulas, it seems important to examine the choices he makes to avoid conventions in *Lone Star*—and the implications of those choices in terms of the story of the West. Going against the common standards of movie storytelling is exactly what allows Sayles to communicate the kind of complexity and continuity Limerick emphasizes in her histories. *Lone Star* was made on a budget of only $5 million (a very modest amount compared with the budgets of most Hollywood pictures), and it earned Sayles an Academy Award nomination for best original screenplay. The film also won a Bravo Special Achievement Award for outstanding feature film
from the National Council of La Raza, which recognizes outstanding portrayals of Hispanics in film and television.5

*Lone Star* contains a number of main story lines that emphasize the intersecting lives of individuals from the Anglo, Mexican, and Mexican American communities, as well as the African American and American Indian populations. Characterizations are complex rather than unidimensional, creating the impression that the West is a mosaic of lives. Sayles’s films are typically about communities and involve an ensemble cast. *Lone Star* is no exception. Sayles articulates his objectives with character development and storytelling in this way: “I definitely want people to leave [my movies] thinking about their lives or the lives of their friends or what’s going on in the world. . . . [In my movies] there certainly is the attempt to examine the ‘us and them’ kind of idea and see if there’s any way to think of it more as ‘we’” (quoted in Beale 38). The story lines in *Lone Star* introduce and develop a number of main characters, including the Anglo sheriff Sam Deeds; the Chicana high school history teacher, Pilar Cruz (Elizabeth Peña); Pilar’s mother, Mercedes (Miriam Colon), a successful businesswoman who owns the Santa Barbara Café; African American army colonel Delmore Payne (Joe Morton); and Delmore’s estranged father, Otis (Ron Canada), who owns Big O’s Nightclub and also runs the Black Seminole Museum in town. A large supporting cast includes a conservative bartender, illegal immigrants, high school students, the owner of a roadside souvenir stand, army privates and sergeants, a story-hungry journalist, and a Texas football fanatic.

Sayles uses a number of strategies to frustrate the attempts of characters to draw clear lines between groups, between the United States and Mexico, and between past and present. He also frustrates viewers’ abilities to do the same as they watch the film. In fact, *Lone Star* makes demands on the audience on a number of levels. It is not a thriller, or escapist. It is slow-paced. Listening is crucial because the stories are based on scene and talk—dialogue. Examining the critical reception to the film is revealing not only because reviewers give it high praise but also because they make a point of letting their readers know that this is not a typical summer movie. One example is Lewis Beale, who wrote: “There are no digitalized special effects in *Lone Star*. Writer/director John Sayles’ latest film, opening Friday, also contains no car crashes, Uzi-toting drug dealers or havoc-wreaking tornadoes. In an age when sensation rules the screen, *Lone Star* is that rarest of commodities: a tale of murder, racial politics and cross-cultural pollination in a Texas border town that uses its
tabloid elements to comment on society at large. It demands both patience and attention” (38). Joe Leydon commented on the time in which the story unfolds: “At a deliberately paced 134 minutes, *Lone Star* may be too much of a good thing for some impatient viewers. But it’s hard to see where Sayles could cut without diminishing the pic’s overall impact” (46). Kevin Jackson, writing for the *Independent* of London, put it this way: “Some viewers may feel cheated by Sayles’ wide canvas and expansive method, and be left impatient for the more single-minded narrative drive of the conventional body movie. It’s true that *Lone Star* is short on cop-show thrills. . . . In just about every other regard, however, it’s a feast—dense, thoughtful and idiosyncratic, with some of the most quietly accomplished acting to be found in any recent American movie” (11). Janet Maslin of the *New York Times* similarly combined high praise with an acknowledgment of *Lone Star*’s exceptionalism: “[Sayles] assures the viewer that this film’s many elements will converge in ways that are meaningful and moving. Indeed, *Lone Star* exists so far outside the province of slam-bang summer movies that it seems part of a different medium and a different world” (C1).

From the outset, *Lone Star* does not present cinematically familiar terrain: the landscape is different, the use of sound is different, and so are the characterizations. According to the classic formula, a Western begins with an opening establishing shot that captures the spectacular, mythic landscape—the Monument Valley of *Stagecoach* or the Grand Tetons of *Shane*. Not so in *Lone Star*. From the first shot, Sayles drops into the middle of things. The only thing that has been clearly “established” is that viewers will need to sift and sort through the details themselves to begin to make sense of it all. *Lone Star* opens with a medium shot in the middle of cactus and scrub brush. There is not even the orientation typically provided by opening credits—those will come later. After a slow movement, the camera reveals a man in a patterned polo shirt and shorts in the bushes, apparently identifying local plants out of a guidebook, mumbling to himself. There is another man in the distance with a metal detector, searching an abandoned rifle range. The men are surprised to find bones, a Masonic ring, and a Rio County sheriff’s badge.

Sayles’s introduction to *Lone Star* and his portrayal of the landscape are closely paralleled by Limerick’s introduction to *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West* (2000). Limerick writes that an accumulation of stories are buried in the Western landscape, waiting to be unearthed: “Even though some Western landscapes practice a trickster’s habit of presenting themselves to newcomers as if they were fresh, untouched, vacant spaces,
nonetheless, stories have become quite literally something in the Western soil” (13). Limerick contrasts, in essence, the image of the frontier landscape that is characteristic of the Western genre film with the kind of unromanticized landscape that Sayles’s characters inhabit—and that, quite literally in this first scene, they have to pick through to discover detritus of the past.

Not only the opening landscape of *Lone Star* but also the sound is unusual for a Western film. It is difficult to make out what the characters are saying, and sounds and lines of dialogue overlap in a somewhat confusing style that is reminiscent of Robert Altman productions. When characters speak in a typical Hollywood movie, there is a singularly clear audio, better than real life, and the story is shown as if it is life set to music, with extensive musical scoring that sets the tone from the beginning and continues throughout the film as a cue to viewers’ emotions. The opening scene of *Lone Star* includes music only for the first few seconds; in fact, throughout the film, Sayles uses hardly any music at all that is not tied directly to the action on the screen: a jukebox playing at a restaurant, music at a nightclub, songs from a car radio. There is very little of the kind of commentative music that is the hallmark of Hollywood productions. Without the continuous musical signals, the burden of interpretation rests more heavily on the audience. Listening closely is a necessity.

As the opening scene progresses, the director’s choices continue to chart unfamiliar cinematic territory. Expectations based on the conventions of the Western are confounded. The film opens in the middle of a confusing landscape that is anything but grand; it is difficult to make out what these men in shorts and polo shirts are saying, and when a lawman finally arrives, he is not even wearing a gun. The white hat and badge are present, but Sam Deeds is not a larger-than-life character. The camera does not look up at him worshipfully but instead angles down at him, especially as he crouches near the ground (a common pose for Deeds in the film), poking around in the dirt.

In typical Sayles fashion, the film has an unusually large number of speaking characters. In fact, more than fifty characters are given a voice in this treatment of the West and are allowed to articulate their various points of view. In contrast, standard Hollywood fare would have two major leads, a few supporting roles, and the rest extras. By including and developing so many speaking characters, from different walks of life and ethnic groups, Sayles is able to accomplish the kind of rewriting of the Western story that Limerick has argued for—one that is less ethnocentric. Also in a style that is typical of Sayles, *Lone Star* has certain individuals who speak only in one or two scenes but are given pivotal
moments: Chucho Montoya (Tony Amendola), Wesley Birdsong (Gordon Tootoosis), and Cody the bartender (Leo Burmester).

Limerick has pointed out that one of the reasons the frontier story has lingered is that “many Americans want the Old West to be the place in the past where we go to escape complexity” (Something in the Soil 21). Complexity cannot be escaped in Lone Star. White hats and black hats lose their conventional significance. Frontera is portrayed as a town that had been controlled by Anglo-Americans, but it is on the verge of a significant shift. The largest segment of the population is Mexican American, nineteen out of twenty residents, and after the next election the mayor and sheriff are likely to be Mexican Americans. Many of the comments made by characters express different perspectives on the political and social changes occurring in the town. These comments also provide an opportunity for Sayles to weigh in on the unrealistic expectation of having class and racial lines clearly drawn. For example, a number of characters—Fenton (Tony Frank), Cody the bartender, a group of Anglo parents—represent the perspectives of the white minority whose values, beliefs, versions of history, and political power are under threat. These characters seem to want the “lines of demarcation” between right and wrong, winners and losers, and “us” and “them” cleanly drawn. Sam Deeds, Pilar Cruz, and Otis Payne, at various points in the film, articulate an alternative point of view—one that Sayles presents sympathetically. As Sam investigates the past and the legend of his deceased father, as Pilar teaches about the collective past and learns about her personal history, and as Otis talks about the past with his living son and grandson, Lone Star evokes a perspective that questions these demarcations. Otis Payne puts it best when he says, “Blood only means what you let it,” and “There’s not like there’s a borderline between the good people and the bad people—you’re not on either one side or the other.”

HISTORY AS A PROCESS

In Lone Star, Sayles presents history as a process; it is embodied in the searches and transformations of different characters as they investigate personal and collective pasts. In this sense, Lone Star is a film not only about history but also about the uses that people assign to history.

A major plot line concerns Anglo-American Sheriff Sam Deeds and his relationship to his father, the well-loved Sheriff Buddy Deeds. On the
abandoned rifle range of the opening scene, evidence of a potential murder is discovered: a human skeleton, a Rio County sheriff’s badge, and a Masonic ring. Once it is determined that the remains are those of the racist Sheriff Charley Wade (Kris Kristofferson), Sam’s father becomes a prime suspect. Most of the townspeople believe that Buddy ran this bad man out of town years before, but Sam believes that his father murdered Wade. Indeed, Sam has been holding a grudge against his father ever since Buddy broke up Sam’s relationship with his high school sweetheart, Pilar Cruz.

The film shows Sam doing many of the things that historians do: looking at artifacts—the bones, badge, and ring—and making inferences; establishing a chronology by examining records from the sheriff’s office, the county, and the hospital, as well as his father’s personal correspondence; and conducting interviews with the townspeople who lived in Frontera at the time of Wade’s murder. When Sam, looking for evidence, asks direct questions, he seldom receives a straight, easy answer. Mayor Hollis (Clifton James) tells him a story; Otis Payne talks about many things, but not what Sam asks about; Wesley Birdsong loads his seemingly offhand comments with isolated details and metaphors. Everyone seems to keep reminding Sam that his father is a “legend,” his mother was a “saint,” and he is just “Sheriff Junior.” A few warn him: “You go poking around in the past, you never know what you’re going to dig up.”

Sam finds contradictions and conflicts of interest, and in general comes to see that the truth is more complex than he had wanted to believe. One of these complexities is embodied in his father. Sam wants to kick the pedestal out from under Buddy, and in the course of his investigations, he discovers that Buddy used the town’s political machine for personal profit. Nevertheless, the townspeople liked and trusted Buddy Deeds and recognized that he was far better than his abusive and racist predecessor, Charley Wade. At Big O’s Nightclub, Sam questions Otis Payne about his father, and Otis implicitly compares Buddy Deeds to Charley Wade: “I don’t recall a prisoner ever died in your daddy’s custody. I don’t recall a man in this county—black, white, Mexican—who’d hesitate for a minute before they’d call on Buddy Deeds to solve a problem. More than that I wouldn’t care to say.”

History and self-definition are also explored through the characters of Pilar Cruz (a high school history teacher and Sam Deeds’s former girlfriend) and her parents, Mercedes and Eladio Cruz (Gilbert Cuellar). Pilar never knew her father, Eladio, because he was killed by Sheriff Wade before she was born—or, as she later discovers, before she was even conceived. Discussions
involving Pilar, other teachers, and parents raise the issue of whose version of history they should be teaching and how closely the textbook should be followed. Questions here about how to tell their cultures’ histories are direct and explicit. After members of the faculty discuss the winners and losers of history and who should get the bragging rights, Pilar reflects: “I’ve only been trying to get across part of the complexity of our situation down here—cultures coming together in both negative and positive ways.” Pilar’s comments put her very much in the same camp as the historians such as Limerick. In *Something in the Soil*, Limerick argues that one of the main projects of the New Western History must be to show people that “benefits often came packaged with injuries . . . the negative aspects of life wove themselves into a permanent knot with the positive aspects” (21). Limerick promotes a view of history as a paradox, as opposed to history as a moral crusade.

While Pilar Cruz seems to directly advocate reconceiving history as *la frontera*, her mother, Mercedes, a timeworn business owner, provides an opposing perspective. She is portrayed as a proponent of assimilation, someone who crossed the Mexican-U.S. border and has never looked back. She is a Mexican American who has “made it.” A respected business owner who has no interest in visiting relatives in Mexico, Mercedes accuses the Mexican American workers at her restaurant of theft and exhorts them to “speak English.” At night, sitting outside on the deck of her riverfront home, she calls the border patrol when she sees people trying to cross the border between Mexico and Texas. It is only later in the film that her hypocrisy is revealed: she actually crossed the Rio Grande in the same way many years before.

The construction of identity and its relationship to history are also explored through the story line surrounding Delmore Payne, a by-the-book African American army colonel who has just taken over command at Fort McKenzie. Delmore is a “spit and polish man” whose teenage son, Chet (Eddie Robinson), is not enthusiastic about following in his father’s footsteps. Like Sam Deeds, Colonel Payne has spent much of his life trying to define himself against his father, Otis. Otis has lived in Frontera for many years and runs Big O’s Nightclub, in the neighborhood formerly known as “Darktown.” Delmore’s son, trying to learn something about his grandfather, visits the Black Seminole Museum and finds out, among other things, that his own heritage is not only African American but also American Indian.

The American Indian presence in the film has another representative: Wesley Birdsong is the owner of a roadside souvenir stand that, as he explains
it, is located “between Nowhere and Not Much Else.” He is another of the film’s minor but memorable characters who is given important lines. During his conversation with Sam Deeds, he provides a catalyzing piece of information: Sam’s much-revered father was having an affair.

As Sam Deeds, Pilar Cruz, and Delmore Payne look into their pasts, they come to realize that the personal identities they have constructed for themselves—their moral commitments to different groups—have been based on stories they have grown up with about their families, their social groups, and their country. Over the course of the film, they all discover that they have gotten some things wrong about the lives of their parents and, in the process, have gotten some things wrong about themselves. These character transformations based on personal histories serve as metaphors for a reexamination of national identity of the kind Limerick has advocated in such works as *The Legacy of Conquest* and “The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century.” In places where the characters had been trying to draw lines to define themselves and exclude others, they instead find interconnections. The case of Sam Deeds and Pilar Cruz is illustrative. Although revelations about the past happen in small ways throughout the film, it is shocking at the end to discover that Buddy Deeds had an affair with Mercedes Cruz and was, in fact, Pilar’s father. Sam’s father and Pilar’s mother had been so dead set on breaking up their high school romance not because of ethnic prejudices but because Sam and Pilar are of the same blood. In *Lone Star*, the lines that separate groups turn out to be very fuzzy, and everyone is far more interconnected than they had believed while they were growing up.

**NO CLEAR LINES: THE VISUAL TREATMENT OF BORDERS**

Like the complicating of the lines between ethnic groups, in *Lone Star* the borders between nations and the boundaries between present and past are shown to be fluid. Sayles uses a unique visual technique, a marked deviation from Hollywood’s cinematic syntax, to make this point: in flashbacks, he uses no break between present and past. Instead, the transition is accomplished within a single shot and with a moving camera (no fade-outs, dissolves, or edits).

Conventions for representing flashbacks and time transitions have changed over the course of American motion picture history, but most all have involved some kind of filmic punctuation device, a break in the celluloid. In earlier
eras, a flashback could be signaled when a character looked up and put a finger on the side of her head, followed by a fade-out of the present and a fade-in to a view of the past with the character’s voice-over recollection. Another device made use of a similar beginning, but this was followed by a pull out of focus as the film left the present and a pull into focus in a different scene in the past. Another common strategy was a montage of flipping calendar pages. Currently, the most common device is the straight cut (a simple edit) between present and past. The straight cut, however, is a break; it is a discontinuity that can be perceived. In terms of traditional editing, it also means a literal splice in the filmstrip.

Because *Lone Star* is about complexity and continuities, Sayles chose an unusual technique that supports formally a point that the film is making thematically. There is no break between present and past; it is all one continuous flow. This choice parallels Limerick’s ideas of redefining the frontier as *la frontera*, a running story with no single, definitive line marking the beginning and the end. Through this strategy, Sayles suggests that our ideas about history shape our definitions of the present. There is no perfect separation.
Sayles’s unusual visual technique is used repeatedly to move the action back into the past. For example, during a scene in Mercedes’s restaurant, the camera moves down from Mayor Hollis’s face into a close-up of a basket of tortillas on the table. As Hollis continues to narrate his story of Buddy Deeds’s standoff with Charley Wade, a hand with a Mason’s ring reaches into the basket to find money hidden among the tortillas. The action has shifted into the past, forty years earlier, and now the film shows Wade and Buddy exchanging threats. To return to the present, the camera cranes right from a close-up of Buddy to find Sam, arms crossed, listening to the continuation of Hollis’s story. In scenes along the banks of the Rio Grande, characters reminiscing in the present are revealed as they were in the past. A moving camera that cranes left connects the adult Sam and Pilar, who are walking along the river talking about their parents and their past romance, with the teenage Sam and Pilar in the same location discussing the same thing twenty-three years earlier.

This visual technique is also used in what is arguably the most powerful scene in the film. Sam has traveled into Mexico to question Chucho Montoya. Chucho is now the “King of Tires” in Ciudad León, but Sam’s interest is in the past; he wants to know what happened on the day that Eladio Cruz was killed. Chucho is another of Sayles’s minor characters who is given a pivotal commentary. Chucho gives Sam Deeds a piece of his mind just before he tells him what he saw on the border forty years ago—Eladio Cruz murdered by Charley Wade:

**CHUCHO:** Down here we don’t throw everything away like you gringos do. Recycling, right? We invented that. The Government doesn’t have to tell people to do it. . . .

**SAM:** You ever know a fella named Eladio Cruz?

**CHUCHO:** You the Sheriff of Rio County, right? *Un jefe muy respetado.*

Chucho smiles, draws a line in the dirt with a Coke bottle.

*Step across this line—*

Sam obliges.

*Ay, qué milagro!* You’re not the sheriff of nothing anymore—just some *tejano* with a lot of questions I don’t have to answer.

A bird flying south—you think he sees this line? Rattlesnake,
In this scene from the past in *Lone Star*, Sheriff Charley Wade (Kris Kristofferson) murders Eladio Cruz at the border.

javelina—whatever you got—you think halfway across that line they start thinking different? Why should a man?

SAM: Your government always been pretty happy to have that line. The question’s just been where to draw it—

CHUCHO: My government can go fuck itself, and so can yours. I’m talking about people here—men. *Mi amigo* Eladio Cruz is giving some friends of his a lift one day in the back of his *camión*—

—but because they’re on one side of this invisible line and not the other, they got to hide in the back *como criminales*—and because over there he’s just another Mex *bracero*, any man with a badge is his *jefe.*

As Chucho speaks of his “*amigo* Eladio Cruz,” there is another unusual transition from present to past. Up to this point, the intercutting between shots of Chucho and Sam as they converse has served to establish the sense of space and time: the location is Chucho’s tire business in Mexico in the present day. But that all changes in a single shot that begins in the present but moves seamlessly into the past. Chucho is speaking while standing in front of a yellow
sign. As he continues to tell his story, the camera slowly pans left, and when it reaches the side of the sign, a different location is revealed behind it. The action is now in the past, on the road across the border bridge, with Eladio Cruz trying to fix the flat tire on his truck and Charley Wade and Deputy Hollis arriving on the scene. Through Chucho’s dialogue and this visual technique, Sayles is able to reiterate points that have been made in the film about the arbitrariness of borders—and the inhumane actions that can occur on one side or the other to protect those lines.

Scenes at Big O’s Nightclub also link present to past. At the end of the film, the camera floats back to reveal the crucial scene from forty years earlier when Charley Wade was killed. Even though Sam has been wanting to believe that Buddy did it, he discovers that Wade was about to kill young Otis when a hesitant Deputy Hollis stopped him by shooting him in the back. The legendary Buddy Deeds, then a deputy, arrived on the scene a bit too late.

**CONCLUSION: THE FRONTIER AND LA FRONTERA COEXIST**

At the end of *Lone Star*, after it has been revealed that Buddy Deeds did not kill Charley Wade, Sam, Otis, and Hollis must decide what to do. Otis comments on how the truth has been hidden over the years: “Time went on, people liked the story we told better than anything the truth might have been.” Hollis remarks that if word gets out about the identity of the body that was found at the rifle range, people will believe that Buddy killed Charley Wade. Sam remarks: “Buddy’s a goddam legend. He can handle it.”

*Lone Star* is more realistic than many treatments of the West on a number of levels. Sayles acknowledges that the frontier is a multicultural place and portrays it as such, recapturing its diversity. Also, and more problematically, Sayles acknowledges that the mythic Western story, as embodied in the character of Buddy Deeds, can absorb new information, revisionist tellings, and minor discrepancies and still remain archetypal. The legendary story of the West, in short, can handle it, too.

The legendary image of steely-eyed lawman Buddy Deeds is so memorable that it may have led even the most vigorous scholar and analyst toward inaccurate plot description. In *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel*, a work that is commendable for both its scope and the importance of the ideas expressed, John Cawelti discusses *Lone Star* and gets the action in the film wrong: “In
fact, the heroic father murdered a vicious lawman who was sheriff before him, mainly because this predecessor brutally exploited and abused Chicanos and African Americans” (110). As revealed in the film, Deputy Hollis was the one who killed the vicious lawman, shooting him in the back. Buddy arrived too late to participate or interfere. The version Cawelti remembers is the one that can be so easily absorbed by Buddy the legend that Sam decides to let the story stand.

Even though *Lone Star* is a successful, nuanced portrayal of la frontera, the condition that Patricia Nelson Limerick laments in “The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century” still looms large; the traditional story of the frontier, with its dichotomies of black and white, lingers unregenerately in our public imagination. The myth of the frontier, whether written in history or represented in film, is a formula that offers a shortcut to understanding—simple definitions, simple reasoning, simple persuasion, and simple paths of action. It has tremendous staying power, especially during eras of rapid social and political change.

There is, then, a significant remaining tension for those who are concerned about public perception of America’s national identity. A more historically accurate version of the American West is not necessarily a recipe for memorability or, for that matter, commercial success. Nor is it likely to quickly or easily replace the frontier in the public imagination as a new “cultural common property.” Our film and television industries are based on formula stories that have a proven audience draw and track record. Sayles was able to make a film like *Lone Star*, a depiction of la frontera that also includes a recognition of the power of the mythic frontier, precisely because he was way on the margins of the Hollywood system.

*Lone Star* is more “realistic” because it acknowledges not only la frontera, as Limerick describes it, but also the staying power and persistence of the common frontier myth. For Sayles, it is not an either-or choice but a sense that society is going to have to figure out how to live with both “the frontier” and la frontera—with the persistent myth and the obtrusive realities of the West. Granted, it is a perplexing duality. Some critics have lamented the ambiguity of *Lone Star*’s ending. In one scene at Big O’s Nightclub, Sam Deeds decides to let Buddy’s heroic legend absorb what really happened on the night Sheriff Wade was killed. But in the next scene, when Sam is at the run-down drive-in movie theater with Pilar, the two seem to agree that they will, as Pilar puts it in the last line of the film, “Forget the Alamo.” A crucial idea, however,
may link these two seemingly contradictory scenes: the notion that individuals should not let what happened in the past—real or legendary—define their present.

In the end, David Ansen’s assessment of Sayles’s *Sunshine State* (2002) could be applied equally well to *Lone Star*: “It raises more issues than it can comfortably digest. . . . But who wants to complain about an American movie that has too much on its mind?” (16). When Sayles takes on the West, conflicts are not neatly positioned with resolution coming through a formula plot. He does not give us history as a packaged product. The stories of our present—and our past—are not tidy and beautifully lit; in *Lone Star*, lines are fuzzy, and relationships and individuals are complex. Even at the end of the film, there is a sense that the final stories have not been resolved. They will continue to be played out—in the relationships among individuals, their societies, and the stories they tell themselves in histories and in movies.

**NOTES**


2. For Limerick’s most direct explanation of la frontera, see “The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century,” 72–95. For related ideas on the rehabilitation of the frontier by practitioners of the New Western History, see The Legacy of Conquest, 17–32 and Something in the Soil, 13–18, where Limerick argues that the history of the American West is defined by “continuity, convergence, conquest, and complexity.”


4. For the most complete assessment of Sayles’s career and his films up to 1997, see Ryan, John Sayles: Filmmaker. Also recommended is Sayles on Sayles.

5. The NCLR Bravo Awards were the predecessors to the ALMA (American Latino Media Arts) Awards.

7. Film is an audiovisual medium, and too often it is easy to overlook the “audio” part and focus only on the story and how it is visualized for the screen. Musical scoring as a guide for the emotional response of viewers is well understood in Hollywood. In any given scene, the accompanying sound track promotes the “appropriate” affective response: sad, scared, expectant, exultant, titillated, nostalgic. In terms of film studies scholarship, however, the sound track is much less thoroughly observed and understood, either in how it is typically employed or in the meaning of a director’s choice to follow a different style.

8. The few noteworthy exceptions are music during the short credit sequences and a few scene transitions, during the short montages of Sam Deeds examining evidence and later driving, and during the final flashback.

9. The dialogue quoted in this chapter is from the film *Lone Star*. Sayles’s screenplay was published in “Men with Guns” and “Lone Star” (1998). The published screenplay was used as a reference, and the spelling and punctuation are from this source, but the lines have been checked against the film. Where there were differences between the screenplay and the film, the dialogue from the film was used.

10. For a solid discussion of time transitions in the history of U.S. film, see Messaris, *Visual Literacy: Image, Mind, and Reality*. Significantly, almost all the conventional devices for a flashback in U.S. motion picture history have involved breaks—that is, discontinuities perceived by the viewer and also encoded within the medium itself. To create them meant physically cutting the film.

11. It is noteworthy that Chucho Montoya draws a line in the sand in this scene. This action is an allusion to accounts of the battle at the Alamo, in which William Barret Travis supposedly drew a line in the sand and asked those who would stay to cross it.

**Works Cited**


