

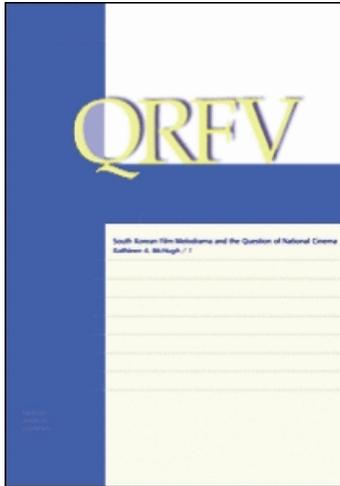
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Publisher Routledge

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## Quarterly Review of Film and Video

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713648686>

### Border Theory and the Politics of Place, Space, and Memory in John Sayles's *Lone Star*

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Online publication date: 14 April 2010

**To cite this Article** Barrera, Cordelia(2010) 'Border Theory and the Politics of Place, Space, and Memory in John Sayles's *Lone Star*', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 27: 3, 210 – 218

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/10509200802310582

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10509200802310582>

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## Border Theory and the Politics of Place, Space, and Memory in John Sayles's *Lone Star*

CORDELIA BARRERA

“People liked the story we told better than anything the truth might have been.”  
—Big Otis to Sam Deeds

John Sayles's *Lone Star* (1996) reminds us that history lives in the present much more than it does in the past because revelations about the past invariably reflect the present as well as future actions. This fact is made evident in the choices of several of the film's main characters who, when confronted with more accurate stories of their past, utilize the knowledge to effectively redirect their futures. The film mingles elements of the thriller—western, mystery, and romance—and stylistically and symbolically reveals that the people of Frontera, where whites, Blacks, Chicana/os, and Seminoles have historically co-existed, all remember the past in different ways. *Lone Star* suggests that a certain fluidity has always characterized life in Frontera; the divisions between an imperialist, hierarchical history and emergent patterns that threaten old systems of living are in constant dialogue in *Lone Star*.

The movie, set in the fictional town of Frontera on the Texas-Mexico border explores the dynamic role of history through the development of both literal and metaphorical borders. In the South Texas borderlands, subjectivities are not just geoculturally split, but they are—historically and in the present-day—fractured by competing interpretations and continual re-interpretations of history. I would argue that space, place, and memory are mythologizing, discursive elements that are both textually and ideologically necessary to revisionist histories that articulate a counter-narrative of both the nation and the Texas border. U.S. third-world feminists have written extensively about expanding categories of analysis that give form and expression to the lived experience of the ways race, class, and gender converge. Border Theory, as conceptualized and utilized by U.S. third world feminists can help us open up and explode stories—histories—on the margins, and of the marginal, that have been silenced, erased, or otherwise left out of the historical record.

U.S. third world feminism fluidly moves within and among genders, races, and classes to insist on “a new subjectivity, a political revision that denies any one ideology as the final answer, while instead positing a *tactical subjectivity* (author's emphasis) with the capacity to recenter depending upon the kinds of oppression to be confronted” (Sandoval, “U.S. Third World” 14). Using Gloria Anzaldúa's assertion about the transformative power of the human soul in relation to the body, we realize that it is not just a matter of reinscribing

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some margin or center, but an awareness that theorizes the politics of difference within a new paradigm.

She writes: “For only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, can the human soul be transformed. And for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they must arise from the human body—flesh and bone—and from the earth’s body—stone, sky, liquid, soil” (97). Additionally, by utilizing postmodern theory as developed by Emma Pérez in *The Decolonial Imaginary*, we can further move beyond the traditional boundaries of history to understand how Chicana/os and African Americans on the borderlands of South Texas struggled against and ultimately opposed colonialist structures to create a liberating third space where the “decolonizing subject negotiate[s] new histories” (5).

Chela Sandoval, in *Methodology of the Oppressed*, argues for one “singular apparatus”—Love—“that is necessary for forging twenty-first-century modes of decolonizing globalization” (2). The theories of these U.S. third world feminists of color, along with Cherríe Moraga’s political theories of the body, expand categories of analysis that give form and expression to the lived experience of the ways race, class, and gender converge. These ideas can help us understand complex negotiations, subjectivities, and newly-emerging epistemologies of the body. If we look, then, through the lens of these theories at John Sayles *Lone Star* we understand that the main protagonists of the film, Sam and Pilar, have, by the end of the movie, entered into a new dissident consciousness in which love is the path towards a reformation of identity, and subsequently the space they inhabit in the border town of Frontera. Shot in Super 35mm format to emphasize the long, flat “horizontal look” (West & West 17) of the border, the film’s visual style accommodates literal and figurative frontiers that result from the characters preoccupation with the historical past.

In the film, history and identity are reinforced through Sayles’s thematic treatment of seamless camera pans, which link past subjectivities and identities to the present. Through the lens of history, and in a postmodern, revisionist context *Lone Star* not only questions traditional myths and narratives, but also works to destabilize them. Of the western genre, Janet Walker writes that westerns “incorporate, elide, embellish, mythologize, allegorize, erase, duplicate, and rethink past events that are themselves—as history—fragmented, fuzzy, and striated with fantasy constructions” (13). Walker’s observations are helpful in looking at how *Lone Star* posits an alternative “western” paradigm. At the heart of the film is the 40-year old mystery of the death of former sheriff Charley Wade, played by Kris Kristofferson, and the re-kindling of a romance between the present Sheriff Sam Deeds, played by Chris Cooper, and Pilar Cruz, played by Elizabeth Peña. But throughout the film, the audience realizes that the film is more about people trying to live together in a liminal space in dialogue with contested ideologies of race, ethnicity, and gender. These people’s histories set the scene, as it were, for the development of other ways of understanding both history and the western itself.

Broadly speaking, *Lone Star* is a revisionist western that serves a “counter-historical function” in that it “prioritize[s] perspectives outside the white-dominated mainstream” (Walker 11). Because many of the anti-racist, social theories of U.S. third world feminists often emphasize a body politic and forms of “embodied knowledge” that enable a motivating force and thus inform theory, the idea of an identity politic that focuses on individual subjectivity can help us identify a common ground, a “differential consciousness” based on identity and difference that is both anti-essentialist and socialist in scope. These ideas expand categories of analysis that give form and expression to the lived experience of the ways race, class, and gender converge. U.S. third world feminist theories of the body help us see that it is not a simple matter of reinscribing a margin or center, but an awareness that theorizes difference within a new paradigm.

Thus Sam and Pilar take up the challenge, as Cherríe Moraga says we must, not just to look at the nightmare of internalized racism within their own bodies and each other, but also to confront it and love it (49). We must seek to identify new relations of power and knowledge that do not further marginalize, but more closely examine those binary relationships that produce marginal subjectivities as a consequence of some center. Although the narrative structure of the film forces us to question the lessons of history from competing, often conflicting points of view, the flashback scenes are seamless and reinforce the idea that the past bleeds into the present.

For instance, during one scene that at first seems to have little to do with the main storyline, Pilar, who teaches history at the local high school, says to a group of angry, white parents—who resent her inclusionary policies of teaching history: “We’re not changing anything, we’re just trying to present a more complete picture.” The parents believe that history should be told from the perspective of the “winners” (Sandoval, “Burden” 79). For historian Tomás F. Sandoval, this deliberate revisionist strategy suggests alternate remembrances of things past. But more importantly, “the townsfolk are fighting over Frontera’s history not because of what it says about the past but because of what it says about their present” (79).

In a way, Sandoval argues that the town is searching for its “true” self in the past. In his reading of *Lone Star* Sandoval prioritizes Hayden White’s directive that the historian “establish the value of the study of the past, not as ‘an end in itself,’ but as a way of providing perspectives on the present that contribute to the solution of problems peculiar to our own time” (125). Furthermore, when we consider the politics of identity through the lens of Hayden White’s idea that narrative is an essential component of the historical experience, we recognize that the characters in *Lone Star* attempt to reconcile the past with the present in a way that is liberating rather than restrictive. For instance, the past and the present combine in long pan shots in two crucial flashback scenes that cement the idea that the truth is often “hidden” in a character’s memory. Panning shots in the film’s two murder scenes—the first of Eladio Cruz and the second of Charley Wade—erase any signal that a boundary in time has been crossed. Both scenes are narrated by characters that dig up a distant past in their memories, further emphasizing the collapse between history and the present.

Emma Pérez proposes a “decolonial imaginary” where the oppressed, the silenced, the “colonial other” not simply flits between colonial and postcolonial spaces, but negotiates identity in a way that works to uncover subaltern histories (7). In order to decolonize otherness, Pérez argues that we must look to a “rupturing space” which she calls “the time lag between the colonial and postcolonial, that interstitial space where differential politics and social dilemmas are negotiated” (6). By redefining Foucault’s discursive archaeology as a method uniquely suited to discover the silences within the interstitial gaps that interrupt European and Euroamerican historical models of time, she works to reconceptualize individual histories with the intent of uncovering alternatives to written history.

Although Foucault’s archaeology, which explodes disciplines and categories is important, what is most crucial in this reading of *Lone Star* is Pérez’s use of Foucault’s “genealogy,” which “recognizes how history has been written upon the body” (xvi). Her challenge to the “written story and its myth” (xvi) is postmodern in the sense that there is “no pure, authentic, original history. There are only stories—many stories” (xv). Traditional historiography produces fictive pasts that serve to negate “other” histories. To this end, Pérez employs the theories of Homi Bhabha, Michel Foucault, and Chela Sandoval, among others, to hone in on the articulations of third space agency within what she calls “interstitial gaps” to “rethink history” (5) with the goal of “freeing” history (127). Her

book's title, *The Decolonial Imaginary* refers to that which "teeter[s] in a third space [and] recognizes what is left out" of history (55). Read in this manner, *Lone Star* allows for a discussion of how Pérez's concepts play out in contemporary treatments of historical pasts.

Chicana/os are not the only ethnic group struggling to define their identity in Frontera. Freedom for African Americans in the historic west remains ambiguous, and it echoes Emma Pérez's notion of a decolonial imaginary that reflects a third space which does not fully represent liberation, but, rather, a transitory space of possibilities not yet realized. Through its reliance on revisionist methods of identity politics, *Lone Star* demonstrates how colonialist impulses of western history have generally erased African Americans from the landscape because they do not fit into the neat, white-centered mythology of the west.

However, in the film African-Americans actively work to create their own postcolonial imaginary so as to re-mythologize the history of the west from the African American point of view. Big Otis, the proprietor of "The Big O," has earned the honorary title "Mayor of Darktown." When his grandson, Chet, visits him for the first time, Otis shows him around the "museum" of Black Seminole and border artifacts he displays in a back room of his bar. Otis recounts the story of the Texas Seminoles who once worked alongside the predominantly white U.S. cavalry as scouts. The artifacts and photos that Otis displays inform the history that "continues to live in the present" through the local army base, a military presence in the border that dates back to the mid nineteenth century, as well as through, Otis and his grandson. (Sandoval, "Burden" 72). Otis makes the point that in Frontera, history has always been "fuzzy" and ambiguous.

An individual's "place" is a type of "cognitive map" represented by fluid identities that are contested at the political, cultural, social, and, finally, individual level. Only when Chet connects with his own Seminole forebears can he envision his future. Historical amnesia has, to use Hayden White's term, lifted the "burden of history" (121) and paved the way towards a new consciousness. Just as Sam Deeds labors throughout most of the film to uncover the "truth" of history by working through past events via the uncovering of stories in all of their "present-ness" (White 132), Chet is beginning to understand that history is dynamic. This realization is crucial because many of the characters in *Lone Star* choose which aspects of their past they will actively engage in creating their present-day identities.

Truth comes at a price, and the young Chet—like Sam and Pilar—soon realizes that the truth is contingent upon one's stance on a tenuous border that was historically created and sustained by the politics of identity. We can take the narratives of history as they are, or we can make a final distinction between history as it has been written and intervene to create histories of our own. Such a treatment of history is evident when Pilar says to Sam: "We'll start from scratch. All that other stuff. All that history. To hell with it, right? Forget the Alamo."

In her ground-breaking article, "U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World," Chela Sandoval charts the meeting points of social actors who, in spite of varying courses of oppositional activity, engage in self-conscious modes of political opposition. She extends Louis Althusser's theory of ideology and ideological state apparatuses to develop a new theory of ideology that "focuses on identifying forms of consciousness in opposition" (2) by subject-citizens who self-consciously oppose the dominant social order with the end result of breaking with dominant, hierarchical forms of ideology. For Sandoval, "differential consciousness" is a powerful strategy of oppositional consciousness because it is mobile: "a kinetic motion that maneuvers, poetically transfigures, and orchestrates while demanding alienation, perversion, and reformation in both spectators and practitioners" (3).

The bulk of her article is devoted to identifying the means and ways U.S. third world feminism functions on the periphery of a historically exclusionary hegemonic feminism. A main goal of Sandoval's is to show how U.S. third world feminism functions "just outside" a commonly cited four-phase feminist history of consciousness consisting of 'liberal,' 'Marxist,' 'radical/cultural,' and 'socialist' feminisms (9). Recognizing the stance of U.S. third world feminism requires a paradigm shift that sets the stage for a new theory and method of oppositional consciousness—a "topography of consciousness in opposition" (9–11). This topography is not feminist in nature; rather, it allows us to identify the "modes the subordinated of the United States (of any gender, race, or class) claim as politicized and oppositional stances in resistance to domination" (11).

This "differential" mode of consciousness is fluid, as citizen-subjects who engage it can and may move "between and among" other forms of oppositional consciousness in tactical ways to enact recoveries, revenge, reparations, or produce justice (14). A differential mode of consciousness, then, permits citizen-subjects to "choose[ing] and adopt[ing] the ideological form best suited to push against its configurations, a survival skill well known to oppressed peoples" (15). Liberation, freedom, and change among subordinated subjects become possible "within the realm of differential consciousness" where self-conscious agents "recognize one another as allies, countrywomen and men of the same psychic terrain" (15).

In *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Sandoval continues along this trajectory to deconstruct a selection of works by canonical Western thinkers. She argues that the works of Frederic Jameson, Roland Barthes, Hayden White, and Donna Haraway, among others, contain the seeds of postcolonial U.S. third world feminist aims. In Sandoval's thinking, a "fundamental linkage" between these diverse thinkers is found in "similarly conceived and unprecedented forms of identity, politics, aesthetic production, and coalitional consciousness through their shared practice of a hermeneutics of love in a postmodern world" (4).

Sandoval examines the juncture which connects the disoriented first world citizen-subject who longs for a new sense of identity and redemption in a postmodern space, and a form of oppositional consciousness as developed by subordinated or colonized Western citizen-subjects (9). In *Lone Star*, this juncture is represented by both the town of Frontera and the complicated history that ostensibly separates Sam and Pilar. Chicana/os are making strides, politically and socially in Frontera, as evidenced by the town's Chicano mayor and the Chicano deputy who will presumably unseat Sam Deeds next year as Sheriff. Thus Sam's body becomes a site of negotiation between a colonialist historical past and his newly developing consciousness.

This negotiation is both personal and political, and echoes Cherríe Moraga's "meditations" surrounding the histories that are inscribed within our bodies. What is unique about Moraga's theory is that she locates sites of complex political and personal negotiations within and on the body. In *Loving in the War Years*, she encourages readers to examine the personal pieces of themselves and their oppression, which she writes are both "given and taken" within the body; applying her theory against oppression begins with our own bodies, our own selves, "under the skin" (54). The body is not immutable. It is a field of inscription on which complex social codes and negotiations are constantly being written, challenged, and re-written. Moraga decodes the processes of the inner discoveries that we must make in order to free ourselves from the silences and oppressions within us all; this we must do in order that we take full responsibility of our roots, our histories.

Rosa Linda Fregoso, in her Oedipal reading of *Lone Star*, argues that the film does not truly represent a new social order because it does not de-center whiteness and masculinity.

She writes: “the white father-white son structure keeps the center intact and multiplicity at the margins of the story world” (56). For her, the masculine conflicts are “resolved” but the conflicts implicating the female characters—Pilar and her business-owner mother, Mercedes—are not. Although she rightly posits, when referring to the symbolic realm, that the film is first and foremost John Sayles’s “reconstruction and vision,” (60) and that the point of view of most of the film (in flashback or not) is masculine-centered, as it is Sam Deeds’s, she makes this point from the perspective of feminist film theory that revolves around cinematic mechanisms of spectatorship and identification.

In this light, she writes that she refuses to participate in the “white patriarchal gaze” and racial structures of vision that inform this film” (61). I would add, however, that we must consider that Sam and Pilar, during the first half of the film negotiate the gaze equally, as they can only glimpse each other—first through bars, then through various “invisible lines” (Magowan 24) of glass. This is one way in which Sayles, who describes this film as “a story about borders . . . where I end and somebody else begins” (West & West 14) metaphorically evinces the ways in which all sorts of borders—race, class, sex, age—separate people.

Unlike Fregoso, I see Sam’s *will*, or *necessity* to uncover the bones of a buried local and familial history as evidence of what Chela Sandoval calls a “decolonizing stance” (*Methodology* 4). Sam is the product of an Anglo-American father who was instrumental in perpetuating an imperialist regime in Frontera, but Sam’s quest for knowledge and truth turns the painful gaze of his own colonialist history to the construction of his own identity, his own body. His search for knowledge ushers what Chela Sandoval calls “a coalitional consciousness” that marks the beginnings of a new “hermeneutics of love” with Pilar in a postmodern space (*Methodology* 4). I believe that Sam and Pilar symbolically represent a type of mirror image of the same decolonizing gaze. Sam, in his willingness to deconstruct and uncover the truth of his own history as evidenced by the colonialist, imperialist imperatives of his father, Buddy Deeds, and Pilar, in her stance as a teacher who daily frames history in terms of revisions, counter narratives, and multiple voicings.

Literary critic José E. Limón argues that *Lone Star* works to revise the history of a traditional iconography of relations between Anglos and Mexicans that reproduces a dominant colonialist imperative. In his analysis of the enduring American cultural iconography of Anglo-American and Mexican relations in Texas, he revisits traditional representations of the American cowboy, the Mexican female figure of illicit sexuality, and the “prim and proper” Anglo female figure to flesh out a theory of ambivalence that plays out in partial and unconscious challenge to the ruling cultural order (604). Although Limón links Pilar to traditional images of the “racial-sexual Other,” he concludes that her character actively “revises the image of the Mexican woman at the sexual and social margins of society” (612). Through her position as an educated woman with activist inclinations, Pilar “appropriates the traditional image of the Anglo schoolmarm” (612). Her body, the body of the colonized, becomes “a site for witnessing a fissure or decentering within the colonizer” (610). Moreover, he argues that Pilar’s social status as a public school teacher sets her on equal footing with “whatever cultural capital still accrues to [Sam] as an Anglo in the 1990s” (612). Importantly, Limón privileges the space—a café owned by Pilar’s mother, Mercedes—where Sam and Pilar finally unite physically. He concludes in the words David Montejano that “the politics of negotiation and compromise have replaced the politics of conflict and control” (qtd. in Limón 613).

I would push Limón’s analysis further to argue that the lover’s union signals the beginnings of a “rhetoric of resistance” in which their bodies, in the language of Chela Sandoval, transform into a methodology of emancipation based in a differential consciousness. For Alan P. Barr, it is love that provides the means for Sam and Pilar to “cross divides,”

transcend barriers” (372) of race, and, as we learn in the last moments of the film, incest, to venture toward “new frontiers” (372). Crucially, their union signals the means by which love becomes “reinvented as a political technology, as a body of knowledges, arts, practices, and procedures for re-forming the self and the world” (Sandoval, *Methodology* 4).

Soon after Sam and Pilar rekindle their romance, we are led to believe that Sam’s life, at least since his return to Frontera, is as “empty” as the blank walls of the apartment he’s been living in for the past two years; he’s been waiting for Pilar to continue the story of his life. When Pilar asks him why he’s hung no pictures on the walls, he answers, “There’s nothing I want to look back on.” They continue:

Pilar: “Like your story’s over.”

Sam: “I’ve felt that way. Yeah.”

Pilar: “It isn’t. Uh Huh. Not by a long shot.”

Cherríe Moraga writes: “Without an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, no authentic non-hierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place” (44–45). This applies to both Sam and Pilar, who, like the audience, are yet ignorant of certain truths “in pointed contrast to Frontera’s suppressed knowledge” (Magowan 23). Sam admits to Pilar that he returned to Frontera because “you were here.” But it was the unearthing of Charley Wade’s skull, and Sam’s subsequent “poking around” in the history of Frontera that led him, finally, to Pilar. In Moraga’s theory, which she labels not a theory as such, but “meditations,” fear and memory take place within the body and it is the body that remembers, and more importantly, negotiates the historical, political, and social realms surrounding us all.

Sam and Pilar take up the challenge, as Cherríe Moraga says we must, not just to look at the nightmare of internalized racism within themselves, but to confront it and love it (49). Sam’s willingness to traverse the juncture between past and present represents his emerging, however unconscious, desire to connect with and ultimately carve an oppositional consciousness. This fact is epitomized in the re-kindling of his love for Pilar, which, in fact, has never died. Traversing this juncture necessitates union with the Other—Pilar. Bridging this gap, however, is key to unlocking a new-world citizenship that encourages a decolonizing global force as envisioned by Sandoval in *Methodology of the Oppressed*.

In this light, I believe that the historiographic function of John Sayles’s vision in *Lone Star* rests on the fluidity and re-negotiation of a politics inscribed on the body that culminates in the revisionist impulses of the historical truth by the main characters. Whether or not an authentic, lasting alliance between Sam and Pilar will be forged remains to be seen. At the film’s end, it appears that Sam has come to terms with the primary source of his own oppression, as signaled by his willingness to uncover the truth of his father’s “deeds”.

While investigating the death of Charley Wade, Sam increasingly becomes more willing to destroy his father’s image, thus metaphorically subverting the patriarchal, imperialist hegemonic rule symbolized by the “mythic” Buddy Deeds’s, tenure as sheriff. Throughout the film, Sam has worked to uncover the primary source of his own oppression. The fact that Pilar and Sam decide to remain together despite the knowledge that they share the same father symbolically speaks to the idea that the two have chosen to engage in a type of “bodily” activism. It is the actions that we take and not just the knowledge of our history that informs powerful, committed social change. Moraga insists that no authentic, nonhierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place without an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of one’s own oppression—we must know and name the enemy both within and outside of ourselves (45).

The work of Emma Pérez reminds us that historically, disenfranchised groups have often created their own postcolonial imaginary when they can otherwise not succeed in breaking from their colonial formations. With this in mind, the lovers use their bodies as sites to map a rhetoric of resistance, in turn ushering a coalitional consciousness centered in a hermeneutics of love in a postmodern space. The final scene in the film concludes with a long shot of Sam and Pilar facing a torn, blank drive-in movie screen. They have agreed to suspend the “rule”. When Pilar says, “I can’t get pregnant anymore if that’s what the rule is about” it is not merely the biological rule against incest that they have suspended, but a rule inscribed in the narrative that dominates the burden of history. At the film’s end, the hope that the lovers envision is shared by the audience; we can imagine that Sam and Pilar, who have successfully destabilized the historical narratives they at one time believed they had been “born” into, have made strides in de-mythologizing history so as to, in Emma Pérez’s words, “consciously remake the narrative” (127).

*Lone Star* shows how Chicana/os and African Americans are key players in creating a third space where liberation is achievable, however transitory. In this regard, the film makes a distinction between history as it has been written and counter-hegemonic, mythological interpretations of that history. When Sam Deeds crosses the Mexican border to inquire about the unsolved murder of Eladio Cruz, he is given a lesson in history from an old friend of Eladio Cruz’s—“*El Rey de las llantas*.” Chuchito Montoya, recycler, and self-proclaimed “king of tires” was there when Eladio, the man Pilar believes to be her father, was shot and killed by Charley Wade. He draws an arbitrary line in the dirt and says to Sam: “The bird flying south, you think he sees this line? Rattlesnake, *javelina*, whatever you got . . . you think halfway across that line they start thinking different? Why should a man?”

This reminds us of Hayden White’s assertion that “only history mediates between what is and what men [sic] think ought to be with truly humanizing effect” (134). In this regard, we must look to the narratives of our past with a heightened scrutiny and acknowledge that the stories we tell ourselves—and the mythologies we pass onto future generations—are interpretations of the truth. Revisionist westerns work to de-mythologize and subvert the hegemony of history. The counter-narratives in *Lone Star* acknowledge a simple truth—that the history of the Southwest, and consequently, American history, must be viewed for what it is—a prism of many colors, not a single, colorless lens of white.

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