

“We’re Not on the Other Side:” Social Complexity and the American  
Melting Pot in John Sayles’s *Lone Star*

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By

Mandy Elliott

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Canada

## ABSTRACT

Although the dominant discussions with regard to John Sayles's *Lone Star* centre around the influence of the past on the present, there is little written concerning the ways in which the past as depicted in Frontera, the town in which the film is set, is treated in light of the American cultural discourse of the melting pot. As a town situated on the border between Mexico and Texas, Frontera is inherently multicultural. That said, there is a distinct naïvety presented in the film with regard to one's ability to cast off one's personal history and "start from scratch," which speaks to the influence of the melting pot mythology, and the way in which it can override the influence of cultural experience and discourse. This mythology, however, proves problematic in *Lone Star*, as Sayles acknowledges the importance of the influence of blood to one's self-realization as a part of the community. It seems clear that the discourse of the town follows the postcolonial imaginary of the American melting pot, and as such the town promotes itself as a unified whole. However, if individual and group histories are the keys to self-realization as Sayles seems to indicate, it follows that the community should embrace a heterogeneous multicultural model, rather than a homogeneous model based on the demands of the American melting pot. To that end, I examine the importance of personal history in *Lone Star* as a means of destabilizing the melting pot ideology. In doing so I discuss the possibilities of individual autonomy in light of what is presented in the film as a hyper-deterministic social and cultural context. This requires a look at the way in which communities built around differences actually function, and I use Manuel De Landa's philosophy of social complexity to elucidate the fallacy of seeing a society as a unified and homogeneous whole and promote the idea of various moving and interchangeable components within an overarching social structure. In viewing Frontera this way, the impossibility of starting from scratch is made apparent, as one's past is shown to be a necessary part of one's future.

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Mandy Elliott

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In a 1998 interview with Gavin Smith, John Sayles reflected on one of his motivations behind his 1996 film *Lone Star*: “Everybody starts with some kind of handicap or advantage, and that’s their personal history. And it’s also their group history. I was interested in the way those two interact: both the personal, and the social and group history” (Sayles 218). Sayles’s use of personal and social history throughout the film seem especially pertinent when considering the multiculturalism inherent in Frontera, the fictitious Texas border town in which the film is set. Born from 19<sup>th</sup> century conflict between the old world and the new, Frontera is depicted as a town that tends to say one thing and do another in terms of its cultural identity. To clarify, Frontera straddles the border between the “melting pot” rhetoric that pervades American discourse and an inherently multicultural population whose historical roots are deeply imbedded beyond the boundaries of modern day America. Despite the inherent multiculturalism of any “new world” nation, the imaginary of the homogeneous American whole has been perpetuated by the image of the melting pot. While it is true that many have worked to dispel such an imaginary in the latter part of the twentieth century, it is arguably still active today, and it figures prominently in *Lone Star* as a means of accessing Sayles’s debate over whether or not ignoring the past and “starting from scratch” (as per the film’s memorable phrase) is impossible.

Although the long-time “Mayor of Darktown,” Otis Payne, notes that “blood only means what you let it” (*Lone Star* 216), the main social issues presented in the film suggest that the influence of blood—along with any cultural assumptions that come with it—is pervasive, despite any personal meaning one chooses to attach or ignore. Moreover, Otis also presents the idea of choice, of choosing to let blood mean something, which would dictate the way in which one navigates the American melting pot. This idea rings true considering Otis’s affinity for the history of his people despite the official melting pot discourse that runs through Frontera and Del’s, Mercedes’s, Pilar’s, and Sam’s consequent aversions to their histories. It is also true for Ray, the aspiring sheriff, as he uses his cultural affiliations as a Chicano man to support the political machine of the town. When we take the melting pot discourse into consideration, we see that not only does Sayles’s exploration of personal and social histories begin to address the naïve suggestion in the film that one can start from scratch, it also begs a closer look at the social and individual interactions that take place in Frontera. That is, the American melting pot requires one to start one’s cultural identity from scratch, and yet, through his emphasis on the personal histories of Sam, Pilar, Otis, and various other characters, Sayles suggests that one cannot divorce

oneself from one's past so easily. Even Pilar's famous declaration at the end of the film that she and Sam can "forget the Alamo" and "start from scratch" (*Lone Star* 244) has an air of naïvety to it as the weight of their incestuous relationship and the impossibility of forgetting it is brought to bear on their relationship. In this way Pilar is lured by the melting pot mythology's promise to provide a fresh start to her life, despite all the difficulties Sayles provides to challenge such naïvety.

Although certainly not at the forefront of the film's narrative, the social structure, and subsequent characterization, of the town reflects the American melting pot mythology that insists on the Americanization of its inhabitants, regardless of previous cultural affiliations. That is, in becoming an American, one casts off any previous cultural affiliations that would set one apart from the unified whole. Conversely, those who do not buy into the melting pot idea can be met with contempt, or, at the very least, with misunderstanding, which certainly exists in the major institutions of Frontera. However, it seems that in Frontera the rhetoric of the melting pot mythology is problematic as it establishes narrowly constructed social roles as they fit the ideal American imaginary, in order to adopt social myth rather than historical truth in the creation of a border society. For example, Otis's social role is the tavern-operating, and unofficial, Mayor of Darktown, despite his other affiliations that necessitate a wider description. Likewise, Del's official social role is that of military colonel, although that role hardly provides real insight into his full and distinguishable identity. Even he buys into this narrow view of his identity until he is forced to reconcile with his own history, after which he considers his identity in contrast with the narrowly constructed role of military colonel. This is not unlike Mercedes, who chooses to forget the humble Mexican beginnings of her journey to become a prominent American citizen. Like Del, Mercedes is ultimately forced to remember these beginnings, and to expand her social role accordingly. Similarly, Sam strives to be more than his social role of Sheriff dictates, and even he must search outside Frontera to find answers to his true identity after he is pushed into a mold that was forged and by his father and perpetuated over time. Rather than taking these more complete identities into account as various and interchangeable parts of the social machine<sup>1</sup>, Frontera presents itself as a unified whole and perpetuates the myth of the American imaginary, wherein authority is tied up in the image of the benevolent yet authoritative American hero after

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of the social machine is a metaphor used by Manuel De Landa to describe the mechanical nature of society wherein each citizen, or component part, has a role to play, and that role keeps society running.

the fashion of Davy Crockett, or, the benevolent, yet corrupt, hero of the film, Buddy Deeds. As a result, one's personal and group histories are minimized to promote a unified and homogeneous American whole based perhaps on a benevolent, yet corrupt, ideal.

Thus, although the people of Frontera belong to many unofficial groups and perform many unofficial roles, the mythology of the town still insists on uniformity and a closed system. As its name suggests, Frontera is a border town, and, as such, multiculturalism is inherent in the social make-up. However, throughout *Lone Star* it becomes clear that the borders found in that society are largely social constructs made to categorize race, gender, and class according to an, albeit fictitious, American social imaginary. As the various social interactions of Frontera occur, however, the boundaries that once separated one group from another shift to become more permeable as the "relational webs" (Bould 50) composed of Frontera's citizens change in response to the various social expectations regarding their social roles. Although the people and ideas within these relational webs evolve over time, Sayles demonstrates that the evolution of the social machine is much less perceivable when the social history of Frontera as an American imaginary is examined.

Of course, providing any insight into such a complicated, not to mention a fictitious, social structure is a task riddled with complexity, especially when accompanied by the degrees of personal or cultural autonomy exercised by individual characters. As such, I would like to examine the ways in which individuals navigate their roles in society with or without regard for the histories that brought them together. In doing so, I will look to Manuel De Landa, as I believe the tension between the postcolonial melting pot mythology and personal and cultural autonomy can be further elucidated by De Landa's philosophy of social complexity. That is to say, De Landa's view of society as a composition of various groups of people, or "assemblages", the boundaries around which constantly shift according to the component citizens within each assemblage, rings true for Frontera, despite its tendency to present itself as a unified whole. Rather than looking at society as a unified whole wherein any true personal or cultural autonomy is difficult, if not impossible, as the melting pot imaginary dictates, De Landa sees society as a composition of various assemblages that preserve autonomy in relation to the larger community. He argues:

A whole may be both analyzable into separate parts and at the same time have irreducible properties [...] that emerge from the *interactions* between parts. [...]

Allowing the possibility of complex interactions between component parts is crucial to define mechanisms of emergence, but this possibility disappears if the parts are fused together into a seamless web. Thus, what needs to be challenged is the very idea of relations of interiority. We can distinguish, for example, the properties defining a given entity from its *capacities to interact* with other entities. [...] In this other view, being part of a whole involves the exercise of a part's capacities but it is not a constitutive property of it. And given that an unexercised capacity does not affect what a component is, a part may be detached from the whole while preserving its identity. (De Landa 10)

Thus, one might have a role in society while maintaining and exerting the irreducible properties of one's personal and cultural histories; that is to say, one might be both the Mayor of Darktown and also a descendent of the Black Seminole people, as Otis is. De Landa works from Deleuze's assemblage theory wherein "a component part of an assemblage may be detached from it and plugged into a different assemblage in which its interactions are different (De Landa 10). That said, "a relation [to an assemblage] may change without the terms [of one's affiliation to that assemblage] changing" (De Landa 11).

In this way, communities are not organic wholes; they are, rather, machines composed of various moving parts that must interact with one another to grow from the differences between them. An individual is a member of various assemblages, including the cultural assemblage that constitutes one's history as separate from that of the wider community. Whereas the individual assemblages exert homogeneity on a micro level in terms of their individual components, the coming together of those assemblages into the larger assemblage of the community on a macro level ensures heterogeneity, which is essential to the preservation and progress of individual identity. De Landa's idea of assemblages, then, serves to elevate the importance of heterogeneity in a town like Frontera where personal history is pitted against American cultural mythology. The American imaginary would see the properties of Frontera's citizens reduced to only those that contribute to the perpetuation of the town as representative of that imaginary. This is the governing stance that is, albeit perhaps inadvertently, adopted by Charley Wade, Hollis Pogue, and Buddy Deeds, and the one that Sam becomes caught up in despite his best intentions.

From the first interaction we have with Charley Wade we can begin to see the authoritative hierarchy of the town. Although an inherently irredeemable blackguard, Wade's

corruption is enabled by his social position over others: a position that is questioned by no one but Buddy Deeds. Mixed with that, however, is the idea that to be on the American side of the border is greatly preferred to the alternative for a number of reasons, both valid and questionable. This combination of authority and American iconography serves to promote a postcolonial melting pot imaginary that works to quash the heterogeneity of its citizens. Despite his legendary benevolence in the wake of the nefarious Charley Wade, Buddy Deeds's view of the town's organization is not essentially different from Wade's. Similarly, despite his indignation over the legend of his father, Sam also perpetuates the melting pot mythology because of his desire to cover up the past and escape his history. De Landa's model, though, would see the various citizens bring their irreducible properties (for my purposes, their individual and group histories) to their socially defined roles, which would increase the social heterogeneity of the town, and destabilize the myth of the melting pot through the various points of view that would necessarily become incorporated into the town's administration. This is certainly true for Otis and, ultimately, for Del and Mercedes, as they each bring their own identities and experiences to their official social roles, despite the social push to the contrary; while they embrace their social roles of nightclub owner, colonel, and prominent businesswoman respectively, the irreducible properties of their cultural and family histories serve to provide identities not inherent in those social roles—identities that society does not value as part of the homogeneous social schema. According to De Landa's theory, it would seem that the component parts that form the authoritative structure of Frontera attempt to project the idea of the town as a unified whole, which is in keeping with the discourse of the American melting pot. Conversely, some individuals in Frontera resist this discourse and demonstrate De Landa's theory as an alternative in terms of their social autonomy.

This autonomy has everything to do with the agency gained through the acknowledgment of one's personal and group history. When one ignores one's personal and group histories in favor of belonging to the mythically unified whole, neither the individual nor the society can truly progress, as both are contained within a closed loop wherein there may be change, but not necessarily progress. However, when one acknowledges one's history despite the social myth, one is able to truly "engage in complex interactions between component parts" (De Landa 10) of society and emerge from the myth of the whole to instead engage in the various assemblages that demonstrate and preserve one's identity. Thus, whether one is a proponent of fact or myth,

history is the basis for one's future in Frontera. Although Sayles makes clear by the end of the film that one cannot simply escape one's history and start from scratch, one can instead look to one's history as a means of navigating one's role in the system. As a result, it is possible to destabilize the mythology surrounding the American imaginary to enable personal progress. To this end De Landa illuminates both the impossibility of truly starting from scratch in Frontera, and also the necessity of embracing one's history as a means of discovering one's identity in relation to society.

### **I. Wesley and Otis: The Problem of Viewing Frontera as a Homogeneous Whole**

Although it is not overtly presented as such in the film, Frontera is a town based on the American melting pot imaginary. As such citizens must choose to adhere to that imaginary or, conversely, to buck against it in favor of finding identity through the personal and group histories found in cultural and family assemblages. Moreover, citizens must navigate between assimilative discourse and the segregative attitudes that dictate the authority of one group over another. On the one hand, Frontera boasts a victorious American heritage, and on the other it enforces territorial lines of cultural demarcation as dictated by colonial rhetoric. Although each cultural assemblage has distinct social boundaries that separate it from the others,<sup>2</sup> and there remains much racial tension despite the town's long history of multicultural co-existence, the overarching system presents itself as a homogeneous one to be followed and maintained, rather than a heterogeneous one to be reacted to and learned from. Although overt indicators of culture, such as food, music, religion, and language, remain part of the town's social environment, Frontera seems to be run in terms of a territorial social order as it has been since the days of the Texas Republic. Before delving into further discussion of the film, I must clarify this crucial term of De Landa's: By "territorial" I mean that despite the rhetoric of the homogeneous whole, the town remains segregated into groups according to narrowly defined indicators of culture, such as food, music, and language. These indicators provide enough differentiation between groups to result in marginalization, and yet not enough to dispel the melting pot imaginary on their own without the agency gained by the embracing of historical background.

Thus, while these cultural demarcations are part of the existing assemblages, the homogeneous system of Frontera does not recognize the ability of those assemblages to

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<sup>2</sup> Think of Otis as the "Mayor of Darktown," or Wesley Birdsong, who remains distant from all communities.

contribute to a heterogeneous society. De Landa's concept of territorialization is helpful to illuminate the nature of demarcation in the assemblage of Frontera:

Processes of territorialization are processes that define or sharpen the spatial boundaries of actual territories. [...] [Territorialization] also refers to non-spatial processes which increase the internal homogeneity of an assemblage, such as the sorting processes which exclude a certain category of people from membership of an organization, or the segregation processes which increase the ethnic or racial homogeneity of a neighbourhood. (De Landa 13)

While the social structure of Frontera attempts to present a unified whole, that supposed whole is treated in a territorial way. Those who do not assimilate, as Wesley and Otis do not, are unwilling to compromise their individual histories for the sake of the social mythology.

Although they mainly live on the margins of society, they still remain part of society on their own terms due to their autonomous roles and the various assemblages they belong to. Thus, although the smaller cultural assemblages that they participate in certainly promote territorial homogeneity, Otis and Wesley also promote their own heterogeneity within the wider assemblage of the community, and are socially influential while they remain resistant to the melting pot.

Wesley is physically on the margins of the community, although, like Otis, he does not entirely leave the social system. Instead, Wesley embodies the nostalgia and the knowledge of an earlier time with his roadside market of old-fashioned oddities. It is not, then, a coincidence that Wesley is the one who informs Sam of his father's infidelity, since Wesley clearly embodies the importance of history despite its seeming insignificance. If his sharing of information with Sam proves anything, it is the importance of history as basis of fact rather than something to be replaced by modern convenience. Although Wesley is certainly homogeneous in his marginalized state, he is able to destabilize the existing social rhetoric of the American imaginary with his enlightening knowledge of history. Moreover, his collection of curios speaks to the heterogeneity of both time and culture, as he presents for sale all manner of natural and crafted artifacts and appliances that are indicative of Frontera's border society.

In contrast, however, his one-man assemblage speaks to his autonomy within the social machine, both in terms of historical knowledge and physical distance, and he tells Sam that he enjoys the emptiness that surrounds his roadside stand, despite the lack of customers. Wesley's

participation in both social heterogeneity and cultural homogeneity points to the heterogeneity of the various components that run—and have run— Frontera as a homogeneous society; although Frontera’s history links everyone to some degree, personal history serves to set individuals apart. Indeed, Wesley has become his own assemblage, as he could live exclusively neither on the reservation nor in the town. Rather, he remains part of both cultural assemblages from a distance, ensuring first and foremost that he maintains his identity as separate from whichever society he chooses to belong to. Although Wesley’s destabilization of the social myth may not have any lasting effects on the town’s discourse, it does, through the illumination of Buddy’s history of miscegenation, provide a way for Sam to see his own history and navigate society on his own terms as Wesley does. Thus, the destabilization of the social rhetoric of Frontera seems to facilitate the individual agency to respond to the system as an autonomous component, rather than as an organic symbiote.

Similar to Wesley, as the “Mayor of Darktown,” Otis is not part of the unified mythology of the town. As his adopted title suggests, he is segregated to some degree from the overarching system, and yet he sees this segregation as an opportunity for building community independently of the larger social structure. Although he maintains a meaningful connection with Hollis Pogue, and keeps his secret regarding the murder of Charley Wade, Otis is presented throughout the film as one who does not hide in Frontera’s melting pot and yet remains a productive and autonomous component in the social machine. Even when he works for Roderick Bledsoe, the original owner of the nightclub, Otis operates under his own agency, and does not follow Roderick’s lead to placate Charley Wade. Whereas Roderick is clearly afraid of Wade and allows him free rein in his club, Otis stands up for himself from his first meeting with Wade despite Roderick’s excuse that Otis is “just a bit slow, is all. He don’t mean nothin’ by [his insolence]” (*Lone Star* 151).

Given his refusal to bow to Charley Wade despite the obvious consequences, as well as his research into his family history that demonstrates the complexities of border town formation, Otis is well aware of his role within the cultural machine of Frontera. Indeed, his hobby of researching his own family history through the line of Black Seminoles is indicative of his refusal to buy into the American melting pot mythology. Although Del finds his father’s adherence to his cultural assemblage regressive and segregative, Otis claims that one’s role in life is bound up in one’s social response to one’s history, despite the mythology perpetuated by the American cultural machine. He notes, “There’s not like a borderline between the good people and the bad

people—you're not either on one side or the other—" (*Lone Star* 168). Here Otis demonstrates that one might be part of more than one assemblage—have more than one role—within the social machine. On one hand Otis is a beacon for the African American assemblage of Frontera, and the history of his people there, and on the other he advocates a non-segregative understanding of the reality of the town despite the myth that would suggest the organizational hierarchy of strictly good Americans and strictly bad people who threaten the American way of life with alterity. Thus, Otis is an example of an individual who understands his interaction with the social machine of Frontera; he is able to navigate his role within society and yet is removed from the control of the postcolonial imaginary.

Because of his refusal to leave his history behind in favor of the cultural mythology of Frontera, Otis is able to influence both his son Del and Del's son, Chet. When Del goes to Otis's home he finds in Otis's study a wall detailing the achievements of his past—photographs and news clippings that demonstrate Del's importance to Otis, as well as his importance within the social construct. Through this, Del is forced to acknowledge the meaning of the history that he has endeavored to escape. At the same time Otis's latest wife, Carolyn, refers to Del as "General," not because she is unaware of his actual rank, but because she is attempting to demonstrate the arbitrary nature of the role assigned to Del by the American military mythology in light of who he actually is. This reminder of his own history, as well as the reality of the significance of his military role allows Del to consider his relationship toward the social construct of Frontera and to approach his interaction with it, and with the other assemblages in his life, differently. Similarly, Otis is able to explain his family's cultural affiliations to Chet, who attempts to find his role in society and does not wish to emulate his father. Because of Otis's ties to both the past and the present, he is able to demonstrate the importance of knowing the truth about oneself and its difference from the social mythology. In this way, Del is able to navigate his role as a man engaged in the community in multiple ways due to knowledge of his history, and Chet is able to look to the past to begin his future.

According to De Landa, and as seen through Wesley and Otis, any process that increases heterogeneity within the overarching system can be seen to destabilize that system (De Landa 13). Although the destabilization of the colonial system is slow, perhaps due to the homogeneous territorialization inherent in the various cultural assemblages of Frontera, it is still possible precisely *because* each homogeneous territory provides general heterogeneity within the

overarching social framework. That is, although each territory or assemblage is homogeneous within itself, the differences between those homogeneous groups provide overall heterogeneity. The dilemma that crops up regarding Fronteran society is found in the treatment of society as a unified and homogeneous whole, despite some attempted appearances to the contrary: attempted appearances that discount the different assemblages that actually contribute to the social organization. Thus, Frontera exemplifies the attempted stability of the social system because it is a society that promotes homogeneity perpetuated by the American imaginary. Strong political and financial motives arguably keep Frontera firmly within the colonial grip, and overshadow any real attempts at social order that could be made through the embracing of cultural heterogeneity. This results in the perpetuation of political corruption, even if it is executed with benevolent intentions as it is by Buddy. It is true that individuals within the town may change their roles or their assemblage affiliations within society, but unless they move towards exposing the true heterogeneity of Frontera, and thus destabilizing the overarching structure, they, too, perpetuate the stability of the melting pot imaginary.

Thus, to use De Landa's theory, on a macro level Frontera serves as a social machine in which the citizens should serve as various interchangeable components. On the micro level, however, those components are capable of exerting their own individual agency to destabilize the social construct. Whether they actually do it or not is up to them. Therefore, Sayles presents in *Lone Star* not only the depiction of social complexity, but also the various attempts—conscious and unconscious, successful and unsuccessful—at stabilizing and destabilizing the territorialization of Frontera. Whereas Ray's, Del's, and Mercedes's embrace of the homogeneity of the town stabilizes the colonial construct, Otis's and Wesley's autonomy and, as a result, their heterogeneity, serve to destabilize the construct, as they are able to take ownership of their social roles. Therefore, these attempts at stabilizing or destabilizing Frontera occur as a result of the agency of Frontera's residents, although I would argue that some of the attempts at stabilization, like Ray's Mercedes's, occur in such a way as to suggest compliance with social agency over and above true historical meaning.

## **II. Ray: Adherence to the Melting Pot as a False Sense of Cultural Progress**

Sheriff's Deputy Ray's Chicano cultural assemblage serves as a way for him to promote homogeneity, not only in his own group but also in the wider society of the town. When Ray

tells Sam that “the Committee” wants him to run for sheriff, he demonstrates his adherence to the melting pot imaginary by allowing that he is willing to align his actions as sheriff with the desires of the Committee by advocating the need for a new jail (*Lone Star* 190). Despite any potential benefit a new jail might bring,<sup>3</sup>Ray’s alignment with Fenton turns his individual agency as *a man* into the socially constructed role of *The Man*, and thus reinforces the way in which the town has always been run. That is, he gives up any individual agency he may have through his personal and group history and instead adheres to the idea of Frontera as a unified whole, despite the heterogeneity of the various assemblages that compose it. Ray’s relationship to the social machine is initially questioned by Shadow when he is arrested for the shooting at Big O’s Place, and this questioning seems to plant the idea that Ray merely stabilizes the existing structure:

RAY

You been talking so much trash today, you made us think you’re a dangerous criminal. Be a good boy, now—

*They guide him past Sam’s desk*

SHADOW

You’re the one who’s a good boy. Man say ‘fetch’ and you fetch—

RAY

Just doing my job.

SHADOW

White man just using you to keep the black man down.

RAY

This isn’t Houston, my friend. We pretty much running things now. Our good day has *come*.

SHADOW

You suckers haven’t had a good day since the Alamo. (*Lone Star* 181-182)

Despite Ray’s insistence that he and the Chicano community are “running things” in Frontera, Shadow’s words provide an interesting contradiction. Ray is not the sheriff yet and, despite the Chicano majority in the town, it seems clear through Fenton’s financial power and political influence and through the general racial discourse that the Anglos are still in power politically

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<sup>3</sup> Although we are certainly led to believe that any benefit from the building of a new jail would be strictly financial, and would be enjoyed almost solely by Fenton.

and socially. Moreover, Ray's assertion that the "good day has come" indicates that, despite a history rife with conflict and marginalization, the future is, in Ray's mind, bright for the Chicanos of Frontera. Shadow's response throws the history of Ray's cultural assemblage into relief and questions the social impetus behind Ray's ascension to his authoritative role within an American political assemblage.

Ray can therefore be considered a component of the hierarchical organization of a town that promotes cultural and historical homogeneity. As such, he follows a code that supersedes his individual or cultural agency in favor of the American melting pot imaginary. In light of this hierarchical social tenacity, further explanation as to the nature or possibility of individual progress is required. De Landa provides this explanation:

Hierarchical organizations [...] depend on expressions of legitimacy, which may be embodied linguistically (in the form of beliefs about the sources of authority) or in the behaviour of their members, in the sense that the very act of obeying commands in public, in the absence of physical coercion, expresses acceptance of legitimate authority. (De Landa 13)

Whatever social rules constitute "legitimate authority" can be seen subjectively in terms of one's assemblage affiliations and one's own agency within the social machine. In Frontera, the hierarchical organization of the town's leadership requires expressions of legitimacy to continue as an authority. Ray provides these expressions as he embraces his authoritative role and becomes part of a system that slights his individual history as a Chicano man, and yet requires that history as a means of perpetuating Frontera's colonial power. That is, the system nominally requires Chicano leadership because the population of Frontera is becoming increasingly Chicano, not because of the potential illumination a Chicano perspective would bring to the running of the town.

The installation of a Chicano leader that perpetuates the American melting pot mythology is invaluable for maintaining a homogeneous society in which marginalized populations are growing. Thus, Ray perpetuates the mythology of the American melting pot by aligning with a political assemblage that pays homage to the postcolonial vision of Frontera as a homogeneous social system. In this way he stabilizes the idea of American culture at the expense of his own cultural autonomy, since we are led to believe that, despite the number of Chicano voters, he

would not be supported by the overarching social structure if he did not first support that same social structure.

### **III. Del and Athena: From Illusion of the Melting Pot to Disillusion of Social Identity**

Ray's unwitting or unacknowledged participation in the stabilization of the American cultural imaginary is similar to Del Payne's. Del's background suggests that Del attempts to escape his past by aligning himself with the military: undeniably a symbol of American colonial mythology. Although Del believes that he has earned the role of colonel in the military with hard work and exemplary service, the fact remains that he is given command of a dying military base in Frontera, a small, backwater town. In accepting this command Del is forced to return to the place of his childhood, despite his desire to forget the past and "start from scratch." However, Del is ultimately made to realize his own mercenary role within the cultural imaginary at the same time that he is forced by his son to embrace his roots and, by extension, his own cultural assemblage within Frontera. Indeed, earlier in the film we learn that the Black Seminoles<sup>4</sup> figure prominently in Del's family history and that, after fighting for the right to live where they wished after the American government tried to move them to Oklahoma, they joined the army and began defending America from their own people. This parallel between Del and his ancestors is not lost on Otis, who says as much to Chet; addressing Chet's incredulity that the Black Seminoles, people of both indigenous and African American descent, fought their own people, Otis notes broodingly, "They were in the army. Like your father" (*Lone Star* 214). This makes Del's realization of his own mercenary role even more poignant as we witness his self-realization as part of the larger, more complex, society. Once he embraces his history, he, like Otis and Wesley, has the potential to destabilize the mythology surrounding the existing structure; as Sam must rethink his role in light of the new information about his past, so must Del be destabilized in order to destabilize the cultural imaginary and progress on a personal level.

As a high-ranking military officer, a role that certainly draws attention to the idea of hierarchical organization, Del exemplifies the socially expected behavior that comes with his role without understanding his own instability as a socially marginalized pawn. Indeed, Del defers to the hierarchical organization through most of the film, rather than engaging in discourses

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<sup>4</sup> When discussing the Black Seminoles with his grandfather, Chet asks whether John Horse is "a black man, or an Indian" (*Lone Star* 212), which points to one's ability to involve oneself in multiple assemblages. Otis's answer that he is "both" (*Lone Star* 213) confirms this.

surrounding his history that might destabilize that organization. Del demonstrates his adherence to the American melting pot imaginary when he questions Athena, the soldier who witnesses the shooting in Otis's club and who later fails the drug test, about her reasons for being part of the military. Only when Athena bluntly associates African Americans in the military with mercenaries for white America is Del confronted with an alternate truth from the one perpetuated by the hierarchical organization of society:

DEL

Do you believe in what we're doing here, Private Johnson?

ATHENA

I—I can do the job, sir.

[...]

DEL

What exactly do you think your job is, Private?

ATHENA

Follow orders. Do whatever they say.

[...]

DEL

And that's the job? Nothing about serving your country—?

*Athena is confused, hesitates to speak.*

These aren't trick questions, Private. [...] I'm just trying to understand how somebody like you thinks.

[...]

ATHENA

It's their country. This is one of the best deals they offer.

*Del knows he asked for it, but doesn't like the answer.*

DEL

How do you think I got to be a colonel?

ATHENA

Work hard, be good at your job. Sir. Do whatever they tell you. (*Lone Star* 217-218)

Athena's military service is not based on the ideology of the American imaginary as Del's is; rather, she sees it as a job that asks her to do whatever her hierarchical superiors tell her to do (*Lone Star* 217). Because she sees her own contribution to the military assemblage as one necessitated by her place in society Athena is able to see her contributions pragmatically, if not completely pessimistically.

Despite the unacceptable marginalization that Athena recognizes in her role within the American cultural machine, her pragmatism demonstrates an individual progression that Del has, to this point, been lacking. In viewing the social system through the lens of her own personal and group histories, Athena understands her social role as an autonomous cog in the social machine, rather than as part of a homogeneous whole. Although Athena exposes a tremendous flaw in the imaginary of the social structure, she is able to see her participation in the structure as a practical decision rather than as a naïve assumption. Indeed, in acknowledging the imperfection of the social system, Athena demonstrates a degree of autonomy that Del does not have until he, too, is forced to acknowledge it.

In speaking with Athena, Del is reminded of his own marginalization. Although he is a colonel, he is, again, a colonel of a dying base in a small town. Whereas Del initially sees himself as an enforcer of justice, his conversation with Athena unsettles him as he begins to see himself as a mercenary. When he asks Athena, "Why do you think they let us in on the 'deal'?" she responds, "They got people to fight. Arabs, yellow people, whatever. Might as well use us" (*Lone Star* 218). Thus, Athena's clear view of the organizational hierarchy of society indicates a cultural divide within the homogeneously presented whole. Her view also illuminates a significant social drawback of the American melting pot for her cultural group, and indeed for any cultural group that is classified as a minority. Although Del fulfills his rank as part of the mythology of patriotism and of the nobility of American culture, he is dismayed to discover that Athena might be right. At the beginning of their encounter, Del refers to Athena as "somebody like you" (*Lone Star* 217), and tries to enforce their hierarchical separation from each other in terms of military rank. However, it also seems clear that Del is separating himself from Athena as her social better. He is under the illusion that his personal history and culture have no bearing on his life, now that he has become a successful member of society. As their conversation goes on, however, he takes her point. Thus, when he asks her, "Why do you think they let *us* in on the 'deal'?" (*Lone Star* 218; my emphasis), he begins to reconsider his role within the social sphere.

As a result, we are unsure as to whether or not we can believe Del in his final piece of advice to Athena: “It works like this, Private—every soldier in a war doesn’t have to believe in what he’s fighting for. Most of them fight just to back up the soldiers in their squad—you try not to get them killed, try not to get them extra duty, try not to embarrass yourself in front of them” (*Lone Star* 219). Although this advice reiterates a benevolent adherence to the existing system, Del’s troubled look after the encounter, as well as his ultimate re-engagement with his family suggest that Athena has provided him with a new perspective that he cannot easily disregard.

In gaining this perspective, he is able to see his role as an individual component within the overarching structure rather than as part of a cohesive mythological whole. This allows him to destabilize the mythology in his own mind, and to approach the military and cultural assemblages of which he is a part in a more pragmatic way, which is reflected in his re-engagement of his relationships with Otis and Chet toward the end of the film. Del may be ignorant of his Black Seminole roots as Otis and Chet know them, but the common ground he shares with Athena allows him to begin thinking of the ways in which his role has previously been dictated by the overarching social sphere.

#### **IV. Mercedes: The Reconciliation of Past and Present**

One of the more complicated characters in *Lone Star* is Mercedes Cruz. Like Del, Mercedes initially adheres unquestioningly to the existing social system of Frontera. However, as the story plays out, Mercedes is forced to come to terms with her past, which requires a break from her staunch compliance with the melting pot mentality. While her ownership of a successful Mexican restaurant would seem to indicate her assertion of cultural heterogeneity within the town, Mercedes is the film’s most adamant advocate for American homogeneity. Indeed, Mercedes views herself very much as an American, rather than as an immigrant. This is made clear through her conversation with Pilar near the beginning of the film. When Pilar asks her mother if she would like to take a trip to Mexico to re-engage with her roots, Mercedes responds, “You want to see Mexicans, open your eyes and look around you. *We’re* up to our ears in *them*” (*Lone Star* 160; my emphasis). Mercedes’s distinction between “we,” the Americans, and “them,” the Mexicans indicates that she has removed herself from her cultural assemblage in favor of participating in American monoculture.

This willful removal is also indicated through Mercedes's desire to present herself with a Spanish, rather than a Mexican, heritage. This is revealed when Pilar's co-worker jokes with her about the desirability of Mexican women:

MARISOL

[Steve] goes for us hot-blooded Mexican girls, I can tell.

PILAR

*Spanish*, please. My mother would have a heart attack.

MARISOL

Your mother's family is Spanish?

PILAR

Sure, they go back to Cortez. When he rode by, they were squatting in a hut cooking hamsters for dinner.

MARISOL

You got to be interested in somebody, Pilar. All you do is work.

PILAR

All my mother does is work. That's how you get to be Spanish. (*Lone Star* 203)

Although it has previously been established that Mercedes grew up in Mexico, her insistence that her family is Spanish provokes questions as to Mercedes's reluctance to acknowledge her Mexican heritage. Although Pilar makes light of her mother's Spanish affiliations, she also suggests that the divide between Spanish and Mexican is based on economics. To Mercedes, to be Mexican is to be poor, and to be Mexican in the United States is to be poor and othered. Although Mercedes obviously acknowledges some group history through her conversations with Pilar, by promoting her distant Spanish ethnicity she places herself in the same position as the other citizens of Frontera who are of European descent and thus avoids the stigma that she places on her true cultural assemblage. In doing so she adopts the homogeneity of American culture at the expense of her true historical identity, and refuses to understand the social plight of those whose stories are not unsimilar to hers.

Of course, despite her willful refusal to acknowledge her past, the past inadvertently presents itself to Mercedes in a number of ways. She insists that her employees speak English instead of Spanish, their collective first language: "This is the United States. *We speak English*" (*Lone Star* 165; my emphasis). Still, however, her conversations are interspersed with Spanish

when she is not carefully monitoring her words. She makes up for this betrayal of cultural affiliation, however, when, while she pours herself a drink, she calmly alerts the Border Patrol that “Wetbacks” (*Lone Star* 182) are running across her property. Indeed, Mercedes adheres to the rule of law concerning immigration throughout the majority of the film, and insists to Pilar, “nobody’s illegal in my café! They’ve got green cards, they’ve got relatives who were born here” (*Lone Star* 159). Not only does this statement speak to the commonality of Americanness that is inherent in the melting pot ideal, it calls Mercedes’s legitimacy as a prominent citizen into question, since we later learn that she was an illegal immigrant who only became a prominent citizen through her relationship with Buddy Deeds, and through the \$10,000 that she received from him after Charley Wade’s death.

Because of her past with Buddy, the financial origins of her restaurant, and the truth about Pilar’s birth, it is not surprising that Mercedes would desire to forget the past. However, the concealment of her past actions do not necessarily equate to her overt promotion of cultural homogeneity through her adherence to the melting pot mentality. Although she can remain silent about her affair and about Pilar’s true parentage, it is ultimately more difficult for Mercedes to divorce herself from her roots. In a clever scene juxtaposition, just after Mercedes calls the Border Patrol, and after she has insisted on the legitimacy of her employees’ immigration, the scene cuts to Enrique, an employee who is in Mexico attempting to help his family cross the river into Texas. Just as Mercedes did years before, Enrique, his fiancée, Anselma, their baby, and Enrique’s friend, Jaime, attempt the river crossing. When Anselma slips and breaks her leg, Enrique asks Mercedes for help. In doing so, he acquiesces to her authority as his employer, but he and his friends also appeal to her as a member of their cultural assemblage: an appeal that is initially met with scorn. When Enrique tries to stop Mercedes from calling the Border Patrol, she confronts him: “You think you’re doing these people a favor? What are they going to do? Either they get on welfare or they become criminals—” (*Lone Star* 231). Given that she was neither on welfare, nor a convicted criminal (although it is true that the \$10,000 she received from Buddy was hardly legal), Mercedes’s attitude clearly stems from a fear of her own past marginalization, either real or potential, which she considers to be detrimental to her Americanness, and from her subsequent alliance with American cultural homogeneity.

However, like Del, Mercedes is forced to reconcile with the reality of her circumstances beyond her role within the social framework of the town. When engaging with Enrique,

Anselma, and Jaime, Mercedes recalls her own illegal immigration experience and the myth of the cohesive American whole is called into question. This is made especially clear in Mercedes's flashback when she is welcomed to Texas, *en Español*, by Eladio Cruz. Thus, Mercedes's first experience of America is at the hands of an immigrant who reaches out to her as both a member of her cultural assemblage and a resident of the United States. Although we do not get to see the full extent of Del's change in perspective, after her recollection Mercedes immediately springs to action to help her fellow immigrants. As a result of her acknowledging her personal and group history, Mercedes is able to understand and navigate her performance of multiple roles within multiple assemblages. Although this acknowledgment is not likely to publicly affect her social role, it does destabilize her adherence to American homogeneity and the validity of the melting pot.

## **V. Social Preservation and the Power to Progress**

In consideration of these case studies, and with De Landa in mind, it seems that what Sayles does, quite effectively, is to depict the stabilization and destabilization of the social structure of Frontera through various encounters between individuals and the social system they inhabit. More specifically, the destabilization of the social construct of Frontera in the mind of an individual is seen directly as a result of that individual's agency gained by the acknowledgment of his or her personal history. The mechanics of the town, then, are not completely deterministic; many of the characters choose certain ends and change their relationship to society despite the construct of Frontera. However, due to Frontera's colonialist origins, there has never been one clear path of progression, as Sayles denotes in the scene in which the parents and the teachers argue about history curriculum. To this end, Sayles asks the question, "[is] there escape from [personal, social, and group history]?" (Sayles 218).

While "escape" may be impossible due to Sayles's depiction of the pervasive nature of history, individual progress, on the other hand, seems possible. It seems clear that individual progress happens in spite of the colonialist machine as a result of the realization that the past is an inextricable part of the future. In the same way that Frontera's social leaders focus on progress despite being unwittingly bogged down in the town's colonial past, Frontera's citizens who desire change are first pulled into their own histories within the social system. Those destined to embrace change are inevitably forced to see and react to their historical roots before they can

engage in self-realization and, ultimately, progress in spite of the self-sustaining loop of homogeneity inherent in Frontera.

According to Kim Magowan, *Lone Star* serves as a “mini-America” (Magowan 21), or a microcosm of what De Landa might call the American cultural machine. This inorganic language fits in well with De Landa’s theory of social and economic evolution as it relates to assemblages, especially given De Landa’s rootedness in historical development. Although America boasts a long history of social change, the mythology surrounding the American social ideal arguably never changes. Thus, America, like Frontera, is a cultural machine that consists of many interchangeable components. Although the components are able to create various networks and relationships within the overarching system, the impetus behind the machine stays the same.

According to De Landa, the reasons for this involve a self-sustaining loop that is generated when a catalyst provokes and facilitates a reaction between two parties. Eugene Holland notes that the product of the initial reaction then becomes the catalyst for the next. Each reaction, then, is based on the original catalyst, which perpetuates itself through a self-sustaining loop (Holland 193). For our purposes here, we might look at history as a catalyst that provokes and facilitates reactions between the social machine of Frontera and its component citizens. If we consider the events surrounding the formation of the Texas Republic as catalysts for the overarching assemblage of Frontera, it then becomes clear that the processes that result from the interactions of individuals within the wider group tend towards an accumulation of social and historical misunderstanding. This misunderstanding then catalyzes the formation of a cultural machine wherein “the formal dynamics remain the same despite differences of content” (Holland 181). To clarify, the operation of Frontera as a society continues as it always has, based on the melting pot imaginary, despite the various individuals who move into and out of their social roles and smaller assemblages; old taboos are merely replaced with newer ones, and there remains a distinct cultural rift between the Anglos and other groups that populate Frontera. This points to what Fernand Braudel refers to as “the slow pace of civilizations, of cultures bent on preserving, maintaining, repeating” (De Landa 95). This is certainly indicative of Frontera; although the components, or citizens, that make up the community change the ways in which they navigate their roles, they still function as part of the historically-driven whole.

De Landa also notes that the buildings within a community serve to “bear witness” (De Landa 95) to the preservation of a given society. As Sayles demonstrates with his seamless pans

from present to past, there are significant aspects of the social machine of Frontera that change very little over the course of forty years, despite the changes in its demographics. This also seems true of Frontera, both in terms of the old buildings and the new. The town's—and, indeed, Texas's—historical pedigree is built around the Alamo—a structure that remains a monument to the history that perpetuates the Anglo discourse in the town. Similarly, much of the activity in the film takes place in Mercedes's restaurant, which provides the setting for the first seamless pan through time. Oddly, even the new buildings are built as homages to the preservation of the town's existing social discourse. The new courthouse seems nothing more than a monument to Buddy Deeds and his melding of the personal with the professional. In addition, the bronze likeness of Buddy with his arm around a child promotes the authority of the Western ideal, of “what a real Texan oughta be” (*Lone Star* o/s); as the small child stands clutched at Buddy's side and fixes his gaze on Buddy's gun belt it seems clear that he is meant to grow up adhering to Buddy's rule of law under the overarching assemblage based around a false sense of homogeneity. Indeed, during the ribbon cutting Fenton can be overheard saying of the image, “I think [Buddy's] gonna run that Mexican kid in for loiterin'” (*Lone Star* 175), which assumes both the hierarchical territorialization of the American cultural imaginary and its propensity for marginalization. Likewise, the proposed new jail will do nothing to add to the community's progress, despite Fenton's excuse that it will solve the citizens' perceived concern about crime (*Lone Star* 171), and will serve as a reminder to adhere to the existing social structure. As it stands, Sam notes that they are “already renting cells to the Feds for their overflow” (*Lone Star* 171), which renders the need for an even larger jail moot before Fenton begins making his excuses. The only function of the new jail is arguably to perpetuate the political power of a given few in the community. Instead of initiating the types of social programs that would actually see crime reduced in Frontera, a new jail serves as an excuse to classify, to marginalize, and to keep the threat of the cultural heterogeneity at bay.

This is not to suggest that Frontera is socially stagnant, or that social progress is impossible. Indeed, Frontera's participation in and perpetuation of De Landa's self-sustaining loop model of society suggests that reactions are constantly taking place. As stated earlier, components shift and react to the machine within which they operate all the time, as we see with Sam's reaction to the new jail, or with Del's realization that he has unwittingly adopted the role of mercenary through his military service. New assemblages of components are also constantly

added to the system as the illegal immigrants cross the *Rio Grande* to join the American cultural machine.

It seems, though, that although the various components within the machine shift in their adoption of social roles, the social roles and their socially dictated parameters still remain. This is not surprising, as De Landa explains, “the main territorializing process providing the assemblage with a stable identity is *habitual repetition*” (De Landa 50). Thus, in some way, the attitudes and events that catalyzed the formation of the town must be perpetuated in some form in order to maintain the American cultural mythology. As a result of the original catalyzing events of the formation of the Texas Republic, the American cultural imaginary has been perpetuated in the overarching community despite the social progress of the Chicano people. The town is colonially and symbolically centered around the American victory at the Alamo and, as an extension, around American benevolence in *allowing* Mexicans to settle in Frontera. As a result, the *Chicanos*, and indeed, all non-Anglo residents, have been granted some illusory social agency in exchange for their adherence in the American melting pot. Every time that illusory agency is enacted, whether in terms of the vote, or promotions to social leadership roles, it connotes social progress while all the while it perpetuates the same social circumstance that began during the fight for the Texas Republic.

Despite the progress of the Chicano people, who were once minorities in a predominantly white community, they remain a largely marginalized group in Frontera despite their majority numbers, and those with political and social roles tend toward the same decisions that have cemented Frontera firmly within the American melting pot. This may stem from the tendency to generally, or even pejoratively, refer to those Chicanos who embrace their cultural heritage as “Mexicans,” which, in turn, suggests that any Chicanos who wish to be American must relinquish any other cultural adherence. Near the beginning of the film Sam notes to Fenton that “nineteen out of twenty people in this town are Mexican” (*Lone Star* 0/s), and that “[the Mexicans] were [in Frontera] first” (*Lone Star* 117). By referring to Frontera’s *Chicano* residents generally as “Mexicans,” even Sam buys into the marginalizing discourse that has been catalyzed by events of American dominance, despite his own sympathies for social and cultural progress. Indeed, as we have seen with Jorge and Ray, the professional progress of many non-Anglos in Frontera can be seen as real, but not necessarily as indicative of cultural progress. Although citizens like Danny Padilla and Otis Payne are able to see the overarching system at

work in its attempt to perpetuate the ideal of the American melting pot, citizens like Ray assume their positions within the social construct of the melting pot. In doing so, they buy into the Western homogeneous mythology as Sam does by the end of the film, and detach from their cultural assemblages to inadvertently perpetuate the social machine that marginalizes them within their professional assemblages.

## **VI. Lines in the Sand: The Propaganda of Multiculturalism**

One of Sayles's more obvious, yet complicated demonstrations of the relations between various social assemblages and the histories therein is in his portrayal of the geographical boundary between Mexico and Texas, and the resulting culture clash within Rio County. Indeed, Sayles's choice to name the town "Frontera" indicates his desire to foreground the border and to play with any and all connotations thereof. Rosa Linda Fregoso picks up on this when she argues:

In the cultural imaginary of both the US and Mexico, the border figures as the trope for absolute alterity. It symbolizes eroticized underdevelopment—an untamed breeding ground for otherness and the site of unrepressed libidinal energies. Its inhabitants are coded as outcasts, degenerates, sexually hungry subalterns and outlaws. In both Mexican and US cinemas, the representation of the border as otherized territory is symptomatic of a colonialist and racist imaginary. The products of a Western gaze, this representation of frontier territories as abject serves both to define the US and metropolitan Mexico and to shape their national identities. (Fregoso 139)

Although the alterity of the border in *Lone Star* seems less stark than the alterity presented in a film like John Ford's *The Searchers*, it is arguably just as present. Given the degrees to which border relations between the United States and Mexico have been depicted in film as scenarios between the heroes (usually the Americans) and the villains, and certainly in the discourse surrounding the Battle of the Alamo, Fregoso is correct in her stark contrast. Moreover, Slavoj Žižek argues that "multiculturalism, the cultural logic of multinational capital, treats 'each local culture the way the colonizer treats colonized people—as 'natives' whose mores are to be carefully studied and 'respected'" (Bould 138).

Although the mores of the non-Anglo cultures in *Lone Star* seem to be “studied and respected” as little as possible by characters like Fenton, Hollis, and others in order to promote the melting pot ideology of the wider American culture, Fregoso’s and Zizek’s points are certainly just. Most specifically, they are depicted in the scene in which the Anglo parents rail against Pilar’s inclusive style of teaching history and the fact that the American-made, Anglo-approved textbook is not being precisely followed. If the good day truly has come for the Chicanos of Frontera, it seems that the Chicano parents depicted in this scene have yet to believe it. They remain defensive about the town’s acknowledgment of its full history, and for good reason. Despite Pilar’s efforts to “get across some of the complexity of [their] situation...[where] cultures [are] coming together in both negative and positive ways” (*Lone Star* 30), the Anglo parents are indignant at the suggestion that the Battle of the Alamo and its surrounding history may have had more complex causes and repercussions than the textbook discloses. Meanwhile, the Chicano parents are indignant that, although they represent a majority, their group history is not taken into account by the Anglo parents in the room because the Anglo parents refuse to acknowledge that the story of Texas statehood is far more complex than the single event at the Alamo. Indeed, Sayles sets up a point-counterpoint scenario between the Anglo and the Chicano parents to demonstrate not only a culture clash, but also a clash between the actual history of the event and the prevailing American mythology. The scene follows:

ANGLO MOTHER

—it is not what we set as the *standard!* Now you people can believe what you want, but when it comes to teaching our children—

CHICANO MOTHER

They’re our children, too!

ANGLO FATHER

The men who founded this state have a right to have their story—

DANNY

The men who founded this state broke from Mexico because they needed slavery to be legal to make a fortune in the cotton business!

PILAR

I think that’s a bit of an oversimplification— (*Lone Star* 129)

The animosity on each side of the dispute is tempered only by Pilar's comment to Danny Padilla, and only temporarily. The Anglo father goes on to refer to the more well-rounded education provided and promoted by Pilar as "propaganda" (*Lone Star* 129), and says, "I'm sure they got their own account of the Alamo on the other side, but we're not on the other side, so we're not about to have it taught in our schools!" (*Lone Star* 129).

This debate is, at least in part, the result of Frontera's postcolonial melting pot discourse. As stark as the contrast between cultures may appear here, however, Sayles also manages to blur the boundaries of culture throughout the film. He maintains the border-driven identities of each cultural group in the community, but he plays with the concept of agency within those groups as individuals ultimately choose whether to adhere to their individual histories, or to align themselves with the social construct. Thus, despite Pilar's point of teaching from both points of view, the civic assemblage of Frontera, represented by the Anglo parents who wish to restrict expressions of Chicano culture to food and music, expects her full commitment to the American ideal. Whereas Danny seems to have strong ties to his cultural assemblage, even at the expense of his civic assemblage, Pilar attempts to commit to both.

Rather than simply describing *Lone Star* as "a story about borders," then, it seems that a more in-depth description would be to call it a story about the negotiating and re-negotiating of borders as the components of Frontera's social machine navigate their various assemblages to define their roles within the system. Although borders, or lack thereof, certainly constitute the central theme of the film, the ways in which they are used serve to illustrate Sayles's interest in the interaction of the personal with the social. Sayles comments that, "[in] a personal sense, a border is where you draw a line and say 'This is where I end and somebody else begins.' In a metaphorical sense, it can be any of the symbols that we erect between one another—sex, class, race, age" (West 210). Borders, then, serve to signify the potential for both personal and social transgression.

This is certainly seen in the racial tension in the film due to Frontera's colonial history. As one man in the classroom scene argues, "Winners get the bragging rights" (*Lone Star* 128), despite the fact that neither he nor the other parents in the room actually won any battles for their country. Instead, they all use the border as a trope for their own personal racial and social boundaries. Although the U.S.-Mexico border is an observed line of demarcation, the parents in the school scene all physically live on the same side of that line. The border that exists, then, is

not a physical border, but a social boundary that hems in the assemblage of the American cultural imaginary and rejects anything that will not be absorbed into that assemblage.

Conversely, despite the pervasiveness of the Western ideal that is perpetuated by American culture, American rules do not apply on the Mexican side of that boundary. When Sam drives into Ciudad León to visit Chucho Montoya, Chucho makes this clear.<sup>5</sup> Whereas Chucho is *el Rey de las Llantas*, the “King of Tires,” in Ciudad León, Sam is nobody, which Chucho illustrates when he draws a line in the sand with a Coca-Cola bottle:

CHUCHO

You the Sheriff of Rio County, right? *Un jefe muy respetado*. Step over 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.

*Sam smiles, plays with the line with his toe*

Bird flying south—you think he sees that line? Rattlesnake, javelina—whatever you got—halfway across that line they don’t start thinking different. So why should a man?

SAM

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

This clear reference to the gesture made by Lieutenant Colonel William Travis at the Battle of the Alamo with an American cultural icon serves to subvert the function of borders on both sides; Chucho’s point that Sam no longer carries any authority is not lost on Sam, but Chucho’s use of the bottle nearly nullifies his point, as it serves as a reminder of the pervasiveness of American culture.

Kim Magowan makes the point that by using the bottle, “Chucho deploys an icon of American imperialism against itself” (Magowan 24). Magowan explains:

Indeed, the capital Chucho has acquired to build his tire “kingdom” was purchased by his labor across the border. Further, the objects he produces cross the border.

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<sup>5</sup> In addition to his other words of wisdom, Chucho notes, “over here, we don’t throw everything away like you Gringos do” (*Lone Star* 193). Although he seems to say this with reference to the used tires in his yard, it could also refer to the relinquishing of personal and group history promoted by the American melting pot mythology.

As he informs Sam, “Lots of your people rollin’ back over that bridge in my rubber” (193). Chucho’s business success thus revolves around his ability to move commodities (money and tires) over a border whose permeability he knows how to exploit. (Magowan 24)

Chucho thus exercises his agency both as a result of and despite the semi-permeable boundary that separates the United States from Mexico, which plays into the overarching theme of boundaries as they relate to social and individual histories in Frontera. Magowan also points out that Chucho was an active part of the American community, or, in De Landa’s terms, the American assemblage. In remembering his history he leaves the assemblage of that community for the one he also belongs to in Ciudad León, into which he brings his experience of America. He may know how to exploit the border, but this is only due to his experience as a member of both communities and, thus, due to the inseparability of his past and his present. Of course, even though Chucho is able to exploit the American cultural machine from afar, the machine remains unscathed. There was inevitably someone to replace Chucho in the duties he performed as part of the machine within the assemblage north of the border, and he must continue to serve that machine from a distance in his new role as *el Rey de las Llantas* to maintain the success of his business.

## **VII. Good Deeds?: Historical Habits and the Discourse of Social Stability**

Of course, inadvertent or not, adherence to the American ideal can be seen through the conduct of Frontera’s remaining citizens as well. This adherence is often carried forward despite nominal attempts at social change, as we have seen in Fenton’s political backing of Ray, and in Sam’s reference to the Chicano citizens of Frontera simply as “Mexicans,” despite their contributions and, in Mercedes’s case, their assimilation, into the American culture. Given Sam’s general demeanor around Frontera’s Chicano citizens, as well as his relationship with Pilar, it seems safe to say that his remark does not denote a racist attitude, but rather, his habitual adherence to an old categorization of the Chicano assemblage by the overarching system.

Katherine Sugg speaks to this general border categorization and notes:

The U.S.-Mexico border is historically and currently the site of state policing of “Mexican” bodies and their relations to citizenship, capital, and affective belonging in the United States. And so “the border” becomes a crucible for the

historicized exploration of theories of border subjects and communities in multicultural, and postmodern, America. This condensing function of the border as simultaneously a real place and a metaphor for the repercussions of colonial histories and transnational capitalism in the United States factored in to John Sayles's decision to set *Lone Star* on the border and in Texas. (Sugg 120)

Thus, part of the difficulty for Sam in performing his social role is found in his habitual adherence to the discourse surrounding a colonized border. Similarly, as presented in the classroom scene, difficulty is found in the incongruity between the heterogeneous discourse of multiple cultural assemblages and the homogeneous melting pot that Frontera purports to be. Like Pilar and her experience in the classroom scene, Sam is therefore caught between these two discourses as he embraces both the town's colonial mythology in his role as sheriff and the border's colonial reality in his relationship with Pilar.

Thus, although Charley Wade intentionally maintained racialized borders within Frontera during his time as sheriff, and used marginalization as a means of exerting his power over others,<sup>6</sup> these racialized borders also exist through both Buddy's and Sam's administrations. Although Buddy had different views toward miscegenation than Charley Wade did, he still enforced the rules against it precisely to cover up his participation in it and to prevent his children from unwittingly engaging in an incestuous relationship.

Indeed, Sam carries anger towards his father because he assumes that his father's rule revealed an enduring racial bias, and that that bias was the impetus for separating Sam and Pilar. Although Sam can hardly be accused of having a problem with interracial relationships, it seems pertinent that he would make that assumption based on his experience of his father's role in the cultural machine of Frontera. Despite Sam's experience with Chucho, and his education regarding the subjectivity of boundaries, he, as an individual, must still attempt to navigate the long-standing social mores within Frontera and the boundaries they imply. As Chucho's life indicates, Sam must look to his cultural past to exploit the imposed social borders that have separated him from Pilar, as well as those that separate him from his father, and his individual desires from social taboos. He must exercise his agency as an individual in order to cross a line that may be merely symbolic in the first place. In this respect, the various problems depicted in

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<sup>6</sup> Think of the murder of Eladio Cruz, and Wade's constant threats against Roderick and Otis. Moreover, consider his frequent use of the derogatory term "wetbacks," or "wets," to describe the illegal immigrants that he exploits through his corruption.

*Lone Star* are not merely racial, economic, or sexual, but social in that they encompass all three. Like the other main characters, Sam must recognize his role in society beyond the one denoted by the American imaginary and respond to it accordingly.

Using De Landa, it is apparent that Sam's history binds him to the social machine, but by recognizing his historical role in that machine and the social boundaries that contain it, he can change the parameters of his performance. Although Sam's recognition and attempted abandonment of his social role would destabilize the American imaginary to a degree, any change of role does not mean that he will not continue to function in the machine as De Landa's theory dictates.

Indeed, as Sayles demonstrates repeatedly throughout the film, the difficulty for Sam in realizing his destabilizing agency within society is wrapped up in his lineage. Buddy Deeds is put in place to stabilize the existing system after the people of Frontera grow to resent Charley Wade. Buddy indicates this resentment when he first defies Wade, saying, "[there's] not a soul in this county isn't sick to death of your bullshit, Charley. You made yourself scarce, you could make a lot of people happy" (*Lone Star* 121-122). Although, as José Limón notes, Buddy's role as sheriff does not include the violent coercion employed by Charley Wade (Limón 241), he still engages in the kinds of colonialist corruption that ignores any individual progress that may have occurred in terms of the ways in which he uses the power given to him by the system. This is seen not only in the flooding of Perdido that Danny refers to earlier, but also in his relationship with Mercedes. Toward the end of the film it is confirmed that she was a "wetback" who crossed the river to gain illegal entry into the United States. Although she is a successful restaurateur in 1995, it is discovered toward the end of the film that the only reason she could ever operate such a business is because Buddy took advantage of his role as sheriff and gave her the \$10,000.00 in county money that he had stolen to make it look like Charley Wade had left town.

Regardless of whether or not Mercedes and Buddy become lovers due to or in spite of this debt, and regardless of the benevolence of Buddy's actions, the fact remains that he took advantage of his role in the social system in order to stabilize his role and thus perpetuate that system. Indeed, flouting the system was common practice for Buddy throughout his tenure as sheriff, demonstrating on one hand a fine sense of justice, but on the other hand, a disregard for the law as it had been established. When Pete enters Sam's office to dispose of the trash, he notes that Buddy "never bothered [him] about [his marijuana use] [...] until the drug people got

on his back in the late sixties” (*Lone Star* 187). He then goes on to relate his fond memories of building the patio at Buddy’s house during Sam’s childhood. It soon becomes clear that Pete was a prisoner of the county during that time, and that Buddy was using his influence as sheriff for his own benefit. Although Pete notes that Buddy “tried to do good for people” (*Lone Star* 188), unlike Charley Wade, who was obviously more than “a bit tough on the Mexicans” (*Lone Star* 188), it seems clear that Buddy perpetuated the idea of the hierarchical system and potentially placed many marginalized Fronterans in his debt. Although he does not resort to violence as his predecessor did, Buddy, like Charley, manipulates the system for his own gain. Indeed, as Kim Magowan points out, Buddy screens his infidelity and indeed his own miscegenation and, as a result, the truth behind his desire to keep Sam and Pilar apart by simply enforcing a prohibition against miscegenation (Magowan 25).

Thus, despite his benevolence, Buddy’s actions prove Shadow right in his earlier assertion that those running the system keep the marginalized firmly in the margins. As Buddy’s administration of his role is different from Charley Wade’s, so the next sheriff’s administration will be different from Buddy’s, meaning that those sheriffs who would not tend to overlook Pete’s drug use would be measured against Buddy’s benevolence. Because of this, those who are marginalized remain mere components of the larger hierarchical system and, although they are certainly shifted around within and by that system, they cannot truly progress unless, like Otis, Wesley, and Athena, they recognize their historical role within that system and desire to move out from it. Of course in Pete’s case, he has no desire to disengage from the system and, like Ray, seems to embrace his role as a cog whose actions are dictated by the social discourse of Frontera, rather than by his own agency.

Thus, given his historically dictated role as sheriff, Sam represents, as Chucho Montoya notes, *un jefe muy respetado*. However, Sam is complicated in that he represents only a shadow of the culturally constructed white American male, especially when compared to his father, Buddy. Although Sam can resemble José Limón’s description of the John Wayne-esque cowboy: “tall, strong, lean, handsome, and of course white” (Limón 230), Sayles means to portray Sam in a different light than he portrays Buddy, who is shown younger, tougher, handsomer, and more decisive than Sam is. Where Buddy engages in an extra-marital affair under the protection of the

town's regard for him, Sam marries and divorces Bunny<sup>7</sup> before returning to the community that has caused him both pain and happiness. This suggests Sayles's exploration of individual agency as it relates to the pervading influence of history. Despite his desire not to play into his father's legend and, as a result, his reluctant adherence to the American cultural imaginary throughout most of the film, Sam is often caught between his social role and his desire to escape it. As sheriff, Sam tries to avoid the kinds of corruption that he knows his father was guilty of, and yet his social role draws him into the hierarchical organization that requires his acceptance of it. Even when he argues against the decision to build a new jail he is countered with the reality of his role. He says to Fenton, "[when] you backed me you needed somebody named Deeds to bump the other fella out of office" (*Lone Star* 171). There is no consideration for Sam's individual agency or ambition. Rather, he is, like his father, merely someone who would administer the town effectively while perpetuating its postcolonial operation.

Although he shudders at his father's seemingly wanton attitude toward his role of social power, Sam exercises his role similarly when he discovers the true identity of Charley Wade's murderer. Sam's desire to expose his father as a hypocrite and a murderer, and, as a result, to allow the people of the town to change based on their collective history, is suppressed in light of the revelation of Hollis's guilt. Although Sam still possesses the power to steer the town away from the corruption of the past by bringing Hollis to justice, Sam instead uses his role as sheriff to squelch this new information, and thus demonstrates his allegiance to the hierarchical organization. Of course, Hollis's crime also, inadvertently or not, prevents Wade from murdering Otis, and thus it is true that Sam's benevolence and pragmatism figure in his decision; however, Sam's use of his role as sheriff to perpetuate the corrupt nature of the system cannot be ignored. As a result, as much as Sam wishes to destabilize the system of Frontera to prove his autonomy, he actually manages to stabilize it by giving in to a homogeneous performance of his social role.

Similarly, Pilar is a prime example of a component of the social machine who wishes to destabilize it and yet must inevitably succumb to it. As with Sam, Sayles plays with the character of Pilar to question the melting pot imaginary. Limón describes the figure of the traditionally represented Mexican woman as "upper-class, very attractive, light-complected, often 'Spanish'

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<sup>7</sup> Bunny is an eerily similar name to "Buddy," which, in addition to the other more overt examples provided, might suggest Sam's inability to truly disengage from the past.

senorita”, but he goes on to describe the more popular imaginary figure as “a figure of ‘darker’ and lower-class, illicit sexuality—usually positioned on the real and figurative border” (Limón 230). Pilar seems to be a mix of the two, as she struggles between the social imaginary perpetuated by Mercedes that they are of Spanish, rather than Mexican, descent (*Lone Star* 203), and her own agency that will see her re-engage in a sexual relationship with her white half-brother. She is proud of her heritage (or, at least, what she believes to be her heritage), and yet she remains marginalized due to her seemingly difficult position as a Chicana teacher who uses a textbook with an American bias. As a result, Pilar exercises her agency by embracing the history of the town and by asserting that the current system does not offer a complete picture of the complexities of border life. Moreover, she exercises her agency as an autonomous individual within the social machine by embracing her own history the moment she sees Sam at the police station. At that moment Pilar takes part in a nonlinear view of history that allows her to relive her past in the present. Indeed, she becomes so focused on realizing her history with Sam that she is willing to detach herself from the larger society.

To that end, it helps to recall De Landa’s assertion that “assemblages are made up of parts which are self-subsistent and articulated by relations of exteriority, so that a part may be detached and made a component of another assemblage” (De Landa 18). In keeping with this theory, it seems demonstrable that Frontera is a society composed of self-subsistent parts, or individuals, that compose a collective interiority until they articulate themselves by relations of exteriority, and branch out into different groups while still maintaining their original identities.

In Frontera, these relations of exteriority are found in the realization of one’s heterogeneous history as necessarily different from the one articulated by the wider community. Pilar’s history is very much caught up in the history of Frontera, but the way in which Frontera articulates Pilar’s history is different from the truth. By indulging in her true past, Pilar must detach from the society that will not recognize it. The problem then becomes what she and Sam will make of their new assemblage. To reiterate De Landa’s point, “the main territorializing process providing the assemblage with a stable identity is *habitual repetition*” (De Landa 50). Thus, despite the repetition of history that pervades Frontera, the agency of the individual to act on that history as it relates directly to them has the potential to destabilize the overarching system. That Pilar and Sam are aware of their history, and yet choose to disregard part of that history to perpetuate another part demonstrates that they have, in De Landa’s words, “detached

and made [components] of another assemblage” (De Landa 18). In this way, although they had the potential to destabilize the system of Frontera with the unwillingness to perpetuate old beliefs (namely Buddy’s heroic status and Pilar’s parentage), Pilar and Sam choose to physically leave the system, perpetuating its homogeneous stability. That is not to say that they should remain in Frontera and flaunt their incestuous relationship for the sake of destabilization. Even if they remained quiet, there is no guarantee that the timeline between Eladio Cruz’s death and Pilar’s birth would remain unnoticed, which would, inevitably, spark speculation.

That said, the two cannot “start from scratch,” given the long-standing history of their relationship, as well as their shared genetic history as half-brother and sister. When Pilar arrives at the drive-in she looks at the dilapidated screen and asks, “when’s the picture start?” (*Lone Star* 242): a question that seems to foreshadow the formation of their new assemblage, but one that also ignores the fact that the picture has been ongoing for years. Although it is richly steeped in history, and it remains standing, the screen, like their future, is blank, but for one perforation through which the truth of their surroundings can be seen. This may present the idea that their new assemblage, much like their old one, is built on a fundamentally unstable foundation. Indeed, despite Pilar’s assertion that she and Sam should “Forget the Alamo” (*Lone Star* 244), she and Sam have no choice but to relinquish their roles in Frontera, only to perpetuate the foundations of that community in their new community; Sam and Pilar are doomed to lie to her children just as their parents lied to them. As Kim Magowan notes, “[Sam and Pilar’s] wish to ‘start from scratch’ is rendered problematic because, in order to do so, they will have to repeat the history of transgression, deception, and cover-ups that they want to forget” (Magowan 27).

### **VIII. Conclusion: Individual Agency and Sayles’s Drawing of Blood**

Thus, it seems that the major social process that occurs between Charley Wade’s Frontera of the 1950s and Sam Deeds’s Frontera of the 1990s does not involve the breakdown of the colonialist machine. Instead, the process is bound up in agency of the individual wherein he or she may choose to accept or change his or her role in the machine. When one discovers a personal history beyond the mythology of the Western melting pot imaginary, one may truly examine one’s role within that imaginary and change it according to one’s preferred assemblage affiliation—a move that carries the potential to destabilize the social melting pot mythology.

However, when one sacrifices one's personal history, even unconsciously, for the social mythology, one is unable to progress beyond it.

In the end it seems clear that Frontera, and, by extension, the wider American cultural machine, is not the melting pot that it is purported to be. Despite the permeable and, at times, highly subjective boundaries that comprise Frontera and work towards its adherence to the melting pot, history is essential to one's self-realization. While Otis's assertion that "blood only means what you let it" (*Lone Star* 216) is true, the fact remains that one's blood—one's history—exists whether one acknowledges it or not, and it persists as we see during Del's negotiation with Chet to invite Otis for dinner. Thus, perhaps it would be more fitting to say that blood means *either* what you let it, *or* what society lets it; as Kim Magowan notes, "meaning is subject to conscious regulation" (Magowan 26). Therefore, blood must at some point mean something and, according to Frontera's social structure, it means a great deal in terms of the ways in which one navigates one's role.

However, once one acknowledges the meaning of one's blood, as Pilar, Mercedes, and Del acknowledge theirs, one can shift the meaning of blood from a social choice to an individual one, and can therefore choose to navigate society in a different way. Pilar and Sam face their joint genetic history, and take it into consideration along with their joint romantic history. In the end, their roles as parts of the cultural machine of Frontera are not even considerations compared with their mutual decision to move beyond the town's code of social acceptability. Similarly, when Del realizes that he, like Athena, and, arguably like Ray, is a mere mercenary, unwittingly acquiescing to his own social marginalization, he is forced to confront his role in the social machine as well, and to navigate his approach to Frontera differently.

Of course, it would seem that given Pilar and Sam's choice, individual agency begets the "self-sustaining loop" of society that De Landa discusses. Frontera will continue the lies and cover-ups surrounding the transgressions of Buddy Deeds and his cohort in deference to his legend, and Pilar and Sam will continue them in order to protect themselves, perpetuating the machine. Because blood is a tie that binds no matter what one's attitude, the answer to Sayles's question, "[is] there escape from [personal, social, and group history]?" (Sayles 218), seems to be emphatically "no". Through his transitions through time and space, as well as his focus on the past as essential to the formation of the present, Sayles makes it quite clear that escaping from one's past and truly starting from scratch is impossible. The problem surrounding the individual

response to society remains highly subjective, given the necessity of embracing one's history. Once one embraces one's history, one's role within the larger system can be thrown into relief and one can then progress to a new teleologically driven role. In this way it seems that Manuel De Landa's theory of assemblage and social complexity as it has been explored here serves to clarify the ways in which Frontera demonstrates the problem of the American melting pot and provides a rich view of the struggle between the social construct and individual agency as they are depicted in *Lone Star*.

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