

Identity at the Border: Narrative Strategies in María  
Novaro's *El jardín del Edén* and John Sayles's *Lone Star*

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Literally and metaphorically, borders are liminal spaces, dangerous places of passage from one territory—or one identity—to another. Anthropologist Victor Turner developed the notion of the “liminal period” as a way of describing the uneasy state of transition between life stages. Turner implies that such moments are heavy with danger because during liminal periods individuals are unbound from the rules governing either the stage they are leaving or the one they are entering, unprotected as they pass from one to another. The experience can be compared to crossing between cars on a moving train, and the resulting brief sense of danger one would feel as one slides the door open against the resistance of the wind, gauging the step that will take one across the shifting gap that must be bridged to get to the other side. The danger is not only to the person in passage, however. Turner, building on Mary Douglas's work on ritual pollution, notes that “in effect, what is unclear and contradictory (from the point of view of social definition) tends to be regarded as (ritually) unclean,” so that the danger of passage is experienced by those around the liminal subjects, for “liminal *personae* nearly always and everywhere are regarded as polluting” (Turner 97).

In using the concrete metaphor of the train, a spatially grounded metaphor of movement, to evoke this perilous moment of change, I follow Turner, whose term, “liminal,” also concrete, spatial, and bound up with movement, refers to the Latin word for threshold. One does not want to trip crossing a thresh-

old, which is why brides are carried over them, in recognition, perhaps, that the step into marriage is more dangerous for women than it is for men. Ritual, says Turner, is the means by which safe passage is assured, a culture's means of getting its members across life's thresholds unharmed, and without harming others around them.

The power in the spatial metaphor of transition, with its intimations of passage and of places where one might go astray, of sites of danger, is intensified when such passages take place at real borders, whose physical barriers and historical meanings come into play. Here we should recognize the shift from Turner's account of liminal situations to border theory's attention to liminal sites, from purely metaphorical thresholds to material ones. The borders that are an effect of the nation-state produce liminal subjects of a particular kind. The representation of transition in such places by visual and narrative means can serve a purpose similar to ritual—to help chart this dangerous territory, not only for those undergoing the passage across that border, but for all those on both sides of the border who are implicated by the passage (cultural, economic, social, sentimental, erotic) that takes place there. It is no surprise, then, that the border film is one of the oldest genres in U.S. cinema and has, as well, an important presence in what has been called Mexico's Golden Age of film, or that it has been well studied by an array of scholars including María Herrera Sobek, Claire F. Fox, David Maciel, and José Limón. María Novaro's *El jardín del Edén* and John Sayles's *Lone Star* are embedded in long traditions in the Mexican and U.S. cinema respectively. Looking at these two films together as part of a group of works we can designate as border cinema can add to our understanding of these movies and others located in similar settings. The national designations of the (independent as well as studio) U.S. and Mexican film traditions are now being not so much contested as supplemented by a reconfiguration of their territory by commentators whose focus is less on each nation's cinematic history and practice than on the border that binds and separates them.

The real border between the United States and Mexico is both a Turnerian liminal space, as it is so elegantly mapped by Gloria

Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and a sharp, political, policed divide: the corrugated metal wall documented by María Novaro in *El jardín del Edén*.<sup>1</sup> In Turner's account (where, after all, these borders are not really places at all, but rather moments in people's lives), there can be no such thing as a permanent liminality. He is fascinated by moments of transition and recommends that other scholars pay attention to those liminal phases that are prolonged, the better to comprehend what goes on during those periods; but in all cases transition ends in resolution, in the successful passage from one state to another. The border, however, is a permanent site of transition and disruption, of contradiction and lack of clarity. Here it departs from Turner's liminal concept—which is essentially unstructured—because its very permanence demands that it develop its own structure, even if that structure is contradictory. Yet even Turner gestures in the direction of the paradoxical stability, or what he calls “the peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both” (Turner 99). The border, a site of permanent flux, a place of neither and both, requires its own set of rules and rituals. Narrative and visual art, here fused in film, take on some of the functions of ritual in creating coherence out of the confusion at the border. Just as ritual organizes behavior during a transitional phase when otherwise there are no rules of comportment, the visual and narrative art of film organizes the territory of the border and what goes on in the space where the U.S. and Mexico bleed into each other.<sup>2</sup>

In Novaro's movie the border becomes a familiar place, with its own community and culture. People camp out, make and sell food, put up sardonic signs: “Always on vacation” is one; another names a food stand “El ilegal.” There are serious signs, too: “If the Berlin wall came down, why not this one?” The border police are part of the familiar landscape: they are taunted by young men trying to prove their bravery, they argue about where the line actually is with the would-be border crossers. In helicopters they patrol the stretch of beach the wall cannot be extended to cover, and they pick up the people they sight, providing a kind of entertainment for the very folks who will try to get through the next day. They watch the Mexican kids play baseball

and give each other high fives when someone gets a hit. Their surveillance adds a political and potentially violent dimension to the gaze in a film in which looking constitutes an important part of the action. The border patrol are not uniformly evil, but are, rather, one component of a capricious system that lets some and not others cross the border. They are one of a number of elements in a very serious game.<sup>3</sup>

Novaro and Sayles implicitly contest a triumphalist view of the border as a liberatory space in Chicano writing and art that some recent scholars have begun to call into question. In their introduction to *Border Theory: The Limits of Cultural Politics*, David E. Johnson and Scott Michaelsen make the point that in border studies there has been a tendency to celebrate the borderland as “a place of politically exciting hybridity, intellectual creativity, and moral possibility . . . the privileged locus of hope for a better world” (Johnson and Michaelsen 3). Although I believe they overemphasize this aspect of Chicano border art and other border practices and the scholarship that surrounds them—certainly writers and artists materially grounded in the poverty and racism of the U.S. Southwest are not simply celebrating the current state of things, nor have they missed what Johnson and Michaelsen call the “exclusions” that mark the border—Johnson and Michaelsen point to an attitude of wariness at the border we would do well to acknowledge. Novaro and Sayles, incidentally neither of them Chicanos, look at the border with a certain jaundiced eye. Novaro depicts the paradise of her film’s title with considerable dismay, and Sayles’s hidden history reveals no Eden at the border.

Novaro’s film is about the social, political, and economic realities that impel Mexicans to come to the border for reasons of survival. It is also about the introspection necessary to come to a knowledge of the self at the site of the border. This is not only a psychic process; it entails physical uprooting as well. In *El jardín del Edén*, a trio of women are the self-seekers at the border. An early sequence cuts among them: an unencumbered Jane comes to Tijuana from the U.S. on a surprise visit to her old college roommate, at the same time that a young widow with three children drives there from the interior of Mexico. Meanwhile, Liz,

the Chicana art purveyor and the object of Jane's visit, is, fittingly, *already* at the border. In a twist on traditional tales of coming to self-knowledge, in which a man undertakes this journey with one or more static female figures to help him along his way, in this variation the women are the primary actors. There are substantial male figures in the film, however, and one of them is most dramatically acted upon. Felipe is the quintessential Mexican peasant, who twice tries to cross the border to find and keep work in the aptly named Imperial Valley and twice fails. Beaten and robbed on his first attempt to get into California, he is caught while he is at work in the fields and returned to Tijuana on his second. At the end of the film he finds himself where he was at the beginning, watching and waiting for his chance for another opportunity get to the other side. This time he is accompanied by his younger brother, a member of the next batch of migrants, swelling like an ocean wave well before the one ahead of it has dissipated. Another male character, Jane's brother Frank, is a disaffected, asocial, blocked writer who takes a few small steps toward connecting with another human being and who in the end has at least turned on his computer, even though he sits in front of a blank screen.

The three women undergo more complex processes. The widow comes to Tijuana shortly after her husband's death. She establishes herself as a commercial photographer and moves toward emotional and economic self-sufficiency. Intent on keeping her husband's memory alive in the minds of her children, she resists the efforts of her aunt to bring her out of her deep mourning. She drives to Tijuana and sets up shop as if in a trance but is jolted into the present when her oldest child disappears with Felipe and Jane across the border. The happy resolution of his safe return coincides with her willingness to emerge from mourning and to acknowledge desire. Although the preponderance of the action in the film is internal, Jane and the photographer each have a kind of movie adventure: Jane smuggles Felipe into the U.S., and the photographer searches for her son when he runs away after an argument with her. Liz's adventure, on the other hand, is purely psychological.

Jane wants to know and experience the world, to have some effect on it. She confesses her confusion to her brother, but, representative of the United States that she is, she nevertheless plunges ahead into parts of the world she wants to gather up for her own delight. Despite her protestations that she is not a tourist, that is precisely how Jane acts, exoticizing and romanticizing people and their poverty. Jane, who has apparently had no experience of physical work herself, is fascinated by the labor of indigenous women. The first of these is Margarita Luna, who works in the kitchen of a small restaurant. Jane peers into the kitchen where Margarita is preparing food, and her point of view transforms the rudimentary kitchen into a lush, magical space, illuminated by Margarita's presence. Jane's gaze utterly evacuates the poverty and hard labor that are at the core of kitchen work in a rural restaurant in northern Mexico. Toward the end of the film, well after Jane should have learned the dangers of romanticizing other people's poverty, however picturesque, Novaro films another figure in the soft focus that she has established as Jane's view of young indigenous women. This character is bearing birds in cages at a local market, and the loud and heavy burden is transformed into the clichéd, seductive, damaging vision of a beautiful, colorful blurring between the natural world and the Indian woman. Throughout the film Novaro avoids fetishizing the bodies of the three women protagonists, putting the film at considerable commercial risk by producing what Teresa de Lauretis calls "a film-theoretical paradox, for in film theory the female body is construed precisely as fetish or masquerade" (de Lauretis 157). In the scene where Jane's gaze transforms the indigenous women into pleasurable objects of contemplation, the filmmaker calls attention to the fetishizing of the body of the female other. In this way, by counter-example, Novaro explains cinematographically her decision to de-aestheticize the bodies of her protagonists. Jane's conscription of the female other for the fulfillment of her own desire is the sign of her alienation from that other, the sign that she is unaware of that other woman's subjectivity, whereas Novaro's film is precisely an exploration of her female protagonists' subjectivity.

Jane's verbal skills are as marginal as her skills at interpreting what she sees. She speaks and understands just enough Spanish to get into trouble, but she herself is shielded from the effects of that trouble by her wealth. Jane is pretty and sweet and appealing, with a desire to do good and help, which sometimes works in the short run (when she takes Felipe in after his beating, for example, or when she charms her brother and his neighbors into giving Margarita a well-paying job as a maid). Her lack of understanding, however, leads to a breach with her friend, Liz, whose serious quest for identity she simply does not understand. It also endangers Julián, the teenage son of the photographer, when she takes him across the border with a man whom she believes to be his brother but who has no particular attachment to, or sense of responsibility toward, him. (Felipe calls him "carnal," which Jane understands only well enough to misinterpret). Jane is heavy handed, ignorant, and naïve, but also goodhearted. Her power (the fact that she has money, and her desire to write stories she cannot begin to understand) makes her dangerous. Unlike Liz, who seeks herself in her own videos and in Mexican and Chicano art more generally, the unself-reflexive Jane wants to write about the exotic other.

Liz and Jane both approach Mexico through aesthetic mediation. Jane employs a sentimental romanticism that allows her to transform grim reality into a beautiful vision. Liz accomplishes the task using art—video, paintings, photographs—a more sophisticated, interactive way to come to knowledge. Jane's innocent ignorance precludes her from getting beyond cliché. Reproducing exotic stereotypes of the other, she simultaneously reinforces the mystification surrounding her own reality. Always on the lookout for new experience, Jane inserts pre-formed ideas of Mexico into her encounters and only reproduces tired old representations. She has little to bring to new experience but her sweet nature. Jane suffers from lightness of being; her ethereal blondness and her slim body are visual signs of her lack of gravity.

Jane wants to be a writer, she says, but we are forced to agree with her brother when he tells her she is too much of a dilettante and has too little discipline and focus ever to be able to write. It

is tempting for the viewer to dismiss this assessment on the part of an older brother who fashions himself a writer and whose emotional distance and inability to get words onto paper suggest that he is protecting his own precarious turf against a gregarious little sister. Yet he is proven right. Jane asks Felipe for his stories, but since her Spanish is minimal she cannot understand him when he tries to tell them to her. She wants Margarita's story, but they do not have a common language. Still, it is hard for Felipe, Liz, and Margarita (as well as the audience) not to like Jane, even as they and we are annoyed, irritated, and even angered by her.<sup>4</sup>

Liz, the Chicana in search of her identity, is the pivotal border character. If Jane sees Liz as Mexican, Tijuana—most clearly in the person of the photographer's aunt, la Tía Juana—reminds her that she is not. It is la Tía Juana who relentlessly corrects Liz's Spanish pronunciation, but who also encourages the Chicana woman's quest for a personal past rooted in Mexico. In perhaps her only act of unmitigated kindness, the older woman distracts Liz's daughter Lupita at the moment Liz is most vulnerable, tears streaming down her face as she watches a video that reflects back to her her own suppression of her Mexican roots.

Tijuana itself is emblemized by this character, la Tía Juana, who is nurturing and solicitous but who makes no bones about the commercial nature of her interactions. Family, friends, all have to pay. La Tía Juana gives nothing away (except perhaps a little juice to the children she is bilking at cards). She makes a substantial living in real estate and by selling used items, from clothing to cameras, recycling and profiting from the castoffs from the profligate Americans just across the border.<sup>5</sup> It is this character that ultimately links the three central characters: they come together in Tijuana, via la Tía Juana. Her niece chooses Tijuana as a place to begin again because her aunt is there and can help her by renting her a place to live and by taking care of her children while she works. That is where she meets Liz, who also rents lodgings from the older woman; and it is Liz's friend, Jane, who takes her teenage son over the border.

Chicanos have been accused of romanticizing Mexico, of desiring an identity that is mired in a long-gone past, of fundamentally misunderstanding what being Mexican in modernity

means. Novaro avoids making such harsh judgments, in part because she clearly sympathizes with Liz's sense of loss, often around issues of language. Liz suffers because she mispronounces and, what is perhaps worse, misspells her own daughter's name, the most Mexican of names—Guadalupe, the name she has given the child precisely to connect her with her roots. The child herself refuses to speak. Liz truly needs to find a usable Mexican past in light of the knowledge that she is also deeply marked by being born and raised in the U.S. Novaro displaces the critique of the romanticizing of Mexico onto Jane. Jane may be Liz's old friend, but she understands neither Liz nor Mexico. She considers Liz Mexican, unable to see what is desperately clear to Liz, that it is her not being fully Mexican that has brought her there. Jane, not Liz, is the one who falls in love with her own idea of Mexico. Liz is in fact more focussed on *chicanismo* than *mexicanismo*. For its part, Mexico, as represented by Felipe, is unaware of the identity crisis the Chicana character represents. Felipe is totally uncomprehending when Liz tells him she's installing an exhibit on Chicano art and alternative videos. None of those words mean anything to him, whereas for her the work is essential if she is to make peace with her own identity. For Felipe, Liz is just as foreign as Jane. Some of this incomprehension is a function of class and geography, of course. Flashbacks to Felipe's rural home demonstrate how art and technology are incorporated into and transformed by local rural needs, losing their metropolitan meaning.

Liz's work as a curator locates her in a particular class position, by dint of education if not economics. The job she is working on—curating an exhibit of contemporary Chicano art on the Mexican side of the border—allows the filmmaker to explore the contradictions between her class and her ethnicity. Liz's own past is accessible to her through the art she curates, as well as through the photographs she inhabits. Liz identifies profoundly with photographic art. Midway through the film she identifies with Graciela Iturbide's disturbing image of a woman covered with iguanas, and in another scene she dresses herself and Margarita Luna as Frida Kahlo to recreate the well-known image, "The Two Fridas," in which the two figures are attached by a heart line. Jane, on the other hand, has no rooted connection to Mexico,

and she maintains her distance from the idealized Mexico she envisions. Novaro makes great use of the emotional impact of Chicano art on Liz, and of the reclamation of symbols and images in that art that invests them with new political, spiritual, and community-centered meaning. Even the cool medium of video carries an explosive potential. Not herself primarily an artist, Liz is the ideal audience for art, knowledgeable, deeply committed, able to read its meanings and judge its quality both for herself and for a larger audience. Visual art is, for Liz, the means by which she can traverse the border both literally—the curating job brings her to Tijuana—and psychologically.

Novaro frequently interrupts the action of the film as Liz deals with her quest for identity by immersing herself in some form of visual art: photography, videos, paintings. *El jardín del Edén* is saturated with such images, or homages. An enormous painting of Frida Kahlo's eyes watch the reunion of Liz and Jane. Twice, clips of Guillermo Gómez Peña's video *Border Brujo* hold up virtually all the action save Liz's profound emotional reaction. After Novaro takes us through the setup for the photo shoot of Liz's reenactment of "The Two Fridas," with Liz and Margarita Luna looking remarkably alike, she holds the camera on the two women for several seconds, so that the film itself imitates the stillness of the painting. When Jane and Liz leaf through a book of Graciela Iturbide's photographs as Jane encourages Liz to identify with one of the images and Liz chooses the well-known image of a woman with iguanas on her head, wishing herself rid of the beasts, Jane herself refrains from identifying with any of the women in the photos; instead she romanticizes them. "These women must live in Paradise," she says, in one of many references to the title of the film. In all these cases, the act of looking itself is narrativized in such an overtly intentional way that we are compelled to reflect upon it.

The action of the film is made diffuse by these scenes of self-reflexivity through viewing, but the film rehearses other reasons for viewing and making images. The photographer does it commercially, in order to feed her children. Her son Julián learns his way around Tijuana by going out and making photos of the city. Just as Novaro presents first the object of Julián's photographic

gaze and then Julián himself in the act of capturing the image, she focalizes other images through Jane, most obviously back-lighting and shooting first Margarita and later the bird vendor in slow motion, i.e., through Jane's romanticizing eyes. When Felipe first enters Jane's field of vision, Novaro holds the camera on him in a way that makes us think we are just now being introduced to this character, when in fact we have already seen Felipe, himself an owner of the gaze. He was the man behind the binoculars in the film's opening scene, watching others try to get across the border by night in the establishing shot that Claire F. Fox has shown to be common currency in border film and video (Fox 46). Yet in the later daylight scene Novaro shows us what Jane sees and how she sees it; for her Felipe is new, an object to be scrutinized, perhaps a potential toy for her collection.

Novaro uses the landscape and spaces of Tijuana, the dense visual imagery of its streets and the expanses of its outskirts, to give the film a kind of documentary realism. The camera stops periodically, or pans across a landscape in a way that does not advance the action but rather reinforces the sense of place or the motifs of the film. Visual references to Eden appear regularly, not only in the motel sign in California where Jane and her two fugitives spend the night, but on other public surfaces, and even on Jane's desk—she has a copy of *Paradise Lost* on which the camera alights. Novaro lets the camera play across signs and graffiti to mark and comment on the movement of the film. A sign that says "telephono," a street sign that crosses the U.S. border with Avenida Revolución, the motel Veladera, where Felipe watches and waits, are all instances of found commentary on the cultural and linguistic interplay at the border. The filmmaker simply intensifies their presence and meaning by making use of them. Novaro's Tijuana is crafted out of elements of a real place whose historical and geographical referents turn it into a kind of hyper-reality.

Novaro's spatial interludes can be symbolic as well as literal. For example, she returns periodically to the image of the gray whales, which ignore international borders. In the final scene, Felipe and his brother watch them easily crossing from Mexican into U.S. waters. The photographer's middle child, Sergio, who

discovers the whales at Frank's house on the beach, wants to believe that the calves are Mexican if they are born in Mexico's waters. Frank tells him that it is good that they are not bound by such constraints. However, Frank's fascination with the whales and with the absolute freedom they represent is part of his alienation. Moreover, although the border makes it difficult for Felipe to find work and escape starvation, it also provides him with a stable identity.

*El jardín del Edén* deviates from the narrative form typical of commercial films. The story line is thin, and although the question of identity is paramount, the characters are not so much developed along traditional narrative lines as traced through a series of visual moments that the viewer must piece together. The film works spatially rather than temporally; it links its characters synchronically. Their relationships are lateral: they are friends, siblings, lovers. For Novaro there is no need to dig up the past to make sense of the present. Even Liz looks for her past in contemporary art. This approach is highly original in a narrative of identity, which typically explores diachronic relationships, the fraught relations between parents and children, and particularly between fathers and sons.

Here I want to pause and make some comments about possible theoretical approaches to Novaro's film. I begin with the relationship between a spatially oriented cinema and the way the viewer experiences and later might theorize about it. The work of Teshome Gabriel is useful in this regard. Gabriel has commented on the spatial nature of what he calls Third World cinema, which he links to the communitarian, political goals of the filmmakers he includes under that rubric. He notes as well that the dominant mode of film criticism, based on psychoanalytic principles rooted in the Oedipal drama, is inappropriate to the study of this Third World cinema. Gabriel's taxonomy of Third World cinema is largely chronological. He posits an initial imitative stage concerned primarily with spectacle and entertainment, followed by the "remembrance phase" of a return to themes and values of traditional cultures and then by the "combative stage," concerned with the "lives and struggles of Third World peoples [signaling] the maturity of the filmmaker and . . . distin-

guishable from either Phase I of Phase II by insistence on viewing film in its ideological ramifications" (Gabriel 343). This scheme does not, however, quite describe the Mexican case. Its concern with national identity—not quite the same thing as the lives and struggles of the people—tends to find an outlet in melodrama, a form associated with Stage I spectacle and entertainment.

Equally significant and problematic for the present discussion, Gabriel's umbrella notion of Third World cinema misses critical distinctions concerning gender and race. Nevertheless, his observations remain useful for what they reveal about non-commercial, oppositional film, and they resonate with Novaro's film, even if they are not quite apropos. He notes the ascendancy of the spatial over the temporal mode in his second phase, a shift he attributes to a somewhat worrisome "experience of an 'endless' world of the large Third World mass, [a] nostalgia for the vastness of nature" (Gabriel 343). However, when Novaro lingers on landscape, her camera is not the nostalgic lover, but rather the steely eyed, often ironic commentator on the degraded scene of the border. Gabriel's claim that psychoanalysis is an inappropriate tool for understanding third world cinema also applies to Novaro's film. However, Gabriel locates the disjuncture in psychoanalysis's concern for the individual whereas the films he is interested in deal with the collective. In *El jardín del Edén*, the individual remains important. Instead, the film resists a psychoanalytic reading by virtue of a feminist aesthetic that displaces the authority of the father, whether he be familial or national.

The structure of the Oedipal story—the fact that it is itself a narrative of identity formation—makes it useful in understanding narrative cinema, in which the viewer is invited to identify with some, and against other, characters. But in a cinema that favors synchronicity over diachronicity, the spatial over the temporal, the lyric over the narrative, or—as Gabriel points out—the political over the psychological, the viewer is called into relationship with the film in another way, a way that requires a different theoretical matrix to explain. *El jardín del Edén* is not productively read through the Oedipal drama since the Oedipal drama is evacuated from it. The film does not follow Gabriel's

Third World model deriving simply from a nationally defined geographical and historical post- or neo-colonial location. For this reason, rather than classify *El jardín del Edén* as an example of third world cinema whose political aesthetic is antithetical to the Oedipal drama and therefore to a psychoanalytical reading, we should also consider Novaro's feminist challenge to Mexican cinematic tradition, characterized by a refusal to center the father, or the phallus, or even the fate of the nation.<sup>6</sup> Jean Franco argues persuasively that the Oedipal story, decked out in national garb, was a favorite motif of Mexican films in the 1950s, so that "cinema was able to constitute an ideal national identity that incorporated the masses by revising the oedipal narrative" (Franco 147). Contrary to Gabriel, she argues that the Oedipal drama is fully consistent with the political project even of revolutionary nation-building insofar as the state has a stake in maintaining patriarchal models. Echoing Franco, Julianne Burton-Carvajal shows that the dominant mode of Mexican film since the 1930s has been what has been called patriarchal melodrama, and Ana López also connects the melodramatic form in Mexico to gender relations within the culture: "Emphasizing the different articulations of gender and subjectivity in a society marked by a history of violence and discontinuity, [she attempts] to link the history of the classical Mexican cinema melodrama with Mexican society, to trace the inscription alongside the social positioning of women" (López 255). As Jackie Byers points out, melodramas "called attention to gendered identity construction," precisely the domain of the Oedipal myth as conscripted by Freud. Byers, whose focus is the U.S. cinema, ultimately argues that Freudian and Lacanian theory are insufficient insofar as they cannot address women's identity formation, a position *El jardín del Edén* amply illustrates. But the point is that the national-patriarchal melodrama and classical psychoanalytic theory are on the same track.

Subtending the Oedipal drama is a stable nuclear family. That family is, in turn, the domestic model for, and the elemental structure of, a stable nation state. However, the state ceases to be inviolable and unitary at its border. The mutually reinforcing stability of the patriarchal nuclear family and the modern nation

state disintegrates when the members of the family refuse the strictures of the patriarchy or go beyond the limits of the state in constituting itself as family. Novaro challenges both the conventional plot and the patriarchal substructure that Franco, Burton-Carvajal, and López link to Mexican society and to its cinema. The melodrama is the film of Mexico at its core; Novaro shakes free of that form at the border.

It is also useful to recall that melodrama is the quintessential form of the "woman's film." As such, and particularly in its domestic guises, melodrama reinscribes such cultural monuments as the long-suffering mother, the dangerously sexual prostitute, the saccharine sweetheart, all inevitably deriving their identity from their relationships to men: husbands, sons, suitors, Johns. Novaro's women are none of these. Their primary relationships are, rather, with each other and with their female as well as their male children. The friendships are, moreover, tentative, never fully articulated in the case of Jane and Liz, or realized, in the case of Liz and the photographer. Each of Novaro's characters is oddly alone.

When John Sayles takes up the question of identity at the border, he charges headlong into precisely the diachronic narrative that Novaro leaves behind. In contrast to the hyper-reality of Novaro's Tijuana, Sayles's *Lone Star* (1995) is set in a fictional town in a quasi-mythic county with the loaded, even apocryphal, names of Frontera and Río. These place names announce the film's obsession with the border and its sites of crossing. They also problematize location by being in Spanish but functioning as the referents for U.S., Anglo-dominated places. The film tells a mystery story whose clues point to a corrupt, murderous sheriff, killed as a result of his own greed and racism, a character whose rigid maintenance of white supremacy and his own gain functions to shore up the borders of his identity and his estate. In unmasking the rigid and cruel boundary markings that went into the establishment of Texas, perhaps as microcosm of the U.S., but also surely marked by its own particular history and geography, Sayles's movie is a political tale as well as an Oedipal one. The body of the sheriff, killed forty years before, is found at the beginning of the film, and the town's new sheriff, the son of the

man who succeeded the murdered man, dredges up the life of his father, whom he believes to be the sheriff's killer. Oedipus kills his father unknowingly; Sam Deeds is bent on killing off not his father (who is already dead) but his father's reputation as the upstanding, courageous sheriff who shepherded the town into modernity. Sam's project is to bring Frontera into what I hesitate to call the postmodern moment, by destabilizing a precarious racial equilibrium that enforced strict segregation of public spaces and a sexual propriety grounded in the appearance of monogamy, and that traded overt bullying and extortion for genteel corruption and graft.

The story of paternity is one of the great narrative motifs, giving both a reason for the narrative and a form for it to take. If patrilineal society is to run properly, paternity, which establishes the necessary boundaries of family, property, and identity, must be assured. The story of paternity is a necessary narrative because it fills in the gap that uncertainty creates; diverting our attention from the disturbing absence of knowledge. The father/son plot is compelling because it satisfies a deep need to know what is for men ultimately unknowable—whether or not they are the biological fathers of their sons, and whether or not they are the sons of the men they know as their fathers. *Lone Star* is particularly satisfying because the ritualized version of the paternity plot, the story of the son's search for his father, is a twice told tale, a tale in black and white, providing as well a fuller story of a nation divided and bound by racial and ethnic differences. And as if that were not enough, *Lone Star* also satisfies our need for surprise and novelty, a need that is the legacy of romanticism and modernism. The subplot furnishes us with three generations: the wise but formerly rash grandfather, Otis; his son Delmore, now an army colonel and a father himself, whom Otis abandoned as a child; and Chet, the colonel's son whom the army man dominates as a way of clinging to him. The chain of events that allows Delmore to learn that Otis took pride in all his accomplishments, together with the insights he garners from an unlikely woman recruit, causes this strict military man to loosen his own emotional boundaries, to let his father back into his life, and to give his son the freedom to explore his own future.

The main plot of *Lone Star* is driven by the protagonist's attempted de(con)struction of the model patriarch, loved and feared, who kept the borders intact. Buddy Deeds deposed and replaced the overtly evil Charlie Wade as sheriff, establishing a genealogy of patriarchs. The terrible father, Charlie Wade, who enforced rigid segregation and policed national boundaries (in part by murdering Mexicans and Blacks crossing into his territory), is supplanted by the apparently good father, Buddy Deeds, who policed those same boundaries, but more subtly. The white father is merely a tyrant to his son; the black son believes his father not only abandoned but also forgot him. When he learns otherwise he can be a better father himself. (What the white son learns precludes him from becoming a father altogether.) As a film this works so well because the compelling paternity plot, linked to the racial history and the consolidation of white masculinist power in Texas, taps into national myths and culturally important stories. It is a great story, driven by the need to narrativize paternity. The redoubling of the paternity plot confirms its centrality. Moreover, unlike "the discontinuous but intersecting spaces of the women's networks" (a phrase used by Teresa de Lauretis, to describe a very different sort of film [158]), the interwoven plots of *Lone Star* are continuous in terms of plot and thematically inter-referential.

The son's task is to solve the mystery of the father. The subplot does that most purely: it is about the son's discovery of his father's love for him. Before that discovery the son substituted the rigidity of the military, with its clear demarcations, for the order a clear and loving relationship with the father would have provided otherwise. But the relentless focus on the father/son plot in *Lone Star* diverts attention from the other paternity story, the story of the father of the daughter. Since daughters marry out of their family, leaving their father's name behind, this is not a compelling story culturally. For its part, maternity is pretty much transparent; so telling its story should be redundant. The problem is that the *stories* of paternity have eclipsed the *reality* of maternity in the cultural imagination of the West. The relevant parent/child relationship has long been the father/son dyad

(consider the biblical begats, or Willy Loman and his sons, or the Father and the Son, mediated only by the Holy Ghost). It took a certain feminist consciousness to attend to the effacing of the mother, and a critical mass of women writers to begin to tell the story of maternity. When feminists began to redress the absence of women in stories of families and of nations, the story we sought out was not about daughters and their fathers, but of daughters and mothers. This is not a tale that is fraught in the same way as the father/son story, since it is unconcerned with the fundamental question of biological connection.<sup>7</sup> For most women the question is not “who is my mother?” but “how am I like my mother, and how can I separate myself from her?”

In *Lone Star* the mother/daughter pair seem to be at absolute odds with each other. The mother, Mercedes Cruz, is a successful businesswoman who puts much effort into forgetting her own past as an illegal immigrant and her husband's death helping others to cross the border. The genealogical narrative is not, of course, the only narrative of identity, even in *Lone Star*. As in *El jardín del Edén*, the border itself is connected with identity, particularly in the case of Mercedes, whose will to repress her past and identify as Spanish is a way to suppress the memory of her struggle for economic survival after her husband Eladio's murder. She appears to be the opposite of Novaro's seekers-of-self at the border, a woman determined to suppress the memory of her own border-crossing. Returning to the repressed, however, she undermines her own conscious desire to bury her identity by living in a lavish house next to the river, where she frequently hears the sounds of night-time border crossers. By stationing herself as a gatekeeper and periodically alerting the border patrol to illegal border crossers who traverse her property, Mercedes assures herself of her identification with the U.S. side of the border. Just as la Tía Juana badgers Liz about her Spanish, Mercedes insists that her employees speak English as a sign that they accept being wholly within the United States.

Mercedes's daughter Pilar, on the other hand, is a teacher trying to combat the hegemonic Anglocentric view of Texas history. Unlike her mother, who helps police the border, Pilar endeavors to problematize it, until at the end it becomes overly

problematic and she opts for a kind of repression of her newly discovered history. Mercedes makes the opposite journey. Of all the central figures the only one who actively resists revisiting the past, in the end the memory of her own perilous crossing comes back to her. When one of her employees comes to her for aid because his fiancée, whom he has been guiding across the river, falls and breaks her leg, Mercedes puts herself back into the young woman's plight. In abandoning her allegiance to the border patrol and driving the injured woman to a man who had been a physician in Mexico, Mercedes confirms her membership in a community on which she had apparently turned her back.

Mercedes's remembered crossing is the quintessential experience of liminality: lost and disoriented in the dark and in the rushing water, in the space between night and morning, between two countries, she is brought to safety by a young, smiling man holding a lantern, a man who will later become her husband.<sup>8</sup> The subsequent murder of Eladio while he is taking others across that same border, this time overland and during the day, is partial cause of her desire to suppress the memory of her origins.<sup>9</sup> (The other is her rebirth as successful businesswoman and mother, both the doing of her secret white lover.) The relationship between Mercedes and Pilar, characterized by mutual disapproval, appears on the surface to be a fairly simple generational dichotomy, a weak echo of Sam's fury at the father he presumes guilty of murder. Yet even though Buddy Deeds is not a murderer, his duplicity adds another layer to the mystery that his son is trying to solve. Looking only at the public man—Buddy the humanely corrupt sheriff whom almost everyone else seems to adore, the son misses the deeply buried father-daughter story that is at the heart of his father's domestic tyranny. Buddy transgresses privately the borders he polices publicly, becoming Mercedes's lover and fathering Pilar.

It is noteworthy that neither Sayles nor Novaro condemns or sensationalizes sexuality. In *El jardín del Edén*, the widow is encouraged by her aunt to allow herself to feel desire for a man, and Jane's relationship with Felipe is simultaneously sexually charged and thoroughly innocent. Sayles outdoes Novaro's normalization of sex by inducing a compassion for and complicity

in incest in the viewer. He presents their relationship as teenagers as pure, idealistic, mutually rewarding and empowering, and unfairly thwarted by a combination of racism and a father with undue power, both as family patriarch and the representative of the law. The resumption of their relationship takes place after Pilar is safely widowed and Sam is properly divorced from a woman Sayles establishes as entirely unsuitable. Their love has survived years of separation, and Sayles makes it re-emerge slowly, tentatively, even soberly, before it is consummated in a scene of pure wonder and joy. Sam and Pilar are nothing if not mature, unencumbered adults. By the end of the film we are all rooting for the triumph of this perfect love and are moved by Pilar's sense of unfairness and her desire to maintain her relationship with Sam. It is thus not surprising that José Limón winds up asserting that Pilar and Sam decide to continue their relationship even after they discover they are blood relatives. The film's ending, however, is more ambiguous than Limón would have it. The camera pulls back to a long shot, showing Sam and Pilar sitting in the abandoned drive-in theater where they were first caught together, and separated, by their father. The iconography of the scene suggests the destruction of the past they had and the promise of an empty, or at least undetermined, future. The drive-in is in ruins and they are side by side on the hood of the car, facing a blank screen. That Limón has projected a happy ending onto that screen, an ending that embraces incest, suggests just how successful Sayles has been in breaking down traditional condemnation of sexuality at the border. Sayles makes incest not only acceptable, but desirable, departing startlingly from the burden of deviance that has traditionally marked sex at the border.

The border has always carried an erotic charge, and most representations of that eroticism has been shaped by the condemnation of sexuality. Debra Castillo notes in her discussion of two border narratives something I believe is common to such stories, that "the borderlands seem to bring to consciousness the most extreme variants of each culture's stereotypes about itself and about the other culture. In both books, these stereotypes are focused in and through the feminine and, specifically, through the conflicted reaction to female sexuality" (Castillo 102).

Underlying this process is the high value placed on virginity and marital chastity and the demonization of prostitutes, as well as the discomfort over inter-ethnic eroticism unless it reproduces patterns of dominance (man over woman, and in the U.S. versions, American over Mexican). It always occurs outside marriage—an important means of delegitimizing sexual intercourse across national difference at the border. Doris Sommer's fruitful reading of the national romances of Latin America in the nineteenth century can help illuminate what is occurring here. Sommer argues that the highly popular narratives of the nineteenth century enacted fictionally the consolidation of the nation via the legitimized erotic connection between different sectors of society. Love and marriage across class, race, and ethnic boundaries pulled the nation together. These same alliances at the border would, however, only serve to undermine national unity. That is why sex at the border, across national lines, is so dangerous. Both sides need to police national sovereignty and national purity once it has been established, and legitimizing transnational sex would undermine that project. More recent border stories, the ones that seek reconciliation, celebrate blurry lines, privilege the borderlands at the expense of unitary national identity, and desire an end to fixed boundaries, embrace this eroticism. José Limón's inversion of the conventional response to border erotics might even, he admits, temporarily overshadow the relationships of inequality between Mexico and the United States, but it is a risk this anthropologist of border culture embraces.<sup>10</sup> So it is not just the over-saturation of sex at the border or changing cultural attitudes toward women's sexual behavior at the end of the twentieth century that have given rise to the calmer attitude toward sexual relations we find in these films.

Protecting the official story of racial purity (a story the whole town knows is false), Buddy Deeds sets up the punch line of *Lone Star*: Sam and Pilar, who have loved each other since their early teens, are half-brother and sister. In re-enacting their parents' behavior, Sam and Pilar are propelled into incest. The borders cannot be properly policed, since they are already transgressed. The underlying question of the paternal narrative, "Who is my father?" with its historically, economically, socially crucial cor-

ollary, "Who is my son?," is transformed into the dramatically more interesting "What is the truth about my father? Who is my father, really? What are his secrets?" And it is a question that the daughter, as well as the son, must ask.

The story of paternity that *Lone Star* seems to be telling is meant to establish nice, clean boundary lines. The true story, the story that emerges in the telling and the delving, confounds the borders. Buddy and Mercedes have transgressed racial boundaries and sexual propriety; Otis never abandoned Delmore completely (and he tells Chet, his grandson, that there is no clear line between good people and bad). The young woman private shows her colonel that the army is not neatly bounded off from the civilian world that surrounds it. Mercedes cannot forever deny a past that continues to be a reality for others. Pilar, the history teacher, wants to forget the complex history of the border she has been struggling to teach, now that it has entangled her and threatens to take her lover from her.<sup>11</sup> The story of paternity in *Lone Star* is more compelling and surprising than we were led to believe at the start of the film.

If John Sayles pushes the paternity story over the top, in Novaro's *El jardín del Edén* the paternal drive to narrative is gone altogether. Fathers are absent from the film; the photographer's daughter Paloma simply needs to satisfy herself of what she has already surmised: like her, her friend Lupita has no father. The photographer fears that her children will forget their father; Liz tells her that such forgetting can be a gift. In much Chicana feminist writing, it is the daughter's connection with the mother that gives her a usable past; in these tales the story of paternity is at best the occasion for what Tey Diana Rebolledo and Eliana Rivero call "an ambivalent mixture of disdain and nostalgia" (Rebolledo and Rivero 109). At worst it is a violent intrusion. Maternally based intergenerational narratives by Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Helena María Viramontes, Pat Mora, and others demonstrate what I have been suggesting is true of Novaro's film, that when paternity is uncoupled from the narrative of identity, a new form of storytelling emerges to take its place.<sup>12</sup> In *Lone Star* John Sayles skillfully exploits the paternal narrative of filial identity. In *El jardín del Edén*, María Novaro leaves it behind to

present us with something new and unfamiliar, but equally compelling.

### Notes

1. For a useful discussion of Novaro's film, see Concepción Bados-Ciria.
2. I borrow the metaphor from Gloria Anzaldúa, who emphasizes the visceral pain that must accompany such bleeding. She writes, "The U.S.-Mexican border 'es una herida abierta' (it is an open wound) where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture" (*Borderlands* 3). Anzaldúa goes on to write about narrative as ritual: "The ability of story (prose and poetry) to transform the storyteller and the listener into something or someone else is shamanistic" (66), and "My 'stories' are acts encapsulated in time, 'enacted' every time they are spoken aloud or read silently" (67).
3. One of Novaro's characters remarks that the Texans are the cruelest members of the border patrol. John Sayles's portrait of Charlie Wade in *Lone Star*, discussed below, suggests he is right.
4. That Chicana feminist scholar Edén Torres, who has studied this film, finds Jane easy to dislike, strongly indicates that the social location of the viewer affects the reading of this character. Torres made her comment about Jane's lack of appeal in the context of a session on border cinema at the 1998 convention of Latin American Studies Association, at which an early version of this article was presented, and at which Torres also spoke on Novaro's film.
5. Sayles echoes the trope of the profligate United States in contrast with frugal Mexico in the figure of El Rey de las Llantas, the used tire mogul who left the U.S. and returned to his border town in Mexico and made a fortune recycling rubber. Like la Tía Juana, he is full of knowledge (he tells Sam the story of Eladio's death, murdered by Charlie Wade) and mixes compassion with wariness. Both characters are happy, successful opportunists, profiting from a global economy that ultimately impoverishes their country, and clear about their allegiance to the Mexican side of the border.
6. Novaro takes up the feminine counterpart to the Oedipal story in her earlier and very successful film, *Danzón*. In that movie the protagonist

goes off in search of her dance partner, an older male figure who is not quite an object of sexual desire but who, in his disappearance, acquires aspects of that persona. In a departure from the Freudian myth, in which the girl child abandons her primary attachment for the maternal favor of the paternal, this character enters a world of friendships with feminine and feminized figures, drag queens through whom the problematic of desire for the father figure is superceded by the issues of identity, independence, and the development of subjectivity. When the protagonist returns home, her old partner is already there. They resume the dancing she finds so pleasurable, but she is no longer dependent on his presence for her own sense of self. In short, the protagonist of *Danzón* goes off in search of a man and finds herself.

7. Only in farce or melodrama is maternity questioned (the baby-switching plot or the story of the daughter who, for reasons of social advancement, disclaims her mother).

8. José E. Limón, in his discussion of *Lone Star*, maintains that the Mexican-American men in the film are presented as asexual beings, but Eladio's offer of rescue and reassurance is also erotic. One of Sayles's gifts is his ability to portray a masculine sexuality that is gentle and caring.

9. It is interesting that the two men who transport people across the border in this film do it for humanitarian reasons. They are not the ruthless mercenaries, *coyotes* who would as soon abandon their charges to die in some desolate landscape, or even the matter-of-fact entrepreneurs who make their monotonous, if somewhat dangerous, living guiding people across in Novaro's film. Both Eladio and Mercedes's young employee Enrique are humanitarians, not so unlike Jane, who smuggles her by-then lover, Felipe, across to California in the trunk of her car.

10. "...while the encounters and performances we will examine do indeed flow out of an undeniable relationship of social inequality and domination, their articulation in idioms of sexuality, eroticism, and desire allows us to envision and experience alternative, if perhaps utopian, models of the relationship between Greater Mexico and the United States" (Limón 4).

11. José Limón calls his reader's attention to the significance of Pilar's plea to "forget history, forget the Alamo" (154).

12. Helena María Viramontes states, "These two things, love of stories and love of my mother influenced me to such an extent that it became

an unconscious part of me. . . . If my mother was the fiber that held a family together, it was my father who kept snapping it with his excessive cruelty" (291-92). Gloria Anzaldúa asks "which collectivity does the daughter of a darkskinned mother listen to?" ("New Consciousness" 377). Cherríe Moraga writes, "Todavía soy la hija de mi mamá. Keep thinking it, it's the daughters. It's the daughters who remain loyal to the mother" (vii). Pat Mora reminds us that "We, and all women, need and deserve our past. We can value the resourcefulness of our mothers and the homes they created and the space they shaped for us. There is much to be learned from the strength of tías and abuelitas, and from our experiences in cooking, gardening, mothering" (56).

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