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# Latin American Gothic and Creolization: from Faulkner to John Sayles

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In his well-known Preface to *Edgar Huntly* (1799), Charles Brockden Brown explained that to achieve Gothic effects, he claimed the merit “of calling forth the passions and engaging the sympathy of the reader by means hitherto unemployed by preceding authors.” Instead of looking to “means usually employed for this end” such as “puerile superstition and exploded manners...Gothic castles and chimeras”, he would resort to “[t]he incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the western wilderness, [as] far more suitable.” Moreover, “for a native of America to overlook these, would admit no apology” (Brown 3). Sixty years later, in *The Marble Faun*, an unreconciled Nathaniel Hawthorne still lamented that in America “there [was] no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight.” However a new source of gothic thrill was opening up.

Melville’s *Piazza Tales*, published in 1856, was in no pain to use several examples of Gothic motifs. To begin with, there was the traditional European setting of the doomed, medieval, Mediterranean tower, as in “The Bell-Tower,” but alternatives could be found away from Europe. Sick and tired of the well-regulated, clearly ruled and divided routine of the lawyer’s chambers, “Bartleby” finished his melancholy life within the damp walls of an Egyptian-like prison called “The Tombs.” The “power of darkness” Melville pointed out as a major object of writing for the American novelist in his review of *Mosses from an Old Manse* was mysteriously at play in *Benito Cereno*, where Captain Amasa Delano, the self-righteous American captain, a native of Duxbury, Massachusetts, was

exposed to the uncertain behavior of a large group of Blacks, while his awareness was completely focused on a Spanish ship, which he associated with the decrepit monasteries and places of old Europe, because it was the Spanish and catholic character of the ship, the *San Dominick*, that hugged his attention.

In “The Encantadas,” the black, volcanic cinder-rock of the Galapagos provided natural craggy, ruin-like peaks, the scene of a raw struggle between innocence and ever-threatening forces of darkness. Melville pretended that they were written by one “Salvator R. Tarnmoor,” a pseudonym associating first an allusion to the Italian baroque painter Salvator Rosa (1615-1673), popular in the romantic era for his dramatic landscapes of ruins and ruin-like caves and rocks; and phonetic echoes of the rare word *tarn*, that Poe had used to describe the dark marsh in which the house of Usher sank, while *moor* almost echoed the sinister rhymes of his famous poem “The Raven”. But in spite of these gloomy associations, the series of ten sketches was still entitled “The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles”, a contradiction that was mentioned by María Teresa Gramuglio who noted that “La elección de ‘Encantadas’ para nombrar las islas en lugar del más denotativo ‘Galápagos’, instala un extrañamiento que la descripción que la sigue intensifica.” (Gramuglio 37) *Estrangement* indeed : what the Latin American material did to the Anglo-American writer was to create a loss of the sense of reality through a process of estrangement, like that of being in a dream, or under a charm—enchanted.

This, I want to suggest, would be a legacy of Melville to Faulkner: It is this space between the American Gothic and the continent of the *real maravilloso* that I propose to explore here. I want to contend that Faulkner really inhabits this borderland, with a span of writing ranging from the English gothic through its New England counterpart, all the way to magic realism, that I think he also seriously, although very marginally, pioneered. As to Faulkner’s nod to the New England gothic, let me just mention one parodic reference: the tale of Labove in *The Hamlet*. As

Irving's famous story "Sleepy Hollow", *The Hamlet* is set in a quiet river-bottom in the hills, and one day an ambitious young man arrives in the community to teach school, and falls in love with the daughter of the wealthiest man, the formidable Katrina van Tassel in Irving, emulated in *The Hamlet* by the larger than life Eula Varner.

The South had always been extensively toured, but the Civil War interrupted the regular stream of visitors from North to South, and the lurking sectional hostility understandably discouraged the return of normal tourist activity. In the years of the post-Civil War Reconstruction, some travellers tried to change the image of the South by emphasizing the oddness of its landscapes, in order to lure prosperous Northerners to tour the sub-tropical southern scene. Rebecca C. McIntyre has explored this movement, in which the South was made to promise the grotesque and ghastly dimension regrettably in want in the dull, Yankee North-East that saw the rapid expansion of industrial plants—in a word, gothic landscapes to serve the Yankees' need for a darker thrill. Here was a lush vegetation, the gothic vaults of live oak alleys, the skeleton-like knuckles of cypress knees emerging from the stagnant black waters of marshes swimming with venomous snakes and alligators, hung with web-like draperies of Spanish--"Spanish?"-- moss, a convenient counterpart to the spider-webbed cloisters where Matthew Gregory Lewis had sought to stage his *Monk* back in the old world. Here were the decaying swamps, apt symbols of a tragic civilization that Poe early used in his "Fall of the House of Usher"—although he was fond of using more traditionally European settings for the gothic atmosphere of countless other tales. Appropriately, the lush natural surroundings now often framed the shell of a dilapidated plantation mansion gutted by the violence of the climate and of sectional strife—the romantic ruins which had been the perfect setting for the European Gothic were now also to be found in the Old South, and so neither Brown, Hawthorne nor Melville need have done without them.

As Louis Palmer reminds us in a recent article, “[t]he standard definition of the traditional Gothic novel tends to refer to three elements: a setting in an ancestral house, real or perceived occult events, and a woman at risk. . . . The woman is generally threatened by a degenerate offspring of the house.” (Palmer 123) The first gothic ruin in Faulkner is the Old Frenchman’s place, which is mentioned for the first time in *Sanctuary* (1931) and in the short story “Lizards in Jamshyd’s Courtyard” (1932 ). *Sanctuary* features a favorite situation in gothic or indeed horror fiction or film: the innocent virgin maiden locked up in the dungeon of a gloomy castle, knowing that, in Temple’s words, “something is going to happen to [her].” The mysteriously threatening figure in *Sanctuary* was Popeye, and this may be why he is strangely referred to as a black man—black in that he embodies the power of darkness. The 1961 Tony Richardson film revealed some of the implications of the novel: in Ruth Ford’s adaptation, the plot was mixed up with elements from Faulkner’s sequel novel, *Requiem for a Nun*, and what happened to be Ruth Ford’s own play adaptation of the novel: Temple was made the daughter of the governor, and her lover, played by Yves Montand, *was* a Frenchman of sorts—“Candy man, her Creole lover... who first taught her the ways of evil!”, as a poster for the film enticingly explained<sup>1</sup>. In Faulkner, the Creole background, i.e. the background of New Orleans, serves as a gateway to the Latin American scene.

In “Lizards in Jamshyd’s Courtyard” the Old Frenchman, Louis Grenier, has long been dead and forgotten. What is left is “the skeleton of the house, and the legend of the gold which his slaves buried somewhere when Grant passed through the land on his Vicksburg campaign.” (*Uncollected* 136)<sup>2</sup> The mysterious allusion in the title is to a Persian king,

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<sup>1</sup> “Sanctuary.” Three-Sheet Poster for the 20th Century-Fox Film, 1961. University of Mississippi Archives and Special Collections, on line at < [http://msbluestrail.org/depts/general\\_library/matinee/faulkneradaptations5.htm](http://msbluestrail.org/depts/general_library/matinee/faulkneradaptations5.htm) >, March 6, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> The story was included in the last part of *The Hamlet* (1940). See also my 2002 essay on this short story.

mentioned in one of Edward FitzGerald's rendering of Omar Khayam's quatrains, very popular at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As had been the case with Gustave Flaubert, Pierre Loti, Oscar Wilde, T. S. Eliot, orientalizing is then the preferred mood to achieve the delicious alienation of the tale. Because of the legend of the buried gold, three local people were lured into buying the place, and are digging up the former formal gardens. The dramatic set is straight out of an expressionist movie: "The three men crouched in the weeds along the ditch at the foot of the garden. The shaggy slope rose before them in the darkness to the crest where the broken roof and topless chimneys of the house stood sharp against the sky. In one of the windows a single star showed, like a feeble candle set upon the ledge." (*Uncollected* 142) As in the first page of *Sanctuary* this is a scene, and there is an audience--the locals have come to watch:

They came, slow, deliberate, behind the bobbing mule ears, with upon their occupants—the men, the women, the young and the old—a quality not festive, since it was too profoundly undivergent, but of holiday, of escape and of immolation like that of people going to theater to see tragedy, to turn from the broad valley highway into the old road, the peaceful and healing scar.

So peaceful the road was, so healed of the old scars of man's old restlessness, that almost with the turning the road appeared to half run immediately into another land, another world: the weathered wagons, the plow-galled mules, the men and the women in overalls and awkward gingham, into another time, another afternoon without time or name. (*Uncollected* 135)

In this first page of the story, the sweet, voluntary enchantment of being estranged that is described about these plain people colors the short story with the flavor of the tale, and Faulkner lightly touches upon a moral in the last page: "Henry, in his pit, moved up and down with the regularity of an automaton. He was waist-deep, as though he were digging himself tirelessly into that earth whose born thrall he was; as though he had been

severed at the waist, the dead torso laboring on in measured stoop and recover, not knowing that it was dead.” (*Uncollected* 150)

The skeleton-like ruin of the Old Frenchman place invites comparison with another story in which the word appears several time: “Carcassonne” (*Collected* 895-900). This is not really a story, more like a prose-poem rendering the romantic dreams of the aspiring poet: his skeleton lies in a garret under a tarred paper roof, while his mind wanders off on a flying Pegasus, dreaming of medieval crusaders. The medieval dream could owe something to Don Quixote, but the title, not explained in the body of the text, may just be a witty compounding of the skeleton and its “bones knocking together”—hence “Carcasse sonne” in French—and the medieval dream of escape which can be visually associated with the preserved walled city (that Faulkner never visited). The French is not the only Latin presence in the text, since the Prufrockian poet is prosaically residing in an unidentified Hispanic location named “Rincon”—presumably owing to Faulkner's reading of Conrad's *Nostromo*--and one Luis who runs the cantina downstairs allows him to use the garret to sleep in<sup>3</sup>. The Spanish setting, the dream-like identification with the legendary knights of the past hark back to the well-known assertion by Faulkner that he constantly re-read *Don Quixote*. We don't have to accept this completely literally to acknowledge that Don Quixote was an important inspiration for him. Montserrat Ginés has paralleled Cervantes's criticism of the nostalgic of Spain's golden age with Faulkner's South obsessed with the past. “In Faulkner's fiction we see the same myth of the past as a time of heroism and unshifting values expressed through the backward-looking characters of Quentin Compson and Gail Hightower, and the same longing for a past Golden Age and rejection of the new order in the character of Ike McCaslin” (Ginés 75). But more important, the sense of honor pushes numerous Faulkner characters to an absurd and foolish

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<sup>3</sup> In Hollywood a few years later (1933), Joseph Blotner tells us, Faulkner was to work on the idea of a *Mythical Latin-American Kingdom Story*, whose setting drew from « Carcassonne » and « Black Music ». The scenario ran to 110 pages. (Blotner 384)

denial of reality, from Quentin Compson to the tall convict, Gavin Stevens and Lucius Priest.

As John T. Matthews suggests, “to be white and a poet of the South in the New World also means to inhabit quarters haunted by skeletons in the corner” (Matthews 242)<sup>4</sup> But beyond the obviously gothic paraphernalia of dark garrets infested with rats and skeletons, Matthews detects the burden of neocolonial oppression, and he proposes to read the story as a fable: “the poet cannot create beauty without encountering the deadly history of new-world oppression that supports him.” This sounds like an exposure of the classic pattern in the American gothic that Leslie Fiedler had identified, one which rested on the horror at the revelation of the suppressed colonized other : “In the American gothic [...] not the aristocrat but the Indian, not the dandified courtier but the savage colored man is postulated as the embodiment of villainy.” (Fiedler 160)

The story “Black Music” identifies the failed poet as one Wilfred Midgleston, whom the narrator mentions he found in Rincon. Wilfred Midgleston would be a representative of the colonial power out of Conrad if his speech did not sound so Southern. Which is odd: the narrator learns that he is actually from New York, but 25 years in Rincon have caused him to take up the dialect of the South with the humid Latin American climate—or would it be with a system of labor common to the whole Caribbean basin? This short story goes on to tell why Midgleston had to flee to Rincon: to frighten away some wealthy New Yorkers who were going to desecrate some pristine Virginia countryside with a grand architectural project, he had felt inspired by the spirits of the place to turn into a satyr.

With *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner really develops his home-grown variety of gothic, so-to speak. The working title for this novel, as for *Light in August*, was *Dark House*, and it is superfluous to expatiate once more on the suitable atmospherics created by the humid atmosphere of the

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<sup>4</sup> My thanks to Deborah Cohn for calling my attention to this article.



Southern summer, by the mephistophelic associations Miss Rosa or Shreve McCarron make of Sutpen to a demon. What I would like to develop is how much the Gothic character of this novel is largely due to the haunting presence of a Latin Caribbean otherness, Spanish or French.

In an analysis stemming from Homi Bhabha, John T. Matthews emphasizes that “scattered throughout Faulkner’s earlier writing—including his work for Hollywood in the 1930s—are evasive admissions of the relations between his South and other new-world Souths.”

(Matthews 239) To return to the gothic motif of the Dark House, let us note that in the second page of *Absalom, Absalom!* the demonic Sutpen is immediately associated to the French architect he commissioned to erect his mansion: “Out of quiet thunderclap he would abrupt (man-horse-demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a schoolprize water color, faint sulphur-reek still in hair clothes and beard, with grouped behind him his band of wild niggers like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men, in attitudes wild and reposed, and manacled among them the French architect with his air grim, haggard, and tatteran.” (*Absalom* 4) Further, the French architect is described as “a small, alertly resigned man with a grim, harried Latin face” (*Absalom* 26). Edouard Glissant notes that whatever is suspicious, sulphur-reeking or equivocal, somehow akin to racial mixing, is associated to frenchness, often to Louisiana—which is the case for Charles Bon, as when Wash exclaims : “Henry has done shot that durn French feller. Kilt him dead as a beef.” » (*Absalom* 106; quoted in Glissant, 324) As Glissant sees it, Faulkner's New Orleans is the space of chaos, miscegenation, through which pass the wild negroes who are going to disrupt the ecology of Yoknapatawpha County. What issues from South of the South is assumed to be unmanageable, New Orleans being a mainland enclave of the Caribbean, a fraction of broken up archipelago and Creole ambiguity within the continuous, systematic model of the continent. The otherness of New Orleans was recently very present in

mainstream Amercian government discourse in the aftermath of the Katrina disaster.

In Mr Compson's re-creation, Charles Bon, the Frenchman from New Orleans, is associated to the romantic East of the decadent *fin de siècle*: he thinks that Henry Sutpen, "the country boy", "looked upon Bon as though he were a hero out of some adolescent Arabian Nights" (*Absalom* 76)—in other words, he is enchanted. On the other hand, he can imagine that Charles just looked down upon the Sutpens and their country ways, contemplating them "with the detached attentiveness of a scientist watching the muscles in an anesthetised frog;--watching, contemplating them from behind that barrier of sophistication in comparison with which Henry and Sutpen were troglodytes" (*Absalom* 74). This is the characteristic gothic uneasiness in Faulkner: the shame, the awareness of being the object of a darker, overbearing gaze. Mr Compson sees in Bon "a certain reserved and inflexible pessimism stripped long generations ago of all the rubbish and claptrap of people (...) who have not quite emerged from barbarism, who two thousand years hence will still be throwing triumphantly off the yoke of Latin culture and intelligence of which they were never in any great permanent danger to begin with." (*Absalom* 75). To Mr Compson, the archetypal representative of Old South mentalities, Bon is at once the representative of the sophistication of an old Europe his kind was not foolish enough to break with and of the untidy undecided ethnic non-identification of creole New Orleans.

At this stage in the novel the reader has yet to learn that Sutpen exposed himself to the "Latin culture." This was in part because of what he learned in school and believed literally—" I learned little save that most of the deeds, good and bad both, incurring opprobrium or plaudits or rewards either, within the scope of man's abilities, had already been performed and were to be learned about only from books. . . . What I learned was that there was a place called the West Indies to which poor men went in ships and became rich, it didn't matter how, so long as that

man was clever and courageous” (*Absalom* 195) –just like Don Quixote he trusted the books too literally: the books that his teacher made him read told him of a version of the myth of El Dorado, “so he went to the West Indies.” Long after, when his dreams of success had been thwarted repeatedly, Sutpen was to retain this quixotic bend: in a dream-like reconstruction of Rosa Coldfield’s impression of Sutpen, Quentin Compson imagines how Sutpen may have sounded on his way back from fighting in the Civil War, strangely reminiscent of the Rincon dreamer in the story “Carcassonne,” “talking that which sounded like the bombast of a madman who creates within his very coffin walls his fabulous immeasurable Camelots and Carcassonnes.” (*Absalom* 129)

Sutpen actually went to Haiti, an island divided between French and Spanish speakers, “a little island set in a smiling and fury-lurked and incredible indigo sea, which was the halfway point between what we call the jungle and what we call civilization, halfway between the dark inscrutable continent from which the black blood, the black bones and flesh and thinking and remembering and hopes and desires was ravished by violence, and the cold known land to which it was doomed.” (*Absalom* 202) An overseer on a French landlord’s plantation, he married the planter’s daughter, without paying much attention to the detail that his wife had been a Spaniard. After a slave-revolt, Sutpen and his wife found sanctuary in New Orleans, as did many white inhabitants of the former French colony of Saint-Domingue. It was only after Charles’s birth that, according to Shreve and Quentin’s reconstruction of the story, Sutpen realised that his father-in-law had withheld from him that the Spanish woman who was his mother’s wife was really a mulatto. In an end-note on Henry and Quentin’s myth-making, John Matthews proposes: “I’d like to think that the effort to recall the ‘Caribbean’ phase of Sutpen’s experience continues to function as knowledge once possessed but now half-forgotten, an action highly purposeful but somehow never ‘decided’.”

(Matthews 260). This sense of the uncanny—Freud’s *unheimliche*<sup>5</sup>, “unhomely,” unfamiliar and disquieting, yet strangely familiar—is inseparable from the sense of the gothic. As had been the case for Popeye in *Sanctuary*, Charles Bon, the Latin outsider in *Absalom, Absalom!* brings in an ominous darkness that the South will want to keep at bay. Which is why Sutpen must have relinquished his wife and son. But it did not prevent Charles Bon from finding an octoroon wife, breeding a son, Charles Etienne St Valéry Bon, who in turn thought of himself as a black man and married a purely black woman, had a black son, Jim Bond. This Jim Bond is the last scion of Thomas Sutpen, proving that under a Latin hood or not darkness not only seeps in to haunt, but prevails. In the famous last page of the novel Shreve McCarron, possibly in a parody of the Southern obsession with miscegenation, foresaw that “in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. Of course it wont be in our time and of course as they spread toward the poles they will bleach out again like the rabbits and the birds do, so they wont show up so sharp against the snow. But it will still be Jim Bond; and so in a few thousand years I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings.” (*Absalom* 302-303)

What needs to arrest us about Jim Bond is that he is an idiot--not a foremost character like Benjy Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*, but still an avatar of the archetypal Faulknerian idiot. What Faulkner has done to make us share an idiot’s perception of the world in *The Sound and the Fury* gives us access to the estrangement he repeatedly creates. For Benjy, the world is a constant wonder, and a constant frustration. He is fully sensitive to what his senses perceive, fully open to the inputs from his memory, but has no means to organize these stimuli, to divide close objects from far ones, the present from the past, what he sees from what he remembers. Everything is fantastically alien to him. Things turn up and disappear as if by magic, and all these changes cause deep distress.

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<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Die Unheimliche”, 1919.

Benjy's case may be extreme, but Faulkner's works provide other examples of this distress at the loss of a sense of the world. This is commonly related to a sense of grief—what happens to the members of the Bundren family easily comes to mind, but a passage from *Go Down, Moses* may also come to mind.

In what may be the only ghost story in the Faulkner canon, “Pantaloon in Black”, after he has buried his wife, Rider, the black sawmill hand returns home, overcome with grief, and sees his wife's ghost:

She was standing in the kitchen door, looking at him. He didn't move. He didn't breathe nor speak until he knew his voice would be all right, his face fixed too not to alarm her. “Mannie,” he said. “Hit's awright. Ah aint afraid. » Then he took a step toward her, slow, not even raising his hand yet, and stopped. Then he took another step. But this time as soon as he moved she began to fade. He stopped at once, not breathing again, motionless, willing his eyes to see that she had stopped too. But she had not stopped. She was fading, going. “Wait,” he said, talking as sweet as he had ever heard his voice speak to a woman: “Den lemme go wid you, honey.” But she was going. She was going fast now, he could actually feel between them the insuperable barrier of that very strength which could handle alone a log which would have taken any two other men to handle, of the blood and bones and flesh too strong, invincible for life, having learned at least once with his own eyes how tough, even in sudden and violent death, not a young man's bones and flesh perhaps but the will of that bone and flesh to remain alive, actually was.

Then she was gone. He walked through the door where she had been standing, and went to the stove. (*Go Down* 136-137)

In this passage can be seen a short example of the kind of ghost Toni Morrison featured in *Beloved*. This could be a rare example of “magical realism” in Faulkner.

What does this all have to do with a *creolized* Gothic? I want to argue that it is the quality of *fading* that characterizes Faulkner's Gothic (the term occurred twice in the above passage, and it could similarly be found throughout corresponding passages on the grief of the Bundren family in

*As I Lay Dying*)—a weakening of the common set of perceptions and inter-relations, of received sets of oppositions (like that between races) that is very often what Faulkner's fictions are about. As we saw about *Absalom, Absalom!*, the disruption of the Southern order by the arrival of Sutpen's wild, creole speaking Negroes from Haiti creates such a panic.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* there are two distinctly different successive narrative paradigms: through the first six chapters the characters try to *know* about Sutpen, guided by evidence or their own prejudice and frustrations. Mr Compson cynically muses:

they dont explain and we are not supposed to know. We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales; we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now merely initials or nicknames out of some now incomprehensible affection which sound to us like Sanskrit or Chocktaw; we see dimly the people, the people in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting, in this shadowy attenuation of time possessing now heroic proportions, performing their acts of simple passion and simple violence, impervious to time and inexplicable...They are there, yet something is missing; they are like a chemical formula exhumed along with the letters from that forgotten chest, carefully, the paper old and faded and falling to pieces, the writing faded, almost indecipherable, yet meaningful, familiar in shape and sense, the name and presence of volatile and sentient forces, you bring them together in the proportions called for, but nothing happens; you re-read, tedious and intent, poring, making sure that you have forgotten nothing, made no miscalculation; you bring them together again and again and nothing happens: just the words, the symbols, the shapes themselves, shadowy inscrutable and serene, against the turgid background of a horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs. (*Absalom* 80)

In the later chapters Shreve and Quentin leave off their attempts to remember and reconstruct, and begin self-consciously to invent. The story of Sutpen as they reinvent it becomes consistent because it so strongly affects the young men they are, worried about love, identity, recognition from the older generation . This is where they invent the New Orleans

lawyer who must have manipulated Bon and his octoroon mother into blackmailing Sutpen so that the would have to acknowledge Charles Bon as his older son.

The Hispanic undertone becomes more explicitly connected with the dark unconscious with other anglo inheritors of Faulkner. In Tennessee Williams' *Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche Dubois can delude herself at length about her former status and the way her former wealthy beau is going to restore her to her former glory, but as her defences break down and she tells Mitch the truth he had suspected, a blind Mexican vendor comes by, peddling her "flores para los muertos". While the Mexican woman voice sustains her monotone, she gets to the point where she acknowledges her intimacies with young soldiers from a training camp near the ancestral family house where her mother lay dying.

In Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, as the title itself suggests, the Mexican south is "the bloodlands of the west" (McCarthy 138) -- also a place of death, but violent death—"This country is give much blood. This Mexico. This is a thirsty country." (McCarthy 102) The party of raiders that the kid joins describe themselves as "the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land". The American raiders contract with the Mexican governor of Sonora "for the furnishing of Apache scalps." (McCarthy 204) The border country is a deserted waste-land, the scalphunters south of it "a visitation from some heathen land where they and others like them fed on human flesh." (McCarthy 78)

McCarthy revives the gothic fears from the Hispanic South, but the implications of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* are never more clearly brought to light than in John Sayles's movie *Lone Star*. The film is set in a generic Texas border-town named, almost in Bunyan-like symbolic candidness, Frontera, Rio County. It revolves on various border-crossings between the Anglo and Mexican backgrounds, while the current sheriff of Rio County forced to investigate the evidence of a murder which took place forty years ago. The community does have a skeleton in its

cupboards, and at the outset of the film this skeleton literally turns up in the dust of an abandoned shooting range. It soon turns out that the bones are those of one of the current Sheriff's predecessors, the legendary Sheriff Wade. Wade was a completely corrupt character, extorting money from blacks and Hispanics for his silence or for a share in their illegal businesses, and trigger-happy about setting scores with those who tried to cheat him out of his colonial cut. Wade was a demon, Rosa Coldfield would have said, and for the town his successor, his former deputy Buddy Deeds, was an angel, someone they remember so fondly that in the course of the film a plaque is unveiled in his honor. Buddy Deeds is the father of the focal character, the current sheriff Sam Deeds, but we understand that Sam is very unhappy about the situation—actually he stayed away from Frontera until two years before. When an old local resident sharply remarks to him “Sheriff Deeds is dead, honey, and you are just his son,” he sighs “it’s the story of my life.” As the film unfolds in a series of flashbacks in which the present fades into the past and back again, we understand that as a teenager Sam had a serious brush with his father who acted to break up his affair with a high-school sweet-heart, Pilar, the daughter of Mercedes, a successful restaurant owner of Mexican origin. Pilar is still around, and in the course of his enquiry Sam and Pilar resume their romantic relationship. Talking to the locals, Sam discovers that moreover it is public knowledge that his father had a mistress, and in his father’s old papers he finds a photo of the pair—the girl was Mercedes. So Pilar’s father is Buddy Deeds, not Mercedes’s husband, the heroic Mexican go-between who first welcomed Mercedes when she crossed the rio, married her and was then murdered by Wade with a truck-load of illegal immigrants. To his son’s apparent relief, Buddy is no saint after all—and he is interested in coming to the conclusion that he could have murdered Wade, but the charge prompts Buddy’s former friends to speak out and confess. They joined together to bury Wade away and paper over the murder. But now Sam and Pilar have to come to terms with their



relationship and kinship. In the final scene of “Lone Star” Pilar remarks that because of complications with her last child she cannot get pregnant any more, so the threats of incest needn’t prevent them. Like Henry Sutpen, against a history which has made the prohibition of incest the linchpin of civilization, they find a loophole in the absolute law of the prohibition of incest, which allows them to decide to ignore it: “But kings have done it! Even dukes! There was that Lorraine duke named John something that married his sister. The Pope excommunicated him but it didn’t hurt! It didn’t hurt! They were still husband and wife. They were still alive. They still loved!” (*Absalom* 274)

*Lone Star* functions as a miniature of the complex postcolonial field in which the United States is confronted to its South. This is dramatized for the viewer by a scene early in the novel in which Pilar, a history teacher in the local school, debates with an Anglo colleague whether the Mexican legacy of the Lone Star state should be taught along its “American” history. The debate constantly resurfaces, for instance when Mercedes reminds her employees to use English with her.

Racist Charley Wade had more radical ways of ensuring that each one, in his words, should “know his place,” by which he means class for the African-Americans, but also, quite literally, where you happen to be at the moment—you can do things in Houston that you can’t do in Frontera, where lines matter, as one should expect. And that includes Otis’s roadside café, which he thought of as the only place where African-Americans could feel welcome until Wade showed him that in his mind it was still Frontera.

In the education of Sam Deeds Frontera turns out to be a place where borders matter, not as barriers, but as contact zones. The borders are not as clear as he thinks they are at the beginning. That is the parable he is given by Chucho Montoyas, a tire salesman he visits in Ciudad León, South of the border. Chucho draws a line in the dirt with a Coca-Cola bottle, asks Sam to step over the line, and, *milagro*, he is “not the respected sheriff of

Rio County, just a nosy Texan who asks too many questions.”<sup>6</sup> Cody, the redneck bartender, also tries to articulate the problem: “The lines of demarcation have gotten fuzzy—to run a successful civilization, you got to have lines of demarcation between right and wrong, between this one and that one. [Charley Wade] understood how people don’t want their salt and sugar in the same jar.” Well, it is a matter of taste, as Sam Deeds notes: “If you mixed drinks as bad as you mix metaphors, you’d be out of a job.”—as Kim Magowan notices, “for all his interest in erecting ‘firmer lines of demarcation’, what Cody rhetorically deploys instead is ‘mix[ing].’” (Magowan 24) The redneck bartender tries to argue for the defence of the English language by asserting “*Se habla* American here, godammit.” By which he means, one supposes, English, but doesn’t the term betray him by being more ambiguous in this context than he realizes? Obviously, even a white bartender needs to have notions of Spanish to get by on a border town, and so, inevitably, unconsciously, languages will tend to *fade* into each other. Doesn’t the infusion of Spanish suggest that *American* is becoming a mixed language, unlike English?

The border community, the viewer realizes, is teeming with interracial couples. Otis, the African-American bartender, is proud of his heritage, and has a little museum to the Black Seminole nation he comes from. In a scene, he is happy to explain to his grandson how the Black Seminoles were the product of generations of creolization. Sam Deeds’s father Buddy is also the father of Pilar through his miscegenous relationship with Mercedes, just as Henry Sutpen’s father Thomas was also the miscegenous father of Charles Bon with his “Spanish” first wife from Haiti.

The clear-cut separations are also denied by the film itself. To talk about the numerous flashbacks in *Lone Star* is not enough. What is particularly noticeable is Sayles’s technique which allows scenes to shift

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<sup>6</sup> Is the use of a Coca Cola bottle itself a subversive challenge to colonialism or the mark of the irony of colonialism? I don’t think the viewer is really expected to translate this message, as Magowan suggests.

from the past to the present in seamless transitions: The story shifts seamlessly into flashback and back again to the present by panning to a detail which is common to the present scene and the remembered scene, allowing them to fade into each other without cut. For instance in a brief flashback Mercedes, the proud and successful restaurant owner who used to be Buddy's mistress, remembers how she crossed the river and met Eladio, who was to become her husband. Sayles avoids cuts, but uses common details between the present and the remembered scene—the noise of the river, the night lighting on Mercedes's face. At first we see a girl lost in the night in the middle of a stream—the spectator may think of the contemporary scene he has seen a few minutes back, of Henrique helping some illegal Mexican immigrants across the river. We and the girl are not lost for very long, as the light of her rescuer leads her to the water's edge and they introduce each other. The camera pans right, off Mercedes's relieved face, and pans back down to focus on the present Mercedes: because of this memory she changes her mind and decides to help Henrique take care of today's wetbacks. "By employing panning shots in place of dissolves, Sayles indicates that the border between the present and the past is not just "fuzzy." It has entirely collapsed." (Magowan 27) This merging of two worlds is close to the immediate experience of fading in and out that Faulkner had tried to convey through the perception of Benjy or through the grief of Rider in "Pantaloons in Black". Eventually, against her own better principles, Mercedes does not call the border patrol, remembers that she herself is a daughter of the border, could never have made it in Texas if her lover had not funded her little business.

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the plot enfolds three successive motivations for the murder of Bon by Henry. First, according to Mr Compson, Henry wanted to save Judith's honor and he wanted to preserve her from a polygamous husband. This agreed with the idea that Henry was too alien to the Latin sophistication and cynicism of the city-boy. Then Shreve and

Quentin discover that he may have wanted to prevent the incest when it appeared that Bon was also Sutpen's son. One character in *Lone Star* seems to comment on both plots when he says it is "always heart-warming to see a prejudice defeated by a deeper prejudice." But the two plots fork out from here to a third possible plot: Henry, they surmise, couldn't care about the incest, but what he did care about was the miscegenation, and so he killed Bon. In Frontera, miscegenation is a poor screen for incest, and so miscegenation and incest, reduced to a social prejudice which needs to be put in perspective, may thrive—with the qualification that the couple may have to move away from town to cover up the skeletons of the past, as earlier generations have done. Where Faulkner's Gavin Stevens famously warned "the past is never dead," Sam and Pilar claim to start again from scratch—Pilar claims to cut off with the past: "Forget the Alamo," she says in the last words of the film—although the future they propose to share seems to be little else than a repetition of their past.

Efrain Kristal has shown that brother and sister incest plots are a common feature of frontier narratives in the literary history of both North American and Latin American narratives, regardless of the language and national literary traditions. In the typical plot, the father's murky past was hidden from his offspring, and a brother and his (half-)sister fall in love with each other before they eventually discover their kinship. Leslie Fiedler had noticed that Brockden Brown "established in the American novel a tradition of dealing with the exaggerated and the grotesque, not as they are verifiable in any external landscape or sociological observation of manners and men, but as they correspond in quality to our deepest fears and guilts as projected in our dreams or lived through in extreme situations." (Fiedler 155) Kristal understands the incest plot as a metaphor for the transformation of a hierarchical world to a new order in which the integration of the indigenous other is possible—the possibility of integration. *Lone Star* suggests that the border South is about screens, but

they are illusory screens—like the empty, perforated, abandoned screen of the drive-in that young Sam and Pilar used to go to for their dates.

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