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Forgive and Forget the Alamo: Collective Memory, Creative Agency, and Rhetoric in John Sayles' Lone Star

Eric C. Miller
Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania

Early in the 2020s, much American public discourse is enmeshed in the same sort of national, historical, and racial controversies that defined much of the 1990s. The southwest border remains a focal point, and immigration continues to trouble and frustrate our political process. Confederate memorials prevalent throughout the southern states have prompted conversations about history, tragedy, and justice. And the national debate over Critical Race Theory has raised tensions over public school history curricula. In 1996, auteur John Sayles considered these themes in his masterpiece film, Lone Star, and his thoughtful treatment has aged exceptionally well. This essay draws on ideas from Friedrich Nietzsche and Hannah Arendt—especially their conceptions of forgetting and forgiving, respectively—to analyze Sayles' film and, ultimately, to comment on America's ongoing interrogation of its rich and tragic past. In their work, I argue, we may locate the rhetorical tools necessary to break a long, vicious, recriminating cycle.

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The concept of *tabula rasa*, as popularized by John Locke, suggests that individuals are born into the world as blank slates, completely fresh and new (Locke, 1996, pg. 7). This image is primarily forward-looking, highlighting absence as a precursor to presence, or non-writing as a space for writing. It is significant, in other words, that a newborn is not theorized as polished glass or glittering snow. She is a slate, or a tablet, without language but constructed specifically to receive language. In this regard, it is also significant that the child is not theorized as a sharpened pencil or a quill dipped in ink, something with the power to impose meaning rather than to accept it.

In preferring to look forward, *tabula rasa* also denies the ability to look backward, effectively severing the subject from whatever came before. The past is irrelevant, we are to infer, because subjectivity emerges as a beginning, a spontaneous appearance rather than the continuation of something already in progress. The subject is disconnected in its uniqueness, without debt or obligation.

It inherits nothing, remembers nothing, and carries no baggage. It is, in many senses, free. When the human subject is born, it exists in complete neutrality, without the hindrance or benefit of history, and so also without excuses.

John Sayles' 1996 film *Lone Star* never mentions *tabula rasa* by name, but neither does it explicitly state the name of the Texas border town where the story is set, and yet both are subject to sharp analytical scrutiny. Though the characters in *Lone Star* are widely diverse in terms of race, age, gender, and experience, they are all involved in a common struggle with the past—the struggle to make sense of and come to terms with their place in history. Rather than assuming a generational blank slate, Sayles' characters understand and identify themselves with specific reference to the past. Collective memory grabs the foreground throughout the film, functioning like a tangible mist through which both viewer and character must navigate, and in which everyone is somehow invested.

Southwest Texas is perhaps the ideal location for Sayles' study, because it offers a memory-place in which both memory and place have been highly contested (Flores, 1998). Memory is stretched across a multi-directional tug-of-war, pulled by equal and opposite generational, cultural, racial, and national forces. The winner of this struggle will claim the power to impose meaning upon the past, a power that might not be so desirable if the past were not so rich with meaningful tragedy. While happy or benign memory may travel quietly without ownership, the tragic is not afforded such luxury. It is claimed and counter-claimed, argued over, and fought for, because the tragic always demands an accounting, and the details of that accounting always hold power over futurity. As Glenn Whitehouse writes in his treatment of *Lone Star*, "any adequate cultural memory for the United States *must* come to terms with the insights of tragedy, insights which today's Americans are apparently only too apt to miss, whether through active evasion of uncomfortable truths, or passive overlooking of bad news" (Whitehouse, 2002, pg. 291).

In the United States, as in most or all other countries, the collective memory is constructed to a large degree with the beams and bolts of the tragic. The meanings we impose upon or deny to our tragedies are the direct product of our creative agency. It is obvious, throughout *Lone Star,* that while individuals continually express a desire for the *true* story behind this or that event, each claiming to relay what *really* happened, none of them is able to

see through a pure, historical lens, because each is somehow interested in the power their particular "truth" must necessarily generate. In an environment like this, there is no such thing as history, strictly speaking. There is, instead, a sort of group therapy, in which people deliberate the past in search of power, closure, or reconciliation, always through agreement, and sometimes with honesty.

In this essay I draw upon Friedrich Nietzsche and Hannah Arendt to examine *Lone Star* in terms of *forgiveness* and *forgetting*, along with the problems and possibilities each poses for what Nietzsche has termed the "artistically creative subject" (Nietzsche, 1989, pg. 246). While both Nietzsche and Arendt theorize forward-looking action as "promise-making," they look backward in different ways (Nietzsche, 1989a, pp. 57-58; Arendt, 1998, pp. 243-247). For Nietzsche, humanity's best means to escape the past is *forgetting*, or letting go of past events so as not to be dominated by them in the present. Arendt privileges *forgiveness*, allowing the subject to remember past tragedies without being controlled by them. In an earlier essay, "On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense," Nietzsche suggests that the truth we ascribe to facts and events is simply an arbitrary meaning imposed through man-made signifiers (Nietzsche, 1989). Though they prefer to abdicate their authority, people are the creators and controllers of their own knowledge, and are thus empowered with a special, rhetorical agency—an agency that holds power over our most important concepts, including *justice*. These theoretical frameworks can make interesting contributions to an understanding of Sayles' film, up to and including its famously cryptic final line, "Forget the Alamo" (Francisco, 2012; Barrera, 2010; Arreola, 2005; Sultze, 2003). They remain useful today, when questions of race, nationalism, justice, and history continue to permeate our public discourse. The following analysis, focused upon a 1996 film set in Texas, is undertaken with an eye toward current events set in Virginia, in Georgia, in Louisiana; across the south where Confederate monuments still stand, in every school board meeting where Critical Race Theory is decried, and in every other public venue where citizens gather to grapple with a past that is not yet past (Soto Vega, 2021; Pippert, 2021; Kretsinger-Harries, 2021; Butterworth, 2019; George, 2019). In Nietzsche, Arendt, and Sayles, I argue, we may locate the rhetorical tools necessary to break free of our vicious historical cycles.

Forgetting

In the second essay of his *Genealogy of Morals,* Nietzsche argues that the origin of human guilt has little or nothing to do with morality as we understand it, but with the failure to fulfill a promise. The broken promise exists within a creditor-debtor relationship that offers up suffering as collateral. If the debtor cannot repay the creditor monetarily—or in the form of the original transaction, whatever it may have been—he may still do so through suffering. The creditor accepts payment in the form of pleasure*,* the pleasure he takes in watching the debtor suffer. In this way, the importance of repayment, or the fulfillment of the promise, has been burned into collective memory over time, instilling in us a sense of justice. But before tackling these matters, and what they may mean to the characters in *Lone Star*, it is necessary to provide some background on the plot.

Lone Star opens with the discovery of a murder victim and the memorialization of the crime's prime suspect. In the late 1950s, we learn, brutal Sheriff Charlie Wade—known to locals as a "real bribes or bullets kinda sheriff"—mysteriously vanished with $10,000 from the county treasury. According to local legend, Sheriff Wade fled Rio County after an altercation with then-Deputy Buddy Deeds, who told him to disappear or face corruption charges. Wade's sudden absence opened the door for Buddy to become sheriff, a position he held with strong popularity until his death in the 1990s. In the film's opening scenes, we learn that Wade's skeleton has been discovered in a ditch outside of town, less than a week before the county courthouse is to be dedicated in Buddy's honor. The timing is awkward. As Hollis, town mayor and Buddy's former co-deputy puts it, "this is a hell of a time to dig up old business" (Sayles, 1996).

Adding to the intrigue, the investigation is assumed by Sheriff Sam Deeds, son of the legendary Buddy. Sam, who always had a contentious relationship with his father, is now charged with determining his guilt or innocence. If investigating a forty-year-old crime is not difficult enough, his efforts are hampered by the ambivalence of the town's older generation, most of whom owe allegiances to Buddy, and would prefer to let sleeping dogs lie. Not to be dissuaded, Sam hunts for clues wherever he is able. As he does so, two other stories unfold in close proximity. Pilar, a widowed Mexican-American history teacher, struggles with the complexities of her subject matter along with those of her relationship to Mercedes, her strong-willed, entrepreneurial mother. Delmore,

an African-American army colonel recently assigned to the nearby base, must re-adapt to life in his former hometown, which is still home to his estranged father, Otis.

As Sam's investigation progresses, we learn that he and Pilar fell in love as teenagers, but were forcibly separated by both Buddy and Mercedes. We also learn that Otis witnessed the shooting of Charlie Wade, but that it was Hollis, not Buddy, who pulled the trigger, and that he did so only to save Otis' life. Finally, after seeing Sam and Pilar rekindle their feelings for each other throughout the film, we learn with them that, through a series of unfortunate events including two murders, an affair, and the subsequent cover-up, they are actually half-brother and -sister. It is this revelation that prompts Pilar to declare, just before the credits role, "We'll start from scratch. All that other stuff—all that history—to hell with it, right? Forget the Alamo" (Sayles, 1996).

The imposition of past upon present is the common thread that binds the film's various subplots. While the Alamo never appears explicitly, it looms constantly over the town's tense, racialized division of power. We learn that "19 out 20 people in the town are Mexican," while the mayor, sheriff, and most of the police are "Anglos" (Sayles, 1996). African-Americans are the smallest minority—except for a miniscule native population—and they seem to be entirely absent from the power structure, with almost no tangible presence outside the sanctuary of Otis' bar, "Big O's." The impetus that drives the film, always simmering beneath the surface, is a question of genealogy and inevitability: *How did things come to be this way, was it inevitable, and what should we do about it now?*

For Nietzsche, this question could be rephrased, perhaps, in terms of justice. When a tragedy occurs, the individuals involved in the event will often split into factions, issuing complaints and mounting defenses as to which party or parties is in the wrong, has committed an injustice, or has violated the terms of some specific or tacit contract. If the parties involved can deliberate to an agreement as to whom the violator is, that party assumes the role of debtor, and the violated become creditors. Justice is achieved when the debt is repaid, whether through money, power, or pleasure—the pleasure that is drawn from the debtor's pain (Nietzsche, 1989a, pg. 65).

For the characters in *Lone Star*, the assessment of justice is often very personal. While the film is broadly concerned with racial

and national relationships, it contextualizes them within the imitate exchanges between family members and friends. Sam Deeds, for instance, has spent the entirety of his adult life begrudging his father for separating him from his first love. Pilar has likewise resented her mother, and both believe that their relationship was forbidden by a deep-seated, generational racism. Similarly, Delmore has never been able to cancel the debt owed him by Otis, the father who abandoned him when he was still a child. Delmore's son, Chet, is likewise aggrieved at *his* father, who pushes him intensely as a sort of compensation. Forty years prior, Sheriff Charlie Wade accumulated a portfolio of unjust exchanges. Of those who now learn of his murder, none are sorry to hear it, accepting his pain as a form of overdue payment.

If Nietzsche were to answer the above question, however—offering suggestions as to how this situation came to be—he would likely cite the system of justice as the problem, rather than the solution. For Nietzsche, justice is an unnatural concept, with roots that extend solely into capitalistic notions of exchange. When an individual is injured through the breaking of a law, it is actually justice, rather than the individual, that has been transgressed. By claiming the right of justice—and with it, the right to carry the transgression—the injured party rationalizes his own *resentiment*. In this way, Nietzsche suggests, the dominated individual reassures herself that though she is dominated, she still in the right, and through self-satisfaction denies herself the opportunity to free herself—and perhaps, her children—from that which dominates her, and which will dominate them. Justice, therefore, is not noble, but rather a means to legitimizing our own impotent anger, the bitterness that it instills, and our desire to feel pleasure through inflicting pain. "As like must always produce like," Nietzsche writes, "it causes us no surprise to see a repetition in such circles of attempts often made before to sanctify *revenge* under the name of *justice*—as if justice were at bottom merely a further development of the feeling of being aggrieved—and to rehabilitate not only revenge but all *reactive* affects in general" (Nietzsche, 1989a, pp. 73-74).

While Nietzsche's assessment may sound counter-intuitive or harsh, it finds broad-based support in the lives of Sayles' characters. Though each of them is eventually freed from his own resentment, that freedom never comes in the form of justice. Sam's investigation turns up positive—as well as negative—insights into Buddy's life, but none of them constitutes a repayment of the debt he incurred. Even the cataclysmic realization that Buddy is

Pilar's father cannot *justify* the situation. On the contrary, the realization actually increases the debt. Not only does it prove Buddy's infidelity to Sam's "saintly" mother, but it could also forever deny Sam the right to live happily with the woman he loves. Likewise, for Pilar, the emergence of the truth does not change the reality that Buddy's actions have denied her both a father and a husband, and forced her to grow up amid a series of important lies. In Delmore's case, his reunion with Otis—and the subsequent union with his own son, Chet—is not in any way attributable to reparations offered by Otis himself. It is drawn, rather, from a willingness to understand, and perhaps, to forget.

For Nietzsche, forgetting is a positive act that an individual—or a collective—employs in her—or their—own service. It is "a doorkeeper, a preserver of psychic order, repose, and etiquette." It is so vital to maintaining mental well-being, in fact, that Nietzsche argues, "there could be no happiness, no cheerfulness, no hope, no pride, no *present*, without forgetting" (Nietzsche, 1998a, pg. 58). As an alternative to the ever-recurring, circular suffering of justice, forgetting breaks with the creditor-debtor relationship and begins anew, choosing to ignore the transaction and whatever may have followed. In doing so, it escapes the cycle and grants both violator and violated an opportunity to cultivate their own agency, refreshed, in Nietzsche's words, by "a little quietness, a little *tabula rasa* of the consciousness, to make room for new things" (Nietzsche, 1998a, pp. 57-58). Of all the instances of forgetting in *Lone Star*, perhaps none is more pronounced than Sam's decision to drop his investigation, allowing Hollis to go unpunished for killing Charlie Wade. The shooting, an act which itself subordinated contractual justice to noble, personal agency, will be forgotten, freeing both Hollis and Otis from the subtle confines of guilt and bad conscience. "I don't think the Rangers are likely to learn anything more than they already know," says Sam. "As for me, it's just another one of your unsolved mysteries" (Sayles, 1996).

Forgiving

While Nietzsche conjures *forgetting* as the antidote to a hegemonic slave morality, Hannah Arendt offers *forgiving* as a positive path for uncertain action, noting that *all* action is necessarily uncertain (Arendt, 1998, pp. 243-247). When humans act, Arendt suggests, they can never be sure exactly what effects their action will cause, whether directly or indirectly. If a man drives his car through a green traffic signal, for instance, he has reason to be-

lieve that the street will be clear, but he cannot know this for sure. If a careless or distracted driver fails to stop for the adjacent red signal, the first driver's reasonable decision to proceed will yield a disastrous consequence. Human agency is a game of chance, and the most we can aspire to is a narrowing of the odds. By making promises, individuals can hope to impose a limited measure of reliability upon the future. By embracing forgiveness, they can hope to free themselves from the inevitable errors that break their promises from time to time. In other words, though Nietzsche and Arendt use similar terminology, the differences between their conceptions are actually quite stark. For Nietzsche, forgetting *opposes* promise-making to subvert a cyclical system of exchange. For Arendt, forgiving and promise-making are two sides of the same therapeutic coin.

For the characters in *Lone Star*, forgiveness begins with the realization that life is uncertain, and always has been. The film's early scenes highlight a pervasive tendency toward judgment, often based in resentment, and predicated on the apparent assumption that the past was somehow more reliable than the present. Benefitting from the advantage of hindsight, Sam, Pilar, Delmore, and Chet all presume to understand the situations their parents had to live through, and all are eager to impose values upon them. This is inevitable, Arendt suggests, because meaning is ascribed retroactively. This is not to declare, however, that such meaning is necessarily *true*. "In contradistinction to fabrication," Arendt writes, "where the light by which to judge the finished product is provided by the image or model perceived beforehand by the craftsman's eye, the light that illuminates processes of action, and therefore all historical processes, appears only at their end, often when all the participants are dead." In other words, action cannot be truly understood until after the fact—after the reverberations have ceased or seem to have ceased, when its effects can finally be measured with some confidence. In this respect, Arendt assigns creative power to the *remembering* subject while largely denying it to the *acting* subject. Since the actor cannot perceive the boundless unpredictability of her action, she cannot understand it. Understanding is reserved for backward-looking futurity, for the "storyteller." "Even though stories are the inevitable results of action," she writes, "it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and 'makes' the story" (Arendt, 1998, pg. 192). While Buddy Deeds may have lived a life, made decisions, and witnessed at least a portion of the consequences, the burden of meaning-making falls to Sam, the investigator, who compiles the elements of his father's story and decides how it ought to be told.

Rather than forgetting a debt, forgiving seeks to understand why and how it came to exist in the first place. In order to do this, the *remembering* subject must try to suspend her temporal position, resituating herself to the best of her ability in the uncertainty of the time and place she hopes to represent. In other words, the storyteller must imagine herself as *actor*, if only to trace the timeline from within, looking forward, rather than from beyond and above, able to assess the narrative holistically. When this exercise is completed, the storyteller-actor may come to understand the true actor as a real, three-dimensional human being, divorced from its two-dimensional, memorialized caricatures, and existing in a world where action and outcome are still very much in doubt. Sayles uses this concept as the driving force of his film, primarily through Sam, but also through Pilar and Delmore. During a scene set in Mercedes' café, for instance, Pilar pushes her mother to open up about her own history:

> Pilar: I was wondering if you wanted to take a trip down south with us… maybe see where you grew up?
> Mer: Why would I want to go there?
> Pilar: You must be curious how it's changed? Amado's [her son] into this big tejado roots thing, and I've never been further than Cuidad Leon.
> Mer: You want to see Mexicans? Open your eyes and look around you! We are up to our ears in them. (Sayles, 1996)

Just as the town's older residents are reluctant to recall the events surrounding the death of Sheriff Wade, they also demonstrate reluctance to open up about their personal lives, even as their loved ones seek to understand them. Whereas Pilar is interested in her mother's life as a sort of secondhand learning experience—as a storyteller-actor seeking to understand a history from within, yet still *as history*—Mercedes can remember her life only from the actor position. For her, memory exists as a still-fresh record of action within uncertainty, complete with the resultant happiness and tragedy, not to mention the guilt associated both with her affair and the secrecy that envelopes it. If not especially ashamed of the act itself, Mercedes is clearly bothered by the necessity of lying about it to her daughter, the physical embodiment of her love for Buddy. While Pilar seeks her mother's past as a means to knowing her more closely, Mercedes resists that past because of the destructive power it may still hold over the present—the implicit threat of an unforgivable sin.

For Delmore, forgiveness is a desired, but initially unreachable option. Still angry at his father for deserting him as a child, Delmore enters the film with the declaration that he will not see Otis, much less forgive him. When a soldier is assaulted at *Big O's*, however, Delmore uses the incident as an opportunity to pay an "official" visit, inquiring about the bar and Otis' history as owner-operator, getting a sense for who his father is along the way. While Otis is more open than Mercedes, he does not make a serious attempt to win his son's favor. Instead, he emphasizes the unpredictable character of life as he has lived it, as well as the nuance of human action:

> Delmore: I hear they call you the "Mayor of Darktown."
> Otis: Over the years, this has been the one place that's always been there. I loan a little money out, I settle a few arguments. I got a cot in the back—when folks get scared they can spend the night. There's not enough of us to run anything in this town. It's Holiness Church… or Big O's.
> Delmore: And the people make a choice?
> Otis: Most of 'em choose both. You see it's not like there's a borderline between the good people and the bad people. You're not on either one side or the other.
> Delmore: (Sarcastically) Right. (Sayles, 1996)

Much like Arendt, Sayles suggests throughout *Lone Star* that forgiveness is impossible without understanding, and that understanding is impossible without immersion. While the storyteller may claim to understand his protagonist, he cannot really understand her unless he has walked a mile in her shoes, doing so with the active suspension of his foresight, so that the road is not necessarily flat and the curves may appear without warning. Though it is difficult to know for sure whether the exercise has been successful, it is easier to recognize when it has failed—namely, whenever a figure appears with *absolute* qualities. When Otis declares, "it's not like there's a borderline between the good people and the bad people," he seems to indict all easy distinctions—between Mexican and Texan, bar owner and churchgoer, sinner and saint. Much like the invisible line that follows the Rio Grande, each individual is invisibly divided, containing both positive and negative characteristics. Any description that privileges the one at the expense of the other is necessarily incomplete. It is

with this idea in mind that Sam becomes continually frustrated in his attempt to understand his father, described by some as a hero and others as a villain:

> Hollis: Your father had the finest sense of justice of any man I've ever known.
> Sam: Yeah, and my mother was a saint. For fifteen years the whole damn town knew that he had another woman on the side. He stole $10,000 to set her up in business, but hell, what's that? You gotta problem? Ol' Buddy'll fix it! You facin' some time in jail? Buddy'll knock half of it off if you do what he says when he says. You got some business that's not exactly legal? Just talk to Buddy.
> Hollis: Buddy Deeds –
> Sam: Buddy Deeds was a murderer. (Sayles, 1996)

Up until the moment he finally learns the details of Charlie Wade's death, Sam is willing to embrace a solely negative understanding of his father's life, an understanding congruent to his own anger at Buddy's apparently racist opposition to his relationship with Pilar. While this may have fit comfortably with Sam's resentment, reinforcing his grievance in a debtor-creditor relationship, it also reflects a refusal to accept his father as a human being operating within tentative circumstances. When Hollis and Otis come clean, however, providing the ultimate pieces of Sam's puzzle, he is finally able to see the barroom in that place and time, and through his father's eyes, allowing him to understand and to forgive. Freed from exaggerated assessments on both ends of the spectrum, Sam is able to let Buddy go, releasing the control his memory has exerted over Sam's adult life. "When word gets out who the body was," Hollis says, "People are gonna think Buddy done it." "Buddy's a goddamn legend," Sam replies. "He can handle it" (Sayles, 1996).

Creating

While *forgetting* and *forgiving* differ from each other, as well as from their respective relationships to similar but distinct understandings of promise-making, they are related in that they both privilege the *remembering* subject over the *acting* subject. Both Nietzsche and Arendt allow that the backward-looking subject has choices to make—choices that constitute agency. While past events may have a "true" essence—they may have occurred in

one specific way, rather than others—this essence is largely unknowable. Further, the past is most urgently relevant to the present insofar as it continues to exert power, and the present is the realm of those who live there, as well as the realm of rhetoric. Early in the film, as Pilar meets with members of the local Parent Teacher Association, the conversation reveals creative agency in action. While each of the represented perspectives has a legitimate claim to inclusion in the story, few are satisfied with sharing:

Anglo, Female Parent:	Tearin' everything down! Tearin' down our heritage, tearin' down the memory of people who fought and died for this land!
Mexican, Male Parent:	We fought and died for this land too. We fought the U.S. Army! The Texas Rangers!
Anglo, Male Parent:	Yeah and you lost, buddy! Winners get the braggin' rights— that's just the way it goes.
Anglo, Male Principal:	People, I think it would be best if we don't view this in terms of winners and losers.
Anglo, Female Parent:	Well the way she's teachin' it has everything switched around. I was on the textbook committee, and her version is not what we—
Anglo, Male Principal:	We think of the textbook as a guide, not as an absolute.
Anglo, Female Parent:	It's not what we set as the standard! Now, you people can believe whatever you want. But when it comes to teachin' *our* children—
Mexican, Female Parent:	They're *our* children too, and as a majority in this community we have the right—
Anglo, Male Parent:	Yeah, well the men who founded this state have the right— the right to have their story told how it happened, not how someone *wanted* it to happen.

Danny, Reporter:	The men who founded this state broke from Mexico because they needed slavery to be legal to make a fortune in the cotton business.
Pilar:	I think that's a bit of an over-simplification. (Sayles, 1996)

As the dialogue reveals, each of the teachers frames the story of Texas with overt reference to race and nationality as they exist in the present. Instead of arguing that *Mexicans* fought the Texas Rangers one hundred years ago, the Mexican father states that "we" fought them, creating a direct, racialized association between past and present. Likewise, when an Anglo mother speaks about how history will be taught to "our" children, a Mexican mother immediately understands the term racially, replying that they are "our [Mexican] children too." Raising his voice to declare that history must be relayed "how it happened," an Anglo father reveals his own personal, racialized, and nationalized investment while attacking such investments on the part of others. In sum, as a microcosm of the tense relations throughout the town and region, this meeting demonstrates *rememberers as choosers*, or in other words, creative agents in dialogue with history.

For Nietzsche, creativity is the definitive feature of human subjectivity, far superior to knowledge, or what people claim as *truth*. Whenever we think we have identified a truth, he argues, we are merely discovering compatibility among referents, an aligning of concepts—concepts that we created when we agreed upon terms. Even if it is "true" that the Alamo was defended primarily by brave, Anglo-Texans, this can only be true to the extent that terms like *brave, Anglo, Texan,* and *defend* have absolute value. But anyone who travels across the linguistic borderline into Mexico will quickly learn that linguistic concepts are only true insofar as they are agreed upon, and agreement is far from universal. Language, Nietzsche argues, is an example of human creativity operating in service to humans. It is functional, malleable, and specifically designed to serve a particular group of people. Therefore, language is always already rhetorical. Indeed, language *is* rhetoric (Thomas, 1998; Whitson and Poulakos, 1993).

Nietzsche is able to equate language with rhetoric because he dismisses the most notable difference between them: though language is broadly perceived as a tool for seeking out and unveiling

truth, Nietzsche argues that its very nature is engineered to unveil the most *beneficial* truth, and this innate attention to value tilts the balance toward persuasion. In Nietzsche's words, man "longs for the pleasant, life-preserving consequences of truth; he is indifferent to pure, inconsequential knowledge; toward truths which are perhaps damaging or destructive, he is hostile" (Nietzsche, 1989, pg. 248). As an anthropocentric—or anglo -, latino-centric—entity, language offers itself as a tool for man's survival.

Assuming language is rhetoric, and rhetoric is an art, the human subject—from which language springs—becomes a distinctly *creative* subject. Words, the supposed building blocks of truth, are simply manmade signifiers, metaphors that bear no innate resemblance or connection to the objects they represent, and which are completely incapable of unlocking an essence. But this distance between signifier and signified wears away over time and repetition, until the two are perceived as one, and the speakers of language forget that the divide ever existed. Through forgetting, in this sense, the illusion asserts itself as truth, and man, who is comfortable with this truth as it relates to himself, accepts it as such. Much like someone who "hides an object behind a bush, then seeks and finds it there," humanity affirms the truths that it generated previously, forgets the process, and credits each disclosure to the nature of the universe itself (Nietzsche, 1989, pg. 251).

The most interesting aspect of Nietzsche's idea is that man lays claim to his peace of mind, not by *asserting* his control over language and truth, but by *relinquishing* it. In fact, Nietzsche argues, "only insofar as man forgets himself as a subject, indeed as an *artistically creative* subject, does he live with some calm, security, and consistency" (Nietzsche, 1989, pg. 252). Though humans continue to make unprecedented strides in their understanding of reality, they do not embrace their creative agency with regard to truth, and there remains a nostalgia for a world in which truths are concrete, though hidden; a world in which knowledge must be discovered rather than created. Man longs to believe in the stability of his own preeminence, and that stability is only possible if truth is larger than man.

In their discussions of the Alamo—as in their discussions of Buddy Deeds—Sayles' characters are generally defined by self-interested dishonesty. While many of them are able to recognize this quality in others, few are willing to see it in themselves. For

Nietzsche, these tense, divisive arguments over the *true story* of this or that event are both ridiculous and self-defeating. Even if people could know what *really happened* in a certain historical setting, their knowledge would only exist within the confines of a particular language system—a system that is inevitably adapted to fit the needs of a race, a nation, a culture, a generation, etc. In billing themselves as pure, unqualified truth, each of these perspectives necessarily becomes a lie, at least in the "extra-moral" sense—a purposeful lie that is widely believed, even by its tellers.

These quarrels could all be resolved, Nietzsche argues, if human agents would simply admit that the truths to which they cling are socially constructed, that the hard realities of past events are ultimately insignificant, having been dominated by the rush to impose meaning upon them. The issue of who did what to whom during the Mexican War, for instance, should not remain raw and unresolved 150 years after its conclusion. It is, however, because meaning is ascribed retroactively, and so meaning outlives events. The result is a struggle for the right to impose—to create—a truth, rather than the right to defend one that exists *a priori.* The Alamo is more important to the generations that followed than it ever could have been for the one that witnessed it, because of the intimate relationship between meaning and power. As Arendt argues, the "boundless" quality of action can still be experienced long after the initial act is completed. But, as Nietzsche argues, it still takes an agent to decide what that action means.

For Sam Deeds, on a personal level, the shooting of Charlie Wade is important because of what it means in the present. Given Wade's history of corruption and murder, there is no pressing desire to bring his killer to justice*,* but the details surrounding his death may help Sam better understand his father. In his professional capacity, however, Sam states on several occasions that he is dedicated to revealing the truth, indicating that truth is important and meaningful in itself. When Danny, a local reporter, states his view that the town should "know the full story on Buddy Deeds," Sam agrees, replying, "that makes two of us." Speaking to Hollis on the dock by Lake Pescadero, Sam states that, "people have worked up this whole big thing around my father, and if it's built on a crime, they deserve to know." Those with firsthand knowledge of the shooting reserve the right to disagree. Hollis, seated in his fishing boat, replies, "Hey, look at all this, will ya? Tackle, boat. All just to catch a little 'ol fish mindin' his

own business down at the bottom of the lake. Hardly seems worth the effort, does it, Sam?" In the end, when Sam finally learns the specifics about Charlie Wade's death, his decision to forget—and in some ways, to forgive—is indicative of a changed perspective. No longer insistent on the value of truth for truth's sake, Sam concludes that reality is essentially a matter of interpretation, and he chooses to accept the subversive account—strictly speaking, the *lie*—because it is appropriate for the present. In doing so, Sam embraces his role as creative agent, choosing to dominate language and interpretation, rather than being comfortably dominated by them. "As time went on," says Hollis, "people liked the story we told better than anything the truth might have been" (Sayles, 1996). Through his complicity, Sam agrees that, in this case, creativity is better than truth.

Conclusion: History and Agency

While the doctrine of *tabula rasa* never gained widespread currency as a philosophical concept, its core principles are still widely and unquestioningly embraced. Foremost among these is the suggestion that humans are comparable to slates, receivers and hoarders of information from *without*, rather than artists and developers of meaning from *within*. From this vantage, we live under the assumption that truth exists in absolute terms, and that we exist in order to discover it. By the time the credits role on John Sayles' *Lone Star*, however, these assumptions are no longer free to travel unchallenged. When Pilar sits by Sam at the old drive-in in the closing scene, the power of conventional truth over people is tested and rejected.

Sam: Do you have any idea when your father died? Eladio?
Pilar: A couple of months before I was born.
Sam: Try… a year and a half… [Shows her an old photo of Buddy together with Mercedes] Buddy bought the café for her with money he took from the county.
Pilar: You can't pull this on me. It's not fair. I don't believe this.
Sam: He paid the hospital bill when you were born. Your mother always calls you "our beautiful daughter" in the letters she wrote to him.
Pilar: When I first saw you in school… all those years we were married to other people… I always felt like we were… connected.

Sam: I remember thinking that you were the one part of my life that Buddy didn't have a piece of.

Pilar: I can't have any more children. After Amado was born there were some complications. I can't get pregnant, if that's what this rule is about… So that's it? You're not going to want to be with me anymore?

Sam: Even if I met you for the first time today, I'd still want to be with you.

Pilar: We'll start from scratch. All that other stuff—all that history—to hell with it, right? Forget the Alamo. (Sayles, 1996).

Forgiving and forgetting demonstrate that most sins of the fathers—including those surrounding the Alamo and the shooting of Charlie Wade, for example—can be dispensed with through an act of concerted will, and the effects of past action can be overcome in present, interpersonal relationships. But in accepting these modes of creative agency as valid, it would be a mistake to minimize or dismiss the effects that they seek to address. As a reminder of this, Sayles offers Sam and Pilar—two mature adults, friends and lovers, who learn at mid-life that they share the same father. For the viewer, the immediate assumption that likely accompanies this revelation is that Sam and Pilar must now end or change their relationship, according to societal dictates. There is no denying their shared parentage—it is a reality, a truth—and it must be accepted. However, Sayles chooses to end *Lone Star* with a shocking decision. When Sam and Pilar decide to continue in their love, the viewer finds herself asking if they can be serious, wondering privately, *Can they do that?* The answer, Sayles suggests, is *yes, they can*. In choosing to "forget the Alamo," Sam and Pilar are actually re-claiming power over it, the power to impose meaning upon the past. Having spent their entire lives being dominated by forces supposedly beyond their control, they have finally learned the value of agency, the ability to take control of their lives and to live in true freedom, above and beyond the "prison fortress" of history. As Nietzsche puts it, "That enormous structure of beams and boards of the concepts, to which the poor man clings for dear life, is for the liberated intellect just a scaffolding and plaything for his boldest artifices. And when he smashes it apart, scattering it, and then ironically puts it together again, joining the most remote and separating what is closest, he reveals that he does not need the emergency aid of poverty, and that he is now guided not by concepts but by intuitions" (Nietzsche, 1989, pg. 255).

As a practical matter, the utility of Sayles' insight is perhaps harder to assess. Early in the 2020s, much American public discourse is enmeshed in the same sort of national, historical, and racial controversies that defined the 1990s. The southwest border remains a focal point, of course, and the confederate memorials prevalent throughout the southern states have prompted similar conversations about history, tragedy, and justice. Out of this contested state of affairs has risen a fierce debate over Critical Race Theory, a necessary but often garbled conversation that has so far produced more heat than light in many public venues (Hannah-Jones, 2019). If *Lone Star* can be understood to suggest that these cycles are breakable—and I have argued that it can—the film stops short of claiming that they can be broken *easily*. On the contrary, Sayles' characters are persistently engaged in the deep and difficult work of study, analysis, and deliberation, struggling always against the claims, interests, and investments that complicate even good faith efforts at understanding. And while Hollis, Otis, Sam, and Pilar ultimately conspire in forgiving and forgetting the past, they are free to do so only upon learning the particular details of the relevant events—details that largely absolve, or at least humanize, their loved ones. In this, Sayles has perhaps stacked the deck somewhat, allowing for a cleaner resolution than that available to the descendants of unrepentant slaveowners and their slaves, for instance. Still, the conversations and confrontations that grind slowly toward reunion in *Lone Star* are compelling enough to suggest that clear communication and creative rhetoric are equipped to initiate liberatory change. The story's finale lends itself to a Nietzschean or an Arendtian moral, but its narrative arc insists that such outcomes must be pursued doggedly and earned.

Though painful, this process of public deliberation and introspection is indispensible to closure. To manage it at scale, the citizens of the United States may need some sort of formal Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to parse the relevant questions of our shared past and draw the most reasonable conclusions about the paths forward (Beitler, 2013). Similar efforts have proven productive in dozens of nations—notably including South Africa, Argentina, and Rwanda—with histories of systemic oppression and brutal violence. By offering the victims of these systems a space in which to share and enter their stories into the public record, a TRC creates a sympathetic but structured environment for the finding and discussion of facts, the airing of grievances, and perhaps, the initiation of healing (Souli, 2020). Without a doubt, such an initiative in the United States would be

controversial, and recriminations would flow feely for the duration. Given the ubiquity and duplicity of the Internet, counter-narratives would fly. And yet the challenges posed by this work in this nation at this historical moment are not different in kind from those arising in any other time and place, or any less urgent to engage. For all of their differences, both Nietzsche and Arendt suggest that history must be confronted before it can be overcome; must be understood and in some measure agreed upon before it can be left behind. This is the only way that shocking conclusions can be reached, especially when such conclusions are most urgently required.

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