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"I'm Just a Cowboy": Transnational Identities of the Borderlands in Tommy Lee Jones' *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*.

1   This article regards the contemporary "border" Western, *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005), as a transnational film. Aside from the collaboration of U.S. and Mexican personnel on the film's production – the screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga, a number of the actors, creative contributors, and technicians are Hispanics – there is a stylistic acknowledgement of transnationality in the fact that the film's dialogue is in both English and Spanish. The same is true of the chapter headings that announce the sections of the film. It can also be considered transnational in its presentation of cultural identity. In part, it deals with the various ethnic groups – Hispanic, Chicano, Mestizo, and Mexican – that the "official" history of the borderlands so often neglects, and that, so the charge goes, the frontier mythology and the Western genre often reduce to Orientalist, unflattering, or outright insulting stereotypes. Not only does *Three Burials* explode such stereotypes – it explodes the whole notion of a "border" through its presentation of various characters and their relationships, all of which cross "borders" of one kind or another: marital, lawful, political, social, economic, cultural, or racial.

2   This article offers a close textual analysis of *Three Burials*, exploring some of the different narrative strategies employed by the film's director and star, Tommy Lee Jones, in his realisation of Arriaga's script. It considers the film's formal characteristics and its thematic content, suggesting that both aspects utilise the plot motifs and iconography of the traditional Western genre in order to self-consciously address the relationship of the frontier mythology and the borderlands, particularly these aspects that focus on the figure of the Anglo-American hero. The article argues that these two interrelated, though hardly indistinguishable, aspects of *Three Burials* constitute a deliberate deconstruction of this mythology. This, in turn, illuminates the film's transnational re-visioning of the region's cultural geography in terms that coincide with the views of scholars such as Patricia Nelson Limerick and Gloria Anzaldúa.

3   As a historian, Limerick has long asserted the need for a more complex and more honest understanding of the borderlands. She argues that, for much of the twentieth century, Anglo-America has been "fixed on the definition of the frontier drawn from the imaginative reconstruction of the story of the United States and its westward expansion" (Limerick, *Something* 87). Like many scholars writing under the collective banner of the New Western History, Limerick seeks to deconstruct the "interpretive straightjacket" of Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis" (Etulain 108). Interestingly, she points out that, despite the "spectre" presented by Turner, "North America has, in fact, had two strong traditions in the use of the term" (Limerick, *Something* 87). On the one hand, of course, there is the "idea of the frontier" which, as an "extremely well established … cultural common property," pertains to a Turnerian ideal, a space "where white settlers entered a zone of 'free' land and opportunity" (Limerick, *Something* 87). On the other, she describes a much less familiar, though "much more realistic usage of *la frontera*," which describes the cultural complexities and personal experiences along "the borderlands between Mexico and the United States" (Limerick, *Something* 87-88).

4   As a concept, *la frontera* stands opposed to the frontier's "imaginative reconstruction" by giving the lie to its grand narrative of optimism and of hardy pioneers transforming wilderness into civilisation. Instead, the concept exposes a darker, more complex "legacy of conquest" (using Limerick's own terminology), including ethnic cleansing, expropriation, and environmental despoliation. Its story is driven less by dashing Anglo-American heroes on horseback than by brutal monopolists, exploiters, and warmongers – men whose twisted

ideals left little room for morality. According to Limerick, it is this complex descriptive that constitutes the "real"history of the American West. Consequently, when it comes to a historical reassessment of the borderlands through *la frontera*, Limerick insists upon there being "no illusion of vacancy, of triumphal conclusions, or of simplicity" (*Something* 88).

5   Limerick presses the importance of the history of the borderlands as part of the complex cultural geography of the United States. "The [Anglo] American conquest of the borderlands [is] an essential element in the story of expansion," she insists, "to be compared and contrasted with the conquest of Indians" (Limerick, *Legacy* 253-54). She further suggests that, for much of the twentieth century, "Hispanic history remained on the edges of Western American history" (*Legacy* 253-54). Her approach is one which seeks to highlight the cultural-ideological machinations that lay behind this elision from the "official" discourse, and which seeks to re-engage the reader with a Hispanic culture now in its "proper place at the centre of Western American history" (*Legacy* 255).

6   With specific regard to *la frontera*, it is Limerick's belief that "the conquered and controlled borderland continued to exist only in the imagination . . . the Mexican border was a social fiction that neither nature nor people in search of opportunity observed" (*Legacy* 251). She draws our attention to the contemporary borderlands as a troubled region with ongoing "conflicts over the restriction of immigration, with disputes over water flow and environmental pollution"; ultimately, she describes "a zone where an industrialised nation shares a long land border with a nation much-burdened by poverty" (Limerick, *Something* 88).

7   Anzaldúa's poetic and highly personalised writing further illuminates Limerick's descriptions of *la frontera's* "legacy of conquest" by shifting the traditional parameters of historiographic concern. She displays a sense of the frustration and fear held by the local communities – the "little people" – among whom she lived and grew up and with whom she identifies her personal history. Her reminiscences of her childhood and self-identification with cultural otherness as a *mestiza* share pages with long passages of non-translated Spanish dialogue, thus ramifying the reality of the borderlands as linguistically polyglot, a "melting pot" of myriad cultures, identities, and voices – voices that have, themselves, invariably become subsumed under the "official" Anglo-American discourse. The result of her work is part poetry, part literary criticism, and part history. Of course, the fact that Anzaldúa does write in Spanish as well as English (and other indigenous languages such as Nahua) provides us with an analogue to *Three Burials'* own dialogism. But this is not the only point of comparison.

8   Anzaldúa writes from the perspective of an intellectual who is at once a woman, a *Tejana*, and a lesbian. Therefore, for her, borders are primarily cultural. Just as the border between the U.S. and Mexico defines the two nations in geo-political terms, so it symbolises the imagined borders separating cultural identities. Anzaldúa's perspective is that of a member of several ethnicities who have suffered from discrimination and who continue to struggle for recognition. She also identifies herself as a Chicana, one of the "dispossessed," whose ancestors "lost their land and, overnight, became foreigners" after the "white imperialist takeover" and who are now regarded as interlopers in their own land (Anzaldúa 28). In order to consolidate their hegemony, the Anglo-American population has either forgotten that the Chicanos once "owned" the country or else bluntly claim that the Southwest is theirs by right of conquest and is to be protected by force from the "incursion" of the Mexican "other."

9   What she seeks to remind us is that one hundred and fifty years ago the border separating Mexico and the U.S. simply did not exist and the people of the area moved across the Rio Grande at will – in some indigenous cultures they still do. Her account of the contemporary borderlands, however, is one of trauma for those "*mojados*" who, "without the benefit of bridges . . . float on inflatable rafts across *el rio Grande*, or wade or swim across naked, clutching their clothes over their heads" (Anzaldúa 33). For her, the U.S-Mexico border,

> *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it haemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country - a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of revision. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live

here: the squint-eyed, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal." Gringos in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens, - whether they posses documents or not … The only legitimate inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites. Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus. Ambivalence and unrest reside there and death is no stranger. (25-26)

10   Anzaldúa's language elicits a powerful imagery of the border as an open wound – "*una herida abierta*" – her emotive language exploding the repressed history of the U.S.-Mexico border. This finds a consonance with Limerick's idea of the border as a "social fiction". However, for the tens of thousands of people – "*los atravesados*" – who attempt to cross it illegally year-in year-out, this "fiction" seems all too real:

Barefoot and uneducated, Mexicans with hands like boot soles gather at night by the river where two worlds merge creating what [Ronald] Reagan calls a frontline, a war zone. The convergence has caused a shock culture, a border culture, a third country, a closed country. (33)

11   Anzaldúa conflates the personal with the political, thereby casting doubt over the possibility of a stable subjectivity. Identity proves as porous and uncertain as the concept of a border that cleanly and unambiguously separates nations, the "Third World" from the "first." Her conception of a "border culture" borne painfully of an uneasy synthesis between "two worlds merging" is one that highlights the fallacy of geo-political attempts to establish a border along national or racial lines, a binary to "distinguish *us* from *them*." In *la frontera*, nothing could be further from Turner's "closed" frontier and his distinct "national character."

12   An attempt to distinguish "*us* from *them*" is personified (and undermined) in *Three Burials* through the character of Mike Norton (Barry Pepper). A bigoted and sexually-frustrated agent of the Border Patrol, Norton clearly sees himself as a defender of the Anglo-American territory who violently resists the Mexican "transgressors." For him the border must be defended with a paranoid (even pathological) zeal. In one particularly telling scene, we find Norton involved in a round-up of Mexican "border jumpers." During the group's detainment, Norton pursues a woman who attempts to flee; after a lengthy chase he launches himself at her, roughly tackling her to the ground and punching her hard in the face, breaking her nose.

13   Overall, the film's depiction of the brutalisation of "border jumpers" at the hands of the Border Patrol, combined with the establishment's callous attitude toward the eponymous Melquiades "Mel" Estrada's (Julio Cesar Cedillo) death, comprise a shocking indictment of Anglo-America's relationship with Mexico. Indeed, the official response to Mel's death exposes a cynical racist dictum: "Your life only matters if you are white." The metonym is reinforced during the scene at the graveyard. When asked by the grave digger what Mel's surname is, Deputy Antonio (Brent Smiga) merely shrugs his shoulders and replies, "Mexico?" It is as if, as a nation, Mexico is to be regarded as one homogenous mass. As individuals, one Mexican is the same as another and, perhaps: "The only good Mexican is a dead Mexican"? This callousness is summarised neatly in a subsequent scene that depicts Mel's grave, where the smallest of markers simply reads: "Melquiades, Mexico."

14   Scholars like Limerick and Anzaldúa have sought a less culturally anaemic and more socially relevant set of discourses on the borderlands. As far as Limerick is concerned, such discourses remain predominantly ethnocentric in character and are written by and for Anglo-Americans. "If the idea of *la frontera* had anywhere near the standing of the idea of the frontier," she argues, "we would be well launched toward self-understanding, directed toward a realistic view of this nation's position in the hemisphere and in the world" (Limerick, *Something* 88).

15   When it comes to popular culture's role in facilitating this "realistic view," Limerick has been far from optimistic. For her, Hollywood has done little to critique the frontier myth. On the contrary, she insists that, historically, the Western genre has actively and straightforwardly endorsed *and* engendered a triumphalist Anglo-American perspective. Its imagined recreation of the frontier is one that consistently fails to deal with what she calls "the risks inherent in the word" that work as a "reduction of a multisided convergence of various peoples into a model of the two sides of a frontier line" (*Something* 94). Where she places Hollywood's West as something firmly enthralled to the "fantasy" of the mythic frontier, the complex "reality"

of *la frontera* typically remains, for her, outside the genre's dominant ideological purview (*Something* 88-92).

16   It should not be enough, however, to consider the Western genre as either historically vacant or ideologically monolithic: a tawdry form which endlessly replicates the mythic binarism and triumphalism of Anglo-American frontier narratives. Such beliefs underestimate the enormous complexity with which the myth is dealt with in the genre and disregard the ideological contradictions and transnational concerns inherent even in some of the most ostensibly triumphalist and ethnocentric of Westerns. Naturally, Limerick is not oblivious to the complex movements within some spheres of popular culture, and I in no way wish to accuse her of a "blinkered" perspective. In fairness, she makes both an appeal to, and a prediction of, historical transfers into North America's collective conscience:

> If the velocity of the movement of ideas from frontier historians to popular culture remains constant, somewhere in the next century, we might expect the popular usage of the word [frontier] to begin to reckon with the complexity of the westward movement and its consequences. Somewhere in the mid-2000s, the term might undergo a crucial shift, toward the reality of *la frontera* and away from the fantasy of the frontier. That shift in meaning will be the measure of great change in this nation's understanding of its own origins. (92)

17   In light of a film like *Three Burials*, Limerick would appear somewhat prescient in her remarks. And one can certainly consider *Three Burials* one of a small but growing number of films that offer an imaginative and a highly-critical reassessment of the mythology of the American frontier as the Anglo-centric "story of the United States" by intentionally foregrounding the formal and thematic limitations of its terms.

18   In the discussions of the so-called "contemporary" Western, John Sayles' masterful *Lone Star* (1996) remains *the* prominent and oft-cited example of transnationalism in the cinematic Western. The film highlights the intersections among racial, ethnic, and social groups by locating itself geographically along the Rio Grande, in a fictional Texas border town aptly named Frontera. In a representative scene, the town's history teacher, Pilar Cruz (Elizabeth Pena), answers angry parents' protestations regarding the possible import into the school's curriculum of Mexican and Hispanic cultures extending beyond anything other than cookery classes. "We're not changing anything," she replies, "We're just trying to present a more complete picture." In the end, this is what *Lone Star* tries to articulate – "a more complete picture" – a breaking down of borders, both geographical and cultural, as they have been established by the binarism of frontier mythology. It is, therefore, representative of the fact that the United States is a polyglot as well as culturally-diverse society, its identity "shaped" from the beginning by the interaction of different cultures (Magowan 20-31; Schultz 261-281).

19   This article contends that *Three Burials* can be read along similar lines. To a certain extent, the film does depict the borderlands as an in-between space, one that is not simply defined as a line drawn between two distinct and wholly different countries, societies, cultures. Instead, it is depicted as a space with its own character and meaning, one that is inseparable from history and myth. By applying the concept of *la frontera* to *Three Burials*, we can interpret the film's ideological agenda as one that explores the traumatic "legacy of conquest" by which the U.S.-Mexico border has been historically and geo-politically constructed asymmetrically along cultural and racial lines. It is, therefore, an important addition to the realisation of *la frontera* in popular American culture. This kind of analysis allows us to explore how this border has been ideologically reified as a binary divide through frontier mythology and used as a prism for historical (mis)understanding.

20   Perhaps the most immediately apparent of *Three Burials'* narrative strategies is the peculiar temporal and spatial disjuncture apparent in the first half of the film. This section of the story is pieced together by interspersing "contemporary" action with sequences from the past, so that we learn only very gradually what happened to Melquiades, follow ranch foreman Pete Perkins' (Tommy Lee Jones) reactions of grief and anger over his friend's untimely death, and gradually build up a picture of their initial meeting and developing friendship.

21   Typically narrated through multiple perspectives and challenging the conventions of so-called "mainstream" filmmaking, disjointed plots have become something of an authorial trademark

for Arriaga. His other notable credits as screenwriter include a trilogy of collaborations with the Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu: the critically acclaimed *Amores Perros* (2000), *21 Grams* (2003), and *Babel* (2006). All these films express, to a greater or lesser degree, transnational concerns. Arriaga's singular writing style translates into the semiotic code of the films produced from his scripts, actively confusing their visual grammar and forcing audiences and critics alike to reassess their conceptualisations of "time" and "space." In the case of *Three Burials*, it is not unusual for up to three different temporal and spatial frames to be simultaneously intermingled through multiple characters' perspectives.

22   It is well-known how sound, continuity editing, causally coherent narrative and closure, have all developed to become the established conventions of cinematic realism or the so-called classical narrative cinema (Cook and Bernink 226). This style of filmmaking has come to dominate film production in Hollywood. If Roland Barthes was correct in claiming that ideology works as a contemporary mythology, then the overall ideological aim of the classical realist aesthetic is to efface its own constructedness and to pass itself off as somehow natural. Of course, the narrative strategy apparent in the first half of *Three Burials* actively works to undermine such pretensions and, initially, draw us away from the story toward the way the story is being told, toward its arbitrariness as a textual construct.[1]

23   Taking the commonly-held position that "realism" does not reflect but rather *constructs* reality, we can say that counter-narrative or alternative styles react against the conventions of "realism," typically serving to make us more aware of these conventions and to question their ideological assumptions (Lapsley and Westlake 156-181). We should, of course, also consider the ideological implications of the counter-narrative itself. To this end, *Three Burials* displays a highly self-reflexive attitude toward the classical Western's alleged collusion between cinematic realism and frontier mythology. Consequently there is a strong intertextual relay apparent in *Three Burial's* confrontation with and contestation of these various modes of ideological expression.

24   The film's aesthetic is, as a result, essentially anti-mythic. However, such a position is no guarantor of extrication from the discourses of myth or myth-making. Nor, indeed, is it an exemption from the assertion of an ideological position. Such assertion is, of course, usually denied by the producer of artistic realism as surely as it is denied by the historiographer. However, it seems axiomatic that the revelation of an ideological position is one that is actively sought by the producer of alternative cinemas as something wilfully exposed through counter-narrative techniques rather than disavowed through causally coherent narrative realism.

25   *Three Burials* possesses a frenetic pace engendered by its formal structure, which makes it difficult to establish a coherent sense of either time or space. When related to its thematic and ideological content, these formal aspects of the film represent time and space in terms that encompass not only the geographical, but the political, the cultural, and the historical as well. Set in both Southwest Texas and Northern Mexico and including a cast of characters from both these regions, *Three Burials* actively confuses the concept of a national identity. It does this by highlighting the arbitrary nature of such identities in as much as they are defined historically by culture and race, and geo-politically through borders.

26   The film addresses these thematic concerns in terms of frontier mythology through its recourse to certain tropes, formulas, and stereotypes of the cinematic Western: the hero's "Code," the revenge motif, the shootout, the cowboy, horses, guns, the physical location of the Southwest desert and the Rio Grande, and the journey into a Mexico of the North American Imaginary (de Orellana 1993).[2] Ultimately, the film depicts communities inhabiting a cultural and geographical space which is not officially recognised by U.S. political institutions or typically explored through the discourses that narrate its history. As a consequence, it is difficult to think of the borderlands with much of a degree of sobriety. Because of this, it could be suggested that *Three Burials* exemplifies the approach adopted by David Harvey toward a philosophy of cinema.

27   "Of all the art forms," writes Harvey, "[cinema] has perhaps the most robust capacity to handle intertwining themes of space and time in instructive ways" (308). He elaborates on this by suggesting that "the serial use of images, and the ability to cut back and forth across space and

time, frees it from many of the normal [artistic] constraints" (Harvey 380). In support of his assertions, Harvey draws directly on the work of the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, particularly his concept of "poetic space" in relation to the narrative construction of individual identity. He quotes Bachelard to the effect that "We think we know ourselves in time, when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being's stability" (Harvey 217). Bachelard states very clearly that even if we want to "detach from our own history the always too contingent history of the persons who have encumbered it, we realise that the calendars of our lives can only be established in its imagery" (Leach 85). Harvey extends these ideas to encompass the cinema by suggesting that time is represented "as memories of experienced places and spaces" and, furthermore, that "history must indeed give way to poetry, time to space, as the fundamental material of social expression. The spatial image (particularly the evidence of the photograph) then asserts an important power over history" (Harvey 218).

28   Harvey's approach enables him to highlight important insights regarding the specific *potential* of cinema to signify history in terms of emotion and memory through its unique recourse to visual imagery and the editing process. Consequently, in *Three Burials* there is the appearance of a modernist-style collage of fractured memories that can be understood as attempts at capturing a "sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being's stability." These images are juxtaposed to shape a narrative complexity that weaves together a number of seemingly disparate temporal events and character motivations by focusing on a single, violent act: the death of Mel at the hands of Norton.

29   It should be noted that our access to Mel is largely mediated through the subjective memories of Pete, who acts as a prism through which we interpret and attempt to decipher the unfolding events of the narrative; other than that, we know Mel only posthumously as a corpse. It is also significant that these memories arise from a grief-stricken man whose own grasp of reality progressively deteriorates following his shock at the news of Mel's death. Therefore, the act of remembering in *Three Burials* is essentially unreliable and is accompanied by the process of mourning as an attempt to recover from a personal trauma. But for Pete, it is his very memories that actively constitute his trauma.

30   In an illuminating essay on traumatic capture in the cinematic Western, Janet Walker relays this trope's commonality within the genre as a whole. Analysing such diverse films as *The Searchers* (1956), *Pursued* (1947), *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), and *Lone Star*, she outlines in some detail the effect that the concept of trauma has on cinematic 'realism' in its profound potential for re-interpreting the history of the American West through film:

> A prominent subgroup of westerns [are] made up of what I'll call "traumatic westerns," in which past events of a catastrophic nature are represented so as to challenge both the realist representational strategies of a genre that so often trades on historical authenticity and the ideological precepts of Manifest Destiny. Traumatic westerns, it might be said, are counter-realistic and counter-historical. They are those films in which the contradictions of American conquest - a kind of generalised trauma - become invested in particular narrative scenarios. (Walker 220-21)

31   There are strong *a priori* grounds for suggesting that *Three Burials* continues in this "prominent subgroup." Pete's memories (relayed in the form of a series of flashbacks) appear to operate, not only as another counter-narrative strategy against realism, but also (by utilising the approach taken by Harvey) as cinematic examples of Bachelard's concept of "poetic space." In other words, his memories are a "sequence of fixations" through which Pete attempts to "place" his friend, as it were, and construct a sense of psychological "stability," an identity for Mel and, ultimately, himself. It is an attempt to determine "spaces of the being's stability" that are removed from temporality, contingency, and chance: "fixations" expunged from the chaotic flux of "real" experience and recast or, rather, re-remembered in mythic terms.

32   The film's self-reflexivity proves fundamental in this regard as it highlights the process whereby identity is constructed through narrative. One such indicative moment – a scene where Pete and Mel are herding cattle together – provides an example. Here, cinematographer Chris Menges' camera encompasses the epic landscape of the Texas Southwest in slow, broad sweeps. Heat-hazed long shots fix these attractive images "as memories of experienced places

and spaces," whilst composer Marco Beltrami's gentle music imbues the whole scene with a romanticised, timeless air. We then cut to a contemporary shot of Pete sitting, brooding in his lodging, at once indicating that this has been his subjective memory of Mel and not objective reality. Shot in a traditionally realist style, these memories are devoid of the disjointed editing of the film's contemporary action sequences within which they are framed and are, instead, permeated throughout with a mixture of nostalgia, eulogy, and a "black and white" morality. Even Pete's engineering of a tryst for himself and Mel with two married women, the local waitress Rachel (Melissa Leo) and Norton's own wife Lou Ann (January Jones), when depicted (or, more properly, remembered) in such terms, takes on an innocent air, despite the obvious moral issue of crossing the "border" of marital fidelity.

33   Such narrative simplicity is, of course, undercut by framing Pete's flashbacks within and (on occasion) throughout with the chronologically disjointed scenes showing the actions and memories of other prominent characters, Norton chief among them. Norton's memories clearly differ from those of Pete's in both mood and composition. Here the mythic simplicity is replaced by a series of complex, often repetitive flashbacks of the circumstances leading up to his part in Mel's death. These are relayed in disorientating fashion with staccato bursts of varying lengths that invade the contemporary action of the narrative at seemingly random points. For instance, in one scene we see Norton responding to the sound of rifle fire. He is aiming at something off-screen but there is no accompanying reverse-shot to illuminate what is contained within his point-of-view. Another quick moment revealed earlier in the narrative sees a panicked Norton burying Mel's body in a scratch-dug hole. (Of course, this is chronologically illogical as it is revealed *before* the revelation of his shooting of Mel.) Another such moment is framed between shots of Norton gazing after Lou Ann as she heads into a shopping mall, the colour of her red miniskirt apparently enough to trigger his memory: a very brief hand-held shot reveals Norton looking at his shaking, blood-stained hands as he kneels over Mel's body. A cut forward in time to a close-up shot showing Norton's pained expression, his eyes watering, not only frames the flashback but it also reveals his trauma regarding the dreadful psychological consequences of taking another man's life.

34   Walker suggests that, in "traumatic westerns . . . past events elude the realist register to suggest another way of knowing, one marked by ellipsis, uncertainty, and repetition" (220). Such marks are apparent in *Three Burials* and are relayed through its numerous flashbacks and multi-layered diegesis. Indeed, in one particular moment, the film itself becomes involved in the process of constructing historical memory in, significantly included as a (disembodied) flashback, the single scene shot solely from Mel's perspective' – this is the moment of his death. As the camera pans downward to provide an overhead shot of Mel dismounting from his horse, it is revealed that he was protecting his goats from a prowling coyote (hence the gunshots heard by Norton) and is himself subsequently gunned-down by Norton's return-fire. The tragic nature of his death is thus enhanced by the realisation that not only did he not deserve such an end but, as he lay dying, Mel never knew who or what hit him.

35   When taken together (and accepting that the structure of the film would deliberately seek to deny this possibility), these sequences revealing the moment of Mel's death constitute what one would typically refer to in the Western as the "shootout." But far from a repetition of an ahistorical genre convention, *Three Burials*' denies the viewers both the immediacy and the catharsis commonly attributed to the gunfight. In both mythic and real terms, not only is Mel's death senseless, but it becomes apparent that Norton does not really see who he is firing at either. Busy masturbating to *Hustler* when he is first alerted to the sound of rifle fire, he panics and responds with shots of his own. And, if we are to believe that he fired out of a genuine sense of self-defence, then his assigned mythical role as "villain" is hereby rendered problematic. Despite his obvious craven cowardice and generally objectionable personality, like everybody else in the borderlands, Norton exists within the chaotic, intersecting flux of emotion and action that constitutes real life. One can no more "fix" him generically than Pete can "fix" Mel's identity through subjective recollections.

36   According to Bachelard, the quality of memories is that they "are motionless," and "the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are" (Harvey 217). However, it is important

to point out that none of the flashbacks in *Three Burials* serve a traditional purpose. This is to say, none of the memories give us any objective clarity on events. Instead, they serve only to confuse, becoming thoroughly *un*sound. Norton's recollections are rendered as trauma through staccato editing and disorientating camera movement, whilst Pete's are, as the product of trauma, acts of attempted displacement. They are events re-imagined through a romantic aesthetic that is itself profoundly undermined by the confusing nature of the film's spatial and temporal narrative patterns.

37   The issue then arises as to how much we really know about Mel – nothing terribly objective at any rate. However, such subjective spatial "fixations" within the narrative as offered through Pete's memories work to emphasise his bond with Mel as something almost innocent and pure, or at least this is the indication; as something removed from the complexities and frustrations of "real" experience and laced with the harmonious simplicity of myth. They act as a counter-point to the recollections of Norton, but, despite their ostensible realism remain very much a product of the same trauma, which Walker refers to as "the catastrophic past event" (220).

38   Bachelard's and Harvey's views are perhaps best illustrated in *Three Burials* in what proves to be the last, and probably the most significant, of Pete's flashbacks. In a scene established by a shot of a lake at sunset, we find Pete and Mel sitting together gazing out across the calm waters. It is here that we gain crucial knowledge of Mel's proud boast to Pete of a home and family back in his native Mexico, a small village he calls Jimenez. Harvey's idea of the significance of the "spatial image" (specifically, the "evidence of the photograph") finds a powerful consonance here as Mel shows Pete a photograph purporting to depict himself, his wife Evelia, and their three children. It is his assertion of both an identity and of a history for himself through visual recourse to a family that he claims not to have seen in over five years.

39   As the scene continues, Mel goes on to note with unmistakable pride that his youngest son is "gonna be a damn good cowboy," and yet this pride is tempered by a constant fear of the possibility of death, a fear that we know to have been already realised. In a broader social sense, as a "wetback" Mel worries about being arrested or, worse still, shot by the Border Patrol. And it is at this point in the narrative that he asks Pete to promise that, should he die "over here," he will return his body to Jimenez. Of course, this scene is like all the others: a moment selected by Pete and re-enacted for us at a particular point in the narrative to suit a particular purpose. And this purpose is to both explain and justify Pete's kidnapping of Norton, the disinterring of Mel's body, and his immanent embarking on a quixotic journey across the border into "Old Mexico." It is not, strictly speaking, Mel's assertion then; rather, it is Pete's attempt to give his dead friend a voice – "stability" – to speak for him as it were.

40   In addition to the above, the scene provides the narrative impetus for Pete to assume the mythic role of the lone hero who will head into the wilderness in order to deal justice to his dead friend's killer. Before the flashback draws to a close, Mel draws Pete a map so he can locate Jimenez. As the narrative segues into its second half, accompanied by the inter-title "The Journey/*El Viaje*," Pete will use this map and the photograph to inform Mel's wife of her husband's passing, and honour his pledge to his dead friend.

41   Assessing the role of the hero in *Three Burials* necessarily engages us with an exploration of Pete's character. His occupation as a ranch foreman, together with his assumption of the role of heroic defender of his dead friend's honour, comprises two key elements of the Western genre: the image of the cowboy and the revenge motif. The film trades on these elements in order to present us with its particular deconstruction of frontier mythology.

42   The significance of the cowboy in relation to the Western lies at the heart of Anglo-America's myth of itself. The cowboy is usually envisioned as a lone hero on horseback, one who lives by his own honour "Code": tough, courageous, and quick on the draw. He typically defends civilisation against the savage forces of the wilderness and revenge often provides the impetus behind the hero's showdown with the villain. Ultimately, however, the hero is also a part of the world of the villain. His past, if not exactly the same, is in many ways related to this figurative savage. Consequently, the embryonic civilisation, whose very existence depends upon such a figure, ultimately rejects his violence once he has vanquished the savage forces that have threatened it. The hero is essentially an abject figure, *suffered* by civilisation and morally

ambiguous at best and a figure threatening atavistic regression at worst. With the wilderness providing him with the territory in which he can live out this mythic identity, the cowboy is thus a profoundly existential figure in a profoundly existential landscape.

43   This article has already discussed how the counter-narrative style engendered by *Three Burials'* formal strategies offer a brutal deconstruction of cinematic realism. It is ironic, therefore, that in many ways the film's most interesting aspect comes at the moment that this counter-narrative style is completely abandoned. At this intermediate point, the film segues into a more traditional aesthetic style of cinematic realism.

44   Having overheard a conversation between Sheriff Belmont (Dwight Yoakam) and Border Patrol Captain Gomez (Mel Rodriguez) that implicates Norton in the killing of Melquiades, Rachel comes to inform Pete "who killed that Mexican." Pete gazes out into the surrounding wilderness of his lonely farmstead and the romantic backdrop subsumes him, almost as if it is etching the knowledge of what he must do into his very soul. The mythic West is to provide him (or so he thinks) with the method by which Norton will be brought to justice. This is confirmed in Pete's mind when Belmont refuses his angry demand that he arrest Norton. The killing of his best friend is to be ignored by the forces of law and, with this realisation, Pete undergoes his transformation: the man who is brought to a standstill by his grief is transformed into the vengeful hero. With this we are in recognisable Western territory: when the lawful representatives of civilisation are unable, or, in this case, unwilling to mete out justice, the gunfighter springs into action.

45   In *Three Burials* it is, of course, the borderlands that provide the geography in which Pete can live out his mythic role as the hero. Its constitution of semi-arid deserts, rugged mountains, and deep canyons likens itself to the historical epic and immediately begs comparison with the aesthetic qualities of Westerns past, the Monument Valley terrain of John Ford or the apocalyptic deserts of Sergio Leone and Sam Peckinpah. The film's intertextual relay makes clear the role that the Western narrative plays, not only in structuring mythic accounts of the historical past but also in its creation of a sense of individual identity. In this regard, *Three Burials* once more refers back to the Westerns of the past: fusing existentialism with the historical epic, incorporating at once the thematic legacies of Bud Boetticher, Anthony Mann, Howard Hawks and, once again, Ford.

46   A journey into such a territory evokes a journey back in time. Pickup trucks are replaced by horses and roads are replaced by mountains and desert tracks. At times, this effect of a temporal shift is depicted in *Three Burials* with no small sense of humour. Belmont, who hates Pete mainly because both men share a relationship with Rachel (Belmont's resentment perhaps growing in the face of his own sexual impotency), accidentally drives his truck into a ditch. The pursuit of Pete is to be a horseback affair. His prowess as the leader of the manhunt is quickly ridiculed. When discussing plans to detain Pete before he can make it into Mexico, Belmont enquires hopefully of Gomez, "What about the heat-seeking radar ya'll got?" With perfect comic timing, Gomez replies, "It don't work."

47   Pete's journey is filmed with striking long-takes of mountainous terrain that dwarfs his small convoy of three horses and a pack-mule. It is at this moment that Pete's own associations with the wilderness become visually manifested: Belmont, whilst crouching from a vantage point, trains his rifle sight on Pete. He hesitates, and then releases his finger from the trigger before finally watching Pete disappear behind a rock face, as if merging with the landscape itself. Belmont's failure to shoot him reaffirms his impotency. More significantly, he is quick to realise the ethical consequences should he kill Pete. He subsequently extricates himself from the manhunt. In a more abstract sense, he extricates himself from the frontier myth, and his role in the narrative effectively comes to an end.

48   Meanwhile, Pete's journey becomes increasingly perverse. Mel's body inevitably begins to rot in the desert heat, resembling less and less the person that it once was. Pete's vain attempts to preserve the body as best he can become increasingly farcical: burning off ants with kerosene, pouring anti-freeze down the cadaver's throat, and even a drunken attempt to comb its hair with a garden fork. Such dark humour is accompanied in equal measure by more traditional moments of danger and fear. Whilst trekking round a mountain gorge, one of Pete's

horse's panics, slips, and proceeds to cascade down the edge and fall to its death. In another, particularly upsetting scene, an unnamed old blind man (Levon Helm) whom Pete and Norton come across on their journey asks Pete to shoot him because his son "has got of cancer" and "won't be comin' back" to look after him – a life lived alone and in darkness is more than he can bear.

49   Of more significance is the way in which *Three* Burials works to conflate the personal with the political. In other words, the film's ideological concern with the grand social themes of frontier mythology, justice, morality, violence, and redemption become focused on the individual. Looked at in this way, Mel's pauper life and ignominious death comes to symbolise social attitudes as a whole. His ill-treatment thus becomes a mirror reflecting broader social truths about the relations between Mexico and the U.S. In his own way, Pete tries to rectify this by inverting the terms under which the oppressor and the oppressed operate. He takes Norton to Mel's adobe hut, makes him sit in his chair, wear his work clothes, and even makes him drink from Mel's cup. It is as if by forcing Norton to exist in Mel's space, he can force him to see from Mel's perspective. Overall, it is Mel's body which best exemplifies this conflation, representing as it does the ultimate sign of putrefaction: the corpse of an unwanted and unknown *vaquero*, a horrible, rotting *memento mori* for Anglo-America to reflect upon.[3]

50   As already mentioned, it is once Pete decides to adopt the role of the hero and cast Norton in the role of the villain that the complex temporality which has dominated the narrative of the film's first part is completely abandoned. It has also been suggested that the film's assumption of the form and iconography of the Western in its second part is undertaken with the self-conscious agenda of deconstructing the genre's mythology from within. Of course, the self-conscious irony of the film's ideology would be lost if the film merely replicated the traditional narrative form and iconography of the Western. Hence, the film contradicts the myth that informed the genre it adopts in its second part. The narrative complexity remains but now it is in the contrast between form and meaning that the film acquires its depth and seriousness. Or, rather, it both deconstructs the mythology and shows, in a form that imitates the myth, the fate of the man who follows it.

51   This fate is finally laid bare when Pete arrives in Coahuilla. To his dismay, none of the locals seem to have heard of Jimenez. When Pete finally tracks down Evelia (whose name turns out to be Rosa), she claims never to have heard of Melquiades Estrada, let alone admits to being his wife. She angrily demands how Pete managed to get hold of a photograph of her and her children and that Pete leave before he gets her into trouble with her husband. (Rosa's angry reaction perhaps indicates that she may indeed have encountered Mel in a sexual capacity, but not that of husband and wife.)

52   After days of fruitless searching, Pete comes across a dilapidated old shack in the middle of the Mexican desert and proclaims it to be Jimenez. Pete's obsessive delusion has, by this point in the narrative, convinced him of the reality of the photo handed to him by Mel. Harvey writes that "photographs are now construed as evidence of a real history, no matter what the truth of that history may have been. The image is, in short, proof of the reality, and images can be constructed and manipulated" (312). We now know that Pete's only reference to the real – the photograph purporting to depict Mel with his wife and children – is revealed to be a lie. As if to confound his delusions further, he produces the photograph once more and holds it out to Norton. A reverse-shot from Norton's perspective reveals it to us in detail for the first time.[4] Aside from the fact that Pete is holding it sideways, disorientating our perception from the outset, upon close inspection the photo shows only Rosa and her three children – one has to look hard to see a shadowy figure in the far background. We presume this is Mel, but it could just as easily be anybody.

53   This harsh reality is as clear to Norton as it is to the audience, and we begin to feel a tremendous sense of sympathy for Pete's increasingly desperate situation. Pete is unable or, perhaps, unwilling to accept the truth of the situation as this would involve denying the validity of the heroic role in which he has cast himself. As Pete and Norton go about recreating Jimenez, it is, just as Harvey relates, "a willingness to search for identity, home, and history" (312). Mel may not have any of these things but Pete is determined to create them for him. His final act

is to reconstruct in the flimsiest of forms the home that Mel claimed but which did not exist. It is his final attempt to create a space of stability for the doomed man, a final resting place for his friend.

54   What of the enigma of Melquiades himself? I have already discussed how our access to him is mediated almost exclusively through Pete's subjective memories, and it is, as a consequence of this, difficult to ascertain much of his personal history. Nevertheless, one can hypothesise, and it does indeed become evident, that Mel created an imaginary home and family – a mythic "space" for himself – something he desired but which never actually existed. In relation to the North American Imaginary, Octavio Paz notes how the U.S. has defined Mexico as a place onto which its own imagined fantasies of cultural and racial otherness could be played out:

> In general, Americans have not looked for Mexico in Mexico; they have looked for their obsessions, enthusiasms, phobias, hopes, interests – and these are what they have found. In short, the history of our relationship is the history of a stubborn deceit, usually involuntary though not always so. (Paz 358)

55   If this can be said of the Americans' cultural (mis)perceptions of Mexico, then *Three Burials'* significance lies in the way it inverts this "stubborn deceit," revealing it to work equally upon Mexico's cultural (mis)perceptions of the U.S. If we reiterate Limerick's suggestion that "the Mexican border was a social fiction that neither nature nor people in search of opportunity observed," then we could say that when Mel first arrives at Pete's West Texas cattle ranch, he arrives out of two interdependent social fictions. The first of these is that which concerns the "conquered and controlled borderland," which Mel has crossed over presumably in search of work; the second constitutes the mythic discourse that has influenced popular cultural perceptions of the American West. When Mel declares – "I'm just a cowboy" – he is not only looking for employment. In mythic terms he is asserting an identity that has its roots firmly in the rhetoric of popular frontier mythology and its attendant cultural, political, and historical functions. In seeking economic and social "opportunity," he is playing into the "American Dream," itself a "social fiction" that, like the cowboy, is firmly rooted in the popular cultural mindset of America. In existential terms, Paz also relates that, in any civilisation, "[t]here is no meaning, there is a search for meaning" (353). Such sentiments relate to *Three Burials'* use of narrative to evoke its underlying tension, juxtaposing the human desire for meaning with its absence.

56   For his part, Norton is purged by confrontation with his own shortcomings. His brutal and torturous journey ends with him being forced at gunpoint by Pete to beg forgiveness for the killing of Mel. Indeed, his heartfelt and pained outpourings of grief and regret leave us with little doubt that, despite Lou Ann's declared belief, he is *not* "beyond redemption." Instead of meeting his end at Pete's hands, Norton is let go. Pete cannot bring himself to kill Norton probably because this would mean a violation of the "Code" by which Pete has constructed his heroic persona. By the same token, Norton is the enemy whose existence has defined Pete and given meaning to his mythic quest. He is also, in the final instance, the closest thing to family that Pete has. In a final touching scene moments before he leaves, Pete says to Norton, "You can keep the horse . . . son." As if to confirm his redemption, Norton calls after Pete, asking if he is "gonna be alright?" A close-up of Norton's battered face showing genuine compassion for his erstwhile captor is thus the last image we see. We are also left to ponder how he will make his way back across the border to his empty home – parted from Lou Ann, the wife who has left him to go back to the city life she had abandoned in Cincinnati.

57   So Pete rides off, betrayed by a mythic identity that did not exist as surely as Mel's professed identity did not. He wanders into a borderland that is neither myth nor reality, nor even a conflicted mixture of the two, lying in-between – a nowhere man, a fugitive cut-off from both the U.S. and Mexico. He has lost his relationship with Rachel, who refuses to leave her husband Bob (Richard Jones) for either Belmont or Pete. Actually, Rachel comes across as the most philosophical of the characters in the film. Unlike Pete, she accepts the complex and contradictory identities that reflect the complexities of the borderlands. To her, they seem complimentary rather than contradictory, a state of mind that completely eludes Pete (and most of the other characters for that matter); she says to Pete, "You just don't understand."

Such an attitude enables her to accept Belmont's impotence and Bob's mixture of jealousy and complacency, all the while assuring Pete that "You're the one for me. The only one I love!" She will not exchange this tangible reality, nor buy into Pete's fantasy of marriage, an offer he makes from across the border when drunk. Thus Rachel shatters Pete's last-ditch effort to realise a mythic identity and completes his personal failure. He has become a lost soul, like Ethan Edwards at the conclusion of John Ford's *The Searchers*: unmoored in a figurative borderland, unable to adapt to civilisation, and, ultimately, lost in the wilderness.

58   The overall tone of *Three Burials* might strike one as rather melancholic. If this is so, it is because the latent history of the borderlands forms a major part of the vast "legacy of conquest" that characterised the Anglo-American settlement of the West. The New Western History is surely correct in suggesting that, for the most part, official history sought to conceal the brutal acts of conquest required in advancing U.S. claims of national, cultural, and racial hegemony throughout the Southwest. It is of little surprise therefore that the issue of the U.S.-Mexico border has received scant attention in popular culture, let alone the Western genre. This article concludes with a reiteration of Limerick's insistence that, for much of the twentieth century, "Hispanic history remained on the edges of Western American history." As already discussed, her account is one which highlights the cultural-ideological machinations that lay behind this elision from the "official" discourses of history, seeking to re-engage her readers with a Hispanic culture now in its "proper place at the centre of Western American history." However, if the fates of the various characters in *Three Burials* teach us anything, it is that we should be wary of claiming a centre of history, especially along the contentious borderlands. In this regard, Paz alludes to the notion of a de-centred subject, suggesting that social alienation "is now a condition shared by all men":

> We Mexicans have always lived on the periphery of history. Now the centre or nucleus of world society has disintegrated and everyone – including the European and the North American – is a peripheral being. We are all living on the margin because there is no longer any centre. (170)

59   Such seems to be the fate of Pete and Mel, although it relates to all the characters, the differences are only of degree. The characters that populate *Three Burials'* spaces play out international issues as personal traumas. This is done through recourse to a dangerously outmoded grid of cultural references informed by the American frontier. Of all the characters, Pete suffers from its effects most directly. Unlike Rachel and even Belmont to an extent, he is, in the final instance, "inseparable from [this] fiction . . . condemned to invent a mask and to discover afterward that the mask is [his] true visage" (Paz 216).

60   However, if the narrative is a failure on an individual level, then this failure forcefully illuminates the myth of the West as a romantic delusion – "a mask" – possessing destructive power for contemporary Americans. On a broader political-allegorical, and even a deeply human level, this exposure engendered by the narrative is a success. For, in utilising the recognisable tropes and motifs of popular expressions of the frontier and subverting them, *Three Burials* suggests a broader *and* a more inclusive telling of one of the most controversial and disputed areas of the present-day U.S., and this is surely a good thing.

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Notes

1 This is undeniably a postmodern trait. However, the filmmakers' style here is not to be dismissed as mere pastiche. On the contrary, and as I go on to argue below, its portrayal of the myth of the West as a romantic delusion possessing destructive power for contemporary Americans, is rendered in terms that are too intensely serious to be regarded as pastiche. Instead, the question impressed upon us early in the film by the narrative strategy is not so much what is happening (or, rather, what has *happened*) but, rather, why is it being relayed to us in the fashion that it is?

2 De Orellana's excellent analysis looks at U.S. cinematic efforts to cover the armed phase of the Mexican revolution together with its deployment of a range of racial and gendered stereotypes by which Anglo-Americans could "read" the Mexican "other."

3 However, we should not be too quick to re-assert our own binary, depicting (albeit in inverted terms) one nation simply as victims of another's brutal oppression. Such a reading would overlook the intelligent way in which *Three Burials* operates. As Limerick rightly points out one should not slip into the habit

of "taking point of view for granted." She reminds us that "Hispanics - like Indians, Anglos, and every other group - could be victims as well as victimisers, and [that] the meanings of the past could seem, at times, to be riding a seesaw" (Limerick, *Legacy* 257). Again, it is *Three Burial's* narrative concern with borders and the crossing of those borders which illustrates this intelligence. For instance, the film is ironic in that it inverts an historical phenomenon by having its Anglo-American protagonist attempt to enter Mexico illegally. Pete enlists the help of a Mexican (the same man who, earlier, we see "helping" the group who are detained by the Border Patrol) who smuggles illegal Mexican immigrants over the Rio Grande - for a fee. Upon quoting Pete $1000 for his assistance, Pete scoffs, "I don't have a thousand dollars." "No, not one thousand," replies the smuggler, "three thousand: one for you, one for the Gringo, and one for the dead guy!" Pete eventually bargains his horse for passage but, in a broader sense, what this scene reveals is the extortionate amount "wetbacks" are charged by gangsters in this regard. As an organised crime, people trafficking is a booming economy, intimately connected to cross-border drug trafficking, and largely set up by unscrupulous Mexicans in order to financially exploit the desperation of their fellow countrymen and women.

4 In the flashback, which constitutes Pete's memory, there is a split second shot on the photograph as Mel hands it over. I would suggest that, at this point in the narrative, we have no real reason to suspect its legitimacy.

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Abstract

As a problematic in-between space of racial antagonisms, liminal identities, and violence, the borderlands of the American Southwest prove fertile grounds for scrutinising Anglo-America's national frontier mythology and, therefore, its own sense of history and cultural identity. This article explores the extent to which the "contemporary" border Western, *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005),challenges Hollywood's cinematic hegemony in this regard. It argues that with *Three Burials* comes a sophisticated challenge to the cinema's characteristic and mythic forms and to the racial assumptions that have traditionally bedevilled relations between Mexico and the USA. Transnational themes bring these issues to the fore and modify the terms in which they are represented and, therefore, imagined.

Index terms