

“I’D SELL MY SOUL AND ALL MY TRAVELLING
SHOES TO BELONG SOME PLACE”:
PASSION FISH (JOHN SAYLES, 1992)
IN ITS CONTEXTS

*“I’d Sell My Soul and All My Travelling Shoes
to Belong Some Place”:
Passion Fish (John Sayles, 1992) en contexto*

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Abstract

The election of Ronald Reagan as President of the United States in 1980 marked the beginning of a period of conflicting discourses on gender issues. Reagan had come to power advocating traditional values and a more frugal government but, upon his arrival at the White House, he adopted the moral agenda of the Christian Right while making ostentation, greed and the pursuit of wealth the most salient traits of his presidency. It seems that during the 1980s discourses swung between the superwoman archetype and the assault on women’s rights; between the deification of money-making, good looks and hedonism on one hand and a virulent reaction against women’s legal achievements on the other. However, as the decade wore on, the work of a large number of writers, filmmakers and plastic artists revealed the need to come to terms with the contradictory discourses women were being exposed to. Among these was a new generation of women writers like Dorothy Allison, Bobbie Ann Mason or Barbara Kingsolver, who offered in-depth analysis of the challenges faced by women in Reagan’s society by turning their eyes to small-town USA. Likewise, in the field of cinema, Reaganesque products like *Dynasty* (1981-1989) or *Fatal Attraction* (1987) shared US screens with a growing number of productions that rested on a new look at the rural heritage of the country and that brought to the surface a more complex negotiation of the conflict between the ongoing campaign for women’s rights and the

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conservative reaction fueled by the Reagan administration. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how two of these works, Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams* (1990) and, more particularly, John Sayles' *Passion Fish* (1992), turned their look to the regional lore of the United States as a way to engage with contemporary challenges and provide a critical awareness of the course of society at the time. Dissimilar in many respects, and not always as coherent as critics want us to believe, both stories rest on a feminized version of the parable of the Prodigal son and on rural imagery to renegotiate the legacy of the Reagan years and reimagine life anew with the complexity that women seemed to demand at the time.

Key words: US cinema, US fiction, cultural studies, John Sayles, Barbara Kingsolver, Ronald Reagan, space, regionalism, postmodernism.

Resumen

La elección de Ronald Reagan como presidente de los Estados Unidos en 1980 marcó el comienzo de un periodo de discursos contradictorios sobre cuestiones de género. Reagan había llegado al poder defendiendo los valores tradicionales y la austeridad del gobierno pero, una vez en la Casa Blanca, adoptó la agenda moral de la derecha cristiana a la vez que hacía de la ostentación, la avaricia y el ansia de la riqueza las características más destacadas de su presidencia. Parece que durante los años ochenta los discursos oscilaban entre el arquetipo de la "supermujer" y los ataques a los derechos de las mujeres; entre, por un lado, la exaltación del dinero, de las apariencias y del hedonismo y, por otro lado, una virulenta reacción contra los avances legales y sociales conseguidos por las mujeres. Sin embargo, con el paso de los años, las obras de un buen número de escritores, cineastas y artistas plásticos revelaban la necesidad de enfrentarse a estos discursos contradictorios que recibían las mujeres. Entre estos artistas se encontraba una nueva generación de escritoras como Dorothy Allison, Bobbie Ann Mason or Barbara Kingsolver que se iban a centrar en la América rural para ofrecer lúcidos análisis de los retos a los que se enfrentaban en la sociedad de Reagan. De forma similar, en el campo del cine, productos de la era Reagan como *Dinastía* (*Dynasty*, 1981-1989) o *Attracción Fatal* (*Fatal Attraction*, 1987) compartían las pantallas de cine y televisión con un creciente número de producciones basadas en una nueva mirada a la herencia rural del país, y que sacaban a la superficie el conflicto entre los movimientos por los derechos de las mujeres y la reacción conservadora alentada por la administración de Ronald Reagan. El objetivo de este artículo es ilustrar cómo dos de estos productos, la novela de Barbara Kingsolver *Animal Dreams* (1990) y, en particular, la película de John Sayles *Passion Fish* (1992), recurrían al legado rural de los Estados Unidos para examinar los desafíos del momento y ofrecer una lectura crítica del curso que había tomado la sociedad. Aunque distintas en muchos aspectos —y no siempre tan coherentes como nos quieren hacer creer los críticos— ambas historias descansan en una feminización de la parábola del hijo pródigo y en una recuperación de la imaginaria rural para renegociar el legado de Reagan y volver a imaginar la vida de nuevo con la complejidad que las mujeres parecían demandar en aquel momento.

Palabras clave: cine, narrativa, Estados Unidos, estudios culturales, John Sayles, Barbara Kingsolver, Ronald Reagan, espacio, regionalismo, postmodernismo

INTRODUCTION

Barbara Kingsolver's second novel, *Animal Dreams* (1990), tells the story of Cosima "Codi" Noline, a physician working in Tucson who drops out after her first year of residency and decides to go back to her hometown in rural Arizona where she will find her real purpose in life as she reconnects with the past and with the land. The story unfolds as Codi establishes relationships with the townsfolk. Once an outsider in her own hometown, upon her return she seems fascinated by the life of the people and, as she observes (165), what she wishes more than anything else is she "belonged to one of these living, celebrated families, lush as plants, with bones in the ground for roots." This narrative of exile and return combines effortlessly with Kingsolver's lyricism to articulate some of the feelings US citizens harbored after a decade of state-sponsored greed, competitiveness and individualism.

Animal Dreams is hardly an exception in post-Ronald Reagan USA. Kingsolver's novel came to join a vast number of cultural manifestations that called for a more cooperative and fairer society, and that tended to associate the alternatives to Reaganism with a rediscovery of the country's rural heritage. Although this movement can easily be perceived, for example, in the areas of photography, painting, music, or fashion—and although a more interdisciplinary approach would prove extremely informative—for practical reasons I will focus only on the field of narrative and, in particular, on the field of cinema and on one crucial film of the post-Reagan years, John Sayles' *Passion Fish* (1992). It is my contention that, like the contemporaneous fiction of writers like Barbara Kingsolver, *Passion Fish* offers a complex assessment of some of the contradictions and of the consequences of the Reagan ethos for citizens in general and for women in particular.

Made during the presidential campaign of 1992, *Passion Fish* betrays a compelling change in the mood of the country that crystalized with the unexpected victory of Bill Clinton in the 1992 presidential election. In its dramatization of the process whereby two equally troubled women, May-Alice (Mary McDonnell) and Chantelle (Alfre Woodward), find themselves isolated in rural Louisiana after a life of excess and self-indulgence in New

York and Chicago, *Passion Fish* emerges as a vehicle that suggests alternatives on how to rethink society away from the hedonism, the worship of wealth, and the social aloofness that characterized US society during the 1980s. In this respect, the experiences of the two female protagonists of *Passion Fish* seem to echo Codi's prodigal return to her hometown and, although changes won't come easy for these women, in the end, as Codi says upon returning to her hometown (30; emphasis in the original), they seem more than willing to "sell [their] soul and all their travelling shoes to *belong* some place."

1. FORGOTTEN ROOTS

The objective of this article is not only to offer a textual analysis of *Passion Fish* but to attempt to, however minimally, grasp some of the cultural forces at work in the United States at the turn of the decade and expose the relationships that have gone unarticulated in the descriptions of such critical period. As we will see, despite the recent reactionary campaigns to pump up the myth of Ronald Reagan, and despite the idolatry that his name triggers in the present among people from all walks of life,¹ some of the cultural expressions that surfaced during his presidency—not unlike, for example, the discourses that would eventually lead Bill Clinton to victory over Republican incumbent George H. W. Bush—suggest that US citizens demanded a different kind of politics. From a cultural studies perspective, any analysis of this kind must be accompanied by real questions about the nature of cinema and the methodology used or, otherwise, we run the risk of merely perpetuating a limited view of the social sphere that would hardly displace the dominant stories about the Reagan era that we have inherited. As a matter of fact, most of the work being done in the field of cinema from a social or cultural perspective boils down either to making films fit the straightjacket of one explanatory framework or to using them as unequivocal examples of one widespread perception of reality. That is, more often than not, what passes for cultural studies is just a simplistic illustration of the presuppositions of the researcher based on some intuitive and unambiguous connections between certain events in the film and certain events in society, without offering clear explanations as to the ways these two different spheres relate. As a

1 See, for example, Will Bunch's *Tear Down this Myth: How the Reagan Legacy has Distorted Our Politics and Haunts Our Future* (2009).

consequence, the result is often a reductionist interpretation of reality that hardly corresponds with the principles that drive cultural studies. In contrast, the researcher should endow him or herself with the right and the obligation to offer a different, more complex rendition of society by bringing into the big picture as many cultural practices as possible and establishing those relationships that can stir a different understanding of reality. By inserting the analysis of *Passion Fish* into its cultural, social and political context we can establish some of the relationships that have not been articulated in the dominant interpretations of the 1980s and thus force the context to reorganize anew.

More specifically, this article is an attempt to better understand the challenges that citizens in general, and women in particular, faced during the 1980s as a consequence of the measures adopted by the Republican governments of Ronald Reagan and, to a lesser extent, George H. W. Bush. A contextualized look at the way in which women were represented at the time—either by female or male artists—offers an understanding of how they dealt with the discourses on womanhood that emanated from the country's institutions at the time. When one thinks about the 1970s, for example, it is very likely that what most readily comes to mind is a number of grim, demoralizing events, whether the Vietnam war, the Watergate scandal, the energy crisis, or the Iran hostage crisis. Although from the perspective of the movement for women's liberation the 1970s was a decade of outstanding achievements and ever increasing visibility,² it is often presented as a catastrophic and forgettable decade that plunged the country into an economic and moral recession that was only halted by Ronald Reagan's visionary economic policy. If truth be told, Reagan's "less government" mantra was an assault on the welfare state that had been in the making since the aftermath of the Second World War.³ As Donald T. Critchlow illustrates (2007), the welfare state had proved a tough adversary for four decades but the economic downturn and the ensuing despair that

2 The Family Planning Services and Population Research Act (Title X of the Public Health Service Act), which provided access to contraceptive services, supplies and information, was passed in 1970; *Roe v. Wade* granted women the right to an abortion in the first trimester of pregnancy; universities established programs focusing on the particular experiences of women (San Diego State College was the first to establish an official women's studies program); Shere Hite published her report on female sexuality; and the first National Women's Conference, which would later become the National Organization of Women, was held in 1977.

3 See, for example, Donald T. Critchlow (2007) and Josep Fontana (2011).

came over the people in the 1970s granted the Republicans an opportunity to rationalize and implement their liberal economic (and their not-so-liberal religious) agenda. That is, by linking the recession both with the administrative state established by the New Deal (and later expanded by Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society) and with the cultural progressivism of the previous decades, the buoyant, carefree message of Ronald Reagan not only facilitated the return of the Republican Party to the White House, but also brought together two factions of the GOP that so far had looked at each other with apprehension: on the one hand, the supply-siders, an economic elite that campaigned for deregulation of the economy; on the other hand, religious fundamentalists that harangued against the so-called "moral relativism" and advocated for a return to traditional values and severe regulation of moral issues. These were two of the lines along which society would evolve during the 1980s in the United States.

Upon the Republican victory in the presidential election of 1980, Ronald Reagan's indifference towards the women's rights movement paved the way for a concerted attack on such causes as reproduction rights, affirmative action, social services, etc. However, women received highly contradictory messages that were rooted in the two faces of the Republican administration referred to above. The Reagan presidency rested on images of wealth, self-interest, greed, individualism, and economic success. Although Reagan identified himself with small-town America, his liberal economic policy devastated small-town life while idealizing financiers, stockbrokers, self-indulgence, and city life. What is more, these images coincided with the myth of the superwoman popularized by Shirley Conran and *Cosmopolitan* editor Helen Gurley Brown. The new woman of the 1980s was a modern professional liberated woman who could have it all: a handsome husband, a loving family, an expensive house, a lucrative job, a fulfilling career, and a sensational sex life.⁴ But, on the other hand, the Religious Right lobbied against women's liberation and campaigned for a return to traditional gender roles. This backlash against women has been examined in fields as dissimilar as sociology (Manuel Castells, 1997), anthropology (Carole S. Vance, 1990), and art criticism (Erika Doss, 2002), but it was a journalist, Susan Faludi, that took the concept to the mainstream in 1992. In her award-winning book *Backlash: The Undeclared War against Women*, she illustrated how

4 See Shirley Conran (1977) and Helen Gurley Brown (1982).

during the 1980s there was a counterassault on women's rights. Faludi maintains that the general message put forward by the media, politicians, psychologists, sociologists and the like was that the liberation movements of previous decades were responsible for every affliction besetting women. In other words, according to Faludi, with the ascendancy of the Republicans, the media consistently echoed the conservative discourse of GOP ideologues who, like George Gilder, harangued against feminism, and illustrated how women's advancements towards equality in the public sphere during the previous decades had robbed them of the true areas of their experience where happiness lies: marriage and motherhood.

Although women maintained that feminism had improved their lives, the general message at the time, Faludi observes (1992: 9), was that liberation was responsible for making women miserable. In the province of film, for example, Faludi painted a particularly gloomy picture. She cast all films produced at the time in the mold of Adrian Lyne's *Fatal Attraction* (1987), a film in which women appear divided into caring dutiful wives and ruthless careerists. The films from the 1980s, Faludi claims, repeated the pattern of the 1950s, few films were made about women and these gave an alluring picture of motherhood while endorsing a "you-can't-have-it-all" message. According to Faludi, in the films of the 1980s, the new aspiration for women was to abandon the workplace and return to a traditional marriage with conventional gender roles —men at work and home-maker wives— and the strong assertive women of the previous decade gave way to virtuous girls who, like Beth Gallagher (Anne Archer) in the Lyne's film, only took action when their families were threatened. In brief, the messages women received during the 1980s were highly contradictory. The ethos of individualism and public success on which the ascendancy of the New Right rested, as well as the images of narcissism and consumption conveyed by music, television shows and movies, coexisted with a vast number of popular cultural expressions that coded personal happiness in terms of heterosexual marriages, child rearing, housewifing, and white picket fences.

2. KEEP THE CHANGE

The Reagan years —during which the emphasis on appearances, success, and material wealth coincided with a conservative assault on women's rights— stirred cultural expressions that would help people digest these contradictions, and this included a repackaging of regional folklore. After all, the rural heritage and the countryside of the United States have been

continually reimagined in response to contemporary challenges, and, as the 1980s wore on, the way this was approached by a number of writers and filmmakers reveals a movement away from the dominant values of Reganism and a yearning for the myth of a simple rural life and a closer relationship with the land where cooperation—and not competitiveness—becomes the driving force of the country, and where the gains made by women and subaltern cultures are not seen as an obstacle in the way of progress and happiness but a national asset.

In the 1980s the increasingly confusing social situation—marked by the high incidence of drugs, the callousness of Wall Street superperformers, the emphasis on material wealth, the rise of a new culture of celebrity, or the shrunk living standards of the working class—may be said to account for the astonishing success of escapist fantasies like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) or *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* (1983), but it also ignited a repackaging of regional lore that shied away from the culture of self-interest and emphasized, instead, the importance of communitarian values. Films like *Country*, *Places in the Heart* or *The River*, all released in 1984, epitomize Hollywood's particular take on the rural at the time. The three films focus on the struggles of small farmers to save their farms from the banks or from the elements that are reminiscent of the many problems farmers actually faced in the 1980s due to Reagan's deregulating policy. As Kleinknecht observes (2010: 10), although Reagan appealed to rural constituencies with platitudes about small-town values, he was responsible for driving hundreds of thousands of small farmers into financial collapse while enriching large grain-trading companies. Seen in this context, *Country*, for example, is noteworthy not only for the unromantic representation of rural communities, but also for identifying them with communal resistance to dominant property relations in an era of intense anti-labor rhetoric, thus challenging the tenets behind Reagan's economic revolution.

Although they can hardly be taken as a homogeneous genre or cycle, many other films made in the 1980s and early 1990s share a similar cultural sensibility. For all their obvious differences, films like *Witness* (1985), *Stand by Me* (1986), *Bagdad Cafe* (1987), *Field of Dreams* (1989), *Steel Magnolias* (1989), *Falling from Grace* (1992), or *Gas, Food Lodging* (1992), only to mention a few, provide a critical awareness of a changing society by delving into traditional lore and local cultures. Some of these films had massive budgets while others were inexpensive independent ventures. Some were mere exercises in folksy escapism while others had recourse to rural communities to consistently condemn the greediness and the self-indulgence

of the times. Some were set in the present while others expressed a longing for the purity and the virtues of a mythical past. All in all, films like *Country*, with its images of the collective resistance of rural communities to uncontrolled capitalism, were regional in orientation but broke new ground when it came to engaging with contemporary social conditions —which also revealed the adaptability of the old conventions of regional writing to examine new social challenges. It is noteworthy, for example, that while the Reagan administration maintained that racism was no longer a matter of concern in contemporary US society,⁵ films like *The Color Purple* (1985), *Mississippi Burning* (1988) or *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989) called attention to critical racial issues and, moreover, that they chose regional settings or native landscapes. Likewise, while the Reagan administration swung between closing the eyes to homosexuality and public outraged condemnations, in *Desert Hearts* (1985), a lesbian romance is played out against the backdrop of Nevada vistas, ranches and cowboy lore.

However, it was in the field of fiction that the tendency towards regionalism was most relevant during the 1980s. The movement in literature from urban to rural concerns and from issues relating to fame and fortune to issues relating to social justice informs fiction as much as cinema, and adds unexpected depth to *Passion Fish's* narrative about two women moving from alienation and isolation to social reintegration. As a matter of fact, book critic Jonathan Yardley, probably the first one to draw attention to this phenomenon, brought together all kinds of cultural expressions, films as well as novels. Upon the release of Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* in 1984 and Carolyn Chute's *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* in 1985, Yardley wondered (in Rebein 2001: 67), "Why in a nation of yuppies, conservatives and materialists, with college campuses full of business students and future lawyers, rural poverty is all the rage?" Although at the time Yardley was inclined to see it as simply the next fad to fill the shelves of the materialistic urban crowd, when analogous novels were put out by the likes of Dorothy Allison, Larry Brown, Barbara Kingsolver, Bobbie Ann Mason, Cormac McCarthy, Larry McMurtry, or Thomas McGuane, only to mention a few, other critics offered more in-depth analyses of the relationship between the detailed representation of country life and the native landscape on the one hand and contemporary cultural, social and political events on the other.⁶

5 See William H. Chafe (1999) and Jewelle Taylor Gibbs (1996).

6 See Robert Rebein (2001) for an account of the coverage these novels received by media critics as well academic researchers at the time of their release.

Taken as a whole, the works of these writers disclose a revealing change in US fiction. They seem to combine a nostalgic, almost naïve yearning for regional realism with skepticism and loss of innocence with regard to agrarian myths and the ways rural USA had been represented. Thomas McGuane's *Keep the Change* (1989) is a case in point. Joe Starling, a successful painter living in New York that is going through a period of emotional disarray, returns to his family ranch in Montana in search of spiritual healing only to find out that the West does not correspond with the romantic notions he had harbored all through his life.

Yet, it is Barbara Kingsolver I want to draw attention to. After her first novel (*The Bean Trees*, 1988) and a short collection (*Homeland and Other Stories*, 1989), Kingsolver published *Animal Dreams* in 1990. This is probably the novel that best illustrates the way women addressed the challenges posed by the contradictions of the 1980s. Although the story is more complex than my opening words might suggest, when seen in the cultural, social and political context outlined above, Codi's return to her hometown begs to be interpreted as a reaction to and a way to tackle the morals (or rather the lack of morals) of a decade that had been characterized by the get-rich-see-pleasure ethos and by the contempt for social values. In the small rural hamlet of Grace, Codi seems to find everything her life lacked as she becomes part of the community and starts a family: she takes a teaching position at the local high school, joins a women's movement to stop a mining company from dumping chemicals into the town's irrigation water, and begins a new relationship with an old flame, which eventually leads to her falling pregnant.

3. THE MYSTERY OF AMERICAN RENEWAL

It is easy to see novels like *Keep the Change* or *Animal Dreams* as a commentary on and a reaction to the consequences of the Reagan presidency. They seem to betray the new mindset of the country, which would make itself felt a couple of years later with Bill Clinton's unlikely victory at the ballot boxes. After all, let us not forget that, while Reagan, in his inaugural address, had spoken of tax cuts, deregulation, and the end of social programs, Clinton spoke of new values and he called to invest in the people and to celebrate what he termed "the mystery of American renewal."⁷

7 See Ronald W. Reagan (1981) and William J. Clinton (1993).

John Sayles' *Passion Fish* was released in the United States only a few weeks after Bill Clinton won the 1992 presidential elections against all odds. Although one should be extremely careful before suggesting that a film is a reflection of the nation's mindset, both events might help us understand how citizens attempted to digest the Reagan legacy at the time. Like *Keep the Change* and *Animal Dreams*, *Passion Fish* rests on the parable of the Prodigal son (or the Prodigal daughter) and takes up the question of the search for a place in which to imagine life differently. In *Passion Fish*, it is a famous soap opera actress, May-Alice, that leaves New York City and returns to her family state in rural Louisiana. However, unlike Codi in *Animal Dreams*, May-Alice is not searching for a meaningful connection with the land. When the movie opens she has just been run over by a car when she was going to have her legs waxed. She becomes a paraplegic and is condemned to a wheelchair for life. Unable and unwilling to face her new condition, she returns to her hometown in an effort to withdraw from public life and drink her life away. Locked away in her old family house, May-Alice will be taken care of by Chantelle, a black nurse from a wealthy family in Chicago who is an ex-drug addict, has lost the custody of her child, and needs a job if she wants her daughter back. Both women turn out to be in a similar kind of spiritual journey, and, eventually, both overcome their isolation and inner chaos and melt into Louisiana's watery landscape.

As was noted above, *Passion Fish* can be read as an assessment of the direction taken by US society at the time. May-Alice's understanding of self-identity reflects the culture of greed and narcissism that dominated the decade of the 1980s, where individual economic achievements and outward appearances moved into the center of public concern, and she is made to emerge fatally wounded from her successful, lucrative and self-sufficient life in New York City. Her mythical journey from the rural areas of Louisiana to New York City and back home again epitomizes the disenchantment with the cultural atmosphere of the 1980s, but it is also tinted with sheer New Right logic. May-Alice is made to regret her autonomy and her public success; after all, it is from more traditional pursuits like home-making and child-rearing that women have derived their gratification and fulfillment in patriarchal societies. And yet, on the other hand, some of the questions *Passion Fish* poses demand a more complex answer: can this woman, who has become disengaged from life, cleanse herself of her experiences in New York during the 1980s and find a new life based on different principles? Will a rediscovery of the country's rural heritage and a communion with the land provide her with those

principles? In other words, given society's persistent celebration of its own mythlessness during the 1980s, can the native land still be approached as the spiritual wellspring of the country? The answers are provided through the gradual shift in the representation of space from constraining, suffocating compositions—which link the character's problems with the loss of the space around her and with the loss of culture and history—to an opening of the frame—which hints at the characters' connection with the land and with the past. The transformation of May-Alice entails a transition from seeing the world through the mediated experience of television to discovering a sense of place and of belonging. Yet, this transition, as well as its final resolution, appears complex and ambiguous.

When the narrative moves to May-Alice's family estate, it focuses on the tension between the claustrophobic mansion and the open bayou country. May-Alice returns to her hometown to die. She locks herself up in the house and refuses to do anything. Unable to face the fact that she has lost the use of her legs and her successful life as an actress, her intention is to wither away in the darkness of her living room. A quick montage of the different and extremely peculiar caregivers she is sent illustrates not only her rudeness and self-absorption, but also the dark and constricted world in which she has decided to confine herself. She basically lives on the couch, among old dark furniture, and keeps the drapes closed at all times, preventing the sun from entering the living room. The only thing she does is drink wine—the bottle is noticeably foregrounded in several wide angle shots of May-Alice—and watch, among other shows, her own soap opera, which returns a whole image of herself prior to the accident. However, regardless of her desire to be left to die in the sofa, some sequences hinge on the articulation of May-Alice's transition from the darkness of the house to the light outside. One particular scene hints at the course the narrative will take. May-Alice falls on the bathroom floor while Chantelle is in town and, unable to get back on the wheelchair, we briefly see her crossing the screen in a deliberately elaborate long take from above with a wide-angle lens. With her back to the floor, she painfully crawls on her elbows from the barely lit left side of the screen to the sun-illuminated right side.

However, the most significant of these scenes takes place when Chantelle takes her out to the garden. May-Alice has not left the house since she arrived in Louisiana and one morning, to her perplexity, Chantelle pushes her outside to exercise her upper body so that she does not become more dependent than she already is. May-Alice refuses to cooperate and

Chantelle leaves her at the edge of the bayou. The scene signals a turning point in the film. Sayles opens up the frame, which suggests the impending change in May-Alice. Shot with a wide-angle lens, the scenes outside permit a great depth of field, which, together with the widescreen format emphasizes the vastness of the watery country and the characters' inclusion into the landscape. During this sequence the audience is offered a sight of the bayou from the point of view of May-Alice. The subjective view of the grim and uninviting watery country is indicative of May-Alice's estrangement from her roots. Instead of an idealized representation with green cypresses, purple waters and extradiegetic evocative folk music, May-Alice sees the Louisiana landscape as a mysterious and threatening territory with snake-filled, mud-colored waters and dried Spanish moss hanging from the brown trees. May-Alice has not come to Louisiana searching for a connection with the land or with her past. Yet, the arcane backcountry of the Louisiana bayous represents the place and the culture she must rediscover if she is to do something with the rest of her life. When Chantelle returns with a cup of hot tea May-Alice seems enthralled by the bayou and, instead of scolding her, she starts talking about the water with a rare air of spirituality.

Little by little May-Alice finds a connection with the landscape and with the folklore of her native land, which will eventually draw her out of her shell. The appearance of Rennie (David Strathairn), an old acquaintance of hers that all the girls had a crush on during high school, and the journey into the swamps contribute to her change of attitude towards the land. The journey into the bayou is exceptionally charged symbolism. Not only does the open country stand out against the enclosed space in which May-Alice locked herself up after the accident, this time the sense of movement as the boat traverses the swamps also contrasts with May-Alice's enforced immobility. The sequence begins and ends with a dynamic montage in which brief shots of the trees and of the local fauna taken from Rennie's boat dissolve into close-ups of the characters' faces. When they stop at a small island for lunch Rennie tells May-Alice and Chantelle about the "passion fish" that gives the film its title. He catches a fish, removes the entrails, and squeezes two small fish from the stomach. According to Rennie this is an old "coon-ass" superstition he learnt from his father. He tells the women to squeeze the small fish tight in their hands while they think about somebody they want some loving from. The eerie atmosphere of the swamps and Rennie's Cajun lore gives the whole trip a mysterious, nearly fantastic aura and May-Alice seems mesmerized as she rediscovers the folklore and the beauty of the region. What is more, before they return

Rennie covers May-Alice's lifeless legs with mud from the swamp to prevent mosquito bites. The symbolism of this event cannot go unnoticed. It is evident that May-Alice has finally overcome the self-destructive behavior she engaged in after the accident by establishing a connection with the land and with the traditions of her homeland.

Chantelle is also embarked on a journey to rediscover the values associated with community as opposed to the hedonism and selfishness of her previous life. Despite her stern appearance and her apparent strength, Chantelle is going through her own hell, and this is also articulated through her relationship with the environment. The question we must ask ourselves at this point is, "Does a return to rural Louisiana have the same effect for an African-American as it does for May-Alice?" Like May-Alice, Chantelle's transformation is also rendered through her relationship with the land and with the local traditions. She discovers the colorful African-American culture of the South and little by little allows herself to be immersed in it.

When she arrives in Louisiana she is shown fully immersed in the landscape but, to her, the place seems more a dreary industrial center than a colourful and romantic natural setting. Standing on the bottom right corner of the frame, she seems noticeably out of place. Then, the narrative cuts to a close-up of her face that unmistakably reveals her disgust. Like May-Alice, she is initially shot in claustrophobic compositions that highlight the feeling of outsidership, especially when she is alone in her room or in the watery landscape of Louisiana. What's more, the uniform she wears invites obvious associations with the racial past of the region. It seems that she needs to find a connection with the natural world and with the African-American culture of her ancestors, but she also must come to terms with a past that speaks of racial tensions. In his study of race, Elijah Anderson (1992) observed that the new values and the new role models for young people in the 1980s undermined the sense of community that had characterized African-Americans. Social changes, he says, translated into a deterioration of traditional culture, the sense of community and family values. For Chantelle, her salvation involves a rediscovery of small-town values as embodied by the African-American community of Jeff Davis Parish. To cut a long story short, her out-of-place-ness (as shown early in the film) and her disdain for local blacks evolves into an appreciation of the colourful local culture and into her integration in the community.

One last episode, which also draws attention to the sense of community and to the colorful Creole culture, hints at Chantelle's final embracing of

regional folklore. The sequence in which she goes with her father and her daughter to the Cajun get-together emphasizes her entry into the shared social space of the African American community. Before any of the main characters appears on screen, the film establishes the communal context for the following scenes by means of a considerably long shot that shows the people, mostly Creoles of color, arriving at the party. After several close-ups of the food that is being served —local produce that had previously signaled Chantelle's out-of-placedness in rural Louisiana— the camera tracks across the attendants before focusing on a group of people that are walking towards the dancing area. This tracking shot, which for a brief moment reminds of the camera work done by Sayles in previous films like *Eight Men Out* (1988) and *City of Hope* (1991), emphasizes the intermingling of the people and the sense of kinship. After a medium shot of the dancers, the narrative cuts to show how Chantelle's family arrives at the social gathering and joins the community. Her father and her daughter take a seat but Chantelle remains standing for a moment with a smile on her face as the camera begins to circle around her, which signals her definitive integration in the community. However, the white and the black communities remain noticeably separate in *Passion Fish*. Although Chantelle, like May-Alice, seems to find a connection with the land and with her heritage, the racial conflict that the successive Republican governments had kept out of the political agenda appears to be irresolvable.

4. CONCLUSION

John Sayles is not the kind of filmmaker that provides audiences with unequivocal, clear-cut answers. What saves May-Alice and Chantelle is their responsiveness to the local folklore and the connections they establish with the land, but *Passion Fish* is ambivalent about its own regionalism and very critical of simplistic representations of rural USA. In other words, May-Alice does not simply go back in time to embrace an outmoded, naïve, and one-dimensional version of the land. Although the narrative rests on the renewed importance of the concept of place in contemporary US culture, it also incorporates a sense of the end of innocence with regard to the representation of the land, a break with what photographer Robert Adams called, in a different context, "the national misunderstanding of space" (1985: 7) —or, in other words, a departure from the a-temporality of the mythic framework associated with Hollywood's prevailing ideology of individualism, competition, success, masculinity, xenophobia, and violence.

What is more, the unearthing of May-Alice's camera makes her transition appear complex and ambiguous. Her role as photographer—which the narrative associates with Ernest J. Bellocq, thus raising questions about issues pertaining to the gaze, gender, sex, class, and power relations—brings up many heterogeneous discourses and invites spectators to distrust utopian resolutions. Looking for a bottle in an old shed, May-Alice comes across her old Leica and starts taking and developing pictures of the surrounding scenery. As she takes up photography again, May-Alice changes from an image to be looked at on the TV screen to the one that makes the images, from "couch potato" to participant. Moreover, contradictory as it may sound, photography seems to help her discover the mysticism of the Louisiana bayous and "return to the real world," as she herself notes. The transition from the mediated world of TV to a rediscovery of the bayous actually involves the foregrounding of the mythmaking process on which western notions about landscape rest. Like Joe Starling in *Keep the Change*, May-Alice cannot adopt the healing possibilities of the native land naïvely. But neither does she relinquish the old function of myths from the aloof and ironic stance associated at the time with postmodernism. On the contrary, she *both* acknowledges the healing possibilities of the bayous and illustrates to what extent the myth of the landscape as the spiritual reserve of the country is the result of the mediation of such media as paintings, photographs, films, et cetera.

Passion Fish goes beyond the old picturesque idea that regards the landscape as unchanging and, instead, defines it as an inhabited, interactive space. Besides, as May-Alice's photographs show, she has arrived at a deeper understanding not only of Louisiana, but of the concept of place itself. She seems to have understood that place is a construct that captures our anxieties about living in a particular time and one that provides resources to sort out our social identity. Her subjective point of view through the camera's viewfinder, as well as the pictures she actually prints, foreground the role of the media in the construction of myths about the landscape and in the negotiation of our own identity as citizens. Notwithstanding complex issues as regards class, race and the female body that lie beyond the scope of this study, May-Alice's transition from her initial escape into the fictional world of television to her knowledgeable appropriation of the Louisiana landscape involves the rejection of the values associated with the 1980s—personal greed, passivity, detachment from other people's plight, and failure to engage social conditions—and the identification with social processes, concrete forms of collective life, and commitment to the community that anticipated the possibility of creating of a different world.

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