

a e t h e r

the journal of media geography

Place, Placelessness, Insiderness, and Outsideness in John Sayles' *Sunshine State*

DAVID SEAMON

Kansas State University

ABSTRACT

John Sayles is one of America's most successful independent filmmakers, whose works include *Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1980), *City of Hope* (1991), and *Lone Star* (1996). This article examines Sayles' portrait of place in *Sunshine State* (2002), a film set in Plantation Island, Florida, where large-scale corporate development is transforming two communities—one black, the other white—into upscale winter resorts. Sayles' film probes the place experience of some sixteen vividly drawn characters and illuminates how the same physical place, for different individuals and groups, can evoke a broad spectrum of situations, meanings, and potential futures. One of Sayles' conclusions is that people cannot escape the place in which they find themselves. They can, however, learn from that place and thereby decide whether and in what ways they will offer that place commitment or not.

INTRODUCTION

IN THIS ARTICLE, I CONSIDER AMERICAN INDEPENDENT FILMMAKER John Sayles' portrait of place, placelessness, insiderness, and outsideness in *Sunshine State* (2002), an ensemble film set in Plantation Island, Florida, a fictitious locale (based and mostly filmed on Florida's Amelia Island, located on the state's Atlantic coast about thirty miles northeast of Jacksonville) where real-estate development is transforming two modest beachside communities—one black, the other white—into upscale winter resorts for wealthy retirees.¹

The white community is Delrona Beach, a prime tourist spot of mom-and-pop restaurants, motels, and roadside attractions built prior to the era of Disneyworld and corporate tourism. The black community is Lincoln Beach, a Plantation Island



Figure 1
John Sayles' *Sunshine State*.

©2002 Frostproof Inc. and Anarchists' Convention. Used with permission of Anarchists' Convention.

neighborhood factually based on Amelia Island's American Beach, one of the few Southern beaches accessible to blacks before integration. Founded in the 1930s and prosperous during the days of Jim Crow, Lincoln Beach progressively lost much of its community cohesion after racial desegregation. One reason for this decline was that black customers no longer had to frequent Lincoln Beach's black-operated establishments, many of which were overwhelmed by larger white establishments, including corporate chains that began to gain market share in the early 1960s.²

At the start of the 21st century, both Delrona and Lincoln Beach are almost entirely at the mercy of two competing corporate developers who conspire legally and illegally (through eminent domain, predatory buyouts, and furtive payoffs to local officials) to gain control of the two communities, which will be transformed into

either high-end gated communities and golf courses or lower-end condominiums and corporate-chain strip development. Place-wise, this inexorable intrusion by corporate power is represented by the wealthy, exclusive enclave of Plantation Island, a recently-completed gated community that will shortly expand if its corporate owners, collectively called Exley Plantation, can gain control of Lincoln Beach.

In his film, Sayles explores the wide range of ways in which insiders (long-time locals and former locals returning) and outsiders (newly-transplanted residents and agents of corporate real-estate conglomerates) deal with the rapid environmental, social, and economic changes that are transforming Delrona and Lincoln Beach into what phenomenological geographer Edward Relph has called *placelessness*—the “casual eradication of distinctive places and the making of standardized landscapes that results from an insensitivity to the significance of place” (Relph 1976, ii).

In various degrees of lived detail, Sayles lays out the situations of some sixteen characters. He gives particular attention to the experiences of two thirty-somethings, the first of whom is Marly Temple (Edie Falco), a sixth-generation Plantation Island white woman. Marly is the frustrated manager of the Sea-View Restaurant and Motel, a deteriorating beachside establishment founded and owned by her father Furman Temple (Ralph Waite), a self-made entrepreneur who describes himself as a “Florida Cracker.”

The second thirty-something is Desiree Stokes Perry (Angela Bassett), an African-American woman born and raised in Lincoln Beach reluctantly returning to her former home with new husband, Boston anesthesiologist Reggie Perry (James McDaniel). She has come by puzzling request of her estranged and strong-willed mother Eunice Stokes (Mary Alice), who sent her away some twenty-five years ago

because of an unwanted, socially embarrassing pregnancy. A third pivotal character is Dr. Lloyd (**Bill Cobbs**), the film's social conscience and Lincoln Beach retiree working tirelessly to save his dispirited community from corporate development. As he explains, "We're trying to save an endangered species—us" (Sayles 2004, 196).

Marly and Desiree encounter each other only once in the film—for about five seconds at the very start when Desiree enters Marly's restaurant to use the women's room. Almost all the film's other characters, however, have some sort of association with one woman or the other, and these interrelationships point to a key dramatic concern in all of Sayles' films—that people are connected, whether they realize it or not. As he explains in one interview (Ryan 1998, 162): "...like it or not, people depend on each other. We're stuck with each other, and we have to deal with each other one way or the other."

Sayles' interest in human interconnections can be understood more fully by noting three interrelated themes often highlighted in critical commentaries on his films: first, Sayles' abiding concern for the lives of ordinary people living more or less ordinary lives in more or less ordinary places and situations (e.g., Ryan 1998, 4, 161, 243-44); second, his effort to portray, through the use of ensemble casts, the complex, ever-changing relationships between individuals and the groups, communities, and places in which they find themselves (e.g., Baron 2006, 24, 38; Carson 1999, xi; Smith 2006, 132; Ryan 1998, 162); and third, as a way to impel dramatic action, his immersing his characters in various lived tensions that include rootedness vs. mobility, ethical integrity vs. financial gain, and communal and place loyalty vs. economic development imposed by institutional forces beyond the place, particularly corporate and governmental entities (e.g., Gravin & Sayles 1998, 57; Molyneaux 2000, 199). One can argue that, in *Sunshine State*, these three themes are expressed through the experiences of insiders and outsiders as they either react to or provoke smaller and larger changes in the place and placelessness of Plantation Island.

INSIDENESS AND OUTSIDENESS AS MODES OF PLACE EXPERIENCE

The use of insiderness and outsideness as conceptual means to describe the range and variety of place experience was first laid out formally by phenomenological geographer Edward Relph (1976) in his book *Place and Placelessness*, an existential phenomenology of place. He defined *place* as a fusion of human and natural order and any significant spatial center of a person or group's lived experience (Relph 1976, 141). In *Sunshine State*, places as significant lived centers range from Eunice Stokes' beachfront house, Marly's restaurant-motel, and a local bar through the three communities of American Beach, Lincoln Beach, and Plantation Island to Plantation Island itself.

The existential crux of place experience, Relph claimed, is *insiderness*—the degree to which a person or group belongs to and identifies with a place. Relph argued that the existential relationship between insiderness and its experiential opposite *outsideness* is a fundamental dialectic in human experience. Through different degrees of insiderness

and outsidership, different places take on different meanings and identities for different individuals and groups. For Relph, *existential insiderness* is the foundation of the place concept because, in this mode of experience, place is experienced without any directed or self-conscious attention yet is laden with significances that are tacit and unnoticed unless the place is changed in some way (ibid., 55).

Relph presents these modes of insiderness and outsidership broadly, recognizing there may be variations, permutations, and additional lived modes that he did not include in his typology (Seamon & Sowers 2008). Here, I consider how Sayles' portrait of various characters' place experiences might offer a refined shading of modes of insiderness and outsidership, which, in turn, might provide a somewhat different reference point for understanding Sayles' film. On one hand, I highlight one cluster of characters whose experiences suggest variations on insiderness, including Marly's, Desiree's, and Dr. Lloyd's. On the other hand, I highlight a second cluster of characters whose experiences suggest various versions of outsidership, including the film's civic boosters, corporate developers, and various associates who may or may not be as they appear. Pivotal, there are two characters—Eunice's grandnephew Terrell; and Desiree's husband Reggie Perry—who respectively represent situations where, on one hand, insiderness devolves into outsidership, and, on the other hand (and more hopefully), outsidership evolves into insiderness.

EXISTENTIAL INSIDERS IN SUNSHINE STATE

As the deepest kind of lived involvement with place, existential insiderness is a situation in which people are normally unaware of the importance of place in sustaining their everyday world. They experience their place without direct attention, yet that place is rife with overriding but tacitly unnoticed significances. There are two characters in *Sunshine State* who illustrate a more or less pure existential insiderness, though varying in tenor and effect.

As a long-time resident of Lincoln Beach, Desiree's mother, Eunice Stokes, remembers the community as it was—a haven for middle-class black families in pre-integration days. Sitting on her porch showing Desiree's husband Reggie a photographic album of Lincoln Beach scenes, Eunice exclaims, "In so many other ways, we were on the outside looking in, but this was *ours*" (Sayles 2004, 261). Near the end of the film, Desiree promises that, if anything should happen to Eunice, she will sell the house and set up a fund for her psychologically troubled grandnephew Terrell, for whom Eunice has become caretaker. Eunice replies plaintively, "Baby, what good is money going to do for Terrell?" (ibid., 312). Is there no way, her plea suggests, to return to the deep-rooted existential insiderness of the old Lincoln Beach where strong communal bonds held neighbors together and made sure everyone was provided for?

A more tragic mode of existential insiderness is expressed by another native of Plantation Island. Gradually going blind, Furman Temple represents a lower-class



Figure 2
Mary Alice as Eunice Stokes.

©2002 Frostproof Inc. and Anarchists' Convention. Used with permission of Anarchists' Convention.

white man proud to have become an entrepreneur in the post-World-War-II period when Floridian businesses were mostly owned locally. The escalating corporate development of the island that threatens his rapidly failing restaurant-motel to which he is so attached leaves him confused and feeling left behind. Eventually in the film, he will accept the fact that his daughter's dreams are not necessarily his own, and he will give Marly his blessing to sell their beachside establishment. Furman's monologue, near the start of the film, poignantly highlights a central American dilemma today—how to provide an opening for individual worth and initiative in a world increasingly structured by corporate capitalism and governmental decree:

My days, life was simpler. You knew where you stood... So if you could carve yourself out a little piece of something you known [sic] that you *earned* it. The hoopin' [sic] crane, the spotted owl, the Florida gater, the colored man, the white man, the Spanish—they all started from scratch, and if you couldn't survive the course that was just tough titty...

Nowadays, we been zoned and regulated and politically corrected and vironmentally [sic] sensitized to the point where it's only your multi-internationals with a dozen lawyers sittin' round waitin' like buzzards for something to litigate that can afford to put one brick on top of another. The little man, no matter how much grit or imagination he brings to it, they got him so tied down he can't nearly breathe (ibid., 180).

Both Eunice and Furman illustrate existential insiders who cling to the past taken-for-grantedness of their place and mostly respond passively to change.⁴ In contrast, Lincoln Beach resident Dr. Lloyd can be interpreted as a self-conscious existential insider who realizes in a proactive way that much of that change, if allowed to just happen, will further undermine Lincoln Beach's communal existential insideness and perhaps destroy the community forever. Integration, he points out to Reggie, was good for African-Americans who could "get over" but "them that can't are in a world of trouble," partly because there is no longer a tightly-knit black community to fall back on for support (ibid., 197).

Dr. Lloyd's full-time work is attempting to save Lincoln Beach from development by urging his neighbors to be more involved and by arguing his case at public meetings and to the press. His exact opposite in terms of existential insideness is another Lincoln Beach native, former college-football star Lee "Flash" Phillips (Tom Wright), who publicly claims to have returned to participate as a "local hero" in the annual "Old Buccaneer Days," a May weekend festival that structures the film's six-day narrative arc. In fact, he works surreptitiously for corporate developers to finagle, through his celebrity status, the purchase of properties from long-time Lincoln Beach homeowners. Phillips does show some remorse when confronted by Desiree, with whom he shares a turbulent past. Having fallen on hard times, however, he knows firsthand that "There's a handful of people who run the whole deal and there's the rest of us who do what they say and get paid for it" (ibid., 297). He also claims that Lincoln Beach "was over years ago" so what is he really doing that is ethically wrong?

INSIDERS REMAINING OR RETURNING

If, in their points of view on place, Furman Temple echoes Eunice Stokes and "Flash" Phillips is a counter to Dr. Lloyd, the central characters of Marly Temple and Desiree Stokes Perry complement each other in that Marly will probably need to leave Plantation Island to find a satisfactory future, while, for Desiree, that satisfactory future may be found by returning to her native place and repairing the past. In *Place and Placelessness*, Relph points out how the places to which a person is most attached may sometimes seem oppressive and imprisoning (1976, 41). Such drudgery of place is the case for Marly, caught in the tension between her father's nostalgic wish that she continue the family business and her private, guilt-ridden desire to dispense with the business and find a future that is right for her.

At one point in her life, Marly had hoped to become an oceanographer but, when asked what crippled her dream, she explains that "Shit happens, you know, and a lot of it happened to me" (Sayles 2004, 274). Marly wishes to escape a stifling sense of existential insideness imposed by family obligations, but Sayles offers no clear evidence that she will break free of her place or break into a world where she is more content. A certain ennui



Figure 3
Edie Falco as Marly Temple
and Timothy Hutton as Jack
Meadows.

©2002 Frostproof Inc. and Anarchists'
Convention. Used with permission of
Anarchists' Convention.

holds her back, and the one hope she has in which a new male acquaintance might pull her along—Plantation Island landscape architect Jack Meadows (Timothy Hutton)—leaves her in the lurch when, at the end of the film, Lincoln Beach construction is stopped, and he is transferred to a new building site.

In contrast to Marly is Desiree, who, in her reluctant Lincoln Beach return after twenty-five years, senses vaguely the possibility of a permanent homecoming that, like Marly's departure, may or may not happen. Sayles is unwilling to say and leaves the future to be predicted by his film audience, perhaps so that they might ponder what they might do in a similar situation. Immediately after her return, Desiree deals with several "ghosts" from her Lincoln Beach past: apologizing to high-school girlfriend Loretta (Charlayne Woodard) for stealing away her high-school boyfriend; apologizing to her high-school theater teacher and Marly's mother Delia Temple (Jane Alexander) for leaving town right before she was to play lead in a community theater production Delia was directing; and informing "Flash" Phillips that he was the father of her stillborn child.

The most significant effort that Desiree must make is repairing the relationship with her mother, particularly working through the personal hurt she felt when Eunice and her father sent her away to have the unwanted baby in Georgia. "You—both of you—had these ideas about what a decent person was, how they acted. I let you down. I was—afraid to face that." Eunice responds that Desiree broke her father's heart, which provokes Desiree to counter ruefully, "And when you sent me away you broke mine" (*ibid.*, 310-11).

Until the very end of the film, Desiree is ambivalent about her return to Lincoln Beach. As she summarizes the situation to her family's long-time friend Dr. Lloyd, "I burned my bridges here long ago" (*ibid.*, 282). By the second night back, she tells Reggie she wants to leave immediately after the weekend: "I don't want to get sucked into any of this. I don't like what I am down here. And I don't trust my mother" (*ibid.*, 233). Eventually, through an offhand remark of Dr. Lloyd, Desiree discovers the reason for her mother's mysterious request that she and Reggie visit: Eunice is dying and secretly hopes her daughter and son-in-law will see the need to take family responsibility for Terrell. At the end of the film, after a heart-wrenching confrontation with Eunice,



Figure 4
Angela Bassett as Desiree Stokes Perry and Bill Cobbs as Dr. Lloyd.

©2002 Frostproof Inc. and Anarchists' Convention. Used with permission of Anarchists' Convention.

Desiree is uncertain as to what the future holds but, for the moment, decides to stay to work through the situation with her mother. "Take as much time as you need," Reggie says encouragingly right before he leaves for Boston.

OUTSIDERS AS UNCERTAIN AGENTS OF PLACELESSNESS

The insiders of *Sunshine State* illustrate a wide range of place experience. At one extreme, there exists a profound sense of attachment and loyalty to place that is sometimes more nostalgic than real. At the other extreme lies a deep sense of entrapment and claustrophobia from which one must escape. Similarly, characters in the film who represent outsiders intimate a wide range of place experience that, on one hand, can be matter of fact and selfishly pragmatic; or, on the other hand, disingenuous and damaging to place and people.

Mostly in the film, Sayles' portrayal of these outsiders is superficial and satiric.⁵ Though he suggests they are unstoppable, Sayles critically questions the changes that corporate capitalism is reaping on Plantation Island's natural and cultural landscape; his disdain for the characters who fuel this inappropriate commodification of nature, history, and community is felt throughout the film. He is most kindly to the two characters who are the developers' uncertain agents: Jack Meadows (Timothy Hutton), the landscape architect designing the manicured gated communities for Exley Corporation; and Francine Pinkney (Mary Steenburgen), an events planner who coordinates Delrona Beach's Buccaneer Days festival, an annual Chamber of Commerce event contrived to draw tourist dollars.

During his brief stay in Delrona Beach, Jack has an affair with Marly, who is attracted by his devotion to his professional work, with which he originally became involved because of his admiration for landscape-architect founder Frederick Law Olmsted. "He's kind of the granddaddy of what I do," Jack tells Marly. "You take land that's wild and inaccessible and you—refine it some, showcase its natural beauty—accentuate the topography a little—and create a place that everybody, rich, poor and in-between, can come together and appreciate." Immediately recognizing that the expensive gated communities built by Exley Plantation are exclusively for the rich, Marly jokingly asks whether she will be invited over for fish fry. Jack responds defensively, "Well—the populist part of it has kind of fallen away. He designed some pretty grand estates too... [If] you're gonna put in the effort, you might as well be paid well" (ibid., 264).

Marly and Jack quickly fall into a romantic affair, and there seems hope that she might finally find happiness. Near the end of the film, however, Exley Plantation workers accidentally unearth ancient Native-American remains on the Lincoln Beach site for which Jack is doing the landscape design. State archeologists immediately stop work, and Exley corporate directors order Jack to proceed to a Puerto Rican property in development. As he and Marley say a last goodbye in the local bar, there is a moment when it seems he might ask her to go with him, but the moment passes and Marly remains in place, while Jack proceeds in his outsider status to the next job in another new place.



Figure 5
Mary Steenburgen as
Francine Pinkney

©2002 Frostproof Inc. and Anarchists' Convention. Used with permission of Anarchists' Convention.

If Jack is an outsider because he moves professionally from place to place and hasn't the time to belong anywhere or to anyone, Francine Pinkney, even though she resides in Delrona Beach, is an outsider because she is trying to reinvent Plantation Island's history to draw more tourists. Though clearly dissatisfied with her work and unhappy that her booster efforts go largely unappreciated by the Delrona Beach community, Pinkney cannot really belong to her place because she has no will or interest in allowing that place, as it is, to be.

At one point, a developer tells her that Plantation Island has "history to burn," what with "Indians, pirates, Spanish gold and the Plantation thing." But Francine responds that "people hate history," which she says, for Plantation Island, is better described as "mass murder, rape, slavery" (ibid., 218). The developer's solution is to "Disneyfy [sic] it a little and they'll come back for more" (ibid., 291). Of course, this is exactly what Francine has attempted as she directs a parade, beauty pageant, and island treasure hunt. Unfortunately, the amateurish, small-scale nature of Buccaneer Days cannot compete with the highflown ersatz of Disneyworld and other corporate tourist attractions.

In all the scenes in which she appears, the viewer recognizes Francine's discomfort and dissatisfaction with her booster efforts. "People think that it's just there. Like Christmas or Thanksgiving," she tells her husband mournfully, shortly after the festival is over. "They don't appreciate how difficult it is to invent a tradition. And at the end of the day, is there acknowledgement? Is there so much as a thank you? Not a peep. I might as well be their mother" (ibid., 290).

OUTSIDERS BEGETTING PLACELESSNESS

There are two other related groups of outsiders in the film about whom Sayles is much more cynical: three developers who represent the two real-estate corporations competing for Plantation Island properties (Sam McMurray, Perry Lang, and Miguel Ferrer); and four white multimillionaire-golfers, presented as a kind of mock Greek chorus, who are the real power behind Exley Corporation and represent the relentless, colonizing power of global capitalism (Alan King, Elliot Asinof, Cullen Douglas, and Clifton James).

The three developers are memorable only in their unstinting efforts, many of them illegal and amoral, to gain control of the island's real estate. One of their most striking scenes is a discussion in which they use the imagery of warfare to describe how gaining property on Plantation Island is to be accomplished: "The other side have [sic] this whole end of the island locked up," says the first developer, "and they're infiltrating into Lincoln Beach over here." "We're not opposing?" asks the second developer. "Zoned residential, hostile native population—it's a minefield," replies the first. "Whereas right here [where the Temples' restaurant-motel is located] it's the soft underbelly of the island" (ibid., 174).

Appearing three times, the four golfers bookmark the beginning, middle, and end of *Sunshine State*. Though they are aware of the negative consequences of their company's efforts (they mention environmental degradation, species extinction, and climate change), most of their dialogue highlights what they see as the unsullied benefits of large-scale development. "A dream is what you sell, a concept," says the lead golfer (Alan King) as he prepares to drive a ball onto an immaculately manicured fairway. "Remember, this was the ends of the earth, this was a land populated by white people who ate catfish, and almost overnight, out of the muck and the mangroves we created this...—nature on a leash" (ibid., 168).

In their last appearance in the movie's final scene, Sayles films the golfers from below, silhouetted by billowing clouds and bright blue sky. His inference is how, in their "Olympian" status, these men and others like them control, behind the scenes, the economic and political forces reshaping both Plantation Island and much of the world. The lead golfer regrets that, unlike the colonizing era of Florida's European discoverer Ponce de Leon, there are no dreams left to pursue: "We live in impoverished times," he laments (ibid., 317). Ironically, as the camera shifts from the lead golfer's swing to the ball he hits, the viewer sees that the four men no longer play their game on a manicured fairway but on a small grass traffic island impinged upon by speeding vehicles and chaotic franchise strip development. More so, jests Sayles, we live in "impoverished times" because of the placelessness for which global corporate capitalism is largely responsible.



Figure 6

Alan King as the lead golfer.

©2002 Frostproof Inc. and Anarchists' Convention. Used with permission of Anarchists' Convention.

OUTSIDENESS HELPING INSIDENESS

In one sense, the most important characters in *Sunshine State* are Terrell, the disturbed teenager in Eunice Stokes' care; and increasingly empathetic outsider Reggie Perry, Desiree's husband. Though a native of Lincoln Beach, Terrell is a badly bruised insider-made-outsider who, as a child, witnessed his drug-crazed father murder his mother and then kill himself. Before he was found, Terrell sat alone with the two bodies for six days. Terrell holds a huge amount of simmering anger for which arson of Plantation Island property has been his release. In Relph's terminology, Terrell is an *existential outsider*—a person who feels alienated and separate from the place in which he finds himself (Relph 1976, 51). Terrell's situation is doubly tragic in that his home place—a world that should sustain existential insideness—is instead an alien, impinging "otherness" of grief, dislocation, and confusion.

Terrell is immediately drawn to Reggie Perry as a positive male role model. At one point in the film, he will tell Furman Temple that in fact Reggie is his father. In terms of place preservation, Reggie is the most important character in the film because he moves from the situation of complete outsider to, in Relph's terms, an empathetic insider who is willing to engage with and understand Lincoln Beach and its people. As an African-American man from the North making his first trip to the South, Reggie is initially uncertain about how he may be treated. When Desiree insists that they stop at Marly's restaurant so she can use the women's room before seeing her mother, Reggie jokes about whether they'll even be allowed in. Very soon, however, he becomes close to Eunice and Dr. Lloyd, who recount the social history of Lincoln Beach. Reggie listens, appreciates what is said, and quickly grows to like the place.

At the end of the film, as Desiree stays on to work through things with her mother and Reggie leaves for Boston, there is a strong sense that he might like to return to Lincoln Beach and that Desiree has similar feelings. Just before Reggie departs, Eunice takes a photograph of Terrell standing between him and Desiree. The implication, by no means certain, is that these three might someday be one family and that Reggie might become a community anchor in the footsteps of Dr. Lloyd.



Figure 7
Alexander Lewis as Terrell Stokes.

©2002 Frostproof Inc. and Anarchists' Convention. Used with permission of Anarchists' Convention.

PLACE OR PLACELESSNESS?

Sunshine State is an evocative portrait of a wide range of characters' dealings with place both as a particular lived situation and also as a particular physical world. As Sayles presents contemporary Florida in the film, much of the state's natural and human landscape has come to manifest Relph's placelessness—"the weakening of distinct and diverse experiences and identities of places" (Relph 1976, 6).

Sayles is ambivalent about this creeping placelessness. On one hand, in characters like Furman Temple, Eunice Stokes, and Dr. Lloyd, Sayles points toward the unspoken value of local place for individual and social well-being. He suggests that people are connected to each other and to their place, and the right thing to do is to accept responsibility for others as Desiree attempts in her tentative reconciliation with Eunice or as Reggie attempts in his uncertain efforts to be a surrogate father to Terrell. Individuals have an ethical obligation to nourish and deepen their connections with family, community, and place. In interviews, Sayles has described this possibility variously, for example: "The hopefulness for me comes from some of the people from below. I don't have hope coming from above" (Ryan 1998, 157). Or: "every positive act of compassion on the part of an individual attempting to cope with frustration or injustice is magnified as its effects ripple out" (Carson 1999, 133).

On the other hand, Sayles openly recognizes that the implacable drive of corporate capitalism to make money and gain power, relentlessly at the expense of natural and human worlds, is the unchallenged engine of American life today. Nothing is left untouched by the economic obsession to transform nature, history, and place into commodities that can be bought and sold—Disney-like corporate chains, extravagant gated communities, or revisionist kitsch traditions like Plantation Island's Buccaneer Days. For Sayles, the important question is "[W]hat do people do when these huge sea changes happen, when your world is never going to be the same again? Who are the people who can... go with the flow and who are the people who... are too rigid? The factory closes and the town dies, or the fishery closes and you're one of twelve generations of fishermen—what do you do then?" (Moyers 2002, n.p.).



Figure 8
James McDaniel as Reggie Perry.

©2002 Frostproof Inc. and Anarchists' Convention. Used with permission of Anarchists' Convention.

In *Sunshine State*, Sayles uses the ensemble cast to illustrate a continuum of possibilities for responding to these profound shifts in America's lived geography. On one hand are characters like Eunice Stokes and Furman Temple, who, partly because of age and generational qualities, react passively and largely withdraw from the world at hand or retreat into the hope of family. On the other hand, a character like Dr. Stokes doggedly works to counter the intruding external forces, while "Flash" Phillips, Marly Temple, Jack Meadows, and Francine Pinkney largely ignore the threat or become its grudging agents.

Of all the characters in the film, Marly, Jack, and Francine are portrayed as the most tentative, confused, and unfulfilled. Searching for dreams that are often unrealistic or unsustainable, these characters intimate a vague but painful sense of loss, much of it unself-conscious. In this sense, the title of Sayles' film is ironic, pointing to the need to circumvent lived superficiality by confronting threatening undercurrents, both personal and societal, that churn beneath stereotypic images and the humdrum experiences of taken-for-granted life. Can individuals, asks Sayles, break free existentially and thereby come to terms with place, people, past, present, and future? Can individuals accommodate themselves to personal, social, and environmental change without abandoning ethical principles and close interpersonal bonds?

21ST CENTURY PLACE

The most overarching and perplexing question that Sayles leaves us with in *Sunshine State* is what happens to the lived relationship between people and place in 21st century America? Phenomenological philosophers Edward Casey (1993), Jeff Malpas (1999, 2006), Robert Mugerauer (1994), and Ingrid Stefanovic (2000) all argue that, even in spite of our mobile, continually changing postmodern era, being-in-place remains a non-contingent necessity for people because having a place is an integral, inescapable part of who and what we are as human beings. If this conclusion has merit, then what happens if both physical and lived aspects of place continue to diminish—geographically, through global capitalism and placelessness; and existentially, through deepening divisions, isolation, alienation, and outsideness?

Sayles uses several characters in the film to represent the situation and potential outcomes. At one extreme is the tragic figure of blind Furman Temple who, through no real fault of his own, finds his cherished way of life reduced to little more than a buyout opportunity. "Where it's all headed," he laments, "I don't want to know, but if they expect my cooperation they just [sic] shit outa luck" (Sayles 2004, 181). At the other extreme are the four golfers, who like Olympian gods looking down on the world they dominate, can actualize almost anything they conjure up for Plantation Island's future. These omnipotent men have few scruples regarding the environmental and social dislocation and devastation their unceasing efforts impose on the natural world and on ordinary people trying to live ordinary lives in the place where they find themselves.

When one of his playing partners expresses concern about species extinction, the lead golfer proclaims: "We still need a lizard the size of a twelve-passenger van? Most of these things, if they came back, people would not be thrilled... Nature is overrated" (Sayles 2004, 235-236).

In between these two extremes are the characters who point to the potential resilience of Plantation Island as a place: Dr. Lloyd, who works to save Lincoln Beach through political action; Eunice Stokes, who hopes that a reconciliation with her daughter might stir her familial concern for Terrell; and Desiree and Reggie, who just might resettle in Lincoln Beach and contribute to a reinvigorated communal integrity. The two characters most difficult to predict in terms of place possibilities are Terrell and Marly. Terrell may well contribute to Lincoln Beach's rejuvenation if Desiree and Reggie eventually adopt him. If not, his future is bleak in that one can imagine his pyromania devolving into more destructive anti-social behaviors.

Intriguingly, Sayles opens the film with Terrell's setting fire to the Buccaneer Day's lead float, which portrays a time when lawless pirates controlled Plantation Island. As the movie proceeds, the inference is clear that the island's 21st century pirates are the merciless corporate developers who raid the Florida coast, seize property, and upset settled ways of life. The irony is that Terrell, the character most potentially breakable by their subversion of his place, may, one way or the other, become an unintentional agent who interferes with their ruthless advance. If Desiree and Reggie adopt him, Terrell may become a contributing member to a revitalized community that holds off the real-estate takeover of Lincoln Beach. If not, the teenager's unhappiness and anger may push him into an unruly underclass interfering with and potentially undermining the corporate powers' social and economic security. In one sense, Terrell represents the determining factor for the resolution of place vs. placelessness and local vs. global involvement, action, and control. Can community, place, and ecosystems be reinvigorated through responsible, caring people who take a stand for their place, whether individually or communally? Or will overpowering economic and political forces intensify placelessness, outsidership, and human alienation from nature?

The film's most ambivalent relationship with place is portrayed through Marly, who cannot really belong in Delrona Beach because her world there is not her own. Sayles' suggestion is that, before Marly can find her place, she must somehow break free from a guilt-ridden sense of obligation to others, whether parents or lovers. After high school, Marly performed in an underwater-mermaid routine at Florida's Weeki Wachee Springs. "The most important thing," says Marly, "is to keep that smile on your face. Even if you're drowning" (*ibid.*, 236). This is Marly's dilemma: surrendering and then moving beyond the artificial smile—the superficial "sunshine state." Can she find a way to live that is more in tune with who she is and what she really wishes for her life? On one hand, she succeeds in that, by the end of the film, she has convinced her father to sell the business she had never wished to manage. On the other hand, her world is still uncertain in that her brief fling with Jack Meadows has come to a dead end.

In the film's next-to-last scenes, Sayles adroitly projects a final placement of the central characters: Jack drives his Exley Corporation company car over the island's causeway bridge toward the mainland, while Reggie backs his rental out of Eunice's driveway as she, Desiree, and Terrell wave goodbye. But what of Marly? Sayles immediately follows these real-world departures with a dreamlike sequence filmed underwater from a camera considerably below the surface. On the shore and barely discernable is Marly, who dives into the water, swims head on toward the camera, and momentarily appears in close up, her face uncertain but *without a smile*. Is she now more in touch with whom and what she might become? Will she discover who she really is when she resurfaces? Will that discovery sooner or later bind her to some place? As with other compelling questions that the film provokes, Sayles gives no definitive answer.

SUNSHINE STATE AS PHENOMENOLOGICAL INSIGHT

"Very few people," says Sayles, "can define themselves outside of the small world that they live in" (Smith 1998, 18). One of the most evocative aspects of *Sunshine State* is its persistent, empathetic concern for everyday experiences, situations, and worlds that viewers might never know or care about otherwise. As Sayles explains, "The important thing is to get that moment when someone in the audience thinks, 'I have never spent time with the people in this movie,' and then they realize that, because of the movie, they have" (Carson 1999, 144).

With this point of view in mind, one understands why, in interviews and writings, Sayles often claims that he is not an artist but an exacting, compassionate observer and recorder of human lives.⁶ He wants his viewers "to be talking about human beings, about their own lives and the lives of other people they know or could know, rather than thinking, 'Oh, that was like *Citizen Kane*...' The references in [my] movies are... to historical things or personal things, not references to other movies" (Smith 1998, 52).

In this sense, Sayles' steady, forbearing attention to commonplace human beings and their mundane worlds points to a style of film making that can rightly be called "phenomenological," if we take that word to mean the excavation of human experience, first, in terms of particular persons and groups in particular places, situations, and historical moments; and, second, as this excavation engenders a self-conscious effort to make intellectual and emotional sense of what that experience reveals in terms of broader lived structures and more ethical ways of being, willing, and acting (Seamon 2006b). One recognizes this kind of implicit phenomenological looking and understanding in Sayles' explanation of how he discovers film ideas and works them through as scripts:

A lot of what I do is just listen, eavesdrop, talk to people, hear their stories, try to figure out where they're coming from, and especially doing that without any preconceptions, just kind of emptying your head and trying to not be in an argument or a discussion with somebody but just hear what they're saying and how they're saying it, which is often as important as what they're saying (Moyers 2002, n.p.).

It is Sayles' uncanny deftness at cinematically constructing and getting viewers intellectually and emotionally involved with quotidian worlds and places that marks *Sunshine State's* most indelible accomplishment. In its multifaceted, complex nature en-crustured in everyday taken-for-grantedness, the phenomenon of place is difficult conceptually to grasp and understand. *Sunshine State* is revelatory exactly because it illuminates the place situation for a wide range of vividly drawn characters and demonstrates how the same physical place can evoke a broad spectrum of experiences, meanings, and potential futures. At the same time, we wonder what will happen to Plantation Island as a place in its own right and what similar developments might mean for the places that have important meaning for us. *Sunshine State* is a penetrating cinematic meditation on the possible ways, both positive and negative, that place, placelessness, insiderness, and outsiderness might sustain or undermine our 21st century world.

ENDNOTES

¹The author would like to thank two anonymous reviewers whose thoughtful critiques have made this article considerably stronger. An earlier version was presented at the 2007 Chicago meeting of the International Association of International Philosophy (IAEP) for a special double session on "Phenomenologies of Place and Environment," organized by the author. Works making links between phenomenology and film research include: Casebier 1991; Kolker & Ousley 1973; Sobchack 1992; Stadler 1990; Wahlberg 2003. Works examining the portrayal of place in film include: Aitken et al. 2004; Cresswell et al. 2002; Kennedy & Lukinbeal 1997; Lukinbeal 2004, 2005. Works examining the role of place in Sayles' films include: Arreola 2005; Barrett 2006; Barr 2003; Jones 2002; Mains 2004; Natter 2002; Shargel 2002; Walker 1999. Other helpful discussions and interpretations of Sayles' work include: Carson 1999; Davis & Womack 1998; Magowan 2004; Molyneaux 2000; Ryan 1998; Sayles 1987; Sayles & Smith 1998; Walker 2002. Works discussing the phenomenology of place include: Casey 1993; Malpas 1999, 2006; Manzo 2003; Mugerauer 1994; Relph 1976, 1981; Seamon 1990, 1997, 2000, 2004, 2006a, b, 2008; Seamon & Sowers 2008, forthcoming; Stefanovic 2000.

²Helpful accounts of Florida's environmental and social history include: Davis & Arsenault 2005; Mormino 2005. Useful accounts of Amelia Island's American Beach include: Phelts 1997; Rymer 1998. In regard to integration and the demise of many black businesses, Rymer (*ibid.*, 219-20) writes: "...the immediate tangible commercial benefits of integration accrued exclusively to white business. Integration represented the greatest opening of a domestic American market in the nation's history, but the windfall only worked one way. Black customers flocked to the stores and hotels and restaurants—and beaches—where they had formerly been prohibited..., and forsook the black businesses to which they had been confined. Whites did not storm across the same open border to spend money in black establishments. For them the border had always been open—at least officially... The results were predictable, if unforeseen. The whole economic skeleton of the black community, so painfully erected in the face of exclusion and injustice, collapsed as that exclusion was rescinded. [One] American Beach resident phrased it in formula, "First we had segregation, and then integration. Then disintegration."

³As of this writing (spring 2008), Sayles has written and directed sixteen films, of which the best known include *The Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1980), *Matewan* (1987), *City of Hope* (1991), and *Lonestar* (1996). Most critics have identified the last as his most accomplished and satisfying work so far.

⁴In addition to the more comprehensive picture of the deep mode of existential insideness suggested by Eunice Stokes and Furman Temple, there are at least two other less central characters in the film who evoke this deep immersion in place: Loretta (Charlayne Woodard), Desiree's best friend from high school whose boyfriend Desiree once stole away; and Mrs. Pierce (Barbara Young), Eunice's meddling next-door neighbor. One of the most telling lines in the film is said by Eunice, who has prepared a casserole for the ill Mrs. Pierce. When Desiree asks her mother if she has "buried the hatchet with Mrs. Pierce after all these years," Eunice responds, "No. But she's my neighbor."

⁵In an interview, Sayles explains that "[t]he people I have the least emotional interest in are the people who have no perspective, who should have more. They've come from the outside world and have chosen to limit their perspective" (Smith & Sayles 1998, 22).

⁶The program notes for his film, *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994), make this point directly: "John Sayles will never call himself an artist" (Carson 1999, 198).

REFERENCES

- Aitken, S., and L. Zonn. 1994. Re-Presenting the place pastiche. In *Place, power, situation, and spectacle: A geography of film*, ed. S. Aitken and L. Zonn. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Arreola, D. 2005. Forget the Alamo: The border as place in John Sayles' *Lone Star*. *Journal of Cultural Geography* 23: 23-32.
- Barr, A. 2003. The borders of time, place, and people in John Sayles's *Lone Star*. *Journal of American Studies* 37: 365-74.
- Barrett, L. 2006. The space of ambiguity: Representations of nature in *Limbo*. In *Sayles talk: New perspectives on independent filmmaker John Sayles*, ed. D. Carson and H. Kenega. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Carson, D., ed. 1999. *John Sayles: Interviews*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press.
- Carson, D., and H. Kenega, ed. 2006. *Sayles talk: New perspectives on independent filmmaker John Sayles*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Casey, E. 1993. *Getting back into place*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Casebier, A. 1991. *Film and phenomenology: Toward a realist theory of cinematic representation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Cresswell, T., and D. Dixon, ed. 2002. *Engaging film: Geographies of mobility and identity*. Landam: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Davis, J., and R. Arsenault, ed. 2005. *Paradise lost: The environmental history of Florida*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Davis, T., and K. Womack. 1998. Forget the Alamo: Reading the ethics of style in John Sayles's *Lone Star*. *Style* 32: 471-85.
- Jones, K. 2002. The lay of the land: John Sayles draws a map of American discontent for the era of Disneyfication. *Film Comment* 38: 22-24.
- Kennedy, C. and C. Lukinbeal. 1997. Towards a holistic approach to geographic research on film. *Progress in Human Geography* 21: 33-50.
- Kolker, R. P. and D. Ousley. 1973. A phenomenology of cinematic time and space. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 13: 388-96.
- Lukinbeal, C. 2004. The map that precedes the territory: An introduction to essays in cinematic geography. *GeoJournal* 59: 247-51.
- . 2005. Cinematic landscapes. *Journal of Cultural Geography* 23: 3-22.
- Magowan, K. 2003. Blood only means what you let it: Incest and miscegenation in John Sayles' *Lone Star*. *Film Quarterly* 57: 20-31.
- Mains, S. 2004. Imagining the border and southern spaces: Cinematic explorations of race and gender. *GeoJournal* 59: 253-64.

- Malpas, J. 1999. *Place and experience: A philosophical topography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Malpas, J. 2006. *Heidegger's topology: Being, place, world*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Manzo, L. 2003. Beyond house and haven: Toward a revisioning of emotional relationships with places. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 23: 47-61.
- Molyneaux, G. 2000. *John Sayles: An unauthorized biography of the pioneering indie filmmaker*. New York: Renaissance Books.
- Mormino, G. 2005. *Land of sunshine, state of dreams*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Moyers, B. 2002. John Sayles' *Sunshine State* [Public Broadcasting Service interview with John Sayles. www.lpbs.org/now/arts/sunshine.html, accessed April 2, 2008].
- Mugerauer, R. 1994. *Interpretations on behalf of place*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Natter, W. 2002. "We just gotta eliminate 'em": On whiteness and film in *Matewan*, *Avalon*, and *Bulworth*. In *Engaging film: Geographies of mobility and identity*, ed. T. Cresswell and D. Dixon. Landam: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Phelts, M. 1997. *An American beach for African-Americans*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Prince, S. 2004. *Movies and meaning: An introduction to film*. Boston: Pearson.
- Relph, E. 1976. *Place and placelessness*. London: Pion.
- . 1981. *Rational landscapes and humanistic geography*. Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble.
- . 1985. Geographical experiences and being-in-the-world. In *Dwelling, place and environment: Towards a phenomenology of person and world*, ed. D. Seamon and R. Mugerauer, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ryan, J. 1998. *John Sayles, film maker: A critical study of the independent writer-director*. London: McFarland & Co.
- Rymer, R. 1998. *American beach: A saga of race, wealth, and memory*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Sayles, J. 1987. *Thinking in pictures: The making of the movie Matewan*. Cambridge: Da Capo Press.
- . 2004. *Sunshine State*. In *Silver City and other screenplays*, ed. J. Sayles. New York: Nation Books.
- Sayles, J., and G. Smith. 1998. *Sayles on Sayles*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Seamon, D. 1990. Awareness and reunion: A phenomenology of the person-environment relationship as portrayed in the New York photographs of André Kertész. In *Place images in the media*, ed. L. Zonn. Totowa, New Jersey: Roman and Littlefield.
- . 1997. Behavioral geography and phenomenology. In *Encyclopedia of phenomenology*, ed. L. Embree. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- . 2000. A way of seeing people and place: Phenomenology in environment-behavior research. In *Theoretical perspectives in environment-behavior research*, ed. S. Wapner, J. Demick, and T. Yamamoto. New York: Plenum.
- . 2004. Grasping the dynamism of urban place: Contributions from the work of Christopher Alexander, Bill Hillier, and Daniel Kemmis. In *Reanimating places*, ed. T. Mels Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate.
- . 2006a. *A Geography of lifeworld in retrospect: A response to Shaun Moores, Particip@tions*, 3 (2). <http://www.participations.org/>; accessed 02 April 2008.
- . 2006b. Interconnections, relationships, and environmental wholes: A phenomenological ecology of natural and built worlds. In *Phenomenology and ecology*, ed. M. Geib. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- . 2008. Place, belonging, and environmental humility: The experience of "teched" as portrayed by American novelist and agrarian reformer Louis Bromfield. In *Writings in place: John Burroughs and his legacy*, ed. D. Payne. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Seamon, D. and J. Sowers. 2008. *Edward Relph, place and placelessness*. In *Key texts in human geography*, ed. P. Hubbard, R. Kitchen, and G. Valentine. London: Sage.

- . forthcoming. Existential geography. In *International encyclopedia of human geography*, ed. R. Kitchin and N. Thrift. London: Elsevier.
- Shargel, R. 2002. Last rays and shadows of summer. *The New Leader* 85: 35-37.
- Sobchack, V. 1993. *The address of the eye: A phenomenology of film experience*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Stadler, H. 1990. Film as experience: Phenomenological concepts in cinema and television studies, *Quarterly Review of Film & Video* 12: 37-50.
- Stefanovic, I. 2000. *Safeguarding our common future*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Wahlberg, M. 2003. *Figures of time: On the phenomenology of cinema and temporality*. Stockholm: Stockholm University, Department of Cinema Studies.
- Walker, M. 1999. "Everybody has his reasons: John Sayles's *City of Hope* and *Lone Star*." *Cineaction* 49: 37-50.
- Whitehouse, G. 2002. Remember to forget the Alamo: The dynamics of cultural memory in John Sayles' *Lone Star*. *Literature and Theology* 16: 291-310.