The Legacy of Sinful Ignorance in John Sayles's *Men with Guns*

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John Sayles's *Men with Guns* (1997) is a daring linguistic and political statement: the film is shot entirely in Spanish and four indigenous Latin American languages, centering marginalized voices while dismantling dominant national narratives. Sayles, an independent American filmmaker, famously prioritizes storytelling over stylistic artifice: "My interest is making films about people… I'm not interested in cinematic art" (Levy 82). His oeuvre consistently offers counterhegemonic alternatives— narratives that expose official myths and advocate for collective social responsibility (Lears 574; Ryan and Kellner 275). In *Men with Guns*, Sayles interrogates the consequences of willful ignorance through the protagonist Dr. Humberto Fuentes, whose comfortable affluence blinds him to rural suffering—a sin of omission that echoes Liberation Theology's critique of privileged complicity. The film's allegorical journey and resistance to historical specificity—choosing to name no country—underscore its universal, transnational implications (Thompson 81). This approach amplifies cultural resistance by exposing power dynamics and reclaiming space for the oppressed.

Sayles wrote the script for *Men With Guns* (Hombres Armados) in Spanish with the assistance of Mexican writer Alejandro Springall. He has acknowledged that the film was partly inspired by his reaction to the startling indifference many Americans showed toward the Gulf War (1990–1991). Sayles was particularly troubled by a poll revealing that 65 percent of Americans wanted to know less about the conflict, perceiving it as distant and irrelevant to their lives (Neff 33). Dr. Humberto Fuentes (Federico Luppi) was inspired by a minor character in Francisco Goldman's acclaimed novel *The Long Night of the White Chickens* (1992). Goldman based that character on his uncle, a "barefoot doctor" in Guatemala who trained physicians to work in impoverished rural communities during the height of the country's counterinsurgency campaigns against the Indigenous population in the latter half of the twentieth century. While Goldman's uncle was not willfully ignorant like Dr. Fuentes, he never imagined that most of his students would end up killed by the Guatemalan army during the nation's bloody civil war (1960–1996) (Neff 33).

Sayles portrays Dr. Fuentes as a likeable, upper-class liberal who believes in progress, modernization, and social justice, but who does not question the forces that sustain inequality and injustice. Becoming a member of the medical profession inherently carries the assumption of wanting to help people. Eliminating disease and promoting a healthy population have been tenets of the modern state since the Enlightenment. The doctor proudly declares, "I am a doctor. A scientist. I believe in progress."[1] He realizes nevertheless that his medical career lacks the heroism that makes a difference in the world. "[He] has avoided those tough moral choices by being ignorant on purpose. And in his case, it would take some work to know what was going on. Dr. Fuentes probably lives in a place where the government controls the newspapers, where the official story is not the whole story, not even much of the real story. But he could know if he wanted to. He probably had suspicions, he heard rumors. He even talks about rumors. But he didn't follow up because he didn't really want to . . . But ignorance allows you not to carry the burden of that knowledge" said Sayles of his protagonist (Carson 230-231).

The first time Dr. Fuentes appears in the film, he is performing a rectal exam to an army general. The patient reminds the doctor about medical confidentiality as his "enemies" can use the news of his tumor. The doctor laughs at the idea of enemies as he is under the impression that there is no conflict in the country. He has no reason to think otherwise. Dr. Fuentes's life of privilege and affluence has secured him a sheltered and comfortable environment in the gentrified capital of an unnamed Latin American country. The press says the existence of uprisings in the mountains are just "rumors" and the general mockingly brushes them off by saying that "the common people love drama." The rectal exam anchors the doctor's own metaphorical ailment. He has had his head up powerful men's asses for so long that he only believes what they tell him. The doctor lives in a bubble aloof to the tragic events happening in his own country. Even the army general condescends on Dr. Fuentes's naiveté. "You think like a child," the general says.

Recently widowed and suffering from shortness of breath, Dr. Fuentes fears he is getting close to the end of his days. It is at this existential juncture, albeit a narcissistic one, that he wonders what legacy, if any, he would be leaving behind. As it turns out, caring for the ailments of the rich and powerful has not brought him personal and professional fulfillment. Dr. Fuentes's preoccupation for an individual (heroic) legacy responds to a male narcissism that Laura Mulvey has identified in

[1] All characters' quotes in the original Spanish are presented in English as they appear in the film's subtitles.

film narratives, especially the western. The male hero has two options to conform and preserve the patriarchal order. He can marry and procreate to ensure a lineage or, in an act of ultimate narcissism, he remains single—the lone hero—and passes on his legacy to surrogates (33-34). Dr. Fuentes seems detached from his two offspring. His daughter has "married well" to a rich landowner whose outspoken conservatism and blatant racism makes the doctor cringe. Dr. Fuentes's son seems to be only interested in living off the material wealth of his father and has nothing to offer to the world. The disillusionment with his children turns the doctor towards his surrogate children. The one accomplishment the doctor recalls with pride is the training of seven young medical students that would then be sent to serve the underrepresented communities in rural and remote areas around the country. Dr. Fuentes never checked on his pupils after they left for their missions a few years back.

Everyone in Dr. Fuentes's circle in the city tries to dissuade him from the futility of the endeavor. His children fear for his safety while traveling alone. The military officer's had already warned him against the mountains as well to avoid the "reds". The doctor's son-in-law discredits the training program altogether and accuses the doctor of being naive. The young landowner argues that the U.S.-funded program was a waste of resources as the Indian population is "ignorant and does not want be helped." The son-in-law contends he knows Indians because they work in his family hacienda and they are lazy. He challenges the doctor to think of how many Indians he treats in his private practice. The doctor listens skeptically and defends the program.

As Klaus Rieser argues, Sayles strips his main character of the role of hero. Despite his affluence and social status, the doctor's innocence, naiveté, and willful ignorance depicts him as a castrated hero who is trying to recover his manhood: the recognition of his power (178). The journey in search of his students will ironically have the opposite effect. The more he sees and learns the more confused he becomes. The only student that remains alive lives in the city outskirts, where he is selling medicine and goods—probably stolen—in the black market. Dr. Fuentes's surprise and quick admonishment about the shady occupation of his medical student provokes a retort of the latter that sets the arch of the film: "Dr. Fuentes, you're the most learned man I ever met. But also the most ignorant." Dr. Fuentes's fall from grace endangers his (paternal) legacy (Gordon 225). By showing that his legacy is non-existent or plain wrong, Men With Guns allows for new national narratives to emerge—consciousness raising—from the margin, from the voices of the oppressed.

The medical training program was funded by Alliance for Progress, an example of U.S. soft foreign policy during the Cold War. Created in 1961 during the John F. Kennedy's Administration, it sponsored projects to modernize sectors of civil society in Latin American countries with the purpose of promoting a positive image of the United States while countering the influence of leftist movements during the 1960s and 1970s. Rather than shaping the "minds of the masses" in Latin America, the program's intended target was the relatively small stratum of intellectuals, the educated, and the semi-educated so they would accept and promote U.S. values and interests, as Dr. Fuentes exemplifies. In one of the black-and-white flashbacks, the doctor tells his pupils that the main battle they will be facing is against ignorance not bacteria. He confidently asserts, "Ignorance... nobody is immune to this disease" in the ironic twist that applies to him above anyone else in the film. His participation in the program presumes his knowledge of a large population out there in need of healthcare even though he himself has never volunteered to help directly. The well-educated city dweller participates in the program from a position of power and assumption of knowledge. The poor and social injustice exist for him in the abstract not as part of his reality.

President Kennedy's focus on Latin American elites to embrace democratic reforms sought to alleviate the economic and social distresses that fueled the spread of communism and the rise of revolutions such as Fidel Castro's in Cuba in 1959. The Democratic President had contended in 1961 that the communist threat in Latin America transcended the Nazi-Fascist threat of World War II. The president had concluded a few years later that Latin America had become "the most dangerous area in the world" (Streeter 58). On the first anniversary of the development assistance program, he warned Latin American diplomats that "those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable" (in Streeter 57).

Alliance for Progress is a small part of in the long history of intervention in Latin America since the last quarter of the 19th century. The United States strived by military force or political means to protect the economic interests of its large corporations such as the United Fruit Company and the Anaconda Mining Company. American companies benefitted from malleable laws about land acquisition, labor conditions, environmental regulations, etc., all of which contributed to the resentment of locals towards the United States. The Cold War intensified American involvement as workers' demands and social movements fought for equality and rights that aligned with leftist and nationalist ideologies. The U.S. used repressive regimes at the local level to squelch such opposition and halt the feared spread of

communism on its backyard. Shortly after the disastrous Bay of Pigs Invasion (1961), Central Intelligence director Allen W. Dulles argued that even if communism did not exist, Latin America would be prone to a "revolution of rising expectations" among the "underprivileged" (Streeter 58). From the 1960s until the 1990s, many countries became engulfed in bloody and long civil wars or suffered under brutal U.S.-backed dictatorships that exacerbated social injustice and resulted in abhorrent human rights violations.

The communist fear also tainted the practice of Liberation Theology in Latin America, a key issue framing the context of Men with Guns. The social revolution that Liberation theologians urged their followers to pursue in order to change the lives of the poor posed a similar threat to the United States due to its Marxist-leaning ideology. Members of the clergy who vocally opposed authoritarian regimes or were suspected of anti-government activities were persecuted or murdered as in the case of the Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero, who was gunned down in 1980 while giving mass. The charismatic priest had publicly spoken against poverty, torture, and the abhorrent human violations perpetrated by his government security forces and death squads.

Despite his good intentions, from a Liberation Theology standpoint, Dr. Fuentes's sin lies in his complicit alliance with an unjust and oppressive system. He is oblivious to the poor and oppressed—as they are invisible in his social circles. Liberation Theology proposes living through the poor. As the Magna Carta from the seminal CELAM (Latin American Bishop's Conference) meeting in Medellín (Colombia) in 1968 proclaimed, Christians are called to be involved in the transformation of their society and denounce institutionalized violence, which it is referred to as a "situation of sin" (Hillar). The conference document urged its followers to engage in "consciousness-raising" evangelization. Theologian and prominent voice in Liberation Theology Father Gustavo Gutiérrez proposed that such evangelization must emerge from the local communities ("comunidades de base") rather than imposed from the top. The assumption was that societal changes would happen through the conversion of the privileged and powerful (Hillar). Liberation would be achieved through a social revolution that worked to end all kinds of oppression. In individual terms, liberation is conceived as a historical process in which people consciously develop their own destiny through their engagement in social changes. Ultimately, at the religious level, liberation is understood as the complete liberation from sin (the source of all injustice and oppression). It is in that sin-free state that man can be finally in communion with God and his fellow men (Hillar). Within this framework, Dr. Fuentes's state of sin

arises from his willful ignorance of the pervasive social injustice oppressing the lower classes of his country. Despite the hints signaling the existence of conflict in the countryside, he has not been motivated to find out what is happening outside his comfortable environment.

Dr. Fuentes's quest to discover the fate of his students will parallel the discovery of his own country. The only other place he seems to know outside the capital is a vacationing resort for the elites on the coast. The capital city appears modern and cosmopolitan with a high-pace lifestyle, loud traffic and bustling of people. Dr. Fuentes moves with ease along the streets of the capital. This urban space belongs to him and the middle and upper classes. No threats seem to be present. He tips the occasional street beggar almost carelessly and ignores the anti-government graffiti along the street walls. As he moves further from the city, the doctor finds himself in a foreign land. He has a hard time finding road signs and directions for the villages where his students were placed. More significantly, he is surprised so very few of his countrymen speak Spanish. He feels awkwardly like a foreigner in his own country. Film scholar Robert Stam frames *Men with Guns* within Third Cinema, noting its subversive use of indigenous languages as decolonial resistance by refusing the cinematic norms of Hollywood (45). Similarly, other critics have argued that the multilingual dialogue in the film functions not merely for realism, but as an ethical imperative—affirming linguistic authenticity to confront historical erasures (Mendoza–Mori 112).

In most instances, the villagers distrust the doctor for being an outsider and white. "You are not from here," they keep repeating. The locals associate the color of his skin as a source of violence and danger. In one occasion, after some meandering on foot and walking through unmarked paths, Dr. Fuentes runs into a dwelling that seems abandoned. The few indigenous women present close their doors to the doctor. The only person who responds to the visitor is a blind woman. She tells him that the men with guns came and burned everything. The doctor asks insistently why, and she insistently responds "just because, because they have guns." Dr. Fuentes cannot understand why anybody would commit an act of violence without an expressed reason. His disbelief highlights his blindness to the suffering of the poor in this encounter with a blind woman. As representative of her community, she can ironically "see" what the doctor cannot. She speaks of indiscriminate violence as a normalized occurrence inflicted on the rural population. At the end, all the information that Dr. Fuentes can gather about his former student was that he was killed by one of the two sides.

The blind woman is the first one in the film to refer to "men with guns." Similar to the lack of specificity in naming the country, "men with guns" draws attention to the existence of systemic violence rather than delving on the particular motivations of each group. Sayles in fact shies away from giving historical details of the events and their participants. In an interview the director explains that the lack of specificity in the title and the country where the action takes place lays the ground for the transnational and trans-historical perspective of the film: "Half of the movies ever made could be called *Men With Guns*. This is a very realistic fable, a quality which is sustained by not announcing that this is Guatemala, El Salvador or Argentina" (Thompson 81). That lack of focus and explanation of the conflict reflects the out of sight out of mind state of aloofness from people like Dr. Fuentes. The military officer referred to rebels in the mountains as "reds", thus framing the struggle as part of the proxy conflicts of the Cold War. We only see guerrilla fighters towards the end of the film. They are portrayed as simple good-hearted men preoccupied about securing food and arms and fantasizing about ice cream flavors. The national army is more ubiquitous throughout the film. They are portrayed as the perpetrators of violence through brief black-and-white flashbacks. They are shown burning villages, gang raping women, and killing other men as sport.

Rather than explaining the ideological roots of the conflict what seems more important to Sayles is showing the impact this violence has on the poor and the indigenous. Throughout his search from town to town, Dr. Fuentes has a hard time deciphering which side murdered his students, because to the locals both sides are just one big blur encapsulated in "men with guns." As a man of reason and education, Dr. Fuentes believes there must be a motivation behind the killings of his students and villagers. To his much frustration, the answer the doctor repeatedly gets hit with is "no reason, just because." Dr. Fuentes's willful ignorance of the structures sustaining the systemic sin devastating his country is also highlighted through his interactions with an American couple played by Many Patinkin (Andrew) and Kathryn Grody (Harriet). Unlike Dr. Fuentes, the tourists are there to see the real—"authentic"—country. They have studied its past and the current political conflict. They mention to the doctor what they learned about the sacrifices of the pre-Columbian civilizations as well as the newspaper reports of current massacres. Dr. Fuentes defensively dismisses both. The sacrifices, he says, "those were up north, not here." And more significantly, he parrots the army general to down play present-day violence by claiming, "People love drama."

Despite the knowledge the American couple has, they share with Dr. Fuentes a sense of privileged aloofness as they take on a leisure tour through violence-ridden

terrain. It is as if they believed that no harm could happen to them because they are white, affluent first-world tourists; similar to the cautious optimism displayed by Goldman's "barefoot doctor" uncle. Sayles comically underscores their knowing while ignoring in their last run-in with the doctor up in the mountains. The fighting between the military and the guerrilla is supposed to be at its worst there, as it was suggested by the army general in the capital and confirmed by the area's police captain. In the scene, Harriet takes a deep breath while admiring the beautiful green scenery of the Indian ruins and declares "it's so quiet here—tranquilo, right?"

Throughout Dr. Fuentes's journey, the locals keep refer to themselves by the harvest they produce: "We are the people of" the salt, rubber, coffee, etc. The diversity of resources suggests the possible wealth of the country. But the obvious poverty and desolation afflicting the towns communicate that it is a tiny minority who profits from the export of these products. Liberation Theologians have used Marxist-leaning Dependency Theory to criticize the subjugation of Third World countries to the economic needs of the First World. Underdeveloped economies rely on the export of a handful—if not one—raw material and are subject to the fluctuations of the supply and demand forces of the world market. The lack of diversity in the national economy relegates most of the work force to the production of the raw material. Traditionally, large corporations, mostly from the U.S. have been in charge of the extraction of these raw materials. To maximize profits they have kept its labor force in low paying wages and poor working conditions and they have pressured national governments to provide favorable conditions such as tax incentives, banning of unions, laxed environmental laws, and no minimum wage. When Dr. Fuentes arrives to the People of Coffee village, he finds a woman nursing a crying child. The doctor tells the woman that her offspring is too old to be nursing that he needs more sustenance. But the woman says she does not have any money despite working in the fields, because that year's harvest fell short.

Along the way Dr. Fuentes picks up a cadre of travel companions. They all too seek to find their own individual salvation by leaving behind their current lives of despair, poverty, and violence. The companions' life stories further educate the doctor about the endemic social injustice existing in the rural and mountainous areas. A young boy (Dan Rivera González) of about 12-13 years of age attaches to the doctor promising to be his guide and show him the way into one of the remote towns in exchange for a few coins. The boy also becomes his translator as he can speak Spanish and the local languages. A village woman informs the doctor that "Conejo" (rabbit in Spanish) has been on his own for a long time. His mother abandoned him, as he was the offspring of a rape. The army troops had adopted him

as a sort of mascot and then left him behind after they burned the area. The boy tours the doctor through a secret cemetery in the jungle where he playfully handles human remains as if they were toys. Conejo also shows the visitor the small school where the army "educated" locals. The soldiers used surgical instruments to torture suspected guerrilla's sympathizers. Dr. Fuentes appears visibly shocked at the use of tools of his trade and probably the ownership of his student to perpetrate such acts of violence. Equally shocking to him and the viewer is the matter-of-fact way Conejo narrates the violence committed in the school building. The boy is desensitized to the horrific events he has witnessed. Out of survival and in an attempt to belong, Conejo attaches to Dr. Fuentes.

The second traveler that joins Dr. Fuentes on his journey is an army deserter. Domingo (Damián Delgado) initially robs them and later forces the doctor at gunpoint to treat a bullet wound. But Domingo's pain is more than physical. The trauma of the violence the army medic was forced to carry out weighs heavily on his conscience. His flashbacks show the acts of rape, killings, and destruction of whole villages committed by the military. Deserting was Domingo's first step towards his individual liberation. He seeks absolution from his sins. He is the only man in the film that gives up a gun and the power associated with it and chooses a different path.

Just like Domingo, Father Portillo (Damián Alcázar) is also on the run from the authorities and above all ashamed and traumatized for his sins. The catholic priest self-describes as a follower of Liberation Theology. He confesses to Dr. Fuentes that he let down the remote indigenous community he was sent to serve. Suspecting that the community was full of sympathizers of the guerrillas, the military gave them two horrific choices. Either the most prominent members of the community, including Portillo, sacrificed themselves or the entire village would be destroyed. While all the indigenous leaders complied to spare their families, the priest fled that morning. His escape resulted in the burning of the village. Not only had he failed his community but also he had betrayed his faith and commitment to helping the poor and oppressed. The priest does not feel worthy of his vocation anymore. He tells Domingo he is no position to give the ex-soldier absolution. When the car gets stopped at a military checkpoint, Father Portillo draws attention to himself in order to protect Domingo from being captured. In his last words to the group as he is taken away by soldiers, the priest gives Domingo the absolution he did not feel comfortable granting before. The priest sacrifices himself this time to save the deserter. Taking this action leads him on the path of his own liberation.

The final passenger in Dr. Fuentes's journey is a young woman who stopped talking after being gang raped by soldiers. The motley crew meets Graciela (Tania Cruz) at a military camp that also houses many of the displaced from the violence. Her mother had asked Fuentes for medicine to cure the daughter's pain. The doctor condescendingly responded that there was not medicine for that kind of pain. Domingo gave her some pills nonetheless, out of empathy and in frustration with the doctor's rectitude. Later in the film, Graciela tries to kill herself with Domingo's gun to put an end to the intensity of the pain she is suffering. Dr. Fuentes successfully dissuades her from firing by describing an idyllic place they have been hearing throughout the trip. *Cerca del Cielo* is supposed to be a peaceful inaccessible refuge up in the mountains away from the turmoil afflicting the country. But no one they encounter has been able to find it so far.

In Spanish *cielo* can mean sky or heaven. The town can then be translated as close or near to the sky or to heaven. If taken as the literal "Near the sky," the place alludes to an out-of-the-way remote location where the oppressed can hide and find refuge from the violence and social injustice perpetrated against them. But if the place is interpreted in its more mythical meaning, "Near heaven or Close to heaven," then *Cerca del Cielo* may refer to a place of spiritual salvation and liberation that allows men to get closer to the poor and their union with God. While Conejo—like Graciela—seems hopeful about the possibility of finding heaven, Domingo is skeptical: "You can believe in heaven if you want to, kid. See where it gets you." The ex-soldier's experience in the civil war sharply dents his optimism for the existence of heaven. Similarly, Father Portillo had alluded to hell when describing the massacres the military had perpetrated: "I obviously don't believe in heaven, doctor. But I can give you a tour of hell."

It is in *Cerca del Cielo* where Dr. Fuentes's last medical student is supposed to have been placed. The doctor and his companions leave the car behind and venture up into treacherous terrain. The steep hike through mud and vegetation strains Dr. Fuentes's breathing. The group ultimately reaches a makeshift dwelling under the tree canopies. Nobody confirms if that is indeed *Cerca del Cielo* as there "is where rumors come to die." The much sought after place seems at the end to be another mirage. It looks more like a refugee camp than paradisiacal enclave. Violence even intrudes there through the bombs military planes drop to combat the guerrilla forces. Conejo, Domingo, and Dr. Fuentes show out right disillusion with their final destination based on their selfish expectations. The young boy is disappointed because he ends up in the middle of nowhere and does not get the promised pay from Dr. Fuentes. He says, "This is where the people eat the sky and shit clouds."

Similarly Domingo regrets the arrival to the remote location, "There's got to be another place beyond that's better." Dr. Fuentes finds no trace of his last student; his last hope for leaving a legacy. He sits to catch his breath and lament that all this quixotic effort was for nothing, that he will not have a legacy to leave behind. He dies quietly this way.

The conclusion of the meandering journey in *Cerca del Cielo* underscores the enduring need to resist oppressive forces and to build a collective, interconnected society. As Gavin Smith puts it, "if Sayles has an overarching impulse, it is to investigate the complex, shifting relationship between individuals and their communities and social orders, or put in another way, the dynamic between the personal and the political in ordinary life" (xiv). By the film's end, Conejo no longer has to fend for himself; the orphan has become part of a family, one of many misfits and refugees who discover in the community a chance for renewal. Domingo's search for absolution reveals his awareness of past sins, and, following Dr. Fuentes's death, the former army medic reluctantly assumes the role of the community's doctor. His redemption will likely come through healing the poor and underserved.

Father Portillo never reaches *Cerca del Cielo*, but his capture by the military enables the other travelers—especially Domingo—to avoid detention and, quite possibly, torture or death. In a Christ-like act of sacrifice, the priest saves his surrogate flock. In doing so, he redeems himself for having once failed God and his village in their time of greatest need.

In contrast to Domingo and Father Portillo, both of whom were haunted by their sins and sought transformation, Dr. Fuentes shows little recognition of his own culpability. He confides to Father Portillo that, had he known his students were in danger, perhaps he could have saved them. The priest, uncertain of the doctor's responsibility, reflects on sins of commission and omission before ultimately conceding, "Maybe ignorance is a sin."

Although Dr. Fuentes's beliefs are shaken during the journey, he resists abandoning them. When confronted with poverty, violence, and injustice, he deflects responsibility, remarking, "Somebody needs to know about this," as if to suggest that is somebody else's problem. By the time he reaches *Cerca del Cielo*, he has witnessed a starkly different reality of his country, yet he rejects the lessons before him. He dies full of regret for not leaving a legacy of fame and personal prestige. Serving the large numbers of neglected underserved does not cut it. Dr. Fuentes's good intentions are undermined by his elitism and bourgeois worldview, which

blind him to human suffering. He thus becomes a symbol of the nation's complacency and complicity in sustaining inequality and poverty.

The film closes with Graciela gazing through a break in the vegetation at a mountain beyond. For the first time, she smiles—a gesture that conveys peace and hope. In that moment, the viewer is momentarily lifted above the grim realities of the bloody armed conflict and exploitative economic system still raging below.

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