

# Dissidences

Hispanic Journal of Theory and Criticism

---

Volume 6 | Issue 11

Article 13

---

January 2016

## Indigenous Trauma in Mainstream Peru in Claudia Llosa's *The Milk of Sorrow*.

REBECA MASEDA

UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA ANCHORAGE, [rmasedagarcia@uaa.alaska.edu](mailto:rmasedagarcia@uaa.alaska.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/dissidences>



Part of the [Latin American Languages and Societies Commons](#), and the [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

MASEDA, REBECA (2016) "Indigenous Trauma in Mainstream Peru in Claudia Llosa's *The Milk of Sorrow*," *Dissidences*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 11 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/dissidences/vol6/iss11/13>

This Article / Artículo is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Bowdoin Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Dissidences* by an authorized editor of Bowdoin Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [mduoye@bowdoin.edu](mailto:mduoye@bowdoin.edu).

---

## Indigenous Trauma in Mainstream Peru in Claudia Llosa's *The Milk of Sorrow*.

### Abstract / Resumen

Despite winning several international awards and being praised by the critics, the Peruvian film *La teta asustada* (*The Milk of Sorrow*, Claudia Llosa, 2008) was deemed racist by some blogospheres and critics. The indigenous peoples have not traditionally controlled their own representations, and thus have been subject to misrepresentations; exoticization, criminalization, infantilization, etc. This paper offers a nuanced multivalent analysis that regards not only images and stereotypes, but also voices, points of view, music and mise-en-scène, in order to argue that *The Milk of Sorrow* provides an ethnocentric view. Several trauma authors speak of the moral obligation of talking about trauma, to make the public "know," to mobilize viewers' responses and to give an opportunity for critical reflection. This last stance is more pressing in the case of indigenous trauma, as their anguish has been largely obliterated from public discourse. Llosa makes a decisive pro-indigenous move in denouncing the traumas, and the lack of citizenship rights suffered during and after the Peruvian Internal Armed Conflict (1980-2000). But, in the process, Llosa also places the path to recovery in the reconciliation between indigenous and "western" lifestyles, and in the necessity of looking forward to a hybrid society in order to recover from the inflicted trauma.

### Keywords / Palabras clave

La teta asustada/The Milk of Sorrow, Claudia Llosa, trauma, film, Peruvian Internal Armed Conflict

### Cover Page Footnote / Si quiere que su cubierta contenga una nota al pie de página...

I would like to thank the reviewers of this paper for their constructive comments, and to the members of the writing group Full Monkey Don't Laugh, Hungry Bear Won't Dance, Dr. Zeynep Kilic and Dr. Dayna DeFeo. Lastly, I thank UAA's professor on Psychology Dr. Patrick Dulin for sharing with me his knowledge on PTSD.

## Indigenous Trauma in Mainstream Peru in Claudia Llosa's *The Milk of Sorrow*.

In 2009 and 2010, *La teta asustada* (The Milk of Sorrow, Claudia Llosa) won awards for best film at Berlin International Film Festival, Montréal Festival of New Cinema, Lima Latin American Film Festival, Havana Film Festival, Guadalajara Mexican Film Festival, Gramado Film Festival, and Bogotá Film Festival. The movie was also nominated for the Goya Awards, Ariel Awards, Argentinean Film Critics Awards, the Peruvian Association of Cinematographic Press Award, and the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts Award. The heightened positive reception of the film contrasted greatly with contemporaneous attacks from the blogosphere and an academic article's suggestion that it was an overtly racist movie.<sup>1</sup>

What happens in *The Milk of Sorrow*? Where does all this controversy come from? Every movie that deals with representation of indigenous peoples risks being accused of promoting a blatant or subliminal racism, and with reason. First of all we cannot deny the historical atrocities against the indigenous people, or the current veiled or unveiled racism that still exists in most cinematic/artistic representations. Shohat and Stam state that the sensitivity towards how the indigenous peoples are represented arises mainly from the “powerlessness of historically marginalized groups” who do not control their own representation (Shohat and Stam 184). The questions that come to mind then are, can anyone speak for anyone? “Does the experience of oppression confer special jurisdiction over the right to speak about oppression?” (Shohat & Stam 343)

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://carlosgc.blogspot.com/2009/02/sorrow-of-milk-racist-mockery-of-native.html>, <http://peruanista.blogspot.com/2009/02/la-teta-asustada-de-claudia-llosa.html>, <http://www.peruvianimes.com/05/why-to-root-against-the-milk-of-sorrows-oscar-nomination/4784/> (Last time accessed Jan, 2, 2013); (Pagan-Teitelbaum, “Glamour” 88).

Some of the accusations include: the movie renders indigenous women as helpless victims (Perpetua), stereotypical, superstitious, and outdated (Fausta); that the indigenous are represented as extravagant (Máxima's character), vulgar and potentially abusive (wedding guest), and servile (Plácido, Noé); the movie presents indigenous traditions in ridiculous ways; "the film portrays Indigenous communities as abandoned, defeated towns inhabited by exotic and curious peoples;" and that the movie is filmed from a "foreign and even white supremacist perspective."<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, most of the comments are not thoroughly described or research supported, which makes it difficult to understand their reasoning fully.

Although, from here we impatiently await a film made about topics of interest to several Quechua-speakers communities by indigenous filmmakers, this paper argues that *The Milk of Sorrow*, more than a racist stance, holds an ethnocentric view –as it “sees the world through the lenses provided by its own culture” (Shohat and Stam 22)— that is not necessarily racist. This paper will demonstrate the need for a nuanced multivalent analysis that regards not only images and stereotypes, but also voices, point of view, music and mise-en-scène. Llosa makes a decisive pro-indigenous move in denouncing the traumas, and the lack of citizenship rights suffered during and after the Peruvian “Internal Armed Conflict” (1980-2000). But, in the process, Llosa also places the path to recovery in the reconciliation between indigenous and “western” lifestyles, and in the necessity of looking forward to a hybrid society in order to recover from the inflicted trauma. It is in this regard that the movie endorses an ethnocentric –Western to be more precise— view to talk about the sorrows of the indigenous peoples of Peru. In sum, Llosa does not reflect a unitary or

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://carlosgc.blogspot.com/2009/02/sorrow-of-milk-racist-mockery-of-native.html>

homogeneous political stance but, with her movie, she offers a hybrid site of reconciliation.

### **Speaking of Silenced Traumas**

*The Milk of Sorrow* begins with a close-up of a dying woman, Perpetua, who is singing in Quechua an account of her rape and her husband's murder by the military during the war. From 1980 to 2000 Peru suffered an internal war between the Armed Forces and a Maoist faction of the Peruvian Communist Party known as Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso) –and in a lesser degree the Revolutionary Movement Túpac Amaru, but it involved in its majority the peasants from the Andean areas and the *Rondas Campesinas* (Stern, Manrique, Theidon, Pagan-Teitelbaum 2010). In 2000, the new government organized the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Comisión de la Verdad y la Reconciliación, CVR) who collected around 17,000 testimonies from 2001 to 2003. The majority of the victims cited by the CVR in its Final Report were Quechua-speaker indigenous people (“Depiction” 162): 79 % lived in the rural areas and 75 % of the mortalities were among Quechua and other native language-speakers (Theidon 19). Although armed conflicts affect the entire population, the impact in Peru was particularly differentiated by gender, ethnic group, and social class, whose exclusion and discrimination was ongoing before the violent conflict erupted (Escribens). In the aftermath of the conflict the indigenous voices still remain silenced. The issue of trauma in nations is complicated, warns Ann Kaplan, because there is always a group that deliberately imposes suffering on ethnic minorities. The authorities then want to repress public knowledge at all cost so as not to arouse outcry, blame, or demands for financial compensation for suffering. (“Traumatic Contact” 47) It is the Quechua speakers’ lack of access to cinematographic means and the absence of self-representation (the absence of

institutional power in general) that prevent an analysis and discussion necessary for real national reconciliation. Is it possible then, that one non-indigenous filmmaker can denounce the traumas inflicted on the Quechua-speaker population? What would this movie look like?

Trauma and traumatic memories have become a pervasive term in public discourse. We live increasingly within what Roger Luckhurst calls “contemporary trauma culture;” the related public grief has become the common currency of our times (“Traumaculture” 28). The psychological effects of traumatic experiences have likely been a phenomenon that people have experienced for millennia. However, it is only lately that the attention given by scholars to trauma have been linked to historical events (for instance, the Jewish Holocaust). Additionally posterior official recognition of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980, offered a space where those suffering from it receive an acknowledgement of their ailment and means for recovery.<sup>3</sup> The public acknowledgement of trauma as a legitimate disorder has helped alleviate the individual sense of unfairness and injustice, and has also provided means for recovery through psychological help, and economic and moral retribution. The wide acceptance of the disorder seems to be linked to the recovery of a notion of historical truth and justice through the testimony of survivors of traumatic events. In this case, trauma and traumatic memories, remembering and forgetting, are not merely personal but also social and historical.

In this climate of ubiquitous public grief and abundant theoretical and cultural discourses on trauma, the limited public attention given to the traumas of indigenous people begs to be

---

<sup>3</sup> Judith Herman argues in her seminal work *Trauma and Recovery*, how the shift in the perception of trauma and the inclusion of PTSD in the DSM IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) happened in tandem with the political movements against the Vietnam War and the Women’s Movement.

questioned; there still exist differences when deciding which traumas are worth representing. Allen Meek explains how war crimes in general “have been publicly denied leading to a failure to memorialize entire communities or an inability of survivors to communicate the horror of their experience” (29). The different indigenous peoples of the Andes are part of these “communities” whose testimonies and cries for justice have largely gone unheard. Laura S. Brown affirms, “our images of trauma have been narrow and constructed within the experiences and realities of dominant groups in culture” (102). The fact of the matter is that traumatized indigenous populations have been unceasingly obliterated by history at large. History focused on grand narratives of war and victories of the Western or westernized world. Kaplan explains how for political and social reasons (or both) it is too dangerous for the culture to acknowledge or recall certain events, or certain traumas (“Trauma Culture” 74).

Trauma scholars, such as Dori Laub, Shosana Felman and Cathy Caruth (following the ideas of German philosopher Theodore Adorno)<sup>4</sup> believe that trauma cannot and should not be represented. They posit that representations of trauma not only fail to grasp the nature and extent of the damage, but it can also contribute to a second traumatization for witnesses of the suffering, and to *vicarious trauma* in those spectators of horrific depictions.<sup>5</sup> They stress the necessity to preserve the silence of respect. They criticize the culture industries and the proliferation of trauma as spectacle and simulation that exposes survivors and open their as well as the public’s wounds. In addition, the repetition of discourses and images about trauma can deflect their emotional impact; it can result in desensitization of the public or

---

<sup>4</sup> Adorno, Theodore. “Cultural Criticism and Society”. *Prisms*. Trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber. London: Neville Spearman, 1967.

<sup>5</sup> *Vicarious trauma* refers to milder symptoms of PTSD from the viewing of atrocity photographs or films, which includes “shock, intrusive imagery, grief, depression, numbing, guilt feelings, and loss of faith in humanity” (Hirsch 17).

collective numbing (Hartman, Sontag). This position, however, has been extensively discussed since its formulation. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang take into account the risks of representing trauma (vicarious traumatization, voyeurism, aestheticization, trivialization), but argue that a choice must be made “between inadequate telling and the relegating of trauma to a mystified silence” (12). They consider that trauma should not be reduced to a private work of mourning, but through acts of testimony, witnessing and mourning, traumatic events of the past can be worked-through and give rise to new forms of political agency. Joshua Hirsch also believes that representations of traumatic events and its effects on people are necessary in order to remember, to not let it be forgotten: “a collective consciousness seems to provide a form of resistance to the tendencies of avoidance and denial of a historical catastrophe that, I argue, Western societies should and must confront” (“Afterimage” 25-6). Susan Sontag herself goes further by commanding: “no one after a certain age has the right to this kind of innocence, of superficiality, to this degree of ignorance, or amnesia” (114).

These ideas follow earlier complaints from Walter Benjamin, who talked about the necessity of challenging the ‘official History’, which is solely constructed based on victories. In *On the Concept of History*, Benjamin commented on how “empathy with the victors thus comes to benefit the rulers every time” (8). If “the empathy of the historian inevitably falls with the victor (thereby) making history a tool of dominant power” (Meek 43), revealing the silenced traumas will challenge the ‘official History’ and will offer something closer to the truth. The recollection of traumatic memories by the oppressed groups offers a fissure in the dominant historical narratives. Thus, trauma should not be reduced to a private work of mourning, but utilized to challenge the so-called factuality of historical events. It is important to represent



the trauma of indigenous groups in order to gain political agency. Dominick LaCapra adds that working on posttrauma can help to address the causes of the experience that triggered the traumatic reactions and thus, “prevent its recurrence and enable forms of renewal” (119). In this regard, speaking of the traumas of the indigenous population serves to denounce the abuses committed against the victims, prior, during and after the Peruvian armed conflict. For LaCapra any viable reconciliation depends not only on empathy and/or mourning, but also on specific economic, social, and political reforms (215). It is in this context that Claudia Llosa’s movie makes a contribution towards educating Peruvians about the injuries and racism indigenous people suffered and still do.

### **Perpetua’s Gruesome Song**

The film’s vehicle to condemn the atrocities committed by all parties in the conflict is Perpetua’s song. The fact that *The Milk of Sorrow* begins with the song in Quechua frames the ultimate intention of the filmmaker. As Mar Diestro-Dópidio comments, her song “not only gives this otherwise buried and silenced abomination –as well as its victims—an audible voice, but its resonance purposefully haunts every minute of the film” (80). Perpetua’s song cites her own rape by a group of soldiers.<sup>6</sup> I discuss elsewhere (2014) that the film does not present Perpetua as a hopeless victim to be pitied, but a woman with agency; she is the chronicler, the historian. According to Theidon, the victim that narrates a trauma has an archetype in Peru: the widow or *warmisapa*. The Quechua name *warmisapa* reflects her

---

<sup>6</sup> Researchers coincide that Shining Path and the Armed forces committed crimes against humanity, but the soldiers and police used sexual violence systematically (Brooke 1993; Falconi & Agüero 2003; Theidon 2004; Escribens 2011). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CVR) calculated that eight out of ten rapes was imputable to the members of the armed forces (Escribens 16). There is also another detail in the movie that supports that soldiers raped Perpetua: Fausta gets visibly altered when she sees the portrayal of a general.

ambivalence: *warmi* means woman and *sapa*, very or alone. Therefore, *warmisapa* could mean either ‘woman alone’ or ‘very woman,’ which contains connotations of strength. Thus, widows are not seen as victims (*lloronas*/ fretful, in contrast with the Fatherland heroes), but as important agents in postwar society (Theidon 131-2). It is not a coincidence that her name is Perpetua; Perpetua was a Christian martyr who was tortured and killed in Carthage's amphitheater (Shaw). Historian Brent D. Shaw describes her as confrontational and proud: “her ability to confront authority, and to reject its terms, no doubt marked her out as a woman who (...) could be labeled ‘a hard contemptuous woman’” (5). In addition, according to Christians, through martyrdom a woman received the title of ‘Domina’, which implies command, ownership, control, and power (Shaw 6). Also, both share an extraordinary quality: Christian Perpetua wrote about her captivity and torture, Indigenous Perpetua uses a Quechua traditional song or *qarawi* with the same objective.<sup>7</sup> The staging of the first scene contributes to dignify Perpetua; she is presented as a matriarch who is transmitting her knowledge before dying. She looks extremely old because the *llakis* or sorrows (Theidon 64) have worn her out, but it gives us the impression that she has no age, she is pure experience and wisdom. While dying she is comforted by her daughter Fausta, and when dead she is carefully embalmed by different members of the family. Her role carries the weight of the entire film; she is the driving force behind all the events.

The singing seems ritualized, a ‘ceremony’ that mother and daughter rehearsed occasionally.

Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan believe that people create these ‘rehearsed memories’ in

---

<sup>7</sup> It is possible that the song is what Quechua-speakers call *qarawi*, a narrative ballad with a long history in Peru. Theidon cites fray Martín de Murua: ‘people sung their past stories and memories (...) and other things they did not want to forget’ (Cavero Carrasco 1981: 2, Cit. Theidon 131-2). According to Theidon only widows sing *qarawi*. *Qarawi* is a vehicle to historicize events and to offer, at the same time, a critical commentary about them. This, women are the ones that historicize (133). This fact is very important because there is reluctance in Peru to let women speak.

order to deal with their sorrows, but also to fill the silence caused by ignorance (18). Fausta, initiated by her mother in these rituals of memories and recollection, carries the burden on her shoulders- the stories of her predecessors' tragedies-, and suffers in her own psyche, the effects of the traumatic events. As Winter and Sivan state, "for some, carrying a survivor's narrative can approximate survivorship itself" (18).

### **Fausta's coat of arms**

Perpetua was pregnant at the time of the rapes, and her daughter, Fausta, witnessed the traumatic events from the womb. The film, based on the anthropological study *Entre prójimos. El conflicto armado interno y la política de la reconciliación en Perú* by Kimberly Theidon, sustains that among Quechua-speakers there is the belief that sorrows and fear can be transmitted from mothers to children through the maternal milk. This disease, *la teta asustada*, creates in Fausta an internal turmoil, flat affect and withdrawal. She fears for her sexual integrity and thus inserts a tuber into her vagina as a 'coat of arms,' to prevent rape. The potato's growth causes an infection and subsequent blackouts, which prompts her uncle to take her to the doctor. The doctor, a visible representative of the Western medicine/attitudes, dismisses the existence of such a disease – sorrow that transmits through the mother's milk. For the medical discipline, the culture of Quechua-speakers presents itself as a barrier to the advances of the sciences and its double, modernity and progress.<sup>8</sup> The scenes in the hospital convey that the medical services for people with limited means, although well-intended, have insufficient resources. The doctor states that he sees eighty people a day, and this situation

---

<sup>8</sup> Theidon cites the information gathered in the health center in Cayara: 'the people's idiosyncrasy makes difficult the activities of the health professionals. This is due to the fact that taboos, myths, and customs persist (Theidon 89).

propels the bureaucratization of the medical profession, which does not allow any time to understand how indigenous people may describe their ailments differently than the European-descent Peruvians. Theidon states that there is a tendency to understand medicine as something outside culture (not informed culturally). From this perspective, Quechua-speakers' culture is presented as a barrier to progress, and health in this case. The Health establishment in Peru is, therefore, alienating the rural indigenous population (Theidon 91). Fausta confronts the situation indigenous people are placed within a society that does not understand them, does not have any interest in doing so, and considers adaptation to the Western ways as their/Fausta's ultimate responsibility. The protagonist of *The Milk of Sorrow* refuses to be treated at first by a medicine that treats her impersonally by discrediting and alienating her. Paula Escibens mentions how individuals construct their subjectivity based on the reality in which they were raised, and their particular reading of it (46). One can discover theories or concepts without the necessity to start from aprioristic principles developed from theoretical postulates or previous research (46). Fausta is not outdated or superstitious; it is the Western mental framework that fails to identify her ailment in its complexity.

The doctor tells Fausta's uncle that 'la teta asustada' does not exist, and that puts an end to the conversation. But, if it would be possible (without being Eurocentric) for us to find a correlation in the Western world, Fausta's malady resonates with what the Psychological profession denominates as 'second generation trauma' or 'vicarious trauma'.<sup>9</sup> An area of Psychology has studied how survivors' narrations are capable of evoking strong emotional

---

<sup>9</sup> Psychology offers terminological nuances for all these term. See an extent discussion in Jenkins, S. R. and Baird, S. "Secondary Traumatic Stress and Vicarious Trauma: A Validation Study." *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 15/5 (2002): 423-432.

responses in therapists, and that these listeners can be “vicariously traumatized” (“Post-traumatic Cinema” 99). People in intimate contact with those suffering from trauma over a prolonged period of time, such as descendents of Holocaust survivors, can also develop milder symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Hirsch explains: “the effects may not normally be as severe or long lasting as in direct trauma. But the effects may include a number of the symptoms of PTSD, such as shock, intrusive imagery, grief, depression, numbing, guilt feelings, and loss of faith in humanity” (“Post-traumatic Cinema” 100). Hirsch denominates ‘second generation cinema’ films that represent specific experiences of survivor’s children; when a whole generation suffers from the memory of an event that did not experience in its own skin (“Post-traumatic Cinema” 143). Kaplan observes that, the more graphic the description of the traumatic event, the more probable the development of vicarious trauma (“Trauma Culture” 90). Fausta, after listening repeatedly to her mother’s gruesome, graphic recount, has absorbed all the pain and fear. She suffers some physical reactions –nose bleeding and nausea when she sees a military man’s portrait— and psychological responses—depression, fear, hopelessness, and distrust. Fausta also unveils her tortured subconscious through the songs she invents. As Escaja indicates, the songs she sings to her dead mother signal the reciprocity: it is now the daughter who tells her story, who reveals that she felt the abuses and rapes from inside her mother’s body (3). She does so, also, in order to not let it be forgotten, now that her mother is no longer there to sing it herself.

Once Perpetua is dead, the film follows Fausta in her journey. She is the sole protagonist of it. The camera offers mainly close-ups of Magaly Solier, the indigenous actress that interprets Fausta’s role. The close-ups allow viewers a close identification with her pain. Pagan-

Teitelbaum writes: “The Peruvian version of the ‘instant Indian’ woman has consisted of adding braids and a traditional skirt to Euro-American actresses (...) In these soap operas, white actresses of European descent are transformed into ‘instant’ provincial figures by virtue of a pair of braids, a naïve attitude, and a mocking imitation of the ways of speaking in rural, non-metropolitan regions of Peru” (“Glamour” 73). Although the actress may seem exotic for a ‘white’ audience, the film does not feed her exoticism: she does not represent the ‘instant Indian’ that Pagan-Teitelbaum describes either. She wears ‘normal’ clothes and her hair is fairly conventional. Ms. Solier is also conventionally beautiful, which contrasts with the images of indigenous women that Pagan-Teitelbaum and Peruvian bloggers remark the media portrays.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Fausta is neither ignorant nor naïve. As I argue elsewhere, the act of inserting a potato inside of her might make her seem ‘mentally damaged’ and outdated, but it ultimately demonstrates her determination and control over her own body. With this gesture she is taking on an active role to impede the sexual conquest. Fausta explains to her uncle (it follows my own translation):

“This doctor does not know anything. It is not a birth control method. I know that! I am not ignorant; I prefer that (referring to the potato) that something else (referring to rape). My mum told me that at the time of terrorism, a neighbor did it so not as to be raped. ‘It was disgusting,’ they say. I thought she was the smartest. Then, she got married, had four children, and she did not have to live with a rapist.”

When later a suitor professes a coarse comment in order to gain her affection, she leaves

---

<sup>10</sup> <http://carlosqc.blogspot.com/2009/02/sorrow-of-milk-racist-mockery-of-native.html>, <http://peruanista.blogspot.com/2009/02/la-teta-asustada-de-claudia-llosa.html> <http://www.peruviantimes.com/05/why-to-root-against-the-milk-of-sorrows-oscar-nomination/4784/>, Pagan-Teitelbaum, “Glamour” 88.

without bothering to utter a word, showing again her own determination and agency. Sharon Marcus considers that women have to resist typical self-defeating notions of feminine speech, and develop physical tactics of self-defense, in order to prevent rapes (389). Strategies that enable women to sabotage men's power to rape will empower women by taking the ability to rape completely out of men's hands. By maintaining her autonomy and mastery over her own body and behavior, Fausta, although subjected to the Peruvian racism and classism, strikes us as someone headstrong and self-determined. Viewers get other glimpses of her will when she refuses to sing when she is impelled, and she confronts the white woman she works for when she is rebuked by her.

### **A transforming journey**

*The Milk of Sorrow* follows Fausta in the journey she has to undertake in order to give her mother a dignified burial in her original Andean village, from which she had to flee after the traumatic events took place. During this journey, Fausta, previously sheltered by her mother and relatives and vicariously traumatized, has to face a country full of racial and class distinctions and inequalities that actually prompted the war in the first place (Gama 1). With the purpose of raising the money for this endeavor, she starts working for a white, close relative of a military man, a high class woman of the capital, who is a pianist suffering from a creative block. She, Aída (Susi Sánchez), is the only well developed white character who is portrayed under a very negative light. Aída (echoing Verdi's opera) represents the Peruvian upper crust, the rich and the entitled. She refuses to help Fausta by giving her an advance to bury her mother; she is moody and a diva—she throws her piano through the window in a fit of rage—; she is stingy with the workers who are going to repair the window; she is not

interested in learning Fausta's name; she plagiarizes Fausta's melody, and when Fausta remarks it, Aída punishes her for it by not keeping her end of the bargain (the pearl necklace). In addition, like a true European archetype, when she exhausts her own talent, she proceeds to steal from the indigenous, and she is incapable of acknowledging her source of creativity. After extracting everything she can from the Fausta, she ditches her. Llosa is using here a reference far too familiar for 'minority' groups, such as the appropriation of African-American music and art in general, without due credit or sharing of the profits from such endeavors.

Aída, fascinated by Fausta's songs, proposes her to exchange one pearl from a broken necklace for each time she sings to her. The pianist giving the Indian girl pearls is reminiscent of what the Spanish conquerors did to the Americans, but Fausta is not doing it because she is mesmerized by the pearls, but as a transaction, for what she is getting out of it: monetary value in order to bury her mother. There is no naïve fascination, but rather an economical transaction. Aída, however, fails to reveal to Fausta her real intentions of using her song for the pianist's benefit for an upcoming and highly anticipated performance, rather than her enjoyment. In this regard, the white woman betrays Fausta by stealing her melody in order to gain social prestige and possibly financial gain, and she does not pay Fausta what she is owed per their agreement. For her, Fausta is no more than a servant, a second-class citizen. When Fausta compliments Aída for the audience's positive reception to the very song she plagiarized from Fausta, she is punished to wander alone in the city at night. To viewers, aware of Fausta's fear, this punishment seems out of proportion; Aída strikes us, in this moment, as a monster. Infuriated, Fausta comes back to Aída's house and claims what is hers, in a most explicit instance of resistance. She then challenges the situation of



victimhood she has been placed in, by her fears and a racist society, and decides to act. She asks another character, Noé the gardener (also indigenous), to help her by taking her to the hospital to have the potato removed from her body as the doctor suggested.

In contrast with the two white characters whom Fausta meets, we also encounter other indigenous sympathetic characters that support and care for Fausta: they accompany her everywhere (hospital, work, funeral homes, bus stations, and the burial setting), respect her space, they ultimately back her in her endeavor, and help her realize that she has to try hard to live, and to live well. The figure of the aunt sheds light about the situation of invisibility and lack of citizenship of indigenous people during the war. While embalming Perpetua she remarks that, back then, they embalmed a lot of people to show them at some point to the authorities because “there was no proof that we were even born, less that we had been killed.” The aunt helps Fausta to find the job so she can raise the money to bury her mother.

Her uncle, Lúcido (Marino Ballón) is one of the more sympathetic characters, as he cares for Fausta and suffers when seeing her so emotionally crippled. He is the bearer of Claudia Llosa’s message about the necessity of reconciliation, of moving on, if Peru is to heal from its wounds. His name reflects that he provides lucid, rational responses to the events that unfold in the film. When Fausta tells him about why she has a potato inside he provides an appeasing comment –“these were other times. Here in Lima everything is different. Everything has changed. Nobody is going to hurt you.” He does not want to have his sister’s dead body in the house when his daughter gets married. Thus, he digs a hole to bury Perpetua, but he waits for Fausta to decide about her mother’s burial. The hole becomes an improvised swimming pool, demonstrating, one, that nothing goes to waste, but most

importantly, that everybody knows that the uncle is not going to bury Perpetua without Fausta's consent, and she is never going to grant it. So the question is settled: now they have a pool.

For Fausta, however, it is Noé (the biblical rescuer) who seems to wake her up from her stupor. He (Efraín Solís) displays kind manners, speaks Quechua with her, and offers to her wise comments. Like her uncle, Noé cares for Fausta but places himself at a distance, respecting her space, but being there when Fausta needs him. Noé tells Fausta that 'death is the only part of your existence that is predetermined,' and that he does not plant potatoes because they are too common and provide almost no flowers. Living in fear and detached from the world is a common response for those suffering from trauma; the challenge is to try to live. Living in stupor impedes growth. His reference to the lack of flowers could also point at a lack of offspring prevented by Fausta's measure. At the end of the movie, though, Noé gives Fausta a potato flower, as a memento of what she decide to leave behind: her fear.

### **Ethnocentric vs. Racist**

Shohat and Stam make the following distinction between racism and ethnocentrism: "to see the world through the lenses provided by one's own culture is not necessarily racist, nor is it racist simply to notice physical or cultural differences, or to detest specific members of a group, or even to dislike the cultural traits of specific groups. What is racist is the stigmatizing of difference in order to justify unfair advantage or the abuse of power, whether that advantage or abuse be economical, political, cultural, or psychological" (22). They

suggest researchers, when analyzing representations of a social group in film, to take into account (in order to identify their racism): how much space do they occupy in the shots? How often are they in scenes compared with ‘Europeans’? Are they filmed in close-ups or in long-shots? Are they active, desiring characters or decorative props? Is the music that of the people portrayed? With what character does music lead us to identify? Whose point of view is that of the movie? With which characters do our sympathies fall? Which is the language used in the movie? (208-9).

*The Milk of Sorron*'s main characters are Quechua-speakers, the story is theirs and when the white people are present, they make evident the situation of inferiority in which they have placed the indigenous people. The ‘daily-life’ scenes are filmed with long-shots as if Claudia Llosa was observing a ‘escena costumbrista’ (that describes the customs of a group) alien to her, but the close-ups of the individual characters are salient: Perpetua in her deathbed, Fausta, Lúcido, Noé... As I analyzed above, the indigenous characters are active, wise, attractive characters that gain our sympathies. In contrast, the white, rich, hollow character is despicable. The movie is not racist by portraying white people as rich and the indigenous as poor;<sup>11</sup> it reflects a social reality. Regarding the use of the music, a melancholic song follows Fausta in her despair, making her suffering our suffering. The main music is delivered through Perpetua’s and Fausta’s songs: they are the bearers of music as revered vehicles for denouncement and catharsis. In contrast, the music for Aída is a means for success and money; she despises her piano for not producing good music (and disposes of it accordingly); and the only piece that satisfies her is a westernized version of Fausta’s song.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> <http://peruanista.blogspot.com/2009/12/racist-television-characters-in-peru.html>

<sup>12</sup> The story this song tells is about a mermaid cheated by the village people, who exchange the singing for quinoa. It is also telling that it takes only one white person to throw out a piano (to destroy), and it takes a lot

Perpetua's and Fausta's songs are full of heart; Aída's is devoid of emotion. In the film, the specific musical traditions (*quarawi* versus opera/classical music) evoke the characters' cultural-political allegiances.

The film –filmed in two languages, Spanish and Quechua— makes evident that the hybridity of languages is power-laden and asymmetric. Aída cannot speak Quechua, and she does not have to because she is in a higher position in the Peruvian power structure. ‘Subordinates’ have to learn the ‘colonizer’s’ language in order to survive. Fausta, Lúcido, Noé, all can switch from Quechua to Spanish and vice versa. The character’s use of Quechua, as Shohan and Stam suggest, “does not simply entail a return to authentic languages but rather the orchestration of languages for emancipatory purposes” (Shohan & Stam 194). The film acknowledges multilinguistic heritage in Peru –its heteroglosia—and it testifies to the biased/unmatched consideration for them. The heteroglosia becomes the space of social and racial confrontation, as diverse ‘sociolinguistic consciousness’ struggle on the terrain of language (Stam 1989). As Robert Stam says, “the discourse of Power strives to officialize a single language” (84). Llosa, by alternating between Spanish and Quechua, transfers to film the Peruvian sociolinguistic reality. All in all, viewers are mesmerized with Fausta, and offended/nauseated with how much intergenerational damage the ‘West’ has done (and still does) to Peru’s indigenous people. If it seems apparent that *The Milk of Sorrow* condemns the situation of violence, poverty and discrimination that white people have put the indigenous people in Peru, why there have been outcries that discredit the movie as racist?

Western societies believe that they are more technological and advanced than the rest. Under

---

of indigenous people to carry a new piano (to rebuilt after the white destruction).

this idealized notion of the West, the West is seen “as ‘mind’ and theoretical refinement and the non-West as ‘body’ and unrefined raw material” (Shohat & Stam 14). Westerners suffer (the thoroughly studied) Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Quechua-speakers the mysterious, incomprehensible ‘Frightened breast.’ PTSD is a disorder mainly explained in neuro-psychological terms, the ‘Frightened breast’ is expressed in physiological terms; the fear is not a brain-chemical response, but transferred by the maternal milk. For white people, the West has knowledge, the indigenous, superstitions. The Andes, Orin Starn explains, have been compared to Medieval Europe and he quotes novelist Mario Vargas Llosa (Claudia Llosa’s uncle) as having called them ‘feudal,’ ‘archaic,’ and ‘superstitious’ (227). Shohat and Stam remind us that the First and the Third worlds live the same historical moment, in spite of the fact that “the Third World lives that moment under the mode of oppression” (Shohat & Stam 293). Although the film leads us to be sympathetic and to understand Fausta’s pain, it is the bio-medical establishment that has to ultimately come to her rescue of her physical body (after she has rescued herself spiritually). She has to, ultimately, turn to the ‘Western’ medicine in order to literally survive. According to the film, indigenous need the advances (technology, medicine, etc.) the Europeans brought to the Americas. The Western-world (Fausta’s reality in Lima) brings both the pain of exclusion and abuse, and the solution to that pain and abuse; West as simultaneously the cause and the remedy.

Peruvian anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena comments how “incrusted in geography, the cultural construction of race in Peru assumed, and continues to assume, that *serranos* (from the sierra) are inferior to *costeños* (people of the coast) because they descend from Indians. Obviously, the Indians occupy an inferior place in the reigning socioracial taxonomy” (24). Starn also mentions that for both “praiseworthy defenders of indigenous ways” and racist

“backward brutes,” the inhabitants of the villages are seen as living in a primordial ‘Andean world’ isolated from the fast paced and advanced technology of the present-day West. “In Peru, this vision maps onto an imagined geography that presents the coast, and especially Spanish-settled Lima, as ‘modern,’ ‘official,’ and ‘Western’ in contrast with the ‘premodern,’ ‘deep,’ and ‘non-Western’ Andes” (Starn 227). It is, thus, noteworthy that Fausta stops in front of the ocean and tells her mother: “Look mum, the sea!” Claudia Llosa herself explained in an interview that the mother is representing the Andes and the beach is representing the coast, and that “It is not enough that the coast looks at the sierra, the opposite has to also take place: the sierra has to look to the coast. The approximation has to come from both sides” (Chauca et. all. 52). Her words seem to imply that she is looking at (and denouncing) the problems of exclusion, poverty and violence the people from the sierra (Quechua-speakers) suffer(ed), but she is also claiming that Quechua-speakers should be more cooperative and be part of a white, Eurocentric Peru. Llosa seems to imply that indigenous people ought to deal with their inescapable reality not through rejection (separatism), but through claiming a place in it.

In sum, the filmmaker does not show “difference in order to justify unfair advantage or the abuse of power, whether that advantage or abuse be economical, political, cultural, or psychological” (Shohat & Stam 22). She promotes the idea of reconciliation, a page-turner, between the indigenous groups of Peru and the white, ruling class. She sustains the principles of the national reconciliation (*la reconciliación nacional*); and that, in uncle Plácido’s words, if Fausta is to live, she has to forget (*‘hay que olvidar’*) because “those were other times” (*‘eran otros tiempos’*).

## Conclusion

*The Milk of Sorrow* is not an indigenous movie, made by an indigenous person, but it is not a racist movie either. Pagan-Teitelbaum mentions how even in the present climate “it is still proscribed to talk about the war in Peru, so the social wound or ‘collective trauma’ of a brutal internal war that damaged social bonds and destroyed trust in individuals, society, and the Peruvian state has not been healed” (“Depiction” 163). Hortensia Muñoz also speaks of the ongoing pain, anger and fear that the indigenous people suffer in Peru, and that still goes unheard. For her, those must become a foundation for constructing a concept of injustice that justifies a demand (447). But, “for this demand to be effective requires formulating a discourse and learning to open spaces for this discourse to be heard” (Muñoz 447). Llosa’s movie is providing one of those open spaces for discussion, and in inviting dialogue she gives a medium for the audiences to engage in discourses that could be transformative. In this regard, she is rendering visible the unspoken trauma inflicted on the indigenous population of Peru, where racism played (and plays) a fundamental part. Llosa’s film gives voice to realities that would, otherwise, remain secret or obliterated.

Trauma scholars have been debating the inadequacy of attempting to represent trauma. They debate such issues as the impossibility of adequately representing traumatic experiences and their effect due to the peculiar nature of traumatic memories, the necessity of keeping the dignity and mourning of those involved, the need to avoid making some else’s suffering a spectacle, and the possible desensitization due to a surfeit of traumatic images (Laub, Felman, Caruth). On the other hand, many authors have claimed the moral obligation of talking about trauma. They claim that it is imperative to make the public ‘know,’ to mobilize

viewers/readers responses and to give an opportunity for critical reflection (Hirsch, Kaplan & Wang, LaCapra). This last stance is more pressing in the case of trauma of 'minorities,' as their anguish has been largely obliterated from public discourse. Refusing to represent their trauma, persisting on keeping their experiences in a mystified silence is not desirable. It could be argued, however, that representing minorities' misfortunes may reinforce their images as victims in need of further "Western" assistance.

*The Milk of Sorrow*, nevertheless, does not depict them as victims, but as active survivors, capable of reconstructing their lives even against the odds (uncle's family and neighbors); including minorities' discourses in history (Perpetua); and establishing a ferocious control over one's own body and mind (Fausta). As Homi Bhabha asserts, "political survivors become the best historical witnesses" (8). Perpetua and Fausta's songs in Quechua give them comfort from their sorrows as a narrative tool, but they also retrieve repressed histories for viewers, thus asserting their control and agency, by narrating history as they experienced it. Therefore, the film can be denouncing the victimization of Quechua-speaker, without losing sight that they are also rebelling agents, manifesting/hinting at the transgressive potential of survivors' discourse. Overall, Llosa creates likable characters that gain our sympathy and our identification through the rendering of their voices, the use of Quechua language, point of view, character development (lacking stereotypes) music and mise-en-scène. In addition, she condemns those who are failing to provide means for the indigenous population and those who continue to exploit them, and not giving them credit for the benefit they extract from them.

The movie, however, could be better labeled ethnocentric because Llosa argues that Peru



will heal from its traumas only by whites and indigenous people working together, acknowledging the deeds of the past, but moving on. The film critiques the situation in which the indigenous people have been placed by the 'whites,' but also seeks to incorporate the indigenous into a broader national identity, which comprises both indigenous and European descent inhabitants. The movie is about burying Perpetua. Perpetua passes onto Fausta the pain, the fear, and all the symptoms of trauma in general. This transmission of memories can be disabling —Fausta is crippled by the fear transmitted to her by her mother—, but it can also provide courage, anger, and prompt acquiring of knowledge necessary to not let the events be forgotten, to secure that in the future justice will be done. Yet, the mother's death is the catalyst for Fausta's own growing and formation. Fausta progressively starts making her own story. Perpetua's story ends, and Fausta has to now create a narrative of her own. In this new narrative she is not sheltered anymore by a Quechua cocoon, she has to face challenging and unfair situations of racism and exploitation, but she has to learn to defend her rights as a citizen and become part of society, to claim the coast on her way. When Fausta finally buries her mother, she tells her to look at the sea. The roles are reversed as Fausta is now the one who shows her mother life from her point of view. There has been a reversal of points of view, or perspectives. It is then that as viewers we get the feeling that she is on the path of recovery from her trauma.

If we are to understand that her trauma is the shared trauma of Peruvian indigenous population, it follows that their healing process, according to *The Milk of Sorrow*, depends on collaboration, not retribution or separatism. The film does not hold a racist stance, but it wishes to turn a page in a shameful history of abuses. In the process it arouses outrage among some indigenous people. White people, however, can affiliate with the disempowered

and attempt to represent their interests, which is highly problematic. Shohat and Stam, however, consider that it is of value to be aware of one's own social positioning, and to accomplish a 'disaffiliation' —“an opting out of the country club of Euronarcissism and privilege”— that allows them to fight racism in their own milieu (345). While it is dangerous to speak on behalf of others (replacing them), it is not racist to speak alongside others. It is in this sense that *The Milk of Sorrow* defends an alliance.

### Cited Works

- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. New York & London: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. *On the Concept of History*. New York: Classic Books America, 2009. Print.
- Brown, Laura S. “Not Outside the Range: one feminist perspective on psychic trauma.” *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995. 100-112. Print.
- Cadena, Marisol de la. “From Race to Class: Insurgent Intellectuals *de provincia* in Peru, 1910-1970.” *Shining and Other Paths. War and Society in Peru, 1980-1995*. Ed. Steven Stern. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1998. 22-59. Print.
- Caruth, Cathy, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995. Print.
- Casas, Quim. “La teta asustada. El miedo antes de nacer.” *Dirigido por* (March 2009): 387-408. Print.
- Chauca, Edward, Rafael Ramírez, and Carolina Sitnisky. “No pretendo retratar la realidad. Pretendo interpretar un tema para sacar discusiones que tenemos reprimidas: Una entrevista con Claudia Llosa.” *Mester* 39.1 (2010): 45-55. Print.
- Cordero, Isabel. “Women in War: Impact and Responses.” *Shining and Other Paths: War and Society in Peru, 1980-1995*. Ed. Steven Stern. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1998. Pp. 345-374. Print.
- Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father. Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1973. Print.
- Diestro-Dópido, Mar. “The Milk of Sorrow.” *Sight & Sound* 20:5 (2010): 80. Print.

- Elsaesser, Thomas. "Postmodernism as mourning work". *Screen* 42: 2 (2001): 193-201. Print.
- Escaja, Tina. "La Teta Asustada". *Chasqui* 40.1 (2011): 1-6. Print.
- Escribens, Paula. *Proyecto de vida de mujeres víctimas de violencia sexual en conflicto armado interno*. Lima: DEMUS Estudio para la Defensa de los Derechos de la Mujer, 2011. Print.
- Felman, Shoshana. *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: Harvard University Press, 2002. Print.
- . "Education and Crisis." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995. 13-60. Print.
- Gama, Francisca da. "Filming the war with Sendero." *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 49 (2007): 1-3. <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc49.2007/daGama-Sendero/index.html>. (Last time accessed Dec 23, 2012) Print.
- Hartman, Geoffrey. "Holocaust Testimony, Art, and Trauma." *The Longest Shadow: In the aftermath of the Holocaust*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002 (First ed. Indiana University Press, 1996). Print.
- Herman, Judith L. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books, 1992. Print.
- Hirsch, Joshua. *Afterimage. Film, Trauma, and the Holocaust*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004. Print.
- . "Post-traumatic Cinema and the Holocaust Documentary." *Trauma and Cinema. Cross-Cultural Explorations*. Eds. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004. 93-121. Print.
- Kaplan, Ann and Ban Wang, eds. *Trauma and Cinema. Cross-Cultural Explorations*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004. Print.
- Kaplan, A. "Traumatic Contact Zones and Embodied Translators." *Trauma and Cinema. Cross-Cultural Explorations*. Eds. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004. 45-63. Print.
- . *Trauma Culture. The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2005. Print.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory*. Ithaca & London: Cornell university Press, 2004. Print.

- Luckhurst, Roger. *The Trauma Question*. London & New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- . "Traumaculture." *New Formations* 50 (2003): 28-47. Print.
- Manrique, N. *El tiempo del miedo: la violencia política en el Perú, 1980-1996*. Lima: Fondo Editorial del Congreso del Perú, 2002. Print.
- Marcus, Sharon. "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention." *Feminist Theorize the Political*. Eds. Judith Butler and Joan Scott. New York: Routledge, 1992. 385-403. Print.
- Maseda, Rebeca. "Canciones de dolor: trauma femenino en *La teta asustada* de Claudia Llosa." (2013) *Letras Hispanas*. 10.2. Fall 2014.
- Meek, Allen. *Trauma and Media*. London & New York: Routledge, 2010. Print.
- Muñoz, Hortensia. "Human Rights and Social Referents: The Construction of New Sensibilities." *Shining and Other Paths. War and Society in Peru, 1980-1995*. Ed. Steven Stern Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1998. 447-469. Print.
- Pagan-Teitelbaum, Iliana. "Depiction or Erasure? Violence and trauma in contemporary Peruvian film." *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 24:1 (2010): 161-177. Print.
- . "Glamour in the Andes: Indigenous Women in Peruvian Cinema". *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 7: 1 (2012): 71-93. Print.
- Shaw, B. D. "The Passion of Perpetua." *Past & Present* 139 (1993): 3-45. Print.
- Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism. Multiculturalism and the Media*. London & New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2003. Print.
- Stam, Robert. *Subversive Pleasures. Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film*. Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989. Print.
- Starn, Orin. "Villagers at Arms: War and Counterrevolution in the Central-South Andes." *Shining and Other Paths. War and Society in Peru, 1980-1995*. Ed. Steven Stern. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1998. Pp. 224-257. Print.
- Stern, Steven, ed. *Shining and Other Paths. War and Society in Peru, 1980-1995*. Durham y Londres: Duke University Press, 1998. Print.

*La teta asustada (The Milk of Sorrow)*. Dir: Claudia Llosa. 2009. DVD. Oberón Cinematográfica, 2010.

Theidon, K. *Entre prójimos. El conflicto armado interno y la política de la reconciliación en Perú*. Perú: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2004. Print.

Walker, Janet. "Trauma Cinema: False Memories and True Experience." *Screen* 42:2 (2001): 211-216. Print.

Winter, Jay & Emmanuel Sivan, eds. *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Print.