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Author

Martinez, Candy

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How do you disclose the unrepresentable? : A Mixtec filmmaker's approaches towards generational sexual abuse in *La Tiricia O Cómo Curar la Tristeza* (2012)

Candy Martinez

Even if a filmmaker attempts to educate audiences about it, sexual abuse is a sensitive topic to convey or discuss. It may stir uncomfortable feelings and/or debate. These two reactions may prompt one to ask if there is a right way of showing sexual abuse. In the introduction to the book, *Trauma and Cinema: Cross-cultural Explorations*, Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang, discuss the challenges filmmakers encounter when conveying sensitive topics. For example, they point to a film's powerful ability to dissuade viewers altogether from watching traumatic scenes, "The effect may be negative if the impact is so great that the viewer turns away, runs from the images, instead of learning through them" (10). Yet at the same time, they discuss the necessity of instilling inquietude and converting such inquietude into action, "On the other hand, a degree of vicarious or secondary trauma may shock a viewer into wanting to know more and perhaps do something about what he/she has seen" (Kaplan and Wang, 10). A film has the potential to educate its viewers if done carefully.

Ángeles Cruz' *La Tiricia O Cómo Curar la Tristeza* (2012), suggests that it is better to show abused women's pain and potentially trigger painful reactions in audiences than to ignore or hide the pain stemming from sexual abuse. After all, the name, *la tiricia* alludes to the perpetual sadness women often suffer from after experiencing sexual abuse from family members. Moreover, the film focuses on what may be considered melancholic symptoms of three generations including a mother (Alicia), a grandmother (Justa), and a great grandmother (Ita).¹ These women's symptoms consist of a combination of

¹ *La tiricia's* etymology can be traced back to the 20th century when Juan de Esteyneffer coined the term in his book *Florilegio Medicinal* (1853). Since he distinguishes three different types of *tiricia* (yellow, black, and green) and attributes the cause of *tiricia* to disequilibrium found in the liver (known as ictericia), Esteyneffer's definition of *tiricia* is associated with humoral

physiological symptoms (lack of appetite, inertness, coldness, inability to cry) and psychological symptoms (apathy, fear). In an interview, Cruz claims Mixtec women in her community have silenced their experiences and endured *la tiricia* related to sexual abuse: “The idea to create the film surged when someone very close to her told her that she had been abused as a child, Cruz never expected such confession and was scared to ask if this woman that was sharing something so intimate was okay, because she had told her forty years later” [Translated from: “*La idea surgió cuando alguien muy cercano a ella le contó que había sido abusada de niña, ella nunca esperó esa confesión y solo atinó a preguntar si la persona que le estaba compartiendo algo tan íntimo, estaba bien, porque se lo estaba diciendo 40 años más tarde*”] (Pérez Garcia). Because women in her community have suppressed their feelings about sexual abuse for so long, it is no surprise that the filmmaker is fueled by this need to voice their experiences and increase awareness around this issue. Though this task is certainly not an easy one, Cruz sensitively and skillfully exposes both the sexual abuse committed by family members and the trauma endured by generations.

This paper will explore the ethical approaches other scholars have suggested for testifiers of trauma to use and how Cruz incorporates such guidelines. The first part of this essay will discuss how Cruz captures women's experiences by embracing their silences without manipulating their stories. The second part of this essay will then discuss how Cruz articulates the process of trauma by examining the film's role of silence and flashbacks. Lastly, this essay will analyze Cruz' portrayal of a Mixtec healing ritual. This essay argues that her techniques, including her usage of silence, flashbacks and ritual enactments practice decolonial forms of disclosing unrepresentable traumas. While it may seem at first that Cruz appropriates melancholic notions of sadness in her work; on the contrary, she challenges traditional frameworks of trauma, which are typically associated with melancholia. Cruz recognizes women's pain without sacralizing their trauma, honors indigenous women's knowledge by portraying Mixtec healing rituals, and instills a sense of optimism to recover from a devastating past atrocity.

medicine and therefore may also be connected to melancholia. However, scholars such as Lorenzo Ochoa insist on the separation between *tiricia* and *ictericia* (“*Medicina Prehispánica De La Huasteca*”). Moreover, others such as David Lorente Fernández insist that the illness primarily affects children and is caused by the loss of a loved one rather than biological factors (“*Medicina Indígena*”). It is unclear what definition of *tiricia* Mixtec communities appropriate. Nevertheless, my purpose is to acknowledge some first glance similarities between melancholia and *tiricia* such as, the loss of a loved one and repetitive self-destructive behaviors, rather than impose a Westernized concept of melancholia unto indigenous communities.

The Multiple Meanings Behind Silence

The ethical approaches Dori Laub stresses for asking testifiers about their trauma includes self-reflexivity and a listener's need to respect silence. As a psychoanalyst private practitioner, Laub refers to cases where he established means of obtaining necessary information unintrusively. In one situation he remarks on the need for a listener to know one's boundaries by not demanding answers to uncomfortable questions, "I had probed the limits of her knowledge and decided to back off" (Felman and Laub, 60). Laub's guidelines evidently demonstrate a psychoanalyst's sensitivity to his patient's reactions. He offers essential advice to listeners: respect silence and be patient. Throughout this chapter "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening", Laub explains the need to respect silence for two main reasons. First, doing so allows a listener to build rapport with a testifier. Contrastingly, failure to respect silence or patiently wait impedes a testifier to fully communicate how he/she perceives their trauma. Second, Laub values silence as a normal reaction to trauma. Placing importance on understanding a testifier's way of processing trauma, Laub acknowledges that silence is a defensive response: "speakers about trauma on some level prefer silence so as to protect themselves from the fear of being listened to-and of listening to themselves" (Felman and Laub, 58). These two points, self-reflexivity and silence, are undoubtedly two important tasks filmmakers, working within the delicate subject of trauma, must consider when producing their work. Self-reflexivity allows one to step back and recognize the point of view of the community and person one is working with. Meanwhile, respecting silence allows one to respect another person's space and sentiments. At the same time, silence is more than an act of courtesy. Laub treats it like a fixed threshold. He states, "He or she must listen to and hear the silence [...] even if this simply means respect-and knowing how to wait" (Felman and Laub, 58). Here, Laub suggests that he practices listening to obtain valuable information in return. On the other hand, after conducting field research in Senegal, Trinh T. Minh Ha comprehends silence as language: "silence not as opposed to language, but as a choice to verbalize, a will not to say, a necessary interval in an interaction—in brief, as a means of communication of its own" (Trinh, 12). Trinh T. Minh Ha reminds one that silence is not necessarily accidental or automatic, and in fact some use it for strategic purposes. Silence can be a deliberate act and practice.

Cruz uses silence in two contrasting ways: as a form of disempowerment and empowerment. On the one hand, scenes convey how patriarchal men silence women from protesting against heinous acts of sexual abuse. During a flashback, an uncle silences his young niece, Justa. Justa attempts to stand up from her seat in the kitchen table, but her uncle instead uses his hands to pull her down. The camera juxtaposes a close up of her uncle's hands on her thighs with a close up of her hands covering her pelvic area away from her uncle. The silence in this scene escalates even further. In addition to silencing Justa, Justa's uncle also silences Justa's mother, Ita; he asks her to leave him alone with Justa.

The next scene shows Ita vigorously remove kernels from corn with a distraught facial expression. One can imagine that such expression results from her recognition of her relative's heinous actions and her own helplessness from being able to do anything about it. A separate scene also parallels a similar instance of silence: the camera's gaze exposes Justa's surrendered power, only this time, not as a sexual abuse victim but as a submissive bystander. After her abusive son takes her daughter, Alicia, away, Justa passively accepts his actions. Alicia's other brother, Ramón, warns his mother, Justa, that they need to look for his sister, Alicia, because her brother, Crispín, has taken her away. With a passive tone, Justa tells her son that she is fine because she is with her brother. Justa's lack of questioning about her son's whereabouts implies that she knows what is going on; yet, she submissively refuses to do anything about it. The silence in both scenes, though brief, is strong enough to project the violent, psychological abuse of women and their inability to voice out injustice.

Yet, on the other hand, silence is not only used to depict women's powerlessness. Cruz portrays instances where women intentionally silence details of their past. For example, several scenes (specifically flashbacks) are conveyed from traumatized women's points of views to illustrate how they construed their trauma. While these flashbacks convey the traumatic abuse women experienced as children, these flashbacks are short and do not show audiences exactly what happened. The silenced details can be understood as a technique women use to block adverse memories from themselves. Moreover, in the film, trauma survivors also silence details about their trauma from other family members. While they are asked by their family members to disclose how they obtained their illness, they do not explain its origins. In one scene, Alicia faces her daughter and her mother at a kitchen table. While Alicia's mother, Justa, asks Alicia if something made her ill, Alicia does not explain her trauma. Instead, Alicia describes her symptoms and acknowledges the transgenerational quality of *la tiricia* that has contaminated both Alicia and her mother. Alicia asks her mother, "Who gave you the *tiricia* illness?" Instead of revealing her experience though, Justa puts her hands on her face and keeps the memory to herself. Such silence manifests women's reticence. In a way, Cruz follows Dori Laub's ethical rules of a careful listener; she respects women's silence by not conveying women's abuse detail by detail. *La Tiricia* does not delve over the details of what happened, why it happened, or how it happened.

Yet, in contrast to Laub, Cruz does not persist to know more. The silence itself is a sufficient testimony of pain and protest. Cruz does not turn violence or disempowerment into a fetishistic device. Nor does she obsessively figure out the culprit behind the violence like a Whodunit detective novel author. Instead, Cruz conveys how a state of physical, social, and spiritual fragmentation results from the structural and continual violence inflicted on girls. At the same time, Cruz' usage of silence does not portray these women merely as victims or accomplices sustaining patriarchal order. Her intention is not to judge these women or place blame on them. Instead, she conveys how they cope with their

past by remaining silent.

The need to respect and value the different forms that indigenous women express pain resonates with the work done by medical anthropologist, Kimberly Theidon. In her research involving the sexual violence inflicted onto Quechua women by Peruvian soldiers during the internal Peruvian conflict from 1980-2000, Theidon acknowledges the reticence of Quechua women. She says, "simply speaking, in spite of many efforts implemented to assure that women speak; Quechua-speaking women have overwhelmingly chosen silence --- even a smoldering silence ---- over speaking about abhorrent experiences" ("The Milk of Sorrow", 14). Though these women have chosen silence, Theidon's work explores other places and forms of expression that Quechua use to articulate their pain. Theidon suggests that *la teta asustada*, the frightened breast, is a way to explain the suffering Quechua women obtained as a result of the Peruvian Shining Path conflict. She describes this concept's dual function: "to convey how strong negative emotions can alter the body and how a mother could, via blood in utero or via breast milk, transmit this dis-ease to her baby" ("The Milk of Sorrow", 9). Thus, *la teta asustada* serves as both a figurative metaphor and a tangible condition. On one hand, sorrow is represented through a liquid which flows incessantly throughout inflicted Quechua women's bodies. On the other hand, the sorrow expressed and felt from a horrific period has real consequences- it is contagious and transmits to one's descendants through maternal breast milk.

Processing Trauma through Flashbacks and Distorted Memories

Like Theidon, I suggest looking at the symbolic and metaphoring meanings behind the way trauma is processed, especially vis-à-vis the role of flashbacks in the film. For Dominick LaCapra, nightmares, flashbacks, and hallucinations are indicators of a trauma survivor's melancholic symptoms. Drawing from Freudian theories, melancholia consists of the inability to reconcile with the past and the repetition of self-destructive behaviors. Such melancholic behaviors are manifested through persistent traces: "In acting-out, on the contrary, one reincarnates or relives the past in an unmediated transference process that subjects one to possession by haunting objects and to compulsively repeated incursions of traumatic residues (hallucinations, flashbacks, nightmares)" (LaCapra, 104). Moreover, LaCapra suggests that understanding trauma survivor's processes consists of analyzing the meanings behind these traumatic residues.

While Marianne Hirsch may agree with the importance of deciphering the messages behind traumatic residues, she offers an alternative interpretation of these messages. She does not necessarily perceive such residues in terms of melancholia. In fact, Hirsch interprets the flashbacks of the Holocaust offspring as a defensive shield against self-destructive behaviors rather than a harmful repetitive symptom. Holocaust offspring's flashbacks quell their anxiety from not knowing their family's traumatic past. Hirsch refers to flashbacks depicted via photographs and instilled in fantasies: "The images already imprinted on our brains, the tropes and structures we bring from the present to the past, hoping to find them there and to have our questions answered, may be screen memories

—screens on which we project present or timeless needs and desires and which thus mask other images and other concerns” (Hirsch, 120). For Hirsch, these flashbacks reveal more than information; it reveals desires and biases. Hirsch’s framework, postmemory, seeks an alternative reading of trauma’s distorted messages: “Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (Hirsch, 107). Hirsch reminds one of the inherent purposes of a flashback: flashbacks are made for people who cannot deal with the past.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud describes anxiety as “a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one” (Freud, 11). On the other hand, Freud claims that fear, “requires a definite object of which to be afraid” (Freud, 11). One may be able to deduct then that the flashbacks of traumatized women in *La Tiricia* may be used to portray their anxiety. Yet, it is important to differentiate the function of psychoanalytic anxiety from the function of Mixtec women’s anxiety. The scenes of flashbacks and distorted memories, which embody Mixtec women’s anxieties, resonate with Hirsch’s postmemory framework. As Hirsch claims, residues are intended to help one make sense of the past. Similarly, flashbacks in the film *La Tiricia* do not merely portray individual anxiety or fear but actually serve to prevent another harmful reoccurrence. Moreover, it is important to note that anxiety fulfills protection not only for oneself but also for another person who may be at risk.

The first instance of a flashback in *La Tiricia* happens in a scene right after Alicia’s inebriated husband inappropriately carries her daughter. A close up of her husband’s hands underneath his daughter’s dress shifts to a close up of Alicia with a distraught reaction. After this moment, Alicia grabs her daughter from her husband and runs into a cornfield with her daughter. Holding onto her young daughter, Mercedes, Alicia’s experiences a flashback of her past. Such experience consists of the moment when her then adolescent brother abused her as a child. During this flashback, a young Alicia is seen holding onto a dog and getting unwillingly carried away by her brother. This scene is evidently filled with tension; Alicia recalls her fear of being abused but also expresses anxiety for the same occurrence to happen with her daughter. Here, Cruz acknowledges that anxiety is a way for these women to process the trauma. Cruz implies that women’s uncomfortable flashbacks may be a way for them to prepare themselves for any future cases of sexual abuse and to prevent the same occurrence of sexual abuse with their daughters. Such technique is intended for spectators to value also. By reconstructing what happened in the past, one can gain perspective into women’s emotions and reactions. The flashbacks (mentioned earlier in this essay) conveying mothers’ paralysis may serve for spectators, specifically those who have been sexually abused in the past, to recognize paralysis and mentally anticipate any future paralysis. Consisting of blurriness and slow motion effects, these flashbacks do not reproduce exactly what happened. Here, flashbacks are not conveying the melancholic behaviors of women. Rather, flashbacks can serve as a method for women to visualize

what a paralytic moment might feel like and thereby discourage one from being trapped in a cycle of such behavior.

Cruz mindfully uses the flashback technique. In her flashbacks, Cruz does not attempt to induce trauma in a way that filmmaker Claude Lanzmann does with his interviewees (LaCapra, 123). Cruz does not want to capture the exact re-experience of women's trauma for her own knowledge or entitle herself with the same agency of a traumatized woman. Instead, Cruz, acknowledges that her awareness of the sexual traumatic act is limited; the technique of silence and hard to make flashbacks support the elusive quality of trauma. Analyzing trauma is like assembling a puzzle with several lost pieces that can never be recovered. Despite of an unintelligible trait of trauma though; the techniques Cruz uses give us a glimpse into traumatized women's minds. The purpose of this is not to entertain audiences, but to help women understand their trauma and relate to the main characters in the film. If women cannot relate to this trauma though, Cruz' film also allows women to empathize with the main characters and instill a sense of responsibility for stopping sexual abuse. Yet, Cruz' attempts to educate others is not self-imposing. She does not explicitly tell audiences to stop sexual abuse like some Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) commercial. Instead, Cruz film articulates the flashbacks of the past and trauma symptoms carefully. Moreover, because she places *tiricia* in the present moment, recognizes the multiple actors responsible for the abuse, and builds the issue of *tiricia* around with saliency, her attempts to instill empathy unto others may not merely be dismissed as 'empty' empathy². Through these techniques, Cruz allows spectators to recognize the injustice done to women. LaCapra states, "[working through] would necessitate not only remembering what happened in the past but actively recognizing the fundamental injustice done to victims as a premise of legitimate action in the present and the future" (137). Nevertheless, Cruz' film requires effort on the audience's part; it is up to an audience to decipher the messages in the film's messages regarding transgenerational pain, Mixtec women's subjugation, and Mixtec women's ways of coping with their trauma. Ultimately, the film complies with a decolonial feminist sense of praxis. In order to relinquish the structural violence of this community, there is a sense of urgency to dialogue with others around this sensitive topic.

Framing Healing in Terms of the Future Rather than Self-closure

Paralysis in the film is portrayed only as a temporary phase, one that Mixtec women have successfully overcome. Mixtec women destroy the cycle of violence the moment Alicia exclaims, "It ends here" [Translated from: "*Pues aquí se acaba*"]. In addition to conveying the processes, symptoms, and realization of *tiricia* and generational sexual abuse, Cruz' film suggests the importance of

² In her book *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (2005), Kaplan states, "What I called 'empty' empathy is empathy elicited by images of suffering provided without any context or background knowledge" (93).

constructing indigenous women's healing process. Whereas psychoanalytical frameworks may equate healing with closure, Cruz' healing methods involve a repetitive process. In *La Tiricia*, negative repetitive behaviors can be replaced by positive repetitive behaviors namely through the technique of a ritual.

In the film, the generations of women affected by sexual abuse practice a Mixtec ritual consisting of picking flowers, making flower wreaths and throwing flowers thrown into a river without looking back. Such ritual demonstrates a way for generations to recuperate their well being. A long shot demonstrates Mercedes picking yellow and white flowers among a lush field. Moving in a circular motion, the camera then moves to Justa who holds a bunch of white flowers with a serene expression on her face. In the background, a feminine voice over states, "To cure the sadness, to cure the sorrow, white flowers" [Translated from: "*Para curar la tiricia, para curar la pena, flores blancas*"]. A beautiful long shot of a river overlooking a few hills conveys three generations of survivors harmoniously bond together. Giving the flowers to her daughter, Mercedes smells the flowers her mother has picked up for her. The mother then smells these flowers herself. Alicia tells her daughter, "Do not carry my sorrow. Do not carry my mother's sorrow. It is not your sadness" [Translated from: "*No carges mi pena. No carges la pena de mi mama. No carges la pena de la mama de ella. No es tuya esa tiricia*"]. Handing over a wreath of flowers to her daughter, Alicia and Mercedes release their burdens into the river without looking back. Such collective practice is reminiscent of Linda Tuhiwai Smith's framing of "envisioning" for indigenous communities, "One of the strategies which indigenous peoples have employed effectively to bind people together politically is a strategy which asks that people imagine a future, that they rise above present day situations which are generally depressing, dream a new dream and set a new vision" (Smith, 152). Similarly, Cruz' ritual calls for women to recall their pain, but also imagine the possibility for recovery, strength, and resistance towards harmful experiences.

Seeking to repair women's physical and psychological paralysis, the Mixtec healing method pronounced in the film illustrates the interrelational connections between mind, body, and the universe. The healing methods reestablish the relationship women have with themselves and their surroundings. By practicing the Mixtec ritual out into an open field, indigenous women can replace the emotion of fear or anxiety with relaxation; an undesirable touch with a pleasant touch; a paralytic body movement with a rhythmical one. The ritual encourages Mixtec women to remember sensual pleasure found in one's own environment namely, local tuberoses flowers, Mixtec music, and dancing.

The ritual itself can be thought of as an everlasting antidote, an elixir meant to help a Mixtec community heal. However, such elixir does not authorize Cruz with the secret recipe or ownership. This elixir is not for sale or for individual use. It is for those who need it. Throughout her film, Cruz does not appear to be preoccupied with her ability to construe the trauma, but rather places emphasis on how a community comes to process the trauma. By creating her film, Cruz passes on the story that can be used as a continual forewarning against those

who encounter a similar circumstance: "What is immortal is, in other words, not the narrator but the very story of the repetition, a story that, repeated at least twice, is not simply individual. And the transmission must go on" (Felman, 12). Cruz film warns spectators of an awful illness caused by sexual abuse. She calls for its prevention and its remedy at the same time. Whereas trauma is not an illness to pass on, Cruz film implies that healing is especially made for future generations.

Conclusion

Cruz' respect for traumatized women's spaces is evident in the way she uses silence; her film does not persist on knowing beyond silences. Throughout the film, Cruz communicates the pain women feel and how they process their trauma. Such effect does two things. First, it acknowledges the pain women have suppressed. Second, it allows spectators to empathize with the struggles of women and construe their violence as an epidemic. At the same time, Cruz is not fixated on showing pain. Because Cruz' film is intended for Mixtec women who have suffered of sexual abuse, she reminds them of an essential Mixtec ritual. Rather than privileging Western psychoanalytical knowledge around trauma, Cruz' choice to end the film with this ritual honors indigenous women's knowledge and resilience. Healing in the film, is not a question of moving or closure, but rather one of interconnectivity.

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