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Colonial Exposure

Aylin Kuryel

> The sun was shining on the sea,
> Shining with all his might:
> He did his very best to make
> The billows smooth and bright
> — And this was odd, because it was
> The middle of the night.
>
> — Lewis Carroll, "The Walrus and the Carpenter"

We hear a cassette being put in a tape recorder, and it starts recording. On a black screen, the deep voiceover speaks: "Nature sends us signals of danger or violent encounters." A barren field, a curtain of sand in the air. "White missionaries took us out of our paradise." Two dead horses lying on the land, a car passes by. "And I wonder, what was our sin?" This is Mateo speaking, as he explains his original name was Sobode Chiqueno, before he was forced to quit the forest and convert to Christianity, as most of the Indigenous Ayoreo people in Paraguay have been since the 1950s. Although some still live in isolation in the forests, most now live in the barren and hot Chaco region with their land stolen, divided, and sold. The tape recorder stops, and the name

Fig. 1. Still image from *Apenas el Sol* (*Nothing But the Sun*) (2020, dir. Arami Ullón). Courtesy of the director.

of the film appears on the screen, *Apenas el Sol* (*Nothing But the Sun*) (2020, directed by Arami Ullón).[1]

The film follows Mateo's journey while he records his own reflections and conversations with others since the 1970s, with an old tape recorder, a medium that is in fact brought by the missionaries to distribute audio recordings of the Bible to the displaced Ayoreo community. Mateo subverts and repurposes the medium itself, while trying to accumulate stories of a community with a fading sense of belonging. *Nothing But the Sun,* made possible by a rare form of collaboration between Mateo Sobode Chiqueno and the director Arami Ullón,[2] generously lays out the material consequences of colonialism and capitalism in the region, and offers fragments of a collective contemplation on being uprooted. To be uprooted in this context generates an unsettling relation to the solar through being exposed to it, and being exposed to it differently, after having to leave the

1 Arami Ullón, dir., *Apenas el Sol (Nothing But the Sun),* 75' (2020) was the opening film of the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) in the Netherlands, between November 18 to December 6, 2020.

2 In our interview, Arami Ullón shared that she would sit with Mateo every day during the shoot to decide how to shape the rest of the shoots. The small film crew went there for three years without cameras and had forty hours of footage after twelve weeks of shooting. The interview was made on December 12, 2020 with Fırat Yücel, for *Altyazı Cinema Magazine's* supplement *Altyazı Fasikul: Free Cinema*.

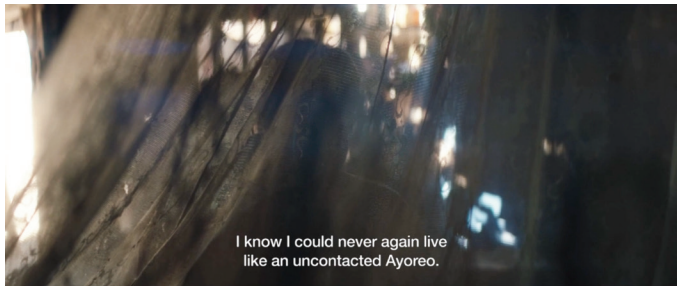

Fig. 2. Still image from *Apenas el Sol* (*Nothing But the Sun*) (2020, dir. Arami Ullón). Courtesy of the director.

forest with the arrival of the missionaries in the late 1950s and the early '60s. What seems to be the driving force of Mateo's search is not the hope of reconstructing a lost culture and identity through collecting its fragments, but rather the urge to meditate on its impossibility. One of the most crystallized manifestations of this impossibility is the drastically altered relation to the solar, upon which both Mateo in his recordings and the film itself reflects, turning the encounter between the people and the sun into a violent one as one of the material consequences of being displaced.

José Iquebi, who was captured and forced to help white people find other Ayoreo in the forest in the late fifties, tells Mateo that he was deadly scared when he first saw the flashes of the photo cameras since his grandfather told him, "it's the guns that have flashes." Jose's uncanny analogy between photo cameras and guns — long before drones were used as weapons — sharply alludes to the destructive capacity of image-making. Exposure emerges as a caustic condition on multiple levels, where the exposure of the film to the light produces the image, which then exposes people to the colonizers by turning them into objects of knowledge, enabling locating and targeting. Consequently, people are removed from their land, which radically transforms the way they are exposed to the sun. The film unpacks the changing dynamics of their relationship to the solar, with solid yet gentle

Fig. 3. Still image from *Apenas el Sol* (*Nothing But the Sun*) (2020, dir. Arami Ullón). Courtesy of the director.

steps, aware of "the depth of responsibility that comes when we tarry with the infinite."[3]

The sun appears throughout the film not as an infinity without context, nor as a metaphor, but as a material entity within which meaning and function change drastically throughout colonial history. Mateo tells us that his ancestors worshipped the sun, which they called Yoquimamito, "a superior and generous being protecting us from above." While detailing a technique in which his tribe would climb up the tress for the sun to hear them better, we see the sun shining through the trees. The scene cuts to a loudspeaker placed very high, and we hear a priest preaching at dusk, and the sun seems to be replaced by the words of the god brought by the whites. This is not the only alteration the sun goes through for the Ayoreo who live in the remote, deforested region, where the land and the wild animals belong to the white people and the Chicoi root of water once running under their feet can now only be found on private property.

3 Imre Szeman, "On Solarity: Six Principles for Energy and Society After Oil," *Stasis* 9, no. 1 (2020): 136.

Fig. 4. Still image from *Apenas el Sol* (*Nothing But the Sun*) (2020, dir. Arami Ullón). Courtesy of the director.

Redistributing Shame

Before unpacking the formal and conceptual figure of the sun in the film, let's rewind for a moment, together with Mateo, and press play. We are listening to the various testimonies that Mateo records throughout the film, and those testimonies shed light on the ways in which the encounter between white people and Indigenous people has been deadly on various levels since the beginning of missionary practice. Ayoreo people were poisoned by the food brought by the settlers. They got sick from the viruses the colonizers carried with them. Cattle ranchers shot people who refused to leave the forest. As the conversations multiply, affects pile up: shame, hope, grief, and nostalgia. Shame is sown in the community to "weaken them by being ashamed of their culture," in Mateo's words. It comes with learning to measure community values through colonizers' standards. Hope lingers in dreams of having a better life among white people, a dream that some community members still hold on to and uneasily reflect upon. Grief taints these words, alluding to the unrealized hopes, stolen lands and animals. It runs like a multiple fissure through conversations. Nostalgia, according to Pebidate to whom Mateo asks to do a blessing ritual, "leaves one sleepless at nights if allowed into the soul." Pebidate is the only person who still practices shamanic healings, and she says she

can still do it because she has no more reason to be ashamed. She has no more fear of being exposed. The film's narrative starts with shame and ends with its absence. At the heart of this interplay between the presence and absence of shame, other questions lurk. Is recording and archiving whatever is left of the past, as Mateo does, a way of getting rid of shame? Is it a way of owning the image and sound by becoming the agents of exposing history? Is filming Mateo's journey a way of transferring part of this shame to the viewer to open up space to discuss complicity, continuity, and proximity?

In one of the last scenes, we see the government agents coming to the area to distribute government handouts of 65 USD per family, which is given every two months, while Paraguay's minimum wage is 300 USD per month. People need to show their Paraguayan identity card, which doesn't specify that they are Ayoreo, and give their fingerprints to collect the money, while there is armed security around. In this twilight zone of surveillance capitalism operating on the colonized land, Mateo says, "thankfully, so far no one has claimed the sun as their own. Maybe the sun is the only thing white people don't consider their property yet." The forest used to be their protection, like a "soft blanket," yet now they are stuck in this desolate place without any vegetation. For decades, trees are cut down to make more space for animal stock and beef farming. The same sun, with which they once communed from the trees, now acts as an agent of aridity and transformed from a companion into a threat. The sun that used to be benevolent when they were still living in the forest under the protection of the trees, which allowed fruit to grow and animals to live, is now a brutal energy, not the source of vitality but a deadly entity. When there is no more a mediating milieu between the sun and the people, the encounter turns violent, exposure to the solar rays become destructive.[4]

4 Arami Ullón, in our interview, reminded that currently in Paraguay, one is allowed to fully deforest the land they own, which is a law implemented by the current government led by the president Mario Abdo Benítez, who used to be the right hand of the dictator Alfredo Stroessner, who ruled Paraguay between 1954 and 1989.

Fig. 5. Still image from *Apenas el Sol* (*Nothing But the Sun*) (2020, dir. Arami Ullón). Courtesy of the director.

But the Sun

At the end of the film, Mateo likens Ayoreo people to a cut tree, one that dries and dies as we see red smoke fills up the sky. The forest is burning, and the sun appears behind the smoke. Its warmth is certainly not felt under a soft blanket anymore. While watching the sun, the viewer feels suffocated too. Things that are on the verge of extinction pile up in a sweltering way: the forest, Ayoreo memories and language, and eventually humankind, unless the regimes of property are altered. "There" becomes "here," "then" becomes "now," as around the globe, it is nothing but the same sun that we all see in the sky. It is not a source of infinite energy nor a source of vitality without transforming our relationship to property.

Yet, there is a last twist to what the image of the sun behind the smoke might tell us. It looks like it is shining in the middle of the night, This is a world where there is *nothing* that is not turned into private property *but the sun.* As Szeman asks, "how can one own what is infinite?"[5] Mateo presents it as the only natural source that is not commodified yet and the film uses this insight as a framework, visible in its title, portraying the sun as resisting to be owned, reminding the possibility of another world, not one that will be restored but one yet to be imagined.

5 Szeman, "On Solarity," 131.

This framing alludes to the vitality of the sun for memory retention. Refracting into the dark rooms of memory and history, it shines as an archive that reminds the cultural and ecological destruction of beings and relations brought by colonialism and capitalism and the urgency to reshuffle our existing coordinates.

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