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# Indigeneity at the Limits of Transculturation

## Decolonial Aesthetics in Claudia Llosa's *The Milk of Sorrow*

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**Abstract:** Elaborating decolonial and intersectional methods, aesthetics has developed rich tools for tackling power differences. A philosophical question arises about the nature of gendered embodied experience and materiality: How to comprehend the cultural field if it is at once a site of heinous expropriation and violence and one of vital social and political possibility? This essay explores this question through a reading of Claudia Llosa's film *The Milk of Sorrow* (*La teta asustada*) (2009). The film, we show, reworks racial, gendered, and colonial logics and supplants a model of transculturation, magical realism, and syncretism and its attendant figuration of resistance by a cultural vision of a web of multivalent, pluri-directional aesthetic promises and threats. Thus it presents a young Indigenous woman as a contemporary decolonial actor who, in encounter with popular culture and the global marketplace, renders memory livable and opens up unforeseen futures for her young town and country. We signal the implications for the positioning of the decolonial feminist spectator or culture maker and for a decolonial aesthetics. Aesthetic existence at the intersection of oppression and liberation, although impure and troubled, functions as a bountiful font of feminist energy and sustenance and a site of communal caring and imagination.
**Keywords:** Aesthetics, Race, Global Marketplace, Corporeality, Imagination

Elaborating decolonial and intersectional methods of analysis, aesthetics has developed rich tools for conceptualizing power differences and the

manifold ways they play into the experiences of cultural actors. Critical attention to the mechanisms of inequity and domination has brought to the surface conflicting dimensions of cultural life. As feminist theorists of race and coloniality have made clear, aesthetic productions hold meanings and make cultural effects that are contingent on intersecting social delineations of gender, race, class, sexuality, and coloniality. In turn, aesthetic productions foster social structures and positionings that push back against oppression and awaken previously unacknowledged, even novel, modes of cultural being and interconnectedness. Thus they help to bring into being unprecedented identities.[1] These insights, whose philosophical and artistic significance is hard to overestimate, give rise to large questions: How to understand the cultural reality that arises when a web of connections between aesthetic meaning, power, and identity pull us into antithetical directions? What are we to make of the field of culture if we comprehend it at once as a site of heinous expropriation and violence and one of vital social and political possibility? More specifically, how do we acknowledge the *aesthetic* intricacies of the cultural interactions that embody this duality? On a speculative note, moreover, what kind of positioning can we associate with the decolonial feminist spectator or culture maker?[2] If disorientation is not necessarily our lot and an ethically upright comportment is not available in any obvious sense, what cultural stances do we assume? In her second feature, *The Milk of Sorrow/La teta asustada* (2009), Peruvian filmmaker Claudia Llosa confronts these philosophical questions head-on. This essay investigates them by way of a reading of this audacious, multi-faceted film, which, even if the subject of a fair amount of attention, especially revolving around the theme of trauma (Vich 2014; Rueda 2015; Rojas 2017), currently still awaits aesthetic analysis of its distinctive critical cultural strategies and, in particular, of its uptake of popular idioms, coloniality, and the neoliberal marketplace.

In one influential approach, the coincidence of aesthetic domination and liberation signals the workings of transculturation. This concept, in writings by theorists such as Mary Louise Pratt (2008 [1992]), Frances Aparicio (1998), and Ángel Rama (1996), describes processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and create new forms from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture. The notion makes visible how different cultures develop in interaction with each other, as a result of which they jointly shift and create wholes that are more than the sum of their parts. The concept has a great deal of currency in present-day cultural discourses, where it is used with a certain looseness and fluidity, often under the rubrics of hybridity and mixing. Sheared of the rich historical, geographical, and material resonances it assumes in various scholarly discourses, moreover, the idea of transculturation is attractive to marketers (of films and other commodities) who wish to multiply audiences and run a profit at a time of planetary interconnectedness.[3] Moving with the global flow, interactivity seduces and sells in expanded zones of cultural

circulation.[4] However, this framework elides aesthetic dynamics that arise in the encounter between dominant and marginal cultural formations. While poignantly invoking the paradigm of transculturation, Llosa's film disrupts it to make room for a more abundant range of aesthetic possibilities and to develop a decolonial aesthetics.

*The Milk of Sorrow* reveals an apparatus of gendered colonial power. Simultaneously, it goes beyond existent conceptualizations of the nexus of power, identity, and aesthetics to investigate the demands of memory, life, and death as dimensions of aesthetic experience and interaction in the current epoch. An indigenous Peruvian aesthetics takes form that participates integrally in contemporary popular culture while also making itself indelibly present in the very modern/colonial culture that marginalizes and diminishes it.[5] Complicating and reorganizing understandings of space and time, the film, we will argue, supplants a model of transculturation and its attendant typologies of magical realism and syncretism by a cultural vision of a web of multivalent, pluri-directional aesthetic promises and threats. Juggling divergent temporalities and shifting cultural and geographical frames, it presents a young indigenous woman as a contemporary decolonial actor who renders memory livable and hints at unforeseen futures for the informal settlement that is her communal home and for her country more broadly. Aesthetic existence at the intersection of oppression and liberation, although tremendously impure and troubled in the film's vision, functions as a bountiful font of feminist energy and sustenance and a site of communal caring and imagination.

## Indigeneity, Transculturation, and Resistance

Crisscrossing forces of aesthetic domination and liberation and of modernity and the seemingly premodern are not new to cultural theory. The convergence of these elements characterizes so-called processes of transculturation, whereby subaltern groups selectively partake of and invent from resources transmitted by a hegemonic culture. Under this heading, Pratt and Aparicio, among others, explore the signifying and resignifying practices that make up contemporary hybridized cultures (Pratt 2008 [1992]; Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman 1997; Aparicio 1998). The term transculturation, originally coined by Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz in the 1940s, aims to replace overly reductive concepts of acculturation and assimilation used to characterize culture under conquest. For Ortiz (1995 [1940], 100–3), it consists of a mutual give and take.

Within this theoretical paradigm, disparate cultural histories and contexts, notably, colonizing and colonized communities, come together to forge new formations. The constellations that emerge could not have existed without each of the divergent trajectories that enter into the mix. Indeed, as current subjects of culture, we inhabit societies that are typically considered products

of transculturation: perspectives in the Global South are part of those in the Global North and vice versa; Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, the Americas, and other regions, jointly give rise to black cultures; Latin(x) America is a confluence of, among others, indigenous, European, African, and Asian heritages; Chicanx consciousness affirms its affinities with Amerindian, Mexican, and US traditions.[6] Clearly, transculturation is everyone's lot in our globalized world, albeit in different ways. The term informs a view of cultures as intertwined rather than sharply differentiated from each other, and as evolving in the course of cultural encounters. This view rejects static roots in favor of the belief that what is taken for the past is inflected by the cultures' current imaginaries, values, and struggles.[7]

Stripped of the nuances it assumes in a variety of theoretical discourses, the notion of transculturation has a strong market appeal to cultural producers and publics. It suggests a path of togetherness in difference. Choosing this path, cultures reconcile frictions. They recognize that crisp separation is not an option and take a step away from conflict. Societies move on in the wake of cultural devastation and political antagonism. They may feel that there is no other way: One must look forward, after all.[8]

The model of transculturation links up with that of resistance.[9] Processes of transculturation can fold in what is conceived as culturally different, unassimilable. Indigenous and other marginalized groups can realize acts of resistance that, besides countering oppression, also create emergent sites of agency within an arc of history, whose course they are altering. Those in power can pride themselves on their recognition of alterity, the expanded field of aesthetic experience they inhabit, and their willingness to share, alter, and reallocate the available cultural resources. This attractiveness, again, is commodifiable: cultural producers and audiences alike appreciate it.[10]

At the same time, resistance to oppression is not an unqualified good in aesthetics. As scholars have argued, the concept of resistance falls short of capturing complexities that are pivotal, life-sustaining aspects of cultural being and becoming.[11] It habitually elides aspects of aesthetic existence, such as the vagaries of black interior lives (Quashie 2012). More than that, it tends to channel economies of reading that dovetail with neoliberal rationality, thus narrowing our critical lenses (Acosta 2014). Accordingly, we can sharpen the questions raised earlier in this essay: What does culture look like if we attend to aesthetic phenomena in their racialized, gendered, and colonial trafficking—including their ties to other intersecting positions—outside the apertures of the schema of resistance that currently carries so much weight in the field?[12] The idea, here, is not to discard these optics but to concentrate on aesthetic elements that decolonial feminism has yet to face in their involved reverberations. While featuring strategies of resistance, *The Milk of Sorrow* also brackets these forms of address in order to shift the spectator's attention to different kinds of aesthetic potentialities. It is then to the film that we now turn.

## Coloniality, Fluids, and Consumption in the Marketplace

Llosa's film explores the lives of Andean migrants who moved to the *barriadas* (slums) on the outskirts of Lima due to the conflict between the Peruvian government and the Shining Path, dating from the 1980s and still ongoing. The indigenous populations in the countryside suffered attacks from both sides. The film, we will show, conceives of the *pueblo joven* (young town) as a liminal zone, where divides between center and periphery, oppressor and oppressed, poor and rich, liberated and entrapped, individual and group, good and bad taste, and acceptable and unacceptable femininity undergo shifts. Enacting these displacements, *The Milk of Sorrow* zeroes in on a convergence of social, aesthetic, and political forces that mark our current neoliberal era. The film's theoretical pertinence is not to a small measure due to this interest. A brief consideration of these forces will offer the context for our argument in this essay.

Through its figuration of fluids, underscored by both the Spanish and the English title in their respective references to breast and milk (*La teta asustada*/*The Milk of Sorrow*), the film navigates an array of racial, gendered, scientific, and national positionalities that for many centuries have received articulation in terms of elements such as blood, milk, and semen. These substances, which often are interchangeable, take part in material constellations that, while evolving, reach back to 1500s Spain and beyond (Martínez 2008; Coles et al. 2015; Feros 2017). Coloniality in the Americas, as scholars have made clear, employs typologies of race and gender embodied in the supposed properties of cleanliness, fecundity, contamination, and impurity carried by the different fluids and their analogues. These metaphorics sustain their influence to date, as revealed by contemporary appeals to conceptions of "limpieza de sangre" (purity of blood) in the political arena.[13] At the same time, it is important to note that a present-day aesthetics of fluids feasts in abundance on the cultural offerings presented by the global marketplace: an ostensibly interminable flow of consumption items to purchase, a stream of TV shows to watch. The film's plot centers on this situation.

Indeed, recognizing the social and political import of the realm of commodity consumption and the mass media, Néstor García Canclini (2001) argues that Latin Americans increasingly look to the market for solutions to their problems rather than to the rules of democracy or commitments to collective participation in a unified nation. The neoliberal market, as is widely acknowledged, celebrates individualism. Investigating the aesthetic implications of this tendency, *The Milk of Sorrow* highlights the promise of individual cultural agency in the marketplace. However, in contrast to a blockbuster movie like *City of God* (2002), the film rejects the pose of the individual heroic artist who miraculously rises up from a favela plagued by criminality and violence to make his entry into the middle class.[14] It proposes a different track for its young, indigenous protagonist Fausta Isidora Janampa Chauca (Magaly Solier) and, by extension, her cousin Máxima (María del Pilar Guerrero), who draws her lessons from telenovelas.

No less available to Fausta and Máxima than a scenario of miraculous artistic uplift is assimilation to the official culture held up by mainstream society. Elite culture has historically posed as a placeholder for the nation, conceived of as the "lettered city," a notion that describes the collusion of lettered culture, especially literature, with coloniality (Rama 1996). The lettered city, drawing at crucial junctures on methods of transculturation and syncretism (13, 81–83), remains in a struggle for hegemony under neoliberalism, where it responds to its own attenuation with efforts at reassertion. Llosa's film scrutinizes the profound aesthetic tensions that the confluence of *pueblo joven*, racialized gender logics, official Latin American culture, and the global marketplace instills into Fausta's lifeworld. By negotiating and reembodying these tensions, our protagonist, as we shall see, traces out a space of cultural agency both for herself and her community.

## Surplus Humanity: Indigenous Tradition or Consumption?

A dark screen. A voice is singing. The lyrics in Quechua detail how women are used as a weapon of war. The person whose voice we are hearing, too, was a victim of rape. To learn this, the non-Quechua-speaking spectator has to read the translation of the song—white words projected against a black surface. This reversal of dark and light, along with the use of song and printed word as cinematic image, confuses and enlightens us. The song does not ask for vengeance, rather remembrance. Before we can process these shifting demands, we countenance the singer's face in a frontal shot. Deeply wrinkled. Aged. And yet, ageless. Written on the face an old story. And yet, of recent origin. The body's history, recorded on the face's wrinkles and creases, testifies to the public violence against indigenous peoples of which the woman sings. She sings of colonialism and its legacy, of how she was raped and tortured by soldiers while pregnant and forced to eat her husband's penis. The newborn baby breastfeeds on this trauma.[15] The milk of sorrow is transmitted.[16] Although both mother and child survived the brutality, the singing brings back memories. Communicating the agony to her daughter kills Perpetua (Bárbara Lazón) again.[17] Before Perpetua, who had been refusing food, dies, she asks Fausta to sing: "I will eat if you sing and water this memory that is drying up." With the death of her mother, Fausta inherits a new responsibility, a new debt. In addition to burying her in their Andean hometown as tradition prescribes, Fausta must keep the song, the memories, alive.

To raise the necessary funds for travel and burial, Fausta goes to work for wealthy composer Aída (Susi Sánchez). Before being allowed to serve her employer, she is subjected to a physical exam by her predecessor, a black domestic worker. Her hands, nails, and teeth are checked for hygiene and disease. After she spends part of the evening waiting in the kitchen in front of a TV, the patrona calls out for her previous servant. Fausta answers the call. The camera first follows Fausta as she walks towards her employer's bedroom. Then the camera gets ahead of Fausta to pan to a number of objects, including a colonial sofa, a bookcase,

and several paintings, among which is an image of a Nursing Madonna, placed in a dark interior room.[18] Fausta walks past the painting without glancing at it. Her shadow covers part of the painting. Simultaneously, the painting's subject matter turns her into a shadow, a ghost. We are reminded of the milk of sorrow. The painting proclaims the role of the catholic church in rendering Fausta a lost soul in the indigenous cosmology. Architecture, interior design, literature, and painting conspire to place Fausta outside official culture. The decorative items mark Aída, already feared by Fausta on account of the biomedical inspection, as a representative of an earlier cultural, political, and economic system. Indeed, these allusions will be amplified in the next scene.

When Fausta enters the bedroom, her employer is drilling a hole to hang a photograph of one of her relatives in military uniform, possibly her father, his posture erect, gaze severe. Aída hands over the drill to Fausta. For a moment she holds it, pointing toward the photo as if the tool were a gun. The viewer sees her reflected in the photo, captured within its frame (Figure 1). Fausta flees, her nose bleeding. The double image has her convulse not only in terror of military repression. The desire for retribution that grips her also has her in agony about the prospect of betraying her mother's request to keep the memories alive. If the mirrored self-portrait alerts Fausta to unstated modes of resistance embodied in the tools-arms equation, her bleeding nose vehemently delimits their reach by avowing that her connection with her mother requires more than militancy.[19] The transgressive blood carries different needs and possibilities. Fausta's nose bled previously when she told her immediate family of her mother's death. To better grasp the significance of this bodily reaction and the way in which the film is working racialized and gendered fluids, we return to this sequence.

Figure 1. Film still. Claudia Llosa, *The Milk of Sorrow*. Fausta encounters her reflection in the photo of a military officer in Aída's bedroom.

Nowithstanding Fausta's songs, the mother didn't have the chance to eat anymore. She dies in her room in her brother's, Fausta's uncle's, house, where they live. The film cuts from this interior scene to the exterior. The initial vision of the house signals poverty in all its ramifications. The uncle and his wife are eating their midday meal while children and animals move around. Suddenly, Fausta's cousin Máxima parades around the table in her wedding dress complaining about its length as if she had succumbed to a distorted notion of modernity, relinquishing the standards of calculated exuberance and parceled-out economic expenditure defining modern subjectivity.[20] As Máxima carries on, Fausta appears with her bleeding nose to inform her uncle and his family that her mother has passed. Read together, the death sequence and the family interaction mark the film as another denunciation of the abuse of women and its aftermath. The film goes further than this.

Llosa's comparison between the two cousins juxtaposes the thrall of consumerism with an organization of death and life associated with the indigenous tradition. Máxima's desire for a longer train is a kind of self-intoxication, a form of excessive consumption. It counterbalances Fausta's vulnerability and grief with excitement. As the viewer intuits, the cousins' dual strategies are not aberrations but the daily norm that the neoliberal market both incites and laughs away as bad taste and morbidity, respectively.[21] They are unacceptable women, or, what Mike Davis (2006, 174–98, 201) calls a "surplus humanity."

## Science and the Fantastic: Dunking a Biopolitics along with Magical Realism

Fausta's and Máxima's surplus status, whether of the disconsolate or exuberant variety, life-denying or life-affirming, has a biological analogue subsumed under scientific classifications by the medical system, as already intimated by the physical inspection. Out of concern for his niece's recurrent nosebleeds, the uncle (Marino Ballón) takes her to a nearby clinic. There, Fausta has an unexplained gynecological exam during which a potato tuber is found to be growing in her vagina. While aware of the use of the potato as a contraceptive by indigenous women, the doctor, who appears to be mestizo, blames Fausta for believing in superstitions and spurning Western medicine. He constructs himself as impersonal and purely objective. He is a scientist whose territory is being disturbed by indigenous incursions. For the film-festival viewer, he reinforces the exotic nature of the potato tuber and its presumed phantasmatic origin, the milk of sorrow.

Outside the clinic, Fausta offers a different explanation: A neighbor has shielded herself from rape by implanting a potato tuber, only to land a marriage that engenders four children. Nothing but revulsion, remarks Fausta citing her

neighbor, will deter revolting men from rape. Fausta's narrative disrupts the doctor's self-presentation for the viewer. Her uncle is baffled. She wants her condition, her use of the potato tuber, to be understood through a specific historical lens that depends on the articulation of race and gender. She resists succumbing to the medical categories that separate and homogenize bodies into healthy and sick. Instead, she places the potato tuber within the social patterns, gender relations, and cosmological understandings of her community. Since her uncle left their Andean village for Lima when he was very young, he was never educated in the communal knowledges that sustain the women. Fausta's explanation reveals the continuities and discontinuities in knowledges among different members of the same community. It challenges the viewer who attributes a magical realist worldview to Fausta.[22]

Blurring dichotomies between modern and premodern forms of symbolization, her explanation also provides a provisional path beyond the conventional global narrative that predicates a distorted modernity of Latin America. Indeed, back home, Fausta folds white napkins into beautiful shapes reminiscent of birds in flight, while talking to her mother. She takes the doctor's note prescribing surgery and turns it into an origami crane. Rather than add it to the other creations, she drowns it with a splash (Figure 2). With Fausta, the uncle, and the doctor, Llosa offers a set of halting translations between different kinds of biopolitics, which she renders readable in aesthetic terms, that is, in relation to the potato and the cranes.[23]

Figure 2. Film still. Claudia Llosa, *The Milk of Sorrow*. Fausta drowns the crane she has folded from the doctor's prescription.

Despite having run out of her employer's bedroom, Fausta is not fired. Besides her, Aída also employs a full-time gardener, Noé (Efraín Solís). High walls enclose the compound, turning the garden into a refuge. Fausta slowly learns to trust him. As she becomes more comfortable in his presence, she broaches the subject of the plants he cultivates and values such as geraniums, daisies, jasmines, hydrangeas. She reveals that she used to have a vegetable garden in her village and wonders why he has excluded the potato plant from the garden. At first, Noé remains silent. For him, the garden functions as a closed, self-absorbed world. Then he ventures that potatoes are abundant, cheap, and flower for a very short time. Although they talk in Quechua throughout this exchange, his perspective reveals that the flowers he prizes are not native, they speak of a colonial past. They are the result of the conquest, which differentiates between flowers and ranks them as part of the construction of a new social order. Like its counterparts the zoo and the museum, the garden is imbricated with the history of colonialism as a storehouse and display site for plants, and with modernity as a barometer of beauty and good taste. Her remarks recover a different history of the potato—now as the absent flower. Fausta assumes a decolonial aesthetic stance.

Bluntly dismissing these subtleties, the film's original poster multiplies potatoes. It announces on the top half the Spanish title *La teta asustada,* followed in subscript by *un viaje del miedo a la libertad* (a voyage from fear to freedom). Below, the lead actor stares at us, shoulders bared, the rest of her body covered by hundreds of potatoes (Figure 3). The uplifting, future-oriented vision of the coincidence of indigeneity and modern nationhood intimated by the text is belied by the contradictions in the image itself. Fausta is at once being buried alive and birthed by Peru's national symbol, disappearing into the earth as she emerges from it. Additionally, the image reproduces the exoticization of Europe's other, continuing the cinematic tradition of Carmen Miranda and her tropical fruit headdress.[24] At the same time, Fausta's piercing look challenges the viewer who falls for either of these interpretive models. Her history with the potato goes on.

Cognizant of the symbolic power of flowers, Fausta greets Noé one day at the gate to the compound holding a huge red lily in her mouth (Figure 4). This performance interrupts the daily course of events. Habitually, the camera places her behind a bar, half-occluded by a shutter. The latter shots, which are recaptured on the cover of the North American DVD (Figure 5), have her gazing out at him, at us, at the world, at the unknown. Questions arise about the position of the indigenous actor in the contemporary cultural field. Is Fausta enacting a gendered amorous tradition while also running into its confinements? In assuming the image of the seductress, is she again asserting the symbolism of flowers? Or should we read her powerful powerlessness in a more reflexive sense? Is the scene

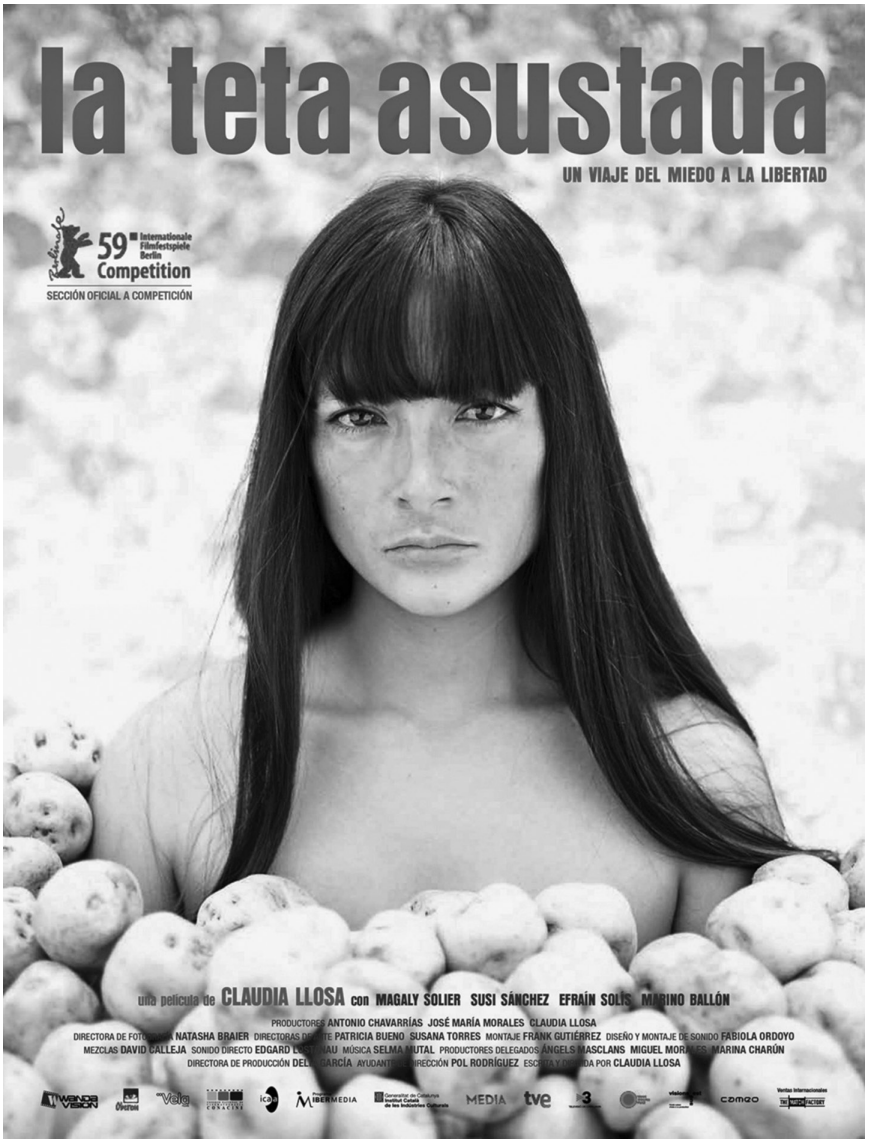


Figure 3. 59th Berlinale poster for Claudia Llosa, *The Milk of Sorrow*. *La teta asustada: un viaje del miedo a la libertad*.

a commentary on the limits of art in a market-driven economy? The compound, after all, borders an open market that Fausta and Noé traverse every day to and from work. Consumerism has become an all-pervasive force, similar to the role religious structures played previously. While the garden escapes neither the history of colonialism nor the commodified world that surrounds it, the two find a short-lived relief in it. We will later return to Fausta's and Noé's potato exchange

and his response to her challenge. Now we will look more closely at Fausta's and Aída's interactions to explore how an individual whom the past has disinherited can negotiate a present and venture beyond the categories associated with elite culture.

Figure 4. Film still. Claudia Llosa, *The Milk of Sorrow*. Fausta greets Noé with a red lily at the gate.

Figure 5. Film still. Claudia Llosa, *The Milk of Sorrow*. Fausta carries out her daily chore of checking who is calling.

## Fausta's Calculus

To appease her nerves, Fausta sings while she works. Impressed with her songs, Aída cuts a deal with her. Every time she sings a song, Aída will pay her a pearl from a broken necklace. True to her namesake, Fausta accepts the offer. Complying with their agreement, Aída moves a pearl from one bowl to another. Various times Fausta attempts to count them but fails (Figure 6). The pearls institute an economic calculus and simultaneously exceed market structures. They are meant to allow Fausta to fulfill a cultural obligation. The mobile pearls and the stubbornly ensconced potato dialogue. Outstripping the traditional terms that define the marketplace and the lettered city, these figures emphasize convergences and divergences between Fausta's lived experiences.

Figure 6. Film still. Claudia Llosa, *The Milk of Sorrow*. Fausta tries to count the pearls.

The dialogue between pearl and potato extends to popular culture. Aída first brings up the trade of pearls when Fausta is watching TV in the kitchen. She is viewing a cartoon based on "The Ugly Duckling," which tells the story of an abandoned duck who hopes to be accepted by his flock. In the episode on Fausta's screen, the character takes a bottle of milk from the refrigerator to pour himself a glass. He excitedly splashes a puddle of milk onto the floor (Figure 7). The duckling refuses the implied biomedical lesson that drinking milk will transform you into a beautiful swan. Fausta, having splashed the prescription crane, meets a fellow rebel and social outsider. Their alliance is reinforced when the duck, now handling tomato ketchup, like Fausta, opts for excess in the plane of red liquids (Figure 8). In comes Aída, who seats herself next to our protagonist in an ostensible gesture of companionship and equality. She takes over from the cartoon, beckoning with her own, high-cultural variety of white uplift: trade me the

pearls for your songs. Lettered authority strikes up a competition with popular culture over the subaltern imagination.[25]

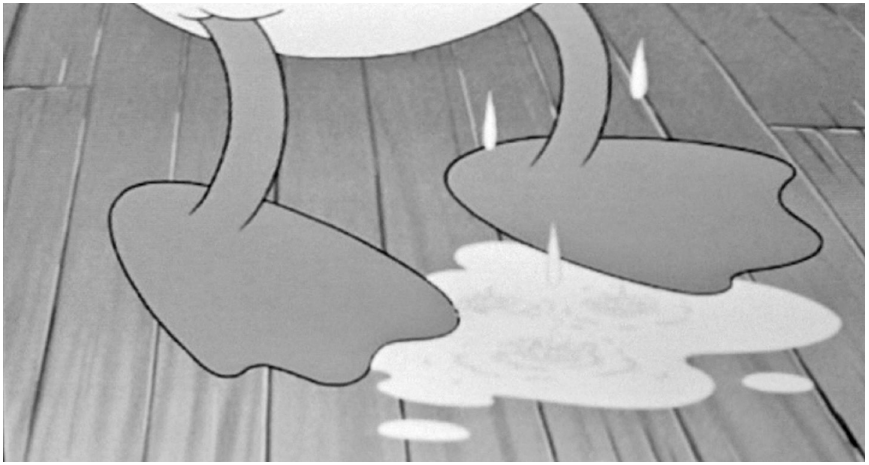

Figure 7. Film still. Claudia Llosa, *The Milk of Sorrow*. The ugly duckling splashes milk onto the floor.

Figure 8. Film still. Claudia Llosa, *The Milk of Sorrow*. The duckling pours tomato ketchup.

## The Two Cousins: Popular Culture and the Indigenous Tradition

Fausta has found a buddy on TV, and Máxima, we know from an earlier scene, looks to telenovelas to plan her wedding. Each a consumer of popular culture, the

two cousins also adhere to their indigenous traditions. Before her official engagement, Máxima turns to the potato to divine the longevity of her marriage. The longer the potato strand, the longer will her marriage last. She succeeds in peeling the potato in one long strand. The camera films the peeling using the same low angle it deploys to show Fausta trimming her own potato, which has begun to grow sprigs that extend from her vagina.

Further, the pair are both invested in flying. Fausta, as previously noted, endlessly produces structures resembling birds. Not until later do we discover the reason for Máxima's complaint about her train. Too short, it will not fly. She wants to soar on her wedding day. As a solution, they attach pink balloons. Of course, they don't lift her. Máxima momentarily threatens to abort her wedding. Fausta, in the meantime, clings to her use of the potato as a safeguard against rape and a contraceptive.

The film contemplates the manifold possibilities that endure in the potato. Much more than a symbol of the Peruvian nation, this privileged Andean substance carries a whole array of meanings grounded in the narratives permeating life in the *pueblo joven*. Versatile and improvisational, the potato communicates with high and popular culture alike. The white pearls, the white wedding dress, the white coat worn by the doctor, and the ugly duckling's white milk foreshadow the white flowers it will sprout toward the end of the film.

## Elite Culture and Its Indebtedness to Indigenous Music

An accomplished composer and pianist, Aída is struggling with writer's block when she proposes the above transaction. She is so frustrated that she throws the piano out of her second-floor window. Soon afterwards, she orders a new piano which is carried to her house by a group of men. As the men toil under the weight of the new piano, Aída haggles over the cost of the delivery. This sequence underscores competing timelines: the time of the house and its occupants' colonial past and that of current worker exploitation. It prepares the spectator for Aída's erasure of Fausta.

Out of sight, Aída reworks Fausta's songs in preparation for her annual concert in central Lima. Aída triumphs. What she proudly calls "all of Lima" is there to celebrate her. On the way home in a car driven by Aída's son, Fausta observes, "They liked it very much, didn't they?" Her facial expression intimates that she contributed to her patrona's success. Enraged Aída's ruthlessness, her military patrilineage, emerges.

Aída refuses to acknowledge that her "original" composition is an arrangement of a "popular" song. She disavows her appropriation of the other's voice. Void of words, of letters, of its remembrance of violence, the arrangement can be listened to and celebrated as pleasing, as Fausta observes: an admirable instance of a transcultural aesthetics. The audience has found delight in another example

of the commodification of Andean music so popular in the West in the late seventies. Aída cruelly orders Fausta out of the car, while pretending everything is fine.

## Beyond Transculturation: Indigenous Creativity

Fausta's expulsion from the vehicle signals the failure of the ruling elite to come to grips with Peru's reality and brings home the limits of transculturation. The aesthetic encounter between the indigenous and the elite is riddled with friction and mistreatment, which the film invites us to hear in the music. Ortiz's notion of a give-and-take is at play. Yet, there is a reversal. Whereas for Ortiz, the subaltern engages in a selective deployment of the dominant culture, here Aída is the taker, Fausta the giver. Moreover, it turns out that there is not really a give-and-take, just taking. Fausta's gift is not seen by Aída.[26] Transcultural musical hybridity is exposed as a deception.[27] While intimating readings of the music in terms of transculturation, the film also disparages them. The lettered city as a civilizing project exposes its bankruptcy.[28] A ruthless ideology prevails.

What is most insidious is not Aída's cruelty. It is the way the system obliterates consequences from the powerful. The cultural system portrayed in the film is rigged in her favor. Like the soldiers, she will not be accountable for the violence. Indeed, they will get away with it as they have many times before. Aída's smile and her waving off of her son's startlement brush aside any moral concerns as if no rupture has happened. In this respect, the film's depiction of class and institutional injustice is unflinching. It could end on this note of disclosure. The viewer understands how the ruling class refuses to recognize that deformation and guilt are of its own making. Llosa's film aims differently.

The milk of sorrow, so far, has kept the anxiety-ridden Fausta on a death track. She is too fearful to brave outside the home without company and suffers from fainting spells caused by the potato implanted to protect her. Somehow, she makes it back to her uncle's house. Her cousin Máxima, who is getting married that day, tells her to come in and get ready for the wedding. Fausta participates but doesn't socialize. Later on, when she is asleep, the uncle attempts to shake her out of her fear of life by almost choking her: "You want to live but you don't dare to. Breathe! Breathe!"

Shocked out of her death wish, Fausta finds the energy and will to question her tolerance for suffering. Casting out for life, she embarks on an alternative narrative that displaces the disturbed milk iconography.[29] Her solutions to her dilemmas convey insights into how life can be turned into a critical concept that exceeds being the bearer of trauma and the docile expression of fate.

Her actions acquire a new urgency. The next day she returns to Aída's house to gather the pearls she is owed. On her way out, she faints. Noé finds her and rushes her to a clinic where she is operated. The potato tuber is removed. During

the surgery, she keeps her fist closed around the pearls. This defiant act ensures her the traveling funds.[30]

Throughout, Fausta keeps her dead mother company, holding her intimately close, except for a scene in which her female family members join her to clean and preserve the corpse. Alone, she usually sings and caresses her mother's body. The corpse is never subjected to Christian rites of the dead, although a calendar with the image of a Sacred Heart Christ adorns the wall. Rather than a sign of religious devotion, the calendar reminds the viewer of the commercialization of religion. The handling of the mother's body emphatically eludes scripts of transculturation and syncretism.

On her way to her village with her mother's corpse, Fausta sees the ocean in the distance. She asks her uncle to stop the truck. She carries her mother's body across the sand dunes toward the sea. This change of plans can be traced to a very early scene when Fausta goes coffin shopping. She visits several stores. The first displays coffins made of heavy polished wood, which foreshadow Aída's dark colonial furniture. Fausta ignores them. At the second store, she comes across a hand-painted coffin decorated with ocean scenes that rivet her. The ocean must bring forth ideas of freedom, flight, the unknown. Moments earlier, she had turned her doctor's prescription into a crane, whose symbolic meaning includes grace, faithfulness, travel, longevity, immortality. Then she drowned the crane, refusing to accept her mother's death. Now she is ready.

Rather than compliantly fulfilling her indigenous obligations, she opts for aesthetic considerations and possibilities. She moves away from a form of resistance based centrally on victimhood. She transforms her existential dilemmas into a problem to be solved with the help of aesthetics, not an already given identity. No longer compelled to follow indigenous habits literally, Fausta begins a new song as the shot of her carrying her mother's corpse across the sand dunes fades. She rewrites the promise to bury her mother while still watering memory. Inventing images in a shifting articulation of the bond with her mother, she recasts the milk of sorrow. The contaminating breast and its poisoned milk are supplanted by nourishing songs (recall the lyrics "I will eat if you sing"). A generative flow is preserved in the life-affirming figures of the ocean and the mother. Fausta answers her mother's desire by offering it an unprecedented form. She makes happen the space for a new song, life.

The film's last sequence once again takes place in her *pueblo joven*, now situated between a ruinous modernity (the city as civilizing project) and a confining tradition (the Andean village as site of resistance). In this liminal zone, the ability to overcome, to change, to reach for freedom is part of daily life. Noé sends Fausta an intertwined blossoming potato plant.

For a spectator invested in characters, this final image can be read as bringing "closure" to the romance.[31] The intertwined potato plant announces the unstated ending, Fausta and Noé lived happily ever after. Despite Llosa's invitation to

follow Fausta's life, to see her move from victim to survivor, and to a state where she enjoys the fruits of her creativity, the film unfolds through temporal disjunctions and juxtapositions. From the opening sequences onward, it derails the project of creating a coherent psychological profile. It questions this enterprise by offering a vision of aesthetic experience and intimacy that surpasses a model of culture grounded in the heterosexual couple and by recrafting the private–public divide underlying the notion of individualist artistic creation. Moving away from these constructions, the film establishes an unruly, polyvalent field of aesthetic interaction.

Figure 9. Film still. Claudia Llosa, *The Milk of Sorrow*. The view of the *pueblo joven* from Fausta's window.

By sending Fausta a blossoming potato plant, Noé acknowledges and finally answers her and our earlier questions regarding her powerful powerlessness. The garden and its occupants turn out to be open signifiers. Gardening is an exploration of the different forms beauty might take. The garden encourages these experiments. While all these aesthetic modalities may not add up to a new public space, the figure of the potato points to future openings for the young children who announce to Fausta Noé's gift. The film thus captures the aesthetic possibilities that traditional Andean culture still maintains along with the threats it faces, including the peril of historical overdetermination through the narratives of previous generations. Through the fluid images of a mother's breast, a flowering potato plant, and the ocean, Llosa gives poetic expression to Fausta's needs as she negotiates and claims as her own the arid terrain of her uncle's home promoted by local and global capital. The camera imbues this landscape with beauty and majesty (Figures 9 and 10).

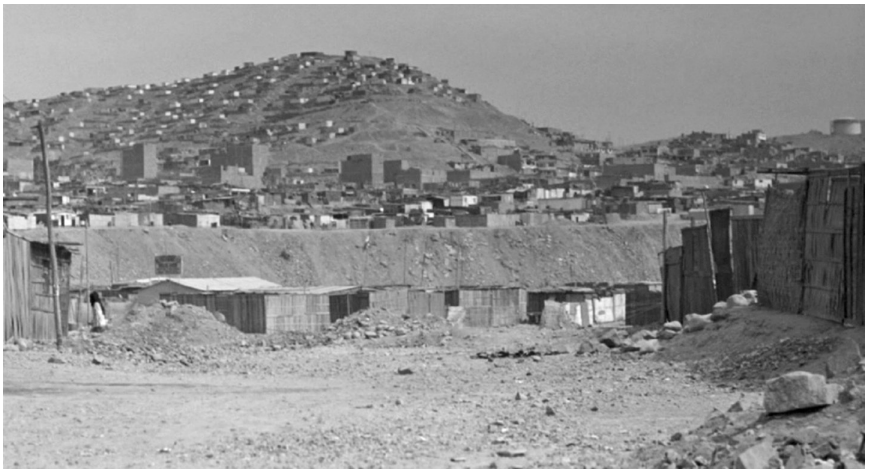

Figure 10. Film still. Claudia Llosa, *The Milk of Sorrow*. Fausta passing through the astoundingly beautiful barren landscape of the *pueblo joven*.

Notably, the potato blossoms outside Aída's garden, namely in the *pueblo joven*. Again, Llosa subverts a script of transculturation or syncretism. Her interest is neither in a plot of resistance nor in a back and forth between indigenous and dominant idioms, the communal and the mainstream, an interplay the uncle knows how to harness into a profitable wedding business. Rather, the film resignifies the potato along with the shocked milk. Over and above trauma and constrained, even if life-sustaining, breathing and interconnectedness, the latter figure assumes intensified connotations of aesthetic generativity, its ties to semen, blood, the maternal body, and the mother's narrative modulated by its connections with water, imaginative/critical questioning, and creativity. Both figures are part of a decolonial aesthetic.

Just as Fausta and Noé translate flowers, potatoes, and pearls from colonialist currency into tools of liberation and futurity—while multiplying the potato's powers beyond the ones bestowed by the indigenous tradition—the film offers a revised conception of sociality and creativity, away from any notion of a distorted modernity that ultimately diminishes these characters as premodern, behind the times. It sketches an aesthetic system that keeps alive the indigenous tradition in the twenty-first century, where aesthetic threats of violation and existential closure go in tandem with aesthetic promises of beauty, community, and the pleasures of life.[32]

## Toward a Contemporary Indigenous Aesthetic

*The Milk of Sorrow* consistently crosscuts between sequences that highlight Fausta's anxieties and ones that focus on the neighborhood in which she lives, a vast improvised housing development surrounding Lima. This young town is

built on desert land punctuated by steep hills. The camera takes us on several walking tours up and down an impressive staircase, pausing for amazing views of the dry landscape. It slowly pans the residents' comings and goings on these narrow stairs, intimately revealing the bodily actions of climbing and descending. These movements stress the precariousness of the neighborhood, which has emerged haphazardly without basic social and civil services. At the same time, long shots highlight the beauty to be found in this singular landscape. We never see the city as such. The camerawork deemphasizes the center in favor of the margin.

Repeatedly, the camera shows Fausta's family enjoying a full, vibrant life. They have managed to turn their precarious state into a communal business, catering weddings, whose values point to socialities not determined by the market exclusively. Aída's lettered society has given way to makeshift spaces that yield an evocative portrait of modern-day Latin American cities. The film juxtaposes fragments of a colonial setting with its surrounding marketplace, marked by its mix of ancient traditions and brazen consumerism, and the community scenes in the surrounding areas. Through these spatial and temporal disjunctions, the film demands that we recalibrate our thinking about Fausta and her family.

The closing credits reveal that the songs recounting the events that cause the milk of sorrow were original pieces composed for the film by Quechua musician and actor Magaly Solier, who plays Fausta. They are not "popular" or authentic indigenous pieces. As artifacts, the songs are part of the market. Yet they denounce the violence that women constantly experience everywhere. When character and actor mirror each other, the entanglements of art and commodification reemerge, this time in the context of the utopian or future-oriented impulses the viewer attributes to the film. The work holds these competing demands for art, profitability, and political change in tension. Simultaneously, it recognizes, projects, and celebrates an emerging aesthetic that marginalized persons bring into being in spaces outside the official culture.

## Conclusion: *Milk*'s Decolonial Aesthetics

Fausta leads her life at the cross-section of violence and liberation. Rather than ironing out these contrary tendencies, Llosa leaves them intact in a troubling but hopeful aesthetic vision. By ending with the potato not as a symbol of Peru but as a symbol of beauty and, by extension, a sign of an appreciation of indigenous cultures that are under erasure, an array of new aesthetic possibilities and threats emerge. Through a set of disjunctions and tensions alongside translations and shifting binaries, the film highlights the manifold aesthetic dimensions of the encounter between *pueblo joven*, a racialized gender system, elite culture, and the marketplace. Transculturation is a fact of life, as attested to by Fausta's delight in the TV cartoon and her clinging to the pearls. The wedding photos staged by the uncle in front of a picture of the Iguazú Falls and the film's citations of

the Nursing Madonna and the Sacred Heart Christ also suggest as much. But transculturation is not the driving force of aesthetic meaning in the film, and the historically potent divides it posits shouldn't detract us from the aesthetic complexities *The Milk of Sorrow* puts into motion, for example, by creating a color red that is at once shocked blood, enticing flower, and rebellious tomato ketchup, or designing a color white that, as a part of a flowering potato plant, channels presumed medicalized and matrimonial purities into a grounded futurity. Working at the limits of transculturation, the film enacts a decolonial aesthetics that shows the indigenous actor as navigating a web of aesthetic threats of eradication and promises of communal caring, sustenance, and imagination. Both the threats and promises are part of her experiences of the world in a manner that is not to be discounted. With the notions of threats and promises, we point to the manifold, fine-grained, and often disjointed "identifications and differentiations" and the dynamism as well as the continuities of ongoing processes of "aesthetic affiliation and disaffiliation, appropriation and disowning" marking the day-to-day aesthetic lives that the inhabitants of the *pueblo joven* craft for themselves.[33] A decolonial aesthetics needs to home in on these multiscalar, polyvalent registers of meaning and their experiential reverberations.

Resistance to Aída's theft and the erasures inflicted by authorized culture is not Llosa's direct concern. She contests the quashing of indigenous life by recognizing the attractions as well as the devastation of the global marketplace and turning our attention to a communal aesthetic flourishing that opts for life. There is no liberation through flying, through the TV's lessons, or through obedience to the mores of the mother's village. These hopes, longings, and commitments play their part in the everyday lives that we see unfolding in the *pueblo joven*. To Fausta's and the viewer's astonishment, the hole the uncle at one point is digging in the ground is not a grave but a swimming pool. When it is ready, the camera shows us a group of people frolicking around the pool, laughing, playing, being social. These sequences design a new sociality.[34] The threats of death and destitution are given a place in the *pueblo joven* alongside the aesthetic joys life holds out. At the end of the film, the image of two young children dancing, who announce Noé's gift of the potato plant to Fausta, affirms how they carry further these actions of aesthetic community making and care.[35]

Reworking the startled milk and the nosebleeds and bringing them together with the evolving potato and water imagery, Llosa's film articulates a decolonial aesthetics that rejects notions of a contaminated modernity (and its counterpoint of a purified/purifying colonial world) and examines coloniality and its affiliations with race and gender in light of both the preexisting indigenous and the later African-descendant populations of Peru. She brings to decolonial discourse a recognition of the complex material and conceptual racial hierarchization of Peru with its African and later Asian groups, which exceeds European–indigenous binaries.[36] Aesthetic existence at the intersection of oppression and freedom remains fraught but at the same time beckons with possibility.

Beyond the frames of transculturation and resistance, emplaced in a thicket of aesthetic promises and threats, the decolonial feminist viewer is neither plunged into disorientation nor interpellated as morally commendable. The unsettlement Fausta experiences when thrown out of the car is a stage in a much more encompassing aesthetic process. The position the viewer is offered is one in which we are called on to navigate the antithetical directions we witness, that is, to come to terms with both egregious expropriation and violence and life-sustaining social and political possibility. Fausta lives this duality. Her spectators are invited to take up an analogous cultural stance. This means surpassing the oppositions between the supposedly spoilt brat (the irate Máxima who finds her train too short) and the good, dutiful daughter (the doleful Fausta who is in mourning). It involves rethinking these stances in view of the shifting oppositions between poor and rich, acceptable and unacceptable femininity, center and periphery, individual and group, and good and bad taste that the film traces. In the course of this process, a concern for bonds of conviviality is sparked in the spectator, who imagines a collective existence that loosens the grip of fear and yields as-of-yet unknown pleasures.

As a figure of decoloniality, the potato plant makes a final appeal or demand on the *pueblo joven* and the spectator alike. It is time to rebuild the world. Noé's gift is the first step. Alert to Fausta's often vacant look, and with a nod to Derrida (2005, 140), we can read her mother's death as the end of the world. So far, we have seen how she rebuilds her world, her human world. But from the start of this film about coloniality, the human–nature relation has also been fractured. The citizens of the *pueblo joven* had to leave their homeland. Now, they need to recultivate the land. Make the desert bloom with potato plants.

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## Notes

1. A drastically abbreviated array of different approaches to these aspects includes Franco (1992); Muñoz (1999); Anzaldúa (1987, 2009); Lorde (1984); Wynter (1992); Richard (2004); Roelofs (2014, 2022); Cheng (2019); and Ortega (2019).
2. For groundbreaking discussions of decolonial feminisms, see Anzaldúa (1987) and Lugones (2003, 2010).
3. On the globalization and commercialization of cultures and their effects on the positioning of postcolonial and transcultural/multicultural aesthetic production, see Lazarus (2012, esp. pp. 21–25). On the effacement of social antagonism under globalization, see Richard (2004).
4. See, for example, Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo's (2020) discussion of L'Oréal's marketing of the actress Zoe Saldana as ethnically and racially hybrid and its correlative elision of her blackness.
5. On the ties between modernity and coloniality, see Mignolo (2007) and Lugones (2010). On the contemporaneity of the indigenous and an indigenous notion of modernity that engages current economic and social conditions, see Rivera Cusicanqui (2012, p. 96, p. 106).
6. These understandings can be found in theorists such as Hall (1994); Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman (1997); Pratt (2008); Anzaldúa (2009); and Mbembe (2021).
7. Hall (1994), among others, theorizes such shifting constructions of the past.
8. When employed as a tool of commodification, the notion of transculturation threatens to efface difference (while at the same time figuring it [see Acosta (2014), p. 5]), eliding what Sara Ahmed would call strange strangeness (Ahmed 2000) and asserting a coercive promise of happiness (Ahmed 2010). Nelly Richard (2004) insists in this context on the importance of aesthetic ruptures.
9. Resistance receives strong emphasis in Aparicio's (1998) account of transculturation, among others.
10. Of course, this does not go for all audiences. We, here, are thinking primarily of mainstream publics. Acosta (2014, p. 5) argues that transculturation reductively conceives of cultural alterity as resistant and colludes with neoliberal logics.
11. Critiques of the resistance model include Anzaldúa (1987, p. 78); Quashie (2012); Acosta (2014). See also Vallega (2014).
12. On the prominence of resistance in Black and Latin American studies, see Quashie (2012); Acosta (2014). In philosophy, Medina (2012), Roelofs (2014, 2020), Taylor (2017), Al-Saji (2019), and Ortega (2019), among others, link artworks to modes of resistance. Important qualifications mark these appeals. For example, while Taylor (2017) uses this nomenclature, his Deweyan cultural phenomenology reaches further, especially with respect to the imagination. Lugones (2003) entwines resisting with oppressing. Acosta's target, ultimately, is limited notions of resistance, not resistance tout court (2014, p. 7). See in this light also Quashie (2012, p. 23). Further exploration of these qualifications goes beyond the scope of this article.

13. In 2017, Peru held a national census which seriously took account of Afro-Peruvians for the first time since the early 1940s. Afro-Peruvians, who totaled 9% of the nation's population (a number reported to have been grossly underestimated), were divided into black, the term used for people of unmixed African descent; Mulatos, meaning of mixed African and European ancestry; and Zambos, referring to mixed African and indigenous ancestry (Instituto Nacional [2018], p. 222; *OkayAfrica* [n.d.]). The use of these categories points to the persistence of the sixteenth-century Spanish notion of "limpieza de sangre" (purity of blood) and its ramifications not only in Peru but throughout Latin America. The film engages these links between fluids and racial categories that are also complexly gendered via corporeal processes that involve milk, blood, and semen, and their presumed capacities to pollute and purify.
14. *City of God* (2002), dir. Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund.
15. The themes of the transmission of trauma via maternal milk and a potato's protective effects (to be discussed shortly), have led critics to challenge Llosa's representation of the Andean world and its political and cultural ramifications. Several commentators also foreground and contest the film's representation of trauma. See, e.g., Vich (2014). Likewise centering trauma, Rueda (2015) and Rojas (2017), by contrast, defend the significance of the milk of sorrow by reference to medical anthropologist Kimberly Theidon's book *Entre prójimos: El conflicto armado interno y la política de la reconciliación en el Perú* (2004), on which the film is partly based.
16. Drawing on Theidon, Rueda (2015, pp. 454–55) ascribes a double meaning to "la teta asustada" in Quechua: it refers both to the woman who feels the fear, who suffers enduring anxiety and melancholy, and to the transmission of the fear via breastmilk. In response to Llosa's critics, Rueda then defends the film's uptake of traumatized consciousness and its representation of an "ontological terror" passed on through maternal milk (p. 460) by coupling these strategies with a Benjaminian deployment of phantasmagoria and dialectical images and commending the communication of the testimony of assaulted women to a broad public, both global and Latin American.
17. Simultaneously, in an incisive reading of the song's shifting tenses and apostrophic address to viewer and daughter, Rojas (2017, pp. 300–2) notes that the mother's singing distances the trauma. For Rojas, the singing establishes a "coherent narrative" of trauma (p. 301), thus revealing a resilience and embodying *sami*, which, in Quechua, signifies "a nourishing spirit and the energy of life," which are also transmitted to Fausta (p. 305). Continuing Vich's (2014) and Rueda's (2015) emphasis on trauma, Rojas argues then that the film traces a process of recovery that exemplifies resilience and (post)memory.
18. The painting would appear to be a copy or version of Mateo Pérez de Alesio's *Virgen de la Leche*, Lima, from the early 1600s.
19. Semen, blood, and milk meet in this overlay of images, situating the film emphatically in the turbulent encounters among these elemental substances.

20. The idea of a distorted modernity holds that Western epistemology and society stand for modernity, while other frames of thought and social organization fall short of that, a persuasion contested by decolonial and critical race theory. The film considers its aesthetic dimensions.
21. The neoliberal market, clearly, has a heavy hand in the violent history whose aftermath the film explores. Furthermore, setting off Máxima against Aída, Llosa emphasizes the temporal frictions marking the latter character, who is both an effective present-day economic operator and an inheritor of a colonial tradition, a point that we will return to later and that the interior of her house has already foreshadowed.
22. Franco (1992, p. 73) critically conceives of magical realism as a marketing category. Shaw (2018, pp. 93–94) reads the figure of the potato as a problematic, othering form of magical realism. However, this reading bypasses the aesthetic complexities of Llosa's treatment of Fausta and the potato, as we will indicate.
23. On the biopolitical regulation of life and death, see Foucault (1978). The uncle's pained and fragmentary interlopings between the different biomedical/aesthetic systems point to the epistemic, affective, and aesthetic labor involved in the encounters between these systems and signals gaps in readings in terms of transculturation. For example, Ortiz's idea that "when cultures encounter each other, each of the parties invariably exerts a strong influence on the other(s)" (Ortiz 1995, p. 100) fails to capture the specificities of the interactions here.
24. In its ambiguity, the poster foregrounds the issues Deborah Shaw (2018) raises in her discussion of the film in the context of debates about the European funding for Latin American women's filmmaking. Shaw faults the film for an exoticized representation of Fausta that diminishes her agency. However, a detailed analysis of the film's aesthetic dimensions, as we argue, points to a different assessment.
25. In their now classic study, *How to Read Donald Duck* (*Para leer al pato Donald*, 1971), Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart frame popular culture as the vehicle for strengthening American corporate interests and promoting Hollywood cultural imperialism throughout Latin America. Llosa stages the "Ugly Duckling" episode from a different perspective. By emphasizing the story's slipperiness and strangeness, she frees up its disruptive potential.
26. With what the viewer is invited to actually see as Fausta's gift to Aída, the film counters limitations that colonial constructions of the colonized arguably place on the capacity of the subaltern to give. See Maldonado-Torres (2007, pp. 258–61) for a discussion of the colonial foreclosure of the capacity for generosity on the part of the damné. Insisting on Fausta's aesthetic gift, the film counters an extractivist aesthetics with a specifically decolonial aesthetics. The aesthetic dimension is crucial to the film's figuration of coloniality and to the film's decolonial strategies.
27. Blocking shared joy, the film links the racially asymmetrical desirability of transculturation with the themes of cultural agency and pride, artistic recognition, and aesthetic futurity broached at the start of this essay (pp. 3–4).

28. Carolyn Wolfenzon (2022) offers a reading of Llosa's film in term of Rama's view of the lettered city, arguing, like the present essay, that it is the migrant living on the margins of the city who is creating Peru's future. However, her analysis sidesteps aesthetics and bypasses the fluidity of such key metaphors as the milk, potato, and ocean.
29. For a reading that is skeptical of Fausta's "trauma liberation," see Gastón Lillo (2011).
30. Adriana Rojas (2017) argues illuminatingly that Fausta honors her mother's memory by means of the songs, the potato and the pearls, while also participating in and sharing the life force "sami." However, she bypasses how Fausta needs to rewrite these metaphors if she is going "to breathe," that is, to create an alternative to her mother's narrative.
31. In a reading of the pearls and potato plant that emphasizes healing and resilience, Rojas (2017) sees Fausta, in the end, as now "free to be a healthy, beautiful pearl" (p. 310; see also p. 305) and the ultimate scene as suggesting "courtship and future marriage in the resilient community" (p. 312).
32. On the role of aesthetic threats and promises in constellations of race and gender and the aesthetic more generally, see Roelofs (2014). See also Ahmed (2010) on the gendered and racializing roles of various kinds of promises of happiness in films.
33. Roelofs (2014, p. 204). Saito (2017) underscores the world-making capabilities of everyday aesthetic existence. On the lived reality of coloniality and decolonization, see Maldonado-Torres (2007). On the centrality of the quotidian to decolonial feminisms, see Martín Alcoff (2020).
34. This sociality evolves in the course of the film in a manner that imbricates a conviviality among the living with a relation to death. For the longest time, Fausta's immediate family never expresses any sympathy at the death of her mother. She has a tense relationship with her uncle, her mother's brother, throughout the period the corpse is in the house. And yet, at the end, he transports the corpse along with other family members in a show of support and compassion, underscoring their mortality.
35. On an ethically grounded aesthetics of care that is also an aesthetically guided care ethics, see Saito (2022). Saito accords a significant role to the imagination in this kind of care (pp. 35–37, 40–45), which, she argues, can also involve the joining of an imaginary community of people who care or of those who share in a common humanity (pp. 158–59).
36. Probing further where Lugones (2003, 2010) and Mignolo (2007) leave off, the film notes an Afro-Peruvian presence through the figure of the black domestic worker and hints lightly at an Asian-Peruvian presence by way of the origami cranes. We see how the upper classes deploy a biopolitics that pits the Afro-Peruvians against the indigenous, asking them to do the dirty work. The song "La Negra, La China, La Chola, La Rubia" (The black, the Asian, the rural indigenous, the blonde), by Luis Javier Amorrorto and Gustavo Aranibar, played while the uncle is comforting Fausta after she has fainted during the communal wedding festivities and continuing while she is waiting in a long line of women in the hospital, points to the interrelations between these racial stratifications.

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