

**THE DECOLONIAL EMPATHY OF TWO MAYA
DOCUMENTARIES SHOWN AT THE XIII CLACPI FILM
FESTIVAL – FICMAYAB’**

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I analyze two short documentaries *Kat at Kat'ex?* (2017) and *Sepur Zarco: la vida después de la sentencia* (2018), both directed by the Maya-K'iche-Kaqchikel media maker from Guatemala, Eduardo Say, and shown at the XIII CLACPI Film Festival-FicMayab'. Both movies feature Mayan witnesses to and survivors of the violence of the civil war in Guatemala. They share their stories of loss and pain with the diverse audiences convened by the festival. I argue that these movies, in referring to the past, constitute platforms in which these witnesses enact forms of reproduction of life through embodied social practices and acts of care that, in turn, portray them as agents of the reconstitution of their own present. I contend that these movies extend an invitation to the Western(ized) viewer to relate to the Maya testimonios of pain and realities, both within the films' frame and outside of it. I use the term "decolonial empathy" to refer to this invitation that considers the Maya peoples' self-determination in the face of state violence and its legacies.

SUMILLA: En este artículo, analizo dos cortos documentales: *Kat at Kat'ex?* (2017) and *Sepur Zarco: la vida después de la sentencia* (2017), ambos dirigidos por el comunicador Maya-K'iche-Kaqchikel de Guatemala, Eduardo Say, y presentados en el XIII Festival de Cine de CLACPI - FicMayab'. Estos documentales presentan testimoniante y sobrevivientes mayas de la guerra civil en Guatemala, quienes comparten historias de dolor y pérdida con la diversa audiencia del festival. Sostengo que estas películas, al referirse al pasado, recrean formas de reproducción de la vida a través de prácticas sociales corporalizadas y actos de cuidado, mostrando a estos personajes como agentes de reconstrucción de su propio presente. Estas acciones, llevadas a cabo por los personajes de estos filmes, cumplen con presentarlos como agentes de reconstitución de su presente. Considerando estos contextos, argumento que estas películas formulan una invitación a los espectadores occidentalizados para que se relacionen con los testimonios y realidades mayas formuladas

tanto desde dentro como fuera de pantalla. A esta invitación que considera esta autodeterminación frente a la violencia estatal y sus legados la denomino “empatía decolonial.”

Keywords: decolonial empathy, Maya documentary, FicMayab’, civil war, Guatemala, CLACPI

Introduction

The XIII Festival Internacional de Cine y Comunicación de los Pueblos Indígenas/Originarios (International Festival of Indigenous People’s Film and Communication), convened by the umbrella organization Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Cine y Comunicación de los Pueblos Indígenas (CLACPI; The Latin American Coordinator of Indigenous People’s Film and Communication), took place in October 2018 in Guatemala. This region is also known among Maya people as “Iximulew”¹. The Red Tz’ikin (or Tz’ikin Network), a collective of *mestizo* and Maya mediamakers, served as the local organizing committee. The committee named the festival ‘FicMayab’ following the decision of the CLACPI assembly that “established that the venues of the festivals should respond to Indigenous peoples and nationalities, and not to states” (Comité organizador, 2017). In this name “Fic’s” stands for Indigenous Film Festival (Festival Indígena de Cine, in Spanish),” while “Mayab” refers to the greater Maya territory which stretches from the region currently known as Nicaragua to the southeast of the region now called Mexico” (Comité organizador, 2017). The word “Mayab” in the name, constantly reiterated in the public addresses of Red Tz’ikin’s spokespersons, invited international and local attendees to relate to a sense of the territory that would go beyond national borders and the institutional control of public spaces, enabling political criticism against the current right-wing government of Guatemala. This sensing of the territory was fostered by the intersection of art and politics where forums on social issues, artistic interventions, and screenings of Maya films followed by Q&A sessions, focused on Maya perspectives, knowledge, and history. Accordingly, activist Andrea Ixchíu, a Maya-K’iche mediamaker and member of the Red Tz’ikin, made a call inviting international and local audiences to learn not only about the Maya history of oppression and resistance, but

1 *Iximulew* means “the land of corn” (Velásquez Nimatuj, 2014).

also about “how we, the Indigenous peoples of Guatemala, live” and have been living for long time. She stated, “we trust that art and culture can lead people to get to know the daily life of Maya peoples that they [non-Maya] don’t normally know or visit. We seek to broaden peoples’ minds, to break with stereotypes, and break with the cycle of violence” (October 2, 2018)².

This article engages with this invitation to experience, see, and listen to how Maya people live, an invitation given to a diverse audience in the context of FicMayab’. I analyze the political meanings of this invitation by examining two independent short documentaries that were shown at the festival. How do the cinematic portrayals in these documentaries speak to the long-term memory of struggle lived by the Native peoples of Iximulew? How do these films speak out against and beyond a historical misrepresentation of the “indigenous other” as a figure of unattainable citizenship and/or of humanity? In which ways do these films instead draw from Maya process-centered modes of living? How do these films then invite us to understand the grief, pain and losses that they speak to? What are the political and ethical implications of this invitation?

Kat at Kat’ex? (Where are they?) was released in 2017 and directed by Maya-K’iche-Kaqchikel Eduardo Say, and produced by the Maya-Ixil mediamaker Heidy Bacá.³ Both are members of the Colectivo Cine en la Calle (Cinema on Street Collective, CCC), and were also close collaborators of the organizing committee during the festival. *Sepur Zarco: La vida después de la sentencia* (Sepur Zarco: Life after the Sentence) was released that same year and also directed by Say. These films feature Maya subjects from Ixil and Q’eqchi’ communities, some of the Maya peoples most affected by the civil war. As portrayed in these movies, these characters are witnesses who share their stories about the disappearance of their relatives at the hands of the military. In addition, these movies denounce how the

2 Although the FicMayab’ convened indigenous films from many territories, including from Turtle Island for the first time in CLACPI film festivals, my study will delve into Maya films, and the connection between them and the territory of the Mayab’ where the festival took place.

3 There are 21 different Maya ethnicities in Guatemala, among which are Q’eqchi’, Kakchiquel, Mam, Ixil, K’iche, etc.

state has ignored their demands for economic and social justice. As a response to the damage and dismissal of their ways of living, the documentary genre of both films conjoins past and present, exposing the ongoing violence that affects Maya people along with the ways in which they make life persist. In so doing, these films put forward scenarios of communal reproduction of ways of living by which the witnesses/characters distribute their pain among society, articulating their criticism while they are shown in concrete, reciprocal daily activities of “communal reproduction.”

By “communal reproduction,” I follow the definition proposed by Maya K’iche sociologist, Gladys Tzul Tzul (2016) who characterizes it as non-capitalist quotidian forms of labor, such as preparing meals, educating children, organizing for and participating in the *k’ax k’ol* (the communal land work) and the festivities through which life is reproduced and celebrated. I contend that these audiovisual scenarios of interpersonal storytelling constitute an invitation to experience how Maya people live. I consider this invitation as a political, ethical, and emotional call made to the viewers to dismantle subjective and social patterns of coloniality ingrained in their society (Maldonado-Torres, 2016) and that affect the ways they see and listen the “indigenous other.” I use the term “decolonial empathy” to refer to this call, rather than a state of mind, by which viewers allow themselves to unsettle colonial structures and imaginaries through which their society has perceived Native peoples for so long. This colonial imaginary sees Maya people as less than humans, as folkloric subjects without rights, or, as “bodies without land, people without resources (...) without the capacity for autonomy and self-determination,” or as pertains to my argument here, as irredeemable victims that are so materially and psychologically impoverished that they are unable to give (Maldonado-Torres, 2016). When understood as a rejection of this colonial imaginary, the act of giving in the contexts of these films become a political action that resonates with other actions taken in the social sphere by Maya activists against the colonial/modern patterns of dehumanization that continuously affect them. This act of giving, then, more than a response, is an expression of a political order that does not align to a mainstream organization of power that determines who can speak and be heard on the basis of gendered and racial hierarchies that privilege the perspective of settler and mestizo

modern subjects. Instead, these Maya movies formulate a micro-politics via “everyday acts of resurgence” (Simpson, 2017, p. 236) that refer to the social, cultural, and ethical commitments of the Maya filmmakers and the characters-witnesses as they are the ones that have no part in the distribution of power (Rancière, 1999).

I follow on Freya Schiwy’s most recent work about activist media in Mexico (2019) in that I also consider the films I study here as activist films that are related to struggles for autonomy. This means that these films do the cultural work of self-defining and signifying cultural and political sovereignty itself (7-8), as other scholars in the field of indigenous media have argued (Cordova, 2014, p.123; Ginzburg, 1994).⁴ My work builds on Schiwy’s view by focusing on how the invitation of Maya mediamakers/ activists requires viewers to face uncomfortable feelings and discourses that come up in the process of dismantling entrenched colonial patterns and engaging in acts of radical solidarity. Following that line, I engage with the concept of “politics of grief” proposed by Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017). With this term, Simpson refers to the mainstream political strategy of perpetuating structural injustice by focusing on the individual trauma rather than the “collective, community, or nation-based losses” (p. 239). I use Simpson’s take on Kanyen’kehà:ka (Mohawk) and the Nishnaaber peoples of Turtle Island to refer to the radical indigenous imaginaries and desires that are embedded in these Mayan films counteract these politics. I also utilise the work of feminist Sarah Ahmed to further challenge the divide between emotion and reason ingrained in the Westernized comprehension of “politics.” In examining the counteracting of the “politics of grief” enacted by the representations in these films, I hope to shed critical light on the “humanitarian compassion” that informs how we (mestizo and settler people) feel and express empathy. I also

4 For debates about the designation “indigenous media,” see Salazar and Córdoba’s article “Imperfect Media and the Poetics of Indigenous Video in Latin America” published in 2008 in *Global Indigenous Media: Cultures, Poetics*, edited by P. Wilson and M. Stewart. See more recently Schiwy, Córdoba, Wood and Legrás’ book chapter “New Frameworks. Collaborative and Indigenous Media Activism” in *The Routledge Companion to Latin American Cinema*, edited by M. D’Lugo, Ana M. López, L. Podalsky.

hope that this study contributes to a further exploration of the diversified forms of struggle through which Maya films, or other indigenous films made by other Native peoples of Abya Yala, put forward a set of conditions for how settler people and others benefitting from settler colonialism could relate to indigenous lives and their claims for justice. Following on the work of curator and critic Amalia Córdova (2014), and visual anthropologist Faye Ginsburg (1994), my study may also contribute to understanding how activist films construct emancipatory imaginaries in and through the social sphere in which their representations are embedded.

In the pages that follow, I situate these films in the historical context of the civil war in Guatemala and its aftermath to which these films respond. My analysis considers how the *mise en scène* in these films gives shape to a call for a decolonial empathy by concrete acts of listening and seeing that are refashioned according to Maya process-centered modes of living and claims for justice. Although my study mostly focuses on how filmic representation delivers this invitation, I return to the FicMayab' in the last part of the article to reflect on audiences' responses to the festival. Although most of the audience responses from which I quote in that final section don't pertain to the two documentaries previously analyzed, they do shed light on the impact that the films directed by Maya filmmakers and about Maya stories have made on a diverse public in Guatemala. This section allows me to reflect on how "decolonial empathy" involves the need for dismantling the assimilationist and dehumanizing educational system in Guatemala as both of these films and the FicMayab' center Maya pedagogies and an epistemology that challenges Westernized ways of producing knowledge and emotions about "indigenous others".

This article draws from my experience as a guest of the FicMayab', which I attended to present a documentary on behalf of a personal friend who could not travel to Guatemala. For the two weeks (from October 2-17) of the festival's duration, I was part of the local/international delegation of mediamakers, activists, and collaborators CLACPI and non-CLACPI affiliated, that traveled to Guatemala City, Quetzaltenango, Totonicapán, Cobán, and Chisec, where screenings, political forums, dance, music, theater, and ceremonies took place in plazas, parks, theaters, universities, public markets, and rural communities.

As I unexpectedly participated in other activities and events (panels and press interviews to promote the festival) upon the organizers' request, I took these opportunities to keep learning how to listen and respond actively in a space managed by Maya people themselves. My ongoing learning experience was enriched by these conversations, the artistic and spiritual activities, and the travels, all of which enabled me to notice and sense everywhere we went not the oppression, but the organizing, the communities, the joy, and the dignity of the peoples of Iximulew.

Making films featuring Maya witnesses in the aftermath of the civil war

The context that the movies address is the aftermath of the civil war that took place between 1960 and 1996 in Guatemala and pitted the state and paramilitary against guerrilla forces. Upon examining the toll of the war in 1999, the Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH, Commission for Historical Clarification) concluded that 200,000 people were killed, 45,000 had been disappeared, and more than one million had been internally displaced or forced to migrate outside the country. The CEH (1999) also stated that 83% of all war crimes had been committed were against the Maya people, which constituted between 40-60% of the country's population. The Commission also established that the state had perpetrated 93% of those crimes, which included acts of genocide perpetrated within the counterinsurgent operations undertaken between 1981-1983⁵. The commission concluded that racism against the Maya people was the deeply rooted historical cause that had facilitated the genocidal acts committed by the military in order to exterminate what they considered to be an "internal enemy" (Rodríguez Maeso, 2010, p.43). According to the CEH (1999), this racist mindset is linked to a colonial imaginary that sees the Maya as an ancestral antagonist who, at any time, could come down from the mountains to take revenge against the white settlers and the ladinos for all the experiences and the damages inflicted upon them since colonial times.

⁵ Following international protocols, the CEH (1999) classified as "genocide" those acts that aim to destroy totally or partially a national, ethnic, or religious group through diverse tactics that are not limited to killings, as they include methods that inflict physical and mental damage, subjection to impossible living conditions, and crimes against humanity, including sexual violence.

The path for justice opened up in the past decade is a testament to the tireless work of Maya grassroots movements and human rights organizations who managed to bring to trial military leaders for some of the most infamous crimes committed during the internal conflict. During these trials, Maya-Ixil and Q'eqchi' women's testimonios provided the basis for "judicial truth" through which they accused state agents of having committed crimes against humanity in the form of enslavement and sexual violence (Velásquez Nimatuj, 2014). In this context, Eduardo Say and Heidy Bacá represent a generation of Maya youth who did not have a first-hand experience of the violence of the war. Nonetheless, through film, they have taken up the task to engage with their communities' claims for justice and with their struggles against longstanding structural violence that continue to pave the path for an endless war against their people across generations. Say and Bacá resort to the methods of low-budget independent filmmaking through the grassroots nature of their work. In centering Maya people's testimonios in their films, they build on actions taken on legal grounds to bring Maya voices and claims to public, non-institutionalized spaces.

***Kat at Kat'ex?* (2017)**

The documentary *Kat at Kat'ex?* (Where are they?) arose from an Ixil community's decision to have the CCC make films that addressed the memory of those who were disappeared in the war. The 2017 release *Kat at Kat'ex?* was directed by Say and produced by Bacá. The project received the support of the non-profit Asociación Dónde Están Los Niños (ADEN), whose name asks "Where Are the Children of Guatemala?" Through their work with ADEN, Say and Bacá met the characters for their movie, Pedro Marcos and Catarina Sambrano. Bacá (2019) explained that working with grassroots initiatives like ADEN is part of the process that the CCC had established when working with victims of the civil war.

Nebaj is the place in which these stories are located. Pedro is the father of a child that was disappeared by the military. Catarina is a daughter who was torn from her family, but who was able to reunite with her sister 35 years after the separation. In their mother tongue of Ixil, Pedro and Catarina each separately recount their stories to us. At the beginning of the film, we see Pedro leaving his house to begin his day's activities. We see him

walking through the town to a barber where he gets a haircut. At that moment, an inter title emerges on the screen stating that “around 45 thousand people disappeared as a result of the armed conflict in Guatemala. Among them, five thousand children” (Bacá, 2017, my translation)⁶.

After getting his haircut and coming back to his house, we see Pedro walking to his farm with a sack of feed for his cows. The image of Pedro walking through that space accompanies the story that we hear him recount in voiceover about how his family had to flee towards the mountains after the army entered the community. While on the screen we see a calm atmosphere characteristic of a farmworker’s activity in the field, Pedro’s voiceover tells us how the army took his wife, how the soldiers discovered the place where he was hiding with his son, and how his son agreed to be taken by the soldiers so they would not kill his father. At this point, the role of Pedro’s voiceover is to guide the viewer through the horrors of his past in what feels like a cross-rhythm to what the viewers are witnessing visually, the images of Pedro’s current life activities. Here, this apparent disconnection between the auditory and visual discourses corresponding to the past and present respectively begs the question of how to understand the dynamic between the voice and the image in which these discourses operate.

According to philosopher Jacques Rancière (2008), it is the power of the word, and not the predominance of the image, that organizes how we interpret the visible. It is therefore through the word that the process of interpreting what we see and how we see it operates upon the viewers. However, in Pedro’s story, the words about the past—i.e. the testimonio—coexist with other audio and visual elements that generate meanings, even though they are not articulated through spoken or recognizable words. These meanings operate through what we see on screen and supplement Pedro’s oral testimonio, without disregarding the character/witness’s authority over his account. The analysis of the following scene will clarify my point and delve into what meanings about the present, not only in the image, but also through noise provided by background music, adds to the comprehension of Pedro’s testimonio.

⁶ Both films have Spanish subtitles. All translations to English of selected quotes from these films are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

While Pedro's voiceover shares with the viewers his tireless search for his son, the camera shows him digging the land as part of the work of planting. Here, the interaction between past and present is expressed through Pedro's body and his labor. At this point Pedro becomes an embodied archive of his own narration, as the past events he narrates not only involve the disappeared body of the son, but also the performance of his living body as a father looking for his son. The work of interpretation, consisting in relating to the father's pain for the loss of the son, requires the viewers to acknowledge that a complete connection to what is being represented to them may not be fully achievable. The effect of the soundtrack towards the end of that scene of digging echoes this idea.

The soundtrack is a fragment of a 1971 composition by Guatemalan musician Joaquín Orellana called *Humanofonía* (Humanophony). The piece is made of soundbites of screams and sobs combined with ambient sounds and the sound of a marimba (Del Farra, 2005)⁷. According to Graciela Paraskevaídis (2008), Orellana's electro-acoustic composition is a testimonial work that represents the daily institutionalized violence experienced during the war. This piece is heard overlapping with Pedro's voiceover narration in the digging scene, and it progressively takes over the final seconds of the scene until we can only hear its disturbing screams and laments. The noises that capture our senses at this moment symbolize the exteriorization of the pain in a form that points to the limitations of language to effectively represent it. In this case, the sound-distorted laments and screams don't simply hand the pain over in a way that lends itself to the development of an easy, familiar feeling. Instead, these noises build an uncanny moment that creates a distance, which precludes the expected compassionate inclination that can lead spectators to develop a familiar and benevolent impulse as well as a feeling of accomplishment having that impulse.

It is with these disturbing sounds as background that Pedro stands up breathless after digging, and looks at the spectator with his shovel at hand. The moment indicates a completion of Pedro's task of opening his wound to the spectators so that, following Sarah Ahmed (2004), they can "learn how to hear

⁷ The marimba is a musical instrument of African origin played in Guatemala and other parts of Latin America.

what is impossible to hear” (p. 33). This means that such an impossible hearing only becomes possible if we respond to a pain that we cannot claim as our own. According to Ahmed (2004), “if I acted on her [the person in pain] behalf only insofar as I knew how she felt, then I would act only insofar as I would appropriate her pain as my pain, that is, appropriate that which I cannot feel” (p. 31). If empathy is the action taken under the assumption that we understand how the other feels and that, consequently, we are perfectly able to relieve that pain, the act of digging proposes a form of empathizing that shies away from the comfortable appropriation of the pain as a condition for some kind of action.

Furthermore, Pedro is not a self-commiserating victim that asks for help based on a deeply entrenched relationship with his past, a fetishization of his wound for others to connect to and act from. The movie shows a witness that has worked on his pain and that lives his present (as the depicted daily activities show) with a sense of justice from which his testimonio emerges. His standing breathless facing the camera can be seen as the expectation for a response from the viewer according to his position as an already empowered person. Accordingly, the viewer sees Pedro from a place of respect. The camera angle positions the viewer on a lower level than Pedro directing our gaze up to him from below. This dignifies Pedro as well as his activity as a rural worker/father. In considering his place of dignity and agency, the viewers can become fair recipients of his testimonio instead of being patronizing outsiders motivated by a dehumanizing “charity” that, in turn, fetishizes the wound.

Catarina is the other witness who tells her story in this documentary. Like Pedro’s story, here the narration techniques also connect the past and the present. However, unlike Pedro, Catarina was able to reunite with a family member, her sister. The film introduces us to Catarina’s story through close shots that shows details of her house. We see Catarina sitting in her house on a low stone close to the ground from the viewpoint of the moving camera that crosses her doorway at the same level at which she is sitting. We see her dressed in her *huipil* and her *corte*⁸, and surrounded by pots and kitchen tools.

⁸ Both *huipil* (blouse) and *corte* (skirt) are part of women’s traditional Maya dress.

Different from the field where Pedro stages his testimonio, here we have the intimate space of the house managed by a Maya woman, where cultural practices and caregiving are put on display through the relation between the mother (Catarina herself) and her daughter. While the images tell the story of this present, we hear Catarina's voiceover telling us how the soldiers took her from her community and burned her family's house down, and how a woman later found her and raised her. She goes on to talk about the disintegration of communal and domestic spaces, and the rupture of family relationships while, visually, we sense the opposite. Catarina's child appears in the foreground as Catarina is shown doing chores such as cleaning her house and threshing corn. Like the scene of Pedro digging the land, Catarina's engagement with the care of her house also represents how the witness works (or has worked) over her memory. While threshing the corn, Catarina tells us in voiceover how she learned about the death of her parents and how she reunited with her sister.

Known as the ancient food of the Maya people, corn symbolizes spirituality and cultural memory. As matter, it implies also the generation of meals and the reproduction of life through an embodied praxis. In that sense, in both stories, memory constitutes a knowledge that is expressed through concrete practices and materials such as the threshing and preparing of corn, rural labor, both Catarina's and Pedro's Maya clothing, and the Ixil language in which they speak to us. In turn, despite their losses, these embodied and audiovisual testimonios refer to how the characters are reconstituting their present life instead of showing them as witnesses through whose stories the viewer can simply assess the violence and destruction of the war. The film uses scenes of daily labor that ensure the persistence of life as a stage where the testimonios can unfold. This underscores the autonomy of the witnesses' bodies and discourses, which is also the base from which they stand up for their dear ones.

Unlike the camera's relative distance in the scene where Pedro works, the scene of Catarina threshing the corn is narrated with close-up and medium shot frames. Just as in the scene of Pedro digging, the medium shots of Catarina are filmed from a low angle looking up at her, suggesting her dignity and the dignity of her labor. The close-up shots situate the work

in the intimate space of the body and in the cultural practice centered on the corn that appears in the foreground. Instead of isolating Catarina and her individual actions, as the use of the close up may suggest, the voiceover through which Catarina shares her testimonio is coupled with the image of her engaged in the cultural and social practice of preparing the corn. In this way, the scene proposes an opening. Her words de-individualize her experience as she relates it to other cases like hers, like Pedro's story. She points out, "many people went through this. Sometimes we say that children and babies who disappeared, older people too, are already dead, but it may not be true, and they are alive . . . Now there is help to find them" (Bacá, 2017). Solidarity between the Maya characters develops through this sense of hope, as well as between Catarina and other Maya people off-screen who have also lost their relatives.

The last shots of Catarina's testimonio show the result of her labor and, materially, pose the testimonio as an experience of sharing. We see close-ups of the threshed corn in a big bucket while the credits run over the screen. As with the scene of digging, here the threshed corn operates as evidence of Catarina's labor of care made concrete by her testimonio towards others who also lost their families, and also of the act of love for her children and herself who will all benefit from the food. In both stories, the embodied labor of threshing the corn and digging the hole constitute bodily acts of care that supplements the act of narrating the past in voiceover. In conjoining the past of the violence with a reconstitution of present autonomy, the elements of this *mise en scène* poses, following Rancière, a redistribution of the sensible. According to Rancière (2004), the "distribution of the sensible" is a "system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it" (p. 12). The distribution of the sensible therefore implies an organization of power that defines, first, who can decide what is there to be shared and, second, in what ways individuals can gain access to that distribution according to the social roles assigned to them. It is according to this "distribution of the sensible" forged in the name of modern politics in Guatemala that Maya people's ways of being and living are marginalized and made invisible. It is according to this frame that Maya people are perceived as the governed ones, oppressed ones unable of self-

determination or as obstacles to development. Instead, this film posits a redistribution of the sensed experience that is in itself a Maya act of (re)constitution of the social order.

Furthermore, in putting these two characters side by side, their testimonios propose a distribution of the sensible based on Ixil women's and men's spheres of labor that are placed in contiguity. In that way, this movie structurally frames its narration according to the daily forms of organization of labor in Maya communities. These stories offered from the perspective of the Maya people are therefore not framed from external discourses that decodify economic and social inequalities such as class conflicts. Instead, the film aims to contextualize the Maya subjects from their own social and cultural frames, from which social and individual desires for transformation are expressed to incite action. In addressing non-Maya Westernized viewers, the task continues to be to elicit a reaction to these embodied acts of self-determination. By focusing on these acts, the testimonios demand a recognition of the Maya subjects as agents whose voice, desires, emotions, and criticism constitute ways of asserting life, countering the violence inflicted upon them and the distribution of the sensible that obscures these actions from being seen.

Sepur Zarco: La vida después de la sentencia (2017)

The next film features Sepur Zarco, another town that was ferociously affected by the violence of the war. Unlike *Kat at Kat'ex?*, Say was commissioned to make this film as part of a newspaper's investigative report. It was made with the consent of the women of Sepur Zarco who were seeking once again to make their situation visible to the public, after the media gave wide coverage to the trial in which by providing their testimonios, they won a court case against their perpetrators.

In 1982, the Guatemalan military forces built a camp in Sepur Zarco, located in the Izabal department, in compliance with the wealthy landowning families who wanted to maintain control of their lands in the face of the rural workers' struggle to become the legal owners of these lands. The rural workers employed at the haciendas were paid very little and because of this labor injustice, they claimed a right to the land on which they had been born, had built their houses, formed families, and had formulated their desires and aspirations (Velásquez

Nimatuj, 2016). According to Irma Velásquez Nimatuj (2016), landowners saw in the armed conflict the perfect justification for murdering families and preserving their ownership of the land. After the soldiers killed the men and burned their animals and their houses, they raped the Q'eqchi' women who had demanded to know where their disappeared husbands were. For a period of six years, these women were detained and subjected to slave labor and sexual slavery, and were also obligated to wash clothes and prepare food for their rapists.

This three-minute documentary addresses the aftermath of the 2016 trial that pitted fifteen Maya-Q'eqchi' women from the community of Sepur Zarco against two state agents who were responsible for the slavery and sexual violence perpetrated against them. The accused were found guilty and sentenced respectively to 240 and 120 years in prison. As part of the sentencing, the court ordered the state to comply with the following demands, formulated by the women themselves for their own reparation and to benefit their community of Sepur Zarco: 1) that a secondary school be built 2) that a healthcare facility be built where the women survivors could obtain treatment for the many physical ailments and mental health problems (which are often permanent) that ensued from the abuse, and 3) the resolution of the land disputes initiated by the Q'eqchi' women's husbands who were killed during the military occupation. This short documentary tells of how the demands of the Maya-Q'eqchi' women are still unmet.

The short film was launched online in 2017 as part of a journalistic investigation conducted by *Plaza Pública*, a trans-media news portal that advocates for social justice and the defense of human rights in Guatemala. That same year, the movie was screened in Guatemala City and Totonicapán during the FicMayab'. Compared to the previously analyzed film, *Sepur Zarco: La vida después de la sentencia* is a more of a free-style documentary in which we have the voiceover of two women from Sepur Zarco. Features such as the predominant use of detailed shots, some of which are out of focus, and the contrast between light and shadows that the director used to protect the identity of the witnesses, create an atmosphere that could be perceived as one of poverty and uncertainty. Yet, the discourse of the women of Sepur Zarco puts forward their desire to transform their situation, foreclosing the possibility that the spectators

might develop a voyeuristic perspective that naturalizes those initial perceptions.

At the beginning of the film, while one of the voiceovers says “we hoped they would give us what we asked for, what we had agreed on. But there is nothing” (Plaza Pública, 2017), the camera travels along a road that goes into the village. The reality that we visually appreciate in these first seconds is countered by the desires of women that speak of the changes they want to see. One of them says: “What we want now are agrarian solutions because I do not have anything . . . Of course I am in a community and there are lands. I do not have a husband and therefore I could not obtain land” (Plaza Pública, 2017). At another point the other voiceover states, “We want to see them [the concrete demands] fulfilled to be able to build a future for our children. We want our children to study. I want that for my children. That they study and have no need to leave, that’s what we asked the institution. They should listen to us, we have rights” (Plaza Pública, 2017).

What does it mean to approach the community of Sepur Zarco through the demands of women who had experienced the dispossession of their bodies and land? Feminist scholar María Lugones (2008) points to the need to look beyond the visible scars that attest to be the violent colonial domination exercised against indigenous bodies and their political orders. To that end, Lugones (2008) advocates for an understanding of the scope of the colonial/modern violence against these women by considering how that violence has wounded the indigenous organization of life. This understanding connects to the central aspect of the Maya women’s work for the reproduction of life, which situates their labor in the non-capitalist or non-remunerated realm of care, as Gladys Tzul Tzul (2016) contends. According to the report of anthropologist Rita Segato (Sentencia, 2016), that was cited in the trial, upon being subjected to domestic slavery, the Q’eqchi’ women lost access to their own bodies, their own care, and process of healing, as well as the labor, and the resources that they would have otherwise channeled to their children and community. The labor of care that the war meant to interrupt includes the reproduction of the family, the upbringing of the children, food preparation, house and resource management, and use of water sources, among other activities (Tzul Tzul, 2016).

As the violence imposed upon women damaged not only their individual bodies and minds, but also the communal body rooted in the reciprocal relation based on the role of men's and women's productive and reproductive labor, the film shows that, accordingly, the women's demands involve not only a claim for justice for themselves but also the desire to reconstitute life through land inheritance for their children. The women's demand for access to land should not be understood as a claim for rights as defined by capitalist logics of individualism and private ownership that would turn these women into small landowners (Tzul Tzul, 2016). Instead, the films give voice to a desire to make life sustainable as a community and, in that way, to accomplish the communal dream that had led the community to stand up to the landowners before the war.

Through these communal logics, the women denounce the inhumane conditions imposed by the Guatemalan state. The state's delay in responding to these demands is a form of biopolitics that consists in letting Maya people die in poverty, which reveals the hollowness of the state's "good" intention to recognize the 2016 sentence. The women's critique against the state, therefore, points to its incapacity to "listen" to them and, therefore, to recognize their rights ("They should listen to us, we have rights"). The women's statement points to the difference between the communal logics and the logic of the mainstream politics that picks its own interlocutors according to racial, gendered, epistemological, and linguistic hierarchies marginalizing Maya women from politics.

Regarding the state, another voiceover also points out "I hope that they concern themselves with what we ask them for, and that they take it into account. It was a written request and it was documented. Will they revise it? Will they feel our suffering? I do not believe they will. They live happily, not like us" (Plaza Pública, 2017). This comment defines the ability to listen as the capacity to "feel" the women's suffering. In the light of what I stated earlier regarding the non-appropriation of the pain, "to feel their suffering" constitutes an active reaction in the face of pain that does not depoliticize it. In other words, to feel their suffering means to respond with an action that is situated within the horizon of social and economic justice where the women's demands are located. "To feel their suffering" therefore consists in the ability of recognizing in that very suffering the

women's act of talking back/speaking out/calling out the state and the rich landowners. This comes from an overall attitude in which they express their desires of life and transformation.

In turn, this gesture would support a transformation of the colonial logics that measures the humanity and the "good judgement" of the other based on a paradigm of reason-civilization, which, according to Western Kantian and post-Kantian ethical traditions, detaches justice and reason from emotions. For Ahmed (2004), "such traditions . . . construct emotions as not only irrelevant to judgement and justice, but also as unreasonable, and as an obstacle to good judgement" (p. 195). It is according to these traditions, then, that the indigenous witnesses, like the women of Sepur Zarco, are positioned as pure or excessive emotional subjects who lack judgment or, if we also go to the extreme, as people without a soul or the capacity to feel. Either of these considerations locate the "indigenous other" outside the realm of reasoning, perceiving her/him as an unreliable person who is incapable of telling the truth.

The discourse of the women of Sepur Zarco deconstructs this opposition between reason and emotion. Like the previous film, this one also suggests a redistribution of the sensed according to a sense of community that is put forward by Maya women's political discourse and that is driven by pain and love. Just as in *Kat at Kat'ex?*, pain and love are a driving force in the political discourses of the Maya subjects in so far as these feelings contain within themselves—instead of being a less important precursor to—a criticism of the structural injustice that keeps the women and their community vulnerable (Coulthard, 2014, p. 22). By locating themselves in a position of moral authority, the women in the films enact their own "politics of grief" (Simpson, 2017, p. 239). In so doing, they inhabit the wishes, pain, care and love as ways of asserting life, repairing intimate social relations with their children, and they express their self-determination over their own bodies, their voices and land that the war had violated. By expressing these feelings (and the criticism voiced therein) the women re-appropriate the reproductive role that had once empowered them and acknowledge the violence that stripped—and continues to strip—that role away from them.

In showing that the subjects' pain does not function as a source or a raw material from which viewers can extract

and refine a critical consciousness that would substitute that pain, the movie mimics for the viewer the request the women of Sepur Zarco made to state: that they not separate the pain from the criticism of structural injustices and from the communal logics of life reproduction. In this way, as in the previous film, it requires that the viewer not fall into a paternalistic view that frames the indigenous victims as “the suffering other,” and that empathizes with them only from the position of “the helping self” that can only see their wounds and not the context that gave rise to them.

Towards a “decolonial empathy”

My purpose throughout the analysis of these films has been to delve into Ixchiu’s remark that the FicMayab’ provides an opportunity to showcase how Maya peoples live. In this article, I have argued that the witnesses’ works of memory and their commitment to the reproduction of life through acts of care and cultural practices, set the epistemological conditions from which viewers are invited to approach Maya people’s realities and demands for justice. In so doing, they are invited to enact a decolonial empathy based on the recognition of their voices and bodies calling out, speaking out, as they have always done, as well as shooting back (Ginsburg, 1994) through the artistic work of Maya youth. For these movies, the conditions for a decolonial empathy are set through a distribution of the sensed that centers on Maya authorship of film and testimonio and puts on display dynamics of distance and proximity that define what can be visible, told, and thought. *Kat at Kat’ex?* for example, embraces “noise” as a mechanism to stymie the viewers’ impulse to appropriate the witness’ pain. In “Sepur Zarco: la vida después de la sentencia,” in accordance with an ethical stance to not reveal the identity of the witnesses, Say’s camera does not let us see the full body of the subjects. To add to these examples, the translation from Q’eqchi and Ixil languages into Spanish captions offer us other moments of uncertainty where we have to wonder what the translation missed and what other meanings were added so that, we, Spanish speakers, can understand or, at least, have a degree of access to the discourse. Having said this, the translation and the above-mentioned moments coexist with the need of these films’ communities of origin that these stories reach wide audiences in order to raise awareness about the wrongs of the war.

As I mentioned earlier, *Kat at Kat'ex?* was made by the CCC to be shown in public spaces within Maya Ixil communities. With their work, the collective aims to generate community dialogues and contribute to general efforts in the quest for social justice. Admission to these public screenings are free, in opposition to the capitalist logics of commercial film circuits that center their programming on Hollywood blockbusters and profit from filmmaking. Upon Pedro's request, the film was screened on a tour outside the Ixil territory to audiences in non-Ixil rural and urban areas in the hopes of obtaining some information about his son. As part of this tour, the film was subtitled in Spanish and screened at the FicMayab' (H. Bacá, personal communication, January 24, 2019). In the case of *Sepur Zarco: La vida después de la sentencia*, Say accepted the commission of Plaza Pública due to his personal interest in contributing to the struggle of Sepur Zarco's women (E. Say, personal communication, February 4, 2019). As the trial ended some time ago, it was necessary to do a follow-up to see if things had changed. The film was made available online on the Plaza Pública web site and in accordance with the Q'eqchi women's desire to continue making their voices heard.

In keeping with the Maya mediamakers' commitment to disseminating the witnesses' stories and portraying the Maya subjects' fight for justice, the films also deliberately function as evidentiary tools in the service of legitimizing the witnesses' perspectives (Schiwy, 2009) and, in so doing, they counter the politics of oblivion about the war and the impunity of its perpetrators, most of whom are still in power. Instead of having an external, objective, omniscient voiceover that separates the narration from the subjects being filmed, as Schiwy (2009) has critically pointed out in regards to mainstream ethnographic film, these documentaries made by Maya people show the usual "objects" as "subjects" of a knowledge they deeply embody (p.145). For the Westernized viewers, this involvement challenges "detached" objectivity as a necessary and possible condition for the production of knowledge and action. Instead, they are invited to consider the embodied bonds of critique and affection that the Maya witnesses (and the filmmakers) invest in telling their witnesses' stories and in voicing through them, their demands that justice be made. At the same time, this does not mean that the images constitute an unmediated window to a fixed reality shown as such by the films' characters. The realities that these

movies portray are not definitive or conclusive. As they show their characters' hope for social change and justice, they house the bodies and political orders weaving the past in the present looking towards a desirable future (Simpson, 2017, p. 237).

Therefore, these films stage an exercise, or are expressions in and of themselves, of a lived self-determination, of an autonomous way of living and being that spectators must acknowledge so that their own act of receiving or learning, and consequently of experiencing radical empathy, can manifest. This, in turn, incites a decolonizing mode of relating to the realities of Maya people that refuses victimhood generated by modern political discourses of recognition (Simpson, 2017; Coulthard, 2014). This offering that seeks to construct a new political inter-subjectivity that resists material and more nuanced settler forms of appropriation and that enables action to emerge.

Final reflections: The Maya films and the FicMayab' as decolonial educational sites

In their circulation, these films function as educational tools that operate outside of institutional modes of knowledge production with their attendant principles of objectivity and academic expertise (Maldonado-Torres, 2016). Seen in this way, the movies not only facilitate the circulation of historical memory, but also support the revitalization of modes of knowledge based on orality and intergenerational teachings enacted outside of literary and assimilatory institutional education. In telling these stories from particular perspectives, these cultural expressions (the films and the festival) thus mobilize broader tools to achieve justice than merely the increased circulation of memory. In a similar fashion, the FicMayab' constituted a pedagogical setting that showcased memory and knowledge based on Maya voices and epistemologies.

The FicMayab' was an autonomous event that resulted from the work of solidarity between artists, intellectuals, and film collectives (including foreign ones that were also members of CLACPI), cultural centers, grassroots organizations, and international Basque and Catalan foundations that have long provided CLACPI with financial and institutional support. The festival was organized without institutional support from the government, because of the organizing committee's commitment to siding with indigenous struggles and, therefore, to opposing the corruption, repression, and persecution that Guatemalan

state institutions continuously exercised against Maya peoples and activists. Because of this position, the legal formalization of the Red Tz'ikin as an NGO, a requisite for it to be eligible for the funding that CLACPI allocated for the festival, was denied to the Red on many occasions, as was access to some public spaces for screenings or activities.

This independent political position formulated in alignment with indigenous struggles was reflected in the curation of programming held in public spaces through dances, ceremonies, and political forums which redefined the social experience of cinema. In the political forum “Mujeres indígenas y territorialidad en Mesoamérica” (Indigenous Women and Territoriality in Mesoamerica) which I attended and that followed the opening of the festival, one of the participants, Lorena López Mejía, a distinguished Maya-K'iche thinker and activist, pointed orally to the many physical, symbolic, and spiritual geographies or territories that constitute the Maya world. These geographies include the body that carries the soul, the heart, the energies, the emotions, knowledge, history, and memory; the womb of the mother; the nuclear and the extended family in which Maya people receive the teachings of the grandparents; mother earth and mother nature; the native peoples themselves, like the Maya, who have historical and ancestral roots, and who have existed from the earliest human memory. The FicMayab', as an event and in its name, embraced and honored these multiple connections that inhabit and differentiate the Maya territory. López Mejía's explanation illustrates the sharing and the teachings of the Maya epistemology that permeated the many instances and across the different media featured in the festival. As the FicMayab' served as a public platform to assert Maya epistemology not only for non-Maya people, but also for the ones who were born in the culture but could not embrace it, it did so implying that these teachings and epistemology have a life of their own beyond the setting of the FicMayab' ⁹.

9 It should be noted that the FicMayab' was part of a broader ecosystem of grassroots initiatives occur on an ongoing basis in Guatemala and that involve art and communitarian, popular, and non-institutional modes of education. This ecosystem also includes legal strategies, mobilizations, and other forms of more visible collective action. In the light of this ecosystem, we can reframe the scope of the FicMayab' and similar initiatives as not limited by economic and time constraints, but as expressions of perseverance and grassroots activism despite numerous obstacles.

Some could argue that it is unrealistic to think that minds and hearts can be transformed by only watching movies or attending activist festivals like this one. This is why post-screening conversations with filmmakers in festivals, as happened in the FicMayab', are crucial to approach that task. According to Dina Iordanova (2012), these interactions can "go beyond the film and address the issues that film is concerned with, as well as . . . influence the thinking of the audience" (p. 16)¹⁰. In a talkback session after a set of screenings, Maya and Guatemalan *mestizo* students expressed publicly their appreciation for the films on Maya people and the space of dialogue offered by the FicMayab'. One viewer stated, "these presentations serve to repair the social fabric that has been damaged because of the historical marginalization indigenous people have suffered" (my translation). Another audience member argued that teachers in urban schools had inculcated into young people the superiority of white and urban people over non-white and people born in the countryside. The screenings enabled him to become aware of how the educational system limited his knowledge about the Maya peoples. Another young self-identified Maya man suggested that institutional educations had repressed his Maya identity. As result of this, he could not speak in his mother tongue. Despite losing that cultural connection, he became aware of the historical issues and injustices that the Maya people endure. He stated, "I hope that young people in this audience take away in their minds and their hearts something of what we have watched today, because I don't think we are the only rational people who think. I say this because even the stones can listen" (my translation).

As sites of decolonial education, these films and the festival contribute to the formation of a decolonial attitude, by which a large audience is able to take up the task of committing themselves to the unfinished process of questioning social and internalized colonial legacies, and to define a course of action accordingly. The analysis of the films and the festival not only invited participants to unlearn the dehumanizing ideologies of

10 Although Say did not participate in a post-screening conversation, Bacá did so in a panel along with other filmmakers and human rights activists. The panel's title was "Aporte del Cine Documental a la Memoria Histórica de los Pueblos Indígenas / Originarios" (Contribution of Documentary Cinema to the Historical Memory of Indigenous/Native Peoples).

institutional education, but they also presented Maya cultures and politics as conditions for that transformation. They therefore forge a path towards a decolonial education. As teaching tools, these films show the felt experience and material aspects of people's cultures and struggles. They address a persistent need within Western academia to keep centering indigenous voices, creative work and scholarship, and to keep expanding the discussion so that it encompasses not only the colonial/modern patterns of marginalization that still affect indigenous peoples, but also their own ways to reconstitute communities through diverse forms of struggles.

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