

The stifling embrace of the colonial power: Otherness, in-betweenness, and conversion of life in the film *Embrace of the Serpent*

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Abstract

Embrace of the Serpent is a 2015 Colombian film directed by Ciro Guerra. In this paper, I present an analysis of the film through a postcolonial framework to answer an overarching question: How is the colonial power assimilated and contested? The answer addresses two intersecting dimensions. First, I examine the four main characters and their relationship with Homi Bhabha's notion of the "in-between" spaces produced by the articulation of differences between the colonizer and the colonized. I argue that each one of these characters represents a different degree or form of "in-betweenness." Second, I look at the consequences of colonialism through the presence of Catholic Missions and rubber plantations in the Amazon. I claim that the film frames religious and economic ideologies as acting together in constituting renewed bodies and territories through the destruction of different forms of being in the world. Overall, *Embrace of the Serpent* offers a polychromatic screen to analyze the intersection of conceptual frameworks that are central to address the questions that emerge from postcolonial scholarship.

Keywords: colonial power, otherness, in-between space, good living, cinematography

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El abrazo asfixiante del poder colonial: Otredad, tercer espacio y conversión de la vida en la película *El Abrazo de la Serpiente*

Resumen

El Abrazo de la Serpiente es una película del 2015 dirigida por Ciro Guerra. En este texto, presento un análisis de la película desde una perspectiva poscolonial para responder una pregunta central: ¿Cómo es asimilado y cuestionado el poder colonial? La respuesta incluye dos dimensiones interrelacionadas. Primero, examino los cuatro personajes principales y su relación con el concepto de “tercer espacio” propuesto por Homi Bhabha y producido por la articulación de diferencias entre el colonizador y el colonizado. Planteo que cada uno de estos personajes ocupa un lugar y representa un grado diferente del “tercer espacio”. Segundo, miro hacia las consecuencias del colonialismo a través de la presencia de Misiones Católicas y plantaciones de caucho en el Amazonas. Expongo que la película encuadra el trabajo conjunto de ideologías religiosas y económicas en la constitución de cuerpos y territorios renovados a partir de la destrucción de las diferentes formas de estar en el mundo. En general, *El Abrazo de la Serpiente* ofrece una pantalla policromática para analizar la intersección de marcos conceptuales que son centrales al momento de plantear los interrogantes que surgen de la producción académica sobre poscolonialismo.

Palabras clave: poder colonial, otredad, tercer espacio, el buen vivir, cinematografía.

“All I know is that, when I came back, I had become another man.”
Theodor von Martius, Amazon, 1909

Introduction

Embrace of the Serpent is a 2015 Colombian film directed by Ciro Guerra. This film, shot in black and white, tells the story of two different journeys through the Amazon jungle made in the course of forty years. The first, by German ethnographer Theodor Koch-Grünberg (Theo); the second, by American botanist Richard Evans Schultes (Evan). Guerra interrupts the chronological sequence of events through flashbacks and flashforwards to connect the two journeys, guided both by the indigenous shaman Karamakate, who travels with Theo and Evan through the wild jungle and its watersheds. Temporarily situated in the first half of the twentieth century, the film intertwined the experiences of the two white explorers who are in search of a sacred healing plant known as *yakruna*.

Embrace of the Serpent has won several awards such as the Art Cinema Award at the Cannes Film Festival, the Golden Peacock Award at the India International Film Festival, and the Best Latin American Film at the San Sebastián International Film Festival, among many other distinctions, including Colombia’s first Oscar nomination for the Best Foreign Language Film. Indeed, the institutional and financial support of local films launched by the Colombian government has represented a significant shift. Between 1978 and 1993, FOCINE, the government agency responsible for designing, implementing, and promoting film production policies in Colombia, provided financial support to prominent national filmmakers, including Carlos Mayolo, Jorge Alí Triana, Sergio Cabrera, and Víctor Gaviria. In 1998, Proimágenes Colombia was established to assume the functions previously performed by FOCINE. With the enactment of Law 814 of 2003—commonly referred to as the Film Law—Proimágenes Colombia was formally entrusted with the administration of the Film Development Fund (FDC). This fund has since supported the production of Colombian films, the training of emerging directors and producers, and participation in international film events. According to Proimágenes Colombia (2024), the FDC allocated 39.8 billion Colombian pesos (COP) to film promotion in 2023, approximately ten times the amount allocated in 2004. Over time, the fund has committed over 367 billion COP since 2004.

Different productions dismantled the prominence of American cultural imperialism and Hollywood’s invasive presence within Colombian public culture. As Fernandes (2013) indicated, hegemonic industries have been “challenged by the rise of national

programming and complex transnational cultural flows that are not limited to simple linear paths originating in the United States or Europe” (p. 37). Some directors engaged in a prolific production of movies and documentaries to publicize and document the experiences of underrepresented communities. As a cultural artifact created within this shift to vernacular and local stories, *The Embrace of the Serpent* emerged as an artwork denouncing the abuses and excesses of colonialism.

In this paper, I analyze *Embrace of the Serpent* by using a postcolonial framework through different authors and texts that have contributed to a set of theories and concepts related to colonialism, race, domination, language, power, and other categories of equal importance within postcolonial studies. In the first section of this paper, I provide a theoretical perspective based on postcolonial concepts to set up the foundation for this analysis. In the following part, I focus on some of the film’s scenes, dialogues and themes to bring such concepts into inquiry.

Theoretical Foundations: Otherness, In-Betweenness, and *Buen Vivir*

I begin this section with a set of theories and authors that have addressed the notion of colonialism and representation through the discursive construction of Otherness, the establishment of ideas of difference through religious identities, and politics of representation. By and large, the colonial enterprise appeals to different tools and strategies to subjugate and legitimize oppression.

Edward Said (1979) wrote *Orientalism* from his awareness and experiences of being an “Oriental” growing up in two British colonies and having a Western education. As a seminal work in postcolonial studies, *Orientalism* is an archive of images, thoughts, rhetoric, narratives, and languages contained in books, manuscripts, and encyclopedias that “created the Orient, the Oriental, and his world” for purposes of colonial domination (p. 40). Drawing on Foucault and Gramsci, Said characterized *Orientalism* as a “mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines” (p. 2) that constructs a predominant and hegemonic cultural form about the Orient. Understanding *Orientalism* as a discourse allows us to understand it as a “systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage and even produce the Orient” (Said, 1979, p. 3) politically, sociologically, ideologically, and imaginatively. *Orientalism*, as a central component of European colonial enterprise, is premised upon exteriority. The *Orientalist* speaks for the Orient, “the former writes about, whereas the latter is written about” (Said, 1979, p. 308). *Orientalism* is a history, a mentality, and a genealogy given to the Oriental because

it is “radically incapable of interpreting itself” (Said, 1979, p. 289). The product of this exteriority, Said claimed, is representation, a “highly artificial enactment, not ‘natural’ depictions about the Orient” (p. 21). The discursive representations of the Orient not only served as a means for colonial subjugation and obliteration. The texts and images contained in archives also delineated the identity and mentality of the West, characterized through opposite attributes.

Within the discursive depictions produced by Europeans, Othering emerged as a tool to separate and classify human beings according to different identity categories. As Chawla (2017) has noted, Othering is a “process of separation, one that creates hierarchies among the human species” (p. 2). Rather than using biological and cultural traits to underline the uniqueness of groups and nations, the distinct identity categories (socially negotiated, taught, and installed) were used to frame difference as a threat to Western values.

Ania Loomba (2015) traced racial stereotyping back to the Greek and Roman periods to describe how Christianity used social constructions of barbarians and outsiders to establish ideas of difference in Europe. Loomba explained that since “the Bible held that all human beings were brothers descended from the same parents, the presence of ‘savages’ and ‘monsters’ was not easy to explain” (p. 113). A response to the menace of difference was to “locate them as creatures who had incurred God’s wrath” (Loomba, 2015, p. 113). Overall, Loomba approached the intersection between colonialism and religious difference to explain how the latter “became an index of and metaphor for racial, cultural and ethnic difference” (p. 114). Discourses and stereotypes of outsiders and deviants traveled hand in hand with European colonial expansion.

Representing the Other, the colonized, or the subjugated is not free of ethical and political considerations. Can the subaltern speak? has been a question that has generated permanent and intense debates among postcolonial and rhetorical scholars. Discussions about the subaltern or marginalized individual emerge to complicate the possibility for representation and the problems of mediation. Gayatri Spivak (2009) argued that the subaltern is a position without identity, the subaltern is deprived of consciousness, cannot speak, but others speak for them. Spivak explores the Hindu tradition of *sati* (widow-burning or widow-sacrifice) to assert that “one never encounters the testimony of the women’s voice consciousness” (p. 297). The widow speaks but through representations based on the colonizer’s perspective and patriarchy. Answering the question Can the subaltern (as woman) speak? in colonial India, Spivak put together the sentence “White men are saving brown women from brown men” (p. 296) to describe the relationship between white and brown skins. More specifically, to

explain how the British prohibition on this ritual legitimizes colonial subjugation and constructs an “imperialism’s image as the establisher of the good society” (Spivak, 2009, p. 299).

The rhetoric of bringing “the good” to the uncivilized and savage group or nation stands at the core of the politics of representation. Leela Fernandes’s (2013) study of transnational feminism underscored the problematic assumptions that universal meanings of human rights convey. Fernandes asserted that the politics of representation is “central to new configurations of state power that have begun to connect discourses of terrorism and the language of human right” (p. 61). By breaking the boundaries that separate the categories of civil society and terror, the colonial or imperial power projects itself as “liberators or protectors of freedom and civilization” (Fernandes, 2013, p. 449). Therefore, colonial discourse not only constructs Otherness through negative attributes but also legitimizes itself by representing the colonized in need of aid and enfranchisement.

As shown above, these authors’ approaches to colonial power underline the discursive practices that construct Otherness. Equally significant, these representations legitimize colonial occupation by portraying the colonized as an individual in need of liberation. From a discursive-based perspective, now I move to the contributions of two of the most important postcolonial scholars: Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha. I focus on them to emphasize the attitudes, practices, and dynamics that emerge from the encounter between the colonizer and the colonized.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (1994) invited to see colonization as a process of dislocation, of separation from what the Black is and has been. Fanon undertook a psychological examination of the epidermalization of the Black’s inferiority, that is, the inferiority complex produced on the Black body by the colonial presence. Fanon approached colonization as a struggle not against a force of oppression but for elevating the self to the white man’s level. Rather than reaffirming Blackness and counteracting, the Black wears the oppressor’s white skin that has inflicted pain on a colored body. Fanon offered a different perspective of the colonized Black man: the human being who wishes to become the same force that subjugates and oppresses. The Black, Fanon said, “lives in a society that makes his inferiority complex possible, in a society that derives its stability from the perpetuation of this complex, in a society that proclaims the superiority of one race” (p. 13). Therefore, Fanon has claimed, this society creates desires such as the Black’s “dream of a form of salvation that consists of magically turning white” (p. 44) or “attempts at a hallucinatory whitening” (p. 100). A central component of the colonial strategy is the imposition of the language of the

civilizing nation, which functions to compress and control the colonized consciousness. The use of the colonizer language turns to be a performance of whiteness by the Black individual, who “possesses the world expressed and implied in that language” (Fanon, 1994, p. 18). In brief, the white world. After all, as Fanon argued throughout his work as a psychoanalyst, “The black man wants to be like the white man” (p. 228).

In other words, Fanon portrayed a society that disavows racial and historical differences. Homi Bhabha (2024) drew on Fanon to argue that this negation of difference “turns the colonial subject into a misfit—a grotesque mimicry or ‘doubling’ that threatens to split the soul and whole, undifferentiated skin of the ego” (p. 75). Bhabha underlined in *The Location of culture* the need to “focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (p. 2). In other words, Bhabha looked at the “in-between” spaces produced by the encounters between the colonizer and the colonized. Both actors enter the stream of a continued fluctuation in which their identities are never fully delineated. It is within this continuous overlapping of differences from where cultural hybridity and mimicry emerge as an on-going process, condensing an ambivalent space in which both the colonizer and the colonized are “*a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (Bhabha, 2024, p. 85). Being “*neither the One nor the Other but something else besides*” (Bhabha, 2024, p. 28) accomplishes the objective of colonial discourse and domination as it legitimizes a system of administration over degenerate racial types. The colonized or the colonizer never ceases to be but never wholly turns into a reformed Other. It is within this space of “in-betweenness” from which hybridity and mimicry emerge as weapons for the colonizer or as subversive tools that could be used to subvert the power of the colonizer.

Whereas Fanon uses a psychological scope, Bhabha relies more on the performative nature of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. However, they converge in the disavowal of racial differences manifested through particular attitudes and behaviors. In the last part of this section, I include a group of authors who have contributed to postcolonial scholarship through different approaches and theoretical concepts.

On the one hand, Macarena Gómez-Barris’s (2017) conceptual approach to the extractive zone drew the contours of a colonial paradigm that operates in regions of “high biodiversity.” More specifically, in the Latin American territories historically inhabited by native communities. *Extractivismo* is the Spanish term to designate the “economic system that engages in thefts, borrowings, and forced removals, violently reorganizing social life as well as the land by thieving resources from Indigenous and

Afro-descendent territories” (p. xvii). Gómez-Barris emphasized that the extractive global economy extends from the 1500s until the present day, transforming natural resources into commodities and deploying different forms of violence to reduce and convert life into profit (p. xvi-xviii). *Extractivismo* breaks the indigenous cosmological relationships that connect the human and nonhuman entities. This relationship has been constituted by Andean and Amazonian native communities through the notion of *el buen vivir*, the good living. As a form of social and ecological life organization based on indigenous principles and practices, *el buen vivir* “maintain[s] a deep and respectful relationship to land, place and the natural world (Gómez Barris, 2017, p. 16).

Gómez-Barris’s emphasis on the transformation of life as a consequence of colonial forces brings Amardo Rodriguez into the conversation. Postcolonial theory, Rodriguez (2017) argued, is “about disrupting dominant ways of perceiving, understanding and experiencing the world by showcasing how such ways diminish and threaten the flourishing of life in all its expressions and manifestations” (p. 176). Essential to this approach to colonialism is the notion of life, human or not human. Furthermore, Rodriguez characterizes colonialism as a set of practices that obstruct and disfigure different forms of imagining and believing.

On the other hand, Michael Lechuga (2020) refers to the notion of White Settler Governance (WSG) emerging from Canadian Cultural Studies as a framework to study the mechanisms of producing institutions and populations through settler colonialism. Although this framework is built upon the historical reality of North American natives, it may be used to look towards territories located in the Global South. Lechuga explains the settler logic rhetorical capacity to call “colonial subjects into being, the capacity to make sovereignty claims over native lands, and the capacity to normalize this invasive process through religious or grand global political narrative” (Lechuga, 2020, p. 381). Thought as rhetoric or narrative, this settler logic resembles the first approach taken in this theoretical section of the paper: the discursive power of colonialism. After all, Lechuga adds, colonialism “layers power over bodies and lands in a way that reshapes them to reproduce structures of settler power” (Lechuga, 2020, p. 381). Deployment of power over bodies and territories, with its consequent transformations and recreations, echoes Ania Loomba’s approach to colonialism. Loomba (2015) defined it as a process of “forming a community”, which accounts for the colonial forces that *un-form* or *re-form* the communities subjected to colonial domination (p, 20).

In this section of the paper, I provided the theoretical foundation to examine the film through a postcolonial framework. First, I looked at the authors and works that

have explored the discursive legitimation of coloniality through the representational practices of Otherness. Then, from Fanon and Bhabha's contributions, I highlighted the processes or attitudes produced in the overlapping of cultural differences within a colonized world. Lastly, I brought into the conversation the discussions that incorporate the notion of "life" (human and nonhuman) into postcolonial theories to account for the colonial transformative forces.

Postcolonial Approach to the Film

Embrace of the Serpent evokes scenes of Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, Peruvian Nobel Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Dream of the Celt*, and Colombian novelist José Eustacio Rivera's *La Vorágine*. These stories depict the devastating presence of colonial power in Africa and South America through rubber plantation projects and the subsequent enslavement and annihilation of indigenous communities. Indeed, the film offers different lines of analysis within a postcolonial framework. One is the attempt of Western science to colonize the indigenous knowledge on the healing properties of endemic plants. Another is the story of the prolongation of a genocide initiated by the end of the 15th century, of a colonial project that didn't end with the independence of the South American territories from the Spanish yoke. As an overarching theme, Guerra's production describes the encounter between the White world and the indigenous cosmovision.

As indicated at the beginning of this paper, the film is structured through the continuing back and forth between the two journeys. The first journey depicts Theodor von Martius (Theo); Manduca, a native liberated by Theo from a rubber plantation; and Karamakate, the shaman. The second depicts Evan and Karamakate at a later time when the latter looks much older. In this section, I assess the film through a postcolonial framework that addresses two overlapping dimensions. In doing so, I suggest the following overarching question: How is the colonial power assimilated and contested? From this main direction, other questions emerge: How do the characters in the film embody Homi Bhabha's notion of "in-betweenness"? How is the colonial and discursive construction of Otherness legitimized? How are the narratives of *el buen vivir* (the good living) displayed? In the following sections, I answer these questions by bringing different authors and concepts into a discussion.

In-Betweenness and Disavowal of Cultural Differences

I propose a first postcolonial approach to the film by analyzing the four characters and their relationship with Homi Bhabha's notion of the "in-between" spaces produced

by the articulation of differences between the colonizer and the colonized. I argue that each one of these characters represents a different degree or form of “in-betweenness.” They embed a series of amalgamations and enmeshments of various cultural traits that are unique to each. These distinctive combinations allow to think of a spectrum of “in-betweenness” in which each character occupies a different place according to the extent of absorption or assimilation of the Other’s culture. However, all of them converge in being “*a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 85). Nobody is situated at the ends of the spectrum, no one could claim purity. After all, their bodies and minds are marked by the colonizing power through different nuances, forces, and transformations.

In one of the scenes, the travelers arrived at a rubber plantation, canoeing through a stream from which crucified bodies emerge. Manduca pours from hand-made containers the sticky and milky liquid harvested from the rubber trees. A man without an arm and with traces of physical torture and suffering appears on the scene to unsuccessfully put the liquid back into the containers. He begs Manduca, who holds a shotgun, to shoot him. He desperately wants to die.

Manduca: If I don’t do it, they’ll torture him to death. No body deserves this hell.

Karamakate: I am not going. Whites can’t be trusted.

Theo: I have no reason to trust you either.

Karamakate: Is this your knowledge? Shotguns? All your science only leads to this, violence, death.

Theo: You’re wrong.

Karamakate: What else are you stealing? Coca? Quinoa? Rubber? That’s why you want to steal *yakruna*? What else are you going to turn into death?

Manduca: Don’t talk to him like that. He has done more for our people than you.

Karamakate: And you? Look at your clothes. The same as the white men. How could you let them culture you like this? You think like the white men, you think nothing. What side are you on? You’re a caboclo. (Guerra, 2015)

This incident is representative of a larger set of situations and interactions in which the characters enter into a continued oscillation of their identities. Within this interstitial space, mimicry and hybridity emerge to constitute the subjects as

“neither the One nor the Other but something else besides” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 28). In this excerpt, Karamakate accuses Manduca of letting the Whites culture him and impose a way of thinking that he considers empty and senseless. Indeed, since the beginning of the film, Manduca appears as the colonized individual that has progressively turned white. His clothes communicate this transformation, which extends to the ways in which he sees the Whites. Rather than annihilating Manduca’s people, the Whites are protectors.

Mimicry and hybridity allow for the characterization of different forms of “in-betweenness.” Within this interstitial space, for instance, Karamakate is located close to one end of the spectrum. He embodies resistance against the destructive presence of the White explorers and worldviews, but he speaks Spanish and recites excerpts from the Bible. Manduca turns to be an indigenous individual that has assimilated some of the Western values. His embodiment of “in-betweenness” brings Frantz Fanon into this discussion to make a parallel with his statement, “The black man wants to be like the white man” (Fanon, 1994, p. 228). Manduca endlessly fluctuates between being “The indigenous man who wants to be like the white man” and the indigenous man that acknowledges the obliterating force of colonial presence. The following excerpt reflects this characterization. Going through a state of delirium due to his illness, Theo jumps into the water to fish with a spear. Karamakate yells at him, saying that fishing is not allowed.

Theo: Permission from who? From the Owner of the fish? I’m sick because of respecting your ridiculous prohibitions [He catches a fish and eats it raw].

Karamakate: How can you help him? Have you forgotten what they did to you?

Manduca: It wasn’t him. He paid off my debt in the plantation.

Karamakate: Then you became his slave.

Manduca: I ain’t nobody’s slave. I’m with him because we need him. He can teach the whites.

Karamakate: How can he learn if he doesn’t respect the jungle?

Manduca: He’s afraid. But he can learn. He’s a hero to his people. They all admire him and listen to his stories. If we can’t get the whites to learn, it will be the end of us. The end of everything. (Guerra, 2015)

Somehow confusing and blurry, Manduca is conscious of the White authority’s presence, but he does nothing against the social or cultural structures which are the

real source of conflict. He builds a contradictory logic by which the colonizer is also the savior. Within an ongoing colonial process, the colonizer not only destroys life but also emerges as the actor who can protect it. Actually, this attitude drives Karamakate to disagree and be at odds more with Manduca than Theo and Evan. Karamakate is more concerned about Manduca's metamorphosis, about his sudden surrendering to the White man. After all, Manduca emerges as the character to analyze what Fanon (1994) called "the death and burial of [his] cultural originality" (p. 25). He fills the colonial-imposed incompleteness of himself by turning into what the colonizer embodies.

Another interesting form of hybridity is the continuous switching between speaking Spanish and a native language. Fanon (1994) described how the colonized people, by adopting the language of the civilizing nations, "consequently possesses the world expressed and implied on that language" (p. 25). Language compresses consciousness. The language of the colonizer marks rigid coordinates of thought far ways from the latitudes/longitudes of liberation. The native goes through a transformative process by which his mind, finally subjugated, reads the world through the eyes of the colonizer. But not only Manduca and Karamakate developed the skills to speak the colonizer's language. Theo and Evan interact with them by using the local language as an instance of hybridity. Thereby, the film suggests an additional framework of analysis to look at the use of the Other's language, either as a weapon for the colonizer or a subversive tool that could be used by the colonized to destabilize the colonial authority, as Bhabha observed.

Otherness, Legitimation of Colonial Power, and Good Living

The second approach looks at the consequences of colonialism through the presence of Catholic Missions and rubber plantations in the Amazon. Both institutions do not function separately. They converge in the practices deployed over bodies and territories. They contradict and neglect the indigenous cosmovision, the harmony between the human being and the natural world. I argue that *Embrace of the Serpent* frames religious and economic ideologies as acting together in constituting renewed bodies and territories through the destruction of different forms of being in the world.

The film depicts the San Antonio de Padua Mission as a religious and colonial institution that came to the Amazon to protect and keep the natives away from cannibalism and ignorance. The characters arrive at a small village. They are welcomed by the sign "TEMEROSOS DE DIOS. BIENVENIDOS A LA CHORRERA" (Fearful of God. Welcome to La Churrera) and by indigenous children, who guide them to a place where more

children are singing in Latin, instructed by a priest. Theo asks him for food to continue the journey, using an indigenous language:

Priest: What did he say. Pagan languages are not permitted here.

Karamakate: "If thou shall judge me fair to the Lord, come to the house and stay in it."

Von Martius: We can't keep going our way without food. You're Capuchin, right? Please, help us. We will stick to your rules. We only speak Spanish. We are men of science. Like St. Thomas Aquinas.

Priest: I doubt you're angels. But it is not for me to refuse hospitality, in the house of God. Be welcome to the Mission of San Antonio de Padua in Vaupés. (Guerra, 2015)

A plaque in a wall declares, written in all caps: *In recognition of the bravery of the Colombian rubber pioneers, who, risking their lives and property, bring civilization to the lands of cannibals and savages, showing them the path of our Lord and holy Church. Rafael Reyes, Colombian President, August 1907.* After observing the children and the priest performing a mass in Latin, dinner was served:

Karamakate: It's forbidden to eat fish before the rains come.

Priest: I came after the massacre of the Peruvians. Brother Marcelino and the elders went looking for new disciples. Two years ago and they have not returned. Didn't you see them in the river?

Manduca: Do you only steal boys?

Priest: Our mission is sacred. We must save the souls of the orphans of the rubber war and keep them away from cannibalism and ignorance. (Guerra, 2015)

These scenes show the discursive representations of Otherness through negative attributes by a Catholic Mission. The discourses produced to justify the presence of a religious institution that inflicts power over bodies and minds resembles Edward Said's examination of the discourse that produces and manages the Orient. The Arab, Said (1979) pointed out, "is 'there' in discourse, reduced to attitudes and dehumanized through omissions and increasing misrepresentation and misinterpretation, with 'no individuality, no personal characteristics or experiences'" (p. 287). In the film, the natives and their spiritual connections with nature are seen as abnormal, in need of correction and normalization. Their characterization as ignorant, pervert,

cannibals, pagan, and savages not only constitutes Catholicism and the West as the bearers of the right values.

The religious discourse that frames a God who punishes the deviant and uncivilized legitimizes the violent imposition of beliefs and the negation of religious differences. It is within this legitimizing narrative that the film opens a parallel with Spivak's (2009) sentence, "White men are saving brown women from brown men" (p. 296). The Catholic Church presents itself as the institution that came to the "new world" to save souls and lead them through the right path, no matter the physical abuses and tortures inflicted on bodies. By projecting itself as the system that is saving the natives from paganism and illiteracy, the San Antonio de Padua's Mission engages with the politics of representation. Leela Fernandes (2013) addressed this concept to explore the discourses that articulate the colonial or imperial power as a liberatory and protective force. In other words, as Loomba (2015) asserted by explaining the historical processes of construction of religious difference by Christianity, "if there was a single origin for all humanity then presumably these fallen people could be brought back into the fold, and converted to Christian ways" (p. 114). All in all, *Embrace of the Serpent* invites us to explore it through a postcolonial frame that accounts for the discursive construction of Otherness and the rhetorics that legitimize the work of an oppressive force.

Ciro Guerra also represents San Antonio de Padua's Mission and the rubber barons and plantations as colonial institutions that enslave and annihilate the native communities and their unique practices of "being in the world." Throughout different scenes, Karamakate communicates a discourse permeated by the solid harmony between the human and the nonhuman. Before embarking on the journey in search of *yakruna*, he warns Theo and Manduca:

The jungle is fragile, and if you attack her, she strikes back. The only way she will allow us to travel is if we respect her. We must not eat meat or fish until the rains begin and we ask for permission to the Owners of animals. We can't cut any tree from its root. If a woman is found, no intercourse until the change of moon. Do you accept? (Guerra, 2015)

Later in the journey, he speaks to the indigenous children who have been caught and disciplined by the Mission's rule. Karamakate builds on a narrative of resistance, on the wisdom enclosed by the non-human living things, and on the falseness of the White religious rituals:

I want to know how it's like here. Whites are crazy. Come, don't be afraid. Look, this is *chircaspi*. A gift that our *Karipukalena* ancestors

received from the gods. We received the sun's semen when *Yeba*, the sun's daughter, scratched his penis and ground the semen to dust. We must do the same with this plan before boiling it. Help me. This is the strongest defense we have against any disease. It will help you endure. Priests picked me up too, when the rubber barons killed my people. They didn't surrender to them, they fought. That's what you have to do. Don't believe their crazy tales about eating the body of their gods. They give you food but they don't respect the prohibitions. One day they will finish all the food in the jungle. You are still small, so the jungle will forgive you. *Master Caapi* will guide you. Every plant, every tree, every flower is full of wisdom. Never forget who you are or where you came from. Don't let our song fade away. (Guerra, 2015)

Macarena Gómez-Barris's (2017) notion of the extractive zone offers a theoretical approach to explore how *extractivismo* collides with the indigenous cosmivision or good living, *el buen vivir*. In other words, to examine how the extractive economies imposed by the rubber business destroy dignity, humanity, and the essence of the natural world. Gómez-Barris stressed that the idea of *el buen vivir* "decenters the importance of 'the human' by focusing instead upon how the natural world possesses its own sets of rights, logics, and capacities that cannot be solely apprehended, managed, or narrated through human language or scientific technique" (p. 23). Karamakate is continuously reminding Manduca, Theo, and Evan how the Whites don't respect the jungle, which he discursively constitutes as a superior body and entity, with its own rules and principles. He stresses how they lack the capacity to perceive and understand the dimension in which the human and the non-human blend into a harmonious whole. Indeed, Karamakate's narratives grant rights that have been exclusively considered human to non-human entities.

It is within this stable kinship between the human and every form of life comprised in "the jungle" from which Rodríguez's (2017) view of postcolonial theory offers an additional route for analysis. This theory, he argues, "encourages bold new ways of understanding, perceiving, and experiencing things that affirm life in all its expressions and manifestations" (p. 176). Indeed, Karamakate questions Theo's motives to go on the search of the *yakruna*: "What else are you stealing? Coca? Quinoa? Rubber? That's why you want to steal *yakruna*? What else are you going to turn into death?" Depletion of raw materials and resources is seen by the indigenous principles as a rupture of the balance and respect between the human and the nature. Karamakate frames the presence of the White explorer

through the conversion of life in its different expressions into death. Therefore, from Rodriguez's perspective, approaching the film through the dichotomy of life and death allows for a revalorization of the different manifestations of life existing within the natives' cosmovision. Land and place are not just physical surfaces or materialities but living entities that blend with human bodies into a congruous whole.

Conclusion

Embrace of the Serpent offers a polychromatic screen to analyze the intersection of conceptual frameworks that are central to address the questions that emerge from postcolonial scholarship. In this paper, I explored the practices by which colonial forces are either assimilated or resisted, the different cultural articulations or forms of hybridity produced by these forces, and the narratives that legitimize their imposition over bodies, minds and territories. In the last scene of the film, Karamakate and Evan arrive at a place called *Cerros de Mavecure*, named by the natives as The Workshop of the Gods. This scene symbolically marks the irreversible effect of colonial devastation. They walk to the summit of a ridge to find the last *yakruna* flower on earth. Karamakate says: "This is the last *yakruna* plant in the world... I destroyed all the others... It is our last hope, my gift to you" (Guerra, 2015). In his first journey with Theo, Karamakate destroyed all the other *yakrunas* because his community was using them for different purposes than the established by ancestral indigenous traditions. It may be that, consciously or unconsciously, he didn't want more Whites in the jungle in search of *yakrunas*.

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