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# "The world speaks, I can only listen": Representations of Indigenous Collective Trauma through Film Sound Design

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“The world speaks, I can only listen”:

Representations of Indigenous Collective Trauma Through  
Film Sound Design

by

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A THESIS

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## Abstract

This research project investigates the role of film sound design in the representation of collective trauma in films about experiences and issues faced by Indigenous peoples. In filmmaking, sound is not only fundamental in providing an aura of realism and in evoking affective forces. It can also provide spectators with imagined sound worlds that represent diverse experiences through aural aesthetic elements that in turn create shades of meaning. A transcultural approach in this study integrates the corpus, placing film representations from different countries in conversation through the analysis of their aural compositions. The project analyzes three contemporary films released between 2013 and 2015: *Charlie's Country* by director Rolf De Heer (Australia 2013), *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* by Jeff Barnaby (Canada 2013) and *El Abrazo de la Serpiente* by Ciro Guerra (Colombia 2015). The findings of this project establish the connection between aural elements, sound mixing, and factors in the representation of collective trauma, such as issues of space, memory, emotion, and expressions of physical pain. By addressing sound not as an isolated subject, but rather as embedded in a context that produces political representations of trauma, this project contributes to the growing understanding of the evocative potential of film sound.

## Resumen

Este proyecto investiga el rol que juega el diseño sonoro cinematográfico en la creación de significado respecto al trauma colectivo, específicamente en filmes que representan experiencias y problemas enfrentados por pueblos indígenas. En el arte cinematográfico, el sonido es fundamental no sólo para proveer un aura de realismo y evocar fuerzas afectivas. El sonido puede proveer a los espectadores con mundos sonoros imaginados que representen variadas experiencias a través de la estética sonora, creando al mismo tiempo diversos significados. El corpus de este estudio se integró a través de una perspectiva transcultural, en la que representaciones cinematográficas de distintos países son puestas en conversación a través del análisis de sus composiciones aurales. El proyecto analiza tres filmes contemporáneos estrenados entre los años 2013 y 2015: *Charlie's Country* del director Rolf De Heer (Australia 2013), *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* de Jeff Barnaby (Canadá 2013) y *El Abrazo de la Serpiente* de Ciro Guerra (Colombia 2015). Los hallazgos de este proyecto establecen conexiones entre elementos aurales, la mezcla sonora de los mismos y factores que influyen en representaciones de trauma colectivo, como problemas asociados al espacio, la memoria, las emociones y expresiones de dolor y tristeza. Al pensar en el sonido no como un tema aislado, sino imbuido en un contexto que produce representaciones políticas de trauma, este proyecto contribuye a ampliar el entendimiento del potencial del sonido para evocar significados.

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## Introduction

In the preface to his iconic text *Audio-Vision*, sound theorist Michel Chion claimed that his objective was to demonstrate how aural and visual perceptions are combined in cinema: “We never see the same thing when we also hear; we don’t hear the same thing when we see as well” (xxvi). The proposition, simple as it may seem, implies that there is a bond between seeing and hearing, and that in cinema studies, not analyzing these perceptions as a combined force entails forfeiting a large sphere of potential meanings. However, film scholarship has largely been focused on the visual, while sound studies remain relatively scarce (Murch XI, Altman 11, Weis & Belton IX). This scarcity has begun to be addressed in recent years. However, scholars Jay Beck and Tony Grajeda accurately state that the challenge of sound studies is “not only to cohere around their object of study but also to articulate cross-disciplinary methodologies and analytical approaches” (2). With these ideas in mind, this thesis establishes a connection between the aesthetic aspects of film sound and the representation of a social phenomenon: collective trauma.

Before entering a discussion of how sound can evoke meaning around such a complex experience, it is fair to question whether film sound can in fact evoke meaning at all. Film music scholar Kevin Donnelly claims that sound design has evolved from a merely pragmatic approach to a more representational one. In Donnelly’s view, a traditional, mainstream approach to sound design, places sound as a functional element whose main purpose is to offer a sense of clarity of both dialogue and diegetic sounds. The transformation to a representational approach comes as a result of technological evolution, that allows the manipulation of sounds through music software. This is an unavoidable fact, as the sound of most films is created, edited and mixed in the same software (Pro Tools and Logic) that has become an industry standard for music. The result of using these tools is that sounds are mixed almost in a musical manner. Considering the role of



music in cinema as a signifier of emotions, recollections, and events, the fact that sounds are designed through a musical approach opens the possibility for aural elements to evoke affective forces and a range of meanings.

This musicality of sound posed by Donnelly is not, I claim, the only aspect that can potentially endow film aural compositions with meaning. In the very concept of sound design lies the key to understand the particularities of film sound. Cinema sound is designed, devised to produce an effect. Although this effect may be—and in fact, commonly is—to simply provide an impression of reality, the acknowledgement that sound can evoke meanings beyond the mere representation of the sources from which it emerges, leads to the understanding that sound design can be crafted towards a significance project, and that this project can have political qualities. As such, films with a political project rely not only on the visual or the narrative to deliver a message. Sound is also a fundamental component in the expression of diverse aspects that mark individual and social experiences represented on screen, including collective trauma.

The choice to look into films that depict collective trauma, and particularly, Indigenous collective trauma, is the result of an interest in contemporary cinema that is part of a decolonizing project. Decolonization is a practice characterized by criticizing modernity “that dares, definitively, to question the words that sustain the modern world: beauty, science, civilization, democracy, State, law, market, objectivity, progress, reason, universalism” (Carballo and Herrera Robles 11).<sup>1</sup> This dare challenges modernity from within. It does not deny modernity or the influence of Western perspectives. Instead it employs the intellectual and cultural practices promoted by modernity to criticize patterns of power and cultural production that revolve around Western centralism, and sheds light on practices effaced by dominant

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<sup>1</sup> Translation by the author

powers.

The interest in cinema with a decolonizing approach was first prompted by the encounter with Walter Dignolo's anthology *Habitar la frontera: sentir y pensar la descolonialidad* [*Inhabiting the frontier: feeling and thinking decoloniality*]<sup>2</sup>. Dignolo's ideas promote a critique of the colonial pattern of power that frames modernity, and in his thought, art has the potential to reveal (and sometimes heal) the wounds of colonialism (Carballo & Herrera Robles 17). When discussing aesthetics and art, Dignolo claims that there is a wound experienced by those oppressed by colonialism, thus, this wound represents a form of trauma that affects a collectivity (446). He also states that art is a fertile ground for the growth of decolonized aesthetics, that detach themselves from dominant, colonial aesthetic patterns and become part of a healing process (449). As such, in Dignolo's view "art is, definitively, a space of expression for decolonial healing," thus implying that artistic creation and its aesthetic choices have the potential to address the trauma process experienced by large groups.

Although in this text Dignolo does not specifically discuss cinema and is more focused on performances and art contained in museums, we can certainly think of cinema as a form of art in which decolonized aesthetics may find a place. Cinema can address the representation of groups effaced by dominant patterns, question the ways in which oppressed subjects have been represented and have been a part the filmmaking process, and question the aesthetic forms that have been used to represent them. In the particular case of sound, we can think of a dominant pattern of aural aesthetics in which the inclusion of sounds in film has the purpose of providing speech clarity and a sense of sonic realism, and in which non-diegetic music has the goal of guiding the audience's emotions. Therefore a few questions arise: How can sound design

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<sup>2</sup> Translation by the author

challenge its dominant aesthetic patterns? and does challenging them results in an aesthetic that contributes to addressing and healing the collective trauma of colonial wounds?

These questions serve as a guide for this thesis project, that seeks to reveal the connection between designed film sound and the representation of Indigenous collective trauma in fiction films. By looking into the sound aesthetic of the analyzed films, I hypothesize that their sound design is part of a project of representation of Indigenous collective trauma. Sound aesthetic has a key role in representing collective trauma, since its elements evoke meaning with regard to Indigenous experiences, Indigenous knowledge, cultural sound practices, cultural and collective memories, traumatic pasts and emotions associated with the trauma experience. To explore these aural representations, I selected three films as the object of study: *Charlie's Country* (Australia 2013), *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* (Canada 2015) and *El Abrazo de la Serpiente* (Colombia 2014). While the settings and film industries that produced these films are far apart from one another, these films share a common subject matter as fictional representations of the traumatic experiences faced by Indigenous groups of each film's country, and serve as expressions of the aforementioned colonial wound.

Beyond this thematical bond, the films analyzed in this text share a set of qualities: their main characters are Indigenous; the representation of Indigenous characters challenges commonly found stereotypes of indigeneity; they are outside of mainstream 'Hollywood' cinema; and they have a strong involvement of Indigenous core members in their production teams. Each film has a particular approach to the construction of its aural world that relies on diverse sound elements. For example, while one signals a high degree of significance of sounds evocative of other spaces or times, another is constructed to make non-diegetic narration and music prime significant aural elements, and the other builds on meaning by layering sounds and

integrating sound families in the audible space. It is the goal of this research project to further delve into the sound design of each film, to reveal its contributions to the depiction of Indigenous collective trauma, and its potential as an aesthetic, meaning-producing element of cinema.

#### TRAUMA IN THE COLLECTIVITY

Throughout this text I argue that, despite the fact that all films are mostly centered on the experience of an individual, these representations are part of a larger context, of trauma as lived by a collectivity. To reach this conclusion it is pertinent to review scholarly discussions on the concept of trauma, and its collective and cultural characteristics. Furthermore, it is fundamental to question the role of aesthetics, and in the particular case of this research, aural aesthetics, in representing trauma as collective, while clarifying the implications that such aesthetic representations have on the reception of traumatic experiences.

The concept of trauma has been widely developed in a variety of fields, ranging from psychiatry and medicine to sociology and the humanities. The seminal ideas of Sigmund Freud have shaped important aspects of our current understanding of trauma, despite having been challenged by many over the past century. For Freud, trauma became an evolving concept that was initially associated with hysteria, dominant in female subjects and related to sexual incidents and an environment of sexual oppression (Kaplan 27). As his thought advanced, he went on to discuss trauma in men, mostly men that had experienced war, and on how external stimuli provoked a disruption in the subjects experiencing trauma (28). Although Freud's ideas are marked by a gender bias and the concept of female hysteria has long since been debunked, his ideas do point to a diversity in the trauma experience, to possible responses to external and

internal stimuli, and to how trauma impacts individuals by altering them not just during a traumatic event but in the aftermath.

Through a brief outline of Freud's thought on trauma, and an understanding of the psychiatric concept of trauma as a result of a disruptive event that produces consequences both physical and psychological (nightmares, depression, and increased sensitivity) on subjects, we can appreciate some relevant qualities of the trauma experience. Trauma is not the event itself, as in fact events are triggers that produce effects. The event is disruptive, breaking the assumed order of things that a subject had, and although the effects can manifest themselves in a variety of ways, they depend on the constant presence of trauma memories to keep being perpetuated. Thus, even if early scholarship on trauma can be contested for being too focused on the individual experience and presenting a form of gender bias, it can still contribute to the discussion and understanding of trauma.

As the concept made its way to the humanities, the field of trauma studies emerged as an analytical approach to look at trauma representations. Cathy Caruth, whose ideas were widely influential, claimed that trauma is necessarily connected to a previous experience and that the events that produce trauma could not be completely grasped or put into words by those who experienced them; trauma produced emotions but its meaning could not be fully apprehended, and thus it could not be claimed (Caruth 91). Although Caruth does indicate the bond between memory and trauma, thus signaling that the effects of trauma can only be seen after the event that produces it, her claims that trauma is unspeakable and that it arises from a single event, have been subject to challenge. Her work has been criticized for not acknowledging the strength of narrativity and representation to address trauma, and for being too focused on a single trigger moment, ignoring trauma that may have emerged from historical processes. In discussing a

postcolonial approach to trauma, Irene Visser asserts that “Caruth’s model of trauma is characterized by homogenizing and dehistoricizing tendencies” (274). Instead of what she sees as Caruth’s “one fits all” approach, she calls for an understanding of the diverse characteristics of trauma and how it can be presented across individuals and groups.

This critique suggests that, as an alternative to a view of trauma as purely individual and not attached to history, there is a perspective of trauma as historical. On this matter, historian Dominick LaCapra sheds light on the traumatic impact that historical events and processes can have. For example, he states that destructive events such as the Holocaust or the dropping of bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki can produce “traumas that paradoxically become the valorized or intensely cathected basis of identity for an individual or a group” (23). Although this excerpt is focused on what he calls founding traumas, it illuminates LaCapra’s ideas on the historical and collective characteristics of some traumas. By stating that historical conditions that exceed a single event can affect groups, he challenges notions of trauma as dependent on a single event or affecting solely individuals. Furthermore, he posits that trauma can become engraved in a collective identity, surpassing the existence of trauma in just one person and one generation.

LaCapra also makes an important distinction on how to approach trauma, stating that the responses may obey to either acting out or working through the trauma experience. Melancholia and longing for the past are, in his view, forms of acting out that promote reiteration and repetition of trauma (mentioning repetition compulsion in a hint to Freudian thought), since the past is relived as if it were part of the present. On the other hand, mourning, narrative and representation appear as forms of working through, since they recognize a separation from the past, allowing for a critical view and for a recognition of difference in present conditions (70). While he points out the differences, he does state that acting out may be a necessary road for

reaching a working through stage. Thus, this historical view of trauma recognizes that while it may never be fully apprehended, attempting to represent traumatic pasts is helpful in claiming and understanding the trauma experience.

As the concept of trauma continues to be discussed, there is an increased awareness on its diversity and its strong ties with cultural and historical contexts. On that matter, the discussion by sociologist Jeffrey Alexander on trauma and its effects in collective identity approaches the topic from a cultural perspective that incorporates an understanding of traumatic experiences as influenced by events and historical processes, capable of affecting a collectivity, and in need of a process of representation for their traumatic qualities to be accepted. Therefore, Alexander's ideas are of utmost importance for the development of this research work. In his text *Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma*, he first posits that there is a "naturalistic fallacy" to the understanding of trauma, in which common belief states that events are inherently traumatic. On the contrary, he proposes that something is traumatic to the extent that a collectivity accepts it as such, having an impact not in the material or behavioral conditions of a group, but in their identity (8-10).

Alexander goes on to explain that there is a process to the representation of trauma in a collectivity, in which actors think of their painful experiences as a fundamental threat to their collective identity. The process first involves a claim of the experienced pain, then this claim must be borne by "carrier groups", which can be prestigious or not, generational, national, fragmented, and so on. These carrier groups may act as speakers or find speakers within them that make the claim accessible to an audience, thus carrying out the trauma process (11). This claim making will then have a significant effect in issues of identity:

“Experiencing trauma” can be understood as a sociological process that defines a painful injury to the collectivity, establishes the victim, attributes responsibility and distributes the ideal and material consequences. Insofar as traumas are so experienced, and thus imagined and represented, the collective identity will become significantly revised. This identity revision means that there will be a searching re-remembering of the collective past, for memory is not only social and fluid but deeply connected to the contemporary sense of the self (22).

Therefore, in Alexander’s view trauma is also—and in fact, fundamentally—about consequences, which are manifested in a collective sense of identity that can only be affected if there is a trauma process, in which the claim is projected to the carrier group. To bring the trauma process into completion, representations must fulfil the function of validating the trauma claim to a wider audience, provoking consequences that lead to a revision of the collective past experiences. The notion of trauma as unspeakable and inapprehensible, is thus transformed in this perspective, as the lack of representation indicates that the trauma process has not been completed. Furthermore, his ideas align with a decolonizing approach, as he discusses that cultural trauma studies must not be restricted to Western experiences, and that “the victims of Western traumas have disproportionally been members of subaltern and marginalized groups” (24).

This brief discussion of trauma and its collective qualities illuminates the central role that representation plays in the traumatic experience, as it is a fundamental in working through experiences affecting a collectivity’s identity. The films analyzed in this text are, in Alexander’s terms, representations of a collective pain that has affected the construction of identity. In these fictional cinematic works, the trauma claim is disseminated through fictional speakers that



represent carrier groups; therefore, the existence of these films implies an active trauma process. Fictional film is one of the many ways to render a trauma claim. However, it has certain particularities that stand out. Film represents trauma by simultaneously rendering the bodily experience of characters, their linguistic expression, as well as aural and visual cues that are indicative of a painful experience, thus appealing to a variety of forms of perception (Fahlenbrach 91). Furthermore, film selects the level of proximity that spectators perceive in relation to characters and scenes by choosing determined frames and points of audition to define spatiality, thus offering a deliberately designed level of closeness with the depicted experience.

Film historian Thomas Elsaesser addressed the possible effects of this aesthetic construction by discussing cinematic representations of the Holocaust. Elsaesser claimed that such a traumatic experience defies representation and poses the problem of which effects can be caused by its depiction. He asserted that problematic representations engage audiences through aesthetic pleasure more than through a critical approach. Furthermore, he argues that “the film experience is, par excellence, a site of mimetic emotions”, and that cinema is “on the side of the excessive, perverse or compulsive, rather than ruled by an aesthetics of detachment and distance” (150). If we are to assume that a certain degree of identification is inherent to cinema, it is fundamental to question how film aesthetics work with audience engagement not towards a project of aesthetic pleasure, but towards trauma representations that allow perception of diverse aspects of the trauma experience, promoting a critical perspective on what is rendered.

#### THE APPROACH TO STUDYING FILM SOUND

To explore the aural constructions rendered by the films analyzed in this text, my analysis is informed by scholarship on film sound studies, which relies heavily on terms and notions

proposed by Michel Chion, whose contributions to sound studies have been crucial for the development of the field. In chapter one I delve into Chion's ideas on the borders of sound, in which he distinguishes how diegetic and non-diegetic sounds are distributed, and in his discussion of the role of reverberation as a marker of the characters' position in the constructed film space. In chapter two, to approach the construction of a voice-over narrative in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, I discuss Chion's notions of the voice-over resource and the "acousmatic" voice as an aural element that signals to the existence of an unseen character. Finally, in chapter three, Chion's arguments on territory and ambient sounds are key in discussing the meaningful implications of a filmic soundscape.

Although my analysis involves a critical view of some of Chion's theoretical discussions, this short summary emphasizes that his exploration of the role of sound in cinema is foundational not just to this thesis but to the entire field of film sound studies. From his initial sound in cinema text *The Voice in Cinema* (1992), to the latest *Sound: An Acoulogical Treatise* (2015), Chion has explored a variety of sound-centered topics, such as the construction of the voice in film, the role of music, the evolution of film sound technologies, implications of sound in film time and film space, and he has applied his theory to succinct analyses of diverse films and their use of sound. Furthermore, his work represents an invaluable contribution to the creation of a theoretical framework to talk about film sound, as he has provided a variety of terms for discussions on cinematic aural constructions, and countless affirmations on the aesthetic composition of cinematic sound.

Beyond Chion, there are contributions to sound scholarship by several authors that inform this study. Sound scholar Rick Altman has provided scholarship with terms to discuss sound, with discussions of the aesthetic implications of technical sound aspects and has edited

volumes that place the work of sound scholars in dialogue. As in the case of Altman, many sound film studies texts consist of edited compilations, such as *Film Sound Theory and Practice* (Weis and Belton 1985), which includes historical, classical and modern approaches to sound theory as well as discussions on practice; or *Lowering the Boom: Critical Studies in Film Sound* (Beck and Grajeda 2008), which draws on the connections between sound, history, film genre, cultural studies, as well as ample case studies. These edited volumes are indicative both of an early interest in how synchronized sound would re-shape the world of cinema, and of a growth of the field, as interest in sound as a research object has increased since the eighties.

Scholarly and practical discussions presented by the aforementioned authors and editors, as well as by recent film sound case studies, are fundamental to the theoretical framework of this study. To consider the historical, technical and aesthetic discussions that have shaped the field of film sound studies, my analysis relies on discussions on sound synchronicity (Donnelly), sound music (Gorbman, Koizumi, Kramer), aural distribution in the filmic space (Fischer, Metz), and the subjective qualities of sound (Ford, Lovatt). Considering these ideas, I approach film sound as an aesthetic phenomenon with affective and representational implications. By this I mean that the aural composition of a film is relevant in eliciting emotional responses both from the characters in the film and from spectators in the audience; and that aural elements are capable of evoking meanings not just related to the sources from which sounds emerge, but to social, political and cultural elements intrinsically related to some sounds. Additionally, this approach implies not just an examination of the presence of sounds, but on how they are edited and spatialized, meaning how they are mixed. Throughout this study I argue that the mixing of sounds has implications in the production of meaning in aural constructions.

Among the sound concepts discussed in this study, one stands out as a novel approach in the construction and analysis of film sound: the sonic continuum. In *Occult Aesthetics: Synchronization of Sound in Film*, scholar Kevin J. Donnelly asserts that we encounter this sonic continuum when the sound design of a film delivers a unified field of sound: “Much as classical film musicals fused music with dialogue (or more accurately, we should use the term ‘voices’), some recent films have fused music with sound effects, creating a sonic continuum” (124). Although Donnelly focuses his affirmation on just two sound families, I argue that the sonic continuum entails thinking of all sound families (dialogue, music, effects, foleys, ambiance) not as separate working groups, but constituents of a larger aural project, which approaches aural elements through a design with similarities to musical composition.

For Donnelly, the design of a film’s sound as a sonic continuum encompasses both technical and aesthetic strategies. On the technical aspect, a musical approach applied to all sound families and a fusing of sound elements is possible because of an industry standard that employs musical software with audiovisual appropriate modifications to edit and mix film sound. Thus, sounds go through tools designed for the creation of music that have added certain elements to fit cinema, such as dialogue effects and mixers, or resources appropriate for mixing sounds in a film theater space. On the aesthetic front, Donnelly asserts that through the sonic continuum, sounds acquire more aesthetic than representational qualities, thus eliciting emotions and suggesting affective forces within the film (128).

The discussion of the sonic continuum is relevant for this study as it provides a framework for thinking of sounds not as functional but as representative of ideas, emotions or concepts. The development of a sonic continuum thus implies that through new technologies, sound design has the potential to work towards the creation of meaning, and not just the

representation of objects on screen. This approach to designing and mixing sound is more evident in the film analyzed in chapter three, *El Abrazo de la Serpiente* (2015), which, as I shall discuss, fuses sound elements towards a soundscape with evocative potential. However, traces of the sonic continuum as an approach to sound design can be found in the other two films analyzed, specifically in instances that employ diverse aural elements as markers of emotions instead of recurring to the use of non-diegetic music.

Apart from these theoretical avenues to think about sound in cinema, this research project investigates cultural connections suggested by aural elements. Hence, it was necessary to investigate which cultural groups were being represented in each film, with the purpose of consulting scholarship on particular cultural perspectives on sound that could be reflected in the sound design of the films analyzed. Research on cultural perspectives led to studies on Australian Aboriginal Yolngu modes of listening and of relating to sound, and studies on mythical perspectives on sound of Amazonian Indigenous groups, which inform the discussion of the connection between aural elements and their mixing, and aural practices distinctive to the groups represented in each film. One of the limitations of this research avenue was that there is little literature on Mi'kmaq approaches to understanding sound that could support analysis of cultural connections in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*. Chapter two nonetheless does present Mi'kmaq perspectives on relevant cultural issues presented by the film.

These concepts of film sound, representation of trauma, and studies on aural cultural perspectives, together provide a theoretical framework for the analysis of the studied films. The sequence analysis method employed entailed the selection of sequences in each film that were representative of emotional, disruptive, traumatic moments, and that presented sound resources that suggested connections beyond the mere representation of aural sources. For a clear, accurate

appreciation of the sound constructions of each sequence, I used Audio- Technica M40X professional monitoring headphones. Even high-quality headphones have limitations: they provide the 2.0 sound mix, instead of the regular 5.1 mix heard in an adequately calibrated studio or film theater. Thus, the discussions on spatialized mixing depart from a comprehension of distribution amongst two speakers instead of multiple, space distributed speakers.

The sequence analysis methodology involved charting to indicate: characters on scene, timing and duration of the sequence, time depicted by the sequence, space depicted, actions, diegetic sounds, non-diegetic sounds, and comments on how sounds were related to issues of trauma and to aural elements in other sequences. With sequences charted, I proceeded to the analysis of aural elements and their mixing in significant sequences, tying them to theoretical discussions on composition, spatialization, connection to other aural and visual elements, suggested affective and cultural connections, and of course, the relationship of the aural composition to elements representative of depictions of collective trauma. This approach enabled a rounded discussion of the production of meaning through sound, and representative of concepts and narrative constructions.

The technical aspects of the methodology signal to another limitation of this study. My analysis departs from an understanding of sound design and its complexities, and from an attempt to listen to the films in ideal conditions. It is necessary to acknowledge that larger audiences are rarely attuned to this form of layered listening. Furthermore, the films mostly circulate through festivals or digital streaming. As such, the conditions for larger audiences to listen to them are rarely ideal and their experience is different to that of someone listening through calibrated monitors or headphones, or in a THX theater. Thus, while this analysis is

based on the presence of sounds in the mix, and the appreciation of the mix itself, it does not pretend to claim there is a uniform aural experience of the films for audiences.

## THE FILMS

This thesis is divided into three chapters, each one devoted to the analysis of a film's aural construction and its relationship with representations of collective trauma. The corpus is comprised of three contemporary films produced between 2010 and 2015, that present Indigenous collective trauma through a decolonizing lens, have a sound design approach that diverges from mainstream approaches, deliver stories that include aspects of the cultural context of the group depicted and have core Indigenous members on the production crew. Chapter one presents the analysis of the Australian film *Charlie's Country*, chapter two deals with the Canadian production *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* and chapter three explores the aural construction of the Colombian film *El Abrazo de la Serpiente*. Each chapter addresses the films' depiction of collective trauma and the aspects that shape it, and explains how aural elements and forms of sound mixing contribute to the representation of said aspects.

*Charlie's Country* is a film by established Australian filmmaker Rolf de Heer, whose previous films depicting Aboriginal experiences—*The Tracker* (2002), *Ten Canoes* (2006)—were made in collaboration with members of the groups depicted. In fact, De Heer's tendency is to act as a vehicle for his collaborators to tell their stories, as in his own words he aims to “relinquish the almost absolute power normally associated with producing and directing a film and cede it to the people I'd be making [the film] with” (De Heer in Redwood 8). *Charlie's Country* is no exception. It was co-produced with the Bula'bula Arts Aboriginal Corporation, an organization that seeks to preserve and promote Yolngu culture. Furthermore, the script was co-

written with Aboriginal actor and protagonist of the film, David Gulpilil, who approached the screenplay as a way to tell his own story of alienation with his community, struggling with addiction and imprisonment, while also delivering a political perspective on Aboriginal life in his surroundings (Redwood 8). Therefore, *Charlie's Country* delivers a mix of a personal and political project of representation, taking the story of Gulpilil as indicative of a larger problem experienced by a collectivity.

Added to these characteristics is the fact that throughout his career, De Heer has placed particular attention to the sound design of his films. Sound designer Jim Currie, who has sustained a long collaboration of over twenty years with the filmmaker, claims that “Rolf de Heer’s care for sound is possibly the highest that you could imagine. And he involves himself in all levels of the sound work as well” (Currie 145). The sound designer also explains that De Heer has been active on doing his own recordings for his films, experimenting with microphones that could provide aural perspectives alternative to mainstream approaches, and in thinking about sound before beginning the production stage (146). Considering this, in chapter one I analyze how the carefully crafted aural construction of *Charlie's Country* works towards a political project of collective trauma representation.

*Rhymes for Young Ghouls* is the first feature film of Canadian Mi’kmaq director Jeff Barnaby, who had previously directed short films within the genres of science fiction and horror, that nevertheless already approached issues experienced by First Nations in Canada. Set in the seventies on a fictional reserve, the film delivers a revenge fantasy intertwined with the representation of real-life struggles of Indigenous peoples living on reserves, dealing with addictions, and facing the menace of the residential school system. The film touches on traumatic issues tied to memory and the need to forget as a coping mechanism, and even though it revolves



around the story of one character—a young woman named Aila—, Barnaby acknowledges that his debut feature speaks to a bigger picture that has left a mark across generations, and that in his film “there is a hole that you fill with forgetfulness” (44). Thus, the director himself sees this individual story as representative of a collective pain.

True to his first steps in filmmaking, Barnaby’s film addresses these traumatic experiences through a mix of film genres, delivering sequences with tints of horror, drama, thriller, and even an animated tale. The aural construction of *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* matches this genre diversity: it uses recurring constructions of sound traditionally associated with horror films, while narrating the story through a voice-over and scoring the film with a mix of original compositions, blues music and Catholic chants. Chapter two investigates this approach to constructing sound design and its possible relationship to the representation of collectively experienced painful events, the struggle to forget them and the fantasy of vengeance that brings the trauma experience to an end.

Finally, chapter three of this thesis explores the aural construction of Ciro Guerra’s third feature film *El Abrazo de la Serpiente*. Guerra’s films are distinguished for being stories that, in dealing with traumatic issues such as abandonment, violence and crime, step away from urban, violence-centered depictions of the Colombian setting, to explore rural landscapes filled with reflective characters. For Guerra “the representation [of violence] has been very problematic [...] and there hasn’t been a profound reflection on what it has represented for the country [...] I prefer to keep the violence out of the frame” (76). This approach to filmmaking can be appreciated in *El Abrazo de la Serpiente*, since although the film explores the consequences that Amazonian Indigenous peoples have faced as a result of cultural impositions and exploitation of natural resources in their land, the violence of these topics is not explicitly treated. In fact, the

film—set largely in the venues of traumatic experiences—renders the consequences more than the violent events, the aftermath instead of the moments of disruption. We encounter characters that have already faced loss, physical, cultural and psychological violence, and separation, and their stories reflect the wounds that trauma has caused.

The film is marked by distinct aesthetic choices: it was shot in black and white, it is told in two different times that mix throughout the plot, and it is, amongst the films here analyzed, a prime example of a carefully constructed sonic continuum, since as the film advances, aural elements are joined to produce a unified field of sound effect. In the film, sound design draws on resources such as a meaningful soundscape, the construction of pain through the bodily performance of the voice, and music with mixed styles of composition to render a story about the about both violent and peaceful contact between cultures, Western impositions on Indigenous peoples, violence provoked by conflict over resources, the sharing of knowledge and the relevance of memory and preservation of culture. Thus, even if the film is focused on one character, it refers to a larger context of traumatic experiences. My analysis is focused on finding the connections between elements of the sonic continuum and the representation of that collective pain as part of the trauma process.

This brief discussion of the context of the films establishes the basis for a comparative study, despite the disparate geographical and cultural settings. The three films all deliver stories of a single protagonist who is an individual shown to be the carrier of a pain experienced by a collectivity, with consequences that transcend generations. Moreover, the aftermath of these collective wounds is reinforced by a context that continues to be oppressive and marginalizing. As such, all three of these films work with the understanding that the trauma process is not over, and that attempting to forget the trauma claim is only a road to repetition and more pain. Since

these stories are constructed through image and sound, it is pertinent to investigate the project of sound in the depictions. With this work I hope to contribute to a discussion of film sound studies that looks beyond the object of sound itself, connecting cinematic aural constructions to the representation of relevant cultural issues.

## Chapter I

### ***Charlie's Country: Sound as a Marker of Traumatic Memories and Spaces***

In a poorly improvised living space, a man insistently looks at a photograph. Accompanied by a melancholic tune, sounds of insects and birds invade the space, but the insects themselves remain unseen. The man produces assent sounds while staring at the picture, and when putting it away, low sounds of traditional music, cheering and clapping are suddenly heard, becoming a part of the scene, in the absence of images to support their presence. Such is the beginning of *Charlie's Country* (Australia, 2013), Rolf de Heer's acclaimed film about the efforts of an Aboriginal man to survive and define his identity in a land controlled by oppressive powers. This brief vignette of Charlie's struggles highlights the complexity of the film's sound design as it forges a powerful association between non-diegetic sound and memory. In this chapter I argue that sound elements are essential in evoking the protagonist's traumatic loss of land and autonomy, as well as his alienation from his culture and community.

The story in *Charlie's Country* is set during the implementation of the Northern Territory National Emergency Response, a conservative initiative enacted in Australia between 2007 and 2013, which had as its alleged objective the reduction of child abuse in the country's Aboriginal communities. The plan implemented actions such as banning Aboriginal people from drinking alcohol, controlling entrance to their land and managing their communities' access to food, goods and services, all of which would be entirely controlled by the Australian government (Keenan 465). In the film, the implementation of this initiative causes multiple problems for Charlie and his community: land and housing are given to white men who implement the initiative, health services for Aboriginal people are deficient, and their access to food is

controlled by the government. The latter represents the biggest issue, as the food they are given is unhealthy and the police forbids all forms of hunting.

The reality derived context that frames *Charlie's Country* clarifies the film's political qualities, through which a fictional representation of a pain experienced collectively is depicted. The film is not just a story of an individual's conflicts, it is also about the oppression and difficulties experienced by Australian Aboriginal people. As such, I claim that *Charlie's Country* is a representation of collective trauma. In discussing this concept, it is first important to distinguish how it is different from individual trauma. For trauma to be collective it must go beyond an individual's psyche and their capacity to respond, instead it must affect social relationships that shape a sense of community (Erikson 154). Sociologist Jeffrey Alexander sustained that events are not traumatic in themselves, but they become traumatic because of the meaning assigned to them through sociocultural processes: "Traumatic status is attributed to real or imagined phenomena, not because of their actual harmfulness or their objective abruptness, but because these phenomena are believed to have abruptly, and harmfully affected collective identity" (8).

Thus, Alexander implies that conditions of collective trauma must arise from the conviction that the identity of a group has been affected by events in which they are directly or indirectly involved. This is reflected in *Charlie's Country* through the claims of its main character, who asserts that people sent by the government are in fact invading his country, and that they prevent him and his community from living in their own way, thus affecting their sense of community and identity. Charlie embodies collective trauma, becoming—in a fictional setting—what Alexander characterized as a speaker for carrier groups<sup>3</sup>, one that through

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<sup>3</sup> For a definition of carrier groups, see Alexander 11.

storytelling has an objective to “project the trauma claim to the audience-public” (12). Charlie’s character, although fictional, functions as a representation of a real-world experience of Australian Aboriginal peoples generally, and Yolngu people specifically.

The trauma claim of the film is framed by two fundamental issues: agency over space and preservation of culture. The first is reflected in Charlie’s difficulties to feel agency over the space he inhabits and in which he creates relationships with others. These problems force him to move across spaces that range from forests to urban settings, into which he enters when facing crises. Although we are mostly spectators to Charlie’s story, it is clear that these problems with space are common to other members of his community. In regard to culture preservation, Charlie must decide whether to stay in his town, despite the extraordinary constraints, and integrate into his life the activities that preserve the culture, knowledge and traditions of his Aboriginal group, or risk becoming completely alienated. The effect of these choices is not limited to Charlie and his experience; instead it extends to his community and its capacity to stabilize identity through cultural practices.

*Charlie’s Country* depiction of collective trauma is supported by a variety of narrative and aesthetic cinematic devices. I posit that aural elements, their interactions with images and with each other, as well as the way they are mixed in the audible space, are fundamental to establishing the constitutive elements of Charlie’s trauma in the film. To support this argument, I will first discuss how sounds evoke cultural memories, then show how spaces represented in the film are tied to issues of collective trauma through sound devices. I will then extend the analysis

of the relationship of space and soundscape<sup>4</sup> to reveal how the soundscapes of familiar and unfamiliar spaces reflect traumatic conditions. Finally, I will articulate the film's work toward reconnection to land through its sound practices.

#### SOUND-MEMORIES OF A LOST COUNTRY

As outlined above, the opening sequence emphasizes both the importance of aural elements and a connection between sound and memory. Within this sequence sound elements articulate pathways of memory. Although Charlie is silent, sounds of cheering and clapping erupt in the audible space although no images support them: this mismatch of sound and image invites the audience into understanding that such sounds arise from Charlie's consciousness, while the fact that he is looking at a photograph evokes these aural elements as memories. This effect can be explained through one of the three borders of film sound, defined by sound theorist Michel Chion. The onscreen-non-diegetic border describes a form of film sound design in which sound with visual sources appears simultaneously with sound from unseen sources that belong to a different space or time than that portrayed by the visual.<sup>5</sup> In this case, it is sounds of clapping combined with an image of Charlie alone, looking at a photograph. On this matter, Chion states:

The onscreen non-diegetic border is more rarely used and crossed by voices and sound effects; it's easy to see why, since it is the boundary between the here and now, visible as such, and a world that lies outside of space and time [...] crossing this border, or

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<sup>4</sup> Soundscapes are to be understood as the sonic environments of a represented space in film. For a discussion of soundscapes as the sonic environments of real places see Southworth 65. For the concept understood as ambient or territory sounds in film, see Chion 467.

<sup>5</sup> For further detail on the three borders of sound see Chion 259.

establishing communications over it, is generally reserved for a single privileged sound element: music (260).

Thus, in the non-diegetic border, music is usually foregrounded, overpowering other aural elements. In this sense, what Chion posits as a rare use of sound, is put to the test by the opening in *Charlie's Country*, not only by using on-screen, off-screen and non-diegetic sounds, but by combining music, voices and sound effects in the non-diegetic border of the opening sequence.

By bending mainstream conventions of non-diegetic sound, it becomes clear that the aural qualities of this first sequence aim to evoke another place or time. Without image representation of these other spaces through flashbacks, the audience must rely on the available sound and visual resources. Sounds of cheering and clapping as Charlie puts the photograph away, become an element that brings forward memories. In his study of cinematic time, philosopher Gilles Deleuze-refers to this kind of phenomenon as a virtuality brought to the present by actuality. He asserts that “the virtual image (pure recollection) is not a psychological state or a consciousness: it exists outside of consciousness, in time” (80). Though Deleuze’s claim focuses on the image, it can be extended to the realm of non-diegetic sound. This is reflected in the aural construction of this initial sequence, in which Charlie’s aural recollections—cheering, clapping and music—act as virtual sounds that belong in a different time than that visually depicted, thus connecting the actual depicted time to times passed through virtual aural elements.

It is noticeable that non-diegetic sound effects, which here belong to a past time and space, are used in combination—although not simultaneously—with non-diegetic music, which exists beyond the film’s story world, or diegesis, and this outside of time. In analyzing this phenomenon, Claudia Gorbman states that film music is “programmed to match the mood or



feelings of the narrative scene of which it is a part, to bathe it in affect” (57); it “enters to satisfy a need to compensate for, fill in, the emotional depth not verbally representable”(67). By these statements, Gorbman establishes an emotional function for music, one that fills the void of not explicitly representable and yet perceivable affects.<sup>6</sup>

The music that accompanies the first sequence of *Charlie’s Country* is a piano melody that I have previously characterized as melancholic. The adjective “melancholic” is of course part of a personal appreciation in which I as a spectator attempt to put the affects promoted by music into words. However, it could also be characterized as peaceful, nostalgic, or emotional. The very fact that such affective forces are difficult to convey in words shows that musical accompaniment is a form of film syntax that serves a non-verbal, affective function for the audience, working as guide into the emotional nature of the narrative situation portrayed.

Therefore, when *Charlie’s Country* introduces the audience to the film, non-diegetic music and sound effects address two sets of film viewing experiences, the one of the audience’s emotional connection to the film, and that of gathering knowledge about Charlie’s memories and his past. The presence of music aims to guide the audience into a range of probable emotions and affects, being there specifically for spectators going through the viewing experience, and not as part of Charlie’s experience in the film. Meanwhile, the ovation-related sound effects provide film viewers with a window into Charlie’s past and memories. While one is there entirely for spectators’ emotional engagement with the movie, the other establishes an affective bond between the audience and Charlie’s experience.

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<sup>6</sup> The concept of affects as emotions not representable through language has been explored by Brian Massumi in *Parables for the virtual: movement, affect, sensation*.

As the film advances, other sequences deliver sound design moments that focus on evoking memory: Tired of being harassed by the local police that takes his hunting instruments away, since they are deemed weapons, and distressed by one of his community members being taken away to die alone in a hospital, Charlie decides to leave his government assigned “home”—a sheet-metal improvised house that barely provides him with any protection—to live in the bushes, where he will be able to hunt and therefore eat. During this time, Charlie must face the disconnection he has with his culture and the gaps in his knowledge about traditional modes of survival. He becomes ill and overwhelmed by his difficulties to survive in the forest. This realization of his crisis of cultural identity, along with his health problems, provide another moment of sound evoking memory, but this time the remembrances have different qualities.

A close up of Charlie sleeping in the dark is accompanied by prevalent sounds of crickets and insects, when suddenly far away non-diegetic voices appear. The camera slowly moves up and frames finger-made paintings on the trees that provide the character with precarious shelter. Along with an apparent visual depiction of a river, sounds of water flowing emerge in crescendo. The flowing water sound is followed by voices, sounds of wind, drones, chants, and musical instruments that appear while the image fades to diverse parts of the paintings. Although this could be interpreted as a dream state, the sequence finishes with Charlie in close up, his eyes now wide open and looking into the distance.

Previous to this dream-contemplation state, the protagonist is seen talking to himself about ancient customs of nourishment, specifically describing his community elders’ practice of eating ashes, and reflecting on the fact that all his ancestors are gone. This signals his feeling of isolation from those who can put him in contact with memories of his culture, a situation that prevents him from adequately surviving by himself in the bushes. The dream sequence that

comes next, brings forward a connection to such thoughts of crisis, which are manifested in an unconscious manner through aural elements rendered with singular accuracy: sounds of nature along with voices and chants appear with high aural definition, yet the paintings in the tree bark have diffuse editing cuts and their implied meaning is supported by non-diegetic sounds that are delivered simultaneously. These aural components appear as embedded in Charlie's recollections with a much higher accuracy than visual elements.

However, Charlie's highly accurate aural memory is momentary, and it appears as part of moment that travels between hallucination and contemplation. The use of heightened accurate sounds connected to his past and memory, and their subsequent disappearance also exposes his disconnection from memories of his culture. An ethnographic study of Yolngu Aboriginal communities suggests that sound is a privileged sense that fulfills functions not only of tending to immediate needs but of establishing a connection between a community and their past: "A wide range of sounds allows Yolngu to communicate with each other for practical purposes, between people and the ancestors in the course of daily life and between people and ancestors in ritual" (Magowan 105). Considering this belief that contact with the ancestors and community can be established through adequate interpretation of surrounding sounds, Charlie's statement that his ancestors are gone, along with the loss of aural memories that are only present in a dreamlike state, signals the rupture between him and his culture's way of thinking about sound.

The acoustic conditions of this dream sequence still deliver the impression of being remembrances, but they go beyond Charlie's individual perspective. Sounds such as chants, musical instruments, and ceremonial voices shape a soundscape of cultural practices that exist within collective recollections, thus entering the realm of cultural memory. The concept of cultural memory and the elements that constitute it, are subject to an ongoing discussion.

According to Jan Assmann it “comprises that body of reusable texts, images and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose ‘cultivation’ serves to stabilize and convey that society’s self-image” (132). While Assmann points out the relevance of these memories for shaping identity, he mostly refers to an objectified and visual paradigm that relies on institutional forms of transmission to construct a canon, ignoring the role of memories that cannot be visualized and that are mediated by individuals who have a high regard for communal ways of living.

According to memory studies scholar Astrid Erll, cultural memory is integrated by processes of a sociocultural nature that relate past and present, involve remembering and forgetting, and require the interrelation of individuals and collectivities (1). What the sequence portrays is precisely a representation of the main character’s experience with said sociocultural processes, not as a passive receptor of visual, tangible and institutionally established practices, but as an individual who mediates the memories of a collectivity, and that struggles to keep them within his recollections. The identity shaped by cultural memory appears in the film as elusive to Charlie, and only achievable in unconsciousness, through the remembrance of sounds that connect him to group practices and that fade away as soon as the character regains consciousness. This instability of the character’s memories represented through the conjunction of sound and visual devices in this sequence, is an important element in the film’s construction of a trauma representation: the traumatic loss defies language and conscious expression.

In Charlie’s land there are two groups of inhabitants, Aboriginal peoples and white officials of the government who are assigned places to live and are in charge of ensuring that the government policies are followed. Although these groups coexist in the space Charlie lives in, he cannot fully belong in either of them or alienate himself completely from these communities. Despite his attempt to be isolated and to follow traditional ways, the trauma of not belonging,

losing connection to the land and slowly starving, is expressed through the fear of cultural memory loss. What this aural dream sequence brings forward through sound is the fact that a portion of those memories are still in Charlie's mind; however, they need to be remediated through speakers, such as the distressed character, in order to keep existing in the social group's psyche.

The traumatic conditions described here arise as part of a process, a series of events and conditions of oppression that go beyond the represented period and that are ongoing. This particular film representation therefore demonstrates the obsolescence of concepts of trauma that consider such a condition only arises from specific events that affect individuals and not groups.<sup>7</sup> The viewer will not find a single event that represents the origin of a sense of disconnection and identity crisis in *Charlie's Country*. On the contrary, what the film delivers is a representation of a trauma that is continuously being built, experienced by a collectivity and represented through Charlie's character. In the representation of this trauma process, sound design devices referring to cultural recollections are fundamental to depict the fear of losing collective memory.

As *Charlie's Country* continues to display fragments of memory through sound, aural elements become more and more crucial in the representation of trauma. A prime example is the film's rendering of traumatic conditions through a construction of three moments connected at different points of the plot. The first moment happens when Charlie talks to a member of his community—presumably belonging to his family, although the film does not clarify this relationship—that will be taken away to die in a city hospital. The older man he talks to sheds a

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<sup>7</sup> Cathy Carruth's discussion of trauma as event-focused has been criticized for being overly individualistic and Eurocentric. For a response to Carruth's approach, see Irene Visser's discussion of decolonizing trauma theory, pages 3-5.

tear and explains he is ill, and that he will be taken to the city of Darwin.<sup>8</sup> Charlie responds to this by saying: “Then you’ll die in the wrong place, a long way from your country, a long way. There’ll be no one with you, no one to look after you” (00:31:42). This first moment serves the purpose of expressing Charlie’s concerns about his relationship to the land, and how severing it, leads to loneliness. Concurrently, this sequence functions as a seed of time that will open the possibility to express Charlie’s distress through sound in future sequences.

The second moment comes as the main character walks through his town and sees the older man about to be taken away in a small plane. The sound of the engine appears in the audible space before the machine is actually in motion. The closing of the aviation device door is unseen, yet the sound reverbs while the screen remains fixed in a medium-close up of Charlie observing. As the aircraft sounds become louder, the protagonist sheds a tear in the opposite side of his face as the older man did in the previous sequence, mirroring his expression. As the tear ends its falling, loud engine sounds fade away without showing the plane’s departure, with the camera still focused on Charlie’s expression. The third and final moment of this construction happens long after these events, when Charlie is rescued from the bushes in which he now lies sick and unable to move. The same plane sound of the second moment provides a transition from a scene of him laying on a doctor’s office bed, to him inside the aircraft being transported to Darwin. During a close up of Charlie with a wandering look, the prevalent machine sound slowly fades into nature sounds as a panning shows the landscape being left behind through the window.

Upon establishing that this three-moment construction creates a connection between memory and trauma, I also argue that unlike previously described moments of the film, in which audiences must assume aural memories belong in another time or space of Charlie’s life, this

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<sup>8</sup> Darwin is the capital of the Northern Territories in Australia

particular depiction is constructed to be a memory and to become part of a traumatic event in the film. There is almost a half an hour difference between the first moment the plane is heard accompanying the older man's departure, and the evoking of the same sound in Charlie's transportation sequence. Thus, the circumstances surrounding the first time the engine sound is depicted serve as a bridge to render a portrayal of Charlie's fears of death and distancing from his community, through the simultaneous work of aural elements with visual and narrative devices. In the third moment, the fading of the engine sound into sounds of nature appears as an unrealistic rendering of the experience of being in an aircraft, thus shifting from the employment of aural devices as a mere tools to create a sense of realism, to a more expressive and meaning-evocative approach to sound design.

The cross-fade between engine and nature sounds in this third moment of memory construction contributes to representing the character's fear of dying away from his country. As the loud engine noise gives way to sounds inherent to the space being left behind, the scene conveys the sense of land disappearing into the distance and an uncertain future ahead. This sequence establishes a connection to the first part of this construction of traumatic memories, in which Charlie had expressed distress and fear of disconnection from a land that, although controlled by oppressive powers, was nevertheless his.

As seen, *Charlie's Country* offers a wide range of opportunities for sound to evoke memory. Some deliver an impression of belonging in another time, some represent cultural memories shared between the main character and his community, while others construct remembrances throughout the plot, to depict moments of crisis. Sound drifts from being a mere element to provide realism, to an expressive vehicle that evokes and constructs memories related

to the trauma process experienced by the main character, both as an individual within the plot and as a fictional representative of the experiences of a carrier group.

#### TRAUMA AND TROUBLESOME SPACES

When discussing memory representation through sound design in *Charlie's Country*, it becomes clear that its mnemonic cinematographic devices are part of a bigger picture: depicting trauma. While the story is fictional and therefore its rendering of trauma is delivered as imagined by the director, screenplay writers, and those involved in the aesthetic and narrative aspects of the movie, its connection to a non-fictional context is clear, as the conditions depicted reflect the policies of the Northern Territories Intervention implemented by the Australian government. In researching traumatic pasts and their representations in media, Astrid Erll asserts that “film can vividly portray individual and collective memory—its contents, its workings, its fragility and its distortions—by coding it into aesthetic forms” (2) and that represented pasts are “always already mediated memories” (3), hence, trauma in *Charlie's Country* is rendered through remediating in cinema the memories of an experience lived by Aboriginal populations of Northern Australia, and in this remediation, the aesthetic of sound plays a fundamental role in the construction and portrayal of trauma.

As with memory, several sequences draw upon forms of sound aesthetic to deliver situations that progressively convey collective trauma. In that sense, I will now refer to a particular sequence that, through sound, evokes Charlie's crises in regard to space and autonomy over his land. Before this sequence, Charlie states that he wishes to have a house of his own, one that is not shared with his family—negating a communal way of living and expressing a desire to live as the “white men” do—and that he is upset that those working with the government get a house on his land. In the sequence of interest Charlie lies sleeping on a mattress on the grass.



Ambient sounds of birds and insects chirping are part of the soundscape, when suddenly sounds of a man named Gus calling for Charlie's attention are heard offscreen. Becoming impatient at the fact that Charlie remains asleep, Gus makes a loud noise by banging on the metal sheets that shelter Charlie, until he finally wakes up.

The mixing of ambient sounds that appear with clear definition, a high volume and as present in the entire audible space, renders an impression of these sounds pervasively entering Charlie's shelter, denoting the lack of real separation between his space and the outside. Gus's voice is mixed without evident reverberation and a loud volume, resulting in an impression of him as almost inside the space depicted visually. Moreover, disregarding Charlie's rest or privacy, Gus hits the metallic material that shapes the shelter, producing a loud, reverberant sound that evokes how simple it is to disturb Charlie, as his simulated individually owned space is in fact in the middle of an open, unprotected land. The rendering of an impression of external sounds invading a visually closed space, thus breaks the simulation of a distinction between public and private space. This aural composition functions in conjunction with visual devices, as the frame remains fixed in a medium shot of Charlie, leaving all prevalent sounds in the off-screen space. The expectation of a shot-reverse-shot to reveal the source of disturbance is subverted, focusing visual aspects in Charlie and his reactions.

Besides ambient sounds and effects, the mixing of dialogue is of special importance in conveying the characteristics of Charlie's space and the relationships enacted in it, aspects which are evoked by the avoidance of reverberations in the speech of both characters. When discussing reverb effects applied to voices on film, sound theorist Rick Altman claimed that absence of reverberation not only indicates closeness, but it is a sign of a sound spoken towards the audience (61). This sequence exhibits the debatable nature of Altman's statement, since the

dialogue from Gus—who remains unseen throughout the sequence—is not spoken towards the audience, but towards Charlie. Therefore, in the off-screen space, the man should be with his back turned to the audience, and yet, the lack of evident reverbs in his voice produces an impression of it being as present, or perhaps even more, as Charlie’s voice. The convention that in a realistic setting “when someone speaks to us with his back turned we perceive fewer of the voice’s harmonics and find the voice less present” (Chion 92), is also challenged. By making Gus’s voice an element that fills the entire on-screen space, the film subverts conventional forms of spatializing speech. Thus, the mixing of this sequence, rather than adhering to film sound design conventions, is focused on evoking Charlie’s space as a simulation of a place owned by him, which in fact can be easily entered by unwelcomed others.

It is also noticeable that this moment of the film does not depict an explicitly traumatic event. Nevertheless, it subtly reveals information on the nature of Charlie’s relationship to space and his lack of autonomy over the land he inhabits, mainly because of the impositions of white men who control his territory. This problematic relation to his land is evidenced through film sound aesthetic forms. The issues of agency over his space are a fundamental aspect of the crises presented by the film, and of the collective trauma portrayed.

A further set of sequences depicts Charlie trying his luck in a different setting, the bushes. The character considers that in this space he will be free to obtain food from a natural setting, and that in a place uncontrolled by authorities, he will be able to reconnect with traditional ways of living. The set of sequences begins after Charlie leaves his town, telling one of his friends that he seeks to live “the old way”. A non-diegetic piano tune that resembles the one in the opening sequence accompanies the beginning of this journey. However, music now has a hopeful, uplifting tone, as if this re-encounter with a natural surrounding would actually

allow the character to work through his crisis. The non-diegetic piece is heard throughout his first moments in the bushes, as he picks up fruits from trees, walks around getting to know the territory, starts to paint in tree bark, and as he builds a set of spears and a precarious refuge. It is quite a cheerful set of sequences. However, the presence of non-diegetic pieces of music poses some questions about its problematic use, especially in relation to the rest of elements that compose *Charlie's Country* sound design.

While non-diegetic music is quite scarce throughout the film, it appears in a few moments as a variation of the piano tune from the initial sequence, and it follows two main principles of mixing and composition of classical film music. One is the effect of inaudibility understood as music “not meant to be heard consciously” (Gorbman 72). The second is that of functioning as a “signifier of emotion” that triggers “specific moods and emphasizes particular emotions suggested in the narrative” (72). While this use of music is suitable for a conventional Hollywood narrative, it contradicts the film’s project on arranging aural elements in a way that they demand the audience’s attention, eliciting a state of contemplation and reflection on what is being heard, and subverting the notion of sounds as mere supporting elements of realism.

On the contrary, non-diegetic music in the film is compliant with a classical Hollywood model of eliciting emotions, and its use has nothing to do with subtlety but rather with guiding viewers into a particular set of feelings. This contrasting use of music poses some issues for rendering collective trauma through sound. While other aural elements contribute to shaping a portrayal of the memories and crises that shape the traumatic experience of the group Charlie represents, the moments in which non-diegetic melodies appear promote a vicarious form of identification. This leads us to consider what sort of engagement sound promotes in representations of collective trauma. Historian Dominick LaCapra posits that in witnessing

mediated traumatic experiences, there must be a distinction between vicarious and virtual experiences of spectators as second witnesses. LaCapra claims that depending on the construction of depictions of the pain of others, different forms of empathy can arise. One form results in a mere emotional engagement with stories that produces sympathy for the characters. The other, which he names “empathic unsettlement” and argues is the most desirable, leads to “*heteropathic identification*, in which emotional response comes with respect for the other and the realization that the experience of the other is not one’s own” (40). The non-diegetic music in *Charlie’s Country* serves the purpose of a pleasurable, affective guide, working as an index of moments that should be considered emotional, and enabling audience’s identification with Charlie’s pain. Thus, the presence of non-diegetic music does not contribute to depicting the social, cultural and political particularities of the experience represented. Instead it poses the problematic risk of an emotional identification with the character, which in turn, relegates the elements of the collective trauma depicted to the background.

Flawed as it may be, the presence of non-diegetic music is scarce, and in the aforementioned set of sequences in the forest, the shift between a pleasurable musical moment to the rendering of unnerving soundscapes, creates a contrast that contributes to rendering the crisis faced by Charlie in that setting. When music fades away, the character’s first approach to a new life ends with him ecstatically exclaiming: “I’m free now! Lots of fish... I have my own supermarket! And this is my country! I can dance with it” (00:50:30). This scene is followed by a close up of the fire he sleeps next to, accompanied by sounds of faraway birds, flames and wood crackling. Eventually, these sounds are overtaken by sounds of thunderclaps, which become increasingly present in the audible space. The hiss of fire extinguished by drops of water is heard

with a loud volume, while visually, the reddish tone of the flames gives way to darkness, ending the sequence with the sound of massive rain that puts a definitive end to the fire.

The latter scene is symbolic in representing the rupture between Charlie's expectations of living a life the old way, and the harshness of being by himself without a community, network of support, or sufficient skills to survive. The space he had claimed as his own country now faces a different kind of invasion: unwavering rain that renders his shelter useless and his efforts to find food pointless. The loud sound of water pouring down in the forest dominates the following scenes for a minute and a half, while the character is seen struggling, without producing any sort of speech. It is in this instance when the disparity between the previous hopeful tone provided by music clashes with the overwhelming sound of a natural element that completely dominates Charlie's surroundings. A moment that guided the affect of audiences through music—evoking hope and triumph—is suddenly transformed, by returning to an aesthetic that relies on other sound families to produce meaning.

Leaving behind the problems posed by non-diegetic music in the film, Charlie's misfortunes in the forest establish the sound of water as a relevant component to express relations between the character and the spaces he interacts with. In this point of the film, water—as the space he tries to inhabit—cannot be controlled, and paradoxically its loudness produces the impression of occupying the open forest space entirely. During the dream of sound memories previously discussed, the sound of water evokes a calm stream, producing the notion of water passing through a restricted, yet open natural space with which the character can calmly interact. This form of listening to water is within the set of sound-memories that the character longs for and that represent cultural memories he attempts to recover. Therefore, a more controlled sound

of water brings forward a representation of the relation he expects to have to a natural, not regulated space.

In a later moment when Charlie is in the city, he stands in front of an ATM trying to withdraw money to purchase alcohol. Once again, the sound of water becomes present, but this time in an artificial manner. As the sound of Charlie pressing ATM buttons is foregrounded, in the background, water emerges from a floor fountain. The sound is repetitive and as the scene nears its end, it becomes louder and louder, until it fades into an artificial drone sound that leads a transition into the next sequence. This is the most artificial presentation of water sounds throughout the film, and it evidences the city as a controlled space in which a natural element becomes decorative. Water is no longer profuse and causing difficulties, nor does it represent memories of past interactions with nature. It is actually ignored by Charlie, as his main goal is focused on obtaining money and alcohol. The sound of water is simply there, in total disconnection from its space and from the characters interacting in it, no matter how loud it gets.

#### THE SOUND OF UNFAMILIAR SPACES

After Charlie is found dangerously ill in the forest, he is transported to a hospital in the city of Darwin. During his stay at the health center, sound once again contributes to depicting the character's traumatic experience. The scenes at the hospital have a unique aural quality in relation to the rest of the settings throughout the film: there is complete isolation from sounds of natural ambiance and a noticeable presence of room tone. This construction of hospital sound remains as the protagonist finds his friend that was previously taken previously to Darwin. The man is found lying in a bed, accompanied only by the sound of a hospital machine. While Charlie contemplates and loudly cries next to his friend, the machine sound starts to increase in volume and definition. As Charlie walks away the room tone also becomes louder, starting to

transform into the sound of high-volume, distorted wind in a closed space. The sound produced by the wheels on his I.V. hanger mount, acquires high reverberance, and the I.V. drip sound becomes present also with noticeable reverb, even though the drip is unseen.

All these qualities are added to sounds that had been previously presented in a realistic manner, and their transformation goes hand in hand with the character's distress. These changes give the impression of being part of the protagonist's perception and of being connected to his emotions. The connection between sound perception and emotion has been explored by research in neuropsychology. Findings in this area suggest that sadness stimulates distraction by paying high attention to surrounding details in an attempt to regain control of a situation, and that distress and sorrowful emotions can be associated with heightened attention to deviant sounds (Pacheco-Unguetti & Parmentier 204). Of course, it is quite unlikely that the sound design of this sequence was informed by neuropsychological research. However, this particular moment demonstrates how sound designers use strategies to represent heightened emotional states by making a character's perception accessible to spectators. Although the change in deviant sound characteristics may be a result of the sound designer's intuition, it does render the effect of perceiving sound as the character does, of entering his mind and his way of listening to surroundings unfamiliar to him.

As Charlie cries and says he needs to go back home, the mutation in the nature of sounds surrounding him represents a change in his perception which arises as a product of sadness and distress. This is demonstrated not only through the heightened characteristics of sound, but because these go back to normal when the character strongly pulls the I.V. from his arm and decides to leave. Through this act, he regains control over his actions, and chooses to leave a setting that causes him pain. In this instance, sound design plays with perception by counter

posing altered sounds not only with their original depiction but with their visual representation: the wheels are not actually seen, and although the IV bag is visualized in the frame, there is no shot of the liquid that drips from it. This sound construction renders a dissociation between the seen and the heard, disregarding expectations of sounds in film as always correspondent with their visual sources. On the matter of film sound design drifting from representations of objective reality, film scholar John Belton asserts:

One could argue that even our experience of on-screen sound involves, though in a much less extreme form, a recognition of a reality of a different order, a reality one step removed from that of the images. The sound track corresponds not, like the image track, directly to “objective reality” but rather to a secondary representation of it, i.e., to the images that in turn guarantee the objectivity of the sounds. The sound track, in other words, does not undergo the same tests of verisimilitude to which images are subjected. Images attain credibility in the conformation to objective reality; sounds in their conformation to the images of that reality, to a derivative reconstruction of objective reality. (Belton 66)

Belton notices that through the alteration of sounds, an alternative construction of reality can be rendered. This is consistent with the depiction of Charlie in the hospital, as sounds are altered in this scene to evoke another layer of the character’s experience. The soundscape that surrounds the fiction is refashioned into representing the character’s sadness and distress, offering a pathway into Charlie’s perception. This is made possible because the visual referent remains unchanged as sound acquires new characteristics that evoke a range of meanings. The film’s depiction of Charlie’s time in the hospital demonstrates how, in the represented trauma process, not only events, but emotions play a relevant role. In the film this is expressed by the



fact that images render a moment engraved in its relation to reality, while sound offers an alternative possibility for depicting emotions and perception.

After his hospital stay, the conflicts of belonging experienced by Charlie result in his complete alienation both from his Aboriginal community and from the Western culture that has occupied his land and intervened in his way of life. Charlie joins a group of several Aboriginal characters who are connected through alcohol consumption, and are also separated from a community. The fact that he is not banned from purchasing liquor, turns him into an instrument for this community of exiles. The bond he establishes with them is not created because of cultural memory or tradition, nor because he has managed to enter the aspirations posed by Western modernity, but because of choices that separate them from any identifiable group. Although the stories of this separated community are not revealed, through the depiction of the rather large group, the film implies that several individuals under diverse circumstances undergo similar stories to the one that Charlie is experiencing, thus establishing that while *Charlie's Country* may be focused on an individual, he represents a story common to many others. As such, he is a speaker for a group that carries grief and trauma with them, and that finds in overconsumption of alcohol a form of challenging authority while escaping the identity conflicts that surround their trauma processes.

Refusing to return to his town, spiraling into alcoholism, and after a violent encounter with the police, Charlie is eventually detained and taken to prison. To depict this setting, the film's sound design explores the representation of trauma through the construction of apparent silence. Sound scholars and theorists coincide in the notion that "silence, absolute silence is a rarity in contemporary cinema and television" (Th  berge 51). What is commonly encountered is a sense of silence produced by the absence of dialogue and/or music, and therefore, only possible

when other sounds (effects, ambiance, foleys) permit a contrast between the rendered and the absent. In an early study of film theory, critic Bela Balazs characterized silence as “an acoustic effect, but only where sounds can be heard” (117). What this implies is that even though audiences may perceive a film as quiet, this impression is the result of contrast offered by other sounds. In accordance to this, *Charlie's Country* silence is not absolute. In fact, it is only Charlie who remains silent, and yet the absence of his voice evokes meaning.

The character's silent demeanor begins after his trial and conviction. When the judge requests some words from him, Charlie speaks first in Yolngu Matha and then translates into English: “My country is my home. I was living in my home, nice and peacefully, then the police came to throw me out. Nothing more to say” (01:23:10). This last fragment of speech turns into a declaration, not only for the judge, but for the aesthetic forms of sound that will appear in following sequences to build an impression of silence. When transferred to prison, the character produces no dialogue. This is a break with previous practices of speech, considering that even in sequences where he has been completely alone, he has at least talked to himself. At his arrival to prison, Charlie is framed through a medium close up with a dark background, while a member of the prison staff shaves his beard and hair. He looks up to the front, almost staring at the camera, as the electric razor sound is heard, accompanied by music with the same melancholic tone of the opening sequence.

The presence of music is not only problematic in the sense of the previous discussion of the matter, but in the effective construction of silence. The razor sound by itself could produce a powerful effect, as it is heard while the character is stripped of his chosen self-image, his freedom and his voice; it functions in contrast to his quietness and that of the guards around him whose faces remain unseen. However, this sound is less present than music, and the range of

meanings it can evoke is overshadowed by the emotions being suggested by the melody.

Moreover, as emotions are being guided, the strength of the visual cut from framing the character still with small, scattered amounts of hair, to a shot of him completely hairless, is diminished by obscuring the clicking turning off sound of the razor with fading music. This initial approach to constructing film silence through sound effects and non-diegetic music, intervenes in the contemplation of Charlie's sorrowful countenance and in effectively rendering an impression of long-lasting silence. Nevertheless, his quietness as the time in prison advances, and even as he is visited by a friend from his community, overcomes the initial problems posed by music, allowing the statement "Nothing more to say" (01:24:19) to acquire its full strength and significance.

Silence as an element of trauma representation in *Charlie's Country* has several roles. First, it conveys a form of coping with the experienced situation. It works as a response to an environment that contributes to the trauma process and that constitutes a form of self-protection in the face of adverse circumstances (Ritter 180). Second, it produces aural contrast between Charlie's time with the group of Aboriginal people he purchased alcohol for, and his current situation. The time previously spent with the new group is filled by loud voices, chatter, laughter and in general, an environment lacking controlled or repetitive sounds. Contrary to this, the aural elements characterizing the prison ambiance are noticeable room tone, repetitive sounds of machines or appliances, and an overall absence of voices and intelligible speech. The aural disparity among these settings contributes to evidencing the unsatisfactory results of Charlie's attempts at belonging in other spaces than those representing his initial conflict.

Furthermore, the represented soundscape of prison not only contrasts with open spaces, but also reads as similar to the other enclosed space that depicted Charlie in isolation and despair, the hospital. These spaces share the absence of sounds of nature, depicted with a highly

present room tone and filled by repetitive sounds. These two spaces hold significance in the plot as places of confinement, where the main character is taken to be deprived of agency over his body and the space that surrounds him. The first deals with illness and is to be understood as a place of healing. The latter deals with criminality and therefore punishment. If in appearance these spaces are destined for very different purposes, and their characteristics make them so unlike, why establish them as similar settings in both their visual and aural construction?

In considering the conflict of space posed by a Eurocentric perspective of modernity, Michel Foucault refers to mental institutions and prisons as heterotopias, spaces that reflect the expected normality of other places by confining those who deviate from the established norms. Under these considerations, the hospital functions—from a Western perspective—as a heterotopia of crisis, a place to solve illness and return to normality. The prison, as established by Foucault, is a space for controlling criminal deviation (25). However, in Charlie's context, these spaces represent crises quite different from the ones intended by the powers that control them. Both signify estrangement from his Aboriginal group, loss of agency over cultural practices and over space, and the forfeiture of a connection to his community. Considering that at some points of the film, his conflict was fueled by his desire to access the forms of modernity promoted by people occupying his land and imposing Western modes of living, it is paradoxical that this can only be achieved by entering spaces where he is highly controlled for being considered deviant from normality.

As established, the trauma process depicted in the film is mainly framed by a conflictive relation to culture and space. The hospital and prison are spaces that prevent their occupants from acting on such a conflict, while only permitting behavior that enacts expected normality. Thus, these restrictions only increase the influence of those settings in the traumatic experience

of the characters. Accordingly, sound design reflects the similarities between these spaces as places isolated from society, that at the same time reflect its expectations. A highly perceivable room tone, and the prevalence of machine sounds, prevent the spaces from acquiring relations with the outside, as if they only existed within themselves. More significant than this, is the aural characteristic that establishes them as places of control, loss of agency and enactment of expected behavior: repetition.

In the hospital, health related machines provide repetitive sounds. Beeping, whirring and clacking are permanent soundscape elements, representative of intervention and control over Charlie's body, in such a way that when liberating himself from the IV, these repetitive sounds suddenly stop. In the prison, repetition is all the more evident, and its rupture is even more significant. As Charlie begins his time in prison, the film depicts the same routine happening over and over again: he carries a laundry cart that makes a clashing sound every time he needs to pass by a place with no ramp; loud washing machines are heard as he deposits the clothes in them while being observed by guards; the sound of a spoon scraping and a plate against a table is heard seven times, while visual elements show food being served to prisoners in line; time spent outside includes far away noises of birds, unseen as the frame shows Charlie against the prison fence; finally, in his cell, a buzzing sound prevails until lights go out, prompting the routine to start over.

This routinary life is depicted simultaneously by sound and image. However, to introduce the changes the character will experience during his imprisonment, slight variations are included within every repetition. The second cycle shows a visit from one of Charlie's friends from his community. The routine goes on, but the plates are heard only four times and with high reverberance, as if their sound filled an empty space, despite the fact that the setting appears as

crowded. The third cycle introduces a case worker inquiring about his intentions when leaving prison; she says he can live his own way, to which he responds “White police locked me up for being Aboriginal. I want to live rightfully now” (01:33:03), as if expected normalization had been engraved in his mind. This time, even more reverberant plates are heard twice, and dry, buzzing sounds of other closed spaces fade into the background. Finally, when being informed by the same case worker that he will be liberated, the cycle is broken. Repetition that had turned into normality stops, and the opportunity to act on the lived trauma process arises.

#### RECONNECTING TO THE COUNTRY THROUGH SONG AND DANCE

Until this moment, a variety of soundscapes that encompass problematic settings for Charlie’s experience can be identified. Charlie’s town represents an open and yet invaded space; the bushes’ sound is marked by uncontrollable natural elements; the city is filled by controlled sounds alienated from natural sound environments; and the closed spaces of the hospital and the prison share repetitive qualities that evoke discipline, control and a normalization of seclusion. All of these places and the sounds that characterize them, indicate complex relationships between the main character and the spaces that surround him. His behavior in these settings continually leads to rupture, either with his family, his community, his cultural memory, his ancestors, or even with the aspirations of belonging to another culture that he considers is wrongfully invading and controlling his country.

Repetition that ends in the prison setting is not only representative of his time in confinement, but of finally putting an end to repetitive behavior, that prevents him from understanding his trauma process, and from healing through his active response to it. A new relationship of the character to space is revealed as he is seen one last time through prison bars,

while saying to himself “I want to go back home now, back to my own country, where my place is” (01:36:56). Mirroring the effect of the previous statement that led to his silence, this assertion is accompanied by a change in sound, from drones and wind tones framing a prison soundscape to sounds of birds, ducks, crickets and water, that eventually lead to a scene of Charlie back in his community.

The return to his town depicts a space that has not changed. It has the same intervention of sounds over open places, and the overall soundscape remains. It is Charlie who must find a new way of relating to this space, an act threatened by the unchanging nature of the town’s conditions, since poverty and access to healthy food are still problematic. An alternative relation to his country is offered by members of his community, who request once again that he teaches the children how to dance, and how to connect to their culture. This time Charlie agrees and states that he would like to transmit this knowledge. Dancing and chanting appear as ways not only of performing an activity that gives the character pride, they are a form of connection to his community and to the youngest members of the carrier group he represents throughout the film. These activities provide both rupture with trauma repetition, and an alternative to the trauma transference to new generations. Notably, the film depicts cultural pursuits that have a high significance among Yolngu groups, since they “perform the landscape in song and dance, recreating the sounds, movements and expressions of the first ancestors who also danced in the landscape” (Magowan 22), meaning that in the performance of these practices a relationship to space is enacted, one very different from the conflictive approach that had constituted previous relations between the main character and his surroundings.

In addition to addressing issues of space, teaching and performing song and dance provide the possibility of rebuilding a previously severed bond to ancestors as “Singing invokes

the essence of the ancestors into performance, while dancing evokes their shape and form” (134). The reconnection does not necessarily imply experiencing an attachment to the past, but bringing memories, both personal and cultural, into a dialogue with the present, as if through chanting and dancing, temporality would merge into the moment of performance (134). Thus, when Charlie teaches the children of his community and dances with them, he is transmitting knowledge of cultural memory, recovering a connection to his ancestors—that he previously considered as lost—and preventing the loss of memories and connections to space for other members of his community.

As the film concludes, Charlie is seen dancing and singing along with the kids he has taught how to dance. Chants, clacking and didgeridoo music are heard diegetically and in synchrony with movements, preventing other sounds from interfering with the sound of the performance. In performing, the protagonist breaks with previous forms of relating to cultural memory and space. Conflicts over agency or connection with his community and Aboriginal culture lose their previous strength, and acting out in the form of repeating such conflicts over and over again—regardless of the change in scenery—is put to an end. In dance and song, Charlie finds a way of understanding and working through trauma, both in an individual and collective manner that affects others in his community. It is through addressing this trauma process that he finally finds his own country.

## **Conclusions**

On the surface, *Charlie's Country* may seem like the story of a lonely Aboriginal man who cannot find his place in the world. Attention to the narrative and the film aesthetic devices supporting it, however, allow spectators to unveil meanings related to culture, and the experience



of Aboriginal peoples from Australia who have faced colonialist practices and impositions. What Charlie experiences as an individual character throughout the film is embedded in a context of collective trauma, expressed through crises of cultural memory and relationship to space. He is part of a group of Aboriginal people that loses agency over a wide array of matters because of government policies that originated from a Western perspective, blind to the discriminatory implications of these policies.

The experience rendered visually belongs mainly to the protagonist, Charlie. Other Aboriginal characters appear but they do not have the same level of relevance in the plot. However, their mere presence and the dialogue exchanged with the main character or the events experienced with him, reveal that amongst them there is a shared background: the government impositions affect them all. The enactment of Aboriginal cultural practices is restricted, healthy food access is compromised and their agency over the spaces that they inhabit is controlled by the state, while those who exert government control are given spaces to own and have a higher decision making power over such places. These factors demonstrate the collective nature of the depicted trauma, and establish Charlie both as a representative of the pain of the carrier group he belongs to in the fictional setting, and as a fictional, mediated speaker for a real collective trauma experienced by Aboriginal peoples of the Northern Territories of Australia.

The film's sound design is key in understanding the complexity and implications of the collective trauma process. When the film addresses memory as a component of the traumatic experience, sound renders both individual and shared cultural memories. It is through aural devices that recollections of events in the life of the character are either elicited or constructed to be of relevance; cultural memories are also present in the film through sounds that are actually more clearly defined than the images accompanying them, and while these recollections come

from an individual perspective, they allude to a collective experience of aural remembrance.

While all of this happens in conjunction with images, the overall style of the film avoids visual flashbacks completely, forming a connection between the present time of the story with sounds that embody past events and, therefore, recollections.

As discussed, sound also serves to express or accentuate the conflicts of space presented by the film. The objects or subjects alluded to by sound, the relationship amongst aural elements and the forms used to mix and distribute them throughout the film's settings, speak to the nature of represented spaces and experiences happening in those places. In *Charlie's Country* sound design suggests the level of agency characters have over the places they inhabit, the relationship of belonging they have to those places based on cultural practices, the act of entering urban settings that present challenging conditions for several Aboriginal characters, and the traumatic experience of being confined to places of control by powers that deem the culture and beliefs of the group represented by Charlie as non-valid.

Beyond these aural constructions of meaning, it is noteworthy that the film's sound design also engages in an experiment to provide non-Yolngu spectators with a window into other forms of understanding sound and relevance of aural practices for connecting to a community and a culture. The director, Rolf de Heer, is known for working in partnership and close consultation with the Aboriginal peoples represented in all of his films, and the script was largely written by David Gulpilil, the Yolngu actor who embodies Charlie. In a real context, the Yolngu, unlike western societies, do not place primacy of the senses on vision. Rather, they understand all senses as relevant, and sound is of prime importance for everyday life, ritual, and connection to ancestors and natural spaces (Magowan 103). When *Charlie's Country* delivers sound memories of culture or practices, represents a disconnection between space and agency, or uses

aural elements to evoke identity conflicts, it offers an experience that elevates attention to sound, promoting contemplation of landscapes and soundscapes, and an involvement of senses beyond vision in engaging with the film.

Moreover, when the protagonist is surrounded by soundscapes that are meaningless to him, sound design evokes a rupture with Yolngu modes of listening. Sound becomes irrelevant for the character when it is closer to Western forms of listening, as if sound were incidental and deprived of meaning. When sound, including songs, sounds of nature and sound memories, acquires relevance to him, it establishes a profound connection to community and culture. It is this disruption that effectively conveys the collective trauma triggered by the loss, among other things, of a sensorial mode of understanding. Thus, the overall aural design of the film is much closer to the Yolngu experience, than to that of non-Aboriginal audiences that experience the film from a western perspective. Through sound aesthetic we are offered an aural glimpse at other forms of experiencing the world, forms in which senses other than vision become relevant.

Precisely because of these qualities to the film's sound design, the choice of non-diegetic music is jarring, since it is at odds with how the rest of aural elements function. While foleys, ambiance, effects and dialogue convey an experience of sound very specific to the Aboriginal group being represented, the use of music as a guide for the audience's emotions fits within a Western mode of listening to cinema.<sup>9</sup> The distance that non Aboriginal audiences face when encountering alternative modes of listening is shortened by the intervention of a use of music all

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<sup>9</sup> To refer to Hanns Eisler's discussion of the classical Hollywood use of music, consult *Composing for the films*, 1947.

too familiar to the classical Hollywood approach, and the musical score therefore potentially undermines the capacity of the viewer to acknowledge that the traumatic experience represented is specific to the Aboriginal group.

The many sequences that build a depiction of collective trauma through sound demonstrate the error of thinking about trauma as arising from a specific event. I have established that it is shown as a process, since it is present in many dimensions of Charlie's life and of his community. It cannot be referred to a specific point in time, nor is it possible to affirm it has ended. The process involves seeing and hearing the character acting out in many moments of the film, and finally attempting to work through the trauma he experiences. This attempt involves a community and a connection to culture. It not only heals Charlie's disconnection, but it seeks to prevent transfer of such a rupture to other generations. The effort to preserve cultural memory through song and dance, also implies the understanding of collective trauma as an ongoing process that needs to be continuously addressed.

In *Charlie's Country*, sound serves to bind the members of a community to their culture, their ancestors and their space. When Charlie considers the sounds of the world around him as irrelevant, the collective trauma he carries and speaks for is not acknowledged, and his actions only perpetuate it. As he allows sounds to regain their meaning-evoking qualities, collective trauma is addressed. The bond unites him to a group, a family, a culture, a space. In producing sounds through song, he embodies a unique relation to land and soundscapes. Charlie's country, once so distant and unfamiliar, finally sounds like home.

## Chapter II

### ***Rhymes for Young Ghouls*: Constructing a Revenge Fantasy Through Sound**

*Rhymes for Young Ghouls* offers a particular approach to representing collective trauma. From its very title —taken from a poetry book by author Tab France (Barnaby)— the film provides more of a paradox than a clear statement: rhymes, that is, short, cheerful melodic compositions usually intended as playful songs for children, are to be sung for young ghouls, adolescent, demonic characters navigating the Earth, looking to feed on the dead, unable to die themselves. This paradox points to how the film subverts expectations of an audiovisual representation about Indigenous youth in the context of Canadian residential schools during the seventies. The film is unusual not only in its divergence from a single genre by mixing elements of drama, satire, horror and animation. It is also peculiar that while a story about what happened to children inside these spaces would be expected, the plot revolves around Aila, a young woman who lives on a reserve and sells drugs that allow her to pay a fee to avoid being taken to a residential school.

The film opens with Aila as a child, surrounded by an alcoholic family that makes a living selling drugs. After a night of drinking, her parents accidentally run over and kill a small child. The accident results in the imprisonment of Aila's father and the suicide of her mother. Seven years later, Aila is living with her uncle Burner and is surrounded by young friends with whom she runs a drug operation. Aila must pay a "truancy tax" to agent Popper in order to stay out of the residential school he runs, but this is jeopardized when one of her friends loses all the money they have earned to a local strip dancer who is in cahoots with Popper. While this crisis takes place, Aila's father —Joseph—returns home to find with disappointment that his daughter is running the drug business. Despite Joe's discomfort, Aila devises a plan to recover the money,

which involves breaking into the residential school with the help of a child whom she has befriended, and taking the money back from Popper. In spite of her plan's apparent success, her friends and family suffer the consequences of taking the money from Popper, who reacts violently against Aila's friends, uncle and grandmother. After his revenge spree, Popper attempts to sexually attack Aila and is stopped by her child friend, who fires a gun at Popper and kills him. In the end, Aila's father takes the blame and is once again taken to prison, and the cycle of trauma and disintegration is once again repeated.

Aila and the young characters that surround her are far from uncontroversial. However, the film presents their actions as a result of both individual and collective conditions of trauma through narrative and aesthetic devices. On this matter, the film's sound design delivers an aural world that contributes to a cinematic representation of the re-enactment and impact of traumatic pasts, and of the desire for revenge and forgetfulness. The sound design is largely conventional, as the soundscape is filled by sounds in sync with images, non-diegetic music and ambiance sounds that reinforce an impression of realism. Nevertheless, many of these aural elements evoke meaning beyond their functional presence in the audible space. Thus, while the sound design may not be experimenting with form, it certainly contributes to content and its potential. In this chapter I will argue that the film's sound design contributes to its rendition of a collective trauma that is marked by a desire to forget and to obtain revenge, while relating to other traumas experienced by collectivities.

To explore the involvement of sound elements in this representation, I will first address the film's use of a voice-over narration as a dominant aural resource, its implication in the diegetic space and how it is involved in representations of disruption. This is followed by a discussion of the use of non-diegetic music, specifically of a particularly noticeable genre in the

film: blues. The discussion of music will examine the possible meanings suggested by the use of a form of music intrinsically related to a collective trauma that is not the one represented in the movie. The discussion of non-diegetic melodies also draws on the use of religious Catholic music as a signifier of trauma. Finally, this chapter closes with an analysis of horror related sounds and their role in representing the experience of Canadian residential schools, as well as issues around desires of revenge.

As noted, the aural, visual and narrative worlds of *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* are strongly related to real life experiences of Indigenous peoples in Canada, especially in regard to the collective trauma experience of those taken to residential schools during the seventies. The residential school system was introduced as a government policy in 1870, and it entailed the abduction of Indigenous children from their families, to be confined to “schools” in which any attitudes associated with their culture were punished (Wotherspoon 65). In residential schools children “were treated as inmates, subject to extreme scrutiny and strict disciplinary measures for transgressions such as speaking their Indigenous language” (128). Furthermore, the children “were subjected to physical, sexual and psychological abuse” (Griffiths 48). The film touches on some of these issues through sequences that portray the intimidation of children in these settings, the physical violence enacted by school authorities and the attempts of sexual abuse from the school director against Aila, the main character.

Although the aforementioned aspects do refer to real life experiences, the space depicted by the film is entirely fictional. The setting is the fictitious Red Crow Reserve, referred to as “The Kingdom of the Crow”, and the residential school is situated in proximity to the reserve, when in reality these schools were usually far away from the place of origin of students forced to be in that system. In terms of sound design, this fictional quality of the space poses both a

challenge and an opportunity. In the sequences with a more realistic appeal, it must capture the aural characteristics of reserves around Canada. However, in sequences closer to genres like horror or action, it allows for the creation of alternative soundscapes that reveal attributes of the characters, their communities, relationships and emotions. And so, in some sequences sound design provides an impression of reality. In others it appears to drive the choreographed movement of characters, and in others it contributes to re-signifying aural elements commonly used in horror Hollywood films.

In addition to space, several aspects of the film's story are more fictional than factual (Santoro 342). In fact, it is only through the aural element of speech that the characters' Indigenous identity is displayed, since they alternate codes between English and Mi'kmaq. Other clues about real life cultural or geographical ties are not revealed. In doing so, director Jeff Barnaby's story is focused on exploring and combining a variety of filmic forms that produce meanings, more than in delivering a realistic portrayal of horrors experienced by Indigenous peoples who faced oppression on reserves and in the residential school system. Despite these fictional aspects, the cinematic elements work together to construct a powerful representation of cultural collective trauma portrayed by the characters. This trauma depiction revolves around several forms of conflict, such as colonized forms of oppression, the persistence of transgenerational trauma, trauma re-enactment, memory, and forgetfulness as a necessary element to carry on in the midst of adversity.

#### VOICES BEYOND THE SCREEN AND "THE ART OF FORGETFULNESS"

In considering trauma as socially mediated attribution that can happen before, during or after the unfolding of events (Alexander 8), it must be taken into account that the trauma process impacts



the way that carrier groups perceive the world around them, the level of agency they have over it, and how meaning is produced around it. Ongoing processes of collective trauma involve the construction of coping mechanisms, in which carrier groups create “cognitive working models that ostensibly function to ensure the safety and well-being of the group and provide it with values and guidelines for the future” (Hirschberger 3). *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* depicts a model of trauma and behaviour that fits within this description. It also demonstrates the challenges that come with trying to make this model work in the face of oppression and adversity. The film relies on non-diegetic aural devices to convey this model of behaviour along with its problematic aspects. This is done through the use of a voice-over narration that leads the audience through the guidelines characters must follow to “survive a thousand years in the Kingdom of the Crow” (00:07:27).

But before voice-over appears, the opening sequences of the film and their aural elements, reveal how the personal trauma of the protagonist emerged as a powerful force in the midst of facing a collective trauma process. This does not mean that the collective aspect is entirely out of the initial representation to favor the portrayal of individual trauma. Collective aspects are revealed through the rendering of life as experienced by all characters on screen: they live on a reserve, their primary activity is selling drugs and their leisure time consists of consuming them along with alcohol. The main character’s personal trauma is depicted through visual and narrative aspects. For example, we see an infant Aila who must wait outside at night while her parents and uncle Burner are drunk, and while waiting she draws sketches of zombies on a notebook with a boy named Tyler, unsupervised, on the hood of a car.

As the night comes to an end, Aila’s inebriated parents leave the house and get into the car, and Aila instructs Tyler to leave. When her mother puts the car in reverse, audio in

synchrony with images announces that something is wrong: a high-pitched squeezing sound along with an image of the car passing through a bump, are followed by a scene of the mother leaving the vehicle. A silent ambiance is only intervened by a few insect chirps and low gasping breaths, leading to a high-pitched short scream from the mother, framed from behind her back as the frame reveals Tyler under the car, lying still in a puddle of blood. The sequence transitions into the next day through a short construction of a silent ambiance. The impression of silence is produced by the contrast of the scream at the end of the previous scene, with windchimes heard distantly. This is then followed by a shot of Aila waking up due to the sound of off-frame punches and male grunts.

What follows is an explicit depiction of traumatic moments that impact Aila's life and that are announced by sound. The punches are a prelude to an over the shoulder image of Aila looking at her father being beaten and taken away. This scene is followed by the sound of a tense rope swinging, which turns into a subsequent over the shoulder frame of Aila looking at her mother hanging from a ceiling. The body of the hanging woman is seen from the back, and as little Aila calls her mom a detailed frame of her hanging feet is accompanied by the sound of urine dripping from the dead body. The first few minutes of the film establish that off-screen sounds will serve as announcers of what will be depicted on screen, as sonic elements that lead to the unveiling of events: the death of the boy, the detention of the father and the suicide of the mother. The latter gruesome image is taken over by the first moment of off-screen narration in the film in which Aila states "The day I found my mother dead, I aged by a thousand years" (00:06:06). The sentence ends with a non-diegetic grunt which is in fact the beginning of the song *Sinister Kid* (The Black Keys, 2010).

The described opening sequences reveal the relevance of off-screen aural elements and their contribution in depicting Aila's trauma story. Diegetic sounds announce upcoming violent and traumatic moments, but sounds produced beyond the diegetic space fulfil other functions. The narrating voice places the storytelling in a different time than that portrayed by the first images. When non-diegetic narration begins, the main character is seen as a little girl, and yet, the voice narrating corresponds to a young woman. The other off-screen element, music, breaks the dramatic tension of previous on-screen actions with a blues-rock song that satirically revolves around a sinister child.<sup>10</sup> In turn, the song dramatically shifts the soundscape from sorrowful to ironic. Before offering a discussion of non-diegetic music, this section addresses the role that the off-screen voice has in rendering aspects of the collective trauma process.

Non-diegetic narration is a key aural element of the film's storytelling, and it is noticeable that its first appearance interrupts the moment that triggers the character's personal trauma. The image of Aila's mother's feet hanging leaves its realist soundscape behind to give way to Aila's voice-over storytelling. The voice-over is an aural device that recurs throughout the film and prevails in the audible space. It remains separated from on-screen speech by being mixed to overpower diegetic aural elements. An event that Aila prefers to maintain unacknowledged throughout the plot is addressed early in the film through an off-screen voice which states the impact it had on the protagonist: aging by a thousand years implies not only losing a childhood, but losing the entire life of the on-screen child character who looks at her dead mother. The voice-over is then taken outside the constraints of human time: the off-screen voice is not just of a young Aila, but of a character that feels as if her hardships had lasted beyond the time of human existence. Thus, she turns into a fantastic story-teller that fits in within

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<sup>10</sup> This suggests a connection between Aila as a sinister child, and the young ghouls mentioned in the title.

the film's style of revenge fantasy. Off-screen Aila becomes a ghoul who narrates from a temporal perspective unattainable by any of the on-screen characters.

This voiceover resource is the thread that binds the film together. It resists the urge that on-screen visual objects have to be spatialized or located in a specific time (Metz 159). In doing so, it produces a distinctive sound composition in which an aural element is super-imposed on others, exercising an influence on what is visually depicted. In *Audio-Vision*, Michel Chion described this voice-over device as textual speech, claiming that it shared some characteristics with the intertexts that appeared in silent films, but with a different power over the image (172). Chion describes how text on screen interrupts images, while voiceover sound exerts a form of power over the visual aspects of the film, thus "images and realistic sounds are at its mercy" (172). Considering this, the intervention of an older Aila's voice takes over the diegetic world that was being presented, and it shifts the significance of the diegetic moment from the impression that it is the main plot that will be followed throughout the film, to the understanding that it is an influential moment in the future of the main character.

The clash between the image of the character as a child and the voice of a young woman as a narrator speaks to the separation that voice-over implies in regard to bodies on screen. Film scholar Mary Ann Doane claimed that a truly disembodied voice can be found in voice commentary of documentaries as it is in fact separated from the actions seen and there is little expectation of it becoming embodied at some point:

While the latter three voices [voice off, voice over in a flash back and interior monologue] work to affirm the homogeneity and dominance of diegetic space, the voice-over commentary is necessarily presented outside of that space. It is its radical otherness with respect to the diegesis which endows this voice with a certain authority (168).

While Doane's claim may be true for documentaries with voice-over commentary, it does not explore the relative disembodiment and otherness in a voice that narrates in fictional film. In the case of this particular movie, the narrative voice emanates from the body that appears on-screen, but in a different time and space that are not yet represented. It comes from a future body belonging to the same character. The spectator will encounter this body eventually, but the temporal state in which it belongs has not appeared through any visual devices yet. It has to be inferred by the connection made in speech between the scene showing the death of the mother and the reference in dialogue. Doane's claim about off-screen voices provides a general framework for understanding how the use of voice-off as an aural device affects all aspects of film (image, sound, time and narrative), but it is limited to documentaries and flashbacks, and does not understand it as a resource that can persist throughout the plot as in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*.

Therefore, Aila's voice-over has a different kind of aural presence than those listed by Doane: it does not fit within the characteristics of a detached commentator, and her narration is not limited to a flashback or to inner thoughts. So, what are its functions and how is it affecting other film elements? Considering that Aila's narration is acousmatic—a sound heard whose source is not seen<sup>11</sup>—it fits better in the category of what Chion named *the acousmètre*. This concept was coined by the sound theorist in his discussion of the nature of the voice in film, in which he claimed that “when the acousmatic presence is a voice, and especially when this voice has not yet been visualized—that is, when we cannot yet connect it to a face—we get a special being, a kind of talking and acting shadow” (21). Chion also claimed that this shadow is not

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the term “acousmatic” see Chion, *Audio-Vision* 18.

separate from the image, on the contrary, it sustains forms of power over it, and that its shifting qualities, from on to off-screen, and vice versa, created four structures of domination: “the ability to be everywhere, to see all, to know all, and to have complete power” (24).

In that sense, what provides Aila’s voice over with changing and unsettling qualities is the fact that those forms of power are not entirely enacted. Her voice re-tells her own story and that of those surrounding her on the reserve. It advances the plot and comments with accuracy on everything that happens to characters on screen, even if Aila is not physically present in the narrated sequence. Nevertheless, it falls short in the possibility of control, since her off-screen speech cannot dominate the actions on-screen. For example, at several moments off-screen Aila claims to have knowledge about how to survive, and her voice beyond the frame understands the guidelines necessary to ensure the safety of her group. However, on-screen Aila is powerless to change the course that the story will follow.

This rupture between knowledge and actions is immediately evident with the first statement about rules: “There are rules for surviving a thousand years in the Kingdom of the Crow. Rule number one: never befriend an indian agent” (00:07:27). This sentence is accompanied by images of Aila’s uncle Burner getting paid by an agent, while others that were with him at a strip club are beaten. Aila elaborates a few seconds later: “If the indians here believe you are in bed with the indian agent, that’s you, that’s your ass kicked or dead” (00:07:38). The statement is heard while images show Burner being beaten by members of his community and eventually being saved by the agent’s helpers. The lead female character remains absent from these scenes, yet the consequences of not following her aforementioned bylaws are delivered by the visual elements. Her strategy for survival cannot be conveyed to the characters,

only to the audience, thus entering a form of the voice that Doane characterized as a “complicity between itself and the spectator” (168).

The complicity factor provides Aila’s off-screen voice with qualities of otherness. On screen, Aila, her friends and her family are impulsive and often careless, refusing to follow four of the five rules given by the off-screen voice. Their dialogue only exists within the diegetic space with no indication of it being directed at anyone beyond the space of the frame. In opposition to this, the voice-over narration delivers a knowledgeable, omnipresent and self-restrained character that understands and reflects not only on the plot development, but on the challenges of life on a reserve. She delivers her thoughts only to those beyond the frame who just like her, lack control over the story: the audience. These contrasting qualities render the Aila that exists beyond the frame as a character-other, separated from her own story, yet able to see it all and transmit it to assumed spectators.

This juxtaposition of character forms continues to be used as off-screen Aila states the rest of the rules, while the audience sees most of them being broken. Rule number two advises to stay out of debt, as the diegetic space shows one of Aila’s friends losing all his drug-earned money in a strip club which causes the group to have difficulties paying the “truancy tax.” Rule number four which states “don’t act like a badass if you can’t fight” (00:53:13), is accompanied by images of Aila and her father losing a fight against the agents. This ends with her and her father being taken to the residential school premises. Rule three, “take care of your family” (00:10:00), is more revealing in that it is actually followed by Aila. She looks out for her friends and family, but this rule is not followed by the character who is closer to her after her mother’s death, uncle Burner. He encourages Aila to enter the drug trade business, and continuously puts himself and others in danger. This signals that the rupture and lack of control Aila experiences in

relation to the voice-over, is more related to the impossibility of controlling others than of controlling herself.

Since the last rule is crucial in understanding the changes experienced by Aila and her voice, I will discuss it last in this section. Before this discussion I will explore how the disjunction between the heard and the seen contributes to the depiction of trauma and its coping mechanisms. The recurring voice beyond the screen not only influences the plot by commenting on its development, it also speaks to the collective quality of the trauma by establishing a set of survival precepts to avoid the consequences of the trauma conditions. This is fundamental, since the rules are not an attempt to fight the oppressive system that perpetuates the trauma process. The speech of the voice-over is not concerned with working through any sort of trauma process, whether individual or collective. The presented rules are meant to be followed by everyone affected by the presence of the agents, acting as a defense mechanism not to preserve culture or gain agency over space, but simply to remain alive.

The fact that characters interacting in the diegetic world of the film seem unable or unwilling to follow Aila's precepts demonstrates the complex relationships represented in the diegetic world of *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*. Such complexities are marked by the fact that the bond between members of Aila's community is depicted not as severed, but as non-existent. Characters do not act as implicated in a wider social group united by sociocultural practices, but as individuals concerned with their survival and that of their immediate social circle. When discussing the individual and collective facets of trauma, sociologist Kai T. Erikson framed this loss of communal bonds as a by-product of the trauma process, which becomes embedded in the psyche of a group without them explicitly noticing it.



The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with “trauma.” But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared [...] “I” continue to exist, though damaged and maybe even permanently changed. “You” continue to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But “we” no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body (154).

Erikson’s characterization of collective trauma and how it affects the sense of community are reflected in the sound design construction of the effects produced by the off-screen voice. The knowledge presented through Aila’s voice can be applied to an entire group, but it can hardly be conveyed to her on-screen character and those closer to her, thus implying the rupture between individuals and social group. This severed bond is manifested, as Erikson notes, in characters damaged, concerned about select people and detached from their larger community. This detachment is explicitly evoked in another sequence in which Aila’s non-diegetic voice describes her impressions of the scene. However, the sequence goes beyond representing the lack of unity in a community by explaining the nature of the true bond of the group and the other coping mechanism rendered by the film: oblivion.

The sequence portrays a party raging at Aila’s home on the day that her father has returned from jail. Many inhabitants of the reserve are seen consuming drugs and alcohol while Aila’s non-diegetic narration describes the characteristics of those around her according to the drugs she sells them:

You have whiskey and wine and cognac dipped cigar blunts, for those rez princes and princesses that wouldn't lower themselves to smoke unless they thought they were doing something that no one else could afford. We have honey dipped blunts for the drum and feather indians who like to keep it au naturel, to smoke down close to the great spirit or whatever, and then you have broken rez rats who want nothing more than to get fucked up for bottom dollar. (00:26:53)

Aila's off-screen statements again reveal the omnipresent and omniscient powers of her voice, while also reasserting the brokenness of the cultural bond by sarcastically describing those in her community who see drugs as a way to connect to spirits and nature. The off-screen voice explains that drug consumption is actually the only resource that unites her community: "This is what brings my people together, the art of forgetfulness" (00:27:56). The statement points to the contradictions and conflicts that frame the film's representation of memory. The most evident contradiction is that the device of non-diegetic narration re-tells and transmits a story to the audience, while being used to talk about the prominence of forgetfulness as a desire of those being represented. Therefore, within the complexities between the on-screen and off-screen Aila lies the fact that she claims forgetting is a need for survival while simultaneously transmitting her story. Furthermore, this storytelling is heavily marked her traumatic experience on the reserve.

What Aila's off-screen statements entail is that the collective trauma of the film is shaped by community rupture, and, as revealed by the latter sentence on her people's bond, issues of memory. A scholarly discussion by sociologist Elena Esposito on forgetfulness and collective memory asserts that collective recollections are bound by the consciousness of individuals that are part of a group, and collective memory grows weaker as members of the group become more

and more individualized (183). What Esposito's ideas imply is that as members of a group are more concerned with individual pursuits, the memory of a group becomes weaker. The film tackles this idea through depicting the desire to forget as the only thing that unites the Indigenous group represented, and how this wish is provided by drugs that are tailored to fit each individual's social position and beliefs. Interestingly, the characters' forgetfulness is not the product of a selfish desire of separation from their social group. Forgetfulness is a coping mechanism that allows them to ignore traumatic memories and carry on surviving. Therefore, the contradiction between the simultaneous desire to forget and to transmit a story speaks to the inevitability of the persistence of trauma and how the coping mechanism adopted by her community alienates them from each other without allowing them to effectively forget painful memories.

Aila's off-screen narration evokes key meanings with regard to issues of memory and community that suggest relationships not just in regard to the content of her speech, but to the nature of the voice-over as a sound design device. For example, once the separation between off and on-screen sounds is broken, other meanings are produced, and both the sound construction and the overall narrative of the film are affected by bringing the voice that has functioned as a shadow into the diegetic space. This is evident in the statement of the last rule, which is the only one that assigns the *acousmètre* to a body. The circumstances around this change of space reveal the implications of embodying the aural voices beyond the screen. The off-screen narration only turns diegetic in the most distressful moment experienced by Aila, when her plans have failed and not complying with rules has resulted in harm for all her loved ones. The on-screen character turns to her father and states "Final rule: don't show weakness or let your emotional barrier down" (01:16:21).

This last rule is produced with different aural qualities in relation to the statement of previous rules, since the pitch is much higher and instead of being asserted with a secure, flat or dominating tone, in the diegetic space it is made through a broken voice marked by a whimpering, sorrowful tone. The voice-over character-other that appeared beyond the screen and was regarded until that moment as all-seeing, all-knowing and complicit with the audience, is transformed in the frame space to exhibit its vulnerabilities and weaknesses. This also demonstrates how rules and their statements have consistently been surrounded by contradictions between expectations and the plot's reality. It is paradoxical that the statement explicitly advises to hide emotions in the most vulnerable moment experienced by the character.

Chion referred to the cinematographic device of turning off-screen voices to diegetic ones as de-acousmatization, a moment where the omnipresent powerful voice is assigned to a body, exhibiting its vulnerabilities: "*Embodying the voice* is a sort of symbolic art, dooming the acousmètre to the fate of ordinary mortals" (28). Following Chion's ideas, it is noticeable that Aila loses all the capabilities associated with the acousmètre when her narrative voice leaves the off-screen space to inhabit the frame, and turns from a young ghoul into a vulnerable human. The complicity with the audience is also broken and questioned, since her father answers with surprise, asking what she is talking about. The latter statement only indicates that, in effect, Aila's rules had been addressed to the audience, never reaching the characters involved in the plot.

Through analyzing the qualities of Aila's off-screen narration we can appreciate that it functions in a variety of levels of significance that surpass the simple idea of commenting on the plot. This voice is implied in the representation of the shifting nature of the main character, as well as in the on-screen events and the shaping of a complex relationship between the diegetic

and non-diegetic spaces of the film. Her voice structures the plot, reveals the characters' contradictions and contributes to the representation of collective trauma by rendering issues of memory and community. Yet, the sound design of *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* and the off-screen space it evokes is not solely composed by a narrating voice, as other sounds inhabit the film's non-diegetic scope. I will now turn the discussion towards the other present aural device that also evokes meaning about collective trauma: music.

#### BLUES IN THE KINGDOM OF THE CROW

As outlined in the previous discussion, the first moment of narration is immediately followed by the beginning of The Black Keys' song *Sinister Kid*, a musical moment that visually leads to a contrasting land and soundscape compared to those of the first six minutes of the film. Initial credits start rolling along with the song, cutting to a shot of uncle Burner along with other men at a strip club watching a woman dance. The song overpowers all sounds in the diegetic space, although it is momentarily interjected by sounds of cheering, glasses clinking, and voices. The volume of *Sinister Kid* slightly decreases when two agents enter the club and one tells the other to clean the place. A whoosh sound accompanies the end of that statement and, as the song returns to its previous high volume, the scene cuts to an outside shot of a group of men being beaten by agents, while Burner stands watching.

The beat of the song paces the fight in slow motion, while the low volume and reverberating sounds of punches are also in the sound mix. The sound of *Sinister Kid* affects the time depiction of this sequence in two ways: it marks the rhythm of on-screen motion and produces a clash with the time represented in the story, as this 2010 song, despite its noticeable blues/rock tone, has a contemporary style that is anachronistic for the time depicted.

Furthermore, the ending of the song is brought into the diegetic sound world: when the sequence changes to a shot of Aila spray-painting a van, its volume decreases and the once clear and dominant sound of music is tinted by a low-fidelity radio effect that is abruptly shut down when the on-screen radio is turned off. The appearance of a contemporary song in a depiction of a reserve in the seventies in Canada reiterates the quasi fantastic qualities of the film: the music is outside of the depicted time; the reserve is fabricated and the “indian agent” is also the residential school director. Despite this the film does not lose its ties to the real-life collective trauma it represents. To the benefit of the plot, these fictional elements become allegorical instead of historically accurate.

The use of the Black Keys’ song does not appear as an attempt to efface the melody to guide the spectators’ emotions, instead it provides the sequence with spectacular grandeur. It elicits a form of contemplation that “lends an epic quality to the diegetic events” (Gorbman 68). According to Gorbman, this produces an effect of admiration of the visual instead of involvement in the plot. *Sinister Kid* does not pretend to be ignored as accompaniment; on the contrary, it overshadows all other sound elements on screen eliciting a focus on the actions. However, what is commonly encountered in cinema is that images appear as causes and music as effects, and it is only in musicals where the relationship seems to be reversed (Chion 422). In that particular sense, the music of this scene does subvert expectations by taking over the actions on the screen space. Music changes the pace of actions and is foregrounded in the mix, overpowering other layers of sound. Only the return of voice-over narration takes actual power over the music, as its volume decreases when Aila’s voice appears to speak about survival.

The musical piece draws attention to itself, since its lyrics serve the purpose of outlining the characteristics of Aila as a main character and allude to the path the plot will take. The song

states that “a sinister kid is a kid who runs to meet his maker” (00:00:54). This line matches Aila’s behaviour since she makes problematic choices that constantly put her in danger. Furthermore, lyrical statements like “your mother’s words are ringing still” (00:00:41), or “if I killed a man in the first degree, baby would you flee with me?” (00:01:36), relate respectively to the traumatic event of the mother’s suicide and to the fact that the little boy who kills Popper stays with Aila until the end of the film. Therefore, the song reinforces the notion of the “young ghouls” as characters with a horror-like quality while it foreshadows events that will build on the trauma process experienced by the characters. Music in this sequence goes beyond emotional accompaniment, entering the territory of space, time, motion, and narrative.

This song is in between the genres of alternative rock and blues, and these musical characteristics reinforce a fact that the film has already alluded to: the space allocated for non-diegetic music will be predominantly occupied by blues songs or by a score with corresponding musical tones. Up until the eruption of *Sinister Kid* as a dominant aural element, the film had already used two songs of this genre. The initial sequence opens with the blues song *Treat me the way you do*, performed by Joe Carter, and shortly after, the scene when Burner steps out to where the kids are is accompanied by another blues piece, *Wish I was in heaven sitting down* by R.L. Burnside. Blues is a curious choice for accompanying Aila’s story, as it is loaded with meaning that alludes to a collective trauma experienced by a different group than the Mi’kmaq community represented. Whether its inclusion obeys to the director’s affinity for the genre or to aesthetical intentions to evoke trauma,<sup>12</sup> its presence suggests a set of meanings drawn from what the genre represents.

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<sup>12</sup> Barnaby speaks of his affinity for blues in the *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* DVD commentary

Considering that the origin of blues music is intertwined with particular oppressive social and historical conditions, to what extent is that context involved in the production of meaning in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*? As established, music in film is constantly employed as a device to guide emotions in regard to on-screen actions. However, this is not its only function as it is bound to other layers of meaning like the musical style, genre, historical conditions of production, and of course its interaction with film elements. This is not to suggest that including a particular musical piece or scoring a film within a certain style will produce a defined set of meanings. What it implies is that film music is in interplay with visual and aural elements. It is related to characters, events, and contexts represented, and by doing so it produces a surface with potential to evoke a variety of meanings such as emotional responses and associations with the socio-historical conditions linked to a musical piece or style (Kramer 151). With this in mind, it is pertinent to explore the context associated with blues music and how it connects to a fictional representation of Indigenous trauma in Canada.

The origin of blues is linked to historical periods of slavery in the United States. Historians of the genre point to the fact that its emergence is connected to work songs and spirituals, and that blues musical progression led to a form of composing that could come from spontaneous emotions, individual feelings, simple personal statements and oftentimes one-verse songs that would repeat a line with different intonations (Oakley 35). As blues continued to be created, it became related to other traits of the life of African Americans. In exploring the meaning of blues, music historian Paul Oliver shows how the genre followed a long history of hardships and discrimination through its lyrics. For example, defining factors include the movement and migration that African Americans were forced into when looking for employment and better life conditions in the United States (44), the experience of dealing with stigma and



discrimination (73), the division of cities and segregation (167), the constant threat of violence and physical punishment (188), among many other discriminatory and oppressive conditions they faced.

Blues musical style, in keeping with the lyrics about the African American experience, possesses an emotional tension that embodies sorrow and exaltation through pitch-bending. This technique produces an ambiguity between major and minor keys, which is uncommon in traditional modes of Western musical composition (Stolorow & Stolorow 8). Thus, blues speaks to a convergence of musical modes and emotions, such as pain and endurance, nostalgia and resilience; “Blues nostalgia seems to speak not just of loss but also, famously, of *resilience* – a particular inscription of absence in a present that will, at all costs be survived” (Middleton 61). Therefore, what blues music provides is a representation of convergent experiences and emotions, of the coexistence of an on-going and threatening environment of collective trauma and a will to prevail and find forms of hope and joy in the midst of adversity.

This brief outline of blues demonstrates its potential to establish a connection with the trauma depiction delivered in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*. There is a dialogue between the traits that shape blues and the representation of a collective trauma experienced by Indigenous peoples in Canada. In relation to Oliver’s discussion of how the genre approaches the pervasiveness of traumatic conditions in all aspects of life, it is noticeable that in the film Aila and those around her must deal with similar hardships: family separation, discrimination and racism, segregation to specific areas (the reserve, the prison and the residential school function as places of confinement), and the constant threat of violence from the oppressors.

Songs used throughout the film are also employed to set the pace of editing. For example, R.L. Burnside’s *Leave me and my woman alone* marks the rhythm of motion and editing in the

sequence in which Aila prepares drugs in a party. Music also reinforces aspects of the trauma faced by the depicted group. This is reflected in a scene that depicts the violence and constant danger that inhabitants of the Red Crow Reserve face: after the first depiction of an encounter with Popper, Aila drives her bike through a road, when she sees her friend Sholo running half naked. Suddenly and without any explicit motivation, she is punched by one of Popper's agents. At the same time, the song *My mother died and left me* by Fred McDowell, fades from foreground to background when punches or off-screen narration dominate the aural space. The lyrics that stand out in the mix are "I remember my mother, yeah she'd go from door to door" (00:02:21) and "I didn't have nobody, put my burden down" (00:02:55). Both lyrics suggest a connection to events that influence Aila's traumatic conditions. The first connects with familial rupture, the second with the separation from community and the burden that the constant threat of violence represents.

There is thus a connection between the topics explored by blues music, the situations presented by the songs' lyrics and the trauma experience represented in the film. The experiences that these cultural expressions deal with are of course different, as well as the social groups they represent. However, they share common ground as representations of a trauma that comes as a product of oppression and discriminatory contexts. In that sense, the use of blues music functions more as a means to establish a dialogue between these forms of collective trauma and their representations, than as an appropriation of a cultural musical production that represents a particular group. The stories of blues and the story of the film find in music a bridge that joins their depictions of loss, resilience and survival.

## RELIGIOUS MUSIC: DESTINY AND SORROW

Having established blues as a bridge between two collective trauma experiences, the film offers a counterpart to this connection by using Roman Catholic Church music in sequences that depict traumatic events related to oppression and physical violence. This music first appears during a flashback presented by the off-screen voice of Aila, in which she tells the story of how animosity between agent Popper and her father (Joseph) came to be. In the mix, the voice fuses with *Dies Irae* [*The Day of Wrath*], a Latin hymn commonly used in masses for the dead. The chant accompanies scenes of Joseph and Popper as kids in a residential school. Specifically, the sequence shows Joseph saving Popper from bullies. The off-screen voice explains that “there was already hate in the boy’s heart” (00:37:10), as a young Popper reports Joseph and the others to a school priest for punishment. In the end, instead of doing it himself, the priest gives the punishment tool to Popper and he dispenses it while smiling.

It is notable that Barnaby chooses *Dies Irae* for this particular sequence, as in Catholic tradition the piece represents the moment in which a person is held accountable for what she/he has done in life during Judgement Day (Chase 2). The inclusion of this piece in scenes of the characters as children suggests that judgement is made upon them and implies that their destinies have already been decided. Popper will be an oppressor with privilege and discriminatory views, while Joseph will be an oppressed and violent man. In addition to this, there are lyrical implications since *Dies Irae* includes a petition to God. A verse of the hymn is a plea to be granted a place amongst the sheep and be taken away from the goats (Translation by Chase 6). The sheep are granted a place amongst a community, while the goats remain as outsiders and keep an evil, heretic connotation. Popper’s power comes from being acknowledged as part of the dominant sheep group, while Joseph remains an outsider goat whose destiny is to be

unacknowledged. Thus, the piece implies a separation between two possible paths, two achievable destinies. This provides an aural contradiction with what is seen on screen. Despite having saved Popper, Joseph is judged and condemned along with those he punched, signaling that despite his good actions he receives a negative judgement. Popper, who decided against reconciliation, receives power over the others.

The second sequence that includes Roman Catholic music also takes place in a residential school setting. The visual aspect shows images of Aila being stripped by nuns, and shows the nuns cutting her braids in a violent, careless manner, while the chant *O Vos Omnes* is heard. The piece continues while Aila is taken to a cell, where she dreams of herself with long hair walking in a garden of the residential school. Eventually, in her dream Aila arrives at an open mass grave filled with the bodies of children. *O Vos Omnes* is a responsory traditionally sung during Holy Saturday. Its lyrics come from the psalm 1.12 of the *Book of Lamentations* (Harty 490). The context of the psalm has implications as it represents a “personified Jerusalem lamenting her captivity and abjection” (Martinez 1). This establishes a link to Aila’s captivity and simultaneously brings forward a contradiction, as representatives of the church are the ones acting as captors.

The psalms contained in the *Book of Lamentations* speak to a trauma experienced by a collectivity, in which “in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem, the traumatized community seeks to express its pain and suffering and to understand how it came to deserve such suffering” (Williamson 9). Thus, the inclusion of the piece offers a representation of a collective pain. Concurrently, this sequence delves into trauma visually, framing Aila’s encounter with the bodies of many children that went through the abuse of the residential school system. By doing

so, the film implies that her story is one amongst many that relate to the collective trauma depiction of the film.

On the level of lyrical content, there are also ties between the responsory used in the scene and images on screen. A translation of the responsory is as follows: “Look, all you who pass, and see if you have a sorrow that is anything like my sorrow in the day of the Lord’s great wrath” (Translation by Slavitt 63). These lyrics accompany images of Aila in a state of extreme vulnerability, as she loses agency over her body by being stripped, having her self-image effaced by cutting her hair and being sent to a place of confinement. The musical piece again establishes a tone of contradiction. While the lyrics are a plea for attention to an unsurmountable pain, on screen Aila remains silent with a serene countenance. Simultaneously, there is an established parallel. While one voice represents the collective experience of fallen Jerusalem, Aila’s silence is representative of voiceless victims of the residential school system which was operated by members of the Catholic church (Griffiths 48).

While we can superficially frame the inclusion of these musical compositions as a simple support elements in the construction of an ambiance, once we delve into the meaning of each piece there are further ties between the chosen music and the sequences in which it appears. There is a purposeful inclusion of Catholic music as a signifier of trauma related to the experience of victims of the residential school system in Canada. If blues represents a connection to other experiences of trauma, the inclusion of these Catholic pieces signals to the overwhelming power that imposition of beliefs and customs had over Indigenous peoples in Canada. Paradoxically, both types of music deal with concepts like justice, sorrow, lack of agency and pain. However, in the film one type of music does so from a place of resiliency,

while the other is representative of positions of power and oppression exerted over the most vulnerable characters.

#### REPETITION, REVENGE AND THE HORROR SOUNDSCAPE

Aila's story could be a straight-forward realistic drama: a child loses her mother, her father takes the blame for a crime the mother committed and returns years later to see his daughter transformed into a revenge-seeking drug dealer. Once the revenge is achieved, it only brings more sorrow to her family. Nevertheless, the plot is filled with elements that touch on a film genre unexpected for this representation of a real-life trauma experience: horror. The inclusion of moments that fit within this genre provides different dimensions to the plot and its representation of trauma. Furthermore, it reinforces the nature of the transformation that Aila deals with: taken out of time while still a child, she ages by a thousand years and turns into an aged ghoul in the body of a young woman who must survive in the Kingdom of the Crow.

Although certain elements of a horror aesthetic are shown in the beginning of the film, including Aila's penchant for zombie drawings, and scenes with a gas mask that she wears, it is not until her first encounter with her grandmother Ceres, that the inclusion of horror genre traits becomes clearer. Right before the night of her father's return, Aila visits Ceres who is in charge of growing drugs in her basement. Before leaving to see him, Ceres tells her the story of "The Wolf and the Mushroom" which she heard from her mother before being taken to a residential school. This tale speaks of a wolf who, alone on a destroyed earth, seeks food and hallucinates that Mi'kmaq children hanging from a tree are mushrooms. The wolf eats all the children and once the hallucination is over, realizes what he has done and proceeds to eat himself until there is nothing left. The tale is audio-visually told through a two-dimensional animation sequence

accompanied by the voice of Ceres. This creates a micro-story within the major plot that is also narrated through an off-screen voice that mirrors Aila's narration throughout the film.

Ceres' tale of the Wolf and the Mushroom is not a real Mi'kmaq story. In fact, it was devised by director Jeff Barnaby who has stated that it represents both the experience of Canadian residential schools and how Aila's character is consumed by revenge (*Rhymes for Young Ghouls Audio Commentary* 00:21:00). Thus, this metaphorical nod to the horror genre draws attention to how the film represents a collective history of trauma through a fictional individual's story presented through an eclectic mode of filmmaking. The tale reinforces notions of the experience in residential schools as an actually lived horror story. It also suggests that storytelling is employed as a way of coping, warning and protecting others (a concept already explored by the five rules stated by Aila) and of the problems faced by Aila due to the repetition of a cycle of violence and revenge.

Even if the narration is not a Mi'kmaq tale, this does not mean that it is not influenced by their mode of storytelling. In Mi'kmaq tradition interactions between humans and animals with personalities are common. One of their creation stories revolves around animals willingly sacrificing themselves to become food, and the respect such a sacrifice entails<sup>13</sup> (Robinson 675). Another story tells of a wolverine that tricks birds into a wigwam where he begins to kill them one by one until his brother stops him by helping the birds escape. Barnaby's tale is influenced by Mi'kmaq ideas on food, sustenance, greed and relationships between animals and humans. However, roles and principles seem to reverse: it is the animal who devours humans, the balance of sustenance cannot be restored, and the wolf's return to consciousness does not lead just to regret, it leads to his self-destruction.

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<sup>13</sup> A full description of the origin story of Nukumi, Glooscap, Apistanewj is available in Robinson, 674-675.

The gloominess of the story is underlined by the horror atmosphere. This is established visually in the animation style which includes dark, apocalyptic imagery, such as “trees” made of spikes and power towers and a wolf with an emaciated appearance who walks with knives and sharp objects thrust into his back. Aurally, a rich set of sounds builds a soundscape that lends fantastic and horror-like qualities to the story. The sounds of the animated sequence begin with eerie music overlaid with thunder, digitally altered growls, chimes and metal high-pitched squeak sounds. These are mixed with low, reverberant, trembling drones. To accompany the wolf’s throwing and eating of the children, sounds of wood chopping and children’s distant high-pitched screams dominate the aural space, and these are heard alongside string sounds simultaneous to the description of the wolf’s hallucination. Finally, the music returns to its initial mournful tone mixed with grunts, sounds of swallowing, bones crackling and agitated animal breaths that fade into the background as the story ends. This gives prominence to the music and Ceres’ non-diegetic Mi’kmaq speech.

The animation sequence delivers an ensemble of aural elements with various sources. These range from natural animal and weather sounds, to digitally produced sounds. The conjunction of unsettling aural elements and their manipulation results in a form of sound design reminiscent of horror film. Similar modes of sound design can be traced back to influential films for the genre, for example William Friedkin’s *The Exorcist* (1973) and Dario Argento’s *Suspria* (1977), which employed voice effects and altered percussion sounds (Mitchell 88); and Hitchcock’s iconic *Psycho* (1960), which used vibrant high-pitched strings (93). The use of “electronically modified sounds of musical instruments, chants or natural sounds that are radically transformed from their sources” (Koizumi 75) can be found in the film scores composed by Tōru Takemitsu, who, influenced by concrete music, avoided single identifiable



music pieces that would work as main horror themes and privileged a variety of modified sounds. Therefore, the elements of this sequence and horror sequences in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* are not new to the genre. However, the construction of the sequences does make a statement about the nature of the situations represented.

Through an aural construction that appeals to known modes of sound design, the horror aesthetic of the animation sequence comes to life. However, the sound design of this moment is mostly focused on creating a familiar construction of the horror genre in which aural elements are included as mere supports of concepts made explicit through visual and narrative devices. This sequence represents an interesting example of an opportunity missed in terms of sound design. In it, a cycle of violence and repetition is represented through visual resources and in the storytelling. For example, Ceres states that the wolf was alone and that he continued to eat himself, while images depict a contorted wolf that turns into a circle until he eats his own heart. However, in the sequence's sound design, the only connection to these relevant concepts is the repetition of the eerie background music at the beginning of the story and after the hallucination is over, and the reiteration of sounds of swallowing. Sounds are only tangentially related and further meaning is not suggested through the sound design or its mixing. Unlike the aforementioned cases of Aila's non-diegetic voice that produces meaning around the ideas of forgetfulness and loss, and the use of blues music that suggests notions about the nature of the trauma conditions, this relevant sequence fails to evoke trauma-related meaning through aural elements.

In general, the film's sound design is barely involved in evoking meaning about repetition. This is a striking choice since the concept is fundamental in addressing the cycle of trauma depicted in the film, as it is intertwined with the main character's desire for revenge. Aila

endures traumatic conditions and acts out through a revenge plot that again puts her father in jail. In a similar fashion to the wolf, this leaves her alone as she is without Ceres and other friends that had accompanied her and that faced the consequences of the vengeance scheme. Repetition is a concept familiar in discussions on trauma. In psychoanalytic studies, Freud spoke of a compulsion to repeat as an explicit form of acting out that “replaces the impulsion to remember” (151). This compulsion is the result of a resistance to engage with memories of the past. While Freud’s ideas were focused on individuals’ actions and did not look into transgenerational or collective trauma and its forms of repetition, it is noticeable that some aspects of his theory fit within the character development of Aila. Specifically, Aila enacts a compulsion to repeat by constantly putting herself at risk of reiterating the cycle of violence that frames her trauma, while citing forgetfulness as the one element that unites her people. In that sense she acts out through repetition instead of working through her trauma process, and the community that surrounds her acts in a similar way.

An important component of the compulsion to repeat is that subjects who perform it are unaware of this repetition and may even try to avoid it, yet “the same thing will happen, again and again, despite one’s best efforts at avoidance, prevention or control” (Russel 605). The notion of “the same” is in need of discussion in this context, since conditions are not repeated in an exact same way. Repetition leads to similar consequences, which for the characters in the film, means being in danger, being attacked by Popper, Joseph taking the blame for something he didn’t do and Aila losing her family to remain only in the company of Burner and the boy who murders Popper.

Numerous events in the film fit with Russel’s description of a repetition cycle that happens despite efforts to avoid it. For example, Aila’s rules which fail to protect her and her

loved ones, or Ceres' caution tale of the Wolf and the Mushroom which warns about a cycle of destruction but fails to prevent it. However, Freud and Russel's analyses of trauma are centered on individuals and lack the integration of social and historical conditions like the ones represented in the film. These conditions are manifested as a hostile, discriminatory and oppressive environment which traps those who enter the cycle of repetition. I would argue that in the case of collective trauma, a compulsion is not so much the product of an individual's actions, but of the load faced by the carrier group and the conditions in which they must live. The lack of acknowledgement of trauma in addition to the compulsion to repeat, are also related to the social context. In that sense Aila, as a fictional speaker for the carrier group, is driven by oppressive conditions into performing risky, repetitive actions.

This discussion reveals that ideas about a cycle of violence and danger, and the compulsion to repeat, are central for the film. They are relevant to the film's representation of trauma and to the overall development of the plot. It is therefore surprising that sound is not more involved in the representation of those concepts. It seems that choices in sound design privileged the delivery of horror atmosphere already presented in images, and forfeited the opportunity to explore sound's potential to express meaning about repetition. A similar approach to sound design is rendered in other sequences that allude to the horror genre. Namely, the one in which Aila dreams of her mother as a zombie who emerges from a tomb and requests revenge, and the one in which Aila is confined to a cell and dreams of a forest outside the residential school, which leads to a mass grave filled with children's bodies. Their soundscapes are rich in distorted sounds, high pitched hisses, trembling strings and reverberant voices. All these aural elements are drawn from known modes of horror aural representation. However, these only support the rendering of genre-specific sequences and do not activate further forms of meaning.

This shortcoming does not imply that sound ceases to produce meaning. All aural elements are still fundamental to produce a horror effect. The genre is used to frame all aspects related to revenge: after the tale of the Wolf and the Mushroom, Aila decides she will get the money back from Popper; in her initial dream, her deceased mother requests vengeance; finally, her revenge scheme is revealed after the scene in which she dreams of the mass grave. This triad of sequences represents moments of profound traumatic impact, both for Aila as an individual and for her entire carrier group. This relationship with collective trauma is made explicit through the eating of Mi'kmaq children by the wolf, and their subsequent representation in the mass grave next to the residential school site. These moments of horror motivate a self-consuming desire for revenge which is central to the film's plot.

This cycle of self-consumption and dissatisfaction resonates with studies on the desire for revenge experienced by victims of individual traumas (crime, abuse, mistreatment) and collective traumas (wars, attacks, establishment of oppressive regimes). Scholarship on the matter suggests that victims of conflict do not find as much comfort as expected in truth-telling processes, as they often re-traumatize victims and have little effect in diminishing feelings of revenge (Mendeloff 216). Furthermore, "perpetrator punishment only partially, and moreover only transitorily, satisfies feelings of revenge among victims of violent crimes, and that in the long run feelings of revenge are not influenced by severity of perpetrator punishment" (Orth 68). Although both studies acknowledge that individual responses to trauma vary greatly, it is noticeable that the aforementioned attitudes are implicated in Aila's path of revenge. First, by not acknowledging her traumatic past through forgetfulness and instead choosing retaliation, and second, by representing the results of the revenge plot as temporarily satisfactory. In fact, these

results lead to the repetition of a cycle of horror supported by the oppressive system in which Aila and her community live.

By design, the horror sequences delivered in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* are entwined with the desire to forget trauma, with compulsions to repeat, and with feelings of revenge. They are also small allegories of real-life horrors experienced by the Indigenous group depicted in the film. In conjunction with the many other fictional aspects of the film which diverge from a realistic representation and appear both in the visual and aural realms, the story appears to be a revenge fantasy. Dania Hückmann, in her discussion of film retaliation fantasies in response to collective trauma, states that it's not so much about a celebration of revenge, but rather a form of resistance to other forms of re-telling and representing trauma in film.<sup>14</sup> It is not about justice but about a fantasy that rewrites history (106). The horror soundscape complements this fantasy of reprisal while digging into mainstream modes of aural terror that are re-signified. Instead of delivering a fantastical individual's story that audiences can acknowledge as untrue, the use of the genre approaches the violence of the residential school system, and the enforcement of oppressive policies as an inescapable, all too real horror with trans-generational consequences.

## Conclusions

*Rhymes for Young Ghouls* delivers an eclectic story that represents real-life collective trauma through the creation of a fictional world. In this story, loss, horror, crime and revenge not only coexist but are common to all inhabitants of the Red Crow Reserve. The sound design of Barnaby's first feature film is not highly experimental in its composition, as off-screen narrative

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<sup>14</sup> Hückmann's discussion relates specifically to the film *Inglorious Basterds* (Tarantino, 2009), which explores collective trauma of the Holocaust, and a revenge plot that is framed by altering the course of historical events in fiction.

voices, non-diegetic music and altered sounds dominant in horror sequences are all aural elements familiar to mainstream forms of filmmaking. As explored in this chapter, concepts, ideas and affective forces evoked by sound, as well as the interaction and interconnection of soundscapes from varied genres, endow the film's sound design with the possibility of evoking meaning beyond the simple creation of ambiance or advancement of the plot. *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* takes on established conventions and brings them into a fantasy of revenge, framed by the representation of the real collective trauma of those who experienced the Canadian residential school system and the injustices, discrimination and oppression experienced by Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Sound, in combination with the rest of aesthetic elements of the film, serves to gradually develop the character of Aila. She morphs from child to young woman, to aged spirit. Meanwhile, through off-screen narration, spectators encounter an Aila-other who speaks only to them. The side of Aila presented through the off-screen voice resource is the one who declares her spirit as aged by a thousand years, states the rules for surviving, declares a desire to forget as the thread that binds her people, and asserts the disconnection she feels from culture and community. Concurrently, the choices of non-diegetic music also establish her as a character not bound by time: a character that on-screen can listen to music produced four decades after the time period depicted, and off-screen accompanies her narration with blues music from the late seventies. Aila then appears as the protagonist of a revenge fantasy, a mythical character who is both a ghoulish and a naive young woman surviving in the Kingdom of the Crow. Through the exploration of varied forms of fiction film, Aila is a particular speaker for the trauma carried by the group she represents. She is beyond reality, yet is rooted in painful memories of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

These qualities do not hide the fact that Aila and those around her are complex and flawed. After all, she is the head of a drug operation inherited from her parents and she maintains this trade through the work of her friends who sell and consume the drugs. Her uncle abuses alcohol and acts as an informant for violent agents. Her grandmother, despite the fact that she represents a more cautious voice, is active in growing the drugs to be sold. Therefore, what the audience does not receive is a sugar-coated picture of Aila or her community as unflawed characters. Instead, audiences are faced with the characters' flaws which come as a result of their environment and the policies enforced over them. The loss, pain and resilience of Aila's group is evoked through blues music, a genre that represents a large history of injustice, loss and sorrow. Furthermore, the film turns to the use of a common aural element, non-diegetic music, and bends mainstream modes of film sound. Blues songs are not to be ignored in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, as they are not simple accompaniments to scenes, and their presence does not appear as an evident form of eliciting emotions from the audience. These songs express the elements surrounding the traumatic conditions of the characters and connect their experience to other experiences of collective trauma.

In the middle of a story with mixed genres, horror stands out as the most surprising inclusion (although Barnaby is no stranger to horror filmmaking, as he explored the genre in previous short films). Yet, horror is well suited to a story with a character who progressively takes on mythical qualities and that finds in real life horrors the triggers for her revenge plot. Although sound design may be missing the mark on expressing meaning related to the compulsion to repeat and Barnaby's notion of a cycle of self-consumption, the creation of a horror soundscape reinforces the horror qualities established visually and narratively. This is

done by employing a mode of sound usually regarded as fictional, to tell a story closely tied to historical and contemporary experiences of horror by the Mi'kmaq people.

The analysis of voices, music, ambiance and special effects establishes that the soundscape is shaped by a multiplicity of aural elements taken from several film and music genres. Interestingly, the film does not rely on sounds with ties to the Mi'kmaq culture or any aural elements that allude to forms of indigeneity.<sup>15</sup> This choice demonstrates that sound can also operate through absence, as the lack of such elements is an effective way of representing cultural rupture and the aforementioned desire to forget. At the same time, the survival of Mi'kmaq speech also represents the survival of some cultural elements. Overall, the film's aesthetic diverges from direct references to cultural context. This renders a severed bond with cultural memory, which comes as a result of trauma conditions caused by policies designed to sever Indigenous peoples of Canada from their cultural roots.

*Rhymes for Young Ghouls'* approach to sound design and its overall aesthetic devices, demonstrate that stories about Indigenous peoples are not necessarily limited to a genre or form of expression. Sounds may come from varied sources and sound design may experiment with mixing established mainstream aural elements in order to evoke alternate meanings. The film reveals that the very nature of narrating voices can speak of pain, separation and forgetfulness. It also reveals that music in film can be at the foreground of the process of evoking meaning, and that even if music is associated with a specific context, it can bridge experiences of trauma. Furthermore, the specificity of genres can be challenged and taken into alternative modes of storytelling, in which sorrow, fiction and eclecticism are all necessary elements for surviving in the Kingdom of the Crow.

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<sup>15</sup> The only exception to this absence is in the credits' song *PBC*, performed by A Tribe Called Red, a music group that mixes several music genres with First Nation musical elements.



### Chapter III

#### ***El Abrazo de la Serpiente: The Representation of Trauma through a Sonic Continuum***

Approaching the end of Ciro Guerra's acclaimed film *El Abrazo de la Serpiente* (2015), its main character, Karamakate, makes a statement: "The world speaks, I can only listen" (1:49:06). The sentence summarizes a form of aural experience in which the world surrounding the characters is considered a living soundscape which functions as a source of memory and knowledge. This proposition acknowledges the potential of sound to evoke meaning, as well as the relevance of aural practices in grasping the produced meanings. Furthermore, this assertion is made at a point of crisis for Karamakate, who is in the middle of a journey in which he attempts to reconnect with memories that he has lost. In this chapter I argue that the film's sound design serves to express or mark aspects of the characters' traumatic pasts, such as the lack of agency over their bodies, the traumatic qualities of spaces, the challenges of preserving collective memories and the loss of connections to a community and a culture.

The film depicts two journeys that occur thirty years apart in the Amazonian rainforest. On both of these journeys, Karamakate is present as a guide, first for ethnographer Theo Von Martius and his friend Manduca, and years later, for United States' botanist Evan Schultes.<sup>16</sup> Although the journeys are prompted by different motivations, they mirror each other by following the same route, encountering the consequences of past actions and pursuing the same objective of finding Yakruna, a sacred plant that serves different purposes for each character. For Theo, Yakruna is his only hope for curing the disease that is killing him and of coming back to his home country of Germany. For Evan, finding Yakruna is related to his search for a steady

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<sup>16</sup> The characters of the explorers are based on real life Theo Koch-Grünberg and Richard Evans Schultes. The experiences and knowledge gathered in their diaries served as inspiration and consult material for the film.

supply of high-quality rubber to be used by his country during a war, since he believes it will enhance the rubber purity; concurrently, consuming Yakruna is his only chance to dream.

Finally, for Karamakate, in the first journey Yakruna represents the hope of finding individuals belonging to his Indigenous group whom he lost since early childhood; in the second journey, finding the sacred plant appears as an opportunity to save the knowledge and memory of his people.

*El Abrazo de la Serpiente* touches complex topics related to real life experiences, that evidence the film's project as a depiction of collective trauma: it deals with the disappearance of the culture of Amazonian Indigenous groups, their experience with invaders that exploit the rainforest's natural resources, and the contact of these peoples with members of western cultures who arrive as explorers. The film depicts the devastating consequences that the rubber boom (1879-1912) and the establishment of Catholic missions had on native groups of the Amazonian setting. These experiences are represented through sequences that depict the cruelty of rubber barons, who enslaved Indigenous peoples as rubber tappers (Uribe Mosquera 38); the system of debt-peonage in which workers were unable to obtain their freedom as their debts with barons were unpayable (Wasserstrom 527); and the oppressive operation of Catholic missions that, supported by a conservative Colombian government, promoted the "civilization" of Indigenous peoples, forcing them to stop using their language and to change their beliefs (Trojan 88).

A range of Indigenous characters in the film embody the conditions that frame it as a representation of collective trauma. A young Karamakate lives alone in the jungle, convinced that all members of his Indigenous group, the Coihuanos, have died, and that he is the last carrier of their knowledge. When he has aged, the traumatic conditions experienced by the character arise as a result of having forgotten all memories from his culture, and having turned into a

Chullachaqui, a hollow man with no recollection of his past or his people's ways. Manduca, the friend and companion of Theo, is a former enslaved rubber tapper for rubber barons, whose freedom was achieved by Theo paying his debt. Children at a Catholic mission visited by the characters in both journeys are forced to speak Spanish and are punished for the use of their language or the enactment of Indigenous cultural beliefs. Finally, other Indigenous characters are either depicted as enslaved by rubber barons, or as having become addicts to drugs and alcohol as a consequence of their experiences throughout the conflicts of the rubber boom.

Aspects of the characters' trauma find a representation in sound design, specifically through three elements: the bodily sounds associated with pain, the mixing and distribution of sounds of a pervasive soundscape and the allusion to songs as carriers of cultural and collective memories. To explore how these sounds are connected to a depiction of collective trauma, the first section of this chapter discusses the association of bodily sounds of pain with the characters' lack of control over their bodies and fates. The second deals with both the construction of a pervasive soundscape throughout the film and its connection to traumatic spaces, and with the specific case of the sound of water which prompts time shifts and evokes meaning with regard to the characters' relationship to nature. Finally, the third section explores the relevance of the concept of song in the film, and the implication that the existence of a song has in the characters' journeys towards preserving their cultural and collective memory.

#### TRAUMA AND SOUNDS OF PAIN

Throughout the film, a range of characters express emotions of pain and despair as a result of traumatic experiences. These emotions are represented as bodily experience expressed in gestures, bodily motion and through the aural construction of voices. Characters scream, sob and

whimper when they are subjected to traumatic conditions. Specifically, the predominantly dejected or sorrowful tones in the voices of the Indigenous characters the film reflect a prominent condition of the collective trauma depicted: lack of control. Characters that scream have gone through collective experiences of pain that attack their agency over their bodies and their actions, and their screams are not just an outlet for physical pain, but for the uncontrollable conditions they live in and the impossibility of obtaining power to avoid further forms of oppression.

Theater scholar Andrés Grumman discusses the voice in performance as an element that “articulates the physical presence of someone in a defined time and space (the here and now) [...] potentializing the possibility of creating sensitive-sensorial effects in the experience of those coexisting in that space and time” (62).<sup>17</sup> Although Grumman’s assertions are made with regard to live performances, we can presume that the voice representation of pain in film implies a desired effect both in the characters witnessing the subjects of pain and in the audience witnessing the scene. We become spectators to the pain of others, and through framing and the construction of aural distance, we experience a closeness that live performances cannot fully achieve. Being spectators to their pain reminds us not just about their physicality and sentience, but about their humanity.

In *El Abrazo de la Serpiente*, two Indigenous characters deliver distinctive expressions of pain that are representative of the collective trauma depicted by the film. Both characters appear only in one sequence, and their stories are included as an affectively illuminating part of the journey of Karamakate, Theo and Manduca. The first is a slave forced to obtain rubber from trees, who begs to be killed when the rubber is spilled. The second, a child who is whipped at a

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<sup>17</sup> Translation by the author

Catholic mission for using his language instead of Spanish. The slave is depicted as a thin, disfigured and mutilated man with large scars. His very image implies a traumatic past filled by violence and by oppressive conditions that have exerted a brutal control over his body. The child, who is being whipped by a priest in charge of the Mission, is largely heard but mostly unseen. A short moment of the sequence does depict the whipping; however, his expression remains hidden as the shot mostly focuses on the priest and the frightened children witnessing the scene. These characters and their stories are included as instances of the traumatic conditions that came as a product of the exploitation of natural resources in the Amazon, and the imposition of Western religious beliefs on Indigenous peoples. Their encounters with violence, their fear, and their experiences of pain are made evident through their physical and aural performance.

The sequence that depicts the rubber slave offers an unusual application of film elements that places the focus on the character's aural and visual expression. It is the first moment of the film that is not translated in subtitles. The film includes speech in nine different languages: Cubeo, Huitoto, Ticuna, Wuanano, Spanish, Portuguese, German, English and Latin; it is therefore unlikely to expect a wide audience to be able to fully understand it without the aid of subtitles. The disappearance of this added film element serves three functions. It is a first a reminder that our understanding of the film has been filtered, and that the many cultural aspects presented have so far been adapted to be comprehensible to diverse spectators (Walker 147). Second, it places the audience in a similar aural and semantic position to that of Manduca and Theo, who can hear the slave but cannot comprehend him; only Karamakate understands his speech and although he provides a translation, it does not fully express the pain experienced by the character. Third, the absence of subtitles places the focus of the sequence in the characters actions, and in his production of sounds, representative of his pain and despair.

Moments before finding the slave, Manduca, a former slave himself, sees a zone with crosses fixed to the ground, trees carved to obtain rubber and buckets filled with the material. Angered, he spills all of it, crying and yelling “Damn rubber!” (00:39:49). An unsubtitled voice is heard in the distance, and eventually the slave is framed running towards the travelers, as his distraught voice approaches the center of the audible space. He continues to speak and cry as he tries to collect the spilled rubber with his only arm. His speech becomes agitated and his voice pitch higher as he gathers the buckets. After two long sighs he looks at Manduca and speaks to him, with an increasingly high pitch and sounds of crying and whimpering becoming more present in his voice. Manduca then asks Karamakate if he understands, to which he responds “He’s asking you to kill him” (00:41:29). The slave continues to speak, and although repetition is evident in his speech, he remains incomprehensible to both the audience and characters other than Karamakate.

As Manduca briefly leaves the frame, the slave yells the same sentence over and over again, which is assumedly a request to be killed, with a louder volume that signals his despair. Upon Manduca’s return, he is seen carrying a shot gun, an action received with concern and shock by Theo and Karamakate, and with a louder, higher pitch screaming dialogue from the slave, who eventually becomes quiet as he takes the front part of the gun and forces Manduca to point it to his head. This creates a tense moment in which Manduca’s companions begin yelling in despair, begging him not to do it, while he claims the slave will be tortured if he does not murder him. Still outside the frame, a crescendo of screaming voices is taken to a point of rupture in which a shot is fired, producing a second of silence (in which even the sounds of the Amazon disappear) that is followed by sounds of Manduca crying and a shot of the slave alive, once again yelling with a lower volume and pitch, as Karamakate throws the gun away.

Trauma in this particular sequence is expressed through the qualities of the voice, more so than by the content of the dialogue itself (Lovatt 168). The slave character does not discuss his traumatic conditions or attempts to put them into words, and the audience is not given any further clues, beyond the immediate context, about the consequences he will face. Semantic knowledge is limited to understanding his request to be killed. Nevertheless, both the characters and the audience are able to perceive a heightened sense of the slave's subjectivity through his voice. As speech emerges from his body, the speed, tone, and aural expressions involved in his act of speaking and yelling, bring forward both his fear of the future and the suffering that has characterized his past. In discussing the physical qualities of the voice, philosopher Mladen Dolar asserts that voices leave the bodies that produce them, while reflecting traits not only of their physical sources, but of the essence of the persons from whom speech emanates:

In a curious bodily topology, it is like a bodily missile which separates itself from the body and spreads around, but on the other hand it points to a bodily interior, an intimate partition of the body which cannot be disclosed—as if the voice were the very principle of division into interior and exterior. The voice, by being so ephemeral, transient, incorporeal, ethereal, presents for that very reason the body at its quintessential, the hidden bodily treasure beyond the visible envelope, the interior “real” body, unique and intimate, and at the same time it seems to present more than the mere body. (Dolar 70)

This presentation of both the body and something more than the body is found in the encounter with the slave. The screaming voices of characters reveal aspects of their physical existence, while also offering aspects of their trauma-associated emotions. Manduca cries, screams and whimpers, exhibiting a physical reaction to distress and revealing emotions associated to the conflict of whether or not to kill the man. Karamakate screams, also showing a

physical reaction to stress but with emotions that reveal a fear more related to Manduca becoming a murderer, than to the act of killing the slave. Theo's voice creates a contrast, as instead of screaming, his speech remains in a low tone with an increased tempo. This exhibits his reaction of shock, while demonstrating a despair to regain control over the situation. Finally, the screams of the slave reveal his physical and emotional pain, while acting as a petition to have some control over his body and his fate, even if that means being killed. In accordance to Dolar's ideas, the screams of these characters reveal something intimate about them and the experiences they bring into this traumatic moment, as well as about their shared desire to have some control over the situation.

Other instances of screaming reveal different aspects of the characters and demonstrate the diverse purposes of the construction of pain through bodily sounds. For example, the film suggests a connection between the experience of the Western explorers by a scream they both produce under similar conditions. Theo and Evan are eventually abandoned by Karamakate. The first is left to die, and the second is left after being transformed into a Coihuanos who must share the knowledge of that group. At the moment of their abandonment they both scream Karamakate's name. Theo screams with a high pitch that fades into a whimper, which reveals his despair over the loss of his guide as well as the weakness produced by his illness. In contrast, Evan's scream has a lower pitch and ends with the same intensity, which demonstrates his physical strength but also his anguish over losing Karamakate. By producing a similar scream, the characters' feelings of loss and hopelessness are connected, while also pointing to their loneliness in the absence of their guide.

Going back to the sequence of interest, the previously mentioned crescendo constructs a particular tone for the sequence, since voices increasing in volume and tempo serve the function



of building tension, instead of a commonly used aural element to produce this effect: music. A musical scoring is traditionally employed to evoke emotions, set a mood, immersing the audience in sets of affective forces or providing transitions between scenes (Donnelly 127). Therefore, music would potentially be an appropriate element to build a tense atmosphere by using musical instruments that increased in pitch and tempo until a point of rupture. Reading this sequence closely, we can hear the voices follow such a musical pattern, thus revealing the tendency to mix non-musical aural elements in film through a musical approach, since “there is an increasingly musical conceptualization of sound design in such [contemporary] films, where sound elements are wielded in an artistic manner, manipulated for precise effect rather than merely aiming to duplicate and complement screen activity” (Donnelly 126).

The effect delivered by the sequence is the building a moment of tension that concludes in a brief instant of doubt. This is prompted by the asynchrony of the fired shot. When the gun is fired the frame does not show the slave or the gun. Instead it remains focused on the sorrowful expression of Manduca, and for a moment it seems that he has killed the man. The second of silence that follows the shot functions as a contrasting aural element in regard to the previously heard voices, indicating that shock has resulted in an absence of speech. As the silence is once again filled by voices and the soundscape, the shot frames the slave alive and disappointed. The tension built through the musical approach to mixing voices fades, leaving a wretched atmosphere supported by the facial expression of all characters.

The combination of the voices’ expressiveness, the absence of subtitles for the slave’s speech and the music-like approach to mixing the characters’ speech, render a traumatic experience that is witnessed by spectators. Audiences are placed in the same conditions of lack of understanding as characters in the scene, they listen to the crescendo of voices, while unable

to escape the expressive aural qualities of the slave's voice, and there are no extra-diegetic elements that mark the representational nature of the scene. Furthermore, by sharing the moment of silence after the shot is fired, while only being able to look at Manduca, spectators share the moment of shock and doubt with the characters on scene. The aural construction of the sequence allows those observing it to engage in a form of spectatorship through embodied closeness, in which sound design promotes a sort of intimacy of the spectator with the scene (Lovatt 172). As seen, this sequence evokes the lack of control that is characteristic of the trauma claim, through bodily sounds of pain, while sharing the depicted traumatic experience with audiences as close witnesses instead of distant spectators.

The whipping scene at the Catholic mission has a similar construction of sound. It also relies on the expression of pain through the voice and in the lack of subtitles to place the focus in the characteristics of the sounds heard. However, two additional relevant aspects contribute to evocation of meaning, and differentiate the sound of this scene: the contrast created by the differences between the voices of the priest and the child, and the fact that what is being screamed is semantically relevant. The aural presence of the child's screams begins as the travelers are framed in an enclosed space. Manduca, Theo and Karamakate are lying down as non-diegetic screams and whipping sounds are heard in the distance, which provokes Manduca to get up and approach the scene. As he comes closer, the priest is framed whipping a child's back, whose expression remains unseen.

Both the priest and the child remain untranslated. Thus, before going into the meaning of their words, attention is elicited by the characteristics of their voices. The priest speaks in a low pitch with loud volume, and his speech is marked by a commanding tone and a fast-paced tempo. As he whips the child, the whipping sound is accompanied by a short exhalation by the priest,

signaling the strength required to inflict pain on the child. Meanwhile, the boy screams in a high pitch and with a loud volume, while his speech is marked by a yielding, begging tone. These differing vocal qualities produce a contrast that places the characters in extremes of aural behavior (Garwood 197). For the audience who cannot grasp the meaning of the words being said, this extreme is already representative of the traumatic and violent qualities of the scene, as the qualities of the voices indicate who holds the power and who is being oppressed, even before the characters are actually framed.

With regard to the actual meaning of the words being spoken, two languages are interleaved in the scene. The priest speaks Spanish and Latin, while the child speaks only in Latin. In previous scenes, the film has established that the children at the Mission are not allowed to speak Indigenous languages, specifically when the priest states that “the languages of the Devil are not allowed here” (01:03:10), after hearing Karamakate speak his native language. Before the whipping scene, Karamakate has taken the children apart to teach them, in their language, about Indigenous knowledge and mythical beliefs about the use of plants. It is thus inferred that the act being punished through physical violence is related to this interaction. This is all the more evident when paying attention to what is being said in between the screams of pain coming from the child, who screams “Pater noster” [Our Father], the beginning of a Catholic prayer. Simultaneously the priest yells “Pater noster, ¡vamos!” [Our Father, let’s go!], thus accompanying the prayer’s initial line with a command.

Therefore, the words being said are not only relevant because of their aural qualities, but because of their implications with regard to the depicted trauma conditions. The fact that the physical punishment is accompanied by an obligation to speak in Latin and to say a Catholic prayer, signals to the oppression faced by the children at the Mission, whom are forbidden from

using their language or acting accordingly to Indigenous ways, while being forced to accept Catholic beliefs as their own. The scene also constitutes a critique of the remarks previously made by the priest, who considers he is saving the children, when in fact he is imposing religious beliefs on them that separate them from Indigenous views. Furthermore, the scene supports the trauma claim as collective, as it is not only one child who is being the victim of violent impositions. Other children are forced to witness the scene, while half naked, seemingly awaiting their turn to be whipped. The sound of bodies in pain serves as a vehicle to convey lack of agency of the Indigenous children in this instance, and in the broader context, to represent the collective trauma of Amazonian peoples.

In *El Abrazo de la Serpiente*, the physical and emotional pain experienced by characters finds an outlet of expression in the composition of voices. To witness their experience, a full linguistic comprehension is not entirely necessary, as the characteristics of their speech, along with the inflexions through which they express pain, already create an aural ambiance that transmits their sorrow. Furthermore, the fact that their traumatic experiences are shared with other characters, indicates the collective qualities of the represented trauma. Nor the rubber slave or the whipped child represent isolated cases. Instead they are common stories, that request attention to their pain through an aural performance.

#### THE PERVASIVE SOUNDSCAPE

A common aural thread that unites the vast majority of sequences in *El Abrazo de la Serpiente*, is its layered soundscape, composed of a multitude of bird and insect chirps, water that gushes, trickles and drips, as well as sounds of rushing wind and rustling leaves. The soundscape is a pervasive presence that can shift and vary in tone, pitch or volume, and can draw attention to

itself. Although this pervasiveness may seem an obvious trait to provide a sense of realism for a film that occurs in the open space of the Amazonian rainforest, it is important to keep in mind that the disposition of every aural element of sound design represents a choice. Furthermore, the set of choices made by directors and sound designers impacts the overall construction of a film sound world and the meanings that it can evoke and promote. The soundscape of the film evokes meaning by signaling moments in the journeys that depict the consequences of past actions which resulted in the loss of memories and in the transmission of trauma to younger generations.

To address the use of the soundscape to produce meaning in *El Abrazo de la Serpiente*, it is useful to consider the more common notion of the soundscape as passive and relevant only to provide a sense of realism. The concept of soundscape was initially used to describe the sonic environment of real places, specifically to define how the visual perception of individuals was affected by the sounds of a determined setting such as, for example, an urban environment (Southworth 65). Later, sound theorist Rick Altman described it as the set of sounds that not only characterize a location but the time in which that setting is depicted (Altman 252). The concept of the soundscape has made its way into the world of filmmaking as an element that can provide a sense of realism. This has resulted in the integration of actual soundscapes into film aural constructions. In mainstream filmmaking the soundscape is usually composed of ambient sounds that are placed not with the intention of referring to their specific source, but rather to produce a sense of ambiance. Michel Chion characterized continuously present soundscapes as territory sounds (467); thus, according to Chion, the pervasive soundscape of *El Abrazo de la Serpiente* can be catalogued as a deployment of territory sounds. However, the sound theorist's definition falls short of capturing the results of the aural composition of this particular film.

Chion's discussion of ambient and territory sounds offers a second level of categorization: active or passive off-screen sounds. Active sounds he argues, elicit responses from the characters or make the audience wonder about their sources, and passive sounds simply describe a setting. Although he clarifies that the term passive does not have a negative connotation, the author explains that the positive aspect of passive sound is that it can substitute actions of establishing shots or other visual devices (482). Although Chion's categories may be accurate for much of mainstream cinema, the generalization is problematic in some instances. First, it considers film soundscape elements as mere garnishments to produce an aural impression of a space as real, and second because his description of a passive soundscape as a positive element is based on its potential to substitute visual elements, not to produce meaning through sound.

*El Abrazo de la Serpiente* challenges these mainstream characteristics of soundscapes. The first challenge is rendered by the contrast between the visual landscape and the soundscape. The film is entirely shot in black and white, a choice made by the director based on his belief that the actual greenness of the Amazonian rainforest cannot be captured. He sought instead for the visuals to resemble the daguerreotypes present in the original explorers' journals. While visually, bright colors are absent, the soundscape is lively in every scene, providing an invitation to be immersed in sounds. This does not represent a substitution of color, and to assert that the territory sounds serve as mere substitutes of visual devices would not be accurate. Instead, the composition and mixing of the soundscape provide spectators with an opportunity to become fully submerged in an aural experience. As an example, the expressive qualities of the soundscape can be appreciated in the first sequences, in which a young Karamakate encounters Theo and his friend, Manduca. Their first exchange of words is a hostile one, in which

Karamakate refuses to help them find Yakruna in order to heal Theo, dismissing Theo's allegations that Karamakate's people, the Coihuanos, still exist and can be found by him.

The sequence's discussion, the later images of Karamakate reflecting and preparing a plant, and the scene of him finally agreeing to help Theo, share the pervasive soundscape previously described. Its volume is maintained throughout the dialogue, and there is a choice not to selectively decrease it in favor of higher intelligibility of the characters' speech. The soundscape's volume increases in a following scene, specifically as Karamakate paints dots on Theo's face with the extract from the plant he was previously preparing. This increase of volume is not only relevant in marking the start of the journey that this set of characters will undertake. It also marks the first moment of contact between Karamakate and Theo, the first exchange of Karamakate's practices with regard to plants' knowledge, and the introduction to the characters' immersion in the Amazonian setting. The heightened volume does not change the definition, pitch or tone of its aural elements, nor does it add new sounds that produce inquiries about their origin, and yet, its increased presence evokes meaning.

The previously described aural construction already signals the less passive and more active soundscape. Its capacity to evoke meaning with regard to issues of collective trauma emerges in a moment that employs the above-described aural composition and that renders Karamakate's alienation from the cultural practices of his people. The sequence of interest portrays the first moments of interaction between an aged Karamakate and the American botanist, Evan. As Karamakate questions Evan's motivations for seeking the sacred plant Yakruna, ambient sounds gradually and subtly increase. Then, Karamakate gets Coca leaves from him, but is faced with acknowledging that he has lost his memories of the proper preparation of the plant for its consumption. Evan then proceeds to make the preparation and

share it with Karamakate, and in this moment the volume and definition of ambient sounds drastically increase in the same way as they did when Karamakate met Theo in the past.

The particular mixing of the soundscape in these mirrored sequences includes the volume increase as a marker of both the contact between the cultures depicted in each journey and the agreement to travel together. Furthermore, the latter sound construction establishes a parallel with Karamakate's past, by increasing sound at the exact moment in which knowledge about the preparation of plants is exchanged. The first sequence renders Karamakate as an isolated person with a particular world view based on a set of cultural understandings and practices. In this instance the soundscape's increase in volume points to a moment in which he is capable of sharing knowledge with others because he has placed primacy on preserving the memories of his group despite his isolation. The second sequence shows Karamakate once again as a lonely subject, but this time he is entirely alienated from his culture and is incapable of assigning meaning to his scarce and fading memories of cultural practices. The volume increase marks a moment in which characters must depend on members of other cultures to obtain the benefits of plants in the Amazonian setting. In the second sequence, the exchange forces Karamakate to confront the loss of the remembrances that connected him to his land.

These volume changes take on the role of cues that not only indicate changes in the plot but suggest connections between the journeys depicted in the film. In that sense, and in a similar way to the previously analyzed crescendo of voices, the mixing of territory sounds has a musical approach. Instead of including a non-diegetic melodic score to mark these moments of change, the sound design takes on the elements of the ambiance, turning them from merely functional, to aesthetic and loaded with meaning. In discussing the mixing of sound effects through a musical approach, music scholar Kevin Donnelly asserts that "sound effects are not simply about



matching what the screen requires to verify its activities. Instead, sound effects can take on more of the functions traditionally associated with music: emotional ambiences, provision of tone to a sequence, or suggestions of vague connections” (132). Thus, the soundscape here takes on these functions by rendering characters emotions and actions, and by suggesting a connection between the journeys made by Karamakate.

Volume is not the only alteration made to the film’s ever-present soundscape. The change in the aural elements of the soundscape signals the entry to particular spaces, while revealing aspects related to cultural conflicts between Indigenous groups and colonial settlers. These meanings evoked by a changing aural construction are more evident in the setting of the Catholic Mission. In the first journey, when Karamakate approaches this space with Theo and Manduca, the chirps that had previously characterized the soundscape change into highly defined bird sounds. These new bird chirps possess flute-like qualities and are mixed with other sounds that resemble high pitched howls. Other bird sounds appear as harsh, low frequency caws. All these varieties of bird sounds are unheard of in the rest of the film, which provides specific aural qualities to this setting even before the characters arrive to the actual place. Although the evocative qualities of bird sounds are not explicitly related to trauma or the conditions experienced in a setting, they do signal the entrance to an unknown setting.

Other aural elements and mixing modes of the soundscape are heard as the characters are introduced to the setting. Sounds of pig snorts appear in the background, and the soundscape remains present but mixed at its lowest volume in the film: it is barely heard in the patio where the voices of Indigenous children praying and singing in Latin are much louder. It is even lower, nearly imperceptible, in the space where they eat. Aural elements of this changing soundscape evoke two distinctive qualities about the place. First, the pig sounds subtly build on the idea of

different nourishment practices. For Karamakate and other Indigenous groups depicted, food must be obtained from the jungle, and there are prohibitions in place that help maintain nature's balance. Meanwhile, in the Mission no prohibitions related to Indigenous beliefs are accepted. The snorting draws attention to the context in which animal domestication is imposed. Second, the diminishment of the familiar soundscape speaks to a form of living isolated from natural elements, one that rejects cultural practices based on the contact with nature. Through alterations in the soundscape, the sound design evokes the conflict between the views of Indigenous peoples and those promoted by the Catholic Mission.

This first journey to the Mission ends violently. Manduca, angered at the priest for whipping a child, attacks him, leaving him unconscious. Theo, aware that they have no way of feeding or transporting all of the children, tells his travel companions that they must leave the children alone. Thirty years later, the journey of Karamakate and Evan brings them back to this aurally unique setting. As they approach the space by navigating through a river, sounds of the same distinct birds heard in the first journey slowly acquire a higher volume. As with the sound of the pig, a new aural element is foregrounded. This time it is the buzz of a fly that travels from one speaker to another in the audible space, thus producing an impression of surrounding the presented environment. After the onset of the buzz, crosses with decomposed bodies hanging from trees are framed from the perspective of Evan and Karamakate, turning the fly's sound into an aural announcement of the visual element of corpses. On this journey, the travelers encounter the abandoned children grown up, now fanatics of a self-proclaimed messiah in charge of the Mission. When the travelers are brought to the messiah, they enter the space in which children used to eat, which has turned into a place of adoration of this messiah. Again, ambient sounds common to the rest of the film are pushed to the background through low volume and definition.

By presenting this same space through variations in the construction of its soundscape, the film's sound design alludes to the changing qualities of the setting as a place of trauma. The first depiction of the Mission constructs a place where a religion is imposed and children are taken away from their families, their practices and their culture. These forms of alienation are reflected in the ambient sounds, different from the ones that permeate the rest of the film, that create an unfamiliar atmosphere. The second aural construction of the setting makes the consequences of the past explicit through changes to the previously crafted soundscape. The distinct bird sounds remain, thus evoking memories from Karamakate and from the audience with regard to the space that is about to be entered. However, the alteration in the unfamiliar animal sound, this time belonging to an insect, signals how the space has changed. The Mission becomes a place of death and punishment, while the nearly absent soundscape in closed spaces indicates the characteristic of the Mission as a site of control.

The analysis of sound construction in these sequences shows that to characterize territory sounds as passive is to miss the potential of sound to produce meaning. Contrary to what Chion posed, the aural elements of these soundscapes do not explicitly call the attention of the characters to produce a reaction, nor do they draw the attention of the audience toward a specific change in the spaces portrayed. The soundscape goes through subtle changes that evoke meaning with regard to the conflictive relationship between the groups that coexist in the Amazonian setting. These alterations may take the form of new aural elements appearing, or already presented elements being altered through the sound mix.

This demonstrates the limits of Chion's ideas about ambient and territory sounds, as his assertions place the construction of an aural soundscape always in service of the image and of

creating an impression of a space with realistic qualities. On this matter, Béla Balázs in his theoretical approach to sound, proposed different notions around ambiance construction through sound:

It is the business of sound film to reveal for us our acoustic environment, the acoustic landscape in which we live, the speech of things and the intimate whisperings of nature; all that has speech beyond human speech, and speaks to us with the vast conversational powers of life and incessantly influences and directs our thoughts and emotions. (116)

Balázs notes the emotional and cognitive power of the soundscape, as well as its potential to reveal particularities of spaces. Moreover, he posits that sounds beyond human speech constantly influence emotions and thoughts. His ideas are much closer to Karamakate's perspective on the sound experience of the world, and they accurately describe how the constant, yet ever-changing soundscape evokes meaning for both characters and spectators.

#### THE PARTICULARITIES OF THE SOUND OF WATER

In the construction of the film's pervasive soundscape, one aural element deserves particular attention, since it is not only part of the ever-present territory sounds, but it is the sound that experiences the most changes throughout the film: the sound of water. As a natural element, water is already of utmost relevance for the plot since the journey through the Amazonian landscape can only happen because of the connection between spaces created by the rivers. Furthermore, water has a high cultural relevance in foundational myths of Amazonian Indigenous groups. A myth existent across Amazonian cultures tells the story of how water and all water-related life came to be. According to this tale, water emerged from a river-tree that was sequestered by a female force. Then as the tree was found by mythical beings, water flowed into

the world and through the movement of the Anaconda. This movement created the Amazonian river and the ancestors came into the world (Duque 172)<sup>18</sup>. Thus, the river represents a connection between the Amazonian peoples and their territory. In the film, the changing sound of water is related to two relevant aspects: the depiction of the travelers' relationship to nature and the film's construction of time.

The sound of water and its visual presence become associated with the characters' contrasting perceptions on the natural landscape and how to navigate it. This is made evident upon the arrival of Theo, Manduca and Karamakate to a steep river area, where water flows violently. As transit becomes too difficult, they stop to rest. While Karamakate and Manduca pull the canoe to safety, Theo advances trembling and carrying five heavily packed suitcases. Despite Karamakate's insistence that Theo should throw away all his objects, he refuses by stating that those things are his only connection to Germany, his family and his people. The dialogue between these characters is overlaid by a presence of the sound of water flowing rapidly, such that it almost obscures the dialogue. This is an uncommon practice of sound design, as speech clarity usually takes precedence and ambient sounds are pushed to the background. In fact, dialogue engineers and sound designers continuously look into new ways of eliminating ambient noise to privilege the intelligibility of dialogue (Fischer 239).

By placing the characters' voices and natural sounds at a similar level of auditory presence, the film's sound design assigns to these aural elements an equivalent level of relevance. In turn, the overpowering sound and presence of water promotes two sets of attitudes related to the characters' perceptions. For Theo, who feels ill, the uncontrollable water means a disturbance that forces him to protect the knowledge he has gathered and his connection to a

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<sup>18</sup> The title of the film seems related to these mythical views, suggesting a relationship between the embrace of a serpent and a moment of rupture and creation.

community. For Karamakate and Manduca the overwhelming water sound appears as a normal characteristic of the setting. They contemplate the landscape and speak calmly to each other about the meaning of the place where they are. Manduca asks “Is this the spot where the anaconda descended from the Milky Way, carrying or Karipulakena ancestors?” (00:37:40), to which Karamakate nods in agreement. This effectively connects the characters and the film with mythical beliefs of the Anaconda as the bringer of life and shaper of the river.

As seen, this sequence reveals two different approaches to the experience of inhabiting a natural setting. For the Westerner, the heightened presence of water appears as a menace to his health and to the knowledge he has gathered. For the Indigenous characters, the rushing water signifies a connection to a land and to a mythical view on the origin of people. Their contemplation of the land and soundscape triggers a form of knowledge that does not require objects to be contained, and Karamakate’s simple nodding visually confirms his unquestioning response to the power of the water. The high volume, rapid flowing and defined sound of water thus promotes the representation of divergent views on the contact with nature as either a menace to objects, or a source of knowledge about the setting in which characters interact.

With regard to time, the sound of water is fundamental in connecting the two journeys depicted in the film and in the transition between the times of each journey. Changing sounds of water along with music are heard in two instances in which shots switch from one set of characters to the other. The first switch is from a shot in which, as they remain still in a canoe on the river, Evan shows Karamakate a book written by Theo that collects his experiences during his time in the Amazon. This changes to a shot of Karamakate, Manduca and Theo advancing into the village of an Indigenous group known by the German explorer. The second switch is from the ending of Karamakate, Manduca and Theo’s time at the Mission, to a shot of Evan and

Karamakate lost, moments before their own arrival at the Mission setting. Sound and visual components work together to represent these mutations in time: The sound of water as a constant presence during the switch of characters establishes the power of the landscape throughout both journeys, and music composed of a mix of piano, chants and electronic sounds also marks the switch between journey depictions.

To discuss sound's involvement in depicting this time shift, it is first necessary to consider the film's construction of time. *El Abrazo de la Serpiente* does not follow a linear form of storytelling, in which a continual depiction of Karamakate's time with Theo is succeeded by Karamakate's trip with Evan. Instead what is rendered is a dialogue between times in which they change into one and other by alternating sequences of each journey. In the first direct transition, the book sparks memories of Theo and Manduca's existence, thus bringing them into actuality. In the second direct transition, the abandonment of the children brings forward the consequences of the past by re-entering the same setting years later. It is noticeable that these time shifts do not appear as direct remembrances of a character, nor do they come from a single perspective. In the same way, sound throughout the film does not come from a specific point of audition belonging to a character. Rather, sounds emerge from varied sources and appeal to the perception of the audience.

This lack of source specificity, both of sound and memories, implies that the depicted journeys are not entirely tied to the past, present or future of a defined character. The fact that memories neither appear as a character's recollections, nor as flashbacks, puts the focus on the rendering of the journeys as fragments of time. By alternating sequences in this way, the film deliberately constructs temporality and draws attention to how one journey mirrors the other. In that sense, the film renders what philosopher Gilles Deleuze referred to as sheets of the past

which, paradoxically, are presented as simultaneous peaks of the present (115). What I mean by this is that chronologically, it is understood that these stories belong in a past. One in the first decade of the twentieth century and the other during the Second World War. Yet, when delivered through film they are present in relation to each other, mirroring one another, without rendering a sense that one of them belongs specifically in the past or is recalled by a particular character.

This complex connection between times is achieved through the simultaneous presentation of the diegetic sound of water and non-diegetic rendering of music at the two previously mentioned points of transition. At the end of Karamakate's reflections on how Theo's picture implies his transformation into a hollow man, music and a voice chanting fill the non-diegetic auditory space of the film. In the background, water sounds of low volume ripples are heard as visually a tilt goes from framing Karamakate to a shot of the river reflecting the landscape. The sound of water changes less than a second before a cut to a shot of Manduca, Theo and a young Karamakate making their way through the river. The sound goes from a tranquil ripple to a river in motion, with water flowing rapidly and with a higher volume than in the previous shot. The combination of non-diegetic music with an advanced diegetic sound announces a changing relationship of the time depicted.

Music in the non-diegetic space already represents a particularity of film sound, since it emerges from no recognizable source and cannot be located in a specific time depicted by the film. It is a sound free of the restraints of space and time (Chion 81), making it a prime aural element to establish a connection between the depicted sheets of past. Furthermore, the music combines an Indigenous chant, an analog European instrument—the piano—and digital sounds consistent with electronic creation of music. Thus, a convergence of musical elements from diverse periods and cultures is present within the musical piece itself. In the diegetic space, water



functions as a displaced diegetic sound that indicates an alteration in the relationships of time and space (Bordwell & Thompson 197). The subtle introduction of sounds of water in motion, contrasting with calm water in the visual frame, signals an alteration in the space of the river, while the fact that the sound changes moments before the image, announces the overlapping nature of the times depicted.

The second direct time-shift is achieved once again through the simultaneity of visual and aural aesthetic devices. In this sequence the same musical piece of the first time-shift appears, first mixed with the sound of paddles rapidly passing through water, with a volume and definition that fade slowly to indicate the characters' motion into a more distant space. Karamakate, Theo and Manduca run away from the Mission and as the camera starts panning from their outgoing canoe to the river reflecting the landscape, the sound of music overpowers all diegetic sounds. When the pan ends in a slight tilt that frames the older Karamakate with Evan, we hear the same paddling through water, with a slower motion and increasing in volume and definition. The visual aspect connects both times through space, while the aural aspect connects them through repetition. The same sounds appear in both journeys, yet one fades away as the other approaches the center of the audible space. These recurrent sounds are joined by the same music that has interconnected the times depicted in the non-diegetic space.

Through this overlapping of time and space both in its diegetic and non-diegetic dimensions, sheets of the past are connected as peaks of a present joined through fragments of time. The shift between depictions of one journey and the other is rendered through a convergence of aural and visual devices that work simultaneously in joining the temporal and spatial aspects of each experience of Karamakate with the explorers. The aural qualities of the river's water are varied in volume, definition, and time. As the river water permits the physical

displacement of the characters, the changes in its sound evoke the displacement between times, thus turning an element of the soundscape into a connection between the journeys depicted.

This link created by sound is concurrent with moments that bring forward memories of abandonment. The first time-shift is prompted when Karamakate remembers how he left Theo to die. Simultaneously, the protagonist sees a picture of the German explorer and identifies the image as a representation of a Theo-Chullachaqui, a being that is as empty as him. Abandonment in the case of Theo results in his death. However, the fact that Karamakate leaves him to die along with the Yakruna plant affects him profoundly, turning him into a Chullachaqui and thus endangering the memories he possessed about the knowledge of his people. The second time-shift results from the abandonment of the children, who grow up without any cultural connections, becoming easy targets for manipulation and submission to the messiah figure that comes to occupy the Mission. Therefore, the connection made between times brings forward traumatic conditions in which abandonment and loneliness produce negative consequences not just for individuals, but for collectivities.

Considering this, the connection between times created by sound does not represent a harmonious dialogue between the journeys. On the contrary, what is brought forward is the cyclical nature of trauma through repetition. The traumatic experience is mainly framed by loss and separation: Karamakate is abandoned by his group at a young age, then he and his first companions leave behind the children, and the cycle continues as the protagonist leaves Theo to die. This reiteration of actions is reflected in sound design by a repetition of the same song and the alteration of sounds of water, which prompt the time shifts that appear as part of a cycle. In his journey with Evan, Karamakate refuses to leave him despite their constant conflicts. That is, the character attempts to break the traumatic cycle of abandonment by creating a connection to

Evan. The following section discusses how this connection is created through the sharing of an aural element: a song.

#### SONGS, LOSS AND MEMORIES OF A COLLECTIVITY

Throughout the film, the concept of song is posed as a medium to establish connections with a group and to preserve the memories of a collectivity. In his work on cultural memory, Jan Assmann began with Maurice Halbwachs' concept of collective memory, and proposed to divide it into cultural and communicative memory. Cultural memory, according to Assmann, involves the remembrance of fixed moments in the past through institutionalized practices, specialists in the enactment of these practices, and symbols that represent these specific recollections (38). On the other hand, communicative memory relies not on institutions but on individuals and their ways of remembering the past and does not have a life span of more than three generations (37). In the film, the memories that Karamakate attempts to preserve touch on both definitions. He plays the role of a keeper and has symbolic mnemonic elements such as Yakruna and the song of his people. Simultaneously, he aims to transmit his memories of the world, and for them to survive beyond his group and the three-generation life span. Thus, when collective memory is alluded in this section, it refers to this combination of recollections to be protected and preserved.

For Karamakate, songs contain these collective memories, and by connecting characters to their cultural remembrances and their ancestors, the preservation of songs implies a form of protection from their traumatic experiences of loss. All main characters are in a moment of estrangement from their cultures and communities: Theo fears dying without seeing his family and being able to share his knowledge with people of his country; Evan is away from his home,

his family, his country, and everything that is familiar to him; finally, Karamakate has been by himself a long time, first believing he is the last Coihuano and feeling the responsibility to be the keeper of the knowledge of his people, and then as a Chullachaqui, bereft of memories. The characters use song as a way to connect to what they feel has been lost, and also to represent aspects about their cultural understanding of the world.

The relevance of songs is pointed out at several junctures: Theo describes the knowledge he has gathered in his expeditions as “his song” contained in a book with text and images; when young Karamakate transmits mythical knowledge to the children at the Mission, he states “Don’t let our song fade away” (01:06:48); an older Karamakate and Evan listen to Joseph Haydn’s *Creation* through a portable phonograph, as the elder insists that the song represents the path that Evan seeks; finally, the film ends with a text-on-screen dedication to the memory of the peoples whose song we will never know (02:02:22). Thus, the notion of song and its connection to memory is a constant. But what are its implications in the film’s depiction of memory? And how are these notions evoked in sound design?

From Karamakate’s perspective, a song is a both a way to understand the world and to connect his cultural memories to others. Therefore, the song is a way for the collective memory of Karamakate’s people to travel. On the matter of memory and cultural practices, scholar Astrid Erll asserts that memories remain in collective cognition because of their travelling qualities:

The term ‘travelling memory’ is a metaphorical shorthand, an abbreviation for the fact that in the production of cultural memory, people, media, mnemonic forms, contents, and practices are in constant, unceasing motion. [...] I claim that all cultural memory must ‘travel’, be kept in motion, in order to ‘stay alive’, to have an impact both on individual minds and social formations. (12)

Erll's 'travelling memory,' with the premise that memories must be mobilized to be maintained in the collective psyche, serves as a frame for understanding Karamakate's concerns with guaranteeing the survival of his song. Having experienced the loss of his people, the future of the memories he keeps depends on his ability to transmit his song to others. Furthermore, Karamakate's ideas represent an actual cultural understanding of songs across Indigenous Amazonian cultures. Although the film does not explicitly represent a particular Indigenous group, and the mentioned groups and plants' names had to be made-up at the request of the Indigenous populations consulted (Guerra 00:04:32), Karamakate's character was designed to be a composite representation of the characteristics of diverse groups (00:03:58). The value and relevance that Karamakate places on his song is, accordingly, consistent with diverse Amazonian beliefs.

The relevance of aural elements is evident in the Wakuénai mythical view on the origin of the world.<sup>19</sup> The myth describes a time before notions of distance or movement across places existed. In this time, a mythical being, Kuwai, expands the world through the sounds he produces, bringing all life into being through his song (Hill & Wright 87). This widespread myth includes sound as a prime aspect of the origin of the world, and consequently of the cultural memories of the Wakuénai people. Its connections to the film are evident, since Kuwai is the son of two mythical beings, the First Woman or Anaconda, and the trickster Made-from-Bone. Thus, his existence happens as the result of the union between the figure of a serpent and a mythical being that resembles humans (Hill 118). The myth is in itself a travelling cultural memory, as it also exists among the Hohodene who describe Kuwai as a being only existent in sound, "whose

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<sup>19</sup> Wakuénai people inhabit land across Brazil, Colombia and Venezuela. Thus, in current geographical views, this myth exists across nations.

body parts are flutes and other aerophones” (Wright in De Mori 116), and brought into actuality in rituals in which similar instruments are played (De Mori 116).

This myth and its implications in ritual, signal the relevance of sound and song as transcultural features of the mythical world view of several Indigenous groups in the Amazonian setting. Scholarship asserts that in the western Amazon, entities and spirits are made tangible through songs and that through an enchanted mode of listening<sup>20</sup>, utterances acquire an agency of their own, in turn producing meaning (De Mori 121-122). This mythical and ritual significance of sound and song is reflected in Karamakate’s work of song preservation as a way to maintain his understanding of the world, and the culture from which the song originates. The loss of his song implies forfeiting his mythical understanding of his surroundings, thus promoting the closure of the world and of existence itself.

Karamakate’s song is not the only one mentioned in the film. In fact, there is an exchange between cultures, since both Theo and Evan share their songs and learn from Karamakate’s. In this sense, the concept of song as a way of moving transcultural memories is activated in at least two of the five dimensions of memories in motion described by Erll: carriers and media.<sup>21</sup> Karamakate’s cultural collective memories and knowledge move across time through a song transmitted by carriers, meaning individuals who are in charge of guaranteeing the survival of their knowledge. Thus, when young Karamakate believes he is the sole survivor of the Coihuanos, his isolation, aggressiveness and despair respond, among other things, to concerns about the transmission of collective memory.

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<sup>20</sup> De Mori describes “enchanted listening” as that in which what is perceived is not entirely tied to the acoustic event, giving aural elements an agency of their own

<sup>21</sup> The other dimensions of travelling memory according to Erll are contents, practices and forms. Although they are somewhat involved in this representation of memories, they are not as relevant as carriers and media. For further description of these dimensions see Erll 12-14.

His concerns are aggravated by the fact that when Theo finally leads him to the survivors of his group, he discovers them using the sacred plant Yakruna for recreational purposes, and cultivating it, against the practices and rules that his song dictates. He then proceeds to destroy the plant and to abandon Theo to die, thus effectively eliminating the bonds he had with nature and with others for the transmission of his knowledge. The severance of these bonds results in his transformation into a Chullachaqui who suffers because he has lost his memories, causing his song to be forgotten. Therefore, in the first journey, Karamakate attempts to save his song through carriers, but his distrust for Theo and his anger endanger his collective memories. The journey with Evan is about recovering the lost song and being able to transmit it across cultures.

It is apparent in the film sequences that Karamakate's song survival depends on his contact with other persons. The situation is different, however, for Theo and Evan, as both their songs are transported through objects, entering the sphere of media quoted by Erll. When Theo speaks of the information contained in his travel logs as "his song", he does not imply the existence of an actual aural composition, but of a set of cultural memories acquired during his time at the Amazon. He turns to describing that set of knowledge as a song after Karamakate has disregarded their journey and the objects he travels with as useless. Evan's case is the only one that brings a song into actuality. Once again dismissing the objects carried by travelers, Karamakate insists he must throw them away to advance, but Evan refuses to lose a record and a portable phonograph through which he is able to listen to Joseph Haydn's *Creation*. Through these three representations surrounding the idea of a song that contains collective memory, it is noticeable that the travelling qualities of the memories evoked are always in crisis, whether it is for the lack of carriers or for the fear of losing the media that contains and allows the transmission of each song.

Considering the relevance of song as an aural concept so tied to collective memories, whose preservation is one of the stronger motives to advance the plot, it is surprising that actual songs are seldom heard throughout the film. This scarcity builds on the notion of songs as at risk of being lost, since they are rarely shared with others, thus preventing the memories from travelling. The most distinctive moment that brings a song into actuality happens when Evan refuses to throw away his portable phonograph. To explain its importance, Evan plays a record that contains Haydn's oratorio *Creation*. He explains to Karamakate "This sound accompanies me in loneliness, it brings me back home to Boston, to my ancestors" (01:28:21). As such, Evan recognizes the relevance of the piece to connect him to a community and a culture as well as his fear of losing this connection.

The sound of *Creation*'s beginning, *The Representation of Chaos*, is heard in the middle of the night in the Amazonian landscape. In this sequence it is initially mixed with the cyclical sound of the phonograph's needle along with the pervasive soundscape that the film has thoroughly constructed. Eventually, the sounds associated with the playback device fade, and both the soundscape and *The Representation of Chaos* come to the foreground of the aural space, increasing in volume and in distribution amongst the speakers. This provides an uncanny sensation of the musical piece being simultaneously in the diegetic and non-diegetic spaces, thus creating a form of sonic continuum in which sound design erases the distinction between families of sounds, to bring the meanings of the diegetic and non-diegetic spaces together: "The unified field sound merges these distinct channels, potentially mixing the objective and the subjective, fantasy and reality, fixed perception and unstable reverie, conscious and unconscious, and not least, musical aesthetic and communicational aesthetic" (Donnelly 126).



As asserted by Donnelly, the effacement of a distinction between the diegetic and non-diegetic sounds, brings the soundscape and Haydn's composition together in a level of meaning production. Previously, the film had already constructed this continuum by mixing voices in pain as a musical crescendo or by accentuating elements of the soundscape to suggest connections and affective forces. The conjunction of the soundscape with Haydn's piece represents the peak of this construction, by entirely fusing aural elements towards an aesthetic goal. The objectivity of territory sounds as representative of a reality-like soundscape mutates into the subjective meaning of this concomitance of aural elements as a form of song. Karamakate's song is thus not musical in the traditional sense, however it is heard throughout the film, being composed by the territory sounds that have pervasively flooded the audible space and the voices that have expressed the characters' pain. Through their equivalence in the mixing of the film, sound design suggests a connection between shared forms of aural understanding of the world and its origins.

This connection is all the more evident when looking into the meanings evoked by the opening of Haydn's composition. *The Representation of Chaos* "depicts the universe prior to the creative act whilst also prefiguring that act" (Berry 32). Thus, in the same way as Kuwai's myth, it depicts the existence of a time before time, before movement and distance, in which sound announces that the universe is on the brink of changing. However, the meanings of this song are still the object of a conflict between Karamakate and Evan. The first insists that the musical piece represents a path, and a way to actively listen to the world beyond the simple act of passive listening. The second claims that while the piece is beautiful, it represents only a story. This exchange of ideas bothers Karamakate, who tells Evan that he must learn to listen to the sounds around him, once again placing relevance on aural practices and the soundscape as a song that offers a perspective to understand the world.

After the characters listen to *The Representation of Chaos*, the film is near its end. Karamakate appears to have recovered his memories, and therefore, his song. However, the problem of securing the survival of this knowledge still remains, as there are no more Coihuanos to listen to his song. The opportunity to transmit this knowledge is presented when the characters arrive to the place where the last Yakruna flower exists. Despite Evan's confession that his true intentions are to use the plant for exploitation of rubber to benefit his country in the war, and the subsequent fight that this confession produces, Karamakate decides to give him the Yakruna preparation. He asserts that even if Evan tried to kill him, he killed Evan in the past, suggesting that he sees Theo and Evan as connected, and that he carries the burden of Theo's abandonment and death.

The conditions for the song to travel and to actually have meaning for Evan are presented as Karamakate tells him that he has realized he wasn't meant to teach his people, instead he was meant to teach Evan. He assures that by drinking the preparation he will be taken to meet the Anaconda and that he should let her embrace him. Once again drawing attention to the relevance of his song as a container of collective memories, Karamakate states: "Give them more than what they asked for. Give them a song. Tell them everything you see, everything you feel. Come back a whole man. You are a Coihuano" (01:57:47). Through this dialogue, the main character acknowledges the need for his memories to travel in order to remain in a broader collectivity, as he does not expect Evan to keep the knowledge to himself, but to offer his song to others and to in fact become a Coihuano, a carrier of the knowledge of his people. By staying with Evan and teaching him, the cycle of trauma framed by abandonment and loss is broken. Because of this, the recovery and transmission of memories permit the beginning of a process of working through the trauma.

The subsequent sequence renders Evan's dream, in which the song he will share with Karamakate is materialized in a musical way. Although numerous images of nature appear, the previous Amazonian soundscape is completely absent. Instead, digitally created musical notes, along with chants and sounds of traditional instruments, provide an ominous composition that accompanies a visual journey through the Amazonian landscape. Aerial images of the rivers end in a frame of Karamakate with light erupting from his mouth and eyes. As images change from the main character to images of space, the musical sounds fade to give way to a heartbeat sound, first rapidly beating, then slowing. As the heartrate slows, images transform once more, this time into colorful abstract patterns. In the end only chimes are heard, until Evan is seen waking up alone, looking for Karamakate as he leaves the Amazon rainforest behind.

Through this abstract, hallucination-like sequence, a combination of aural elements work towards the rendering of the collective memories being transmitted to Evan. Although there is not an evident message, it is clear that the world view he has acquired places a high value on a connection to nature and to others, on a mythical view of the Amazon origin, and on life itself. Although the jungle soundscape is absent, a conjunction of melodic sounds and sound effects produces the impression of a song being delivered, finally achieving the goal of Karamakate's collective memories travelling towards others, bearing the potential to survive in a collectivity. As Evan is unable to find Karamakate, he must acknowledge himself as a new man, embraced by the serpent, carrying the Coihuanos' memories with him.

## **Conclusions**

*El Abrazo de la Serpiente* offers a story full of journeys. Beyond its most explicit rendering of travelling, the film delivers a trajectory towards recovery of culture, forming transcultural

connections, accepting the need for memories to travel in order to remain in a collectivity and working through collective trauma. In that sense, it is notable that the film's depiction of trauma shows a range of aspects of the collective traumatic experience. Through characters such as the slave and the children, individuals become representative of painful experiences that affected collectivities. Moreover, the collective nature of the trauma is manifested through Karamakate's concerns and objectives. He does not seek an individual benefit or a personal way to work through his pain. Instead, his purpose is to save his cultural knowledge by transmitting it to others. When he becomes more individualistic and focused on his own anger, his memories are lost, and repetition of trauma conditions arises.

Sound is fundamental in rendering the components that, together, create the depiction of collective trauma. Through the construction of voices in pain, and the decision to keep the most significant painful sequences untranslated, the film places a focus on its aural construction and not in words for the transmission of emotions associated with trauma. Moreover, it creates a distinctive aural presence of characters that are representative of a collective pain. Through the composition of a pervasive soundscape with slight variations, the film can evoke meaning with regard to the traumatic qualities of spaces, suggest how certain settings are places of control and reveal clashes between Indigenous and European cultural perspectives. Finally, the significance of songs as a medium to transmit collective memories across cultures, accompanied with a sound design that supports the notion of songs as travelling memories, offers a path for working through the trauma. When songs are considered lost or endangered, the characters' feelings of loss and separation are heightened, leading to a repetition of the trauma cycle. When songs are recovered, acknowledged as valuable and shared, collective memories travel, creating meaning for others and breaking the trauma repetition.

Furthermore, the film's sound also delivers an aural journey, in which territory sounds go from representing an ambiance, to signaling moments of change. Sounds are also elevated to another level of meaning, in which they represent a song which is in turn a carrier of knowledge and a path towards perception of Karamakate's understanding of the world. The mixing of several sound families follows a musical approach, in which the film's sound becomes more than the sum of its parts, just as the sounds of an orchestra work together for the performance of a symphony. Thus, the aural elements in *El Abrazo de la Serpiente* render what Donnelly referred to as a sonic continuum, a unified field of sound in which sound families work together not just in a pragmatic way, but towards evocation of meaning, with different layers of signification for the film.

Ciro Guerra's film offers a unique representation of Indigenous Amazonian peoples and their experiences with collective trauma, while presenting two sides of Europeans' cultural contact with the Amazonian peoples. One side seeks to take advantage of the Amazon natural landscape while imposing their culture through violence and oppression of Indigenous groups. The other is eager to learn from the people, to gather their knowledge and share it with others. Both sides collide in the character of Evan. Despite these contradictions, the fact that his duality connects him with Karamakate's past journey, turns him into the recipient of his guide's knowledge. The fact that this non-Indigenous character receives all this knowledge can be connected with a previous scene in which Manduca expresses that to save their cultures and territory, Karamakate must share his knowledge across cultures: "If we can't get the whites to learn, it will be the end of us. The end of everything" (01:33:17). As such, this sharing of Karamakate's knowledge does not negate the harm that has been caused to Indigenous peoples. Instead it signals to the possibility and hope to stop further harm by connecting to others

with Western, Eurocentric views. The traumatic experiences faced by Indigenous peoples, the cyclical nature of trauma and its eventual rupture all find a representation in the film's aural construction. Through its sound design, *El Abrazo de la Serpiente* creates a song of its own, ready to embrace those willing to listen.

## Conclusions

The qualities of sound imply that it cannot exist in a vacuum. Although this assertion is related to the physics of sound, it is a legitimate simile when thinking about sound in cinema and its capacity to evoke meaning. Sound is always in interplay with visual elements, but beyond that, aural elements in film have the potential to suggest meaning on different levels that range from narrative cues to specific aspects of cultural depictions. In that sense, as asserted by Grajeda and Beck (see introduction), film sound studies must delve into the relationships suggested by aural elements, rather than limiting inquiry to the sounds themselves. In this study, I have demonstrated how the aural construction of films contributes to the portrayal of trauma experienced by a collectivity. The analysis of three films depicting Indigenous collective trauma demonstrates the strong relationships between their sound design and representations of issues of space, memory, historical oppression, repetition, and separation, which in turn are fundamental for the trauma claim rendered by each film.

### TRAUMA CLAIMS AND THEIR AURAL CONSTRUCTION

In *Charlie's Country*, the first film analyzed, the collective trauma claim is, on the surface, associated with the contemporary context. However, the film signals to a long history of discrimination, oppression and imposition of Western views on Aboriginal peoples in Australia. Through the story of Charlie, audiences witness the confinement of the group depicted to designated impoverished areas, the lack of agency that Aboriginal characters have over everyday decisions, and the impositions that affect their health, access to food and enactment of cultural practices. Although only Charlie's pain is evidently visible, it is clear that he is one among many, suffering from the oppressive conditions that result in an everyday lived trauma. The main

proposal of the film is that even in the midst of these traumatic conditions, the carrier group still has a degree of agency in how the trauma claim affects their collective identity: they can either act out against the trauma by alienating themselves, or they can work through it. This can be achieved if as a community they preserve and ensure the transmission of their cultural and collective memory.

I have demonstrated that the representation of space and memory issues relies on sound resources that include the following: the use of non-diegetic aural elements to evoke personal, collective and cultural memories; a mixing of voices and ambient sounds that signify relationships of power in settings that in turn indicate the lack of agency of the main character; the heightening of sounds to indicate altered emotional states of despair and grief; and repetition or alteration of key sounds to express the oppressive conditions of particular spaces. Thus, sound design meanings are not only dependent on the presence of sounds in the audible space. They also rely on the forms used to mix them in order to provide impressions of space, distance or heightened sensations.

Furthermore, the aural composition of the film suggests connections with aural practices specific to the Yolngu group depicted and employs a culturally relevant aural element, singing, as a primary vehicle for addressing the pain experienced during the trauma process. Using sound to represent culturally specific forms of listening reveals how sound design further challenges dominant modes of aural composition, as it provides non-Yolngu audiences with a window into aural practices unfamiliar to Western cultures. The overall approach of sound design forfeits the common pragmatism of mainstream cinema, in favor of an aural aesthetic that contributes to a project of not only depicting a collective trauma experience, but also the cultural particularities that surround it.



In *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* the trauma claim takes a different path. As a representation of seclusion of Indigenous peoples and the painful experiences of those who faced the residential school system, the film diverts from realistic depictions to dabble into a revenge fantasy gone wrong. This is done through a combination of the genres of drama, thriller and horror. This unusual combination of genres underlines the fact that the efforts to represent the trauma process can include diverse forms of representation that must not always aspire to realism. Considering the emotional load of the experiences depicted, representations of this collective trauma are in danger of promoting a form of empathy that leads to a pleasurable identification. In this form of identification audiences feel sympathy for the characters and are more focused on the emotions the film provokes in them than in thinking about the trauma claim. The film provides a distancing effect in which audiences become witnesses more than subjects emotionally involved in the plot. This is done by mixing genres both narratively and visually, and by presenting a reality-derived trauma through a narrative that avoids attachments to hard facts. Through this approach, the film provides an opportunity for making the trauma claim accessible while promoting the empathic unsettlement described by LaCapra, in which audiences understand the experience depicted without making it their own (40).

In terms of sound design, this film follows many mainstream patterns, like the constant inclusion of non-diegetic music to elicit emotions, the use of a non-diegetic narrator and a functional approach to the mixing of the soundscape. This is not to say that sound is completely adhered to a functional approach in which sounds simply represent objects on screen. The non-diegetic voice and musical pieces suggest meaning in some aspects of the film's trauma claim. For example, the isolation from a community, acting out through a collective desire to forget, connection to traumas experienced by other collectivities, as well as association between music

and forms of oppression. Meanwhile, the inclusion of aural elements of horror film suggests that the trauma experienced by characters is lived and emotionally approached as a horror story, in which they are vulnerable to forces they cannot control.

Thus, sound design is in many instances supportive of the trauma claim. However, it does not have a strong involvement in the film's representation of a feature central to its trauma depiction: acting out through repetition. Characters are constantly in danger of re-living their trauma process both because of their actions and because of the oppressive environment in which they live. As such, the plot delivers a cycle of violence and revenge that continues as the characters' traumatic history is expressed through repetitive actions, due to the impossibility of finding ways to work through the trauma. This is the main axis of the trauma representation; however, it finds no relevant support in the film's sound aesthetic. There are also no strong ties between sound and representation of cultural characteristics, though this may be in support of a depiction of forced alienation from cultural beliefs. Thus, by adhering to dominant modes of sound design, the film forfeits additional opportunities to create an aesthetic of sound that further supports the trauma claim.

Finally, *El Abrazo de la Serpiente* offers a representation of trauma experienced by diverse Indigenous groups inhabiting the Amazon setting at the beginning of the twentieth century. The trauma claim of the film is supported by direct or indirect reference to: the violent control of oppressors over the bodies of oppressed characters; the extermination of groups; the exploitation of natural resources; the enslavement of Indigenous people; the imposition of cultural and religious beliefs through violence; and the risk of losing the groups' collective memories. To project this trauma claim, the film relies on a character who carries the burden of preserving the knowledge of his people, and who interacts with members of other cultures whom

are also in need of accessing his knowledge. Furthermore, the claim is supported by aesthetic choices that render a particular construction of visuality, time and sound.

Ciro Guerra's film employs a sonic continuum approach to provide diverse aural elements with evocative qualities. Characters' voices and the natural soundscape are edited and mixed through an almost musical approach that loads them with meaning with regard to emotions, key moments of the plot, and instances that reflect the traumatic conditions experienced by characters. Sound families, then, do not appear as separate. Instead, they are mixed into a sound field that works toward the construction of meanings associated with the collective trauma claim: sounds of pain convey the violent domination over the bodies and choices of Indigenous characters; a heightened soundscape with variations of volume and pitch signals complex relationships of cultural contact; variations in the soundscape's presence on the audible space and the elements that integrate it, reflect the conflictive qualities of settings; and the fusion of the soundscape with a non-diegetic song suggests that the characters' traumatic conditions of separation and loss, find a form of healing in the sharing of cultural and collective memories. Thus, this film rejects the effacement and separation of sound elements, and instead renders an aural aesthetic that contributes to a political project of representation.

#### REPRESENTING TRAUMA THROUGH SOUND: THE COMMON GROUND

Among the analyzed films there are several aural elements and compositions that contribute to the depiction of collective trauma. The relevance of one aural element stands out, namely, the use of song, as all films present songs as relevant to their respective trauma claims. In *Charlie's Country* the main character can only reconnect to his land and community through songs and dances that are traditional to his people. In *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* blues songs serve as

bridges between traumas experienced by different collectivities, while religious Catholic songs serve as markers of oppression through the imposition of cultural and religious beliefs. Finally, in *El Abrazo de la Serpiente*, songs are aural elements that preserve and transmit collective memories and that unite characters to a community, a setting, and to each other. Therefore, in all three films songs address the wounds that shape the trauma claim. Furthermore, in *Charlie's Country* and *El Abrazo de la Serpiente*, they offer a representation of cultural views on preservation of cultural and collective memories, and of aural practices as ways to connect to others.

Another common aural construction is the representation of challenging conditions through sound. In the first film, Charlie's inability to integrate, or the discomfort he experiences in diverse settings, is represented by overwhelming, heightened or repetitive sounds. Through the mixing and speech of an off-screen voice, *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* renders a separation between a controlled space where knowledge guarantees survival, and the real one in which knowledge fails to protect the characters from the constant menace of violence. Shifts in aural qualities of the soundscape and setting-specific aural elements in *El Abrazo de la Serpiente* signal the characters' entrance into spaces of danger and isolation. The analysis of these films shows that the cinematic syntax of sound has varied approaches for conveying the challenges faced by the characters. For example, while two of these films alter their soundscape, the other relies on the differing qualities of an off-screen element. However, all these resources have one aspect in common: alteration.

To indicate taxing conditions, sound design undergoes alterations either through changing qualities of aural elements, or through the intervention of new sounds in the established aural construction of each film. At the level of space representation, this manipulation of sound

serves the purpose of marking specific settings as places of unbelonging, rejection or confinement. In regard to the representation of affective forces, changes in sound provide access into what the characters perceive and how certain emotions affect them. Therefore, alteration of sound is strongly tied to aspects that are evocative of traumatic conditions associated with space issues and with the emotional experience of characters who carry the trauma.

The three films also employ non-diegetic music in many sequences, but with different approaches. From the films analyzed, *Charlie's Country* is the one that more evidently includes music through a mainstream approach. The intermittent piano tunes fulfil the function of eliciting emotions but do not actively contribute to the plot development or to a political project of representation. In fact, while other sounds construct meaning related to the culture of the group represented, the music completely drifts from this depiction by presenting melodies performed with a European instrument and composed under rules of Western composition. The case is different with *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*. Although the non-diegetic music included does not have strong connections to the culture of the group depicted, it is representative of collective trauma experiences. The inclusion of blues songs provides a way of expressing a trauma with historic roots that continues to affect a large population. Meanwhile, the inclusion of Catholic music speaks to the consequences of religious imposition. Thus, in Barnaby's feature debut, the content of non-diegetic music is relevant to the trauma claim.

On the other hand, *El Abrazo de la Serpiente* includes non-diegetic music that mixes Western instruments with Indigenous chants and digitally produced melodies. Therefore, music in this film employs a transcultural combination of instruments and musical conventions associated with diverse cultures and created in diverse times. This form of mixing music suggests a relationship between the depictions of contact between cultures in the plot and contact

between the temporality of the journeys depicted. This is all the more evident when we notice that this music is used to prompt the time shifts of the film. Moreover, a key musical piece included in the film is Haydn's *The Representation of Chaos*, as it provides a cultural and emotional connection to the characters on screen and a way to work through some of their traumatic conditions. Hence, the inclusion of music in these films demonstrates the versatility of this aural element, while evidencing that a mainstream approach to musical soundtracks can limit or even detract from its contribution to the political project of representation of each film.

At a narrative level, it is notable that all three films turn at some point to the depiction of myth and traditional belief practices to express worldviews associated to the characters and their trauma experiences. Charlie's experience of separation is not only from his living community, but from his ancestors, to whom he can only reconnect through song and dance. The ancestral song and dance follow Yolngu perspectives on aural practices and contact with nature, and Charlie's limited and fragmented memory of these practices in turn shows that his isolation surpasses his present. Furthermore, it extends to a disconnection from his past and the past of his Aboriginal group. Unlike the belief practices and songs from *Charlie's Country*, the mythical views presented in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* are fictional. However, while the story of the Wolf and the Mushrooms may be invented, it does present animal and person relationships and uses the parable quality of the myth in a similar way to many Indigenous stories and storytellers. Finally, *Ciro Guerra's* film includes a variety of mythical elements that represent perspectives of diverse Indigenous groups from the Amazon.

This pattern of the use of mythical views and stories signals the relevance that these narrative elements have for the cultural groups represented. The mythical elements speak to diverse aspects of each film's trauma representation, such as separation, imminent danger in the

midst of an oppressive context, and the cyclical nature of trauma repetition. But beyond these connections to trauma depiction, the presence of myths in these films also reveals a perspective on working through collective traumas: the preservation of cultural and collective memory. In all films, mythical perspectives imply a preservation of knowledge and the transmission of it to future generations, thus guaranteeing the survival of the group's culture despite oppressive attempts to efface it. Therefore, the films represent myths not as entertaining folk tales, but as vehicles of Indigenous ways of knowing and understanding the world. When these forms of knowledge are disregarded in the fictional context of the films, the result is that characters put themselves at risk and increase their trauma conditions. On the contrary, when characters acknowledge the relevance of mythical views, they find ways to preserve collective and cultural memories, and to address the effects that collective trauma has had on them and their groups.

All of the films in this study rely at some point on the representation of Indigenous ways of knowing to support their trauma claims and to represent forms of working through the collective trauma depicted. To different levels, sound design contributes to these representations and as such, it becomes fundamental in each film's project of decolonized aesthetic. Although challenging mainstream modes of aural construction is a relevant part of this decolonizing project, it is not just about editing sounds differently, but about evoking culturally relevant meanings through aural elements and their mix. When sound design is concerned with representing culturally specific aural practices, it contributes to decolonized representations that not only acknowledge Indigenous ways of knowing, but also make them accessible to wider audiences. Notably, aural elements that integrate this decolonizing aesthetic are associated with each film's approach to working through the collective trauma they represent, mainly by suggesting associations with the preservation of knowledge, memory and culture.

It is striking to find these aural and narrative similarities among films with distant geographical origins and that represent particular experiences of Indigenous groups in each depicted territory. This does not imply that there is a defined set of rules on how to depict collective trauma conditions in cinema; there is no recipe for trauma representation. However, these similarities suggest that there are connections across cultures in the modes of aural representation of trauma experienced by a collectivity. What the aural analysis of these films reveals is that as aural compositions divert from dominant modes of sound design, they not only render an aural aesthetic that evokes meaning, but one that explores the cultural particularities of the groups depicted and the collective traumas represented. A functional approach to sound is not preoccupied with contributing to political projects of representation, but with producing an impression of realism. Thus, an integrated aesthetic approach opens possibilities of representation that can produce a broader range of meaning through sound.

#### FINAL WORD

The analysis of these films shows how sound design can contribute to fictional filmic representations of trauma as experienced by collectivities. In that sense, aural elements work on several levels, suggesting connections to trauma aspects in some instances, or explicitly depicting them in others. Furthermore, sound can work on a level of cultural representation that aides in understanding the particularities of the groups and the trauma claims depicted. It is noticeable that, when an aural composition is closer to dominant modes of sound design, it can hinder reflection on the representation of trauma claims. When this dominant approach is challenged by experimenting with sound and taking advantage of its potential to make meaning, the aural world constructed by the films contributes to their political projects.



The findings of this research project underscore the relevance of sound as an aesthetic, meaning-producing element in cinema. Evidence from the three films reveals that, to different extents, forms of aural composition and mixing can contribute to depictions of collective trauma. Sound in these films is a significant avenue to engage audiences with their trauma claims, by appealing to a sensorial mode of experiencing cinema, while avoiding forms of sound design that simply aim to capture the audience's attention through a pleasurable emotional attraction. Sound design supports a project of addressing the wounds associated to each trauma depiction, making them accessible to larger audiences, while clearly presenting them as the pain of others and not as mere instruments of emotional engagement. In considering these filmic representations as part of collective trauma processes that are still developing, it is necessary to acknowledge the role that sound plays in evoking meaning and in rendering aspects associated to the traumatic experiences.

This project, through the analysis of three relevant films, reveals the details of film sound practices associated with the production of meaning, and allows for a different appreciation of the films studied—one that recognizes the relevance of sound design as a fundamental part of the film experience. Furthermore, these aural practices are not only unveiled but placed in a conversation with each other, which results in a wider understanding of modes of representation of Indigenous collective trauma through sound design. The productive findings of this comparative work suggest that there is much room for further exploration and study of new and historical use of sound as a meaning-producing element in cinema.

Through the consideration of sound not as an isolated subject, but as one intertwined with narrative and aesthetic concerns, connections and meanings emerge, to reveal the potential of sound for representation. Thus, it is clear that a primarily visual approach to film, both in

filmmaking and scholarship on cinema, leaves a void that ignores the evocative capabilities of sound. If as initially discussed, cinema as an art form provides a space for healing the wounds of trauma, it is not just because appeals to our sense of vision, but because it immerses us in aural worlds that reveal the traumatic experience of others, offering a connection beyond emotional identification. Cinema can be a space not just for hearing, but for truly listening.

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