

# Learning from a Llama, And Other Fishy Tales: Anticolonial Aesthetics in Lucrecia Martel's *Zama*

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Near the beginning of Lucrecia Martel's film *Zama* (2017), the titular character, a colonial magistrate in eighteenth-century Paraguay, encounters an indigenous prisoner who is to be punished for some unspecified infraction. The setting is grungy and apparently naturalistic: Spanish colonial officers and enslaved men alike appear unkempt, the prisoner's body is bound and bruised, and the spectator is prepared for a scene of unpleasant violence. But instead, the prisoner tells a story that tips the film into a much less naturalistic realm. He describes a type of fish that is constantly being thrown out of the river, forcibly ejected by the water itself, which does not want it. Rejected by the very element that sustains their lives, the fish must fight constantly to stay in place. The comparison to the Spanish colonists who are listening to his tale is evident, lending the prisoner's words a sense of threat. As he speaks, we cut unexpectedly to a visualization of these fish, ugly and bewhiskered, churning up the water. Suddenly, we are no longer in the grim space of the colonial outpost but in an underwater netherworld. Although that world is just as violent as the land above, in a reversal of terms it is the usurping creatures that struggle for life and the environment around them that holds the power. The mellow soundtrack of 1950s guitar pop by indigenous Brazilian group Los Indios Tabajaras provides an ironic counterpoint to the thrashing of the animals, locating the spectator in the viewing and

listening position of the environment—elemental and sensory—that is eager to eject the fish. In this dream-like prologue, animals stage an anticolonial allegory that prefigures the entire film in miniature.



Figure 1. Fish churn up the murky water in the prologue to *Zama* (Lucrecia Martel, 2017).

Animals have always been important to Martel's films, from the cow drowning in the swamp in *La Ciénaga / The Swamp* (2001) to the creature that the wealthy female protagonist runs over with her car in *La mujer sin cabeza / The Headless Woman* (2008)—which might be a dog or might be an indigenous child. As these examples illustrate concisely, animals mark violent limit points in her films, in which upper-class Europeans interact with working-class and indigenous people and where death is ever-present. The fish story in *Zama* most obviously harks back to the much more whimsical *Pescados / Fish* (2010), a short in which koi babble in an invented language. This film points to Martel's dry humor and propensity for the fantastic but, even here, repeated cuts to a car driving on a dark, rainy highway create anxiety and suggest some real-world consequence for the language of the fish. Animals mark a pulling-away from realism in Martel's films, but not a retreat from political analysis. The cow in

*La Ciénaga* tropes the fatal quagmire of class and ethnic relations that enmeshes the film's children, and Cecilia Sosa has read the dog/indigenous child in *La mujer sin cabeza* as an allegorical figure that speaks to the Argentine history of disappearance and trauma.<sup>1</sup> To borrow the Todorovian figure of the fantastic, the dog/child is always ambivalent: animal or human; neorealist representation of working-class precarity or allegorical figure of history; material creature or formal trope; real or imagined; dead or alive.<sup>2</sup> In *Zama*, animals are also poised between realism and allegorical figuration, and in their ambivalence they form a key element of the film's radical reconfiguration of colonial space. Here, I will argue that animals play a key role in *Zama*'s formal system, and that an ambivalent and complex relationship among indigenous animals, people, and environment forms the basis of the film's visual address and its anticolonial aesthetic.

*Zama* ostensibly centers on the figure of Don Diego de Zama, a mid-level colonial functionary who is desperate to leave his backwater outpost and return to the family he hasn't seen in years. He must petition the Spanish king for permission to change posting, a process that is represented as Kafkaesque and entirely hopeless. While Don Diego struggles vainly to push forward his heroic quest, the film's focus seeps into the social organization of the colonial society and the indigenous one that intersects with it. One of the most striking qualities of *Zama* within Martel's oeuvre is its shift from the provincial and domestic registers of her earlier films to a seemingly larger canvas of Latin American colonial history. Deborah Shaw exemplifies a common focus on Martel's earlier films as "representations of the relationship between the local and the intimate," and Patricia White has discussed her films in terms of a "micro-politics of gender, sexuality, and location."<sup>3</sup> In contrast to these closely-knit, female-centered stories, *Zama* narrates its story on a grander scale: it is an adaptation of a well-known novel, it directly addresses the topic of colonial history, and it is set in the sweeping landscapes of northern Argentina and Paraguay. Instead of a close focus on a single region of

Argentina, *Zama* evokes a broader Latin American space. The novel it adapts is Paraguayan, the film's actors are variously Mexican, Spanish, Argentinian, and Brazilian, and we hear a mix of European and indigenous languages and accents<sup>4</sup>. This larger canvas demands that the spectator toggle between the small and the large, the local and the transnational, the intimate and the colonial. Critics have become familiar with how Martel unpicks relations of class, gender, sexuality, and regionality through domestic spaces and the smallest gestures. But in *Zama*, she adapts her *optique* to colonial histories. What changes when we regard colonial history through this lens?

Martel's always political animals offer a route into *Zama's* worldview. *Zama* asks us to look anew at the relationship between the European and the indigenous, and this political aesthetic unfolds through the organization of looking relations and the arrangement of figures—animal and human—in cinematic space. There's a really beautiful disconnect, delicately leveraged apart by Martel's camera, between the image of the historical past as previously imagined—whether by the heritage costume drama, by the more excessive and chaotic visions of someone like Werner Herzog, or even in the modernist novel on which the film is based—and the way it is conjured here. In prising apart the image, *Zama* at once recognizes the structures of colonial visibility and overthrows them, enabling the spectator to see more than one thing at once, and more than one scene within the scene.



Figure 2. A llama intervenes in the scene. (*Zama*, Lucrecia Martel, 2017)

A key early lesson in this effect is the interview between Don Diego and the governor into which a llama intrudes. In this scene, which is noted by almost every critic of the film, Zama hopes to learn that his requested transfer to Lerma has been granted, and is horrified to learn that it is instead the governor who will be transferred and not Zama himself. Worse, his former assistant, Ventura Prieto, is being deported as punishment and yet he is allowed to choose his destination. To add insult to injury, he has chosen Lerma, the very city to which Zama had asked to go. Even someone punished by the state is allowed to leave, while Zama is endlessly trapped. The moment appears tragic for Zama as hero, but it is fatally undercut by the appearance of a llama, which not only walks around photo-bombing (cine-bombing?) Zama throughout his humiliation, but also disrupts the scene aurally by neighing loudly. The llama thus teaches us how to read *Zama's* spaces and its figures. It instructs us to pay attention to the background of the image, to deep space, and to the margins of the frame. It tells us that in this film, composition as a method of distributing and redistributing attention is being used in a very different way than is conventional. Moreover, the llama teaches us that the purported main characters might not be the most important ones, and that we should reallocate our attention to those

figures who might appear to be mere “local color.” Hence it directs us to reconsider the concepts of narrative focus and figure/ground relations; indeed, it encourages us to notice the perceptual workings of that process and to recalibrate how we read the arrangement of figures within the frame. Such recalibration of our attention turns, of course, on power: the llama directs us to the margins rather than the center of the image and to the soundscape beyond speech. The fact that it is a llama—a native South American animal—that instills this pedagogy opens out a more complex and subtle political aesthetic that reverberates across *Zama*.

In the introduction to their collection on animal life and the moving image, Michael Lawrence and Laura McMahon ask, “How might moving images resist or refuse the objectification or anthropomorphisation of the animal and instead work to unravel hierarchies of looking and distributions of power?”<sup>5</sup> *Zama*’s llama does not, at first glance, especially resist anthropomorphization: the humor of the scene in some ways depends on our reading of the llama as a human-like intrusion, a minor character that has accidentally wandered on-stage and is upstaging the lead actor. Moreover, to read its face as cute depends on a human-centered interpretation of animal features. To critique the llama as an anthropomorphic joke, however, would be misguided. Its undoubted cuteness has two crucial effects here. One is to amplify the effect that animals often have of breaking through the diegesis and performing as themselves<sup>6</sup>. Even if Martel had shot this scene 100 times and paid the best llama wranglers, the llama would always give the impression of following its own agenda; of being part of the real world outside the narrative. This rupturing of diegetic space works to upset the smooth operation of colonial vision, as the materiality of the animal and its apparently unbidable movements interrupt the discursive flow and unidirectional control of serious colonial narrative. Secondly, cuteness as an affect fatally counters *Zama*’s seriousness, teaching audiences to laugh at the white man, rather like second-wave feminist films laughed at patriarchy. (Here we can recall that the llama is not

mute, unlike Lawrence and McMahon's example of a silent and powerless animal.<sup>7</sup> Its loud barking emphasizes its takeover of space.) Joshua Paul Dale et. al. point out both the immense growth of cuteness culture in the twenty-first century and its migration from vernacular forms such as cat videos to museums and other institutions of high culture—to which we could add art cinema.<sup>8</sup> The llama's goofy face and long neck are humorous, but the humor is not ultimately aimed at what Sianne Ngai would describe as our incipiently violent feelings of power *over* the cute object.<sup>9</sup> Rather, the llama's cuteness is weaponized to undermine Don Diego's power and authority in the scene. We laugh because it is the cute animal who leads our affective response, not the white man's self-importance. Martel's film is thus precisely interested in unraveling hierarchies of looking and distributions of power. The native animal trumps the white man in this scene and across the film.

The llama is also a figure of indigeneity, an emergence of native lifeworlds into the supposedly serious business of white men. Here we come to the crux of the llama's pedagogy. With this figure, *Zama* proposes the risky strategy of situating native animals, indigenous people, and the natural environment as an interlinked formal force imposing on the visual and auditory fields and threatening to dispossess the figural centrality of the white European colonists. There is, of course, a colonial history to comparisons between animals and colonized peoples. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam discuss the racist discursive linkage of indigenous peoples and animals, using the example of anthropological-zoological exhibitions in which "exotic" people were displayed like animals at various World's Fairs.<sup>10</sup> Their influential argument links animalization, cinema as an apparatus, and the construction of the world as colonial spectacle, "a view of 'the world itself as an exhibition'."<sup>11</sup> Here they cite Timothy Mitchell, who writes of the relationship between Europeans and a colonized world, in which the world was "rendered up to the [European] individual according to the way in which, and to the extent to which, it could be set up before him or her as an exhibit."<sup>12</sup> This historical conflation of indigenous

peoples, animals, and environments as images to be consumed by European audiences built on existing aesthetic modes of colonial vision.<sup>13</sup> Thus, to link animals to people and environments might seem like an unlikely decolonizing aesthetic.

Martel obviously does not align indigenous animals, people, and landscape in the colonial dehumanizing way, but neither does she do so in the more subtle way that art cinema has often done. An obvious point of contrast is Werner Herzog's *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972), in which human and non-human nature in Latin America is presented as sublime and overwhelming. Although that film also lays bare the colonial endeavor, it has been critiqued for installing a neocolonial gaze in both its performative excess and its view of the tropical environment.<sup>14</sup> With her focus on the image's ground rather than its (white, male, colonial) figure, *Zama* strips away this masculinist visuality, in which even aesthetically radical work can reinscribe a colonial vision. The prominence of the llama is both an admission and a warning. The scene destabilizes the white man's story but neither does it tell an indigenous one. In fact, the indigenous account of this history is not, the film suggests, its story to tell. Martel is a white, European-descended filmmaker and her project here is not to speak from an indigenous point of view.

Instead, *Zama*'s llama might more productively be thought in the context of Anat Pick's "creaturely cinema," which "destabilises a clear dividing line between humans and animals."<sup>15</sup> Even more helpful, in proposing an ecological film theory, Pick and Guinevere Narraway point to the importance of the physical world to film theory, from Kracauer and Bazin onward. Ecological thinking that connects humans, non-human animals, plant life, and inanimate matter, they suggest, has always been central to conceptual understandings of cinema as a medium.<sup>16</sup> And lest this idea should sound apolitical, they take as foundational Timothy Morton's premise that the ecological involves thinking history, ideology, race, gender, capitalism, and society.<sup>17</sup> This combination of animal studies with



ecocriticism resonates strongly with *Zama's* formal strategy, which, as in the allegory of the water that expels the fish, asks the viewer to see the entirety of the colonized environment together, as the very element in which Don Diego exists. The film's combination of humans, animals, and land can be thought in ecological terms as a non-anthropocentric vision that is nonetheless focused on the human history of colonial violence. *Zama* is engaged in a process of resignifying the shapes and boundaries of human and non-human, figure and landscape, both as formal questions of looking relations and as political questions of colonial and postcolonial existence. That is to say, *Zama* asks us to locate non-human animals, indigenous people, and the South American environment in one category, and Europeans in another. These are not the boundaries of colonial dehumanization, but rather a decolonial *optique* in which indigenous life resists the violence of colonial vision.

For Shohat and Stam, “social structures ‘animalize’ people, who consciously resist animalization,” and *Zama* stages both colonial animalization and its resistance in a scene of Don Diego at work in the magistrate’s court, where indigenous women, animals, and systems of colonial space are closely intertwined.<sup>18</sup> In this scene, Don Diego and his assistant Ventura Prieto hear the petition of a married couple of white settlers in Concepción. To establish his authority, the older man recounts that his family traces its lineage back to the man who chased the Indians from the land. He continues with a tale of his family fighting with and eventually murdering all of the local population. Now they have nobody to work the land for them and have come to Zama to demand that he give them an “encomienda,” a concession of forty “tame Indians,” as slaves. The uninflected manner in which the man tells his story illustrates how whites dehumanized the indigenous people of Concepción to enable genocide and slavery. But this familiar story is reconfigured from the outset by the audience of five indigenous women, one holding a lamb, who cluster around the edges of the frame. The direction of their gazes draws our eye inward, to the settlers at the center of the composition, and ultimately to

Don Diego, and yet their presence rewrites this art historical system of attention. It insists that the spectator notice the material weight of the women, the murder of whose male relatives is being described by the objects of their look. The compositional arrangement interrupts the colonial narrative, and as the scene progresses, our separation from Zama's own point of view disrupts it still further.



Figure 3. A group of indigenous women unsettle compositional hierarchies. (*Zama*, Lucrecia Martel, 2017)

As the man boasts that they chased the Indians from their lands, a young woman appears behind the couple in the back of the frame, very much like the llama did. She walks across the frame, headless at this point, and places a hand on the old woman's shoulder. We cut to Don Diego looking at her, his expression making clear, even before we see her face, that she is the object of his desire. Tutored by the llama, we understand her entrance to be a significant one. The first time we see her fully is in an extraordinary close up, in which the long snout of a hunting dog covers half of her face

before it lifts away from her and she raises a hand to caress it. This striking young woman is of mixed race, evidently the child of a relationship between one of the violent male colonists and a woman from the indigenous tribe whom they admit to having wiped out. As we see her face for the first time, we hear her grandfather say offscreen that he “showed no mercy” to the indigenous population. At the moment her grandmother describes her as mixed, we see the young woman again in close up from Zama’s point of view. Her head is tilted down toward the dog, but on these words she looks up at Zama and almost directly to camera, her chin held up defiantly. The expression of the young woman in these shots vividly resists both the sexual violence narrated in the grandparents’ dialogue and the objectifying gaze of the shots’ point of view. Throughout the scene, Zama directs our look at the young woman, but even though these are technically point of view shots, we do not see what Don Diego sees, or rather we don’t see her in the way that he does. Daniel Giménez Cacho’s performance makes evident how his character looks at her; lasciviously, with a gaze that encodes class and racial hierarchies as well as gendered ones. He is distracted by desire from what he finds a perfectly reasonable request (for forty slaves), whereas we find in the granddaughter a textual repository of the disgust we feel for this entire story. Where he sees a native body he might possess, we see her pride and her steady resistance to his gaze.



Figure 4. The granddaughter's face is partially covered by that of a dog. (*Zama*, Lucrecia Martel, 2017)

What is particularly striking in this scene is how the granddaughter's resistance to colonial animalization is figured in part through her association with an animal; the large dog that sits by her side. In this apparent contradiction, the contrast between these two modes of human-animal connection is powerfully animated. Don Diego sees the indigenous woman as less-than-human, but the film imagines a creaturely solidarity in resistance to the violence of this worldview. Throughout the conversation, we see Don Diego looking in her direction, but we hear the dog whining insistently. In effect, the dog speaks for the granddaughter, complaining throughout the settlers' story in a way that echoes the llama's disruptive whinnies. As the old woman demands the *encomienda*, the dog's affectionate snuffling and licking sounds compete with her violent words. The young woman's connection to the dog is asserted most vividly in the stunning shot in which their faces are momentarily overlaid. How are the woman and dog being compared? Does the shot reference Bergman's *Persona* (1966) and a classic image of both female subjectivity and modernist cinema? We notice the woman's stillness and poise, as she listens to a discourse for which she and the viewer share

a revulsion. And we can see her kindness to the animal. But there is also an affective register to this composition, in which an affiliation that cannot be literally communicated is nonetheless visually conjured. This superimposition within the frame creates a brief human-dog hybrid, the political power of which is visible to the spectator but not to the ostensible origin of the point of view.

This scene brings together the indigenous women, the dog and the lamb, and the unseen native land usurped by the settlers of Concepción. It intertwines human and non-human nature, opposing animalization with affiliation, and in compositional terms, it transforms grounds into figures. Each is conventionally the object (of the look, of the story), and these indigenous (back)grounds are the matter from which white narrative might grow. And here, the intersection of patriarchy with colonialism is viscerally clear, as the granddaughter illustrates the role of women's forced sexual labor in this production of story and history. Frantz Fanon describes the discursive work of animalization, writing "When the settler seeks to describe the native fully in exact terms he constantly refers to the bestiary," and Shohat and Stam point out that this bestiary discourse involves attributing libidinousness to the native.<sup>19</sup> Martel reveals the projection involved in this logic, making Don Diego the one constantly leering at women. Indigenous men are not presented in sexual situations at all throughout the film, and women's sexuality is only viewed in relation to colonial sexual violence. Their own sexual agency and desires are hidden from view, unavailable to representation and to the gaze of the outsider. Thus, the granddaughter meets Zama's gaze with quiet insubordination and, with the intimate eye for women's social relations that Martel's films always center, she disdainfully refuses to kiss him on the way out. Martel asks us to look differently at the image as object and to read its aesthetic composition within a politics that is neither realist nor modernist. *Zama* asks us to look at the granddaughter otherwise, to recognize her beauty and yet to see her strength from outside the patriarchal and colonial gazes that have dominated both cinema and art history.

Gender is an ever-present component of Martel's revisioning of the colonial world, and *Zama* unpicks the intersections of sexism with colonialism's racial and class hierarchies. From the film's very opening, Don Diego's centrality in the frame and in our attention is undermined by indigenous people, especially women. The first shot shows Zama walking pensively on a beach while we see and hear children shouting and squealing behind him. As he moves, they are obscured behind his figure but still audible. From the outset, then, he is not the center of attention in his own narrative. Although the composition of the shot gestures to the heroic stance of the great man alone in nature, staring at the sublime space of the ocean and looking out to Europe, both the indigenous figures and the soundtrack that maintains their presence undercut this colonial viewpoint.<sup>20</sup> Not only is our attention drawn to the people and activities that colonial heroism excludes (from play to labor practices), but the visibility and audibility of those figures comedically pricks Zama's own pompous vision of himself. As if he were aware of this non-diegetic humiliation, Zama's next move is to reassert his power through violence against indigenous women. He secretly watches a group of women bathing in mud, and, when one woman chases him, he turns and, overwhelming her physically, slaps her face repeatedly. It's a switch in power in which he reasserts a right to her body, and yet he still seems humiliated.

The film also unpicks the different relations of white, indigenous, and black women to colonial patriarchy. At a society party, an animal once again forms a key visual relay for these relations. The scene deploys the internal frames and plays of looks with which we are familiar from Martel's films, but it amps up the contrast of foreground and background and the clarity with which social relations are outlined through compositional space. Several upper-class white women are seen through a window, but the spectator's sense of distance from them is redoubled when indigenous servants are revealed working in a kitchen even further back in the frame's depth of field. Zama's movement organizes the scene, but he is constantly thwarted. He is besotted with the alluring Doña Luciana, but

his view of her is blocked by a horse that also turns its head to block the spectator's view of Zama; in the end, the horse occupies most of the screen space. When Zama tries to watch Luciana unseen, he is relegated to the edge of the frame while Luciana moves toward its center, rubbing the animal's belly gently, and singing as the horse whinnies appreciatively. Zama is again a voyeur, but one who loses out to an animal in Luciana's affections. Indeed, what conjoins Luciana to animals and to the indigenous women is their fundamental indifference to white men. The llama will walk into an important meeting since human concepts of inside and outside, privacy and boundary mean nothing to it. Luciana does not care about Zama and devotes more attention to the shiny chestnut coat of the horse. And, as we learn later, the native woman with whom Zama has had a baby doesn't care about him and doesn't take his largesse seriously. The film turns all of Zama's fantasies of being a heroic and—essentially public—figure in a colonial landscape and overturns them through the indifference of those who are limited to private and bodily encounters. It is in these domestic indignities that the force of indigeneity is felt.



Figure 5. Doña Luciana pays more attention to a horse than to Don Diego. (*Zama*, Lucrecia Martel, 2017)

However, the film's domestic scenes make clear that Doña Luciana's position is very different to that of the non-white women who surround her. At the party, indigenous women labor in the kitchen while a naked black woman sits, unmoving, in the corner of the frame while she is offered sexually to Zama. Martel's films have always been interested in class and ethnic relations as they play out within domestic spaces. The intimacies of the spaces shared between predominantly indigenous domestic workers and their white bourgeois employers are central to her films from *La Ciénaga* onward.<sup>21</sup> Here, in the colonial home, these power relations are more vivid, more obviously violent, and the compositions formally figure at once the highly delineated hierarchies and the queasy bloom of their proximities. This differential is made most clear in Luciana's home, where her servants are constantly given prominence in the frame. The black servant who fans guests creates a constant reminder of black labor, both visually and through the prominence of the fan in the sound mix. Luciana's relationship to her maid Malemba is more complicated. Luciana is in many ways progressive, bold in her sexual freedoms and critical of colonial society. "Europe," she says, "is best remembered by those who have never been there," and her dialog is full of such pithy criticisms of the social order. She is equally dismissive of Malemba's desire to marry, saying, "she bought her freedom and already wants to lose it." Luciana critiques Eurocentrism and patriarchy from within, and yet she is still implicated in colonialism and her feminism is constricted by her social position. Malemba is supposedly free but must ask Luciana's permission to marry. In one shot, Luciana's head is cut off, a reminder, perhaps, of her status as another headless woman whose gender and class leave her with nowhere to go. The viewer is faced with Luciana's bust, making us momentary voyeurs before we are caught looking, as it were, by Malemba, whose expression indicates that she, too, is paying close attention to the way she is being narrated by white people.





Figure 6. Composition constantly works to make relations of gender, power, and race visible. (*Zama*, Lucrecia Martel, 2017)

In the film's final section, we move out of the domestic and landscape becomes the focus of its ecological aesthetic. Having failed to persuade the Spanish king to allow him to transfer, Zama has reluctantly joined a band of men hunting for notorious bandit Vicuña Porto. Porto has been terrorizing colonial high society for years and has become the kind of folk-villain who is invoked to explain every crime against property or person. Legends about him abound, and he plays the narrative role of an invisible bogeyman and a maybe mythical anti-colonial guerilla. On horseback, the party ventures into a verdant and swampy wilderness, only to be overtaken and captured by men from a local tribe who wear masks made of coconut shell and demand the white men's horses. The loss of the horses neatly returns these animals to the side of the indigenous, where they belong. Power is rapidly switched—without animals, the colonists simply have no authority over the land or its people. With the masks on, they blend into the landscape in a way that blurs the line between figure and ground.

And while their bright orange body dye is visually striking and has the immediate effect of making figures stand out from background, orange against green, it also transforms human figures by covering them in a natural product, turning skin into a painted landscape. It becomes clear how an aesthetics of ground over figure can be an assertion of identity, indigenous belonging, and anti-colonial power. Already separated from the protections of European society, Zama learns that the bandit was one of his own group all along. Vicuña Porto swears Zama to secrecy and, when Zama confides in a comrade, Vicuña Porto punishes him brutally by chopping off his hands and setting him adrift in the swamp. It is surely no coincidence that this near-mythical avenger is named after an Andean animal (*vicuña*, or *Vicugna vicugna*), a camelid related to the llama. From the llama's disarming cuteness, the film moves inexorably toward the violence foretold by the prisoner's fishy tale.

*Zama's* move into this vegetal environment extends its indigenous field of vision, insisting on the primacy of the grounding landscape as something other than the absence of European culture. Having trained its audience how to read its images—to see what escapes Zama's own vision—Martel can turn to the beauty of the natural environment with confidence in the spectator's critical eye for indigeneity. These final scenes are spectacular and as carefully framed as the interiors. The flat landscape is introduced in a frontal tableau-like composition that contrasts palm tree verticals with Zama's group crossing the frame in a horizontal line. The formal arrangement of the shot once again works to decouple the colonial fantasy from the cultural significance of the environment. In an earlier study, I have argued that revising how we view landscapes has been a significant project of art cinema.<sup>22</sup> The notion of the picturesque landscape view emerges alongside capitalist expropriation of land and the violent exploitation of its inhabitants, both in Europe and in its colonies. Raymond Williams insists that the “very idea of landscape implies separation and observation,” and this mode of vision is also a central function of cinematic spectacle.<sup>23</sup> For Williams, such separation is primarily

class-based, but this logic is extended in the significant body of postcolonial scholarship on the colonial gaze.<sup>24</sup> From nineteenth-century photography and early actualities onward, the visual culture of landscape was defined by the perspective of a metropolitan, presumptively white spectator taking pleasure in the exotic spectacle of foreign environments. Just as *Zama* asks its spectator to see colonial figures differently, so it enables us to read the South American landscape as something other than sublime and exotic.



Figure 7. The horizontal landscape undermines colonial visions of ownership. (*Zama*, Lucrecia Martel, 2017)

Returning to Pick and Narraway's nuanced version of the ecological, we can bring together such readings of the landscape with approaches to indigeneity and colonial history in the Americas. Shohat and Stam, again, argue that, "Animalization forms part of the larger, more diffuse mechanisms of naturalization: the reduction of the cultural to the biological, the tendency to associate the colonized

with the vegetative and the instinctual rather than with the learned and the cultural.”<sup>25</sup> This discourse can be located within what Aníbal Quijano understands as the colonial form of knowledge, in which both the social and subjective formations of European modernity only exist in relation to the conquest of Latin America.<sup>26</sup> Recent theories of indigeneity often consider the rhetoric of dispossession, working from the influence of Locke’s Enlightenment theory of property. Locke claims that only those who cultivate and improve the land can lay claim to it, while those who live off the land without mastering it, like animals, do not transcend nature and thus cannot be said to own it.<sup>27</sup> This account lays the philosophical foundation for indigenous peoples to be dispossessed, and, according to scholars such as Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, it continues to determine liberal subject formations. For Butler and Athanasiou, as for Quijano, this right to possess is not merely a legal or social principle, but a constitutive part of colonial subjectivities.<sup>28</sup> The distinction between those who have transcended nature and those who are merely part of it is, for them, alive and powerful in the contemporary world.<sup>29</sup> This sense of separation, mastery, and ownership is precisely the subjectivity that Don Diego illustrates. He sees the indigenous people as part of nature—as one with the animals and the environment in which they live—and himself as having transcended it. The project of the film, seen through this lens, is to destroy this subjectivity and to undo the visual and auditory primacy of the colonial worldview. *Zama* proposes that although indigenous people may be dispossessed, Europeans cannot truly possess the land and might also—if only fantasmatically—be displaced. The colonial violence of dispossession is eventually reversed and enacted on *Zama*’s body and mind.



Figure 8. Toppled from heroic verticality, Don Diego ends the film lying prone at ground level. (*Zama*, Lucrecia Martel, 2017)

*Zama* revises what it means to look at colonized worlds without looking as a colonizer. Or rather, to look (possibly, probably) as a beneficiary of colonization and yet to see outside the sedimented structures of power that have created both cinematic vision and the social spaces in which we might view the film. If its protagonist, in the opening shots, desperately wanted to imagine himself as an important colonial figure dominating a subjugated ground, by the time we reach the final scenes of his amputation and semi-conscious drifting, such a phallogentric aesthetic has been completed overthrown and subsumed by the horizontal space of the low-lying landscape. Figure and ground are no longer contrasted and Don Diego's ability to take up vertical space is destroyed. From the violence of Vicuña Porto chopping off Zama's hands, we move to a peaceful landscape full of lush greenery and glassy water, through which the half-dead Zama floats in a small boat steered by his indigenous rescuers. The beauty of this sequence, we understand, is not a contrast to the violence that has come

before. In *Zama*, Martel cannot spirit away the colonial visuality in which indigenous people, animals, and environment are understood as ground rather than figure, but she makes us see that structure's violence. Moreover, the film works to destroy *Zama* precisely through the colonial visuality of which he is a subject. The animal and the animalized native (the llama and the *vicuña*) do not need to move from ground to figure in order to become subjects on colonial terms. Rather, the ground disgorges its unwanted colonial trespasser. The prisoner's animal allegory is eventually realized and the endlessly green flatland ejects the dying colonist. *Zama* is never anything other than utterly out of place and unwanted, and in the end his figuration, his centrality to framing, becomes not a naturalized view of the white man but a splinter that the fabric of the film labors to expel.

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Cecilia Sosa, "A Counter-narrative of Argentine Mourning: *The Headless Woman* (2008), directed by Lucrecia Martel," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 26, no. 7-8 (2009): 250-262.
- <sup>2</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975).
- <sup>3</sup> Deborah Shaw, "Sex, Texts and Money, Funding and Latin American Queer Cinema: The Cases of Martel's *La niña santa* and Puenzo's *XXY*," *Transnational Cinema* 4, no. 2 (2013): 165-184; and Patricia White, *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015): 45.
- <sup>4</sup> Languages heard include Spanish, Portuguese, Qom, Pilagá and Mbyá Guaraní.
- <sup>5</sup> Michael Lawrence and Laura McMahon, "Introduction," in *Animal Life and the Moving Image* (London: BFI/Palgrave, 2015), 2.
- <sup>6</sup> See, for example, Serge Daney, "The Screen of Fantasy: Bazin and Animals," trans. Mark A. Cohen, in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 32-41.
- <sup>7</sup> Lawrence and McMahon, 3.
- <sup>8</sup> Joshua Paul Dale, Joyce Goggin, Julia Leyda, Anthony P McIntyre, and Diane Negra, eds., *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness* (London: Routledge, 2017), 1.
- <sup>9</sup> Sianne Ngai, "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 4 (2005): 816.
- <sup>10</sup> Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 108.
- <sup>11</sup> Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking*, 108, citing Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 13.
- <sup>12</sup> Mitchell, *Egypt*, 13.
- <sup>13</sup> See for instance Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); on cinema, Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and the Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); and for a broad overview, Martin Jay and Sumathi Ramaswamy, eds., *Empires of Vision: A Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
- <sup>14</sup> See, for instance Lutz P. Koepnick, "Colonial Forestry: Sylvan Politics in Werner Herzog's *Aguirre* and *Fitzcarraldo*," *New German Critique* 60 (Autumn 1993): 133-159; and in the same special issue, John E. Davidson, "As Others Put Plays upon the Stage: *Aguirre*, Neocolonialism, and the New German Cinema," *New German Critique* 60 (Autumn 1993): 101-130.
- <sup>15</sup> Anat Pick, *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 6.
- <sup>16</sup> Anat Pick and Guinevere Narraway, eds., *Screening Nature: Cinema Beyond the Human* (New York: Berghahn, 2013), 2.
- <sup>17</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 2.
- <sup>18</sup> Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking*, 258.
- <sup>19</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 41; Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking*, 137.
- <sup>20</sup> These images resonate strongly with John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea* (2015), a three-screen installation that also uses the iconography of the colonist in a heroic landscape. In an experimental mode, Akomfrah also elaborates the connections between postcolonial and ecological critique.
- <sup>21</sup> See, for instance Deborah Martin, *The Cinema of Lucrecia Martel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 38.
- <sup>22</sup> Rosalind Galt, "On L'Avventura and the Picturesque," in *Antonioni: Centenary Essays*, ed. John David Rhodes and Laura Rascaroli (London: BFI Publishing, 2011): 134-153.
- <sup>23</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Frogmore: Paladin, 1975), 149.
- <sup>24</sup> See for example Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, trans Myrna Godzich and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Zahid R. Chaudhury, *Afterimage of Empire: Photography in Nineteenth-Century India* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); and E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
- <sup>25</sup> Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking*, 138.
- <sup>26</sup> Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2007): 168-178. See also Billy-Ray Belcourt, "Animal Bodies, Colonial Subjects: (Re)Locating Animality in Decolonial Thought," *Societies* 5 (2014): 1-11.

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Belcourt argues for a material connection between (primarily settler) colonialism and animal exploitation, insisting that we conceive of contemporary modes of white supremacy in the Americas as fundamentally linked to the fate of both indigenous people and animals on stolen land.

<sup>27</sup> John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 14-26.

See also David Chandler and Julian Reid, “‘Being in Being’: Contesting the Ontopolitics of Indigeneity,” *The European Legacy* 23, no. 3 (2018): 251-268.

<sup>28</sup> Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (London: Polity Press, 2013), 7-9.

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of the force of intersecting gender, sexual, and racialized oppressions emerging from this colonial encounter, see also María Lugones, “Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (2007): 186-209.