

Memory and Cultural Continuity as a Form of Resistance in *Black Shack Alley* and *Even the Rain*

Daniela Angel

Lake Forest College

Lake Forest, Illinois 60045

The erasure of identity is often used as a method of oppression and control in postcolonial societies; culture is, therefore, one of the most powerful tools for unity and resistance. The films *Black Shack Alley* (Rue Cases Nègres) (1983) and *Even the Rain* (También la lluvia) (2010) show situations of deep injustices in Martinique and Bolivia, generational power structures based on race, ethnicity, and culture create situations of powerlessness for the main characters, José and Daniel. These situations are depicted in the films *Black Shack Alley* and *Even the Rain*. *Black Shack Alley*, directed by Euzhan Palcy, features José, a young boy growing up in the sugar canes of Martinique, where generations of descendants of African slaves endure the abuse of the French colonizers, trapping them in an unending cycle of poverty. Similarly, *Even the Rain*, directed by Icíar Bollaín, is set in Cochabamba, Bolivia, Spanish directors come to shoot a historical film on the colonization of the Americas. This creates a parallel between the enduring power structures of the colonial world. These struggles have endured throughout centuries as indigenous Quechua people today continue to face the same struggles. Both films focus on the power of culture and remembrance as means of resistance against oppression.

According to Stephen Duncombe's essay (176), resistance is often simplified as standing against any form of oppositional power. Therefore if we exemplify this oppositional power as colonial power structures and erasure, remembrance and the continuation of culture can be interpreted as a form of resistance. We will explore this conceptualization of resistance alongside *Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith, and Identity* (Rodríguez and Fortier), which defines cultural memory as "the process by which a society ensures cultural continuity by preserving its collective knowledge from one generation to the next" (1). According to these definitions, cultural continuity can be seen as a method of resistance in the films *Black Shack Alley* and *Even the Rain*. First, we will examine the role of language, Creole, and Quechua, as well as customs, and how they are used as methods of resistance against prejudices. We will then focus on history, addressing the meta-narration present in *Even the Rain*, as well as the role of storytelling in the creation of narratives in *Black Shack Alley*. These various examples of cultural continuity may very well intersect at certain points, but they will all serve to analyze how the act of remembrance becomes oppositional and revolutionary when cultural survival is at stake.

In both films, the role of language and customs are fundamental in opposing colonial powers. One of the most important facets of cultural continuity is the material representations of a society: "artifacts and symbolizations become a source for identity: language, food, clothing, music, and the organization of space." (Rodríguez and Fortier, 107). In Martinique as well as Bolivia, the imposition of French and Spanish as official languages served as a method of oppression and erasure of identity. By using Creole and Quechua in their respective films, the directors highlight the importance of remembrance and the value of linguistic knowledge. Through the importance placed on the Quechua word Yaku (water), *Even the Rain* emphasizes the true ownership of water and resources in Bolivia, reminding the audience of the origin of modern-day Bolivia and its colonial past.

Furthermore, the representation of cultural practices serves as a form of resistance against the whitewashing often seen in the movie industry when portraying ethnic groups. Scenes such as M'Man Tine smoking her pipe (Palcy 8:03-8:52) create a genuine understanding and value of the culture, resisting the commercialization of culture as entertainment. This significance is amplified by the fact that the director of the film is from Martinique and is portraying her roots. On the other hand, *Even the Rain* also showcases cultural elements. For example, the Quechua hats worn by protestors (Bollaín 1:24:24-1:24:51) serve as

material representations of culture. The clothing becomes embedded with meaning, symbolizing their commitment to preserving their ancestry and their willingness to fight for their rights and identity, as they have for hundreds of years. These elements serve as a method of appreciation of culture and as a method of resistance to the stereotypes and prejudices that often accompany the practices of marginalized communities. Moreover, *Black Shack Alley* director Euzhan Palcy places special importance on the portraying daily life elements of the characters. She achieves this through the use of still shots that focus on the houses in the town and the dances in the community (Palcy 16:48-17:11). Showing these cultural elements on film subverts the colonial narrative and serves as an act of resistance, representation turns these elements into something valuable, opposing the derogative nature with which they are often perceived.

Additionally, history is one of the most important aspects of cultural resistance and conservation. History creates a narrative that forms behavior, culture, and thought: "It is through narrative that a culture organizes and integrates its understanding of reality." (Rodríguez and Fortier 8). In *Even the Rain*, history is at the forefront of the film. The use of the 'mise en abyme' places the historical narrative in parallel with modern issues, creating a direct link between colonialism and the injustices that Quechuas face today. The roles of Daniel (Hatuéy) and his daughter in the film show the continuity of history. They highlight how the resources stolen from the Quechuas by the Spaniards during colonization are still being plundered today. One of the women says "You take our lands, you take our wells. Are you going to take the air too?" (Bollaín 22:56-24:16). Through this clear historical continuity, the memory of the Quechua people serves as a crucial foundation for their resistance against the oppressive government. As is said by the president of Bolivia, "Given their long history of exploitation, Indian distrust is embedded in their genes" (Bollaín 51:24-53:44). Director Tosar purposefully highlights the importance of history in the making of power structures, by acknowledging the past and the fight of their ancestors, Quechuas regain the power to resist modern struggles today. A historical narrative plays a prime role in resistance and cultural continuation in *Black Shack Alley*. The use of storytelling as a means of conserving culture and resisting colonial narratives is seen through the character Medouze, an old man in the village who serves as guidance to young José. One of the most significant scenes in the film depicts Medouze recounting the story of his ancestors, who came from Africa and were forced to work in the sugar cane fields (Palcy 18:54-24:02). Through this story, cultural knowledge is passed on, and memory becomes a means of resisting injustices. They resist the present forced on them by "the whites" and envision a new future where they return to their rightful land. As one character says, "When I will be dead when my old body is buried, then I'll go to Africa" (Palcy 23:23). This cultural continuation of narrative's "power resides in its ability to create, form, refashion, and reclaim identity." (Rodríguez and Fortier 7). In this way, generations of descendants of black slaves reclaim their identity and culture. This is a form of resistance against the forced erasure of African culture in colonialism. Remembering cultural background and identity fosters a longing for justice and a desire to return to a better place, "cultural memory is the ground from which everyday experiences become meaningful" (Rodríguez and Fortier 109).

In conclusion, memory and cultural continuation serve as forms of resistance in both *Black Shack Alley* and *Even the Rain*. By including cultural elements in media, cultures, and ethnicities become valued and respected, overturning colonial prejudices and biases. This, along with the concept of history and remembrance, serves as both a method of survival and resistance, fostering unity in people and fueling resistance movements. Therefore, according to Rodríguez and Fortier, "For the many marginalized communities that are beset by a world that would deny them a place, cultural memories establish place, legitimacy, and voice" (Rodríguez and Fortier 111). Memory and cultural continuation thus method of survival and resistance, opposing the generational subjugation and oppression to which they have been subjected.

References

- Duncombe, Stephe. "Resistance." *Keywords for Media Studies* (2017): 176-179.
- Rodríguez, Jeanette and Ted Fortier. *Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith, and Identity*. University of Texas Press, 2007.
- Rue Cases-Nègres (Sugar Cane Alley)*. Réal. Euzhan Palcy. Interpr. Garry Cadenat, Darling Légitimus et Douta Seck. 1983. Film.
- También la lluvia (Even the Rain)*. Dir. Icíar Bollaín. Perf. Luis Tosar, Gael García Bernal and Juan Carlos Aduviri. 2010. Film.

Note: Eukaryon is published by students at Lake Forest College, who are solely responsible for its content. The views expressed in Eukaryon do not necessarily reflect those of the College.

