

## **Otras competencias: Ethnobotany, the *Badianus codex*, and Metaphors of Mexican Memory Loss and Disability in *Las buenas hierbas* (2010)**

In Mexican director María Novaro's 2000 feature *Sin dejar huella* [*Without a Trace*], a corrupt detective who is keen to put women behind bars asks "¿Cómo se llama el delito ése cuando roban cosas de nuestra cultura?" ["What's the name for that crime when they steal things from our culture?"]. His sidekick promptly replies "Saqueo al patrimonio de la nación" ["Looting of the nation's cultural treasures"]. Ana, the detective's prey, is a partner in a business making fake Mayan artefacts, a plot device which allows the film to follow her across Mexico from the northern border with the United States to the Yucatan peninsula.

In Novaro's most recent feature, *Las buenas hierbas* [*The Good Herbs*], made in 2010, dislodgement of Mexico's indigenous cultures (through the forgetting, flight, and appropriation of ethnobotanical knowledge) grows from a plot device to a structural frame which envelops and continuously informs the narrative. Rather than running towards the site of an authentic culture, in *Las buenas hierbas* the record of an indigenous culture is the marrow of the film, the cultural landscape across which the protagonists' lives are transcribed.

Pages of the *Codex de la Cruz-Badiano*, the herbal almanac translated into Latin by Juan Badiano, from a Nahuatl text written in the Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco in 1552 by Martín de la Cruz, an indigenous botanist, are the visual terrain and background for a story about Alzheimer's, and the physical and mental disabilities entailed by the disease. Set in Mexico City, the film's focus is the relationship between Lala, a middle-aged ethnobotanist, and her daughter Dalia, a single mother with a passion for vocabulary and philosophizing.

Initially Lala is presented as an extremely competent person, impatient with her daughter's speculative approach to life. However, the third protagonist in the film is dementia and very soon Lala's high level of cognitive functioning deteriorates: the film's second act opens with her confiding

her diagnosis of Alzheimer's to Dalia, and, in the third act, she begins to lose physical as well as mental functionality.

Lala's interest in ethnobotany gives Novaro the premise for imbricating in the narrative many references, textual and visual, to the *Codex de la Cruz-Badiano*, and the film's interweaving of a twenty-first century drama and a sixteenth century herbal allows the director to make artefacts of Mexico's indigenous cultures speak to the present more effectively, perhaps, than in the earlier film, *Sin dejar huella*. In *Las buenas hierbas*, the indigenous culture is felt as far more than a lost trace: it is the framework for an intimate examination of amnesia and memory, on a personal as well as a national scale.

Novaro does not theorize the differences between medical and social models of disability in her film. However, the dialogue between indigenous herbal practice and contemporary bio-medicine established by the film's structure potentially disrupts both the notion that the medicalization of disability is an artefact of industrialised and developed societies as well as the sense that progress towards a social model of disability is exclusively a feature of recent history and of Western identity politics. In the reading which follows I propose that the film's negotiation of indigenous and bio-medical conceptualizations of the ailing and non-normative mind and body reveals elements of both models of disability in pre-Columbian apprehensions of the diversity of experiences today rendered by notions of the able and disabled body or mind. I suggest that what was only a plot device in *Sin dejar huella* becomes a process of cultural subsidence in *Las buenas hierbas* such that Novaro is able to show viewers that there is a specifically Mexican understanding of disability informed by pre-Hispanic cultures. Furthermore, the ethnobotanical cultural milieu created by the film allows it to extend its portrait of a family affected by a disability to a critique which politicizes on a national scale the questions it raises about cultural memory and social justice.

The characters in *Las buenas hierbas* talk often about the codex, and animation is used to bring alive the original color illustrations to show the development and flowering of the plants described

by de la Cruz. This is one of several unconventional flourishes in the film, which also reifies words to put them on screen as if emerging from a person's mind or as if letters of the alphabet were part of the atmosphere which the characters inhabit. *Mise-en-scène* is used to imply an environment that is quite literally colonized by a language, which, furthermore, takes on some of the aspects of the plants also described by the film, as it grows and establishes itself over a terrain.

Among the film's key themes, then, are memory and amnesia, aging and dementia, gender and science, and cultural hybridization and imperialism. And plants. What I want to do in this chapter is first to consider the film under some of these headings—by looking at how understanding the iteration of ethnobotany specific to Mexico can help in seeing how the film fits into a specifically Mexican discourse of disability, indigeneity, and femininity—, and then to ask how the notion of Third Cinema might be re-purposed, or extended, to take account of a film like this one which is concerned with the third age.

### **Foundations of a Mexican Disability Discourse**

Mexico City, the megalopolis which gives its name to the world's most populous Spanish-speaking country, is sinking. Built over the network of canals which existed before the arrival of Cortés, the subsidence problem can be seen in tilting buildings and in the flights of steps which have had to be built to permit downwards access to the entrances of buildings whose portals used to be at ground level.<sup>1</sup> If this material subsidence creates issues of accessibility for those with mobility impairments in Mexico City, so too does the fact that the country's approach to issues of social justice and national identity is also steeped in the layers of history over which contemporary political and institutional structures are built. I do not mean to say here that reference to pre-Columbian cultures automatically creates obstacles or impediments to equality for disabled people in Mexico; the point is a more neutral and descriptive one to the effect that approximations to disability politics in Mexico

have recourse to a legitimizing or differentiating discourse of pre-Columbian antecedence which lends questions arising from physical and mental impairment in Mexico a distinctive framework.

For example, in the preamble to its 2004 statistical assessment of disability in Mexico, *Las personas con discapacidad en México: una visión censal*, the Mexican National Institute of Statistics, Geography, and Technology (INEGI) posits as an index of national development increased recognition of people with disabilities as an interest group and moves towards the betterment of services and provisions for them. At the same time, and before summarizing the history of the shift from the asylums of the Porfiriato to the welfare models developed in the 1980s, the *Visión censal* casts its gaze back to a pre-Hispanic North America and discovers indigenous cultural practices that in some ways resembled pre-Christian medieval Europe's animist stigmatization of people with physical or mental deficiencies and, in others, reflected an enlightenment which surpassed that of the European colonists:

En la cultura náhuatl la dualidad en la explicación y tratamiento de las enfermedades y deficiencias, se manifiesta en las interpretaciones animistas fuertemente asociadas a supersticiones o abusiones, así como en el desarrollo de una amplia práctica terapéutica basada en la herbolaria, que fue causa de admiración entre los conquistadores. (INEGI 2)

[Dualism in Nahuatl culture in the explanation and treatment of diseases and deficiencies was apparent in animist interpretations strongly associated with superstitions or auguries, and was also to be seen in the development of an extensive therapeutic practice based around herbalism, something which was a source of admiration among the conquistadors.]

The colonists' admiration for the pre-Columbian herbal pharmacopeia is also remarked on by Francisco Guerra who says that "The botanical gardens of Nezahualcoyotl and Moctezuma, and the fact that a special market existed in the ancient Tenochtitlan just for medicinal herbs were deeply admired by the conquistadores" (332-33).

INEGI's survey brings this pre-Columbian and—partially—medical model of conditions seen as aberrant or defective very much into the present:

La influencia que tuvieron las civilizaciones griega y romana en la Europa medieval también se refleja en la mezcla de las culturas española y prehispánica, y se observa también en las concepciones y actitudes que actualmente tiene nuestra sociedad hacia las personas con discapacidad. (2)

[The influence which Greek and Roman civilizations had in medieval Europe is also reflected in the mixture of Spanish and pre-Hispanic cultures, and can be seen also in the concepts and attitudes which our society currently has towards people with disabilities.]

The very fact, then, that disability in Mexican discourse—administrative as well as anthropological—is read as subject to the same syncretizing influences as many other aspects of contemporary Mexican culture and society binds notions of impairment equitably into a specifically Mexican *Weltanschauung*.

In *Nadie es ombligo en la tierra / Ayac xictli in Tlalticpc: incapacidad en el México antiguo* (2000) Arturo Rocha portrays pre-Columbian conceptions of disability in light of a Nahuatl injunction against the casting out from ordinary society of those with non-normative presentations of physical and mental capacities. Reviewing the book, Ernesto de la Torre Villar says that Rocha finds:

[Una] amplia serie de elementos que permitan conocer c[ó]mo en [el pueblo mexica] existieron discapacitados muy diversos que convivieron con la sociedad común, ordinaria; cómo fueron conceptuados, comprendidos, cuál fue la explicación de su incapacidad, cuál su tratamiento y cómo acerca de ellos surgió una reflexión y una conducta en la que percibimos humana comprensión y no rechazo; fraternal piedad, cordialidad hacia el semejante, ayuda, respeto.

[[An] extensive series of elements which allow us to apprehend how there existed [among the Mexica] people with very diverse disabilities who lived as part of the everyday society; [these elements also illustrate] how people with disabilities were conceptualized, how they were understood, which explanations were given for their handicaps, which treatments there were and how there grew up around the disabled a way of thinking and a form of conduct in which we see not rejection but human comprehension; fraternal piety, cordiality towards one's fellow man, help, respect.]

Bridging pre-Columbian practice and post-Hispanic epistemology are the codices, hybrid documents like the *Badianus codex* which applied the structures of European herbals to indigenous botanical knowledge. As the introduction to INEGI's census puts it:

La práctica terapéutica se basó principalmente en la herbolaria, sus avances quedaron manifiestos en los *Códices Florentino y Badiano*, donde se plasmaron complejos tratamientos para enfermedades, deficiencias y discapacidades tales como la epilepsia, la ceguera y la sordera, las cuales eran atendidas en sus múltiples manifestaciones. (3)

[Therapeutic practice was based principally in herbalism [and] the degree to which it had developed can be seen in the Badianus and Florentine Codices where there are to be found complex treatments for illnesses, deficiencies, and disabilities such as epilepsy, blindness and deafness, conditions which were addressed in their multiform presentations.]

This is significant in terms of my chapter's focus on María Novaro's *Las buenas hierbas*, because it sheds light on the director's conjoining of, on the one hand, a narrative set in 2007 about a woman who becomes disabled due to Alzheimer's and, on the other, an exploration of the relevance to contemporary Mexico of the indigenous knowledge preserved in the *Badianus codex*. The film is punctuated with beautifully animated illustrations from the codex together with chapter headings taken from the accompanying descriptions of a plant's medicinal or therapeutic properties; if at first this gives it a structural likeness to Laura Esquivel's novel *Como agua para chocolate* (and to the blockbuster film based on it), closer examination reveals a film which is spikier and possibly more challenging than Esquivel's romanticized and magically real cookbook. *Las buenas hierbas* gives us *recetas* of a different kind, and prescriptions not only for individuals but for social ailments (foreseen, for example, in de la Cruz's inclusion in his manuscript of a plant-based remedy for ineffectual politicians and administrators beset by fatigue and mediocrity).

How do we arrive at a film which, without losing the plot, can shift from animated pages of the *Badianus codex* to scenes set in a community radio station where the presenters decry government corruption and the failure to act on findings like those made by the Mexican journalist Lydia Cacho about sex trafficking? “¿Qué crimen de estado se ha sancionado en México en los últimos años?” [“Has there been any sanction for a state crime in Mexico in recent years?”], the hosts ask rhetorically, before answering their own question: “No hay ni un preso: están gobernando” [“There's not a single person in prison: they're governing the country”] (Novaro 2010). To understand how Novaro's film about plants and about pre-Columbian botany can also be a film about social (in)justice, disability, women's rights, and unpunished violence, it will be helpful briefly to review Victor Manuel Toledo's work on new ethnobotanical paradigms in Mexico.

Toledo argues that “ethnobotany in Mexico lives by a process [of] ‘scientific revolution’; that is, the replacement of an academic tradition with a new way to conceive and carry out research” (85). Mexican ethnobotany, he says, “has entered a new dimension in which it is no longer isolated and a

discipline enclosed within itself, but has become part of a new interdisciplinary trend loosely tied to the problems of production and politics” (85). Toledo claims that a confluence of factors has contributed to making the crossroads of demos and indigenous knowledge presupposed by ethnobotany a magnet and rallying point for troublemakers and critics; the growing sense in Mexico that native epistemologies are cultural artefacts requiring preservation and conservation coincided with a realization that while the legacy of indigenous plant knowledge plays a large part in the development of pharmaceuticals, eighty per cent of Mexico’s medical drugs are supplied by multinationals whose profits remain entirely exogenous. Little or no benefit or acknowledgment flows back to the cultures whose embedded knowledge feeds into breakthroughs classed as wholly modern and Western. Research by Fabricant and Farnsworth indicates that eighty per cent of “122 compounds of defined structure obtained from only 94 species of plants, that are used globally as drugs [...] have had an ethnomedical use identical or related to the current use of the active elements of the plant”, and that “most useful drugs derived from plants have been discovered by follow-up of ethnomedical uses” (69, 74). Toledo’s point is that few of the profits from these (re)discoveries go back to the source and that the convergence of Western pharmacy and indigenous practice around social knowledge of plants is therefore contentious, political, and an arena in which are condensed many of the tensions between globalization and ecological concerns about people and the places they inhabit.

Edward Anderson argues that as an area of inquiry which is by its very nature interdisciplinary, ethnobotany “is a subject than cannot be dealt with from the narrow specialist’s viewpoint so common in academic circles” (184) and that it demands “breadth of knowledge in both the social and natural sciences” (193). In Mexico, this already hybrid epistemology has in addition “attracted and united the most dissident, heterodox, and radical investigators [and] become a discipline preoccupied with social change, technological innovation, the country’s economic self-determination, and the struggle of Indian peoples” (Toledo 75).

Setting *Las buenas hierbas* in a discursive environment informed by the ethnobotanical research of its protagonist, then, affords Novaro several narratological benefits. The incorporation of an interdisciplinary subject favors the hybridity which critics have noted in the director's work. As Joanne Hershfield suggests, "If it wants to appeal to a global audience, a [Mexican] national film must supplement its localness with a global aesthetic that appeals to an audience educated through globalizing models of cinema practices" (171). As Hershfield goes on to illustrate, Novaro has found a way in her films to achieve this fusion and yet remain outside the drive towards "a global aesthetic of violence" (172). In a similar vein, Miriam Haddu proposes that "Novaro attempts to rediscover her nation" and "projects in her work a vision of what she deems to be an acute interpretation of a specific sense of 'Mexicanness' on the screen" (104). In light of Hershfield's and Haddu's work, I would argue that the approximation in *Las buenas hierbas* to the increasingly global phenomenon of dementia diagnosed as Alzheimer's, and to mental disability through a character whose life work has been an engagement with the pre-Columbian pharmacopeia, allows Novaro again to negotiate between the local and the global in a way that retains comprehensibility for an audience outside Mexico whilst also eschewing an equation between filmic Mexicanness and an aesthetic of violence. Furthermore, the film's invocation and literal re-presentation of the *Badianus codex* establishes a frame of reference for the film which points to the potential for a specifically Mexican conceptualization of disability and of its socialization throughout a history which extends much further back than the identity politics of contemporary rights movements.

Comparing Novaro's original screenplay (dated 2004) with the finished film (released nearly six years later) is instructive in that the text makes slightly more obvious the hybridization of the local and the transnational, and of Western bio-medicine and pre-Columbian herbalism. For example, in the script a cross-cut between the sixteenth-century codex and a contemporary clinical breakdown of landmarks in the physical and mental deterioration of people with Alzheimer's bridges scenes sixty and sixty-one:



Vemos [...] reproducciones de imágenes de plantas tomadas de[1] *Libellus de medicinalibus Indorum Herbis* que Lala tenía en su oficina [...] Leemos [...] “*Cómo se cura el que ha sido vejado por el torbellino o el ventarrón*” (Novaro 2004, 65)

We see [...] reproductions of plants taken from the copy of the *Libellus de medicinalibus Indorum Herbis* which Lala had in in her office [...] We read [...] “*Cure for one who has been shaken by whirlwinds or gales*”]

and this is followed immediately by:

Un recuerdo pegado en la pared [que] explica las “ETAPAS DE DETERIORO FÍSICO Y MENTAL DEL ENFERMO DE ALZHEIMER” (Novaro 2004, 65)

[A reminder stuck to the wall [which] explains the “STAGES IN THE ALZHEIMER PATIENT’S PHYSICAL AND MENTAL DETERIORATION”]

In the screenplay, the turning points in the pathogenesis of Alzheimer’s are used as chapter headings for the divisions which break the film up into a series of numbered stages. In the finished film, these chapter headings are not used and their place is taken instead by the animations of pages from the codex, each illustrating a different condition and a different plant-based therapy. The conversation between indigenous and bio-medical knowledge is retained, however. For example, the film keeps the scene where Dalia researches the arguments for a bio-chemistry of gendered behaviour, and the *mise-en-scène* of Lala’s office and home juxtaposes indigenous knowledge, in the form of the *Badianus codex*, with the accoutrements of an empirically-based scientific practice. It is telling, perhaps, that María Sabina, a *curandera* synonymous with non-Western therapeutic practices and knowledge, appears to Lala in her home, rather than in her workplace. The domestication of local knowledge and culture is further reinforced when Dalia rejects the hospital as a source of succor for her mother and decides that the best place for her care and her treatment is, instead, her home.

### **A Feminist Ethnobotany**

María Novaro has said of her approach to gender and narrative: “Trato de contar las cosas *desde* la mujer, no *sobre* la mujer” [“I try to narrate things *from* a woman’s perspective, and not to narrate things *about* women”] (Delon and Quezada 2011 [part I]). Novaro adds to this remark a recollection of a conversation with Carlos Monsiváis in which he had emphasised that there had been few stories

in Mexican cinema told *by* women and she positions her filmmaking within an attempt to rectify this imbalance. Focusing in *Las buenas hierbas* on the *Badianus codex*, a text written by a man and translated by a man, might seem like a strange choice given the director's preference for telling stories *by* as well as *about* women. However, the work of women scholars in the rediscovery and republication of the codex was vital, as Peter Furst outlines in his ethnobotanically informed history of the text in the twentieth century. The manuscript had languished in European libraries for 450 years, Furst notes, before Charles Upson Clark chanced upon it in the Vatican library in 1929. "These and other facts about the history and content of the Aztec herbal", Furst writes, "we owe to Emily Walcott Emmart, who translated the herbal [...] and published it in full color with explanatory introductory chapters in 1940 as *The Badianus Manuscript*" (111). The watercolor reproductions of the manuscript's botanical illustrations were done by Marie Therese Missionier-Vuilleman and it was Elizabeth Clark and another female member of the Garden Club of America who secured funding—through an award established in honour of the Club's first president, also a woman—for the expenses entailed in the costly color printing of the book.

The film's inclusion of strophes from Maria Sabina's mushroom *velada* positions femininity at the centre of the narrative and at the heart of Novaro's concern with her characters. Each line of Sabina's incantation begins with the words "Soy la mujer" ["I am the woman"] (Novaro 2004, 48) and one of the sections replayed by Lala in the film (apparently—in the diegesis— from a tape recording made during field work) ends with the line "Soy la mujer sabia en lenguaje porque soy la mujer sabia en medicina" ["I am the woman who has wisdom of language because I am the woman who has wisdom of medicine."] The curandera's equation of lexicographic and medical sapience seems to augur the taking up of ethnobotany as a socially and politically disruptive epistemological framework by Mexican activists and by Novaro herself in a script informed by this context.

Lala will tell her daughter in a later sequence of the film "Las mujeres somos transmisoras de palabras y sabiduría" ["We women are the ones who pass on words and wisdom"] (Novaro 2004, 55)

and the resonance with Sabina's incantation implies a feminized transmission of indigenous knowledge between the peoples of Mexico and between generations within a family. Indeed, Lala has named her daughter Dalia, as if she were the child both of her corporeal maternity and of her research into plants and the meanings and uses they held for Mexico's native peoples. At the beginning of the film Dalia is impatient with her mother's clearly often repeated advocacy of natural plant remedies for her grandson's ailments. In a long suffering tone she echoes Lala's recommendation of a homemade plant-based ointment which is "mejor que cualquier crema" ["better than any cream."] Towards the end of the film when, frustrated by the cruel impersonality of the hospital, Dalia is treating her mother at home, she uses the same preparation Lala had made for her and says again, this time with tenderness and regret, "es mejor que cualquier crema" ["it's better than any cream."] While going through her mother's personal belongings, she also speaks aloud her sadness that she did not take the opportunity when it arose to ask Lala about her meeting with María Sabina and what it was like to take part in a *velada*. Her mother's ailing and disabled mind becomes the damaged repository of an indigenous knowledge already once removed from its source. Tellingly, the incarnation of indigenous plant and mycological knowledge in the film is someone who can only be represented posthumously and by the use of a special effect which conjures María Sabina into Lala's presence.

It is also noteworthy that the greatest tension in the film occurs in a scene where Dalia is trying to help dress her mother before they set out on a visit to the hospital. Lala's incapacity to tell the difference between a skirt and a cardigan, her loss of the ability to dress herself, is interwoven with her tremendous agitation about the need to find some vital textual material in the *Badianus codex* which lies open on her bed amidst a rapidly growing pile of discarded clothes. Here, perhaps, is where *Las buenas hierbas* implies most clearly an affinity between the loss of subjective identity and the loss of non-Western cultural knowledge and traditions. Globalization is the Alzheimer's chewing up the store of cultural diversity and memory, and Lala's personal breakdown figures the

fragmentation and erosion of a collective subjectivity. The same scene also illustrates some of the paradoxes and contradictions within the film: on the one hand, the evocation of pre-Columbian traditions through the extant codices which record them resists what Ethan Watters describes in *Crazy Like Us: the Globalization of the Western Mind* as “the flattening of the landscape of the human psyche” and a process of diagnostic and iatrogenic contagion which “homogeniz[es] the way the world goes mad” (2-3); on the other hand, this same gesture of rhetorical similitude draws the film into the paradigm which Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell have identified whereby disability becomes a metaphor for social and political aberrance and thus becomes harder to see in its own right:

The disabled body surfaces as any body capable of being narrated as “outside the norm”. Within such a representational schema [...] narratives revisit disabled bodies as a reminder of the “real” physical limits that “weigh down” transcendent ideals of the mind and knowledge-producing disciplines. In this sense, disability serves as the *hard kernel* or recalcitrant corporeal matter that cannot be deconstructed away by the textual operations of even the most canny [...] philosophical idealisms. (206)

### **Localizing a Global Diagnostic Paradigm**

Novaro’s screenplay and mise-en-scène, as we can see from the previous discussion, bring together the erosion of personal identity due to dementia with concerns about the loss of cultural subjectivity. Finding this narrative device at work in a Mexican film from the 2000s does not come as a complete surprise to anyone familiar with the spate of films made in the last five years or so with a focus on Alzheimer’s, and is also consistent with the 2012 estimate that there are now more than 800,000 people with Alzheimer’s in Mexico (Secretaría de Salud).

In Spain, Carla Subirana’s documentary film *Nadar*, made in 2008, followed first her grandmother’s, then her mother’s diagnosis with Alzheimer’s alongside the director’s attempt to memorialize the grandfather neither she nor her mother ever knew. He was executed during the Civil War. Similarly, Albert Sole’s *Bucarest: La memoria perdida* (also released in 2008) situated a portrait of the filmmaker’s father as his Alzheimer’s worsened alongside a revision of a politically

oppressed and oppressive chapter in Spain's history which, the film's structure implies, is being eroded by time and neglect as implacably as the Alzheimer patient's synapses are being corroded by tangles of proteins. Also from Spain is *Arrugas* (2011), the animated adaptation of Paco Roca's comic book about a bank manager who develops Alzheimer's and which was also intended as a critique of institutional neglect of the elderly and of end-of-life care.

Korean director Chang-dong Lee's surprise success with *Poetry*, a film released in 2010 about the travails of an older woman as her Alzheimer's symptoms worsen, shows that the pattern is a global one. While Alzheimer's is experienced on a very personal level by the patient and by his or her caregivers it lends itself as a paradigm to an international art house circuit because the signs of the progression of Alzheimer's are universal. In *Las buenas hierbas* Lala first forgets that she put her keys in the biscuit tin, then forgets how to dress, begins to have difficulty with hand to mouth coordination, and then starts to lose motor control generally: these signposts are common to all the films I have mentioned as they portray the diagnosis and pathogenesis of Alzheimer's. Subjectivities, as they fall apart, begin to look very samey: towards the end of the process there is no individuation.

In spite of, or perhaps because of the homogenized mileposts in Alzheimer pathogenesis, nearly all the films mentioned here try not simply to wrest some individuality from the ravages of Alzheimer's but also, paradoxically, to make it function as a metaphor for a cultural specificity under threat of loss or of being forgotten. While *Las buenas hierbas* is not as overtly political as *Nadar* and *Bucarest: La memoria perdida*, which cast historical amnesia as a correlate of Alzheimer's, neither is Novaro's film as lyrical as Chang-dong Lee's *Poetry*. It sits somewhere between these two extremes while clearly inviting the viewer to reflect on the loss to science of the pharmaceutical knowledge which was not preserved in the codices and to draw a comparison between the loss of an individual's memory and cognition and the lacunae in the Mexican peoples' knowledge of their pre-Hispanic heritage.

Blanquita, a minor character in the film, expresses the metaphorical function of Alzheimer's when she says that despite the asyndetic thinking it produces, it nevertheless reveals a more profound truth, and from the film's ethnobotanical and anthropological context, we can take this to be a truth about the loss of cultural memory. This is a function which Alzheimer's could not be made to serve in an American approach to the condition, for example, where one of the therapies considered most progressive is to forget memory and to cease to attach any importance to it (Basting 2009).

As I have argued elsewhere (Prout 2012), a problem with using Alzheimer's as a metaphorical vehicle in this way is that it tasks the patient, who is effectively losing the capacity for executive action, with the further responsibility for safeguarding, and thus for losing, the already tenuous cultural or historical memory which his or her ailing mind comes to represent. We can see, therefore, that the strand of scholarship which underscores the extent to which disability is the disavowed kernel at the root of critical rhetoric and discourse is germane to interpretations of this new wave of Alzheimer's filmic texts. When we try to read Novaro's film within the Third Cinema manifesto this becomes still more obvious: gerontophobia (and ableism) is a disavowed kernel of the 1960s rallying cry for Latin American cinema to be progressive and revolutionary (something which Novaro possibly achieves more effectively in an engagement with radical ethnobotany than through any violent emulation of Ernesto Che Guevara).

### **A Third Cinema for the Third Age?**

The Third Cinema manifesto does not speak directly to Alzheimer's (which, in any case, did not undergo a resurgence as a diagnosis until the 70s) although it does say that the revolutionary kind of society which will foster a guerrilla filmmaking is one "intensifying all the modern resources of medical science to prepare people with optimum levels of health and physical efficiency" (Getino and Solanas 115).

In *Las buenas hierbas* we see that modern medical science is part of the problem, rather than the cure, inasmuch as it exports through the imperial corridors of technology and knowledge a globalizing and homogenizing set of diagnostic practices and cures. Novaro's film sets against the hi-tech panopticon of the MRI scanner the folk wisdom of Mexico's indigenous peoples. Whereas Subirana's film segues between hi-tech images of her grandmother's brain and the similarly rippled image of her grandfather's fingerprints, as recorded in his criminal record, *Las buenas hierbas* makes a very similar segue, but in the Mexican film the images which merge are of the brainscans and of leaves and petals falling from trees until the plant material and the tau tangles characteristic of Alzheimer's seem to become one.

Like Claudia Llosa's *La teta asustada* (2009), *Las buenas hierbas* brings into dialogue Western and non-Western models of medical practice in an encounter which spotlights the holism of pre-Columbian concepts of the relationship between body and soul and the mechanistic approach taken by Western bio-medicine. Perhaps slightly more than *La teta asustada*, *Las buenas hierbas* tends towards a syncretic accommodation of both traditional and hi-tech medicine. Alongside its inclusion of content from Nicolás Echevarría's *Mujer espíritu*, the documentary made in 1978 about María Sabina, Novaro's screenplay also name checks or includes visual references to people like Julieta Fierro, an astronomer and celebrity scientist, and Constantino Macías, a well-known ecologist. And Lala herself is portrayed as a respected botanist, one in a line of female Mexican scholars going back to Helia Bravo Hollis who was a significant figure in the field in Mexico in the 1940s (Herrera 116-121).

Scene nineteen in Novaro's script is illustrative of its evocation of an idealized knowledge environment where traditional and scientific wisdom are to be found alongside each other. In this scene there is no dialogue: the camera simply tracks across the contents of Lala's offices at UNAM's Botanical Gardens: it first picks out the computer screen on which we see a page about Alzheimer's being loaded and then shifts to other objects: a poster depicting María Sabina, "la sabia de los

hongos” [“the mycological sage”], a diploma awarded to Eduarda Calderon, “etnobotánica Mexicana” [“Mexican ethnobotanist”], a book, *Plantas curativas en México*, and a large reproduction of illustrations from the de la Cruz-Badiano Codex.

The hybridization created here in the *mise-en-scène* is further reflected in the relationship between the film’s content and its structure, more so in the original screenplay than in the finished film, as I suggested previously. In the written text, the same page which we had seen on Lala’s computer screen, and a poster which is referred to later on and is headed “Etapas del deterioro físico y mental del enfermo del Alzheimer” [“Stages in the Alzheimer patient’s physical and mental deterioration”], provide the subheadings which break the dialogue into chapters with intertitles which read, for example, “Cuarto tiempo: alteraciones en el comportamiento con períodos de lucidez” [“Fourth phase: changes to behavior with periods of lucidity”], or “Sexto tiempo: se pierde la capacidad de estar sentado y no se puede mantener la cabeza erguida” [Sixth phase: loss of the ability to assume sitting position and to hold head up straight.”] *Las buenas hierbas* thus uses a paradigm from Western bio-medicine as a framework for narrative content which is to a considerable extent drawn from indigenous traditions of botany and medicine. Here we can see that Novaro’s appeal to the *Badianus codex* is not only facilitated by intertextual reference but is also brought into being by creating a textual edifice in which neither European nor traditional science is ever clearly privileged at the expense of the other. In this, the film’s organic structure reflects the *Badianus codex* itself: is it an Aztec pharmacopeia ordered after the fashion of a European herbal, or is it a European almanac which westernizes its indigenous content within the strictures of an old world paradigm? The question has vexed scholars since the re-emergence of the text in the 1930s.

In the 1980s Debra Hassig wrote that the only New World elements present in the codex were the plants themselves; the idea of signature diseases, where the plant is somehow matched with the part of the body affected by an ailment, and of cures which addressed imbalances in humors or in temperature, were clear evidence of contamination of the original knowledge by European concepts,



she said. Hassig also proposed that the recording of indigenous pharmaceutical practice was not intended for posterity but simply as a means to permit the more efficient annihilation of “suspect religious ritual” (31). In 2008, Millie Gimmel posited, on the other hand, that “in spite of its European appearance the Codex is an indigenously produced work that reflects primarily indigenous sensibilities” (186). She says that “the European contamination seen by so many scholars in the Codex might actually be more a reflection of indigenous ethnocentricity and misinterpretation of European texts rather than the wholesale acceptance of European medicine” (186). Gimmel stresses the non-alphabetical reading practices of the Aztecs and their ability to categorize plants using visual classifiers. She foregrounds studies of the Aztecs’ belief in three animistic entities to propose that where other scholars have seen the imposition of a European humoral notion of medicine, there is also a remnant of indigenous ontology. From this she concludes that the “Codex de la Cruz [is] a work which looks like a European herbal but whose content and composition is almost completely indigenous.” The ideal readerships for the text did not exist at the time of its composition, she says and proposes that “As twenty first century readers and scholars we must recognize the hybridity of this text and treat it as the blended text it is” (187). My own contention here is that María Novaro does precisely this and her syncretic alignment of indigenous content within a paradigm drawn from Western medicine’s pathogenesis of Alzheimer’s makes the codex available to just such a hybrid reading. Here again there is a parallel with the work of INEGI and its emphasis on cultural hybridization within a medical history of disability..

In their manifesto for a Third Cinema Getino and Solanas quoted the narration from their film *La hora de los hornos* to the effect that “As early as the seventeenth century the Jesuit missionaries proclaimed the aptitude of the South American native for copying European works of art. If you want to be a man, says the oppressor, you have to be like me, speak my language, deny your own being” (116). By building her film around the *Badianus codex*, a text which plugs so directly into the debate over whether early hybrid texts from the new world are merely slavish copies of European

traditions or valuable records of indigenous cultures, Novaro can be seen as having created a work which falls within the legacy of Third Cinema: it speaks clearly to the debate opened up and expanded by Getino and Solanas's manifesto over mimesis as oppression and, as my reading of the film through Gimmel's re-interpretation of the codex suggests, uncovers a potential for hybridization which the manifesto's dichotomizing debate seemed to have foreclosed.

A trickier theme to situate within the Third Cinema legacy is, arguably, memory. The manifesto privileges novelty, youthfulness, and physical mobility. Ernesto Guevara is the example most often cited and, indeed, he is praised as the exemplary new man, while "the cinema fit for a new kind of human being" is contrasted with an execrable cinema characterized as one made "for the old kind of human being". There is not much scope here for making something good out of what is held to be old and infirm and therefore worthy only of the dustbin of history. If we look at Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Memorias del subdesarrollo* [*Memories of Underdevelopment*], for example—a film which in many ways would seem to respond to the manifesto—we see a clear distrust of memory and of any kind of recall which is not concerned with holding imperialists to account for the wrongs done to those they have oppressed. The title of Desnoes's novella and of Gutiérrez Alea's film might almost have been more accurately *Memoria es subdesarrollo* [*Memory is Underdevelopment*].

Unlike Lala in *Las buenas hierbas*, the problem for Sergio in *Memorias del subdesarrollo* and for Diego in *Fresa y chocolate* is that they remember too much. Their memories are not only of bourgeois paraphernalia but are also bourgeois capacities in and of themselves. They will not let go of the past and are therefore counter revolutionaries. It is Sergio's capacity for recall which often signals the plangent soundtrack in *Memorias del subdesarrollo*: memory is evoked as a melancholy and self-involved dimension. When Sergio dispatches his parents at the airport, is it a kind of wish fulfilment on the part of ICAIC, to banish the older generation to a place of oblivion? My point is

that a concern with the loss of memory sits uneasily with a manifesto which is based on a thrusting advance towards a new dawn.

The Third Cinema manifesto recommends as much distance as possible from the generic formulae of Hollywood and in this, perhaps, *Las buenas hierbas* does respond to its legacy. As Martin Norden has illustrated in *The Cinema of Isolation* and as Robert McRuer has advanced in his more recent *Crip Theory*, Hollywood is only able to approach disability and debilitating conditions through narratives which depict a heroic overcoming of adversity: a film like Novaro's which follows the implacable advance of Alzheimer's is unthinkable within that format and, indeed, to find U.S. films which are as honest about Alzheimer's, one must look not for fiction but for documentaries like *The Alzheimer Project* (2009), a film which had an acknowledged public service and consciousness-raising remit.

Similarly, the attention to the third age in *Las buenas hierbas* could also be read as an evolution of the Third Cinema manifesto inasmuch as the film focuses on the elderly and those with pre-senile dementia, a demographic which cinema prefers on the whole to forget. From this angle, the narrative can be understood as meeting Getino and Solanas's challenge to expose "the whole climate of pseudonormality behind which the warfare of everyday life is hidden" (127). Particularly towards the end when Novaro's perspective shows the impersonal treatment extended to Lala by hospital staff, the film uncovers the disregard for elders and for people who are no longer able to be self-advocates.

It has been posited that the United States especially fears Alzheimer's disease because it is a condition which undermines independence and which forces those involved in caring for a person with Alzheimer's to rethink the bootstraps mentality privileged by the putatively American way of life. *Las buenas hierbas* engages with a disease, then, which is in itself a threat to the imperialistic cult of the individual. In some ways *Las buenas hierbas* fits within the legacy of Third Cinema: it affords a central role to a section of the population often overlooked by mass media and society,

namely the elderly and people affected by the symptoms of dementia. It also calls into question neo-imperialist paradigms of bio-power and pharmacracy by framing medical practice within a hybridized narrative which conjoins indigenous and Western traditions and thus confronts the notion that all “human problems are diseases that medicine will soon conquer” (Szasz xv) when the imperialist project, reconfigured as a globalized diagnostic practice, has gained control of the entire planet.

In other ways I think it is fair to say that Novaro’s film either expands or breaks away from the Third Cinema manifesto. It is a narrative scripted by a woman and in which women and motherhood are the predominant focus, an aspect of creativity not especially central in the manifesto informed as it is by a machista outlook on filmmaking where guns, testosterone, and guerrillas represent the model to be followed. More subtly, I would argue that the film’s exploration of memory and of the fragility of individual subjectivity also expands on, or breaks away from, the original manifesto. To find value in the individual life of a woman who is losing her mind, Novaro’s film departs from the flight from the past. Nevertheless, by summoning collective cultural memory alongside the exploration of individual memory *Las buenas hierbas* also responds to the need foreseen by the pioneers of Third Cinema not to be drawn into a debate about the conceptualization of post-Hispanic Latin American culture as merely a reiterative or simulative derivation of a European original. Though this, in turn, as I have sought to set out in the preceding pages, sets a heavy burden on the individual mind as a storehouse for an entire cultural legacy.

### **Impressions of Loss**

The two strands of memory loss treated by the film—subjective and cultural—could have rendered Lala’s experience little more than a metaphor, but *Las buenas hierbas* avoids reducing the individual to a cypher for a larger amnesia and is starkly honest both about the disintegration of Lala’s subjectivity and the physical deterioration wrought by the illness. Those who care for people with

Alzheimer's are often portrayed as the real victims of the disease; without painting Dalia as a victim, *Las buenas hierbas* nevertheless illustrates the anguish she endures as her mother disappears before her eyes. Ofelia Medina (Lala) and Úrsula Pruneda (Dalia) make the filial relationship tested by Alzheimer's a credible one in scenes which never become mawkish.

Novaro situates herself in a tradition of female botanical artists and researchers, asking questions about how the representation of the natural world has been a labor divided by gender (see, for example, Lightman, and Speirs) and about the relationship between this segregation and the misogynistic violence which is also referenced in the film. *Las buenas hierbas* brings Mexican cinema into a current of films about Alzheimer's and shows that while the pathogenesis of the disease is the same everywhere, responses to it are imbricated in cultures which remain discrete. Loss leaves a distinct impression, an idea developed in *Las buenas hierbas* both at an historical, national level, and at a personal one.

In her latest film, as in her previous work, María Novaro eschews an aesthetic of violence to approach pressing issues within Mexican society; by perverting the butch gung ho gun-toting revolutionary zeal of the Third Cinema manifesto it has been my purpose in this chapter to mirror Novaro's gesture. I have also tried to read the film in a way which elucidates the political and social connotations of the director's choice of a sixteenth-century Aztec herbal as the cultural medium for her representation of Alzheimer's and mental disabilities. In addition, my argument has pointed to the dialogue between feminist and disability issues in the film and I want to end with Novaro's own assessment of how women's filmmaking is received in Mexico, a quote which illustrates, I think, that the shared interests of feminism and of disability rights as cognate political movements have still to be worked out fully:

Yo pienso que—y lo vivo cada vez que saco una película—muchas veces nuestros temas son considerados menores, nuestras películas son consideradas más chiquitas, nuestra cinematografía es considerado género menor, como si fuéramos...como si fuera cine de minusválidos o de personas con capacidades diferentes y nos dijese, “Pues, por ser mujeres no está mal”, como si estuviéramos en otra liga, en otra competencia. (Delon and Quezada, 2011 [part II])

I think—and I experience this every time one of my films comes out—that very often our themes [as women filmmakers] are considered to be minor, our films are considered as smaller, our cinematography is considered a minor genre, as if we were...as if it were the cinema of the handicapped or of people with different abilities and as if we were being told of our filmmaking, “Well, considering it’s made by women, it’s not that bad”, as if we were in another league, in another competition.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco (Aztec forerunners of what became Mexico City) were built on islands within Lake Texcoco. In the seventeenth century, the lake was drained and filled in by the Spaniards: this, together with other geological factors and the drainage of aquifers to supply drinking water, is at the root of the city's subsidence. Illades and Lesser estimate that parts of Mexico City are sinking at a rate of between 5 and 10 centimetres each year (1998: 13). Cultural landmarks in Mexico City, such as the Cathedral and the Guadalupe Basilica, famously tilt while the Palace of Fine Arts has sunk so significantly over the last century—by nearly four metres—that what used to be the ground floor is now in the basement (Johnson 2011).

<sup>2</sup> This translation (and others in the text) are by the author. The final word in this quote from Novaro—"competencia"—means "competition" or "ranking" in the context of the director's conversation about the reception of Mexican women filmmakers' work. In Spanish, the word also denotes competence and competency. The title of my essay uses "otras competencias" having in mind the parallel meanings of "competencia" in Spanish.