

LA MEMORIA DE LAS MARIPOSAS

The Memory of the Butterflies

Director Tatiana Fuentes Sadowski

Peru, Portugal | 2025

77 min. | Spanish, Murui Huitoto with English subtitles

Screenplay Tatiana Fuentes Sadowski. **Cinematography** Tatiana Fuentes Sadowski, Isabel Madueño Medina. **Editing** Tatiana Fuentes Sadowski, Fernanda Bonilla, Elizabeth Landesberg. **Sound Design** Félix Blume. **Sound** Félix Blume. **Executive Producers** Isabel Madueño Medina, Ico Costa. **Co-Producers** Tatiana Fuentes Sadowski, Isabel Madueño Medina, Ico Costa. **Production company** Miti Films (Peru).

Synopsis

Tatiana Fuentes Sadowski found her attention grabbed by an old photo of two Indigenous men: taken to London to be „civilized“ around the turn of the 20th century, their names were known, but little else – Omarino and Aredomi. Sadowski felt compelled to dig deeper into the past. **THE MEMORY OF BUTTERFLIES** deconstructs the official history of the extractive, colonial rubber trade of the late 19th and early 20th century in Latin America. Using black-and-white, hand-processed Super 8 imagery that could almost pass for the extensively researched and meticulously worked archival footage and historical photographs it cuts into and challenges, the film proposes a counter-history of the colonial project, one in which Sadowski self-reflexively questions her own position as filmmaker. Going beyond the archive, Sadowski shares the photo with the Indigenous peoples of Peru today, the descendants of Omarino and Aredomi, and films their interventions. A powerful cinematic invocation, **THE MEMORY OF BUTTERFLIES** seeks to recover lost and overlooked stories of a generation devastated by the rubber boom, providing space for the ghosts which break from official memory. (Ted Fendt)

Tatiana Fuentes Sadowski is a Peruvian filmmaker whose work bridges experimental and documentary cinema, exploring themes of memory, colonial histories, and collective healing. She studied Performing Arts in Peru and Film and New Media at Le Fresnoy – Studio National des Arts Contemporains. Her previous films have been showcased at festivals including Doclisboa, Oberhausen, and Art of the Real. **THE MEMORY OF BUTTERFLIES** is her opera prima, her latest exploration of archival research and Indigenous storytelling. She is committed to addressing historical wounds through a poetic cinematic lens.

Films: 2012: La Huella / The Imprint (short film). 2013: Yo marco los árboles para reconocerlos después / I Mark the Trees to Recognize Later (short film). 2015: Bam bam pum lol. 2020: Carta para Amadeo / Letter to Amadeo (short film). 2025: La memoria de las mariposas / The Memory of Butterflies.

Director's Statement

When a Photo Beckons

Deconstructing official narratives to reveal what images conceal

LA MEMORIA DE LAS MARIPOSAS (THE MEMORY OF BUTTERFLIES) was born from a single photograph: the portrait of Omarino and Aredomi holding hands in London. I felt beckoned by them. I decided to follow their footsteps and began investigating, which led me to search for them in archives from Peru, Brazil, Ireland, England, Portugal, the United States, and France. Most were propaganda images from extractive projects and colonialist expeditions from the Amazon. Both Omarino and Aredomi were enslaved by the most powerful rubber company of the time, La Casa Arana, and their story is part of the more than 40,000 indigenous people cruelly murdered under the violent system of rubber extraction.

The film demanded a montage of cuts and relations to deconstruct the official historical narratives and reveal what these images conceal. Repeating the images over and over again means answering these ghostly callings, and, at the same time, I ask myself why this image keeps coming back and what it has to tell me. Telling this story through a critical lens required me to examine my place and how I approached it. Speculation allowed me to confront where we came from and what we inherited and to imagine new futures, in close alliance with the desires of the communities of descendants where we filmed. I am constantly striving to decolonize my gaze and my approach, to imagine Omarino and Aredomi as historical subjects with agency, while also allowing opacity in their identity constructions.

I filmed in black-and-white Super 8mm, seeking a timeless image that bridges the archives with my journey. The materiality of the analogue image became the materiality of memory, a speculative, ambiguous, and undefined reality. The soundscape was also designed as a medium – a call to all the spirits in this story and natural forces of this territory: water, wind, fire, and earth. It seeks to allow them to tell the story, as witnesses to these events.

During the film's production, we met with Indigenous communities descended from rubber boom survivors along the Ampiyacu, Putumayo, and Igaraparaná rivers in Peru and Colombia. Through workshops and collective discussions, the film was deeply shaped by these encounters. Our understanding of memory shifted. Stories like those of Omarino and Aredomi are often overshadowed by dominant official narratives. This film seeks to reclaim these silenced biographies, shedding light on a brutal past while honouring the resilience of those who endured it. By sharing their story with their potential descendants, the film regenerates their memory in the present.

From the beginning, I knew that telling this story went beyond what is objective and implied communicating with uncontrollable forces. The film is a threshold between the archives and the present, between the living and the dead. It attempts to be a medium, an experience that allows these transmissions.

Tatiana Fuentes Sadowski

Interview

Respect the Silence, Respect the Not Knowing, Respect the Pain

Tatiana Fuentes Sadowski talks to Asja Makarević and Lisabona Rahman about film as a medium of memory and the necessary limits of knowledge

Asja Makarević: I would like to start from your title of the film, THE MEMORY OF THE BUTTERFLIES. Can you elaborate on that?

Tatiana Fuentes Sadowski: The title is a secret of the movie. In the process of making the film, we heard that in the Amazon, for these communities, the ancestors become butterflies. We didn't say this in the movie directly. There are in fact a lot of subjects that we do not reveal entirely. We kept that wisdom for the communities. So yes, the title refers to the memory of the ancestors.

AM: The focus of the film is on Omarino and Aredomi, a young man and a boy, and the single photograph of them. It seems to trigger your exploration of colonial history. Could you reflect on why you chose to focus on them, rather than, for example, on Roger Casement, the British consul?

TFS: We could have chosen Roger Casement as a main character. But for us, it was very important to be on the side of these two main characters and the communities. In these archival propaganda images, the focus is on the side of the colonizers. They were created with violence and colonialist intentions. We knew from the beginning that we did not want to place the gaze in that direction. In many ways, we had to destroy and deconstruct this universe of archive images and documents in order to attempt to be on the side of Omarino and Aredomi. Of course, it is all speculation and I cannot even say that I am closer to them because there is a big distance between us. That distance is important in the film. We are not taking their voice and we are not talking for them.

Lisabona Rahman: I find it interesting, but also mysterious that we do not exactly know from which position you are narrating in the film. There are multiple alignments with the city, the people, the photographs. And then, you address Omarino and Aredomi and the ancestors of your son. Could you talk about these positions in the film?

TFS: In all these years, I had a question inside me: why do I need to tell this story? Because it is not my story. Omarino and Aredomi are not my ancestors, nor the ancestor of my son. I think there is a lot of art that takes stories that do not belong to the artist, with many good intentions, but this risks an appropriation of the pain of others, and taking charge of the pain of others. So I had this question but I did not arrive at an answer. When I went to Iquitos for the first time, I discovered the role of the place in the family of my husband during this historical period. When I discovered this, I thought, okay, maybe this is not a coincidence. I have a lot of personal answers that are not in the film and I think it is not necessary to have them there. But the tension is important. What do we do with what stays with us? What are we transmitting?

This position allowed me to tell this story from a unique perspective. Now I feel that this is my story, too, in some way, or the story of my son. I discovered the photo in 2015. I was not married then and did not have my son. But I received this charge, this responsibility or transmission. I did not know what it was, and even now, I do not have an answer. The important thing is to confront ourselves with these questions and to take charge of what we do in the present.

LR: Maybe there is no final answer because your life develops and the knowledge that will come out, not only about Omarino

and Aredomi, but also about the community, will continue to open up. Perhaps we have to accept that the answer is not stable and final.

TFS: Yes, completely. One of the important things was to take this story back to the communities. When we were there, nobody knew about them. No one had heard of their story. In some way, this was a symbolic return for them to their homelands. I want to share what happened when we came back to the communities with the images of Omarino and Aredomi, and other archival images. When the descendants were in front of these images, many of them made for propaganda purposes, the relationship was not like my impulse with these images, that I need to deconstruct this official narrative. It was a loving and affectionate welcome of these images. In the film you can see the moment of their intervention on the images with a drawing. There is a symbol of protection, a written prayer for them. And this moment was magical in many ways. So it is different what these images can provoke or awaken in the communities.

AM: You mentioned the word 'charge' - the image has a charge, too, and there is a transmission to you, the possible receiver of its message. But there is also a lot of silence. The images were not made by well meaning onlookers. They are staged and little cues are provided. But there are other images as well, which helped you connect with this one in order to tell this story. Can you talk about the process of making your way through these other images and the network they create together?

TFS: We need to say that the majority of the images that are in the film are propaganda images from the beginning of the 20th century. These are images used for extractivist projects in the Amazon or with intentions to civilize the Indigenous and to impose the idea of progress and early capitalism. The photo of Omarino and Aredomi belongs to this universe. There are just three or four photos of them. The film uses other images that I call relative images. These images are of other people, other communities that were suffering the same situation in this period. They were made with the same intentions as the images of Omarino and Aredomi. In my process, I felt that I could use these images because they are in the same position, telling the same story. It is like the people depicted in these images lend their bodies to Omarino and Aredomi. For this reason, many of the images are fragmented as well. Also for the idea to not reveal everything, to leave the lacunae or holes in the information, in the imagination, in order to let in speculation.

The silence of these images is also the silence of violence. It is a situation that we cannot imagine. Even in the community, they said that in that time, people did not share stories, because it was really violent what was happening. They just needed to survive. So in this context, I felt that I need to respect this silence, and I need to respect the not knowing. It is a way to respect the pain. But this is not a silent movie. This was also a collective process with my beautiful small crew, with my two co-editors and my producer Lali Madueño Medina. We thought that the only voice that could tell what was happening at that time is nature. Nature was, and still is, a witness. When you are in the Amazon, you are living with death, and with many different ghosts, presences, spirits.

AM: The soundscape is important to maintain the presence of nature. The images of water also come to mind. There is a geographical explanation to them, but they also serve as a connecting point between different sequences in the dramaturgy of your film. Can you reflect on the presence of water and its function in your film?

TFS: I wanted the elements to talk. The wind, the water, even the earth. For that reason, we even buried the film in the ground in the Amazon. We were careful not to contaminate the place. But it was important to see the elements in all their force. The water, the river is important because it is present in all these

communities between Peru and Colombia, where the rubber exploitation was happening, between the rivers Putumayo and Igara Paraná. Near the principal station of the company, there is a waterfall that crosses a red zone. This part of the river has an important meaning for the communities of that area. It is a sacred place, the origin of their ancestors. The river, like the forest, is one of the main witnesses of what happened. The river also connects with the ocean. Omarino and Aredomi take the river to traverse the ocean to arrive in London. For me, the water has many meanings in the film. Water symbolizes the relationship between mother and son. My son is also a part of the film. He appears briefly, but is connected. Everything is connected.

AM: Your investigation of the story surrounding Omarino and Aredomi brings you also closer to the story of your own family in this village. Your voiceover suggests that you are ready to leave the story of the boys in the village and to deal with the story of your own dead. I felt it is a strong, intimate moment in the film. We get a glimpse into the history of your family, into how it could have been implicated, not directly, but by staying silent and not actively protesting. Would you like to reflect on that?

TFS: Some parts of the voiceover I cannot explain in a rational way. But I felt that I was seeking for this voice for maybe six or eight years. I was looking for knowledge. And when I arrived in the communities, I learned that it is not necessary to know everything. Even more than that, we need to stop searching for answers to these memories. We are not allowed to know everything about the destiny of these boys, because for the communities, memory is like a basket and there is a limit to how much you can know. For me, that point was the limit. The charge or responsibility that I was speaking of is maybe not Omarino and Aredomi's story, it is my own story. This echoes my reflections about why I needed to tell this story, to take on the pain of others, even with good intentions. The research continues, but in a more personal way. It is not necessary to have that in the film, because it is my own process. But it is relevant to know the story of Omarino and Aredomi in all its complexity. What it means to take charge of my own dead is a mysterious sentence for me. I am still discovering it.

LR: Can you tell us how you started this project in the first place?

TFS: I started this project in 2015, when I found the photo of Omarino and Aredomi on the Internet. An old photo album had appeared in Iquitos, in Peru and among these images was the photograph of Omarino and Aredomi. Something about that photo stayed on my mind for years. I started to investigate it. First, there was this whole archive universe about the rubber exploitation in Peru and Colombia. La Casarana was the name of the main rubber company in that period. They were responsible for more than 40,000 deaths. But it is difficult to find information about any of these 40,000 deaths. That was a push for me, it made me very sad. I went to archives in Peru, Brazil, and in Ireland, because Roger Casement, who was the British consul in Brazil, was an Irish human rights activist. Many archives of these communities are in England, Ireland, France, or in the United States. It is not easy to access these archives, and it is expensive. We are glad that we arrived at an agreement with the institutions of the archives so we could put the images in the film. I was privileged to access this information, but the communities do not have this access, even though these are their memories.

Then we started to retrace the journey of the two boys between London and Iquitos. When I travelled to Iquitos and the Putumayo and Igara Paraná rivers, the images of the present started to enter in this investigation. It began with archive images, but then it was research, editing, and shooting all in parallel. We edited for two years and a half. I started to shoot with a Super 8 camera in black and white because I wanted to follow this transmission flow between the archive and the people. For that I wanted a temporal image, about which you don't know whether it is past or present. You need to get in touch with different temporalities.

So the Super 8 appeared like a snake of connection. When I was editing, I was interested in these glimpses of memory, because the experience of memory is not linear but more like flashes. You are trying to see something, and then it disappears.

AM: Like a dream-logic?

TFS: I struggle with this idea of dreaming, or I call it day-dreaming. I try to draw a clear line, because for many Indigenous communities, dreaming is a practical tool. It happens, like you dream that you need to go to hunt in this place. I find it exciting that you can dream answers for your life in a practical way, and that you can receive wisdom like that. I don't want to appropriate this use of dreams, because I do not dream in that way. But I see that these images are my way to make it visible. It is in this editing dialectic between the present, their archive, what is dream or fact. I think this is the human experience of remembering. It is fragmented and nothing is certain.

LR: It is impressive how you take the materiality of film into this whole process. It is not just a thing that you expose your images in and then say goodbye. The film is not just something to carry the image, but it is made visible. We see the splices, the perforations, the colours as a feature of the film itself. Why did you engage with film in this way?

TFS: I am an artist who wants to experiment with light and materiality. For me, the reality of the film is a medium. It is an excellent medium to express all these ideas that I have about memory and transmission. How can the film capture the light that the bodies emanate? How can film capture the auras? When I was thinking about transmission, about the force of these spectres, it was natural to give the movie this materiality. I wanted the approach to this story to be intimate and for me, intimacy involves the body. Much of the Super 8 footage was developed by ourselves or in homemade laboratories in Iquitos, which was the capital of the rubber trade. And this is a symbolic act, to develop with the same water a hundred years later. It was important to fill the film with the force of this territory.

LR: I see, it is a record not only of the past, but also of your present experience. Did you treat the sound in a similar way?

TFS: Yes. We had the French sound artist Félix Blume with us, a wonderful sound seeker. We were interested in capturing the sound of the animals, insects, the atmosphere of life. For example, in Puerto Arica, we heard a monkey every morning. A spectral sound. We all thought that we need to record this. And Félix took a boat to other islands to record these monkeys. It is similar to what is going on in the archives with the images: because what you see is not what is going on. These are propaganda images, you need to imagine more than what you are seeing. The idea was similar in sound: we need to hear other beings living in the forest and also the idea of metamorphosis. We could not do a sound design that jumped quickly between past and present. We needed something that would join the past and present in certain moments, that was the natural sounds and the animals.

LR: The sound creates a sense of continuity. And it is a resistance countering the silence in the images. It brings up the disorderly, the natural, whereas the picture is always in order. So the sound created the organic world that was lived in by Omarino, Aredomi and their community.

TFS: I have another story on hearing more than what you see. We used microphones that we put in the water because we wanted to hear the dolphins. And we used these sounds in moments when we wanted to create something strange. You can hear the dolphin in the middle of the forest. We made such transgressions because we were not seeking for the natural, but the spectral reconstruction of the atmosphere. Repetition is also an important element in the film because we have only three or four photos of Omarino and Aredomi. So we need to repeat the images a lot to

create an answer to this question: what does this photo want to tell me? It is like a recurring dream.

LR: A person who can speak to spirits compares the past to a basket that is contained. "It's not that we do not want to open it, but we lack the word to close it again." I think that really sums up your film: when we look at the past, we also need to find a way to deal with it. I feel that your film is an offer of how to deal with the past. It is not conclusive, but maybe there is no conclusive way to deal with it.

TFS: I read somewhere that this desire to know is a very occidental way to understand the world. For many communities, it is not like that. When we put our hands in some stories, we deal with the past, with pain, many questions that were not closed. We open that and often we do not find a way to deal with this and leave it open. For me, that is the idea of the limit. I learned this from the communities and it is something that transformed the film. We cannot open this basket, which contains a lot of good memories and very painful memories. When you open it there are all these energies, all these stories that come out. For the communities in the Amazon, the dead are among them. You can hear and see them, you can even have encounters with them. They said that the dead do not want us to talk about this pain. This point is important to respect now. So we decided to put this closure into the film, the decision not to research any more.

LR: Tatiana, thank you very much for revisiting all the memories of working on the film. It is impressive.