

Intimate Enemies: Violence and Reconciliation in Peru **by Kimberly Theidon**

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Peru has been forever changed by the violence that swept its countryside during a civil war that began in 1980 and slowly ground to a halt in the 1990s after claiming nearly 70,000 lives. Kimberly Theidon, a Harvard anthropologist, has been studying the legacies of the violence for more years than the violence itself lasted. The fruit of that long study is a stunning new work of scholarship. Scholars of Peru, transitional justice, post-conflict societies, and medical anthropology will find much to admire in this book and will be forced to rethink some of the dominant paradigms in these fields.

Theidon does invaluable work here in capturing the ways in which those affected by the violence talk about the physical and psychological legacies of the violence. This continues work she began in a previous book, published in Spanish and much better known inside Peru than elsewhere, which detailed “the milk of sorrow”, an ailment afflicting women subjected to sexual violence during the armed conflict. That work inspired an award-winning film by Peruvian director Claudia Llosa. In her most recent book, Theidon again deploys her skills as a medical anthropologist with a keen ear for the ways women in these affected communities make sense of their realities and grapple with the fear and violence of the recent past. When these women spoke of *llakis* (painful memories that overwhelm one physically), of the danger of blindness from crying too much, or of passing on to their children the anxiety of living through the *sasachakuy tiempo* (literally, the difficult time), Theidon listened carefully. She resists the temptation to lump these forms of suffering into one shapeless category of “trauma”, which she notes has become a hegemonic concept, one that cruelly homogenizes the actual lived experiences of human beings.

In addition to understanding the medical or biological effects of violence on individuals, Theidon also explores how these villagers learn to co-exist with those they so recently considered enemies. In these villages, there is a potentially volatile mix of former rebels and their sympathizers, former military personnel, widows and orphans. Rather than being caught in the cross-fire between insurgents and government forces, it was within these communities themselves that people chose sides and now must come

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to terms with living alongside one another. Of particular interest to scholars of transitional justice will be the sections dealing with how communities that largely rejected the Shining Path allowed some former rebels to return to or join their villages if they expressed regret, submitted to physical punishment, and participated in communal institutions like the *rondas campesinas* (village patrol groups). Though Peru held a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, it is in the “micropolitics of reconciliation” in small communities across rural Peru that the real work of reconciliation is being done. Though the results certainly do not satisfy everyone, and the anxiety and resentments remain, revenge killings are virtually unheard of.

The construction of memory and history is a major theme here, but Theidon’s approach challenges many of the assumptions scholars of transitional justice often make. The Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been celebrated for its bold mandate and respected final report, and for calling for prosecutions. Theidon herself worked with the Commission at times, but she sees clearly how its work gave communities many incentives to construct a history for themselves that suppressed the complexity of the truth, silenced some (often female) voices, and sought to represent those communities as populated only by innocent victims. Because the Peruvian state has tied many reconstruction benefits, from monetary reparations to access to mental health, to the question of innocence, the transitional justice agenda has made “truth” more elusive. And as testimony-takers deployed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission heard again and again, those exhausted and scarred by the years of violence and its aftermath often simply wanted to forget.

Intimate Enemies is at times a troubling read, both for its unflinching attention to suffering and its tendency to sow doubt over established wisdoms. The disquiet it provokes is tempered by Theidon’s excellent writing, her ability to allow the voices of the people she is writing about to come through loudly and clearly, and the sense of solidarity her brand of engaged, participatory anthropology embraces.