

Why Do People Kill? Why Do They Stop?

A Review of *Intimate Enemies: Violence and Reconciliation in Peru*

By Kimberly Theidon; University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014

Mira Vale¹ · Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good¹

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Why do people kill? How do they kill? Why do they stop killing? How does social repair emerge following decades of people committing “lethal acts of violence against individuals with whom they have lived for years?” (xii). Kimberly Theidon’s *Intimate Enemies* addresses these questions in her highly praised, vivid, and dense ethnography on decades-long fratricidal armed conflict in Peru.

The widely expanded, English language update to Theidon’s 2004 *Entre Próximos, Intimate Enemies* brings readers through the murky aftermath of the *sasachakuy tiempo*, Peru’s “difficult time.” The product of Theidon’s extensive ethnographic research in the 1990s and 2000s, this book takes as its subject the post-conflict lived experience of Quechua-speaking peasants in Peru’s Ayacucho region, the cradle of Peru’s bloody and protracted civil war.

Fought ostensibly by government armed forces and the Maoist revolutionary group *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path), the multi-decade conflict swept up rural peasants as conscripted combatants and collateral damage. The Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (PTRC)—formed as the conflict waned at the turn of the twenty-first century—estimated in 2003 a total of nearly 70,000 fatalities, twice as many deaths as had been previously reported. Most of the conflict’s victims were rural, Quechua-speaking peasants. Yet notably, only about half of deaths were perpetrated by guerrilla forces; there was also wide civilian participation in the violence. Mindful of the narratives and logics imposed by Peru’s TRC in pursuit of its titular goals, Theidon focuses her post-conflict study on narratives from peasants themselves. Particularly in the latter half of her book, Theidon explores the complexity of violence’s aftermath in two disparate regions of Ayacucho. The first,

✉ Mira Vale
mira_vale@hms.harvard.edu

¹ Department of Global Health and Social Medicine, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA

a group of Northern communities that generally opposed *Sendero's* efforts, suffered nonetheless at the hands of state military forces in search of *terruco* sympathizers. The second, Southern communities home to much more endogenous *Sendero* partisanship, endured internecine violence across hyper-local split allegiances. Theidon's detailed ethnographic insights sketch the prevailing ambivalence her interlocutors felt as the conflict ended, wading through cloudy truth toward uneasy reconciliation.

One of the most curious features of the *sasachakuy tiempo*—and most troubling for its scholars—was that the conflict pitted long-time acquaintances, neighbors, and even family members against one another. Following the conflict's conclusion, neighbors who had murdered, raped, and tortured each other were expected to carry on living together, united by their attempts to forget. The book's most valuable contribution to post-conflict studies is Theidon's documentation of these so-called "intimate enemies." Under the pall of resolution cast by the PTRC's final report, the striking proximity of survivors to those who harmed them produces a remarkable politics of forgetting.

Theidon's analysis compels readers to consider parallel examples. Similar complications of proximate living spaces, socially embedded violence, and multilateral pressures for silence characterize sexual assault on Western college campuses. Theidon's framework proves similarly useful for understanding state-sponsored violence. The legacy of suffering portrayed in Robert Lemelson's (2009) documentary "40 Years of Silence," for example, demonstrates the persistence of proximate reminders of the 1965 killings in Indonesia. These themes also appear in *Why Did They Kill* (Hinton 2004) and in essays in *Genocide and Mass Violence* (Hinton and Hinton 2015). Social repair becomes a compound problem as survivors cope with relational and physical proximity to intimate assailants and navigate contradictory top-down injunctions to be silent, to speak truth, to forget.

A related intricacy Theidon addresses is the notion of trauma. In line with a growing literature from psychological anthropology, Theidon's close look at lingering post-conflict sentiments and struggles of Ayacucho residents contests a universal understanding of trauma. These rich data allow Theidon to characterize PTSD as an imported diagnosis, a globalized concept that eclipses local variation. Importantly, Theidon clarifies that even Peruvian articulations of trauma fail to encapsulate rural peasants' experiences. The notion of *estar traumado*, promoted by Peruvian NGOs, is a similar import, a label applied by the PTRC but ill-suited to the aftereffects and lived realities of Ayacucho residents. Alongside the regionally specific experiences of trauma, Theidon also characterizes trauma's gendered articulation. Theidon explains that women's testimony is difficult to obtain because it is frequently offered in the plural. Women tend to elaborate on the effects of violence at family and community levels and are comparatively reticent to discuss traumatic events they personally experienced. Theidon's gender analysis demonstrates a critical methodological approach worthy of modeling in ethnographic conflict studies.

A stunning read for the density of its ethnographic detail and the magnitude of violence it recounts, *Intimate Enemies* is rich with interpretations relevant to conflict and peace studies, medical and psychological anthropology, and Latin American

studies. It is opportune that *Intimate Enemies* is now in paperback and thus more accessible for academic courses. In a geopolitical moment when fratricidal conflicts are rife, Theidon brings to her readers valuable insights into violence's psychology and the fraught art of living in its aftermath.

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