



Intimate Enemies. Violence and Reconciliation in Peru

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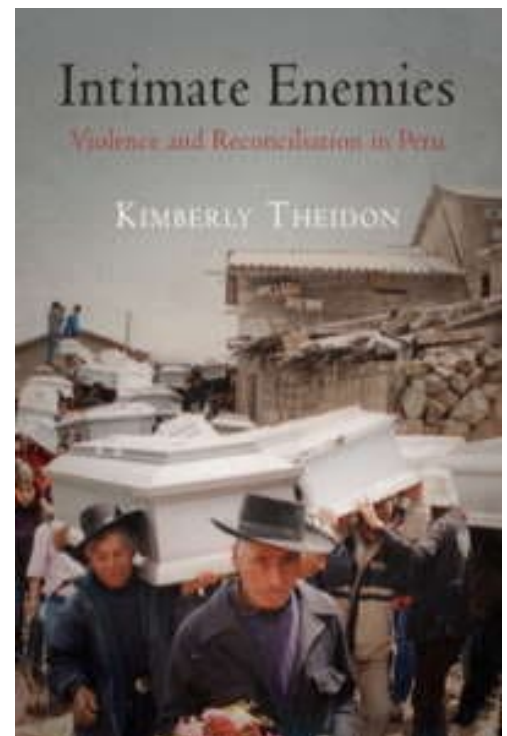


Kimberly Theidon illuminates both the horrific and beautiful complexities of post-conflict reconstruction and transitional justice as it unfolds on the ground via her ethnography, [*Intimate Enemies: Violence and Reconciliation in Peru*](#). Throughout the narrative, Theidon continually asks how individuals and communities survived – and continue to survive – the violence of the internal armed conflict described in Quechua as the *sasachakuy tiempo*, or difficult time. Drawing on data gathered from 1995 to 2003, Theidon's *Intimate Enemies* offers a critical analysis of post-conflict reconstruction and political violence presented as a complex web of intertwined theoretical lenses, including medical anthropology, psychology and trauma, religion, gender-based violence, politics and law, and transitional justice vis-à-vis reconciliation and memory. Unlike most studies that select a specific frame through which to analyse their work, Theidon challenges popular



theoretical dichotomies by revealing the intricate interlocking parts that constitute Peru's political violence and survivor responses. Organised thematically, *Intimate Enemies* has four non-chronological sections - each comprised of several chapters - allowing those interested in particular aspects of reconstruction and violence to locate key information easily.

At the start, Theidon not only provides foundational historical and political information about her regional field site of the Andes, but follows researchers such as Haraway (1988) by describing her situated knowledge. When asking people to share their deeply-personal experiences of gross human rights violations, Theidon explains that "the possibility of distance and impartiality must be surrendered" (p.12) as the anthropologist cannot exist as a detached observer with any success. Through unabashedly acknowledging her positionality, ethics, and missteps, she paints a realistic picture of the difficulties and challenges of ethnographic research while building both professional and personal rapport with the reader.



The first section, *The Difficult Time*, problematises the use of psychological frameworks that homogenise culturally-specific psychological, spiritual, and social suffering into broad generalisations of 'trauma'. Theidon surpasses the classic West-versus-Rest dialogue to analyse how individuals use the top-down language of trauma to legitimise their experiences, communicate material needs, and express continued violence.

Through a series of vignettes, the relationship between memory, suffering of the mind, and suffering of the body is carefully laid bare as physical ailments are described in connection to the suffering felt.



Experiences such as irritation of the heart are reminiscent of the Guatemalan desire for *para sentir bien en el corazón* (to feel good in the heart) (Sanford 2003) and shed light onto the nuanced experiences of those who live through mass violence while contributing to theoretical underpinnings in medical anthropology and anthropologies of memory, reconciliation, and violence. With this discussion, Theidon explores what it means to reconstruct a sense of humanity and segways into relevant findings concerning the role of religion in both violence and reconstruction. While religion can condemn or contribute to violence and unite or divide peoples, Theidon also illustrates how religion can sometimes complement the often inadequate forms of secular justice. Overall, *The Difficult Time* provides a complex and engaging introduction to ethnography. From a teaching standpoint, this section pairs well with Merry's (2006) *Human Rights and Gender Violence* discussion of transnational modernity, which provides a top-down perspective of 'traditional' aspects of culture while Theidon establishes the relevance, nuance, and importance of the very cultural facets that can come under international critique.

Section two, *Common Sense, Gender, and War*, discusses the effects of widespread rape, proliferation of illegitimate children, increased widowhood, the coupling of older women with younger men, and the prevalence of families left without male heads of household in war-affected Peru. Theidon relays that, "in the thick description women provided, they narrated a broader set of truths about systemic injustice, the gross violations of their socioeconomic rights, and the futility of seeking justice from the legal systems that operated nationally and locally" (p.108).

Through observing two focus groups facilitated by the Peru Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Theidon heavily critiques transitional justice and post-conflict reconstruction frameworks that essentialise the female experience to that of rape and victimhood.

Transitional justice mechanisms often omit both the resiliency of the survivors of



sexual violence and the socioeconomic marginalisation of war widows. An evaluation of transitional justice theory questions the dynamics of remembering and forgetting and challenges the historical documentation of the female experience in times of political violence. In testimonies of violent rape and coerced sexual acts, women emphasised how they protected their children, provided for their families, and fought. Theidon's work reveals resilience and warriorhood that surpasses stale conversations that often minimise female agency in wartime. She questions why transitional justice practitioners and scholars of mass violence do not further explore the words of Señora Edilberta Chocña Sanchez: "Oh, such courage! These women defended themselves with so much courage" (p.142).



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Following from this, sections three and four, *Looking North* and *Looking South*, complement each other by analysing division and reintegration of societies, the politics of identity, and the unmaking of violence in the two regions. In an endeavour to address a critical gap in post-conflict and transitional justice studies, Theidon moves beyond the national and transnational debates concerning



justice, reconciliation, and accountability, to conduct an ethnographic examination of these concepts put into practice at the local and regional level. *Intimate Enemies* provides insight into community-level reconstruction strategies including political negotiations, religion-inspired wrath and forgiveness, punitive measures, and reconciling and rationalising one's own actions with oneself. This micro-level ethnographic analysis does not focus on specific government-driven mechanisms, but instead examines local goals, initiatives, and community justice. The latter section, *Looking South*, continues these analyses and reveals alternative perspectives from communities that served as the base for the rebel movement; it was an area in which few were able to claim freedom from guilt. Rather than dichotomous and rigid categories of insurgent, soldier, or civilian; of human or not-human; or of victim or perpetrator, Theidon uncovers the fluid nature of such ascriptions, a factor that certainly supports critical transitional justice studies challenging the binaries of retribution vs. reconciliation, universal vs. particular, conflict vs. post-conflict, and remembering vs. forgetting. Choices made by the Peruvian government regarding reconstruction and the complicated local responses to that reconstruction are unpacked.

Upon the completion of *Looking South*, the reader is left without a reflective conclusion to remind the audience of the interconnectedness between the topics and nodes of the research. Instead, Theidon offers a brief note of encouragement, reminding everyone that when studying violence, one also bears witness to resiliency that exceeds survival.

While the text reads much like an ethnographic experience with information overlapping and intersecting, there are moments when the structure of the book may require intermittent readers to spend time reorienting themselves – an effort that would be aided by the inclusion of a more comprehensive glossary.

Despite these stylistic critiques, *Intimate Enemies: Violence and Reconciliation in Peru* provides invaluable ethnographic information for both theory and practice



regarding political violence. The writing style easily lends itself to teaching and, for those unfamiliar with ethnographic fieldwork, the non-linear organisation reflects the nature of such work, in which myriad variables and theories ebb and flow throughout the research process. Using a multi-pronged theoretical examination, Theidon masterfully presents a cohesive, informative, and nuanced analysis of reconstruction while simultaneously giving homage to the essence of the human spirit.

References

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