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Disillusion, embodiment and violent reconciliations: Engaged anthropology on Rwanda, El Salvador, and Peru

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Genocide Lives in Us: Women, Memory, and Silence in Rwanda

Jennie E. Burnet (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012)

Everyday Revolutionaries: Gender, Violence, and Disillusionment in Postwar El Salvador

Irina Carlota Silber (New York: Rutgers University Press, 2011)

Intimate Enemies: Violence and Reconciliation in Peru

Kimberly Theidon (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013)

These are three exceptional ethnographies of death and survival that can be grouped together under the umbrella of postconflict studies, a thematic focus that has received considerable attention in anthropology in recent years. As a matter of fact, much recent ethnographic research on war has actually been carried out in the immediate or more distant aftermaths of war rather than at the heights of war, even when the research focus on war itself. The great bulk of research for the three books under review was also carried out in the aftermaths of wars. Questions of humanity linger in all three books. They all focus, in one way or another, on the complex interplay of wartime legacies, peacetime developments, and social repair. They all lay emphasis on the war-peace continuum of violence, both direct and structural, both physical and discursive. “Wars are fought,” as Kimberly Theidon tells the reader. “They are also told, and the telling is always steeped in relations of power” (p. 6).

Jennie E. Burnet’s *Genocide Lives in Us* delineates how Rwandan women seek reconciliation as they cope with a recent but extremely violent past, and remake their lives amidst extraordinary devastation and authoritarian governance in postgenocide Rwanda. She warns the reader of heart-breaking stories that may undermine the reader’s faith in humanity. Despite her warning, humanity can repeatedly be found in the remarkable resilience of the women who tell these very stories. The research was made extraordinarily complex because

of the authoritarian situation of constant and all-encompassing state surveillance in Rwanda. It became necessary for Burnet to do more than respect the silences of her informants, she had to listen to these silences meticulously as well. In a fascinating description of her field methods, Burnet outlines this intersubjective learning process of how to listen to silence.

Turning now to Latin America, Irina Carlota Silber's *Everyday Revolutionaries* is a multi-sited and transnational as well as longitudinal account of the legacies of the war in El Salvador as experienced by various activists and agents of development and democratization. She delineates, to use her own words, "the *entangled aftermaths* of war and displacement" that produce "postwar deception and disillusionment" (p.10). Methodologically, she relates this focus to her changing role as a fieldworking anthropologist, or what she calls the performative aspects of doing fieldwork: "For the anthropologist is also entangled" (p. 19). This, she notes, is not to be read as a confession but rather as an ambition to extend a conversation on methodology.

Lastly, Kimberly Theidon, in *Intimate Enemies*, invites the reader to follow her fieldwork and her Peruvian informants as they rebuild individual and collective existence in the aftermath of their civil war. One's presence, one's speech, Theidon suggests, elide neutrality. An anthropologist hears stories of war and violence, and can do nothing but choose a side or have a side chosen for her, she argues. In being equally honest and inviting about the actual fieldwork process, in this sense Theidon's *Intimate Enemies* does not differ from the two other books. All three books are profoundly personal and existential accounts of the anthropological encounter. As all three books illustrate, here is perhaps only another application of the old anthropological chant of "participant observation" that, nevertheless, needs to be re-constructed in the context of war and violent conflict.

Now, it would be impossible for me to summarize the three books in a fair way in this short review, yet there are some common themes. Integral to the argument in all three books is a well-placed gender perspective which the authors frame in terms of global politics, local cosmologies, and, to speak with Theidon, "local biologies" (p. 37). All three books address, in one way or the other, the theme of embodiment. So when Burnet innovatively focuses on Rwandan silences and stories untold, and how people mourn in silence and how silence actually is amplified, Theidon quotes an informant who treats ulcers in Peru: "Everyone has them." Theidon then adds that silence "has been imposed and there are secrets that eat away at

a person from the inside out” (p. 364). But in situations of “too much memory” people were also in search for strategies and practices to forget, whereby they could agree to bury things “between” them (p. 33, 269). In my own work in war-torn Uganda, I sometimes heard informants talk about the importance to be able “feel free, not to think too much” and to find ways to “swallow” sorrow and bitterness physically as well as ritually. More as a parallel than a contrast to these examples, Burnet’s female informants in Rwanda were exercising “their agency by controlling when, how, and to whom to tell their stories,” something that “restored the dignity stolen from them” (p. 86). The women in Rwanda were also looking for ways and strategies that would assist them to avoid remembering the past. By way of such examples, Burnet and Theidon join a growing anthropological critique of the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder paradigm as reductionist, mechanistic, and a model which removes local agency and local histories from the equation.

To furthermore compare the three books, Silber’s words in *Everyday Revolutionaries* are illustrative: to a certain extent they all exemplify a growing trend of “activist-inspired anthropology rooted in the *everyday* nature of witnessing, of being present to testimony, of engaged listening” (p. 159). More, in constructive, yet quite different ways, the three books unsettle the line that scholars tend to draw between war and peace. So if Burnet’s book on Rwanda includes the words “memory” and “silence” in the subtitle, Silber uses the terms “disillusionment” and “postwar” in the subtitle to her award winning book on El Salvador. For Peru, Theidon offers a powerful title, *Intimate Enemies*, which again is a clear indication of the common focus of all three books, and Theidon’s subtitle proceeds to unsettle another dichotomy that we need always to problematize and deconstruct in our effort to contextualize war and postwar, namely that of “violence” versus “reconciliation.” The legacies and manifestations of violence are present in the reconciliatory efforts of Theidon’s postwar Peruvian informants, but also in the memories and active silences of Burnet’s Rwandan women informants as well as in the disillusionments of Silber’s Salvadoran female political activist informants. Silber refers to fellow anthropologists Carolyn Nordstrom and Anna Tsing: while peace often debuts before war ends, rather than being something that suddenly appears through the signing of accords, “habits” of war always “linger.” And potential possibilities for a better future also harbor “friction” of global interconnectedness (p. 93). Such legacies are illustrated by Burnet’s poetic and haunting title, smartly borrowed from a statement of an informant, *Genocide Lives in Us*. Theidon puts words to an insight she shares with Burnet and Silber: “there is no ‘observation’ when people are at war and you arrive

asking them about it. You are, whether you wish to be or not, a participant. When terror weaves its way through a community, words are no longer mere information” (p. 12).

As Richard Fardon (1990) once pointed out, there is a potential problem with too much of an interest among anthropologists in regional studies at the cost of global and thematic comparison. When anthropologists enter regional fields that have been established and mapped by previous generations of anthropologists, such as Africa, Central America or South America, in their analyses they obviously cross-reference previous regionally specific scholars and in doing so they may unintentionally regionalize theorization as well, which then is at risk of becoming parochial. In other words, a regional focus may limit anthropologists theoretically because too much of a regionalizing of theory and analytical concepts may not assist scholars in generating an overarching body of theory. It would therefore be a pity if any of these three books did not reach a broader readership, transcending their regional focuses. They all have important stories to tell of general interest in anthropology; theoretically, thematically as well as methodologically. For example, as I read Theidon’s stories of the Shining Path (*Sendero Luminoso*) guerrillas in Peru, over and over again I note similarities and parallels with my own experience of working with a focus on the Lord’s Resistance Army rebels in Uganda, which encourage me to revisit my notebooks and rethink my own analyses. Such a reading experience is truly inspiring.

On the other hand, my Africanist bias may also be a problem. Having worked in neighboring Uganda for many years, I found Burnet’s book on Rwanda to be exemplary when it comes to contextualizing and historicizing the argument and analytical key concepts as well as the postgenocide situation that Burnet focuses on. In the introduction she positions her fieldwork and the book’s main argument pedagogically in relation to Rwanda’s recent history. Turning to the Americas, and as I am not that familiar with the history of Central and South America, I sometimes felt that Silber’s “broad strokes of history for those unfamiliar with El Salvador” were not enough to settle my curiosity for the war context in El Salvador, yet I sympathize with Silber’s ambition to rather open up “a window into postwar lives by rooting them in localized memories of war” (p. 40). For the anthropologist, it is always an act of balancing the past with the present, while also outlining actual hopes and anguishes for the future. In doing this, Silber focuses on the agency of “becoming or ‘being revolutionary’” (p. 42) and how these revolutionaries eventually became “postwar development beneficiaries” (p. 25). So even if I sometimes had more of a problem in following the context of the actual war in El

Salvador that Silber's stories revolve around than I had with Burnet's genocide story on Rwanda, I also need to be honest: perhaps my familiarity with the literature on Rwanda makes me a biased reader? I suspect that this may actually be the case, and Silber's stories of postwar frustration and legacies of disillusionment are anyway very important and instructive also for me, not least because I work in a different part of the world. Silber's take on activists and NGOs is especially memorable. As her ethnography details, a focus on NGOs should not be on the all-too-common failures in terms of good or bad NGOs but rather in terms of the constant negotiations of meanings and practices among activists and practitioners, and more so in terms of negotiations between the NGOs and their constituencies. Postwar governmentality, Silber notes, is about the control of time. Anyone who has attended NGO meetings can attest to this as well as to the "lies of democracy" (p. 5) so acutely present in times of transition from war to peace.

And even if the armed conflict in Peru to some extent remains a riddle after reading Theidon's book, I learnt a great deal about the world-infamous yet elusive Shining Path insurgency. Again with reference to the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda (and beyond), I certainly now how important it is to nuance and anthropologize the black and white global narratives of the world's most infamous rebel groups. God forbid that Invisible Children Inc., the celebrity organization behind the *KONY 2012* online film on Uganda's rebels that went viral, would make a film on the Shining Path as well. Theidon's book is mandatory reading for anyone who as much as want to mention the name "Shining Path." With its more than 400 pages, it is indeed an exceptionally rich and thick account. One important lesson from Theidon's book is that if people are to understand anything about the Shining Path and the present situation in postwar Peru, they need to understand the motivations of some key players, including victims of war and violence of course, but they also need to listen to the unsettling stories of the perpetrators themselves, including members of the Shining Path. This combination is exactly what Theidon is offering to the reader. In the Andean context, she explains, the status of human being is a moral quality that is acquired, and it may be lost. In a most tactful way, Theidon contextualizes and describes such processes of gain and loss without denying the humanity of the perpetrators (or of the victims for that matter). It is both powerful and painful reading. And it is important. As anthropologists, I believe we are to try to understand the reasoning and humanity of our informants, whoever these informants are. One reviewer of my own work on Uganda was upset because apparently I made the perpetrators seem too human. I was "overhumanizing" the Lord's Resistance Army rebels. Even if framed as a strong

criticism, I chose to regard the overhumanizing aspect, whatever this term was supposed to mean, as an anthropological achievement. In a similar yet very different way, Silber skilfully uncovers the humanness in situations of postwar disillusionments in El Salvador and beyond. “Reconciliation,” she concludes as she accounts also for the stories of the agents of violence (e.g., guerrillas, rebels, perpetrators and thus not only victims in the one-dimensional sense of the word), “takes part in departures and in making [oneself] anew rather than in searching for truth or justice” (p. 190). But even to seek only the possibilities of *coexistence* can in many contexts be an ambitious goal indeed, notes Theidon. And in Rwanda, as added by Burnet, *cohabitation* remains a matter of necessity. But even as the legacies of civil war and terror are still unfolding more than fifteen years into El Salvador’s transition to peace, and as the global war on terror foster new imaginations of terrorist revolutionaries all over the world, Silber concludes her truly longitudinal and transnational anthropological account with a return to those small stories of wartime hope that may, for example, make up “an astronaut-boy’s dreams” (p. 201).

All three books struggle with detail and context, offering, as Don Handelman puts it in a defense of the anthropological monograph as an academic and scientific genre, a “powerful sense of discovery” yet “with the sense of uncertainty lingering, troubling, perhaps always eluding any finality of closure” (Handelman 2009: 219). If Burnet’s book is exemplary in presenting such a clear structuring of the argument as it progresses from chapter to chapter, Theidon adds another quality that I am equally sympathetic to. “This was not a simple story to follow,” she notes, and thus she wants her book to be faithful to the way she experienced the research (p. 22). But also social coexistence and reconciliation may take turns that elude the categories of the observing outsider. “If you are confused,” she tells her reader, “that is precisely the point. Ambiguity is what allowed this to work” (p. 260).

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