

Short Communication

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Narratives, Resilience and Violence in Peruvian Amazonia: The Huallaga Valley, 1980-2015

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Taking as its geographical frame of reference the war-torn Huallaga Valley of the Peruvian Amazon – an epicenter for leftist rebels *Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru* (MRTA), and *Sendero Luminoso* (SL) and a booming shadow economy based on the extraction and circulation of cocaine, oil and fine timbers--my current research is dedicated to broadening the postcolonial theoretical frameworks for contemporary understandings of *indigenous* narratives and legal pluralism in the wake of conflict. I provide novel insight into the complex relationships with the affective dispositions of those caught up in civil war, and post-conflict violence. In this respect, my research illuminates recent efforts at decolonizing hegemonic forms of Occidental jurisprudence, while generating novel ways to destabilize anthropological iterations of Amazonia, and the regnant theoretical dominance of perspectivism that silences indigenous voice, political economy and history.

Violent events trigger distinctive narrative modes, allowing people to re-cast chaotic experiences into causal stories in order to make them sensible, render them safe, or in some cases, imprint memories that traumatize, and in so doing restrain human well-being. By mapping the role narrative's play in the affective dispositions of those individuals drawn into the low-intensity warfare in Peru's Huallaga Valley (1980-present), my work explores the dual impulses of engagement and disruptive interruptions underwriting the indeterminacy and emotional volatility associated with violent encounters characterizing the postcolonial expansions of the neoliberal Peruvian state apparatuses. Emphasizing emotional dispositions through study of the speech acts of the narratives elucidates how the mobilization of violence blurs and complicates the formal lines ostensibly dividing state and non-state actors, regulates temporality, instantiates law, and underscores the mutually constitutive nature of postcolonial violence.

During the height of the bloodshed, communal well being suffered, malnutrition intensified, and ultimately the sense of caring and *communitas* became restricted. Thick narrative descriptions I have collected from the war-ravaged Huallaga Valley transmit the seemingly ineffable tragedies deeply embodied in the lives of those who suffered. Some fled to illicit forest encampments located deep in the jungle, or to the culturally inhospitable environs of coastal cities like Trujillo, or Lima. Flight and insecurity punctuate the narrative accounts of many, such as Eduardo, a 57-year-old coca-grower (*cocalero*) caught up in the throes of the conflict.

"I fled in the darkness of the night. I knew when I would leave. The *verde luna* (rising moon) was the path of freedom from the craziness of the 'armed struggle' (AKA *la lucha armada*). I fled during the *verde luna* with a small amount of money I had saved as a *cocalero*. My legs followed the path (*sendero*) to my cousin's homestead. He gave me shelter and arranged for my travel to Trujillo. *Pucha!* When I arrived [in Trujillo] that's when the fear gripped me. Was I a coward (*cobarde*)? Would my family suffer from my disappearance? Would the police capture me (*chaparme*)? Was I guilty for refusing to act as a *sopolón* [snitch] for the army? Words kill here."

In conveying the ambiguity and profound dominance of fear in the Huallaga Valley, personal accounts such as Eduardo's reveals the salience of violence in configuring human experience, and perhaps most importantly illuminate the difficult ethical problems posed by its very representation, not to mention comprehension and calls for intervention or social support. This is poignantly brought home in the narrative of María Navidad, who like Eduardo had to flee the insecurity of the endemic violence engulfing her rural community.

María Navidad: "I left with my family from this town when I was 14. It was when my father saw the first of what were to become many bloated, lifeless bodies floating down the [Huallaga] River. We were all scarred that first night... so many people crying. My sisters and I couldn't go to the boat landing (*el puerto*) to see the commotion. My mother stayed with us. Only the men went with their flashlights. They tried to rescue (*rescatar*) a corpse that had been lodged in a broken tree limb stuck in the turbid river. The Mayor [*Alcalde*] was informed. Then the Military arrived. Someone shot guns in the air... Boom. Boom. Boom. Silence. Mama was crying, and so too was Florinda [younger sister]. We waited by the glow of the *lamparin* [kerosene lamp] for a half an hour – but it seemed like hours. Papa and Roener [older brother] returned. Immediately we could tell by the sound of their rubber boots who it was – they weren't like the noise of the soldier's army boots, or the rubber ones worn by the *cumpas* (rebels). Papa looked ill. I remember Roener saying that the army believed that *el pueblo* (the town's residents) were now collaborating with the '*terrucos*' (terrorists). The next morning we all left here to live deep in the forest (*al centro*) where Papa's brother's families had their agricultural plots (*chacras*). There we lived for nearly 2 years. I didn't return to town until we felt safe. My mother always feared I would be forced to become a member [of the rebels] or that the soldiers would abuse me. Mama and I fought a lot in those days about this. Papa was the one in the end who said I could accompany him into town, telling my mother and my *Abuelita* (Grandma) we couldn't always be running like wild peccaries. We had done nothing wrong. We would be safe. He was right, but things had changed, and I always wonder if it was the town or me that transformed. Yes, things will never be the same."

Instead of simply rejecting the insights yielded from functional approaches to violence, my research contributes to demonstrating the complex, dynamic interplay between purposive action and mutuality in shaping the postcolonial ontological experiences and sensorial representations of violence among indigenous peoples of the Peruvian Amazon. Using narrative analysis to tease out a theoretical construct of violent mutuality challenges the dominant framework of understanding violence merely in terms of functional, purposive action. Epistemologically speaking the purposive action framework accentuates the effectual alleviation of problems, the deterrence of risk and wrathful revenge, while the notion of mutuality highlights loyalty (partial or otherwise) to a shared moral economy, the perpetuation of social solidarity and the maintenance of *comunidades*.

Postcolonial forms of resilience in the face of suffering from structural or intimate acts of violence are inscribed in the narrative accounts that reconstruct not only the physical ravages of conflict, but also salve the intensely embodied mental wounds that linger in scarred memories, and the frightful efforts to remember to forget. It is here that my research regarding grievous human rights abuses in zones of violence provides one of its most consequential contributions: recognition that reconciliation is by no means equivalent to local, indigenous notions of "justice" or customary forms of dispute resolution. Invariably some victims can be re-humanized by recounting their stories, even if they are narratives of inexorable suffering. Yet ethnography based on long-term fieldwork has persuasively provided a series of ruminations on the inevitable contradictions of Occidental post conflict reconciliation efforts, this is especially for those that implore victims who find comfort in silence to publically enunciate their stories of suffering to establish perpetrators.

Yet without reconstituting a moral community through consciously acknowledging the multiple socio-cultural contours shaping overlapping epistemologies of justice, freedom and communal wellbeing, efforts at lasting reconciliation will remain elusive. As my long time friend Ronaldo mentioned to me one steamy night during a round of drinking bottles of Pilsen beer: "we returned (to our homes) with heavy hearts, broken by war, by what we lost and fearful for what was yet to unfold." Like María Navidad, the damage had been done for Rolando, but he expressed in lengthy ruminations that while the future was unknown, he was more than willing to reengage in violent encounters to protect his kith and kin, a sentiment echoed by many of those I interviewed. Understanding that emotional dispositions are not simply a response to problems and the minimization of insecurity, but also embedded in notions of mutuality and the cultural politics of intimacy provides a much-needed counter-weight to the functional tendencies regnant in the field of human rights scholarship on the impact of endemic violence.

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