

Reseña / Review

John Gibler, *I Couldn't Even Imagine That They Would Kill Us: An Oral History of the Attacks against the Students of Ayotzínapa*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2017.

The Listening-Space-Turned Book

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John Gibler's most recent book *Una Historia Oral de la Infamia: Los Ataques contra los Normalistas de Ayotzínapa* is about to be published by City Lights in a translation into English by the author, under the title *I Couldn't Even Imagine That They Would Kill Us: An Oral History of the Attacks against the Students of Ayotzínapa*. Since its first publication in Mexico in 2016, the book has been translated into several languages, published in a variety of formats, published by different publishing houses and collectives throughout Latin America and Europe. A number of these editions changed the title, and some added a mixture of accompanying texts and materials. The English translation includes an extensive paratext: a foreword by Ariel Dorfman, a prologue, and an extensive epilogue written by the author, with visual materials consisting of maps of the Mexican state of Guerrero and surrounding regions including the city of Iguala, where the attacks took place. Those readers who turn to the book as an introduction to, or to follow up on, the events of the night of 26th

September 2014 in Iguala, will benefit greatly particularly from the information provided in the prologue and the epilogue. For others, like myself, the amount of guidance and framework provided by the material inserted *before* the main text may overcrowd a listening space these readers may wish to reserve for their interaction with the rich collection of narratives. This second type of reader might wish to read both prologue and epilogue *after* the oral history. In this way, the oral history takes precedence and is then enriched by the author's reflections on writing and poetics.

The actual text of the oral history of infamy is an intensely subtle composition. The writer draws on a wide repertoire of personal sensitivities, contextual knowledge, intellectual lucidity, analytical gradations, and wordsmithing, to turn the denunciation of the events of one night, into a shared space of resistance against the rule of contemporary totalitarianism. As in his previous books, Gibler takes a well-known, well-worked genre beyond and outside of what it is conventionally meant to say, communicate, or to convey. Thus, the (sometimes single-mindedly focused) chronicle develops an open horizon because of its encounter with the perseverance and generosity of resistance and rebellion in *Mexico Unconquered*, and the (easily prying or questioning) 'interview' turned into a mutual journey beyond the borders of the sayable in a conversation with Andrés Tzompaxtle. Now, oral history creates a composition of multiple voices amid pain and devastation, and a listening space that embraces the numbing violence and deafening noise.

The body of the text chronologically follows the events of the night of September 26, 2014 with accounts by the young survivors, and by others affected by the events in different ways, including; journalists, a teacher who accompanied the students, parents, and the coach of the youth football team that was also attacked. The book also contains an excerpt of an interview with a doctor who refused to help the persecuted students. To those who are willing to hear their stories, the testimonies of the students are a gift of aliveness, given generously in the face of a force bent on their destruction. The testimonies of some older adults—among them the football coach and the teacher—relay their excruciating experience of witnessing the young people they teach and care for shot at, beaten, terrorized, hunted, insulted, vilified, arrested, tortured, killed, forcibly disappeared. The testimonies are paced and arranged in such a way to highlight the poetics of a spoken, primarily oral language as it unfolds into its ability to acknowledge such horrors. Because this work is so honest and clear-sighted, it stands its ground against the spoken horrors conveyed in *Historia Oral de la Infamia*. The book is one of those rare publications that brings together

written and spoken words in concert with one another—a literary accomplishment seldom found in print, and one that harks back to the combination of poetic sensitivities and political lucidity in the late Carlos Montemayor's seminal novel on Guerrero, *Guerra en el paraíso* (1991).

In the prologue to the English edition, this sensitivity to the poetics of spoken language helps the reader with the—possibly challenging—process Gibler, describes as 'writing by listening.' He explains the process of creating the *Oral History* was guided by the Zapatista practice of listening. He then adapts his own practice as a writer to appeal to a wide audience. Gibler is a writer-listener who cares for his readers by clearing their field of attention of noise, and by holding the listening space. The reader-listeners then can accompany the author on his listening journey and can correlate that with what the oral history conveys. That journey leads into a listening space, created and held by the book's author, where the students of Ayotzinapa become teachers to the reader: they teach us how to live through horror without giving in to it. Their testimonies express clarity in the process of experiencing, lucidity in analysis and interpretation, and honesty in confronting the affective and emotional dimension of the violence they endured. Even when the students reconstructed the night in which they faced executioners, sent by people who felt entitled to wipe them off the face of the planet, they never lost the integrity of their personal narratives. This integrity is crucial to what Gibler calls the 'politics of listening', because integrity makes it possible to resonate with horror without giving in to it, as well as solidarity and friendship without absorbing them into one's own psyche. Without integrity, resonance is absorbed either into horror, or into a communized grief and pain; and in the absoluteness of either, resonance eventually turns into a barely audible and exhausted echo.

The details of the actual operation that took place on the night of September 26, 2014 emerge clearly from the testimonies of the students. From this material, Gibler carves out a lucid, detailed representation of one very concrete manifestation of totalitarian terror in the 21st century. In this instance, over the target of this terror was the alternative and often dissident world of the teacher training college in Ayotzinapa. Gibler lets us see—rather than dictating to the reader—exactly how on that specific occasion of totalitarian terror worked its way through the interconnected spatial, physical, ideological, affective, political, mediatic plains of social life. He even captures the mentality of its executioners in an interview with a medical doctor who, in a specific moment, refused to help the persecuted students, and who endorsed their

destruction, and facilitated the work of their destroyers. He articulates a 21st century version of the banalization of evil and thus lets us see that totalitarian terror and the banality of evil have made it into the 21st century, and that the defenders of Western ‘progress’ and their allies have managed to spread them to Mexico.

The title of the original publication in Spanish hints at the systemic character of the issues at stake here. *The Oral History of Infamy* alludes to Jorge Luis Borges’ *Historia Universal de la Infamia* which personalized and individualized infamy in its protagonists. In Gibler’s book, individuals are the executioners of systemic infamy. Therefore, they are to be held responsible. That consideration of the relationship between the specific and the systemic (as distinct to the universal) manifests itself in the appropriate attention to both, without positioning them against each other. Within the more specific realm, the disappearance of the 43 students is as important as the gun attacks on the students, the assassination of six people, the torture and killing of one student, and the anguish of family members of the 43.

Education is one of the areas which allows for the negotiation of the relationship between the systemic and the specific and has always been a primary target of those who wish to establish totalitarian rule. In the testimonies of the students and their parents, a plethora of information unfolds as to what education means to those who are usually excluded from it. The students and their parents speak of their hope for a way out of economic misery, of a thirst for adventure, of a determined desire for understanding, a pleasure in learning, a wild thirst for knowledge, of a strong sense of social responsibility and political commitment, of the refusal to separate knowledge and experience, and of the tremendous energy of young men entering adulthood—with everything that this implies. For those readers who have been around first-year students in other contexts, the mixture of confusion, excitement, and homesickness upon starting a new phase of young adult life may come as a powerful backdrop to the events. Gibler salvages this element that has often been moved into the background in examining the Iguala attacks. But it is in the context of the growing up of young adults that another dimension of the sheer cruelty of the attacks becomes apparent. That dimension includes attempts to domesticate the spirit of young people, to keep people with dissident knowledges out of the education system, to take possession of education as an indispensable instrument to destroy the spirit of youth and produce docile, subservient, uncritical younger generations.

When the systemic and the specific are placed in relation with each other, scale no longer makes sense. Thus, Gibler dispenses with categories such as scale as well as with its sonic equivalent, volume. Instead, he chooses intensity, resonance, integrity. The outcome is an extraordinary composition in the form of a book. Much more could be said about Gibler's book; about his work with masculinities, for example; about the notions and practices of traditional and relational autonomy which seem to be at work in the composition of the text; about the ways in which it goes against the grain of an *embourgeoisement* of solidarity activism. Readers of the English edition need to be aware that the title's shift of focus away from the collective dimension of the oral history onto the first personal pronoun, and its narrowing down of the systemic dimension of infamy of the attacks as an isolated event, is a distraction. Also, the paratext of the English edition may be helpful to some readers, but threatens to dilute the intensity and narrow the scope of the oral history. Considering Gibler's previous work and comparing the English edition to other editions published outside of Mexico, one wonders whether both the change in title and the decision to add the extensive paratext was Gibler's or the publishers', and the comparison suggests that the latter might be the case. The editors may have intended such preambles to fulfill a need to honor, in their entirety, the voices, sounds and resonances of this oral history of infamy. However, publishing a companion book, or making the additional materials available online, might have been a better way of providing additional information and context. That said, the listening space-turned-book is one that we all need to enter. We need to listen to the oral history, with integrity and the disposition to resonate, and with a sensitivity for, and responsiveness to, all the voices and the ways of listening Gibler has integrated into his composition. Readers will leave that listening space changed, with more knowledge and certainty about how to fight totalitarian powers that are once again invading so many worlds.