

Review / Reseña

Agüero, José Carlos. *The Surrendered: Reflections by a Son of Shining Path*. Edited and translated by Michael J. Lazzara and Charles F. Walker. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. 149 pp.

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Peru's recent past haunts its present, as witnessed during the 2021 presidential elections, when the daughter of Alberto Fujimori, the dictator during the 1990s, ran against leftist teacher Pedro Castillo. The specter of the internal armed conflict (1980-2000) pervaded the campaigns of both candidates, as Keiko Fujimori relied on the fears of moderates and Peru's economic elites, condemning Castillo's politics as extensions of past terrorism and a threat to the national economy. On the other side, Castillo's supporters welcomed those who vowed to never again vote for impunity and a corrupt regime, substantiated by Alberto Fujimori's disgraced resignation from power in 2000 and Keiko's ties to the corruption scandal of the Brazilian construction firm, Odebrecht. As a result, the country witnessed a polarized election. Peruvians remained unable to untie what historian Steve Stern denominates "memory knots" of the internal armed conflict, which left over sixty-nine thousand Peruvians dead. José Carlos Agüero's book, *The Surrendered: Reflections by a Son of Shining Path*, translated and edited by Michael J. Lazzara and Charles F. Walker, is a timely reminder of the unfinished

transitions and ongoing memory battles in contemporary Peru. Translated from its original Spanish, *Los Rendidos: Sobre el don de perdonar* (Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2015), Lazzara and Walker present a new introduction and a concluding twenty-one-page conversation with Agüero.

In *The Surrendered*, Agüero “destabilize[s] the unconscious pacts that shape [Peruvian] reality” (21). A writer, poet, human rights activist, and historian, Agüero reflects on his experiences as the son of Shining Path militants killed by state forces. For Agüero, the book is the product of years of introspection and ongoing questioning regarding his place and his parent’s place in post-conflict Peru, where the defeated Maoist guerrilla group is viewed with hatred and fear. The Peruvian Truth Commission (CVR) attributed 54% of the deaths during the conflict to the Shining Path, reinforcing the guerrilla’s primary role of a villain in national memory. Agüero explains that the nature of the book “is somewhat undefined” (20). It blends sixty-seven personal anecdotes, reflections, and notes that take the reader backward and forwards through time and the author’s consciousness. This journey creates a destabilization attributed to Agüero’s ability to question the narratives and officials’ histories engraved on Peru’s post-conflict society. Agüero is particularly critical of the human rights language and narrative of the conflict, which limit the definitions of victimhood, leaving individuals like his parents and himself, as “ghosts who can’t even be victims, because they are unnamable in conventional language. They’re semisubjects” (86). The path forward, Agüero proposes, is for Peruvians to create spaces of conversations where everyone can “feel curiosity about the suffering of people different from us or even those we hate” (21). In his conversation with the editors, Agüero concludes that Peru needs “proof” of the suffering and violence endured by different members of society. The country needs a safe space for Shining Path and ex-Shining Path militants to speak of the violence and laws to ease their return to society after imprisonment (125). Agüero does not absolve his parents or the Shining Path. Instead, he puts forward his experiences and feelings as evidence and an act of dissidence from current academic and non-academic interpretations of the conflict.

The book is divided into six thematic chapters, an introduction, and an interview between the editors and Agüero. In their introduction, Lazzara and Walker contextualize the significance of Agüero’s contribution to the field of memory studies and, most importantly, emphasize Agüero’s journey at the heart of the book. As a prelude to the text, the editors introduce Agüero’s parents, Silvia Solórzano Mendivil (1945-1992) and José Manuel Agüero Aguirre (1948-1986). They were political militants

whose experiences intertwined with Peru's left and trajectory. Both served as militants in the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR), and his father was also a union leader in Lima. Their transition into the Shining Path is ambivalent. However, later Agüero speculates that his parents desired to create change and, as people of "action," they were attracted to the Maoist group's armed struggle (108). Lastly, the editors discuss the process and discoveries upon translating Agüero's work. For them, "working closely with the textures of Agüero's voice" taught them "that the shame that comes from being the son of two people whom Peruvian society calls *terrorists* can manifest even on a linguistic and syntactical level" (15). Thus, revealing Agüero's multiple mechanisms to navigate his identities as the son of Shining Path militants, a historian, a poet, and a human rights activist.

In chapter one, titled "Stigma," Agüero discusses the shame he felt and feels about his parents, but does not shy away from questioning these feelings. He argues that "the war was brutal and atrocious," but that the post-conflict period cannot be compared to the years of wartime (28). While the driving factors of the armed insurrection—"poverty, exploitation, and racism"—prevail, the guerrillas and authoritarian state are no longer present (28). The battles that remain are with the actors, all designated as responsible by the CVR, but only a few have created politically driven memories and narratives of the war. Those left out, like Agüero and his parents, lie in grey zones, although Agüero disputes the term. He designates his mother as a second-class terrorist, a militant of the Shining Path but not part of its key leadership, a figure who sought to exit the guerrilla group but remained trapped in its confines and resigned to fight for ideals of her own. Branded by his parents' affiliation, Agüero also juggles with the confines of the Shining Path in his life, as well as his journey in human rights and in solidarity with victims of the guerrillas.

Chapter two, titled "Guilt," begins with feelings of relief and grief following the death of his parents. The chapter illustrates the complexities of Agüero's mother as a political militant and victim. Recalling his mentor and renowned Peruvian Sociologist Carlos Iván de Degregori, Agüero argues for the need to understand ordinary people's motivation for joining the Shining Path. To humanize militants such as his mother, who did not fully believe in the Shining Path's dogmatic mantra but instead joined to create change. Fear of assassination by the Shining Path prevented her from leaving the guerrilla organization. Agüero argues that several of those arrested for collaborating should not be regarded as "puppets" for they "did not allow themselves to be manipulated" (55). Militants, such as his parents, "acted as activators: they tapped

people whose skin was already sensitive to the touch” (56). Yet, Agüero also links the desire for change and revolution in Shining Path militants to other leaders in the democratic left. He illustrates the role of teachers and militants in pushing their students into revolutions or extremes, and he asks society to forgive them. “They were children of their times. They’ve now been defeated,” he concludes (57).

In chapter three, “Ancestors,” Agüero expands on the trajectory of his father’s life and militancy. He inserts voices of family friends and his grandmother, who long sought the return of her son, massacred by the state. The short but insightful chapter humanizes Agüero’s father but juxtaposes the union leader and militant to the legacy entrusted upon his children. “My ancestors are cursed,” writes Agüero, working through his father’s fate as a result of a war his father waged against the state (60). Without arriving at a resolve on his father, an anecdote of his aging grandmother illustrates his father’s haunting presence. When Agüero visited her, she had dementia and would often recognize him, but occasionally she would confuse him for his father.

Chapter four, “Accomplices,” weaves several narratives together questioning the extent of complicity and innocence. On the one hand, Agüero engages with Lurgio Gavilán’s memoir, a breakthrough for the Peruvian narrative focusing on Gavilán’s childhood as a Shining Path soldier saved and recruited by the army, later turned priest, and finally anthropologist. For Agüero, Gavilán’s book helps exonerate people in Ayacucho, which faced and incited violence against each other. He argues that Gavilán “avoids creating moments of tension that might call his morality into question” (66). However, he asks, “can we expect anything more from an author with such a complicated past?” (67). With this question, Agüero returns to the present and the stigmatization and hatred that pervades Peruvian society. For Gavilán to write more openly and not be confined by the lens of a child’s eyes regarding his experience with death and rape, there needs to be a society willing to listen. Gavilán’s book, as much as Agüero’s, has broken barriers in the silences of Peruvian society. However, they remain confined to the post-conflict society relying on language that prioritizes certain victims, and certain militants over others. In this chapter, Agüero presents the experiences of other “accomplices” of his parents, Gerardo and Hortensia, humanizing their roles in the conflict without clearing them of responsibility. He also illustrates his complicity as a child, crafting bombs and transmitting messages. “I did all this believing in the possibility of a different future. But, at the same time, I hated that life” (74). Agüero grew up exposed to his parents’ socialist and Marxist teachings, but he also witnessed the arrests, incarceration, and deaths that surrounded them. Thus, he concludes the

chapter by remembering how he felt following his mother's death and the capture of the Shining Path leader, Abimael Guzmán, a few months later. He writes of the moment as a conclusion. "My life as I once knew it had ended—and at the same time, my future" (78). His education and values as the son of armed revolutionaries were no longer feasible. The world of solidarity and utopic revolution vanished. Nevertheless, he felt relief, as the concern for his mother, who had fallen from the Shining Path's graces and was constantly harassed by the armed forces, was over. He was now alone.

In chapter five, "The Victims," Agüero takes on the academic discourse on human rights and lauds the turn towards decentering the victims. He examines the necessity to revisit the "miserable kind of agency" (82) and "recover the fear that destroys all certainty" (83). Agüero urges researchers to "fight against Lima-centric and racist explanations" (92). This approach is already occurring in social science and humanities scholarship, especially on peasant communities in Ayacucho. Agüero brings in his experiences as part of the CVR, listening to testimonies, as well as the motivations for individuals and communities to accept the designation of victims as a political strategy. As victims, they gained recognition and power from the state that had long since neglected and abused them. However, he questions the longer effect of this approach, asking, "should rescuing peasants from their subordinate role in history mean that other victims disappear?" (92). Agüero presents the need to explore the agency of individuals such as his parents, why they fought, and how they navigated their roles in the Shining Path. He links the role of experts on transitional justice as vultures, "a whole discipline. . . standing untarnished as they scrutinize the people who have killed each other in excess" (90). Thus, Agüero forces the reader to consider the tools and language we use to understand the conflict and puts into question the readily accepted terms of victim and perpetrator, of guilt and forgiveness, striving to destabilize the unconscious pacts created during the democratic transition.

Agüero returns to the concept of "the surrendered" in chapter six. Here, he reflects on his journey towards understanding his parents and his experience before and after their deaths. Agüero concludes that, unlike the scholarly works that need to shift away from victim-centric terms, he needs to allow himself to "become a victim for the first time" (97). First, as a victim, he can "forgive," and later "surrender. . . to stop being a victim and hand [him]self completely to the judgment, scrutiny, and compassion of others" (97). The act of forgiving in this context is to create a space as a victim, to forgive those who killed his parents but more importantly to forgive his parents for waging a war and losing. To surrender then is to gain acknowledgment, to be recognized

in the realm of memory and truth, and to find validation through the responses of others. In *The Surrendered*, Agüero seeks humanity for himself and victims who remain relegated to ghosts or semisubjects, unacknowledged but still living and haunting society.

The book concludes with a poignant conversation between Agüero and the editors, Lazzara and Walker. The conversation began with an emphasis on Agüero's parents and their militancy, as the editors inquired about their reasons for joining the Shining Path and their values as longstanding leftists. The conversation then shifts to Agüero's childhood in Lima's shantytowns, his complicity through exposure, as well as the risks he incurred by helping the Shining Path militants. The interview contextualizes Agüero's reflections, as well as the years that followed the publication of his book. Agüero received acclaim and criticism, including accusations of terrorism, demands for his arrest, as well as gratitude from children of Shining Path members and other victims. Thus, Lazzara and Walker illustrate the impact of Agüero's book and his boldness to illuminate the taboo in Peru's post-conflict society.

The Surrendered is a significant contribution to memory studies, human rights, and an indispensable book for scholars of Peru's past and present. It is a text that questions and turns long-standing facts upside down. Agüero's voice comes through in Lazzara and Walker's brilliant translation, capturing the burden and shame of his experience. The translated edition, along with the editor's introduction and conversation with the author, make the book accessible to audiences outside Peru. The universal themes within the book widen the scope of its impact for understanding post-conflict societies and the humanity of victims. The book will make a valuable addition to undergraduate courses in the humanities and social sciences, as well as graduate courses on memory and human rights.