Abstract

This book review analyzes *Art from a Fractured Past: Memory and Truth-Telling in Post Shining Path Peru*, collection of essays selected and compiled by Cynthia E. Milton, and published by Duke University Press in 2014. This volume joins a growing body of scholarship dealing with violence, memory and transitional justice in Peru, where, from 1980 to the mid-1990s, a brutal internal conflict between the military and the radical Maoist sect Shining Path claimed the lives of nearly 70,000 people. As a whole, the pieces included examine the production and function of diverse artistic production, focusing mostly, though not exclusively, on visual, narrative and performative art created by the indigenous individuals and communities directly affected by the conflict. From music festivals to art contests, and from theater productions to films, the essays not only move beyond official and institutional processes such as the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, but also demonstrate the many, often ambiguous and paradoxical ways in which violence and memory are articulated and negotiated through art. For Milton’s volume questions the very idea of representational art, choosing to focus on artistic production dealing with individual and collective experience, remembrance and healing rather than pedagogical, activist or “civic” art. Challenging binary distinctions of “high” and “popular” artistic culture, and examining sites of the production and contention of memory and justice, *Art from a Fractured Past* is a welcome addition to areas of studies dealing with both the recent internal conflict and the endemic social hierarchies existing in Peru.

**Key Words:** Peru, internal conflict, memory, reconciliation, art

Resumen

Esta reseña analiza *Art from a Fractured Past: Memory and Truth-Telling in Post Shining Path Peru*, volumen de ensayos recopilado por Cynthia E. Milton y publicado por Duke University Press en 2014. La colección aporta a un creciente campo de estudios sobre violencia, memoria y justicia transicional en Perú, donde el brutal enfrentamiento entre las Fuerzas Armadas y la secta Maoista radical Sendero Luminoso, de 1980 a mediados de los noventa, culminó con la muerte y...
desaparición de casi 70,000 personas. Los ensayos incluidos en esta colección examinan la producción y la función de diversas formas de producción artística, concentrándose sobre todo en arte visual, narrativa y performática creada por los individuos y comunidades más afectadas por el conflicto. De festivales de música a concursos de arte, y de producciones teatrales a fílmicas, los ensayos no sólo van más allá de procesos institucionales y oficiales, como la Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación (CVR), sino también demuestran las muchas formas, ciertas veces ambiguas y contradictorias, en que violencia y memoria son articuladas y sorteadas a través del arte. De hecho, el libro de Milton se sustraen nociones de arte representativo, enfocándose en la relación entre producción artística y experiencia, rememoración y reconciliación en vez de arte pedagógico, activista o “cívico.” Problematizando binarismos de arte “alto” y “popular”, y explorando espacios de producción y disputa de la memoria y la justicia, Art from a Fractured Past es un lucido aporte a campos de estudios enfrentándose tanto al conflicto interno reciente como a fracturas sociales e históricas subyacentes en el Perú.

**Palabras clave:** Perú, conflicto interno, memoria, reconciliación, arte

What is the role of art, and artistic production, in the aftermath of tragedy? Can art accurately express pain, and can it hope to promote individual and collective healing? Is artistic production a way to reveal “truths” legal and institutional processes cannot? If, following Theodor Adorno’s famous (and perhaps under-contextualized) aphorism, “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” how can the literary, plastic and performative arts engage with the consequences of unimaginable violence? These are some of the questions that Cynthia E. Milton’s latest publication, Art from a Fractured Past: Memory and Truth-Telling in Post-Shining Path Peru tackles. Instead of providing easy answers, which such questions certainly cannot generate, the essays included in Milton’s collection confront the paradoxes in thinking about the need and the function of artistic production in the aftermath of Peru’s violent internal war [1980 – mid-1990s] between the Maoist organization Shining Path and the Peruvian military, which in little over a decade left nearly 70,000 dead, mostly members of the indigenous communities of the Peruvian highlands. As a whole, the nine essays, along with Milton’s introduction and Steve J. Stern’s afterword, provide an excellent look at the ways in which different forms of artistic production, from films and comic books to reenactment scenes and ethnographic drawings, have faced, questioned and negotiated the violence and the legacy of these decades. However, Art from a Fractured Past also atest as to how the violence perpetrated during the internal conflict is the result not of recent, isolated events, but rather of endemic ethnic, social and cultural divides within the nation.
Art from a Fractured Past is successful in that, despite confronting complex notions of historical memory and the function of aesthetics, it moves beyond theoretical issues to show the effects of the internal war on individuals and communities. As Milton states, the events of the 1980s and ‘90s in Peru instead require contextualization and historicization – and, as the articles in the collection demonstrate, they also incite a questioning of the role of aesthetics in dealing with the past. Therefore, all the essays, including Milton’s and Stern’s respective texts, propose a constant dialogue with the role of the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CVR, per its initials in Spanish), its successes and its limitations. More importantly, they incite a closer understanding of the function of commemorative art in relation to the Commission’s work. The CVR, whose Final Report was made public in 2003, was developed as an attempt to uncover the truth and the extent of the internal war, and to inquire into murders, kidnappings, disappearances, torture, and rape committed by both warring sides. Led by philosopher Salomón Lerner, it has allowed for a greater understanding of the events by providing countless and useful testimonies, statistics and case studies and yet, because of financial or cultural restrictions, it has also been accused of being out of reach to those most affected. It is in these spaces, outside of the written word and institutional authority, that the diverse artwork analyzed throughout the collection can be situated. This is not an attempt at entirely denouncing official truths or even just “filling gaps” in knowledge, but rather at negotiating and contesting sites of memory and forms of truth-telling. Rarely do these essays’ conclusions drastically diverge from and challenge the CVR’s notions of memory and justice. Instead, they focus on the necessity and value of this kind of institutionally-based efforts in responding to violence and providing justice, as well as the awareness that these cannot suffice the need for experiential and aesthetic representations of a fractured past.

Each of the three main sections in Milton’s volume proposes an analysis of different artistic approaches – which could be categorized, in order, as plastic, narrative and performative arts. Yet, beyond just deploying an interdisciplinary methodology, this multiplicity allows for a productive exploration of the topics at hand – memory, justice, and reconciliation – from distinct sites of cultural and social enunciation. In Part One, Milton’s piece about the Rescate por la memoria art contests in Ayacucho, along with Edilberto Jiménez Quispe’s series of drawings and testimonies from Chungui: Violencia y trazos de memoria, deal with visual representations of the war and its aftermath, focusing on how the individuals and communities most affected portrayed themselves and the effects of the war on their everyday lives. Both articles center around drawings and paintings depicting attacks, by both Shining Path militants and the Peruvian Armed Forces, on towns and schools, the fragmentation of communities, and the disruption of quotidian and family life. These texts in particular, though the issue emerges throughout the volume, invite the reader to reflect on how violence is witnessed in childhood, and what the effects are of growing up with or inheriting violent memories. Along with María Eugenia Ulfé’s analysis of Peruvian retablos, tryptic boxes depicting religious or everyday events, as vehicles for communicating the experiences and memories of the war both by the CVR and Andean artists,
the essays in Part One also challenge the notion of “subalternity” often prescribed to these forms of art. Instead of describing the paintings, drawings and retablos produced by indigenous communities as “folk” or “popular” art (as opposed to “high” or “national” art), Milton, Jiménez Quispe and Ulfé’s contributions demonstrate the arbitrariness of these binary distinctions. In doing so, they problematize categories that in many ways end up recreating the social and ethnic hierarchies they intend to contest.

Unlike Part One, devoted to the artistic productions of the indigenous communities themselves, the articles in Part Two provide readings of texts (both literary and visual) by individual artists and filmmakers. In “Violence, Guilt, and Repetition: Alonso Cueto’s La hora azul,” Víctor Vich argues that this novel focuses on the ongoing effects of the internal war, and the lack of individual or collective transformation despite the attempts at a national reconciliation. Chapter 5 is a partial reproduction of Luis Rossell, Alfredo Villar and Jesús Cossio’s Rupay, a comic book representing some of the most tragic events of the conflict, including the killing of eight journalists in the province of Uchuraccay in 1983 and the subsequent failed attempts at elucidating the details of the incident. The last piece in this section presents an interview with filmmaker Palito Ortega Matute, where he describes his artistic process and his attempt at portraying the daily life in Ayacucho both during and after the conflict. Though perhaps the least cohesive section (Cueto’s novel has received ample literary and commercial attention, being translated into many languages, while Ortega’s films, though increasingly well-known and successful, were produced with very few resources and employed local actors), Part Two poses the question of who has the authority to “realistically” depict the armed conflict and its effects. Vich’s reading of Cueto asks the reader to consider to whom these memories belong, and to continue to “explore the relationship between subaltern and elite voices, guilt and responsibility.” [137] Ortega, on the other hand, states that being from Ayacucho gives him the ability to tell a story in a different, real way. Following these arguments, this section raises the issue of whether limeño artists and intellectuals can accurately portray the suffering caused by Shining Path and the military. Rather than resolving the problems, however, Part Two further challenges the role of testimonio: whose voices, and by whom, are being represented and mediated in its process of (in)visibilization.

Finally, Part Three deals with performative representations and recreations of the violence. Ricardo Caro Cárdenas’s “Commemorative Paths in Sacsamarca” recounts the tributes held in 2003, 2004 and 2007 in the public plaza in Sacsamarca, Ayacucho, where local communities gathered to portray their collective memories of the past. In “Colliding with Memory: Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani’s Sin Título, Técnica Mixta,” Cynthia M. Garza examines one of the theater group’s most recent productions, aimed at evoking the absent bodies of the disappeared – both of individuals victims as well as the nation’s. Jonathan Ritter’s “The ‘Voice of the Victims’: Testimonial Songs in Rural Ayacucho,” explores the commemorative role of pumpin, a traditional Andean musical genre, arguing that its function is not necessarily to serve
as a “collective memory” but rather as a social space where individuals can contribute their own, distinct versions of their collective pasts. At the center of these essays is the notion of the embodiment of violence and memory, and how the recreation and commemoration of the past can serve to both deliberate about a conflictual legacy and offer the possibility of retribution and healing. In particular, the articles on pumpin (a musical genre affected and radicalized by Shining Path) and the commemorative events in Sacsamarca deal with the idea of “civic inclusion,” not in an effort to homogenize experience but to show the many ways in which violence is experienced and dealt with by the individuals in a community. Rather than great instances of resistance and defiance (which certainly did take place during the conflict) we are faced, in Part Three, with fragmented or fractured collective bodies as well as experiences of the conflict – going beyond realities the CVR by itself could be able to portray.

*Art from a Fractured Past* is a welcome and necessary addition to the fields of transitional justice and memory work, in particular in the Peruvian context where, unlike the Southern Cone, the violence took place during democratically elected governments. Milton and Stern successfully frame the nine essays in the collection as investigations of the function of artistic representations, beyond gratuitous popular/high distinctions, in remembering the experience of violence and commemorating those lost. The art produced and shown in these essays does not claim a pedagogical function, however, nor does it attempt to accurately, or definitively, resolve the issues of a fractured past. As Milton argues, these essays, “are not directly concerned with the truth value of art and the production of coherent narratives.” [18] Instead, they reveal the continuous, often contradictory, processes of understanding and mourning taking place within affected communities, and the Peruvian nation at large. Because, and this is worth repeating, the *fractured past* refers not only to the effects of appalling recent political and social events, but also to unresolved conditions, differences and hierarchies between *el Perú oficial* and *el Perú profundo* which, though beyond the scope of this volume, continue to demand thought and investigation.

**Bibliography**