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Superando la teta asustada: Structural violence, intergenerational trauma, and indigenous Peruvian women's agency¹

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Anthropologists have made few notable contributions to the study of “modern wars” (Simmons 1999:74). War and militarism have the same kind of relationship to anthropology that colonialism developed. Gusterson writes: “For an earlier generation of anthropologists, colonialism powerfully shaped access to the field and the choice of research topics but was itself rarely brought into focus as a topic of ethnographic research or reflexive self-questioning” (2007: 156). War and political violence, however, have become important topics in Peruvian studies (for example, Gorriti 1999; Stern 1998). Researchers have mainly focused on political violence associated with the Shining Path insurgency. Indeed, “Senderology” – the study of the guerrillas – is a thriving activity in Peruvian Studies. Starn (2004) argues that the intense human suffering caused by war too often disappears from this discourse. Similarly, much of the anthropology of trauma focuses primarily on the context of political violence, genocide, and war. Also, anthropological studies on violence in the home do not explicitly discuss women's experiences of violence as a form of trauma and suffering (see Alcalde 2007; Hautzinger 2007). When women's experiences *are* placed at the center of research discussion is mostly focused on “rape as a weapon of war” (see Theidon 2001, 2007; Das 1991, 1995, 2007). When oppressive gender relations and violence in the home are considered violence is mostly attributed to alcohol consumption (Elsass 2001). Anthropologists have this limited vantage point because they have largely sought to understand trauma and suffering as “resulting from what political, economic, and institutional power does to people, and reciprocally, from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems” (Kleinman and Das 1997).

The lack of ethnographic knowledge of the influence of these “forms of power” on gender relations in intimate settings points to anthropology's narrow understanding that political, economic, and institutional power operate on multiple levels. Feminist Peruvian anthropologist M. Cristina Alcalde (2006) claims that this myopia about war and political violence in Peru has meant that researchers have largely ignored other more prevalent forms of violence experienced by women living in Lima. Alcalde (2006) is also one of the few Peruvian scholars focusing critical attention to the impact of migration on women's experience of intimate violence in Peru (Cánepa 2007; Dean 2007). It is important to note that along with an absence of ethnographic knowledge of Peruvian women's experience of intimate violence in the home, children's experiences of family violence has yet to be critically studied.

Most studies on war and political violence in Peru are centered in rural villages throughout Ayacucho, the region most affected by the political violence (Theidon 2001). Anthropologists need to critically examine how such historical patterns of violence, trauma, and inequality also impinge on the lives of contemporary *urban* communities. Anthropologist Kimberly Theidon's work provides a useful framework to begin such an inquiry. Her work on the legacies of armed conflict in Ayacucho explores how painful memories accumulate in the body

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and how one can literally suffer from the symptoms of history: “Memories also sediment in our bodies, converting them into historical processes and sites” (2009: 9). In exploring how lacerating memories of war and violence accumulate in women’s bodies, she writes: “there is a memory specialization within these communities, and it is women who carry – who incorporate – the pain and mourning of their communities” (2009: 8). For example, in their narratives, women often spoke of being fearful of breastfeeding their babies and transmitting their “milk of sorrow and worry.” As one woman explained:

My daughter was born the day after the massacre at Lloallepampa. I was hiding in a hut. I had to throw my husband out because if the soldiers showed up they would have killed him. I gave birth all by myself. During that time – when we were hiding – I didn’t even have milk for my baby. How could I have milk when there was nothing to eat? One day some other women told me, ‘if you leave your baby in the mountain, the apu (mountain god) would grab her and she would die.’ Remembering this, I left her on a mountain so she would die. How was she going to live like this? I had passed on all my suffering through my blood, through my breast. I saw her from a distance, but since she was crying I had to go back and get her because if the soldiers heard her, they would have killed me. Today, she can’t study. She’s 17 years old and is in fifth grade. She can’t progress – every year she fails. She says she has a headache; that her head burns. What is it – fear?

Theidon proposes that *la teta asustada* – literally the frightened breast – is both a phenomenological reality and a theory about the violence of memory. Other researchers explore similar concepts of the *embodiment of violence*. For example, Elsass comments that in Ayacucho, memories of war are described as “evil and bad thoughts” which cause “a burning head” and “gnawing shame” (2006: 309). In a study of Mexican women’s health, Finkler argues that: “...women’s health cannot be isolated from family structure, from the men and children in their purview, from the cultural context, from gender ideologies, and from cultural comprehensions of sickness” (1994:9). As such, life’s lesions – which Finkler describes as the perceived adversities of existence, including social relationships, and unresolved contradictions in which the human being is entrenched and gnaw at the person’s being – can be considered the embodiment of pain and suffering.

The Peruvian Truth Commission includes women’s narratives of children always being sick, particularly with *susto*² because there was so much violence. Women I spoke with shared similar views. One indigenous woman had this to say about the memory and embodiment of violence:

Suddenly memories of what I have lived come back to me. I have to tell myself, ‘it’s in the past, it already happened.’ Sometimes memories come back to you. When you meet somebody new the fear comes back.” Women also explained how trauma and intimate violence affects their children: “If it affects us as women, as adults – how do you think it affects children? To see your mother humiliated, abused...our children are unable to cope with the violence. A son is traumatized because he can’t help his mother. So he grows up with a rebellious attitude and is emotionally stunted.

² In ethnomedicine, *susto* is defined as a form of fright so intense it results in the flight of the “soul” from the afflicted person’s body. In most indigenous and mestiza/o cultures the healing process for such a person requires psychosocial intervention and a specific repertoire of ritual practices. Medical anthropologists classify *susto* as a psychiatric disorder associated with stress and stress-related events and associated with depressive episodes. See Weller, Baer, García, and Rocha 2008; Durà-Vilà and Hodes 2012.

This statement speaks to the concept of intergenerational trauma, which I discuss at length next. Although *la teta asustada* explains how experiences of trauma can alter the body and how a mother could, via blood *in-utero* or via breast milk, transmit this dis-ease to her baby, it is also useful as a framework to understand how the transmission of trauma across generations involves both women *and* men.

This idea is central to theories of historical and intergenerational trauma. Yellow Horse Brave Heart defines historical trauma as “the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, over the lifespan and across the generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences” (2007: 7). Although there are many ways to approach the legacies of trauma, I suggest that theories of historical trauma – as conceptualized by Native scholars are helpful to an understanding of how historical patterns of violence, trauma, and inequality operate on multiple levels within contemporary Peruvian communities.

First, in speaking of historical and intergenerational trauma, historical in this sense does not refer to trauma that occurred solely in the past, but rather, to traumas that are “historical” in the sense that they began a long time ago, or that are a result of historical practices that survive in memory (Whitbeck 2004). As such, historical trauma informs people’s health, lives, and social relations across space and time (Duran and Duran 1998). I am suggesting that if we contextualize historical trauma in this way, we must critically rethink how anthropologists have approached the study of trauma and violence. Theidon illustrates how studies on violence and trauma in Peru and across Latin America have focused primarily on the effects of political violence in rural peasant communities (see also Green 1994, 1999). However, studies throughout Latin America also indicate that one of the results of such violence is an increased flow of rural-to-urban migration as many people are forced to flee their homelands (for example Green 1994, 1999; Stephen 1997). By its own admission, the Guatemalan Army verifies that over 440 rural villages in the highlands were completely destroyed and countless others were partially razed. As a result, from 1983 to 1985 one million people – out of a total population of about eight million – were internally displaced in rural Guatemala (Green 1999). Likewise, in efforts to defend themselves against the Senderistas, 600,000 Peruvians fled their homelands in a mass exodus, devastating over 400 *campesino* communities (Aguirre Coronel 1995).

In Peru, a large flow of migrants, including many women, arrived in Lima in the 1980s and early 1990s because they had been displaced from their communities of origin by the armed conflict between the state and the Shining Path (Alcalde 2006). It is thus surprising that anthropologists have not attempted to explore how the effects of trauma also impinge on the lives of people who have been displaced and are now living in urban centers such as Lima. Wallace (1968) argues that war and memory are inextricably bound. Are we to understand this is true only when people continue to live in the “spaces” marked by the atrocities of war? Rigoberta Menchu has argued that one of the unacknowledged goals of the counterinsurgency in Guatemala was to eradicate Mayan culture through the destruction of indigenous communities. Yet, as Green (1999) points out, little has been reported about the subtle ways in which war also reshaped social relations in Mayan families and communities. However, Green does not consider how this process can affect women’s vulnerability to and experience of intimate violence.

The critical examination of the prevalence of intimate partner violence in Peruvian women’s lives can provide important insights on how trauma experiences shape gender and power relations at home. To do this, I draw on Alcalde’s (2006) work on the impact of migration on indigenous women’s experiences of intimate violence and their efforts to leave abusive

relationships in Lima. To clarify, my study explores how the prevalence of intimate partner violence in Lima can serve as an example of the intergenerational effect of historical trauma and the damaging impacts it has on communal life, gender relations, and family life. Such an analysis is critical at this juncture because of the high prevalence of intimate partner violence in Peruvian women's lives in Lima (Guezmes 2002). This research may also have implications for the study of trauma and intimate violence among Mexican-origin women in the Mexico and the United States.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines intimate partner violence (IPV) as physical violence, sexual violence, threats of physical and or sexual violence, and psychological and or emotional abuse perpetuated by a current or former spouse, nonmarital dating partners, or boyfriends and or girlfriends of the same sex (Saltzman et al 1999). Some researchers have developed a more expansive definition of IPV (Guezmes 2002) to include economic violence – withholding money for basic needs like food and shelter, not allowing women to work to meet basic needs, forcing women to hand over all the money they earn, and destroying personal objects of value (Garcia-Moreno 2006). Such forms of violence are prevalent in some Peruvian women's lives. For example, two recent studies of IPV in Lima indicate that 51 percent of women had experienced physical and sexual violence (Guezmes et al. 2002) and 88 percent knew someone who had experienced IPV in the previous 12 months (Espinoza 2001). Furthermore, the reported prevalence of any IPV experienced during lifetime and current pregnancy for 2,9392 women is 45.1 percent (Perales et al. 2009). For women who experience abuse, the lifetime physical, emotional, and sexual IPV is 34.2 percent, 28.4 percent, respectively (ibid).

The research by Alcalde (2006) shows how IPV in the lives of women in Lima is compounded by external structures of oppression that promote inequality and suffering among marginalized groups. Alcalde demonstrates that migration and class are powerful forces shaping battered women's vulnerability to isolation and poverty, thereby prolonging the violence they experience. By situating the prevalence of intimate violence in migrant women's lives within a structural violence framework, Alcalde provides a useful example of how to explore the intimate interconnections of structural violence, political violence and experiences of trauma and suffering. Structural violence, a term developed and employed by Galtung (1969) and more recently articulated by Farmer (2004), focuses on attention on the often invisible and historically deeply rooted social machinery of oppression that promotes suffering among marginalized groups. Alcalde proposes that we recognize how structural violence expands our analysis of the forms of violence faced by battered migrant women in Lima. This compels us to move beyond blaming the victim or the batterer and instead focusing on the social justice issues raised by the historical systems of oppression. This allows for further exploration of how racism, sexism, class bias, and deprivation of the right to safety and fair treatment – as distinct, yet interconnected forms of violence – affect Peruvians differently depending on each person's place of origin, gender, class, and phenotype. Alcalde's work is the only ethnographic material I have read on the impact of rural-to-urban migration, ethnicity, and class on Peruvian women's experience of violence as they attempt to leave abusive relationships. Alcalde works primarily with women living in domestic violence shelters and draws connections between different currents of violence – political, structural, and IPV. My own work with women living in domestic violence shelters in Lima also draws on a framework of analysis that includes these different currents of violence.

Most of the women Alcalde (2006) interviewed were indigenous migrants from highland communities who had migrated to Lima as a result of either being displaced from their

communities of origin by the armed conflict between the state and the Shining Path or by the war's devastating effects on all levels of daily life that made it difficult for women to meet the daily shelter and food needs for their children and themselves. In some cases the small plot of land owned by a woman's family, to which she might have returned to escape her first or second abusive partner, was expropriated during the armed conflict. Following migration, women were especially vulnerable to isolation from potential support networks and to structural violence in the form of racism, sexism, and institutional discrimination.

Women I collaborated with described similar experiences. Most had migrated to Lima from the rural communities - mostly in the Peruvian highlands – either with their current abusive partner, with a former abusive partner, or on their own in search of employment. Leaving their mothers, sisters, and other family and sources of social support in their home communities, many women expressed a sense of isolation. Women also stated that in light of coming from resource-limited communities of origin and living in similar conditions in Lima, they feared they would not be able to provide for their children and themselves on their own. One woman explained:

When you come from the province and you don't have family near you, or when you come from a broken family...you're alone. You don't have your mother and sisters to listen to you. You're alone and you're poor; what can you do? They [partners] take advantage of this and they abuse you more because they know you don't have anybody and they say to us, "if you leave me, you'll starve, nobody will feed you." Who can we talk to? Who can we go to for help? We're alone and they know this. Sometimes women from the provinces are abused more than others.

The study by Alcalde (2006) emphasizes various factors that shape migrant women's experiences of intimate violence. These include shame, economic dependency, lack of familiarity with Lima, lack of knowledge of domestic violence laws, police indifference of hostility and absence of support networks. The women I spoke with shared very similar experiences:

If I go to the police, they will only ask you one question: has your husband hit you? They don't care about the other violence. It has to be something very serious for them to help you. If you go with stories about how you feel sad and hopeless, they won't listen to you. You have to tell them you want to commit suicide to get their attention. Women know the police won't do anything. We need other alternatives. We need a way out...I don't understand why the police always fails to help women. They don't listen to us. One time I called them and they took him [partner] away but they let him come back home as if hadn't done anything. They said it was a family problem and that they couldn't intervene...I went to the police many times. They would take him [partner] away but he was always allowed to come back home. I decided I couldn't bear the beatings anymore so I decided to hit back, to hit him the way he hits me so that he will never hit me again...They [police and other service providers] don't listen to us. They say they do but then don't. Sometimes we're right there in front of them with our faces and bodies swollen from the beatings, with our tears, and we want to tell them all that we suffer but they don't care. They say it's our fault. We feel worse because we can't share our stories with them...They treat us the same way at the women's police stations. They'll begin asking you questions and investigating and then they'll say, "you're unfaithful to your husband and that's why he hit you. You must have done something for him to hit you." They say that and they're women! They're women!

These passages speak to women's experience of repeated violence – beatings from their husbands and disregard and neglect from police including those working at women's police stations. Although women followed "established" domestic violence protocol by going to the

police and seeking help through the three-tier violence intervention model adopted by Peru – which presumably integrates social, medical, and legal services – their suffering and trauma was largely ignored. Research conducted in Brazilian police stations, the model followed by the Peruvians, suggests that prevailing discriminatory gender ideologies are part of the worldview internalized by women and men alike. According to Nelson (1996) the police stations in Brazil in 1985 and solely staffed by women had similar problems in relation to law enforcement, resources, and discrimination to the Peruvian ones.

In Lima, the police and other institutions continue to contextualize IPV as strictly physical violence. Missing from this framework is consideration of the embodiment of violence and historical trauma transmitted across generations. A psychologist I spoke with explained: “In Peru, and specifically in Lima, to be considered a victim of violence, a woman has to have two black eyes, a broken nose, and a shattered jaw.” Researchers have also noted that policies aimed at combating IPV were implemented in the context of increasing authoritarianism under Alberto Fujimori and used to alleviate the image of the government rather than to provide effective protection and legal reparation to battered women. Some activists have argued these policies were not only poorly enforced and underfunded but also failed to address the underlying cause of IPV, “and in some cases contributed to reproducing the sexist and domestic hierarchies that are at the root of much of the violence in Peruvian society” (Boestin 2006: 355).

One way that women living in domestic violence shelters have accounted for the perpetuation of violence at the institutional level is by building community organizations and forming their own social support networks that open spaces for healing, an issue I will take up in another report. Since the police and others fail to “listen to them,” women at the shelter listen to and share stories of violence, trauma, and suffering. However, as the ethnographic narratives passages above indicate, when women feel they have exhausted their attempts to protect themselves via established protocols, they are forced to resort to violence to protect their children and themselves.

Alcalde (2006) considers the construction of race, class, and place as historical structures of oppression that impact migrant women’s vulnerability to IPV. She suggests that women’s difficulty in finding employment in Lima partly reflects the dire economic situation in contemporary Lima. However, while identities in Lima may be fluid and flexible, the meaning attributed to skin color, educational and socioeconomic background, place of origin, and language deeply influence the forms of discrimination encountered by indigenous women. Structures of oppression, racism, and class bias limit women’s ability to care for their families and lead violence-free lives. Finding a job, a necessity for women to be able to leave abusive relationships and serve as primary heads of household, can be extremely difficult when they “appear” poor, uneducated, and indigenous. Alcalde reports that most of the women interviewed were unsuccessful finding work while at the shelter (2006: 156).

Women I spoke to shared similar experiences. They explained that most restaurants and shops list *buena presencia* (“good appearance”) as a requisite for job applicants. This is most often a euphemism for a person that is light-skinned, urban, well-groomed, and well-dressed (Alcalde 2006). Women I spoke to considered this an obstacle to securing employment and leaving abusive relationships. I suggest these experiences open up a space to explore the discourses of indigenous identity and the construction of the “Other” (Femenias 2005). I intend to do so in my dissertation research.

Yellow Horse Brave Heart (1993, 2000) makes an important distinction between historical trauma and historical trauma response. Historical trauma response is best understood as a “constellation of features” perceived as related, or as a reaction, to the historical trauma. Yellow Horse Brave Heart’s definition requires cumulative “emotional and psychological wounding” to substantiate its existence. However, a more accurate conceptualization or definition of historical trauma would refer only to the conditions, experiences, and events that have the *potential* to contribute to or trigger a response, rather than referring to both the events and the response (Denham 2006). Accordingly, “the subsequent manifestations of or reactions to historical trauma, which may vary from expressions of suffering to expressions of resilience and resistance, are appropriately recognized as the historical trauma response” (411).

In the context of the intersectionality of political violence with structural violence and IPV in the lives of Peruvian women, expressions of resilience can be located in the strategies women pursue to make sense of violence in their lives and what they consider necessary paths to protection and healing for their children, themselves, and at times even belligerent partners I wish to suggest that despite the insurmountable suffering and countless obstacles faced by women I met at the shelter, it is necessarily to acknowledge the courage, strength, and creativity they employ as they attempt to survive, heal, and even thrive. I will briefly note that one of the main themes to emerge from the focus groups I did with the women was a shared interest in finding ways for their entire families to live beyond the cycles of violence. At no other moment throughout the focus groups did women cry in painful memory as when they talked about how violence affected their children. Far away from their family and communities of origin, most women explained that before going to live at the shelter, their children were their only source of support and solace. They feared that exposing their children, especially their sons, to intimate details about their experiences with violence would make their sons resentful and fearful of their father. This was a source of pain for the women because although they suffered from their partner’s violent behavior, some recognized that their partner’s loved their children and were otherwise good fathers.

When asked what their ideal violence intervention program would look like, many women asked for family counseling and specifically for workshops and focus groups for children *and* men to help them “overcome the pain they feel.” Indeed one woman said, “We want to understand our men. Why do they abuse women? Why do they have that pain? Why does it come out like that, why does it become violence? We want to understand this more than anything.” This speaks to indigenous women’s resilience and active engagement in ending violence not only for themselves but also for their children and their partners. This commitment to family healing can be understood to contest myopic focus of many feminist non-governmental organizations on women’s health rather than on healthy relationships between women and their partners. Women commented that “*feministas* [feminists] always want the couple to separate but sometimes we don’t want to leave them.” My collaborative ethnography with indigenous women in Lima is one step in the path helping to bring life to such visions of violence intervention programs that prioritize healthy gender and family relations.

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