

Book Review

- *Victims and Warriors. Violence, History, and Memory in Amazonia*, by Casey High. University of Illinois Press, 2015.

Divided into seven chapters, this book explores the multiple ways men and women of different generations among the Waorani (an Ecuadorian group also known as Huaorani or Auca) experience and remember past violence in ways that evoke indigenous understandings of social difference. Waorani memory appears throughout this book as an expression of colonial history, multiple indigenous understandings of the past (p. 74), and also as a commentary on specific relations in which social life is ‘defined and contested’ (p. 11). Challenging Western ideas of tradition, identity and history (pp. 9-10), this moral practice makes High focus on ongoing social and political transformations in an Amazonia that today definitely goes ‘beyond the “local” and the “indigenous”’ (pp. 2-3, 109). Waorani imagination concerns people and events that extend well beyond their ethnic reserve: ‘The question is not whether they are part of a “modern” or “global” world but the extent to which ... Waorani will be able to engage these processes on their own terms’ (p. 170). What would their own Waorani terms look like? The author’s response is concerned with generational involvements and tactics by which they engage with the ‘translocal processes’ (p. 75) that he describes. In the case of masculine fantasies of power, for example, he finds them simultaneously drawing on multiple discourses rooted in ‘indigenous Amazonian understandings of gendered agency, local oral histories of violence, global media, and colonial imagination’ (p. 97).

Exploring the ‘generational and embodied dimensions of memory in urban intercultural encounters’, High looks at warrior performances by young people (both in local public school events and in state-sponsored folklore festivals) (p. 24). He shows the forms in which they actually invert the usual victim perspective expressed in Waorani oral histories of violence (p. 68). This disregard of victimhood would illustrate, according to him, how the ‘colonial imagery’ of Amazonian groups has itself become constitutive of ‘indigenous social imagination’ (p. 100). Therefore, rather than inauthentic self-representations through these ‘essentialist ideologies of culture and identity’, Waorani are in fact proclaiming their ‘right to difference’ (p. 170). These indigenous self-representation performances would be neither ‘simply adopting popular stereo-

types' (p. 68) nor forms of 'cultural commodification' (p. 68). On the contrary, they would assert their independence and strength in front of outsiders as powerful as big oil companies. In short, given an indigenous politics in which those groups that 'fail to live up to expectations of autonomy and authenticity' risk being suspect of losing their traditions or culture and having their rights claims disregarded (p. 115), rejecting the image of victims becomes nothing less than real political activism (p. 101).

At the same time, this image of a warrior would contradict 'the Waorani ideal of "living well"' (p. 70), which is defined in this book as an 'ideal of generosity and peaceful conviviality' strongly linked to the notion of 'comunidad' (pp. 147, 155, 157). This homogenizer and utopian ideal – whose Andean version (*Sumak Kawsay* or *Buen Vivir*) has been promoted as a supposedly ancestral philosophy by the intellectual complicity between indigenous leaders and non-indigenous activists – could have been more fully integrated in the arguments of this book. It is not totally present, for instance, in its description of a massacre that occurred in 2003 in which a group of Waorani men killed many members of an 'uncontacted group' (p. 98) called Taromenani.

This group, which High describes as affected not only by violence but also by the politics of isolation (p. 178), is also a good illustration of another important argument of the book: its sharp rejection of the predisposition to view indigenous peoples and cosmologies in isolation from broader political and economic relations in Amazonia (p. 77). High convincingly argues that 'the myth of lost tribes' (p. 110) tacitly absolves Western societies from any responsibility for the habitually precarious situation of Amerindian groups. In consequence, when High considers the possibility that the killings and abductions of Taromenani were carried out 'with a view to incorporating certain 'enemies' into' (p. 179) Waorani's homes, he suggests that these argumentations could actually 'support the interests of extractive industries' (p. 179), and also excuse 'the ecologically destructive and socially disruptive forces' (p. 101) which pressurize relations between indigenous peoples.

In sum, this book constitutes an exciting analysis of the most intimate aspects of memory and experience in a contemporary Amazonian indigenous group in dialogue with its own stereotypes. Finally, despite its occasional redundancies (mainly because of pedagogic aims) and some categorical assertions, this will certainly be a compelling book not only for anthropologists but for anyone interested in contemporary Amerindian groups.

Juan Javier Rivera Andía, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
jjriveraandia@gmail.com