The Surrendered

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The Surrendered: Reflections by a Son of Shining Path.
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I. Stigma

Does the stigmatized individual assume his difference is known about already or is evident on the spot, or does he assume it is neither known about by those present nor immediately perceivable by them? In the first case one deals with the plight of the discredited, in the second with that of the discreditable.

Erving Goffman, Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity

1. You learn to live with shame. To have a family that part of society views as blighted by crimes, a family of terrorists, is a concrete reality, like a chair, a table, or a poem.

You internalize shame gradually over time and live it in many different ways. When you’re a child, things are simpler but more hurtful: your defenses are still fragile, and you’re an easy target. Where are your parents? What do they do for a living? These aren’t easy questions to answer. People don’t ask them maliciously, but they make you uncomfortable. They’re disarming. They hurt, in a way.

You look back, and you think: things weren’t so bad. Shame could rarely be seen: you don’t have memories of blushed faces, sweaty palms, or mockery. But there’s a feeling of inferiority that darkens your days. You can’t tell the truth. And not being able to tell the truth strips you of
your honor. As a child, you don’t understand things in these terms, but you can feel them.

“My parents are in prison, my parents have been detained, my parents are in hiding, my parents are dead.” I couldn’t give explanations like these, even though they might have brought me some relief—so that on occasion I could stop hiding or faking normalcy to fit in.

Things get better as the years go by. You learn to handle situations. You invent stories that have some degree of truth but also a fair dose of fiction. On rare occasions, you decide to confide in people who seem capable of understanding. You learn to feel out situations to determine if those asking you questions will treat you harshly, coldly, or indifferently.

Shame isn’t a feeling: it’s something real, a reasonable reaction, though it’s not something you can avoid. It’s not momentary humiliation. It’s not like tripping on a stage in front of a packed auditorium. I’m talking instead about a kind of shame that doesn’t need a trigger, that’s part of everything you do and of how you relate to others. It builds up for years—with every lie, every silence, every secret, every evasive answer, every story, in long, lonely moments.

How many people did my parents kill? That’s not something I need to know. That I can simply pose that question at any moment—and that the question is valid—is what sustains this kind of shame.

2 But there’s something else that sustains this kind of shame. I realized it not long ago when I went to a meeting that happened in a tiny room in downtown Lima, a meeting organized by young leftists, anarchists, and university students.

A group of young people gathered to watch a film about a former Shining Path militant.1 They’d screened similar films in the past. In general, they looked for independent films that could show different viewpoints

1. Little by little, we’re seeing more films like this appear: Aquí vamos a morir todos (We’re all going to die here, 2012), by Andrés Mego; Sybila (2012), by Teresa Arredondo; Las huellas del Sendero (Shining Path’s tracks, 2013), by Luis Cintora; Tempestad en los Andes (Tempest in the Andes, 2014), by Mikael Wiström; and Caminantes de la memoria (Memory walkers, 2014), by Heeder Soto and Zoila Mendoza. It’s curious that films have opened space for certain questions and taboo topics to find public expression.
on the Peruvian conflict, alternatives to those of the NGOs or the perspectives on TV.2

When the film ended, all who were gathered there talked, debated, and enjoyed refreshments in a welcoming, inclusive environment. Everyone agreed it was important for the “other voices” and the “other version” of the war to be aired publicly—even if this could happen only gradually and in marginal spaces (such as at this precarious meeting in a rundown, old house in downtown Lima). The people gathered were not young extremists but rather a laid-back group of kids: critics of Peruvian society, vegetarians, a whole mix. Their comments insisted on a need to dispel myths about the war. Yet, at the same time, they played their part in creating new myths about Shining Path: its freedom-seeking heroism, its egalitarian zeal, its devotion to noble causes, its personal sacrifices for others. They celebrated the guerrillas’ altruism and advocated for a need to “recover the context” in which Shining Path acted so that society could better understand the guerrillas’ actions—so that people could see that what Shining Path did was political in nature, not just terrorism. In the end, they wanted to humanize Shining Path.

I was surprised at how closely their demands echoed others I’d been hearing recently. Within academia, too, people were pushing to unveil hidden memories and spoke of a need to give Shining Path a human face. Their arguments dovetailed nicely with a critical stance that was starting to emerge in Peru about concepts such as victimhood and innocence” When applied to people affected by violence, these terms tended to erase the complex political processes that give rise to the violence in the first place.

The young people also fiercely critiqued NGOs. They considered them hypocritical for making choices about who would be considered a victim—for categorizing certain victims as defensible and others as inde-

2. In Peru, Alberto Fujimori’s authoritarian government propaganda rather successfully managed to make the term NGO synonymous with terrorist organizations and with those seeking profit from poverty at the expense of society’s most vulnerable groups. To create a discourse on political violence, NGOs have used a human rights framework and deployed categories such as perpetrator, victim, guilt, and innocence. As in other countries, NGOs in Peru have maintained their own version of the theory of two demons or of the people caught in the crossfire, which has afforded them an identity while allowing them to fulfill their mandate in openly hostile environments.
fensible. Doing this, they thought, turned NGOs into accomplices with the prevailing power structures.

I asked the kids if they thought that we should, in fact, celebrate the brand of unbridled altruism that the Shining Path militant in the film displayed, or if instead we should interpret the pride the young woman took in separating from her family and those in her immediate circle, all in the interest of the revolution, as deeply egotistical. I asked them if giving a “context” to Shining Path was simply a political strategy masked as an intellectual argument seeking to validate certain decisions that had caused great harm.

For quite a while, those present took turns responding to me, their tone growing ever harsher. They felt I was ambushing them. They called me a neoliberal, a petty bourgeois, an academic. But what made me feel even more uncomfortable was that they felt cornered. They felt I was subtly accusing them of being members of MOVADER.\(^3\) They thought I was treating them like countless others had done every time they dared to give voice to those “other memories.” They thought I was launching veiled threats, that I was implying that in that humble house in downtown Lima people were defending terrorism.

I listened quietly. I wouldn’t have wanted to come across as overbearing. I asked myself seriously if I had been—if there was any way to ask these questions without an implicit tone of condemnation or judgment.

Then I remembered a similar experience from my past, which made me choose not to respond in the moment. I wanted to avoid the inevitable betrayal of language: its inability to speak without implicating the speaker. When one touts an air of moral superiority, it becomes hard to listen to others who have something different to say. Either they are obliged to keep silent, or they default to a politically correct way of speaking to stave off any suspicion that they’re terrorists.\(^4\)

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3. MOVADER is an arm of the Peruvian Communist Party—Shining Path that today is legal and wants to participate in elections but refuses to renounce the ideology that fueled its war. One of its main agenda items is amnesty for its jailed leaders.

4. I remember having done exactly this when I invited two friends to present to the Memory Studies Workshop in 2012. We were talking about new ways to research and approach the experience of Shining Path, particularly in prisons. The use of expressions such as political prisoner to talk about members of Shining Path or the MRTA made me feel as if it were my responsibility, given that I was the one organizing the sessions for...
As the meeting drew to a close, an energetic young woman, who must have been around thirty years old, looked me straight in the eye and announced clearly and forcefully that she was not at all ashamed of her parents. “That’s what you implied, right? Well, not me! I’m proud of what my parents did in the war because they did it for the good of others,” she contended. Quiet muttering throughout the room validated her stance. Soon the meeting ended, we shook hands, and I left.

The shame that stemmed from this experience isn’t the kind that manifests through feelings. It’s not the shame of a blushed face or sweaty palms. It’s a way of being that implies rejecting pride, refusing to create myths, and being willing to give up the safety that comes from having a pristine family legacy. It requires embracing a fragile kind of speech that doesn’t shy away from the word perhaps. It requires acceptance—systematic acceptance—free of alibis.

And what do you have to accept? You have to accept that members of your family, your dearest friends, or people in your inner circle committed acts that resulted in deaths, that those acts weren’t just errors. You have to accept that they did these things of their own free will—and not simply because the rebellious generation of which they were part compelled them to act in certain ways.

You have to accept that they understood that their decisions would lead to collateral damage (within their families, in their neighborhoods, among their neighbors, and among the innocent, who do indeed exist). As often happens in wartime scenarios, they saw this collateral damage as an acceptable cost that they weighed against a greater good. You have to accept that war is not the same as peace, even though injustices and social conflicts never go away.

The Peruvian war was brutal and atrocious. Still, it can’t be compared to the postwar period, although it’s true that certain constants make it tempting to erase the differences between past and present (such as poverty, exploitation, and racism).

an auditorium full of undergraduates, to point out that no terminology is innocent, that all terms have a genealogy, and that, consequently, using certain terminology without explanation could lead students to assume that there was academic consensus about it. I merely made everyone uncomfortable and caused one of my invitees to feel obliged to “publicly put a stop” to any apologies for terrorism. So, unintentionally, I became part of the machinery of censorship, and I isolated my colleagues even more.
You have to accept that fathers, siblings, cousins—even you—bear responsibility in a long chain of reasoned and willfully made decisions. To accept these things is to give up self-protection.

If people are unwilling or unable to let down their guard, then they will never feel shame at all. But I’m not convinced that this is necessarily a bad thing. Believing that shame isn’t worthwhile serves as a balm to many. Why not let everyone deal with their difficult pasts in the best way they know how?

Take the young woman who spoke that night with conviction and clarity, or the others who supported her in that room. Shame doesn’t serve her—or them. Instead of letting down their guard, they struggle, as young leftists, to find their place in the world. They question the world itself, faithful to family legacies that make sense to them only when they act and respond in sync with those legacies.

3

One afternoon Gonzalo said to me, “That’s it. I’ve decided. From now on I want people to call me Ricardo.” He didn’t need to explain further.

I’d known him since we were kids. For quite some time, I’d been vaguely aware that he was arguing with his mother. She would get on his case, saying he wasn’t proud of his birth name. After a lot of back and forth and a complicated legal process, a judge granted him permission to change it. I congratulated him, cautiously.

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to get used to it,” he told me. “Just give it time,” I replied. He was chewing on chamomile leaves and staring off into the distance. From a neighboring apartment, we could hear the undulating, tropical rhythms of a song by the band Guinda. It had a happy beat, but its lyrics were about suffering and falling out of love.

We stayed quiet for a long time, drinking our tea, sip by sip, paying silent homage to my friend’s lost name. With our simple, silent ritual, we celebrated and lamented that name. His parents had come up with the best name they could think to give him back in 1987: the name of their leader, Presidente Gonzalo. We knew of other kids who’d been given similar names, and we’d often laugh about it. Shining Path’s enthusiastic young militants parented no small number of Lenins, Maos, and Stalins. We met one kid named Fal, whose name derived from an acronym for the lightweight automatic rifles (fusil automático ligero) that Shining Path used to wage its urban guerrilla war. We also met a girl named
Ila, whose name evoked another Shining Path emblem: the beginning of the armed struggle *'(inicio de la lucha armada)'*. Ila is now dead. Lots of kids back then were baptized with names steeped in the promise of revolution.5

We said goodbye to one other. Gonzalo walked me out of the neighborhood so I wouldn’t get mugged. “It’s just that you seem like a yuppie now,” he said to me, half in jest, but warmly. When we got to the bus stop, I shook his hand, and we wished each other’s families well. Then I watched him walk off toward the neighborhood market.

His name isn’t Gonzalo anymore. It no longer evokes that nightmare of a leader. The name that brought him so much suffering no longer marks him. Watching him from that angle, with his back to me, heading off to buy bread “like any other little Peruvian” (to quote a poem by Teresa Cabrera), I couldn’t see the invisible mark that lingers in him.6 But it was there. He didn’t look better or worse, nor did he look more complete or incomplete. Only the two of us managed to see beyond the name that used to be there.

Perhaps, though, the fact that he erased his name will, in the end, mark him even more indelibly—not just in his words and his persona, but in his memory, like an infinite stain.

When someone reveals something about you, it makes you vulnerable. At some point in time, or at many points, it happens. Secrets are never perfect, especially secrets like ours that so many people knew about—from the police, to members of community organizations, to my parents’ Party comrades, who were constantly being detained and tortured.7 It sounds nice to call it a “public secret”; it makes for a pretty metaphor.

5. A friend once told me about a period of time in which many girls were named Nora, a dark homage to Abimael Guzmán’s first wife.

6. “Amor o madre aguardo / como cualquier peruanito / su forma de pan en el desayuno / u otra presencia / aún más olorosa y divina.” (Love or mother I wait / like any little Peruvian / your form of bread at breakfast / or some other presence / even more fragrant and divine.) Cabrera, “Como cualquier peruanito,” in *Sueño de pez o neblina*, 53.

7. The militants I met from the Peruvian Communist Party—Shining Path never called their organization Sendero; they knew that the press had invented that term. They preferred to speak instead of “the Party,” or “the P,” for short.
But in real life, public secrets are messy, fleeting, tacit pacts of silence. They work like concentric circles: everyone is in the know, but to greater or lesser extents.

When we lived in Lima’s El Agustino district, our closest neighbors knew exactly what my parents were up to and what was going on in our house. Other neighbors who lived down the block—or on the next block—knew too, but in less detail. People who lived farther away had their suspicions and reacted to us differently. Some acted in solidarity or showed us little signs of support; others sympathized more discreetly with my parents because they thought my parents were “fighting for social justice.” Still others criticized my parents, but always under their breath, because they feared the Party. It’s strange to say, but we knew that people were afraid of us, and we used it to our advantage, to protect ourselves.

Around that time, we had a friend named Benito, a member of Shining Path who’d been captured and likely tortured. We feared he might betray us by telling his torturers my parents’ names. When we found out Benito died, we had to flee our home.8 A few days later we returned briefly to gather some of our things. When we got there, some of our close friends told us details about the police raid and certain neighbors’ names who’d helped them carry it out.

They pointed out a group of people who told the police we were terrorists. They mentioned others who had given the police information or told them about “suspicious people” frequenting our house. They also mentioned people who defended us: neighbors who weren’t at all political but who held my mother in high regard, who considered her a fighter for social justice. They were the ones who kept the police from ransacking our house and stealing our things. We didn’t have much, but what we had was important to us.

Those were tough times, so it was hard to get mad at anyone. At the end of the day, we thought our neighbors’ reactions were normal and

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8. Benito was from the provinces, perhaps from Ancash, and often came over to our house when we lived in El Agustino. My family loved him for his kindness, for how tenderly he treated the children, and for his timidity. We had to flee our home because it was quite possible that he’d been tortured before he was killed; in that state, anyone could inform on his comrades or be captured with others connected to him. In either case, the police could have confirmed that our house was supportive of Shining Path.
predictable. After all, they had to protect themselves. At the same time, though, I still remember how deceived I felt by one neighbor in particular. She lived very close to us and had two babies, in dire poverty. My mother often spoke to the woman about the abusive relationship in which the woman was trapped, offering her advice and treating her like a relative who needed shelter. My mother never tried to involve her in politics or in any matters related to “the P,” the cryptic way in which Senderistas referred to the Party. We constantly shared with her what little food we had and regularly took care of her babies.

She was the one who betrayed us most hatefully, most scornfully! “That woman is a terruca! She’s the leader!” the neighbor told the police about my mother.9 I’m not sure if the whole time we were helping her she really hated us. Perhaps she just wanted to exist. Perhaps this was her opportunity—her one and only chance to exist somewhere other than on the bottommost rung of poverty’s ladder. For a brief moment, she imagined a rung even lower than her own: ours! Because in addition to being poor, we were also dirty.10

9. Terruco has become so hegemonic that it now describes not only the terrorists themselves but also the entire period of violence, which is called “the time of terrorism.” It takes on greater meaning as part of an authoritarian-military discourse that tried to become Peru’s official memory. See, among others, Degregori, Qué difícil es ser Dios.

10. I think it’s relevant to share one more doubt. When one of my two siblings read this text, he didn’t agree with my description of our neighbor’s actions. In contrast to my version, my brother remembers her as one of the people who most defended us. The basic outline of the situation remains unchanged: when faced with danger, our neighbors debated whether to accuse us, defend us, or play dumb. I think my memory is accurate, and I know that the most important thing isn’t how faithful I am to an isolated fact. But, when I wrote this episode, I was thinking about this particular woman and not another. I wasn’t thinking about our neighbor, one of the leaders who worked to make sure every child had milk, nor was I thinking about our cynical neighbor, the one who lived in a wood-planked house. No, I was thinking about this particular woman, who was at the bottom of the heap. This led me to tell the story in a certain way and to share certain reflections. I gave meaning to an event by considering a specific person’s attributes, not just her conduct. Yet if it hadn’t been she (even though I think it was), would the reflection hold up? I’d have told more or less the same story, but perhaps I’d have come to different conclusions. That’s why we shouldn’t forget that reflections like those I’m offering in this book are but small contributions to a slow and complex process of debating the violence. These reflections should complement larger research efforts.
A neighborhood friend, a boy in my brother’s class at school, showed up at our house the day before yesterday with a newspaper clipping. “Is this your mother?” he asked. A full-color image on one of the newspaper’s inside pages showed a woman lying on her back, stretched out on the beach. There was a sign on top of her that read, “This is how traitors die.” In the note, the woman’s first and last name appeared, though slightly altered, probably because of the journalist’s failure to copy the police report correctly.

“Yes, it’s her,” I said.

I waited to see what would happen, how he’d react.

“The good part,” I told him, “is that my mother is an anonymous Shining Path militant, not one of the leaders. She isn’t one of those women about whom a lot has been written, like Abimael Guzmán’s closest female comrades.”

My mother’s death didn’t matter to anybody. It didn’t grab major headlines, only brief mentions on morning television and in a few newspapers. She was, in a matter of speaking, a second-class terrorist who they claimed was supposedly killed by her own comrades. She wasn’t worth anyone’s time. She wasn’t newsworthy.

There my friend stood, discovering the secret—waiting. He was a simple, very poor young man, who now works hard running a printing press to support his family. He hugged my brother. And he kept our secret. So did four million television viewers who saw what happened but chose not to see.

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11. As far as I have been able to tell, agents of the Peruvian Army killed my mother extrajudicially in May 1992. Similar actions took place in both Lima and the provinces throughout the early months of 1992. See, among others, Comisión de la Verdad, Informe final; Uceda, Muerte en el Pentagonito. The sign found on her body, supposedly authored by Shining Path, gives reason to believe it was forged. After being detained at the exit to San Marcos National University, where she worked typing up students’ papers on an old typewriter, she was shot three times and then her body was abandoned on a beach in Lima’s Chorrillos District. Various witnesses saw her get into the truck that captured her on University Avenue while she waited for public transportation to take her home.
I can only imagine what it’s like to be exposed to public scrutiny and scorn. My family belonged to the world of unorganized militancy. They certainly had their share of adventures and misadventures, but they were essentially waging a silent war, a small-scale war, a war happening on the outskirts of Lima in the “cones,” in various districts and humble shantytowns full of shacks covered with makeshift roofs. They had few medios with which to fight, and the weapons they did have were quite old. They were young, Senderista men and women living in countless homes spread throughout the city that gave them temporary shelter. Their struggles and battles weren’t epic.

The police were not much better off. They were equally exposed and left to their fate. They had routines very much like those of the militants: sleuthing, harassing, pursuing people, showing up a moment too late, with only occasional success. Their families lived in the same poor neighborhoods as their enemies, and their weapons were just as precarious.

It was a relentless war—a war without bloody trenches or barbed wire, without newspaper coverage of the mass graves being discovered in the Andean highlands, without reports or spectacles. All were left on their own to count their dead silently.

All of these people belonged to the same generation: young police officers who were really adolescents, practically children; the subversives; and the army recruits, many of them forced into service and who now languish, forgotten, in their towns. All of them killing one another! It was like a war among children, and this made it so much grayer. It makes

12. Conos (cones) refers to the large districts that formed on the outskirts of Lima when migrants moved from the Andean highlands to the capital in the mid-twentieth century, a process that accelerated because of the forced displacements that the war sparked. The cones were impoverished areas that grew in a disorderly way. Today they are like large cities unto themselves within the new metropolitan Lima.

13. The Shining Path militants I met used the colloquial term medios (resources) to refer to their old pistols, revolvers, rifles, and explosives. Taking care of one’s medios was almost a sacred thing, given their scarcity and the high human cost of obtaining them.

14. Since at least 1983, both the press and the national and international human rights organizations have presented evidence of massacres, torture, and mass graves (especially what was happening in Andean regions such as Ayacucho, Apurímac, and Huancavelica) in chronicles, reports, accusations, and photographic exposés.
me think of something from a character in *All Quiet on the Western Front*: We showed up dreaming of our futures, believing in what our teachers instilled in us, believing in what adults said, but the first death, the first decimated body we saw, put an end to that order.\(^{15}\)

My parents and their friends were just common Senderistas. Others weren’t so lucky: they were high-profile figures, had noteworthy captures, were foreigners, or held important positions. Because of their notoriety, they’ve lived exposed for years, either in jail or stalked by the news media. Once they were released from jail, many of them found it hard to create spaces in which to piece their lives back together. Do they miss prison? There, at least, they had friends.\(^{16}\) In the outside world, they’re surrounded by the hatred and fear of those who label them infectious agents. Do they deserve such treatment? Yet how can they not warrant suspicion, mistrust, or even resentment and hate if families today mourn their dead because of the things these people did?

But is it enough to say that Shining Path’s militants deserved what they had coming, that they should simply accept the consequences of their actions indefinitely without ever being afforded any consideration? Does forgiveness have a “time,” just as memory, as academics say, has a time?\(^{17}\) What fate would those who belonged to Shining Path have to suffer to make us feel at ease or more satisfied? Would they have to be exiled, disappeared, ostracized, forgotten, or left destitute? Is that all we can offer them?

7 Some films have been circulating, on a small scale, among people interested in the topic of memory: a handful of biographical films and

\(^{15}\) Remarque, *All Quiet*, 291.

\(^{16}\) Martha-Cecilia Dietrich’s 2015 documentary, *Entre memorias* (Between memories), delves into this subject: MRTA women, some in prison and some not, who are taking stock of their lives.

\(^{17}\) *Temporalities of memory* is a phrase that memory scholars commonly use to refer to several things: that it’s easier to remember a painful and complex occurrence the more time has passed since it happened; that the opportunities to hear new voices and points of view about the past shift in accordance with people’s willingness to remember the past, forget it, or reinterpret it; and that there’s no single road to forgetting or remembering. See Degregori, “Sobre la Comisión”; for a much more detailed and historicized treatment of these topics, see Stern and Winn, “El tortuoso camino.”
lots of films about prisons, especially about the experiences of female prisoners. It’s striking to see such a growing interest in topics that were once considered taboo and somewhat risky.

But what might the people represented in these films think about how they’re portrayed? What might they say about how artists are interpreting them?

It must be hard for the Shining Path militants portrayed in these films to rest. They can’t really protest or demand greater respect. What rights can people protest when they have lost all rights?

Many years have passed, and Shining Path militants continue to be a pretext for banal performances of feigned understanding. We all can talk about Shining Path because doing so makes us look better. We shine next to them. We appear more magnanimous. And when we face them protected by our ethics, our reason, and our impeccable democratic spirit, we skirt the real issue and take comfort in our difference from them.18

It’s so difficult to approach our enemies—or the guilty—with any real willingness to understand them. I’m not saying that we should agree with them or forgive them. Nor should we try to defeat them in an ideological battle. I’m talking about simple understanding—with no compensation and no reward or recognition for being an empathetic hero. It’s tough because we don’t get anywhere in society by trying to understand our enemies. It doesn’t bring us prestige. And if we were to show empathy, no one would notice.

18. This is what Arredondo does in her documentary Sybila, a personal, almost egotistical coming-to-terms with the myths of her childhood. In the process, she shows no concern for the damage that such exposure might cause the protagonist’s family, a family that has had to confront not ghosts but rather years of very complicated experiences. The film undoubtedly has merit because it shows some decisive moments: particularly how an impatient and harshly rational woman from Shining Path constructs her arguments. But it does this through an ambush whose goal is to show how very different the director-narrator is from her protagonist. Articles in the press that celebrated the film also expressed amazement at the director’s empathic approach: they said, let’s try to understand this exotic woman who draws us close and pushes us away, who at bottom is unknowable to us but seems human. Yet if the exercise were instead to switch roles, would it be so simple to write this way, claiming authority to grant understanding or even humanity? I think that to understand the other is, in a way, to die with the other, to give oneself over to another person. But it’s not always possible to do that, nor is it even right to ask someone to do it.
To treat the families of “innocent” victims with empathy is a different story. In that case, we gain something almost immediately. That’s why there are so many activists, artists, memory promoters, and cultural mediators. Wasn’t it Todorov who, suspicious, warned us that those who lead the fight for memory and morality might be doing it to feel better about themselves and to secure their status as exemplary individuals?¹⁹

When someone acknowledges the “legitimate” victims, it really doesn’t matter if the approach is childish, mechanical, or disingenuous. People celebrate the mere gesture as intrinsically just, as ringed by a halo of goodness. There are extreme cases (which perhaps aren’t so rare), such as that of an urban artist who travels all over the place with a stencil of the likeness of Mamá Angélica, the great Peruvian human rights activist. Within five minutes, that artist can multiply Mamá Angélica’s image wherever he feels it’s missing. Another example comes to mind of a different artist whose collages combine images of Ekeko (the god of abundance), Japanese manga characters, and other elements of Lima’s chicha cultural melting pot, as well as the victims’ faces and other iconography related to them.

But nothing is simple. Human rights organizations feel affection for these artists. They are grateful to have them as allies, as companions in their quest for justice and reparations—especially when no one else does anything and the state remains so indifferent. Despite the banality of their art, these artists accompany the victims and their families in solidarity. And solidarity is no small thing.

So, it’s hard to make clear judgments about anything. Ultimately, the use and abuse of memory is something that has no clear limits but rather, perhaps, only moments and needs.

¹⁹. “Ritual commemoration, when it only confirms a negative image of the other in the past or a positive image of the self, is ineffective as a tool of public education. . . . It is often said nowadays that there is no statute of limitations on the rights of memory, and that we should all be fighters on its side. But when we hear such appeals against forgetting and for the ‘duty of memory,’ we should realize that we are not being asked to undertake any recovery of memory—through the establishment of facts or through their interpretation. Nothing and no one stand in the way of such work in democratic states like those in which we live. What we are being invited to undertake is the defense of a particular selection of facts that allow its protagonists to maintain their status as heroes, victims, or teachers of moral lessons, against any other selection that might give them less gratifying roles.” Todorov, Hope and Memory, 175.
It’s inevitable for the victims to be an object of study, opinion, and representation. It’s also inevitable for the guilty, the enemies: the subversives, the terrorists, the Senderistas. And it’s inevitable for the families and heirs of all these people. Perhaps they’d prefer to forget. But they can’t do anything to stop others from exploiting their experience because, even though the experience is theirs and theirs alone, it no longer belongs to them.

I remember Milan Kundera’s reflections on compassion: a discredited, blighted word for the Peruvian Left, which instead always preferred to speak of solidarity. Kundera spoke of one sense in which we might understand compassion: as a true, impassioned sharing in another’s suffering.20

With the best intentions, some academics and artists rescue memory and strive for societal recognition of all memories—including those of the men and women of Shining Path, or of the MRTA. But there is no trace of compassion in their approach, nor should we expect it. People react in whichever way suits them best.

Yet I think that to lack compassion is a weakness. People never stop to consider (or let themselves feel) that in the process of trying to get to know another’s experience they may really be invading the privacy of families that have already suffered so much and that are tired of being the main characters in local tales of infamy.21

“Tell that boy to go home,” I overheard her say. The words emanated from the kitchen. She spoke them in a deep tone that she tried to keep hushed. I could sense a tiff brewing. My friend, almost certainly

20. The story’s narrator says: “In languages that form the word ‘compassion’ not from the root ‘suffering’ but from the root ‘feeling,’ the word is used in approximately the same way, but to contend that it designates a bad or inferior sentiment is difficult. The secret strength of its etymology floods the word with another light and gives it a broader meaning: to have compassion (co-feeling) means not only to be able to live with the other’s misfortune but also to feel with him any emotion.” Kundera, Unbearable Lightness, 20.

21. Perhaps it’s because language sets traps that make it hard for us to understand one another. Ulfe and Ilizarbe (“Paloma”) find themselves perplexed by a woman from Shining Path who was at once “a dove and rigid as steel.” In Mikael Wiström’s 2014 film,
ashamed, told her mother that she had just invited me over to play Monopoly. How was she now going to tell me that I wasn’t allowed in her house? Confusion ensued, muttering, pots clanging. I heard an authoritarian-sounding voice that I couldn’t quite decipher. Frozen in the entryway, standing in front of a partially cracked-open door of metal and glass, I couldn’t move a muscle. I felt so much rage and confusion. I hadn’t done anything to deserve this. It wasn’t my idea to go to their house! My friend had invited me! My pride was wounded. My legs stayed still, and there I stood: it was as if I wanted to hear my friend kicking me out so that she would feel guilty and I would feel sad. The perfect drama! But it didn’t happen that way. Her older sister stepped outside and, in the most polite tone she could muster, said, “I’m sorry. My sister has to study. She can’t play with you.” And she closed the door.

Twenty years later in a café in the San Miguel Mall, a young woman told me that she had spoken of me to her family at a gathering of aunts and uncles who knew me—or who knew my family. They told her about all the terror they’d lived through because of us. They told her to stay far away from me because I would only wind up ruining her career. They said I was angry and resentful, that assuredly all I wanted to do was take revenge on everyone because of what happened to my parents. She told me all of this at great length and in great detail. She emphasized that those were her family’s opinions but that she thought differently. She just wanted me to tell her the truth, to help her decide whose side to take.

The truth . . . The only truth that occurred to me at that moment was the most obvious one: that her family was concerned about her, that they had reasons for feeling as they did, that in their memories my mother

...Tempestad en los Andes, one of the protagonists, a young woman, asks herself the same question when she tries to explain the actions of her aunt, the Shining Path leader Augusta La Torre. The woman, Josefin Ekermann, cries and can hardly utter the following words: “I can’t understand it because she was so tender and at the same time so harsh” (my paraphrase). Language traps us because it forces us into dichotomies; it forces us to affirm ourselves so strongly that it becomes hard for us to identify with others in simple ways. Who is not harsh and also sweet and sensible? Why can’t we start by accepting that we’re faced with people who, if they aren’t our equals, are very similar to us? Ekermann became a respected human rights defender; she died in the March 2019 Ethiopian Airlines crash outside of Addis Ababa.
was, above all, a plague who put everyone she touched at risk. These people had never seen me before. But their memories of my mother made them view me as an extension of her, as resentment incarnate, a Senderista in my very DNA, to my core, an infectious agent. That’s what they believed. And because of their fear and desire to protect a family member whom they loved, they never stopped to think about what someone else might be feeling, what I or my family might have experienced. They never stopped to consider that maybe I wasn’t a suicide bomber poised to exact revenge on the world.

Of course, I didn’t say all this to her. I just shared the gist of what I was thinking. “Your family loves you,” I said. “They’re worried about you. I don’t feel like talking about this anymore.” And that’s where we left it.