

The Aftermath and After

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Living in Rwanda After the Genocide By Jean Hatzfeld (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 242 pp., \$25)

The Antelope's Strategy: Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda By Lee Ann Fujii (Cornell University Press, 212 pp., \$29.95)

After Genocide: Transitional Justice, Post- Conflict Reconstruction and Reconciliation in Rwanda and Beyond Edited by Phil Clark and Zachary D. Kaufman (Columbia University Press, 399 pp., \$50)

A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster By Rebecca Solnit (Viking, 353 pp., \$27.95)

I.

The subject of catastrophe invites the high eloquence of writers, the explanatory power of historians, and the deepest empathy of ordinary people. But the aftermath of catastrophe--that is not yet a subject to which many people kindle. Most of us prefer to back away from the scene of torment, with its inconsolable survivors and its insoluble problems. The survivors, though, cannot back away. They continue to live where the others died. Jean Améry, tortured at Auschwitz, wrote powerfully about the world's readiness to isolate the survivor, who is unable to join in "the peace chorus all around him, which cheerfully proposes: not backward let us look but forward, to a better, common future."

After a century of wars of unprecedented scale and savagery, of mass murders and natural disasters, the problems of post-catastrophic societies are a huge and

unconscionably neglected quandary for our times. *Gedenk!* Remember! It is a beloved dictum, generalized from the Holocaust to other genocides and disasters. For the fortunate, the unscarred, the calamity can be comfortably assigned to the past, and the ongoing effects remedied with material assistance and goodwill. But for those who remain on the scene, and suffer for it, neither the present nor the future can be divested of the darkness of the past. They are surrounded by our talk of sympathy and fellow feeling--and they may be forgiven for wondering whether this post-catastrophic uplift is not often a mask for indifference.

So is there a more efficacious response? Are there forms of empathy that are not smug and spurious and self-serving? What moral relationship can outsiders forge with those who have been irreparably and unimaginably harmed? These are ancient problems, addressed by seers and philosophers and divines; but they have practical urgency--and even policy dimensions--for ordinary people in the twenty-first century.

In July 1994, the French journalist Jean Hatzfeld crossed the border from Burundi into Rwanda with the first reporters to arrive at the end of the genocide. Fresh from the war in Bosnia, Hatzfeld had covered conflict and its aftermath in Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East for two decades. In the totality, and the intimate savagery, of the killing, Rwanda was like nothing he had ever seen. Eventually he left journalism to write full-time about the difficulties of rebuilding Rwanda, dividing his time between Paris and Nyamata, a market town in a devastated region in the south of the country. Months of interviews and investigations turned into years, and one book led to another. *Into the Quick of Life*, about the town's survivors, and *Machete Season*, about an imprisoned gang of local perpetrators, published in French three years apart, appeared in English in 2005. Hatzfeld became a familiar figure in Nyamata. Now *The Antelope's Strategy* brings the story up to 2008, with the killers returned from prison and townspeople trying to cobble together a common life under the sign of "reconciliation," which is the official policy of the government and the mantra of Western humanitarian organizations.

Too little known in the United States, Hatzfeld's work is a profound inquiry into the character of social relationships in a post-genocide society. There is no comparable work about Jewish survivors in the immediate aftermath of World War II, and none from within Cambodia after 1979, and none, to my knowledge, about Bosnia, where in any case the violence was less total. One would not guess the importance of Hatzfeld's slim volumes from their calm pacing and their modest tone. His books seem at first glance to be compilations of interviews strung together with short commentaries. Ruminative rather than hard-hitting, characterized by sparse exposition and rigorously controlled details, these books are kin to Jan Gross's *Neighbors* and *Fear*, short and definitive and profoundly troubling studies of the murders of Polish Jews by Poles before and after the Nazi genocide. Taken together, Gross's books constitute a pared-down alternative to the big Holocaust classics, as well as a refutation of the genocide melodramas that Hollywood has popularized. Like Gross, Hatzfeld works from an awareness of the essential paradox in writing about genocide, which is that he is bound to describe what is beyond words. Leaving much of the exposition to his tersely eloquent Rwandan subjects, his solution is linguistic

restraint and emotional fact, as if too many words and too many feelings would corrupt the account of such a reality.

How are people doing? It is the only question from which any real empathy proceeds; but unfortunately it is rare for outsiders to ask it. The question is at the core of *The Antelope's Strategy*, which takes its title from a survivor's description of sprinting every day for months to outwit the killers. Many readers are likely to have left Rwanda back with Philip Gourevitch's *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*, an account of the genocide and the immediate aftermath that ends in 1997. A tiny African country with no book publishers, few writers, and a thin literary tradition has difficulty in keeping the story going. Hatzfeld's assurance to survivors that "you also interest us when you go on living" is admirable, but it goes against the grain of declining Western interest.

As far as most of the literate public is concerned, Rwanda was never so fascinating as in those three months of 1994, and the survivors never so interesting as when they were about to die. This despite the complex and extraordinary history of the last fifteen years. For the *génocidaires* did not fall to their knees, repentant: they fled to the Democratic Republic of Congo and continued to attack across the border. France continued to meddle secretly, and Congo's Mobutu supplied them with arms. The war in Congo since 1997 has killed an estimated 5.4 million people. Meanwhile, Rwanda has been the only nation ever to bring to trial masses of low-level perpetrators; the trials have fueled bitter controversies and have provoked a surge of genocide denial outside the country. But as far as most Westerners--and most Africans, too--are concerned, Rwanda is, well, so 1990s.

Hatzfeld's books, and especially *The Antelope's Strategy*, push against the tight framing of genocide as a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Hatzfeld wants us to see that genocide is a process halted only with great difficulty and political will. In Rwanda, as in Cambodia, the actual violence did not end for years after the spotlight moved on; and even after the countries were finally pacified and secured, the moral and psychological ravages continued--as they do today. Hatzfeld's important book investigates the intimate history of a single town. For a lesser writer, the task of tracing the threads that connect the blood-drenched past and the barely tolerable present would end up in platitudes. But Hatzfeld turns out to be no mere journalist. He is a historian and a moral observer of great distinction.

II.

Compared to postwar Poland, where locals expelled or murdered Jewish survivors who managed to stagger home from the camps, present-day Rwanda looks like a multicultural haven (although there were plenty of murders in Rwanda in the 1990s). Visitors to the country are impressed by what they find there, as I myself have been; and rightly so. The country could have ended up like Somalia, or like Sierra Leone during its cycles of horror. In Nyamata, however, no one is killing anyone. (Or almost no one: Hatzfeld discusses one murder.) Fewer fields lie fallow, and there are fewer abandoned houses scarring the landscape. Hatzfeld stresses that Hutu and Tutsi go

to the same churches, and even to the same cabarets, and their children attend the same schools.

But that is not the whole truth. At the end of Sunday services, Tutsis and Hutus huddle in separate groups. As evening falls, you would notice that Tutsis gather to walk home together from town for safety in numbers. On the hills, he reports, "people walking along abruptly cross to the other side of the path, sneering or muttering insults at a passerby." And those picture-perfect schools, where adorably well-behaved children sit on hard benches with no distractions except the teacher (American kids would riot), are the same schools, Hatzfeld points out, where the killers and the victims sat beside each other twenty years ago, schoolyard chums.

Hatzfeld's book begins with the return of a group of convicted killers in 2003, unexpectedly freed from long prison sentences by President Paul Kagame's startling release of some forty thousand *génocidaires*. (Forty thousand!) The decision rocked the country--"stupefied" is Hatzfeld's description of the survivors in Nyamata, "stunned, anxious when not plain terrified." The Tutsis were always a minority, less than 10 percent, but now the survivors--an estimated 130,000 at the end of the genocide--constitute a sliver of the population of 9.7 million. The release of the Hutu killers in 2003 was a huge gamble that they would not endanger the survivors. And most of the gang in *Machete Season* returned, to remake lives alongside people whose loved ones they once hunted down and hacked to death. Reconciliation was the plan. The men had learned in prison to ask forgiveness, and official ideology encouraged the survivors to grant it.

On the first day back, they made their way through town in a long line, looking humbled and wary to the mixed crowd of onlookers, fearful themselves of retribution. Claudine, a teenager when she survived the hunt in the nearby marshes where fifty thousand died, gives an acid description of the psychobabble of reconciliation-speak as they stumbled along: "Their sheepish voices were saying, 'Hallelujah, hallelujah! How are you? May God protect you! Love one another as yourselves. We shall pray for you, that's definite from now on.'" But in the whirlwind of emotions and domestic dramas set off by the homecoming, the program of neighborly truth and reconciliation fizzled. Hatzfeld heard the same complaint from Tutsis over and over: "Not one prisoner came asking for forgiveness."

The killers were incurious about how their victims were faring, and oblivious to what the genocide had wrought, except as it affected their own problems with abandoned fields and wives with babies. "They are afraid to have a conversation," Claudine adds, "so if someone goes near them--quick, they blurt out a *bonjour* to ward off a handshake, behaving like angels but turning away from any gesture of closeness with us." In fact, prisoners were more likely to see themselves as dispensers of justice and forgiveness--taking back wives who had been unfaithful, ousting wrongful occupants of their fields--than as criminals in search of absolution. To be sure, the responses varied: some explicitly rejected remorse, but one hapless man ended up dead because he insisted on talking too much, compulsively confessing to anyone who would listen. He produced too much truth, too many revelations, for the

community to bear. Others expressed contrition strategically, always in public, so as to build up credibility with the authorities. They never appealed in private to victims' families.

All this resonates troublingly with Hatzfeld's appalling discovery, in *Machete Season*, that the genocide conferred on the killers a near-complete immunity to guilt, remorse, and the need for contrition. "In the wake of a genocide," he concluded then, "the evasion of the ordinary killers and their families passes understanding." The moral blankness that Hatzfeld encountered in his interviews of perpetrators bore no resemblance to what he had seen after wars elsewhere among soldiers, secret police, torturers, and mass killers, who under pressure routinely confessed and sought release from their crimes. The revelation from central Africa conjoins with the arguments of Jan Gross, Omer Bartov, and others who have studied the perpetrators of the Shoah. It also helps to make sense of the confident prevarications of the former Khmer Rouge *génocidaires* in Cambodia--a trait visible right now on the Web in the testimony of Kaing Guek Eav, formerly the torturer Duch, on trial in Phnom Penh for crimes against humanity before a joint Cambodian/international court. In prison, perpetrators recited a litany of exculpations, which family members echoed. ("It wasn't me, it was the others." "I wasn't there, I didn't see anything," "I didn't want to, but they made me do it.") "Is it possible," Hatzfeld asked in *Machete Season*, "that of all categories of war criminals, the perpetrator of genocide winds up the least traumatized?" The answer was an unequivocal yes.

Thus it is not surprising that in *The Antelope's Strategy* the prisoners' return yields no touching encounters with survivors, no affecting acts of penance or even clumsy attempts at making reparations. Yet it is nonetheless extraordinary to watch through Hatzfeld's eyes as their obtuseness plays out in face-to-face encounters with the victims. Rwanda's densely settled countryside and small-town life make separation impossible. People bump into each other in the market, in church, in clubs, and on the narrow paths that connect the dwellings in the hills. Initially awkward and humble, the ex-cons became more comfortable and assertive.

A survivor describes her encounter with a man who had been her teacher. Wearing a good suit, he was dignified and composed, whereas "I was the one who was startled. . . . I felt almost humiliated. I swerved to one side." We hear from the killers: Pancrace, a sociable fellow who was twenty-five in 1994, takes a cheerful view of the situation. True, he dreams more of the murders than he did in prison, and he fears that the "traumas" of the survivors might lead them to harm him. (Western aid organizations have introduced "trauma" into popular usage.) But there is no overt nastiness and no apparent danger, and that is enough for him. "I was charged, I was convicted, I was pardoned. I did not ask to be forgiven. After all, it's not worth asking for forgiveness if your plea cannot be accepted." Case closed. The old gang sometimes gets together and reminisces, rather like ex-Nazis in German beer halls in the 1950s. "We visit one another, share drinks and memories. Among ourselves, we feel at ease talking over this or that event in the marshes or in Congo. We enjoy revisiting good and bad moments together. With the Tutsis, though, we feel ill at ease."

A disturbing picture takes shape in *The Antelope's Strategy*. Perpetrators and their families pay lip service to reconciliation; and they do so because their ideas of reconciliation are so faint and undemanding, and they have so little at stake. It is the survivors who lag behind, with their memories, their rage, their futile yearning for vengeance. A killer conveys the hard facts of reconciliation realpolitik: "The Tutsis--you can see they don't work as they used to. They are still desolate. They go on suffering, one way or another, and show themselves to be vulnerable. Their courage fails them if the rains skip a visit. They fall by the wayside." But the Hutus? "They are reinvigorated: they thought themselves finished forever."

An American might say that they wish to "move on," which is our *ne plus ultra* of advice about the experience of tragic loss. "They shorten their memories so they can look toward the future. They don't want to wind their lives around their memories." Another killer explains that Hutus have nothing to run from, whereas Tutsis are always poised to flee: "The survivors always feel death at their heels. They meet an evil look, hear a shout--and they jump sideways." But "as for a killer, if he goes back to his land, he doesn't feel pursued by anything, not even the stench of death he worked in every day."

Innocent Rwililiza seconds this judgment from the other side. He is Hatzfeld's interpreter and longtime aide, and one of twenty survivors of six thousand people who hid fifteen kilometers away in Kayumba Forest. Innocent sees how post-catastrophic life moves away from the survivors, leaving them stranded--a phenomenon also described with excruciating clarity by Jewish survivors in the 1950s. Innocent, too, sees the killers' zest for life, their eagerness to get on with things and leave the past behind. He reflects on the paradox with stunning clarity:

When I see Hutu families doing well, when I see killers buckling down to the daunting work of clearing the land and gathering in harvests, when I see Hutus applying for good jobs or to study in college, or dressed up on Sundays, in elegant wedding processions--I wonder, Why do we, who ran so hard, find ourselves falling behind as also-rans? With our psychological problems, our meager crops, and our losses? Why do we, who proved each morning how faithful we were to life, to the point of collapsing each evening from exhaustion, receive the smallest share of gratitude? Why is robust strength waiting so long to knock on our doors? Those are questions that humiliate my deepest being.

As the world goes, Innocent is a success: a civic leader, a teacher who is now a head of school, and remarried. (He lost his wife and son in 1994.) Other survivors in Hatzfeld's book have fallen in love, married or remarried, and had children; they run farms and businesses, and hold responsible positions. Yet all this apparent normalcy does not change the fact that they are, in important ways, losers twice over: in the genocide, and in a world that wants to leave the genocide behind. They, too, are so 1990s.

Floating through the book is an important group of Nyamata's residents--the dead, who are hidden to more prosaic observers, including their murderers. They keep the

survivors company. "They are dead to the living," Innocent explains, "but they have never disappeared for the survivors: I mean that a certain complicity keeps them closer to survivors than to other living souls. They listen to us; they bring us happiness or sorrow." To understand survivors, one must be a connoisseur of the unseen, a student of implication and indirection: how else can we detect the invisible companions, the ghosts, who always attend them? Hatzfeld is the only writer I know who dwells upon these invisible but intimate relationships. They are present from the first pages of *The Antelope's Strategy*, always complicating and disturbing the author's endeavor to record the truth.

Claudine, one of the book's most appealing informants, counters Hatzfeld's incessant hankering for facts with a bit of banter, and then with a reproach that calls up the ghosts. "More questions?" she asks in feigned astonishment. 'Still about the killings. So you just can't stop. Why keep on? Why ask me?'" She identifies the survivor's predicament: close enough to the dead to know that they cry out for the last word, and close enough to know that they will never have it. "All the dead moldering away under the papyrus or drying up out in the sun--they've got no way to tell anyone they disagree."

The ghosts raise questions about the ethics of representation, and put the brakes on supplying the ghoulish detail that lends authenticity to the stories that the living consume with a morbid relish. "Describing the way the dead were demeaned, chopped up so viciously, is dishonorable to them," another survivor of the forest flatly asserts. "Giving details about how they were stripped naked or cut short, how they dragged themselves along, how they pleaded for mercy, how they screamed or groaned or vomited or bled--that can be humiliating for them. One must be polite even to the dead, respecting their privacy." In this as in other pressing matters, however, survivors disagree. Another woman insists that survivors are honor-bound to describe the dead, whatever the lurid details or imperfections of their account: "These well-known and dearly beloved dead are the most necessary people to remember when telling about the genocide."

III.

No other post-genocidal society has faced such dire problems of re-integration, and no country has ever created a reconciliation program of this magnitude. In postwar Europe, survivors emigrated to the United States and Israel, leaving non-Jewish Germans to come to terms with their past on their own. In Cambodia, there has been no national reckoning, and in any case the perpetrators constitute a minority in a sea of survivors and their children. In Rwanda, however, the demographic problems of reconstituting a nation out of a vast Hutu majority and a tiny Tutsi remnant are compounded by the brutal fact that the violence of 1994 was produced by a mass mobilization, and was carried out by an army but also by civilians and a volunteer militia.

There are an estimated 175,000 to 200,000 killers, and by now most of them are back in Rwanda, having returned from Congo. Behind them stand bands and battalions of

looters, cheerleaders, helpers, and passive onlookers. And further back in this mutilated society there is a confusing gray zone: intermarriage, and the flimsiness of Tutsi and Hutu labels, and the mix of local friendships and animosities make the line between victims and perpetrators sometimes blurry. (But not too blurry: the genocide deniers like to trot out the indisputable fact that the *génocidaires* also killed Hutus, but this is roughly equivalent to saying that the Holocaust was not a war against the Jews because Gypsies, too, were killed.)

Analyzing the complications of culpability and victimhood in Rwanda has attracted a new generation of researchers to the hills. Many of them are especially interested in *gacaca*, the community-based court system implemented in 2002 to try lower-echelon perpetrators. Others are concerned with the roots of the genocide. The scholars tend to be hostile to the Kagame regime, and their stress on the gray area between Hutu activism and Tutsi victimhood challenges the regime's use of ethnic hatred as the overriding paradigm, the satisfactory explanation, for the killings. Lee Ann Fujii's book is a political science study that takes such an approach to an extreme. From fieldwork and interviews in two communities, Fujii argues that the violence was driven by neither Hutu extremist ideology nor hatred of Tutsis, but rather by local loyalties and animosities, aggravated by fears of the war that Kagame's insurgent army had brought to the north. Central to her thesis are the lower-level *génocidaires* whom she interviewed--Fujii calls them "joiners"--who represent themselves as having been cowed by peer pressure and local zealots into participating.

Fujii's rejection of the ethnic-hatred explanation and her substitution of a local-networks explanation will seem like a straw man to anyone outside the business of political science model-building. Historians of collective violence have long recognized that mass murder need not depend entirely on visceral hatred of individuals in--or the entire--targeted group. Mass violence in the service of lofty loathsome ends (ridding the world of verminous Jews or cockroach Tutsis) is often multi-determined in its causality. It often recruits participants for whom the ideological mission gives cover for more banal motives: neighborly grudges and fears, greed for the others' property. The work of mass slaughter always embellishes, and even glorifies, its own purposes for the sake of exculpation, as the killers bond over their ideals and share their pre-existing prejudices about their victims.

Fujii also has the social scientist's habit of slicing and dicing passages from interviews and then taking the fragments at face value: the "linguistic turn" unfortunately passed political science by. But her book demonstrates some of the strengths of the new scholarship as well. The research is assiduous; and Fujii rightly leaves Kigali and the official line behind for the uneasy realities of the countryside, where cohabitation can be very complicated. You can see from her book, for example, how community ties occasionally undercut the genocide venture, as when a man describes participating in a series of murders so as to draw attention away from a Tutsi friend's hiding place. Still, such exceptions cannot persuade the reader that the genocide was not primarily about killing Tutsis.

Perhaps the politics of reconciliation are too ham-handed to deal with self-

justifications and explanations like those of Fujii's joiners. The historical precedents suggest that stability in the aftermath of such a catastrophe is conducive to less truth, not more truth. In Rwanda, the hope is that internal peace and security will over the long run allow oblivion and justice to cohabit. *Gacaca* is the centerpiece of the government's attempt to tap the resources of ordinary people in dispensing justice and ascertaining truth. It is winding up its work this year, and as in all things Rwandan, debate rages about its long-term effects.

The critics are vociferous: they include embittered Hutu exiles abroad, some of them in flight from genocide charges, as well as foreign legal observers. The latter tend to know little about Rwanda, but a lot about international law; they deplore the lack of due process in the *gacaca* system, and the paucity of formal guarantees to its defendants. The supporters of *gacaca* retort that community courts were the best that could be done in a shattered country, where only a handful of lawyers and judges survived, and where, in 2000, there were 120,000 prisoners in jail awaiting trial.

The furious temper of the debate about *gacaca* and other matters of reconciliation is evident in Phil Clark and Zachary Kaufman's book, a singular attempt to bring together conflicting points of view. The book begins with an extraordinary preface by Rwanda's president, who, among other things, eviscerates the most hostile essay in the volume, which accuses his government of manipulating genocide memory for Tutsi political advantage. Whether you agree with Kagame or not, the sharp intelligence and moral passion of his piece are undeniable. Clark and Kaufman, practitioners and scholars of international law who are well versed in Rwandan affairs, are rare among Western academics and lawyers in acknowledging the full range of Rwanda's difficulties. They reject the current academic fashion of scapegoating Kagame, and they call attention to two alarming trends in academic studies: "a neglect of basic truths about the genocide, and the proliferation of genocide denial and other forms of damaging revisionism." Their fine tone of broad-mindedness, combined with the unusual presence of Rwandan writers working inside the country, opens up a more realistic and generous assessment of the country's accomplishments, and provides some basis for cautious optimism about the future.

Clark's pieces on transitional justice are among the best in the volume. In a subtle analysis of *gacaca*, he goes beyond the best-among-bad-options defense to enumerate the system's successes. *Gacaca* defied predictions that it would dispense victor's justice or, worse, lynch law. It involved masses of Rwandans in rule-based procedures and deliberations--an impressive experiment in a country that lacks traditions of civil society. The courts (officially numbered at 12,000) tried tens of thousands of cases, and collected masses of evidence on what actually happened in 1994.

No one is satisfied, of course; everyone thinks that *gacaca* is flawed. But perhaps this is its strength: *gacaca* professes to produce no permanent solution, only enough justice and truth for everyone to live with. These trials put me in mind of Amos Oz's remark that in the aftermath of disaster, an ending by Chekhov is preferable to an ending by Shakespeare. In Chekhov, everyone is depressed, bitter, disillusioned, but

still on stage and still alive. In Shakespeare, there has been justice, and corpses litter the place.

Hatzfeld is not a political analyst, and he does not weigh in on *gacaca* in particular or the Kagame regime in general. But he does probe at the moral underside. He is impatient with the kinds of prevarications that Fujii treats as quasi-rational motives for participation in 1994. He sees the extremist politics of the Hutu regime as the engine that revved up the genocide, but he has held consistently that the world of Rwanda in 1994 was not devoid of moral choices. Indeed, that is why people suffer, Tutsi as well: the unquenchable remorse of a mother who let go of a child's hand, the daughter who hid while her brother died.

About *gacaca*, Hatzfeld is lukewarm. Inevitably, trials get tangled up in recriminations and pressures. Poor people trade their testimony for money and food. Hatzfeld nicely captures the mixture of lassitude, oratory, and astounding stories of running, hiding, and heartless killing that make up a typical session. "Some gatherings drag out in monotonous monologues, whereas other meetings unleash confrontations of startling violence, psychodramas, nervous breakdowns, provoking gestures of both kindness and rage." Relatives of the "dearly beloved dead" rarely find heart's ease. The survivors in Nyamata report unbearable discomfort and avoid sessions when they can. "Something strange and lost comes over me whenever I hear those killers speak," says a man who went once to the trial of his sister's killer and never went back. His disavowal was, you might say, Chekhovian.

Yet the irony is that these people who seem to others tired and frightened, who shrink at the business of coerced amity, who hold back from attending the tribunals and wish their tormentors dead, stand at the moral center of the community. They, not the killers, are the ones who think seriously about reconciliation. Regardless of their harrowing memories, the survivors are anything but forlorn and mired in the past. Knowing how impossible reconciliation is, they acknowledge what it actually requires, whereas the perpetrators fatalistically shrug off the entire business. Aware of the needy imprecations of the ghosts, the survivors understand what a burden it is to mourn the dead, as Rwandans are constantly adjured to do. Since they are the ones who most clearly see the flimsiness of the vow to "never forget," they are the ones to wonder whether oblivion is the only practical course.

The survivors also grasp that reconciliation means that once again they are the chief victims. They know that it means less truth, not more, about what happened to their loved ones, because for truth to be palatable to the huge Hutu majority it must be evenhanded. "Many people explain the genocide, especially during the mourning period every April, but they avoid the truly devastating facts, names, cruel details, and speak of it as a lesson useful to both sides," notes one cynic. Too much truth--all the facts about what the supposedly innocent neighbor women took from a Tutsi house, or how a crowd of onlookers jeered at someone being tortured--is counterproductive.

Alphonse, a killer, agrees that only censored truth is useful: "Telling how we lived it so zestfully, how hot we were--no. How we cracked jokes while out hunting, how we had

a Primus all around on good days, slaughtered the cows, sang in the marshes, how we casually gang-raped unlucky girls and women, how we had contests in the evenings over who had cut the most victims, or made fun of the dying in their agony and all suchlike amusements--that doesn't bear telling." And beyond the gang's own actions, what they really cannot talk about is how many people helped them in their foul work: "Saying that everyone joined in except for a few old guys, ladies, and their tiny children--that's another truth that must be filtered."

The truth is too much, and in some sense the survivors are also too much. There is an undertone of resignation in many of their comments to Hatzfeld--an understanding that if they disappeared, Rwanda could move along smoothly. "Perhaps after all the survivors have disappeared," ventures one woman, then anguish will no longer blight the children. "Tutsi survivors have no future," Innocent states firmly. "I say this to you speaking as one of them." Then the well-educated Tutsi elite who run things, many of them returned from exile abroad, can have their way with an evenhanded version of history: "It suits them to present the genocide as a kind of human catastrophe, a dreadful accident of history, in a way, requiring formidable efforts of cooperation to repair the damage."

No one has been able to imagine an alternative to this harsh can-do policy, and Hatzfeld makes no attempt to do so. But he does trace the pressures bearing down on communities such as Nyamata. The great instigators and whitewashers are not government officials, but the humanitarian organizations and foreign donors. By now unencumbered by any lingering embarrassment over the West's abnegation of responsibility in 1994, aid workers are happy to instruct Rwandans on how to be good neighbors. Hatzfeld mentions the millions of dollars that go into seminars on forgiveness and apologizing, and humanitarian organizations produce touching tableaux of harmony for the benefit of foreign visitors.

It seems to have occurred to none of these well-meaning people--the Americans are church people, and teenagers on community service projects, and idealistic college graduates in NGOs--that they are far less sophisticated about forgiveness than the Rwandans themselves, having most likely been limited in their experience to the realms of love, marriage, and parenting, and probably never having seen, say, a neighbor toss a baby down a pit latrine. They may be lending a hand building a hospital, or administering a model farm, which is certainly admirable. Yet everyone from abroad seems to think that they have something to teach the Rwandans about reconciliation. No one considers that it is the other way around.

The politics are clear to the Rwandans: reconciliation "satisfies the authorities, the international donors, and as for the sorrow of the survivors, that's just too bad," maintains Marie-Louise Kagoyire. Innocent Rwigyira, with a sure grasp of the global economy of penance, captures the interplay of self-interest and spurious affect: "If you think about it, who is it talking about forgiveness? The Tutsis? The Hutus? The freed prisoners, their families? None of them. It's the humanitarian organizations. They are importing forgiveness to Rwanda, and they wrap it in lots of dollars to win us over. There is a Forgiveness Plan just as there is an AIDS Plan, with public awareness

meetings, posters, petty local presidents, super-polite whites in all-terrain turbo vehicles.” That last image packs a punch, because white Land Rovers were the vehicles in which U.N. workers and soldiers hightailed it out of Rwanda as the genocide began.

For all its limitations, the Kagame government has lurched out of the diabolical aftermath of 1994 to hold firm to the idea of a re-integrated country and a plausible common good. Reconciliation may be a fiction, but it is a necessary fiction. Nyamata’s Tutsis have a stake in it—their lives and those of their children, all born since 1994, depend on it. The optimists among them acknowledge the demographic realities, but still they offer hope: “Everyone can change,” argues the man who as a teenager saw his pregnant sister’s belly ripped open. “The Hutus’ wrongdoing becomes less serious when life agrees to smile.” Sylvie, a social worker, takes a practical view not too far removed from Kagame’s: “Why shouldn’t it be possible to reconcile? Personally, I think it’s quite possible. To live in harmony as before, well, that’s out of the question, but why not be eighty percent reconciled?” She continues: “I was cut [by a machete] in my life, but I want to pursue life, absolutely. Even if I no longer trust my neighbors, I still have confidence in myself.”

But it is important not to be too carried away by the uplift of all this. For many others, the genocide will never lessen its grip. Hatzfeld gives the last word to Francine, a happily married woman who explains that she has walked out to meet life again but knows that she can never entirely occupy it. “Someone who saw herself in muddy detail as a corpse in the papyrus lying among all the others, comparing herself to all those dead, always feels distressed. By what? I cannot say. . . . The truth is, if she has lost her soul even for a moment, then it’s a tricky thing for her to find a life again.” There is no happy ending. There is no ending at all. There is only the search for more life in a place from which life was once banished.

IV.

Rebecca Solnit is a writer who wants sad stories to have happy endings. *A Paradise Built in Hell* professes to have found a little bit of heaven in post-disaster societies. Its argument is that landscapes of ruin and damnation unleash utopian instincts of altruism and mutual aid, which can transform politics-as-usual. Disasters jump-start civil society, which Solnit sees as lifeless and enervated in normal times. “Disaster is an end, a climax of ruin and death,” she instructs, “but it also a beginning, an opening, a chance to start over.” Catastrophe can engender revolution, when “the very air you breathe seems to pour out of a luminous future, when the people all around you are brothers and sisters, when you feel an extraordinary strength.”

Solnit’s life-enhancing hells do not include genocide, and except for a long section on New York after September 11 she focuses on the aftermath of natural catastrophes, not on political violence and mass murder. She does allow that some disasters do not produce redemption: Hurricane Katrina is such a calamity without a silver lining. But this raises a deeper problem with her conception of her subject. Is hell to be neatly subdivided, with paradise an option in the safer neighborhoods of fire,

earthquake, and terrorist attack, while hurricane zones are red-lined against human happiness?

The ineradicable tragedy that Hatzfeld's subjects attest to--the experience that refuses a silver lining--is completely beyond Solnit's ken. Her book is a work of secular theodicy, an exercise in consolation literature of a particularly American sort--blind to the dark side of human responses to disaster; oblivious to the desolating sadness of the aftermath; indifferent to finality. Who wouldn't prefer to believe that providence has a hand in all our trials, and that we suffer no anguish in vain? In Solnit's bloodied but lucky world, tragedy never has the last word. Instead, an upbeat tone characterizes the morning after catastrophe. You could dismiss this wildly misplaced sunniness as the invention of one writer, were it not that a similar blinkered optimism, the same conviction that no situation lacks a positive effect, also colors the feel-good rhetoric of many humanitarian workers in disaster zones at home and abroad.

Solnit illustrates her theodicy with six disasters: the San Francisco earthquake in 1906; the explosion of a ship transporting munitions in Halifax harbor, Nova Scotia, in 1917; the London Blitz; the Mexico City earthquake in 1985; New York after September 11; and New Orleans after Katrina. Except for Katrina, as I say, these episodes are depicted as the blossoming of self-governing communities that fulfill a nineteenth-century vision of mutual aid. Solnit finds inspiration in, of all people, Kropotkin. "Imagine a society where money plays little or no role," she rhapsodizes, "where people rescue each other and then care for each other, where food is given away, where life is mostly out of doors in public, where the old divides between people seem to have fallen away." It is a great time to be alive, this moment "when everyone has agency and no one has ultimate authority, when the society invents itself as it goes along."

Government intervention is at best a tolerable intrusion, according to *A Paradise Built in Hell*: governments are tools of grasping elites who want nothing more than to protect their power and their property. It is citizen responders who constitute the real core of help. Official relief takes away their chances to discover all they are capable of. And sometimes government is even lethal: her proof for this claim is San Francisco's response to the earthquake, when she maintains that officials treated the public as the enemy and made the prevention of looting their central task.

It is not that Solnit is wrong about the good-heartedness and self-reliance that can emerge under particular conditions of duress, or about the usefulness of citizen responders, or about the exhilaration of helping others. None of this will come as news to anyone who has lived through a power outage. In San Francisco, homeless people set up soup kitchens in the rubble and organized bucket brigades to fight fires. In New York in 2001, residents poured into the streets to raise money, to offer water and food to anyone in need, to give blood, to honor the dead. The cooperation during the London Blitz is legendary. So yes, adversity brings out the best in some people.

The problem is that up against the historical and emotional reality, Solnit's main argument--her anarchist excitement--collapses. Hells don't make heavens, not now,

not ever. Solnit works in black and white, with citizens responding to disasters nobly and helpfully, since that is human nature, while elites--who apparently do not share in human nature--act out of fear and selfishness, always subverting the common good. She has no interest in the vast contrary evidence that disasters can bring out the worst in people as well as the best--which is one reason why government action, as opposed to moist volunteerism, is necessary and desirable. She analyzes at length the depressing and oft-told story of those whites in New Orleans who armed themselves to protect their neighborhoods from the supposed onslaught of marauding blacks, but she does not notice that those unpleasant homeowners also have to be counted as citizen responders, and that only decent police action--which was short in supply in the days after the storm--could have shut them down.

In an odd way, Solnit's book transposes the altruist anti-government sentiments of the right--George H. W. Bush's thousand points of light, and even Herbert Hoover's response to the Mississippi flood ("the cooperative spirit of Main Street is what is putting the Mississippi Valley back on its feet")--into the predilections of the left. When citizens roll up their sleeves to help their neighbors, they can light up a society as bureaucrats never can; but when government help arrives, its efforts are "more effective but seldom joyous." It appears that joy matters more to her than efficacy.

Solnit skips over the massive contradictions in her own examples. Londoners did not survive the Blitz by joyously organizing themselves in a vacuum: the City of London, that is, the municipal government, backed them up with air raid wardens, ambulances, and coordinated fire and digging brigades. As for "the opportunity to build a new superior life structure, almost from scratch," I suppose you could point to the fact that Labour was voted into power after the war, if you believe that Labour represented a superior life structure. But surely this turn of events cannot overshadow the facts about what preceded it: London lost 20 percent of its population, and 40 percent of its industrial workers, to death and relocation, with the East End suffering the most; and many poor neighborhoods never recovered from the loss of life, jobs, and infrastructure. The destruction of communities is not a boon to communitarianism.

In New York, government never broke down: ordinary citizens stepped into the breach in a situation in which the federal government had already reacted immediately with thousands of National Guard, and essential city services for most of the city continued. If there was ever a post-catastrophic paradise, it was surely Manhattan in the fall of 2001, endowed with citizens who were affluent, law-abiding, and non-gun-sliding, and a durable local government that never came close to collapsing under the force of the attack and its three thousand deaths. In her discussion of New York, Solnit does admit that the scenario did not play out in a "great collective renewal," whatever that is--but then neither did the disasters in San Francisco, Halifax, or London.

New Orleans, the city of sorrow, is the one place that gives Solnit pause. "The disaster there was so horrific it begat little of the ebullience of many other disasters," she writes. In New Orleans, of course, the disaster was the lack of government,

although the book is uninterested in this central fact. Solnit rehearses the tales of terrific citizen responders who came with their boats to rescue people, and neighbors who risked their lives to save others trapped in attics and on rooftops. But what the victims in New Orleans wanted, desperately, was the National Guard and federal troops, not self-actualizing participatory democracy. It takes nothing away from the rescuers' valor to acknowledge that it was the two federal agencies that showed up immediately, the Coast Guard and the Fish and Wildlife Service, that were responsible for the overwhelming numbers of rescues--some thirty thousand of them. These employees were not acting joyously, with an eye to the new day dawning. They were doing their jobs.

New Orleans still longs for government help. *A Paradise Built in Hell* sets a great deal of store by the young volunteers who have come through the city since the storm. Their continued devotion to New Orleans is a story in itself, and quite ill-covered: in many ways they have "kept the lights on in the city so that the rest of the country can't forget," as the New Orleans historian Lawrence Powell once remarked to me. But the tragedy of this situation eludes her. That the reconstruction of a great American city has had to depend on a volunteer army of idealistic ill-paid twentysomethings is not a glory, it is a crime. The book exults in the "fresh energy and chaos" that they brought to the city; but the last few years have shown that the longer individual volunteers stay and the more they dig in, the less ebullient and full of quick answers they are. Those invested in joining a "beloved community" can only go so far in a city where the daily grind of reconstruction makes people feel anything but beloved. New Orleans needs more than volunteers and self-actualization. It needs generous and well-administered federal aid, and decent city government to replace the mess of corruption and ineptitude. *That* would be paradise.

Solnit's reliance on participants once or twice removed from the catastrophe wears thin: memories of survivors who were children at the time, and protected by their parents; who came onto the scene as helpers; who look back on catastrophe from a vantage point of decades; who did not lose any loved ones in what they endured; or who never lived through a catastrophe at all. Although the book brings in a survivor every once in a while, it is fundamentally incurious about what life is really like for people who continue to exist in the long aftermath. In this, and in its many rosy views, it backs away from the bottomless sadness of survivors and chooses to peddle an updated version of the refrain that appalled Jean Améry half a century ago: not backward but forward to a better future.

A quasi-religious language suffuses *A Paradise Built in Hell*, beginning with its title. Solnit's classless self-governing society resembles nothing so much as a state of grace; and her uprising of the spirit--"the joy in disaster"--evokes the exaltation of a revival. "Again and again I have seen people slip into this realm and light up with joy. The lack of a language doesn't prevent them from experiencing it, only from grasping and making something of it." Solnit here taps into a repository of Protestant millennialism that lies deep in the American psyche. More precisely, it is an Arminian understanding of sin and salvation. God dispenses suffering as He pleases, but we can make of it what we will, using the test to redeem ourselves and deliver ourselves

into His hands, washed of our sins.

Solnit is right that desperate situations can awake dormant impulses of selfless service. Yes, the world needs kindness and generosity, and both sometimes flourish in the midst of calamity. But let us honor affliction with our own sobriety. To offer help is not to put yourself in the way of something big, such as the eschatological movement of history; it is to acknowledge in the face of suffering that whatever you do is very small. Is empathy the goal in post-catastrophic circumstances? Then seek humility, not bliss. “Before you mention Grace / Mind that you do not deceive yourself and others,” cautioned Miłosz, a poet who had seen the hells that the enthusiasts of paradise inflicted on the earth. It is a warning about clarity in an emergency, about the pitfalls of self-delusion in any politics of transcendence.

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