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James Dawes's *That the World May Know: Bearing Witness to Atrocity* (book review)

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also be organizationally inevitable in a collection as capacious as this that the category distinctions often seem blurry. Many essays would seem to belong to more than one section in being both “aesthetic” and “polemical,” or “therapeutic” as well as literary, or even not to belong in a particular section at all, as in the move from literary self writing to film in Section I, where an abrupt and untheorized move is made from the personal, if fictive, to the fictional, if historical. These blurrings make for groupings that may seem artificial, or may even obstruct a reader’s sense of what is to be gleaned from any given chapter. The volume also necessarily creates slippage between its governing terms—disease, disability, and trauma—in a somewhat troubling way, since these are distinct types of experience and certainly not to be construed as synonymous.

Such objections aside, and they seem slight, *Unfitting Stories* is a thoughtful gathering of approaches to understanding the relationship between narrative structures and the myriad personal, social, and political meanings of trauma, illness, and disability. In this age of memoir, such a collection is both timely and new.

Susannah B. Mintz

James Dawes. *That the World May Know: Bearing Witness to Atrocity*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007. 304 pp. ISBN 978-0-6740-2623-0, \$19.95.

In *That the World May Know: Bearing Witness to Atrocity*, James Dawes has written one of the most insightful and penetrating works on a class of social actors who devote their lives to doing good. I have never read any book quite like this one. Even for a person who writes about human rights crusaders, humanitarian workers, and those who document and report the most abominable atrocities, I was moved to tears by the loneliness and tragic paradoxes that are emblematic of the young idealists trapped in the desire to save mankind. At once, theirs are lives of nobility, voyeurism, despair, and redemption—all rolled up in a childlike belief that life can be better. The genius of Dawes is the emotional intelligence with which he breaks down the pathologies of disaster and catastrophe.

Dawes attempts what is arguably an impossible task—standing on the outside to understand exactly what goes on in the humanitarian world. This provides some intellectual purity to his analysis, but it also ironically puts him in the category of those who engage in reportage over atrocities. It is in that sense that he is not really an outsider, but an active participant in the dilemmas that confront do-gooders. However, one must concede to Dawes a most valiant effort of isolating narrator and analyst from the fog of action. At the end of the book, I felt that it should be required reading for budding idealists

and jaded former activists. I do not know how many fallen or retired “angels” have looked back so introspectively on their earlier careers.

Dawes creates several categories—a kind of prismatic rendering of the universe of humanitarianism—through which he explores the complexities of this existence. The two poles of his analysis are actor on the one hand, and participant on the other. This distinction is not water-tight because as I have pointed out, the observer and reporter is also an actor. Nevertheless, one can see the distinction as separating actors from voyeurs. But in either case, there are moral injunctions. The so-called storytellers of the Rwanda genocide, for example, are not free from conscience. How will they report the events—whose version, and from which perspective? Is there a purpose to the reporting? Is that purpose morally defensible? Does it violate the victim, or is it through the mouths of the victims? What gives the storytellers the right to broadcast the privations of the victim?

On the other end of the pole is the actor who claims a moral imperative to act. But again, by what moral compass is the actor proceeding? Does the actor know for sure what is good for the victim? If so, how? In other words, is the actor driven by a culturally-bound sense of right and wrong, or is there a universal moral code that is beyond question, and on which the actions taken are deemed unassailable? If such a code did exist—and was embedded in the consciousness of the victim—then its execution might be uncontroversial. But we all know that universality is a loaded die. This is what complicates the attempt to rescue victims from their condition. Is the rescue an imperial project designed to enhance certain hegemonies, or is it a truly shared universal wisdom? Dawes grapples with these questions but he does not really answer them. Perhaps there are no good answers. But he succeeds in taking us to the inner torment of the project of charity.

In human rights and humanitarian law, the work of charity or global volunteerism is a Western project. In fact, international law itself—the body of jurisprudence on which these works are based—has as its original purpose the civilization of the pre-modern. Conceived as the preserve of “civilized nations,” international law was Europe’s justification for empire and the conquest of the black, brown, and yellow peoples of the world—in short, the subordination of the global South to the mercies of Eurocentrism. Human rights and humanitarian work are the most illuminating expressions of the manifest destiny of the West. This is not to say that these doctrines are without redemption. It is rather to understand them as part of a historical continuum that connects the Christian missionary to the colonial administrator and the merchant of capital. How and whether this chain of exploitation can be broken remains an open question. It is one of the subtexts that vexes Dawes.

It is clear that Dawes focuses most of his attention on external charity—that is, work that is done by people from the rich global North to rescue conflicted societies in the global South. There is little doubt that the projects of human rights and humanitarianism are highly racialized. Again, Rwanda gives us a wonderful example. Nowhere do the pathologies of the African as the savage and victim, and the white as the savior, come into sharper focus. Gil Courtemanche, a French-Canadian journalist, writes a novel about the genocide in which a Rwandese woman who is gang-raped by Rwandese genocidaires wistfully remembers the heavenly climaxes with her departed white lover. The contrast is clear. African men are savage beasts who commit genocide, and rape and infect women with AIDS, while the white in the story is the epitome of tenderness, loving caresses, and sexual ecstasy. If that is not the epitome of racism, then I do not understand the word.

Granted, there are sprinklings of local actors in the stories. But these are mostly Europhiles or those pursuing modernist projects. They may be native activists for democratic rights or appendages of international organizations. In my view, this does not change the fundamental character of the project of human rights and humanitarian work. If anything, it heightens the chasms in the enterprise. For instance, when the “burned out” or “aged” Western activist “matures” and returns home to the West, he or she abandons the victims in the “field.” I found this “retreat” back to the West to be one of the most compelling stanzas by Dawes. Nothing more poignantly illustrates the limitations of the crusade. That is why one can understand the crusade as a palliative that may alleviate pain, but does not address the structural problems that caused the global asymmetries and impoverishment in the first place.

Dawes’s book is evidence of a growing literature that looks at human rights and humanitarian work not as absolute religious truths, but as enterprises that require more probing. While there are some critical works in this vein, Dawes’s stands out for its incisive analytical clarity and philosophical avant-gardism. It is post-modern and it is not. It believes in these crusades and it does not. It is a book by an outsider who is an insider by virtue of the work. It embodies in it the entire panoply of the contradictions of the human rights project. But it does so without losing hope that tomorrow can be better. It does not crush the ambition of the idealist, but nor does it give congratulatory comfort to would-be or has-been idealists.

In a sense, the book is suspended in purgatory—unable to deliver a final verdict on whether there is an earth or a heaven. This is the paradoxical riddle that it leaves those infected with the bug of charity to figure out. But for the academic, the book is a panoramic window into an edifice of norms, institutions, processes, and people. My hope is that others will pick up the mantle

from here and develop the many tantalizing threads opened up by Dawes's brilliant pen. Perhaps a scholar-activist will take on this challenge and tell us how the inequities of the scandalous global order can be combated, if at all, without the distortions of the human rights and humanitarian crusades. My hope is that I have not seen the last of Dawes's illuminating scholarship.

Makau Mutua

Ahmad H. Sa'di and Lila Abu Lughod, eds. *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*. New York: Columbia UP, 2007. 356 pp. ISBN: 978-0-231-13579-5, \$75.00.

Published in 2007, just antedating the sixtieth anniversary of the Israeli state, this book is a timely and wide-ranging collection of essays concerning the Palestinian catastrophe—*Nakba*—and subsequent questions of Palestinian identity and existence. The mass-expulsion and the uprooting of 600,000 Palestinians (80 percent) in 1948 left a nation in exile, in continuous statelessness and refugee squalor. Hence, the rules that came to govern the lives of the Palestinian refugees are necessarily different from those of formal state citizens, and equally different are the tools necessary to record the modern history of the Palestinian people. In this book's treatment of the Palestinian refugees, it juxtaposes the standard (Israeli) narrative of the cataclysmic events of 1948—afterwards the “Western” narrative—with the oral and recorded histories of the Palestinian Diaspora, and hence a direct contrast to the Israeli history of the victors.

Ever since the violent beginnings of Israel in 1948, outlets of western media have propagated the Israeli standard narrative of a “return from exile, after millennia, with people with memory of suffering redeemed in . . . their own modern nation-state” (286). This projection of a mythical past onto a contemporary state project, wherein the name of the Palestinians—let alone their tragedy—is expunged from the history, has become the standard narrative that western peoples have internalized as established fact.

Hence, over five decades, Israel and its supporters have rejected any moral/legal culpability for the Palestinian *Nakba*, weaving this historical blackhole into the national myth of the Israeli state. The displaced Palestinian nation has been, comparably speaking, unable to present a counter-narrative to the Israeli national myth, since much of Palestinian history was contained in the realm of oral memory.

Until recent developments in ethno-history and the oral tradition disciplines that depend on such memories, Palestinian oral history has been reflexively dismissed as unreliable when weighed against the presumptive strength