

BOOK REVIEW

Jennie E. Burnet. *To Save Heaven and Earth: Rescue in the Rwandan Genocide*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023. xxix + 277 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$35.95. Paper. ISBN: 9781501767111.

This is an outstanding work of scholarship—pulling together incredibly well the ever-shifting constellations of choices, circumstances, relationships, and locations in the context of the Rwandan genocide, and demonstrating how these elements worked together to explain the operational and decisional aspects of rescue work.

Burnet's work is informed by feminist and anti-racist theory and praxis such as “tactical humanism” and listening with “deep empathy,” and recognizes that human agency emerges from grounded and unique subject positions. She pairs semi-structured interview data with inductive coding and the use of computer software to identify themes, repetitions, differences, key words in context—producing “coherent and scientifically valid accounts of chaotic and potentially traumatic events” (xvi–xix).

The book finds that unyielding moral choices were more likely to end in martyrdom, that is, the death of the rescuer; in contrast, rescuers were more likely to be successful when they deliberately maneuvered and compromised within the moral grey zone of genocide—facing “choiceless choices” (4, citing Robert Melson 2005) while incessantly balancing the combination of opportunity, pressures, and conscience. The study's “most significant conclusion: successful rescue almost always entails morally ambiguous decisions...” (xx). In clear and eloquent prose, Burnet argues the inutility of understanding human action in the context of static categories and stable structures when situations are actually “amorphous,” “fleeting,” and “rapidly changing” (43). She writes that people “caught in the machine of genocide decide how to act or react not once, but over and over again, revisiting decisions and making new ones as the context evolves and various choices emerge or disappear Bystanders can become perpetrators, perpetrators rescuers, victims perpetrators, and rescuers perpetrators” (7). Human agency, then, is understood as an “emergent property” arising out of the complex and situational interplay of “heterogenous network components,” comprised of “human and nonhuman actors, inanimate objects, and contextual factors” (11).

In Chapters One and Two, the author examines the political, social-historical contexts of genocide in Rwanda, and introduces the reader to actor-network theory and the concept of a moral grey zone, the theoretical foundations of the analysis. Chapters Three and Four demonstrate how Islam and Christianity influenced the options people confronted, and the interaction of religious beliefs

and organizations with micro-local social histories, kinship ties, decisions of local leaders, and so on. In Chapters Five and Six, Burnet highlights the role of border zones, that is, spatial distance from political power as a variable of particular importance since it presented increased opportunities for rescue—opportunities that were nonetheless conditioned by patronage ties, kinship networks, and particular local histories of political authority, migration, and religion. Chapter Seven undertakes a comparison between rescuers who survived the genocide, and martyrs who “refused the moral compromise necessitated by genocide’s gray zone” (13).

This work is the culmination of several years of field research, deep immersion, and a thoughtful, thorough, and organic assessment of rescue work by those facing impossible choices. Burnet’s findings are drawn from more than two hundred interviews conducted in ten communities in Rwanda between 2011 and 2014, and ethnographic research conducted since 1997 in both urban and rural areas. These communities represent variation in religious composition, degrees of social and spatial proximity to political power, and variation in start dates of genocidal violence—factors established in the literature to impact the speed and intensity of genocide implementation at local level.

This book will be of interest to many audiences. Those methodologically inclined will find it an instructive exercise in the theories and techniques of capturing in a coherent and systematic way human decisions that are generated variously depending on “heterogeneous assemblages” (43) of factors that are constantly shifting and changing. Burnet’s work is also a solid example of the decolonization of scholarship as she cites “Rwandan and African scholars, Black scholars of all genders, women scholars, and LGBTQ+ scholars whenever possible” (xvii). Those interested in the subject matter of rescue work will find a compelling and highly plausible alternative to theories of “inherent altruism” or “rational, consistent motivations” or factors like “social ties” taken alone. The book explains how rescue activity “was not an accident, nor was it random, but it was also not an obvious choice or predetermined outcome of a particular religious belief or moral disposition” (222). Burnet’s work is a remarkable contribution to the study of genocidal violence as well as rescue work—giving us a creative and insightful way to think differently about commonly held assumptions about structures, actor-categories, and human decision-making in times of great violence and chaos.

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