

Book Review

Jill Stauffer: *Ethical Loneliness. The Injustice of Not Being Heard*. Columbia University Press, New York 2015.

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To read Jill Stauffer's book, *Ethical Loneliness*, is to undergo the page-turning yet profoundly uncomfortable experience of struggling to hear fractured and broken stories told by survivors of worlds' end. The critical insight of the book is that we are all responsible to attentively hear these stories of atrocity. This injunction to hear is the core of the work, and it performs that imperative as well as asserting it.

In the course of the book, Stauffer introduces the reader to victims testifying before truth commissions and before archivists, to witnesses who hear those testimonies, or fail to, and to contemporary philosophers of restorative and retributive justice. The experience of listening that went into writing this book was itself a harrowing one, as it took Stauffer to the ICC, to holocaust video archives, and to the South African Truth and Reconciliation transcripts and recordings. In that sense, the book itself is a heroic act of listening, as well as a call to listen. Stauffer presents us with the victims' own words and voices, and she puts these voices in dialogue with a gentle grace that tries to enable and not to usurp the reader's effort to hear. She asks the reader to think about what it means to hear those who suffer, because hearing is the first step out of the moral isolation of both those who endure atrocity and those who ignore it.

Through many examples and contexts, Stauffer's narrative illustrates how careful hearing is essential to the hope of reestablishing trust and community after serious violence, and how fragile selfhood is without that (normally taken for granted) trust and community. When no one hears or attends to the enormity of an

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atrocities, its victims experience 'ethical loneliness,' a term coined by philosopher and Holocaust survivor Jean Améry, and defined by Stauffer as 'the experience of having been abandoned by humanity' (1).¹ Stauffer explains: 'Ethical loneliness begins when a human being, because of abuse or neglect, has been refused the human relation necessary for self-formation and thus is unable to take on the present moment freely' (26). Thus, Stauffer deftly connects Améry's sense of abject abandonment with Emmanuel Levinas's insight that selfhood is created through the Other: One needs a community to maintain a world of meaning—'meaning' or 'norms' are not just out there in the ether for a cellular self to apprehend through reason. So what is lost in cataclysmic violence is not just a family member, or health, or a home, but a reliable 'world' in which neighbors reinforce survivors' judgments about injustice, care about their well-being, and share their sense of history. Victims need others to stand with them, to grant them a hearing, in order to constitute them as 'selves' and as ethical beings.

Yet the phenomenon of ethical loneliness is difficult to overcome for those whose worlds are crushed by hatred and violence, because we so often fail to hear, or fail to hear properly. Again and again, Stauffer shows us how hard it is for us to linger in the discomfort of hearing about atrocities without trying to rush through the ugly parts, forget the hard parts, dismiss the odd parts, straighten out the chronology, water down the anger, deny the complicity, stuff the story into familiar narrative frames, enforce forgiveness or victimhood, whitewash or simplify the ending, and forget to listen to what is *not* said as well as to what can be put into words. She discusses, explores, and catalogs many examples of how we refuse or fail to hear.

One striking example is an interview with Hanna F in the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University. Hanna is a concentration camp survivor. The interviewer is determined to hear her as a 'plucky' hero with 'guts' who twice escaped from Auschwitz. But Hanna, whose testimony is resistant and fractured throughout the interview, responds, 'No, no, no. No, but there were no guts, there were just sheer stupidity' (73). The interviewer then ends the interview before we know what Hanna meant.

Jill thoughtfully points out and glosses the interviewer's failure to hear Hanna: 'while there may be redemptive stories to tell, many times survivors of grave abuse do not marvel at the strength of the human spirit, especially not their own. Instead they "mourn its fragility when the isolated self has no support"' (74). As Hanna says earlier in the interview, and as other testimonies of abuse recount,² surviving may

1 All page references in text are to Stauffer 2015.

2 In a recently aired NPR radio interview with Henry Wu, a formerly incarcerated Chinese dissident who valiantly returned to China undercover to document prison conditions, Wu's quiet and haunting description of his imprisonment deflects narratives of heroism: 'I forgot my dignity, future, freedom, everything. I surrendered. I cooperated with the wardens, and I beat fellow prisoners. I stole food. I begged guard's mercy at his feet while in the solitary confinement. That's how I survived the camp. You know, the heroes cannot survive the camp, the system. They are physically crushed right away.' National Public Radio, *Remembering Harry Wu, 'Troublemaker' for the Chinese Communist Party*, aired April 19, 2016.

not be 'plucky', but may only leave one 'alone in the whole world' (72).

And as I read Jill's reading of Hanna's interview, I find myself implicated in these failures to hear, wishing for a happy ending, a clear path away from the brokenness. Instead, Stauffer leaves the reader at knife's edge; she will not resolve the tension that she creates into either a narrative of retributive justice or one of restorative peace. From Stauffer's perspective of Levinasian self-understanding, she grows a book that itself embodies the productive ambivalence of that Levinasian dialogue between self and other. To read this book, then, is not to appropriate knowledge from another, but to become a new I.

The book ends with hope that suffering can be heard and trust restored, but cautions that it will not happen by rushing to a forced and storybook reconciliation, but only by lingering in anger and resentment, hearing and rehearing anguished voices without preconceptions, and working hard to recreate a safe and just world that is trustworthy.

Stauffer is clear that both retribution and reconciliation tragically over-simplify and prejudge what justice might require of us in order to recreate a trustworthy world. Yet 'justice' is nonetheless understood to be the objective of all the repair and restoration and revenge and retribution talk throughout the book. But what justice is gets articulated differently at different times. Sometimes it is the 'restoration of a lost equality' (149) or to 'regain a moral equivalence stolen ... by abuse' (124). Sometimes it is a marking of the loss of, and a 'giv[ing] back' of 'something that should have remained intact' (144). Sometimes it is the rebuilding of trust and safety (127), and sometimes it is what must *precede* the rebuilding of trust and safety—that is, a reaffirmation of normative ethos 'where the abuse and torture ... are widely and actively confirmed as harms that should never have happened' (127) enacted, at least in part, through some kind of accountability or punishment. And sometimes, justice is articulated as giving 'to each what is her own' (145) as a kind of narrative propriety. Stauffer moves toward her blended ideal of 'reparative retribution' advisedly, of course, and wants to blend the past-orientation justice of retribution and trial with the future-orientation justice of restorative justice and repair. So justice is both, and at the same time, neither one.

But perhaps something more might be said about these formulations that would not do violence to the ambivalence that is central to the book's point. For example, I would resist a formulation of justice as a 'restoration of a lost equality'. While violence sometimes unbalances equality of various sorts, it sometimes rebalances structural inequalities or simply seesaws wildly. Often, victims become offenders, as Stauffer thoughtfully recognizes and discusses (153-65), and both conditions may be manifestations of injustice, not an overcoming of it. There is no necessary 'gain' in committing acts of violence, and the point of punishment is rarely to provide a kind of disgorgement of unjust enrichment. Equality, even equality of dignity, is only contingently affected by violence. Moreover, another of the book's formulations of justice as giving 'each his own' recognizes that justice is precisely not equality, but a tailored equity, requiring unequal treatment. And if the third formulation above is

correct, that justice *is* rebuilding trust and safety, then justice in this sense reduces to restorative justice and misses something Stauffer wants us to hear elsewhere in the book.

The shortcomings of restorative justice are made plain by Stauffer's engagement with Jean Améry. Améry haunts the pages of Stauffer's book like Hamlet Senior's ghost (as Stauffer underscores through her frequent Hamlet references), urging that something is indeed rotten in the state of 'reconciliation' when no one wants to hear anger about genocide anymore. Unless we cease our 'felicity awhile' (142, quoting Hamlet) to listen to Améry's angry story, and unless we too are moved to desire to undo the wrongs that caused his suffering, we leave him, unjustly, in his unbearable and inhuman state of ethical loneliness. So whatever justice is, it is not merely conciliation or a 'renewed being-with,' as I, for one, have argued (Meyer 2010).

The book's traumatic return to Améry's voice, again and again, and its urge to take revenge and anger seriously, creates and performs a problem about justice and about time, as Stauffer so astutely recognizes. She several times returns to the problem of *ressentiment* and to Friedrich Nietzsche's remarks on *amor fati*. She asks whether Améry is 'Nietzsche's man of *ressentiment*' (124). She describes Nietzsche's concern this way: 'When you want the past to be other than it was, you tie yourself to something that you are powerless to change. In doing so, you undermine your own future' (123). But Stauffer believes Améry is not the man of *ressentiment*. She points to Améry's own answer that resentment 'is his way of saying Yes to life rather than remaining indifferent to it' or 'covering over his lack of power' (125). Demanding justice, Stauffer argues, is not *ressentiment*. On the contrary, she says, reconciliation without justice may be a despairing capitulation caused by a lack of power—a form of seething and unresolved dispossession that creates *ressentiment*.

On this point, I have a few remarks:

First, if we truly do desire Améry's 'time machine' (123) to change the past, we *are* guilty of a kind of *ressentiment* and nihilism—a rejection of our finitude and rage against the conditions of our own existence. Storming and raging to erase the past through an Act V fin-de-Hamlet total purge destroys us at the source of our humanity. *Ressentiment* is not just a form of weakness for Nietzsche, it is a denial of one's finitude, of one's being-in-time.

To be finite is to exist only at the expense of violence. To wish away the past, however horrific, is to wish away the conditions of our own existence, and more, the conditions of the existence of everyone we love and have loved. In this respect, we are like children of rape. Hamlet cannot exact his revenge without also causing the deaths of everyone he loves: Ophelia, Gertrude and even himself. Everyone who now exists, exists only because of everything, violent or kind, that went before. One's children are born only in this timeline—the timeline that includes murder and torture. Nietzsche's command, then, is to love one's fate—*amor fati*. So as greatly as we desire it, the wish for a time machine is nihilism.

But on the other hand, if we merely 'redraw the boundary' around the acts of the past and reject and leave the 'bad past' outside the boundaries of our 'new

self', we seem to leave Hamlet-Senior's Ghost trapped outside our shiny 'new world' in Améry's state of ethical loneliness, as one who no longer belongs in the newly-cleansed history of the world. Like Gertrude, we remarry; we forget; we move on. And, it seems, we also leave outside of the boundary any confrontation with the violence and injustice of Hamlet-Senior's murder.

So, I think Stauffer is right to quarrel with a simple reconciliation's 'new start'. A society after genocide is not the same as a society before genocide; I cannot simply redraw the boundary. In some way, Gertrude's approach carries the same flaw as the time machine; it tries to make the past as though it has not been, or at least as though it can be unplugged from the present.

So we search for a third possibility. If we live with knowledge of our world's fragility and with a sense of complicity for the past's influence on the present, we seem closest to Stauffer's solution, for the past becomes a kind of antibody we must carry forever—a story we must struggle to hear again and again to remind ourselves 'never again'.

But this living-in-complicity provokes still more thought. If we are called to pay attention, to recognize and take on our responsibility for world-sustaining justice, to 'absent [ourselves] from felicity awhile' to hear over and over the stories of horrific violence, how can we act at all, if all action *and* all inaction cause ripples of pain and suffering in ever-widening circles of time and space?

In a world of complex affinities and many kinds of crimes, are we ever free from complicity? How sweeping is this responsibility? How can we bear it? Throughout the book Stauffer stresses that we are all complicit in suffering—we buy clothes made by child labor, we benefit from institutionalized racism, we fail to stand up for the voiceless, we fail to hear suffering and violence that makes us uncomfortable, we are the 'inverted pyramid' (Améry 1980, 71) of indifference and forgetfulness that drives Améry into the chasm of loneliness and despair. Stauffer calls out to us 'lucky' ones 'who have remained relatively safe and secure' to 'perform revisionary practices' on ourselves so that we will see that we 'are implicated in the destruction of worlds and in a responsibility to rebuild those worlds' (138).

And so I return again to Hannah Arendt's famous words on forgiveness: 'Only through this constant mutual release from what they do can men remain free agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new' (Arendt 1958, 240). As Stauffer frames Arendt's point in an earlier article, 'forgiveness is a way of rendering the past the past. It attends to the possibility inherent in the term "future", the time to come that enables humans to create things anew rather than dragging their way through a determined universe' (Stauffer 2002, 6). Even if the atrocities themselves are unforgivable (though I have elsewhere argued they may not be) (Meyer 2010), at some point our failure to respond to them exactly as we ought to must be forgivable. As finite creatures, we cannot take on the burden of an eternity of ripple-effect complicities, or we are damned from the start, if we do *and* if we don't. To be human, we need some moment in time that is not already over-burdened with guilt; we need

the contingency of a future. As humans in time, we live by jumping into the future, or we cannot live at all.

Liberalism, for all of its flaws, claimed to provide a neutral moral space where reasonable minds could differ and responsibility was bounded by choice and consent. Liberalism thus opened up a metaphysical 'free zone' in which a future could emerge, if not guiltless, then with a limited, finite guilt that could be borne by limited, finite creatures.

Stauffer is right that the old liberal account of the cellular self is simply not tenable, especially after we acknowledge that social conditions allow genocide to flourish. But is there another way to open room to move, to disagree, to start, where we are not already doomed and set against each other by a kind of predestined complicity in everything?

And so I wonder, if we take our finitude seriously, if we acknowledge the shortness of life, the limits of human power, and the limits of human knowledge, whether we could find a space where we can temper what seems to me to be a crippling complicity and overwhelming guilt. Can we find an Arendtian humility, in which we can live in some open space that allows for disagreement, for uncertainty, for newness, for joy?

Stauffer quotes the Fortunoff Archive testimony of holocaust survivor Stanley M, which, she says, demonstrates 'a complex failure of hearing made up of his own understandable cynicism, the difficulty of conveying the true horror to people who have lived safe lives, and the failure of those people to listen, truly, to what narratives of horror try to convey' (107).

Here's what Stanley says:

What can I say? Sit with a young person, woman or man, and explain her what it is to be hungry, hated and hunted and not having hope? It is very difficult. Their reaction is very, very, you know, curious one. Curious for my part. Because [...] if you start to build up the climate of brutality what men can do to men, how prejudice can lead to disaster and hatred, at one point they inject argument and say we are better generation and things like that will not happen because we are better. This puts you in a very difficult position because you cannot argue with that and try to prove, no you are just as bad as me, because that would be immoral from my point of view. So the dialogue ends and I say yes, you are better and I hope you stay that way (107).

While Stauffer is right that Stanley's listeners are not listening deeply enough to experience with Stanley the fragility of human worlds, I want to pause over Stanley's point that if he were to argue that his interlocutors are 'just as bad as me', that would be 'immoral'. While he does not believe that human nature has changed so much that racism and fear cannot create genocide today, he refuses to argue the point, because it would be 'immoral' to take the future away from these young people. Instead, he allows them to keep the hope that 'we are better'. While his own experiences have robbed him of 'the useful fiction of autonomy' (24) he refuses to deny it to

his listeners. He retreats from what he knows about humanity, offering a kind of humility in judgment, a kind of hope-as-moral-action rather than belief, that is, 'from my [Stanley's] point of view', an act of 'morality'. He refuses to pronounce the future dead on arrival, not out of epistemological uncertainty, for he himself is not uncertain, but out of moral reticence. He gives to others what he denies to himself: freedom to act.

This gentle reticence that Stanley offers his interlocutors is like the voice of a parent whose toddler insists that he can pour the milk himself. The parent knows the milk will spill, but also knows that the child must have the opportunity to pour the milk, nonetheless. The child must have a moral space in which to act, without the predestination of a guilt and failure that has always already arisen. It is a space kept open so that one might imagine oneself to be 'better', without being frozen by the responsibility one was born into. So, the child is not 'free' as a metaphysical matter, because she is not a cellular self only responsible through her own consented-to acts, but instead her (relative) freedom is a gift from the parent who steps back in a moral act of humility that refuses to prejudge. In some ways, Stanley's withholding of judgment is akin to rules of the trial that refuse to presume guilt, or refuse to infer guilt from a past crime, not because that refusal is accurate or even rational, but because it is moral—a gift of room to speak, to act, to provide a boundary, to start the trial from 'now'.

So I wonder: if we could replace the liberal understandings of metaphysical individual autonomy with Stanley's moral act of humility, a conscious withholding of judgment, then perhaps we could establish room for finite beings to face a future. To be sure, genocide is not spilled milk, and, as Stauffer exhorts us, we must hear and bear in mind the past and never forget it, recognizing that we are all responsible for responding to atrocity. She is also certainly right that we ordinarily tend to err on the side of rejecting responsibilities for past atrocities and their repair. But guilt should not turn into despair or determinism. Perhaps we may acknowledge all Stauffer's points and at the same time risk a future, with a stubborn act of moral hope that this time, maybe, we might be 'better'. Stauffer's book may not fully give us the new understanding of responsibility that would ground something like Stanley's 'morality', but it provokes us to hear and attend to the echoes of the violent past in the present, and certainly she is right that if we do not hear the past, any moral hope for the future is false.

In sum, this is a superb book. The lessons it offers on how we fail to hear others' stories of suffering are vivid and wise, and the weave of Levinas's points about self-formation with Jean Améry's account of ethical loneliness gives a rich account of both the fragility and necessity of justice and of our mutual responsibility in tending and caring for each other.

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