K. Millet, *The Victims of Slavery, Colonization and the Holocaust: A Comparative History of Persecution*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, 280 pp., £32.00.

Reviewed by Rimona Afana

In her victim-centred approach to crime, Millet zooms in on the experiences of those whose lives have been mutilated by some of the worst instances of mass political violence: slaves captured and sold in the Americas, the indigenous African groups forced into the German colonial army in German South West Africa and the *Sonderkommandos*, Jews pushed by the Nazis to assist in the extermination project. The book's three parts track the subjectivity of persecution by blending historical data with narratives which document the individual and collective transformations triggered by systematic persecution, the *sensus communis* ("shared sense") of victim experiences, contrasting it with that of perpetrators. This approach unveils that "the epistemologies of persecution—what victims intuited and what victimizers applied—are not necessarily reducible to each other, although both victim and perpetrator share the same historical data" (1).

Millet contextualizes her work by highlighting the tendency in genocide studies to posit "'victim objects' rather than specific subjects" (18). Scholars' suspicion that colonization or colonizing intent are the cause of persecution remains tied to a concern with numbers, agents and causalities. As perpetrators were placed before victims, the objectification of victims also produced hierarchies of victimhood (18–19). Millet seeks the opposite: researching victims as subjects, mapping "persecution's effects on victim phenomenology in the construction of both individual and collective subject positions" (19). Aside from its contribution to genocide studies, the study's focus and design can inform debates on victimhood and accountability within transitional justice, peace psychology and state crime victimology.

The study commences with a journey into the brutalities of slavery in West Indies plantations. For the British, Millet notes, Africans were *res nullius*: "ownerless being", unclaimed. With "ownerlessness" instrumentalized for imperial profit, victims' consciousness became marked by two foundational experiences: "the Middle Passage" and "the Slave Auction". Their trajectory: "ownerless being" to "ownerless merchandise" to private property (21). While slaves were seen as "calibrated ontologically" to fit masters' desires, whims, judgements, the enslaved remained committed to freedom, upsetting the master–slave dialectic (29). Reading chroniclers of those times depicting black people as a "savage multitude", perverse, godless, and ignorant, Millet observes "African diversity was recalibrated under slavery as a singular race" who had to be tamed to accept their inferiority and homogeneity (33–4). To planters, slavery was commanded by God,

serving the common good, with the slave–master relation marked by interdependence (37). Abolition prohibited chattel slavery, yet it did not invalidate the *res nullius* within the formula; future subjects would “reproduce slavery’s coordinates, its expectations and its entitlements, without necessarily the reproduction of slavery itself” (157). Former slaves “remained restrained within a shadow epistemology, the social bonds of slavery within the marketplace” (42).

The consciousness of being enslaved is next illustrated by drawing on first-hand accounts. Olaudah Equiano writes in his memoir of how death, sickness and madness marked his confinement in the cargo hold of a slave ship. The transatlantic crossing turned captives into “a transitional class of beings” (44). Narratives of two old slaves, Sibell and Ashy, illustrate the internal split: Africa remained integral to their identities, prior subject positions contrasting their current objectification. The traumas of being captured, forcibly displaced and sold to cruel masters brought Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua to the realization that his only options were: forcing his sale by exhibiting himself as drunk and dishonest thus valueless, becoming a fugitive, or suicide. Enforced familial dislocation marked slaves’ psyche: Mary Prince recounts how her mother, as in a burial ritual, prepared her and her sisters for auction; buyers showed no empathy, since “slavery hardens white people’s hearts towards the blacks” (52–3). Zooming out, Millet notes that victims existed amid institutions blocking them from entry, so “theirs became a battle for representation and admission within those institutions for the future” (164).

The second part tracks the subjectivities of colonizer and colonized in GSWA. At the Berlin Congo Conference, European powers adopted the General Act which regulated the colonization of Africa in the interest of “free trade”. With Africa codified as *terra nullius* (80–1), natives became mere resources of the colony, to be exploited by settlers. Indigenous subjectivity, sovereignty and resistance were incompatible with their objectification. German missionaries in the 1800s reported “barren” lands, ignorance, crime, chaos, a sense of “darkness”. That mandated lifting the indigenous from their “primitive” condition through hard labour and stability, in opposition to their perceived nomadic, tribal, idle inclinations. To Germans, natives required correction and punishments—humiliation, torture, imprisonment, murder, massacres. All this culminated in the Herero-Nama genocide. Massacre was endorsed “as an educational instrument in the promotion of the indigenous peoples’ social transformation into the colony’s workforce” (100). As “the colony’s health was contingent on racial purity”, Africans became “useless existentially” (105).

Survivors describe the desert covered with corpses, while others ended up in concentration camps. The sense of profound loss and emptiness exceeded Herero categories (107). After the extermination order was rescinded, the few survivors were resigned to captivity and enslavement. Samuel Kariko describes his experience arriving at the collection sites: those who had escaped the massacres were

“walking skeletons”, forced to surrender, collected and conditioned to work for the little food they got (111). The camps produced “a people without the memory of autonomy” (112). The *sensus communis* of their victimization was twofold: “their interchangeability as units of labour in German epistemologies of the colony until 1918 and the absence of traditional Nama and Herero polities after 1908” (113). Looking at postcolonial literature, Millet notes that for the future of those colonized, central became the awareness of hybridity and the need to make their voice, muted under colonial epistemology, again heard. Here, “freedom from colonial space was a reclamation project of the mind and the land” (165).

The third part examines victimization during the Holocaust. To Nazis, Jews were constructed as parasites and criminals, having used “capital” and the “Entente” nations to push Germany to self-destruction (121–2). Seen as illegitimate and deindividualized, Jews were reduced, according to Millet, to *ens nullius*, beings without “being”, lacking human legitimacy. Nazi rhetoric, loaded with colonial signifiers, exploited the history of Jewish persecution—displacement, exile, forced labour (134). As legal persecution was followed by attacks and destruction of property, by forced displacement and concentration camps, the “Final Solution” culminated in death camps. The initial language of “migration” and “resettlement” concealed extermination plans (128). Crimes became abstracted: Nazi subject positions were marked by a lack of personal responsibility; accountable instead were their leaders and the “collective dynamism of extermination” (131).

Victims’ “shared sense” is then discussed. Survivors like Rudolf Reder, Stanislaw Szmajzner and Abraham Bomba were tasked, respectively, with digging graves for the corpses, converting victims’ valuables into jewellery for SS officers, and cutting women’s hair before gassing. *Sonderkommandos* would recognize relatives, unable to tell them of the atrocities ahead – workers’ survival depended on their silence (148). Esther Raab recounts seeing an officer grab an infant by his feet, smashing his skull against a boxcar, then throwing it “like a dead rat” (143). Victims’ cries and screams stayed forever imprinted in Jacob Wiernik’s body; the infinite burning of bodies marked a perception of dying exceeding death itself (146). To Shlomo Venezia, death was a “continuous, uninterrupted process”; Jews in Birkenau felt “already in hell”, turned “into robots”, silent, obedient (151). Millet sees victims’ *sensus communis* revolving around ash; their physical-social disintegration became their persecutors’ “liberation”. *Ens nullius*, Jews illegitimately occupied space and time, they “were excised both diachronically and synchronically” (145). Victims had neither subject nor object positions—their status “had no precedent within a racial hierarchy” (158).

Persecution relied, Millet argues, on the following formulas: *res nullius* + merchandise = chattel; *terra nullius* + map = colony; *ens nullius* + parasite/garbage = ash/extermination. As subjects “felt entitled to enslave, colonize and exterminate”,

objects became interchangeable and muted to their assigned status (157). Victims lacked representation within the criminal systems in place, their subjectivity was bound to loss, absence, emptiness. Yet, they actively negotiated the above formulas and through collective memory they resisted physical and symbolic erasure. Millet concludes that recognizing the specificity of these three groups' experiences counters the interchangeability on which their persecutors relied (166).

Immersing myself in this book has been unsettling: the horrid details in the victim and perpetrator accounts move slavery, colonialism and the Holocaust beyond abstraction. Even to those researching state crimes, these often remain unfathomable, elusive; the study's primary sources counter that, by giving crimes a sense of proximity. To honour the impetus behind the book, I devoted this review primarily to condensing victim experiences rather than to historical data or to my commentary. The study's comparative dimension felt to me underdeveloped—these atrocities are treated individually, commonalities and differences to be perhaps deepened in future publications. The concepts Millet uses to filter crime, *res nullius*, *terra nullius*, *ens nullius*, and her contrasting the interiorities of victims with those of perpetrators is an approach I would like to see applied to other sites. The book is rooted in history and in (comparative) literature. Given my background, I wish this montage of narratives had been supplemented with analysis drawing on transitional justice, peace psychology, critical criminology, international criminal law and decolonial studies. All contribute theoretical and empirical insights central to interpreting criminality, victimhood, accountability.

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