Global Human Rights and Literature: Imagining a Cosmopolitan Community of Individuals

The late historian and Human Rights Watch researcher Alison Des Forges engaged in activism, scholarship, and speaking aimed at understanding the events that led to the 1994 Rwandan genocide—in which more than 500,000 Rwandans lost their lives in a swift state-sponsored massacre that spanned 100 days—and promoting reconciliation and global policy change in its aftermath.¹ Her book *Leave None to Tell the Story* provides a history of the genocide that has not only been distributed across the world in languages such as French, English, and German but also in the local Rwandan language Kinyarwanda to Rwandan schools, universities, and the judiciary.² In Rwanda, Des Forges acknowledged the “extraordinary voices for reconciliation at the grass roots level,” people “rebuilding their lives” in an atmosphere where justice remained precarious and amid the shadow of a watchful international community for whom “genocide and coming to terms with genocide are almost unimaginable.” In her public appearances, Des Forges, deeply affected by the conflict that took the lives of friends and colleagues, aimed “to remind people of what happened and raise their consciousness,” while at the same time acknowledging that her “kind of anguish is just nothing compared to the anguish of the Rwandan people.” Des Forges referred to situating her own devastation at the loss of lives with the suffering of those directly affected as “the key to keeping it all in balance.”

¹ Des Forges died in the crash of Continental Airlines flight 3407, en route from Newark, New Jersey, to Buffalo, New York, on February 12, 2009.
A statement similar to Des Forges—"My kind of anguish is just nothing compared to the anguish of the Rwandan people"—appears in the acknowledgments section of Sarah Stone’s novel The True Sources of the Nile, part international human rights drama, part love affair set between the San Francisco Bay Area and Burundi, a country neighboring Rwanda and similar to Rwanda in ethnic makeup and civil conflict. Stone writes in her afterword, "No attempt to understand what happened and what it means, what provokes and continues the cycles of killings, is useful for the dead. But it is a human urge to cut a gravestone, out of whatever materials we have." Her novel about an NGO worker’s experience in Burundi in the midst of warfare represents a cutting of a gravestone, yet, like Des Forges, she acknowledges the limits of her ability to feel the suffering of the people in Burundi, whose lives provide a large portion of the subject material for her novel. Des Forges and Stone, both Americans who worked for separate NGOs in troubled central African nations, represent two late 20th-century trends in humanitarianism and arts and letters. One, they are part of the rise of the NGO in international relations, a phenomenon Bruce Robbins describes as:

[…] the dramatically increased impact, especially since the end of the cold war, of the so-called NGOs, or nongovernmental organizations—units that are precisely other than nations. Before 1970, NGOs had no voice at the United Nations. But we can see that something has changed when, for example, the French Communist Party petitions the United Nations for status as a sanctioned NGO and wins, thus winning the right to speak officially at the UN Social Summit. At the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, attended by some five thousand representatives of nine hundred organizations, these nongovernmental groups were arguably the decisive force that broke the sterile, state-induced impasse between the First World universalists and Third World relativists—especially, it should be noted, NGOS from the so-called Third World.

The second trend is related to the first, an instance of art imitating life: the appearance of novels about NGOs and the experiences of international actors in global settings and international human rights dramas. These novels employ the language of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (in the case of Stone, she inserts the text of the UDHR into her novel), the discourse of human rights, and morality plays staging the successes and dangers of humanitarianism. The United

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Nations often appears as a backdrop, character or landscape, its very presence creating a world of diplomacy, conflict, and internationalism. Whereas international human rights doctrines, treaties, and covenants comprise universal norms that aim to be distributed and agreed upon globally, human rights novels insert life into the abstractions and interrogate the limits and contingency of universalism and translation across difference and particularity. The UDHR, for example, is the most translated document in the world, available even to language communities of fewer than 50 people living in remote parts of Mexico. Yet, the translation of language in declarations does not automatically decode rights and render such discourses relevant to the groups translation aims to bring into the imagined space of the international human rights community. As Hathaway points out, "Declarations of rights that are not easily defined and measured, or that are not accompanied by an effective plan for securing true remedies for violations of those rights, may actually be counterproductive." According to Mary Ann Glendon,

The Declaration, as we have seen, was far more influenced by the modern dignitarian rights tradition of continental Europe and Latin America than by the more individualistic documents of Anglo-American lineage. The fact is that the rights dialect that prevails in the Anglo-American orbit would have found little resonance in Africa or Asia. It implicitly confers its highest priority on individual freedom and typically formulates rights without explicit mention of their limits or their relation to other rights or to responsibilities. The predominant images of the rights bearer, heavily influenced by Hobbes, Locke, and John Stuart Mill, is that of a self-determining, self-sufficient individual.

Novels pick up where treaties leave off and concern themselves with the dilemmas and conflicts that defy codification by principle, deeming the translation of culture

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6 While the United Nations and other organizations such as the European Union and the African Union have created declarations, treaties, covenants, and protocols that are more specific and detailed than the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, I concern myself with the UDHR because of its wide translation and placement within the human rights imaginary. I am grateful to Joseph Slaughter for pointing me to treaties such as the African (Banjul) Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and its protocols that would greatly benefit my work in the area of human rights and literature.
as equally important as the translation of language. In their exchange on race and culture, the novelist James Baldwin told the anthropologist Margaret Mead of the need "to translate what it means to be born here, what it means to be born there, what it means to be born at all. What time means."9 Novels provide cultural translations of human rights, humanitarianism, the United Nations, and the UDHR, making more immediate and pressing the portraits of failure and misguidance alongside the potentialities for reconciliation and redress in international affairs. With a focus on the human being, the novels adjoin legal, social, and political rights concerns with an interest in what Cora Diamond refers to as "gestures, manners, habits, turns of speech, turns of thought, styles of face as morally expressive—of an individual or of a people, the sharp-eyed, description of life, of what matters, makes differences, in human lives."10 For Diamond, "A human being is someone who has a human life to lead, as do I, someone whose fate is a human fate, as is mine," and, "We show what we make of this in our language and our literature, but in large measure also in the language of our relations to each other."11 In her placing literature and moral philosophy side by side as neighbors, Diamond restores the concept of the human being to its rightful place, reconciling it with the rise of Kantianism and reason as the foundation for conceptualizing what constitutes a human being. Similarly, Søren Kierkegaard asks that people "be contented with being a human being" and suggests that all "worldly worry has its basis in a person's unwillingness to be contented with being a human being, in his worried craving for distinction by way of comparison."12 Because of comparative worry, Kierkegaard reasons, "the worried person finally goes so far that because of diversity he forgets that he is a human being, in despair regards himself as so different from other people that he even regards himself as different from what it is to be human."13 He believes "only that the person is free who is contented with being a human being."14 Diamond and Kierkegaard stress the importance of being human like other humans, a fundamental obligation of readers subjected to the imagined world of a novel and the greatest challenge to human rights, where difference and universal humanity are at odds. But privileging one's humanity over diversity does not negate or disregard cultural specificity or national personhood; rather, cul-

13 Kierkegaard et al. (1993, p. 169).
14 Kierkegaard et al. (1993, p. 177).
tural specificity and personhood are understood in relation to the importance of being human, resulting in a greater platform for dialogue. The loss of core belief in humanity has resulted in major conflicts, and restoring that universal notion is done time and time again in fictional narratives, imaginative works willing to delve into the "sense of mystery surrounding our lives, the feeling of solidarity in mysterious origin and uncertain fate." The unifying scenes, dialogues, actions, and gestures may come on the occasion of strife and loss—a sad story about the suffering of another—or they may arise out of ritual and pleasure—human beings participating in local cultural ceremonies and traditions. Narrative invites readers to share in the plight of others and reflect on the lives of others in relation to their own. The sum effect is acknowledgment of the importance of being human, respect for local culture, and the basis for shared identity like the one imagined in the UDHR.

Though novels have always shown the tendency to champion the rights and subjectivity of the downtrodden or vulnerable, they have not traditionally been understood as substantive and rigorous human rights tools. The omission of literature from serious conversations about human rights is starting to change, however. Increased attention is being paid to human rights and literature, a field that some define as consisting of "human rights stories" that "have begun to coalesce as a self-contained set of texts sharing key formal properties, an emerging global subgenre." Novelists J.M. Coetzee, writing on post-apartheid relations in South

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Africa, Michael Ondaatje, detailing the work of NGOs in Sri Lanka, and Dave Eggers, assuming the narrative voice of a Sudanese refugee, are seen as exemplars of this type of fiction, and both the organizers of literary prizes and academia have recognized the human rights themes in their novels. In terms of critical attention, the work of scholars like James Dawes, Joseph Slaughter, and Lynn Hunt has prompted important debates about the potential and limits of the humanities, literature, and the arts on human rights. In 2005, the Modern Language Association of America hosted a Human Rights and the Humanities conference, chaired by Judith Butler and Donna C. Stanton, which brought together literary scholars and professionals in the field of human rights and led to a special edition of PMLA featuring articles related to human rights and literature.¹⁸ In a 2009 special edition of Comparative Literary Studies, “Introducing Human Rights and Literary Forms; or, The Vehicles and Vocabularies of Human Rights,” editors Joseph Slaughter and Sophia A. McClennen survey the field and call for collaboration while emphasizing that there are limitations that cannot be overcome:

While we understand that law alone is generally inadequate in the face of human rights abuses, humanities scholars and teachers cannot afford to discount or disregard the legal condition of human rights, just as political scientists, legal scholars and practitioners would do well to recognize that human rights are a cultural discourse as much as they are a set of legal standards.¹⁹

Acknowledgment of the presence of human rights talk in global fiction has led to productive analyses, particularly of the ways in which literature archives, promotes, revises, interrogates, and calls into question social, legal, and political notions of human rights principles. But it is important to remember that at least from the time of Greek epic poetry and, later, Greek tragedy—The Iliad and The Odyssey and Antigone are oft-cited examples—ideas reminiscent of human rights and the art of storytelling have had some kind of relationship, and contemporary assertions that there is an “emerging” new synchronicity between the two deny centuries of interplay, continuity, and contingency—what is easily identifiable as a tradition (the kind espoused by Eliot or Auerbach). J. Peter Euben characterizes the classical version of the relationship as “the continuities between Greek tragedy and classical political theory,” and modern instances of that relationship became readily apparent during the revolution in scientific and philosophical thought

known as the Enlightenment, an important antecedent to the narrative of human rights. The language of the Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen and the Declaration of Independence figures directly into the UDHR, and philosophers such as Voltaire and Rousseau not only wrote essays, treatises, and speeches in favor of rights for women, children, slaves, and the poor, they also wrote novels for this purpose. According to Hunt,

The magical spell cast by the novel thus turned out to be far-reaching in its effects. Although the adherents of the novel did not say so explicitly, they understood that writers such as Richardson and Rousseau were effectively drawing their readers into daily life as a kind of substitute religious experience. Readers learned to appreciate the emotional intensity of the ordinary and the capacity of people like themselves to create on their own a moral world. Human rights grew out of the seedbed sowed by those feelings.

In 1759, for example, Voltaire, then the most prominent man of letters in western Europe, published Candide, a novel designed to attack the religious optimism of thinkers unwilling to adequately account for injustice in the world. Voltaire's satirical novel, conversely, describes conditions of disaster and horror, largely inspired by his reaction to the destruction caused by the 1755 Lisbon earthquake and the Seven Years War. Voltaire, wealthy and accomplished, understood himself as a happy man in a miserable world, and he wrote Candide to critique the optimism of those who did not share his concern for the less fortunate. His novel ends with the variously translated, “Il faut cultiver notre jardin,” signaling the importance of every individual cultivating his or her own garden. Perhaps Canadian Michael Ignatieff is the contemporary figure for us who most resembles Voltaire. He is a Harvard-trained historian who has taught at Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, and Toronto and was the former director of Harvard's Carr Center for Human Rights and a leader of the Liberal Party of Canada. He has written extensively on human rights, including a philosophical text titled The Needs of Strangers, in which he ponders the dilemma of “when is it right to speak for the needs of strangers? Politics is not only the art of representing the needs of strangers; it is also the perilous business of speaking on behalf of needs which strangers have had no chance to articulate on their own.”

22 Schmidt, Hammer Lassen Architects will design the new International Criminal Court (ICC) building to be constructed in The Hague by 2015. Bjarne Hammer, the firm's creative director, said the building will include a garden with flowers and plants from each of the 114 member countries of the ICC.
Ignatieff is also a novelist—his *Charlie Johnson in the Flames* (2003) is a story about the mid-1990s conflict in the Balkans: a Kosovar woman has helped a group of journalists to safety amid unfamiliar terrain. Serbian forces see her aid the outsiders and set her afire. The image stays with Charlie Johnson and he cannot rest until he finds the man who torched her and took her life. Charlie Johnson is devastated by the kindness of a woman he cannot even name. Ignatieff, passionate in his expression of legal, historical, and political ideas about human rights, has also made claims about human rights through prose. These literary claims, disguised in the material of a fictional narrative, have value for rethinking a human rights paradigm that has struggled to answer the riddles of difference and universality.

Scholars of the 19th century make similar claims for the discourse of human rights and literature in that period. Joseph Slaughter, in his book *Human Rights, Inc.*, suggests that the novel genre and liberal human rights discourse are more than coincidentally, or casually, interconnected. Seen through the figure and formula of human personality development central to both the *Bildungsroman* and human rights, their shared assumptions and imbrications emerge to show clearly their historical, formal, and ideological interdependencies. They are mutually enabling fictions: each projects an image of the proper relations between the individual and society and the normative career of free and full human personality development.

An interrogation of these proper relations can be seen in the work of an anti-Bildungsroman form like Kierkegaard’s *Either-Or*, which poses alternative formations of the individual, or classic American slave narratives like the *Narrative of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, which claim humanity for those left out of categories of personhood. Similar to the anti-Enlightenment discourses that emerged alongside Enlightenment thinking, the 19th century found diverse reaction to the *Bildungsroman* form and the interrelated rise of human rights. Kierkegaard’s *Either-Or* resembles the novel form, and Douglass, in addition to writing and rewriting his autobiography, crafted a novella titled “The Heroic Slave,” notable for how Douglass transforms the real events surrounding a slave ship and its human cargo into a narrative that, contrary to historical accounts, regards the slaves as human beings.

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The 20th century—which began with the Armenian genocide, witnessed the Holocaust at its midway point, and ended with the Rwandan genocide—is where human rights and literature have gained their most identifiable interplay and dialogue. The United Nations has published at least one novel with human rights as the dominant theme. In the foreword to Amnesty International’s collection, Freedom: Stories Celebrating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Archbishop Desmond Tutu asks, “And what have art and literature to do with human rights?” and responds to his own query with, “They are all bound up with this wonderful talent we humans have: to empathize with others. If, by reading any one of the stories in this anthology, we are enabled to step, for one moment, into another person’s shoes, to get right under their skin, then that is already a great achievement.” In 2008, The Irish Times published a series of short stories in which prominent Irish authors each specified an article from the UDHR and transformed the content of the Article into a fictional narrative that increases the article’s clarity. Fictional accounts of NGO experiences and the work of human rights organizations fall under their own cataloguing category at the Library of Congress. A simple search of “human rights” and “fiction” returns Underground People by Lewis Nkosi, City of Light by Michael Doane, Activist’s Daughter by Ellyn Bache, Anil’s Ghost by Michael Ondaatje, Burridge Unbound by Alan Cumyn, Work of Idle Hands by Jonathon Platz, Alma by Jay Higginbotham, A Changed Man by Francine Prose, Acts of Faith by Philip Caputo, The Secret Keeper by Paul Harris, Angel of Vilcabamba by David E. Stuart, and The True Sources of the Nile by Sarah Stone. Stuart writes about a human rights investigator in Peru while Prose begins with a neo-Nazi who has an epiphany about brotherly love and joins a human rights organization. Harris uses a familiar trope—that of a journalist from an industrialized nation (Britain) trying to make sense of the tragedy and conflict in a war-ravaged nation-state (Sierra Leone). Caputo’s novel crosses Africa and focuses on the good acts and corruption of humanitarian workers, medical supply deliverers, airplane pilots, missionaries, and renegades in Sudan. Higginbotham’s book Alma is about women’s rights as human rights; Platz tells a story about a Canadian working for Amnesty International, while Cumyn’s protagonist creates his own human rights organization and truth commission on an island attacked by terrorists in the South Pacific. Nkosi’s fictitious tale is about the leader of the South African National Liberation movement in the final years of apartheid. Ondaatje’s novel about human rights workers in Sri Lanka is well known and the subject of most human rights and literature analyses currently dominating scholarship in the academy.26

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The proliferation of human rights and literature into the contemporary public sphere, both as literary practice and theoretical scholarship, has created new and more inclusive paradigms for global rights talk. Human rights represents a complex set of moral, social, political, and legal discourses that have, borrowing from the intellectual capital of the past, emerged since the mid-20th century to protect all human beings from further destruction and misery. The Charter of the Nuremberg Tribunal, the United Nations Charter, the UDHR, and the Geneva Conventions reflect important gains made in the area of protecting vulnerable human beings from the arbitrary justice of abusive governments, corporations, and ideological collectives aiming to impose their will on individual expression and choice. Accordingly, human rights, as a discourse, has become the lingua franca of the world. Yet, because “human rights activists take it for granted that they represent universal values and universal interests, they have not always taken as much care as they might about the question of whether they truly represent the human interests they purport to defend.” For Hannah Arendt, “the conception of human rights based upon the assumed existence of a human being as such, broke down at the very moment when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships—except that they were still human.” Additional challenges to human rights are sovereignty, or the right for one country to interfere in the relations of another under the impetus of emergency, and the assumption that all human beings are willing to empathize with human beings they consider to be different from themselves. Thus, a remarkable set of ideas—human rights—suffers from the inability of its constituency—everyone—to imagine themselves as part of a universal species. In particular, some elites cannot align themselves as equals—at the basic level of humanity—with those human beings they either wish to assist or understand to be in misery. This inability to understand ourselves as equal human beings negates the power and potential of human rights as a resource for global justice. According to Helen Stacy,

A question has been put squarely on the table for those who promote international human rights: can Europe’s Enlightenment philosophy of individual rights survive present-day culture wars and contrive to provide legitimacy for international human rights institutions and courts? Or has the justification...
for a universal system of rights been extinguished because Enlightenment ideals of respect for culture, religion, and political organization simply cannot engage with systems that are not built upon the same foundations.\(^{30}\)

Yet, to ask such questions presupposes membership in an international community and access to deliberations within a public sphere that can impact policy and provide the impetus for change. One of the most important strategies that mainstream NGOs employ, for example, is to create narratives (human rights reports, country reports) of horror and mayhem that they can place in the hands of prime ministers, presidents, and assembly members. In order to have success and liberate the oppressed or endangered, NGOs need their reports to see the light of day. This process relies on a complex relationship and negotiation of philanthropy, prestige, and networking. The most successful NGOs have the necessary monetary support, global reputation, and access to state apparatuses to advocate on behalf of groups and individuals in danger. This elite process has the side effect of negating voices, leading to what David Kennedy has called the "professionalization of human rights" as

a mechanism for people to think they are working "on behalf of" less fortunate others, while externalizing the possible costs of their decisions and actions. The representational dimension of human rights work—speaking "for" others—puts the "victims" both on screen and off. The production of authentic victims, or victim authenticity, is an inherently voyeuristic or pornographic practice that, no matter how carefully or sensitively it is done, transforms the position of the "victim" in his or her society and produces a language of victimization for him or her to speak on the international stage. The injured-one-who-is-not-yet-a-victim, the "subaltern" if you like, can neither speak nor be spoken for, but recedes instead before the interpretive and representational practices of the movement. The remove between human rights professionals and the people they purport to represent can reinforce a global divide of wealth, mobility, information and access to audience. Human rights professionals consequently struggle, ultimately in vain, against a tide of bad faith, orientalism and self-serving sentimentalism.\(^{31}\)

The writer Emmanuel Dongala has dramatized this fundamental dilemma in his award-winning novel *Johnny Chien Méchant* (2002), translated into English as

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Johnny Mad Dog and later turned into a French-Belgian-Liberian film by Jean-Stéphane Sauvaire. Dongala tells the story of child soldiers in a fictionalized African nation and weaves scenes of their traumatic initiation into rebel armies with dramatic occasions of Western intervention, humanitarian workers and journalists trying to expose atrocities and shine a light on the inhumanity of rights violations. The voice of Laokele, a 16-year-old African girl affected by the violence, is placed next to that of Katelijne, a Belgian journalist and filmmaker trying to capture the story of civil strife and African misery for her audience back home. In the narrative, Laokele and Katelijne are characters made equal by the fact that major and minor characters within an imaginative work cannot be understood exclusive of one another. Conversely, in the material world, the voice of a 16-year-old African girl whose life is in danger is usually brought to the West through sensational images and the crafting of an objectifying narrative. Dongala both critiques this tendency and creates equality for the subject under duress and the humanitarian journalist or worker attempting to liberate. When Laokele refuses Katelijne's request to interview Laokele's mother, who has been injured by rebel violence, Katelijne urges her to reconsider:

“No, no!” said Katelijne. “It’s not at all the same thing! If people could see your mother speak, the psychological impact would be enormous! Viewers always like strong images and emotions, you know. While your mother is speaking, we’ll get a close-up of her haggard face. Then we’ll pull back and focus on her in a medium close-up for a moment, to show her sitting so fine and straight. Then we’ll zoom in on her legs and end with a close-up of her stumps. It’ll be dramatic! American journalists have a saying: ‘When it bleeds, it leads.’ In other words, the bloodier the image, the more visually compelling it is and the better it works. And when it comes to images, those stumps are unbeatable!”

Laokele challenges Katelijne directly with anger and indirectly through Dongala’s descriptive enumerating of her dreams, losses, and attempts to protect her younger brother from the war. Given the opportunity to tell her story, she demands the opportunity to select its frame and reject attempts to turn her life into a spectacle. Ironically, the film adaptation of Dongala’s novel elides this discursive human rights thread within the narrative. The emphasis on a girl narrator is replaced with the dominant voice of a violent boy because the violent boy aligns more with

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the spectacle of violence and killing emphasized in the film version of Dongala's book. Katelijne does not appear nor does Laokele's rejection of Katelijne's failure to acknowledge her humanity. The film not only epitomizes the dangers of the "professionalization of human rights" flagged by David Kennedy but also shows the difficulty of translating human rights narratives to the screen. In a review in *The New York Times*, Manohla Dargis calls the film adaptation a series of "skillfully shot, rapidly edited scenes of dead-eyed children walking, running, dancing, shooting, screaming and killing, killing, killing. Without context, information or explanation, the movie plunges you into horror—yet, to what end? There's no pleasure here, certainly, just effort and craft and a lot of black bodies, children and adolescents mostly, though also some adults, in a surrealistic and violent pantomime."34 Dargis writes that she was repulsed by the film's "provocative flourishes" set against an audio of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Before the film even started, "the predominately white audience" was assured "that Liberia's president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, and all the people of the republic stand behind *Johnny Mad Dog*. Afterward, still reeling from what I'd just seen, I wondered, Who am I to argue?"35 Dargis' repulsion raises important concerns that must be addressed in relation to the adaptation of human rights narratives for the screen and their effectiveness. The film, at least in Dargis' visit to the theater, trivializes the intention of Dongala's novel, which he says he wrote with Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*), one of the great works of world literature and human rights narratives, as inspiration.

The appearance of novels like Dongala's in greater numbers and the increased critical attention being paid to the emerging field should be combined with methods for implementing the knowledge production created by these narratives and critical work into policies and recommendations for human rights practices and strategies. In other words, human rights and literature presents itself as more than a discursive phenomenon—imaginative voices like Dongala's Laokele, the 16-year-old African girl who rejects Western fetishization of her and her family's condition in the novel *Johnny Mad Dog*, can inform international humanitarian law and humanitarianism of the future. Human rights and literature is the field of literary inquiry that holds promise for democratic and equal comparative analysis of narratives by and about human beings living in regions of the world marked as culturally, socially, and politically "different." A human rights story has the difficult task of creating equality among characters in a text. By equality, I do not mean that every character should have the same political, social, cultural, and legal

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recognition from the start of a story until the end. Rather, I mean the equality of recognition of characters, the author, readers, and every being associated with the novel world, as human beings—the undeniable fact that both Huck and Jim in the Adventures for Huckleberry Finn, for example, are human despite the material and facts of history denying the humanity of one, affirming the humanity of the other. Some readers will resist this, but writers who author human rights stories try to address this problem in their fiction or at least problematize the inequality of actual human life and fictional renderings of human life and make it a major theme of the novel. The novel, as a form, welcomes the writer's intentionality, and, in fact, is unable to hold the prejudices imposed by states, societies, and individuals, and authors themselves. A character might come from a wealthy background or hold an important position in his society, but the equality of fiction poses the possibility that the wealthy person's life will not be regarded as more important than a person facing poverty. Indeed, fiction allows a reversal, an emphasis on the life that finds itself neglected in reality. It is not true that a mere emphasis on lives in jeopardy in fiction brings that life into the public sphere. When Dave Eggers assumes the narrative voice of a Sudanese refugee in What Is the What, his narrative remains that of an American elite telling the story of a refugee who does not have the same social and cultural capital in the public sphere and marketplace of ideas. This inequality means that Eggers must mediate on behalf of the Sudanese voices he is interested in providing with agency. But how does that mediation look and what are the strategies for bringing about equality? According to Emmanuel Levinas, "that apparent simplicity of the relation between the I and the You, in its very asymmetry, is yet again disturbed by the arrival of the third person, who stands next to the other, the you. The third party is also a neighbour, a face, an unattainable alterity. Here, with the third party, we have the proximity of a human plurality."36 By careful consideration of the subjectivity of the human being in a position to offer assistance vis-à-vis the individual in need of assistance, critical analysis of a literary work opens possibilities for imagining equality.

This equality is especially important for the predominant setting of human rights narratives—between the United States or a western European country and one of the nation-states of Africa, where the "heart of darkness" metaphor lingers and impacts international relations. These narratives gain notoriety through what Eileen Julien has characterized as "engagement with what is assumed to be European or global discourses: surrealism, primitivism, magical realism, cultural studies, the motifs of postcolonial theory (hybridity, exile, marginalization, dislocation), or areas of inquiry and theory integral to the social sciences, such as Marxism, fem-

inism, democratization and governance, politics of the state, and globalization.\textsuperscript{37} Julien points to the use of Western ideas in these novels as the source of their popularity on social science syllabi in universities across the United States. In these narratives, human rights is exposed as the fiction, and the situation of fictional characters as a reality. A character in Nuruddin Farah's \textit{Gifts} (1993) says, "Last week, the world ran and Africa starved."\textsuperscript{38} The narrator in Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's \textit{Purple Hibiscus} recalls her father's facial expressions when confronted with the West, "the kind of expression he had in the photo when they did the big story on him after Amnesty World gave him a human rights award."\textsuperscript{39} The blank expression is an undecided verdict on the status of human rights even when characters—in this case, the narrator's father—find themselves caught up in its work, rewards, and discourse. Ngozi Adichie expands on these themes in \textit{Half a Yellow Sun}, a fictional account of the Nigeria-Biafra War that lasted from 1967 to 1970. Characters in the novel debate the United Nations, international relations, the Cold War, and British colonialism. Ngozi Adichie calls her novel her "tribute to love: the unreasonable, resilient thing that holds people together and marks us human."\textsuperscript{40} As a human rights narrative, \textit{Half a Yellow Sun} engages with Enlightenment philosophy and the discourse of human rights, not as a prerequisite for enabling the novel to participate in global literary dialogues but as an intertextual and centuries-old discussion on the human condition, and a rejection of the notion that "the African and the European would always be irreconcilable."\textsuperscript{41} In \textit{Human Love} (2004; English, 2008), Andrei Makine creates a character who is "a champion of human rights who braves all dangers."\textsuperscript{42} He believes that the "only element left capable of saving Africa from its wars, torture, fallen ideologies, is love, love for another individual, love for humanity."\textsuperscript{43} The novel is also about civil strife in Africa and includes the familiar pessimism with difficult but retrievable rays of hope: "This evening I decide to abandon the search for any rational order in the fragments of the past my memory has retained. The logic of history, the causes of every war and every peace, universal morality—none of that has ever helped humanity to prevent a boot smashing a woman's collarbone and children learning to kill."\textsuperscript{44} Gillian Slovo's \textit{Red


\textsuperscript{43} Makine & Strachan (2008, p. 224).

\textsuperscript{44} Makine & Strachan (2008, p. 189).
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_Dust_ (2003) is set in post-apartheid South Africa. A native South African working as a lawyer in New York returns home to represent a black man who must attend the amnesty hearing of his white torturer before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). As an apparatus of justice and reconciliation, the TRC has met with great criticism because perpetrators of crimes during apartheid received amnesty for admitting their crimes. Slovo’s novel challenges the TRC as an apparatus that makes “the world feel good about its own humanity” and parses its complexity along lines of race, gender, class, and sexuality.65 Richard North Patterson’s _Eclipse_ (2009) is a fictional story based on the Nigerian human rights activist and writer Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was hanged by his government after a trial that the world has acknowledged as a sham. Human rights is an unavoidable theme in a novel about African immigrants living in an African-American neighborhood in late-20th-century Washington, D.C. In _The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears_ (2007) by Dinaw Mengestu, an Ethiopian convenience store-owner debates the world each morning with his customers, mainly Kenneth from Kenya and Joseph from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Admirers of the American Dream, the Declaration of Independence, and the Gettysburg Address, their experiences in Washington, D.C., lead them to rethink their readings of America, democracy, and freedom. A narrative about African immigrants to the United States relocating in an African-American neighborhood results in a double-crossing of the Atlantic. Those descendants of African slaves transported to the Americas during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade encounter new African immigrants escaping homelands reeling from the legacies of colonialism.

More than fifteen years after the Rwandan genocide of 1994, a substantial collection of novels and stories about the tragedy has appeared. These include Julian R. Pierce’s _Speak Rwanda_, Boubacar Boris Diop’s _Murambi: The Book of Bones_, Hanna Jensen’s _Over A Thousand Hills I Walk With You_, and Uwem Akpan’s short story, “Fattening for Gabon,” from the collection, _Say You’re One of Them_. Julian R. Pierce’s 1999 novel _Speak Rwanda_ attempts to narrate the events of the genocide from the voice of victims, as well as perpetrators, who characterize the United Nations human rights policy as, “Ask questions, talk, do nothing”46 and deem the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, a crowning achievement of the United Nations Security Council, “a measure of Western justice, not of ours. They are trying to prove that the West needs to police us for our own good.”47 Boubacar Boris Diop’s fifth novel, _Murambi_, is regarded as one of the more successful texts that attempts to make sense of genocide, a feat no less difficult than Toni Morrison’s response to slavery in her novel _Beloved_. According to Eileen Julien,

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67 Pierce (1999, p. 275).
Murambi’s significance lies elsewhere. It does what a creative and transformative work alone can do. It distills this history and gives voice to those who can no longer speak—recovering, as best we can, the full, complex lives concealed in the statistics of genocide and rendering their humanity. In thinking about the gruesome murder of hundreds of thousands of people and this book—a frail object—we confront the enormous disproportion between the work of art, as beautiful and powerful as it may be, and the terrible events it symbolizes. Yet it is through the work of imagination and language that the novel reconstitutes those unique human beings, now lost to us, and allows them nonetheless to survive and to be heard. Their stories may lead us to reflect on the practice of evil and help us claim our very own humanity amidst the routine banality of violence, the numbed indifference or silent acquiescence of which we are all part.48

Novelists around the world—and even the United Nations itself—have recognized that the art form of fiction can intervene in the human rights conversation in distinctively powerful ways. The international community (defined broadly as a collection of NGOs, governments, multinational organizations, humanitarian agencies, cultural and educational institutions, individuals, activists, and social justice groups interested in human rights) continues to move forward with the attempt to realize the aims of the UDHR and the creation of even more rights documents. These efforts have combined to make human rights the lingua franca of the world, but the process has cast aside too many lives, making it necessary to look at the important categories of “universal” and “human” and figure out ways to make these legitimate and functional terms. Doing so can help the UDHR move from being merely a widely translated document to one that is read and valued by all or an overwhelming number of human beings. How can we conceptually restore (or include) these too many lives to the categories of the universal and the human in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? Is it possible to place political and moral philosophy in conversation with literary narrative and ask philosophy to consider the humans (major and minor) at the center of a novel or story as a way to struggle with the category of the human and the universal in the UDHR, human rights, and in political and moral philosophy more generally? Though novels cannot literally stop something like the Rwandan genocide, they can remind us of what Anthony Appiah calls “the recognition of our responsibility for every human being, and the recognition that human beings are different and that we can learn from each other’s differences.”49 And while I cannot determine how these texts will affect our under-

standing of human rights, NGOs, the United Nations, international human rights law, sovereignty, etc., I can locate where in these texts discussions of these issues are taking place and suggest that we let these ideas enter into the public sphere and stop denying them a political voice because they appear as art.

In 2000, the United Nations published its first and only novel to date, *Marie: In the Shadow of the Lion*. The novel is about an 11-year-old girl in an unnamed African country—clearly Sierra Leone—that is in the middle of a civil war. The novel opens with a universally understood and innocent scene: Marie is at school, laughing and playing with friends. By the end of the novel, rebels have murdered her teacher, recruited and initiated six-year-old boys into their forces by having them kill other six-year-olds, snatched infants from their mothers’ arms and slung them into rocks, and recruited Marie as a concubine for the leader of the rebel forces. The novel spares no detail, and the influence on the rebels is telling: “American rap music blocked out the sounds of the African night while rebels drank and danced in their best Calvin Klein jeans and Nike sneakers.”

Here is one unfortunate example of the violence the novel narrates:

“He asked you what was in the rag?” another soldier said. “Let’s see.”

The soldier grabbed the sheet. He reached in and pulled Mary out by one of her legs. Now Mary shrieked and wiggled in the air. Without a thought, the soldier tossed baby Mary to the side of the road. She hit some rocks, and didn’t move.

“No!” Inez screamed and broke through the soldiers. She ran to her still baby and held her to the chest.

The soldiers smirked and walked away. One of them tucked the sheet into his pocket. He could use it to clean his gun.

Marie escapes the rebels and runs away with the help of a boy from her school, Joseph. Marie and Joseph are playing together on the school playground when the novel opens; by the end, Joseph has been recruited and indoctrinated by the rebels. He has killed three people. When he sees Marie brought to the camp, he helps her escape. Marie tells him to escape with her but he chooses to remain behind to hold off the rebels while Marie runs away.

“Come with me, Joseph. They’ll kill you. You know they’ll kill you.”

“Don’t you understand?” Joseph said without emotion. “They already did.”

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51 Piasecki & Yost (2000, p. 44).

52 Piasecki & Yost (2000, p. 104).
The United Nations suggests the book for 11- to 15-year-olds in the West and advises them, if outraged by the life Marie has faced, to set up Humanitarian Clubs in their schools, write articles in their school newspapers, write to their local media outlets, and petition their respective government leaders to support international treaties. The postscript to the novel informs readers that “So far, no generation has been able to stop these terrible things from happening. We hope that maybe, just maybe, yours will be the first.” Kofi Annan tells the readers, “Marie's story may upset and even alarm you. But this is as it should be. It is right to be shocked when brutal things happen to innocent people. We must use our sense of outrage to stop them happening.”

While the novel represents an instance of the United Nations employing the power of fiction in the name of human rights—getting readers who lead lives of calm and privilege to identify and sympathize with and help human beings in less stable environments—ultimately the work of fiction proves merely that the United Nations should not be in the business of publishing novels. Yet, the question remains: How is the United Nations to publicize, respond to, and ultimately conscript the international community to prevent the daily violence of Sierra Leone or Kosovo? The answer is complex, but I argue that it will require everything we have: men and women from every part of the world regardless of race, social class, gender identification, or nationality; novels, stories, tragedy, and imagination from writers everywhere; NGOs, international relations history, international relations theory; a loss of elitism; and a tremendous amount of love. The United Nations does not need to commission novels. These novels already exist.

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Acta Nordica
Studier i språk- og litteraturvitenskap

Per Thomas Andersen (Ed.)

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