

“The Language of All Nations”: Defining Human Rights Fiction

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In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine **calls movement** of the body and the face and the tenor of one’s voice “the natural language of all nations”.¹ Unlike films or photos, novels and short stories dealing with human rights abuses cannot rely on the embodied or vocalized appeals for help that so often move human action. This frees them up to appeal to a shared bodily vulnerability presumed by, but not often articulated in **human rights discourse**. Building on work by Elizabeth Anker and James Dawes, I will examine ways that a dual emphasis on bodily vulnerability and embodied, event-based knowledge characterize what Dawes calls “the novel of human rights”. The first part of the chapter will provide a brief overview of the intertwined histories of human rights and novels dramatizing their protection or abuse. The second is devoted to defining this subgenre, which is expanding tremendously in the twenty-first century even as critics scramble to define it. The third and final part draws on phenomenological ideas of the body, intersubjectivity, and knowledge-without-certainty to describe an ethics of responsibility operating in much of the fiction within this new genre.

The history that makes possible the human rights novel

It is hard to say when the history of the human rights novel should begin. Saronik Bosu and Heba Jahama begin their “Chronology of Major Works

and Events” in human rights history with the Iroquois Constitution, 1200–1500.² Lynn Hunt argues that the advent of human rights literature came with the advent of the novel itself, analyzing Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740) as an early work of perpetrator fiction.³ Samuel Moyn begins his most recent book on the topic with the Jacobin conception of the welfare state,⁴ and one could analyze England’s contemporaneous Jacobin novels as human rights novels because they target specific rights abuses.⁵ The UN Declaration of Human Rights from 1948 provides another obvious starting point. And as Joseph Slaughter argues, “literary theorists writing contemporaneously with the UDHR tended to describe the novel’s primary virtue as its capacity to represent [...] the problematics of social personality”, or in other words the way an individual comes to be recognized as a legally entitled entity within society and before the law.⁶ This conception of the means through which human rights might be achieved is very much aligned with the 1948 Declaration.⁷ Or perhaps we should look to the 1970s when, according to some, “The human rights revolution occurred almost *ex nihilo*”.⁸ Or the 1990s, by which time human rights had “become the dominant moral vocabulary in human affairs”.⁹

Human rights scholars’ search for a beginning reveals an underlying tension within the grounding philosophy of human rights: are they natural or culturally constructed? It reveals tensions between rights as legally articulated and forms of life that unfold within or outside the enforcement of these legal protections. Although one could write a literary history of rights advocacy beginning at any of these points, I would like to suggest that human rights novels have become a discernable, global phenomenon only in the last twenty-five years. There are three interlinking phenomena that led to this rise. First, the precise language of human rights did not begin to dominate international ethics until the 1980s and 90s. It is not that the need for human rights was greater than it had been during the genocidal decades that came before, but that the world’s increasing globalization heightened the sense that human rights problems were global, species-level problems and needed to be addressed as such. As this chart shows, use of the term “human rights” accelerated dramatically between 1979 and 2000.¹⁰



It was at this point that a broad, public discourse of human rights became available for authors to appeal to and revitalize.

Also, the twenty-first century has seen a spread of what Adam Kirsch calls “the global novel”, in which “individual lives are now lived and conceived under the sign of the whole globe”.¹¹ The rate of reading novels in translation is increasing. *The Guardian* reports that the “number of translated books bought in Britain increased by an astounding 96% between 2001 and 2015”. This is a reader-motivated more than a publisher-motivated trend. “Translated fiction sells better, overall, than English literary fiction and made up 7% of all UK fiction sales in 2015”.¹² Also, due to increasing immigration rates and the globalization of Anglophone and Francophone publishing practices, more novels by authors born outside of North American and Western Europe are being read by audiences within those privileged spaces. As contentious as this trend might be for writers in minor languages,¹³ it has created a recognized route through which stories from places without the capacity to mass produce works of literature can reach readers all over the world.

Finally, the last twenty-five years have seen a resurgence of historical fiction, much of it portraying human rights abuses. This phenomenon has been noted by Greg Forster and Hamish Dalley.¹⁴ They both label it “post-colonial historical fiction”, but that demarcation might be both too large and too small. New examples include Viet Than Nguyen’s *The Sympathizer* (2015) and Vaddey Ratner’s *In the Shadow of the Banyan* (2013), which in their examination of the Vietnam-American War and subsequent Khymer Rouge brutality engage intra-national violence and military intervention

in and by sovereign states as much as the legacies of colonialism. Or Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), about the Nigerian Civil War and *Murambi: The Book of Bones* (2000; trans. 2006) about the Rwandan genocide. Beyond their post-colonial settings, what these books have in common is their use of a genre associated with nationalism to make trans-national demands for ethical remembering in the face of human rights abuses. These novels may not evoke the language of human rights in a predictable way – Adichie's characters long for “the right to mourn”, “the right to self-pity”, the “right to name” – but they rely on a shared understanding of what constitutes human rights abuse, not only the extremes of genocide and torture, but also rights restricted by cultural normativity, like the right to become a family.

The emergence of post-colonial historical fiction overlaps with the emergence of human rights fictions, and although there are works in each of these categories that lie outside the other, there are many works that would fit into both. Since the genre is still emerging, it would be premature to try to define it too rigidly. The narrativization of human rights struggles in humanitarian accounts, journalism, films, and literature inflects readers' understanding of what it would mean for human rights to be realized, so if we understand human rights as a dynamic ideal instead of an already-determined list, then human rights and novels about them are continuing to define each other. James Dawes has written the most direct attempt to define the novel of human rights. He finds the following recurring features: “a justice or escape plot, with a cluster focus on violated homes, mobility crises, and damaged families”, although he recognizes that some novels with these features do not have the promotion of rights as a major concern.¹⁵ Joseph Slaughter focuses on the *bildungsroman* and demonstrates that *bildungsromane* and human rights law presuppose comparable goals for the development of the human individual in relation to society. In contrast to Dawes and Slaughter's focus on genre, Elizabeth Anker's phenomenologically-grounded investigation aims less for a broad ranging definition, and more for a thick description of a few novels selected on the basis of their attention to the body. Anker argues that “liberal human rights discourses and norms [...] yield a highly truncated, decorporealized vision of the subject – one that paradoxically negates core dimensions of embodied experi-

ence”, but that “the literary medium might replenish and recuperate our increasingly depleted cultural and social imaginaries” by renewing our awareness of the body’s “many faculties of participation and belonging”.¹⁶ I am more interested in the potential human rights literature holds for the future than in their intertwined past of the novel and rights-based thinking, but the historical relationships between them, as outlined by Slaughter and Anker, suggests that novelistic reimaginings of human rights can help make those rights a reality. I think Dawes is right to ask “what does the development of human rights fiction as a genre tell us about the future of human rights as a movement?”¹⁷ Dawes focuses on American novels because “the political, rhetorical, and ideological function of human rights in the United States has not only operated in distinction from but also often in direct contradiction to the practices and conceptions of human rights” elsewhere.¹⁸ Nevertheless, he ends his 2018 examination of the “US novel of human rights” with the hope that his “nation-reifying argument will be dismantled”, and I will try to make a modest and respectful start at doing that.

Defining the twenty-first century human rights novel

By calling human rights novels a “genre”, I do not mean to draw a boundary around what future novels about human rights can or cannot do,¹⁹ but to affirm what John Frow calls “a social life of forms”, a grouping of texts that reflects reading expectations and a shared formal basis for innovation among writers.²⁰ The human rights novel cannot be referred to according to character-driven shorthand the way that detective novels, spy novels or piquaresques can. Although certain character positions do recur in many human rights novels, seeing these characters in terms of their plot functionality limits, rather than expands their capacity to involve readers in sense of global responsibility for human rights, so I would not advocate generic classification based on the plot-functions of particular subject categories. The trifecta of “savages, victims, saviors”, which Matua Matak argues that human rights discourse normalizes, is particularly problematic.²¹ When people become only “subjects to be saved” the fullness of their potential disappears, and saviors and perpetrator categories are simultaneously

created, pre-prescribing goals for individuals in all of these subject positions and inuring them in a hierarchical relation.²² The novels that Anker has called “human rights bestsellers” reinscribe these subject positions in literature. On the whole, however, literary works complicate such reductive categorization, by inviting readers to contemplate the inner lives, circumstances, and dynamism of characters. I would argue that this tendency to push back against reductive subject categories is a defining trait of human rights fiction. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, for example, Ugwu can be read as a victim of systemic inequality and kidnapping, and once he has been forced into the army, a perpetrator of war-time rape. The narrator of *The Sympathizer* is both tortured and torturer, both a refugee and an exploiter of refugee labor.

It could be argued that human rights novelists work across a variety of levels of realism, with novels like Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005) dramatizing rights infractions like the international market for internal organs through the frame of a speculative future, but I would **argue** that, on the whole, twenty-first century human rights fiction draws upon textures of everyday life in the tradition of realism.²³ The great national allegories of the late twentieth century (Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*) prepared the way for global human rights fiction, but they function differently for at least three reasons. First, in focusing on the nation-state as an enabler of human rights abuses, they divert attention away from human rights protection as an internationally-shared responsibility. Second, by using characters to symbolize broader movements and tendencies within the nation, they minimize the truth-value claims of realistic fiction.²⁴ Related to this, they convert the body into a boundary that may be violated, an object that may be desired, or a collection of capabilities that may be affirmed or denied, drawing attention away from the body as a site of empathic identification. Contemporary human rights fiction tends, in contrast, to work in a realistic register. **They** slow the pace to include conversations, which allows for a nuanced representation of speech patterns, even in translation. They detail the direction of a character’s gaze, the position of a hand, the smell through a window in order to locate violent acts among what is possible in the everyday world.

The “reality effect” created by these details gestures toward the possibility of reference to a shared world without necessitating a restriction of narrative truth to that which can be documented or verified.²⁵ Although realism has been derided in the past as incapable of conveying the world-shattering effects of trauma, realism is used by twenty-first century authors to convey the deadening repetition of violence in conflict zones. In *Anil’s Ghost* (2000) by Michael Ondaatje, a doctor swallows a pill with Orange Crush before commenting on a truckdriver who had been crucified to the tarmac. The passage is worth quoting at length.

“We get a lot like this one [...]”

“Nails in hands?” [Anil] realized she sounded horrified.

“Nowadays we get everything. It almost a relief to find a common builder’s nail as a weapon. Screws, bolts – they pack their bombs with everything to make sure you get gangrene from the explosions”

[...]

“Just sleep and work,” Gamini [the doctor] yawned. “Nothing else. My marriage disappeared. All that ceremony – and then it disappeared in a couple months. I was too intense then. I’m probably another example of trauma, you see. That happens when there is no other life. What the fuck do my marriage your damn research mean. And those armchair rebels living abroad with their ideas of justice – nothing against their principles, but I wish they were here. They should come and visit me in surgery.”²⁶

Marriage and research are reduced to “all that ceremony” and personal trauma to just “another example” in a nation at war. The pacing, language, and materiality of the scene are classically realistic, but their juxtaposition with an overdetermined act like a crucifixion, with the language of trauma and the evocation of ritual hint at meaning that used to be there, in reality for this character, meaning that repetitive exposure to violence has now made it impossible to believe in.

Finally, although human rights novels appeal to a trans-national responsibility for rights enforcement, they often do so through the traditionally nationalistic form of historical fiction. Whereas nineteenth-century historical fiction featured a self-made hero of the “middling sort” who navigated the differences of two culturally distinct sub-cultures battling for dominance, twenty-first century historical fiction typically features one or

more characters who focalize a story of political violence through the transnational standards of rights advocacy. These characters function as “transitional figures” for the reader, having insider’s knowledge about the culture/s in conflict, but working from values the human rights reader is assumed to share.²⁷ Anil is such a figure in *Anil’s Ghost*, Cornelius in *Murambi*, Olanna in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Also, in contrast to their nineteenth-century fore-runners, contemporary historical novels highlight the failure of national sovereignty, rather than its consolidation. But in chronicling civil wars, genocides, or the structural violence of starvation, they complicate the idea that state failure is a local problem, by linking it to cultural practices, corporate intervention, colonial histories and the global media’s portrayal (or lack of portrayal) of the crisis. These novels challenge the assumption of autonomous subjectivity either by dispersing heroic acts and/or focalization among several characters, so there is typically no “hero”.

Dawes’ choice to define human rights novels according to recurring plotlines (justice or escape plots) or thematic foci (home, mobility, secrecy) seems practical. In shifting from a national focus (US) to a temporal focus (twenty-first century) for the genre of the human rights novel, I would draw attention to another dominant plotline – the struggle to represent historical tragedy. In addition to a rights-bearing transitional figure, many contemporary human rights novels feature aspiring authors, filmmakers, playwrights, and researchers who dramatize the difficulty of narrativizing history. Sometimes these figures are the same as the “transitional figure”, but in important cases they are not. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, it is Ugwu, a village boy and war-time perpetrator, who the novel portrays as destined to tell the true story the Biafran conflict. *The Sympathizer* contains a brutal critique of *Apocalypse Now*, picturing the Coppola-like director as driven by fame and artistic pretensions to abuse refugee labor and override any possibility of Vietnamese self-representation. In making the attempt to turn violent histories into art, these works present questions about the ethics of representing rights violations as still open. Human rights novels invite readers to engage contemporary rights violations with empathy and imagination, but they also take unique risks. Readers from outside the region being portrayed may know little or nothing about the events they describe, so however fictional their plotlines, novelists face pressure to make the his-

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torical circumstances accurate. The memory-work these novels do is important, not only for representing the possibility of justice, but even for providing a kind of justice. As Cathy Schlund-Vials writes, they “serve an essential role, seeking through memory a mode of redress which necessarily and evocatively falls outside limited legal and juridical mechanisms of international intervention (e.g., the tribunal) and the violating nation-state”.²⁸

In serving this function, human rights literature generally, and novels in particular, involve readers in two legally-defined actions – witnessing and protecting. Someone sitting on her back porch reading a novel may appear ill-equipped to do perform either of these functions, especially for people in other parts of the world, especially with regard to human rights abuses that have already taken place. However, human rights novels construct the reader as responsible for these actions through their bestowal of pseudo-experiential knowledge and their appeal to what Augustine called “the language of all nations”, the shared experience of vulnerable embodiment. In developing these two ideas – that of the reader as witness and that of the reader as embodied protector – I will turn to phenomenology.

The reader as witness and protector

For many historians and literary scholars, the language of testimony and witnessing connotes trauma studies, particularly the psychoanalytical work of Shoshana Feldman and Dori Laub. Without denying the value of their work, I want to re-orient the language of witnessing, focusing on the figure of the humanitarian witness and phenomenology’s evocation of the subject-as-witness. Didier Fassin claims that “a new form of humanitarianism was born” in 1968 when in the midst of the Biafran War of Independence Médecins Sans Frontières declared its mission was not only to offer assistance, but also to bear witness to what it had seen to an international public.²⁹ If this is true, then human rights novels portraying actual, historical events of political violence function as humanitarian witnesses, also, and render readers secondary witnesses. This claim has to be modified somewhat, however, to account for the fictionality of novels. Humanitarian or-

ganizations must stick to facts in order to maintain their international authority. Because novels are written after the crisis of violence has passed, there is no danger that they will compromise the possibility of humanitarian intervention. But also, being fiction and arriving late to the scene, novels do not portray a world shared between readers and characters in the way that humanitarian narratives do. That is not to say that readers do not share a novelistic world with characters *at all*, only that they do so differently than fact-bound narratives.

The knowledge a reader gleans from a narrative based in facts is both empirical and what phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion calls “negatively certain”.³⁰ This is true for novels and humanitarian narratives. In reading a humanitarian narrative, autobiography, or non-fiction testimony, readers interpret most of the knowledge they gain as empirical and verifiable. They assume that narrative features such as place-names, dates, and numbers of victims will match other retellings of the same events while recognizing that the knowledge available to the author/s will be circumscribed by human limitations such as not being able to be in more than one place at a time and not being able to remember all of the details from any single moment. While thinking about these narratives, however, readers also absorb knowledge that they can be certain they have gained without being able to say, with certainty, what that knowledge is. Marion calls this knowledge “negatively certain”. For him, negatively certain knowledge is the natural consequence of what he calls “saturated phenomenality”, the phenomenon of being given more in a single event than we can take in.³¹ Particularly when an event is shocking in its violence or unprecedentedness, we cannot anticipate it, cannot contain it fully in existing categories, and cannot fully recall it afterwards. In spite of our inability to conceptualize or even recall an event, we are changed by it, and the negatively certain knowledge we gain functions in our acquisition of new knowledge, whether we realize it or not.³²

For example, American potter Iris Barna was a renowned contemporary folk artist, whose works have been featured in the Museum of International Folk Art. A friend of mine commissioned some dishes from her for a wedding gift, including soup bowls. When she received the bowls, they were beautiful, but to her mind awkwardly shaped, some had square bottoms;

should be a semi-colon

others had sides as tall as her hand. It was not what she had in mind when she ordered a soup bowl; had she not held the artist in such esteem, she would certainly have complained. Six years after receiving the bowls, this same friend went to Auschwitz, where the artist had been imprisoned. She saw a square-bottomed bowl, deep as a hand. Since Barna's pottery did not typically refer to her history as a camp survivor, it seems unlikely that she meant to make Auschwitz-style bowls, but the event of eating out of hand-deep bowls operated in her acquisition of knowledge about pottery.

The event of reading or hearing any narrative arrives as a saturated phenomenon and marks us with negatively certain knowledge. Whereas we interpret factual narratives through a framework that discriminates between what we know and what we feel or imagine, when reading novels that framework is more loose. It is not so important to distinguish between knowledge that we interpret as verifiable and objective versus the less conceptualizable truths of ethics, fellow-feeling or the sense of justice having been miscarried. Reading novels, we absorb negatively certain knowledge that exceeds conceptualization simultaneously with historically verifiable facts, and although we may sense that a place-name or date is accurate and may look it up elsewhere to verify its factuality later, the truth of a novel's facts is not as important as the deeper, less certain truths novels invite us to think about.

Novel readers, then, become a particular kind of witness. Their knowledge has the dirt still stuck in its roots, so to speak. Such knowledge cannot be separated from the anxiety or gratification we may have felt on behalf of certain characters, or the moral outrage we feel at others. In contrast to humanitarian witnesses, then, who run the risk of obscuring survivor-witnesses voices in presuming to speak on their behalf (however essential such ventriloquism might be for the restitution of human rights), readers of human rights novels know they are empowered to speak *about* but not *for* those who lived through the conflict. Through the processes of interpretation during and after reading, some knowledge gained from the text will settle into conceptually-stable knowledge that, while often still open for re-interpretation, functions as certainty in the acquisition of new knowledge or interpretation of future real-life or read-about situations. However, there will also be knowledge that readers know they possess because the event of

reading a particular novel is now part of their unfolding life experience, but that they cannot articulate because it remains impossible to conceptualize. One primary basis for novel readers' ability to identify with characters, especially in realistic novels, is the experience of sharing life in the flesh with other people. When Husserl tried to account for the phenomenology of life with other people, he assumed that each of us, as the egoic centers of our own experience, could only understand another person's experience analogically. Much writing about narrative empathy falls back on this understanding. More recent phenomenological work, in contrast, conceives of subjectivity as always already intersubjective. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "perspectives blend, perceptions confirm each other, a meaning emerges".³³ Even lifeless things appear to us first of all as connected to a world where we expect things to happen with other people. Only secondarily do we see things in their materiality. **This** Should be "a" lectern, to borrow an example used by both Heidegger and Marion, appears first as a prop for someone's lecture, not as a wooden box of such-and-such a size. Perspectives of other people not only reach us when we try to perceive them; they operate in our perception of the world constantly.

Furthermore, our perception of other people's suffering does not wait for us to decide to see it. If I see the face of someone in pain, that face speaks "in the language of all nations" first. As I look at that person, I may cast around to figure out what is causing the pain, or it may be immediately obvious, or it may be obvious that I cannot know unless the person chooses to tell me, but I will understand the presence of pain. Just as I might cast around for a cause or a means of relieving the pain, I might try to summon experiences of my past to try to imagine what that person is going through, but this process of sense making via analogy occurs as a reaction to the perception of pain, not as an essential ground. I do not experience another's pain as my pain in them, but immediately as *their* pain. The fact that the person in pain might try to hide or exaggerate the performance of being in pain only confirms the already-connectedness of that moment of seeing. This ability to perceive pain as belonging to another person and yet involving us as soon as we see it provides the foundation for external characterization in novels. Descriptions of clenched hands or the grating of metal cuffs against a wrist bring forward associated feelings without any passage

through analogy, but we do not experience those feelings as happening to us.

Human rights novels evoke myriad questions about the ethics of reading about others' pain, but even the most exploitive counteract the tendency of human rights discourse to treat the subject as disembodied or embodied universally in the same way. Novels play on the body's shared capacity for feeling as a shared language. What a body "says" in that language is, like verbal language, brought forth by singular circumstances, in a singular way, by a singular person, with a particular history and a particular relation to a shared world. When bodily pain and related hardships like hunger and untreated illness are experienced by characters as consequences of human rights violations, readers begin to interpret who might be responsible. Who could have prevented this? Who could relieve this pain? Since 2005, state sovereignty has been defined as the power and responsibility to protect citizens from rights violations. This is opposed to the twentieth-century understanding of state sovereignty as "an absolute principle of non-interference from other states".³⁴ However, human rights novels tend to portray relief from human rights abuses as a responsibility shared within communities, by humanitarian organizations and by an imagined global citizen. Hence, in *The Sympathizer*, the narrator's acquaintances hold him responsible for securing places for some, but not all of them on an escape helicopter leaving an embattled Vietnam. In *Murambi*, a worried Tutsi father turns to his wife as they sense the preparations for a massacre beginning, and says "Don't worry, Séra, the entire world is watching them, they won't be able to do anything".³⁵ He holds the media accountable for publicizing even a threat of violence and holds global media consumers responsible for opposing any violence that might start. Diop, Senegalese himself, reinforces the ideal of rights shared by and *enforced* by all of humanity, relying finally on the image of bones to reinforce the fragile materiality of embodiment all humans share.

Conclusion

Twelve years ago, Dawes asked, "What can [the human rights novel] teach us, right now, about the work we must do today?"³⁶ If we were to ask that

again, today, I hope we would discover that twenty-first-century human rights novels offer an underutilized means of education. They offer a kind of knowledge that operates beneath and beyond the facts we can check through standardized testing, an event-based experiential knowledge that connects to “real life”, which is always intertwined with other people. I hope, too, that we would see individuals as always more than perpetrators, victims, or benefactors. I hope that we would recognize the indivisibility of subjectivity and embodied life, so that survivors would not be defined by their experiences as repositories of special wisdom about life and death or “subjects to be saved”.³⁷ Neither are they primarily resources for the restitution of social order following conflict. I hope that human rights norms would be reconfigured in light of globally shared responsibilities for their protection, so that each human is not only a recipient of state-maintained protection, but also an agent of human rights realization. If our students are also agents of human rights realization, then it is our responsibility to show them how human rights norms succeed and fail in the world through novels that hail them as participants in that shared world. As Diop writes, “all the beautiful words of the poets [...] can say nothing, I swear to you, of the fifty thousand ways to die like a dog, within a few hours”.³⁸ And yet please delete **with** along with his playwright protagonist, Diop “did not intend to resign himself to the definitive victory of the murderers through silence”.³⁹ Although we cannot say enough to defend human rights, we must start by saying something.

Notes

- 1 “And that they meant this thing and no other was plain from the motion of their body, the natural language, as it were, of all nations, expressed by the countenance, glances of the eye, gestures of the limbs, and tones of the voice, indicating the affections of the mind, as it pursues, possesses, rejects or shuns”. Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Edward Bouverie Pusey (Franklin, PA: Franklin Library, 1982), p. 11.
- 2 Saronic Bosu and Heba Jahama, “Chronology of Major Works and Events, 1215–2018”, in Crystal Parikh, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Human Rights and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. xiii–xxi.
- 3 Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: Norton, 2008).

- ⁴ Samuel Moyn, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2018), pp. 12–40.
- ⁵ For example, William Godwin's *Things as they Are, or The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794) critiques abuses of governmental power, Elizabeth Inchbald's *Nature and Art* (1796) explores gender inequality, and Thomas Holcroft's *The Adventures of Hugh Trevor* (1794–1797) distinguishes law from morality and accuses legal institutions of moral blindness. Fredrick Douglass was among the first American authors to use the language of rights. See Laura T. Murphy, "The Reemergence of the Slave Narrative Tradition and the Search for a New Fredrick Douglass", in Sophia A. McClennen, Alexandra Schultheis Moore, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Human Rights* (Abington: Routledge, 2016), pp. 126–35.
- ⁶ Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), p. 51.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 17–19.
- ⁸ Moyn, op. cit., p. 121. Aryeh Neier also suggests the 1970s as a crucial moment in the evolution of human rights discourse because the nongovernmental human rights movement globalized in this decade. *The International Human Rights Movement: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 7.
- ⁹ Michael Ignatieff, "Is the Human Rights Era Ending?" *New York Times* (February 5, 2002), Section A, p. 25.
- ¹⁰ Graph generated by Google Books Ngram Viewer. Moyn, op. cit., p. 182.
- ¹¹ Adam Kirsch, *The Global Novel: Writing the World in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016), p. 25. See also Debjani Ganguly, *This Thing Called the World: The Contemporary Novel as Global Form* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016).
- ¹² Statistics compiled for the Man Booker International Prize and reported by Paula Eri-zanu, "Translated book sales are up, but Britain is still cut off from foreign literature", *The Guardian* (30 September 2016).
- ¹³ See, for example, Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
- ¹⁴ Greg Forster, *Critique and Utopia in Postcolonial Historical Fiction: Atlantic and Other Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). Hamish Dalley, *The Postcolonial Historical Novel: Realism, Allegory, and the Representation of Contested Pasts* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
- ¹⁵ James Dawes, *Novel of Human Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 20.
- ¹⁶ Elizabeth Anker, *Fictions of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2012), pp. 2, 221, 222.
- ¹⁷ James Dawes, *That the World May Know: Bearing Witness to Atrocity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 6.
- ¹⁸ Dawes, *Novel of Human Rights*, p. 10.
- ¹⁹ See Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre", trans. Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry* 7, 1, *On Narrative* (Autumn, 1980), pp. 55–81.
- ²⁰ John Frow, "'Reproducibles, Rubrics, and Everything You Need': Genre Theory Today". *PMLA* 122, 5 (2007), p. 1629.
- ²¹ Matua Matak, "Savages, Victims, Saviors: The Metaphor of Human Rights", *Harvard*

- International Law Journal* 42 (2001), pp. 201–45.
- ²² Lauren Wilcox, *Bodies of Violence: Theorizing Embodied Subjects in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 184.
- ²³ For an analysis of *Never Let Me Go* as a human rights bildungsroman, see Titus Levy, “Human Rights Storytelling and Trauma Narrative in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*”, *Journal of Human Rights* (2011), pp. 1–16.
- ²⁴ See Fredric Jameson’s controversial “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”. *Social Text* 15, 15 (1986), pp. 65–88.
- ²⁵ Roland Barthes “The Reality Effect”, in François Wahl, ed. And Richard Howard, trans., *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 14–148; Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 100–103.
- ²⁶ Michael Ondaatje, *Anil’s Ghost* (New York: Knopf, 2000), pp. 131–32.
- ²⁷ Dawes uses the term “transitional figure” to discuss the protagonists of “justice plots”. *Novel of Human Rights*, pp. 23, 174.
- ²⁸ Cathy Schlund-Vials, “Remembering the Forgetting: Human Rights Literature and Memory Work”, in Chrystal Parikh, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Human Rights and Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 102.
- ²⁹ Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, trans. Rachel Gomme (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 200, 206.
- ³⁰ Jean-Luc Marion, *Negative Certainties*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).
- ³¹ Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).
- ³² For an extended examination of the way this excess effects reading, see Cassandra Falke, *The Phenomenology of Love and Reading* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 119–55.
- ³³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. xxii.
- ³⁴ Wilcox, op. cit., p. 169.
- ³⁵ Boubacar Boris Diop, *Murambi: The Book of Bones*, trans. Fiona McLaughlin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 9.
- ³⁶ Dawes, *That the World May Know*, p. 6.
- ³⁷ Carolyn Dean, “The Politics of Suffering: from the Survivor-witness to Humanitarian Witnessing”, *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 31, 5 (2017), pp. 628–36 (p. 631).
- ³⁸ Diop, *Murambi*, p. 175.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 179.