Gareth Griffiths, Philip Mead (eds.)

The Social Work of Narrative

Human Rights and the Cultural Imaginary

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THE SOCIAL WORK OF NARRATIVE

Human Rights and the Cultural Imaginary

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Introduction: Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?

Gareth Griffiths

"Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?" is the title of one of Gauguin's most famous paintings, painted in December 1898. It was meant to be his last. After completing it, he later said, he intended to commit suicide but in the event he did not and continued to paint and to live on, presumably with these questions still unanswered. (Shackleford et al 2004, 168).[1] I use the title from the painting here ironically. Although Gauguin was regarded with suspicion by the French colonial authorities on Tahiti, especially after he criticized the Governor and others in a satirical journal he edited, nothing in his life or art can be construed as offering a conscious resistance to colonialist ideology. His fascination with the world he discovered and celebrated in the islands of Polynesia was always tinged with the quintessential colonial fascination with the Other, with an exoticisation of the Polynesian people. Nevertheless, in the title of this painting one can see Gauguin striving to understand what connected his life and theirs, what they and he shared and where they differed. It is as if he is asking, were these beautiful but, as they were regarded in his day, "primitive" people his originaries, his human antecedents? Was their world the world from which his own had come? And if so what did this mean? Like his contemporaries at the end of the 19th century Gauguin clearly saw so-called "primitive" people as exemplars of an older stage of human history, with history itself seen as a sort of Darwinian progression, a simultaneous journey through both time and evolution: where do we come from? who are we? where are we going? But in these haunted questions we might see also the spectral traces of the collapse of the enlightenment confidence that had allowed the thinkers and artists of the late 18th and early 19th centuries to conceive of the human as a universal category. A category clearly and unambiguously defined by unquestioned and unquestionable characteristics, all flowing from the claim that reason was the defining core of humanity

[1] In the top left corner of the painting are the following words from which the title is derived: "D'où venons-nous ? Que sommes-nous ? Où allons-nous?"

and that humanity's increasing capacity to "reason" was a sign of their progress in evolutionary terms from the “primitive” to the “civilized”. The same confidence allowed intellectuals from the time of Rousseau and Voltaire onwards to assert that through human reason the rights of human beings could also be defined and achieved. In Gauguin's despairing set of questions at the end of the 19th century that confidence can be seen to be crumbling and it is in the wake of this disillusionment that the modern struggle to define and achieve human rights has been conducted for a century or more since, right up until the present day.

The essays collected in this book are written in the aftermath of that long process of disillusion with that self-confidence in the definition and valuation of the human. As a number of the chapters in this collection show the modern documents that sought to define and institutionalize a universal concept of human rights did not emerge until a half-century after Gauguin's agonized questions and in the aftermath of two of the most devastating wars in human history. That we still debate and question these issues again more than half a century later illustrates both the persistence of this need to define the human and their inalienable rights and the increasing difficulty of doing so in any way that seems meaningful and acceptable to all the people it seeks to encompass. Most people recognize that the formal documents set out after the Second World War, especially the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights are the starting point of most contemporary assertions of human rights. These documents are framed within a year or so of the start of the post-war dismantling of colonial power that begins with the granting of Indian independence in 1947.[2] In fact the Declaration itself has its origin in the processes within the UN to resist the reimposition of colonialism at this time. This suggests a strong link between the two ideas: anti-colonialism and human rights. But even that link is disputable given the "imperial" role played by the new world powers to emerge post-1945, particularly the United States and the Soviet Union; this despite the fact that they both at the time protested their anti-imperialist stand. For this and other reasons in recent times the idea of human rights

[2] Though, of course, the revolt of the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the Caribbean and in Meso and South America and their independence struggles began over a century–and-a-half earlier, while the American Independence War against Britain and the Haitian Liberation War from France date from the late 18th century.

has been subject to direct criticism, with the very idea of human rights being seen as a tool used by powerful countries and institutions to justify intervention into regions of the world where those countries and institutions have strategic interests to be served. Other organisations have emerged that perceive these powerful forces as needing direct exposure or opposition, for example Wikileaks or Anonymous. These groups and protest organisations assert the need for a violent contestation over international policy and the control of the media and political institutions that deploy the idea of human rights. Organisations such as the WSF (World Social Forum) have emerged to oppose and offer alternatives to the international groupings represented by the institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF (International Monetary Fund) set up after the Second World War and in their view still dominated by the major powers represented in the meetings of the so-called G8 and G20 nations. Similarly the NAM (Non Aligned Movement), inheritors of the post-war attempt to avoid the Third World nations (as they were widely called at the time) being drawn into the Cold War, see themselves as offering a different and less controlled model than the United Nations, whose policies they argue are limited by the veto rights of the elite nation members of the Security Council. Alongside this clash of contending groups, and seeking to avoid direct involvement in the conflict between them, are other groups who also claim to represent the defense of human rights, such as Amnesty International, *Médecins Sans Frontières*, and PEN International. Such groups seek to act and speak out against all those they see as inflicting suffering and violence on the weak, whatever their source or cause, and to avoid engaging directly in a political struggle. Whether such a stance is or is not possible is not addressed specifically in this book but the implicit challenge this struggle poses to the idea of a unilateral and uncontested concept of human rights is implicit in many of the chapters here if only under erasure. The essays collected here do not answer these continuing problems concerning the concept of human rights. In fact, if anything, they suggest their ongoing intractability. But they insist too, despite these problems, on the need to continue to struggle to understand what human rights might be and how they might be defined and defended. The very difficulty the idea poses and the conflicting attitudes it arouses might, in the telling phrase used in a number of contexts by Gayatri Spivak, one of the most influential of modern critical thinkers and activists, suggest that for

all its problematic nature human rights is one of those concepts "one cannot not want" (Spivak et al 1993, 28).

If I may locate these concerns within my own speaking positions, as perhaps all who engage in this debate must do, I would emphasise that as a white, western-educated, male critic my concern with these issues originates in my earlier work developing theories of the postcolonial from a relatively privileged position. Postcolonial theory takes as its starting point the validity of difference and the need to allow the voices of all people to be heard. But it also begins with a realization of how problematic the task of distinguishing those differences and recording those voices is in practice. Postcolonial theory then begins with a questioning of the idea of an unproblematic universal. Postcolonial theory is also concerned with locating discourses within the unequal structures of power, and like the discourse of human rights postcolonialism may be critiqued for the fact that it has been promulgated and sustained by Eurocentric institutions that are almost exclusively located within and dependent upon the dominant, post-war Euro-American powers. But if I may again quote Spivak, this time on the complex problematic that links the postcolonial and human rights discourse:

> The usual thing is to complain about the Eurocentrism of human rights. I have no such intention. I am of course troubled by the use of human rights as an alibi for interventions of various sorts. But its so-called European provenance is for me in the same category as the 'enabling violation' of the production of the colonial subject. One cannot write off the righting of wrongs. The enablement must be used even as the violation is renegotiated. (Spivak 2004, 524)

In addressing the issue of human rights certain groups have been foregrounded as the subject of this practice, which in itself raises the issue of whether or not the concept itself is locked into a top-down vision of who defines its idea and who is defined by them and for what ends. The idea of the precariat, those groups whose existence is predicated upon ongoing and seemingly implacable precariousness, which threatens their access to basic needs such as food, water, health and safety from violence, is too often limited to groups defined only by race (e.g. blackness) or gender (e.g. women or LBGTI people), or both in conjunction. The first of these groups is often more heavily represented either in certain regions (the so-called

undeveloped world more recently named the “Global South”, which have often though not always been seen as coterminous with the postcolonies) or in the diasporic migrants from those regions increasingly resident in the erstwhile colonial or neo-colonial metropoles. The latter, though not so obviously locatable geographically, may be especially vulnerable to cultural discrimination in regions which reject gender equality or even claim a phantasmagoric freedom from gender diversity of the kind represented by LGBTI people, as Chantal Zabus's chapter here discusses. In the essays collected here there is a strong focus on these regions for that reason and on the treatment of such groups there, reflecting the link this book sees between the concerns of earlier discourses such as the postcolonial and those of modern human rights activists. Of course, discriminations are as profound in every society but the emphasis on human rights is often directed from the erstwhile metropoles toward the post-colonies or “underdeveloped” regions as if they are to be the recipient of a support in suppressing these practices that is innocent of the power structures within which it plays out. It is for this and other reasons that human rights discourse has been justly critiqued in recent times. The increased discrimination against and demonization of specific religious groups that has emerged in recent times as a powerful factor in denying many people their basic human rights, often leading to their being forced into exile or killed, has made their persecution in their own regions and the role of the metropoles in reacting to this the most powerful new example of the abuse of human rights. The migrant diasporic groups in the metropoles referred to earlier do feature in some chapters here. But since this book was conceived and the chapters commissioned in late 2013 the size of this group has increased to an extent and with a speed that no-one then could have predicted. The appalling and discriminatory policies pursued under the euphemism of “border protection” by the country in which the editors live (Australia), policies that to our shame are now being held up by right-wing and racist groups in Europe and elsewhere as examples to follow, are the subject of some discussion in several of the chapters here. But the huge and increasing discrimination of the many people displaced by war and other forms of social violence for which the wealthy countries of the so-called west have to take much responsibility is clearly going to be a major focus in future work on the subject of how human rights are actually practiced. How those issues are recorded and how the stories of those people are told will be a major force in the future

public discourse on human rights. The reaction of countries across the world to the unprecedented numbers of migrants fleeing conflict, violence and life-threatening poverty, frequently because of discrimination on ethnic or religious grounds within their own countries and regions, poses the most powerful questions for those who claim to support international conventions and treaties to protect human rights. Some might go further and ask whether or not the intervention into these conflicts by the countries that defined those conventions and set up the institutions to enforce them may have been a major factor in causing these abuses to proliferate so rapidly. How the human and expressive forms of narrative have dealt with and will deal with these issues will be crucial to our understanding of them and to our reactions and if we were able to commission more articles now in 2017 when this book was finalized this would clearly be an area to address. Even so many articles here imply that how we express and represent these complex issues may be crucial in creating the context that helps in resolving them

Of course we have also to acknowledge other gaps in the coverage of this book, though more will inevitably suggest themselves to readers and reviewers. One of the growing critiques of human rights discourse comes from animal rights activists. Their contention is not only that the human as a category comes into being through the false dichotomy between human and animal, leading to speciesism as a major discriminatory force, but also that this leads to an ongoing privileging of human rights over those of animals at a time when environmental destruction threatens to engulf all living forms on the planet. We acknowledge these powerful arguments, though we do not have a chapter that addresses them specifically. The other field that arguably should have been included is that of the rights of the disabled and the mentally ill. Discrimination against those suffering from the disability of a mental illness is a feature of all societies, and even when social forces acknowledge the need to address those inflicted as suffering from an illness their representation in media and popular public discourse is often still deeply prejudicial. The number of people suffering from such illnesses may or may not have increased, but the numbers acknowledged as requiring treatment and needing to have their human rights acknowledged is on the increase in every society. Both editors of this collection have a close family member suffering from a major mental illness, and as anyone in that position knows it is almost impossible to find anyone, who when the subject

is raised, does not indicate that they have a family member or friend who suffers from a mental illness. The silence in many societies about such people is deafening and if in rich countries the provisions for dealing with these conditions are woefully inadequate in many poor countries they are virtually non-existent.

Not in any sense in justification of these omissions, nor even in mitigation of them, but to suggest the concern of the book that has emerged our focus here has been neither to present a discussion of the ongoing debate on the theories of human rights discussed above nor even to seek to give expression to all the forms that it has taken in the groups listed here. The question we sought to address was the role that "narratives" of many kinds have played in articulating or defining human rights, from the role narrative played in the very conception of the idea of human rights to the wide variety of forms that narrating human rights concerns have taken since then. We have also sought to address this across a number of regions of the world. Again the areas on which we focus, Africa, South Asia, Australasia and East Asia, suggest the lifelong interests of both editors in the ongoing effects of colonization, and the preponderance of a concern with texts in English reflect their own linguistic limitations. But within those parameters we have sought to define narratives in the broadest possible way. One of our principal assertions is that imaginative narration, the telling of stories, the transformation of the world by the act of imagining it and speaking it forth, is one of the most powerful tools that people can employ in searching for justice or in confronting and overcoming oppression. These imaginative tellings are not limited to written words or even to words at all. Images, pictures, cartoons, graffiti and music are all powerful ways of allowing silenced voices to be heard.

Narrative, and especially imaginative narrative (to avoid or rather to extend the limited capacity of literature and the written to include more forms of imaginative story-telling and human memorialization) is not in itself an unproblematic tool to employ in discussing and defending the concept of human rights. As Joseph R. Slaughter has noted, human rights discourse is imbricated in the idea of a progressive and rational view of humankind that formed itself around the idea of literature as the expression of human growth and development, exemplified in the so-called *Bildungsroman* (Slaughter 2007, 27). This enlightenment view of both literature and humanity has often been contradicted by the darker visions of 20th-century

imaginings and 20th-century realities. The genre has thus seemed far less viable as the certainties of the 18th- and early 19th-century enlightenment ideas slipped into the darker spaces of late imperialism and 20th-century global warfare. But, as Slaughter asserts, despite the fact that

> the idealism of the classical, affirmative *Bildungsroman* seems to have lost much of its social and aesthetic appeal in the age of modernist irony and postmodern suspicion […] the genre retains its historic social function as the predominant formal literary technology in which social outsiders narrate affirmative claims for inclusion in a regime of rights and responsibilities. (27)

It is this continuing usefulness of this kind of classic enlightenment narrative, metamorphised into film documentary, that Asha Varadharajan draws to our attention when she relates how the film maker Leslee Udwin asserts that in her film about the Gulabi Gang and its leader Sampat Pal Devi

> she wanted to "lend my energies to *amplify* their voice"—not help the voiceless find their voice or represent those who cannot represent themselves. […] Udwin indicates that her film was not about "those people over there" but the result of her desire to film both the "blatant breach" of any "kind of civilized" principles and the inspiration of a society in the throes of change. (145)

Varadharajan is alert to the dangers in the casual use of a term like "civilised" and the issue of Udwin's relations with powerful external institutions, in this case the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) who sponsored the documentary. She is also well aware that narratives such as Udwin's clearly continue to pose the problematic issue long addressed by postcolonial theory of whether or not it is ever possible for anyone to speak *about* the Other without speaking inadvertently *for* the Other. Yet for all these strictures narrative remains the tool that often falls most readily to the hand of those whose voices have been silenced by oppression. And as these chapters show time and again the form narrative takes has developed into many modern types, employing diverse forms and media. Philip Mead's piece on Alexis Wright shows how the current disputes over how to

recover Indigenous agency through engagement with the politics of the dominant society can be explored through the power of speculative fiction. Her latest novel *The Swan Book* uses a science fiction mode to place Indigenous ways of thinking at the centre of a future world where Euro-American technological excess has overthrown the casual assumptions of the benefits of progress and modernity on which this social imaginary has been constructed. The silenced world of the indigene becomes the voice not of a past to be lamented but of a future in which the change inherent in diversity has to be embraced if humanity is to survive.

These imagined narratives can give voice to those who are too often voiceless, but as David Trigger and Richard Martin, Kieran Dolin and other writers in this collection show they are crucial ways of recovering and developing the cultural imaginary within which both oppressed and oppressor have been formed. This cultural imaginary forms the unacknowledged ground upon which both oppressor and oppressed construct their social and legal being. It may be too simple to suggest unequivocally, as Shelley did in the early 19th century, that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" but it may be true to say that the forms of legislation and the forces that bring it into being are deeply influenced by how people narrate the experiences of their world. Story, image, song and written or spoken memories all act to construct the cultural imaginary from which we derive our own identity and through which we seek, however inadequately, to perceive that of others, recognizing the ways in which they differ from us and the ways in which we share their concerns and needs.

It is arguable that what allows us to survive and develop as a species is not anything material, for example our ability to develop tools or to use language. As we reach out to broader ideas of where we stand as humans in the evolutionary pattern we recognise that other species have developed many of these characteristics. It is possible that it is the imagination that really allows human beings to behave in the ways they do, for good or for bad. Imagination allows human beings to conceive a reality different from that which they are experiencing and to understand their world as part of a changeable past and future. The exercise of this power to imagine allows human beings to manipulate their world in a unique way. This may be why we can cause so much devastation but it may also be the means by which we can take control of our future in positive ways. The imagination

and its power, harnessed through story and memory, may be the most important aspect of our lives and the most neglected.

As this book comes to completion we see a world in which the defining certainties and authority of the mid 20th century seem increasingly remote. In late 2016, when this introduction was written, 65 million or more people had risked everything by fleeing to Europe in a desperate attempt to survive the violence of war and endemic poverty, both of which cannot be disassociated from the international relations of the last fifty years or more. In the wake of this event more people are currently displaced than at any time since the period immediately following the last so-called World War, the period that saw the attempt to regulate and define how human beings should deal with one another and how human rights should be defined and defended. Yet the protocols developed at that time seem less and less adequate, if they ever were. Legal and institutional forces seem unable to act as the human rights institutions and protocols the major world powers have promoted and defended for the last half-century or more collapse through increasing isolationism and cultural bigotry. In face of this political bankruptcy the task of imaginative narration becomes increasingly vital. Since public media fails to do go beyond "a feeling of empathy or compassion, and seldom crosses over into the realm of responsibility or action" as Sukhmani Khorana's chapter in this book argues, the role of narrative to promote an engagement that demands action and not just sympathy becomes crucial. It is the ways in which narratives of all kinds have tried to address this issue that forms the core of this book.

The history of narrative and of the human imagination and the social role they have played is a story of persistence rather than conclusion, of unending effort rather than of triumph. Like human rights themselves the truths such narrative seeks to tell are perhaps inevitably deferred, always a promise of what might be rather than what is, a promise of what we seek rather than what we have achieved. The social role of narrative is always in this sense an engagement with the unattainable. As J. Hillis Miller put it:

> The law is always somewhere else or at some other time, back there when the law was first imposed or off to the future when I may at last confront it directly, in unmediated vision. Within that space, between here and that unattainable there of the law as

> such, between now and the beginning or the end, narrative enters as the relation of the search for a perhaps impossible proximity to the law [...] the function of narrative for those who have 'eyes to see or ears to hear with and understand' is to keep this out in the open. (Miller 1987, 25)

Despite the limitations of narrative in addressing human rights, as these chapters show the telling of the stories of those whose rights have been curtailed continues with unabated vigor, variety and persistence.

In this regard perhaps we are still dealing with the issue that confronted Gauguin a century or more ago, and as for him so for us the importance of imagination remains central to the human venture. For Gauguin the end of his century saw a collapse of confidence in the certainties of post-Enlightenment humanism, a collapse he could only record through an act of the imagination. Just so in our time the moral certainty and unquestioned claim to authority of legal declarations have seemed increasingly questionable as we confront the ongoing violence and inequality that has defined the early 21st century. And again it is in the stories and images we have made through which this crisis of morality and authority has been best perceived and may best continue to be engaged.

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Holiday snap

I look at myself
suntanned
a still serviceable body
somewhere in the Maghreb
and wonder

who is that nonchalant guy
holding a beach towel
as though to wipe away
so much deplorable history
printed in sand at his feet?

Camel or tank
tracks
swished by the desert winds
of corruption and war
and the newer tsunami

of tourists.
Is he deaf to the rumble of tanks
that will come in three weeks
to the indiscriminate shelling
to the mercenary snipers

to the murder of those who are serving
his drinks
making his bed
too frightened even to whisper
lest he's a spy?

Andrew Taylor