

WALZER, BELINDA, Ph.D. Rhetorical Approaches to Gender and Human Rights in Contemporary Transnational Literature and Cultural Studies. (2012)
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This dissertation extends the conversations surrounding human rights literature and its intersection with transnational gender studies and rhetorical theories. It does so through extended analyses of literary accounts of human rights abuses from Iran, South Africa, and Burma including Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Sindiwe Magona's "Women at Work", and Wendy Law-Yone's *The Road to Wanting*. The project brings together these disparate global locations and scholarly fields by analyzing the pedagogical imperative that underwrites the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and subsequent instruments. This pedagogy gives rise to a normative discourse and culture of rights, one that is both productive and problematic. The human rights literature under examination emerge out of that normative discourse of rights and both participate in and speak back to that normativity. Thus, the dissertation examines how narratives as cultural productions are both pedagogical and performative of the normative culture of human rights. Specifically, the dissertation brings transnational feminist discourses of selfhood as process rather than product, theories of identification, and visual rhetorics directly to bear on human rights concerns by rethinking rhetorical theories of both the speaking subject and transnational reader responsibility. In so doing it brings together and extends Judith Butler's concepts of post-sovereign subjectivity, Pheng Cheah's articulation of human rights as embedded in discourses of global capital, and theories of witness and rhetorical listening. Through a rhetorical approach to human rights literature informed by gender studies, this dissertation ultimately considers how these narrative representations also

construct a transnational feminist readership. This readership recognizes the ways in which the texts that emerge out of the human rights regime can draw attention to, complicate, and/or remake that discourse.

RHETORICAL APPROACHES TO GENDER AND HUMAN RIGHTS
IN CONTEMPORARY TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE
AND CULTURAL STUDIES

by

Belinda Walzer

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Approved by

Committee Chair

To Sandy

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of
The Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____
Alexandra Schultheis Moore

Committee Members _____
Hephzibah Roskelly

Mark Rifkin

Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION:
READING RIGHTS: NORMATIVE HUMAN RIGHTS DISCOURSE,
TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM, AND THE SUBJECT OF RIGHTS

Rhetorically, human rights are an inventory of axioms about what it means to be human that everyone presumably knows; practically, it is necessary to admit that, at the very best, they constitute what everyone should know.

-Joseph Slaughter Human Rights, Inc., (14).

We, the Governments participating in the Fourth World Conference on Women, [...]

Recognize that the status of women has advanced in some important respects in the past decade but that progress has been uneven, inequalities between women and men have persisted and major obstacles remain, with serious consequences for the well-being of all people.

-Fourth World Conference on Women Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

In 1995 more than fifty thousand people gathered in Beijing for the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW). Thirty miles away in Hairou the Non-Governmental Organization Forum also met to discuss women's rights as human rights. The Beijing conference was the fourth in a series of conferences that had been held throughout the world to discuss issues relating to women, but the Beijing conference was significant

because it was the first that was primarily about women's rights as human rights.¹ The conference produced the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action that together reaffirmed a commitment to "advance the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere in the interest of all humanity" (Act 3 of the Declaration), and declared that "women's rights are human rights" (Act 14 of the Declaration). Since this declaration and the conference, the development of women's rights as human rights has been both vast and disappointing.

While advocates across the world continue to review and take stock of women's rights, change has not been achieved at the levels and pace as hoped and does not reflect the urgency of realizing women's rights as human rights.² Despite its status as a world leader, the U.S. has historically neglected to promote the goals of the Beijing Declaration and in many ways has reversed progress in the past decade, especially in terms of reproductive rights. For example, Aili Mari Tripp notes that under the George W. Bush administration, "the United States was the only country out of 179 that refused at a 2004 UNFPA meeting in Chile to endorse the 1994 Cairo consensus (International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action) affirming the need for reproductive health information services to improve economic development and slow population growth" (53). Further, she claims that since the 1995 conference in Beijing,

¹ Charlotte Bunch and Susana Fried in the Conference Reports published in a 1996 *Signs* forum that collected reflections and responses to the conference from women in attendance were careful to note that until this conference the women's issues interrogated were not explicitly linked to human rights.

² For example the Beijing Platform by the UN Commission on the Status of Women, the Beijing +5 review, the Beijing Ten-Year and Beyond report, and the review occurring in March of 2010 marking the fifteen-year anniversary of the Beijing Platform are all positive steps, but clearly gendered rights abuses still pervade globally.

“the United States has generally been uninterested in following up on the goals and gains made at the landmark 1995 gathering...At the 2004 meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women [CSW], the United States openly refused to continue its endorsement of the Platform of Action...U.S. unilateralism in the CSW has undermined the commission’s work overall” (53).³ However, Hillary Clinton’s speech as Secretary of State at the fifteenth Anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development (2010) suggests a new direction under the current Obama administration: “Under the leadership of this Administration, we are committed to meeting the Cairo goals...One of President Obama’s first actions in office was to overturn the Mexico City policy, which greatly limited our ability to fund family planning programs” (Clinton).

Despite these hopeful sentiments, the struggle for women’s rights as human rights continues, often within problematic discourses centered in the West, necessitating questions such as, on what and whose terms are women’s rights being determined? If human rights as declared in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and other instruments and women’s rights as declared in the Beijing Declaration construct a normative global framework and culture of rights, then how does that normative discourse contribute to the operations of power that both construct and undermine women’s subjectivities as rights-bearing subjects throughout the world? In order to answer these questions, this dissertation triangulates the fields and conversations of human rights theory, rhetoric, and transnational feminism and engages them in direct

³ The “attack” on women’s reproductive rights occurring currently in the US is case in point that the US has been traditionally slow in supporting women’s rights. It is telling also that the debate over reproductive rights is not couched in human rights terms, further reinforcing the divorce between women’s rights and human rights.

dialogue regarding the normative discourse of rights and women's rights as they surface in literature. Institutions such as human rights require narratives to legitimate them⁴; thus, project uses a rhetorical methodology to examine how narratives as cultural productions both construct and potentially destabilize or remake such a culture, and considers the potentials of a transnational feminist readership of such narratives.

Overview of Human Rights Instruments

During the drafting of the UDHR, ratified in 1948, the Eastern Bloc and the democratically minded states engaged in extensive politically motivated debate over the function of the UDHR. Although the document was not legally binding, the nations involved recognized the ramifications and potential power of a declaration that could become "soft law" or customary international law. The Eastern Bloc opposed the ratification of a document that privileged individual rights over rights of the community. The debates resulted in the creation of the UDHR as a non-binding declaration which "emerged in the last possible moment of international consensus" (Cassin cited in Slaughter 49). In order to hold nations accountable to the Articles within the UDHR in more tangible ways beyond the rhetorical obligation that the declaration demands, the United Nations developed nine subsequent conventions and covenants and eight optional protocols to be ratified by participating nation-states. These covenants and conventions have more legal force than does the UDHR and become legally binding upon ratification.

⁴ See Joseph Slaughter's *Human Rights Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* for more on this legitimating link between human rights and narrative.

Although the covenants and conventions are legal documents and not declarations as such, they contribute similarly to the normative culture of rights. Since each covenant articulates and focuses on a different issue, in contemporary discourse rights have been split into roughly three generations, first, second and third, each corresponding to different aspects of individual and collective rights, but all with roots in the indivisibility of the UDHR.

First generation rights, encapsulated in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (opened for signature, ratification and accession in 1966 but not entered into force until 1976), articulate civil and political rights which are intended to protect the individual from the state. These are often called negative rights because they require a lack of participation by the state in the individual's private life. While Chapter III develops this relationship between the gendered individual and the state more explicitly, I wish to note here that the ICCPR further articulates the right to self-determination outlined in the UDHR, which states that "everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his [sic] personality is possible" (UDHR Article 29). In other words, together the UDHR and ICCPR construct the normative subject of rights as an individual subject, one whose full development can only be obtained in relation to the community to which "he" belongs.

These first generation civil and political rights have received the most critical attention within the discourse surrounding human rights, both legal and literary.⁵ For

⁵ For an example of critiques of human rights from legal perspectives see David Kennedy's article "The International Human Rights Movement: Part of the Problem?" in which he outlines several ways the discourse of international human rights might be more problematic than productive.

example, Joseph Slaughter's influential book, *Human Rights, Inc.* links the UDHR to the traditional *Bildungsroman*, suggesting that the *Bildungsroman* echoes and supports liberal human rights discourse in a "mutually enabling fiction" that assumes that the ideal subject of human rights is also the ideal subject of the *Bildungsroman*: a white bourgeois, affluent, European male, based on autonomous subjectivity (4). Slaughter argues that the UDHR and the *Bildungsroman* both construct "an image of the human personality that ratifies the other's idealistic visions of the proper relations between the individual and society and the normative career of free and full human personality development" (4). Generally, this process of development is depicted as a series of events or crises in which the subject comes of age before finally recognizing his place as an individual within society and marrying, a move that symbolizes the subject's willing alignment of his individuality with the social and legal structures of the state.⁶ The state's legitimation of the subject as depicted in the *Bildungsroman* is a pedagogical moment as Slaughter argues in which the novel teaches the correct socialization and "unification of the citizen with the 'imagined community' of the nation" (Lowe 98). These "mutually enabling fictions" thus determine not only the subject's socialization to and interpellation by the nation-state, but also the kinds of subjects who are able to claim human rights. In this way, the *Bildungsroman* and liberal human rights discourse based on the autonomous subject of first generation rights are performative and pedagogical in that they "are

⁶ As Franco Moretti and Albert Sbragia explain, "It is... necessary that, as a 'free individual,' not as a fearful subject but as a convinced citizen, one perceives the social norms as one's own. One must internalize them and fuse external compulsion and internal impulses into a new unity until the former is no longer distinguishable from the latter. This fusion is what we usually call 'consent' or 'legitimation'" (Moretti 16).

discursive regimes that constitute and regulate, imagine and test, kinds of subjects, subjectivities, and social formations;...they are ‘machines for producing [and governing] subjectivity’” (Jameson qtd. in Slaughter 8).⁷ Thus, if the subject of rights is also the subject of the *Bildungsroman*, then that subject is a “self-possessed individual” (19) who is also traditionally a white, bourgeois, European male predicated upon Enlightenment rationality.

If this first generation, normative subject of rights as pedagogically constructed via the UDHR and the *bildungsroman* as articulated by Slaughter does not extend to all males, let alone all humans, then “women in all class, economic, and political situations have been omitted consistently from the discourse of community and nation” (Roskelly 217). In other words, the UDHR and surrounding instruments construct a normative discourse in which “women and members of racial, religious, sexual and class minorities [are] not comprehended practically within its original enabling fiction” (Slaughter 5). This formation leads Catherine MacKinnon, Charlotte Bunch, Hephzibah Roskelly and others to continue to question, where are the *women* in human rights?⁸ It is important to note that the enabling fiction of human rights discourse has proven incredibly productive since the foundation of individualism underscoring universal human rights prevents one person’s needs and desires from being subordinated to another’s needs in the same way that the individualism underscoring Western feminist discourse has led to huge advances in women’s basic rights. However, liberal understandings of agency are inadequate as the

⁷ I borrow the language of performative and pedagogical from Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*, a concept that is examined further in Chapter I.

⁸ For example, see the opening passage to Hephzibah Roskelly’s “Imagining Women as Human” in *Theoretical Perspectives on Human Rights and Literature* (2012).

only approach to the transnational and cross-cultural work necessary in both human rights and feminist discourses.

Second generation rights add to the negative rights articulated in the ICCPR with rights that protect the individual within collectives by including economic, social and cultural rights, articulated in a separate convention called the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The UDHR, ICCPR and ICESCR together make up the International Bill of Human Rights. Second generation economic, social, and cultural rights are considered positive rights because they often require action from states for enactment. These social, cultural and economic rights are examined more explicitly in Chapter IV.

Third generation rights, sometimes called “solidarity rights,” protect the rights of collectives and groups over the individual.⁹ These rights, articulated in a series of declarations, covenants and conventions in recent years including the African [Banjul] Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981, entered into force Oct. 21, 1986), remain the least explored and the most controversial form of rights.¹⁰ The United Nations

⁹ According to Philip Alson in “A Third Generation of Solidarity Rights: Progressive Development or Obfuscation of International Human Rights Law,” the concept of third generation rights was first articulated in the “Preliminary Draft of a Third International Human Rights Covenant on Solidarity Rights” at the Fourth Armand Hammer Conference on Human Rights and Peace, Aix-en-Provence, 21-23 August 1981, para. 1.

¹⁰ A significant debate that arose in the 1970s surrounds the issue of third generation rights, which are substantially more difficult to articulate and legislate than first and second generation rights and are therefore much slower to be drafted and ratified. Third generation rights refer to rights based on solidarity or collective rights and do not focus on the autonomous individual but rather on “the right of peoples to self-determination and the protection of minority groups within nations” (Saito 389). The criticism of third generation rights can be more or less grouped into four major threads. The first is aimed at problematizing the idea of generations (a conversation mirrored in feminism’s debate over the “waves”); the second criticizes the conversation for diverting attention from the original rights articulated in the UDHR, many of which are still violated throughout the world; the third suggests that many of these rights can ostensibly be

General Assembly's Third Committee, or Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Affairs Committee is the body that addresses issues roughly corresponding with third generation rights including the "advancement of women, the protection of children, indigenous issues, the treatment of refugees, the promotion of fundamental freedoms through the elimination of racism and racial discrimination, and the promotion of the right to self-determination" amongst others (UN General Assembly's web site). Third generation rights also include rights on behalf of all people including the right to a healthy environment, the right to development and to peace (Ruppel 103) and suggests that "if a community is not free, most of its members are also deprived of many important rights" (Louis B Sohn qtd in Saito 396). One of the major problems in third generation rights is the necessity, particularly for indigenous groups, to mobilize under collective yet static identities which often results in cultural essentialization. Third generation rights have been making some headway in drafting and ratifying documents privileging solidarity rights, including the very new 2007 Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which affirms "that indigenous peoples are equal to all other peoples, while recognizing the right of all peoples to be different, to consider themselves different, and to be respected as such." Chapter IV and V together examine the ramifications of considering solidarity rights or collective rights in relation to the individual.

found embedded in conventions already drafted and ratified, including the UDHR, the ICCPR and the ICESCR; the fourth questions the notion of solidarity (Alston).

The Normative Culture of Rights and Women's Rights as Human Rights

Since the ratification of the UDHR, the declaration and instruments of human rights have perpetuated a normative discourse, what Inderpal Grewal calls a human rights regime based on first generation or civil and political rights “in which a conceptual apparatus has become so powerful that it seems to be the ‘truth’ or becomes seen as ‘natural’” (Grewal, “Foreword” vii).¹¹ This regime of truth, normative human rights culture, has led to both productive and problematic outcomes for human rights and women's rights.

On the one hand, the normative culture ignores rights issues that do not map onto traditional understandings of human rights violations. Furthermore, the narrow understanding of human rights as those based on the autonomous citizen-subject and as articulated in the UDHR has led to multiple paradoxes of rights (e.g., rights discourse being used as an alibi for humanitarian intervention), and has contributed to a structure of rights that I examine more closely in Chapter II. On the other hand, as Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg and Alexandra Schultheis Moore, editors of the recent collection *Theoretical Perspectives on Human Rights and Literature*, note, “[w]hether or not the language of human ‘rights,’ with its nationalist and juridical parameters and moral idealism, is the most efficacious and ethical framework for the work of securing dignity for all peoples remains in question. Still, striving toward such a condition is never not urgent” (1).

¹¹ Grewal defines the human rights regime specifically in relation to women's rights as human rights and attributes it to “the networks of knowledge and power that have inserted such discourses into geopolitics” (337-338).

Since rights were designed at their inception to protect the individual from the public government interfering in “his” private affairs, feminist cultural critics such as Charlotte Bunch and Donna Sullivan have critiqued these negative rights for not only contributing to the enforcement of a binaristic private/ public sphere but also for having the unfortunate and tragic byproduct of failing to protect those who stereotypically inhabit the private sphere, i.e. women. Thus, despite the continuing conversation of women’s rights as human rights, the discourses surrounding human rights in legal and literary discourse have traditionally addressed gross human rights violations that interrupt the perceived “state of normalcy” while frequently neglecting less acute but sometimes more pervasive human rights abuses, especially women’s rights occurring in the private sphere. As Donna Sullivan argues, “the challenge is not to shift focus away from gross violations of civil and political rights by the state, but, first, to broaden the normative framework to include the abuses suffered by women that do not fit this paradigm” (127). In other words, rights advocates must broaden and continue to critique the discourse articulated in the previous section as opposed to discarding that discourse.

In order to remedy this public/private divide and to protect one of the most vulnerable populations throughout the world, in 1979 women’s rights gained its own convention, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). CEDAW offers a specifically gendered look at first and second generation rights and outlines women’s civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights stating, for example, that “the full and complete development of a country, the welfare of the world and the cause of peace require the maximum participation of women

on equal terms with men in all fields.”¹² The convention arose out of the apparent need for more focused attention on the violence against women perpetuated and implicitly condoned by the state and “private agents” (Friedman 21). However, not only does a foundation in Enlightenment notions of liberal subjectivity pose problems for finding the women in human rights, even once “the woman” was (re)introduced in the discourse through CEDAW, this grounding in liberal individualism continued to pose several problems for women’s rights as human rights. First, as Slaughter shows, the relationship of the UDHR to the *Bildungsroman* is problematic not only because of the individual subject of rights it constructs, but also because that subject is traditionally male. Second, that individual liberal subject constructed by the UDHR carries with it a notion of personhood that relies upon a resistive kind of agency (predicated upon an Enlightenment notion of subjectivity) that does not take into account the ways in which agency can function in more incorporative terms, thereby ignoring gendered notions of agency that are not so binaristic (this tension is examined more closely in Chapter III). Third, the UDHR contributes to the development and perpetuation of the separation of the public and private spheres that have distinctly gendered ramifications regarding domestic violence and issues of work (see Chapter IV). And fourth, in foregrounding individuality, agency as resistance, and the nuclear family unit as the foundation for the nation, the normative discourse emerging out of the UDHR precludes notions of solidarity and

¹² In 1967 the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women was established as a precursor to CEDAW and in 1999 was also added the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

collectivity that do not fit either the mold of familial unity or third generation rights that subordinates the individual to the collective (see Chapter V).

In order to further examine the normative discourse of both human rights as well as women's human rights and since the four human rights instruments under examination, the UDHR, the ICCPR, the ICESCR, and CEDAW, together provide the foundation for the discourse surrounding women's rights as human rights, they also provide the organizational framework for this dissertation. Recognizing that all human rights are indivisible, each chapter addresses one document, beginning with the UDHR, and considers the culture of rights and literature that emerges out of each document. As a rhetorical act that performs that which it speaks, the UDHR (and subsequent instruments) calls for using a rhetorical methodology. Although human rights discourse implicitly deals with rhetorical issues—as Wendy Hesford argues, “rights can be considered a discourse of public persuasion that envisions certain scenes of rhetorical address and normative notions of subject formation” (*Spectacular Rhetorics* 12), and as Sally Engle Merry argues, “the impact of human rights is a *matter of persuasion* rather than force, of cultural transformation rather than coercive change” (qtd in Hesford *Spectacular Rhetorics* 21; emphasis added by Hesford)—the conversation surrounding human rights in the humanities often takes its lead from literary history, theory and/or legal discourses rather than the extensive conversation surrounding rhetoric and rights.¹³ I utilize the deep

¹³ Joseph Slaughter's foundational text, *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (2007) might be one of the more well known examples of the general trend in human rights discourse towards literary studies, but his text is not alone. For example, Lynn Hunt's, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (2008) locates the origins contemporary rights discourse in the rise of the novel; James Dawes's *That the World May Know: Bearing Witness to Atrocities* (2007) and Elizabeth Swanson

history and conversation surrounding rhetoric in order to bring that discourse to bear on the relatively new discourse of gendered human rights in/and literature and the humanities. Furthermore, while there is a small but vibrant conversation currently surrounding human rights and narrative work from a rhetorical perspective, few are drawing explicitly from the burgeoning field of theoretical approaches to human rights in/and literature and the humanities *and* the conversation on rhetoric and human rights in application to literature.¹⁴ Instead, those considering “a rhetorical approach to human rights” examine “how advocates construct particular responses in contingent situations, and how public debates influence communities, interpretations of rights, and rights enforcement” (Lyon and Olson 2004), and primarily consider rhetorical acts that are less literary.¹⁵ In comparison, I draw from the conversation surrounding human rights in/and literature and use a rhetorical perspective to interrogate literary texts that represent human rights issues. By utilizing a rhetorical methodology, I examine the problems and

Goldberg’s *Beyond Terror: Gender, Narrative, Human Rights* (2007) both use literature and literary studies as a foundation for their work on human rights; Sidonie Smith and Kay Shaffer’s *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (2004) and Mark Sanders’s *Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of a Truth Commission* (2007) consider the overlaps of legal human rights discourse and narrative in literary terms, among many others. Most notably, Alexandra Schultheis Moore and Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg’s recent collection titled *Theoretical Perspectives on Human Rights and Literature* (2012) compiles essays from several of the key figures doing work in human rights and literary studies.

¹⁴ Wendy Hesford, Wendy Kozol, and Erik Doxtader are a few of the rhetoric scholars who are also fluent in the theoretical conversation about human rights in the humanities occurring around literature and representation.

¹⁵ Examples include scholars such as Erik Doxtader, who examines the discourse surrounding the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and Wendy Hesford, who examines human rights campaigns, truth telling and documentary reportage—what she calls “spectacular rhetorics.” Arabella Lyon and Lester Olson’s are also examples of scholars who bring a communications and rhetorical perspective to the conversation on human rights in their study of the rhetorical features of rights discourse.

potentials of a kind of transnational feminist readership and reading practice.¹⁶ In so doing, this dissertation triangulates and extends the conversation surrounding human rights literature and its intersection with transnational feminist studies and rhetoric in three ways: first by bringing transnational feminist discourses of selfhood as process rather than product directly to bear on human rights concerns; second by using those theories of the always emerging subject to extend human rights discourses to those currently excluded; and third by rethinking rhetorical theories of both the speaking subject and reader responsibility in relation to human rights in/and literature in order to critique the limitations of human rights discourses without abandoning their potential. I turn specifically to transnational feminist discourse as a way to enable a gendered perspective and analysis of human rights discourse without falling into the traps of Enlightenment discourse so problematic to both human rights and gender studies.

Transnational feminism and human rights discourse are both diverse and extensive fields of academic inquiry. Transnational feminism, as a movement that promotes pluralistic perspectives and transnational yet contingent mobilizations, seeks to locate gender oppression in contextual moments of local and cultural specificity, while recognizing the need for mobilization across diverse linguistic, cultural, socio-economic, geographical, and political locations. It arose as an effort to balance the centralizing tendency of feminism(s) emerging out of the global north that have foundations in second wave notions of agency, subjectivity, and individualism, and as an effort to open the

¹⁶ Because it is beyond the scope of this project to examine the ways in which the literature that emerges out of the normative discourse reimagines the issues and alliances for the women on the ground, so to speak, the scope of this project is limited to an examination of the kinds of ethical alliances one can create in reading practices.

discourse to global difference. According to Wendy Hesford and Wendy Kozol, many of the uses and definitions of “transnational” are problematic, including using it to denote the demise of the nation-state, which is critiqued for being ahistorical, using it to define crossing borders or a “diasporic” discipline, which is problematic because it romanticizes displacement, using it as a definition for neocolonial, which mystifies what was before late capitalism, and using it as a discourse to oppose globalization or refer to movements across space and time that do not weaken state power (14). However, Hesford and Kozol along with Caren Kaplan, Inderpal Grewal, Aihwa Ong and more conclude that, while “transnational” is an overused term, it should not be abandoned but rather continued to be interrogated. Therefore, I use it as a way to explore “the interdependence of the local and global [and] how each is implicated in the other” (Hesford and Kozol 15), and because it accounts for both the tangible effects of nation-state borders as well as the discursive effects of human rights and feminist discourses as they cross disciplinary and geographical boundaries.

Like transnational feminism, the conversation surrounding human rights discourse in the humanities seeks similarly to improve human conditions throughout the world while also working to ethically represent and expose human rights violations all the while critiquing the ways in which the normative discourse is indebted to hegemonic western discourse and contributes to existing global power structures.¹⁷ The consistent

¹⁷ I maintain a distinction throughout this project between normative human rights discourse as located in the UDHR and legal instruments of rights and the normative culture that emerges out of that discourse, and the conversation surrounding the critique of that discourse in the humanities. Often these discourses can overlap, particularly in literature which both emerges out of the normative discourse but can also remake/speak back to that normativity productively much like the criticism surrounding normative rights.

interrogation of these implications is important, especially considering the fact that both human rights discourses and transnational feminism continue to suggest new epistemological approaches and policy to prevent violations and social injustices. Thus, this project explores the overlaps in the human rights and transnational feminism conversations on three major issues that stem from a similar foundation in Western Enlightenment philosophy: 1) their grounding in liberalism and the autonomous subject, 2) their character as discourses that wish to offer simultaneously both a critique and a solution, and 3) the tension between recognizing local and global operations of power and subsequent issues surrounding mobilizations for change.

The first issue involves the historical grounding in liberal values of freedom based on individuality that both critical discourses attempt to combat by calling for more contextualized, localized understandings of operations of power and resistance. However, in the fight for social justice, the normative discourses of human rights and transnational feminism become caught between two theoretical tropes: abandoning contextual specificity of oppressive forces for common understandings of oppression.¹⁸ The universal categorization, vital for mobilization, is elided in an intense focus on the local in the name of recognizing diversity and cultural relativism.¹⁹ In other words, the second

¹⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty offers a reading of subaltern history in *Provincializing Europe* that provides a potential solution to the problem by incorporating History 2 as a discourse that articulates subjects and narratives that have been written out of hegemonic, capitalist narratives of history. History 2s offer a necessary subaltern supplement to the European narrative of capital or History 1 and, “in practice always modify and interrupt the totalizing thrusts of History 1” (254). However, this concept of History 2 allows for a simultaneous understanding of the local and non-secular within the universal Enlightenment capitalist narrative lacks a gendered perspective and is problematically romanticized in its third world locations.

¹⁹ For a deeper discussion of the tension between the local and the global, see Domna Stanton’s “Top-Down, Bottom-Up, Horizontally: Resignifying the Universal in Human Rights Discourse.”

issue in which both discourses are engaged is the tension between the need, on one hand, for a common discourse so as to foster wider mobilization to alleviate the violations, and, on the other hand, the danger of those universals then “evacuate[ing] the place of the local” (Chakrabarty 155).

Although feminism(s) and transnational feminism(s) have never been nor will ever be a monolithic movement or idea, the narratives emanating from hegemonic western feminism associated with liberalism created the dominant discourse which then informed the discourse of women’s rights as human rights during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Through this grounding in liberalist notions of autonomous subjectivity and universality, western feminism posits a universal subject of woman predicated on western notions of patriarchal oppression. Also, like normative rights discourse, hegemonic feminism’s foundation in liberalism has led to a homogenizing tendency that assumes that the same kind of oppression operates similarly across socio-political locations throughout the world and, as such, can be revolted against in similar ways, hence western feminism’s mobilization under a wider heading of Woman (read: Western woman) working to overthrow that oppressive force, namely patriarchy. This normative discourse of women’s rights leads to the production of a universal global female subject, “one based on an essentialized conception of the female body as one that is subject to violence” (Grewal *Transnational America* 155).

It is this discourse that caused such a hostile response to the term feminism across the global south that persists today.²⁰ Chandra Mohanty in *Feminism Without Borders*, critiques this notion of feminism that underwrites the discourse of women's rights, arguing that a liberal dominated feminism elides both geographical and ideological specificities of oppression, subject construction, and agency. Mohanty argues against a feminism dominated by liberalism and instead calls for a more contextual understanding of oppression, subjectivity, and the agency generated by those forces, thereby rejecting the universal subject of oppression but embracing or utilizing the alliances that these generalizations can lead to. However, this kind of relativism carries a danger of slipping into what Homi Bhabha calls "cultural diversity," a fixed notion of culture as epistemological rather than enunciatory, and which causes women to be read as socialized and subject to a static concept of culture.²¹ The problem becomes, therefore, how to recognize the ways in which grounded discourses can speak across time and space to mobilize for change and how to consider alternative subjectivities and agency that might be culturally constituted outside of values of liberalism without binding those subjectivities to a static notion of third world culture and agency as resistance.²²

²⁰ To be clear, the backlash is against the term "feminism" because of the connotations it has with the imposed universality of the western woman. Otherwise, women and men across the world have historically been addressing forms of contextual gendered oppression for a long time.

²¹ Mohanty's more recent publication in 2003 reaffirms her call for collectivity across diversity without slipping into cultural relativism. In this new publication she calls it feminist solidarity which is appropriate for the argument regarding rights that I am making.

²² This concept of subjectivity as constantly becoming is based on the postmodern, Foucauldian notion of discourses of power that constitute the subject.

Although there has been much work done that critiques these foundations,²³ the discourse of rights, including women's rights, must continue to recognize the important gains that this history has made and its current importance, while also simultaneously considering other notions of subjectivity that are not grounded in individualism and thus other kinds of subjects of rights. Therefore, the effort to recognize the located and contextual nature of women's lives and oppressions throughout the world and the importance for located and contextual recognition of women's rights leads critics to argue that "a universal approach to human rights work cannot be assumed but rather must be negotiated" (Friedman 20).

As I have explained, in the discursive overlap between the human rights regime and transnational feminism, the issue of subjectivity is central. Grewal suggests that the imperative questions to ask regarding gender and human rights are, "what happens in the process of learning the language of human rights, how [do] subjects become changed, connected, 'empowered'" ("Foreword" viii)? In other words, one of the most important aspects transnational feminism brings to human rights discourse and its critique of the "regime of truth" is this critical interrogation of the discourses of power and epistemologies that operate behind what counts as a human rights violation, who counts as a victim and what activism and agency look like. I am, therefore, interested in texts that question the ways in which the legal and narrative representations of human rights

²³ For select examples, see Chandra Mohanty, Saba Mahmood, Rey Chow, Uma Narayan and Sara Suleri.

impact subject construction.²⁴ Considering the forms of agency that the normative discourse of liberalism elides in both feminist and human rights discourse helps to expose those subjects written out of the dominant discourse in both fields. To these ends, Chapter II provides the foundational terms and problems and each subsequent chapter interrogates texts that depict expanding notions of the gendered subject of rights from the individual in Chapter III, to the collective in Chapter IV, to the transnational subject in Chapter V. As case studies, together they explore the complexity of subject production within and against the normative discourse of rights.

In order to consider forms of subjectivity and thus agency that take into account the necessity for individual agency, but which do not necessarily map on to liberal foundations, I turn to postmodern and poststructural feminist critics who suggest that rather than understanding agency from a liberal standpoint as utilizing individual and autonomous identity, one can understand agency as working from within intersections of differing locations of power.²⁵ Judith Butler's concept of post-sovereign subjectivity, that recognizes the ways subjectivity is constructed by the very structures of power to which one is subject, provides the foundation for this alternative agency. Considering agency in this way changes the terms of the struggle from a revolution intended to overthrow or to resist to a more complicated incorporation and participation within the power

²⁴ For example texts such as Joseph Slaughter's *Human Rights Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*, and Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg's *Beyond Terror: Gender, Narrative, Human Rights* and authors such as Wendy Hesford and Wendy Kozol are participating in this contemporary conversation.

²⁵ For example, Judith Butler, Saba Mahmood, Chandra Mohanty, Inderpal Grewal, Gayatri Spivak and more have all contributed to this conversation on alternative agency.

structures.²⁶ This alternative agency, examined in Chapter III through an analysis of the individual subject in *Persepolis*, comes from within power structures by reframing/rebuilding the boundaries constructing the subject rather than breaking/destroying the framework entirely, thereby leaving the subject unmoored from the very structures of power that form her. Post-sovereign subjectivity thus allows for different conceptions of what it means to act in the name of social justice and in the name of agency.²⁷

Finally, because both human rights and transnational feminist discourses are “analytical and...politically prescriptive projects” (Mahmood 10) in which critics, activists and scholars hope to offer simultaneously both a critique and a solution, the discourses suffer from a predicament that arises from this necessity to offer critiques of the very action, discourse and humanitarian work that must happen in order to prevent and alleviate issues of social justice and human rights. This tension, however, is a potentially productive one that encourages critical attention and focus on the multiple discourses and disciplines themselves such that “the concept of human rights as women’s rights becomes here an object for analysis rather than a goal to endorse” (Grewal “Foreword” vii). In this way, since the goal is further analysis of the discourses at play and their power dynamics, the goal itself is rhetorical, a concept that is examined more closely in Chapter II.

²⁶ See Wendy Brown’s “Feminism Unbound: Revolution, Mourning, Politics” for a further explanation of what it means to consider feminism outside of the scope of revolution, also explored in Chapter IV.

²⁷ Saba Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety* is one such example that rethinks agency outside of sovereign and liberal understandings of subjectivity using an analysis of the Egyptian women’s mosque movement, recognizing the women’s embrace of traditional notions of Islamic piety as a site of potential agency as opposed to a site of internalized patriarchal oppression.

Specifically, my dissertation utilizes Butler's concepts of post-sovereign subjectivity, Pheng Cheah's articulation of human rights as embedded in discourses of global capital, and theories of identification and visual rhetorics in literary texts from Iran, South Africa, and Burma.²⁸ I analyze the ways these texts, which represent rights violations as implicitly and explicitly gendered, consider and construct normative understandings of human rights and interrogate the kinds of subjects that emerge out of these texts. As Cheah says, the task of the humanities should be "the articulation of a framework that renders intelligible the inhuman ways of achieving humanity in the contemporary world" ("Humanity in the Field of Instrumentality" 1553). By utilizing a rhetorical methodology to consider the pedagogical and performative nature of the human rights instruments and the literature that emerges out of the normative discourses they construct, I examine how these narrative representations both reflect and resist a narrow, static, liberal subject of rights, thus providing ways to consider anew the modes of ethical mobilization and transnational readership across diverse socio-political locations and borders.

Chapter Overviews

Each chapter coalesces around a different set of questions and terms about human rights, subjectivity, rhetoric and transnational feminism. Chapter II, "The Responsibility of Rights: Rhetorical Approaches to the Pedagogy of Human Rights in *Speak*

²⁸ See Chapter IV for a more explicit articulation of the ways in which human rights are always already embedded within discourses of global capital.

Truth to Power”, introduces the major concepts and terms of the normative global structure of rights through analyzing the multimedia and cross-cultural human rights advocacy project *Speak Truth to Power*. Drawing on scholars such as Wendy Hesford, Gayatri Spivak, and E. Ann Kaplan, it examines the pedagogical and rhetorical foundations of the UDHR and its normative culture of responsibility that contributes to the structure of rights. The operative term in this chapter is pedagogy since I interrogate one particular human rights teaching project, *Speak Truth to Power*. *Speak Truth to Power* it exemplifies the kinds of pedagogical projects to which the UDHR gives rise, but which also carries its own seeds of critique. Each chapter also takes up a different rhetorical mode and Chapter II examines the potentials of performance in human rights literature.

Chapter III, “Beyond Revolution: The Fiction of Individual Sovereignty in *Persepolis*”, takes up the pedagogical and rhetorical relationship between the *bildungsroman* and the normative human rights subject depicted and constructed in the UDHR and the ICCPR. It considers *The Complete Persepolis*, an autobiographical graphic narrative by Marjane Satrapi set in Iran and Austria before and during the Islamic regime. *Persepolis* describes a society where oppression is religiously founded, but which Satrapi depicts as having specifically gendered ramifications in the policing of women's bodies. With attention to visual rhetoric in the form of the graphic narrative as providing an alternative mode of resistance and utilizing Saba Mahmood’s understanding of agency (the operative term for the chapter), *Persepolis* depicts the paradox that claiming women's rights as human rights is predicated upon a normative and essentialized (first

generation, western, autonomous) concept of woman. A rhetorical analysis of the graphic narrative form produces a reading that understands the character Marji as a complex, transnational, emergent subject of rights, one who grapples with this paradox of rights and the privilege that comes with such a subject position.

“Between Collectivity and Specificity: The Possibility of the Speaking Subject in ‘Women at Work’”, Chapter IV, examines the normative discourse emerging out of the ICESCR in relation to a novella which is written and set during Apartheid, a culture of institutionalized and systemic rights abuse (predicated on racism but which is also depicted as playing out in uniquely gendered ways). Chapter IV examines the rhetorical possibilities of the speaking subject who has no access to rights. Sindiwe Magona’s “Women at Work” takes up the paradox that in order to mobilize (the operative term for this chapter) or be heard under a universal global heading of women's rights as human rights, women's individual conditions of suffering and subjectivity must be subordinated to a larger notion of community. This gendered resistance requires a transnational feminist rhetorical methodology of listening that I call “reading as enablement.” This methodology enables readers to become more attuned to the ways they are implicated in texts that expose and represent human rights violations and enables different kinds of discourses and thus subjects of rights. Magona's text weaves together multiple narrative “I”s into a collective voice, producing a subject of rights who subordinates her individuality and embraces this collectivity because it provides a better chance of access to rights (despite the fact that rights are generally predicated upon individuality). In so doing, the text critiques this paradox and takes into account the unique operations of

different, political, social and economic sites of gendered oppression that construct specific and gendered subjects of rights.

Chapters II, III and IV each take up different terms: pedagogy, agency and mobilization respectively. Chapter V examines another way of reading women's rights as human rights within a transnational framework, that of "solidarity." "Women's Rights as Human Rights: The Transnational Subject in *The Road to Wanting*" analyzes Burmese author Wendy Law Yone's *The Road to Wanting* in relation to the normative discourse of rights, CEDAW, and transnational mobilization of women's rights. The novel constructs the most nuanced and complex subject of rights: one who at first seems only recognizable within the structures of global capitalism and human trafficking, but who ultimately finds a kind of transnational feminist solidarity that complicates that discourse through a manipulation of language and gendered solidarity. At the end of the novel, standing between borders, the main character Na Ga turns towards Burma and her indigenous subjectivity while still keeping open the promise of a transnational feminist solidarity predicated upon a poststructural feminist promise.

CHAPTER II

THE RESPONSE-ABILITY OF RIGHTS:

THE UDHR AND THE PEDAGOGY OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Knowing this, knowing this: the world does not have to forever be the way it is now.

-Ariel Dorfman, "Educational and Advocacy Package" (5).

Now, Therefore THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY proclaims THIS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS as a common standard of achievements for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

*-Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
(resolution 217 A III of 10) December, 1948.*

Several years ago I taught a freshman seminar course called "The Rhetoric of Rights: the Politics of Human Rights Discourse." The course was organized around the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and select conventions and instruments. As a declaration, and thus a rhetorical act that performs that which it speaks, the UDHR calls for rhetorical analysis; therefore, for each human rights issue we studied, we read corresponding conventions and we watched human rights films and documentaries so that the students and I could think rhetorically about the films' narratives in relation to the

documents. Towards the beginning of the semester as a way to introduce the concepts of the UDHR, I screened a documentary film that was part of a larger multi-media human rights educational project funded by the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights called *Speak Truth to Power*. *Speak Truth to Power* is “a multi-faceted global initiative that uses the experiences of courageous defenders from around the world to educate students and others about human rights, and urge them to take action” (website). The film presents the premier of a play written by Pulitzer Prize-winner Ariel Dorfman called *Speak Truth to Power: Voices From Beyond the Dark* at the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts in DC in 2000.¹ The play is comprised of monologues featuring the testimony of eight human rights defenders from around the world performed by actors. It is strategically organized so that the rights defenders are speaking back to a fictional figure called “The Man” who represents consolidated oppression and power. The documentary film features the premier of the play at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C., acted by Hollywood stars (including Alec Baldwin as “The Man,” Sigourney Weaver and more), and the performance of the play is interspersed in the film with interviews of the real defenders and documentary footage of the human rights violations they represent. My students’ responses to the documentary in their film journals and subsequent class discussion varied from surprise that these human rights violations were occurring to a mild desire to know more. One student said something along the lines of, “I didn’t know that was going on over there—it’s too bad that they can’t just be more like

¹ Ariel Dorfman is most well known for his 1990 play, *Death and the Maiden* (also a 1994 film of the same name directed by Roman Polanski), depicting an unnamed Latin American country in which a woman has to host a man for dinner who tortured and raped her under the former regime. The film explores issues of gender, justice and truth and reconciliation.

us.” Many of my students believed that the issues profiled had been resolved. These genuine reactions of my students elicited by a film intending to teach students about human rights issues with an aim towards action point to several of the troubling issues that underlie the normative discourse of rights.² By only screening the film, I created an environment in which my students learned more about the individuals profiled, but I did not provide a space for my students to take agency for their self-reflexivity, nor did I provide a contextual notion of the structural imbalances behind many of the issues profiled. My students’ reactions are exemplary of a larger issue at stake in human rights discourse: the ways in which the UDHR and subsequent instruments construct a normative discourse of rights that can paradoxically perpetuate many of the issues which the human rights instruments intend to remedy. This chapter examines this normative culture of rights constructed and performed by the educational impulse of the UDHR and surrounding instruments through an extended analysis of *Speak Truth to Power*, suggesting that even while these educational projects emerge out of the normative discourse and are performative of that discourse, they can also expose and potentially speak back to and/or remake that normativity.

Since rhetoric asks us to consider the relationships between audience, subject and speaker and in so doing, provides a way to interrogate the construct of a normative discourse of rights, I argue that we must bring an overtly rhetorical lens to human rights discourse in the humanities in order to further examine the pedagogical nature of the

² I do not mean to suggest that my students’ reactions were "wrong" in any way, just that their reactions are informative regarding the larger structure of rights emanating from the normative culture constructed by the UDHR. If anything, my approach to teaching the project was "wrong" in that I did not scaffold it or introduce it in ways that could have provided a deeper engagement for my students.

UDHR and subsequent pedagogy and performativity of the culture of rights that emerges. This rhetorical lens enables me to examine the problematic and productive aspects of the normative culture that emerges out of human rights discourse including the structure of rights, the emergent subject of rights, and issues of spectatorship and witnessing. In this way I am able to encourage my students to take into account the delicate and nuanced rhetorical engagement and identifications necessary in human rights discourse.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a Pedagogical Instrument

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and other United Nations rights instruments were constructed to serve a pedagogical function. The preamble to the UDHR, quoted in the epigraph, declares from the outset how important this pedagogical function is to the promotion of the foundations and principles of human rights. From the very beginning, education underwrites the project of human rights. In addition to the call for education in the preamble, Article Twenty-six of the UDHR embeds this pedagogical function in the document as a fundamental right, indivisible from the rest: “Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.” Furthermore, the 1976 International Convention on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) devotes Article Thirteen to a more specific outline regarding the

parameters of education about human rights by reiterating that it is through education that rights can be guaranteed.³ The Foreword to the Office of the High Commissioner to Human Rights (OHCHR) teaching manual calls this distinction a difference between “‘human rights through education’, insuring that all the components and processes of education...are conducive to learning about human rights, and ‘human rights in education’, ensuring that the human rights of all members of the school community are respected” (7). These references to education in the UDHR and surrounding documents together articulate not only how important education is to perpetuating the goals of human rights, but also the ways in which the documents, particularly the UDHR, are pedagogical instruments which have both productive and problematic effects. As a declaration then, the UDHR constructs a normative pedagogical and performative global framework and culture of rights and subsequently a normative subject of rights.

This chapter articulates the pedagogical and rhetorical foundations of the UDHR and its normative culture of responsibility that then contributes to the structure of rights by examining one pedagogical project called *Speak Truth to Power*. *Speak Truth to Power* emerges out of and performs the kind of pedagogy to which the UDHR gives rise and thus provides an interesting site through which to explore the productive and non-productive aspects of the normative discourse produced by the UDHR. If the UDHR and the culture it constructs are as pedagogical as they are performative, the analysis of the ways in which such a culture is constructed necessitates a rhetorical lens which can

³ To be clear, there is a distinction between the education *of or through* rights and rights *to or in* education. This chapter is interested in the former: the ways in which human rights documents and discourse are taught, specifically in post-secondary education.

account for the transactional nature of such a pedagogical project.⁴ By examining the pedagogical and rhetorical foundations of the UDHR and the normative culture of responsibility that emerges in *Speak Truth to Power*, this chapter sets up the foundational concepts and terms to which the other chapters respond. While this normativity surrounding the discourse of rights is a huge achievement in itself in that it promotes the foundations of human dignity, the respect for the rights of individuals, and the basic tenets of the UDHR, it is precisely because this normativity is so important that its implications deserve closer attention. In promoting foundations of human dignity, the UDHR also promotes notions of individuality and a subject of rights who is predicated upon an Enlightenment notion of liberal subjectivity.⁵ Additionally, as I explore in further chapters, this normative discourse can also work to protect the very aspects that contribute to the oppression of women throughout the world. However, as I mentioned in the Introduction, this is not a discourse that is monolithic, nor is it a discourse one can afford to ignore. While this normative discourse of rights predicated upon first generation rights can be problematic as I will show, one must not forget that it has also contributed to vital and unparalleled advances for women and men throughout the world.

⁴ I use the concepts of pedagogy and performance following Homi Bhabha's definition in *Location of Culture* as a way to consider how the discourse of human rights both pedagogically inscribes the concept of human rights as well as performs it in recursive ways. In other words, the UDHR is pedagogical in that it produces a normative culture of rights which is itself then also pedagogical (constitutive) and performative (recursive). As Bhabha says, "In the production of the nation as narration [or human rights discourse] there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative" (209). Considering this pedagogical and performative nature of the UDHR through a rhetorical theory also provides a useful addition and corrective to Bhabha's notions of pedagogy and performativity.

⁵ See Introduction and Chapter II for a more comprehensive reading of Joseph Slaughter's *Human Rights Inc.* which provides the analysis of the ways in which the subject of rights is linked with the subject of the *bildungsroman* and thus the normative subject of rights is often figured as a white, bourgeois male.

In order to make the pedagogical impulse of the UDHR a reality, the United Nations developed UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) whose role is to utilize education, science and culture in order to promote the concept of global human rights: “from the very beginning the promotion of human rights in the framework of the United Nations system was intimately associated with their dissemination and their teaching” (de Senarclens 7). In 1982 UNESCO hosted a conference in Strasbourg, inviting pedagogy experts from all over the world to discuss the progress of the UDHR's educational agenda and teaching of human rights throughout the world.⁶ The conference attendees concluded that the education and teaching of human rights was, for various reasons, sorely lacking. Most importantly for the purposes of this chapter, the attendees of the UNESCO conference in Strasbourg determined that it was the responsibility of higher education and academia to realize the pedagogical imperative founding the UDHR and surrounding documents of human rights (de Senarclens 13).⁷ This conference and the association borne out of it advanced the pedagogical imperative underwriting the human rights agenda and further exemplify the necessity of education in developing and promoting a culture of human rights.

⁶ The proceedings of this conference are collected in *Frontiers of Human Rights Education* (1983) with additional source materials for human rights educators. The collection covers a broad range of critical questions, issues and methods for teaching about human rights. As I will show later, the projects that attempt to promote this kind of education, however, fall short of the lofty goals of the conference and subsequent pedagogical guide.

⁷ Although it was clear in the conference proceedings and subsequent published collection that the agenda of education in human rights and human rights in education was important, the conference proceedings admitted that they had yet to define the best way of achieving that: “Although the principles of human rights education are largely established, it still remained to define concretely the objectives and the methods of achieving them.” It seems as though it has been UNESCO’s goal to define these best practices since the conference determining their necessity, as evidenced by UNESCO’s various compilations and manuals of what they consider good programs.

Because the conference found the education of human rights lacking,⁸ there was a renewed effort throughout the human rights bodies to encourage the education of human rights principles.⁹ In 2003 UNESCO developed a branch devoted only to human rights education, which was ratified as part of its strategy on human rights (*Human Rights Education in the School Systems of Europe, Central Asia and North America: A Compendium of Good Practice* 12). In fact, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) developed pedagogical manuals designed for educators teaching about human rights principles and violations all over the world. For example, one called “Human Rights Education in the School Systems of Europe, Central Asia and North America: A Compendium of Good Practice” lists programs for educating about human rights from throughout North America, Central Asia and Europe. This manual, published as a way to celebrate the results of the so-called decade of human rights (1995-2004), compiles strategies from governments, NGOs, professional bodies, and individual educators to help inform policy makers, administrators, individual educators, and the general public. The forward to the manual affirms the pedagogical imperative as important to the concept of human rights, stating, “the right to education provides an entry point to the enjoyment of all human rights” (7). An entire section, called “Teaching

⁸ The conference proceedings say that surveys were taken before the conference which “revealed considerable inequality between regions and even within regions in the development of human rights teaching and research and in the amount of teaching materials available and accessible” (UNESCO Final Report of conference proceedings). Besides this, it is unclear how the teaching and education was evaluated besides by noting that rights violations persisted and thus, more education was necessary.

⁹ The experts that met included “university teachers, researchers and professionals specializing in the field of human rights, representatives and observers from international governmental and non-governmental organizations concerned with the promotion of human rights, together with observers from Unesco Member States” (UNESCO Final Report of conference proceedings, Introduction).

and Learning: Tools for the Classroom,” lists different external and NGO organizations promoting education of human rights at all levels ranging from downloadable posters of the UDHR to learning about and promoting free speech. The pedagogy designed for secondary and higher education generally utilizes some sort of example or story of human rights violations to generate empathy and/or identification with those who cannot claim rights or who have had his/her rights violated.¹⁰ Almost all of the exercises and methods have some sort of action component which overwhelmingly designates that further consciousness-raising, in addition to raising money, are the kinds of actions appropriate within the normative culture of rights work.¹¹

Listed in this compendium is the “ABC: Teaching Human Rights,” which is another manual intended to be used as a practical guide to teaching about human rights and human rights issues. Although this manual is designed for use in primary and secondary school, it is exemplary of the kinds of methods that are generated by and that define the normative culture surrounding the UDHR and which are reflected in many of the other “best practices” listed. The manual is designed to be used when teaching about

¹⁰ For example, one “best practice” for learning about rights for refugees and asylum seekers asks students to imagine that they are part of a family group who can only bring three things with them when they flee a conflict and enter a refugee camp and later a relocation country (The Advocates for Human Rights “Energy of a Nation: Immigrants in America -Resources for Learning about Immigration”)

¹¹ There are some very interesting projects from non-US locations that do provide very productive methods for action that have had tangible, local results because of their contextual understanding. For example, one project that joined the American Bar Association and the Kosovo Education Center to provide tailored civics and poetry books to Kosovo classrooms to teach students (and teachers) about children’s rights and human rights. The Kosovo Education Center has “credited the introduction of the Rule of Law Initiative funded books...with spearheading the creation of a Kosovo-wide advisors network for child rights...school children who were surveyed in Gjakova stated that these books have moved their school to set up a children’s rights committee which has helped them “to better identify school problems and responsibilities and has taught them the importance of their role in defending children’s rights” (“ABA Rule of Law Initiative Civics Books Have Major Impact in Kosovo Classrooms”).

human rights in any curriculum level, and is representative of the kinds of discourses surrounding the understanding of good practices for teaching human rights and which reflect a certain kind of relationship between the individual (particularly in the economic North) and rights discourse. The manual defines two pedagogical strategies employed when teaching human rights courses in the US, both with similar goals of fostering compassion and raising consciousness, but with opposing approaches. The first approach has a local focus that allows students to research issues in their own community and act accordingly in ways that might contribute to alleviating those particular domestic problems. In this model, the goal is to foster individual compassion and empathy for others locally that can then be, theoretically, transferred to an international context.¹² Next, students are encouraged to examine their own communities—for example their school—for different types of discrimination and then to transfer that awareness and compassion outside of their local communities by shifting their humanitarian attentions abroad. According to the OHCHR, the goal of this approach to human rights education is for students to “learn to evaluate real-life experience in human rights terms, starting with their own behavior and the immediate community in which they live...and then to take active responsibility for improving their community” (68). On a theoretical level, this particular pedagogical strategy is similar to the traditional notion of stoic cosmopolitanism that Martha Nussbaum articulates in which local affiliations are linked

¹² For example students are encouraged to understand others based on one’s own experience: “think of a time when they felt hurt because someone did not respect them. How did disrespect feel?” (OCHCR “ABC” 30).

through reason first to the family, then the local community, and finally humanity as a whole in a series of expanding concentric circles.

The second pedagogical model outlined by the OHCHR also has an individual focus, but asks students to consider their local situation through an examination of international or global human rights abuses. This approach generally seeks a more comprehensive understanding of the historical contexts in which violations occur, combining a geography lesson with a lesson in the workings of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Texts are taught thematically or geographically, and students are asked to generate compassion for people very different from themselves. This compassion is then extended to those in the students' local communities when students are asked "to consider how they might best use what they have learned to promote and protect human rights in their own communities" (OHCHR 65). On a theoretical level, this pedagogical strategy is similar to what Elaine Scarry calls "generous imaginings." This kind of imagining can, according to Scarry, supplement a policy approach to rights with a bottom up "generous" or "spontaneous" daily imagining of others (which requires a radical unimagining of the depth of ourselves). In both approaches, students are encouraged to act. Whether it is to alleviate similar problems in their local situation, or continue to spread awareness of these issues to other communities, the goal is generally to raise awareness through individual empathy and/or identification which then leads to the responsibility of action, with action defined as contributing time or money to further consciousness-raising or direct humanitarian intervention. While these pedagogical tactics are intended as strategies for elementary and secondary school educators, they are

relevant for post-secondary education because many of the educational projects used at the college level still follow these strategies.

This normative agenda and methodology surrounding human rights pedagogy of consciousness raising that leads to action is also reflected in the industry of educational bodies and groups at the post-secondary level devoted to teaching about human rights and for humanitarian ends. Today one can browse university websites in the US and find student groups dedicated to raising consciousness about international human rights issues such as the genocide in Darfur (STAND), displaced children in Uganda (Invisible Children United), ending slavery throughout the world (Free The Slaves) and more local rights issues such as holding US Presidents accountable for crimes against humanity (World Can't Wait). This selection of student groups popular on college campuses in North America speaks to the kind of normative culture that determines what counts as an issue to take a stand against and what does not. For example, a comparison of a selection of student groups from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) and a selection of student groups from American University of Beirut (AUB) reveals that the list is decidedly different. UNCG's human rights focused groups include Invisible Children United, STAND, UNICEF, and Students Helping Honduras while AUB's human rights focused groups include Students of Action, the Human Rights & Peace Club, the Democracy and Citizenship Club, the Lebanese Red Cross Club, the UNESCO Club, the Women's Rights Club, and the Student Activism Club. The most striking difference is that the UNCG student groups focus on issues that are generally non-local, and the AUB student groups focus on issues that are mostly local. While this is not

necessarily surprising for AUB given Lebanon's recent history of civil war and, while I do not mean to be reductive and suggest that the student body at UNCG is not involved in social justice in the immediate community of Greensboro, it is interesting to note that in comparison to Greensboro the human rights focused groups in Beirut have a very local human rights agenda that is not quite so apparent in Greensboro.¹³ This disparity speaks to the ways in which the normative forces of the documents get translated differently across diverse locations. While many colleges and universities have also developed their own Human Rights projects and networks,¹⁴ and while there are also national initiatives spearheaded by non-profit organizations (NGOs) such as Amnesty International,¹⁵ this chapter is interested in external projects which have a specific focus on human rights educational curricula such as the Human Rights Video Project,¹⁶ and Facing History and

¹³ There are many UNCG groups that are devoted to promoting the local community through Greek organizations and to promoting political and civil rights through service, but those that have an explicit human rights agenda and consider themselves doing human rights work at UNCG generally focus on non-local humanitarian issues.

¹⁴ For example, see Thomas Keenan's Human Rights Project at Bard College, The Lowenstein Project in the Orville H. Schell, Jr. Center for International Human Rights at Yale, UCLA Sanela Diana Jenkins Human Rights Project and the University of North Carolina's own Human Rights Research Network to name only a very few.

¹⁵ Another example of an NGO that fosters education about human rights is the Human Rights Education Associates (HREA), an organization which provides support, training and assistance to human rights educational initiatives. See <http://www.hrea.org>.

¹⁶ Funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Ford Foundation, the Human Rights Video Project was developed through a partnership between the National Video and the American Library Association and is an initiative that brings films and suggestions for discussion to local libraries across the country. Its mission is to "increase the public's awareness of human rights issues through the medium of documentary films" (<http://www.humanrightsproject.org/>).

Ourselves.¹⁷ *Speak Truth to Power* is one such external, transnational, and educational project.

As I stated at the outset of this chapter, *Speak Truth to Power* is a multidisciplinary, transnational, and multimedia pedagogical project that uses testimony by human rights defenders from all over the world translated into performance, photography, and an educational curriculum in an attempt to raise students' awareness of international human rights violations and to inspire activism. I examine *Speak Truth to Power* in particular as representative of the proliferation of human rights educational projects because of its diverse approach that reflects the ways in which the normative discourse gets performed across different media. *Speak Truth to Power* comprises the following elements: a coffee table book, a photography exhibit, a play, a film and a website with extensive educational tools. The book, published in 2000 by Kerry Kennedy Cuomo, features the testimony of fifty-one (including Cuomo) human rights activists, defenders and victims accompanied by their photographic portraits taken by Pulitzer prize-winner photojournalist Eddie Addams.¹⁸ The photographs also travel throughout the world as an autonomous exhibit. The book features well known human rights

¹⁷ Facing History and Ourselves is an interesting organization which has offices all over the US and relationships with schools and organizations in Northern Ireland, Israel, Rwanda, South Africa and China. The program "combats racism, anti-Semitism, and prejudice and nurtures democracy through education programs worldwide" and provides complete curriculum guides and teaching awards for those who make creative use of the curriculum as well as seminars, workshops, events, conferences, benefits, and more (<http://www.facinghistory.org/>).

¹⁸ The late Eddie Addams was a war photojournalist well known for his coverage of the Vietnam War exposing and documenting human rights violations. One of his most well known images is the controversial 1968 photograph of General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan executing Viet Cong prisoner Nguyễn Văn Lém in Saigon. The photograph is oft referenced in the discussion over the role of war photography and witness (see Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*).

defenders such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama and Elie Wiesel, but it also includes less well known defenders and activists including Kailash Satyarthi, “India’s lodestar for the abolition of child labor” (Cuomo *Speak Truth* 213); Fauziya Kassindja, a woman from Togo who escaped female genital mutilation; and Dianna Ortiz, an American nun who was abducted, raped and tortured while doing literacy work in Guatemala. One of the most powerful images and testimonies includes a Sudanese rights activist and defender working for women’s rights in the Sudan who cannot be named. His/her striking portrait depicts him/her covered entirely in black and with a noose around his/her neck. The image serves as the cover for the book and represents all the others who cannot speak for fear of reprisal. The book embraces the founding principles of the UDHR and is dedicated to “all the unsung who show us not how to be saints, but how to be fully human.” The human rights issues represented range from “freedom of expression to the rule of law, from environmental defense to eradicating bonded labor, from access to capital to the right to due process, from women's rights to religious liberty” (*Speak Truth to Power* book 6). The defenders are defined nationally and likened to the “Martin Luther Kings of their countries” (6). While the goal of the book is less to feature the Declaration of Human Rights and more to feature extraordinary courage in the face of adversity, it promotes the same normative culture and principles of rights as do many of the other educational projects.¹⁹

¹⁹ The book has also been translated into 6 languages and the project boasts international partnerships between donors, governments and US teachers’ unions. For example, in Italy “the 12-week course has been taught to over 250,000 students. The human rights education curriculum is also being taught in South Africa and Romania” (*Speak Truth* web).

It is clear that student-run groups and educational projects such as *Speak Truth to Power* are an extremely important addition to college campuses and curriculum. Whether sanctioned by the UN, developed by NGOs, or as external projects, projects designed to educate about human rights generally work towards the same ends of raising awareness and inspiring activism (as articulated in the OHCHR's official manuals), generating a student body conscious of human rights violations, and ostensibly providing students with tools to contribute to the alleviation of suffering including consciousness raising, donating, fundraising, volunteering, and influencing policy. However, the pedagogical strategies surrounding these projects as outlined above and as further explained below, particularly in North America, often lack the theoretical depth to prepare students to engage in the issues critically and to interrogate their responsibility toward action. Simply learning that such violations occur throughout the world and at home and encouraging students to participate in humanitarian action, while necessary and important work, does not often prompt students to understand their own implication in the geo-political power structures that might contribute to the perpetuation of rights abuse.

A brief example of the kind of action that can stem from not addressing the paradoxes embedded in the normative culture of rights is the attempt in 2007 of a French humanitarian organization to evacuate out of Chad and place under foster care with French families ten thousand orphans from Darfur (BBC News).²⁰ The charity, Zoe's

²⁰ Traditionally there has been a difference between the histories of humanitarianism and human rights work. Humanitarianism generally has a practical, philanthropic agenda whereas human rights work has more of a focus on the principles of human rights such as liberty, equality, and dignity. This means that, for example, in the wake of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice at the NYU School of Law and other human rights bodies had to issue a call for "Human Rights-Based

Ark, was charged with human trafficking for abducting one hundred and three children with allegations that the children they attempted to airlift out were from Chad and had families. According to the children's relatives, some were “lured from their homes with sweets” and were promised to return in a week after schooling (Hancock). The group's blatant disregard for international law and human dignity, and their condescending attitude towards the autonomy of these children and their families exposes gross assumptions about whose responsibility it is to right wrongs and reflects the dangers of a culture of personal action and humanitarian work without adequate context, self-reflexivity and attention to the foundations of human rights.²¹ Therefore, a critical approach to the pedagogy and pedagogical impulse of human rights work is necessary to cultivate an engagement that is rhetorical and dialectic so as to move beyond action that might perpetuate an unequal global structure of rights.

The members of the 1982 Strasbourg conference anticipated this need for structural engagement with the normative culture of rights as well as the need for interdisciplinary education and engagement throughout the humanities rather than only in policy and law. Philip Alston notes that educators of human rights will need to think about “the impact of existing international structures and policies on respect for human rights” (Alston 19). Alston suggests that it is not useful to interrogate isolated incidents of human rights abuses as it represents them as occurring in a vacuum rather than as a result of much larger, more pervasive global political, economic, and social structural

Approach to Humanitarian Assistance for Haiti" reminding humanitarian organizations, in their haste, to respect the foundational principles of the UDHR.

²¹ Also see “Kony 2012” and the shoe brand *Toms* “One for one” advertising campaign.

imbalances. Ultimately, he calls for academia to perform a structural interrogation of human rights discourse so as to expose what he calls the “flimsy facades” (22) of rights. George Andreopoulos also calls for a more structural approach to the challenges and further paradoxes that the post-cold-war era of rights posed to policy and the education of human rights. He argues that post-cold-war human rights pedagogy has to do the following:

Integrate *cognitive* (growing awareness and understanding of the complexities of weak states/fractured societies), *attitudinal* (the development of a greater sensitivity to the linkages between the fate of these weak entities and the welfare of the international community), and *empowerment* objectives (enabling members of these entities to define their own individual and collective identities in a new context as a way of meeting their needs and those of their respective communities). (Andreopoulos 15)

In other words, rather than just fostering identification and consciousness raising in the education of human rights, there is a need for a broader approach to transnational and subnational issues of human rights violations that address awareness on a structural level as well as on an affective level. I take up this call for further interrogation of the pedagogical nature of the UDHR and surrounding instruments by analyzing the normative discourses constructed by the external pedagogical project of *Speak Truth to Power*.

If, according to Domna Stanton, part of the role of the humanities is to interrogate the discourse of human rights without foreclosing upon or giving up on its concepts (1523), then this constructive criticism and interrogation must also extend to the very pedagogical practices and normative discourses surrounding the education of human

rights employed by teachers and practitioners of human rights. External projects such as *Speak Truth to Power*, however, provide a productive site through which to explore this pedagogical impulse and the normative culture it constructs since, as an external project, it has emerged out of that normative discourse but also can provide an interesting reflexivity through which to explore the tension between the humanities mission to interrogate and a normative culture of rights which privileges action. The rhetorical lens I bring to this critique of human rights discourse enables a deeper and more complex understanding of the interaction between how rights discourse conceives of the relationship between critique and action.²²

Normative Discourse and the Structure of Rights

As a whole, *Speak Truth to Power* hopes to raise awareness and to inspire: “these voices are, most of all, a call to action...We must bring the international spotlight to violations and broaden the community of those who know and care about the individuals portrayed...The more voices are raised in protest, the greater the likelihood of change” (Cuomo *Educational Package* 3). The project claims to address several questions, including, “why do people who face imprisonment, torture, and death, continue to pursue their work when the chance of success is so remote and the personal consequences are so grave?...Where do they derive their strength and inspiration? How do they measure success?” (Cuomo *Educational and Advocacy Packet* 2). This agenda is most clearly seen

²² This relationship is examined more closely in Chapter IV.

in the educational component of the project which encourages students to participate in local and international activism related to the issues profiled (including, genocide, labor rights, and reconciliation to name a select few). Recently, however, the educational component has expanded its curriculum to a website where entire lesson plans, complete with pedagogical techniques, goals, readings, activities, assignments and essay contests, can be downloaded and used without charge. Despite the clear problems that *Speak Truth to Power* presents (which I explore below), I continue to be drawn to this project in particular as representative of the larger normative culture for two reasons: the multiple versions of the project and the multiple forms it takes. Because the project started as one thing (the book and photographs) and morphed into another (the play by Ariel Dorfman, in conjunction with an educational package by Amnesty International) and yet another (the educational curriculum in conjunction with the NYSUT in 2010), it provides a unique location to consider how a project with the same goals looks different over ten years and thus how normative discourse comes to be constructed and performed. In other words, *Speak Truth to Power* is a dynamic pedagogical project which continues to evolve and generate new curricula reflecting the growth of the larger normative culture. Additionally, the play in conjunction with the curriculum of *Speak Truth to Power* provides a location for examining the ways in which the normative discourses of the UDHR are both performed and produced in various locations and iterations.²³ In

²³ The play has been performed in “Geneva, Madrid, Barcelona, Helsinki, Rome, Milan, Seoul, Florence, Mantua, Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Sydney.” When the play was performed in Doha, Qatar by famous actors and singers of the Arab world it was broadcast on Al Jazeera television (*Speak Truth web*). It has been performed by “prisoners (in a major theatre in Bucharest, after rehearsals in the penitentiary).

considering the literal and theoretical connotations of the concepts of pedagogy and performativity, the play provides a space through which to examine the ways in which this normative discourse is represented as opening the discourse to an interrogation of its foundations, and the pedagogy provides a space through which to examine the most direct iteration of the pedagogical imperative that underwrites and reflects that normative discourse.

The pedagogical approaches of *Speak Truth to Power* are predicated on bringing the global to the local and finding similarities across difference as outlined in the OHCHR pedagogy manuals. Although it was originally promoted in conjunction with Amnesty International in the form of an *Educational and Advocacy Package* for all grade levels, the pedagogical component of *Speak Truth to Power* is now located on a website, used in partnership with the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) at the secondary school level, and continues to add to the list of issues and defenders profiled in Cuomo's original project (civil rights and bullying are the latest editions to the list of rights violations). The curriculum available on the website is representative of many of the issues that can emerge in a normative culture of rights. What seems to be missing at the heart of the educational project are the rhetorical questions that it implicitly produces: What is the truth that the defenders and the pedagogical mission are attempting to speak, who is speaking, and to what power? More importantly, how are students being taught to engage in this process of speaking truth to power?

Future productions are planned for Paris, Istanbul, Zimbabwe, Cambodia, Hong Kong and Mexico" (*Speak Truth web*).

For example, the curriculum uses the profile of Marina Pisklakova, a Russian women's rights activist, to introduce students to the issues of domestic violence and gender-based violence. Each human rights issue is linked to a specific article in the UDHR as a way to learn about both the declaration as well as about the issues it intends to prevent. Designed as one lesson taking eighty minutes, the lesson on Pisklakova and domestic violence is linked to Article Three of the UDHR on the right to life, liberty and personal security, and to Article Five on freedom from torture and degrading treatment. After learning about Pisklakova's work in starting the first domestic violence hotline in Russia, students are encouraged to turn their gaze to their own communities' options for women and victims of domestic abuse by taking action like setting up an educational table in a neighborhood and/or attending or setting up a self-defense class.

My concerns with this particular lesson plan are representative of the curriculum as a whole. Although individual students and teachers will respond to and adapt these lesson plans according to their own needs and in ways that cannot be predicted, the curriculum as described not only presents each issue as an isolated moment of rights violation with one "defender" who has had an experience of speaking out to advocate for change, but also does not leave time or space for a deeper discussion of contextual causes or responses, which is particularly troublesome regarding women's rights.²⁴ Encouraging students to participate in self defense is another short-sighted and troubling outcome for a lesson on gendered rights for several reasons, not the least of which are the dangerous

²⁴ For example, see Charlotte Bunch's "Women's Rights as Human Rights: Toward a Re-Vision of Human Rights" and "Transforming Human Rights from a Feminist Perspective", and Donna Sullivan's "The *Public/Private* Distinction in International Human Rights Law."

implications of victimhood and blame perpetuated by the suggestion of self-defense classes as a sufficient solution to domestic abuse. The most recent addition to the website curriculum is a profile and lesson surrounding the prevention of bullying. This lesson is linked to no fewer than five Articles in the UDHR including ones on freedom from discrimination, the right to adequate standard of living and the right to an education. When compared to the lesson on violence against women, which can be caused by all of the same issues that contribute to bullying (and more), the complexity and contextuality of the lesson on gendered domestic abuse is sorely lacking. Additionally, by addressing each issue individually in relation to isolated articles of the UDHR, the curriculum ignores the other important human rights conventions and instruments that encourage a deeper interrogation of the issues, for example the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In so doing, this curriculum privileges the first generation rights of the individual articulated in the UDHR. Furthermore, isolating separate articles based upon individual violations undermines the indivisibility of rights as a whole, even within the UDHR.

In another example of the problematic pedagogical impulse of this particular project, in order to learn about genocide, students are directed to learn about Elie Wiesel and the Holocaust. Students are encouraged to read a short biography and Wiesel's testimony, watch short films depicting Oprah's interview with Wiesel at Auschwitz, and view a film on the U.S. Holocaust museum in D.C. The guiding questions for the lesson are "How can we be more like Elie Wiesel today? What can this class do to remember the Holocaust and be a defender against genocide?" The objectives for the lesson are "Know

who Elie Wiesel is and why he is a human rights defender. Learn how his example provides the inspiration for students to stand up to genocide today.”²⁵ In the “what can this class do?” section, students are encouraged to create a “living” Holocaust museum of posters, participate in STAND and/or raise money through spaghetti dinners and a battle of the bands. Like Pisklakova, Wiesel is the only defender depicted in relation to genocide, and the Holocaust is foregrounded as the only genocide. While this particular lesson does encourage students to consider other historical moments of genocide later, students are taught only to understand the issue in historical terms as an isolated event. This particular approach lacks any sort of contextual and historical information about genocide and conceptual issues surrounding the representation of human rights atrocities.²⁶

It is important to note that the pedagogical component of *Speak Truth to Power* in and of itself is not problematic, but the ways in which the lessons have the potential to flatten the complexity of the issues constructs a normative discourse that does not do justice to the UDHR's intended indivisibility nor the ways in which violations are deeply embedded in larger forces of global capital and other operations of power. In fact, many of the defenders profiled on the website could encourage a very productive conversation about the indivisibility of rights in response to the interconnectedness of rights abuse since many of their testimonies depict multiple sites of violation under one issue. Thus,

²⁵ The full list of issues profiled is as follows: non-violent activism, children’s rights, genocide, domestic violence, free expression and religion, slavery/trafficking, forced labor, free expression, police brutality, political freedom, health care and potable water, combating poverty, reconciliation, political participation, labor rights, bullying, environment, and child labor.

²⁶ For example, see Theodor Adorno and Elaine Scarry.

rather than separating each issue and defender into a lesson on separate articles of the UDHR, a more interesting way of using the website's teaching materials could be to explore the whole of the UDHR through each and then consider separate conventions in relation to the different people/issues profiled. As Henry Giroux argues, the pedagogical carries with it the potential for contextual work already:

As a performative practice, the pedagogical opens up a narrative space that affirms the contextual and the specific while simultaneously recognizing the ways in which such spaces are shot through with issues of power. Central to this referencing of the ethical and political is a pedagogical practice that refuses closure, insists on combining theoretical rigor and social relevance, and embraces commitment as a point of temporary attachment in order to take a position without standing still. (Giroux 145)

Also important to note on the website is the glaring absence of human rights issues and violations that do not have a representative person to reflect his/her singular action in defense of the violation, or that do not have a straightforward solution. For example, there are defenders from Burma, China, India and several from the US, Eastern Europe, and Africa representing issues ranging from bullying to reconciliation, from the environment to child labor, and from slavery/trafficking to civil rights. However, rights defenders and advocates from the Middle East (including Palestine) are sorely underrepresented in the teaching curriculum as well as are issues such as the right to asylum or LGBT rights. Despite the international goals of the original project, the educational component is clearly designed for an American audience (all the way down to the typo which lists "bullying" twice on the list of rights issues). In other words, if *Speak Truth to Power* is representative of other educational projects, which I believe it is,

certain rights related issues make it in the normative discourse of these global educational projects and others do not.

Invariably, the end result of learning about these issues is either further consciousness raising or charitable or humanitarian work. In this way, the pedagogical agenda of *Speak Truth to Power* mostly employs the tactic of exposure without necessarily insisting on a structural or contextual interrogation of each issue. This lack of structural interrogation, context and/or depth in fulfilling the pedagogical impulse of the UDHR leads to a normative culture then that encourages action without critical interrogation, much like the action take by Zoe's Ark. Each section of the curriculum is designed to educate students about individual issues, and by raising consciousness the project hopes to teach students to feel a sense of responsibility to act. Gayatri Spivak shows how the responsibility to act is born out of the discourse itself and is reflective of and constructs a structure of rights with an embedded power dynamic. She claims that linguistically there cannot be rights without wrongs, and, conversely, wrongs are predicated upon rights. Reflected in the normative culture, this means with rights comes the responsibility to right wrongs. We can see this directly represented in almost all of the human rights based projects listed above and most clearly in *Speak Truth to Power* which has as the goal of each lesson a responsibility toward action. Invariably, that action almost always looks like raising consciousness or raising money. However, this structure of responsibility reinforces a troubling binary of a giver and a receiver of rights that denies agency for those who suffer human rights abuses and can create a mutually dependent relationship that solidifies a binary of powerless people who rely on the

powerful for their rights. Makau Mutua articulates a similar structure between the African continent and the west respectively, which are bound up in what he calls a Savage-Victim-Savior metaphor. Mutua argues that this “grand narrative of human rights contains a subject which depicts an epochal contest pitting savages, on the one hand, against victims and saviors, on the other” (10). This dynamic in turn leads to human rights being used as an alibi for further political, economic and military intervention (Spivak 524). In other words, rights require a response but *how* one responds—particularly those with rights and with privilege—is key, thus requiring a deeper interrogation of the rhetorical negotiation necessary in the analyses of normative rights discourse and the responses it generates.

Ariel Dorfman’s play *Speak Truth to Power: Voices From Beyond the Dark* is included on the *Speak Truth to Power* website hosted by NYSUT and is meant to be studied and performed in schools. When considered alongside the teaching objectives of the project, the play offers a location through which to draw attention to and reconsider this structure of rights. The play also offers a site that is embedded in and reflective of the normative culture but which is able to provide a critical literary distance through which to speak back to the discourse out of which it emerges. Rather than only promoting action as a means to an end, in his play Ariel Dorfman intervenes in the rhetorical questions asked above: who is speaking, how and to what power?

Voices From Beyond the Dark has nine speaking parts. Eight parts are for students to play the human rights defenders and one part is for a student to play “The Man,” a character that represents consolidated oppression. Dorfman says about this character,

“The Man starts out as the voice of the state, the repressive authority. He's an evangelist of evils, the voice of the defenders' adversary.” (Dorfman interviewed by Tinari).

Dorfman suggests in his original stage notes that multiple people can play each defender part but only one male student must play The Man. The stage notes also call for the names and/or images of the defenders to be displayed behind the actors on stage.

Through the figure of The Man, the play draws attention to the structure of rights. For example, the stage notes to the play suggest that the eight defenders stand grouped four on each side around The Man in the center. Behind the actors Dorfman suggests there is a screen upon which the names and possibly images of the real defenders can be projected or written. In the beginning, it is The Man who names each defender, both by speaking his/her name and by gesturing to the place that writes the defenders name and/or image (another option is for The Man to actually write the defender's name on a chalk board as he speaks it):

MAN

Guillaume Ngefa Atondoko

THE MAN MAKES A GESTURE AND THE NAME GUILLAUME NGEFA ATONDOKO APPEARS ON A SCREEN BEHIND THE ACTORS.

Yes. He befriended pygmies as a child. Yes. Of course.

FIFTH VOICE (MALE) *(from the darkness)*

For a month, I was sentenced to death and I had great fear.

LIGHTS RISE ON THE FIFTH VOICE. THE MAN MAKES A GESTURE AND THE NAME WEI JINGSHENG APPEARS ON THE SCREEN

In this way, the figure of The Man represents the ways in which the state interpellates the subject; it is only through The Man's gestures of naming that these subjects are intelligible to the audience. This gesture also suggests that in order for these defenders to

speak their truth to power it has to be in The Man's language and on his terms. However, by bringing the testimony of real people into the world of the play, Dorfman challenges the power of the fictional figure, The Man. By rhetorically drawing attention to the ways in which The Man symbolically provides the platform through which these defenders can speak, Dorfman demonstrates how rights are embedded in this structure of power.

Additionally, literally staging this dialogue as a play (as opposed to a narrative or poem) meta-textually draws attention to the figurative platform that is necessary for these defenders to speak their truths to a wide audience, which in this project is manifest in the connections through Kerry Kennedy Cuomo and the funding from the Robert F. Kennedy Foundation. This structure of rights is even more present in the premier of the play (depicted in the film) as the host of the evening is President Bill Clinton. By locating the premier in DC and flying as many rights defenders as possible there, it further suggests that these voices speaking out against rights violations can only be heard through the language of English and through the discourse of the global North (specifically the U.S.).

By the end of the play, however, there is a transfer of power. The rights defenders eventually begin naming themselves and at the very end the stage directions call for the lights to rise on the eight defenders and dim on The Man. Chillingly, this is just after The Man's last monologue which ends with "I also know how to wait. My turn always comes. I also know what it is to wait in the dark," suggesting that the work of these rights defenders (and by association the audience members) is not finished. Dorfman suggests in his stage notes about the human rights victims profiled: "And then something happened. Something extraordinary. They found a way of speaking out...They

understood that if they witnessed this suffering inflicted on themselves or on others, and did nothing, they were, in some twisted way, being turned into accomplices”

(*Educational and Advocacy Packet 4*). It is this sense of responsibility, this sense of personal accountability pervasive throughout the entire project of *Speak Truth to Power* that recalls Said’s famous call to action for the public intellectual to continue to work against hegemony, to “represent all those peoples and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug” (Said 11). In this way, the play is still calling for action like the teaching component, but it is action that moves beyond consciousness raising and humanitarian interventionism that perpetuates the structure of rights. Dorfman says in his stage notes that the kind of work needed to promote human rights and to alleviate suffering is not the kind that pays “lip service to human rights...and which does not deliver when it comes down to the wire, when we need acts rather than words”

(*Educational and Advocacy Package 60* my emphasis). Despite the fact that he clearly wants action and not just critique or consciousness raising, by drawing attention to the structures of power represented by The Man, Dorfman is in line with Spivak’s notion of pedagogy as moving beyond that which seeks only to expose rather than to question who is “poised to right wrongs” (Spivak 526). In other words, despite the obvious challenges of moving students to compassion and thus responsibility to action, pedagogy of human rights literature ideally must push even further to question the type of action taken in relation to the structure of rights. In Spivak’s language:

All that seems possible to surmise is that the redressing work of Human Rights must be supplemented by an education that can continue to make unstable the presupposition that the reasonable righting of wrongs is inevitably the manifest

destiny of groups—unevenly class-divided, embracing North and South—that remain poised to right them (530).

Instead, pedagogy and education must move toward a self-consciously critical approach that destabilizes the positions of those who believe it is their responsibility to give rights without questioning why they can claim rights and others cannot (Spivak 530). Through the character of The Man, Dorfman encourages the audience to ask the rhetorical questions of who is speaking, how, and to what power, which draw attention to the speech that is permissible and the speech that is structurally impermissible because of the global dynamics of legibility that render the subaltern unable to speak.

In the latest version of the play on the NYSUT website, the stage notes call for two people to play “The Man”, one man and one woman. In Dorfman's stage notes from the initial version he specifies that the character should be played by only one male person such that The Man can embody oppression that is “more perverse and pervasive and closer to home both to those who stage this and those who watch it” (*Educational Package* 60). This homogenization of power through the figure of The Man provides a useful symbolic location to which the characters can speak back, but it also refigures the global dynamics of power operating both within and against human rights discourse from more pervasive, mutable dynamic, structural (in one word: hegemonic) inequalities to a unified power that is easier to name and thus misleadingly easier to resist. Additionally, in the new stage notes, The Man characters are supposed to talk and dress differently than the defenders and should move about the stage at will “whispering, probing, threatening, determined to undermine the message from the heroes and heroines. This differentiation

is crucial to the drama of the play.” By flattening the complexity of the ways discourses of power and hegemony operate and making them symbolically more obvious and set apart from the defenders, the play suggests that the power to which one can speak truth is not only identifiable, but is able to be resisted and potentially overthrown, a myth that deserves further interrogation.²⁷ Further stage notes suggest that The Man(s) can be “shown directing cameras—if there are cameras—moving people, affixing photos.” This version of The Man as behind the camera, however, is an interesting development and points to the issues of representation, spectatorship, and witnessing that lie beneath the larger impulse to action that the project is predicated upon. This aspect of the play is particularly productive in relation to the impulse toward action that the rest of the project perpetuates because it draws attention to what action looks like and the power dynamics behind the scenes, so to speak.

Spectatorship vs. Witnessing

This chapter began with an anecdote of my experiences teaching one particular aspect of *Speak Truth to Power*, the film. I'd like to return to my students' experiences after viewing the film as a way to consider how this project constructs its audience and the role of the witness in normative rights discourse. As another iteration of the project separate from the play and the pedagogy but related to both, the film is also a fruitful site

²⁷ This is not to discount the important work that the defenders do in resisting and overthrowing that which perpetuates rights violations—in fact, as the project shows, their action was highly effective—it is, however, to draw attention to the problematics of conceiving of power outside of a Foucauldian notion of its discursive operations.

through which to explore *Speak Truth to Power's* constructions and reflections of the normative discourse stemming from the pedagogical imperative of the UDHR. Although the film is based on the play, by interspersing Dorfman's performance with further information intended to raise consciousness, the film functions as more overtly pedagogical than does the play. Thus I examine my student's reactions as part of the pedagogical impulse of the project out of which the play emerges and to which it responds.

In addition to my students' reaction of disbelief without the subsequent responsibility toward action that consciousness raising relies upon, they also felt detached relief saying things like, "thank goodness we don't have to deal with those issues here!" What my students were showing me in their discussion of the project was its potential to allow for a position of spectatorship and consumption of these issues rather than a position of witness. If witnessing has to do with a "deliberate ethical consciousness" that "involves wanting to change the kind of world where injustice, of whatever kind is common" (Kaplan 122), it suggests an engagement with the structural imbalances that caused the trauma in the first place. Most importantly, "'witnessing' prompt[s] an ethical response that will perhaps *transform the way someone views the world, or thinks about justice*" (Kaplan 123, emphasis mine). By only viewing the *Speak Truth to Power* documentary, without sufficient scaffolding and/or discussion, my students were unable to perform what Dori Laub describes as third level witnessing, which is to witness the process of witnessing, and instead expressed the reactions of what Kimberly Nance calls defensive reading which can lead to the opposite of responsibility or compassion.

Nance describes defensive reading as an approach in which the reader keeps the sufferer at a distance in order to preserve their ability for inaction: “suffering can also be held at a cool remove by readings that posit an incommensurable difference between sufferer and reader: *I can’t even imagine what that would be like*” (165 emphasis original). The eerie echoes of my student's reactions to the film with Nance's “diagnosis” only continued to get more precise: “reading about the suffering of others may lead readers only so far as passive gratitude, evident in comments such as *reading this book made me realize how lucky I am to live where I do. It must be terrible to be born in such a place*. In such readings the dynamics of pain and privilege are reduced to the luck of the cosmic draw” (164, emphasis original). In fact, not only did my students essentially say that, but they also believed that the issues profiled had been resolved, a direct effect of the ways in which the personal testimonies were displayed in the film: “epideictic readings allow readers to look on and cheer from a distance because victims have finally *found their voice* or are *talking back to power*” (Nance 165, emphasis original). After screening the film and viewing students’ responses, I faced difficult pedagogical questions: Where was the self-reflexivity on the part of my students? Where was the decentering of privilege that leads to a critical awareness of the paradoxes and structures of rights? Nance might as well have been writing about my class since my students were overwhelmingly responding to the film defensively.

Defensive reading when it comes to human rights literature can be doubly troublesome. First, defensive reading can prevent an empathetic engagement with the issues at hand because, as Nance explains,

to avoid becoming overwhelmed by demands for help, most people will engage in action to restore justice only when a number of specific and exigent criteria are met. If those requirements for action are not met, most readers of human rights literature will seek to restore justice not by changing the world but instead by changing their minds—redefining the situation, sufferer, suffering, and/or themselves so as to minimize any potential sense of obligation. (Nance 163)

Second, even if students are able to empathize with the defenders, and, if we take as a given that to be compelled to action one must be moved by empathy for those in need,²⁸ then this mode of defensive reading is problematic in and of itself because students remain in an affective space that prevents action. Therefore, just exposing students to issues of human rights does not guarantee students' impulse to act, in fact, it can have the exact opposite effect, rendering students helpless in the face of injustice and “even *less* likely to intervene in a given situation than they would have been had they not read those texts at all” (Nance 163). Either students refuse empathy through their natural defenses, or they have the potential to over-identify which either paralyzes them or ceases to account for a critical distance necessary for ethical witnessing and action that disrupts the structure of rights. Nance's findings are an important reminder that texts do not intrinsically do human rights work but it is the pedagogical approaches and interventions that produce more productive results.

I do not mean to criticize my students. Rather the opposite; in fact they responded correctly and insightfully to the ways that the project compelled and prompted them to react. In so doing, my students show that relying on the pedagogical function of the

²⁸ This relationship between empathy and identification is traced by Lynn Hunt in *Inventing Human Rights* in which she argues that empathy, brought about through the rise of the novel, is important to cultivating the humanitarian impulse that is foundational to human rights.

UDHR and supporting documents alone can mask the paradoxes at the heart of the normative discourse and culture generating a population aware of human rights without necessarily addressing the structural inequities that found human rights abuses.

Pedagogical projects such as *Speak Truth to Power* do not necessarily encourage a comprehension of the complexity of the problems, nor students' own role in the structure of rights, regardless of the student's or audience's location. In fact, the very power dynamics that can lead to human rights violations are often reified in the normative culture surrounding human rights education because these projects do not automatically lead students to analyze their own positions as witnesses and/or spectators.

Following Anne Cubilie, E. Ann Kaplan and others, I define witness as someone who understands the structure of injustice and is thus positioned to act in more ethical and critically informed ways. Witness is generally thought of in human rights criticism as in opposition to spectatorship such that the spectator “gazes passively at violence, whereas the witness undertakes an ethical look that mobilizes the viewer's sense of responsibility” (Kozol 166). This spectatorship not only leads to a lack of action, but it can also lead to, as Susan Sontag argues, an oversaturation of horrific images in the media in a self-perpetuating cycle: “Each situation has to be turned into a spectacle to be real—that is, interesting—to us” (109). Not only was the *Speak Truth to Power* film eliciting a defensive reading from my students, but in so doing, it was rhetorically positioning the students as inactive spectators of both the defender's testimony and the issues being profiled rather than encouraging a “difficult and more active engagement...[that] works to (re)build structures of responsibility and ethics” (Cubilie qtd

in Kozol 166). As my students' initially showed me, the pedagogical aspects of the *Speak Truth to Power* project have the potential to support a stance of spectatorship by encouraging defensive reading. However, I return again to the performative and rhetorical aspect of the project so as to show the multiple and varied ways in which the normative discourse of human rights emerging out of and constructed by the UDHR carries the seeds of its own critique in that it complicates identification and witnessing through the different voices speaking back to The Man and by drawing attention to the role of experience in testimony.

The most prevalent theme running throughout the play is the phrase “I Know.” This concept of knowledge in the face of evil, both for the defenders, the audience and The Man is a notion that underlies much human rights and humanitarian work, the idea being: if we can just get word out, if people can just know what is going on, they will feel responsibility to help and to act. The play begins with the first voice, who we later find out is that of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, introducing this theme of knowing to which The Man responds:

FIRST VOICE (MALE)

Courage begins with one voice.
It's that simple.
I did what I had to do.
Anything else would have tasted like ashes.
That is what we know.

*AS LIGHTS FADE ON THE EIGHT, WE HEAR THE VOICE OF THE MAN
(NINTH ACTOR) IN THE DARKNESS*

MAN (*from the darkness*)

They know. They can't say they don't know. They can't say they don't walk into this with their eyes open.

In addressing “them” The Man refers here both to the defenders as well as the audience members, pointing the finger, from the very beginning at the problems of spectatorship and witness by asking what it means to really *know*. The refrain of knowing continues throughout the play drawing attention to and questioning who has access to different kinds of knowledge and who does not, who is able to be known and who is not, and how far consciousness-raising can go. The multiple voices of the defenders constantly repeating this refrain also resists the notion of the production of knowledge as individual and static, and suggests instead that it can be polyvocal and fluid. At the very end, The Man draws attention to the problems of knowing suggesting that the biggest danger to human rights, following Hannah Arendt's notion of the banality of evil, is from the person who does nothing in the face of injustice: “the forces of indifference and apathy that are the world’s enemies of the struggle for a better world” (Stage notes 60). If rights abuse requires a responsibility to action, then what happens when one knows and does nothing?:

MAN

...All those names. Names we won't forget, not me. Others will forget those names. They're already fading from memory, those names...The lights on them now and the applause about to start and surround and caress them, the lights that begin to dim, go out one by one, as the audience goes home and a faraway face, perhaps one of these very faces, flares up in pain and then dies down, and it's time for dinner and it's time again for sleep, and tomorrow it will be back where it has always been...I also know how to wait. My turn always comes. I also know what it is to wait in the dark. (58)

The sardonic tone and clearly cruel attitude of The Man exemplified in this passage actually serves to create a distance between the audience and the character, going against

what most human rights texts generally attempt. Additionally, the multiple monologues of the defenders similarly resist direct identification. W. B. Worthen argues that “[p]erformance enunciates an interpretive dissonance between the historical and the immediate, between the formal ideology of genre and the differential politics of its concrete implementation (167). The use of performance, then, becomes the means by which the space is elucidated between the here-and-now of the performance and the history of the event (or previous enunciation) that the performance signifies. Thus, *The Man* and the competing voices of the defenders coupled with the refrain of “knowledge” constructs a knowing distance in the audience drawing attention to the issues of speaking truth to power and human rights on a more structural level. According to Kaplan, this distance is necessary in order for ethical witnessing to occur that takes into account the larger structural issues, so as to not just identify on a personal level but to “have a perspective on injustice broader than that of the main protagonist herself” (Kaplan 135). Wendy Hesford argues that in considering human rights texts from a rhetorical perspective, we must be particularly attuned to the failures and ruptures in identification since these failings have the potential to be productive as they “prompt us to question the presuppositions of both legal and dramatic realism that urge rhetors (advocates) to *stand in for* the ‘other’ on the grounds that such identifications risk incorporation of the ‘other’ within the self” (Hesford “Documenting Violations” 107, emphasis original). By drawing attention to these moments of unethical identification, the play constructs the link between the structural imbalances of human rights discourse as well as the ethical ramifications of speaking for the “other.”

This knowing distance and lack of direct identification also encourages the audience to participate in witnessing, the witnessing that the project is doing. Dori Laub calls this the third level of witness. He argues that there is “the level of being a witness to oneself with the experience; the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others; and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself” (Laub 75). According to Kaplan, an important part of Laub’s third level of witnessing is a “deliberate refusal of identification” with individuals so as to respond more to the situation than to the individual suffering the trauma therefore enabling a larger structural or political meaning (Kaplan 124-125). It seems to me that *Speak Truth to Power* can provide the imaginative space necessary to engage critically with these problems because *Speak Truth to Power* does not invite complete identification with the human rights defenders as static subjects and objects of knowledge and instead represents not only the defenders, but also the violations, contexts, and subjects of those violations.

Through the book, the film, and the play, the project of *Speak Truth to Power* asks the audience to participate in the second two of Laub's three levels of witnessing: the reader and audience (and potentially speaker if the student's are performing the play) is able to witness both the testimonies of others as well as their own (and other's) site of witnessing. While Kerry Kennedy Cuomo is technically the interviewer and thus witnesses on the second level, through publishing the testimony she asks a wider audience to take the role of witness. The play provides the space for the third level of witnessing as it is there that the project draws attention to its role as witness to its own witnessing and encourages the audience to do the same. The layers of “knowing”

throughout the play, of drawing attention to what is representable and what is not, and of exposing the seams of who has access to the platforms through which to speak truth to power is part of the self-reflexivity of third level witnessing. By blurring the lines between fiction and non-fiction in using the actual testimony of the defenders but with fictional license in organization and through the figure of The Man, Dorfman exposes the distance between the events of rights abuse and the re-presentation of the violence as a play. In other words, the project establishes a critical distance through non-identification that encourages witness with the multiple voices, the multiple iterations of the defenders, and the multiple levels of performativity. This can lead to an examination of the structure of rights and an articulation of the problematic normative discourse that constructs the normative subject of rights.

Conclusion: Rhetorical Response-ability

Aspirationally, *Speak Truth to Power* utilizes powerful images, testimony and performance to draw attention to human rights abuses so that ideally the audience can feel the same sense of responsibility to act as do the human rights defenders profiled. However, in considering the pedagogical telos of the UDHR and the normative culture of rights which produce projects such as *Speak Truth to Power*, there needs to be a space for critical pedagogy that has as its end result not only humanitarian action and spectatorship but rather (or more accurately: also) witnessing, self-reflexivity and the critical interrogation of the discourse *as action*. In writing about teaching issues of human rights

atrocities, Mathew Newcomb interprets one student's shame that she did not know about the Rwandan genocide while it was occurring as “not about a failure to act, but about a failure to know” (191). This rhetorical perspective on the concept of action within human rights discourse is useful. In almost all—if not all—of the pedagogical projects, curriculums, and manuals, the end result of human rights work is action in the form of humanitarian work. But what if rhetorical stance is a form of ethical action itself? This rhetorical stance does not suggest just consciousness-raising via poster-boards and spaghetti dinners, rather, as Luc Boltanski argues, it can be a renegotiation of the rhetorical act of viewing such that speech becomes an “acceptable response to the shocking spectacle of distant suffering,” but this speech must “at the same time report to the other both what was seen and how this personally affected and involved the spectator” (xv). Let me be clear: this by no means precludes or forecloses the kind of humanitarian work that remains still so necessary; as Spivak puts it, “the enablement must be used, even as the violation is renegotiated” (“Use and Abuse” 133). Nor do I mean to promote consciousness raising as the end result of human rights pedagogy. Rather, this renegotiation of what action looks like within a rhetorical framework enables a different perspective on the notion of witness in terms of pedagogy and the normative discourse arising from the UDHR and being perpetuated and re-constructed through human rights projects and literature. Assuming that a rhetorical stance engages a set of ethics that requires people to consider their own positionality, the audience’s positionality, and the relationship of both to the subject matter and structures of power through which such speech is permissible, then this kind of reframing of action through

rhetoric can open the discourse to a deeper notion of witness that aligns most closely with Kaplan's version of witness as transforming world view and as the ability to witness witnessing.

As Diane Davis argues, rhetoric is fundamentally founded upon the precepts that "communication in the most simplistic sense—as symbolic exchange—...remains utterly dependent upon a sharing and a response-ability that precede it" (2). Keeping this in mind, when I use the project of *Speak Truth to Power* now, it is not so much to teach it as it is to enable students to participate in facets of the project across disciplinary lines by screening the film, reading the testimony, performing the play, and exploring the teaching curriculum. With these several points of engagement—by asking students to *read* (the book), *speak* (the play), and *listen to* (the film and to the play) the defender's testimony—*Speak Truth to Power* has the ability to provide students (and teachers) with the necessary imaginative space through which to engage critically with the discourse of rights. By moving through the different points of rhetorical engagement, students learn to be sensitive to the delicate rhetorical negotiations important in human rights discourse and thus to be sensitive to the performance of a discourse and one's ethical responsibilities from the beginning. Conceptually, a rhetorical lens turns the gaze onto the reader/audience and asks him/her to consider his/her relationship to the text and his/her own role as meaning-makers in that interaction.

CHAPTER III

BEYOND REVOLUTION:

THE FICTION OF INDIVIDUAL SOVEREIGNTY IN *PERSEPOLIS*

Realizing that the individual...is under a responsibility to strive for the promotion and observance of the rights recognized in the present Covenant[.]

-Preamble to The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (resolution 2200 A XXI) December, 1966.

The normative political subject of poststructuralist feminist theory often remains a liberatory one, whose agency is conceptualized on the binary model of subordination and subversion. In doing so, scholarship elides dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance.

-Saba Mahmood, The Politics of Piety (14).



*-Marjane Satrapi, Persepolis II: The Story of a Return.(245/4)
Figure 1 “...And so much for my individual and social liberties...”*

This chapter analyzes the normative culture emerging out of the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and takes up the pedagogical and rhetorical relationship between the *bildungsroman*, the normative human rights subject depicted by and constructed through the ICCPR, and women's rights as human rights in Marjane Satrapi's graphic narrative *The Complete Persepolis*.¹ Much of the discourse surrounding women's rights as human rights occurs within this framework of civil and political rights and, as explained in the Introduction, constructs the normative subject of rights as an individual subject, one whose full development can only be obtained in relation to the community to which "he" belongs in what Joseph Slaughter calls a "mutually enabling fiction" (4). This grounding of women's rights in discourses of individuality often competes with western feminism's other agendas for liberating women from patriarchal discourses. If the normative subject of rights as constructed by the *bildungsroman* is one who is predicated upon enlightenment concepts of individualism that are gendered masculine, then in order to mobilize women's rights under this category of individualism, women's rights as human rights must "suffer" several paradoxes of rights, to borrow Wendy Brown's term. As Brown argues, "although rights may attenuate the subordination and violation to which women are vulnerable in a masculinist social, political, and economic regime, they vanquish neither the regime nor its mechanisms of reproduction" ("Suffering" 422). Satrapi's *The Complete Persepolis*,

¹ Satrapi's *Persepolis* work was originally released in France by L'Association, Paris in 4 volumes, *Persepolis 1* and *2* in 2000 and 2001 respectively and *Persepolis 3* and *4* in 2002 and 2003 respectively. *Persepolis 1* and *2* were translated into English and released by Pantheon as *Persepolis 1: The Story of a Childhood* in 2003. *Persepolis 3* and *4* were translated into English and published by Pantheon as *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* in 2004. The English publications of *Persepolis 1* and *2* were then compiled by Pantheon into *The Complete Persepolis* in 2007, and throughout the chapter I refer to both volumes as simply *Persepolis* unless referencing a specific volume.

an autobiographical, coming-of-age, graphic narrative set in Iran and Austria before and during the Islamic regime, takes up this notion of contextual subject construction within and against the individual notion of the subject in human rights discourse; thus I examine the ways in which this graphic narrative performs and constructs this normative subject of rights yet simultaneously complicates it as well.

More specifically, *Persepolis* emerges out of the normative culture of first generation, civil rights and depicts a subject who is able to claim women's rights as human rights based on a kind of agency that requires a privileged notion of individuality. Additionally, *Persepolis* depicts the ways in which the religious oppression enacted by the Islamic regime is figured in gendered ways; most specifically, Satrapi represents this oppression in the policing of women's bodies.² The main character Marji comes of age navigating the traditional stages of adolescence in Iran and Austria, rebelling against her parents, rebelling against the state, and, finally, aligning herself with the state through marriage.³ This traditional *Bildungsroman* plot is reworked in its depiction of the individual subject of rights as Marji comes to terms with a failed marriage, her privilege, and the inevitability of a life in exile from Iran. A rhetorical reading of the autographic form (that takes into account the relationship between the visual and the textual) can literally *draw* attention to the paradox that claiming women's rights as individual human rights is predicated upon a normative and essentialized (western/autonomous) concept of subjectivity (and thus a privileged liberal notion of agency), and the ways in which the

² This policing of bodies occurs in *Persepolis* through the Islamic Regime's strict dress code, but Satrapi is also careful to depict it occurring through the social norms of gendered beauty.

³ Like Hillary Chute in "The Texture of Retracing in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*," I will henceforth refer to the author as Satrapi, the adult narrator as Marjane, and the child character as Marji to avoid confusion between the three subjects represented (97).

text depicts a complex, transnational, emergent subject of rights, one who grapples with this paradox of rights and the privilege that comes with such a subject position. In so doing, *Persepolis* draws attention to a kind of transnational readership that complicates the construction of a privileged, agentival and recognizable subject.

Legal and Cultural Context of *Persepolis*

Persepolis depicts Iran before, during, and after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the rise of the autocratic Islamic state under Ayatollah Khomeini. The beginning of *Persepolis I: The Story of a Childhood* is narrated by eight-year-old Marji who is learning to navigate the new rules of the Islamic regime built upon the foundations of an Islamic republic and *sharī'ah* law. As the narrative progresses Marji grows increasingly resistant to the regime—a resistance that is supported by her parents—until by the end of the first book she is an adolescent in the airport leaving for Austria. The second book, *Persepolis II: The Story of a Return*, picks up once Marji is in Austria and narrates her struggle to find her identity in exile. In a mirror image of Book I, Book II ends with Marji in the airport leaving her family to return to a final, self-imposed exile in Europe. The political setting of Satrapi's narrative proves difficult to articulate since the history and discourses of human rights in contemporary Iran (as in most nations) are contested and decidedly non-monolithic. In fact, there is a wide disjuncture between the Islamic Republic's state sanctioned policies and rhetoric on women's rights, and the ways in which women understand their role in the public and private sphere and their claim to the civil and

political rights articulated in the ICCPR and CEDAW. In other words, the ways in which the Iranian state conceives of women's rights (recently, in very conservative terms⁴) is very different from the ways in which those rights might actually manifest for Iranian women and from the ways in which Iranian women see themselves as subjects of rights.

The disjuncture between the Iranian state and the educated population of women advocating for change in Iran was most obviously and recently played out in the attempted ratification of CEDAW by the Iranian parliament in the early part of the twenty-first century. Before and immediately after the 1979 revolution in Iran, discussions of human rights in the public sphere (which included women's rights) were stigmatized for being pro-Western, pro-imperial, un-Islamic, and politically motivated (Mokhtari 470). In the late 1990s human rights and women's rights began to be a more popular topic of discussion as reformist Mohamad Khatami and other reformists and activists with political power re-framed rights discourse within the doctrines of Islam.⁵ Appealing to Islamic doctrine has also proven an effective and popular rhetorical tactic for women advocating for more rights within Muslim countries including Iran.⁶ In fact, many women define themselves as "Islamic feminists" with the idea that women *can* use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house.⁷ Locating the discourse of rights

⁴ For example, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad recently changed the government's Bureau for Women's Participation to the Center for Women and Family Affairs, signaling a subordination of women's rights in the public sphere to women's role within the family and the private sphere (Osanloo 45).

⁵ Khatami held the presidential position in Iran from 1997-2005 when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took office.

⁶ For example, see Nayereh Tohidi's "'Islamic Feminism': Negotiating Patriarchy and Modernity in Iran" which describes, using Iran as an example, the ways in which Islamic feminism has mobilized and achieved some gains through appealing through religious means to the established patriarchal regime.

⁷ As with most feminism(s) this movement is non-monolithic as well. In fact, Tohidi articulates several different perspectives on "Muslim Feminism" or "Islamic Feminism" which respond to the different approaches to what she calls traditional/conservative Islam, liberal/modern Islam and revolutionary Islamism or radical Islam—all of which have different perspectives on the "Woman Question". ("Islamic

including women's rights within Shi'a jurisprudence in Iran meant that advocating for rights was no longer seen as contributing to a discourse promoting western intervention or neo-colonialism. This increased discussion has had the overall effect that now "human rights" is no longer a stigmatized phrase policy-makers and intellectuals go to great lengths to avoid for fear of being labeled 'Western'...In fact, the opposite is true; justifications of rights violations in the name of upholding Islamic principles are now more frequently the subject of suspicion, stigma and critique" (Mokhtari 475). In the wake of these larger political changes in the latter half of the twentieth century, and as a direct result of pressure from intense campaigning by Iranian women's groups and women's press, in 2001 the Cultural Commission of Iranian Parliament decided to engage in discussion regarding ratification of CEDAW, a discussion that quickly stalled. After pressure from women deputies, the head of parliament finally admitted in 2003 that the nation's elders were against the ratification because they declared CEDAW "incompatible" with *shari'ah* law (Tohidi "Islamic Feminism" 629), subsequently declaring a *fatwa* against CEDAW's ratification (Mokhtari 476).⁸ The nation's women responded by collecting petitions and developing a class action lawsuit against the violations of parliamentary rules (Tohidi 629).

Feminism"). As Tohidi articulates, "Muslim feminism or 'Islamic feminism' is a faith-based response of a certain stratum of Muslim women in their negotiation with and struggle against patriarchy...on the one hand and the new (modern and post-modern) realities on the other. Its limits and potentials for women's empowerment, however, like those of other ideology based feminisms, have to be accounted for in its deeds and practices more so than in its ideological or theoretical strengths or inconsistencies" ("Islamic Feminism" 635).

⁸ As Tohidi describes, "since the Constitutional Movement of 1906-11, any major political and ideological discourse, including the 'Woman Question', has been fought out in an uneasy triangle involving Islam, Westernism and nationalism" ("Women in Iran" 112).

The ratification of CEDAW, according to Tohidi, was halted partly because the religious elders recognize Iranian women hold power within the public sphere already, and thus ratification would threaten the patriarchy that underlies the version of *sharī‘ah* upheld by the elders. For example, in a comparison between Saudi Arabia, which has ratified CEDAW, and Iran, Tohidi claims that Saudi Arabia can afford to ratify CEDAW—albeit hypocritically—to boost their global image without much actual change in women’s lives because Saudi women, living under the deeply entrenched patriarchal Islamic system, are less able to actually claim the basic civil and political rights that CEDAW guarantees once ratified. Ratification in Iran, however, would open the floodgates for women who are already politically active and who have a large presence in the public sphere, providing them with a state-sanctioned platform from which to attack the establishment. As Tohidi argues, “[CEDAW’s] ratification in Iran would have to entail real changes and reforms in the legal system and the gender policies of the Islamic regime while in Saudi Arabia, a hypocritical and formal ratification could be undertaken without much immediate challenge from the society at large” (“Islamic Feminism” 628).

The debate over ratification of CEDAW in Iran illuminates the distinction between the conservative state’s rhetoric (and the conservative religious elite) and women’s active fight for rights in Iran. It is important to note that ratification of CEDAW is often, as in the case of Saudi Arabia, used as a way to promote a nation’s global image rather than as a substantive legislative step that affords women better lives.⁹ On the one

⁹ Importantly, as of 2012, the US has signed but has yet to ratify CEDAW. As Tohidi points out, “this hypocrisy and double talk about women’s rights is not limited to Muslim states. To evade international responsibility with regard to safe guarding women’s equal rights, the United States [conservative right]

hand, this comparison exposes CEDAW's limitations when it is used as an empty signifier for women's rights rather than legislation that can actually guarantee better conditions for women throughout the world. On the other hand, in refusing to ratify CEDAW, Iran (and the US) actually lends it more legitimacy. Ratification would more than likely guarantee real changes as there is a large educated population who can mobilize widely and strongly for women's rights already, a fight in which CEDAW could become a powerful tool.

Iranian women's negotiation with the Islamic regime is complex and mediated by socio-economic status, education, religion and state policy (Tohidi "Islamic Feminism" 624). The feminist movement in Iran—what Tohidi calls the "Woman Question"—has played a significant role in public and private policy decisions since at least the first revolution (the Constitutional Revolution and Movement of 1906-1911). During the 1979 revolution, the women's movement enjoyed widespread popularity. For example on March 8th 1979, Women's Day, there was an "unprecedented massive celebration...signifying a sense of solidarity with women's movements globally [which] turned into a weeklong protest against the new pressures women faced at the local/national level" (Tohidi "The Global-Local" 860). The movement has traditionally emerged out of socio-economic privilege. For example, the gains made by Iranian women in the early years of the first revolution including the first school for girls "were funded by private money, clearly indicating no central endorsement" (Tohidi "Women in Iran" 112). Linked to this power of the women's movement and the privilege out of which it

invokes its Constitution and the Vatican invokes natural law and Church tradition just as Muslim countries invoke Islamic law (*sharī'ah*) as being incompatible with CEDAW" ("Islamic Feminism" 625).

emerges is the fact that one of the reasons that Iran's women are so successful in agitating for more rights is that Iran has one of the highest educated women to men ratios in the world (Barlow and Akbarzadeh 23).¹⁰

Satrapi's *Persepolis* is situated within this privilege through her familial history, her socio-economic status, her legal status, and her secular upbringing. Satrapi (and Marji) descends from pre-Shah royalty in that her maternal great-grandfather was the emperor deposed by the Shah. Her grandfather (the Emperor's son) was made prime minister but later became a communist and was imprisoned. During the revolution, her paternal uncle, Anoosh, defected with Marji's paternal great-uncle during the Shah's reign. Anoosh was also politically active as a Marxist during the revolution and was ultimately killed by the regime when Marji was a child. Not only is Satrapi's family descendent from royalty and political leadership, but Marji's nuclear family is also clearly socio-economically privileged. Because Marji is a child, Satrapi can depict this privilege through Marji's realization of her positionality. For example, after reading books that depict issues of social class, Marji says "I finally understood why I felt ashamed to sit in my father's Cadillac/ The reason for my shame and for the revolution is the same: The difference between social classes/ But now that I think of it...we have a maid at home!!!" (33/6, 7, 8). This realization is followed by Marji's coming to terms with her positionality as best she can as she admits, "We were not in the same social class

¹⁰ Barlow and Akbarzadeh attribute the role of Iranian women most recently in the political sphere to not only their access to education, but also to their lack of memory of the 1979 revolution, calling the current contradiction between state policy and women's reality a "gender-crisis" in which "the disjuncture between conservative Islamic tradition and modern structures in Iran has generated serious social and economic problems" such as unemployment, poverty, drug addiction and an increasing rate of suicide in young women (25).

but at least we were in the same bed” (37/7). Satrapi’s (and Marji’s) family history is also secular, a positionality that situates them within the discourse of rights as articulated in the UDHR and ICCPR. Marji’s mother and grandmother are clearly educated within liberal feminist discourse and pass that knowledge onto Marji from a young age. In an early part of Book I, Satrapi draws explicit attention to Marji’s conflicted relationship with God (a conflict the reader can gather is one between her family history and beliefs and the current rhetoric of the new regime that she is taught in school). For example, in humorous passages, Marji believes she is a prophet, has long conversations with God, and, in one frame, draws God and Marx together with the only difference being that “Marx’s hair was a bit curlier” (13/3). As the war begins and her uncle Anoosh is executed, Marji banishes God, who has been appropriated and now represents the Islamic Regime. One frame early in Book I literally depicts Marji’s internal conflict between secularism, which is aligned in the frame with modernity, and religion, which is rapidly being co-opted by the regime. She is drawn as divided down the middle and the text says “I really didn’t know what to think about the veil. Deep down I was very religious but as a family we were very modern and avant-garde” (6/1). The problematic juxtaposition between religion and modernity from Marji’s eight year old perspective resonates with the stereotypes that many Western readers assume, but in fact, the text goes on to radically complicate the binary as religion and secularism take on very different meanings under the oppressive regime within Iran, particularly for women.

Marketing *Persepolis*

Given Iran's complex cultural, historical and political context and Satrapi's unique perspective situated within the Iranian elite, how is the transnational readership encouraged to interpret this literary representation of Marji as a subject embedded in such a context? In Kenneth Burke's terms, what might be some of the terministic screens that precede and influence readers' interpretations of *Persepolis*? For example, on the back of the 2007 edition of the *Complete Persepolis* in an excerpted review of the book, *Time* magazine invites a western audience to read *Persepolis* as a unique text that provides the reader insight into the troubling history and political situation of Iran. The review states, "A memoir of growing up as a girl in revolutionary Iran, *Persepolis* provides a unique glimpse into a nearly unknown and unreachable way of life...That Satrapi chose to tell her remarkable story as a gorgeous comic book makes it totally unique and indispensable" (*Time*). In the larger review, the author also mentions, "'Persepolis' [sic] domesticates world events and makes them relatable and real. It pulls back the veil on a culture that utterly preoccupies us...[it] makes for one of the most vital and surprising reads of the season...Sometimes funny and sometimes sad but always sincere and revealing" (Arnold). The review is exemplary of the normative discourse surrounding the text and functions rhetorically as an interpretive guide for how to read the narrative. The inside cover summary adds to the rhetoric of the review by saying "It is the chronicle of a girlhood and adolescence at once outrageous and familiar, a young life entwined with the history of her country yet filled with the universal trials and joys of growing up."

Although it is impossible to know each reader's terministic screens, the marketing constructs an audience through the framing devices and rhetorical cues before a reader even opens the book. I see three readings most noticeably and obviously invited by the rhetorical cues constructed by the mediating framework of marketing that is the book cover. First, the blurb suggests that Satrapi provides an authentic insider view of Iran that exoticizes it as a country "unknown and unreachable." Second, this marketing reaffirms ethnocentric superiority based on a normative understanding of rights and stereotyping of women in Iran.¹¹ Finally, this authentic insider position is conveniently combined with an entertaining and accessible cosmopolitanism that deconstructs cultural barriers and enables western readers (to whom the text, in this edition, is marketed) to have access to the exotic "unknown." *Persepolis* has enjoyed immense popularity in the west partly due to its "familiarity and universality, in other words, the normative or normalizing 'Western-ness' of her text" (Naghibi and O'Malley 226). Before even opening the book, then, the marketing of *Persepolis* encourages Western readers to understand the character as an authentic insider or native informant who is different enough to be interesting, but similar enough for readers to identify with her in her "universal" experiences of coming-of-age, a representation that simultaneously masks Marji's exceptionality.¹²

¹¹ This ethnocentricity is perpetuated by the insider view and contributes to the structure of rights in terms of women's rights, freeing women as an alibi for intervention, and war in Muslim nations, as explained in the Introduction of this project.

¹² This paradoxical universality perpetuated by the authentic insider that is both different but the same echoes Rey Chow's critique in "Where Have All the Natives Gone" in which she examines the problematics of relying too heavily on the authentic insider or survivor's experience as a way to resist essentialism. Rather than assume that all women are modeled after the white western woman who suffers under patriarchy, instead this authentic insider model assumes that all third-world (or non-western) women are modeled after the same authentic other.

Additionally, Satrapi writes in the Introduction to *Persepolis* that since the Iranian revolution Iran has been “discussed mostly in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism. And as an Iranian who has lived more than half my life in Iran, I know this image is far from the truth. This is why writing *Persepolis* was so important to me. I believe that an entire nation should not be judged by the wrongdoings of a few extremists” (Satrapi, “Introduction”). Satrapi’s introduction constructs her ethos from the beginning as someone who will set the record straight about the stereotypes in Iran. In this way *Persepolis* seems to contribute to a version of New Orientalism that Fatemeh Keshavarz argues many of the “eyewitness literature” coming out of Iran today perpetuates which provides authentic insight while clearly maintaining the Orientalist hierarchical divide and supporting Western political and cultural interventions.¹³ These rhetorical cues given by the framing of *Persepolis* so as to appeal to a western readership are reinforced by the misleadingly approachable, familiar, and supposedly simplistic comics, the *Bildungsroman* form, and the genre of the autobiography.

As any good reader response critic will posit,¹⁴ readers bring their own sets of interpretive frames and terministic screens to a reading. However, in order to understand the ways in which the text also constructs its readership, it is important to situate the text within legal, cultural, and historical contexts as well as its literary contexts. *Persepolis* is

¹³ Keshavarz’s main recipient of this critique is Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* which Keshavarz argues reiterates many of the same narratives as Orientalist discourse but from an insider’s perspective. By utilizing a native informant, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* “replicates the totalizing—and silencing—tendencies of the old Orientalists by virtue of erasing, through unnuanced narration, the complexity and richness of the local culture” (Keshavarz 3). For example, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* victimizes women, neglects to mention any sort of Persian intervention in the literary world (despite a rich literary tradition), simplifies political issues, and portrays the culture and characters in reductionary ways.

¹⁴ For example, see works by Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, Roland Barthes, and Louise Rosenblatt.

located within two relatively new literary movements, Iranian autobiography and the graphic narrative (more specifically, autographics). I situate *Persepolis* within the relationship of discursive understandings of a rights-bearing subject based on the mutually enabling fiction of the UDHR, ICCPR, and the *Bildungsroman*. As such, I am more interested in *Persepolis* from a rhetorical perspective in terms of the possibilities that its form as graphic narrative and a *Bildungsroman* can create than I am in its relationship to the tradition of Iranian autobiography. But, according to Hillary Chute, the graphic narrative is defined by its relationship to the genre of autobiography¹⁵; and traditions of autobiographical visual work so as to consider the ways in which it emerges out of the normative discourse of first generation rights, therefore it is necessary to situate the text within the specific traditions of women's autobiography in Iran.

Persepolis is part of a trend of post-1979 Iranian autobiographies written by women which are most often in response to the history of human rights violations in Iran. When interviewed (and in the Introduction to *Persepolis*), Satrapi often comments that Iran is radically misrepresented in Western media. *Persepolis* is her attempt to expose that misrepresentation to readers outside of Iran in order to remedy some of those stereotypes. This uncovering of the truth that Satrapi claims *Persepolis* is about takes place within a larger discourse of autobiography by Iranian women which has "been perceived as a form of metaphorical unveiling as indecorous as physical unveiling"

¹⁵ Following Hillary Chute, because of *Persepolis*' relationship to autobiography I use the term "graphic narrative" because many of the most productive and interesting book length graphic works are, in fact, autobiographical and thus cannot be called novels. Chute employs the term graphic narrative to describe "a book-length work in the medium of comics" ("Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative" 453).

(Naghibi and O'Malley 224).¹⁶ The first woman (in 1848) to publically discard her veil, in what one critic calls an autobiographical moment, was executed by the government; “this public unveiling of body and pen...has proved to be a costly enterprise for the Iranian woman” (Milani 8). Despite being tied to a discursive history of unveiling, Iranian women, both in Iran and exiled, are using the genre more and more since the early 2000s as a way to process the 1979 revolution and its aftermath, as “a means of mapping out the complexities and contingencies of identity,” and as a way to “challenge the stereotype of the self-effacing, modest Iranian woman and to write themselves back into the history of the nation” (Naghibi and O'Malley 223- 224). The proliferation of memoirs and autobiographies written in or translated into English by women (and men) writing out of or about Iran is not surprising given the increase in the visibility of Iran in global politics and the US's interest in the region and given the exoticized context through which they are often marketed (with *Persepolis* as case in point).¹⁷ Many of these memoirs and autobiographies are written originally in English and have the same goal as Satrapi's of debunking stereotypes perpetuated by Western media representations while simultaneously raising consciousness and working against the regime.¹⁸ Situating

¹⁶ In fact, as Milani explains, the same verb for unveiling is used for exposing a secret (6).

¹⁷ To give a further idea of the proliferation of memoirs and autobiographies published in English coming out of Iran since the early 2000s, here are more examples in chronological order: Tara Bahrapour's *To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America* (2000), Gelareh Assayesh's *Saffron Sky: A Life Between Iran and America* (2002), Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), Firoozeh Dumas *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America* (2003), Roya Hakakian's *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran* (2004), Azadeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran* (2005), and Shirin Ebadi's *Iran Awakening* (2007). Although there are examples of other Persian women who have written autobiographies before this, as Milani points out, they were already public figures and even these were not published until the mid-twentieth century (12).

¹⁸ In this chapter I locate *Persepolis* within this international discourse since, while the text has been translated into Farsi, it can only be found on the black market in Iran and its publication history suggests

Persepolis within the tradition of textual Iranian autobiography also enables readers to consider the ways in which the autobiographical *graphic narrative*—what Gillian Whitlock calls autographics—can complicate these somewhat stereotypical notions of indecorous unveiling and exposure (despite the rhetorical framing by the publishers and Satrapi’s appeals to a western readership) in an examination of the representation of an individual subject of rights who literally *draws* attention to women’s rights as human rights.¹⁹

The interaction between reader and text required in graphic narrative form, with its contextual relationship between the visual and the written, highly iconic symbols, and structural gaps, can potentially draw attention to the tension between traditional and alternative understandings of subjectivity and the modes of resistance they enable within gendered human rights.²⁰ In graphic narrative terms, *Persepolis* is relatively conventional. Satrapi uses mostly traditional panel sequences drawn with distinct black borders with penned figures on a predominantly white background, moving the reader in

that the text was directed at predominantly Western (French and U.S.) audiences. Therefore, I intentionally locate the narrative within discourses of Iranian autobiography published and translated into English and published in the U.S., and the genre of graphic narrative and human rights targeting western audiences, particularly given the ways in which the audience is constructed by the marketing and framing of the book. While it would be interesting and productive for *Persepolis* to be read within a framework of Islamic traditions of human rights, my assumption is that this is not Satrapi’s intended audience and therefore is not within the scope of this argument.

¹⁹ “Autographics” according to Gillian Whitlock melds even more deeply the graphic narrative and autobiography and thus gives rise to an analysis that draws attention to the subject positions engendered by the visual and verbal nature of the narrator.

²⁰ The uniqueness of the graphic narrative form to perform social critique, “to challenge dominant modes of storytelling and history writing” (Chute “Comics as Literature?” 456), is partly due to its underground history. According to Chute, comics in the US became associated with critique of mainstream America with the publication of what was then *Mad Comics: Humor in a Jugular Vein* (456). This underground medium circulated mostly self-published work (the kind of work which can be seen today in the feminist zine culture) and was an “influential cultural vehicle, challenging and arresting because [comics] meditated on the violation of taboos” (Chute 456). It was out of this underground culture that comics as a medium to represent human rights atrocity was born.

a relatively linear way through the panels.²¹ In so doing, Satrapi is able to cover historical ground efficiently as the text encourages the reader to create a logical narrative by connecting disparate panels representing different historical moments. Through its use of visuals in relation to text, the graphic narrative genre manipulates time and space differently than prose. In fact, the graphic narrative is defined by its ability to depict time through space. In his foundational text on the genre of comics (also written in comics), Scott McCloud defines comics as “[j]uxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.” (9). Similarly, Hillary Chute describes the graphic narrative as a form that “always hinges on the way temporality can be traced in complex, often nonlinear paths across the space of the page” (Chute “Comics as Literature?” 454), thus it can engage the reader in the meaning making process in a very obvious way. Each frame pauses the action in time and the reader constructs the linearity of the narrative between each frame. Because of this form, graphic narrative and autographics have the ability to confront the problematics associated with subjectivity, representation and identification so fraught in human rights texts in complex and productive ways.²²

²¹ As Tensuan argues, in relation to the style of art that Satrapi uses, "In US and British reviews of *Persepolis*, one can see this dynamic at work not only in readings that imagine the work as a transparent rendition of an undiluted cultural tradition—that is the characterization of *Persepolis* as 'a charming, poignant story, drawn in small black-and-white panels that evoke Persian miniatures' (Mc-Grath 26), or a naïve version thereof, as in the suggestion that '[t]he art seems to be almost a cross between Persian friezes and children's doodles' (Cave 1). Such critical visions maintain an investment in a vision of Satrapi as an artist who maintains a direct relationship with an idealized Persian culture uncluttered and unaffected by Western cultural or commercial influences and forces" (Tensuan 956).

²² For example, Whitlock and Poletti explain that “[a]utographics frequently involves the ‘graphic’ in the sense of explicit and confronting images of bodies in pleasure and pain” (vii). Additionally, for a more explicit analysis of *Persepolis* in relation to trauma studies see Hillary Chute’s analysis in “The Texture of Retracing in Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*” in which she writes that Satrapi’s visual depiction of torture and violence, by utilizing iconic and simple graphics, does not turn the violence into spectacle. Satrapi does not

However, a rhetorical lens is key when considering the reading and the readership of transnational texts dealing with issues of human rights and particularly autographics. As Wendy Hesford and Wendy Kozol argue, it is necessary “to recognize women’s human rights through the dialogic processes of looking and being seen...of reading and writing practices. This dialogical process is also a transnational and transcultural process whereby reading or seeing human rights violations locates the view, the reader, and the witness within local and global communities” (11). Since the genre of the graphic narrative visually represents this act of looking and being seen, the reader must pay close attention to rhetorical cues. As Hesford and Bruggemann explain, to look is not the same as to gaze rhetorically. In visual rhetoric the gaze includes the contextual information surrounding the rhetorical moment; it includes an attention to “who is looking, how they are looking, why they are looking, where they are looking, and who/what is being looked at” (Hesford and Brueggemann 11). While this seems simplistic—of course readers think about the who, why, where, what, and when in interpretations of texts, both written and visual—really considering the contextual implications of the gaze requires a deeper rhetorical interrogation into the interactions readers have daily with discourses and the texts they are reading. Gillian Whitlock quotes Art Spiegelman, author of the famous graphic narrative *Maus*, on the rhetorical demands that his graphic narrative places on the reader:

try to make the violence *too* real and thus maintains the horrific nature of the torture and incompatibility with a reality structured by rights (Chute 99). For example, in an analysis of the panel depicting a torture scene of one of Marji’s friends in which a human body is abstractly depicted cut into pieces, Chute claims that the abstract representation from a child’s perspective expresses “the limit-what Marji *cannot* yet realistically imagine...Satrapi shows us that certain modes of representation depict historical trauma more effectively, and more horrifically, than does realism (in part because they are able to do justice to the self-consciousness that traumatic representation demands)” (“The Texture of Retracing” 102).

I didn't want people to get too interested in the drawings. I wanted them to be there, but the story operates somewhere else. It operates somewhere between the words and the idea that's in the pictures, and in the movement between the pictures, which is the essence of what happens in a comic. So by not focusing you too hard on these people you're forced back into your role as a reader rather than looker. (Spiegelman qtd in Whitlock "Autographics" 968)

Considering the rhetorical gaze requires thinking through the ways in which the text is working on its readers and vice versa, which is necessarily a self-reflexive moment as one considers his/her relationship to and identifications with the text. As Theresa Tensuan says, "*Persepolis* cues the reader to closely attend to the ways in which her perception of the work is inflected by strategic misrepresentations, a systemic lack of information, and active acts of interpretation" (Tensuan 956). Therefore, not only is a rhetorical perspective so important in understanding the relationship between the visuals and the textual, but it also carries with it an attention to the contextual, something, as I have tried to make clear in this section, is extremely necessary when approaching and understanding *Persepolis* and the kinds of readerships it constructs.

Through attention to these rhetorical cues, a transnational feminist reading practice emerges that attends to its own privilege as well as the politics of representation in all of its complexities. I examine this reading practice by looking at how *Persepolis* reveals Marji's coming of age within normative human rights discourse and, as her exile indicates, the costs and limitations of that approach. Finally, in an analysis of Book II, I turn to Saba Mahmood's concepts of non-normative understandings of agency for alternatives to conventional reading practice that privileges a first generation subject of rights predicated upon a narrow understanding of subjectivity and agency. This analysis

of *Persepolis* informs the intersections of transnational feminist scholarship and human rights scholarship about the nature of agency outside the historical notions of freedom and liberation that ostensibly provide the foundation for Western feminism and universal political and civil rights and thus enables a more complex and productive understanding of both agency and revolution in human rights and transnational feminist discourse. When understood through visual rhetoric, *Persepolis* is a coming-of-age narrative that depicts the complications of a subject who ostensibly claims rights based on her autonomy. It shows the ways in which subjectivity and human rights can be divorced from not only the “ideal subject” but also from the notion of autonomy.

Limitations of Liberation

Persepolis opens with the ten-year-old main character, Marji, learning to navigate the new rules of the fundamentalist Islamic regime built upon *Shari'a* law (see Figure 2). The first few boxes depict Marji and her friends wearing the veil with skeptical expressions:

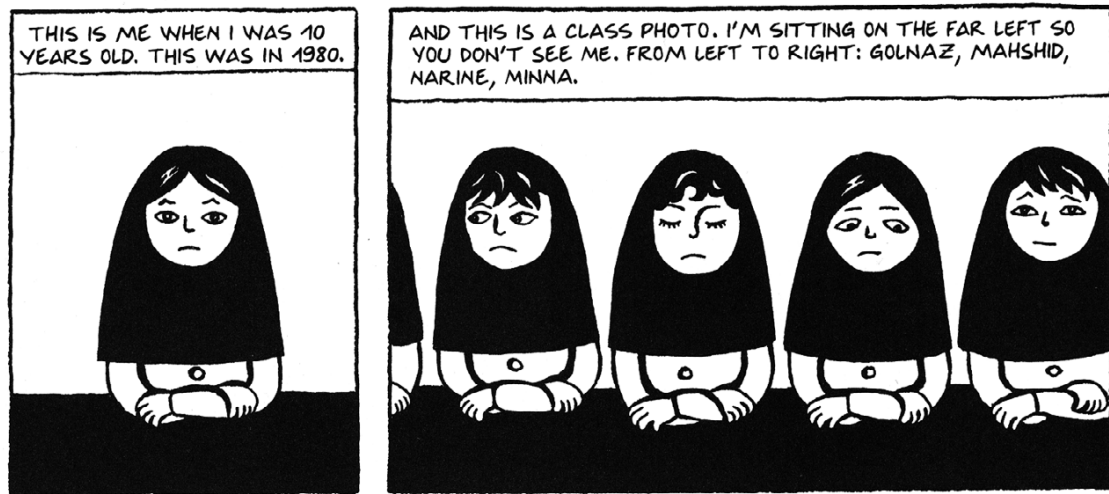


Figure 2. “This is me when I was ten years old.” (*Persepolis* 3/1-2)

This opening scene lays the foundation for several of the issues explored throughout the text. For example, on just this first page (including these two panels) there are five panels that ask the reader to shift between the years 1979 and 1980 and the present. In this first panel, *Persepolis* also utilizes the standard function of closure to provide rhetorical distance between the reader and the character and between the narrator and the character. The written text begins with Marjane, the narrator, commenting in present tense on the character Marji who is drawn in a panel alone: “This is me when I was 10 years old. This was in 1980” (See Figure 2, Satrapi 3/1). The next box depicts Marji’s friends with different shades of unhappiness, each veiled, with Marji just outside the frame of the image. The text reads, “And this is a class photo. I’m sitting on the far left so you don’t see me. From left to right: Golnaz, Mahshid, Narine, Minna” (3/2). In this first sequence of boxes Marji is separated from her classmates so that the reader must imagine her in her class picture. This separation provides autobiographical and historical distance between

the narrative voice and the child character.²³ Additionally, the iconic Figures of Marji and her friends draw attention to the ways in which the Islamic regime, through an imposition of the hijab, suppresses the individuality of each girl.²⁴ The graphic narrative shows this ostensible flattening of difference formally as each girl is drawn as a compilation of lines with only small degrees of variation indicating different expressions that barely distinguish one from the other. However, it is in these small variations that this narrative of universality can also be complicated, highlighting the ways in which the content and the form work together to destabilize the normative understanding of the subject of rights.²⁵ This scene also sets the stage for a depiction of the ways in which the religious oppression of the Islamic Regime is manifest in gendered ways. Although Marji and her friends are just young girls, their bodies are already being disciplined and policed by the state. However, this same page a few frames later depicts Marji and her friends using the hijab as a jump-rope on the school playground, already resisting this policing and

²³ Chute argues that this frame draws attention, from the beginning, to the distinction between Marji-the-child, Marjane-the-narrator and Satrapi-the-author creating a complex autobiographical and speaking subject: "Here, her self-establishing ("this is me") and the immediate deestablishment of her person in the following frame ("you don't see me") not only creates disjuncture between narration and image (we do see her, even as she notes we do not; we know we are seeing a drawing, even as she announces the panel as a photograph) but also indicates how the visual form of the graphic narrative, in harnessing the possibilities of pictorial space, can create a complex autobiographical fabric. The comics form calls attention to what we as readers "see" and do not see of the subject: the legibility of the subject as a literal—that is to say, readable—issue to encounter." (Chute, *the texture of retracing* 96).

²⁴ *Persepolis* is drawn with mostly iconic Figures, which, according to McCloud, encourages a deeper sense of identification through a phenomenon called masking in which readers anthropomorphize and see themselves in shapes that look even remotely like a face. As McCloud suggests, the more human and realistic a drawing of a face looks, the more difficult it is to identify as that character. However, Satrapi plays with this function of iconic masking by juxtaposing the written text with the visual text, utilizing this space to provide distance not only between the narrator and the young Marji, but also between the narrator and the reader.

²⁵ As Gillian Whitlock argues, "In *Persepolis* drawings of veiled women refuse that stereotype of the nondescript archetypal Muslim woman. Rather, Satrapi's female Figures are human, and full of character and individuality even with the veil...Satrapi's cartoon drawing sustains the individuality and agency of her autobiographical avatar and friends vividly, and with compassion" (975-977).

reformulating the function of the hijab, a renegotiation that is made possible because of Marji's privilege and her status as a young child.

In just this first page, *Persepolis* depicts the ways in which Satrapi at once perpetuates the normative subject of rights as predicated upon the individuality so important to the project of universal human rights, while simultaneously complicating this Figure of the individual in gendered terms. As Hephzibah Roskelly argues, what is needed for women's rights as human rights to become normative within the existing culture of rights discourse predicated upon first and second generation rights are "new plots that re-imagine relationships between what is individual and social, that re-see the connections between the private and the public, and that understand the implication of the global in the local" (219). Rather than attempting to remake the discourse of rights on gendered grounds, what is necessary is to insert "women as some of the humans whose rights are asserted in documents like the UDHR" (Roskelly 219). Therefore, although it is important to consider the ways in which *Persepolis* plays with and complicates the normative discourse of rights for western and transnational readers, as Roskelly reminds us, resistance that is recognizable on western feminist terms is necessary for women's rights to make their claim to human rights in the first place.²⁶

Satrapi is careful to recognize and pay homage to this liberal feminism so important to the growth of women's rights throughout the world through her powerful grandmother and mother, despite the fact that one can also read *Persepolis* as

²⁶ Although I am aligning first generation, individual normative discourses of rights with first and second wave hegemonic feminist discourses as necessary discourses for women's rights as human rights to be recognized within here, I also recognize that these discourses are not the same and should not be conflated—especially since first generation rights often come at the expense of women's rights, a problem that first and second wave feminist discourses advocate utilizing liberatory agency to remedy.

complicating that framework. For example, in a move that appeals to many feminists, a series of panels depicts Marji's mother reading her Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* as a young girl, and Marji humorously attempting to urinate standing up. Marji finally concludes, while sitting down, "As an Iranian young woman, before learning to urinate like a man, I needed to learn to become a liberated and emancipated woman" (175/3-7). The juxtaposition of Marji's mother reading her Simone de Beauvoir as a young girl with Marji suggesting that all Iranian women are oppressed, yet failing to urinate standing up, is a slippage in which Satrapi complicates a simple identification with the narrator based on Western stereotypes. On the one hand, this series of panels promotes liberatory and Western feminism, and, on the other hand, it suggests that a model of feminism based on a masculine framework (i.e. if women urinate standing up, they will gain the power of men) might fail. It also suggests that women throughout the world have their own agency to resist and thus do not need to be liberated by a benevolent giver of rights. Presenting the theoretical impracticality of this model through the image of Marji, Satrapi simultaneously allows us to recognize the complexity of her social, political and cultural location and history. In this way, *Persepolis* is an example of a text that bridges and embraces tensions between the local sites of subjectivity and the global transnational feminist community and draws attention to the too easy alliances that a transnational readership can create that produces and performs the normative culture of rights. This readership is both productive and problematic: productive precisely because it normalizes; and problematic because of the paradoxes and baggage that comes with what it normalizes.

The first book of *Persepolis*, for the most part, depicts Marji as an autonomous agent coming of age within and against the new Islamic Republic. For example, as Marji begins to exert her individuality (a form of agency which her mother and grandmother model for her), she develops her identity simultaneously against her mother and the fundamentalist regime, and through this opposition she gains a sense of autonomy predicated upon agency as resistance. A few years after the revolution Marji skips school to smoke cigarettes with older girls and her mother finds out. As her mother reprimands her, Marji likens her mother to the torturers and the Islamic regime saying, “My mother used the same tactics as the torturers,” and later adding, “Dictator! You are the Guardian of the Revolution of this house!” (113/4-9). Conflating the revolution with her own adolescent rebellions, Marji compares her smoking to those who opposed the regime: “Those who opposed the regime were systematically arrested/ And executed together/ As for me, I sealed my act of rebellion against my mother’s dictatorship by smoking the cigarette I’d stolen from my uncle two weeks earlier” (117/ 4-6). Against the backdrop of the revolution and mass executions, Marji’s rebellions are meant to seem privileged, inconsequential, and adolescent as she struggles to find autonomy in her own world.

Additionally, when Marji goes out to buy music on the black market, she is stopped by the Guardians of the Revolution for inadequate dress. Marji escapes by talking her way out of it. The last frame of the chapter depicts Marji unwinding from the harrowing experience rocking out to Kim Wilde’s “We’re The Kids in America”

(134/7).²⁷ Marji's rebellion here is not political but adolescent, and her agency is tied to a level of privilege to which others during the revolution did not have access. Further evidence of the discrepancy between the agency that Marji's privilege affords her and the reality of the revolution is shown in two frames that are juxtaposed one page later in Book I. One frame depicts the deaths of young lower class boys who are given "keys to paradise" so that they will fight for the regime in the war against Iraq. The other frame depicts Marji as she dresses as a punk and parties with her friends. The composition of these two panels mirror each other, suggesting Marji's participation in the rebellious punk scene can be reduced to her class privilege and is not actually subversive of the regime at all. As Naghibi and O'Malley point out,

The broken bodies of the child soldiers are mirrored by the exuberant postures of the party-goers; the keys on their necklaces are mirrored by Marji's "punk" chain necklace; the holes in their shrapnel-ridden bodies are mirrored by holes in Marji's sweater...far from being a political gesture, Marji and her friends' consumption of punk subculture becomes a shallow indulgence of privilege. (240)

In drawing attention to these similarities and thus highlighting the differences between the two circumstances, Satrapi appeals to some western readers who expect certain narratives about the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war and other stereotypes. Later, during her experience in Austria, Marji's friends like her precisely because she is different, third-world, and exotic: "I was different, I had seen war" (116/1). On the opposite page Marji is depicted with her eclectic friends happily smiling with a caption

²⁷ As Theresa Tensuan argues about the Kim Wilde scene, "the song's exuberant celebration of youthful freedom creates a complicated contrapuntal rhythm in a political context in which American imperialism helped open the avenue through which the clerics could come to power" (Tensuan 961).

that reads: “An eccentric, a punk, two orphans and a third-worlder, we made quite a group of friends. They were really interested in my story. Especially Momo! He was fascinated by death” (167). However, these same friends on the very next page complain and commiserate about their boring ski vacations with unbearable relatives while Marji tries, in vain, to tell them about Iranian tradition. The scene draws attention to the distinct privilege that affords Marji’s Austrian friends the ability to be counter-culture in the first place. These friends reflect a western reader’s positionality back onto them, suggesting that, as Tensuan points out, “In Satrapi’s case, such patronizing evaluations work hand in glove with readings of *Persepolis* that gloss over, discount, or dismiss the careful attention she places on the complexities of the political, religious, and economic strife that shaped her childhood and adolescence in favor of a reading that celebrates the work as a universal coming-of-age story” (Tensuan 957). In other words, there are limitations to the forms of liberal agency and individuality to which western feminism has historically been tied, and with which readers might identify, that Satrapi is careful to express. The insistence on a kind of liberatory agency that privileges individuality eventually leads Marji to exile and an inability to claim an Iranian cultural and national belonging in the way that fulfills her, such that her “liberation” is ultimately unmoored and unplaced.

The last frame of Book I depicts Marji in the space of limbo that is the airport, not quite Iran but not yet Austria. As the violence of the Islamic regime escalates and Marji continues to challenge those who pose a threat to her individual liberties as an adolescent, her parents decide once and for all she is better off growing up in Europe. In explaining

their decision to send her away, her parents juxtapose Marji's individuality (in relation to the Iranian nation-state which suppresses and polices that individuality) while simultaneously predicating that identity on her Iranian heritage: "Considering the person you are and the education you've received, we thought that it would be better if you left Iran" (147/2), and then later, "never forget who you are!" (148/6). This initial exile imposed by her parents further suggests Marji's privilege—she is able to leave. However, it also leaves Marji in a difficult position in which she cannot claim her belonging in the ways she desires.

Throughout much of the second book Marji oscillates between the desire to fit in, the desire to participate in anti-assimilationist subcultures, and the realization of her status as other. Throughout her identity crisis Marji continues to believe her subjectivity is autonomous, and she can pick and choose her identity based on her hair style. Marji embraces her enlightenment of Western liberalism, but this enlightenment is playfully and often ironically juxtaposed against her Iranian heritage as she tries to come to terms with her becoming and fluid identity. At Marji's first party when she is surprised at seeing couples make out she says, "I was turned off by all these public displays of affection. What do you expect, I came from a traditionalist country" (185/1). And when she gets high and sees her friend Julie having just slept with her nineteenth man, Marji explains: "That night, I really understood the meaning of 'the sexual revolution'. It was my first big step toward assimilating into western culture" (188/8). The attempts at assimilation, which are predicated upon a liberalist notion of agency, seem to be fundamentally in contradiction with her "Iranian-ness." Only a few pages later, Marji

feels guilty about her exposure and embrace of “Western culture.” A panel that depicts Marji taking a giant step away from her parents towards the reader depicts her movement away from her Iranian heritage. The caption reads “The harder I tried to assimilate, the more I had the feeling that I was distancing myself from my culture, my parents and my origins, that I was playing a game by somebody else’s rules” (193, see Figure 3):



Figure 3. “The harder I tried to assimilate...” (*Persepolis* 193/1)

The image shows Marji taking one giant leap away from silhouettes of her parents, not quite toward the reader, but more toward the edge of the frame. The image not only complicates the Iranian identity that Marji is stepping away from (her parents in no way are representative of the Islamic Regime and the stereotypical Iranian identity with which she is marked by others), but also draws attention to the meta-textual and physical space of the page and the black frame of the box keeping Marji from stepping too far away from her history.

Eventually Marji's attempts to assimilate and the rising guilt she feels because of them come to a head. At a party Marji denies that she is Iranian with the feeble excuse: "I should say that at the time, Iran was the epitome of evil and to be Iranian was a heavy burden to bear" (195/4). Later that evening her guilt gets the better of her as she remembers her grandmother's edict, "Always keep your dignity and be true to yourself!" (195/6). Finally, after overhearing some Austrian girls gossiping about her saying that she makes up her claims of having seen war she screams, "I am Iranian and proud of it" (197/1 see Figure 4). This illocutionary act, which is also a moment of enunciation, allows her to claim an identity based on her Iranian citizenship, despite the complicated fact that she must claim it as such because she is *not* in Iran and has tried so hard to assimilate to Austria.



Figure 4. "I am Iranian and proud of it!" (*Persepolis* 197/1)

Ultimately, Marji is literally and figuratively unplaced by her attempt at a liberation that is unmoored from her familial, cultural, and national sense of belonging. In

a striking set of panels taking up an entire page, Marji sits on a bench, having left her apartment for being accused of stealing her land-lady's broach.²⁸ As Marji sits, everyone first goes to work, then they return and when night falls she is alone on the bench (See Figure 5, 235/1-3). The three frames emphasize Marji's obvious loneliness, but also her lack of community, even amongst the crowds of people going to and from work. In all three frames a double line, meant to represent the curb, divides Marji from the Austrian citizens, signaling her alterity. This scene begins Marji's time living on the street as a final desperate act of independence in Austria, an act that is also, as always, guided by her grandmother's words of advice: "'Night brings good council,' my grandmother always told me" (235/3). Although the first night she spends on the street she declares, "There were plenty of others..." (237/7), Marji is drawn alone taking up most of the frame, lying prone on a park bench. The two months that Marji spends on the street signals the failure of her hopes of freedom in the west. The limitations of an agency predicated upon liberalism and autonomy and the price of a liberation that casts Marji adrift from her community is too high, and Marji finally decides to return to Iran.

²⁸ This event is the last in a string of scenes in which Marji is treated as other, marked by her gender and Iranian citizenship. For example, her boyfriend's mother verbally attacks her, calling her a witch and accusing her of using her boyfriend to get an Austrian passport before telling her to get out (220/4-6). When Marji is invited to a professor's house to have dinner with his family, she is never invited back. The last straw comes when Marji is wrongly accused by her landlady of stealing.



Figure 5. "It was November 22nd." (*Persepolis* 235/1-3)

Transnational Feminist Readership and Alternative Agencies

Marji's first exile shows the limitations of a liberal feminist notion of agency, which also underlies much of the mobilization for women's rights as human rights. The limitations of this agency and the liberation so desired by Marji and her parents, despite its important place in rights and feminist advocacy, ends up being unmoored and unplaced. This final section extends Saba Mahmood's concepts of non-normative and alternative concepts of agency in order to consider alternatives to a reading practice that constructs a narrow readership predicated upon the problematic stereotypes perpetuated by the marketing framing of the book. I build on Mahmood's notion of non-normative agency as a way to show how alternative forms of agency can emerge from secular cultural practices,—as opposed to only from within religious cultural practices of piety where Mahmood locates this agency—and thus can construct a transnational feminist readership that recognizes the ways in which Satrapi literally draws attention (through autographics) to the representation of the subject of rights as a complex, emergent subject who recognizes her privilege.

Anthropologist and feminist scholar Saba Mahmood's foundational argument in her monograph *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005) provides a way to contextualize religious and non-Western practices and non-religious normative practices as feminist. Relying heavily on Judith Butler's concepts of subjectivity (articulated more closely in the Introduction of this dissertation), Mahmood traces of a kind of dynamic agency based on post-structural notions of subjectivity

through the women's mosque movement during the Islamic Revival in Egypt. Mahmood considers the ways agency might be conceived of contextually and critiques the concept of universal resistance that embraces a teleology of progressive politics which elides other forms of agency. Instead, Mahmood's concepts of agency are unmoored from the liberal (and necessarily secular) structure of resistance which enables her to trace this dynamic notion of agency based on post-structural notions of subjectivity.²⁹ She explores what is traditionally (in the West) understood as one of the most forceful sites of patriarchal oppression as located within religious discourses and uses it as a way to speak back to the assumptions associated with first world or liberal feminism. These assumptions are founded in rationalism, include the innate desire for freedom and autonomy, and "locate agency in the political and moral autonomy of the subject" (Mahmood 7). Mahmood ultimately argues that in embracing the veil, these women are enacting an alternative form of agency entailed "not only by those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms" (Mahmood 15). In this way, considering subjectivity through the lens of post-structuralism reframes the ways in which agency is understood and suggests that, rather than understanding it from a liberal standpoint as utilizing an unfounded concept of individuality and autonomy, one can understand agency as working from within the intersections of myriad and differing locations of power. Thus, agency becomes reframed as incorporation rather than resistance.

²⁹ It would be interesting to consider Mahmood's work on the Islamic Revival and the Islamic Brotherhood in Egypt in light of the recent revolution. Unfortunately, there is not space here to do so.

While Mahmood locates this reframing of agency solely within religious practices, I build upon her work to show how alternative forms of agency can emerge from secular cultural practices as well and are located within the rhetorical relationship between reader and text. Satrapi's *Persepolis* is an interesting location through which to explore how this notion of alternative agency plays out in the secular sphere because of the tension that Satrapi constructs between religion and secularism that Marji navigates as she comes of age. In this way, instead of assuming that agency is always tied to the autonomous subject (what Mahmood would call the secular subject emerging out of enlightenment rationality in which individuality is foregrounded rather than subordinated to the higher power of God and/or religious hierarchy), I explore the moments of agency in *Persepolis* that are formed by secular cultural practices and which uncover alternative ways of being and knowing that do not depend upon Western liberal epistemologies or religious piety.

The complexity and ambivalence of Marjane's forms of resistance are exemplified when Marjane engages in dialogue with the fundamentalist administration of her art school in Iran about the restrictive impracticality of their uniforms. As a result Marji is allowed to design the women's art uniform, which she does in way that still adheres to the Islamic revolution's moral code of appropriate dress for women but is much less physically restrictive (298). This act begins as a moment of liberatory rebellion and resistance in which Marji stands up to her school's administration for lecturing the students on dress code, for which she receives praise from her grandmother. However, it

can also be seen as a moment in which Marji readjusts the forms of agency at her disposal and reworks the system from within.

The theoretical framework that Mahmood articulates through Judith Butler's work and post-sovereign subjectivity shows that if subjectivity is constituted by the very power to which one is subject, then the borders of subjectivity actually make possible the transgressions that constitute agency. Thus, recognizing the structure of power through which we come into being allows a more effective site of agency, hence "agency begins where sovereignty wanes" (Butler *Excitable Speech* 15-16). The graphic narrative provides an interesting representation of these symbolic borders as the frame itself can be read as a visualization of the conventions that constrain the subject and the borders that the subject comes up against. The repetitive nature of each frame can signify the repetition of subjectivity as constantly becoming in a way that is detached from both liberal understandings of agency as well as religious frameworks of power through which Mahmood's subjects claim their agency.

For example, the second book of *Persepolis* describes Marji going through puberty. An entire page is devoted to images of Marji as she grows into her body (see Figure 6, 189-190). The images make light of the difficult time in her adolescence and clearly represent her as becoming, both literally and figuratively. As Tensuan argues, "Satrapi literally as well as figuratively draws out the ways in which the transition from childhood to adulthood becomes a transformational moment overdetermined by narratives of development that set gendered roles, define class distinctions...[and] inscribe religious differences" (Tensuan 952). In this particular scene, while several of

the frames have no gutter between them giving the impression that this all happened simultaneously, or outside of time, the text describes a linear process of her “physical metamorphosis” (189/1 see Figure 6) over which she has very little control. The nonexistent gutters contribute to this sense of Marji being propelled without power in her physical growth process. Once her physical metamorphosis is over, Marji begins to take control of her appearance through cutting her hair and wearing scarves (190, see Figure 6). As she does so, the gutters become much larger, and the frames become larger. Finally, at the end of the series there are three large panels with large gutters and a kind of social role is attributed to and claimed by Marji: “That’s how I became the school’s official haircutter” (190/11).



Figure 6. “My mental transformation was followed...” (*Persepolis* 189-190).

This scene contributes to the cosmopolitan universality upon which the book's framing appeals are based and deconstructs cultural barriers, but it is also about Marji's unique experiences of cultural belonging.

Considering this notion of the subject as becoming, the kinds of alternative agency that a secular framework can give rise to, and the visuality of the graphic narrative form is particularly interesting in this passage because of what signifies individuality: her hair. It is no mistake that Marji's coming of age and the unique identity that she finally claims is figured physically through her choice of hair cut, so that when she returns to Iran, it is this individuality that she seems to be literally covering up. In the scene depicted in the epigraph to this chapter Marji dons the veil again after being in Europe for several years (see Figure 1).³⁰ Marji is leaving Austria by choice to return to Iran and considers herself an agent entering Iran, a country that she sees as hostile to her personal civil and political rights. She states, "...And so much for my individual and social liberties...I needed so badly to go home" (245/4). Marji's expression is one of disappointment, and it is tempting to read the panel as reaffirming the western reader's expectations of depictions of veiling as within the rhetorical framing of the book cover. However, at the very moment in which she gives up these individual liberties, she claims her place within a community and a home, admitting the difficulty of claiming rights that are only predicated upon liberal notions of subjectivity and thus agency. Juxtaposed with Mahmood's quote and the preamble to the ICCPR, these three epigraphs serve to

³⁰ Jennifer Worth claims that Marji hides beneath different, mostly unsatisfying, symbolic veils in her attempt to assimilate in Europe before donning the physical veil and returning to Iran: "This graphic framing, supplemented by the textual framing of Satrapi's narrative voice, serves as a constant reminder of Marjane's subjecthood in all of its objectified manifestations." (157).

exemplify the tension between liberalist notions of agency often tied to civil and political rights, women's rights based on autonomy, and postmodern understandings of agency and subjectivity often ignored in rights discourse because of the challenges they pose to mobilization and resistance.

Marji's liminal space between both cultures, Iranian and Western, alienates her from belonging fully to either, and, in a last attempt to gain acceptance in Iranian society towards the end of *Persepolis*, Marji decides to take the traditional path of marriage as a way to legitimize her place in society. Marji enters the institution of marriage, which is directly tied to the structure of the nation-state, in order to ostensibly gain more freedom from the harsh rules of that very state. However, once she embraces the made up, beautiful, aerobics instructor—what she believes Iranian culture wants her to be (even liberal Iranian culture exemplified by her husband)—she seems to have lost something of herself. The panel that depicts her unhappiness after her wedding (a wedding she had because she thought it would help her relationship to make it public) juxtaposes the identity that Marji was pretending to be for her husband and his friends, and her autobiographical comic avatar, the now adult Marji. The panels juxtapose a white background for her “false” identity, and a black background for her “real” identity, and her position with the “false” Marji gazing forward with glassy eyes, demure and smiling, and the “real” Marji in profile view, downturned mouth and defiant expression. While this panel is intended to express the ways in which Marji manipulated herself to fit the image of what her husband wanted of her, when closely viewed, the juxtaposition is between more than just a false identity with a more authentic identity. It is a juxtaposition

between the Marji who tried but cannot embrace the normative expectations of both Iran and Austria because of her social, cultural and familial background, who still feels not-quite-Iranian yet not-quite-European (318/7-8, see Figure 7). The marriage ends quickly and predictably in divorce, and Marji decides, once and for all, to choose exile in France.

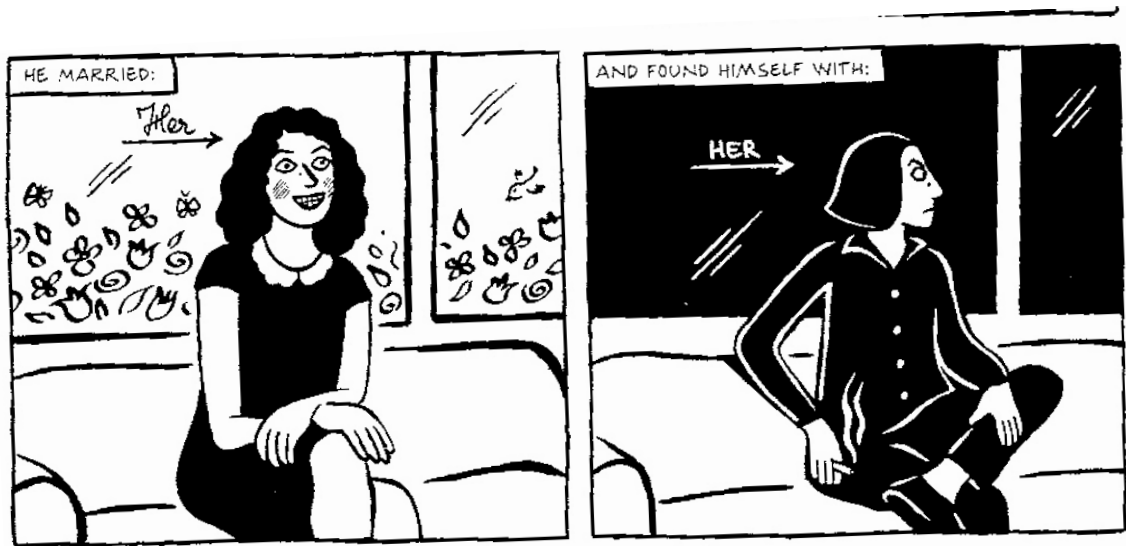


Figure 7. “He married...” (*Persepolis* 318/7-8)

Conclusion

In mirror image to the end of the first book, at the end of the second book and *The Complete Persepolis*, Marji says goodbye to her family again in the space of liminality that is the airport. As Marji leaves at the end of Book I, her parents justify her exile based upon a notion of individuality and rights predicated upon liberatory rights speak and feminism. When Marji chooses her own exile at the end of the narrative, her mother supports her again saying, “This time, you’re leaving for good. You are a free woman.

The Iran of today is not for you. I forbid you to come back” (341/3). At the airport the scene is much more celebratory than at the end of Book I:

The goodbyes were much less painful than ten years before when I embarked for Austria: there was no longer a war, I was no longer a child, my mother didn't faint and my grandma was there, happily...happily, because since the night of September 9, 1994, I only saw her again once, during the Iranian New Year in March 1995. She died January 4, 1996...(341/4).

The last words of the collected work are “...Freedom had a price” (341/4) with the price being that Marji no longer was able to spend time with her grandmother or call Iran her home. As Marji's quintessential role model for liberatory agency, her grandmother plays a large role in the text and so ending with her death is symbolic regarding the complex ways in which Satrapi understands and represents not only agency but also the appeals to a transnational readership.

This transnational readership is constructed not by the *Time* magazine framing, but rather by Satrapi's choices to not flatten or shy away from the social, cultural, historical complexity and privilege within which she and the text are situated. However, rhetorically situating the text is necessary in order to understand this complexity. In a reading of the frame in which a German photographer takes a picture of Marji's mother protesting and publishes it in European newspapers (5/2, 3), Tensuan argues that this must be situated within a larger discourse emanating out of the comics culture of L'Association in which Satrapi was embedded at the time: "In casting her mother as an icon of heroic resistance, Marji could be aligned with readers of *Le Monde* or of the *Evening Standard* who would be cued to see Taji Satrapi as an emblematic representation

of individual resistance, communal movements, and democratic progress" (Tensuan 957). However, Tensuan goes on to argue that, depending on each reader's personal and cultural context, they will place this figure of protest within different political histories, but most will read Taji Satrapi as "an icon of resistance to anti-democratic forces and cast as a representative figure in the ideological script in which an individual takes on a 'regressive Muslim fundamentalist' regime" (958). This reading of Taji elides the complexity of Satrapi's narrative and family history. In other words, western readers would like to place Satrapi's text within the narrative of progression promoted by the *Bildungsroman* which also carries with it the satisfying rise of the individual who, in the wake of texts like *Reading Lolita In Tehran*, deploys the resistive agency of the autonomous subject in response to the oppression of the fundamentalist regime, promoting the three problematic readings articulated above. However, this reading ignores the more complex subject construction of Marji's coming of age, and it is this complexity that calls out to readers in a wider transnational framework.

As Wendy Hesford reminds scholars, "to highlight configurations of agency is not to retreat to static notions of subjectivity or modernist notions of the autonomous subject, however. Rather, a relational approach attends to the dispersion of rhetorical agency and the 'articulated networks that connect speakers and hearers in multiple, sometimes contradictory ways'" (Wells qtd in Hesford 23). In this way, the rhetorical cues that the *Time* magazine review of *Persepolis* gives to readers is really an insight into western readers' own perspectives on the privilege upon which a liberatory version of agency and resistance is predicated. The alliance and readership that the *Time* review constructs,

then, is one also based upon this privilege. However, Satrapi's autographic narrative draws attention to these lures of identification predicated upon this privilege and complicates them through the graphic form and Marjane's unique sense of humor, constructing instead a wider transnational readership who can recognize alternative and gendered forms of secular agency divorced from liberal notions of autonomy. In this way, the narrative identifies the limitations of normative rights speak in which liberalist individuality and autonomy is privileged above all.

CHAPTER IV

BETWEEN COLLECTIVITY AND SPECIFICITY:

THE POSSIBILITY OF THE SPEAKING SUBJECT IN “WOMEN AT WORK”

It is said that we tell stories so that we do not die of truth. But we also tell stories to know who we are and to make sense of the world. We constitute our social identities through narrative and, although life is much more than stories, stories also try to create order in the chaos of our lives. Stories in their widest sense can be used to bring order, or tell about chaos.

We listen to one another's stories so that we share carrying the truth. But we also listen to stories in order to become, for one brief moment, somebody else, to be somewhere we've not been before. We listen to stories in order to be changed. At the end of the story we do not want to be the same person as the one who started listening.

*-Antjie Krog, Mosisi Mpolweni and Kopano Ratele.
There Was This Goat: Investigating the Truth Commission
Testimony of Notrose Nobomvu Konile (19).*

Considering that, in accordance with the principles proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.

*-Preamble to the International Covenant on Economic,
Social and Cultural Rights (resolution 2200A XXI)
1966; Entry into force January 1976.*

The previous chapters on *Speak Truth to Power* and *Persepolis* have addressed the UDHR and ICCPR respectively. This chapter, through the short story “Women at Work” by South African public intellectual Sindiwe Magona, turns to the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The ICESCR was initially designed as a way to further establish and hold states more accountable for the positive rights articulated within the UDHR, such as the right to work, equal pay and unionization (Article 23 in the UDHR and Article 6 in the ICESCR), the right to education (addressed in Ch. II in the UDHR and ICESCR), the right to marriage under free and full consent of both parties, as well as the right to protection of that family by the state (Article 16 in the UDHR and Article 10 of the ICESCR).

Sindiwe Magona’s “Women at Work” is part of the collection of short stories *Living, Loving and Lying Awake At Night* and was written as anti-Apartheid movements and resistance escalated prior to the end of Apartheid in 1994 and before the country entered the reconstruction process of the TRC. The collection is set during Apartheid when South Africa was racially segregated and ruled by a white minority through a series of harsh mandates and acts that denied even basic rights to the non-white majority and which was marked by brutal and violent human rights violations.¹ Titled after the most obvious rights it speaks to, “Women at Work” addresses the gendered relationship

¹ The legislation of Apartheid was primarily comprised of the Population Registration Act of 1950 which classified and grouped members of society based on race, the Group Areas Act of 1950 which segregated the population according to race and the criminalization of miscegenation through the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949 and the Immorality Act of 1950. The Reservation of Separate Amenities Act of 1953 deepened segregation and distribution of civil rights. Essentially, Apartheid created a state within a state of white rule and effectively stripped all non-white people of their first, second and third generation rights.

between the right to work, the protection of the family by the state as articulated in the ICESCR, and women's rights. "Women at Work" comprises the first section of Magona's 1991 collection of short stories titled *Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night* and describes the experiences of black women employed as domestic workers in white homes. Eight women get together separately with the main character, Atini, to gossip about their oppressive conditions and their white "medems," constructing a linguistic space of collectivity through the subversive rhetorical mode of gossip. Although "Women at Work" represents the condition of black women under Apartheid in which almost no fundamental rights were granted to the non-white population, I read the novella alongside the ICESCR as a way to investigate the normative culture of economic, social and cultural rights.

Through an examination of "Women at Work," this chapter explores the role of listening in human rights discourses and interrogates the potentials of the narrating subject in literature coming out of Apartheid and post-Apartheid South Africa, a culture of institutionalized and systemic rights abuse.² I propose a reconsideration of the rhetorical strategies of the narrating subject as well as the reading practices through which we interpret and construct that subject. A rhetorical lens allows teacher-scholars and readers to consider not just what the text is doing, but how it calls on readers and how readers respond, in other words, "how one gets heard" (Hesford "Documenting Violations" 108). I extend the conversation surrounding human rights and rhetoric in this

² A version of this paper was originally presented at the American Comparative Literature Association conference in Vancouver 2011, and I owe the dichotomous framework of the role of scholarship in human rights discourse as both enabling and unmasking to which this paper responds to the call for papers composed by organizers Alexandra Schultheis Moore, Elizabeth Goldberg and Greg Mullins.

chapter by rethinking rhetorical theories of both the speaking subject and reader responsibility in order to critique the limitations of human rights discourses without abandoning their great potential. In the fictional discourse of witnessing, testimony, and narrating rights violations, responsibility is often placed upon the narrator, (whether the victim of rights abuse or the witness of rights abuse) who is then critiqued as either promoting or undermining uneven structures of power that lead to uneven distributions of rights. In other words, much of the literature surrounding human rights intends to raise consciousness, to mobilize advocacy, or simply to appeal to empathy, despite the fact that much of the conversation surrounding that literature critiques the implications of these appeals.³ I am interested in this paradox because it is essentially a rhetorical problem—how to mobilize advocacy through identification while simultaneously drawing attention to how problematic that representation or appeal might be within the structure of rights and cross-cultural structures of exchange. Therefore, this chapter suggests that a burden of responsibility also falls upon the reader/listener within the rhetorical moment of meaning making between reader and text (particularly literature) so as to recognize the ways in which the narrative can both critique and promote the discourse of rights. I do this by examining what a theory of reading that does not participate in a hermeneutics of suspicion might allow for when considering the ways scholarship and critique of literature enables and/or disables the work of human rights discourse across cultural and temporal difference. In other words, I propose a method of reading as enablement rather

³ While this chapter and dissertation as a whole is primarily interested in fictional literary representations of human rights issues, the same paradox of mobilization vs. critique applies even more so to non-literary human rights texts and reportage which intend only to raise consciousness.

than only as critique and suggest that, as a transnational feminist rhetorical methodology, it enables different kinds of discourses and thus subjects of rights to be heard.⁴

Listening To The Sounds Of “Women at Work”

Through the rhetorical collectivity constructed by the discourses of gossip amongst the black domestic workers within the private sphere of white households, “Women at Work” examines the rhetorical possibilities of the speaking subject who has no access to rights within such a culture. An analysis of listening enables the critical work surrounding human rights literature and narrative to both critique the normative discourse’s problematic paradoxes, structures, and foundations while simultaneously promoting the discourse as something “we cannot not want,” in Gayatri Spivak’s terms (qtd in Brown 422).⁵ In particular, “Women at Work” takes up the paradox that in order to mobilize (or be heard) under a universal global heading of women's rights as human rights, women's individual conditions of suffering and subjectivity must be subordinated to a larger notion of community. Magona’s fictional text weaves together multiple narrative “I”s into a collective voice thus producing a subject of rights who subordinates her individuality and embraces this collectivity because it provides a better chance of access to rights. In so doing, the text critiques this paradox and takes into account the

⁴ The term “reading as enablement” as another alternative to reading with suspicion comes from Gayatri Spivak’s notion in *Righting Wrongs* that we must continue to promote the discourse of rights even as we critique it, or in her terms, “the enablement must be used even as the violation is renegotiated” (524).

⁵ See Chapter III regarding the liberal subject as necessary in human rights discourse.

unique operations of different political, social, and economic sites of gendered oppression that construct specific and gendered subjects of rights.

Sindiwe Magona is probably best known for her historical novel *Mother to Mother* which creates fictional correspondence between the mother of Amy Biehl, a white college student killed by a mob of black youth in 1993, and the mother of Biehl's killer.⁶ Magona is also well known for her autobiographical works, and, although *Living, Loving, and Lying Awake At Night* is fictional, it was published in the years between her two volume autobiography, *To My Children's Children* and *Forced to Grow*. "Women at Work" is also loosely autobiographical in that Magona grew up in the town from which the main character comes, Magona was a single parent struggling to provide for her children, and she worked as a domestic worker after being fired from her teaching job because she was pregnant. Siphokazi Koyana suggests that Magona's "authority" to write about human rights violations under Apartheid comes from Magona's experience as a woman who started from nothing and grew into a successful international public intellectual and author during and after the Apartheid regime.⁷ Despite growing up in the slums outside of Cape Town, Magona claims it was when she worked as a domestic worker that she was introduced to the fundamentals of racism (*To My Children's*

⁶ Magona is also well known in South Africa for her public policy and community work in Cape Town and through the United Nations Public Information Department. Magona worked for the UN until 2003 when she retired to focus on her writing and work as a public intellectual.

⁷ Magona's family encouraged her education, sending her to a Christian boarding school after which she became a teacher. She was forced to resign her teaching post once she became pregnant out of wedlock. By the time Magona was twenty-three she had three children. During the time Magona was pregnant, and thus not allowed to teach, she was employed as a domestic worker.

Children), a condition that she clearly expresses in “Women at Work”.⁸ As Magona herself admits, “Most [of the other autobiographers] went to boarding schools and colleges as young women. I did my matric by correspondence as a ‘has been,’ a single parent, mother of three, poor, no longer behusbanded, with no abode of my own. The difference I suppose is life experiences” (Magona qtd in Koyana 68). Although much of the critical work surrounding “Women at Work” and Magona’s other fictional and non-fictional texts focuses on the potential of her autobiographical voice in resistance to the oppressive forces of Apartheid and the reconstruction of South Africa, I am interested in the ways we read the fictional discourses she produces in relation to the instruments of human rights. This chapter is concerned with the ways Magona articulates a subject of rights in her novella and how we then interpret that subject through reading as enablement. Magona’s turn to the fictional to represent the realities of Apartheid, both through *Mother to Mother* and *Living, Loving, and Lying Awake At Night* allow for a deeper insight into the possibilities of identification and communication across difference. In this way, her fiction offers a productive site to examine the ways in which the narrative emerges out of and promotes a normative discourse of rights so necessary to those under Apartheid.

The main character of “Women at Work” must leave her village, Gungululu, to take domestic work in the white owned houses of the township East London so as to

⁸ After her husband left her and her children, Magona went back to teaching before emigrating to the US where she received her Master’s in social work and business administration from Columbia and worked for the United Nations. Much of Magona’s public work has been devoted to her role as a community activist in South Africa (she served on the Cape Town city council) and to addressing political and gender oppression at large (Koyana 67).

provide for her starving children. The novella opens as a yet unnamed character considers how to care for her children while she completes her daily work for her family. The section is narrated in third person and is particularly alliterative and poetic, drawing attention to the importance of listening and the orality of traditional storytelling and testimony. The aural nature of Magona's story actually preempts the critical attention to Xhosa literary and oral story-telling history and broke new ground by blending oral and written traditions in the text.⁹ For example, the narrator describes the woman's work by the sounds it makes: "On her bared knees, skirt girded high, the basin of cow-dung next to her, she set to work. A scoop or two from the basin; thwax-thwax, onto the floor" (Magona 4). The narrative is also particularly active in its descriptions of the woman's work as she provides for her family and makes a point to list the woman's daily duties. She starts a fire, gathers cow dung, spreads it on the floor, goes to the river, gathers berries, "pluck[s] *umfino*, a wild spinach, from the veld if sheep and goats had overlooked any" (5), and digs for roots. The reader is given insight into the woman's private life which is described with a hint of nostalgia cut through with the desperation this woman feels at not having enough to provide for her family, but always in aural terms: "Then she went to the river. The pail swinging at her side sang its song of emptiness, the wind playing in its dry throat. Returning, it stood silent on her head; filled with life from the river, it was content and thus made no noise" (4). The main character decides to leave her five children to find work in the city with the logic that if she did not,

⁹ As Margaret Daymond argues, "'Women at Work' indicates that 'The means of figuration found in her inherited oral forms may have come to her as a comparatively unmediated cultural resource, leaving her free to invent ways of allying it with written forms in order to inscribe a relatively new phenomenon'" (344).

she would not be a good mother. Interestingly, the main character at the beginning of the narrative does not speak directly to the reader. When she asks questions and debates leaving, it is clear she is asking them to herself such that the reader gets insight through the omnipotent narrator into the characters inner voice: “Her heart leapt. She had found the key: I will not be a mother that way. She would fulfill her obligations as she understood them and provide for them. The only way she could be a mother to her children, she saw, would be to leave them” (Magona 6). This recognition that in order to be a good mother she must, in effect, be an absent mother is a direct result of the denial of her basic rights to survival and protection of her family as articulated within the ICESCR.¹⁰

The poetic nature of the opening along with the constant attention to sound and onomatopoeia sets the reader in a rhetorical mode of listening. When the woman decides to leave her children to take work in the town. She journeys through the veld and the forest all the while being propelled by a metaphorical thorn in her heart and the sound that the thorn makes as it drives deeper and deeper: “A thorn long embedded in her heart twisted itself: Ttssp! A drop of blood squeezed out of her heart and lit the whole night blackened sky...Ttssp!” (7). This onomatopoeic “Ttssp!” sound of the thorn is repeated over thirteen times throughout the short four page passage of her journey to the town. As she travels, all of the animals she passes are described by the sounds they make, and the

¹⁰ This juxtaposition between the kind of domestic work that the main character was doing in her own home for her own children with the domestic work that she leaves her children to do for the white families in town highlights the ways in which different kind of work are valued, particularly in gendered terms. Although it is outside the scope of this argument, it would be interesting to consider “Women at Work” within the larger gendered human rights issue of domestic workers.

river is described aurally as well: “the swish swi-i-i-ss sshh of the water surged through her veins” (8). The landscape and the character seem one and the same as the woman leaves the veld and journeys to the city. This short third person narrative is attentive to other sensory devices as well, but there is a clear abundance of sounds in the beginning of the text that prepares the reader for the dialogic and aural nature of the rest of the story.

This opening passage in “Women at Work” sets up the operative themes that the rest of the text explores including the auality of the narrative and the focus on work. The following sections of the text deepen the call for being listened to as they are all narrated in first person dialogue. In all, there are eight women gossiping about their experiences of working under white “medems” during Apartheid, and each chapter is named for the woman who is talking. Although the speaker of each chapter is talking to Atini, the reader does not hear Atini’s voice again until the final chapter, which she narrates in first person, present tense. I examine Magona’s lesser known novella specifically because of its poly-vocal narrative form. Because the framing of the novella (the third person description of sounds and the final section of first person addressed directly to the reader) and the dialogic form of the multiple first person voices gossiping to Atini call for being listened to, Magona’s “Women at Work” provides a productive space from which to explore reading as enablement.

I recognize this attention to the aspect of listening in the dialogical exchange within the politics of representation can be problematic in relation to Gayatri Spivak’s well known argument in “Can the Subaltern Speak” since the focus on listening does not necessarily take into account the ways in which that discourse is already mediated by

institutional structures that govern who gets heard and how. However, this does not negate the importance of analyzing the rhetorical exchange within discourses that *do* make it onto the global discursive stage. As Hesford argues, the critical debates surrounding representations of the oppressed have focused on one of two aspects. On one hand, they have focused on “the problem of the privileged speaking *for* rather than *with* the oppressed” which situates the speaker as “an authenticating presence,” and on the other hand, they have focused on “the assumption that the subject can speak only for herself that ignores how rhetorical conventions and discursive systems shape the construction of subjectivity and agency” (Hesford “Documenting Violations” 108). Thus, the critical debates surrounding representativity need to also take into account “not only the social location of the speaker or writer but the material-rhetorical context into which the utterance or text is projected” (Hesford “Documenting Violations” 108).¹¹ In this way, although listening more carefully does not necessarily enable readers/listeners to hear those who cannot already be heard on some level, nor does it address the filtering process through which such discourse must travel in order to be heard, it does enable a deeper insight into the meaning making process and the power that governs the rhetorical operations within the normative discourse of rights. In order to provide ways to navigate this rhetorical negotiation between reader, subject, and writer in politically charged human rights texts, I build upon Rita Felski’s articulation of the critical need for reading outside of suspicion and Krista Ratcliffe’s theoretical foundation of rhetorical listening in

¹¹ The concluding passage of this chapter does a brief reading of the testimony of a woman named Mrs Konile during the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission who, when she testified, gave a story that was almost completely illegible to much of the audience.

order to posit a feminist transnational methodology called reading as enablement which I then examine in relation to Magona's "Women at Work."

Reading as Enablement

Instead of seeing as dichotomous writing as enablement and reading as critique, it seems as though scholars, teachers and readers can understand that writing can suggest its own critiques and reading can be more productive than critics often expect.¹² As Felski says, "we are sorely in need of richer and deeper accounts of how selves interact with texts" (*The Uses of Literature* 11). In other words, considering more deeply the ways in which texts call on readers in rhetorical ways can have potential positive ramifications for opening and/or exposing the normative discourse of rights as performed in literature. Although it seems counterintuitive, this deeper engagement is predicated upon a reframing of the ways in which readers and scholars approach texts outside of a hermeneutics of suspicion. Felski argues that readers today, particularly in academia and even more particularly those engaged in theoretical work, are perpetually engaged in what she calls "techniques of suspicious interpretation" which encourages readers to "rea[d] between the lines," "against the grain," and uncover meaning that "lies beneath or to the side of these words, encrypted in what the literary work cannot or will not say, in its eloquent stuttering and recalcitrant silences. Disdaining the obvious in order to probe

¹² I do recognize that criticism can be just as enabling and paying attention to the affective and subjective aspects of reading can be equally disabling and problematic, but too often attention is paid only to the work that critique can do rather than the work that the text already does.

the infinite mysteries of the unsaid” (“After Suspicion” 28). In other words, this hermeneutics of suspicion trains readers to look past what is being said in the text to an interpretation that ignores not only the text’s particular historical context but also how meanings of texts change as they link with various interpretive communities.¹³ Even when readers attempt to preserve difference in the text, she argues that this mode of suspicion is ever-present. This focus on the negative has led teachers and scholars to disregard other modes of reading that might be more informed by an aesthetic appeal or simply by pleasure in reading.¹⁴ Felski’s attention to the relationship between reader and text in traditional academic scholarship provides the impetus for a focus on this same relationship in human rights literature, a field where the ramifications of that relationship and interaction can be much more tangible in terms of consciousness-raising with the goal of humanitarianism.

Instead of an ethos of suspicion, then, readers could consider why certain texts appeal more than others as an orientation toward meaning rather than “demystification of truth” so that readers are engaged in an analysis of “the intricate play of perception, interpretation, and affective orientation that constitutes aesthetic response” and that

¹³ Since scholarship is propelled by this kind of criticism, pedagogy is as well. Value in the classroom and beyond is thus accorded not to the text itself but to the skill and ability to read it critically (*The Uses of Literature* 3). In this way, the hermeneutic of suspicion pits reader and text in a dichotomous and antagonistic relationship. As Felski says, “Critic and work are thus bound together in an alliance of mutual mistrust vis-à-vis congealed forms of language and thought” (“After Suspicion” 29). Although Felski is not necessarily arguing for those of us in literary criticism to completely abandon reading critically, she is arguing for critics to be suspicious of a hermeneutics of suspicion and to pay attention to the ways in which we interact with texts when teaching and writing.

¹⁴ Felski argues that everyday readers and literary critics do different work because literary critics always approach with suspicion and distrust rather than “common sense” and she hopes to enable communication between this common knowledge and literary theory rather than only privilege theory (*The Uses of Literature* 13).

presumes “the irreducible complexity of everyday structures of experience” (“After Suspicion” 31). Although Felski is not referring specifically to human rights literature, I find productive her argument that readers need to ask why one reads and begin there for analysis: “the starting point is a deep sense of curiosity about the nature of our aesthetic attachments, as worthy of sustained and sophisticated investigation” (“After Suspicion” 32). She claims that this kind of work reaches “outward to the world as well as inward to the text” (“After Suspicion” 32). Instead, if readers take the text on its own terms and accompany critique with “generosity, pessimism by hope, negative aesthetics by a sustained reckoning with the communicative, expressive, and world-disclosing aspects of art” (“After Suspicion” 33), then this mode of reading could have important implications when considering the usefulness of critique versus the “enablements” of reading human rights literature. As Felski argues, since “affect cannot be separated from interpretation,” readers must ask what is gained or lost by considering the text’s “ability to inspire intense responses, inchoate emotions, quasi-visceral passions” (“After Suspicion” 31)? Re-thinking the nature of the engagement with texts and what assumptions and training readers bring to bear on those texts is particularly important since human rights literature often calls on its readers in unique ways.

Reading outside of or around the pervasive hermeneutics of suspicion thus asks readers to look more closely at what is there and to pay attention to the ways in which the texts do their work. In other words, it asks readers to be attuned to the rhetorical work of literary texts. Again, as Felski argues:

We are called on to honor our implication and involvement in the works we read, rather than serving as shame-faced bystanders to our own aesthetic response. Here my argument links up with a recent ethical turn in literary studies, an exhortation to look at, rather than through, the literary work, to attend to the act of saying rather than only the substance of what is said. (*The Uses of Literature* 20)

Reading outside of suspicion, what I call reading as enablement, thus encourages the critical gaze to turn on the reader rather than only on the text, fostering accountability and self-reflexivity when reading human rights texts.¹⁵ In this way, reading as enablement also has the potential to implicate the reader more deeply in the process of meaning making so that the focus is returned to the ethical relationship between reader and text rather than just the subject depicted. This focus on the larger structural issues surrounding a text's rhetorical appeals can thus undermine the problematic structures of power in human rights discourse articulated in Chapter II.

One of the ways in which readers can be more open to how meanings of texts change as they link with various interpretive communities is by paying attention to the affective aspects of reading. This perspective asks readers to engage with ordinary desires and motives for reading, which can also encourage readers to come to terms with the spectacular nature (to borrow Wendy Hesford's terms) of human rights texts. The challenge is, then, to enable both this affective aspect of reading as well as the necessary critique. In fact, in human rights literature, too much attention on affect can be a major concern since an important goal of the discourse surrounding human rights and literature works to disrupt the structures of power that emotive registers alone can produce. In

¹⁵ Felski offers her own solutions to the alternatives of reading outside of suspicion including recognition, shock, enchantment and knowledge; however, I find these less useful for texts representing overtly political issues and texts representing human rights issues.

order to resist remaining entrenched in emotional registers without moving into self-reflexive critique, and as a way to exemplify the ways in which reading as enablement can work outside of the hermeneutics of suspicion, I utilize Krista Ratcliffe's framework of rhetorical listening in an analysis of "Women at Work" so as to theorize reading as enablement instead as a stance towards the text that allows for both embrace and critique. Exploring this text through reading as enablement is useful in terms of considering what we hear about form, sentiment or violation and how texts speak in different ways to the normative discourses of violation and suffering.

Rhetorical listening is a way of meaning making that fosters an openness to the text similar to Spivak's call from the other before will. Krista Ratcliffe defines rhetorical listening as a "trope for interpretive invention and more particularly as a code of cross-cultural conduct" (17). This openness relies partly upon a Burkean understanding of identification in which identification precedes persuasion and thus negotiation. As Ratcliffe argues, rhetorical listening can "precede *conscious* identifications. Such conscious identifications are important because they may provide grounds for revising identifications troubled by history, uneven power dynamics and ignorance" (Ratcliffe 19). By bringing further awareness to the ways in which texts call on their readers in terms of conscious identification and bringing this to the forefront of interpretation, thus potentially exposing deeper, less conscious identifications, rhetorical listening can function as a "stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to *any*

person, text, or culture” (Ratcliffe 17).¹⁶ Shifting the mode of engagement to the aural instead of the ocular enables different levels of engagement; perhaps one can *hear* what is difficult to *see* in the discursive moment.¹⁷ By being more attune via “different body organs, different disciplinary and cultural assumptions, different figures of speech, and most importantly different stances” (24), one can understand that rhetorical negotiation always already exists pre-identification since, as Kenneth Burke argues, “however ‘pure’ one’s motives may be actually, [there are] impurities of identification lurking about the edges”(26). Rhetorical listening involves recognizing that rhetorical engagement does not presume that full understanding is ethical or even possible. Instead, rhetorical listening suggests a focus on the positionality of understanding as standing-under discourses to let them “wash over, through, and around us and then [let] them lie there to inform our

¹⁶ In her review of *Rhetorical Listening*, Stacey Sowards states that Ratcliffe locates the problem of identification for rhetorical listening in the fact that Burke et al. highlight similarity across identification (for example, consubstantiality) rather than difference, and Ratcliffe is searching for a mode of identification that preserves difference. In fact, the premise that rhetorical listening can function, through identification, as a mode of cross-cultural exchange, assumes first and foremost that difference between the self and the other and even between the self and the other-within-the-self must be ethically preserved. This history is foundational to understanding cross-cultural difference in ethical terms. However, this idea of difference also relies upon a notion that the beings in relation are self-directed.

¹⁷ Although Ratcliffe wishes to imply that her theories of identification and its relationship to identity are universal (and makes reference to multiple and even conflicting identities and identifications within an individual), her theories of self-hood are still located soundly within western—specifically North American—discourses of identity which are predicated upon a psychoanalytic subject and rely upon autonomy, individuality, and Enlightenment discourse. In other words the discourses of rhetorical listening (through identification, non-identification, and disidentification) are located within and informed by the notion of individual agency and self-direction. Ratcliffe does turn to feminist and cross-cultural studies for a way to bridge what she sees as the relationship between personal agency and discursive agency in order to locate a more productive notion of identification that makes space for “a rhetorical agent who possesses personal agency (albeit limited) even as that agent is socialized by enveloping cultural discourses” (52). However, her concept of an openness to the ways in which the text call on the reader I still find extremely useful, and when situated within a transnational framework, rhetorical listening can become divorced from notions of Enlightenment subjectivity so as to enable notions of agency (that are important to Ratcliffe) which do not rely upon individual subjectivity to emerge.

politics and ethics” (Ratcliffe 28). To stand-under (as opposed to understand) and listen rhetorically is to proceed without an implied telos of full understanding. By paying attention as much to the discourse as to the subject, listeners can step back and consider their own positionality as well as the speaker’s position within the rhetorical exchange. This leads to accountability on the part of the reader/listener because it requires “consciously standing under discourses that surround us and others while consciously acknowledging all our particular—and very fluid—standpoints” (28). This accountability logic is based on the recognition of a commonality between the rhetor and the listener which fosters an ethical imperative to openness that, “regardless of who is responsible for a current situation, asks us to recognize our privileges and nonprivileges and then act accordingly” (Ratcliffe 31-32). Foregrounding that ethical imperative to openness becomes even more important when considering texts and situations that are not only cross cultural, but that depict or discuss human rights violations. A focus on accountability in the rhetorical exchange can simultaneously undermine the structure of rights and the savage-victim-savior metaphor by drawing attention to one’s positionality within the discourse. Furthermore, by questioning one’s own politics of location under these discourses, one can recognize that neither one’s subject position nor that of the text/narrating subject have to be fixed. As Ratcliffe says, rhetorical listening implies “an ethical responsibility to argue for what we deem fair and just while questioning that which we deem fair and just” (25).

In short, reading as enablement through rhetorical listening is comprised of the following tenets:

- 1) It enables the critical gaze to turn on the reader rather than only on the text, fostering accountability and self-reflexivity when reading human rights texts.
- 2) It enables the text to speak back to critique by asking readers to recognize what the text enables in addition to critiquing what and who it denies.

I recognize that the term enablement can have negative connotations, which I actually think is useful for the concept of reading as enablement. Scholars and teachers must certainly be open to the possibilities of what artistic engagement might bring about or enable in human rights discourse, while simultaneously critiquing what those enablements actually promote or reaffirm (in terms of human rights as an alibi or the structure of rights). Reading as enablement can embrace both the productive, animating capacity of enablement as well as the problematic capacity of the term. Rhetorical listening implies an interrogation of one's subject position in relation to the text and the narrative "I". This interrogation then allows readers to be more attuned to the potentials of narrative in relation to both embracing and critiquing the normative discourses of human rights.

Before examining "Women at Work" in terms of rhetorical listening as a way to read outside the hermeneutics of suspicion, I must offer one more point of explanation and justification as to why it is necessary to consider the rhetorical space we enter when reading, writing, and teaching human rights texts outside of only the hermeneutics of suspicion. Pamela Ryan, writing about black South African women including Magona, in "Singing in Prison: Women Writers and the Discourse of Resistance" (1993), makes a

confession that has become standard practice in third wave cross-cultural feminist scholarship. Ryan writes about the tension between her “first voice” which participates with a critical tone in the discourse expected in literary scholarship and what she calls her “second voice,” filled with affect and emotion which Ryan links to her personal subjectivity. Early in the article, Ryan acknowledges her politics of location as an academic and a “white South African feminist” (57). She admits that because of her whiteness she feels more comfortable expressing her feelings rather than critiquing with suspicion when writing about black women in the early 1990s South Africa, despite the fact that her academic persona is predicated on scholarship on this subject. Ryan spends almost four full pages justifying her ethos. In speaking about Chandra Mohanty’s third world feminism, Ryan admits, “I find this a particularly comforting stance (second voice speaking) since I have frequently experienced guilt and anxiety over my subject-position vis-à-vis the black women writers whose work I write about” (58). In a discussion about the enabling forces of academic scholarship and the ramifications of criticism in politically charged circumstances such as Apartheid and human rights violations, moments of confession such as Ryan’s, even as she writes cogent and useful criticism about resistance, are important to note. Clearly, Ryan sees her criticism as disabling in some way, either to her own academic subject-hood or to the black women she critiques, otherwise she wouldn’t spend the time painstakingly carving out an ethos as a white woman writing about black women’s resistance. She says, “However supportive a white feminist might be of her black ‘sister’, she is not an historical inhabitant of a black

woman's subject position and needs to maintain a rigorous interrogation of her own subject position while listening to black women articulate their situation" (Ryan 59).

Ryan's recognition of her politics of location is a direct result of the latter half of the twentieth and early twenty-first century backlash against hegemonic western feminism in non-western and transnational contexts spearheaded by postcolonial and transnational feminists.¹⁸ This backlash marks an important shift in western academic discourse about transnational feminist and postcolonial issues and strongly informs human rights discourse in the humanities. Although Ryan writes almost 20 years ago, teacher-scholars still face similar issues. Because understanding and justifying one's politics of location has become a necessary and important step in transnational and postcolonial work (especially feminist and gendered work), including human rights scholarship, it has become even more necessary to continue to consider ways to move beyond the divisions that these differences can potentially entrench. Reading outside a hermeneutics of suspicion in addition to rhetorical listening has ramifications, as Ryan shows, for the discursive relationship between reader and narrative within normative discourses of human rights. In other words, sometimes it is just as important to listen to the rhetorical calls of the text and what it is asking of the reader rather than searching the text for its subversive, resistive, or potentially problematic subtext.¹⁹

¹⁸ See Sara Suleri, Chandra Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler, Inderpal Grewal, Caren Kaplan, Wendy Hesford, Wendy Kozol, Veena Das, Saba Mahmood and others.

¹⁹ This kind of critique can often serve a specific agenda. Hesford in "Documenting Violations" critiques Catherine MacKinnon for deploying the rape warfare in Bosnia in service to her anti-pornography stance, suggesting instead that a more productive and more ethical approach to the texts would be to "explor[e] these women's testimonials for what they say about the complexities of women's victimization and agency and the politics of nationalism and transnational feminism" (121). This is a kind of reading as enablement

Listening to Gossip: Reading as Enablement in “Women at Work”

Of the eight different women speaking in “Women at Work” (including the omniscient narrator at the beginning), Atini has three of the nine sections devoted to her. She also provides narrative cohesion as it is her story in the beginning, she is the only narrator that talks directly to the reader, and she is the character to whom all of the other women speak. In this way, through Atini, the multiple voices operating in “Women at Work” contribute to a cohesive narrative about women’s experiences as domestic workers and servants. There are, in all, six other women who speak to Atini: Stella, Sheila, Sophie, Virginia, Joyce, and Lillian.²⁰ By listening rhetorically to these women gossiping, we are able to hear how the shifting of voices, tense and narrative style throughout the novella works against the traditional notion of the autonomous narrating subject of first generation rights and instead contributes to a sense of a collective; however it is a collective that Magona is clear to depict as conscious of who is listening to it and the ways in which it is heard.

The reader discovers each woman’s story through the one sided dialogue, and each story functions also as an educational moment for Atini as each woman gives her advice for how to navigate her medem and work as a domestic laborer since Atini is the new girl on the block. For example, Stella’s medem is particularly spoiled, and the story

that approaches the texts on their own terms to examine what story they tell the reader and how that can be interesting and/or productive.

²⁰ It is no mistake that all of the names are particularly Anglo-European, in fact, the first chapter Atini narrates first person she says “I am Atini, though Mrs Reed calls me Tiny” (Magona 11). This is evidence regarding the intended audience of the text and the ways in which readers are cued to read these women.

that Stella tells Atini about writing her medem a note teaches Atini to stand up for her principles despite her lack of rights (Magona 16-19). The second woman, Sheila, tells Atini that Atini's new medem goes through maids regularly and is particularly difficult to work for. Sheila also briefs Atini about important news regarding mobilization for labor rights, albeit couched in other seemingly insignificant gossip about her own medem:

Have you heard about how maids should not let the white women call them girls or servants anymore? And we should join a group to fight for our rights? Do you think that can happen? White women can learn not to call us girl? After all these years they're used to calling us anything they like—never mind if the girl likes it or not; never mind if it's her name or not? Do you really think they'll learn that? Me, myself, I don't think so. I really don't think so.

Of course, I think it's a great idea. We should have maids' groups. The women we work for *must* have their groups too. Otherwise, if they don't have groups all over the place, how do they know how much they pay us? (Magona 22)

The monologue about labor standards, unions and rights gets diverted quickly as Sheila continues to complain about how the medems must discuss wages since they all pay equally poorly. This diversion draws attention to what readers have access to in the supposedly revealing and disclosing discourse of gossip. In other words, the gossip is different depending on who is listening.

As a public intellectual, Magona is very aware of her readership both in South Africa and elsewhere in the English speaking world.²¹ Therefore, she consciously draws attention to how public the novella is in relation to the privacy of gossip, for example by allowing the reader access to the most intimate thoughts and actions of the mother (who

²¹*Living Loving and Lying Awake At Night* was originally written in English and published first in South Africa by David Philip Publishers in 1991.

we come to learn is Atini) in the first section. This exposure of Atini's innermost thoughts, coupled with the insight into the subversive and secretive gossip that occurs in the private lives of these domestic workers, to the privileged English speaking readership during Apartheid is a significant move on Magona's part. The revealing of this gendered private discourse in such a public (published) way expresses the power of the collectivity that I argue this form of gossip creates if it was able to move from the private to the public sphere.

As I argue above, "Women at Work" calls on its reader to position him/herself as listener in obvious ways. But, as listener, the reader is also positioned outside of the space of collectivity. The narrative gives a feeling of being at once a part of the gossip, while simultaneously reinforcing the externality of the reader in relation to that intimate sphere. For example, each chapter titled after a woman is narrated in first person. Each woman narrating, except for Atini, addresses the reader through Atini as only "you". For example, one character says at the beginning of her chapter "Did I wake you up? You weren't already asleep, surely?" (20), and another character says in the beginning of a different chapter, "*Wethu!* Why didn't you come to the meeting last night?" (Magona 27). Although this direct address seemingly positions the reader directly *as* Atini, in standing under these discourses, the reader is also able to "hear" Atini as the other partner in dialogue even while the other women are speaking. While this could seem like employing a hermeneutics of suspicion—listening for what lies between the lines—in fact, the sections in which other women speak to Atini positions the reader *alongside* Atini so that

readers must identify with her through a complex consubstantial space.²² In his oft quoted passage on consubstantiality, Burke argues, “In being identified with B, A is ‘substantially one’ with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he [sic] remains unique, an individual locus of motives...[T]o begin with ‘identification’ is...to confront the implications of division” (Burke qtd in Hesford “*Kairos*, Global Sex Work, Video Advocacy” 166). It is in the moments of the most intense division that identification becomes most apparent since “identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division. If men [sic] were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity” (Burke 22). This grounding of rhetoric through identification allows for the possibility of communication by first recognizing difference and then finding similarity which, of course, leads Aristotle to make the argument that rhetoric “proves opposites” (Burke 25).²³ As Burke suggests, then, identification enables the reader to recognize that which he/she cannot or doesn’t want to see and it asks us to “locate identification across *commonalities* and *differences*” while recognizing our accountability in the structures of

²² Kenneth Burke in *A Rhetoric of Motives* examines the workings of identification in terms of consubstantiality or identification across difference. This recognition across difference—to identify *with* something—is the moment Burke calls consubstantiality: “This consubstantial “*acting together*” assumes a place where a person ‘is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another’” (Burke qtd in Ratcliffe 55).

²³ However, this bringing together of separate discourses and materiality in ways that can be unconscious can also pave the way for hegemony: “If you would praise God, and in terms that happen also to sanction one system of material property rather than another, you have forced Rhetorical considerations upon us...[since] God has been identified with a certain worldly structure of ownership” (26). Identification ironically therefore underlies both the ways in which communication across difference can occur, but also the ways in which communication across difference will never occur. I’m thinking, for example, of the debate surrounding abortion in which, according to Sharon Crowley, true communication will never occur since each side is arguing points which have been identified with pro-choice and pro-life but which are actually about entirely different issues (women’s rights and fundamental Christianity respectively).

power that precede those identifications, particularly when they are cross-cultural (Ratcliffe 25). Therefore, through attention to the rhetorical negotiations occurring throughout the dialogue in the text, readers can recognize the ways in which the novella actually works against this too easy alignment with Atini. Further evidence of the ways in which the text positions the reader both inside and outside (a move that also draws attention to what the reader has access to) is Atini's direct address at the beginning and at the end. By gossiping to us, not with us, our place as privileged listeners is confirmed.²⁴

While Atini is the only character to narrate in first person without the framing of dialogue quotes (she is the only narrator to which the reader has direct access, the others must be filtered through Atini's platform in order for us to hear them), each woman's direct rhetorical appeal "situates the particular within the communal plural—"I" (Hesford "Documenting Violations" 105). As Hesford argues about the testimonial of which this is the fictional counterpart, there is a "lateral move of identification...which acknowledges the possible differences among 'us' as components of a centerless whole" (Sommer qtd in Hesford "Documenting Violations" 105). Each time one of the women complains about her medem to Atini, she enters this rhetorical space of community built upon their common experiences. The reader is given direct insight into this space, but simultaneously held at a distance in terms of what one can access. In the first chapter the reader is cleverly drawn into the story through the third person narrator and given access to the innerworkings of the character's mind. However, the reader is removed from that space of insight once Atini speaks directly to the reader in Chapter two.

²⁴ It is important to note that the privilege is one that the text encourages the reader to recognize in terms of accountability and Apartheid, not a privilege in terms of insider access to the discourse as a spectator.

Atini talks to the reader in the same way that the other women talk to her. The direct address encourages the reader to consider the ways in which he/she does not have full access to it. Instead of directly identifying as Atini the reader is encouraged to recognize his/her own positionality as outside the space of gossip. At the very end of the novel Atini says,

Aren't the ways of the Man Upstairs strange? Aren't they wonderful? Joyce has told me she has a scholarship. She is going to a school overseas and if she does well they will help her study to become a doctor. Oh, I am so happy for her. Shows you...you have to be determined. There *are* ways. If you know what you want and you don't give up... (Magona 56)

Although this passage might suggest that the text ends on a hopeful note, as one can see, the text actually ends with ellipses; if readers are listening rhetorically and suspending understanding by “standing-under,” then they are able to recognize other aspects of the novella that are also ambivalent and might not suggest such a hopeful telos, another way in which Magona plays with not only readers’ expectations, but their position of privilege. For example, Atini says a few passages before the end, “But, deep down, all the words tell the same story. We are slaves in the white women’s kitchens. That is how I see it. I ran away from that hell of starvation, torn clothes, sick children...Now, I find that I am in hell. And I am a slave” (Magona 56).

Magona’s use of the individual narrative voices to construct a cohesive narrative is significant because of what it suggests about the subject of rights and about being a non-white woman under Apartheid. Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* argues that when human rights violations occur, the subject is automatically decentered, shaken or

disrupted from his/her narrative “I.” The reaction then is to immediately try to recover or recenter this narrative “I” and tell a singular story of said event. This singular story, however, can be unproductive since it can work against the collectivity necessary to rectify the violation or right the wrong.²⁵ This is not to discount the importance for victims of recovering that narrative singular “I” and the first generation rights that come with it, but this theory does have the function of opening that space of narration to include subjectivities and forms of narration that do not rely upon the first person autonomous subject and thus open the discourse to other subjects of rights.

This decentering of the singular “I” has been addressed in terms of the maternal voice in Magona’s work. As Meg Samuelson notes, in other work Magona consciously decenters the speaking “I”, giving it a relational and communal identity by having it talk to other characters. Magona resists the singular “I” in her autobiographies and instead the maternal voice (specifically in *Mother to Mother* and *To My Children’s Children*) “maintains the family, the community, and, by extension, the people’s sense of self” (Samuelson 229). “Women at Work” pushes one step beyond this, suggesting that the narration of the subject of rights must be poly-vocal. Samuelson ultimately suggests that Magona’s narrative voice “weaves new selves in and out of the current South African discourses” (241). In this way, Magona’s work carves out a space for women to write themselves into the post-Apartheid nation of South Africa.

²⁵ Although the most effective humanitarian appeals are traditionally those that describe an individual’s story, Butler considers the function of the narrative “I” within a national context as narrating normative notions of community and/or a singular narrative through which members of a community can come together.

In reading for enablement, readers can also recognize the multiple readings that the novella enables. Margaret Daymond argues that Magona's use of gossip in the novella is a political move that grants a kind of subversive agency based on experience to the women as well as informally polices the women and constructs communities: "it serves as a screen for the production and circulation of a 'knowing otherwise', the use of which ranges from politicization to survival strategies'. At this level, the realistically presented gossip functions as written testimony, as a primary account of actual experience" (Innes and Rooney qtd in Daymond 333). This reading embraces the use of gossip as both resistance and social cooperation, exemplifying more sophisticated moves when criticism pays attention to its own role in the discourse.

Ryan makes a similar move in her reading of "Women at Work" and the role of gossip, arguing that since domestic workers were unable to outwardly resist their treatment by the white "medems" for fear of losing their jobs, instead they turn to "the creation of female spheres of influence within existing structures of oppression...these oppressive institutions are opposed by a subtle undermining of the way they operate" (61), for example, through gossip outside the purview of their employers. In this reading, gossip provides a location through which these women can establish and construct their own selfhood in the safe spaces of Atini's room, despite the fact that it, in fact, does not work against their situation as domestic workers in tangible ways. In this way the reader's role in accessing that community formed outside of but well within the parameters of acceptable behavior of domestic work is tied to this discourse of gossip as a listener instead of a participant. Through Atini, Magona suggests that these women

achieve agency through their gossip, (further evidenced by the suggestion that at least one of them got out and another is able to narrate her story) but also continue living in “hell”.

Despite the fact that each woman’s story in “Women at Work” describes individual moments of the women resisting oppression, ultimately these women cannot collectively advocate for better circumstances for fear of losing their positions. Instead, the text of “Women at Work” symbolically brings these women together. As Christine Loflin argues, “In these short stories, each woman has a voice; by presenting linked stories rather than the story of one, archetypal character, Magona uses the form of her stories to present a vision of collective speech” (Loflin 114). Magona’s text thus functions as a space of resistance by weaving together multiple narrative “I”s into a collective voice.

Conclusion: Mrs Konile’s Testimony

I begin this chapter with passage in the epigraph from *There Was This Goat: Investigating the Truth Commission Testimony of Notrose Nobomvu Konile*, by South African journalist and writer Antjie Krog and her colleagues Mosisi Mpolweni and Kopano Ratele. *There Was This Goat* considers the relationship of narrative to subjecthood and the assumptions behind the ability to hear and/or understand narrative in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) through an extended

examination, both fictional and non-fictional, of one woman's testimony.²⁶ Mrs Konile is one of several mothers of the Gugulethu Seven who came before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to tell of their discovery that their sons were killed and framed by the Apartheid regime.²⁷ Krog et al. set out to understand Mrs Konile's testimony which is confusing at best, obscure and unintelligible at worst. As a way to examine the ways social and political norms underwrite the ability to engage in rhetorical dialogue—the ability to even hear a story—Krog et al. construct a fictional conversation of two white people listening to Mrs Konile's testimony followed by a fictional conversation of two black people listening to Mrs Konile's testimony. Krog et al. turn to fiction as a way to access an allegorical universality that is not immediately available to readers if Krog were to only recount her personal experiences of listening to the real testimony as a reporter during the TRC. As such, the two white characters argue about how to listen to and make sense of Mrs Konile's story since its narrative time, space and events all shift unexpectedly and illogically. The "First White" comments, "You know, we hear these people, but we don't understand them," to which the "Second White" replies "Ja, but do they understand us?" (20). The conversation continues with the Second White carefully defending Mrs Konile's testimony based on the idea that pain negates

²⁶ Antjie Krog's is most famous for her loosely autobiographical and multi-genre novel, *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa*, exploring her experiences as an Afrikaans journalist reporting on the TRC hearings. Krog's latest book about the TRC, *There Was This Goat: Investigating the Truth Commission Testimony of Nostrose Nobomvu Konile*, co-written with Mosisi Mpolweni and Kopano Ratele, was published just over ten years after the TRC's report.

²⁷ The Gugulethu Seven is a well known incident in which seven young black men were killed point-blank by police officers and Apartheid counterinsurgency enforcement. Their deaths well publicized; the young men were framed, and killed for anti-Apartheid activity. The killing was used as a way to convince the state government to increase the security budget for the counterinsurgency unit, Vlakplaas, enforcing Apartheid.

language, sense-making, and subject-hood.²⁸ The First White continues to claim that he/she cannot successfully “hear” Mrs Konile’s testimony as he/she cannot think outside of the stereotypes he/she has grown up with as a beneficiary of Apartheid. This passage is worth quoting at length:

FIRST WHITE: I am trying to say that because of my past as a white person, because of the way narration within and about this country was and still is structured, I simply cannot hear Mrs Konile...Must I conclude that Mrs Konile was not, and never will be, speaking to me?

SECOND WHITE: ...But we can assume that, for Mrs Konile, the event had no beginning and no end, and nothing to link her personal experience and comprehension. The death of her son had no conclusion as far as she was concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect. Now through her testimony she literally had to transfer this event to another person outside herself; she had to transmit her story and bring it to some kind of coherence through the use of language...So, in fact, it had nothing to do with you, she was trying to start a process of healing.

FIRST WHITE: ...I find it crucial for me to understand Mrs Konile...I felt that through my empathy and careful listening I could form a kind of cross-cultural solidarity that could enable us to create a new community. But Mrs Konile’s story was just one big barrier! She made it impossible for me to hear her as a fellow human being. (Krog, et al. 25)

The two white characters serve to establish, for the larger explication of Mrs Konile’s story, the fact that narration, in fact any form of communication, is underscored and permeated by structures of power within the dialogical exchange. Neither of the white characters can “hear” Mrs Konile’s story on its own terms, and, in order to make sense of it, one character overwrites Mrs Konile’s testimony with stereotypes pervasive during

²⁸The Second White who is a thinly veiled fictional caricature of Krog herself is informed by Elaine Scarry’s argument on the relationship between language and torture, and the First White cites Frantz Fanon’s argument that “Mastery of language affords remarkable power” (Krog et al. 21).

Apartheid, attributing *his/her* inability to make it legible to *Mrs Konile's* supposed inability to think three-dimensionally and logically.

This conversation between the two fictional white characters is followed by a fictional rendering of what a conversation between two black women might be like had they also been listening to Mrs Konile's real testimony broadcast (in English) during the TRC.²⁹ These characters lambast the TRC process as a farce in which the black population must take on the burden of changing the white population's racism. The "First Black" criticizes Mrs Konile's testimony as not taking on this challenge and expresses embarrassment at Mrs Konile's nonsensical testimony because it promotes stereotypes, to which the Second Black responds: "Do not get me started. It's all bogus. The whole Truth Commission was...staged for the world and for whites, not for us, sister" (Krog, et al. 30). The Second Black argues that listening to Mrs Konile was impossible because of the uneven power dynamics that permeate the literal and discursive translations of the testimony³⁰:

SECOND BLACK: ...what you read are not her words but a translation of what she said. Language is not a by-the-way issue here...Language changes reality; it constructs what counts as effective or failed communication, what is true, what we see and fail to see, our identities, the universe itself...

FIRST BLACK: ...You can't say this makes sense, however much you defend and love black people.

²⁹ As the author of this fictional conversation says, "Conversations [like this] were, are, to be heard all over the land were to be listening—in kitchens and after lectures, at funerals and weddings, in living rooms and restaurants" (Kopano in Krog et al. 29).

³⁰ Mrs Konile spoke Xhosa and her testimony was translated to Afrikaans and English but not to many of the other African languages, nor was there any official translation from Afrikaans to Zulu, the "home language of most people in this country" (Krog et al. 30).

SECOND BLACK...To truly hear Mrs K's truth, and the truth of most of the black people who testified at the Truth Commission hearings, you have to work hard to understand it, you have to gain our trust. (Ratele in Krog, et al. 31)

The Second Black suggests that Mrs Konile's story draws attention to how listening is not about just understanding, it is about working through the pervasive and violent power dynamics embedded in narrative during and after Apartheid in South Africa, even within racial categories. In other words, both white and black people in South Africa listening must learn to hear Mrs Konile's narrative on its own terms which requires a level of trust in entering that rhetorical exchange. The two blacks disagree on the function of the TRC, with the First Black suggesting it is about teaching whites about the pain of Apartheid and learning forgiveness and the Second Black suggesting that they need a whole new TRC about anger in which Mrs Konile's testimony might be more legible. Mrs Konile's real unintelligible story and the fictional dialogues constructed around it ultimately raise questions about the process of narrating, listening, and meaning-making in the dialogical exchange surrounding human rights discourses. As Krog says in her analysis of the fictional dialogues surrounding Mrs Konile's testimony, "Mrs Konile...was not the only one who was narrating. Everyone who listened to her was interpreting her narrative...and drawing conclusions about her and 'those like her'. While listening, people were also reformulating their own identities in response to her" (Krog et al. 26). Mrs Konile's testimony in fact is a good example of the issues surrounding representativity. Based upon the TRC's standards of what constitutes a story worth hearing, hers was deemed appropriate, but the ways in which it was delivered rendered it un-hearable. Krog et al. in

There Was This Goat then set out to uncover the processes through which it either already was or had to be filtered in order to make it legible to any audience.

Both fictional conversations and the rest of the non-fictional analysis of Mrs Konile's testimony in *There Was This Goat* question the major premises upon which the TRC was predicated: that the very act of narrating and being heard is necessary and potentially healing for both narrator and listener, that narration can construct a certain kind of subjectivity that transcends otherness, and finally that narration that achieves those things provides the foundations for citizenship and moves the public towards a collective nation built upon a new narrative of togetherness.³¹ However, this act of communal narration is predicated upon a specific kind of relationship between speaker and audience, one built on trust and the mutual goal of nation construction. This gives rise to the question of what happens to the concept of narrating a new citizenry or community if those listening have no tools (or desire) to comprehend the narrative on its own terms?

This brief reading of the fictional conversations and Krog et al.'s literary examination of Mrs Konile's testimony serves to underscore the importance of understanding the rhetorical relationship between text and reader, narrator and listener, speaker and audience in human rights representations, particularly when that discourse is

³¹ For a more detailed analysis of the function of narrative and testimony within the TRC see Kay Schaffer and Sidone Smith, Mark Sanders, Desmond Tutu, Fiona C. Ross, Richard A. Wilson. Although a fuller account of the ways in which human rights discourses were deployed in anti-Apartheid movements and in relation to the TRC are important regarding the ramifications of a methodology like reading as enablement and rhetorical listening, that is outside the scope of this analysis which serves to establish a discipline of reading across privilege and difference that can elucidate the ways in which texts call on readers more ethically thereby opening the normative discourse of rights to "hear" those texts operating performatively and pedagogically within the discourse.

mediated by discursive operations of power.³² The fictional passages in *There Was This Goat* thus examine not only the translation of Mrs Konile's testimony and the role of the TRC in constructing citizens but also the process of communication across difference and the role of the listener in understanding human rights narratives. As Krog says of her experience trying to unpack Mrs Konile's testimony in the writing of *There Was This Goat*, "we realized that the dominant discourse at the Truth Commission had no way of 'hearing' Mrs Konile. Her narrative defied all the elements that render narratives 'audible' within what we considered to be the dominant discursive framework operative at the hearings" (Krog et al. 46). Krog, et al. ultimately argue that it was predominantly because western philosophies of identity are assumed universal that Mrs Konile was not able to be heard during the TRC testimonies. As soon as Krog et al. read Mrs Konile's supposedly unintelligible story within a discourse of ubuntu and locate it within African traditions of identity as non-individual, mutually constructed, and historically located (within ancestral traditions), then her nonsensical story makes a lot more sense. As Krog et al. suggest, "it is precisely because [the general audience of the TRC] cannot understand the self-in-community (I am because we are here) and the unity-of-the-world (we are all interconnected, even if we don't always know in what ways exactly) that make a person like Mrs Konile sound incoherent" (Krog, et al. 60). The fictional renditions of conversations between two white people and two black people serve to enable this recognition of the discursive frameworks operating at the hearings and as a

³² Of course this relationship of rhetorical exchange is never devoid of power structures and dynamics, yet there seems to be a kind of urgency to this dialogical exchange when it comes to literature dealing with human rights and/or socio-political issues that is underexplored in the conversation surrounding literary representations and readings of issues of human rights.

carry-over from the Apartheid regime since it is in this literary space that the fears, racism, assumptions, and anger on both sides of the racial divide become available for analysis and critique. Most importantly, in form and content (it is framed rhetorically as dialogue between two people listening to a radio broadcast), the fictional conversations elucidate that the interpretive act of *listening* is incredibly important in understanding the dynamics at play in normative human rights culture. Yet analysis of the rhetorical function of listening remains relatively underexplored within literary readings of human rights narrative. This chapter has attempted to remedy the absence of attention to listening within literary representations of issues of human rights.

As we consider how and why we read, and as we look anew at that which we think we already know, it seems as though we need to also consider seriously what we read for in terms of human rights literature. If we approach with a more open understanding of reading as enablement rather than just consciousness raising or critique, then it might serve to renegotiate the rhetorical relationship and stance of reader and text, subject and audience and, ideally, subject and rights.

CHAPTER V

WOMEN'S RIGHTS AS HUMAN RIGHTS:

THE TRANSNATIONAL SUBJECT IN *THE ROAD TO WANTING*

Recalling that discrimination against women violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity, is an obstacle to the participation of women, on equal terms with men, in the political, social, economic and cultural life of their countries, hampers the growth of the prosperity of society and the family and makes more difficult the full development of the potentialities of women in the service of their countries and of humanity [.]

*-Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of
Discrimination against Women (resolution 34/180) 1981.*

The irreducible imbrication of all claims to human rights within the force field of global capitalism requires us to rethink the understanding of normativity that is the basis of currently existing human rights discourse.

-Pheng Cheah Inhuman Conditions (149).

“Ready at last. I am not afraid” begins *The Road to Wanting*. The novel, Law-Yone's third which was long-listed for the 2011 Orange prize, depicts the main character Na Ga reflecting on her life as she waits in the fictional frontier town of Wanting on the

Chinese side of the China-Burma border.¹ This text provides the final point in the analysis of the ways in which narrative as cultural production both legitimates and potentially destabilizes or remakes normative understandings of human rights.

This chapter examines the ways in which *The Road to Wanting* addresses and potentially reconfigures this underlying logic in the relationship between women's rights as human rights as articulated in the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and global capital. Wendy Law-Yone has described *The Road to Wanting* as a novel about a young woman who moves from tribal existence to modernity within the course of a lifetime. The novel traces the main character Na Ga's coming-of-age from a member of the Lu, a fictional minority community, to her experiences as a domestic worker in Burma, a sex worker in Thailand and finally her return to Burma via China. The idea for the novel was generated when Law-Yone found herself talking with an Inuit shaman and storyteller in his nineties while an African-American soap opera played in the background on his television. In an interview, Law-Yone says that this juxtaposition between what she calls stone-age culture as represented by this man who embodied all that was traditional and anti-modern, and cultural modernity as represented by this pop-culture soap opera fascinated her and so she set out to explore that journey in *The Road to Wanting* (Interview with Bow). This juxtaposition is also one between pedagogical and performative transnational discourses and more local ways of knowing that may or may not speak back to them. By tracing the *bildungsroman* of the modern subject within and against a backdrop of rights, *The Road*

¹ I refer throughout this dissertation to the state of Myanmar as Burma, following a lead from both the text and author under analysis, and most scholars. I also continue to call the state Burma as a political choice.

to Wanting takes up the development of the subject of rights within this normative discourse that cannot transcend the current hegemony of global capitalism. If the discourse on rights is ultimately pedagogical, and the literature that emerges from that discourse could also be pedagogical in terms of articulating normative subjects of rights, then Law-Yone's novel constructs the most nuanced and complex subject of rights. Furthermore, the novel depicts the mobilization of a kind of transnational subjectivity and sisterhood that exists within the purview of normative discourses of rights but which takes up the paradoxes of rights and disrupts their structures by utilizing and claiming the language through which women's rights become human rights. The English language of this sisterhood is appropriated as the main character, Na Ga, grounds the promise of transnational feminist solidarity in a privileging of local subjectivity, disrupting the structures of rights in productive ways.

I turn to Burma (officially called Myanmar by the ruling military) in my final chapter because *The Road to Wanting* provides what I believe is a productive counterpoint to *Persepolis* and Magona's work. Sindiwe Magona's "Women at Work" comes out of and examines a political moment in which South Africa is still very much in the throes of Apartheid and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* gives a historical account of the ways in which Iran's oppressive regime came to power and continues to crack down on uprisings and resistance. Wendy Law-Yone's *The Road to Wanting* gives perspective on the long oppressive rule of the military junta and looks back on Burma's history under

such a dictatorship.² The previous chapters have also explored multiple issues and paradoxes of rights that define the normative discourse of the human rights regime, including the structure of rights and the problems of witnessing (Ch. II), the problematic notion that claiming women's rights as human rights is predicated upon a normative and essentialized concept of woman (Ch. III), and the paradox that in order to mobilize under a universal global heading of women's rights as human rights, women's individual conditions of suffering and subjectivity must be subordinated to a larger notion of community (Ch. IV). Additionally, the chapters have explored individual rights with a privileged transnational setting and collective rights within a national setting. In productive contrast, this chapter turns to a paradox that underwrites the entire project of human rights: the foundations of women's role within human rights and the relationship of rights to discourses of global capital. In this way, this chapter speaks back to the privilege in *Persepolis* and the subordination of the individual to the collective in "Women at Work" by depicting a local subject of rights within a non-western yet still transnational setting. Finally, unlike the example of South Africa and Iran in which the oppression represented was more obviously focused on the identity markers of race and religion respectively, the oppression in Burma is more diffuse and has to do with maintaining military power, socialism, and the repression of ethnic minorities and religions while promoting a "unified" Burma under the heading of racial or ethnic

² Very recently the Military Junta has begun to loosen their grip and relinquish some control of the Burmese people as the country moves toward a democracy. For example, Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest in November of 2010. In 2011 Thein Sein became president and peaceful demonstrations are now allowed. In a historical moment in December of 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met with Aung San Suu Kyi promising to renew diplomatic relations and ease sanctions as Burma continues toward democracy.

purity.³ In this way, this chapter exemplifies another nation-state in which the effects of the autocratic and dictatorial national power wielded by the military junta since 1962 get represented as directly and indirectly effecting women's lives.

The Economic Ties That Bind: Women's Rights as Human Rights

This chapter returns to the questions articulated in the introduction of this project: on what and whose terms are women's rights being determined? How does that normative discourse contribute to the operations of power that both construct and undermine women's subjectivities as rights-bearing subjects throughout the world? I frame this chapter with two epigraphs that exemplify the connection between women's rights and global capital. The first is an excerpt from the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which lays the foundation for the normativity of women's rights as mobilized via their relationship to global economic structures, particularly in developing nations. As Donna Sullivan argues, "systemic gender inequality has been addressed primarily within the framework of development policy rather than the affirmative human rights obligations of states" (127). In order to end where we began in the Introduction and as a further example of how pervasive this logic is, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2010 began her remarks on the event of the 15th Anniversary of the Cairo International Conference on Population

³The concept of racial/ ethnic purity has been tied to nationalism since decolonization. The military junta has capitalized upon this conflation of purity with nationalism and has used it as an excuse to expel and/or deny basic rights to some minority groups that are not officially recognized under the 135 ethnic/racial groups. The junta promotes a national agenda of racial purity.

and Development with the statement that "women's health is essential to the prosperity and opportunity of all, to the stability of families and communities, and the sustainability and development of nations." In this speech commemorating fifteen years of progress after the 1994 conference given almost 30 years after CEDAW's drafting,⁴ Clinton suggests that granting women the right to contraceptives and other basic family planning and health would contribute positively to not only population control but also to the basic subsistence level and economic standing of their families. CEDAW and Clinton's speech justifies women's rights on the basis that "investing" in women's basic reproductive rights will be beneficial for the family and thus the nation.⁵ Clinton's use of investment terminology and metaphor exemplifies the link between women's rights and economic prosperity. In the following passage from her speech, the repetition of the term "investment" underscores this reliance upon a capitalist model:

In the Obama Administration, we are convinced in the value of investing in women and girls, and we understand there is a direct line between a woman's reproductive health and her ability to lead a productive, fulfilling life. And therefore, we believe investing in the potential of women and girls is the smartest investment we can make. It is connected to every problem on everyone's mind around the world today (Applause).

⁴The Programme of Action (A/CONF.171/13/Rev.1) that was published after the UN International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo articulated a 20 year course of action based upon the relationship between "population, development and individual well-being." It becomes clear in this document and the subsequent conversations surrounding it that the individual well-being referenced primarily refers to women and their access to family planning, education, and maternal health.

⁵ This is also predicated upon the logic of the UDHR and other documents that the family is the fundamental unit of the state.

This relationship between women's rights and national and global economic development is not new.⁶ Fifteen years prior, in her capacity as First Lady, Clinton stood in front of another group this time of mostly women at the United Nation's Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, and delivered a speech titled "Women's Rights are Human Rights." Clinton's 1995 speech makes a universalizing gesture like her 2010 speech suggesting, "What we are learning around the world is that, if women are healthy and educated, their families will flourish. If women are free from violence, their families will flourish. If women have a chance to work and earn as full and equal partners in society, their families will flourish. And when families flourish, communities and nations will flourish" (Clinton 113). Clinton bases her ethical and logical appeal for women's rights as human rights by justifying them as in service to the family and thus the nation. By this logic, when women's rights are violated all human rights are violated and thus, women's rights *are* (and provide the foundation for) human rights and conversely, human rights are women's rights. Given this history of women's rights as tied to the family and thus the nation, it is not unexpected that in 2010 Clinton describes a notion of women's rights that is inextricably tied to global economies. In the fifteen years that elapsed between the two speeches, the function of women within the normative discourse of universal rights widened from the family to the nation to the global economy suggesting that this relationship has become normative enough that it is rhetorically effective when

⁶ It is generally well known that women's rights are used as measures for global economic development. For example, in her article "Globalization of Women's Rights Norms: The Right to Manifest Religion and 'Orientalism' in the Council of Europe, Charlotte Skeet references articles such as the World Bank's, *Engendering Development: Through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources and Voice* (2001) and Genevieve Painter's "Linking Women's Rights and MDG's: An Agenda for 2005 from the Gender and Development Network" (2005) to name a few.

speaking to an international audience to justify women's rights as human rights based on their role in global capitalism.

This relationship of women's rights to their function within global economies is even less surprising when considered within the discourse of normative rights writ large as embedded in global capital.⁷ Pheng Cheah argues that discourses of rights are always already “contaminated” by global capital (146). Therefore, in order for the subject to be recognized within the global capitalist regime out of which rights emerge the subject must be legible economically. As Cheah says, “Globalization touches the core of what it means to be human” (Cheah “Humanity” 1552).⁸ The global North’s participation in rights discourse is contaminated by global capital through the normativity of the causality between the promotion of human rights and economic growth, “for instance, when the United States conceptually relates human rights issues to trade negotiations” (Cheah 161). This is clearly exemplified in Clinton’s speeches and the instruments of women’s rights when promoting women rights becomes the foundation for national and global economic development. The link is further solidified in the example of Burma when nation-states, including the US, levy trade sanctions as penalty for human rights abuses

⁷There is a distinction here between the relationship of women’s rights to economic rights and the embeddedness of normative rights discourse in global capital. Neither are necessarily problematic, except in the ways in which they get played out within uneven power dynamics.

⁸Cheah also examines this relationship between the human rights regime and discourses of global capital. He locates the hegemony of global capital in rights discourse in the conversation over universality and cultural relativism. This is a particularly hot topic for feminist discourses and the complexities of the issue are no more apparent than in the international discussions over prostitution and sex-work. Although it has led to productive complications and interrogations of the exportation of ideologies from the global North, the juxtaposition of universality against cultural relativism is problematic for several reasons in both rights and feminist discourses. For example, it ignores the possibility that the cultural relativist approach constructs a universal national subject that elides indigenous identities that are not legible within nationalist discourses (Howard-Hassman 440). In the case of sex-work, the universality of victimization in the discourses surrounding prostitution ignores the “different ways in which women and activists interpret and resist these practices in different regions of the world” (Hesford 127).

by the regime so that stymieing economic growth and denying participation in globalization becomes adequate punishment for gross human rights abuses. Furthermore, as Cheah notes,

the World Trade Organization...is the main institution for the execution of an elaborate plan to reorganize global production and production capacities... [industrialized countries] seek to produce a global division between knowledge-rich and knowledge-poor countries, recolonizing the latter by permanently blocking them from acquiring the knowledge and capacity to accumulate wealth (Cheah *Inhuman Conditions* 162).

In this equation then, the countries in the global South function as participants in the global capitalist system through their response to the North's model by seeking to compete on the North's grounds, calling upon global capitalism as the vehicle for development. Ironically, then, despite the fact that they are used as justification both for and against (in the case of sanctions as penalty for rights abuses) economic development, "it is the disenfranchised who are caught in the aporetic embrace between a predatory international capitalism and an indigenous capitalism seeking to internationalize" (Cheah *Inhuman Conditions* 164).⁹

Clinton's speeches over the past fifteen years exemplify Cheah's and others'¹⁰ contentions that normative rights—and women's rights in particular—are always already

⁹ According to Cheah, the NGOs in the South, despite the fact that they are ostensibly neutral in relation to the state and its relationship to global capital, are still participants in global capitalism through their reliance upon and regulations by nation-states and sources of funding: "NGOs from the South are precariously balanced between, on the one hand, relying on Northern sources for funding...and the expansionist economic interests of wealthy postindustrial countries and, on the other hand, criticizing statist models of development in the South without jeopardizing the ambivalent need for the nation-state as an agent of accumulation in defense against transnational capital. Simply put, NGOs are always part of the linkages of global capital as they invest state-formations and are effective only by virtue of being so" (Cheah *Inhuman Conditions* 166).

¹⁰ For example, see Upendra Baxi's *The Future of Human Rights*.

embedded in global capitalism. In drawing attention to this rhetoric of women's rights in relation to global capital, I draw attention to the ways in which CEDAW relies upon an already existing relationship between human rights and global economies so as to more deeply tie women's rights to human rights. There are serious and important gains to be made through this rhetorical appeal and relationship. For example, part of what the fundamental discourse of rights attempts to provide, explored more fully in the previous chapter on the ICESCR and Sindiwe Magona's "Women at Work", is the right to work and thus the right to a sustainable and sustaining economic condition. However, as with most discourses that become normative, the relationship of women's rights to human rights through global economic capital has its problems. For example, predicating women's rights on their relationship not only to the family but to global economic structures locates them more explicitly within second and third generation rights rather than within the more comparatively normative and recognized first generation individual rights (a discourse women have fought hard to become a part of, despite its drawbacks as well—see Chapter II). In so doing, the relationship also privileges a kind of heterosexual normativity and presumed nuclear family. Essentially, CEDAW encourages and enables women to gain access to the existing structures of normative rights as articulated in the UDHR productive and problematic though it may be.

In 1995 the *New York Times* called Burma the new South Africa because of its track record of human rights and environmental abuses (Bow 37). The literary conversation surrounding Burma is an interesting site through which to consider the gendered modes of resistance to the regime since the political resistance to the military

junta is literally embodied by a woman. Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the Burmese Democratic Front and proponent of non-violence, is the face of opposition to the government. Under intermittent house arrest since 1989, Suu Kyi was released from house arrest most recently in November of 2010 as the junta relinquished some control and established a democracy. She is now an active member of parliament.

Once one of the more wealthy nations in the region, in 1987 the currency was severely devalued and economic sanctions continue to be levied against the dictatorship for human rights violations. Until recently, Burma was one of the most isolated countries in terms of global economic markets, except for their relationship to China, who, according to recent estimates has invested at least 15 billion dollars in the current regime (Ide). This investment means that China has a vested interest in maintaining the regime and, as experts suggest, part of Burma's latest move toward democracy is an explicit move away from China's influence.¹¹ These global economic relationships are examined by *The Road to Wanting* in Na Ga's transnational movement through Burma, Thailand, and China, and through other characters in the novel. Furthermore, Law-Yone's positionality as an exiled American and British writer makes this an interesting site through which to explore the representation of the normative culture of rights regarding the effects of global capital on individual gendered rights.

Wendy Law-Yone has examined the effects of the Junta's power and the ways in which they are played out upon women's bodies in all three of her novels to date, all of

¹¹ The official international broadcast for the U.S. Government, the *Voice of America* suggests that "We know from interviews with Myanmar leaders and business community that there was a feeling of claustrophobia in the country related to China's dominance" (Bower qtd in Ide). Additionally, last year the country halted a major Chinese hydropower dam project in northern Burma further suggesting that the country is moving toward engaging more with diverse international partners and limiting China's influence.

which are directly or indirectly about Burma. Law-Yone was born in Mandalay and grew up in Rangoon.¹² Her father was the founder of an English language daily called the Rangoon *Nation* until he was imprisoned under Burma's dictator General Ne Win before he exiled as a revolutionary in Thailand and as a writer and lecturer in the US (*Versilio*). Wendy Law-Yone left Burma at twenty and spent some time in Southeast Asia before moving to the U.S. in the 1970s to study comparative literature and modern languages (*Versilio*).

Writing about Law-Yone's second novel, *Irrawaddy Tango*, in which a Burmese village girl who marries the dictator of her country (a fictional but unmistakable representation of Burma) and then becomes the leader of the rebel forces fighting to overthrow him, Leslie Bow argues that Law-Yone "suggests a fictive solution to an ongoing historical conflict in Burma by appealing to the individual's sovereignty as protected by the discourse of human rights" (Bow 41). Bow's perspective on the ways in which Law-Yone's work is situated within both human rights discourse and Asian-American discourse is useful here in considering the transnational readership of Law-Yone's work. Bow argues that Asian-American literature in particular "is a site where representations of Asia are reproduced for American consumption" (40), so one needs to situate the literary representations in relation to the media representations and stereotypes of countries like Burma, particularly when it comes to issues of human rights, so as to avoid perpetuating problematic structures of rights and the alibis to which these

¹² As Leslie Bow argues, this positionality enables Law-Yone to "produce critiques of postcolonial state politics that employ First World conceptions of individual rights" and to "interrogat[e] the conflict between ethnic group interests and national unity via a gendered appeal," thus "rais[ing] pressing questions about human rights' necessary subject" (Bow 41-42).

stereotypes have historically led.¹³ Instead, when approaching literary texts representing countries, in this case Burma, that have been public targets for human rights violations readers and critics must ask, “do such representations merely serve to reproduce...Asia’s difference from the West?” (40). In the case of *Irrawaddy Tango*, Bow argues that rather than just reproducing this difference, the text “deploy[s] the rhetoric of human rights in order to critique methods of governmental repression justified by the construction of national crisis...*Irrawaddy Tango* suggests a fictive solution to an ongoing historical conflict in Burma by appealing to the individual’s sovereignty as protected by the discourse of human rights” (41). I argue that Law-Yone’s more recent text *The Road To Wanting* follows Law-Yone’s perspective in her second novel but complicates, to a degree, this difference.¹⁴ To these ends, much like in *The Road to Wanting*, *Irrawaddy Tango* depicts a gendered form of resistance to the autocratic leadership in Burma.¹⁵ Thus, in both texts, women’s bodies become the space upon which the autocratic government’s power is represented as played out in the form of sexual repression, and women's bodies stand in for the repression of indigenous groups seeking autonomy and upon which the state gains its sovereignty (Bow 43).¹⁶ Furthermore, Law-Yone's location as an exiled figure who has spent much of her adult life in the US means that her novels emerge out of a conscious and subconscious engagement with the normative discourses

¹³ I examine this contextual importance in terms of a transnational readership more closely in Chapter III in relation to the stereotypes and media representations of Iran.

¹⁴ Law-Yone does perpetuate a problematic perspective on issues of indigeneity, however.

¹⁵ In Bow's words, “Significantly [the deployment of universal notions of individual rights] are not only nationally inscribed but gendered according to First World precepts about injury, women's rights, and individual redress. [Law Yone's] commentar[y] depends on constructing a female subject of state reprisal--the repression of political dissent is depicted as the regulation of female sexuality” (42).

¹⁶ As Leslie Bow claims, *Irrawaddy Tango* “center[s] on the figure of a woman who becomes the singular subject of state reprisal, a body whose actions must be forcibly controlled for the continuance of the national status quo” (Bow 43).

and pedagogical principles of the UDHR and CEDAW circulating within the U.S. Given that this discourse cannot deny its emergence out of and location within global capitalism, scholars of human rights discourse must interrogate the limits and possibilities of that normative discourse for the most vulnerable. In other words, we must ask, “What do we mean when we posit human rights? How are these various positings positioned in or by the current global conjecture?” (Cheah 148-9).¹⁷ As a *bildungsroman* of a young girl in south-east Asia which explores this very juxtaposition and relationship between women's rights and their relationship to global capital, *The Road to Wanting* is uniquely poised to address these questions of the normative discourse.

The Language of Transnational Sisterhood

The book opens as Na Ga prepares herself for suicide, despite her lack of rope and, it seems, her lack of desire to die. We are first introduced to Na Ga when she is at her most vulnerable and her most lost. She has been discarded by her American lover and savior, Will, and sent back to Burma via China when she decides to commit suicide. Using a torn *longyi* (a traditional dress in Burma that represents resistance to the military junta) to form a rope, she manages to string it from a barred window and plans to escape from a world in which she believes she has nothing for which to live. However, the term “desire,” like much of the language in the novel, works in multiple ways. Her desire to

¹⁷ According to Cheah, human rights activists and scholars must ask “not...whether universal human rights exist or not. Instead we should focus on the nature and limits of the normative claims being made by various actors...when they appeal to human rights within the theoretical framework of established human rights discourse” (Cheah 148).

die is stymied by her own body in the ultimate Cartesian split, first by a charley horse that renders her unable to lift her legs and then by an unexpected awakening of sexual desire: “Then something stirs and trembles in the lower regions. Something starts to convulse down deep. My cunt, what do you know, is protesting” (3).¹⁸ In linking Na Ga’s desire for life with sexual desire, Law-Yone ironically foreshadows the tale of abuse Na Ga suffered as a sex worker in Thailand in which her survival was predicated upon divorcing her mind from her body, and her will to live from others sexual desire. In the very moment that Na Ga’s mind overcomes her body, however, there is a knock at the door and Na Ga is saved by the young Chinese receptionist, Minzu, who comes to tell her that Na Ga’s handler who was supposed to smuggle her across the border has killed *himself*. In this striking opening scene, Na Ga’s only available means of agency for working against the system in which she is but a small pawn is to take her own life with a cheap *longyi* made in Thailand. These first few pages of *The Road to Wanting* establish several of the themes that the novel explores: The role of language as it relates the promise of transnational sisterhood, the structure of rights with/in global capital as represented by sex work, and, through those, the relationship of the gendered subject of rights to the larger forces of global capitalism.

This section examines the ways in which language operates in the text so as to draw attention to a subject of rights who is simultaneously linguistically constructed within the structure of global capitalism but who also uses that language against itself to carve out a space of transnational feminist solidarity that promotes agency within that

¹⁸ Law-Yone has said that she likes to use explicit sexual references and scenes to explore issues of meaning and power that aren't often explored in forthright and honest ways (interview with Bow).

structure. *The Road to Wanting* interrogates the operations of power that underwrite both rights discourse and feminism through textual word play, metaphor, and double meanings of names, destabilizing the fixity of meaning and drawing attention to the ambivalence in the relationship between the sign and signifier as a way to speak back transnationally to the structures of global capital. For example, in a moment of meta-textual reference to the double meanings of words, Na Ga thinks how strange the term “nest egg” is: “(Now there’s a term that’s never made sense. How is it that the same word can mean ‘savings’ as well as ‘tricking’, for doesn’t a *nest* egg, in English, also mean a *trick* egg, a lure for a hen to come and lay more eggs in that selfsame nest?)” (13). The English language is depicted here as a tricky and ambiguous construct in which the very thing that provides for one’s future is, at the same time, a farce. This reference to a nest egg also serves as an unmistakable metaphor for the ways in which global capital functions in that often what is actually being traded doesn’t tangibly exist but can still function as a “lure” for further investment. This metaphor also points to the relationship between globalization, global markets, and English. The language here is key as it represents a moment of translation, not only between languages as Na Ga navigates her transnationalism but also in terms of the ways in which the normative discourse of rights gets translated in different discursive locations. When Na Ga tries to help Minzu learn English, which Minzu mispronounces as “Anguish,” Na Ga faces a fill-in-the-blank question in which all of the options could be a potential answer depending on context. Na Ga says to herself, “How I hate these games of choice. Really, how is one to know whether it’s his source, his chain, his train or his course of thought that Larry has lost? Perhaps he has lost them all. Or none of them”

(67). While the language of global capital as represented by English attempts to regulate, control, manage and stabilize, the language of the novel attempts to destabilize, disrupt, deregulate and make fluid by pointing to moments in which meaning is not fixed, especially in English.¹⁹

According to Tamara Ho, Law-Yone was the first exiled Burmese author to write in English and, thus, “introduced into the Anglophone literary frame Burmese immigrant characters who negotiate language as a tool of oppression and as a means of resistance” (666). However, in *The Road to Wanting*, Law-Yone uses language less as a means of direct resistance for her characters and more meta-textually as a means of play, of drawing attention to the relationship between the subject and the structures that construct and confine that subject. Although the book is written in English, it is ultimately unclear what language the main character speaks to the reader, further establishing Na Ga's ambivalent relationship to “Anguish.”²⁰ The fluidity of meaning as it relates to language leads to some of the more entertaining and insightful passages that describe failed communications in Burmese, Chinese, English and Thai. For example when Na Ga has to speak to the male desk clerk at the hotel in Wanting, she cannot understand him since he “speaks no known language” (48). When he does speak to her, it is in what she thinks is English but it is entirely incomprehensible:

¹⁹ As Crispin Thurlow argues, not only is English the standard language of business and transnational corporations but it is also used as an instrument of regulation for “evaluating, controlling and managing not just ‘products’ but also the people who ‘make’ them.” Thurlow uses the examples of call centers in which workers are “policed into particular ways of speaking” (6).

²⁰ The book was originally written in English but often Na Ga clarifies when she speaks in English and/or Burmese making the reader question what language her default voice speaks.

'Are you cowed?' he sneers, in what sounds like English.
 Cowed? I frown. I am making every effort to understand.
 'Are you *cowed*?' he repeats.
 'Cold?' Is he asking if I am *cold*?
 'Are you cowed? Are you cowed?'
 Is it necessary for him to *shout*, the oaf? I glower back at him, then shrug. What's the point anyway?
 'Pez,' he says darkly.
 'Pez?'
 'Pez!' He's raising his voice again.
 I raise mine even louder. 'Pez? What Pez? What are you saying?' I want to smack his sullen face with its over-large Chinese pimples.
 'Pez! Pez!' he hisses, waiving me away, and giving his full attention to a newspaper he's pulled out from under the counter.
 So this is what I face from now on, with Jiang gone: no one to rely on, no one to speak to in a language I fully understand. (Law-Yone 49)

However, directly after this exchange Minzu, who does not speak English and can barely communicate to Na Ga in Burmese, addresses Na Ga in Burmese, and Na Ga understands her perfectly: “‘Ma Ma! Where you go? I worry. I bring you tea...you not there’” (49). The juxtaposition of the male clerk, who remains unintelligible to Na Ga and the reader, with Minzu, who Na Ga and thus the reader understands implicitly, suggests that this sisterhood is first and foremost predicated on being understood as an intelligible (and linguistic) subject. It is through Minzu's address of Na Ga as *big sister* (Ma Ma) that the beginnings of a community in which Na Ga can be recognized and understood is formed and that provides the foundation for the possibility of a transnational feminist solidarity. Although many of the uses and definitions of transnational can be problematic,²¹ I define this solidarity as transnational in this final chapter because this version of solidarity that

²¹ See the discussion about transnational feminism, subjectivity and agency in the Introduction to this dissertation for a deeper definition and the stakes of using the term transnational.

the text suggests critiques the ways in which feminist (and rights) discourse performs and constructs existing hegemonic western structures.²²

The indigenous group to which Na Ga belongs is intended to represent the smallest minority group in Burma. Law-Yone is clear that she based the fictional Lu on a real Burmese minority group called the Wa, but chose to construct a fictional tribe rather than name the Wa. She says, “I chose to model my character's culture on a group like the Wa because until recently it was a Stone Age culture. I don't name the Wa in my novel; I don't want to appropriate a culture. I want to respect it; I want to use it as a template” (Interview with Bow 194). Law-Yone takes pains to construct this ethnic group in the novel complete with fictional stereotypes, a creation myth and a world view. For instance, they have a reputation for being ignorant, backwards, isolated, savage head-hunters. They believe their souls are butterflies that are only poised on earth for a short time and whose names are held in a poppy seed until they are old enough for it to be sucked out and told to them. The Lu creator holds a large book, featured in one of Na Ga's reoccurring dreams, that chronicles the means by which all Lu will die. This book plays a large role in Na Ga's journey home and final acceptance of her identity. This fictional ethnic identity is physical, not just cultural, with characteristics such as eyes like “down-turned commas,” gums that “show above [their] teeth when [they] smile,” and dark skin (244). The Wild Lu “see things only as they are, not as they might possibly be.

²² As Hesford notes, “I use the terms *transnationality* to capture movements across space, time, and discourses and to disrupt totalizing top down views of globalization...as [Aihwa] Ong notes, transnationality should not be conceptualized in opposition to globalization as if it were not regulated by the logic of global capital. In other words, transnationality is not inherently good or progressive” (“*Kairos*, Global Sex Work, Video Advocacy” Footnote 8 pg 166).

Nor do [they] understand the lies known as irony” (252). This, of course, is ironic and comes at the end of a tirade in which the narrator claims proudly all of the aspects of the Lu that are seen as derogatory. The Wild Lu also heavily fortify their borders and have very little contact with the outside world, representing a very real desire for ethnic sovereignty that many of the hill tribes hold.

This detailed creation of the fictional Wild Lu serves to provide the backdrop for Na Ga's subject construction that emerges in the space between the intensely local (the Lu) and the transnationality that is forced upon her as a sex worker trafficked across national borders. In a twist towards the end of the novel, the reader comes to understand that Law-Yone has named the Wild Lu after the Burmese word for human. This link becomes explicit at the very moment in which Na Ga finally claims her heritage as Wild Lu and decides to return home to Burma. At the end of the novel, Na Ga receives a posthumous note from her handler confessing his identity as also Lu. When alive, Mr. Jiang had denied his Lu identity in the face of discrimination and subordinated it to the larger cause of the insurgency against the Burmese state, at one point wiping out entire Lu strongholds in the name of the Shan militia. Mr. Jiang's confession that they are of the same people, the Wild Lu, prompts Na Ga to claim her indigenous identity but in relation to the larger construct of what it means to be human within the linguistic structure of rights:

‘Mr Jiang...is a Lu!’ I howl.

Minzu says, ‘A Lu...yes, indeed’

‘No! A Lu!’ I am shouting to be understood, to emphasize the right tone, not the tone for the same word that means ‘human being’ in Burmese. ‘I mean a Wild Lu!’

‘A Lu. A Wild Lu.’ She is still using the tone for ‘human being’, but I know it is only her accent now, I know she follows my meaning.
‘But I, too...’ I am beating my chest to make sure she understands – beating it too, to stop myself tearing out my hair. ‘I, too, am a Lu! I am a Lu! I am a Wild Lu...and I didn’t know another Lu in front of my face!’ (245)

The confusion in the pronunciation of the ethnic identity of Lu with the Burmese word for human being is in keeping with the actual meaning of Lu in Burmese. Lu is widely translated in Burmese to mean human or human being, and so what Na Ga is grieving here is not the fact that she didn't recognize the physical features of Mr Jiang's “Lu-ness”, but that she didn't recognize his humanity in relation to her own. If one re-reads the passage by inserting “human” into the place of “Lu,” which readers of Burmese would assumedly do, all of a sudden the passage takes on a radically different meaning. This textual moment in which the universal human subject is conflated linguistically with the individual and indigenous subject is also a conflation between solidarity rights (both gendered and indigenous) and individual rights.

Clearly, naming is a device that Law-Yone uses to express the relationship of subjects to language and the larger forces of both national and global discourses. For example, Na Ga stays in “The Friendship Hotel” in “Wanting”, and her American savior's name is “Will.” However the names of Na Ga and her “sister” Minzu are worth unpacking for their significance. For example, on the surface, Na Ga's name means something relatively insignificant—when pronounced as Nah Gah it means “ears-that-stick-out,” but when pronounced *N'gah* it means “the serpent-dragon” (60)—however the name Na Ga is symbolic for its lack of meaning. According to Lu tradition, one does not find out his/her real name until one is old enough to have it drawn out of a name seed by

one's mother. Since Na Ga left her mother at too young of an age to enter the work force, first as domestic help and then as a sex-worker, she was never told her real name and so goes by a provisional one that is effectively meaningless. This no-name then becomes even more symbolic in terms of representing subaltern positionality.

Additionally, the word “Minzu” can be loosely translated into “ethnic group” in Chinese. The relationship between Minzu and Na Ga, then, comes to represent a sisterhood that is not tied to normative national discourses on either side of their transnational solidarity. In fact, Minzu facilitates almost all of Na Ga’s major turning points in her journey since the text juxtaposes the present tense with Na Ga's recounting of past tense events. Each flash back is juxtaposed with an event in Wanting, generally involving Minzu, that propels Na Ga's coming-of-age and ultimately enables her to arrive at the decision to return home on her own will: Minzu interrupts Na Ga's hanging; she enables Na Ga's first real sleep (a turning point in Na Ga's decision to return home); she takes Na Ga swimming where Na Ga finally feels healed of her wounds; and it is in her discussions with Minzu that Na Ga finally finds the sister that she has been wanting.

Law-Yone describes *The Road to Wanting* as one in which the character is so invested in escaping that she forgets who she is until she is forced to remember. Law-Yone likens Na Ga's journey to her own exile from Burma saying in an interview, “I...came to realize...that my journey was in a way a reflection of this young woman’s journey...It's about losing site of your origins and wanting so much to escape what is painful about it and yet not being able to and about not recognizing your kin, not recognizing yourself until you are inevitably forced to” (*Versilio*). Na Ga's recognition of

her kin that Law-Yone describes is not just her realization of Mr. Jiang as a Lu and a human (which Minzu facilitates), but also it is a recognition of her feminist solidarity with Minzu. This solidarity is not a kind of sisterhood that is founded upon a second-wave, western feminist, liberatory discourse but rather one predicated upon a promise of transnational solidarity following Chandra Mohanty's concept as something that is defined by "mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities...feminist solidarity as defined here constitutes the most principled way to cross borders" (Mohanty 7).²³ However, Minzu and Na Ga also remake Mohanty's definition of feminist solidarity since theirs works within the framework of global capital while Mohanty's is fundamentally opposed to capitalism. If Mohanty argues that "capitalism is seriously incompatible with feminist visions of social and economic justice," (9) Na Ga's solidarity with Minzu in the most unlikely of locations suggests that, despite its incompatibility with global capitalism, this kind of feminism must survive and operate within this structure if transnational feminist solidarity is to also promote human rights.

Since women are the lynch pin for familial, national and global economic success, they also become the subject (and the site) to be freed and saved by those with rights from the trappings of what is seen as backwards, patriarchal tradition. In gendered terms this is usually played out through metaphorical discourses of unveiling and modernizing. However, this savior metaphor is also embedded in the complex and contentious

²³ Also, see Nima Naghibi's *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran* which, although located in Iranian feminist discourses of veiling and unveiling, is useful since it suggests a model of sisterhood that does not flatten power dynamics, nor does it suggest false hope for equality.

discourse surrounding the global sex-work industry and human trafficking. Although statistics are unreliable and difficult to obtain, according to the UN Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP) Burma serves as a source country for prostitution throughout South-East Asia, including Thailand, China, Malaysia, South Korea, and Macau: “UNICEF for example, proposed in 2003 that 10,000 girls are being trafficked every year from Myanmar into Thai brothels alone.”²⁴ It is impossible to get accurate readings of these numbers for many reasons, not least because most of these subaltern women fall outside of the recognition of the nation-state and because, as I explore in *The Road to Wanting*, families of women who are trafficked into prostitution often will not take the women back home even if repatriation is attempted. Additionally, while there has been a concerted effort to recognize human trafficking as a serious problem for human rights,²⁵ it is a gendered issue that does not always get recognized within international and global rights concerns (Warren 242). As a victim of both, Na Ga represents the site upon which the liberalizing versions of western feminism (examined in Ch. III) and the problematic structure of rights in terms of the responsibility to right wrongs (examined in Ch. II) converge.

²⁴ Research also suggests one-third of the population has moved between rural and urban areas in the region, and “one mid-point estimate suggests that out of one million illegal immigrants in Thailand, 75% are from Myanmar.” Additionally, “a total of 134 trafficking cases were investigated in 2008 involving 303 victims (153 female and 50 male), and 342 traffickers prosecuted. 15 cases were of internal trafficking, and there are likely to be further cases in remote areas. Identified cases can only represent a small fraction of the scale of the problem.”(UNIAP).

²⁵ For example, in 2000 the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children was established which helped to formalize this issue as something requiring international attention. Additionally, Wendy Hesford cites the 1983 conference organized by Charlotte Bunch and Kathleen Barry as a turning point in the attentions on violence against women in the context of traffic in women and sexual slavery. She also points out that it was a major focus in the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women (126).

Throughout much of the book Na Ga seemingly has very little actual agency over her decisions. As a little girl Na Ga is sold to another village's headman's wife by her parents to ensure Na Ga's survival in dire economic circumstances. She is saved from the abusive headman's wife by Daw Daw Seng and taken to Rangoon where they both serve as a servant to an American family who all but adopt Na Ga. When they leave, she and Daw Daw Seng return to Seng's village in the Shan state where Na Ga works in a paper factory. She sees a glamorous woman arrive in a helicopter and after finding out that the woman is a broker who, Na Ga is told, finds work for women in the city. Na Ga leaves with a different broker who traffics her into Thailand where she becomes an indentured sex worker. Eventually she is given her "pink slip" with her freedom, but the text implies that Na Ga remains in the industry before being detained in a police raid. She is taken by the police to a relocation camp on the Burmese border where she is once again saved, this time by Will, the American who works for the International Committee for Repatriation (ICR). As her sponsor, Will takes her to Bangkok where she serves as his companion. After 10 years of living together, Will decides he wants to marry his American girlfriend and sends Na Ga back to Burma. As one can see, the novel's central metaphor and title revolve around Na Ga's constantly wanting rather than acting or doing: Wanting her American "family" to take her to America with them (which they do not), wanting a better life than the one she has living with Daw Daw Seng as a factory worker (which leads her being trafficked into sex-work), wanting to pay back her debt to the brothel owners (which she finally does, but then still doesn't leave), wanting her American savior Will to not leave her (which, of course, he does), wanting to commit suicide (and failing),

and finally, wanting to leave Wanting. Na Ga's most active decisions ultimately land her as a prostitute in Thailand, and, finally, at the end of the novel when she has come to embrace her identity, Na Ga actively decides on her own accord to return to Burma. The text thus resists the narrative of passivity surrounding global sex work and interrogates instead Na Ga's positionality within the structure of rights and the structure of global economies.

The narrative of the passive victim is one that is well known in stories of global sex-trafficking. As Wendy Hesford argues, this narrative creates a strange marriage in the agendas of international human rights activists, feminist and anti-immigrationists (125). She says, "despite ideological differences, all the antitrafficking campaigns, including those that address trafficking as a complex problem involving context-specific issues of migration and labor, rely on women's victimization narratives to structure their rhetorical appeal" (126). This narrative of victimization came out of second-wave attempts at mobilizing a kind of global feminism that was predicated upon universalizing women's role as oppressed under patriarchy. Thus, "in the course of creating sympathetic visibility for women and girls coerced and trafficked into the sex trade, antitrafficking campaigns often isolate women and children as objects to be seen and then rescued" (130). It is this scenario exactly that gets played out in Na Ga's rescue by Will. He comes to the refugee village first with a team of people representing ICR, the organization who broker repatriation for the detained women,²⁶ and sees Na Ga from across the room: "I noticed

²⁶ The irony is not lost here that this kind of repatriation for women who have been arrested and sent to these refugee camps for deportation can be seen as a kind of internationally sanctioned trafficking itself which makes Will less a savior and even more of a participant in the global structure from which he

him right away, the tall one in the checkered shirt who detached himself from the group he'd arrived with and was standing alone, watching me....He appeared to be looking down at everyone" (158). Later, when she lives with Will, Na Ga describes how he would look at her: "Eyes narrowing and flaring as though to focus his gaze, he seemed to be looking *through* me, *past* me, down his nose at me, trying to see beyond the obvious, to pick out some hidden detail" (98). Will returns a few days later after his initial visit to the camp to remove Na Ga. When he first speaks to her, he addresses her in the Lu language, and it becomes apparent that he is only interested in Na Ga because of her unusual minority status, a status with which she barely self-identifies. The power dynamic in their relationship is obvious from the beginning when Na Ga leaves with Will:

Of course I said yes—but with an indifferent shrug, careful not to seem too eager, in case I was being tested, or teased...Blindly, I had signed the release papers thrust at me, then followed him out through the camp and into the waiting car, never even stopping to say goodbye to Thaya, or to gather up my few belongings. It was only when he handed me his handkerchief, saying 'It's okay, everything's going to be okay,' that I gave up pretending it was the cold that was making my nose run and my eyes stream. (164)

Na Ga does not decisively say yes; she says yes as if she had no other choice. She does not sign the papers knowingly; she signs them blindly. This scene would suggest that Law-Yone's description of sex trafficking and the role of international aid is very much in line with the narratives perpetuated in the antitrafficking campaigns that Hesford critiques. Part of the complexity of the discourse surrounding sex work and sex trafficking is that categorizing women as victims in all sex work, even consensual sex

benefits and in which he has independent mobility and from which Na Ga does not benefit and in which she doesn't not have upward mobility.

work, has the effect of universalizing women under the category of exploitation based upon sex. While antitrafficking campaigns capitalize upon and construct this universalization so that even legal prostitution becomes something to save women from, ultimately, it is a problematic construct that flattens the contextuality and complexity of women's lives throughout the world and reduces their ability for agency within the system: “Women are seen as radically naive...The testimonies of women provide evidence that they were duped and trapped into prostitution” (Hesford 130-1). This is akin to the universalizing gestures of western feminism under the oppressions of patriarchy regardless of local operations of power and ultimately “does not account for how the economy structures sexual desire and the demand for commercial sex work” (A. Wilson cited in Hesford 132).

Removed from the context of the narrative, then, the moment in which Na Ga is saved by Will perpetuates several of the problematic issues in the structure of rights explored throughout this dissertation, including perpetuating the savage-victim-savior metaphor, the giver and receiver of rights, and the passive victim of sex-work. However, when considered within the context of the arc of the narrative, Law-Yone actually undermines several of these normative discourses. *The Road to Wanting* addresses this complex pedagogical narrative through Na Ga's relationship with Will.

When Will “saves” Na Ga, the dynamic is not what one would expect. In fact, it is Will who ends up feeling trapped. Na Ga lives with Will for 10 years during which she refuses to let him play the role of savior and resists being saved in the way that he expects. For example, she takes pride in being at his beck and call as a caretaker. She

leaves the house as little as possible and turns down opportunities for education, preferring instead to only care for Will. Most disconcerting to Will, however, is that now it is Na Ga who stares at Will, at the breakfast table, while he sleeps and in moments she knows he isn't watching her: "I studied him as a means of shedding light on the unknowable, unspeakable traits of all men" (178). In other words, while Will chose Na Ga to take home with him because she represented something unusual and exotic but also universal in her victimhood, Na Ga attempts to see Will as something equally unknowable and exotic yet universal in his position of power. Despite the fact that the prose describing Na Ga's relationship with Will is full of wonder, thanks, and contentment, this tone comes off as ironic more often than not, and Na Ga's actual fear of Will and her situation slips through. For example, she says: "Only when Will was sound asleep could I observe him as closely as he observed me" (98). Turning on the light she goes over every inch of his body trying to fathom how men can enact such cruelty: "how could I approach that harmless being, that blameless body, except with utmost caution" (99). Much to Will's chagrin, Na Ga continues to serve and care for him, refusing to let him forget the power dynamic which mimics the structure of rights and neo-colonial interventionist strategies. In a thinly veiled metaphor for role of the giver and receiver of rights, when Will finally makes Na Ga leave, he gives her the nest egg money calling it "Mad money" to make up for his guilt in returning her home to Burma, the very fate from which he saved her in the first place: "I caught the look on his face as I took it out and counted it. The look of a man who seeks atonement by over-tipping" (14).

It is moments like the ones above that suggest a level of agency within Na Ga's seeming passivity. Na Ga chooses to not leave the house (drawing accusations of agoraphobia from Will's feminist friend), and she chooses to fulfill the companionship role that Will has brought her to Bangkok to fulfill above and beyond what he would prefer. She attempts to become so indispensable to Will that he will never ask her to leave. By perpetuating to its fullest the role of indentured servant to Will, Na Ga enacts a space of agency that works against the narrative of victimhood that Hesford argues surrounds the sex trade. Simultaneously, this embrace of servitude serves as a constant reminder to Will of their power dynamic. I do not mean to imply here that *The Road to Wanting* serves only as an allegory for the ways in which human rights are embedded in global economic structures and the narratives of victimhood surrounding the global sex trade. As a text coming out of the normative discourses in which this is the case, Law-Yone's narrative at once participates in this normativity while simultaneously speaking back to it. In other words, rather than being allegorical, the text is performative.

In the final moment of spectacular conflict between Na Ga and Will, Na Ga attempts to break out of her role as passive servant and confronts Will while he is with his fiancé so as to make him finally see her rather than through her: "All I had to do was show up, stand there in front of them and the poison would spread without a word being said: *Look at what he's done, see how he's left me!* Even better: I could show up with a baby. Will and his talk of wanting a child, needing to breed, so he was not deprived of next-of-kin. *You want a child? I'll give you a child!*" (212). The discourse of spectacle, the idea that if the public could just *see* then they will help, is exposed here for its

inefficacy. Na Ga shows up with a baby, and the scene backfires when she thinks she has smothered the rented baby. Will's fiancée brings it to life, and Will escorts Na Ga out. Na Ga fails to generate the crowd's empathy which further exposes the problems surrounding discourses of consciousness-raising and spectacle. However, in this scene Na Ga also fails to generate the reader's sympathy, which further destabilizes and remakes the narrative of passive victimhood and exposes the complexity of her positionality as subaltern within the larger global discourse of rights.

The women who are most aware of this positionality are those most embedded in the system. When Will comes to "save" Na Ga, he interrupts her from a conversation with other women who have been removed from brothels throughout the country and taken to the border awaiting repatriation and an ambiguous fate. The women are discussing the absurdity of the ways in which international aid organizations and human rights instruments classify and categorize them:

"Names!" Thaya yawned. "I used to think names were important. But if you worry about names in a place like this, you'll end up in a lunatic asylum...Are we DPs, displaced persons? Or are we just common refugees? Or are we IDPs, the internally displaced? Are we IIs, illegal immigrants - or LMWs, legal migrant workers? Or are we, God forbid, TVs - trafficking victims?"

"Well, why don't they just call us what we are?" said another voice from further down the bamboo platform. "Whore 24681, Whore 24682 and so on?" (163)

The women recognize their positionality within the structure of rights and the legal discourse better than any of those offering aid might. It is not surprising either that they describe as the worst categorization that of trafficking victim. Note that it is the international *status* of trafficking victim that is the worst, not the actual fact of being a

victim of trafficking. A similar scene is played out in the brothel where Na Ga works. Once, one of the girls brings home to the brothel a human rights lawyer's business card printed with the statement, "Debt bondage is prohibited by international law on forced labour and by Section 344 of the Thai Penal Code" (128). The women all laugh, joking about calling the police who are their clients anyway: "The police were constantly in and out of our rooms, now as clients, now as wardens, armed with their walkie-talkies, side-arms and nightsticks" (128). The absurdity of the rule of international law reaching these women in their brothel is not lost on the reader; they remain subaltern and thus outside the reach of international law as meted out by the state and the state's actors. This disconnect between the instruments of rights and the actual practice of promoting and claiming rights leads Upendra Baxi in *The Future of Human Rights* to state that "The extremely impoverished peoples of the world know that the many ways in which the concreteness of their everyday suffering remains unrelated to human rights texts" (8). Expanding upon this, he claims that the language of rights is morally exhausted and that human rights are no longer about the rights of man but instead contemporary rights are about the relationship of rights to capital. He calls this the human rights marketplace where multinational corporations are considered human and where the state is in the business of protecting capital rather than rights. In response Baxi argues for a politics *for* human rights (rather than *of* human rights) where humans once again become the subject of rights based on the egregious violations that the state itself sometimes inflicts to further its capitalistic interests (Baxi 6). Therefore, the future of human rights is in aligning it with capitalism rather than opposing it to capitalism. Although Cheah

concedes this point as well saying that “they are the only way for the disenfranchised to mobilize,” he does so reluctantly. In terms of the human rights documents that the women refer to, Baxi argues that “the best that human rights normativity can do is to invent serial human rights formulations that somehow match each human violation caused by impoverishment, disenfranchisement, and unalloyed ‘terror’. But this in itself, this distance, even chasm, constitutes the very grammar of the languages of human rights”(8). In other words, there is always a chasm between the actual violation of rights and the discourse of rights or the lived violence and the language of policy.²⁷

Conclusion: The Promise of Transnational Solidarity in Women's Rights as Human Rights

In keeping with the framed narrative, the novel ends almost where it begins. Just as the opening lines of the novel begin, the final chapter begins with “Ready at last,” only this time Na Ga is not preparing herself to die, she is preparing herself to cross over to Burma and live: “The wait is over. Today is the day I leave” (249). The novel also comes full circle at the end so that the *longyi*, the same garment with which Na Ga tried to hang herself at the beginning of the novel, is seen for its other uses: “The *longyi*, as I've said, is a wonderful garment...A *longyi* can save your life” (247-8). The final scene of the novel

²⁷ Understanding Theresa de Lauretis's concept of the rhetoric of violence, one can also see how the naming of something as a violation of rights in its own document (women's rights, indigenous rights etc), and therefore hoping to address and prevent the violence on those bodies of people, actually has the possibility of inflicting violence on those who lie outside of the parameters of each individual naming of the violation.

depicts Na Ga leaving Wanting, China for Burma. Minzu tries to come with her because she is afraid of what will happen to Na Ga without her sisterhood:

‘But who will look after you?’ she says, sounding quietly practical now. I point in the direction of the Mizo and the Shan. ‘They will.’
‘No, I mean like a...like a...sister.’
‘You will,’ I say. ‘But first you have to learn English, or better Burmese, so we can write to each other. Or I have to learn Chinese. What do you think is best?’ She considers this seriously, then says, ‘Anguish.’
‘Minzu, I have to go now. I *have* to go.’
‘But you’ll come back, Ma Ma?’
I mustn’t lie to her, I mustn’t make any promises I can’t keep. (261)

As the end of the novel shows, it is the language of English that Minzu chooses to provide the space for a feminist solidarity that underwrites the discourse of rights.

However, as argued above, that language is flexible and can be remade so as to provide a space of feminist solidarity that draws on the available discourses but which also draws attention to the structures of power and translations embedded in “Anguish.”

Ultimately, *The Road to Wanting* depicts the ways in which Na Ga embraces her positionality within the hegemonic global capitalist structure in order to gain access to individual rights, but simultaneously complicates that normative structure. If, as Cheah argues, it is the disenfranchised that are most affected by the embeddedness of rights within a discourse of global capital, then it forces them to mobilize under a heading of collective identity that is constructed as outside of or against capitalism. This collective identity only gains epistemological purchase, however, based upon an assumption about the preexisting indigenous subject which paradoxically must be performed anew as one recognized by rights discourse (Cheah 172). Na Ga, however, suggests that this solidarity

can be gained through transnational sisterhood by reimagining the construct of family. If the normative discourse in which CEDAW is embedded posits a heteronormative notion of the nuclear family, then Na Ga remakes this notion through her relationship with Minzu. Na Ga actively rejects a larger collectivity, refusing to befriend the other clerk at the hotel, only recognizing Mr. Jiang's friendship after his death, and resisting any sort of community when she lives with Will. In other words, rather than thinking outside the notions of global capital, a structure that Na Ga cannot escape particularly within the political-economic situation of Burma, she embraces this embeddedness and remakes it for her own ends.²⁸ At the end of the book, then, Na Ga uses the "violent gift," literally her "nest egg" from Will, to cross the border. However, she retains the promise of transnational feminist solidarity with Minzu. By attending to the language of global capital, the novel suggests the potential for a different relationship of the gendered subject of rights to the hegemony of global capital. The future of this endeavor, however, is ultimately ambiguous and must survive as a promise.

The final lines of the novel depict Na Ga and Minzu attempting to communicate across the no-man's-land of the border: "*Never mind...I am trying to mouth the words and semaphore at the same time. I'll tell you later!* Then I turn and cross the line" (261). Leaving open this communication with the promise of the future recalls Wendy Brown's radical suggestion that the feminist movement should be predicated upon "[a] utopian imaginary that has no certainty about its prospects or even about the means and vehicles

²⁸ I consider the benefits of the relationship of the normative discourse of rights, and specifically women's rights, to economic structures particularly for those attempting to gain access to rights in the Introduction and Chapter 4 as well.

of its realization” (115). Ultimately, this postrevolutionary promise is what can underwrite the discourse of women’s rights as human rights. Returning to the similarities I draw between transnational feminist discourses and human rights in the Introduction, I argue that both discourses are grounded in liberalism, have characters as discourses that offer both critique and solution, and have as problems mobilization under universality while still recognizing difference. Based on a postmodern understanding of subjectivity, Brown posits a feminist movement that is divorced from its enlightenment liberalism and thus its revolutionary agenda, a move that can be applied to women’s rights as human rights.²⁹ As she claims, “gender...as a domain of subjection with no outside...cannot be liberated in the classical sense, and the powers constituting and regulating it cannot be seized and inverted or abolished” (“Feminism Unbound” 112). Thus, by understanding that the feminist movement (specifically the second wave movement) is mourning a revolutionary promise predicated on an Enlightenment logic that never existed,³⁰ feminists can actually achieve the revolutionary agenda (i.e. equal rights) more successfully. Although Brown’s promise is located within a western feminist context, recognizing the ways in which both discourses, in order to become normative, must be embedded within and constructed by the structures of power that might be paradoxically problematic is useful since it means that both discourses’ projects of critique/solution can recognize that overthrowing this normative discourse is ultimately dangerous (not to mention impossible). Furthermore, Brown’s “feminism unbound” is useful in considering

²⁹ What Brown calls “the emancipatory nature of reason and the capacity of human beings to make their own history” (Brown “Feminism Unbound” 102),

³⁰ Brown says “Revolution, the world turned upside down, through which modernity entered history, which modernity would perfect and by which modernity would be perfected, appears today both anachronistic and unprecedentedly dangerous” (“Feminism Unbound” 101).

the transnational readership that I argue these texts construct. As a readership that is also embedded in the normative discourse of rights, through close attention to the delicate rhetorical negotiations necessary in rights discourse, that readership can also recognize the ways in which the texts that emerge out of the human rights regime can draw attention to, complicate, and/or remake that discourse.

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