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## Conjuring Creative Citizenship Beyond Rights

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A Review of *Writing and Righting: Literature in the Age of Human Rights* by Lyndsey Stonebridge.  
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. 176. \$25 hardcover.

Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) is one of several key texts through which Lyndsey Stonebridge crafts the elegant, satisfying chapters of her latest, *Writing & Righting*. Stonebridge's small book packs the same genre of punch for readers now as Sontag's did when it was published, just after the Abu Ghraib torture photos had been released, when Sontag's questions carried ethical urgency: What is the purpose of looking at images of atrocity? If the atrocity has already happened, and suffering cannot be alleviated because of the evidence the image provides, how does the act of looking do anything but consolidate the viewer's sense of safety by comparison?

For Stonebridge, the question concerns literature, not photos or images, and its role in the project of human rights or, as she more eloquently puts it, its role in transforming human rights claims into "common sense." Her inquiry traces the trajectory of human rights as the twentieth century has given way to the twenty-first, while also exploring the development of human rights and literature as a critical method, largely in the decades since 9/11. In both cases, she is careful to alert readers to the gap between language and *the real; the now*; between what we claim and what we accept. The book deeply treats our current context, refreshingly facing the human rights horizons of racial struggle

and inequality, climate disaster, and mass subhumanization, and then poses the perennial question of “How we might get from imagining other people to agreeing to share resources and power with them?” (24). In other words, how do we translate the empathic feelings that arise from reading about human rights violations into actions that diminish not only suffering, but the *causes of suffering*, in deep structures of inequity and violence? How do we mobilize our privilege in material ways that positively impact others’ lives and move the world to greater justice? How do we leap from feeling to action through identification with a character or plot? And perhaps most of all, how do we find courage and clarity to acknowledge our role in the suffering of others and then to act differently?

While I cannot report that Stonebridge delivers that formula (because, well, it doesn’t exist, does it?), she does achieve something nearly as complex in the time she devotes in each chapter to exposing the nearly surreal level of denial and untruth, not to mention sheer interpretive cynicism, at the core of our current political systems and their discourses. In her insistence that the gap between words and reality in the current political arena has totalitarian ancestors and aims. In her recognition that living in the space between stated values and actual practices is the truly

*maddening* condition of all our lives. In her idea that we turn to writers whose first-person perspectives emerge from within what I, following Suzanne Césaire, can only call “the great camouflage” of racist patriarchal imperialism, and who have experienced its unthinkable harms, to restore a culture where human rights—or better, human dignity—is a matter of *common sense*. I will go so far as to say that the act of reading Stonebridge’s book felt like a meta-experience of how to build commitment to the solidarity of creative, universal citizenship beyond the cynical arena of the neoliberal nation-state, and I am grateful for it.

Over the course of six tightly woven chapters, Stonebridge explores the harrowing edge we are all obliged to ride between ours as a moment of reckoning and ours as a moment of transformation, all within the context of (impending) climate disaster. Her emphasis remains rightly, refreshingly on context as she questions whether “the words ‘human rights’ any longer carry enough moral, political, cultural, social, or even semantic weight to adequately convey what it is that so many are currently determinedly, urgently, and sometimes desperately working to protect across the globe just now” (8). This through-line includes sustained attention to the work of Hannah Arendt (whetting our appetite for Stonebridge’s

forthcoming *Thinking Like Hannah Arendt*), and is braided with a parallel query about the role of literature in advancing human rights, in which Stonebridge tracks a rather standard narrative of human rights-oriented literary criticism that treats literature—the novel in particular—as a catalyst for empathy with suffering Others without which the human rights project could not have emerged. In *Writing and Righting*, Stonebridge attempts to move beyond this notion of literature as “the cultural wing of a politically impotent humanitarianism” (8), analyzing writers “for whom empathy is not enough” (viii). More on this later.

“The problem,” Stonebridge explains, “is that for all the reading and all the feeling, the dumping on the powerless by the powerful has continued” (18). Moving beyond the massive rights violations accepted as the norm in the neoliberal twenty-first century, Stonebridge highlights the loss of accountability and possibilities for redress, the brazen ways in which human rights law and precedent are blatantly ignored as the “barbarous” conditions that generated our modern human rights regime (“Preamble,” Universal Declaration of Human Rights [UDHR]) are rebuilt in our modern camps and indefinite detention centers. Revisiting Arendt’s idea of perplexity—that those for whom human rights were invented

were prevented from claiming them because the system to do so requires the warrant of legitimacy conferred by the nation-state, which is precisely what they have lost—Stonebridge asks, following Arendt, “[H]ow do we confront a system that has inured itself against culpability?” (19).

For Stonebridge, there are two distinctly literary answers to that question: the first, to “follow our writers into the darkest places of our history” so as to “grasp injustice from its inside, from the position of the powerless” (20). The second is to embrace what she calls a literature of “creative citizenship” as a way of defamiliarizing the “mix of totalitarian ideology and terror [that] work both the system of the detention camp and the politics that enables the citizens of Western democracies to somehow stomach what is being done in their name” (104).<sup>1</sup> Once we can collectively perceive and acknowledge that the racist, colonial aspects of totalitarianism have boomeranged back into the heart of our democracies, we will perhaps be able to recalibrate the common sense of fundamental human dignity to turn the tide away from our current acceptance of the massive degradation of the camp and the slums as signs of our times.

Stonebridge provides three major examples of such writing: following Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others*, she starts by

revisiting Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* (1938) as an example of a text that "helped turn ideas about equality and moral interconnection into common sense" (53). For Stonebridge, Woolf's experimental literary modernism brought new forms and terms to bear on understanding how all solidarity is "compromised by the inequalities of power" (57), and she goes further than Sontag did, showing how Woolf's critique of liberal internationalism is better read alongside other writers whose perspective originates *outside* that protected sphere: Simone Weil, who questioned "rights" as a framework that always already presumes inequality, suggesting a focus on duties and obligations to one another instead, and Suzanne Césaire, an under-studied Martiniquan writer who insisted that "the supposedly French values of 'liberty, equality, and solidarity' were part of the 'great camouflage' used to cover up policies of enslavement, colonialism, and racism (59). Introducing Césaire helps Stonebridge to build her argument that our current status quo comprises a cruel brew of totalitarianism and racist colonialism, and that without contesting the complicity of the privileged class with the horrors facing those on the bad end of the colonial compact, our language of global liberty, equality, or solidarity can never be anything but camouflage for a staggeringly violent lie.

Building from this foundation, Stonebridge offers a set of unique and powerful chapters about writing that demonstrates the mechanics of creative citizenship, a form of belonging that includes "necessary and dissenting forms of citizenship" prompted by the global capitalist nexus of climate disaster, political unrest, racial violence, and inequality. A chapter on what she calls "the poetics of Grenfell," comprised of responses shared by survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire at a Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council meeting, develops most pointedly the difference between writing that seeks to generate moral sentiment through empathy and writing that claims the "right to have rights" that Hannah Arendt made famous in her "Perplexities on the Rights of Man and Citizen" (1946). Stonebridge concludes, "The poetics of Grenfell . . . refuses to perform traumatized victimhood in exchange for legal or political recognition," instead "evoking the power of a citizenship not as exclusion . . . but precisely as, quoting Ben Okri . . . 'a living force for the possibilities of the world'" (70). According to Stonebridge, pointed questions like "Why aren't human rights respected here?" replaced the expected anguished testimony to pain and loss, introducing a new political stance in the meeting and "re-shap[ing] what was passing for reality in the council chamber" (77).

Moving more deeply to focus upon the disavowed violence at the heart of our societies, chapter 5, “The Bewilderment of Everyday Violence,” recapitulates democracy’s origin story through the brutal state of nature that Thomas Hobbes insisted we were secretly loath to give up, the will to othering and violence that has defined our social contract even as we parrot the words of a Declaration of Independence that states otherwise. And chapter 6, a brilliant meditation on the suspended temporality initiated when we hold people indefinitely as migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, illuminating how the entire project of detention as it has been taking new shape (in Europe since the start of the Syrian war in 2011 and in the United States since what has come to be known as the “Central American Immigrant Crisis of 2014”) represents the extinction of “human time” (93). In a tender reading of Behrooz Boochani’s *No Friend But the Mountains* (2018), Stonebridge probes the condition of statelessness whereby it is not only a sense of place which is lost, but also a sense of time, the human time of births and work and family and marriage and death, which is to say that the future tense is made impossible for those held in indefinite detention, without benefit of habeas corpus, in an endless traumatic present of waiting and queuing outside the bounds of the law and country.

“Survival time,” she explains, “not human time, comes to define solidarity and struggle” (107).

Stonebridge follows this notion of “survival time” into the Palestinian refugee camp Baddawi, concluding *Writing and Righting* with a look at what Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, describing the “refugee-refugee humanitarianism” that marks the Baddawi camp, calls “the poetics of undisclosed care that exists between those trapped in the grey zones of contemporary statelessness” (108). While it cannot muster the kind of power needed to challenge the state, this poetics of care, undisclosed because the people who share it are invisible as such, joins the heroic efforts of all those who have lived, died, and survived the camps and lagers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to retain their humanity within the nightmare where both law and time are suspended, and work becomes simply the agonizing labor of staying alive.

I read Lyndsey Stonebridge’s *Writing and Righting* by candlelight over two raw days in October 2021 when a series of *bomb cyclones* knocked out power for millions across the United States. The trajectory of the book from the empathic “We” attempted by Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas* to the raw annihilation of the “I” in literature by those who are just now trapped inside the whirlwind of totalitarian holdovers from the colonial era tracked my

sense of visceral loss as the message of climate disaster made its way into my increasingly chilled bones. It seemed eerily as if the storm had been ordered up to help this reader to cross from the empathic imagining of the suffering of others typically initiated through literature to a more corporeal identification that may shift the readerly subject position from “I” to “We,” even as Stonebridge shows us how the project of human rights has failed to transform this “We” into the politically viable position that could bring creative, universal citizenship into being.

Stonebridge’s account of human rights-oriented literary criticism focuses to its detriment on the most visible work in this area, such as Lynn Hunt’s *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (2007), which joins a line of criticism that includes Richard Rorty, Martha Nussbaum, and others who emphasize literature’s role in building the capacity of empathy across difference. Her historiography of the field misses the rather large body of criticism that advances precisely the kinds of queries she valorizes: into legal personhood and its exclusions, particularly in the realm of citizenship; into writers who marry local traditions of resistance with universal notions of human rights; into the loss of human rights through the securitization of the nationalist state. Her conclusion that we have been “writing two literary histories of human

rights at once: one still bumps along hoping that enough moral sympathy can be generated to make the world a better place; the other is writing a history of suffering and survival that has yet to be archived or recognized” (113) is challenged by a range of work from theorists like Elizabeth Anker, Eleni Condouriotis, James Dawes, Yogita Goyal, Mukti Lakh Mangharam, Sophia McLellan, Alexandra Schultheis Moore, Angela Naimou, Crystal Parikh, and Joseph Slaughter, among others whose work I invite interested readers to peruse.

For this reader, this strain of the book is not its most important by far. Rather, it is Stonebridge’s clarity in delineating the state of human rights in the twenty-first century, her exposure of the “great camouflage” as it structures our world in a moment of simultaneous reckoning and transformation, her fluency across theoretical and literary critical genres, traditions, and voices, and her admonition that “just now we are crossing an accepted threshold” (87) when it comes to the treatment of humans, that make this a thoroughly edifying read. Let us take her clear-eyed diagnoses into our lives as readers, thinkers, citizens, and humans as we each consider our role in reckoning with a racist, colonialist, totalitarian past, rejecting its afterlife in our current world systems, and transforming its remains into a future of authentically human space and time.

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#### NOTE

1. This may be the kind of language *New Statesman* reviewer David Herman meant to highlight when he

described the book as “suffused with examples of casual Leftism which can feel hectoring if you don’t share her values and assumptions”; for me, her bold language precisely transcends the partisan to announce the hard truths of our collective state of denial regarding what we once agreed upon as universal rights. Perspective is indeed everything (David Herman, “What Lyndsey Stonebridge Gets Right—and Wrong—in Writing and Righting,” *New Statesman*, 9 June 2021, available at <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2021/06/lyndsey-stonebridge-writing-and-righting-review>).



