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INTRODUCTION

How It Feels to be Free

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, human rights became enshrined as the dominant moral language of our time. Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel described human rights as "a world-wide secular religion." Former Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan termed human rights "the yardstick by which we measure human progress."[1] Faith in the moral authority accorded to invocations of human rights crosses the present-day political landscape from the corridors of state power to the streets of oppositional grassroots politics. U.S. president George W. Bush and British prime minister Tony Blair turned to human rights to defend the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. So too did the Russian feminist punk rockers Pussy Riot to protest their imprisonment after they performed "Mother of God, Drive Putin Out" in a Moscow cathedral. The contemporary presence of human rights has become almost prosaic. Some American fifth graders now spend as much time studying the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as they do Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*. Even the fiercest critics of the global scope and uneven enforcement of human rights, who rue that "the age of human rights is upon us," acknowledge the ubiquity of its moral power.[2] It was not always so.

On October 1, 1949, at the Musée Galliéra in Paris, the United Nations Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) opened a massive public exhibition to celebrate "mankind's age-old fight for freedom" in honor of the adoption of the Universal Declaration by the United Nations just one year earlier. A document that has become almost commonplace in the twenty-first century was unfamiliar if not downright strange in the late 1940s. In fact, human rights had been virtually absent

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from the world stage before the mid-twentieth century. Most striking in retrospect about the UNESCO exhibition was the apparent need by its organizers to teach visitors what human rights actually were and to inculcate in them a shared obligation to bring human rights to life. The exhibition's primary purpose was a didactic one, making visible what the organizers termed "the universal nature of the responsibility for achieving and defending human rights."

Visitors to the UNESCO exhibition first encountered a small planetarium in a darkened room. Through its windows they saw the Earth turning in space – its political divisions symbolically left unmarked – while listening to a recorded voice that read from the first three articles of the Universal Declaration with its promises that "everyone has the right to life, liberty, and the security of person." Adjacent to Earth, the exhibitors had placed a small drawing of Adam and Eve frolicking under the apple tree to lay down a marker for their vision of human rights as rooted in an almost timeless past. Exiting the planetarium, visitors strolled through a hallway of illustrated panels and panoramas that depicted "man's slow emancipation" from prehistoric times to the present to "illustrate the contribution of all peoples, nations and civilizations to the sum total of Human Rights." Panels depicting the *Rights of Man through the Ages* presented the Magna Carta, the U.S. Declaration of Independence, and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man while *Fighters for Freedom* featured such figures as Montesquieu, Abraham Lincoln, and Mahatma Gandhi.

Visitors next entered several rooms that offered a pictorial "history book" of the 1930s to demonstrate "how rights were abused and violated by totalitarian states." This state of affairs, the exhibit argued, led to the outbreak of World War II and to "democratic states" working "to re-assert rights" through the establishment of the United Nations. Passing into a hall in which a dozen pillars devoted to the thirty articles of the 1948 Universal Declaration illustrated past examples of their protections and violations, viewers were reminded of the centrality of the Declaration in the "struggle for human rights." The final room of the exhibition was "devoted to the duties each person must fulfill if Human Rights are to become and remain a reality for all." That pressing task, organizers told visitors as they were leaving the exhibition, "will only be complete

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when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been converted into fact."[3]

The pedagogic narrative of human rights history in the UNESCO exhibition was largely a fiction. Even beyond the imagined reach of the human rights past to the biblical times of Adam and Eve, its insistence on a linear and progressive history across time and space elided the astonishing singularity of the turn to global human rights in the 1940s. Without question, concerns about rights have a long history that can be traced to the early modern world, if not before. Rights talk was central to the French, American, and Haitian revolutions.[4] The antislavery movement and the rise of nineteenth-century humanitarian practices opened up new forms of transnational empathy.[5] So too did appeals in the early twentieth century that drew public awareness to humanitarian suffering in the imperial Congo and the Armenian genocide.[6] At the same time, the collective rights of minority peoples also began to attract international attention.[7] But the articulation of *global* human rights in the 1940s was something altogether different. The unprecedented guarantees they offered extending beyond the confines of the nation-state to universal political, civil, economic, and social rights for everyone fundamentally challenged dominant understandings of the relationships between individuals, states, and the world community. Over the second half of the century, the growing global presence of human rights would point toward new ways of feeling what it meant to be free. But for visitors to the UNESCO exhibition in 1949, human rights remained a historical novelty.

This book examines how and why human rights went from an exotic aspirational language to an everyday vernacular. It does so by exploring the entanglements of the United States in the rise of what I call the twentieth-century global human rights imagination. The book asks three central questions: What set global human rights in motion and made them believable for Americans after 1940? How did human rights simultaneously come to reflect and shape transformations in broader American sensibilities of being in the world? Why have human rights become a ubiquitous moral language today, and what are its limits?

To have posed such questions about human rights as a historian even a decade ago might have seemed quixotic at best. The history of twentieth-century human rights has only recently begun to be told. The most

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enduringly influential accounts of the place of the United States in the post-1945 world order left human rights to the side, as did most traditional accounts of American diplomatic history. Except for a brief and seemingly obligatory nod to Jimmy Carter's "discovery" of human rights in the 1970s, most international historians saw human rights as no more than a sideshow that rightly remained in the shadows of the more important Cold War struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union.[8] Nor did historians of social movements in postwar America devote sustained attention to human rights as such. Civil rights, not human rights, were more commonly the object of study.[9] The flagship *American Historical Review* did not publish an article with the phrase "human rights" in its title until 1998, and eight years would pass before an article dealing with modern human rights history appeared in the journal.

The first decade of this century, however, brought a dramatic upsurge of historical interest in human rights. As one former president of the American Historical Association put it, "we are all historians of human rights." The decade of the 1940s first became the subject of the new human rights history, most notably in studies that focused on the making of a UN-based human rights order. More recently, scholars have begun to excavate the global explosion of human rights concerns in the 1970s. Once at the margins, human rights and its history are now at the intellectual vanguard of the historical profession.[10] But if we have a growing and sophisticated body of global human rights history that was almost unimaginable a decade ago, what we should make of human rights for the larger narratives we tell about U.S. engagement in the twentieth-century world is considerably less clear.

Much of this new work has pivoted around a contested debate over when global human rights politics and its American iterations really began to matter. On one side are historians who view the 1940s as the magic decade, claiming that the normative heft of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights still hovers powerfully over contemporary practices. Another group of historians is less sure, arguing that the alleged human rights revolution of the 1940s was little more than "death in birth"[11] and dismissing the Universal Declaration as a Great Power feint that most contemporaries were certain would never disturb the smooth operation of realist power politics. For them, the 1970s was when the

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real business of human rights politics got started as a global moral vocabulary that trumped once-prevailing ideologies of the Cold War and Third World revolutionary nationalism. It is, they argue, the indispensable decade that set today's global human rights landscape in motion.[12]

In this take-no-prisoners competitive sweepstakes for the origins of the contemporary preoccupation with human rights, both parties bring a similar conception of time and narrative to their arguments that needlessly hamper efforts to make sense of a transnational human rights past. The literary scholar Frank Kermode asks us to think about the ticking of a clock. "We agree," he writes, "that it says *tick-tock*," but in doing so "it is we who provide the fictional difference between the two sounds: *tick* is our word for physical beginning, and *tock* our word for end." But such commonsensical perspectives, he argues, ignore the critical interval between "*tock*" and "*tick*." By inventing narratives to order the world that favor "the closed to the open," Kermode tellingly suggests, we can ignore fortuitous moments – most famously, he notes, the enigmatic appearances of the Man in the Mackintosh in Joyce's *Ulysses* – that defy more sweeping narratives, but are nonetheless constitutive of them.[13] Much of the new human rights history is keen to tell what Kermode would call a conventional *tick-tock* narrative. It searches for a point of origin, a take-off moment, in which human rights gain the traction that makes them a central presence today. Tick is the 1940s or the 1970s. Tock is now.

What human rights were understood to be by the historical actors who gave them shape and form in the mid-twentieth century and beyond is a considerably messier and more complex process than the linear narratives of the new human rights history would allow. Human rights history can read quite differently if we think about the second half of the twentieth century through the prism of the interval between *tock* and *tick*, attentive to the potential men (and women) in mackintoshes. This book returns to the 1940s and 1970s as its central focus. But it approaches the two decades as contrapuntal moments to offer both an alternative narrative of the place of the United States in twentieth-century human rights history and a new approach to the writing of global human rights history itself. The book is not so much concerned with the state and Great Power politics or with the diplomatic negotiations through which the international human rights legal regime came to be formed, the subjects

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of much of the new human rights history. The central protagonists of this book are what we now call nonstate actors, although they often did not identify themselves in that way in the historical moment. Diplomats and policy makers are not entirely absent in the pages that follow. But the focus is on what we might in retrospect call human rights amateurs who collectively brought into being a distinctly twentieth-century global human rights imagination; they include photographers, lawyers, filmmakers, doctors, musicians, physicists, statisticians, writers, clergy, grassroots activists, students, and senior citizens. Quite simply, it was these "amateurs" who made human rights after mid-century believable to a variety of American publics. Critically they did so on a transnational canvas.

This book situates their efforts against the epochal global ruptures that defined the 1940s and the 1970s and the very different ways in which these two decades shaped the place of the United States in the twentieth-century world. Importantly, both decades were liminal moments in which the very structures and meanings of international order were up for grabs. In neither was it clear at the outset what was to come. The Cold War of the late 1940s was an almost unimagined possibility for most Americans as World War II came to a close. Similarly few would have anticipated that the superpower confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union that underlay the high Cold War international order after the 1940s would begin to come undone in the 1970s. This contrapuntal history is especially attentive to the critical place of contingency in how the 1940s and 1970s were understood and felt by the Americans who lived through them. It recovers the interpretatively rich points of friction between the global and the local in these two threshold eras that made possible the capacious and often revolutionary lenses through which Americans began to reimagine the world around them, among them newly formed conceptions of human rights.[14]

Global human rights emerged for the first time on the international stage and in the United States in the 1940s as part of a larger transnational conversation about the meanings of the postwar peace. A constellation of sometimes inchoate but always interlocking internationalist sentiments – among them calls for multilateralism, global justice, international policing, and humanitarian intervention, along with human rights – lay in

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tension with territorially bounded conceptions of unilateral state sovereignty as the prime mover of relations between nations. In this postwar moment when prevailing notions of sovereignty and the international were in flux, a variety of transnational and local actors pushed against what were seen as the era's elastic conditions of possibility. Some operated in the elite sphere of the United Nations. Others emerged in more quotidian local spaces. Together they created the imaginative terrain of what might transform the postwar world. The 1940s moment proved fleeting, engulfed and largely pushed to the side by the political and social force of the Cold War and, in what was just as unanticipated, the rapid-fire pace of decolonization. But before it passed, human rights became believable in the United States not just at the level of writing international declarations and covenants but also as a powerful weapon to advance domestic campaigns for racial justice at home. America was both in the world, and the world was in America.

A similarly open-ended and transformative global moment marked the 1970s, though ultimately with very different implications for what human rights would come to mean in an American context. In that decade an intensification of global capitalism and the emergence of neoliberalism, shifting patterns of international migration, the end of empire, and the transnational diffusion of new technology and media all pushed against the nation-state–based international order that structured the high Cold War era. These fragmentations in world order enabled novel forms of transnational humanitarian, environmental, and human rights politics to come into being. A growing belief in the authenticity of the interior world for making sense of individual suffering was at the heart of this new politics. Lived experience, moral witness, and testimonial truth became keywords of the era, reshaping the contours of global politics and morality and remaking global human rights thought and practice. But unlike the 1940s when Americans were present at the creation, human rights in the 1970s got almost everywhere else first before coming to the United States. Nor did human rights come home again as a primary means for addressing domestic social suffering and injustice. Without question the world shaped the thought and practice of human rights in 1970s America, but human rights became a resonant vernacular largely for problems beyond the United States.

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The ways in which the global transformations that propelled human rights were experienced in 1940s and 1970s America form one of the central concerns of this book. How it felt to have rights or to lose them was critical to the growing believability of the global human rights imagination and its American vernaculars. So too were new ways of apprehending how the suffering of strangers could come to matter as much as one's own. In foregrounding shifts in global affect and feeling for the making of human rights history, this analysis marks a sharp departure from the more common practices of writing international and human rights history. Historians seemingly more easily articulate the imagined physicality of geopolitics than structures of feeling, and yet the historical present is often understood affectively before it is perceived in other ways. Recent work in literary theory helps us see what has generally remained invisible to historians. "The present is not an object but a mediated affect," writes Lauren Berlant. It is "a thing that is sensed and under constant revision … a genre of social time and practice in which a relation of person or worlds is sensed to be changing but the rules of habitation and the genres of storytelling about it are unstable."[15] Human rights and its believability emerged in just such volatile and unstable moments.

To uncover the pivotal place of affect in the rise of global human rights during the 1940s and the 1970s requires the use of a broader range of sources that get at these more allusive historical forces. This book draws on traditional, political, diplomatic, and legal texts, but it also turns to such imaginative and visual sources as photographs of Depression-era social suffering, newsreel footage of atrocities in Nazi death camps, and memoirs, folk art, and soundscapes depicting torture and other human rights abuses in 1970s Latin America and the Soviet Union to make sense of how transformations in affect shaped the more visceral ways in which American began to understand human rights. It is, for instance, far more concerned with exploring how an encounter with Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* or Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's epic three-volume *Gulag Archipelago* might have shaped American understandings of what human rights mean and how their absence can feel than the ins and outs of the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or 1970s-era U.S. human rights diplomacy with the Soviet Union.

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That these American sensibilities had global roots is also critical to the arguments made here. To focus on the place of the United States in the making of a global human rights imagination might initially strike readers as a return to the exceptionalist narratives that have too often informed the writing of American history.[16] The approach here is quite the opposite, seeking to provincialize how Americans operated on the world stage by lifting up the critical role of processes initially set in motion far beyond U.S. shores. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing efforts to situate American history in frames both smaller and larger than the nation.[17] Decentering the United States in the history of human rights normalizes American actors. They did not, as some U.S. historians have suggested, bring human rights to the world. Instead like local actors in a variety of geographical places in and after the mid-twentieth century, Americans struggled to find a vernacular language to articulate the meanings of what for them too was an entirely novel turn to global human rights talk.

Provincializing America also helps us rethink how to write the history of the engagement of other states and peoples in the making of the twentieth-century global human rights order. Much of the existing history of human rights often feels closed in on itself, so intent on recovering what has been a lost history that it fails to consider how human rights shaped and were shaped by the larger historical processes of empire, decolonization, the Cold War, and globalization after 1945. Frictions between the global and the local that created an American vernacular of human rights operated in other geographical spaces as well. The multiple human rights vernaculars that such frictions helped produce were always inflected by local particularities, and yet we know too little about them. What a displaced person in the DP camps established in the immediate aftermath of World War II or a Soviet, Chilean, or South Korean dissident in the 1970s understood human rights to be is only just beginning to come into view. In writing about American understandings of human rights from the bottom and the middle up, rather than from the top down, while being attentive to the wider global processes through which they emerged, this book seeks to advance what might be considered a second generation of human rights history.

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Finally, viewing the place of Americans in the making of the global human rights imagination through a transnational lens challenges how historians have explained the broader patterns of U.S. engagement in the world after 1940. In more conventional accounts of U.S. foreign relations, the preponderance of American power in the second half of the twentieth century invariably puts the United States at the center of the world. "The present world system sprung from the United States more than other actors in the global theatre," writes Walter LaFeber, capturing what remains a virtual consensus among American diplomatic historians. "The influence of that system on the United States" was never "as great as the American influence on the system." More recently Fredrik Logevall has argued that decentering the United States is "to risk being ahistorical, by assigning greater influence to some actors than they may in fact deserve. The United States is not merely one power among many and has not been for a very long time."[18] Daniel Rodgers, whose work has been at the center of the recent transnational turn in the writing of American history, offers an intriguing twist on these more traditional formulations. He agrees that Americans "were everywhere after 1945," but argues that their collective self-perceptions that the United States "saved the world" through its intervention in World War II meant "it would not thereafter be easy to imagine that there was still much to learn from it." Americans were always "in the world" during the second half of the twentieth century, Rodgers suggests, but they were almost never "of it."[19] Yet, the interplay between the global and the local in the making of human rights vernaculars in the United States brings into question assertions of both the unilateral exercise of American power and the hermetic terms of its global engagement. Here, power and influence were more often relational and multidirectional. In the realm of human rights, Americans could be both in and of the world.

The World Reimagined has two parts. The first examines the surprising prominence of human rights language in 1940s America during and after World War II in a broad cosmopolitan frame. The chapters explore the visual, textual, and legal dimensions of the wartime human rights imagination. Visual forms of rights consciousness emerged alongside sustained wartime conversations that produced remarkably detailed proposals for

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