American Vernaculars: The United States and the Global Human Rights Imagination

On a wintry January evening in 1973, the members of Amnesty International USA Group 11 gathered on the Upper East Side of New York City to adopt a new prisoner of conscience, Sutanti Adit of Indonesia. Adit, a medical doctor and the wife of the leader of the Indonesian Communist Party, had been arrested and imprisoned in the ruthless campaigns of repression that followed a failed 1965 coup against the Sukarno government, which had ruled Indonesia since its formal independence from Dutch colonial control in 1950. She was among more than a hundred thousand Indonesians arrested, interrogated (often under torture), and imprisoned by the state. As many as fifty thousand of them remained in custody for more than a decade housed in prison camps whose sanitation, medical facilities, and food were inadequate at best. They were permitted very limited contact with the outside world, including family and friends, and harshly mistreated by prison guards.1

For over six years the members of Amnesty International USA Group 11 worked tirelessly on behalf of Sutanti Adit following what would become standard practice for the wider organization’s grassroots prisoner adoption efforts. They wrote letters to Indonesian authorities at the United Nations and in Jarkarta urging her release from prison. Members of the group also sought to develop a direct relationship with Adit, sending postcards and small amounts of money to her in prison and making sustained inquiries into the well-being of her children, sister, and mother in the hopes of providing moral support and as a further reminder to the Indonesian state that her case was not forgotten. At moments, a kind of compassion fatigue fell over their efforts with one group member suggesting “that we drop this case since we haven’t made any progress with it.” But Group 11 pressed on with their letter writing throughout the 1970s. At the same time they


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sought to mobilize broader public and government pressure for Adit’s release, conducting petition drives, placing articles in such publications as the New Yorker and Ms. Magazine and organizing letter writing campaigns to congressional representatives, the State Department, and New York–based corporations doing business in Indonesia.  

Why had the suffering of a distant stranger come to matter so much to the members of Amnesty International USA Group 11? To have asked such a question a decade ago might have seem quixotic, at best. The history of twentieth-century global human rights politics, and the American place in them, has only recently begun to be told. The flagship American Historical Review did not publish an article with the phrase “human rights” in its title until 1998, and it would be 2004 before an article dealing with modern human rights history appeared in the journal. In the pages of Diplomatic History, only four articles with human rights in their titles appeared before 2005. The most enduringly influential accounts of the making of post–1945 world order—think here George Kennan, John Lewis Gaddis, and Melvyn Leffler—left human rights to the side, as did most textbooks on American diplomatic history, beyond a brief and seemingly obligatory nod to Jimmy Carter’s “discovery” of human rights in the 1970s. 

Skepticism has often been the default mode for observers of the human rights scene. For these self-styled realists, any apparent triumph of a human rights regime is little more than a smokescreen or illusion, what Jeremy Bentham famously called “nonsense upon stilts.” Nor, realists argue, should the emergence of global human rights talk obscure the ways in which the more fundamental exercise and hierarchies of power within and between states and societies remains largely unchanged.

2. The activities of Group 11 are detailed in what for local Amnesty groups is a very rare complete set of monthly minutes from 1973 through 1980 contained in Folders 2–5, Box 17, Yadia Zeltman Papers 1972–1985, Amnesty International USA Archives. On compassion fatigue, see Amnesty International USA Group 11 Minutes, April 11, 1974: 1.


For most international historians of the post-1945 period, skepticism was fodder for a broader dismissal of human rights altogether 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.

The first decade of this century, however, brought a dramatic upsurge of historical interest in human rights. It was the 1940s that first became the subject of the new history human rights history, notably in explorations of American state and nonstate engagement in the construction of a global rights order in such seminal works as Carol Anderson’s 2003 *Eyes off the Prize* and Elizabeth Borgwardt’s 2005 *New Deal for the World*. More recently, scholars have begun to excavate the global explosion of human rights concerns in the 1970s, including innovative and path-breaking monographs like Samuel Moyn’s 2010 *Last Utopia*, Sarah Snyder’s 2012 *Human Rights Activism*, and Barbara Keys’s 2013 *Reclaiming American Virtue*. Once at the margins, human rights and its historiography are at the intellectual vanguard of international and diplomatic history. These and other transformational works, which have deservedly garnered multiple book prizes and enjoy high levels of visibility in our field, put front and center what had previously remained just out of view.

But if we now have a growing and sophisticated body of American and global human rights history 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. For historians like Liz Borgwardt, the 1940s was the magic decade in which the wartime power of the Atlantic Charter and Franklin Roosevelt’s “four freedoms” guided the drafting of the United Nations Charter and the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights whose normative heft still powerfully hovers over contemporary practices.

In sharp contrast, Samuel Moyn tells us the alleged human rights revolution of the 1940s was little more than “death in birth,” oratorical “ornamentalism”

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provided as a sop to pesky if well-intentioned internationalist do-gooders that most policymakers were certain would never disturb the smooth operation of realist Great Power politics. Barbara Keys agrees, suggesting the fluorescence of a 1940s human rights vocabulary was a “tepid” wartime “inspirational fiction” whose “rhetorical flourishes” were “regarded as an alien, un-American force.” For Moyn and Keys, the 1970s was when the real business of global human rights politics got started. In Moyn’s view, it was the collapse of the major twentieth-century utopian visions of revolutionary socialism and postcolonial nationalism that provided the space for a global human rights politics to flourish as what he terms a minor utopia. Keys’s more granular exploration of 1970s congressional politics and the establishment of Amnesty International USA looks to the trauma of the Vietnam War to locate the emergence of liberal and conservative visions of American human rights politics. For her, like Moyn and a growing number of other scholars, the 1970s is the indispensable decade that set in motion today’s global human rights landscape.

In this take-no-prisoners competitive sweepstakes between the 1940s and 1970s, I am struck that both parties bring a similar conception of time and narrative to their projects, one that is familiar to all of us but in fact can needlessly hamper our 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.

Many of the new human rights historians are keen to tell what Kermode would call a conventional tick–tock narrative. They search for a point of origin, a take-off moment, in which human rights gains the traction that makes it a central presence for present-day state and nonstate actors. Tick is the 1940s, or the 1970s. Tock is now. But what human rights were understood to be by actors in the historical moment was always a considerably messier process, one that linear narratives can obscure. Human rights history, and indeed international history more broadly, might read quite differently if we thought about the second half of the twentieth

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century through the prism of the interval between tock and tick, attentive to the potential men (and women) in mackintoshes.

I want to explore two such tock-tick moments that might help us begin to construct an alternative narrative of the place of Americans in the making of what I term a global human rights imagination. My concern here is not so much with the state or Great Power politics, nor do I necessarily want to insist that human rights became the dominant lens through which all Americans saw the world around them. Instead, my interest is with uncovering the structures of feeling that gave human rights meaning and power in an American context. I look to contrapuntal swings of tock-tick in the 1940s and 1970s to address an interpretative puzzle: how and why did human rights become believable for American publics in particular times and places?

My approach to these questions is informed by a conceptual posture that seeks to decenter or provincializes the presence of American actors on the world stage. A part of this method is simply pragmatic, disaggregating American state and nonstate actors to better capture the multiplicity of positions Americans could occupy in global human rights politics and the intensity of their various engagements. It also involves a willingness to look beyond still prevailing notions of American exceptionalism to recognize the ways in which the lexicon of human rights was constituted in transnational space. In this sense, provincializing seeks to normalize American actors. Like local agents in a variety of geographic places after 1945, Americans also struggled over vernacularizing global rights talk.11

At the same time I foreground a set of sources, largely visual culture and imaginative literature, that depart both from the more traditional practices of writing American diplomatic history and from the sources that have informed much of the new histories of human rights but which such scholars as Melani McAlister, Christina Klein, and Naoko Shibusawa have drawn upon in other contexts to eloquently reveal how Americans came to understand the world around them.12 Ultimately by placing human rights history in the interval between tock and tick we can better understand not only why Amnesty International USA Group 11 took up the cause of Sutanti Adit, but also the complex contours of the reach, and limits, of the American and the global human rights imaginations.

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An outdoor exhibition organized by the Office of War Information in February 1943 at Rockefeller Center in New York City titled “This Is Our War” put human rights at its center. In the fifteen months since the United States officially entered the Second World War, Franklin Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms address, the Atlantic Charter, and the United Nations Declaration had emerged for wartime policymakers as an almost sacred trinity that expressed the aims America and its allies fought to protect in the war against Germany, Italy, and Japan. All three documents were couched in what for many Americans was the still unfamiliar language of human rights. In speech after speech in early years of the war, American statesmen and diplomats pointed to the “spirit of human rights and human freedom” as a primary aim of the war. But there was more than a little official worry that Americans were not paying close enough attention. A January 1942 poll revealed that only 21 percent of Americans had heard of the Atlantic Charter. Six months later a July 1942 poll reported only 35 percent had heard of the Four Freedoms. Even more distressing for policymakers, only 5 percent had heard of the freedom from fear or freedom from want. Pollsters never directly asked if Americans knew the term “human rights,” but had they the results would likely have been the same.

At the center of the “This Is Our War” exhibition was an altar-like structure that framed and displayed copies of the Atlantic Charter and the United Nations Declaration. Surrounding it were four large allegorical sculptures with soaring liberatory golden plinths arising out of each of them to illustrate how victory in war would bring with it the attainment the Four Freedoms (figure 1). Liberty. Freedom. The Four Freedoms. Human Rights. For the exhibition organizers, the terms were synonymous and interchangeable, one building upon the other to provide an essential lexicon for appreciating the purposes of war. But what did


spectators make of the human rights on display at Rockefeller Center? Or, put more broadly, how might American publics have made the unfamiliar language of human rights that drove so much of wartime rhetoric their own?

Seven years before the exhibition opened, on a cold and rainy California day in February 1936, the photographer Dorothea Lange stopped at a crude hand-lettered sign that read “PEA-PICKER CAMP.” One of the photographs Lange made on that bleak afternoon became known as *Migrant Mother* (figure 2), the most familiar popular image of Depression-era America. *Migrant Mother* was part of an explosion of mass circulated images in the 1930s that depicted what in today’s parlance would almost inevitably be called violations of individual human rights. The work of Lange, Walker Evans, Margaret Bourke-White, and other like-minded photographers in this era collectively captured moments in the lives of the disadvantaged and oppressed, making their situations legible for those who

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*Figure 1*: Office of War Information, “This Is Our War” Exhibition at Rockefeller Center, 1943. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection [LC-DIG-fsac-1a34588].

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viewed their work. Implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, they urged viewers to make these problems their own. “Human rights” as such was never among the ways these photographers and those who encountered their work in the 1930s consciously glossed these images. There is no bright line that seamlessly joined these depression-era photographs to wartime evocations of human rights or to how Americans might have later read the human rights provisions of the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The connections are at once more tenuous and diffuse.

Figure 2: Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, 1936. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection [LC-DIG-fsa-8b29516].
Lynn Hunt’s pioneering exploration of how human rights came to occupy a central place in early modern Europe and her examination of the changing nature of eighteenth-century print culture and its impact on thought and behavior illustrates how this might be so. Hunt suggests that the rise of epistolary novels like Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1770) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Julie* (1747–1748) tied communities of readers together in ways that transcended older boundaries of social distinction and produced a novel subjective sentimentality and moralization of politics. “For human rights to become self-evident,” Hunt argues, “ordinary people had to have new understandings that came from new kinds of freedom.”

The mass circulated documentary photographs of the 1930s and the broader visual culture that surrounded them, themselves as revolutionary a set of aesthetic experiences in the United States as the rise of the epistolary novel was in eighteenth-century Europe, opened up new ways of seeing the world. In seeking to make the suffering of strangers as visible and deeply felt as one’s own, photographers like Lange were simultaneously engaged in imaginative, moral, and political interventions. The photographs they made spoke to the possibility of forging empathetic connections between themselves, their subjects, and those who encountered their work. As a *Nation* editorial in 1935 put it, they allowed “the average man . . . to look at things from points of view he has never taken and to see them in arrangements he has never made.” In all these senses it is perhaps no surprise that the Office of War Information chose visual forms to make legible the human rights dimensions of the Second World War. If the sculptures at Rockefeller Center are now largely forgotten, and perhaps on aesthetic grounds deservedly so, the more enduring presence of works like *Migrant Mother* provide visual flashpoints to understand a growing American consciousness of what in wartime came to be called human rights.

Significantly, a transnational frame helped bring into being the form and subject of 1930s American documentary photography. The sensibilities that drove this work were part of a larger genre of *reportage* through which photographers along with writers, filmmakers, and other visual artists throughout the world sought to foster a critical awareness of social reality. Too often read as distinctly American idioms that bore witness to unique domestic political, economic, and social problems, 1930s visual and textual *reportage* in the United States was in fact both a local and global phenomena. Lange’s *Migrant Mother* and such well-known books as John Steinbeck’s best-selling 1938 *Grapes of Wrath* were joined to similar works by


European, Asian, and Latin American writers and artists.\textsuperscript{19} Not only did the concerns of reportage transcend national borders, the creations of American photographers, writers, and artists were mutually constituted, sometimes indirectly and at other times directly, in transnational space. This was especially so for photography. The modernist aesthetics of the Weimar \textit{Neue Sachlichkeit} or New Objectivity heightened interest in using photography to consciously and critically draw attention to social reality, prompting new forms of documentary photography to emerge in interwar Germany and central Europe that shaped how American photographers thought about their work.\textsuperscript{20}

The movement of influences on form, content, and meaning in global space was not one whose vectors necessarily flowed from Europe to the Americas. In the case of Walker Evans, and the photographs of poor southern American sharecroppers for which he is best known, the circulatory patterns were anchored in exchanges within the Americas. In subject matter, composition, and social bite, the photographs Evans made in the American South bear powerful traces of his globally inflected experiences on the streets of Havana earlier in the 1930s when he traveled to Cuba to take photographs for the radical journalist Carleton Beals’s book \textit{The Crime of Cuba}.\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Havana Country Family} (figure 3) comes from Evans’s sojourn in Cuba. It depicts a homeless and destitute family that had migrated from the Cuban countryside to the capital, and predates by more than three years his better known and frequently reproduced photograph of the southern sharecropper Bud Fields and his family (figure 4). Evans’s Cuban photographs foreshadowed in composition and subject matter his simultaneously empathetic and damning portraits of poverty and social injustice in 1930s America: subjects at a middle distance, straight-on, the

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Figure 4: Walker Evans, *Bud Fields and his family at home, Hale County, Alabama*, c. 1935, Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection [LC-USF-342-8147A].
camera held at eye level, no special lighting effects, all conveying to viewers a mutual regard and respect between photographer and subject.

The circulation of Evans’s photographs in *The Crime of Cuba* also anticipated one of the ways in which his American-centered work and those of other 1930s-era photographers reached their intended audiences. The genre of photo-textual books in which image and word were equal and built upon one another provided a major vehicle for the dissemination of documentary photography in the 1930s with some like Margaret Bourke-White’s *You Have Seen Their Faces* enjoying best-seller status. Many 1930s-era documentary photos were also circulated through traveling exhibitions at museums, libraries, schools, universities, and, sometimes, in department stores. They appeared too in hundreds of local newspapers and their Sunday supplement sections as well as in popular weekly and monthly magazines such as *McCall’s, Collier’s, Fortune, Time, Literary Digest, Life,* and *Look.*

Through a variety of circulatory guises, these photographs invited viewers into an unfamiliar world in which an encounter with the visual potentially offered new forms of social and cultural intelligence about the self and society. The preserved public comments from one of the traveling exhibitions suggest the deep engagement of viewers with the photographs they saw and the range of political and emotive responses they elicited. Among them:

You exhibited only the ugly pictures—the exhibit is meant to be one sided / Perfect picturization of American life as it is not shown in newspapers / First real pictures have ever seen on American families / Popularizing the worst is bad policy / Pictures which give social and economic situations at a glance rather than a bunch of trick angle shots. This makes photography worthwhile / Subject very sordid and dull for exhibition / Sensational and enlightening. Important educational feature that should reach thousands of people who don’t believe such conditions can possibly exist in the U.S. / Poor peoples plight should not be exhibited, but help rendered instead / They tell a story that should be repeated many times over / True to life / Interesting and thought-provoking / Human / These pictures force your mind to ponder a great social problem which must be solved before we can really be proud of our so-called “American Standard of Living” / They surely aren’t flattering to a progressive land like ours. / Horrible pictures of conditions that are a blot


on American civilization / Very terrible, something should be done about it. Foreign countries aren’t the only ones—we have it right here. / Your pictures clearly demonstrate that one half the people do not know how the other half live / Anything to be able to help themselves should be done, but not thru direct relief / Teach the underprivileged to have fewer children and less misery / Wake up smug America! / We should be ashamed. Charity begins at home.  

The comments provide rare, unmediated traces of the meanings accorded to 1930s documentary photographs by contemporary viewers. The range of responses does not neatly map onto New Deal liberalism. Some chose to pull away from what they had seen, expressing skepticism about the seeming ubiquity of economic and social distress on display. But the overwhelming sensibilities that emerge from these comments are an emphatic apprehension of social suffering at home, illustrating how encounters with documentary photographs in the 1930s could produce the intangible structures of feeling that are one critical element of an emergent human rights consciousness.

In a world at war in which human rights in part drove the United States and its allies forward, the potency of these 1930s photographs provided one ready visual frame through which freedom from fear and freedom from want could not only begin to be understood but also felt. At war’s end human rights found a prominent place in the United Nations Charter in its novel, if not revolutionary, claim that the promotion of individual human rights was a fundamental purpose of global community. That it did so is less of a puzzle set against the explosive shift in contemporary visual culture through which images of social suffering offered a scaffolding for building an empathetic appreciation of what having, and losing, human rights might mean.

"Our commitment to human rights must be absolute," President James Earl Carter told the American people in his inaugural address on January 20, 1977. "The world is now dominated by a new spirit. Peoples more numerous and more politically aware are craving, and now demanding, their place in the sun—not just for the benefit of their own physical condition, but for basic human rights."  

Oddly, human rights had played only a marginal role throughout Carter’s presidential campaign. A brief mention at a Democratic issues forum in Louisville in late 1975, and passing references in a speech on foreign policy in Chicago the


following March were his only mentions of human rights until the second presidential debate in October 1976, with less than a month to go before Election Day. At the debate—better known for the gaffe of Carter’s opponent President Gerald R. Ford who claimed “there is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe”—Carter criticized Ford for “ignoring human rights” in Chile and other dictatorships friendly to the United States, his unwillingness to use the Helsinki Accords to promote liberalization of immigration and freedom of expression in the Soviet Union, and his refusal to meet Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “a symbol of human freedom recognized around the world.” Carter closed the debate by arguing “[w]e ought to be a beacon for nations who search for peace and who search for freedom, who search for individual liberty, who search for basic human rights. We haven’t been lately. We can be once again.”

Carter’s invocation of human rights at the debate came largely through the urging of his political advisors, notably his pollster Patrick Cadell who told him surveys showed that human rights was “a very strong issue across the board” uniting both liberals and conservatives. Even after the debate, however, Carter made little public mention of them again until his inauguration address put human rights at the center of American foreign policy. Four months later, in a speech at Notre Dame in which he reaffirmed America’s commitment to human rights as a fundamental tenet of U.S. foreign policy, Carter noted: “Throughout the world today, in free nations and in totalitarian countries as well, there is a preoccupation with the subject of human freedom, human rights.” He was right to suggest there had been a global explosion of interest in human rights in the 1970s. But Americans did not get there first. One might argue that they got there last.

What made human rights visible to American publics in the 1970s? U.S. historians have most commonly attributed their rise to domestic political causes, positing the crisis of national confidence in the wake of Watergate and Vietnam and revulsion at the realpolitik of Nixon and Kissinger foreign policy as the crucial motors that produced American human rights talk. Without question, these internal factors shaped the receptivity of some American actors to the kind of political

work human rights might do. But they do not tell us much about how it was that the vocabulary of human rights came to be there for the taking in the first place.

The exceptionalist currents of American thought about its own primacy in the making of a global human rights imagination run deep. As one Carter political operative put it, the United States is “the one nation where human rights is center stage for the world.” It can be difficult to acknowledge the extent to which U.S. engagement with human rights in the 1970s was as much if not more the story of the importation of ideas into domestic space as the exportation of American values out into the wider world. In fact, human rights moved from the margins of global political discourse to become a central optic through which a variety of states and peoples saw the world around them long before it did for most Americans. Not only was Amnesty International, the leading global human rights nongovernmental organization in the 1970s, a European importation into American politics, it was a broader and diverse network of translocal actors in the Soviet Union, Western Europe, Asia, and Latin America whose protean conceptions of human rights would deeply shape the contours of human rights thought and politics in the United States. Soviet dissidents came to the language of human rights in the late 1960s. So too did West European states, both in their reaction to political repression in Greece and the preparatory meetings that led to the Helsinki Accords. Anti-torture activists in Uruguay, Brazil, Chile, and South Korea found human rights in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In all this, American actors were, initially, bit players.

Human rights might best be thought of in 1970s America as a guest language, one that returned to the cultural politics of the United States through what Americans came to know about the thought and practice of dissidents in the Soviet Union, political activists in Latin America and Asia, and such transnational rights advocates as Amnesty International. It was less about the domestic as commonly rendered by political historians than the ways in which human rights became enmeshed in a profound set of transformations in how many Americans conceived of themselves, and their relationship to the state, society, and the world at large. A midcentury consensus about the embedded nature of the individual in the public and the social gave way in the 1970s to what Daniel Rodgers has

termed an “age of fracture” in which individuals, contingency, and choice became the watchwords of political and social thought.33 The growing therapeutic culture of the 1970s, dubbed the “Me Decade” by the journalist Tom Wolfe, heightened concern with the self and valorization of individual experience, further conditioning the sympathetic responses of Americans to the kind of testimonials and witnessing through which human rights abuses were most frequently made visible. So too did the increasing concern with identity politics and Holocaust memory as the decade progressed. As Peter Novick has argued, the rise of an American Holocaust consciousness emerged in tandem with “a cultural climate that virtually celebrated victimhood.”34

Carter’s invocation of Solzhenitsyn in his presidential debate with Gerald Ford points toward the central role that non-American actors played in shaping the American global human rights imagination in the 1970s. Mediated by new concerns with the self, the guest language of Solzhenitsyn became detached from its Soviet context (and Solzhenitsyn’s own distrust of human rights talk) to help forge an emergent American human rights vernacular. Solzhenitsyn’s reputation among American critics as “the greatest living Russian writer” first emerged during the 1960s with the publication of One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, Cancer Ward, and First Circle. His Nobel Prize–winning work circulated widely among American reading publics, with One Day in the Life and First Circle Book-of-the-Month club selections. At home, Solzhenitsyn was increasingly outspoken about the ills of the Soviet regime to the displeasure of the Brezhnev Politburo who banned his writings, had him barred from the Soviet Writer’s Union, and ordered the KGB to disrupt his work and family life. With the publication of his magnum opus The Gulag Archipelago in Paris and New York in December 1973, Leonid Brezhnev had him arrested and expelled from the Soviet Union two months later.35

The American press breathlessly covered Solzhenitsyn’s dramatic arrest and deportation, and after he and his family settled in a small Vermont town Solzhenitsyn quickly became enmeshed in American Cold War politics.36 When


36. On the avalanche of U.S. press coverage on Soljenitsyn’s exile from the Soviet Union, see “7 Russians Make Forcible Arrest of Solzhenitsyn” and “Solzhenitsyn Exiled to West
President Gerald R. Ford declined to meet Solzhenitsyn at the White House, his challenger in the 1976 Republican presidential nominating contest, Ronald Reagan, told reporters Solzhenitsyn “would be welcome to eat dinner anytime at the Reagan White House.” Ford and Reagan forces sparred over a “Solzhenitsyn plank” at the Republican convention that turned him into a proxy for the internecine feuds within the Republican Party over the efficacy of détente. The conservative Senator Jesse Helms sought to confer honorary citizenship on Solzhenitsyn. Solzhenitsyn’s own public speeches in the United States in which he vehemently denounced what he saw as the tragically wrongheaded policies of détente and encouraged the United States to “intervene” in Soviet domestic affairs played into a hawkish Cold War reading of his views. Some American liberals took an increasingly skeptical attitude toward Solzhenitsyn’s politics, “disenchanted” by his “far-fetched” Slavophile nationalism, put off by his “scorn for democracy,” and distrustful of “the willful Russian autocrat in him.”

But Solzhenitsyn’s great imaginative power, even his harshest critics acknowledged, did considerably more than rehash Cold War polemics. In *Gulag Archipelago*, he offered an entirely original lens through which to apprehend violations of individual human rights far from American shores and made what to American readers was an exceptionally compelling claim that they ought to matter. In part, the content and reception of *Gulag* are essential to understanding Solzhenitsyn’s transformative impact on his readers. Over the course of four volumes, he traced the history of the imprisonment, brutalization, and murder of tens of millions of Soviet citizens by their own government between 1929 and 1953 in “that amazing country of *Gulag* which, though an archipelago geographically was, in the psychological sense, fused into a continent—an almost invisible, almost imperceptible, country.” It relied on eyewitness testimony related to him by more than two hundred prisoners, interspersed with his own experiences in the camps and a sweeping account of how he believed Soviet political culture had brought about the destruction of millions of innocent lives.

The reception of *Gulag Archipelago*, which appeared to rapturous reviews in the United States and elsewhere in the world, was extraordinary. Since its publication...
in 1973, *Gulag* has sold more than thirty million copies in thirty-five languages. American sales reached three million by 1985 (by way of comparison Alex Comfort’s 1973 *Joy of Sex*, published in the same year as the first volume of *Gulag*, sold five million copies during the same period). While even *Gulag*’s English language translator admitted many readers were unlikely to have actually read all eighteen hundred pages of the three-volume work, the sales figures for such an ambitious and demanding work are staggering.  

But more important than *Gulag*’s subject and vast circulation for an emergent American human rights consciousness was the impact of its form. Solzhenitsyn’s subtitle for the project was “An Experiment in Literary Investigation,” and his method consciously relied on confronting readers with first-person testimony. He was intent upon viscerally pulling his readers into the narrative, insisting on their engagement with the clear intent of altering how they saw and felt about an unfamiliar world. *Gulag* opens in this way:

> Down the long crooked path of our lives we happily rushed or unhappily wandered past a variety of walls and fences—rotten wooden palings, clay embankments, brick and concrete walls, iron railings. It never occurred to us to ask what was behind them, or to look or even think about it. But that was where gulag country began, two yards away.... All those gates were prepared for us, every last one! And then a fatal door opened and four white hands, unused to work but tenacious, grabbed us by the leg, arm, collar, cap, ear and dragged us like a sack, and slammed the door to our past life shut forever more. ‘You’re under arrest!’ And all you can manage to bleat out is, ‘M-me? What for?’

Readers might have easily pictured the white hands grabbing them as well. Solzhenitsyn uses this direct approach throughout *Gulag*, asking readers to imagine for themselves the harrowing ordeals he describes: “Reader! Just try—sleep like that for one night! It was five degrees Centigrade in the barracks!” Or: “[T]here were tortures, home-made and primitive. They would crush a hand in the door, and it was all in that vein. (Try it, reader!).”  

The “I” is omnipresent throughout *Gulag*. For Solzhenitsyn it was rendered with a mix of indignation and pity to craft a self-styled voice of authenticity that challenged and discredited the prevailing strictures of Soviet official speech. The receptivity of American readers, for whom the language of Soviet socialist


realism was largely unknown, to the immediacy of Solzhenitsyn’s first-person method was conditioned by the increasingly popular style of the New Journalism in 1970s America. Its literary form was one node in the broader embrace of the self in the era’s cultural politics. Through such works as Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* and Hunter Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail*, the practices of the novel and the journalist were collapsed into a new form that lifted up the subjectivity of the author who sought to simultaneously engage, inform, and advocate. Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag* is a long way from the gonzo journalism of Hunter Thompson. The techniques of the New Journalism played no role in his own experiments in literary investigation, and his subject matter and moral gravity were quite different. But the sensibility of Solzhenitsyn’s methods and his desire to so directly involve readers in recovering the world of the gulag clearly resonated with its spirit. For his American readers, bringing the “I” into the gulag offered a palpable window into distant suffering and a visceral sense of the fragility of the human condition.

This focus on the individual became the center point of the American global human rights imagination in the 1970s. Along with Solzhenitsyn, the figure of the nonconforming dissident was more broadly lionized for his (and those lifted up in the West, like Andrei Sakharov and Václav Havel, tended to be male) “titanic stature,” “courage,” and “moral grandeur.” More broadly the testimonials of individual victims of what were increasing called human rights abuses, whether the arrest and imprisonment of dissidents in the Soviet East or the increasing presence of torture and disappearances in the military dictatorships of Brazil, Chile, and Argentina, came to define the topography of American human rights. As the individual was lifted up, however, the circumstances that produced the violations of their rights were often put in a secondary position. Not only was Solzhenitsyn decoupled from late Soviet history, many of the nonstate actors at the forefront of the human rights campaigns of the 1970s were by conscious choice indifferent to context. Political repression and its history were more commonly presented as moral parable rather than a causal network of political and social relations. Substituting the universal for the particular brought human rights much of its popular appeal in 1970s America but it left open, and indeed deliberately suppressed, the multiple and sometimes conflicting structural forces and local particularities that gave rise to the violations of rights in the first place.

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42. This was especially true for Amnesty International. In the organization’s internal and more public articulations of its self-described “impartial” mission, Amnesty continually insisted “we do not seek to explain the root causes of political repression” and that its work was based on “universally shared values, leaving all other matters to the side.” *Amnesty International Report 1980* (London, 1980), 2, 4, 7. Greg Grandin nicely traces the substitution of universal for the particular in the work of many national truth and reconciliation commissions; see his “The Instruction of Great Catastrophe: Truth Commissions, National History and State Formation in Argentina, Chile and Guatemala,” *American Historical Review* 110, no. 1 (February 2005): 46–67. For shrewd assessments of Amnesty, see Keys, chap. 3 and 8; Jan Eckel, “‘Under a Magnifying Glass’: The
If the 1970s American human rights imagination is best understood against a wider transnational landscape, one dimension was quite different than its other global iterations. Almost everywhere else the focus was on violations of rights happening overseas and at home. Yet in the United States, human rights were almost never imagined to have resonance for domestic rights questions in the 1970s. The social movements of the era for civil rights, women’s rights, and gay rights only infrequently invoked human rights as a way to frame their causes. And in the rare instances that they did, it was almost always in a minor key.43 Rights questions in the United States throughout the 1970s remained almost completely decoupled from what would be increasingly vigorous American attention to violations of human rights elsewhere in the world. Forty years on, that same insularity in American rights talk persists.

The Indonesian government released Sutanti Adit from prison on December 20, 1979. We do not really know why. It is possible that the Indonesian generals read and were moved by the appeals from Amnesty International USA Group 11, or were unnerved by the broader naming and shaming campaign led by Amnesty International and other nonstate human rights actors against Indonesian political repression. They might instead have been pushed by the pressures put on them by the Carter administration, though arguably that state pressure was in turn stimulated by the transnational nonstate campaigns of which Group 11 was a part. It is also quite possible that local politics or the complicated internal dynamics of the regime ultimately shaped the decision to release Adit along with thousands of other political prisoners in the late 1970s. The Indonesian archives that might allow us to move beyond speculation remain firmly closed.44 In this and many other similar situations, we do not have the empirical evidence to fully understand how these cases worked in practice. But if the outcome remains murky, what drove the work of Group 11 is not.

Whether advocating for the release of Sutanti Adit, writing in the comment books of exhibitions that brought photographs like Migrant Mother to

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communities across the United States, or reading the *Gulag Archipelago*, Americans in and after the mid-twentieth century began to feel the suffering of strangers came to matter as much as their own. In doing so an emergent global human rights imagination offered them new ways of seeing and being in the world. It was always partial. Some human rights in some places mattered. Other modes and locales did not. It was an American vernacular but one that took shape and form in a transnational imaginary often initially set into motion far beyond U.S. shores. In the sometimes unfathomable suffering that was so palpably a part of the twentieth-century world, a global human rights imagination came to order perceptions of the past and present and to offer a believable, if imperfect, hope for a different future.