

Reimagining the Intervention Narrative: Complicity, Globalization, and Humanitarian Discourse

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In her book, *Reading Humanitarian Intervention: Human Rights and the Use of Force in International Law*,¹ Anne Orford examines the phenomenon of a new international interventionism, predicated on a willingness to use military force in the name of humanitarian values and human rights. She specifically notes the inscription of the logic of this intervention in the heroic narrative which casts, on the one hand, state and local governments, stereotyped as entities riven by premodern tribalism, ethnic tensions, religious factionalism, and manipulated as such by local political elites with an interest in compromising democracy and human rights against, on the other hand, the international community, stereotyped as (a white knight in shining armor) intervening agent, bearing peace and human rights to local communities that need saving. This form of character casting, argues Orford, is accompanied by an “imaginative geography” organized around the presumption that the international community is absent from the locus of violence until its timely arrival in the role of “heroic savior.” The extent of the international community’s complicity (through the prior, perhaps longstanding, *in situ* activities of its economic institutions and development agencies²) in the production of the conditions that led to the outbreaks of conflict and genocide (e.g. Yugoslavia, Rwanda), in relation to which international

¹ Anne Orford, *Reading Humanitarian Intervention: Human Rights and the Use of Force in International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

² *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83; 166.

intervention is deemed called for, is glossed over or obscured.³ As much as the heroic narrative remains a politically powerful device for mobilizing international audiences and decision-makers behind humanitarian intervention, it is also deployed to pull a blanket over the international community's accountability for interventions that have gone terribly wrong, or at least collapsed into a ruse for rejecting the active and well-considered participation of the very peoples on whose behalf such interventions are mounted. In addition to addressing issues of complicity and accountability in humanitarian intervention, I would like to describe a practice of transversal politics based upon a multiform agency.

Investigating the Appeal of Intervention Narratives: Fact Production and Narrative Pleasure

By propagating false dichotomies between presence/absence and action/inaction which steer the debates relating to intervention around the issue of military deployment, and focusing tenaciously on the "local" and "ethnic" origins of human rights abuses and conflict, the heroic narrative masks the international community's complicity in the production of these crises and underscores as "just" and "natural" the (neoliberal) economic system which the international community is supposed to be operating. This occurs because few readers are willing to forego the pleasures of the heroic narrative long enough to consider whether and how the heroic narrative's active distancing of the international community from places beset with humanitarian crises permits its economic projects to retain their modular form and traditional separation from violence, to ensure their coding, alongside of military intervention, as benign or even humanitarian. Few readers consider whether and how intervention actually entrenches the rights and practices of corporations and international economic institutions in such a manner as to perpetuate or at least indirectly contribute to human rights abuses. In this "collective daydream,"⁴ because the origins of violence are located "somewhere else," in powerless victims and

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 87-110.

⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 52.

barbaric oppressors,⁵ racialized stereotypes are sustained and neoliberal economics preserved as sacrosanct.

What exactly enables such narratives to gain generalized support and become “more and more a part of ‘the stories that we are all inside, that we live daily’”?⁶ Orford notes in this regard the connection between the invisibilization of international complicity and narrative pleasure. By narrative pleasure she means the “powerful sense of self” which these texts engender in “those who identify with the hero of the story, be that the international community, the Security Council, the UN, NATO or the USA.”⁷ Indeed, by ascribing a redemptive identity to the intervening forces, the heroic narrative shifts the reader’s attention away from the violence inflicted by the hero himself upon the very object of his quest, at the same time that it co-opts him into a process of Althusserian “hailing,” whereby the individual is brought to recognize himself as the subject of very highly satisfying cultural representations of the heroic.⁸ The heroic narrative, moreover, is portrayed as non-fiction, as dealing with facts tied to the “oppressed” peoples, to their “oppressors,” and to the “hero” himself. Images of abuse, malnutrition, mass murder combine to produce, in relation to the “oppressed,” a generalized picture of helplessness, victimhood, and a degrading “feminization” and, in relation to their non-white “oppressors,” a generalized disposition of unremitting brutality. In addition to constituting the full extent of the reader’s sense of the “realness” of these characters, these images code the extent to which they must either be given succor or opposed. What is more, the heroic narrative is relentlessly rehearsed, in keeping with

⁵ Tom Farer suggests that the international community needs to intervene to control the hysterical urges of those engaged in conflicts motivated by religious or ethnic tension: “peoples in a state of ecstatic mutual fear” are “likely to go on clawing at each other unless external actors can either club them into submission, break the stalemate ... and/or guarantee the safety of those willing to assume a defensive posture” (“Intervention in Unnatural Humanitarian Emergencies: Lessons of the First Phase,” *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 18 (1996), p. 15; Cf. also *Reading Humanitarian Intervention*, pp. 158-185).

⁶ See *Reading Humanitarian Intervention*, p. 159. See also Terry Threadgold, “Introduction,” in *Feminine, Masculine and Representation*, ed. by T. Threadgold and A. Cranny-Francis (Sydney, 1990) pp. 1-35.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 161. See also Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Practices,” in *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. by Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971).

modernity's accepted means of "truth" production, which in Judith Butler's terms, occurs by means of the replication of the "acts, gestures, enactments," in this case, of colonial stereotypes that allow the reader the pleasure of identification with white masculine traits and other images regularized through sociopolitical discourse.⁹

Narrative pleasure is thus intimately tied with fact-production and its ability to reassure audiences of the existence of differentiated others (both victims and oppressors). Such "facts" are drawn heavily but not exclusively from the language of policy elites, making it tempting to conflate responsibility for the deployment of the heroic narrative with vested interests. Capitulating to such a strategy fixes the oppressor/oppressed dichotomy and exculpates activists, academics, media outfits and publics from their role in the production and reproduction of the heroic humanitarian discourse. Acknowledging that the very reading of cultural texts cannot be treated as distinct from their active (re)creation necessitates an examination of the privileged enunciative positions occupied by global media and transnational activist groups and their failure to problematize the material conditions which make possible the continued use of colonial representations. Responsibility for the entrenchment and popularization of the heroic narrative, its stereotypes and conservative repercussions, is thus dispersed, a product of the agency of multiple actors who serve simultaneously as authors and readers of "disaster pornography."¹⁰

A problematization of material conditions would point to the various roles played by corporations, governments, and individuals living in areas of relative peace in exacerbating and creating structural causes for conflict such as poverty and economic displacement, as well as more direct participation in issues such as the trade in small arms and the smuggling of conflict diamonds. Our embeddedness in the history of colonization, however, makes it easier to sustain the "imaginative geography"—to depict images of the helplessness of "colonial" subjects rather than of complex webs of complicity and exploitation which would contravene our (modern) view of places as

⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 173.

¹⁰ Audrey Macklin, "Like Oil and Water, with a Match," in *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones*, ed. by Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), p. 77.

bounded and equipped with “internally-generated authenticities.”¹¹ Projects aimed at breaking such myths, however, are not impossible. Activist efforts to subvert economic developmentalism, for instance, have made visible the other faces of international community. Such attempts rarely encroach upon the narrative of humanitarian intervention, for although scholars have examined the relationship of corporate activity and state interest to the rise of humanitarian crises, these relationships are often seen as incompatible with the masculine white knight character (hence politically unviable) and are therefore edited out of the dominant narrative. Indeed, more than just being incompatible, such a relationship poses a fundamental contradiction by depicting the international community as the savior to a crisis which it co-produced, reducing if not completely removing any heroic appeal. But if exploitation is to be addressed, it is crucial that attempts be made to portray the character of intervening forces as participants in the production of conditions which lead to conflicts and humanitarian disasters; this portrayal entails not only a restructuring of the heroic narrative, but constant efforts to move beyond the colonial moment and to secure the “factual” nature of international complicity. It is only by presenting the role of the international community in producing the material basis of suffering that the performance of the hero-subject can be unsettled and his/our bankruptcy exposed.

Problematizing the material basis entails therefore a re-imagining of the character of the international community, particularly intervening forces that play the role of protagonist. Humanitarian crises, however, oftentimes demand urgent action and it is unsurprising that most actors who favor intervention choose (self-consciously or not) to make use of the political capital captured by the pleasure of the heroic narrative to engender support for particular policy options or for a general redirection of international law. It is in this light that it becomes important to ask whether or not humanitarian interventions can be framed using a narrative that simultaneously valorizes the international community as a protector of human rights and condemns it as a participant in human rights violations. Can such a contradiction be integrated into a narrative

¹¹ Doreen Massey, “Imagining Globalization: Power-Geometries of Time-Space,” in *Global Futures: Migration, Environment and Globalization*, ed. by Avtar Brah and Mary J. Hickman (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1999), p. 29.

which is both coherent and politically viable or are we forced to accept scripts which ignore the “facts” of complicity?

Towards Alternative Narratives: Complicity and the Re-placement of the International Community

An effort to locate spaces for alternative narratives begins with an interrogation of the constitution of the international community. The fictive choice between presence and absence reifies notions of responsibility that underplay implicatedness and instead frame action in terms of “the *duty* to protect values of freedom” and “*our* position of military strength and political influence.” This, in effect, draws upon a dichotomy of power/powelessness which excludes those who suffer from humanitarian crises from the international community, understood as being constituted only by those who are “outside” and who possess the capacity to intervene. Individuals and groups whose presence disturbs the image of the white male knight are not allowed to share in the identity and agency of the international community by virtue of their presupposed “impotence.” This is the case even when excluded actors themselves identify with the hero character: in fact, it is precisely in these cases that one can see the efficacy of narrative pleasure, for it is able to generate desire even among those readers who possess incompatible markers, those who are set aside (in Bhabha’s terms) as “almost the same, but not quite.” The near-synonymous use of the term “international community” with “those who are capable of intervening” reveals the impulse to secure a singular identity for the hero in the narrative, exhibited perhaps most vividly in the operation of whiteness, not as an “unmarked category,” but as an amalgam of traits such as potency, moral righteousness, and progressive democratic politics.

An alternative narrative that seeks to make visible exploitative practices must begin by disaggregating the hero character and foregrounding the role of particular actors in the perpetuation of human rights abuses. It must *relocate* the international community and its practices both spatially and temporally into the site and moment of violence. What would emerge is a more complex plot structure, where the configuration of characters implicated in crises and those who have the potency to engage in solutions becomes

radically transformed, where the dots are connected between things such as commerce, war, and gender.¹² Such an effort involves more than just identifying new sets of antagonists vis-à-vis new sets of protagonists, for oftentimes those who can act as agents of change and humanitarianism have at some other point served as agents of human rights violations. Consequently, demands for intervention must be understood in the context, not of capability, but of past actions that may have contributed to the emergence of humanitarian crises. Such a shift in focus from traits to actions allows us to cut through gendered and racialized subjectivities, since the appeal of stereotypes can potentially be eroded by systematically highlighting past actions that contradict and subvert dominant representations. What makes the construction of alternative narratives difficult is the fact that the subversion of colonial stereotypes, the disaggregation of the “international community,” and the rethinking of “responsibility,” are not separable operations but interrelated projects which require simultaneous attention. What this means for intervention is that an alternative narrative requires the contemporaneous reconfiguring of the identity of the international community and of the subject of intervention, since the representation of the need for international action constitutes and is constituted by the repetition of colonial stereotypes.¹³

The disaggregation or breaking apart of the heroic character and its fictive traits is *bolstered* by the very instability of the colonial stereotype. In other words, it is the very need of the heroic narrative to operate through endless rehearsal that provides the space for such an alternative to operate and gain credence. Moreover, it is the

¹² “Like Oil and Water, with a Match,” p. 78.

¹³ Prospects for an alternative narrative grounded on the notion of complicity and past moral actions are contingent on the security of colonial stereotypes, including preconceptions about victims and oppressors, as well as saviors. The stereotype, however, is inherently unstable and open to subversion; its untenable presuppositions opens interpellation to disobedience. This slippage between discursive commands and their effects is reflected in Bhabha’s description of the colonial stereotype as productive. For Bhabha, “the stereotype is a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive” (*The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 70). “The *same old* stories...*must* be told (compulsively) again and afresh, and are differently gratifying and terrifying each time” (*Ibid.*, p. 77).

same process of rehearsal that will allow a notion of international action based on complicity and international presence at the site of violence to gain security within an international imaginary. A rereading of international intervention cannot stop with a critique of the conservative ends of the heroic narrative, but must proceed with the positing of a plot which underscores complex conceptions of complicity and intervention and which resists the temptation of a linear narrative structure. A viable alternative which does not obscure exploitative practices but which instead subverts colonial stereotypes must involve multiple actors being reentered into history and into the site and moment of the original production of violence. The international community would then be viewed as engaging in intervention, not to “rescue the weak,” but to recover the trumped up morality and values of the self that were tarnished or lost due to direct or indirect participation in the production of crises. Simply put, this alternative would abandon the narrative of the singular hero who protects the powerless, for the story of multiple agents engaged in interdependent quests of moral recovery.

Globalization and the Operationalization of Alternative Narratives

At this point one might ask: How can such alternatives be operationalized? Does a focus on complicity not excuse those who view themselves as distant from conflicts? Does the media’s need to simplify complex stories not demand the continued use of the white male knight?

First, it must be noted that readers are not as resistant to narratives implicating their participation in human rights abuses as one might initially suspect. Globalization has begun to erode the view that the moral decisions of actors can be geographically isolated. Consumers have recognized their role in perpetuating sweatshop labor by boycotting particular products. Companies, responding to pressure from civil society, have begun to adopt versions of the discourse on corporate social responsibility. Governments have withdrawn military support in situations where human rights abuses have been exposed. The heroic narrative is not necessary in order to get the “international community” to act. A narrative focusing on complicity and

responsibility carries its own appeal and is able to “invite the reader to identify with a central figure”¹⁴ who does not have to be conceived as morally upright. Readers, it would seem, are sophisticated enough to understand interconnectedness and feel the effects of time-space compression.¹⁵ There are dangers here of overestimating global social consciousness and of once again rendering invisible the agency of actors in the areas of intervention themselves. What is important to note is that efforts to more resolutely ascertain complicity and responsibility can emerge within intersubjective frames of meaning constructed by actors who live and operate in areas of conflict by means of *networks* of cooperation. Here it becomes crucial to rethink globalization and resist the temptation to reduce it to a process with a singular logic (capitalist expansion) controlled by elite structures (neoliberal institutions, governments, and multinational corporations).

Steven Flusty argues that “globalization *is* only because it is woven through the planet’s social fabric from the ground up ... by everyday life’s hyperextension – the increasing spatial reach of emplaced social relations.”¹⁶ He rejects, in other words, the notion of *a* globalization in favor of multiple globalities, upon which we may be able to posit transformative potential. Similarly, Arjun Appadurai, borrowing from Benedict Anderson, talks about how the multiple dimensions of global cultural flows make possible the production of *imagined worlds*, by which he means the “multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of person and groups spread around the globe.”¹⁷ Both conceptions of globalization demand, first of all, a subversion of the popular understanding of globalization as an “unassailable macroeconomic logic” which underlies “the very nature of contemporary society.”¹⁸ Secondly and, perhaps more importantly, the notion of a variegated globalization points us

¹⁴ Reading *Humanitarian Intervention*, p. 166.

¹⁵ David Harvey, “Time-Space Compression and the Postmodern Condition” in *The Global Transformations Reader: An Introduction to the Globalization Debate*, ed. by D. Held and A. McGrew (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), pp. 82-91.

¹⁶ Steven Flusty, *De-Coca-Colonization: Making the Globe from the Inside out* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 4.

¹⁷ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 33.

¹⁸ See *De-Coca-Colonization*, pp. 6-7.

to the constructedness of globality and the role of non-sovereign activities in global formation. There is, in other words, a quiddity or an everydayness to globalization, a space wherein new networks or globalities can and are produced.

The awareness of everydayness points to the agency involved in global formation, and to the location of power within individual activity and individual practices of resistance. Such agency means that narratives can be rewritten outside of official languages and can be constructed through the production of networks. Such a view of globalization would entail a re-imagining of the spatial as “the sphere of the juxtaposition, or co-existence, of distinct narratives, as the product of power-filled social relations.”¹⁹ Within this rejection of the “imaginative geography” of the heroic narrative, “places” may be recast as articulations of social relations, “including local relations ‘within’ the place and those many connections which stretch way beyond it. And all of these embedded in complex, layered, histories.”²⁰ The global must be cast as a place that is open, porous, and hybrid — it is “*place as meeting place*.”²¹ It is in this spirit that the divide between activists and academics can potentially be bridged, not only within Western or Northern spaces, but also within the intersection of spatial, racial, gendered, and class distinctions. Research which gives voice to the stories of resistance movements in sites of violence can and should be integrated. An intervention narrative does not have to employ a singular plot line, predicated upon the rhetoric of heroes and victims. It can and must include the stories of actors such as political prisoners as well as civil society organizations and other local groups seeking to address a particular humanitarian crisis. These actors are simultaneously heroes *and* victims, in the same way that the “international community” is simultaneously an opponent of violence *and* its major sponsor.

It is important to note, however, that varieties of work that foreground stories “from below” still tend to be dismissed as anecdotal and thereby theoretically useless. What this signifies is the continued dominance of views which subordinate specificity to the convenience

¹⁹ “Imagining Globalization: Power-Geometries of Time-Space,” p. 41.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

of meta-narration. In opposition to this is a multiply instrumental globalization, one that produces a cartography that subverts the colonial logic, that disaggregates the international community, and that pushes for collaboration on the basis of “dreams of human rights.”²² By providing a social technology that enables transversal politics, globalization enables the simultaneous recognition of difference and sameness—difference, not in the sense of ascribed identities but in terms of material conditions, and sameness, not in the sense of increasing homogeneity, but in terms of a common investment in the practices that perpetuate human rights abuses. Globalization—as an ethic—is the arduous task of pushing for the “recognition of the irreducibility of otherness” by opening narrative spaces for otherness, constituted as resistant “gripping” entities that need to be engaged as opposed to being simply avoided by means of the deployment of imaginative geographies.²³

This is not to say that globalization is necessarily value-neutral. By pointing towards its potential, I do not intend to undermine the fact that it has in the past (and in the present) become a vehicle for the transmission of the heroic narrative. Indeed, processes of global formation are replete with democratic deficits, lending themselves easily to actors who have the material resources necessary to endorse and communicate particular narratives. But, as discussed above, the heroic narrative is an ongoing process that implicates far more than those international economic institutions, development agencies, governments, and multinational corporations which have the greatest stake in the continued veiling of exploitative practices. We ourselves are

²² Orford uses the concept of dreams to illustrate both the instability of colonial images and the possibility of human rights providing the basis of ethics in international intervention. “For Freud, the space of dreams is dynamic. If we follow Freud’s lead along the royal road, the space of a dream is not a screen upon which images are projected. Rather dreams exist in dynamic networks of meaning. In dreams, trains of thought and images move back and forth across paths within the unconscious, changing direction and appearance without warning. Pile argues that we should thus not treat the images in the daydream of colonialism as fixed, as if the space of the dream were a screen upon which the colonizer could project his fantasies of the colonized.” (*Reading Humanitarian Intervention*, p. 203).

²³ See Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 11.

heavily invested in this process of invisibilization, not only because we ourselves benefit from the modular exportation of the neoliberal order, but because the heroic narrative gives us the satisfaction of securing our identities as non-barbaric, enlightened combatants who protect those who need protecting even if this involves entering sites of violence.

It is important, then, to note that an integration of stories involving economic exploitation means that activists and scholars must not only operate transnationally, but must begin integrating campaigns for humanitarian intervention with issues such as the oppressive effects of neoliberalism and the uneven impact of economic globalization, all the while not losing sight of the gendered and racialized dimensions of these problems. Campaigns trumpeting various human rights issues already exist. The problem lies in the fact that they have remained, despite globalization, relatively disjointed, reinforcing the hierarchical separation of “economic” issues and “military” ones. A humanitarian *crisis* emerges at the intersection of various forms of oppression. A narrative which focuses exclusively on the military dimension may lead to a necessary military intervention, but it also allows a quick exit once a mission has been accomplished, leaving behind the structures, policies, and colonial preconceptions which have themselves taken part in the production of crisis.

Conclusion

I have been consciously optimistic about the prospects for framing humanitarian intervention using alternative narratives. I has argued that economic exploitation and complicity are obscured because of a failure to problematize the material conditions of humanitarian crises. “Facts” about crises have been selectively produced and reproduced, often with an exclusive focus on images of victimhood which reinforce colonial stereotypes and preserve the myth of moral superiority. Indeed, “the narrative of humanitarian intervention authorizes and thus erases the violent foundations of the international community,” reassuring us “of the civility of our society and the barbarity of those others upon whom we have inflicted violence.”²⁴ Destroying this myth

²⁴ *Reading Humanitarian Intervention*, p. 197.

requires projects that expose the “truth” about complicity and efforts to disaggregate the monolithic image of the international community. It is by disaggregating the unitary character of the hero that we can shift the notions of international responsiveness away from generalized heroic *traits* towards an ethic of accountability for past and present *actions*. Such a focus on complicity should not, however, be used to deny the agency of those living in crisis zones, but to highlight how conflict and complicity have combined to constrict their agency.²⁵ This alternative, in other words, does not work to erase difference, but to foreground difference in terms of access to rights and security. It is an alternative which posits “a notion of place where specificity ... derives not from some mythical internal roots nor from a history of relative isolation,” but from the absolute particularity necessitated by a post-colonial moment.²⁶

A critique of the heroic intervention narrative should not be taken as oppositional to humanitarian discourse. Indeed, the language of human rights “can offer us a way to start mourning, and then move on. However, this requires us to be able to accept the “lack, gap and non-identity” which human rights memorializes.”²⁷ It is in this light that one might look to globalization as a site of resistance, for not only does globalization make us aware of our interconnectedness, it also allows us to hear the stories of others, conduct efforts across borders, and make the necessary connections which thread across conflict, economic exploitation, gender, race, human rights, and personal action. By making these connections and subverting the dominant story, we can stop acting out “our desire to exclude that which threatens our perceived political unity” and begin the arduous task of recognizing “the foreignness in ourselves.”²⁸ ☞

²⁵ “Like Oil and Water, with a Match,” p. 91.

²⁶ “Imagining Globalization: Power-Geometries of Time-Space,” p. 41.

²⁷ *Reading Humanitarian Intervention*, p. 214.

²⁸ Costas Douzinas, *The End of Human Rights* (Oxford: Hart Publications, 2000), p. 365.