

Re-Thinking the Figure of the Humanitarian: Sahar Khalifeh's *The End of Spring* and the Function of Human Rights Narrative

David Jefferess

University of British Columbia, Okanagan Campus, Canada

Sahar Khalifeh's novel, *Rabi' Harr*, published in English as *The End of Spring* (2008), ends with Ahmad committing suicide by driving his ambulance, "like a rocket," into a group of Israeli soldiers. In the moment preceding this act, he is described as having "lost his senses" as he witnesses his father being beaten by Israeli soldiers, and a young English solidarity activist, Rachel, killed by a bulldozer as she attempts to protect his parents' home from demolition. His father describes him as a martyr, while the Israeli media brands him a terrorist. Ahmad's final act follows a narrative of his life growing up in the occupied West Bank, from his early childhood experiments with art and photography, and his infatuation with a young Israeli settler girl, Mira, to his imprisonment and torture by Israeli authorities and his experience of the al-Aqsa Intifada. While Part I of the novel focalizes Ahmad as a child, Part II begins with chapters presented in the first-person voice of his older brother, Majid, as he recuperates from serious injuries in the besieged compound of Palestinian Authority President Arafat, as well as chapters focalizing the home of the mother of Suad, a friend of Ahmad and Majid.

In *The Palestinian Novel* (2016), Bashir Abu-Manneh describes Khalifeh's fiction "as *histories of social and political oppression*, capturing Israeli domination, Palestinian processes of resistance and potential transformation, as well as, distinctly, possibilities for Palestinian-Israeli cooperation and solidarity" (119, original emphasis). In contrast, Anna Bernard (2010) engages with this novel through the framework of human rights narrative. She argues that it reflects both the Bildungsroman and the human rights report, and provides an explanatory narrative, documenting the psychological trauma and social contexts that ultimately lead Ahmad to become a suicide bomber: "it is not too farfetched to identify a simultaneous address to a western audience which directly confronts the invidious stereotype of the 'Palestinian terrorist'" (352). Such a reading relies upon the ethic of sentimentality that underwrites the genre of human rights narrative, though Bernard is attentive to the way the text draws the reader not only into a presumed empathic relation with Ahmad but also documents a real historical event. Talal Asad, reflecting on his book *On Suicide Bombing*, emphasizes that his interest is not in

why someone becomes a suicide bomber, but “the role of violence in the constitution and continuity of liberal society” (Asad 126). In this article, I read the novel through and against Joseph Slaughter’s idea of “humanitarian reading,” arguing that it undermines the humanitarian impulse of the Western-situated reader by highlighting relations of complicity within systemic violence.

I wrote this article 10 years after *The End of Spring* was published and more than 15 years after the specific historical moments it recounts in fiction, including Israeli attacks on West Bank towns and the construction of the barrier wall during the al-Aqsa Intifada (commonly referred to as the second intifada, in Europe and North America). I am mindful of Joseph Slaughter’s caution that within the human rights literacy project, the “collective sympathy of the ‘powerful’ for the ‘powerless’ does not seem equally excited by watching... the daily, normalized sufferings of people in Iraq and the West Bank as it does by watching a Hollywood film about the genocide in Rwanda ten years after such sympathies might have been actionable” (“Humanitarian Reading” 92). My aim is to show how *The End of Spring* undermines the discursive framework of the ‘powerful’ benevolently caring and speaking *for* the ‘powerless;’ for instance, the English activist Rachel’s claims to innocence are mocked and derided by Ahmad, and it is Ahmad, through his photography, who bears witness to his own experience, and that of his community. In contrast to *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), to which Slaughter alludes—and which he argues provides solace to the Western viewer by occluding the colonial politics that inform both the origins of the genocide and the failure of the so-called International Community to intervene (*Human Rights, Inc* 38)—*The End of Spring* foregrounds a complex politics of relation and complicity. The novel reveals the fallacy of the humanitarian figure as neutral, innocent, and transcending notions of difference (Jefferess 2011, 2015). Further, I wrote this article in June 2018, during the period of the Great March of Return in the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip, and just after the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) killed Razan al-Najjar, a Palestinian medic, and wounded Dr. Tarek Loubani, a Canadian doctor.

In the moment of writing the article, then, I seek to recognize the way in which the English translation of this novel need not necessarily be read – specifically in anglophone countries and regions – within the genre of human rights account. Rather, *The End of Spring* challenges some of the very assumptions that underpin the consumption of human rights narratives in Europe and North America; specifically, the presumption of the humanitarian as a neutral party outside of conflict who acts out of an abstract care for others. In fact, the narrative undermines Western models of human rights reading, as a practice of cultivating empathy for suffering others and/or as the vicarious positioning of the reader as savior. In the first section, I situate my analysis in relation to debates regarding the dual role of the humanitarian – presumed as white and/or Western – to provide aid for suffering others and to represent that suffering to a Western audience. I then argue that *The End of Spring* presents specific acts of

witnessing, including journalism and photographic documentation, that foreground a Palestinian community and that undermine the idea that these representations must be crafted as a way to inspire a presumed white/Western audience to care and act. Finally, I analyze the way the novel represents “humanitarian acts,” and specifically Ahmad’s role as an ambulance driver. Ahmad performs the role of the humanitarian both as provider of care and as witness, but he also commits an act of lethal violence, and, more importantly, he cannot fulfill the ideal of innocent neutrality, premised upon the notion that the humanitarian transcends social identities, like nation, race, and religion. In conclusion, I return to the moment of writing this article to reflect upon Israeli Defence Forces attacks on “humanitarian actors.”

The Privileged Status and Voice of the Humanitarian

In “Humanitarian Reading,” Joseph Slaughter provides an analysis of J. Henry Dunant’s *A Memory of Solferino* (1862), which he characterizes as “one of the most objectively successful of humanitarian interventionist narratives in history, precipitating both the incorporation of the Red Cross and the first Geneva Convention on the conduct of warfare” (“Humanitarian Reading” 90-91). Slaughter situates this text against “sentimental models of reading,” as promoted by Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty, in which readers seek to empathize with suffering others. Using Elaine Scarry’s critique of empathy as Western “generous imagining,” Slaughter argues that such reading practices *use* the suffering of others as a means of “training our sympathetic, moral imaginations” (92) and affirming the moral distinction of the reader, against those who lack this sentiment, and against “the poor and powerless, who are in need of both security and sympathy” (105). In contrast, Slaughter argues that Dunant’s memoir of providing humanitarian relief to wounded and dying soldiers after a battle in the Austro-Sardinian war “exemplifies a logic of grammatical empathy that invites us to project ourselves not into the position of the sufferer but into the position of the humanitarian, the subject position of one who already recognizes the human dignity of the wounded and attempts to relieve their suffering” (94). Significantly, Slaughter contends that Dunant’s narrative does not so much position the reader to empathize with Dunant, as the hero, but to recognize themselves within the grammatical position of the humanitarian figure. This position is taken up in the narrative not only by Dunant, but also by other tourists and local women residents; further, Dunant envisions the position can be taken up by a team of trained relief workers, what would become the International Red Cross.

The ethical value at the basis of humanitarian reading, in contrast to practices that emphasize empathy for the suffering Other, is an ethical awareness that Slaughter characterizes as indifference to difference. The

humanitarian position “may be occupied by anyone who disregards nationality in the face of human suffering” (99). In his memoir, Dunant characterizes himself as a ““mere tourist with no part whatever in this great conflict”” (qtd in Slaughter, “Humanitarian Reading” 100). The humanitarian, then, is narrativized as outside of the conflict until they take up the position of the “third actor.” Within Makau Mutua’s (2002) theory of the narrative triangle that informs human rights narrative—Savage, Victim, Savior—the Savior can be seen as a third actor, defined by the innocence of their positioning as an outsider to the conflict as much as by their particular acts of aid or support for the Victim. As such, according to Slaughter, “the sense of ethical obligation perhaps develops not in response to another’s tragedy but as *a sense of responsibility to the moral integrity of one’s own class of humanity*” (103, emphasis added).

Although Slaughter suggests that this reading experience is not as morally or intellectually satisfying as sentimental modes of reading (103), the humanitarian reading practice he theorizes is not dissimilar from that of Nussbaum and Rorty. Both approaches presume a white/Western situated reader. Both cultivate a sense of moral distinction. Further, both affirm the reader as an innocent observer; the reader sees themselves within the conflict only in so far as they “care.” This desire to uphold “the moral integrity of one’s own class of humanity” produces a sense of affiliation to a benevolent community that does not so much transcend but elide or erase relations of social power, such as race, class, and citizenship. Although Nussbaum, Rorty, and Slaughter do not overtly acknowledge racial positions of power or identity, following Gada Mahrouse (2014), I explicitly link “white” and “Western” to emphasize the relation between the “West” as an ideological history and whiteness, or the politics of race thinking, and how this relation informs humanitarian subjectivity. To study the English translation of Khalifeh’s novel within the frame of human rights narrative, as these critics theorize, produces a reading position that relies upon the reader’s apparent distance from the suffering and violence portrayed in the text.

While humanitarian discourse foregrounds the ideal of shared human dignity, Didier Fassin argues that in practice, humanitarianism exhibits a “complex ontology of inequality.” In “Humanitarianism as a Politics of Life,” Fassin describes three permutations of this inequality (519). First, the life of a humanitarian worker is accorded greater status than the lives of those they are in a conflict zone to “save”; assessments of the safety of humanitarian workers, for instance, define the level of participation of NGOs, such as Médecins sans frontières (MSF), in a conflict or disaster. Related to this first point, the expatriate humanitarian receives greater protection than local staff. Finally, humanitarianism “establishes a distinction between lives that can be narrated in the first person (those who intervene) and lives that are recounted only in the third person (the voiceless in the name of whom intervention is done)” (519). Significantly, the (higher) value placed upon the life of the humanitarian, who risks their

life to aid others, is tied to the role of the humanitarian to be *the* voice for the voiceless, speaking of, for, and in place of those who suffer.

In *Humanitarian Reason*, Fassin provides a fuller explanation of the humanitarian's role as witness. A primary function of humanitarian organizations is to provide authoritative accounts of conflict or disaster. Fassin describes the humanitarian witness as both *testis*, one who observes an event, and as *superstes*, testifying to *their experience* of the event. Unlike those who testify from the position of the victim/survivor, because they are perceived as neutral, or innocent, humanitarian actors have a "stock of credibility" that allows them not only to produce a record but to "engage affects," such as donations or political action from their home governments (207). The humanitarian witness is endowed with the impartiality of the outside observer, while utilizing an emotional or subjective register that foregrounds *their* experience and perceptions (216). Their authority to speak is marked by their personal experience of the conflict zone as one who has taken great risk, and as an outsider, seemingly with no part in the conflict otherwise.

The End of Spring depicts the presence of Israeli and international activists in the occupied West Bank, and most notably the young English woman Rachel, who is killed by a bulldozer while trying to prevent a home demolition. These activists are not humanitarians, per se, as they "take sides" in the conflict, and their role is not confined to providing medical aid and other forms of care. Yet, they are positioned as the Savior within the triangle Mutua defines, providing support for Victims against Savages. As Gada Mahrouse (2014) describes, the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), for instance, is premised on a dual function similar to the role of the humanitarian Fassin outlines. The ISM activist in occupied Palestine seeks to protect the Palestinian (Victim) by using the presumed privileged status of their whiteness and/or Western passport; it is precisely their privilege, or the higher status presumed to be conferred due to their race, that makes their "risk" performing nonviolent direct action more politically effective than the same acts performed by Palestinians. The international solidarity activist also relies upon this status to provide personal witness testimonies in their home countries, to inform their communities of the oppression Palestinians experience (Mahrouse 30).

In *The End of Spring*, the English activist Rachel seems to allude to Rachel Corrie, a white ISM activist from the United States who was killed by a bulldozer in Gaza in 2003, despite her confidence that her skin and passport would protect her from this fate (Corrie). As Mahrouse shows, Corrie's whiteness is at the basis of both expressions of contempt for her actions and valorizations of her sacrifice. Responses that honored her typically reinforced the significance of her positioning as a white woman. As Mahrouse explains, Edward Said emphasized Corrie's whiteness in order to "more convincingly make the case about the ongoing injustice in the occupation of Palestine," because as "a white American, Corrie represents a neutrality and innocence to which Said could never lay claim," due to his positioning as an Arab-American (37-8). Yet, Mahrouse

shows how the killing of Corrie by the IDF did not garner the sort of universal sympathy and outrage anticipated by the strategy of European and North American activists risking their lives to protect Palestinians. Mahrouse argues that “the lack of empathy and accountability garnered by her death can be attributed to what was perceived to be her acts of treason, not only by siding with the enemy, but by becoming one herself” (35). Rather than transcending race to enact care and recognize a universal human dignity, Corrie became a race-traitor.

Significantly, commemorations that seek to honor Corrie’s life and actions often required excising email statements that did not align with the performance of white innocence and humanitarian indifference to difference. In order to produce her as a humanitarian who sacrificed her life for others, she needed to be remembered as post-racial rather than anti-racist. For instance, *The Guardian* omitted sections of her emails that provided details “of some of Israel’s most destructive and inhumane activities in Gaza” as well as Corrie’s characterization of Palestinians as people who “organize against all odds,” which allows the paper to construct Palestinians as a “a helpless people that may be deserving of charity on terms determined by Western philanthropy, but not as people capable of taking action on their own behalf” (El Lozy 108). Similarly, the play, *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, was opposed in initial attempts to stage it in New York, even though, as Mahmoud El Lozy argues, it presents a comforting narrative of “personal crisis” (118). The play depoliticizes Corrie’s writing, omitting passages in which Corrie characterizes the treatment of Palestinians by Israel as “genocide” or reflects upon her own complicity in the United States’ support of Israel. El Lozy contends that “these choices weaken the play’s potential to initiate the most important kind of soul-searching – the painful kind” (188). As such, I would argue, these commemorations of Corrie attempt to reclaim her as a humanitarian, that third actor exhibiting the “moral integrity” with which a white/Western audience wishes to claim affiliation.

Humanitarian Witnessing: Authority, Audience, Action

Focusing on the way *The End of Spring* utilizes human rights discourse to give “interiority to the iconic figure of the ‘terrorist’” and testify “to the real-life devastation wreaked by Operation Defensive Shield,” Bernard emphasizes Khalifeh’s interest to “call upon an international audience to respond to Palestinian oppression” by insisting upon and enacting “the Palestinian right to self-representation, in both the legal and narrative senses” (Bernard 352, 356). Reading the text within the framework of humanitarian narrative, I am interested not so much in how the novel “documents” the al-Aqsa Intifada but in how it depicts various forms of Palestinian self-representation, and hence how Khalifeh’s depiction of witnessing undermines the humanitarian will to speak of, for, and in place

of suffering others. Significantly, while I may analyze the novel from the position of a white, materially privileged reader in the settler state of Canada, as a way to trouble the Victim-Savage-Saviour triangle that informs human rights narrative, the various acts of witnessing depicted in the novel are not directed to an international audience. Ahmad's father owns a bookshop and is a correspondent for the local newspaper *Al-Quds*. Laura al Washmi becomes a correspondent for Palestinian television. Ahmad's brother Majid, after being interviewed by Laura, becomes a television spokesperson for the Palestinian authority, relying, in part, on his father's journalism. A number of chapters also shift from the third-person narration that structures most of the novel to the first-person voice of Majid, written as journal entries while he recuperates in Arafat's besieged compound after receiving serious head wounds during an Israeli attack. These chapters begin with the refrain that Majid *must* write so as not to lose his memory and slip back into a coma. Thus, these depictions challenge the way in which the Palestinian is constructed as a testifying Victim within human rights narrative. These characters represent the conflict to make sense of it for the Palestinian community and for themselves. The act of representation is presented as the assertion of will and agency, but without the need for an authorizing sympathetic Western audience, who might respond on their behalf. This theme is most pronounced in the depiction of Ahmad's photography.

The novel opens with a description of Ahmad as an "artist by nature," and he is characterized as a "dreamer" by his teacher, drawing napping cats, kites, and butterflies. Taught to take photographs by his father, Ahmad's first photos both illuminate and complicate the experience of the Palestinian refugee in their own lands. A photo of the town dump, taken for a story his father is writing, "turned out to be expressive and clear, full of life. When you looked at it you could feel the sunlight and hear the rustle of the trees and smell the flowers as if you were standing right there in the heart of that place" (20). Asked by his brother Majid to take a publicity shot of him for a singing contest, Ahmad photographs him on a hilltop: "Ahmad zoomed in and zoomed out until the settlement appeared behind his brother as if it were right there surrounding him" (18). The photograph depicts the reality of enclosure and constraint of the ever-expanding Israeli settlements, yet also reveals Majid to his father in a new way: "The boy really was as handsome as the picture. He belonged in the movies or on television, but he was here in the West Bank" (20). As much as these images reflect Palestinian suffering, they also reflect resilience, producing Palestinians as more than the Victims of human rights discourse.

In *Conflicted Commitments*, Mahrouse examines the way in which Western activists seek to negotiate the need to represent suffering others through photography, without reproducing a voyeuristic gaze that enacts a relationship between viewer and subject defined through pity (90). She quotes Wendy Kozol who expresses concern about attempts to document violence that do not include the image of the suffering body: "In losing the

spectacle, we lose the voyeuristic privilege of the gaze but do we also lose knowledge of the trauma itself?” (Kozol qtd in Mahrouse 86). In contrast, Khalifeh’s depiction of Ahmad’s photographic gaze, I think, requires the Western reader to reflect on the very idea of trauma, and what it is *supposed* to look like and entail. Ahmad’s photographs initially emphasize visions of beauty and possibility that are not separate from, but a part of, the reality of life under occupation; in the final scene, the photographs are described as acts of history-making, with emphasis not on the interpretation or possible effects of the image for an audience, but on the act of self-representation. By presenting the act of photography in a way that de-centres the Western viewer, as the presumed intended audience, Khalifeh “documents” this historical moment in a way that is not limited to established human rights constructions of “trauma,” or perhaps requires a broader understanding of “the trauma itself.”

Mahrouse analyzes an example of a Canadian activist who accompanied ambulance paramedics in Hebron, in the West Bank. In one instance, the ambulance stopped to attend to a Palestinian man who had been executed by the IDF while he was walking home with his groceries. The activist recognized the opportunity for a “classic shot” that would be sure to have “an impact” in Canada, but instead chose to take a photo the next morning, after the body had been removed, but with the groceries still strewn in the street and the blood on the ground (Mahrouse 83-4). Importantly, while the activist was careful to produce an image that would not objectify the man, Mahrouse does not detail any similar anxiety on the activist’s part about how, back in Canada, this photographic evidence of Israeli oppression would require the narration of *his* experience. As Fassin argues, humanitarian testimony necessarily presents the Palestinian in the narrow role of Victim: “the stone thrower turned trauma victim... third-person testimony gives way to first-person narrative while the *auctor* imposes his authority” (Fassin 221). The humanitarian witness speaks of, and in place of, the Victim, and this *responsibility* is normalized, as those who are being spoken for “are assumed not to have access to the public arena” (221).

While there most certainly was a time when an international audience could not easily access the narratives of Palestinians, this is not the case today, when Palestinian-produced videos and written testimonies circulate widely, whether through documentaries released on streaming platforms, organizations (such as the Electronic Intifada), or through individual testimonies via Twitter, Instagram, or other social media in real time. Nonetheless, Palestinian testimony continues to be subordinated (Bernard 356). We can see this process of marginalization in the work of Western activists who have taken up the Palestinian cause. For instance, Stephen McCloskey (2018), the director of Belfast-based development NGO, Centre for Global Education, reflects upon how his multiple visits to Gaza and the West Bank over a ten-year period allow him to provide a “first-hand narrative of life” in the Palestinian occupied territories (45). McCloskey refers to Palestinian human rights organizations as

“informants” and—reflecting Fassin’s argument about the humanitarian witness—he asserts the responsibility to represent, reinforcing his ability to describe Palestinian experience for a Western audience, relying upon the credibility of *his* personal narrative (46-7, 52-3). Ironically, despite describing how he was inspired to see the Palestinian experience for himself by hearing the narratives of Palestinians who visited Northern Ireland, and despite referring to Palestinian organizations that provide various forms of evidence of Israeli oppression, McCloskey makes the case for the need for the humanitarian witness rather than amplifying Palestinian voices.

The responsibility of the humanitarian witness to represent *their* understanding of the other’s trauma serves to reinforce the presumption that Palestinian testimony is not to be trusted, undermining both Palestinian subjectivity and Palestinian political analysis. For instance, McCloskey’s personal narrative is overtly structured by humanitarian discourse. Fassin describes how the humanitarian interest with physical and mental health depoliticizes and decontextualizes conflict, “substituting the politics of justice proclaimed by the martyr with the politics of compassion, which has the sufferer as its object.... Humanitarian subjectification blurs the image of violence—or rather, through the offices of psychiatrists and psychologists, it requalifies it as trauma” (Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason* 211). For McCloskey, the response to narratives of Palestinian oppression can only be Western aid for its traumatized victims. He explains how his experience as a witness precipitated a “capacity-building” education project with an emphasis on providing “psycho-social support to help the young people address the effects of conflict-related trauma” (55-56). Although McCloskey highlights various aspects of the Israeli occupation, including the impacts of the blockade of Gaza and the consequences of military attacks in the occupied territories, the rationale he provides for the development model of action describes Palestinians as experiencing a “chronic shortage of school buildings,” “mental health problems” caused by the conflict, and chronic poverty and unemployment. Palestinians are reduced to a set of development “needs” that are rhetorically separated from the policies and practices of the Israeli state, and the European and North American nations who support it. As Mahrouse highlights, the presence of Western activists and humanitarians in the occupied territories of Palestine is not necessarily beneficial for Palestinians; her interviews with Palestinian community organizers raises the question of whether international activists would not support Palestinians more effectively by organizing against Israeli policies in their home countries (114).

By emphasizing the role of Ahmad as a witness, documenting his experience through a camera, *The End of Spring* does not simply provide a human rights narrative, functioning as an “informant” for a Western-situated audience, but also depicts the differing interests, frameworks, and stakes in performing the role of witness. Ahmad’s photographs, which include snapshots of kittens, birthday cakes, or his Israeli crush, Mira,

record an experience that is shaped by, but not limited to, the trauma of occupation, reflecting complexity of aspiration and experience. For instance, his photos of Majid's first big musical performance capture his brother's hope for personal stardom and the audience's experience of the show as a performance of Palestinian nationalism (71). In the climactic scene of the novel, "Ahmed picked up his camera and began taking pictures. At first he leaned against the front of the ambulance, but then he was taken in by the scene and moved closer to the events, forgetting the emergency services. Crowds of protesters and peace activists of all colors and nationalities were very calmly and quietly heading toward the Wall" (264). Ahmad takes his photos for no specific audience or purpose. In the documentary *Five Broken Cameras* (2011), Emad Burnat's video documentation of dispossession and resistance in the West Bank village of Bil'in is edited, produced as narrative, and then shared internationally, but the documentary shows Burnat as compelled to record without any expectation that his footage will be viewed outside his community. Similarly, Ahmad's witnessing is not motivated by the possible responses of an international audience.

The tenuous position of the Palestinian as witness to their own experience is highlighted when Rachel reaches out to cover Ahmad's lens before even introducing herself (265). His brief conversation with Rachel and her friend Mira, the Israeli settler whom he had briefly befriended as a child, presents a stark contrast between how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is represented from different positions of witnessing. Returning to Abu-Manneh's characterization of Khalifeh's fiction, rather than imagining possible practices of solidarity, in this novel, at least, the relation between Palestinians and Israelis (as well as people in the West) is defined through the terms of humanitarianism. Ahmad feels that Mira and Rachel treat him as an object of curiosity, pity, and charity. Although they are present in his community ostensibly in solidarity with Palestinian resistance to the wall and demolitions, Ahmad experiences them as nonetheless, or necessarily, "the stronger ones and we're the orphans, like America and the Native Americans, or New Zealand and the Maori" (267). In the scene, Mira and Rachel are presented as oblivious to the nature of the social and historical context for the conflict, yet confident to explain the "Middle East," overtly asserting their role to enlighten Ahmad. They cannot understand why Ahmad, as a Palestinian, would be fearful of Jewish people; Rachel asserts that Mira has neither benefited from nor is complicit with the actions of her settler father, and they explain that neither of them are encumbered by religion, like Muslims in Palestine are, believing instead in humanity, animal rights, the right to education, air, and water (268-9). Rachel is appalled and defensive when Ahmad highlights how she, as an English woman, must remember history, and specifically the role of Britain in the establishment of Israel through the Balfour declaration. Figuring the position of the white/Western human rights actor (with whom the humanitarian reader can claim affiliation, in Slaughter's theory), Rachel and Mira enact outrage for the the human rights "abuses" of the Israeli

state, but cannot recognize themselves as “beneficiaries” of the oppressive system that produces those abuses (see Mamdani). Unlike Rachel Corrie, who highlights in emails and journals her position in a complex history, grappling with her complicity and privilege, Khalifeh constructs these activists as not simply naïve, but racist; concluding their debate, Rachel calls Ahmad “history” (270). They join the demonstration not to listen and to learn, but to explain and help. In their narratives, Ahmad is in need of “progress,” as if his suffering is not related to their material privilege and their privilege to see themselves in the position of the Savior.

When the demonstration confronts the IDF, as Israeli bulldozers tear olive trees from the ground, before turning on the houses, Ahmad experiences the scene through the lens of his camera: “Take a picture. This is history. Click. Click. The earth’s grief. Click Click. People’s pain. Click. Click” (272). Ahmad’s declaration that Mira and Rachel need to know their history becomes jumbled with Rachel’s condemnation of him *as* history; Ahmad documents destruction and pain, but for what end? In this scene, his assertion of the responsibility to record reinforces his lack of access, legibility, and respect, as a subject who can represent. His photographs will not inspire an international audience to act, and there is no sense that this is his intent or desire. As a witness, he records with the click of his camera his father sitting in front of his house, dragged and kicked by soldiers, and then Rachel walking in front of the bulldozer and killed. In the moment before he presses the accelerator of the ambulance, driving into a group of Israeli soldiers, he is described as taking “pictures of the events like he’s making a movie. Fast forward. But it’s an overexposed film. He’s filming, without taking pictures, in his mind, what mind he has left” (275). Here, the motif of filming reflects that broader sense of the trauma referred to above. In his brief life, Ahmad experiences various forms of trauma, including being berated by his father for not being sufficiently masculine, torture in an Israeli prison—which, significantly, is alluded to but not detailed—and being tied by IDF soldiers to the front of an Israeli tank in the form of a cross, as a human shield. The conflict defines Ahmad’s experience; unlike Mira and Rachel, he is never able to feel that he is an outsider to the system of oppression. However, as his comments highlight, though they seek to position themselves through a humanitarian narrative, as Savior, they too are neither outside this system nor neutral. Experiencing this ultimate traumatic event through the lens of his camera might reflect a desire to disassociate, to be an observer, to be only a witness, which, of course, is not possible. Placing Ahmad in the position of recorder of history, and not the subject of the Western lens, as trauma victim, object of human rights abuse, Khalifeh undermines the Western/humanitarian will to speak of, for, and in place of those who suffer oppression. Focused upon the act of photographing rather than what constitutes the “classic shot,” Ahmad’s role as witness shifts emphasis from what the photographic image might do (activate compassionate action; provide voyeuristic pleasure) to the power dynamics of humanitarian representational politics.

The Fallacy of Humanitarian Neutrality

Reading the English translation of *Rabi' Harr*, as a text consumed by an anglophone audience outside of Palestine, I argue that the novel neither invites readers to empathize with the Palestinian characters, as per the sentimental reading model, nor encourages them to see themselves in the position of the humanitarian. Rather, the narrative reveals the fallacy of the neutral, innocent humanitarian. Humanitarianism is not, necessarily, admirable, and is shown not to effect social change. *The End of Spring* represents the presence of international solidarity activists during the al-Aqsa Intifada, but their role is not centred in the narrative. For instance, in one of Majid's journal entries, he describes the arrival of a team of "peace activists of every color and nationality: British, Germans, Americans, Italians, and even Jews. Jews? That was what really surprised us. Because all along we thought the world had forgotten us, that I had no family and no friends, that I was an orphan at the banquet of the wicked. But they came. They really came" (170). The activists arrive carrying signs and ignoring the warning shots of the IDF soldiers, who attempt to prevent them from entering Arafat's compound. Once inside, they contribute to the daily chores, provide aid, food, and candy, write articles and editorials about the siege, and "they distributed themselves among our rooms to act as shields against the expected attacks" (171). They are not neutral, yet their role is specifically that of the Savior. At the basis of the efforts to protect Palestinians simply through their presence is the fundamental irony at the heart of humanitarianism; it is their racial privilege, and specifically their status as nationals from Germany, Canada, or the United States, that allows them to take up this role.

Throughout the novel, Khalifeh draws attention to the way Palestinians, in contrast, must live with the reality that they are not recognized as human, and their lives are regarded as having no dignity. As Al-Washmi explains to Majid and Ahmad, in his travels to Canada, the United States, and even Oslo, he has "lived through the bitterness of being an Arab in the marketplaces of the West" (64). Majid longs for "a lighthearted conversation, a happy moment to make him feel that he was human" (118). And when the IDF attacks Nablus, soldiers cry through loud speakers, "People of Nablus! All you whores! We're coming to fuck you!" (194). Importantly, however, Khalifeh's representation of international support, especially through the characters of Rachel and Mira, reveals the way in which humanitarianism dehumanizes in a corollary way to Israeli propaganda and threats. Palestinians are reduced to beggars, "waiting expectantly for assistance and charity", and even the Palestinian authority is little more than "people looking for a handout wearing a necktie" (261). Significantly, while Khalifeh's representation of the activists who seek to protect Arafat's compound, as well as Rachel and

Mira, acknowledges how these activists recognize the human dignity of Palestinians, the function of these activists becomes the provision of aid and protection to Palestinians who are necessarily regarded as lesser. Ahmad does not feel like Rachel addresses him as another human being, but out of a “concern for human rights, or some kind of teenage rebellion against her parents and the government, or society, or Bush and Blair and the Iraq war, or globalization and Christian Aid and Catholic Relief and similar things. Charity, in other words” (266). Despite her good intentions, he feels that she sees him only as someone to educate, protect, and uplift.

As I argued in the previous section, Mira and Rachel are presented as unwilling to recognize their complicity in Palestinian oppression. Dunant, as the narrator of his own experience, can present himself as having “no part whatever in this great conflict”, and though Slaughter characterizes Dunant as a Swiss entrepreneur with a “failing colonial agriculture venture” in Algeria, this active participation in colonial exploitation is somehow separate and unrelated from the performance of benevolent humanitarian indifference (Slaughter 94). In contrast, Rachel and Mira’s self-representation of their innocence, goodwill, and indeed post-national or post-religious attitudes is revealed as hopelessly naïve in the novel. Just as importantly, their performance of care is not the subject of the narrative, and ultimately their risks and sacrifice are shown, contra Fassin’s argument, as having no greater meaning than that of Palestinians. Indeed, after being surprised by Mira’s presence at the demonstration, and letting himself wonder for a moment what this might mean, “when [Ahmad] reached the house and saw his mother, he forgot Mira and the ‘maybe’ because what he saw was much more significant” (239). Mira’s presence, as a Savior-figure, is secondary to the experiences of Palestinians.

Despite Rachel’s indignant reaction to Ahmad’s comments about the history of the conflict, and her degrading comments towards him, she sacrifices herself for his family:

He saw the Thatcherite girl running toward the house to protect his father. She opened her arms wide in the shape of the cross and started screaming, ‘Stop! Stop!’ but the bulldozer kept going ‘Stop! Stop!’ like an earthquake shaking the earth violently and tearing it asunder....A peasant woman beat her chest with her fists and the young men cried ‘*Allahu Akbar!* God is great!’ but God was setting down the course of history. History marched forward like the hands of Big Ben toward a girl who dreamed of love and the human conscience. The British woman beneath the tires. Click. Click. She had no religion. Take a picture. She has become one of us. She became a saint the moment the Catholic priest pronounced her dead. (274)

Rachel is both Thatcherite and Palestinian in the moment of her death, and despite ironically being declared a saint, within the novel there is no further honoring of her sacrifice. Her actions and death are a mere example of the reality of the conflict. In *The End of Spring*, white/Western humanitarians do not tell their own stories, their narratives of Palestinian suffering are undermined, and their refusal of the relations of race, nation

and religion is shown as ironic; they cannot extricate themselves from this relation, and indeed they reinforce it through their attempts to provide aid and protection.

While the presumption of white/Western humanitarian innocence is undermined in the novel, the representation of Palestinians performing humanitarian work is not presented as reflective of a distinct class of humanity. During the siege, Umm Suad's home becomes a refuge, providing food and care: "She gathered all the women in the neighborhood and delegated jobs... Do you want to eat? Come to us. Do you want to drink? Come to us" (179). She provides a model of the "strong woman," the woman of care, knitting a sweater for a young boy who could not return to Gaza, but, of course, her kitchen fed both the poor of the neighborhood and the fighters. Unlike the humanitarian figure that Slaughter and Fassin write about, who can imagine themselves as entering a conflict from the outside, for Umm Suad, there is no outside to the conflict, and her work of providing care and comfort is necessarily partisan.

During the incursion by the Israeli military, Ahmad comes to Umm Suad's home as a reprieve from his work. He cannot even describe to her what he has seen at the hospital. She provides him with a bed, food, and encouragement: "You have to eat so you don't collapse. You need to stay strong to be able to go on helping... You must be strong so you can live up to this responsibility" (189). While it is a necessary responsibility during the period of the IDF attack, and while his work strengthens his ties to the community, he is nonetheless berated for his decision to join the Red Crescent/Red Cross as an ambulance driver. Both Suad and the Catholic priest, who is sent by Ahmad's father to counsel him, critique his choice to join the emergency services rather than pursue his education. While Suad, whom he describes as being closer to him than his brother, responds to his commitment to the Red Crescent/Red Cross by arguing that he is "still very young" (234,) the priest declares that the "Emergency services isn't enough. You have to go back to your studies, life at home under your parents' wings. When you grow up and mature, then you can decide for yourself" (243). But in the moment of confrontation with Mira and Rachel, Ahmad thinks back to these conversations, resolving that education would not be his answer, for "What was the good of having a mind in this place" (267)? The aspiration for education is based on the hope of escaping the confines of the walls, checkpoints, and surveillance of the West Bank. For Ahmad, the choice to do humanitarian work reflects recognition of his confinement, and the necessary responsibilities to his community.

As a result, even before he turns his ambulance into a lethal weapon, Ahmad performs the role of the humanitarian in a starkly different way from the ideal of the humanitarian as the third actor that Slaughter contends the white/Western reader seeks to identify with. Ahmad is introduced to the reader as a dreamer, but one who is confined. The ideal of the humanitarian is a figure who bears no mind to borders and is indeed

marked as part of a special “class of humanity” because they purport to enact a transnational and post-racial identity, entering the conflicts of others from the outside to provide care. For Ahmad, the decision to become an ambulance driver—to serve the function of the humanitarian—is marked by the recognition that he cannot be neutral or indifferent. Putting on the distinct white outfit of the Red Crescent/Red Cross is coupled with growing a beard, beginning to attend the mosque, and reading the Qur’an (237). He describes his incarceration and torture by the IDF as what “woke him up,” and his joining the Red Crescent as how he committed himself to becoming involved (175). Further, it is his work as an ambulance driver that allows him to become fully aware of the scale of violence perpetrated against Palestinians: “We’ve lost everything, Umm Suad... People have been kicked out of their homes and farmers have had all their trees uprooted. They demolished houses and blew up mosques and wounded hundreds and jailed thousands. There is nothing to live for, Umm Suad—what can I tell you? I’m out there riding in an ambulance and I’m unable to help a single human being” (204). Of course, he is able to “help,” so here I read this assertion as Ahmad’s resignation that such humanitarian work will not alter the circumstances; he can provide care in this capacity but not effect change that will end the oppression.

While there is much made of Ahmad’s choice to work as an ambulance driver, there is little detail of his actual work. However, in one extended scene of the chaos in a hospital during the attack, Ahmad’s introduction to emergency services, he is overcome:

The doctor turned and stared like a lunatic at Ahmad standing there, as though he were lost, in the middle of all the wounded who were reaching out to him and grabbing his legs and pulling on his feet while he stood like a statue.... A hand grabbed at his pants and scratched his leg and elbowed him. He collapsed. As soon as he fell, he started to come to and get back on his feet to escape, but the nurse caught him and shook him by the shoulders and slapped his face. He woke up.... The doctor shouted, “Hey you. Come here.” The nurse pushed him from behind, and when he got there and saw the gaping abdomens, the flesh and the blood and the blackened bodies, he passed out. (186)

As a white/Western-situated reader, am I to empathize with the trauma that Ahmad experiences in this scene? This representation of Ahmad’s inability to provide care in a moment of chaos, along with his rationale for joining the emergency services as a way to contribute to the struggle and assert a Palestinian identity, disrupts the ideal of the humanitarian as neutral, transcending difference, and representative of the moral integrity to which we all should aspire. I want to emphasize, however, that Ahmad’s performance of the role of the humanitarian is not a failure; rather, *The End of Spring* illuminates how Palestinians can never be regarded as humanitarian, as well as how as a reader I must interrogate the apparent neutrality and idealized indifference of the white/Western positioned humanitarian as fallacy.

Conclusion

I conclude by situating my reading of the representation of humanitarianism in *The End of Spring* specifically in the context of IDF attacks on paramedics in the occupied Palestinian territories. According to the World Health Organization, between March 30 and July 10, 2018, the period in which this article was written, 357 health workers and 58 ambulances were affected by IDF attacks (WHO). It appears that the IDF has systematically targeted healthcare providers and medical facilities, at least since the beginning of the al-Aqsa Intifada, in what is described as a wider policy informed by the “right to maim” (Puar 4). The killing of Palestinian paramedic Razan al-Najjar on June 1 and the wounding of Canadian doctor Tarek Loubani on May 14 both received extensive international media attention immediately after the attacks, and this coverage typically highlighted that they were both identifiable as medics when they were shot, and that the targeting of hospitals, aid stations, and medical workers is a crime under international law. When the Israeli human rights organization B’Tselem concluded on July 17, 2018 that the IDF had deliberately killed al-Najjar, however, few media outlet outside the region in the report.

Significantly, the motivations for both al-Najjar and Loubani were questioned in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. For instance, in an op-ed in the Canadian newspaper, *The National Post*, former Canadian Ambassador to Israel, Vivian Bercovici highlighted Loubani’s 2013 arrest in Egypt, implying that he was linked to terrorism, and admonished his accusations that the IDF are using “butterfly bullets” as not credible. The IDF made multiple different denials regarding the targeting of al-Najjar, and ultimately branded her a terrorist, using a dubious edited video to support its claims (Hass). Importantly, the targeting of these two medics was minimized, if not rationalized, by questioning their innocence; they had both taken sides, unlike the idealized image of the humanitarian. These critiques of the neutrality of al-Najjar and Loubani are pointed, in that they seek to undermine sympathy for them, by troubling their status—and hence the sanctity of their lives—as humanitarian figures.

Yet, in *The End of Spring*, the ideal of humanitarian neutrality can be regarded as a fallacy. The novel undermines the neat Savage, Victim, Savior framework of human rights discourse. Unlike the idealized humanitarian constructed in Dunant’s foundational narrative and reflected in humanitarian discourse, neither al-Najjar nor Loubani—like Ahmad in *The End of Spring*—can perform their humanitarian role as if they are not implicated in the conflict in any other way. They cannot “disregard nationality in the face of human suffering” (Slaughter, “Humanitarian Reading” 99), for, in part, their work seeks to validate Palestinian struggle. If Slaughter’s humanitarian reading posits the reader as humanitarian, imagining themselves as “one who already recognizes the human dignity

of the wounded and attempts to relieve their suffering” (94), *The End of Spring* illuminates how human dignity is never implicit or outside of political context, and how attempts to relieve suffering require the understanding of the play of difference rather than its transcendence.

The B’Tselem report begins with a quotation from Razan al-Najjar’s mother that emphasizes her daughter’s role as a humanitarian: “Rozaan was among the first to go help because she believed in humanitarian work....When Rozaan was in the field, I was proud and calm, because she was a paramedic, and I believed the Israeli military wouldn’t harm her” (B’Tselem). However, the report’s findings do not highlight, never mind emphasize, the need for the IDF to abide by International Humanitarian Law and protect, specifically, humanitarian workers. Instead, it focuses on Israel’s Open Fire Policy more broadly. As such, the report does not reaffirm the “ontology of inequality” that Fassin identifies in the policies and practices of Western humanitarian organizations, which posit the humanitarian life as inherently more valuable than the lives which humanitarians care for. The report shifts discussion from whether or not they were humanitarians, and in need of special protection—which marks the Canadian Prime Minister’s claim to be appalled by Loubani’s targeting, allowing him to maintain support for the ongoing Israeli occupation (Naim)—to the specific policies and practices of the Israeli state.

In the opening to this article I highlighted Slaughter’s caution that sentimental forms of human rights literacy provide opportunities for Western readers to feel compassion *after* the moment of crisis, as well as their tendency to construct the position of empathetic reading as one of innocence. *The End of Spring* cannot be easily read in Canada, where I read it, as either a human rights narrative, in the sentimental mode, or as a humanitarian narrative. Instead, by presenting multiple and complicated figures of humanitarianism—both as witness and provider of care or protection—the novel, I suggest, invites white/Western readers to question their affinity to the ideal of humanitarian neutrality, and to recognize how humanitarian action is not outside of conflict or power and, significantly, is not directed at ending suffering, but only caring for those who suffer.

Works Cited

- Abu-Manneh, Bashir. *The Palestinian Novel: From 1948 to the Present*. Cambridge UP, 2016.
- Asad, Talal. “On Suicide Bombing.” *Arab Studies Journal*. Fall 2007/Spring 2008.
- Bernard, Anna. “Another Black September? Palestinian Writing after 9/11.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 46, no. 3-4, 2010, pp. 349-58.

- B'tselem. "Israeli soldiers deliberately and fatally shot Palestinian paramedic Rozan a-Najar in the Gaza Strip." 17 July 2018. https://www.btselem.org/gaza_strip/20180718_paramedic_rozan_a_najar_killed_by_deliberate_fire. Accessed 17 July 2018.
- Bercovici, Vivian. "Trudeau Rushed to Judgment on Gaza. And Canada's Friends in Israel Noticed." *The National Post*. 1 June 2018. <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/vivian-bercovici-trudeau-rushed-to-judgment-on-gaza-and-canadas-friends-in-israel-noticed>. Accessed 17 July 2018.
- Burnat, Emad and Guy Davidi, directors. *5 Broken Cameras*. Kino Lober, 2012. DVD.
- Corrie, Rachel. 27 February 2003. "Rachel's Writing and Emails from Palestine." Rachel Corrie Foundation for Peace and Justice. <https://rachelcorriefoundation.org/rachel/emails>. Accessed 17 July 2018.
- El Lozy, Mahmoud. "Palestine Uncovered in *My Name is Rachel Corrie*." *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, vol. 28, 2008, pp. 102-26.
- Fassin, Didier. "Humanitarianism as a Politics of Life." *Public Culture*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2007, pp. 499-520.
- . *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*. Translated by Rachel Gomme. UP California, 2012.
- Hass, Amira. "Why not Posthumously Declare a Medic a Terrorist? It's the Easiest Solution." *Haaretz*. 10 June 2018. <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/.premium-why-not-say-the-medic-was-a-terrorist-it-s-the-easiest-solution-1.6163164>. Accessed 17 July 2018.
- Jefferess, David. "Benevolence, Global Citizenship, and Post-Racial Politics." *Topia: A Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 25, Spring 2011, pp. 77-95.
- . "Introduction: 'The White Man's Burden' and Post-Racial Humanitarianism." *Critical Race and Whiteness Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1-11.
- Khalifeh, Sahar. *The End of Spring*. Trans. Paula Haydar. Interlink, 2008.
- Mahrouse, Gada. *Conflicted Commitments: Race, Privilege, and Power in Transnational Solidarity Activism*. McGill/Queens UP, 2014.
- Mamdani, Mahmood. "Reconciliation without Justice." *Southern African Review of Books*, vol. 46, November/December 1996.
- McCloskey, Stephen. "Activism as Development Education." *Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2018, pp. 42-73.
- Mutua, Makao. *Human Rights: A Political and Cultural Critique*. UP Pennsylvania, 2002.
- Naim, Basem. "A Letter from Gaza to Justin Trudeau." *Al Jazeera*. 11 June 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/letter-gaza-justin-trudeau-180611120919056.html>. Accessed 17 July 2018.
- Puar, Jasbir K. "The 'Right' to Maim: Disablement and Inhumanist Biopolitics in Palestine." *Borderlands*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1-27.

- Slaughter, Joseph. "Humanitarian Reading." *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, edited by Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown. Cambridge, 2009, pp. 88-107.
- . *Human Rights, Inc.* Fordham UP, 2007.
- World Health Organization (WHO). Situation Report: Occupied Palestine, Gaza. 3 July – 11 July 2018. <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/situation-report-occupied-palestinian-territory-gaza-3-11-july>. Accessed 17 July 2018.