

Human Rights Narratives and the Right to Truth

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Abstract

Human rights stories are claims, told through narrative, to one or more people about something that happened that infringed or violated an agreed-upon human right. Stories can address human rights violations judicially through formal courts, commissions, or tribunals and non-judicially through public narratives in social and political discourses. Human rights stories, told as testimony in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2007–2015) and the #MeToo movement, demonstrate how stories about lived experiences promote human dignity and assert agency. The purpose of this analysis is to highlight the role of storytelling in both the address and redress of human rights violations within the process of telling narratives of lived experience. When states do not initiate or act through judicial processes, or those processes do not un-silence stories of violations, the emergence of informal truth-telling through public narratives emerges (Ganz, 2009). Whether told in formal judicial or informal nonjudicial spaces, sharing lived experiences is an agency asserting action that can respond to systems of oppression. Everyone ought to have a right to tell their story.

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Growing up in North Kildonan, Winnipeg, I saw most of the kids I went to school with in Sunday school. My school was one of few German-immersion, predominantly Mennonite, elementary schools mainly due to its location in a historic Mennonite settlement. I grew up in church with kids who looked and talked like me; I felt seen in that space and always had someone looking out for me who was somehow a relative. These social networks would be limiting when my curiosity led me to mischief, and my parents would get a phone call from a distant relative who saw or heard about what happened. My mother always cautioned me, “someone is always watching.” I am grateful for these social networks; they continue to support and look out for me.

Our grandparents’ war stories were a talking topic amongst the kids on the playground in elementary school. These war stories did not glorify what they did in the war but what they refused to do. Mennonites are pacifists and believe in principled non-violence. Their cunning stories about nonviolently resisting oppressive governments captured our imaginations. We were proud of how our grandparents refused to participate in diminishing the agency of others.

I believed *my* Opa (grandfather) had the best story. My Opa was a storyteller; he was infatuated with history and used the savings from his day job, bricklaying, to produce documentaries. He used film to tell the story of Mennonites fleeing Russia during World War II. I have distinct memories of older men approaching me in drab church basements, telling me that this was the story of *my* people. I saw how telling stories gives agency to the storyteller and their communities. For my Opa, telling his story was an exercise of agency, his inherent right. To share community stories in public spaces through film was an opportunity he was only afforded after fleeing persecution.

My Opa grew up under the brutal tyranny of the USSR. The Mennonites were subject to forced starvation, disenfranchisement, dispossession, and murder. The community where my Opa lived was later taken under German occupation, where he witnessed the potential of stories to mobilize people, through imposed propaganda films that became mandatory to view. My Opa knew that in the same way propaganda used stories to foment hatred, enforce stereotypes, and call citizens to action over the fear of “the other,” it could also be used as a source of advancing human dignity.

My Opa saw storytelling’s capacity to promote liberation and to give voice to silenced groups who survived human rights violations. Being able to tell the stories about what happened in a production studio without the threat of death or diminishment was a form of redress for the participants in my Opa’s films, as well as a healing experience for my Opa. This was his means of reclaiming the lost livelihood, culture, and ways of life they had prior to being displaced.

Not everybody has had a chance to celebrate their stories. Many young people do not have seniors or respected community members telling them their story is one to be proud of. Many communities received disdain and ridicule for their beliefs or culture. Without equality in being able to share one’s story, authoritarian regimes can produce unchecked, falsified narratives to gain power through fear. The inability of a people to tell their story sustains political violence, ethnocide, and genocide.

I want to continue the work of my Opa; to un-silence the stories of those who are subjugated. Oppression is absolute; it manifests through discourses of power and excludes lived experiences that do not contribute to its success. I plan to continue undoing these systems, a central tenant of which is asserting space for stories to be told. My Opa instilled a conviction and deep desire to create opportunities for individuals and communities who are not being heard, or

actively silenced. My culture is my history, a history told through story. Like my Opa, I want to advocate and show up for those who are not being heard.

Introduction

This writing analyzes social and political theories underpinning identity, story, cohesion, truth, hegemony, and human rights. Through an examination of stories came to be told within the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2007–2015) and the #MeToo movement, this writing demonstrates how stories, often told as testimonies of lived experience, promote human dignity. Storytelling addresses and redresses human rights violations by engaging in the process of telling narratives of lived experience. In doing so, truths are negotiated, understanding the past and what the future ought to be. Storytelling is a collective process in which everyone should participate.

Human rights stories are claims, told through narrative, to one or more people about something that happened that infringed or violated an agreed-upon human right. People tell stories even in the direst state of oppression (Mollica, 2019). Everyone can tell a story; its potential and capacity to assert agency, empower groups and ultimately be life-giving are what Senehi refers to as “constructive storytelling” (cited in Opacin, 2021). Storytelling can outline violations judicially through formal courts, commissions, or tribunals and non-judicially through public narratives in social and political discourses.

Truth, Testimony, Witnessing

Yasmin Naqvi suggests several qualifiers for true, credible stories. True stories are verifiable, corroborate similar claims, and contain depictions of an event that happened (Naqvi, 2006, p. 254). Telling a true story is an “action of good faith and takes the form of an obligation of means” (Naqvi, 2006, p. 254). Truth is not a static concept but rather a constantly evolving

process created by the perspectives and experiences of individuals. Truth is centrally about un-silencing stories and acknowledging the perspectives of those who have been marginalized and oppressed.

Knowing the truth about human rights violations involves a process of actively listening to and engaging with the perspectives of those affected. This process must create spaces where silenced voices can be heard and given priority within the evolving narrative. Because society's understanding of truth constantly evolves, we must actively work to uncover and acknowledge the stories that resist dominant narratives of “truth.”

Using a rights-based framework, the process of redressing rights violations means the storyteller negotiates and defines truth. Human rights instruments provide frameworks for understanding and protecting rights. However, these instruments alone do not guarantee that rights will be upheld in practice. For rights to be fully realized, individuals and communities must be able to speak out about violations and hold those in power accountable to acknowledge their truth, as told through stories.

To fully understand and rectify past events, it is crucial to acknowledge and explore the various perspectives surrounding them. As Jennifer Llewellyn (2008) argues, “finding relational truth requires the creation of spaces and processes in which truths can be told and heard and in which perspectives can meet one another head-on to challenge, integrate, and illuminate the truth about what happened, why it happened, and what are its implications” (p. 191). The process of seeking to understand the truth can gain a deeper understanding of what happened, why it happened, and the ongoing effects of these events. Uncovering the truth requires actively engaging with the factors that led to the suppression of truth.

Telling truth through testimony is a human need. For states, testimonies serve as redress to wrongdoing. Schaffer and Smith (2004) assert that when survivors testify, “they begin to voice, recognize, and bear witness to a diversity of values, experiences, and ways of imagining a just social world and of responding to injustice, inequality, and human suffering” (p. 1). The process of giving testimony can serve as a therapeutic tool for individuals who have experienced trauma. By telling their story, individuals can process and make sense of their experiences in a way that may not have been possible through other means.

Storytelling constitutes a fundamental dimension of human agency, particularly within restorative justice, as it allows for expressing personal experiences and emotions. However, storytelling may not always confer complete agency to victims. The power dynamics underlying the broader social, cultural, and political contexts may constrain the extent to which survivors can exercise agency over their narratives. Elizabeth Archuleta (2006), writing on the context of Indigenous women, suggests, “many women have not yet reached a place where they can release their fear, so their lack of voice renders them invisible” (p. 106). Though storytelling is one path toward agency, it cannot guarantee greater control for the survivor.

Facilitating procedures involving testimony carries a duty to create a safe, brave, and supportive space for individuals to share their stories and respond to injustice. When these duties are not met, it limits the capacity of stories to increase agency. Inger Agger (2012) nuances the effect of testimony, “From a strictly therapeutic perspective, the process of giving testimony may create a kind of forum in which there is a possibility for both an individual and collective interoceptive process” (p. 584). Testimony creates a collective interoceptive process, where sharing trauma stories allows a community to better understand and empathize with one another.

Telling their story can allow individuals to reclaim agency and control over their experiences rather than feeling like passive victims. Inger Agger (2012) explains, “Testimony is a narrative about an event: a trauma story told by a witness who suffered an injustice or something painful or terrible” (p.570). Responding to a rights violation as a survivor can provide a sense of validation and acknowledgement for an individual and community treated unjustly. Archuleta (2006) suggests that victimhood carries a perception of inferiority and renders individuals “unable to assert agency” (p. 106). Giving testimony functions as a re-establishment of social order; the procedure of telling testimony affirms a society where violations do not go without redress and individuals have spaces to assert agency.

This process de-silences stories, allowing a complete understanding of the harm perpetuated and how the truth was muted or silenced. Pursuing truth is essential in understanding and addressing past injustices to reconstitute the lives and history of those impacted. For a group to effectively challenge dominant systems, there is the potential to share testimony to leverage shared experiences to assert agency and disrupt the mechanisms of oppression that have silenced their voices. Testimonies which push against dominant narratives, “can intervene in the public sphere, contesting social norms, exposing the fiction of official history, and prompting resistance beyond the provenance of the story within and beyond the borders of the nation” (Schaffer & Smith, 2004, p.4). Collective narratives can be powerful tools for shaping societal norms and conventions.

Those who control the message; control the discourse, set the agenda, and influence the collective conscience (Griffin et al., 2019). Courts, commissions, tribunals, and social media can be used to disrupt the status quo and challenge the dominant discourses through stories that

critique the unquestioned assumptions of state power. Storytelling plays a vital role in forming and maintaining social norms and identities.

Through telling stories, individuals learn about their culture, history, and community. Creating a shared understanding of the world and a sense of belonging. Sandra Jasmin Gutiérrez de Jesus (2022) asserts, “storytelling socializes culturally relevant information. In this way, stories communicate information and educate and enhance identity formation” (p. 6). Meaning storytelling can also be used as a tool for social change, allowing individuals to share their experiences and perspectives and creating space for dialogue and empathy.

Telling these authentic stories implicates individuals or groups who attest to the veracity of the accounts. Bohle (2017) describes witnessing as a “means re-presenting the truthfulness of what was seen and heard” (Para 16). Telling truths through narrative lends credibility and witness to collective social truths, which can lead to restoration and restitution of the harms outlined within the personal and social stories. Witnessing is a form of accountability for those who have perpetrated the violence and a “census-making” process that adds credibility to testimony (Lang, 2019, p. 18). Witnessing allows those affected to respond to violations. Hearing and acknowledging their stories can be cathartic and healing for those who have suffered, allowing them to speak their truth and recognize survivors of human rights abuses.

True, credible human rights stories are narrative accounts outlining events where states diminish human dignity. The TRC of Canada used the testimony to assert the rights of Indigenous peoples. As a central tenet of the right to truth, when the narratives of lived experiences resist systems of oppression, like colonialism, storytelling can create actionable change and promote human dignity within those systems.

The Right to Truth

Human rights are universal fundamental entitlements (OHCHR, 1948). Human rights are political and influenced by societal demands and contingent on the politicization of individuals as subjects (Goodhart, 2016, p. 5). By outlining the implications of the right to truth, most notably the role of storytelling, stories are a central metric to indicate a state's efficacy in promoting human rights, specifically, rights about life, identity, culture, work, and self-actualization.

To make a human rights claim, an individual must be a political subject within a society which agrees on the inherent value of human dignity and the protection and promotion of human rights. Human rights claims involve two central elements; being the claimant is an entity that can make human rights claim (a visible political subject), and the claim must be accepted as violating a right (Goodhart, 2016, p. 4; Klinkner & Davis, 2017). Told in formal spaces, testimony functions within the right to truth as a means for states to investigate gross human rights violations (Naqvi, 2006). States have a duty to use all available resources for redress and prosecution, a central tenant being testimony.

The United Nations developed the right to truth as a means for victims of human rights violations committed by states to know the truth about what happened (Naqvi, 2006; Klinkner & Davis, 2019; Szoke-Burke, 2015). The right to truth, advocated for by various legal and political organizations and actors (Klinkner & Davis, 2019), is a normative claim that has received “non-judicial institutional recognition” within the United Nations (Klinkner & Davis, 2017, p. 45). The right to truth is contingent on narratives, told as testimony, to seek redress for gross human rights violations committed by states (Klinkner & Davis, 2019).

International Human Rights Law recognizes the right to truth outlined in Article 24 of the Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance. Central to the right to truth is “knowing the full and complete truth as to the events that transpired, their specific circumstances, and who participated in them, including knowing the circumstances in which the violations took place, as well as the reasons for them” (United Nations Observances, para 1). The right to truth has a critical capacity to set new precedents and benchmarks for human rights law.

Knowing the truth about what happened gives agency to victims of atrocities and gross violations of humanitarian law (Naqvi, 2006; Klinkner & Davis, 2019). Klinkner and Davis (2019) explain, “the right to truth exists as a means of ensuring transparency, ending impunity and protecting human rights” (p. 13). It is both an obligation of the state and a right for victims and families of human rights violations. The complexities within the right to truth balance the rights of individuals and their communities to know what happened alongside the “perpetrator’s due process rights, not least the presumption of innocence and the right to defend oneself against criminal charges” (Naqvi, 2006, p. 272). The critical capacity is contingent on increasing spaces and methods for stories of lived experience to be told while acknowledging the duties it may place on states to redress systems which cause harm.

Creating space for authentic, true narratives about rights violations has led to restoring human dignity and setting new benchmarks for state transparency, though it is not guaranteed (Naqvi, 2006). The right to truth is contingent on the state accepting the role of primary duty bearer (Klinkner & Davis, 2019). To make a claim to the right to truth, and have the lived experiences lead to social change, formal processes need to be implemented by state systems.

In hearing testimony, the violation of additional rights often emerges. For Klinkner & Davis (2017), the right to truth has validity in its capacity to acknowledge how “suffering creates an interest of sufficient weight to justify imposing a duty on others, particularly the state” (p. 56). The process of finding the truth can be a form of reparation in that stories previously silenced have agency and are un-silenced (Klinkner & Davis, 2017; Naqvi, 2006). Naqvi (2006) further outlines four types of truth that emerge within judicial processes; “factual and forensic truth; personal and narrative truth; social truth; and healing and restorative truth” (p. 254). Redress from storytelling about lived experience deals with the latter three types of truth. However, calls to action must be pursued to move toward restorative truth. In doing so, harmful hegemonic systems are implicated in the process of telling story.

Colonialism in Context

Understanding hegemony is central to the power of silencing and justifying state human rights violations, an absolute form of power (Harley, 2014; Selmeczi, 2012; Chabot & Majid, 2013; O’Brien & Lianjiang, 2006). Hegemony is dominance; for one group to have dominance, another group must be subjugated (Redekop, 2002; Dodge, 2018; Gobby, 2020; Selmeczi, 2012). Foundational to this work is understanding colonialism’s structural and psychological components and its dehumanizing relationship to current society and systems which uphold it (Puxley, 1977). As will be evidenced, colonialism as a thought and social system has led to precedents and normative behaviours that silence and oppress non-European and non-masculine entities.

The procedure of the current justice system in Canada and the United States is influenced by colonialism and continues to uphold colonial values of ownership, neglecting and silencing ontologies deemed as “the other.” Peter Puxley (1977) wrote extensively on the relationship

colonialism imposes on its subjects. Colonialism is a visceral experience that inherently creates dehumanizing conditions for any culture or individual which does not conform to its norms and conventions (Puxley, 1977; Fanon, 2004). The norms within colonial customs, and as a result, within the law, historically employed the language of progress and development to justify the exploitation of groups like women and Indigenous peoples (Puxley, 1977).

Puxley (1977) describes the colonial experience as functioning like a machine.

Colonialism is unreasonable as a thought system because just like a machine, it only knows the sum of its parts (Puxley, 1977). The machine creates norms and expectations, rewarding parts that function as expected, leaving all else alienated and excluded (Puxley, 1977). Refusal to conform to the colonial machine leads to “tremendous loneliness, isolation, and the experience of the outsider” (Puxley, 1977, p.114). This machine “cannot afford non-conformity” (Puxley, 1977, p. 105). The nature of colonialism as a hegemonic system is the exclusion of all people and places that do not fit the imposed ideals. Throughout Canada’s colonial history rights claims outlined through narratives were perceived as inferior and outside of the normative “machine” (Kuokkanen, 2007; Radner, 1959).

Colonial development is then contingent on “prescribed behavior” for society (Puxley, 1977, p. 109). Those who fit the norm, and perform the correct behaviour, in turn, receive political privilege and inclusion (Puxley, 1977). These normative privileges continue to influence the post-colonial world, often privileging rights claims made by the same groups privileged under colonialism, white European men. Defining the white European man as “normal” and any deviation therefrom as derivative but not equal to the norm creates a system of normalized silencing. Historically, the “others,” or derivatives, have been Indigenous groups, women, and overall social expressions of Indigeneity and femininity.

Similarly, the closer a claimant in a human rights violation adheres to the normative expectations of an ideal claimant, the greater their chances of having their story heard by judicial processes (King, 2013). For groups who experienced European colonization from the 15th century onward, their assumed inferior status as humans was a justification for diminishing and dismissing their claims of wrongdoing (Jennings, 1975; Shrubsole, 2019). Stories were, and to a large extent still are, silenced and excluded from judicial processes for redress when the social position of the claimant is outside of the imposed norm, or “the machine” (Puxley, 1977).

The interplay between individual empowerment and collective narratives can impact social and structural inequities contingent on social, political, and historic contexts which create circumstances for stories of injustice to be told in public spaces and be responded to by society. The collective experiences of marginalized communities have the potential to disrupt dominant narratives and challenge oppressive systems, paving the way for systemic transformation and sustainable peacebuilding. There is little distinction between storytelling that impacts the community and the larger social and political circumstances surrounding those stories. During colonization in the 15th century, stories were silenced, and peoples were subjugated to such an extent that stories alone could lead to meaningful systems change was stifled. Nonetheless, stories continued to be told in that dire state of oppression by colonial power systems.

Frantz Fanon was a prominent anti-colonial revolutionist. His writing was in the context of Algeria under French colonial rule in the 20th century, though the effects of colonialism transcend geographic space and are total in impact and outcome. Fanon (2004) explains these visceral effects in writing, “we now know perfectly well that there is no need to be wounded by a bullet to suffer from the effects of war in body and soul” (pg. 217). Fanon (2004) suggests the most natural human state of the psyche is non-conformity; diversity is more innate than the

imposed homogeneity of colonial narratives. Centuries of colonialism have led to a natural combativeness in colonized societies, which catalyzes social change (Fanon, 2004).

Transformed societies begin with producing what Fanon calls “combat literature” (Fanon, 2004, p. 173). This literature “informs the national consciousness, gives it shape and contours, and opens up new, unlimited horizons” (p. 173). In Algeria, the power of storytelling in shaping a national consciousness was so great that colonial forces “began systematically arresting these storytellers” (Fanon, 2004, p. 174). Stories feature tales of bravery and bring the present situation to life, which “develops the imagination” for what a new society could be (Fanon, 2004, p. 174). When a new imagined society is outside of or in direct opposition to the norms within a hegemonic normative “machine,” they are quickly quelled.

Combat literature functions as a “call to action” for all societies subjected to the total effect of colonialism (Fanon, 2004, p. 146). Storytelling is a means of combatting colonial ideals by responding to and resisting systems of oppression. Stories need space and protection to be told, heard, and acted upon, meaning both states and society are implicated.

The TRC and Reclaiming History

The TRC made the implicit experiences of survivors explicit, and the calls to action function as setting new precedents, benchmarks, and customs for redress. The TRC of Canada responded to redressing violations outlined within the Right to Truth. Truth and Reconciliation Commissions un-silence stories previously diminished by states. The Canadian TRC, which began in 2008, was primarily based on the South African TRC, which began in 1995 (TRC of Canada, 2015). The function of the TRC of Canada was to address the genocide committed by the government of Canada, with specific attention to residential schools.

In the 1840s, residential schools were introduced and by 1850, “attendance at residential schools became compulsory for all children from the ages of six to fifteen” (King, 2013, p. 113). Peter Henderson Bryce (senior health inspector for the Department of Indian Affairs) documented the brutal conditions leading to death in Canada’s residential schools. He found that 24 percent of all students who entered a residential school “died either in the schools or shortly after leaving them” (Angus, 2015, p. 16). Moreover, in schools where proper, detailed records were found, like File Hills Boarding School, they had a death rate of 69 percent (Angus, 2015). However, the numbers are likely higher given the lack of disclosure and silencing of deaths and assaults in these schools.

The TRC demonstrates how stories told as testimony in formal judicial spaces like courts, tribunals, commissions, or other public hearings can create judicial rulings or calls to action that promote human dignity. The stories told in the TRC were stories previously subjugated beginning when Europeans arrived in the 15th century. In response to the testimonies and stories heard during the TRC of Canada, the commission outlined 94 calls to action for all levels of society (TRC, 2015). Although not all calls to action have been met, they set new precedents for the work to create more just and equitable systems, especially for the lived experiences previously silenced.

The TRC of Canada outlined the necessity of redressing the impacts of colonialism. The assimilation and destruction of Indigenous culture using colonial apprehension programs continue to have catastrophic impacts on Indigenous people’s well-being (Robertson, 2019; Goodhart, 2016; Talaga, 2017). Today, mental health and life expectancy are lower worldwide for Indigenous peoples, and many communities suffer post-traumatic stress because of hundreds of years of colonial cultural assimilation (Goodhart, 2016; Fanon, 2004). Indigenous peoples are

overrepresented in society as having higher rates of poverty, homeless, and being incarcerated as adults (TRC, 2015; Byle, 2019; Fachinger, 2019; King, 2013; Maynard, 2017). Child and family services systems continue to keep Indigenous children under the control of a post-colonial state (Angus, 2017; Byle, 2019; Clark, 2019). Such is the absolute and total nature of colonialism and its generational impact.

The TRC investigation involved deep listening to stories of residential school survivors and the impacts of colonial systems of subjugation. The right to truth within commissions involves the assumption of fidelity in testimony to understand what happened fully. Klinkner and Davis (2019) write, “the truth encompasses the opportunity for victims to narrate their story. This reflects the need for survivors of gross human rights to relate their experiences – also perhaps independently from an official process” (p. 165). In the formal recording of human rights testimonies, colonialism’s impacts were named, and the calls to action function as redress to the violations outlined in stories.

The TRC, specifically the IRS (Indian Residential School), testimonies were told through various means. There were national events, community events, and public broadcasts (Vanthuyne, 2021, p. 363). Karine Vanthuyne (2021) writes, “Commissioner Wilson insisted on the Canadian TRC’s consideration of its Indigenous participants as “experts” in the production and transmission of historical knowledge on the IRS system and its aftermath” (p. 365). The assumed truth within the TRC storytelling was monumental in and of itself because Eurocentric cultures considered spoken word or oral traditions inferior and non-binding (Kuokkanen, 2007; Radner, 1959, p. 70). Cultural stories, often told through ceremony, were intentionally silenced, and outlawed through the Indian Act (Shrubsole, 2019). The act of telling one’s story about the

experience of losing a sense of identity as an effect of losing culture functioned as a means of redress and a response to state injustices (Shrubsole, 2019, p. 37; Klinkner & Davis, 2019).

The TRC not only gave voice to the violations of the past but ignited calls to address the impacts of those past actions on current systems. Abigail Byle (2019) writes, “As documented by Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry, many of Canada’s social systems and policies are rooted in beliefs, practices and legislation that harm Indigenous peoples” (p. 22). The TRC (2015) was a space for human rights stories, called testimony in the formal report, to be witnessed, and acted upon. In one testimony Joseph Martin Larocque, a residential school survivor, said,

[Residential school] was a very harsh environment. They, they treated us like criminals.... You, you had to, it’s like a prison. But we were small kids, and we didn’t understand. We didn’t understand harsh discipline. We, we understood love from our, our parents. But the harsh discipline was hard to take, and that happened to everybody, not only me. (2015, pg. 183)

Protecting Indigenous culture is an inherent right that should be respected and upheld to acknowledge the past and move toward an equitable and just future. Invoking inherent rights is essential to resist systems which lead to genocide. Robert Van Krieken (2004) describes genocide as “ways in which human groups can be “eliminated,” including the destruction or undermining of their culture and physical environment” (p. 125). Colonial systems in Canada used various means to eliminate Indigenous peoples and their culture; residential schools are one of them. In residential schools, the narratives central to identity, the cultural stories of creation and community, were silenced by force. The act of re-telling these stories, of un-silencing them, functions as a form of reparation in and of itself.

As a collaborator, the recipient of the story becomes part of the collective experience. Part of the responsibility, or duty of witnessing a human rights story, is to “lay the foundation for Indigenous resurgence in the present and future” (Braith, 2020, p. 235). Melanie Braith (2020) describes the function of the listener as not only to witness but to inhibit “the role of a collaborator, helping to facilitate a process that is only possible if there is one who speaks and one who listens” (p. 206). As an actor in the process, the witness receives the story as a gift, but the reception of the gift “also come with responsibilities” (Braith, 2020, p. 222). Listening is participatory in that it requires witness and action. The TRC formally released a report with actionable next steps from the state authority.

The TRC of Canada named 94 calls to action and a call for Canada to commit to UNDRIP (*United Nations Declaration on the Right of Indigenous Peoples*). The de-silencing and active acknowledgment of stories about Indigenous people’s lived realities functioned to not only validate claims communities had been making for decades but outlined actionable items for states and society at large to implement for restitution of past silencing. The stories themselves were being told despite formal acknowledgement by the state; through the TRC of Canada, the state began formally acknowledging the stories as true and historical. What was happening was not unknown to Indigenous communities; it was unacknowledged, diminished, and denied by the state and many non-indigenous Canadians.

To actualize the calls to action, stories need to keep being told to heal communities, seek reparations, and galvanize collaborators into action. There is still work to be done, and stories must continue to be told. The intentional undermining of Indigenous identity and perspectives from decision-making processes results from a complex interplay of historical and ongoing factors perpetuating the marginalization and oppression of Indigenous peoples. Having stories of

human rights violations be acknowledged and heard is a necessary procedural action in finding truth and redress. Telling stories of lived realities which resist dominant narratives is an act against state interests to maintain the status quo. By asserting their sovereignty and continuing to tell their stories of lived reality, the political pressure became too great for state systems to ignore.

Canada has not formally codified the right to truth in their legal mechanism, despite its efficacy in promoting reconciliation. To work towards changing systems, it is imperative to know their total impact (Klinkner & Davis, 2017). Addressing the harms of colonialism through a formal commission was long overdue. It took centuries for action to be taken against the destructive hegemonic components. The ability to share stories en masse improves the fidelity of a story by positioning the testimony relative to similar stories. Individuals came forward, giving shape to a meta-narrative of abuse, trauma, resilience, and responding by reclaiming identity. Narratives can function as a call to action.

Formal systems can implement actionable items following truth-telling, like the TRC of Canada. Narratives can be a tool to shape values, create cohesion, and invite listeners to tell their own stories as part of a cause, a ruling, or a social movement (Ganz, 2009). Formally, the right to truth is only applicable when states initiate and allocate resources to the process of finding the truth. Informally, storytelling functions as a means of truth-telling and cultivating a collective identity, which still results in “calls to action” when told in public spaces (McConnell & Smith, 2018; Ganz, 2009). When formal judicial systems do not create space for cohesive narratives, stories can emerge on informal, non-judicial platforms like social media.

Judicial and Non-Judicial Processes

In a fully functioning democracy, a truth and reconciliation commission may not be necessary as human rights violations and historical injustices are typically addressed and resolved through open and transparent democratic processes. The ability to participate in public discourse is an essential component of a democratic society. Stories about lived experiences can occur in public spaces, leading to greater understanding and accountability. The ability to tell these stories in ways which inform democratic processes means that individuals would have the liberty to do so.

However, in situations where democracy has failed or where there has been a history of gross human rights violations, a truth and reconciliation commission may be established to address these past injustices and to promote healing and reconciliation among the affected communities. Truth and reconciliation are processes by which fundamental truths are established and agreed upon as a foundation for building a more just and democratic society. When states do not initiate or act through judicial processes, or those processes, do not amplify or un-silence stories of violations, informal truth-telling emerges through public narratives (Ganz, 2009).

Creating more space for stories about the lived experience in non-judicial “everyday” social spaces, like schools, workplaces, or even social media, can transform harmful biases and stereotypes. These everyday social spaces are more accessible and have fewer procedural implications than formal spaces. Informal testimony can still contribute to setting new social precedents and norms, impacting state precedents, and further protecting and promoting human rights.

Nerkez Opacin (2021) draws attention to the impact stories told through informal means can have. Opacin outlines how the story of Fikret Alić, who shared their testimony of surviving a

Bosnian concentration camp in a *Times* article (1992), was the first time many individuals heard about the operation of concentration camps in Bosnia (Opacin, 2021). Opacin (2021) explains, “Storytelling, in an informal environment such as these programs, is a grassroots cultural practice that is not a state-controlled process in promoting peacebuilding and dealing with the past” (p. 183). Telling stories about human rights violations, even informal and non-judicial, can still transform institutional policies and practices. By outlining wrongdoing, social pressure emerges and can create more inclusive, equitable, and life-enhancing systems.

#MeToo and Stories of Resistance

Within formal judicial court systems, assault and harassment allegations are often “resolved” through arbitration (Chaundry, 2019, p. 217). Going through arbitration, rather than a judicial process, means that testimonies shared therein are not public records unless agreed upon by both parties (Chaundry, 2019, p. 232). If one party is accused of sexual assault, it would be in their best interest not to have the testimony go public. These rights violations stories are told in a vacuum, where violators often use their power to diminish the survivor’s claims.

Formal systems are part of silencing stories of violations. The *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW) and the *International Labor Organization’s* (ILO) *Convention on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work* each address the systemic rights violations women face in every aspect of their lived realities. These conventions seek to eliminate sexual harassment and other discrimination against women. Despite implementing formal mechanisms, that exact mechanism can function to further silence stories. Here the capacity to live or enjoy basic human rights is diminished, yet stories continue to be told even when systems of oppression attempt to silence them. Sometimes, these stories of resistance emerge through non-judicial spaces.

The #MeToo movement was not a response to inadequate reparations within formal judicial systems but used storytelling as a process within restorative justice. Sexual assault and harassment are prevalent in every aspect of social life, not just in workplaces or the visible social arenas. Bailey Jackson et al., (2021) explain, “intimate partner violence is often labeled a ‘private issue,’ while law enforcement officials sometimes perpetuate harm on those already victimized, women who fight back are often imprisoned” (p. 3). Stories of assault or harassment are silenced in formal spaces like the workplace and are especially silenced and diminished in private spaces.

Before #MeToo, there was limited capacity to share stories of survival in both the court of public opinion and the formal judicial courts (Chaundry, 2019, p. 233). Lang (2019) suggests that although men are also survivors, and included in the #MeToo conversation, “the bodies and embodied experiences driving movements that would undo rape culture overwhelmingly belong to, and are shared by, women” (p.19). The #MeToo movement is rooted in the power of storytelling, reflecting the intersectional experiences of women subjected to sexual violence and harassment.

When Tarana Burke began the #MeToo movement in 2006, she did not imagine the global scale it would later embody (metoomvmt.org). Burke writes, “In those early years, we developed our vision to bring resources, support, and pathways to healing where none existed before” (metoomvmt.org). The #MeToo movement is a storytelling movement. Bailey et al., (2021) suggest, “The widely observed ‘#MeToo moment’ is not so much a moment but a loud chorus of voices that has, for years, been using Twitter and other social networks to tell women’s stories about violence in a way that challenges the simplistic frames relied on by mainstream media and politicians” (p. 19). It is rooted in a ritual communication model, whereby participants

voiced stories of resilience and survival and had cohesion over the shared experiences of surviving sexual violence (Carey, 1989; metoomvmt.org).

Responding to injustices through narratives recognizes that survivors have not simply passively accepted or "bounced back" from wrongdoing but have actively resisted and continued to advocate for their rights and autonomy. Burke's initial response of silence when a child disclosed abuse highlights the pervasive nature of patriarchal power structures and how they silence and disempower marginalized communities. Bailey (2021) describes the stories within #MeToo as "speaking to mainstream media, to patriarchal establishments, and directly to one another as a form of community building that works to alleviate the risk and fear associated with coming forward" (p. 18). Through her reflection and willingness to add her voice to the collective narrative of survivors, Burke catalyzed a ripple effect that ultimately led to the widespread visibility of the movement.

When Alyssa Milano amplified the #MeToo hashtag on her platform, it activated a cascade of voices and narratives silenced for far too long. Survivors assert agency through the sharing of their stories. The diverse motivations and experiences of #MeToo participants reflect the complexities of feminist intersectionality and demonstrate the power of collective action to challenge oppressive systems (Bailey et al., 2021). At its core, #MeToo is a nuanced and dynamic movement that centers the voices and experiences of survivors, with Burke serving as a key figure in its genesis and ongoing evolution.

Systems of oppression operate by silencing true stories at all levels, social, economic, and formal courts. By amplifying narratives of lived experience which resist hegemonic systems of patriarchy and colonialism, telling true stories about the harm perpetuated confronts power and responds to its unmet needs. Emerging stories from informal processes had some capacity to

redress normative workplace practices and bring women's voices to the forefront to change them. In public discourse, credibility shifted from the accused to the survivor and asserted a public space for these testimonies to be heard where none previously existed (Lang, 2019). This does not suggest that sexual harassment ended when the news stories were released or that it is no longer pervasive in society. It shifted how the assault was talked about and which voices were centred.

The #MeToo movement gained momentum in 2017 when allegations against Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein were brought before the media in a series of articles by Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey of The New York Times. Isabelle Chaudry (2019) explains, "Statistics reveal that one in three women between the ages of eighteen to thirty-four have been sexually harassed at work-many of whom were targeted by male co-workers, clients or customers, and managers" (p. 217). The collective experiences of sexual assault survivors created a paradigm shift in company policy and practice and saw the termination of predators from their positions of power (Richards & Nystrom, 2022; Chaundry, 2019).

Cheris Kramarae (1981) identifies women as a muted group. In systems designed on the premise of men's dominant interests, femininity is then an alternate way of being relative to the dominant norms of men (Kramarae, 1981). As power holders, men create dominant norms through the "malestream expression" (Griffen et al., 2019, p. 413). Advancements in technology *can* create "new spaces where women can make their voices heard" (Griffen et al., 2019, p. 413). Using story and collective narratives was one means that was implemented to un-silence stories of violations.

Social media is a space where norms and conventions can be contested in real-time. Fileborn and Loney Howes (2019) write, "the #MeToo movement was a highly successful one:

an act of solidarity with and between survivors arguably on a scale that has not been witnessed before, a movement that has generated tangible action and consequences for some perpetrators, and driven substantive public debate on sexual violence” (p. 5). Through social media, the collective experiences functioned to empower those who spoke truth to power and held perpetrators accountable in the court of public opinion, and some cases, judicial courts.

Individuals may have constitutional and legal rights, but socioeconomic barriers may deny them the enjoyment of that right. Simon Fischer et al. (2000) explains, “rights, in theory guaranteed under the constitution of a state, may in practice not be accessible to [people] who belong to a marginalized group or who are intimidated by the powerful from claiming their rights” (p. 51). With women in the #MeToo movement, patriarchy historically functioned as a system of subjugation and silencing. Telling their truth was imperative in resisting those systems. Those who conform to or are born into normative ideas of the ideal “subject” receive greater enjoyment of human rights (Goodhart, 2016, p. 294). Meaning that to make a human rights claim, groups that conform to the ideals of the state are in a better position to make a claim and have a ruling in their favour.

The Public Narrative

Not all stories work toward human rights advancement. In the same way, stories can be used to cultivate action for human rights violations redress; they can be used to garner hate and subjugate others, as evidenced by propaganda in authoritarian states. Mahoney (2017) explains, “emotions can immobilize, consolidate differences, and reproduce inequality, or emotions can be the barometer for which leadership educators facilitate change and disrupt controlling discourses” (p. 59). Human rights stories are narratives which increase the enjoyment of existing

rights, respect and promote human dignity and seek to transform systems using anti-oppressive frameworks to increase equity and achieve justice.

This essay is informed by the storytelling method outlined by Marshall Ganz (2009). His *Public Narrative* storytelling methodology outlines how stories can/are used for social change. Antron Mahoney (2017) defines the public narrative as “a method of translating values, and subsequently emotions, into action through leadership practice” (p. 57). The public narrative is used in this writing theoretically. A public narrative story is typically a 6-minute event where the story of self, us, now is cohesive and clear. For Marshall Ganz, the differentiating factor that transitions a story as pure testimony toward a story that leads to change is whether the story is about an event or explains the experience of the event itself (Ganz, 2010).

The TRC of Canada and the #MeToo movement did not overtly or intentionally use the public narrative. The purpose of using the public narrative is to generate discussion on the impact marginalized stories can have on changing oppressive systems and how they become silenced. Stories illicit ethical considerations and conceptions in their recipients (Schaffer & Smith, 2004). In sharing public stories, Ganz suggests that the recipient leaves with the feeling of knowing they can make a difference; he refers to using the acronym Y.C.M.A.D “You Can Make a Difference” (Ganz, 2010, p. 10).

The Public Narrative has three central components: the story of self, us, and the story of now (Ganz, 2010). The public narrative describes “the self-in-context.” For groups whose lived experience is silenced by power holders, like the ones outlined in this writing, their self-in-context is the story of subjugation in the context of colonialism or patriarchy. Through values within stories, Ganz (2010) suggests that the experience of hardships evokes emotions in recipients who can then be cultivated for action.

The story of self ought to enable recipients to realize a shared purpose, especially in circumstances of uncertainty (Ganz, 2010). The story of self builds relationships with recipients to create a shared visceral experience. Ganz (2010) describes these moments as transcending influences on our lives and becoming resources, by bringing these influences into a story allows the recipient to feel and experience the story.

Ganz's (2010) story of us is contingent on getting listeners to "get each other." Stories of us are not categorical values but moments brought to life by universal shared experiences. Ganz (2010) describes these stories as egalitarian as they are not requisites of belonging to a category but are contingent on having a shared experience. Fominaya (2019) describes collective identity as "the ability to distinguish the (collective) self from the "other," and to be recognized by those 'others'" (p. 433). Identities are reinforced by shared narratives of the collective us.

To belong to a culture or any form of a collective group is to belong to the stories that shape it. Chaitin explains (2003), "Telling one's story, through oral or written means, has been shown to be a key experience in people's lives, especially those who have undergone severe social trauma" (para. 9). The stories told about oneself as well as the stories told about collective selves" shape values, perceptions, and worldviews.

Identity and story and interdependent. Senehi (2009) explains that as culture is shared through stories, it has the capacity to "get at the intersection between structure and human agency" (p. 211). The purpose of cultural stories is to be retold (Chaitin, 2003). Neil Postman (1986) suggests, "to forget how something is to be said or done is a danger to the community and a gross form of stupidity" (p. 25). When collective stories, such as cultural stories and narratives about group identity, become silenced, it indicates oppression.

The story of now uses the experiences of oppression to convey a sense of urgency for human action (Ganz, 2010). The storyteller is an “action facilitator” (Ganz & Lin, 2011, p. 359). The public narrative is about showing the recipient the urgency rather than telling them about it. Strategizing calls to action is storytelling’s cognitive (logos) element, the analytical process of creating change. When combined with the narrative, the affective portion (pathos) becomes the emotional motivation for the recipient (Ganz, 2010, p. 15). When values are narrated, the intersecting components of each story (self, us now) become a galvanizing experience. The public narrative is not meant to function as a restrictive methodology for sharing experiences; it is a tool to make the implicit experience within stories explicit (Ganz, 2010).

Stories give meaning to lived experiences (Chaitin, 2003). People define themselves and their understanding of the world around them through narratives (Chaitin, 2003). Schaffer and Smith (2004) suggest “life storytelling constitutes a social action on the part of individuals or communities, resonating through multiple cultural contexts, including moral, aesthetic, political, and legal” (p. 4). Life storytelling can empower individuals to create community cohesion to promote and protect human rights.

Human agency and human rights are diminished when stories are silenced, muted, or excluded. Stories reflect law, life, love, and understandings about what it means to be somewhere, to be in a place and have that place part of identity. Stories that cultivate human action are “strong, emotive stories chronicling degradation, brutalization, exploitation, and physical violence; stories that testify to the denial of subjectivity and loss of group identities” (Schaffer & Smith, 2004, p. 4). Narratives that define perceptions of the self or community are told even in dire states of oppression. When these stories corroborate with others, creating cohesion and group agency, they can shift norms to promote human agency.

Hegemony

Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci described and analyzed how hegemony diminishes well-being and limits what *types* of stories can be told within political systems (Harley, 2014; Selmeczi, 2012). Oppressive hegemonic systems discredit the fidelity of stories that exist outside the norms that perpetuate them. Testimony then dismantles hegemonic forms of oppression by challenging the assumed narratives underpinning systemic norms.

Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault are renowned thinkers in deconstructing hegemonic power systems (Harley, 2014; Selmeczi, 2012). Gramsci believed that language is a central tenant for the effective function of hegemonic structures. Gramsci referred to this notion as “discursive hegemonic structures” (as cited in Redekop, 2002, p.113). When hegemonic structures control the language used in everyday life, they shape ideas by “controlling the root metaphors and the criteria for ideas accepted as legitimate” (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 410). Gramsci believed that for hegemonic structures to exist, they must have the consent to be produced; this manifests as a “discourse” of power (Harley, 2014). Consent is expressed by public opinion produced through hegemonic activities.

Gramsci outlined the coercive nature of judicial systems in states and their use of military force to subjugate opponents when discourse was insufficient (Harley, 2014). Gramsci believed regimes could not be sustained by force over long periods of time (Harley, 2014). In turn, regimes needed to use other means to control subjects. Gramsci describes two methods of accomplishing control without direct force: “domination, by which he meant direct physical coercion by the police and armed forces; and hegemony, by which he meant ideological control and consent” (Harley, 2014, p. 274). Force was only available when other options were exhausted. The ideal was to disguise state actions as reflecting the consent of the majority

(Harley, 2014). Disguised state action manifests in unchecked social norms that become precedents, despite perpetuating injustices.

Foucault outlined how hegemonic discourses manifest by privileging some lives at the expense of others, which ultimately leads to oppression (Mayes, 2018). Foucault outlined these manifestations as being a symptom of biopolitics. Biopolitics describes how hegemony promotes some lives' well-being and leaves others to die (Mayes, 2018; Braun, 1997; Selmeczi, 2012). Biopolitical discrimination is deeper than just disdain for "the other"; it is the state-sanctioned protection and life enhancement of dominant ontologies at the expense of the "biologically weak" alternative ways of being relative to the constructed ideal of hegemonic norms (Mayes, 2018, p. 21). This function is evidenced both in colonialism and in patriarchal systems.

Biopolitics normalizes desired behaviour without requiring enforcement by training societies to act according to a set of ideals. For example, the precedent of objectifying and sexualizing women or excluding Indigenous peoples and their beliefs from social arenas. Although there may be legal protections, for example amending the laws which banned Indigenous cultural practices or ratifying conventions which deal with women's rights (CEDAW), hegemonic systems of oppression may continue to cause harm. This harm ultimately functions as political death.

Without political life, an entity also loses privileges to make human rights claims relative to someone who fits into hegemonic norms. Anna Selmeczi describes political death as groups being "inaudible and invisible or to be pushed out of sight" (Selmeczi, 2012, p. 504). Political life means having the power to advocate and determine for oneself how to live one's life within state politics and without coercion or imposition of state forces.

In Canada, notions of whiteness and masculinity are often used to diminish Indigenous groups and performances of femininity by exercising control over territory, identity, and bodies (Mayes, 2018). Operating outside of these norms can leave individuals and communities excluded and isolated in policy, procedure, and practice. Collective narratives have the capacity to resist unquestioned norms and power systems. Courts, commissions, tribunals, or even social media can disrupt these status-quo norms and conventions, though there will always be the risk of simultaneously perpetuating them.

Hegemonic structures can promote the physical, political, economic, language, identity, and presence or spirit of a society (Redekop, 2002; Saul, 2009). When they fail to do so, they embody a failed elite. John Ralston Saul (2009) identifies a failed elite as “afraid to encourage the wide discussion of ideas to find the basis for its actions, unable to act except in a veiled or populist manner, afraid of the idea of power except as an expression of interests” (p. 176). An oppressive hegemonic system is a failed system because it does not promote the well-being of all members within a community. By extension, it does not create space for story and diminishes human dignity.

Anti-hegemonic Storytelling

Whether it be everyday forms of resistance or more overt manifestations of confrontation, resistance and non-corporation are foundational to transforming systems of oppression (O’Brien & Lianjiang, 2006; Gobby, 2020; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). John Ralston Saul (2009) asserts that every country has its own story and way of interpreting the past through its lens. This creates a collective understanding of “*how things are.*” The role of storytelling in social change disrupts notions of “what has always been” and moves into a space of “what ought to be.”

Transformed systems ought to promote well-being and the *enjoyment* of human rights and are inherently egalitarian. Sharing collective stories directly resists the norms and conventions that otherwise mute and render invisible the lived experiences of people who are not ideal political subjects (Kramarae, 1981; Archuleta, 2006). For the organized efforts to successfully transform systems, they need to tell stories their audience accepts.

These transformed systems would then promote peace. Justice is one of several precursors to transformative change outlined in this essay. Franz Fanon (2004) suggests that transforming the systems of oppression requires an unlearning, or learning, “the untruths planted within him” (p. 233). This means a transformation of consciousness (Fanon, 2004, p. 229). It is in the transformation of systems where individuals can live into their rights and assert agency.

The TRC of Canada and the #MeToo movement used the lived experience to address rights violations and redress the systems that upheld them. The public narrative demonstrates the cause-and-effect relationship between telling one’s story and the capacity to elicit public action in policy, procedure, and practice. There is no quantifiable measure for the impact of hearing testimony and speaking truth to power on groups who share that experience. Telling the story creates more leaders, tellers, and activists to dismantle the systems that created the circumstances for injustice.

The TRC of Canada was a formal means of asserting these idyllic oughts for Canadian society. The calls to action were emblematic of these imperatives and ideals. They are cohesive and have a framework for implementation. The calls to action are separated into sub-sections, each dealing with a different element of systems which govern society. Storytelling as testimony can also be used for change and setting new precedents through informal systems as well.

The TRC is a response to the historical “letting die” of all social categories that were non-white or non-European. Howard Adams (1989) nuances this notion when writing, “it is necessary to keep in mind that this white ideal is not rational; it is subconscious” (p. 144). Rights claims, the shared experience of a violation, can be cultivated for action to resist and transforms hegemonic norms. The TRC was not a catch-all solution for the wrongdoing of the past. It did function to create mutual recognition through (stories of us) and outline potential steps forward (stories of now) to undo the systems that led to genocide in the first place.

For women living in patriarchal power systems, their stories were silenced by systems threatening their livelihoods and careers if they spoke out against abuses of power. Whether in a formal commission hearing or informal stories over social media, everyone can be a storyteller for social change. Of course, not everyone tells stories according to the public narrative methodology.

The phrase “Me Too” comes from an experience of listening to others, listening to individuals’ stories of self, and sharing an experience within that story to create a story of us, those who are diminished by systems of silencing. Speaking truth through testimony and sharing an experience of “the self” functions as an assertion of one’s right to be heard by resisting the individuals and systems which created the circumstances leading to the experience (Ganz, 2009). The story of now resists the constructed power of hegemony by using transformative counter-hegemonic tactics. The Public Narrative is one means of cultivating these narratives to create social change (Ganz, 2010).

As Fanon (2004) suggests, storytelling can be an anti-colonial, anti-hegemonic action. Telling stories about honour and valour by historically labelled inferior groups asserts agency and ultimately changes how those groups see themselves. As they are represented within the

individual or cultural narratives as virtuous, they begin to see themselves and internalize that they are virtuous. In the same way, the power of stories to assert agency was so great in Algeria that they attempted to systematically silence them to protect the status quo of colonialism; all anti-hegemonic stories have the same power to galvanize change (Fanon, 2004).

As human rights stories told through public narratives can resist dominant narratives, they effectively confront the state (Harley, 2014). In doing so, they function similarly to the combat literature in Algeria (Fanon, 2004). Without political or economic power, there cannot be true self-determination, as there is no robust procedure to assert or defend rights (Goodhart, 2016). When stories are jeopardized by assimilation or other forms of oppression, individuals and culture may be silenced by states, though they continue to tell stories through public narratives. Stories confront power and have the capacity to effectively undo social systems of harm.

No one is voiceless; systems of oppression silence them. Good justice inherently transforms systems of violence and oppression into life-enhancing, rights-promoting systems. Good justice principles “provide a way of assigning rights and duties in the basic institutions of society, and they define the appropriate distribution of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation” (Saul, 1971, p. 4). Saul narrows these principles down into two basic functions, the first being equal rights “to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others” (p. 60). The second is “social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone’s advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all” (p. 60). To achieve good justice, well-being and life-enhancement must be protected and enhanced. The anti-establishment experiences must be shared to cultivate justice.

The Right to Tell Story

The act of telling is an act of counter-hegemony. Retelling stories serve as “acts of remembering test the values that nations profess to live by against the actual experiences and perceptions of the storyteller as witness” (Schaffer & Smith, 2004, p. 3). Stories contribute to the culture, identity, and cohesion among groups and are a central tenant of successful social change towards promoting human dignity (Selmeczi, 2012; Dodge, 2018; Keck, 1995). Stories are paramount in understanding culture and identity (Krahn, 2012; Chaitin, 2003; Carey, 1989; Senehi, 2008; Kuokkanen, 2007; Ganz, 2011). Successful social change is contingent on transforming the way things are to re-constitute participants' lives to create self-determination (Fominaya, 2019; Snow & Benford, 2000; Oliver & Johnson, 2000).

Not being able to tell human rights stories functions to diminish human dignity and could be asserted as an expansion of the right to life within the UDHR article 23, the right to culture - as outlined in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) article 11, and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* section 25, and 35, or even the right “to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment” (UDHR, 1948, art 23; Fenge & Aldridge, 2015, p. 51). To become uncoerced by the discursive elements of hegemony, movements must stubbornly and willfully resist and push against harmful forms of hegemony, like patriarchy and colonialism.

Oppressive hegemonic systems, in practice, work against the realization and enjoyment of human rights. The UN bodies which deal with human rights violations, use testimony to appropriately get redress for “slavery, torture, rape and other forms of physical abuse, genocide, terrorism, racial and gender discrimination, ethnic cleansing, arbitrary detention, or denial of cultural integrity” (Schaffer & Smith, 2004, p. 2). Storytelling as a right would stipulate other

rights, such as the right to truth, culture, and identity. All these factors have been available through the increasing “international commitment to narratability” (Schaffer & Smith, 2004, p. 3). Through narrative, human rights violations are unsilenced, meaning that if the claims are true, states have a duty to implement processes for finding truth (Klinkner, Davis, 2019). Stories continue to set new precedents and norms within “the court of world opinion” (Schaffer & Smith, 2004, p. 3). Stories told through testimony then function as rights claims.

Conclusion

Given the power of storytelling to assert agency, empower groups and ultimately be life-giving, everyone must participate in the process of sharing human rights stories. When collective identity can be cultivated, jurisdiction can be asserted, and agency within groups creates momentum and power to work toward social transformation (Ganz, 2011).

The intersection of political power and the act of storytelling can serve as a catalyst for change, and a means to uphold the fundamental principles of human rights for all. Human rights began with telling stories of injustice and acting upon those stories to create declarations and conventions to protect, respect, and promote human dignity. In the same way, each right has a corresponding responsibility; each witness has a duty to act in ways that affirm and promote human dignity to undo the systems that led to the injustice.

As a refugee fleeing war, he was disadvantaged. Coming to Canada with nothing, he again suffered class subjugation. His ethnicity, religious beliefs, and race would afford him social privileges in Canada. Coming to a new land and receiving social privileges is at the loss of privileges Indigenous groups held during colonization. The nexus of these social locations is part of the complexity and function of hegemony in society.

My Opa always wanted one of his grandchildren to be a pastor. For him, faith meant seeking heaven on earth, not as a distant revelation or “second coming” but as a call to create a more just and equitable earth in the here and now; heaven is just. Justice was not reserved for an afterlife, but rather a present divine call to assert agency where it was being diminished. For my Opa, his faith was synonymous with justice. At the same time, my Opa instilled in me an ethos of anti-authoritarianism, which does not lend itself well to church or organized religion. Although I got a degree in biblical studies, I have no plans of pastoring.

My Opa instilled in me the belief that we can catalyze a moment of lived experience when we tell stories. The perpetrators of the violations done to his family and community were never brought to justice. Telling their stories functioned to restore the parts of their lives that were silenced and persecuted. My Opa taught me that when we tell stories about the past to evoke action for a better future, the world we lived in yesterday can be more just today when we continue to tell stories, even in states of oppression.

There is power in telling stories. Listening to stories makes me understand the importance of creating space for the stories being silenced. Lila Watson once said, “If you have here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” Because hegemony is absolute, the liberation of silenced stories by those with less privileged social locations than me does not diminish mine; it accomplishes the opposite.

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