

HUMAN RIGHTS
AND
NARRATED LIVES

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HUMAN RIGHTS AND
NARRATED LIVES: THE ETHICS OF
RECOGNITION

Kay Schaffer
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*To activists and witnesses involved in
human rights struggles around the world*

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A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

The idea for an extended study of the uses of personal narratives in campaigns for human rights arose during the first meeting of the International Auto/Biography Association in Beijing in June 1999. “All I have is my story” became a phrase challenging us to consider peoples’ rights to their own stories. With that nub of an idea we applied to the Rockefeller Center program in Bellagio, Italy, for a joint fellowship that would enable us to begin our collaborative mapping of the relationship between storytelling and human rights as they intersect across the domains of law and literature. The month at Villa Serbolini not only delighted our senses, it also enabled us to do preliminary reading and thinking about the history and philosophical foundations of the human rights regime and its many critiques. Most particularly, we thank José Antonio Aguilar Rivera, fellow Serbolini confrère and Mexican political scientist, for his generous reading of our first attempt at presenting this background. José complicated our arguments and returned us to the drawing board to reconsider how we wanted to situate our larger argument about life writing in the field of human rights.

Fortunately, we have been able to work side-by-side frequently over the last four years. Our debts of gratitude for making these meetings possible go to the Humanities Research Centre (HRC) at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra and to the School of Humanities at Curtin University of Technology in Perth. In Spring 2003, the HRC at the ANU sponsored a year-long project on “The Humanities, Culture, and Human Rights.” For six uninterrupted weeks we were able to pursue our project and to engage in dialogues with colleagues whose interests we shared, among them Norbert Finch, John Docker, and Margaret Jolly. Carolyn Turner, deputy director of the HRC, welcomed and supported us in our fellowship. To the Feministas, a collaborative of feminist historians at the ANU, which includes Georgiana Clauson, Ann Curthoys, Desley Deacon, Rosanne Kennedy, Jill Matthews, and Ann McGrath, we owe a special debt for their rigorous critique of an early version of the introduction.

Their challenge to us, as we sat before them soaked from the late afternoon rains of mid-February Canberra, forced us to hone our larger argument, refine our methodology, and begin the book from another angle. We also thank Susan Andrews for talking through with us the place of Holocaust studies in the contemporary study of trauma.

From Canberra we moved to Curtin University in Western Australia, where Sidonie held the Hadyn Williams Fellowship in the School of Humanities and Kay joined her as a visiting scholar in the humanities. At Curtin, we owe our thanks to Barbara Milech who organized our visits under the auspices of the Human Rights and Globalization Project and hosted us with unfailing generosity and graciousness. We thank Brian Dibble for lending us his parking space and office, Dean of Humanities Tom Stannage for hosting our residency, and colleagues Krishna Sen and Jon Stratton for their conversation and suggestions.

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Our partners, Robert and Greg, have remained committed to our work even as we have left them behind to meet together for extended periods long distances from home. Their energetic arguments with us have reminded us to sharpen our questions and deepen our thinking.