Journal of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University
วารสารศิลปศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยธรรมศาสตร์
Journal homeage: https://so03.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/liberalarts/index

Human Rights during the Pandemic—Towards an Enabling Pedagogy

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Article Info

Academic Article

Article History:
Received 11 June 2021
Revised 6 October 2021
Accepted 6 October 2021

Keywords:
human rights pedagogy
interdisciplinary
COVID-19
enabling fictions
humanities during the pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic that coincided with a renewed fight for racial justice in the wake of George Floyd's death in 2020 has brought to the fore contesting debates about human rights in the USA. Such questions as who counts as "human" worthy of rights and whose freedom matters (often at the expense of whom) have been at the heart of the tumultuous events in US political and public life since the beginning of the pandemic. Set against this backdrop, this paper examines effective pedagogical practices that enable students to critically respond to these exigencies of our time. Using an intermediate literature course entitled "Memory, Human Rights and Global Anglophone Literature" I designed and taught at Elon University, North Carolina in Spring 2021, the paper outlines a few pedagogical innovations that I effectively put into practice while navigating the unique challenges posed by the pandemic. I use Joseph R. Slaughter's articulation of "enabling fictions"—literary and legal forms that mutually inform each other to envision "free and full human personality development" of human rights—in the course design and execution. Building on Slaughter's work, I argue that a pandemic-era classroom must integrate "enabling" activities that help students yoke empathy with interdisciplinary inquiry and transformative composition meaningfully. An enabling classroom empowers a student coming from an entitled and insulated background to ethically imagine the pain of "the other" without reifying a hierarchical power dynamism that taints the ethos of Western human rights activism.

> "*The General Assembly,*
>
> *Proclaims this Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms . . .*"
>
> - Preamble, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948

In defense of the humanities

2020 was a watershed year for the USA. Against the COVID-19 pandemic, a surge of anti-Asian hate crimes added up to a record-high nationwide rise (Allam, 2021). A renewed call for racial consciousness reached a tipping point following George Floyd's death at the hands of police officers. Optimists started calling attention to "a racial reckoning" (Richeson, 2020). Skeptics were dismayed by widening fractures on the political front. Midway into 2021, the country is still trying to make sense of the aftershocks of these calamitous events. At the tail-end of spring, a verdict had been given to the killing of George Floyd, but there is little consensus about the highly-anticipated racial reckoning. There was no such reckoning, decries the CNN columnist John Blake. "The 'racial reckoning' phrase has become a rhetorical decoy," Blake (2021) writes, "a way to avoid facing the deepest problems about race in America instead of a call to confront them."

Higher education, like every other aspect of US life, attends to and is being informed by this environment. While pivoting to new pedagogical platforms in response to the pandemic, colleges and universities were simultaneously tasked with recalibrating their approach to diversity, equity, inclusion, social justice, and antiracist pedagogy. The humanities and liberal arts, in particular, have gained significant attention in rethinking today's role of education. In the wake of the Capitol siege, Seb Dance, a former member of the European Parliament, reflecting across the pond, tweeted: "When the dust settles we need to have a serious conversation about how we equip people with the critical analytical skills they need in an increasingly online world. Sifting fact from friction [sic] must be everyone's core skill." Parcak (2021), a professor of archeology at the University

of Alabama–Birmingham, responded: “Congratulations, you just discovered ‘The Humanities.’” Parcak was not alone in calling attention to the disciplinary area that has been at the core of civic education and critical thinking since the mid-5th century BCE (Britannica, 2021). The Association of American Colleges and Universities (2021), issuing a statement on January 7, accentuated the intricate bond between a liberal arts education and democracy:

> *[. . .] democracy is not self-sustaining; rather, it depends upon the sustained engagement of free people united in their commitment to the fundamental principles of justice, liberty, human dignity, and equality of persons. The task of an education allied to democracy is not simply to help students gain knowledge and skills. It is to also assist students in forming the habits of heart and mind that liberate their thinking and equip them for, and dispose them to, the creation of a more just, equitable, and inclusive society through civic involvement.*

Institutions ranging from Ivy League universities to small liberal arts colleges were quick to post similar messages, emphasizing the decisive nature of liberal arts in fostering and sustaining a meaningful democratic environment. Some even highlighted that civic education must be part of general education (The Columbus Dispatch, 2021).

While it is undoubtedly a positive sign that the discipline of the humanities that has been at the receiving end of downsizing for allegedly being “not with the times” (Schlund-Vials, 2011, p. 102) is being recognized for its transformative value, dishearteningly it took a pandemic and a series of tumultuous political events for society to acknowledge that the humanities are indeed “with the times.” Concurrently, this is a wake-up call to us humanities instructors. Since the 5th century BCE, humanities instructors have been training students to appreciate humanity and gain critical skills necessary for democratic citizenship. If this age-long mission needs to be “rediscovered,” then is it possible that we are not doing something right? Or is it because, unlike career-driven disciplines, humanities education does not yield easily quantitative and instant results, it fails to receive due attention? How do we assess the success or failure when the returns of our

efforts are qualitative than quantitative? How can we make success visible? In such an environment, humanities instructors are entrusted with the responsibility of making a case for why humanities education matters without waiting for it to speak for itself.

Several questions can be used as heuristics to think through our current responsibilities inside and outside the classroom. First, with Chilean American teacher-scholar and human rights activist Agosín (2015, p. xi), we must always ask, "[. . .] how do we humanize through the arts a deeply dehumanized world?". Second, with Ira Shor, we must ask, how should we recalibrate our methodologies in the classroom to involve students in pedagogical innovation meaningfully? Third, we must question how we make humanities applicable and relevant to students of non-humanities disciplines and thereby amplify our efforts to create a humanities classroom the hub of interdisciplinary and intersectional inquiry? We live in an age of narratives that define our behavior and attitudes (as succinctly exemplified by contesting narratives surrounding mask-wearing and vaccinations), and narratives have profound social implications. We must then question: what narratives do we tell, and how do we use them pedagogically? With Joseph R. Slaughter, we must ask how we distill the "enabling" power of fiction in the classroom?

These questions were etched into the planning of my 2021 Spring semester syllabi as I was completing the first year as a new faculty member of English at Elon University. As a faculty member of color, I teach postcolonial and global literature with a commitment to antiracist pedagogy. The new wave of national conversations about racial justice, the rhetoric of freedom, and pandemic-related inequity only harkened back to the older and continuing questions about humanity, its denial, and racially-inflected aberrational applications over the course of modern Western history. The debates of justice are only new avatars of centuries-long discontents dating back to European imperial expansion. A meaningful engagement can begin by historicizing the discontents and seeing them not simply as American and Western issues but as having global routes.

Keeping these ideas in mind, I designed a literature course on the topic of "Memory, Human Rights, and Global Anglophone Literature." Using a range of literary, cultural, and historical texts from global Asia, Africa, and the USA, the course urged the students to examine how the notion of the human has been variously defined and

unevenly applied to grant humanity to certain communities at the expense of others' exclusion. The COVID-19 pandemic and the concomitant fight for racial justice have brought to the fore an age-long debate on aberrations, contradictions, and limitations inherent in the human rights discourse. While such questions as whose lives matter (at whose expense?) and whose liberties are worth protecting (at whose expense, again?) have seeped into our everyday existence, the classroom has become a timely space to engage these questions and imagine proactive solutions. Set against this backdrop, the course probed how literature and popular culture lay bare inadequacies of institutional articulations of the human and their violent repercussions since the inception of the Western human rights discourse. The students simultaneously studied how writers, artists, and filmmakers make use of various iterations of memory to contest exclusivist narratives of the human condition. I used Joseph R. Slaughter's articulation of "enabling fictions"—literary and legal forms that mutually inform each other to envision "free and full human personality development" of human rights—in the course design and execution. Building on Slaughter's work, I argue that a pandemic-era classroom must integrate "enabling" activities that help students yoke empathy with interdisciplinary inquiry and transformative composition meaningfully. An enabling classroom empowers a student coming from an entitled and insulated background to ethically imagine the pain of "the other" without reifying a hierarchical power dynamism that taints the ethos of Western human rights activism.

"It just ain't the sixties anymore!"

As Asian American teacher-scholar Chan (2005, p. 10) cogently puts it, academic work is a form of community work. For such community work to culminate in meaningful results, both the teacher and students must work together within the parameters of the classroom and forge paths to reach out to the world outside with a transformative agenda. A case in point is the birth and advancement of ethnic studies programs following the Civil Rights Movement. However, Osajima (1998) observes that, over the past few decades, students have become distanced from political activism. Deliberating on the crucial investments made by students in the 1960s in bringing critical visibility to ethnic and Asian American studies programs that revolutionized the huminites education

in the USA, he says, “Our long-term survival and growth depends on how well we can inspire new generations of students to take up the challenge raised by the Third World Strike” (Osajima, 1998, p. 60). In a mournful tone, Osajima (1998, p. 60) recalls Michael Omi’s words: “it just ain’t the sixties anymore”.

While Omi’s sentiments hold true on one level, we must remind ourselves that ethnic studies pedagogy cannot remain nostalgically fixated on the sixties. Today’s students must prepare themselves for a more competitive global job market, and it seems logical to opt for a profession-oriented education. However, a student’s decision to prioritize STEM or finance over humanities by no means suggests their lack of regard for critical social issues. Nor does it diminish the value and promise of humanities. Students today are “woke” in subtle, less explicit, and more dormant ways. An effective classroom enables them to hone their critical skills and apply them across curricula. If, as Chan and Osajima hold, the classroom is a vital link between the community and action, we must attend to the changing dynamics of the current academia and adjust the course design to facilitate reciprocal exchange between the classroom and society effectively.

In response to such an exigency, a literature class themed on human rights and memory offers a timely inquiry. Our understanding of the human can be self-centric which can make us incognizant of violations affecting those who do not share the same identity, experiences, and space with us. Dissipating this barrier is a point of departure for activism (albeit less visible) given that young students in the classroom will soon be in leadership positions, making crucial decisions that impact local, national, and global communities. On the other hand, higher education today seeks to produce global citizens. A parochial view of human rights hampers this global outreach. Human rights crises today have a historical trajectory that connects the different continents. A literature classroom can offer a critical comparative framework that helps students challenge binaries such as the West’s perceived role as the human rights dispenser vs. the Global South’s position as the beneficiary. Moreover, the West does not exist in a human rights utopia. Literature as a discipline equips students with a skillset to see through the shortcomings of the rights discourse and envision a future beyond a standardized set of norms.

Navigating challenges old and new

The course “Memory, Human Rights, and Global Anglophone Literature” enrolled thirty-three students. Even though it was an “English” course offering, 97% of the student body was composed of non-English majors from eighteen different academic programs ranging from Adventure, Health, and Physical Education to Strategic Communication. The largest group of 18% were Finance majors. This multidisciplinarity of the cohort was one of the greatest strengths of the classroom. In channeling their strength into a productive learning environment, it is necessary to create a space of belonging for non-English majors. The course should feel relevant to both their disciplinary fields and lived experience.

An interdisciplinary focus proves productive in establishing this common ground. What’s more, wherein interdisciplinarity and intersectionality have become part of the core disciplinary values of English literature, the syllabus organically demands literary texts be put in dialogue with historical, legal, political, and cultural artifacts. For instance, the students read Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s 1964 novel *Weep Not, Child* alongside audiovisual texts that document the British colonization of Kenya, the Mau Mau uprising, and interviews with the author. The discussion of the novel was followed by Shailja Patel’s “The Sky has not Changed Colour” from her 2010 multimedia text *Migritude*. Similarly, when they read Khushwant Singh’s 1956 novel *Train to Pakistan*, they watched an archival video footage of Jawaharlal Nehru’s speech “Tryst with Destiny” on the eve of India’s independence and referred to journalistic coverage of the Partition of India. The discussion of the novel was followed by excerpted chapters from Urvashi Butalia’s 2000 nonfictional text *The Other Side of Violence*. The array of genres enabled the students to investigate literary representations of human rights violations through an intersectional analysis of issues including race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and class.

The interdisciplinary focus is further helpful to make non-Western, non-canonical, and minority literature accessible to both English and non-English majors. It is imperative for a literature course that questions limitations of the universal application of human rights to have a global scope in its selection of texts. The students were not familiar with the non-Western geopolitical spaces the course focused on—late-colonial Kenya, postcolonial India, and postwar Sri Lanka—nor had they read any assigned texts

before taking the class. In bridging the gap between students' familiar and unfamiliar grounds, audio-visual texts were particularly useful.

In addition to the above challenges common to a multi-ethnic literature classroom with a global concentration, the COVID-19 pandemic posed an unprecedented set of new challenges. In Fall 2020, the classroom was not the same. A vaccination was yet to come. Certain circumstances compelled a few students to register as remote learners. For a majority of the students, an in-person learning environment was facilitated by a combination of practices including mask-wearing, proper social distancing, weekly testing, contact tracing, and quarantine in the event of a positive COVID identification. However, the socially-distanced classroom design limited the number of students who could meet at a given time. In the fall semester, I taught an upper-level literature course on postcolonial global literature with thirty students. In adapting the classroom to the pandemic exigencies, I divided the student body into six groups and the regular hundred-minute class session into two fifty-minute sessions. I met a combination of three groups during each session. I also changed the composition of each session by rotating the groups weekly. This enabled all students to interact with everyone in the cohort. In order to facilitate remote learners, I ran a synchronous Zoom class in tandem with the in-person class. While the class was in session, I experimented with the act of walking the laptop into the class discussion, which minimized one layer of distance between the remote and in-person learners. I constantly paid attention to students' concerns and feedback via two surveys, three polls, and three sessions of one-on-one conferences held at different points of the semester.

The effectiveness of these practices I employed in the literature classroom in the fall semester informed the design of "Memory, Human Rights, and Global Anglophone Literature." Despite my multi-year teaching experience in the US academia, the pandemic-era pedagogy has been a learning curve for my students and me. It was, therefore, incumbent on me to build on the success I had in the fall semester and keep looking for more effective practices with meaningful participation of students. A concern shared by some students from the fall semester related to the limited time available for class sessions which made it sometimes difficult to cover all the assigned content. I took this into account when selecting the primary reading material for the spring semester.

Given that the class consisted of students from all four academic years—with three graduating seniors and five first-year students—it was essential to put together a syllabus that was academically rigorous to an upper-level student and welcomingly flexible to a freshman.

Empathy: An age-long challenge with novel iterations

The pandemic and the fight for racial justice have accentuated the value of empathy. Individual decisions concerning mask-wearing and social distancing have become catalysts of debates about empathy and social responsibility. Higher education has started using empathy as a keyword in its pandemic-era education recalibration efforts. Speaking to college leaders and educators, scholar-educator Givens (2021) proposes "radical empathy" that involves a series of steps one ought to take in actively immersing oneself in the experiences of others. "In order to have empathy," she writes, "we need to be willing to consider that others have experiences that are different than our own and that we must be intentional in trying to understand our differences. It means avoiding making assumptions about people—and being willing to listen and to learn." As opposed to a sentiment, she reminds us that empathy is part of a larger action plan that involves introspection and public-facing action.

The promise of empathy, its activation, and its limits have been at the heart of human rights scholarship since the inception of the Western human rights discourse in the late eighteenth century. As Hunt (2007) delineates, the universal human rights discourse lays out a set of declarations through moral obligations sans a mechanism for enforcement. But, for them to gain any meaning, they need to be invoked within an economy of emotions. In particular, empathy helps a human subject see another human being like a mirror image of their autonomous self. Hunt writes:

> *Autonomy and empathy are cultural practices, not just ideas, and they are therefore quite literally embodied, that is they have physical as well as emotional dimensions. Individual autonomy hinges on an increasing sense of the separation and sacredness of human bodies: your body is yours and my body is mine, and we should both respect the boundaries*

> *between each other's bodies. Empathy depends on the recognition that others feel and think as we do, that our inner feelings are alike in some fundamental fashion. To be autonomous, a person has to be legitimately separate and protected in his or her separation, but to have rights go along with that bodily separation a person's selfhood must be appreciated in some more emotional fashion. Human rights depend both on self-possession and on the recognition that all others are equally self-possessed. It is the incomplete development of the latter that gives rise to all the inequalities of rights that have preoccupied us throughout history.* (Hunt, 2007, p. 29)

In channeling the intertwined force of empathy and autonomy, literature and popular culture play a pivotal role. In the second half of the eighteenth century, a proliferation of fiction, theatrical work, music, painting, and journalism shifted their focus from conventional topics such as mythology to ordinary people's suffering and institutional violence, which allowed otherwise insulated readers to imagine experiences of those outside their realm (Hunt, 2007, p. 30). Historically, a profusion of literary and cultural work thus bridged the distance between the self and the other. Still, it has failed to avert the grave human rights crises of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Hunt would attribute this to incomplete activation of empathy. She also points out that oversaturated sensationalism can impede the meaningful activation of empathy. Like Givens, Hunt thinks of empathy as part of an action plan. "[Since] they are rights that require active participation from those who hold them" (Hunt, 2007, p. 21), she ponders: "what can motivate us to act on our feelings for those far away, and what makes fellow feeling break down so much that we can torture, maim, or even kill those closest to us?" (Hunt, 2007, p. 211).

Hunt's query is even more applicable to the current pandemic and fight for racial justice. She provides a heuristic to engage with a principal idea of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—epigraphically used in this essay—that foregrounds education and teaching as indispensable practices to sustain rights. Put differently, human rights cannot endure on their own. Their survival and dissemination rely on formal

and informal pedagogical practices. The humanities classroom, let alone one with a human rights concentration, has a larger responsibility towards this goal. In a media-oversaturated world that constantly inundates us with experiences of far corners of the world but neglects to foster an empathetic bond between the self and the other, a humanities instructor is charged with thoughtfully channeling students' critical attention to human rights pedagogy.

Enabling fictions and enabling methodologies

As critics have exhaustively pointed out, rights need to be declared for them to gain visibility and they often become visible when they are violated. The "man" in the original articulation normed a propertied white male individual, excluding enslaved subjects, women, children, servants, the propertyless, and those with psychological disorders (Hunt, 2007, p. 28; Slaughter via Hartman & Cubilié, 2007, p. 43). Human rights are then more idealistic than realistic, for they "forever promise more than they deliver in real life in terms to the 'wretched of the earth'" (Baxi, 2008, p. 2).

Where rights' self-evidence demands active intervention by those who have the power to advocate rights, narratives play a decisive role. In this regard, Slaughter's (2007) articulation of "enabling fictions" via Rita Felski's work is insightful. In *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*, Slaughter elucidates the relationship between the liberal human rights discourse and the Bildungsroman novel genre that elevated a bourgeois white male citizen as the universal subject:

> *Seen through the figure and formula of human personality development central to both the Bildungsroman and human rights, their shared assumptions and imbrications emerge to show clearly their historical, formal, and ideological interdependencies. They are mutually enabling fictions: each projects an image of the human personality that ratifies the other's idealistic visions of the proper relations between the individual and society and the normative career of free and full human personality development.* (Slaughter, 2007, p. 4)

Slaughter argues that the two were "developed as technologies for making commonsense commonsensical, for what is already known effective" (Slaughter, 2007, p. 7). That is, the efficacy of human rights law has been premised on the successful translation of what everyone knows (common sense: the supposedly "self-evident" notion that every human being is entitled to rights for simply being born human) into what everyone should know (commonsensical: a rational judgment that everyone deserves rights for being human). If this idea sounds redundant, it is because, as Hannah Arendt points out, human rights are indeed tautological and paradoxical.[1] However, in a practical scenario, this tautology holds true. We tend to take human rights for granted and we often think we know them. We tend to norm the human based on our own limited experience which can be insulated, entitled, and lacking perspective. We tend to norm victimhood in a similar manner, based on our own limited experience, which we may assume to be universally acceptable and applicable. Translating the commonsense to the commonsensical is an educative process which is why the Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) insists that "every individual and every organ of society . . . shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms."

Slaughter's framework is methodologically relevant and influential in designing a literature classroom that uses literary and cultural work as windows to historical inquiry, critical engagement with contemporary politics, and envision future directions of the present-day socio-political phenomena. In other words, a literature classroom utilizes the discursive power of narratives to force students to be vigilant, critical, and imaginative. As Slaughter sees it, the field of law holds a similar paradigm. Law gains its force not only through institutions but also discourses. Literary and cultural forms mirror human society, condition, and regulate it. So do legal forms (Slaughter, 2007, pp. 10-11). Slaughter anchors the power of literary/artistic work to a Gramscian nexus of hegemony:

[1] Arendt highlights the paradoxical nature of the so-called inalienable rights: either they are the rights of those who have no rights which results in a void or they are the rights of those who have rights which results in a tautology (Rancière, 2004, p. 302).

> *If law, like power more generally, operates through a combination of coercion and consent (what Antonio Gramsci theorized as hegemony), then part of its force comes from the cooperation of extrajudicial institutions and discourses. That is, the effective jurisdiction of the law is not restricted to, and its instruments of compliance are not solely housed in, those institutions that bear its name—legislatures, the judiciary, law enforcement, etc. in contrast to the legal apparatuses, cultural forms like the novel have cooperated with human rights to naturalize their common sense—to give law the Gramscian force of culture.* (Slaughter, 2007, p. 25)

This intersection of discursive and institutional power harkens back to Edward Said's 1978 *Orientalism*. Said shows how colonial writing, which legitimized the white imperial maleness as normative humanity at the expense of the Orientalized native other, informed colonial institutions of governance, education, and science. In a similar vein, Slaughter uses Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, as a case in point that became an enabling fiction to imagine the making of a human person (Slaughter, 2007, p. 48). Imperialism, the rhetoric of human rights, and the Bildungsroman narrative share an affinity. Since its articulation in eighteenth-century Europe, the latter provided "some of the spirit and humanitarian rhetorical cover for colonialism and the civilizing mission" (Slaughter, 2007, p. 36). Slaughter shows how Bildungsroman narratives such as Khaled Hosseini's 2003 novel *The Kite Runner* have been exploited, abused, and misused in the service of humanitarian violence.

The pandemic has witnessed a surge of enabling fictions that have had a deeply corrosive impact on human rights. Therefore, in the design of "Memory, Human Rights and Global Anglophone Literature," I paid significant attention to the progressively transformative aspect of enabling fictions. The course was theoretically grounded in the feminist frameworks laid out by human rights scholars Lynn Hunt and Marita Sturken, and memory scholar Elizabeth Jelin. In the first two weeks, the students read excerpted chapters from Hunt's *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (2007), Sturken's *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (1997), and Jelin's *State Repression and the Labors of Memory* (2003). Hunt's work

offers a survey of the Western human rights discourse, its limitations, and exclusions. The students also read the 1776 US Declaration of Independence and the 1789 French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Following Sturken and Jelin's scholarship that shows how power, gender, nationalism, and narratives intersect in memory politics, the students watched Lance Warren and Hannah Brown Ayers's 2017 documentary *An Outrage*. The film documents histories and memories of lynching in six locations in the American South. I encouraged the students to attend a panel that the university organized. Titled "For Wyatt Outlaw: A Film and Panel Discussion on Lynching in the US," the panel discussed the film related to three documented lynching incidents in Alamance County, where the university is located. In the fourth and fifth weeks, the students read Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child,* followed by a discussion of Shailja Patel's poetry. In week seven, the class transitioned to postcolonial South Asia and studied the partition of India, analyzed Nehru's speech, and read Singh's *Train to Pakistan*. After reading excerpts from Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*, they watched Deepa Mehta's 2005 film *Water*. In the last two weeks of instruction, the class focused on postwar Sri Lanka. Primary material included selected poetry from Indran Amirthanayagam's *The Elephants of Reckoning* (1993) and *Uncivil War* (2013), Jude Ratnam's film *Demons in Paradise* (2017), and selected music by Shan Vincent de Paul and M.I.A.

The sequencing of the topics from "here: the known" to "there: the unknown" was calibrated to resist a common paradigm of the Western human rights discourse that tends to replicate a binary vision of the world. By virtue of modern Western origins of the human rights discourse and the West's economic and political might, popular iterations of human rights underscore a unilateral movement from a benevolent Global North to an illiberal Global South. The profusion of popular cultural work ranging from such figures as Indiana Jones to Captain America celebrates the West as the sole dispenser of rights vis-à-vis the rightless of the non-Western world. It is crucial to start a critical discussion of rights focusing on the students' familiar territory in this context. Warren and Ayers's *An Outrage* was instrumental in establishing a comparative and intersectional framework that enabled the students to complicate the mainstream Global North-South dichotomy. They put the legacies of slavery and the Jim Crow era in conversation with contemporary racial disparities paying attention to the intersections of

race, class, gender, and institutional justice. They applied the same framework to later discussions of colonial Kenya, postcolonial India, and postwar Sri Lanka.

The intersectional and feminist inquiry that undergirded the course's focus on memory and human rights instructed the students to question singular narratives of history that have been solidified by patriarchal ideologies. Warren and Ayers's documentary highlights the limitations of official archives crafted by the nation-state and celebrates the power of oral tradition to constitute memories that have been rendered illegitimate by institutional definitions of the human condition. The film powerfully uses silence to lay bare residual legacies of unspeakable violence inflicted upon black bodies. The film equipped the students with a methodological toolkit to think beyond explicit linguistic codes when conducting critical analysis. Its fusion of several narrators ranging from descendants of lynched subjects to scholars and activists showed the value of investigating an event from multiple perspectives.

On the heels of this discussion, the students put Shailja Patel's feminist reflections four decades after Kenya's decolonial struggle with Thiong'o's contemporary reflections. Thiong'o's Bildungsroman, through first-hand experiences of its protagonist, Njoroge, contests the imperial British singular narrative of the Mau Mau insurrection. However, the novel is driven by a heteropatriarchal plot that foregrounds masculine agency both in leading the resistance and cracking down on it. Conversely, Patel's work empowers women survivors of colonial brutalities to claim a space in the postcolonial archive that has suppressed their presence. In a similar vein, Singh's 1956 novel contests Nehru's celebratory speech on the eve of independence by exposing how religio-nationalism unworks the promised "noble mansion of free India where all her children may dwell" (Nehru, 1947). However, his novel also presents a heteropatriarchal narrative that imagines women as either objects of desire or mute victims. Finally, Butalia's feminist work that delves into the haunting impact of the 1947 Partition on the Indian society for the following five decades responds to the limits of both the postcolonial nation's narrative as well as Singh's novel since she grants ordinary women and men a space of agency to tell their stories other than as victims.

This corpus of literary and cultural work accentuated the efficacy of testimonials that Slaughter considers a vital genre of enabling fictions. Drawing upon Anne Cubilié's

work, Slaughter writes, "…the testimonio genre bridges a fairly rigid social (and usually geopolitical) divide, binding—not unproblematically—the subaltern with the intellectual, activist elite to challenge the hierarchical power structures that tend to naturalize disenfranchisement and trivialize systemic violations of the subaltern's human rights" (Slaughter, 2007, p. 41). Testimony-centric literary and cultural work can be progressive and problematic at the same time. While exposing human rights crises, if a text privileges a Western humanitarian perspective at the expense of the rightless in the Global South—as is often the case of Western humanitarian journalism—it perpetuates a neocolonial trope embedded in a capitalist system. Slaughter writes:

> *In the economic system, the West is corporatized as a human-rights-concerned consumer, whose demand for politicized human beings from the non-West creates both an international human rights market and a Chinese business opportunity [. . .] this economy of Western-consumer demand and a non-Western supply has an analogue to the metropolitan literary industry's appetite for Third World Bildungsromane that turns multicultural, postcolonial reading into a kind of humanitarian intervention—a market forced imposition of certain literary norms that are almost compulsory.* (Slaughter, 2007, p. 35)

To prepare them to be vigilant of capitalist and humanitarian appropriations of enabling narratives and testimonies, I trained the students to use three questions heuristically in their analysis: 1. Why does the writer write? 2. How does the writer's positionality impact the narrative? and 3. What does the narrative accomplish vis-à-vis an audience (both primary and secondary)? These guiding questions constantly reminded the students of the performative, transformative, and pedagogical value of literary and cultural work. They forced the students to be critical of their own patterns of consumption, expectations, and biases as audience members based in the Global North. Students offered more nuanced analyses as they came to consider texts as having composite attributes—transformative power as well as shortcomings. The students wrestled with the motif of giving a voice to the voiceless. In the discussion of Mehta's *Water*, they paid attention

to the value of the film that brings visibility to the rightless widows in late colonial India while paying attention to the entitled platform held by the storyteller as a Canadian Indian filmmaker. They extended this conversation to the work of British Sri Lankan rapper M.I.A. whose work has a double bind as it engages with human rights activism while being complicit in the consumer culture. Attention to such contradictions moved the discussion towards ethical practices of representation.

Calibrating an enabling praxis

As teacher-scholars of humanities, we must pay attention to not only what a narrative seeks to accomplish but also how it is processed by its primary and secondary audiences and its residual legacies. Slaughter concentrates on the mutually inclusive nature of narrative ethics and juridical ethics. Given the progressive or retrogressive impact narratives have on society against the backdrop of the pandemic, political events of 2020 and 2021, and the fight for racial justice, it is incumbent on us to further Slaughter's articulation of enabling fictions. If a narrative causes dehumanization, discrimination, harm, and divisions, can we still call it an "enabling" fiction? In a purely theoretical sense—after Slaughter's articulation—yes. However, given its retrogressive impact, I argue that we should perhaps call it a "disabling fiction." An enabling narrative that seeks to transform the human rights discourse positively must embody an empathy-centric action plan and a commitment to an ethical form of representation. On the contrary, a disabling fiction implicitly and/or explicitly capitalizes on sowing seeds of disunity, dismisses any ethical obligations a speaker has in their use of rhetoric and impedes a vision of horizontal humanity.

If respect for human rights and freedoms is contingent on teaching and education, as the Preamble to the Universal Declaration puts it, empathy and ethics become literacies that one needs to be taught and trained in. While incorporating the enabling transformative power of literary and cultural work in our syllabus, therefore, we must work towards an enabling praxis. In the course "Memory, Human Rights and Global Anglophone Literature," I successfully experimented with several activities that sought to activate an ethic-empathetic action plan. I see these activities as part of a practicum that I have been invested in for the past year. The literature classroom marks for me one

milepost of a continuing search for more meaningful pedagogical practices. Hence, the enumerated list below is not exhaustive.

1. Community-centric pedagogy

We read not only for ourselves but also the community. An enabling classroom prioritizes community engagement in its reading practices which then seeps into a range of other activities. For instance, I embedded a “co-teaching session” into the syllabus as a graded assignment. At the beginning of the semester, each group signed up for a fifty-minute session during which they would teach their colleagues the text/s assigned on that day. Prior to the session, they conducted research and met with me to plan the activity. During the session, they were expected to assume the role of the teacher—my position—and do something more than a mere presentation. They engaged their colleagues with questions, assigned in-class activities, and led the discussion. I built the second half of the class session on the dialogue initiated by the group.

Another community-centric activity I implemented was forming a voluntary student group that helped me decide on pandemic-related contingencies. Six students joined this group, and they made recommendations for the syllabus and material during the semester. They weighed in when it was necessary to scale down the content I had initially been assigned. I also consulted them when I designed the final project for the class.

2. Imagination-centric inquiry

Over the semester, the students drafted an essay and twenty blog posts (each post averaged three hundred words) which was adequate for me to assess their academic writing skills. I substituted the final project, typically a research paper in my literature classroom with a research-informed creative inquiry. The students were required to conduct research into a human rights crisis and make an intervention using imagination and creativity. This project was inspired by Moore and Goldberg’s (2015) position that imagination is a tenet of human rights pedagogy:

> *Reading within and across discourse communities, particularly those constructed by the text in relation to those within the classroom, demands attention to imagination—specifically the ability to imagine others, and now especially, the other as human. The range of the serious play of imagination depends, in turn, on strategies of representation . . . Inasmuch as it scrutinizes the production of meaning through the descriptive, narrated, and dialogic elements of character, plot, setting, theme, and symbol or image—in short, through the same elements of story that form the basis of human rights testimonies—literary studies is a proving ground for interrogating and understanding the complexities of representation in the global information age.* (Moore & Goldberg, 2015, p. 7)

Imagining the other is a challenging process as it requires one to be critically attentive to their positionality, biases, and entitlement. In order to facilitate critical introspection, I added a short reflection component to the inquiry. They were expected to deliberate on where they stand in relation to the human rights crisis of their inquiry. Among the varied projects students created individually and collectively, I observed an increased focus on artwork, photography, and remediations of visual artifacts. For example, one group presented a collage on racial discrimination and violence in the Jim Crow era and the present. They assembled the photographs in an overlapping design, which forcefully showcased how the present-day experiences of the Black community overlap with what happened in the past. Another student made an abstract artwork to decenter harmful rhetoric labeled on a migrant's body. A few more student groups did similar image-centric projects while two groups made podcasts.

3. Introspection-centric inquiry

A graduating senior engaged his colleagues with an iteration of a "bomb shelter activity for his final project." The interactive exercise simulated a post-nuclear apocalyptic scenario. The audience was challenged with selecting six out of twelve candidates to share their bomb shelter and its meager resources. The audience was provided with the

profiles of the twelve candidates: name, age, IQ, health status, education, and work experience. Much information was still missing, and the audience had to assume the characters' gender and sexual orientation based on their names. The activity ignited a vibrant debate about putting together the most strategic team that would increase their rate of survival at the expense of eliminating those who may become a "liability" than an "asset." Younger candidates with better work experience fared better than elderly characters with poor health. The students also thought it was "necessary" to rescue a young woman for the sustenance of humanity, assuming she was heterosexual and was willing to procreate. As Baxi (2008, p. 8) puts it, "In the world of contemporary human rights, however, not every human violation is necessarily a human rights violation . . .". The exercise brought to the fore the utilitarian value assigned to the human condition that seeps into our own interpretations of the human condition. The human condition is invariably informed by human biases and prejudices, making one consider some humans "more valuable" than others. The bomb shelter activity thus crystallized the course's continued focus on introspection. It forced the classroom to openly reckon with how humans tend to rank other human subjects based on their utilitarian value.

These enabling activities offer non-English majors to feel a sense of belonging in an English classroom. Human rights-centric enabling literature pedagogy cannot and should not be limited to an English classroom. Interdisciplinarity is at its core, and as a result, it demands instructors to design courses with porous disciplinary borders. Interdisciplinarity fosters a reciprocal enabling exchange between disciplines. For instance, Joshua Strauss, a graduating senior majoring in Human Service Studies who took the course, commented on the change the literature class had on his former perspective of human rights that he viewed within a binary dialectic of right vs. wrong. "This class exponentially challenged my thoughts about human rights," he mentioned in response to a survey I conducted after the semester was over. "[. . .] I had never thought about how other cultures and societies have thought about human rights. It made me realize that human rights are actually affected by the way the concept of human rights is seen by people all over the world." Such intercultural awareness is key to puncturing parochial ideas that stand in the way of imagining the other in the image of the self. Speaking of the relevance of human rights-centric literature in the USA, he further noted,

“We are more like a massive collection of many different groups in different locations of America. American culture has basically become a culture of ethnocentrism at its core because we do not have a central identity like other countries. Learning about human rights literature is imperative if the society of America is going to be successful in taking into account the needs of everyone.”

Conclusion

My specific experience with the Spring 2021 literature classroom that I used in this paper as a touchstone can be limited because an instructor may not implement the same plan unless certain conditions are met. In my case, the student body’s active engagement with the course topics, their readiness to be challenged, their intellectual curiosity and passion for interdisciplinary thinking, and my home department and institution’s investments in diversity, equity, and inclusion enabled me to implement my plan effectively. Given the global scope of the pandemic and the concomitant social inequalities and human rights abuses that have gained attention in other Western countries like the UK and Germany, Asian countries like India (the uneven toll of the pandemic on Dalit subjects) and other Central Asian countries (Human Rights Watch, 2021), it is worth asking if an enabling pedagogy can work outside the US context, in other Western and non-Western academic spaces. While I have little data to answer this question, I would like to conclude this essay with a hopeful note.

Contradicting critics who maintain that empathy has been exhausted, Hunt writes, “It has become a more powerful force for good than ever before.” However, “[. . .] the countervailing effects of violence, pain, and domination is also greater than ever before” (Hunt, 2007, p. 212). With Hunt, as humanities instructors, then, we must gather our forces to empower empathy. Our efforts can begin with an enabling classroom that meaningfully challenges students by placing them at the center of knowledge-making. An enabling classroom enables students to critically reflect on their own biases and consider reading and composition as an ethical imperative. Such a classroom is not content with existing definitions and parameters of the human rights discourse. With Baxi, the classroom should question the inadequacy of language to capture and assess nuances of the human rights discourse. “[. . .] we ought to note that not all forms of

human violations stand addressed by the languages of human rights," Baxi writes. "Nor do all violated people have equal access to the languages of human rights; having access to a growingly common human rights language is not the same thing as marshaling the sure power to name and redress human violation" (Baxi, 2008, p. 2). An enabling pedagogy must direct students to look for creative forms to extend the linguistically limited discourse. In a 2004 essay, Wendy Brown deliberates on the actualization of human rights at present. "Is the prevention or mitigation of suffering promised by human rights the most that can be hoped for at this point in history?" she questions. If that's the case, "human rights politics probably deserves the support of everyone who cares about such suffering" (Brown, 2004, p. 462). An enabling classroom contributes to garnering that support. An enabling classroom also must outlive the pandemic.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers and the editor for their helpful feedback, the students in the Spring 2021 course "Memory, Human Rights and Global Anglophone Literature" for their contributions during the pandemic, the Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (CATL) at Elon University for offering support to the research, and Amy Allocco and Brian Pennington for sharing the summer writing hours.

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