

I live ~~here~~

a companion education piece



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Introduction

The educational piece for *I Live Here* is designed to serve as a tool for learners to further examine the human rights issues raised in the four pieces that makeup Mia Kirshner's "paper documentary." It is intended to encourage critical thinking and creative expression in response to conflict, trauma and human rights violations.

Each of the four pieces focuses on human rights issues that are commonly found in areas of poverty or conflict.

- Malawi - addresses the effects of HIV/AIDS on the population, orphans, lawlessness, and boys in prison.
- Juarez - brings to light issues of missing young women, rape, and lack of protection.
- Burma - confronts rape, lack of protection, forced abortions, life as a refugee, and child soldiers and the positive power of letter writing.
- Ingushetia - focuses on life as a refugee, disappearances, and music as an outlet of expression in difficult times.

This supplement will aid in understanding the experiences of marginalized groups and individuals who have suffered extreme violations of their human rights. It will help students contextualize these issues and relate them to similar violations elsewhere in the world or in their own communities. Ultimately, it will assist students in creating ways to affect change and to take action in the local and global spheres. It will encourage learners to interact with the text and use it as a source of inspiration to reflect in a creative way.

Activity One: Exploring Themes

Themes:

In each piece of *I Live Here*, the theme of silenced voices is presented. These are the voices of isolated and marginalized groups and individuals who have experienced violations of their human rights. Victims of human rights abuses are often silenced and find ways to express their voices during and after the difficult times they endure. Each section of *I Live Here* provides examples of people finding their voice in silence within the context of war or conflict. Group discussion on this exercise may begin by talking about what it means to have your voice silenced, to be isolated from society, and to be part of a marginalized community.

Written exercise:

- ***Global perspective***

Choose an example from each *I Live Here* piece that illustrates the experience of an individual or group's voice being silenced. Think about how silenced voices are heard within the context of conflict situations. Provide examples of how marginalized individuals and groups find and express their voice in these situations. You should also address those situations in which individuals are unable to find their voice (i.e. they are killed or disappeared) and those left behind who tell their stories. Try to find connections that link each piece together.

- ***Local perspective***

Provide examples from communities in the U.S., or in your hometown, of individuals or groups who are marginalized or isolated from society, who find their voice within the confines of or despite their situation. Did these examples generate change or did they just serve as a coping mechanism? Were they positive or negative examples?

- ***Human Rights perspective***

Address the human rights violations that caused these individuals or groups to be silenced, isolated, and marginalized and the circumstances that allowed the violations to occur. Who is responsible for these violations and what can be done to allow these voices to be heard?

Activity One: Examples from the text

Examples from *I Live Here* that depict themes connected to silenced voices and marginalization

Malawi

- Lawlessness and lack of accountability: People get hit by cars in Malawi and the police suggest that since no one saw to “get out of here and forget it ever happened.”
- AIDS: death, funerals, the wasting disease.
- Orphans: (i.e. Topher) an isolated and marginalized population.
- Boys in prison: the author was allowed access because the guards wanted them to find out how bad it was. Their stories reveal feelings of marginalization. The boys are kept there because no one wants them and no one will bail them out.

Juarez

- Disappearances: There are missing young women who are raped and killed. Their families and friends express their silenced voices.
- Lack of protection: Physical and sexual abuse is pervasive.
- “The worst pain is silence...I’ve been contemplating a kind of pain that makes no sound, a silence that comes from no one speaking your name.”

Ingushetia

- Refugee life: People disappear. In another life who would these children have been? Drunk, abusive husbands become more abusive as the war worsens. It is unusual for a Chechen woman to leave her husband.
- Music: Hedda connects to her own darkness through the music of Beethoven. She expresses her sadness about wanting to return home through her music. “Sounds can hurt you. They are solid. The bombs come screaming, grinning, obscene. Those sounds are an abomination. Someone should pray for those sounds. They are trapped in hell.”
- “Silence is not the opposite of sound.”

Burma

- Refugees: They can endure sickness (i.e. malaria) but cannot endure the weariness and worry, a disease that they feel should be overcome but can only be cured by god.

- Letter writing: a powerful tool of expression. "...writing this unspoken letter in my heart and believe that you will hear me." – in response to a boy soldier who spared her life.
- A girl writes to her mother about her experience being raped. It is "a kind of letter, though I am writing most of it in my heart, for you, for me, for a time when I can speak of it. This torn and bloodied sheet should be enough, but words bring clarity."
- Lack of protection: In the camp, who is there to tell when women and girls are raped or abused?
- Forced abortions: Violent abortions that may leave women sterile. Sex workers living in brothels are forced to have abortions.
- Child soldiers: "not afraid of anything, don't feel anything, don't have dreams, and don't want anything."

Activity Two: Personal and Collective Responsibility

If you are able to read this – and are in a classroom, or other environment, where you are reading it to expand your understanding of issues that are critical to our increasingly connected global society – you are probably living in a fairly stable society that guarantees you a variety of rights. Wherever you are now, where you sit and ponder the meanings of *I Live Here*, human rights, such as those addressed in *I Live Here* are a pressing one in our world. It encompasses nearly all human interactions, from how people create governments to how people treat each other in one-on-one interaction, and bridges all social and economic strata.

As people become more connected through the use of technology and transport, we are able to see much more of what is happening beyond the confines of our towns, counties, states, countries and continents. As we bridge gaps of geography and time with the internet, travel, and vehicles for information such as literature, we obtain access to information about what seem to be “other worlds” in comparison to the locales in which many of us were raised; we are given a unique opportunity. *I Live Here* provides a gateway of that kind, where visual art and narrative give us glimpses of the reality of situations in our world.

It is often mentioned, among those who would effect some positive social change, that awareness is the first step in creating those changes. While this is correct, awareness is the simple provision of the opportunity to help create some change. In other words, “if you know something, but do nothing, nothing has still been accomplished.” It’s important to note that no single person is, or should be, expected to obtain some awareness from a college experience and single-handedly solve issues of displacement, sex and gender discrimination and abuse, violence, hunger or poverty on a global level. However, we might begin to take steps that further our personal understanding of the issues – and our place in the world in relation to them.

Contextualizing is a useful tool in developing this kind of understanding, so a little background knowledge should be gathered. Here’s one suggestion, though any data about nations will help you contextualize. Do a quick search on the internet for the average per capita income of one of the places in *I Live Here*. Then compare it to the nation in which you live (presumably, the United States). You’ll probably notice a disparity between the two that’s somewhat staggering.

Activity Two: Comparing and contrasting human rights abuses

1. Choose one of the four areas, from *I Live Here*, and choose one human rights- related theme that was presented within that piece. Then choose another area in the world where people have endured similar human rights abuses – preferably, but not necessarily, one that is more affluent/privileged – for its contextual utility.
2. Research each area and issue, paying careful attention to the history of each issue in each area. Notice the struggles endured by people in each area and/or time period as they relate to changes in the societies.
3. Compose a dual narrative that chronicles, in parallel, the kinds of experiences specific to each issue and area.

Examples:

- a. If you chose the first English settlers (prisoners in exile) in Australia and the refugees from Burma, you would create a narrative experience for each that showed, in parallel, the struggles of forced displacement.
 - b. If you chose the experiences of women in Ingushetia and women in Afghanistan, you would want to show, in your narrative, the similarities between the two societies where women are oppressed, as well as the historical events that helped to create the social environments of oppression.
4. Take liberty in creating characters that you would want to read about, but maintain attention to factual details that would have affected them. You are a (very) creative nonfiction writer – for this assignment.

Remember, this is an exercise in gaining understanding and communicating it in an interesting manner that employs creativity. Mia Kirshner used creative methods to convey the reality a variety of human rights issues in *I Live Here*. Similarly, you will be conveying realities both past and present in narrative form. You are free to choose the viewpoint of the narrator and to create details as you see fit, provided you adhere to the facts of each situation. Something that will be important to glean from your research and communicate in your writing process is the idea that all cultures and societies endure similar difficulties as they evolve, though they evolve in different ways, and at different speeds.

Your work for this assignment should help you gain a greater understanding of several aspects of human interaction. The broadest is the notion of a sort of universal growth that takes place at different times in different places. Some people are, have been, and will be in positions of potential usefulness to others who are, have been, or will be in positions to receive assistance. Your narrative should show these changing patterns of the dynamic between human beings.

Activity Three: Finding creative ways to relate personal narrative

Human rights affect us all. Whether your grandparents immigrated from the violence of Eastern Europe during the first half of the 20th century, or you are a first generation refugee from Africa, human rights have played an integral part in your life. Reflecting upon this will give you an opportunity to investigate questions of self through the lens of human rights. This activity will ask you to tell your narrative in a personal and creative way.

The vast majority of us living in North America are immigrants. Often families fled their home countries to seek a better life because their basic human rights were not being met, be it political, economic, medical or intellectual. Others faced their gravest violations of human rights in North America when they were forcibly brought over to be used as slaves. While indigenous peoples tell a story of how they have had to forcibly change their ways to accommodate for immigration.

Living in one of the most developed parts of the world can make these issues seem far removed from our lives. We are afforded amenities that billions of people could only dream of, yet, millions of us lack health care – a basic human right, or are economically shackled to financial institutions to pay for another human right; education.

Think about ways of using the creativity and the individuality inherent in art to relate your story.

Your narrative should address the following questions:

1. What struggles were endured in order for you to have the freedom to tell your story?
2. Whom should I speak with (parents, grandparents, friends) in order to become more aware of, or connect closer to, my human rights story?
3. Are there still human rights concerns in the area where my family left, or where I live now?
4. What can be done to raise awareness about past or present atrocities?
5. If you are indigenous to your homeland what human rights issues have affected you?

Assignment:

After answering the questions and researching the salient aspects of your story, think about ways it can be conveyed through your artistic medium. How can you take advantage of this medium in a manner that will creatively explore and convey your story?

Example:

You are a musician originally from the Czech Republic. Your family immigrated in 1985 when you were eight years old, in order to escape the repressive rule in what was then Czechoslovakia. Now living in North America you do not have much contact with Czech culture. Talk to your parents and other relatives about what it was like living in Czechoslovakia under communist rule, and the details of how you were able to flee. Then compose a piece of music that uses traditional Czech melodies, and write lyrics that conveys the parts of your story that you find resonant.