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# Cultivating Critical Sentimental Education in Human Rights Education<sup>1</sup>

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One of the most serious challenges faced by recent scholarship on human rights education (hereafter HRE) is to conceptualize a pedagogical orientation that avoids both the pitfalls of a purely juridical address (i.e., the emphasis on the idea of human rights as legal entitlements) and a ‘cheap sentimental’ approach (i.e., the reading of sad and sentimental stories of horrendous suffering which move us to pity, patting ourselves on back, and then resuming our ordinary life). The term ‘cheap sentimentality’ was coined by Hannah Arendt (1994, p. 251) to refer to what she saw as misplaced expressions of guilt among German youth after World War II. ‘Empty sentimentality’ is a similar more recent term which refers to a superficial feeling of empathy and solidarity with those who suffer (e.g.,

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see Kaplan, 2005). What I am trying to do in this paper, then, is to call for a pedagogical orientation that accepts the values of ‘sentimental education’ (Rorty, 1998) in HRE, yet a form of sentimental education that adopts a critical perspective on “the presumed transparency of suffering” (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 9). The central question driving my paper is: Which pedagogical demands would a critical-sentimental education place on human rights educators and learners so that HRE discourages cheap or empty sentimentality and instead cultivates action-oriented empathy?

To address this question, the paper is structured in the following manner. First, I discuss human rights and human rights education, especially in light of critiques for a juridical approach; this part of the paper suggests that as long as HRE is guided by an abstract set of universal principles, then its pedagogical orientation will be prone to the pitfalls of a declarationist, conservative and uncritical approach. This sort of pedagogical orientation will also have consequences in terms of how educators and learners are engaged sentimentally with stories of human rights abuses. For this purpose, I then explore HRE as ‘sentimental education’, beginning from Rorty’s (1998) key intervention on human rights discourse on the importance of ‘sentimental education’ in creating feelings of sympathy towards those who suffer from human rights violations. Rorty’s model is praised for some of its strengths, while the next part of the paper discusses its weaknesses and thus enriches his account with interventions from other scholars on HRE who suggest a different take on how to deal with the issue of sentimentality. The last part of the paper re-frames the idea of ‘sentimental education’ to fortify it with the necessary ‘criticality’ so that it can diffuse the dangers of empty sentimentality and move beyond the pitfalls of a purely juridical address of human rights.

### **Human Rights Education Critiques**

The last few decades have witnessed the evolution of HRE into a field that sources its currency from a perceived consensus on the universalism of human rights and their moral power (Keet, 2012). Although there is a range of perspectives in relation to HRE, “most scholars and practitioners

agree that HRE must include both *content* and *process* related to human rights” (Bajaj, 2011, p. 482, emphasis in original). The first component emphasizes knowledge about the history of human rights and familiarity with key documents (e.g. the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights), while the second component emphasizes the development of skills, values, and actions so that learners advocate for and participate in the transformation of society towards greater human rights protection for all (Lohrenscheit, 2002). The general goal of all HRE remains the integration of human rights standards and practices into people’s daily lives (Tibbitts, 2002).

Bajaj (2011) argues that there are different ideological orientations and outcomes of HRE and identifies the following three categories depending on where the focus is placed: (1) HRE for global citizenship, which focuses on fostering knowledge and skills related to universal values and standards; (2) HRE for coexistence, which focuses on fostering knowledge and skills that promote peaceful coexistence in conflict-ridden societies; and (3) HRE for transformative action, which encourages learners to engage in struggles for social justice and change. The underlying ideological orientation of the first approach is HRE as new global political order; the second approach views HRE as healing and reconciliation; and the third approach envisions HRE as radical politics of inclusion and social justice. The bottom-line is that there can be many ways to or orientations of HRE, in accordance with its educational objectives and context.

Since the adoption of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 after the atrocities of World War II, the idea of human rights as a universal set of standards has become almost incontestable (Baxi, 2007), “elevated to political correctness where a denial of them taints the innocent philosophical skeptic” (Knowles, 2003, p. 133). However, the extent of human rights violations all over the world has gradually begun to cast doubts whether the rhetoric of human rights remains simply an empty and abstract moral ideology (Keet, 2009). Various critiques of human rights in recent years have raised “the problematic consequences of the *desire* for universal human rights,” (Hoover, 2013, p. 935) by asking questions not only about the philosophical justification of universal moral rights but also about

the consequences of a supposed universalism of human rights. The issue here is not human rights critiques per se, as Keet (2012) correctly points out, but rather how human rights have ended up being presented through HRE as monolithic truths derived at by a questionable epistemology that assumes a universal conception of human rights (Al-Daraweesh, 2013; Al-Daraweesh & Snauwaert, 2013; Keet, 2012; Zembylas, 2014). In particular, Al-Daraweesh (2013) argues that there has been gradually constructed a ‘conventional approach to human rights education’ which is based on a singular conceptualization of human rights as representative of all other conceptualizations.

Historically, what is of interest, is how we have ended up with this ‘conventional approach’ (Al-Daraweesh, 2013) or with a ‘declarationist’ form of HRE to use Keet’s (2012) term. Okafor and Agbakwa (2001) analyze three orthodoxies that proliferated and have become constitutive of the broader human rights discourse as well as the mainstream HRE discourse and practice: the heaven-hell binary, the one-way traffic paradigm, and the abolitionist paradigm. According to the first orthodoxy, the world is split into two types of societies: the ‘heavenly’ societies (which respect human rights) and the ‘hellish’ ones (which violate them). This typology constructs Western societies as heavenly places, while third world countries are “virtually constituted by incessant epidemics of the most horrendous sorts of human rights violations” (Okafor & Agbakwa, 2001, p. 566). The existence of the heaven-hell binary, according to Okafor and Agbakwa (2001), is a result of grounding human rights knowledge on the Western tradition. The second orthodoxy, the one-way traffic paradigm, is grounded in the idea that current HRE applications are mainly dependent on a Western conceptualization of human rights. Thus the focus of HRE becomes the transmission of human rights knowledge from heaven to hell. Finally, the third orthodoxy, the abolitionist paradigm, “understands a major task of the human rights movement as the abolishment of local cultural practices that contravene the dictates of international human rights law” (Okafor & Shedrack, 2001, p. 584). In this manner, cultural traditions are considered as an obstacle to HRE. The abolitionist paradigm is problematic as a basis for HRE,

argue Okafor and Shedrack, because it leads to approaches that are decontextualized, overly ethnocentric and disrespectful.

These three orthodoxies conceptualize human rights from a rationalist perspective or a Western viewpoint and demand that educators and students adopt a universal or juridical perspective of human rights violations. Most importantly, these orthodoxies suggest how HRE, as it currently practiced around the world, provides fertile grounds for a declarationist and conservative strand because there is no space for human rights critiques (Keet, 2012). For example, an important implication of the emphasis on teaching the articles of human rights from the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights as universal truths is that it leads into an approach that limits the pedagogical value of HRE and most importantly its transformative possibilities. In fact, according to Keet (2012), the ‘institutionalization’ of HRE over the years—namely, the inclusion of human rights in structured and often highly formalized curricula, textbooks and materials—has contributed to the spread of the declarationist approach. The declarationist approach is usually grounded in a perceived consensus on human rights (as) universals and refrains from reflections on how human rights and their critiques are integrated into HRE efforts.

Also, Sliwinski (2005) explains that the preferred curriculum strategy often follows a standard formula, beginning from the basic article of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, followed by specific case studies of oppression—usually about distant places and different peoples. The problem with this formula is that it “offers a largely normative approach in which the steady re-articulation of this curricular strategy is combined with a justification of human rights education as a universal method for interpreting specific cultural violence” (pp. 221-222). It is not hard to see, then, how such a conceptual framing of HRE might lead to a perception of human rights as a sacred meta narrative discourse (Hopgood, 2013)—namely, a view of human rights as a revered set of universal norms.

Needless to say, not all scholarship on HRE is grounded in a rationalist, Western perspective; as shown from literature in the non-formal HRE sector, there is considerable critical work taking place (see Bajaj, 2011b, 2012; Tibbitts, 2002). My critique here is not addressed to this valuable work; ra-

ther it builds on this work to critique the conceptual framing of HRE that is grounded on a conventional or a declarational approach, arguing that it needs to be further explored and unpacked, if human rights educators want to facilitate the transformative radicality of HRE. In fact, as literature carried out by scholars such as Bajaj and Tibbitts suggests, a critical orientation recognizes that transformation is an essential component of HRE and that this transformation cannot take place with either a superficial, voyeuristic approach or a blind and uncritical acceptance of human rights as universal truths.

As Keet (2012) further argues, if human rights educators simply take for granted human rights as universal principles, they will most likely fail to adopt a critical orientation towards both human rights and HRE. In particular, treating human rights as universal principles may have two important consequences. First, this orientation may lead towards a juridical address of human rights in which human rights learning is limited to their presentation as universal legal entitlements for all (Keet, 2009). A juridical approach, according to Keet, fails to capture the local cultural and political complexities of human rights abuses around the world and may inadvertently lead learners to adopt a rationalist perspective. Second, the conventional or a declarational approach to HRE may end up cultivating a 'cheap sentimental' approach to human rights, because even if students are moved from learning about horrendous human rights abuses, this learning does not necessarily lead to a more compassionate response (Sliwinski, 2005). As Sliwinski points out, it may be too much to expect from human rights educators and learners to respond directly to human rights abuses, yet the issue of affect and sentimentality cannot be ignored because it interferes with learning about human rights and their abuse (see also Abrams, 2011; Zembylas, 2011). In other words, the aim is to gain a notion of human rights learning that moves away from a set of universal principals to a critical inquiry of human rights abuses (Adami, 2014) in a way though that touches learners affectively yet not superficially.

And here is precisely where Rorty's (1998) intervention, despite its narrowness, is valuable: for Rorty, the problem is not whether human nature or human rights are universal or not, but about which practices can

pragmatically alleviate suffering from human rights abuses and how to engage individuals and societies so that relieving pain becomes possible. Particularly in light of the fact that historically Western human rights theory has failed to seriously consider the role of affect and sentimentality, Rorty's reiteration of the idea of how sympathy for the other's suffering can be cultivated is an important contribution that deserves further attention, as recent work shows in philosophical literature (e.g. see Barreto, 2006, 2011, 2013). Turning to Rorty, then, as a point of departure for my concern on the role of sentimentality in HRE is not insignificant at all; on the contrary, it constitutes an important intellectual choice that not only historicizes the discussion of HRE as 'sentimental education' but also recognizes the need for pragmatism, yet one that avoids the pitfalls of cheap sentimentality. The next part of the essay focuses on Rorty's intervention on sentimental education and discusses its contribution to the issue of how best to respond to human rights abuses.

### **Human Rights Education as 'Sentimental Education: Rorty's Intervention**

In his essay "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality," which was prepared for the 1993 Oxford Amnesty International Lecture, Rorty (1998) argues that the idea of universal human rights should not be based on a metaphysical or transcendental truth about humanity but rather on the pragmatic consequences of suffering and the need of sensitivity to cruelty. In particular, he suggests that human rights are worthy ideas but they are instrumentally fruitless; therefore, the best, and probably the only, argument for human rights is sentimentalism grounded on a pragmatic basis. According to Rorty, we would achieve better results if we tried to influence ("manipulate," as he says) people's feelings, and the best way to do so is by telling sentimental stories like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As he writes: "The goal of this sort of manipulation of sentiment is to expand the reference of the terms 'our kind of people' and 'people like us'" (1998, p. 176). Such stories will create feelings of sympathy with those whose rights are violated, because they will make the reader imagine what it is like to be in the victim's



position. This sort of ‘sentimental education’ will also contribute to the cultivation of feelings of solidarity with other fellow sufferers.

Rethinking human rights discourse from an educational perspective raises the question of which kind of *paideia* ought to be established in order to contest human rights violations and advance an ethics of sympathy and solidarity with those who suffer. Rorty suggests that human rights violations can be contested through what he calls ‘sentimental education’—that is, through cultivating a sympathetic and affective identification with others. He claims that this sort of education is the most important element needed to strengthen human rights. In fact, he maintains that to cultivate sympathy and solidarity as the primary values of human rights culture there has to be a long-term process aimed at advancing the sentimental education of individuals and societies. For Rorty, then, sentimental education becomes a cultural, historical and political project aimed at modifying the way individuals feel by cultivating moral feelings (Barreto, 2011).

Rorty’s proposal for sentimental education has two main consequences for human rights (see Barreto, 2006, 2011). First, it expands the number of those to which we refer as “people like us” (Rorty, 1998, p. 176), by making us more familiar with them and emphasizing the likeness between them and us; Rorty seems to believe that by perceiving similarities between ourselves and others, we will be “less tempted to think of those different” from ourselves “as only quasi-human” (Rorty, 1998, p. 176). Second, it offers opportunities for what he calls ‘sympathy,’ that is, to put ourselves in the place of those who suffer, who are the objects of cruelty, and who have been the victims of human rights violations. The first coaches us to think of our identity in a non-exclusionary fashion, while the second invites us to act in solidarity (Barreto, 2006). In the first place, then, an education aimed at ensuring the acquisition of moral feelings and particularly sympathy, could contribute to preventing the formation of victimizers; in the second phase, sympathy could also contribute to creating a sense of solidarity or a desire for eliminating the suffering of others (Barreto, 2011). Importantly, both sympathy and solidarity are not some characteristics of human nature but rather the effect of a process of sensibilization developed

in specific historical circumstances. Which particular tools does Rorty suggest to achieve this sensibilization of the rationalist modern culture?

Rorty suggests that sentimental education develops the capacity for sympathy and solidarity by manipulating our feelings through sad and sentimental stories. Reading stories about people who have been the object of oppression and cruelty can lead us to realize that they also suffer like we do and therefore they are entitled to the same dignity as we do. Such stories, he claims, “repeated and varied over the centuries, have induced us, the rich, safe, powerful people, to tolerate and even to cherish powerless people” (Rorty, 1998, p. 185). For Rorty, then, story-telling becomes the prime tool of the sensibilization of individuals and culture to the suffering of others. His strategy is to suggest a widening of our shared moral identity so that it is more inclusive of others who may be “strangers” (different from us) but they are our fellow sufferers; his aim is to create and strengthen an ethos of cooperation, respect and democracy (Barreto, 2011). Rorty traces the consequences of his reflection in the human rights arena by suggesting that this political culture cannot be other than one in which individuals and social groups are conscious about the contingency of the ways in which they are constituted as well as the relative validity of their beliefs and opinions. A society immersed in this ethos is more likely to be open to learn from others, to widen its moral identity, to accommodate strangers, and to profoundly reject all forms of cruelty. This sort of sentimental education provides us an allegedly non-foundational, non-rationalistic version of moral obligation (Hayden, 1999).

In many respects I think this is a laudable proposal. Rorty makes two important moves that are in the right direction and make important contributions in discussions about sentimental education in HRE: first, he rejects the metaphysical narratives of universalism and rationality in human rights in favor of an epistemic anti-foundationalism and the contingency of human rights; and second, he assigns a role to emotions of sympathy and solidarity in the official discourse of human rights. Regarding the first move, Rorty maintains that knowledge is historical, contextual and contingent and therefore human rights are born out of historical and cultural circumstances. This implies that human rights cannot be grounded in a

metaphysical theory of natural law or a transcendental universality, but rather in a cultural theory; human rights discourse should be seen as a *culture*. Consequently, human rights are to be respected not because they are a universal set of standards but because they constitute the minimum common legal and political standard agreed by the international community of nations at a particular historical moment. It is in this manner that human rights offer a pragmatic ‘tool’ that helps us to resolve the problems we confront—such as cruelty, injustice, oppression, neocolonialism and genocide.

Rorty’s attack on the theory of human rights deserves consideration not only because it has been formulated at a very critical moment in the debates over the universality or particularity of human rights, but also because it makes an important contribution to undermining the universalism of human rights. Rorty’s call to put aside the quest for metaphysical foundations of human rights and engage instead with the pragmatic problems of how to relieve suffering, builds on the practical ethos common to the work of many human rights activists (Barreto, 2011). It is interesting to point out that subsequent critiques of human rights theory in recent years have raised similar issues; although some of these critiques have taken different trajectories than Rorty’s, there is a common position against the universal and metaphysical framework of human rights. For example, it has been argued that: human rights have become over the years essentialized and universal norms often expressed in juridical terms, when their history indicates that human rights are a Western concept grounded in liberal views and serve the interests of Western powers acting in neo-colonial terms (Baxi, 2007; Mutua, 2002; Spivak, 2004); or human rights are vague, abstract and more symbolic than substantive (Ignatieff, 2001).

Regarding the second move, Rorty goes even “beyond the formulation of an ethics of sympathy and thinks of the ways in which such a morality can be translated into an ethos in the culture of the new millennium” (Barreto, 2011, p. 1). For example, Rorty speaks of the importance of campaigns to complement the shift in sensibilities, the expanding ‘we.’ His claim is that beyond animal pain, which may be universal, the human suffering that concerns him is precisely tied to the contingency of language.

Rorty's sentimental education is not simply about realizing that others suffer as I do but expanding your sense of the range of human vulnerabilities. As Barreto (2011) adds, Rorty develops the concept of a 'global moral sentiment' by focusing on sympathy and solidarity as the appropriate feelings and values for a human rights culture.

### **Critique of Rorty's Model on 'Sentimental Education'**

Using Rorty's intervention as a point of departure for thinking about sentimental education in HRE, I argue here that, even though he makes a valuable contribution by highlighting in particular the role of sympathy and 'sentimental education', there are two problems with his theory that leave the door open for cheap sentimentality to intrude. These problems are: first, by reducing justice to solidarity and psychologizing solidarity, he neglects material/structural conditions of inequality; also, the fact that Rorty's model casts the other in the role of the victim ultimately helps rationalize the structural inequalities. The second problem is that we may cultivate pity rather than solidarity, which reinscribes the power of the self over the other; relevant to this problem is the tendency to circumscribe response to the width of the learner's skull so that s/he fails to follow through with action in the world. Each of these problems is briefly discussed below to show the dangers of uncritical sentimentality as well as how other scholars in the field of HRE may help us go beyond Rorty's account.

First, rather than regarding the others' suffering as a politics of injustice, Rorty's proposal focuses on the self who needs to be motivated to show solidarity towards the other and thus fails to pay attention to the politics of the asymmetry of power between the West and vulnerable others. In other words, Rorty's proposal fails to address the causes of social grievance and suffering (Brown, 2004). This critique highlights the failure to acknowledge the systemic (social, economic, juridical) inequalities and deficiencies of the political system that hinder the implementation of human rights in the first place. Rorty restricts the efficacy of his sentimental education to our ability to read about and draw the 'correct' sympathetic conclusions about others' suffering. He seems to underestimate the possibility that feelings of sympa-

thy, when confined to the individual or when they are de-politicized from the economic and political circumstances, may in fact reinforce the very patterns of economic and political subordination responsible for such suffering (Spelman, 1997).

In addition, Rorty fails to consider that the overvaluation of suffering entails another danger; that of fixing others as the *sufferers-victims*, as those who can overcome their suffering only when the rest of the world feels moved enough to empathize with their suffering (Zembylas, 2013a). This is precisely the difference between Rorty's proposal and postcolonial theorizations of human rights (such as Baxi's, 2007); empathizing with the other's suffering does not automatically mean that the trapping of turning the other into a passive and submissive victim is dismissed. Failing to address the political conditions of those who are marginalized and oppressed and omitting to acknowledge the political necessity of improving their living conditions limits HRE within the realm of what Terry Eagleton refers to as the 'banality of goodness' (Eagleton, 2009): a banal moral ethos grounded in the self-centered altruism of the everyday, while the asymmetry of power that must become the principle of solidarity upon which we act towards vulnerable others remains unrecognized (see also Chouliaraki, 2011).

Second, Rorty neglects to acknowledge the dangers of sentimentality in narratives of suffering (Berlant, 1998). Thus, there is skepticism about the potential for "sad and sentimental stories" to impel privileged individuals—who may be distant spectators to human rights violations—to establish meaningful empathetic connections with others (Hayden, 1999; Staples, 2011). To echo Berlant's (2000) acute critique of sentimental narrative or sentimental liberalism, injustice and human rights violations cannot be reduced to feeling bad about other's pain. Suffering, which is in part an effect of socio-economic relations of violence and poverty, is problematically assumed to be alleviated by empathetic identification with others, yet there is no assurance that the feelings evoked will not be those of pity, a feeling which does not lead to any action. Pity refers to a type of affective relationship between the spectator and a sufferer, which shows empathy and tender-heartedness towards the spectacle of human pain but it is not necessarily accompanied by action to alleviate the structural conditions and

effects of suffering (Boltanski, 1999; Cohen, 2001; Geras, 1999). The object of pity exists primarily within an imaginary realm that sentimentalizes the other. Woodward also argues that:

the experience of being moved by these sentimental scenes of suffering, whose ostensible purpose is to awaken us to redress injustice, works instead to return us to a private world far removed from the public sphere. Hence, in a crippling contradiction [...] the result of such empathetic identification is not the impulse to action but rather a “passive” posture. [...] The genre of the sentimental narrative itself is morally bankrupt. (2004, p. 71)

It is difficult to see how Rorty’s appeal to a “shared ability to feel pain”—which is curiously grounded in a universal claim when he has made great efforts to reject universalism—prevents the danger of empty sentimentality. Rorty’s proposal does not anticipate these implications and goes only so far as claiming that cultivating a greater awareness of and sensitivity to others’ suffering will produce respect. As Hayden rightly observes:

Surely a sympathetic familialization is valuable in helping to foster respect for human rights; however, would it necessarily produce that respect, and if it does not, then what? [...] What about would-be violators of human rights who do not care to read stories about those they would dominate and oppress, or who are unaffected by the stories they do read? Do we simply shake our heads in disappointment at the actions of torturers, rapists, and genocidal murderers and then encourage them to try reading some more sad stories about their victims? (1999, p. 63)

This critique highlights the trappings of narratives of sentimentality such as voyeurism and passivity—trappings that evoke superficial feelings of sympathy and pity for the sufferers rather than compassionate action which can make a difference in sufferers’ lives (Zembylas, 2013a). In educational literature more generally, there have been concerns whether sentimentality and sentimental education can really make a difference in

developing emotional connections among students and others who suffer from human rights violations (Callan, 1994; Zembylas, 2008).

Finally, Rorty does not describe how the ability to recognize others' suffering will necessarily lead to some kind of action to eliminate the causes of their suffering. He claims that solidarity will be created based solely on feelings of sympathy; however, he does not tell us how it is that individual empathizers would experience the 'right' kind of feelings such that they would be motivated to experience solidarity and thus strive to alleviate others' suffering through specific actions which make a difference (Hayden, 1999). Again, the consequence of this sort of sentimental education in HRE is that it does not seem to encourage *transformative* action for the elimination of the causes of human rights violations; it only goes as far as taking action to alleviate suffering. To encourage transformative action, as literature on critical human rights education (Bajaj, 2011a; Keet, 2012) and the transformative model of HRE (Bajaj, 2011b, 2012; Tibbitts, 2002) shows, human rights educators need to actively promote transformation at many levels (pedagogical practice, policy, teacher development), including the recognition of the role of affect in the process of transformation (Amsler, 2011; Berlak, 2004; Boler, 1999; Stenberg, 2011; Zembylas, 2013b, 2015).

The problems identified here can be a starting point for further insights into sentimental education in HRE so that sentimentality is not entirely dismissed for being too superficial. Two important issues that are highlighted by the literature on sentimentality are the following: first, how to respond sentimentally while not ignoring the material/structural conditions of inequality; and second, how to show solidarity through pragmatic action rather than falling into the trap of pity or passive empathy. Rorty's attempt to re-establish the central role that sentimental education plays in sympathizing with those who are oppressed by humiliation, cruelty and pain is a valuable point of departure to reflect more critically on sentimental education in HRE and to enrich what is already present in the field (e.g. scholarship carried out by Bajaj, Tibbitts and Keet).

## Toward a Critical Account of Sentimental Education in HRE

While it is true that Rorty's proposal opens some possibilities to alleviate suffering by fostering feelings of sympathy and solidarity for others who suffer, the failure to acknowledge the 'asymmetry' between the spectator and the sufferer is simultaneously a failure to realize that no matter how 'sentimental' HRE is, it does not necessarily lead to action that aims to alleviate the structural conditions and effects of suffering (Chouliaraki, 2008). To go *beyond* a sentimental HRE, the first step that is needed for human rights educators and learners is their ability to trace the process of sentimentalization of narratives of suffering and how this process can end up being fixed into self-centered accounts of others' suffering in our globalized world. The emerging testimonial culture of personalized stories of suffering makes the pedagogical challenges of human rights educators and learners even greater, because as Brown (1995) has shown, the fetishization and sentimentalization of narratives of suffering tend to turn all political claims into claims of emotional injury, thus depoliticizing the histories that have produced suffering and rendering action to alleviate the structural conditions and effects of suffering impossible. What is needed, therefore, is a pedagogical orientation that is more balanced than Rorty's—one which can offer *critical* 'sentimental education' in HRE, inspired by the fertile ground of sentimentality, yet one that is not restricted to a superficial engagement with stories of human rights abuse.

A critical perspective is well established in HRE literature (Bajaj, 2011a; Keet, 2012; Tibbitts, 2002) and its contribution is invaluable in terms of preparing the ground for HRE practices that critique superficial approaches, acknowledge the role of power relations and promote transformation. In this paper I want to build on these contributions and go a step further by focusing in particular on the critique of the role of affect and sentimentality in HRE. What I term here *critical sentimental education* is that which approaches stories of human rights abuse with *both* criticality *and* affective engagement, highlighting the importance of critical consciousness around issues of power relations and various types of injustices



and inspiring transformative action to dismantle these injustices. A critical sentimental education that seeks to help learners feel solidarity, while also coming to understand the dangers of pity and engage in some sort of action is no doubt a difficult undertaking, especially in contemporary circumstances of massive violations of human rights around the world. Needless to say, there are human rights educators who try to use human rights framework specifically to evoke the respect deserving those who suffer violations and work in solidarity rather than “pity and guilt” approach. Yet, what I am arguing here is the need to specifically recognize and overcome the problems identified earlier in relation to the manipulation of emotions; for this to happen, a critical sentimental orientation on HRE would need to operate on several levels.

First, a critical orientation to sentimental education is an exploration that not only recognizes the role of emotions and suffering in the processes of human rights assertion and recognition, but also it explicitly exposes and deconstructs the dangers and trappings of cheap sentimentality. Undoubtedly, the cultivation of empathy and solidarity is regarded as an important aspect of HRE (e.g. see Al-Daraweesh & Snauwaert, 2013), and therefore “promoting proper sentimental dispositions will be an important task” (Steutel & Spiecker, 2004, p. 532). Although it is not always clear what constitutes ‘proper’ sentimentality, it is important not to rush and discard the value of sentimentality altogether (Callan, 1994). The problem is not the value of those emotions that can be useful in our struggle to increase empathy with others’ suffering, but the emotions that are shallow and self-centered and inhibit the possibilities that might make these emotions the point of departure to recognize structural conditions of inequality and inspire transformative action.

The value of critical orientation, then, lies in its analytical implication, namely that to promote action-oriented empathy and solidarity in HRE practice, there has to be a systematic investigation of the different ways in which feelings of empathy are evoked in the classroom and have differential implications for those who suffer (Zembylas, 2013a). If, for example, human rights educators and learners engage in critical inquiry that demonstrates how the reading of stories of horrendous suffering often

moves us to pity and ends up with resuming our ordinary life, then this will be an important step forward to wonder: what more can I (we) do to change this? To interrogate the trappings of sentimentality and especially narratives of pity, human rights educators and learners need to challenge the emotional investments and emotion-informed ideologies that underlie their responses toward suffering and seek to promote sympathy and solidarity that make a concrete difference in sufferers' lives. I am not suggesting that there are no human rights educators who actually try to evoke feelings of sympathy and solidarity, particularly in the non-formal HRE sector; what I am saying is that human rights educators will also need to engage in the hard work of explicitly challenging the emotional investments that underlie these practices.

For example, an emotional ideology of sentimental education that—intentionally or unintentionally—invests in feelings of guilt to motivate sympathy for others is unlikely to establish pedagogical opportunities for action-oriented empathy against social structures of injustice. Feelings of guilt involve unconscious identification with the other—they are self-centered, apolitical and privilege issues of personal identity and difference (Zembylas, 2013a). If learners are bombarded with material teaching them that they should feel guilty for doing very little about human rights abuses, then this logic may bounce back and students may adopt an angry, reactionary approach. Becoming angry at those who try to instill guilt in them, learners may attempt to justify through their anger why they have no moral or political commitment to act, and thus the whole effort will become a boomerang (see Boltanski, 1999; Cohen, 2001).

Second, a critical orientation to sentimental education in HRE offers an alternative vision of agency and solidarity for students, by engaging them in pragmatic everyday actions that lay the seeds for systemic and structural change. Horton and Kraftl term these actions 'implicit activism', that is, actions which are "small-scale, personal, quotidian" and proceed "with little fanfare" (2009, p. 14). For example, showing care for others who suffer through modest everyday acts or standing up for immigrants who are discriminated in the public sphere through supportive words and gestures constitute forms of implicit activism. These modest forms of activism may

not leave much (representational) trace but extend the field of activism and solidarity and open more possibilities for schools to get involved with pragmatic everyday actions that make a contribution to social justice causes rather than assuming that activism is only about the grandiose and the iconic (Zembylas, 2013b). These individual everyday acts seem, at first glance, not to have any dramatic effects; however, collectively they are actions of considerable emotive and political value, because they contribute to the process of gradual change; the point is “not to identify every daily act as activist, but to theorize how small acts transform social relations in ways that have the potential to foster social change” (Martin, Hanson & Fontaine, 2007, p. 79).

Finally, a critical orientation to sentimental education in HRE creates pedagogical openings for cultivating self-empowerment, solidarity and action-oriented empathy with others. Learners are enabled to establish and maintain this critical attentiveness and self-empowerment, when they begin to interrogate and challenge arguments based on binaries such as us/them, citizen/foreigner, friends/enemies, and good/evil, a stereotyping of groups considered to be *more* or *less* grievable. Research in peace education (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2012; Zembylas, 2015) and HRE (Bajaj, 2011b, 2012) in fact shows how widespread these binaries are and emphasizes the necessity of engaging in explicitly showing their negative consequences. In terms of pedagogical practice, for example, this idea implies that learners are encouraged to ask questions and explore the potential of actions that challenge the taken-for-granted policy in many countries of keeping asylum seekers in remote detention camps. These questions could raise many concerns about human rights violations: Do asylum seekers in these settings have human rights or not? What are their stories? Does each and every human being is viewed as an individual with a history and identity that require dignity and respect? How far our compassionate empathy can go for these fellow human beings? What can be *practically* done (by *you* and *me*) to show solidarity to the suffering of *these* fellow human beings? It is more likely that students will overcome the dangers of cheap sentimentality, if they begin to understand the conditions (structural inequalities, poverty, globalization etc.) that give rise to suffering and acknowledge the emotional

connections between themselves and others, specifically what it might mean for a fellow human being to encounter these vulnerabilities.

Needless to say, this is not an easy task, especially when privileged learners are inextricably implicated in the structures and systems (e.g. capitalism) that lead to so much suffering in the world (Bajaj, 2015). For example, the privileged learners who witness narratives of human rights abuses from a distance (e.g. in the context of a poor developing country) may get the impression that the situation is inalterable and inevitable (Zembylas, 2013a). In a classroom that harbors pity rather than self-empowerment and action-oriented empathy, the students will detach themselves from the reality of suffering, suspend compassionate action and engage in ‘passive empathy’ (Boler, 1999). The recognition of the multiple ways in which compassion is assigned differently in a classroom—i.e. how learners are taught to feel *more* compassion for some individuals and groups compared to others—is relevant to how learners engage with the other’s suffering. These multiple ways in which compassion is assigned differently need to be exposed and interrogated rather than taken for granted. While privileged learners become knowledgeable about other people’s lives—including issues they have not had to endure, such as sexual slavery, seeking asylum, starvation, torture, or having a missile hit a marketplace (Porter, 2006)—they also become mindful of how it is impossible to claim that they fully ‘know’ or ‘feel’ the other’s pain (Zembylas, 2013a). Attentiveness to the ways in which compassion is assigned differently involves cultivating in students the ability to acknowledge the symmetries and asymmetries of suffering.

In summary, then, the purpose of critical sentimental education in HRE is to create those pedagogical spaces so that symmetries and asymmetries of suffering are not simply recognized to evoke certain feelings but rather those feelings are interrogated to promote pragmatic action for transformation (Bajaj, 2012). To fulfill this purpose, we need a pedagogical orientation that embraces human rights framework specifically to critique the emotional consequences of different actions. It is not enough to use the human rights framework to evoke respect and empathy; human rights edu-

cators need to become critically conscious of the role of affect and sentimentality in the teaching and learning of human rights.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This paper has suggested that an explicit analysis of different dimensions in critical sentimental education has the potential to enrich existing scholarship in critical HRE. The orientation sketched here focuses on how HRE might move away from an instrumentalized, moralized and sentimentalized method for promoting solidarity and empathy with narratives of suffering. This orientation is not limited to perspectives such as Rorty's voyeuristic approach to sentimentality, but rather focuses explicitly on the emotional and political consequences of various manifestations of sentimentality. Such an orientation in HRE will not only encourage learners to become more sympathetic to the living realities of those who suffer, but it will also interrogate the conditions of hearing narratives of suffering so that possibilities for cheap sentimentality are minimized as much as possible. If human rights educators want their students to develop both an emotional and a political sensibility that enables them to understand stories of suffering and their consequences, then the pedagogical practices by which they attempt to achieve that aim might have less to do with human rights embedded in a 'declarationist framework' and more with an interrogation of sentimentality in human rights assertion and recognition.

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