

International Journal of Human Rights Education

Volume 4
Issue 1 *Decolonial Human Rights and Peace
Education: Recognizing and Re-envisioning
Radical Praxes*

Article 13

2020

Joyful Human Rights by William Paul Simmons

Maria Autrey
University of San Francisco, mnautrey@usfca.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/ijhre>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Autrey, Maria. (2020) . "Joyful Human Rights by William Paul Simmons," *International Journal of Human Rights Education*, 4(1) .

Retrieved from <https://repository.usfca.edu/ijhre/vol4/iss1/13>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Journal of Human Rights Education by an authorized editor of USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. For more information, please contact repository@usfca.edu.

Book Review

Joyful Human Rights by William Paul Simmons

University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019, 304 pages

\$75 (cloth)

ISBN: 978-0812251012

Review by Maria Autrey*
University of San Francisco

Clowns, dancing, and pillow fights are not something I was expecting to read about in a book on human rights, and that is a problem; or so William Paul Simmons eloquently and joyfully exposes in his book *Joyful Human Rights*. Weaving together theoretical rigor with vivid, and sometimes visceral, narratives, Simmons offers us a new way of conceptualizing human rights beyond the law and its institutions. This book reveals a means for us to radically re-imagine a less punitive approach based upon a more comprehensive understanding of human experiences. For many of us, joy in the realm of human rights might feel contradictory. Still, by focusing on it, Simmons shows us how to distance ourselves from the paternalistic, colonial, and penal approach that has become commonplace in textbooks, activism, and academic writing, where "human rights" is usually followed by "abuse."

* Maria Autrey (she/they) is an educator and activist from Mexico, and currently a doctoral candidate at the University of San Francisco in Human Rights Education. Maria's research focuses on liberatory sex education, exploring the use of critical pedagogy in grassroots sex education projects to foster social change through the promotion of acceptance, diversity, and inclusion. Maria also advocated on a local and national level to stop violence against women and girls, for LGBTQ+ acceptance, and for trans youth rights in Mexico. mnautrey@usfca.edu

Drawing from over a quarter of a century of experience as a scholar, teacher, consultant, and activist, Simmons proposes a disruption to current human rights thinking and practice. He dares us to think of joy as an integral part of human rights, both in spirit and in action, by questioning the status quo of history and storytelling that favor atrocities and terrors while glossing over iconic moments of human rights marked by great joy. He draws attention to the neglect of joy and its role in the field of human rights and warns us that, to our intellectual and psychic detriment, this exclusion has limited our understanding of human rights. This volume seeks to answer the question: what is to gain by carving out a significant role for joy in human rights work?

This compelling work provides a sharp point on how we can make a better sense of the philosophy and origins of human rights discourse and offers us a new perspective when talking and thinking in a nuanced way about human rights. In this book, joy is understood as a "radical affect [that] has the power to radically transgress hegemonic symbolic realms - misogyny, racism, colonialism- including the hegemonic discourses that have developed in political theory and human rights" (Simmons, 2018, p. 55). It is with this understanding that we are presented with four examples to study through the lens of joy: the joyful activist, the joyful perpetrator, the joyful martyr, and lastly, the human rights winner (or the joyful victim). Focusing not on the politics and treaties of human rights, but rather on their *spirit* and profound impact on marginalized populations reveals that those who experience the most pain are also most likely to find joy and radical new possibilities for human rights.

Joyful Human Rights is structured in three sections and organized into seven chapters. The first part, comprised of the foreword, preface, and first chapter, serves as an introduction, compiling statistical and anecdotal evidence that document the elision of joy from current human rights discourses. In the second section, made up of chapters two and three, the book explores the theoretical framework of joy in human rights. The second chapter serves as the foundation of his argument, providing an in-depth phenomenology of joy based on diverse writers and thinkers that have rarely been invited to the conversation on human rights, from classical

philosophy (Spinoza) to social theory (Lacan) and feminism (Lorde). However, Simmons is careful to separate his understanding of joy from that of happiness. Grounding his argument on Sara Ahmed's (2010) and Lorde's (1984) thinking, he points out that the critical difference is that happiness and anger are inimical. In contrast, joy can be tethered with anger, and in doing so, escapes the hegemonic grips of forceful happiness.

The third chapter examines the historical, philosophical, and legal factors that have led to the near-total absence of joy from human rights discourse and the almost exclusive focus on abuses. Journeying back to the origins of human rights scholarship, Simmons searches for fundamental causes for this disconnect, finding that during liberalism's founding period, reason was favored as a less dreadful alternative to enthusiasm and passion. This chapter argues that embracing solemnity in human rights has become in itself a form of fanaticism, as a way to add to its apparent gravity; nevertheless, joy persists. To illustrate the point, Simmons uses examples of Nelson Mandela, Emma Goldman, Adolek Khon, Audre Lorde, and others who, when faced with the gravity of human experiences and the fragility of human rights, still found the space for joy, dance, and songs.

The final section, made up of chapters four to seven, covers the "so-what?" question, exemplifying what it means to approach human rights with joy as a lens. In this section, we are challenged as readers to view the foundation of human rights with joyful eyes. Through evocative examples, we are invited to shift the way we see activists, perpetrators, martyrs, and, most importantly, victims. Vivid tales of comradeship and carnivals during protests represent the joys of the activist. Chilling stories of torturers and mob lynchings illustrate the "sinister joy" perpetrators experience, and the ambiguity of martyrs demonstrates the difficulty of escaping the politicization of human rights, even when focusing on joy.

In my opinion, the most crucial point is made in the last chapter entitled "Human Rights Winners" where Simmons expands on the idea of victimization. Instead, he proposes that victims and even survivors of human rights violations should be seen as winners. The notion of victims experiencing joy is one that all of us working in human rights know from experience, but rarely see in texts. Many times, it is joy that sustains

survivors and helps them heal and recover from their trauma. To see the victims as just victims is to reduce their agency and reduce them to a small part of their lives. To see them only as victims is to see them as their perpetrators do. Therefore, Simmons proposes joy as a humanizing tool that sheds paternalistic and colonial attitudes towards victims.

Simmons's vivid writing and engaging selection of vignettes make this book an excellent resource for educators. *Joyful Human Rights* offers us a blueprint for growth with our students by focusing on human rights success stories, planning for self-care to prevent burnout, and transforming vicarious trauma into vicarious growth. Centering joy in our classroom allows us to guide our students through a balanced perspective that moves away from courses that usually focus on the worst abuses and terrors in human history. Furthermore, human rights workers and activists will appreciate Simmons's conceptualization of human rights winners. As someone who works with survivors of sex trafficking and sexual abuse, I found this very useful. Instead of reducing individuals merely to their victim status or the tragedies they have experienced, human rights workers, educators, and students can help harmed individuals reclaim their full humanity, including positive emotions such as joy.

This book provides an innovative and nuanced way of correcting a historical imbalance that has reduced the history of human rights to a timeline of abuse. Bringing joy back to a field that has mostly ignored it can lead us to a better understanding of the meaning of human rights, beyond the legalistic version determined by state and international actors. Breaking out of the symbolic world and embodying our rights, joy becomes a force to be enjoyed and wielded against the co-optation by a larger rational order. Finally, joy is presented as fuel for the passion of human rights workers who need to be joyous and celebrate to find balance in their work and recuperate from trauma.

In a time where thousands of people are dying every day from an unprecedented global pandemic, where we are physically distanced from our communities and seemingly bombarded with a never-ending stream of terrible news, *Joyful Human Rights* might be the text we need to refocus our thoughts. The book calls for joy and encourages human rights educators to

incorporate more joy into our classrooms, for scholars to focus on moments of human rights victories in our writings, and for everyone struggling to find a balance to look for joy in our paths, knowing full well that everyone has a different route to recovery and growth. May we all find healing in joy.

References

Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of happiness*. Duke University Press.

Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches by Audre Lorde*. Crossing Press.