We who live in fortunate lands where we have inherited good things . . . are prone to accept freedom, the most important of these good things, with an indifference which is the greatest threat to its continuance.

— Lester B. Pearson

“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. . . .” So proclaimed the UN General Assembly in 1948. Today, when I introduce a copy of the Declaration to my Canadian Literature students, a majority have never held one in their hands much less studied it. When asked which human rights are important, the majority emphasize freedom of expression. For most, this is itself a symptom of privilege. Civil wars, famines, diasporas, and daily threats to bodily and community integrity happen elsewhere. The absence of substantive exposure to the fundamental instruments, institutions, histories, promises, and limitations of human rights in even the most obvious educational contexts is a significant omission in light of the critical role the United Nations envisions for human rights literacy.”
The 1993 Vienna Convention on Human Rights, which devotes a portion of its proceedings to the role of education, and the United Nations proclamation of a Decade of Human Rights Education from 1995–2005 point to the enduring relevance of what must be at once a local, national, and transnational endeavour. Indeed, after September 11, 2001, and the ensuing “war on terror,” being informed about the international culture of human rights and justice is essential in a world where mutually entwined consequences of east/west and north/south histories are playing themselves out at all times both globally and locally. Further, Madame Justice Louise Arbour’s critical role in bringing Slobodan Milosevic to trial at The Hague and her initiative in establishing the International Criminal Court indicate that commitment to justice within an international human rights culture is a Canadian commitment (if not always upheld in practice).

My paper seeks to explore the ways in which a human rights pedagogy might enrich readings of Canadian literature and, reciprocally, to discover what a postcolonial contextualized approach to Canadian literature might offer human rights pedagogy. The majority of human rights courses at present overlook consideration of literature, while most Canadian higher-education courses, including literature courses from a postcolonial perspective, overlook human rights as an essential thought category. In my classroom experience, I have found that bringing together Canadian literature, postcolonial theory, and human rights pedagogy enriches each category. Most productively, it pushes the possibilities of literary citizenship for Canadian student readers toward greater critical engagement with the public and social spaces of their lives and those addressed by the writers and their contexts. This notion of the “reader as citizen” first came to me via Margaret Atwood’s *Survival*. While I do not share her 1972 vision of seeking a cultural map for a unitary Canada, her juxtaposition of reader with citizen is immensely provocative (15). Literary citizenship beckons the reader to consider the politics of her own locations in body, community, nation, and world from the perspectives of the politics of others’ locations invoked through the imaginative transference of the literary encounter. When human rights literacy is part of the reader’s cultural knapsack, she learns to read the diversity of social experience in the Canadian context in both a local and global way.

Some critics may wish to counter my enthusiasm for an international culture of human rights by referring to the weakening role of the
United Nations in tandem with the decline of nation-states under pressure from global trade alliances, increasing heterogeneity, and political fragmentation. While the United Nations by its very name seems to be a constellation of bounded entities, dependent on the old notion of the sovereign nation, its covenants and charters historically challenge and constrain the notion of national autonomy as an alibi against prosecution for violation of citizens' rights (Weeramantry 160). The culture of human rights is historically a transnational, non-governmental civil society phenomenon as evidenced by international anti-slavery and women's suffrage organizations in the nineteenth century and by NGOs like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Doctors Without Borders in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, some of which have played a major part in introducing and/or drafting covenants in an evolving human rights culture (Florini 185). Critics may also wish to take issue with the very assumption of universal rights and argue that the notion is largely a Western invention, the suspect offspring of liberalism, which is misplaced and oppressive if mapped onto non-Western contexts. Justice Weeramantry of The Hague argues in Justice Without Frontiers for the ancient intercultural roots of two central propositions of human rights culture—dignity and equality with their responsive codes of justice—in all of the major world wisdom and spiritual traditions, including Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism (6–8). Further, the liberation movements of the twentieth century, including civil rights, indigenous, women's, and gay movements, as well as the independence struggles of the formerly (and arguably still) colonized world, all invoke the norms, language, and aspirations of human rights culture.

I do not wish to suggest that we ignore the lessons of critical anthropology, among others, about the need to honour the complexity of local knowledges and contexts, but I contend that it is essential to uphold a provisional and particularized universal in the interest of an international culture of human rights. By this I mean a generalizable notion that is nuanced by attention to complexities of history, context, and body. Such a strategy is part of what I term “critical humanism,” one which interrogates and situates those inherited Enlightenment notions which are problematic, but which we cannot live without. I am here coming out of the closet as a “critical humanist” to suggest that humanism, like literature and nation, is an intellectual and ideological category which requires reconstructive
renovation rather than flat out dismissal. Seyla Benhabib also relevantly urges such reconstructive work: "Among the legacies of modernity which today need reconstructing but not wholesale dismantling are moral and political universalism, committed to the now seemingly 'old fashioned' and suspect ideals of universal respect for each person in virtue of their humanity; the moral autonomy of the individual; economic and social justice and equality; democratic participation; the most extensive civil and political liberties compatible with principles of justice; and the formation of solidaristic human associations" (Situating 2). A context-accountable, but generalizable notion of a common humanity also opens the door to getting past sit-on-your-hands privilege, guilt, or apathy, which I encounter regularly with students (most of whom are from the privileged majority), without collapsing into sentimental or paternalistic constructions of a decontextualized suffering other. Such a notion enables a sense of connection with others who are not like me but like me, as well as responsive civil society action based on shared vocabularies of democracy, rights, and justice.

What does all of this have to do with Canadian literature in a postcolonial framework? A 1994 article from the Association for Canadian Studies Bulletin, titled "Education on Human Rights and Democracy in Canada" (Gibbs and Seydegart), provoked one of those "eureka" shifts in me; quite suddenly, the connections between national literature studies, minority ethnic and diaspora studies, postcolonial criticism (all of which I was currently engaged in), and human rights/democracy studies came sharply into focus. My 12 years of experience as a member of CACLALS (Canadian Association for Commonwealth Language and Literary Studies) and ACQL (Association for Canadian and Quebec Literatures) bears out that most of us who entered the profession as Canadianists from the 1980s onward began to tilt toward postcolonial analysis as a significant conceptual framework for thinking through the literature of a nation emerging from its former colonial status, while still vexed by asymmetrical power relations between itself, First Nations, and diverse ethnic communities within its geopolitical boundaries. Postcolonial criticism, because of its relationship to national liberation struggles and the enduring historical consequences of colonization, is directly implicated in the international culture of human rights and democracy; yet it is rarely discussed in these terms. Ajay Heble is the rare exception when he suggests that human rights
questions are one of the “new contexts” for Canadian criticism (92). A postcolonial approach already mandates that we do not teach Canadian literature in isolation from intercultural and interdisciplinary contexts of world literature, history, and politics. Take the period of exploration, conquest, slavery, and settlement by way of example. Anti-slavery societies are among the earliest transnational manifestations of human rights civil society. Susanna Moodie, as most of us now know, participated in one of these as scribe for the slave narrative of Mary Prince, before her marriage and immigration to Canada (Ferguson 33). I offer this as a context for her progressive debate with another settler wife about “allowing” Black people to sit at her dinner table, as well as destabilizes her objection to working-class people doing the same in Roughing It in the Bush (213–21). I also consider the early Black presence in Canada in relation to the slave trade and the American Civil War through discussion of slave narratives and freedom songs from the first volume of George Elliott Clarke’s anthology of Black Nova Scotian writing, Fire on the Water.

Most Canadian literature criticism takes the form of an interrogation of cultural nationalism from a “postnational” perspective focused on heterogeneities of region, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. What is missing in this conversation is an engagement with the interdependence of nation and citizenship. If, as postcolonial studies advocate, nation is a powerful force in constructing social identity, so then is citizenship within states that variously adhere to and/or violate the norms of individual and collective human rights. Critical citizenship calls for a similar intensity of work to that being done on other aspects of identity formation such as gender and race (Strong-Boag 236). As an American-Canadian, I bring to my encounter with the Canadian nation a profound scepticism about patriotic nationalism and the failures of a democratic state in which all citizens were not created equal from its inception; at the same time, I share a persistent idealism with those who seek to use the aims of democracy to make the state more accountable for its failures. Further, just as literature has been variously doing the cultural work of nation, it has also often been doing the cultural work of official and unofficial citizenship. What carries over from my American roots into my Canadian literature classroom, then, is an ardent belief in the pursuit of democratic culture which is often manifest through citizens forming civil society alliances.

By situating my approach to my Canadian literature teaching within
a human rights/postcolonial framework, I seek to open up sustained reflection on the ways that the literary imagination contributes to the democratic experiment in Canada, the ways writers and readers are part of that conversation. Briefly, I want to suggest what a human rights pedagogy looks like, a subject to which a rich array of studies have been devoted, particularly since the UN Decade of Human Rights Education was declared from 1995-2005. Human rights pedagogy promotes human rights literacy: the ability to recognize the human rights dimensions of particular situations in history, narrative, and everyday life, to debate the relevance or necessity of particular human rights interventions, and, ideally, to recognize the possibility of one's own agency in taking responsibility for acting to influence human rights solutions, promotion, and protection.

I open the year, as many do, with some discussion of what counts as Canadian identity, but re-framed in the context of the writer and reader as citizen. I suggest that active and critical Canadian citizenship not only requires familiarity with and pride in our cultures, histories, and values, but also requires democracy and human rights literacy. This involves familiarity with the major documents, aspirations, violations, and protections of human rights as these are played out in the Canadian context, including provincial, national, and global manifestations. I hand out a “human rights tool box” which includes copies of the UN Declaration, the Canadian Charter, the Multiculturalism Act, and an international human rights time-line. We spend a class studying the United Nations Declaration, brainstorming a Canadian human rights timeline, and developing a
framework within which to pursue discussion of human rights questions relevant to the developing values of the democratic experiment in Canada. From our first contemplation of the reader as a citizen within a human rights culture, I set forth some questions about the cultural work literature may do on behalf of nation, citizenship, and human rights. Does the text imply or more directly call forth citizen writers or readers? How do we experience our own citizenship through questions, narrative situations, and character dilemmas posed by the literature? What kind of cultural work is the text doing on behalf of nation building, maintaining, or renovating? What representational strategies, character situations, historical moments call up questions of belonging and non-belonging, country as home-place and alien space? How central are human rights values to the citizenship structures of the text? A human rights framework provides a unifying matrix for issue-based teaching that derives from a critical rainbows approach combining insights from feminisms, queer theory, critical race theory, critical multiculturalism, and postcolonial and ecological theory. Students sometimes feel that they are asked to jump through many politically correct hoops when they are asked to engage with these assorted frameworks as they are evoked by the different course readings, but what they all share is a common rights heritage, whether it be experience of violations or an evolving rights culture that seeks to protect and redress violations. “Learning to see through a human rights lens” re-frames many postcolonial and other issues as significant rights-focused categories (Flowers, Handbook 38).

A non-inclusive list of human rights related categories which are manifested through the contexts, narratives, conflicts, and diverse representational strategies of Canadian literatures in English include the following: forced migration, slave trade, immigration, displacement, diaspora, and transculturation; settler-invader societies; racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities’ histories, cultures, and experience of discrimination; war and suspension of civil liberties; gender and sexuality discrimination; and the relationship of the nation to all of the above. Further, I link human rights questions to three conceptual categories: social identity, body, and agency. Because the body is freedom’s limit, the site where violations are scored, marked, amplified, endured, and resisted, reading for the body is an essential strategy for a human rights pedagogy. Twenty years of gender, queer, race, and postcolonial theory have variously foregrounded the body
as a central category to each. As an abstract category, it is highly theorized and necessarily so, but as an experiential entity, it is the locus where social suffering registers daily as close as one's own skin and bones, within situations of insidious domestic abuse and catastrophic political events on a global scale. Late twentieth-century body studies have tended to focus on the pleasures of the desiring body, which is a refreshing break from centuries of anti-body religion and philosophy; however, day-to-day embodiment questions are most acute when the body is in a state of deprivation—hungry, shelterless, subject to extremes of weather, and the limitations of disease, age, and pain. Ethical representations of the vulnerable and suffering body in literature join with Amnesty International appeals in a collective endeavour to bring an end to suffering (Scarry 9). The body in literary representation as itself, as metaphor, as voice or refusal of voice, as subjugated and/or resisting is a primary strategy of witness. As Albert Camus notes, the artist is “freedom’s witness” in that he or she testifies “not to the law, but to the body” (Felman and Laub 108). While specificities of the social body must be carefully attended to, the body is also a primary node of connection across the different locations of writers, narrative situations, characters, and readers. Feeling, sentience, embodiment, and affect all do critical work in fostering human rights consciousness in citizen readers.

Literature as a context for human rights education addresses several problems in human rights legal and philosophical culture—decontextualization and abstraction—which tend to flatten local cultures and erase particular subjectivities. Postcolonial approaches to literature have urged the restoration of historical, political, economic, and geographical contexts to our readings. Literature, being of its time and place, always calls forth such an approach either implicitly or explicitly. Literature also calls forth attention to subjective complexity, the inner world of writers, characters, protagonists, and readers, giving particular attention to the struggles for agency of ordinary people in everyday life. The affective powers of the imagination cultivate compassion for those dissimilar from me, “an ethics of reciprocity,” without which a culture of human rights and democratic futures would be impossible (Nussbaum xvi; Ricoeur 186). Literature is distinguished from other human rights discourses by its ability to evoke subjective contexts to the readerly imagination and, in so doing, awaken empathy and solidarity with the character/protagonist situa-
ations which the reader is called into relationship with. Literature, as Paul Ricoeur suggests, becomes a kind of “ethical laboratory” for thought experiments in which we wrestle with ethical dilemmas through imaginative suture with characters, speakers, and identity locations in ways not available to us in newspaper, television, historical, and perhaps even Amnesty International reports (163–64, 170). Rather than seek to disrupt the phenomenon of character identification so common in first readings of texts, I use it as a leverage point where students may venture toward intersubjective regard for “the other as myself” (Ricoeur 193). In a human rights framework, this could take the form of trying out positions of participant, bystander, witness, or intervener in a situation of rights violation (Flowers, Teaching 1–2). Here is where the audacious claims of my title—“Everything I know about human rights I learned from literature”—begins to make sense. While this is something of an exaggeration, students frequently respond to such works as Obasan or Disappearing Moon Cafe or Not Wanted on the Voyage or Whykah Falls with “I never knew” or “I’d never thought about this” or, more dramatically, “I will never think about Canada in the same way.” One of the goals of human rights pedagogy is “connected learning,” a capacity to make meaningful links between learning and everyday life. For example, what do the immigration policies that contextualize Disappearing Moon Cafe have to do with immigration policy after the American September 11th?

Throughout the year, we consider the ways that the creation of overarching myths, narratives, and symbols of nation involve selective forgetting of the unsavoury elements of a nation’s history. As Edward Said asserts in “Nationalism, Human Rights, and Interpretation,” “For the intellectual to be ‘for’ human rights means, in effect, to be willing to venture interpretations of those rights in the same place and with the same language employed by the dominant power, to dispute its hierarchy and methods, to elucidate what it has hidden, to pronounce what it has silenced or rendered unpronounceable” (198). Former BC Chief Justice Thomas Berger makes explicit the link between Canadian democratic ideals, citizenship, and a less than ideal human rights history in Fragile Freedoms. In the “Cultural Collisions” section of my CanLit course, the narratives arising from the fateful encounters between explorers, settlers, and First Peoples are students’ first opportunity to reflect on the contradictory representations which betray clashing early rights and cultural domi-
nation values in such writers as Susanna Moodie or David Thompson. Notions of essential human dignity collide with pseudo-anthropological notions of racial superiority and inferiority. George Copway, the Ojibway Methodist missionary, in his autobiography, appeals to Christian justice discourse and liberal natural rights discourse, both of which were at the time heavily linked with the anti-slavery movement (22–23). Surprisingly, most human rights curricula, including the few I could find offered in literature, overlook indigenous peoples' rights and earth rights as essential to a rights culture, just as the early documents do (Flowers, *Handbook* 6). Postcolonial theory can make an essential intervention into human rights pedagogy and curricula by redressing these omissions.

Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* is a twentieth-century human rights literary cornerstone.¹⁶ In counterpoint to this novel's testimony to the personal, family, community, and national consequences of concentration-camp internment of Japanese-Canadians during World War II, I hand out copies of the Multiculturalism Act and the Charter. While the novel was written before these essential Canadian human rights documents, it comments on the emerging official discourse of multiculturalism and is itself part of the challenge minority rights advocates pose to the democratic experiment in the wake of a history scarred with rights violations. Just as the United Nations Charter of Rights is a response to the pressures of history, particularly the Jewish Holocaust, so the Canadian Charter may be seen, in part, as a response to the pressures of Canada's postcolonial history. Further, we look at how these central Canadian documents explicitly embed themselves in a genealogy of international human rights documents and culture by invoking them directly in their preambles. Human rights culture is a continuous work in progress within and between nations. I disagree with Roy Miki's reading of the novel's liberal humanist agenda which, he argues, privileges the private inner discourse of Naomi over the politically engaged discourse of Aunt Emily, so that the novel's radical possibility collapses into quietism (115, 140).¹⁷ Perhaps one reason for this (mis)reading is that the Buddhist values central to the spiritual thread of the novel are not carefully attended to by Miki and most critics. He notes only the Anglican Christianity, which he takes as a sign of Western colonization, but it is also important to consider how the community minister Nakayama-sensei alters Christian values in a hybrid Anglican-Buddhist spirituality. There are competing registers and urgencies in the novel of spiritual life, imaginative life, embodied life, and social being.
which, taken together, comprise the whole person experience. It is precisely this novel's intimate negotiation of the impact of public racism and state policy on inner life, bodily integrity, family, and community which is so persuasive.18 Again and again, I have witnessed the kind of critical thinking this novel has stimulated in student journals, papers, group work, and classroom debates. While some critics may see these as classic liberal moments, marked by passing White guilt, I see tentative shifts in thinking about self, others, and belonging or disenfranchisement within Canada as promising steps toward critical citizenship. If I risk sacrificing theoretical and critical complexity in my second-year courses for pragmatism, so be it. For students, Joy Kogawa is one literary citizen who makes a difference; she shows the possibility of literary agency at the intersection of literature with civil society advocacy.19

Teaching Canadian Literature offers an opportunity to promote and interrogate values intrinsic to Canadian democracy. Chief among them is respect for and commitment to a culture of human rights here and internationally. Postcolonial pedagogy is, by its investments, implicitly bound up with human rights awareness, violations, and protection. Making a postcolonial human rights pedagogy explicit in Canadian literature teaching may make a modest contribution to decreasing student apathy and increasing future civil society participation, which is our best hope for keeping governments responsible and responsive to the democratic ideals they espouse. In Canada, where our fragile freedoms are often taken for granted, where democracy suffers from lack of rigorous citizen participation, awakening the citizen in student readers is critical to democratic futures both here and globally. I wish to close by echoing Ajay Heble: “is it utopian of me to suggest that Canadian critics and teachers have a responsibility, however modest, to initiate and nurture forms of solidarity which will help bring about progress, help facilitate change both in the current distribution of social relations and in the popular understanding?” (92).

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NOTES

1. A 1997 American Human Rights survey found that 93 per cent of Americans cannot even name the UN Declaration of Human Rights, or much less have ever held it in their hands and read it (Flowers, *Handbook* 16). One can only guess that similar statistics would result from a similar survey in Canada. Such absence of even the most basic human rights literacy suggests that democracy is bereft of substance in North America.

2. Most human rights courses are offered in the obvious disciplines of law, political science, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology. Flowers' *Human Rights Here and Now* has a helpful "Lit and Human Rights" unit; Amnesty International has published a resource notebook, *Teaching Human Rights through Literature*; and I found several human rights and literature syllabi on the Web: Julie de Sherbinin's "Human Rights and World Literature," Colby College, and J.S. Peters' "Literature and Human Rights," Columbia University.


4. I adapt this notion of the concrete and therefore partialized universal from Seyla Benhabib in "The Generalized and Concrete Other" in *Situating the Self*. Other critics such as Cornel West and Edward Said have called for a similarly strategic universalism in the service of justice.

5. In an interview with Howard Winant, Gayatri Spivak speaks of "collective agency" as a category "one cannot not want," but which we must subject to persistent critique (93). She speaks in another interview of acknowledging "the dangerousness of what one must use," in this case strategic essentialism (129). It seems appropriate to extend her method to work with a strategic universal for human rights culture.

6. Susan Stanford Friedman argues for the necessity of reforming a number
of relevant categories to thinking about human rights—agency, identity, self, author, experience, meaning, and authority (187).

7. I am increasingly uncomfortable with the trend in radical pedagogies to read student crisis moments such as anger, guilt, tears, and resistance as a sign of effective teaching. I once received an angry e-mail from a White male student who dropped my Canadian literature course, asserting, "You came to destroy everything I ever thought." This "teachable moment" made me aware of my need to be responsible for my unfair advantage in being a senior learner with ten or more years of post-secondary learning behind me. In my experience, meeting students where they are and unfolding critical consciousness gradually is more effective than overwhelming them with critique.

8. For a helpful overview of citizenship and civil society theory, see Kymlicka and Norman.

9. In A Place for Us, democracy theorist Benjamin Barber defines civil society as the third space between the state and commerce.

10. Of the myriad resources available, I have found Ishay's The Human Rights Reader, Flowers' Human Rights Here and Now and The Human Rights Education Handbook; Lauren's The Evolution of International Human Rights; Berger's Fragile Freedoms; and Kleinman's Social Suffering particularly useful. Useful Web resources include: Human Rights Resource and Education Centre, University of Ottawa (<http://www.uottawa.ca/hrrec>); Human Rights Internet (<http://www.hri.ca>); and Human Rights Resource Center, University of Minnesota (<http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/hrcenter.htm>).

11. The pedagogical scenario that I outline in this paragraph is a composite of several different approaches I have taken over a number of years in my Canadian Literature survey course. Human rights questions are clearly not the only angle of inquiry around which the course is organized. Currently, I divide the course into four thematic clusters: "Cultural Crossings and Collisions," "Land Claims," "Re-inventing the Nation," and "Heritage-Community-Identity." See Flowers' The Human Rights Education Handbook for an excellent group-work activity section which includes human rights timeline brainstorming (84).

12. Body theory that has been helpful to my linkage of human rights, representation, and literature includes Elaine Scarry's The Body in Pain, which argues that the body and culture are simultaneously unmade through the inhumanities of torture and war, while conversely, the act of creation is laden with "ethical consequence," bound up with ending crimes against human bodily integrity (22–23); and Thomas Csordas' Embodiment and Experience, in which he cautions against an objectified bodiless body which is discussed primarily as a cultural phenomenon that has little relationship to the lived body, the "threatened vehicle of human being and dignity" in situations of political violence. He calls for
attention to the "multiple body"—experienced in a variety of lived, social, cultural, and consumer contexts, and regulated through institutional practices and discourses (3–6). Csordas helpfully articulates the overlapping interactions between sentience, representation, subjugation, and agency.

13. A weekly reading-commentary assignment works well as a venue for students to informally express their affective, subjective responses to the readings.


15. For two inspiring resources on connected learning, see Brownlee and Schneider, and Gabelnick.

16. Kogawa’s Obasan and Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale are the only Canadian texts I found on American or world literature bibliographies of literature and human rights.

17. I apologize if I have oversimplified Roy Miki’s admirably subtle analysis of Obasan.

18. An important contribution of the liberation movements of the twentieth century to human rights culture has been to shift the emphasis from the liberal focus on the individual to collective or peoples’ rights. See Felice for attention to this problem. Obasan negotiates both the individual child-protagonist’s rights violations and that of her family and community. However, Miki expresses concern that the novel becomes an icon of “groupness,” one writer’s representation standing in for the experience of all Japanese Canadians (173).

19. In a similar vein, we look at the consequences of the Chinese Exclusion Act and Head Tax on three generations of women and men in Sky Lee’s Disappearing Moon Cafe. First Nations, Jewish, Québécois, and gay or lesbian Canadian writers all invoke human rights questions and culture either implicitly or explicitly.

WORKS CITED

Brenda Carr Vellino


