

STUDENT WORK EXAMPLES: WRITING ABOUT SOCIAL ISSUES

These pieces of student work show a range of voices and approaches to multifaceted topics.

I have four moms.

This fact warrants shock, almost every time I share it. I am then met with distance, sometimes disgust, and finally, and always, confusion. I subsequently give my well-rehearsed monologue for the millionth time, explaining how I was born to two women, who then separated, and then both got remarried.

But there really is more to the story. My family has been shaped and reshaped, and people have come in and out of my life. At age 2, I experienced separation for the first time. I met my moms' new girlfriends and then wives, new cats and dogs, and lived in a plethora of new homes. At age 16, I experienced separation once again. During those 14 years in between, I grew to love my step-mothers, step-sister, and even my step-cat, as I watched them become part of my family. But at 16, when my mom Amy left my step-mother Oona and my step-sister Lucia, it wasn't just a marriage ending. I thought my family had ended too. All the bonds that I had woven around me were being broken and I didn't have any say in the matter.

Last week, I got a call from Oona that Lucia, despite putting on a brave face, was nervous beyond belief for her first day of school. She needed me.

I opened the door to her blue eyes inches away from my face. Her long eyelashes danced around the corners of her eyes, preventing me from looking away. Fear. She was breathing heavily, and I could practically hear her heart beating, trying to jump out of her chest. I wrapped her in an embrace in attempts to console her, and her small body relaxed. She dragged me to her cluttered bedroom filled with stuffed animals and duct tape art. I could tell she had to ask me something, but she was afraid, embarrassed maybe. Finally, she spit it out.

"I need an outfit Liv. For the first day"

And with that, a small tear rolled down her face. I had never seen her like this before. The confident, poised eleven year old I know was hidden under the folds of an anxious sixth grader.

Something as simple as what to wear on the first day had grown to include every woe she had faced in the past few months. This first day of school solidified our family separation. It meant, for Lucia, that she was an only child once again.

She reached into her dresser and pulled out a shirt and shorts, and my chest instantly filled with warmth. In her hands she held my first day of school outfit from freshman year.

I looked at her, and there was an unspoken longing, almost pleading, for me to be with her. And in that moment, I knew that I would never leave the life of this awkward, beautiful, kind girl. I love Lucia, and no matter what it might say on paper, she is my sister. It is my job to be her role model, to be her rock, and to help her pick out an outfit on the first day of school.

I have never had a rock. Every time I move, I have to figure out how to support myself, my mothers, and the rest of my family. In my most recent change, I've learned how difficult it is to be independent, but how rewarding it is all the same. I do my own laundry, cook for myself, get myself to school and to my job. And I get myself to where I need to be to care for the people I love.

Lucia is learning the same. Though in different homes, we are learning together to strengthen ourselves and figure out what is most important to us. For me, the most important thing is my relationship with Lucia. And no matter what, she is my sister. ●

LANNISTER POLICIES IN COUNTER INSURGENCY

In the quiet early hours of a spring morning, before anyone realized that what would happen in this place was just a part of something much bigger, a young woman crawled over crumbled rubble through a haze of smoke toward a door. She was barefoot and burning. Flames crept up her body, scorching the skin from her legs, back, and neck. A carefully picked T-shirt with a logo for her favorite band melted swiftly to her torso. Though she was no more than twenty-eight, she would not live through this morning, and she would never know who sent the missiles that left her to burn alive in her small office, unable to open a melted door. It was not quick. Co-workers heard her cries, and then her screams, as the one hand she had left melted to the face she was trying to protect.

Beyond the girl, on the other side of the door, was a community of pain. Her friend hung from the building upside down. In an hour, both his legs would be amputated. It was an easier death than hers. Sixteen co-workers would die that day, thirty-eight would be maimed and scarred. When rescue squads arrived to wade through the fifteen feet of rubble that had been a four story building, first they had to wait for the mile-high dust cloud to subside. It was a scene all too familiar to the modern mind.

Death by bombing is death by terror, the deliberate taking of human life with extreme violence. It is not the result of accident or a spasm of calamity, the ravages of misadventure or a natural disaster. It occurs because someone, somewhere, decided that people should die. For decades, the world has grown technology to kill people more precisely. Satellites can pinpoint buildings; drones can deliver death remotely. When the massacre of civilians occurs, it represents a civilization's collective will.

The Geneva Convention defines war crimes as acts which "endanger protected persons or objects or breach important values" (ICRC, 2015). Protected persons include civilian populations or civilian individuals.

The young woman was a civilian make-up artist. Her co-workers were technicians and journalists. The bomb site was Serb TV. The missiles were sent by NATO. It was not an accident. It was not collateral damage on the periphery of a military target. The girl, the workers, the journalists, they were the target. In the decade and a half since 9/11, the U.S. and its allies have committed to counter terrorism methodologies that include invasion, bombing of civilian targets, and assaults on civilians. Along the way, many well-meaning people have come to believe that civilian deaths are not only acceptable but suitable. They have moved beyond thinking that it is difficult to minimize civilian deaths, to moving to an acceptance of a planned civilian deaths. More than that, there really isn't any notion of civilian at all. The very notion of a 'civilian citizen' has come to be a signifier of 'us,' while anyone who is in any way perceived to be related in religion, ethnicity, or location to a perceived enemy, has come to be a signifier for 'target.'

The truth is that acts of terror will occur, and people will die alone and in fear, and that nations must make efforts to counter these attacks. Counter insurgency, though, must hold itself to the ideals that it is purporting to protect. Over the last decade, in the process of waging a war on terror, the US and its allies have adopted both the strategies and mentality of those whom they condemn. What the U.S. calls war crimes on the part of others is in danger of becoming its own counter-insurgency methodology. This anti-humanitarian methodology is manifested most distinctly through: the profiling of journalists as military targets; the conceptualizing of civilian centers such as hospitals as propaganda centers and thus also military targets; and the normalization of collateral damage to civilians as inevitable to successful counter insurgency.

The decision to make the killing of journalists a valid military objective can be seen early in the timeline of Western anti-terror policy. The clearest example of this policy is the bombing of Serb TV by NATO. It was April 23, 1999. Serbia and Kosovo were engaged in a vicious struggle over independence. NATO, citing Serbian human rights abuses, sided with Kosovo. NATO launched an extended missile attack. One of NATO's earliest targets: the Serb TV station. The station's coverage would not feel unfamiliar to fans of FOX News. Much of what it aired was propaganda. Some of what it aired was footage excerpted from other stations around the world. It was manned mostly by young volunteer journalists and technicians.

New York Times journalist Steven Erlanger described the scene of the NATO bombing thus: “Everything crashed. There was no way out. There was smoke everywhere. It was terrible. People were screaming. It was like a nightmare.” There was a “huge detonation, and everything went completely dark.” Erlanger chose his words deliberately. He used a narrative technique used by fiction writers. He invoked the sympathy of the reader by giving access to the experiences and inner thinking of the characters. It, was, he wrote, “an increasingly familiar one of smashed glass, broken walls, twisted timbers, scorched paint and emotional devastation” (Erlanger, 1999).

Images of NATO airstrikes make a paradoxical contrast with the purported aim to end human rights abuses and the death of civilians. Here is where the thinking becomes as important as the act. The decision to bomb Serb TV was justified by Western leaders agreeing that journalists were legitimate targets. Noam Chomsky, analyzing the rhetoric of the attack, cites: “Richard Holbrooke, then envoy to Yugoslavia, described the successful attack on RTV as “an enormously important, and, I think, positive development,” a sentiment echoed by others” (Chomsky, 2015). British leader Tony Blair also called the decision, “entirely justified,” and Kenneth Bacon, a Pentagon spokesman, defended the massacre, saying that “Serb TV is as much a part of Milosevic’s murder machine as his military is” (Erlanger, 1999).

As Chomsky points out, there is an irony here, considering the cries of outrage and “we are Charlie Hebdo!” that erupted when Western journalists were targeted for death. There is a bitter disparity of reactions between the outrage at the murder of Charlie Hebdo and French journalists, and the righteousness, even gleefulness of Western leaders claiming that enemy journalists are viable military targets. Thinking about this disparity, Chomsky suggests that that war crimes committed against ‘us’ are considered terrorism and those we commit are considered part of a legitimate war effort. It is hard not to see a moral emptiness to the discourse of NATO and Western allies. It is disturbing in two ways. Either leaders know that it is morally wrong to target journalists and it illustrates a deliberate propaganda campaign aimed at positioning any desired target as justifiable in order to rally public opinion, or it demonstrates an inability to perceive anyone other than us as fully human.

In the counterinsurgency timeline, the move from targeting journalists to targeting doctors might not seem such a big one. It marks a subtle and important stance, however: the conceptualizing of civilian centers such as hospitals as potential propaganda sites and thus legitimate military targets. The deliberate assault of a hospital in Fallujah by U.S. forces, in November of 2004 is a notable example of this policy. Noam Chomsky says of this war, and of this incident: “it’s interesting to look at it carefully. Fallujah, first of all, was one of the worst atrocities of the 21st century. The Iraq war itself was the worst crime of the 21st century, easily. Fallujah was probably the worst war crime carried out during that war” (quoted in Larkin, 2015).

Chomsky goes on to describe the event: “seven thousand Marines attacked Fallujah, probably killed everyone who was there. They called them insurgents - whatever that means. On the first day of the invasion of Fallujah, *The New York Times* had a front page photograph of Marines breaking into the general hospital, which is a war crime, and throwing all the patients and doctors on the floor and shackling them. It was hailed as a triumph” (2015). That Times article was written by war reporter Richard Opiel. Opiel wrote, on November 8, 2004, the day after the attack, that, “Iraqi troops eagerly kicked the doors in, some not waiting for the locks to break. Patients and hospital employees were rushed out of rooms by armed soldiers and ordered to sit or lie on the floor while troops tied their hands behind their backs.”

Chomsky’s choice of language, the use of the word “shackled,” where Opiel uses “tied,” illuminates Chomsky’s outrage. His outrage reflects overall outrage at the war itself and at the choice of a hospital as a primary assault. What matters most about the assault on the hospital is not what happened there. It is the discourse around the attack. When asked about why they assaulted the hospital, U.S. high command claimed that the hospital “was releasing casualty figures” and therefore it was a propaganda center and legitimate war target. (Chomsky, 2015, Opiel, 2004).

Here’s the problem with this discourse. It makes two assumptions. The first is that it widens the concept of what counts as propaganda, so that releasing news of civilian casualties caused by U.S. troops qualifies as

propaganda. The second is that it assumes that civilian authors of propaganda are legitimate military targets. Both of these assumptions teeter on the brink of humanitarian abuses and war crimes. Journalists and doctors are not legitimate military targets of civilized nations.

Not just the assault on Fallujah hospital, but the numerous civilian casualties of the Iraq war marked a move toward Western acceptance of collateral damage to civilians. *CNN* reporter Zakaria called the Iraq war “a failure and a terrible mistake . . . a humanitarian tragedy” (2015). What the war did was condition us to accept civilian casualties.

The normalization of collateral damage to civilians as a natural part of successful counter insurgency is the most recent and most insidious shift in counter insurgency. The airstrikes in Syria manifest this willingness on the part of the U.S. to countenance the massacre of civilians. For example, on December 28th, 2015, “a U.S.-led coalition airstrike killed at least 50 Syrian civilians when it targeted a headquarters of Islamic State extremists in northern Syria, according to an eyewitness and a Syrian opposition human rights organization” (McClatchy, 2015). McClatchy notes the delay and reluctance of U.S. forces to acknowledge these deaths. Only after repeated inquiries were they affirmed.

According to McClatchy DC, “the Syrian Network for Human Rights, an independent opposition group that tracks casualties in Syria, has documented the deaths of at least 40 civilians in airstrikes in the months between the start of U.S. bombing in Syria Sept. 23 through the Dec. 28 strike on Al Bab. The deaths include 13 people killed in Idlib province on the first day of the strikes. Other deaths include 23 civilians killed in the eastern province of Deir el Zour, two in Raqqa province and two more in Idlib province” (2015).

The effect of this kind of indiscriminate bombing is further illustrated by the deaths of doctors with the alliance Doctors Without Borders, when Al Quds Hospital in Aleppo, Syria, was destroyed by a government air strike on April 27, 2016. At least 27 people were killed. Among them were 3 children and 6 staff members. “This devastating attack has destroyed a vital hospital in Aleppo, and the main referral center for pediatric care in the area,” the head of the charity’s Syria mission, Muskilda Zancada, said in a statement. “Where is the outrage among those with the power and obligation to stop this carnage?” (Barnard, 2016). This incident was not the first killing of doctors in Syria. In response to prior targeting of doctors, Doctors Without Borders issued a global statement asking for a global “obligation to ensure the protection of humanitarian workers.” The agency especially expressed concerns that “such attacks directly impact the ability of aid organizations to provide medical assistance.” (MSF, 2013).

The lack of moral outrage that charity and humanitarian workers lament marks the mentality as well as methods of an unethical counter insurgency policy. The problem with the stance that collateral damage to civilians is acceptable, is that when you say it’s okay to kill civilians as long as insurgents get killed as well, there is no protection for women and children or ordinary citizens. First journalists, then doctors, then...everyone. The lives of those who are not us simply come to be meaningless.

In her allegory, *The Terrible Things*, Eve Bunting tells the story of animals in a woods. Every day, someone comes to take away some of the animals, to their death. Each time, the other animals face a moral choice: to protect the innocent or to ignore the violence around them. They choose ignorance. They willfully refuse to see what happens around them. They refuse empathy. In the end, there is no-one there to protect the final few. Each decision we make, as individuals, as a government, as a nation, reflects ethical choices. We have to have a moral code we are defending, or the country we are defending is no longer worth defending.

There is also the question of whether ruthless and anti-humanitarian tactics work. In his fight for civil rights, Dr. Martin Luther King stated that “darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that” (1957). In his analysis of the Iraq war, analyst Loren Thompson notes that each civilian killed, each child’s death, each hospital bombed or burned, stirred up opposition. “If anything,” Thompson notes, “our presence helped spur recruiting by sectarian militias and local supporters of Al Qaeda” (2011). The reason that insurgency recruiting increased is that U.S. actions were seen as not only threatening but inhumane.

The notion that other people’s lives don’t matter will not, in the end garner the support of greater civilized communities. It’s a Lannister type Game of Thrones policy, exemplified when Jaime Lannister exclaims,

“F*** anyone who isn’t us.” The thing is, though, that the Lannisters lose all their support, not because they weren’t strong, but because they weren’t good.

The U.S. has slipped into counter insurgency methods that mirror the war crimes and atrocities of those we claim to be better than and fighting against. We need to amend these policies, for they fuel the justifiable scorn of those we attack, and create a legacy of hypocrisy and hatred from which we, like Bunting’s woodland animals, may not emerge.

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(Mentored to *Stamped*, by Reynolds and Kendi)

PRONOUNS OF INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION IN THE 2016 ELECTION

It came down to pronouns.

She said, “I can tell you’re hurting. I can tell you’re mad.” He said, “I’m mad.” Pronouns of exclusion and inclusion.

One thing that Trump did, that Hillary didn’t, was he expressed anger about people’s legitimate economic grievances. Hillary said, ‘you’re angry, and I understand that.’ Trump said, “I’m angry.” He recognized an emotional force and he swamped himself in it. If there is one thing to learn from this election, it is the necessity to connect with people. Hillary simply didn’t do that. She never even went to Wisconsin. As if they didn’t matter to her. And mostly, she called people who were hurting, “them,” and “you.”

Trump’s stances make it nearly impossible to listen to or figure out (to us, in this city), what drives his opaque and frightening voters to vote for him. It’s hard not to dismiss *anyone* who voted for Trump as a bigot. That some people vote for him *because* he is a bigot, is clear. That’s the terrifying part. He is a man celebrated by the KKK and by Putin. It’s bad.

There are millions of people who are frighteningly affected by Trump and even more, by the maelstrom of hate language and ideas he has released in his followers. He has given permission to rant against and imperil immigrants and minorities. He has normalized misogyny and racism. He has promulgated xenophobia. He has unleashed behavior and views that are terrifying in their historical precedent.

There are going to be far more threatened by a Trump presidency than I am. Latino high school friends in Long Island showed up to school on the day after the election to find white peers yelling, “now we can send you home.” That’s what Trump has unleashed.

This campaign has been divisive, polarizing, dangerous, and not especially nuanced. There is nuance to talk about in the aftermath of this election. I’m sixteen. I’ll vote in the next election. We must do better.

The open question is—are there are people who voted for Trump not because they are frightening but because they are frightened? People who voted for him while not liking parts of him, the way those who voted for Hillary didn’t like all parts of her? If the only lesson to learn from this election is that nearly ¼ of the country may be racist, then well, a lot of people probably already knew that. If there’s more, if there are people who voted for Trump for other reasons, then we need nuance to get to those reasons. Perhaps it’s that they simply couldn’t and wouldn’t vote for Clinton. We need to find out why. Some of it was sexism. What else was it? A lot of it may have been not what she did, but the way she came across. Clinton gave her life to public service. She worked on behalf of children and women and the disenfranchised. She offered solutions. But she didn’t connect. She didn’t convince people that she saw and cared about them.

Sanders connected. And he offered solutions. Trump offered hate. That he offered hate didn’t matter as much as that sense he gave, though, that he saw real economic woes. He’s probably not even going to address those problems. But he acted as if they mattered. Meanwhile the media and the Democratic party convened to diminish Sanders, who might have given people an alternative, rational, non-bigoted vision of care.

People are threatened and suffering in our cities and our countryside. The whole election sucks. There’s no silver lining. People who are suffering will continue to suffer, as there is no evidence that Trump actually has any plans that will create economic change. Meanwhile the othering, the hate-mongering, the incitement to violence and anarchy that Trump has unleashed makes all the gaps between us seem ever wider. People do care about each other. It’s just that care is masked by fear, and fear makes some people pitiless.

What’s nuanced and tricky is that one kind of suffering, even as it is more compelling - the suffering of those threatened by hate and bigotry—doesn’t negate other kinds of suffering, economic kinds which are driving people into voting booths to vote for someone like Trump. It’s not a scale of suffering.

People are tired of long hours and low wages and a dim future. There has to be a way to recognize many, many people’s deep economic pains whilst not condoning and solving them through bigotry and bullying. If

the Democratic party can't find a way to do that, then the only solace financially desperate people will seek will be the unhappy solace of a candidate who explicitly publicizes his sympathy, no matter how flawed that understanding may be, a candidate whose pronouns are the pronouns of "we" not "you." ●