

Buffalo Girls and The Rights of the Child
An Aporetic Human Rights Case Study For Inquiry and Public Writing

Jordan Hayes, SHREI 2014

OVERVIEW AND RATIONALE

The 2012 documentary *Buffalo Girls* depicts the lives of two 8-year-old Muay Thai boxers, Stam and Pet. These Thai children don't compete for fun, but to earn money for their families, potentially a good deal of it. Michael Atkins of *The Village Voice* writes that director Todd Kellstein's "movie could have tackled an entire culture's disposable misogyny, but instead gives only a glimpse of girlhood as gladiatorship."



Fig. 1. Stam Sor Con Lek, one fighter portrayed in *Buffalo Girls* (Kellstein).



Fig. 2. “In the Ring.” Stam Sor Con Lek fighting in the ring with Pet Chor Chanachai, another boxer depicted in *Buffalo Girls* (Kellstein).

Buffalo Girls provides this unit’s case study for student research and writing. Relevant to the film are international human rights compacts such as the 1990 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, an international treaty ratified by Thailand, but not by the United States, despite its status as “the most widely ratified treaty in the history of the world” (Lauren 249).

Providing students with a case study likely to lead to discovery and discussion of this international-legal disparity is one goal of the unit, for it challenges many students’ assumption that the United States, as a self-professed leader in the field of human rights, participates fully in all major international human rights compacts. Another goal is to foster inquiry into the Thai social, cultural, economic, and national context in which *Buffalo Girls*’s documentary subjects make their choices and fight their battles. By inviting these different valences, this unit problematizes our hailing of a particular culture’s children in the name of their universal human rights.

While almost all viewers of the film find Stam and Pet affectively engaging, not all will agree that their plight constitutes a violation of human rights, even if they question the appropriateness of juveniles’ paid participation in Muay Thai. In making such an assessment, some viewers may point out that Muay Thai is valued as a martial art, cultural practice, and point of Thai national-historic pride. Others might ask, don’t we need to consider the boxers’ poverty? And might this be especially relevant in a society under scrutiny for widespread human trafficking and sexual slavery? (US Department of State)

The diversity of reasoned viewpoints that may be brought to bear on *Buffalo Girls* render it an aporetic case for human rights study, by which I mean that it invites a wide range of reasoned, ethical responses, rather than scripts a singular approach. To claim this much is *not* to assert the impropriety or ineffectiveness of teaching human rights through texts that tend to elicit a less equivocal response. On the contrary, course materials that present a clear affront to human dignity, in an abstract sense, and human rights, as concretely defined through international instruments, are pedagogically sound by virtue of their power to stir a student to social and political consciousness. Irrefutable examples of human rights violations confront students with exactly the sort of troubling realities that the formalized human rights were intended to redress.

In my own teaching, though, I have found it useful to *follow* these kinds of lessons, those driven by more determining examples, with case studies in which a human rights violation isn’t a foregone conclusion; hence, this unit’s approach to *Buffalo Girls*. In teaching this unit, I enlist my students’ emotional reactions, attitudes, and cultural dispositions – Kellstein’s fine directorial work makes *that* easy – and interleave this affective engagement with research on the film’s context as well as the governmental powers responsible for guaranteeing the human rights reserved for children such as Stam and Pet. Throughout the activities below, this case study asks students to consider not just the way the documentary appeals to our emotions, but also the role played by this engagement in one’s further thinking about the political and governmental issues the film raises.

For some viewers, sympathy or even outrage may not be a sufficient response to the complexity on offer in *Buffalo Girls*. The distance between our universal ideals of human rights and the social, economic, and cultural realities of any locality, such as the setting of *Buffalo Girls*, raises theoretical and political questions. Should we, for example, take Stam and Pet to be subjects of their locality and nation, or hail them as citizens of the world, bearers of rights superior to those guaranteed by any nation-state? The latter gesture, sometimes tacit, yet so fundamental to teaching human rights, interpellates others in a discourse that may be at odds with the roles they play within local, national, and cultural filiations. To ignore this tension risks a certain well-intentioned paternalism, yet to defer always to relativism abandons the hard-earned normative power of human rights. An aporetic case study deliberately moves students to encounter precisely such an intellectual and ethical impasse.

One means of theorizing this difficulty is offered by the cosmopolitan philosophy propounded by Kwame Anthony Appiah, author of *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. Appiah's cosmopolitanism provides a useful conceptual framework for Human Rights Education in two ways: First, although philosophical cosmopolitans value difference, cross-cultural conversation, and individual autonomy, they specifically safeguard human rights as our collective threshold of tolerance. Thus cosmopolitanism offers us one way to explicitly situate human rights within an iteration of the liberal philosophical tradition that engages the complexities of a globalized world. Second, the way in which the cosmopolitan model of human rights hails individuals as global subjects affords us multiple avenues for critiquing national governments, the primary guarantors of human rights on the international scene today. In sum, cosmopolitanism provides Human Rights Education a comprehensive ethics of global engagement in which international human rights play a pivotal role in our negotiation of cultural difference. An explicit viewpoint, cosmopolitanism may be discussed, debated, and tested in practice by classes studying human rights, such as those completing this unit.

At the heart of the activities listed below is a writing assignment in which students are asked to enter the online public debate generated by *Buffalo Girls*. This public writing task urges students to first judge the film's relevance to their study of human rights and then situate their view within the existing climate of opinion around the film. In their representational practice, my students' earned expertise affords them a particular agency to invoke, if they choose, the ethical and political force of the human rights discourse.

Human rights remain present to students in our world's complex and dynamic society of peoples, states, and cultures long after they ascend the scaffolds of our instruction. An aporetic human rights case study may approximate the ongoing critical engagement we hope students will internalize, share, and elect to act upon in their own right as citizens of the world.

COURSE SEQUENCING NOTES

PRIOR CONTENT

This unit assumes a class already familiar with human rights as a concept; the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as the pivotal definition, enumeration, and assertion of human rights on the world stage; instruments like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) as codifications of those rights; and the idea of these documents comprising the so-called International Bill of Human Rights. As such, this unit may be best undertaken toward the middle or in the second half of a course driven by the study of human rights.

CO-LEARNING

This unit is designed as an opportunity for co-learning, by which I mean the shared pursuit of knowledge by an entire classroom community, both the students and their instructor. Although the instructor will no doubt be better prepared than her students to initiate the discussion suggested below, the aporetic nature of the example invites evolving viewpoints for all who participate. As a result, this unit is well suited to instructors (like myself) whose professionalization was not specifically in a field emphasizing human rights.

RHETORIC AND “RHETORICS” IN ENGLISH COMPOSITION

This unit was originally launched for use in required English Composition classes at a community college. As such, it bears traces of its disciplinary point of origin, despite my effort to reduce it to those essential features most likely to prove useful to an interdisciplinary readership. In English Composition, “rhetoric” refers to the study of persuasion, which includes consideration of the various styles of appealing to an audience. Although we often bring the term to bear when discussing printed texts, its current academic usage subsumes its application to other modes of communication. Thus at several points I mention “visual rhetoric” to refer specifically to the range of visual elements students might incorporate into their public writing, from pictures and photographs to headings and layout options, all of which may depart online from the fairly restricted presentation common to print-based academic formats.

TECHNICAL LITERACY AND PUBLIC AUDIENCES

Because human rights have an ongoing relevance to world affairs, student writers thinking about human rights can easily enter into dialogue with a public audience. Blogging is one platform through which students can interject voices informed by the study of human rights into conversations in which they may hitherto have been absent. By the time I present *Buffalo Girls*, each student has established her own blog, become familiar with its privacy settings, developed confidence deploying images as part of their blog’s visual rhetoric, practiced creating links to sources within their posts, and cultivated an understand of how best to invite public regard of their online compositions, such as by tagging posts with key words relevant to ongoing conversations.

Last, this unit assumes students who know how to avail themselves of database research options available through their libraries’ websites and have some experience evaluating online sources for their credibility. Because the inquiry this unit instantiates will necessarily encompass a broad range of sources, from pages hosting informal commentary on *Buffalo*

Girls to UN websites offering access to complete human rights documents, students taking part in these activities will have a rich opportunity to practice research strategies for locating and assessing sources.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- Amid the welter of popular and critical responses to *Buffalo Girls*, what distinct positions can we decipher in the public conversation about the documentary? Has a human rights perspective been represented there?
- Do you feel it is right to have children engage in Muay Thai-style boxing for money? If not, is this wrong in a moral sense, in terms of human rights, or both?
- If this is a human rights concern, which conventions and specific articles are relevant?
- Could this approach, reading the juvenile practice of Muay Thai in terms of justice or human rights, ignore the importance of Muay Thai's valuation as a martial art, cultural practice, and point of Thai national-historic pride?
- Does it matter in our assessment that young girls like Stam and Pet come from poverty, or that they can, if they fight well, improve their family's lot in life? And might this level of income be especially relevant in a society under scrutiny as a node in the global system of sex trafficking?
- How does gender play a role in this case? Is Muay Thai more acceptable for boys of a similar age? Might Stam and Pet's ability to win prize money actually represent a point of progress for Thai women?
- Does it matter that Thailand is infamous as a center of human sexual slavery, a practice into which low-income Thai girls who *aren't* earning money remain at constant risk of conscription?
- Do we scrutinize child practitioners of sports and martial arts in Western countries the same way we scrutinize those in countries like Thailand? Might we find the controversy around *Buffalo Girls* to reveal a Western bias or paternalism? Does the international conversation fostering human rights offer us a means to look past the limitations of our own cultural perspective?
- How might our expectations be confounded by the fact that Thailand, along with almost every other member of the United Nations, has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, but the United States has not?
- How can we find answers to the many questions we have about *Buffalo Girls*? And, when we have concluded our research, how might we best intervene in the public conversation around the film?

LEARNING OUTCOMES

At the close of this unit, students will:

1. Problematize the affective force of a representational text featuring children and discuss emotional engagement as a motivator for responsible research, writing, or action, particularly in the field of human rights.
2. Practice regarding a representational text as a case study with potential relevance to the human rights conversation.
3. Pursue research along one or more of at least these axes:
 - a. The reception of and popular responses to the film.
 - b. The social milieu depicted in the film, including the cultural, historic, and national significance of Muay Thai.
 - c. The economic situation of the lives of the subjects under discussion.
 - d. The potential applicability of human rights documents constituting the “International Bill of Human Rights” and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).
4. Examine the role of Western, Eastern, and national biases and assumptions; consider the opposition between paternalism and relativism.
5. Develop an informed response to *Buffalo Girls* through blogging in response to shared sources and classroom discussion.
6. Engage in rhetorical, conventional, and stylistic analysis of public commentary on *Buffalo Girls*.
7. Engage in public online writing on *Buffalo Girls*, first via websites hosting viewer reviews and comments, and second in original blog posts that take a position on the documentary’s potential legibility in terms of human rights.
8. Develop an awareness of the problems posed when scrutinizing another culture through the global-political discourse of human rights, and consider this problem within the philosophical-political framework provided by Cosmopolitanism.

UNIT OUTLINE: <i>Buffalo Girls</i> and The Rights of the Child		
ACTIVITY <i>RELEVANT OUTCOMES</i>	Steps	Implementation & Assessment
I. ACTIVATING SCHEMA, TESTING ASSUMPTIONS <i>OUTCOMES: 1-2</i>	A) Pre-viewing questionnaire	May be done in class or as written homework <i>Assessment: credit / no credit</i>
	B) Discussion of the pre-viewing questionnaire	Full class activity <i>Assessment: Participation</i>

II. VIEWING THE FILM AND DEVELOPING QUESTIONS FOR RESEARCH <i>OUTCOMES: 1-4</i>	A) Viewing of <i>Buffalo Girls</i>	In class (64 minutes)
	B) Post-viewing questionnaire	May be done in class or as written homework <i>Assessment: credit / no credit</i>
	C) Post-viewing discussion and brainstorming of research topics	Full class activity <i>Assessment: Participation</i>
III. RESEARCH: SWARMING THE QUESTIONS <i>OUTCOMES: 3</i>	A) Student research and blog post	Online written homework <i>Assessment: credit / no credit</i>
	B) Blog commentary on student-selected sources	Online written homework <i>Assessment: credit / no credit</i>
IV. FROM THE SWARM-SELECTED SOURCES TO A CLASS READING LIST <i>OUTCOMES: 4-5</i>	A) Presentation and review of class reading list	Full class activity
	B) Student selections from the reading list	In class or prior to written homework
	C) Reading journals	Written homework <i>Assessment: credit / no credit</i>
	D) Class discovery debate	Full class activity <i>Assessment: Participation</i>
V. JOINING THE PUBLIC CONVERSATION <i>OUTCOMES: 5-7</i>	A) Research into the public conversation	Online <i>Assessment: credit / no credit</i>
	B) Summary and rhetorical/conventional profile	Written homework <i>Assessment: credit / no credit</i>
	C) Written contribution to the online conversation	Online <i>Assessment: Graded with qualitative feedback.</i>
VI. INVITATION TO ACADEMIC ARGUMENT <i>OUTCOMES: 7</i>	A) Process-based composing	Written homework <i>Assessment: credit / no credit with qualitative feedback</i>
	B) Public blog post on <i>Buffalo Girls</i>	Online <i>Assessment: Graded with qualitative feedback</i>

	C) MLA (or other academic style) essay [Optional]	Written homework <i>Assessment: Graded</i>
VII. METACOGNITIVE REFLECTION AS PHILOSOPHICAL SCAFFOLD <i>OUTCOMES: 4, 8</i>	A) Written reflection	<i>Assessment: credit / no credit</i>
	B) Reading/annotation of Brooks's interview of Appiah, "Cosmopolitanism: How to be a Citizen of the World"	Written homework <i>Assessment: credit / no credit</i>
	C) Final unit discussion	Full class activity <i>Assessment: Participation</i>

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTIONS

Activities enlisting a pedagogical concept that may be unfamiliar to the interdisciplinary reader begin with a brief italicized explanation.

I. TESTING ASSUMPTIONS AND ACTIVATING SCHEMA

By the term "activating schema," I mean the explicit consideration of students' prior knowledge, including ideas, experiences, and attitudes, all of which will impact their viewing of Buffalo Girls.

Instead of beginning the unit with a viewing of the film, students start by writing in response to the questionnaire included below. These questions are intended to help students enter into their viewing of *Buffalo Girls* with a greater awareness of their attitudes toward sports, martial arts, Muay Thai, Thailand, juvenile athletics, child labor, children's human rights, and some intersections between these topics. Having these ideas on paper facilitates a return to this starting point later in the unit.

A. Pre-Viewing Questionnaire: If administered in class, students should be giving time to consider and write out honest answers to these questions. The instructor may wish to model the desired engagement by responding in writing to the questionnaire as well. Assessment will be on a credit/no credit basis.

Pre-Viewing Questionnaire

1. Were you an athlete when you were a child?
2. If so, did you want to participate? Did you ever feel compelled to do so?
3. How much time should kids devote to sports?

4. What do you take to be the difference between professional and amateur athletes?
5. Should kids have jobs?
6. If so, at what age? If not, why?
7. When might it be a human rights problem to have kids work?
8. How do you feel about fight sports (boxing, MMA, etc.) or marital arts (Karate, Wu-Shu, Tae-Kwon Do, etc.) in general?
9. Have you lived in or been to Thailand? Briefly summarize your experience or knowledge of the country.
10. Are you aware of Muay Thai (Thai kickboxing) having cultural or historical value? If so, what?

B) **Discussion of the Questionnaire.** This activity can be a full-class discussion in which students are invited to share their thoughts about questions that elicited clear or strong responses.

II. VIEWING AND DEVELOPING QUESTIONS FOR RESEARCH

A) Viewing of *Buffalo Girls*. (64 minutes)

B) **Post-Viewing Questionnaire.** The questions below ask the students to first consider the affective appeal of the film and then shift toward eliciting a more detailed critical stance. This second battery also specifically asks students to place their responses to the earlier questionnaire in dialogue with *Buffalo Girls* and to revise, extend, or qualify their earlier positions.

Post-Viewing Questionnaire

1. Who was your favorite fighter, Stam or Pet? How do you feel about her? Why?
2. How do these young women feel about fighting? How do you know?
3. How do other people depicted in the film seem to regard Muay Thai?
4. What do you suppose the makers of the film think about the children's participation in Muay Thai? What gives you that impression?

Before continuing, please review your responses to items 3-7 of the Pre-Viewing Questionnaire.

5. Do you think Stam and Pet's participation in Muay Thai is, in effect, a job?
6. Do Stam and Pet seem to have reasonable access to education and healthcare?

7. Do you think these girls should participate in Muay Thai? Why or why not? Please give a detailed response.
8. Did the film change or add to any of the ten ideas you wrote down in response to the Pre-Viewing Questionnaire? Which ones, and how?
 - a. Please consider carefully: many viewers of *Buffalo Girls* will be able to add to Pre-Viewing question #9, which asked about your knowledge of Thailand.
9. Do you think that this film portrays a potential violation of children's human rights? Why or why not? Please give a detailed response.
10. What might we want to know more about in order to better answer or support your position on #9 directly above?

C) Post-Viewing Discussion and Brainstorming of Research Topics. The instructor should use the two questionnaires and earlier conversation to scaffold the post-viewing discussion. Effective discussion may move from the impact of the film, and the affective response elicited by its images and soundtrack, to the issues it raises, including the matter of human rights.

The discussion should culminate in a brainstorming session starting with, but not necessarily limited to, student responses to question #10 above. The instructor can bear in mind the four axes of research listed as part of the Learning Outcomes above as she guides the generation of research questions. These outcomes are duplicated below along with some sample research questions:

- a. Review of relevant human rights documents.

Which human rights treaties might be relevant to this conversation?
 - b. Inquiry into the reception of and popular responses to the film.

Have critics and viewers already regarded this film in terms of human rights?
 - c. Investigate the social milieu depicted in the film and the cultural, historic, and national significance of Muay Thai.

What does Muay Thai represent for Thai people? What is its history? What might be the significance of children's and women's participation?
 - d. Investigate the economic situation of the lives of the subjects under discussion.

How severe is the poverty known in rural Thailand? Would the children who take part in Muay Thai be otherwise compelled to work, or else vulnerable to human trafficking?
-

III. RESEARCH: SWARMING THE QUESTIONS

San Francisco State University's Professor Larry Hanley introduced the idea of a student research "swarm" in his teaching of American Literature. Here, I mean directing teams of students to engage in multiple, parallel, shared searches in order to investigate a matter in depth.

While this activity asks that students participate in their own research groups, the instructor should foster a class-wide sense of purpose and affirm the class community's commitment to co-learning. Effective attention to each of the various avenues of inquiry identified by the class will enhance the quality of each participant's thinking about and response to the issues suggested by *Buffalo Girls*.

A) Student Research. Students use lab (or homework) sessions to search pertinent sources and then post links to these texts along with comments about them. These informal reports should explain how these sources respond to the class research questions or otherwise extend the class inquiry. Groups should have access to each other's blogs, be encouraged to comment on one another's work, and share key sources. Students may invite a public audience into their work by tagging their blogs with pertinent key words likely to direct interested web traffic toward their efforts.

Assessment of the research will be on:

1. Effective pursuit of the questions devised by the class.
2. Quality, credibility, and relevance of the sources reported.
3. Clarity and insight in the comments upon the sources.

IV. CLASS READING OF SWARM-SELECTED SOURCES

After evaluating the student blogs, the instructor will be in a good position to make a short list of particularly useful, insightful, or credible texts located by the class. Although a large class is quite likely to have located the Convention on the Rights of the Child, it may be added to the list, if need be, as the instructor's contribution.

- A. Student Choice: Selections from the Short List.** Students will be assigned reading homework in which they study a set number of the texts from the short list, with the Convention on the Rights of the Child being the only text required of all readers in the class. The instructor should adjust the number of texts in play, as well as the amount of reading required, to match the time available for the unit.
- B. Homework: Reading Journals.** The students will keep reading journals (in any format the instructor deems useful) as they read and annotate their sources, and then use these journals in class as the basis for small group discussions.
- C. Class Discovery Debate:** An informal class debate between teams which have affiliated upon the basis of common positions is a highly desirable activity. A carefully moderated,

low-stakes debate allows student's to engage an audience's questions and consider their position within a range of possible viewpoints. In this case, possible positions include:

- a. Because of its threat to the safety and health of the children involved, this practice is a human rights concern.
- b. Because it constitutes child labor of a hazardous kind, this practice is a human rights concern.
- c. Because it violates a child's right to an education, this practice is a human rights concern.
- d. This practice is a human rights concern, but not one we should prioritize, given the seriousness of other ongoing violations of international human rights.
- e. This practice is not a human rights concern, given that the practice is comparable to other sports worldwide.
- f. This practice *is* a human rights concern in Thailand because of the country's ratification of the Covenant on the Rights of the Child, but would not be a violation of a human rights treaty in the USA, which has yet to ratify the Covenant on the Rights of the Child.
- g. This practice is not a human rights concern, and our temptation to view it as such suggests a Western bias and/or a misunderstanding of Muay Thai within Thai culture.

V. JOINING THE PUBLIC CONVERSATION

The piece of graded writing assigned in this section is scaffolded by two low-stakes activities intended to help students evaluate the online commentary on *Buffalo Girls* with academic rigor, thereby beginning to bridge a collegiate site of learning with a public space of writing.

A) Homework: Research into the public conversation. Each student will research a website to which she wishes to add her opinion about *Buffalo Girls*. More than one student may use the same site, but the instructor may wish to compile a current list to ensure some variety.

Any site providing the film, whole or in part, or else running a review of the movie could be appropriate; the essential feature is a permanent log of viewer or reader comments. Examples include but are certainly not limited to netflix.com, imdb.com, amazon.com, youtube.com, rottentomatoes.com, villagevoice.com, newyorktimes.com.

Here, for example, is a pair of reviews from amazon.com:

An amazing film

By [Steve Rosse](#) on March 9, 2014

Format: DVD

This is an amazing film about gender and poverty.

As I write this, a current You-Tube sensation is Samantha Gordon, a nine-year-old American football player. All the videos of her are exceptionally violent, because American football is a violent sport.

Putting nine-year-old girls into a boxing ring is no more brutal or backward than putting little Samantha in at running back. And yes, these girls carry the financial burden of their families, as does every nine-year-old planting rice in Asia. There are nine-year-olds carrying machine guns in Africa.

The families in America who exploit their children on "Dance Moms" or "Toddlers in Tiaras" are doing the exact same thing as the parents of the "Buffalo Girls." So if you watch this film and your reaction is "I'm glad I live in America," you're having the wrong reaction.

Makes you see how lucky we are to live in the US

By [Failito](#) on February 26, 2014

Format: DVD **Verified Purchase**

Its an eye opener, entertaining but kinda of sad for the girls. Seems like they are carrying the financial burden of their families dreams.

B) Homework: Summary and Rhetorical/Conventional Profile of public commentary on *Buffalo Girls*. For homework, each student replies in writing to the questions, which outline a summary and rhetorical profile of the kinds of reviews posted to the site they've selected. In order to enable high quality responses to the assignment, the class should review the questions below, discussing various valid approaches to them, before the assignment is attempted.

Questions for Profile Homework:

1. When was the latest published review written, and is there reason to assume other visitors to the site will be able or likely to access a new posting?
2. Summarize the content and tone of several (3-4) public postings to the site.
3. How do reviewers on the site tend to appeal to their audiences? Do they offer cool reasoning or passionate reactions? A combination? Do they portray themselves as credible commentators? Offer at least two specific examples.
4. How long are the reviews? Use sites like www.wordcounttool.com as needed.

5. What kind of values, knowledge, or expertise have reviewers shown or implied in their posts?
6. Did others discuss *Buffalo Girls* as presenting any kind of ethical or legal problem?
7. Did the reviewers or commentators compare national or cultural contexts? Was there any mention of human rights?
8. What are the conventions of writing on this site? Do users ever enlist support for their assertions? If so, how?
9. How formal do writers posting this site tend to be as far as sentence structure, punctuation, capitalization? If there seems to be a range of options, could you reasonably post a comment to this site written in the sort of Standard English you might use in an academic setting? Why or why not?
10. What do you plan for your own contribution to the conversation? Will you respond to another posted comment or review, as we saw in the examples from amazon.com [listed above]? Include ideas on the length you propose, content you intend to cover, central message you wish to convey, readings you intend to draw upon, and strategies you will use to appeal to other readers.

C) Homework: Written contribution to the online conversation. The previous assignment allows the instructor to vet student choices and set up, if needed, guidelines as to a desired word count, consideration of class readings, etc. The next steps are for each student to (1) write a comment or review that takes a position on *Buffalo Girls* in light of their research and then (2) publish this to a site they've analyzed, in a style acceptable for that site. In doing so, the students will have brought their initial thinking about *Buffalo Girls* to an online audience outside of academia.

Because this assignment is both an intervention in public conversation as well as a precursor to the unit's major assignment, this written work merits qualitative feedback from the instructor as well as a letter grade.

Course Sequencing Options: *Classes without a heavy writing requirement might not need activity VI, a full-blow essay on Buffalo Girls. At this point, some instructors might wish to move ahead to the final activity, VII, or else, in lieu of the writing task listed below, transition their class to the pursuit of independent research projects, endeavors well scaffolded by the activities presented above.*

VI. INVITATION TO ACADEMIC ARGUMENT

This is the culmination of the unit as I presented it to English Composition students: an essay of academic rigor to be posted to the student's own blog and tagged so as to invite a public readership. The student's own blogs are more appropriate than comment windows for the greater rigor and length required by this assignment.

A) Process-Based Composing: The earlier online comment from Activity V now provides the student with a rough or "idea" draft expressing or implying the student's working thesis

to be taken up and developed in activity VI. In order to hone the message they developed in their online comment, the instructor should guide the class through an academic writing process comprised of steps like drafting, peer review, revision, editing, proofreading, etc.

Writing Prompt:

Task. Write a blog post of 1250-1500 words that invites an online readership into your more completely developed thinking about *Buffalo Girls*. Your response should touch upon each of these interlinked questions:

- (1) Does *Buffalo Girls* present a human rights problem? Why or why not?
- (2) What contextual, historical, or cultural information should we bear in mind as we try to make this determination?
- (3) Are the “International Bill of Human Rights” documents or the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child relevant to what we see in *Buffalo Girls*? If so, how?
- (4) What are the consequences of your position, either in terms of further actions to be considered or broader conclusions to be drawn?

Public Audience. On the one hand, write for readers that haven’t studied the texts we have, but are interested enough in *Buffalo Girls* to take a look at your blog if it pops up in a search engine. On the other, be sure to write with a depth that will satisfy more academically minded readers who find their way to your work. What follows are some suggestions intended to help you appeal this public audience:

- The text itself should begin with an introduction geared to entice your reader into learning more about your approach to the documentary. You might quote another writer’s thoughts about *Buffalo Girls*, provided the passage or statistic you find makes a good hook. Alternatively, you might begin on a more personal note by relating your own response to the emotional impact of the documentary.
- Use a mix of formal and more relaxed language appropriate for the general yet savvy reader you are inviting into your point of view.
- Regardless of your tone, your more engaged readers will be seeking an underlying argument including a central claim (your thesis); strong and explicit reasons for the validity of that claim; evidence for those reasons, which might be drawn from the texts you’ve studied for this class; and a thoughtful regard for the existing range of opinion about the film, which

you can reflect through a refutation section in which you anticipate and then rebut a reader's possible objections to your point of view.

Blog format. Your blog will be most effective if, instead of formatting a strictly academic essay, you take advantage of some of the conventions for online writing.

- When you introduce key sources, offer your readers immediate access to them by building links right into the body of your blog post, rather than using an academic documentation style.
- Think of the layout of your post as a design problem: how can the visual rhetoric of your blog and this post arrest a reader's scanning of the page so that they focus on your written words? Also, might visuals be needed to help break up the text or remind the reader of *Buffalo Girls*' emotional intensity?
- Be sure that you tag your blog post with keywords that will help others find and access your work. You might start with "Buffalo Girls," "Human Rights," and even "Muay Thai." Using well-chosen tags is an essential strategy for guiding interested readers to your blog.

B) Coda: The MLA Essay.* The last activity in this sequence can be a reformatting of the blog post as an academic essay.

* *Instructors in other disciplines may of course wish to use APA, require some other style, or perhaps forgo such an assignment.*

VII. METACOGNITIVE REFLECTION AS PHILOSOPHICAL SCAFFOLD

This final activity enlists English Composition's frequent aim to encourage metacognition on the part of our students. By offering students chances to engage in thinking about their thinking, typically by asking them to assess and comment on their own processes as well as end products, we aim to foster their awareness of their own agency as learners, of the consequences of the choices they make while reading and writing. Below, a final questionnaire supports students' development of their thinking about the affective, governmental, and cultural aspects of the human rights conversation.

A) Written Reflection: At the close of the unit, the class should be provided ample time to reflect in writing on their work. While every student should be encouraged to answer each question, they should also be afforded the flexibility to respond in greater detail to those that most interest them.

Reflection Questions

1. Think back to our initial viewing of *Buffalo Girls*. Did the film engage you emotionally? If so, how?
2. If you did feel something as you watched the documentary, how did that impact your work in the rest of the unit? You might consider the questions you raised, sources you brought to our attention, comments you made or posted online, others' comments that interested you, and your final blog post on *Buffalo Girls*.
3. When it came time to attract audiences to your own ideas about *Buffalo Girls*, did you anticipate others' feelings or views? How so?
4. Did you learn anything about Thailand that you did not know prior to our work together? If yes, what?
5. Do you feel critical of the makers of *Buffalo Girls* or other viewers of the film? If so, why?
6. We increased our repertoire of human rights documents during this unit. What did you learn about human rights that you didn't know before we took on *Buffalo Girls*?
7. Do you feel critical of the Thai government, the UN, or some other organization? If so, why?
8. What is your advice for students researching and writing about what they take to be a possible human rights violation? You might compare this writing task to others from earlier in your studies.
9. Do you see Stam and Pet mainly as citizens (though minors) of Thailand or as members of the world community? Please explain.

B) Reading/ Annotation of Brooks's interview of Appiah, "Cosmopolitanism: How to be a Citizen of the World." Appiah's interview from *Mother Jones* introduces the philosophy of cosmopolitanism with a single, brief text. This assignment can help the class situate their work on *Buffalo Girls* into a broader discussion of human rights and global engagement.

Assigned annotation of the text should emphasize the identification of:

- New vocabulary
- Difficult passages
- Unfamiliar references (such as events that were current in the early to mid 2000s)
- References to human rights
- Connections to earlier work in the class, especially the *Buffalo Girls* unit

Prior to the closing discussion, the instructor should consider scaffolding her students' understanding of the piece with additional steps as needed. Student reading groups could, for example, engage in comparative work with their annotated texts in order increase their confidence with Appiah's ideas.

C) Closing Discussion. After the steps listed above are complete, the instructor should lead a final class discussion touching upon both the students' written reflections and

“Cosmopolitanism: How to be a Citizen of the World.” What follows are a set of questions the instructor might use to (1) help the class transition from sharing their reflective writing to considering cosmopolitanism as a system of values in which human rights have a specific role, and (2) assess the applicability of cosmopolitanism to the *Buffalo Girls* case study and, in light of Appiah, the values implied by the class’s responses to the documentary.

- What, according to Appiah, does a cosmopolitan value?
- How do cosmopolitans regard cultural difference, identity, and nationalism?
- Is cosmopolitanism the same thing as relativism?
- What is the role to be played by human rights in the cosmopolitan outlook?
- In what ways might our study of *Buffalo Girls* be in harmony with what Appiah suggests? In what ways did our study of *Buffalo Girls* take a different approach?
- Consider the last question of your reflective writing: *Do you see Stam and Pet mainly as citizens (though minors) of Thailand or as members of the world community?* How do you think Appiah would answer? Why?
- Do you regard yourself to be a philosophical cosmopolitan of the sort Appiah describes? Why or why not?

Appiah’s cosmopolitanism may serve as a point of reference in the class’s continuing conversation about human rights. Of particular use as a next assignment might be Donnelly’s International Human Rights, in particular his chapter on “Theories of Human Rights,” which distinguishes the cosmopolitan vision from statist and internationalist models human rights (19-35).

WORKS CITED

- Appiah, Kwame A. “Cosmopolitanism: How to Be a Citizen of the World.” Interview with Julian Brooks. *Mother Jones*. 23 Feb. 2006. Web. 21 Sept. 2013.
- Buffalo Girls*. Dir. Tod Kellstein. Perf. Stam Sor Con Lek and Pet Chor Chanachai. Buffalo Girls Movie, in Association with Union Entertainment Group, 2012. DVD.
- Donnelly, Jack. *International Human Rights*. 4th ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2013. Print.
- Failito. “*Buffalo Girls* Customer Review: Makes you see how lucky we are to live in the US.” *Amazon.com*. 26 Feb. 2014. Web. 2 April 2014.
- Kellstein, Todd. [Stam Sor Con Lek]“Review: ‘Buffalo Girls’ is an Eye-Opening and Emotional Look At too Small of A World.” *Film School Rejects*. 19 Nov. 2012. JPEG file. 25 May 2014.
- Kellstein, Todd. “Stam Sor Konlek vs. Pet Chor Chanachai.” *Milk. Blitz. Street. Bomb*. 10 December 2012. JPEG file. 25 May 2014.

Lauren, Paul Gordon. *The Evolution of International Human Rights: Visions Seen*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. Print.

Rosse, Steve. "Buffalo Girls Customer Review: An amazing film." *Amazon.com*. 9 March 2014. Web. 2 April 2014.

United States. Dept. of State. *Trafficking in Persons Report 2011*. Washington: GPO, 2011. Print.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC RESOURCES

Appiah, Kwame A. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2006. Print.

Appiah, Kwame A. "Cosmopolitan Patriots." *Critical Inquiry* 23.3 (1997): 617-39. *JSTOR*. The University of Chicago Press. Web. 21 May 2014.