



# Reading *Eveline* in Jakarta: Community Learning with Hazara Refugees

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This chapter outlines an intensive class that took place over approximately two weeks in the summer of 2018 at the Cisarua Refugee Learning Center (CRLC), a school in Western Indonesia that serves refugees and asylum seekers, many of whom are Hazaras. The authors met at the CRLC and worked together in the summers of 2017 and 2018. Back then, Akhlaqi was a teacher and the deputy principal of the school; she has now been resettled in Toronto, Canada. Gelmi was one of the many volunteers to visit Cisarua; he ran two workshops on reading and writing skills that Akhlaqi organized as training sessions for teachers, and attended as a student. The class combined language and literacy instruction for ESL learners and also aimed to provide professional development for teachers in the form of metacognitive reflection on the course itself. This article argues that, in this unique scenario, the Humanities and Liberal Arts should take

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the lead as disciplines that teach interdisciplinarity and care for language, the powerful tool that regulates our interactions as individuals and as groups.<sup>1</sup>

### TRAPPED ALL OVER

A better understanding of the social and cultural coordinates of our learning experiment requires a few words about Hazara people and their history of socioeconomic exclusion, geographical dispersion, and intra-communal resilience. Hazaras have been living as a minority group in a vast swath of land that runs through Central Asia (especially Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran); most belong to Shiite Islam and speak Dari, a language related to Farsi, the official language of Iran.

In Afghanistan, Hazaras were first displaced during the reign of Abdur Rahman (1844–1901) in a campaign of social engineering that favored Pashtun tribes, when the country was just emerging as a nation. Over the past fifty years, the Hazaras faced two major humanitarian crises: the first in 1978 with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the start of the civil war; the second after the 2001 U.S.-led war against the Taliban began. Monsutti and Balci chronicle that in the 1990s, up to 40 percent of individuals under UNHCR protection were Afghan nationals; since the early 2000s, more than four million Afghans have reportedly made their way home, although harassment and violence against Hazara people persist. This essay was written in the summer of 2021, a few weeks before the U.S. withdrawal. The frantic return of the Taliban to power may well count as the third major humanitarian catastrophe in less than a century for the people of Afghanistan.

In Pakistan, Hazaras are listed as indigenous people; for the most part, they live outside refugee camps and participate in the local economy. Here too, however, episodes of violence targeting the Shiite minority are frequent. Finally, also in Iran, the most populous Shiite country in the Islamic world, the situation is far from ideal: the war with Iraq (1980–88) and repeated Western embargoes severely weakened the economy and therefore the demand for an immigrant workforce. Recent developments have eased the situation, especially in matters of education, with refugees allowed in schools (Shammout & Vandecasteele).

<sup>1</sup>The two authors thank Ariel Leutheusser and Victor Xavier Zarour Zarzar, as well as the attentive reviewers, for their feedback.

Like any other refugee group, Hazara refugees are being resettled at a painstakingly slow pace, with projections of even longer waiting times in the future. Over the past decade, UNHCR has been flooded by an exponential increase in cases, mostly due to the Syrian civil war, with fewer countries willing to cooperate in alleviating the crisis.

### EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION, EDUCATION THROUGH EMPOWERMENT

Indonesia is a relatively new site of the Hazara diaspora. For many, it is a transit country where displaced Hazaras await resettlement in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, or Canada. To this day, no Indonesian government has signed the 1951 U.N. Refugee Convention, which has resulted in the exclusion of refugees and asylum seekers from the workforce, while also limiting their access to education. Although Jakarta has generally complied with the policy of non-refoulement,<sup>2</sup> until 2016 the country lacked a legal definition for refugees. A presidential decree of the same year produced no major breakthrough in legislation (McConnachie). Despite scenes of jubilation following the rescue of many Rohingya fleeing Myanmar, migration remains a problem in Indonesia. Reports of violence and harassment are frequent, and Hazaras do not feel safe in a predominantly Sunni country that is itself wrestling with its secular legacy and the emergence of religious extremism and regional demands for independence.

Knowing that their stay would not be a short one, members of the Hazara community in the village of Cisarua, fifty miles southeast of Jakarta, began to advocate for the creation of a school for their kids. Women were particularly vocal in this process, while others were doubtful, fearing troubles from the Indonesian government and UNHCR if they started working as teachers. However, since teachers would be serving as volunteers in a school supported by private donations, no law was broken, and after the

<sup>2</sup>The United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner defines the principle of non-refoulement as follows: "Under international human rights law, the principle of non-refoulement guarantees that no one should be returned to a country where they would face torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and other irreparable harm. This principle applies to all migrants at all times, irrespective of migration status." <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Migration/GlobalCompactMigration/ThePrincipleNon-RefoulementUnderInternationalHumanRightsLaw.pdf>.

initial show of bravery by their female colleagues, male instructors also joined the school.<sup>3</sup>

This episode shows a recurring frustration among refugees. Left with minimal legal protection and only a little help from international organizations, refugees are stuck in a vicious circle of fear and lack of awareness of their still-limited rights. In the case of CRLC, it was probably the untenable duration of their stay in Indonesia that convinced many to start their own school. This step to self-determined empowerment proved inspiring and led to the creation of many other refugee-led initiatives in the area. The study of refugee rights is currently absent from the curriculum, but the very existence of the school has made students and their families more aware of their status. This has prompted conversations on how to improve life conditions, organize protests, or simply discuss different opinions on the well-being of the community. Also, CRLC has established a network of collaborations with college students, academics, and journalists from overseas who visit the school every year. These exchanges have benefited both sides, providing opportunities to share knowledge, experiences, and skills. These visits, too, have encouraged both young people and adults to investigate and talk more about their refugee status.

Officially, CRLC was founded in August 2014. On the first day of class, a donation of two hundred Australian dollars sufficed to gather eight teachers and forty kids in a small room, with some stationery. Pretty soon, more families enrolled their children, and more school materials were provided. After just a few months, the school moved to a bigger space that could host the now one hundred CRLC students. Parents helped convert a summer house into a school, as told in *The Staging Post*, a documentary by Jolyon Hoff, an Australian filmmaker who enthusiastically supports the center. Twelve months later, two more schools opened in the area, and soon more followed. Refugee-led initiatives now serve approximately 1800 students with more than 100 teachers. Unfortunately, we should not be misled by this powerful example of resilience. For the most part, living conditions for asylum seekers and refugees in Indonesia are still dire, stuck as they are in limbo with little hope and fewer rights. Their stories have only occasionally caught the attention of mainstream media.

<sup>3</sup>Unlike in other locations, teachers are not subsidized by UNHCR. Education, which is inevitably a long-term commitment, is seldom a priority for international agencies that work in emergency contexts. This problem resurfaced as Covid-19 spread around the world.

CRLC has a predominantly Hazara population, but over the years it has also welcomed refugees from Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Sudan, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The language of instruction is English, to allow interactions among students and teachers, and to prepare students for a life in an English-speaking country. Educators and managers are themselves refugees, which gives them firsthand knowledge of the living conditions and hardships of learners and their families.

At the academic level, GED (General Educational Development) is a very popular program at Cisarua. It consists of a set of tests that award a U.S. or Canadian high school diploma equivalency. The refugee centers facilitate several preparation courses for students above the age of eighteen. Students are eager to enroll in these classes because they know that a diploma is a prerequisite for college entrance or a higher-paying job once they are resettled. The function of these centers is not limited to curriculum instruction. Sports, music, vocational training, computer classes, and literacy courses for adults and the elderly are also included. Sports provide entertainment and stress-relief: futsal (a kind of soccer for teams of five players) is now an essential part of refugees' lives. Other sports have also been introduced: boxing, karate, Taekwondo, Muay Thai, and general fitness are especially appreciated by younger members of the community. Music is also in demand, with classes in guitar, piano, and *damboura*, a traditional Hazara instrument.

Most volunteers were never professionally trained to become teachers; the turnover of instructors is often rapid, given the precarity and unpredictability of refugee life. It is essential for each center to implement professional development sessions to assist faculty. As a matter of fact, students are simultaneously learning English and *in* English which, in second language acquisition, is an example of CLIL, Content and Language Integrated Learning.<sup>4</sup> In the past, centers used Australian textbooks donated to the school. Their language, however, required significant adjustments, and the school recently moved to texts specific for learner of English as a second language.

<sup>4</sup>On the complexity of language instruction at CRLC, see Alberto Gelmi, "Teaching Teachers. An experiment in intensive training for educators in a refugee community," *Idee in form@zione* (2019).

SLOW-READING *EVELINE* IN JAKARTA

The main question for the intensive class that is the focus of this chapter was the selection of the core readings. The workshop had to combine language instruction with professional development for teachers. On average, five to seven students participated in this class, scheduled before the first period. The text had to be accessible yet challenging for students, to raise their interest, stir conversations, and prompt critical and creative responses. Before the class, school managers had shared with the instructor the students' language profiles and their plans for professional development. Teachers ranked in the intermediate level of proficiency, with a good command of informal, everyday English; their focus for the two-week project was academic reading and writing, in preparation of the GED exam and in light of the fact that most volunteers interrupted their studies before the end of high school in their home countries.<sup>5</sup>

A delicate matter was whether we should prefer an escapist piece that could offer some relief, or more realistic writing that mirrored the students' predicament. This inevitably dovetailed into a question of power: should learners read Western works of literature, or should they instead look into their own cultures? And what about the culture of the host country? During an informal conversation, students signaled their interest in Western literature. One person justified her preference by mentioning the Charlie Hebdo shooting that took place in Paris only one month after she arrived in Indonesia in 2015. At the time, the student remembered news outlets pointing their finger at the lack of integration of Muslim migrants into French society as a cause for the attack. The episode persuaded her that getting an education while in a transit country was an effective way to expose herself to the culture of her future countries of residence. She argued that reading "Western stories" was an excellent bridge toward the Other.

The choice fell on James Joyce's *Eveline*, a short story from the collection *The Dubliners*. It tells of a young woman, torn between a dull existence with her family in Ireland and a brand-new life in Buenos Aires with her love, Frank. Bittersweet memories of the past will eventually hold her back, as Eveline decides to stay with her abusive father and let Frank go, in the heart-melting closing of the story.

The density of this text and the students' uneven level of proficiency mandated a lower reading speed. Contrary to the academic practice of timed examinations, the class embarked in an experiment of "slow reading." In

<sup>5</sup> Some former students of the school later become teachers themselves.

Thomas Newkirk's definition, slow reading has less to do with actual timing than "with the relationship we have with what we read, with the quality of attention that we bring to our reading, with the investments that we are willing to make" (Newkirk 2012, 2). The new pace allowed us to pause, interrogate, and discuss *Eveline* and her choices, the boundaries of her agency, and the universality of her story. Written in Catholic Ireland a century ago, and now perused in Southeast Asia by a group of Muslim refugee men and women and a white European male facilitator, Joyce's story did not disappoint. *Eveline*'s final acceptance of her fate—her "paralysis"—did stir conversation and resonated within our unconventional interpretive community.

One paragraph at a time, everyone savored the description of environments and characters, coming up with ingenious equivalents for the cultural references mentioned in the story and trying to predict what would happen next. This hands-on approach made it natural for students to engage creatively with *Eveline* as a final project, imagining a different ending to the story. The outcomes included a vendetta-plot featuring the mysterious figure in an old picture hanging in *Eveline*'s living room that a student-writer explicitly modeled after Bollywood blockbusters. Another participant wrote a melancholic piece, acknowledging that there is no real Prince Charming in life, as *Eveline*'s loving boyfriend Frank turns out to be just as possessive and psychologically abusive as her father.<sup>6</sup> In a written reflection at the end of class, this student wrote:

Reading stories is more interesting and engaging than reading articles or political news. The story was narrated in a similar condition as ours. The unhappiness of the main character in her childhood city where she grew up and had memories with her siblings, friends and her mother perfectly connected to our emotions when we left our own home country behind. The difficulty of making a choice between staying or leaving was what we had behind us. *Eveline* left a place where she was not happy, but she still had some bonds. That touched our entire heart and mind.

The pressure underlying text-selection and the stress of contemplating multiple teaching objectives at once were quickly supplanted by the simple enjoyment of storytelling and the human connection that comes with it, when we gave ourselves time to actually listen to the characters and their adventures and misadventures.

<sup>6</sup>For an incredible showcase of literary and artistic talents in the refugee community in Indonesia, see <https://www.thearchipelago.org/>.

## CONCLUSIONS

During and after the Covid-19 pandemic, statistics show, staggering numbers of children and young adults were left with minimal or no access to school during the transition to online instruction. Although the trend is international, things are unsurprisingly worse in developing countries and among refugee communities.<sup>7</sup> We would, however, make an egregious mistake if we held the pandemic responsible for all the shortcomings of our educational systems. As much as literacy rates have risen over the last fifty years, millions of people are still excluded from elementary education, including a disproportionate number of women. Moreover, the complexities of the global economy and world migrations demand higher benchmarks in literacy than the mere ability to read and write. What experts call “functional literacy” is alarmingly out of reach for many citizens who are incapacitated from fully grasping the meaning of a text they need for everyday life.<sup>8</sup>

The Humanities and Liberal Arts can and should inject a sense of primacy for language as the place of interaction among fellow human beings. From elementary school all the way up to college, too often literacy classes are forced to bear a double burden: teaching students how to read and write while also covering a daunting array of world literature. To the contrary, language education should be a shared endeavor on the part of all instructors, in the spirit of groundbreaking initiatives such as the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC).<sup>9</sup> Born in the 1970s, these programs are based on the assumption that best practices pertaining to reading and writing exceed the specific contents of a given discipline; WAC aims to incorporate into each class moments of meta-disciplinary and metacognitive reflection that are vital for twenty-first-century citizenship.

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF and the United Nations have been drawing attention to this unfolding crisis <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1086232> (last retrieved: October 2021). Reliable and updated statistics are available on the UNESCO website (<http://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/literacy>; last retrieved: October 2021).

<sup>8</sup> According to UNESCO, functional literacy “refers to the capacity of a person to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective function of his or her group and community and also for enabling him or her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his or her own and the community’s development” (<http://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/functional-literacy>, last retrieved: October 2021).

<sup>9</sup> For an excellent introduction to the principles of WAC, see the Open Access materials assembled by Hostos Community College (CUNY): <https://commons.hostos.cuny.edu/wac/> (last retrieved: October 2021).



The slow reading of *Eveline* at CRLC not only exposed students to a literary masterpiece whose main character echoed the students' own sense of disempowerment; it also attempted to provide—in the short time available—the tools to proceed independently to other works and other authors and creatively engage with them. Most importantly, in several moments of pedagogical and didactic exchange, it suggested ways in which students could carry on this work in their capacity as teachers.

Although the combination of literacy, ESL, and teacher training was in a way unique to the CRLC experiment, the interdisciplinarity, the peer-to-peer mentorship, and the integration of content- and language teaching that underpinned it, are pedagogically universal. They foreground learning as a social collaboration in which language is simultaneously a tool and an end in itself. Against this backdrop, literature is an incredible vehicle for interpersonal and cross-cultural dialogue that does not turn a blind eye to the chronic injustices of our world. A sober reminder that, at all latitudes, the Liberal Arts pave the way toward the integral humanism we should still reach for.

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