

The Language of Human Rights in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa – Professor Sangina Patnaik

I am applying for a grant to assist Professor Sangina Patnaik on her research on the language of human rights in transcripts from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Victims Committee hearings. This research focuses on the role of narrative in shaping systems of legal reparations and justice directly following the apartheid era. My work with Professor Patnaik would involve both participation in a reading group on the topic of human rights (and in particular, its emergence as a concept attached to a specific set of vocabulary) and archival research on transcripts from the hearings. Some goals of this project include determining what the language of human rights is, and what historical factors have shaped its existence as an exclusive lexicon; investigating how this language was employed in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and to what extent its use reflected a true ethos of human rights; and recognizing problems in the rhetoric of the Commission in an effort to consider how future human rights-oriented procedures could rethink conventional language and utilize different linguistic means for actualizing justice.

Working with Professor Patnaik on this research would inform and supplement my studies at Swarthmore. As an Honors English major and Honors Art History minor, I am deeply interested in studying how systems of speech, description, and representation affect the lives of those who have experienced violence and are seeking justice. Studying the legal impact of the vocabulary of the TRC on South African citizens' realities post-apartheid would assist me in developing my critical thinking about the effects of symbolic schema on the lived realities of people whose identities position them at intersections of oppression. I believe that participating in Professor Patnaik's research would be extremely valuable for me, as I would be sharpening my research skills and strengthening my knowledge of topics around which my Honors exams will center: the cultural impact of language structures, the way historical narratives shape cultural memory, and the role representation plays in both actions of oppression and resistance.