Event: “Poems in Pursuit of Peace: A Poetry Performance by Emi Mahmoud,” October 29, 2018

Reflection:
Attending Emi Mahmoud’s poetry reading and Q&A was a reminder of the different ways in which we have to approach human rights. As someone interested in the relationship between human rights and the arts, specifically theater, it was inspiring being in a room with an acclaimed poet who uses her art as a vessel for change. Using spoken word makes human rights more accessible to the general population. Not everyone has access to documents like the UDHR or Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and even if one does it is not a guarantee that they can be easily understood. Many of these treaties were written in such a way that makes it difficult to fully understand what is and is not protected. What Emi does is transform the information in those documents from abstract to engaging and concrete.

Emi’s work really focuses on lived experience. Her reasons for writing and then sharing her work are different: she writes to process and she shares for advocacy, for the people whose worlds are ending. Because studying human rights feels academic so much of a time, it is almost revolutionary for Emi to be doing work parallel to lawyers and policymakers in a journal. She usually cries when writing her poetry and by the time she performs it, she has already done her processing and the emotion is contained and controlled. This allows her to create intimate, truthful stories and then adapt her delivery to make her messages more effective. At one point she referenced not being able to get in front of the UN or world leaders and present as too emotional. There is a balance that she has to attain that involves mediating her personal investment and goals. While her logic makes sense, I wish it did not have to. Regular people, that is, non-politicians, should be involved in human rights in any capacity they can without feeling as if they have to censor themselves to be respected and fully heard.

One of the best parts about the evening was how transparent and open Emi was with her own journey. It never felt like we were there receiving a lecture on human rights. From beginning to end, she was open to receiving questions at any point from the audience and read a wide selection of poetry from her collection, Sister’s Entrance. The event was very much like a slam poetry reading-conversation hybrid. One of the most profound things she said while talking was that she doesn’t believe she’d be able to do the work she does (political or otherwise) without having a US passport or the backing of the UN. Why is it that an individual needs an international organization’s support or identification from a Western country in order to be legitimized? In 2018, it is unacceptable that we do not automatically view everyone’s experience as equally deserving of being heard. Emi’s point highlights a very important point that although human rights have made strides, we still need to return to the baseline of reevaluating whose experiences are valued more and how we can change our own biases.