



President's New Year's Reception 2024

Acceptance Speech | Gerawork Teferra Gizaw, Winner of the Voltaire Prize 2024

Dear Professor Günther,

Dear Dr. Friede Springer,

Dear distinguished participants,

Yes! I do accept The Voltaire Prize for Tolerance, International Understanding, and Respect for Difference. I accept this award not only for the contribution I made so far or for the pushbacks and challenges experienced as a result of it but also for two additional reasons. First, for the commitments I want to reinforce – bringing research to the community level so that wondering critically, understanding one’s surroundings, and questioning status quo become common ways of life. I believe that it had been there but we lost it along the way as we instrumentalize ourselves for specific work or when we try to mimic our role models. Second, accepting this prize also means supporting the notion of tolerance for differences, free thought and speech, and at the same time understanding our entanglement. To that effect, this award will be an invaluable gift and a reminder of the responsibility that I assume to especially challenge the monopolization of knowledge creation, associated discourses, and work towards promoting meaningful learning. I strongly believe that for those at the margin, the collective ignorance and lack of sincere dialogue are the fertile ground for all forms of vices we experience. My little efforts in the forms of writing and dialogue, which I tell below, have been a reaction to those vices.

In one of my writings, “Kakuma Refugee Camp: Pseudo-Permanence in Permanent Transience,” I explored the life experiences of refugees in the context of humanitarian governance. I collected stories based on decades of lived experiences and shared views on how space for life is created in limbo, a space that led refugees to liminality, dissociation, and hopelessness, or faking of life. In my other contribution for a book chapter, ‘The Right to Research’, I explored the evolution of refugee education service from the 1940s. Then I showed the substandard education service in the Kakuma camp, which I believe was caused by the gap in the functional arrangements of institutions, an area that often seems to be ignored. As an educator who worked with refugees, I volunteered to show how refugee education, which is meant to “affirm self-worth in a society that systematically excluded and undervalued them,” has continued to contribute to a different form of exclusion. Whenever I had the opportunity, I also advocated for meaningful learning.

During my study in the Global History Lab and follow-up courses, where I met wonderful people

– Kate, Professor Marcia, and Professor Jeremy, who became my scaffolding to see the bigger picture, I also noticed the challenges to meaningful learning. I have seen valuable resources that help us understand our context hidden behind paywalls and accessible only to a few. The consequence of this situation is the creation of two groups, the elite and the ignorant. As a result of this experience, whenever opportunities arose, I expressed how unfair it is to deny access to resources. I also tried my best to make sure my contributions become available in open access, though I am not sure how far my effort helped. By trying so I believe I questioned the de facto monopolies of higher institutions.

In the process of this journey, I have also questioned the culture of research whose main goals seem to be (at least practically) a self-service academic adventure that ends with discourse within intellectuals' small circles and academia with little or no impact on the outside world. I tried to show how using poor and marginalized communities as a means of research reduces humans to objects. In my research with colleagues, I demonstrated how community-based research enhances community members' participation and how the little benefit can trickle down and continue to accrue. By promoting community-based research, I also questioned the de facto monopolies of knowledge production. I also expressed my worries that researching human sufferings especially caused by power, like in refugee camps, is indirectly legitimizing the cause.

I have also shown my resistance in action to rules that restrict thinking, and I gave priority to wondering freely and critically with little worry about language, essay structures, themes, and other academic writing requirements. Living in a highly constrained and controlled environment and as an educator, I not only experienced but also observed how such rules are a burden and restrain free thinking and writing. As a result of such rules, speaking is reduced to echoing and writing to paraphrasing. Recycling concepts and ideas becomes the norm. This is happening because the burdens imposed in the form of rules to write and get grades are much heavier than the motivation to freely wonder and critically think.

In addition, living in a refugee camp, between nations, where the local and global divide are considered as if they are mutually exclusive, my choice has been a different one. Tolerating all forms of pushback from those who see in duality, I created a space for dialogue and questioned the perceptions of distorted and flawed Local-Global duality that has been used to influence thought, manipulate peoples, and silence different expressions.

Finally, outside the efforts that led me to this award, I want to go back to my past and tell a story related to free expression. In the 1980s, college restrooms were like a library to me where free, original, and candid expressions were found. I enjoyed them! One day's experience may illustrate all – as usual staying longer in the restroom I searched on the wall for a new post, and indeed there was. I read it – the message was about comparing two ethnic languages and it tried to uplift the undermined language by saying (this is according to my current recollection) – '*X... language is the best language one should use proudly*', considering the context there was a strong message in the post. Then I read the striking response – very brief and candid – it said (this is also based on my recollection) – '*so just go out of the college, stand at the main gate, and using that language either try to speak to the beautiful girl or just beg for a coin and you then know the right answer*'. I reread it and imagined doing exactly what the respondent suggested – and I couldn't control my laugh. His message was also strong. Such witty and satirical expressions, informed me of the many unexpressed thoughts and feelings buried in all of us and

waiting for time to explode. Actually, it has already started exploding everywhere, and my laughter was also part of it, but in the wrong way. Centuries ago, such witty and satirical expressions were freely used by pioneers like Voltaire and Diogenes to convey ideas, challenge power, and question dogmas.

Today the situation is different. I may not need to stay longer in restrooms to read witty posts on speaking walls, there are millions of free virtual speaking walls (of course not valuable virtual library resources). We are flooded and overwhelmed by such expressions to the extent that distinguishing our own real expressions/experiences from what we are absorbing is becoming difficult. As businesses use brain tattoos as models of advertisements to unconsciously influence our consumption behaviors, indoctrination is the formula to instill ideology and belief systems, produce skilled labor, and shape opinions. These virtual walls can easily reach us through the gadgets we carry and the websites we visit. As a result, it is not only free expression that is endangered but also free thoughts and wondering. I think Voltaire foresaw the danger when he said "I do not agree with what you have to say, but I'll defend to the death your right to say it."

At the moment we need many Voltaires who defend not only free expressions but also free minds, or more Diogenes who reject all forms of self-service establishments!!

To my father who believed in dialogue and argument

To my mother who paid the price

Thank you, Staci, for witnessing that knowledge is found everywhere

Thank you, Kate; Thank you, Marcia, for bridging the gap

Thank you, Elena, for taking the risk!