

Telling the Story: Power and Responsibility in Documenting Human Rights Violations

September 15-16, 2005

Brandeis University • Hassenfeld Conference Center

Thursday, September 15

8:30 - 9:00 • Welcome

9:00 - 9:30 • Introduction to Aims of the Conference

9:30 - 11:45 • Presentations by Human Rights Documenters

(9:30 - 10:30) *The 1994 Rwandan Genocide: The Challenges of Bringing Mass Killing to the Front Pages*
Corinne Dufka, photojournalist/reporter, Human Rights Watch (United States)

(10:45 - 11:45) *Threads of Hope: The Story of the Chilean Arpillera*
Marjorie Agosin, poet/activist, Wellesley College, 2005-06 Madeleine Haas Russell visiting professor at Brandeis (Chile)

12:00 - 1:00 • Lunch

1:00 - 5:00 • Presentations by Human Rights Documenters, Continued

(1:00 - 2:20) *The So-Called Child Witch: The Creation of a Local Human Rights Story in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*
Angela Nicoara, filmmaker, Internews-Rwanda (Romania)

(2:20 - 3:40) *Mapiripán: A Shortcut to Hell*
Maria Cristina Caballero, journalist, Harvard University (Colombia)

(3:40 - 5:00) *Voices from the Grave, Justice for the Living: Dilemmas Surrounding Exhumations*
Susannah Sirkin, forensic specialist, Physicians for Human Rights (United States)

Each documenter will be given an hour to present and “deconstruct” a piece of human rights reporting that they have produced. The aim is for the audience to understand the complex array of decisions that went into its production. There will then be 20 minutes for audience discussion of the presentation. Some of the questions that the documenter will address include:

- What is the purpose of their particular example of documentation of human rights violations? Does it seek to sound the alarm? Establish “the truth”? Bring about justice, reconciliation, reparations, policy changes, military or other interventions, or donor contributions?
- Does the “why” determine/influence/justify the “how”? Should it?
- What are the “sources” of the particular example of human rights documentation? Who is considered to have the “real story”? Victims? Witnesses? Outside observers? Anyone else?
- How are the portrayals of violations constructed? What language, symbols, tropes, etc. are utilized?
- How subjective or objective are the results?
- Who are the audiences for this documentation? How are they reached?
- What is the impact of documentation, both short and long-term?
- What are the responsibilities associated with telling the human rights story? Who are the “watchdogs” of the documentation process? If there are none, should the process be regulated?
- What are the potential risks involved in telling the story, to victims, documenters, or others?

Thursday, September 15, Evening

5:30 - 7:30 • Dreitzer Gallery

In Memory's Grove: Commemorative Art by Kevin Sipp and Keith Morris Washington

Reception and gallery talk by artists Kevin Sipp and Keith Morris Washington discussing their art installations on memory, story-telling, and human rights.

In this exhibition, two important African American artists explore the legacies of tragic loss and human rights violations, with particular attention to the history of lynching and racial violence in the United States. In a large sculptural installation, "Strange Fruit Hanging from the Tree of Life: Reflections of Bruno," Atlanta-based artist Kevin Sipp recalls the death of Renaissance philosopher Giordano Bruno, burned alive by the Inquisition in 1600, as a point of entry into the long history of victims of injustice and intolerance the world over. Sipp's "memory tree" projects the sounds of prayers and laments for the lost, from Bruno to lynching victim Emmet Till, organized around the haunting anti-lynching song, "Strange Fruit." Boston-based Keith Morris Washington takes us on an uncanny journey through American landscapes of pain and memory, through shroud-like paintings depicting now-pastoral settings where lynchings once were perpetrated. Washington's murals subtly juxtapose bodies, trees, and the land, memorializing the victims of America's long history of domestic terrorism against persons of color.

The opening of the exhibition will also be marked by an observance of the fiftieth anniversary of the lynching of Emmett Till, murdered at age 14 in Mississippi on the night of August 28, 1955.

Friday, September 16

8:30 - 9:00 • Synthetic Summary of First Days' Proceedings

The rest of the day is composed of a series of three panels that will take up the issues raised during the presentations by human rights documenters on the first day. Each panel will feature three speakers who will have 15-20 minutes each to speak about their work with reference to the panel's theme. Two discussants will offer brief remarks (5-7 minutes) after the panelists speak. There will then be an audience discussion for 30 minutes.

9:00 - 10:45 • Panel I: Bringing to Light

What are the most important challenges faced in initially investigating and exposing human right violations? How are primary narrative accounts produced by victims, journalists and investigators? What power do these early accounts and early narrators wield in shaping subsequent public and institutional perceptions of the events under investigation?

Moderator: Florence Graves, Brandeis Institute for Investigative Journalism

The Perpetrator Narrative: West African Mercenaries
Corinne Dufka, reporter/photojournalist, Human Rights Watch

Some of the Challenges that Journalists Confront
Maria Cristina Caballero, journalist, Harvard University

Transparency and Truth at What Cost: Unveiling the Rape of Girls in Darfur
Maryam Elahi, director, Human Rights Program, Trinity College

Discussants: Maria Green, Brandeis University; Susannah Sirkin, Physicians for Human Rights

Friday, September 16 (continued)

11:00 - 12:45 • Panel 2: Struggles over Voice

What forms should human rights documentation take? Whose voices ought to be primary in the assemblage and production of various texts and aesthetic representations of human rights violations? How are human rights stories told, passed on, and transformed in their movement from private experience to public forums?

Moderator: Sally Merry, New York University

The Lost Girls: Whose Story is This?

Aduei Riak, Sudanese refugee and advocate, Brandeis University

Water Dropping from My Eyes

Deirdre Giblin, asylum lawyer, International Institute of Boston

Strange Fruit Hanging from the Tree of Life

Kevin Sipp, artist, Atlanta, Georgia

Discussants: Marjorie Agosin, Wellesley College; Mark Auslander, Brandeis University

12:45 - 1:45 • Lunch

1:45 - 3:30 • Panel 3: Audience, Efficacy, Ethics

What are the central ethical responsibilities of those who document human rights violations? Is "getting the story out" always the pre-eminent moral responsibility under conditions of crisis? Under what circumstances should victims and eyewitnesses be actively pressured to share their recollections? When should forms of social memory, or of social forgetting, be actively promoted in the interest of reconciliation, peace or social healing? To which local and international audiences do human rights documenters owe their primary responsibilities?

Moderator: Leigh Swigart, Brandeis University

The Role of International Arbitration: The Experience of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights

Sanji Monageng, commissioner, African Commission for Human and Peoples' Rights

Human Rites? Truth and NGO-ization in Northern Sierra Leone

Rosalind Shaw, associate professor of anthropology, Tufts University

Telling the Story of Soviet Dissidents

Joshua Rubenstein, northeast regional director, Amnesty International

Discussants: Zolani Ngwane, Haverford College; Angela Nicoara, Internews/Brandeis University

3:40 - 4:00 • Final Discussion