Rational Witness no More: Social Documentary and War in Northern Uganda

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Abstract: My repeated experiences with Beatrice in Padibe Internally Displaced Person’s Camp in Northern Uganda showed that social justice documentary and art work in, or about, situations of mass human rights abuses and war requires a conceptual shift from rational, to implicated, to critical witness. Coupled with my practical experience of using ethnographic research that privileges marginalized voices, and pursuing alternative dissemination opportunities, the critical witness stance can re-conceptualize dominant media and humanitarian narratives on issues such as internal displacement and children in armed conflict. These are first steps in challenging hegemonic practices that tend to bind social documentary media and art-work to a production and dissemination process that simply serves to reinforce prevailing political and economic agendas.

Keywords: Documentary, Advocacy Art, Political Art, Witnessing, Conflict, Northern Uganda, Politics of Storytelling

“Bearing witness implies that there is no best way of depicting or thinking about atrocities, but the very fact of paying heed collectively is crucial.” (Young 15)

“No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it.” (Einstein)

Reality Check

--The following is from an email written by Ojibu Odong Geoffrey, Gulu, Northern Uganda, Dec.17 th , 2008 to Lara Rosenoff:

Yesterday I got a phone call from your long-time friend in Padibe i.e. Beatrice having admitted in the hospital in Kitgum with her baby suffering from diarrhoea, vomiting and has lost weight. She therefore requested me to pass this information to you. The medical bills which she is requesting you help in squaring since the little funds she got finished while still in the hospital. She had not been able to tell how much its needed to short the bill. If there could be possibility, then I can move over and see them before Christmas.

I RAN THROUGH the frozen streets of Toronto, Canada to a Western Union on Parliament street, on the second floor of a take-out Indian restaurant. With the scent of curry in my nostrils and the pungent sounds and sights of a Bollywood musical blaring from a small TV screen behind the bulletproof glass of the counter, I transferred money to Ojibu, halfway around the world to Northern Uganda, in East Africa. I was concerned. Beatrice had never asked for money before and I knew that it could not have been easy for her.
I met Beatrice two years earlier when I began a documentary photography project following her in her home at Padibe Internally Displaced Persons’ (IDP) Camp. She was 15 then and head of her household which consisted of herself and her three brothers. Her father had been killed when she was one year old and her mother had died of AIDS when she was just nine. She had been abducted by the Lord’s Resistance Army rebel group and escaped the year before we met. Reunited with her brothers in the IDP camp, she had to drop out of school as she suffered from repeated bouts of typhoid due to unclean water in the camp. Over the past two years, I have seen Beatrice estranged from her brothers and kin, become pregnant, birth a child and finally marry- all by the age of seventeen.

After receiving the Western Union money transfer, Ojibu’s trip to bring Beatrice the funds in Padibe IDP Camp, would take him east of Gulu into Kitgum District (Lamwo district as of 2010), and north toward the border with Sudan. He would travel through the worst hit areas of the 23 year old conflict between the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan government. At certain stages in the conflict, over 1.8 million people, or 90% of the northern population, mostly Acholi, had been displaced into severely overcrowded and squalid IDP camps, supposedly for their protection from the rebels. In 2005, a report stated that there was “almost 1000 excess deaths every week in Kitgum, Gulu and Pader Districts among IDPs in camps, above and beyond the baseline mortality not attributable to the crisis” (Ugandan Ministry of Health 35). It is also estimated that one in five girls and one in three boys in Northern Uganda have been abducted at some point by the LRA and were forced to be child soldiers (Annan, J. et al. iv). Despite the lull in fighting since late 2006, and improved security and living conditions in Northern Uganda, no formal ceasefire or peace agreement exists. Ojibu’s route, on impossible red roads through the parched and suffocated bush of the dry season, would travel past burned out vehicles, recovering villages and some of the hundreds of thousands of humanity still concentrated in the IDP camps.
Stuck waiting in the Western Union Masala in snowy Canada, I thought of Beatrice and her infant son, Vita. Statistics regarding mortality rates for children under five flashed through my head. The Ugandan Ministry of Health documented in 2005 that the under-the-age-of-5 mortality rate (U5MR) was well above emergency thresholds (two deaths per 10 000 children per day) in all areas of the north affected by the conflict (Ugandan Ministry of Health ii). I saw in my mind the line of worry across Beatrice’s 17 year-old forehead as she looked down at her child. I could hear baby Vita crying from the discomfort of the illness. I could smell the clinic’s overwhelming perfume of sweat and bleach, and frustratingly wondered again what our documentary project, the photos and installations of Beatrice’s life, could really do for her and her son? My developing relationship with Beatrice over the years has forced me to reconsider the impetus and efficacy of social documentary communications, and in doing so, has challenged a common assumption about the prominence and undisputed value of documentary photography as ‘bearing witness’.

The idea of documentary photography as bearing witness is part of a tradition that dates back to the late 1800’s and has earlier roots in the ideals of a free press (Newton 98). In contemporary discourses around social documentary work, conversations have typically focused on representation (Sontag), aestheticization (Reinhardt, Solomon-Godeau), commercialization (Moeller) and the questioning of documentary’s ‘truth claims’ (Renov, Nichols). This latest approach to documentary deals with the ‘uncertainization’ of life and truth’s pursuit, and therefore problematizes the idea of witnessing and testimony through artistic representation, the indexical acts of reference upon which they rely, and the issues associated with speaking for others. According to Shoshana Felman however, “the appointment to bear witness is, paradoxically enough, an appointment to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak for others and to others.” (Felman & Daub 3). How then can contemporary documentary reconcile its need to bear witness? And, what becomes of the role of witnessing in social documentary work? It is to an exploration of this crisis in witnessing that I turn to focus on the actions of myself, as maker/researcher in my practice (as witness), and my goal of communicating with a public/audience (who then also become witness), to explore if, and how, critical documentary media communications can function in contemporary society.

This paper thus analyzes both the potentials and pitfalls of contemporary social documentary through a conversation about witnessing in three acts: the rational witness, the implicated witness and the critical witness. These acts correspond to the three visits I had with Beatrice, and will thus serve as both the background and the impetus for the theoretical questionings that will practically expand conceptions regarding the pedagogic and transformative potential of documentary work in contemporary North American life.

**Act I: Rational Witness**

I began travelling throughout Northern Uganda in 2004, three years before I met Beatrice, to voluntarily photograph and film the conflict. At that time, I naively felt that if I documented the horrors and gross human rights abuses, and communicated them in North America, then people would understand the terrible living conditions that over two million people were forced to endure. I grew up immersed in my grandmother’s stories of survival from the holocaust, and believed that if people had known about the mass murders, then

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1 “…a key rationale supporting the idea of a ‘free press’ is that if people know what is going on in the world, they will be better informed and work to improve society.”
action would have been taken to curtail the slaughter. Similarly, I felt that if people saw the
horror in northern Uganda, then action would be taken. This view persisted through two
more visits, including the first time I met Beatrice.

I have come to see the naïveté behind my intent, and believe that I conceived of myself, and
the North American public, as rational witnesses. The rational witness is, and has been
for sometime, the justification behind the creation of social documentary work in North
American society. As famed conflict photographer James Nachtwey notes on his website:
“I have been a witness, and these pictures are my testimony. The events I have recorded
should not be forgotten and must not be repeated” (Nachtwey). There is an intent here that
the photographer rationally bears witness and that his or her testimony will rationally affect
others (aside from the photographed and the photographer), causing some kind of rational
healing or remedying action in the world.

Upon further examination of this idea of man and woman as rational witness, it became
clear that it is the result of a combination of eighteenth century ideas that bring together
conceptions of the morality of wo/man through rationality (enlightenment), that democratic
citizenship necessitates participation in political life (civic-republicanism), and that the press’
role is as a pedagogical tool that presented the rational and politically active man and woman
with information about the world (libertarian theory of the press). I began to understand
that the idea of man and woman as rational witnesses are therefore an accepted, yet severely
outdated concept behind the production of social non-fiction work today. The documentarian
and the contemporary North American public are neither inherently rational nor political;
and the press is not ideologically neutral or separate from our socio-economic system.

I began to realize that if my documentary work is focused on finding a way to contribute
to a change in perception and actions, I had to recognize that any media or art I produced
would be experienced through hegemonically established dominant perceptions created in
part by existing images and communication systems. I became particularly concerned with
Solomon-Godeau’s question that if documentary photography is reformist in intention, what
are the ways that it can truly contribute to change when it functions within the larger systems
that serve to limit, contain and ultimately neutralize it? (171). David Levi Strauss also speaks
to the problems of the ideology of the overall system for the dissemination of images, noting
its impact on the images themselves. “Photojournalistic news images leave our complicity
intact. They do not make us question things because they operate within a perfectly organized
rhetoric of consumption that reinforces a language of spectatorship” (Strauss np).

These problems of liberal market capitalism in relation to the ideals of a free press have
much in common with a political economy view of media culture, and essentially follows
the Frankfurt school’s critique that “the culture industries had the singular function ( . . . ) of
providing ideological legitimation of the existing capitalist societies and of integrating indivi-
duals into the framework of the capitalist system” (Durham & Kellner xvii). And if one
sees conflict, such as that in Northern Uganda, and the representation thereof, as part of a
larger, global, capitalist system, then how can any amount of witnessing within that system
provoke change?

I thought that perhaps I had found hope in a contemporary theory of rational witnessing, what
some call the “CNN effect”, which actually correlates policy formation with media
coverage. “We may speak of the CNN effect as 1) a policy agenda-setting agent, 2) an impediment to the achievement of desired policy goals, and 3) an accelerant to policy decision-making” (Livingston 2). However, my optimism was short lived. Although some images and media coverage do create critical attention in the public sphere, there is no discernible proof that direct action ever resulted from merely the appearance of images in the media (Perlmutter, Jakobsen, Gilboa).

I had to accept the fact that the contemporary press and media are not practically, or primarily, concerned with the education of society over profit, nor is the average North American the politically engaged citizen conceptualized by Thomas Jefferson et al circa 1789 when they inscribed the ideals of rationality, witnessing and a free press in the United States’ Bill of Rights. Habermas noted even in 1975 that most people had by then abandoned the public and political realm, enabling elites to deal with crises unencumbered by lengthy public debate. He called it ‘civil-privatism’ and stated that everyday life, even 34 years ago, was a- or anti-political. Chantal Mouffe agrees that that era has not ended, and in 2008 called our time a ‘post-political age’ (8). Jay Sandel also agrees, and offers, “. . . if politics is to recover its civic voice, it must again find a way to debate questions we have forgotten to ask” (58).

But still many documentarians, myself included at some point, believe in the ideal that if people knew what was going on in the world, they would work to improve and change society. But, how could the public work to change what is wrong in society if they are no longer engaged in political life? How then can a critical documentary approach realistically function in a ‘post-political’ age?

I have found much inspiration in James Carey’s ideas concerning the ritual view of communication (1989). He argues that the dominant view of communications in our society is a transmission model that conceives of communication as information transferred from a sender to a receiver. The ritual model, on the other hand, sees the parties as participants engaged in the process of community building through time. “[. . .] one sees it as a process whereby reality is created, shared, modified, and preserved” (Carey 33). So, if we eschew the idea of the rational witness and the maker/researcher engages in different ways of telling different stories, in different forms, might we not ultimately create transformative perceptions and actions concerning issues such as contemporary long term conflict?

I was not certain, but at least I had found the will to continue. I decided to change my practice, and re-visit Beatrice in Padibe IDP Camp. Instead of visiting another girl in another IDP camp in northern Uganda or elsewhere, I thought that a more personal, sustained and micro-level view of one girl’s experience of conflict might be a right step towards ‘engaging in different ways’. I also heeded the voice of Donna Haraway who states that: “In situations of sustained and widespread violence, privileging the voices of those who are at the center of the violence (…), but at the margins of society offers a more immediate and subtle understanding of the dynamics of bloody violence” (quoted in Riaño-Alcala 15).

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3 Even in regard to the oft-referenced case of coverage of the Vietnam War, Halin (1986) concludes that it really represents a case of the media reflecting and responding to already existing divisions that appeared among political elites.
Act II: Implicated Witness

I thus returned to visit Beatrice in Padibe IDP Camp, eleven months after I first met her, and found her living in a different part of the camp. She had moved away from her brothers, and was crying and upset.\(^4\) They had quarrelled over her brother Patrick’s new wife, and she was kicked out of the hut. Beatrice had practically raised her brothers and had been taking care of them since her mother died when she was nine years old.

I knew that something was amiss because I had arrived in Padibe IDP Camp the day before and when I finally found my way to Beatrice’s old hut amidst the maze of overcrowded humanity in the camp, I saw her brother Patrick with his new wife. They greeted me, and as is customary, borrowed a chair from a neighbour and offered me a seat. When seated, he looked at me seriously and said that we had to talk. He said that he didn’t think that I would return to the camp to see Beatrice, that he was surprised to see me back here…that I shouldn’t listen to Beatrice if she tries to speak against him…that he did not beat her even if she tells me that he did…that she can now come back…

I didn’t quite know what to do. I told him that I would go find Beatrice at her new place and that I would come visit soon, and to please give my greetings to Richard and Bosco, her other brothers. The hairs on the back of my neck were tingly and my stomach had bottomed out. As I wound my way back through the huts, the sounds and smells of the camp dissolved into my thoughts. I was deeply affected by her brother’s address. Not only did it make me worry more about Beatrice, but the way he spoke to me made me see my relationship with Beatrice in a whole new way. Somehow, by returning to visit her, I had shown myself as a guardian of sorts.

I had returned to visit Beatrice, in hopes of moving beyond the rational witness, only to realize that by returning I unwittingly became much more than a witness, I became a participant, or rather, an implicated witness. A new responsibility was now attached to our relationship. I had already felt attached to Beatrice - the rubber bracelet she had given me the year before had never left my wrist…but this was different. The naïve image in my mind of us as collaborators was dispelled by the realities of our specific time and place. I realized that within this “Other” world, my identity was already constructed. “You have a way of talking, gesturing, and valuing as that world constructs you as the outsider before you even travel there.” (Madison 104). Now I acknowledge that I had, on several occasions broken that stereotype (by learning to garden, speaking the language, cooking, and staying for weeks in the camp), but I ethically felt that it was my responsibility to live up to this image of my otherness that implied authority and guardianship; not only because of how it materially affected Beatrice, but because of how it now affected other people’s perceptions of her.

I understood then that my return made people see Beatrice and me differently than before. I was assigned this role of ‘guardian’ because of a need created by the realities of that time and place: the murder and death of Beatrice’s parents; the impoverishment and trauma of her extended family from 22 years of war, abduction, displacement and disease; and the dearth of government (psycho-socio-economic) programs. Whether I intended it or not, my role as the engaged and responsible, but immensely privileged witness, took on a whole new light in the situated context of an internal displacement camp in the midst of an unresolved

\(^4\) Perhaps it is not so unusual for a teenage girl in Canada to burst into tears, but for an Acholi girl, and for Beatrice, it was. I had never seen her cry - not when she spoke of her father or mother dying, nor when she spoke of her abduction or beating.
two decade long conflict. I again became self-conscious about the documentary work, reflecting on the primacy of my moral duties to Beatrice. I newly wondered about the implications of my role as witness, within my relationship with Beatrice and, if and how it converged with my evolving conception of my role as communicative witness in North American society.

I also had to acknowledge then that my research had catapulted me into a specific socio-cultural reality and that any action I took had to be primarily understood, and judged, within the aforementioned context of conflict and displacement. Witnessing, then, became more of a responsibility to Beatrice herself, than to educating and informing my North American society. It was a fundamental shift that alluded to a definition of the role of witness primarily as a responsibility to the subject first as “being a witness implied both a specific positioning and a responsibility of testimony ‘a caring form of vigilance.’” (Malkki 94).

And, there was one more thing.

Beatrice was pregnant.

She was too scared to tell me until the end of my visit. The father of the child was in jail for defilement of another underage girl, and she believed that he was wrongly accused. With no family, and no man, I feared the worse for Beatrice and her baby. Traditionally, the Acholi are a patrilineal clan society and land passes through men (Girling, Apoko, Finnstrom). But Beatrice was an orphaned girl, now estranged from the men in her family. Where would she live, what could she call home if she wanted to leave the camp? And, without a man, and without land, what could she do, aside from brewing alcohol, to survive? 

I then began to recognize my experiences and questionings with Beatrice as a kind of ethnographic fieldwork, and learnt that the rich and problematized narratives and testimonies that emerge from this kind of sustained research approach, may be the best kind of stories to act as an antidote the black and white, objective and simplified mass media communications that unwittingly reinforce hegemonic economic and political practices.

I also turned to examining my new role as implicated witness, wondering how to translate and communicate this role onto the North American public. I decided that the grounding of the documentary work in Beatrice’s and my own testimonies could serve to explore the idea of interactivity, and engagement. “…they [testimonies] cultivate a more dialogical relationship with and alongside the spectator as opposed to speaking to the spectator” (Zimmerman 63). Testimony can also be seen as a performative speech act (Felman & Daub, Guerin & Hallas, Caruth), that makes the act of bearing witness not simply the communication of a truth already known, but its actual production through the embodied act of speaking testimony. These ideas flowed well from Carey’s ritual view of communication because the testimonies could fundamentally serve to problematize habitual production and consumption patterns associated with the communication of conflict. This idea of testimony differs from Nachtwy’s idea (and my old view) of photos as testimony, insofar as the addition of both my own and

5 “The most common economic activity reported by women [in IDP Camps] is alcohol brewing and distilling, followed by agriculture. Brewing and distilling appears to be dominant because it is a relatively profitable and a low risk use of small amounts of capital on an activity, which can be performed alongside childcare and household responsibilities. Vulnerable young women, especially those with children or orphans to care for, are in most need of livelihoods assistance (including a significant number of single young mothers). Even modest amounts of start-up capital and training can help young women develop alternatives to alcohol brewing and distilling” (Annan, J. et al. ix).
Beatrice’s testimonies could create a dialogue that questions the spectator-researcher-subject relationships.

The works of installation artist Alfredo Jaar and filmmaker Claude Lanzmann are fine examples of these kinds of testimonies. Claude Lanzmann’s film “Shoah […] takes responsibility for its times by enacting the significance of our era as an age of testimony, an age in which witnessing itself has undergone a major trauma” (Felman 206). If my and Beatrice’s joint testimonies (which include our evolving relationship), could open discussions surrounding North America’s habits of viewing conflict, as well as girl’s experience of conflict, perhaps it could also provoke thought regarding our economic and political ties to the actual conflict.

Once again, new questions regarding the creation of documentary work and the implicated witness then emerged: Where does one’s ultimate responsibility in witnessing lie? Is it possible for an implicated, non-rational and non-objective documentary practice to respond to the needs of your ‘subject’, and at the same time help re-politicize and implicate the North American public in the subjects and realities presented? How does implicating oneself, much less the North American public and subsequent politicians, really affect those documents? Or simply, how do you know that you will not do more harm than good?

**Act III: Critical Witness**

Although I was perhaps even farther from having definite answers to my original questions about contemporary social documentary work, I nonetheless returned to visit Beatrice a third time before producing any media for the North American public. Trying to overcome my fear of being implicated and involved, I found much value for non-rational engagement without guarantees in Julie Salverson’s idea of *foolish witness*.

It is absurd, even ridiculous, to risk answering the call of another. It is absurd to think that my availability as a listener, a witness, might contribute anything in the face of another’s violation, another’s loss, yet I step forward all the same…In being foolish witnesses, we allow ourselves to fail while remaining always alert, ready, and willing to try. (2005 np)

This time I found Beatrice in yet another part of the camp. She had given birth to Vita (her son) and was now living with the father of her child (he had been released from prison). Things were considerably better and we spent our time caring for Vita, taking more photos and video, looking at photos from the previous visits, and discussing her life from those times. We also spoke of the photo exhibits that I was planning, filmed a conceptual video for an installation, and discussed using our voices as text along with the images. We went through her life story again, and she told me new and different information than before. I also asked if she wanted to have an exhibit in her community, but she said “to Acholi people here in Northern Uganda, I would say nothing, I would rather ask them to teach me the way to live with others. And I would just ask them to tell me how the fighting began or the cause, and how to resolve conflict or fighting” (personal communication, July 2008).

It is only then, after two years and several months, that Beatrice’s reality hit me. She was born into conflict and was orphaned and grew up in the camp. Formal and informal education
processes were therefore disrupted, leaving Beatrice and tens of thousands of others like her, without a grounding in the cultural and social life of their communities.\(^6\)

Aside from allowing greater understanding of Beatrice’s perspectives of her world, it also made me think a great deal about “the asks” attached to social documentary work— the “what kind of action?” we witnesses advocate for with our work. I began to examine the initiatives and policies that I might support or rally for, and found myself hard pressed. I also began to question the information that is procured in the course of regular research and media practices in the camps - information that is used in establishing and implementing life-changing policies, and media that might be used to support them. The very idea of an international community that “knew best” through impersonal studies was starkly thrown into question.\(^7\)

As I write this, one year later, the revelation seems obvious. And of course - how can top-down, hegemonic research practices (including visual documentation and creation) yield transformative data and policy suggestions? Or transformative communications?

Once again, I longed for my documentary work to be different. Despite whatever effects I sought for the work in ‘my’ world, whatever conversations I could initiate in North America, I felt that it must also have a direct, relevant and beneficial impact in Beatrice’s world.\(^8\) Hence the Western Union run through the icy streets that began your journey with me here in this paper.\(^9\)

I struggled with the dual responsibility of witness to both Beatrice and my society, and decided that my only way through the dilemma was with self-critical examination and ethical, albeit risky, action in the face of uncertainty. I have certainly travelled quite far from the rational witness I conceived of myself when I began my work in Northern Uganda in 2004. Although the trip served to complicate contemporary conceptualizations of witnessing, taking me down muddy paths at times lined with thorns, it also brought me to a place where I could finally proceed confidently with action. The critical witness therefore names the stance that I, and consequently my public, must be critical but keep trying to do something, however irrational action may seem in the face of such gargantuan injustice and paralysing uncertainty. Again, Julie Salverson’s foolish witness captures this well: “The possibility of the ethical stance on foolish witness comes from an insistence on engagement based in availability and the willingness to step forward without certainty. The goal is relationship, not success” (246).

Conceptualizing myself and the public as critical witness therefore calls for: i) ethnographic, sustained and situated research methods that privilege marginalized voices, ii) critical and engaged research that can produce critical and engaged work that might further provoke critical and engaged action, rationality and objectivity contribute further to spectatorship, a maintenance of the status-quo and de-politicization, iii) the conscious creation of spaces to

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\(^6\) “Their [youth in conflict’s] artwork and discussions give an impression of a web of relationships hacked through by the violence of war. These breaks in connection include links with the natural world, cultural life, community relationships and friendships – the structures and fabric of a child’s life” (CAP 10).

\(^7\) “A virtual flood of humanitarian reports assessing the situation in the camps has been released over the last years. Despite all these reports - or perhaps because of them - people on the ground feel more and more like animals in a zoo, subjected repeatedly to assessments. To them, the outcome is unclear, the feedback often too abstract” (Finnstrom 134).

\(^8\) I later made the choice to interview Beatrice (through Augustine, a mutual friend) by email, rather than visiting again, sending her the saved money from my plane ticket for school necessities instead. I know this is possible because of the scope of my research practices and I do not mean to condemn other research practices where direct support of this kind is impossible. Nor do I wish to deny the many problems in support of this kind.

\(^9\) And since then, continued support at a tailoring school.
re-politicize the public by disseminating the work in a variety of forms to a variety of publics in a variety of ways.

I have come to think of my documentary project with Beatrice within Chantal Mouffe’s theoretical framework of critical art, hegemony, and agonistic public spaces in a plural democracy. “According to the agonistic approach, critical art is art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony” (Mouffe 12). This conceptualization of witnessing then, and my documentary communications (“art” for Mouffe), follow in her ideals towards a radical democracy by using art to create agonistic (dialogue that eschews the goals of rational consensus) public spaces where the public (wo)man participates in the political.

The ritual view of communication posits that the stories we tell have a constituting effect on society. And for alternative stories to be told and retold, we, the documentarians as critical witnesses, must find creative and alternative methods of dissemination. Varying dissemination methods in public spaces is also fundamental to what is called autonomous media practices: “If the global justice movement is committed to changing the world, its participants must struggle to reclaim and to create spaces in which all people can participate in communications and culture, and therefore, in politics” (Dubois & Langlois 10).

Considering the scope of my project with Beatrice, I decided to focus on four main dissemination methods or spheres: the gallery, the street, the lecture hall and the internet. Building on the idea of centering the work on our testimonies, I included Beatrice’s voice, as well as my own, in all forms of the communication; embedding within the works her own views of her life and the transparency of our close and problematic relationship that I have begun to describe here. 10 Essentially, I began to consider how I could manifest the story in a chronologically controlled photo exhibit, slideshow presentations, a collaborative public event11 and a publication.12

Aside from our personal story, I wanted to question our society’s views and dominant narratives of conflict in Africa, child soldiers, and internal displacement. I also needed to question dominant narratives concerning the international community’s role (and my own for that matter, as my introduction could be interpreted as such) as “humanitarian and savior” (Orford 188) in light of the realities of colonization, imperialism, and economic globalization. I strived instead to impart a conception of collective responsibility vis-à-vis these issues, and see the possibilities in critical witnessing for transformative, and inescapably irrational, action within our depoliticized system. For the most part, these considerations were manifested in video-based art installations, complementing the photo-based exhibitions, public events and a publication (see Annex A for photographic documentation).

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10 The web version of the project, as well as details of the various lectures, exhibits and installations can be found at http://www.hernameisbeatrice.com

11 I also realized that there were already various communities, groups, artists and students working to create awareness about the issue of internal displacement as a result of conflict. I decided to propose a day to bring together these various voices to create an “IDP Awareness Day”, visualizing a larger and more diversified public space than either I or Beatrice were capable of creating.

12 The publication, lectures and installations would be offered free of charge to conform to my critique of the commodification of images.
Epilogue

—The following is quoted from an email written by Ojibu Odong Geoffrey, Gulu, Northern Uganda, Dec. 21st, 2008 to Lara Rosenoff.

Vita was admitted in St Joseph hospital for a period of one week i.e. from the 9th-15th December, 2008. He was suffering from diarrhea and vomiting as earlier on communicated. He was under intensive care because he was seriously dehydrated as a result of loss of water from the body. That condition made him lose weight from 10kgs to 9kgs. The parents of the child were advised to give him a lot of juice in order for him to regain weight faster. Its now good to note that Vita has greatly improved according to what Beatrice and the husband explained to me yesterday. Both of them seem to have been relieved from the stress that they were having when Vita was still in the hospital at St. Joseph. Vita is now faring well and I believe he will recover soon.

I received this email from Ojibu after he had received the Western Union transfer and travelled to Padibe to visit. All was well with Baby Vita and Beatrice. They eventually both travelled to Gulu in February 2009 to attend Saint Monica’s tailoring school, and both are now doing well.

Ultimately, the story told here is what I have to offer at the end of my almost three-year quest to answer how independent critical documentary practice, as an alternative to hegemonic press practices, can help re-politicize the North American public and provoke change.13

I had a great fear upon entering academia that the people’s experiences that inspire my work would get lost within the questioning, analysis and inquiry of an academic institution. I had a fear that the theoretical concerns of the institution would overwhelm the practical concerns of the individuals who first inspired my urge to learn. I had a fear that producing work within this context might only serve to advance my own needs.

I know those fears are both justified and unjustified. Yet I bravely proceed because to do otherwise implies an acceptance of, and complicity with, the perpetration of injustices in the world. That is my lesson of the critical witness.

Beatrice shared her life with me because I asked her to. She trusted me and, at first, she was a little scared of me. I would like to pay her the utmost respect by telling and retelling our story so that it may contribute to the stories we tell as a society. That it may somehow change perspectives, and that changed perspectives will eventually change actions.

After three years, this lesson is what I have to offer.

A peace agreement between the Ugandan government and the LRA has not been signed. The LRA are still active in Southern Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic. A Ugandan-led, US-backed, joint14 offensive named “Operation Lightning Thunder” officially collapsed the ceasefire when it was launched against the LRA in DRC in December of 2008. Its poor planning resulted in an increase in LRA rebel activity, including abductions and killings of DRC’s civilian population.

13 These experiences have also propelled me to ask questions regarding youth’s identity construction in conflict zones, the main focus of my current PhD studies in Anthropology.

14 The armed forces of Uganda (UPDF), DRC (FARDC) and Southern Sudan (SPLA) in a joint intelligence-led military operation, this morning the 14th of December 2008, launched an attack on the LRA terrorists of Joseph Kony in Garamba forests of the Democratic Republic of Congo,” UPDF statement.
The operation was terminated after three months. Kony and the LRA are still operational. The Government of Uganda has yet to be seriously questioned by the International Community regarding the illegal forced displacement, and consequent death and disease, of 1.8 million people. Taking advantage of the relative calm, about 80% of people have left the camps and returned to their traditional lands.

Beatrice

“I still feel good at this time because I have not yet heard of people being killed in Acholiland. For now I don’t know what will happen but I have been hearing that the LRA are in Congo since when I started schooling. I still cannot say that the war has ended. I am even doubting.”

References


Annex A

Photo Exhibition in Montreal, Canada

Photo Exhibition and Installation in Toronto, Canada
Installation on Queen St. West, Toronto, Canada

Installation on Screens in Dundas Square, Toronto, Canada
Cover of Publication. Offered at Exhibit Locations

Publications on Display at IDP Awareness Day, Toronto, Canada
About the Author

Lara Rosenoff

Lara has collaborated on numerous projects in and about Northern Uganda as artist, activist, researcher and lecturer since 2004. She most recently finished her MFA in Documentary Media in June 2009 with a project that follows one girl over 2 years in an internal displacement camp, all the while questioning her own role as witness. She is currently continuing her work in the area as a PhD student in Anthropology at The University of British Columbia, and her dissertation project will examine disruptions in intergenerational knowledge exchange and its effect on youth in areas of long-term conflict. Lara will be pursuing art-based research methods, collaborating with youth and the elderly towards new forms of representation and research of the worldviews of those living in areas of violent conflict.
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