

INTERNATIONAL WORK

AFRICA

LIBERIA

The Ebola Listening Project

Katherina Thomas, journalist and global health researcher, introduces the project: ‘The “Ebola Listening Project” was founded in early 2015 by a group of four: Paradise Oghenerueuse Young and Abraham Bacco Fahnbulleh, who both worked as Ebola contact tracers during the outbreak, Angie Dennis, a student at the University of Liberia and Ebola survivor, and Katherina Thomas, a British-American journalist and global health narrative researcher. The project grew out of a simple observation: at the height of the 2013-2016 West Africa Ebola outbreak, the voices of community leaders and ordinary people in Liberia – the worst-affected country – were sidelined from conversations about the scope of the response, and the resulting gap in trust and understanding cost lives.

‘The group came together and recorded hundreds of oral histories, from the densely populated urban community of West Point, to remote forest communities accessible only by canoe. The collection includes more than 300 audio recordings of the life stories and Ebola experiences of Ebola survivors, health workers, community



Two Ebola Treatment Unit hygienists being interviewed for the ‘Ebola Listening Project’ in Monrovia.

leaders, traditional and religious leaders, village chiefs, members of women’s and youth groups, and ordinary people.

‘The group traced chains of transmission through narratives, recording the stories of entire families and groups of friends among whom the virus spread. Mosaicked from memory and haunted by absence, the resulting narratives yield insights that complement the clinical and humanitarian aspects of an Ebola response. In the case of Liberia, they include qualitative findings about the case incidence of Ebola and the motivations of groups who violently attacked Ebola treatment units. They document traditions rarely shared with outsiders, and explore the origins of rumours, ultimately revealing compelling insights about the ways that communities understand infectious disease outbreaks and

illness, and how ordinary people see interactions with international medical responders.

‘The group’s work raised challenges that no oral history textbook could answer. In a country where mental health services and access to health information is limited, narrators often asked for answers about the disease itself, or saw the interviews as informal therapy. The group fact-checked many memories – names, dates, places – against records shared with them from the Liberian health ministry, but stories are not science, and in a time of deep and pervasive trauma, there were moments when they witnessed the fault line tremble between memory and story. The resulting insights can inform best practices of oral history during public health crises.

‘The project is entirely unfunded. The group has

gradually supported the collection of the initial 300 interviews from their own pockets and they are currently applying for grants that would allow for its completion. Funding would enable them to complete the collection and make it available in perpetuity at Harvard University's Center for the History of Medicine which would like to receive the collection as a donation. The group ultimately hopes to share their insights with responders in the ongoing Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where, although the context is different, a similar breakdown of trust between local communities and international responders is exacerbating the crisis. They also plan to share the material with communities in sub-Saharan Africa in the form of a travelling exhibition, concurrently offering training sessions for researchers and journalists in oral history interviewing during outbreaks.'

● Further information about the project and to make a donation: website www.gofundme.com/oral-histories-of-ebola

ASIA

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES Oral History Archives

Dr Aisha Bilkhair, research advisor at the National Archives of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), introduces the Oral History Archives:

'The United Arab Emirates is a relatively young country declared in 1971, however it has a deep history, evident in the many documents, manuscripts, maps and other items contained in the country's museums and archives. The Oral History Archives were established in recognition that missing from the country's historical records were oral accounts and the cultural knowledge and understanding of day-to-day life that these would reveal. In 2009 a partnership with the Regional Office for Oral History at UC-Berkeley Bancroft Library supported the

development of the Oral History Archives and helped to embed international standards of oral history among UAE researchers. To stay informed of evolving best practice and developments in oral history, the UAE Oral History Team (OHT) participates regularly in International Oral History Association meetings.



The cover of *Their Memories Our History*, 2018.

'Since 2009, over 1,000 oral history interviews have been recorded. Many of these have been with members of various government entities including recording memories of older members of the Federal National Council and with the Environment Agency as part of their "State of Grazing" project. This latter project revealed previously undocumented creative works including poetry, lullabies, sea chants, the pearl diving industry, star navigation and more. Members of the public also contact the OHT to request an interview with a family elder to document their memories and experiences. The OHT have experienced challenges associated with many oral history initiatives: memory loss among elderly narrators, narrators' pride preventing them sharing experiences which may make them

appear less fortunate to others and a reluctance to talk about fables and myths presuming that only tangible events are worthy of documenting.

'In 2018 the National Archives published *Their Memories Our History*, a book in which fifteen narrators recounted their memories. The publication was accompanied by a social media campaign (Instagram, Twitter and Facebook) in which the National Archives posted old, local colloquial words extracted from the oral history interviews that are no longer in use and explained their meanings. The National Archives are currently working to make the Oral History Archives accessible to the public via smart applications and a digital library.'

● Further information: website www.na.ae/en/archives/oralhistory

EUROPE

FRANCE Oral history conference

Ariane Mak, research associate at École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), part of the Paris Sciences and Lettres (PSL) Research University, reports on the French oral history conference she co-organised with Carine Lemouneau (University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne). The conference was entitled 'Contemporary practices of oral history: from interviews to oral archives' and was held on 11-13 April 2019 at EHESS in Paris.

'The April 2019 conference aimed to establish a dialogue between different approaches to oral history and oral archives in France, and to examine the emerging uses of interviews in fields such as art history. A special focus of the conference was on the methodological, ethical and epistemological issues raised in collecting, analysing and archiving interviews, as well as the challenges of reusing oral history archives. There has been a perception that French academia is reluctant to embrace oral history, however the April 2019

conference demonstrated that oral history is very much alive and well in France.

'The three-day conference brought together thirty-seven presenters (historians, archivists, artists) and a further seven experts who were invited to host each panel (Raphaëlle Branche, Marta Craveri, Christian Delage, Véronique Ginouvès, Nicolas Hatzfeld, Michel Pigenet and Françoise Thébaud). A range of themes were explored across the eight panels including: oral historians and the challenges of fieldwork; interviewing political leaders and scientific experts; oral history and labour history; memories of war; and feminist history.

'French oral history specialists Florence Descamps and Philippe Joutard gave keynote speeches. Florence Descamps (École Pratique des Hautes Études) examined the specificities of French oral history, the success of the "oral archives" concept and its deep impact on the way the field has established itself in France. Philippe Joutard (Aix-Marseille University) revisited his seminal research on the war of the Camisards and its long-lasting effects on collective memory and understandings of history in the Cévennes region.

'While the focus was primarily put on French oral history, participants also came from Luxembourg and Belgium, such as Elena Danescu and François Klein (Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History) who presented the Pierre Werner and Europe research programme, and Alexandra de Heering (University of Namur) whose paper examined the difficulties she faced while interviewing Dalits in Tamil Nadu state, India.

'Attended by over 150 participants (including presenters), the conference gave rise to stimulating debates, demonstrating the importance of creating more opportunities for bringing together oral history practitioners in France.'



● For more details on the conference programme and participants, as well as news and articles related to oral history in France, see: <https://oralhistory.hypotheses.org/74>

ITALY Society of Women Historians

Paola Stelliferi, member of the executive committee of the SIS-Società Italiana delle Storiche (Italian Society of Women Historians), introduces an oral history project that will be presented at the SIS conference on women's memory, history and archives in Rome on 15 June 2019:

'2019 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the foundation of SIS: an association founded by feminist historians in 1989 with the political-cultural aim of changing the approaches to historical research. The idea for the conference is to rediscover some of the key voices that have characterised the origin of Italian women's history and – consequently – the foundation of SIS: women's memory and subjectivity.

'The thirtieth anniversary conference and celebrations will be the occasion to share the results of an oral history project about SIS's activity inside and outside academia. The collection of SIS's founding members' memories aims to create an important source

for the comprehension of the role of feminism at the birth of women's history in Italy and the political and cultural dimension gained after the seventies. Both women's history and oral history were born with the democratising ethos of 1968, with the aim to unveil the experiences of "ordinary" people, subaltern social groups and women: all subjects who at the time were still hidden by history.

'This is a work in progress: so far twenty audio interviews of former presidents and founding members have been collected, but the goal is to create a rich archive of around 100 interviews in total.

'The oral history project will become part of the SIS's archive at Casa Internazionale delle Donne in Rome, where audio recordings will be digitised and made accessible for future research on the female presence inside academia, on women's attitude towards power and lobbying, and on the development of the women's liberation movement during and after the 1980s – the decade when the political commitment to feminism transitioned into a cultural one.'

● Contact: Paola Stelliferi, email paola.stelliferi@uniroma3.it

PORTUGAL Oral history of Portuguese cinema

Dr Raquel Rato is a researcher at the Institute of Contemporaneous History (IHC) at the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences at the University Nova de Lisbon. She introduces the 'Words in Motion: a living testimony of cinematographic patrimony' project that she is currently coordinating. The project has received financial support from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (<https://gulbenkian.pt/en/>). Established in 1956, this foundation aims to improve quality of life through art, charity, science and education:

'The IHC was able to create a research and artistic team to take this project forward in partnership



Dr Raquel Rato (left) with interviewee, Teresa Ferreira, a film colourist.
Photo: Edmundo Diaz Sotelo.

with the prestigious Ana Carolina Maciel, from the University of Campinas, Brazil, and with the Portuguese National Cinema Plan, coordinated by Elsa Mendes.

‘The project will develop an audio-visual archive from filmed interviews with the initiators of the New Portuguese Cinema (1960-1980) and create an accessible online digital platform. All video-recorded interviews will be accompanied by full transcripts. The archive will also contain information and resources on the preservation of the history of Portuguese cinematography for future generations. The initiative will contribute to the history of Portuguese cinema with a unique and original narrative based on the memories of those who have witnessed and lived through the most fertile period of Portuguese cinematography.

‘Twelve interviews have been recorded during 2019 with some of the oldest individuals who are responsible for building the new Portuguese cinema. All interviews are filmed by a director of photography, Edmundo Diaz Sotelo, and edited by Nuno Pereira.

‘Oral history provides an opportunity for revisiting the existing dominant narrative of the history of Portuguese cinema – a focus on the film and director – by opening access to aspects

normally left out and to explore some of the social and material conditions under which new Portuguese cinema developed. The project includes various meetings and workshops and will also engage in formative initiatives in secondary schools, aiming to alert young people to the importance of the living memories of our national cinematic heritage. There will also be a number of academic publications arising from the project.’

● Contact: Raquel Rato, email raquelrato35@gmail.com, provisional website <https://raquelrato35.wixsite.com/ei-hocp>

NORTH AMERICA

USA The Peabody Ballroom Experience

Dr Joseph Plaster, Curator in Public Humanities at Johns Hopkins University (JHU), introduces a new community–university public humanities partnership and the role of oral history within that. The project is funded by the Andrew W Mellon Foundation, under the auspices of the Johns Hopkins Sheridan Libraries:

‘The “Peabody Ballroom Experience” is an ongoing public humanities collaboration between Johns Hopkins University and

Baltimore’s ballroom community, a performance-based culture comprising gay, lesbian and transgender people of colour. The project aims to cultivate an exchange of knowledge between JHU and the ballroom community by creating diverse opportunities for faculty, students, staff and the community to come together as partners in education. Project components include workshops with special collections materials, film screenings, panel discussions and dance workshops, a dozen oral histories and a documentary film. The project celebrated its first year in April 2019 by throwing an epic ball competition at the George Peabody Library. The event, comprising vogue, runway and realness competition categories, drew guests from as far away as New York and Paris.

‘In recent years there has been a strong “public turn” within universities that is renewing interest in participatory action research, community-based learning and collaborative approaches to knowledge creation. Major foundations prioritise humanities projects that encourage the flow of knowledge from universities and institutes into their communities and from their communities into their institutions. But what constitutes “knowledge” in the academy? What cross-disciplinary collaborations are made possible when we approach performance as a repository of knowledge?’

‘Conducting a dozen oral histories with ballroom performers provided a means for exploring these questions; the interviews enabled me to better understand how performance acts as a repository for knowledge and history in the ballroom community. Oral histories also helped me forge relationships with ballroom participants, many of whom eventually served on the project advisory committee. Finally, I presented the stories at the culminating ball competition by creating and playing an audio collage comprised of oral history



Audience at the George Peabody Library, April 2019. Photo: Gerard Gaskin.

interview clips mixed with a club music track.

‘The culminating ball was curated by Peabody Library staff and an advisory committee made up of leaders in Baltimore’s ballroom community. Library curators began by presenting a selection of the existing collections made up of over 300,000 volumes dating from the Renaissance through the nineteenth century. The advisory committee then selected books, discussed how to interpret them through ballroom performance traditions, and ultimately produced twelve runway, vogue and realness categories. At the ball, performers responded to these categories, interpreting the Library’s historic collections through costume and stylised performance.’

● Further information: website <https://peabodyballroom.library.jhu.edu>

Gentrification and housing activism in Bushwick, New York

Cynthia Tobar, Assistant Professor at Bronx Community College and a Bushwick-native artist, introduces her oral history project through which she met with notable Bushwick residents and conducted interviews

documenting ongoing gentrification and the fight for affordable housing in the Bushwick neighbourhood of Brooklyn, New York City.

“Cities for People, Not for Profit: gentrification and housing activism in Bushwick” traces the history of ongoing gentrification and the subsequent fight for affordable housing in Bushwick from the perspective of artists, activists and community residents. Bushwick is becoming emblematic of class inequality, and so the aim was to capture interviews that reflected the social, political and economic effects of late-stage gentrification as it is unfolding in



Leticia Paguian, Vicente Mayorga and Rigoberto Silva, 24 November 2015. Photo: Cities for People, Not for Profit.

the neighbourhood. The resulting narratives capture a sense of immediacy in housing insecurity among the working-class and artist residents.

‘The project began in 2013 as a personal investigation of the effects of the displacement and gentrification taking place in Bushwick from the perspective of the artist circles I was frequenting in the neighbourhood. My field research and choice of narrators took the form of gathering oral history interviews from these artists. It quickly grew in scope to include the stories of long-time residents, community organisers and activists who have been fighting for housing justice in Bushwick.

‘As of December 2016, a total of fourteen oral history interviews had been gathered, of which nine were archived online and are available to the public. The interviews for “Cities for People, Not for Profit” reflect the community-based nature of the project, which in turn echoes the project’s mission and goals for community-sourced solutions to gentrification and displacement in the neighbourhood.

‘We are barely scratching the surface with our current collection. However, these interviews do offer a range of perspectives that can help to understand the various elements that lead to the rising number of

displaced households. Depending on funding, I would like to continue collecting additional interviews over the next year. More interviews are needed to examine not only the factors surrounding the physical and emotional displacement of long-term marginalised residents, but also how this leads to their involvement within activist organisations that increase their sense of agency within the community. This would permit us to uncover effective ways to empower these residents to contribute to greater urban democracy, using these stories to underscore the urgent need for politics in this city to prioritise housing that corresponds to the human social needs of the people of this city rather than to the capitalist profit-driven economy of the elite few. Stories are a catalyst, activating residents and directing them to resources and networks to address affordable housing as a social justice issue in Bushwick.'

● Further information: website <http://citiesforppl.org/>

National Home Front Project

Erica Fugger, oral historian at Washington College's Starr Center for the Study of the American Experience, provides an update on the 'National Home Front Project' and its newly launched collaborative archive. This

interview initiative has received funding to partner with community organisations across the United States to collect and preserve civilian memories of the Second World War.

'When the "National Home Front Project" was founded in 2013, our undergraduate students at Washington College began collecting oral histories with local retirees on the Eastern Shore of Maryland about their experiences during the Second World War. Four years later, we received a grant from preservation giant Iron Mountain, Inc. to expand our regional efforts into a national community partnership programme. The project recently launched the beginnings of its collaborative digital archive and has collected over 350 oral histories to date.

'While prominent organisations like the US Library of Congress's "Veterans History Project" have long worked to preserve stories of military service, our programme has sought to become a leading national repository for interviews about civilian contributions to the war effort. The first oral history we collected through our national partnerships was with Elinor Otto, who is considered the longest-working American "Rosie the Riveter." Ms Otto was laid off from her job in airplane manufacturing at age ninety-five

and went on to become a spokesperson for a Second World War commemorative organisation called the Spirit of '45, which we collaborated with to conduct the oral history.

'Our programme has further partnered with over twenty groups across the country by offering training workshops for community members and creating pedagogical tools like the "Oral History Jukebox" to help evaluate interview technique. We support collaborations with other schools and universities, museums, archives, historical societies, senior citizen groups, community organisations and individual families. One recent highlight included working with the Muslim American Leadership Alliance to help document the untold narrative of Muslim Americans' contributions to the war effort. We have also begun to preserve a collection of oral histories from Second World War conscientious objectors, previously inaccessible to the public.

'Our archive may be US-focused, but the interviews we collect demonstrate the wide-ranging and lasting impact of this global conflict. The "National Home Front Project" houses powerful stories like those shared by international refugees who immigrated to the United States after the war, memories of a German U-boat surrender off America's coastline, and reflections by the children of soldiers killed in action overseas. We have also begun connecting with similar interview efforts in the United Kingdom and Canada, and hope to collaborate with other Second World War archives across the globe. As the war begins to fade from living memory, our project seeks to bring the generations into conversation across cultures and borders, and preserve these important civilian perspectives before it is too late.'

● Further information: email info@nationalhomefrontproject.org, website www.nationalhomefrontproject.org



'National Home Front Project' student interns pose for a photo with Idelia Johnston, who served both in the US Naval Reserve and as a 'Rosie the Riveter' during the Second World War. Photo: Erica Fugger.

OCEANIA

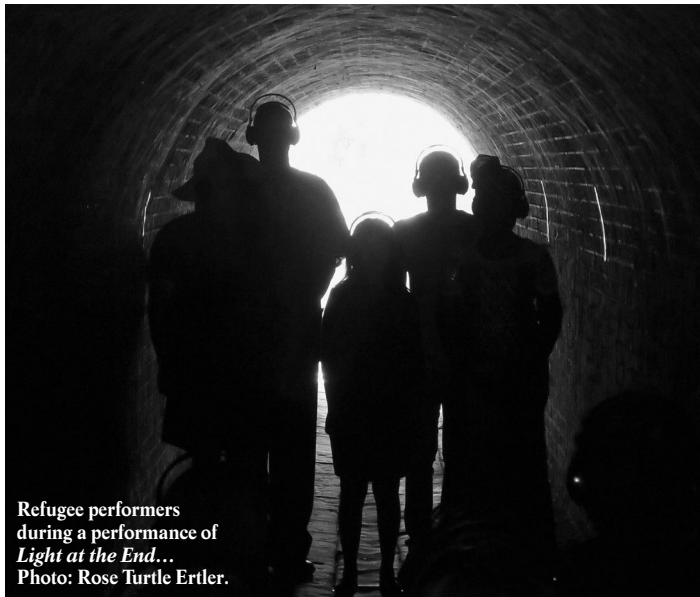
AUSTRALIA

Light at the End... theatre with refugees

Rose Turtle Ertler, sound artist and theatre/installation maker, writes about *Light at the End...*, which is performed by local refugees inside a tunnel under a train line. So far, the show has been performed in three towns across Victoria (Ballarat, Castlemaine and Bendigo). In each town Rose collaborates with five refugees, local to that town, to create a site-specific version of *Light at the End...*:

'Light at the End... is a performance that features oral histories of refugees presented in a theatrical context. I wanted to present a genuine insight into humanity, with real people (not actors) and their stories. For the creation of the work, in each site I met individually with the five performers a few times, always with cups of tea! We chatted about all sorts of things and after several meetings I recorded their responses to two questions: "Can you tell me about a 'moment of light' in your life?" and "What makes you strong?" (or "What gives you strength?"). I didn't want to ask questions that may typically be asked of a refugee ("Where are you from? What was your journey here like? How long have you been here?" etc). The project aims to celebrate humanity, and so it was important to me that the questions could be asked to anyone, not just refugees.

'Responses to the question about "moments of light" included wonderful anecdotes of visas finally being granted, first setting foot in Australia, buying a home and feeling settled, being reunited with family and finally being able to communicate confidently in English. All these events came after a period of stress, depression and uncertainty, therefore highlighting the celebration of "light". It is these emotional peaks that interest me as a gatherer of oral history and they often have the power to affect audiences on an emotional level.



Refugee performers during a performance of *Light at the End...*
Photo: Rose Turtle Ertler.

'Light at the End... is always performed in a dark, dank tunnel under a train line. The only equipment introduced to the space are wireless headphones for the audience to hear the soundtrack of stories. During the show, the five performers begin as strangers at the other end of the tunnel, backlit and starkly silhouetted by daylight streaming in from behind. They are not acting but just being themselves. Gradually, as the recorded stories unfold, the performers walk closer towards the audience, their faces and identities eventually revealed in the light.

'For the finale of the show, performers and audience walk together, a slow meditation towards the light – a time to reflect and absorb the many stories that have just been shared. Once outside the tunnel, in the light, audience and performers mingle in a casual conversational setting. Audience responses have been extremely positive. My favourite feedback so far was the statement, "so wonderful to reflect on our common humanity and common courage, even though our lives may be different in many ways".'

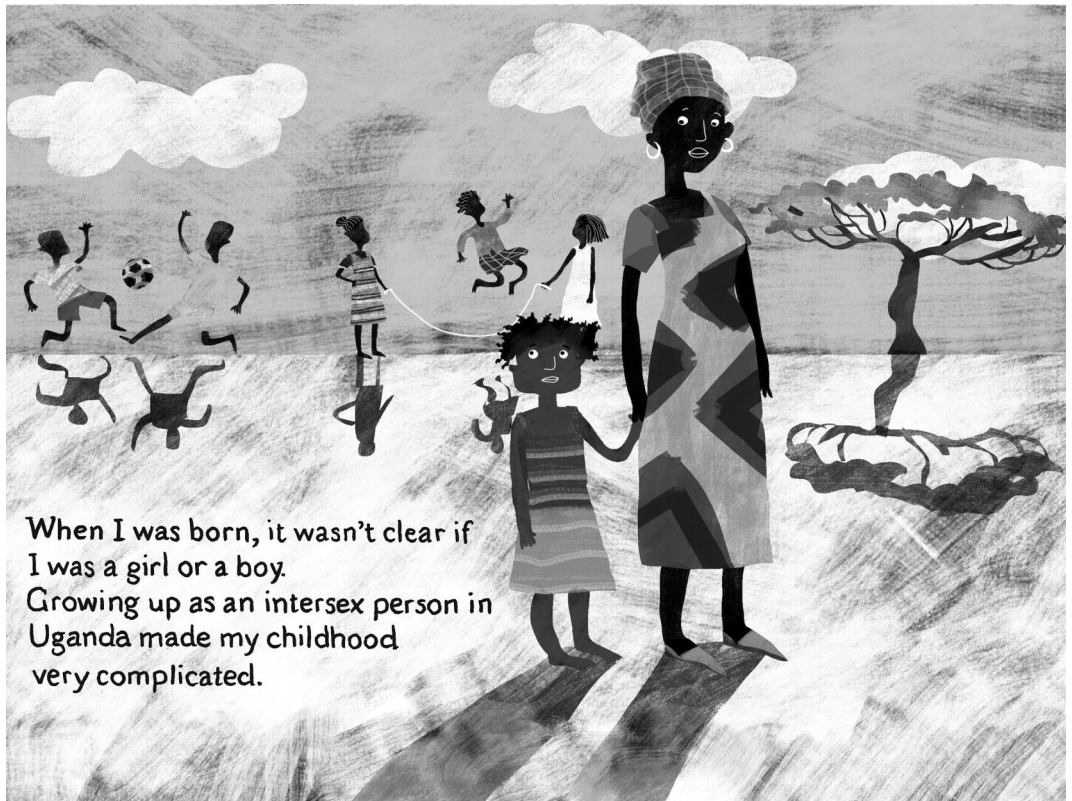
● Further information (including video and audio recordings): website www.roserturtleertler.com/light-at-the-end

INTERNATIONAL

PositiveNegatives: visual life stories from around the world

PositiveNegatives is an award-winning not-for-profit organisation that works with narrators, artists and partners from around the world to develop visual life stories on social and humanitarian issues. Sara Wong, researcher and project manager at PositiveNegatives, introduces the organisation and its achievements to date:

'PositiveNegatives has a distinctly international focus, having worked in forty-three countries to date. The visual life stories that PositiveNegatives have co-created with participants and artists have originated in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and Oceania. The breadth of visual stories is wide, ranging from life as a domestic worker in Ridhya, to the life story of an intersex activist in Uganda, to a family whose son went missing in the Colombia conflict. Told by people with lived experience of some of our most pressing global issues today, these stories are creatively sparking engagement and nuanced understanding in public, political and educational discourses around



When I was born, it wasn't clear if I was a girl or a boy. Growing up as an intersex person in Uganda made my childhood very complicated.

Frame from *Born Julia and Julius*, a comic and animation on the life story of a Ugandan intersex activist. Funded by Open Society Foundations. Illustration: Gabi Froden.

the world. Some of the stories were submitted to the UK parliament as part of the Modern Slavery Act review and have also been used internationally in schools. Since it was founded in 2012, PositiveNegatives' comics, animations and other narrative media outputs have been viewed by over ninety million people. There is increasing evidence to suggest that comics and visual narratives can be used to develop understanding, empathy and critical engagement among their readers.

Founding director Dr Benjamin Dix received his PhD in anthropology from the University of Sussex (2016), exploring ways to represent complex testimonies through sequential art, based on fieldwork conducted with Sri Lankan Tamil communities in Sri Lanka, India, London and Switzerland. This approach of developing visual life stories *with*

participants then formed the basis of the PositiveNegatives methodology. Dix explains, "After working with the United Nations through the conflict in Sri Lanka, I become increasingly aware of the importance of telling human-centred stories of peoples' lived experiences rather than seeing the situation through dehumanised reports and policy papers."

"The visual life stories are developed by conducting primary research using narrative-based methodologies. A participatory approach places the narrator at the centre of the research and production process. Any transformation of a story into a particular medium is, however, subject to a degree of interpretation and this is a key challenge. To address this, PositiveNegatives is, wherever possible, working with artists that have lived experience of the issues being discussed. While this doesn't

remove the challenge, it has proved to produce more meaningful outputs and relationships in the projects.

"PositiveNegatives works with partners in academia, charities and the private sector. Previous and current partners include SOAS University of London, University of Sussex, Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), Harvard South Asia Institute, the United Nations (UN), Overseas Development Institute (ODI), Open Society Foundation (OSF), Hogan Lovells, the *Guardian* and the BBC.

● Further information: email info@positivenegatives.org, website <http://positivenegatives.org>

International Work is edited by Siobhan Warrington who welcomes all contributions by email to siobhan@oraltestimony.org