Reconstructing
Children's Rights

An online institute about dismantling racism, neo-colonialism, and patriarchy in humanitarian and development efforts to protect children and support families

SEPTEMBER 2021
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Our Stories, Our Faces, Our Voices: Who Tells Our Story?

"Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.... When we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise." [1]

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the first three conversations, the Reconstructing Children's Rights Institute has recognized and unpacked the power imbalances inherent in the international development and humanitarian aid industries and more specifically the fields of children and youth rights and child protection. Practiced incorrectly and without making explicit the underlying dynamics of power and funding, the international children's rights industry can cause harm and undermine the dignity, power, and autonomy of those it intends to support, who become othered "beneficiaries." Rather than empowering children, youth, and families, these industries' imagery, communications, and narratives can strip them of their voices, their identities, and their multi-faceted stories.

This session will move the conversations beyond words and concepts to focus on the power of the visual arts and storytelling to portray the lives of children and families from a variety of perspectives and points of view. The speakers will reflect on the themes of the Reconstructing Children's Rights Institute as articulated visually in the Institute's artwork - works whose titles are *Possession, Exploitation, Discrimination, Domination, Resistance, and Rebellion*. This session will highlight how the language and imagery often used to describe children, youth, and families perpetuate and reproduce the colonial, racist, and patriarchal underpinnings of the field. The speakers will also discuss how they and other artists are pushing back and retelling stories and using art and arts programming as a way to protect and empower communities and, more broadly, to reconstruct and to reframe children's rights. In versions of the stories that are told and portrayed differently, children, young people, and their communities are no longer passive beneficiaries but holders of their voice and agency. The speakers in this session are all pushing the boundaries on telling stories, creating imagery and art programming in ways that help us think about children's rights and child protection in new ways, ways that both reject and critique the imperialist visual and narrative language of the past while creating space for creativity, re-imagination, rebellion, resistance, joy, and self-expression.

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1.   Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), "The Danger of a Single Story" - TedTalk

Racist, Patriarchal, and Colonial Roots: Humanitarian and Development Aid Industry Use of Imagery and Storytelling

Over the past few decades, scholars, writers, and activists have written about imbalanced storytelling perpetuated by the humanitarian and development aid industries, highlighting the deliberate use of undignified, inhumane imagery to provoke shame and guilt on the part of the viewer, eliciting feelings rooted in white saviorism, particularly in the public health field.[2] We have repeatedly seen the use of visual arts and storytelling to depict romantic and exotic imagery of faraway continents and people (aid recipients or victims) that need saving and protecting (by providers of aid and humanitarianism). For example, Binyavanga Wainaina, in his essay "How to Write About Africa?", writes about the "broad brushstrokes" used to depict the "African" continent:

> *"In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country.... Throughout the book, adopt a sotto voice, in conspiracy with the reader, and a sad I-expected-so-much tone. Establish early on that your liberalism is impeccable, and mention near the beginning how much you love Africa, how you fell in love with the place and can't live without her.... Africa is to be pitied, worshipped or dominated. Whichever angle you take, be sure to leave the strong impression that without your intervention and your important book, Africa is doomed.... African characters should be colourful, exotic, larger than life—but empty inside, with no dialogue, no conflicts or resolutions in their stories, no depth or quirks to confuse the cause.... Describe, in detail, naked breasts (young, old, conservative, recently raped, big, small) or mutilated genitals, or enhanced genitals... And dead bodies.... Remember, any work you submit in which people look filthy and miserable will be referred to as the 'real Africa'... Always end your book with Nelson Mandela saying something about rainbows or renaissances. Because you care."*[3]

This use of imagery and storytelling is another example of racism, neo-colonialism, and patriarchal legacies and overarching power imbalances within the humanitarian and development aid infrastructures. The camera and photography have been used as "a weapon of imperialism" by European colonialism since the mid-19th century and have "played a role in administrative, missionary, scientific and commercial activities" as well as military and political interventions.[4] As Teju Cole noted in his 2019 essay, "When we speak of 'shooting' with a camera, we are acknowledging the kinship of photography and violence."[5] And as Adia Benton argues in her critical analysis of the humanitarian field, "Visual analysis" of humanitarian images can deepen the evidentiary base for claims linking race, risk and humanitarianism.

2. Leslie Butt. "The Suffering Stranger: Medical Anthropology and International Morality." *Medical Anthropology*, 21(1): 1–24 (2002); Luc Boltanski. *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1999); Abi Cantor. "Visualising the AIDS Crisis." *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*, 12(9): 669–670 (2012); Thomas Keenan. "Mobilizing Shame." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103(2): 435–449 (2004).
3. Binyavanga Wainaina, "How to Write About Africa," *Granta* (2005). Available here.
4. Teju Cole, "When the Camera was a Weapon of Imperialism. (and When it Still Is.)," *New York Times* (February 6, 2019). Available here.
5. *Ibid*.

Conflations of the humanitarian with the heroic that accompany racialized perceptions of risk conjure notions of the human in which 'race' (generally) and blackness (specifically) are central mediators of risk."[6]

The media – including reporters, journalists, bloggers, and writers – have played a role in perpetuating these imbalanced narratives and colonial and racist tropes. The media has had a tendency to create white saviors who "connect" the readers to Black and Brown recipients of aid in need of saving; focusing on a single victim, drawing out his or her suffering and splattering it on the page for devouring, further dehumanizing that victim.[7]

The "Single Story" of International Children and Youth Rights

The dynamics discussed above are particularly prevalent in the international children's rights field. One of the ways in which children, families, and their communities become othered, dominated and stripped of their power is via language and imagery. When one thinks of the international children's field, one of the first images that may come to mind is a "dirty," shoeless Black or Brown child with a protruding belly who needs to be "saved" or, on the flip side, a smiling, "clean" and happy child who has been rescued and saved, at great risk and sacrifice, by foreign, outside support. The perception is that the savior is white and the children being saved are Black or Brown.[8] These images are plastered on organizational websites, reports and other materials (e.g., technical guidelines, research studies and government policies), fundraising brochures, holiday greeting cards, humanitarian ambassadors' social media feeds, and news outlets. The images used are a powerful vehicle for telling or selling a story. The imagery is used either to fundraise or advocate for a specific issue or an organization. The lack of humanity in the images suggests that the goal of such visual storytelling is not about the realization of children's rights but the promotion of a charity-based model that assuages the viewer's guilt.[9] Those whom we are intending to support are prevented from telling their story, but instead, someone far removed from their realities – the holder of power – is deemed the storyteller.

As the writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has said, the tendency is to tell a "singular story," which can create or further perpetuate stereotypes that, while perhaps partially true, are also incomplete. Poverty, illness or violence ("places of negatives, of difference and darkness") are the children and families' single story, creating pity and a need to be saved.[10] And, often, there is a tendency to focus squarely on either a single victim or a single hero, and if a collective of children and young people are shown, it is often within the lens of possible perpetuators of violence or society's ills.

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6. Adia Benton, "Risky Business: Race, Nonequivalence and the Humanitarian Politics of Life," *Visual Anthropology* (2016). Available here.

7. Sean Jacobs, "No surprises: Nicholas Kristof prefers "White saviors." Africa is a Country (July 12, 2010); Emily Roenigk, "5 Reasons poverty porn empowers the wrong person," One.

8. Benton (2016).

9. CRIN has articulated this in its work and materials. For more information, visit: https://home.crin.org/.

10. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), "The Danger of a Single Story" - TedTalk

We need to push back against this existing narrative, and, as Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe has said, we need to "inspire voiceless peoples to share their own histories and create a global 'balance of stories.'"[11]

> *"So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become. It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power.... How they are told, who tells them, how many stories are told, when they are told, how many are told are really dependent on power.... Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person."* [12]
>
> *Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*

Role of Art and Storytelling in Narrative Change

Arts themselves can be transformative, especially if the artist is using a medium to tell their own story, to create a new visual or narrative discourse. Historically, racial and social justice movements have involved artists and storytellers, whose language and imagery allows people to visualize and think about all the social injustices and the possibility of transformation in new ways.[13] Children, youth, and young community leaders are constantly creating visual and narrative art, and there is a real possibility of catalyzing the arts and arts programming to hear and to see what children are telling us. Examples of community art projects include Artolution in Colombia and Lawrence House in South Africa, in which children and young people collaborate on public art to convey their shared narratives. Refer to the Reference List for additional information regarding arts programming and creative organizations.

Unfortunately, adults often deploy the arts only to tell the single story mentioned above or when arts are integrated into child protection programs as a therapeutic tool, not as a vehicle for self-expression and empowerment. The arts have far more potential within the international children's rights sector than we give them space to expand.

11. Ashley Fetters (March 22, 2013), "Chinua Achebe's Legacy, in His Own Words, The Atlantic

12. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), "The Danger of a Single Story" - TedTalk

13. Aidan McGarry, Itir Erhart, Hande Eslen-Ziya, Olu Jenzen, and Umut Korkut (eds). *The Aesthetics of Global Protest Visual Culture and Communication* (Amsterdam University Press: December 2019).

Speakers Biographies

Aisha Bain, Chief Architect and Co-Founder, Resistance Communications. Aisha Bain is a feminist warrior, social justice activist, radical storyteller, and smasher of patriarchy. Aisha is an inspiring leader with over 15 years of experience in senior management, program management and operations, and progressing gender equality and responding to violence against women and girls in more than 20 countries. As a filmmaker, artist, and author, Aisha uses her insurgent imagination to design creative tools and media to further social justice movements, and to raise the voice and visibility of women and girls within those movements. Aisha has led advocacy efforts with governmental and multilateral donors and institutions, and authored publications that led to high level policy change and new funding streams, as well as features in The Guardian, BBC World, CNN, Voice of America, Democracy Now!, CSPAN, Huffington Post, NPR, Buzzfeed, The Advocate, and others. For detailed bio, refer to the Resistance Communications website.

Meredith Hutchison, Creative Director and Co-Founder, Resistance Communications Meredith Hutchison is a fierce feminist and racial justice activist, artist, and photo-facilitator, collaborating with communities to create images that combat stereotypes, challenge oppressive systems, spark dialogue, and show that there can be change. Her work uses art, photography, graphic design, theater, humor, movement, imagination and love, to amplify the voices and deep visions of women and girls. Meredith has designed and implemented programs of participatory and collaborative media in 15 countries, partnering with international nonprofits, UN agencies, and grassroots movements. Meredith's work has been featured by a range of media outlets including the BBC, CNN, Newsweek, ABC, Le Monde, Ms. Magazine, Buzzfeed, Refinery 29, The Washington Post, among others and has been exhibited across the globe in galleries and public spaces. For detailed bio, refer to the Resistance Communications website.

Speakers Biographies

Miriam Sugranyes, Illustrator and Art Director, The Rights Studio: After graduating in Philosophy at the Universitat de Barcelona, Miriam moved to London, where she obtained an MA in Visual Communication - Illustration at the University of the Arts London (Camberwell College of Arts). Since 2013, Miriam has been working hand in hand with the Child Rights International Network (CRIN) as an illustrator and art director. In 2020, Veronica Yates and Miriam co-founded The Rights Studio, and Miriam serves as the Art Director. The Rights Studio is a creative hub for people and organizations to engage on human rights issues affecting children, young people and future generations through the arts and other creative expressions.

Miriam's work aims to translate images into what others think in words. This brought her to specialize in the editorial field: conceptualizing and illustrating social issues, books, articles, murals, campaigns and other things combining hand-drawn and digital processes. To view Miriam's work, you can visit the RS Gallery and her portfolio.

Speakers Biographies

Galuh Indri Wiyarti, Illustrator and Graphic Designer. Galuh Indri Wiyarti is an Indonesian illustrator and graphic designer based in Málaga, Spain. Graduated from Leeds Arts University in 2018, she uses collage and mixed media as her method of work.

Galuh recently worked at SUKA Studio (a creative agency in Jakarta specialized in brand and identity design) as a graphic designer and project leader before moving to Spain. Since then, she has helped international companies and communities to attend their visual needs by designing concepts and illustrations, for editorial and animation purposes.

Heavily inspired by the Dada absurdism, this artistic movement motivates her to focus on translating narrative using whimsical humor. Her work aims to break the boundaries through visual interpretations, aiming to connect and communicate with people despite language and cultural barriers.

The artwork of the Reconstructing Children's Rights Institute has been created by Galuh.

REFERENCE LIST

The following is a brief list of resources by academics, practitioners and activists critically examining power imbalances, colonialism, and racism in visual arts and storytelling. Please refer to the Institute's Master Reference List for a complete list of resources.

| Journal Articles, Podcasts, and Blogs:

- Chimandanda Nygozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story," TEDGlobal 2009

- Adia Benton, "Risky Business: Race, Nonequivalence and the Humanitarian Politics of Life," *Visual Anthropology* (2016). Available here.

- Luc Boltanski. *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1999)

- Leslie Butt. "The Suffering Stranger: Medical Anthropology and International Morality." *Medical Anthropology*, 21(1): 1–24 (2002).

- Abi Cantor. "Visualising the AIDS Crisis." *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*, 12(9): 669–670 (2012).

- Thomas Keenan. "Mobilizing Shame." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103(2): 435–449 (2004).

- Teju Cole, "When the Camera was a Weapon of Imperialism. (and When it Still Is.)," *New York Times* (February 6, 2019). Available here.

- Aidan McGarry, Itir Erhart, Hande Eslen-Ziya, Olu Jenzen, and Umut Korkut (eds). *The Aesthetics of Global Protest Visual Culture and Communication* (Amsterdam University Press: December 2019).

- Sean Jacobs, "No surprises: Nicholas Kristof prefers "White saviors." Africa is a Country (July 12, 2010).

- Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman. "The Appeal of Experience; the Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times." *Daedalus*, 1996: 1–23 (1996).

- Robert Sember. "Images in Public Health." *American Journal of Public Health*, 93(10): 1626–1629 (2003).

- Redfield, Peter 2012. The Unbearable Lightness of Expats: Double Binds of Humanitarian Mobility. *Cultural Anthropology*, 27(2): 358–382.

- Emily Roenigk, "5 Reasons poverty porn empowers the wrong person," One.

- Binyavanga Wainaina, "How to Write About Africa," *Granta* (2005). Available here.

- The Rights Studio, 'Our Journal.' A weekly blog examining the relation between arts and children and human rights. Examples of blog entries.
  - » The Art of Questioning
  - » It Is Not About Words
  - » The Task of a Storyteller

Art and Human Rights Organizations and Events:

- Artivism Pavilion (Venice Biennale): the first-ever human rights pavilion at the Venice Biennale. In 2019 they exhibited the work of six artists and art collectives who use art as an instrument of activism in response to identity-based mass atrocity. They invited CRIN to formulate three challenges to the visitors.

- Tate Exchange (London): In 2019 and 2020, CRIN participated in the annual week-long Tate Exchange event at the Tate Modern in collaboration with the Digital Maker Collective alongside multiple other partners. It brought together tech activists, experts, students, university staff, creatives and the public to explore ideas for making society a better, fairer place.

- Nasty Women: an art event in support of End Violence Against Women, which was an initiative of Nasty Women UK, which is part of the global art network Nasty Women.

- Little Inventors: a creative education organization that inspires imagination by taking children's ideas seriously. They help children develop and showcase creativity and problem-solving skills, building confidence, curiosity and resilience to become caring citizens.

- Kids' Own: Kids' Own is Ireland's only dedicated publisher of books by children. Through a range of local, national and international projects, Kids Connect connects children with professional artists and publishes the work that they create.

- Pivot Collective: The Pivot Collective is a collaborative non-profit organization focused on improving knowledge translation between research, engagement, policy, and practice. Our core mission is to shift existing hierarchies of knowledge and power in global health and development towards a more equitable distribution. Through their research and writing, public and community engagement, facilitation and training, and other creative projects, they work to disrupt dominant narratives about health and wellbeing and challenge existing forms of knowledge production and translation.

- Vision Not Victim: Co-founded by Aisha Bain and Meredith Hutchinson, a global girl-driven program that provides creative platforms to unleash the power of adolescent girls, address the violence they face and work towards gender equality, supporting girls, parents, and communities to create safer and more supportive environments for girls.

The artwork for the Institute has been created by
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