

Panel Discussion: Testimony as Activism: Archives of Displacement

9 November 2020

How victims fleeing violence, conflict, and forced migration cope with displacement is salient to the work of Professors Anita Fábos (IDCE) and Frances Tanzer (Strassler Center). The Strassler Center co-sponsored their jointly moderated webinar examining the intersection between research and activism with the Higgins School for Humanities, the department of International Development, Community and Environment, and the programs in Media, Culture & the Arts, and Peace and Conflict Studies. In discussing the role of activism in historical and current stories of displacement, the panelists were in dialogue with each other in showing how testimonies amplify voices seeking to achieve justice and positive change. They began by explaining their academic and professional trajectories.

Historian Natalia Aleksion (Touro College) described a dinner with two sisters who reminisced about surviving the Holocaust and meeting their future husbands while hiding in a forest bunker. Their highly intimate account of daily life in Polish, which they assumed she could not understand, intrigued Aleksion and contrasted with the silence of her survivor family. Through testimonies and interviews, she uncovered other very personal survival accounts. Her presentation focused on Adela Hilsenrath who, as early as 1944, recorded her wartime experiences hiding with her young son and husband. Writing in both the first-person and the plural we, she places her individual suffering into tension with the communal experience of destruction and displacement in Drohobych, Poland. Expressing feelings of material loss, she describes leaving her beloved home as well as her country and native language.

Leora Kahn (PROOF: Media for Social Justice), a former photo editor, curator, activist, and educator, combines visual storytelling with testimony in pursuit of social change. Her book of portraits of Holocaust survivors, co-published in the 1990s, initiated her into recording survivor testimonies. Inspired to study peace building and conflict transformation, Kahn pivoted to interviewing rescuers. In Rwanda, she interviewed Hutus who saved Tutsis during the 1994 Genocide in order to understand what motivated these ordinary citizens. Seeking role models for prosocial behavior, she compared the testimonies of rescuers from the Holocaust, Bosnia, Cambodia, Iraq and Sri Lanka. Today, she focuses on refugees and their experiences of forced migration.

Working at a think tank, Noha Aboueldahab (Brookings Doha Center) examines issues of justice and accountability in the Middle East and North Africa. She interviews activists, lawyers, and civil society professionals who have survived human rights abuses. Many of her interviewees are pursuing justice while living in the Arab diaspora. Having grown up in Egypt, Aboueldahab is conscious of the systemic human rights abuses that are endemic to dictatorships while mindful of the responsibility of foreign governments who support such regimes. She seeks to expand the “accountability gaze” beyond the domestic, post-colonial, authoritarian context to address external actors complicit in these atrocities. Her belief that transitional justice complicates the boundaries between past, present, and future informs her conversations with diplomats, policy makers and civil servants.

Considering the role of testimony in the framework of activism, the panelists acknowledged a common approach, despite disciplinary and contextual differences. Aleksion highlighted the search for justice in her description of the Central Jewish Historical Commission, established in Lublin shortly after the city's liberation and located near the Majdanek death camp. Survivors drafted protocols for documenting atrocities using discarded Nazi materials. They collected the names of German perpetrators and local collaborators in order to hold them accountable.

For Kahn, testimonies empower activists and victims in ways that can lead to positive change. She described an exhibition documenting gender-based violence in Bogotá, Colombia that afforded victims the opportunity to testify about their experiences to UN officials, government figures, and health officials. Previously, they had found it difficult to get their stories heard but the exhibition, which included testimonies, helped to initiate changes in health policy and led to the delivery of mental health and medical services to survivors.

In pursuing justice for past and ongoing atrocities, Aboueldahab aims to unsettle stubborn narratives. Her efforts foreground the work of activists, giving them credence at conservative organizations that tend to dismiss them as belonging to the streets. She lamented that activism is often a long and heart-breaking process in places controlled by authoritarian rule and armed violence where lives are lost or ruined because of the serious risks involved. In this case, as in all of those presented, survivors documented the past in order to build a new future.

Mary Jane Rein