

Teaching Unimaginable Experiences

A Symposium on Discussing Genocide, Slavery, & Mass-Murder in the Classroom

January 24, 2007

Event Summary

Participants: [Mia Bay](#) (History) –Facilitator, [Alex Hinton](#) (Anthropology), [Lee Jussim](#) (Psychology), [Chris Brown](#) (History), [Michael Levine](#) (Germanic, Russian, and East European Languages and Literature), and [Paul Hanebrink](#) (History)

In an effort to stimulate a broad conversation on teaching around potentially unsettling topics in race and ethnicity, the Rutgers Center for Race and Ethnicity held an innovative roundtable discussion among university faculty who teach in a variety of fields. The scholars who participated in this forum brought a wealth of experience to the discussion. Coming from various disciplines, they employ a range of media, written texts, poetry, novels, and films in the classroom and teaching a variety of difficult topics, including slavery, genocide, political violence, terrorism, and the Holocaust.

Teaching the Unimaginable's Central Challenges

In classroom discussions of the issues raised by genocide, violence, and terrorism, participants all faced questions about how to best introduce students to the realities of violence in people's lives; how to discuss what motivates people to extreme acts of violence; and how to educate students about what one can learn from the terrible past. "The challenge is to get students to bring their emotional and intellectual understandings together," Chris Brown, noted.

The Use of Shocking Imagery:

A major focus of discussion was how to best contextualize and analyze potentially shocking images that are, nevertheless, crucial to understanding these experiences. Introducing images of scarred, burned, or mangled bodies can be unsettling and disturbing for undergraduate students. Participants debated whether scholars should try to remove emotion from such images, or actively use the potential in "shock value" to open discussions in ways that written texts cannot. "There's a big difference between doing the readings and seeing something," noted Alex Hinton.

On Teaching About Violence:

"Those lectures where I deal with the violence itself are often the most descriptive—stepping back from analysis and giving a descriptive narrative can be useful at times." (Paul Hanebrink); "What do you do with experiences that are so overwhelming that you have to develop different narrative strategies to tell them and different reading strategies to understand them?" (Michael Levine)

On Explaining Motivations Toward Brutality:

Mia Bay suggested that "in teaching atrocities, you always get down to the question of were these particularly evil people? What was going on here?" To which Alex Hinton replied "From an anthropological perspective, I want to encourage students to not see violence as something that happens somewhere else, where people are either brutal killers or savages. It's [also] always important to heavily contextualize what you're talking about." "I think there is one point that successfully communicates to students what is going on. It's an oversimplification of course, but it's often 'we have to get them before they get us.' And this resonates with a lot of students." (Lee Jussim)

Moving Students Toward Critical Analysis, and Learning From the Past:

"We're in a weird moment in history, where the brutality of the Iraq War is not being shown in the same way that the Vietnam War was. So when I show images of violence, students tend to be queasy, shocked. They see violence like that as something distant, something that doesn't happen like that anymore." (Mia Bay); "Comparison helps you figure out what's typical but also what's particular. Everything is implicitly comparative. I think comparison is built into our ability to make distinctions." (Chris Brown); "An uplifting end to two weeks of horror is to talk about how to prevent genocide and mass-murder. Do you have examples of preventing genocides, countries that looked like they were on the path to genocide but something happened to change that?" (Lee Jussim).

Future Resources:

This session was part of an ongoing series of cross-disciplinary conversation on teaching, research, and public policy sponsored by the Rutgers Center for Race and Ethnicity. The Center thanks all the panelists and participants for their observations and insights. If readers of this website have suggestions for additional resources around teaching unimaginable experiences in the classroom, we encourage you to [contact us](#).

Resources for Teaching Unimaginable Experiences

Note: Any comments that accompanied resource suggestions are included in brackets below.
Readings:

Wilhelmus Petrus Du Preez, *Genocide: The Psychology of Mass Murder*, Boyars/ Bowerdean, 1994 [Simple, short, readable intro and overview book]

Alexander Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide*, University of California Press, 2005

Alexander Hinton, *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide*, University of California Press, 2002

Alexander Hinton, *Genocide: An Anthropological Reader*, Blackwell, 2002

Films:

[Night and Fog](#) (31 mins) [Both poetic and graphic documentary of the Holocaust. The length makes it usable for a class, but I would strongly recommend that anyone considering showing it actually watches it first. Some of it is quite disturbing.]

[Obedience](#) (45 mins) [Movie of a famous psychology experiment by Dr. Stanley Milgram showing how readily everyday people submit to the orders of an authority to harm another person.]

Web:

<http://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/20TH.HTM>

[Summarizes the life work of PJ Rummel, a political scientist who has been trying to document every mass killing in history. This section focuses on the 20th century. He gets a staggering total of 262 million people killed by mass murder and genocide in the 20th century.]

Slavery & the Making of America <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/> [Website for PBS documentary that contains a number of useful classroom resources, including slave testimonies, photos, and timelines]