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# Joyful Human Rights Activism

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# The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy

2017 Conference of the University of Dayton Human Rights Center

Nov. 8-10, 2017, Dayton, Ohio

For the archive of the conference, see [http://ecommons.udayton.edu/human\\_rights/2017/](http://ecommons.udayton.edu/human_rights/2017/)

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**Research Panel:** Re-Imagining Rights

**Presenter:** William Simmons , University of Arizona

**Title:** Joyful Human Rights Activism

**Abstract:**

In popular, legal, and academic discourse, a subtle but significant shift has occurred: The term “human rights” is now almost always discussed in relation to its opposite, “human rights abuses.” Syllabi, textbooks, and academic articles focus largely on abuses, victimization, and trauma with nary a mention of joy or other positive emotions.

This will be obvious to most human rights scholars and practitioners *once* it is pointed out, but the depth of the elision is staggering. Human rights could also be discussed in the context of the most joyful of human experiences and even those victimized almost always experience the panoply of human emotions including happiness and joy.

In this paper, drawn from my forthcoming book *Joyful Human Rights* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), I explore how many activists around the globe are claiming their rights in a new, festive, way. I argue that joyful rights claiming can be self-expressive and self-fulfilling while disrupting hegemonic discourses.

I begin with more traditional formations of joy in social movements through a brief analysis of carnival in the seminal work of Mikhail Bakhtin, recent research on playful social movements, and Victor and Edith Turner’s concept of *communitas*. I then explore how erotics infuse the varied works of queer resistance performance artist Jesusa Rodriguez in her mass cabarets and other performances and protests. The following section looks at clowning as a form of social protest and shows how clowns have refined their resistance techniques from the early modern jesters to contemporary hospital clowns and the remarkable NGO “Clowns without Borders.”

The paper concludes with a discussion of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who found great joy and renewed faith the last three years of his life when he opened his heart to fight with the poor in El Salvador.

**About the presenter:**

William Paul Simmons is an associate professor in Gender & Women's Studies and Honors Interdisciplinary Faculty at the University of Arizona. His research uses theoretical, legal, and empirical approaches to advance human rights for marginalized populations around the globe. His books include *Human Rights Law and the Marginalized Other* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), *An-archy and Justice: An Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas’ Political Thought* (Lexington, 2003), and the forthcoming *Joyful Human Rights* (University of Pennsylvania Press).

With Carol Mueller, he has edited *Binational Human Rights: The U.S.-Mexico Experience* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014). With Michelle Tellez, he has conducted ethnographic research on sexual violence against migrant women and he has published articles and a book chapter exploring legal remedies for the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico.

Simmons was the founding director of the master's program in social justice and human rights at Arizona State University and is currently spearheading the development of three human rights programs at the University of Arizona.