

Oct 2nd, 11:30 AM - 1:00 PM

Biafra and the Politics of Humanitarian Consumption

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Ayalogu, Chi-Chi, "Biafra and the Politics of Humanitarian Consumption" (2019). *Conference: The Social Practice of Human Rights*. 21. https://ecommons.udayton.edu/human_rights/2019/events/21

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Going Against the Grain

University of Dayton Human Rights Center
Social Practice of Human Rights Conference, Oct. 1-4, 2019

Biafra and the Politics of Humanitarian Consumption

Presented by:

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Session: New Media and Imagery

Abstract:

The Nigeria-Biafra War (1967-70) is overwhelmingly represented by photographs of malnourished, sickly looking and often protein-deficient children, iconic and complex images that encapsulate the narrative of an impoverished black Africa in the western imagination. While these photographs reveal the grievous, inhuman atrocities that took place in Biafra, they have come to be negatively associated with the entirety of black Africa, as they tend to validate inaccurate ideas of homogeneity on the continent. Yet despite their homogenizing effect, Biafran leaders re-appropriated images of suffering for propaganda use, specifically to elicit a humanitarian response and thereby procure aid and resources from denizens of the west. This tactic successfully projected the country as a prominent and worthy humanitarian cause, galvanizing western viewers. Thus, this paper concerns itself with the humanitarian response to sensationalist images of suffering Biafrans, in addition to the exploitative systems that Biafran leaders inadvertently participated in by re-appropriating images that attest to the myth of a destitute Africa. Furthermore, I endeavor to understand how the paradigm of spectatorship and subjectivity, as it relates to western consumption of Biafran propaganda imagery, manifest in the humanitarian response to the crisis. I consider the critical works of T.J Demos and filmmaker Renzo Martens, both of whom question the motives that undergird humanitarian interventions. This paper elucidates the manipulative function of Biafran propaganda images and the uncritical humanitarian reception to these images, a reception that highlights the ways in which the humanitarian industry is invested in the systems of oppression that it seeks to rectify.

Presenter information:

Chi-Chi Ayalogu is a first year doctoral student at Carleton University. Her research looks at the humanitarian reception to the images that came out of the Nigeria-Biafra war in an attempt to better understand the humanitarian industrial complex, western spectatorship, African subjectivity, and at large, the power dynamic between the west and black Africa. She argues that Biafra offers an example that contradicts the singularly flattened narrative of an Africa that waits to be acted upon by commodifying its suffering to manipulate western consumers.