

The Great Archaeological Discovery Of Our Time

03-08-2024 ~ *An interview with renowned archaeologist Gary M. Feinman on the emergence of a global data set from our past that humanity can use to prosper—and avoid the biggest mistakes.*



The motives that drove archaeologists of the past included a thirst for glory, a taste for treasure, and a desire to enshrine a new political era with the legitimacy of the ancient past.

Gradually, over the decades leading closer to ours, the discipline matured, gaining an ethical framework, and started asking questions about the societies and lifestyles of the people who had left their traces behind. Archaeologists began to compare their evidence to how we live now and increasingly started hunting for the origins of modern-day problems, from plagues and warfare to inequality. Archaeological research spread beyond the palaces and cities of a few civilizations to six continents, and the rapid growth of evidence in human origins produced a global outlook and a 6 million-year-long clock to record the gradual changes in the human story that led us to the present.

The diligent research of tens of thousands of archaeologists carefully documenting the past all over the planet has accumulated and crossed a new threshold leading to big implications: It's socially useful information that we can plug into improving our lives.

Our sample size of this greater past dwarfs by many magnitudes what we thought history used to be. Thanks to advances in technology, the data about the human story can integrate and interact with the records we keep today.

Many modern human problems are the result of "[evolutionary mismatch](#)"—our

lifestyles are at odds with the biological capacities we developed and relied on for millions of years to get here—and range from [heart disease](#) to [various forms of addiction](#) and [ADHD](#). A synthesis of human origins research and our new understanding of human biology presents a powerful perspective and roadmap for dealing with some of our biggest challenges.

By combining that synthesis with the archaeological record's increasingly detailed knowledge of human settlement and state formations, from its origins to the present, we can build from a universalizing framework and global data set. This approach can better integrate the wider body of Indigenous knowledge and worldviews than the Western-based historical models and understanding of the human story that continues to hold sway.

One of the first to see the scale of this opportunity is archaeologist, researcher, and professor [Gary M. Feinman](#), MacArthur Curator of Mesoamerican, Central American, and East Asian Anthropology at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. Feinman and a growing cast of colleagues have turned stereotypes about Mesoamerican societies on their heads—many were cooperative, relatively egalitarian—and they developed an impressive array of frameworks that allow us to compare different aspects of societies from various times and places, including ours.

Feinman has been a prominent advocate for developing better models to interpret the past and for the synthesis of information across time periods and regions of the planet. We are stronger when we can draw from a broader set of parameters, counterexamples, and nuances that prevent the common human instinct to take off on flights of fancy.

I thought readers could benefit from sharing our conversation about the great archaeological discovery of our time: the realization that this new data set is a powerful engine for the betterment of humankind.

Jan Ritch-Frel: Let's start with a great essay you wrote in 2023, "[Learning from History, If We Dare](#)." You wrote of a "treasure trove of information that just may guide us toward better futures." We're in an era, thanks to accumulations of evidence and technology, where humanity has a critical mass of history at its fingertips that it has never had before. Why is this significant?

Gary M. Feinman: As deep-time historians, we have finally gotten the volume and

multiple scales of data that permit comparisons across different cultural periods, over long spans of time, and diverse social formations. In a real sense, through archaeology, we can now begin to assess a truly global historical record that is not narrowly restricted to just literate societies or the European past. For a long time, the classical Mediterranean world or medieval Europe—both known from texts—were used as proxies for humanity's past. Now, we know that is not appropriate, as our past as a species has neither been uniform nor linear.

At the same time, we now have models that help us identify and point ourselves toward understanding what underpins good governance, collective and cooperative behavior, as well as the causes of economic inequality and their alternatives. The social sciences have finally discarded 200-year-old approaches to understanding the past, such as the idea that the nations of Europe are the pinnacle and end-point product of steady human progress. A historical framework pegged to that framework makes useful comparisons across history almost impossible.

Ritch-Frel: Do we have many examples of our leaders and governing circles daring to learn from anything other than cherry-picked history?

Feinman: The problem is that for centuries, scholars interested in drawing lessons from the historical past have looked principally to the classical world, Europe's recent past, or progressivist models that made unwarranted assumptions about human nature writ large. Many leaders who saw history through a straw have paid a heavy price.

More problematic are the scenarios that presume humans are perpetually selfish or that our leaders are always despotic or militaristic. These scenarios ignore the nuances of human nature, which include both the potential for selfishness and the ability to cooperate with non-kin at scales unsurpassed in the animal kingdom. Human behavior is always contingent on context, and alone, it cannot account for human history. Rather, we must look for the parameters, patterns, and variability in institutions and behavior that account for humanity's differences, diverse pasts, and changes.

Contrary to prevailing opinion, there is no end to the debates and lessons we can learn from history. Technologies change, but the basic socioeconomic mechanisms and relations that underpin human institutions have broad

commonalities and structures. We know this in regard to scale and now another key dimension: the degree to which power is concentrated and distributed.

Of course, pure reliance on education and exposure to democratic institutions and good governance is not enough for these things to take hold. How institutions are financed makes a big difference, and if that does not change, then political realities will not either.

Ritch-Frel: Since we've never had so much history to learn from and make use of before, the reality is that the mechanisms for initiating better use of a more comprehensive history have to be produced. What are some of the key starting points?

Feinman: We first have to recognize that when explaining humanity's past, history itself matters. The path dependence, or sequence of changes, and existing structures matter. In other words, the social sciences are historical sciences—like biology—but without general laws or mechanical explanations like there are in physics. Even though there are no universal laws of history, we can identify useful probabilities.

How do we do that? First, a comparative study of the past has to allow for variation in sequences, speed of development, and change. Then, as we compare different regional sequences of history, we can study the relations between historical factors and key variables under different parameters. One great advantage of history and archaeology compared to the recent past is that we know the outcomes. We already know what happened, and that gives us the opportunity to understand why.

As we build our understanding of humanity's global past, the strength of the relationships we see between institutions and factors such as population growth, nucleation, and scale will become stronger. Only through a broad comparative lens, made possible with archaeological data, can we construct a genuinely global archive of histories and heritage.

Then there's the social modeling question—a lot of historical error has been produced by seeing events as driven solely by the elites. High status generally may come with more clout than others have, but in social formations, there are many other groups and forces that have a hand in determining how events unfold. If we're interested in greater accuracy, we will include the vantages of the wider

population and daily life.

Institutions are part of this mix: They perform functions based on earlier embedded history that people have to contend with and sometimes reform.

Most human settlements and social formations are open—population flow and change are near-continuous. This means that membership and affiliations in our communities and “societies” are generally in flux and have mechanisms that reflect that.

Cultural groups are not homogeneous, and cultural traits do not shift in unison. Some aspects of culture, like worldviews or visions of the universe, resist change. Others, such as how people organize politically or what they do for a living, may shift more readily.

This is where it becomes so critical that we can study the past in both granular and scaled-up ways, using a range of new technologies we have available, from isotopes and DNA to satellite mapping.

The methodology of many research disciplines that use individuals as their key metric has continuously let us down the more our questions scale up—this applies to both behavioral ecology and classical economics. They are useful but conceptually inadequate when it comes to explaining the diversity and complexity of the deep past.

Ritch-Frel: Regarding the educational process for future leaders, where would you start?

Feinman: We need a curriculum for future leaders that broadens their perspective on human behavior and the global past. If we're going to enjoy the benefits of history, behavior in the contemporary West should not be isolated or considered distinct from the rest. A proper dose of a synthesis of anthropology, archaeology, and history will temper the curricula that prepare future leaders in ways that dampen modernist and Eurocentric biases.

The famous [Philosophy, Politics and Economics](#) (PPE) courses at Oxford and Cambridge, which have produced almost all the UK prime ministers for many decades, and the [Grand Strategy](#) courses taught at the elite campuses of the United States, are deeply imbued in these theories and presumptions.

Ritch-Frel: Do you think the PPE and the Grand Strategy crowd know they're holding onto an obsolete and reductive bag and will embrace history and biological sciences, or will this have to be a knife fight in the alley?

Feinman: In so many ways, recent policies and beliefs regarding inequality, globalism, democracy, and migration have been birthed from disciplines like economics, politics, and law, which are grounded in Eurocentric ideas and assumptions. These biases are not surprising since Western social scientific thought grew hand in hand with Euro-American colonialism and contemporary paths of economic development.

But now, our mission is to disentangle and refine our conceptual frames, drawing on and broadening it based on what we have learned. The data we have collected in archaeology, anthropology, and history demand an episode of “destructive science,” a new conceptual development that aligns with what we know, in which we expand and integrate theoretical ideas drawn from economics and politics. And we can temper them with the diversity in practices and institutions that have been documented by archaeologists, historians, and anthropologists.

By Jan Ritch-Frel

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Source: Human Bridges

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Speaking Papiamentu ~ On Re-

Connecting To My Native Tongue



03-07-2024 ~ It

starts at Schiphol, the Amsterdam airport. Before that, I am still immersed in my life in Jerusalem, busy with family matters and with grassroots activism against the Israeli occupation, while under pressure to finish grant proposals for the multicultural Jerusalem feminist center and art gallery where I work. I do not have time to connect emotionally to my trip, which still feels more like a yearly obligation to visit my elderly mother in Curaçao, when I would rather spend my precious vacation time trekking in Turkey or Nepal.

I usually have a few hours to kill, not enough to take the train into Amsterdam and visit old friends, which I do on my return trip when I have almost twelve hours between planes. And so, I silently wander around the airport, feeling a little like a spy, as I do in Jerusalem when I hear Dutch tourists speaking on the street, not suspecting that I, who probably look like a local to them, would understand. Not identifying myself as a speaker of Dutch, I take in the talk, smiling to myself, my little secret.

Here, in transit at the airport - a liminal space par excellence - I sometimes pretend to be a total stranger and address the salesperson in English. Perhaps that has more to do with the fact that I have not yet woken up my slumbering Dutch, or do not want to give away my unfamiliarity with the currency and other

taken-for-granted facts of daily life in the Netherlands.

Or perhaps it is my resistance to being taken for an “*allochtoon*” – that polite way they refer to the “not really Dutch,” who nevertheless hold Dutch citizenship – a category that groups together the mostly Moslem migrants and those of us, from the former Dutch colonies, blacks and whites alike. It is a label that had not yet been coined when my schoolteachers in Curaçao taught us to see Holland as our “mother country,” to sing *Wilhelmus Van Nassauwe*, the Dutch national anthem, on Queen Juliana’s birthday and to accept the Batavians, a Germanic tribe, as “our” ancestors. They say that when you count, you invariably give away your mother tongue – to this day I count not in Papiamentu, but in Dutch, so totally did I embrace the colonial language.

I was four when I learned Dutch in kindergarten. I remember the feeling of utter embarrassment when everyone expected me to speak Dutch with my cousins whose father was Dutch, and I ran away crying. I was losing the secure ground that Papiamentu provided, having to jump into the deep waters of a foreign language without a life-vest before I knew how to swim.

Very soon, however, I was speaking Dutch fluently, determined to excel in the language. I wanted to know it even better than the Dutch children whose parents came from Holland. I spoke Dutch with all my school friends, even though most of us spoke Papiamentu at home, including the handful of schoolmates from my own community, the Sephardic Jews who settled on the island in the seventeenth century, after fleeing the inquisition in Portugal and Spain.

In my elementary school days, the teachers forbade us to speak Papiamentu even in the schoolyard, claiming it was the only way to learn proper Dutch. And so, I read, wrote, and thought in Dutch – it became my first literary language, as Papiamentu was basically only a spoken language at that time. Now, as I write this in 2007, after forty-two years away from the Dutch speaking world, my Dutch gets rusty, until I find myself again surrounded by its sounds and it returns to me and becomes almost natural.



I roam around the halls of the airport's immense shopping center, not quite knowing what I am looking for. It is rather busy at the camera counter - I realize it is not a place to come with all my questions about which new camera to buy, my first digital SLR, after getting excited with the results of my digital point and shoot. Up to now, I had refrained from following the footsteps of all the other photographers in my family and never took my photography seriously. All that changed when I realized that editing my digital photos could finally give me the control over my images that I sought.

No, there is no point shopping here, I'd better look at cameras in Curaçao at a more relaxed pace, where the prices will certainly be lower. At least they used to be, when I was growing up and the island was still a duty-free paradise for American tourists.

Suddenly I remember that once, in these huge avenues of shops designed to entice travelers on the move, there used to be a stand with fresh, raw herring. I do not see it anymore, even though this is still the season of the celebrated first herring catch - the end of June. It fills me with longing, even though "new" herring was not something we ate at my home, it is what the "real Dutch" loved. Raw herring is a taste I developed later, and yet, it is so very much a taste from that past, perhaps from my acquired Dutch identity, and I feel that eating herring now would prepare me for my return.

I search for a shop that used to sell every possible variety of *drop* - salted licorice

- yet not daring to ask for it, perhaps so as not to expose my weakness, my secret addiction or not admitting it to myself. I have a good spatial memory - I remember you had to walk through a drug store to get to it, and it is a long way from the main shopping center with the largest stores. I find the drugstore, but now there is a cosmetics counter in the back. The millions of foreigners who pass through this airport obviously do not have the taste for the salty and pungent licorice, a taste that you only acquire if you grow up in Dutch culture, and so it was not profitable to maintain a shop that specializes in salted licorice.

Without quite making a conscious decision, I meander into a store where they sell Dutch delicacies - cheeses, fish, chocolates, biscuits. And there, on one of its shelves, I see a large box of salted licorice, which I buy immediately. I taste one, and as soon as it has melted in my mouth, I take another, and yet another. It is not that salted licorice reminds me, like the Proustian *petite madeleine*, of a lost childhood, rather, it reawakens my desire for more and more salted licorice. I can forget about licorice completely, go about my daily life in Jerusalem without knowledge or reminiscence of it, without even longing for it, in fact, I do not care much for sweets, and then, suddenly, as soon as I taste it again, I turn into a licorice addict. It is a lot easier not to eat it at all, than to eat it in moderation.

I start to move towards the gate, still sneaking my fingers into the box of licorice that is now in my backpack, hidden from my own conscience, as I suppress the certain knowledge that soon I will develop a bellyache. There is a long line outside the closed hall where a second hand-luggage check is held before you can enter it - much like the flights to Israel - but it is not weaponry that is being sought here, but drugs.

Most of the people in the line are Afro-Antilleans, seemingly living in Holland and going back to the islands for a family visit, sometimes accompanied by a Dutch spouse and children in all shades of skin color, wearing their best clothes. There is also an assortment of casually dressed Dutch tourists, mostly young couples out to spend their vacation in the tropics, invariably scuba diving at the magnificent coral reefs - something that I, as a native, never learned to do.

I begin to hear Papiamentu, a word here and there, a mother calling a child, snippets of a conversation. Somehow, I still feel a little like a foreigner, an outsider, an eavesdropper. But the reality of the past week, the tense work on the proposals is all gone, as if it never existed. Even my exasperation with the Israeli

occupation of Palestine has left me, as if a heavy burden has been lifted from my back. I am relieved not to have to think about it, for I am essentially an introspective person who realizes she must take a moral stand and become an activist, despite herself.

Slowly, my mouth full of licorice, I start to get that familiar sensation that I recognize from my previous border-crossings in Amsterdam. I cannot give it a name, it is a sense of strangeness, of looking at myself from the outside, this licorice-eating woman who is standing in line with other speakers of her mother tongue, when she lives in an everyday reality where nobody really knows her Papiamentu-speaking-self, where she has absolutely no occasion to let it out. I realize I am a stranger to those closest to me, and how this part of me, the woman-who-speaks-Papiamentu, is unknown to them, cannot be known to them.

There is a song by a popular Israeli singer who immigrated from Buenos Aires, that speaks of living his life in Hebrew and that he will have no other language – yet in the depths of the night, he still dreams in Spanish. I do not even dream in Papiamentu. This part of me is totally absent in my life in Israel, where I have nobody with whom to speak my language – as far as I know, I am the only Papiamentu speaking person in Jerusalem. And so, as soon as I return to Jerusalem, I stop living in Papiamentu. Nobody there knows that part of me.

When I asked a friend what it felt like to live in a country where French, her mother tongue, is not spoken, she answered that language is a home you can take with you to wherever you go. She has her French-speaking relatives and enjoys movies and books in French. For me, Papiamentu cannot possibly be a home away from home – without an expatriate community with which to connect, when my mother tongue has less than 300,000 speakers and none of them can be found in my immediate vicinity and when the phone connection to that distant country that nobody else here calls, has always been outrageously expensive.

I cannot even find solace in writing my mother tongue, living in a Papiamentu world of my own – since Papiamentu, at least for me, is not a written language. Its orthography was only formalized after I left the island, and I still find it strange to read, with its strict phonetic spelling, so that words originating from Spanish or Dutch are written in unfamiliar ways.

Feeling that Curaçao means nothing to those who have never lived there and who

do not know my language, I do not dwell on my background – I do not talk about where I come from. I am not willing to play the role of an exotic bird from a little island in the Caribbean. On the other hand, I refuse to be thrown into better-known categories, such as “Argentinean”, sharing little with South Americans – other than their music and dance – as I learned Spanish only in sixth grade, and unlike English, it always remained a foreign language to me.

And so, rather than allowing myself to feel the loneliness, I let that part of me go – I have erased it. It is a part of me that I do not speak *about*, if I cannot speak *from* it. I do not even miss my Papiamentu-speaking-self when away from the island. I do not live with a sense of loss, longing for a vanished childhood, for a hidden identity, for my language as a home – just like, in my daily life, I can completely forget about the pleasures of eating salted licorice. Until recently, I did not realize that I have been paying a price for the erasure of such a central part of who I am. Rather than being a stranger to those around me, I was a stranger to myself.

It is, perhaps, because I am not an exile that I do not feel that sense of loss – I have had the privilege to return to Curaçao almost every year since I have been living in Jerusalem. Or rather, I do not believe I deserve to indulge in a feeling of loneliness, after all, I left my native country voluntarily to study abroad, knowing I would never return to live there. I am not like the homeless, the displaced, the refugees who were forced to abandon their language.

Perhaps I can speak of a sense of self-exile, as I did not find my place in the complex colonial society of the island, with its racial, class and gender segmentation and hierarchy, its strict internal borders, where everyone had their place, and knew it. I did not want to accept the place I was assigned, as a female member of a privileged class, whose movements across these internal borders, unlike those of the men of that class, were heavily restricted.

At a young age, I became aware that each social group took for granted its own conception of the world, its own truth, which often was in contradiction to the others, and that kept them within their borders. And so, even when living on the island as a high school student, I had already learned to be an outsider – one who refused to see herself as embedded within the internal boundaries and tried to see beyond them.

I was like the *stranger*, a concept developed by the sociologist Georg Simmel

referring to someone who is both near and far, who is spatially inside a social group, yet at the same time, not quite a member of it – not committed to its norms, values, definitions of reality. It means being in liminal space between the groups, a position that frees you to take on a broader perspective, allowing you to be more “objective” (1). In other words, I was already a budding anthropologist, thriving on the threshold – the *limen* – between different ways of life.

It is this adaptability as an outsider that prepared me to cross cultural and language borders without experiencing culture shock – to adopt English with utmost ease, even before I went to college in the USA in the second half of the stormy sixties, where I found myself again in the liminal spaces of critical thought and the struggle for social justice, together with other foreigners and with students of color – a period that has consolidated my social consciousness.

A year or so after graduating, I had no difficulty adapting to life in Jerusalem, becoming fluent in spoken Hebrew when I moved here with the Jewish American man I met at the university in the Boston area and married, raising two children who have always insisted on speaking Hebrew with us.

My life in Jerusalem revolves around spoken Hebrew, while I also nourish my English, which has gradually replaced Dutch as my literary language. In fact, it is the only language in which I am able to write today. I never became proficient in written Hebrew and do not feel pressured to perfect it, another expression of my political ambivalence about living in Israel. I guess I take pleasure in being a perennial outsider.

I do not even have Israeli nationality, as the Dutch at the time did not permit dual citizenship, and that suits me well to this day. In 1970, when we first arrived in Jerusalem, I saw it as a bit of an adventure trip to a young, exciting country with an ethnically diverse, anthropologically intriguing society. The occupation of the Palestinians did not appear as malevolent as it became over the years. I am certain I would not have wanted to settle here today.



As I stand in line at the Amsterdam airport, catching a plane to Curaçao, I hear my mother tongue and smile at the people waiting to get on the plane, in acknowledgment that I understand. There is no sense of spying anymore; it is replaced by an eagerness to identify myself as a speaker of Papiamentu. I blend in with those waiting to be checked, voicing my agreement, of course, in Papiamentu, that the waiting is taking much too long.

Finally, on the plane, at my window seat, for which I always ask so I can see, and photograph, the island when we are landing, I realize I am shedding the layer of my everyday life in Jerusalem, like an overall, or rather a heavy spacesuit that cloaks my entire body and dictates my movement. It takes me a while to recognize that Papiamentu-speaking-self that is crammed inside, the way I think, twinkle my eyes, dance the *tumba* in Papiamentu. I regain a visceral quality, not just a language – all those things that get lost in translation.

An American friend, on hearing me switch to Papiamentu while on the phone with one of my cousins living in Boston, exclaimed in delight: “you become a totally different person when you speak Papiamentu!” It was a moment of deep recognition, of acknowledgement. She was the first person who was not from the island, who saw me, and her remark, like a paradigm leap, enabled me to see myself, and feel the person that I am, fully, with all my layers of language.

The flight is long, sometimes close to ten hours, or even more if there is a stopover in St. Maarten or Bonaire, two other Dutch islands in the Caribbean. I

try to sleep and seldom watch the movie, while I make a concerted effort to wean myself, temporarily, from my licorice habit. I speak Dutch and Papiamentu on the plane with the flight attendants or the people sitting next to me.

If I flew a different airline or route, say via Madrid and Caracas, the transition to my Papiamentu-speaking-self would be delayed. Perhaps it would be more abrupt. Would I then have time to reflect on this sense of strangeness that overcomes me at the Amsterdam airport? Perhaps, I would immediately adopt my Papiamentu-speaking bearing from the moment I land, as if I had never been away. I would not have the chance to see myself from the side, as a woman I do not know in my ordinary life. I would not feel the pain and loneliness of not being able to share such a vivid part of myself. I would not have come to writing this essay and realizing that this part of me is a stranger in my other life.

Who is this woman who becomes again a speaker of Papiamentu, when standing in line at the Amsterdam airport? There, I reconnect with an inner core that I have denied myself all those years. There is the music of the language – juicy words like *barbulète*, *kokolishi*, *warawara*, *maribomba* – just their sounds make me dance, take me back to a childhood rich in fantasy and folktales.

Yes, there is a sense of coming home when I speak Papiamentu – a mother tongue is, after all, a home, but not one I can take with me to places where there are no other speakers. It is a home in the sense that it makes me whole again, that fills me with the lifeforce of who I fully am.

From the airplane, I finally catch a glimpse of the island below. My heart begins to somersault, as more and more of my island becomes visible. Enthralled I begin to photograph. I have always loved to look down from airplanes, to see landscapes as gigantic, two-dimensional paintings. But most of all I love to look at Curaçao – seeing it not abstractly, but in its very physical manifestation – its large inner bays, shaped like fig-leaves with a narrow passage to the sea; the waves splashing against the rocks of its rugged north coast, and its flat plain of dry, red sands along the sea near the airport. I already feel myself there as I identify all the bays where I have been, or the hills I have climbed with my brother Fred. From the air, I get ideas for new places to explore, and of course, to photograph.



And now, a few years later, I realize that something is starting to happen to me when I photograph the island on my yearly visits to my mother. It is through my photography that I begin to look more closely at the island, becoming more and more connected. I discover that I can *transcend* the outsider stance that seems to be inherent in the act of taking pictures, meeting my subject on a deeper level without holding back, as I am thrown into the realms of the senses, the psyche, of history and memory.

And the more I open myself to the island's rhythms, sounds and textures through my lens, the harder it becomes to leave my language behind. To let the woman that I am on the island be erased.

Back in Jerusalem, I continue to work with the photos - enhancing the digital images and uploading them to my photo-website, while also creating photobooks. In other words, I am no longer cutting myself off from the island.

Sharing the images, I see that people really look, and I begin to realize that through my photographs, they can see a part of myself that I did not let them know before. I realize that with my photographs, I am speaking Papiamentu. That I am saying *kokolishi*, *maribomba*, *warawara*. And I am being understood.

Notes:

1. Georg Simmel, "The Stranger", Kurt Wolff (Trans.) *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. New York: Free Press, 1950, pp. 402 - 408.

Bio:

Rita Mendes-Flohr (née Mendes Chumaceiro) is an ardent trekker, an exhibiting art photographer, and the co-founder, former director, and curator of a feminist art gallery. An eternal outsider, she was born in Curaçao, studied in Boston and lives in Jerusalem, feeling at home only in the in-between. Coming to writing at a later stage in her life, she has published a socio-architectural memoir/novel of her multicultural Caribbean childhood, (in Hebrew translation) inspired by her background in architecture and anthropology and writes introspective travel essays (in English) that she plans to publish as a book together with her photographs of those journeys. Her work can be viewed on her site: www.ritamendesflohr.com



USC Shoah Foundation - Interview

with Carola Berman



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Now online the interview with Mrs. Carola Berman, family of Paula Bermann.

The interview: [Carola Berman](#)

(June 2023: The link will be active for one year)

Joseph Sassoon Semah: On Friendship / (Collateral Damage) IV - How to Explain Hare Hunting to a Dead German Artist

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The publication can now be ordered € 49.95 and € 5 shipping costs: Stichting Metropool Internationale Kunstprojecten, account number NL 42 INGB 0006 9281 68 stating On Friendship IV, name and address.

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Brief description

The publication highlights Beuys' work and thought from different perspectives and his relationship to post-war culture and politics in particular.

Joseph Sassoon Semah's (1948, Baghdad) work - drawings, paintings, sculptures, installations, performances and texts - provides ample space for critical reflection on identity, history and tradition and is part of the artist's long research into the relationship between Judaism and Christianity as sources of Western art and culture and of politics.

Joseph Beuys (1921, Krefeld -1986, Düsseldorf) is one of Germany's most influential post-war artists, who became particularly famous for his performances, installations, lectures and Fluxus concerts. In 2021/22, Joseph Beuys' 100th birthday was celebrated extensively with the event '*Beuys 2021. 100 years*'.

But who was Beuys really? Joseph Beuys mythologised his wartime past as a national socialist and Germany's problematic and post-traumatic past. After WWII, Beuys transformed from perpetrator to victim. How should we interpret Beuys in the future?

Joseph Beuys and Joseph Sassoon Semah, two ex-soldiers, two artists. Joseph Beuys was a former gunner and radio operator in the German air force during WWII; Joseph Sassoon Semah served in the Israeli air force. Who is the (authentic) victim and who is the Victimiser?

The Abuse Of The Right To Sexual And Reproductive Health In Nigeria: The Way Out



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Somewhere in Osun State, Nifemi, a three-year old baby, has been put under the knife for her clitoris to be cut off. Somewhere in Zamfara, thirteen-year-old Aisha has been betrothed to a 65-year-old Alhaji. Somewhere in Lekki, ten-year-old Ayoola is being sexually abused by his uncle. Somewhere in Zamfara, new mother, Aisha, just drew her last breath after bleeding profusely due to the negligence of the medical practitioners that handled her childbirth. Each of these people are victims of the failed healthcare system which Nigerians are constantly being subjected to. For a long period of time, the issue of the abuse of the right to sexual and reproductive healthcare in Nigeria has been ignored like a slowly growing pimple. However, the previous pimple has now developed into an unavoidable boil ridden with pus and blood. Much to the chagrin of the powers that be, the ripple effects of the poor handling of sexual and reproductive health in Nigeria, can no longer be swept under the carpet.

The World Health Organisation defines reproductive health as: *“A complete state of physical, mental and social wellbeing, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity in all matters related the reproductive system, its functions and its processes”* [1]. The right to sexual and reproductive health has slowly garnered recognition over the past five decades. From the World Population Conferences in Rome and Belgrade held at 1958 and 1965 respectively [2], to the Beijing Conference of 1995 [3]; reproductive and sexual health has constantly been reaffirmed as a sine qua non in the lives of both men and women. In Nigeria, several Acts, and policies alike, have been enacted in order to guarantee this right to every Nigerian. They include, amongst others: The HIV(Anti-Discrimination) Act, 2013; the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act, 2015; and the National Strategic Framework for the Elimination of Obstetric Fistula in Nigeria (2019-2023) [4].

However, the Nigerian situation seemingly sings a different tune. In spite of the

existing legal framework, there have been numerous cases bordering on the flagrant abuse of the right to reproductive and sexual health in Nigeria- ranging from child marriage to sexual violence.

Currently, Nigeria has the highest number of child brides in Africa [5]. Over 20% of global maternal deaths occur in Nigeria with a staggering 600,000 maternal deaths enumerated from 2005-2015 [6]. In the same vein, over 25 percent of Nigerian women have been circumcised, with Osun State hosting the highest prevalence rate of 77 percent [7]. Each of these violations have negative effects on victims, hence, the global attention which the right to reproductive and sexual health has attracted. For example, there has been no report on the health benefits triggered by Female Genital Mutilation; however, numerous studies and research works have reported the harmful effects of female genital mutilation which could range from immediate complications which include: shock, haemorrhage and genital tissue swelling; to long-term complications which include: pain during sexual intercourse, urinary tract infections and menstrual problems [8].

Likewise, child marriage holds grave health consequences for the girl child. Young mothers are more likely to experience health conditions such as obstetric fistula [9]; disturbingly still, girls between ages 10 to 14 are five times more likely to die at pregnancy and childbirth than women between ages 20 to 24 [10]. In the light of these disturbing statistics, the lurking question remains-how do we stop the abuse of the right to sexual and reproductive health?

There is no gainsaying the fact that law qualifies as one of the most effective instruments for social control. As a backdrop for this, there is the need to create a strong legal framework which would effectively battle the violation of the right to sexual and reproductive health in essence, reducing such violations to the barest minimum. One of the major causes of the alarming prevalence of the violation of the right to reproductive and sexual health in Nigeria, can be attributed to the shaky legal system that governs the concept. For example, the recently enacted Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2015, currently stands as the first and only federal legislation which explicitly prohibits female genital mutilation [11]. This, however, has not reduced the rate of Female Genital Mutilation, as only thirteen states having been recorded to have domesticated the act [12]. This has proved to be a bottleneck in the battle against the menace of female genital mutilation. Likewise, Nigerian legislations do not seem to

protect gender interests.

For example, the Criminal Code does not recognise that boys are indeed, susceptible to acts of sexual violence. The statute stipulates a penalty of life imprisonment for persons who have unlawful carnal knowledge of girls below the age of thirteen [13], and merely prescribes a seven-year sentence for persons who are found guilty of unlawfully “dealing with” a boy under 14 years [14]. This is rather disheartening, considering that studies have proved that boys are just as susceptible to sexual violence [15].

In essence, in order to stop the abuse of the right to sexual and reproductive health, there is the need to create a strong legal framework which attends to the needs of both genders; and in the same vein, prescribes strict punitive measures to be meted out on people who either induce, perpetuate, or participate in sexual violence. It is pertinent to note that legislations ought to reflect informed decisions which are aimed to protect all classes of people in the society. The achievement of this feat is largely hinged on the need for women in legislative positions. Research has proven that the burden of reproductive health problems is usually on women [16]. However, women occupy only about 6 per cent of federal legislative seats [17]. Hence, the need for gender balance in legislative houses is a viable tool which is capable of propelling the Nigerian legal system towards curbing the menace of the abuse of the right to sexual and reproductive health.

Furthermore, it is worthy of note that whilst creating a strong legal framework where violators can be brought to book is quite important, severe punishments do not always serve as strong tools for deterrence [18]. Nigeria is a largely patriarchal society; hence, a large number of the acts of violation usually perpetrated, are linked to cultural and religious roots. In essence, even when laws are enacted to prohibit certain acts, such acts would only be perpetrated in secret. This is because the rate of obedience to prohibitive laws is usually low if such laws contradict the norms of the people. This is where mass sensitization comes in. There is the need to conduct mass campaigns in order to educate the people on the ills of harmful traditional practices, and on the need to protect the sexual health of targeted persons in the society. In order to achieve this, it is important to focus such symposia on traditional and religious leaders. Studies have shown that people usually heed to the dictates of their traditional and religious leaders [19], as they are seen as custodians of the divine authority

bestowed by God. With the involvement of traditional and religious leaders, there would be a higher chance that the people would heed to calls for the abandonment of harmful traditions and norms. In the same vein, it is pertinent to note that the target audience for such campaigns and symposia should not be limited to the women and girls in rural areas alone. For example, the prevalence of Female Genital Mutilation in urban areas in Nigeria, is relatively high, compared to its prevalence in rural areas [20]. This shows that sensitization ought to be targeted at inhabitants of both urban and rural areas; as both classes of people function as perpetrators of the abuse of the right to sexual health. Thus, in areas where sensitization fails, the law would take over and vice versa. Both the law and sensitization are complementary.

Research has proven that one of the leading causes of child marriage is poverty [21]. In the same vein a study by World Bank reports that there is a huge gap between the prevalence of female genital mutilation amongst girls from rich backgrounds and girls from poor backgrounds [22]. What this means is that a large number of the traditional practices usually perpetuated by the Nigerian people are borne out of economic inadequacies. Also, one would notice that poor men usually prefer to see sexual intercourse with their wives as a form of leisure. Most times, since these men cannot afford relaxation centres or leisure courts, when they get back from their respective energy-consuming low-paid jobs, they turn to the only viable form of relaxation- sex. In order to put a stop the menace of harmful practices perpetrated on girls by women, there is the need to improve economic conditions in the country. It is submitted, that the recent proposal of Value Added Tax (VAT) increase, would only aggravate the drastic state of reproductive health in Nigeria. This is because even the poorest people would be taxed heavily. The ripple effect of this is that, a man who can barely afford to feed his family members, would neither desist from seeing sex as a form of relaxation nor spare a second's thought to any plans for family planning.

It is therefore recommended, that the government put in extra effort into creating more affordable reproductive and sexual health services for the benefit of the masses and in the same vein, implement financial policies that are people and pocket-friendly.

In conclusion, it is of utmost importance that a country which seeks to move forward economically and politically, pays attention to reproductive and sexual health issues. This is because the youths are usually badly hit when the

reproductive health policies in a nation, are either non-existent, unimplemented, or inadequate [23]. Needless to say, the youths have a stronghold on the labour force of Nigeria.

This means that whatever hits the youths, hits the economy. In the same vein, in tandem with the popularly chanted mantra, youths are indeed, the leaders of tomorrow. Any form of complacency as regards the issues that affect them, could ultimately destroy the political future of Nigeria.

It is therefore, highly recommended that the issues highlighted in this article, be treated with immediate attention.

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[d-the-issues-impact-on-the-economic-growth-of-women/](#); accessed on the 25th of October, 2019.

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[13] See Section 218 of the Criminal Code.

[14] See Section 216 of the Criminal Code.

[15] <http://venturesafrica.com/why-nigerias-new-violence-against-persons-prohibition-act-is-only-the-beginning/amp/>; accessed on the 25th of October, 2019.

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Philip Roth ~ The Plot Against America

About The Plot Against America

Set in Newark, New Jersey, in the early 1940s, *The Plot Against America* tells the story of what it was like for the Roth family and Jews across the country when the isolationist aviation hero Charles Lindbergh was elected president of the United States. Roth's richly imagined novel begins in 1940, with the landslide election of Lindbergh, who blamed the Jews for pushing America toward war with Nazi Germany. Lindbergh's admiration of Hitler and his openly anti-Semitic speeches cause increasing turmoil in the Roth household, and in nine-year-old Philip, as political events at home and abroad overtake their daily lives. Alvin, the orphaned nephew the family has taken in, runs away to Canada to fight the Nazis. Sandy, Philip's older brother, ascribes his parents' fears to paranoia and embraces Lindbergh's Just Folks program, which sends him and other Jewish children to live in the "heartland" for a summer. Philip's mother, Bess, wants the family to flee to Canada before it is too late to escape. But his fiercely idealistic father, Herman, refuses to abandon the country where he was born and raised as an American. Overwhelmed by the tensions around him, Philip tries to run away. "I wanted nothing to do with history," he says. "I wanted to be a boy on the smallest scale possible. I wanted to be an orphan." But history will not let go, and as America is whipped into a deadly frenzy by demagogues, the Roths and Jews everywhere begin to expect the worst. In *The Plot Against America* Philip Roth writes with a historical sweep and lyrical intimacy that have rarely been so skillfully combined. As the novel explores the convulsive collision of history and family, readers take a chilling look at devastating events that could have occurred in America—and consider the many possible histories existing beneath the one that

actually happened.

About Philip Roth

In 1997 Philip Roth won the Pulitzer Prize for American Pastoral. In 1998 he received the National Medal of Arts at the White House, and in 2002 received the highest award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Gold Medal in Fiction, previously awarded to John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, and Saul Bellow, among others. He has twice won the National Book Award, the PEN/Faulkner Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. In 2005 Philip Roth has become the third living American writer to have his work published in a comprehensive, definitive edition by the Library of America.

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