

The Harvard Crimson

March 1st 2011 (Excerpt)

INTERROGATING THE STRUCTURE

A new class in the Department of African and African American Studies (AAAS) this year, AAAS 109: "Using Film for Social Change," taught by Visiting Lecturer Joanna H. Lipper '94, is being used as a platform to unite students' idealistic motivations with a realistic means of communicating their objectives.

The class was introduced as part of the concentration's Social Engagement Initiative, an interdisciplinary track led by Department Chair Evelyn B. Higginbotham. As part of the track, students are required to incorporate a visual component and policy recommendations into their work, as well as the traditional academic essay. The aim is to make the theoretical and more academic elements of a student's learning more tangible in a real-world environment—whether that means practically implementing a clean water system in Ghana, as the first Social Engagement participant Sangu J. Delle '10 did, or simply finding ways of interviewing subjects in order to capture the most important theme of a particular social narrative. "What I wanted our students to do was to wed these two things: academic work and the kind of work they would learn from," Higginbotham says. Academic work, she suggests, may present an insubstantial engagement with the real events of the world outside academia. "The idea of media across cultures, how to interview, how to capture the most important theme that is being conveyed by people in different parts of the world, how they are unique ... the same interpretation and selection has to take place in a visual form [as in a written one]."

Higginbotham, who had been personally moved by Lipper's films and photography, approached and hired Lipper as a Visiting Lecturer. "She is someone who combines both the intellectual standards we are looking for and the quality of a first-rate artistic project," Higginbotham says.

Lipper completed her own undergraduate career at Harvard in 1994 with a special concentration in "Creation and Expression in Literature and Film," which she used to study, among other things, questions of identity. She sees her own work as giving a voice to unrepresented groups, among them children and teenage mothers.

It is this inclination that forms much of the appeal of the class for its students. "I'm interested in how you use the micro level of a community or people's individual lives and use those to interrogate the larger structures of government and policies and how [effective] are they actually," says Sheba M. Mathew '13, an anthropology concentrator,

and one of a few students who are currently trying to establish a Social Engagement secondary. "Film—especially the way we're approaching it in this class—is a pretty good way to ... just ask people about their lives. And some people are a little put off, but most are honored that someone is willing to listen to them," Mathew says. "Professor Lipper wants film to be used for social change in terms of telling people's narratives and looking at those narratives and questioning the social structures around us."

Lipper's class incorporates a number of angles to approach the relationship of film and social issues in creating awareness or playing the role of advocate. It involves weekly film screenings, featuring both fiction and non-fiction, technical skills training, mandatory 'internships' with the organizations on which the students will be focusing their respective final film projects, and readings. Comparable in size to a VES studio or a seminar, the class has drawn students from across the University. Mehron H. Price '13 plans to use the class to supplement personal objectives that have been in the works for years. Though she has no prior experience with filmmaking or editing, she and her sisters have run their own non-profit, Kids Helping Needy Kids, since Price was 11 and they were struck on a family trip to Africa by the child poverty in her mother's native country of Ethiopia. For her, the multimedia aspect of social work is not only an effective means of communication but a necessity for motivating involvement in a particular cause when there are so many from which to choose.

"I think the multimedia can strengthen your request [for donations], and I think people react really strongly to seeing individual life stories," Price says. "You can tell statistics about so many Ethiopian children are orphans, or you can follow one child throughout their day in an orphanage. And people will react more strongly to an individual life story."