AURORA FORUM AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY

What Matters: Documentary Photography and Social Change

David Elliot Cohen, Michael Watts, and Ed Kashi with Mark Gonnerman

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Mark Gonnerman: Good evening, and welcome to the Aurora Forum at Stanford University. I’m Mark Gonnerman, the Forum’s director, and we’re very pleased that you’re here with us tonight for a conversation entitled “What Matters: Documentary Photography and Social Change.”

Tonight is really a celebration of this book: What Matters: The World’s Preeminent Photojournalists and Thinkers Depict Essential Issues of Our Time. We’re here with the editor of this book, David Elliot Cohen, with photographer Ed Kashi and with geographer Michael Watts. The book is eighteen photo-essays paired with essays by eminent scholars and photojournalists that bring attention to current challenges with regard to the natural environment, warfare, the distribution of wealth, and the spread of disease.

Tonight we’re going to do some stage setting, where we see some images and get into the spirit of the book. We’ll begin with David Elliot Cohen talking about the project – his idea for it and how he pulled it all together.

I’m sure many of you are familiar with David Elliot Cohen’s work, for he is the co-creator of the renowned A Day in the Life in America and America 24/7 series of books. Four of these volumes were New York Times best sellers and several others were national and international best sellers. A lot of these books were produced in the ‘80s and in the ‘90s and even into this century. He’s a graduate of Yale University, and his award-winning books have appeared on the covers of Time and Newsweek, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and many other periodicals around the world. He has also produced a number of pro bono books that have benefited victims of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, AIDS-education programs in Africa, and, most recently, a book to help AIDS orphans in Uganda. Just yesterday, he flew from Paris to SFO from a safari in Africa with his wife and five children, but believe me, he knows where he is tonight [Laughter], and we’re happy you’ve joined us.

David, let’s hear about What Matters.

David Elliot Cohen: Thank you. Good evening. As Mark said, I flew in last night from Paris after the unbelievably bad idea of bringing five children to Paris. Actually, everybody had a good time, but then we had to pile an African safari on top of that. Anyway, I’m going to do my best tonight and hopefully it will be all right.
I’m going to talk a little bit about why I did this book and a little bit about the modus operandi of putting it together and, at the end, what I think I learned from it. I can’t speak to every picture. I’m going to play in the background some photographs from What Matters. It will just give you the name of the chapter and show you the pictures. You obviously need the context to know what they’re all about, but I think it will give you a little bit of the flavor of the book. My job, I think, here today is to give you an overall view of the project. Then we have the great privilege of delving into one of the chapters, which is entitled “The Trouble with Oil,” and that’s where we have Ed and Michael. I just put the books together. Ed and Michael actually go out in the field and do the hard and dangerous stuff.

My book What Matters contains eighteen long-term photo-essays about the essential issues of our time by some of the great photojournalists of this generation. Some of them, like James Nachtwey and Sebastiao Salgado and our guest tonight, Ed Kashi, are household names, at least in photo circles. Others aren’t, or at least not yet. But all of them are masters of their craft and deeply passionate about their subjects. We can say that, but how passionate? Well, passionate enough to shoot water issues in thirty countries for five years, like Brent Stirton did, or malaria on three continents for two years like Maggie Hallahan did, or AIDS-ravaged communities in sub-Saharan Africa for well over a decade like photographer Tom Stoddard, who contributed to this book. On the story that we will see in greater depth here tonight, “The Price of Our Oil Addiction: Scenes from the Niger River Delta,” Michael Watts, on my left here, was shot by MEND rebels, and photographer Ed Kashi was imprisoned and held incommunicado by Nigerian troops for a while. So suffice it to say that all the stories in this book were shot under very tough conditions and usually with insufficient pay.

Imagine having that much passion and having such a powerful inner need to tell the stories that need telling, no matter what the obstacles. I worked on What Matters for about eighteen months. My method was as follows. First, I developed a list in my own mind of what I consider to be essential issues. Then I wrote to photo editors and major publications to find out whether these issues had been photographed and who photographed them best.

As it turned out, some of the issues I’d identified could be photographed and some of them couldn’t. For example, I consider election campaign finance to be legalized bribery and a meta-story that affects a wide array of issues, but I haven’t seen a way that it can be photographed effectively, so that was dropped. On the other hand, when I started this project I was not fully aware of the widespread misery caused by child marriage, and it was not on my original list of essential issues, but then one of the editors I consulted, Cathy Ryan at the New York Times Magazine, pointed me toward Stephanie Sinclair’s amazing long-term work on this subject, and I added a chapter called “Lost Girls” to the book.

Once I gathered all the photo stories, I edited them and then posted them on-line – all the stories on-line on a private Web site. Then I contacted a group of eighteen top commentators – mostly authors and academics like Michael, but all real experts in their
fields – and I asked them to take a look at all of the photos in the book, not just the photos that they were going to write to, but all of them so that they had an idea of the scope of it, and then to write an essay that would explain and elucidate their particular story. These commentators included, for example, Jeff Sachs at Columbia, who headed up the UN Millennium Project to halve world poverty by 2015, and who wrote the seminal work *The End of Poverty*. He wrote the story on ending poverty in this book. Another was Samantha Power at Harvard, who won the Pulitzer Prize for *A Problem from Hell: America in the Age of Genocide*. She wrote the story about Darfur because that’s what she was passionate about at the moment. Another academic named Omar Bartov, an amazing man, wrote the genocide chapter. Another of these was Michael Watts from Berkeley, who is joining us here.

When the photos were selected and the essays were written, I asked all the writers and photographers to tell me how their readers could learn more about the subject and which organizations and nonprofits were doing the best job addressing these issues, because it’s one thing to show all these pictures and then explain them, but I wanted to add a comprehensive what-you-can-do section at the back of the book so if you looked at the pictures and you read the words and you became passionate about it, you actually had some place to go to turn that emotion into action.

*What Matters* was finally published in September 2008, and since that time I’ve done scores of interviews in hopes of, as they say, getting the book out there. This sort of shilling is necessary for two reasons. First, because of the Internet now, information is, for the most part, free. More specifically, any information that won’t immediately make you money is free. People will still pay for objects and machines and closely held business information, but one important consequence of the Internet is that consumers will no longer pay for general information. So my forward-thinking publisher (and I’m one of the few authors who will say that in an un-ironic tone) and I recognized this fact, and they agreed that we could post the entire book on-line, free of charge, on the Internet. Thanks to Andy Patrick, who’s sitting in this room, you can now see that on [www.whatmattersonline.com](http://www.whatmattersonline.com). Putting it all for free on the Internet represented my desire to get these photos and this information out there even if we don’t get paid for it. For my publisher, it represented something different, which is basically the same sort of white flag that newspapers started waving years ago and virtually all publishers will be waving soon. I don’t think anybody sees the way forward there.

The second reason I have to shill *What Matters* is due to the nature of this particular book. The fact is, even if information weren’t free, most people will not voluntarily shell out twenty dollars for a book that shoves tough issues in your face. I knew that from the outset and I decided to create this book anyway, but that also means I need to reach out and find that tiny percentage of potential readers who will actually go out and buy the book or look at it or take it out of the library.

At any rate, I’ve done my best to publicize this book in a media environment that’s not particularly friendly to this sort of project, and I’ve actually done as many as eighteen radio interviews in one day, which is kind of a surreal experience: “Have I answered that
question yet?” [Laughter] Eventually, though, during the course of every single interview, the interviewer will inevitably ask the same question, which is: “Why did you do this book? Why did you decide to do this?” Now, when you answer the same question hundreds of times, you have a choice. You can either give a stock answer, which is a fifteen-second sound bite that sounds reasonably intelligent and might move some people to buy your book, or if you’re in a perverse frame of mind, which I’ve been in for a while, you can actually think about the answer and refine it every single time that you are asked. With most of my previous books, like Mark mentioned – the *Day in a Life* series and the *America 24/7* series, I would just go with the stock answers. I did *Day in a Life* books for twenty years, so the five stock sound bites that I expel during the course of any interview … there are five answers no matter what the questions are … they’ve sort of become like pebbles polished in a stream. “What is *Day in a Life*? It’s a visual time capsule – a book that you can hold in your hand twenty years from now and say, ‘This is what it was like to live in fill in the blank in fill in the blank.’”

But *What Matters* was a change of course for me and is sort of a passion project, so to speak, so I’ve been considering my words each time that I answer the same question, “Why did you do this book?” My out-of-the-gate response was true, which is: one day in 2007, I walked into the sprawling new Barnes & Noble mega-store near my house and I looked at all the lovely illustrated books there and I saw all the usual suspects: Annie Leibovitz, who’s a friend of mine, Frans Lanting, who’s a friend of mine, Richard Avedon. All glossy, all very well done, but at that point in time, pre-Obama, after seven years of Bush-Cheney alternate-reality madness, I decided that I didn’t want to do that kind of book anymore. So instead, at that point I felt the need to create a book about something that really mattered to me, which is how the name popped into my head, namely how the language of photojournalism could enlighten readers about the crucial issues of our time – how photojournalism has the ability to capture a decisive moment and serve it up for consideration and actually make the viewer think about the meaning of that particular moment in time, and how great photojournalism is always personal and specific, but then manages to make a leap that compels you to think about the larger ramifications of that moment and what it’s showing you. That’s what great photojournalism does.

So that was my initial response. It’s not bad, and it was true. But after a while, I segued into a different answer, which is also true, and it was this. When I started out in photojournalism as an editor thirty years ago, I worked for a really great photo-editor named Robert Pledge, who’s still around, at a great photo agency called Contact Press Images, which, even more amazingly, is still around. We had a small group of wonderful photographers there that included Annie Leibovitz, David Burnett, the late Eddie Adams, Alon Reininger, Dilip Mehta, and a few others. And at Contact we consciously pursued stories that we thought could make a difference and we found bizarre ways to pay for it by putting together lots of different magazines because we wanted to make pictures that could create an uproar and demand change. The three years that I worked at Contact Press Images were a meaningful time in my life. It was right after I got out of college, and it was a meaningful time in my career because we all felt as if we were doing something valuable.
After three years, I left Contact and hooked up with Contact photographer Rick Smolan on a book project that became *A Day in the Life of Australia*, and that became the *Day in the Life* series, which was fifteen volumes that took us all around the world and sold millions of copies over twenty years. Then, over the course of several more years, that morphed into a sort of new type of *Day in the Life* book called *America 24/7* and lots of other big collaborative projects, some of which were successful and some of which were distinctly unsuccessful.

With *What Matters*, I wanted to circle back to that time at the beginning of my career when we truly believed that photojournalism could make a difference and that just photography could change the world. Again, true answer.

But then finally I distilled the answer further and I came to what I think is the core of the matter. I created this book because I believe in my heart that one great photograph can change the world. And if I can show two hundred great photographs about the crucial issues of our time to enough people, then maybe one of these people, or may be few people, or maybe even lots of people, will connect with one of these images. And when one great image resonates with one talented and dedicated person, and that person digs deeper and learns more and then takes action that creates positive change in the world, then the whole eighteen-month process of putting this together can be considered useful in some way.

This connection is not an exact science or even close. I can’t predict what person will connect with which of the two hundred images that are flashing way too quickly in front of you, or which image will resonate for whom and what action that person will take. Those are all random, uncontrollable responses. But I completely believe that a connection will take place. And the proof of that distilled theory actually came very quickly after the book was published and not at all how I expected.

About a month or so after *What Matters* was published, a friend of mine e-mailed me a link to a Bill Moyers’s interview with someone I had never heard of. He is a musician named Mark Johnson and he has something called Playing for Change [www.playingforchange.com](http://www.playingforchange.com). Have any of you ever seen that show? It turns out that Mark has done some amazing things. He created the documentary *Playing for Change*, in which musicians from all over the world – New Orleans, Italy, the Congo, South Africa – all played the same song, and then Mark mixed their distinctive musical styles together to create these beautifully affecting medleys. More concretely, however, Mark also built a music school for kids in a poor township near Cape Town, South Africa, which has turned into a community center that brightens these kids’ otherwise very difficult lives. That first school near Cape Town turned out to be such a success that he’s now building similar schools all over the world. That’s his intent. At one point in the interview, Bill Moyers asked Mark Johnson why he decided to do this good work, and here’s Mark’s answer, which I’ve taken the liberty of shortening a bit. He said:
Many years back, my brother gave me a Christmas gift, a photo book called *A Day in the Life of Africa*. [Cohen: It’s a book that I did.] And in that book was one photograph, and the caption was something along the lines of “One of the more dangerous townships in South Africa finds solace through backyard jazz.” I had this picture on my wall for years, and it served as a symbol for me and the crew that I traveled with.

I did some research and I found out that the band leader was an upright bass player called Pokei Klaas. So when we traveled down to Cape Town, we heard this music playing in the street, so the crew and I walked over to hear this music and I asked one of the musicians, “Do you know Pokei Klaas?” And he said, “Oh, yeah, Pokei. He’s my best friend. I’ll take you to see him.”

So the next day, we all got in a van and drove out to Guguletu Township, one of these huge, tin-roofed townships that surround Cape Town. We passed thousands of shacks, and I remember there was a lot of sorrow because there was a lot of HIV in the area and a lot of poverty. So we decided, OK, we’ll put on a little concert in the backyard because the people here need something to celebrate. I’ve never in my life seen something so beautiful as when the people came out of their homes and just started dancing. So we asked Pokei, “What can we do to give back to your community?” Pokei said, “You know, the kids here really need a music school. They need some hope. They need something that can give them inspiration.” So just a couple of months ago we went down there with some shovels and we built the first Playing for Change music school. It was in the exact spot where the photograph in *A Day in the Life of Africa* was taken. Now it’s a chance for kids to get together, to have something positive to look forward to. And what we’re doing with this foundation is we’re building hundreds of these schools around the world.

So there it was, basically: proof of concept. One talented person, Mark Johnson, connected with one photo shot by a black South African photographer that I’d found eight years earlier named Fanie Jason, and a book, *A Day in the Life of Africa*, that I’d created. And if you’d ask me before I heard this story which photo in *A Day in the Life of Africa* would have touched someone and inspired them to go out and change the world, I would never have chosen that picture. But that one photo hung on Mark Johnson’s wall for years and eventually it inspired him to build these music schools for disadvantaged children around the world.

One photo and one inspiration and one dedicated person. I want to be clear: I’m not taking credit for any of what Mark Johnson did. I’m just amazed, though, that if you put this stuff out there that somebody will connect with it and they’ll make a big change for the better. By the way, I did *A Day in the Life of Africa* as an AIDS-education benefit in the first place because I saw a series of photos on African AIDS by Jim Nachtwey in a *Time* magazine that was delivered to my office by mistake.

At any rate, there are two hundred photos in *What Matters*, and like I said at the beginning, I don’t know which photo in *What Matters* will connect with which dedicated
person. The who and the when and the how are all completely unpredictable, but it will happen in some form, I promise, because I know in my heart that one photograph can change the world. Thanks very much. [Applause]

Gonnerman: Thank you, David, for opening up our conversation in just that way.

I’m going to now introduce Michael Watts and Ed Kashi, and we’re going to look in a bit more detail at their chapter in the book, as David mentioned, “The Price of Our Oil Addiction: Scenes from the Niger River Delta.” Together, our two other guests have published a book – I think it came out in June of 2008: *Curse of the Black Gold: Fifty Years of Oil in the Niger Delta*, a very graphic book looking at the profound cost of oil exploitation in West Africa.

Michael Watts, who is sitting to my right, is the Chancellor’s Professor of Geography and Development Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, where he has been for thirty years. Educated at University College, London, and the University of Michigan, where he earned his Ph.D., Professor Watts’s work focuses on theories of political economy, especially the political economy of mass poverty in the majority world. He’s been doing field work in Africa since the 1960s and is particularly interested in the political economy of Nigeria and the political ecology of oil. At Berkeley, he has served as director of the Institute for International Studies, director of the African Studies Center, director of the Rotary Peace Fellows Program, and now co-directs the Undergraduate Development Studies Program, a degree-granting interdisciplinary program with nearly one hundred majors. The author of eight books and over a hundred articles, he has received a number of awards and fellowships from scholarly organizations, including the Social Science Research Council, the MacArthur Foundation, the National Science Foundation, and the Guggenheim Foundation. We’re very pleased to have you here with us tonight.

Ed Kashi, our photographer, has photographed in more than sixty countries. His images have appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, *Time*, *Geo*, *Newsweek*, and many other publications. He has shot eleven major stories for *National Geographic*. His first *Geographic* cover story was published in the book *When the Borders Bleed: The Struggle of the Kurds*. His project on Protestants in Northern Ireland was published as *The Protestants: No Surrender*. His work on West Bank Jewish settlers received a World Press Photo award, and in 2003 he completed an eight-year project, *Aging in America: The Years Ahead*, that included an exhibit, award-winning documentary film, Web site, and book. The project won prizes from Picture of the Year in World Press Photo. Ed and his wife, Julie Winokur, who is a writer and filmmaker, founded Talking Eyes Media, a multimedia nonprofit that produced a book and exhibition called *Denied: The Crisis of America’s Uninsured*.

We’re really pleased to have such a socially engaged documentary photographer and such a socially engaged scholar with us tonight to look more closely at one very important issue, that is, oil politics. Ed Kashi has brought with him a film that he’ll show. Then
we’ll go on further in conversation that we’ll have first up here on the stage and then we’ll open up to audience-inspired discussion. Ed…. [Applause]

**Ed Kashi:** Mark, thank you, and thank you for inviting me here. Michael, David, it’s good to be here with you. I also want to point out that Oronto Douglas is here, who is from the Niger Delta. He was an associate of Ken Saro-Wiwa’s in the 1990s, for those of you who are familiar with the issue around the Niger Delta, so it’s an honor to have you here. Actually, a lot of the work you’re going to see would not have been possible without folks like him helping. [Applause] In fact, you helped spring me out of detention. [Laughter] I’ll never forget when you came to get me from the SSS (State Security Services) building in Port Harcourt and you took your cell phone out to make a call (I don’t know if you remember this) and then the director of the SSS, a very (at least in my estimation) intimidating man (there was a strict rule not to use a cell phone in this building for obvious reasons) … he took your phone away and I was thinking, “Oh, my God, I’m going to get jailed again.” But with Oronto….

Thank you all for being here. I want to share about a seven-minute multimedia piece and I just want to pick up on something David said. When David contacted me to ask me to include my work in this book, I was thrilled and honored because it’s the intention of this project, and increasingly of the work I do, it’s all about trying to figure out how to make change using photography, using media, storytelling – in my case, visual storytelling. How can we do more than just get our work published or shown on the Internet or shown on TV? How can we touch people and impact people in a way so that our work is a starting point to action? In connection to that, I’ve started to do a lot more multimedia, where I use stills, ambient sound, moving pictures, at times, and, most importantly, the voice of the subject, which you’ll hear, including Oronto’s voice in this piece.

Lights down, please.

[Film is shown.]

*I come from a community of farmers and fishermen. People were fishing to survive. At the time I was growing up, there were no fish being brought from outside the community. Today there is not a single person in our community who you can describe as a professional fisherman because there are no fish to depend on.*

*This share of paradise, the Delta of my birth, reels from an immeasurable wound: barrels of our chemical draught flow from this earth to the unquestioning world that lights up its life in blind trust. The inheritance I sat on for centuries now crushes my body and soul.*

*We have enough oil. How many thousand barrels of oil at this site run from our land every day? And how much is coming to us? Nothing.*
The oil companies themselves are not willing to come and sit down. At this moment, they make a fantastic profit that nobody – nobody – knows about. They produce the oil, they report to government, they sell the oil, and the government sits down in Abuja only to receive the profit.

A lot of the money that is being generated from the oil revenue has been shared by people who are in power and they are cohorts. At the moment, there is too much official corruption that is going on.

The government cannot even address matters as basic as water to drink, sanitation, public education. And of course, it is difficult.

No water, no lights, no roads. People are dying every day because of oil exploration.

In the Niger Delta, people are being denied their rights to property. No Niger Delta person can lay claim that that piece of land given to him by his ancestors is his as a right because the government has put in place a decree that says that property, that land, that forest, that river no longer belongs to the person because they want to take all the oil and gas.

Can someone mobilize these people to say no to pollution, to say no to degradation, to say no to injustice?

It is that shout of “No,” that existence, that a federal government would not want to tolerate. And that was why they hanged him.

Things have gotten worse since Saro-Wiwa was murdered.

The law doesn’t say that because you have the permission of the federal government to explore for oil, it still does not permit you to pollute my environment.

If Shell, Agip, Elf, Chevron, are allowed to do business, and we hold them accountable for any ecological violence or moral interruption, then communities can go to court and get justice. Right now, they cannot.

The oil economy is killing almost every other sector that you find in the Niger Delta.

We have witnessed a clear destruction of a sense of community as we had in our villages and towns. Communities have been basically robbed of their means of survival.
We are tired of the situation. If you are looking for a job. No job. You go out for fishing. You don’t get fish. An angry man is an angry man. So any moment from now, a dangerous thing can happen.

They can shut down oil production in Nigeria. The effect of that on the federal government would be great. The government would collapse.

The Niger Deltans have been talking for years that one man carries his own weapon. The government is checking everywhere. So that means the government respects violence, not dialogue.

We have a very repressive government. We have a military that is out to kill. Such a military will go to any length in wiping out communities that occupy platform and they have it closed down.

We are the Niger Delta soldiers. We are angry that our brother has been killed!

The average Niger Deltan is not afraid of that, and if he will die, he must die a hero – not a coward.

There are different phases of struggle. We are still using dialogue. Let us see if these people will look at this in our view. But if they do not, everybody – even the women, not only the men – even the women will carry weapons. And when it starts, until we have our freedom we won’t stop.

Kashi: Thank you. [Applause]

Gonnerman: Thank you, Ed. Very powerful. Talking Eyes Media: it’s a great name.

Kashi: I came up with that on a massage table in San Francisco. [Laughter]

Gonnerman: Good things happen on massage tables.

Kashi: Massage therapist’s table. [Laughter]

Gonnerman: Michael, it’s unusual to be sitting next to someone who’s been going to Nigeria for so long – arriving there in the ‘60s, watching the changes that have come with the petro-capitalist economy. Can you talk about your experience of change over time – of what you’ve seen?

Watts: First of all, thank you all for coming this evening, and thank you, Mark, for the invitation. I can probably say that I’ve been going to Nigeria for a very long time, and a part of my interest in working with Ed was not only to work with someone and to have the opportunity to link image and text, and to that extent do things that scholars typically
don’t do. We write our scholarly articles and six people read them, if we’re lucky on a
good day, and that’s the end of it. So one part of it was to broaden the audience. But
another part of it was, in fact, to take that experience over a very long time and tell a
story that somehow an American audience could grab hold of. In a sense, it comes back
to the direct challenge that David’s book represented. It’s true, as David says, that a great
image is capable of transcending itself, and through a visual language motivating us.
That is absolutely true. But the particular burden, it seems to me, of linking image and
text is to recognize that there’s also another type of language in prose and narrative, and
those can be combined in some powerful way. And that’s essentially what I wanted to
try to do in the case of this long story of the extraordinary transformation and costs in
Nigeria. But the story could have been Saudi Arabia, the story could have been Ecuador,
the story could have been of any oil-producing state – and to say something that would
resonate with a group like this.

To that extent, incidentally, I felt that behind the oil story in that sense was a bigger story,
and it comes up, it seems to me, in all of the essays, in all of the images in the book, and
that is to pose a very simple question like: Where do the things, the commodities, the
resources that we consume come from? We just had a wonderful dinner this evening on
University Avenue at Tamarine. Where did that food actually derive from? This is a
Michael Pollan story, isn’t it? You know, even the stuff on the center of our plate: we
have no idea where the hell it comes from and, more importantly, what are the costs
associated with that. That can be a food story; it can be a fuel story. So really what I
wanted to say, in a sense, through our book and our essay, was to challenge an American
audience and all of you, incidentally, because 20 percent of all imports into this country
come from Nigeria. It’s where some of the highest-quality fuel, the so-called sweet
crude, very low in sulfur, that’s used for the gasoline industry, that you pump into your
cars every day [comes from]. And in doing so, there are costs that are incurred in your
being able to do that that are largely invisible until someone like Ed comes along. That
was essentially the challenge: to try to pose the “what matters” question. It matters
because you depend on it every day and it comes with an enormous ethical weight, if you
see what I’m saying. And that seems to me to be the great attraction, for me at least, of
trying to translate my experience in Nigeria through working with Ed into a challenge for
all of us, actually.

Gonnerman: You talk about putting image and text together. How did you actually
come up with this particular essay? Did Ed say, “Here are the images I have right now,”
and that sparked some insight concerning some themes you’ve been dealing with all
along?

Watts: Well, I would say two things. We can talk about this. I think we’re the only
ones, David, in the book who actually worked together. This was the product of a project
that was five years in the making, and frankly, when I began I wanted someone to work
as I work – as a photographer. That is to say, I’m an ethnographer. I go to different parts
of the world, I talk to people, I try to immerse myself. And that’s how Ed worked. So
the idea was, in fact, to take that MO, if you like, and try to then convert it into a sort of
powerful vehicle for raising these sorts of issues. And to that extent, this essay came out
of a lot of back and forth, which perhaps Ed can talk about from his vantage point. I obviously brought the language of a writer. I have no control or understanding of the visual language of photography, and if you’re not careful, these two powerful languages can work together but they can also work against one another. So to come to the point of how language and image work together was a product of a deep and long conversation. I’m just saying that from my vantage point, I learned a great deal about that visual language because Ed taught me that sometimes you don’t need to batter an image with words. They have that transcendent…. But of course I love words.

Cohen: When I was just starting out in this profession, I once found myself in an elevator with the long-time, legendary managing editor of Time magazine, Ray Cave. During this one elevator ride, he managed to tell me this. He said, “Putting great photos and great words together on a page is like sleeping with two beautiful women at the same time: great in theory, very difficult in practice.” [Laughter]

Watts: Absolutely, absolutely. And that is the challenge, it seems to me. And Ed taught me, for example, that sometimes not only great images do speak for themselves in some way, although intellectually I resist that. As an intellectual, I would say, “Wait a second. A photograph stops time. It stops social process. It interrupts something. So don’t tell me that it can speak for itself.” But on the other hand, I absolutely agree with David: great photographs do something that transcends that stopping and interruption. But Ed taught me that, actually, sequences of images can be put together that indeed use this visual language – that are very, very powerful – sometimes, I think, even too powerful. That image that you may have seen – it’s an apocalyptic image of a child carrying a dead animal with black…. They were taken in an abattoir in Port Harcourt. Ed put those images together. They are almost for me too powerful. They are so dark, so apocalyptic. So again, all of this is struggling with how you try to put powerful images (the two women with one man in bed) … put them together.

Cohen: What was the upshot of publishing that picture of the kid holding the goat over his head?

Gonnerman: Ed might want to tell that story.

Kashi: Well, before I get there, I also want to say that I’m a photographer who loves words. I’m a photojournalist, a documentarian—it’s sort of the same thing—who takes the journalist part of photojournalism as seriously as the photographic part. Certainly at this point in my career and my evolution. So for me, ideally you create a photograph or a body of images that stand on their own. But when you contextualize them with words or sound, as I’m now learning the voice of the subject, you start to tease out all these other layers of meaning that hopefully make the pictures more powerful but most importantly the message more powerful. Photography is a universal language. That’s one of the great things about it. But alluding to that photograph of the boy with the dead goat, that appeared in National Geographic, the February 2007 issue. A month or so after it came out we got a call from a woman named Betty in upstate New York. I live in New Jersey now, near New York. She asked for a copy of the picture and we thought, Oh gosh, this
is some crackpot. Anyway, we gave her a copy of the picture and then six months later she contacted us and she said, “I just want you to know that through my church I found that boy and he is now enrolled in school and I’ve extracted him out of this absolute dead end – because this job, which was also a very dangerous and unhealthy job … and now he’s going to school.” When those things happen…. I’ve been fortunate that that’s happened a few times in my career so far where there’s actually an image or a body of work that catalyzed action. I think what David has tried to do with his book is do that on a massive scale.

**Gonnerman:** Let’s talk about this passion for going to places and figuring out what’s going on – going back to places. You re-photograph. You have images that you’ve taken and then you will go back into a dangerous situation. This is why you were arrested, right? You were re-photographing something. What drives you to do that?

**Kashi:** Well, I think I tend to work in long-term, in-depth. I’m not a chasing-the-news kind of photographer. That’s not my strength either. I could do it, but my strength is getting intimate, getting close, really understanding a subject and then going back to develop over time a body of work. But what a gift this man was for me because I usually don’t work with an academic (and you’re not just an academic), but what you did is you put me in my first entrée into one of the toughest places I’ve ever worked in my life. The only reason Iraq is tougher is because stuff explodes unexpectedly. But really, apart from that, I think the Niger Delta is harder to work in. We can go into detail if you want to know why. Because of his contacts, like Oronto, I entered at this super-high level. I’m telling you, if you had said, “Yeah, I’d love to work with you. Here’s the name of someone,” and then I’d book my tickets and gone, I swear within three days I would have been either jailed or deported, even with all of my experience around the world because it is such a tricky place, full of traps, and I would have fallen into it. We almost did, anyway, with the SSS. Just when I arrived at the airport in Port Harcourt, they fingered me – even at that point, before I got out of the damn airport. And then this guy Mr. Jukes is calling me on my cell phone: “Hello, Ed. Where are you now?” [Laughter] If I hadn’t had Michael with me and people on the ground like Oronto watching after me, forget it. I don’t care how much experience I have. I would have been, as I said, either arrested or deported. So what an advantage I had as a photojournalist, as a reporter, to enter an incredibly difficult story at such a high level of intimate access and a very high level of knowledge of this story because I’d done my homework, and just speaking with Michael alone taught me so much. I wish I could have that all the time.

I don’t have that luxury all the time. Usually I’m starting from scratch and kind of working my way up to get the right contacts. Maybe I’m working with a writer who is really great. Sometimes I work with writers who know less than I do. Anyway, for me that was incredible. What a difference that made. And then, because I was not working from the beginning, because then I developed this as a personal project, so to speak, and then we came back together a few years later to produce the book … because I was not working on a deadline for a publication with an editor it was just my thing. You have more freedom to pursue and develop the project from your heart and from the point of
view of what it is you’re trying to accomplish as opposed to fulfilling some editorial point of view or having it fitted in to some magazine’s deadline.

**Watts:** If I may, put in that way, that brings us right back to David’s challenge, which is that the photographer, as much as the writer, also has to be clear about why this matters. Why are you slogging through these creeks? Why are you doing these things? This matters for some reason. And this is the other point, which is that working with a great photographer was also for me extraordinarily educative even though this, at one level, is an area that I had been going to for forty years. And part of that has to do with the language with which one sees the environment one’s working with. I see it as an academic, as a scholar, as this is the consequence on this particular forest of this gas flaring. Ed has a visual language and would point out things to me that I had seen for forty years and had never drawn any significance to. Ed would say as we were walking around, “Michael, why are all of these buildings incomplete? Why are they not finished? Everywhere we’ve gone there is an incomplete building.” Of course that’s absolutely right. And the reason why they’re incomplete is that these were government contracts that were given as a way of distributing large quantities of oil money to contractors who didn’t need to complete the project. The whole point was to get the contract, start, and then scarper with the money. Well, there’s a great story there about government accountability, about the relationship between huge quantities of oil wealth and what gets done with it – something that I had rendered invisible. So again, from my vantage point, working with someone who worked in a visual language also added to my understanding of something that I sort of took for granted.

**Kashi:** I also want to answer more directly why do I go back. It’s because I love telling stories and I can’t help myself, quite frankly. Now, granted, I only have so much time, so much energy, I have a family, all this stuff, so I have to pick and choose what I devote myself to. And so when I went with Michael in July of 2004 the first time, I caught the bug. When I saw the social and economic inequity there and the injustice, I realized this was sort of my new calling, if you like. So for the next few years, that was my obsession – this story. And I love getting close and intimate with subjects. For me, that’s a gift. That’s part of what is so amazing about doing what I do on a very personal level: I get to learn, I get to meet all these people, I get to hear their stories. And additionally, I get to tell the world those stories. I get to project them … their stories. So that’s why people like me are willing to go back and endure whatever discomforts or dangers. It’s really an honor and it’s a privilege, and it carries a tremendous responsibility with it, as well.

**Cohen:** This is very typical. Every one of the eighteen photographers in this book (one of them was a group effort, but seventeen photographers) is effectively a monomaniac on a mission. There’s no economic reason, there’s no worldly reason why they should be doing what they do. There’s no worldly reason why Ed should go back to Nigeria time and again. There’s no economic or worldly reason for Tom Stoddard to spend ten years on the AIDS story, or Salgado to spend seven years doing global migration. This isn’t an economic process and it’s not a religious process, but it’s closer to religion.
Watts: Wouldn’t you say, David, that not only the photographers but also the essayists in responding to your challenge about what matters also have to make a decision about how to make something potentially very far away (Bangladesh – coal, Nigeria – oil) speak to an American audience? The book isn’t only for an American audience, but we happen to be talking to one. And so there’s the additional challenge of providing a point … because as you pointed out earlier, this book, in a sense, is the starting point, not the end point.

Cohen: Yes, it’s a survey.

Watts: And it’s got to be a launching pad for people to get involved or wanting to get involved or do something. So therefore the burden on the image and the essay is to find a point of connection with this audience. It seems to me the essays, in general, do that very well. They provide a ground on which a viewer-reader can’t just walk away.

Cohen: This is interesting. Ed’s unusual in being a photographer who also needs to explain the words. There are a lot of photographers who, as we were saying earlier, *raisa ipso locutor* (the thing speaks for itself): Look at my image and you’ll understand it. It drives me crazy. You have to give these pictures good captions, good context, or you lose a lot of the value. I really appreciate the fact that you see the benefit there.

Gonnerman: Let’s just talk about that statement: you look at this and you can’t just walk away. It’s a tough book.

Cohen: Working on it for eighteen months was incredibly depressing.

Gonnerman: I was thinking during the images that when the Dalai Lama was at the Forum in 2005, this question of media came up. He said you also have to stop and think about all the good things that are happening all the time: the way people are taking care of each other, trying to restore the environment, and so forth. I had this idea as you were showing your work that your *A Day in the Life* series took care of that side of things.

Cohen: Twenty years of happy books and this was the horrible reaction.

Gonnerman: One of the issues, also, and there’s that great essay in the book by Omar Bartov, the historian at Brown University, who talks about how familiarity breeds indifference: we see these images and they may reinforce certain kinds of cultural stereotypes. There are some hazards here, too, in terms of the way people relate to images. They may just walk away. There’s this saturation problem that we have. How do you address that?

Cohen: Well, Bartov talked about basically atrocity pornography. He asked the question: Can there be such a thing as a beautiful picture of a horrible subject? That’s effectively what the photographers are going out to do. What kind of tension does that cause? Does it inure us when we see these images time after time after time and just make it actually have the opposite effect of making it all the more palatable? I read that
essay and it hit home for me. Even though it runs counter to a lot of what this book is
trying to say and do, I thought it was important to have that essay in there as a
counterpoint.

Kashi: It’s one of the conundrums of doing this. I guess that’s also why contextualizing
the work is so important to me. It’s interesting. I feel that when I worked eight years on
the Aging in America project, it was where I first began to understand that it’s not enough
to just sort of peel away the cover and show what’s bad in the world – that I also had to
show in that case what’s positive about having longevity. If all I did was a project on
people decaying, dying, end of life, dementia, who’s going to want to look at that after a
while? Or, in the case of war photography, and on and on, after a while you’re going to
lose your reader. So what I’ve come to understand is it’s so important to give some hope
or some solution – to provide that in the context of a project now.

Cohen: One of the things that I tried to do in this book is in the last essay about this
amazing man named Eddie in Pakistan who singlehandedly created the entire social
services network of Pakistan over the course of fifty years. There were no ambulances;
he had ambulances. There were no “mental” hospitals; he created the mental hospitals.
There was no one to bury the indigent dead; he did that. There was no one to take care of
unwed mothers, which, you can imagine in Pakistan; he did that over the course of fifty
years. He was an irascible bastard and he would not take any money from the
government or from anybody who told him what to do. And I thought at least that was
another counterpoint to it. This is what one person – again, one monomaniac with a
mission – can do if he puts his mind to it over fifty years. One single person can make a
difference.

Gonnerman: The photography there is by Shahidul Alam, who is a Bangladeshi
photographer who was our guest here a couple of years ago. There’s this whole network
of storytellers that your book brings to a large audience.

What do you say about this situation of saturation and knowing how to react to the
overwhelming onslaught of images?

Watts: It’s complicated, isn’t it? It seems to me that the danger of this type of … the
idea of the transcendent image, the image that alone can convey something, which we
know at one level to be true, it’s also equally true that there is a danger, and it’s a danger
that has even been pointed out by someone as great as Salgado that some of his most
powerful images come terribly close to aestheticizing poverty. And, in fact, some of his
imagery has almost an iconically Christian resonance. So there’s always a danger there
with these sorts of images or having images that are so powerful that they seem to close
off the possibility of doing anything about the problem on both counts. So there’s always
that problem, it seems to me. Then, thirdly, you have this fact that we are bombarded
with the spectacle of images every day and we can’t get away from them. And that
spectacularization of everything is itself another side of it. So again, these are the
problems. But this is why I think the text part of it is so key because I think all of the
essays, actually….
What’s striking, David, for me about them is that they all have a potential hook as a way of drawing people in that can only draw you in if there’s possibly some light at the end of the tunnel and is compelling enough for the reader not to be able to walk away. I’m not saying my essay has these qualities, but I tried to do that in my case by using the language of addiction. You know, George II, in his famous 2006 State of the Union speech (I’m stumbling over even invoking his name; it’s sticking in my craw) [Laughter] … the famous 2006 State of the Union speech, where he referred to our addiction to oil. So I tried to, in my case, draw a reader in by saying we’re addicted to oil. No one likes to be called an addict, do they? You’re an addict; we’re all addicts. But are we addicts in the same sense that crack heads are addicts? Is that the case? So it was a way of trying to sort of draw people in through the language of addiction. It seems to me that all of the essays and all of the images have to have some quality of drawing in and then getting you thinking about something that leads you to the point where you feel that something can be done.

Gonnerman: I want to talk about the what-you-can-do section of the book and invite people right now: if you want to contribute to the discussion, there’s a mike in each aisle. I want to say two things about that. One is that I think all of us are interested in whatever feedback you have, and especially Ed’s. At dinner tonight, he loves to be in a situation like this where people can respond immediately to the work. But also, Andy Patrick, who was also at dinner, said that when you go to the mike, you might talk about something that has moved you tonight so that you might do something.

What’s in the what-can-you-do section of the book? How did you go about organizing that?

Cohen: There are basically two parts of it: How can I learn more, and if I want to take action, where is the best place to take action? I thought that I could start randomly trying to figure that out, but I thought the best sources for that were actually the photographers and writers who had been on the ground. So I got most of my suggestions from them. There are 197 different resources in the back of the book if you happen to find an image that you connect with and you want to convert that into action.

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Linda Cicero: Ed, I think one of the most important and effective things that you bring is the use of color – the way you are using color to document a world that is in color. I wonder if you have anything to say about those documentary choices where color is used instead of black and white, and black and white is used instead of color. I’m more drawn to looking at documentary photographs in color because that’s the way the world is.

Kashi: Well, it’s interesting, since traditionally we think of documentary or serious photography as black and white. Frankly, my color work is the result of going digital because before I went digital around 2002-2003, if we had done this before then, I would have shot this in black and white film with my Leicas, but because at the point I came
into this I was fully digital, I am now shooting in RGB. Then I can make a choice to go color or black and white afterwards.

With the Niger Delta in particular, there’s definitely a palette. There’s something there that I wasn’t even aware of until two or three years into it and I started to look at a critical mass of the work and see that. Part of it is the light; part of it is that 90 percent of the time there are clouds of some kind. It’s totally counterintuitive for the photographer who gets up at four. One of the great things is you don’t have to get up at four in the morning because, you know what, there will be no sun. But at noon you can have the most beautiful light, and it’s also close to the equator, it’s interesting, whereas when I worked in the Middle East, where I’ve worked a lot, by eight o’clock in the morning the light is horrible until five in the afternoon most times of the year except the winter. So some of the color in this work is really predicated on the color palette of the place – the quality of the light and also the way the people dress and so on and so forth. But again, in the past I would have done this in black and white. What’s interesting now is to work in my sort of hard-core documentary journalistic work in color. It really began in 2003 working in Iraq and going there six times between 2003 and 2005. That’s when I fully went digital. I guess I miss working in black and white. I hope that answers your question.

**Question from the Audience:** First of all, thank you for being here and for presenting. I actually didn’t want to come tonight, but I’m glad I did.

You talked about why do the book, and all of you have talked some about why you do the work you do. Do you have in your mind a theory of social change? I ask the question because, personally, I look at our political system and I despair of change. When you have a significant number of people in this country who do not believe that there is global warming and you travel anywhere else in the world and it’s assumed – people are studying it, it’s just assumed – and the people in this country who have those beliefs have an impact on the political system, which is their right. So I despair of the political system responding in a meaningful way. What are you thinking about the change that is needed for our survival? It’s not just the people in Nigeria’s survival; it’s all of our survival. How is that going to come about?

**Cohen:** Let me first talk about global warming because it’s interesting that Bill McKibben, who wrote the piece – I think it’s one of the best pieces in the book – for the global warming images said … you know, actually right now a lot of people do think there’s global warming, but fifteen years ago, nobody did. What McKibben said was, “No images, no outrage.” Until there were images … and Gary Brasch, who did this, has been relentlessly pursuing this for ten years … until there were images, people didn’t believe it.

**Question (continued):** And people went to the places where the snow was disappearing. You can just go to the Sierra.

**Cohen:** I don’t know if you noticed because it was sort of quick at the beginning, but he went around and systematically shot and found photographs of these glaciers in the 1920s
or the 1890s, and what they look like now. Once there was image, there was outrage, and once there were images, then people started believing there was global warming. McKiven wrote his book in 1989, but until the images started coming in the late ‘90s and early 2000s, it didn’t have as widespread acceptance.

Gonnerman: Michael, you have a lot of undergraduates who are studying developing economies. How do you feel about this question of social change and what’s motivating these students?

Watts: I want to say pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will. But I share your deep intellectual pessimism. But you know what? This is what I actually think. I think that for every case of an American body politic that I think, “Oh, my God, I can’t believe that this poll actually suggests this” … for every case of that, there is – we were talking about Nigeria and oil and addiction and all of that – there is a case in which two weeks ago, Shell settled out of court for $50 million (never, of course, claiming that they were guilty of the allegations), but nonetheless, the point is that through a very long and complicated process, a piece of litigation came and was heard in the New York District Federal Court. For every case of pessimism, there’s a case of that. The former CEO of Halliburton (not Dick Cheney; prior to Dick) is now doing time. Halliburton was, in fact, fined $180 million, which is the largest case of corporate corruption fines of that sort, because of their corrupt practices and payments to high-ranking government officials in Nigeria. My point is that for every case of that abject pessimism, I can equally give you examples, even under circumstances where in Nigeria, I have to say, it looks sometimes like the possibilities are slight. The fact that Oronto Douglas here, who when I first met him was a young lad – his father was a fisherman, raised in a small village – he is now the personal assistant to the vice president of Nigeria. He came up through the student movement, environmental activist, a lawyer. You see what I’m saying? Somehow that retains some sense for me of balance, of trying to keep the pessimism of the intellect in balance with the optimism of the will.

Cohen: If you take the long view, there was slavery until there wasn’t, and women couldn’t vote until they could, and the Nazis overran Europe until they were defeated. Sometimes this stuff takes a long time, but Martin Luther King said the arc of the universe tends toward justice in the end.

Question: I just wanted to say thank you for being here and thank you for publishing the actual book. We are proud owners of it and I recommend that you all get it. As an aside, I’m curious about the medium. Your choice is a bold one. I come from the newspaper and then the on-line industry, and there clearly is no path forward there quite yet. As you made that choice, I’m curious about what it’s like as publishers of that and as readers of it, viewers of it … what you think the experience is of looking on-line versus holding the book. How is that different and how do you experience it and what do you think others might think of it? Then if you want to add any path-forward thoughts, I’m curious.

Cohen: I’m amazingly confused right now. Never in my career, which, because of my advanced age is a long one, have I seen the end of book publishing as we know it – the
end of coffee table books as we know it. I don’t see the way forward. There will be a way forward and probably somebody thirty years younger than I am is going to come up with it, and as soon as they do, I’m going to jump all over it. I did another book after this. If you just talk about financial viability, this is a complete money sucker. So I decided to do a book that might actually have a chance of making money, which was about Obama. I like Obama, anyway, so it worked out for me. It came out at the right time and it actually became a national best seller; for two or three weeks it was on the national best-seller list. Then when I saw the numbers of what actually sold, it was like literally a third of what it would have taken to get onto the best-seller list five years ago. So I’m having trouble seeing how this is all going forward and, if it is ending, I’m glad I had the opportunity to throw a few grenades before I went out the door. [Laughter]

**Question (continued):** But as each of you looks at the photographs and the text in the print, and I do see how old you all are relatively [Laughter], and I’m in your group…

**Watts:** Could you elaborate on that? [Laughter] I’m interested in what you have to say about that.

**Question (continued):** I’m right in there with you.

**Cohen:** I’d like to say that Michael’s older than I am. [Laughter]

**Question (continued):** We come from the era of books, and there are people who have grown up in a different era. That’s all I’m trying to say, with all due respect. What is your experience in tactilely holding the book, looking at the images? It’s kind of like the discussion of the black and white and the color: how is that different for you all and what feedback do you get? It’s different from the economic path forward. It’s the experience of it.

**Kashi:** Well, I think a book remains a unique user experience on that level, but for some people it doesn’t resonate, particularly for younger generations. One thing is for sure: it’s sort of immutable, it’s a fact; it’s the “thingness.” If all we did was create a Web site, it might have had tremendous impact. Who knows? But having the book meant I got on CNN and Al Jazeera and NPR, and so on. If all we did was create a Web site, I don’t know if that would have happened. It’s interesting. You sort of have to look – and it was never like this when we started – but you have to look at what’s viable now and then what’s going to be happening five years from now or ten years from now. It’s a very strange time. It’s a very confusing time. The fact remains that producing a physical book is still very meaningful.

**Cohen:** It’s still an event.

**Kashi:** It’s an event. It galvanizes other, in a sense, maybe they’re traditional modes of publicity, dissemination, meaning, and all that. So you have to roll with that for now. But five years from now? I just published a new book last month – a photographic book – and I don’t know. Is that going to be the last book I publish? Maybe five or ten years
from now I wouldn’t think of doing the same body of work as a book. Maybe it will be on a Kindle. I know at National Geographic there is a team that is designing the magazine for an iPhone, for a Kindle (assuming it will eventually be color), and so forth and so on, and of course on the Web as a downloadable PDF, so it’s kind of like we’re all saying: Ask that guy! [Laughter] Andy Patrick, ask him. But no, I’m serious. There are visionaries who are in the trenches now trying to figure this out, but it’s key. It’s key also to, I feel, the survival of our democracy. I very much believe in that – that the media is the fourth estate. It’s a bit of a digression here, but I had to say that.

**Watts:** But Ed, do you think that in a curious way, in answer to that question, again you’re back to the idea that the book is not the end point but is a starting point? Just think about our book. What was most interesting, I think, to both of us was the fact that after the book gets published it then has a life and attraction of its own. One, for example, is that Oxfam America, who it just so happens coincidentally are in the midst of one of their programs raising questions of corporate transparency in the extractive industries, they love Ed’s images, so we talked to Oxfam America. They approached us, actually. And we put together a mobile, peripatetic show that has image and text and that will be going around to campuses and going around to other oil-producing communities in North America, for example. So in a sense, then, this presumes that there still will be, of course, a future for the book, but in a way, perhaps, it’s the fact that the half-life of the book after its publishing is more important in how it then takes on a life of its own rather than the “thingness” of its publication.

**Cohen:** I don’t know. I’ll tell you one thing. I go around and I still see in people’s houses books that I published twenty years ago, and I’ve never seen anybody leave an image on their computer screen that long. [Laughter, Applause]

**Kashi:** But wait, I think I have the answer now. [Laughter] I think maybe this isn’t really what you asked, but let me just say: the key is this multi-platform approach, so in a way, the book opens up the possibilities for the other platforms. In my case, we’ll do the multimedia piece. I paid to have that done; nobody paid me to have that done, but I feel it’s essential to have that as a companion to the book. And I can’t tell you – I don’t know how you guys felt about it – but I’ve shown it not just in America, but it always gets a reaction, and at the very least you’re hearing the voices of the subjects. You’re not hearing me or Michael tell you; you’re hearing Nigerians tell you. To me, there’s tremendous value in that. There’s the Web site that Andy Patrick and liveBooks was gracious to help me to produce that for the book. The exhibitions – the Oxfam thing. I’ve been asked to go to a national conference of the student leaders for Oxfam later this month in Boston to talk to them about how to utilize my work to galvanize action on their campuses. As I was saying at dinner, I never would have thought I’d be doing something like that, but that might be one of the most meaningful things I’ll do this year.

So it’s a very confusing time but it’s an incredibly exciting time. In the past, to go back to the Aging project, when I began it in the mid-‘90s, I wanted to do a book and an exhibition. And by the time we were done, we were doing multimedia, we did a one-hour documentary, a Web site, and on and on and on. So now I feel you have to look at it
as a multi-platform approach to storytelling, to communication, because you want to hit everybody.

One other thing we were talking about a little while ago with the political question: I think that’s why it’s important to see what happens in Iran because I feel that something … maybe things won’t change right now, but something with Twitter and YouTube … something happened there. Something was unleashed in a very unlikely place, too. Well, maybe not so because they’re very smart people and they’re very tuned in. But it’s going to be interesting and important to see what was unleashed there and what happens because I think the future of creating this kind of change, whether you use photographs or film or music, words, whatever it is, is to spread it out in this way we never were able to do before – never were able to do.

**Question:** I actually read a newspaper this morning in an actual newspaper, and I read an interesting article and I think it would have been interesting no matter where I read it. Hearing you talk about this, clearly you want to get – in this case two of you – this specific story out, but in terms of the book, many of these stories out, but it sounds like each of you at some level wants more than just to get the story out. You want people to do something. I see you all shaking your heads yes.

This article in the *New York Times* was comparing the means by which businesses are able to get people to do something, in this case, buy things (soap, cars, this, that), but they get people to act and they’re very good at modern marketing, and NGOs and social activists are typically not good at doing that. They get the story out (I’m not accusing you of this; this was the comparison that was made in this article), and if businesses used the same methods and were as unsuccessful as many social activists and many NGOs are at getting people to act, they would have gone back to the drawing board a long time ago to figure out how to get out their message better. They also gave examples of modern psychology and how studies in psychology are showing what it is that gets people to act, and it turns out a lot of it is counterintuitive. One example given was that people are much more likely to help one single person if they’re shown one person. One child who needs help I will send money to. If I’m shown eight children who need help, I don’t give money. This is counterintuitive. You’d think the problem’s bigger so I would be more likely to give money, but we don’t. So I’m curious if any of you have gone to study modern business marketing methods and the latest in psychology to help you package your stories and write your stories and show your photographs in ways that are the most likely, based on today’s knowledge, which is incomplete, to get people to act and not just to tell the story. (I didn’t write the article; I’m just translating what I read this morning. I just found it very interesting.)

**Cohen:** I’m going to perversely disagree with your premise, which is that businesses are really great at getting people to buy things, but NGOs and charities aren’t….  

**Question (continued):** Well, that was the article’s premise. I’m setting up a straw man and they’re making a very gross comparison.
Cohen: I disagree with the straw man’s premise because it’s not that hard to convince people that they want a Mercedes. It’s a lot harder to convince people that what they want to do with their money is to help people in the Niger River Delta. I would suggest that the bar is a lot higher. If you want to talk to my kids, you just mention “big-screen TV” and they’re already sold. [Laughter] It doesn’t take a genius to convince them to buy it.

Question (continued): But people buy all kinds of crap they don’t need or don’t want and aren’t good for them, so we are manipulated all over the place. The question is, setting aside your first objection, can’t you admit that they might have figured out a few ways that actually, if you packaged your book correctly or your Web site correctly (I’m not saying you don’t do it correctly), but there would be ways that you could actually be even more successful than you are, even though you’ve got a much higher bar?

Cohen: I’ve done books that are New York Times best sellers. I created those books to be New York Times best sellers. I put the pictures together, put the premise together, and said, This is going to be a New York Times best seller because this is what people want, and they did. So I obviously have the basic talent necessary to create a New York Times best seller. [Applause] Nothing I could do could make this book a New York Times best seller unless I developed this new level of genius that has thus far eluded me.

Question (continued): My point isn’t about this book being a best seller. My point isn’t about this book at all. It’s about the stories that you have and getting people to act on what those stories are. That’s what my point is to all three of you. I agree, you’ve obviously been a very good business person. My point is, have you thought about whatever you did to make your book a best seller to talk about selling that story in a way that got people to act?

Kashi: In this case of the Niger Delta, does it touch or bother any of you that the fuel you burned to get here and the fuel you’ll burn to go back came from this place where this is how these people live? [Applause] It bothers me, big time. How do we translate it into action? I think people feel helpless. You might really care. One thing I’ve got to say is that this situation is unsustainable. It is unsustainable. At some point, this whole fossil-fuel-based system is going to collapse unless there’s some change. I feel that way. Seeing places like Nigeria, and not just Nigeria, and then how we’re living and this gross inequity. Somehow, maybe in my lifetime I’ll get through without the collapse, but it seems unsustainable. How do we translate this into outrage, action, on a practical level? I think that is the biggest … that’s the nut we have to figure out how to crack, particularly for our younger generations. How do we get them to care about this – that it isn’t just, “Oh, those poor people in the Niger Delta”?

Cohen: Very quickly, to be less perverse, I think that when I do a Day in the Life book that I know is going to sell to a lot of people, I’m not asking for a lot of sacrifice on their part. I’m giving them something that one million people want. In this case it’s something different, and I don’t think it’s less valuable. I’m not going to give one million people what they want, but I think that we will reach fifty, one hundred, one
thousand, three thousand people who will actually do something. Nobody who reads a *Day in the Life* book is actually going to go out and do something, but here we will reach fewer people but in a more intense way and hopefully repeat some of that story about the guy I told you about who saw the *Day in the Life of Africa* book.

**Gonnerman:** We’re running out of time. We have three people standing here with questions. Please make quick questions, the three of you, and then we’ll have some response, final comments, and wrap up for the evening.

**Question:** First, thank you. My question has to do with an emphasis on the individual. I do believe in the power of one, and I’m totally amazed at various times at how much any one individual can accomplish. I have two interrelated questions. One: have you received any response from corporations to your book, because you very prominently feature people wearing Shell helmets? I was wondering if anyone has tried to sue you. Second, I was wondering if you’ve received any positive responses from groups of employees at some of those types of companies – that maybe those employees within the companies felt perhaps badly enough about what Shell or Chevron was doing that they have indeed provided some type of a response to a problem and you may know about it.

**Question:** On intimacy with the subjects, you mentioned intimacy, spending time. I was wondering if you ever got extraordinarily sympathetic with people who were benefiting from corruption because that is a part of a smaller ecosystem and economy.

**Question:** Actually, there’s a book, *Doing Democracy*, which maps out the stages of social movements, so if anyone wants to know how social change works, I recommend that.

**Gonnerman:** By Bill Moyer – not Bill Moyers but Bill Moyer, the late Bill Moyer: *Doing Democracy*. It’s a great book.

**Question (continued):** As a devoted political activist, I know I created millions of flyers we gave away – powerful images looking at the problems. I went to the Story Field Conference looking at changing the giant meta-narrative, and we came out with a new one looking at hopeful solutions. I think one reason people can’t look at the problems or get active is because it’s so overwhelming, so I’m looking for a new image that has the hopes for solutions in it with a keyhole to help navigate people through. I think people can envision the collapse, but they need to see what can replace and overcome the problems we’re facing.

**Gonnerman:** Some final comments on this question of feedback that you’ve had?

**Cohen:** On the feedback I’ve had, one of the companies that I attacked in one of the essays offered me a project, [Laughter] and they were extremely aware of the books.

**Kashi:** I haven’t been impacted by that in any way in terms of companies. They didn’t cooperate, anyway, to begin with. [Laughter]
But on the question the gentleman asked about intimacy, I was a little unclear.

**Gonnerman:** Have you formed close relations with people, some of whom were being photographed, who are benefiting from the corruption?

**Kashi:** I don’t know. I don’t think so.

**Watts:** Maybe I can put another spin on that, which is about the issue of empathy, which is that Ed has said we’re about telling stories. You noticed in the movie and in the book, too, the book ends with the movement for the emancipation of the Niger Delta. Some of you are probably following the press: oil prices are now creeping up again; they’re partly driven by an insurgency in the Niger Delta. It’s now a full-fledged insurgency. Beginning in May, the Nigerian government launched a major military assault on these guys. I raise that issue because when we put the book together, there was a sense in which we were not sure that as a totality it could easily be read, as we had a great deal of empathy for organized violence as a solution to the problem. That was the way in which we used quotes and text and image, and it was a real issue. I remember we went back and forth and at some point I said to Ed, “Ed, this could be read as if we are a mouthpiece (empathetic) for military struggle, for an insurgency.” So those are very profound issues and I’m sure that there were other ways in which that narrative could be read in the book outside of the military insurgency issue. Those empathy questions, I think, are a central part of putting any set of images and text together.

**Kashi:** I just came back two weeks ago from the Niger Delta, and I was actually hired by one of the oil-producing states – the state of Bayelsa – to shoot a film, and it was basically to show there’s a new governor. I guess I became empathetic with him, and he’s certainly benefiting from oil money. Whether he’s corrupt or not, I don’t know. The idea was to show how they’re trying to make things better, and I was really happy, in a way, because whenever I’m involved in these talks about the Niger Delta, invariably someone asks if there’s any hope there, and I always say I can’t see it, which is terrible. It’s terrible to have to admit that it feels hopeless. So it was interesting to be hired to go there to look for hope, and it was very difficult. It’s interesting to be on the other side of it. I’m on the governor’s boat going through the Delta and the security men are drinking beer and throwing the cans in the Delta and I’m thinking, What’s going on? It’s all very confusing, in a way. I don’t know what that has to do with anything, but I just wanted to mention that. [Laughter]

**Cohen:** I neglected to thank Mark earlier, and I think that this Forum is a wonderful thing. I just want to wish you luck going forward. [Applause]

**Gonnerman:** Thank you. The Aurora Forum is about conversations with people who turn vision into action for positive social change, and so tonight has really been a great Aurora Forum experience for all of us. Thank you to David Cohen, Ed Kashi, and Michael Watts, and thank you to you all. [Applause]
David Elliot Cohen, Author and Editor
David Elliot Cohen is the co-creator of the renowned *Day in the Life* and *America 24/7* series of photojournalism books. Four of these volumes were *New York Times* bestsellers. Several others were national and international best-sellers. A graduate of Yale University, Cohen’s award-winning books have appeared on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* among many other periodicals worldwide. His pro bono books have benefited victims of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, AIDS education programs in Africa and most recently, AIDS orphans in Uganda.

Michael Watts, Chancellor’s Professor of Geography and Development Studies at the University of California, Berkeley
Educated at University College, London, and the University of Michigan, where he earned his Ph.D., Professor Watts’s work focuses on theories of political economy, especially the political economy of mass poverty in the majority world. He has been doing field work in Africa since the 1960s and is particularly interested in the political economy of Nigeria and the political ecology of oil. At Berkeley, he has served as director of the Institute for International Studies, director of the African Studies Center, director of the Rotary Peace Fellows Program, and now co-directs the Undergraduate Development Studies Program, a degree-granting interdisciplinary program with nearly one hundred majors. The author of eight books and over a hundred articles, he has received a number of awards and fellowships from scholarly organizations, including the Social Science Research Council, the MacArthur Foundation, the National Science Foundation, and the Guggenheim Foundation.

Ed Kashi, Photographer
Ed Kashi has photographed in more than sixty countries. His images have appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Time*, *Geo*, *Newsweek* and many other publications. He shot eleven major stories for *National Geographic*. His first *Geographic* cover story was published as the book *When the Borders Bleed: The Struggle of the Kurds*. His project on Protestants in Northern Ireland was published as *The Protestants: No Surrender*. His work on West Bank Jewish settlers received a World Press Photo award. In 2003 he completed an eight-year project, *Aging in America: The Years Ahead*, that included an exhibit, award-winning documentary film, website and book. The project won prizes from Pictures of the Year and World Press Photo. Kashi and his wife, writer/filmmaker Julie Winokur, founded Talking Eyes Media, a multimedia nonprofit that produced a book and exhibition called *Denied: The Crisis of America’s Uninsured*.

Mark Gonnerman is founding director of the Aurora Forum.
Comments?
We welcome your comments and suggestions via email to auroraforum@stanford.edu or via the feedback form on our website: auroraforum.org.

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