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## Reading Between the Lines

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## **Abstract**

“Why do so many people come to our country? They come here and they take pictures, and then they go home and use them to show that we are a terrible place. Why do you do this?”

This question was posed to me by a sixteen-year old boy in Port-Au-Prince, Haiti while I was visiting his school on a post-earthquake relief trip in 2012. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, Haiti, mission work, natural disasters, relief work, international aid, humanitarian work

## **Disciplines**

Inequality and Stratification | International and Area Studies | International Relations | Latin American Studies

## **Comments**

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](#) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.



they both need and deserve the help of the US and other countries. But, in a TED talk by Chimamanda Adichie, "[The Danger of a Single Story](#)," she describes the dangers of viewing a country as a headline of desperation. "A single story creates stereotypes," she says, "and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but incomplete. They make one story become the only story".

Haiti's single story is the destroyed school building, the tent city field. We see their devastation, and poverty, and use them to form our judgments. Yes, they had an earthquake. Yes, they have a lower standard of living than us, and many families live in absolute poverty. Yes, they have one of the longest histories of slavery and racism that exists in the world. But this is not the only story of Haiti.

Haiti's history includes the seldom told story of the slave rebellion in 1791 that led to Haiti being the first independent black republic, and the only state established in the wake of a successful slave revolt. That is the Haiti that I know. The people of Haiti have more strength and determination than any people I have ever met in my entire life. They don't let the ruins of an old school house stop them. They move 15 feet away, and their students still show up to learn.

Other countries may have provided a few tarps for people to sleep under at the onset of the tragedy, but Haitian hands had poured the cement and mortar to rebuild their homes. We lost interest after a few months, but they were the ones still living among wreckage, and they were the ones who did and are still doing the majority of the work to make their country a better place for its citizens.

So what is the answer to the question of the boy that I met? Poverty sells, it's true. Pictures of flies and trash and destruction bring pity, evoking enough concern to attract a few million dollars in donations before the American attention span wears thin. But why aren't we interested in the initiative that others take in addressing the issues that plague their communities? Do we need to see them as helpless so that we can pat ourselves on the back for "saving" them while overlooking how small of a role that we actually play in bettering their lives? Have we just been so bombarded with stories of destitution and stagnation that we're incapable of viewing citizens of less-developed countries as anything but helpless, defeated victims of circumstance?

I don't have the answer. I do know though that we can choose our headlines. We can choose how to tell the stories of others. Until we begin to tell the whole story of Haiti and other less-developed countries, we will only continue to perpetuate stereotypes. As far as we're concerned, Haiti's not making it anywhere.

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