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Reading Between the Lines

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Reading Between the Lines

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

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Disciplines

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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.



READING BETWEEN THE LINES

December 9, 2013

"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.

The school was located in a parking lot next to the twisted metal and cement remains of the building they used before the earthquake. We were speaking to a class of maybe 40, sitting in old rickety plywood desk seats, with a propped up chalk board behind our backs, and three foot tall corrugated metal to our sides. It would have been easy to snap a picture of this and stick it on a glossy magazine cover next to a depressing headline about abject poverty and slow progress.

And that's exactly what happened. A year after the earthquake, *Time* published an article focused on the rebuilding effort in Port-Au-Prince. The feature image was a high definition picture of blue, green, red and white tarps stretching for miles. Every thin plastic roof had some sort of flag advertising the country donating the tent. More images of rubble-ridden roads and a child with a distended belly and stick-figure arms accompanied this piece, which lamented over how horrible it must be to live in such a place, forsaken by God, government, and goodwill.

The problem was though, that I was reading the article in the same exact place that its cover image had been taken, only a few weeks after its release. A green field sprawled out in front of me, slightly scarred, but mostly clean and clear. The tarps had all been folded and stored, tent peaks replaced with parks. Of the seven largest tent cities in Port-Au-Prince, four had been entirely cleaned up. They had not simply been relocated, consolidated or hidden from the public eye. I'm not sure where *Time* got their pictures or facts, but it was not the Haiti before me.

I do not mean to glorify the state of Haitian affairs, either then or now. That field may have been clear, but there was and is so much more work to be done. They are still the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, and

they both need and deserve the help of the US and other countries. But, in a TED talk by Chimamanda Adichie, "<u>The Danger of a Single Story</u>," 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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http://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com/2013/12/09/reading-between-the-lines/